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Aboriginal Interventions into the Photographic Archives: A Dialogue between Carol Payne and Jeffrey Thomas

Carol Payne and Jeffrey Thomas

This collaborative article is structured as a dialogue between Iroquoian artist/curator Jeffrey Thomas and historian of photography Carol Payne. Together we examine First Peoples interventions into the ethnographic photography archive, a cultural formation that has long been perceived as a key site of Aboriginal subjugation. Jeff Thomas' own photo-based and curatorial practice is a focal point of our discussion. In his work, as well as that of several other contemporary Aboriginal figures, the photographic archive has emerged as a key trope. It is examined, not only (predictably) as an embodiment of imperialism but also, more surprisingly, as a site from which to reclaim the native subject. In this respect these interventions enact a cultural negotiation between Aboriginal peoples and the realities of historic colonialism and neo-colonialism, strategies reflecting what Homi K. Bhabha has termed hybridity or cultural translation. The format of this article, a dialogue between an Aboriginal artist/curator and a Euro-Canadian historian of photography, is, therefore, purposeful. While eschewing reductive essentialist readings, we propose this format as symbolic of the dialogue between cultures which has been opened up by such interventions as these recent re-examinations of the ethnographic photography archive.

Keywords: Ethnography; Aboriginal art; Photography; Canadian art; Bhabha, Homi K.; Thomas, Jeffrey

CAROL PAYNE

Over the past three years, I have been researching and writing about a major Canadian photographic archive, the Still Photography Division of the National Film Board of Canada.¹ From the early 1940s to the late 1960s, it produced and published some 200,000 images. In effect, for decades, the Division served as the country's image bank constructing a governmentally-endorsed portrait of nationhood which was promoted in Canada and abroad.

Images depicting First Peoples comprise a prominent part of that archive. Typically, they present Aboriginal peoples as the official nation's "Other"; these

individuals are usually rendered nameless, reduced to flagrant cultural stereotypes, presented as a homogeneous group and portrayed as peoples frozen in a time long past. Images like these affirmed for me what seemed to be a truism: that the photographic archive – whether under the aegis of a colonial or settler colony government or under that of anthropology – marked a site of Aboriginal subjugation.

But in the course of undertaking this research, I have begun to see the NFB archive more and more in terms of contemporary photographic practice – particularly that by contemporary Aboriginal artists like Plains Cree artist George Littlechild, Métis artist Rosalie Favell, Anishnabe artist/curator Barry Ace, and Iroquoian artist/curator Jeffrey Thomas, with whom I have collaborated on this article. In Thomas's work and that of a few other figures, the photographic archive – and not just any archive, but the ethnographic photography archive – has emerged as a trope. It is, however, being looked at anew, examined, not only as I had, predictably, as an embodiment of imperialism, but also, more surprisingly, as a site from which to reclaim the native subject. What I had perceived as a text so entrenched in cultural colonization that it defied alternative readings, has become for many Aboriginal individuals and communities a redeemable – even valuable – resource.

This collaborative article (or conversation in the guise of an article) marks an effort to introduce that practice – Aboriginal interventions into the photographic archive – specifically in Thomas' work and contemporary Canadian Aboriginal practice in general to a broader audience. In earlier conversations between Jeffrey Thomas and myself, we have agreed that these interventions enact a cultural negotiation between Aboriginal peoples and the realities of historic colonialism and neo-colonialism. (In effect, I suggest that these strategies are akin to what Homi K. Bhabha has termed hybridity or cultural translation.) The format of this article as a dialogue between an Aboriginal artist/curator and a Euro-Canadian historian of photography is, therefore, purposeful. It does not, however, suggest an essentialist reading (in which positions are determined wholly by how one is culturally situated in terms of race, class and/or gender); instead, it is *symbolic* of the dialogue between cultures which has been opened up by such interventions as these recent re-examinations of the ethnographic photography archive.

JEFFREY THOMAS

During the mid 1970s, I developed an interest in photography and taught myself how to use a camera. Influenced by photographers like Eugene Atget, Walker Evans and Lee Friedlander, I began photographing the architecture of my hometown, Buffalo, New York. As my interest in photography developed, I turned to the library to try to find photographs made by Aboriginal photographers. Instead, I found pictures by white photographers who seemed to have an overwhelmingly singular preoccupation with photographing Indian warriors and chiefs. I felt that the photographic archive should reflect the reality of Aboriginal people, depicting all the members of our societies in everyday settings, rather than single out one aspect of our culture and history. My recent work, as a photographer and curator, has been concerned with building a bridge between the historical images of



FIGURE 1 Jeffrey Thomas, *Powwow Dancer drinking diet pepsi*. Six Nations Reserve Powwow, 1983, silver gelatin print. (Courtesy of the author/photographer).

Aboriginal people found in the library and the archive and the present day Aboriginal world experienced by its inhabitants.

In the mid 1980s, I began to photograph the powwows taking place in south eastern Ontario and the north eastern United States. (Fig. 1) The powwow is an Aboriginal dance event that began in the American west among the Siouan speaking tribal groups, as a warrior society dance, sometime during the 1700s. As a result of the government suppression of the warrior tradition, by the late nineteenth century the warrior society dance evolved into the “war dance” of the popular late nineteenth-century Wild West shows. Today, the powwow has become a popular pan-Indian event, that takes place throughout North America. My interests in photographing the powwow were twofold and interrelated: first, I hoped these pictures would affirm the presence of a live and vibrant First Nations culture in the wake of our urbanization. Second, when seen in juxtaposition with my pictures of the contemporary urban landscapes, these photographs were meant to call into

question the relevance of the historical pictures of Aboriginal subjects taken by white photographers that I had found in my early researches.

I was invited to exhibit the powwow series at the Museum of Indian Archaeology in London, Ontario. The curator paired these pictures with an exhibition of photographs by Edward S. Curtis, taken from his twenty-volume series *The North American Indian*, (1898). Curtis' photographs, which largely reconstructed the vanished Aboriginal tribal world through photographic recreations and an anthropologically based text, were much like those I had found in my library research: dramatic and focused on the more spectacular elements of First Nation's culture and history. The exhibition was important for me, but left me with conflicted feelings about the agency of my project. My urban landscape photographs were not included in this exhibition and nor were they of interest to the galleries wanting to show my powwow work. I was concerned that the public would see my photographs as an Aboriginal version of Curtis' and overlook my desire to affirm the cultural importance of the powwow for contemporary First Nations communities.

There were elements of Curtis' work I admired at the time, primarily the dedication it took to produce such a massive work. But, I also appreciated that he had preserved such powerful First Nations personalities. I was very confused about the powwow work I was doing and decided to stop making photographs all together. This lasted for three years. I remember thinking to myself, that if I could find a good reason to start making photographs again, then I would resume work on the powwow series.

During this time I moved to Winnipeg and in 1988 began visiting the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature's research library to try and find a historical basis for the powwow. When I discovered that the historical precursor for the powwow was the plains warrior society's dance event, I began to think about photographing the contemporary plains First Nations communities surrounding Winnipeg. While at the museum, I also began going through their photographic collections and discovered a number of historical photographs of Canada's First Nations people. I learned that these pictures were reproductions from even larger collections of photographs of Canada's First Nations people housed in the collections of the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario, and the Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec. I also learned that the National Archives had a complete set of Curtis' *The North American Indian*. These discoveries energized my interest in making photographs again, this time with a view towards finding a way to incorporate these historical images into my work.

A discovery from an unexpected source also inspired me to renew my commitment to this project. The third-floor library window overlooks Winnipeg's notorious south Main street where one can view a strip of pawn shops, seedy hotels, abandoned buildings, drug and alcohol use, prostitution, and a very visible First Nations street presence. The view is so incongruous, given the museum's extensive library about First Nations history, and an extensive ethnological collection of First Nations artifacts and photographs. The collections represent the strength of the First Nations world, and the view through the window demonstrates the devastation of a people whose culture has been taken away.

In 1990 and 1991, I received a Manitoba Arts Council grants to produce new work. I began by concurrently photographing along the inner city streets of Winnipeg and at local powwows. I found that Manitoba powwows were very

different from the powwows imported to the east. The prairie area is the homeland of the powwow and there these events are more community based, with very few tourists in sight. And, unlike the artifacts I saw in the museum collection, the dress and objects used by the dancers were part of a living culture.

In 1991, the Museum of Man and Nature invited me to exhibit my new powwow work in their contemporary gallery. I titled the exhibition *Strong Hearts: The Traditional Powwow Dancer*, named after a Lakota plains warrior society organized by Sitting Bull. Once again, the museum wasn't interested in exhibiting my street work. However, because the new powwow series had expanded beyond its previous parameter of formal portraiture, to include everyday scenes taking place on the powwow grounds, this omission was not as serious a problem as it had been for my earlier project. Additionally, the exhibition was strategically situated. The new contemporary gallery space was located at the end of the visitors tour through the museum. Having been introduced to pre-historical and historical First Nations culture, the visitor would then encounter contemporary First Nations culture through *Strong Hearts*. My hope was to make a connection with the First Nations people on Main street through the title on the museum's marquee, *Strong Hearts: The Traditional Powwow Dancer*. I don't know if any street people ever entered the museum, but I do know that many First Nations school kids saw the exhibition.

Before *Strong Hearts* had closed in the fall, I had moved to Ottawa, Ontario, to begin research at the National Archives of Canada. I began going through the thousands of index cards with small reprints of the original photographs in the First Nations collection and writing my own descriptions of the photographs. My aim was to find a new agency for the photographs and to uncover the voice of the people that posed before the cameras. While in residence, I was contracted by photo archivist Melissa Rombout to write new captions for historical photographs that retained inappropriate words like Squaw, Half-breed, and Redskins. I eventually wrote new captions for over one hundred photographs, and just as importantly, I had the chance to study original historical photographs. In 1996, the archives invited me to co-curate an exhibition of photographs of Aboriginal people from their collections. The title of the exhibition was *Aboriginal Portraits From The National Archives of Canada*. The exhibition included photographs from as early as 1848 to more recent work produced in the 1980s.

CAROL PAYNE

The archive (including photographic archives), which as Jeffrey Thomas has explained has been central to his work for over a decade, has been the subject of much important recent scholarship. (Thomas' work can be seen as part of that revisionism.) It might be useful at this point to introduce some of the key premises on which both that recent revisionist work and its object of study (the archive) rests.

For many, the archive exemplifies how – in Foucauldian terms – power operates: that is, as an impersonal network rather than the simple, direct, and linear enforcement of authority. The photographic archive, specifically, has also been character-

ized usefully in terms of Foucault's writings as a regime of truth. As Allan Sekula, for example, has argued, "photographic archives by their very structure maintain a hidden connection between knowledge and power."² The often unquestioned authority of the photographic archive rests, according to Sekula, on the "illusory neutrality" of its two key components: its bureaucratic organizational system and the association of photography itself with the notion of a "universal language based on empirical truths."³

Within that paradigm, the ethnographic photography archive might be seen as a particularly virulent example of that enactment and veiling of power. Under this rubric, the most familiar work is probably Edward Curtis' popular twenty volume publication *The North American Indian* (1907–1930), which has been such a critical touchstone in Thomas's own archival interventions. (Of course, there are numerous other, less celebrated, figures and institutions which depicted and compiled photographic archives of the First Peoples of North America in the name of ethnography. A partial list might include Richard Pratt, Joseph Kossuth Dixon, Adam Clark Vroman, various photographers for the Smithsonian Institute, National Geographic magazine, and anthropologist/photographers you have discussed who worked under the auspices of the Canadian Geographic Society.)⁴

In the case of Curtis or these other figures, the ethnographic photography archive's distinctive configuration of knowledge/power is, of course, ingrained in the broader project of imperialism. The normative model – that is, the "universal language" – it proposes and measures the world against is decidedly European or Euro-North American in this case.⁵

The study of racial variations through empirical data, ethnography has, since the nineteenth century, employed such technological implements as calipers, the measuring tape, audio recorders and, importantly for our purposes, the camera and systems of classifying photographic images to buttress ethnography's construction of racial difference.⁶ Yet, these – seemingly neutral – tools, too, are culturally inscribed. In effect, they are the products of the interpreting culture, which, therefore, inherently normalize Europeaness. Ethnographic and anthropological photography, for example, as Elizabeth Edwards has argued, "represented technological superiority harnessed to the delineation and control of the physical world . . . [and in part through them] the power of knowing [has been] transformed into a rationalized, observed 'truth'."⁷

In nineteenth and early twentieth-century studies of native North Americans, for example, ethnographic photography and other materials were marshalled to support racial theories proposed by such figures as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Lewis Henry Morgan.⁸ Inherent in such images and their organizational systems was a belief in racial distinctions and classifications with their inherent premise of the inferiority of Aboriginal peoples and the justification for colonial dominance.

At times, the camera's – and the photographic archives' – power has appeared so intractable to native communities that prohibition was proposed as the only viable form of resistance. (In a celebrated example of this tactic, the Hopi (Pueblo) nation banned photographic tourism in 1915.) Yet, Jeffrey Thomas has adopted another, at times controversial, strategy in curatorial projects and art production: the cooption of the ethnographic photograph.

JEFFREY THOMAS

It's interesting to note and respond to nineteenth-century ethnography and how it delineated racial difference and the inferiority of Aboriginal people, thus, making it possible to justify the final push of Indians to the periphery of the civilized world, as reflected by their captivity on reserves. This is consistent with the policies of the times, to erase Indian culture and absorb them into mainstream society. The photograph and archives, in effect, like the Samuel de Champlain monument in my photograph (Fig. 2), monumentalize the passing of the "true" Indian.

Curtis' work captures this historical mind-set perfectly. *The North American Indian* is a perfect example of the way in which Indians were observed and preserved



FIGURE 2 Jeffrey Thomas, *View of Samuel de Champlain monument Ottawa, Ontario*, 1997, silver gelatin print. (Courtesy of the author/photographer).

during the late nineteenth century. After spending many hours going through the entire twenty volumes of the series, it became obvious to me that he employed ethnography as an authoritative voice, while using photography to tell a fictional story. As an ethnographic text, his study was sound. It made sense as a study of Indian culture, touching upon tribal histories, mythology, ceremony, and so on. But his photography resorted to the fictionalization of history. What I mean by this is that the tribal culture that formed the basis of the text no longer existed on the reserves during Curtis' time: The photographer staged the scenes that he photographed.

Because the subjugation of Indians by the Canadian and U.S. governments created a very different culture than that which Curtis had set out to depict, he resorted to recreating the past through the memories of community elders. The world Curtis staged was by no means unknown to these elders. They had, in fact, been born into it and raised in its ways. One of the unknown aspects of Curtis' project that fascinates me is that he included many of the battles between Indians and the government, like the Battle of the Little Bighorn. He showed the entire sequence of events that led to this most famous of battles, and not the usual cleaned up version of the history we read about in American history books. Although Curtis didn't draw attention to the discrepancy, the 'official version' can easily be compared with the tragic history he restaged and recounted. This is one example of the important function of the archive. If Curtis had photographed the people as he found them, rather than recreating and restaging the history of these people, then we would have a very different image of the First Nations world in the early twentieth century.

It was, however, my curiosity about what Curtis had omitted from First Nations history through his recreations that framed the approach I would take in my photographic practice. When I saw my first Curtis prints in the mid 1970s, they raised questions in my mind about who these people were and what their world looked like. And this is what drove me into the archive. I wanted to find evidence of the past Curtis and his contemporaries avoided showing. What I discovered in my initial research was that the archive, like Curtis, had already declared the Indian dead and had begun the process of memorializing their culture. With this in mind, I realized that just as the Champlain monument was not intended for Aboriginal people, the archive/monument was not for North American Indians. (Fig. 3)

Growing up in a city I have had to confront the fear of blending into mainstream society and losing my Iroquoian identity. In school we were taught that people of all colours were supposed to blend into the melting pot. I remember how scared I was in grade school when I first learned about the melting pot. Studying Indian culture through the ethnographic archive became a subversive activity for me. I felt as though I had stumbled upon a record that was not supposed to be seen by Indians. I had a scenario playing in my mind where all the Indians had been assimilated and told that only one history existed and then someone came across these books and images showing what Indian life had been like – showing that there wasn't just one history. And then the revolution! (Fig. 4)

When Curtis' works were first published, I don't think that white society ever imagined that Indians would one day be visiting the archive to search for evidence of their past, especially urban based First Nations people, who, for the most part, have been absorbed into mainstream society.



FIGURE 3 Jeffrey Thomas, *Indian figure at the base of the Champlain monument, Ottawa, Ontario, 1992*, silver gelatin print. The photograph also shows the Canadian Parliament buildings in the background. (Courtesy of the author/photographer).

CAROL PAYNE

Aboriginal artists, scholars and community groups have been visiting the archives in increasing numbers, finding evidence of cracks in the colonial edifice and a site from which to reclaim the native subject. The re-inscription of the ethnographic archive is evident in scholarship spanning from new readings of Edward Curtis' corpus to recent writing by, for example, such figures in North America as Brock Silversides, Paul Chaat Smith, Gerald McMaster and Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, among many others.

The archive has also emerged as a prominent trope in artists' practices in Canada since the 1980s. This work ranges from Ontario-based Ojibwa artist Carl Beam's extensive recontextualization of ethnographic images in such mixed media works to artist/filmmaker Shelley Niro's explorations of female Iroquoian ancestry and remakings of the family album by Plains Cree artist George Littlechild, Métis artist Rosalie Favell and Anishnabe artist/curator Barry Ace's web-based project *Wassechgan* (window in Ojibway). Jeffrey Thomas' work – both as a photographer and a curator – has produced one of the most extensive recent considerations of the photographic archive in Canada from an Aboriginal perspective.

In general, I would suggest that there are two broad – though intertwined – strategies that Aboriginal artists and communities have adopted in reclaiming the ethnographic photography archive. The first consists of institutional critique: interrogations of the ethnographic image itself and its place within the regulatory



FIGURE 4 Jeffrey Thomas, *Culture Revolution* (Bear Thomas) Toronto, Ontario, 1984, silver gelatin print. (Courtesy of the author/photographer).

taxonomic system of the archive as manifestations of imperialism. Secondly, artists also reinvent the archive to serve genealogical ends. Here the key paradigm is that of the family album – with images either directly drawn from ethnographic archives or used with allusions to archival ordering. Often these source materials are reinscribed with postmodernist irony or reinvented as a metaphor of political self-determination.

(Genealogical applications of the ethnographic archive are also employed extensively beyond the perimetres of art. Archival images and other records are now being recouped, reorganized and maintained by several Aboriginal communities to amass their own archives. The Kitiganzibi Reserve in Maniwaki, Quebec, for example, has established its own photographic archives comprised of prints culled from ethnographers' field work. In some cases, these are the only visual depictions remaining of members of the community. Their reclamation has been important to family and community heritage.)

By employing the paradigm of the album, these artists and communities are also invoking and problematizing the normative model of the white, middle class nuclear family. Typically in collections of ethnographic photography – or the colonial enterprise as a whole – whiteness is not represented. Yet its absence (for example, the lack of images of Europeans and references to European contact) paradoxically underscores white hegemony. In short, whiteness – or Euro-North American references of any kind – do not have to be seen or articulated overtly; they are assumed.

These two strategies – the critique of the archive itself and its reinscription as genealogical material – are often imbricated. In Thomas' work as well as that

of the above-mentioned artists and communities, the photographic image and archive exist at once as affirmations of community history and evidence of subjugation. These artists and communities are interested in the spaces of negotiation between the two. In interrogating the archive as an institution and in remaking the family album (a cultural artifact associated with whiteness and middle class status), these artists challenge that hegemony. Simultaneously, they make the cultural artifacts of whiteness – the family album, the archive, the museum display case – the objects of an inverted anthropological gaze, a gaze from an Aboriginal vantage point.

Although I would say that Thomas' work largely engages in cultural and institutional critique, the idea of retrieving community history – in effect, the genealogical project in a broader frame – is also crucial.

JEFFREY THOMAS

When I was a young boy and would come across photographs of First Nations people, I had the sense that they had something to say to me. I remember feeling frustrated by this because the images usually didn't offer any personal information about the people I was looking at. And, I wondered if anyone really knew who they were. I set out to find their voice and this led to the development of my photographic practice and my work as a curator. I felt that it was critical to experience the dynamics of working with a camera to understand what motivated photographers like E.S. Curtis, and then to apply that same focused eye to reading historical images. I was also fortunate to have known family elders on the Six Nations reserve, who I greatly respected, and used my interaction with them to engage with the archive.

I have a simple test that I apply to my work. Ask a non-native person what they see in a typically adorned plains Indian man. People will generally comment on things like bead and feather work designs. This is applied to photographic works like E.S. Curtis, who has often been criticized for "dressing up" his subjects in appropriate Indian type clothing. But upon close examination of Curtis's portrait work, one will see that the face almost always stands out and draws you in first. But traditional portals to the past, like anthropology, history books, and Hollywood westerns, have conditioned us to only see Indians as objects.

My response is different. The first thing that attracts my attention is the face of the individual. I wonder what their voice sounds like when speaking in their own language, and what they thought about having their picture taken. Essentially, I just want to sit down and have a conversation, like I would have done with my elders. (Fig. 5)

As an Iroquoian person living in an urban environment, I have found that there is virtually no evidence of my ancestors having been here before me. Consequently I am forced to carry the memories of my community and history in my mind. Yet buried beneath cities like my hometown of Buffalo, New York, lies an Iroquoian past. "Attitude" (1998), a work from my *Memory Landscape* series, is a response to this situation. A duel portrait, on the right hand side is a picture of my son Bear, photographed in Buffalo in 1997, against one of the most banal urban backdrops I could find, and on the left is a reproduction of Edward Curtis'



FIGURE 5 Jeffrey Thomas, *Emily General, Six Nations Reserve*, 1984, silver gelatin print. (Courtesy of the author/photographer).

portrait of Iron Breast, a Piegan man. (Fig. 6) Through this pairing, I intend to communicate that the spirit and strength of being a First Nations person lives on today. The images are connected because we carry our history with us and images like the ones made by Curtis speak to us today.

More recently I have developed a new work for an exhibition at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City. The title of the exhibition is *Spirit Capture*. It surveys how native North American people have been portrayed through photographs from the museum's collection. The title for my new work is *A Conversation with Edward S. Curtis* and takes form as an image-text based, fictional, conversation between Curtis and myself. The idea emerged from my research with *The North American Indian* and the discovery that Curtis had interjected his personal observation of the Indian people he worked with, throughout the text in the twenty volumes. I found myself responding to his comments with questions and then began working out a conversation. The exhibition involves both photographic comparisons between our respective bodies of work and our 'conversation', presented in the gallery as an in-house web site, accessible using a touch screen to navigate through the site.

CAROL PAYNE

In asserting that "historical images are not stagnant" but can be engaged in dialogue, Jeffrey Thomas's work – as well as the work of George Littlechild,

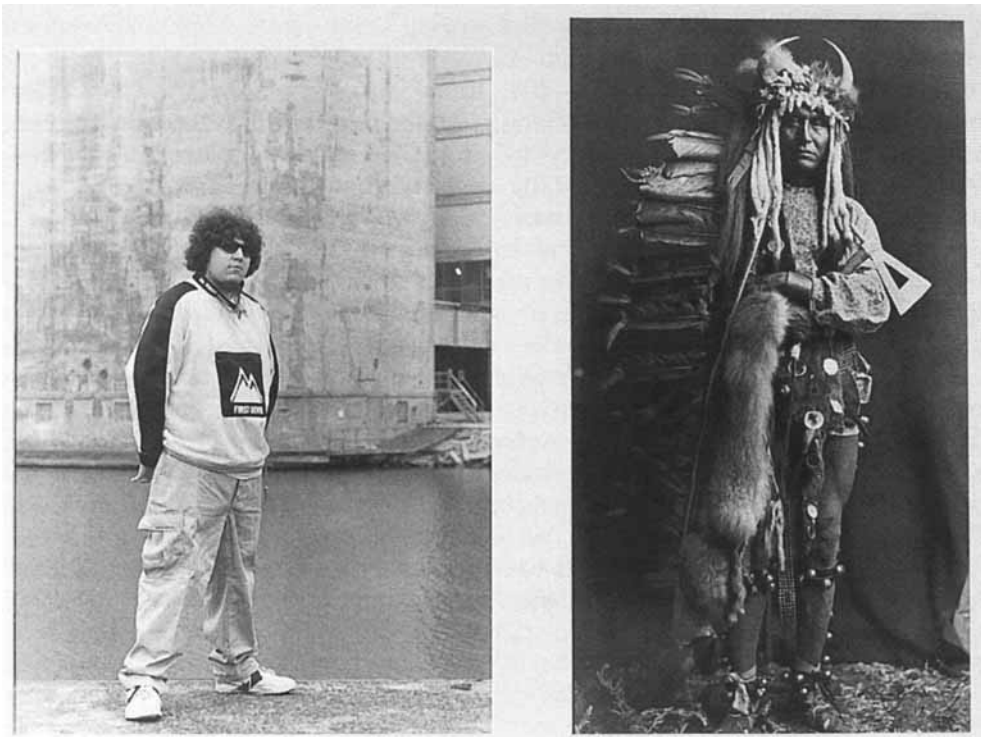


FIGURE 6 Jeffrey Thomas, "Attitude," from the *Memory Landscape* series, 1998, silver gelatin prints. (Courtesy of the author/photographer).

Barry Ace, Rosalie Favell, and several others – examines the spaces of negotiation between Aboriginal and European (colonizing) cultures.

In this respect, it also corresponds to some key concepts articulated by Homi K. Bhabha. As Monika Kin Gagnon has noted, Bhabha's work is centrally engaged in the project of interrogating imperialism through strategies adapted from Derridean deconstruction.⁹ Following Derrida, Bhabha rejects rigid binary models as reasserting hierarchical distinctions between, for example, the colonial power and its "Other". Instead, he is interested in the spaces of contestation or processes of negotiation between them. Bhabha has employed the term "hybridity" – and, at other times, the less contentious phrase, "cultural translation" – to describe that space of tension between cultures.¹⁰

For Bhabha, such incidents of hybridity not only "unsettle the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicate its identifications in strategies of subversion . . ."¹¹ In short, hybridity – or cultural translation – is a strategy of retranslating or reinscribing the effects of the dominant culture. By demonstrating that the dominant culture can be subverted in this way, hybridity also, importantly, signals the tenuousness of the colonial position itself and asserts the agency of the colonized.

In drawing on and reinscribing the ethnographic photography archive – a cultural formation entrenched in the colonial project – Thomas seems to employ the strategies of hybridity and occupy, what Bhabha has also termed "interstitial spaces".

By appropriating archival images and pairing them with contemporary photographs, Thomas effectively counters conventional European treatments of the Aboriginal subject as frozen in a past time. Through placement, the archival images take on new meanings. No longer do they present the Aboriginal subject as sign of exotic spectacle, now they have come to suggest a cultural lineage and, in these cases, images of resistance. By appropriating archival images, this work does not attempt to erase evidence of the effects of imperialism on Aboriginal life; yet it asserts that those effects can be reinterpreted from an Aboriginal subject position. As in Bhabha's writing, there is an emphasis placed here on the charged spaces between the two positions, spaces of conflict and negotiation.

In Thomas's work – as well as in interventions by various artists, scholars and Aboriginal communities – the ethnographic photography archive has been radically reinvented. As I have argued, by employing the strategies of hybridity or cultural translation, imperialist conventions for representing the "Other" have been disrupted. By employing genealogical models and mounting institutional critiques of the ethnographic image and the taxonomic system of the archive, Thomas and the other figures I have briefly mentioned – in Bhabha's words – "turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" or in Thomas' words, claim the space of the storyteller.¹²

JEFFREY THOMAS

In 1998, I was invited by the Canadian Museum of Civilization to curate a photographic exhibition from their collection of photographs depicting First Nations people. The museum's photographic collection is composed of field photographs taken by anthropologists studying Aboriginal people across Canada. I was struck by the technical and aesthetic qualities of the photographs that were produced by these anthropologists, but also by the fact that the people they photographed were presented in everyday situations. I felt that this collection was, in fact, the missing photographic link I had been searching for. These photographs transcended the iconic photographs produced by E.S. Curtis and his contemporaries. I was especially excited by the work of four anthropologists who concentrated their studies on my reserve between the years 1912 and 1949.

As I began looking through the photographs made at my reserve, I noticed that the captions mentioned the names of people that I had heard about in my childhood. And this provoked a recollection of a conversation that I had listened to as a young boy. A group of elders often gathered at the house on the reserve in which I was staying, to talk about the old days, and one particular day I heard the word anthropologist for the first time. They spoke about the anthropologists who had come to visit their father from Ottawa, and in later years, to interview them. They wondered what happened to all the information that was collected. I remember thinking to myself that someday I would find that information for them.

On the living room wall of the house was a photograph of a man standing next to stalks of corn that towered over his head. I asked who the man was and why the photograph was taken. Although they didn't remember his name, the reason

for the photograph was to record how well the corn grew that year. The man stood proudly next to the corn, wearing coveralls and sporting a large handle bar mustache.

As my research progressed at the museum, I was given access to the refrigerated vault, where the original glass plate negatives were held. I found a drawer of small brown envelopes that contained glass plate negatives that measured $3\frac{1}{2}'' \times 5\frac{1}{2}''$. There were over one hundred and fifty negatives in the drawer and as I began viewing them over a light table, I read the inscription on the envelope. It noted that the negatives were taken at Six Nations. I recognized some of the family names. Some of the negatives were accompanied by contact prints, and in one envelope I found the negative for the picture of the man I had seen on the living room wall, his name is Jacob General.

Finally, I began to wonder about the anthropologists who took these pictures. Their names were Marius Barbeau, Harlen Smith, Sir Francis Knowles and Frederick Waugh, all employees of the Geological survey of Canada (now the Canadian Museum of Civilization). Their photographs stood out from the thousands of documentary photos recording various aspects of traditional Aboriginal life that I had come across in my archival research. These anthropologists were meticulous about capturing the names of the people, their community roles and family relationships, and were thus also very unlike the more commercial oriented photographers, whose work I had viewed, who often left the people they photographed nameless. I turned to their correspondence and field notes for clues and found that they had had to negotiate their way into the communities. They didn't simply wander in and assert their authority.

My discovery changed the way I viewed archival images. The archive had become a family photo album. (Fig. 7) The people from the early twentieth century had a bearing and very strong sense of self that I recognized from memories of my own interaction with and observation of my elders, a bearing that came from being photographed at home in their own environment. I felt the portraits were representative of a site of negotiation and like a portrait, a transaction takes place between photographer and sitter. This was confirmed when anthropologist Harlan I. Smith noted to whom and when he sent photographs back to in the community. I felt that the sitters used the anthropologist's camera to ensure that their presence would always be available for future First Nations generations.

In the end, I selected photographic portraits made by these four men and titled the exhibition *Emergence From The Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspectives*. Although the community people did not trip the shutters of the anthropologist's cameras, I felt they certainly exerted an obvious sense of control during the process of portrait making. To complete the exhibition, I invited six aboriginal artists to participate in the exhibition with photo-based work. In pairing the historical and contemporary work, it was my intention to break the rules governing the representation of Indians, insofar as they are typically only seen as part of a past rather than a present cultural experience.

In conclusion, my dream is to make the archive an active site of engagement. When I first approached the National Archives of Canada I wasn't sure that this dream could be realized. Historical imagery, and historical imagery of Aboriginal peoples in particular, appeared to be soundly encased in the past. Eventually I



FIGURE 7 Sir Francis Knowles, *Liza Thomas-Cayuga Tribe, Six Nations Reserve, Ontario*, 1915. (Courtesy of The Canadian Museum of Civilization. MCC/CMC 35529).

came to discover that the images were only in a state of sleep. The problem was how to awaken them. By making them part of my photographic practice, a door was opened to begin a dialogue. And, as Carol Payne has mentioned, Aboriginal artists are now a part of the awaking process. As our conversation has developed, the feeling of sharing a mutual interest in photography and its ethnographic format, has indeed opened a dialogue between cultures.

NOTES

1. Carol Payne, "Economics, Race and Governmental Imaging of the Land in the National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division," (tentative title) in John O'Brian and Peter White, eds. *Conscripting the Canadian Land* (forthcoming); Carol Payne, *A Canadian Document: The National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1999).

2. Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive" in *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York and Cambridge: The New Museum of Contemporary Art with The MIT Press, 1987), 118-119.

3. Ibid.

4. See, for example: Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography & Exhibitions: Representations of the 'Native' People and the Making of European Identities* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999), especially Chapter 4 "Shifting Focus: Photographic Representations of Native Americans and African-Americans," 96-132; James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Catherine Lutz, *Reading National Geographic*

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Jeff Thomas, Editor/Curator, *Emergence from the Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspectives* (Hull, Québec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999–2001).

5. And, here I purposefully use the present tense to acknowledge the tenacity of colonialist beliefs.

6. Ethnography is, in effect, a sub-discipline of Ethnology – the study of racial variations – which, in turn, falls under the general rubric of Anthropology, the scientific study of human culture. While Ethnology emphasizes interpretation of race, ethnography stresses empirical observation.

7. Elizabeth Edwards, "Introduction" in *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920*, Elizabeth Edwards, ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Royal Anthropological Institute, London, 1992), 6.

8. These two figures represented the two dominant ethnographic theories of the late nineteenth century. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft believed that American natives had degenerated from a higher state to present primitive condition and therefore incapable of assimilation into US society. In contrast, Lewis Henry Morgan, subscribed to a Social Darwinianist theory of the stages of evolution: savagery, barbarism, civilization. He proposed that Aboriginal peoples had achieved barbarism and were capable of reaching the level of civilization, which of course was tantamount to the imitation of European culture.

9. "Identity and Cultural Displacement," a conversation between Jamelie Hassan and Homi K. Bhabha, Monika Kin Gagnon, moderator, in Jamelie Hassan, *Aldin's Gift* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1996), 13.

10. The term hybridity – with its reverberations of eugenics and genetic modification – has been called into question. See Hassan, 24–28.

11. Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders" in *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1994), 34.

Elsewhere, Bhabha has described hybridity as the "construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity." Homi K. Bhabha, "Culture's In Between," *Artforum*, Vol.XXXII, No.1 (September 1993), 212.

12. Bhabha, "Signs Taken As Wonders," 35.