

Outstretched Hands: Reconciling past and present within the Parramatta Riverside Walk

Mona Malamiri

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney

This article argues that the art installation on the Parramatta Riverside Walk conveys a sense of the pre-colonial collectivist community through traditional modes of art, storytelling and interpretation. The art space raises issues of multiculturalism and reconciliation, reiterating these ideas within the public sphere of knowledge. Through exploring social, cultural, political and historical ideals manifested within the Parramatta region, and the wider Australian populace, this article demonstrates a continuity in combating issues facing the cultural integration and unity of indigenous and non—indigenous people in today’s world. Furthermore, by highlighting Aboriginal customs and values – namely spiritual and religious ideologies - the article denotes tradition to the rising popularity of ‘*avant-garde*’ mentalities and worldviews such as Neotribalism. It is the very essence of this relationship between Aboriginal traditional values and national heritage that, I argue, shapes social understanding and tolerance of indigenous culture.



‘The strength of the past in all aspects of life is far, far weaker than it was [even] a generation ago.’ – J.H. Plumb, English historian

It’s a warm spring day as I stroll along the foreshores of the Parramatta River. The air is thick with activity in the heart of Western Sydney, with the general hustle and bustle from the street overhead. When I turn around, I can see the entire Riverside Walk so far – the evocative mural pathway winding out of sight, the informative plaques and the native vegetation – and in the distance I can hear the voices and music playing from the Walk’s soundscape. This installation is a complete sensory experience. As I continue down the snakelike pathway, I reach the final plaque that reads ‘Reconciliation.’ I am standing on the section of the mural painted with outstretched hands, symbolizing the present moment and encapsulating the essence of the Australian story. The Parramatta Riverside Walk pays homage to the past.

Contrary to Plumb, I argue that within the context of Australian society, and more specifically the Parramatta region, recognition of the past remains at the foreground of national culture. In order to fully understand the present moment, it is essential to

revisit the past – the history and heritage of Australia. Designed in 2000, the site reflects the Aboriginal perspective, allowing an intimate journey through the history of the Darug people. For the particular frameworks of this article, I hope to explore the traditions and customs of the Aboriginal community prior to European settlement, as to shed light on the resonance of indigenous values within contemporary culture. With indigenous and colonial pasts deeply embedded within the space, the public is invited to reconsider key social, political and cultural ideas and movements that have assisted in the construction of our current postmodern world.

History, heritage and tradition

In perhaps his most renowned works, Plumb (1969) comments on what he believes is the ‘demise of the past,’ attributing this primarily to the progressive nature of modernity. Fueled by ‘*scientific and technological advances, faith in social engineering and impatience of tradition,*’ Plumb argues the past as irrelevant to modern social systems (Wallman 1992, p. 24). However, within contemporary Australia, this theory appears somewhat flawed. To explore traditional ideas embedded within the Australian context, it would be arbitrary to ignore the prevalence of the past in shaping our present time. Our nation is, after all, a product of its past. As Attwood (1996) notes, Australian society maintains ‘*a strong sense of the past, and this shows every sign of continuing to deepen.*’ More than ever, we have become aware of our Indigenous past, and we embrace this in understanding the world we live in.

The Parramatta Riverside Walk is a manifestation of this awareness. The installation itself promotes values of diversity and reconciliation, and challenges the colonial ‘*cult of forgetfulness*’ by explicitly addressing the past (Attwood 1996, xiv). From the imperialist convenience that was *terra nullius*, to the injustices faced by the Aboriginal community and notable individuals such as Pemulwuy and Bennelong, the Walk acknowledges culturally and regionally specific elements from the tumultuous history of the indigenous. Hence, the significance of this site lies with its communicative nature, fulfilling the intent of the artist,



Figure 1 - snapshot from Riverside Mural:
http://www.goodwalkingbooks.com/html/historic_walks.html

Jamie Eastwood, who hoped to provide “*insight into aspects of pre-European Parramatta history... and give recognition to the Burramattagal people and neighboring clans that originally occupied the area*” (Flynn 1997).

While exploring notions of the past, the installation reveals aspects of traditional Aboriginal customs, particularly highlighting values of spirituality and ancestry. The connection to nature and land defines indigenous worldviews and belief systems, and is demonstrated in the space through representation of Dreamtime art. Swain (1992) argues '*the essence of [Aboriginal] tradition is place*' and notes the significance of '*metaphysical primacy to place rather than to time*' (Attwood 1996, xiv). Thus, the Riverside Walk reflects not only broader Aboriginal culture but also embodies the unique environment of the land, using the symbols of eels and turtles to draw specific links between the native Darug custodians and the Parramatta region, and to further reflect the '*central tenet of traditional Aboriginal society*' (Fryer-Smith 2002, p. 2:2).

Spirituality and interconnectivity

The installation explores notions of 'interconnectivity' – a term which has been somewhat problematic in definition. Best described by anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner,

'No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland.' (Fryer-Smith 2002, p. 2:6)

The richness of the Aboriginal relationship with the land, as well as the deeply spiritual ideas of Dreamtime mythology, were foreign concepts to early colonial settlers (Thomas, 1994). With value assigned to science and progress, the dismissing of Indigenous spirituality by the Europeans was pertained. With this comes the creation of the 'primitivism,' a paradigm used to epitomize the '*sheer inversion and juxtaposition*' of indigenous and European cultures (Thomas 1994, p. 174). This debasement, alongside theories of Social Darwinism and racial superiority, typifies the cultural miscommunications of the colonial epoch.

To justify land rights and ownership, Europeans adopted the social derivative of Darwinism as the cultural norm. The essence of the paradigm lies in the discoveries of evolution by naturalist Charles Darwin, whose initial research found an '*overarching framework or chain...linking all creatures together*' (Francis 1997, p. 92). From this stemmed an evolutionary science that also described certain human races as competing in a 'struggle doomed to extinction' (Francis, 1997). Scholar Henry Reynolds (1986) argues that this racial ideology cemented the inferiority of Indigenous Australians, while fueling '*prejudice and structuring the policy of colonial and, later, state governments in their dealings with Aborigines*' (Francis 1997, p. 92).

In light of contemporary postmodern worldviews, and social postmodern mentality, these ideas of 'primitivism' have been eradicated, with the racial and political motives of past disparagements scrutinized. Although these falsities have disparaged as social norms, and have indeed been rectified as falsities by the very science that hoped to legitimize them, the paradigm of primitivism has been subject to renewal and serves a new purpose in our existing context.

Today, we find the spirituality of traditional Aboriginal culture resonating in contemporary mentalities. The postmodern ideals of truth and disillusionment have challenged modernist values of progress and enlightenment, with shift from the individual self, to the group. Theorists, such as Maffesoli, agree, suggesting that

postmodernism will soon *'result in a decline of individualism and the birth of a new neo-Tribal era.'* This movement reciprocates the collectivist nature of the Indigenous community, depicting the resurgence to tribe mentality. Moreover, the *'intellectual superiority of early societies'* has been seen as the fulcrum for the New Age interest in spirituality of contemporary culture (Thomas, 1994). As argued by Thomas (1994), Aboriginal culture and custom is *'original in a radical and absolute sense'* with a *'unified field of psychic energy... [offering] higher forms of happiness and sociality'* (Fryer-Smith, 2002). With postmodernity knowledge lending itself to the *'sensitivity of difference'* and reinforces tolerance to diversity (Lyotard 1979, p.37) progression of new thoughts and ideas are inevitable.

Stylistic Approach

“Apart from providing cultural education I hope that the pathways will provide something beautiful that will flow with the riverine environment.” – Jamie Eastwood, 1997

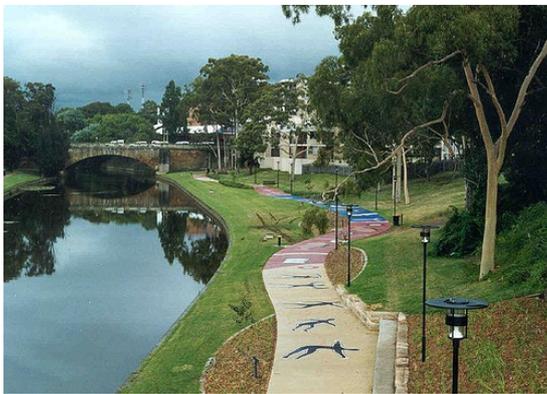


Figure 2 - aerial view of Riverside Mural art:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jmetzner/3693618049/>

Albeit the cultural significance of the Riverside Walk, Eastwood's intention of creating an aesthetically pleasing artwork coincides with the underlying values of the postmodern art movement. Intertwining elements of traditional and postmodern art styles, the Walk reflects not only native traditions, but reiterates the relevance of the past in contemporary society.

Of the many elements that form the entire installation piece, the focal point of the site is undoubtedly the mural pathway. Embedded within the chronological illustrations of the Aboriginal story, the pathway is essentially realized in a traditional Aboriginal style, with features distinctive to its form. Through the use of cultural semiotics, the site is instantly identified as a space of historical significance; however, the site also reveals much about the beliefs and values of the indigenous community through art representation.

Art in Aboriginal tradition maintains a way of life *'centered on enduring, religiously sanctioned relationships between people and land,'* (Morphy 1998, p.5) with its primary function to *'communicate ideas to specific person or groups of persons'* (Berndt 1982, p.41). Perpetuating customs and traditions, it denotes a means for *'keeping the past alive and maintaining its relevance to the present'* (Morphy 1998, p.5).

As aforementioned, the connection with nature is superlative to indigenous beliefs. Thus the tradition materials used in Aboriginal artworks were derived from natural resources. This too became influential of the colour palette using throughout the Aboriginal style even after the introduction of synthetic paints and colour. Using ochre, charcoal and clay to create a palette of 'reds, whites, yellows and blacks' (Berndt 1982, p.38), the maintenance of the artistic tradition again mirrors the continuity of ritual and custom, as well as cultural identity. This preservation of identity the Dreamtime depictions and unique art form proves pertinent throughout the history of post-colonial Australia, promoting the '*legitimacy of Aboriginal culture*' and countering stigmas of savagery and backwardness (Thomas 1994, p. 188).

Using both the distinct colour palette and stylistic approach, Eastwood conveys signs that reiterate the Dreamtime mythology. Using conventions of traditional Aboriginal artworks, there is a vast use of symbol through the mural painting, in addition to the lack of words and text to heighten the messages surrounded the space. The art is purely interpretive, allowing the individual to become fully immersed with the language of the presented denotations.



Figure 3 - Lizard art from the Riverside Mural:
http://camwest.pps.com.au/heritage/themes/theme_15.html

However, it is necessary to emphasize the Aboriginal art as simply coexisting within the premises of postmodern art. The site is essentially realized as 'installation art' – its use of interactive and mixed mediums, together with the unconventional presentation of the artwork ultimately alluding to the postmodernist style.

The Walk is a sensory exploration – the mural a display of colour and artistic technique inviting participants to engage with its story, the soundscape projecting voice and narration, Aboriginal music and sounds synonymous to indigenous culture, native grasses and trees planted around the pathway and feature lighting installed in surrounding areas. As referred to in my peer review, the reading *Postmodernism: A*

Rough Guide highlighted the ‘*figurative, rather than abstract*’ approach to postmodernist art, which reflects the very nature of the Riverside Walk (Curran et al 1996, p.57).

As stated by Natoli (1993), “*postmodern art simply is and must be experienced*” and while “*modernist art refers to a hidden meaning behind its surface... Postmodern art presents itself at surface.*” This reflects the very essence of the Riverside Walk and its intended experience. The artwork is presented at surface value, with corresponding plaques used to reiterate the narrative of the images. This elimination of ambiguity provides a concise delivery of the Aboriginal past, removing barriers that may hinder audience interaction. By approaching the installation in this matter, there is a sense of unity between Aboriginal and European cultures, and a mutually enhanced tolerance and understanding of their union.

Australia Today

When describing the ‘feel’ of postmodernism, Ignatieff (1989) claims postmodernity as the ‘*3-minute culture – the culture of the short attention span*’ where everything is increasingly the same everywhere (Curran et al 1996, p.61). If we observe even our micro worlds today, we can see this ‘3-minute culture’ exemplified with the growing popularity of social mediums over the last decade. Daily, we are invited to share personal updates, stories and experiences on social platforms such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter, however, particularly as the latter stipulates, only in ‘small bursts of information’ (<<http://www.twitter.com>>).

In our contemporary society, increasing access to mass mediums has resulted in the formation of a homogenized global community, where the geographical boundaries of nations are ‘transcended by advertising, marketing and satellite television, with transnational flows of information and culture’ (Curran et al, 1996). McLuhan (1964) refers to this homogenization as the creation of a ‘*global village,*’ where we are indeed more aware of the world as a single whole. With this comes interaction between different nations, cultures and customs, and the transmission of a range of ideology and belief. As the disintegration of the modernist system, postmodernity can thus be defined by its ‘*incredulity toward metanarrative*’ (Lyotard 1979, p.36) and its emphasis on social and cultural disillusionment. What progress is to modernity now translates as the recognition of man’s ‘*limits*’ to postmodernity (Curran et al 1996, p.51).

While theorists such as Marc (1995) have more recently blamed the spread of mass media for the evident Western ‘*lack of historical consciousness,*’ there is still a strong value of the past in the present moment, if not heightened by these new information systems (Morris-Suzuki, 2005). Within Australia, the awareness of other Indigenous communities, perhaps most relevant being the Maori groups, has aided in the reconciliation of our own histories. Through witnessing the ‘*cultural renaissance*’ of the Maori people, shifting mentalities of the Australian populace towards Aborigines are typified (Thomas 1994, p.184). Hegel (1990) comments that in order to ease the “*unhappy consciousness*” – the divided internal self – there is a “*necessity for reconciliation.*” The appeal of reconciliation then lies in the promise of “*a return to humanity’s proper abode where all estrangement is finally overcome*” for the establishment of a global community (Berstain 1992, p.294). This idealistic,

somewhat Romantic, perspective resonates in the reconciliation of Aborigines and Europeans in Australia, with a plaguing need to correct the injustices of the past, by an enlightened generation. This ties together with the aforementioned awareness of man's 'limits' and recognizing the wrongdoings of the past.

Contrary to the colonialist mentality of 'forgetfulness,' notions of multiculturalism and racial tolerance are pushed to the foreground of contemporary social concern. Particularly in light of our '3-minute culture,' the permanency of the Parramatta Riverside Walk solidified the Australian strive towards cultural equality. As mentioned by both peer reviewers, recent political events, namely Prime Minister Rudd's 'Sorry' speech, further allude to notions of reconciliation within Australian society. These public discussions signify, as noted by the reviewer, the intrinsic nature of multiculturalism within contemporary Australia and the demise of racial ignorance. Hence, this fixed installation compels the community to engage with the Aboriginal presence of the Parramatta region, and heightens their awareness of Australia's indigenous past, creating a more educated, tolerant population.

Conclusion

The complexities of both the traditional and postmodern epochs have indeed shaped the current nature of Australian society. With the foundations of the country stemming from Aboriginal and Indigenous culture, it is inevitable to explore the present moment without some recognition of the past. Through exploring the past, we are connecting with the traditional Aboriginal worldviews, beliefs and customs, and can further understand our own contextual space. The Parramatta Riverside Walk is reflective of the notions and values of equality, diversity and multiculturalism that have become synonymous with the city itself. The communicative nature of the installation art has provided insight into values of spirituality and community that underpins Aboriginal culture, whilst extending their significance within the broader Australian arena. Furthermore, the site has enhanced understandings of the present moment, through exploration of ideas rooted in history, politics and those aligned with social construction, namely primitivism, social Darwinism and neo-Tribalism. It is through these relationships of tradition and postmodernism that we can examine the global concepts and movements, and it is essentially through these macro ideologies that we can better understand aspects of our micro communities and cultures.

Notes on contributor

Mona Malamiri studies media arts and production at the University of Technology, Sydney.

References

- Attwood, B. (ed.) 1996, *In the Age of Mabo: history, Aborigines and Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Berndt, R.M. & Berndt, C.H. 1982, *Aboriginal Australian Art: A Visual Perspective*, Methuen, Sydney.
- Berstein, Richard J. 1992, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Curran, J., Morley, D., & Walkerdine, V. (ed.) 1996, *Postmodernism: A Rough Guide in Cultural Studies and Communications*, Arnold, London.

- Dallas, M. 2003, *Parramatta's Indigenous Heritage*, Parramatta City Council Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Study, viewed October 5, 2011, <http://www.parracity.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/51014/ParramattasIndigenousHeritage.pdf>
- Flynn, M. 1995, *Place of Eels: Parramatta and the Aboriginal People of the Sydney Region*, Form Architects, Parramatta.
- Francis, M. 1997, *Social Darwinism and the Construction of Institutionalised Racism in Australia*, The Australian Public Intellectual Network, viewed October 9, 2011, <http://www.api-network.com/main/pdf/scholars/jas51_francis.pdf>
- Fryer-Smith, S. 2002, 'Chapter Two: Aspects of Traditional Aboriginal Australia' from *Aboriginal Benchbook for Western Australian Courts*, The Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration (AIJA), viewed October 4, 2011, <<http://www.aija.org.au/online/ICABenchbook/BenchbookChapter2.pdf>>
- Hinkson, M. 2003, *Exploring 'Aboriginal' sites in Sydney: a shifting politics of place?* Australian National University, viewed October 4, 2011, <http://epress.anu.edu.au/aborig_history/ah26/pdf/ch04.PDF>
- Jordan, G. & Weedon, C. 1995, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Lyotard, J. F. 1979, The postmodern condition in *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London.
- Morphy, H. 1998, *Aboriginal Art*, Phaidon Press, London.
- Morris-Suzuki, T. 2005, *The past within us: media, memory, history*, Verso, London.
- Natoli, Joseph P. & Hutcheon, L. 1993, *A Postmodern Reader*, State University of New York Press, New York.
- Thomas, N. 1994, The Primitivist and the Postcolonial in *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Melbourne University Press, Victoria.
- Wallman, S. 1992, *Contemporary futures: perspectives from social anthropology*, Routledge, London.