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NIGEL LENDON



Axel Poignant, *Young Women, Croker Island*, (1948/printed c. 1979), silver gelatin print on Ilford Galerie, © Roslyn Poignant, Axel Poignant Archive, London.

In 1948, the Anglo/Swedish photographer Axel Poignant made a brief visit to the Methodist Mission on Croker Island, which is located off the north-west coast of Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory.¹ From the early 1940s, the Croker Island Mission was one of the places where the 'Stolen Generation' children were located, as a consequence of an arrangement with the missions in the Northern Territory arising from the 'New Deal' policies introduced by the Federal Government.² The photograph

Young Women, Croker Island was taken as one of a small number of photographs Poignant made on his first visit, the record of which now exists mainly in the form of proofs and several prints in the Axel Poignant Archive in London.³ This image was printed in its present form by Poignant in about 1979 and has only recently been exhibited and is reproduced here for the first time.

Young Women presents to the viewer five young women on a beach wearing stylish two-piece bathing

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costumes, who appear confident, self-possessed, relaxed, and modern – a perfect embodiment of their apparent wellbeing. And yet historical evidence suggests that the location of this photograph was a part of one of the darker chapters of Australian history.

Representation

The setting is an island that Edna Walker, one of the Stolen Generation residents of Croker Island, has described in the bleakest possible terms: 'One of the worst things that happened to anyone was Croker Island.⁴ In his autobiography Bob Randall tells lurid stories of missionaries' immoral and brutal behaviour.⁵ Indeed, it was the Croker Island experience that was recently highlighted in the Nanna Nungala Fejo story related by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in his apology speech on 13 February, 2008.⁶ In contrast, Doris Clarke, another of the children who was sent to the Mission, described it as '... beautiful, it was fantastic. Nobody had no problems.'⁷ And Claire Henty-Gebert, in her book *Paint Me Black*, gives a similarly favourable view: 'We had lots of happy times on the Island.'⁸

If the cultural context in which this photograph was taken has subsequently been represented in such contradictory terms, it is hard to argue that such contrary sentiments are evident in the image itself. Read it alongside the elemental formalism of Max Dupain's *The Sunbaker* (1937/1975), which was to become one of the iconic modernist Australian images, or any number of contemporaneous images of Australian beach culture in the popular press, or compare this photograph to all the other archetypal 'Australian' images of its time.⁹ In that context we realise that it is the characteristics that made *Young Women* distinctly *atypical* that make it now so compelling, and so much more evocative than as just another modernist image. Its history also suggests that it was *too modern* for its time, particularly in the sense that it now appears to anticipate a role for cross-cultural transactions which were not then fully realised in contemporary photographic practice.

Given the conflicting evidence of the experience of Croker Island, *Young Women* invites us to ask: how could this be so? Could this be one of those photographs that steps beyond ambiguity to radically misrepresent the reality it appears to depict? One way of addressing this predicament is to ask ourselves, how were these young women represented by the photographer, and how might they have represented themselves to him? In so doing we admit the possibility that their reality is being represented and misrepresented in the one moment. It would appear this is one of those rare photographs that simultaneously tests the objectivity of the photographic process, and reminds us what a photograph cannot represent – that a complex contextual reality is more than can be portrayed in the moment captured by the shutter.

Style

By the late '40s, Poignant was recognised as being at the forefront of a modernist realist mode of practice in Australia.¹⁰ Through both his choice of subjects and the way he engaged with them, he exemplifies what Helen Ennis has described as the most advanced and distinctive character of modernist photography in this country, and in Poignant's case as 'evidence of a radical social and artistic practice in which Aboriginal people were not only made visible but represented in positive terms'.¹¹

The style of such an image, the way in which the photographer produced its particular character, tells us something about the possible meanings which can be extracted from an individual photograph's look and feel. It's the way in which an artist chooses to show us what they see, full of conventions and cues which the viewer may or may not recognise; that is, how the photographer arranges the scene, organises his subjects, and makes the image, with all the formal characteristics and elements of his own personal preferences, revealing the ideas and attitudes that he brings to the scene. Despite his place in the modernist canon, Poignant's intentions were never those of a formalist: 'While I am concerned to achieve in a single image the essence of a subject, I am also concerned with the sequential documentation of detail.' For him the clarity of a documentary image, 'so clear and full of information', was his means to the ultimate challenge, to make 'visible the elusive inner reality that lies behind ...'¹²

Chronologically, this image sits in the middle of the most active period of Poignant's practice in Australia. Group portraits occur throughout this phase of his oeuvre – see his *Jack and his family*, (1938), the Melville Island series (1948), or the Mangrove Creek (1951), Arnhem Land and Nagalarramba series (1952).¹³ However it is rare to find an image arranged with the same kind of frontal composition in these later bodies of work. In fact, his photography of groups of people moves away from the perspectival monumentality of *Young Women* and becomes more dynamic, and more structured by the circumstances and events in which the subjects are participating. Indeed the seeds of these later developments are to be found within *Young Women* – even though the specific circumstance of this image is the group portrait itself.

Characteristically, Poignant adopted a low perspective, composed the figures to fill the frame, and chose a moment when each of the five composed themselves, both as individuals, and as a group. This approach brings the subjects forward, almost as if they are occupying the same space as a viewer, giving them a presence and enhancing the immediacy of the moment. The image is crisp, high-key, with strong shadows and fine detail. Small accents activate the ensemble created by the five figures – the droplets of water on the skin, the bobby



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pins, the popped button, the bathing cap cord wound around a finger, the ragged costume on the girl in the left foreground – all of which reinforce the photograph's realism: it seems to say to us, this is as it was ...

Agency

Now reverse the dynamic of this interaction. What are the means of representation available to the *subjects* of a photograph – in 1948, on the most northern rim of Australia, in what some have described in the same terms as a detention centre?¹⁴ We could speculate that these five young women posing for a male photographer exercised a distinctive kind of agency, at least to the extent that their behaviour and interaction had the capacity to make or break what the photographer wanted to achieve.

They appear to us as young women conscious of their stylish modernity, dressed in the latest swimwear fashion, and probably quite pleased with the effect they have created. Remember the first magazine advertisements for two-piece costumes were published in the *Women's Weekly* in the summer of 1946, with patterns to make your own in the same year, yet it was to be another thirteen years before they were legal on Bondi Beach.


While it may seem unusual for mission girls to be allowed to wear such daring and fashionable costumes, by 1948 these young women of the Croker Island community had already led an unusual life. Five months after their arrival at the island in 1941, and two months after the bombing of Darwin by the Japanese, all 96 children from the mission were ordered to evacuate. They set out on an epic journey, first overland to Pine Creek, as related by the mission 'cottage mother' Margaret Somerville, and thence by truck and train, eventually reaching safe haven in Sydney and at Otford, near Wollongong.¹⁵ During the next four years, they were educated in local schools in the area, and brought in contact with everything that the modern world had to offer. Claire Henty-Gebert relates how she took sewing classes at Wollongong Home Science High School, and how they made good pocket money sewing

clothes and garments.¹⁶ These girls had seen the latest fashions when they were at school in New South Wales, had access to catalogues and patterns, and had made their own swimsuits when they returned 'home' to Croker Island in 1946.¹⁷ The images from Poignant's two visits, in 1948 and 1952, show an active, complex community, where the students were taught such skills in the context of their curriculum. Hence we see the girls in Poignant's photographs dressed like fashionable teenagers anywhere.

In a photograph such as this the potential for multiple meanings renders *Young Women* both engaging and challenging – especially given we are the first to look at it in sixty years. We ask ourselves, how could it have been like that? From our retrospective viewpoint it is as if the evidence of the photographic moment *must* be at variance with what we know of the totality of the historical experiences of subjects like these. Projecting forward in time, we might also ask ourselves whether these women might have spoken positively about their experience, or in the negative in their subsequent historical accounting of life on the mission? This is not just a matter of inherent ambiguity, rather it is better conceived as a kind of polysemy, where the same image may carry different associations for different viewers: one account of the larger social and political circumstances of that moment may seem to deny its apparent verisimilitude, while the other affirms the reality of its subjects' experience.¹⁸

We see them now as young women who were at ease, relaxed, and apparently self-possessed in the excitement of the presence of the photographer, an outsider, with a certain charisma and dynamism of his own. In retrospect they appear to us as young women expressing confidence in their self-presentation to the camera, expressive of the dynamic of their own interrelationships as much as their individual and collective relationship to the man who is photographing them.

The arrested dynamism of this image is also conveyed by signs of recent activity as the subjects, wet from the sea, dripping with water, interacting with each other and with the



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photographer. Posing. As teenagers do. Showing off their costumes ... So how might we interpret their self-presentation as they interact, both as individuals, and together, as sisters? We observe the ease with which they relate, coming together as if the camera has created a singular collective form. We register their familiarity as they share the intimate physical expressions of the bonds that unite them, the characteristics that distinguish them from their visitor, the photographer. Or is the appeal of this image also a certain guileless lack of pose, unconscious of the consequences and effects of the photographic interaction?

Not at all. These young women themselves had plenty of opportunities for a direct experience of photography.¹⁹ Apart from their sojourn in New South Wales, Claire Henty-Gebert and her friends had their own box brownies, which they had bought from the mission store, from the money they earned from sewing. For these people photographic communication was a key element of their modern world, and numerous examples of local vernacular photography show groups of their peers posing for snapshots, or engaged in the many activities of mission life.²⁰

But perhaps these young women were also conscious of their particular 'otherness', their mixed descent identity, as they presented themselves to this Anglo/Swedish photographer? The relationship with Poignant is strangely linked – they are *all* outsiders on Croker Island, and yet he becomes *their* exotic 'other', one who represents what is denied to them, the ultimate freedom of being able to come and go, a citizen of the rest of the world.²¹

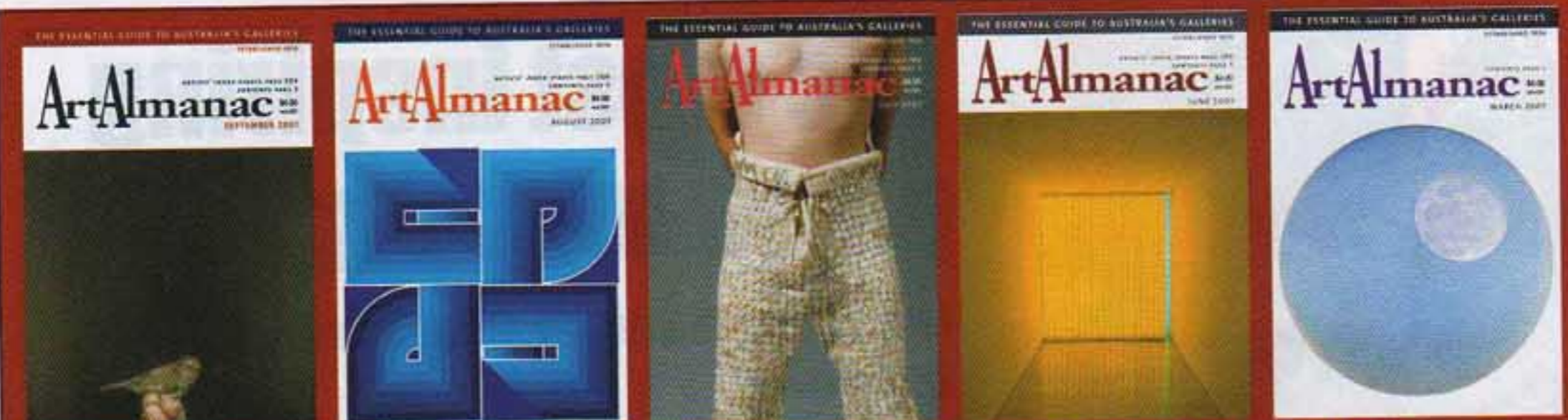
The few proofs from this first brief visit to Croker Island, now in the Axel Poignant Archive in London, show how Poignant responded to the opportunities for the camera. Ten photographs of the series were also published in *A.M.: The Australian Monthly*, framed by an editorial rhetoric (titled 'One Approach to our Color Problem') which while revealing mainstream attitudes to the 'problem' of the forced removal of children from their familial settings,

now grates against the visual rhetoric of Poignant's images.²² The photographs chosen for reproduction are more conventional than *Young Women*, with portraits of staff and students, and schoolroom and living environments, plus other beach images, which together convey a kind of holiday atmosphere, as any series of images of teenagers at work and play might produce. Among these adjacent images, some are conventionally composed individual portraits in the style characteristic of that phase of his practice: carefully arranged, low angle, three-quarter profile, the subject disengaged, looking away from the camera. The majority however are much more informal, like snapshots, where groups have posed and faced the camera directly.

Two others from the proof sequence are atypical in a quite different sense: perhaps using a timer, or perhaps asking one of the children to take the photograph, Axel has posed *with* the group, and thus photographed himself with some of the subjects from *Young Women* and other participants. Such an action surely confirms the nature of the social interaction we have surmised in our analysis of *Young Women* above – so confident were they of their role in the photographic transactions taking place that Axel was able to reverse roles, becoming himself a member of a group portrait.

What are we to make of this degree of informality sixty years later? Such photographic transactions can sometimes function as an 'ice-breaker', in this case enabling Poignant to achieve the innovative and distinctive characteristics we see in *Young Women*, and the later forms which emerge more fully in his Nagalarramba series. For the young women themselves, their participation in these terms displays their confidence and relative sophistication in their mediated interaction with Poignant, the outsider.

A precedent for such studies of the nature of interaction between photographer and subject in pre-modern colonial contexts has been addressed by David



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MacDougall in his study of the French photographer Jean Audema (1864–1936).²³ Two aspects of MacDougall's eloquent analysis are particularly relevant to our interpretation of the Poignant photograph. The first is the question of the pose, which is more elaborate and dramatic in the case of Audema's composition of his subjects in the French Congo at the turn of the 20th century. In Audema's case this is more a signature of his approach than with this unique image, but which suggests to MacDougall an unconventional degree of interactivity between subject(s) and photographer: 'The confidence of the subjects looks more like their response to the importance the photographer has attached to making the photograph and perhaps the appreciation he is showing them as his actors.'²⁴

The second is the subjects' demeanour, and their sometimes smiling engagement with the photographer, and by implication the viewer. This can often be disconcerting, if not troubling, in its effect. 'Discussions of the smile in colonial photographs are burdened with a desire to read them simultaneously as expressions of oppression and resistance. [By this argument] (t)he smiling subject is being induced to smile, but the smile is also a weapon of the "returned gaze", confronting the photographer and the colonial apparatus.'²⁵ In this case, and given Poignant's characteristic approach to his subjects in these years (in shorthand, his 'style'), we read *Young Women* as reflecting a much greater sense of the immediacy of the moment, and the dynamic of the interaction, than the staged effects of an earlier era to which MacDougall so perceptively refers. Here the assertiveness of the smiles of Poignant's subjects speak more of a kind of bravado, a knowing gesture across cultures and generations, more an internal dialogue than some act of resistance. If self-confidence is as much a matter of individual circumstances and experience as it is socially constructed, then this group portrait demonstrates both dimensions, as a projection of both a personal and collective self-image.

What MacDougall refers to as a certain appearance of 'élan and self-confidence' may itself be subjected to a

critique that argues that the photographic subjects (of colonised cultures, of Stolen Generation policies) are inevitably the product of an instrument of subjugation, what Jonathan Crary calls a 'technology of domination'.²⁶ However, as MacDougall argues, '(i)t may be politically satisfying to see all colonial photographic subjects as exploited, but it also does many of them a disservice, denying them any agency or authority at the time'.²⁷

Modernity

Why is this photograph so compelling? In its polysemous character it represents both the best and worst of the complex Australian modernity of the thirties and forties. In the post-Depression and post-war era the qualities of Australian life, its institutions, and its prosperity were all entering a period of confidence and optimism. Australia represented itself as the land of opportunity, which later led Donald Horne to coin the term 'the Lucky Country'. And in 1939, federal legislation was set in place for what were to become more widely known as 'assimilation' policies – promoted as the 'New Deal for the Aborigines in the Northern Territory' – which shifted the emphasis from biological to economic assimilation and ultimately the welfare state.

This took place while widespread and significant changes were occurring throughout Australia in governance, the economy, public infrastructure, education and the arts, and in the wider context of a modernising era which both the historian R. M. Crawford and Peter Coleman called the 'New Australia'. Yet as the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner observed, none of the subsequent historical accounts included any significant examination of the new policies with respect to Indigenous Australians.²⁸ As Stanner wrote: 'What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale.'²⁹ Stanner described the absence of an historical consciousness of Indigenous Australia in the scholarly literature of the post-war era as 'The Great Australian Silence', and noted that



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despite these significant changes to policy, 'another ten years had to pass before its effects became at all noticeable'.³⁰

For the majority of the Indigenous population Australian modernity was primarily experienced in these years as assimilation, dispossession, and isolation from mainstream consciousness. In the 1940s its most extreme manifestation was the removal of children (especially mixed-descent children) from their parents and familial settings, to be brought up on missions 'like white children'.³¹

Young Women, Croker Island therefore presents a modernity far more complex than any cosmopolitan equivalent could possibly achieve. Here are five young women, wards of the state, living in a sheltered community on the far northern rim of Australia. They are caught by the photographer Axel Poignant poised as if in a moment where their lives appear to promise the best of all possible worlds. But with the benefit of hindsight, the apparent promise of the emergent modernity the photographer has captured is at odds with subsequent accounts of the life experience of many young people like these, and thus what we read as the implicit optimism of *Young Women* seems unlikely to have to have been fulfilled. Our sense of the photograph therefore swings from one view of modernity to another; one benign and optimistic, the other fraught with conflict and pain.

Notes:

1. Axel Poignant's biography may be found at:

<http://artwranglers.com.au/axel-poignant/>

2. Peter Read, *The Stolen Generations*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999.

References to relevant Northern Territory legislation may be found at www.hreoc.gov.au/education/bth/download/laws/bth_laws_histNT_10r.pdf

3. The people in the photograph are (left to right): Rita Simken (deceased), Nancy Schmidt (nee Cameron), Nida Lowe (nee Wilson), Queenie Farrar (deceased), Ruby Rose (nee Braun).

4. Edna Walker, quoted in 'Stolen lives', *European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights: news* at <http://www.eniar.org/news/stolenwages11.html>

5. See Rob Randall, *Songman: The Story of an Aboriginal Elder of Uluru*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2003, pp. 49-75.

6. Kevin Rudd, 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous People', Wednesday 13 February, 2008. www.aph.gov.au/house/Rudd_Speech.pdf

7. Doris Clarke, quoted in Helen Dalley, 'Stolen Generation Revisited', http://sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/cover_stories/transcript_462.asp

8. Claire Henty-Gebert, *Paint Me Black*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2005, p. 36.

9. What constitutes 'its time' is a moot point. Geoffrey Batchen has analysed the implications of the 'late' production of Dupain's *The Sunbaker* (which was not printed for exhibition until 1975) in his 'Max Dupain: Sunbakers', *History of Photography*, 19:1, Winter 1995, pp. 349-357. As Roslyn Poignant advises, the circumstances of Poignant's relocation to London in 1956 meant that he did not have access to any negatives or prints from this period until he recovered them in 1970, and then other projects took precedence until after 1976 when he began to explore his earlier work.

10. By both his peers, and subsequently. In September 1947 Poignant was awarded the gold medal for his submission to the *Newcastle and Hunter Valley 150th Anniversary exhibition*, which resulted in the book *Australian Photography 1947* (Sydney, 1947), edited by O. Zeigler and the first substantial post-war publication on Australian photography.

11. Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, London, 2007, p. 78.

12. Axel Poignant, in Laurence Le Guay (ed.), *Australian Photography, a Contemporary View*, Sydney, 1978, p. 11.



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Image: Julie Brock, *Zero Right to Left* (2007), oil on paper. ©HEDS# 00120C, SQA12087AM

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13. Roslyn Poignant with Axel Poignant, *Encounter at Nagalarramba*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1996.

14. Edna Walker, op cit. <http://www.eniar.org/news/stolenwages11.html>

15. Margaret Somerville, *They Crossed a Continent*, Sydney, Methodist Overseas Missions, 1967.

16. Henty-Gebert: 2005, p. 35.

17. Henty-Gebert: 2005, p. 32. Peter Forrest records how 'throughout the war years, many of the girls had kept some of the island's sand which had been trapped in the hems of their skirts. "Our beautiful island home" they said, as they touched the sand reassuringly.' Introduction, xiv.

18. See Eileen Cummings's autobiographical account, at <http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/women/tribute/2003/eileencummings.html>. See also Molly Baban's autobiographical account, at www.larrakiadevelopmentcorporation.com.au/downloads/newsletter_ldc21.pdf. See also Confidential Evidence 544, given in the *Bringing Them Back Home Report*: 'I found the Methodist Mission [Croker Island] very helpful and myself, from my experience, I really can't condemn the United Church, or Methodist Mission. Because they've been excellent to us. There were one hundred children and they showed a little bit of affection to each of us, y'know.' at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/stolen40.html>

19. In addition the Goulburn Islander Lazarus Lamilami, who three years later was to become Poignant's guide and assistant, had been one of the builders on Croker Island since before the war. In 1947 he had moved back to neighbouring Goulburn Island, where his brother George Winunguj was an active member of the camera club.

20. Henty-Gebert: 2005. Visitors to the region record the presence of Indigenous photographers as early as 1927: see letter from Lloyd Warner to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Sydney University Archives, P130/41/660.

21. 'The missionaries brought us up and gave us every advantage: they made us citizens of the world.' Ruby Rose, pers. comm., 11.08.08.

22. 'One Approach to our Color Problem', *A.M. The Australian Monthly*, April 1, 1949, pp. 25-27.

23. David MacDougall, 'Staging the Body: The Photography of Jean Audema', in *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and*

The Senses, Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA, 2006, pp. 176-209.

24. MacDougall: 2006, p. 181.

25. MacDougall: 2006, p. 204, see also Geary and Webb (1998), pp. 58-60; Lutz and Collins (1993), p.198.

26. Jonathan Crary, 'Modernizing Vision', in Hal Foster, (ed.), *Vision and Visuality, Discussions in Contemporary Culture Number 2*, Dia Art Foundation (co-published by the New Press), New York/Seattle, 1988, p. 43.

27. MacDougall: 2006, p. 182.

28. R. M. Crawford, *Australia*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 1960.

29. W. E. H. Stanner, *After The Dreaming: Black and White Australians – An Anthropologist's View* (The Boyer Lectures 1968), The Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1968. p. 25.

30. Stanner: 1968, p. 19.

31. Margaret Somerville: '...we brought them up as white children, just as though they were our own children, we loved them.' Quoted in Helen Dalley, 'Stolen Generation Revisited', http://sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/cover_stories/transcript_462.asp

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