

10 Reading indigeneity without race

Color, representation and uncertainty in photographic evidence

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Indigenous perspectives are obscured in or absent from the colonial archives, reflecting both attitudes to indigenous peoples and the limited ability of subjugated peoples to represent themselves. Recovering Indigenous pasts from such written records is therefore challenging and often relies on dispersed and fragmentary sources. Photographic images are increasingly recognized as a complementary and alternative source of information that can provide insights into the otherwise unknown or unrecorded lives and circumstances of indigenous people. However, the ways in which indigenous people are read into these historic images, especially in settler societies such as Australia, is largely dependent on the recognition of physical differences. In other words, the recognition of indigenous people in imagery often depends on observations of skin color and physiognomy and continues a visual dichotomy of “Us” and “Them”.

The problems and social consequences of racial classification based on physical attributes, especially skin color, are well known. However, in the context of reading the past through imagery, we often rely on the identification of physical characteristics to identify indigenous subjects. This raises issues for those who might be considered to be indigenous because individuals’ cultural identities are often unrelated to, and can be misrepresented by, skin color. Thus, the reliance on skin color to determine indigeneity has implications for the representations and recognition of indigenous peoples today and in the future.

Using images from early Great Barrier Reef scientific and holiday expeditions, I illustrate some of the challenges of reading Australian Aboriginal¹ identities in photographs, including where Aboriginal people have (or may have) been used to represent an Other that is not necessarily consistent with their own self-identity.

Reading indigenous history through photographs

Photographs have proven to be a very powerful medium for recovering Indigenous histories obscured, neglected and deliberately omitted from

written historical records. While simplistic readings of photographs can perpetuate existing stereotypes or lead to misinterpretation, careful analysis can reveal understandings of Indigenous experiences unavailable through other sources. These sometimes radical reinterpretations can return status to the disempowered, become a site of remembering and create new narratives about the past.

The power and unique insight offered by photographs is underpinned by the persistent perception that photographs capture a form of external reality (despite the growing ease with which digital images can be manipulated). This perception that photographs have the capacity to provide impartial evidence or support irrefutable fact makes them an attractive source of historical information. Photographs are especially useful where there is an absence of written records for particular events, people or places. Photographs that capture images of the marginalized and disempowered have thus become an invaluable heritage resource. They are valuable to researchers because of their ability to provide new evidence of events, places and people, and can illustrate and confirm what is already known from other sources. Moreover, photographs are able to connect communities to the past, to family and to their sense of identity (e.g. Blaikie 2001). This comes in part from the strong notion of contact evoked by photographs: there remains a tangible connection between the photographic subject and the photographic image (cf. Sontag 1973; Taussig 1993: 200–1).

The authoritative nature of photography and its role as an agent of colonialism, in particular its tendency to produce essentialized representations of the Other, have been widely critiqued. Photographic assemblages of different human groups formed part of a wider colonial scientific practice of collecting. Collecting photographs of indigenous “types”, along with artifacts, artworks and human remains, can be likened to the collecting of animal and plant species, in which specimens were ordered into an evolutionary framework. In the case of cultures, collecting focused on those societies that were seen as vestiges of earlier human development (cf. Tylor 1871) and who were also thought to be doomed to extinction. Photographs formed an important part of these collecting practices (Blaikie 2001; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Smith 2003), and many of the images were staged to portray indigenous people in particular adopted poses and cultural objects that signified European understandings of essentialized cultures (e.g. Albers and James 1983). Aboriginal people were thus photographed in these highly staged ways, with dress, artifacts and backdrop carefully composed to portray Aboriginal people as an essentialized group.

Nicolas Peterson (2005) argues that photographs can serve as both illustration and evidence of colonial attitudes. He suggests that when photographs are used to illustrate something, they function to support a pre-existing attitude or narrative, but when an image is used as evidence, it validates the nature of something. Images can act as illustration and evidence simultaneously, and may oscillate between these roles in different

temporal contexts. Thus, Peterson argues that photographs that were once used to illustrate a particular narrative in a colonial context can be reread in the present as evidence of something else (Peterson 2005: 11). Peterson's analysis of family represented in photographs of Aboriginal people is one such study. He shows how photographs of Aboriginal people circulated widely through postcards drew not on the similarities of life-long partnerships between men and women as married couples but on the unsettling and destabilizing notion of polygyny and its association with primitiveness. In other words, the original context served to highlight the otherness of Aboriginal people, but a reanalysis of the images can reveal the similarity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family structures. However, while Blaikie (2001) suggests that photographs of family groups in the Scottish Islands have been used to support the idea that island life was characterized by stable communities, they have also ignored the knowledge that some photographic subjects have not always remained on the islands, that some returned only temporarily and that others are absent altogether.

While Blaikie (2001: 363) cautions that the capacity of photographs to be reinterpreted makes them particularly vulnerable to invention and fabrication, it is this same capacity for reinterpretation that has made them a powerful and empowering source in Indigenous heritage (e.g. Conor and Lydon 2011; Kleinert 2006; Lydon 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013; Macdonald 2003; Peterson 2005; Pinney and Peterson 2003). Peterson (2005: 24) suggests that the popular conception that photographs capture the world as it is – that they do not transform objects but merely present them to us – ignores the social and political circumstances surrounding the creation of images. The challenge for the researcher is thus to adopt an openly reflexive position that acknowledges that both history and photography are produced in context and are thus inherently “provisional and negotiable” (Blaikie 2001: 363). In other words, our analyses should be capable of recognizing and deconstructing invented traditions and staged authenticity, but also recognize coexistent and contradictory Indigenous readings. Rather than being authoritative, photography is thus understood as being flexible and open to interpretation. This leads to the possibility of multiple and varied readings and rereadings of historical photographs (Kleinert 2006: 70).

Despite the inherent weaknesses of the photographic record, skillful scholarship demonstrates the many nuanced ways of (re)reading historic photographs that can empower those who have been marginalized from dominant and official histories. This is important for heritage studies, which increasingly turns to such sources to support, refute or negotiate new understandings of the past. There is a growing and substantial body of research in Australia that seeks to reinterpret, recontextualize and repatriate photographs of Australian Aboriginal people (e.g. Conor and Lydon 2011; Kleinert 2006; Lydon 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013; Macdonald 2003; Peterson 2005; Pinney and Peterson 2003). Scholars such as Lydon, Peterson, Smith and Kleinert have analyzed images to reveal the dynamics of

historical encounters between Europeans and Australian Aboriginal people, the circumstances of photographic production, the context of receiving and reading photographs, and the active participation of Indigenous subjects in the creation of images. Even though photographs created in the colonial era were rarely created for the purpose of empowering Aboriginal people, recent analyses of these images have the potential to make a valuable contribution to Aboriginal history and heritage (Lydon 2013) and have become powerful objects and historical sources in the formulation of self-identity in the present. Many photographs of Aboriginal people are used in this way to read both colonial attitudes and Aboriginal resistance to colonial subjugation. Jane Lydon (2013) demonstrates how archival photographs amassed during Australia's colonial era gain new meaning in the present for Aboriginal people. She suggests that historical images can be reinterpreted and recontextualized to facilitate a wider understanding of Aboriginal experience among non-Aboriginal people.

A particularly potent aspect of research into historical photographs is the (re)connection it fosters between the photographic subject and kinship networks. Blaikie's study of photographic representations of people from the Scottish Islands show how photographic subjects are used in the present as a means of "reckoning of kin" (Blaikie 2001: 354). Similarly, photographs of ancestors, family groups and individuals are important to present-day extended Aboriginal kinship networks. Photographs offer people a connectedness with their past and identity. A number of studies suggest that historical, archival and contemporary images play a central role in Aboriginal constructions of family and self today (Bradley et al. 2014; Kleinert 2006; Lydon 2013; Macdonald 2003; Smith 2003, 2008). Smith, for example, argues that images are themselves an extension of Aboriginal personhood. Historic images, as much as images of the living, are drawn into a way of understanding the Aboriginal self that is plural and consistent with distributed personhood (Smith 2003: 2008). Historic photographs can thus strengthen continuity between past and present as an affirmation of Aboriginal identity. Lydon (2013) argues persuasively that historic images play an important role in Indigenous heritage, where images are used to reconstruct family history, document culture and express connections to place. Photographs are thus a significant heritage resource for relatives and descendants of Aboriginal photographic subjects (Aird 2003; Bradley et al. 2014; Lydon 2013).

The rereading of historical images in the present can therefore produce and maintain symbolic relationships and material evidence of the past. They enable Aboriginal people to express and maintain connections with identity and family, and can provide evidence of these relationships in a form understood by legal and administrative systems, where Aboriginal people are required by the state to demonstrate their rights to land and heritage. And importantly, photographs enable Aboriginal people to negotiate their own sociality in time and space (Bradley et al. 2014; Macdonald 2003; Smith

2003, 2008). Photographs have helped to reunite fractured families and heal a sense of self for individuals removed from their families under government policies of segregation and assimilation (Macdonald 2003; Peterson 2005: 11; Smith 2003: 9, 11).

Skin color as a marker of indigeneity

These nuanced and insightful reinterpretations of historic photographs are thus invaluable to Indigenous people. However, the initial analysis often relies on outmoded understandings of cultural identity. Most of the studies already mentioned are based on close collaborations with descendants and extended family and community members of photographic subjects, and it is through oral history and discussion about photographs that the identity of individual subjects can be made, confirmed or corrected (Blaikie 2001; Bradley et al. 2014). It is only through this process that we can reliably identify Aboriginal subjects and reposition them in time and space, and ultimately reinstate them in kinship networks. Where images are sourced from personal family collections and there is a strong uninterrupted connection with the photographic subject, information and connection are most reliably maintained. However, such context is not always available. The poverty and displacement of Aboriginal people throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has not always been conducive to the maintenance of historic photographs within families. More importantly, the earliest photographs were, on the whole, not created by or for Aboriginal people, but rather were formed as colonial collections that created a currency and circulation of images beyond and separated from the photographic subjects and their wider kinship groups. Specific cultural context and individual identity were largely irrelevant within such collections. Many images therefore exist in public collections or other dispersed and decontextualized archives and may have been unknown to the communities of origin.

It is for this reason that repatriation of historic photographs to Aboriginal communities of origin has become an important and emotional practice (Aird 2003; Bradley et al. 2014; Lydon 2010b; Macdonald 2003). Prior to any such repatriation, however, the Aboriginal subject matter of photographs must be determined. Photographs discovered during archival research may initially be determined as relating to Aboriginal groups on the basis of limited documentary information or family involvement. Some images are captioned to indicate that the subject is Aboriginal, and in fewer cases still individuals are named. Where captions exist, researchers may rely on the collector's identification of Aboriginal subjects, though there are several examples that indicate this information can be inaccurate (e.g. Blaikie 2001; Bradley et al. 2014). However, not all images are captioned or include biographical information. Some may have geographic information, generic titles such as "black", "native" or "aborigine". Some may have no information at all. However, researchers may nevertheless determine Aboriginal

subjects with considerable certainty because Aboriginal people are assumed to be identifiable by their physical appearance and signifying context and cultural objects. For instance, Peterson (2005) notes how group portraits are often placed within a “natural setting” or near housing that emphasizes “primitiveness” and poverty. However, it is physical characteristics, particularly skin color and physiognomy, that are most commonly assumed to be indicative of cultural identity. In his analysis of different family groups, Peterson (2005) identifies a number of individuals and families by name. Other individuals remain anonymous, and it is assumed that no family connection or individual identities had been determined at the time of publication. These individuals are nevertheless shown to be Aboriginal through the evidence of dark skin and features represented in the photograph. In one instance, the original caption is stated as “Gin and Family, Australian Blacks” (Peterson 2005: 15, Figure 10.5). Gin is a derogatory term for an Aboriginal woman, but Peterson’s own analysis of the image identifies the woman more specifically as a person of mixed descent. While he does not elaborate on this, it is assumed that he has made this judgment based on the woman’s physical appearance. There is no indication in the text that this woman is a known individual or that there is other evidence of her heritage. In the original caption, she is unambiguously categorized as Aboriginal, but Peterson’s analysis reclassifies her Aboriginal identity as someone of mixed descent.

Judgments about Aboriginality are highly contentious and are the source of significant anguish, hardship and deprivation in Australia where families have been torn apart through the identification and reidentification of who is considered to be Aboriginal and who is not. In the context of missions and reserves, skin color was a significant marker of how an individual would be treated under legislative frameworks (Pocock et al. 2015). Evolutionary ideas about human development assumed that Aborigines were an inferior and weaker race in natural decline. The role of early missions was thus seen to “smooth the dying pillow” of a doomed race (cf. Elkin 1951: 172). Against these predictions, Aboriginal populations grew rapidly, with a significant number of children born to parents of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage. This brought an increased cost of maintaining reserves. Colonial control therefore shifted its attention from a policy of segregating Aboriginal people on reserves to assimilating Aboriginal people into mainstream society (e.g. Haebich 2000; Hall 1997; Higgins 1979). Typically, lighter-skinned children and adults were targeted and subjected to a range of assimilationist policies and practices. People of mixed descent – especially those with fair skin – were separated from their families, excluded from missions and reserves, and denied government assistance. However, these individuals were seldom accepted by non-Aboriginal society. Despite being separated from family and home, and being designated as non-Aboriginal, they continued to be regarded as Other and discriminated against on the basis of their Aboriginality. As a consequence, they were denied access to

mainstream education, employment and housing. Some individuals and families were able to negotiate a place in white society at the cost of denying or hiding their Aboriginality, often by severing contact with family (Broome 2005; Haebich 2000; Pocock 2014; Reid 2006). This contradiction of being neither white nor Aboriginal continues to play a significant role in how Australian Aboriginal people are recognized as authentic indigenes. While miscegenation was widespread and inevitable, observed biological changes were mistakenly linked to cultural change and identity (Cowlshaw 1987: 230–1), and there continues to be a misguided demarcation that links darker-skinned individuals with authentic indigeneity. Skin color is thus an oversimplified and complex marker of Aboriginality. Fair-skinned Aboriginal people continue to be questioned about their authenticity and their rights to claim indigeneity.

Anthropologists simultaneously recognize the biological fallacy inherent in the idea of human race and the formidable reality of race as a social and cultural issue (see Challinor 2011; Cowlshaw 1987; Feagin 1991; Jablonski 2012; M'Charek 2013; Mukhopadhyay et al. 2007; Smedley and Smedley 2005; Wade 2002). The association between race and racism has encouraged anthropologists to seek alternative means of discussing difference (cf. Allison and Piot 2013; Challinor 2011). But this itself tends to ignore the way in which perceptions of visible difference shape the experiences of individuals, and may even be significant to the way in which people self-identify (e.g. Challinor 2011). Skin color remains a strong sign, even though the ways in which Aboriginality is defined, enacted and recognized is based on complex and often contradictory characteristics that extend far beyond appearance (Cowlshaw 1987: 232–3). However, photographs are visual and symbolic by their very nature, and thus indigeneity continues to be categorized through a racialized lens. The belief that it is possible to identify Aboriginal people as a type or race was based on scientific classification of groups that persisted long after the idea of race had been challenged (Conor 2014: 16–17) and continues to make it possible to assign identities to photographic subjects without knowledge from other sources. The use of skin color to identify photographic subjects as Aboriginal may be obvious and necessary, but it remains problematic, as suggested by a case study of Great Barrier Reef photographs.

Photographs from the Great Barrier Reef

The Great Barrier Reef is Australia's premier tourist destination and the holy grail of marine science. Like many other colonial endeavors, Aboriginal labor enabled and supported the establishment of tourism and scientific research on the Reef Islands (Pocock 2014). The strong connection between photography and science, and photography and tourism, and the intersections between them produced a rich, diverse and often dispersed archive of twentieth century Great Barrier Reef images (Pocock 2009). The vast

majority of these depict island scenery, marine species and groups of holidaymakers and scientists. Among them, a small number of images of Aboriginal people are discernible, captured as they worked for and alongside scientists, tourism operators and holidaymakers (Pocock 2014). Images in institutional collections in Australia and overseas include promotional photographs, advertising and travel magazines, as well as snapshots captured by holidaymakers and those who worked at the Great Barrier Reef. Images of Aboriginal people at the Great Barrier Reef therefore include those that cast indigeneity in particular ways, as well as images created by photographers with close connections to Aboriginal communities. The latter are regarded as significant because they are more likely to capture Aboriginal people in daily life as it was lived rather than within the staged settings of formal photographs (Aird 2003: 30; Kleinert 2006).

Promotional images of Aboriginal people at the Reef are relatively rare, but some do appear in popular magazines, such as the Australian travel magazine *Walkabout*, and published books. Where they exist, these images largely fall within established colonial representations of Aboriginal people, and are most often presented in poses or engaged in activities that clearly signify Aboriginality. The signifiers of Aboriginality include activities such as turtle hunting, gathering turtle eggs, dancing, spear and boomerang throwing, and fishing with spears (Figure 10.1). In a few instances, tourists visited missions and reserves as part of their excursions to the Reef, and were presented with staged and controlled performances of Aboriginality. The images that holidaymakers captured during these visits thus mirror the essentialized images of staged photography, in that Aboriginal subjects appear semi-naked, scarred and painted, and engaged in activities that were established signifiers of traditional Aboriginal society (Figure 10.2) (Pocock 2014).

Images of Aboriginal people are less conspicuously captured in the background of tourist photographs as they performed their roles as servants and laborers. Here, they are often incidental to the main image. They include images of Aboriginal people rowing boats, carting luggage and cooking (Figure 10.3) (Pocock 2014). Even though the relationship between photographer and subject was unlikely to have been enduring or meaningful, these images nevertheless capture an everyday way in which Aboriginal people performed tasks and were integrated into the industry.

The sense of everyday interaction is also noticeable in photographs taken during a year-long British scientific expedition to Low Isles in 1928–29. The British Great Barrier Reef expedition was well publicized and documented, including the publication of a popular book by expedition leader Maurice Yonge (1930). The extensive media reports on the expedition do not refer to the Aboriginal participants, but Yonge acknowledged their contribution in his book, which also includes some photographs of the workers. Yonge's private collections (e.g. O'Neill 1928; Great Barrier Reef 1930; Yonge 1928) provide many more insights into Aboriginal people's

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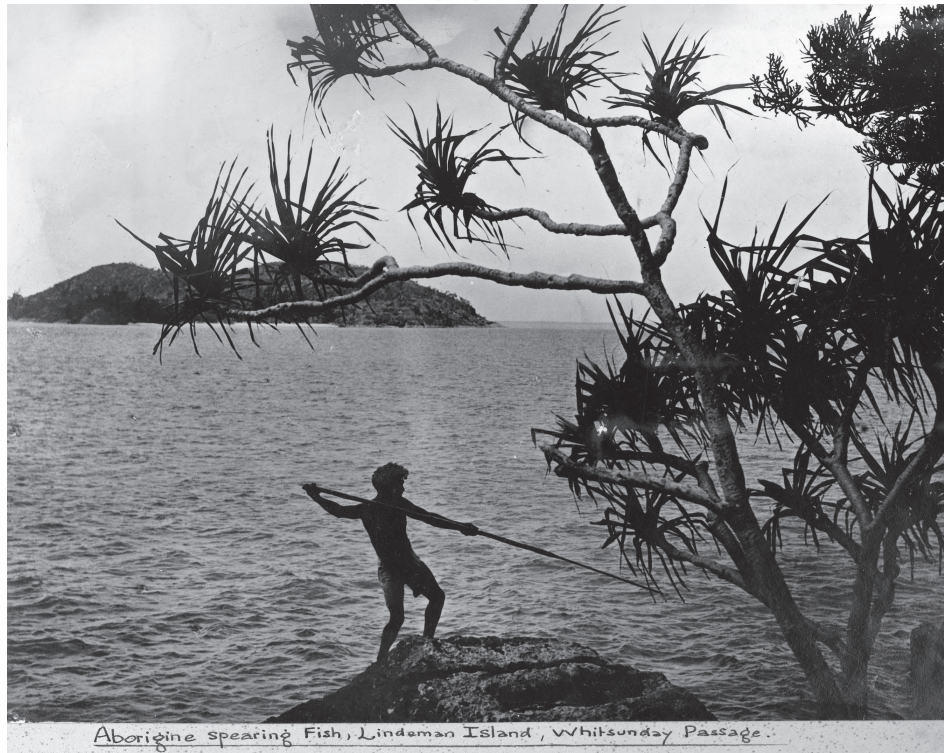


Figure 10.1 Man spearing fish, Lindeman Island, c. 1931 (© Queensland State Archives)



Figure 10.2 Aboriginal performance, Palm Island, 1931 (© John Oxley Library)

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Figure 10.3 Tourists being transported to Great Barrier Reef Islands with unidentified Indigenous men in the background (© John Oxley Library)

experiences on the expedition at Low Isles. The Aboriginal workers were employed through the mission and reserve at Yarrabah and Palm Island, and included two Aboriginal families and a number of single adult men. The families each comprised a man and woman and two children; the first stayed just a few weeks before being replaced by the second family. Photographs from the archives show these individuals as part of daily activities and routines. They show interactions and relationships with one another and can also be read to understand the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. They are different to the staged promotional images in that, for instance, the Aboriginal families on Low Isles are photographed as families (contra Peterson), in European clothing and in similar housing and inhabiting the same (if segregated) living space as the scientists. As part of a suite of photographs that document life on the island, Aboriginal people are recorded as part of the everyday. They are shown as family groups and as groups of workers; there are snapshots of children playing with each other and receiving gifts on Christmas day. While the photographs do indicate demarcation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal roles and recognition, there is no deliberate staging or performance of Aboriginality. Nor is there any apparent staged Aboriginal context, perhaps because everyone's living conditions were generally described as basic and primitive.

The historic context of these images and the relationships between people make it possible to identify individuals and to research something of their history through archival records. After initial identification, it was possible to make contact with descendants, relatives and community members to learn more about them. Thus, with the Reef images it is possible to use

archival records and interviews to identify individuals, provide greater recognition and repatriate images to communities that can incorporate them into familial identities and use (cf. Aird 2003; Kleinert 2006; Lydon 2013; Smith 2008). The archival records made it possible to ascertain some biographical details. For instance, Claude Ponto, who lived with his family (Figure 10.4) on Low Isles for most of the year of the expedition, told Yonge that he was a tracker from the Northern Territory in the far north of Australia. Part of his story is that he was engaged by Victorian police in the very south of mainland Australia to track the legendary bushranger Ned Kelly,² before being stationed at Yarrabah. These stories were repeated by his family. The story establishes him as authoritatively Aboriginal. The skills of Aboriginal trackers are legendary (Langton 2006), and, by identifying as a tracker, Claude Ponto is recognized as authentically Aboriginal. This is accentuated by his Northern Territory origins – a region typified as being the locale of “authentic Aborigines”. This is less obviously, but significantly, contrasted with Victoria in the south, where it is implied that Aboriginal people either no longer exist or no longer have such authentic skills. However, Claude Ponto also occupied other identities, as is apparent in his affiliation with the notorious but iconic Australian legend Ned Kelly, as well as his residency in a Queensland mission, his work at Low Isles and his marriage and descendants.

Creating alternative ethnicities

Photographs that deliberately portray Aboriginal people at the Reef demonstrate indigeneity through established tropes and performances. Photographs from tourist performances and those in promotional images are linked to established notions of Aboriginality through body paint, scarification, artifacts and dance or corroboree performances. The mission – like the bush setting – also becomes an indicator of Aboriginality. In these contexts, dark-skinned people are portrayed as sharing a single cultural identity, despite the enormous cultural variation that existed among Aboriginal people on missions and reserves (Pocock 2014). Aboriginal people were frequently taken to missions from vastly different geographic and cultural regions, bringing with them diverse languages, cultural practices, knowledge and experiences. While these policies and practices were designed to destroy social cohesion, they inadvertently created a new, larger collective of Aboriginal people (Gilbert 1995: 147). For holidaymakers and other outsiders, however, the cultural identity of Aboriginal people on the mission is unquestioned and singular. It is assumed that all inmates were Aboriginal.

Revealing an Aboriginal history at the Great Barrier Reef primarily emerged through these somewhat unexpected images. I was not actively researching Indigenous history when the presence of Aboriginal people became obvious to me. Rather, it was my background and long-standing interest in Aboriginal history and heritage that made me take note of these

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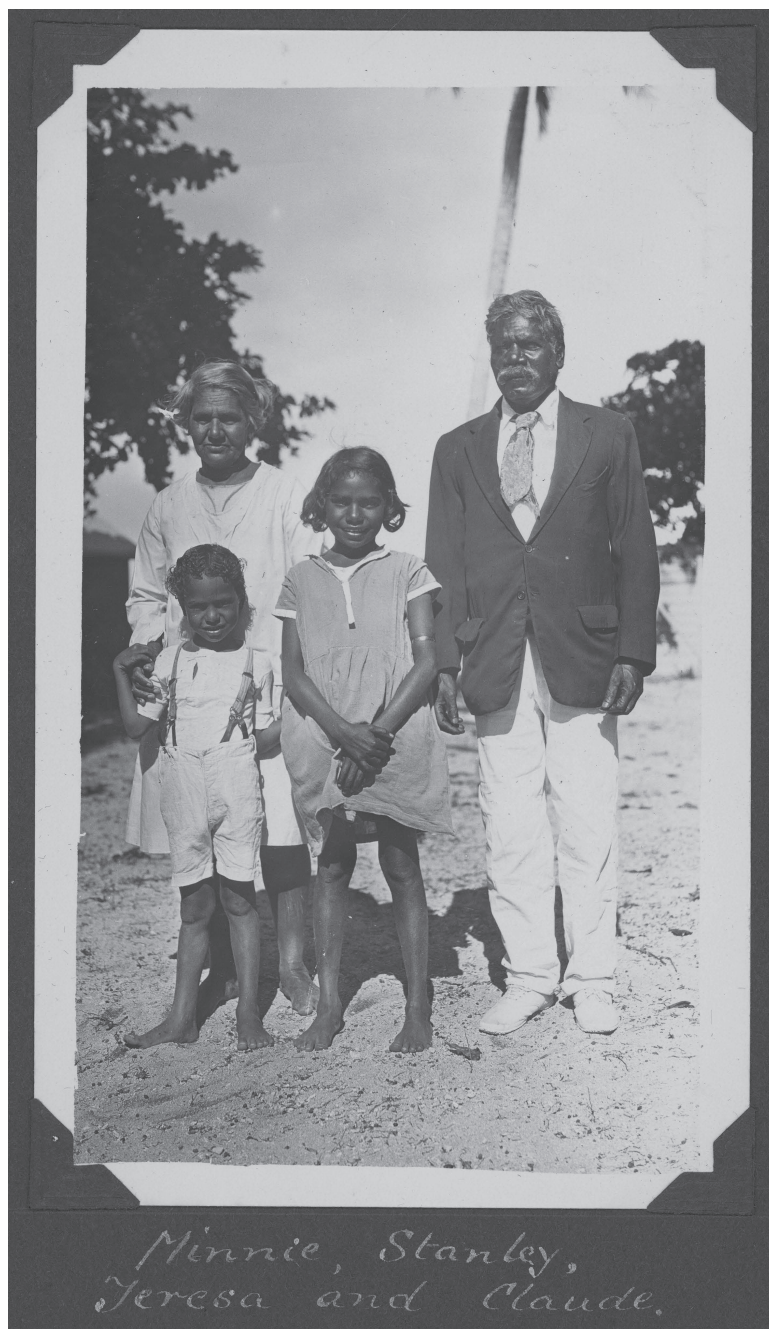


Figure 10.4 Minnie Connolly, Claude Ponto and their two children, Teresa and Stanley, at Low Isles, 1928 (© National Library of Australia)

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otherwise unseen individuals. It is quite likely that others may previously have overlooked their presence in the photographs. In the vast majority of the images I encountered, Aboriginal people appear in colonial clothing, performing everyday tasks associated with scientific research, holiday camps and domestic duties. Indicators or performances of indigeneity are not necessarily present. I assumed (possibly as other researchers have assumed) that the photographic subjects were Aboriginal because of their physical characteristics, notably skin color and physiognomy. While a knowledge that they were employed in particular roles helped to identify Aboriginal individuals, the contexts, performances, props and clothing that signify indigeneity in staged photographs are largely absent.

Historically, the Great Barrier Reef region comprises traditional lands and seas of Indigenous groups including more than 70 mainland Aboriginal groups along the coast and a number of Torres Strait Islander peoples indigenous to the islands off the far north-eastern tip of Australia. While Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders are regarded as genetically and culturally distinct from one another, they are known to have married, traded and shared some aspects of cosmology over a long period of time (Fuery 1993: 269; Greer et al. 2002). This includes trading cultural practices, technologies, skills and stories. In addition to these indigenous groups, South Sea Islanders from Vanuatu, Fiji, the Solomon Islands and other parts of the Pacific were brought to Queensland to work in the emerging sugarcane industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Brass 1994; Miller 2010; Moore 1992). While culturally and biologically distinctive, all of these individuals can be characterized as having dark skin. People on missions and reserves included those of both Aboriginal and Islander descent.

The excursions that tourists made to the Aboriginal reserve at Palm Island were not the primary motivator for Reef holidays. The vast majority of tourists were interested in marine science and drawn by the romantic ideals of tropical islands (Pocock 2005, 2014). A significant part of the tropical island trope is the South Sea maiden, and, where this figure appears in Reef marketing and advertising brochures, she is largely represented by white women. Occasionally, however, dark-skinned women are photographed as Pacific Island dancers (Pocock 2014).

Torres Strait Islander men and women were drawn into performances of song and dance on tourist islands (Hayward 2001; Pocock 2014). It seems likely that some people of South Sea Islander descent were also employed in this way, as both Torres Strait and South Sea Islanders are perceived as sharing more with Pacific Islander cultures than do Aboriginal cultures. Aboriginal people were nevertheless present at the Reef in a range of roles that supported the early tourism industry. By and large, these individuals – like many services in tourism – were invisible to tourists, and hidden from the camera. However, in some circumstances they were recast in a dual role. Among the anonymous photographic images of dark-skinned women are Aboriginal women who are portrayed as Pacific Islanders. Dressed in

grass skirts, with hibiscus in their hair, propped against coconut palms and other signifiers of the Pacific, the tourist context overwhelmingly suggests an Islander cultural identity for any person with dark skin. In conversation with members of the Yarrabah community, it emerged that some Aboriginal rather than Islander women were asked to perform these roles. Similarly, family members at Yarrabah revealed that some of the men employed by Yonge were of Islander rather than Aboriginal descent. In the absence of such collaboration and knowledge, however, the cultural identity of subjects may be assumed to be other than how the individuals self-identified.

Context and performance

Many researchers have made use of context to identify, understand and reinterpret experiences of indigeneity represented in photographs. Context is also a site of analysis itself. The staged setting of formal posed photographs is often a powerful marker of how the broader public perceived and understood Aboriginal people at the time. By placing Aboriginal subjects in real or simulated bush settings and equipping them with the clothing and tools they might have worn at the time of initial contact with Europeans, formal and staged photographic images met a public expectation and understanding of Aboriginal people and their circumstances (Peterson 2005: 24). However, it is equally possible to re-equip Aboriginal subjects with new contexts and different cultural objects and costumes to create an entirely different identity, as is suggested by images of women at the Great Barrier Reef. While white women with grass skirts and flowers in their hair are never presumed to be Pacific Islanders, women with dark skin might be.

While skin color masks a whole range of cultural affinities, shared skin tone is decreasingly a marker of affiliation. In a globalized world, humans interact across diverse areas and populations. The genetic mix which has existed for all of human history now occurs more rapidly and between what may once have been distant populations. Indigenous people, colonists, migrants and refugees meet, marry and have children in a variety of circumstances. As a consequence of colonization, forced segregation and assimilation, Aboriginal people in Australia developed a very diverse ancestry, and like indigenous people everywhere, may no longer claim only one biological line of descent. The result is that not everyone has features that are thought to be typically "Aboriginal". Some people are quite fair: light skin, blue eyes and blonde or red hair. These individuals would not be recognizable as Indigenous by appearance alone. As Cowlshaw (1987) suggests, Aboriginality is a complex and often contradictory interplay of descent, appearance, behavior and circumstance. It is certainly not simply visual.

One of the most powerful aspects of recent reinterpretations of historic photographs is the capacity to go beyond appearance to consider the active engagement of participants (Kleinert 2006: 71). It is possible not only to reinterpret information captured in photographs but to understand the

ways in which Aboriginal people have influenced how they have been photographed (Kleinert 2006; Lydon 2006; Macdonald 2003). In a recent example, Aboriginal people are using social media and photography to assert an Indigenous presence. Following the social media-oriented practice of planking or extreme sleeping that was particularly popular in the early 2010s, Aboriginal people developed “Which Way”, which appropriates one of the most long-standing stereotypes in Aboriginal imagery. First posing and then posting images to social media, Aboriginal people assume the emblematic Aboriginal pose of standing on one leg before the camera. Like planking, individuals make this brief performance in diverse locations and share them through Facebook (McQuire 2011). There is humor and irony in the practice that gives a nod to an ancient stereotype while being very much in the present. The physical appearance of subjects is irrelevant and is as diverse as any cross section of contemporary Aboriginal society. Some wear symbolic Aboriginal colors or flags, some are fair and others are dark, but it is the performance and posture of self-identification that expresses indigeneity and can be recognized as such.

Conclusion

Identity is fluid and contextual (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Hall and Du Gay 1996; Leve 2011), and in this way indigeneity is also something that shifts and changes according to its spatial and temporal contexts. Aboriginality in Australia is constantly contested, often for the political or economic benefit of the state. As Marcia Langton (1993) suggests, Aboriginality is continually renegotiated in Australia as a result of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. It is also renegotiated among Aboriginal groups. Reading such flows and shifts within the static representations of photographs remains a constant challenge.

The impetus for identifying Aboriginal people in historical images is partly fueled by a need and desire to redress the invisibility of Aboriginal pasts, to renegotiate Aboriginal identities of the past in the present. Through photographs, previously obscured histories have highlighted the economic, social, cultural and labor contributions that Aboriginal people make to Australian society. Evidence of struggles and resistance assist to counter myths and deliberate obfuscation of Aboriginal presence by the state and defy the fiction of *Terra Nullius* that forms a cornerstone of Australian settler societies. However, when Aboriginal people in Australia enjoy educational, financial or political success, it is not their ideas, skills or politics that are questioned, but their very identity. The basis of such criticism is most commonly directed through notions of racial purity that are read as cultural purity (cf. Cowlishaw 1987). Thus, skin color becomes a misused marker of Aboriginality or indigeneity.

Without performance, staged context, cultural props or bodily adornment, indigeneity can be rewritten and misread through photographic imagery. In

seeking to understand the Aboriginal past, we seek to represent the Other. This is an Other created by time, but, when researchers are unrelated to the subjects, it also becomes the Other of race. The researcher is drawn to observe physical characteristics of the body – facial features and body type, but most of all dark skin. But these markers are of limited meaning in how Aboriginal people see themselves and each other. Not all individuals with dark skin are Indigenous, or identify as such, and many Aboriginal people with strong cultural connections and standing within their communities are fair-skinned (cf. Cowlshaw 1987). Aboriginal people view images not as the Other, but as the self – whether that is a present self or a distributed self that incorporates family across time and space (Smith 2008). As Sontag (1973: 164) suggests, memories that photographs evoke do not depend on the quality of the image, but on the capacity of the viewer. And thus the significance of contact in photographs lies not in the likeness but in the continuing association with the original, facilitated through a perception of contact between the subject and the photograph.

As visual objects, photographs can thus create differences that are not present, and can hide or mask experiences and expressions of indigeneity – or simply lack the capacity to represent them. Denis Byrne (2003) has suggested that Australian archaeologists need to recognize Aboriginal history in cultural heritage assessments or risk becoming complicit in the erasure of Aboriginal people from the landscape. This can also be taken as a broader challenge for the interpretation of other forms of material culture, including photographs. Whereas Byrne suggests that archaeologists must learn to read historical-cultural artifacts not simply as products of particular colonial cultural manufacture but also through Aboriginal cultural use and patterning, we might similarly ask how scholars might read indigeneity in photographs where there is no staging, performance or apparent physical difference. Collaboration with Indigenous people is necessary to reinterpret images in the present and to diminish the photographic necessity of “Us” and “Them”.

Notes

- 1 Australia is home to a number of different indigenous groups, each with distinct territories, language and customs. It is preferable to identify people in relation to their specific language and cultural affiliations, and in doing so these proper nouns are capitalized as any other language or nation name would be. For pragmatic and historical reasons, the term Aboriginal is adopted as a convenient shorthand and as a collective proper noun for referring to all mainland Aboriginal people. In addition, the original inhabitants of the Torres Strait Islands are recognized as a distinct group. Although indigenous, Torres Strait Islanders are not Aboriginal. The term Indigenous has subsequently been adopted as a more succinct way of referring to all Australian Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. Thus, when the terms Indigenous or Aboriginal are used as a replacement for specific proper nouns, they are capitalized. This recognizes these groups as a distinct culture or nation, and is afforded the same respect as any other cultural group. In this paper, the term Aboriginal is preferred, but in the

case study of the Great Barrier Reef photographs where the origin of individuals is unknown, the individuals may be Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or even South Sea Islander. In these instances, the general term Indigneous is used.

- 2 Ned Kelly is arguably Australia's most infamous colonial outlaw. He was eventually captured and hanged at Melbourne Gaol in 1880. Despite committing a number of serious crimes, Ned Kelly was regarded as an underdog, who was unfairly persecuted by authorities. Sometimes referred to as an Australian "Robin Hood", he has attained legendary status in Australian folklore, history and popular culture.

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