book **Photography and Indigenous Rights**

review by Melinda Hinkson

Jane Lydon, *The Flash of Recognition: Photography and the Emergence of Indigenous Rights* (New South Publishing, 2012)

On 12 December 2012, as I sit down to write this review, SBS TV is preparing to switch on Australia's first national free-to-air television service devoted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programming. The launch of NITV in its new free-to-air guise is to be marked by a ceremony and concert later in the day, fully televised of course, staged somewhat predictably against the towering backdrop of Uluru. *The Australian* newspaper's full-page story on the events and history leading to the establishment of a dedicated Indigenous channel is headed 'Culture for All to Share'. Certainly the launch of NITV marks a significant moment in the long and fraught cultural politics of representation in Australia. The choice of Uluru as an appropriate visual landscape for this launch belies a carefully considered strategic choice—why Uluru rather than Redfern, or Kalkarinji, we might ask? Similarly debate continues within and between Aboriginal communities themselves over the relative merits and best approach to soliciting content for NITV.

That this debate occurs, often with considerable passion and investment, is an indication of just how much Aboriginal people have achieved over the past thirty years with respect to the production and public circulation of their own images. Yet it also points to the fragility of this achievement. A survey of Aboriginal visual production would reveal a tremendous volume of work hailing from across the country, from humble community-based video projects through to internationally acclaimed feature films and photomedia. Across this diverse sector, work of enormous diversity in focus and ways of depicting Aboriginal experience continues to be made and broadcast to audiences of varying size and location. Yet the images that circulate in mainstream media continue to wield the greatest influence in shaping public attitudes towards Aboriginal people. So age-old questions continue to be crucially relevant: Who gets to depict Indigenous experience? On whose terms? What is the price of recognition?

Investments in these debates run deep and have a long and complex history. Jane Lydon's new book *The Flash of Recognition: Photography and the Emergence of Indigenous Rights* makes a timely intervention in this field, providing a compelling overview of a complex field and history, and undertaking much insightful analysis of the dynamic ways in which pictures have been put to work over the past century of conflicted Australian identity politics. In these days of tight budgetary pressures on publishers, it is a delight to encounter a book that has been so lavishly illustrated and beautifully produced. New South Books are clearly banking on this title becoming a classic in its field—all the indications are that they have made the right call.

While *The Flash of Recognition* is a visual history of the politics of Indigenous recognition in Australia, Lydon's wide-angle lens of scholarship (to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Deborah Spitulnik) ensures we read this history as shaped by international events and inflected by compelling theoretical debates around photography's capacity to incite change. The result is a stimulating account of a series of entwined processes—the complex and ambiguous power of photography to make distant events visible and thus real, the strategic politics of putting such images to work, and related shifts in public sentiment towards the subjects of those images. Tracing these intersecting movements across time and space, Lydon shows us how photographs function at the level of public feeling, considers the ambiguous outcomes of our emotional responses to such images and identifies the ultimate capacities and limits of photography to transform relations between persons.

One of the most stimulating and important elements of this book is its sweeping account of distinctive shifts in Australian visual culture over the past century. Against the backdrop of her specific interests in the representation of Indigenous people, Lydon provides a fresh angle from which to think about emergent forms of Australian nationalism and the crucial role of photography in the shaping of Australian identity politics across the twentieth century.

Yet while the book stimulates such thinking, Lydon's interests are ultimately more tightly focused. Taking the politics of Indigenous identity as its case material, the central problematic that runs through the book concerns photography's power to make distant suffering real and the question of what modes of response can follow. Given that photography becomes a crucial medium through which Australians come to know Aboriginal people, what is this medium of engagement capable of achieving? Does the deployment of photography in support of humanitarian campaigns necessarily incite empathic responses in the viewer? Do photographs bring us close to their subjects? Can photographs change the way we see these people or do they efface difference? These questions continue to animate much scholarly work in visual studies and Lydon brings them to bear on Australia's visual cultural history. In the process she places Australia in a globalised field, tracking the ways a shared visual language emerged as a result of the accelerated circulation of journalistic photography that coincided with rising social movements for human rights.

Notwithstanding a longer history, Lydon reveals that this complex and powerful role for photography came into its own in the latter part of the Second World War, when shocking images of Nazi atrocity were published and circulated around the world. Lydon argues that such images not only made real the horrific consequences of Hitler's eugenicist campaign they also shaped 'a visual culture that subsequently demanded photographic evidence for distant events'. Photography was crucial in establishing distant suffering as an ever-present element of our late modern experience.

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Lydon cracks open the complexity of photography's workings by way of reflection on her own response as a student fifteen years earlier to a photograph reproduced on the cover of Charles Rowley's *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, a photograph of two Aboriginal men chained at the neck, their eyes trained on the camera, engaging the gaze of those who look upon them. Lydon was jolted by this image. She observes that this jolt had two elements: the photograph showed her that neck-chaining was a historical practice, but it also affected her 'viscerally, emotionally', arousing 'pity and anger on behalf of those men'. The book interrogates this paired process of photography's evidentiary role and its capacity to create empathy. It also tracks the movement of certain images across time and space, and their dynamic accrual of meanings as they travel.

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Struck by the ways images of Aboriginal people chained by the neck have in recent years become pervasively deployed to signify colonial oppression and evoke support for Indigenous rights, Lydon undertakes a historian's quest to find out whether these same images were used to prompt similar responses in the colonial past. She finds to the contrary, that 100 years ago such images were seen in mainstream Australian society as 'evidence for safeguarding progress and for a threat contained'. How and when, Lydon asks, 'did these images assume their present power to confront and shock us?' How did they come to be mobilised in demands for 'better treatment of Aboriginal people'?

She finds that social circumstances come to bear down upon and shape the interpretation of images just as much as the publication of images itself stimulates shifts in public thinking. Before photographs of Aboriginal people neck-chained could evoke cries for justice, the populace had to be better informed about the brutal treatment of those people. Public outcry following a series of massacres in 1920s and 1930s triggered a groundswell of protest. 'A range of factors', Lydon shows us, 'including radicalisation of Indigenous activists, and an acute awareness of international developments surrounding racial thought and the persecution of the Jews, shaped a complex postwar visual culture that entailed a new recognition of Australia's Aboriginal people'.

Lydon shows photography's role in establishing ideological trajectories, such as assimilation's use of 'a visual language of abjection' that pictured Aboriginal people in primitive conditions, as objects of pity. The campaign to improve Aboriginal conditions required activists to show the public a new way of reading photographs, to shift the popular narrative from seeing Aborigines as primitive people to seeing people living in primitive conditions. A problem of Aboriginal inferiority was progressively recast as a problem of the injustice of Australia's treatment of those people.

Activists acquired increasingly sophisticated understandings of the power and potentiality of photography, learning from the 'astute visual politics' of the Black Power movement in the United States, lessons that were deployed most effectively in the demonstrations associated with the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. As Aboriginal people increasingly moved to produce their own self-representation from the 1970s, a new kind of identity politics was born.

Lydon's historical survey ends with the visual culture wars that galvanised public support for the NT Intervention. Arguments about the need to make the circumstances of remote communities visible were front and centre as a raft of legislation was rapidly passed through federal parliament in August 2007. The image of the suffering child was deployed not only in support of 'urgent' and pervasive intervention in the lives of NT Aborigines, but also to discredit the previous policy approach of self-determination. Five years on, it is interesting to reflect upon how quietly such images have faded from view. As the Intervention itself has morphed from 'emergency response' to the more mundane policy of 'closing the gap', so too have the images circulating in the public sphere in support of this way of seeing Aboriginal circumstances changed. The launch of NITV, framed against the backdrop of Uluru and celebrated as 'culture for all to share', reminds us further of the dynamic yet predictable ways in which images of Aboriginal Australia circulate and shape-shift across time. And all the while a new generation of Aboriginal makers of images are watching and responding to this mediascape, honing their own distinctive visions and inventing new ways of bringing Indigenous stories to a public domain. Jane Lydon has given us a wonderful book, brimming with images, with which to contemplate such matters.