Title

Enduring settler-colonial narratives: interdisciplinary approaches to cultural curation

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Abstract

The politics and poetics of race and identity in the canon of Australian colonial art remains contentious. This paper examines the role of cultural curation in the construction of the national narrative and raises questions in relation to the appetite and capacity of public art galleries for de-colonising the archive. Institutional curatorial presentations of benign colonial encounters risk naturalising the settler narrative. Displays that include negative stereotypical depictions of Aboriginal peoples transmit colonial notions of race in which the colonised are framed as unequal, needy and under-civilised. Stereotypes are reductive and often deeply embedded in historical (mis)representation masquerading as cultural knowledge. Without counterpoint, such presentations suggest an entrenched institutional conservatism built on a white-self-representative-colonial substructure. At their extremes, stereotypes can bolster psychological barriers to reconciliation. This paper argues the need for curatorial approaches that engage academic research. Aspects of the recent re-hang of the Australian art collection at the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) are examined to identify trends in contemporary museum curatorial practice. With over one million annual visitors AGSA is significant to the cultural ecology of the state. This paper considers the (lost) potential impact of inter-disciplinary academic research on institutional cultural curation. It reflects on how the archive might be activated to enable complex narratives that destabilise colonial structures; negotiate the dialectic of (un)belonging; and, unsettle ideas of otherness.

Biography

Yusuf Hayat is currently a PhD candidate at the University of South Australia. His practice-based research has a focus on migrant narratives, transcultural aesthetics and intersubjectivity in art. He is committed to social justice and has worked in leadership roles for several international non-government organisations across social housing, social support and Emergency Relief. As an artist, Yusuf's work integrates photography,

video, painting and architectural approaches to sculptural form. He recently undertook artist residencies at the British School at Rome and NEXUS Arts, Adelaide. He has exhibited in Australia and overseas.

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Keywords: Critical Race, Whiteness, Colonialism, Cultural curation, Decolonisation

This paper mobilises Critical Race and Whiteness scholarship to examine practices of cultural curation that transmit colonial notions of race in the construction of the national narrative. One of the key arguments of this paper is that racialized discourses continue to structure social reality. Institutional cultural curation is presented as a contested site of power relations that can communicate 'powerful messages about the core values, norms, cultural hierarchies, and central narratives of mainstream society' (Henry, Mattis and Tator 1998, p.5). The curatorial intent underpinning certain aspects of the recent reimagining of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) is interrogated to raise concerns in relation to the appetite and capacity of public art galleries for de-colonising the archive. This paper considers the (lost) potential impact of inter-disciplinary academic research on institutional cultural curation. It reflects on how the archive might be activated to enable complex narratives that destabilise colonial structures; negotiate the dialectic of (un)belonging; and, unsettle ideas of otherness.

The Australian contemporary art context is at a critical juncture. There are networks of cultural producers, curators, and academics who proclaim a commitment to redress historical (mis)representations of First Nations peoples and repatriate the national narrative. Brook Andrews, Artistic Director of the 2020 Sydney biennale states *NIRIN,* after the Wiradjuri word meaning 'edge', 'decentres, challenges and transforms dominant narratives, such as the 2020 Captain Cook anniversary in Australia and reorients Western mapping, shining a light on sites of being that are often ignored or rendered invisible' (Biennale of Sydney 2019).

Included in the biennale are The Unbound Collective, a group of four Aboriginal artist academics (Ali Gumillya Baker, Faye Rosas Blanch, Natalie Harkin & Simone Ulalka Tur) concerned with 'transforming understandings of sovereignty, ethics, decolonisation, storytelling, institutionalisation, history and representation' (Baker 2015, p. 60). The Unbound Collective were included in *The National 2019: New Australian Art.* The artists staged *Sovereign Acts IV: Object* at the opening event.

The performance involved promenading through the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and projecting onto the walls of the colonial wing text such as 'if these walls could speak', 'in this space is evidence of crime', and 'we are still afloat in the wake of deep colonialisms' as a critical interventions that interrogate the 'outdated, violent, racist ideas of western colonialism' (The National 2019) and confront the residual colonial substructures of cultural institutions.

The Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), initially operating as the National Gallery of South Australia, was established within a few years of AGNSW. Both museums have classical façades (an echo of the Parthenon) whose colonnaded porticoes serve as mnemonic devices that recall the grandeur of Greece, Rome, London, and all the associations embedded in the residual civilisational and colonial cultural memory. AGSA is situated on a tree-lined boulevard on which the paving was set with 150 bronze plaques in 1986 to commemorate 150 years since the colonisation of South Australia (SA). The building is comfortably set amongst institutions that served to bring the fledgling state into a relationship with what Tony Bennet, in his influential essay 'The Exhibitionary Complex', refers to as 'two new historical times – national and universal'(Bennet 1988, p. 89). Entering AGSSA through the portico leads audiences into a vestibule and then through to Galleries 1 – 5, known collectively as the Elder Wing of Australian Art. Only a few years ago, visitors to the Elder Wing were flanked by two sets of busts as they entered the main gallery, one pair black and the other white. On the eastern wall sat Woureddy and Trucaninny, a Nuennone man and woman from Bruny Island, and English explorers Charles Sturt and Sir George McLeay, to the west. The juxtaposition of subjects suggesting that the politics and poetics of race and identity in Australia remains divided.

The Elder Wing has recently undergone a transformation in which the collection has been re-imagined. The previously mentioned busts are omitted in thematic presentations that are no longer organised strictly along linear-time. The displays are intended as spaces of contestation in which cultures of the world collide and notions of Australian Art are problematised and re-negotiated. The aesthetically impressive, if subjectively themed, curatorial constructions present several propositions that defy a simplistic definition of Australian Art. However, as curator Professor Irit Rogoff (2012, p. 22) states,

> if you work out a thematic and then assemble things that are seemingly engaged with that thematic, those objects don't simply sit there and illustrate

passively, they start to instantiate and embody and draw out the thematic with different meanings than it may have had originally.

The presentation in Gallery 2 of the Elder Wing (Fig. 1), entitled *Longing and Belonging*, presents audiences with an authorised (civilised?) alternative narrative that shields us from the savageries of colonialism. Aspects of this theme raise significant questions in relation to the appetite and capacity for decolonizing the archive. The claim of being at home affirms what Ien Ang describes as a 'historical amnesia of (British) colonialism which actively erases the history of Aboriginal disposession of the land' (Ang 2001, p.190). The romanticized display of colonial homemaking practices resists a complex narrative that readily accommodates multiple perspectives. The display of domestic furniture adds further authenticity and a misleading aura of documentary truth to the paintings. In *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* Ghassan Hage draws our attention to the shared etymological roots of *domus* and *dominus,* of practices of making 'homely' and of 'domination'. Hage describes domestication as a 'struggle to create homely spaces or, to put it more existentially, a struggle to be 'at home in the world'. Yet, paradoxically it is also a mode of domination, control, extraction, and exploitation' (Hage 2017, p. 91). According to Hage (2018), 'we still live under the domination of a white colonial domesticating assemblage'.

The text accompanying this display refers to the 'unsettled feeling of displacement that comes from not being in one's home country' as a 'characteristic' of the Australian experience. *Longing and Belonging* assumes 'Home country' to be an overseas place of origin, alienating Indigenous audiences from the 'Australian experience'. Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson asserts the 'positionalities, multiplicities, and specificities' (Moreton-Robinson 2015, p. 8) of migranthood that result in a fragmentation of subjectivity have a very different effect for Indigenous subjects as Indigenous peoples', who have experienced significant internal migration and displacement throughout Australia's history, sense of belonging is 'derived from an ontological relationship to country derived from the Dreaming' (ibid, p. 11). The wall text confirms Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos' assertion 'that white Australia is too accustomed to disassociating the Indigenous other from much of what we value *as Australian'* (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos 2004, p. 44)*.*

The institution assumes an inherent moral goodness that is untroubled by the expression of epistemic violence 'belonging' entails. Non-Indigenous belonging is premised upon the foundational assumption of Terra Nullius which continues to

'maintain white ways of knowing as central to definitions of belonging in Australia' (Riggs 2003, p. 87). Moreton-Robinson presents the argument that the landmark Mabo decision created a hybrid of settlements in law that diminishes, but doesn't erase, *terra nullius* (Moreton-Robinson 2015, p. 68). The continued denial of Indigenous subjectivity amounts to a 'criminality harboured in the national imaginary' (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos 2004, p. 46). In her discussion of settler belonging, Fiona Probyn (2002, p. 76) states

> To take on settler belonging is taking on the imperial, colonial and postcolonial history of Australia and the discursive arrangement by which such ethical and moral questions of "belonging" have been asserted. Consequently, the question of settler belonging must be situated within the epistemic violence that gives rise to it, or else it is in danger of becoming a sentiment which rejects imperialism as its obstacle and replaces it with Indigenous people themselves.

Included in the display are two paintings by English artist Charles Hill. *The first lesson* (1857) depicts a barefoot (perhaps Kaurna?) woman with her dog at the doorstep of, what we can guess is, the artist's home (see bottom left of Figure 1). The woman is given bread covered in lard by a young girl. The girl's mother has her hand on the child's arm and is carrying a younger child in her other arm. A third child peers past the mother's skirt – all eyes are sympathetically on the woman at the door. Directly above and to the right of *The first lesson* is *The artist and his family* (late 1860s)*,* also by Hill. The viewer is positioned inside the house looking onto a dinner table and out to a wide-open vista. In *Art of Australia*, critic John McDonald describes the oddness of the family scene as 'the perfect painting for a humorous caption competition' (McDonald 2008, p. 163). Neither painting is included in AGSA's bicentenary publication *Creating Australia: 200 years of art 1788 – 1988.* The dubious aesthetic credentials of the paintings give rise to suspicion as to what exactly is happening in this display.

Figure 1: Installation view. Elder Wing of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2018. Photo: Saul Steed.

In *Rethinking Settler Colonialism: History and Memory in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand and South Africa*, Professor of Material and Visual Culture, Annie Coombes asserts that the 'cultural and political character' of the fledgling nations were ultimately shaped in 'the colonisers' dealings with Indigenous peoples – through resistance, containment, appropriation, assimilation, miscegenation or attempted destruction' (Coombes 2012, pp. 1-2). The 1836 proclamation of SA states,

> firm determination to punish with exemplary severity all acts of violence or injustice which may in any manner be practiced or attempted against the natives, who are considered as much under the safeguard of the law as the as the Colonists themselves, and equally entitled to the privileges of British Subjects.

An anonymous letter to *The Adelaide Times* in 1851 (cited in Goldsworthy 2017) gives some insight into how that intention translated into treatment:

> Shame Upon Us! We take their land and drive away their food by what we call civilisation, and then deny them shelter from a storm…… What can a

maddened black think of our Christianity to deny him the sod on which he was born? He lived before the white fellow came on the natural produce of the soil. You grow hundreds of bushels of corn on his land but deny him the crumbs that fall from the table.

The 'crumbs that fall from the table' of *The artist and his family* appear to find their way into the *The first lesson* below. Christ, the icon of Christian innocence and goodness incarnate, looks down on both. The selection and presentation of this painting, seen in Figure 1, fabricates a benign colonialism that weaves a moral presence in place of attempted genocide, marginalisation and displacement.

The thematic presentation glosses over the dis-location of Indigenous people that makes possible the location of the colonists. The narrative being privileged is of the values of charity and benevolence the mother is teaching the child. Audiences are invited to identify with the positive self-image and 'civilising' mission of the benign, colonial mother(land) - Britannia. There is no attempt to refute this and rescue the dignity of the Indigenous woman, or audiences that identify with her, in *The First Lesson*. Her 'displacement' and disenfranchisement are overlooked, rendering her invisible yet visibly framed as unequal, needy, and under-civilised; visible only in so much as she serves to affirm the settler narrative. The juxtaposition of artefacts satisfies colonial tropes in which the exemplary and emulatory imagery perpetuates certain ideals of white subjectivity and selfhood. Damien Riggs and Martha Augoustinos' psychoanalytic analysis of systems of representation demonstrates that in order for whiteness to maintain itself as a normative site of power 'it is necessary for the white nation to construct Indigenous people as undeserving, as abusing the system and as 'naturally inferior' to white people' (Riggs & Augoustinos 2004, p. 223). Without counterpoint, the display risks being read as a sentimentalised version of what Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall describes as a 'racialized regime of representation' in which the superior white position is naturally self-evident (Hall 1997 p. 249).

Albert Boime's discussion of compositional tropes 'throughout the history of art' that denote subordination and social hierarchy can offer an analysis of Hill's *The First Lesson*. The triangular configuration of the painting positions the mother at the apex of the pyramid in a position traditionally occupied by 'royal, religious, or allegorical authority.' The settler family perform the act of charity and benevolence from the raised doorstep of their home. The Indigenous woman appears to be assigned a

subservient status in which she is 'literally and figuratively associated with all that is base or inferior in social positions' (Boime 2002, p. 170).

Mirning artist and academic, Dr. Ali Gumilya Baker of Unbound Collective states 'how stories are told and the implications of the stories we leave for future generations are important considerations for representation' (Baker 2018, p. 16). In discussing her work Racist Texts (2014-2017), in which books are piled against the gallery wall from floor to ceiling, talks of her mother's search for herself in books and finding nothing 'but hatred written by the coloniser'. Baker counters the 're-articulation' of colonial representation in asserting 'our people never stopped being, were never frozen in time, were never plants or animals of a lower rung of a constructed false hierarchy, a hierarchy created precisely to justify the stealing of land while allowing those who benefited from the theft to feel good and righteous about it' (Baker 2018, p. 18).

Senator Pat Dodson links negative portrayals of Indigenous peoples by the coloniser 'with a long history of oppressive and domineering Indigenous policy' (Dodson 2011, p. 189). The negative stereotypical depictions point to what Stuart Hall (1997, p. 259) refers to as a 'signifying practice' that 'classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as 'other.' The ritualised degradation of stereotypical images can form the basis of attitudes and influence social interaction. Balvin and Bretherton (2012, p. 201) argue stereotypes 'often represent cultural knowledge: knowledge shared and accepted as a norm by groups of people' and can be an obstacle to reconciliation (Balvin and Bretherton 2012, p. 201).

Former Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, Donald Preziosi (2006, p. 55) declares the framing of the present 'as itself the product of the past' is a primary function of art history so 'the past can itself function and do work in and on the present' (Preziosi 2006, p. 55). An alternative presentation might have highlighted Indigenous peoples' continued cultural distinctiveness as a marker of extraordinary strength, resilience, and survival in spite of structural disadvantage and systemic discrimination as an ongoing result of colonisation. There are an increasing number of people reliant on financial and material assistance on a regular basis with 13% of the Australian population living below the poverty line. That figure jumps to 31% in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Australian Council of Social Services, 2018). The Australian Council of Social Services (2011, p. 9) lists several structural causes of poverty and disadvantage including that

many people living in poverty face discrimination in employment, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and people with a disability.

The presentation (inadvertently) reproduces racialized socio-cultural inequality in supporting white audiences to think about colonial relations and the national narrative in particularly benign ways. Chapter 1 Section 1.4 of The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, entitled *The Importance of History*, offers a poignant reminder of the continued relevance of historical (mis)representation. The findings declare 'what is known is known to historians and Aboriginal people; it is little known to non-Aboriginal people and it is a principal thesis of this report that it must become more known' (The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody).

The contemporary art context presents an opportune moment for public cultural institutions to engage curatorial practices that redress historical (mis)representations of First Nations peoples and repatriate the national narrative. Engaging the inter-disciplinary field of Critical Race & Whiteness Studies offers critical insights that can potentially help untangle the racist discourse from the cultural fabric woven by public institutions. Critical reflection of contemporary cultural, political and socio-economic conditions from a variety of disciplines is necessary to imagine a more equitable distribution of resources and social relations dedicated to goals of equity and justice.

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