

Photographs as Anthropological Knowledge



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Introduction

From the inception of photography being invented as a technology, it has been understood as a tool that represents and documents a subject. In portrait photographs, there is a relationship between the photographer and the person being photographed. One is the author in control of the perspective, while the other is subject to the photographer's viewpoint. The medium was adopted as a tool for anthropology because of its inherent ability to transmit raw, reliable data, which allowed for visual representations to corroborate ethnographic studies (Pinney 2011). Originally the photograph was assumed to provide an exact likeness of its subject, but is now understood to be a more subjective and sometimes discriminatory piece of visual information. Photography's documentary quality has the dual ability to represent or misrepresent individuals and groups of people through forced perspectives, artificial staging, scientific racism, and other uses that are purported to be visual evidence. These practices have also asserted forms of surveillance, objectification, and domination over groups of people that researchers are studying (Edwards, Morton 2009). Indigenous people are often labeled as "Others" in comparison to Western cultures, and photographers can sometimes victimize their subjects through their authoritative power as the documenter.

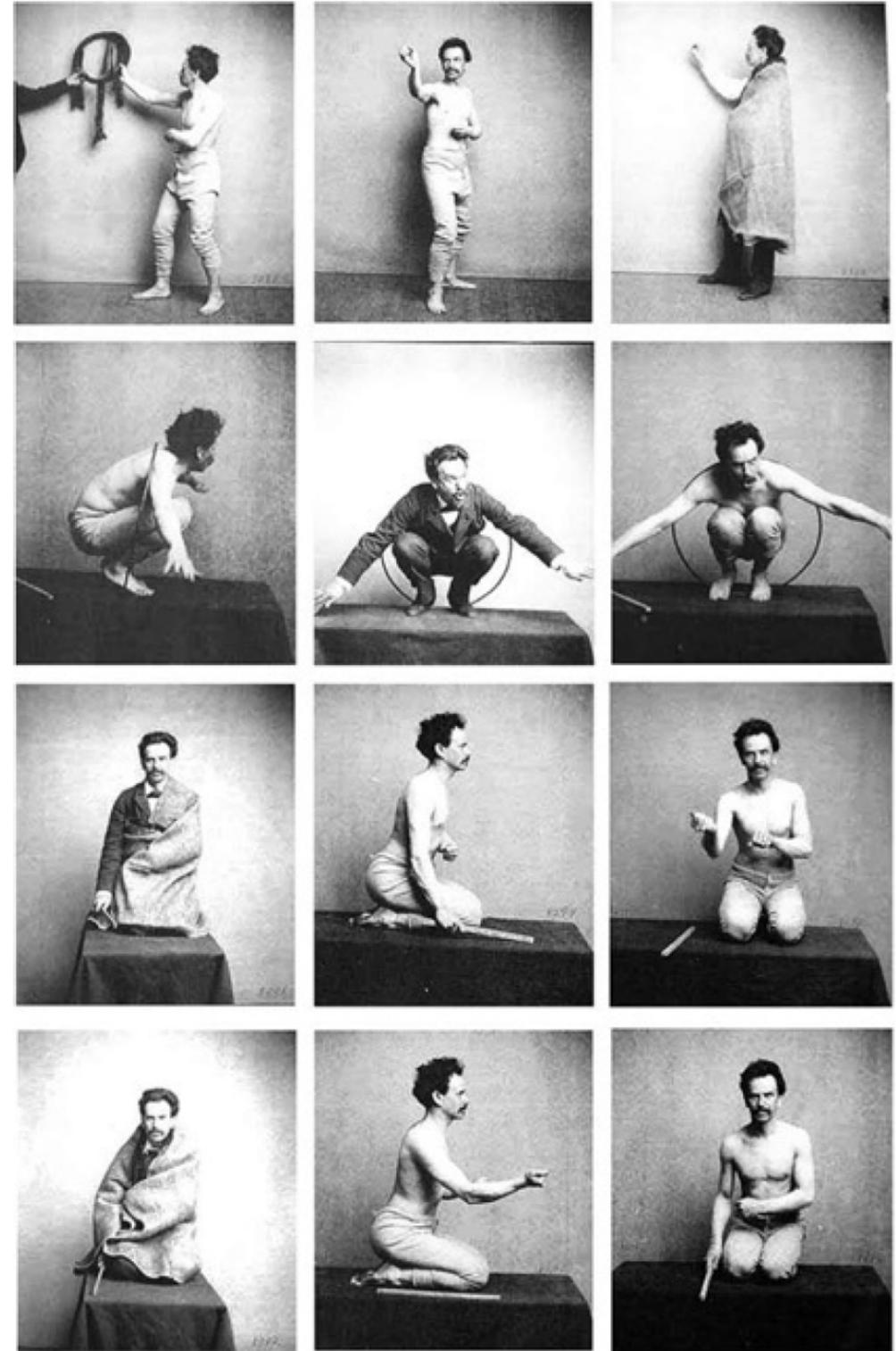
In the following chapters, I will be highlighting several photographic series by anthropologists and artists that encompass the dual nature of photography's ability to represent and misrepresent cultural knowledge. Anthropologist Franz Boas created photographs of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples and

their cultural traditions to exhibit in spaces such as the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and the American Museum of Natural History. While he worked to document Indigenous cultures authentically, the visual depictions also perpetuated forms of ethnographic objectification and misrepresentation of Kwakwaka'wakw customs. When anthropologist Beatrice Blackwood took portraits in the Kainai tribe, she emphasized their physical features as an understanding of behaviors (Peers & Brown 2009). Through a visual repatriation project in 2001, digital copies were brought back to the Blood Indian Reserve and the Kainai peoples were able to embed cultural meaning into the photographic archive.

From these research methods and their legacies, Indigenous artists have recontextualized past images and authored new photographs of what it looks like to decolonize Native American representations. Contemporary artist Wendy Red Star deconstructs past misconceptions of the "noble savage" and cultivates visual narratives through humor and playfulness (Beck 2016). Rapheal Begay from the Navajo Nation also reflects on past representations of Indigenous land through his introspective photographs of the landscape he grew up in. By reflecting on past visual anthropological projects and understanding their faults, contemporary practices have the power to utilize photography and Indigenous voices as more authentic forms of cultural representation over colonizing perspective.

I.

Representation & Misrepresentation



Franz Boas in various poses of Hamat'sa ceremony to recreate as figure group



When anthropologist Franz Boas directed an exhibit at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he coordinated to have 15 Kwakwaka'wakw people live on the fairgrounds for nine months. The Indigenous peoples from the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America were expected to demonstrate their ways of life, including their tradition of the Hamat'sa ceremony. Although Hamat'sa was considered a private ritual in Kwakwaka'wakw culture (Glass 2009), Boas utilized it specifically to highlight seemingly mystical and theatrical components of the Native peoples to garner interest from an audience. In the photographs showcased here, Native peoples posed for the camera to emulate the Hamat'sa, which would be exhibited in figure groups that Boas created for various museums and exhibitions. Alongside these images are photographs of Franz Boas himself posing to recreate the characters that would form his artificial Kwakwaka'wakw figures. While the images appear as visual, anthropological knowledge about a group of people, they were often staged and directed to fit a certain narrative of what would appear most interesting – where the Native peoples become a “spectacle” more so than a documented individual. This practice of exploiting certain components of ethnographic research muddled the differences between visual knowledge and inauthentic representations of colonized nations (Glass 2009). Whether it was the intention of the anthropologist or not to display Kwakwaka'wakw culture in such a light, the power dynamics of the researcher and the subjects, or the photographer and the photographed, often render the individuals as “powerless, objectified and passive under the colonial gaze” (Edwards & Morton 2009).



In several instances, photographs of Kwakwaka'wakw events were recontextualized from their original format to be used for research or exhibition purposes. The above image is a staged Hamat'sa ceremony photographed by John H. Grabill in 1893, while the photograph on the next page is the same image retouched by Franz Boas in 1893. Background information of the fairground in which the event took place were removed, giving a false sense of place and authenticity of what is being represented in the photograph.





Hamat'sa dancers photographed by Edward Curtis in 1914



Figure group of Kwakwaka'wakw Hamat'sa initiates emerging from a room behind a painted screen, designed by Boas in 1895 for the Smithsonian

II.

Informed & Reinformed





Beatrice Blackwood's photographs of the Kainai peoples taken in 1925 offer the viewer a feeling of a thoughtful, timeless archive of portraits within a community. Each subject appears strong, insightful, and respected by the photographer. Blackwood's captions of her images provide a less individualistic and empowering perspective however, which seems to disconnect from the strengths of the work. In her time at the Kainai nation, Blackwood focused her research on physical anthropology, and collected genealogies and body measurements of her subjects. Captions such as 'Full Blood' and 'Half Breed' are attached to each image through her notes. The anthropologist looked into these details as indicators of "traditional" or "assimilated" cultural elements, where certain social and economic circumstances may be considered biologically inherited (Peers & Brown 2009).

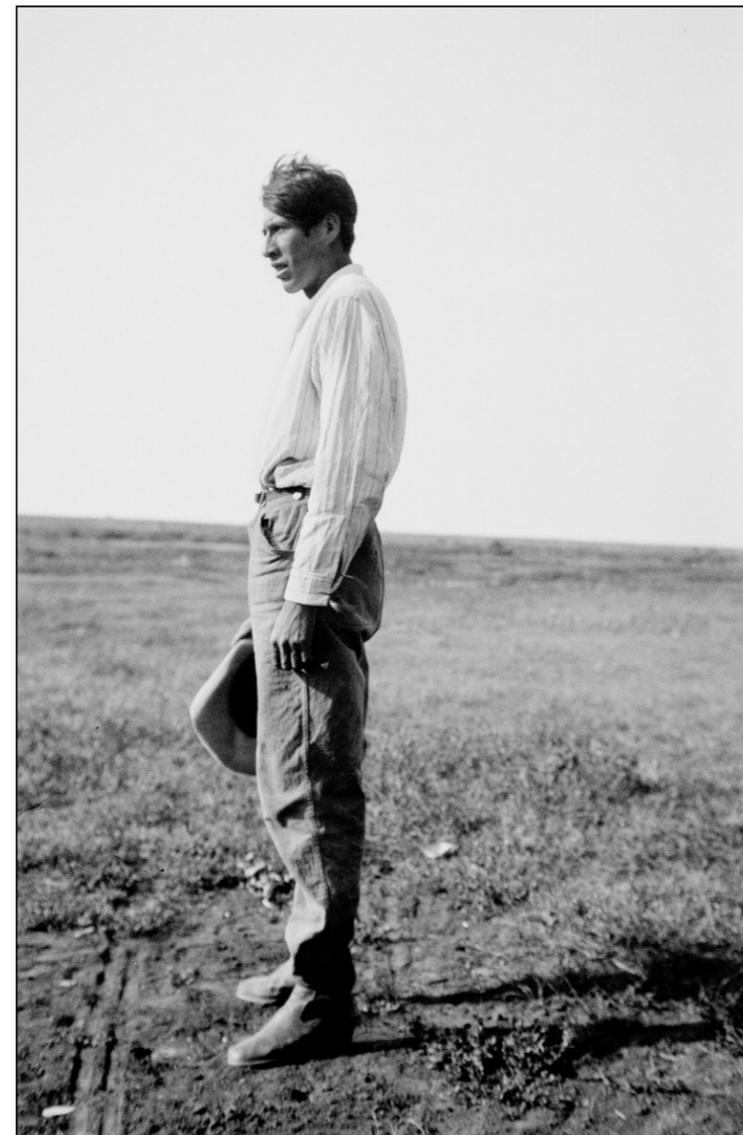


In 2001, Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown worked in collaboration with the Kainai peoples and the Pitt Rivers Museum to visually repatriate the digital collection of images to their original culture, where the archive could reclaim its photographic meaning by connecting back to its subjects. When the Kainai community and the Blood Tribe were given the portraits filled with family members of their past, the anthropological information placed onto the images had no meaning to them. For them, the meaning was grounded in their names, their relationships, and the emotions and memories they carried (Peers & Brown 2009). There was a major differentiation of what was considered anthropological knowledge and cultural knowledge, depending on the voice that was informing or reinforcing the photograph.

Appendix Two: Beatrice Blackwood's Notations on Her Photographs with Kainai Identifications

| Number | Blackwood List A | Blackwood List B | Kainai Names |
|------------|--|---|---|
| BB.A3.48 | Adult male, full length, full face and profile | Pete Many Fingers or Six Toed Pete. Full Blood. | <i>Aakaokitsii</i> , Pete Many Fingers |
| BBA3.49,50 | 4,5 The same man, close up, full face and profile. | 4,5 Pete Many Fingers or Six Toed Pete. Full Blood. | <i>Aakaokitsii</i> , Pete Many Fingers |
| BBA3.20B | 3 Adult male, full length, full face and profile. | 5 Pete Many Fingers or Six Toed Pete. Full Blood. | <i>Aakaokitsii</i> , Pete Many Fingers |
| BBA3.20M | 8,9 Another man, full face and profile. Close up. | 8,9 Charlie Wolf Plume. | <i>Aiyiisoiyiisaami</i> , Double Train Headdress, nickname <i>l'kotsiisoiyik-kaawa</i> , Red Leggings. |
| BB.A3.51 | Another man, full face and profile. Close up. | Shot on Both Sides. Head Chief of the Bloods. Full Blood. | <i>Aatso'toawa</i> Head Chief Shot Both Sides. |
| BB.A3.52 | Another man, full face and profile. Close up. | Shot on Both Sides. Head Chief of the Bloods. Full Blood. | <i>Aatso'toawa</i> Head Chief Shot Both Sides. |
| BBA3.55,56 | 10 and 11 Young man, standing, full face and profile. | 10 Sam Black Plume, Full Blood | <i>Pa'nii</i> , Sam Black Plume |
| BB.A3.57 | 12 Older man, standing by his tent. Full face only. | 12 Falling over the Cutbank | <i>Piaana</i> , Falling over the Cutbank |
| BB.A3.58 | Young couple with baby | 13 Ben Strangling Wolf and wife Lucy, Full Bloods | <i>Aatso'to'wa</i> Shot at from All Sides, <i>Kaksi-kamo'saakii</i> Just Stole Woman or Day Steal Woman and their daughter Dolly. |
| BB.A3.59 | 14 The same woman and baby [This is an error, as the photograph numbered 13 by Blackwood is of Lucy Strangling Wolf and her family]. | 14 Mrs Ethel Tail Feathers. Half Breed. | <i>Aisstaohkomiakii</i> Comes Calling Woman with Gerald Tail-feathers. |





III.

Contemporary Consciousness



My Backyard (Hunter's Point, AZ), 2016 by Rapheal Begay



Baaéítichish (One Who Is Talented) by Wendy Red Star



Four Seasons Series by Wendy Red Star

In contemporary practices, there is a greater mindfulness of how Indigenous communities are represented in photography and whose voices should be the authors of certain cultural knowledge. However, there are still echoes of problematic historical practices that resonate in contemporary visual anthropology and photography. Artists such as Wendy Red Star and Rapheal Begay are combatting this by making work that challenges mainstream stereotypes and inaccurate perceptions of Native cultures that historically relied on colonial perspectives. Through the playful nature and engaging staged settings of Wendy Red Star's self-portraits, she shapes her narratives around her Apsáalooke heritage on the Crow reservation. Her work also criticizes the traditional portraits by anthropologists and photographers such as Franz Boas and Edward Curtis that often showcased Native individuals the "noble savage" and a romanticized American past (Beck 2016). Her series *Four Seasons* specifically looks at the colonial trope of the "Ecological Indian" and the white settler's misinformed notions of Indigenous communities (Monani & Seymour 2020).

Throughout the work of Rapheal Begay, the photographer documents the surroundings in which he grew up in the Navajo nation. Each of his images is embedded in memory and identity through his own experiences growing up in this community. The archive of Begay's photographs become an exploration of his own history, as well as the collective history and knowledge that exists in the Navajo nation that has been heavily impacted by their fights for land, sovereignty, and rights (Jensen & Begay 2020).

Stove-Pipe Dreams (Blue Canyon, AZ), 2017 by Rapheal Begay



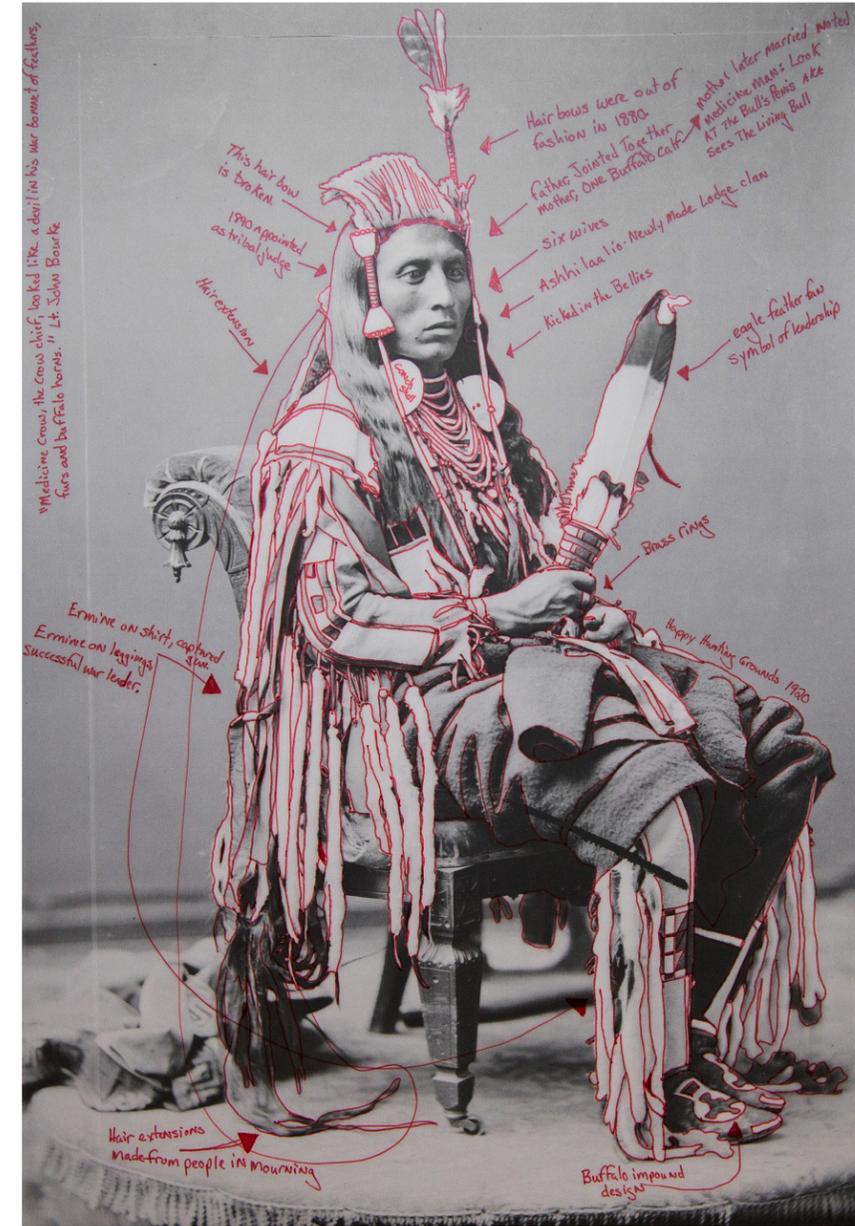
Internal (Ft. Defiance, AZ), 2017 by Rapheal Begay



Censor My Census (Window Rock, AZ), 2017 by Rapheal Begay



1880 Crow Peace Delegation Series by Wendy Red Star



1880 Crow Peace Delegation Series by Wendy Red Star

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