At Camp Coorong, just outside the South Australian lakeside town Meningie, the esteemed Ngarrindjeri Elder, weaver and cultural educator Aunty Ellen Trevorrow has been up early helping several young grandchildren head off to school. A winter mist has floated in from the Coorong waters. Aunty Ellen brings in a stack of loose pictures and photo albums she has selected from a collection passionately assembled over many decades.

She takes out a photo showing her husband, the feted Ngarrindjeri leader Uncle Tom Trevorrow, as a chubby, well-nurtured baby, cradled in the arms of his father, Joe Trevorrow, at the former One Mile Fringe Camp, near Meningie. Next to them is Tom’s brother Choom (Joe Trevorrow Jnr), who in his younger days helped transport the mail across the rugged remote Oodnadatta-Birdsville track. Behind them stands a hand-built home, cobbled together from repurposed metal and wood (Figure 21.1).

The image, taken in 1954 by Aunty Charlotte Richards, vividly evokes the camaraderie, survivance and proud independence of Ngarrindjeri family life in the Meningie-Coorong fringe camps in the mid twentieth century.

Charlotte Richards is a talented, pioneering Australian Aboriginal woman photographer, notably one of the earliest documented Aboriginal women photographers. Her rare, distinctive images offer an intimate inventory of the resilience of family life in fringe camp communities, on the edges of
21.1 Joseph Trevorrow holding his son Tom Trevorrow with Joe Trevor Jnr, 1954
Photographer: Charlotte Richards, courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection
white settlement, from the 1940s to the 1980s. As history, they advance understanding of social realities of Aboriginal lives outside the regulated spaces of government reserves, rigorously challenging established notions of the ‘Australian family’ in opposition to dominant popular representations of the white nuclear family (shaped by the ‘white Australian policy’) and the three-bedroom home as the desired basis of mid-century Australian society.5

Very little is known of Aboriginal photographers from this period, and the history of the fringe camps has often been overlooked and misunderstood: cast in a negative light set in opposition to ideas of ‘tradition’ on the one hand, and to assimilation on the other.6 Yet it is a rich, vital history of cultural and physical survival, negotiation with the colonial powers and of collective and personal entrepreneurship and distinct vibrant intellectual traditions.

Charlotte Richards was of Ngarrindjeri and Barngarla ancestry. She grew up in camps along the South Australian
Riverland and Coorong, and lived for a considerable time at the Meningie One Mile Camp, ‘doing a little bit of schooling in Meningie’. Born about 1930, she was the daughter of a skillful Ngarrindjeri putari, midwife, Ruby Koolmatrie, and a Barngarla traditional doctor, ‘Nulla’ (Walter) Richards, ‘a tribal man’ from the west coast of South Australia; her childhood was mobile, connected to seasonal work, kin, Country and learning. She grew up surrounded by elders born in the colonial era, with deep knowledge from pre-contact times. From an early age Charlotte Richards had a passion for photography and was rarely without her box-brownie camera.

When she died in the late 1980s, she left four known albums of photographs that her descendants repatriated back to families two decades ago. It is part of our ongoing project to trace and document the collection, estimated to comprise around four hundred rare photos, now housed among a wide range of families living in different parts of Australia.

Aboriginal people became increasingly excluded from the Australian nation-state during the interwar years, under contradictory policies of segregation and assimilation. As conditions on government reserves declined, living with extended kin on fringe camps became a way of maintaining continual, if changing, connections to Country, keeping languages viable, obtaining regular agricultural work, and overall living independent lives. Fringe camps were a vital part of a wider struggle for sovereignty, land and citizenship that intensified in the politically volatile period leading up to the 1967 Federal Referendum. Aboriginal people could remain, to varying degrees, beneath the institutional radar. Ngarrindjeri name these ‘survival times’. Located at prescribed distances from white towns, camps often bore the name One Mile, Two Mile, Three Mile and so on. Importantly, too, fringe camps were significant sites of oppositional knowledge that nurtured future generations of cultural educators and community leaders.

Yet within the context of broader Australian history fringe camps signify a history of human rights violations, social exclusion, inadequate housing and deplorable health and life expectancy outcomes. Fringe camp families were, the late Uncle Tom Trevorrow explains:
living on the land at a time when you weren’t allowed to live in the town, because only white people were allowed to live in Meningie, blackfellas weren’t allowed to. Yet we had to be close enough to town for kids to go to school, otherwise Welfare would have stepped in. A lot of Ngarrindjeri people didn’t want to live on the Mission, at Raukkan, yet couldn’t live traditional along the Coorong because the land had been taken away, so they had to live, we could say a “semi-traditional lifestyle”, in bush camps—the old bag huts, tin huts, tents. Always where there was fresh water and plenty of bush tucker, kangaroo and emu as well as rabbits and fish, birdlife and eggs, mallee-fowl, so we lived off the land. That carried on [into the 1970s], before we were allowed to live in the towns with the other people.14

While Indigenous people remained a popular and scientific subject of photography, as Jane Lydon has compellingly explored, they increasingly obtained the means to use the medium for their own purposes from the early twentieth century, when developing technology made private cameras widely available.15 The advent of the box-brownie camera democratised photography for many, but for Ngarrindjeri with large families the cost of developing photos on a regular basis was prohibitive.

Charlotte Richards was, however, uniquely able to pursue a photographic practice because she didn’t have children of her own to support (although she regularly fostered friends’ children during tough times) and was exceptionally skilled in living off the land; hunting, fishing, trapping rabbits. Moreover, she never lived in a house, always in a tent and, at the end of her life, a caravan. Surplus income from sewing wheat-bags and picking beans and fruit, sustained her photographic practice. She spent her lifetime documenting other people’s families so that they would be remembered through her photos, which she generously shared, during a time when the Aboriginal family was being torn apart by the state under aggressive policies of child removal, later known as the Stolen Generations. ‘Can I get a photo of your kids?’ she would always ask as she circuited the breadth and depth of Ngarrindjeri country, visiting her network of family and
friends with her camera. Her deep and intimate knowledge of Country and traditional survival skills underpinned her mobility and independence, and ultimately her photography.

**Earliest photographs**

The earliest photos we know of from Charlotte Richards date from the 1940s: four decades before ‘a self-consciously Indigenous photography movement began to emerge.’ Here (Figure 21.3) we can see her experimenting with the prevailing aesthetic tradition of the studio portrait, a medium long popular with Aboriginal people. The thick scrub of the One Mile Meningie Camp, substitutes for a faux landscape backdrop, in front of which her subjects (her aunt Isabelle Koolmatrie, her sister Irene Richards and her grandmother’s brother Joe Walker Jnr) pose in a performative tableau. Dressed with flair, the subjects wear the coloniser’s clothes inventively, without need for the constraint of shoes on the soft Coorong sand. In the foreground is a pet magpie, Aunty Charlotte’s ngatji or totem, a hallmark of many of her early photos. She was legendary for travelling with her pet magpies, which she taught to talk by splitting the tip of their tongue, with her cats and dogs in trail. To the right is a government tent, supplied sparingly by the Aboriginal Board of Protection, housing for many in the camps. Chairs are tin drums and, importantly, there is reading material, a newspaper or magazine. Sometimes such items were salvaged from the nearby town dump. In the background, Aboriginal viewers also point to the presence of ancestral spirit-figures. Charlotte Richards has altered or reconfigured dominant imagery to achieve a more accurate representation of Aboriginal identity.

Paired with this, a more relaxed, playful portrait, likely taken moments later, shows others at the camp, her parents Ruby and Nulla (Walter) Richards, with Joe Walker Jnr in his dapper striped blazer, with a remembered Aboriginal visitor from Victoria dressed in a dark formal suit and hat (Figure 21.4). We see, too, ‘the formation of an Aboriginal photographic practice ‘that centres upon ‘co-authorship between image maker and subject’. The photographs evoke the powerful images of dispossessed rural workers, taken also in the 1940s, as part of the US Farm Security Administration
project, by photographers such as Dorothea Lange (most famous for her enduring image, *The Migrant Mother*).21

Another photo, from about 1950, features a convivial group of men at the Meningie One Mile Camp, including Tom Trevorrow’s father and two of his brothers (Figure 21.5): ‘Yeah, but a funny old camera: got to turn the motor car upside down, or sideways, see?’ Tom remembers. ‘The motor car’s supposed to be *that* way ... with the boot open.’ The double-exposure, produced by the malfunction of the camera’s wind-on feature, has produced a magical ‘signature’ to this image.

21.3 Rear: Isabel Koolmatrie (Auntie Belle) and Irene Richards; seated: Joe Walker Jnr (Uncle Poonthie), taken at the Meningie One Mile Fringe Camp, late 1940s
Photographer: Charlotte Richards, courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection
21.4 Walter (Nulla) and Ruby Richards, Joe Walker jnr (Uncle Poonthie) talking to an Aboriginal man from Victoria, late 1940s
Courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection
Former fringe camp residents vividly remember Charlotte Richards. ‘Aunty Charlotte was the one with the camera, always clicking, taking photos of kids and adults,’ Aunty Alice Abdullah, daughter of Joe Trevorrow and Annie Mason, recalled. ‘She was highly spirited and full of life, like one of the film stars. She’d wear high-heeled shoes, stockings and red lipstick when she came to the One Mile. She was very beautiful with dark skin and a bushy head of hair; I used to think she looked like one of those kewpie dolls. When I saw her old box, I thought, “How can you make a photo out of that?”

By any standards, and certainly for her era (much of her youth was lived before the 1967 Referendum), Charlotte Richards emerges as a talented and independent woman, who lived life on her own terms. With her sister Irene, she toured the country and western shows, singing and playing the button accordion. Her camps would ‘always be lit up with a lovely fire and they’d be sitting around yarnin’ and doing a
bit of cooking on the coals. She’d have her little old wind-up gramophone playing country and western music’, Rita Lindsay remembered:

She loved the camp life, fishing and rabbiting. But she kept great security over her photographs, they were under guard. She stored them in big albums inside an old brown suitcase, which must have been waterproof. She wouldn’t let anyone mess around with her special stuff, she was very particular. It would all be packed neatly in her car ... she always knew even when one photograph was missing.

Love of clothes and attention to fashion and its changing styles were an additional dimension of her aesthetic expression. In her relationships she crossed racialised sexual boundaries. Her partners were usually non-Indigenous men, but rather than assimilating into their lives and community, she drew them into the life of the camp. Such independence can be viewed as an extension of traditional Ngarrindjeri womanhood, embodied in the role of the putari (female doctor).22
**Ngarrindjeri women**  
The warmth and subtlety with which Aunty Charlotte captured the world immediately around her, is particularly evident, too, in her portrayals of women, clearly showing her ability to encapsulate the inner life and uniqueness of her subject. They reveal her contemporaries as vigorously independent young women ready to take on the world in defiance of the docile gender roles of women in mid-century Australian society more broadly, and the race-based injustices that lay before them.

Charlotte’s cousin Joyce Kerswell, pictured ‘driving her old buck board’ on the way to the fairground (Figure 21.7), dressed in an outsized man’s cap, appears the epitome of the young, modern, mobile and independent woman.

‘That’s when she had a snake show,’ Tom Trevorrow said of this photo:

> and all her snakes are in that old buck board — tigers and brown snakes. That’s how she started off, there were a lot of sideshows going on all around, boxing troops and all that back then. Then she left to have her own sideshow company, with the big blow-up castles and the fairy floss and the dodgem cars and all of that.23

Aunty Joyce Kerswell was an avid collector of photos and it is thanks to her diligent efforts that we have so many of Richard’s photos today.

Like other Ngarrindjeri from the fringe camps, Joyce Kerswell was highly mobile and entrepreneurial, venturing into her own fairground business, starting with a collection of tamed (yet highly venomous) local snakes. Another Ngarrindjeri woman from the camps, Annie Mason, sometimes accompanied her, performing a fire-walking act.

This incandescent portrait of Aunty Thora Lampard, one of Charlotte’s closest friends, probably from about 1950, shows the sensitive connectivity between photographer and subject (Figure 21.8). Her hair is elegantly coiffed in the latest style, her beauty radiates from the frame. The Castrol oil-drum on which she sits is the only hint of material privation. The photos are an equal collaboration between subject and photographer.
Bearing witness
When she was around the age of thirty, not long after the photo of Thora Lampard was taken, a series of events triggered a turning point in Charlotte Richard’s photography. As the camps became increasingly targeted for forcible child removal by the government, she turned her attention to photographing children in the context of their families, as a form of actively bearing witness.24

In 1956, Thora Lampard’s one year old son, Bruce Trevorrow, was illegally and wrongfully removed by the Protection Board for Aborigines while he was recovering from gastroenteritis in hospital. Without Thora’s knowledge or consent he was fostered into a white family while the state explicitly led her to believe he was still in hospital.25 Not long after, Charlotte’s young sister Irene Hunter died under tragic circumstances, having contracted pneumonia in a leaky tent beside the River Murray while pregnant with her fifth child. Charlotte’s aging parents cared for Irene’s children at the Meningie Seven Mile Camp, until one eerily sunny day the government lured the children away with the false promise of

21.7 Joyce Kerswell, early 1950s
Photograph by Charlotte Richards. Courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection
21.8 Thora Lampard, taken at Victor Harbour in the 1950s
Photograph: Charlotte Richards, courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection
a visit to the circus. The children never returned; separated and fostered into different white families unbeknown to one another. Charlotte’s mother’s health broke and soon after she died. Charlotte was propelled ever more strongly to document her version of the ‘Australian’ family and in doing so she created a record that would later provide vital information for families piecing together shattered lives. As Jane Lydon has said, ‘This points also toward a way of seeing photos that encompasses the healing power of images of kin and culture, as they are enfolded into living families and worlds.’26 In this light Charlotte Richard’s photos become much more than family histories; they are explicitly political, born of cultural genocide. It is fitting that Irene’s children later became the executors of her work.

Photos from the edge: photojournalism and the social realist turn
Many of Charlotte Richard’s later works, produced from the 1970s on, are more confronting; they exhibit an at times unflinching gaze and distinct social realist turn capturing definitive ‘metonymic’ moments that convey a larger story. Here, in her vision, her skilled capacity to seize and frame the definitive moment, and her knowledge of the power of angle and frame, Richards was influenced by the visuality of social realism evident in 1950s and 1960s cinema and the photojournalism tradition of Magnum photographers such as Eve Arnold and Henri Cartier Bresson, whose work circulated in Life magazine and in Australia was refracted in the more populist Post and Pix magazines, that Charlotte and other Ngarrindjeri women avidly read.27 Indeed, magazine photographs, often those of Hollywood celebrities, papered the walls of the fringe camp homes. While Charlotte Richard’s photos may lack the technical proficiency that comes from large budgets and high-end equipment, and her potential career was thwarted by the prevalence of the racialised thinking that dominated her time, they surmount this through their transmission of a lucid, unmitigated intimacy of a world of which she was inextricably part. The photographer, not the camera, is the instrument (to borrow Eve Arnold’s dictum).29

These are photographs from the edge, taken by an Aboriginal woman from the fringe camps, chronicling an
important yet marginalised history at a time of intense raced-based social exclusion: as recent analysis has suggested, photography stands ‘at the crossroads of history and memory’, providing an essential resource for ‘critical black memory’.30 The photographs were taken against the odds, and that they exist today is also against the odds. Their provenance in Ngarrindjeri peoples’ private collections, preserved in time-worn suitcases and biscuit tins under beds and in closets, as people moved between fringe camps, communities that were once Aboriginal reserves and private housing is evidence of the high value placed on them.

Conclusions
Charlotte Richard’s photos depict the fringe camps in ways seldom seen outside the Indigenous community. They reveal Indigenous experience—‘including change, strength, dignity and worth’ within an Indigenous intellectual tradition, asserting a subtly nuanced, multi-faceted standpoint.31 The humour and warm social relations embodied here are missing from most official visual documentations of Ngarrindjeri. Her easy, relaxed portraits, full of exuberance and vitality, offer us a unique and treasured glimpse into a world in which Ngarrindjeri led productive and resilient lives, resourcefully evaded institutionalisation and cared for one another during a challenging period of intensive state intervention. They celebrate both everyday pleasures and a spirit of survival against the pressures of assimilation. In a sense, Aunty Charlotte’s photos anticipate the later work of noted Ngarrindjeri visual artist Ian Abdullah, who similarly camped along the River Murray and painted intimate scenes of lived histories outside the mainstream.32 She used the camera as an instrument to record family life for Aboriginal families themselves and it would seem with a keen eye to the future.

I would like to end with this photograph of an Australian family taken, it would appear, near the beginning of the 1980s (Figure 21.9). Here we see Charlotte Richards playing the piano accordion, an instrument previously played by her mother Ruby Richards, and more recently by her sister Irene Hunter’s daughter, the acclaimed Australian singer Ruby Hunter. Behind her is a Hills Hoist clothesline, a symbol that
has become iconic of Australian mid-century suburbia. With her is her partner from about the 1970s onwards, Jim Davis (1919–1998) and their hybrid blended family. We see an indigenised contemporary world, and, by extension, a re-imagined Australia with a cosmological order that could have been, if colonial relations had been different.

Notes
1 I thank Aunty Ellen Trevorrow, Uncle Tom Trevorrow, Uncle Walter Richards, Aunty Roslyn Richards, Uncle Jeffrey Hunter, Aunty Rita Lindsay and Aunty Alice Abdullah for sharing their collections and knowledge and for their commitment to this ongoing project.

4 In 2015, the remarkable Mavis Walley Collection [BA2666], State Library of Western Australia has also come to public attention. Walley’s work documents Aboriginal families living in the Western Australian wheatbelt over a similar period.

5 The ‘white Australian policy’ was instituted through The Immigration Restriction Act, 1901. See, for example, Anna Haebich, Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800–2000, Fremantle Press, Western Australia, 2000; Karen Hughes, ‘Mobilising across colour lines: Intimate encounters between Aboriginal women and African American and other allied servicemen on the World War Two home front’, Aboriginal History, vol. 41, 2017, pp. 43–71.

6 For an analysis of this in relation to Ebenezer mission, see Jane Lydon, Fantastic Dreaming: The Archeology of an Aboriginal Mission, AltaMira Press, Maryland, 2009, pp. 175–6.

7 Personal communication, Aunty Rita Lindsay, 2013.

8 As her birth appears not to have been registered, we have only an approximation of her date of birth given by family members; this ranges from 1926 to 1936. Personal communication, Aunty Yvonne Koolmatrie, July 2014.

9 The project I refer to here continues a research and curatorial collaboration with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow to document photographs held in Ngarrindjeri private collections in historical and cultural context, placing a particular emphasis on photographs of the fringe camps.


11 As in Canada, in Australia Aboriginal people were subject to large-scale assimilation attempts.

12 Fringe camps were spaces of activism and resistance as well as spaces that celebrated culture. When the Tent Embassy was established in Canberra in 1967 it bore some of the features of the fringe camps. Following the referendum, they drew a younger generation of leaders into activism. See Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, The 1967 Referendum, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2007.


14 Ibid., pp.190–1


16 Personal communication, Uncle Walter Richards, nephew of Charlotte Richards, September 2012.


19 Ngatji translates directly as ‘close relation’.

20 Keith Munro, cited in Lydon (ed.), Calling the Shots, p. 7.


Hughes and Trevorrow, p. 199.


This later became a landmark legal case in Australia and to date Bruce Trevorrow is the only victim of Aboriginal child removal policies to receive compensation from the state for wrongful removal.


Personal communication, Muriel Van Der Byl, July 2014.


Ibid.