When the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition opened at the State Library of Queensland in September 2012, there was much excitement and goodwill. Elders Marshall Bell and Flo Watson both spoke to the crowd, and as artist Vernon Ah Kee later wrote on his blog: ‘Quote of the night was from Marshall Bell when he said: “It doesn't matter whether Tindale was good or bad. It doesn't matter whether what he did was right or wrong. Those photos are real.”’. 

This landmark exhibition was curated by Michael Aird and featured Ah Kee’s drawings and enlarged prints of anthropologist Norman Tindale’s photographs of 1938-1940, as well as extensive archival information and stories from the subjects themselves and their relatives. The transformations of the exhibition’s title refer to the way Tindale’s
'data' was given both new physical form, as well as engendering fresh social meanings and relationships.

Marshall Bell and Michael Aird at the launch of the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition, State Library of Queensland, South Brisbane, 24 September 2012 (Photograph Mick Richards)

Chad Morgan with a photo of his great-grandmother and other family members at the launch of the *Transforming Tindale* exhibition, State Library of Queensland, South Brisbane, 24 September 2012 (Photograph Mick Richards)
Scholars such as Elizabeth Edwards, a visual anthropologist, have argued that we should explore the materiality of images and the diverse forms they assume, attending to the ways their form and vitality shape us as much as we imbue them with meaning. Digitisation constitutes a major transformation of photographs’ historical accumulation of materiality. It also creates new social relations, and enables the return of historical archives from European museums to Indigenous relatives in Australia. In this article I explore the new relations and narratives that emerge from this process, focusing on their Indigenous significance, and using the example of a slightly enigmatic cardboard panel held by the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford on which are mounted thirteen photographs from South Australia. With Pitt Rivers Museum curator Christopher Morton, I have puzzled over its individual and collective history for some years. For Indigenous descendants of the people recorded in these photographs, their physical form is less important than the way they embody missing relatives, lost through invasion and assimilation. This process is slow and often awkward, but the rewards are great. It challenges foundational national histories, re-connecting family networks and telling the truth of Indigenous experience.

I also explore the ways that colonial archives have in recent years been ‘translated’, often in ways that counter their producers’ intentions, into objects that serve Aboriginal purposes. In particular, I examine the role of digitisation in making photograph collections accessible to audiences across the globe, notably ‘source’ communities and descendants of their Indigenous subjects. As a medium of exchange, photographs of Aboriginal people have served vastly different purposes within indigenous and Western knowledge systems, from embodiments of kin and ancestral powers, to visual data that actively created scientific knowledge.

In the digital age, it has become an urgent matter to understand and balance these traditions. The ‘Returning Photos’ project, based at the University of Western Australia, brings together research on photograph collections in Oxford, Cambridge, Paris and Leiden, to explore the global circulation of photographs of Australian Aboriginal people that began in the 1840s, charting their central role within the major shift in Western visual culture from Enlightenment humanism to the emergence of modern views regarding race and history. The project aims to return digital copies of photographs currently housed in Europe to their subjects’ descendants, providing a major Indigenous heritage resource. Here, through a range of examples focused on South Australia, I will explore some of the stories that have emerged from this research and the Indigenous significance of the photos.
This work is premised on digitisation and its promise to share images across time and space. Visual technologies have always provided diverse and mutable conduits for transmitting images around the globe. Australia’s first 1840s photographs of Aboriginal people, for example, were daguerreotypes, singular metal mirrors that could not be shared unless transformed into engravings and printed by a press. However, as photographic technology developed over the course of the nineteenth century, the medium came to be defined by its mass reproducibility and global reach. Recent theories of photography have also moved toward exploring the photo’s ‘recodability’ – the way that information captured in the original image can later work against the photographer’s intentions and give it new meanings. Photographs are also increasingly considered within conceptions of the archive as constituting and being constituted by a history materially performed by things. Photos are not merely singular objects, but the institutional structures around them also have dynamic social lives, so we now attend to the ways that archival practices establish meanings over time, producing different narratives rather than a single, dominant reading.

Elizabeth Edwards has argued that we should explore the materiality of images and the diverse forms they assume, attending to the ways their form and vitality shape us as much as we imbue them with meaning. Drawing on anthropological conceptions of material culture as mediating social relations, she argues that the historical archive is structured by historical material practices, in creating a ‘resource’ available to users. So objects such as photos and archives are not just settings for human action but actively shape it, in a recursive relationship. Consequently, Edwards warns against ill-considered digitisation that may obliterate historical processes and impose created meaning. Giving the example of the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum Tibetan collections, she advocates recording these haptic qualities, for example by documenting and making visible multiple forms of the object, from negative to lantern slide to finished book. Albums and slides were contextualised with their original format assemblage or written narrative. Edwards argues that:

thinking materially through the social biography of photographs as active objects in a matrix of exchanges – personal, commercial, moral, political – can generate ideas which will enable us to see photographs differently. The choice is not between analogue and digital, for one cannot
substitute for the other, but rather the digital as another moment in the on-going social biography of the material archive, creating a space, as was attempted with the Tibet Album project, in which the digital becomes an exegesis on the analogue archive to the enhancement of historical understanding.

‘TRANSFORMING TINDALE’

Many of these issues are exemplified by the ‘Transforming Tindale’ exhibition. This installation was based on genealogical information and photographs amassed by anthropologist Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell in 1938, at the Queensland Aboriginal communities of Yarrabah, Cherbourg, Mona Mona, Palm Island, Woorabinda, Bentinck Island, Doomadgee and Mornington Island.

Perth-born Norman Tindale (1900-1993) was an Australian anthropologist, archaeologist, entomologist and ethnologist who moved to Adelaide in 1917. Two years later he became an Entomologist’s Assistant at the South Australian Museum, and received his Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Adelaide in March 1933. From 1938 he collaborated with Joseph Birdsell of Harvard University in studying Aboriginal ‘hybrids’ and together they undertook anthropological surveys in 1938-39 and again in 1952-54 on Aboriginal missions across Australia. This project sought to explore race-crossing and classify Aboriginal people into racial types. As Warwick Anderson has noted, after WWII Birdsell and Tindale abandoned their framework of racial classification in favour of population dynamics. Toward the end of their careers both became supporters of Aboriginal self-determination and the land-rights movement.

However, their mission collections were made within a framework of racial classification, and they collected anatomical measurements and took standardized photographs as records of the physical form of the Aboriginal residents. These collections now constitute substantial archives relating to these far-flung communities. As Amy Roberts, Madeline Fowler and Tauto Sansbury have noted, it was not always a pleasant experience for the Aboriginal people involved. When Tindale and Birdsell went to Point Pearce Mission (Burgiyana) on the Yorke Peninsula in 1939, Narungga Elder Lewis O’Brien, who was nine years old at the time, described how ‘We had to line up in the school and have our heads and bodies measured with callipers. We didn’t know what was going on, but I remember feeling out of sorts about the whole business.’ During this fieldwork, the researchers’ wives Dorothy Tinsdale and Bee Birdsell supervised children’s crayon drawings – these
have now formed the basis for a permanent exhibition, ‘Children, Boats and Hidden Histories’, becoming a wonderful heritage resource for Aboriginal communities, documenting them in ways that have now been given new meanings.

Transforming Tindale was developed following extensive discussion with the relatives of the photographic subjects. It comprised large format photographic prints blown up from the anthropologist’s thumb-nail-sized prints which were placed on the wall alongside Ah Kee’s drawings, which responded to them through mimicry and supplementation. This exhibition re-connected people with these photos. But these relations sit within the genealogies and field notes Tindale collected. Such archives were re-examined by relatives re-connecting with relatives and stories but also as a means of cementing larger community ties and history. This is what north-western NSW people called ‘Karroo’ or ‘mates’, as Heather Goodall has explained of Brewarrina in far north-western NSW where Tindale worked in 1938. Goodall emphasises the significance of the ‘collectively-focused’ work of the Barker family and other Aboriginal researchers, suggesting that ‘[i]t is not only traditional or even biological kinship which has generated the most complex and active readings, it has been the historical and lived experiences which these people had shared and which continue to link their descendants.’

I asked Michael Aird a few questions about his role in this process – such as what he had learned – to which his response was: ‘I learnt how powerful words can be when attached to photos. I have always known that, but the words in this exhibition were the most powerful words I have ever worked with. (I spent a lot of time crying while I was transcribing).’ Michael is a very experienced and accomplished researcher, so his emotional response points towards the historical and affective significance of this archive. He suggested the moment when the State Library of Queensland obtained digitized versions and copy prints from the South Australian Museum in 1990 or 1991 was important but

the first main part of the Transforming Tindale story is not about digitization... [but] 20 years or so of these images being shared among families using whatever technology they had access to. Then in more recent years, digital technology started to be used with families using Facebook, email or mobile phones to share copies of whatever quality images they had access to.
The next step was his visit with Vernon Ah Kee to the South Australian Museum to look at the collections. They found that Birdsell’s copy prints were better quality than the more well-known Tindale versions. Aird explains that they ‘had better tones and they were still in pairs, of the front and side shots of each person’ and had extra information because they had not been cropped. Although digitisation is now changing the ways such photo collections can be managed and used, Michael warns against placing too much emphasis on it, cautioning,

Yes, digital images are important, but from the very earliest days of photography, through to photocopies through to the digital era of Facebook, Aboriginal people have been doing a great job of sharing photos using whatever technology is available... The latest digital technology is wonderful and fantastic, but so too were other previous technologies. The invention of photocopies were pretty fantastic as well, 25 years ago I was thrilled that I could secure 20 cent photocopies that were essential to my research. In fact those old photocopies are still essential to my research alongside digital images. It is essential that photographs be accessible, get exhibited and published and information keeps getting added to them.

So both Edwards and Aird emphasise the ways that digitisation constitutes a major intervention in a photograph’s ‘historical accumulation of materiality’. From their respective positions, they may both be understood as advocating flexibility and an understanding of the importance of the earlier or original objects and contexts, not just the most recent version. Digitisation creates new social relations, and in the case of projects aiming to ‘open up’ and share historical collections, such as my ‘Returning Photos’ project, enables the return of historical archives from European museums to Indigenous relatives in Australia. Within a theoretical shift under the umbrella of post-representation from what images mean to what they do – as objects circulating through the world – I find it helpful to attend to the connections, flows and ‘webs’ that constituted imperial networks as a way of conceiving of these transnational historical movements and uses.

**South Australian Panel ‘1998.249.33’**

Such issues are exemplified by the case of a panel held by the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford on which are mounted thirteen somewhat enigmatic photographs. The detective work required to understand this object has revealed a range of Aboriginal life stories and historical relationships.
‘Mixed Box 49’ was assembled by Curator Henry Balfour around 1931 as part of his project to create a systematic research resource from photographs that had accumulated by that time within the Museum. The archival reference, 1998.249.33, denotes the large board on which Balfour pasted the prints at that time (1998.249.33.1-13). The panel is a ‘synthetic’ object that combines the individual images for the first time, representing a historical moment in which their meaning radically changed, to combine and displace earlier orderings under the rubric ‘Australia’. The taxonomic basis of the Pitt Rivers Museum is technological type, such as ‘pottery’, ‘food quest’ or ‘houses’, and these leftovers were arranged by geographical area and ‘by implication racial types’. As Balfour wrote in an annual report, ‘The extensive collection of ethnological photographs, which have generally accumulated, was taken in hand, and a start was made to have them uniformly mounted and classified for arrangement in a series of cases. When completed this collection will be very valuable for reference.’ This assortment of photographs seemingly has little in common except their origin in South Australia, designed as a visual tool for anthropologists based in the metropolitan hub of imperial knowledge.

We know that they were produced in Australia for very different agendas. Through observation and analysis of the board, and research about the images, we can see that they are all from the colony of South Australia, and originally formed at least three groups – an early group of seven, a pair donated by John Bagot and another four linked to the Poonindie Mission and Mrs Christina Smith’s Mt Gambier Aboriginal school, both sponsored by Anglican Bishop Augustus Short during the 1860s.

In broad terms the sub-assemblage of eleven seem to express a classic ‘conversion narrative’ typical of missionary collections, showing the seemingly ‘primitive’ Indigenous people and then their transformation following Christianisation and education. Following detailed research regarding several of these images, a range of Aboriginal life-stories has begun to emerge, mapping the process of cross-cultural encounter and engagement at key places during the region’s white settlement between the 1840s and 1870s. By restoring them to their place of origin and their families, they regain their historical status as individuals.

Tenberry (c1798-1855) was a senior Ngaiwong man from Moorundie on the Murray River. From around 1845 ‘King’ Tenberry’s image circulated around the globe in a series of visual formats, standing in for guardian of authentic tradition. He was shown in the engraved
Mixed Box 49 (Courtesy the Pitt Rivers Museum)

Mixed Box Panel, South Australia, 1998.249.33.1-13 (Courtesy the Pitt Rivers Museum)
frontispiece to Edward John Eyre’s journals of exploration, his image was circulated in the form of engraved prints, a painted portrait and the earliest extant photograph of an Indigenous person produced in South Australia. After the explorer Edward Eyre was appointed Protector of Aborigines between 1841-44 at Moorundie, Tenberry became the native constable, and was credited with ending conflict between black and white across the region. When Eyre returned to Britain in 1844 he took Tenberry’s son Warrulan with him. Today, he has been reclaimed by descendants as an important ancestor. In the film Bloodline, Elders talk about their heritage, in an educational resource designed to communicate with outsiders, but also to teach the younger generation about their history and culture.

‘Tenbury (aet c.60) Chief of the MURRAY BEND tribes. 1847. S.AUSTRALIA’, PRM1998.249.33.1 (Courtesy the Pitt Rivers Museum)
POONINDIE ANGLICAN MISSION

By contrast, the remarkable series of portraits commissioned by Anglican clergymen at Poonindie Mission during the 1850s and 1860s express a conception of the essential unity of humankind and the equal capacity of their subjects, in a distinctively inclusive vision of Indigenous people. In 1853, a time when no Aboriginal people had yet been converted to Christianity, a celebrated group of converts at Poonindie were christened, including Thomas Nytchie, James Narrung, Samuel Conwillan, Joseph Mudlong, David Tolbonko, John Wangaru, Daniel Toodko, Matthew Kewrie, Timothy Tartan, Isaac Pitpowie and Martha Tanda, wife of Conwillan. Short later noted that ‘Some of the Aborigines became devout Christians, while others were nominal Christians. Narrung, Todbrook, and, later, James Wanganeen became evangelists. Kandwillan took services at Poonindie in Hale’s absence and Wirrup and Wanganeen often assisted with services and prayers’.20

James Wanganeen was a Maraura man from the Upper Murray who had attended the Native School in Adelaide in the late 1840s and was then transferred to Poonindie in 1850. He was baptized in 1861, after Hale’s departure, and during the 1860s rose to prominence as an evangelist among his own people.21 He became a well-known figure in settler society, even featuring in a novel set in 1860s Adelaide.22 It is unlikely that the daguerreotypes were made prior to his baptism in 1861. In 1869 Short wrote to Hale to describe the labour James Wanganeen had accomplished in the field, and noted that ‘Wanganeen and Mary Jane have a boy and girl, and seem very happy together’. He quoted them, inviting Short to ‘come and see how happy we are, and we will be so happy to see you and shew you the little children, and all the work we have been doing at Poonindie, and how nice our Church looks’.23 Rev. F. Slaney Poole arrived at Poonindie in 1867, and later recalled that ‘One of the members of the choir, named Wanganeen, was a handsome and intelligent aborigine, and he used to read the service on occasions when the superintendent or myself was not present’.24

Other collections can be brought into dialogue with the panel’s Poonindie portraits. For example, newly re-discovered daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, held in British and Australian archives mark a radical departure from many contemporary photographs of Indigenous Australian people. They point to a rare visual theme that flourished in South Australia during these years under the impetus of Anglican church leaders commemorating the achievements of Christianised Indigenous farmers.25
‘Wanganeen’, PRM1998.249.33.9 (Courtesy the Pitt Rivers Museum)

Townsend Duryea, Portrait of James and Mary Jane Wanganeen, c.1867–1870/1, Carte de visite, Papers of Mathew Blagden Hale, DM130/231 (University of Bristol)
As well as sponsoring the Anglican mission at Poonindie, the Bishop of Adelaide supported Mrs Christina Smith’s Aboriginal school at Mt Gambier between 1865-1867, and in 1865 he commissioned several studio portraits of Smith’s protégés – Buandik people – from professional photographer Walter William Thwaites who had also produced portraits of the Bishop himself. These young women feature in Smith’s 31-page pamphlet *Caroline and her family: with, The conversion of Black Bobby* published in Mt Gambier in 1865, telling the sad story of how the dying Caroline, or Mingboaram, asked Smith to care for her two daughters. These young people were named after Short and his benefactor the Baroness Burdett Coutts. Tragically, Mrs Smith’s book is basically a series of conversion narratives in which each Aboriginal child is converted to Christianity and then dies a ‘happy death’. So stories such as these remind us that not all Aboriginal histories may be reclaimed by relatives: some links remain broken.

Today, Indigenous people of South Australia explain that photos play a central role in continually reconnecting the living and the dead, the past and the present. For example, Ngarrindjeri elder Aunty Ellen Trevorrow talked to Karen Hughes about how photos replenish the knowledge that underpins Ngarrindjeri wellbeing. Ellen’s family album elicits important stories that can have a healing ability, connecting generations and helping to piece together lives fractured by the state.

Other photos point to more painful stories, revealing children removed under assimilation policies – some still missing. Treasured among the photographs in Ellen’s family collection is a portrait of her maternal grandfather, William Charles Brown, and his younger brother, Patrick (Paddy) Joseph Brown, as children. This image was recorded shortly after the boys had been snatched from their family, near the Riverland town of Renmark, in 1910. After being held overnight in a jail and placed under the control of the State Children’s Council, the children were transferred to the Industrial School in Edwardstown, Adelaide, without their parents’ knowledge or consent. The image was published in the 1910 *Report of the South Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines* as an example of colonial ideas of ‘uplift’ used to promote the project of child removal and ‘training’. The accompanying caption read: ‘Fine boys doing well under the care of the State Children’s Council.’ Enfolded back into family, after the photograph was recovered during research for the 1988 book *Survival in our own land*, it is now deeply cherished, and much copied and shared among Grandfather William’s descendants – an image of connection, in stark contrast to its original intent. However, Ellen’s mother, Aunty Daisy, never stopped searching during her lifetime for Uncle Paddy’s family, the legacy of their removal.
a cause of ongoing pain and dislocation. More than a century later, the photograph has incubated vital information to reunite William and Paddy’s descendants, who were dislocated through government policy.
But sadly, the family circle is not yet complete, as Ellen says: a companion photo was re-discovered, revealing two smaller children to the left of William and Patrick. The boy, who appears about three or four years old, is their younger brother Robert (Uncle Bob) Rollison. He later married Ngarrindjeri woman Hazel Stanley and lived at Meningie. But the infant girl Daisy – thought to be their missing sister, after whom Ellen’s mother was named – has disappeared from available historical records. Fragments of information remembered from Ellen’s mother suggest that as an adult she may have lived in Victoria. Ellen and her family continue to search for ‘Aunty Daisy’ and her descendants, whom they hope to find while they still have one member left of the first generation.

CONCLUSION
Within a theoretical shift under the umbrella of post-representation from what images mean to what they do – recovering the connections and ‘webs’ that constituted imperial networks including through digitisation allows us to reconstruct and reverse those transnational historical flows. But there are limits, of course: it is important to retain a sense of the object’s materiality and concrete and historical context in our digital interventions. In addition, the mobility of the object does not mean that the social relationships around the object can be moved as easily, as demonstrated by the Transforming Tindale exhibition, where the curators pursued a rigorous process of re-connecting and returning archival holdings. However, the meaning and power of the images resides in their social and especially familial context as well as their historical value in making histories. In some ways the fluidity of digitisation helps to solidify those social ties, moving archival information outwards and back to the local Indigenous contexts from which they stemmed. As ethnomusicologists have warned, however, it is important to ensure that such ‘snapshots’ of culture in performance do not become a means of freezing culture and preventing dynamic change.32

The impacts of assimilation are still very raw and indeed, unfinished for many Aboriginal people across Australia. Families were dislocated and displaced from the earliest days of invasion. The camera has often captured people undergoing rapid change, accommodating new circumstances in order to survive, or simply enduring. Since the late 1990s, a sea-change among collection managers has taken place, as the status of archival photographs has shifted from colonial relic to Aboriginal heritage. In digital form, and in descendants’ hands, the meanings of these images are radically altered, serving to re-connect
families, reconstruct biographies, tell stories and assert a living presence within the nation’s past and future.

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ENDNOTES


2 This research has been funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant, ‘ Returning Photos’ (DP110100278, proposal titled ‘Globalization, Photography, and Race: the Circulation and Return of Aboriginal Photographs in Europe, 2011-2015’).


4 Similarly, Tony Bennett’s chapter in Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce (eds), Material Powers: Cultural studies, history and the material turn, Routledge, Oxon, 2010, draws on Latour’s argument that museums play critical role in loading non-humans into discourse, making objects mobile and available for varied forms of social enrolment. Since the 1980s this notion of a recursive relation between the material world and human behaviour has been given impetus by material culture studies and the ‘material turn’, represented by scholars such as Daniel Miller, Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett.


8 Tindale recommended absorption rather than segregation from the white population. After his war service Birdsell abandoned his racial framework in favour of ‘population characteristics’ but had trouble fitting his data into this new approach, requiring him to undertake further work in WA during the early 1950s. Warwick Anderson, The Cultivation of Whiteness, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006; see also R.M.W. Dixon, The Languages of Australia, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2011, p262.


Email Michael Aird to Jane Lydon, 2014.

ibid.

ibid.


1998.249.33 is an archival board on which Henry Balfour pasted 13 prints (1998.249.33.1 - 13). A similar board featured in a discussion of the materiality of photographic archives through the example of the Pitt Rivers Museum’s Native American ‘Mixed Box 54’, assembled in 1930-1. Their example indicated that the original prints had been soaked off their original mount and added to the board in 1931, with carefully transcribed captions. See Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, ‘Mixed Box: The cultural biography of a box of “ethnographic” photographs’, in Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds), *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp47-61. In their example, ‘Box 54’ containing 203 photographic images of Native American peoples was mounted on 23 cards, from 5 donors. For Edwards and Hart, the box was chosen at random and it is its ‘ordinariness’ that was prominent. Pitt Rivers Museum, *The Pitt Rivers Museum Annual Report*, 1932, pp1-2.


24 P.A. Howell, ‘Poole, Frederic Slaney (1845–1936)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Australian National University, Canberra, 1988
25 For an extended discussion focusing on Hale’s series held in Bristol, see Jane Lydon and Sari Braithwaite, ‘Photographing “the nucleus of the native Church” at Poonindie Mission, South Australia’, Photography and Culture, vol 8, issue 1, 2015, pp37-57.
26 Mrs James [Christina] Smith, Caroline and her family: with, The conversion of Black Bobby, Watson & Laurie, Mt Gambier, 1865.
27 One month later, it suggested that this series would make ‘suitable Christmas presents’, and listed, along with views of the town’s principal public buildings, and a ‘Carte of the Lord Bishop of Adelaide’, photos of a ‘Group of Aborigines, with Prototoress (sic)’ as well as individual ‘Large Cartes of Misses Anne Burdett Coutts, Helen Bishop, Old Sally, and Master John Short’: Border Watch, 25 November 1865; Border Watch, 23 December 1865, p3. Thwaites series did meet with some popular interest, as indicated by its representation in Australian institutions.
29 Ellen Trevorrow and Karen Hughes, “‘It’s that reflection’: photography as recuperative practice, a Ngarrindjeri perspective’, in Lydon (ed), Calling the Shots, pp175-206.
31 Mattingley, ibid.