

Colonial Creativity: Constructions of Indigenous Australians in the Age of Modernity

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The contemporary context of Australia cannot be understood in isolation from its colonial past. As a powerful force of modernity seeking to defy geographical boundaries and advocate for the progress of man from all empires and local landscapes, colonialism has had a profound impact on even the most organic and timeless modes of thought. The tradition and culture of Indigenous Australian's have been deeply challenged in regards to their relevance for the modern nation state, predicated on an alternate worldview privileging human populations as objects of examination and control, rather than as the producers of authentic cultural knowledge. Subsequently, this article will critique the construction and relevance of Indigenous tradition and knowledge within Australia's contemporary postcolonial context. In order to do so, the article will examine the political and cultural paradigms resulting in representations of the colonial subject as primitive and 'other,' ultimately enabling British colonial powers to assume hegemony over the local inhabitants and their ideological worldview founded in local tradition. The divide established between traditional knowledge and the modern notion of scientific thought will be addressed in order to expose the marginalisation and silencing of contemporary Indigenous populations due to their intrinsic, spiritual connection to the past. This modern attempt to deny Aborigines contemporaneity will be examined through the physical and contextual setting of Brenda Croft's Indigenous artwork titled *Wuganmagulya*, located in Farm Cove in Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden. The article will conclude contemporary discourses of urban modernity have resulted in the emergence of commodified forms of Aboriginal tradition that attempt to conceal the cultural waste produced during the context of colonisation.

Keywords: Indigenous, Aboriginal, Modernity, Tradition, Culture, Knowledge

*Gumtree in the city street,
Hard bitumen around your feet,
Rather you should be
In the cool world of leafy forest halls
And wild bird calls
Here you seem to me
Like that poor cart-horse
Castrated, broken, a thing wronged,
Strapped and buckled, its hell prolonged,
Whose hung head and listless mien express
Its hopelessness.
Municipal gum, it is dolorous
To see you thus
Set in your black grass of bitumen-
O fellow citizen,
What have they done to us?
Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 1960.*

I. Introduction

“What is meant by ‘modernity’ varies greatly, and depends on the historical narrative one is constructing” (Armstrong 2005, p.845).

It is the intent of this article to detail the narrative of colonialism as it has been applied to shape the value Australian society holds for Aboriginal tradition and culture, within the context of the past, present and future. During the colonial period, the category of ‘the other’ was established as a viable binary opposition to the coloniser, or white man. The imposition of this subordinate identity enabled the coloniser to disregard the knowledge and tradition of local inhabitants of holding any rational value or relevance to the progress of mankind, whilst affirmed their imperialistic ideals. Modernity, in its fascination with processes of categorisation and control has therefore sought to regulate the extent to which Aboriginal thought and tradition can be deemed contemporary or modern. Caught within a dichotomy championing the objectivity of science and rational ideology that is not fixed within a particular context, but rather can transcend the boundaries of time and space, Aboriginal traditions and identities have increasingly become constructed as static or insular. Inevitably, this raises social and cultural implications for modern representations of Aboriginality, in which suburban indigenous people are expected to identify with the “ritual, spiritual and philosophical underpinnings” (Cowlshaw 2009, p. 184) of a past Aboriginal identity they can no longer associate with.

This complex narrative of colonial naming and the construction of ‘the other’ manifests within Brenda Croft’s Indigenous artwork titled *Wuganmagulya*, located in Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens. Constructed in 2000 as one of twenty other public artworks commissioned for the Sydney Sculpture Walk, the artwork can politically be deemed a romantic celebration and display of Sydney’s undeniable connection with past landowners, so that the increased number of tourists drawn to Sydney during the 2000 Olympic Games may recognise a modern acknowledgement of the past. Intricately stained into the concrete of the water side walkway, the mural-style artwork depicts scenes from local rock carvings, most of which have been naturally eroded over time and can no longer be identified. Accompanied with other essential signifiers of Aboriginal culture, including etchings of the names of significant individuals, spiritual sites, animals, tools and rituals, the artwork further pays tribute to the original Yura inhabitants of the site, as well as those who traversed the land to participate in traditional ceremonies in Sydney Cove (Croft 2001).



Figure 1.1- Brenda Croft’s artwork titled *Wuganmagulya*, located in the Royal Botanic Gardens in

Sydney, NSW. Viewed 2 April 2011, <http://www.google.com>

Discourses of urban modernity are reflected in the physical state of the site itself, with the original shoreline of the cove concealed behind a wall of shaped sandstone, whilst the segment of the path the artwork occupies once featured an expanse of mudflats. The natural beauty of the physical surroundings, however, is in a state of conflict with knowledge of the unnatural conquest of the land that enabled the forces of modernity to transform Sydney into an urban space of colonial property, capital and technological dominance over the original Indigenous landowners. Thus, the pavement installation will be discussed in relation to how it relocates Aboriginal tradition to a silenced, non-existent sphere of urban living. The artwork does not value the significance of Indigenous tradition to a contemporary Australian identity, but rather acts a technology of memory designed to permanently fix a second class belief system in a past time and space.

II. Colonialism, as a force of Modernity

“To consider modernism... is to deal with the notion of modernity as a series of epistemic shifts in systematic regimes of knowledge, communication and perception” (Armstrong 2005, p. 844).

Predicated upon the principle of self-improvement, modernity is founded in a “belief in the necessity of social progress” (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, p. 33). Therefore, colonialism, as a means of linking civilisations and systems of knowledge throughout the world can be perceived to hold its roots in The Age of the Enlightenment. If man was able to transcend beyond his own self-imposed immaturity (Kant 1784) founded in adherence to societal conventions and dominant philosophical ideology, it was believed he would irreversibly escape his primitive origins and achieve the Victorian ideal of progress (Wright 2004). Subsequently, “the hazardous romance of exploration and conquest came to fascinate Europeans and their descendants,” (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 12) as their hubristic desires drove them to gain dominion over the natural world and its primitive inhabitants.

“Two previously very remotely connected, if not completely separated cultural zones” (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, p. 13) came to confront one another in 1788 as the British arrived to the shores of Botany Bay. In order for British colonial powers to assume hegemony over the mysterious natives, it was necessary to appropriate Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist theory of meaning, whereby any given object could be assigned a culturally derived meaning so that it comes to signify or hold a particular symbolic value. Based on a series of physical and social attributes, including their skin colour, minimalistic culture and use of language, the local inhabitants of the land were labelled as the inferior element of a series of binary oppositions. Gillen and Ghosh affirm such hierarchal constructions through stating “nearly always, the settlers and their descendants hold a privileged position in the colonised society” (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 14).

The act of naming, however, is inherently linked to a key tenet of modern knowledge which is perceived to thrive on “abstract formation and exists divorced from the lives of the people” (Agrawal 1995, p. 425). The categorisation of Australia’s local inhabitants into ‘savages,’ ‘natives,’ ‘primitives’ and presently ‘Aboriginals’ essentially presupposes a relationship of power and control, whereby the colonial subject is seen as immature and in need of taming in order to be freed from the simplicity and irrationality of their traditional belief system. Subsequently, the ‘otherness’ of the colonial subject is to be perceived as “neither inherent nor stable: his or her differences had to be defined and maintained,” (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p.

20) a task that was effectively fulfilled through Saussure's structuralist theory of binary opposition.

Social Researcher Arun Agrawal states "The only choice one possesses about context is which context to highlight" (Agrawal 1995, p. 425). Brenda Croft's artwork *Wuganmagulya*, in its location and function fundamentally reflects the culturally derived superiority of modern thought over Indigenous tradition and their paradigmatic worldview. The privileging of Sydney's modern context over that of the original landowners is witnessed in its two dimensional quality; a mural citizens merely run over during lunch hour, or stand upon as they attempt to capture the perfect picture of the harbour, with both the flamboyant modern constructions of the Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge occupying the background. Like a "Gumtree in the city street," (Noonuccal, 1960) it stands in isolation from those whose culture has been reduced to the footpath, appropriated by the political interests of urban modernity. Is it rational that artist Brenda Croft was confined to a strict portion of the pavement to creatively provide Indigenous spirits "a sense of place, recognition and honouring," (Croft 2001, p. 121) whilst an alternate sculpture titled *Folly for Mrs Macquarie*, in reference to Lachlan Macquarie and his wife who governed Sydney from 1810 to 1821 is given a superior location at the main entrance to the gardens, and features a sturdy three dimensional structure of elaborately intertwined metal, indicative of the barbed wire that divided up the land? The relationship of power and control founded in colonial binary constructions has not been broken down within the contemporary context, but rather has been reinforced through civic installations seeking to mask the inequality of culturally constructed dichotomies.

III. Questioning traditional knowledge

In order to further analytically discuss the impact of modernity upon the continuity of Aboriginal tradition, it is necessary to question the parameters of tradition, and the alternate conceptions of common sense and natural tradition. These two definitions of tradition call into question whether the term refers to "a core of inherited cultural traits whose continuity and boundedness are analogous to that of a natural object, or must tradition be understood as a wholly symbolic construction?" (Handler & Linnekin 1934, p. 273) The conventional understanding of tradition as a set of unchanging common sense beliefs and customs, however, establishes a false dichotomy between tradition and modernity as rigid, mutually exclusive states. Moreover, M. E. Smith (1985) identifies "that 'traditional' and 'new' are interpretative rather than descriptive terms" (Handler & Linnekin 1934, p. 273). As culture is seen to shift and evolve ceaselessly, there can only ever be what is new, however what is new can assume symbolic value as 'traditional.' Modern thought, seen to facilitate the "closure of the cultural sphere; by a culturalisation of everything in human affairs, in which all knowledge is mediated by symbolic forms; and in which all knowledge is historically specific," has asserted a purely symbolic value of Aboriginal tradition, in order to silence any claims of relevance their spiritual ideology holds towards Australia's contemporary social, political and economic context. Whilst Croft's artwork depicts spiritual scenes and components of the natural world inextricably linked to Indigenous culture, it is merely a symbolic reconstruction void of contemporary significance, championing the discontinuity of tradition over simultaneous elements of continuity.

The subordinate status of Aboriginal tradition is further witnessed when placed in a dichotomy with the dominant Western scientific mode of thought. "Science is open, systematic, objective and analytical, and advances by building rigorously on previous

achievements” (Agrawal 1995, p. 421). In contrast, Indigenous knowledge or tradition can be perceived as a non-systematic, closed system based on common sense principles which are unable to retain their significance for development overtime. Consequently, as an immediate outcome of the dominance of modern modes of thought, Indigenous tradition and knowledge is disappearing or manifesting itself in increasingly simplistic forms throughout Sydney, as seen in Croft’s *Wuganmagulya*. Moreover, Agrawal suggests “it is this inattention to how power produces knowledge, and the acceptance of the rhetoric that ‘knowledge is power’ that perhaps drives contemporary civic authorities to marginalise displays of Aboriginal tradition and culture to a commemorative status. This ideology refers to Michel Foucault’s power/knowledge structure in relation to discourse theory, through which he claims “we should admit...that power and knowledge directly imply one another...if a discourse community holds a given statement to be true, this acceptance imbues it with a certain power in the context of that discourse” (Foucault 1979 p. 27). Within the discourse of contemporary modernity, and throughout the context of Australian colonialism, it has been civic authorities and government bodies that have possessed the power to define how Aboriginal tradition is to be practiced and represented within public spaces, and simultaneously the relevance such ‘common sense’ tradition holds to the social, cultural and political progress of the nation.

IV. Pavement installations- pathway or processes of burial?

In order to claim urban modernity has denied Aboriginal tradition contemporaneity and constructed it as a relic of the past, it is necessary to address how pavement installations, and more specifically *Wuganmagulya* itself functions as a technology of memory dramatically intended to symbolically transfer Indigenous knowledge and culture from the realm of the living to that of the dead. This notion is furthered by M. Hicks who asserts “memorial plaques and pavement installations in the city, whether miniature monuments, digests of historical information for tourists, or commissioned public artworks, are epitaphic” (Hicks 2009, p. 453). Identifying the tomb-like features of the pavement, civic authorities such as the City of Sydney Council have appropriated the tradition of the funeral inscription “from cemetery rows to cement sidewalks” (Hicks 2009, p. 254). Just as a burial ground may separate and conceal the stories and experiences of the deceased from concerns of the present, Croft’s artwork unconsciously works to embed Aboriginal tradition within the realm of the non-living.

“Beneath the pavement lies sandy inlets, reclaimed marches...trampled wildflowers, and the remains of exterminated animals. Beside these covered animals...lies middens, rock carvings and other vestiges of the lives of Indigenous people, left behind as those people were driven away” (Hicks 2009, p. 460).

Thus, installations upon the ground contain a profound elegiac quality, whilst intentionally or subconsciously signify the passing of earlier existences. Whilst *Wuganmagulya* presents as a gesture of inclusion, as a space to acknowledge traditional spirits and the original landowners of the area, it in fact further isolates Aboriginal people by casting them to the ground, amongst the deceased and those that are being memorialised through other pavement artworks.

The erosion of Indigenous culture due to its perceived irrelevance to modern progress is similarly exhibited within the permanent Writers Walk pavement installation located on the promenade in Circular Quay, Sydney. Whilst the stated function of the series of plaques is to “demonstrate the evolutionary process that continues to channel the thoughts and perceptions,

the hopes and the fears of writers who have know this great city and its people,” (Hicks 2009, p. 464) transcribed segments of lost Indigenous language replace the original literary quote. Subsequently, modernisation has simultaneously occurred with the degeneration of tradition and the corrosion of connections between locality and identity, (Fonteyn, 2009) as civic monuments seek to reflect the complexity of the urban experience and replace tradition with progress as “the ideological grout of modernity” (De Lorenzo 2002, p. 71).

V. Aboriginality today, and Issues of Authenticity

Within the contemporary post-colonial context, Australian urban space can be seen as a “manifestation of colonial property, capital and technological dominance separated from, and unaffected by the land upon which it exists or the Indigenous heritage of that land” (Fonteyn 2009, p. 197). Whilst the profound displacement of Aboriginal sites may not affect Australia’s predominantly white-Anglo population, complex issues of identity emerge as Suburban indigenous populations are expected to identify with such cultural sights and traditions that have been associated with Aboriginality since the colonial era. Gillian Cowlshaw further recognises the intricacy of the contemporary Indigenous identity through stating:

“What different people ‘make out of’ their Aboriginal ancestry seems to vary from pride to preciousness to hurt to resentment, and for some, a sense of loss or insufficiency. For many, it is simply the unremarked condition of life” (Cowlshaw 2009, p. 161).

In this sense, the binary opposition and dichotomy Aboriginal tradition was placed within against Western scientific thought at the time of colonisation has resonated to marginalise the modern Indigenous individual who is expected to exhibit elements of a ‘primitive’ culture that does not reflect their current time and space. Subsequently, Indigenous people have been assigned an identity based on symbols of a metaphysical past, such as an outback lifestyle, an understanding of dreamtime stories and the ability to use cultural tools such as the boomerang and didgeridoo. Such culturally constructed indicators of Indigenous tradition have been appropriated by civic authorities to produce commodified forms of Aboriginal culture. “Indigenous artefacts, paintings and dancing are displayed and performed as emblems of goodwill on official occasions,” (Cowlshaw 2009, p. 180) as decorative, tokenistic expressions, rather than as any challenge or attempt to breakdown the hierarchal binary construction between the traditional and modern. Consequently, it can be argued bureaucratic processes have attempted to encompass the contemporary Indigenous being within a homogenous, fixed Aboriginal identity that anchors them in the past, just as *Wuganmagulya* seeks to deny Aboriginal tradition contemporaneity through fulfilling an elegising function.

VI. Conclusion

The well-accredited philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood noted in his autobiography that “so long as the past and present are outside one another, knowledge of the past is not of much use in the present” (Macmillan 2009, p. 43). The powerful dichotomy established between Indigenous tradition and the modern notion of progress has been firmly engrained since the colonial context, successfully perpetuated by Foucault’s power/knowledge structure. It is evident that modernity acts to re-define sacredness and the value of tradition, “restraining or regulating it in certain ways, unleashing it in others, reformulating the context in which it manifests itself,” (Gelder & Jacobs 1998, p. 22) each shift essentially serving to reinforce the superiority of the modern paradigm and isolate Aboriginal tradition to the category of the

'pre-modern,' as seen through close analysis of Brenda Croft's artwork *Wuganmagulya*. Yet the traditional and modern do not have to be perceived as mutually exclusive states, incapable of coalescing to bring about a culturally-informed urban identity for the contemporary indigenous being. Contemporary constructions of Aboriginal tradition, like the series of categorisations and naming devices employed during the colonial context still seek to deny contemporaneity and an urban identity to Aborigines situated within Australia's current post-colonial context.

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