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Collaborations

Petra Brown

Petra Brown lectures at Deakin University. She completed her PhD in philosophy on Bonhoeffer, Schmitt, Kierkegaard and the idea of exceptional violence. Her broad research interests are in Continental philosophy and religious studies.

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Calling the Shots

Matthew Stanton

Matthew Stanton is a Melbourne-based freelance photographer, visual artist and educator who has lectured in photography at Melbourne, Monash and Deakin universities. His film and photographic works have been exhibited nationally and internationally.

The individual is not the pure ‘author’ of their project in the world; rather, a project is ‘an aggregate of actions, a unit of social life’ that has a life beyond the actions of the individual.

subjecthood emerges from the intense emotional experiences that people have when they come together in collectives; symbolic form plays an important part in both constituting subjecthood and in passing on cultural historical knowledge. Thompson argues that, if subjecthood is founded in these encounters with symbolic forms, then it is not a matter of a cognitive exchange of information between collaborators but of recognising the charged emotional or ‘sacred’ space that enables difficult work to take place, often at a cost to individual collaborators, and also facilitates recognition of those who are part of the collaborative project and those who are excluded. Thompson argues that ‘research on collaborative projects could benefit greatly from greater attention to the *spirit* of collaborations’.

John-Steiner’s ‘rhythms of collaboration’ and Thompson’s ‘spirited collaborations’ demonstrate the kind of interplay or intellectual exchange that Blunden set out to capture in this collection: to explore the relationship between individual identity, agency and social formation and context.

It is the collaborative work of all contributors that is the strength of this collection and demonstrates that knowledge is not a form of acquisition and ownership by isolated individuals in competition with one another but that knowledge building is an inherently cooperative human and social endeavour.

Andy Blunden has made this a truly collaborative work between contributors across the globe. This spirit of collaboration is further strengthened by Blunden’s introduction, overview and reflections on the contributions, all of which were developed and crafted with opportunity for critique by the participants. My one concern is that perhaps too many connections are made. Blunden’s introduction and conclusion, and some of the final contributing chapters, are so well developed and edited that the ‘spirit’ of collaboration threatens to become subservient to more utilitarian or functional aims, as shown by Helena Worthen when she asks in regard to any theory, ‘What is that good for?’ I would suggest that the perimeter of a concept like collaborative projects cannot be fully set, and this is just as well. As Blunden himself recognises: ‘Where a project may “end up” cannot be determined in advance. The plot unfolds according to its own dynamic and through interaction with the wider community’. I commend this collection to any reader who wishes to be enriched by the idea that life is constituted not just by the efforts of the individual but by the rhythms and spirit of collaborative projects with others. **a**

The paperback will be published by Haymarket Press in June 2015.

books **Calling the Shots**

review by *Matthew Stanton*

Calling the Shots—Aboriginal Photographies, edited by Jane Lydon (AIATSIS, 2014)

Photography has often played a troubling role in the colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Its attempted use to either validate the sinister pseudo-scientific theories of eugenics or to present a romanticised notion of the ‘Noble Savage’ on the verge of extinction has been an important topic of discourse among cultural theorists and historians over the last four decades.

Recently, another side to the discussion has emerged that directly addresses the unique importance ‘repatriated’ historical photographic archives hold for Indigenous cultures despite the painful and degrading colonialist agendas that often motivated their creation. This topic, in addition to some fascinating explorations of the work of significant twentieth-century Aboriginal photographers, forms a major basis for *Calling the Shots—Aboriginal Photographies*, a collection of essays compiled, edited and co-authored by Australian historian Jane Lydon.

In Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner’s 1956 essay *The Dreaming* he coined the term ‘Everywhen’ as an alternative to the often reductive and misused ‘Dreamtime’ and to better articulate the ontological and cosmological complexity of a variety of Aboriginal frameworks of belief. In many respects the concept of ‘Everywhen’ significantly underpins this text and illuminates the compelling ways in which Aboriginal communities attribute an almost talismanic power to photographic images of their ancestors. When the subjects of the photographs represent kin or cultural connection they also contain the potential to transcend mere representation and, as Jane Lydon suggests, ‘assume the powers

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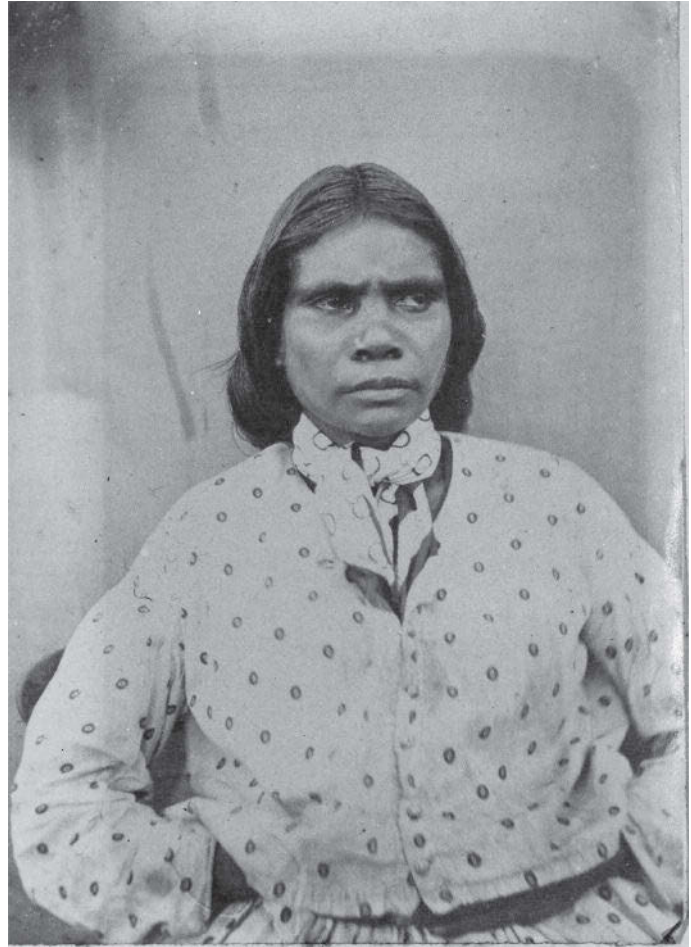
of the ancestors embedded within social relationships with both the living and the dead? This relationship differs significantly from the common Western conception of the photograph as sign of absence or *momento mori*. For many Aboriginal communities the photograph instead embodies a healing presence and an opportunity for the reconstitution of ties to culture and place weakened or fragmented over centuries of European settlement.

Across all of Australia's states and territories the book rigorously explores a range of compelling Indigenous perspectives on the ties between photography and place, self-representation and the restoration of ancestral continuity via imagery, which, in many cases, has been rescued from the relative indifference of Western museum archives.

This indifference is articulated most acutely in Julie Gough's opening chapter on the plight of the forty-seven Tasmanian Indigenous people who took up forced residency at Oyster Cove station in 1847 after their relocation from life in exile on Flinders Island. Approximately fourteen members of the Oyster Bay population were photographed over a twenty-year period, with astonishingly scant accounts of the subjects' identities and previous activities in the records that accompany them. Gough discusses the way in which this ongoing lack of will to identify the subjects is indicative of what she sees as an underlying resistance to link the subjects of the photographs with the extant Aboriginal community. To do so, Gough says, is an act that would acknowledge that 'Aboriginal history is not past, but alive, in us'.

The emphasis on the need for ongoing processes of identification and subsequent reclamation of family histories from museum collections is continued in Michael Aird's chapter, 'Aboriginal people and four early Brisbane photographers'. Aird details the challenging processes of identifying the photographers who made important historical images of his people in their traditional lands around Brisbane and the Gold Coast. Through knowledge of an image's author, Aird has been able to discern the locations and dates of particular images, often allowing him to also identify the subjects of the pictures. The ultimate aim of his rigorous research is the eventual restitution of the images and those they depict to their rightful place within a living tradition. Aird seeks to overcome the prevalence of colonial historical exclusion evidenced by image titles such as 'The Last of His Tribe', which commonly used such romantic depersonalisation coupled with extinction narratives as a tool to justify the perpetuation of colonial dispossession.

Karen Hughes and Aunty Ellen Trevorrow's remarkable, conversationally derived chapter, "It's that reflection": photography as recuperative practice, a Ngarrindjeri perspective', charts the way in which the 'explicit cultural, emotional, intellectual and spiritual knowledge' of nearly six generations of South Australia's Ngarrindjeri people can be 'reflected' within the living fabric of the community through photography. This process of reflection and its affective powers is said to occur when a unique connection exists between the viewer and the subject of a particular image. This relationship enables the static index of the photograph



Charles Walter. **Maggie, aged twenty-nine, S Hobson's (Woman) Yarra Yarra tribe**, albumen silver print, State Library of Victoria, accession H91.1/45. Bill Nicholson and the Wurundjeri Tribe Land Cultural Heritage Council Inc.

For many Aboriginal communities the photograph ... embodies a healing presence and an opportunity for the reconstitution of ties to culture and place weakened or fragmented over centuries of European settlement.

to be transformed into a conduit through which the wisdom of the past can be transmitted and take root in the present. Trevorrow, a Ngarrindjeri elder, is the caretaker of a substantial family photographic archive documenting Ngarrindjeri clan history. She speaks with great insight and poignancy regarding this notion of reflection in relation to a series of astonishing images from her personal collection, many of which are now also kept for community access at the Ngarrindjeri Culture and Education Centre at Camp Coorong. The images she shares bear witness to the continuing strength, dignity and courage of her distinguished forebears in the wake of many decades of devastating state intervention in their lives.

Photographs such as the one of elder Queen Louisa Karpany, made in 1915 when she was already aged in her nineties, are a perennial source of strength and inspiration for each new



Aunty Charlotte Richards. Uncle Nulla (Walter) Richards, his daughter Irene Richards (mother of Walter Richards, and Iris, Ruby, Jeffrey and Robert Hunter) and Uncle Poonthie (Joe Walker), One Mite, c. late 1940s early 1950s. Courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow.

Photographs such as the one of elder Queen Louisa Karpany, made in 1915 when she was already aged in her nineties, are a perennial source of strength and inspiration for each new generation of Ngarrindjeri women.

generation of Ngarrindjeri women. Shown bearing the traditional Ngarrindjeri baskets, which she wove using techniques perpetuated by her descendants today, Karpany directly addresses the lens with a calm yet focused gaze that seems to knowingly stare down the intervening years. Regarding the power of this, and many of Trevorrow's other images, Hughes touches on the Ngarrindjeri concept of 'Miwi' or 'the inner spirit', which, along with the more direct signifiers of place and lineage encountered through images of kin, is said to function as a kind of sixth sense through which important knowledge is transmitted and gained. As such, for the Ngarrindjeri the photograph functions not just as a certificate of that 'that was there', as French theorist Roland Barthes once suggested, but also as a locus of continued presence.

Another compelling story from this chapter relates to the

little-known work of Aunty Charlotte Richards, a Ngarrindjeri photographer and aunt to Australian singer Ruby Hunter. Richards was a striking and somewhat glamorous figure and a lover of 'cameras and music and magpies'. She lived mostly off the land, dedicating herself to the documentation of Ngarrindjeri families as she nomadically traversed their traditional country with a small Kodak Box Brownie camera from the late forties through to the early eighties. Throughout this time Richards accumulated a personal archive of great cultural importance that she shared readily amongst her people, ensuring their stories would be preserved for subsequent generations. Richards' intimate images render her subjects with great affection, humanity and sensitivity while demonstrating a firm understanding of the performative potential of the medium along with a flair for experimentation that imbues many of her pictures with a unique magical lyricism. In many respects Richards' work was an important precursor to the more directly politicised Aboriginal photographic movement of the seventies. Her work preceded that of figures such as Mervyn Bishop, who sought to create images that spoke directly of the reality of Indigenous experience while countering the tendency towards degradation seen in the majority of archival images produced of Indigenous people.

William Faulkner once said that 'The past is never dead. It's not even past': *Calling the Shots* contains many rich and fascinating accounts of the ways in which vital Indigenous storylines are being reformed in the present after wavering on the cusp of disappearance. Significant to the survival of these stories and perspectives are recent shifts in historical agendas that have made accessible vast photographic archives for the Indigenous descendants of those pictured therein. Of equal importance is the enduring commitment by Indigenous individuals to the photographic documentation and preservation of their cultural heritage, despite attempts by the state to gradually extinguish it. Not only does the book open new avenues of dialogue regarding the ways in which such histories are revived in the present through photography but also it engages with compelling ideas surrounding the nature of the medium from refreshingly new philosophical and ontological perspectives. **a**