

Alcheringa: Invisible Aborigines on TV | Chris Healy

In the second half of the 1960s during school holidays at my Melbourne school, Manningham Primary, we used to watch film screenings, presumably to keep us off the street in those brief respites from formal instruction. The format, as I remember it, included a feature such as *Born Free*—a film that never failed to bring forth a flood of tears—preceded by a ‘short’.¹ More than once that short came from the TV series *Alcheringa*, a prize-winning 1962 ABC television program of twelve quarter-hour episodes, initially broadcast weekly, that re-created, romantically and anthropologically, an imagined world of everyday Indigenous practices ‘before the coming of the white man’.² The series was written and directed by Frank Few, an American-born director who also made some of the first wildlife or nature documentaries in Australia, and hosted by Bill Onus, a Yorta Yorta man. The cast members were all Aborigines.³

In each episode the opening sequence is followed by Bill Onus providing specific commentary that serves to frame the action. At the end of each episode, Onus reflects on what has been shown and anticipates the next week’s program. Week by week, the series consists of dramatic recreations of the life of Aboriginal people of ‘long ago’. For the most part, these recreations focus on how Aboriginal people were imagined as acquiring the means of physical subsistence. So, there are programs such as:

Australian Television History:
ACH 26 | 2007 | pp
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‘Making a Stone Axe’ (Episode 3), ‘Fishing’ (Episode 5), ‘Women Gathering Food’ (Episode 6) and ‘Hunting an Emu’ (Episode 8), as well as two episodes couched somewhat differently: ‘Trading’ (Episode 2) and ‘Walkabout’ (Episode 10). The various activities are dramatised as the life an Aboriginal family group—a man, woman, young girl and boy—who, we are told, are spending the hot summer months in an ‘allocated area’, after which they will be ‘reunited with the tribe in the autumn’ (Episode 1).⁴

The series was shot on 16 mm black and white film, with the exception of the Onus commentary that opened and closed each episode, which was filmed in outdoor locations under natural light without synchronised sound. For the most part the camera is static, using medium shots and medium close-ups. Occasional tracking and following shots of characters walking through the bush are intercut with close-ups of faces and manufacturing activity. There are a few panoramic sequences, particularly in the ‘Walkabout’ episode. The editing is, in general, leisurely, as is the pace of the dramatisation. The exceptions are the hunting scenes in the episodes ‘Hunting a Kangaroo’ (Episode 7) and ‘Hunting an Emu’ (Episode 8), in which relatively fast cuts are used to dramatisé the chase and the kill.

The soundtrack consists of occasional diegetic sound—scraping or axe-blows on a tree that were recorded separately—an orchestral score played for mood and feel, and a voice-of-god narration provided by John Morgan. This narration performs a number of roles. It explains some of the on-screen action, for example, telling us in Episode 1: ‘Upon the return of mother and daughter from their food gathering, the boy tells them what he and his father have achieved during their absence.’ It provides contextual information elaborating on the on-screen action, much of it couched as authoritative anthropological knowledge:

Trading performed an important function in spreading the culture of the Aboriginal people across Australia. Various articles, corroborees, ritual cults, art designs and material culture of all kinds were passed on directly or indirectly through trade, bringing to the varied cultures scattered across the continent a degree of unity. (Episode 2)

Occasionally the commentary becomes explicitly didactic. At other times, the narration borders on the bizarre and mysterious: for example, in the episode on shellfish, the narrator informs the viewer that the ‘Australian Aborigine had extremely good teeth’ (Episode 11).

So these are the basic elements of *Alcheringa*, but one example fished from a very large reservoir of cultural products—images, newspaper accounts, books, public displays, films, television programs, theatrical events, and much else besides—in which non-Indigenous people have told each other stories about ‘things Aboriginal’.⁵ I hope that it is already abundantly clear that, in important ways, *Alcheringa* produces ‘bad’ representations of Indigenous people. However, in the first instance I want to insist on thinking about such representations in specific rather than moralistic terms. In other words, I want to avoid such general observations as ‘*Alcheringa* offers only a partial sense of everyday Aboriginal life in pre-colonial Australia’, as this is a charge that could be levelled at any such representation which will, by definition, always be inadequate. I am more interested in the consequences of particular representational and other choices, for example that the ‘historical’ Aboriginal people are silent, their actions and minds only explicable through the intervention of the voice-of-god who explains all. At the same time, we should acknowledge what *Alcheringa* achieves at this level. Given its scale and audience, it provides a reasonably nuanced account of some aspects of Aboriginal everyday life and material culture.

So I want to return to *Alcheringa* here not to judge it as producing good or bad representations, but because it takes us to some of the central tensions between ‘archaic Aboriginal being’ and ‘pure white modernity’ that seem to overflow from, or produce a surplus in, this televisual re-staging of an imagined pre-colonial Aboriginal world. To put it another way, I want to think about how such programs work in a paradoxical memory culture haunted by strange patterns of amnesia in the contact zones between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Here, I want first simply to recall the existence of *Alcheringa* (and the presence of Aboriginal people in other examples of early Australian TV such as *Whiplash*) neither as a breakthrough example of popular representations of Aboriginal people nor as racist rubbish, but as an example of how Aboriginality—in stories, images, objects and relationships—has been a variegated but constant presence in Australian public culture. I want to explore how *Alcheringa* deploys and relies on characterisations of Indigenous people that are primitivist, condescending and disrespectful; how it understands Aboriginal people as colonised; and how, in some ways, it is a relatively

open and complex television series that produces Aboriginality as a postcolonial space of exchange that looks forward to more recent examples of television.

Stone-Age Primitives

The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist's dummy—or so we like to think.⁶

Each episode of *Alcheringa* begins with the same fixed-camera shot of a flat, empty landscape punctuated by a small dead tree in the middle distance. As the opening narration begins, two Aboriginal men enter the frame from behind the camera and walk towards the tree. John Morgan's sonorous and theatrical mid-century English-Australian voice intones:

Theirs was a timeless land.
Unmarked or divided by the wheels of science.
Before the first half-formed words of recorded history, these people
made peace with an unchanging world.
These were the people of the dreaming time.
Of a world now dying.
A world of ages past.
A world of Alcheringa.

As the narration closes, a powerful and insistent Indigenous song reaches a crescendo as the word '*Alcheringa*' appears on screen in a script constructed out of boomerang shapes. The screen then fades to black, before Bill Onus appears to introduce the weekly component part. If the intensity of the opening helped lodge this series in my memory, it certainly did so by insisting, from the beginning, on the primitivism of the people about whom I was to learn. Through image, narration and diagesis, *Alcheringa* is relentless in producing a vision of Aborigines as primitives.

The first move in guaranteeing the primitiveness of Aboriginal people is to establish them as a distinctive group defined by race. This is achieved in both the opening shot of two black men carrying spears in an arid landscape, and the first lines of the narration to the first episode: 'The Australian Aborigine is an Australoid, one of the four basic races of mankind. He lives in close harmony with nature and is dependent upon her for his existence' (Episode 1). While the narration tells the listener that the 'origins' of the Aborigines are scientifically

inconclusive, the real origins of Aborigines are made entirely clear: Aborigines are part of nature, and definitely of another time. The notion that '[h]e lives in close harmony with nature' is the strongest single theme which structures the series, organised as it is around the variety of ways in which Aborigines acquire the means of subsistence—men fishing and hunting, and women gathering food—and the technical means which enabled this mode of life—fire, boomerangs, stone axes and bark canoes. But this version of 'harmony with nature' is not a proto-environmentalist insistence that all human societies exist in a mutually interdependent relationship with nature. In this case it is predominantly an account of 'harmony with nature'—and indeed a form of existence—that is 'of another time', in the sense that Johannes Fabian and many others have argued is so central to evolutionist thinking.⁷ Aborigines are a distinct and separate race of people who are both ancient and underdeveloped in comparison to 'Europeans', who are both the paradigm for, and pinnacle of, human biological and social development. Aborigines were superstitious and cunning people whose cultural barbarism was marked by polygamy. And the viewers of *Alcheringa* know this because they are told so by the voice-of-god narration, which confidently instructs the viewer on all aspects of the lives and minds of these silent, naked, black people.

The primitivism of Aborigines is secured most emphatically in *Alcheringa* through images of Aboriginal bodies which ground and guarantee otherness. This is clear from the first episode through the use of close-ups of near-naked black bodies, and the prosthetic scarification applied to the skin of Harry Williams and Doris Simpson, the male and female leads. In later episodes, particularly the episode on collecting shellfish, the camera lingers fetishistically on Doris Simpson's body to produce an eroticised primitive woman. Certainly John B Murray, the series producer, understood how important it was for Simpson to appear topless, and spent some time convincing her that, in his words, *Alcheringa* was not 'just more exploitation'. While I am sure that Murray's aims concerned his sense of verisimilitude, in some respects it was more exploitation, and not only of Simpson's body.

But perhaps it's not all so neat in *Alcheringa*. In the first place, 'primitives' take many forms, especially in the Pacific. We know this because Pacific-Island peoples have, at various times, been both noble and beast-like. More broadly, primitives can be evil enemies or loyal companions, wily tricksters or child-like simpletons, lazy or labour-

power, and much else besides. Nor are these categories necessarily fixed: the capacity to control the name of the Other is a fundamental part of the power of colonial attribution. If we stay, for a moment, with Torgovnick's notion of the primitive as 'our ventriloquist's dummy', then the mobility of the category suggests that Aboriginal people are figured as primitives not simply to produce racist representations but in order to fulfil particular functions for non-Indigenous people. So, what roles were these primitives playing for non-Indigenous viewers who were, after all, the majority audience for the TV series? In addition to being primitives, I want to suggest that in *Alcheringa*, Aborigines are both *decent* primitives and *our* primitives, Australian primitives. Despite living at a low level of material development, being superstitious, and possibly polygamous, they are a people who are resourceful and strong, family-centred and networked by trade, who possess culture and spirituality, great ingenuity and skill. These ambiguities are made clear in Episode 3 of the series, 'Making a Stone Axe'.

On the face of it, this episode is about the processes involved in making a stone axe. The lesson for the viewer is that 'the stone axe raised his standard of existence'. But these aspects of the program are intercut with a series of close-ups and wide shots of the two happy children of the family, swimming at the water hole, playing with a koala and just generally mucking around. The narration didactically informs the viewer that children were 'treated affectionately' and given 'considerable freedom', but that 'as in most primitive nomadic tribes, infant mortality among the Australian Aborigines was high. Disease, hunger and unavoidable lack of care were the main causes' (Episode 3). Whatever we might make of this odd last phrase, this vision of Aboriginal people is, in part, underpinned by a strongly humanist sense of the primitive possessing particular pre-modern virtues. In this sense, not only is family strong, attachment to place rich and meaningful, and childhood a space of play rather than instrumental training, but Aboriginal society itself becomes momentarily utopian. These pre-modern virtues of the world of *Alcheringa* are also articulated as lessons for the present. In other episodes, the narrator tells us that 'time had not yet become man's master' (Episode 2); notes with some appreciation the 'remarkable ability [of Aboriginal people] to take advantage of his natural environment' (Episode 5); and evokes an explicit moralism in commentary such as: 'Unlike modern men, the Aboriginal hunter killed game for food alone' (Episode 7). We can hear

in these small, melancholic laments a refrain that is common in appraisals of modernity from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Joni Mitchell. But what is important in *Alcheringa* is the human connections made between the values of their world and ‘our’ world.

These claims about Aboriginal society are clearly addressed to non-Indigenous people as lessons that can be learnt from ‘our’ primitives about ‘our’ society; and I do not mean this in any generic sense but as a specifically Australian injunction. These lessons are about this country in that the series is grounded in Australia. From the opening desert shot, to Onus standing in front of a map of Australia in the first introductory sequence, to the animal extras (emu, kangaroo, koala, turtle, etc.), the diegetic sound and the locations—Lake Tyers in the far east of Victoria, a sheep station near Balranald, the Dandenong Ranges just outside Melbourne, and Wilson’s Promontory—*Alcheringa* is rooted in Australia. It is important to remember that the audience for this series had a very different experience of national audio-visual culture than that of a contemporary TV audience. In the first instance, they had a relatively limited exposure to images of Australia on TV. After all, this is before the Leyland Brothers and *Bush Tucker Man*. Theirs was an audio-visual culture dominated by the cinema and the newsreel, by images in magazines and books, by advertisements and newspapers. So while *Alcheringa* does not use locations that we now take as iconically national—Uluru or the Bungle Bungle Range (Purnululu) for example—almost all of what we see on screen is immediately identifiable as Australian. So, in one remarkable sense, ‘our primitives’ are, in this televisual rendering, occupying ‘our’ country. Our primitives live in tribal lands, use trade routes across the country, have a remarkable body of knowledge about animals, plants and other natural resources, and their spiritual belief systems are intimately attached to place.

But there is a strange paradox in the Aboriginal occupation of ‘Australia’ in *Alcheringa*, because the country is both occupied and empty. In the archive of film-making about Aboriginal people, there is, in general, a strong preference for filming large numbers of Aboriginal people. We can see this convention in the archetypal anthropological wide-shot of ceremonial performances.⁸ In all these cases the frame of the camera and, by extension, the location itself, is full of people. *Alcheringa* is closer to that other more melancholic imaging tradition in which Indigenous people form a minor or even absent element within a landscape. The work of Eugene von Guérard or Albert

Namatjira are strong examples of such work that resonates with the broader cultural conception of Australia as an empty continent.⁹ So, while we are told by the narration that a ‘tribe’ occupies the story-space of the series, for most of the program the actual televisual space is only occupied by a four-person family-group. In terms of production of the program, this was certainly a result of a very limited budget.¹⁰ But the relative emptiness of the *mise en scène* certainly connects the world of *Alcheringa* to the cultural imaginary of *terra nullius*.

So, we have seen that *Alcheringa* invests heavily in primitivism ‘with its aura of unchangeability, voicelessness, mystery, and difference from the West’.¹¹ However, while these first two characterisations, ‘unchangeability and voicelessness’, can, and probably should, be thought of as negative attributions, I am not so sure about ‘mystery and difference’, especially if we consider the ways in which the series was consumed. *Alcheringa* is first and foremost a TV series structured around teaching and learning. I mean this in a double sense, referring to the series as being about teaching stories, and to how it engages the viewer as possessing a desire to learn through the production of fascination. The film narrative and the voiceover remind the viewer repeatedly that the various activities on screen are being undertaken primarily as a means of teaching the children (and particularly the son) the skills needed to survive and prosper. This is especially the case in the episodes ‘The Boomerang’, ‘Making a Stone Axe’ and ‘Bark Canoe’, in which we are told:

For this young boy living in close harmony with nature and learning to utilise the many materials she provides this had been an important experience. Just how well he absorbs its details will determine his future success as a hunter and provider for his family. (Episode 4)

It is also very strongly the case in all of the three books of the series. For example, the preface to *The Stone-Axe Maker* reads:

A long, long time ago, many Aborigines lived here in our land of Australia. In those days the hills, the valleys, and the deserts—in fact, all the land belonged to them. The boys and girls were taught by their fathers and mothers all they should know—how to track animals, how to find food in the bush, and how to make the things they needed, such as spears, boomerangs, and stone axes. This is the story of such a family living in a desert area.¹²

These aspects of the series are heavily accentuated (again in both the TV and book series) by the loving attention to detail in how the scenes

and processes of making the boomerang, the stone axe and other tools are shot. The use of close-ups in particular works to produce the instruction of *Alcheringa* not only as didactic but as fascinating. And that is how I remember watching the series and reading the books. Stephen Atkinson has written evocatively about his relationship with *Whiplash*¹³ in which the TV series seems to have energised a fascination with ‘things Aboriginal’. Similarly, for me, *Alcheringa* helped make sense of a stone axe and a boomerang that my father brought to Melbourne from the Territory in the early 1970s; it was an incitement to curiosity.

It seems to me now that Frank Few might also have been curious about Aboriginal people, and wanted to incite that curiosity in others. Like me, he had come from the United States to Australia, and perhaps that transition provoked questions about Indigenous Australia and the presence of the disavowed past of his adopted country. But unlike me, Frank was a Native American. Perhaps that personal history about which I know little else led him to make television that was inquisitive about the world of Aborigines as stone-age primitives. Such curiosity is neither good nor bad, and nor is it necessarily racist. There is nothing objectionable about either producing or marvelling at a filmic reconstruction of making a boomerang; or being enthralled by images of living in a world in which one had to hunt and harvest food everyday. But it is objectionable in *Alcheringa* because it is curiosity without any reflective impulse; it has no capacity to imagine how that curiosity comes about, how questions of difference become important, how Indigenous people have been fixed in time to serve particular non-Indigenous needs. It is also curiosity in the absence of any consciousness of the historical experiences of Aboriginal people, experiences fundamentally entwined with non-Aboriginal people, and it is to those questions that I now turn.

A Colonised People

So, there is nothing that we see in the re-creation of traditional Aboriginal life in *Alcheringa* which disturbs the temporal location of Aboriginality as pre-historical and of nature.

One of the crucial characteristics of Aboriginal people rendered as stone-age primitives is that they are *always* stone-age primitives: they are outside history, fixed in another time to both modernity and the present. In one sense, we see this in a very pure form in *Alcheringa* as

a series which recreates life in an unspecified but clearly very distant past. Onus, the series host, emphasises this when he introduces episodes with expressions such as: ‘Let’s watch the past ...’ and ‘Come back with me ...’. That past, as I have already noted, is characterised as ‘a timeless land’ and ‘an unchanging world’. And, importantly, it was and is (interchangeably) a world, a way of life, and a people ‘now dying’. Yet, the viewers of the series and we ourselves know that the series depended on modern Aborigines as actors and narrators, as well as an array of modern technologies: that *Alcheringa* was, in part, the product of a colonial history. The very framing of the series is performed, and some of the words are spoken, by an Indigenous man, and a man who identifies himself as Aboriginal in a number of ways. To put it differently: a series about some stone-age primitives (a people now dying) is introduced to the viewer by a genial and articulate man who is very much alive and very much Indigenous. I want to explore these contradictions—of ‘a people’ both alive and dying—as an example of a particularly Australian colonial conundrum of living in (at least) two places and (at least) two times, and to consider how such a conundrum is worked through in *Alcheringa*.

The notion of stone-age primitives was first given voice in Europe to name people who, for Europeans, had once been in *their* place but who were no longer. It referred to people of ‘the first, earliest age, period or stage’.¹⁴ In Europe, primitives were dead people and necessarily absent people, precisely because they preceded history and the triumph of civilisation. They were, like the fossilised bones of long-dead creatures, signs in the archaeological strata. Their time was not the time of Europe. Yet, this did not mean that living primitive people were an impossibility for the European imagination. Indeed, according to the *OED*, at the end of the eighteenth century when ‘primitive’ was used to refer to ‘inhabitants of prehistoric times’ (in Europe), it was also used to refer to ‘natives’ in non-European lands. However it did mean that—both before and after the adoption of evolutionary models of human biological development derived from Charles Darwin—reports about, images and even the bodies of living primitives could only come to Europe from elsewhere, and thus from other times. Thus it is because Europe is possessed of historicist thought that the primitive is necessarily anachronistic.

The term ‘anachronism’ plays an important role in the key recent contribution to historicist thought, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s masterly work, *Provincializing Europe*. Chakrabarty begins from a simple

proposition: ‘That Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge’.¹⁵ He means this in the practical sense that the histories of non-Europeans are understood as backward, under-developed, incomplete and lacking in relation to Europe: ‘the “first in Europe and then elsewhere” structure of time’.¹⁶ In this sense, the primitive is indissolveably linked to the modern, objectified as a vestige of another time or place:

Historical evidence (the archive) is produced by our capacity to see something that is contemporaneous with us—ranging from practices, humans, institutions, and stone-inscriptions to documents—as relics of another time or place. The person gifted with historical consciousness sees these objects as things that once belonged to their historical context and now exist in the observer’s time as a ‘bit’ of that past. A particular past thus becomes objectified in the observer’s time.¹⁷

But the ‘gift’ comes with a cost when, instead of seeing different ways of being human that co-exist in the present, historical consciousness produces a hierarchy.

For Chakrabarty, philosophy itself is infused with the historicism that Walter Benjamin called the secular, empty and homogenous time of history, such that:

Reason becomes elitist whenever we allow unreason and superstition to stand in for backwardness, that is to say, when reason colludes with the logic of historicist thought. For then we see our ‘superstitious’ contemporaries as examples of an ‘earlier type,’ as human embodiments of the principle of anachronism. In the awakening of this sense of anachronism lies the beginning of modern historical consciousness.¹⁸

Chakrabarty’s project is to think historical difference. To ‘provincialize Europe in historical thought’ is not to do away with European thought but rather ‘to struggle to hold in a state of permanent tension a dialogue between two contradictory points of view. On the one side is the indispensable and universal narrative of capital ... On the other side is thought about diverse ways of being human’.¹⁹ He stages a dialogue around a mobile triangulation of Europe (as a hyper-real category), the modernised colonial subject and/or state (modern Indians and India) and the peasant (‘a shorthand for all the seemingly nonmodern, rural, nonsecular relationships and life practices that constantly leave their imprint on the lives of even the elites in India and

on their institutions of government'²⁰). While we cannot map that particular triangulation directly onto the Australian colonial experience, we can join him in the spirit of thinking historical difference in specifically Australian ways.

European Australians were split in different ways. Firstly, they lived in a place that was both not Europe—Australia as a continent that predated colonisation—and a place that was European—Australia as a colony and then a nation-state that came into existence through European discovery and colonisation. It was also a place of multiple temporalities: archaically prehistoric (Aboriginal), incompletely modern and underdeveloped (first as a European outpost and then as an emerging nation), and as completely modern and fully historical (as Europe transplanted or an autonomous complete nation). Traditional Australian historiography has focused almost exclusively on the question of Australia's development from primitive colony to civilised nation; that is, on the universal narrative of Australia becoming fully modern. It is no surprise that such historiography ignores the simple fact that being fully in the time and space of Australia could only be conceived in relation to the place and time of Aboriginal people in Australia.

We have already touched on some of the generic 'solutions' to the contradictions between archaic Aboriginal being and pure white modernity: the fantasy that the continent was un-occupied; the genocidal desire, acted on at small and larger scales, to remove Aboriginal people from the country; the belief in the present as a transitional moment before their inevitable 'departure'; the myriad practices to effect the eradication of Aborigines as a distinct people; and, of course, forgetting. But real as these ideas and practices are, they were at the same time imaginary 'solutions' to the actual intercultural predicaments of colonisation. Being in Australia meant that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples co-existed, they watched each other, listened to each other, they interacted through the complexities of conquest and governance, of punishment and dialogue, of theft and trade, of employment and sex, and much, much else. Here I want to explore how *Alcheringa* negotiated what we might call the actuality of such colonial complexities, actual inter-cultural relationships so often obscured by forgetfulness, and refusals to see or hear.

When Onus appears on screen after the opening sequence, he reminds me of my paternal grandfather. The two men were almost the same age. My grandfather's parents were children of Irish immigrants.

Bill grew up on Cummeragunja. They both had snowy-white hair, and seemed possessed of patrician seriousness and stubborn dignity. In front of a camera (Onus) or at Church (my Grandpa), both wore similar respectable and honest three-piece suits. These are the very first words that Onus utters in *Alcheringa*:

Yes. My people, the Australian Aborigines, knew of *Alcheringa*, which means from the very beginning of time. Their ways were the ways of their forefathers. These ways were good. They need not be changed. Let's look back through the mists of time and see some of the ways of my people before the future overwhelmed them and the white man's time began. (Episode 1)

At one level, the first three words, 'Yes. My people', entirely undo the ways in which *Alcheringa* locates Aborigines as both stone-age primitives and pre-historic to the historical time of Australia. Onus's historical consciousness, far from objectifying 'his people' as a bit of the past, claims Aborigines, in Stephen Muecke's wonderful phrase, as *both* ancient and modern.²¹ In other words, the kind of settlement implied in much of *Alcheringa*—that with the coming of history to the continent of Australia, an archaic people were naturally displaced to become a dying remnant—is unsettled as its re-enactment is staged by a man who is both articulate and very much alive in the present and says: 'My people'. How can we make sense of these seemingly contradictory aspects of the television series?

According to John Murray, the decision to feature Onus as the 'host' was not made until after the shooting of the episodes was completed. He says: 'There was a lot of talk about it. But we felt that it was necessary. It gave the series a continuity and structure. Without that, the episodes were very disparate. [Onus] sort of held it together.'²² Betty Few, who, while not credited, co-wrote the series with her husband Frank, says that Onus was involved prior to this in at least two ways: Frank had already discussed aspects of the series with Onus, and Onus had assisted in recruiting the two children who appear in the series.²³ In these ways he was working as, what we would call and credit a consultant or advisor today. However, Betty Few also insists that Onus was not involved in writing the script which she and Frank produced after extensive library-based research. John Murray, on the other hand, says of Onus that: 'He had a knowledge of Aboriginal culture and Frank and Betty tapped that'.²⁴ I have no reason to doubt Betty Few who, as co-author of the series' script, is probably in a better position than Murray to attribute influences.

Nevertheless, there are some stark differences between the texts of the voice-of-god narration within the episode (which as I have already indicated purports to be an expert, anthropologically inflected commentary) and Onus's framing narrations. So, whether or not Onus wrote these pieces they are a distinct element in the film text. Onus speaks in the first person and repetitively produces a living connection between himself and the subjects of the films not only through his filmic presence, but also by saying 'my people'. He also uses the Wiradjuri language (the language of his people) to name artefacts and spiritual beliefs. Through his powerful on-screen presence, Onus thus establishes strong continuity between pre-colonial Aboriginal people and himself. And he claims for himself the status of being a modern Aborigine. He speaks of the film being about 'primitive Aborigines' in a way that is analogous to the contemporary expressions 'classical' or 'traditional' Aboriginal culture. The way he handles and talks about a boomerang, axe and spear makes a point of both his knowledge of these objects and of their artefactual status; they are both his and of his time and not his but of another time when he says, 'Come back with me and see how the Aborigine used this spear' (Episode 5).

In a sense, this co-existence of 'ancient and modern' is of a piece with Onus's life. He grew up in a famous Aboriginal reserve community, and while a teenager worked as a drover and shearer. He was a wharf tally clerk and a Justice of the Peace. After the Second World War he was instrumental in reviving the Australian Aborigines League, while also organising with Doug Nicholls such theatrical performances as *Corroboree* (1949) and *An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark* (1951). He was a champion boomerang thrower, who gave exhibitions around Melbourne, and in 1952 he established Aboriginal Enterprises.²⁵ We could consider Bill Onus's life as archetypal for generations of twentieth-century Koories in the south-east of Australia. He was deeply connected to his Yorta Yorta traditions through a community re-fashioned by colonial settlement and government policies of segregation and concentration. His experience of life and labour was both rural and urban. Archival records and living tradition attest to his energies in cultural, political and entrepreneurial ventures. His son, who died in 1996, was not only a very significant artist but an institutional bridge between the aesthetic, cultural and political world of his father and a new century.

So rather than think of Onus in *Alcheringa* as an unfortunate case of him performing as a ventriloquist's dummy, we might imagine him as

speaking to both an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous audience about precisely the historical context for this life: the experience of colonisation. At the conclusion of the first episode, Onus stands in front of a map of Australia and says:

At the coming of the first European, it is estimated that there were about a quarter of a million Aborigines in Australia. This number was broken down to about 525 tribes or sub-tribes. They occupied every corner of the continent from the burning deserts of the centre to the jungle-covered coastal areas.

The tribal area of my forbearers, the Wiradjuri, extended along this part of the Murray River, a place of plentiful water and game.

From the primitive man's viewpoint, an excellent place to live.

Unfortunately for the Aboriginal, the new settlers from Europe also found the area most suitable for colonisation. In the skirmishes that followed, the primitive Wiradjuri lost, and as a tribe ceased to exist.

In this little scene Onus puts colonisation on the historiographical map of Australia. He remembers Aboriginal occupation of the country in ways that were already integral to Koorie Land Rights claims of the 1960s, and would reverberate ten years later in national demands for the recognition of land rights. He remembers the place of his people, 'the tribal area of my forbearers', not as disappearing but as continuous with a colonised place, 'along this part of the Murray River'. And he remembers the impact of invasion for the Wiradjuri; a defeat that was only partial, qualified by the phrase 'as a tribe' and attested to by his presence which announces in everything but the words themselves: 'But as a people we have survived'.

There is another way in which can recognise, and remember, the actual presence of colonialism in *Alcheringa* and it comes in a story from John Murray about producing the series. Murray remembers:

We had to cast the jolly thing and that was diabolical. Frank and I travelled all over Victoria and southern New South Wales to the mission stations and anywhere Aborigines were living, on the banks of the Murray or whatever river it was, in humpies. We finally, after a long search which was not successful, found the female lead [Doris Simpson] working as a domestic two streets up from Ripponlea Studios [the ABC studio in suburban Melbourne] and we found Arthur working on the assembly line at General Motors [Holden, at Fisherman's Bend in Melbourne].²⁶

I like this story because of the contrast between the presupposition made by Murray and Few—that they would discover Aboriginal actors by searching country Victoria for ‘Aborigines in humpies’—and their actual experience of recruiting from a Melbourne suburb and a transnational company’s factory floor. But it is not a story to be told simply at Murray’s expense; in fact, it reminds us that, more often than not, filmmaking (and much other cultural production) about Aboriginal people is often not only the product of some abstract relationship, but relies on actual interaction and exchanges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, asymmetrical though those relationships may be.

I have already mentioned the central importance of Onus’s role in *Alcheringa*, but the series can also be considered in relation to its first shooting location at Lake Tyers, perhaps the most significant site of continuing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interactions in the south-east corner of the continent; an important memory place.²⁷ The connection of *Alcheringa* to Tyers came during a turbulent period. The 1957 Board of Inquiry into the Aborigines Act of 1928 ‘had recommended the dispersal of the 186 Aborigines still living at Lake Tyers’.²⁸ According to Anna Haebich:

Moves to close Lake Tyers in the early 1960s drew strong protests and the Board was forced to adopt a compromise where it pushed residents to leave while agreeing to maintain the land as a permanent Aboriginal reserve. Families who left Lake Tyers experienced considerable difficulty in adjusting to their new way of life, often with tragic consequences, as one woman recalled in evidence to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families.²⁹

Albert Mullet, a respected elder and spokesperson for the Gunai/Kurnai people grew up on a fringe-camp at Lake Tyers. He remembers:

There was only full-blood Aboriginal people to live on Lake Tyers. So all part-Aboriginal people, we lived across the lake. And we were sort of then the, I suppose you would say fringe dwellers then. Living outside of the mission because the government policies didn’t want part-Aboriginal people. In their devious ways, saying: ‘We cannot afford to keep these people. They’ve got to assimilate into wider society and they’ve got to survive by the best way they can.’³⁰

John Murray came into this situation with the actors and crew of *Alcheringa*, and remembers being shocked by the man who ran what was then the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station: 'He was a real brute, a real bastard of a man and we were shocked by the attitude he had to the Aborigines, you know, absolute contempt'.³¹ He went on:

What happened was our lead was arrested on the location at Lake Tyers. I had these tents, and I had Arthur's tent next to mine, so that you know if he wanted anything ... he wouldn't feel too isolated. And I put the door of the tent round on the other side to give him some privacy ...

And suddenly one day, we're filming on the bank of the Lake, and the police arrived and they just arrested him on the spot for carnal knowledge ... It seems that a young girl who was underage, had been going into Arthur's tent. I couldn't see at night. And he [Arthur] seemed to think that she wasn't underage at all and I really believe him ... But the police wouldn't take no for an answer and they just took him. You know, we were left stranded there and we had to find another lead ... Arthur was put in jail in Lake's Entrance and I went in to take him some clothes and food and so on and it was as bad as anything you could imagine of South Africa. You know, the attitude of the police was just complete loathing and contempt.

It was a great shock to me, I had no conception of the Aboriginal problem until then ... that in Australia that we would treat and have attitudes like we did was a real shock.³²

Arthur took no further part in the production of *Alcheringa*, but John Murray had one further moment of contact in relation to his imprisonment:

At one stage ... much later, I got a call from a woman who was ... looking after Arthur after he was charged ... She wanted me to appear as a witness for him ... I was about to go off on the Balranald leg [of the *Alcheringa* shoot] and I also felt well I'm an employee of the ABC and so, I don't think that's my role ... I hadn't seen anything anyway and I had no knowledge of him other than when we hired him and it was in the first week or the second week, and I felt no, it's wiser under all the circumstances that I didn't go. But I'm very sorry that I didn't go. I should have gone and done something.

Because it may have made a difference to his prison sentence. So I was very sorry that I hadn't taken that step.

In fact it's one of the saddest things of my life.³³

The *Gippsland Times* reported:

Michael Arthur Johnson (24) an aboriginal, laborer, Gibbs St, Collingwood pleaded guilty to three counts of carnal knowledge at Lake Tyers between January 23 and 25 this year.

Sentencing him, Mr Justice Adam said Johnson's bad record merited a heavy sentence but he was prepared to make an allowance because he was a victim of circumstances.³⁴

Conclusion

I came to the television program *Alcheringa* as a way of talking back to white amnesia in Australia. I wanted to recall how images and stories about Aboriginal people were part of the ordinary array of elementary-school training in the 1960s. Like singing the national anthem at Monday assembly, learning to respond to a roll-call and playing football, Aboriginality was part of my everyday life as a child of perhaps eight or nine years of age. As a child who grew up in Melbourne in the second half of the 1960s, it is not possible for me to claim, as others have done of earlier periods, that I was taught nothing, knew nothing, had never seen images of or heard about Aboriginal people before some moment of coming to consciousness. That my personal memories are different is, in and of itself, insignificant. They are useful here because they direct me to a text, *Alcheringa*, that played a role in the memory culture of school-aged children in the 1960s. In this television series Aboriginal people were visible to me. In *Alcheringa* we can see Aborigines from the very beginnings of TV in Australia. In seeing these little films in suburban Melbourne, I met and learned about Aboriginal people. These memories have provoked me to revisit *Alcheringa* in order to think about the actual presence of Indigenous people on television in the 1960s, and to consider how such a program might be remembered today.

Second, and this is the more speculative aspect of the paper, I want to draw attention to some of the challenges of thinking about television and history. It seems to me that a historical method concerned only with documents and dates, evidence, text and context does a disservice to the cultural significance of television. Seen through the lenses of TV history, the time-trafficking of an Indigenous presence on screen in *Alcheringa* seems to me to enable a kind of magic of appearance and disappearance, which both reproduces that sense of anachronism which Chakrabarty argues is so central to Europe's self-possession of historicist thought, and undoes that particular 'gift' and

opens up some of the energies of those many ‘diverse ways of being human’.³⁵ This re-enactment of an imaginary past not only demonstrates the leaky productivity of some television, that allows past and present to bleed into each other, but it also appears to call forth different futures, futures which remember this kind of image-making but transform it anew in other TV series and films, this time made by Indigenous people, such as *Bush Mechanics*, *Pandemonium*, *Nice Coloured Girls* and *One Red Blood*. Perhaps we need to imagine new ways of conceptualising TV history as both ephemeral and deeply emotional, as disappearing and persisting in mysterious ways, as flashing before us images of searing intensity and of endless, droning ambience. It may be we need to conceive of TV history as working with a memory machine that, like the technologies of dreams, moves us around in time, replays life to us in perverse and disorienting ways, and sometimes offers us clues and traces to work through the past differently.

Earlier versions of this work were presented at the Settlers, Creoles, and the Re-Enactment of History Conference, Vanderbilt University, 11–12 November 2005, and the History of Australian Television Conference, University of Technology Sydney and the Powerhouse Museum, 8–10 December 2005. A longer version of this essay will appear in my forthcoming book, *Forgetting Aborigines*, UNSW Press, 2007. I thank the AIATSIS for supplying me with copies of *Alcheringa* and Wendy Borchers for passing on to me her earlier research on *Alcheringa*. I’m grateful to Alison Huber and Isabelle de Solier for their work as research assistants on this project.

- 1 James Hill, *Born Free*, Columbia Pictures, 1966.
- 2 The series is available from ABC Enterprises <<http://www.abc.net.au/programsales/s1122598.htm>> and from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. The term *alcheringa* is Aranda. In Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, Macmillan, London, 1899, the term is ‘translated’ as ‘Dreamtime’. Any sense in which I might suggest a straightforward translation is complicated by the fact that the meaning attributed to the term is central to debates between Spencer and Gillen on the one hand, and Carl and T G H Strehlow about ‘dreamtime’ as an Aranda concept on the other. Carl Strehlow writes, for example, that the ‘word “*alcheringa*”, which according to Spencer and Gillen is supposed to mean “dreamtime” is obviously a corruption of *altjirrinja*. The natives know nothing of “dreamtime” as a designation of a certain period of their history’. Quoted in Barry Hill, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, Knopf, Sydney, 2002, p 141. See also pp 140–1, 164,

- 174–5, 388, 531 & 629, where Hill explores differing interpretations of *alcheringa* and related terms and, more generally, Patrick Wolfe, ‘On being woken up: the Dreamtime in anthropology and in Australian settler culture’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol 33, no 2, April 1991, pp 197–224.
- 3 My memories of the film were probably consolidated by the fact that I also owned two of the three books that were spin-offs from the series: *The Boomerang Maker* and *The Stone-Axe Maker*; the third book in the series was *The Fire Maker*. (Frank Few & Betty Few, *The Boomerang Maker*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1963; Frank Few & Betty Few, *The Stone-Axe Maker*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1966; and Frank Few & Betty Few, *The Fire Maker*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1969.) Each of these books tells the story of a father making things through a relatively simple narrative on the verso pages accompanied by very beautiful black and white photographs.
 - 4 There are two further characters who make an appearance: a member of another tribe who the father figure meets very briefly in ‘Trading’ (Episode 2) and an older man who is both a comic figure and an instructor in hunting expeditions (episodes 4, 7, 8 and 9).
 - 5 Marcia Langton, ‘Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television ...’ [An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things], Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993, p 34.
 - 6 Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals and Modern Lives*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p 9.
 - 7 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983.
 - 8 It is interesting that this filmic tradition seems to draw on conventions in nineteenth-century painting that can be seen in the work of artists such as William Barak and George Lacy. See *Remembering Barak*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2003.
 - 9 For Eugene von Guérard, see Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1999, pp 71–87. On the complex question of Aboriginal ‘presence’ in Namatjira, see Alison French, *Seeing the Centre: The Art of Albert Namatjira 1902–1959*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2002.
 - 10 Interview with John B Murray.
 - 11 Torgovnick, op. cit., p 20.
 - 12 Similarly, *The Boomerang-Maker* begins: ‘Kirri and his sister Jeenga lived in eastern Australia. One day when they were walking through the bush, their father, Nambruk, decided it was time to teach Kirri how to make a boomerang and how to throw it.’ (n.p.)
 - 13 Stephen Atkinson, ‘A rumble in the great Australian silence: *Whiplash* and the telling of the Australian frontier’, in this volume.
 - 14 *Oxford English Dictionary*.
 - 15 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000, p 28.
 - 16 *ibid.*, p 8.
 - 17 *ibid.*, p 238.
 - 18 *ibid.*

- 19 *ibid.*, p 254.
- 20 *ibid.*, p 11.
- 21 Stephen Muecke, *Ancient & Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004.
- 22 Interview with John B. Murray.
- 23 Interview with Betty Few.
- 24 Interview with John B Murray.
- 25 'A tourist outlet for Aboriginal art in Belgrave (Victoria). Funding for this venture came from compensation Onus received for injuries sustained in a traffic accident, which left him an invalid for a year. Unable to return to his former employment as a wharf tally clerk, Onus sought an alternative means of income. Aboriginal Enterprises offered a wide variety of merchandise: bark paintings from Arnhem Land and locally made artefacts, furniture, textiles, and pottery decorated with motifs from traditional Aboriginal art. With additional branches in Narbethong (Vic.) and Port Augusta (SA), Onus provided employment and training and fostered a strong sense of cultural pride among a new generation of urban Aborigines.' Entry for Onus, Bill (William) Townsend (1906–1968), in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p 666.
- 26 Interview with John B Murray.
- 27 Lake Tyers was established as a Church of England mission in 1861. In 1908 it became a Government Station under the control of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines and, then, from 1957 until 1969 under the Aborigines Welfare Board. Originally 'home' to Kurnai people, other Aboriginal people from across the state were moved to Lake Tyers over a long period as other stations such as those at Lake Condah and Coranderrk were closed following the *Aborigines Protection Law Amendment Act 1886*. In Haebich's judgment, the '1886 Act set out to sweep Aboriginal identity away with the stroke of a pen and to negate the government's special responsibilities to its indigenous people'. Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2000, p 166. While the results were extremely destructive, Aboriginal families and communities survived at Lake Tyers, and at many other sites of former stations across the state, in fringe and town camps, and in the larger cities where their Aboriginality was officially denied but often assiduously policed. In 1971 the Victorian Government returned Lake Tyers Reserve, including 4,000 acres, to the local Koorie community under the *Aboriginal Lands Act* (1970).
- 28 *ibid.*, pp 498–9.
- 29 *ibid.*, p 500.
- 30 See the ABC Radio series *Mission Voices*, available from <http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/lake_tyers/default.htm>.
- 31 Interview with John B Murray.
- 32 *ibid.*
- 33 *ibid.*
- 34 *Gippsland Times*, 17 March 1961.
- 35 Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, p 254.