

Alternative Modernities

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Settler Modernity and the Quest for an Indigenous Tradition

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

INTRODUCING (THE THING)

In the 1880 introduction of the ethnology *Kamilaroi and Kunai*, the Reverend Lorimer Fison described a sensation he experienced studying the “intersexual arrangements” of indigenous Australians. He described feeling “ancient rules” underlying the Kamilaroi’s and Kunai’s present sexual practices, catching fleeting glimpses of an ancient “strata” cropping up from the horrific given conditions of colonial settlement, sensing some “something else,” “something more” Kamilaroi and Kunai than even the Kamilaroi and Kunai themselves, a some *thing* that offered him and other ethnologists a glimpse of an ancient order puncturing the present, often hybrid and degenerate, indigenous social horizon.¹ Fison pointed to this ancient order as the proper object of ethnological research and used the promised feelings this order produced to prod other ethnologists to turn its way. But Fison cautioned, even admonished, other researchers that in order to reach this order and to experience these feelings they had to be “continually on the watch” that “every last trace of white men’s effect on Aboriginal society” was “altogether cast out of the calculation.”² Only by stripping from their ethnological analysis the traumatic effect of settlement on indigenous social life could the researcher reach, touch, and begin to sketch the outline of that thing, which was not the present corrupted Aboriginal social body

1. Lorimer Fison, *Kamilaroi and Kunai* (Canberra: Australian Aboriginal Press, 1880). “[In] inter-sexual arrangements . . . as elsewhere, present usage is in advance of the ancient rules. But those rules underlie it, and are felt through it; and the underlying strata crop up in many places” (29).

2. Fison, *Kamilaroi and Kunai*, 29.

but an immutable form that predated and survived the ravage of civil society.

The emergent modern ethnological epistemology Fison promoted bordered on the paranoid. Every actual indigenous practice was suspect. All “present usages,” even those seemingly “developed by the natives themselves” and seemingly untouched by “contact with the white man,” might be mere mirages of the investigator’s own society. They might be like the “present usages” of the “Mount Gambier blacks,” the desperate social acts of men and women who had watched their society “reduced from 900 souls to 17” in thirty years and were “compelled to make matrimonial arrangements as [they could], whether they be according to ancient law or not.”³ But even “present usages” untouched by the ravages of British settlement were little more than mere chimera of the ancient thing Fison sought. They taunted him with glimpses of what he truly desired—a superseded but still signifying ancient society shimmering there just beyond him and them, settler time and emergent national history.⁴

The proper ethnological thing Fison sought would always just elude him, would always be somewhere he was not. Maybe this ancient order survived in the remote interior of the nation, but it was never where he was. Where he stood, the ancient rules were submerged in the horror of the colonial present and mediated by the faulty memory of a “few wretched survivors [who were] . . . obliged to take such mates as death has left them, whether they be of the right classes or not.”⁵ Or the ancient rules were heavily encrusted with the autochthonous cultural debris generated by the inexorable tectonic shifts called social evolution. Not surprisingly, a restlessness pervades Fison’s ethnology. Irritation and humiliation punctuate the rational veneer of his text as he is forced to encounter his own intellectual limits and to account for his own conceptual failures. Time after time, Fison is forced to admit that

3. Fison, *Kamilaroi and Kunai*, 42.

4. “By present usage, I mean that which has been developed by the natives themselves, not that which has resulted from their contact with the white men. This is a factor which must be altogether cast out of the calculation, and an investigator on this line of research needs to be continually on watch against it” (Fison, *Kamilaroi and Kunai*, 29).

5. Fison, *Kamilaroi and Kunai*, 30.

mediated modern public sphere.”²⁰ But most Australians would have a strong sense that indigenous subjects are more or less like other social subjects as a result of shared or differing beliefs, characteristics, and practices (often experienced as characterological essentialisms) and that the loss of certain qualities and qualifiers would narrow the difference between contemporary social groups. For instance, they might not be able to say why, but they would “feel” ethnic and indigenous identities share the common qualifiers “race” and “tradition-culture.” And they would feel these qualifiers somehow differentiate their social location from the other social positions, or identities, crowding the symbolic space of the nation—say, whites, homosexuals, women, and the disabled. But an indigenous identity would not be considered the same as an ethnic identity because traditional indigenous culture has a different relationship to nation time and space.²¹

Indigenous modifies “customary law,” “ancient tradition,” and “traditional culture,” among others, by referring to a social practice and space that predates the settler state. Commonsensically, *indigenous people* denotes a social group descended from a set of people who lived in the full presence of traditions. I would hazard that in contrast to *unicorn* most Australians believe that to which *tradition* refers existed at some point in time and believe some residual part of this undifferentiated whole remains in the now fragmentary bodies, desires, and practices of Aboriginal persons if in a modified form. And I would also hazard most non-Aboriginal Australians think indigenous people are distinguished not only by their genealogical relation to the nation-state but also by their affective, ideational, and practical attachment to their prior customs. To be truly Aboriginal, Aboriginal persons must not just occupy a place in a semiotically determined social space; they must also identify with, desire to communicate (convey in words, practices, and feelings), and, to some satisfactory degree, lament the loss of the ancient customs that define(d) their difference.

I mean the awkward “that to which” and the seemingly vague “experienced” to evoke the strategic nonspecificity of the discursive and affective space of “indigenous tradition” in the contemporary Australian

20. Benjamin Lee, “Textuality, Mediation and Public Discourse,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 414–15.

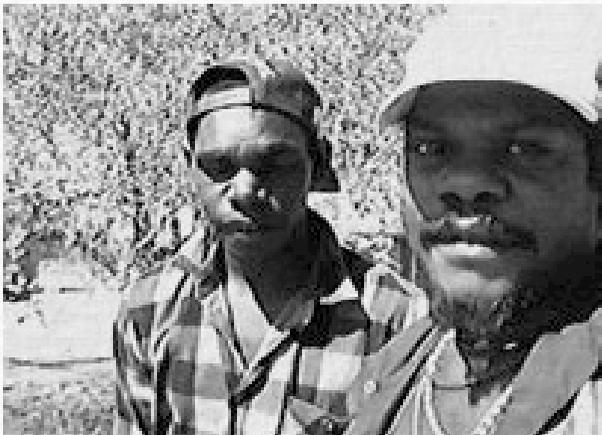
21. See, for instance, William Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

nation, a point I will elaborate later. And I mean my constant conditioning—“to some satisfactory degree,” “some . . . part,” “if in a modified form”—to mimic the juridical, public, and political conditioning of an authentic Aboriginal subjectivity. And, finally, I intend these mimetic provisos to suggest how the very discourses that constitute indigenous subjects *as such* constitute them as failures *of such*—of the very identity that identifies them (differentiates their social locality from other social localities) and to which they are urged to establish an identification (affectively attach).

In their discursive passage into being, then, indigenous people are scarred by temporal and social differences. These scars are the difference between any actual indigenous subject and the full presence promised by the phrase “indigenous tradition” and thus the identity “indigenous.” At its simplest, no indigenous subject can inhabit the temporal or spatial location to which indigenous identity refers—the geographical and social space and time of authentic Ab-Originality. And no indigenous subject can derive her being outside her relation to other social identities and values currently proliferating in the nation-state. Because the category of indigenousness came into being in relation to the imperial state and the social identities residing in it and continues to draw its discursive value in relation to the state (and other states) and to other emergent national subjects (and other transnational subjects), to be indigenous requires passing through, and, in the passage, being scarred by the geography of the state and topography of other social identities. Producing a present-tense indigenousness in which some failure is not a qualifying condition is discursively and materially impossible. These scars are what Aborigines are, what they have. They are their true difference; the “active edge” where the national promise of remedial action is negotiated.²² Legal and popular questions coagulate there: Is the scar small or large, ancient or recent, bleeding or healed, bred out or passed on? What institutional suturing was and is necessary to keep this lacerated body functional? For whom? For what?

The gap existing between the promise of a traditional presence and the actual presence of Aboriginal persons is not simply discursive. It also produces and organizes subaltern and dominant feelings, expectations,

22. Jacques Lacan, “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud,” in *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 146–78.



BP: Oh, it's like your life from the Dreamtime ancestors?

RS: Yeh, and I come out of that Belyuen waterhole.

BP: Oh, you been born from there now?

RS: Yeh, that's the dam. That old man Belyuen gave this mob kid here now—us here now—like today where we walk around.

BP: Yeh, walk around.

RS: It's like a gift from God.

BP: From which one? From on top way?

RS: Yeh, well, we got our own; we got our own thing—gift. Ah, we got our own father, see.

BP: We got him from here now?

RS: From Belyuen, from our ancestors.

BP: And do you believe that?

RS: Yes.

BP: Oh, you do?

RS: Yes. That is true.

BP: And are you teaching your kids?

RS: Yes.

BP: Oh, which ones?

RS: I am teaching my niece, there, Chantelle.

BP: You call her daughter, isn't it?

RS: Yeh, my daughter from my little sister.

JASON SINGH: I'm from Daly River.

BP: Wait now, I'm shifting from sun. Daly River?

JS: Yeh.

BP: I don't know, you look like Belyuen. You got the same Belyuen nose.

JS: Nah, but you look here. I staying at Peppi.

BP: Let me look. Ah, you been live there.

NATHAN BILBIL: I always come here for just once in a while.

JS: Keep going.

BP: Ah, yeh? You smell like a Belyuen again.

JS: Oooh, ha ha ha.

ROBERT BLOWES: Right. And when you were talking to

Mr. Howie here, you said that's the native way to call him brother?

TOPSY SECRETARY: Yes.

RB: Yes. Was that really brother?

Соединившись вместе, орды гуннов и готов, собравшись кругом Атиллы, полны боевого воодушевления, двинулись далее вместе, но, встреченные и отраженные Аэцием, защитником Рима, рассеялись на множество шаек и остановились и успокоились на своей земле, разлившись в степях, заполняя их пустоту.³⁵

[Having linked up and gathered around Attila, the hordes of Huns and Goths, filled with martial enthusiasm, moved forward together. But having been engaged and repulsed by Aetius, the defender of Rome, they scattered into a multitude of bands. They halted and settled down peacefully on their own land, spilled out into the steppes, and filled their emptiness.]

Khlebnikov gives two “zaum” versions of the sentence, which are presumably meant to be synonymous:

*Ша + со (гуннов и готов), вэ Атиллы, ча по, со до, но бо + эо
Аэция, хо Рима, со мо вэ + ка со, ло ша степей + ча*

Or, alternatively,

*Вэ со человеческого рода бэ го языков, нэ умов вэ со ша
языков, бо мо слов мо ка разума ча звуков по со до лу земли мо
со языков вэ земли.*

It will be noted, of course, that both “universal” texts are written in Cyrillic letters and that, in addition to monosyllables, they contain recognizable Russian words. But a recognition of the Russocentric bias at the basis for his universal language seems to have eluded Khlebnikov.

Then, and this is far more surprising and significant, Khlebnikov provides what a professional would call a back translation from “zaum” into Russian. It is, of course, well known that a back translation is unlikely to reproduce the original sentence, since the initial translation was merely an approximation of the original, and the back translation is an approximation of an approximation. In this particular case, however, the back translation is not so much a distant echo of the original as an interpretation of its “true” meaning. Presumably (since Khlebni-

35. The Russian text for this section of the manifesto is cited from Khlebnikov, *Tvoreniia* (Moscow: 1991), 623. The English translation is mine.

kov provides no information as to how the translation process works, we are forced to presume), although this new sentence does not much resemble the original on the surface, we are meant to believe that they are equivalent — that is, that their semantic deep structures are identical. Far from being a random nonsense language, then, “zaum” appears to be a sort of deep structural code that mediates between different versions of the same thought, allowing the poet/seer to decode the hidden meaning of ordinary linguistic signs.

*Думая о соединении человеческого рода, но столкнувшись с
горами языков, бурный огонь наших умов, вращаясь около
соединенного заумного языка, достигая распылением слов на
единицы мысли в оболочке звуков, бурно и вместе идет к
признанию на всей земле единого заумного языка.*

[Thinking about the unification of humankind but running up against the mountains of languages, the energetic flame of our minds turns to the unity of beyondsense language, achieving the scattering of words into thought units cloaked in sound, and energetically and in concert moves toward the acceptance of a single beyondsense language for the entire world.]

The wars between Rome and the barbarians, the conflicts between East and West, turn out to have been signs of humankind’s ultimate desire for unity. A specific historical event had within itself the latent seeds of utopia, but their presence could only be divined by the poet through his “translation” of the words used to describe them. Through translation, Khlebnikov claims to have apprehended the hidden meaning of history.

Khlebnikov’s linguistic research, striving as it does to recognize in modern Russian the outline of a universal language (one that had existed in the past and would do so again in the future), had, as we will see a bit later, numerous and extremely diverse followers in the Soviet Union. Before examining them, however, we must pause to consider for a moment the local historical events Khlebnikov uses to make his universalist point, because his choice for translation purposes of a sentence describing an attack on Western civilization by hordes from the East was by no means accidental. For nineteenth-century advocates of the synthetic nature of Russian civilization such as Gogol and Dostoyevsky,

tions of a globalized economy, 'Keynesianism in one country' no longer functions."³⁸

In addition to the daunting practical problems that attend the establishment of a basic structure of cosmopolitical justice as Habermas conceives it, there are a number of important theoretical issues his approach raises, of which I shall mention only the following.

1. Habermas's conception of civil union amidst cultural diversity takes "constitutional patriotism" to be the political-cultural glue holding multicultural polities together. This obviously raises feasibility questions as to whether allegiance to legal-political institutions, practices, ideas, values, traditions, and the like can function as the core of social integration in modern societies, whether it can provide sufficient "glue" to keep together the socially differentiated, culturally heterogeneous, and ideologically fragmented populations that characterize them. But it also raises conceptual questions concerning the very idea of "decoupling" a shared civic culture from culture(s) more broadly. I have already touched on some of them above and will here add only the following consideration. Habermas's discussion of political-cultural neutrality (or impartiality) vis-à-vis a multiplicity of subcultures tends to focus on the contrast of civic with ethnic culture, for one of his chief aims is to disentangle state from nation. Other aspects of the politics-culture nexus tend to be neglected, at least in the context of this discussion. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, however, some of these other aspects figured prominently.³⁹ There, the interpenetration of public-political and public-cultural spheres was an important theme: The analytic distinctions between them did not occlude their real interconnections. In particular, the powerful connections of political culture to popular culture, which increasingly means mass-mediated culture, was identified as a key issue for contemporary democratic theory and practice. Supposing that

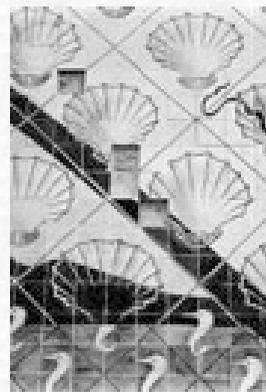
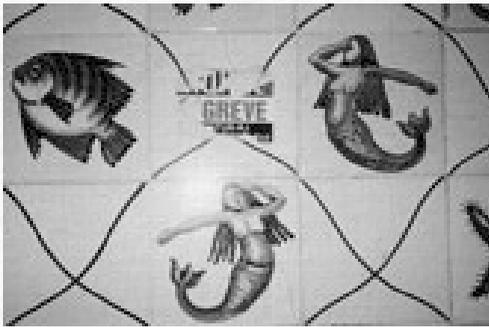
38. J. Habermas, "Learning by Disaster? A Diagnostic Look Back on the Short 20th Century," in *Constellations*, vol. 5, no. 3 (September 1988): 307–320.

39. J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Burger with the assistance of F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. T. McCarthy (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1984, 1987).

mass-mediated popular culture is a permanent feature of modern society, what implications does that have for shaping and sustaining a sense of national belonging? How is this likely to be affected by the transnationalization of the culture industry? To what extent and in what ways is political culture transmitted and political integration achieved in and through mass-mediated popular culture? And if the answers are "considerably" and "many," what are the consequences for Habermas's distinction between assimilating to a particular political culture and assimilating to a hegemonic national culture?

2. Similar questions can be posed at the global level, as can questions peculiar to it. Habermas's cosmopolitan scheme turns on the idea of realizing the "same" system of rights in a diversity of political-cultural settings, and that immediately raises issues concerning the transcultural notion of rights invoked here, the nature of their transcultural justification, the sense in which the "same" rights can be said to animate the rather different political-cultural traditions that embody them, and so on. In brief, how could a transnational legal-political consensus regarding the basic structure of cosmopolitical justice be achieved across the wide range of political-cultural diversity?
3. To deal with this issue, Rawls introduces the idea of an "overlapping consensus" on a law of peoples among political societies marked by widely different political cultures — liberal and nonliberal, democratic and nondemocratic, egalitarian and hierarchical, secular and religious.⁴⁰ Habermas's cosmopolitan ideal does not allow for the same broad scope of variation among political cultures. He defends a more "comprehensive" version of a rights-based theory of justice. This has the advantage of reducing the need for citizens to develop the starkly split political/nonpolitical mentalities that Rawls's scheme requires. But it makes cosmopolitan justice turn on institutionalizing at a global level a version of the same system of rights that is variously institutionalized in national constitutional tradi-

40. Rawls, "Law of Peoples." See my discussion of his approach in T. McCarthy, "On the Idea of a Reasonable Law of Peoples," in *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant's Cosmopolitan Ideal*, ed. J. Bohman and M. Lutz-Bachman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 201–17.



Interiors of Palace Gustavo Capanema

the late 1950s, Rio de Janeiro accumulated a varied symbolic repertoire as capital of the colony in 1763, capital of the independent empire of Brazil under the regency of Pedro I in 1822, and finally capital of the newly proclaimed republic in 1889. Under the positivist motto of “order and progress,” which is slashed across the national flag, modernity and nationhood were closely linked in the consolidation of the republic.

By tearing down the crumbling colonial mansions of the downtown area, razing topographical obstacles that interfered with the opening of new avenues adorned with modern buildings of eclectic architecture, Mayor Francisco Pereira Passos from 1902 to 1906 sought to transform the antiquated capital into a modest version of the Parisian ideal.

Supported by the hygienist endeavors of doctors and engineers, Pereira Passos, in the guise of a local Haussmann, attempted to instill a model of modernity that reproduced in the tropical scenario what was deemed to be the utmost modernity of urban planning forged by French cultural models and, to a lesser extent, American innovations.

Getúlio Vargas’s rise to power in the 1930s signaled a rupture with previous cosmopolitan aspirations of the Old Republic. During his reign as supreme dictator of Brazil, Vargas commissioned the construction of several public buildings that were to reflect the edification of the nation according to an assortment of notions concerning the nature of the modern and its linkage to a national ethos. The construction of the Ministry of Education and Health (Ministério da Educação e da Saúde [MES]) in the 1930s and 1940s represented the triumph of the modernist canon—a triumph that was later reflected in the architectural plans for the university campus of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in the vicinity of the Fundão, built from 1949 to 1962.²

With the shifting of the federal capital from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília in the 1960s, modernist architecture came to directly convey the fabrication of a new national ethos.³ The modernist canon was exemplarily

2. In this essay I use both the current name—Palace Gustavo Capanema, named after the minister that enabled its construction—and its former name, the Ministry of Education and Health (Ministério da Educação e Saúde [MES]). The archival material contained in the excellent article of Maurício Lisovsky and Paulo Sérgio de Moraes de Sá, “O novo em construção: O edifício-sede do Ministério da Educação e Saúde e a disputa do espaço arquitetável nos anos 30,” in their *As colunas da educação: A construção do Ministério da Educação e Saúde, 1935–1945* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições do Patrimônio, 1996), xi–xxvii, served as my main source of documentation for the historical elaboration of this essay. Their article also details the plans for the construction of a university campus at the Fundão. See also Donato Mello Jr., “Um campus universitário para a cidade do Rio de Janeiro,” *Arquitetura Revista* 2 (1985): 52–72.

3. The complete triumph of modernist architecture was fully consolidated with the invention of Brasília in the late 1950s. The international attention that Brasília’s construction attracted placed this immense peripheral nation at the vanguard of modernist architecture. Internally, the construction of the capital city in the desertic heart of Brazil emblemized the utopia of a modernity that would irradiate its modernity by the mimetic means of a new national foundation. The modernist city, the new capital of the peripheral country, signaled the possibility of staging the modern outside of its central axis. The remarkable feat of constructing a capital in the tabula rasa of the central plateau of Brazil was the initial signature of an inaugural