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## Impossible Historical Reenactments: Invisible Aborigines on TV<sup>1</sup>

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In the late 1960s at my Melbourne school, Manningham Primary, films were screened during the holidays, presumably to keep us off the street in those brief respites from formal instruction. The format, as I remember it, was a feature such as *Born Free*—a film that never failed to bring forth a flood of tears—preceded by a “short.” More than once, that short came from the television series *Alcheringa*, a prize-winning 1962 ABC program of 12 quarter-hour episodes, initially broadcast weekly, that recreated, romantically and anthropologically, an imagined world of everyday indigenous practices “before the coming of the white man.” 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 indigenous.

In each episode, Bill Onus appears after the opening sequence and provides 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. The series consists of dramatic recreations of the life of indigenous people of “long ago.” For the most part, these reenactments focus on Aborigines acquiring the means of physical subsistence. Programs include “Making a stone axe” (episode 3), “Fishing” (episode 5), “Women gathering food” (episode 6) and “Hunting an emu” (episode 8), as well as two more socio-cultural episodes, “Trading” (episode 2) and “Walk-about” (episode 10). The various activities are dramatized as the life of 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).

The series was shot on 16 millimetre, black-and-white film, all of it filmed in outdoor locations under natural light without synchronized

sound, with the exception of the Onus commentary that frames each episode. 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, and the editing is, in general, leisurely, as is the pace of the dramatization. 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 dramatize the chase and the kill.

The soundtrack consists of occasional diegetic sound such as scraping and axe blows on a tree that were recorded separately, an orchestral score played for mood and feel, and an omniscient narration by the actor 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, corroboree, 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 an episode on gathering shellfish (episode 11), the narrator informs the viewer that “The Australian Aborigine had extremely good teeth.”

These are the basic elements of *Alcheringa*, which is 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.” I want to examine *Alcheringa* here, not to judge it as producing good or bad representations, but because it exemplifies 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 restaging of an imagined pre-colonial Aboriginal world. I want to think about how such programs work in a paradoxical memory culture haunted by strange patterns of