

# *A Study of Indigenous Australians within the Rubrics of Modernity and Tradition*

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In order to cohesively understand Australian culture, the implications and disturbances of modernity need to be acknowledged. The unjust treatment of Aborigines is widely recognised amongst the Australian population, yet few understand the repercussions that modernity has caused to the preservation of this distinct culture. This paper examines whether an “Indigenous Modernity” can exist in our present day. In doing this, the exhibition held at the Museum of Sydney; “From Little Things Big Things Grow: Fighting for Indigenous Rights”, was used as a stepping stone for exploring the manner in which Aborigines became second-classed in their country. This paper details the perspectives of both the Europeans and the Aborigines to enable the reader to understand the mentality of those destructing and those preserving. These conflicting perspectives developed the war between the “Ancients” and the “Moderns”, whereby the Aborigines were defeated by the Europeans. By setting on a quest to examine Australia’s colonial history, it becomes evident that modernity has marginalised and excluded the Aboriginal population due to their association with the past. Aborigines were categorised as “The Others” who were unable to embrace modernity due to the lack of Western ideologies within their societies. This association with “otherness” has not faded away and has caused the modern day stereotype of the authentic Aborigine. The “real” Aborigine is perceived to be the darker, remote Aborigine who lives isolated from civilisation in a state of wilderness. This misrepresentation has been influential in denying an “Indigenous Modernity” in our modern society, whilst also contributing to the racial discrimination in our population. This is quite different to the Aborigines’ perspective on their ability to modernise. Their adoption of Christianity and urbanised lifestyle changes are indicative of this. Notably, Aborigines have used their tradition in order to understand and connect with these modern concepts. While the Europeans defined themselves by rejecting tradition, Aborigines have reformed their culture in order to associate with the modern world.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Modernity; Otherness; Aborigines; Europeans

Century after century, colonial empire after colonial empire, the poor premodern collectives were accused of making a horrible mishmash of things and humans, of objects and signs, while their accusers finally separated them totally – to remix them at once on a scale unknown until now...(Latour 1993, p.39).

## **I. Introduction**

Traditional Aboriginal culture since the prevailing of modernity has fallen into the backdrop of Australian modernisation. This paper will seek to explore whether it is possible to engage with an “Indigenous Modernity” in our present day. During the colonial period, Europeans created a homogenised Aboriginality by merging separate tribal communities to form the singular discourse of “The Others”. This association of Aborigines with “otherness” subjected them as the darker side, those timelocked in the past, represented and underdeveloped (Russel 2001). Within the European mentality, an “Indigenous Modernity” could not exist due to this association of Aborigines with the traditional past. In our present day, this image of “otherness” has developed the stereotype of the remote Aborigine, which remains influential in denying the existence of an “Indigenous Modernity”. However, when examining the effects of modernity from the Aborigines’ perspective, it is evident that they have adopted several formalities, including modern spirituality and urbanised lifestyle changes, which can be understood to form a distinctive “Indigenous Modernity”.

The focal point for analysis begins with the exhibition; *From Little Things Big Things Grow: Fighting for Indigenous Rights*, which is held at the Museum of Sydney. This homogenised image of Aboriginality is exemplified by reference to the 1967 Referendum, which illustrates the impact of social ills in forming the identity of a populace. The exclusion of Aborigines from the Australian Constitution reinforces the unjust alienation which they were subjected to, due to their association with “otherness”. Thus, the exhibition induces a critique of modernity through the representation of its dark, yet typically concealed persona. Modernity should not always be viewed in a positive light, and this paper will seek to illuminate the detrimental effects that modernity continues to have on the Indigenous population.

## **II. The Notions Underpinning the Concept of ‘Otherness’**

It is no coincidence that the invasion of Australia occurred during The Age of Enlightenment and had influenced the European mentality by the notion of progress during the eighteenth century. The global historical time of “first in the West, and then elsewhere” (Chakrabarty 2000, p.6) encouraged modernity to initiate within Europe and then permeate outwards. This theory, known to be historicism, legitimised the notions of civilisation, enlightenment and rationality, elements which define modernity. Historicism was applied within an Australian framework through the interactions of the Europeans with the Aboriginal population. By associating Aborigines with “otherness”, they provided the “cultural context in which Europeans (especially the state) have acted” (Beckett 1988, p.192). This cultural context which developed from the imposition of binary oppositions to socially construct the identity of Aborigines, drew a strict benchmark between the whites and the blacks. The term “Aboriginal” was non-existent prior to colonisation, and Aborigines had defined themselves based on the characteristics of their segregated tribal communities. However, this method of self-recognition was disregarded by the Europeans, whose identity was born from rejecting everything that the term “Aboriginal” connoted:

I learnt that anyone of my colour would always be an outcast and different from a white person. It gave me the firm idea that an Aboriginal...was mentally and physically inferior to all others. He was the lowest class known in the world, he was a little better than an animal; in fact, dogs were sometimes to be preferred (Attwood et al. 1994, p.15).

The British chose to treat Australia as a continent which was open to settlement by imposing the legislative provision of “Terra Nullius”, which held that Australian land was “uninhabited” (Parkinson 2005). This legal fiction was justified by the labelling of Aborigines to be assets of the past, embodying the characteristics of pre-modernity, in which Europeans sought to revolutionise. Chakrabarty (2000) informs that pre-modern societies lacked concepts which included: citizenship, the state, public sphere, rationality and human rights, evident within Aboriginal societies. These particular formalities were of no use to Aborigines who were dependent on segregated tribal laws in order to function within their communities.

In effect, Attwood addresses modernity’s rejection for the past, in that modernity “does not need the past, its intellectual and emotional orientation is towards change rather than conservation...” (Attwood 1996, p.vii). From the Europeans’ perspective, the past was perceived as a traditional formality which was primitive, lacking progress and solely focused on the transfer of information through cultural rituals and customs. Yet the modernist belief holds that information should be transferred by way of scientific thinking and experiment (Keene 2006), rather than word of speech. As such, this “traditional lifestyle” was evident within Aboriginal communities. However, Aborigines did not reject the discourse of progress, but rather maintained their development within the framework of the customs and rituals which had formed their identity, avoiding the destructive effects of modernity.

This Aboriginal lifestyle which was conceptualised around tradition gave effect to the theory of Social Darwinism. This theory observed that a tribe “with self-sacrificing individuals would have [a] survival advantage over another tribe without such individuals” (Caruana 2008, p.652). Within this context, those individuals capable of sacrificing the past would have the advantage of survival. The focus of modernity towards change rather than conservation enabled European racial superiority over these inhabitants. Only the fittest population was to survive, and the association of Aborigines with the past had hindered their ability to fight against these social changes ensued by modernity. To the Europeans “the new methods, new processes, new forms of living have no sanction in the past and no roots in it” (Attwood 1996, p.vii). The belief that human societies have the potential to evolve and improve (Gillen & Ghosh, 2007) was unbeknown to the Indigenous population, who focused on maintaining the current standards of their lifestyle into the future. As such, Aborigines were regarded as “savages” who lived in a state of wild nature (Attwood 1996). Indeed, Europeans perceived these inhabitants as the most barbarous people known on the surface of the globe, unable to progress as they remained within this traditional state of mind (Attwood 1996). However, this is not to deny that Aborigines did not also perceive of the Europeans as “savages” who had eroded the functionality of their societies, highlighting the counteractions of modernity’s progress.

Wherever we trace the steps of white population we discover the introduction of evil, the diminution of numbers, the marks of disease, the pressure of want, the physical and moral ruin of this people (Parkinson 2005, p.144).

The conception of “Terra Nullius” denied Indigenous people personhood and governance, in effect excluding them from the benefits of modernisation (Cowlshaw 1999). It is contradictory that Europeans had imposed modernity on the Aborigines, yet only to deny them from its benefits. Aborigines were deprived from fundamental necessities including: freedom of movement, custody of their children and control over personal property (Attwood et al. 1994). This challenges modernism’s claim to be the “final solution” (Sim 2005, p.271) to the problems of history when it generates inconsistencies of its own. By enforcing a European class-based and hierarchical society on the Indigenous population there was a consequent degradation of culture. The notion of “Race Science” ensued by the miscegenation of “The Others” and “The Moderns” (Parkinson 2005), particularly ties with the period of the Stolen Generations. Such European institutions programming Indigenous children to be “white” illustrate the tensions of modernity in eroding the diversity of the Aboriginal tribes. Latour (1993) has informed that these contradictions have made the modernists invincible in their claim, by failing to understand the different spheres of human life and activity. Evidently, the missionaries who held Aboriginal children in institutions believed that they were transferring the benefits of the enlightenment, by breaking the child’s connection with their family, culture and traditional land (Cassidy 2006). Aboriginal children had been detached from their cultural roots and denied access to their family unit, with the aim of enforcing Western ideologies into their lifestyle. This is evident in Figure 1, displayed at the exhibition.

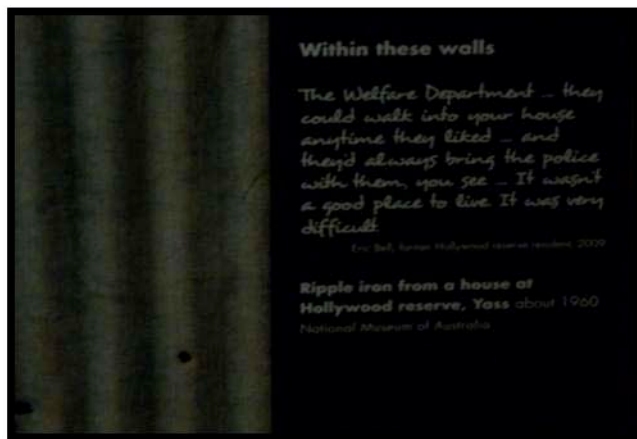


Figure 1 – Ripple Iron Wall

### III. The Formation of an ‘Indigenous Modernity’

The Age of Enlightenment has caused considerable debate due to its application in society. According to Kant (1784), the enlightenment seeks to disengage people from religious and social institutions which condition them to believe that they are unable to use their own understanding. Aborigines had as a consequence, been stripped away from their religious and cultural entities, in order to empower them to function independently. Barker relates that “our own religious beliefs were a subject of ridicule, and we were told that we were useless humans and must forget about our Aboriginal religion” (Attwood et al. 1994, p.15). Despite the embedded importance of religion within the Aboriginal community, as a form of identification with their land and people, Europeans were determined to defeat the Aborigines’ connection with their sacred past. Accordingly, these European settlers brought with them Christian missionaries, who imposed the teaching of evangelical Christianity on this population, in order to bring them into the realms of modern spirituality. The modern critique that God should not be included in the social or natural

construction of the world (Latour 1993), allowed the modernists the power to play God. By influencing the notion that Aboriginal religion is “incorrect” per se and that Christianity is “correct”, the Europeans hid themselves behind modernity in order to intervene with human choice and freedom, expressed in religion.

However, the influence of Christianity on the Aboriginal population indicates the formation of an “Indigenous Modernity”. In the last census, only 1.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island people identified traditional Aboriginal spirituality as their religion, whilst 38% identified a Christian denomination (Atkinson 2008). This signifies the impact of modernity in eroding traditional spirituality over the years. The adoption of Christianity by the Aboriginal population has been explored in Mary Leahy Poum Poum’s painting, *Jesus Nativity Scene* (Cooinda Gallery 2003). As evident in Figure 2, the painting depicts three angels lingering over the shed of baby Jesus. The use of other sacred concepts, including the traditional techniques, illustrates the manner in which Aborigines have come to associate with modern spirituality. By personalising their understanding of Christianity, they are able to use the symbols from their sacred past of the dreamtime, illustrating the modern hybrids. Here, Aboriginal tradition had prevailed due to its ability to reconstitute itself, “as to live on in new forms and guises” (Gross 1992, p.4). Despite the Europeans efforts to eradicate the populations connection with their past, Aborigines have been able to assimilate their culture into a modern framework, allowing them to use their tradition to associate with modernity.



Figure 2 – ‘Jesus Nativity Scene’

#### IV. The Rejection of an ‘Indigenous Modernity’ by the European Elite

Despite the adoption of modern spirituality, Europeans denied the existence of an “Indigenous Modernity” and maintained the association of Aborigines with “otherness”, evident through the omission of the Indigenous people from the Australian Constitution. During the early periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the mentality of the Europeans had noticeably shifted. Aborigines were no longer regarded as subjects of modernisation, as was evident in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, they were deemed to be the relic of the Stone Age, who were possibly even subhuman (Attwood et al. 1994), and thus were incapable of contributing to a modern democratic society. Therefore, the exclusion of Aborigines from the Australian Constitution was justified by the theory of Social Darwinism, which would naturally eradicate this “primitive” populace.

In Figure 3, the Lin Onus’ oil painting, entitled *Firing the Humpy* (Museum of Sydney 1982) has reinforced this European motive to “wipe out” the Aboriginal population. The illustration depicts Europeans to be watching a burning corrugated iron humpy with a chimney. The attitude of these observers is uncanny – there is no remorse for obliterating

the Indigenous peoples’ unique association with their land. It was deemed to be necessary to allow for the progression of modernity. This illuminates modernity’s dark persona exposed at the exhibition, while simultaneously providing an insight into the mindset of the Europeans during this period. Modernity’s rejection for the past had clouded their ability to recognize Aboriginal people as a population with a distinct culture in need of preservation.



Figure 3 – ‘Firing the Humpy’

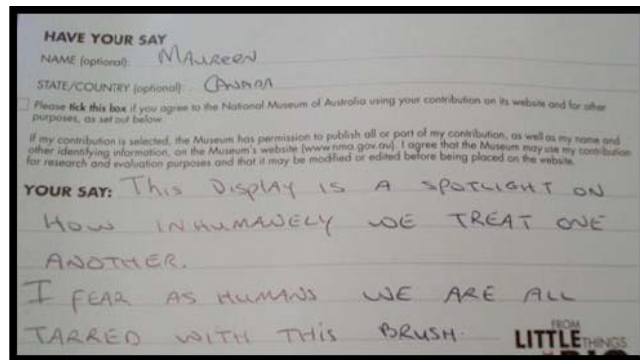


Figure 4 – Acknowledgements

The Europeans used aggression to enforce modernity upon the Aboriginal population. In effect, this elucidated in the war of the “Ancients” versus the “Moderns”. Those who were fighting to preserve their cultural tradition were faced with uncontrolled aggressive forces which became more manifest during times of revolt, evident in Figure 5. This Aboriginal rebellion-ship towards Europeans is vividly displayed at the exhibition. As depicted in Figure 6, Bill Onus’ Australian Aborigines League banner had ultimately provided a voice for the Aborigines to unite against their association with “otherness”. It can be argued that during the colonial period these uncontrolled forces had influenced the actions and mentality of the Europeans. Social Darwinism had been applied within Australia with approximately 20, 000 Aborigines killed by white violence, ten times the number of whites killed by the blacks (Kercher 1995). This inhumane behaviour exhibited by Europeans gives rise to Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis. His theory extrapolated that all humans have primitive sexual aggressive forces hidden deep within their minds, which if not controlled, would lead individuals and society to chaos (Freud 1963). Museums have effectively documented these uncontrolled aggressive forces which can be argued to shape and influence the direction of history. History is a depiction of human struggles (Gillen & Ghosh 2007), where the Aborigines were subjected to an aggression that continues to discourse within Australia’s colonial history.

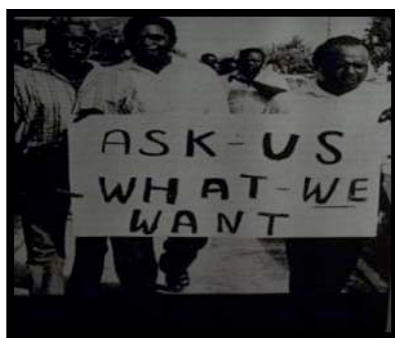


Figure 5 – Ask Us What We Want



Figure 6 – The Australian Aborigines League



The subjection of Aborigines to racial inequality functions to perpetuate this association with “otherness”, evident in our present day. Despite social movements to negate racial inequality, discrimination remains a factor contributing to the exclusion of Aborigines from mainstream society. This is primarily caused by the theory of Social Darwinism which unconsciously operates within the minds of the non-Aboriginal population, who have adopted Westernised ideals. Such Western ideals are made evident by the social hierarchy implemented by the Europeans, which placed the Aborigines at the inferior end of the scale. In written law, Aborigines are seemingly “equal” to the non-Indigenous population. The 1967 Referendum allowed for Aboriginal people to be included in the census by removing the impendent in section 127 of the Australian Constitution, and permitted for the Commonwealth to make laws in regards to Aboriginal people (Parkinson 2005). It was held that Aborigines had attained the formal recognition that they should be “equal” with the moderns. As depicted in Figure 7 and 7.1, changes to the Australian Constitution would function to eradicate the racial inequality which severely taunted this population, effectively allowing Aborigines to walk the same path of modernity that Europeans formed.

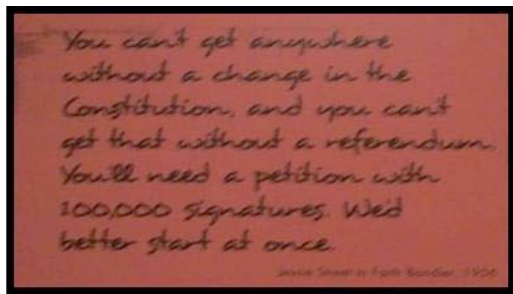


Figure 7 – Constitutional Endeavours



Figure 7.1 – Unity

However, the 1967 Referendum did not defeat the association of Aborigines with “otherness”. To date, there remains a silent massacre in the form of racial discrimination which targets this population. According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, in Western Australia, Indigenous young people are five times more likely to have had contact with the police and 29 times more likely to have been arrested (Putt 2009). The statistics in New South Wales do not depart from this, with Indigenous youth being more likely than non-Indigenous youth to be taken to court, and less likely to be cautioned by police (Putt 2009). In explaining the disparity of these statistics, Luke and Cunneen have argued that racial bias in the exercise of police discretion early in the criminal law justice system has contributed to the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in juvenile detention centres and prisons (Putt 2009). Hence, the colonial image of Aborigines as inferior and primitive operates at the subconscious of every individual who has adopted a Westernised mindset, continuously subjecting Aborigines to “otherness”.

## V. The Issues Surrounding Authenticity

The continuous association of Aborigines with “otherness” is caused by the stereotypes which encircle this minority group in Australia. A widespread misconception is that by Aborigines becoming more educated and Westernised, all that will remain is a farfetched image of their authentic roots. This underlying assumption as explained by Hudson (2010) informs that the only genuine Aborigine is the darker, remote Aborigine, living out in the bush. Here, the notion of Aboriginality is limited to the idea of “the savage”, introduced by the Europeans. The forcibility of this stereotype must not be overlooked, as it remains a

key factor for denying the existence of an “Indigenous Modernity” by the non-Aboriginal population. This image “subjectifies” Aborigines to the colonial out-dated perception of their inhabitancy. As modernity was a symbol of order and progress, ““primitive” Aboriginality of the tribal and traditional had presented notions of disorder and chaos.

It is contradictory that society expects Aborigines to abide by this stereotype, yet it criticizes them for what is perceived to be their lack of assimilation. Interestingly, development and progress in Aboriginal societies are understood to cause cultural disintegration. Europeans are able to create one identity which is spread across many ancestries, yet Aborigines will be labelled as half castes, or quarter castes in doing the same (Attwood et al. 1994). In effect, Aborigines are in a constant battle to prove their legitimacy, not just as members of a community, but as people who embrace a valid connection with their Indigenous heritage. What is valid has constantly been overshadowed by this stereotype of the remote Aborigine, which restricts the definition of an “Aboriginal” to the colonial context of Australia.

Those who see cultural preservation as being of primary importance often vilify proponents of mainstream education, employment and private property rights for Aboriginal people. As if by advocating for these basic rights, they are guilty of committing a form of cultural genocide (Hudson 2010, p.26).

In our contemporary society, it can be argued that the majority of Aborigines have assimilated into Australian culture. In Figure 8, it is evident that even during periods of protest, Aborigines had accepted modern attire in order to be acknowledged within Australian society. Despite the stereotype of the remote Aborigine, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) notifies that only 24% of Aborigines live in rural suburbs. This suggests that the majority are integrated amongst other urbanised communities, negating this image of the isolated Aborigine who lives in the wilderness. However, tradition is still maintained amongst the Indigenous population as a gateway for understanding their place in the world, regardless of their occupancy. This is evidenced with the story of Rebecca Richards in “Road to Success” (ABC 2011). Richards was the first Indigenous person to achieve the honour of winning the Rhodes Scholarship, allowing her to further her studies at Oxford University. Despite her ability to adapt to modern society, Richards’ father maintained the importance of tradition by regularly teaching her the stories associated with the Aboriginal dreamtime and traditional songs. Richards shares that by weaving her Aboriginal tradition and educational endeavours, she was able to “create something new” (ABC 2011), highlighting the modern hybrids which give rise to the formation of an “Indigenous Modernity”.

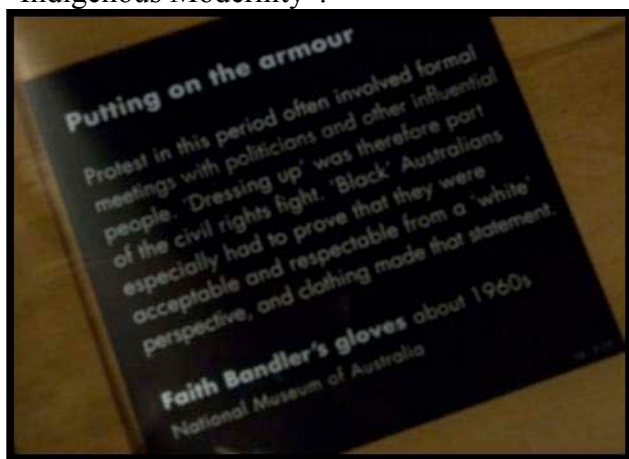


Figure 8 – Putting on the Armour



## VI. Conclusion

One cannot examine the effects of modernity without considering both perceptions of the Europeans and the Aborigines. The existence of an “Indigenous Modernity” will continue to be denied by the modernists whilst Aborigines are perceived to be the minority group maintaining the image of “otherness”. This “otherness” is evident at the exhibition, through different visuals of the Aboriginal and European perspective, and has continued to the present day in denying an “Indigenous Modernity”. However, through the eyes of the Aborigines, an “Indigenous Modernity” exists in our modern society, as indicated through their adoption of modern spirituality and urbanised lifestyle. The ability of Aborigines to detach from a way of life which had once defined them is sheerly undervalued in today’s society. For the Europeans, modernity defines itself by rejecting tradition, though for the Aborigines, modernity provides a portal for understanding past traditions, in order to comprehend the future.

## Notes on Contributor

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