Introduction

‘HER MIND WAS VACANT’

Someone called her gin, someone else lubra, but I never heard anyone call her girl or woman.¹

There were many names by which the Aboriginal woman portrayed in this photograph might have been known to settler-heritage Australians, but few of them were likely to have been her own, or of her choosing. Depending on the time or place this woman might have been typecast as a ‘lubra’, ‘native belle’, ‘sable siren’, ‘spinifex fairy’, ‘stud’ or ‘gin’. In most forms of colonial knowledge production and in most of the mediums of its dissemination, her names, her work, where she belonged and who and what belonged to her were deemed largely immaterial to the meanings she ought to impart about herself or her people. What names she might have called newcomers was also of little interest to the historical record. For nearly all settlers, seeing that she was Aboriginal and typecasting her as such through various colloquial subject-effects, or name-calling, sufficed to evoke an
understanding about her, one as surface-based, half-knowing and compelling as this image: a way of knowing that was skin deep.

The encounter encapsulated by this photograph was experienced within the pages of a hardcover, now collectible, 1960s edition of an outback woman’s ‘life among the blacks’ — a book in the tradition of better-known authors such as Mrs Aeneas Gunn, Daisy Bates and Mary Durack. In this instance Alice Duncan-Kemp gives an account of life on a cattle station in the Channel Country of Southwest Queensland. The caption merely states, ‘This photograph was taken during the early days of white settlement’. It has the shimmer of albumen silver, the most commonly used processing technique for photography between 1857 and 1895. For over a decade I have attempted to trace the woman in this photograph as part of this study of settler print impressions of Aboriginal women, to repatriate her image to her descendants and seek their permission and cultural clearance. Visual anthropologists and curators of Aboriginal family history in museums and state libraries and public record offices — people who spend months, sometimes years, sorting family biscuit-tin collections into records that Indigenous descendants might identify themselves by — have never seen this image before. The family of Duncan-Kemp believes the publishers of the second edition of Where Strange Paths Go Down, W.R. Smith & Paterson, held a number of such photographs of Aboriginal people unrelated to the Duncan-Kemp station and scattered them throughout her book, perhaps against her wishes. Duncan-Kemp wrote about the Karuwali, Marrula and Mitaka peoples. Like Bates herself and the photographs she sometimes even misattributed to people she claimed to know, Paterson may have used a postcard, or a plate cut from a book, or bought it from a studio as a print, though the quality suggests he had a good print and perhaps the original.
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In settler-colonial Australia this woman had long been type-cast under already established, even entrenched, conventions for knowing Aboriginal women. From the 1790s around Sydney, she was known as a ‘gin’, and from the 1830s around Tasmania and then into Victoria, a ‘lubra’. The failure to credit her own name was an erasure of her identity – at least from the settler perspective. Other categories were called upon to construe her meaning, in a process of what we might call ‘cultural captioning’. Her photographed image evoked recurrent meanings of Aboriginal femininity for white consumers through the machinery of print, namely through its repetition. As an Aboriginal woman she was positioned at the ‘intersection of “race” and gender (as markers of difference)’, as Marcia Langton has put it. As I have elsewhere explained, ‘lubra’ was quite possibly a misinterpretation by the ‘conciliator’ George Augustus Robinson at Oyster Cove, Tasmania, in 1826 whereby he may have mistaken the local word for penis as referring to wife. Lubra became a settler construct that spread through the settler imagination with alacrity, sweeping aside local language use, totemic distinctions, restricted nomenclature, mortuary protocol and permissible forms of address. All Aboriginal women become lubras, whether they were married or not. Very often this classified them with the social phenomenon of ‘black velvet’, that is, as a class of Australian women to whom sexual access was assured for settler men, particularly on the remote pastoral, mining and pearling frontiers – the ‘stud’ was said to be ‘easy for the taking’. From this survey of white imaginings of Aboriginal women, the lubra type became a masthead of sexual and racial difference localised to Australia. And like *terra nullius*, despite being incorrect, it attained the status of a sustaining national fiction that absented the identities of Aboriginal women, or imagined them within a particular frame, or a sort of cultural skin.
Since the photograph gives nothing away about the woman it takes as its subject, a kind of over-determined anonymity was imposed over her surface — skin, hair, expression — which then carried the burden of her meaning. As Homi Bhabha writes, ‘skin, as a signifier of discrimination, must be produced or processed as visible’. In the annals of costume history, it is usually the task of ‘native’ women to display the meanings of traditional dress. When the native woman was naked, interest was focused on her exposed skin and sometimes its markings. It may be ironic, or telling, that the English word ‘skin’ was adapted by Aborigines to explain cosmologies of kinship and marriage laws, such as ‘skin’ relative, or to describe the contravention of those laws by the expression ‘wrong skin’. But the concentration of melanin in our epidermis determined what Frantz Fanon dubbed a ‘racial epidermal schema’, namely the investments, operations and entanglements of settler-colonial institutions that sheathed Aboriginal men, women and children as Other. There were other perceived determinates — hair structure, occipital ridge, evenness of teeth, ratio of arm length to trunk, prehensility of toes, acuteness of vision, lack of reflection, depth of female genitalia — most of which were clearly confected, but that nevertheless defined the physiognomy of Aboriginality. But skin was undoubtedly foremost in assigning group membership to the ‘native’. Said to be uniquely ‘velvety’, colonised women’s skin also intimated touch, or unmediated contact, a very different contact to that with Aboriginal men.

In the colonial visual archives the pathos and beauty of this woman’s photograph make it a singular portrait. By my reading — and I take ownership of this as a subjective reading — it seems an expression rent, dissembled, and yet defiant. A scholarly response should couch it in the repertoire of meanings construed about Aboriginal women for white consumption since settlement, and
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that is certainly what this book will attempt. Popular understandings of human variation were informed by racialist thought, which despite a postwar coyness about the very concept of race, nevertheless continued to be shaped by comparative anatomy, physiology and zoology. These disciplines were originally forged from ‘data’ extracted during exploratory voyages from the 1760s and they played critical roles in the development of the discipline of anthropology. Along with this epistemological circumstance the image also draws on the conventions of nineteenth-century photographic portraiture, a format that from around 1900 colonised people showed ‘mounting enthusiasm’ for, commissioning studio portraits, Anne Maxwell argues, as a ‘mechanism to recover pride and dignity’. As with any image, multiple meanings threaten to capsize the determinates of skin colour, nakedness, hair grooming and expression.
Under the cultural rubric of settler-colonialism, representations of Aboriginal women became part of an invented system of type-portraits whereby the nation of Australia was imagined as a shared experience and, as Anne McClintock has argued, ‘all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender’, some of them outright ‘dangerous’. There is no question that much of the imagery and textual description of Aboriginal women in the colonial archive undermined their wellbeing and safety. Denigrating cartoons in print culture, such as this one from 1929 (Figure 0.2), had been standard fare over which Australians buttered their toast without batting an eye. The simian features, ragged Mother Hubbard dress, oversized feet and spindly limbs formed a visual blazon reserved for Aboriginal women, along with the inference that their access to modernity was always compromised by a tattered hem, a misappropriated utensil, a missed button.

When I first came across such cartoons in Australian 1920s print (I was researching a PhD on modern girl types, such as the flapper, and their relation to industrialised image production), I reacted at first with repugnance and cuffed over the pages, thinking some things are best consigned to history. At this moment, 1998, then Prime Minister John Howard was decrying a ‘black armband’ view of history and arguing we needed to focus on our national achievements. He’d lifted the term from historian Geoffrey Blainey, reacting to the confronting revelations arising from new research in the areas of Indigenous studies and imperial history. While people were then exposed to more historical detail of conflict and discrimination, there was less work on the everyday perceptions so well captured in the (increasingly digitised) print archive. I was torn between believing that non-Indigenous, particularly settler-heritage Australians should know more of the
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racism of our everyday ephemera and doubting that Aboriginal women needed any reminders of these malicious descriptors. Perhaps they have preferred not to pass on their memories of this racism to spare their children and grandchildren the pain of their humiliation. As such there lies a conflicting warp in the very spine of this book. Its intention is to counter the amnesia besetting those who fanned the history wars, to bring about a reckoning in settler-heritage Australians about the entrenched cruelty with which racism and misogyny hinged in our nation’s public. But with that comes the potential risk of reinscribing trauma for Aboriginal readers. The material comprising this archive is deeply offensive, it is often shocking and sometimes nauseating. It should disturb all Australians, but I hope its potential to incite a reckoning offers some safeguard for Aboriginal readers, especially women.

There was also remarkable variety in the ‘image-objects’ through which Aboriginal women were imagined and desired, disregarded and absented. The engraving that graces the cover is taken from a photograph of two young women in the Herbert River area of Queensland, so the women may have been of the Nawagi, Bandjin or Warakamai peoples. The engraving was captioned ‘Civilised girls from the vicinity of Townsville’ and signed CPAULLK.A. It was published in the travelogue of a Norwegian zoologist, Carl Lumholtz, in his 1889 Among Cannibals, which was translated into four languages. Despite its jarring and sensational title, Lumholtz’s account is relatively considered and sympathetic for its time. This striking image illustrates the ambivalence with which ‘civilised’ Aboriginal women were met. The dilly bag slung over the headscarf and the missed buttons intimate their assimilation can never be complete – and indeed that it may even be resisted – while the panniers indicate their usefulness for domestic service. For Lumholtz, ‘civilised’ women made useful servants,
but despite their original ‘modesty’ their first contact usually with ‘rough settlers’ invariably led to prostitution, at first by force and then as a means of survival.¹⁹

Nearly a century later this affirming image of a mother laughing and going about her day, indifferent to the camera, appeared in a feature on Aboriginal women in the popular tourist magazine *Walkabout*, entitled ‘Dark ladies’ (Figure 0.3).²⁰ There are many such admiring, even fond, images of Aboriginal women, yet others in the colonial archive are breathtakingly offensive. ‘Goodbye mother’ (Figure 0.4), taken by New Zealand commercial photographer Thomas Cleary, probably in either Benalla in 1896 or Wahgunyah in 1897, is one of a series of photographs
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of Victorian Aborigines discovered in 1988 in the shed of a photography student’s uncle. The woman has been identified as Kate Friday and was possibly Kwat kwat or Pangerang. Aboriginal artist Tommy McRae sued Cleary for failing to pay Friday and other Aboriginal people the £10 he had promised. The photograph was said to be a ‘parody on the “irrational costume” affected by lady cyclists’. It was not the first use of the ‘primitive’ to parody white women’s modernity and it would not be the last, for it was woman, as Deborah Poole writes, ‘who embodied the purest means of perceiving [racial] difference’.

Of critical importance to these ways of apprehending and appraising Indigenous women was the historical coincidence of print and colonialism, and the dissemination and synchronisation such knowledge was afforded through the industrialisation of print. It is also true that Indigenous Australians engaged with this technology, printing their own newspapers such as The Abo Call in 1938, writing protest letters, and accessing print imagery and text. Jack Patten was this shortlived newspaper’s editor and he was acutely aware of the consequence of this medium.
He made ‘propaganda for the emancipation and betterment of the Aborigines’ the first objective of the new organisation, the Aborigines Progressive Association. He determined to ‘print, publish and circulate books, papers, pamphlets and leaflets to promote the objects of the association’. Through this ‘alter/native’ use of print, Patten sought to counter the ‘libel’ that had been reiterated since the time of Dampier and the ‘cruel joke’ of the ‘jacky-jacky’ type by ‘comic cartoonists’.

Aboriginal readers also took a keen interest in print. Visitors at nineteenth-century reserves noted hut interiors were decorated with cuttings from the illustrated press, and the consumption of newspapers at Coranderrk was reported in 1879. Anecdotally, Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory were avid readers of Eric Joliffe’s 1950s cartoon booklets *Witchetty’s Tribe*. Our focus will stay with print because it was the dominant media form of the colonial era, and sifting through its remarkable offerings allows us to consider, as Michael Taussig urges, the ‘capacity of the imagination to be lifted through representational media, such as marks on a page, into other worlds’. Print not only reported events, but circulated meanings of Aboriginality from archives and events that historians often treat as distinct from print, such as public lectures, excerpts from new publications, and the documents of governance such as the findings of Select Committees and Royal Commissions. This study follows the methodological devices Edward Said set out in his foundational work, *Orientalism*. He asks us to look for the ‘strategic formation’ of texts, that is, ‘the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large’. It is an approach wholly suited to the principal function of print: to copy and to imprint by reproducing en masse.
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Let’s consider the scaling of grey in this print copy of the unnamed woman reproduced in Where Strange Paths Go Down. It calls to mind a line from Taussig: it is poised between ‘fidelity and fantasy, between iconicity and arbitrariness, wholeness and fragmentation’. For all we know about the formal properties of photography and print, this image still affects me through a set of emotional responses influenced through childhood exposure to the growing disquiet about colonial legacies, spurred by Aboriginal activism of the time. I have been asked why I undertook the research and writing of this book. Without wanting to cross the very fine line between self-indulgence and accounting for my standpoint, it is a question a white scholar in Indigenous studies should be able to honour.

The disclosure in the documentary The Last Tasmanian that settlers buried Aboriginal babies up to the neck and, forcing their mothers to watch, kicked off their heads, was among many I found sickening and shameful. This documentary by Tom Haydon, released in 1978, created controversy as descendants challenged its premise that Aboriginal Tasmanians had been eradicated. At twelve years of age, I wasn’t aware of the controversy surrounding the screening of this widely viewed documentary. Michael Mansell refuted that the atrocities committed in Tasmania in the nineteenth century were part of ‘the swiftest and most complete genocide on record’. Tom O’Regan, too, argued, ‘the Tasmanian Aborigines have no existence in the present’ in the film. Nor did I then know that reactions to the film marked a turning point in white representations of Aboriginal and settler history, and influenced the politicisation of anthropological and archeological methodology. At that age it seemed unfathomable that generations of an entirely unfamiliar people had lived out their lives over millennia in a place where I felt at home and
at peace but from which they were now entirely erased – if we
generalised, as I did, from the contention of *The Last Tasmanian*. If
I really was ‘fifth generation’, I wondered, had my forebears been
involved in their eradication? During this period of widespread
changes to the Australian historical consciousness, and intensified Aboriginal activism, like many settler-heritage Australians
my sense of national identity became deeply unsettled.

But, as Sara Ahmed has warned, ‘declarations of shame can
work to bring the “the nation” into existence as a felt commu-
nity’. Without providing any relief to Aboriginal suffering, such
sentiments can be irritatingly mawkish to Indigenous Australians.
These feelings can appropriate their suffering as ‘our shame’, which
is then expunged through public declarations. Insofar as adopting
a political stance requires public display, anti-racism is performa-
tive, which is not to suggest it isn’t genuinely and profoundly felt.
At times among settler-heritage Australians I’ve wondered if there
isn’t a degree of competitiveness in fawning displays of anti-racism,
which I’ve sensed on a few occasions makes for tiresome company
for Aboriginal and Islander peoples. In his study of whiteness
Richard White has remarked that even lacerating ourselves with
admissions of guilt, ‘bears witness to the fineness of a moral spirit
that can feel such guilt’. Reconciling the past means not only
knowing it, but knowing how it has been constructed to nation-
alise historical imagination. Reconciliation means uncovering our
individual and shared historical inheritance and understanding the
processes by which it became shared. Racial difference imposes
profoundly determining identifications, and neither whiteness
nor womanhood can be shed like a skin. As a white woman I’m
positioned on either side of the dominant/subordinate power dyad.
In other words, I know one type of subjugation and I know of and
have benefited from another.
Wanting to know more, in my early twenties I thought I knew who to best ask about the first people of the poplar-scented Ovens Valley, where an intergenerational aura enfolded me in a sense of place. Edith Hoy (1905–1996) was a woman who in hindsight was steeped in history. As a child she knocked about with Ned Kelly’s nephews and nieces in the bush hamlet of Greta West in north-eastern Victoria. Writing under a male pseudonym – notably her boss’s – she was a reporter for Wangaratta’s *Chronicle Despatch*. She ‘pioneered’ a number of business ventures into the Ovens Valley, including Hoy’s Buses and the Bon Accorde Hospice. She was president of the Harrietville Historical Society and energetically planted plaques among the heath over the Victorian Highplains to commemorate the cattlemen and drovers. After she retired she wrote a history of gold mining in the Ovens Valley, particularly on the Buckland Valley riots and the Chinese expulsion, along with a pamphlet on Guide Alice (Manfield) of Mount Buffalo, another early tourist operator with whom she may have identified. Every January 26, Mrs Hoy was Harrietville’s Australia Day impresario, inviting dignitaries to hoist the flag in the Historical Park and breaking the celebratory crust of almond icing. Finally, she installed a waterwheel in the Historical Park to commemorate her late husband. She was also my maternal grandmother.

Before all these flags and fruitcakes, plaques and historical parks became apparent to me as artefacts of a very orthodox form of colonial history – one in which Aborigines were notably absent – I thought Haha, as we called her, was the obvious person to ask about the region’s colonial past. On a drive out to the Greta Cemetery I asked, ‘What happened to all the Aboriginal people here?’ She raised the imposing span of her palm to me and said, ‘They ran away into the hills’, then turned and resolutely scanned the horizon, not to be drawn. Granted, Haha might simply have
grown tired of my blathering, or was deep in remembrance for
the people reposing beneath the Greta sky, but it nevertheless
struck me as a telling omission from a local historian.

Given that seven or eight shepherds were speared and one
Aborigine shot in the ‘Faithfull massacre’ on the Broken River
near Benalla in 1838, the ‘frontier skirmishes’ first described in the
works of Richard Broome and Henry Reynolds is a more accurate
description of interracial relations in the area. The Faithfull
brothers’ men were killed by a sanctioned avenging party of 150
Pangerang men in retribution for the shooting and injuring of a
number of Aboriginal men following an attack on the Faithfulls’
overlanding party on the Ovens River a week before. The
suspicion of an impending attack was aroused among the Faithfull
party through the absence of women at the Aboriginal meeting
place they were befouling with their camp and stock. As was the
case in many violent reprisals in the incendiary violence on the
colonial frontier, the misuse of women, or failure to properly
recompense for the exchange of women, was one of the motiva-
tions for the assault. The ratio of European men to women on the
rapidly advancing Victorian pastoral frontier was twenty to one
and sexual outlet was assumed to be a universal constant in white
men. As Patrick Wolfe has argued, territoriality is not encoun-
tered without gender, itself foundational to the world-historical
project of settler-colonialism.

But violence in the northeast predated even the Faithfull
reprisals. Around 1838, William Thomas, the Protector of the
Port Phillip, Westernport and Gippsland districts, described the
individual men who comprised the native police in Victoria under
Captain Dana. ‘Yupton – (Yeap-tune)’ was highly regarded for his
restraint in action, particularly given ‘his father, mother, and elder
brother were shot by the settlers in a sheep robbery between the
Goulburn River and the Ovens. The deaths of the Faithfulls’ shepherds occurred during a series of raids against stations being established along the Port Phillip route from Sydney to Melbourne, soon after the government in 1836 issued annual licences for the depasturing of stock ‘beyond the limits of location’ to shore up the wool export market, by then the colonies’ largest. Dispatches from Governor Gipps show him to resist pressure from squatters overlanding stock to form ‘militias’ though this meant their punitive raids on Aboriginal camps could appear ‘administratively clean’. Overlanders from Sydney pushed south. They set up their stations during a drought, prompting the local people’s requests for food – though they may also have been seeking recompense for the use of their lands, waterholes and access to women. Following a raid on his Ovens station, Faithfull led a counter-attack during which sixty rounds were fired on a camp of men, women and children. He reported, ‘I trust and believe that many of the bravest savage warriors bit the dust’. In Grenfell Price’s brief 1949 history he noted that George Faithfull knew his name to be ‘a terror’ among Aborigines in the vicinity of Wangaratta. In one disturbing incident Faithfull recovered a boy sheltering under a log, ‘took him home and tamed him, and he became very useful to me’. A raid on George Mackay’s Whorouly station on the Ovens and King rivers in 1840 was attributed by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, George Robinson, to the many ‘collisions’ which he feared to have been of a ‘fatal character’ perpetrated by one of Mackay’s shepherds. One of Mackay’s men, perhaps the same, had recommended to the local protector that since ‘Blacks’ were cannibals they ‘ought to have bullets put through their heads’. (Haha’s home, where my mother was raised and we kids had holiday visits, was in Mackay Street, Wangarrata.) In 1839, in response to eighty-one petitioners, a letter from a Port Phillip administrator informed the
Colonial Office that a party had been dispatched, ‘consisting of an officer and twelve men of the mounted police, to the River Ovens, as soon as he heard of the late massacre of Mr. Faithfull’s men, and that this party has since been increased to twenty-one’. The group soon swelled to forty-four with ‘a discretionary power’ given to the police magistrate in Melbourne ‘to cause parties of infantry to advance, if necessary, into the interior’. In all but name these Border Police, stationed along the river crossings on the Port Philip Overland Route, were the militia pastoralists had earlier demanded. The number of deaths they caused is unknown.

No doubt running for their lives into the hills was one response to the violent incursion of Europeans into the Aboriginal homelands of Victoria’s North East, which took in the people of Bidawal, Monero-Ngarigo, Gunai-Kurnai, Jaithmathang, Taungurung, Mitambuta, Ngarigu-Currawong, Dhuwuroa, Waywurru and Wurundjeri. In fact, Aborigines waged hit-and-run strikes on stations throughout the region though only fifty-nine Europeans were killed by Aborigines on the Victorian frontier while 800–1,000 Aboriginal lives are estimated to have been lost in conflict. Attacks in the North East, such as that on Mackay, in which his house and stores were fired, a shepherd killed and thousands of pounds of stock stolen, were met with paramilitary-style raids on camps. Reprisal attacks were led by Fitzherbert Mundy and parties of Europeans assembled from the neighbouring stations of William Bowman, Henry Yaldwin and John Hutchinson. They were among the eighty-one settlers who had threatened to take matters into their own hands if the government did not retaliate by raising a militia. Fighting was reported in the area again in 1841, when Aborigines were said to be using firearms. The Aboriginal population of Victoria was halved and halved again through two onslaughts of smallpox in the 1790s and
again in the 1830s.  

James Boyce writes in his history, *1835*, that thirty years after the founding of Melbourne, population decline across Victoria was at least 80 per cent.  

The discovery of gold in 1852 occasioned a massive influx of men into the valley of the Minjambutu/Mogullumbigj. Very often Aborigines acted as guides to the goldfields including men documented at Omeo and on the Ovens. But through violence and disease, by 1901 the area was thought to have become entirely ‘devoid’ of Aboriginal people. The dramatic depopulation was descriptive of the Australian frontier wherever it pressed forward into Aboriginal homelands. In 1934 Polish anthropologist Krzywicki assembled a tribe-by-tribe breakdown of Aboriginal depopulation and found most groups had halved within twenty years of contact with Europeans. The Kundangora (one division) of the Ya-itma-thang people (Omeo, high plains) were counted at 500–600 in 1835. Krzywicki claimed that by 1862 only four or five of its people remained. In an 1877 census only thirty-four people were listed as living off-reserve in the North East. In 1942 Charles Barrett, naturalist and prolific publisher, wrote in his booklet *Blackfellows* that the ‘Oven River blacks’ had ‘long been extinct’.  

This may have been wishful thinking. Survivors did not simply run into the hills as Haha told me. Mary Jane Milawa (‘mil’ = eyes, ‘wa’ = water in Pangerang) belonged to ‘the Wangaratta tribe’ and lived in her ‘miam’ on the banks of the King River (see *Figure* 0.5). Sally Corbett ‘belonged to the Maragan (Broken River) tribe’ (see *Figure* 0.6). Both women were profiled together in *Science of Man* in 1900. Sally (who married twice) and Mary Jane visited each other and Mary ‘lived the old camp life on the site of a very old camping ground’ about 2.5 miles from Wangaratta. Corbett was described as ‘the last
female representative’ of the Wangaratta tribe and ‘an intelligent black’ with ‘a kind disposition’, showing ‘a strong attachment to those who had treated the blacks with kindness’. Yet Pangerang elder Freddie Dowling advises me that Corbett died a few weeks before Milawa. *Science of Man* records that Corbett ‘liked to talk of old camp life’ but ‘her mind was vacant’ of any religious belief and ‘had the usual dread of evil spirits’. Though married twice and known to have had children, it was doubted if any of them were living. As it transpires, Mary Jane Milawa was the sister of Luana, Freddie Dowling’s great grandmother. By his account Luana and Mary Jane were taken by Wiradjuri people to safety at Wahgunyah near Lake Moodemere, but Mary Jane pined for her country and, still a girl, walked back to the river flats east of Wangaratta below the township of Milawa where she camped until she died in 1888.

Mary Jane Milawa and Sally Corbett lived before Haha’s time. Whether my grandmother was aware of the people of the North East who remained, and whatever she knew of the destructive events that went unmentioned in her carefully stage-managed Australia Day revelries, her explanation to me was nevertheless pervaded by a sense of unmentionable history. It’s unlikely that in her time even such an inquiring amateur historian would have known that the local Aborigines called the Ovens River the ‘Torryong’, the King River the ‘Poodumba’ and their junction ‘Burawang’. There is nothing in her five scrapbooks, including hundreds of pages of closely typed transcripts from the *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, pertaining to Aboriginal history (although she was unusual to have taken such an interest in the Chinese). Sally Morgan’s grandmother has called this distinct unknowing of white Australians ‘living a half-life’. I first felt its peculiar pall between Haha and I there on the Kingswood’s baking nylon seat
on the way out to the Greta Cemetery. Bhabha takes the question into new territory when he asks how this might be experienced by the colonised: 'If, as they say, the past is a foreign country, then what does it mean to encounter a past that is your own country reterritorialized, even terrorized by another?'

As it transpires Haha did take an active interest in local Aboriginal history, but as distinct from the terrorising by settlers. She knew of rock art in caves at Mudgegonga near Myrtleford, and didn’t tell anyone for fear of them being vandalised, but later gave their whereabouts to the anthropologist John Mulvaney, whom she took to the site in December 1965, and who gave assurances the site would be protected. She sought references from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. She also talked of her great grandfather who had dark colouring on his back, perhaps from labouring with coal, and who worried about taking off his shirt when working or boxing for fear that his dark skin might imply Aboriginal heritage.

The concealments of colonial history require the intimate and informal discretions of rolled-down shirtsleeves and clandestine caves. But they also rely on sanctioned, ritualised, spectacular displays – of flags, plaques and waterwheels. Haha was a custodian of a form of history that I came to understand as particular to settler-colonialism as both arbitrary and archived. As Chris Healy has argued, the ‘intercultural space of Aboriginality’ is ‘constituted by strange and transient patterns of remembering and forgetting’. The things Haha vouchsafed to display or keep secret marked the distance Ann Stoller has charted ‘between recognized and disqualified knowledge, between intelligible accounts and those deemed appropriate for exchange’. She gave careful consideration to where and how imperial signs should be made known and remembered as part of our national and
local heritage. Her stalled remembrance of North East Victorian Aborigines stands in direct contrast to her energetic and insistent memorialising of white ‘pioneers’. Healy is prescient when he asks if it is enough to ‘simply incite more memories’ or whether it’s more critical ‘to remember white forgetting’.

His argument is linked to Bhabha’s that, 

> It is not adequate simply to become aware of the semiotic systems that produce the signs of culture and their dissemination. Much more significantly we are faced with the challenge of reading, into the present of a specific cultural performance, the traces of all those disciplinary discourses and institutions of knowledge that constitute the conditions and contexts of culture.

With this in mind, Healy’s contention that settlers were ‘desperate to fill, to replace bodily absences with body traces that could be studied’, helps to explain Haha’s interest in the cave outside Myrtleford. Such a site of remembrance, once revealed to authorised custodians, might create an alternative to her cattlemen plaques, yet also address the ‘permanent emergency of authenticity’ that Healy sees as luring tourists to such sites, arguably questing for a national origin other than land theft and violent incursion.

It was through this sense of mired history that I viewed this photograph of the woman ‘taken during the early days of white settlement’. The fact that the woman herself went unnamed and could not be traced places her within ‘spaces blanked out by that ruthless whiteness’ that Robert Young has described. Blanking out is not merely passively absenting an omission, or forgetting.
Skin Deep

It is an active part of the production of historical understanding. It constructs the Other as for consumption within the dominant Western culture, projecting and disavowing her difference. On the one hand this unnamed woman’s story – arguably best told by her descendants – fills in a blank. It assigns a position from which her content can be shared. But since the content of that story has been blanked out, the other task this image assigns is to understand the processes by which her individual, rather than typecast, identity was effaced, paradoxically by that most individuating of artefacts, the photographic portrait. She appears within the frame of the coloniser. Yet, a number of portraits of Aboriginal women taken at this time suggest through their address to the camera that many women had become ‘practised’ sitters. It is similar in composure and technique to a portrait of Ngilgi a Bibbulmun woman Daisy Bates counted as a friend, which appeared in her *Passing of the Aborigines*, but I have not been able to trace the photographer to locate it within any body of work. The unnamed woman’s address to the camera is arresting and unassimilable to the categories available at this time, within which to apprehend her. Her resolute individuality punctures any imposition of type. It is not merely that some residue of the self is extant in every photographic portrait. Her expression belies any attempt at silent extirpation, any foreclosure of her life experience. As far as I can tell (and again I make no claim over any correct reading, but take ownership of this reading as subjective) it seems to animate her face with anger, grief and possibly trauma. Caught between this ineradicable expression of self and the photograph’s cultural framing of the Other woman is a certain indeterminacy. She remains unknowable to authorised colonial knowledge. Yet, because her image has been consumed by white Australians it has become part of a shared story of intercultural encounter.
'Her mind was vacant'

Understanding the processes of these attempts to know, remember, forget and blank out within the figurative space of the Aboriginal Woman might tell us something about colonial forms of knowledge production. As Bhabha reminds us, ‘the image is only ever an appurtenance to authority and identity; it must never be read mimetically as the appearance of reality’. Nevertheless, it is hard to turn away from her expression even in an effort to avoid an overdetermined typecast. Gayatri Spivak has warned against ‘the slippage to rendering visible the mechanism [of occlusion of the subaltern subject] to rendering vocal the individual’. There is indeed no way to fill this cultural frame with her identity by making visible the ways this woman was effaced. What it meant for this woman to directly look down the lens, and whether this contravened protocols for perceptual relations, such as eye contact between men and women, we cannot know. Whether the photographer had offended her or her husband through inadequate recompense, or in requiring her to bare herself, as far as we can see, to at least her shoulders, or come indoors, stand or sit against a sheet, where perhaps a brother-in-law had just been seated, to put to one side her child, head covering, pipe, her digging stick…for all this exposure, she remains ‘doubly in shadow’. We cannot access the emotional triggers for her arresting address to this camera. Nor can we assume she had any sense that we might, decades later, engage with her address. Did she associate the click of the shutter with the mechanics of incursion, or was this woman, cast as primitive, familiar with or even inured to this quintessentially modern machinery? We could resign ourselves to never knowing, or attend to the task that remains of ‘measuring silences…into the object of investigation’.

Since 1970, the colonial archive, occluded and partial though it is, has become an important source for Indigenous activists,
including native title claimants, and stolen generations connecting back to family and country, and artists wanting to dispel settler-colonial icons and stereotypes. The gleanings from this same archive have been contested by historians accusing each other of selective, tendentious readings and partial interpretations. All are invested in shaping national memory either as reckoning or redemption. It has long been apparent that any historical work is necessarily selective, mediated by text – document, image and artefact – themselves created and preserved by partisan institutions and traditions, their significance often fermented in the distillery of nationalism.

The authors were, of course, largely settler men wanting to account for racial difference, within a context of colonial dispossession, and usually not wanting to leave much trace of individuals who might make unsettling claims as landowners, heirs and custodians. It is also important to remember, as Robert Kenny writes, that there is ‘as wide a gulf between the mind-set of the world we inhabit and the mind-set of the colonists…as there was between those colonists and the Aboriginal peoples they confronted’. The more information we have about historical texts, the greater empirical basis we have to assign fresh meanings and significance to them, and from this reinvent national remembering. However, more and more historians are drawing upon remnants and filling in the gaps with broader context and imaginings, acknowledging that even the most comprehensive sources are partial and require additional referencing through subjective analysis and creative connections to a variety of contexts. The colonial archive is now intercepted with ‘the triple imperative to throw past light on ambiguous present usages, to dereify the concept of race, and to keep encounters and local agency at the forefront of analysis’.
'Her mind was vacant'

Despite the intentions of the publishers to convey something typical about her race, this photo is ineluctably a portrait. It is a mutable amalgam of bared yet imperceptible emotions. Again, by my reading, the halves of her face seem split unevenly by the spread of light, and each seems to be held in tension between a distinct and irreconcilable disturbance. The left, in darkness, seems wrathful, yet this anger appears to be contained within an intelligent management of that emotion’s causes and sensations. The right, pressed with a handprint of exposure, seems bright with the trauma of newly slapped shock. The brow seems drawn into a scarcely traceable expression of anxiety. There appears an edge of scorn arcing over the plains of her face. That and an excruciating vulnerability, caught off guard yet composed in the face of history, unifies this face, for me, into the most compelling and compromising human visage. She looks to me devastated yet non-compliant.

No name, no date, no place – hardly a working basis from which to understand colonial relations as impressed through its print archive. Ordinarily the difficulties such an image presents would render it historically impermissible. Yet, these are in themselves descriptive difficulties. This woman’s imposed anonymity interpolates her into the prevailing type of lubra or gin. In my book, it is descriptive of racial encounters to which we still need to reconcile ourselves.

In her esteemed history of images of Andean Indians, Deborah Poole found such colonial images provide an impetus to ‘examine the role of visual images in the structuring and reproduction of the scientific projects, cultural sentiments, and aesthetic dispositions that characterize modernity in general and modern racial discourse in particular’. A similar archive of images and descriptions of Australian Aboriginal women can be found in the holdings
of museums, public record offices and state libraries around the world. They reference much earlier conventions of iconography of indigenous women who, as Phillipa Levine observes, ‘bore an enormous symbolic burden as writers from Walter Raleigh to Edward Long employed them to mark metaphorically the symbiotic boundaries of European national identities and white supremacy’.97 As Levine notes, subsequent writers borrowed freely from one another, superimposing imagery from enslaved and colonised women from diverse scenarios of racial difference. These earlier archival holdings also provide the basis for mapping out shifting discourses of racial difference within the amalgam of gender. But in terms of trying to account for white imaginings, this particular study focuses on how these images, textual descriptions and material products were circulated and reiterated for white consumption in travelogues, settler autobiographies, illustrated encyclopedias, pictorial atlases, newspapers and magazines – that is, in print media. It is striking that before 1967, Aboriginal women were largely depicted unnamed, or given white names, often Mary or Topsy, or typed as lubras and gins throughout popular print.

Yet, by the time Duncan-Kemp’s book was published, Indigenous women had been appearing as public figures, such as the community advocate Faith Bandler98 and Pearl Gibbs.99 In addition, white women involved in Aboriginal reserves had become public advocates, including Mary Montgomery Bennett100 and Caroline Kelly.101 The publication of anthropologist Phyllis Kabbery’s Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane in 1939 redressed the gender partiality of male anthropologists and their failure to credit women their distinct role in ritual, the ‘matriarchal transmission of rights’102 to perform ceremonies, along with their interests in land tenure law.103 Aboriginal women gained
increasing recognition after the 1967 referendum, through the unrelenting activism of Marcia Langton, Bobbi Sykes, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) and many others, through the international champions Evonne Goolagong and Cathy Freeman, and through biographers Margaret Tucker, Ruby Langford Ginibi and Sally Morgan. Also noteworthy were a series of biographical essays on Koorie women by anthropologist Dianne Barwick, a collection edited by Fay Gale, the award-winning television series *Women of the Sun* in 1981, anthropologist Dianne Bell’s 1983 *Daughters of the Dreaming* and an exhibition of the same name at Museum Victoria in 1990.

Before these post-referendum additions to understandings of Aboriginal women, newcomers craved to know the specifics of Aboriginal women’s lives, such as how they grieved, birthed and were married, but then usually erased their individual identities. In the most obvious sense, one explanation has to be the dispossession of identity and the role it played in what Patrick Wolfe influentially identified as the settler-colonial ‘logic of elimination’. It created a space divested of individual women in the white imagination which was then supplanted by types, tropes, obfuscations and sometimes outright lies. It is these supplanted imaginings that form the basis for this book. It is a print history of settler impressions of Aboriginal women situated at that most potent juncture of racism and misogyny. This is a book of lies.

The colonial archive largely consists of accounts by white men. It is not only delimited to their worldview, but it is also marked by a particular disregard for the identities of individual Aboriginal women, more overt than the disregard for Aboriginal men. It is also replete with fantasies, projections and caprices. To give another example, in 1946 Norman Laird wrote a vignette about an unnamed ‘Aborigine girl’ standing by a railway siding.
on the Nullarbor while his train was being rewatered. The quotation that kicks off this introduction comes from Laird. He saw her ‘cracked and bleeding feet’, her ‘matted and untidy hair’ and wrote that her ‘European rags hung upon her like a blanket of darkness choking the life-green from a struggling plant’. Even though the girl seemed to ‘shrink into space’, Laird wanted to see into the ‘sheltered caverns of her eyes’. He imagined he saw ‘a fellow creature who, having lost so much on the margins of existence, seemed now to watch wistfully for a new signal from life’. Laird is contemptuous of white superiority and ‘civilised stupidity’, displaying his fine moral spirit. Nevertheless, he attributed her impoverishment to an inherent Aboriginal incapacity to take on the mantle of civilisation. The girl may be of a ‘vanishing race’ but Laird passionately hopes for a better future, and by 1946 he is also aware of the importance of perceptual relations. He wishes her people are never permitted to be ‘publicly humiliated with remarks, jokes or ridicule that directly reflect upon their mental status’.

The author is caught up in the prevailing ideas of his time and his cackhanded sympathy ought to be a warning for how fine feeling is not enough. From today’s vantage he was wrong on a number of counts; most obviously and against all odds, the young woman’s people did not ‘vanish’. He was wrong to conflate the undoubted loss of knowledge, language and ceremony with dying race theory. And he writes, ‘If it is pointed out that the aborigines are unable to learn calculus, let us also remember that we cannot learn black-tracking’. Racial difference is granted latitude through a peculiar mix of patronising self-apology. Laird’s piece is embroidered with the fortifying regret of tenderfoot occupants. Still, in the end all that we know about the young woman he describes comes from his side of the tracks. He never crosses over,
'Her mind was vacant'

asks her name or attempts to find out anything about her. This appraisal from a distance characterises the gendered and racialised perceptual relations of the settler.

It is clear newcomers have always been deeply ambivalent about the processes of colonisation they were complicit in and accrued dividends from. Perhaps it was this that prompted them to concoct entire narratives of Aboriginality working off glimpses. In 1952 a TAA passenger, Eric White, penned a vignette of ‘Aborigine Nellie’, a young woman travelling on her own with a hessian bag to Katherine (see Figure 0.7). He claimed she ‘rolled big, frightened eyes’ at the plane because she was ‘a mute and lonely symbol of her race, a stone-age victim of the machine age’. Even so, he notes ‘her deportment would have excited the envy of many a model or ballerina of the south’. Clearly intrigued, White continues, ‘Every movement had a natural grace; each gesture was smooth and dainty. The print frock emphasized the slimness of her waist’. Then he snuck a snapshot of her and, again, to my
reading, she seemed to huddle dejected on the lowest step leading up to the Cloncurry passenger lounge. It is remarkable from today’s vantage that White did not make any attempt to speak to her. Instead he lifted her name from the passenger list. And the name she gave may have been how she preferred to be known by whitefellas. The name or names she knew herself by were either immaterial to whites or perhaps something of herself she preferred to keep to herself. If she was coming from home she may have been a Kalkadoon, Pitta Pitta or Mitakoodi woman. White watched her every move, even though he knew she ‘crouched’ in her seat, ‘intent on keeping out of sight’ and was ‘trying to be as inconspicuous as possible’.

That sense of entitlement to visual access pervades perceptual relations from settlers to Aboriginal women. Is it any wonder she crouched in her seat? Laird left her historically stranded; today an anthropologist at the Northern Land Council is unable to identify ‘Aborigine Nellie’. The question for us is do we leave this woman consigned to history or, having attempted to identify her and contact her descendants, do we ask why Aboriginal women were granted this oneiric presence in the national optic?

Under this unrelenting gaze, of following and noting their every move, yet not wanting to include their voices or lived experiences, it isn’t hard to imagine Aboriginal women keeping things back, such as their names, their destination, their business. Their sacred knowledge has been denigrated as ‘superstition’, even suspect, such as during the Hindmarsh Island affair, in which a proposed bridge in South Australia was disputed by Ngarrindjeri women as infringing on sacred ‘secret women’s business’ they could not reveal. Indigenous intellectual property has understandably become a site of heightened protection. When contacting Aboriginal women’s organisations to repatriate images
such as that of ‘Nellie’, this has been raised as a concern. As such, this isn’t a book about Aboriginal women’s stories, but rather about the stalled encounter within which whites wanted to know Aboriginal women – without actually speaking to them. It is an attempt to reconcile this failure of recognition with regard.

The article on ‘Nellie’, like that on Sally Corbett and Mary Jane Milawa, is centred on a named woman. In the vast print literature on Aboriginal women up to 1967 I’ve been able to locate twelve such articles in journals and magazines (including some newspapers). Nine are obituaries in the ‘last of her tribe’ genre, including three on Trugernanner and another on Fanny Balbuk-Yooreel of Swan River, which shows a photograph of her corpse. One article features a tree climber. Another queries whether Fanny Cochrane Smith was in fact the last Tasmanian. The last is a story on ‘Black Aggie’ in a journal entitled *Wild Life*. Three of these stories are written by the amateur anthropologist and well-known journalist Daisy Bates, who camped at Ooldea for sixteen years and devoted her life to collecting information and artefacts while tending to the sick. Along with her widely read 1938 book, *The Passing of the Aborigines*, Bates published 270 newspaper articles on her ‘natives and I’. These articles on women she knew consolidated her claim to having intimate knowledge of the ‘dying tribes’, as she called them.

It seems Aboriginal women were mostly named in print after they died in what we might call obituary hubris. In the John Greenway bibliography of some 20,000 references (which we will come to in the next chapter), largely listing journal and magazine articles on Australian Aborigines until 1959, there is one lonely publication authored by an Aboriginal woman. It was written by Ngoondaw Gladys, a fourteen-year-old girl at the Mount Margaret Mission in Western Australia in 1937, rather forlornly
about Saint George, and was published by the mission to showcase her progress after two years of schooling. Yet, literate and educated Aboriginal women, such as Bessy Cameron (nee Flowers), teacher at Ramahyuck, wrote letters to the press but weren’t listed in the Greenway bibliography.

Does recirculating these unnamed images simply reinstate settler presumptiveness about visual access? Does it merely consolidate a vantage over Indigenous women where, to paraphrase Bhabha, they are not? Or is it justified by what they can tell us about settler imaginings of Aboriginal women and the part they continue to play in shaping non-Indigenous responses to Aboriginal women? Certainly the textual imaginings of Aboriginal women that comprise this study confirm Langton’s crucial argument that, ‘The densest relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors’. More circumspect settler observers, such as Victorian squatter Edward Curr, whom we will meet again in this work, knew that the knowledge most Australians had of Aborigines was derived purely from read sources which were themselves ‘little better than a tissue of errors’, intimating also the flimsiness of evidence for white perceptions. Women were particularly obscured to predominantly male observers by their reserve, as they protected restricted knowledge, and by their being subsumed under the category ‘native’ and collectivised into types such as lubra and gin. When in 1934 Krzywicki singled Aboriginal women out for particular attention (attempting to verify whether women ever induced abortion), he complained, ‘The life of Australian women is to this day a closed book in many respects: we know little about it’. European-heritage authors compensated the gap with much speculation and little regard.