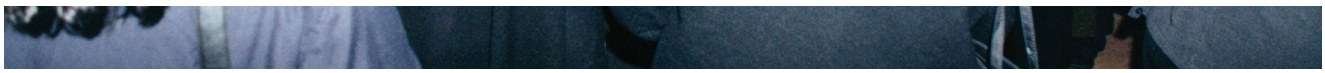
VISUAL ECONOMIES AND DIGITAL MATERIALITIES OF KOORIE KINSHIP AND COMMUNITY

PHOTOGRAPHS AS CURRENCY AND SUBSTANCE

SABRA THORNER



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Photographs as currency and substance

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Cover image: The launch of the "Koorie" exhibition in 1985 at Museum Victoria (the flagship public museum in Melbourne, Australia). The extensive montage of portraits was a significant precursor to the Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT) developing into a stand-alone cultural institution of Melbourne, and formed the foundation of the Trust's photographic collections. They were taken by KHT co-founder Jim Berg, who had a mission to photograph every Koorie in Victoria (a project he dubbed: 'have camera, will travel') – to establish the presence and legitimacy of Aboriginal people in Australia's southeast, and to empower them with tangible evidence of connections to kin and community. Reproduced with permission from Jim Berg and the Koorie Heritage Trust.

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Introduction

The proliferation of images online – on platforms such as Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp – raises important questions about what photographs are, why they are particularly powerful kinds of things (if they are things at all), and how the digital is fundamentally reconfiguring how and why we relate to each other. Daniel Miller (2015) has noted that more than a billion photos are posted online every day; and the majority of what's taken in the world today are these photos. Digital photographs now travel at great speed and with great ease, compressing time and collapsing distances. They are, paradoxically, both ephemeral (vanished when a hard drive crashes or a smartphone dies) and never really gone (photographs posted on social-media platforms are indefinitely preserved in a dislocated elsewhere – on servers housed in multiple confidential data-centres across the country).[1] They are forms of creative expression, and also, quite quickly, out of our control. They are simultaneously commodities (as social-media data miners and marketing departments now sell them to third parties; or use them to target their advertising to particular users),[2] and fetishes (standing in for people's real lives in myriad ways).

Amiria Salmond[3] has argued that linguistic methodologies came to supersede object-based epistemologies in anthropology in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century; as the discipline became more professionalized, and began increasingly to rely on fieldwork as its primary method, the value of things gave way to those of words as raw data for further analysis.[4] Now, about a hundred years later, a new trend is emerging, as photographs are becoming like speech acts – joining (and in many cases, displacing) words (verbal and text-based utterances) as a primary medium of communication.[5]

What does all of this mean for Indigenous people in Australia, the people with whom I work? Communities made vulnerable by colonial imaging practices are now actively 'resignifying' the medium of photography by activating visual archives in particular ways: photographs are both a substance and a currency through which personhood, kinship and community are being fashioned and reaffirmed. In mobilizing these metaphors, I have two primary goals: 1)

1 I thank computer engineer Ayse Naz Erkan for helping me think through the logistical and philosophical issues embedded in understanding how social-media platforms work, and where the content goes when users upload, tag, seek and/or retrieve photographs. All the data managed by companies such as Instagram (owned by Facebook since April 2012) is replicated (to distribute the risk of a breach, compromise or attack of any kind): always stored in more than one location at once. In the United States, these locations tend to be in large buildings in the interior of the country – as insulated as possible from earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters; and where facilities are more affordable than in metropolitan centres on the coasts.

2 For example, in December 2012 Instagram granted itself the right to sell users' photos to third parties without notification or compensation; many users opted out in protest.

3 Formerly Henare.

4 See Henare 2005.

5 Indeed, the very name 'Snapchat' for an app that allows for 'chatting' via 'snapshots' that quickly disappear hails photographs into being as a genre of speech. Miller (2015) argues that digital photographs are so ubiquitous that 'all ethnography is ethnography of the photograph now'. Thinking of photographs as a form of communication is not new (see Edwards 1992:3, and throughout the rest of *Anthropology and Photography* for ethnographic examples); my intervention is to think through what has changed in the shift from analogue to digital.

to bring together analysis of the materiality of photographs (including the way the shift from analogue to digital is changing how we handle and engage them) and what is being exchanged as they are shared interpersonally and circulated more widely; and 2) to argue that the changing nature of photography actually embeds us — academics in various university/museum contexts, and my fieldwork interlocutors — in the same social field, all of us trying to balance access and privacy, self-production and self-preservation in digital-media worlds.[6] Drawing from my ethnographic research on Indigenous photography with the Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT), an Aboriginal cultural centre in Melbourne, Australia, I argue that we can learn much from the Indigenous treatment of photographs in archives and online, and hope that the examples below might help us all be more thoughtful about the circulation of photographs as visual utterances, an increasingly fundamental media of exchange in our contemporary lives.

Photographs constituting Koorie kinship and community

The Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT) is an urban community centre with a mission to preserve, promote and protect the living culture of Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia.[7] Established in 1985, KHT is one of the most stable and long-running Aboriginal organizations in the country.[8] It began with the identification of Aboriginal skeletal remains as objects of cultural heritage in need of repatriation — removal from museum and university contexts of study and re-housing in a way that would respect the humanity of the deceased. The expansiveness of the notion 'cultural heritage' allowed founders (and their supporters) to quickly diversify their efforts, and the Trust grew to include collections of historical artefacts, contemporary artworks, oral histories, films, and photographs of Victorian Aboriginal people. When it moved into purpose-built premises for the first time in 2003, the Trust expanded to incorporate exhibition, performance and classroom spaces, as well as a library and shop; it also supports a family histories programme through which Victorian Aboriginal people can trace connections to kin from whom they've been separated. As a whole, it strives to be an Aboriginal community gathering place; an archive from which community members might learn and/or revitalize traditional knowledge and practices; and a site where visitors from elsewhere might learn about historical and contemporary Aboriginalities in Melbourne and across the state of Victoria.[9]

The south-eastern corner of Australia was the region of the continent first colonized in the late eighteenth century;[10] and its original inhabitants and their descendants have suffered the most

6 For more on the concept of 'media worlds', see Ginsburg et al. 2002. For more on how to think ethnographically about 'the digital', see Coleman 2010; Geismar 2013a; Ginsburg 2008. For ethnographic explorations of digital media, see Boellstorff 2010; Gershon 2010; Horst and Miller 2012; Juhasz 2010; Miller 2011.

7 'Koori(e)' is a word that denotes Aboriginal people whose families originate in south-eastern Australia.

8 See Thorner 2013, chapters 2–3, for more on KHT's origins, history and contemporary operations.

9 At time of writing in mid 2015, the Trust is undergoing a move to new space in Melbourne's Federation Square, the southern anchor of the city's Central Business District and a prime location to attract tourist foot-traffic.

10 Permanent European settlement of Australia is usually dated to when British ships landed at what became Sydney Cove in 1788. Pastoralists arrived in Melbourne about 50 years later, in 1835. I cite these dates because they are in stark contrast to the remotest regions of Central Australia, where some of occasions of 'first contact' between Aboriginal people and white settlers didn't occur until the 1960s (and the last first contact, not until 1984); for a particularly thoughtful account, see Myers 1988.

devastating effects of dispossession, including forced migration onto government-administered settlements and church-run missions; language and culture loss; and the widespread removal of children from their families.[11] Photographs were central to these processes, circulated from the mid nineteenth century to produce Aboriginal people as romanticized noble savages, racialized types, objects of scientific curiosity and passive victims of incursions upon their lands.[12]

Gunditjmara elder Jim Berg, co-founder of the Trust, first picked up a camera in 1953. He was 15; the other young men around him were running amok — getting drunk, high, arrested — he was shy and quickly learned that hiding behind a camera lens allowed him to avoid awkward social situations, and also empowered him to document his family and community at Framlingham (in Western Victoria) in his own way.[13] By the 1970s, his project, affectionately dubbed, 'have camera, will travel', had resulted in an extensive visual archive that has now become crucial to people trying to reclaim fractured kinship ties and affirm cultural continuity in a place where Aboriginal people are often presumed absent or inauthentic.[14]

Berg's photography hobby quickly blossomed into a sustained campaign of recontextualizing the medium, both forging a new idiom of image-making practice, and generating a new visual archive to disrupt and displace the power of these histories. This archive is now held in KHT's photographic collections. When I interviewed him, he explained:

11 The forcible removal of children from their families was official Commonwealth government policy until 1972. By the early 1980s, organizations such as Link-Up (in Sydney) were being founded to facilitate and support the reunification of Aboriginal people with their lost parents and other relatives. KHT's Family History Unit was built in this context (and alongside the foundation of Aboriginal Legal and Medical Services in both Sydney and Melbourne). Following a mid-1990s national inquiry, these children became formally known as the 'Stolen Generations', a term that has taken on quite a life in political mobilization for Aboriginal social justice in Australia. In a much-heralded first act in office in February 2008, newly elected Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a formal apology to the Stolen Generations and their families. The documentary *Link-Up Diary* (MacDougall 1987) and feature film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce 2002) are both powerful resources on these subjects.

12 For more on this history (and how Aboriginal people actively participated in them, often subverting and/or resisting colonial image-making practices), see Lydon 2005; also Peterson 2003, 2005.

13 Gaynor MacDonald (2003:233) notes how historically uncommon it was for south-eastern Aboriginal people to own cameras (though this was starting to shift during the fieldwork she conducted in New South Wales in the late 1990s). Berg's commitment to photography was entirely unprecedented, and the breadth and depth of his archive, unique.

14 Because of their relocation onto reserves in Victoria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Aboriginal people became largely invisible in cosmopolitan Melbourne (see Lydon 2005 and Peterson 2003 for more on this). Yet, by the 1960s, the notion of a singular, national Aboriginality was being solidified by mobilization for Aboriginal rights across the Australian continent — via the 1963 Bark Petition, 1965 Freedom Ride, 1967 Referendum, and many other events (see Attwood 2003 for a more detailed history). Because of their specific colonial histories, Koories may not look stereotypically Aboriginal, may or may not speak an Aboriginal language, and are no longer living in remote conditions; as a result, the swell of 1960s–80s activism to increase their recognition was met with powerful resistance and a backlash challenging the legitimacy of south-eastern Aboriginal peoples' claims to Aboriginal identity. Sylvia Kleinert (2006:69) succinctly argues that one generation earlier, in the 1930s–40s, urbanization was presumed to have erased Koorie Aboriginality; and Gaynor MacDonald (2003:238) notes that because Koorie-ness was imagined as of the past, contemporary people were considered 'cultureless'.

> *I took photographs of my extended family, right across the state... [Photography is] an extension of the mind... [I] don't have to know the individuals themselves, but I know the families... [We're] looking after their interests in the sense that they can relate to their family by looking at photos, and tracing their family tree[s]...*[15]

If a family tree is a chart diagramming relatedness, Jim's statement conveys his commitment to photographs as objectifications of family relations (making tangible the intangible), and to their compilation into a recognizable and accessible organizational framework as an inherent, desirable good for a community traumatized by generations of dislocation and separation of young people from their biological kin, language groups and cultural practices. Through the work of photo-media artists Lisa Bellear, Bindi Cole, Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley, Genevieve Grieves, Ricky Maynard, Michael Riley, Wayne Quilliam and others, documentary photography has become a well-developed strategy of political activism.[16] In the words of Palawah artist Ricky Maynard, it serves 'to picture our own history, record our survival, our sovereignty'.[17] Not only do photographs emplace people in families, they also affirm the significance of Koorie lives, as a collection becomes evidence of a community whose vibrancy and richness directly confront disempowering photographic histories.

Thus there is value in the moment of a photograph's production, validating a subject's existence; and value activated later, when photographs are mobilized in the emotional work of trying to make sense of confusing, alienating and/or violent pasts.[18] Elaborating on the importance of KHT's photographic archive, Berg asserted:

> *Well, it's there for people to come in and trace their family tree through photos... I've had people come in, we had one young fella, he was 46. He walked into the office one day and said he's never seen a photo of him[self] as a baby, and I said, yep, I've got a photo of you, 'bout two days old, in the arms of your mother and your dad. Come back tomorrow and I'll find it for you. And I had it for him... He cried his eyes out.*[19]

This quote resonates with Mary Bouquet's (2001) assertion of photographs as a substance of kinship: for people who've been forcibly removed, perhaps growing up in foster care, in institutions and/or without any home, the photographs in Berg's extensive archive bear a latent potency. When viewed, they evoke strong emotions (surprise, grief, embarrassment, sadness, relief, joy), and allow individuals to imagine (and/or forge) their own senses of belonging to a family, that most fundamental and formative of social institutions. The catharsis of the tears reveals both the great pain of loss and the hopeful possibility of healing.

The photograph here is also a medium of exchange: the tangible thing through which the visitor might begin to imagine himself as embedded in a family (with biological parents) and

15 Author's Interview with Jim Berg, 25 November 2008.

16 For more on this, see Thorner 2013, 2015.

17 Artist's Talk, Center for Contemporary Photography's Indigenous Photographers' Forum (Melbourne, Australia), 12–14 October 2009. Similar motivations and trends have emerged in contemporary Indigenous photographic art practice in the US and Canada; for example, see Lidchi and Tsinhnahjinnie 2009.

18 See Edwards 2005 for more on the embodied, sensorial nature of telling (hi)stories over photographs. For another example of the value of establishing an accessible photographic archive, see Poignant 1992; Poignant with Poignant 1996.

19 Author's Interview with Jim Berg, 25 November 2008.

a community (embodied by elder Jim Berg, and exemplified in the archive he helps to preserve at KHT). Elder Len Tregonning, who has long been part of the Trust's Education Department, has his own poignant story on the power of a photograph. Lenny was removed from his family at age four, and grew up in a boys' home on a government-run mission. One day, while leading a programme on Aboriginal history at an eldercare centre, an older gentleman pulled Lenny aside to show him a photograph. Startled, Lenny exclaimed, 'That's my uncle!' And the man replied, 'No, no, it's my father.' Via a conversation over a creased and faded old print, the two men became cousins.

In both Berg's and Tregonning's anecdotes, viewing a photograph together leads to a revelation, producing relatedness for people who've had little or no access to their kin. The social interaction – the photograph plus the narrative explanation of its significance (the object and its exchange, considered together) – makes kinship tangible, interpellating viewer and subject into a relationship that transcends space and time. There is now, in fact, a robust ethnographic literature on how photographs (re) construct and/or (re)affirm Aboriginal kinship and community.[20] My intended contribution, via this article, is to think about how the nature of photography and photographic archives are changing in our increasingly digitized world, and how these shifts in visual representation, access, and circulation are necessarily bringing us all into relation.

Digitizing photographs in Koorie contexts

Photographs are objects to be treated with great care – this is the foundational premise for all of the Koorie Heritage Trust's work with photographic collections. As is evident in the examples above, photographs bear fraught potential. In addition to representing and producing kinship relations, they simultaneously wield the ability to expose a subject's vulnerability, compromise autonomy, and/or threaten the privacy of someone whose kin network or community life might have been deeply affected by colonial legacies of surveillance and cultural dispossession. In recognition of the power of photographs, KHT curators have developed protocols that require two different kinds of permission for any use of any image (via loan or replication): authorization from the copyright holder or his/her descendant(s); and cultural clearance.[21]

Copyright in Australia is fairly straightforward: it is a legal protection endowed any photographer, extending 70 years beyond

20 For example, see Aird 2003; Deger 2006; Goodall 2006; Kleinert 2006; MacDonald 2003; Smith 2003, 2008. In many communities, this emotional work occurs regardless of the circumstances or intent of the original photographic-encounter; see Aird 2003; Edwards 2001; Poignant 1993; Smith 2003 for more on how visual images taken for colonial agendas are now being repurposed in the interests of reconstructing family histories and native title claims.

21 Indeed, this article is without images (beyond the cover) precisely because these regulations make it purposefully challenging to reproduce photographs (without great effort/expense), especially online.

his or her death.[22] 'Cultural clearance' is more difficult to define, and its attainment varies on a case-by-case basis; a condition that acknowledges intellectual property law's inadequacy in protecting Indigenous peoples' social relations, understandings of objects and histories of state-sanctioned dispossession, it is meant to respect that more than one person may bear responsibility for the ideas, cultural knowledge or imagery embedded in a work. With photographs held by KHT, this extends beyond the photographer to include the person/people pictured (or his/her/their descendants), and often also the donor, if different.

When I was conducting fieldwork with the Trust in 2008–10, the Collections Department had recently, for the first time, received funding to audit and catalogue its photographs as a collection equivalent to its artefact, painting, library and oral-history collections. The long-term plan had three basic components: the compilation of a finding aid (including the assignment of catalogue numbers to various units, and each object's housing in the best possible storage materials/containers); the development of a digitization plan and priority list; and finally, the labour of digitization.

The finding aid was an Excel spreadsheet that contained the first detailed overview of the photographic collection's contents (more than 48,000 distinct units). The reliance on a program that requires little specialty knowledge and would be automatically upgraded over time (with organization-wide updates of Microsoft Office suites) was a purposeful strategy: Excel is both a stable and accessible clearinghouse between different data sets and digital infrastructures.

Preparations for digitization included seeking the advice of a photographic consultant, research into various software platforms and hardware possibilities, budget allocations, and employee and volunteer work plans; it also meant careful consideration of distinct collections-management and community-access goals. The work of digitizing involved short- and long-term planning: to keep the Excel file current during the years-long project of scanning and annotating photographs (one-by-one) in various media (negatives, prints, albums, slides, posters); imagining and problem-solving issues of interoperability between different programs and available equipment; and acknowledging that the people with time to learn the technical skills

22 There is an exception, however: if a photographer is commissioned by an employer, provided with the equipment to execute a specific job, and remunerated for taking photographs, then copyright is held by that employer. Until the Australian Copyright Act (1968), copyright in Australia was valid for 50 years from the date the photograph was taken; with the passage of this federal law, the validity of copyright was extended to 50 years after the death of the maker of a work. When the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA) came into effect in 2005, the rule shifted to 70 years after the death of the maker. The rule is not retroactive, however, and so the copyright of any work produced before the Act came into effect in 1969 expires 50 years after it was made. For example, a photograph taken in 1955 will no longer be copyrighted in any way — because it was taken more than 50 years ago and before copyright law in Australia changed. I thank John Dallwitz for sharing his substantial wisdom on this topic; see also, Anderson 2005 for more on how copyright is itself unstable and might be reshaped to be more responsive to Indigenous concerns.

and do the work were often not the same as the people holding the precious cultural knowledge.[23]

This was a process of wrangling thousands of photographs into an archivally sound collection that would serve a community of Koories across the state. I describe it briefly here because I think that — partially as a result of KHT's status as a well-respected urban cultural centre — many requests come in that simply presume this work is already done. Photographs have become so pervasive online, so integral to myriad forms of communication, that most people tend to neglect, ignore or be unaware of reasons why this may not be an inherent good (or a fait accompli).

The labour of digitizing photographs in this organization must constantly negotiate the challenge of enabling circulation in ways that recognize Indigenous subjects' rights to control their own representations (even if this is not expressly protected by law), according to collections-management strategies that are archivally sound (required by accreditation bodies, expected by donors, and necessary to maintain the organization's cultural capital in a field of Indigenous organizations that come and go), intensely future-oriented (the 'Trust' in the organization's title purposefully implying preservation of objects/knowledge in perpetuity) and with pragmatic acknowledgement of the limitations of a community organization's small staff and budget (meaning: large projects take lots of time), as compared to public institutions that similarly hold important archival photographic collections (such as the state library and museum). KHT perpetually struggles to ensure its own financial survival; staff are often over-burdened; digitizing photographs is time- and labour-intensive; and access to and care for visual images in this historical and social context are culturally complex processes. Moreover, putting the photos online was a prospect treated with much caution: how would the curators (and volunteers) secure appropriate copyright and cultural clearance for this new treatment of each album, print, negative or born-digital image? If having a searchable online catalogue would increase community or public demand for images, how would the Collections Department manage such demand (and was this where they wanted to most concentrate their resources)?

In 2003–4 the Collections Department piloted the Koorie Heritage Archive (KHA), a 'digital keeping place' for photographs of Victorian Aboriginal people and the stories they evoked.[24] A stand-alone Macintosh computer, held in a semi-private alcove in the Trust's library, was loaded with 3,400 scanned digital photographs for Koories to 'visit with' — as they traced family histories, searched for relatives from whom they'd been separated, and worked to affirm (or reclaim) their existence in a state where mainstream narratives tend to presume Indigenous absence.[25] Former Director of KHT's Family History Service, Sharon Huebner, speaks

23 This is a paradox I've encountered in many Indigenous organizations. During my own fieldwork with KHT, for example, I was put to work as a volunteer in the Collections Department; in this role, I dedicated much time to scanning analogue photographs and annotating digital records to be searchable by staff and (eventually) community members. I was available, eager to contribute, learned the software program and archival strategies quickly, and didn't already have a regular workload or ongoing projects that this new undertaking would take me away from. Yet (certainly at the beginning!) I was also the least knowledgeable member of the team when it came to Koorie names, kinship networks or historical events.

24 The software for this was provided by Ara Irititja, a digital archiving project developed by Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people in Central Australia.

25 'Visiting with' photographs is a vernacular shorthand implicitly constructing photographs as active participants in beholders' social/emotional lives. For more on this topic, see Deger 2006; MacDonald 2003.

movingly of photographs' power to 'help people not forget who they are, where they come from'; and of the archive as a way of 'reuniting [a person] with someone, some place that had been lost to them'.[26] When the archive was new, small groups of people would gather excitedly around the computer, calling out names of people pictured, rattling off memories, as staff furiously typed into database fields.

When I was last in Melbourne, in December 2012, the Collections Department had recently initiated a proposal to upgrade the KHA software and redevelop this project in response to several community members' volunteering their time to update names and other details. Because it is neither online nor on any network, this archive offers the possibility of both private viewing (often guided by Family History staff) and small group visiting. It also capitalizes on a distinct advantage of digital media: viewing photographs on screen in no way degrades the original/analogue object. Because of community members' increased familiarity and comfort with digital interfaces, most interaction with photographs can now occur without a great burden on staff members' time. The software and hardware certainly require maintenance and attention, yet the KHA objectifies the possibility of digitization without exposing photographs, their makers, or those pictured to the anxiety-inducing public of the worldwide web.

The photographs in the KHT collections have quite a burden to bear: they make tangible Jim Berg's chosen strategy of self-preservation (as a young man hiding behind the camera); they enable the emotional work of individual healing (as with Berg's example of the visitor who reconnected with his biological kin via a photograph in the collection); and they facilitate the revitalization of a community (evident in the examples of people gathering excitedly around the KHA to tell and record the stories evoked by photographs; and the dedication of volunteers to reawaken this community resource).[27] The photograph is instrumental in all of these exchanges — not consumed, but mobilized in both affective and activist processes.[28]

Yet materialities matter here, too. The camera was an object that literally allowed Berg to obscure his face and thus avoid uncomfortable social situations. The micro-processes of forging a collection (recounted above) illustrate that digitization is embedded in a political economy that includes archival goals, specific materials and devices, and the traversing of various kinds of social relations. And the infrastructures of access — what kind of computer is used, where it lives, how much privacy and sociality it affords users; which platforms might put community users at ease, and which might facilitate effective/efficient collections management; and what hardware and software cost, in financial terms as well as in the expenditure of staff time and labour — are the substance of Koories' engagement with digital photographs.

Photographs as currency and substance

Thus, with this ethnographic context in mind, I return to my initial assertion that we think about photographs as both currency and substance as a way of considering together

26 Huebner 2009.

27 After an initial flurry of great activity around the KHA in 2003–4, neither the software nor the hardware were upgraded for almost a decade; both Ara Irititja developers and KHT staff spoke of it as 'lying dormant' during that time.

28 As I elaborate in the next section, in defining currency as a particular kind of thing (following Kopytoff 1986), Joel Robbins and David Akin (1999) assert that it cannot be consumed; rather, its meaning arises via movement and conversion to something else to be 'enjoyed'.

both the materiality of images (and how this is necessarily changing with the proliferation of digital possibilities) and what is being exchanged as they circulate. At KHT, the circulation of and talk over photographs lead to personal healing and community revitalization, and digitization is increasingly facilitating this cultural work. These processes of exchange — via photographs — are bringing diverse social lives into relation, both infrastructurally and interpersonally.

Photographs are both like money and not like money; and their status as particular kinds of social actors is a current issue in many of our lives.[29] While there exists a rich anthropological literature on money, modernity, globalization, nationalism (and their increasingly theorized alternatives/disruptions),[30] an in-depth examination is outside the purview of this article. Yet what is important for my purposes is this: digital photographs are among other twenty-first-century forms of exchange that complicate our notions of currency as limited to the coins and banknotes used to purchase goods and services. For example:

1. In 'pig banks', established to increase economic sovereignty in Vanuatu, pigs are stockpiled for the performance of traditional ceremonies, enabling the transmission of *kastom*.[31]
2. In the early 2000s, 'carbon-trading' became a strategy for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, relying on voluntary participation in a market of pollution shares in order to make the generation of energy more responsible.
3. In open-source and cultural-commons forums, code and information are the media of exchange, as disparate actors come together to solve a shared problem.
4. Cryptographic currencies such as bitcoin now offer non-state and non-bank regulated forums for exchange online; these currencies are anonymous, have no intrinsic value and are not vested in any back-up form (such as the gold standard, still retained in reserve — outside of circulation — to ensure the stability of the US dollar).

Taken together, these 'alternative economies' help us think about markets, the circulation of objects, and where/how value accrues, as fundamental to our understandings of geopolitical processes and the survival of local communities alike; they also urge awareness and recognition of our responsibilities and reciprocities across myriad, simultaneous social networks.

At and through the Koorie Heritage Trust, digital photographs are now firmly embedded in visual economies that include Koorie people across the state of Victoria, Koorie and non-Koorie staff-members (and volunteers) of KHT, archivists and software developers in Adelaide (and formerly, in New Zealand) and academics in New York and London (who might be reading/

29 Tagg (1984) writes of 'the currency of the photograph' as a way of describing its value (and its embeddedness in regimes of knowledge and power); and both MacDonald (2003) and Kleinert (2006) describe photographs as cultural capital in Koorie communities. That photographs have value in Koorie lives (and that that value sometimes remains latent, waiting to be tapped — or exchanged for something else — at a later moment) is a foundational premise of my work.

30 See, for example: Bloch and Parry 1989; Foster 1999; Hart 1986; Holbraad 2005; Keane 2001; Maurer 2005; Robbins and Akin 1999.

31 '*Kastom*' is a word in pidgin, used as a vernacular in Melanesia, to speak of traditional practices performed in the transmission of culture. See Regenvanu and Geismar 2011; also Geismar 2013b:175—206.

thinking about this article).[32] Kinship and community are being produced, and an archive is being accessed and validated, reinforcing the status of a cultural institution that strives to be the city's (and the state's) pre-eminent centre for (and authority on) all things Koorie. Knowledge is being exchanged between community members, volunteers and IT professionals, as personhood and relationships are being (re)claimed and digital tools are built, customized and deployed according to specific cultural and historical concerns. Professional networks are also being maintained, even as many co-participants in this economy live and work quite far away from one another.

At the same time, digital photographs are never simply media of exchange; on the contrary, their materialities matter a great deal: who/what is pictured, the medium of display and the method(s) of access have significant implications for how images work in particular circumstances. This is not incompatible with the currency metaphor; indeed, Robert Foster (1999) and Keith Hart (1986) both argue that money is simultaneously material and symbolic,[33] relying on a fluidity between the tangible and the abstract. And yet, while digital/digitized photographs can be infinitely replicated without any loss of quality or fidelity to the original, one photographic image is not interchangeable with another in the way that all US pennies, for example, have the same value; in fact, quite the opposite. Viewing and relating to photographs is context specific: different images affect different people in different ways (and in different places, at different times, for different reasons, and so on).[34]

The currency metaphor is a productive thought experiment, because it urges us to pay attention to what is really being exchanged via photographs in Indigenous Australia: personhood, kinship and community are at stake — as are the status of a community organization, the redefining and recognition of Aboriginality in Australia's south-east, and the participation of its claimants in global/digital processes. Yet photographs' non-interchangeability is the point at which it becomes useful to simultaneously consider photos as a substance — particular kinds of objects with their own unique properties.[35] As I briefly alluded above, Mary Bouquet (2001) argues that photographs are a substance of kinship that, like DNA or the formal genealogical diagrams of early anthropology, constitute

32 The notion of visual economies (as opposed to visual cultures) comes originally from Deborah Poole, whose 1997 ethnography *Vision, Race, and Modernity* first opened up the space for anthropologists to analyze the movement of photographs across national contexts and through time. Several years later, Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson's *Photography's Other Histories* (2003) provided a framework to think about culturally specific engagements with a globally disseminated medium.

33 Hart (1986) suggests examining your pocket change as a springboard for discussing the abstractions the material objects carry with them. For example, the 'heads' side of all US coins is embossed with the head of a 'founding father' and the words 'In God We Trust', simultaneously evoking the political authority which minted the coin, and suggesting that that power is divinely sanctioned.

34 I thank Zeynep Gürsel and Jennifer Deger for conversations that urged me to clarify this point.

35 This is quite different to pondering how photographs bear the substance of Aboriginal personhood (and/or carry the traces of persons) — the focus of a wonderful article by Smith and Vokes (2008). See also Smith 2008, which makes a compelling argument that Aboriginal personhood is 'dividual', that is, realized through shifting configurations of relatedness and differentiation between distinct persons. In this context of a sense of self that is distributed, and experienced through relationships, displays of photographs in Aboriginal peoples' homes allow for self-preservation even when kin are not physically present.

the familial relationships they represent,[36] simultaneously objectifying and producing relatedness (between persons pictured, as well as between photographer and subjects).[37] Marianne Hirsch's work (1997) is also useful in this context; in her development of the notion of 'postmemory', she traces the transformation of photographs from inert objects into vehicles of storytelling, enabling those who 'read' them to imagine meaningful connections between personal memories and broader social histories.

At KHT, this is happening through the interpersonal exchanges over prints (and, increasingly, computer screens); the production of new photographic archives; and the development of digital infrastructures to facilitate rigorous collections management and the best, most appropriate community access possible, given very real constraints on staff time and institutional funding streams. Photographs are at the core of this multifaceted organization's work, and they are never taken for granted, nor shared or circulated without great care.

Concluding thoughts

The Koorie Heritage Trust is one context from Indigenous Australia that is concretizing the contemporary stakes of photographic representation and circulation: photographs in this region, state and cosmopolitan city have been used to dispossess, racialize and otherwise disempower Aboriginal people; yet they are now being recontextualized to preserve knowledge, enable personal healing and affirm senses of community. This re-present-ing and recognition of Koorie people is happening via the technologies of producing, archiving and digitizing photographs.

Expanding outward from this ethnographic example, imagining photographs as the currency and substance of these social processes helps us to be more thoughtful about what photographs are, and what power they have to act — in all of our highly mediated and interconnected lives. Specifically, I hope that analysing photographs as media of exchange whose materialities matter in personal lives, community contexts and global political economies inspires careful, critical thinking about current platforms (whether social media or collections management) and behaviours (all the ways we now communicate via photographs) that render photographs into visual utterances in our shared digital-social world.

36 MacDonald 2003:235–6 also analyses photographs as both representing and constituting relationships.

37 See also McGrath 2010, which argues that Ngaanyatjarra re-narrativization of history over photographs is a sharing of 'the substance of people's lives' — intergenerational connections between people and places.

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