

2009

# Picture imperfect: re-reading imagery of Aborigines in Walkabout

Mitchell Rolls

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci>

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#)

---

## Citation of this paper:

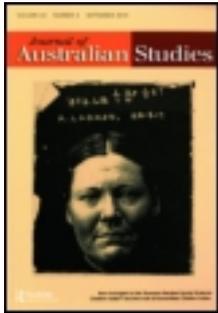
Rolls, Mitchell, "Picture imperfect: re-reading imagery of Aborigines in Walkabout" (2009). *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)*. 354.  
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/354>

This article was downloaded by: [University of Western Ontario]

On: 30 October 2012, At: 13:27

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journal of Australian Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjau20>

### Picture imperfect: re-reading imagery of Aborigines in Walkabout

Mitchell Rolls<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Tasmania,

Version of record first published: 19 Feb 2009.

To cite this article: Mitchell Rolls (2009): Picture imperfect: re-reading imagery of Aborigines in Walkabout, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 33:1, 19-35

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14443050802672494>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## Picture imperfect: re-reading imagery of Aborigines in *Walkabout*

Mitchell Rolls\*

University of Tasmania

The representation of Aborigines in the popular Australian magazine *Walkabout* has attracted the attention of a small number of scholars. For the most part their analyses draw a distinction between the portrayals of primitive natives and those of the emergent modernising Australian nation. It is argued that Aborigines appear as debased, as noble savages, or as bearers of an idealised and imagined traditional culture. These representational strategies are evident in both photographs and text in *Walkabout*. Whilst not necessarily disagreeing with these critiques, more nuanced readings of Aboriginal photographic representation in *Walkabout* are possible. This article seeks to reveal the potential for a more diverse and complex understanding of the images appearing throughout the 1930s.

**Keywords:** Aborigines; Aboriginal representation; photography; *Walkabout*; criticism

The popular monthly Australian magazine *Walkabout* commenced publication in 1934, and continued until 1974. An attempt to revive the magazine in 1978 lasted three issues, with the concluding edition being published in March of that year. The magazine was one of the first initiatives of the Australian National Travel Association (ANTA), and Charles Holmes, a director of ANTA, was *Walkabout's* founding managing editor, a position he held until his retirement in 1957. Whilst *Walkabout* remained conscious of its primary purpose of promoting travel to and throughout Australia, it also sought to bring Australia's rural hinterland, the interior and remote north (from Cape York to the Kimberley) to its predominantly urban readership. It was modelled very loosely (and modestly) on *National Geographic*, and confidently predicted in its first issue that it would 'be Australia's geographic magazine'.<sup>1</sup> However, in comparison with *National Geographic* only a small number of scholars have considered *Walkabout*. Their focus is usually on the magazine's representations of specific subjects of interest, or its role in the history of Australian tourism.<sup>2</sup>

One subject that has drawn several critiques is *Walkabout's* representation of Aborigines, particularly in photographs. These critiques argue that *Walkabout* located Aborigines in the past and denied them a place in the emergent modern nation. M E McGuire, in her discussion of *Walkabout's* influence on popular culture and the then young artist Sidney Nolan, contends that *Walkabout's* photographers employed a number of stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> There is the comic motif where Aborigines confront modernity with naïve and childlike bewilderment. In the instance discussed

---

\*Email: [Mitchell.Rolls@utas.edu.au](mailto:Mitchell.Rolls@utas.edu.au)

Aborigines encounter the vehicle in which the staff photographer (Roy Dunstan) and editor (Charles Holmes) were travelling.<sup>4</sup> Other stereotypes detected by McGuire were that of ‘stone-age man encountering modernity and at once doomed by its superiority, and the noble male athlete, once proud and free, now lost to modernity’.<sup>5</sup> Images and descriptions of the latter, usually set in the natural realm outside of the supposedly despoiling influence of civilisation, emphasised a superb physicality. McGuire provides a psychoanalytical explanation for interest in these fine physiques. It arose, she argues, because of modern man’s anxiety over their manhood: ‘Modern man was shaped not by the elements but by his cosseted mother. He felt emasculated and deprived’.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever anxieties or otherwise were determining the sort of images of Aborigines included in *Walkabout*, McGuire provides no evidence on how contemporaries were reading these images. Nor does she provide any evidence that *Walkabout*’s readership was collectively anxious about emasculation, or that its readership was exclusively or predominantly male. Similarly, no evidence is provided that fear of emasculation was a general condition of the contemporary male population, and hence an affliction likely to be influencing the decisions of the male editor and photographer in their choice of imagery. McGuire’s reading of these images is conjectured rather than demonstrated.

The failure to provide reliable data substantiating how contemporaries were interpreting the images of Aborigines is a problem common to the critiques of *Walkabout*’s representational strategies. Glen Ross, in his analysis of the magazine’s ‘narration of the nation’ throughout its first fifteen years,<sup>7</sup> argues that *Walkabout*’s ‘writers imbibed in a primitivist discourse’ that found Aborigines extant ‘in isolated pockets and facing cultural or biological extinction’.<sup>8</sup> The portrayal of an Aboriginal absence created the space for settlers to fill with their modernist project of opening up the outback and unleashing its imagined productive potential. Whilst Ross inaccurately states that *Walkabout*’s many articles on the interior were always accompanied by visual or textual references to Aborigines, he finds that any images included furthered rather than contradicted the notion of a fading race.<sup>9</sup> Like McGuire, Ross too draws attention to the comic motif, again in an image of Aborigines in Central Australia pondering a car. (see Figure 1)<sup>10</sup>

Jill Barnes too found *Walkabout* employing representational strategies that drew a distinction between primitive natives and progressive whites. Her concern was how the Australian National Travel Association and *Walkabout* constructed the centralian patroller tradition for tourism marketing purposes.<sup>11</sup> In the period of analysis (1929–1958) Barnes identified ‘three dominant tourist gazes’: the ‘heroic imperial gaze’ glorifying discovery and conquest of Australia’s remote regions, and romanticising those exploring and/or working in these areas; and a ‘developmental gaze’ celebrating attempts to unleash the imagined and sometimes realised productive potential and wealth of the interior. As with McGuire and Ross, Barnes also identifies an ‘anthropological gaze’ which ‘framed “traditional” “full-blood” Aborigines and their spiritual connections to “totemic” landscapes as “authentic”, uncorrupted specimens of early humanity, worthy of preservation and scientific study’.<sup>12</sup> Barnes finds important exceptions to the portrayal of Aborigines as a fading race ill-equipped to survive modernity, but these exceptions are insufficient to counter the prevailing gaze. Yet we still do not know from Barnes what contemporaries were making of the images under scrutiny.



Figure 1. 'Coiffures for Men: Australian Aborigines', photograph by Frank Hurley, *Walkabout*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1941, p. 22.

The Aboriginal academic Lynette Russell's analysis of imagery of Aborigines in *Walkabout* is in keeping with the arguments of the above critiques. She found that Aborigines were depicted as being outside the influence of modernity and at best exemplars of a languishing noble primitivism. Russell asked two things of the images: did they 'reiterate and crystallise the essentialist and humanistic principles which stressed sameness'; and did they 'emphasise and reproduce conservative social hierarchies'.<sup>13</sup> Russell concluded in the affirmative and she discerned four interrelated themes. Firstly, Russell argues that the imagery propounded the notion that Aboriginal culture was phallogocentric. Secondly, the images portrayed Aborigines as being mute and anonymous. Thirdly, the images demonstrated a primitivist, romantic bias towards Aborigines as the last of the noble savages. Fourthly, Russell argues the images promoted the notion that for Aborigines assimilation to dominant cultural and hegemonic values was the only viable alternative to cultural and physical exhaustion.<sup>14</sup>

The questions asked of *Walkabout's* images in the above critiques and the conclusions drawn are similar to those made by scholars critiquing the imagery published in *National Geographic*. Few depart from the overarching argument of Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins in their 1993 text *Reading National Geographic*.<sup>15</sup> Lutz and Collins examined through the apparatus of current cultural studies theory approximately 600 randomly selected photographs published between 1950 and

1986.<sup>16</sup> They discern an agenda at odds with *Geographic's* banal, cheerful wholesomeness. Underscored by classical (apolitical) rather than progressive (politicised) humanism, the ostensible difference of the imaged Other is ultimately rendered familiar. The Other's Third World impoverishment, wars and oppression, and on the other hand their exotica, are subordinated to *Geographic's* appeals to an underlying universal human nature. Instead of revealing difference and its attendant anomalies, misunderstandings, discord, tensions, inscrutability and demanding activism,<sup>17</sup> Lutz and Collins find a notion of sameness in difference is promoted. They argue that *National Geographic* constructs a world in which 'we are all alike under the skin',<sup>18</sup> which in turn 'allows us to pursue the illusory goal of wholeness'.<sup>19</sup> This enables *Geographic* to promote what Lutz and Collins would regard as the conceit that the world of Others is comprised 'of people basically like us'.<sup>20</sup> In this way American imperialism and foreign policy, let alone any consequences, are afforded no scrutiny. The failure to engage at this level is not that of a submissive kowtowing to a dominant western imperialism, but as a knowing, complicit agent of it. *National Geographic*, Lutz and Collins proclaim, 'may be assigned a position within the class structure and foreign policy interests of the United States'.<sup>21</sup>

Lutz's and Collins' critique of *National Geographic* is unexceptional, in that few critics disagree with them. For example, Alison Nordström's examination of photographs of Samoan women, landscapes and culture which appeared in *Geographic* between 1898 and 1985, concludes that the images and their accompanying text 'underscores the *Geographic's* unchanging role as a vehicle for capitalist and imperialist ideology'.<sup>22</sup> What is more, the visual images contributed (and presumably still contribute) to a 'common vocabulary ... by which the colonisers chose to understand the colonised'.<sup>23</sup>

As do the critics of *National Geographic*, the critics of *Walkabout* ascribe it agency. *Walkabout* was not simply beholden to a late colonialist ideology. Rather, it was intent on promulgating representations of Aborigines that naturalised settler ascendancy and ultimately Aboriginal acquiescence: either through dying out (those whom were traditionally-oriented), or being 'saved' through assimilation. As with *Geographic's* almost jaunty wholesomeness, Russell does detect in *Walkabout's* 'cheery bush nationalism'<sup>24</sup> 'a well-meaning (if perhaps paternal) interest in Aboriginal people and culture',<sup>25</sup> but this does little to ameliorate her critique.

### Reading for settler discernment

Photography has been described as a 'midwife to modernity',<sup>26</sup> and as such the key criticisms of *Walkabout's* portrayal of Aborigines are not without foundation. *Walkabout's* inaugural editor, Charles Holmes, was certainly aware of the role photography could play in revealing the interior to *Walkabout's* predominantly urban readership and in conveying symbols of progress. To this end *Walkabout* not only paid its correspondents and photographers well, it employed Roy Dunstan as its staff cameraman, and the published black and white photographs are of high quality. Aborigines were a crucial symbol delineating the imagined and desired progress of the settler nation. Their apparent primitivism stood in stark contrast to the modern. Hence on this issue *Walkabout's* portrayal of Aborigines in some of the imagery included was hardly arguing against contemporary orthodoxies, at least explicitly.

On other matters, however, it is arguable that *Walkabout* was contesting orthodoxies. This is particularly evident in its concern for overcoming settler diffidence about Australia's interior and the contemporary construal of settler angst.<sup>27</sup> Instead of finding the landscapes of the interior and remote north fearful and loathsome, an interest in and enthusiastic appreciation of Australia's ruggedness prevails. *Walkabout* was concerned with making settler Australians feel more at home in the country in which they dwelt. In the early decades its focus was on the interior, in educating settlers (and others) about the interior, and in boosting the imagined potential of the region. Aborigines were by and large displaced. They were, however, in the pages and therein lays the rub. As already raised, one significant problem facing critics, and no doubting the difficulty of overcoming it, is that little endeavour is made to reveal how this Aboriginal material was viewed or read by contemporaries. An assumed ideology is grafted upon contemporary consumption. It is taken for granted that specific and current readings of race were the filters through which *Walkabout's* readership interpreted the photographs of Aborigines and other related material.

An early commentator (in 1859) on photography saw no disjunction between the signifier and the signified and described photography as 'an angel copier; a God-like machine of which light and sunshine is the animating Promethean fire'.<sup>28</sup> The above critiques of *National Geographic* and *Walkabout* do not give credence to this opinion. Rather, they follow what is now convention and elaborate the point that the meaning of imagery is discerned from a broader context, not from the image alone. Hence '[m]eaning is dependent on insertion within a network of other signifying practices, rather than on the formal properties of the individual image'.<sup>29</sup> This network of signifying practices lends further credence and an arguable veracity to the cited critiques. Photography was/is one method through which colonisers both represented and took control of the physical world. It quickly became a part of the technology facilitating the appropriation of the Other and the placing of them into a symbolic structure which retained notions of racial and cultural superiority.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Aborigines were often depicted as beings of the past, a people ill equipped to survive modernity and who ultimately would fade before triumphant settler progress. A postage stamp issued for the Centenary of Victoria in 1934 exemplifies this (see Figure 2). An Aboriginal man, clad only in loin cloth and carrying spears, stands on a grassy Yarra bank overlooking the river to the arisen city on the opposite bank.

Less obviously triumphant is the photo of the 'head of Australian Aboriginal' that adorns the front cover of the first edition of *Walkabout* (see Figure 3).<sup>31</sup> This is the only photograph of an Aborigine in this edition. Nevertheless, this inaugural issue included articles by Arthur Upfield – 'Coming down with cattle' (about droving)<sup>32</sup>; and Ion Idriess – 'The Kimberleys'.<sup>33</sup> Both articles extolled the productive potential of Australia's remote regions. Also included in this issue were photographic spreads of '... (sic) and the cities', showing a bustling Martin Place, St Kilda Road, Circular Quay and 'Brisbane, from across Brisbane River',<sup>34</sup> advertisements enticing one to 'Know the thrill of driving the Ford V-8',<sup>35</sup> and exhortations to travel to exotic locations and stay in luxury modern hotels.<sup>36</sup> Inserting 'head of Australian Aboriginal' into this network of signifying practices of modernity one can readily, perhaps too quickly, read the cover image as a headstone to a culture and a people, a people destined not to share in the prosperity of the emergent modern nation.



Figure 2. Postage stamp, 'Centenary of Victoria', 2 June 1934. This material has been reproduced with permission of the Australian Postal Corporation. The original work is held in the National Philatelic Collection. Image supplied by National Archives of Australia: A1200, L20314.

Whilst several editions contained no imagery of Aborigines, from the first edition in November 1934 to December 1940 over 120 photographs of Aborigines, or photographs inclusive of Aborigines, appear. The second issue for example, contained thirteen photographs of Aborigines, either as sole subject or as participants within a broader frame. Nine of these illustrate an article by the anthropologist and photographer Donald Thomson.<sup>37</sup> Another photograph is of a man adorned for ceremony, and is clearly in the anthropological mode yet there is no accompanying explanation, other than the image being one of the 'Inland oddities' of Robert Croll's article promoting the tourist potential of inland Australia.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, whilst a very few of the above-mentioned 120 images do perhaps belong to a comic motif, and others suggest the noble natural male athlete doomed by modernity, the overall impression is that of a continuing, vibrant presence. More than weight of sheer number of photographs alone, this presence is instructed by the diversity and type of images. Some of the images such as the young 'Aborigine making fire by friction' could evoke a timelessness threatened by modernity (see Figure 4).<sup>39</sup> However the image also provides clear evidence of young Aborigines continuing to exercise highly skilled traditional practices. In doing so it compromises any certainty that modernity would necessarily extinguish Aboriginal culture.

*Walkabout* emphasised both change and continuity. It did not focus exclusively on traditional practices or imagery. It included many images of Aborigines participating

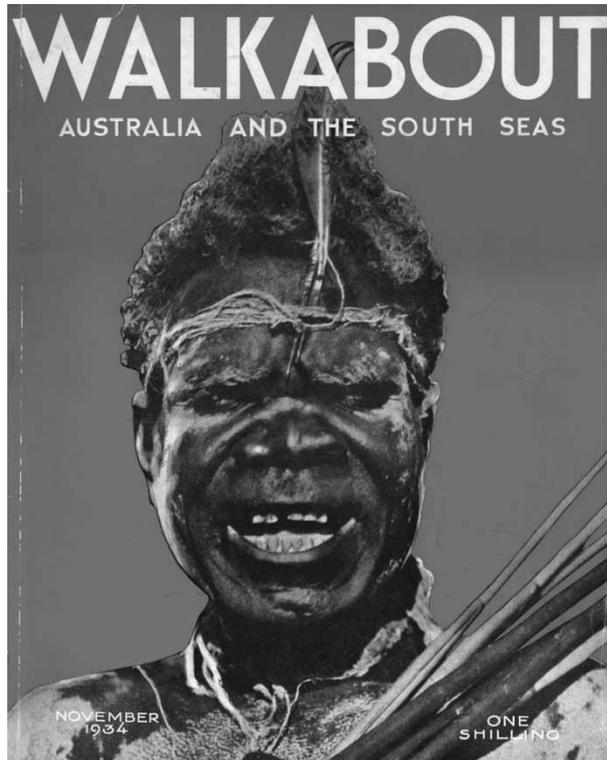


Figure 3. 'Head of Australian Aboriginal', photograph by E O Hoppé, Cover Design, *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1934, front cover.

in the broader economy. Therefore readers could see that alongside the maintenance of at least some traditional practices, Aborigines were adapting to sweeping change. Photographs of Aborigines yandying for tin,<sup>40</sup> of an Aboriginal family on a dray pulled by a team of donkeys (see Figure 5),<sup>41</sup> '[w]hite and native stockmen in Western Australia's cattle country'<sup>42</sup> and Torres Strait Islanders working in the sardine industry,<sup>43</sup> show Aborigines adapting to and participating in the sort of developments, progress and opportunities manifesting in the remote regions. And whilst imagery depicting traditional activities predominantly featured Aboriginal males, suggestive of phallogocentric cultures as Russell contends,<sup>44</sup> Aboriginal women were depicted participating in the changing economy, such as yandying for tin and salting buffalo hides.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, whilst most photographers contributing to *Walkabout* were male and their access to traditional women's practices would have been restricted, *Walkabout* more broadly did privilege a masculine environment in accord with the era.

In the January 1935 edition there is a photograph of a policeman being floated across a river on a paperbark raft with the aid of two Aborigines (see Figure 6).<sup>46</sup> It has a straightforward caption: 'A north Australian policeman crosses a river on a paperbark raft'. Lynette Russell argues that this image falls within the 'silent and anonymous' category, whereby the caption fails to record the presence of the Aboriginal men and that their 'silence and anonymity ... implies a passivity which



Figure 4. 'Aborigine making fire by friction', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 8, 1935, p. 55.



Figure 5. 'Station blacks at Innamincka, Western Queensland, about to leave on a "walk-about"', *Walkabout*, vol. 2, no. 7, 1936, p. 37.



Figure 6. 'A north Australian policeman crosses a river on a paper-bark raft', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1935, p. 21.

their cooperation denies'.<sup>47</sup> Russell adds that 'Silence is a powerful and effective technique for subordinating the colonised'.<sup>48</sup> However, not only is silence, particularly refusing the demand to speak, also a powerful tool for the colonised themselves, as it is for many marginalised and/or oppressed groups, but Russell's reading of this image is at best overly deterministic. The caption, which does not name any of the three human subjects, is simply descriptive of the event. It provides information that is not apparent from looking at the photograph. We only know there is a white man sitting on what might be a make-shift raft in a large body of water, with two Aboriginal men standing chest-deep in front. Even when considered in situ within the illustrative context of Idriess' article on 'Where the wild men roam',<sup>49</sup> or in the broader context of the magazine itself, the image allows for other more sanguine readings. For example, rather than being silent and anonymous, the photograph gives the two Aboriginal men considerable agency. They appear strong, confident, relaxed and in charge. The policeman appears out of place, anxious and vulnerable. The Aboriginal men show no outward signs of dispirited subjugation or physical decline in the face of significant change, but instead bespeak of an enduring, vital presence.

Furthermore, *Walkabout* seldom named any person appearing in any photograph. The white 'crocodile-shooter, North Australia', adorning the cover of the February 1938 edition,<sup>50</sup> is as anonymous as the two Aborigines appearing in the photograph 'Aborigines with a small crocodile, caught in the Finniss River, Northern

Territory'.<sup>51</sup> The Aborigines climbing the coconut palms on the cover of the August 1938 edition,<sup>52</sup> and the Aborigine climbing a tree with the aid of lawyer-cane,<sup>53</sup> share anonymity with the white axeman scaling a tree in the cover photograph of the July 1936 edition.<sup>54</sup> These are not exceptions, but are typical of *Walkabout's* apparent reluctance to name anybody appearing in any images. The 'silence and anonymity' that Russell finds a characteristic of images of Aborigines in *Walkabout* is a characteristic shared by almost all who are represented, whether Aborigine, some other indigene, or settler.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1930s at least, *Walkabout* did elide images of urban Aborigines (its focus on the remote and interior contributing to this elision). It did suppose along with contemporary opinion that in the words of Idriess the interior would soon 'know [the "black man"] no more'.<sup>55</sup> This is notwithstanding the fact that much of its imagery of Aborigines undermined this supposition, a supposition that spurred the era of salvage anthropology that rushed to record authentic Aboriginal culture before 'it was too late'. The belief that change equated to cultural degradation has for two decades or more now been critiqued, and one is instructed to find cultural continuity amidst any changes wrought. Challenging this well-intentioned shift in understanding is the fact that Aborigines themselves are now arguing that their cultural integrity is under threat from an array of provocations. To cite but one example, in 2004 Rodney Dillon, the then Tasmanian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission state commissioner, declared in a spirited attack following prosecution for a breach of the fisheries act, that his fines represented 'the codification, erosion and legislative genocide of [his] living culture . . .'.<sup>56</sup> I would simply point out that the blunt critiques of salvage anthropology and critiques of the general if not popular understanding of cultural change as cultural loss need considerable refinement in the light of Aborigines now arguing this very thing. If *Walkabout* is to be held on this account as an exemplar of a mindset more pernicious than perspicacious in terms of its representation of Aboriginal peoples and cultures, then Aboriginal foreboding equating cultural change with cultural destruction similarly warrants critiquing.

Not only are the critiques of *Walkabout's* imagery cited above simplistic and deterministic, their negative portrayal of the images under scrutiny is in accord with Susan Sontag's relentless assessment that 'to photograph people is to violate them'.<sup>57</sup> Such understanding carries over into analysis of an image's reception. This raises the vast field of reception theory explicating the interrelationships between text and reader; however this is largely outside the scope of this article. The cited critiques of *Walkabout* do not engage with reception theory. There is insufficient data available on how this imagery was being negotiated by contemporaries, and such information can no longer be reliably obtained. Nevertheless, in the above critiques a reader is given no latitude to make of an image what they will. A singular reading endorsing a particular politics of representation is privileged over an assumed unlikelihood that other readings might be realised or even possible. Readers are not privileged with any discerning faculty. Within this analytical framework photographs are 'objects of consumption', not 'occasions for interpretation'.<sup>58</sup> On this premise Lutz and Collins confidently declare that '[u]nder most circumstances, the photographer's gaze and the viewer's gaze overlap'.<sup>59</sup> And yet they cite a number of readers whose responses to photographs undermine their argument:

A lot of times [*National Geographic*] makes me think about things outside of my own little life, I mean, even if things are going good or bad, you know, you get still caught up in your own world. And, just being exposed to that stuff, you know, makes me think of what other people have, you know, or what they don't have. So, it just makes me think more. So, that's why I like it.<sup>60</sup>

If this young man remains within the embrace of the aforementioned vehicle of capitalist and imperialist ideology that *National Geographic* is said to be,<sup>61</sup> then at the very least he is thinking and asking questions. For him, like others who responded similarly, *National Geographic* is an occasion for interpretation, not passive consumption.

As discussed, none of the critiques cited above provide any evidence demonstrating that *Walkabout's* readerships' interpretation of the images is congruent with their argument. Rather, the critics presume that when *Walkabout's* images of Aborigines are inserted into the 'network of other signifying practices', then their meaning is manifest and is imbibed, consciously or otherwise, by readers. Alternative readings are not allowed for, nor even the possibility of interpretation. Little attempt is made to situate the images in their own historical context. Instead, the images are read in light of today's interpretative tools. However, whatever signifying practices inform the reception of these images, there is every reason to think that readers could arrive at disparate interpretations of the same image.<sup>62</sup> Irrespective of signifying context both within and without *Walkabout*, and whatever the failings or otherwise of the captions, photographs do not present a 'single privileged message' to be drawn 'in univocal fashion'.<sup>63</sup> Or as Victor Burgin notes, '[b]eyond what is seen in the image ... there are many stories to be construed from what is seen ... The photographic image can carry a large number of different meanings. It is "polysemic"' (his emphasis).<sup>64</sup> Commenting on audience response to anthropological photography, Iskander Mydin suggests it is 'as varied as photographs themselves: nostalgia and historical interest, curiosity, anger (at seeing some anthropological subject stripped, measured and photographed) and voyeurism'. Such responses need not be mutually exclusive.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, whatever the intentions of a photographer and whatever the ideological apparatus in which the imagery is sited and functions, readers of the images need not simply, inevitably and unreflectively sup from the same interpretative cup.

This is not to exaggerate the potential of divergent interpretations. Any reader responses to images that are at variance to how critics are reading them do not, as Lutz and Collins remind us, necessarily have consequence insofar as transforming the lives of those depicted.<sup>66</sup> But at the very least any deviating responses do not fit comfortably with the argument that readers of such images are consumers, not interpreters, complicit in a nationalist agenda. In defence of *National Geographic* and contra Lutz and Collins, Stephen Greenblatt surmises that 'for all its flaws, [*National Geographic*] seems ... to be doing something immensely valuable: establishing a frame that at least a few readers every month will be driven to push beyond; inviting the beginning of moral awareness; creating a representation that makes it possible to begin to situate oneself in a vastly larger world'.<sup>67</sup> I argue that *Walkabout* too, in a more local and constrained context—it sought to bring readers home to Australia, not bring the world within its embrace—provided grist to the curious, and exposed urban dwellers to an Australia that many were unlikely to witness firsthand. In this

respect photographs were crucial. (Interestingly, according to *National Geographic's* own marketing studies 53 per cent of current subscribers to the magazine only look at the pictures and their captions).<sup>68</sup>

If the photographs in *Walkabout* were responsible for engendering diversity of response, and if they assisted in opening up the interior of Australia to an urban readership's sense of wonder and curiosity, then our critique of its imagery of Australia's indigenes needs either considerable refinement, or evidence that the imagery did solicit a univocal response along the lines suggested above. Even when the images are inserted into the wider network of signifying practices that facilitate, at least to some extent from today's perspective, simplistic readings of them, the possibilities of multivariate responses remain. Whilst any such response would not have necessarily assisted in the transformation of the daily lives of Aborigines, before we can even begin to understand the images of Aborigines in *Walkabout* then we must countenance the fact that readers bring different interpretations to what they read. To bludgeon by implication *Walkabout's* readership with the crude implement of accusation that their reading of imagery was in some ways a violation of Aborigines, denies readers their own powers of scrutiny, critique, and discernment. It also marks with the taint of disdain – at best – any use Aborigines might have had and have for such imagery.

### Reading for indigenous agency

In examining Johannes Lindt's late nineteenth-century studio portraits of Aborigines Anne Maxwell, like McGuire does for *Walkabout's* images, locates them within a psychoanalytic framework. Rather than fear of emasculation, however, the popularity of the images, according to Maxwell, arose from a 'mood of nostalgia' generated by increasing discomfort over Aboriginal dispossession and the sometimes if not often violent means it was achieved. Lindt's images 'allowed white settler audiences to recoup their lost innocence by projecting themselves into the idealised world of the Aborigine uncontaminated by European colonisation'.<sup>69</sup> Further:

[b]y converting the spectacle of the Aborigines' displacement into an object of beauty, Lindt ensured that their distress was kept at arm's length. But he also ensured that his audience could exorcise any feelings of regret they experienced through the display of sentiment. Rather than hiding the Aborigines' abject condition, he transmuted it into a commodity for the social demonstration of pity.<sup>70</sup>

Few of the images of Aborigines appearing in *Walkabout* were studio portraits, although a number were obviously posed and carefully constructed. Few if any afforded settler consumers the indulgent exculpation that Maxwell attributes to Lindt's earlier portraits. The images were too many and too varied to allow for such a uniform response. And whilst some of the anthropologically-inspired images allude to a presumed fading past, and some of these (amongst others) contrast modernity with a supposed primitivism, the abundant presence of Aborigines, often pursuing the same or similar activities to the settlers depicted, contradict the textual proclamations of Aboriginal acquiescence before triumphant white settler progress.

Hence any reader reading *Walkabout's* photographs alone was exposed to many images of Aborigines, both young and old, continuing their cultural practices. They were also exposed to many photographs indicating that Aborigines were not doomed

by the superiority of modernity, but instead were engaged participants in the changes being wrought upon their lands. Readers of both text and photograph were therefore confronted by contradiction: the images demonstrated extant Aboriginalities – both ‘traditional and ‘modern’ – that many articles displaced (recall Idriess’ lament that the interior would soon ‘know [the “black man”] no more’).<sup>71</sup>

In the critiques I have cited photography is yet another implement of oppressive and repressive colonial and imperial power. Even in its capacity to bear witness, however compromised a witness a photograph is, the images are afforded little capacity to serve a liberating function. Maxwell’s analysis of photographs taken of indigenous peoples between 1850 and 1915 concludes most ‘were racist in tone’ and ‘contributed to white hegemony in various ways’.<sup>72</sup> She argues that ‘it was only when colonised peoples became the subject of images that recorded transformations brought about by colonialism that they were able to use photography as a resource in their struggle for equality and recognition’.<sup>73</sup> Such a reading affords both settler-readers and Aborigines little independent agency, let alone affording Aborigines their own consumptive interests and desires. In Foucauldian terms, both Maxwell and the cited critiques of *Walkabout* are complicit in constructing and defending the very ‘regime of truth’ they ostensibly find fault with. Their criticism does not invert or contest this regime, but instead, operating wholly within its discursive domain they continue to define and bolster it. I recognise I am reading Foucault against the grain, but if ‘[p]hotography has been historically important to the formation of the discourses of the body which have been such a vital constituent of disciplinary power,’<sup>74</sup> a thesis I do not dispute, then critique that continues to locate the subject bodies as abject victims within the same discursive framework is complicit in exercising the very disciplinary power it seeks to subvert.

In his essay ‘Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human sciences’ Jacques Derrida discusses the inevitability of employing concepts drawn from the same system that one is criticising. ‘[W]e cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest’.<sup>75</sup> Recognising, at least to some extent, problems that this inevitability posed for her analysis of colonial photography and exhibitions, Maxwell notes in her preface that she is ‘aware that, in writing a book that reproduces the racist imagery belonging to the Victorian era, I am effectively enacting a second-order violence’.<sup>76</sup> It is not only the imagery that should be of concern to Maxwell, for as with Lutz and Collins, Nordström, McGuire, Ross, Barnes and Russell,<sup>77</sup> Maxwell’s argument too relies on ‘the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it [is] seek[ing] to contest’.

I am not suggesting here anything as puerile (yet faddish) as this matter could be better circumvented by inclusion of an Aboriginal voice. Aborigines too, are trapped by the discourses as Russell’s papers demonstrate.<sup>78</sup> But admitting to the possibility that imagery may be doing something in addition to operating within the claimed oppressive regimes of truth is perhaps a way of addressing this. Furthermore, Aborigines are also consumers of imagery. The imagery purportedly disclosing the last of type in their so-called natural state and setting, which as noted attracts trenchant criticism, is often and for a number of differing reasons valued by Aborigines. It is valued even though they are aware of the extent and nature of the critiques the images now attract.<sup>79</sup> Also valued are Norman Tindale’s stark, unflattering mug-shot type photographs of Aboriginal heads and profiles, often

taken at the same time as were intrusive physical measurements. These photographs, especially for descendants long separated from immediate and close family, provide poignant links to heritage and mementos of family perhaps never met and now out of reach.<sup>80</sup> Michael Aird, for example, tells of how he has

often seen Aboriginal people look past the stereotypical way in which their relatives and ancestors have been portrayed, because they are just happy to be able to see photographs of people who play a part in their family's history.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, by the time *Walkabout* commenced publication in 1934 an increasing number of Aborigines (though not necessarily those in remote areas) were able to afford cameras and associated costs and were taking their own photographs.<sup>82</sup>

Of significance here is that Aborigines are consumers of the imagery that attracts scholarly criticism, they have reason to read these images in ways other than the ways the critiques argue they should be interpreted, and from the 1930s onwards, when *Walkabout* commenced publication, Aborigines were increasingly making use of the medium of photography themselves. Such mundane and private uses of photographs and photography might not obviously be a source of transformation of sometimes squalid conditions or a useful tool in the struggle for equality and recognition. However, in interpreting the photographs and the medium against the stereotypical portrayals and finding significance and function beyond the parameters of their critique, such uses of the photographs undermine the authority and persuasiveness of the dominant critical discourse. It is possible that *Walkabout's* readers too, amongst whom were Aborigines, were reading the photographs in disruptive ways. Confronted by imagery attesting to the continued presence of Aborigines and their humanity – a humanity eliciting both difference and sameness – *Walkabout's* readership had ample reason to see beyond the stereotypical motifs privileged by the critics. The critics have not allowed for nuance. They have not countenanced the capacity for reader interpretation. Nor have they countenanced Aboriginal interests in photographs and photography. The possibility of Aboriginal agency in any of *Walkabout's* imagery is refused. These failures and refusals suggest a will to find a politics of representation, not a will to find and understand what range of views penetrated *Walkabout's* audience, or the audience's responses to those views.

## Notes

1. Editorial, *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 November, 1934, p. 7.
2. For example, on Uluru in *Walkabout* see Michael Cathcart, 'Uluru' in Tim Bonyhady & Tom Griffiths (eds), *Words for Country*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2002, p. 215. On the Australian National Travel Association and its role in founding *Walkabout* see Jim Davidson & Peter Spearritt, *Holiday Business: Tourism in Australia since 1870*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2000, pp. 76–82.
3. M E McGuire, 'Whiteman's walkabout', *Meanjin*, vol. 52, no. 3, 1993, pp. 517–25.
4. McGuire, 'Whiteman's walkabout', p. 518.
5. McGuire, 'Whiteman's walkabout', p. 518.
6. McGuire, 'Whiteman's walkabout', p. 519.
7. Glen Ross, "'The fantastic face of the continent': the Australian geographical *Walkabout* magazine", *Southern Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1999, pp. 27–41.
8. Ross, 'The fantastic face', p. 28.
9. Ross, 'The fantastic face', p. 29.

10. Ross, 'The fantastic face', p. 30. See also 'A meeting with natives of the Arunta tribe' (photographer Frank Hurley) in Frank Hurley, 'The red centre: sidelights on a motor tour from Adelaide to Alice Springs', *Walkabout*, vol. 6, no. 12, 1 October, 1940, p. 9.
11. Jill Barnes, 'Crystallising identities: the imagining of the centralian patroller tradition for tourism marketing purposes, 1929–1958', *Strehlow Conference: Traditions in the Midst of Change*, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, 2002, pp. 151–67.
12. Barnes, 'Crystallising identities', p. 152.
13. Lynette Russell, *Savage Imaginings: Historical and Contemporary Constructions of Australian Aboriginalities*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2001, p. 23. See also Lynette Russell, 'Going *Walkabout* in the 1950s: images of "traditional" Aboriginal Australia', *The Olive Pink Society Bulletin*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1994, pp. 4–8.
14. Russell, *Savage Imaginings*, pp. 25–6.
15. Catherine A Lutz & Jane L Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 2003.
16. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, p. 13.
17. See Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, pp. 164–65, 263.
18. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, p. 166; see also p. 61.
19. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, p. 167; see also pp. 3, 61, 277.
20. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, p. 280.
21. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, p. 11; see also Lisa Bloom, 'Constructing whiteness: popular science and *National Geographic* in the age of multiculturalism', *Configurations*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1994, pp. 15–32.
22. Alison Devine Nordström, 'Wood nymphs and patriots: depictions of Samoans in *The National Geographic Magazine*, *Visual Sociology*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1992, p. 49.
23. Nordström, 'Wood nymphs', p. 49.
24. Cathcart, 'Uluru', p. 215.
25. Russell, *Savage Imaginings*, p. 25.
26. Roger Hall, Gordon Dodds & Stanley Triggs in Brian Osborne, 'Looking at the world through tinted lenses', *Queen's Quarterly*, vol. 100, no. 4, 1993, p. 871.
27. See Mitchell Rolls, 'Reading *Walkabout* in the 1930s', *Australian Studies*, forthcoming.
28. Cited in Christopher Pinney, 'The parallel histories of anthropology and photography' in Elizabeth Edwards (ed.), *Anthropology and Photography: 1860–1920*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1992, p. 74.
29. Christopher Pinney, 'Underneath the Banyan tree: William Crooke and photographic depictions of caste' in Edwards, *Anthropology*, pp. 165–66.
30. Even after the waning of the overtly evolutionary Social Darwinist models, the notion of racial and cultural superiority endured. See Elizabeth Edwards, 'Introduction' in Edwards, *Anthropology*, p. 6.
31. E O Hoppé, 'Head of Australian Aboriginal', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 November, 1934, (photograph, cover image).
32. Arthur Upfield, 'Coming down with cattle', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 November, 1934, pp. 9–15.
33. Ion Idriess, 'The Kimberleys (north-west Australia)', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 November, 1934, pp. 32–4.
34. *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 November, 1934, pp. 30–1.
35. *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 November, 1934, p. 51.
36. *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 November, 1934, pp. 43, 53, 58, 60, 62, 63, 65.
37. Donald Thomson, 'Across Cape York peninsular with a pack team: a thousand-mile trek in search of unknown native tribes', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1 December, 1934, pp. 21–31.
38. Robert Croll, 'Inland oddities', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1 December, 1934, pp. 37–43, 57.
39. See 'Our cameraman's walkabout', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 8, 1 June, 1935, p. 55.
40. See John K Ewers, 'Yandying for tin at Moolyella', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 7, 1 May, 1935, pp. 23–4, (photograph on p. 24 by C Longmore). A yandy is a shallow hand-held dish used in mining. Yandying is a winnowing process achieved by rhythmically rocking material in a yandy. Aborigines often used coolamons, a wooden dish carved from trees or branches, as a yandy.

41. See A B Haines, 'Our station blacks', *Walkabout*, vol. 2, no. 7, 1 May, 1936, p. 37.
42. See E Morrow, 'Mustering "clean-skins"', *Walkabout*, vol. 5, no. 5, 1 March, 1939, p. 36; see also Haines, 'Our station blacks', pp. 38–41.
43. See W H McFarlane, 'Sardine Industry', *Walkabout*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1 December, 1937, p. 68.
44. Russell, *Savage Imaginings*, p. 26.
45. See Ewers, 'Yandying', pp. 23–4; Arthur Barclay, 'With the buffalo hunters', *Walkabout*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1 February, 1938, p. 18.
46. See 'A north Australian police officer crosses a river in a paper-bark raft' in Ion Idriess, 'Where the wild men roam: experiences travelling north of the King Leopold ranges in the Kimberleys north-western Australia', *Walkabout*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1 January, 1935, p. 21.
47. Russell, *Savage Imaginings*, pp. 27, 28.
48. Russell, *Savage Imaginings*, p. 28.
49. Idriess, 'Where the wild men', pp. 17–21.
50. 'Crocodile-shooter, North Australia', *Walkabout*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1 February, 1938, cover image.
51. *Walkabout*, vol. 4, no. 11, 1 September, 1938, p. 32.
52. 'Aboriginal North Australia', *Walkabout*, vol. 4, no. 10, 1 August, 1938, cover image.
53. 'Tree-climbing with lawyer-cane, Palm Island, Queensland', *Walkabout*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1 November, 1935, p. 59.
54. "'The Climber", Powelltown, Victoria', *Walkabout*, vol. 2, no. 9, 1 July, 1936, cover image.
55. Idriess, 'The Kimberleys', p. 33.
56. Kane Young, 'Surprise Aboriginal ambush stuns Greens', *Mercury*, 17 February 2004, p. 8. In Tasmania Aborigines are permitted to take abalone without an amateur fishing licence. They are, however, bound by the same quota and size limits as amateur fishing licence holders. Dillon was prosecuted and fined for having too many abalone in his possession.
57. Cited in Pinney, 'The parallel histories', p. 75.
58. Victor Burgin in Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, p. 194, fn. 6. Reception theory considers reader negotiation of received hegemonic definitions, and analysis is sensitive to the fact that readers parochially adapt dominant definitions according to their own particularity. In short the reader is afforded agency, an agency that has the potential to destabilise the sort of textual determinism assumed in the cited critiques of *Walkabout's* imagery. See Dave Morely, 'Texts, readers, subjects' in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe & Paul Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language*, Hutchinson & Co., London, 1980, pp. 162–73; Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/decoding' in Hall *et al*, *Culture, Media*, pp. 128–38.
59. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, p. 193.
60. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, p. 260, fn. 1.
61. Nordström, 'Wood nymphs', p. 49.
62. See Max Quanchi, 'The power of pictures: Learning-by-looking at Papua in illustrated newspapers and magazines', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 35, no. 123, 2004, p. 39.
63. Georges Mounin in Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: a Cultural History*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 28; see also pp. 27–9.
64. Victor Burgin, 'Art, commonsense and photography' in Jessica Evans (ed.), *The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography*, Rivers Oram Press, London, 1997, p. 83.
65. Iskander Mydin, 'Historical images – changing audiences' in Edwards, *Anthropology*, p. 250.
66. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*, pp. 260, 280, and *passim*.
67. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Kindly visions', *New Yorker*, vol. 69, no. 33, 1993, p. 20.
68. Lutz & Collins, *Reading* p. 76.
69. Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the 'Native' and the Making of European Identities*, Leicester University Press, London, 2000, p. 140.
70. Maxwell, *Colonial Photography*, pp. 140–2.
71. Idriess, 'The Kimberleys', p. 33.
72. Maxwell, *Colonial Photography*, p. ix.
73. Maxwell, *Colonial Photography*, p. 163.

74. David Green, 'On Foucault: disciplinary power and photography' in Evans, *Camerawork Essays*, p. 128.
75. Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human sciences' in Richard Macksey & Eugenio Donato (eds), *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore and London, 1972, p. 250, see also p. 252.
76. Maxwell, *Colonial Photography*, p. x.
77. Lutz & Collins, *Reading*; Nordström, 'Wood nymphs'; McGuire, 'Whiteman's walkabout'; Ross, 'The fantastic face'; Barnes, 'Crystallising identities'; Russell, *Savage Imaginings*; Russell, 'Going Walkabout'.
78. Russell, *Savage Imaginings*; Russell, 'Going Walkabout'.
79. See Michael Aird, 'Growing up with Aborigines' in Christopher Pinney & Nicolas Peterson (eds), *Photography's Other Histories*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, p. 23.
80. See Jo-Anne Driessens, 'Relating to photographs' in Pinney & Peterson, *Photography's Other*, pp. 17–22; Aird, 'Growing up'; Nicholas Peterson, 'The changing photographic contract: Aborigines and image ethics', in Pinney & Peterson, *Photography's Other*, p. 137.
81. Aird, 'Growing up', p. 25.
82. Aird, 'Growing up', p. 25. Remoteness was not necessarily a barrier to Aboriginal use of the photographic medium. The photographer Axel Poignant discovered to his surprise a camera being used by a group of Aboriginal men on Goulburn Island off the Coburg peninsular in the Northern Territory. The men were using it to take photographs of themselves and the community (Leonarda Kovacic, 'What photographers saw: Aboriginal people and Australian colonial experience' in Penelope Edmonds & Samuel Furphy (eds), *Rethinking Colonial Histories: New and Alternative Approaches*, RMIT University, Melbourne, 2006, p. 98).