

Moving from Colonization to Decolonization: Reinterpreting Historical Images of Aboriginal Women

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Since contact, society has been witness to literally thousands of images of the First Peoples of this territory. Many of these images, some of which have been falsely created, have become part, if not all, of the status quo's understanding of what it is to be "Indian"; and, more specifically, what it is to be an Indian woman. Images resembling the serenity of the Victorian era can be seen featuring Indian women in orchestrated positions: photographs of women posing for studio photographers with "papoose"¹; sketches of Indian women "serving" their men during the treaty-making process; and Indian women, typically with children, sitting in front of teepees.²

Many of these stereotypical images have paved the way for what has come to be known as the "Hollywood Indian Woman." Hollywood westerns provide an example of this. For example, we can all, without much effort, think of a Western "classic" that features First Nations women – and even men – sporting headbands: part of the Indian "motif," perhaps?³ However, it was only recently that I learned what the presence of the headband signified: it was not typical of traditional dress; rather, it was needed to secure the actress's wig.⁴ Today, it is difficult to find a baby doll, Barbie doll, cartoon drawing or photograph that does not attempt to incorporate this infamous Indian headband. We have seen this image so many times that we, without question, accept it as real.

What this suggests is that the popularisation and mass production of "Indian women" – or what we have come to know as "Indian women" – is ultimately the result of colonialism.⁵ These are the images that have been manipulated, altered and, in some cases, created by others. These are the images that society has been left with – the images of colonized Indian women. The fraud becomes real, and the real becomes forgotten.

However, deep beneath the endless stacks of "familiar" photographs exists a collection of pictures that, on second examination, clearly challenge the former stereotype. These are the photographs that show Indian women participating in activities other than serving their men in treaty negotiations and/or posing with "papoose" for studio photographers. These are images

of “real” Indian women. These pictures serve two separate yet interrelated purposes. First, they challenge the accuracy of these previously accepted images – they show Indian women, for example, without headbands.⁶ Second, the images show Indian women in “real” or “atypical” activities.⁷ They let us, for possibly the first time, begin to understand, at least historically, what it means to be an “Indian woman.”⁸ As well, for these images in particular, they provide an opportunity to embrace each as a story of individual resistance.

The images chosen for this essay may at first be deceiving. On first glance, these images seem to portray a commentary on the assimilation and colonization of Aboriginal women. However, on re-examination, it is easy to see that these pictures depict resistance. Rather than Aboriginal women becoming colonized, these pictures, if deconstructed in the right frame of mind, clearly detail decolonization – that is, the bringing of “Indian” into the White world. The women, and in some cases children, in these photos can be seen as forever changing the rules, and roles, in non-Aboriginal society.

For some time now, scholars have embraced Aboriginal scholarship.⁹ That is not enough. It is crucial, just as we have begun to deconstruct mainstream academia, to deconstruct mainstream images. We must re-examine “old” pictures with a new outlook. We must understand the story around the photograph and the history of it. We must also bring these ideas to contemporary images: Who is responsible for the image? For its promotion? For its distribution?

This path can begin by examining the pictures in this essay. What is typical of these photos? What is not? What is missing? What are the subjects doing? What story might the picture be telling? How does each image speak to resistance and decolonization?

Most important, though, it is time to accept the reconstructed images of First Nations, particularly of women, from First Nations themselves. Aboriginal photographers and artists are clearly challenging the stereotypical images that have become “mainstream.” Most certainly, it is clear that voices should be seen as well as heard.

Notes

- 1 “Papoose” is an Algonkian term meaning baby. I have learned recently, from my aunts, that the piece that the baby is wrapped in is referred to as a moss bag. Thank you, Aunts.
- 2 These images can be seen anywhere – from sketched historical accounts to modern-day greeting cards, calendars and Internet sites. Even though the mediums on which the images were displayed have changed, the images have remained the same.

- 3 Any typical "cowboys and Indians" film will provide dozens of unyielding Indian female stereotypes.
- 4 During the summer of 1995, I had the honour of taking an upper-year Native Studies class, at the University of Saskatchewan, with instructors Dr. Maria Campbell and Marjorie Beaucage. It was truly an altering experience.
- 5 I am defining colonialism as the interference and imposition of non-Indian culture on First Nations and First Nations culture.
- 6 The absence of the headband encourages us to ask the question of the presence of the headband in the first place.
- 7 By atypical activities, I am purposely resisting the "typical" activities of Indian women depicted in popular photographs.
- 8 Here, of course, I am specifically emphasizing the singular term "woman" to also resist identifying and recognizing groups of Indian women.
- 9 By Aboriginal scholarship, I am specifically referring to scholarship done by First Nations people.



Plate 1: Irene Tootoosis of the Poundmaker First Nation Reserve at a homemaking training session at Red Pheasant First Nation Reserve. University of Saskatchewan Archives (date and photographer unknown).



Plate 2: Violet Thomas – Loon Lake First Nation Reserve. University of Saskatchewan Archives (date and photographer unknown).



Plate 3: Sewing machines presented to Waterhen Lake First Nation Reserve, 1969. University of Saskatchewan Archives (photographer unknown).



Plate 4: Mrs. Ella Humphry assisting Mrs. Lewis at the Loon Lake First Nation Reserve. University of Saskatchewan Archives (date and photographer unknown).



Plate 5: Two Indian children outside a miniature tepee, Pion-Era, Saskatoon, 1960. Saskatchewan Archives Board SB 6382 (photographer unknown).



Plate 6: Indian children dancing at grandstand during Pion-Era, Saskatoon, 1969. Saskatchewan Archives Board SB 6038 (photographer unknown).



Plate 7: Indian art – hand-painted cards, 1962. Saskatchewan Archives Board SB 5951, Saskatchewan Government photographer.



Plate 8: Toy Indian tepees and crafts made of moose hide by Cree Indians on Sweetgrass First Nation Reserve at the Saskatoon Arts and Crafts Society Show, 1951. Saskatchewan Archives Board SB 2470 (photographer unknown).



Plate 9: Display of articles made in a knitting class, Waterhen Lake First Nation Reserve, 1969. University of Saskatchewan Archives (photographer unknown).