Colonial Photographs and Post-Colonial Histories:
The Kainai-Oxford Photographic Histories Project

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First Nations – First Thoughts

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Introduction

Between 1925 and 1927 Beatrice Blackwood, an anthropologist from the Pitt Rivers Museum[1], Oxford University, conducted research in North America, during which she spent two days at the Kainai Nation in southern Alberta, Canada, referred to then, and often still, as the Blood Tribe. While there she took 33 photographic portraits. Some eighty years later, copies of these photographs have been returned to the Kainai Nation, through a visual repatriation project that considers the contemporary meanings of the images to Kainai people. The photographs, taken within the intersecting anthropological and colonial perspectives of the time on 'traditional' and 'acculturating' Aboriginal peoples, are precisely the kind of colonial legacy which comprises ethnographic museum collections. At the PRM, where such collections are exhibited within a deliberately-retained Victorian mode of display, the shift to a postcolonial mode of intellectual curation might be thought to be especially challenging. The Kainai-Oxford Photographic Histories Project is, however, contributing to this shift, in part by exploring the meanings and shifting intellectual contexts of one collection, but more importantly by prompting the museum to develop new ways of working with source communities. The community-centred research process which has shaped the project has been key to uncovering—and challenging—the meanings, knowledge, and discursive formations attached to this collection of images.

Beatrice Blackwood's Research

Blackwood's research, funded by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation, concerned issues of culture, intelligence and "race", broadly defined. She conducted psychological tests, gathered genealogies, and collected physical measurements from Native American and African-American communities to try to understand which behaviours and physical appearances were inherited, which were responses to social and economic circumstances, and which were learned. By the time she reached the Blood Reserve in August 1925, she had realized that prejudice and poverty, as well as political forces, constrained the lives of Native peoples far more than any physical factors. She was shown round the reserve by Joseph Faunt, the Indian Agent, and recorded observations on the community's response to their economic situation and to restrictions on ceremonies imposed by the government, as well as commenting on

[1] Hereafter PRM.

education and healthcare. Blackwood's photographs record what she thought depicted "traditional" or "modern" aspects of Native cultures; many are also referentially anthropometric in their paired front and side poses. Her Kainai images show men in the fields, women collecting rations**,** a family group beside a tipi, and children with their mothers. They also include class photographs of girls at residential school, who were forbidden by the staff to return home from the time they reached puberty until they married. The photographs thus show both the pressures the community faced at the time of Blackwood's visit, and the strength of Kainai people. Together make a remarkable portrait of a strong community in transition.

Process

This project has demonstrated that research methodology is crucial to uncovering knowledge, meanings, and discursive formations surrounding artefacts, especially those which were acquired in circumstances of intellectual and political colonial control. Over the years, many Aboriginal people have talked to us about the legacy of mistrust of museums and anthropologists amongst their communities. We have been told of the times when researchers have made promises that were not fulfilled, or published sensitive information without permission. We have also been told of the misinterpretations and errors within ethnographic texts and archival sources that are still drawn upon by researchers, Native and non-Native. It has been patiently explained to us that communities need to reinterpret historical documents and photographs in their own way, for their own purposes, and to ensure that their histories are presented in their own words (see also Warry 1990). As this project has progressed, we have learned that historic photographs –including those produced by anthropologists—can be used by communities to recover histories that have been submerged by mainstream academic analyses and to prompt memories that challenge received interpretations.

The Kainai-Oxford Photographic Histories Project has aimed to produce outcomes for both Kainai people and outside researchers. Together we have developed a kind of analysis which reflects Aboriginal and western perspectives in understanding how histories are constructed and how visual images serve as a focus for understanding the past. In addition we have written a book aimed at museum professionals and academics which considers the potential of photographs to recover cultural and historical information for community use and the importance of community consultation (Brown and Peers et al 2005). From the beginning, however, we insisted that the project be framed by Kainai people, and that the results be accessible to them in a format of their choice.

Drawing on Brown's previous fieldwork in southern Alberta (Brown 2000), when we began the project we contacted the Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Foundation, a voluntary organisation made up of spiritual advisors from the Kainai community who have worked with museums throughout North America, primarily in negotiating repatriation claims.[2] The role of the Mookaakin Foundation is not to grant permission

[2] Dr. Gerald Conaty, Senior Ethnologist at Glenbow Museum, is also on the board. Institutions the Foundation has worked with include the National Museum of the American Indian, the Provincial Museum of Alberta, the Peabody Museum, Glenbow Museum, the Canadian Museum of Civilization and Parks Canada (Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Foundation n.d.).

to researchers, but to ensure that research is undertaken in a culturally appropriate manner that respects community-held values and serves community needs. Several board members of the Mookaakin Foundation are also educators and they immediately saw great potential for using Blackwood's photographs in community schools. They also expressed interest in both Blackwood's motives and our own. From the outset the Mookaakin Foundation has supported our goal of educating museum and archival professionals about the importance of consulting with Native peoples. However, while they strongly wished to see Blackwood's photographs utilised to teach history and recover voices and knowledge they made it clear that the project should proceed on Kainai terms, meeting Kainai needs and not just academic ones. To meet their concerns, they suggested that we write a protocol agreement that outlined the project goals and spelled out the responsibilities of the museum staff and Mookaakin Foundation members in ensuring these goals were reached. Verbal assurances that we would share the information were not enough. The Foundation wanted an agreement which extended beyond us as individuals and involved the PRM itself; they envisaged a long-term relationship which would be upheld by future museum staff in the years ahead. The protocol agreement we developed states that the Mookaakin Foundation will help to facilitate interviews and provide cultural guidance; in return, we agreed that a set of Blackwood's photographs would be given to the tribe; copies of all interview tapes and transcripts would be sent to interviewees for review; and, with their permission would be deposited with the community. Furthermore, Mookaakin Foundation must see drafts of all oral or written presentations about the project.

Working together

Working with Mookaakin Foundation allowed us to learn about the community's views on research ethics and opened up connections within the community we have been able to draw upon for assistance in the research process – whether this took the form of suggesting people whom we should approach for interviews or in explaining cultural rules for behaviour. Though the protocol agreement was certainly a crucial starting point, its importance shifted as the project developed. Mookaakin members have since commented that they were willing to participate not only because we brought materials to them (without even having to be asked), but because of the *way* we approached them and the way we have tried to be respectful of cultural rules of behaviour throughout the project. As an example, Brown also met with the Red Crow Community College Elder's Advisory Board early in the process, as is expected with any new cultural and educational project, and the elders have been an important source of guidance and support throughout the research.

The fact that we had made a commitment to ensure that the research would be available to the community was extremely important to those who shared their knowledge during interviews. Trust-building proceeded differently across the community: for some, the protocol agreement was important as a formal codification of expectations, while for others making sure that every interviewee had the opportunity to control how his or her information would be used was far more important than any written document. It is also important to emphasize that all those who assisted us did so for their own reasons, and to benefit future generations of Kainai people in various ways.

The first phase of interviewing concentrated on identifying the people Blackwood photographed, after which people began to share contextual biographical and historical information. During the interviews the photographs were presented in clear plastic wallets in a folder which also contained contact details for the PRM staff responsible for the North American collections, Photograph and Manuscript collections, and Marketing (the department responsible for authorizing reproductions of images in the Museum's collections), a short biography of Blackwood and her research, and copies of the diary entries and fieldnotes pertaining to her visit to Kainai. Post-it notes were used to attach the identifications Blackwood had provided for some individuals, and these were added to as the interviews progressed and people's names were remembered. The interviews were quite open, as we hoped people would talk freely about what the images meant to them, rather than be directed to particular topics. Some very general questions were asked of each interviewee, however, concerning the ways in which they thought the images might be used to talk about history and how they could be used within the community.

Many elderly people contributed to the project but younger people were also interviewed; though they did not necessarily know the people photographed personally it was important that they had an opportunity to express their views on the potential of the images to promote understanding about the past and to explore generational responses to the photographs. On one occasion, a class of students at Kainai High School also viewed the photographs and were invited to think about their relevance to their own history, adding another dimension to the readings of the images, that of Kainai teenagers. Their teacher afterwards spoke of how amazed she had been at the response of her students to images of their great-great grandparents, as she had often found it difficult to get them to engage with other forms of history (see also Farr 1984: xiii).

This first phase of research was followed by a second fieldtrip in the summer of 2002, when Brown re-visited all those interviewed previously to review the transcripts and make any necessary changes. Progress reports were made to the Mookaakin Foundation and to the Red Crow Elders Advisory Council, and they were invited to comment on a proposed book outline. During this period, many participants recorded consent statements, mostly in Blackfoot, in which they explained why they had contributed to the project and what they hoped future generations might learn from it. Mary Stella Bare Shin Bone, for example, made the following remarks:

> The way I see things, this is going to help us preserve our knowledge of our people in the past…. In a lot of cases, what we cannot recall about us we tend to rely on the white man's version of us (written version). I, for myself, do not rely on or have the white man's perception. I strongly rely on our own perception in respect to our view of our way of life…. Today we have lost a great deal of our ways; it is important that this project takes place so that it may help our people, especially the young, to recall more of our history…. If I thought and believed that it is not to the benefit of our people, then I will not share my knowledge. (M. Bare Shin Bone 14 August 2002)

Following that second visit we drafted the book manuscript and sent chapters to the Mookaakin Foundation and other interested community members, prior to a further

short fieldtrip in May 2003. On this visit, each interviewee was shown the draft manuscript, we explained the context in which their quotes had been used and asked for their approval and suggestions for any changes. It was also during this trip that copies of all the tapes, transcripts and Blackwood's photographs were presented to Red Crow Community College, for community use and we hosted a supper at the College to which everyone who had participated was invited. At this event we put copies of the photographs up on the wall with the identifications in English and Blackfoot, so that other people who were in the building at the time and who had not previously had an opportunity to see them were able to look. It was at this event that the one individual whom no-one had yet recognised was finally identified as *Piaana* (Falling over the Cutbank).

Meanings and knowledge revealed

Museums are repositories of knowledge that can transcend existing narratives and ways of thought and Blackwood's photographs are a very good example of this. As Elizabeth Edwards has noted of anthropological photographs more generally, "even the most dense of colonial documents can spring leaks" if one look carefully at the images themselves, and at "the points of fracture" provided by their details and the implications of these (Edwards 2002:12). Theory and narratives by dominant-society scholars about indigenous peoples have, of course, a long history of entanglement with relations of power between these groups. Challenging existing narratives and theories is similarly entangled with altering the relations of power which surround artefacts in museum collections, and especially those which have typically been involved in formulating theory. In our case, negotiating issues of power embedded in research proved vital to understanding the Kainai meanings of Blackwood's images and for challenging existing understandings of these photographs.

In the process of interviewing community members about Blackwood's photographs, a great deal of information was recovered – but this would not have been the case if we had taken a less community-based approach to research. Indeed, had we not been willing to frame the research and outcomes according to community expectations, it is likely that the project would not have proceeded at all. We emphasize, however, that we mean more than simply "we were sensitive ethnographers and therefore people spoke to us." By trying to understand the community's concerns about the research process, we actually began to understand what these images mean to Kainai people. Their concern that we adhered to cultural protocols for the proper transmission of information had much to do with the nature of the information they saw encoded in the photographs, and with the culturally-based intellectual framework within which Kainai people interpreted the images. This Kainai framework emphasizes biography and family history as lenses through which one understands community history and the fluid dynamics between past and present.

This relationship between method and theory can perhaps best be understood as a parallel register of meaning to that often used in the analysis of ethnographic photographs, which are 'read' at two levels: the surface level of forensic detail and the deeper level of the historical, intellectual, social, and political contexts which went into their composition. Only by working in a community-based manner could we begin to understand the nature and importance of the deeper level of 'conjunctive

knowledge' associated with the photographs and the attendant social responsibilities attached to such information.

This model of dual registers of meaning is also useful to understand Kanai responses to the photographs. The portraits elicited a great deal of biographical and associated family information about the people depicted. Much of this is personal family history, and was deemed inappropriate for publication. In addition to genealogical knowledge, interviewees shared information that clustered into several broad themes about Kainai history and survival, and which we agreed could be written about for external audiences. These themes include the period of transition represented by the photographs; the survival of Kainai people and culture in the face of such change; and the cultural knowledge and values embedded in the photographs, 'read' by Kainai people from forensic details. These kinds of information are needed for transmission to younger generations—who may lack other sources of such knowledge—as frames of reference for understanding the strength of their ancestors who survived this period dominated by the assimilationist policies imposed by colonial agencies.

One especially striking example which shows these different layers of meaning concerns naming practices and the importance Kainai people have placed on restoring both the Blackfoot and the English names to the individuals Blackwood photographed. Though Blackwood recorded some English names, her images were intended as 'type' shots and within this mental framework the personal names of her subjects were unimportant. For the Kainai, however, recovering the Blackfoot names was seen as central to the project. Older people related the importance of identification in order to share clan and family histories linked to those individuals, and to promote the understanding of the historical knowledge embedded in the names. Younger people suggested that, in addition, the photographs could be used to reconstruct part of the community's history which has not been passed down. Visual anthropologist Roslyn Poignant has noted that photographs, memories and histories intersect with one another and, in combination with other ways of articulating perspectives about the past, can prompt "inside ways of responding to culturally specific actualities, which are not necessarily available to outsiders" (Poignant 1996: 8). The responses of Kainai people to Blackwood's photographs demonstrates that there is acute concern among some community members that the disruption of the continuity of Kainai historical knowledge has meant that each successive generation has been increasingly cut off from community-focused histories and genealogies. For those who care about history, access to historical photographs and to the memories of those people within the community who have direct knowledge of the information encoded within such photographs, is vital. It permits the sharing of the "inside" readings of the images which can then be reincorporated into successive generations' understandings of their community's collective history as well as individual family histories.

Kainai insistence on recovering the names of individuals in Blackwood's photographs, then, is by no means a focus on surface details. The names themselves are key to their constructions and uses of history, which are family and clan-based. Most importantly, the responses of Kainai people to the photographs made it very clear that the images have dual sets of culturally informed meanings: one familiar to anthropologists, and one familiar to Kainai people. These are not simply informal anthropometric photographs; they are photographs of Kainai people, lives, and

histories. By reattaching names, Kainai people appropriated these anthropological photographs to fit with their own ways of inscribing the past (Edwards 2002:100).

A second theme addressed by many interviewees concerned the notion of historical transition. Blackwood's photographs were taken during a time when the different experiences and expectations of community members who had grown up on the reserve and those who recalled the pre-Treaty era were becoming starkly apparent. The introduction of new systems of education, political organisation, religion and healthcare combined with agricultural developments fostered an environment in which Kainai people embraced and adapted to these changes at varying levels. As visual indicators of people's responses to their changing circumstances the forensic details in photographs enable them to be read in ways which complement documentary sources and confirm oral histories and to be utilised to broaden understanding of a period of Kainai history that has not been subject to extensive research.

Related to this theme was that of the notion of survival. Though some people spoke of the images in terms of negative experiences of disruption and loss, at the same time, they saw within them a strength and contentment which they felt people today could learn from. These images show the connections which those people depicted still had with their traditional culture and worldview, even though the community had been confined to a reserve for fifty years. As they discussed the transitions that their ancestors had experienced, many individuals commented on the ability of Kainai people to adapt and survive and to maintain their identity as Kainai, despite extreme hardships and being subject to the destructive impact of colonial rule**.**

This sense of survival and pride in identity and in history was remarked upon with great admiration and respect. Even though the photographs held so many mixed messages for viewers the theme of survival and awe of what their ancestors endured for the benefit of their children and grandchildren was repeatedly articulated, and in terms that emphasised the importance of understanding their struggles and experiences and learning from them today. This point was perhaps best summed up by Andy Blackwater:

> [This] was perhaps almost the lowest point in our history. When the buffalo was all gone. Not having the kind of industrial skills and farming, ranching….And it's reflected even in the faces of the pictures. But being a First Nation people, your priorities are different. Of course we joke about ourselves, character-wise, but the richness of our people is on the inside rather than on the outside. And you look at these pictures and even though they are going through some hardship, you can see people are somewhat content. Still content. Some are able to laugh. They are not completely succumbed to the outside forces. Still have their liberty, freedom at least to facial and other expressions. It shows the diversity and the ability to adapt to new situations. We are very adaptable (Blackwater 26.11.01).

Kainai in Oxford

After we had multiple trips to the Blood Reserve to work on various aspects of the project, Kainai people were finally able to visit the PRM in the spring of 2004. Frank Weasel Head and Andy Blackwater, with whom we have worked closely during the

entire project, spent several days in Oxford, meeting staff, looking at collections, and seeing the museum. During this time they identified Blackfoot material in the museum's collections, and gave a lecture on their work repatriating sacred material. The most exciting part of their visit was a session examining mid-nineteenth century Blackfoot 'war shirts' in the PRM collections. On examining one in detail, Weasel Head and Blackwater taught us to look for traces of body paint left by wearers and described their ceremonial use. When he saw a drawer with another five of these shirts, though, Weasel Head said, 'I have never even seen one of these kinds of shirts. Not a single one.' The next day, in his lecture to PRM staff and students, he asked not only why he had never seen these before, but also why not a single Kainai child in the past century and a half had ever seen them. Andy Blackwater reminded us why such visits are difficult for First Nations people:

> You are holding part of us there—we don't alienate ourselves from those items. We continue to include them in our prayers. In our community we don't have one of those at all, at the present time. (Blackwater to Peers, personal communication 5 May)

As difficult as such project are when conducted overseas, this is an important opportunity to acknowledge that one of the things we should be doing with historic collections in the UK is ensuring that their source communities have the opportunity to study them. We look forward to taking back photographs of these shirts to Kainai people, and exploring loans, as ways of doing this.

Implications and conclusions

At its deepest level, this project has turned out to be not about photographs or artefacts at all, but about relationships - both the relationships documented in the photographs and the relationships which can be developed around such materials in the present. The knowledge generated and recovered in this project has been multifold. We have learned that though community members welcomed the opportunity to use the knowledge elicited by the photographs to create counter-narratives to external impressions of Kainai people and history for a broad audience, they were primarily interested in using the images to bridge knowledge gaps within their *own* community. This is, we should emphasize, a common situation in projects which bring together museum collections and indigenous source communities: there is not simply a multiplicity of narratives and counter-narratives, but usually a multiplicity of agendas and goals for such projects which differ greatly for museum, scholarly researcher, and source community members. Like the narratives themselves, these are not always reconcilable.

For the Kainai, historical and cultural information has been retrieved, recorded, transcribed, and deposited in the library at Red Crow Community College for community use. Beatrice Blackwood's intended meanings of racial 'types' and cultural purity are being subverted, and the photographs will serve as prompts for conversations across generations, about Kainai cultural values and behaviour. The tapes are already being listened to and we have received messages from College staff about the richness of the information recorded in Blackfoot intended specifically for

the community. This material is being used not only for teaching purposes, but is helping staff members to clarify aspects of their own genealogies. Duane Mistaken Chief, an instructor at the College, for example, has explained that looking at the photographs and listening to the interview tapes is has cleared up a number questions surrounding his and his children's family histories:

> The actually do have a lot contained in them and knowing the language; the context; and, the background of the speakers really enriches which I have heard on the tapes. It's kind of like having a different kind of conversation going on in my head, other than what is being said on tape (Mistaken Chief to Brown, personal communication 15 April 2004).

We also have been told of the circulation throughout the community of copies of the photographs we sent over for personal use. We are now seeking funds to move onto the community-based part of the project. Community members have suggested that a small exhibition be developed using the images and some of the community-based information that emerged during interviews. This would provide another opportunity for more Kainai to view the images, and would strengthen the growing sense within the community of the importance of family photographs. We have also been asked to contribute to a degree programme in Kainai Studies where we would talk about this project in a series of discussions about repatriation.

For the PRM, the process of learning how to work within a community-based research paradigm has been challenging, but rewarding. We have had to rethink the issue of copyright attached to photographic collections, of our obligations to source communities, and the ways in which source communities are (and generally are not) represented in displays, research grant applications, and institutional policy. The protocol agreement has provided the basis for policy documents within several departments of the museum. Most significantly, we have gained a sense that collections really do belong at one level to their communities of origin: that they have meanings, memories, and knowledge attached to them that are tremendously empowering, in places other than the museum or scholarly arenas.

It has taken almost eighty years for the Kainai community to have access to Blackwood's photographs and one of the questions posed by Kainai at the outset of the project was why had it taken the Museum so long to bring these images to them. In trying to answer that very direct and necessary question we have had to articulate our own understandings of why museums need to operate differently within the post-colonial era, and how they might do so. As the PRM attempts to redefine itself as a relational museum, exploring social and material relationships in the present as well as the past, we look forward to continuing to work with the Kainai community to further understand how the meanings they bring to museum collections can foster new perspectives on colonial interactions, and can contribute to debates about the responsibilities of museums to their source communities.

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