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Indigenous Visual History: Remembering “Us” in Indian Residential School Hockey Photographs

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Résumé de l'article

La photographie est une technologie coloniale puissante qui a été utilisée - et contestée - dans le système des pensionnats. Dans le cadre d'une campagne photographique, le gouvernement canadien a rassemblé des images d'enfants autochtones participant à une excursion de hockey unique en son genre afin de montrer publiquement qu'il parvenait à les assimiler à la société eurocanadienne. Les Sioux Lookout Black Hawks de 1951, une équipe de hockey du pensionnat indien de Pelican Lake (anglican) dans le nord-ouest de l'Ontario, ont été emmenés dans un tourbillon d'expositions à Ottawa et à Toronto. Ils ont été fêtés par de hauts responsables du gouvernement et de l'Église anglicane qui ont posé à leurs côtés dans une série de photographies professionnelles prises par un photographe de la Division de la photographie fixe de l'Office national du film et commandées par le ministère des Affaires indiennes. Ces photographies suggèrent que le hockey favorise une masculinité et des valeurs citoyennes appropriées, conformément au programme assimilationniste du gouvernement. Les réponses de trois joueurs de hockey montrés sur ces images quelque soixante-dix ans après qu'elles ont été prises, et notre exploration de la manière dont les survivants ont interprété le savoir colonial incorporé dans les photographies pour reconstituer leurs propres subjectivités, élargissent le canon, petit mais croissant, du rapatriement visuel, où les photographies d'archives sont « rendues » aux communautés autochtones qui ont été les sujets des lentilles des colonisateurs. Somme toute, nous démontrons comment les réponses des survivants aux photographies (et leurs significations implicites) constituent des technologies de la mémoire autochtone qui les recentrent, eux et leurs communautés, en tant qu'auteurs de leurs propres histoires et, par conséquent, de leur avenir épistémique.

Indigenous Visual History: Remembering “Us” in Indian Residential School Hockey Photographs

ALEXANDRA GIANCARLO AND JANICE FORSYTH

Abstract

Photography was a potent settler colonial technology that was employed — and contested — in the residential school system. In one photographic campaign, the Canadian government marshalled images of Indigenous children on a once-in-a-lifetime hockey excursion to publicly convey it was successfully assimilating them into Euro-Canadian society. The 1951 Sioux Lookout Black Hawks, a residential school hockey team from the Pelican Lake Indian Residential School (Anglican) in northwestern Ontario, were taken on a whirlwind exhibition tour to Ottawa and Toronto. They were celebrated by high-ranking governmental and Anglican church officials who posed alongside them in a series of professional photographs taken by a National Film Board's Still Photography Division photographer and commissioned by the Department of Indian Affairs. These photographs suggested that hockey fostered appropriate masculinity and citizenship values, in line with the government's assimilationist agenda. The responses of three hockey players shown in these images some seventy years after they were taken, and our exploration of how the survivors interpellated the colonial knowledge embedded in the photographs to reconstitute their own subjectivities, extends the small-but-growing canon of visual repatriation, where archival photographs are “returned” to Indigenous communities who were the subjects of the colonizers' lenses. Ultimately, we demonstrate how the survivors' responses to the photographs (and their implied meanings) comprise technologies of Indigenous memory that re-centre themselves and their communities as authors of their own stories, and, thus, their epistemic futures.

Résumé

La photographie est une technologie coloniale puissante qui a été utilisée - et contestée - dans le système des pensionnats. Dans le cadre d'une campagne photographique, le gouvernement canadien a rassemblé des images d'enfants autochtones participant à une excursion de hockey unique en son genre afin de montrer publiquement qu'il parvenait à les assimiler à la société eurocanadienne. Les Sioux Lookout Black Hawks de 1951, une équipe de hockey du pensionnat indien de Pelican Lake (anglican) dans le nord-ouest de l'Ontario,

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Sometimes, a photograph's visual message is obvious. In the image below (Figure 4.1), from around 1917, the Indigenous persons to the left of the white reverend are said to be of “the Past” and are clad in blankets, feathers, and other hallmarks of “the old dress.” Their long hair is braided. One displays a drum. Unlike all of the others pictured, one of the men does not meet the camera's gaze. Even his slightly turned body position suggests being out of place or an element of discomfort. Their costuming, positioning, and facial expressions, in tandem with the caption, convey the sense that it will not be long before these “Indians of the Past” recede into history.

As for the boys on the right side of the photo, the message implicit in the caption “the difference school makes to them” is that this difference is *improvement*. The reverend, and by extension the religious guidance and education the St. Paul's Anglican school (Kainai Nation/Blood Tribe in southern Alberta) is providing, forms a visual-symbolic bridge between “the Past” and “Present,” with one hand reaching out to the older man's shoulder and the other on one of the boy's shoulders. The two boys closest to the reverend look contented. This paternalistic pose suggests the boys are comfortable and well cared for as they make the transition to the Euro-Canadian world. Most of the boys seem to have been deliberately outfitted with props suggesting aspects of education and development that the school provided: one in

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Figure 4.1. Reverend Middleton with people from the Kainai Nation (Blood Tribe) in southern Alberta. Circa 1917.



Written on the back of the photo: “Pupils at St. Paul’s School. Indians of the Past + Present. The three on the left show the old dress, the others show the difference school makes to them.”

Source: “Reverend S. Middleton with Blood people, southern Alberta,” [ca. 1917], (CU1125990) by Unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

a military uniform, two cadets with musical instruments, one boy in religious garb, and another in a suit carrying a book. For the church authorities and government officials, along with any private donors, funding this school — the likely intended recipients of this photo — assimilation would appear to be proceeding apace.

Yet, perhaps, there are cracks in the image that threaten to shatter its obvious message. The littlest boy in front of the reverend is pressed so closely to the older man in traditional dress, identified elsewhere as Weasel White Buffalo, that the latter’s drum casts a shadow on the boy’s chest. The younger leans his head against the arm of the older. In fact, upon looking closer, the two have similar features. Maybe this

photograph was arranged to coincide with the rare days when family was allowed to visit their children held at the school. Though we cannot know for sure, it might be that posing together was a stolen moment of togetherness for a father and son. It is possible, therefore, to read this photograph not as a successful demonstration of assimilation, but rather as signifying a bond unbroken.

Photography, Settler Colonialism, and Indigenous Narratives

In this article, we consider photography as a potent tool of settler colonialism, with special emphasis given to how this settler colonial technology was employed — and contested — in the Indian residential school system. We focus on one photographic campaign in which the Canadian government employed images of Indigenous children to demonstrate the “success” of its residential schools in assimilating them into Euro-Canadian society. We then present the responses of those shown in these images, recorded some seventy years after the photographs were taken.

At the Anglican Church-run Pelican Lake Indian Residential School (“Pelican Lake”), like other schools throughout Ontario during the early to mid-1900s, school administrators saw physical education as a site for character development. In the case of the recreation program at the school, administrators perceived a heightened challenge because Indigenous children, supposedly, needed extra structure and guidance in their leisure time.¹ Sports at the school, such as hockey, would foster the character traits that would, in turn, breed disciplined Canadian citizens — one of the implicit and explicit goals of the residential school system over its long existence. With an enforced gender separation permeating sport and recreation, as it did all aspects of residential school life, school administrators also encouraged gendered norms through participation in “masculinizing” sports.² As the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada (the Anglican Church) explained in its pamphlet on Pelican Lake, at the school, “recreation becomes an education.”³

In 1951, the Department of Indian Affairs and the Ministry of Health partnered with Pelican Lake to take the school’s highly successful boys’ hockey team on an exhibition tour of the provincial and national capitals. In addition to extensive press interest, the Sioux Lookout Black Hawks were photographed by a National Film Board (NFB) staff photographer, Gar Lunney (NFB Still Photogra-

phy Division). The extent of the public distribution of these photos is not known. It does not appear that the exact NFB images of the tour made it into newspaper coverage, though at least three photographs printed in local and national papers — taken by freelancers and in-house photographers — mimic or replicate the composition of the “official” images. Importantly, all photographs taken for the Still Photography Division were made available as stock images to be used across federal government departments and programs. For example, the photograph shown here as Figure 4.5 was reprinted in the 1952 issue of the *Canada Handbook*.⁴

We are fortunate to have worked with three of the survivors who were at the centre of this tour as adolescents: Kelly Bull, Chris Cromarty, and David Wesley. In prioritizing their perspectives seventy years on, we learn that far from accepting the assimilatory aims and processes of the tour and of the hockey program during their time at Pelican Lake Indian Residential School, they used the sport for what they called “survival.” That is, in a very real sense, hockey’s privileged position within the hierarchy of sport at the school provided the boys with sporadic opportunities to escape the normalized physical, psychological, and cultural violence that was part of their everyday lives as students. As athletes, though they were enmeshed in another form of coloniality, enacted as it was on and through the body, their sense of physicality that they brought with them to school, which provided the basis for their athletic excellence, allowed them to retain the seeds of decoloniality that they learned to express as the years wore on. In other words, their bodies contained a different way of knowing, an Indigenous epistemology—or system of knowledge—that stood in contradistinction from that of the colonizers.

In the conversations that arose from looking at the photographs together, the players render the photographs taken of them something other than a showcase of the government and church’s assimilation program. This visual repatriation, as such efforts to return historic photographs to source communities are often called, had results that extended beyond those commonly detailed in the existing literature. Often, visual repatriation projects with Indigenous communities and peoples bring forth suppressed biographical or historical details,⁵ forgotten community legacies,⁶ or reconnections with ancestral lands,⁷ all of which demonstrate the ways Indigenous peoples are challenging coloniality by reasserting their own valid and legitimate histories and knowledges that make them who they are. In our project, partici-

pants also used the photographs to reinsert their and their teammates' unique identities, memories, and aspirations into the images — and narratives — over which they had previously had no control. Their reflections were not static, owing to new insights that emerged from multiple photo-elicitation sessions and other conversations with the players.

Below, we present and analyze memories and messages that emerged from the photo-elicitation sessions and follow-up conversations. We suggest that the survivors' narratives comprise technologies of Indigenous memory; following Lydon, these “memory technologies” are techniques or strategies that challenge photography as a settler colonial tool.⁸ First, we turn to scholarly understandings of how colonial authorities have deployed “before and after” photography in the service of publicly displaying “successful” assimilationist education, thereby situating the publicity photos of the Black Hawks within a long — indeed, global — colonial representational strategy. We consider how photographs of male youth hockey would have telegraphed visual messages of appropriate masculinity and proper citizenship training at the time of the tour. We examine the foregoing in light of the NFB Still Photography Division's role as the federal government's official photography organ that, during the 1950s, took as its mission the promotion of a unified Canadian nationhood underpinned by paternalistic care for Indigenous peoples.

Transforming Children: Visual Messages Through Photography

Scholars have analyzed how the Canadian government and related institutions used photography as a tool of settler colonialism. Government expeditions produced photographs that made knowable the “wild” lands and people of the Canadian West and North.⁹ Images of colonized people, particularly in the anthropometric vein, furthered racist notions of “savagery” and suggested that Indigenous people, and later “traditional” Indigenous culture, were bound for extinction.¹⁰ Photographs also formed a part of assimilation policy and, as such, assimilation policy has its own visual history.¹¹

Perhaps the most common example of what has been called the “before-and-after/savage-to-civilized”¹² genre of school photos is the set of images of Thomas Keesick Moore that appeared in the 1896 Canadian Department of Indian Affairs Annual Report. In the first photograph, he is wearing clothing consistent with prairie Indige-

nous nations. His hair is braided and adorned, and he leans against a fur-covered ledge or pedestal. Somewhat tentatively, he holds a toy pistol in his right hand. Moore's attire, seemingly a combination of his actual clothing and props, is reflective of instructions that Captain Richard Pratt, who also founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania had received in 1878 upon bringing captured Native American children to enroll at the Hampton Institute. Hampton's president wished to have photographs taken of the would-be students and instructed Pratt to have them "bring their wild barbarous things. This will show whence we started."¹³ In the follow-up photograph of Moore, no trace of "wild barbarous things" remains. Like other images in this genus, he is posed like the "before" photograph. This time, though, he wears Western clothing and stares more confidently at the camera, hand on hip and a cap on the ledge beside him. He has grown visibly, reflecting the common procedure to allow some months to elapse after the first photographic sitting so that, to the viewer, the schools' "conversionist practices had had a chance to take effect."¹⁴ Gone are the feathers and furs of the "before" image. In case his physical changes were not sufficient evidence of the "improvements" that the school was achieving, the potted plant placed in the image suggested the child's "nature" was now safely contained and growing as it should.¹⁵ These photographs' intended audiences were wide-ranging and included other governmental bodies, church authorities who co-administered residential schooling, and the growing Canadian citizenry. They were visual advertisements of "progress" and "development" intended to drum up financial and political support for the state's combined interest in schooling.¹⁶

Scholars have shown that school administrators and government officials within Canada's residential school system used photographs of students engaging in Euro-Canadian sports to telegraph messages suggesting student health and well-being was top of mind.¹⁷ Images of student athletics were particularly evocative as they seemed to "position sport as falling outside the colonial structure."¹⁸ American boarding schools for both Black and Indigenous children likewise employed imagery of the students participating in the recognizable extracurricular activities of sports and music.¹⁹ Though under much different circumstances, the photographs taken of the Black Hawks during their 1951 tour accord with many of the themes from disparate time periods and colonial locales.

Playing the Canadian Game: Media Representations of the Black Hawks

The Black Hawks as *hockey players* would have had specific cultural resonance for Canadian viewers in the early 1950s. Hockey was, and is, recognizably, distinctively (and problematically) *Canadian*.²⁰ From the early to mid-1900s, representatives from minor league sports associations and journalists alike suggested that youth sport promoted “proper” masculinity in the face of “public concern about the nation’s children (particularly the nation’s boys) and their physical, mental, and moral development.”²¹ The visual message of hockey had increased potency during the 1950s, by which time *Hockey Night in Canada* had become one of the most popular radio and television shows of the time.²² Under the auspices of the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association, organized youth hockey in the post–Second World War era enjoyed broad community support from businesses, church groups, and organizations such as Lions Clubs.

During this period, youth clubs and organized activities were seen as key sites for “character training” and prerequisites for healthy and productive citizenship.²³ Carefully regulated recreation would avoid young Canadians diverting from accepted norms, as well as, crucially, instilling middle-class, Anglo-Saxon values. Not six months after the Black Hawks’ whirlwind tour of southern Ontario, the *Globe and Mail* called the province’s junior male hockey players “specimens of a perfect manhood.”²⁴ It is this very type of narrative — one that equates hockey with the development of desired masculine traits in the nation’s boys — that has led scholars to speak of hockey programs as sites for informal citizenship training that socialized boys “into the codes of masculine behaviour.”²⁵

Ever concerned with convincing the public of the wisdom of their approach to “the Indian problem,” the Department of Indian Affairs needed to appear to be ensuring that these boys had the same opportunities and training as mainstream Canadian boys. Meanwhile, the popular press presented organized hockey as the ultimate character-building for the nation’s youth; the sport was held up “as *the* place (rather than *a* place) where athletic activity could build moral virtues to make young boys work or battle ready.”²⁶

The NFB Still Photography Division operated from 1941 to 1984, during which time it produced and distributed nearly 200,000 photographs that influenced the nation’s psychological state. Childhood is a prominent theme in this archive, where images of children served as “potent signs” of Canadian citizenry and national unity.²⁷ The “Indian

Hockey Team” series, included in its 1952 production schedule summary, helped to reaffirm those messages.²⁸ The photos were paid for by the NFB, though were likely requested by the cash-strapped Department of Indian Affairs, whose assimilationist objectives dovetailed nicely with those of the NFB. By today’s standards, the photographs appear quite staged. This was an effect of the meticulousness that went into preparing each photo. Division photographer Chris Lund, Lunney’s colleague and contemporary, remarked that photos they took during that era were carefully composed to elicit an emotional response from the viewer and to offer a recognizable visual message.²⁹

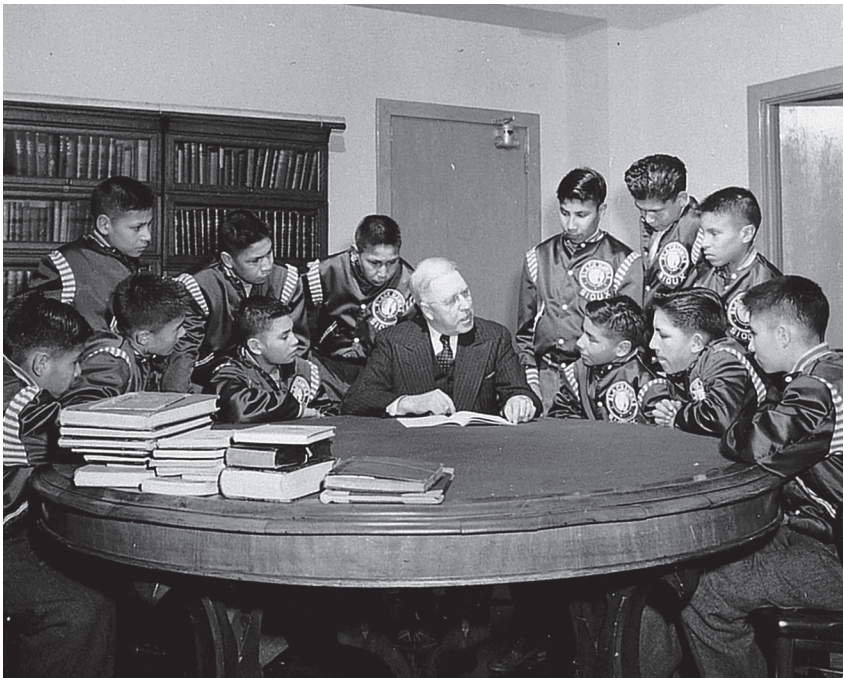
Adele Stalmach argues that part of the visual force of NFB photos from this era lies in their showing Indigenous people not only undergoing the assimilation process, but in *having been successfully assimilated*.³⁰ Whether those featured in these images thought their participation constituted assimilation is altogether another question. Kelly vehemently disagrees with this implication, and there is a robust body of work that persuasively demonstrates how engaging in Western forms of physical activity and sport does not invalidate participants’ Indigenous identities and, in fact, often constitutes cultural resistance to assimilation.³¹ In its imagery, the NFB during this period “attempted to recognize cultural diversity through established stereotypes by presenting positive and inspirational images of all of Canada’s people” irrespective of race, gender, or other differences.³²

The smiling Indigenous youth appear functionally indistinguishable from other Canadian boys engaging in the popular minor hockey leagues of the period, aside from differences in physical appearance that are minimized through Western dress and haircuts. If anything, the boys getting to play at Maple Leaf Gardens and meet famous hockey players suggested the youth were being offered enviable opportunities above and beyond those extended to Euro-Canadian boys — a discourse the survivors contradicted in their retrospective analysis with us.

The photographs of the Black Hawks on tour portrayed them as, literally, recipients of the benevolent gaze of government and church officials, who were shown instructing the boys about an important passage in an open book — presumably selected from a stack of books placed in the foreground of the image (Figure 4.2) — or overseeing their interactions with white peers, their hockey opponents (Figure 4.3). As represented in NFB photography in this era, children stood for the nation’s ideal citizenry and portrayed Canadians as “in need of the paternalistic protection and guidance of government.”³³ In most of the

images that Lunney took of the Black Hawks, he assumes a role as a “fly on the wall” as the boys are meeting with and seemingly receiving guidance from a parade of older white men who were government officials, church leaders, or sports role models. The Indigenous father figure is nowhere in these images, even though documents from the tour tell us that scores of Indigenous supporters from Kahnawà:ke, a Mohawk community located south of Montreal, attended their games. The only Indigenous member of the coaching staff, school supervisor Pete Seymour, did not join the team for their southern Ontario tour.

Figure 4.2. The Black Hawks at the National Archives in Ottawa during their April 1951 tour.



From L to R, front row, seated: George Carpenter, Frank Wesley, Ernest Wesley, possibly Dominion Archivist W. Kaye Lamb, Johnny Yesno, Jerry Ross, and Walter Kakepetum. Top row, from L to R, crouching or standing: Kelly Bull, David Wesley, Henry Spence, Matthew Strang, Eddie Mandamin, and Albert Carpenter.

Source: AFC 451-S5-F14, 56953, 6-5.2-27, 1950-1951. Archives and Special Collections, Western Libraries, Western University.

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Figure 4.3. Black Hawks player Albert Carpenter shakes the hand of an opposing player from the local Ottawa league during 1951 tour.



Source: AFC 451-S5-F14, 56960, 6-5.2-27, 1950-1951. Archives and Special Collections, Western Libraries, Western University.

The shot-from-below angle of Figure 4.4 emphasizes both the size of the totem pole and the relative size of tour co-organizer Jan Eisenhardt, whom the boys indeed “look up to” as a representation of government care. Three of the Black Hawks’ faces are dutifully directed to the totem pole by Eisenhardt, the newly appointed supervisor of physical education and recreation at Indian Affairs. Importantly, this memory was one of the few that survivor David recalled with specificity, possibly because of the rarity of seeing Indigenous artefacts or because he might be pictured in this photo (and, therefore, could remember posing for it).

The way that the photograph is staged, with the older Eisenhardt seeming to be in the process of teaching the boys about the totem pole, and by extension about “Indigenous history,” falsely suggests a pan-Indigenous history and identity. This single, overarching category of “Indigenous culture” — irrespective of the specificity of the totem pole to some of the First Nations along the West Coast

Figure 4.4. Three of the Black Hawks with Jan Eisenhardt.



From L to R, Frank Wesley or David Wesley, Johnny Yesno, and Albert Carpenter. Eisenhardt was appointed supervisor of physical education and recreation with the Department of Indian Affairs in February 1950.

Source: AFC 451-S5-F14, 56955, 6-5.2-27, 1950-1951. Archives and Special Collections, Western Libraries, Western University.

— is unconcerned with the diverse identities of the students as Cree, Ojibway, and Oji-Cree. To viewers, this tableau could also imply that the Black Hawks were sufficiently separated from their cultures that they now needed to learn about them (reconstituted as a homogenous group) in a museum as other children did across the country. Alienated from their cultures, the boys' subjectivities were being remade through coloniality's "death project,"³⁴ at the same time their identities were flattened into one overriding classification: Canadian boys on a school trip. Such framing aligns with one of the primary goals of the NFB Still Photography Division in this period: to show Canada as a cohesive social unit. This framing renders the Indigenous youth easily knowable through a static and homogenous past. While participation

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Figure 4.5. Their April 1951 tour consisted of visits to institutions of civic importance.



This photograph was probably taken at the National Museum or the National Archives. From L to R: Kelly Bull, David Wesley, unknown (rear), George Carpenter, Jerry Ross (rear), Ernest Wesley, Johnny Yesno, and Walter Kakepetum.

Source: AFC 451-S5-F14, 56956, 6-5.2-27, 1950-1951. Archives and Special Collections, Western Libraries, Western University.

in minor hockey also served as citizenship training for non-Indigenous youth across Canada,³⁵ the Black Hawks evidently required advanced lessons that extended well beyond what the game itself could offer.

Capturing “before-and-after” in a single image, which the totem pole photograph (Figure 4.4) and the mural photograph (Figure 4.5) also suggest, was similarly used as a visual advertisement of assimilation in the American boarding school context. In 1901, professional photographer Frances B. Johnson visited the Carlisle Institute and photographed students at their classroom desks wearing neat, period-appropriate Anglo-American clothing. Woven baskets sit on a couple of the students’ desks, and various “traditional” items hang on

the rear wall of the classroom as if on ethnographic display: blankets, ceremonial sticks, buckskin clothes, and so on. The displayed objects bear a museum-like quality, seemingly confirming that such amusements belong to the past, to be discarded as “the students pass into modernist capitalist time.”³⁶ The Indigenous students, dressed uniformly in Western clothing, are a striking juxtaposition of modernity and all that it entailed, especially promoting the idea of individual success in capitalist society, against the collective “primitiveness” of their ancestors. A similar framing is present in the Black Hawks photographed in their matching Euro-Canadian sportswear in front of the totem pole. What is important in these types of images, according to Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, is that “when [Indigenous] children ... can look at an ‘Indian’ presented in tribal garb as an illustrated object in a history lesson, their process of cultural alienation would seem to be complete.”³⁷ The survivors, looking at the images from the tour, had a different understanding to share.

Listening to the Black Hawks

Photo-elicitation interviews helped to unearth the experiences of the players themselves, now seventy years after the tour. Such returning of historic images of colonized peoples to communities for engagement, interpretation, and addition of *their own* meaning, usually termed visual repatriation, has been an increasingly important method of working with Indigenous peoples to diversify understandings of the past, build relationships, and “reclaim” the past by challenging historical power relations.³⁸ At its deepest level, when addressing colonial epistememes—or knowledge systems—visual repatriation can create pathways for Indigenous intellectual productions that counter the cognitive violence they experienced, and, in doing so, help victims reclaim a portion of their lost humanity. Visual repatriation scholars, by and large, have yet to tackle the foundation of Western epistemology using a decolonial lens. Research by leading decolonial scholars, including scholars of visual imagery, may be particularly useful here.³⁹ Indigenous communities in various parts of the formerly colonized world are engaging more frequently with and reframing visual archives to re-centre Indigenous narratives in lieu of colonial history.⁴⁰

Unlike some other visual repatriation projects,⁴¹ the Black Hawks’ engagement with the photographs taken of them did not tend to elicit previously subsumed biographical or historical information, reveal

unknown ancestors, or uncover stories that had never been told. We had anticipated that working with the photographs in our project would likely produce similar types of insights to those above, not expecting that the Black Hawks would use the images in a different way.

We came to realize that their recollections and stories went well beyond the photographs to acknowledge and articulate their first-hand lived experiences with sports’ engagement with coloniality. In other words, rather than deal with the content of the photographs in front of them (although they did this on occasion), they mostly critiqued their own experiences to imagine what Indigenous futures might look like on their own terms, self-editing without the fear of reprisal in front of them. They repurposed hockey in their minds to forge alternative Indigenous visions for themselves and their people, constantly engaging in reflection with each new experience. As a result, they were doing more than reclaiming the past; they were simultaneously building a future, asking themselves (and others): What does it mean to be Indigenous (or more specifically Cree, Ojibway, and Oji-Cree)? What do they need to do as Indigenous people to recover their humanity?

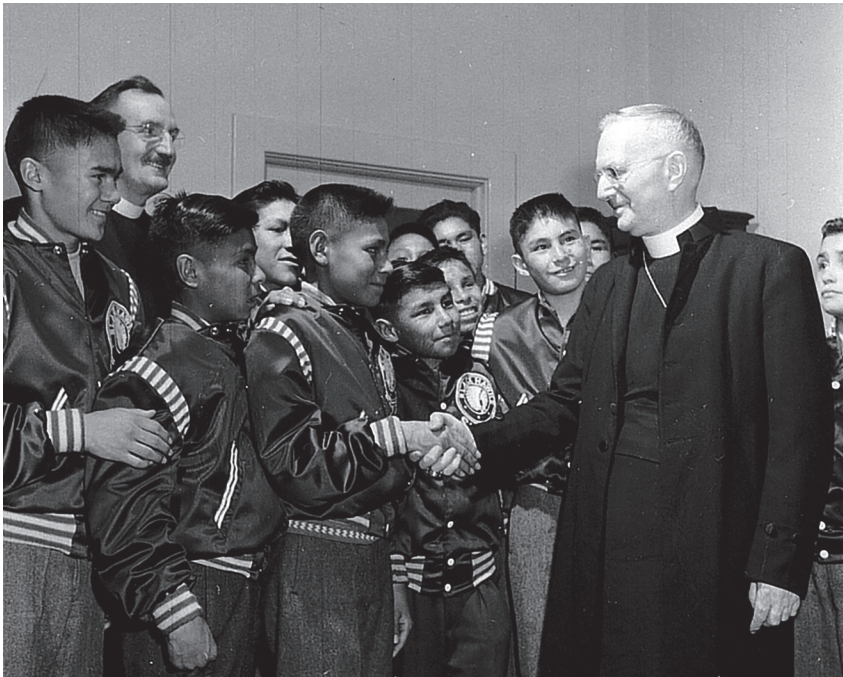
Part of the difficulty with trying to tell their story around images is that the photographs could not contain everything that the survivors needed to say, and, in at least one case, the player’s own interpretations of the photographs shifted over time as they unravelled their story. Oral history work, by its nature, is messy.⁴² Recollections that had initially been spurred by a certain photograph led to discussions reignited later in the interview process. Eventually, during more casual conversations one survivor, Kelly, would spontaneously bring up one of the images and reiterate key messages about his evolving understanding of what he and his fellow players had experienced as hockey players, and students, at Pelican Lake Indian Residential School.

An Archive of Social Relations

Probably more than any other factor, the survivors’ engagement with the photographs brought forth the importance of *relationality*. The photographs became an archive of social relations. While visual repatriation can most famously weave counter-histories, survivor narratives also centred what Veli-Pekka Lehtola calls “‘small stories’ of *us*.”⁴³ More than any other effect, working with these images facilitated a type of visual repatriation that re-centred the Black Hawks themselves and their peers in the stories of their own lives, asserting

an active presence in the visual archive of their past. For example, one of the images of the tour, Figure 4.6, features Kelly shaking the hand of the Anglican bishop in Ottawa while his teammates and the school principal look on. Yet Kelly does not remember this moment at all. His memories align with what were, to the players, the main benefits of the trip revolving around temporarily escaping residential school: getting plenty to eat, playing hockey, horsing around in the hotel corridors after bedtime, and getting to see Maple Leaf Gardens. In other words, his most vivid memories pertain to the opportunity to enjoy a handful of carefree moments so rare for residential school students.

Figure 4.6. Kelly Bull, flanked by his teammates and Pelican Lake's Principal Wilson, shakes the hand of the Bishop of Ottawa Rev. Robert Jefferson.



Photograph from the April 1951 tour. From L to R, in foreground only: Frank Wesley, Pelican Lake's Principal Wilson, George Carpenter (side profile), Kelly Bull, Johnny Yesno, Albert Carpenter (face tilted upwards and partially obscured), Bishop of Ottawa Rev. Robert Jefferson, Walter Kakepetum.

Source: #2AFC 451-S5-F14, 56955 6-5.2-27, 1950-1951. Archives and Special Collections, Western Libraries, Western University.

Chris, David, and Kelly — almost reflexively — rattled off the names of each of the players in the photographs of the team as well as schoolmates in other images. The players, for the most part, do not remember being followed and photographed by a professional photographer, and the survivors had no interest in the person doing the photographing. Rather, they concentrated on remembering all of “our” people by name.⁴⁴ As we flipped through the photographs and the players were named, so too were they humanized by the details the three survivors remembered. When asked if he remembered which player was in Figure 4.3, Chris responded: “Albert Carpenter. He was the captain of the team. He’s a skater.” David proudly recalled how another one of his teammates, Johnny Yesno, had gone on to become a successful actor and radio host. The Black Hawks’ focus on *each other*, not on the “important” politicians and officials they met, mirrors Sami and Inuit recollections prompted by historic photographs. The Sami who were undertaking visual repatriation with images from the assimilative schooling era were single-mindedly focused on their fellow pupils, asking, “Who they were, what kinds of homes or environments did they come from, what happened to them?”⁴⁵ The Inuit who commented on images of their community members taken during the governor general’s 1956 tour of their territory likewise emphasized their kin and ignored the “important” government official.⁴⁶ In a photograph of the tour featuring one of the players shaking the hand of a dignitary, Kelly’s comments ignored the latter altogether, instead remarking, “And there’s little Albert! He could skate like the whirlwind, that kid. There he is.” He praised another teammate, Matthew Strang, saying, “I’ve never seen a kid that was as acrobatic as he was!” Residential school had stripped the students of their individual identities, so the act of naming them — and their singular qualities — reclaims who they were.

In another instance, Kelly picked up an enlarged copy of a team photo that had been in his possession for decades and expressed that he had no desire to talk about the coaches, school staff, or dignitaries shown. Instead, he wished to talk about every one of the players. He explained how one mischievous player pulled pranks on the coaches. He spoke of how another player had a physical disability but was a great skater. He explained the boys’ home communities, family relations, and later lives. Through his words and stories, the players were foregrounded and the residential school system — personified in the administrators seen in the photo — temporarily retreated into the

background. Kelly's memory technologies were similar to the Inuit working with archival photographs of family and community from the 1950s, through which those pictured "were transformed from anonymous types to historic individuals."⁴⁷ His engagement with the image emphasized how photographic meaning, decades later, can be destabilized⁴⁸ and even given "radical energy" when his comments are read alongside the present-day contexts of Indigenous cultural reclamation and self-determination.⁴⁹

Kelly also had something incisive to say about a photograph that appeared in another article that the research team published,⁵⁰ the image of the boys with the bishop (Figure 4.6). He remarked that he was troubled that the photographic captions that we had included for the readers had listed the white officials in the photographs by name but anonymized the players. We had done this deliberately to maintain the privacy of the players, reasoning that they were minors and that the adults shown were public figures. For Kelly, however, this distinction mattered little. Looking at the image again, all he could see was the "big, smiling face" of the principal who had terrorized him, leading him to ask, "Why does he get to be named and we don't?"

Over the course of our years-long collaboration, Kelly's perspective on the images of the Black Hawks changed. Consequently, in follow-up conversations he began to refer to his experiences on the team, mediated through the images, in more ambivalent terms. The photographs, therefore, did not only spur memories. In this player's case, they led him to re-evaluate how he had previously approached these seemingly benign images, some of which he had personal copies kept as souvenirs. Kelly more forcefully questioned what he saw in the images and the players' unwitting participation in a photographic campaign for the system that they despised. As a child he could not understand the hockey tour's political motivations. Now, in his own words, he sees how "the government was trying to tell the public that the Indian kids were happy. Look at the smiles on their faces."

To further demonstrate how the players spoke back to photographs taken of them — and of how we were initially representing them — consider a group of images from a different archive than the tour photographs (Figures 4.7 and 4.8). The source of these images is a photo album from a former school employee that, decades later, was donated to the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre, which has one of the largest national repositories of images and documents related to the Canadian Indian residential school system.

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Far from being the focus of the pictures, as was the case in many colonial school settings, as detailed above, the students’ presence in these photographs seems incidental or tangential. Seemingly of little importance to the photographer or the adults photographed, these images suggest uncomfortable parallels to stereotypical photographs in which Indigenous peoples “were considered little more than local scenery.”⁵¹ Similarly dressed in shabby work clothes — a stark contrast to the skirts and suits that the women and their male companions wear — in Figures 4.7 and 4.8, the boys seemingly recede into the background as props, even though they far outnumber the supervisor and her companions, who were clearly the intended subjects of the images. Kelly and first author, Alexandra, tried to parse out how these photographs may have come to be taken and to make sense of what was pictured:

K: Gosh. Hmm. It seems to me that what might have happened is there’s more pictures taken of *this* age group.

A: But I wonder why that was.

K: Maybe because of the schedule, maybe the younger boys could go out...

A: Could it have been something as simple as the days those guys were visiting, she was with this group, so they ended up taking pictures of that group? Like the supervisor [to whom the album belonged] was in charge of those boys that day?

K: Yeah. Yeah.

A: I know that these pictures came from the pictures of — it’s called the Joyce Clinton Collection. ...

K: I saw that somewhere.

A: Yeah. It’s because it’s [written] in here.

K: Who the heck was Joyce anyhow?

In his present-day engagement with these photographs, the details about the supervisors are unimportant to Kelly. Instead, Kelly’s remarks around the images brought depth and multivocality to what was shown; he “insist[ed] on personal and cultural specificity,”⁵² challenging the boys’ anonymity. He points out his brother, George, and multiple other students by name, remembering who came from a musically inclined family and whose father was a local chief.

The survivors, in speaking about these images and others, are not defined by the colonial “gaze” that has dominated how outsiders have

Figure 4.7. Supervisor(s) and visitors pose in front of male students. Circa 1950.



Photos from an album donated to the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (Algoma University). Album belonged to former Pelican Lake staff member Joyce Clinton.

Source: Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre, Algoma University

represented Indigenous people. Nor do they refer to the values and ideals being promoted through the imagery: assimilation, competitive individualism, and the benefits of progress and development. Instead, they use their own memory technologies⁵³ that firmly re-centre themselves, their identities, and their relationships to each other and their home communities that, in turn, speak back to the settler colonial photographic archive. The survivors engaging with the photos in this way echo the visual repatriation work of Indigenous communities

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Figure 4.8. Supervisor(s) and visitors pose in front of male students. Circa 1950.



Photos from an album donated to the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (Algoma University). Album belonged to former Pelican Lake staff member Joyce Clinton.

Source: Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre, Algoma University

globally: “Enmeshed within Indigenous narratives, photographs may serve a range of recuperative purposes, confronting the sometimes-degrading circumstances in which they were produced.”⁵⁴

Chris and Kelly were very deliberate in their comments and used our discussions around the photos to make broader statements about the destructive consequences of residential school on their own lives and their communities. Chris wanted to emphasize that what was depicted in the photographs of the 1951 tour had no relevance or

meaning for struggling Indigenous communities: “Our parents never went to school; they didn’t care about what was going on. They were trying to survive! Trying to survive. They didn’t care about totem poles or Parliament buildings.” The positive qualities he believes he was meant to learn from his family were wholly absent at Pelican Lake, despite what photographs might suggest. He explained:

You almost felt like a stranger every time you went home. And those ... qualities that my parents had — my dad was a hard-working person to keep us all [with enough] food and clothing, and then my mother, as I told you, was a very caring person — you’d like to have those things, but nobody’s teaching you them.

For Kelly, a gifted storyteller, a single photo could unfurl webs of relatedness that connected the distant past with the present. For instance, he used photographs of the boys playing in the schoolyard as an entry point to discuss how he saw the injustices of the residential school period continuing up to the present day. Barriers that Kelly experienced firsthand, such as racism and financial limitations, continue to hamper Indigenous youth participation in physical activity and sports today.⁵⁵ He felt these discrepancies deeply when reflecting on the images because he was acutely aware of how sports and physical activities had been bright points in the otherwise shattering experience of residential school. He explains:

One of the things that bothers me is I wonder how good I would have been [at sports] had I had the proper nurturing, coaching, support, like a white kid gets. He gets ice time. He gets the best coaching, nourishment, and ... that’s the point that was always in the back of my mind about Indian kids [today]. I said, “There’s something missing here. There’s something not right.”

At the outset of this project, we had expected the photographs to serve as a kind of “window” into the past that would allow shrouded memories to resurface; instead, they were more of a referent with which the players’ engagement was not static. The photographs were symbolic and elicited a variety of themes for immediate and future conversations with research team members, including the struggles of being away from home, the loss of culture via assimilation, the deprivation of choice and self-determination, and the hard work of

decolonizing the mind. The photographs were a tool that allowed the former players to articulate and rearticulate key parts of their residential school experiences that they wanted the public to know. They were vehicles that the former players used to refuse the erasure of their experiences and their messages.

The survivors' present-day engagement with photos from their time at residential school served to elicit stories that captured the depths of their intelligence and resiliency. Looking at the images in conversation with Chris led to a profound understanding of what sports had meant to him during that dark, lonely period. The night he first heard Foster Hewitt announcing a Toronto Maple Leafs vs. New York Rangers match through the staticky radio in the supervisor's bedroom at Pelican Lake, he learned that “there was something beyond the residential school. So your dreams began. At least mine did.” Knowing that there was a whole world extending beyond the confines of the institution, symbolized by hockey in distant cities, allowed him to be able to survive those terrible years. He remarked that after hearing that first broadcast, “you find out in geography studies that [New York City] is supposed to be one of the largest cities in the world, so that kind of leads into all that from this experience we had with hockey.” As a young adult, Chris loved attending hockey games in Toronto, where he was working, and had gone to New York City for his first-ever vacation. It is fitting that when the research team asked him to select a handful of images about his life, he chose one from the top of the Empire State Building. June 10, 2022, marked the end of his journey, and as a testament to Chris's spirit, we have included the photo and his witty caption here (Figure 4.9): “Photo taken at top of Empire State Building at New York City in October 1958. *P.S. I was a mid-day cowboy way before Jon Voight was a mid-night cowboy.” A demonstration of Chris's subjectivity and agency, this photograph could be seen, too, as comprising part of the technologies of Indigenous memory that invert the intentions of photographs taken *of* the students.

Conclusions

How the surviving Black Hawks engage with photos taken of them some seventy years after the fact opens new understandings of their time as hockey stars at Pelican Lake Indian Residential School within a system designed to strip away their identities as Indigenous children

Figure 4.9. Photograph of Chris Cromarty as a young man visiting New York City.



Source: Given to authors by Chris Cromarty.

and turn them into young men ready and willing to serve the nation. To the Canadian public, images of the boys engaging in this quintessential Canadian pastime would have conveyed that their (forced) acculturation to Euro-Canadian life through the residential school system was proceeding apace. The broadly accepted role of male youth hockey in promoting healthy and productive future Canadian citizens⁵⁶ suggests that hockey images, as visual symbols of a harmonious Canadian identity, would have had a powerful impact for viewers. Like in other assimilatory state schooling regimes across time and geography, school photography became “a central technology to visually publicize and certify the assimilationist project’s institutional efficacy

and cultural erasures.”⁵⁷ Through the boys’ eyes, however, hockey was a way to temporarily escape the confines of their institution, build camaraderie with fellow students, and experience genuine mastery and success.

The promise of visual repatriation is that photographs which are evidence (and reminders) of oppression can also be repurposed to extend community knowledge, rebuild identity, and retell history in personal and locally relevant ways.⁵⁸ The commentary spurred on by the photos — but not limited to the photos — decentres the official picture or story of the Black Hawks and challenges the primacy of photography as a settler colonial tool, giving weight instead to technologies of Indigenous memory aligned with decoloniality. The narrative is now about them, the boys, not about the nation or how the tour promoted the aims of Indian Affairs, the Anglican Church, or the mission of the NFB Still Photography Division. Like visual repatriation efforts with other Indigenous people worldwide, such as the Sami’s reappropriation of colonial photographs, the Black Hawks’ focus on the lived experiences of themselves and their peers means that “instead of being iconic representations of something static and timeless, the depicted persons are transformed into *agents in their own history*.”⁵⁹ In this way, they insert their *own* stories into the images of their lives.

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