

**RECLAIMING THE GAZE:**  
EXAMINING CONTEMPORARY NUXALK PERSPECTIVES ON HARLAN I.  
SMITH'S FIELDWORK PHOTOGRAPHS, 1920-1924

by

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## **Abstract**

Archival photographs of native peoples are tricky objects. They complicate the current rhetoric of repatriation and collaboration that tends to dominate present reassertions of control by First Nations communities over objects held (or once held) by non-native institutions. Framing the reclamation of cultural objects by First Nations peoples from non-native museums as acts of repatriation does not address instances in which little or no dialogue or collaboration exists - the instances when native peoples enter (or break into) the museum or archive through other means. The perspectives of contemporary Nuxalkmc on and employments of Harlan Smith's photographs discussed here emerge from larger processes of self-determination and identity-making. I argue that this represents an important way in which contemporary Nuxalkmc assert a form of possession of these photographs, reclaiming and repurposing them in ways that have produced a space for these images outside of the museum archive, on their own terms.

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## Introduction

On the Internet homepage of a group entitled “Nuxalk Pride!!!” there is a photograph of a woman named Eliza Moody (CMC # 56871). This image was taken in 1922 by an archaeologist named Harlan Ingersoll Smith at Bella Coola, a primarily First Nations community on the Central Coast of British Columbia, Canada. This photograph is one of over a thousand produced by Smith during his fieldwork in the Bella Coola area between 1920 and 1924. Smith’s photographs are currently kept in the archival collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in Gatineau, Quebec. In this photograph Eliza Moody sits, slightly turned to the side, holding a copper shield, a traditional symbol of wealth among First Nations groups on the Northwest Coast. All of this “ethnographic” information – her name, the photographer, the object, the date – is absent, however. Rather, the image is simply labeled “family”. In what follows I wish to examine such re-contextualizations as a means through which Nuxalkmc talk about, talk through, and employ these images, transforming them from non-Nuxalk representations of the past into important objects in the present. I argue that this represents an important way in which contemporary Nuxalkmc assert a form of possession of these photographs, reclaiming and repurposing them in ways that have produced a space for these images outside of the museum archive, on their own terms.

### *Moving Out From the Archive*

In the spring of 2006 I stumbled, quite by accident, onto the CMC’s online archive of Harlan Smith’s photographs from Bella Coola. I quickly learned that the majority of the images focused on a group of people known ethnographically at the time of their taking as the Bella Coola Indians, now self-identified as the Nuxalk Nation, whose traditional territory extends

throughout the Valley and surrounding coastal area (Kennedy & Bouchard 1990). At the time of my introduction to these photographs, I was initially concerned with what they could communicate about both their subject matter and the practice of anthropology in Canada during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As I continued to think about these images over the following year I began to wonder about how they might not only document a particular moment in the past, but also figure in significant ways into an understanding of present Nuxalk relationships with such representations. In this light, the archive becomes not a final resting place for these images—the extension of a dominant tradition of Western, modernist thought that associates photography with death, loss, and discontinuity (Berger 2002: 47-49; Edwards 2003: 89)—but an entry point into a larger examination of a continuing “cultural biography” (Kopytoff 1986) of these photographs as objects in ever-changing circumstances.

### *Thinking Beyond Repatriation*

Archival photographs of native peoples are tricky objects and complicate the current rhetoric of repatriation and collaboration that tends to dominate present reassertions of control by First Nations communities over objects held (or once held) by non-native institutions (Simpson 2001). Also, I do not think photographs, with their inherent reproducibility, fit easily into these kind of repatriative gestures. It is certainly true that for some kinds of objects, a physical return is, in many ways, the only way to mark a shift in control (Saunders 1997; Glass 2004b; Noble 2002). In these cases physical repatriation becomes “a symbol for the wider goals of self-determination” on the part of indigenous peoples (Glass 2004b: 116) and an important “inter-cultural” conversation between museums and descendent communities (Jacknis 1996: 284). As many have similarly pointed out, however, the relationships between communities and museums

constructed through repatriation, however, come with new power imbalances. Brian Noble (2002: 115) observes that, “the redressing of power imbalances is still being conducted within (and limited by) the ontologically privileged practices of the museological profession, rather than by practices of First Peoples themselves.” While continuing to be an important step in righting past wrongs, repatriation, as a framework for the reassertion of control over and access to cultural objects by indigenous peoples, has the potential to further exacerbate, rather than remedy, asymmetrical relations between museums and communities, and within communities themselves (Harkin 2005; Saunders 1997).

Recent studies in anthropology on archival photographs and descendent communities have often drawn upon the framework of collaboration between Western museums and descendent populations (Poignant 1996; Peers & Brown 2006). These studies, which stress the need for institutions in control of photographic collections and archives to acknowledge the voices and opinions of those in the communities in which they were taken (Edwards 2003: 85), are often defined as forms of “visual repatriation” (Bell 2003).

While clearly appropriate to some cases, framing the reclamation of cultural objects by First Nations peoples from non-native museums as an act of repatriation does not address instances in which little or no dialogue or collaboration exists—the instances in which native peoples enter (or break into) the museum or archive through other means. Thus I hope to present the perspectives of contemporary Nuxalkmc on and employments of Harlan Smith’s photographs as an ongoing critical relationship that challenges such non-native representations of their culture—one that emerges from larger processes of self-determination and identity-making that are not dependent on the benevolence of the museum. Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie (2003: 44) has appropriately defined this as a practice “photographic sovereignty”, locating archival images in

indigenous practices of reclamation and repurposing.

Discussing Smith's photographs as such requires negotiating multi-sited intercultural contexts, connecting disparate processes of production and circulation (Ginsburg 2002), and marking out the multiple systems of value and meaning (Myers 2001) into which these images are received. These fields encompass part of the "social life" (Appadurai et al. 1986) of these photographic objects in Bella Coola, the museum archive, and the spaces they pass through in between. As objects, photographic images contribute to broader "visual narratives" that are re-enacted in different cultural contexts (Edwards & Hart 2004). Therefore, in thinking about these images and the work they do, it is important to consider that in and through their life as objects they acquire multiple pasts and presents that exist simultaneously in the kinds of knowledge inscribed on them in different locations. What Aldona Jonaitis (1992), following Frederic Jameson, refers to as "wrapping." John Berger (2002) famously called this 'the ambiguity of the photograph', stressing the ability of an image to be continuously re-narrated through a particular "moment of looking" (49). It is thus important that we always think in multiplicities about both these images and the larger cultural systems into which they are folded.

To understand the ways through which such contextual "reactivations" (Benjamin 2007[1968]) occur, as a practice of photographic sovereignty, images must be considered in terms of their role as active objects that operate in peoples' cultural lives (Latour 1993; Gell 1998; Edwards & Hart 2004; Miller 2005). This perspective better opens photographs up to ethnographic study by addressing not only the content of images, but the larger cultural systems they operate in (Porto 2004). Adding to this, Edwards & Hart (2004:1) observe that,

Photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience...they occupy spaces, move into different spaces, following lines of passage and usage that project them through the world....In shifting the methodological focus away from content alone, it can be seen that it is not merely the



image qua image that is the site of meaning, but that its material and presentational forms and the uses to which they are put are to the function of a photograph as a socially salient object.

My aim in this thesis is to examine some of the ways Nuxalkmc put these photographs to use.

Christina F. Kreps (2003), discussing indigenous concepts of heritage preservation, points to an interplay between both personal and social domains through which people connect with and employ objects. This presents an appropriate analytical framework for discussing the reclamation and repurposing of Harlan Smith's photographs by Nuxalkmc. In Kreps' examination certain objects are ultimately social ones, communicating cultural knowledge to a larger group, while others have a more personal connection to individuals or families. I argue that as objects, photographs occupy both these domains. Furthermore, collections of ethnographic photographs must be understood to contain images that are considered both personal and social objects depending on the viewer or setting in which they are put to use. Therefore, personal and social engagements with photographic objects are not mutually exclusive, but necessarily interwoven.

I argue that in actively making Harlan Smith's fieldwork images both personal and social objects in different ways, Nuxalkmc invoke a form of "photographic sovereignty" by inserting these representations of their culture into systems of meaning and usage that were never intentioned by their maker. In these ways Harlan Smith's photographs are reclaimed by Nuxalkmc on their own terms. While the ability to do this is perhaps enabled by a remarkable body of material in which these particular images are circulated (that is not often the case with many photographs from the period), it is nonetheless significant. As I will show, by incorporating photographs into the construction of current genealogies and "imaginative geographies", Nuxalkmc are able to forge visual links with their ancestors and no-longer-occupied sites on their land. These links to people and places, in turn, constitute an important

dimension of Nuxalk identity-making today. As Roslyn Poignant (1996: 13) observes, “photographs and memory...connect in a reinforcement of culture which invite[s] cultural renewal.” In these moments, Smith’s photographs become equally important social objects that reinforce larger Nuxalk culture. Following Morris (1994), the people and places Smith photographed have, in many ways, come to symbolize Nuxalk culture for current generations. Finally, certain photographs are also politicized in narratives that express important forms of place-based politics and reveal tensions over places in Nuxalk territory. Photographs elicit stories that express these tensions, and reveal the inseparability of sovereignty and territoriality in Bella Coola today. This becomes important to maintaining a Nuxalk national identity that, like Nuxalk culture, is continually renegotiated in response to an ever-changing present.

## Methodology

This thesis is based primarily on fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2008 with members of the Nuxalk Nation in Bella Coola, British Columbia. When preparing for my fieldwork, I initially thought it would be a great idea for copies of the photographs to be put on CD-ROM, which would have given me access to all the images while in the field and also put the collection in a format that could be used in many ways within the community after I departed. This did not happen. Although they were very helpful with all of my questions pertaining to Smith's archives, everyone I spoke with at the museum either overlooked my request for CD's or pointed me to the online archive as the best option for accessing the photographs digitally. While I understand their reason for doing this (i.e. the time and effort required to make CD's seems unnecessary when the entire collection is available for free online), Internet access in Bella Coola is a limited resource. To offset this, I downloaded a selection of the images myself from the online archive to make my own CDs and present digital slideshows. Pam Brown from the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia also suggested that I make several booklets of images to use during interviews, leaving lots of writing space should my interlocutors wish to jot down notes. I also purchased as many copies as grant money would allow of Leslie Tepper's (1991) *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan Smith's Fieldwork Photographs* (these also proved to make great thank-you gifts to those I spoke with). Many people in Bella Coola already had a copy of this book, which also came in handy.

Upon receiving permission from the Nuxalk Nation Band Council, I conducted photo-elicitation interviews with individuals ranging in age from elders to young adults. More often than not I would go through the Tepper (1991) catalogue or the booklets I had made up with people. This is the format most people preferred, very few people wanted to look at the images

on the computer. Photo-elicitation as a methodology has a rather long history in the social sciences. Early examples of its application can be found in John Collier's work with multi-ethnic neighbourhood populations in Maritime Canada in the 1950s (Harper 2002). Collier subsequently published his famous text *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (1986) a decade later, a work that became a foundational piece in the emerging field of visual anthropology. For Collier, and others who have taken up his mantle (for example, Gemma Canal and Douglas Harper), photo-elicitation produces a revolutionary approach to the classic ethnographic interview.

As Douglas Harper (2002: 13) notes, photo elicitation "is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation." Furthermore, Gemma Canal (2004: 35) observes that while "photographs reinforce spoken or written narratives...they also lend words a new dimension; that is, photographs inspire new narrations." In conducting my photo-elicitation interviews, I asked as few leading questions as possible so as to let the person's narratives run uninterrupted. Interview sessions took the shape of conversations and the majority of my questions were for clarification or asking participants to expand on a point they were making. In doing this I hoped to observe the ways in which photographs became vehicles for larger narratives rather than the subject of the conversation itself. In using Harlan Smith's Bella Coola photographs as interview material, I was able to hear unique narratives, ones I do not think would have come to the surface had I just asked questions. I was also able to observe how particular photographs elicited certain kinds of narratives.

The conversations I had with Nuxalkmc about the photographs are also supplemented by participations of various kinds during my stay in Bella Coola. These include presenting slide shows of photographs to groups of Elders, attending and taking part in several memorial potlatches, traveling with Nuxalkmc throughout their territory, and the general daily activities of life in Bella Coola whether digging potatoes or watching soap operas—all of which proved quite insightful. Lastly, I conducted a month of archival research at the Museum of Civilization in December 2008. Here, I examined material from Harlan Smith's archives such as his field notes and his correspondence with his colleagues and, most importantly, with people in Bella Coola. This proved to be extremely informative in terms of better understanding the relationships Smith had with Nuxalkmc during his time in Bella Coola and also provided a glimpse of Nuxalk experiences of photography during this period. As well, Smith's archives reveal the intentions behind and employments of his photographs within the institutional mandates of the Victoria Memorial Museum at the time.

## Historical Contexts

### *A Brief History of the Bella Coola Valley*

The contemporary Nuxalk Nation is a sovereign First Nation located in the Bella Coola Valley, British Columbia. Like most of what is now British Columbia, the Bella Coola valley remains (technically) unceded First Nations territory as per the ordinances of the Royal Proclamation of 1763 (Tennant 1990: 10). This does not mean that Nuxalkmc (like all First Nations groups in British Columbia) have not been systematically removed from control of their territory and culture through years of federal and provincial legislation, and centuries of colonial violence. The reserve community of Bella Coola is located on the ancestral territory of the peoples now collectively known as Nuxalk, approximately 430 kilometers Northwest of Vancouver, BC at the mouth of the Bella Coola River (Kennedy & Bouchard 1990). Nuxalkmc are the descendents of indigenous peoples who have inhabited the Bella Coola Valley region for thousands of years. Nuxalk ancestral territory, while significantly obscured by generations of colonialist cartography (Brealey 1995; Harris 2002), is a vast area of land extending from coastal channels to the Interior Plateau region of central British Columbia. Ancestors of Nuxalkmc were scattered throughout this territory in numerous politically autonomous village sites at places like Talyu (Tallio), Suts' lhm (Kimsquit), Kwalhna (Kwatna), Q'umk'uts, Stwic, and Nusqlst (Boas 1898; McIlwraith 1948).

Nuxalkmc were connected through intermarriage and trade to other coastal and inland native groups—most prominently the rhizomic coastal channels, inlets, and rivers, and the overland Grease Trail (Kennedy & Bouchard 1990). Nuxalkmc also engaged in acts of warfare with, among others, Kwakwaka'wakw peoples from Vancouver Island to the south, and Tsimshian from Gitxaala to the North (McIlwraith 1948 vol. 2: 338-339). Documented Nuxalk

interactions with non-native peoples extend as far back as 1793 when both Captain George Vancouver and Alexander Mackenzie encountered groups of Nuxalk during their respective intrusions into the Bella Coola region (Kennedy & Bouchard 1990: 336). By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nuxalk contact with non-native outsiders was firmly entrenched in social, political and economic relations with the institutions of the burgeoning Canadian state. Trade relations with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in neighbouring Bella Bella began as early as 1843, with a permanent settlement of the HBC being established in Bella Coola in 1869 (Kennedy & Bouchard 1990: 337). Increasing white settlement in the Bella Coola Valley came with an influx of Norwegian settlers moving into the area from Minnesota in 1894 and establishing the town of Hagensbourg. This was the first major non-native settlement in the Valley (Kennedy & Bouchard 1990: 337).

Jennifer Kramer (2006: 28) notes that at the outset in Bella Coola "trade appears to have been carried out to the benefit of both sides"; however, "the relationship between the Native and settler groups deteriorated into a series of thefts systematically perpetrated against the former by the latter and their descendants." The expansionist forces of settler colonialism had, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, greatly affected Bella Coola and its Nuxalk inhabitants. The devastating effects of smallpox and other diseases (which reduced the Nuxalk population from 3000 to 300 [Boyd 1990]) over the course of a century, the imposition of the Douglas reserve system (Tennant 1990), the federal government ban on potlatch ceremonies (Cole & Chaikin 1991), and the introduction of capitalist labour forms (primarily resource-based industries of fishing and timber) greatly disrupted Nuxalk life in the Valley. This was manifest in the abandonment of ancestral village sites and the concentration of Nuxalkmc near the mouth of the

Bella Coola River. By the early 1900s most Nuxalkmc were living in a reserve village on the north shore of the mouth of the Bella Coola River (Kennedy & Bouchard 1990: 323).

### *Harlan Smith in Bella Coola*

Anthropologically, Nuxalkmc were the object of a multitude of early outsider gazes, both visually and textually (Goeken 1886; Boas 1886; 1891; 1898; Jacobsen, A. 1891; Jacobsen, F. 1891). In 1885, J. Adrian and Phillip B. Jacobsen brought a group of nine Nuxalk to Europe where they engaged in over a year of public performances (Cole 1995: 68). It was here that Franz Boas began his ethnological relationship with the Nuxalk (and with the Northwest Coast in general). In 1897 he spent two weeks in Bella Coola as part of the Jessup North Pacific Expedition (Seip 2000: 16). T.F. McIlwraith conducted extensive fieldwork among the Nuxalk between 1922 and 1924. McIlwraith, working under the direction of Edward Sapir, then head of the Anthropology Division at the Victoria Museum in Ottawa, collected massive amounts of cultural data on Nuxalk traditions, social organization, and religion. His work was finally published in 1948 as the two-volume *The Bella Coola Indians*, which still stands as the most thorough ethnographic account of traditional Nuxalk culture (McIlwraith 1948).

On June 13, 1920, archaeologist Harlan Ingersoll Smith arrived in the Bella Coola Valley.<sup>1</sup> At this point in his career Smith was Dominion Archaeologist for the Anthropology Division of the Geological Survey of Canada, headed by Edward Sapir. He would spend the better part of the next four summer seasons conducting fieldwork in and around the Bella Coola area. Smith's work during this period is best described as multi-faceted. His main purpose was to examine the relationships between people and their material world, requiring a combination of

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<sup>1</sup> HS/ES June 13, 1920 Box 633, f40



both anthropological and archaeological approaches, and involved the purchasing of objects and the collection of human remains for the Victoria Memorial Museum (Roby 2005).<sup>2</sup>

Ethnographically, Smith spent the early part of his time in Bella Coola gathering information on traditional plant and animal uses, as well as ethnomedical practices (Roby 2005: 96).

Archaeologically, his work appears to have involved little actual excavation and consisted mainly of scouting possible sites for future digs - sites to which Nuxalkmc took him<sup>3</sup>.

One of the Northwest Coast's early archaeologists-*cum*-ethnographers (Thom 2001; Roby 2005), Smith published extensively between 1889 and 1936 on subjects of archaeology, ethnography, education, museology, and ancient history. The majority of the data he collected in Bella Coola never saw publication. Smith did publish select material from his Bella Coola fieldwork; most of these articles, however, are less than a page in length and do not really represent any major body of work (Smith 1924a; 1924b; 1925a; 1925b; 1929). It has been posited that Smith may have intended to write a monograph-length work, based on the organization of his fieldwork notes (Seip 2000: 16). These notes, along with his professional correspondence, now reside in the archival collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC).

One of Smith's most noted accomplishments during the four seasons he spent in the Bella Coola area, and what became the main focus of his work, was the massive collection of photographs and films he produced while in the field. While most of the subjects of Smith's photographs concern Nuxalk life, Dakelh and Tsilhqot'in peoples traveling through the Valley are also featured. In total, Smith took close to 1300 photographs (for a detailed breakdown see

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the objects collected by Smith are currently on display in the Nuxalk House in the Great Hall of the CMC.

<sup>3</sup> See Smith archive Box 4, f3

Tepper 1991) and shot hundreds of feet of film.<sup>4</sup> Field photography in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was an arduous task, and Smith is heralded as one of its important pioneers (Leechman 1942). Smith was working primarily with a Kodak large-format camera, producing 4x5” negatives appropriate for both portraiture and landscape photography. Actively exposing film and developing plates in the field<sup>5</sup> meant Smith was also transporting his heavy photographic equipment through the Valley, often lugging it himself as he did not trust the men he hired as guides with such “fragile things”.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in 1923, Smith’s letters to Sapir include multiple requests for a film camera as well. It arrived in early July 1923 and Smith taught himself how to operate it while in the field.<sup>7</sup> The combination of still photography and film equipment increased Smith’s output immensely. Roby (2005: 90) notes that in the 1923 season alone Smith reported taking over 300 photographs. It is clear that many more also came from individual film frames.

### *The Photographs*

Smith’s photographs from the Bella Coola Valley cover a broad range of subject matter. While producing an extensive amount of portraits of individuals, Smith also photographed everyday life and practices, landscapes, objects, dwellings, and ceremonial demonstrations. In a time of anthropological image-making on the Northwest Coast dominated by Curtis-esque romanticized portraiture and “contrived...costumed stereotypes of Indians” (Roby 2005: 92), Harlan Smith’s photographs, in their sheer breadth and volume, present a much more engaged and diverse collection of images. CMC archivist Jonathan Wise (2006: 3-10) observes that, “[t]o

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<sup>4</sup> The actual amount of film Smith shot is difficult to ascertain, since most footage was destroyed in a fire at the National Film Board in 1967 (Zimmerly 1974; Wise 2006).

<sup>5</sup> HS/ES July 1, 1922 Box 633 f. 41

<sup>6</sup> HS/ES August 16, 1922 Box 633 f.41

<sup>7</sup> HS/ES July 14, 1923 Box 633 f. 41

some degree, Harlan Smith resisted many of the prevailing stereotypes of the time by depicting an honest reality that was both complex and human.” This observed ‘resistance’ on the part of Smith is perhaps afforded by his equal focus on materiality and activities, rather than only cultural norms and social networks. Many of his images were designed to serve as “living analogues to help clarify the material patterns of archaeology.”<sup>8</sup> His photographs are thus as much ethnoarchaeological representations as they are ethnographic. Therefore, what appears as a resistance to ethnographic stereotypes might equally be viewed as a reinforcement of archaeological ones.

Smith’s earliest photographs from Bella Coola, taken in the 1920 and 1921 fieldwork seasons, are devoted mainly to images of the geographical landscape, archaeological sites, abandoned village sites and houses, and various kinds of objects (grave monuments, carved house posts, ceremonial objects). There is a noticeable lack of photographs of people in these earlier sets of images. This changed with the arrival of T.F. McIlwraith in 1922. McIlwraith had significant trouble operating the camera he had brought with him to Bella Coola and, according to Smith, “professe[d] to know nothing of photography.”<sup>9</sup> Smith also began taking photographs at McIlwraith’s behest. As a result of this, the majority of Smith’s photographs after this period are much more people-centred. While many of these images are posed portraits, there are also numerous photographs of Nuxalkmc in ceremonial regalia, and more candid shots that capture a more intimate, casual relationship between Smith and the people he photographed.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Martindale, personal communication, 2009

<sup>9</sup> HS/ES July 1, 1922 Box 633 f.41

*Nuxalkmc and the Photographic Encounter*

Harlan Smith's arrival in Bella Coola was not, by any means, the first Nuxalk encounter with a non-native photographer (or anthropologist). In 1885 a group of nine Nuxalk dancers were photographed by Carl Gunther in Berlin (Tepper 1991). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indian Agent Iver Fougner made several images of Nuxalkmc in and around the old village of Q'umk'uts (Tepper 1991), Smith notes collecting prints of these from Phillip Jacobsen while in Bella Coola.<sup>10</sup> Sharon Bohn Gmelch (2008: 158) cites a further instance where Franz Boas, during his trip to Bella Coola in 1897, attempted to take a photograph of a totem pole and was asked by Nuxalkmc to pay for the privilege, Boas declined and left without the picture. In 1913 anthropologist C.F. Newcombe travelled through the Bella Coola Valley, taking photographs of village sites such as Talyu in the South Bentick Arm and collecting, among other things, Nuxalk totem poles, which remain in the collections of institutions such as the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Royal British Columbia Museum.

By the time Harlan Smith travelled to Bella Coola, most Nuxalkmc were familiar with non-native photographers and the photographic process. This places Smith's images in an interesting position with regard to the critical understanding through which Nuxalkmc undoubtedly approached his work in Bella Coola based on their past experiences with photographers and anthropologists. It is important to consider the people with whom Smith worked as involved actors, with their own interests in the photographic process. Barker & Cole (2003) highlight a similar situation in their analysis of T.F. McIlwraith's field letters from 1922-1924. They comment that "the 'informants' McIlwraith writes about appear less as passive

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<sup>10</sup> See Box 633 f. 40

victims than as active participants in the unfolding of their own history” (25), indicating that in their interactions with these outsiders, as in all things, Nuxalkmc exhibited agency.

Articulating this in the present, however, is complicated. Margaret Blackman (1981: 86-87) observes that, “How natives viewed the photography process and the expectations they held of imaging must be pursued largely through the documented history of native/photographer contact, a history in which the native seldom speaks for himself.” To this end, there is little in Smith’s notes and letters that directly discusses Nuxalk reactions to and participation in his photography. This being said, there are hints that might allow for a better understanding of the broader research encounter from which Smith’s photographs emerged and, to some degree, Nuxalk expectations of them.

Initially Smith appears to have worked mainly with a man named Joshua Moody collecting information on traditional Nuxalk plant and animal uses, and being taken to many locations which he photographed. Moody was a high-ranking Nuxalk chief and spoke Chinook Jargon well enough for Smith to understand. Smith’s relationship with Moody in this period of fieldwork is interesting. In his earliest notes and letters from the field, Moody is identified only as the “Bella Coola man” with whom Smith was working. About one month into his initial 1920 fieldwork season, Smith begins to frequently refer to Moody by name. He speaks of the progress he is making with excitement, and of Moody with admiration,

I have not tried to get a Bella Coola who could speak English since the 2<sup>nd</sup> day because I could understand Joshua fully so far and have not tried to get another Bella Coola since Joshua is so interested and so good. If I began on another he would probably be angry and quit me. In fact he said as much.<sup>11</sup>

Smith’s assertion of Joshua Moody’s “interest” in his work is interesting. While partially attributable to the wages Smith offered, Moody appears to have genuinely enjoyed working with

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<sup>11</sup> HS/ES July 24, 1920 Box 633 f. 40

Smith (and later McIlwraith at Smith's recommendation [Barker & Cole 2003]). Smith has many notes about working with Joshua on Alexander MacKenzie's diaries from his overland trip to the Pacific in 1793. This work, which is not mentioned in his reports back to Sapir, seems to have been carried out more as a result of Moody's, rather than Smith's, overall interest in the material. These early examples of Harlan Smith's work with Joshua Moody indicate the development of a mutual respect and congeniality that would become apparent in Smith's relations with later informants, other high-ranking Nuxalkmc like Jim Pollard, Captain Schooner, Alec Davis, Willie Mack, and Joe Saunders, and their families.

On June 24, 1921 Smith wrote to Edward Sapir, "Jim Pollard called on me...and he said he told them [other Nuxalkmc] I was not that kind of a man, that I paid for all I got and that I sent photographs when I promised them. It certainly is a fine feeling to be defended by my Indian friends."<sup>12</sup> This offers a glimpse of the kind of relationship Smith had with those he worked with throughout his years in Bella Coola. Most of the key figures that appear in both Smith's writing and photographs were all high-ranking Nuxalkmc and their families, many of the men powerful chiefs like Pollard and Moody. His dependence upon them as collaborators of various sorts marks this photographic encounter, and his larger research project, as being one of a series of intercultural exchanges, rather than a one-way transmission of cultural knowledge. This is particularly evident in Smith's efforts to make sure people in Bella Coola received copies of photographs. Roby (2005: 90) comments on this as a practice that he carried on throughout his career and as the above letter to Sapir indicates, this practice continued, at least to some degree, in Bella Coola. What specific photographs were sent back, or what has happened to them over the years is unknown, but Smith's discussion with Jim Pollard shows that the return of

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<sup>12</sup> See HS/ES June 24, 1921 Box 633 f. 41

photographs became something Nuxalkmc expected of him. It also indicates that Nuxalkmc approached Smith with an air of caution and were quick to be suspicious of his actions. Their suspicions were perhaps confirmed two years after Smith left Bella Coola.

On February 6, 1926 an article written by T.B. Windross entitled “Where Witchcraft Still Lives in Canada”, based on information credited to Smith, appeared in the *Vancouver Sun*. The article contained two photographs of Nuxalkmc taken by Smith: one of a man named Kimsquit Alec (see CMC #58523), another of Captain Schooner’s widow burning his possessions after his funeral (see CMC #58708). The article, which discussed the practice of witchcraft among Nuxalkmc, particularly its role in several deaths at the time, was not received well in Bella Coola. On February 16, 1926, Chief Samuel King wrote to Smith in Ottawa. His words are worth quoting at length,

Dear Mr. Smith

I was very sorry to see in Vancouver Sun newspaper February 6<sup>th</sup> a bad story of our people and my dead wife you tell about...you come here to get words for Ottawa, and not for newspaper pictures...All the story Mr. Windross say you tell him is very bad now, all my people see the pictures and some read the words, they are not right and we all feel sorry. Did you tell all this story in newspaper to Mr. Windross, how much he pay you, we want to know...We no want you to story anymore to newspaper; write me soon and tell me why you do this bad thing to me and my people. If you come to British Columbia this summer come to see us; we want to talk to you about this trouble. All my people have big meeting in hall last night, we see the bad pictures and talk in newspaper – be sure you write and tell us all about it so as to make us all know good of you again Mr. Smith.

I am head chief of Bella Coola, BC,

Samuel King<sup>13</sup>

This letter is striking for several reasons. It is a clear indication that Nuxalkmc were critical of representations of their culture in non-native spaces of circulation. Chief Samuel King communicates a general concern on behalf of Nuxalkmc that such publications were grossly misrepresenting their culture. We can see in this letter a mobilization of the entire community in

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<sup>13</sup> SK/HS February 16, 1926 Box 216 f. 98

Bella Coola around what they saw as a distinct betrayal of the trust they had placed in Smith and his work.

This indicates a distinct shift from the earlier relationships Smith developed in Bella Coola. What was initially an intercultural exchange of knowledge, a sharing of information and culture on the part of Nuxalkmc, was transformed. The personal tone of this letter speaks to the previous opinions of Smith in Bella Coola. King's appeal to Smith for a face-to-face meeting "so as to make us all know good of you again" was never realized. Smith's response came in the form of another letter in which he expressed deep regret at the misunderstanding. He claimed to have no knowledge of the article and noted that he had little control over the use of his photographs as they were the property of "the government" and they could do with them as they wished.<sup>14</sup>

*Photographs at the Victoria Memorial Museum*

As indicated above, Smith did not see the photographs he was producing as his property, but that of the government<sup>15</sup> to be used for the larger federal anthropological and museological interests operating in Canada at the time. The legacy of Franz Boas and the salvage paradigm that dictated most of the anthropological work in North America during this period (Gruber 1970) certainly influenced the display and circulation of Smith's photographs in non-native spaces. For example, Smith's archives contain many notes on a planned "Indians of Canada" exhibition, a massive endeavour he was preparing for the Victoria Memorial Museum before his retirement in 1937 that was never realized. His plans for this exhibition include many comments on the employment and display of his photographs, which became central elements in the

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<sup>14</sup> HS/SK February 27, 1926 Box 216 f. 98

<sup>15</sup> HS/SK February 27, 1926 Box 216 f. 98



exhibition design. For Smith, photographs were primary sources of evidence and ethnographic data that were easy to understand and readily interpretable by the average museumgoer.<sup>16</sup>

In Ottawa, at the Victoria Memorial Museum, institutional interests coalesced in an educational program designed to amass and disseminate a particular representation of Canada's native peoples to a non-native audience (Roby 2005; Zimmerly 1974: 5). Regarding Smith's photographs and films, David Zimmerly (1974: 5) notes, "it was not intended and indeed probably no one ever thought of them as future historical documents or sources of data themselves." As such, Smith's photographs and films became primarily educational materials, used in the VMM's series of public lectures and exhibits on native cultures, in newspaper articles, and other similar displays of the endangered (or dying) cultural "other".

Fred Myers (2001) points out that such processes of objectification impose specific "regimes of value" onto the world of cultural objects. Photographs of native peoples at the Victoria Memorial Museum during this period became objects inscribed with a particular set of values and meanings, and came to circulate in specific arenas of consumption as mediations of disappearing native cultures. The rhetoric of disappearance and loss became both a motivation for fieldwork in Canada (and elsewhere) and a contextualizing apparatus for the circulation and display of images of native cultures, their traditional knowledge, and material culture (Cole 1995). Christopher Pinney (2003: 203) observes that through this, "[w]hat might be termed 'colonial' schemata positioned people and objects deep within chronotopic certainties as they sought stable identities in places from which they could not escape." Photographs, therefore, became indexical of a particular idea of native cultures—their past, present, and imagined future—and subsequently became fixed in a particular relationship of objectification. Any consideration

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<sup>16</sup> See Box 91 f. 2

of Harlan Smith's photographs from Bella Coola must obviously account for the asymmetrical power relations and dominant ideologies that inform the contexts of their production, circulation, and reception (cf. Tagg 1993). They are easily read as artifacts of a salvage practice and indicators of a particular ideological apparatus mired in the aftershocks of colonial contact. Focusing on this aspect, however, distracts attention from how Nuxalkmc view these photographs today. While I acknowledge the "salvage" climate that colours a reading of these images, and Smith's larger research and collecting agenda through the Victoria Museum (cf. Cole 1995), it is as important to consider the actions and opinions of Nuxalkmc in relation to them.

*On Circulation – From the Archive to Bella Coola*

When thinking about photographs as objects with an inherent reproducibility and resulting multiplicity, it is important to consider the various forms in which Harlan Smith's images are circulated and the channels through which Nuxalkmc engage with them. The National Museum of Man (predecessor of the CMC) effectively took all of Smith's films and photographs out of circulation as educational materials in 1935 when they abandoned their film program (Zimmerly 1974: 7; Morris 1994: 74). In 1972, the museum used photographs from the collection in two travelling exhibits (Jackson 1972). In 1991, the newly created Canadian Museum of Civilization produced a catalogue of the collection, with a significant number of reproductions, entitled *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan Smith's Fieldwork Photographs 1920-1924* (Tepper 1991). This is still the main source used by Nuxalkmc. From 1999 to 2002 the CMC curated an exhibition entitled *Emergence from the Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspective*. This exhibition featured portraits of two Nuxalkmc—Lame Charlie and Eliza Moody. To commemorate the exhibition, these images were made into postcards and are sold

through the CMC gift shop. Outside of the CMC, copies of Smith's Bella Coola images have also appeared in the collections of various public culture institutions, such as the Royal British Columbia Museum and in many academic and popular printed materials (cf. Wild 2004; Mack & Thomassen 1994; Barker & Cole 2003), perhaps the most significant being T.F. McIlwraith's *The Bella Coola Indians* (1948).

The museum has recently digitized the collection and it is available to the public via their online archival database. This signals a new era in terms of public access to and usage of Smith's photographs. For Nuxalkmc, it presents a new arena for them to view the collection in its entirety for the first time. This has become increasingly popular with younger people who are well acquainted with the Internet and have access to it, either at school or at home. The online archive is now also used in a weekly computer literacy class run through the Nuxalk Elders' Centre. Downloading and printing off Smith's photographs from the Internet has become one of the main ways in which some people engage with the collection. There are some points to consider, however. First, the technology that affords this global accessibility is not itself universally accessible. Bella Coola is in a remote part of British Columbia, Internet access is limited and connections are rarely fast enough to properly load the digitized photographs. Second, finding the online archive on the CMC's website is not easy, and knowledge about its existence is not widespread. These limitations are worth considering in that digitization does not become an immediate solution to issues of control. Despite this, it has become another point of entry into the archive for Nuxalkmc and part of a larger context of circulation of Smith's photographs in Bella Coola today.

## Contemporary Circumstances

The dominant circulation of Harlan Smith's photographs in what are essentially non-Nuxalk spaces and their control by the CMC does not mean that Nuxalkmc have not actively brought these images into spaces of their own. Upon arriving in Bella Coola I was surprised by the sheer volume of photographs people had displayed in multiple forms, both inside and outside their homes. Walls of houses were literally covered in images, both new and old. Photographs also appear in a variety of ways—as fridge magnets, buttons, postage stamps, dangling objects on rearview mirrors, screened onto t-shirts, and sewn onto throw pillows. Images are exchanged as gifts between relations and always mark significant events such births, marriages, and deaths. This more “local” display and circulation of photographs, while in itself not necessarily specific to either Bella Coola as a place or to Nuxalkmc as a group of people, presents a particular context that allows for active engagement with Smith's images—specifically it structures peoples interest in, engagement with, and usage of photographs from the collection.

Prints and photocopies of Smith's photographs taken from various sources are found on both the walls of peoples' homes and in more social spaces, such as, the House of Smayusta, seat of the traditional Nuxalk government and the Nuxalk Culture Centre, where the Band Council meets and various community discussion are held. Some prints also sit in shoeboxes with hundreds of other photographs at Acwsalcta school, waiting to be scanned onto a computer. Many people in Bella Coola have copies of *The Bella Coola Valley* (Tepper 1991) and *The Bella Coola Indians* (McIlwraith 1948). Others have been ordering prints from the CMC for many years.

In addressing Nuxalk engagements with Harlan Smith's images I intend to focus on their use of the photographs today as active objects in present narratives and displays of culture.

Elizabeth Edwards (2003: 88) observes that in such cases photographs are not “passive images in which communities merely recognize an ancestor or a now deserted settlement. It is more than simply responding to images through a sharpened memory. Photographs are active in dialogue, [and] become... powerful stimuli for the maintenance of indigenous knowledge.” The Smith photographs most often found in these instances are of people, either portraits or dressed in ceremonial regalia. In private homes, the Smith photographs displayed are most often of family members. In more public spaces Smith’s photographs serve as visual tributes to important Nuxalk men and women who have become cultural figureheads. The other main types of photographs I will focus on in the following discussion are those of places. These too were often of interest to Nuxalkmc I spoke with and as the following examples will show, become both personal and social objects in the ways people talk about and use them today.

### *People and Names – Family Stories*

T.F. McIlwraith, writing about the importance given by Nuxalkmc to their ancestral families in *The Bella Coola Indians* (1948[1992]: 120-143) notes that,

It is probably no exaggeration to say that in every part of the world the most important social unit is the family. It certainly is among the Bella Coola....The explanation lies in the high regard with which the members of an ancestral family esteem the prerogatives they have received from their forebears...Strong as is the belief in a common ancestry, it is unlikely that this would have sufficed to hold together the members of the ancestral family without some definite prerogatives. These are of two kinds: names and land.

This assertion forms the basis for an understanding of the concept of family in Bella Coola today and will frame the upcoming section, particularly ideas of names and land. When I first arrived for fieldwork the extensive networks of family relations struck me immediately. A friend told me once that the smallest family in Bella Coola is about 100 people. “Family” is much more than simply the relations between people. Echoing McIlwraith, I would assert that “it is probably no

exaggeration to say” that in contemporary Nuxalk culture, “family” becomes an important cultural complex, a source of empowerment that continues to structure peoples’ engagements with others and their environment, but also (and more importantly for my interests here) with cultural objects such as photographs.

One of the most interesting things about Harlan Smith’s photographs of Nuxalkmc is the extent to which most people pictured are named and the extensive amount of documentation made about each image (Tepper 1991: vii). In terms of Nuxalkmc engagements with the photographs, the presence of names makes it all the easier for them to be inserted into contemporary family lineages. This can be seen through a direct relationship with the people pictured as family members. When I presented slide shows of the photographs to groups of people, these presentations would usually be accompanied by a chorus of “That’s my Grandma!” “That’s my Grandpa!” or “That’s my Auntie!” and someone would inevitably respond, “No, that’s my Auntie!”

One woman, who came up to speak with me after I presented a slide show at a weekly luncheon, told me “I just go through that Tepper book and highlight all my family members to show to my grandchildren”. Similarly, many people told me how they use the Tepper (1991) catalogue as a visual family tree. In several other interview sessions, an elder would go through the images with their children, grandchildren or nieces and nephews. They would point out family members pictured, explain how the person was related to them and usually recount a story involving the person in the photograph. In many of these conversations photographs were connected by the telling of other stories that went far beyond the images themselves.

One day I sat in the kitchen of an elder’s home with him and his grandson, and as we looked through the photographs, an image of a group of men paddling a spoon canoe down the

Bella Coola River (CMC # 61960) elicited a story about helping his grandfather carve canoes when he was younger. His grandfather would tell stories and sing Nuxalk songs as they worked. He talked about how he would help him in the early morning until school started. He would then sit and watch the clock until lunchtime when he could rush back to the carving shed and then back to school for the afternoon and then race home again to help until dark. A similar photograph of a man poling a spoon canoe, when viewed by another elder and her nephew, elicited a different kind of story. The elder told us (her nephew and I) about one of their family members who one day decided to play a joke on his friend by stealing the man's canoe and paddling it across the Bella Coola River. She explained how the attempted heist ended in disaster with the man getting a thorough soaking and the canoe swept away in the current. Needless to say, the friend was none too impressed. The woman, her nephew, and I, however, were in stitches. She went on to talk about all the old photographs her father used to have in his home, which were unfortunately destroyed in a fire. He was featured in several of Smith's photographs and it made me wonder if any of the lost pictures would have been Smith's. The woman did not know, but said they were all of family.

These cases illustrate uniquely personal relationships with certain photographs as objects. They are narrated and engaged with through the telling of "family stories" (cf. Greenhill 1981), which I noticed became a very important way in which certain people I spoke with inscribed new values onto and reclaimed Smith's photographs as their own. First Nations artist and curator Rebecca Baird (2003: 4) observes that in this way photographs not only "excavate lost lives and forgotten achievements, but also...are rich in meaning" for people in the present. People employ them in the present as visual kinship markers and incorporate them into larger inter-generational narratives of "family". Through this, they enter into a new "photographic discourse" (Baird &

Hill 2003: 10) that inserts them into the larger circulation and display of family photographs that is an important cultural practice in Bella Coola.

The faces of family members in Harlan Smith's photographs and their recognition in the stories of Nuxalkmc today are one important dimension of how photographic sovereignty is practiced. Photographs are reclaimed through the personal stories they evoke. I also learned that names themselves become another vital link to the past and a source of important cultural knowledge in the present. A Nuxalk elder and hereditary chief, Nuximlayc (Lawrence Pootlass), explained to me one day the ways that names still connect Nuxalkmc to their culture. As we looked through Smith's photographs, he spoke of his family history. He told me how his family is connected through marriages to various non-Nuxalk families from surrounding places like Rivers Inlet, Bella Bella, and the Plateau region. He explained to me how the present community of Anahim Lake, British Columbia is derived from the name of a Nuxalk man, Anuxim, who married an Ulkatcho woman and moved "up top". "A lot of our names are connected to places in our territory", he explained. He spoke of the importance of connecting family lineages with their villages of origin through names. In this sense, the passing on of names, for him, also passed on knowledge of the larger ancestral connections from which they are derived.

Ethnographers on the Northwest Coast have long discussed the ongoing importance of inherited names and prerogatives to the continuance of culture and the maintenance of social organization (Boas 1924; Drucker 1939; Suttles 1960). At one memorial potlatch I attended during my fieldwork, there were five separate name-giving ceremonies. People spoke of the continued importance of name-giving as a cultural practice. The names given circulate within families, and every name that is given was held by someone before. It becomes quite apparent that this practice presents an important arena for the reclamation of Smith's photographs in terms



of reconnecting the Nuxalkmc photographed with their Nuxalk names (many of which were not recorded by Smith, but are still remembered), thus attaching specific photographs to important family histories.

Peers and Brown (2006) discuss the importance of returning names to historic photographs of First Nations people. They observe that,

Because names recall significant events in...history, images have immense value for people who hold those names today: they provide a visible link with the past, with those ancestors who held their names before them, and an opportunity to recall the stories that some names are connected with (2006: 115).

Cultural leaders like Nuximlayc have been working with Smith's photographs in this capacity for many years with other elders and family members. Younger generations also see the importance in this. One young Nuxalk man, Clyde Tallio, with whom I worked extensively during my stay in Bella Coola, found that while the presence of peoples' names (often their Christian ones) was remarkable since many photographs from the period contain unidentified "Indians", the general absence of their Nuxalk names presented a problem. He told me on one occasion,

What I'd actually like to see is their Indian names alongside their Christian ones...I mean some of their Indian names are in here, but some aren't and a lot of times people forget... "Oh what's his Indian name?" So if the person, the family...if the elder's passed on and we lose that Indian name....So like Albert King, it'd be nice to also have Albert King's Indian name in there, his Nuxalk name.

For him, the returning of Nuxalk names to the people in Smith's photographs ensures that they will continue to circulate within families as important links to the past and sources of knowledge in the present. To this end, he has been continuing the work, trying to collect the Nuxalk names of the people pictured. While I was in Bella Coola we spent a lot of time recording the Nuxalk names of the individuals in the photographs. This was often not an easy task since many Nuxalkmc in the photographs had multiple names designating various social and ceremonial positions. While the work is ongoing, it will hopefully become a source of information for the

entire community to use. At Acwsalcta School, for example, they have recently installed a large digital picture frame that displays the images and names of Nuxalk elders at the school's entrance. Clyde and I discussed the potential for digital copies of Smith's photographs to be included here along with the Nuxalk names of those pictured.

This employment of certain images indicates an interesting transition from the personal relationships people have with particular photographs to their more social application. Certain names, while still the property of families, also invoke social (and political) responsibilities for those that hold them. Thus, in attaching names to certain photographs, they become at once both personal and social objects. As family photographs, they are reclaimed and connected to the present through stories and memories told among family members. As social objects, they are simultaneously made into public affirmations of kinship, and the rights to certain names and prerogatives. While "family" is a primary framework through which people in Bella Coola engage with photographs of people as objects, current articulations of culture indicate a move beyond this as well into larger arenas of engagement with and displays of contemporary Nuxalk culture.

*"We're All Nuxalk Now" –Photographs and the Rejuvenation of Nuxalk Culture*

During my stay in Bella Coola, I quickly came to realize that not only did Harlan Smith's images become objects that Nuxalkmc now find interesting as family photographs, they are also part of a larger constellation of material that has allowed many to re-engage with their culture. This poses an interesting argument for a reconsideration of "salvage ethnography": its appropriation by descendent communities and its re-fitting as 'tradition' (Glass 2004b: 279). While often criticized for depicting First Nations as "dying cultures" (as I have discussed

earlier), in the hands of Nuxalkmc today, such materials also become important to efforts of cultural rejuvenation (Kramer 2006: 77). An acknowledgment of this is not meant to ignore the problematic history in which objects like Smith's photographs are embedded or to imply that having to turn to ethnographic documents is not met with an air of ambivalence in Bella Coola, as it is elsewhere on the Northwest Coast (Mascia-Lees 1998; Glass 2004b). Nor does this mean that such material supersedes the knowledge possessed by Nuxalk elders. I merely wish to indicate that what is occurring in Bella Coola today is a mixture of Nuxalk oral and "non-Nuxalk"<sup>17</sup> written sources that work together to inform an increasingly vibrant articulation of culture, cementing what has come to stand as tradition. The goal then is to better understand the more nuanced ways in which Smith's photographs contribute to a reinvigorated cultural "baseline" (to quote one Nuxalk informant of mine) that responds to the devastating effects of the colonial encounter.

These effects can be seen in a history of depopulation and economic displacement, and in the legacy of residential schooling (Fournier & Crey 1997), and prohibitions of ceremonials (Cole & Chaikin 1991), which dislocated generations of Nuxalkmc from their culture. Many of the older generations have experienced forms of forced assimilation and a loss of knowledge at the hands of colonial institutions (Kramer 2006: 36-40; Barker & Cole 2003). Looking at Harlan Smith's photographs with Nuxalk elders often evoked narratives of their experiences in

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<sup>17</sup> The use of this term to describe information collected by outsiders is complicated. Although they claimed authorship, the bulk of the classic monographs produced by Boas and McIlwraith are made up of translated oral traditions inscribed and translated by the anthropologists. Contemporary Nuxalkmc therefore, quite reasonably, regard such texts as their own. Such recorded texts may in some contexts acquire an enlarged authority, contributing to an essentialized perception of 'tradition.' Thus when John Barker consulted with Nuxalkmc in 1990 regarding the reissuing of *The Bella Coola Indians*, he was told in no uncertain terms that the text should be reproduced exactly as it was in 1948 despite inconsistencies between McIlwraith's fieldnotes and the text because "these are the words of our ancestors" (Barker, personal communication, 2009).

residential schools at places like St. Michaels in Alert Bay, British Columbia. While these narratives were often difficult for both the teller and for me as the listener, I am deeply grateful to them for sharing them with me. I remember very clearly one of the times I met with Nuximlayc in his home to look at the photographs. He was very excited to speak with me as he had worked closely with one of my supervisors at UBC on the reprinting of McIlwraith's *The Bella Coola Indians* (1948), a text he views as extremely important to Nuxalkmc. His interest in Harlan Smith's photographs extends from a similar view of the importance of these materials to a re-acquaintance of Nuxalkmc with their culture.

As we looked through the photographs, his narrative focused on his return to Bella Coola after residential school and a long period of working in Victoria. He spoke with resentment about how distanced he was from his culture at that point in his life, "When I got back, I didn't know I was a hereditary chief. My father had never told me! Why didn't he tell me?" He kept returning to the effects the school had on him, and his father before him. Today, he is a strong proponent of Nuxalk culture and continues to work to ensure that Nuxalk sovereignty is upheld. He maintains a position of non-negotiation in regard to current treaty efforts put forth by the British Columbia provincial government (cf. Alfred 2001). While he spoke of his experiences in residential school as the source of a loss, they also became a source of empowerment, causing an increased determination on his part to learn about his culture and pass it on to others. It was very interesting, in this light, to see the value he places in Harlan Smith's photographs. For him these are sources, along with the work of Boas (1898) and McIlwraith (1948) in particular, through which he was able to gain back knowledge of Nuxalk culture.

A younger man I spoke with took a similar position. He commented that while the history of colonialism clearly impacted Nuxalkmc in extremely negative ways, today, it gives them the

desire to regain what was lost. For him, however, Smith's photographs were more than "family photographs". He feels that the photographs provide an important documentation of Nuxalk creativity in terms of art and ceremonial practices that is important to *all* Nuxalkmc and should be drawn upon. This speaks to a larger situation that is occurring in Bella Coola today – the coalescing of what were once very specific, family-owned, ceremonial and social prerogatives under the fairly recent idea of a larger "Nuxalk culture". The importance of this was explained to me one evening as I sat looking through Smith's photographs with Clyde. We came to an image of Jim Pollard wearing a Thunder mask and regalia (see CMC #56880). He explained how Thunder is the most important of Nuxalk dances. Looking at the photograph Clyde said, "The story we use today actually comes from Kimsquit, we use it when we introduce this dance. We don't really mention that part when we tell it. It's sort of been agreed upon by the old people that aren't with us anymore that this will be a Nuxalk dance, shared by all of us. We all come together in Nuxalk now, we're all Nuxalk."

As social objects, Smith's photographs have become important contributions to accessing a period in the past that allows Nuxalkmc to advance their culture in the present. They have also become important mnemonic devices that people speak through about Nuxalk culture today. In this context, the Nuxalkmc who posed for Smith's camera, as well as the photographs of them, have become vital to both family histories and the broader rejuvenation of Nuxalk culture. Nuxalkmc today cherish their names, stories, songs, and dances today. At potlatches, for example, various performances are attributed to cultural patriarchs and matriarchs like Jim Pollard, Willie Mack, Skookum Mary, Reuben Schooner, Captain Schooner, and Mrs. Reuben Schooner whom Smith photographed. Photographs of these individuals are displayed on the walls of the building that houses the House of Smayusta, the seat of Nuxalk traditional

government. The photographs all appear to be photocopied from the plates included in McIlwraith (1948). They are shown along with many other photographs of important Nuxalk elders. Here, the photographs contribute to the remembrances of individuals who were powerful leaders in the past, and who have subsequently become cultural figureheads in the present.

More recently, several of Smith's portraits have come to be circulated on Nuxalk Internet sites such as "Nuxalk Pride" (discussed in my introduction) and the more politically oriented "Nuxalk Smayusta". These websites employ the Smith's photographs in a mediation of Nuxalk culture and knowledge to a more global audience. On the website "Nuxalk Smayusta" several of Smith's photographs are used in the section documenting Nuxalk perspectives on sovereignty in their territory. There are two portraits of Captain Schooner and Jim Pollard. Their photographs accompany historic statements made by these individuals concerning the importance of resources to Nuxalkmc, and their disdain at government abuses of their land. There is also a photograph Smith took of the village of Q'um'kuts (see CMC #50122). This photograph of the village, in this context, is connected to the history of Nuxalk settlement and ties to their land. Thus Smith's photographs of places, as well as people, have acquired a special significance in Bella Coola today.

During his travels up and down the Bella Coola Valley, Nuxalkmc and others brought Harlan Smith to many traditional village sites, which he filmed and photographed. When I was in Bella Coola, I had many conversations about these images with people, both young and old. Many of the photographs Smith took were of ancestral places no longer occupied within Nuxalk territory. As the following narratives will indicate, while these places remain "unoccupied" by Nuxalkmc, they still serve as important "markers" (Basso 1996) of contemporary Nuxalk

identity through their connection to family. What follows are some examples in which this occurs.

*Experiencing Family Places and Exploring Identity*

Every Wednesday at the United Church in Bella Coola there is an elders' luncheon. I would present a slide show of Harlan Smith photographs every week I attended. The elders seemed to really enjoy seeing the images, and they always induced much discussion among people in the room. After one of these presentations, I was talking with the woman who organizes the luncheons, and she told me that one of the elders had identified a picture of a gravestone from Kimsquit (CMC # 52037) I had shown as belonging to her Grandmother. The next day I was attending a memorial potlatch at the Nuxalk Hall and was approached by her. We talked for a long time about the photographs and about how different potlatches were now compared to when she was younger. Finally she said to me "You know that picture you showed yesterday? That was my Grandmother's gravestone out in Kimsquit." I asked her if she remembered the place. She said "Oh yes. I used to live out there when I was a little girl". She told me how much she liked seeing Smith's photos of Kimsquit and talked at length about how she would love to move back, but laughingly informed me that she thought she was too old to get out there now since Kimsquit is only reachable by boat.

Talking with her made me recall a similar conversation that occurred when I was looking through images on the CMC online archive with Clyde. Clyde is one of the leaders of the Nuxalk Rediscovery Camp, which takes younger Nuxalkmc out into the channels to visit traditional sites in their territory. His family is from Talyu, a traditional village site located in the South Bentinck Arm. We were sitting in his Grandmother's living room and Clyde was downloading photographs from the archive for her. As we scrolled through the pages of thumbnails, he

suddenly said “Let’s type in ‘Tallio’, I want to see what comes up.” The search immediately brought up photographs Harlan Smith had taken out in South Bentinck (see CMC #50253; 50267, 58616), some of which Clyde had seen, some of which he had not. We looked through the images for some time and then he said “You know I really want to move out there. I think it would be really great if people moved back to their ancestral villages. I am trying to get my uncle to have a pole carved that we can raise out in South Bentinck.”<sup>18</sup> He also talked about how he liked looking at the old images of Talyu and comparing them with the way the place looks now.

This desire to return to ancestral lands was also expressed on another occasion by a couple of elders when I visited their home. Upon arriving, I was excited to see their copy of the Tepper (1991) book out and obviously well used. They are both extremely interested in the history of Bella Coola and do a lot of research of their own. They told me how they really like to go out on the land and travel to the places Smith photographed and see what they look like now. They were also curious to see the images of places that were not included in the Tepper (1991) book, such as the sites where Smith was conducting archaeological work at Burnt Bridge, Mud Creek, and Newscultz (the site of the husband’s family’s village). “I just really want to know what he was doing up in Nusq’lst!” he said. He also mentioned work he has been doing trying to visually recreate the original village-scape of Q’um’kuts (an ancestral village site on which the current town of Bella Coola now stands) from the photographs (see CMC #48937, 48938, 56912). It was interesting to hear their desire to compare Smith’s images of certain places with the way the landscape looks now. Their obvious attachment to these places produced an interest

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<sup>18</sup> On August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009 the Snow family raised a pole at Talyu. Many other families are now having poles carved to raise in their ancestral territories.



in the photographs, similar to Clyde's, as a means of seeing the changes between the past and present in certain locations to which they have a personal connection.

Schwartz and Ryan (2003: 3) highlight these kinds of engagements as one of the ways in which “photographic practices...play a central role in constituting and sustaining both individual and collective notions of landscape and identity.” In this sense, these narratives reveal a particular sense of place that is quite apparent in Bella Coola. Despite the massive changes brought on through contact - spatially represented by the movements of people and the abandoning of traditional sites - people in Bella Coola retain a strong identification with these no-longer-occupied places in their territory through memory and imagination. Following Gaston Bachelard (1994: 5), memory and imagination can be seen here as working together to form what he refers to as a “mutual deepening”, manifest in how they engender peoples' contemporary identities.

Keith Basso (1996: 146) observes that sense of place can never be separated from sense of identity – “selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined”. Similarly, Harlan Smith's photographs of these places figure into the larger memories, imaginings, and experiences of people, both young and old, about not only the movement from, but also a return to these places. They serve as mnemonic devices and contribute to larger “imaginative geographies” (Schwartz & Ryan 2003) that work to connect contemporary Nuxalkmc with their places of origin. A form of what Thomas Thornton (2008: 179) refers to as a “linking landscape” – “a terrain of the imagination, based on a geographic landscape, that is designed to bring people together.” In doing this, as “tools of emplacement” (Thornton 2008), these images are presented through narrative into current identification with ancestral places that is a major source of empowerment for current Nuxalkmc, especially youth. The photographs allow Nuxalkmc to travel, through

memory and imagination, to places on the landscape once occupied by their ancestors before contact and produce an imagined “reterritorialization” (Malkki 1997) to counter the historic deterritorializations of the colonial encounter.

What becomes significant in these cases are the ways in which the people I talked with “emplace” (Basso 1996) Smith’s photographs in this process. These photographic experiences with no-longer-occupied ancestral places and the imaginative geographies discussed earlier must not be considered as inherent “naturalisms” (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 13) of culture and place. Rather, they are deeply imbedded within larger spatial processes and tensions that engender a distinct politics of place in Bella Coola. These tensions continue to inform Nuxalk sense of place in Bella Coola and a distinct form of “place-based politics” (Harvey 1996; Oza 2008; Massey 1994) that is important to consider. In the following section I will give two examples that directly insert Smith’s photographs into contemporary Nuxalk politics surrounding places in their territory. These instances shift relations with photographic objects away from the personal and into a larger social (and political) domain of defining and asserting sovereignty over Nuxalk space in the Bella Coola Valley. They are reminders of a larger history of exclusion at the hands of settler society, and contestation over territory between Nuxalkmc and neighbouring First Nations groups (primarily Ulkatcho and Heiltsuk)— an issue that is itself the product of settler colonialism (Bern & Dodds 2000).

### *Narrating Tensions and Expressing National Identity*

Recent scholarship in the social sciences (cf. Harvey 1996; Oza 2008) has sought to demonstrate that the negative aspects of “place-based politics” give rise to reactionary forms of violence, nationalism, and xenophobia. While Doreen Massey (1994) questions whether this

reactionary view is the only way to relate to places, she still ultimately agrees with the assertion that all reactionary place-based politics are in fact “bad”. While I agree that reactionary politics have a tendency to instigate radical and violent forms of “Othering”, in Bella Coola, it represents a distinct political strategy and a form of power for Nuxalkmc in asserting their self-determination within the dominant society of the Canadian nation-state.

Furthermore, in line with a critical take on place-based politics is a similar critique of ideas of “territoriality” and “the nation” (Appadurai 1996; Hardt & Negri 2000). Appadurai (1996: 347) notes that, “sovereignty and territoriality, once twin ideas, live increasingly separate lives”. In Bella Coola, this is not necessarily the case. In terms of the emergent Nuxalk Nation (the name under which Nuxalk-speaking peoples have collectively been known since the early 1980s [Kennedy & Bouchard 1990]), and its assertion of sovereignty over the last century, these ‘twin ideas’ are not so separate.

The present reserve community of Bella Coola now sits on the original site of the Nuxalk village of Q’um’kuts. During the period of Harlan Smith’s work in Bella Coola, the village was still visible, and some elders still inhabited the dilapidated houses on the site (Barker & Cole 2003: 11). Smith took many photographs of the decaying village site, which include images of structures and, more strikingly, images of the graveyard (see CMC #48993), which for Nuxalkmc is still a deeply sacred place. Today, what is left of the graveyard is on land owned by the non-native proprietors of the Bella Coola Motel<sup>19</sup> who have steadfastly denied Nuxalkmc access to their land. In May of 1995, the tension between Nuxalkmc and the motel owners reached such a level that hereditary chiefs and cultural leaders organized a protest at the site,

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<sup>19</sup> The motel sits on the former location of the original Hudson’s Bay Company post. The land was then taken over by the Clayton family. During his fieldwork, Smith documented and photographed many of the Nuxalk artifacts held in the private collection of Elizabeth Clayton (see Tepper 1991).

demanding that they be allowed onto the land to right the fallen headstone of Chief Klakamot and place flowers on the graves of their ancestors (House of Smayusta 1995). The protest ended with the intervention of the RCMP and to my knowledge the owners of the Bella Coola Motel have yet to acquiesce to the demands of the Nuxalk Nation.

I learned about this while looking at Smith's photographs of the graveyard with people in Bella Coola. More often than not, looking at these photographs produced narratives of their current exclusion from the place. People told me countless stories of the owners not allowing Nuxalkmc who wanted to honour the graves of their ancestors onto their land, and the anger and resentment they felt as a result of this. These exclusionary tactics, for many, recalled the continuous history of racism and dislocation their ancestors had suffered since contact. While this as an example of how contestation over places in Bella Coola between Nuxalk and non-Nuxalk exemplifies a larger history of exclusion at the hands of settler society, there are also stories that reflect other forms of contestation between Nuxalkmc and neighboring First Nations groups.

A Nuxalk elder explained this to me one day as we drove the valley in search of a haircut. He told me how he was troubled by this contestation since he saw it as greatly undermining Nuxalk claims to sovereignty. When we got back to his home, we took out the Tepper (1991) catalogue. He immediately recognized images of Ulkatcho people that Harlan Smith had taken (see CMC #48985). According to people I spoke with, the Ulkatcho First Nation has been trying to claim a site in the Bella Coola Valley known as Stwic, as their own.<sup>20</sup> Many of the images are of Ulkatcho campsites in the area. He was very excited by these images and exclaimed, "See!

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<sup>20</sup> Stwic is located in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park. The contestation is, therefore, not over actual ownership of the land, as it belongs to neither Nuxalk nor Ulkatcho, but rather who has the right to claim it as their traditional territory. To this end, several Nuxalk families with ties to Stwic have buried relatives on the land and have placed memorial poles at the site.

They were just campsites! They didn't have any permanent settlement.” While I am in no position to debate the veracity of either set of claims to Stwic, it is important to note how these images become implicated in contemporary contestations over the place. For this elder, Smith's images represented a form of proof for Nuxalk ties to Stwic as their traditional territory. What becomes important for my interests here is the way these stories of contestation were constructed around particular photographs and how, in turn, these photographs figure in to these contemporary politics of place.

In the above narratives, Harlan Smith's photographs become important vehicles through which people express forms of place-based politics. While the images themselves do not directly represent the issues under discussion, they become mnemonic devices for larger narratives on the political dimensions of place. In this way, they become social objects through their contribution to the narration of contemporary events. Again, this indicates that, as historic images, they also figure significantly into present issues that affect the entire Nuxalk Nation. In this sense, they are inserted into a continuing reproduction of national identity that is always a “contested and ongoing project” (Raffles 1999: 335), an intercultural process defined by tensions between Nuxalkmc, other First Nations, and non-native peoples (Kramer 2006: 14).

## Conclusions

Nuno Porto (2004: 113) observes, “Photographs...are always entangled in a web of social processes in which they perform specific actions....The question then is not simply what photographs mean, but how they act, why they do whatever it is they do and to whom.” I have attempted here to begin to illustrate the ways in which a particular First Nations community relates to and finds value in a collection of ethnographic photographs as cultural objects. I say “begin” because there is much more work to be done. In this case, there still remains a lack of dialogue between the Nuxalk Nation and the Canadian Museum of Civilization with regard to the access, control, and circulation of these photographs.

During my stay in Bella Coola, a letter was drafted for the approval of the Band Chief and Council requesting that digital copies of the collection be sent back to Bella Coola in order that they might be employed in a number of settings – a particular one being educational material for Acwsalcta School. It is my hope that this will occur in the near future. For now, however, the collection remains the sole property of the CMC and ultimately under their control in terms of accessibility and circulation. As discussed, the recent digitization of the photographs is an unprecedented move towards opening up the archive, and some people in Bella Coola have taken advantage of this. It is still, however, a contentious situation and met with a degree of ambivalence. For some it does not alleviate the “stinginess” on the part of the CMC that they have experienced in the past. Unlike other recent kinds of digitization projects in which Indigenous communities were involved in the design and implementation of the project from its very beginning (cf. Christen 2007), the CMC’s online archive does not fully represent the interests of Nuxalkmc in these photographs. It is in many ways a reminder that Nuxalkmc entered into a relationship with Smith based on a degree of respect and trust. Unfortunately, the

larger anthropological/museum apparatus into which these photographs were eventually placed drastically undermined any form of control circulation for Smith and especially for Nuxalkmc. The awareness of Nuxalkmc of this fact, however, has become an important critical perspective that informs contemporary feelings about these photographs and makes their efforts to reclaim them all the more significant.

As I have shown here, Nuxalkmc have found a myriad of ways in which to engage with these photographs outside of the current context of repatriation and collaboration that often defines such practices, and despite asymmetric issues of control. Today in Bella Coola Smith's photographs have become important objects, employed in diverse ways. The narrative and physical applications of these photographs in the present by Nuxalkmc are not so much about what is visible on their surface, but about the larger connections these images establish with peoples' contemporary lives. In this sense, while they evoke powerful memories, they do not merely reflect the past, they become active parts of the present. In the process of shifting from the archive to Bella Coola, a reactivation occurs. The photographs are transformed and given new meanings. Approaching Smith's photographs as objects serves as a way to see how they are brought home. Their physical existence in the museum archive, the problematic intentions that frame their production, the rigid history and meanings imposed on them in one location, are contrasted by relationships made with them in another (Marr 1996).

I went to Bella Coola unsure that I would find any presence of Smith's photographs in the community. I left with more than I could ever fit into this discussion. As such, this is by no means intended to be an exhaustive survey. However, the examples explored here illustrate several important ways in which to understand the work these images do. As archival photographs, these images "preserve" a moment in the history of Bella Coola. Through their

usage by contemporary Nuxalkmc, however, they are brought into the present in important ways. The examples explored here illustrate how Nuxalkmc transform these images from static representations of “the past” into active objects in the present. This indicates new possibilities for approaching archival photographs in anthropology that signals a shift in how we can thoroughly engage with these so-called “preserved moments” in more dynamic ways.



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