

Doubletake

The Diary of a Relationship with an Image

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FIRST TAKE

I am surprised by this photograph [opposite page], which seems so unlike the conventional images I've seen of Native people 'taken' by white people. It is simple enough — a man and woman are smiling warmly at the photographer, while their little girl smirks proudly. The parents are seated comfortably on the ground, the man with his legs crossed, the woman perhaps kneeling. The child stands between them, closer to her father, holding a 'bouquet' of leaves. Behind them are signs of early spring — a tree in leaf, others still bare-branched.

I'm trying to deconstruct my deep attraction to this quiet little picture. I have been mesmerized by these faces since the postcard was sent to me last month by a friend, a Native Canadian painter and curator who found it in a taxidermy/Indian shop (he was bemused by that conjunction). Or maybe I am mesmerized by the three cultural spaces that exist between the Beaver family and Mary Schaffer and me.

They are not vast spaces, although we are separated at the moment by a continent, national borders, 84 years. They consist of the then-present space of the subjects, the then-present, but perhaps very different, space of the photographer, and the now-present space of the writer in retrospect, as a surrogate for contemporary viewers. Or perhaps there are only two spaces: the relationship between photographer and subjects then and between me/us and the photograph now. I wonder where these spaces

converge. Maybe only on this page.

Good photography can *embody* what has been seen. As I scrutinize it, this photograph becomes the people photographed — not “flat death” as Roland Barthes would have it, but “flat life”. This one-way (and admittedly romantic) relationship is mediated by the presence/absence of Mary Schaffer, who haunts the threshold of the encounter. I am borrowing her space, that diminished space between her and the Beaver family. She has made a frontal (though not a confrontational) image, bringing her subjects visually to the foreground, into the area of potential intimacy. The effect is heightened by the photograph’s remarkable contemporaneity, the crisp ‘presentness’ which delivers this image from the blatant anthropological distancing evident in most photographs of the period. The Beavers’ relaxed poses and friendly, unselfconscious expressions might be those of a contemporary snapshot, except for the high quality of the print. At the same time they have been freed from the ‘ethnographic present’ — that patronising frame that freezes personal and social specifics into generalization, and is usually described from a neutral and anonymous third-person perspective. They are ‘present’ in part because of their impressive personal ‘presence’. A certain synchronism is suggested, the ‘extended present’ or ‘eternal present’ cited by, among others, N. Scott Momaday.

What would happen to the West, Johannes Fabian has mused, “. . . if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of its Other”.¹ I think I’ve been invaded. I feel as though I know these people. Sampson Beaver and his wife seem more familiar than the stiff-backed, blank-faced pictures of my own great grandparents, the two pairs who went West in the 1870s, among those pushing their way into others’ centers from the Eastern margins of the continent.*

As I begin, I’m also looking at this triple portrait cut loose from all knowledge of the people involved — an aspect that normally would have informed much of my own position. With only the postcard caption to go on, my response is not neutral, but wholly subjective. I’m aware that writing about a white woman photographing Native people is a kind of metaphor for my own position as an Anglo critic trying to write about contemporary Native North American art. I’d rather be Mary Schaffer, a courageous woman in long skirts, who seems to be trusted by this attractive couple and their sweetly sassy child. How did she find her way past the barriers of turn-of-the-century colonialism to receive these serene smiles? And I want to be Sampson Beaver and his (unnamed) wife, who are so at home where they are, who appear content, at least in this spring moment.

* My great-grand father, Frank Isham — teacher, businessman, dairy farmer, mining engineer, ranch foreman — built a little wooden schoolhouse in Dakota Territory. I have a photograph of it — bleak, unpeopled, rising from the plains as a rude reminder of all the unholy teachings to come. Frank and Mary Rowland Isham had their sod house burned out from under them by a ‘half breed’ protesting the presence of white people.

¹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983.

SECOND TAKE

I showed the picture and my 'diary' to a friend, who said she was convinced that the real relationship portrayed was between the photographer and the child, that the parents liked Schaffer because she had made friends with their little girl. Certainly the photograph implies a dialogue, an exchange, an I/eye (the photographer) and a You (her subjects, and we the viewers, if the photographer would emerge from beneath her black cloth and turn to look back at us). At the same time, the invisible (unknowable) autobiographical component, the 'view point' provided by the invisible photographer "writer, naturalist, explorer, who lived and worked in the Rockies for many years" is another factor that shaped what is visible here. I have written to the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff for information about her.

The cultural abyss that had to exist in 1906 between the Beaver family and Mary Schaffer was (though burdened by political circumstances and colonial conditioning) at least intellectually unselfconscious. It may have been further diminished by what I perceive (or project) as the friendly relationship between them. The time and cultural space that usually distances me — self-consciously, but involuntarily — from historic representations of Another is also lessened here. Schaffer's photograph lacks the rhetorical exposure of 'authenticity'. But the Beavers are not universalized into oblivion as 'just folks' either. Their portrait is devoid of cuteness, and yet it has great 'charm' — in the magical sense. It is only secondarily quaint, despite the inevitable, but thin, veneer of picturesqueness (totally aside from the subject matter: 'exotic Native people') arising from the passage of historical time and the interval implied by the dress of almost 90 years ago. This is not, however, the Edward S. Curtis view of the Noble Savage, staring moodily into the misty past, or facing the camera forced upon him or her with the wariness and hostility that has been appropriated by the cliché of 'dignity'.

It is now common knowledge that one of the hegemonic devices of colonialism (postcolonialism is hardly free of it either) has been to isolate the Other in another time, a time that also becomes another place — The Past — even when the chronological time is the present. Like racism, this is a habit hard to kick even when it is recognized. Schaffer's photograph is a microcosmic triumph for social equality as expressed through representation. The discontinuity and disjunctiveness that usually characterize cross-cultural experience are translated here into a certain harmony — or the illusion thereof. This is a sympathetic photograph, but it is not, nor could it be, empathetic. (Is it possible honestly to perceive such a scene as idyllic, within the knowledge of such a dystopian social context?) The three figures, despite their smiles and amicable, knowing expressions, remain the objects of our eyes. We are simply lucky that this open, intelligent gaze has passed into history as evidence of a different encounter between Native and European, of the maintenance of some human interaction in the midst or aftermath of genocide.

The Beavers' portrait seems a classic visualization of what anthropologists call 'intersubjective time'. It commemorates a reciprocal moment (rather than a cannibalistic one), where the emphasis is on interaction and

communication; a rare moment in which subject and object are caught in exchange within shared time. The enculturated distance between photographer and photographed, between white and Native has somehow been momentarily bridged to such an extent that the bridge extends over time to me, to us, almost a century later.

This is the kind of photograph I have often used as an example of the difference between images taken by someone from within a community and by an 'outsider'. I would have put it in the former category. However it was not taken by a Stoney, but by an adventurous white lady passing through the Northern Rockies, possibly on that quest for self (or loss of self) in relation to Other and Nature which has been a major theme in North American culture.

The Beaver family (I wish I knew the woman's and child's names) is clearly among friends, but the picture might still have been very different if taken by a Native 'insider'. Of course we have no way of knowing what that image might have been. Photography, loaded with historical stigmas, has only recently become an accepted art form among Indian peoples; there are not many Native photographers working as 'artists' even today. This has been explained from within the communities as a response to past abuses. Photography has been a tool by which to exploit and disarm, to document the 'disappearance' of Indian nations, to keep them in their 'place' in the past, and to make them objects of study and contemplation: "Government surveyors, priests, tourists, and white photographers were all yearning for the 'noble savage' dressed in full regalia, looking stoic and posing like Cybis statues. . . . We cannot identify with these images," wrote Flathead Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith, in her text for the first national Native American photography exhibition in 1984. The press release from the American Indian Community House Gallery in New York also set out some distinctions between non-Indian and these Indian photographers, among them: "These photos are not the universal images of Indians. They are not heroic, noble, stoic or romantic. What they do show is human warmth and an intimacy with their subject. . . ." This is the feeling I get from the Beavers' portrait. Am I just kidding myself? Overidentifying with Mary Schaffer?

Another explanation for the avoidance of photography raises old taboos — the 'photos-steal-your-spirit-syndrome', which is not, in fact, so far off in this situation. The more we know about representation the more obvious it becomes that photography *is* often a spirit snatcher. I 'own' a postcard which permits me to have the Beaver family 'living' in my house. The Oglala warrior Crazy Horse never allowed his photograph to be taken, and it was said of those leaders who did that "they let their spirits be captured in a box" and lost the impetus to resistance. Contemporary American Indian Movement (AIM) leader Russell Means has described the introduction of writing into oral traditions as a destructive "abstraction over the spoken relationship of a people". The camera was another weapon in the wars of domination. As Dennis Grady observes:

... how fitting it must have seemed to the victims of that process — the natives of North America, whose idea of 'vision' is as spiritual as it is physical — when the white man produced from his baggage a box that had the power to transcribe

the world onto a flat paper plane. Here was a machine that could make of this landscape a surface; of this territory, a map; of this man, this woman, this living child, a framed, hand-held, negotiable object to be looked at, traded, possessed; the perfect tool for the work of the 'wasi'chu', the greedy one who takes the fat.²

2 Dennis Grady, 'The Devolutionary Image: Toward a Photography of Liberation', *SF Commentwork*, No 16, Summer/Fall 1989, p 28.

Our communal 'memory' of Native people on this continent has been projected through the above-mentioned 'stoic' (numb is a better term), wary, pained, resigned, belligerent and occasionally pathetic faces 'shot' by 19th and early 20th Century photographers like Edward Curtis, Edward Vroman, and Roland W. Reed — all men. Looking through a group of portraits of Indians from that period, I found one (*Indian with Feather Bonnet*, c. 1898) in which the expression was less grim, more eye-to-eye; the photographer was Gertrude Kasebier. The photographs by Kate Cory (a 'midwestern spinster' who came to Arizona at age 44), taken in the Hopi village where she lived from 1905 to 1912, also diverge from the general pattern, as do some of Laura Gilpin's works.* All of which suggests an empathetic relationship between race and gender lurking in this subject, although I can't explore it here.

Of course Mary Schaffer, although a woman and thereby also, divergently, disenfranchised, was at least indirectly allied with the oppressors. She may have been an 'innocent' vehicle of her culture and her times. She may have been a rebel and independent of some of its crueler manifestations. Although it is more likely that she was oblivious to anthropological scholarship, she might have known about the then-new 'comparative method', which was to permit the 'equal' treatment of human culture in all times and in all places, but failed to overturn the edifice of Otherness built by previous disciplines. She may have been an enthusiastic perpetrator of expansionism.

Perhaps this photograph was already tinged with propaganda even at the time it was taken. Perhaps Mary Schaffer herself had an axe to grind. She may have been concerned to show her audience (and who were *they?*) that the only good Indian was not a dead Indian. Perhaps this portrait is the kind of 'advocacy image' we find in the production of leftist photographers working in Nicaragua. The knowledgeable, sympathetic tourist is not always immune to cultural imperialism. I wonder if Mary Schaffer, like so many progressive photographers working in poorer neighbourhoods and countries, gave her subjects a print of this photograph. Was it their first, their only image of themselves? Or the first that had not disappeared with the photographer? Is a curling copy of this picture given a place of honour in some family photo album or on the wall of some descendant's house?

I'm overpersonalizing the depicted encounter. To offset my emotional attraction to this image, let me imagine that Schaffer was a flag-waving imperialist, and try to read this image, or my responses to this image, in

* In 1989, Lily and Grant Benally, members of the Navajo Nation, won a suit against the Amon Carter Museum in Texas for the frequent public (and publicity) use of a Laura Gilpin photo called *Navajo Madonna*, taken in 1932. The court recognized that public use of a personal photo could be offensive and that the Navajos believe that 'bad effects' could result from being photographed. — *The New Mexican*, June 10, 1989.

a mirror, as though I had taken an immediate dislike to it. Can I avoid that warm gaze and see in these three figures an illustration of all the colonial perfidy that provides its historical backdrop? Do Sampson Beaver and his family look helpless and victimized? They are handsome, healthy people; perhaps chosen to demonstrate that Indians were being 'treated well'. The family is seated on the ground, perhaps placed there because the photographer was influenced by stereotypical representations of the 'primitive's' closeness to the earth, to nature. The woman is placed at a small distance from her husband and child, like a servant. They are smiling; perhaps Schaffer has offered the child a treat, or the adults some favour. Nevertheless, it is hard to see these smiles as solely money-bought.

A virtual class system exists among the common representations of an Indian family from this period: the lost, miserable, huddled group outside a teepee, the businesslike document of a neutrally 'ordinary' family, or the proud, noble holdouts in a grand landscape, highlighted by giant trees or dramatic mesas. For all the separations inherent in such images, there is no such thing as 'objectivity' or neutrality in portrait photography. Personal interaction of *some* kind is necessary to create the context within the larger frame of historical events. The Schaffer photo too is 'posed'. And the pose is an imposition since Native people had no traditional way of sitting for a portrait or a photograph; self-representation in that sense was not part of the cultures. But at least the Beaver family is not sitting bolt upright in wooden chairs; Sampson Beaver is not standing patriarchally with his hand on his wife's shoulder while the child is properly subdued below. Man and wife are comfortable and equal as they smile at the black box confronting them, and the little girl's expression is familiar to anyone who has spent time with little girls.

Today I received some scraps of information³ about the Stoney Indians (an anglicization of the word Assine, meaning stone) who were Assiniboine, offshoots of the Sioux. They called themselves Nakodah and arrived in the foothills of the Rockies in the 18th Century, fleeing smallpox epidemics. With the arrival of settlers and the founding of Banff, the Stoney were forced into a life of relatively peaceful interaction with the townspeople. In the late Nineteenth Century, Banff was already a flourishing tourist town, boasting a spa and the annual "Indian Days" powwow, begun in 1889. The Whyte Museum there has a massive archive of photographs of the Native people of the Rockies, (including this one, and one of Ginger Rogers on vacation, sketching Chief Jacob Twoyoungman in a plains headdress). Eventually forced to live off tourism, the Stoney were exploited but not embattled. And Mary Schaffer, for all her credentials, was a tourist herself.

Indians were the photogenic turn-of-the-century counterparts of today's 'lookouts' — roadside scenic vistas: readymade 'views', 'nature' viewed from a static culture. The role of photography in tourism (or as tourism) started early. What looks to us today like a serious 'documentary' photograph may just be the equivalent of *National Geographic* voyeurism, or a colorprint of a New York City homeless person taken for the folks at home. The 'egalitarianism' (intentional or not) of Schaffer's photograph may have irritated her audience, at least those back East, where exaggeration and idealization of the 'savage' reigned unchecked. Even

³ Jon Whyte, *Indians in the Rockies*, Altitude Publishing Ltd, Banff, 1985.

today, when Indians wear rubber boots or sneakers at ceremonial dances, or an Apache puberty ritual includes six-packs of soda among the offerings, tourists and purists tend to be offended. Such 'anachronisms' destroy the time-honoured distance between Them and Us, the illusion that They live in different times than We do. 'Anachronisms' may also be somewhat threatening to Our peace of mind, recalling how They got 'there', were put 'there', in a space that is separated from us by the barbed wire of what has been called 'absentee colonialism'.

But how did *we* get There — off-center — to the places where we are face to face with those who do not apparently resemble us? Johannes Fabian distinguishes between historic religious travel "to the centers of religion or to the souls to be saved" and today's secular travel "from the centers of learning and power to places where man was to find nothing but himself".⁴ The Sioux visionary Black Elk (like the Irish) says that anywhere can be the center of the world. We the 'conquerors' have not thought so. We 'travel' to the 'margins' to fulfill some part of us that is 'marginal' to our own culture, but is becoming increasingly, embarrassingly, central.

Once at the margins, we are not welcomed with open arms. At dances we gawk or smile shyly at the Indian people hurrying by, and they ignore us, or are politely aloof when spoken to, so long as we behave ourselves. They don't need us but we somehow, paradoxically, need them. We need to take images away from these encounters, to take Them with us. According to Dean MacCannell, tourists are trying to "discover or reconstruct a cultural heritage or a social identity. . . . Sightseeing is a ritual performed to the differentiations of society".⁵ The same might be said of photography itself. As the ultimate invasion of social, religious, and individual privacy, it is banned by many pueblos and reservations.

LAST TAKE

The books I'd ordered from Banff finally arrived. I dove into them and of course had to revise some of my notions.

The Beaver family photography was taken in 1907, not 1906; not in early spring, but in late September, when Schaffer was completing a four-month expedition to the sources of the Saskatchewan River. Having just crossed two turbulent rivers, she and her companions reached the Golden Kootenai Plains, (the Katoonda, or Windy Plains) and weaving in and out of yellowing poplars, they spied two tepees nestled deep among the trees.

I have seen not one but many of their camps and seldom or never have they failed to be artistic in their setting, and this one was no exception. Knowing they must be Silas Abraham's and Sampson Beaver's families, acquaintances of a year's standing, I could not resist a hurried call. The children spied us first, and tumbling head over heels, ran to cover like rabbits. . . . above the din and excitement I called, 'Frances Louise!' She had been my little favourite when last we were among the Indians, accepting my advances with a sweet baby womanliness quite unlike the other children, for which I had rewarded her by presenting her with a doll I had constructed. . . . love blinded the little mother's eyes to any imperfections, and the gift gave me a spot of my own in the memory of the forest baby. . . . In an instant her little face appeared at the tepee-flap, just as solemn, just as sweet, and just as dirty as ever.⁶

⁴ Johannes Fabian, *op cit.*

⁵ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Schocken Books, New York, 1989

⁶ E.J. Hart (ed.), *Hunter of Peace: Mary T.S. Schaffer's Old Indian Trails of the Canadian Rockies*, Whyte Museum, Banff, 1980, p 70.

It was this group of Stoneys (members of the Wesley Band) who the previous year had given Schaffer her Indian name — Yahe-Weha, Mountain Woman. Banned from hunting in the National Parks, they were still able to hunt, trap and live beyond their boundaries. In 1907 she remained with them for four days. "When I hear those 'who know' speak of the sullen, stupid Indian", she wrote:

I wish they could have been on hand the afternoon the white squaws visited the red ones with their cameras. There were no men to disturb the peace, the women quickly caught our ideas, entered the spirit of the game, and with musical laughter and little giggles, allowed themselves to be hauled about and posed and pushed in a fashion to turn an artist green with envy... Yahe-Weha might photograph to her heart's content. She had promised pictures the year before, she had kept the promise, and she might have as many photographs now as she wanted.⁷

7 Ibid, p 71.

Sampson Beaver's wife Leah was no doubt among the women that afternoon. He was thirty years old at the time, and she looks around the same age. In the language of the tourist, Schaffer described him crouching to light his pipe at a campfire:

...his swarthy face lighted up by the bright glow, his brass earrings and nail-studded belt catching the glare, with long black plaits of glossy hair and his blanket breeches...⁸

8 Ibid, p 72.

It was Sampson Beaver who then gave Schaffer one of the great gifts of her life — a map of how to reach the legendary Maligne Lake which she had hitherto sought unsuccessfully — thereby repaying his daughter's friend many times over. He drew it from memory of a trip sixteen years before — in symbols, "mountains, streams, and passes all included". In 1908 Schaffer, her friend Mollie Adams, 'Chief' Warren (her young guide, whom she later married), and 'K' Unwin followed the accurate map and became the first white people to document the shores of Cabha Imne (Beaver Lake), ungratefully renamed Maligne for the dangerous river it feeds. In 1911 she returned to survey the lake and its environs, which lie in what is now Jasper National Park.

Mary Sharples Schaffer Warren (1861-1939) was not a Canadian but a Philadelphian, from a wealthy Quaker family. Her father was a businessman and 'gentleman farmer', as well as an avid mineralogist. She became an amateur naturalist as a child and studied botany as a painter. In 1894 she married Dr. Charles Schaffer, a respected, and much older, doctor whose passion was botany and with whom she worked as an illustrator and photographer until his death in 1903. After completing and publishing his *Alpine Flora of the Canadian Rocky Mountains*, she conquered her fear of horses, bears, and the wilderness, and began her lengthy exploring expeditions, going on horseback with pack train deep into the then mostly uncharted wilderness for months at a time.

Schaffer's interest in Indians and the West had been awakened when, as a small child, she overheard her Cousin Jim, an army officer, telling her parents about the destruction of an Indian village in which women and children were massacred; afterwards he had found a live baby sheltered by the mother's dead body. This story made a profound

impression on Mary Schaffer, and she became obsessed with Indians. In her mid-teens she took her first trip west, met Native people for the first time, and became an inveterate traveller. The Canadian Rockies were her husband's botanical turf, and for the rest of her life Schaffer spent summers on the trails, photographing, writing and exploring. She finally moved to Banff, where she died.

When Schaffer and Mollie Adams decided to take their plunge into the wilderness, it was unprecedented, and improper, for women to encroach on this steadfastly male territory. However, as Schaffer recalled:

... there are times when the horizon seems restricted, and we seemed to have reached that horizon, and the limit of all endurance — to sit with folded hands and listen calmly to the stories of the hills we so longed to see, the hills which had lured and beckoned us for years before this long list of men had ever set foot in the country. Our cup splashed over. We looked into each other's eyes and said: 'Why not? We can starve as well as they; the muskeg will be no softer for us than for them... the waters no deeper to swim, nor the bath colder if we fall in,' — so — we planned a trip.⁹

⁹ Ibid, p 17.

These, and many other hardships and exhilarations, they did endure, loving almost every minute of it, and documenting their experiences with their (often ineptly hand-colored) photographs of giant peaks, vast rivers, glaciers, and fields of wildflowers. When they were returning from the 1907 expedition, they passed a stranger on the trail near Lake Louise who wrote:

As we drove along the narrow hill road a piebald packpony with a china-blue eye came round a bend, followed by two women, black haired, bare-headed, wearing beadwork squaw jackets and riding straddle. A string of pack-ponies trotted through the pines behind them.

'Indians on the move?' said I. 'How characteristic!' « As the women jolted by, one of them very slightly turned her eyes and they were, past any doubt, the comprehending equal eyes of the civilised white woman which moved in that berry-brown face. . . .

The same evening, in a hotel of all the luxuries, a slight woman in a very pretty evening frock was turning over photographs, and the eyes beneath the strictly arranged hair were the eyes of the woman in the beadwork who had quirted the piebald pack-pony past our buggy.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid, p 69.

The author of this 'photographic' colonial encounter was, ironically, Rudyard Kipling.

As Levi-Strauss has pointed out, the notion of travel is thoroughly corrupted by power. Mary Schaffer, for all her love of the wilderness (which she constantly called her "playground") was not free from the sense of power that came with being a prosperous 'modern' person at 'play' in the fields of the conquered. At the same time, she also expressed a very 'modern' sense of melancholy and loss as she watched the railroad (which she called a "python") and ensuing 'civilization' inching its way into her beloved landscape. More than her photographs, her journals betray a colonial lens. She is condescendingly "fond", but not very respectful, of the "savages" who are often her friends, bemoaning their unpleasantly crude and hard traditional life. In 1911, for instance, her party passed "a Cree village where, when we tried to photograph the untidy spot, the inhabitants scuttled like rabbits to their holes". In 1907, on the

same "golden" Kootenai Plains where she took the Beavers' portrait, their camp was visited by "old Paul Beaver", presumably a relative of her darling Frances Louise. He eyed their simmering supper "greedily", but

our provisions were reaching that point where it was dangerous to invite any guests, especially Indians, to a meal, so we downed all hospitable inclinations and without a qualm watched him ride away on his handsome buckskin just as darkness was falling.¹¹

11 Ibid.

Despite years of critical analysis, seeing is still believing to some extent — as those who control the dominant culture (and those who ban it from Native contexts) know all too well. In works like this one, some of the barriers are down, or invisible, and we have the illusion of seeing for ourselves, the way we never *would* see for ourselves, which is what communication is about. For all its socially enforced static quality, and for all I've read into it, Mary Schaffer's photograph of Sampson, Leah, and Frances Louise Beaver is 'merely' the image of an ephemeral moment. I am first and foremost touched by its peace and freshness. I can feel the ground and grass warm and damp beneath the people sitting 'here' in an Indian Summer after disaster had struck, but before almost all was lost. As viewers of this image, 84 years later, on the verge of the quincentennial of Columbus' accidental invasion of the Americas, we can only relate our responses in terms of what we know. And as a nation we don't know enough.

Thanks to Gerald McMaster and Jon Whyte.