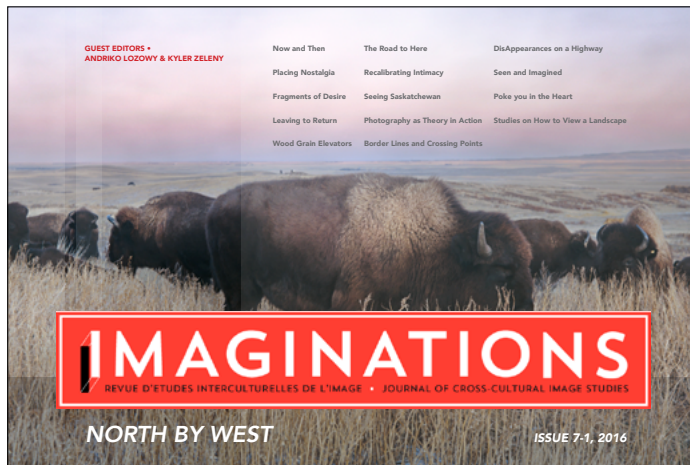


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PHOTOGRAPHY AS THEORY IN ACTION: WILLIAM HANSON BOORNE, GEORGE WEBBER, AND THE PEOPLE OF THE BLOOD

GEORGE WEBBER & MATT DYCE

Résumé

Cet article analyse les représentations non-Indigènes des danses cérémonielles des Kainai (Gens-du-Sang) de l'Ouest du Canada en comparant deux événements photographiques distincts séparés par un siècle. Le premier photographe, William Hanson Boorne, était imprégné des présomptions coloniales sur les peuples Autochtones qui prévalaient au cours des années 1880. Boorne a employé les mythologies liées à l'appareil photo, comme sa prétendue capacité à « capturer l'ombre » ('shadow catcher') en photographiant la traditionnelle danse du soleil contre les souhaits des Kainais. Selon lui, il photographiait là les images d'une pratique qu'il croyait être sur le point de disparaître à cause de la modernisation de l'Ouest. Le deuxième photographe, George Webber, est un documentariste contemporain basé à Calgary (Alberta). En 2000, il a également photographié les participants à la danse du soleil des Kainais. Bien que Webber partage l'objectif de Boorne de représenter visuellement la spiritualité et le mouvement de modernisation de l'Ouest, sa pratique photographique est différente de celle de Boorne. Webber concevait l'utilisation de l'appareil photo comme un outil de mémoire culturelle et une façon de comprendre les changements tels que vécus par les individus. La comparaison des deux événements photographiques que représentent Boorne et Webber sont mis en contexte dans le cadre des deux thèmes de ce numéro spécial : l'Ouest canadien comme un discours visuel, et la photographie comme « théorie en l'action ».

Abstract

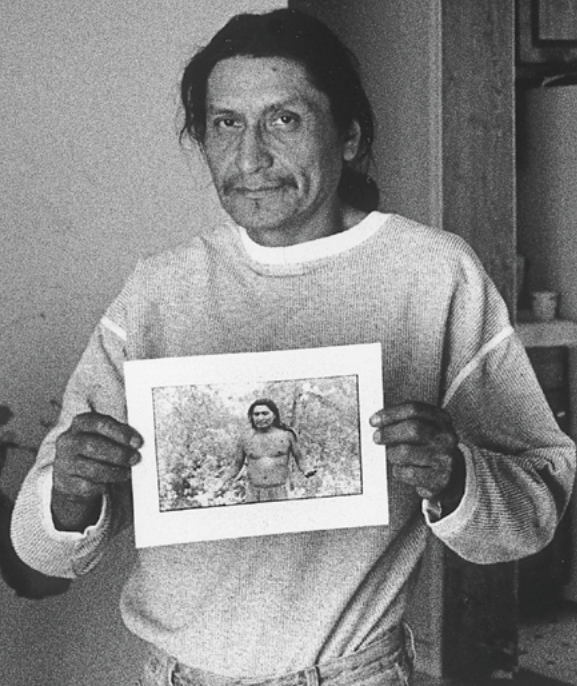
This paper analyzes non-Indigenous representations of Kainai (Blood) ceremonial dances in Western Canada by comparing two distinct photographic events separated by a century. The first photographer, William Hanson Boorne, exhibits colonial assumptions about Indigenous people that were prevalent in the 1880s. He utilized mythologies about the camera as a "shadow catcher" when he surreptitiously photographed the sun dance against the wishes of the Kainai, capturing images of a practice he believed was about to disappear as the West was transformed by modernity. The second photographer, George Webber, is a contemporary documentarian operating out of Calgary, AB. In 2000, he also photographed participants in the Kainai sun dance. While he shared Boorne's aim to depict spirituality and desire to present the West in transformation, Webber's pictures and photographic practices are significantly different than his predecessor. He treats the camera as a cross-cultural memory tool and means of understanding personal change. Comparison of the two photographic events illuminates the Canadian West as a visual discourse and photography as "theory in action."

Fig. 1. Horace Shouting in his living room holding a photograph of himself after completing his Sun Dance in 2000, 2005 - (Webber, *People of the Blood* 101).

This special issue of *Imaginations, North By West*, considers how photography is “theory in action” in the context of visual discourses of the Canadian West. Assigning these two together is a felicitous pairing, as photography and “the West” are both inventions of the 19th century: contained in each is the literal sense of being a newly discovered practice or a place, yet their larger making cannot be subtracted from the realm of cultur-

al imagination. Photography, developed in the crucible of a European industrial revolution, was quickly enlisted as a medium through which to present modernity (Trachtenberg; Kern). The realism apparent in the camera became a significant tool for organizing the natural sciences, freezing the chaos of the observable world into a still and silent document; in the home it became the preferred method of recording family histories and experience. Emblem-

atic of the modern world undergoing a period of rapid change and upheaval, photography offered not only the remarkable ability to capture and freeze time but also appeared to overcome space by making the distant apprehensible. For many Europeans, it made remote lands of imperial conquest appear before their eyes and helped organize the people who lived there into the racial and social prejudices imagined by “European civilization.”



In parallel, categories of time and space also informed the invention of the Canadian West. After purchasing Hudson's Bay Company's land rights in 1871, the nascent country of Canada planned for independent growth through a national policy calling for opening the West to farming and transforming it into a captive market for Eastern manufacture. To accomplish this goal, an array of spatial technologies were released on the region: the train was meant to annihilate distance between east and west; the squared survey grid of the Dominion Land Act aimed to fix an egalitarian settler society in place; government cartographers gave the land new names and meanings; Indigenous peoples were forcibly moved to reserves; the churches hoped to spread Anglo Protestant values; and visual propaganda in settler's pamphlets and CPR advertising promised a country of plenty, imagining gold wheat fields and a string of glistening prairie metropolises stretching across the plains (Owram). At the turn of the century,

the Canadian West was created as a thoroughly modern space, a frontier representing an implicitly new area that promised to be a step forward into a dynamic future. Thus, in the realm of cultural imagination, photography and the West were of the same order: they both promised a means of coordinating space and time. Each signalled a break between the past and the future, and both conveyed the dynamic sense of modernity and suddenness of change present in their age. In turn, looking at the places where photography and the West intersect can help illuminate the relation between visual discourses and Western imagery and the anchor points that have bound them together.

In this essay I draw comparisons and contrasts in two places where photography and the West were enmeshed in order to analyze the understudied relationship between photography, history, and spirituality. I argue that a pair of photographic encounters—one in the 1880s and one in the 1990s—may provide helpful bookends for thinking about the relationship between these issues. Both take place on the Kainai Reserve in southwest Alberta and involve non-Indigenous responses to the ceremonial sun dance carried out there. A comparative analysis of these photographic sets, separated by a century, offers insights into the relationship between peoples and concepts in the late-19th century and today.

As a historical and cultural geographer, I was invited to reflect on the work of Calgary-based documentary photographer, George Webber, and to do so using "photography as theory in action" as a method for thinking through visual discourses of the Western Canadian frontier. *North By West* intentionally aimed to place academics and practicing photographers in collaboration with one another. The assessment offered here emerged out of a conversation between myself and Webber. In order to continue that conversation here, I juxtapose his recent work with a photographer working in the same area 100 years earlier, William Hanson Boorne. They form important bookends of the period, since both Boorne and Webber offer photographic responses to Indigenous ceremonial practices in the West. This essay proceeds by recounting Boorne's photographic work relating to the sun dance of the Kainai people in Western Canada and then exploring the ways that academics have interrogated, overturned, and sought to decolonize previous understandings of Indigenous views on and uses of photography. With this methodology established, I return to the work of Webber to analyze how his photographic point-of-view and work on the Kainai Reserve upsets and challenges received ideas of spirituality, frontier, and history.

1880s—William Hanson Boorne

In the late-19th century the Kainai were known as the Blood Tribe and were one of three bands making up the larger Blackfoot Confederacy. Their trading relationship with Europeans dated to the early fur-trade period and they retained a significant amount of power and influence in the region. Yet their autonomy had been severely undermined by the extirpation of the plains bison, the incursion of white settler society, and government attempts to erode their culture through the *Gradual Civilization Act* (1857) and later the federal *Indian Act* (1876). As their society was under assault by colonialism, the rich spiritual representations of the Kainai, Siksika, and Peigan people were repurposed to serve as symbols denoting European ideas about the frontier in this period. Although the horse had long been an integral part of Kainai culture and social rank, images depicting a lone warrior on horseback roaming the prairies conjured for many viewers a concept of independence from the decadent grasp of modern, industrial cities and waged labour. Brilliant headdresses and embroidered garments evoked much the same interest in the parlours of the East (“Making Sense out/of the Visual”). The photographs in Figures 2, 3, and 4 offer a glimpse of the types of images that interested colonial society. The images captured Indigenous peoples and transformed them into an overlapping set of meanings. For some, these pictures were evidence of a world of freedom that still existed outside “civilized” colonial society, while others recoiled in horror at the



apparent “savagery” they portrayed (Welch). Indeed, many had no trouble in experiencing both of these impressions simultaneously. Moreover, the culture of realism ascribed to the camera reminds us that Victorians believed photographs carried within them the moral truth of their subjects. Even the clearly staged “Deligalugaseitsa – Sepistopota” shown in Figure 3 would have been viewed as an open window into the souls and individual character of the subjects portrayed (Lalvani). The popularity of Western imagery of this order was in large part due to the unstable experience of white spectators viewing them through the lens of colonial racism, where the Indigenous subjects evinced both desire and revulsion (Said; Aloula).

Fig. 2. *Mutsinamakan and wife, T'suu T'ina, near Calgary, AB, about 1885* - by William Hanson Boorne (McCord Museum, Montreal MP-1973.49.3.21).

Fig. 3. *Deligalugaseitsa - Sepistopota, Sarcee Indians, Sarcee, near Calgary, AB, about 1885* - by William Hanson Boorne (McCord Museum, Montreal MP-1973.49.3.39).

Fig. 4. *Warriors' society, Blood sun dance, Gleichen, Alberta in 1887* - by William Hanson Boorne (Glenbow Museum, Calgary NA-2172-5).

Among those who travelled to the West hoping to profit from the photography of Indigenous peoples was William Hanson Boorne, a studio portrait artist originally from England. Boorne and his partner, Charles May, had set up a small studio in the frontier outpost of Edmonton and began photographing the changing West. Their visual narrative framed the Western landscape in two ways. Indigenous people were presented as ethnographic evidence of life before the arrival of white settlers—if not framed by studio backdrop wilderness, Indigenous subjects were usually set against vast and seemingly empty spaces. In contrast, the pioneer transformation of the prairie was valorized through images of progress depicting workers engaged in railway construction, farmers ploughing fields, or vistas of growing towns and cities (Figures 5 and 6). Unlike images of Indigenous people, the meanings here are unambiguous: they offered a narrative of colonial society settling the unused plains, modernizing and making them productive. These images were sold to publishers and collectors in eastern North America and Europe; here Boorne's goal was to exploit the fact he was one of the few practicing photographers in the new Western frontier.

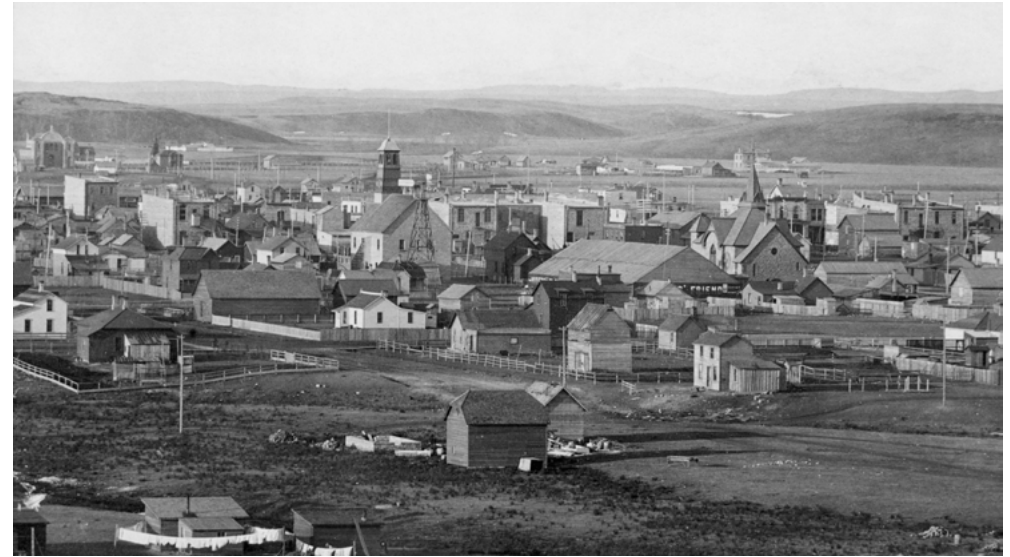


Fig. 5. *View of Calgary, 1889* - by William Hanson Boorne
(Glenbow Museum, Calgary NA-2399-23).

Fig. 6. *Canadian Pacific Railway bridge over Elbow River* - by William
Hanson Boorne (Glenbow Museum, Calgary NA-1753-2).



After some years of financial uncertainty, in 1885 Boorne discovered a lucrative opportunity that drew him to the Blood peoples' lands around what is now Standoff, Alberta. He aimed to photograph a rare event never pictured before: the ceremonial sun dance of the Blackfoot Confederacy. Sun dances were and continue to be widely practiced by Indigenous groups throughout North America. It is impossible for outsiders to accurately convey the importance of the sun dance or to represent the diversity of practices that have existed over time between different groups. In the 19th-century interior plains, sun dances served numerous functions. Families and communities congregated annually at these ceremonial events, allowing for the arrangement of marriages, the passing of stories, the trading of goods, and the observation of sacred rites of renewal (Pettipas). An important aspect was the dance itself, which took place inside an open lodge constructed for the occasion. What interested many 19th-century colonial voyeurs was not the sacred ceremonial knowledge of the plains peoples, but the practice called "piercing." At some events, dancers had their chest muscles cut open and a piece of wood drawn through the opening. With this fixture in place, rawhide ropes were used to hang a drum from the body or were strung to a pole in the centre of the lodge. By dancing through the pain created as the ropes pulled at the wooden anchors, participants honoured the Creator on behalf of the larger community, eventually ripping holes in their flesh as the dancers broke free. Rather than see the self-endurance of the dancers as a

ritual of renewal, however, Boorne imagined the dance as a kind of "torture" he could profit from by capturing on film. He proposed to photograph this ritual for private collectors.

In the pages of the Toronto-based *Canadian Photographic Journal* (1892-1897), Boorne shared details of his two trips to the area, describing his attempts to capture images of the sun dance ceremony. He believed the most valuable would be images of what he termed the "torture" scene, which he knew would be desirable precisely because it had never before been photographed. Victorian audiences were fascinated by the salacious and "savage" ways of the plains, the images offering both the pleasure of voyeurism and the opportunity for moral condemnation. Viewed through the racial logic of imperial supremacy, the self-harm involved in the ceremony provided evidence of the perceived racial degeneracy of Indigenous groups and showed the necessity for the civilizing power of colonialism. Boorne traded tobacco, tea, and other goods to gain entrance to the ceremony. However, his first attempt to access the sun dance failed. According to his accounts, as soon as his camera was set up, "the racket began. They crowded around me, threw a blanket over the camera, yelled, shouted, danced and actually fired guns over my head to scare me" (Boorne 372). It was only on his second trip to the sun dance in 1887 when he visited the Blood Reserve and met the famed Chief Red Crow that he was able to photograph freely. According to Boorne, after three days of taking photographs of the general camp (see Figure 4),¹ his presence was becoming ordinary and the chief and

seven other headmen all accepted a payment of a couple of dollars. At the sun dance the next day, this transaction bore fruit. Employing popular racist tropes to set the scene, he described how, when some "bucks, braves, and squaws" (Boorne 373) tried to intervene with his picture work, Red Crow allowed him to make the photograph.

Boorne's photograph of a pierced dancer performing the sun dance is still available today for anyone who would seek it out; it is sold at online auctions where it may be purchased for private collection or display.² Exploring the context in which the photograph was made explains as much about why it was valuable to colonial viewers then as it offers a window into the desires of colonial society today. Yet, notwithstanding the uncertain circumstances of its production, Boorne's 1887 photograph also allows us to bear witness to an important historical act of resistance. In a period when the sun dance was increasingly scrutinized by Indian agents and missionaries intent on halting its practice—indeed, the Federal Government outlawed sun dances in 1895—Boorne's photograph records an Indigenous community in open defiance of colonial rule. No matter what meaning derived from it, the photograph as a historical document is enmeshed in a broader sense of the passing moment it was intended to capture. As Boorne pointed out, "Nine braves were tortured that day, and this I believe was the last 'sun dance' held by the Indians in the North West" (373). Refusing to acknowledge his own implication in this historical turn, Boorne explained, "All the old customs are gradually dying out" (373). In

presenting this claim, he both obfuscated the role of settler colonialism in attempting to extinguish those same customs and appealed to a popular but mistaken belief that Indigenous peoples were a “vanishing race” (Ryan; Lyman and Curtis). His description was clearly motivated by a desire to increase the value of his photography. The notion that such scenes would never be seen again drove a kind of anthropological rush to document the final moments of the Indigenous North Americans untainted by Western civilization. While the camera was an instrumental part of capturing this supposed disappearance, the desire for memorialization was driven by a belief that Indigenous society was incommensurate with the unfolding pattern of modern civilization that was gradually overtaking and transforming Western Canada. The title of Boorne’s account, “With the Savages of the Far West,” evoked the same binary tension between a space and people fading into history and an emergent society witnessing their demise. Conjuring a medieval crusade into a heathen land, he described himself as a “knight of the camera” (372). By describing his photography as a crusade into a space outside civilization and a step backwards into the past, he elaborated on the shroud of myth he believed still hung over the land of the Blood. Key to this tension was his explanation of their reluctance to be photographed:

I must digress a little here, to explain that the Indians are the most superstitious of people, and in those days it was a very difficult matter indeed to get one to allow a photograph to be taken, even with the offer of money. They were beginning to know the sight of a camera, and understood what it was for, but what they could not comprehend was how a ‘spirit picture,’ as they called it, could be taken of them without taking something away from them; in short, they believed, as many do even now, that the act of photographing them would shorten their lives, by robbing them of a part of themselves (Boorne 372; italics in original).

In a late-19th century context, Boorne’s photography was indeed theory in action. Though deep within the trappings of colonial thought, he utilized the camera at the nexus of spirituality and history to make sense of the wider contours of time and space wending through the West—it was the Blood’s spiritual prohibition and fear of photography that demonstrated they were out of place in the modern West. Boorne drew Romantic colonial notions of a vanishing race and spirituality-as-superstition through the image itself: exposing layers of time and space, he presented his photography as a means of recording the moment when the Indigenous past ended and the future of the Canadian West began.

History, Spirituality, Photography

Boorne was by no means alone in either his experience trying to secure the images or his willingness to speculate on the spiritual reasons behind the difficulty in doing so. In fact, many historians have recently taken a more serious approach to understanding the relationship between Indigenous spirituality and photography. Historian Brock Silversides explains, “It has been a generally accepted truism that Native people did not like having their pictures taken” (Silversides 6). However, he suggests that while some Indigenous people called the camera “the face puller” and believed that a photograph weakened some part of them, a more likely reason to be wary of photography was that Indigenous people were aware that white male Europeans carried assertions of their own cultural superiority. Understanding that such images would be used to make them objects of scorn, they generally avoided the invitation to sit for portraits. In *Print the Legend* (2002), Martha Sandweiss attributes the fear of cameras to outbreaks of disease coinciding with visits from photographers who introduced new pathogens. Refuting claims that Indigenous people thought cameras were “shadow catchers,” she counters that these understandings of Indigenous belief are squarely situated in late-19th-century prejudices about the backward nature of non-white cultures. As such, they should be interpreted as just one more myth based on the systemic stereotyping of Indigenous landscapes, stories, and traditions. She argues instead that the understanding of photography

(consenting to an image of oneself) was akin to signing one's name. As such, the powers afforded to the camera were not for ensnaring spirits but only an "obliquely acknowledged role in capturing the image so easily shed by the subject" (Sandweiss 222).

By posing the question of how photographs and cameras entered Indigenous societies, Sandweiss provides a more nuanced view of how Indigenous people were caught in a mesh of European social and cultural ideologies. According to Carol Williams in *Framing the West* (2003), reconsiderations of Indigenous views must also be paired with broader understandings of the power relations inscribed in cross-cultural image making. She argues that "[t]o conceive of photography as an active negotiation rather than a mechanical process resulting in an artifact fundamentally revises conventional assumptions about the European use of photography in colonial lands" (Williams 139). Arriving at this conclusion by reconstructing the introduction of photography from the perspective of the Coast Tsalish on the Pacific coast of present-day British Columbia, Williams has asked not only how photography was introduced to Indigenous groups, but also what kinds of things in their culture photographs replaced. In the case of the potlatch ceremony, photographic images replaced goat-hair effigies used to stand in for the presence of a distant figure unable to attend the feast. The spiritual power of the goat-hair effigy was to symbolize the absent spirit and convey the presence of the person metonymically. To her this suggests a

refined, if different, understanding of representation from Europeans—the Coast Tsalish did not believe images were some stolen part of themselves, but also recognized that photographs could carry with them important meanings of self. The cultural difference was made clear in William's comparisons of photographs used to memorialize the dead: while European settlers usually commemorated people by portraying them alive as a memory, the Coast Tsalish often requested post-mortem photographs to properly honour the spirit of the deceased their body represented. While the Coast Tsalish are distinct from the Kainai and other groups, the example confirms a broad wealth of research leading to the consensus that in many cases of transcultural image-making, Indigenous people understood European conventions of photography and also possessed their own sophisticated understandings of the practice.

What these historians endeavour to do is see through the colonial archive to access the social and ideological world of Indigenous people at the time of European expansion into their territories. They reveal a complex set of understandings behind the surface of the records left by photographers such as Boorne, who claimed to understand the West. Not only were his beliefs about Indigenous spiritual relationships with photography incorrect, but the overall view he perpetuated—that Indigenous culture was disappearing under the weight of modernity—was also wrong. The 1887 images were not of the last sun dance performed. The

ceremony continued as an act of resistance through the early-20th century and was given renewed legal status when the Government of Canada lifted the ban in 1951 as part of its early efforts at redress.³ Indeed, the relationship between the sun dance and non-Indigenous photography may also be considered from the perspective of the present. Here, George Webber's images of the Kainai sun dance provide the starting point for a renewed way of thinking about photography and the West as "theory in action" and for understanding history and spirituality in the contemporary age.

Though deep within the trappings of colonial thought, he utilized the camera at the nexus of spirituality and history to make sense of the wider contours of time and space wending through the West—

1990s—George Webber

With new perspectives on photography and the West as “theory in action” we can turn to the photographs of George Webber. Webber’s pictures can be thought of as an entry-point for showing how the same things that historians have discovered get pulled through images in practice. Webber is a Calgary-based photographer whose visits to the Kainai Reserve between 1992 and 2005 are the basis of *People of the Blood*, what he calls a “photographic journey.” By the time he took these trips, he had already achieved acclaim for his work employing the candid style reminiscent of photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson and the social realist perspective of American such as Walter Evans and Dorothea Lange. This lineage is telling, given that their photographic work was, at least in part, a response to the heady boosterism of agricultural expansion of the late-19th and early-20th century that framed the West as a productive Eden. Evans’ and Lange’s images challenged this narrative by chronicling the hardships of Depression-era farmers and sharecroppers during the dustbowl of the late 1930s and 1940s. Whereas the Western imaginary of Canada and the United States had once been saturated with promises of prosperity and wealth, the Depression exposed how debt economies and the harsh parameters of industrial agriculture on the plains environment had turned the countryside from a modern experiment into an impoverished social and ecological landscape.

In Webber’s photographs, the intersections of time and space that structured the birth of Western Canada are in disarray. Considered against the visual narrative of Edenic West in the late-19th century—in which the latent potential of the land is transformed into wealth and progress through human effort—Webber’s pictures often portray the landscape as austere and dominating, tracing the natural limits placed on the excesses of the imagination. The pictures are replete with the powerful prairie theme of space: the billowing clouds in the sky, a vast sea of grassland extends from the bottom of the frame, and only a thin layer of human artifice existing at the line of the horizon. The human landscapes are compressed between earth and sky. While his landscapes bear the traces of decay—abandoned dwellings, a fraying grain elevator, a ruined church—in the social-documentary tradition he bears witness to the endurance of humanity. While the dream of limitless prosperity in the West has eroded, the people living there are resolute and resilient in the face of change.

Though the bristling sense that the Canadian West was powerfully striding into the future emerging from the late 1800s has ended, many of these images evoke that past perspective. Hence, in Webber’s photographs, time and space are not so easily divided: the great swelling wave of the Canadian attempt to conquer the West has already crashed; the landscape that remains is made from the swirling currents of success and failure, past and present.



top:

Fig. 7. *Swalwell, AB* and Fig. 8. *Joseph Prive, Forget, SK* - by George Webber (*Prairie Gothic*). In the photograph of *Swalwell, Alberta*, Webber contrasts the lasting promise of an abundant prairie, shown on the town's welcome sign, with the apparent bleakness of reality.

middle:

Fig. 9. *Buttes and fence in Spring, 2001* - by George Webber (*People of the Blood 91*).

Fig. 10. *Scotsguard, Saskatchewan* - by George Webber (*Prairie Gothic*).

bottom:

Fig. 11. *Joey Hofer and Maria Hofer in the automotive hop, Little Bow Hutterite colony, 1999* - by George Webber (*A World Within: Little Bow Hutterite Colony 38*).



In one important sense, Webber's photographs of the Kainai reserve in *People of the Blood* are not significantly different from the other projects he has undertaken to document the Canadian West. In an interview, Webber described his spiritual motivation for learning about closed societies through photography. Raised Catholic, he was initially drawn to photographing closed societies by his interest in the relationship between belief and struggle. Reflecting on a photojournalist experience at a closed Hutterite colony, he says he simply went out "looking for commonality" (see Figure 11). His images of Standoff on the Kainai Reserve show the same themes of time and history in the landscape and offer a glimpse of the depth of character people develop through struggle. Yet, whether intentional or not, the overwhelming presence of the colonial past provides a measure of the context in which present-day photographs are made. One powerful manifestation of the complexity of this relationship emerges in an image of Larry Hairy Bull, which Webber uses for the cover image of his volume. As he explains, "On a rain-drenched Highway 2, I meet Larry Hairy Bull and his pregnant wife, Bernice White Man Left. ... I offer them a lift. Larry tells me he used to play guitar for the country-rock group Stray Horse. After we arrive in Standoff, he looks back at me and lifts his hand to mimic a Native headdress" (Webber 16). The image shows Larry in front of the townsite, a stretch of suburban ranch homes extending beyond him. The gesture is powerful and ambiguous; it plays to

the notion of the Romanticized photographic gaze to which Indigenous people have been subject, conjuring up images of Boorne seeking out the "noble Red Man" of a James Fennimore Cooper novel. The image contrasts the historical associations between the headdress as a more authentic or traditional aspect of Indigenous culture with the reality that Larry and Bernice live in ranch homes on the reserve, in the shadow of power lines and a giant water tower.

In this image, Webber lets the subject narrate the context of the event, rather than structuring it in a way that relies on pre-existing tropes or the viewer's expectations. The intention of the photographer recedes to a sympathetic portrayal of the subject, what Webber describes as "gentleness with the other," rather than seeing the man as a mechanism to tell a larger story. Photography is theory in action when it becomes a means for people to negotiate the context of both their representation and place in history. In this respect, there is both an interesting similarity and striking difference between Webber's experience at a sun dance ceremony on the Kainai reserve and Boorne's experience over 100 years earlier. For Webber, his induction to the dance was the result of an invitation from a new friend whom he met on the Blood Reserve in 1997: Horace Shouting, who would be participating in an upcoming ceremony. As Webber explains, while the sun dance is meant to show thanks to the Creator and bring strength to the community, Shouting had

decided to participate in the sun dance as a means for moving past difficulties he had with alcoholism and a marital breakdown. What attracted Webber to the sun dance was his empathy with Shouting's position: he thought of his Catholic upbringing and recognized that within both traditions, ceremony could offer "value or a pathway to a better life" (Webber, Phone Interview). When it came time to participate in the dance, Webber brought his camera with him. Though he was granted permission to photograph before and after the ceremony, as he set up his equipment some participants requested he stop. No explanation is offered as to why the photographs cannot be made (instead, in Webber's view, this is for the Blood alone to know), but the narrative proceeds with an account of the ceremony and its meaning, the gathering of plants and herbs, the preparation of the lodge, the piercing of the chest and back, the fastening of rawhide to the central pole, the dancing and pulling of the ropes.

Fig. 12. *Larry Hairy Bull, Standoff, 1997*
- by George Webber (*People of the Blood* 18).





Fig. 13. *Horace Shouting after completing Sun Dance*, 2000 - by George Webber (*People of the Blood* 18).

These striking parallels with elements in Boorne's account remind us that the people who practice it have maintained the customs and significance of the sun dance over a long span of time. Webber describes Shouting being pierced with the rawhide lanyards and viscerally recounts Shouting's pain as he tears the leather ropes from his body. However, the similarity between the two exchanges ends there. While Boorne attempted to claim authority and take power over the meaning of his photographs, Webber offers only those images made in collaboration with Shouting: for example, standing outside the lodge after the ceremony with evidence of the proceedings on his body (Figure 13).

Webber's photographs, like Boorne's, are theory in action. However, in his case, what he pulls through history and spirituality is not a sense of a drastic break or difference, but his shared attempt with Shouting to find connection. Both Webber and Shouting interpret the pictures they made as part of a journey, not mechanical records of time or as part of some historical transformation of Western Canada. The time and space they locate in the image is still important, but it is less a historical document than a memory device for Shouting to consider, which he does when Webber visits him in later years (Figure 1). Webber writes that Shouting had explained that he decided to participate in the sun dance after he had a vision: "he recounts a dream in which he saw an eagle perched on the east side of his house. The next night he had another dream in which he saw the eagle on the west side of his house. He took the dream as a sign that he

must change the direction of his life” (Webber 2006, 58). Aligned with this story, the photograph conveys a moment of spiritual transcendence—a reminder that such intimate moments of exchange coalesce and challenge the yawning historical spans of time and space we associate with periods akin to modernity or geographies such as “the West.”

Legacies of the Photographic West

Comparing Boorne and Webber’s image-making practices illustrates the various ways in which spiritual beliefs and beliefs about spirituality were and still are woven into photography in Western Canada through coordinations of space and time. However, a lingering question still remains over what to do with the legacy of Boorne’s image-making practices in society today, given that the historical production and use of his photographs was deeply suffused with colonial values and power relationships (Paakspuu).

Boorne’s sun dance images and the “torture” scene are only a small fraction of a vast archive of images produced by settler-colonial society. Many Indigenous groups have sought to recover names and meanings of ethnographic imagery or photographic records made for government indexing purposes, often working with academics or public institutions (Payne and Thomas; LAC). One initiative along these lines paired the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, the current repository of many of Boorne’s images, with Blackfoot elders in order to return Indigenous voice to the pictures within

(Onciul 3). Another book, *“Pictures Bring Us Messages” / Sinaakssiiksi Aohtsimaahpihkookiyaawa: Photographs and Histories from the Kainai Nation* (2006), produced through extensive collaboration between two European anthropologists and the Kainai Nation brought a set of images made in the 1920s back from England to a community who had never seen them, where they became an entry point for recovering community heritage (see Brown and Peers). Museum curator and historian Ruth Phillips sees one way forward is to re-visit assumptions about the power relationships inherent in colonial imagery, arguing that many of the seemingly stereotypical uses of Indigenous dress (Figure 2) also represent self-fashioning expressions of identity (“Dress and Address”). Taken together these endeavours seek to decolonize the visual archive of the West, disentangling imperial coordinations of space and time and returning Indigenous meaning and significance to images.

Alternatively, an argument exists that colonial photographs should simply be destroyed, ending their enduring power to make meanings. Such debates point to a lingering debate on the nature of photographic representation (Barthes): do the material images physically store and convey the violence of colonialism that produced them, or are they merely ephemeral representations that symbolize a world entirely removed from the picture itself? Arguing these points may owe as much to the power of photography as it does to the colonial mythology that Indigenous people believed pictures stole their soul, or to the Victorian belief that pictures contained the moral embodiment

of the subject depicted. Indeed, we can ask the same question of “the West”: should we now praise the decaying barns and empty towns that fascinated Webber as part of the end of the colonial era?

In this sense, what cultural imaginations of “the West” still have to offer are much less clear than what ideas about photography do. Webber’s work certainly reminds us that, inasmuch as late-19th century photographs of Indigenous people were made and imbued with myths about spirituality and taboos around image-making, the enduring belief that photographs tell a moral story about the subject portrayed can be an important point of connection and a means to understand difference as Canada aims to enter an era of truth-telling and reconciliation. If photography can work in this process as theory in action, can the West as well?

Notes

¹ Figure 4 shows Boorne's picture of the general sun dance camp, not the sacred ceremony. Boorne was clearly pestering the Blood people and admits as much in his account, but there is no indication as to whether the people here agreed to making this photograph. That the subjects of the image are lined up and looking at the camera suggests they were willing to be portrayed or at least interested in controlling the conditions of their representation.

² The photograph is not reproduced here as it was clearly taken against the wishes of the Blood participating in the ceremony.

³ A review of the timeframe shows something of the importance of the sun dance in cultural adaptation to the pressures of colonialism. Following the Government ban in 1895 the Kainai continued to openly practice the ceremony. While it continued to be a sacred and communal practice it also evolved to incorporate new meaning of resistance to Federal Government policy. Shortly after the prohibition was lifted in 1951, the Kainai hosted a National Film Board of Canada crew in order to film the proceedings with the hope of preserving their customs for future generations. The 1960 film *Circle of the Sun* details how the sun dance was being used to encourage troubled Blood youth to find direction by getting back in touch with traditional culture (Low).

Image Notes

Figure 1. *Horace Shouting in his living room holding a photograph of himself after completing his Sun Dance in 2000, 2005* (Webber, *People of the Blood* 101).

Figure 2. *Mutsinamakan and wife, T'suu T'ina, near Calgary, AB, about 1885*, by William Hanson Boorne (McCord Museum, Montreal MP-1973.49.3.21).

Figure 3. *Deligalugaseitsa – Sepistopota, Sarcee Indians, Sarcee, near Calgary, AB, about 1885*, by William Hanson Boorne (McCord Museum, Montreal MP-1973.49.3.39).

Figure 4. *Warriors' society, Blood sun dance, Gleichen, Alberta" in 1887*, by William Hanson Boorne (Glenbow Museum, Calgary NA-2172- 5).

Figure 5. *View of Calgary, 1889*, by William Hanson Boorne (Glenbow Museum, Calgary NA-2399- 23).

Figure 6. *Canadian Pacific Railway bridge over Elbow River* by William Hanson Boorne (Glenbow Museum, Calgary NA-1753- 2).

Figure 7. *Swalwell, AB* and Figure 8. *Joseph Prive, Forget, SK*, by George Webber (Prairie Gothic). In the photograph of Swalwell, Alberta, Webber contrasts the lasting promise of an abundant prairie, shown on the town's welcome sign, with the apparent bleakness of reality.

Figure 9. *Buttes and fence in Spring, 2001*, by George Webber (*People of the Blood* 91).

Figure 10. *Scotsguard, Saskatchewan*, by George Webber (Prairie Gothic).

Figure 11. *Joey Hofer and Maria Hofer in the automotive shop, Little Bow Hutterite colony, 1999*, by George Webber (*A World Within: Little Bow Hutterite Colony* 38).

Figure 12. *Larry Hairy Bull, Standoff, 1997*, by George Webber (*People of the Blood* 18).

Figure 13. *Horace Shouting after completing Sun Dance, 2000*, by George Webber (*People of the Blood* 18).

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