Volume 4, Issue 1

Photographic bundles

Jan Newberry

Photographic bundles

Jan Newberry

Abstract

The Raising Spirit project began as a participatory one using photo-elicitation. Across the project, the role of photographs shifted from objects meant to elicit Blackfoot childrearing values to bundles of relations realized in a photographic complex that unsettled boundaries between young and old, settler and Indigenous, and university and community. Adapting design approaches to coding the photographs moved our work beyond conventional challenges to the photographic representation of Indigenous North Americans. Like Blackfoot bundles, the transfers of knowledge through the photographic bundle built relationships and mediated expectations about what research, tradition, and other ways of knowing can be.

Raising Spirit began as a photo-elicitation project designed to prompt reflection on and articulation of values that may be practiced but not be explicitly voiced. I had suggested it as a form of auto-ethnography in Heider's (1975, pp.3) sense of a routine-eliciting technique to get at the Dani's own account of "what people do." By combining this approach with community-based participatory action research (Hall, 1992), 8000 photographs of everyday moments of raising children were taken by Opokaa'sin caregivers.

These photos became the anchor in a project that ranged widely in the communities reached, relationships built, and methods employed. They were the focus of interviews with the participant-photographers, with powwow participants, with Elders, and with young children. Layers of voices were recorded talking about a selection of the photographs. Children and youth produced art in reaction to them. Field trips to sacred sites were taken with knowledge keepers and traditional stories were recorded to provide context for the values reflected in them. They were collated, indexed, and coded by Indigenous high school and university students. Experimental, design-based, collaborative ethnographic work was done with them. Ultimately, they were handed over to Opokaa'sin for their use, and with the hope that other images might be added by community members to sustain the library as a living resource for the future.

I am not a visual anthropologist. Prompting the collection and use of so many photographs made me anxious. My anxiety was compounded because, for the first time, most of the ethnographic fieldwork was not done by me. Stepping away from the embodied experience of first-hand fieldwork and the presumed authority conferred was disorienting. I didn't take the photographs or do the interviews around them. I wasn't always present for the work with young people, and my work with the young researchers, settler and Indigenous, was filtered through the work of Amy and Erin. Instead, I supervised all the people doing the work.

It was the photographs that knotted together my participation in this project with the work of youth under my supervision. I charted the travel of these photographs through Blackfoot Territory in their fieldnotes, their blogs, their stories about what they had done on their field trips, and in their shared anxieties about what we were doing and what it meant for them and for Blackfoot peoples generally. All of this was troubling to me. What was my responsibility to these stories that were not my own but that were shaped by Blackfoot Territory? And what was my responsibility to the young researchers who were in my care and who were powerfully affected by this work, its limits, its ethical dilemmas, its complex skein of relationships, and its implications of properly identifying the traditional and the culturally authentic?

Photographs of Indigenous people in North America have been a particularly powerful point of contention in terms of representation (Glass, 2009). Although in this case Indigenous, primarily Blackfoot, parents were making choices about what to photograph, the underlying logic of the initial project had been to locate and elicit a tradition of values still practiced despite violent disruption. This logic of lost tradition was not only my own, but that of our Indigenous collaborators. This was one reason why my recognition of the colonizing implications of choosing photo-elicitation was slow in coming. It was evident that the project photographs were entangled with memory and desire for the participant photographers and their interlocutors. This desire registers a broader desire by Indigenous peoples whose images have been captured and collected for so long to re-appropriate not just images but memory (Seesequasis, 2019).

The goal of preservation was driven by the sense, felt by many of our Blackfoot collaborators, that histories of childrearing practices were still being erased through foster care and a broken child-care system.

The original goals of the project included revitalizing language and increasing cultural resilience by identifying key values. The work focused on adult photographers and interlocutors. Later, as project goals shifted to the development of a digital storytelling library available through a mobile application, the work also shifted to center young people and incorporate them as researchers. They were charged with adding to knowledge about the photographs and helping to interpret the meanings of the original photographs through a

variety of media. Young people from kindergarten to university age interviewed and were interviewed, made art, produced exhibits, coded photographs, and related them to traditional stories.

We experimented with a design approach to coding the photographs in relation to all the other material produced to organize and build the digital library. Mixed groups gathered to identify and connect values represented in the photographs to the Blackfoot terms identified through research with community members and Elders. These groups included, variously: old and young, university and community members, Indigenous and settler folk, and students and faculty. This collaborative analysis was mediated through the photographs themselves, often placed in the centre of a large sheet of brown paper which served as the canvas for coding notes, connections, field observations, doodling, and relationship building. Although what was represented in the photograph was the presenting problem, it was the act of sitting together to contemplate values that became the most significant and transformative work of the project.

Figure 1: *Collaborative coding at one of our first design studios.*

The work in the second half of the project exploded some of the early and accepted approaches to ethnographic research on other ways of knowing. What was "elicited" was no traditional framework but rather the emergent hopes for connection to values at play among Indigenous young people, including those living off-reserve and in care, and the possible futures imagined through such ethnographic methods for sharing other ways of being across difference for settler and Indigenous young people alike (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018).

The repatriation (and digitization) of photographs from museums and archives (Lydon, 2010; Seesequasis, 2019) to their original communities is part of yet one more return to decolonizing anthropology. Resignification of the photographs after return transfers has been considered as well (Glass, 2009). Huleah Tsinhnahjinne (2003, pp.41), a Seminole/Muscogee/Dine' photographer, describes the beautiful day when she decided to "take responsibility to reinterpret images of Native people." Yet, for the Raising Spirit project, the collaborative production and interpretation of images was done by Indigenous people *alongside* the diverse others brought together by the project. Relations of difference were mediated not just by the images but the photographs as material objects themselves.

Ultimately, it was not what the pictures depicted that mattered so much as how they served as bundles of relations. Edwards (2012) considers the photograph as a relational object and the photography complex as sets of "photographic relations and the complex purposes and practices that entangle the photographic image" and that have the "capacity to mobilize new material realities" (Edwards, 2012, pp.223). The agency of the photograph itself is activated by "networks of humans and nonhumans, people and things" (ibid.). The Raising Spirit photographs bundled together relationships across apparent community divides and, as it happens, Blackfoot ways of knowing provides a way to understand this.

Blackfoot ceremonial life centers on bundles of sacred objects conceived as living beings and transferred between people and ritual societies as a medium of exchange and connection, and as sets of relationships that include both human and other than human (Noble, 2007). These bundles are relational objects like the photographs themselves. For our project, the photographs entangled traditionalists with young people in foster care, postdoctoral fellows with kindergartners, university researchers with agency social workers and educators. This photographic bundle mediated expectations about what research, tradition, and other ways of knowing can be.

References

de la Cadena, M., and Blaser, M., eds., 2018. *A world of many worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Edwards, E., 2012. Objects of affect: Photography beyond the image. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41, pp.221-234.

Glass, A., 2009. A cannibal in the archive: Performance, materiality, and (in) visibility in unpublished Edward Curtis photographs of the Kwakw aka'wakw Hamat'sa. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 25(2), pp.128-149.

Hall, B. L., 1992. From margins to center? The development and purpose of participatory research. *The American Sociologist,* 26(1), pp.15-28.

Heider, K., 1975. What do people do? Dani auto-ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 31(1), 3-17.

Lydon, J., 2010. Return: The photographic archive and technologies of Indigenous memory. *Photographies*, 3(2), pp.173-187.

Noble, B., 2007. Justice, transaction, translation: Blackfoot Tipi transfers and WIPO's search for the facts of traditional knowledge exchange. *American Anthropologist,* 109(2), pp.338-349.

Seesequasis, P., 2019. *Blanket toss under midnight sun: Portraits of everyday life in eight Indigenous communities*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

Tsinhnahjinnie, H., 2003. When Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words?. In: C. Pinney and N. Peterson, eds. *Photography's Other Histories.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 40-52.

Jan Newberry is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Lethbridge, Canada. Her book *Back Door Java: State Formation and the Domestic in Working Class Java* considered urban space, gender, community and state in social reproduction theory. More recently, she has worked on the governmentality of global early childhood education programs. Her work has appeared in *Economy & Society*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Indonesia*, *Anthropologica*, *Ethics and Social Welfare*, and *Collaborative Anthropologies* among other peer-reviewed journals. Her current research concerns collaborative and multimodal ethnographic methods in Blackfoot Territory. She is co-founder of the University of Lethbridge's Institute for Child and Youth.

Web: https://directory.uleth.ca/users/jan.newberry
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8462-2231