

# Indigenous Photographies

## Editorial

Jane Lydon and Angela Wanhalla

From the invention of photography, Indigenous people were a popular photographic subject, contributing to a visual language of race given force by global comparisons and debates. As historians of race and science have shown, throughout the nineteenth century the world's Indigenous people were considered to constitute evidence for Western conceptions of progress and civilisation by supplying evidence for 'humanity's childhood'.<sup>1</sup> Photography was invented at a time when a profound shift in ideas concerning race was well underway, from Enlightenment assumptions of a common origin and humanity, to modernist concepts of race as biologically distinct species. Indigenous Australians were considered to represent a distinct place in human taxonomies, and in consequence, the camera was quickly applied to recording them for a metropolitan audience, producing a vast number of photographs that were subsumed into an already flourishing traffic in colonial natural history specimens. Yet more recently, this historical archive, and photographs produced by Indigenous peoples themselves, have become tools for decolonisation.

This special issue addresses the legacies of this significant historical process in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand: all former settler colonies with contested national histories. In each of these sites, photographic practice was embedded in settler colonialism. The camera registered spaces available for colonial settlement, and erased Indigenous presence; was deployed for the purposes of racial science; while images of Indigenous peoples were commodities that circulated across empire. In this special issue, contributors

focus on Indigenous responses: the rebuttals, reworkings, and creative transformations of the photographic archive to serve Indigenous purposes in the present.

From the 1980s, a global Indigenous art photography movement began to emerge that began to represent local Indigenous cultures, identity and political claims from an explicitly Aboriginal perspective. A range of young photographers focused attention on their nation's unresolved past and oppositional projects took issue with national celebration, rejecting the triumphalist tone of much foundational commemoration.<sup>2</sup> At that time, the photographic archive relating to Australian Aboriginal people was often interpreted in determinist ways, as inevitably constituting a tool of colonial surveillance and control.<sup>3</sup> However, new approaches to the archive emphasise its fluidity as these artefacts of the past are framed by new meanings. It is important to understand their origins within the profoundly unequal relations of colonial invasion and dispossession – yet their performance in the present, in the hands of Indigenous relatives and descendants, may counter colonial amnesia and express Aboriginal views and experiences.

The 'archival turn' of the 1990s has brought increased scrutiny to the practices of collecting, collating, and classifying photographs and artefacts – procedures that are now sites of contested histories.<sup>4</sup> The last decade especially has seen Indigenous artists seized by 'archive fever' – a term coined by French poststructuralist Jacques Derrida in 1996.<sup>5</sup> Artists draw upon the archive to re-tell or transform national histories that have omitted or denigrated Indigenous people.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Indigenous photographers have provided a new perspective on past and present by revealing marginal experiences, asserting Indigenous capacity and addressing the losses and fractures of historical processes such as assimilation.

One of the first to experiment in this way was Australian artist Leah King-Smith, whose early series *Patterns of Connection* was met with critical acclaim and became the most popular project on Aboriginal identity of the 1990s. The series came about when King-Smith

was commissioned to create a 'picture book' of historical photographs. However, she found these portraits so moving she felt she had to change the direction of her project to something more personally engaging, and so created what she terms 'photo-compositions': artworks that combine rephotographs of the nineteenth-century photographs with her own colour photographs of the Victorian landscape and paint. She used a mirror to reflect the old images, then superimposed her own landscape photographs to create a haunted, haunting effect, in some places painting over the landscape. King-Smith's innovative formal treatment recovered Aboriginal people from the archives to re-position them in a positive, living, spiritual realm. *Patterns of Connection* was exhibited widely, touring with different exhibitions to the United Kingdom, North America, Japan, Thailand, Laos, the Philippines, as well as around Australia. The critic Anne Marsh pointed out that King-Smith's romanticising, spiritual concept of Aboriginal identity projected an essentialising 'New Age' notion of identity that is essentially spiritually bonded with the land – yet Marsh also highlighted the ways that this series 'tapped into a cultural mythology' and the idea that photography offers a physical but also magical bond with what it shows.<sup>7</sup>

Since then the photographic archive has been increasingly plundered, re-assembled, and cross-pollinated by Indigenous artists who challenge its colonial meanings. Through seemingly simple techniques of recontextualisation – overwriting, inscription, layering, enlargement, and resurfacing – the historical image may be literally transformed. Australian/Wiradjuri artist Brook Andrew, for example, has deliberately attacked a legacy of invisible violence by retrieving photographs that bear traces of colonial trauma from the archive as evidence for the forgotten or concealed tragedies of dispossession. While he is careful to respect the distinction between these disturbing historical images and traditionally restricted secret-sacred subjects, Andrew argues that 'they should be brought into the light, aroused in the public domain'.<sup>8</sup> In his 2007 series *Gun Metal Grey*, the violence of

colonialism is evoked by returning us to moments of fear or effacement; gleaming silver shrouds his subjects, like the woman of ‘Ngalan’ (Light), softening and reversing the colonial photographer’s distancing gaze. Using deceptively simple techniques of enlargement and metallic foil coating, these overlooked fragments of evidence become ‘unmanageable’, swelling out from the archive and beyond our control. In their contribution to this special issue Andrew and art historian Jessica Neath reflect on the profound changes that have taken place in this domain since his career began. In particular, broad cultural and legal shifts have focused attention on cultural protocols and the ethics of image use in new ways. Exploring the continuing and pernicious effects of the ‘relentless ideology of primitivism’, they review the possibilities for a decolonising practice that might re-assemble and repurpose a colonial worldview.

Photographic archives have also served as inspiration for artistic production in New Zealand that centres Indigenous frameworks, concepts, and worldviews. Prioritising storytelling and lived cultural practices, artists such as Lisa Reihana and Fiona Pardington have sought visual decolonisation from colonial imagery, stereotypes, and tropes fostered by photography and the late nineteenth-century postcard industry.<sup>9</sup> Taking the form of a ‘conversation’, art historian Ngarino Ellis and photographer Natalie Robertson discuss their research collaboration. Both of the Ngāti Porou iwi (tribe), their discussion is specifically concerned with elaborating on the Māori values and principles that should underpin both academic and community research, particularly where photography is concerned. In an approach that centres Māori epistemologies and ontologies, as expressed through manaakitanga (hospitality) and rangatiratanga (sovereignty), which requires respect for Māori forms of storytelling and tikanga (protocols), Ellis and Robertson write of their responsibilities as Ngāti Porou scholars and practitioners with genealogical connections to their research subject. Acknowledging the ‘networked relations between photographer, the

photographed, and the life worlds of communities involved’, they argue, is an important step in recognising that research conducted in community settings takes place within a relational framework, and therefore needs to bring benefits that enrich and empower communities.

Moving to a private Indigenous domain, we find that the importance of historical photographs to Aboriginal descendant communities has grown in recognition in recent decades. Indigenous Australian scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson uses the term ‘postcolonising’ to describe the situation for Indigenous people whose homelands have not been decolonised, and where the ‘the colonials did not go home’.<sup>10</sup> Such images represent otherwise unknown ancestors and relatives, often lost as a result of official processes, as well as information about places, histories, and relationships unavailable from other sources, and a range of other meanings. Recent studies of Indigenous (re)valuations of photography – including the essays presented here – demonstrate the distinctive ways the medium is deployed within Indigenous social relations and histories.<sup>11</sup> For many Australian Aboriginal people photographs are not merely representations, as in the Western tradition, but may assume the powers of the ancestors, embedded within social relationships with both the living and the dead. Such meanings and practices are explored by Karen Hughes and Ellen Trevorrow, whose essay here reflects upon the experience of talking to Ngarrindjeri Elders and their families at Camp Coorong, South Australia in sharing and interpreting a vast collection of rare personal historical photographs.<sup>12</sup> They employ the concept of ‘survivance’, key to Native American studies, to denote Australian Indigenous practices of self-determination against the aftermath of colonisation.<sup>13</sup> As they explain, for Ngarrindjeri, the photographs ‘carry a life-force similar to that of semi-sacred customary objects’, evoking kin, asserting an Indigenous worldview, and demonstrating Ngarrindjeri sovereignty.

Sovereignty is at the heart of the essay by Robertson and Ellis, and Sherry Farrell Racette’s contribution to this special issue. Working with the photographs of Métis political

activist James Brady (1908–1967), active in Alberta’s communities in mid twentieth-century Canada, Farrell Racette explores his work as a form of ‘visual sovereignty’. A self-taught community photographer, Brady’s visual register was deeply embedded in place, people, and kinship, and invested with political weight, using his camera to document the plight of northern Indigenous communities. He photographed individuals involved in the emerging Métis political movement and used the camera as an extension of oral storytelling. As a form of visual sovereignty, Brady’s photographs documented Indigenous and Métis presence in home territories, highlighting ‘individuals who embodied self-determination, living resistant lives’.

Some community-based photographers were not Indigenous, but embedded in communities through marriage, as was the case with the trader George Robson Crummer, whose portrait of a Cook Island family features on the cover of this issue. Born in New Zealand, Crummer arrived in the Cook Islands in 1890 to establish a shipping business, but quickly took up photography, documenting many aspects of Cook Island life. His photographic work was enabled by his marriage to Upokotio, the daughter of a high-chief, in 1892.<sup>14</sup> Many of his photographs, which are held by Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, depict Cook Islanders as keen consumers of western goods and technology, particularly the bicycle and motorcar. But as the family portrait that adorns the cover demonstrates, the bicycle sat comfortably alongside traditional cultural practices, like *tīvaevae* (women’s artistic quilt-making), for they were both symbols of status, skill and success.<sup>15</sup> While Crummer’s photographs are an important record of early twentieth life in the Cook Islands, the portraits of family are of particular significance to descendants.

In her article, Ngāi Tahu scholar Helen Brown highlights the work of a Pākehā (white) photographer and his relationships with an Indigenous community: the journalist and amateur historian William A. Taylor (1882–1951). Active in the first half of the twentieth

century, Taylor visited Ngāi Tahu communities in the Canterbury and Otago regions of New Zealand's South Island, and photographed people and places. During his life Taylor accumulated six thousand images, which were donated to Canterbury Museum in 1968 along with his manuscript material. Although recognised at the time as an important collection of photographs, scholars have largely overlooked Taylor's imaging of Ngāi Tahu, yet, as Brown points out, photography was crucial to his research practice and embodied an approach that prioritised relationships. Of the six thousand images in Taylor's collection, there are few photographs that are not of his family or Ngāi Tahu people, suggesting that he regarded these as one and the same. A friend and advocate, Taylor's photographic work stressed Ngāi Tahu presence in the mid-twentieth century, 'visually emphasising the fact that the Ngāi Tahu story was not just about the distant past but was a present-day reality populated by real people with mana, knowledge, history, integrity and a legitimate grievance against the Crown'.

In sum, for Aboriginal and Māori artists and communities, photographic archives offer a rich source of history, counter silence and exclusion, and provide a means to explore many issues that remain in the present. Archival images are tangible and powerful relics that provide a link with the past and bring it concretely into our time. This is the power of photographs: to address absence, to reconnect relatives with each other and to Country, and to heal. As Wiradjuri scholar Lawrence Bamblett argues, photographs link people in the present, as well as connecting them to places and the past; they 'fit into the joyful scene of people telling stories'.<sup>16</sup> The history of broken families, and the dispossession and control of Aboriginal people remain contested, and often absent, from national stories and visual histories, but these silences are filled by the solidity and presence of photographs.

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1 – Henrika Kuklick, “‘Humanity in the Chrysalis Stage’: Indigenous Australians in the Anthropological Imagination”. *British Journal of the History of Science* 39, no. 4 (2006): 535–68, quotation p. 535. See also Douglas, Bronwen, and Chris Ballard, eds. *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race 1750–1940*. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008.

2 – Annie E. Coombes, *Rethinking Settler Colonialism: History and Memory in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand and South Africa*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2006.

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- 3 – For instances, see John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Basingstoke: Macmillan 1998; and Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1977.
- 4 – Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton ‘Introduction’, in *Photography, Anthropology and History: Expanding the Frame*, ed. Christopher Morton and Elizabeth Edwards, Farnham: Ashgate 2009, 1–24.
- 5 – Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996.
- 6 – Jane Lydon, ‘Transmuting Australian Aboriginal Photographs’, *World Art* 6: 1 (2016), 45–60; and Ashley Rawling, ‘Brook Andrew: Archives of the Invisible’, *Art Asia Pacific*, 68 (May/June 2010), 110-117.
- 7 – Anne Marsh, ‘Leah King-Smith and the Nineteenth-Century Archive’, in ‘Australia’, ed. Michael D. Galimany, special issue, *History of Photography*, 23: 2 (Summer 1999) 114–17.
- 8 – Brook Andrew, ‘Come into the Light’, in *The Island Catalogue*, Cambridge: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology 2007, unpaginated. See also Brook Andrew and Laura Murray Cree, ‘Brook Andrew’, *Artist Profile*, 11 (2010), 50–59; and Marcia Langton, ‘High Excellent Technical Flavour’, in *Brook Andrew: Hope and Peace*, Melbourne: Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi 2005, 26-35.
- <sup>9</sup> – Kriselle Baker and Elizabeth Ranking, ed. *Fiona Pardington: The Pressure of Sunlight Falling*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press 2011; Jo Smith, ‘Native Reenactments/Living Iterability: Lisa Reihana’s *Native Portraits n.19897*’ in *Settler and Creole Reenactment*, ed. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Daniel Spoth, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2009, 273-93.

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9 – Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2015, 10. See also Shino Konishi, ‘Settler Colonial Studies and Indigenous Scholars’, *Settler Colonial Studies* (forthcoming), for a review of Indigenous critiques of the ‘settler colonialism’ paradigm.

10 – See *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies*, ed. Jane Lydon, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press 2014; Gaynor Macdonald, ‘Photos in Wiradjuri Biscuit Tins: Negotiating Relatedness and Validating Colonial Histories’, *Oceania*, 73: 4 (June 2003), 225–42; Ben Smith, ‘Images, Selves, and the Visual Record: Photography and Ethnographic Complexity in Central Cape York Peninsula’, *Social Analysis*, 47: 3 (Fall 2003), 8–26; and Jennifer Deger, *Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2006.

11 – Camp Coorong was established in 1986 through the Aboriginal Lands Trust Act 1966 (SA), founded by Ellen Trevorrow with her husband Tom, the late Ngarrindjeri leader, and his brother, the late George Trevorrow.

12 – Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor first coined the term ‘survivance’ in its present usage. See Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1999.

<sup>14</sup> ‘George Crummer: Picturing the Cook Islands’, <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/discover-collections/read-watch-play/pacific/george-crummer-picturing-cook-islands> (accessed 12 October 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Nina Tonga, ‘Photoised: Portraits of the Cook Islands’, *Cook Islands News*, 11 July 2014. Originally published on the Te Papa Tongarewa Blog: Nina Tonga, ‘“Photoised”: Bicycle Portraits in the Cook Islands’, <https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2014/07/01/photoised-bicycle-portraits-in-the-cook-islands/> (accessed 13 October 2018).

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13 – Lawrence Bamblett, ‘Picture Who We Are: Representations of Identity and the Appropriation of Photographs into a Wiradjuri Oral History Tradition’, in *Calling the Shots*, ed. Lydon, 99.