

Postcards of the Past; Past, Present, Identity and Place

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In the first place, we should insist that if the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an Australian and assimilates himself to us, he shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed, or birthplace, or origin. But this is predicated upon the person's becoming in every facet an Australian, and nothing but an Australian... There can be no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an Australian, but something else also, isn't an Australian at all. We have room for but one flag, the Australian flag.... We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language... and we have room for but one sole loyalty and that is a loyalty to the Australian people.

Edmund Barton, 1907

I. Context

The North Head Quarantine station played a significant role in shaping the history of Australia. The station was first used as a site quarantining ships in the early 1800's, following a proclamation by Governor Darling. Prior to the construction of North Head, other sites around Sydney Harbour including Neutral Bay were used as temporary quarantine stations. Ultimately in 1828, the death of Darling's son prompted the Governor to distinguish that a better system of quarantine was essential. Over the next 30 years small improvements continued to be made to the Wharf Precinct and the segregation of people become more than that of separating those of poor health. Rather social stratification was based on dividing racial/cultural groups. Those white migrants who came ashore the Wharf Precinct delivered a sense of successful settlement and could continue due to 'the achievement of invisibility by the immigrants' (Morrissey et al 1991, pp. 25) thereby continuing a culture of white supremacy. Through a 'traditional' lens, the underlying foundation of Australia was associated with Britain's desire to manufacture a new colony associated with promise and glory. However, in order to achieve this desired level of supremacy, Australia would have no doubt but to mirror the Mother country shaping democracy and cultural preference "for the most obvious way to express what their society stood for was by recourse to religious language", so forth the Church of England and the Church of Scotland formed part of the system of the state. This particular site and more specifically the archeological inscriptions found here, inspires critical thought regarding the nature of the Australian identity. Despite having left one place, the immigrants birth place, being within the boundaries of Quarantine meant that they had also not entered Australia and thus a state of suspension between old and new homes manifested. Upon the arrival of immigrants at the Wharf Precinct, there was a shared desire among the migrants to inscribe their existence within the formation of the rocks at the station thereby proclaiming a sense of identity and providing a testimony to their survival thereby conforming to acts of belonging. A Chinese inscription made at the Wharf

Precinct communicated the pessimism felt by its creator during his stay a warning to those who may come that are not of the preferred status (Frederick, 2010).

Sky ... Ocean
I am very frightened of having the disease
Moreover the doctor is helpless to control the
sickness.
Feeling pessimistic and despondent.
I am not used to maintaining hygiene yet.
If you asked me the feeling about the voyage.
I shall persuade you never come here for pleasure.
Wish you good health and a long life.

Xie Ping De, a resident of HE Country
Early Summer, Ding Ji Year
(Xhoa and Zhou 1986)

The inscriptions found at the boundaries of North Head can be identified as postcards of the past in which can be used as measures to compare the ‘then’ and ‘now’. This essay will argue that the ideas and history associated with the North Head Quarantine station are not tools used to understand the past but rather a means to understand the present. In this essay the focus is driven towards the themes of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ how they are inextricably linked in the realm of cultural assimilation and the evolution of the superior race, changing the way settlement has been understood in Australia. Undoubtedly, the idea of modernity is attributed to the notions of ‘tradition’. However, by breaking down these notions through concepts of *progress* we able to account for the liminality of the immigration experience.

II. Colonialism and the Enlightenment, dynamism of Modernity

Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier,
in the hope of reaching at least a point that could be called a true present,
point of origin that marks a new departure. (De Man, 1970)

Modernity originally was founded as a “necessity of social progress” (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, pp. 33). The concept of modernity has inextricably been linked to the changing way settlement has been understood within contemporary Australia. In order to understand the concept of *assimilation and settlement today* we must navigate back through to the history of colonial Australia. It has been argued that ‘Australia’ exists predominantly as an idea. (White, 1997) Although through a geographical scope the very existence of Australia is real, as a “political entity.... Australia... is something we carry around in our heads” (White, 1997, pp. 13) Australia’s establishment was merely the reflection of European imposition. There was a shared belief that the new empire could be manufactured to meet the needs of the British civilian and that for ‘all the strangeness and harshness of the landscape it was amenable to improvement’ (White, 1997). According to Robert Bork, modernity is the child of the enlightenment (1927), and with that there was a communal view that society could be enhanced through the ‘application of reason’ (Gascoigne, 2002).

When the British came ashore at Botany Bay in January 1788, “two previously... if not completely separated cultural zones” (Gillen and Ghosh, pp. 13) came to challenge one

another. Thus, it was in the British colonies desire to subjugate and execute power over the existing savages thereby enforcing them to assimilate with the rest of British society. Their mannerism would have to change to therefore reflect the “normal Australian standards” (Burnett, 1998, pp. 6) thereby eradicating the savage’s cultural distinctiveness (Jakubowicz, 1989). Ferdinand De Saussure’s structuralists theory of meaning was inevitably adopted to execute such power whereby any given object can be subjected to a “culturally diverged meaning” (Nelson, 2011, pp. 3). This meaning is drawn upon both physical and social attributes including language, skin colour and ultimately culture whereby each subject withholds symbolic value based upon society’s ideal notion of supremacy. The process in which individuals were “grouped” was based upon the principles of ‘modern knowledge’. The categorization of Australia’s first dwellers as “savages” projects a relationship in which power and control is drawn over the subject by modern knowledge deeming them ‘immature’ (Kant, 1784) whereby they are in much need to be ‘tamed’ and thus condemned as ‘civilized’ as for “nearly always the settlers and their descendants hold a privileged position in the colonized society” (Gillen and Ghosh, 2007, pp. 14).

The British colony was drawn to the “application of reason” notion as it could be used as a tool in which could justify a social system based on hierarchy, for instance maintaining a white Australian status. (Gascoigne,2002) Therefore such Enlightenment goals were used as a badge to merely rationalize social position. At this stage within the ‘modern world’ the principle of social progress was not truly embraced; but rather taken advantage of. At this time the concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ were in a state of limbo and thus one concept had yet to govern the other. However, the enlightenment sought after to break the notions of tradition;

the progress of improvement appears slow, and fettered by obstacles almost insurmountable Whose baneful influence will continue, until a more enlightened system of policy shall be adopted (Gascoigne, 2002, pp. 10).

According to the studies of Gillen and Ghosh, there was a “belief of societies to organize their own self improvement” (Gillen and Ghosh, 2007, pp. 33) that inevitably became a key concept in the event of modernity. This notion had a major impact on the course of colonialism. Prior to the 17th Century human societies were completely unaware that had the potential to evolve and improve. German philosopher GFW Hegel proposed a philosophy of progress. He suggested “human life is a struggle for freedom; true freedom involves an enhanced understanding of self, others and the world” (Gillen and Ghosh, 2007, pp. 33) and that people without a state and written law were identified as “peoples without history”.(Gillen and Ghosh, 2007, pp. 33). This thereby made the concept of assimilation coincide with the notion of progress.

As Australian policy began to progress, “the Enlightenment chiefly influenced the attitudes of those who founded the infant colony” (Gascoigne, 2002, pp. 7). ‘The improvement of convicts’ (Gascoigne, 2002) and the still attached belief that Enlightenment could be used as a tool to aid human improvement, desired to assimilate those who where different, for instance the aboriginal cultural.

...New Australians in the true sense of the word, a knowledge of the English language would be essential, for without the ability to speak and understand our language, they would be forced into their own.... groups,

they would become so many little pockets of foreigners among Australians whom they did not understand and with whom they could not mix socially nor work effectively because of the language bar (Buchanan 1950 quoted in Ozolins 1993, pp. 70).

Modernity inevitably unraveled that a sense of 'unity' could unfold among many different ethnic groups and thus manufacture social cohesion. "With the increase of immigration... all the land shall be appropriated and cultivated" (Gascoigne, 2002, pp. 10) and thus "the ideal of improvement transmitted a belief in the possibilities of progress into the fabric of everyday life" (Gascoigne, 2002, pp. 10).

III. Tradition through a microscope and the evolution of Modernity

It is essential to reflect upon the concept of assimilation through a 'traditional' lens to thereby critically analyze the impact modernity has had in shaping the changing the way settlement has been understood in Australia. By evaluating 'tradition' we are able to decipher the past to therefore develop an understanding of contemporary society. Foremost, tradition is defined as the "values... and codified patterns of behaviour... it provided the order that helped stabilize social existence and it fortified community ties to give people a greater sense of belonging." (Gross, 1992, pg 20)

Australia was seen as a mere opportunity for British colonists to construct an ideal nation whereby Christianity was the essential component for human improvement.

"Tradition was understood to be a continuous temporal chain linking the present to the most distant past" (Gross, 1992, pp. 21) and thus through a traditional mode of thought, Christianity seemed to succeed in bettering human endeavours. However this ideal nation was merely an 'invention, an artificial construction' (White, 1997) to thereby enforce white hegemony. There was this preconceived idea that improvement of the human condition merely succeeded through the revelation of the Christianity tradition in that convicts were transformed into good and valuable inhabitants and thus the "improvement ethic was applied Aboriginal society" (Gascoigne, 2002, pp. 12)

The North Head Quarantine station seemingly mirrored this notion of white supremacy. The station itself was built upon a sacred Aboriginal burial ground. The Aboriginal landmark was transformed to better suit the needs of the 'new' and 'more advanced' colony. The destruction of the landmark thereby accounts for the authority in which the 'white' people held over other races.

As we continue to explore academic literature, we note that the concept of tradition is shattered through the changing historiography of Australia. Francis Bacon unlocked the door for a new way of reasoning. Bacon proposed that "the goal of an individual should be to approach the world exactly as it is given to the senses, and thus without any reliance on received ideas". (Gross, 1992, pp. 24) This therefore allowed people to question the truth-value of tradition. Scientific Revolution thereby became evidence of what the human mind was capable of splintering traditional modes of thoughts and allowed for self developed thought. The age of modernism is often credited as the 'cultural revolution' whereby principles of tradition were revoked. As modernity evolved, tradition fractured. The enlightenment thereby provided a sense that the application of reason would provide a better world, a world of healthier equality.

IV. The Quarantine Station today and Understanding Contemporary society

The transcriptions found at the Quarantine Station today can be identified as postcards resembling the progress made from “then” and “now”. The North Head Station is a site in which can be used as a tool to measure evolution of modernity. By analyzing the history of the station we are able to depict answers as to how contemporary society operates. As we reflect upon the archeological inscriptions we are engaging with ancient methods of traditional beliefs. In the process we are able to reflect upon our own ties to the past and thus question how we got to where we are today. Within modern society, there is still an ongoing debate regarding the policy of multiculturalism and in turn the quest for national identity. However through notions of progression deemed by the principles of modernity we are more considerate and accepting of other pocketed cultures living within Australia. The inscriptions found at North Head portray the misery in which traditional perceptions had upon those who were not of the ideal race.

The concept of modernity inevitably accounts for not how we decipher the past; but moreover how we can understand present. Although we have graduated from a ‘modernistic’ era, the issue of modernity still withholds its relevance within contemporary society. Similarly to those views explored in colonial Australia, learning the English language continues to be regarded as the fundamental philosophy to settlement within Australia. For instance if we reflect upon the study of Viviani (1984), the concept of settlement of Vietnamese refugees in Australia is explored. Such a study raises the issue of the Nation aim in teaching immigrants English, thereby aiming for ‘cultural assimilation’. Ultimately Viviani concludes that while preexisting notions regarding the role of English ‘are in a state of transition ... it is probably true that at the public level and at the practical level of teaching English the view of language as an agent of cultural assimilation remains dominant’ (1984:196). Although contemporary society is forth coming to social cohesion; the notion of assimilation and to thereby blend citizen still exists. This therefore concludes to a loss of community tongue and the values they maintain (Burnet, 1998). “The cumulative and extraordinary challenges of settlement” (Minas, 1990, pp. 254) may inevitably press a sense of vulnerability among the diverse groups therefore questioning does *assimilation ever succeed?* And does multiculturalism promote unity or revoke social cohesion.

This issue here however, is that according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics more than fifty per cent of Australians were inevitably born overseas. The Australian multicultural public policy attempts to thereby manage the effects of cultural diversity. “It acknowledges the right of all Australians first, to a cultural identity” followed by religion and language second and thirdly the individuals rights to equality, regardless of cultural, colour and or religion. Thereby through post modern spectacles the concepts of modernity are broken down. The postmodern condition reflects the changes associated with social institutions (Giddens, 1990) whereby contemporary society is more accepting of social cohesion. For example; The North Head Station today is merely identified as historical landscape in which tourists can visit to get a taste of their nation’s past. The functional purpose of the site within contemporary society allows us to unravel these concepts of tradition and modernity and inevitably the progress in which followed therefore accounting how contemporary society operates today. We are able to glimpse through the evolution of ‘assimilation’. Although the relevance of such a concept remains public policy has altered how citizens are assimilated into society and a common objective of social cohesion is noted.

V. Conclusion

The inscriptions found at the boundaries of North Head can be identified as postcards of the past. The archeological legends can be used as tools to therefore understand the 'then' and 'now'. Through exploring colonial Australia we are able to depict an understanding regarding the operations of contemporary society through spectacles of 'traditional' and 'modernistic' approaches. Through analytical study we are able to identify that the themes of 'modernity' and 'tradition' are inextricably linked in the realm of cultural assimilation and the evolution of the superior race. It from these studies we are able to decipher the changing the ways settlement has been understood in Australia.

By breaking down these notions through concepts of *progress* we able to account for the liminality of the immigration experience. Ultimately the North Head Quarantine station is more than tool that can be used to understand the past but rather a *means to understand the present*.

Notes on Contributor

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