

# Framing ethnographic photographs in the digital environment

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## Introduction

Digitization provides increased accessibility to information and can be part of a move towards digital repatriation or shared curatorship of Indigenous objects, but ease of access often leaves information prone to misinterpretation. This makes examining the way digital archives frame First Nations subjects imperative. Historically, ethnographers and other colonial actors who documented Indigenous communities shaped perceptions of Aboriginal peoples. Photography, as a tool of colonialism, enabled photographers to create false representations of their subjects (Savard, 2005). Images were easily reproduced, reinforcing prejudices in outsiders' minds, and Indigenous peoples rarely had access to the tools needed to combat this pervasive stereotyping. The continued display of these photographs, including accompanying text, is often problematic (Blackman, 1985; Brown & Nicholas, 2012; Cronin, 2003, Powers, 1996; Savard, 2005; Spitta, 2013; Zamir, 2007), and with digitization, access to these photographs has grown.

Indian--Baskets and basket making.  
Indian--Canoes.  
Indian--Costume.  
Indian--Crafts.  
Indian--Fishing.  
Indian--Indian People N.E.S.  
Indian--Rites and ceremonies.  
Indian--Schools  
Indian--Social life and customs  
Indian--Textiles.  
Indian--Totem poles.  
Indian--Villages and reservation.

Figure 1. Subject headings from BC Archives

The language used here is dated and has problematic overtones, e.g. "Indian--Costume."



CALL NUMBER: A-00950  
Catalogue Number: HP002007  
Other Cat. Number:  
Subject: INDIAN - INDIAN PEOPLE N.E.S.  
Subject: INDIAN - COSTUME  
Subject: FAMILY GROUPS  
Geographic Region: THOMPSON-NICOLA (B.C.)  
Title: "St. Paul and family; Kamloops, most celebrated Indian Chief in British North America"; Jean Baptist St. Paul "Lolo", his wife and two daughters; taken at Thompson River Post, Fort Kamloops, in summer 1865.  
Photographer: Gentile, Charles, 1835-1893.  
Date: 1865  
Accession Number: 197812-012

Figure 2. Example record from BC Archives' online visual records collection where title is partially provided by photographer

name; whether or not the nation of the individual(s) is identified; whether or not the photographer is identified; whether the photographer is Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal; whether the Subject label is respectful; if there been an effort made to include some context in the record; and can this record be found using unique search terms? Within these variables there is room for coders to note any nuance. For example, is the nation name used out of date? Is dated information given as historical context to the photograph's creation?

## Goals

The goal of our research proposal is to increase discussion about archives' use of subject headings and descriptive notes, asking where improvements can be made to reframe digitized photographs in a culturally sensitive way. BC Archives is part of the Government of British Columbia and is partnered with the Royal BC Museum; their metadata and classification send a message to viewers of these photographs whether they mean it to or not. Our intention is not to signal out BC Archives, but to point to this institution as a typical example of a repository in need of help.

Family photographs provided by Laurie Mills



Louisa Byce (née Saylor), Allan Ritchie, Pussy McWatch, and two Cree community members

Louisa with son, Charlie, and daughter, Georgina

*How culturally appropriate is BC Archives' labeling of photographs depicting First Nations subjects?*

## Context

Research on the framing of digitized photographs focuses on Australian Aboriginal or Māori rather than North American Indigenous communities. In Canada, suggestions for improved methods of display do not go beyond physical exhibitions (Cronin, 2003; Crouch, 2010). Spitta (2013) argues that one of the problems facing Western scholars is the lack of appropriate language to discuss photography of Indigenous peoples in their own context.

Some critics believe digital spaces may never be appropriate for the display of these photographs, especially where ownership remains with institutions and not Indigenous groups themselves (Brown & Nicholas, 2012). The power hierarchy and non-Indigenous thought processes involved in the construction of these spaces do not accommodate Indigenous voices. Recognition that these voices need to be included exists, but action is lacking. Provincial archives in particular have not partnered with Indigenous communities and there is currently no formal evaluation of their online display methodology.

## Methodology

As a provincial archive, BC Archives' records have an authority that becomes problematic when they use colonial language in their subject headings and descriptions. We are interested only in photographs taken before 1970 that contain an image as well as textual information. This narrows our pool of images from 4500 image of First Nations subjects to approximately 3014 images. Given this as our base number, with a confidence level of 95%, we will need to evaluate 341 randomly selected records to achieve a confidence interval of +/-5. Each record will be analyzed by at least three coders. Because we are dealing with subject matter that requires knowledge of ethnographic and colonial history, coders will be Aboriginal themselves or knowledgeable about First Nations issues in Canada. This is vital in attempting to decolonize the framing of the archives' holdings. The content analysis focuses on seven variables: whether or not the individual(s) in the photograph is/are identified by

## Literature cited

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## History

Photographs carry the fingerprints of colonialism, but are also reminders that "the past was wonderfully complex" (Newell, 2012, p. 290). We need multiple perspectives to understand our shared history, and this *can only be achieved through partnership* with Aboriginal groups and the recognition that a problem exists. Ethnographers viewed their collection activities as an effort to preserve dying cultures, but it had the opposite effect in that it stripped away cultural heritage.

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