



# The Critical Image: Ethics and the Art of Vernon Ah Kee

A Thesis submitted by

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## Abstract

For Lithuanian philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, the idea of totality and infinity is made possible due to the notion that the Other is irreducible to comprehension (Levinas 1996, p.6). The Other overflows any meaning that can be attributed and any attempt to reduce the subject to a concept is a form of 'totalisation'. Levinas's Other is 'infinite', in that the subject exceeds any concept that one can possibly designate (Levinas 1969, p.22). The Other is beyond my full understanding; I cannot comprehend the maximum extent of their complexities, subtleties, choices and freedom. I can only come 'face to face' with them, in dialogue. This thesis applies the concept of Levinas's 'face to face' theory to the contemporary artwork of Australian Indigenous artist Vernon Ah Kee. I introduce the term 'critical image' to describe works of art that have criticality at their core and enter into dialogues that challenge contemporary thought. I ask, if Vernon Ah Kee's images are 'critical images' what are they critical of? In response to this question, I examine the colonial context of Ah Kee's work, including the role of anthropology in creating colonial identities for Indigenous Australians. Ah Kee's artwork is discussed in relationship to Levinas's key concepts of 'responsibility', 'proximity', 'infinity' and 'totality'. Levinas's theories, it is argued, are useful tools in examining Ah Kee's work in that they provide an ethical framework for interactions with the Other, preserving their alterity, and confronting us in the way we see Other people.

This thesis utilises a post colonial methodology that incorporates art criticism and philosophical questioning. This study recontextualises colonial critique within the ethical framework of Levinas's thought, not only reconsidering the usage of Levinas but repositioning Ah Kee's work in this new context.

## **Certification of Thesis**

This thesis is entirely the work of Jason John Castro except where otherwise acknowledged. The work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award, except where acknowledged.

Student and supervisors signatures of endorsement are held at USQ.

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## Introduction

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues that we are primarily ethical beings. We are defined by our responsibilities and obligations to Other people. In his theory of the ‘face to face’ relationship, Levinas asserts that we are confronted by that which is different to us when we communicate with Other people. The Other challenges us and questions our being, placing limits on our ego through reminding us we are not alone. When we come ‘face to face’ with Others we are captivated by their presence and forced to respond, even if that response is a lack of response. The Other takes us out of the comfort of our possession of the world and forces us to share. The philosophy of Levinas is significant in that it challenges many of the cornerstones of Western thought such as the shifting from an ego-centric notion of self to one that is dependent on our interactions and responsibilities to Other people.

Levinas does not speak specifically about the racial Other, however, in this thesis I will be extending Levinas’s thought by applying it to a new context. This work can be seen as part of the newly emerging third wave of Levinas’s scholarship. Philosophers Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco state that the first wave of Levinas study focused primarily on responding to his first major work *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 1969). The Second wave focused on Jacques Derrida’s response to this first major work, and Levinas’s second major work, *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence* (Levinas 1981). Atterton and Calarco state that a new third wave of Levinas criticism is emerging that is “concerned primarily with exploring progressive socio-political issues, both as they derive (positively) from Levinas’s thought and lead (critically) to a confrontation and interrogation of his work (Atterton and Calarco 2010, p.x)”. This thesis draws

on Levinas, in the context of this third wave of scholarship, as a means to examine post colonial issues in regards to the art work of Australian Indigenous artist Vernon Ah Kee. This use of a post colonial critique extends the traditional use of Levinas's work as it not only broadens the usage of his thought but extends his position on art. As an emerging field of research, scholarship in this area is scarce at present and I rely heavily the work of Robert Eaglestone as a means of critically engaging the applicability of Levinas's philosophy to works of art.

Derrida uses the metaphor of waves crashing on a beach to describe the movement of Levinas' thinking, in what philosopher Richard Bernstein presents as "always the 'same' wave returning and repeating its movement with deeper insistence (Critchley and Bernasconi 2002, p.252).

Levinas's writing relies heavily on repetition and it is difficult to avoid this recurrence of ideas when talking about his work. Hilary Putman describes Levinas as a hedgehog who knows one big thing as opposed to the fox who knows many little things (Critchley 1993, p.295). Levinas returns again and again to his central ideas that the Other is 'infinite' in its alterity, is irreducible to comprehension and imparts a call for responsibility, obligation and justice. In this context, the central question of this thesis is: *Can Emmanuel Levinas's theory of the 'face to face' encounter be applied to the art work of Vernon Ah Kee?*

In 2012, Australian Indigenous artist, Vernon Ah Kee, exhibited a series of large scale drawings in the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition. The drawings were appropriations of the anthropological colonial photographs of Norman Tindale, which were taken as part of the Harvard and Adelaide Universities expedition (1938-1939). These photographs were taken at Queensland Aboriginal missions and reserves Palm Island, Yarrabah, Cherbourg, Woorabinda, Bentinck Island, Doomadgee and Mornington Island, and it is important to note that these communities largely

consisted of Indigenous people who were forcibly removed to reserves and missions under the 1897 Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (State Library Queensland, 2009). I will argue that these images shift dramatically in context in Ah Kee's portraits from their original framework of scientific document, transitioning from their role as data, and moving into the realms of both family portraiture and colonial critique. This shift in context occurs due to Ah Kee's aesthetic choices such as the delicate texture of the skin and the large scale of the works that fill the view of the audience member and creates a sense of closeness and intimacy to the subject. Through this shift in meaning Ah Kee maintains contact with the original context from which these images come from. Ah Kee's work critiques the colonial history of Indigenous Australians and challenges many of the racist assumptions his audience may have about them. I argue that Ah Kee's art has criticality at its core, it enters into a dialogue, contesting and rupturing colonial discourse. Ah Kee's art can be read in light of the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas insofar as it elicits a sense of responsibility in his audience. Ah Kee bears witness to the colonial history of his family, and in turn, makes his audience a witness also, and therefore responsible.

This discussion will be divided across five chapters. Chapter One is a review of the literature covering the writings and issues connected to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee. First I will discuss the texts regarding the theories of Levinas; this will include primary and secondary sources. The primary source material will focus on Levinas's two major works *Totality and Infinity* (1969) and *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence* (1981), in addition to his essay on art *Reality and its Shadow* (1948). Next I will examine the secondary sources that provide commentary on the work of Levinas, including Jacques Derrida,

Benda Hofmeyr and Robert Eaglestone. Once the Levinas material has been discussed I will examine the colonial context of the work of Vernon Ah Kee, including writings surrounding the formation of the Queensland missions such as Palm Island, the location of the source material photographs that Ah Kee appropriates. These sources will identify the violent history of colonial rule, including the role of concerns about the Native Police in the establishment of the missions. I will then examine photographic discourse surrounding the representation of the Indigenous subject and the way in which photography was used as a scientific instrument to produce data in such fields as anthropology. This will lead to a discussion of debates within anthropology such as the debate between those supporting an objective model of anthropology, and those insisting on a subjective model of fieldwork. In relation to critiques within contemporary anthropology I will engage Johannes Fabian's re-examination of anthropology in which he states that European anthropologists provide themselves with the privileged position of the *here* and *now* while designating their racial and culturally Other subjects to the *then* and *there*. Following this discussion will be a consideration of 'Dying Race' theory, in which Indigenous Australians were presumed to be dying off due to the colonial influence of Europeans in an act of 'Social Darwinism' in which the 'weaker' race was unable to compete with the more dominant. This theory will be shown to be the key ideology of the anthropologist Norman Tindale, who took the photographs that Ah Kee's work is appropriated from. It was Tindale's belief that he was documenting the last remnants of Australian Aboriginal society and promoting both a biological and social absorption policy of the Indigenous Australian population.

Chapter Two will examine the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and provide an overview of some of the major concerns within his work. Levinas argues that we are primarily ethical, rather

than rational beings. His thought challenges many of the cornerstones of Western thought and questions categories such as objectivity, ontology as first philosophy and rationalization. For Levinas the Other is irreducible to comprehension; and efforts to 'know' a subject is to exert a power over them and deny their alterity. Instead, the Other overflows any understanding that I can have over them; they are more than I can ascribe and will always confound me. It is due to these 'infinite' qualities that the Other is transcendent. When I ascribe qualities to the Other I limit their freedom in an act of 'totalisation'. For Levinas, it is through the 'face' of the Other that we are exposed to that which is completely foreign to us, thereby forcing us to share the world we inhabit and placing on us limits to our actions. Levinas argues that we are obligated to the Other. It is responsibility that defines the 'face to face' relationship; the Other insists that we respond to their presence. In opening ourselves up to communication we expose ourselves to vulnerability.

Chapter Three addresses Levinas's deep seated antipathy to art and his overall scepticism to representation. I will argue that Levinas' stance on the function of art is a contradiction, betrayed by the privileged position that he affords philosophical discourse, despite the fact that it is presented in a plastic literary form. I will further argue that his elevation of the critical discourse of philosophical text neglects the possibility of criticism taking place through other plastic forms. I introduce the theory of 'Ethical Criticism' and the work of Robert Eaglestone (1997). Eaglestone argues that the literary style of Levinas takes on a poetic structure to convey his philosophy. He contends that this adoption of a poetic style opens up the option of other literary based models being useful in terms of Levinas's thought. For Eaglestone, 'Ethical Criticism' intervenes in critical dialogues in the same way in which philosophy does, opening up

the opportunity for art to be more than just mimetic representation. Levinas's categorisation of art as purely mimetic discounts the possibility of it having a critical voice and entering a dialogue. I argue that certain types of artworks have criticality at their core, and as a result, I introduce the term 'critical image' as a way of describing art works that are dialogically based. I argue that the voice of the artist in a 'critical image' steps beyond the boundaries of the mimetic and into the realm of discourse, that is to say, Levinas's domain of the 'face' in his 'face to face' theory.

Chapter Four will examine the colonial context surrounding the art work of Vernon Ah Kee. The key premise of this chapter is that if Ah Kee's works are 'critical images' – what are they critical of? I will outline Ah Kee's belief that Indigenous Australians are held at a lesser value than their European counterparts, both in a historical and contemporary context. When talking about Aboriginal Australians, Ah Kee states that "Australia still struggles to acknowledge that we are fully human (Ah Kee 2009, p.23)". This struggle to acknowledge the humanity of Indigenous Australians is furthered by Ah Kee's assertion that he was born officially subhuman, since he was born preceding the referendum that officially recognised Aboriginal Australians as Australian citizens. Following the discussion regarding the unequal status of Indigenous Australians I will introduce my concept of the 'face to faceless'- a way of describing a breakdown of the 'face to face' relationship in which the 'face' of the Other is not recognized as such. Discussed within this context will be Anne Maxwell's 'Norm /Deviance Model' in which European characteristics, both physical and social, were labelled superior and Indigenous Australians were judged as an inferior deviance from the white norm (Maxwell 1999, p.133). Maxwell argues that Australian Aboriginals became synonymous with degeneracy. This notion

of Indigenous Australians being viewed as inferior is extended to the work of anthropologist Norman Tindale, whose photographs Ah Kee appropriates in his portrait series. Tindale is discussed in connection with the theory of the 'Dying Race', in which it was perceived that the Aboriginal peoples of Australia were dying out due to the influences of European contact. This theory was closely related to beliefs in 'Social Darwinism' in which the passing of Indigenous Australians made way for the more adaptive Europeans. Also examined is Tindale's belief in social and biological absorptionist theories in which he addressed the 'half caste problem'. Further discussion will follow regarding photography's role in anthropological practice as a tool for obtaining objective data.

Anthropology will be examined within this colonial context chapter, focusing specifically on critiques within the field that re-examine the practices that were held during the Tindale era. These critiques include that of anthropologist Johannes Fabian, who claims that the ability to visualize a culture through photographs, maps and graphs became synonymous with understanding the culture (Fabian 1983, p.106). Fabian goes further with his critique, arguing that European anthropologists designated themselves the privileged position of the *here* and *now* while assigning their Indigenous subjects to the *there* and *then* (Fabian 1983, p. 30).

Anthropology is additionally examined through the debate between objective and subjective methodologies, with the proponents of objective modes arguing that a psychological distance is required to create effective fieldwork and subjective advocates claiming that such a separation is not possible when coming in contact with subjects. To conclude this chapter on the colonial context I will argue that the theories of anthropology such as the 'Dying Race' and 'Great Chain of Being', in which non Europeans were perceived as being below the evolutionary ladder to

white people, permeated the psyche of mainstream colonial culture. As evidence of the way in which these anthropological concepts found their way into the everyday dialogues of Australian culture I will present newspaper editorials and letters to the editor that employ these theories.

Chapter Five will examine the art works of Vernon Ah Kee, including the portraits of the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition as well the drawings of the *unwritten* series (Ah Kee uses lower case for the title of this artwork) and his text works, in relationship to the ‘face to face’ theories of Emmanuel Levinas. First I will consider the portrait work of the 2012 exhibition *Transforming Tindale*. This exhibition was held at the Queensland State Library in which nine large scale portraits were shown in conjunction with 150 photographs from the library’s collection of Norman Tindale’s anthropological study of Indigenous Australians, the *Harvard-Adelaide Expedition*. Tindale conducted this expedition in 1938 and 1939. These photographs are appropriated by Ah Kee in his portrait work and are transformed from anthropological data into intimate family portraits. These works will be discussed in relationship to Levinas’s notions of responsibility and justice. I will argue that Ah Kee’s art work bears witness to the colonial history of his family and the power that was exerted over them by the state. It is my position that Ah Kee’s art evokes a sense of responsibility from his audience. I will further argue that this bearing of witness is transferred to the audience of Ah Kee’s work, in which they become co-witnesses, thereby invoking Levinas’s concept of justice in which our obligation to the Other extends to *all* Others.

This chapter will also present Anthony Gardner’s notion of ‘breathless’ in regards to the art work of Ah Kee. The concept of ‘breathless’ suggests a closing of distance that Gardner argues eliminates the space to dodge responsibility. This closing of the space of impunity will be

compared to Levinas's concept of 'proximity' in which the 'face' of the Other, through their closeness, captivates us and imposes a sense of obligation. I will also discuss Ah Kee's *unwritten* series as an antithesis of the portrait work in which the mask-like figures are described as a struggle between birth and death, as illustrated by Robert Leonard, or existence and erasure by Gardner. I will argue that Leonard's concepts of birth and death, and Gardner's existence and erasure, are compatible with Levinas's concept of 'infinity' and 'totality' insofar as they share a commonality in the way in which they express notions of the transcendent nature of 'infinity' and the limiting characteristic of 'totality'. Ah Kee's text works will then be examined in comparison to Levinas's notion of the 'saying' and the 'said'. It will be argued that the cryptic nature of Ah Kee's text work, through the use of the elimination of space between the words, creates a temporal gap between the delivery of the message and the decoding of its meaning. This results in a delivery of the message before meaning. This delivery of the expression before meaning, I will argue, coincides with Levinas's conception of the 'saying', in which one is exposed to the 'face' of the Other, preceding the meaning of the 'said'. This chapter interweaves art criticism with the philosophical discourse of Emmanuel Levinas to explore Ah Kee's art work in a new context. Levinas's theories are helpful in understanding the responsibilities placed on the audience of Ah Kee's work and the obligations that arise from this interaction.

This study incorporates qualitative research methods. It encompasses a post colonial critique as its primary methodology. The post colonial methodology is applied in both the discussion of the art works of Vernon Ah Kee and the investigating of the colonial context informing Ah Kee's work. A historical methodology is also incorporated in the examining of the colonial context of the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee, particularly the Tindale images that he appropriates for his

portrait work. This thesis is a joining of art criticism with philosophical argument analysing the artwork of Ah Kee, coupled with the theories of Levinas.

Appendix A of this thesis will present a discussion of the studio research that I have undertaken to accompany the written component of the PhD. Coming from a Native American heritage, my art work has many similarities in subject matter to Ah Kee in its colonial critique due to a parallel history of colonialism between North America and Australia. Although the differences in colonial experience diverge greatly between North America and Australia, there is common ground in such colonial encounters as the application of ‘Dying Race’ theories, in which Indigenous peoples were thought to be vanishing. I appropriate the colonial photographs of Edward Curtis, a photographer of European descent who photographed Native American tribes. Curtis, like Norman Tindale, advanced the theory of ‘Dying Race’, writing in 1898, “you and I know and of course everybody does who thinks of it, the Indians of North America are vanishing. They’ve crumbled from their pride and power into pitifully small number, painful poverty and sorry weakness. There won’t be anything left of them in a few generations and it’s a tragedy—a national tragedy (Curtis in Youngblood 2009, p.6).” Through the appropriation of Curtis, I give voice to Native Americans in a way similar to how Ah Kee does for Indigenous Australians and raise questions about our treatment under colonial rule. I also examine Native American representations, particularly the use of ‘Indian’ figures in ‘Cowboy and Indian’ games that were popular until recent criticism led them to be viewed as racist. The appendix will also consider the relationship between my artwork and Levinas’s theory of the ‘face to face’ encounter.

This thesis has limitations regarding scope, particularly in regards to Chapter Four which examines the colonial context surrounding the art of Vernon Ah Kee. This chapter offers a broad overview of some of the issues to consider when viewing Ah Kee's work, however, it is not within the scope of this thesis, given its limits in word length, to provide a detailed account of race relations in Queensland and the role anthropology played in its affiliation. The chapter provides insight into Ah Kee's use of anthropological images with specific reference to the source images Ah Kee appropriates from Norman Tindale. 'Dying Race' theories are discussed as an ideology that heavily influenced Tindale's thought and the direction of his studies. The work of Johannes Fabian is introduced as a means of understanding Ah Kee's claim that Australian Indigenous peoples are often viewed as relics of the stone age, as opposed to contemporary beings (Ah Kee 2009, p.8). The debate within the field of anthropology between objective and subjective methodologies is examined as a means of calling into question the role of objectivity in relationships with the Other, reflecting the shift from objective data, in the Tindale source material photographs, to subjective family portraits in the drawings of Ah Kee. Race relationships are examined to provide a context for the racism in Australia, both in an institutional form of scientific enquire and the common prejudices found in mainstream society. These examples of racism are but small illustrated instances of the widespread practice in the history of Australia's race relationships. This discussion of racist practices in Chapter Four is by no means extensive, but provides a context in understanding Ah Kee when he questions the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia.

In the examination of Ah Kee's art work in Chapter Five, I have limited the discussion of his portraits to the works in the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition. The reasoning behind the limiting

of this scope is that the *Transforming Tindale* portraits exhibit a maturity in technical style and conceptual development and complexity. Through the inclusion of Tindale's photographs, that accompany the drawings in the exhibition, their connection to that history is explicit and better exhibits the qualities of 'critical images', a term I introduce in Chapter Three to describe images that have critical dialogue as a central characteristic. Ah Kee's work is examined in terms of his own practice with only a brief mention of his role in the Queensland Indigenous artist collective proppaNOW. As a founding member, Ah Kee's role in proppaNOW is a significant one.

Containing members such as Jennifer Herd, Richard Bell, Tony Albert, Gordon Hookey, Bianca Beetson, Laurie Nilsen and Andrea Fisher, proppaNOW has been a prominent artist collective that has brought recognition to the issues and politics of urban Indigenous art in Queensland. The contribution to the arts community of Queensland by proppaNOW is important but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do justice to the breadth and depth of both the collective and individual artistic interests of the group.

## **Chapter One.**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1969.**

For Lithuanian philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, the idea of ‘totality’ and ‘infinity’ is made possible due to the notion that the Other is irreducible to comprehension. The Other overflows any meaning that can be attributed to it and any attempt to reduce the subject to a concept or theme is a form of ‘totalisation’. Levinas’ Other is ‘infinite’, in that the subject exceeds any concept that I can possibly designate. The Other is beyond my full understanding; I cannot comprehend the maximum extent of their complexities, subtleties, choices and freedom. I can only come ‘face to face’ with them, in dialogue.

‘Infinity’, for Levinas, is transcendence in that the Other is infinitely foreign. Since they are beyond my comprehension they are separated and free beings, they are beyond my power. When one reduces the Other to concepts, and places them within a system of thought, they are diminished. Levinas sees this as an act of violence that erases the being as an individual, like nobody else, and places them within a ‘totalising’ system. This dehumanising process eliminates the ‘infinite’ nature of the subject and replaces it with a system in which the particularised entity is interchangeable with Others, which Levinas see as the greatest disrespect. When I ‘totalise’, I imagine myself outside of the ‘face to face’ relationship and take a ‘totalising’ position that assumes the power to designate meaning to that which is beyond meaning. In viewing oneself removed from the ‘face to face’ encounter, from an outside imagined point, the subject is reduced to an object, since I am no longer in dialogue with, but talking about, the subject.

The face of the Other questions my being as a moral summons. There is an ethical underpinning to social interactions that calls to me through the face of the Other: I am irreplaceable in my duty, obligated to respond to the openness of the Other’s expression. For Levinas, it is this responsibility for the Other that underpins social interactions. From the moment we are first

conscious, our reality is defined by our response to Others. Responsivity, and in turn responsibility, delineates our existence in a constant relationship to Other human beings; we are not alone. The presence of Others, and my 'face to face' interactions with them, call into question my possession of the world. I am obligated to share this world with Others, it is not mine alone. My ego is challenged and I have no course of action but to yield in responsiveness, confronted by that which is not me.

### **Jacques Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*, 1978.**

In *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida deconstructs Emmanuel Levinas' first major work, *Totality and Infinity*. Derrida's key criticism of Levinas is that there is a problem with language, and in turn representation, in his work. He asks how it is possible to break free of the dominance of ontology in philosophical discourse while at the same time using the ontological language of philosophy. How is it possible to reveal the 'face', that is to say the Other, through philosophical discourse when that discourse is imbedded in the logocentric language of the Greeks, from which philosophy extends? Derrida argues that Levinas cannot escape ontology when his language presupposes being, since the language that he uses is dependent on being as a founding principle of Greek thought. In an effort to break free of the panoramic view of 'totality', in which difference is reduced to the same, Levinas relies on a language, and a history, that thwarts his effort. Levinas responds to Derrida's criticism through the writing of his second major work *Otherwise than Being*.

### **Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*, 1981**

Robert Eaglestone argues that "*Otherwise than Being* can be read as a rewriting of *Totality and Infinity* after *Violence and Metaphysics* (Eaglestone 1997, p.131)". In this, Levinas' second major work, he addresses Derrida's criticism of *Totality and Infinity* by avoiding the ontological language of philosophy and creating a much more open ended language structure. *Otherwise than Being* not only exhibits a shift in form, but also in content, the emphasis on language itself is now put forward as the basis of the 'face to face' relationship. This emphasis on language demonstrates a linguistic turn in Levinas' thought and differs greatly from the presence of the

Other, in what Derrida describes as an act of empiricism, being the basis of the 'face to face' encounter in *Totality and Infinity*. The face speaks, and by placing the function of language over sight, Levinas responds to Derrida's insistence that there is a problem with both language and representation in his earlier work. Levinas moves away from sight as a metaphor, thereby distancing himself from a panoramic view of the 'face to face' experience which has its roots in Greek philosophical traditions that are ontologically based in their preference of sight over other senses and the logocentric role of light in Western discourse since Plato.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas introduces his key concept that redefines the 'face to face' encounter in light of his linguistic turn, the differentiation between the transcendent 'saying' and the thematic 'said'. For Levinas, 'saying' is exposure to the Other, the act of expression that signifies the 'proximity' of a being that is separate from me. 'Saying' interrupts my possession of the world and announces the presence of that which is not me. Levinas states that, "The unblocking of communication, irreducible to the circulation of information that presupposes it, is accomplished in the saying. It is not due to the contents that are inscribed in the said and transmitted to the interpretation and the decoding done by the Other (Levinas 1981, p.48)". The act of 'saying' precedes the message that is conveyed in the 'said' and it is through this act of 'saying' that one is obligated in both responsibility and responsiveness. What Levinas describes as a 'radical passivity' occurs, in which one is acted upon by the presence of another who resides outside of my control, who is a free being. I am held hostage by the Other in my responsibility towards them; they have a hold on me. This 'radical passivity' is an exchange of responsibility that precedes my ability to formulate language, and for Levinas, is first philosophy and ethical.

It is through the power of the 'saying' that Levinas links his linguistic turn in *Otherwise than Being* with his previous idea of 'infinity' in *Totality and Infinity*. It is through the 'saying' that one experiences the 'infinite' nature of the Other in the 'face to face' relationship. This is accomplished in that the 'face' of the Other 'speaks', announcing its presence not only through its voice but through the eyes that look at me. Language exhibits a duality. On one hand, it is the transcendent 'saying' that is 'infinite', expression loaded with responsibility. On the Other hand, this transcendent 'saying' collapses into the 'said' that conveys the message being announced, constantly slipping into the logocentric possession of 'totality'. However, the thematising 'said'

is constantly expanded by fresh expression, the limits of the 'said' interrupted by the limitless 'saying'. Levinas argues that this is true, not only of language, but of experiencing the 'face' also. The 'face' of the Other signifies the being with which it coincides, a sensible point of contact between that which is visible and that which is not. Yet at the same time the 'face' is described by Levinas as "its own caricature, its picturesqueness (Levinas 1989, p.135)". A 'face' is both itself and its shadow, a duality in which the 'face' is its being, yet at the same time the withdrawal of being, its resemblance. It is through this concept of the 'saying' and the 'said' that Levinas attempts to answer some of the questions raised by Derrida.

### **Emmanuel Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow*, 1948**

In *Reality and its Shadow*, Emmanuel Levinas is highly critical of visual art and views the practice as purely mimetic in which the object is replaced by its likeness. By substituting an object for its image we break the "living relationship with the real object (Levinas 1998, p.132)". Instead of experiencing the object, and grasping it as a concept, we experience the object through its absence, its shadow. What we experience through art is not reality, but according to Levinas, reality doubled up on itself. Art creates a hither world, one that is removed from the tangible world of dialogue and criticism. The image remains outside of this world in that it is 'un-worlded'. Sensibility, one's exposure to the world, is mediated through the image, replacing one's contact with the real, and in turn truth, with the materiality of the plastic form, brushstrokes of a painting or stone of a sculpture. For Levinas, the image is the antithesis of truth, reality concealed by its likeness.

For Levinas, every artwork is in essence a statue, a stopping of time in which it is without future, the eternal instant. He sees this frozen moment as if being trapped in a 'nightmare'. This holds true for literature as well as the image or object of visual art, within the narrative the characters are doomed to forever repeat the written word, never to break free of the fate to which they are assigned. Fate, for Levinas, is the antithesis of freedom, in art it is the instant forever past, art is the death that is "never dead enough...the eternal duration of the interval—the meanwhile....something inhuman and monstrous (Levinas 1989, p.141)". He dismisses art as self

indulgent and as an unethical play of shadows, in which reality is concealed by the plastic form in which it is held, the pursuit of beauty and the uncovering of the “essence of essence”.

**Benda Hofmeyr, “Isn’t Art an Activity that Gives Things a Face?” Levinas on the Power of Art, 2007.**

Benda Hofmeyr argues that art has the capacity to call upon the experience of Levinas’ concept of ‘radical passivity’. She defines ‘radical passivity’ as “a paradoxical notion that is suggestive of an immobilizing encounter that facilitates authentic action (Hofmeyr 2007, p.1)”. It is through this ‘paralytic shock’ that one is confronted by the Others ‘arresting alterity’, confronted by another who is not me, invoking a sense of responsibility (Hofmeyr 2007, pp 2-3). For Hofmeyr, art is like a ‘face’ in that it “has the power to address us in a way that stops our indifference and inertia and enables us to act effectively (Hofmeyr 2007, p.3)”. The ‘face’, like certain works of art, calls for a response. ‘Radical passivity’ is twofold in that it interrupts and immobilises, yet at the same time calls for action, thereby instilling a sense of responsibility and responsivity from the viewer. In relationship to one’s responsibility, Hofmeyr further argues that “it is the ethico-political responsibility of artistic and cultural producers to come up with strategies to engender Others with such empowering paralysis- a passivity that provokes a “pre-conscious awareness” of the power we have to act (Hofmeyr 2007, p.3)”. This is not the type of art that Levinas criticises in *Reality and its Shadow*, that is, an art that is purely aesthetic in its mimetic pursuit of beauty, but a radical departure from art for art’s sake, into art making as a political act with ethics as its foundation.

**Robert Eaglestone, Ethical Criticism, 1997.**

Literary theorist, Robert Eaglestone, brings attention to Emmanuel Levinas’ deep seated antipathy to art and points to the fact that, “Few critics seeking to utilise Levinas have taken this antipathy into account (Eaglestone 1997, p.99)”. He points to a contradiction in Levinas’ theory regarding art and literature, highlighting the literary status of Levinas’ work, which seems to be at odds with his stance on representation. Eaglestone points to the development of Levinas’ literary form and content, in his later works, shifting from what Derrida described as an “act of empiricism” in the ‘face to face’ relationship in which the physical presence of the Other is required, to a literary

method in which language is the focus. He states that “Levinas’s new understanding of language means that the ethical is understood to signify through language, in the reference to, the representation of, but no longer the actual presence of, an interlocutor (Eaglestone 1997, p.168)”. This raises the possibility of representation being ethical and having a voice, a ‘face’. Focusing on literary criticism, Eaglestone asks what qualities could possibly make such criticism ethical.

Criticism, which Levinas sees as a ‘re-worlding’ of the ‘un-worlded’ through the act of creating dialogue, is central to Eaglestone’s argument that literary texts, in addition to philosophical texts, have the possibility to be ethical. Drawing on Levinas’ own literary style, and the way it interrupts philosophical discourse, Eaglestone highlights the role of interruption as both a stylistic device and a conceptual framework for ethical criticism. He points to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as an example of critical text that accesses the ‘saying’, and imposing a sense of responsibility on the reader in the way that it “draws attention to the injustices which underlie Western discourse (Eaglestone 1997, p.178)”. He argues that this drawing attention to interrupts, thus creating not only a disturbance to Western discourse but the opening up of a dialogue.

**Jeremy Long, *Aboriginal Settlements*, 1970.**

Australian social scientist, Jeremy Long, argues that the establishment of the Government missions in Queensland was the result of public criticism over the conduct of the Native Police, who routinely murdered the Indigenous inhabitants of Queensland. He contends that the term ‘disperse’ was used as bush slang for the murder and wholesale massacre of the indigenous population, as a result for attacking settlers or stock. To support his argument, Long quotes the historian, George William Rusden, as saying that the native police were “a mere machine for murder” and that “if there be any pre-eminence in evil, Queensland must bear the stigma of deserving it” (Long 1970, p.92). Long’s claims of paternal protection from the Native Police are offset by his recognition that the establishment of government missions and reserves was an action of exerting control over the Indigenous population and limit their interactions with the European colonisers. With the introduction of the 1897 Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act the authorities were given far reaching powers of control over the day to day living of the Indigenous inhabitants.

**Joanne Watson, *Palm Island*, 2010**

While acknowledging the influence of public concerns regarding the Native Police, Australian historian, Joanne Watson, attributes the founding of the government missions to the desire to control the Indigenous population and end the “bitter clashes between colonisers and Indigenous people on the Queensland frontier (Watson 2010, p.18)”. Watson cites imperialistic tendencies, rather than paternalistic, in determining the forced confinement of the Queensland’s Indigenous population to government reserves. To support the argument of imperial motives, Watson points to the fact that Archibald Meston, who was appointed Special Commissioner by the Queensland government to compile the 1896 *Report on the Aborigines of Queensland*, “had not spoken out concerning the abuse of Murris or proposals to alleviate distress until the 1890s, while others expressed concern, especially over the actions of the Native Police, from the 1950s” (Watson 2010, p.31). Watson further supports this argument by stating that Meston “advised the government that ‘the law of the strongest’ dictated that Murris accept ‘enforced residence in one locality’” and that he “supported the ‘principle of isolation on reserves’ in response to the perpetual warfare of the colony (Watson 2010, p.31)”. Watson contends that the motive for imperialism was wide spread and that “North Queensland Murris were perceived as pests in the way of an inevitable and a sacred duty of the British to colonise in the name of ‘progress’ (Watson 2010, p.27)”.

Watson argues that the government reserve for Indigenous people on Palm Island was viewed as “the Australian version of Alcatraz (Watson 2010, p.17)”. Its prison camp setting, removed from the mainland, exerted control on the Indigenous inhabitants to a much greater extent than the other Queensland state missions and reserves at the time. She notes that the threat of being sent to Palm Island was used to control the Indigenous peoples on the mainland reserves. She states that “Palm Island was the government’s ultimate punitive destination for those who resisted colonisation—the backbone of a policy of containment and control (Watson 2010, p.19)”.

Watson claims that Palm Island featured a large collection of political prisoners who dared to speak out against ‘protection’ laws or tried to organise political parties that addressed the needs and distresses of the Indigenous population. She also suggests that many were sent who refused to stop cultural practices that were outlawed.

**Andrew Markus, *From the Barrel of a Gun: the Oppression of the Aborigines, 1860-1900*, 1974.**

Australian historian, Andrew Markus, supports Watson's view that imperialistic tendencies to claim Australian Aboriginal lands over paternal protection of the Indigenous population was the motivating factor in the establishing of government reserves to intern the Indigenous population when he argues that "the right to dispossess the Aborigines of their land was not a subject for debate" and that "it was taken for granted both in the cities and in the frontier (Markus 1974, p.7)". Markus attributes the actions regarding the treatment of Australia's Indigenous population to the ideology held by those on the frontier, when he states "In rationalizing their treatment of Aborigines and in defending their actions against outside criticism the frontiersmen were united by a common set of attitudes. These attitudes, encapsulated in a clearly defined ideology, made the right of Aborigines to 'life liberty and the pursuit of happiness' subservient to the expansion of the pastoral economy (Markus 1974, p.7)".

Markus argues that the "central tenet was the degradation of the Aborigines to a status below European men" and that "once the Aborigines were degraded to a sub-human status European standards of dealing with their fellow men could be demonstrated to be out of place on the frontier (Markus 1974, p.7)". To support the argument that a prevalent ideology dominated the frontier psyche, Markus draws on newspaper articles and editorials to illustrate the link between imperialistic motivations, 'Dying Race' theory and the 'Social Darwinist' theories of Herbert Spencer. The blunt reality of genocide, as a means of colonial imperialism, is explicit when Markus references an article in the Queensland newspaper *Northern Miner*, as quoted by *The Bulletin*, 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1883, "it is the inevitable consequence of our possession of the country, and the English Government having taken possession of Australia and let her children seize the land, the aboriginals must go somewhere-lead, or rum, or Otherwise. The nigger has to go (Markus 1974, pp.70-71)".

**Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the ‘Native’ and the Making of European Identities*, 1999.**

Art theorist Anne Maxwell argues that, in Australia, the representation of the Indigenous peoples was based on a norm/deviance model. She states that, “In this scheme, the more racial characteristics deviated from the white norm, the more their bearers became identified with ‘degeneration’ (Maxwell 1999, p.133)”. Maxwell further argues that, through the designation of Aboriginals as deviant, a series of dichotomies were established that reinforced the claims to modernity that white Australia was desperate to present by having a non modern Other in which to compare itself against. Dichotomies such as modern/pre-modern, civilised/savage and Christian/Pagan were used as a way of defining white Australia’s superiority over the colonised Indigenous inhabitants. This not only elevated white Australia’s identity of itself but also justified the taking of land and ‘terra nullius’, in which the land was deemed ‘nobody’s land’, as well as the relocating of Indigenous Australian inhabitants to government reserves and missions, as well as the extinguishing of the Indigenous culture and murder. Maxwell claims that ‘Dying Race’ and ‘Social Darwinism’ theories “were popular because they allowed settlers to believe that indigenous peoples and their cultures had declined primarily because of their failure to compete with the more ‘adaptive’ races of Europe and not as a result of settlers’ atrocities (Maxwell 1999, p.138)”. Maxwell argues that settlers were locked into a ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality, underpinned by a ‘Social Darwinist’ reading of the English scientist Thomas Huxley. By promoting its own sense of entitlement, white Australians were free to act as they pleased against a people that were seen as being less than their European counterpart.

**Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure*, 1995**

Art Historian, Nicholas Mirzoeff, agrees with Anne Maxwell’s position that the non-European Other was used as an opposition to the European ideal when he argues that, “The perfect body in Western culture was sustained and made imaginable by the imperfect body of the racial Other (Mirzoeff 1995, p.135)”. He addresses the role of photography in documenting this difference and the way in which the racial Other was used as a counterpoint to the ideal European body. He further argues that during the nineteenth and twentieth century’s museums, private collectors and

scientific laboratories created a visual taxonomy of racial difference through the creation of archives of visual material devoted to classifying such differentiation. This process of racial cataloguing and distinction, he argues, transforms the colonial subject into a body to be examined and therefore a specimen. Mirzoeff is critical of the use of photography by anthropology in its attempt to establish a visual classification of race, when stating that “in the colonial photograph, all that can be seen is the colonizer and his or her prejudice (Mirzoeff 1995, p.139)”.

**Jonathon Crary, *Techniques of the Observer : On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 1992.**

Art historian, Jonathon Crary, argues that representation in Modernism was a two pronged movement. On one hand, there was a select group of artists who were breaking free of classical Renaissance perspective traditions, particularly Manet, impressionism and/or postimpressionism in the early phase of Modernism. On the Other hand, there was a reinforcement of perspective based and realist tendencies through the use of photography and cinema. Crary argues that the camera obscura was used as a philosophical model to articulate an objective world view that coincided with the advancement of rationalist scientific ideologies in which, “The aperture of the camera obscura corresponds to a single mathematically definable point, from which the world can be logically deduced by a progressive accumulation and combination of signs (Crary 1992, p.48)”. The objective philosophical model made the camera an essential tool in the collection of data in the colonial anthropological endeavour.

In contrast to the scientific models that use the metaphor of the camera obscura, Crary examines the role of subjectivity in Modernist models with a concentration on the body. He argues that this focus on the body and interior spaces, that influence perception, return the role of the observer into the equation of the perceived. With subjectivity, the image of a subject is not projected onto a blank screen to be examined by a detached reason, but rather perceived through the impression of the outside world onto the body of the observer. Subjectivity is the relationship that blurs interior and exterior space and creates impressions rather than an unhindered transmission suggested by the camera obscura model of vision and perception.

**Terence Wright, *Photography: Theories of Realism and Convention*, 1992**

Art historian, Terence Wright, examines the polarizing theories of photographic discourse which, on one hand, proposes that the reality of the photograph is unproblematic in that it allows transparent access to the subject, and on the other hand, that the images provided by photography are highly constructed and are dependent on a photographic literacy in their interpretation. Due to the transparency of the camera in a photographic image, photography was encouraged to be used as an instrument to yield exact mathematical data in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Analogous to Crary's position that a philosophical model was instrumental to the wide spread use of the camera in the sciences, Terence Wright states that, "So, for an anthropology deeply rooted in positivism, photography offered a tempting proposition: an objective vision and collection of 'facts', facilitating systematic organization and analysis, in the service of scientific enquiry (Wright 1992, p.20)". He further argues that the illusion of realism is dependent on ones literacy of photographic images and that photography is an "arbitrary systems of representation, they only appear realistic because we have learned to see them as such (Wright 1992, p.24)". It is this dependence on a photographic literacy that makes the realism of a photographic image culturally specific.

**Roy D'Andrade, *Moral models in Anthropology*, 1995**

Anthropologist, Roy D'Andrade, argues for the superiority of objective models of ethnography over moral, or subjective, models. The use of an objective based methodology appears in line with the positivist philosophies discussed by Crary and Wright. He asserts that object models are better equipped to describe 'the world as it is' since it focuses on the subject of its study instead of directing that investigation inwards towards the role of the anthropologist. He states that, "An objective description tells about the thing described, not about the agent doing the description, while a subjective description tells how the agent doing the description reacts to the object (D'Andrade 1995, p.399)". He argues that moral models of ethnography focus on delineating blame on what it considers 'good' or 'bad' and is loaded with moral judgments and politics when addressing its ethnographic practice. He questions the moral authority of the ethnographer in defining oppression and power as well as deciding what course of moral action should be taken.

He further argues that properties such as oppression or the inequality of power are not empirically measurable and therefore less reliable data that is obtained by objective empirical methodologies. D'Andrade contends that objectivity and moral judgements should be kept separate in ethnographic practice to create reliable data that can be tested and repeated. He states that the role of the ethnographer is to create data that is neutral and that the anthropologist is outside of the 'good' or 'bad', that the data can be used.

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology*, 1995**

In response to Roy D'Andrade's objective model of anthropology, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, argues that the moral, or subjective, model of ethnographic study is essential in creating an anthropological practice that is ethical. She questions the objective model in which the observer is removed from the events taking place before them and advocates the involvement of the anthropologist in the struggles, both political and social, in which the subjects of the study find themselves involved in. Influenced by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, she argues that ethics should be the overriding factor in ones interaction with the Other that supersede any notion of scientific observation, stating that "responsibility, accountability, answerability to the Other- the ethical as I would define it- is precultural to the extent that our human existence as social beings presupposes the presence of the Other (Scheper-Hughes 1995, p.419)". In the way that Emmanuel Levinas proposes ethics as first philosophy, Scheper-Hughes suggests that ethics be first anthropology based on the social nature of human experience and the intersubjective nature of ethnographic practice. She calls on anthropologists to not be just 'spectators' to events but actively engaged as 'witnesses'. She argues that 'witnessing' provides a moral and ethical dimension that positions the anthropologist inside the events instead of outside as a neutral observer, stating that, "Anthropologists as witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations (Scheper-Hughes 1995, p.419)". She advocates an active role in the process of social engagement with the ethnographic subject that includes social and political action.

**Peter Benson & Kevin Lewis O'Neill, *Facing Risk: Levinas, Ethnography, and Ethics*, 2007**

Anthropologist, Peter Benson, and religious scholar, Kevin Lewis O'Neill, examine the practice of anthropological ethnography in light of the ethics of philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. They propose that the 'face to face' aspect of ethnographic research is inherently risky for the anthropologist due to the fact that one's responsibility to the Other challenges any preconceived notion one may have about, not only the subject, but oneself. They argue that pre-existing models for ethnographic practice, including D'Andrade's objective and Scheper-Hughes's subjective models, contain elements of Levinasian ethics in their obligations of responsibility towards their subject, but fall short of realizing the full extent of the implications of Levinas's thought, particularly in the relationships of power between subject and ethnographer. They further argue that perhaps any model is not possible due to the 'totalising' effects of the application of such models. Instead, they suggest that an 'ethical sensibility' that focuses on "a critical self-reflection that brings powerful issues of power and inequality to consideration (Benson & O'Neill 2007, p.48)".

**Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: how Anthropology Makes its Object*, 1983**

Anthropologist, Johannes Fabian, argues that there is a lack of covalence between the anthropologist and the subject that they are studying. The anthropological subject is designated 'over there' and in the 'past', a relic of an earlier stage of development to the West. Stages of development are apparent in the coupling of 'primitive' societies as child like, accentuating the inequality of power relations. He states that "talk about the childlike nature of the primitive has never been just a neutral classificatory act, but a powerful rhetorical figure and motive, informing colonial practice in every aspect from religious indoctrination to labour laws and the granting of basic political right (Fabian 1983, p.63)". This inequality of power relations positions the 'primitive' at an earlier stage of development to be guided by the 'adult' Western anthropologist. They do not occupy the same space and time. Dichotomies such as civilised/savage, here/there and present/past are established. Fabian argues that these dichotomies are not benign but politically loaded.

Fabian also contends that the ability to visualise a culture, through the use of tables, diagrams and photographs, has become synonymous with understanding it. He credits this to the bias of vision in rationalist thought and the role of observation in both anthropological practice and scientific methodologies. Visual devices become a way of charting and mapping a culture. The visual becomes a text to be deciphered. But he argues that this act of 'visualism' removes the anthropologist from the common praxis and places the subject at a distance, and in turn, objectifies the subject into a collection of textual data. He references the debates in the sixties and seventies in which the critics of anthropology denounced the dehumanising effects of overly scientific methods. "A common complaint was that social scientists treated their subjects as objects, that is, passive targets of various structural, behaviourist and often quantitative schemes of explanation, and this to the detriment of 'understanding' the motives, values, and beliefs of their subjects as persons (Fabian 1983, p.118)". Fabian argues that the role of the anthropologist must be one of covalence for it to be an ethical relationship with the subject. The role, and presence, of the anthropologist must be acknowledged as a sharing of information, a subjective experience that places the subject in a common contemporary frame of time and space.

**Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1938*, 1997**

Historian, Russell McGregor, traces the development of 'Dying Race' theories in regards to the Aboriginal people of Australia. He credits pessimism towards the Indigenous Australian inhabitants by European Australians as the cause of the concept of the 'Dying Race', exasperated by their failure to 'civilise' the Aboriginal peoples and convert them to Christianity. Biological causes were attributed to this failure placing Indigenous people on a lower evolutionary scale to their European counterparts through the application of 'Great Chain of Being' theories in which Europeans were located at the top of the chain. He states, "As Europeans became increasingly familiar with the diversity of humankind -and with the anthropoid apes— the gap in the Chain between man and monkey was able to be filled in, with the black races at the bottom of the human link, closest to the highest simian (McGregor 1997, p.5)". Other pseudoscientific theories and practices were used to support the theory that Indigenous peoples were at a lower stage of development such as phrenology, the study of human skulls, in which the assumption was that

Indigenous people had less developed brains, particularly in the areas that governed morality and intellect.

Through 'Dying Race' theories, it was determined that since the Indigenous Australians had not reached a stage of modernity in their development as a culture, and attempts to 'civilise' the Aboriginal people had failed, that they were not ever capable of 'progressing' to the level of their European counterparts. The causes of this were both social and biological, it was argued. Evolution was used as positive proof that the Australian Aboriginal was destined to pass into extinction in the face of a superior European subspecies of humanity. 'Survival of the fittest' dictated the annihilation of Indigenous Australians due to natural law. McGregor states that, "The doomed race concept derived its strength from the way it dovetailed neatly into contemporary preoccupations and presuppositions about the nature of civilisation and man. Progress was a law of nature, and those that failed to elevate themselves would necessarily be swept aside in the universal struggle for survival (McGregor 1997, p.58)". It was argued that the passing of 'inferior' races would strengthen humanity as a whole by eliminating the weak links in the evolutionary chain. European progress was a natural force that devoured those before it that could not compete.

### **Norman Tindale, *Survey of the Half-caste Problem in South Australia*, 1940**

Australian Anthropologist, Norman Tindale, was of the belief that the Australian Indigenous population was destined to extinction through the application of 'Dying Race' theories. He credited many factors to the demise of the Aboriginal people including low birth rates, disease, exposure to alcohol and drugs. Tindale was convinced that any contact with European settlers was of great damage to the Indigenous Australian inhabitants when he states that, "Study of the statistics of the racial contact that have taken place in various parts of our continent in the past suggest that even a small degree of association with whites is more detrimental to them than the severest droughts (Tindale 1940, p.76)". It is contact with Europeans, like the natural force of a drought, which sweeps aside the vulnerable and 'inferior' race, according to Tindale.

For Tindale, the extinction of the Indigenous population was limited to those of full Aboriginal Australian blood. While stating that the 'full blooded' Aboriginal Australians were in decline he

concedes that there was a great increase of 'half-caste' children. He goes to great lengths to distinguish the division of blood percentages through generation that he defines as ranging from "full bloods" to "half-caste", "Quadroon", "Octoroon" and those "barely distinguishable from Europeans". Tindale's solution to the 'half-caste problem' was to isolate full blooded Aboriginals to government reserves and limit their contact with Europeans to ration distribution and medical needs. He suggested that those of 'mixed blood' should be removed from their parents and assimilated into the European population in an effort to breed out the Aboriginal physical characteristics and social traits when he states that, "Complete murgence of the half-castes in the general community is possible without detriment to the white race. Their aboriginal blood is remotely the same as that of the majority of the white inhabitants of Australia, for the Australian Aboriginal is recognized as being a forerunner of the Caucasian race (Tindale 1940, p.67)". Echoes of the 'Great Chain of Being' theory are present in Tindale's assertion that Aboriginals are a 'forerunner' to Caucasians, suggesting that the Indigenous Australian people were less developed in terms of evolution science, and informing his conviction in 'Social Darwinism'.

### **Robert Leonard, Your Call, 2009**

New Zealand curator, Robert Leonard, argues that Indigenous Australians were in the past effectively categorised as 'subhuman' and held on par with flora and fauna. He points to the fact that Vernon Ah Kee was born in 1967, a few months prior to the referendum that recognised Aboriginals as Australian citizens, highlighting Ah Kee's belief that "he was- in a sense- a non-person: officially subhuman (Ah Kee, 2009, p.6)". Leonard contrasts this beginning with the success Ah Kee has experienced in his short career, addressing the experience of Indigenous Australians grounded in these historical injustices and ongoing exclusion and inequality, particularly "his interest in the ambiguous gaze of the colonised subject; and his interest in the way that racist values are projected onto Aborigines (Ah Kee 2009, p.6)". He argues that this projection of racist values constitutes Indigenous identity both in acceptance and resistance, highlighting Ah Kee's work, *This Man is...*, as an example of operating "on the verge between pathos and defiance (Ah Kee, 2009, p.6)". He further argues that identity is inescapable for Aboriginal Australian people due to the experience of Indigenous Australians being "over determined by their being

Aboriginal (Ah Kee 2009, p.7)”. Leonard extends this view to encompass the portraits of Ah Kee, that are appropriations of the colonial anthropological photographs of Norman Tindale, stating that “the portraits could be seen as idealising, heroic depictions- a celebration of resistance showing generations of his family surviving racism- they could also be seen as neutral depictions to which we bring our own values, making them screens for our prejudices and romantic fantasies (Ah Kee 2009, p.8)”.

### **Anthony Gardner, *Without a Pause, Without a Breath*, 2009**

Art historian and critic, Anthony Gardner, argues that there is a sense of ‘breathlessness’ in the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee. Drawing on Ah Kee’s video work, *whitefellanormal*, Gardner emphasises the bombardment of often contradicting identity labels that overwhelm the viewer and places them in a state of confusion. The result is a destabilising of fixed identity in which “the sheer range of possible labels and characteristics that can be attached to the portraits ensures that any one description is always too reductive or inherently stereotypical no matter how well-intentioned it may be (Ah Kee 2009, p. 54)”. Identity, in the work of Ah Kee, is far too complex and mutable to be thematised in language, according to Gardener. This differs greatly from Robert Leonard’s position in which identity is defined by the dichotomy of idealised, heroic/prejudiced and romantic fantasy. Gardener supports his position by referencing postmodernism in the 1980s and identity politics in the 1990s, citing artists Barbara Kruger and Willie Doherty as examples of artist who challenge the simplification of identity to easily definable terms.

The notion of ‘breathlessness’ is further examined by Gardener in Ah Kee’s text works and portraits. He states that, “A rejection of gaps, a refusal of pauses, a removal of spaces in which one could have caught ones breath- these are the tropes most common throughout Ah Kee’s practice (Ah Kee 2009, p.57)”. Drawing on Ah Kee’s text work, Gardner highlights the lack of spaces between the words as a strategy to make the “familiar English strange”, forcing the reader to “second guess the words they thought they knew (Ah Kee 2009, p.57)”. Gardner adds a spatial dimension to his notion of ‘breathlessness’ when critiquing Ah Kee’s portraits, that are appropriated from the colonial anthropological photographs of Norman Tindale, in that he argues that Ah Kee does not leave room for the viewer to dodge responsibility. He argues that that there

is a “removal of distance between the audience and the Aboriginal subject gazing at them directly, defiantly, confrontingly (Ah Kee 2009, p.57)”. He further argues that this removal of space confronts the distance and detachment that many Australian people have treated, both in the past and present, their racial and cultural Other. “There is no arm’s-length relation between the subject and its audience here, so common from the racist, top-down dictates of white governments and white people towards Aborigines since Australia’s invasion or ‘settlement’ (Ah Kee 2009, p.57)

## **Chapter Two.**

### **Face to Face: Emmanuel Levinas**

The difficulty with the writing of Lithuanian philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, lays is the fact that he challenges many of the cornerstones of Western thought; rationalism, objectivity and the role of ontology as first philosophy. To understand Levinas requires a radical rethinking of what constitutes human existence. He shifts focus from the ego centred self that devours the world to one that is defined by its interactions with Others and the obligations that arises from this contact. For Levinas, the self is not a rational being but primarily an ethical one. Ethics is not defined through the rational weighing up of pros and cons surrounding an action, or the implementation of a moral code, but rather the description of a particular type of interaction that occurs in the coming 'face to face' with the absolute Other. Levinas's writings are difficult texts that explore his main concepts from a variety of angles, returning and repeating his major themes. Levinas relies heavily on repetition and this reoccurrence of subject matter unavoidable when discussing his work.

This chapter will outline the theories that underpin the thought of Emmanuel Levinas as a basis for critiquing the art work of Vernon Ah Kee in Chapter Five. I will then address the difficulties in applying the work of Levinas to that of the image in Chapter Three. I will argue that a certain type of image, one that has criticality at its core, what I define as the 'critical image', complicates Levinas' condemnation of art and opens up the possibility of applying his theories to art criticism. The philosophical writings of Levinas can be used as an ethical framework, to not only examine the art work of Vernon Ah Kee but also the colonial context and the Western discourses, particularly the roles of photography and anthropology, that Ah Kee's work challenges.

## **Irreducible to Comprehension**

For Levinas, the Other is irreducible to comprehension. That is to say, that the Other is not reducible to any concept that I can have of them. The nuances of their existence, their complexities, their freedoms and choices are beyond what I am capable of ascribing. The Other overflows any understanding that I can have of them. To reduce to comprehension is to move from the particular to the universal. This process undermines the 'face to face' relationship and interjects a conceptual intermediary which diminishes the Other, in that direct contact is buffeted through the imposition of the ego. That is to say, that to moderate the 'face to face' relationship with ideas of the universal is to imagine oneself outside of the association and assume a position of power. You are no longer talking *with*, but rather, *about* the subject. In this relationship the Other is removed from their particularisation and becomes just one of the many. Through this process the Others' absolute difference is reduced to the same through internalisation, a subsuming of the Other that takes the form of possession. For Levinas, this is an act of violence.

Violence is the act of depriving the Others' alterity, and for Levinas, this act of denying the absolute difference of the Other is an act of objectification. He states that, "knowing is always convertible into creation and annihilation; its object lends itself to a concept, is a result (Levinas 1981, p.87)". The Other is annihilated in that the alterity and the particularisation of the individual is lost. A mental construct replaces the individual through the process of thematisation, in which the 'totalising' concept stands in place of the being. That is to say, that through the objectification process, in which the being becomes a known set of conceptual frameworks, the mind possesses the Other and can use that power of knowing as it will, reducing them to concepts. For Levinas, this relationship, in which the Other is subsumed, is not ethical. This act of possession, of reduction, of creating a conceptual stand in for the Other, is violence.

For Levinas, the reducing of the Other to comprehension is a form of ontologically knowing a subject so as to reduce them to concepts. He states:

The neutralization of the Other who becomes a theme or an object- appearing. That is, taking its place in the light-is precisely his reduction to the same. To know ontologically is to surprise in an existence confronted that by which it is not this existence, this stranger,

that by which it is somehow betrayed, surrenders, is given in the horizon in which it loses itself and appears, lays itself open to grasp, becomes a concept. To know amounts to grasping beings out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing it from its alterity (Levinas 1969, p.44)

To mediate the 'face to face' relationship through the interjection of conceptual frameworks is to neutralise the dynamic aspects of dialogue and ascribe fixed meaning to the exchange, a meaning that is self reference. To know is to grasp, as a tool, by the empowered self that has no limitation to its powers. It minimises the Other to the point of nothingness when it loses its alterity; it becomes the same. The Other is viewed not 'face to face' but at a distance, one of the many that I internalise, consume. To know ontologically is to remove the Other from what makes them a unique being, which I do not have control over, and exhibit a mastery over them through the conceptual process. Levinas states that, "A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice (Levinas 1969, p.46)". The injustice is that the Other is denied their difference, that is, their subtleties, their depth, their complexities and their freedom, allowing such conceptual frameworks as stereotypes to occur. In reducing to the same, individuality is flattened. Once difference is suppressed I no longer have any responsibility to the individual as a human being, I have no limit to my freedom and I am unrestrained, permitted to act in any way I see fit, including murder (Levinas 1969, p.303).

## **Responsibility**

Levinas challenges the role of the unfettered ego when he states that,

communication would be impossible if it should have to begin in the ego, a free subject, to whom every Other would be only a limitation that invites war, domination, precaution and information. To communicate is indeed to open oneself, but the openness is not complete if it is on the watch for recognition. It is complete not on opening to the spectacle of or recognition of the Other, but in responsibility for him (Levinas 1981, p.119).

The ego requires something to keep it in check, and for Levinas, that something is the obligation that one feels towards the Other in the 'face to face' relation. Without responsibility the Other is nothing more than either a threat or a means to an ends. The ego would devour the Other to

further its own objectives. Communication can only occur between that which is absolutely Other, a coming together in 'face to face' contact, a relationship loaded with responsibility. This obligation precedes the ego, and manifests itself before any conceptualisation can occur. The openness of the Other's face and their expression weighs me with the commitment not to kill but to exchange in communication. Levinas states that, "To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this freedom as a "moving force," this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder (Levinas 1969, p.303)". For Levinas, communication is the exchange of contact, the coming together in a 'face to face' situation. The presence of the face itself is the first word. I am disarmed by the existence of the Other; I am not alone. My freedom to act in any way I see fit is called into question by the presence of the Other.

The face of the Other calls into question my possession of the world. I am confronted with the fact that I am not alone and that there are limits to my will and power, I am forced to share. In the 'face to face' exchange the ego is confronted and found wanting. Before me stands another, a free being, beyond my control. In communication I cannot predict their responses. The act is a free exchange with someone who is beyond my power to reduce to comprehension, to possess. Philosopher Simon Critchley states that "in speaking or calling or listening to the Other, I am not reflecting upon the Other, but I am actively and existentially engaged in a non subsumptive relation, where I focus on the particular individual in front of me. I am not contemplating, I am conversing (Critchley and Bersnasconi 2002, p.11)". The 'face to face' relationship is an exchange that exceeds rationalisation, it moves beyond the ontology of reason and being, it is a shared space in which the Other calls to me in their individual presence. The Other is not contained within my thoughts about them but a dynamic force that confronts me and calls my being into question. I am not outside of the process, as contemplation would suggest, but locked into dialogue. The face is a living presence and I am engaged with the Other who is like no Other. For Levinas, I am also defined by this relationship in that in responding to the call of the Other there is no one who can assume my responsibility and answer the call for me. It is through my response to the Other that I discover my own freedom and my own responses.

## **Infinity**

For Levinas, the 'face to face' relationship is primarily linguistic. He states that, "The eyes break through the mask – the language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble. The eye does not shine; it speaks (Levinas 1969, p.66)". The eyes do not merely see, they speak, call into question my being and require a response. Levinas sees the 'face' as a primary signifier that signifies the presence of the Other, and the eyes that are looking at me beckon, asking the question 'who are you'. It is through this inquiry that I discover what it means to be me, I am questioned, held accountable for my existence and it is through my responsibility to the Other that I respond. The face is expression and it is through the language of the face that we come to experience Other human beings. This experience is not mediated through concepts, I am not outside of the relationship viewing it from a distance, that is to say objectively, but within the ethical relationship of dialogue. The Other is not an object but a being that I am locked into a non subsumptive relationship with. The Other expresses itself through its very existence, the 'face' before me, signifying its presence.

Levinas argues that, "The face, preeminently expression, formulates the first word: the signifier arising at the thrust of his sign, as eyes that look at you (Levinas 1969, p.178)". The face of the Other primarily signifies itself, its unique presence. The expressive capabilities of the face are related to language in that the living presence of the Other speaks through the eyes, announcing its presence, its agency that is separated from my own. Before me stands a being who is beyond my grasp, is irreducible to comprehension, and calls to me, I am obligated to respond. Even if I refuse to respond, that is a response within itself. Once the Others' eyes lock onto mine the relationship is inescapable, they are removed from the distant and are brought closer to me in 'proximity'. Yet the Other remains infinitely distant in that there is a separation that is unreachable. This separation is maintained because the Other is a distinct entity that cannot be subsumed or reduced to sameness, the Other is infinitely foreign. "The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is encompassed (Levinas 1969, p.194)". In this way the face of the Other cannot be possessed, it is beyond my ability to grasp, it is beyond me, a transcendent 'infinity'.

For Levinas, the 'face' transcends any quality that I can attribute to it. "Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolute Other (Levinas 1969, p.49)". The Other is outside me, my ego cannot account for its existence, it exceeds me and overflows my understanding, extending any limit that I may try to place on it. The Other is independent of me, a separated being, therefore 'infinite'. When we attempt to place limits on the Other, to ensnare them in conceptual frameworks and stereotypes, we place them in 'totalising' systems. In order to grasp the Other we must reduce them from 'infinite' being; through the third party of concepts. What we construct is not the 'infinite' being but a caricature of their irreplaceable individuality and alterity. To do this I must limit the 'infinite' being to that which is already familiar to me, that is, I must reduce the infinitely foreign to that of the same. Levinas sees this as an act of violence (Critchley and Bersnasconi 1996, p.9).

Violence is enacted on the Other when I reduce their 'infinite' and transcended being to graspable concepts that are interchangeable with the individual before me. For Levinas, this act removes one from the 'face to face' relationship and assumes a position of power in which the being before me is transformed into an object, through imagining oneself outside of the relationship and from an 'objective' position. Levinas states:

"In this sense, it does not invoke these being but only names them, thus accomplishing a violence and a negation. A partial negation which is violence. This *partiality* is indicated by the fact that, without disappearing, those beings are in my power. Partial negation, which is violence, denies the independence of the being: it belongs to me. Possession is the mode whereby a being, while existing, is partially denied. It is not only a question of the fact that being is an instrument, a tool, that is to say, a means. It is an end also. As consumable, it is nourishment, and in enjoyment, it offers itself, belongs to me (Critchley and Bersnasconi 1996, p.9)".

According to Levinas a 'face to face' relationship with the Other is to experience their 'infinite' and irreducible qualities. By reducing a being down to a series of concepts, that is, naming instead of invoking, a violence is accomplished through the denial of the full spectrum of their being, their 'infinity'. By labelling the Other I negate everything that that label does not encompass, a stereotype. I diminish that which is beyond my control to that which I can assume power over. I dismiss that which is uncontrollable, through the act of naming, partially negating.

Through this process I possess that which is unpossessable. Instead of existing as a free being external to me, and 'infinite' beyond my grasp, the Other is reduced to a manageable concept for which I have control and possession. In this frame of referencing, there is nothing external to my will and therefore nothing that is outside of my custody. Reduction is an act of violence as it strips away from the Other that which cannot be grasped and possessed, creating a form that which can be subsumed. It is in this fashion that an irreducible being is made an incomplete being, digestible to the mind and the ego. The Other becomes a tool designated by its use value to be manipulated by the mind in the form of concepts which are malleable. It is through this process that the Other becomes able to be consumed. The consuming mind does not interact with Others, in that their 'infinite' difference is maintained, but collects images to possess. The mind devours the Other and places it in a system of 'totalisation', thereby reducing what was radically Other to that of sameness. This will be of particular significance in Chapter Four when I address the colonial context of Ah Kee's work, specifically the role anthropology plays in thematising the Indigenous Australian subject into 'totalising' conceptual frameworks.

### **Totalisation**

'Totalisation' is the extinguishing of difference by reducing the Other to comprehension and placing them within the mind's possession as a system of thought. This removes the Other from the absolute alterity of 'infinity', a separated being, and places them within my custody, the unfettered ego that possesses the world. Levinas states that, "Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of the totality, in a contraction that leaves place for the separated being (Levinas 1969, p.104)". 'Infinity' is founded on the separated being that is beyond my possession and, in turn, transcendent. This is accomplished through the coming together in a 'face to face' relationship in which the person before me is locked into a non-subsumptive relation and is not engaged in an objectification process where I imagine myself outside of the exchange and assuming a position of power. I 'totalise' when I diminish this exchange to conceptualise the individual before me and place them in relation to Others.

When I 'totalise' I negate the full range of the Others' being and substitute the person for a mental image. In this way, individuals lose their meaning as transcendent beings and become one

of the many, while I view them not in 'proximity', but at a distance. 'Infinity', on the other hand, is beyond the control, and therefore the power, of an unrestricted ego because "he overflows absolutely every idea I can have of him (Levinas 1969, p.87)". This overflowing is apparent in conversation. I do not control the Other's responses, the way in which they react to the things that I say. I do not control their freedom. They exceed my expectations since they have their own agency. For Levinas, it is the expression of the Other, when I come 'face to face' with them, that causes this overflowing and he states, "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity (Levinas 1969, p.51)". Therefore, it is through expression that the quality of 'infinity' is exposed. The face of the Other, through their 'proximity' and expression, exceeds not only the ideas that I can have about them but they overflow the power of the I to contain, therefore transcendent. The Other transcends the ideas I have of them as well as the very concept of I, in that I am not alone and am not in full possession of the world.

### **Ethics**

The question arises, what is the quality that separates an 'infinite' relationship from one which is 'totalised'? For Levinas, the key condition is one of ethics and responsibility to the Other. Philosopher Richard Cohen puts forward the idea that, "Levinas's unique appreciation for the extraordinary impact of moral exigencies, the obligations, responsibilities and call to justice which inform the whole of social life constitute the very humanity of the human (Cohen in Levinas 1981, p.xi)." It is this call to ethics that informs all of our social interaction. Our social lives are defined by our obligations and responsibilities towards each Other, otherwise humanity would be absent. Simon Critchley, states that "Levinas's point is that unless our social interactions are underpinned by ethical relations to the Other persons, then the worst might happen, that is, the failure to acknowledge the humanity of the Other (Critchley and Bersnasconi 2002, p.13)." Without an ethical obligation underpinning our social interaction any action would be permitted and be morally acceptable, even murder.

Ethics in the 'face to face' relation is not a set of moral deliberations about the positive and negative effects of a decision; rather, it is a description of the event of contact. Critchley states that, "Levinasian ethics is not therefore an obligation towards the Other mediated through formal and procedural universalisation of maximums or some appeal to good conscience. Rather, and this is what is truly provocative about Levinas, ethics is lived in the sensibility of an embodied exposure to the Other (Critchley and Bernasconi 2002, p.21)." It is the exposure that is ethical, not any value I may ascribe. The 'face to face' relationship is ethical because the Other stands before me, and I am obligated to respond to their living presence. Ethics describes the non-subsumptive relation, not as an appeal to universal maximums that I formulate in rationalisation and place upon the encounter, but as an experience. The individual before me stands like no Other and I am irreplaceable in my obligation to respond, nobody can take my place or shoulder the responsibility I have for the Other.

It is the 'totalising' being that has no limits to their freedom. In 'totalising' the obligation and responsibility towards the Other is removed since they are no longer perceived as a transcendent being but a mental construct consumed by the ego, to use as the will sees fit. It is a dehumanising process in which the being before me, who is an individual filled with their own agency, is reduced to a caricature of their full scope of being, a stereotype. The irreplaceable individual is substituted as one of the many, their transcendence diminished and their very alterity stripped away. It is by this process that injustice can occur. It is when I perceive the Other as less than an 'infinite' being that my freedom is no longer impeded and my actions are without consequence. Acts such as genocide and colonisation occur when the victims of these actions are perceived as being less than the perpetrators.

### **Sensibility**

According to Levinas the key to understanding one's responsibility towards the Other is the fact that we are sensible subjects open to pain and hunger. It is through our sensibility that we know what it is like to feel hunger or pain. We must understand what it is to be hungry first before we understand what it is to give bread from our mouth. It is through sensibility that we recognise the needs of Others, and through responsibility that we come to fulfil those needs. When a baby

cries, a parent knows what it is to be hungry and is therefore moved by the need and responsibility to feed a child. It is from our own sense of the world that empathy is formed. Sensibility exposes the self to the Other, opening up oneself to vulnerability. Levinas states:

“It is vulnerability and a paining exhausting themselves like a haemorrhage, denuding even the aspect that its nudity takes on, exposing its very exposedness, expressing itself, speaking, uncovering even the projection that the very form of identity confers upon it. It is the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible in only giving the very bread I eat. But for this one has to first enjoy one’s bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one’s heart, to give oneself in giving it. Enjoyment is an ineluctable moment of sensibility (Levinas 1981, p.72)”.

In expressing oneself there is an obligation to the Other and a risk. I cannot foresee how the Other will respond. Expressing myself I leave myself open and remain exposed. I am within the Others’ power and my ego is subservient to their needs. It is a ‘radical passivity’ in that I am under the influence of an agency that is outside of my own, it affects me. In ‘being-for-another’, as opposed to the Hegelian ‘being-for-itself’ (*für sich*) or being as individual or separate being; a being as it appears to itself. I take the bread from my mouth and give it to another. I first must be a sensible being to appreciate what it means to give. I must enjoy what I have in order for it to be a sacrifice. In expressing myself I share what is mine, with another. I recognise the Other in their ‘face’ and through expression I enter into a dialogue, a process of giving signs. I share that which I have collected from the world, my very experience gathered through being a sensible subject.

Levinas argues that through subjectivity the individual is defined by being open to vulnerability in the ‘face to face’ relationship when he argues that, “The subjectivity of a subject is vulnerability, exposure to affection, sensibility, a passivity more passive still than any passivity, an irrecoverable time, an unassemblable diachrony of patience, an exposedness always to be exposed the more, an exposure to expressing, and thus to saying, thus to giving (Levinas 1981, p.50)”. In vulnerability we are exposed when we express ourselves. In passivity we are affected by the Other, held captive by the demands of the Others’ eyes, their expression, their face. It is through being a sensible and vulnerable being that we know what is to feel pain, we understand the risks involved in opening up in dialogue. The Other is unpredictable and beyond my control

and it is through the understanding of these risks that my giving, in communication, takes on a level of sincerity and ethical standing. In 'saying' we open ourselves up, exposing our private thoughts, our own particular relationship with the world.

### **Vision : the Caress and the Grasp**

For Levinas, "It is the human corporeality, as a possibility of pain, a sensibility which of itself is the susceptibility to being hurt, a self uncovered, exposed and suffering in the skin (Levinas 1981, p.51)". The skin takes on special significance in that it is more than the surface of the individual but it is the divergence between that which is visible and invisible in what Levinas describes as "quasi-transparent" (Levinas 1981, p.89). The skin is my contact with the Other in 'proximity'. The skin makes up the 'face', but the 'face' is more than just skin, it is a window to the Others' inner being. I see the Others' 'face', the skin that they are in, but they transcend the skin they are clothed with, they are a transcendent identity that is beyond my comprehension. Vision is more than sight in that it invites the touch, contact. "Vision opens upon a horizon, and describes a traversable distance, invites the hand to movement and to contact, and ensures them (Levinas 1969, p.191)". For Levinas, the eyes touches what it sees in a 'face to face' relationship, it is contact par excellence, not only skin to skin but that which is invisible, being to being, 'infinity'. He argues that sight invokes touch in the "face to face" relationship when he states:

In the ethical relationship with the real, that is, in the relationship of proximity which the sensible establishes, the essential is committed. Life is there. Sight is, to be sure, an openness and consciousness, and all sensibility, opening as consciousness, is called vision; but even in its subordination to cognition, sight maintains contact and proximity. The visible caress of the eye. One sees and hears like one touches (Levinas in Critchley and Bernasconi 2002, p.225).

The use of the words "caress" by Levinas is important as it suggests a gentle touch in an ethical relationship, life is acknowledged, contact made. It is the ethical relationship between sensible subjects that is expressed as sight through touch as a model. This is opposed to sight as a model of the grasping touch that would suggest knowing the subject on an ontological level. The caress suggests a soft touch that explores the surface of the face, more a glance than a gaze. The

movement transverse distance and establishes contact with the Other, a conjoining. It also suggests an intimacy to the 'face to face' dynamic. Levinas acknowledges the complexity of sight when he suggests that sight is subordinate to cognition and appears to differentiate between grasping and caressing modes of vision. Grasping is coupled with knowing in that the sight that holds presupposes knowledge and comprehension before contact. This is expressed when he argues that, "Knowledge would be the suppression of the Other by the grasp, by the hold, or by the vision that grasps before the grasp (Levinas 1969, p.302)". This indicates that grasping vision suppresses the Other through its processes of rationalisation. The grasp is the 'totalisation' of the Other in reducing them to comprehension in a move in which rationality precedes contact, thereby circumventing the 'face to face' contact, and therefore is not ethical.

On one hand Levinas approves of vision, in that it signifies the proximity of contact in an ethical 'face to face' relationship, yet on the other hand decries it for its relationship to rationalisation. It is through vision's relationship to knowing that he links vision as a model of 'totalisation' when he states, "Totalitarian thinking accepts vision rather than language as its model. It aims to gain an all-inclusive, panoramic view of all things, including the Other, in a neutral, impersonal light like the Hegelian Geist (Spirit), or the Heideggerian Being (Levinas 1969, p.15)". Here vision is represented as a knowing eye that places the Other into systems of thought that 'totalise' the subject, in that one imagines oneself outside of the 'face to face' relationship and in the privileged position of the 'observer'. A panoramic view is achieved through placing the person that is seen into a systematic mode of thinking that evaluates the subject and situates them within a body of already known logic. This is the act of universalisation in which the particular becomes part of the general. It is a grasping view in which the individual is subsumed into the body of knowledge.

According to Levinas, vision takes on the form of control when he argues that, "Inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them. A thing is given, offers itself to me. In gaining access to it I maintain myself within the same (Levinas 1969, p.194)". Here vision is presented as reductive in that difference is internalised through the rationalising process and made the same. The individual being is reduced to being a being among many Other beings, possessed by the seeing eye. They do not exist outside of the possessing ego

and bring no challenge to my being. Transcendence does not occur because the possessing eye denies all questioning from that which is outside to itself. Levinas states, “The relation with the Other as a relation with his transcendence- the relation with the Other who puts into question the brutal spontaneity of one’s immanent destiny— introduces me to what was not in me (Levinas 1969, p.203)”. The vision that grasps, designates the subject to being one of the many, devalued in the fact that we are no longer in a ‘face to face’ relation but the relationship is between me and my existing body of knowledge, that which I already possess, into which the subject is placed. The individual is held in possession, dominated, I do not caress but take. The subject is not a ‘face’ but an object for my grasp.

### **Language: Saying and the Said**

Language has a privileged position as a model within the ‘face to face’ relation. Language is expression, the ethical coming together in dialogue. The presence of the Other demands a response, even if that response is to not respond. The ‘face to face’ relationship is one of dialogue, a sharing and an intimacy. My response to the Other, for Levinas, is both a response and a responsibility loaded with the ethics of a ‘face to face’ relationship. I am held hostage by the Other in my responsibility towards them, they have a hold on me. This ‘radical passivity’ is an exchange of responsibility that precedes my ability to formulate language, and for Levinas, is first philosophy. He argues that, “The facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as a moral summons (Levinas 1969, p.196)”. It is this moral summon that comes before language, that takes the form of pure ‘saying’. The ‘saying’ precedes the ‘said’, in that the face of the Other signifies itself and announces its presence, and in turn, my moral obligation towards them in which, “The responsibility for another is precisely a ‘saying’ prior to anything ‘said’ (Levinas 1981, p.43)”. He criticises the philosophy of Sartre and Hegel, with their focus on ontological being, in that “oneself is posited on the basis of the for-itself”, but for Levinas the basis of the ‘face to face’ relationship is always founded in the ‘for-another’ (Levinas 1981, p103). It is this ‘for-another’ that drives social interactions. It is our obligation that drives us to interact with Others and it is their needs that defines us, when he states that “to recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give (Levinas 1969, p.75)”. To give, for

Levinas, is to enter into a dialogue, to converse. The primary basis of this giving, this dialogue, is our ethical responsibility towards the Other. Levinas states:

Responsibility for the Other, in its antecedence to my freedom, its antecedence to the present and to representation, is a passivity more passive than all passivity, an exposure to the Other without this exposure being assumed, an exposure without holding back, exposure of exposed, expression, 'saying'. Not 'saying' dissimulating itself and protecting itself in the 'said', just giving out words in the face of the Other, but 'saying' uncovering itself, that is, denuding itself of its skin, sensibility on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves, offering itself even in suffering- thus wholly sign, signifying itself (Levinas 1981, p.15)".

Responsibility precedes my freedom in that I am held captive by the appearance of the Other before me. What Levinas describes as a 'radical passivity' occurs when I am exposed to the absolute Other. Transfixed by the 'proximity' of that which is not me, I am vulnerable. The face of the Other announces itself in the 'saying', that is, its expression, *before* the content of the 'said' is conveyed. For Levinas, 'saying' is the act of exposure to the Other. The 'face' signifies itself, its presence, its irreplaceable uniqueness, and most importantly, my responsibility towards it, before I have a chance to rationalise the content of what this Other presents. 'Saying' places a hold on me, I am obligated to respond to the appearance of that which is not me, that which is beyond my power to rationalise. The Other overflows my understanding in its 'saying', before me, denuded and exposed; vulnerable in its uncovering of the sensible self that is open to wounding. It is through the 'saying' that I come 'face to face' with the Other. The 'said', on the other hand, is a collapsing of the 'saying' in which the 'infinity' of expression is reduced to the finite content of the message being conveyed. Dialogue takes place as the 'saying' constantly interrupts the collapsing into the 'said' and interjects new expression, new responsibility into the intersubjective bond.

### **Justice**

For Levinas, my responsibility to the Other has no limit. I have 'infinite' responsibility to the Other, to the extent that through the exposure to the Other I have responsibility towards *all* Others, creating the notion of justice. Levinas states that, "The third party looks at me in the eyes

of the Other—language is justice (Levinas 1969, p.213)”. It is through the exposure to the Other, specifically through the language of the ‘saying’, that my freedom is subverted and my obligation is revealed, not just to the Other before me but to *all* Others. I am responsible even before I realise what my responsibility is. It is through the eyes of the Other that my possession of the world is questioned and it is this experience of alterity that my responsibility is compounded to the point that I am even held accountable for the actions of all Others. A concrete example of this is one’s responsibility to prevent genocide. Although I stand outside of the conflict my responsibility is not diminished. Through the notion of justice I am responsible for the actions of Others. Justice demands that I act against genocide, even though I may not have a ‘face to face’ relationship with either the victim or the perpetrator. Yet I am held accountable for the actions of perpetrator, and the suffering of the victim, when Levinas argues that, “The judge is not outside of the conflict (Levinas 1981, p.159)”. Through viewing as a third party, the role of a judge, the conflict becomes my own, I am responsible. I empathise with the victim, and in turn feel a sense of responsibility, because it is through my contact with the Other, as a sensible subject, that I recognise what it means to be caused pain. I feel the pain of the victim, as well as the guilt of the perpetrator. In my responsibility, I am obligated to act. This is the foundation of law. It is due to our responsibility towards the Other and the fact that we are sensible beings, that a sense of humanity is developed. As a sensible being we understand what it is to be hungry or hurt. Via contact with the Other we recognise our responsibility to alleviate the suffering of Others. It is through our commonality of being sensible subjects, and the responsibility this brings, that we are connected by intersubjectivity.

## Chapter Three.

### The Critical Image: Levinas and Art

To use Levinas' theories to examine art is problematic. Literary theorist, Robert Eaglestone, has highlighted Levinas' deep seated antipathy to art and his overall scepticism to representation, especially in his early works preceding his second major work, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. He states that "this antipathy is such that it simply prevents any direct attempt to apply his work to the aesthetic, or to the interpretation of works of art" and that, "Few critics seeking to utilise Levinas have taken this antipathy into account (Eaglestone 1997, p.99.)". This chapter will examine Levinas' position on art and representation. I will argue that Levinas' stance on the function of art is a contradiction, betrayed by the privileged position that he affords philosophical discourse, despite that fact that it is presented in a plastic literary form. I will further argue that his elevation of the critical discourse of philosophical text neglects the possibility of criticism taking place through other plastic forms, particularly what I refer to as the 'critical image'. I contend that certain types of artwork have the ability to create the act of 'saying', that which interrupts the self sufficiency of being through the interjection of the Other, invoking exposure and proximity through experience of 'radical passivity', demanding a sense of obligation and responsibility from the viewer. This analysis of Levinas's position, in regards to the work of art, will have a major bearing on Chapter Five which addresses the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee, as I attempt to answer Levinas' contradictory question in his essay, *Is Ontology Fundamental*, "Can things have a face? Is not art an activity that lends faces to things (Peperazak, Critchley and Bernasconi 1996, p.10)?" I will answer that it is possible, through a certain type of image, that of the image that has criticality at its core, the 'critical image'.

In his essay on art, *Reality and its Shadow* (1948), Levinas articulates his problem with art. Here Levinas argues that the problem with art as a critical medium is that it lacks the presence of the object and is purely mimetic insofar as it "consists of substituting for the object its image. Its image, and not its concept (Levinas 1989, p.132)". He contends that to 'grasp' a concept is an action in which we "maintain a living relationship with a real object (Levinas 1989, p.132)". An image denies this relationship in that it is a shadow of itself. It is reality doubled on itself rather

than the Platonic notion of reality twice removed. Borrowing an idea from the philosopher Martin Heidegger's key text on art, *The Origins of the Work of Art*, Levinas argues that the object suggests itself through its absence, its shadow. The image remains outside of this world; it is 'un-worlded', to use a Heideggerian phrase. Sensibility, one's exposure to the world is mediated through the image, replacing one's contact with the real, and in turn truth, with the materiality of the plastic form, the brushstrokes of a painting or the stone of the sculpture. What takes place is not Heidegger's transcendence, in which art brings attention to that which is overlooked in the world, but for Levinas is removed from the world entirely. For Heidegger, beauty is truth, uncovered by the act of artistic creation, but for Levinas the image is the antithesis of truth, the real concealed by its likeness.

For Levinas, the problems associated with representation extend beyond the boundaries of art and into our experience of reality. When we come 'face to face' with another person they are both themselves and their image. He states that "a person bears on his face, along side of its being with which it coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness (Levinas 1989, p.135)". The face is more than its image. The skin is a point of sensible contact that leads beyond the skin, an intermediary between what is visible and that which is not. For Levinas, the 'face' includes the transcendence that lies beyond the 'face'. The problems with representation go beyond that of art and extend to a dilemma with visualisation itself. A face is both itself and its shadow, a duality in which the face is its being, yet at the same time the withdrawal of being, its resemblance. Art, for Levinas, does not partake in this duality insofar as it lacks any sense of being behind the plasticity of its surface, pure resemblance, pure shadow. There is no voice outside of its materiality.

Levinas also denies the possibility of art having a face in that "every artwork is in the end a statue— a stopping of time, or rather its delay behind itself (Levinas 1989, p.137)". An image has no history or future but an eternal instant. "Eternally, the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden (Levinas 1989, p.138)". The image is immobilised, a lifeless life. Locked in the instant an artwork does not have the freedom of the future, its fate is already written, the moment complete. This holds true for literary narrative also. The fate of the characters predetermined, imprisoned in the written word, locked into the rhythm of the

narrative. Fate, for Levinas, is the antithesis of freedom, in art it is the instant forever past, art is death that is “never dead enough ... the eternal duration of the interval- the meanwhile ...something inhuman and monstrous (Levinas 1989, p.141)”. However, he contrasts this ‘inhuman’ duration of the artwork with ‘eternity of the concept’, specifically that of criticism (Levinas 1989, p.141). Levinas fails to see the critical possibilities of art and literature, therefore dismissing them entirely as aesthetic, poetic, the pursuit of beauty and the essence of essence.

Criticism is arts’ saving grace as it ‘re-worlds’ the image back into the real world of dialogue. For Levinas, criticism is the exposure of contact through the concept. That is to say, that through the act of criticism the ‘un-worlded’ piece of art is reintroduced to the real world through the critical voice, a voice that extracts meaning and content through the introduction of dialogue and scepticism. This reading of Levinas is supported by Robert Eaglestone, when he argues that, “The only salvation for art is for the critic or the philosopher to cross that distance between resemblance and the real: ‘the immobile statue has to be put into movement and made to speak’ It is necessary to reintroduce the hither world of art ‘into the intelligible world in which it stands, and which is the true homeland of the mind (Eaglestone 1997, p.109)”. In this reckoning, criticism is ethical in that it partakes in the real world dialogue of concepts and ideas. The experience of art on the other hand, is the self-indulgent play of shadows, and that for Levinas, “There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague (Levinas 1989, p.142)”.

But what about the critical text or image that broaches the real world of concepts through the inclusion of critical dialogue within its plastic form? Eaglestone points out that, “Geoffrey Hartman argues that criticism is a genre of literature. If this is the case, criticism, For Levinas, would fall into the monstrous category of the aesthetic (Eaglestone 1997, pp.109-110)”. For Levinas, there is a clear cut distinction between art and criticism, but I would argue, that this distinction is anything but clear cut when examining many contemporary post modern art works. He appears to define art as mere aesthetics, the pursuit of beauty. But many contemporary art and literature works, and one could argue certain historical works, exceed this definition. Eaglestone points to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as an example of a text that calls on responsibility. “Said’s work-and much post-colonial theory it inspired- draws attention to the injustices which underlay

Western discourse. This ‘drawing attention to’ is a process of interruption or disturbance of Western discourse (Eaglestone 1997, p.178)”. Cannot post colonial art create this same disturbance of Western discourse? I will argue in Chapter Five that the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee does precisely this. Through the plastic form of art, Ah Kee’s work displays a distinct voice— a clear presence of the Other— that encroaches on the viewer, calling into question that which they are, that which they know. I further argue that Ah Kee’s work is a call for justice, loaded with responsibility for the viewer, enacting a sense of ‘radical passivity’ through plastic strategies that invoke the power of the ‘saying’.

It is through the power of the ‘saying’, as opposed to the fixed meaning of the ‘said’, that Levinas attempts to negotiate the problems of representation in his second major work *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*. This was a response to the criticism of Levinas’ first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, by Derrida in his essay, *Violence and Metaphysics*. Derrida’s key criticism of Levinas is that there is a problem with language, and in turn representation, in his earlier works. He asks, how is it possible to reveal the ‘face’, that is to say the Other, through philosophical discourse when that discourse is imbedded in the logocentric language of the Greeks, from which philosophy extends? How is it possible to interrupt philosophical discourse, which is to present the absolute Other, through that which is the same? These questions force Levinas to reconsider the language in which he delivers his argument. In fact, this line of questioning compels him to reconsider language more generally in its role in a ‘face to face’ relationship. When previously he considered the phenomenological presence of the Other, in what Derrida describes as an act of empiricism, as the basis for the ‘face to face’ relationship, this shifts to language as the foundation for such experience. The face speaks, announcing its presence through the act of ‘saying’, a ‘saying’ that presents itself prior to that of the ‘said’ or closed, ontology. The ‘saying’ interrupts my being, introducing to me that which is not myself. It is this act of interruption, as a means to disrupting the ‘said’ and accessing the ‘saying’, that defines the literary style of Levinas’ writing. Through examining Levinas’ reliance on literary devices, a contradiction to his stance on literature and art will be made apparent, supporting Derrida’s claim that “*Totality and Infinity* was a work of art and not a treatise (Craig 2010, p.223)”.

Levinas turns away from the ontological terminology of his earlier works to a much more open ended use of language, in an attempt to break free of the locus of philosophical discourse and create a 'null-site (non-lieu)' from which to critique (Levinas 1981, p.8). This much more literary use of language alters both the plastic form of the text and its content. A difficult text, *Otherwise than Being*, has been described by Maurice Blanchot as "a gift of literature" (Blanchot 1997, p.112)". This shift to a literary form, as opposed to a philosophical treatise, seems at odds with Levinas's stance on art and literature, particularly through his reliance on the use of metaphor and the way it lends a poetic quality to the document. He uses a metaphor to define an idea, only to switch that metaphor, sometimes in the very next word, in a constant rhythm of shifting and exchange, to steadily describe that which surrounds the idea without giving it a fixed locale. In many ways the 'saying' is unsayable. Levinas defines by not defining at all. Switching metaphors and circling around that which cannot be 'said'. Against Levinas's own claims, a creativity is at play here; a poetic that ruptures the passing of the 'said'. A 'saying' that connects through representation, yet at the same time avoids representation as a fixing act. In this way the plastic form of language, and in turn the face, is both the 'saying' and the 'said', with the act of 'saying' constantly interrupting the plastic form in which it is held. In this way, the particular (saying) constantly interrupts the universal (said).

Repetition is another literary trope employed by Levinas as a means to circumvent the 'saying' collapsing into the 'said'. Derrida uses the metaphor of waves crashing on a beach to describe the movement of Levinas' thinking, in what philosopher Richard Bernstein presents as "always the 'same' wave returning and repeating its movement with deeper insistence. Regardless of what theme or motif we follow- the meaning of ethics, responsibility, the alterity of the Other (*autrui*), subjectivity, substitution- there is a profound sense of the 'same' wave crashing (Critchley and Bernasconi 2002, p.252)". This use of repetition decentres the narrative, freeing the 'saying' from the 'said'. The constant returning, and re-returning, to ideas, alongside the switching of metaphors, creates a series of ruptures to the narrative, an overflowing of meaning that mirrors ones experience of the 'face'. The language of the text works as a metaphor for the 'face to face' relationships. Each description is simultaneously true and untrue in that there always with something more to add, another angle to approach. Language, like the face of the Other, refuses to be grasped. Yet Levinas returns once and again, in an attempt to say the

unsayable, slowly moving his argument forward through the exposition of different nuances through the introduction of complimentary metaphors, in an effort to transcend both the 'said' and the material form of language itself. Cannot this strategy of de-centeredness be applied to Other forms of art and literature?

Benda Hofmeyr describes "radical passivity" as "a paradoxical notion that is suggestive of an immobilizing encounter that facilitates authentic action (Hofmeyr 2007, p.1)". She further argues that art has this power to elicit 'radical passivity' and that "it is the ethico-political responsibility of artistic and cultural producers to come up with strategies to engender Others with such empowering paralysis— a passivity that provokes a "pre-conscious awareness" of the power we have to act (Hofmeyr 2007, p.3)". Do not the categories of many contemporary art practices, such as postcolonial and feminist art, aim to enact a paralysis that spurs one into action? Do they not appeal for justice and impose a sense of responsibility on the viewer through the criticality of their content and their ability to rupture Western discourse? This is not the 'art for art's sake' that Levinas critiques in his castigation of the image but a radical rupturing of the dialogues of Western discourse.

Criticality, and its ability to partake and rupture discourse, is what gives philosophy its privileged position, allowing the ability to transcend its plastic form. But what of other plastic forms that share the critical voice, that create dialogue, rupture discourse and invoke a sense of responsibility on the viewer? I argue that the work of Vernon Ah Kee does precisely this, utilising many of the same strategies as Levinas's writing style; such as repetition, creating of a non locale of meaning, and an emphasis on the 'saying' over the 'said'. Ah Kee creates a critical dialogue that interrupts Western discourse, providing a perspective, a voice, that is absolutely Other. A voice that calls for justice. A voice that is ethical.

## **Chapter Four.**

### **The Colonial Context: the Racial Other**

In the previous chapters I addressed the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the difficulty in applying his ideas to works of art. Contradictions in Levinas's positioning were discussed, giving rise to the possibility of a literary or art status for his own work. I examined the position taken by Robert Eaglestone, in which he argues that Levinas's stance on criticism opens the way for dialogue to occur outside of philosophical texts, and that criticism can take place in many forms, interrupting and disrupting colonial narratives and practices of dominance and objectification. I introduced the term, 'critical image', to define artwork that has criticism at its core and argued that such images could be discussed in relationship to Levinas's framework. I further suggested that the 'saying' and the 'said' can be profitably applied to a critical engagement with the art of Vernon Ah Kee. If the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas can be applied to artwork of Vernon Ah Kee it is necessary to first establish, if they are critical images, what are they critical of? Which discourses do they interrupt?

This chapter will address the colonial context that surrounds the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee and the colonial discourses that his artwork challenges. Although situated in a contemporary context, Ah Kee's positioning has an eye firmly fixed on the history of colonial power and the injustices committed on Australian Aboriginal people. As in the case of Levinas' notion of justice, Ah Kee's work bears witness. His imagery stands as a testament to the injustices that have occurred, and continue to occur, to the Indigenous population of Australia. I will argue that central to Ah Kee's practice is the advancement of equal status of the Indigenous Australian subject to their European counterparts, a response to the unequal status that has taken place in both Western discourse and the representations of Australian Aboriginal people. I will further argue that the failure to recognise Indigenous Australians as equals has prevented European Australians coming 'face to face' with their Indigenous counterparts, thereby reducing their responsibility towards the racial Other.

## **Officially Subhuman**

Vernon Ah Kee was born in 1967, a few months before the referendum that officially recognised Indigenous Australians as Australian citizens. Curator, Robert Leonard, notes that Ah Kee perceives that period at the beginning of his life as one of importance in the foundation of his identity stating that, “For those few months, he says, he was-in a sense- a nonperson: officially subhuman (Ah Kee 2009, p.6)”. I will argue that this belief, that white Australians viewed Aboriginal Australian people as less than equal to those from a European heritage, is a defining characteristic of the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee. It is the colonial discourse of Indigenous Australians being inferior to their European counterparts that Ah Kee interrupts. It is Ah Kee’s assertion that Aboriginal people are still to this day perceived as being lesser beings when, in relation to the 2004 Palm Island riots, he states,

Two years ago, the Australian Government sent armed troops into defenceless Aboriginal communities in the north of Australia and we let that slide. Would that have happened if Aboriginal people were truly recognised as people? Not only do we still not have rights full rights as citizens, Australia still struggles to acknowledge that we are fully human. If they did, there’s no way armed troops would have been sent into our unarmed communities (Ah Kee 2009, p.23)

The failure to recognise the Other as an equal has major implications in Levinas’ ‘face to face’ relationship. The ‘face’ of Levinas’s Other encapsulates their alterity, an individual like no one else, full of complexity that exceeds any qualities that I can designate. If the racial Other is viewed as being of lesser value than its European counterpart its ‘infinite’ qualities are reduced, resulting in an inequality of power. What occurs is the Other loses its ‘face’, a failure to recognise the value of the Other in which one’s responsibility towards them is also diminished. Instead of a ‘face to face’ relationship, in which I am obligated to the Other, the association is reduced to a ‘face to faceless’ relationship, against which any action is permissible, even murder. The Other is not viewed as a unique being whose value and existence is equal to mine, in fact, Levinas’ Other exceeds my value due to the power of obligation under which I am placed. In a ‘face to faceless’ relationship the Other is reduced and ‘totalised’, no longer an individual viewed in ‘proximity’, but one of the many, a ‘faceless’ figure viewed at a distance that denies

the coming together of Levinas's notion of 'proximity'. Viewed in this way the Other is interchangeable with Others. Levinas states that, "The substitution of men for one another, the primal disrespect, makes possible exploitation itself (Levinas 1969, p.298)". For Levinas it is impossible to exploit the Other once we have recognised their 'face', acknowledged their presence and felt the pull of obligation towards them. It is only through the act of 'totalisation', in which the 'face' of the Other is not recognised as such, that the personal connection of the 'face to face' relationship is broken, allowing exploitation and injustice to occur.

Philosopher, Bernhard Waldenfels, states that "whatever sinks down into the anonymous, the impersonal, the neutral, is faceless (Critchley and Bersnasconi 2002, p.67)." This statement by Waldenfels can be interpreted in two ways when examining Ah Kee's position that Indigenous Australians are seen as less equal than those from a European heritage, allowing the deployment of government troops to Palm Island. Firstly, the Indigenous inhabitants of Palm Island can be viewed as 'faceless' in that the personal relationship of a 'face to face' encounter between individuals is replaced by a perspective in which those individuals are viewed as interchangeable with another. An example of this is to view the participants involved not as individuals but as a collective, in this case a mob to be dispersed, arrested or killed. The 'faces' in a mob are 'faceless' in that they are anonymous and depersonalised, reduced by thematising them as rioters and lawbreakers. Secondly, the government troops can be seen as 'faceless', thematised as representatives of the law. As representatives of the law, they become a neutral force, guided not by the dictates of a 'face to face' relationship but in their role and capacity as government officials. They represent themselves not as a collective of individuals but representatives of the state. In either interpretation of 'facelessness', either the Indigenous Australian inhabitants or the government troops, the power in the relationship rest solely with the state. Responsibility by the troops is negated by the fact that they are fulfilling their role as designated by the law. The power to disperse, arrest, or kill is held by the state, sanctioned by law. This power by the state was demonstrated in the arrest and murder of Cameron Doomadgee by police on Palm Island, the event that sparked the riots.

## **Norm/Deviance Model**

Ah Kee's position, that Indigenous Australians are perceived as being less equal than those from a European heritage, has historical support. Art historian, Anne Maxwell, argues that while Europe and North America viewed colonised people as marketable curiosities, Australians varied from the Hegelian same/difference dialectic to a norm/deviance model. She states that, "In this scheme, the more racial characteristics deviated from the white norm, the more their bearers became identified with 'degeneration' (Maxwell 1999, p.133)". Within the norm/deviance model, racial characteristics took on special signification that outstripped appearance and signified personality and character flaws, setting up dichotomies between those of a European heritage and their racial Other, such as; civilized/savage, good/bad, beautiful/ugly and advanced/primitive. The face of the Other came to represent all that the population of European heritage saw itself above, creating a hierarchy of being in which European appearance and culture was at the pinnacle and Indigenous features and customs far below. Australian Aboriginal appearance became synonymous with inferiority.

Maxwell further argues that the Indigenous population were used by European Australians as a means of fortifying their own egos in an effort to prove their own modernity. With a racial Other to contrast themselves with, European Australians could feel on par with their counterparts in Europe and North America in terms of culture and technology. She states that "as white Australians were defending their own claims to modernity, they were intent on denying indigenous Australians' ability to obtain the same status (Maxwell 1999, p.135)". Therefore, Aboriginal characteristics, such as dark skin and broad noses, came to signify a lack of modernity, a lower form of cultural evolution that reflected an earlier stage of development, a remnant of the stone age. Ah Kee is acutely aware of this when constructing his portraits of the Indigenous subject, stating,

the portraits are a realisation of my efforts to establish a revisioning of the Aborigine as a beautiful and worthy subject full of depth and complexity. The Aborigine is a worthy subject to be sure, but my intention is to strip away from the image any of the romantic and exoticised notions of primitivism, virtue, and, most importantly, the decorative stone age (Ah Kee 2009, p.8).

Ah Kee's statement is significant on three points. Firstly, the use of the word "revisioning" suggests an interruption of a discourse, establishing a critique of Western dialogue, thereby exhibiting characteristics of 'critical images'. Secondly, by "revisioning of the Aborigine as a beautiful and worthy subject full of depth and complexity" suggests that, historically, Indigenous Australians have not been viewed as worthy subjects, lacking in the beauty, depth and complexity of their counterparts from European heritages. Visual cultural theorist, Nicholas Mirzoeff states that, "The perfect body in Western culture was sustained and made imaginable by the imperfect body of the racial Other (Mirzoeff 1995, p.135)". The perfect body and face in Australian culture became the opposite of Indigenous characteristics, with an emphasis on pale skin, high cheekbones and narrow noses. Thirdly, Ah Kee notes his intention to strip away notions of the Aboriginal subject being exoticised, romantic, 'primitive', 'noble savages' ; 'remnants of the stone age'. They are portraits that avoid the thematising characteristics of historical colonial imagery that were entrenched in 'Dying Race' and 'Great Chain of Being' theories. Ah Kee attempts to break free of traditional depictions of Australian Aboriginal people and the history which viewed the Indigenous population as lesser beings doomed to extinction by their very lacking in comparison to their counterparts from a European heritage. By depicting the Australian Aboriginal subject in a classical drawing technique, and in the manner of a contemporary portraiture style, Ah Kee challenges the notion that Indigenous peoples are any less beautiful, complex, or full of depth as the European subject, filled with agency behind their piercing gazes.

### **Norman Tindale and Dying Race Theories**

In 2012 Vernon Ah Kee staged the exhibition *Transforming Tindale* at the State Library of Queensland. This series of large scale drawings were appropriated from the anthropological colonial photographs of Norman Tindale, that were taken as part of the *Harvard and Adelaide Universities Expedition* (1938-1939) (State Library Queensland). (See fig 1.) These photographs were taken at Queensland Aboriginal missions and reserves Yarrabah, Cherbourg, Mona Mona, Palm Island and Woorabinda, and it is important to note that these communities largely consisted of Indigenous people who were forcibly removed to reserves and missions under the 1897

*Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (State Library Queensland).

Tindale states that,

Fourteen months were spent in the field by the Harvard- Adelaide Expedition, principally along the eastern and southern portions of Australia, from North of Cairns to Perth. Survivors of many aboriginal tribes were interviewed, often in their own country, and the data may be 'said' to have been acquired during the course of interviews with approximately 2,450 people (the total number subjected to anthropometric examination) (Tindale 1940, pp. 140-141).

Part of the anthropometric examination included photographing each Indigenous subject from both front and side, including the photographs of Ah Kee's family members from which he has appropriated the *Transforming Tindal* works. These family members were not part of the Indigenous subjects examined "in their own country", but interned on the government reserve of Palm Island. The outcomes of the expedition were released in *Results of the Harvard- Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition*, published in 1940 in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia vol. 64*. Tindale states that, "In the present paper and accompanying map an attempt has been made to give a list of all established tribes, and where possible, a concise account of the known boundaries and a précis of recent natural tribal displacements that have occurred (Tindale 1940, p.140)". Apart from the mapping and listing of tribal groups and areas, two major concerns of Tindale underlining the results of the study are made apparent in *Survey of the Half-caste Problem in South Australia*, published in the 1940-41 edition of the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch vol. 42*. Firstly, there was a concern of interracial coupling which was producing 'half-castes' and the possible affects this would have on the future white population. Secondly, Tindale's assertion of 'Dying Race' theories, prevalent at the time, in which it was perceived that the Aboriginal population was in decline due to coming into contact with European settlers.

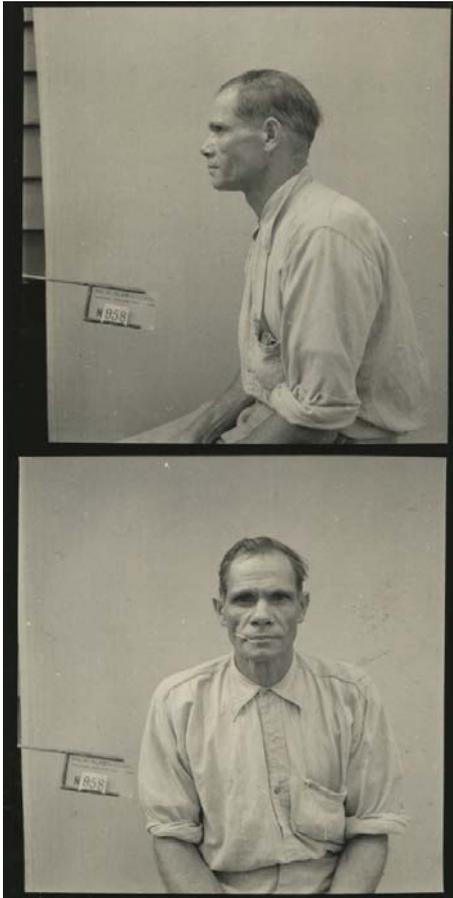


Fig 1.

The use of the word “problem” in the title of Tindale’s *Survey of the Half-caste Problem in South Australia* is significant in that points to the concerns regarding interracial partnering and the social taboo of such couplings at the time, highlighting the underlying racism of such fears and the ‘inferior’ status held by the Indigenous Australian population. Tindale categorises blood percentage mixes with the classifications of ‘half-caste’, ‘quadroon’, ‘octoroon’ and ‘those barely recognised as Aboriginal’, stating that, “The aborigines of South Australia are a dying remnant, but the half-castes who replace them are increasing in numbers and need attention and care (Tindale 1941, p.67)”. It was his conviction that the ‘pure blood’ Aboriginal Australian was doomed to extinction, while those of racially mixed parentage would be absorbed into the white population with Indigenous racial characteristics ‘bred out’. He goes to great lengths to assuage fears of ‘throwback’ generations in which Indigenous racial physical characteristics would

reappear, stating that, “A low percentage of Australian aboriginal blood will not introduce any aberrant characteristics and there be no fear of reversions to the dark aboriginal type (Tindale 1941, p.67)”. Tindale’s choice of language highlights underlining racist attitudes by coupling the term “dark aboriginal type” with “aberrant characteristic”, and confirms Anne Maxwell’s position that a norm/ deviance model was in place at this time in Australian history. Aboriginal physical racial characteristics are represented as something to be suppressed, negative features that are a social, as well as physical, stigmatism.

Tindale’s position was that ‘full blood’ Aboriginals should be isolated to government reserves and that contact with the European population should be minimised to medical care and ration distribution, so as to slow and ease their passing, stating that, “Full bloods in the settled districts are a diminished group and will soon be extinct (Tindale 1941, p.68)”. He attributes many causes to this perceived extinction including disease, alcohol and the encroachment on traditional hunting lands stating that, “Study of the statistics of the racial contacts that have taken place in various parts of our continent in the past suggest that even a small degree of association with whites is more detrimental to them than the severest droughts (Tindale 1941, p.76)”. By using the metaphor of “the severest drought” for white contact, Tindale implies that European contact moves like a natural force, eliminating those of the weaker racial Other, invoking the notion of ‘Social Darwinism’ in which the more adaptive race survives.

While adopting a policy of isolation for ‘full bloods’, Tindale proposed a program of integration with those of mixed racial parentage, forwarding that, “Complete mergence of the half-caste in the general community is possible without detriment to the white race. Their aboriginal blood is remotely the same as that of the majority of the white inhabitants of Australia, for the Australian aboriginal is recognized as being a forerunner of the Caucasian race (Tindale 1941, p.67)”. By labelling Indigenous peoples as a “forerunner”, Tindale implies that Caucasians are a more developed race on an evolutionary timeline, evoking comparisons with ‘Great Chain of Being’ theories in which non Caucasian peoples are placed lower on a evolutionary ladder beneath their European counterparts as a link between humans and the animal world of monkeys and apes. Historian Russell McGregor states,

Traditionally, the Great Chain had been employed to express the plenitude of God's creation by arranging nature into a vast hierarchy, from inanimate matter, through to the simple organism and on to man at the apex, or perhaps beyond to the angels. Each link on the Chain was differentiated from its neighbours by only small variations, so that the whole comprised a continuous scale expressive of the harmony of creation. As Europeans became increasingly familiar with diversity of humankind- and with the anthropoid apes- the gap in the Chain between man and monkey was able to be filled in, with black races at the bottom of the human link, closest to the highest simian (McGregor 1997, p.5).

The 'Great Chain of Being', with its religious history, decreed it a God-given right for Caucasians to be at the top of the evolutionary ladder and apex of the natural order. The fact that Europeans held a unique position at the zenith of evolutionary development with Other races points to the reality that coming 'face to face' with the racial Other was impossible when non Europeans were denied the status of being able to occupy the top stratosphere of evolution with their European counterparts. Being designated as the missing link between human and animal, the racial Other did not manifest itself in the mind of Europeans as Levinas's 'brother', 'sister' or 'neighbour'. To see the racial Other not as an equal but as a baser form of existence denies their 'face'. If, according to Levinas, substituting one human being for another, is the primal disrespect that allows exploitation to occur, what does that say for the ability to substitute human for animal? If substitution of one human for another allows exploitation to occur, what manner of atrocities can be implemented on those not seen as on an equal evolutionary scale?

Anne Maxwell suggests that, "In Australia theories of race being advanced by English scientists such as Thomas Huxley were used to sanction the implementation of a programme of modernization that condoned the physical removal of Aborigines from their traditional lands. Such theories were popular because they allowed settlers to believe that Indigenous peoples and their cultures had declined primarily because of their failure to compete with the more adaptive races of Europe and not as a result of settler atrocities (Maxwell 1999, p.138)". Science was a double edge sword in that, on one hand, 'Dying Race' theories sidestepped the issues of settler atrocities, yet on the other hand, the viewing of the Indigenous population as less than human, as provided by 'Great Chain of Being' theories, allowed the atrocities such as genocidal massacres to continue unabated. The failure to see the racial Other as a 'face', in a Levinasian sense, as

detailed by both 'Dying Race' and 'Great Chain of Being' theories, allowed atrocities to occur that included; murder, the removal from traditional lands in an effort towards assimilation, forced incarceration on government reserves, and the removal of children from the parents as seen in what is now referred to as the Stolen Generation.

Despite Tindale's leanings towards 'Dying Race' and 'Great Chain of Being' theories, with their subtext of racial inferiority levelled at the Indigenous Australian population, he acknowledges that the difficulties experienced by those of 'mixed blood' were largely caused by social circumstances when he states,

There seems little evidence to indicate that the difficulties of adjustment mixed breeds may have at present are particularly the result of marked racial inferiority. Physically many are of a fine type...their disabilities seem to a lack of education and home-training and the discouragement in belonging to outcast stock...The majority are of mediocre type, often but little inferior to the inhabitants of small white communities which have, through force of circumstances remained in poverty, ignorance or isolation (McGregor 1997, p.160).

Tindale championed the education and training of 'mixed breeds', so as to better integrate them into society, expressing a social absorptionist positioning that matched his biological policy of 'breeding out' Aboriginal physical characteristics. Separation of 'full bloods' and 'mixed bloods' would be beneficial in that the white community could absorb those of 'mixed blood', both biologically and socially, leaving the 'full bloods' to pass away over time. McGregor asks that, "if the problem was predominantly social in genesis, why was a biological programme of absorption necessary for its resolution (McGregor 1997, p.160)"? He answers that question by stating that, "Politically, a white Australia demanded that its citizens adhere to dominant norms, not only socially and culturally but also physical (McGregor 1997, p.160)". This seems to support Anne Maxwell's position that a norm/ deviance model was in effect, both on a social and physiological level. Tindale points to the fact that absorption was happening naturally and notes cases where 'quarter castes' had passed over into the white community and had climbed social ranks (McGregor 1997, p.160).

## **Photography and Anthropology**

Tindale's survey attempts to support the theory of absorption when McGregor states that, "Norman Tindale's survey was the first detailed scientific investigation into the feasibility of biological absorption (McGregor 1997, p.161)". Photography played a major role in this study so as to compare physical characteristics and variables between the Indigenous population. Each subject was photographed front and side, in the manner resembling police mug shots, with even lighting, a fixed focal length and a plain white background. Such techniques for photographing subjects were used for a wide number of applications, from the documentation of the racial Other, to criminals, those with mental illness and medical patients. In terms of photographing criminals, cultural theorist, Suren Lalvani, suggests that the primary function was clear identification that, "sought to effect a representation of the body as "neutral". With this in mind, the focal length was standardized and the body of the criminal exposed to an "even and consistent lighting" (Lalvani 1996, p. 109)". This aim of 'neutrality' in the photographic image is also apparent in the Tindale images. Any sign of subjectivity is stripped from the image with the aim being a neutral depiction that is in accordance with the notion of objectivity as proscribed by the scientific method. Tindale's subject is not that of portraiture but specimens, human objects for the scientific gaze.

Nicholas Mirzoeff, asks, "What do colonial photographs represent, both for the viewers in the period and today? What can be learnt from them about 'the creation of a colonial reality', a process which implicated both the colonizers and the colonized? Can we observe the process by which 'race' is written onto the body, transforming the body into a specimen (Mirzoeff 1995, p.136)"? The role of the human as specimen is clear in the Tindale images due to the fact that names are not used to identify the subject but rather numbers. Being reduced to a number is an act of depersonalisation, an act of total thematisation, one of the many. This rests at the heart of Levinas's philosophy, which was born out of his experience as a Jewish prisoner of war during World War Two. Although not marked on the skin, like the Jewish prisoners inked with serial numbers, Tindale's subjects are 'totalised' and reduced none the less through the designation and substitution of 'face' for numeral. Although not inked by tattoos, their difference, their race, their deviance, "is written onto the body" as Mirzoeff suggests, and on their faces through the

darkness of their skin, the curliness of their hair and the breadth of their noses. Designated “outcast stock” in Tindale’s own words, the use of the word “stock” once again takes the Indigenous Australian subject out of the world of humans and closer to the world of animals. The notion of difference separates those from a European heritage from non-Europeans, with photographs standing as proof of their disparity and the racial Other’s inferiority and inability to measure against the white norm.

Mirzoeff states that, “Race thus could not exist without a visual taxonomy of racial difference. In order to provide and classify such difference, entire archives of visual material came into existence in the nineteenth and twentieth century museum, private collectors and laboratories (Mirzoeff 1995, p.136)”. Tindale’s photographs of Indigenous Australians, through the *Harvard-Adelaide Universities Expedition*, added to these archives, an index of the racially Other. A colonial reality was constructed, photograph by photograph, specimen after specimen. Institutions like museums were constructed to house, share and showcase this taxonomy of racial difference, treasures gathered through colonial conquest. Fields such as anthropology created, to collect and add meaning to what was taken. In this, photography played a major role as data, as proof.

The veracity of truth and objectivity, in regards to photographic practice, has been a major debate in photography’s history. It is a debate that exceeds the scope of this thesis due to its parameters and complexity, however, I will address the notion of objectivity briefly and the implications that this position has on the practice of photography in the context of anthropology. Art historian, Terence Wright, argues that there has been polarising ideas regarding photographic theory. On one hand, there are those that propose that the reality of the photograph is unproblematic in that it allows transparent access to the subject, and on the other hand, that the images provided by photography are highly constructed and are dependent on a photographic literacy in their interpretation. Due to the transparency of the camera in a photographic image, photography was encouraged to be used as an instrument to yield exact mathematical data in the nineteenth century. He states that, “So, for an anthropology deeply rooted in positivisms, photography offered a tempting proposition: an objective vision and collection of ‘facts’,

facilitating systematic organization and analysis, in the service of scientific enquiry (Wright 1992, p.20)".

Mirzoeff suggests that, "Photography was used by anthropologists from its earliest days in their attempts to establish a visual classification of race, class and sexual difference. In Other words, in the colonial photograph, all that can be seen is the colonizer and his or her prejudice (Mirzoeff 1995, p.139)". What can be seen in the photographs of Norman Tindale from the Harvard-Adelaide Expedition is the control exerted over Indigenous Australians. They were not free participants in this study, interned on government reserves, controlled in every facet of their daily lives. They were told to be photographed, and obeyed under the ever present threat of punishment in their lives. Australian Indigenous author, Marnie Kennedy, who grew up interned on Palm Island under the *1897 Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, states that, "We were under the Act which means we must obey, work hard, do as you are told, and used in any way the white man wished. You were told not to answer back (Kennedy 1985, p.43)". What can be seen in Tindale's photographs is the way that the Indigenous Australian subject was held at a distance, 'proximity' severed by the imposition of neutrality and scientific methodologies. The photographs of the *Harvard-Adelaide Universities Expedition* are not the way one would photograph Levinas's notion of the Other as a 'brother', 'sister' or 'neighbour'. One's family, one's neighbour, is not a specimen. Aboriginal Australian people were treated this way for what they were perceived to be by the colonizer and that perception was one of difference and inferiority within the 'Social Darwinist' context.

Mirzoeff's claim that what we see in colonial photographs is not the subject but the coloniser and their prejudices seems to be in opposition with the intended purpose of an objective and neutral record. The position, not to have a position, is a position in itself, influenced by positivist philosophy and highly constructed in the physical act of composing the photograph and the stage in which the subject is placed. The subject is removed from its context, namely the government mission in which they are confined. The plain white background creates a void space in which light, and the eye, can enter unhindered and without distraction. It is a space of light and nothingness, a metaphor for objectivity, in which the Indigenous Australian subject emerges before the viewer. Levinas states that, "We are in the light inasmuch as we encounter the thing in

nothingness. The light makes the thing appear by driving out the shadows; it empties space. It makes space arise specifically as a void. (Levinas 1969, p.189)". For Levinas, the outline of the object imposes a limit on the subject, the borderline between object and nothingness. It is this relationship between being and nothingness that gives light, and in turn vision, its privileged position in Western discourse. Levinas states, "Thus for vision and for touch a being comes as though from nothingness, and in this precisely resides their traditional philosophical prestige. This coming forth from void is thus their coming from their origin; this "openness" of experience or this experience of openness explains the privilege of objectivity and its claim to coincide with the very being of existents. We find this schema of vision from Aristotle to Heidegger (Levinas 1969, p.189)". He challenges this privileged position afforded to sight and objectivity, in Western discourse and philosophy, by contesting that this openness of experience does not constitute the being of another, but only represents the Other. The outer appearance merely thematises the form of the Other, revealing nothing of the inner workings that comprise being beyond the surface, including a sense of transcendence that is an essential component in the 'face to face' relationship. For Levinas, the privilege of sight is a 'totalising' philosophy that denies the alterity of the Other, a discourse that places representation, the different reduced to the same in the mind of the observer, over the independence and unbreachable nature of the absolute Other.

For Levinas, the experience of coming 'face to face' with the Other is not the relationship between observer and object. Expanding on Levinas' position that the Other is not dependant on the observer, Philosopher, John Wild, argues that, "The Other is not an object that must be interpreted and illumined by my alien light. He shines forth with his own light, and speaks for himself (Levinas 1969, p.14)". This interpretation of Levinas's philosophy highlights the position that the 'face to face' relationship between myself and the Other is markedly different from an observer/object relationship. Once again, Wild's statement reflects Levinas's belief that the Other's being is not dependant on the observer's ability to formulate a mental representation of them, and that to rely on representation as a foundation of being is to reduce the different to the same. A mental construct of the Other, residing in the mind of the observer, is a subsuming movement in which being is substituted for appearance, stripping alterity from the subject and replacing it with that which is in my own power to perceive. This reduction from different to

same, which occurs in the representational process, is fundamental in Levinas's concept of 'totality', in contrast to his notion of 'infinity' that the Other possesses in their exceeding of any thematisation I can endow them with. The subject shines its own light, carries its own voice and bears its own meaning, independent of the observer, even when the presence of the observer is masked by the photographic process.

Reducing the different to the same, for Levinas, is a subsuming act of control and ownership. He states that, "Possession is preeminently the form in which the Other becomes the same, by becoming mine (Levinas 1969, p.46)". In objectifying the Other I strip them of their freedom, alterity and singular being. As a representation, and in the case of the physical object of a photograph, they belong to me. Levinas suggests vision is a mode of dominance when he argues that, "Inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, and exercises a power over them. A thing is given, offers itself to me. In gaining access to it I maintain myself within the same (Levinas 1969, p.194)". The act of possession and objectification is especially apparent through the photographic process, in which the likeness of the subject is retained in the form of the photographic print. The photographic print is objectification par excellence, substituting their being for their likeness in a physical object of this encounter. These photographic objects are retained in the possession of the anthropologist, deposited in the repositories of museum and university collections, given value, sold and traded to other researchers and institutions. The colonial anthropological subject had no rights to the image of their likeness, ownership and power resting with the anthropologist/photographer. Possession and control of the photographic object coinciding with the power to represent, to reduce to same, accounting for the standardisation of the photographic process used by anthropologists such as Tindale. The homogenous setting of the photographic stage mirrors the power of the anthropologist to reduce and place the being of the Indigenous Australian subject back into the context of their own making, that of Western discourse and of colonial representation and control.

## **Anthropology: a Critique from Within**

The tradition of reducing the being of the racially Other to visual objects in anthropological practice has not escaped criticism within its own field. Many contemporary models of anthropological enquiry exhibit a critique within its own field of traditional models.

Anthropologist, Johannes Fabian, argues that the inherent cultural and ideological bias towards vision and graphic-spatial conceptualisation in the social sciences is a bias inherited from the rationalist thought of Descartes and the empiricist philosophies of Hobbes. He states that, “to use maps, charts and tables signal conviction deeply ingrain in an empirical, scientific tradition. Ultimately they rest on corpuscular, atomic theory of knowledge and information. Such a theory in turn encourages quantification and diagrammatical representation so that the ability to “visualise” a culture or society almost becomes synonymous for understanding it (Fabian 1983, p.106)”. Tindale’s mapping of Aboriginal lands, as well as the photographing of Indigenous subjects, demonstrates the inclination towards the atomic theory in which knowledge is endowed with material form. This tendency towards what Fabian refers to as ‘visualism’, substitutes the being for representation in material form, as well as, seeing for understanding. This act of ‘visualism’ opposes Levinas’s philosophy in two ways. Firstly, it replaces being for representation, ‘totalising’ the subject through the reduction of their ‘infinite’ qualities to the finite nature of the mapped, tabled or the pictorial-aesthetic depiction. Secondly, the objective of knowing the Indigenous subject through the ability to represent is flawed, in terms of Levinas’s philosophy, in that the Other is unknowable. The underlying belief in ‘visualism’ appears to suggest that if enough data can be collected, analysed and compared, that a complete ‘picture’ of the individual or the society can be formed— a ‘totalising’ view.

Fabian further argues that the compulsion to utilise ‘visualism’ in anthropological methodologies creates both temporal and spatial distance between the anthropologist and their racially Other subject. In support of Fabian, anthropologist Matti Bunzl states that,

Fabian’s argument is motivated by a contradiction inherent to the anthropological discipline: on the one hand, anthropological knowledge is produced in the course of fieldwork through intersubjective communication between anthropologists and interlocutors; on the Other hand, traditional forms of ethnographic representation require constitutive suppression of the

dialogical realities generating anthropological insights in the first place. In objectifying discourses of scientific anthropology, “Others”, thus never appear as immediate partners in a cultural exchange but as spatial and, more importantly, temporally distanced groups (Bunzl in Fabian 1983, p. X).

Bunzl argues that, for Fabian, there is an inherent break between the ‘intersubjective communication’ and the objectifying representations of ethnographic anthropological study. Fabian’s ‘Intersubjective communication’ shares similarities to Levinas’s ‘face to face’ interaction, in that it is a relationship between beings based on language and dialogue. Also, in common is the critique of the reductive quality of representation that betrays the experience of this interaction, what Bunzl describes as the “dialogical realities (Bunzl in Fabian 1983, p. X)”. However, while Fabian’s ‘intersubjective communication’ lacks the quality of responsibility that underpins Levinas ‘face to face’ relationship, there is clearly an ethical dimension to his critique. He argues that anthropology creates a hierarchy, both spatially and temporally, in which the racially Other is perceived as ‘over there’ and socially in a time frame that predates Western culture. The privileged space of Europe is seen as both the ‘*here*’ and the ‘*now*’, with the racially Other as the ‘*there*’ and ‘*then*’. Fabian states that, “social interaction presupposes intersubjectivity, which in turn is inconceivable without assuming that the participants are coeval, i.e. share the same time (Fabian 1983, p.30)”. He argues that the inability of the Western anthropologist, residing in their privileged position of ‘*here*’ and ‘*now*’, to share both space and time, creates an unequal power relationship which denies ‘intersubjective communication’ and social interaction, and which I would argue prevents any chance of Levinas’s ‘face to face’ relationship occurring. If one does not share the same space and time, how is it possible to meet ‘face to face’?

Fabian outlines the objective of his critique when he states, “I wanted language and communication to be understood as a kind of praxis in which the Knower cannot claim ascendancy over the Known (nor for that matter, one Knower over another) (Fabian 1983, p.164)”. Fabian’s thought can be linked back to Levinas’s position earlier discussed in Chapter Two where the ability to ‘know’ a subject is coupled with a power over them. Like Levinas,

Fabian denounces the unequal power relationship of vision and its ties to knowledge, instead proposing that ethical relations are built on the foundation of communication and language. Instead of a Knower/Known relationship, with its suggestion of power held by the anthropologist, Fabian puts forward not only a relationship of coevalness but also one of partnership, in which the subject is of equal value in the proceedings. This equality differs from Levinas's idea of obligation, in which the Other exceeds my value, but aims to at least eliminate the notion that the Other is of less value. By sharing the same space and time, as suggested by Fabian, I would argue that the possibility for one to come 'face to face' with the Other is greatly increased and comes closer to Levinas's notion of 'proximity'.

Fabian's critique is not the only contemporary questioning of anthropology. The notion of sharing space and time has been extended to debates concerning the relationship between anthropologist and anthropological subject. One key debate has been between the application of objective versus subjective methodologies in anthropological fieldwork. Proponents of the objective methodologies, such as the anthropologist Roy D'Andrade, insist on maintaining a conceptual distance from the subject they are studying. The objective model is based on observation, as opposed to the role of interaction proposed by the subjective methodology. D'Andrade states the "driving force of an objective model is the goal of obtaining a surer understanding of how things work, of what is happening "out there" (D'Andrade 1995 p.408)." For Subjective methodologies on the other hand, as proposed by anthropologists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, there is no "out there", only where the anthropologist and subject intersect. By that I mean, that the foundation of anthropological fieldwork is defined by relationships. These relationships happen in a way in which the subjective anthropologist does not recede into the background of the anthropological narrative and text. When writing about the experience of the fieldwork the subjective anthropologist is not a disembodied eye but a presence that is not discounted. While the objective model attempts to describe what is happening outside of itself, the subjective model tries to take into account what happens when 'out there' meets 'in here'.

What defines the subjective model is the fact that when the worlds of the anthropologist and their subject intersect there is an obligation placed on the anthropologist to serve the needs of their subject. Subjective methodologies are often called moral models of anthropology due to the

moral obligations placed on the anthropologist. Scheper-Hughes challenges the traditional objective role of anthropological practice when she states,

I have had to pause and reconsider the traditional role of the anthropologist as neutral, dispassionate, cool and rational, objective observer of the human condition: the anthropologist as “fearless spectator,” to evoke Charles McCabe’s (un)felicitous phrase. And I am tempted to call anthropology’s bluff, to expose its artificial moral relativism and try to imagine what forms a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology might take (Scheper-Hughes 1995, p.410)

What Scheper-Hughes model proposes is a radical shift from the traditional model in which the anthropologist remains removed from the social and political landscape of the subjects they are studying. She proposes actions such as helping establish workers unions and literacy programs, as well as working as an advocate to lobby government departments and even being involved in the political process of the people (Scheper-Hughes 1995, p.410-411). This subjective model of anthropology requires the anthropologist to make ethical and moral choices and to implement these choices into action. Scheper-Hughes asks, “What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them (Scheper-Hughes 1995, p.411)?” This could be seen as compatible with Levinas’s ‘face to face’ philosophy in some ways as it advocates a sense of obligation to the Other. The anthropologist is given a ‘face’ and an acknowledged presence in the anthropological narrative and text, however, by placing the anthropologist at the forefront, and their political leanings and beliefs at the centre, the power still returns to the anthropologist. The fieldwork that embodies the interaction with the Other returns to the same in that the anthropologists responds to the experience of the Other through a pre-established moral and political code, usually a leftist political position that is entrenched in Western democratic ideology. In defending the position of objective models and criticising subjective methodologies, Roy D’Andrade states that, “Overall, there is the unreflexive assumption that one is a member of an elect that by natural grace knows what is right, and this elect consist of those who hold the moral model (D’Andrade 1995, p.408)”. For Levinas, ethics is not a moral model, as it is in subjective methodologies of anthropology, but the description of the event of coming ‘face to face’ with the Other. That is to say that the feeling of obligation one

feels to the Other and the openness to new experience, that only Other people can give, is what is ethical.

Anthropologists, Peter Benson and Kevin Lewis O'Neill, argue that both the objective and subjective models of anthropology fall short of Levinas's notion of ethics in that they lack the acknowledgement that "critical self-reflection about the fundamental face-to-face dimension of fieldwork is central to ethnography's ethical possibilities (Benson and O'Neill 2007, p.29)". For Benson and O'Neill, the ethical dimension of the 'face to face' encounter in ethnographic practice is the mindfulness of being open to experiences in which "one's own knowledge and experience, design and control are challenged (Benson and O'Neill 2007, p.45)". This interpretation of Levinas's thought, in which the anthropological subject confronts, challenges the power and authority of the ethnographer in terms of both objective and subjective models. The objective methodology is contested in that distance is closed between subject and anthropologist. By that I mean, the conceptual detachment afforded to the objective positioning is breached by the intruding 'face' of the Other. The Other's 'face' questions me and casts everything into doubt in Levinas's thought. This doubt and challenging of position has significance for subjective anthropological methodologies also. So called 'moral models' of subjective frameworks, are tested in that the 'face' of the Other disputes ones claim to moral superiority and contests ones position of power over the anthropological subject. It is the opinion of Benson and O'Neill that Scheper-Hughes' notion of a subjective anthropology that is 'world saving' is contradictory to Levinas's thought. They state that "actors come to see themselves as sovereign, righteous, on the "right side" or even powerful, Levinas seems concerned with a certain risk inherent in such acts (Benson and O'Neill 2007, p.43)".

Benson and O'Neill challenge the unequal power relationship between anthropologist and anthropological subject in both objective and subjective methodologies. They draw on the work of anthropologist Tala Asad who argues that colonialism made possible the close interaction between Western ethnographers and colonised subjects, but that the relationship due to unequal power relations would be decidedly one-sided (Benson and O'Neill 2007, p.42). In connection to objective and subjective methodologies they state that, "the participation of both of these positions in a stark division between subject and object, self and Other, suggests complicity with

the very legacies of Western power and knowledge from which they claim to depart (Benson and O'Neill 2007, p.41)". I will argue in the next chapter that the art of Vernon Ah Kee aims to close this gap between anthropological subject and viewer to create a dialogue, a relationship that challenges the disparity of power; one that confronts the viewer, challenges the views they hold true about the world and is more in accord with Levinas' ethical relationship of the 'face to face' encounter.

### **Inequality in Mainstream Society**

It was not only in the fields of science and anthropology that inequality between Indigenous Australians and their European heritage counterparts existed, but also within the mainstream society. Ideas such as 'Dying Race' and 'Great Chain of Being' theories permeated their way into the frontier psyche, often used as justification for dispossessing the Aboriginal Australian people of their traditional lands. Viewing the Indigenous Australian people as lesser beings layed at the core of settler's belief that, not only was it necessary, it was just for them to further their imperial tendencies. In an appropriation of Charles Darwin's 'Survival of the Fittest', modified to a 'Social Darwinist' interpretation, settlers justified their taking of land and the interning of the Indigenous population as the superior species taking over from the inferior. Australian historian, Andrew Markus, states that "the right to dispossess the Aborigines of their land was not a subject for debate" and that "it was taken for granted both in the cities and in the frontier (Markus 1974, p.7)". Markus attributes the actions regarding the treatment of Australia's Indigenous population to the ideology held by those on the frontier, when he states "in rationalizing their treatment of Aborigines and in defending their actions against outside criticism the frontiersmen were united by a common set of attitudes. These attitudes, encapsulated in a clearly defined ideology, made the right of Aborigines to 'life liberty and the pursuit of happiness' subservient to the expansion of the pastoral economy" (Markus 1974, p.7).

Markus argues that the "central tenet was the degradation of the Aborigines to a status below European men" and that "once the Aborigines were degraded to a sub-human status European standards of dealing with their fellow men could be demonstrated to be out of place on the frontier (Markus 1974, p.7)". To support the argument that a prevalent ideology dominated the

frontier psyche, Markus draws on newspaper articles and editorials to illustrate the link between imperialistic motivations, 'Dying Race' theory and the 'Social Darwinist' theories of Herbert Spencer. The blunt reality of genocide, as a means of colonial imperialism, is explicit when Markus references an article in the Queensland newspaper *Northern Mine*, as quoted by *The Bulletin*, 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1883, "it is the inevitable consequence of our possession of the country, and the English Government having taken possession of Australia and let her children seize the land, the aboriginals must go somewhere-lead, or rum, or Otherwise. The nigger has to go (Markus 1974, pp.70-71)."

Markus concedes that paternalistic affinities did exist, in conjunction with the imperial colonial tendencies, through the inclusion of a newspaper article from the *Age*, 13<sup>th</sup> of January 1881. In this article it states:

It appears to be taken for granted that the Aborigines are doomed. They must, like the Aborigines of Other countries, pass away before the white man. It would be useless at this period to discuss the cause of this or deny the inevitable. In this country they pass away without struggle. They simply vanish. Such helplessness as they manifest stirs up in us a feeling of pity, and we are moved by Christian philanthropy to give such help as will extend the vanishing point and allow them to glide off the stage rather than pass away abruptly (Markus 1974, p.64).

Although eloquent, the *Age* article masks the violent coming together of Indigenous Australian and European cultures, through its claim that the Indigenous population was vanishing into thin air. By stating that the Indigenous population was disappearing "without a struggle", the very real affects of colonial and imperial brutality are sweep aside, while denying the role colonial experience had on Indigenous Australian people in terms of resistance, and in turn, the responsibility of the European colonisers for the brutality that was taking place. Paternalism manifests itself in the language used, through words such as "helplessness" and "pity", creating a lament that is naturalised through the subtext of 'Dying Race' and 'Social Darwinism' theories. The Indigenous Australian population "passes away before the white man", swept aside like a natural force, "inevitable" due to the Europeans superiority. It is beliefs such as these that Vernon Ah Kee challenges. Although they are historical beliefs, I argue that the frontier psyche

permeates contemporary Australian thinking and that Ah Kee confronts and disputes this inequality through the presentation of the 'face', an effort to disrupt the viewers preconceived notions held about Aboriginal Australian people. In the next chapter I will examine the artwork of Ah Kee and demonstrate the way in which he creates dialogue with his audience. I will argue that this discourse between artist and viewer challenges many of the assumptions about Indigenous Australian people that have been discussed in this chapter, held by both the scientific and anthropological communities as well as the mainstream society. These challenges and dialogues will be examined in light of Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the 'face to face' and will explore Ah Kee's work in relationship to the ethics of this encounter.

## Chapter Five.

### Vernon Ah Kee: the Artist and Ethics

This chapter will address the art of Vernon Ah Kee in relationship to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In the previous chapters I outlined the overarching theories of Levinas's concept of the 'face to face' encounter. I then discussed the difficulties of applying Levinas's thought to works of art. The work of literary theorist, Robert Eaglestone, was introduced in its challenge to Levinas's antipathy to art and representation, offering a position that criticism was in line with Levinas's position on philosophy and dialogue. The term 'critical image' was introduced to describe artworks that are dialogically based, meaning images that have criticality at their core and aim to interrupt prevailing discourse. It was argued that the art of Vernon Ah Kee displayed the properties of 'critical images', challenging Western discourse in terms of anthropological debate, through the use of photography as a colonial tool of power and the inequality of Indigenous Australians as expressed in the scientific theories of 'Dying Race' and 'the Great Chain of Being'. This chapter will address key concepts of Levinas, such as responsibility, persecution, sensibility, 'saying' and 'said', in relation to the artwork of Ah Kee. I will engage specific artworks through Levinas's key concepts, with a focus on the portraits and text works. The *unwritten* series will be discussed as an example of Ah Kee's use of facelessness as a counterpoint to the portrait work and will be examined in relationship to Levinas's notion of 'totality' and its opposition to the ethics of the 'face to face' encounter.

#### The Portraits: the Transforming Tindale Exhibition

In 2012 Vernon Ah Kee staged the exhibition *Transforming Tindale* at the State Library of Queensland. (See Fig. 2.) The library houses copies of a portion of the Tindale photographs that were taken on the Queensland missions of Palm Island, Yarrabah, Cherbourg, Woorabinda, Bentinck Island, Doomadgee and Mornington Island. The exhibition consisted of nine large scale 240cm by 180cm portraits drawn on canvas. Also included in the exhibition were 150 copies of photographs taken from the Tindale collection. A video also accompanied the drawing and

photographs in which people talked of their experience of being photographed by Tindale and family members talked about those who had been photographed.



Fig 2.

The portraits were of Ah Kee's family members, appropriated from the Tindale photographs that were taken on the mission of Palm Island, with the exception of portraits of Ah Kee's three children. The portraits of Ah Kee's children include the placement of a Tindale style endnotes entering the frame from the left hand side that mimic the original Tindale photographs. The portraits appropriated from the Tindale photographs taken on the mission of Palm Island are inspired by the three photographs carried by Ah Kee's grandmother. Curator, Robert Leonard, states that "Ah Kee's grandmother always carried two photos with her in her purse: one of Ah Kee's grandfather (her husband), Mick Miller; the other of his great-grandmother (her mother), Annie Ah Sam. She also had a shot of his great-grandfather (her father), George Sibley (Ah Kee 2009, p.6)". The Tindale portraits include both front on and profile poses while the drawings of Ah Kee's children only include front on poses. The works are arranged in triptychs with the front on, then profile of the Tindale appropriated images of the grandparent or great-grandparent, followed by a drawing of one of Ah Kee's children. (see fig 3.)



Fig 3.

The inclusion of Ah Kee's children in the portrait triptychs, and in the larger context of the exhibition that included the Tindale photographs, is important as it suggests a continuance of Ah Kee's lineage from the more historical images. By that I mean, there is a continuation that extends both ways from Ah Kee within the exhibition. Firstly, they situate Ah Kee's position of critique not only in the historic but in both the present and the future. It is possible to say that Ah Kee views injustice and discrimination as a continuing force in the present day of Indigenous Australian's lives. Secondly, the inclusion of his children challenges Tindale's notion that Aboriginal Australians were dying out as a race due to 'Dying Race' theories. By showing his offspring Ah Kee makes the statement 'we have survived' despite the treatment that we have received. Thirdly, the inclusion of his children signifies that the historical mistreatment of his ancestors, as well as their resilience, form part of his and his children's identities. For Ah Kee, the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition is about family. In an interview that talked about the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition, Ah Kee outlines the connection the art making process has to his family when he states,

It's a story for me that when I look at my own family and think about what I have been doing, it's a story about my whole family, it's for my whole family. As an artist I don't make art from the position of being separate from my family, functioning as an individual. I make art from the context of coming from a big family and being in a family. So for me, like the Tindale images, I think that my own family has a sense of ownership over my artworks, so that's why for me, my artwork has to have some kind of resonance for

everybody in my family, Otherwise it's not working (Transforming Tindale: In Conversation with Michael Aird, Vernon Ah Kee and Louise Denoon 2012).

Ah Kee's statement that his family has sense of ownership over both the artworks that he creates and the Tindale images is important as it indicates a reconstitution and reversal of the power relationship between image maker and subject. In the creation of the Tindale images, the power rested firmly with the anthropologist, backed by the control exerted by the state over the Indigenous Australians forcibly detained on the Queensland missions. Ah Kee's statement of ownership suggests a reclaiming of these images, both within his own art practice and by Aboriginal Australian people. A shift occurs; the Tindale images are taken from their context as anthropological data and repositioned in the context of family portraiture. A returning of their loved ones takes place and a shift arises from being a possession of the state to being back into the belonging of the family structure. It is important to note the significance of returning to family, in the Indigenous Australian experience, in the context of the families that were broken up and sent to different mission as well as the affect of the Stolen Generation in which children were forcibly removed from their families. By reclaiming the images of their ancestors, Indigenous Australians work towards repairing their fractured families and recontextualise their life experience in relationship to what had occurred to their family in the past. The images of their family are more than data, more than anthropological subject; they are people that they have an intimate connection with.

Ah Kee addresses the shift in meaning when appropriating the Tindale images in the portraits of the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition when he states, "I am recontextualising not just the images but the process itself, and naming, and renaming. And identifying these people as people and not data (Transforming Tindale: In Conversation with Michael Aird, Vernon Ah Kee and Louise Denoon 2012)." By recontextualising the images and process, Ah Kee strips it from its power. The colonial authority is challenged when it is taken out of the realm of science and control of the state and reconstituted in the structure of the large Aboriginal family. At the same time as power is being stripped from the original context of the Tindale images, power re-emerges on the side of the subject and their families with the reclaiming of their loved ones as well as the nurturing of their identities formed by the bonds of their ancestors. For Ah Kee, being a person,

and specifically an Aboriginal Australian person, is being part of a large family. This is supported by the earlier statement that he doesn't view his art making practice as that of someone working as an individual but always within the context of his family. Ah Kee transforms the Tindale images, as suggested by the title of the exhibition, but does not shy away from the original context and historical significance of the photographs.

The original context of the Tindale photographs is reinforced by the inclusion of the end notes that protrude into the picture frame from the left hand side. Curator for the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition, Michael Aird, supports Ah Kee's assertion that there is a paradox in that the subjects represented are both data and people when talking about the end notes inclusion he states, "It's reminding the visitors to the exhibition that these, on one hand, were people treated as objects with numbers attached and they were real people as well, so it's that contradiction (Transforming Tindale: In Conversation with Michael Aird, Vernon Ah Kee and Louise Denoon 2012)". Ah Kee plays with this contradiction as his drawings reflect both family portrait and ethnographic record. He transforms the Tindale images, yet anchors them in their history of injustice to the Indigenous Australian people. The ambiguity of Ah Kee's images reflects the complex relationship he has with the photographs. He first encountered the Tindale photographs as cropped copies in his grandmother's purse of his grandfather, great grandmother and great grandfather. It was only later in life that he researched the source of the images and was made aware of the Tindale collection (Ah Kee 2009, p.7). So for Ah Kee his relationship with these images began as one of intimacy and in the context of family portraiture. The drawings Ah Kee produces retains this sense of intimacy. The soft texture of the charcoal imitating that of the skin. The eye caresses the surface, approximating touch. There is a sense of closeness to the subject. Levinas's notion of 'proximity' is called forth in that one immediately senses the 'face to face' relationship between artist and subject, they are connected. The cold, dispassionate and distant view of the original Tindale images is replaced with a rendering and sensibility that is much more intimate. There is nothing 'scientific' about Ah Kee's gestural strokes. The subject, originally depicted as an object of scientific study, is transformed back into an individual, and not just any person but a family member.

The success of the ambiguity of Ah Kee's drawings is called into question by curator Robert Leonard when he states,

The portraits are ambiguous. Ah Kee may be motivated by a desire to redeem the images of his ancestors (as captured by Tindale), by investing time in exploring and registering their detail; by emphasising the intensity of his sitters' gaze, suggesting agency; by granting them an ennobling Mount Rushmore scale; and by identifying them, tying them to a specific genealogy-his own. However, his images of contemporary sitters are tainted by association with the Tindale images, as if Aborigines today-even his young son- might still be heirs to old attitudes; imprisoned by them...While the portraits could be seen as idealising, heroic depictions- a celebration of resistance, showing generations of his family surviving racism- they could also be seen as neutral depictions to which we bring our own values, making screens for our prejudices and romantic fantasies(Ah Kee 2009, p.8).

Ah Kee's portraits are ambiguous, but the need and desire by Leonard to place the sitters at the polemics of either idealised heroic or tied to old prejudices is problematic in that it falls into the dichotomy of the noble/ignoble savage as discussed in Chapter Four. Neither comes 'face to face' with the Other. Instead of the image of the individual person depicted by Ah Kee, he has already ascribed the subject to the universal concepts of good and bad. This shift from the 'infinite' individual to the universal is a shift from the Levinasian concepts of 'infinity' to 'totalisation', as noted in discussing Levinas's thought in Chapter Two. Leonard claims that the large scale of the portraits is "ennobling", however, I would argue that the increased size reverses the power relationship of the gaze between subject and viewer. The scale, coupled with the intense gaze of the sitter, emphasises the feeling of being watched by the subject which undermines the power of looking normally associated with colonial imagery. The viewer may judge the subject, as Leonard suggests, but in the same instance the viewer is also being judged by the Indigenous Australian subject. Leonard states that the contemporary sitters are "tainted by association with the Tindale images" but in the same way the viewer is also 'tainted' in their association to the images in that their Australian culture allowed the unequal power relationship that produced these images. Coming 'face to face' with the viewer they insist, 'you did this to my family and you continue to do wrong'. Ah Kee is as much activist as artist in this respect, acting as a voice for not only himself but for his family and people. The portraits are ambiguous because they are multilayered, resonating in different contexts simultaneously. Ah Kee speaks in

several voices at once. One voice speaks to his family while another speaks to a white audience. These voices push and probe the viewer of European heritage in a way compatible with Levinas's notion of the 'face to face' encounter. For Levinas, the face of the Other, through its very appearance makes demands of us, forces us to respond. Ah Kee's portraits are not passive; they ask questions of the viewer. Like the 'face' they intercede, interrupting the day to day business of the audience. One must react to these images, even if it is to ignore them—they draw a response. Like the 'face' I can choose to treat these images in an ethical response and remain open to their 'unknowable' qualities that make them irreducible to comprehension or I can, as I would argue Leonard has done, reduce that which is absolutely different to the same through a process of having to categorise the Indigenous Australian sitter in term of Western concepts. What Leonard is doing is trying to 'totalise' the subject of Ah Kee's portraits by placing them in easily defined categories instead of treating them ethically in a Levinasian sense by acknowledging their 'infinite' qualities and bearing witness to their individuality and unhindered alterity.

Ah Kee's portraits ask questions of the viewer and demand the audience take a position in regards to the treatment of Indigenous Australians. His work is opposed to 'art for art's sake', having a political purpose in regards to raising awareness of the mistreatment of Aboriginal Australian people. Ah Kee is an activist whose work is tied to the interests of his family past and present. As mentioned earlier by Ah Kee, he does not see himself as a separate entity creating art outside of the context of his family. It is the relevance of his artwork to the interests of his family that he gauges its worth. He is obligated to his family and it is this obligation that defines Levinas's 'face to face' relationship. The portraits of Ah Kee's are products of him coming 'face to face' with his family and these relics of his encounters are entrenched in the context of their treatment by colonial powers. He is responsible to his family, which again is a hallmark of Levinas's 'face to face' relationship.

## **Responsibility**

Levinas's notion of responsibility can be related to the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee on a few different levels. Firstly, there is the primary responsibility of the artist to his subject matter. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ah Kee's subject matter includes many facets of colonial history such as the inequality of treatment towards Australia's Indigenous population. This responsibility to subject matter includes his accountability to his ancestors and family, as previously discussed in this chapter. Secondly, responsibility is evoked between the viewer and the artwork. I argue that the artwork operates as a 'face' of the artist, creating a dialogue between artist and viewer. Thirdly, due to coming 'face to face' with the artist, and being obligated to the them, Levinas's notion of justice, that was discussed in Chapter Two, arises in which my obligation to the Other causes me to be obligated to *all* Others. This notion of justice creates a bridge between viewer and the artist's subject matter in that I am not only obligated to the 'face' of the Other but the 'faces' he depicts, the 'faces' that *he* is obligated to. The viewer responds to both the voice of the artist and subject matter represented, and in a Levinasian sense, is obligated to both.

Vernon Ah Kee's responsibility to his family as subject matter in the portraits exhibits an obligation to bear witness to the colonial powers exerted over them both in the past and present. To bear witness is to bear responsibility. But Ah Kee not only bears witness to the atrocities that have occurred to his family but also the positive aspects of his 'face to face' interactions with them. Not only does he provide the colonial context of their existence but he expresses the 'infinite' qualities that they possess through such methods as the suggested agency of their intense gaze, a response to the 'totalising' colonial gaze of Tindale. Levinas states, "It is by the voice of the witness that the glory of the infinite is glorified (Levinas 1981, p.146)". Ah Kee's images act as a voice of that glory and as a witness asserts the 'infinite' qualities of his interactions with them. Ah Kee is witness to their value and worth as human beings when he states that his portraits are, "revisioning the Aborigine as a beautiful and worthy subject full of depth and complexity (Ah Kee 2009, p.8)". Through this statement Ah Kee bears witness to two things. Firstly, the value of the Indigenous subject as an 'infinite being' that is worthy of attention and, like their European counterparts, deserving to be represented as deep, rich and

complex. Secondly, by using the word “revisioning” he alludes to the fact that Aboriginal Australian people have not been viewed as deep and complex in the past in a way that their European heritage counterparts have. So simultaneously he is talking about both the ‘infinity’ of the Indigenous Australian subject and ‘totality’ of the subject by Europeans historically, in terms of Levinas’s framework. Through positioning the subject in relation to the context of both ‘infinity’ and ‘totality’, Ah Kee is able to produce images with a conceptual complexity that in turn helps to create the high level of ambiguity noted by Leonard. In a Levinasian sense people *are* ambiguous because they are full of complexities that can’t be pinned down unless the subject is simplified and ‘totalised’, which according to Levinas is an act of violence. Ah Kee’s images stand witness to this violence that has happened in the past, both in colonial history and within the images created within this colonial narrative, but at the same time providing an alternative voice that points towards the ‘infinity’ of the subject.

Leonard notes the intensity of the subjects gaze in Ah Kee’s drawings that suggests agency of the sitter Ah Kee 2009, p.8). This perception of agency can be related to Levinas’s notion that the eyes speak, forming a linguistic basis for Ah Kee’s representation. Through his subject Ah Kee tells a story, it is both a history lesson that confronts preconceived ideas about Aboriginal people and a contemporary lesson that commands the viewer to acknowledge their responsibility, not only for this history but the current treatment of Indigenous Australians. Levinas’s notion of justice, as outlined in Chapter Two, suggests that responsibility is implied regardless of whether you are guilty or not. In Levinas’s reckoning everyone is guilty. As soon as you come ‘face to face’ with someone you are responsible, you bear witness and you are guilty. Ah Kee’s portraits say ‘this is who I am’, ‘this is the history of me and my family’. The haunting looks of their eyes persecute the viewer. Levinas describes the persecution of the Other in terms of an obsession, a gnawing at ones ego in which one cannot avoid their responsibility when he states, “The undecidability of the ego is the irremissibility of the accusation , from which it can no longer take a distance, which it cannot evade (Levinas 1981, p.112)”. Being irremissible is to be without pardon, nobody escapes the guilt of the persecution. The scale of Ah Kee’s drawings fills the view of the audience member, emphasising the closing of distance claimed by Levinas when he states that you “can no longer take a distance”. Art historian Anthony Gardner describes Ah Kee’s artwork as a ‘breathless aesthetic’ (Ah Kee 2009, p.56). Gardner describes a closing of

distance between subject and viewer that appears compatible with Levinas's statement that persecution by the presence of the Other prevents the person coming 'face to face' maintaining distance and thereby avoiding responsibility. Gardner expands on his notion of 'breathlessness' when talking about Ah Kee's portraits and points to possible readings that imply guilt and persecution when he states:

A rejection of gaps, a refusal of pauses, a removal of spaces in which one could have caught one's breath- these are the tropes most common throughout Ah Kee's practice...Sometimes these tropes are more subtle or special, as with the removal of distance between the audience and the Aboriginal subject gazing at them directly, defiantly, confrontingly in the *What Is an Aborigine?* series, or even *whitefellanormal*. At stake, it seems, is a removal of the distance and detachment with which many Australian people have treated (and continue to treat) their Other. There is a no arm's-length relation between the subject and its audience here, so common from the racist, top-down dictates of the white governments and white people towards Aborigines since the invasion or 'settlement' (Ah Kee 2009, p.57).

Here Gardner draws comparisons between the use of distance and space with the notion of persecution of guilt as in accordance with Levinas's position. He also points to the fact that through the 'totalising' mechanism of creating conceptual distance, white Australians have been able to treat Indigenous Australians unethically by avoiding responsibility. This could also be said to be true of the conceptual distancing through the mediating power of scientific methodologies and objectifying processes used in colonial photography discussed in Chapter Four. Levinas alludes to the closing of distance during the 'face to face' encounter when he refers to the Other as "neighbour", suggesting closeness, stating, "This way of the neighbour is a face (Levinas 1981, p.88)". Here Levinas uses the term neighbour also within a biblical sense, such as 'love thy neighbour'. Use of the term neighbour suggests not only a close 'proximity' but also a connectedness that runs ethically opposed to the "arm's-length" treatment of Indigenous Australians by the white government and people that is suggested by Gardner. I would argue, as suggested in both the positions of Levinas and Gardner, that no detachment is possible in an ethical encounter and that that division of the intersubjective relationship between myself and the Other allows exploitation to occur.



Fig 4.

Due to the creation of a conceptual distance between white Australians and their Indigenous Other, Gardner suggests that racism has been allowed to flourish. This avoidance of guilt can be seen in Ah Kee's text work *austracism* (see fig4.and the detail in fig 5.). The text piece consists of a series of racist statements, each preceded by the statement "I'm not a racist but...". By saying you are not a racist is a direct negation of responsibility, avoiding a negative stereotype while simultaneously projecting a negative stereotype on the Indigenous Australian Other. Also, by saying "I am not a racist" you limit the freedom of the Other. By that I mean, Levinas's Other has unlimited freedom in their response to me, and by saying that you can't call me a racist, one places a conceptual boundary that guards against criticism. In terms of Levinas's thought this denying the Other of a range of response is a form of limiting the 'infinite' qualities and freedom of the Other and returning that which is different to the same. That which has its own alterity is

being thematised in a sense that what its own belief and response to your statement gets reduced back to the way *you* feel about the statement, primarily being that it isn't racist.

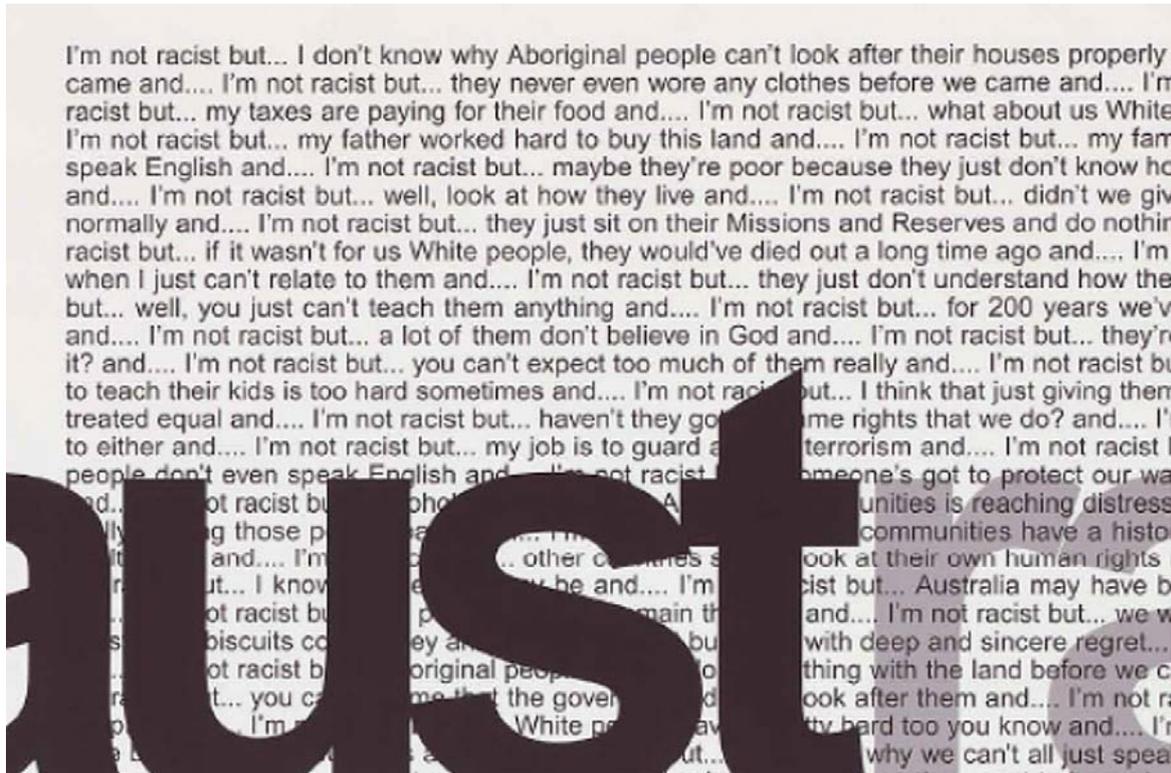


Fig 5.

Ah Kee uses the constant preface of “I am not a racist but...” as a trope to encourage an audience to respond by saying ‘yes that is racist’, so there is a notion of justice at play in that the audience member is forced to defend the Other. Another response could be one of guilt in which the audience member has said some of the statements listed, or similar statements. In that case, it forces the question on the viewer, ‘am I racist’? The artwork is once again ‘breathless’ in that you either feel that the statements are racist and defend against the ‘totalising’ nature of the depicted declarations or you agree with the statements and must bear the title of a racist, even if you deny it. The overarching accusation is that Australia is a racist place with people who hold racist views and are in denial about that racism. For Ah Kee, he attempts to take the power out of

the white audiences hands, no longer are they in power to say what is racist or what is not. The Indigenous Australian Other holds the power in this artwork, defining both what is racism is and who is racist. The distance is closed between the voice of the artist and the audience in this text work and is 'breathless' in the same way as the portraits. The constant repetition of accusations assaults the viewer giving no space to breathe or create distance. The audience drowns in their own assumptions about Indigenous Australians and has their thematising beliefs deflected back at them.

What Gardener alludes to in his notion of 'breathlessness' is the inescapability of guilt. This is especially true of the white audience member but also resonates with those not from a European background. As with Levinas, no one is irremissibility of the accusation. Through coming 'face to face' with the Other in terms of both the voice and 'face' of the artist and the subjects he represents, one 'faces' some form of persecution. Either one is confronted as a racist, because Other non Europeans can have racist views about Indigenous Australians, or through a call to justice in which the viewer needs to defend the ethical treatment of Aboriginal Australian people. Even Indigenous Australians are not spared guilt in the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee. He is part of a Brisbane based Indigenous collective called proppaNOW. Art critic, George Petelin states that,

The name proppaNOW, derived from a colloquial expression often used by Aboriginal people, encapsulates the group's philosophy of approaching everything in a proper and considered manner'. What "doin' things proppa" in Aboriginal parlance means is not to superficially imitate *tradition*, but to adhere to a *protocol* of respect and consultation in developing that tradition. proppaNOW does not subscribe to the superficial rituals and symbols that now mistakenly signify authenticity: instead, it adheres to central social processes that are profoundly Aboriginal. This is what allows proppaNOW to pursue, as their mission statement cum manifesto expresses it, a 'constantly innovative approach' and to 'question established notions of Aboriginal Art and Identity' without at the same time jeopardising that identity (proppaNOW 2009, p.11).

The use of the term 'proppa' suggests that ethics is of primary concern to the collective of which Ah Kee is a part. His artwork demands Indigenous artists work in a "proper and considered manner", being true to a contemporary sense of culture that does more than imitates 'tradition' of the past. Ah Kee's work is an encouragement for Aboriginal people to form their own sense of

self outside of presubscribed stereotypes placed on them. It is the belief of proppaNOW that Indigenous Australian art has been pigeonholed into the traditions of western desert styled dot and animal x-ray bark paintings. It is the collective's mission to expand not only what is considered Aboriginal Australian art but what it means to be an Indigenous Australian. This breaks the racist stereotype that 'real' Australian Aboriginals live in the outback and desert and not also in urban centres with contemporary urban lifestyles. The artwork of the proppaNOW collective can be seen as the artists coming 'face to face' with their own Aboriginality, which in turn gets extended to the Indigenous Australian audience member who is then persecuted to questioning and expanding their own sense of self as Aboriginal Australian people and the relationship that they have to their history, family and others in their community. The Aboriginal Australian audience is forced to come 'face to face' with themselves, insofar as, the Indigenous Australian viewers' notion of who they are is extended through the history lessons Ah Kee gives, but also through the process of reaffirming family and community ties. Bonds are strengthened in the Aboriginal Australian community and the activist approach of Vernon Ah Kee, in the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition especially, works as a catalyst for bringing people together. In talking about the Tindale collection as a reference material and his inclusion of the photographs in the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition Ah Kee argues that the work is of value to "people who have been dislocated and broken away from who they are. This is a vital reference material. For families it kind of enforces who they are (Transforming Tindale: In Conversation with Michael Aird, Vernon Ah Kee and Louise Denoon 2012)". The idea that the exhibition can help Indigenous Australian people reconnect with their sense of self is important especially for people who have been dislocated. This dislocation can have many causes such as the breaking up of families that were sent to different missions and removal of children from their families through the Stolen Generation.

The use of NOW, capitalised for importance, in the name proppaNOW anchors the collective in a contemporary setting. This affixes their art production in the present day and challenges the notion that Aboriginal Australian culture and peoples have died out as suggested by 'Dying Race' theories as discussed in Chapter Four. Indigenous Australian culture and identity, and in turn art making practice, are depicted as vital, dynamic, living forces that change, grow and develop in the present over time. This challenges a taxidermical model of Aboriginal Australian

culture as a dead, stagnate collection of ‘traditions’ from the past and puts forward a new model that is multifaceted, diverse and adaptable; a living, breathing culture. By situating their art making practice in the present, proppaNOW dispute the notion that there is a white European *here* and *now* as opposed to an Indigenous *there* and *then*, as proposed by Johannes Fabian and discussed in the Chapter Four. The then and there, as suggested by Fabian, correlates with Ah Kee’s assertion that Aboriginal people are often treated as being stone age peoples, regulated to the past and with no contemporary relevance (Ah Kee 2009, p.8). The viewer of the art work of proppaNOW is forced to share the same time and space, being the contemporary Australian urban locale, and is forced to come ‘face to face’ with their Indigenous Other. This once again reinforces Gardner’s assertion that Ah Kee’s body of work does not allow a distant, arms-length approach to the Aboriginal Australian subject and voice that would allow one to avoid responsibility.

For Levinas, responsibility is the hallmark of the ‘face to face’ encounter and by examining the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee it would appear equally important in the images and messages he portrays. As discussed, responsibility extends itself to a wide range of audience; European, non European and Indigenous Australian. Through a series of tropes such as scale and the gaze of the sitter, Ah Kee creates images that confront the viewer, calling into question their actions and beliefs in regard to Aboriginal Australians. I argue that he is as much an activist as an artist, building bridges towards his family and the wider Indigenous community. Ah Kee comes ‘face to face’ with his audience and challenges them, giving them no room to breathe or dodge responsibly. Like Levinas’s ‘face to face’ relationship, an encounter with Ah Kee’s art work is filled with obligation. One can ‘face’ that obligation and be enriched by the ‘infinity’ of the Other if one chooses to embrace an ethical position and avoid ‘totalisation’ of the Indigenous Australian subject. Levinas likens the sense of obligation and responsibility to the Other as to being held hostage and this is true of the work of Ah Kee, one is held captive by the eyes of the portraits. Ah Kee’s subjects demand accountability, positioning responsibility as a hallmark of his method of operation.

### **Unwritten series: Representing Totality**

In 2008 Vernon Ah Kee completed a series of drawings titled *unwritten* (see fig 6.). Robert Leonard states that the series are, “in many ways the antithesis of the portraits (Ah Kee 2009, p.9)”. They differ greatly in physical treatment to the portraits and I will argue that Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of ‘totality’ can be readily applied to these works and are polar opposite to the notion of ‘infinity’ that I have argued is present in the other portraits. Whereas I have argued that Ah Kee portraits operate as a coming ‘face to face’ with the subject represented and the viewer, the *unwritten* series represents the act of ‘totalising’ by Australians of European heritage, thereby rendering the subject ‘faceless’; a masking that conceals the ‘infinite’ qualities of the Other and suppresses their individuality. Instead of particularised they become generic figures interchangeable with one another, a quality that was discussed in Chapter Two as being a great form of disrespect and a rationalising that made exploitation possible through the severing of the ‘face to face’ relationship in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas.

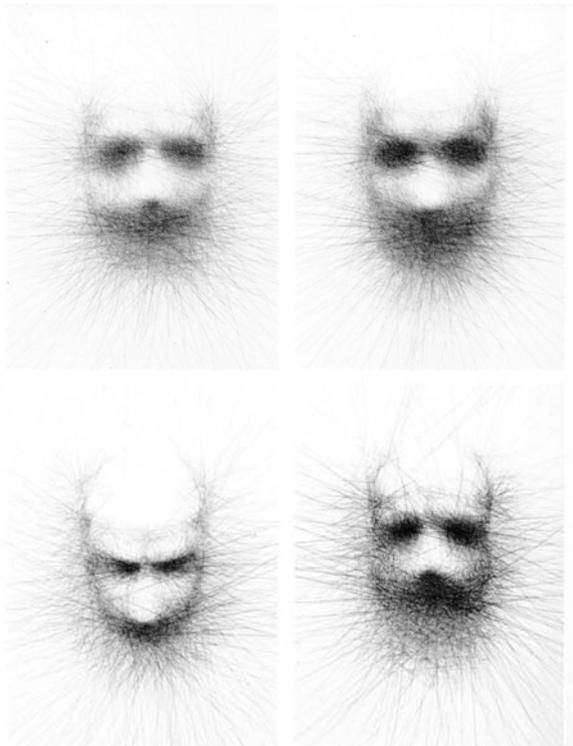


Fig 6.

Discussing the *unwritten* series Ah Kee states,

They are primitive people becoming more human to the Western eye. And as that happens, white features are ascribed to them. And where white people see those features ascribed to them- like learning to dress and learning to talk- they are rewarded. So these faces have high cheekbones and long noses, characteristics of a very general white Anglo-Saxon face, but they don't have eyes, nostrils, ears, mouths. They are people who haven't been recognised as human and, at the same time, are starting to have this white ideal applied to them, just enough to give shape to their faces. The work is about becoming (Ah Kee 2009, p.9).

Through this statement Ah Kee takes the notion that the particularised figures are reduced to being interchangeable with one another one step further in arguing that the Aboriginal Australian subject is interchangeable with Anglo-Saxon people when they display European characteristics. This can be related to Levinas's concept that through the act of 'totalising' we suppress difference and make the same. By saying that the work is about becoming, Ah Kee positions the subject in relation to Levinas's notion of 'infinity' as 'to become' suggests an expanding beyond the designation of characteristics by others; as can be illustrated through the voice of Ah Kee himself challenging these notions. But at the same time, Ah Kee is arguing that an act of total subsuming occurs which not only appears in common with Levinas's notion of the same and 'totalisation' but also critiques the social and genetic absorptionist policies forwarded by Norman Tindal as discussed in Chapter Four. In the reduced capacity of being 'totalised' the Indigenous Australian subject is made easier to consume, absorbed into larger white body, losing its 'infinite' qualities and difference. Ah Kee argues, with these images, that the act of controlling the Australian Aboriginal people involves a stripping away of their identity and voice and replacing these 'infinite' qualities with the creation of a facade of European imagining in their own image. They are restricted, unable to exceed white expectations and designations. The tight shroud-like surface of the drawing, that the figure pushes against and struggles to break free of, works as a metaphor for the Indigenous Australian subjects struggle to break free of the ideas, and ideals, that those from European backgrounds have of them, such as stereotypes and misconceptions. The shroud is a metaphor for the inability to transcend, to be more than what is ascribed, and the ability to transcend is a hallmark of Levinas's 'face'. In Levinas's thought the

'totalising' being that denies the transcendence of the 'face' has no limit to their actions since the obligation that they have to the Other is no longer present, permitting any action, any injustice, even murder.

Through the lack of eyes, ears and mouths the Indigenous Australian figures of Ah Kee's *unwritten* series are masks that are incapable of expressing themselves. They can't communicate and are rendered physically mute. This removes Levinas's notion that in the 'face to face' encounter there is a risk in facing the expression of the Other that makes us vulnerable. By facing a 'faceless' subject their unpredictability is limited, their freedoms curbed, their alterity suppressed. They cannot respond to the actions I take on them, are passive and no longer filled with their own agency. They do not challenge my freedoms and existence. I am safe from their touch, my ego unthreatened. No longer am I transfixed by the 'proximity' of the Other that is not me.

It is the difference in the rendering of the subject that suggests a 'totalising' of the figure instead of the 'infinite' qualities expressed in the other portraits. Anthony Gardner states that in the *unwritten* series, "While his earlier works detail the fine lines of the wrinkles and tough skin, here they are masked behind dark lines, and eyes and mouths dissolve into hollow sockets (Ah Kee 2009, p.56)". Gardner here points towards an important difference in the physical rendering of the *unwritten* series in comparison to Ah Kee's other portrait work. This dissimilarity of technique can be related to Levinas's notion of the difference between the 'caress' and the 'grasp' as was outlined in Chapter Two. In the portraits we have the softer rendering of delicate skin. The eye of the viewer caresses the fine lines, wrinkles and folds of the subjects face. The caress of the eye, decentring vision for the prominence of the touch, becomes a metaphor for 'proximity' and contact, an intimate closeness. The *unwritten* series, on the other hand, has dark lines that mask the face and suggest a covering, rendering the subject more object-like. The lack of detail suggests distance imposed by the intermediary of a barrier between the subject and the viewer. A barrier that the subject is hard pressed against in a desperate effort to break through.

In the *unwritten* series Robert Leonard notes that the figures are stripped down to their most basic resemblance to human head when he states that, "they feature generic, mask-like, male

heads or face- recalling basic heads one might find in a how-to-draw book, offering armature for a portraits before the distinguishing, individualising details are added (Ah Kee 2009, p.9)". The simplistic rendering of the human heads make them more object-like. The figure is an outline of a person, in many ways a projection, a generic stand in for the infinite and the transcendent. Leonard states that, within the *unwritten* series "the faces emerge from striated lines as if they are pressing through into the viewer's space from behind the canvas itself (Ah Kee 2009, p.9)". The shroud-like qualities of the surface of the drawings suggest a distance that is non transversable, a barrier that intercedes the space between subject and viewer.

Leonard argues that the barrier between the viewer and represented figure has a duality in it meaning, stating that "the images simultaneously suggest birth (as if the subjects were breaking through the canvas to be born), and death (they could be suffocated; the faces have deeply recessed eyes, reminiscent of skulls, they also suggest death masks) (Ah Kee 2009, p.09)". The metaphor of birth could be interpreted in the *unwritten* series as the face of the artist struggling against the projections of a white society, a struggle for voice, identity and an acknowledgement of their 'infinite' qualities. The artist pushes against social norms in a bid to have a voice that is their own, distinct in its tone, a resistance to the act of 'totalisation'. Ah Kee states that,

When I read about white Australian history, including Aboriginal components within that history, it makes no sense to me. It's so wildly out of context that it renders me as a person invisible, invalid, unrecognisable, not real at all; with no future, no past, not having existed, and not existing in the future. That's what history does to me, and to all my people. It's wild because references to Aboriginal people, even within popular, contemporary culture, still hark back to the stone age- the simple, the exotic, the dumb. No voice, no sight, no hearing. That's how this culture accepts Aboriginal people. I use my work to establish some sort of equilibrium for myself. It's how I make sense of the world (Ah Kee 2009, p.23).

The *unwritten* series can be seen as illustrating this statement by Ah Kee in that the Australian Aboriginal subject is rendered mute, blind and deaf. Ah Kee takes Leonard's statement about the *unwritten* series being simultaneously metaphors for life and death a step further by stating that, more than death; Aboriginal people are erased out of existence, having never existed. For Ah Kee, history and especially Indigenous Australian components within that narrative are so far removed from his lived personal experience as an Australian Aboriginal, so as to render

Indigenous people null and void, replacing people's lives with artifice. By that I mean, Ah Kee is unable to recognise his own people within both the narrative of Australian history and within popular contemporary culture due to the fact that instead of seeing representations of the family he knows he only recognises a narrative and representations that hark back to the preconceptions European Australians have about Aboriginal Australian people. This relates once again back to the notion of Emmanuel Levinas that the different is made the same when people are 'totalised'. For Ah Kee the Indigenous subject does not have a 'face' to European Australians, they have no voice, no opinion, no right to speak. Instead, Ah Kee argues that projections of "the stone age-the simple, the exotic and the dumb" are applied to Aboriginal Australian people, stereotypes that talk more about the prejudices of European Australians than the lives and complexities of Aboriginal Australian existence. I argued that fighting against such projections onto Indigenous Australian people is central to Ah Kee's practice, thereby defining his artwork as 'critical images', as discussed in Chapter Three. Leonard's metaphor of birth and death signifies this struggle, on one hand, Ah Kee is fighting to be heard, an expression of birth as the voice of the artist emerges. On the other hand, death is present in the silencing of that voice and its replacement as artifice. Complicating the matter is the emergence of this stand-in for Aboriginal Australian people, an image crafted by European Australians in their own prejudices. This replacement, as argued earlier by Ah Kee, is only seen as a 'face' when it starts to display and be attributed white characteristics and have European ideals placed upon it. This is not the face of the Other but a mirror. It seems as if Ah Kee's notion of identity is closely related to the act of self determination. His conception of self is defined by the ability to find his own voice through the exploration of the themes of his artwork such as his relationship to his family and their shared history of being under colonial rule. Ah Kee's identity is closely linked to the responsibilities that he has to his family and the obligations that arise from this accountability.

Anthony Gardner comes to a similar conclusion as Leonard in terms of a binary interpretation of the *unwritten* series but instead of a division between birth and death he breaks the images down in terms of existence and erasure when he states, "It is the struggle between existence and erasure that takes place in the state of uncertainty that is the real subject of these portraits (Ah Kee 2009, p.56)". Existence is present in the voice of the artist, the 'face' expressed through the 'here I am'. As stated earlier by Ah Kee, he creates an equilibrium for himself through the work

that he makes in an effort to make sense of the world and the way in which his people are represented in history and popular contemporary media. As he makes sense of the world through his work he also reaffirms his own existence through the formation of his 'face' that he presents to the audience and wider community. This act of creating voice balances the erasure of Aboriginal Australian people through their representation as 'exotic stone age members of the past' that Ah Kee fights against. As discussed in Chapter Four, Indigenous peoples struggle to be held present in the here and now, displaced in history and anthropology to the there and then. This slippage in time and space is part of the erasure that both Gardner and Ah Kee recognise. By presenting a contemporary 'face' in the here and now, Ah Kee resists displacement and erasure and reaffirms the existence of not only himself but also his people. It is this struggle between having voice and being silenced, presenting and suppression of the 'face', the difference and the same, that creates the uncertainty that Gardner speaks of. In terms of Levinas's thought it is the struggle between 'infinity' and 'totality'. Gardner is very close to Levinas's notion of 'infinity' and 'totality' when he discusses the struggle between existence and erasure. The similarity is apparent when Levinas states, "knowing is always convertible into creation and annihilation (Levinas 1981, p.87)". The main difference in their thought is the underpinning of "knowing" as the root cause of this battle between existence and erasure for Levinas. The act of knowing, as discussed in Chapter Two, buttresses the act of 'totality' in which the alterity of the Other is suppressed and in its place a mental construct or concept is held. For Levinas this is an act of violence, and within the *unwritten* series this violence is readily apparent through the metaphor of the suffocating shroud-like covering of the Indigenous Australian subject. Gardner discusses this violence and couples it with the projection of racist attitude when he states,

rendered anonymous, almost homogenised and asphyxiated by the social forces that entangle them. Hung together in an initially horrific *mise-en scene*, they illustrate the desperate desire to breathe from within a sea of racist projections- those that society and those that remain assumed, unspoken, *unwritten*, as the drawings' titles proclaim. These drawings, in Other words, are not so much portraits of particular people as of the state of being 'born in this skin' (Ah Kee 2009, p.56).

Here Gardner attributes social forces projected onto the Indigenous Australian Other as a power that asphyxiates through the act of homogenisation, once again displaying the characteristics of

Levinas's theory of the different made same through the act of 'totalisation'. He forwards the notion that they are not portraits of individuals but a representation of what it feels like to be born an Aboriginal Australian and face the constant struggle between existence and erasure. Gardner uses the term "born in this skin", using the title of an artwork Ah Kee exhibited for the 2008 Sydney Biennale. (See figs 7 and 8.) Executive Director of Artspace Visual Arts Centre Blair French, describes the art work as, "Vernon Ah Kee's designation of a decrepit, long disused, heavily graffitied dockworkers' toilet block on Cockatoo Island as a work of art-authored under his name and title (Ah Kee 2009, p.98)". This use of designating the toilet block as art, in an act similar to Marcel Duchamp's' readymades, Ah Kee brought attention to the violence of racism by highlighting the racist graffiti that covered the walls. French states that "Ah Kee created a space in which to refocus his own experiences of racism (through displacement)— in a form of a violent inscription upon a material surface (a skin) (AH Kee 2009, p.98)". With the artwork *Born In This Skin*, Ah Kee highlights the overt racist attitude that exists in Australia, a manifestation of the personal racism he has faced in his life for the simple fact of being born Australian Aboriginal; born in this skin. In this artwork a clear example of the racist projections, the shroud that covers and suffocates the Indigenous subject of the *unwritten* series is provided, words of hate like 'kill all blacks' and 'all blacks are shit'. Here Ah Kee turns a mirror back onto the audience, confronting them with the hateful words of their own people. Once again, as discussed earlier, there is no space to dodge responsibility.

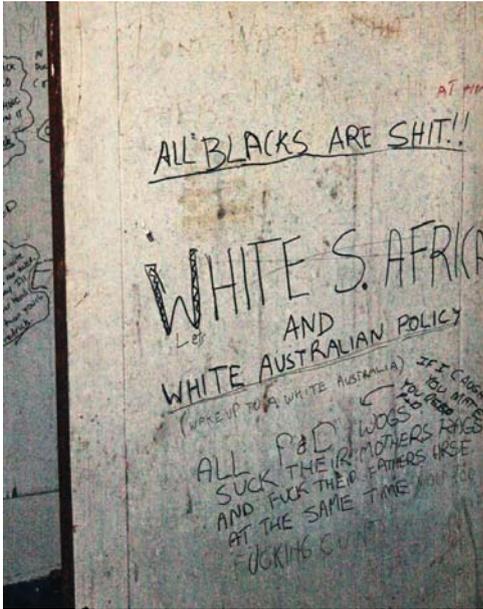


Fig 7.



Fig 8.

### **Text works: the ‘saying’ and the ‘said’**

Like the *Born in This Skin* installation, Vernon Ah Kee uses text written onto the walls of the exhibition space as a means of communicating with his audience. The text is printed on an adhesive surface so it can be directly applied to the walls of the gallery space. (see fig 9.) Instead of the racist voices of the white majority that was voiced in *Born in this Skin* and reflected back onto the white audience, Ah Kee’s text work is often the voice of the Indigenous Australian Other speaking directly to a white audience. The message, however, is complicated in its delivery. Ah Kee removes the spacing between the words creating run on words that blend together and often require a decrypting process to extract their meaning. This decryption process places a demand on the audience to pay a closer attention to what has been written and apply to it a critical consideration. In talking about Ah Kee’s 2005 text work *acceptance* (Ah Kee uses a lower case tile), Robert Leonard states that he, “runs words and lines together, avoiding conventions of leading and kerning, making his words harder to read. Sometimes you need to double check that you have read them correctly. For example, it’s easy to mistake ‘my duty is to persecute error’ for ‘my duty is to persecute terror’ (Ah Kee 2009, p.7)”. (see fig 10.) It is ambiguity of meaning that one first encounters when viewing the work. The voice of the artist precedes the message. By that I mean, the audience is confronted by words they do not understand, they recognise the letters but the meaning is obscured. In the passage of time the word arrives at the viewer, we hear the voice, then after a delay meaning appears. I argue that this temporal disconnect between word and meaning in Ah Kee’s text pieces can be related to Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the ‘saying’ and the ‘said’ as discussed previously in Chapter Two.

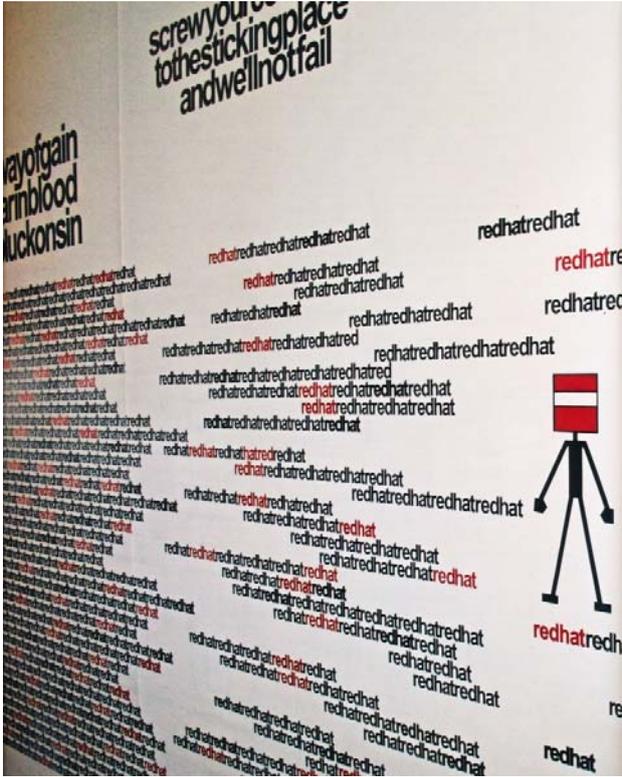


Fig 9.

my duty  
is to persecute error  
your duty is to accept  
truth

Fig 10.

As discussed in Chapter Two, language has a privileged position in Levinas's notion of the 'face to face' relationship as a mode of expression that is ethical in its creation of dialogue. In Levinas's theory the 'saying' precedes the 'said', in that the face of the Other signifies itself and announces its presence, and in turn, my moral obligation towards them. Levinas states, "The responsibility for another is precisely a saying prior to anything said (Levinas 1989, p.43)". I would argue that Ah Kee's use of ambiguity, in which the word precedes the meaning, echoes Levinas's notion of the 'saying' and the 'said'. It is moral obligation and responsibility that underlines the 'face to face' relationship and it is these qualities that are expressed in the 'saying' prior to the meaning that can be attributed to the words spoken. So too with Ah Kee's text work, before a message is communicated the artist conveys his presence with the text, a statement of 'here I am'. It is this presence of the Other, through their voice as expressed through text, closing the distance between artist and viewer and bringing them together in 'proximity'.

For Levinas, the 'face' of the Other, and in this case the text of the Other, is a commanding presence. Philosopher Benjamin Hutchens states that, "Before the thematic nature of precisely *what* the self should do is commanded, the expression *that it should do something* commands the

self to respond. What one should do is a theme of language, but that one must do something is an expression of language (Hutchens 2004, p.48)". By this Hutchens means that the imperative to respond to expression (saying) precedes the content (said) of what is being asked. Ah Kee demands that the viewer listen. It is the audience's responsibility to be open up to communication, to respond, to enter into a dialogue. For without being open to dialogue and facing ones responsibility, that is to acknowledge the 'face' of the Other, communication is not possible. As discussed when talking about the *unwritten* series, Ah Kee is struggling to have a voice as an Aboriginal Australian, to have his 'face' recognised as such. Prior to any message, any content, any context, he is first being asked to be recognised. The presentation of the 'face', the voice, comes before one even knows that he is an Indigenous Australian man and the history of his people because how can one even be capable of understanding that history, or begin to fathom what it is like to be 'born in this skin', if one is not willing to acknowledge the 'face' of the Other first. Ah Kee asks not to be treated as the exotic, the stone age and the dumb. Prior to the time that any of these racist ideas can attributed to him he first announces his presence through his voice, his words, but more than words, his expression.

Philosopher Sean Hand states that, "For Levinas, however, the saying and the said, the act of expression and the thing expressed are never correlative, as noesis and noema, since in the saying there is always the trace of alterity that goes beyond anything that can be measured in terms of its thought content (Levinas 1989, p.144)". Hand uses the philosopher Edmund Husserl's distinction between the act of apprehending (noesis) and the object apprehended (noema) as a way of showing that expression (saying) is always something more than that which is expressed (said). The two never quite come together because in the 'saying' resides the 'face' of the Other that is always just out of reach. By that I mean, that the 'face' of the Other is infinitely different to the viewer, therefore, expression made by the 'face' of the Other, in this instance the words of Ah Kee, can never fully be compatible with my interpretation of what they have 'said'. It is this incompatibility that creates this temporal spacing in which 'face' of the Other lays bare and forces me to respond, even if my response is to ignore them. In this way the 'I am' precedes the 'this is what I have to say'.

The 'saying' and the 'said' of Levinas's theories is also relevant to Ah Kee's portraits in that the expressions of the subjects' 'face' creates a 'saying'. Benjamin Hutchens states that, "the Other person's approach says to me 'Here I am! You should not murder' as Levinas quotes with great satisfaction on numerous occasions. The 'Other' lays the self 'bare to the total negation of murder but forbids it through the original language of his defenceless eyes' (Hutchens 2004, p.49)". Here Hutchens reminds us that to Levinas the eyes speak, once again centring language as the primary mode of expression. Like the text work, the portraits announce 'here I am' both in the sense of the artists presence and the subject represented. The subject expresses a 'face' and the viewer is obligated to respond. The 'face' of the subject works as a proxy for the 'face' of the artist through his voice, expressed through the gestures of his drawing. The voice calls for ethical treatment, to be heard, to be allowed to exist and not murdered. This once again relates to Anthony Gardner's assertion that Ah Kee's work is about the labour between expression and erasure; the struggle between the 'I am' and murder.

The 'saying' also correlates to Gardner's earlier discussed notion of 'breathlessness' in which there is no room to avoid responsibility and can be seen when Levinas states that, "saying is a denuding, of the unqualifiable *one*, the pure *someone*, unique and chosen; that is, it is an exposedness to the Other where no slipping away is possible (Levinas 1989, p.50)". It is this unavailability of responsibility that is a hallmark of the work of Vernon Ah Kee. Whether it is through the 'saying' of the written word or the expression of the eyes, the viewer is obligated to respond to Ah Kee through the strategies he employs. The viewer is always implicated in the work, it is not 'art for art's sake' but a clear political approach to present a 'face' and create dialogue. Robert Leonard states that Ah Kee's work "transfers the onus back onto the viewer. Through what they say and how they say it, the works implicate us in their inquiry (Ah Kee 2009, p.13)." Ah Kee's work is based on dialogue, a coming 'face to face' with his audience. As I have shown, this coming 'face to face' is loaded with responsibility for the audience. Ah Kee opens us up and make us vulnerable to the Other, we bear witness and we are held accountable.

The earlier text works of Ah Kee lack the complexity of the later text pieces when engaged through the context of Levinas's 'saying' and 'said'. Works such as *If I was White* (1999/2002) are heavily reliant on the message conveyed (said) and less complex in their expression (saying)

(See Fig 11.) As Ah Kee's text works develop over time the ambiguity of the text and the need to decipher what is written, that is to say, the manner in which the 'saying' precedes the 'said', becomes a more prominent feature of the work. The earlier works, such as *If I Was White*, contain a much simpler mode of delivery that almost bypasses the 'saying' altogether and aim to make the clearest straight forward message. I argue that Ah Kee's text work matures over time and moves away from a closed meaning construction to a mode of operation that is much more open ended in its conclusions. This development of style creates more effective works that have a greater nuance and subtlety of meaning.



As has been shown in this chapter, Ah Kee's art work demands responsibility. Like Levinas's theory of 'face to face' relationships, the art work insists that the audience responds. This is an ethical association in which the artwork intercepts the audience member and forces them to bear witness. In Ah Kee's portraits we come 'face to face' with his family members and witness the injustice and power that was exerted over them through their association to the Tindale images and the colonial history of the missions on which they were taken. But we also bear witness to their resilience and the 'infinite' qualities they possess. Ah Kee creates a sense of closeness in his renderings that belie the original context from which they are appropriated. He creates ambiguity within the portraits so that they convey dualities of meanings, on one hand providing a critique of European dominance, while on the Other creating tender family portraits. Examined was the *unwritten* series, and it was argued that these images working in counterpoint to the 'infinite' qualities of the portraits, creating a representation of 'totalisation' by those Australians from a European heritage. Levinas theory of the way in which 'totalisation' makes difference the same was related to Ah Kee's assertion that Aboriginal Australian people are only recognised as people once they start to exhibit European characteristics and have white ideals placed upon them. I also discussed the text work of Ah Kee and the similarities of operation between the way in which the cryptic text and the notions of the 'saying' and the 'said' within the framework of Levinas's thought. The parallels between the art work of Vernon Ah Kee and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas have been shown to be compatible across a range of works, centring on notions of dialogue, responsibility and ethical relationships with the Other.

## Conclusion

The central premise of this dissertation is that the 'face to face' philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas can be applied to the art of Vernon Ah Kee. Levinas's arguments surrounding his theory of the 'Face to Face', which were examined in Chapter Two, force us to rethink many of the cornerstones of Western thought. He asserts the impossibility of objectivity when dealing with Other people and that we are primarily ethical beings, with this ethics preceding any notion of being. For Levinas, ethics is first philosophy (Levinas 1969, p.46). The Other confronts being and challenges our sole possession of the world; we are not alone. It is through this encounter with the Other that we come 'face to face' to that which is not us, that which is beyond our control, beyond our ego. The Other constantly surprises us; we cannot gauge what their responses will be to our presence and our words in dialogue. Through this engagement, we close distance, invoking what Levinas refers to as 'proximity' (Levinas 1981, p.138). This closeness captivates us and forces a response when we come 'face to face', even if that response is to ignore the Other; we are locked into a relationship. That relationship is loaded with obligation and responsibility. The Other beckons to us and their eyes speak. Their 'face' reveals their 'infinity', always something more than I can attribute qualities to.

Levinas's thought centres around a few main concepts. For Levinas, the Other is beyond my capacity to full grasp and therefore irreducible to comprehension (Levinas 1969, p.43). He defines this quality as 'infinity'. When we come 'face to face' with another person in an ethical manner, we acknowledge these immeasurable qualities. The act of suppressing and denying the infinite qualities of the Other, through such actions as characterising and stereotyping, is categorised by Levinas as an act of 'totality', and as such, a form of violence. In 'totalising' the Other, we claim a position of power over them, creating mental constructs to replace that which is 'infinitely' Other. For Levinas, the process of 'totality' strips the alterity from the Other and places them in the context of one of the many that I have ideas about, not different but made same through an act of possession and subsumption. He sees this as a primal disrespect that allows people to be interchangeable, the basis upon which exploitation becomes possible (Levinas 1969, p.298). When one 'totalises' they fail to acknowledge the 'face' of the Other. I have argued that this creates a 'facelessness', expanding on Levinas's notion that when we

'totalise' we are no longer in a 'face to face' relationship, we imagine ourselves in a privileged position outside of the interaction. The failure to recognise the 'face' of the Other allows any action permissible, even murder.

Levinas's antipathy towards art and the problems regarding the application of his thought to works of art was discussed in Chapter Three. Robert Eaglestone's *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (1997), focuses on the possibility of applying Levinas's theories to the act of critical discourse was discussed. Eaglestone examined the literary status of Levinas's own writings, noting their poetic style, and argues that their art-like qualities opens the door for other art forms to be viewed in relationship to his theories. I assert that a certain kind of art, that with criticality at its core, could be examined in the context of Levinas's thought. I introduced a term 'critical image' as a way of defining artworks that interrupt dialogues and interject into theoretical or social debates. I further contend that these 'critical images' operated like philosophy in that challenge conventional thought and extend beyond Levinas's conception of art as purely mimetic.

I argued that the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee exhibits the characteristics of the 'critical image' in that he challenged historical and contemporary ideas about Aboriginal Australians by interjecting into critical debates concerning the status of Indigenous Australians and their treatment under colonial rule.. Within Chapter Four I outlined the colonial context of Ah Kee's work and asked the question, if Ah Kee's art works are considered 'critical images' what are they critical of? With Ah Kee's appropriation of the photographs of anthropologist Norman Tindale in his portraits as a starting point, I examined in Chapter Four, colonial photography and anthropology's role in the colonisation of Indigenous Australians. It was Tindale's assertion that Indigenous Australians were dying out as a race, an example of 'Dying Race' theories that were popular at the time. He advocated both social and biological absorptionist policies of the 'half caste' population that he concluded was happening 'naturally' with no threat of averting back to 'negative' Aboriginal characteristics (Tindale 1941, p.67). Anne Maxwell's, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the Native and the Making of European Identities* (1999), was introduced, in particular her assertion that a norm/deviance model was in place in Australia from the time of colonization/invasion. Maxwell claims that those from a

European heritage were considered the norm and Indigenous Australians the antithesis of that standard. Thus, Aboriginal features such as dark skin and broad noses became associated with degeneracy and inferiority (Maxwell 1999, p.133).

Chapter Five demonstrated how Ah Kee's art challenges the notion that Aboriginal Australians are inferior to their European heritage counterparts. Representing the Australian Indigenous subject in a way that highlights their agency and complexities, he defies what he sees as negative representations of his family. The portraits exhibit a sense of closeness that evoke Emmanuel Levinas's notion of 'proximity'. The art audience comes 'face to face' with the Indigenous Australian subject. Anthony Gardner (2009) confirms this closeness when he speaks of Ah Kee's work in terms of 'breathlessness' in which no room is allowed for the audience to engage with the subject in an 'arms length' fashion that has characterised race relations in Australia (Ah Kee 2009, p.57). I argued that this removal of distance and of its relationship to Levinas's notion of 'proximity' could be examined in terms of Levinas's notion of responsibility. Ah Kee confirms that he has a great sense of responsibility towards his family and sees his art making practice not in the context of an individual but in the context of being part of a large Australian Aboriginal family (Transforming Tindale: In Conversation with Michael Aird, Vernon Ah Kee and Louise Denoon 2012).

Ah Kee bears witness to the colonial control exerted over his family and reminds his audience of the presence of this colonial power through the inclusion of the anthropological end notes that protrude into the frame of his portraits. He includes these end notes into the contemporary portraits of his children who were not photographed by Tindale, asserting that colonial control continues into the present. The notion of responsibility is extended beyond Ah Kee and to his audience in that it appeals to Levinas's notion of justice in which once we are obligated to the Other we are obligated to *all* Others. Through Ah Kee's bearing witness the art audience also becomes witnesses. I argue that Ah Kee is as much an activist as an artist, calling into question the viewer's position on race relations in Australia in regards to its original inhabitants. His work is multilayered, speaking to different audiences simultaneously. To an Australian Aboriginal audience it speaks of family and a shared colonial history, while to an audience of a European Australian heritage it confronts racist historical stereotypes and beliefs that still may be held.

Ah Kee's *unwritten* series (2008) was discussed as an antithesis to the 'infinite' qualities of the subject expressed in the portraits. Robert Leonard (2009) described the works as being a struggle between birth and death, while Anthony Gardner forwarded a similar reading in that he recognized a dichotomy between existence and erasure (Ah Kee 2009, p.9 and 56) . I extended these two readings to Levinas's notion of 'infinity' and 'totality', arguing that the *unwritten* series could be read within the context of Levinas's diametrically opposed modes of interaction with the Other. The *unwritten* series can be read as an examination of the idea of 'totality' in that it aligns with Ah Kee's assertion that Australian Aboriginal people are only recognized as human as they begin to display the characteristics of European Australians and have white ideals placed upon them (Ah Kee 2009, p.9). This contention by Ah Kee can be seen to be aligned with Levinas's notion that when we 'totalise' the Other they transfer from being different to the same in that they are subsumed (Levinas 1969, p.289).

While Ah Kee's early text works submit to the 'said' at the expense of a loss of 'saying', it was argued that the mature text works lend themselves to an engagement with Levinas's idea of the relationship between the 'saying' and the 'said'. Due to the cryptic nature of his text works there was found to be a delay between the delivery of the text and the message that was conveyed. This delay between speech and message was found to be compatible with Levinas's idea that the 'saying', meaning the expression, precedes the message delivered in the 'said'. For Levinas the 'saying' announces the presence of the Other, signifying their 'proximity'; it is the 'here I am'. The decryption process forces the audience into a mode of criticality in which they pay closer attention to what is being 'said'. The 'saying' presents the 'face'; and with it, our ethical obligation to respond. Like Anthony Gardner's notion of 'breathlessness' the presence of the Other allows no space to avoid responsibility. Levinas argues that the presence of the Other, as asserted through the 'saying', persecutes us and does not allow us to take a distant, separated relation in which we can evade our obligation (Levinas 1981, p.112).

It has been argued that Levinas's theory of the 'face to face' could be applied to the art work of Vernon Ah Kee. I further contended that the notion of responsibility underlines the notion of the 'face to face' as well as the art practice of Ah Kee. As 'critical images', Ah Kee's work engages the audience and questions the attitudes they have about Indigenous Australians and the

treatment they have received under colonial rule. Levinas's notions of obligation, 'proximity', the 'saying' and the 'said' can all be applied to the artwork of Ah Kee. Levinas's concepts of 'infinity' and 'totality' are useful tools in understanding the art work of Vernon Ah Kee, but even more importantly they challenge a colonial mentality that reduces the Other to an easily subsumed form by emphasising the 'infinite' qualities of the Other and confronting stereotypes that 'totalise' and limit the Indigenous Australian subject. Levinas's theories bring a new light to the work of Ah Kee in that they provide an ethical foundation from which to not only view the artwork, or write about Ah Kee, but to interact with Indigenous Australian people more generally. This ethical underpinning challenges Western scientific and anthropological notions that we can know the Other through the collection of data, when according to Levinas the Other is irreducible to comprehension (Critchley and Bernasconi 2002, p.11). In their very alterity, this study concludes that the Other confronts us, what we think and who we are.

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## Appendix A

### Relationship Between Practical and Theoretical Research

This appendix will address the relationship between the theoretical research of this thesis and the practical studio research. The studio research component comprises a body of art works that consists of sand paintings, photographs and a video work. The work will be discussed in relationship to the art of Vernon Ah Kee as well as its connection to the ‘face to face’ theories of Emmanuel Levinas. I come from a Native American heritage, being a part of the Dine people (also known as the Navajo or Navaho). My heritage is a hybrid of Native American, Mexican and European Australian. This hybridity informs my art practice as I explore notions of identity that cross cultural traditions and art styles.

I examine the art of Vernon Ah Kee in this thesis because I recognise similar subject matter and methodologies in my own approach to art making. There is a common ground in that we use the tactic of appropriating colonial imagery from anthropological sources in the creation of portraits of our respective peoples. Like Ah Kee’s use of appropriation, I reclaim these images of my people and transform them, in a distinct act of political purpose. I create ‘critical images’ that reflect upon the colonial history of my people and the role of anthropology and photography as tools of colonial control and power. There is a parallel history of colonialism between North America and Australia that is reflected in a commonality of colonial images produced in these countries. I am not trying to suggest that the colonial histories of North America and Australia are the same, the histories are markedly different, but there is a degree of overlap such as the prevalence of ‘Dying Race’ theories as a defining ideology that influenced the images produced of Indigenous peoples by those in colonial power. The histories of race relations in North

America and Australia are distinct from each other, but the practice of documenting the Indigenous peoples spans both countries and the images produced share many common techniques and styles for their representational conventions.

I explore the fascination of collecting images of Indigenous peoples by the scientific and anthropological communities of the late nineteenth and twentieth century in my art work *Anthropological Pokemon: Gotta Catch Em All* (2013)(See Fig. 12). Taking on the name Pokemon of a popular children's trading card game, this series explores the impulse to collect, trade and possess images emphasised by the Pokemon catchphrase, 'Gotta Catch Em All'. A comparison between the procedure of the children's game and the collection practices of institutions devoted to the housing of colonial images, such as libraries and museums, is made. The impulse to collect is heightened, in both the Pokemon card game and the museum collection, by the rarity of the card or image, suggesting that the more 'exotic' the people the more collectible they become. Also present in this artwork is the drive to 'totalise' the individuals by reducing their 'infinite' qualities through the substitution of 'face' for data. By that I mean, that alterity is stripped through the action of obtaining scientific data, substituting Levinas's notion of the 'face' for scientific record exemplified in the photographic image. This practice relates to Johannes Fabian's notion of 'visualism', the process of which the ability to visualise someone becomes synonymous with understanding them, that was discussed in Chapter Four (Fabian 1983, p.106). The notion of the importance of data is accentuated by the Pokemon cards that contain reference details, in numeric rankings, to the powers and weaknesses of each creature that is caught. Each creature is also supplied with a reference number, drawing comparison with

Ah Kee's inclusion of anthropological end notes in the frame of his portrait drawings that have a reference number for each subject in the original photographs.



Fig.12.

The methodology of appropriating colonial imagery is also implemented in the sand paintings *Little White Lies 1* and *Little White Lies 2* (2012) (See Figs. 13 and 14.) These art works are appropriated from the colonial photographs of Edward Curtis, an American photographer of European heritage. Curtis compiled a twenty volume series consisting of 1500 photographs titled

*The North American Indian* between the 1900 and 1930 (Youngblood 2009, p.6). (See Fig. 15.)

Curtis ascribed to the ideology of 'Dying Race' theories, stating in 1898 that,

You and I know, and of course everybody does who thinks of it, the Indians of North America are vanishing. They've crumbled from their pride and power into pitifully small numbers, painful poverty and sorry weakness. There won't be anything left of them in a few generations and it's a tragedy- a national tragedy (Youngblood 2009, p.6)

This statement by Curtis is strikingly similar to the assertion by Norman Tindale that was discussed in Chapter Four that, "the aborigines of South Australia are a dying remnant (Tindale 1941, p.67)". Curtis held the belief that he was documenting the last of a people. Through my appropriation of these images I reclaim my ancestors and demonstrate that we have survived. Not only have we survived but we have been indelibly changed through the colonial experience. Curtis, like Tindale, takes a taxidermical approach to Indigenous cultures treating them as if they only exist in the past, as dead cultures. The underlying connotation is that Indigenous cultures are static and don't have the right to adapt and grow in the same way as their European counterparts are permitted. Hybridity is viewed as a losing of culture instead of expanding and seems to confirm Vernon Ah Kee's assertion, that was discussed in Chapter Five, that Indigenous Australian are often viewed as relics of the 'stone age' as opposed to contemporary beings with contemporary lives (Ah Kee 2009, p.8). Wayne Youngblood argues that Curtis would often "manipulate images and settings to better idealize and communicate his idea of a 'vanishing race'. He also is known to have occasionally used the same garments on members of different tribes, as well as using a few props repeatedly (Youngblood 2009, p. 22)". This demonstrates that Curtis was more concerned with representing an ideal that was placed upon

Native American cultures rather than an accurate representation of their lived culture. This reflects Levinas's notion that through the 'totalising' process, that which is different, is made same. By that I mean, instead of acknowledging the alterity of the subject and photographing them in their lived experience, Curtis made them the 'same' by subsuming their alterity to fit a prescribed notion of what Native Americans should be, and look like, in the eyes of a European photographer and audience.



Fig.13.



Fig.14.

Through reinterpreting Curtis's images in the form of sand paintings I expand traditional cultural practice in light of the colonial experience. I argue that the impact of colonial history has become a part of Native American contemporary culture and identity. Native American culture is represented as a living entity, anchored in the present. I adapt a traditional art form to create 'critical' images that negotiate both contemporary and historical issues. Sand painting is used by the Dine in sacred ceremonies (See Fig. 16.) I adjust the process of sand painting to create contemporary art works that, while referring to traditional practice, are firmly placed in the contexts of post modern art practice.

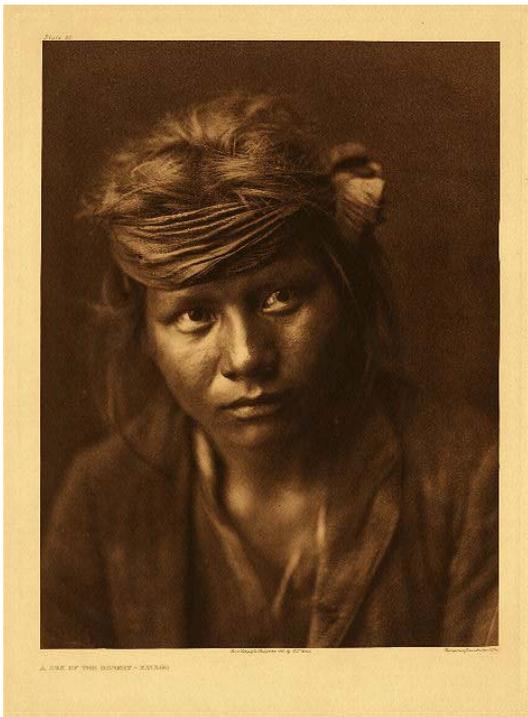


Fig.15.

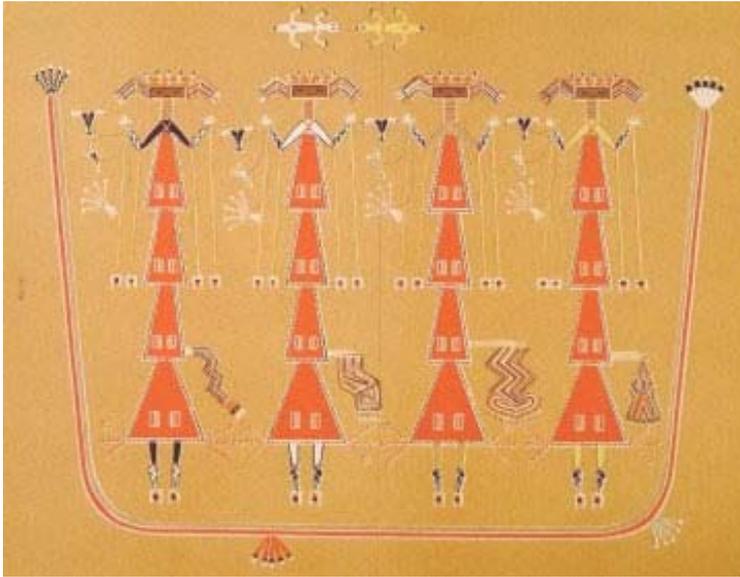


Fig. 16.

The process that is used to create the sand paintings is non traditional in its approach. Traditional sand painting is produced within the context of sacred ceremonies, however, contemporary practice has expanded the tradition into the fine art context. Traditionally the sand painting is swept up and scattered at the end of the ceremony, but contemporary fine art practitioners adhere the sand to boards with adhesive. My art work is non traditional in both technique and subject matter. I take the colonial image into the photo editing program Photoshop and pixilate the image to create an image that is made up on a series of discrete squares. I then use the Photoshop program to assert the value of each square in a tonal range between zero and one hundred. The tonal value of each square is then transcribed onto graph paper (See Fig. 17.) At this stage the image is in the represented stage of pure numeric form, this is conceptually important as it reflects the notion of data. From this stage I mix black and white sand to obtain the tones represented by their numerical form. For example, the tone of 60 in numeric form is achieved by

mixing 60 scoops of black sand mixed with 40 scoops of white sand, in this way 100 separate tones are achieved. The graph with the numerical values is then transferred to a board that supports the sand painting. Using wood glue, the sand is then affixed to the surface of the board with each numeric representation corresponding to its equal tonal range of mixed sand (See Fig. 18.)

50	52	50	65	80	71	84	91	88	83	71	39	22	60
50	60	71	82	63	11	70	82	82	67	51	44	7	35
56	38	57	49	22	0	8	39	68	53	25	31	17	13
50	23	19	15	25	33	53	75	65	6	16	24	11	0
55	31	11	3	1	7	31	39	5	1	22	22	9	0
58	49	25	3	0	0	7	0	0	9	31	26	11	0
4	61	36	12	0	5	6	2	9	15	39	34	4	0
1	66	45	30	19	17	6	8	32	47	49	36	6	0
4	73	55	45	31	19	17	28	48	61	42	33	34	24
4	82	64	53	50	34	30	42	56	60	29	64	76	69
3	84	74	60	60	50	43	53	57	35	0	21	63	60
32	82	80	65	66	58	55	62	56	10	0	0	13	23
32	79	80	76	65	66	66	64	50	22	20	18	19	16
19	76	79	82	71	65	68	67	53	43	40	38	47	68
4	73	74	83	81	65	66	67	65	63	74	78	81	66

Fig.17.

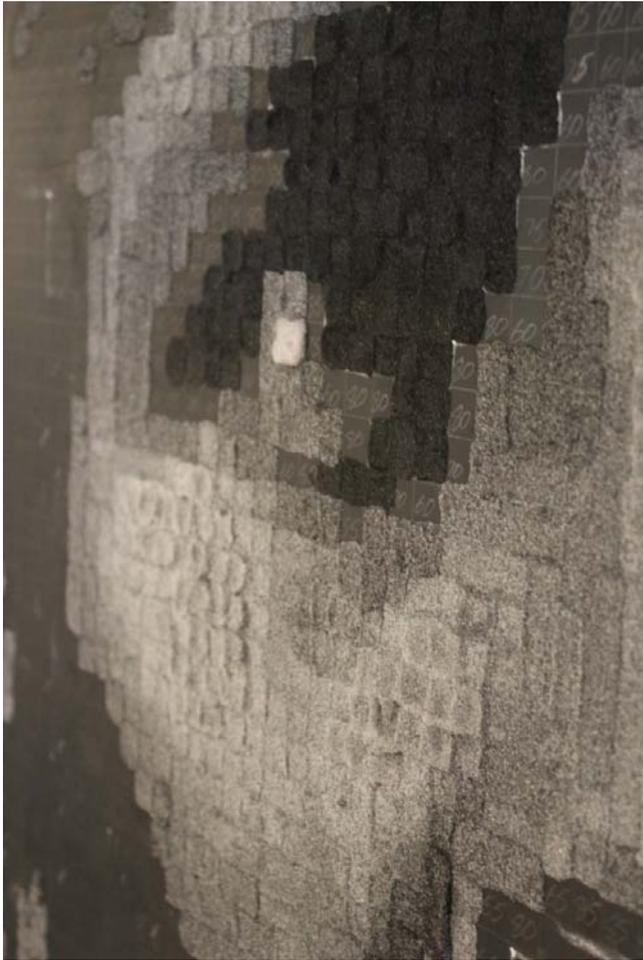


Fig.18.

From a distance the images appear to be photographic, but as one gets closer to the image the figure starts to break down into its pixelated planes of sand. This breakdown of the image is of great conceptual importance to the work as it references Levinas's notion of 'proximity'. From a distance the image makes 'sense' and for me this signifies the act of 'totalisation' in that stereotypes can seem logical conclusions from a distance, such as the assumption that Indigenous races are 'dying out'. However, as one moves closer to the Other these ideas that we have about Indigenous people are replaced with something 'infinitely' more complex, such as the individual

tones and patterns of the sand grains. As the viewer navigates their way around the space in this art work it becomes a metaphor for Levinas's notion of 'proximity'. The closer we are to the Other, the ideas that we have about the Other breakdown; the 'said' breaks down into the 'saying' (See Fig. 19.). The complexity of the sand surface becomes a 'saying' between the artist and the audience in a similar fashion to the way in which Ah Kee's text works were discussed in Chapter Five. The texture of the sand signifies the texture of the skin, and in turn signifies the 'face'. Our contact with the sand paintings of the *Little White Lies* series becomes a metaphor for our ethical interaction with the Other.

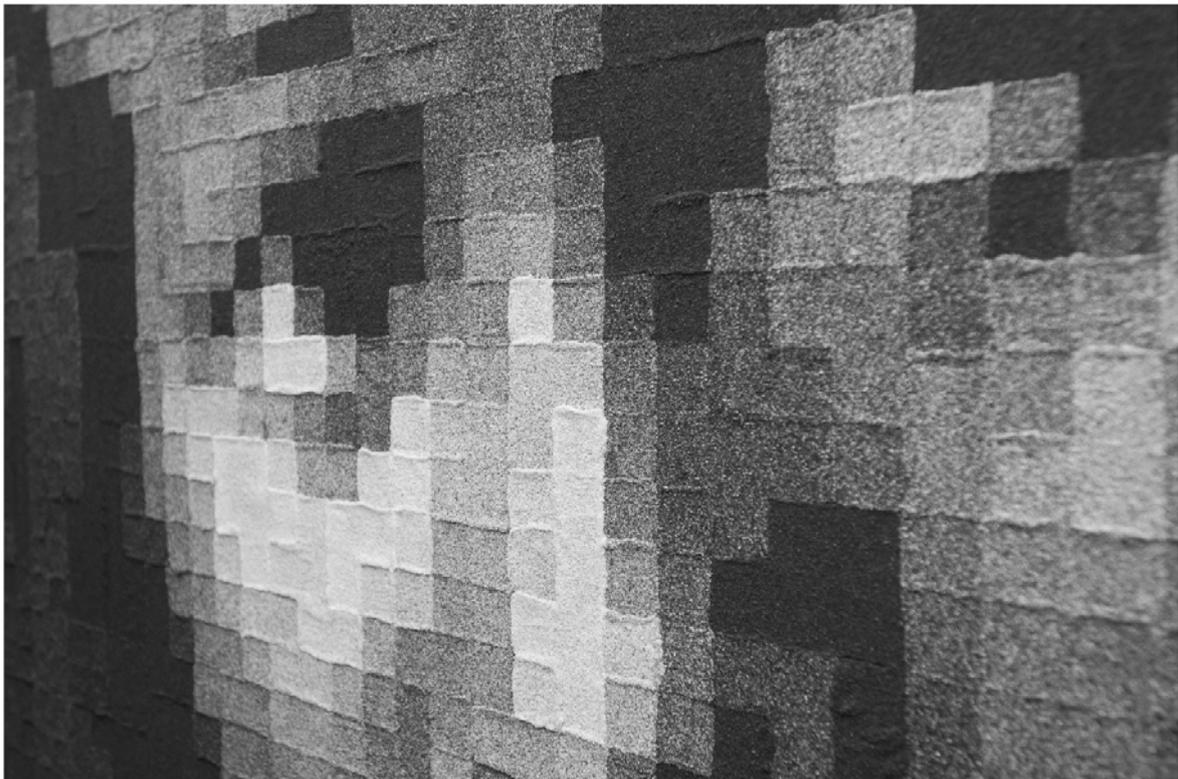


Fig. 19.

The other works that utilises this sand painting technique are *Mexican Blanket: Caste 1* and *2*. (2013)(See Figs. 20 and 21.) The subject matter of these works is the hybrid nature of my cultural heritage and the impact that having a cross cultural ethnic background has on identity. In this work I argue that each distinct cultural influence mixes in a way that does not dilute their source but creates new and interesting combinations; extending a sense of 'infinity' in which culture (and the individual) is ever expanding. This is not a 'melting pot' methodology of cultural mixing, in which the separate heritages get reduced to a 'sameness', but each culture influencing an original and personal blend. This notion of cultural heritage and identity is markedly different to the ideology of Norman Tindale, as discussed in Chapter Four. Tindale forwarded the idea of the Indigenous culture being absorbed by the dominant European heritage ethnicity (McGregor 1997, p.160). I argue that the influence of all cultures in ones heritage can be of impact to ones sense of self. In the *Mexican Blanket: Caste* sand paintings I represent my diverse cultural heritage through the inclusion of distinctly different influences including; traditional Mexican blanket designs that represent my Mexican heritage and the art form of sand painting that represents my Native American background. My European heritage is signified by the pixilated works resembling the styling of abstract field painting works in the tradition of Modern Art. The sand paintings, when viewed close up to reveal their tone and texture, could be viewed in terms of the traditions of painters such as Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. These various styles and influence come together in a way that is not subsumed by any particular culture but a mixture that celebrates diversity and an equilibrium that reflects my sense of 'infinite' identity. This is not a form of 'Third Space' but an ever extending notion of spaces and identity.



Fig.20.

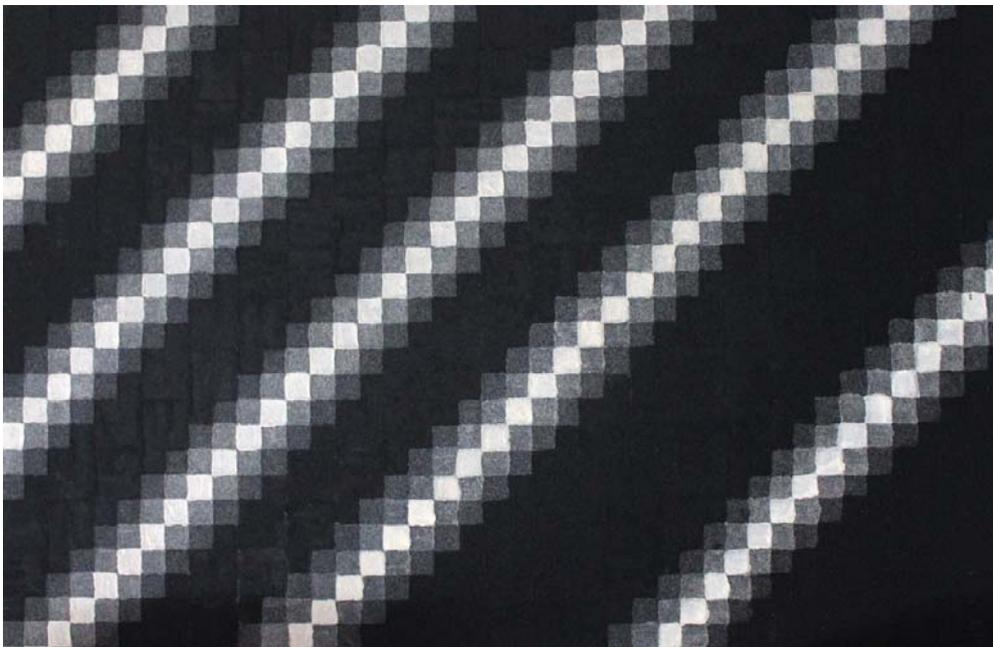


Fig. 21.

Two of my photographic series represent children's 'Cowboy and Indians' toys, *One Little, Two Little* (2014) and *Kill, Kill, Kill* (2016) (See Figs. 22. and 23.) *One Little, Two Little* explores notion of 'totality' in which the subject of the Native American is reduced to a basic stereotypical representation of an 'Indian'. These figures are represented in a light that accentuates their object-like qualities, exploring Levinas's notion that the Other is irreducible to objective knowledge in an ethical 'face to face' relationship that acknowledges the 'infinite' qualities of the Other (Levinas 1969, p.68.) This is an act of objectification, in which the 'infinite' qualities of a specific Native American subject is replaced with a generic substitution that has been reduced to a 'totalised', static state. These figures are not Levinas's Other, a being in it 'infinite' qualities, but the Other that has been condensed into an opposition. By that I mean, the 'Other' stands as an opponent to the social and ethnic norm of the (white) cowboy. Children use these toys and, in the context of their imaginative actions, kill that which is Other. *Kill, Kill, Kill* explores this notion of opposition with 'Cowboy and Indian' figures set up against each other in a 'war game'. This art work examines the violent history of colonial struggle in which Native Americans were massacred, such as the, "Wounded Kee Massacre in 1890, when somewhere between 150 and 300 mostly unarmed men women and children were killed by American soldiers (Youngblood 2009, p.13)". The children's game normalises these conflicts in that it is ingrained at an early age to view the Indigenous Other as an enemy with which you are in conflict.



Fig. 22.



Fig. 23.



Fig. 24.

The video *Face to Face* also uses ‘Cowboy and Indian’ figures in its imagery (See Fig. 24.). In this video the subject of ‘totality’ is explored through a series of negations such as, ‘I am not a savage, I am not noble, I am not ignoble, I am not exotic...’ This series of statements challenge the ‘totalising’ frameworks of conceptual labels and stereotypes of historic and contemporary racist views of the Native American Other. After this series of statements the voiceover announces, ‘I am standing before you filled with my own agency. I will always be more than any idea you can ever have about me. The only thing you can do is stand before me, in dialogue, face to face’. Within this art work I examine what constitutes an ethical relationship according to Levinas’s theory of the ‘face to face’. The series of negations challenge many of the common myths about Indigenous Americans. What is suggested to replace this unequal relationship is

Levinas's notion of the ethical encounter in which one must release conceptual frameworks, stereotypes and held beliefs about the Indigenous Other and accept their 'infinite' nature if you are to come 'face to face'.

The art work component of this research is influenced by Vernon Ah Kee's practice and utilises some similar strategies, such as the appropriation of colonial photographs, to create 'critical images'. These 'critical images' are designed to create dialogue, centred around critiques of Western discourse, particularly in the context of colonial representations. Notions of ethics and justice are central to my practice, tied to both the work of Ah Kee and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. My art work aims to challenge the viewer, and by coming 'face to face' with the audience, create a dialogue that widens their understanding of Native American people, in an effort to understand and break free of representations of the past. I hope to impart on the viewer a sense that Indigenous cultures are living, growing and changing entities, not 'totalised' historical stereotypes but 'infinite' in their subtlety, variety and complexity.