

# *I Love A Sunburnt Anomaly: The Polarisation Of The Australian National Identity.*

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This article will argue that Janet Laurence's and Fiona Foley's 'Edge of the Trees', a permanent installation at the entrance to the Museum of Sydney, is an allegorical microcosm of non-Aboriginal Australia's and, in some ways, Aboriginal Australia's current perception of its Aboriginal history and its place in a national identity. This article will examine the role of the 'Aboriginal Memorial' and contemporary Aboriginal art, in particular that of Laurence and Foley, in relation to traditional and modernist ideologies. The work will be exposed as an expression of modernist and colonialist ideas, rather than the traditional memorial and somewhat all-inclusive postmodern perspective that is implied and perhaps intended. The argument will expose the ambiguity within the concepts of traditionalism and modernity and will ultimately deduce that for two nations to survive distinctively, in close proximity to each other, they must maintain difference, even though that means never reaching complete acceptance or forgiveness. Australian society, much like the 'Edge of the Tress' installation, will forever oscillate between binding and separation, between "us" and "them".

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

William Forkner, *Requiem for a Nun*.

This article will argue that Janet Laurence's and Fiona Foley's 'Edge of the Trees', a permanent installation at the entrance to the Museum of Sydney, is an allegorical microcosm of non-Aboriginal Australia's and, in some ways, Aboriginal Australia's current perception of its Aboriginal history and its place in a national identity. This article will firstly examine the role of the 'Aboriginal Memorial' and contemporary Aboriginal art, in particular that of Laurence and Foley, in relation to traditional and modernist ideologies. Upon close inspection of the elements of the installation and in comparison to the elements of 'Aboriginal Memorials' within Australia generally, similarities will be drawn with Romantic European representations of indigenous people. The work will be exposed as an expression of modernist and colonialist ideas, rather than the traditional memorial and somewhat all-inclusive postmodern perspective that is implied and perhaps intended. A doubling of "otherness" within both white and Aboriginal postcolonial society will be explored and will lead to this article stressing the racial tensions between white and Aboriginal Australians. The argument will expose the ambiguity within the concepts of traditionalism and modernity and will ultimately deduce that for two nations to survive distinctively, in close proximity to each other, they must maintain difference, even though that means never reaching complete acceptance or forgiveness. Australian society, much like the 'Edge of the Tress' installation, will forever oscillate between binding and separation, between "us" and "them".

First, to clarify, tradition or traditionalism is often referred to as an individual or group's defence of historical and cultural practices (Keeble 1994, p. 17). It has a vast array of associations, on the one hand it can be viewed as noble and 'closer to humanity's state of blessed innocence' (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p.20) and on the other, it is perceived as primitive, savage and degenerative (Thomas 1994). As Keeble understands:

The word "tradition", from the Latin *traditio*, indicates a transmission, a handing over, a handing down of something received. Clearly such a transmission must involve a language of some sort...the content and the modes of this language comprise the primary dimensions of tradition. (Keeble 1994, p.17)

Modernity is often understood as being a somewhat separate entity to tradition, almost the polar opposite. At its core are notions of progression, development and abandoning what was and is for what might be (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 33). It is also referred to as a continuation of the Enlightenment, an era Gillen and Ghosh (2007, p.33) explain as having been 'imbued with a sense of life being in transit from a primitive origin to a utopian end'. The belief in the potential for social and societal progress, through reason, effort and intelligence is essential to enlightenment philosophy and modernist reasoning (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p 33).

Janet Laurence's and Badtjala artist Fiona Foley's 'Edge of the Trees' public installation at the entrance to the museum of Sydney is made up of 29 massive, sandstone, wood and steel pillars and is reminiscent of a forest or collection of buildings. 'The names of 29 Aboriginal clans from around Sydney are etched on and correspond to 29 vertical poles. As one walks between the pillars, the names of places in Sydney are spoken by Koori voices' (Museum of Sydney 2010). In this way, the work also resembles artworks such as *Aboriginal Memorial* by the Ramingining artists, at the National Gallery of Australia, and *Memorial* outside the Mission Church, Gunwinku, Elcho Island. Such works aim to evoke an Aboriginal burial ground of traditional Hollow Log Bone Coffins and are often a collection of different sized poles painted with sacred markings (Smith 2001, p. 644). The Museum of Sydney is built on one of white Australia's most significant historical sites, specifically where,

Australia's first Government House was built in 1788 as a home and office for the colony's Governor, Arthur Phillip. The museum forecourt, known as First Government House Place, preserves the remaining foundations of the house below, while aboveground the extraordinary art installation *Edge of the Trees* marks the site of first contact between the British colonisers and the Gadigal people. (Museum of Sydney 2010)

It is this historical significance and the ever-changing function and form of the site, which moves the meaning of the content of the work from respecting and upholding a predominantly Aboriginal past and thus tradition, to acting as a symbol for renovation, progress and thus modernism. The work utilises materials in an attempt to symbolise three separate ideologies, wood (tradition), sandstone (a symbol of modernity and progress in early settler colonies) and steel (perhaps a symbol of "postmodern" Australia today, in particular the metropolis which now encompasses the site). Upon first inspection, it would seem as though the installation is attempting to recreate a respectful intermingling of cultures. The very fact that the site is named

*Edge of the Trees*, perhaps in the intention to encourage a certain site-specific historical awareness, quite clearly reinforces a belief about Aboriginal people as “fringe dwellers” (Kearney cited in Rekhari 2008, p. 126). As Haskins (2009, p.156) clarifies, when speaking of colonial fixations with the alleged “half-caste problem” in the major cities over the nineteenth and twentieth century’s, ‘wherever “civilized” white settlement became established, Aboriginal people were viewed with suspicion and under the strictest surveillance, increasingly segregated on reserves set aside for them outside the civic space in a re-enactment of the “fringe camps” of emergent bush townships’.

This very idea of a national biological cohesion and avoiding racial contamination from the 1930s to the 1960s, painted Aboriginal Australians as “problems” and threats to a white, British imperialist nationhood. Such views have thus brought about, or indeed added to, the quite frequently “tip-toed” around and ambiguous notion of Australian nationality. As Moran (2005, p. 177) notes ‘racism is not necessarily logically or internally consistent. Australian racism had within its repertoire of understandings the claim that Aboriginal blood was closely enough related to “Caucasian” blood as to render the issue of absorption less controversial’. The inconsistency and illogicality behind the “half-caste problem” lead to a number of tragedies within the Aboriginal population, such as the stolen generations, who were assimilated through a process of miscegenation, which required the removal of “half-caste” children from their families. Moran (2005) also argues that the ‘many meanings of assimilation reflected the confused understanding of the nature of the Aboriginal “problem” ... and [reflected] concerns about the “half-castes”, their relationship to the “full bloods” and to the white Australian community’ (p. 174). The assimilation of “half-caste” children and women into society created an obvious racial distance between Aborigines and Europeans, both physically and cognitively. It is this racial distance and confusion regarding determining who was eligible for cultural absorption that fuelled many of the racial tensions that exist today. Many “mixed blood” Aboriginal people were forced to assimilate into European societies and their ways of life and many “full bloods” were not. One can only imagine the kind of confusion and frustration this would cause a young child and the devastation this would do to a culture and a community. If Europeans themselves were, until recently, confused about the nature of their nationhood, certain ramifications today are frankly inevitable.

Terry Smith (2001, p.629), in his exploration of ‘Public Art between Cultures: The "Aboriginal Memorial," Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia’ argues that since the 1970s, Aboriginal art has played a major role in ‘securing political gains for Aboriginal people’. In particular Smith draws attention to Michael Jagamara Nelson’s Bicentennial mosaic design outside Parliament House in Canberra. In Smith’s article, Nelson spoke of his artwork and his culture, stating ‘You, the white people, took this country from us ... White people must understand. This country is Aboriginal people’s homeland ... We want to keep our culture strong for our children's children’ (2001, p. 631). In this way the ideas behind “tradition” help us to understand Aboriginal memorial art spaces as Nelson defends his cultural and historical practices in the present. Smith argues that Aboriginal memorials and public art sites such as these are often in direct response to, and in rejection of, the bicentenary and the white Australian identity that, for them, comprises their culture’s obliteration and destruction. Smith also argues that in 1988, the year of the bicentenary, the very idea of a *nation* was at stake and so to build a consensus, the Australian Government conceived the bicentenary, which

manifested itself on many levels. This encouraged many in the “culture industries” to ‘rethink nationality from critical perspectives’ (p. 635). Smith goes on to express the tensions that exist around nationality due to

The doubled foundational and fundamental national ideologies: imperialist and nativist, with the first usually attracting a string of conservative reflexes (English, empire, ruling class, Anglican, global capitalism), the second a more radical set (Irish, republican, working class, Catholic, modernist). (Smith 2001, p 635)

This very idea of Australian nationality as an “awkward intertext” (Smith 2001, p. 635) has given birth to public art such as ‘Edge of the Trees’ which thus represent a much broader expression of opinion. As both a non-Aboriginal and an Aboriginal Australian created ‘Edge of the Trees’, the controversy surrounding the issue is heightened. If it were merely a non-indigenous artist, one could claim that Aboriginal tradition and art was being exploited as a commodity (which occurs often in Australia) or, conversely, if it were just created by the Aboriginal Australian, as Bhabha notes, the work would ‘not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; [but would renew] the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space, which innovates and interrupts the performance of the present’ (namely modern white Australia)(Smith 2001, p. 657). This conjunction of artists suggests both cultures have reached a consensus on depicting Aboriginal culture as the primitive “other”. Nicholas Thomas (1994) justifies, “Primitivist” idealizations are advanced not only by whites but also by some Aborigines and some Maori, and their evident strategic value in advancing the recognition of indigenous cultures clearly precludes any categorical rejection of the whole [primitivist] discourse’(p. 57).

European film, art and music often romantically depict Aboriginal or indigenous people as “at one with nature”, primitive and yet also portray them as easy to conquer. Rekhari (2008, p.129) explicates, when exploring the exclusion of Aboriginal identity in Australian cinema, ‘the contrast of a non-Aboriginal Self is placed in direct opposition to an Aboriginal Other, substantiated by the belief in the “primitive” affinity with nature versus the “civilized” urban way of life’. In early Australian colonial art, the indigenous are often portrayed as part of the harmonious whole, as ‘nature’s children’ [who] might presumably disappear with the civilising influence of European domination...the Indigenous figures were also shown as subsidiary to the “improvements” brought by the settlers; portrayed as temporary figures at the edges of the landscape’s stage as “fringe-dwellers” ’ (National Library of Australia 2010, section 2).

The site projects a culture that is, in fact, slowly being phased out. When one looks at the work at eye level, it seems as though Aboriginal culture is rendered as dominant. However, one merely has to change the angle of their viewing to notice a myriad of high-rise buildings enveloping the site. Certain similarities can be drawn here between depictions of Aboriginal culture in a degrading sense and ‘Edge of the Trees’. The wooden poles etched with Aboriginal clan names serve to position the Aboriginal culture they represent as being dominated by postcolonial agendas.

Although this article has sought to delve deeply into tradition and modernity in relation to Laurence and Foley's work, the site also exposes the work as projecting modernist notions, whilst rejecting the ideas of modernism in an artistic sense. Primarily, this is because it lacks a traceable structure and consistency. It employs a sense of superficial 'pluralism, absence of universally binding authority, levelling up of hierarchies, interpretive polyvalence' (Bauman cited in Herrero 2005, p. 132). The experience of the work changes with time, depending upon where you stand and also depending upon what sounds are playing one's interpretation will be different. The paralleled nature of their work with the site's history is also a postmodern concept. It projects a pluralistic and all-encompassing view of our human existence, using self-referential irony and juxtaposition of material elements to question the sharp classification of black versus white (Herrero 2005, p. 132). One critic, Jens-Uwe Korff, quixotically sugar-coats it – 'the steel poles act almost like a needle which injected a new era into the century-old ancient culture' (Creative Spirits, 2010). The work, on the surface, appears postmodern, as it depicts an incredulous attitude towards the 'political narrative about the history of nationalist struggle' (Butler 2002, p.14).

Dr. Fidel Fajardo-Acosta defines postmodernism as being:

Characterized by emphasis on the ideas of the decenteredness of meaning, the value and autonomy of the local and the particular, the infinite possibilities of the human existence, and the coexistence, in a kind of collage or pastiche, of different cultures, perspectives, time periods, and ways of thinking. (Fajardo-Acosta, 2010)

The work's apparent intention of celebrating "coexistence" merely serves to make more obvious the distinction between Aboriginal and European culture. It reinforces the artists' and thus society's continuation of modernist and colonialist power anxieties in an attempt to "uncontaminate" white Australia. In so doing, it demonstrates the crisis and inherent contradiction within Australian society – forced binding with inevitable disconnection.

Ernest Renan describes a nation as:

A soul, a spiritual principal. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principal. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form... To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more – these are the essential conditions of being a people... The Spartan song – 'We are what you were; we will be what you are' – is, in its simplicity, the abridged hymn of every *patrie*. (Renan, 1990, p.19)

If a nation then, is a people who have "common glories in the past", Europeans and Aboriginal Australians will never be and can never be one nation. There are no common glories, only uncommon catastrophes, and the very fact that one such catastrophe was to force together a people who were inherently distinct 'adds even deeper dimensions to the sense of betrayal

Aborigines associate with the assimilation period' (Moran 2008, p. 193) and certainly does not encourage Renan's 'present-day consent, the desire to live together'. In this way our social order is essentially contradictory. On the one hand, part of Australian society is following the capitalist narrative of rise and fall – postmodern values rejecting modern values (just as the Enlightenment rejected the Renaissance), and yet a confident, traditional, aboriginal culture devastated by a progressive society's invasion will forever haunt Australian society.

Moran (2008, p. 193) suggests there was a 'general fissure between those who saw some value in the (albeit restricted) maintenance of aspects of Aboriginal life and tradition, and those who advocated the continuance of the processes of dismantling of culture in the effort to produce individual Aboriginal citizens no different to other white citizens'. While this argument explores the meaning of tradition in relation to Aboriginal society, it seems to be the misunderstanding of tradition in Australia that is part of the issue. Tradition is not an unchanging and strict adherence to certain practices; it is ever relevant to the present and is progressive just as modernity is, as it needs to be renovated and restored in order to be maintained. It seems the commonly understood definition of tradition is fundamentally flawed.

'Edge of the Trees' projects Australian national identity as unstable, quite disorderly and confusing. Just as McCrone and McPherson (2009, p. 16) refer to Michael Billig's term of "banal nationalism", that is, the idea that 'nationalism is constructed and reconstructed on a daily basis not by flags which are obtrusively waved "in our faces" but by "flags hanging unnoticed on a public building" (because they are not, of course, unnoticed)' and condemn the National Day for falling short of this "hypodermic-needle" narrative, constantly referring to, ever determining our acceptance of and saying "sorry" to our Aboriginal co-inhabitants, is not a formula for genuinely binding a people together. It seems it is the *impression* that is the agenda, but is not *the* agenda, which is perhaps quite the opposite. As Gillen and Ghosh (2007, p. 20) explain 'the otherness of colonised persons is neither inherent nor stable: his or her differences had to be defined and maintained'.

What remains to be noted here is not that Laurence and Foley are purposefully demeaning Aboriginal society, they are, merely, a product of their times and their teachings and prove modernity and tradition are not mutually exclusive. Laurence and Foley expose the vagueness and codependency of the two discourses and in doing so denote their own inner enemies and identity insecurities. Even though Laurence and Foley are presenting the ideas of tradition in their acknowledgement of customs, tribal names and so forth, the concept of their work overall is safely within the bounds of a progressive society. They are representing a concept from the Enlightenment which presents history not as 'an aimless chronicle but a developing process of constantly shifting struggles, in the course of which humanity achieves freedom by learning about itself and the world' (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p 33). This preoccupation with divisions and hybridity only works to make more apparent the difference between the two cultures. This suggests we may never be one nation; rather our national identity will forever fluctuate between superficially including, but intrinsically excluding, Aboriginal society. As Graeme Davison notes:

There are some Australians who are uncomfortable with the open-ended, uncertain nature of historical debate, and who yearn for the security of an authorized version of the national past...Our cultural institutions have

already suffered much from the heavy hand of political correctness, of both left and right varieties. Perhaps it's time to reclaim them for the majority of citizens who are less interested in enlarging our imaginations, feeding our senses, expanding our geographical and intellectual horizons. (Davison 2004, p. 61)

## Notes on Contributor

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