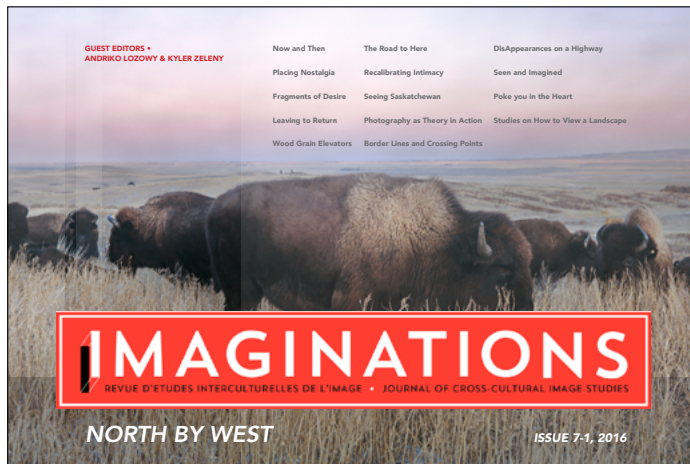


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NOW AND THEN: SITUATING CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE CANADIAN WEST INTO A SHARED PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY

ELIZABETH ANNE CAVALIERE

Résumé

La photographie a une place importante, contemporaine et historique, dans les visions de mise en forme, dans l'élaboration de visions, compréhensions, et expériences de l'Ouest canadien. Les utilisations variées des premières photographies de l'Ouest, circulé dans un moment de la conscience nationale provoquée par la Confédération, ont façonné l'imaginaire collectif canadien. Artistes contemporains sont encore influencés par un grand nombre des mêmes idées qui émergent en ce moment au début de l'histoire canadienne, à un moment que le pays et la photographie développer ensemble. Thèmes de l'exploration, l'identité, le colonialisme, le règlement, le tourisme, les ressources naturelles, l'industrie, et l'écologie sont résonnant dans les photographies historiques maintenant continues dans des collections d'archives et de musées comme dans les photographies contemporaines et l'écriture de celui-ci. Cet essai relie des thèmes historiques et œuvres d'archives avec le travail de photographes contemporains travaillant dans l'Ouest du Canada aujourd'hui, et qui est présentée dans ce journal. Cet essai se développe l'histoire qui persiste dans les thèmes que les photographes contemporains explorent dans leur travail, et servir comme un lien entre les artistes présentés dans ce journal dans une histoire visuelle commune.

Abstract

Photography has played an important role, both contemporary and historical, in shaping visions, understandings, and experiences of the Canadian West. The varied uses of early photographs of the West, circulated in a moment of national consciousness brought on by Confederation, shaped the collective Canadian imagination. Contemporary artists and scholars continue to be influenced by many of the same ideas that emerged in this early moment of Canadian history, when both country and medium developed alongside one another. Themes of exploration, identity, colonialism, settlement, tourism, natural resource, industry, and ecology find as much resonance in historical photographs in archival and museological collections as they do in contemporary photography and critical discourse. This essay bridges historical themes and archival pieces with the images of contemporary photographers working in western Canada today, whose photographs are featured in this issue. This essay sets the historical framework that endures in themes that contemporary photographers explore and also links the artists featured in this issue into a shared visual history.

Photography has played an important role, both contemporary and historical, in shaping visions, understandings, and experiences of the Canadian West. Shortly after the rivalrous invention of photography in France and Britain in 1839, explorers and itinerant photographers produced the first photographs of Manitoba and Saskatchewan's expansive prairies and, by the 1850s and 1860s, Alberta and British Columbia's Rocky

Fig. 1. *The Prairie Looking West*, 1858.

Mountain range. This moment in the mid-19th century is a particularly poignant one, bringing together a nascent photographic medium with the exploration and coming together of Canada as a new nation. Both settlers and the colonial government of British North America, soon to be the Canadian government after Confederation in 1867, were keen to tap into the possibilities that lay westwards, motivated by the gold rush and natural resources of the northwest; the potential for colonial expansion and settlement in the prairies; the threat of advancement northward from the United States; a quickly expiring hold on the interior by the Hudson Bay Company; and the British imperialist drive to gain access to the Pacific.

Contemporary artists and scholars continue to be influenced by many of the same ideas that emerged in this early moment of Canadian history, when both country and medium developed alongside one another. Themes of exploration, identity, colonialism, settlement, tourism, natural resource, industry, and ecology—to name only a few—find as much

resonance in the historical photographs now held in archival and museological collections as they do in the contemporary photographs and essays in journals such as *Imaginations*. While by no means a comprehensive history of Canadian photography, this essay will work to bridge historical themes and photographs with the work of contemporary artists photographing the Canadian West. By setting a historical framework, I hope to develop an ongoing dialogue between the historic and the contemporary, as well as to situate the artists featured in this journal into a shared photographic history.

One of the earliest uses of photography in Canada was in the exploration of land. In 1858, Humphrey Lloyd Hime was the first photographer in Canada to be attached to a governmental exploratory survey. Photographs produced during the survey, such as his *Prairie Looking West* (fig. 1), have become iconic early images of the Canadian interior, both in their moment and ours, for their ability to describe the land physically (in this case flat and expansive in every direction) as well as to shape an ideological understanding of the prairie land as empty and ready for settlement.¹ The complexity, bulkiness, and danger of early photographic processes, such as the daguerreotype—made by exposing

a silver-coated copper plate to dangerous mercury vapours producing a singular, highly detailed and sharp image—discouraged the use of photography on survey expeditions for nearly two decades after the medium's invention. However, the collodion wet-plate process used by photographers such as Hime had the advantage of the clarity of a daguerreotype combined with the reproducibility of a calotype—a paper-based process that produced a less crisp but reproducible negative—and a newfound portability in the durable glass plates. Additionally, the exposure times for the collodion wet-plate process were shortened significantly from that of the daguerreotype, broadening the range and clarity of photographic subjects. These technological milestones were paramount in photography's use in the geological and topographical documentation of the Canadian West during the 19th century. Photographs were used by surveyors, scientists, engineers, government officials, and even amateur naturalists as a way to inventory and process the land and its contents visually.² As documentation, photographs contributed to the delineation of physical boundaries between Canada and the United States as well as to the shaping of a concept of national consciousness through the claiming of place.

The scientific and documentary function of photography continued to grow throughout the 19th and 20th centuries with, for example, developments in aerial photography and photogrammetry. The precision and perceived objective nature of the photograph made it an invaluable tool in the measurement and collection of data about the land. However, the mapping, documenting, and inventorying of the Canadian West is not exclusive to official governmental and military efforts. Artists have found much inspiration in photography's scientific capacities—an interest that often hinges on the technological qualities of photography—in order to map and delineate geographical space in connection to the construction of identity. In his series *Borderline*, Andreas Rutkauskas visually documents the border with the fidelity of the camera while at the same time drawing out the subtle physical and cultural distinctions that define the identities of both Canada and the United States. Further, whereas photography in the 19th century provided a new tool in the documentation of physical space, today digital photographic technologies coupled with the exactitude of satellite mapping provide new conceptions of space that challenge and reinterpret notions about the boundary and frontier. Tara Milbrandt and Doug Harper's *Portrait of a City*, for example, engages the longstanding notion of the frontier as it meets the postmodern through photographs of architectural relationships in Edmonton.

The establishment of borders throughout Canadian history physically defined a nation and at the same time brought the resources contained within those borders under national control. Natural resources, from trees to water to prairie, and infrastructure, notably the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) completed in 1885, transported resources eastward and settlers westward. Logging and mining camps, bridges, railroads, steamships, and machinery are frequent subjects in 19th-century photography, often commissioned as records by the owners, developers, and engineers overseeing the enterprise. Commissions were given to professional photographers, many of whom had their own commercial studios. The Montreal studio of photographer William Notman was one of the most prolific studios in Canada in the 19th century.³ The Geological Survey of Canada in 1871 commissioned Notman's studio to provide a photographer, Benjamin Baltzly, to accompany their survey team through the Rocky Mountains.⁴ Notman's son, William MacFarlane Notman, was commissioned to photograph various mining operations throughout Ontario. In addition, Notman himself received a commission from the engineer of the Victoria Bridge, James Hodges, to document the various stages of its construction—this commission launched Notman's prestigious career. Photographers documenting resources, infrastructure, and enterprise, such as those from the Notman studio, used photography both to catalogue and to glorify. Both industrialists and the broader public understood scenes of industry and accomplishment as symbols of progress and of pride in their new nation. Notman's Victoria Bridge photographs (fig. 2), for example, convey not only the various stages of its construction, but also the magnitude and magnificence of what was then the largest bridge ever built.



Fig. 2. Victoria Bridge under construction, from below North Abutment, 1859.

For 19th-century Canadians, resources seemed infinite, as was the industry that emerged around the cultivation of those resources. Recent attitudes towards the ecological status of the land and its resources, however, have brought into question the impact of industry on the environment and surrounding communities. In the 1970s, photography became more conceptual, critical, and political in critiquing industrialization

and suburbanization.⁵ Contemporary photographers have turned their lenses towards an active questioning of the effects of Canadian resource consumption, now understood to be quickly exhausting and detrimental to the land. Towns that were prosperous and thriving due to resource-based industry now sit abandoned as the primary resource has been harvested, mined, or farmed to extinction. Eamon MacMahon's photographs

of abandoned Uranium City, a once-prominent mining town in northern Saskatchewan, trace the fallout of the collapse of a resource-based, single-industry town. His photographs capture the scars of industry and the vacant buildings of disappearing communities of workers as they are slowly reclaimed by nature. Likewise, George Webber's photographs of aging and abandoned prairie towns both recall the early excitement towards the

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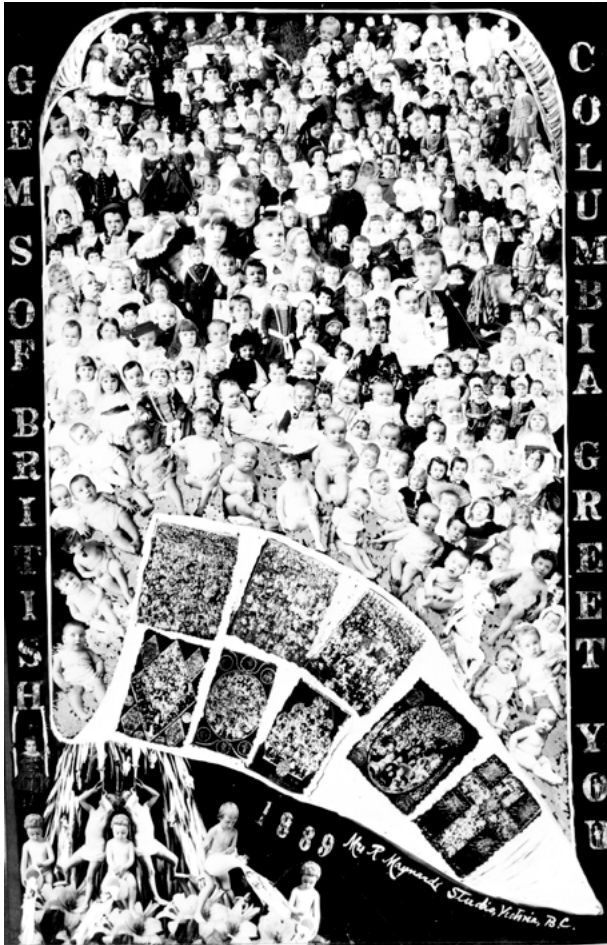


Fig. 3. *The Gems of British Columbia Greet You*, 1858.

harnessing of Canadian natural resources and mark the consequences of early progress. Valerie Zink's series *Oxen to Oil* brings a human understanding to the prairie oil economy through photographs of workers and their living environments where natural resources are still being extracted. Aaron Elkaim's series *Sleeping with the Devil* conveys the profound impact of the oil industry on citizens of Fort McKay First Nation in their move away from traditional ways of life.

In addition to inventorying and documenting resource and industry, photographs were used to plan and document the construction of symbols of national unity such as the CPR. The dissemination of images worked both to satiate curiosities about the vast interiors of the country as well as to encourage settlement in the West. The westward movement of settlers upon the completion of the transcontinental railway continued well into the 20th century. Whereas the earliest photographs of the Canadian West were made by explorers or studio photographers from central Canada on commission, the populating of the West brought photographers who resided more permanently in the growing towns and cities of the interior to the Pacific Coast. Itinerant photographers and studio photographers, such as Richard and Hannah Maynard⁶ or Frederick Dally⁷, documented the emergence and development of cities and towns across western Canada as well as growing communities of people. The often playful studio photographs of Hannah Maynard,

for example, not only depict a range of citizens and travellers through Victoria, British Columbia, but also reflect the ways people consumed photography. Her annual *Gems of British Columbia* (fig. 3) provided a composite of all of the baby photographs made in her studio over the course of a year and was sent to clients as a holiday card. These types of photographs were eagerly consumed by local populations and reflect a sense of community and local pride.

Today, scholars and archivists use historical photographs to shed light on local histories of both place and photography. Local histories of place, community, and belonging, however, are no less important to contemporary photographers. Several photographers in this issue explore their own local histories of place, creating biographical studies of the West as home. Thomas Gardiner considers the lived experience of urban centers to rural towns through photographs of sharply contrasting symbols. Through his photographs, Gardiner traces a local history of change and its impact on his own life. In her series *trans.plant*, Vera Saltzman reflects on place as a shared history of human experience. Saltzman uses photographs to connect memories of her childhood home in Cape Breton to the physical realities of her new home in rural Saskatchewan. Likewise, John Conway's series *Sense of Place on the Saskatchewan Prairie* explores the ambiguity of place in relation to memory through photographs of disparate yet visually

similar geographical locations. The movement of people westward was not a fixed event in Canadian history. Immigration and migration continue to bring people from across Canada and the world to the West, creating a nexus of cultures in a shared place. Take, for example, Elyse Bouvier's exploration of the Chinese-Canadian experience in the West through her photographs of restaurants and food in rural Albertan towns. Bouvier draws attention to an experience ripe with telling juxtapositions that is often overlooked in dominant histories of the Canadian West that emphasize European settler history.

While photography was integral to the exploration and settlement of the Canadian West, it was also a central component of a much more leisurely pursuit in the 19th century. A burgeoning industry, tourism was based principally on the spectacular vistas of the Rocky Mountains and made possible with the accessibility of the transcontinental railroad. Photography both now and in the 19th century is a relatively democratized medium, purchased directly from a photographic studio or made by anyone with the advent of the personal Kodak camera. Photographs were inexpensive ways to collect and inventory sites as souvenirs or for potential future travel.⁸ In the late-19th and early-20th centuries, tourist photographs became central components of personal travel albums, travel literature, and collectable memorabilia. Perhaps the most famous example of a tourist's own use of photography is found in the 1893 publication *Through Canada With A Kodak* by the Countess of Aberdeen. Along with the written account of her journey, the book included both the Countess's own photographs taken with a Kodak camera and photographs purchased from photographic studios.⁹

In addition to appealing to the individual, photography in the tourism market was quickly taken advantage of by business and industry. The CPR under the direction of William Cornelius Van Horne, its general manager from 1882 and president from 1888, took advantage of photography's popularity in the creation of illustrated promotional material about the railroad with the intention of attracting both tourists and settlers westwards. Van Horne had a fondness for the arts both as a collector and as an amateur painter; his artists' pass program resulted in a great many paintings and photographs of scenery along the CPR.¹⁰ Widely displayed, published, and collected, these images brought Canadians visually closer to a landscape that was unique to their nation.

The sights of the Canadian West are no less attractive to tourists today and endure as symbols of Canadian national identity. In addition to producing photographs of the landscape, contemporary photographers also explore the ways in which photography is used by tourists and the tourism industry to shape experience and encounters with nature. Bridging the past and present, Trudi Lynn Smith's ongoing project *Finding Aid* explores the re-photographing of popular tourist attractions from the archival record—prominent sites, such as Lake Louise in Banff National Park, that continue to attract visitors from across Canada and the globe. Smith's series questions the ability of tourists to access the past history of a particular site by acknowledging the temporary and ephemeral nature of the tourist industry. Jessica Auer's series *Studies on How to View Landscape* works to understand the act of looking itself by recording tourists in the act and by tracing the dominance of particular sites in which

Photography both now and in the 19th century is a relatively democratized medium, purchased directly from a photographic studio or made by anyone with the advent of the personal Kodak camera.

that act takes place. Conversely, Erin Ashenhurt's series *Dis/Appearances on a Highway: A Model Drive* develops the artist's own personal experience as a tourist, photographing grand sites alongside the less appealing roadside motels and attractions during her road trip from Vancouver to Stewart, British Columbia. Nonetheless, her playful challenge on the constructed nature of such experience echoes the legacy of photography's participation in the construction of the tourist experience.

As people were finding ways to use and consume photography in the 19th century, they were also coming to terms with Canada as a nation. The formative link between photography and Canadian imagination, particularly as it exists in the history of photography of the Canadian West, has endured to this very day. The connection between image making and the making of a Canadian imagination can be attributed at least in part to the institutions that collect and preserve Canadian photographic history—Library and Archives Canada, the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, and the many historical societies, archives, galleries and museums.

The photographers featured in this special issue continue this legacy, often using archival photographs, investigating historical themes, and photographing the same prominent sights and small towns in the Canadian West that have been photographed since the medium's inception. *North by West* offers a collection of contemporary photographers, image makers, and scholars who each contribute their own critical perspective on visual culture. Visual culture does not stand in absentia, but rather works in relation to and problematizes issues of race, colonialism, wealth, territory, industry, politics, ecology, and culture using the dominant communicative form of the day—the visual in relation to our own imaginations.

Image Notes

Figure 1: Humphrey Lloyd Hime. *The Prairie Looking West*. 1858. C-017443. Image courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

Figure 2: William Notman. *Victoria Bridge under construction, from below North Abutment*. 1859. PA-181445. Image courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

Figure 3: Hannah Maynard. *The Gems of British Columbia Greet You*. 1889. F-05081. Image courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

Notes

¹ For studies of Hime see: Richard Huyda. *Camera in the interior: 1858. H.L. Hime, Photographer The Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition*. Toronto, Ont.: The Coach House Press, 1975; Joan M. Schwartz. "More Than 'Competent Description of an Intractably Empty Landscape': A Strategy for Critical Engagement with Historical Photographs." *Historical Geography* 31 (2003): 105-130.

² Scholar Suzanne Zeller has suggested that the expansionism and unification of Canada relied strongly on human as well as natural resources. For Zeller, the processes of inventorying—equally dependent on those creating the inventory and the resources being counted—and of utilitarianism are definitive in the formation of Victorian Canada and the "natural theology" that she sees as characteristic of Victorian science. Suzanne Zeller. *Land of Promise, Promised Land: The Culture of Victorian Science in Canada*. Ottawa, Ont.: The Canadian Historical Association, 1996.

³ See: Stanley G. Triggs. *William Notman: The Stamp of a Studio*. Toronto, Ont.: Coach House Press and Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985.

⁴ See: Elizabeth Anne Cavaliere. "Benjamin Baltzly: A Photographer's Expedition Journal." *Journal of Canadian Art History* 35.1 (Fall 2014): 16-129.

⁵ The critical turning point is often seen to be the 1975 exhibition "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape" held at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY.

⁶ See: David Mattison. "The Maynards: A Victoria Photographic Couple." *New Islander* (October 19, 1980). [is there a page range?]

⁷ See: Joan M. Schwartz. "Frederick Dally." *Encyclopedia of 19th-Century Photography*. Ed. John Hannavy. New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2007: 377; Andrew J. Birrell. "Frederick Dally: Photo Chronicler of B.C. a Century Ago." *Canadian Photography* (February 1977): 14-19.

⁸ For further discussion of the photograph as a commodity in tourism, see: John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London, UK: SAGE Publications, 1990. For a key case study of the relationship between photography and tourism in a Canadian context, see: Keri Cronin. *Manufacturing National Park Nature: Photography, Ecology, and the Wilderness Industry of Jasper Park*. Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, 2011.

⁹ Ishbel Gordon, Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair. *Through Canada With A Kodak: By the Countess of Aberdeen*. Edinburgh, UK: W. H. White & Co., 1893.

¹⁰ See: E.J. Hart. *The Selling of Canada: The CPR and the Beginnings of Canadian Tourism*. Banff: Altitude, 1983; Roger Boulet and Terry Fenton. *Vistas: Artists on the Canadian Pacific Railway*. Calgary, Alta.: Glenbow Museum, 2009.