

# THE SETTLER-COLONIAL GAZE IN TRANSNATIONAL NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY OF CANADA: EXPOSING THE UNSETTLED HISTORY IN THE RUDOLPH P. BRATTY FAMILY COLLECTION

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## **Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.**

I've long been curious about people and understanding what is going on beneath one's exterior, but academically, that started out with literature. I earned my undergraduate degree at the University of King's College in Halifax where I studied English and Spanish. A couple years later, I pursued an MA in Modern and Contemporary Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where I shifted from reading the words in characters' minds to viewing portraits. I focused on photographic constructions of the self and looked at artists that connected images and texts. Studying alongside artists, writing a thesis on Moyra Davey's photographic and written work, collaborating as a co-curator of my cohort's MFA Show, and working at the Art Institute across the road in the Department of Photography made that time very formative.

Since then, I have worked as a curator of photography. I've been fortunate to work in several museums and university galleries, including curating and collaborating on exhibitions at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York, the Chicago History Museum, and the Image Centre at Toronto Metropolitan University.

## **Tell us about your dissertation and how it relates to the study of Canada.**

My dissertation research focuses on a collection of photographs called The Rudolph P. Bratty Family Collection. This collection has around 22,000 press prints made through the 20th century by a myriad of photojournalists who were all photographing people and events related to "Canada." The prints were sent to The New York Times for publication consideration, but only some were published.

These images lived in The New York Times Archive for decades, but in the late aughts, Canadian collector Chris Bratty, purchased and brought this collection of photographs to Canada, eventually gifting them in 2017 to the Image Centre at Toronto Metropolitan University.

I'm analyzing their significance today, considering their settler-colonial legacy, and looking at how the photographs that were not printed might have impacted the construction of Canada's national identity. As a curator, I am also thinking practically about the responsibilities attached to caring for and exhibiting these photos.

## **How did you come to choose this research topic?**

I was inspired to work with this collection of images because it comes with a set of issues that are important for me to work through as I build my toolkit and personal philosophy as a curator. These issues include understanding how to talk about difficult subject-matter, how to look with others, how to facilitate research knowing one has biases and how to learn to see beyond them, and how to advocate for respectful archival and exhibition practices that meet the guidelines of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and how to share images that cannot be read by everyone because they require specific cultural knowledge.

These are skills that are not easily taught in tangible ways when training to be a curator or art historian. I have found this collection—composed of work by different photographers, depicting a century of transformation in Canada that included a myriad of marginalizing and inhumane policies, as well as stories that were never shared—necessitates one to engage with these tough questions. There is a lot to see in these news stories in the narratives created in the gaps between media and art, and image and text.

I am also committed to being a great collaborator, since exhibitions are always team efforts. Thus, it is also essential for me to understand the history of this place where I grew up and hope to work. I would like to better understand the transnational social and power dynamics between Canada, Indigenous nations, and the US; the history of the people who are making and visiting the exhibitions and art; and the questions that different people care about in our contemporary moment. This collection is too big for one person to take on analytically and

that would not be to its benefit anyway, but I hope I can begin some conversations and create some connections so that the stories in and around it can broaden. I hope my contributions can help lead to a multi-perspectival view of these photographs.

## **What are 3-5 main takeaways you want others to come away with?**

**1.** Visual imagery in the media has a significant impact on how one views the world in both the present and when looking back. Looking at photographs necessitates active looking.

**2.** Many stories about the territorialization of Canada have been neglected by the mainstream media and I hope to make some of those more visible. Today, the media has all sorts of biases and censorship, so it is essential to consider which stories are privileged and why, and to consider what is absent.

**3.** For those who work in museums, including myself, collaboration when looking at images is essential for understanding their complexity, dynamism, and biases. Although many museums have been re-evaluating their missions, it is beneficial to consider how funding and staffing can better support the guidelines of the UNDRIP and, in Canada, the TRC.

## **Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.**

I had to unexpectedly pause my primary research because the collection I am working with is being digitized, making these prints temporarily inaccessible to researchers. While the delay has impacted my work schedule, it is inviting me to be more malleable with my writing process, to consider how similar collections may compare, and to lean into

more practical components of my research question. I am also learning more about how collections are digitized, which is an interesting and useful addition for me to consider.

**Tell us about what you enjoy the most about the work you do.**

I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to do this work. I enjoy many parts of it. I am exposed to so many different perspectives, from my peers, professors, others on campus, those I encounter as I research, and author's perspectives in books I am introduced to.

I also love working with photographs and how photographs connect me to different people, whether they may be an archivist, subject in photographs, historian, knowledge keeper, photographer, artist, curator, museum visitor, or another museum professional. It also is meaningful to me that this work will be valuable in the workplace. I am keen to bring everything I am learning to the exhibitions I help organize in the future and to wherever else I work.

**What advice do you have for those starting their academic journey?**

I would probably say three things:

- Build a team of people around you that you trust and who you can share ideas with freely, but who also encourage you to think in new ways.
- Earning a PhD is a slow process and that's okay.
- As hard as it is to work on such a large project, like a dissertation, it is quite a privilege to have the time and support to immerse oneself in something one is passionate about, so try to enjoy it. Read things that interest you. Meet people who share your questions and passions.

**What are the next steps in your research?**

I have more connections to make and research to do, but it's finally time to begin writing my dissertation!