Re-positioning the Aboriginal Subject in Photography

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Re-positioning the Aboriginal subject in photography.

Aboriginal people have been the subject of photography since its introduction to Australia in the mid nineteenth century. Only recently, though, have Aboriginal people turned around the camera to photograph themselves, and even more recently become renowned as photographers. Colonial portraiture of indigenous people was common throughout the colonised world in the nineteenth century. Europeans had a fascination with exotic ‘other’ and attempted to document indigenous cultures photographically. In Australia, scientific studies of indigenous people functioned to reinforce the social ideology that led to the adoption of a national policy of assimilation. Such studies hid beneath the guise of ‘ethnography’. In the 1970s, John William Lindt photographed Aboriginal people in his Grafton studio. His images are a bizarre cocktail of constructed settings and painted studio back drops, with Aboriginal people and traditional artefacts carefully positioned within. This documentation of traditional Aboriginal people is one that requires closer examination. Photographs reveal the subjectivity of the photographer, and reflect the social values of the time in which they were made. Photographs such as Lindt’s may have been an attempt to capture a disappearing picture, yet in reality they became a part of the system that perpetuated the fragmentation of Aboriginal culture.

Contemporary Aboriginal photographers have been forcing their audiences to re-examine the power relations between photographer and subject. This has been achieved through work which refers to the historical representation of the Aboriginal subject at the same time as recontextualising the subject into a position of agency. These contemporary images are strong precisely because they challenge the stereotypical representation of Aboriginal people that has come from a history of western cultural imperialism.

There are political reasons why Aboriginal people have suddenly been accepted into the world of fine art making. Now, more than two hundred years after the European invasion of Aboriginal land, Australian have recognised the necessity for reconciliation. Furthermore, the understanding of Aboriginal diversity has challenged the division between urban and ‘traditional’ Aboriginal art. This has opened the door to a whole range of new Aboriginal art forms receiving attention from major art galleries both in Australia and internationally. Photography has been a particularly important medium for contemporary Aboriginal artists. United by their quest to formulate a positive identity, Aboriginal artists in the 1990s are dealing with a shared history of cultural oppression. The representation of the Aboriginal subject through colonial eyes was one of ‘primitive other’. Nineteenth century Aboriginal photography was made by Europeans for a European audience. The main difference today is that Aboriginal people are imaging themselves, and are doing so in a way that portrays the richness and diversity of Aboriginal life. This dissertation is written in an attempt to impress upon its readers the importance of Aboriginal self-determination, both within visual representation of the Aboriginal subject, and in society as a whole.
In the 1870s John William Lindt set out to systematically document Aboriginal people as they lived traditionally before European contact. In 1873 Lindt produced his *Album of Australian Aboriginals*, of which many copies were made and sold. These images have been reproduced in many different books and journal articles, and are integral to discussions about ethnographic imagery from nineteenth century Australia. The National Gallery of Australia holds a complete set of the twelve images in its collection, acquired in 1982. These prints are slightly yellow and fading around the edges. However, the rich tones of the images have withstood the test of time. The images are an important testimony to the historical treatment of the Aboriginal subject in photography. They give a strong sense of the relationship between Aboriginal people and their European colonisers in the nineteenth century.

Lindt’s *Album of Australian Aboriginals* attempts to describe traditional Aboriginal life. The term ‘traditional’ is problematic because traditions are always changing. There is no specific time or place that is definitive of traditional Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal traditions just prior to 1788 were different to the traditions of 30,000 years ago, and differ from traditions now. Aboriginal culture has been portrayed in Lindt’s photographs as simple and unchanging, and almost extinct. In the late nineteenth century that was how Aboriginal people were viewed by the colonisers. The diversity between Aboriginal people from different regions becomes lost in Lindt’s simplistic representation.

Lindt’s photos attempted to capture this unchanging traditional Aboriginal life, yet they actually speak more about the conjunction of old and new, the blend of old traditions with new elements. This point is illustrated by the inclusion of colonial and pre-contact artefacts present in Lindt’s photographs. For example, in one of Lindt’s portraits we are confronted with a breastplate and cotton cloth (clearly introduced by Europeans) alongside boomerangs and a spear (refer to Figure 2). By setting up a fake outdoor setting in the studio, Lindt was able to control the props and the setting to create images of ‘traditional’ Aboriginal people. These photos do a lot more than document ‘traditional’ Aboriginal people. They speak strongly of the power relations not only between photographer and subject but also of the broader social fabric. They are located in the late nineteenth century and not pre-contact. The traditional Aboriginal artefacts pictured may have been intended as a reference to traditional life but cannot now be seen in isolation from the colonial matrix in which they are positioned.

When Lindt was making his *Album of Australian Aboriginals*, Aboriginal people were viewed as a dying race. Lindt’s images have the appearance of a museum diorama with their painted studio backdrops and constructed settings. Figure 1 is an image of three generations of Aboriginal women clothed in tattered fabric skirts. The older two are seated on fake rocks constructed of boxes covered in crumpled paper. The scene is an obvious studio reconstruction of a camp setting although it is strangely cold and isolated, with no

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1 Breastplates were commonly given to some Aboriginal people by Europeans designating them as chiefs. Europeans controlled the Aboriginal people via the chiefs who were used as a way of justifying European intervention.
campfire and no sense of action or movement. There is a shelter constructed of wooden boards roughly tied with rope. It is only covered on one side making it seem less than functional as a shelter. The women portrayed here seem isolated and vulnerable and not entirely unlike wax dummies in a museum. In the early nineteenth century the elite of land owners and colonial officials assumed that Aboriginal people would assimilate with white people. By the end of the century there was a widespread conviction that ‘full blood’ Aboriginal people were a dying race and that Aboriginal blood could be bred out of existence. The attitude that Aboriginal people were dying out reflected the reality that hundreds of thousands of indigenous people were literally wiped out by guns and new diseases that came with the colonisers. There was a paternalistic attitude towards Aboriginal people which perhaps inspired portraiture such as Lindt’s *Australian Aboriginals*. Clearly Lindt’s portraits also reflected a desire to preserve the people before they were no longer around to study.

Lindt not only portrayed but also perpetuated this nineteenth century discourse around Aboriginal people in his portraits. Brenda Croft discusses the hidden agenda of nineteenth century ethnographic imagery:

> Many of these images were also propaganda - taken not only to record ‘vanishing’ indigenous cultures, but also to grease the wheels of assimilation [...] Cultural genocide was condoned by the prejudicial opinion of the period that Aboriginal nations were on the verge of extinction. Such beliefs, either supported, or acted upon, were the impetus behind photographing indigenous peoples to ensure that an ‘historical’ record remained.

In other words, colonial portraiture of indigenous cultures was made specifically to reinforce the idea that Aboriginal culture was almost extinct, and to justify the European invasion.

There is some disagreement on this point in academic literature. Alana Harris, an indigenous Australian, describes a more positive function of colonial portraiture:

> Nineteenth century photographs [...] provide a unique record of her people around the turn of the century. Given the general unsympathetic reaction to Aboriginal culture by Europeans in the nineteenth century [...] images of Aboriginal people are surprisingly positive [...] direct eye contact with the photographer gives the portraits an identity of real people not just objects of anthropological interest [...] nineteenth century images strongly support the notion of a proud people who have continued with dignity and a strong sense of identity and survival.

Harris was referring specifically to the photographs of Henry King and Charles Kerry, but there are strong similarities between these photographs and those made by Lindt. All are studio photographs in which the Aboriginal subject is positioned with an array of artefacts. None identify the Aboriginals by name. Harris’s point about the general reaction to Aboriginal people at the time is valid, however the underlying function of these

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3 Croft 1997, pp. 9-10.
4 Cooper and Harris 1997, p. 20.
ethnographic images needs to be acknowledged. Such images were a part of the justification for European colonialism and the fragmentation of Aboriginal culture. Furthermore, Harris is projecting what can only be recognised in hindsight back onto these Aboriginal subjects. I would argue that the strong sense of identity and survival that Harris refers to is a post-colonial phenomenon. It is not nineteenth century images, but rather contemporary images of Aboriginal people that talk about an identity based on a nation of proud and dignified survivors.

Aboriginal people were physically displaced from their land by their European colonisers. Furthermore their relationship to the land, which was central to their spiritual and social practice, was severed. By removing his subjects from their natural environment and placing them in a reconstructed studio setting, Lindt unwittingly portrays this displacement in his photographs. Figure 2 shows an Aboriginal man and his family. The painted studio backdrop and hessian bag floor give the image a sense of discontinuity and desolation. The people pictured here look out of place perched in the centre of the scene alongside an abundance of artefacts. Ken Orchard comments that Rosalyn Poignant “has perceptively described Lindt’s photographs of Aboriginal people as images of displacement which encapsulate their actual displacement as the land’s owners”. It is only now, in the 1990s, that prior ownership of land by indigenous people has been formally recognised. Until recently, in legal terms, Australia was considered terranullius at the time of European settlement.

Furthermore, the paternalistic relationship between colonist and Aboriginal inhabitant is reflected in Lindt’s photos. The breastplate worn by ‘king’ Charley (Figure 2) embodies this paternalistic relationship. The European colonisers successfully imposed their own system of control over Aboriginal people by turning some of them into chiefs. These images stand as a reminder of the way in which Aboriginal people were treated by their colonisers. Not only were they removed from their land, but they were also told what to wear and how to behave. The way the subjects stare out from their setting is almost haunting to look at now, more than one hundred years after the event. Lindt’s images are unsettling precisely because they so aptly portray this cultural imperialism whilst attempting to do the opposite.

A photograph can contain a physical backdrop but the socio-political thought in which a photograph is situated can also be seen as a kind of backdrop to the photograph. Arjun Appadurai draws attention to the role of backdrops in locating the photograph in a public discourse:

all backdrops thus direct the viewer’s attention outwards from the foregrounded subject of the photograph to a location represented in it and to the discourse in which the photograph is located, to which it is a potential contributor.5

5 Orchard 1999, p. 167.
6 Terra the Latin word for land, nullius meaning uninhabited.
What Appadurai is saying is that backdrops are not neutral. Backdrops can be an indicator of the social discourse surrounding a subject, and they can also function to influence the way people think about a subject. Lindt’s images need to be re-examined in the context of a nineteenth century western imperialist backdrop.

Lindt’s Aboriginal portraits are comparable to colonial portraiture in India around the same time. In both India and Australia native people were posed in constructed traditional settings under the imperial gaze of their colonisers. Colonial portraiture of traditional cultures always references a particular historical context, as Christopher Pinney argues:

> The new visual culture that emerges around the turn of the century does, of course, make direct appeal to ‘traditional’ motifs and concerns, but I would wish to stress how these are mediated through a particular historical context. They are not the eruption of some unchanged Indian psyche [...] but highly complex, ‘modern’ attempts to formulate visual identities under specific historical and political conditions.\(^8\)

The way in which indigenous cultures were viewed as traditional and unchanging is common to all colonial portraiture in the nineteenth century, as is the fascination with exotic ‘other’.

In the nineteenth century colonial regimes defined themselves in opposition to ‘other’. Pinney describes how nineteenth century anthropological studies attempted to fix indigenous cultures in time as if they had a lack of history. In contrast, European cultures were considered to be richly complex and full of history.\(^9\) This idea underpins colonial portraiture in Australia. In Lindt’s *Album of Australian Aboriginals*, the images all contain the same set of props symbolising traditional Aboriginal life as it was perceived by Europeans in the nineteenth century. This portrayal of Aboriginal life is idealised and contrived, and the diversity of Aboriginal culture is lost. The subjects here are passive actors directed by their European colonisers for a European audience. By imaging ‘primitive other’, Europeans affirmed themselves, by contrast, as progressive and civilised.

In Lindt’s Grafton studio portraits there is a strong dichotomy between the portrayal of Aboriginal people and of their colonisers. Shar Jones states that:

> There is little distinction between Lindt’s treatment of Aborigines and that of itinerant white rural workers.\(^10\)

However, some glaringly obvious difference confront the viewer at first glance. The Aboriginal people are all photographed with the same set of artefacts and the same kangaroo skin replacing their clothes. By contrast, the Europeans photographed all wear their own clothes and are pictured with the tools of their own trade (Refer to Figure 5). The Europeans stare with the dignity and pride of someone pictured at work. The Aboriginal people, on the other hand, look helpless and lost, seemingly existing without purpose other than survival.

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\(^8\) Pinney 1997, p. 96.
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 53.
\(^10\) Jones 1985, p. 28.
There is an even greater disparity between the representation of Aboriginal people and wealthy Europeans in Lindt’s studio portraits. Figure 4 is an image of a wealthy expatriate German scientist. This portrait does not show the full figure but only the head and torso. This man is captured in a full suit laden with medals to prove his importance as a great scientist. The Aboriginal people in Lindt’s portraits, by contrast, are shown full figure and almost naked, and as such are more like an object of scientific study. This dichotomous representation reflects the nineteenth century thought that Aboriginal people were simple, irrational, spiritual and close to nature, as opposed to Europeans who were complex, rational, scientific and culturally mature. The division that can be seen in Lindt’s treatment of subjects is not only racial. The white rural worker is portrayed differently to the wealthy scientist. This economic division is manifest as a rural/urban division. There is an implied social hierarchy in Lindt’s images with rich Europeans on the top and Aboriginal people at the bottom. The white itinerant rural worker falls somewhere in between.

Nineteenth century studio portraiture was highly contrived by nature. Photographers put a great deal of time and effort into constructing a set. Long exposure times, painted backdrops and artificial lighting are all factors that contribute to the stilted and unnatural feel to this genre. In the 1870s when Lindt worked in his Grafton studio the wet plate process still dominated photographic practice. This process required a darkroom on site as the glass negative needed to be immediately developed. Furthermore, the exposure time for the process was lengthy, ranging from ten seconds to one and a half minutes. Many photographers had bracing devices to hold the subject’s head still while their portrait was being taken. Studio photography offered a controlled lighting environment and close proximity to a darkroom. This may account for the popularity of studio photography in the late nineteenth century. Lindt’s studio portraits were of a very high technical standard but it is precisely because of the studio that they appear so contrived. Lindt used the studio as a stage and the Aboriginal subjects were actors under his direction. While the nature of studio photography is contrived, in Lindt’s portraits of Aboriginal people the constructed set is devised to suit the agenda of European colonialism.

Imagery has always played an important role in the construction of cultural identity. Photography and the ability to reproduce imagery has enhanced this importance. The truth of photography is so powerful that an image can seem more real than reality at times. People who have been through a traumatic experience might say “it was like something out of a movie” as if to validate the experience. Similarly, a picturesque scene might evoke a comment like “this could be a postcard”. We internalise the truth of photography to the extent that the representation becomes more real than the experience it represents. In portraiture this power can be mystified but it is no less present. A portrait describes an individual identity yet at the same time it is inscribing social values on to that individual. The setting, the backdrop, the pose, the props, the lighting, the very way in which we look are all culturally constructed. Lindt’s images were influenced by colonial European thought and, at the same time, reinforced European colonialism in Australia.

11 Ibid., pp. 2-4.
One of the key issues in the representation of the Aboriginal subject is that of power. There is automatically a power relationship between photographer and subject. The photographer has the power to portray the subject in any number of different ways. The inclusion of props and backdrops within the frame is one way in which the photographer can influence the reading of a photograph. Lindt’s *Australian Aboriginals* series contains an abundance of objects that symbolise the hunter/gatherer lifestyle of a ‘traditional’ Aboriginal. For example Figure 3 shows an Aboriginal man with his apparent catch of the day. The man stands behind a dead kangaroo holding a spear. A woman is framed neatly between the kangaroo, a boomerang and a shelter. She leans on the kangaroo and clutches the boomerang awkwardly, holding it up for display. The same boomerangs, spear and kangaroo skin in Figure 2 are used again in this image. It did not matter to Lindt that boomerangs were specific to particular regions of Australia, nor that Aboriginal people in the 1870s mostly wore clothes. These images depicted a ‘primitive’ culture. Western imperialist discourse defined such culture in need of civilising. Willis comments that:

power relations are inscribed in every photograph. The Aborigines are lined up for the camera so that anthropologists can take away an image and study it for their own ends.12

Willis is drawing our attention to the process of ‘taking’ someone’s picture. Literally speaking, every time you take a photo of someone, you are taking something away from that person. This imbalance of power is present in all colonial photography. The Aboriginal subject was the object of European Scientific study.

The development of photography was encapsulated in the development of scientific experimentation. Michael Taussig astutely comments that in colonial America:

Photographing the Indians was seen as an essential part of scientific investigations. Indeed photography seems to be emblematic, to verify the existence of the scientific attitude as much as the existence of that which was photographed.13

Anthropologists throughout the colonised world developed a fascination with other cultures, and Aboriginal people were studied as if they were scientific specimens.

Anthropometry was developed as the science of human measurement, and indigenous subjects were photographed placed up against a measuring stick. Paul Fox describes how the potential for standardising indigenous people was realised by ethnographic photographers working with measurement:

the secretary of the London Ethnographical Society [...] proposed in 1869 that a measuring grid be used when taking anatomical portraits to enable accurate comparisons between the anatomical characteristics of different races to be drawn by ethnographic collectors.14

12 Willis 1988, p. 213.
13 Taussig 1993, pp. 198-199.
In the discourse of scientific rationalism and European imperialism, indigenous peoples were considered to be lower on the evolutionary scale. The underlying function of colonial portraiture was mystified under the guise of ethnographic documentation.

In the nineteenth century the idea of the 'criminal type' was developed and composite photographs were made in an attempt to document the typical look of a criminal. Appadurai comments that:

all colonial photography is in some sense part of a project of archiving and documentation, whether the eye of the particular photographer is part of the gaze of curiosity, of horror, of conversion or of criminology.

The point is that colonial photography was about classifying 'other', and reinforcing the perceived self/other opposition. The comparison of colonial portraiture to portraiture of criminal types is apt because such photos can seek to portray an individual as representative of a large group of diverse individuals. At the same time such photos can also seek to record individuality.

A photograph is like a trace of its subject. Photography becomes one of the primary methods of recording indexical evidence in the nineteenth century because it so accurately describes its subject. Photographic records of criminals were taken alongside fingerprints for identification purposes. Taussig discusses the use of fingerprinting by the State in certifying identities:

It should be noted that fingerprinting as modern state practice owes everything to modern colonialism, beginning with the use of the sign-manuals of “finger-marks” by mid nineteenth century British colonial administration in India so as to prevent people from impersonating pensioners after their deaths.

Both fingerprints and photographs have a similar relationship to their subject. Both have been used as an apparatus of State control.

In the post-modern arena the power of photography has been acknowledged and as such photography has been taken on as a means for raising awareness around political issues. Willis talks about how this is changing the position of the Aboriginal subject in photography:

Photography has evidently developed politics based on representation, on the social relations of the practice itself and a relation to a broad range of political struggles [...] photography is also being employed as a tool for fighting racism [...] 130 years ago Aboriginal people were the passive objects of photography, while now they are using it themselves against the racism through which they have been depicted.

15 Ibid., p. 12.
16 Appadurai op. cit., p. 4.
17 Pinney (1997) defines indexical signs as “those signs which have some natural relationship of contiguity with their referent. Thus smoke is an index of fire; and photographs [...] are also indexical” (page 20).
18 Taussig 1993, p. 222.
Contemporary Aboriginal photographers, while sometimes playing on this historical treatment of the subject, no longer objectify their subject, but rather have begun to portray them as active agents.

Imagery that may have been construed as derogatory towards its subject can be reclaimed by the subject and turned around. The same can be equally true of language. For example gay people have reclaimed the word ‘queer’ and use it in a positive way. Similarly, ‘black fella’ is now commonly used by Aboriginal people. In recent years artistic representations of Aboriginality have been reconstructed. The recent exhibition *Re-take* at the National Gallery of Australia has demonstrated the importance of such re-interpretation. This exhibition contained works that portrayed diversity and richness present in Aboriginal culture. The earlier photographs in the exhibition could be viewed in a new light as a wonderful resource documenting a part of Aboriginal history, while the contemporary photography consciously spoke about and challenged the history of Aboriginal representation in portraiture.

Identity is a complex issue in the 1990s. Aboriginal identity is complicated by the question: what is Aboriginality? There are such a broad range of Aboriginal living situations that it is impossible to single out any one that is representative of all. Some Aboriginal people live in Aboriginal communities in outback Australia. A more common situation is that of urban Aboriginal people who have been brought up in cities. Some have been disenfranchised from their people and their ‘country’. Many were part of the stolen generation who were taken from their parents and adopted out to the white community to live as white Australians. Although there are many differences there are also things that unify Aboriginal people. All share the same history of an oppressive colonial regime. Howard Morphy asserts that:

> another common element has been the very process of coming to terms with Aboriginality in the post-colonial world and the problematic issue of cultural identity.

Many Aboriginal artists are also united by their engagement with these issues in their art practice. The question what is Aboriginality? is ongoing, but to some extent Aboriginality is about self-identification. The recent trend towards Aboriginal autonomy necessarily includes the right of Aboriginal people to represent themselves.

Historically, Aboriginal art was not recognised as fine art. Furthermore, the only Aboriginal art forms that were considered authentic were the traditional ones, and these were being appropriated for a tourist art market. The art produced by urban Aboriginal people didn’t fit the European expectation of what Aboriginal art should be. However there has been a recent acceptance of Aboriginal art into the fine art category, and the urban/authentic dichotomy that once was assigned to Aboriginal art has been challenged.

The 1990s have seen more recognition given to Aboriginal artists, and to Aboriginal photographers in particular. The works in *Re-take* by contemporary Aboriginal

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photographers address the history of Aboriginal displacement and white Australia’s cultural dominance. However in many of the works this is done with a sense of humour. Of particular significance was the work of Aboriginal artist Rea. The exhibition title Re-take cleverly refers to the process of re-examining and re-positioning the Aboriginal subject in the photographic frame. Rea’s work draws the audience’s attention to the historical treatment of Aboriginal people. The cover of the Re-take catalogue shows an image made by Rea of an Aboriginal woman in a maid’s outfit framed within a toaster. We clearly see the reference to the role of women as domestic servants. The woman is pictured in black and white but the toaster is a constructed image in surreal bright colours. The text accompanying this image read:

SLAVE (sleiv) n., 1. a person legally owned by another and have no freedom of action or right to property.

Perhaps one of the intended messages is that Aboriginal women, although no longer servants, nonetheless continue to be contained within this historical framework. This work is about Aboriginality and speaks as strongly about Aboriginal identity today as it does about the oppressive colonial history to which Aboriginal people have been subjected.

The camera has been an important tool for Aboriginal artists concerned with representing themselves. Morphy discusses the role of photography in helping contemporary Aboriginal artists to assert control over the portrayal of the Aboriginal subject in art:

Photography has been an increasingly important medium for Aboriginal artists. Alana Harris (b. 1966), Brenda Croft and Michael Riley, working in New South Wales, have produced photographs which, as well as documenting aspects of contemporary Aboriginal life, have consciously engaged with their historical position, challenging stereotypes and giving new interpretations to persons and events. Because photography was so commonly used in support of the oppressive colonial regime in Australia, it is now an important resource being used to challenge this history.

Contemporary Aboriginal artists have been challenging the stereotypical representation of Aboriginal people in photography. Leah King-Smith is an Aboriginal artist who works with source imagery from the pictorial collection of the State Library of Victoria. She takes nineteenth century ethnographic images of Aboriginal people and relocates them physically into her own art. Anne Marsh discusses how King-Smith has changed the representation of the Aboriginal subject:

Leah King-Smith’s series of photographs entitled Patterns of Connection shows how the artist addresses the imbalances of power in the ethnographic archive in order to re-establish a position of agency for Aboriginal Australians within visual representation.

King-Smith provides a literal example of the way in which Aboriginal artists use nineteenth century imagery as a basis for their contemporary art. Other artists equally challenge the

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21 Ibid., pp. 404-406.
22 Marsh 1999, p. 114
portrayal of Aboriginal people in colonial imagery, but the reference to such imagery is more subtle.

Agency is a key issue in the Aboriginal subject. Aboriginal photographers have been unified by their engagement with this issue. The camera is in their hands now. The work of Fiona Foley illustrates this. By using herself as the model to recreate the kind of photographs that exoticise ‘primitive other’, she successfully draws attention to this issue, while changing her status from that of a passive object to an active subject. Foley’s Native Blood series (1994) shows a woman adorned with ‘traditional’ artefacts. She wears a grass skirt and beads. She is posed against a studio backdrop with breasts bared. Yet somehow we get a sense that she is consenting. She looks dignified and elegant. It is no surprise that these images are self portraits.

Another contemporary photographer who is changing the way in which Aboriginal people are represented in photography is Tracey Moffatt. Her series Some Lads portrays a group of Aboriginal dancers who are spunky individuals with a spirited sense of humour. In Some Lads 4, two young men are fooling around. One man holds a cloth noose around the other man’s neck. The noose is perhaps a reference to the increasing number of Aboriginal deaths in police custody, yet there is nothing sinister about the image. These men are in control of their situation and are clearly enjoying performing for the camera. This exemplifies the way in which Moffatt uses humour to make serious political statements about Aboriginality. Moffatt’s work refers to the historical treatment of Aboriginal portraiture, particularly nineteenth century studio studies of Aboriginal people. In an artist statement published in Australian Photography: the 1980s, Moffatt states:

The concept behind this series of studio portraits of black male dancers came about in reaction to images of black Australian people I was continually seeing presented around me by photographers in books, magazines and galleries. These images tended to always fit into the realist documentary mode usually reserved for the ‘ethnographic subject’.23

Moffatt’s series Some Lads speaks strongly about nineteenth century ethnographic photography of indigenous Australians. The painted studio backdrop in Some Lads is quite crudely done yet it serves its purpose well. It reminds the viewer that these images are created in a controlled studio environment and references such work as Lindt’s Album of Australian Aboriginals. Furthermore, many of the subjects in Some Lads are photographed with bare chests, as are the subjects in Lindt’s series.

However, by contrast to Lindt’s work, Some Lads portrays its subjects more positively as active individuals. Newton comments on the conscious effort by Moffatt to counter the type of representation of the Aboriginal subject in colonial ethnographic photography:

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23 Ennis 1998, p. 28
Sexuality is often neutralised in dance photography but here [...] the dancers' bared torsos and loose practice [sic] clothes raise the issue of Aboriginal male sexuality and their attractiveness to white women.  

No longer are we presented with a passive subject enacting a white ideal of tribal life. Instead the subjects are active, sexual and autonomous beings who are in control of their own situation. These images reinforce the contemporary discourse around the right for Aboriginal self-determination.

Tracey Moffatt has also made some important films that address the historical position of the Aboriginal subject. Moffatt's 1990 film Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy is a direct response to Charles Chauvel's Jedda from 1955, in which a young Aboriginal girl is taken to be brought up on a farm as a white girl. Moffatt describes Jedda as "an overblown melodramatic and [...] racist film". In Night Cries the interior of the farm house from Jedda is reconstructed. Moffatt has literally re-positioned the set from Jedda into her own film placing it under her direction. The same characters are depicted but some forty years later. The roles here are reversed with the Aboriginal daughter now looking after her white elderly mother. In this film Moffatt places the Aboriginal character in the position of agency and control. It is the white mother now who is totally dependent on her daughter. In Moffatt's films and in her photography the historical position of the passive Aboriginal subject is challenged.

The current political climate surrounding Aboriginal issues is one demanding more and more self-determination by Aboriginal people. Recently major leaps have been made in this direction. An example is the landmark 'Mabo decision' which has led to a complex series of land rights claims by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The bicentennary of European occupation of Australia has been an important catalyst for change. Aboriginal people used the bicentennary as a platform for raising awareness about indigenous issues while the rest of the nation celebrated 'invasion day'. The 1990s have seen increasing public awareness about Aboriginal issues, and about the process of reconciliation. Furthermore there has been a public demand for an official apology to the Aboriginal people for the ways they have been and continue to be treated. It is no coincidence that Aboriginal photographers have also recently found a place in the contemporary art world.

John William Lindt's Album of Australian Aboriginals stands as testimony to the position of nineteenth century Aboriginal people, not only within the photographic frame, but also in the broader context of Australian society. Photographs such as Lindt's supported the displacement of Aboriginal people from their land and the erosion of Aboriginal culture. In a nineteenth century European discourse of scientific rationalism, indigenous culture was

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24 Newton 1995, p. 15  
25 Moffatt 1999, p. 66  
26 Eddie Mabo was the first indigenous Australian to gain recognition for native title in court, which meant recognition of prior ownership of the land by its indigenous inhabitants.
seen as primitive and was studied scientifically. The camera was an instrument used to document Aboriginal people. Nineteenth century imagery of indigenous Australians functioned to reinforce the widely held view that they were a dying race in need of salvation. The camera also functioned to validate scientific studies of Aboriginal people.

The main shift in the representation of Aboriginal people in photography has been to do with agency. The Aboriginal subject has been transformed from a passive object to an active subject of photography. The camera is an important mechanism by which Aboriginal artists are now re-asserting their Aboriginality and challenging the stereotypical representations that pervade Australian history. The reconstruction of colonial imagery helps to unite contemporary Aboriginal artists in finding a post-colonial identity. It is through this forum that contemporary Aboriginal photographers have recently made their mark in the art world. As Aboriginal people are gaining more autonomy and self-determination, Aboriginal artists are gaining more recognition. Photography, once an instrument of cultural genocide, has now become a popular medium through which Aboriginal artists can reclaim the representation of the Aboriginal subject.
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Figure 3
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