

Imagining Communities of the Past: Applying Benedict Anderson's Ideas about Simultaneity on *First Generation*

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines a nation to be an “imagined political community”.¹ He also claims that the emergence of these imagined communities hinged on “a fundamental change” in our conception of *simultaneity*. Prior to the emergence of ‘nations’ as defined by Anderson, events of the past and the future were considered to be simultaneous with the present, because all of them were “linked to Divine Providence”. Following a “decline in [these] religious beliefs”, simultaneity evolved into the modern notion of events with “temporal coincidence”.² Anderson claims that this new conception of simultaneity is central to the creation of “imagined communities”. However, is the theory of simultaneity applicable on artwork which elicits the idea of ‘community’ by explicitly referring to the past? To test Anderson’s claim that simultaneity is central to the creation of “imagined communities”, this essay looks at the sculpture *First Generation* (2000) by Singaporean artist Chong Fah Cheong. This essay argues that the sculpture makes possible an “imagined community” rooted in the past, despite its lack of simultaneity with the present. Although there is inconsistency between the sculpture’s grounding in the past and Anderson’s theory about simultaneity, his idea of nations having cultural roots can help resolve the tension.

First Generation depicts ideas which are strongly rooted in the past, standing in sharp contrast to the viewer’s present timeframe. This contrast is first emphasized by the incongruity between the sculpture and the surroundings it is placed in. *First Generation* is a bronze sculpture made

¹ Benedict Anderson, “Introduction” in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

² Anderson, “Cultural Roots”, 22-24.

of five boys – two boys are suspended mid-air, while others are preparing to jump or taking their clothes off. Coupled with the Singapore River flowing below, the sculpture is depicting these boys voluntarily jumping into the river. Their mouths are wide open, and their arms are lifted up, indicating that they are enjoying the thrill of the experience. The carefree attitude of the boys stands in contrast with the hectic environment around – one with luxury hotels and towering corporate buildings. The very activity of jumping in the river, at the heart of the city, is unimaginable to the present Singaporean viewer. The nudity of the boys too, would be considered highly unlikely in the present time, where public nudity is a criminal offense. It is difficult to connect with a present-day community by engaging with the sculpture since the elements belonging to it *could only exist* in the past. The title of the work – *First Generation* – further adds to this distinction. It denotes a lineage extending to the past, the boys being one of the ‘first’ of this lineage. The sculpture as situated thus exhibits the “radical separations between past and present” that Anderson mentions³ – depicting a past distinct from the viewer’s present.

Despite the sculpture’s contrast with the present, it has features which help in creating an “imagined community” rooted in the past. *First Generation* primarily does this by referring to experiences common to most viewers’ pasts – pleasant times from their childhood. As previously mentioned, the boys’ expressions and postures indicate their exuberance. One boy is even pushing another into the water, highlighting the trust and friendship that exists within the group. Most viewers would find it easy to relate the sight to instances from their childhood – characterized by playful times and simple pleasures. As a result, they can relate to the boys without knowing them personally. This is similar to Anderson’s idea behind an imagined community, where “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-

³ Ibid., 23.

members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.⁴ The extent of this communion, though, is *limited* – both spatially and socially. The Singapore River forms an important part of the sculpture, as the boys are directly interacting with it. The identity of the river as “Singaporean” adds an element of *bounded space* to this imagined community – some (like the boys) belong to this space, but others (those “not Singaporean”) do not. The title ‘First Generation’ further contributes to the boundedness – the ‘generation’ being depicted belongs to a family, clan, or some form of social group. The idea of a social group posits the existence of ‘others’ who do not belong to this community. The limit satisfies another characteristic of Anderson’s imagined community, where “even the largest of them [nations]... has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations”.⁵ Therefore, the sculpture does exhibit features which help in creating an “imagined community”. This imagined community is rooted in the past, despite Anderson’s claim that “acts [in an imagined community] are performed at the same clocked, calendrical time”.⁶

Although Anderson’s theory about simultaneity stands inconsistent with the sculpture’s grounding in the past, his idea of nations having cultural roots can help resolve the inconsistency. The “nationalist imagining”, he says, has “a strong affinity with religious imaginings”. After the decline of religious beliefs, the idea of ‘nation’ emerged to provide “continuity” to the cultural roots previously underpinned by religion.⁷ Indeed, the sculpture contributes to the “continuity” – it connects members of the present with an imagined community linked socially and spatially to their past. One aspect of the painting stands out in this regard – the boy placing his arm on the barricading along the river. This conscious choice

⁴ Anderson, “Introduction”, 6.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Anderson, “Cultural Roots”, 26.

⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

by Cheong bridges the children of the past with the barricading of the present, signaling “continuity” between the two timeframes. Unfortunately, Anderson never explicitly connects his ideas of cultural roots and simultaneity. Nevertheless, this essay shows that although Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” works well with the sculpture, his claim about simultaneity requires reconsideration. (966 words)

Matriculation Number: A0184716X

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006.

Chong, Fah Cheong. *First Generation*, Bronze sculpture, 2000, Singapore River (in front of the Fullerton Hotel), <https://www.publicarttrust.sg/Public-Art/First-Generation>.

