‘Images and Reality’ of First Nation Women

The turn of the twentieth century was a time when it was believed Aboriginal population numbers were rapidly declining. As the prevailing belief in the demise of these people persisted, a belief that continued into the 1930s, artists, writers and photographers were keen to preserve a record of a vanishing race through the lens of photography, artistry and words, perpetuating the enduring image of Aboriginal people: Artist Emily Carr referred to the people as ‘relics of its first primitive greatness ... only a few more years and they will be gone forever, into silent nothingness’;¹ linguist Edward Sapir who made every attempt ‘to write the stories and present the ethnographic material he gathered in a manner ... true to the way they were told to him’² and photographer Edward Curtis all expressed their varied opinions of First Nation people. The influences of people, politics, and place were present within these visual representations, it was a time of placing people within new contexts and frames of reference (which were manipulated by those creating the images in photographs, books and paintings) in which indigenous people interacted with flourishing settler communities, experiencing new economic opportunities in early twentieth century Canada.

With reference to First Nation women, in particular Nuu’Chah’Nulth women, I want to consider the photographs of Edward Curtis in the context of political, cultural and social change, and consider how photographs have shaped and continue to shape people’s understanding of First Nation people by allowing negative cultural stereotypes to be preserved.³ The early 20th century was a time of change for Nuu’Chah’Nulth women, a time when they were adjusting to altered and rapidly changing economic conditions, when family life and communities were disrupted due to residential schooling and reserve living, a time when traditions, language and culture were curtailed when government impositions began to be felt more strongly.

³ Edward Curtis’s The North American Indian; Curtis.library.northwestern.edu; http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/curtis/toc.cgi?sec=&psec=nal.11.#nal.11.booknai
Curtis, like many others at the time, believed that while Europeans were set to develop and expand the Americas the future for Aboriginal people was extinction. It is true their way of life was changing, lands reduced due to expanding settlement and government policy, population numbers decreasing because of imported diseases (tuberculosis, smallpox, measles); nevertheless the people were not disappearing they were adapting to the considerable changes happening to their way of life. However, one cannot dismiss Curtis’ contribution to the visual history of First Nation women and Nuu’Chah’Nulth women in particular. For all his flaws his photographs represent someone.

Curtis’s life work, the photographic project of North American Indians, is a visual documentation of the lives and culture of Aboriginal people. Curtis wanted to capture images of First Nation women (amongst others) before the people and their culture disappeared using the strengths of photography to frame people’s perceptions of these women.

As the landscape was being re-imagined as one in which indigenous people were absent, the photographs became a record of a disappearing race, and in the process had a significant impact upon the composition of that image shaping, and continuing to shape, people’s understanding of First Nations by allowing negative cultural stereotypes to be preserved and perpetuated. These images suggest little of the complexity of their culture, simply portraying people of a bygone age.

European conventions of genre prevailed in Curtis’s photographs. For instance: the Bark Gatherer (1915) and the Berry-picker (1915) depict Nuu’Chah’Nulth women wearing traditional clothes from earlier times although the women usually wore European clothing. This falsification accentuates the misrepresentation of Nuu’Chah’Nulth women posing questions in people’s minds. Is it possible to understand another’s culture solely from photographs? Or is it just a fleeting glimpse offering little in understanding? As life was changing due to political impositions so photographs should reflect that change and present people appropriately. Curtis, in a letter to Frederick Webb Hodge of the Bureau of American Ethnology, argued strongly his pictures were reconstructions, representations of authentic Indians, a European perception of everyday life, images of the way things were.

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4 Frederick Webb Hodge of the Bureau of American Ethnology was editor of the Journal of the American Anthropologist and the ‘Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico’.
Photographs equal displacement, framing the way people are perceived out of context as the process removes the person from that setting. Curtis dislocates the women in his posed pictures.

In order to ensure Curtis found what he was seeking and to guarantee he could reproduce genuine portrayals, Curtis took on his travels a box of ‘Indian’ paraphernalia, wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing, in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look.’ By his own admission, Curtis wanted to depict the people as he imagined they had been before Europeans arrived making the people more ‘Indian’ reflecting his stereotype of how an ‘Indian’ looked and dressed. To achieve this goal he posed, re-clothed, and positioned the women in costumes and in ways he believed represented them. By manipulating his photographs Curtis reinforced typical stereotypical views of the people, images which survive to this day. He offered an idea that stood for ‘an aspect of reality’. By denying the complexity of First Nation society, in particular the strengths of the women, the myth of a primitive race juxtaposed against settler mentality is perpetuated.\(^5\)

There were repeated claims the people were wrongly dressed in Curtis’s images, as he had clothed the women to match European expectations, ‘a picturesque genre approach to Native American culture.’\(^6\) Not all believed as Curtis did as the following example demonstrates posing a dilemma for both the colonised and the coloniser.\(^7\) In 1881 Father Augustin Brabant, the first priest to live on the west-coast of Vancouver Island, believing the traditional dress of the blanket formerly worn by Nuu’Chah’Nulth women had no place in white society, had introduced European styled clothing to the women who traded dog fish oil for printed calico, flour, molasses and tobacco. Although Nuu’Chah’Nulth elders were adamant that change was not good, with their earnings from waged labour in the hop fields and canning factories young Nuu’Chah’Nulth women bought European clothes preferring to wear western rather than traditional dress. By the end of the nineteenth century white-

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styled clothing prevailed so the pictures taken by Curtis were denounced as fakes as nobody dressed in traditional clothing when the cameras were absent.

Despite misgivings about the way Aboriginal people are represented, photographs do have a historical value as they depict an aspect, albeit partial, of the culture, clothing, history and environment of people. Curtis’s photographic images provide a portfolio of evidence and could be considered an important example of historical testimony as the pictures, although staged represent someone, a living person; they are not fictional but a photographic instance taken at a pertinent time in history. However, there is a further dilemma: on the one hand photographs provide irrefutable evidence of women’s role, on the other hand, Curtis rarely acknowledges the women by name, instead using a generic name. Is this because he did not ask for their name; did he think their names irrelevant, unnecessary or unimportant? Was Curtis implicitly providing evidence and confirmation of European perceptions in his photographs of First Nation women as second class citizens?

Photography has the capacity to unsettle historical accounts, portraying people in familiar settings but in an unfamiliar way, and Curtis’s habit of not naming the women he has photographed caused disquiet amongst the Nuu’Chah’Nulth.

In 1915, Curtis photographed Virginia Tom, a Hesquiaht / Nuu’Chah’Nulth woman. In the photograph she is standing looking out to sea wearing traditional bark clothing, a cape and a headband, and carrying a burden basket strapped to her head. It is a very striking image, a typical Curtis pose staged for his glass-plate camera but for her daughter, Alice Paul, there was concern and unhappiness.

‘I’m always seeing her picture. ... Every time I look at the books she’s there. But they never use her name, just ‘Hesquiaht Woman’. But I know her name. It’s Virginia Tom.’

Virginia Tom was specifically singled out by Curtis because of her excellent weaving skills, skills that have continued to be passed down through the generations to her great-granddaughters. She was extremely skilled at weaving clothes, hats, capes, mats and baskets from cedar bark, spruce and local sedge grasses. In an interview in May 2010 I am proudly told of Virginia Tom’s weaving abilities by her great-granddaughter, Genevieve:

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‘My great-grandmother was a master weaver who worked at the fish plant, in the cannery. She wove the basket in the photograph, a burden basket made of spruce roots that is worn on the head.’

Even today Virginia Tom’s family are extremely unhappy about the discourtesy Curtis paid her by not naming her. Her descendants are, understandably, very proud of their great-grandmother but, like so many other members of this vast family, are sad Virginia’s name was missing from the photograph.

Photographs should reflect the strengths of Aboriginal women so providing an extraordinary chronicle of First Nation women. In the archives in Victoria there are many examples of named and un-named photographs, a mixture of posed Curtis and relaxed family images. Photographs reveal an image of the women in question, a narrative about the history of a specific people at a particular time, an interpretation or perception of the lives of First Nation women. However, consider the following questions about photographs of First Nation people: Is the person’s individuality still visible? Is it possible to perceive the defiance or acquiescence of the situation they have been subjected to? Do the people represent the colonial experience? Or is resistance or acceptance visible in their faces? Lippard makes an interesting observation when she says: ‘White people need to surrender the right to represent everybody, the colonial overview.’ For many reasons the past is hidden from us as Curtis’s photographs are staged or adapted to portray people’s expectations or used as propaganda. However, the cameraman can also be hidden. In her comments about her mother’s photograph, Alice Paul makes a very perceptive remark:

‘I remember the camera too, and the man all covered up under there with that black cloth’,

A comment that suggests there was something to be hidden, or omitted, in photographs.

The images of First Nations should be considered with both scepticism and hope. On the positive side new interpretations can change views and perceptions by adding a name, by explaining the context, the place, and the stories surrounding the picture, whilst remembering there is a negative power to historical photographs, misinterpretation. What is noticeable and significant about Curtis’s pictures is a relative dearth of smiling people so

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9 Interview with Genevieve, 6th May 2010.
the picture of ‘Clayoquot Girl’ (1915)\textsuperscript{11} is unusual as she is smiling. Many photographs depict unsmiling people, grave with expressions of resignation, at one with their surroundings, perpetuating the enduring image of stoic ‘Indian melancholy’, the resignation implying the inevitable demise of a people, the vanishing Indian in the face of the triumph of civilisation and colonisation.

There are a number of photographs taken of children at residential school, posed portraits expressing the advantages of education for First Nation children that, with the right clothes and hair styles, children would find assimilation into white society easy and beneficial. An alternative, and I believe truer opinion, is expressed in an interview when I was told:\textsuperscript{12}

‘If you look at the pictures of the children they don’t look happy at all ... in some of the pictures the photographer, the professional photographer they hired, would make sure you could tell they weren’t happy in the residential school pictures.’\textsuperscript{13}

When the photographer came the children were given dolls to hold and told to smile; once the children had been photographed the dolls were taken away.

The underlying challenge of linking history with photographic images is the lack of accompanying documentation explaining the people, the place and the instance. Many photographs, either in archives or personal collections, are undated, unplaced, floating in a vacuum. Captions, if they exist, are brief, the people not identified or named either by their given name, their colonial name or even the band to which they belong. Some images were staged to be used as propaganda to record either a vanishing and primitive culture or to aid assimilation. In general, photographs show First Nation women as subservient to a dominant male figure, the women sitting on the ground looking away from the camera or in a pose of domestic activity. While this was not an uncommon scene in their communities, once the photograph is taken out of context, taken away from the community and displayed to a non-native audience or placed in a new context such as a book or museum, not explained or understood by the viewer, then the voiceless woman suffers the further indignity of becoming a negative stereotype.

\textsuperscript{11} Clayoquot is on the west coast of Vancouver Island near Tofino an important location in Nuu’Chah’Nulth history. Reference to the photograph in Gidley, M. \textit{Representing Others}, p279; pn17545 ‘Clayoquot Girl’ (1915) by Edward Curtis, copy in Ethnography Department, RBCM, Victoria.

\textsuperscript{12} Robert Alexie’s book ‘Porcupine and China Dolls’ illustrates this point well as boy’s hair was cut so short it resembled a porcupine and girl’s short hair made them look like china dolls.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p5 of transcript
Photographs can provide an excellent source of historical information but it is necessary to be aware of misrepresentations and misunderstandings. Photographs allow the stories of those hidden from history an opportunity to be seen and heard. Photographs can inspire researchers in historical interpretations by offering connections between the oral and the visual although how oral historians effectively use and understand photographs needs greater scrutiny. Exploring connections between oral history and photographs is challenging, moving beyond photographs as social documents and memory triggers towards photographs as a visual representation of an oral narrative, the stories unsettling the seemingly fixed meanings of the photographs themselves. Stories provide a view of how the world has been ordered, balanced and settled; however photographs can be seen as destabilising, and even subjugating First Nations if taken by colonial photographers or trophy hunters. It is the very existence of photographs, their misrepresentation of First Nation life and the use to which they have been put in colonial and capitalist ventures that is at the heart of (unease within Aboriginal contexts) Aboriginal protest against portrayal in museums.

A joint venture between the curator at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC and a small group of Nuu’Chah’Nulth women, in which problems of repatriation, representation and naming of artefacts were discussed, made it possible to match family names to artefacts and photographs, encouraging people to change attitudes and begin using museums as a tool to celebrate their history, in other words connecting communities and people to museums. This new approach offers valuable opportunities to know and understand more fully the women represented through picture, artefacts and their community role. Raising awareness of women’s voices / involvement in the wider context of museums heralds opportunities for women to be heard, voices empowered by grassroots history projects that will contribute to women’s narratives, challenging traditional approaches. The combination of correctly representing women, their artefacts, photographs and explanatory narratives will give a voice to and greater understanding of Nuu’Chah’Nulth women. How and why the objects and photographs came to be in museums is often vague, and the ways they have been classified and sorted reflect a Eurocentric approach, often erroneous. This persistent colonial legacy creating a path from ‘primitive to civilise’ should be challenged.
Curtis’ work is often criticised for over-romanticising Native people and relaying stereotypes of stoicim and a vanishing race so let me finish on a positive note. His photographs constitute social and economic evidence from the early part of the twentieth century. The issues for the people relates to the reasons why the photographs were taken, the consequences for the people in the way they are portrayed. Ideally the photographs should be considered as a testimony to the Nuu’Chah’Nulth people and their culture, catching a visual impression of the people at that time alongside other forms of evidence – oral histories, artefacts and archives. It is important not to lose sight of the fact if these are falsified images then the photographs themselves represent partial truths or are partly inaccurate, just one insight of an Aboriginal worldview. Given a historians questioning of what is ‘true’, especially from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, all photographs could be seen as ‘versions’ of the truth. The stereotypes portrayed and disseminated through photographs have had a significant impact upon socio-cultural understandings of Aboriginal people and continue to do so today, adding to the continuing debate about ‘authenticity’ and misrepresentation.

It has been said: ‘Photos are bittersweet. They are very beautiful and intimate portraits of Native peoples from the past that we are able to have a record of today.'¹⁴ Curtis’s intention behind his series of photographs came from a perspective that Native people were a dying race that had to be documented by white men like some sort of ancient history exhibit. However, Curtis captured images of people’s ancestors that are cherished today. “Visual reclaimsing, that’s the preciousness Curtis will never know.”¹⁵ This is a body of work, of pictures to reflect upon, to learn from so it is possible to view the past through the eyes of the present in a positive way with understanding; “for us it’s like a portal ... to see our ancestors” says Tsinhnahjinnie.

Dr Jacky Moore May 2017

¹⁴ Leilani Clark (Dine’) from ‘Recreating Curtis’ in Native Peoples, Spring 2014.
Primary Sources:
Transcripts of interviews with Nuu’Chah’Nulth First Nation women between 2009 and 2011.

Secondary sources:


