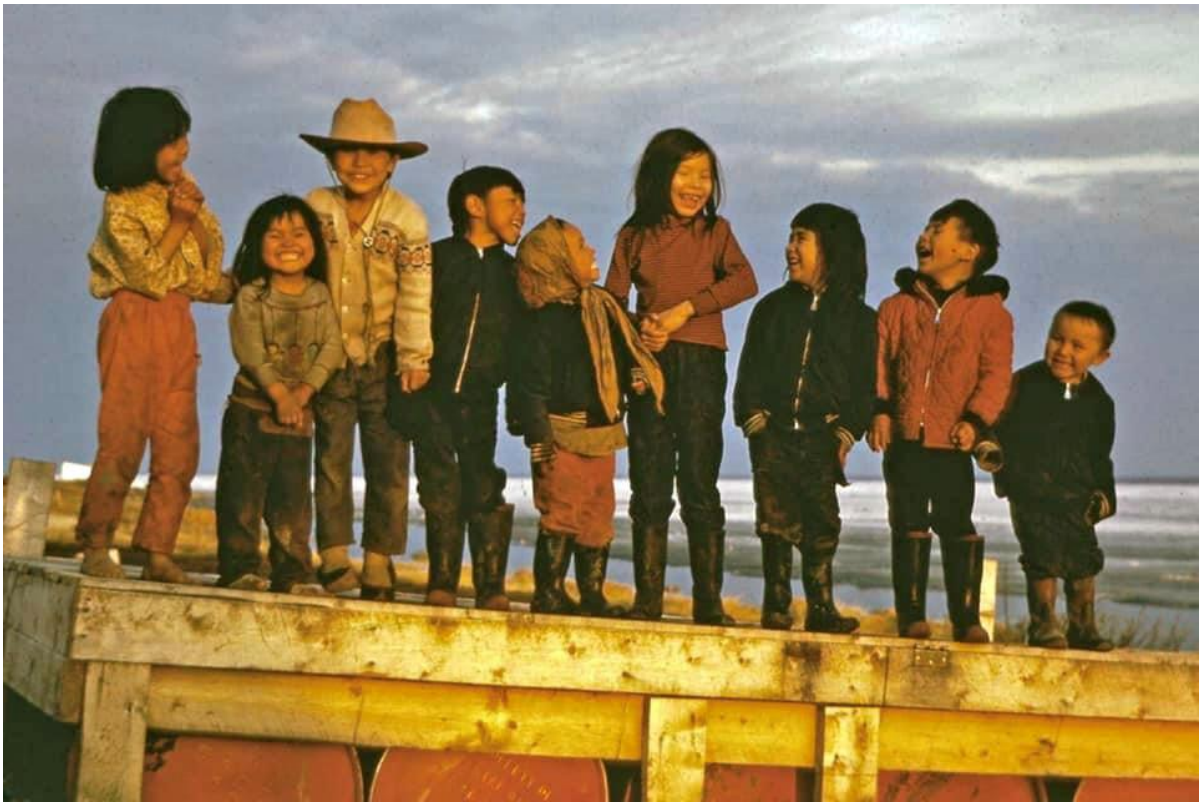
Beyond Nostalgia: Networks of Indigenous World-Making with Paul Seesequasis

TANJA GRUBNIC

Paul Seesequasis is a Plains Cree writer, journalist, cultural commentator, and curator from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He is most well-known for his work as the independent curator of the *Indigenous Archival Photo Project*, a social media–based project he initiated in 2015. The project shares an abundance of photographs taken of Indigenous people across Canada and the United States since the late nineteenth century that have been stored in archives, museums, private collections, auction houses, and other repositories, with the intention of restoring visibility to portraits of Indigenous life in a way that centres the communities to whom the photographs rightly belong. The original photographs, so often taken or displayed in an extractive, decontextualised manner, rarely named the people or places captured by the camera's lens. By sharing these images on various social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook, Seesequasis has connected with community members from various Indigenous nations that have provided opportunities for re-storying these images. The project transcends mere photo-sharing, and it is about more than just nostalgia. Many community members have identified and continue to identify friends and family members, sometimes even themselves, as well as the places and communities in the photographs. These instances of identifying the people behind the lens not only humanise the subjects, but also instigate a collective process of memory reconstruction and world-making, where once-lost stories are reclaimed and re-storied back into a myriad of Indigenous cultural narratives among communities. The project has initiated profound dialogue online that challenges the historical anonymisation and marginalisation of the people in the photographs. Through these identified faces and places, a new narrative emerges that honours the resilience,

diversity, and enduring vitality of Indigenous communities across generations past, present, and future.

~ This interview has been edited for clarity, brevity, and style. ~



A group of smiling children in Délı̨nę, Northwest Territories taken in May 1968. The children from left to right are: Bernice Taneton, Goldie Modeste, Patricia Takazo, Paul Kodakin, Lucy Ann Kenny, Anne Marie Bezha, Carolina Kenny, Steven Taneton, and Leonard Kenny. The photograph was taken by Rene Fumoloeau (1926-2019); originally from France, he spent most of his life in the Northwest Territories photographing Indigenous communities. This photograph has been sourced from the Northwest Territories Archives and the Rene Fumoloeau fonds.

An Interview with Paul Seesequasis

TG:

Thank you so much for meeting with me. I was hoping to start off by giving you a chance to introduce yourself, your work, and the project.

PS:

Okay. my name is Paul Seesequasis. I am Plains Cree background, born in Saskatchewan. I'm living in Saskatoon currently, which is more or less a hometown. I've lived out east, out west, pretty much several places in Canada. So, I moved around a bit in my lifetime.

The project is almost a decade old now, more than a decade old perhaps. The Indigenous Archival Photo Project began by happenstance, I guess. I was always interested in imagery and narratives around Indigenous images—and the issue of, you know, all the tropes and stereotypes and everything else that goes along with that word "Indigenous," which, as we know, is kind of an umbrella term that lumps together quite diverse people. It's one of those imperfect words, but it's what we're stuck with now. So, it became the Indigenous Archival Photo Project.

Part of it was this idea you mentioned of a new "digital literary culture." I think part of what made the project possible was that it was operating within the parameters of the internet and social media. It was, by its very nature, a bit transgressive in regard to collections and museums and archives.

I never went about trying to—and it's not like I'm trying to—do the equivalent of reclaiming items out of museums and stealing them. That wasn't the framework I was looking at. My framework was more the issue of liberating these images, if you will, from the "bricks and mortar" or the "archival drawers" and getting them seen again in the communities. I was fortunate to build up

enough of a following that when I began to post these images, I would get an increasing amount of responses like, "That's me!" "That's my auntie!" "That's my uncle!" "That's George, 40 years ago!" That kind of thing.

This whole other narrative began to surface, which I wasn't curating. It just happened spontaneously from the posting of a photograph. You'd get a narrative from people in that community. And then a whole storyline would develop, which did not exist prior to that image being shared online. The image may or may not have been named. It depended on the circumstance, but it just involved the creation of a new literary subtext to the photograph that was organic in that it came directly from people who had some relation to that photograph. That obviously didn't happen every time, but it happened enough times that it began to germinate into the idea of where this project could go, what its use could be, and how it could resonate in a way that made it worthwhile to direct my energy into. And then it took off from there.

My primary source material comes from museums, archives, and historical societies, but also now private collections and things that people send to me. It certainly has grown. It's been a very interesting project that kind of developed on its own. I then responded to where I see I can take things to a different level. The project has spawned externally into a series of physical exhibitions that I've curated on photography, as well as the book *Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun,* and numerous articles, features, that sort of thing. It's become its own thing. It's been interesting and fun. And, I think—I hope—beneficial for a lot of people. It provides that kind of…I wouldn't call it affirmation—well, I guess it is affirmation—to get that response on social media. The response on social media has provided enough affirmation for me to stick with it and to feel that it's something worthwhile. I don't feel that it's something that is taking me away from other things. It feels like it's a part of what I enjoy doing.

A young Inuk woman smiles at the camera. This photograph was printed in the March 1945 issue of "The Beaver Magazine," published quarterly by the Hudson's Bay Company since 1920. While Indigenous men were often named in the magazine, albeit with names misspelt, women or girls were rarely named. They were usually only given a generic reference, like "A young lady," with no name or location mentioned, which is how this woman's photograph was labeled. The woman has not been identified, but a community member has suggested that the woman is wearing a Kitikmeot style parka likely worn by Innuinnait women near Kugluktuk, Cambridge Bay, Umingmaktok, Kingauk. This photograph was taken by J.H. Webster (1903-1991), an Anglican missionary, and is now part of Canada's History Archive, featuring *The Beaver*. The magazine, which is still in print, was renamed "Canada's History" in 2010.

I think that covers most of it. The project has that social media aspect to it, but it also has the book aspect, articles, magazines. Narratives that are put into publication, either online or on paper. And the physical exhibition.

TG:

It's really interesting to see what the project is about and how it's evolved. You mentioned how important social media has been to the formation of this project, and I noticed in the prologue to *Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun* that you wrote this project would not have been possible without social media. Can you say a bit more about how social media has been particularly important for this project? What has social media enabled that may not have otherwise been possible?

PS:

It's enabled the project to exist, really. It's hard for me to imagine this working without the internet. It can't, you know. I'm old enough to remember the early internet and pre-internet days, and it would be impossible. I don't know what you would do. You couldn't do it because there's no gathering place, really. There was no network of gathering places. So, it relied on what was formerly Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram more recently. But those became the three main platforms of connection. And it's really what the project relies on in terms of reaching an audience.

There are two sides to the internet audience. One side is people who are just generally interested in whatever—from wherever they are coming from—either in Indigenous culture, or old photographs, or history, or archival materials. It attracts a fairly broad spectrum of people who are followers, but who do not have a relationship to those images, if you will.

Then, there's the other audience that the project cannot be successful without. These are the people who have a direct connection to those images. They're the ones who feed the narratives; who generally provide the stories; who often provide a corrective. There could be a mistake in

the captioning of the image, or a mistake I've made; in the early days, I occasionally would guess where the photo was taken—which I learned not to do after being corrected by the audience.

It tracks those two types of people. The general interest types, who are the majority, and a smaller number that are directly related. Those people I can connect to only because the internet exists, only because there are platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and that's where those people are. So that's the invite, I guess. That's the connection. The connector.

It's unlike writing a book. When you write a book, you publish it, but you have no control over who's going to read it or how it's distributed, or how many copies are going to sell, other than what you do with your own promotion. It's very much a different world where the book is on your shelf and you have no control what you do with it. But when you're connecting online, you don't know when it's going to end or when it's going to start. It's a different kind of connection online. It's more vibrant. More unpredictable. Sometimes, I'll get a comment on a photo that was posted three years ago that suddenly sparks a whole other debate. If I post something say on a Tuesday, it's not necessarily over by Thursday. It could come back three years from now. That's the weird thing about the internet. It has this almost infinite possibility of something coming back. It doesn't always happen, but it does happen enough that I've noticed it. That gives it a different nature than anything else.

For a physical exhibition, you're reliant on the people who come to see it. Of course, the audience, as in readings with books and stuff, you have that connection. But with the internet, it's 24/7 and it's continual. I don't want to say it's permanent though, because nothing on the internet is permanent as we know. There are, you know, attempts at internet archives. It's an issue I've thought about, as this project goes on: Am I properly archiving this process itself? That's something I'm paying more attention to now than I did in the beginning. Even if I go back five or six years, I

don't remember everything. And, you know, things disappear off of social media. I think on Facebook, once you start going back five, six years, it becomes very difficult to recover your posts.

And, you know, I'm not looking for a picture of my favorite cat from five years ago. I'm trying to find these images that I had posted; I'm thinking strictly project-wise. It does have that impermanent side to it as well. It's contradictory in that way. It comes back often years later, but it's also impermanent in that unless you archive it or save it in some other way on a hard drive, it eventually evaporates. The issue of preservation takes on a different nature. It's more difficult. It's a challenge for me. A book you preserve in a library or on a bookshelf. Even photographs you can preserve by taking scans of them. But that relationship to the audience that exists on the internet, that is much more ephemeral. It's much more of a challenge.

TG:

I think these are really important insights, like thinking about how online environments challenge time. I'm intrigued by what you said about how the internet provides these kinds of meeting spaces. So often, the internet is thought of as this "place-less" kind of no man's land. It doesn't exist. It's not real. It's not a thing that you can sit on or stand on. But I'm wondering if this project potentially challenges that kind of view of the internet as not being, or not having a sense of place or space. And I'm wondering if you think that this project might help us understand the connections between and across land and the digital. I'm also thinking about how the project is kind of a "traveling" project, right? It goes from the internet, to the art gallery, to the book, to the magazine, to the communities. It's not contained only within social media.

Two young Tuscarora women selling crafts to tourists in Niagara Falls. This photograph was taken in 1860. Notably, the women are wearing conventional, day-to-day attire. This candid photograph marks a departure from most studio portraits that imposed a stereotypical "traditional Native look" onto Indigenous people by the outside gaze. The photograph was taken by William Notman (1826-1891), one of Canada's first internationally renowned photographers, and is currently stored in the McCord Stewart Museum Archives. The women have yet to be identified.

PS:

Yes. I think, definitely. It's a really good question. That's an important aspect of it—the gallery space. It allows you to have the actual images or photographs mounted and seen. It's a much more, for lack of a better word, analogue experience for people because you see the photo. I'm

not going to say you can touch it, but you can see it. It's right there. You can see other things that may be part of the exhibit, like notebooks or cameras, that sort of thing. So, there's that analogue aspect of it, which is lacking with the internet. With the internet, you're looking at a screen of course and you see the image reflected in pixels.

The advantage is that on the internet, you potentially reach a lot more people than you do through a physical exhibition or even a book. It's spontaneous. An exhibition takes months to plan; a book takes years. In that regard, it's much less work. If I find an image that's interesting, an hour later, it can be up on the internet as part of the project. If I'm going to do an exhibition with that image, it's going to take, you know, six months down the road. A book is going to take a few years. And then there's this question, how am I going to finance that over years? It's also more expensive—the actual book and exhibition world—than the internet is. Short of paying my monthly internet fee, my expenses are minimal.

Maintaining a website that is connected has its expenses as well, but it has a kind of affordability and democratic reach—democratic in that it's open to anyone who's following you or people who aren't following you, but who happen to see it because it gets retweeted or reposted on whatever platform. It branches out.

When I do the project online, I think that's an important factor—when you're talking about the difference between the physicality of exhibitions and books, magazines, whatever, and the kind of spontaneity and unpredictability of the internet in terms of reaching people.

Now, on the other side of the equation, there is that ephemeral sense or quality to it. There's so much information flowing on social media, and it's all over the place. It's really easy to just be a pebble on that huge beach that is the internet. You drop it in there, and it's easy for it to become almost forgotten or inconsequential. That happens occasionally. I get reminded of a photo that I

completely forgot about. I find that is something that I'm trying to weigh when I talk about the importance of archiving this stuff—to find some sort of permanent record of the internet side of this project. Because it is the key part of the project and stimulates the other parts of it. But I also want to protect that source material.

TG:

I think that really got into my question thinking about how this project travels across digital and physical places, especially when you started talking about the analogue dimensions of the project and how there's a difference between seeing the physical photograph versus looking at it through a screen as a digital file. Either way, I think there's something about seeing images of the past that make us feel like that history is now somehow more real or alive. But I wanted to segue into a question about nostalgia because I think it's about more than just a feeling of nostalgia to see and connect with these old photographs. How might nostalgia contribute to a rewriting or reclaiming of history?

PS:

These photos kind of show another world. It is another world. So many of the images in this project fall into that kind of framework of it being another world—a world that's gone. That's part of what photography is. It shows little freeze frames of a departed world, if you will. Even if it's a contemporary photo or a selfie we're taking today, you look back on that five years from now, and, well, "that was me," but you're no longer that person. That world that you're looking at is no longer there. I mean, the places are still there, but the people have changed, the culture's changed, everything's changed.

I think one of the things that resonates with the project is it rekindles the memory of those worlds for the people who see those images and respond to them—especially if they have a family connection to them or some sort of kinship. They see a world that's no longer there. It's not just

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Chief Isaac (~1847-1932) and Eliza Isaac (nee Harper) in Dawson City around 1898. When the Klondike Gold Rush happened, thousands of gold seekers flooded to the area; Chief Isaac took the community to Moosehide Village, a few miles upriver, to safeguard against people becoming consumed by the gold rush fever. He even sent the traditional songs and dances to their Han relations in Tanacross, Alaska for safekeeping. Thanks to his foresight, over a century later, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in are still alive and thriving in Dawson City, while the gold rush is just a memory. The Isaac family patriarch and matriarch consists of Chief Isaac and Eliza Harper (daughter of Chief Gä St'ät). Chief Isaac is from the Wolf Clan and Eliza Harper is from the Crow Clan. This photograph is currently stored in the University of Alaska (Fairbanks) Archives with the title "Canadian Indian or Alaska Native Couple," demonstrating how this image has been stored (and storied) in a way that erases the identities of these important leaders and obscures their community's history of resilience. The photographer is unknown.

about loss, though. And it's not just about nostalgia. If it was just that, it would not be that interesting of an approach. I think it's more about building a sense of continuity to family histories and to the past.

In a world where we're bombarded with so much information and imagery and everything else, one of the things that a project like this does using images and the internet is that it gives us something we can personalise and somehow hold onto to anchor who we are, what makes us unique.

If we're just floating in the present, we don't have that. You feel much more rootless. But if you do have a sense of something you can hold onto, it gives you the strength. It's like that cliché of the person holding onto a tree in a huge windstorm. You have something that hankers you, so you don't feel lost within this information age. I think in that way, this project goes beyond nostalgia. It reminds us of things we can hold onto that define our own place. I think that's where it's resonated with people.

TG:

I really like what you said about this not being just about nostalgia. This makes me think that nostalgia is not just a passing emotion, but something that actually creates a dialogue and reframes history.

PS:

That's really an important point. Nostalgia can go in many ways. It can go into a kind of romanticisation of "the good old days." You know, all the clichés, rose tinted glasses, all those things looking back. And that's not necessarily just a harmless kind of force. It can also be a very negative force. You know, "Make America Great Again," or "back to the fifties," every house with

a white picket fence and a mom staying at home raising the two kids, oh, and daddy works. It provokes a thing that never existed in the first place for the majority of people. One of the things I'm aware of with this project is refreshingly the lack of that kind of nostalgia with it.

I often avoid using images that are stereotypical, of beads and feathers and that sort of thing, unless it has a context to it in terms of identification. But I'm not trying to replicate a nostalgia for some sort of "old days" when things were better or when we were traditional and stuff like that. I think that all cultures and societies are adaptable and have always been adaptable. They've never been stuck in one kind of framework that defines who they are. That's an important aspect of this project. And you see it in the imagery, how people change. So that's that side of nostalgia.

But the other side, which I think you're getting at, is the important side. And that's the recovery of things that have been lost either through neglect or through politics or war or environmental change, whatever the cause may be. These old photographs provide the opportunity to reclaim that history. It can provoke that kind of thing, which is about loss. But through that loss, you get a sense of the determination of people to get through hard times, or to survive. I think it provokes that kind of reminder for people. So, it's less a romantic nostalgia as opposed to a reaffirming of the memory of where we come from.

TG:

I think that's really important. I think it is a sort of a re-framing of the past because it's not romanticised, right? Not everything is filtered through those rose-coloured glasses. I think that translates in your book as well, especially through the work that you do within community.

There are a few inter-related questions that I'm thinking of that tie into this. We've kind of talked about this a little bit, but the internet is sort of a "mixed bag." For all of the wonderful things the internet has enabled, what are the risks? How have you approached or navigated these risks to

centre joy and healing, which are important aspects of this project? And what are some of the ethical considerations that arise and that you navigate when doing this work?

This photograph is of the Cree performer, orator, and singer Frances Nickawa (Fanny Beardy) (1898-1928). She was called the "Second Pauline Johnson" and was known for touring around North America extensively. She even performed in England and Australia before dying at the young age of 29. Reminiscent of Johnson, Nickawa would first perform in a European-style gown before changing into an "Indian" dress made of buckskin fringe and strings of beads, like the one in this photograph. She reportedly made the dress herself. Despite her fame and prolific career, she has largely been forgotten today. This photograph was taken in 1924. In the 1930s, the Reverend Egerton Ryerson Young Jr. (1869-1962) wrote a biography about Nickawa, but it was never published. The photograph remains a part of the Egerton Ryerson Young Jr. Fonds along with other biographical materials and is stored in The United Church of Canada Archives. The photographer is unknown.

PS:

Good questions. Well, you know, the internet can be a very caustic, unfriendly place. Whether it's trolls or political debate, or people who are rage-farming certain issues. Fortunately, I'm not a frontline journalist, or a pundit who's throwing themselves into those battles. So first, I guess, is to consider my place of relationship to the internet. To be aware why I am on there—and I'm on there in regard to this project. I do occasionally, rarely post personal stuff, but it's usually separate from the project. This project has its own space on the platforms. It's not me. It's not my cat pictures or anything. I'm careful to not blur those boundaries. I view them as quite separate things. This project is my work. It's not how I feel that day or what I had for breakfast. It's not that kind of thing. It's the project.

In regard to the negativity of the internet, because I'm not engaged in those kinds of debates, I don't have that energy drain with the project. On the rare occasion, there are comments from trolls, inappropriate or offensive comments, which doesn't happen very often. It has happened on occasion, but I'd usually just mute that person. I don't block people. If they're determined, they tend to come back in another form and they don't need to know they're blocked, you know?

There's never been an issue that has derailed a narrative or caused a whole string of replies. Usually, people doing that are fishing for a reaction, and fortunately, they've never had bites off my site. So that's a good thing. It's because of what I'm doing and having a sense of purpose that I don't get drawn into that side of the internet. It's not an issue. And I'm glad for that.

Then there's the second part. There are several ethical questions. I guess the first ethical question is, do I formally have the right to reproduce these images from archives and museums? In most cases, it's not an issue because in recent years, most institutions, archives, museums, et cetera have

digitised their collections in order to increase access for communities and for their audiences. I've always been careful to credit the source. That's always important.

Where it becomes more of a question of ethics is deciding what images do I post? When I began this project, I really was about reframing through photography the Indigenous experiences that are outside of the usual kind of ideas of victimhood, or of trauma-sourced imagery, that sort of thing. I very much avoid that within the project. Even on issues like residential schools, I don't post, *rarely* post images that were of residential school students or that sort of thing. If I do get those presented to me through private collectors or sources, I'll forward them to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Ottawa who have people on staff and who are getting paid to do this sort of stuff. That's their place to archive that, not mine.

Ethically, since the early days, I made a conscious curatorial decision that this is what the framing of this project is about. It's not about denying bad things that have happened—colonialism, all that stuff. It's not about denying that. It's about reaffirming the dignity and the strength and vibrancy of people through these times, and even the hardest of times. That's what the project's been about.

So ethically, I haven't had to deal with showing images of trauma, you know? Things like that, and trying to provoke pity or outrage… I'm not going in there posting a photo to get people angry, like "look at what you guys did." That's not what I do. I don't want to farm photography in that way. By farm, I mean I'm not trying to cultivate a response to it. I avoid those kinds of photos and that's a moral decision for the project. I also avoid anything that is, from my sense—and this is a personal take, and I'm not saying it's a perfect take, but it's a personal take—anything that could be seen as private or ceremonial, like sun dances. I don't do ceremonial imagery because those weren't meant to be shared in the first place.

I don't want to be reinforcing photography as an extractive art form. I mean, obviously photography is an extractive art form, but I don't want to frame it as being extractive in the negative. It's not what I'm trying to do with this project. Ethically, I think that covers it. I think there's maybe been one or two cases where I've taken down a photo because of something that's arisen about that person's history, or what happened where I felt that it could be a reminder of trauma or of tragedy. But those instances are very rare and are usually unconnected with the photograph itself. It might be a photograph of an individual, but it's not the photograph of the plane they were on when it crashed sort of thing. It's just by unfortunate circumstances that something happened to that person's life when I've taken down the photo. But those are very rare.

I feel ethically it's a nice place for me to be. I think it's appreciated by people who follow the project. In some cases, some of these exhibitions and photos have gone on to be sent to the families or returned to those communities. So that's also a nice closure to it. A nice, ethical closure is the return of these prints to the communities or to the families. So, it works in that way as well. That's more or less the ethical code to it, I guess.

TG:

It sounds like there's a great deal of responsibility that goes into this project that might not always be thought of, like deciding what photos to share and all these other factors. It's been illuminating to bring up some of those considerations.

PS:

Oh, entirely. Just to add to your point there, probably three quarters of the images I look at or might consider for the project, I do not use.

Community members have identified the man in this photograph as Fred Long Claws Jr. (Dakota Ojibway) from Waywayseecappo First Nation in Manitoba. According to one community member, Fred stood over seven feet tall. The photograph has been attributed to Alexander J. Ross (1851-1894) a photographer known for his work documenting First Nations people in Winnipeg before establishing his own studio in Calgary in 1884. This photograph was given to Seesequasis from a private collection, but at least 125 of Ross's photos are stored in archives like the Glenbow Archives at the University of Calgary. It has since been returned to the Waywayseecappo First Nation. The exact date is unknown, but it would likely be from the 1880s.

TG:

Wow. That's important to note. I think it really highlights that there is a hidden side of the project, which is deciding what gets included and possibly even leaving some things out.

PS:

Oh, for sure. And that sometimes is not an ethical question. It's almost an aesthetic taste question as well. I like to feel something when I look at an image, a curiosity, or just being taken by the aesthetic quality of the image, you know? And that's a subjective thing, I admit. But that can frame what I post as well.

TG:

I think this ties really well into another question I had, which is how do you approach or potentially redefine the role of curator?

PS:

How do I? I'm not sure. I don't want to say I redefine it because that feels presumptuous on my part, you know, that I reinvented it. But I can answer in terms of how it works for me. As a kind of self-taught curator, I'm not… I don't come from or have links to any institutions or museums. I've never been employed as a curator. Well, I shouldn't say I've never been employed as a curator because I am curating online. I'm curating physical exhibitions, but that's a freelance kind of relationship. I've never been on the staff of a museum or a curator at a museum or anything like that. So, it's not my employment. It's not my vocation. On one level, it's good. I'm not beholden to anyone. I'm not working with an institutional framework.

The negative side to that, I guess, is that when you're freelancing, you're always kind of scrambling to do the kind of research you want to do. But how? Because I'm not an academic and

I'm not institutionally connected, I don't have access to SSHRC[1] grants or things that other academics potentially could get research monies from. I'm often excluded from that. A lot of research takes money.

One thing I found from this project is that there's a huge difference between doing research online and seeing what's digitised, and actually going to a major archive, museum, or institution and having a chance to go through their archives. You find so much more. But to do that costs an airfare and hotels and all that stuff. So, being freelance means being inventive and trying to find ways to get around that. Sometimes you just can't, unfortunately. There's only so much you can do. So, it can be frustrating being an independent curator, I guess.

Being an independent online curator, there's a positive side. It's always exciting. You never know what you're going to find any day that you go on and start doing that kind of online research. I'm never tired of it, and I'm pleased for that. It's never bored me, you know, or I'd stop doing it. It's always been interesting. It's often spontaneous discovery—it's not something I was looking to find. I just find it.

Sometimes I challenge myself on ways of finding material. It involves using search engines in the creative sort of way. Not getting too set in your ways. I've been doing this for over a decade, so I know all, or most, of the major museums, collections, and historical societies that I would normally count on. But I try not to get into that rut of that's the only place to go. I'll check auction houses. I'll check licensing sources like Getty or Alamy because sometimes really interesting images surface there that I never would've thought.

It's not just restricting myself to the "official" archival stuff in museums. It's about looking at private auction sales. It's about doing online searches, whether it's Firefox or Google, and keying in a couple of words like, I don't know, "Buffalo woman" or something and seeing what comes up as

under images. It's like, "oh, wow, where's that from?" It's making those discoveries that makes it interesting. Little, little treasures that you weren't expecting. That's how I like to think of it, I guess. That makes the project more interesting.

In short, I think being an independent curator—and it's not just me, I'm sure a lot of people are finding this—requires being your own mother of invention and finding things that work for you. It makes it a very interesting vocation. Some drawbacks, as I stated. Resources are always a factor. Money's always a factor. It's never a deciding factor because you can always get around it, but it does limit what you can do. I have some ideas of things that I'd like to do, but to do them, I have to source funds to make it possible. I don't believe at all in this "starving artist" thing. Good art requires funding. Being anxious about the lack of funds does not promote creativity. It stifles it. That's always a factor in being an independent curator, money.

TG:

That's a really good point. So, I think the open-ended question I'll leave off with is: what does it mean to work in community to you, and how does this change depending on the platform, whether it be on social media, or in a gallery, or in a book?

PS:

It's really different. I was at an event a few months ago where I spoke and showed images that were taken right after the first World War around 1919 of three or four leaders and residential school survivors and other people were there. The dialogue and the relationship of taking these images, these photographs, and having them in a real three-dimensional space with actual living people who have a relationship to those photos is an entirely different experience than anything that can be replicated online. And that includes the most positive and interesting stories that develop off, say, you know, *Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun*—a lot of stories developed on

Facebook, et cetera, from people recognizing people. It's one level, but it's an entirely different level when you actually are in a space where people have a connection and that kind of analogue experience. That tactile experience hits on a different emotional cord for people.

It's cool when you see people with those images. It's happened a few times with the project where they're holding a picture of themselves forty years ago, that kind of thing. You get that continuity and that kind of sense that these are real people and that resonates. You can't really replicate that. The internet has the opposite effect. It kind of disassociates our sense of self and reduces it to the image we are on the internet, if you know what I mean. Whether it's, and so much of it is, you know, our own self-image now, or how we promote ourselves, or whether we're influencers and that sort of stuff… That's the nature of things.

I'm not trying to be critical of it. I'm just saying it's kind of a performative aspect, but when the physical exhibition takes place, there's that opportunity to connect with actual people and discussions. It reminds one of the importance of that kind of in-person discourse and how it strikes much more resonant chords than the internet does. We've become, I think, so acculturated, if that's the word, by social media and by computers and by the screens that it can be unhealthy without that counterbalance. So, for me, the physical exhibitions, and the book, and other things like that, readings and speaking to groups, et cetera, in person ideally, is a counterbalance. It's a healthy thing not just for me, but for the project as well. And it's an important aspect of it. So, while a good part of this project has existed and could only exist because of the internet, it would be lacking without going outside the internet.

TG:

I guess it was never meant to stay only on the internet. I think it was meant to have that bigger impact that it has had.

PS:

I don't know if I was smart enough to see it that way when it began, so thank you. I won't claim credit for that, but it's a necessity for it. Time has taught me that, I recognise fully now.[2]

Notes

[1] Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
[2] Tanja Grubnic chose images for this interview in consultation with Paul Seesequasis, expanding his social media captions to provide additional context and information. Details such as birth dates and locations are included if known. All images are believed to fall under fair use.

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