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Review of The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada

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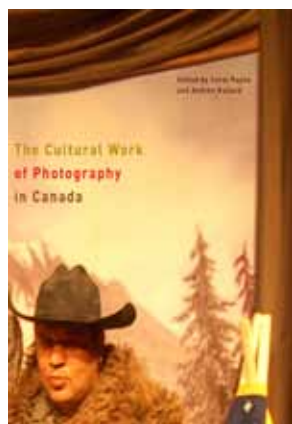
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Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard, eds., *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011, McGill-Queen's/Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History Series, 296 pp., 90 photographs, ISBN 978-0773538610.



The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada is a collection of fifteen essays that provides an overview of current scholarship in the field of Canadian photographic studies. The questions that guided the editors Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard in shaping the anthology were threefold:

How have photographs contributed to the “imagined community” of Canada? In

what ways does the narration of photographic images in the media or through exhibitions often shape our understanding of the past? And how do photographs that have been used in the broader project of memory work to link past and present?

According to the editors, these questions coalesce into one central issue that is explored throughout the book, “the role that photography has played in representing Canadian identities.” Within this editorial framework, the contributors’ essays address the complexity of gender, class, race, and regional perspectives embedded in a range of photographic practices, revealing the fissures in Canada’s visual imaginary as a settler colony and modern nation-state that promotes multiculturalism over forced assimilation and peacekeeping over war and conquest.

The essays are organized into loosely chronological and thematic clusters under the headings, “Visual Imaginings,” “Circulating Narratives,” and “Remembering and Forgetting.” A fourth and final section, “Writing Photography in Canada,” is comprised of a historiographical text by the editors. The first section addresses nineteenth-century photographic practices through case studies of portfolios, albums, and commercial studio production. The second and third sections focus on the twentieth century, covering a breadth of subjects that range from newspaper photographs of Toronto’s immigrant communities at the turn of the century to Canadair’s advertising campaign and *Weekend Magazine* photographs at the height of the Cold War. Disrupting the historical flow of these chronological clusters are three essays by Sherry Farrell Racette, Lynne Bell, and Jeff Thomas that analyze how contemporary Aboriginal photographic practices “talk back” to the colonizing imperatives of

state and empire. These texts reveal the dichotomy that exists between the scholarly project to critique colonialist depictions of Canada and its Aboriginal inhabitants by reading historical photographs against the grain—as exemplified by Carol Williams’s analysis of Hannah Maynard’s studio photography and Andrea Kunard’s case study of an album compiled by Sir Daniel Wilson—and the role that contemporary First Nations and Métis artists play in devising photographic strategies of resistance to an ongoing history of image domination. In so doing, they signal that indigenous representation, whether historical or contemporary, is *the* fissure in the photographic register of “Canadian identities.”

The anthology’s overarching focus on the analysis of indigenous representation from a variety of perspectives is its greatest strength. This leaves the minority of essays that do not address the relationship of First Nations to the visual imaginary of Canada somewhat orphaned. Sara Bassnett’s examination of the representation of ethnic identities in the 1910s through press photographs of Toronto’s immigrant enclave of “The Ward” and Sarah Stacey’s historical overview of *Weekend Magazine*’s three decades of publishing from 1946 to 1977 are significant contributions to our understanding of the ideological intertwining of immigration, nationalism, and photography (and in the case of Stacey’s essay, the only one in the anthology to address Quebec’s distinct nationalism). Yet, the connections that can be drawn between their essays and the analyses of the racialist underpinning of nineteenth-century photography in the “Visual Imaginings” section are oblique rather than foregrounded. Similarly, though James Opp’s study of Yousuf Karsh’s involvement in the Canadair advertising campaign to promote the defence industry through “Picturing Communism;” John O’Brien’s discursive tale of a dirty bomb detonated over British Columbia and Canada’s role in the arms race; and Blake Fitzpatrick’s analysis of his exhibition’s staging of atomic photographs in Ottawa’s decommissioned Diefenbunker are eloquent testimonies to the erasure of historical memory in Cold War photography, they are analytically distinct from the scholarly intent to redress the legacy of white settler colonialism that characterizes the majority of the essays.

This analytical divide between the interrogation of photography as the handmaiden of colonialism and the deconstruction of its role in mediating social relations and inscribing political agendas in the service of the nation state suggests how multifaceted the stakes are for the cultural work of photography in Canada. While the quality of scholarship of the individual essays is impeccable—each warranting a discursive engagement that is beyond the scope of this review—, as a collection they do not quite add up to an exposition of “the role photography has played in representing Canadian identities,” whether imagined, narrated, or remembered. What resonates instead are the

particularisms of the local and the regional, with the nation becoming an ideological mirage that eludes the camera's gaze, even when it is being evoked to represent the politics of national security or national unity. The overarching focus on indigenous representation further complicates the mirage of nation, for arguably what is at stake politically for First Nations and Métis is an identity invested in their status as treaty nations that are separate from the Canadian state. Discussion of Quebec's distinctive relation to colonialism and of how its separatist brand of nationalism impinges on the cultural work of photography in Canada is, outside of Stacey's essay, notably absent.

That the sum of the anthology's parts highlights indigenous representation while demarcating a fault-line between the photographic register of colonialism and nationalism underscores the need for, and significance of, scholarship that challenges dominant historical narratives conjoining identity and nation. The last overview anthology of Canadian photography, *Thirteen Essays on Photography*, was published, as the editors note in their introduction, two decades ago. An initiative spearheaded by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, this collection primarily showcased critical writing on contemporary photography. The shifts in photographic discourse and the expanding breadth of historical and cultural inquiry that have occurred in the intervening years place exceedingly high expectations on Payne and Kunard's present volume to account for the changes in scholarship on Canadian photography. By way of contextualizing these changes and their editorial decisions, the editors contribute a historiographical essay to the anthology that is both valuable in its breadth and instructive in its analysis.

In their essay Kunard and Payne identify two distinguishable camps in the development of scholarship on Canadian photography. The first is the purview of archival historians, who focus on photography from the 1850s to the 1950s; the second is the domain of curatorial initiatives, which have undertaken the exhibition and analysis of photographic practices from the 1950s to the present. What is striking about both is the degree to which the arena of scholarship—that is, the collections they draw from in their study of photography—has been shaped by museums and federal governmental initiatives, those of Library and Archives Canada, the National Film Board of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the National Gallery of Canada, or provincial museums such as the

Vancouver Art Gallery, the Banff Centre, and the Art Gallery of Ontario. The collecting mandates of these institutions privilege historical continuity over contestation, and Kunard and Payne's historiographical overview demonstrates that the scholarship in the field has been similarly constrained.

In light of this historiographical legacy, *The Cultural Work of Photography* is a benchmark publication. By showcasing contemporary scholars of Canadian photography who are committed to unsettling the hegemony of nationalist narratives, Payne and Kunard announce a sea change in the field. They describe this as one in which the featured authors

meld theory with cultural history. They extend our understanding of photography and the nation, memory and the dissemination of mass media. Together, they prompt us to consider how photographs have contributed historically to cultural history in Canada and how those same images can reshape meanings and memories in the future.

I would argue that the authors achieve far more, holding out the promise for the cultural work of photography to contest how identities are represented in the service of empire and the state and to envision counter-narratives of political agency and self-determination. Jeff Thomas's essay about his exhibition *Emergence From the Shadows*, which juxtaposed First Nations portraits taken by anthropologists in the nineteenth century with photographic works by contemporary indigenous artists, demonstrates how this promise has been realized in the curatorial realm. Collectively, the fifteen essays in *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* constitute a critically attuned scholarship dedicated to the interrogation of the photographic register of nation and identity. For this scholarship to add up to a revisionist history of photographic studies in Canada, there is still much cultural work to be done. We can only hope that another two decades does not lapse before subsequent anthologies build upon Payne and Kunard's editorial vision, one that has provided an important assessment of a changing field and that attests to the essential role photography has played in shaping the visual imaginary of Canada.

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