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Object lessons: Visualizing displacement in the Canadian Arctic

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Bio:
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Caption for image:
J.G. Wright, "Natives hauling freight from the beach," 1946, Indian and Northern Affairs, R216, Vol. 14958, album 28. Library and Archives Canada.

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Wooden crates seem to tumble out into the middle ground of the photograph, as though spilled by the camera itself—cubist boulders in the tundra leading to an icy fjord in the background—in J.G. Wright's image of supplies arriving on the beach in the hamlet of Pangnirtung (Fig. 1). Located in Canada's high arctic in the Northwest Territories (now Nunavut), the Inuit settlement was just 25 years old when Wright took this photograph in 1946, documentation made on behalf of the Eastern Arctic Patrol and the National Film Board (NFB) on one of the Canadian government's annual expeditions to the North.[1] Although Inuit had lived on Baffin Island for thousands of years, they were largely itinerant hunting and fishing communities until the 1920s: permanent, year-round inhabitation at Pangnirtung only began with the establishment of a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) post there in 1921, followed shortly thereafter by a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) office in 1923, an Anglican Mission in 1926, and a government hospital in 1930.[2] The place that Wright pictures, in other words, was still in the making, the product of settler colonial contact, cultural exchange, and Canadian nationalist expansion into the North—processes that would metastasize in the lead up to the Cold War. Representations of Indigenous bodies were central to visualizing the Arctic as Canadian territory in the first half of the twentieth century, often positioned as objects embedded in the landscape—"planted there like human flags," as one contemporary observer put it—rather than human subjects acting upon it.[3] Between the wooden boxes and the rocky mountainside in Wright's photograph, dozens of human figures clustered

[1] C.S. Mackinnon, "Canada's Eastern Arctic Patrol, 1922–68," *Polar Record* 27.161 (April 1991): 93–101.
[2] Qikiqtani Inuit Association, *Qikiqtani Truth Commission, Community Histories 1950–1975, Pangnirtung*, (Toronto: Inhabit Media, 2014), 9.
[3] Carol Payne, *The Official Picture: The National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941-1971* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 178.

around an HBC post attest to this visual trope. Now stored in the albums of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs in the Library and Archives of Canada, the typewritten caption for Wright's image tells the viewer we are witnessing "Natives hauling freight from the beach," but it is the crate of glass, which the handwritten label tells us is destined for the "Pang" HBC post, that overwhelms the frame and seems to be the real subject of the image.

State photographic archives often distract us with their accidental visual evidence. Slips between what captions direct viewers to see and the focus of the camera's gaze present ruptures in the production of colonial common sense, productive moments where what state officials thought they were documenting is superseded by the real material conditions that made colonialism, and Indigenous resistance to it, possible.[4] Wright's photographs of the arrival of crates in the Canadian Arctic are not unique within the holdings of Library and Archives Canada. Images like these appear throughout the government's official photographic documents of the North, and in photographs of Pangnirtung in particular, as early as 1903 and as late as the 1970s. Though I came across this visual trope accidentally—while searching for photographs of students in the Indian residential school system—its prominence in the national archive is not accidental. What function did these representations of crates arriving on the shores of the Canadian Arctic serve in the settler colonial imagination? And how might we, as viewers in the present, read the relations—between Inuit bodies and the material objects of settler colonialism—that are being played out for Wright's camera through a reparative frame, one that goes

[4] Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler's methodology of reading "along the archival grain" to illuminate the tensions and paradoxes in colonial epistemologies that are revealed by its record keeping has been vital to my thinking about working in the colonial photographic archive. See *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

beyond public promises of reconciliation to recognize and redress the histories this photograph captures?

To address these question involves taking the centrality of crates in the photographic archives of Canada's North seriously, and imagining how these moments of cultural contact and exchange produced particular kinds of subjects and (non-)citizens in Canada's colonial and national imaginary. The appearance of crates in photographs of Inuit territory before 1950 perform a kind of "visual suturing," as photography historian Sarah Parsons describes it, linking the North to the rest of the country in order to assert its status as Canadian territory, but they also suture the visual codes of these cultures together.[5] The very same crates bringing supplies to build colonial architecture in the Canadian North in the form of RCMP offices, HBC trading posts, and residential schools, brought back Inuit prints, weavings, ivory sculptures, and material culture to be sorted, displayed, and claimed by ethnographic and anthropological museums in the South. Wooden crates, as vessels, functioned as a two-way method for colonization.[6]

On its surface, then, Wright's photograph indexes the materials of colonial infrastructure in post-war Canada. But this photographic scene can also be read for the "colonial object relations" it signals: the forces, narratives and policies that shaped Canadian subjectivity in the lead up to the enactment of the country's first citizenship laws in 1947.[7] Drawing on psychoanalytic theories of repair that argue that human

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[5] Sarah Parsons, "'Planted there like human flags': Photographs of Inuit Canadians and Cold War Anxiety, 1951 -1956," (paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Studies Association, Toronto, Ontario, October 8-11, 2015).

[6] I am grateful to Rado Istok and Jacqueline Hóang Nguyễn for this astute observation.

[7] While citizenship emerged as a legal category in Europe and the United States as early as the eighteenth century, Canada did not adopt its first citizenship laws until 1947. This late adoption means citizenship emerged as a visual category in Canada long before it was legally guaranteed, and was negotiated in response to transnational movements for deolonization and national sovereignty happening in the period

subjects use objects to play out and work through their experiences of abandonment and loss, David L. Eng has proposed that postcolonial scholars extend this model to consider "how colonial modernity frames not only the material development but also the psychic emergence of liberal subjectivity."[8] To study colonial object relations is to attend to the ways that the emergence of the Canadian settler subject necessitated a circulation of affect that made indigenous bodies invisible, absent, or even disposable, in the national imaginary. It reveals, in other words, that there could be no concept, nor image, of the modern liberal Canadian subject without its shadow figures of the stateless person, the refugee, or the "disappearing Indian."[9]

Photography played a crucial role in visualizing the supposed "disappearance" of Indigenous subjects, inventing the myth of the "dying race" portrayed by Edward S. Curtis, but also chronicling displacements that had real and devastating material consequences for peoples like the Inuit. Only a few years after Wright's photograph was taken, for instance, the Canadian government enacted a program of forced resettlement of several Inuit communities to high above the Arctic circle: an attempt to assert sovereignty over the North in the Cold War era.[10] These "relocations," as they were euphemistically

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around 1948. Inuit were not considered Canadian citizens until 1950, and the rest of the country's Indigenous peoples were only added in an amendment made in 1960.

[8] David L. Eng, "Colonial Object Relations," *Social Text* 34.1 (March 2016): 1-20, 2-3.

[9] See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). For a landmark analysis of the cultural and political work performed by the trope of the "disappearing Indian" in Canadian visual and literary culture, see Marcia Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian" in Janet Giltrow, *Academic Reading: Reading and Writing in the Disciplines* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002): 267-29.

[10] In August 1953, the government's High Arctic Relocation Program resettled eight families to Ellesmere Island. Pangnirtung is not the product of forced resettlement, but a more nefarious and subtle colonial process of forced migration. European over-whaling on Baffin Island produced a collapse of the whale stock in 1919, pressuring the previously itinerant Inuit communities there to diversify into seal, caribou, beluga, walrus, and the hunting of white fox and to establish year-round residency closer to HBC posts in order to trade these goods. See *Qikiqtani Truth Commission, Community Histories 1950–1975, Pangnirtung* (Toronto: Inhabit Media, 2014), 10.

called, moved families to places so remote they could only be reached by supply ships once a year and where everyday subsistence was a challenge, if not an impossibility. These spaces, carefully documented by state agents and NFB photographers on their annual expeditions, made Inuit bodies "gone" both visibly and physically, but also insisted they were "there" when the exigencies of the Cold War made human occupation of the North a political necessity.

Photographs of the construction that facilitated the making of these new places—RCMP posts, hospitals, as well as residential and day schools—make the push and pull of colonial object relations obvious.[11] Residential schools, in particular, were places where not just material, but psychic and emotional labour, was invested in transforming Indigenous children into Canadian subjects: a process that worked to erode the linguistic, cultural, and religious practices of Indigenous peoples in what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has recently recognized as "cultural genocide" (a designation that, importantly, has limited legal repercussions for the Canadian government's responsibilities to reparations.)[12] When I look at Wright's image, I also see the hundreds of photographs of schoolchildren lined up in front of these schools, or seated at their desks, their hands unnervingly still on their desks, or hunched over work stations, which the national archive also contains. I imagine the wooden crates piled up in the foreground breaking apart, and reconstituting themselves in the forms of these simple, one-story buildings; the plates of glass reinforcing the windows against the Arctic winds.

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[11] For a history of the architecture of government schools in the Arctic, see Marie-Josée Therrien, "Built to Educate: The Architecture of Schools in the Arctic from 1950 to 2007," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada* 40.2 (2015): 25-42.

[12] Daniel Schwartz, "Cultural genocide label for residential schools has no legal implications, expert says," CBC News, June 13, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/cultural-genocide-label-for-residential-schools-has-no-legal-implications-expert-says-1.3110826, accessed October 28, 2016.

The political and symbolic work that crates performed for the colonial imaginary in photographs of Canada's Arctic was often quiet, seemingly overlooked in the bureaucratic paperwork that accompanied them. But their consistent presence in the visual landscape insists that we pay attention to them: to the cultural exchanges they instigated, the material conditions of settler colonialism they supported. Reckoning with their significance might be the first step towards activating the calls to action laid out by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report,[13] though Eng is pessimistic that repair of this kind is possible in a post-colonial moment that continues to be shaped by colonial object relations. In the Canadian context, where national sovereignty has not led to decolonization, Eng's skepticism is warranted. But to speak of the possibility of reconciliation between Canadian citizens and Indigenous peoples—a process that implicates federal policy, education, religion, photography, and anthropological institutions alike—necessitates first recognizing the banal ways that colonial object relations have operated in the past, and continue to unfold in the present, often right in front of the camera's lens.

[13] In 2015, the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission published 94 calls to action that represent the first step toward redressing the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and advancing the process of reconciliation. These calls are all encompassing in their appeal to shift the colonial object relations of contemporary Canada, addressing all levels of government and mandating changes in the sectors of education, art, public monuments, religion, sport, culture, and politics. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action" (Winnipeg, MB: 2015), http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf, accessed October 30, 2016.