

ABSTRACT

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Grantee: University of Melbourne and Sabra Thorner

Title: Indigenizing Photography: Archives, Activism, and New Visual Media in Contemporary Australia.

The research I undertook with the 2008-2009 AIATSIS grant examines the technologies and resources through which Indigenous Australians are fashioning a new visual culture. Other peoples' representations have had extraordinary power over Indigenous lives, memories, and futures; in this project, I have worked to interrogate how Indigenous people are *renegotiating representation* on two different levels: 1) how are Indigenous people/communities taking up photography as a form of cultural activism; and 2) how do individual expressions and/or community goals emerge through collective institutions? Through fieldwork in three different sites, I have been guided by the central question: how are contemporary photographic practices being Indigenized in Australia?

My first phase of research was at the Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT). KHT is an urban Indigenous cultural centre in Melbourne, working to digitize a photographic collection of 47,000 items—including negatives, slides, prints, born digital images; housed in frames, albums, exhibition mounts, packets, and miscellaneous boxes. The range of materials—and roles they play in the Victorian Koorie community—is great, including: snapshots of rallies, marches, and events bequeathed by activists; intimate family and community portraits donated by boardmembers; and high art productions purchased at auction or following an arts-competition.

The second phase of my research was with the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists' Cooperative in Sydney. Boomalli is an avant-garde arts collective, comprised of urban Aboriginal artistactivists, many of whom work in photography to challenge stereotypical notions of Indigeneity shaping the Australian national imaginary. Through Brenda Croft, Destiny Deacon, Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt, r e a, Michael Riley, Christian Thompson, and others, photography has been redefined as a premier visual art form that can be powerfully mobilized in sociopolitical critique. Boomalli is currently undergoing significant reorganization, and so my fieldwork here centered on archival work and interviews with founding and current members, to compile a comprehensive history of this unique institution.

The third phase of my research was with Ara Irititja (AI). AI is a multimedia digital archive developed by remote Pitjantjatjara and Yankunyatjara (PY) communities (collectively: Anangu) across South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory, collaborating with archival and IT consultants since 1994 to radically re-imagine how digital technologies can be used to collect and protect traditional knowledge (and never compromising Indigenous cultural protocols to suit the software). The project is currently undergoing an important transition—from object-based database to a knowledge-based multimedia archive—and works constantly to thoughtfully balance Anangu concerns to keep information/media under local control with the exciting new capabilities of the internet to build a secure, culturally-appropriate knowledge center.

Though my dissertation fieldwork is ongoing, I am struck by several important findings from the last 18 months. In all three of my fieldsites, I have been enlisted as a local historian: KHT, Boomalli, and AI are interested in and want to celebrate their unique histories; they are staffed with interlocutors who engage with my

anthropological project and are eager to have me contribute actively to their respective missions. Multisited fieldwork is cumulative: relationships are ongoing and projects extend and overlap in unanticipated ways. Photography is a multifaceted medium; using it as a starting point has enabled me to consider how digital technologies can be made culturally specific and relevant; how art-making remains a largely uncensored domain and an important realm of social intervention; and how traditional knowledge is being looked after in the twenty-first century. Finally, Indigenous organizations are a site of production of contemporary Aboriginality: through the grappling with perpetually inadequate funding and human resources; the creative deployment of innovative technologies; and the navigation across often fraught relationships among Indigenous stakeholders, as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders, the Koorie Heritage Trust, Boomalli, and Ara Irititja are facilitating change in Australia's visual lexicon and national imaginings.