

3607 Old Indian over one hundred years old.

Adolf Selige Publishing Co, St. Louis, "An example of the longevity of nature's own laws," (sic) on verso, postcard (UL#1626_02_0017)

POSING THE PAST

PAIGE RAIBMON

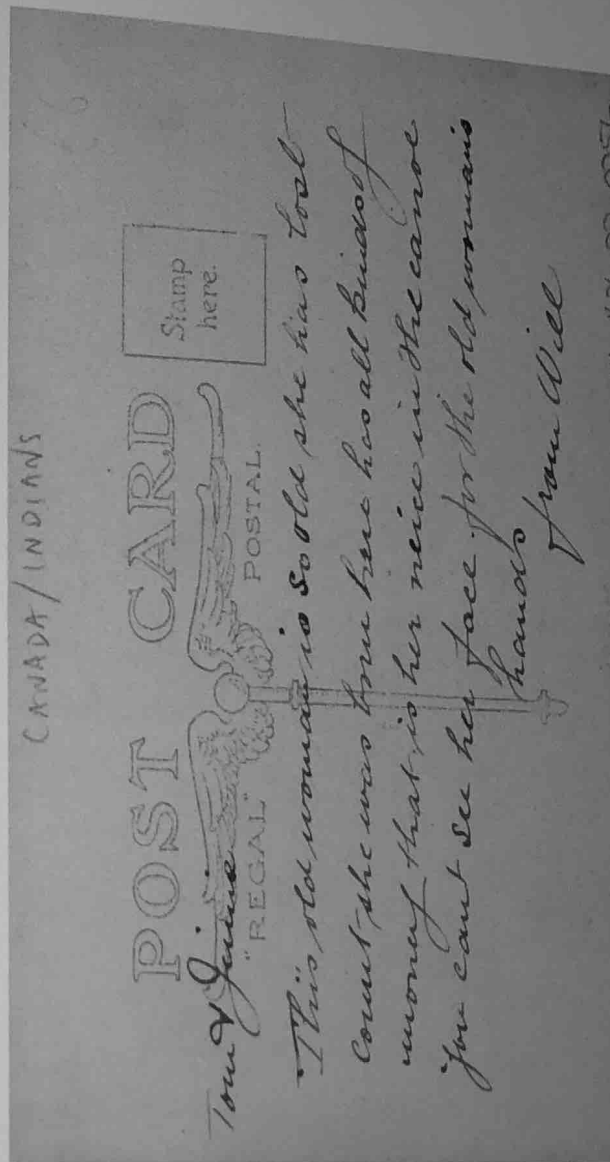
A commercial trade in the art and images of Indigenous people flourished in British Columbia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During that period, makers of postcards, stereograph cards, and cabinet cards commonly printed them with photographs of Indigenous people and sold them at a range of prices and qualities. Hundreds of postcards and stereograph cards in the Uno Langmann collection bear witness to the existence of this market. A striking number of these images are of Elders: grandfathers and grandmothers who grew up during the initial decades of colonialism, and who, in turn, raised their own families while settler society entrenched itself in their ancestral territories. Why did these images appeal to settlers? What messages circulated when someone mailed or received a postcard of an “Old Indian Over 100 Years Old,” or a “West Coast Native, A Quatsino Granddad”? What meanings emerged

when a middle-class settler slid a card from her “Canadian Scenery” stereograph set into her viewer and gazed upon “Aged British Columbia Indians” in 3-D? As a settler historian who is a resident and raising her children in the unceded, ancestral territory of the hənq̓əminəm̓-speaking peoples, I wonder about these sorts of questions when I look at these evocative images today.

Images carry and produce multiple meanings that are not moored to the conscious intentions of those who create or circulate them. For example, for at least some of the Indigenous men and women in these images, the act of posing for a photograph was a kind of wage labour. They routinely insisted on being paid in exchange for agreeing to be photographed. At the turn of the twentieth century, photographers typically paid a one-dollar “Kodak fee” to their Indigenous “subjects.” That dollar was roughly the amount that Indigenous workers earned for a full day’s agricultural labour or by selling a modest-sized hand-woven basket to a tourist.¹ Compared to hours in the sun picking hops or berries, or to days harvesting, preparing and weaving cedar roots, earning a dollar for a split-second’s pose was a boon. Indigenous people incorporated

wage-earning opportunities in agriculture, industry, and tourism into their strategies for dealing with settler colonialism and capitalism. Read in this light, images of grandparents show individuals at moments of tremendous adaptive capacity. Read in this light, images of the Dakelh woman “Six-Mile Mary” show more than a possible centenarian — one caption put her age at “106 years old.” They show Mary Quaw, the strong, independent woman who raised many children, on her own, off the land. This, in fact, is how her own great-granddaughter, the strong, independent Saiku’z woman Mary John, characterised her.² Living descendants of Elders like “Six-Mile Mary” can read the survival of their families in the faces of ancestors who appear in these historic photographs.

But the intentions and stories of those who posed for colonial photographers did not travel with the image after the camera shutter clicked. The social lives of the post-cards and stereographs printed with these images were quite at odds with Indigenous realities. The images that circulated via colonial mail and that decorated respectable living rooms promoted settler colonialism and industrial development in British Columbia. The meanings that



"Six-Mile Mary' McBride, BC," c.1910, postcard, front and back (UL#1626_02_0256)



postcards and stereographs produced are evidence of colonialism's incredible power to enlist in its service the very individuals whom it sought to dispossess.

The popularity of photographic commodities such as postcards and stereographs was both a cause and an effect of the broader nineteenth-century culture of spectacle. Anthropology and tourism gained popularity in this context, and as they did so, they facilitated the transformation of Indigenous life into public display. World's fairs and expositions exemplified this trend. They featured "live exhibits": mock villages in which Indigenous people lived and performed the acts of everyday life for tens of thousands of viewers. The photo of Da'naxda'xw Chief and carver Bob Harris that is in the Langmann collection was taken under these circumstances at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. The Kwagu'ł Chief Charles Nowell described their group's work: "The men was doing some carvings there to sell; the women was doing baskets and mats. We had three or four Indian dances there. We used to make the people that came to see the dance pay so much to come in."³ While in St. Louis, Harris and Nowell conspired with an African performer to stage the prestigious

Schweig & Cohl, St. Louis, "Bob Harris Wearing Kwakwak'awakw Dance Regalia at the St. Louis World's Fair," 1904, postcard (UL#1732)

Hamatsa dance, complete with its elaborate rendition of cannibalism. The performance was stunningly realistic: the performers scandalised their audience, nearly got arrested for murder, and drew huge crowds to their next show. Nowell explained: "People come with their kodaks taking our pictures; the guards couldn't keep them away."⁴

Like ethnographic "live exhibits," postcards and stereographs showed Indigenous people in settings and dress that settlers interpreted as "traditional" and/or "uncivilised." Such labels implied the absence of a presumed opposite: the traditional lacked all that was modern; the uncivilised lacked everything civilised. Settlers of many stripes — tourists, ethnographers, capitalist bosses, and workers alike — connected these either-or designations to their ideas about race, and claimed that white people held the monopoly on civilised modernity. They refused to recognise that individuals could be both indigenous and modern. Colonial laws, practices, and beliefs held these to be mutually exclusive categories. This made for a neat teleology that categorically eliminated "Indians" from the world that settler colonialism set out to build. "What little there was that was picturesque about [the coast Indians] has

vanished only a few degrees faster than their own extinction as a pure race, and they are now a lot of longshoremen," wrote reporter Julian Ralph in *Harper's* in 1892.⁵ Ralph's article was an inventory of the natural resource wealth of "Canada's El Dorado," as he called British Columbia. His point about "longshoremen" was meant to assure investors that neither they nor their money were at risk from the Indigenous population. He continued: "They are a tractable people and take ... kindly to the rudiments of civilisation, work, and to cooperation with whites."⁶ Ralph and many of his readers shared the belief that once the Indigenous population entered the industrial economy, their "Indianness" disappeared, and along with it any threat they might pose to those enacting the Crown's claim of sovereignty.

Turning Indians into workers was just one way colonial stories erased Indians. Postcards and stereograph cards frequently achieved this same erasure through their representations of death. Death might loom imminently, as in the images of apparently weak and frail Elders. Or it might be a *fait accompli*, as in myriad photographs of Indian graves. Within the context of colonial stories, each of these devices removed living Indigenous presence from the land.

Such figurative erasures were connected to the physical acts of removing people from the land. Sometimes this connection came in the person of the archæologist, who excavated burial sites, and in so doing, renamed them “middens,” denied genealogical ties between living and “pre-historic” Indigenous peoples, and often actually removed deceased Indigenous bodies from the ground.⁷ Other times, this connection existed in the person of the photographer. Early photographers were often employed by the bureaucracies that implemented settler laws and regulations.⁸ Richard Maynard worked as a documentary photographer for the Department of Indian Affairs. The images he took under this commission subsequently found their way into the booster literature and tourist market.⁹ Benjamin Leeson worked as Canadian Customs officer, mining recorder, postmaster, constable, and coroner in Winter Harbour during the many decades that he sold photographs to tourists travelling by steamship.¹⁰ The “Quatsino granddad” and other Kwakw̓a’ka’wakw whose images he sold on postcards and in souvenir albums were his long-time neighbours.

Why was there a commercial market for this sort of photography? Precisely because these images aestheticised settler colonialism in ways that helped settlers tell themselves appealing stories about themselves. One writer who advocated the use of “Indian basketry in house decoration” in 1901, put it like this: “It is no fad that makes us seek to know something of the art-life and expression of the people whom we are thrusting to the wall after disposing them of the home of their forefathers.”¹¹ Having thrust people to the wall, what exactly did settler society seek to know? For one thing, that Indigenous peoples were on their way out and El Dorado was in need of inheritors. When Leeson titled his souvenir album *The Vanishing Race*, he underscored just this point.

To conclude, I want to consider the social life of a photograph that appears on a postcard in the Langmann collection. The postcard shows a couple on the beach. The man is pulling in their canoe, and the woman faces the camera, holding freshly caught salmon in each hand. The fish might have been destined for dinner, barter, or sale. The postcard is titled “3620 Fisherman’s Return. (Puget Sound Indian),” and is one of a series bearing Indigenous



Case & Draper, "Native Basket Weaver," 1905–06, toned gelatin silver print (UL#14194)



3620 Fisherman's Return. (Puget Sound Indian)

"Fisherman's Return (Puget Sound Indian)," postcard (UL#1626_02_0282)

images. In reality, the man and woman were neither in nor of Puget Sound. They were Makah, and the photograph was shot at Neah Bay on the Olympic Peninsula by the Norwegian photographer Anders Wilse around 1900.

I can speculate why the postcard printer transposed the scene from Neah Bay to Puget Sound. It could have been an accident. But postcards of Puget Sound, the site of the growing city of Seattle, had many more potential buyers than did photographs of remote Neah Bay. There were far more tourists in the Puget Sound region at the time than on the Olympic Peninsula. It is not far-fetched to say that in this case perhaps the printer made a simple marketing decision.

A more dramatic re-presentation of this image subsequently occurred when it was re-issued as a postcard of Alaska, which was eventually collected by John G. Brady, missionary and governor of the district of Alaska from 1897 to 1906. Superimposed behind the couple is a poem. The text directly conveyed the point that hundreds of stand-alone photographs made less explicitly. The poem situated the couple as personifications of place. In fact, the text nearly erased the couple altogether, as it turned

them into features of the landscape that spoke "Alaska's Call," as the poem was called. Unsurprisingly, the poem did not mention that the couple was exercising a hereditary right to fish. It claimed that they stood on their beach offering up their fish and more to any and all takers. This postcard put words into the couple's mouths that should have been a laughable parody of a settler fantasy. But the postcard played the lines straight.

Strong arms and stout hearts,

List to fair Alaska's call!

"Here's welcome to the willing!

Here is room for one and all!"

"Yours — come reach out and take them —

Are the fish that swim my seas!

Yours my gold and tin and copper —

Come and share my wealth of these!

"Not alone on sea and mountain

Are there fortunes to be won;

I have fields that need but tilling

And their gold outshines the sun!

“There are millions of my acres
Where now by wild grass waves,
To make homes for sturdy freemen;
Will ye linger south as slaves?”

Strong arms and stout hearts,
List to fair Alaska’s call!
Here a royal realm awaits you!
Here is room and wealth for all!¹²

The notion that Indigenous people bequeathed their territories and resources to settler society as a gift is outlandish. But the notion resonated. Julian Ralph, the author of “Canada’s El Dorado,” concluded his article with this same point when he invoked the famous, at that time still outlawed, gift-giving practice known as the potlatch: “It is the white man who is to enjoy the greater than all previous potlatches in that region. The treasure has been garnered during the ages by time or nature or whatsoever as you may call the host, and the province itself is offered as the feast.”¹³ And this idea endured. In the first modern survey history of British Columbia, published in 1958, the chapter on development in the 1880s and 1890s was called “The Great Potlatch.”¹⁴

At the turn of the twentieth century, many hundreds of commercial images of Elders and graves cast Indigenous people as advertisements for their own dispossession. These images were illustrations in a larger colonial fairy tale that reassured settlers their occupation was uncontested. Although fairy tales can contain certain truths, they are not true stories. Entirely different stories about these images also existed, stories in which burial grounds evidenced extended Indigenous occupation of and title to land; stories in which Elders embodied the tremendous depth of knowledge that could only have been acquired through those generations of occupation. In Indigenous stories, Indigenous people had a rich history of their own. In colonial stories, Indigenous people were history. When they posed for that photo on the shore in 1900, the Makah couple could not have known what journey their likeness would take. The social life of things, including photographs, is inevitably political.¹⁵ And so, from the vantage of the present, we ought to ask: What politics will these images engage today? What better, truer, and more just stories might they tell if we pay them due attention?

¹ Images of baskets and other Indigenous material arts also appeared frequently on postcards and stereographs. ² Bridget Moran, *Stoney Creek Woman: The Story of Mary John* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997 new ed. (1988)), 27–30. ³ Charles James Nowell and Clellan S. Ford, *Smoke From Their Fires: The Life of a Kwakiutl Chief* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1941), 186. ⁴ *Ibid.*, 188. ⁵ Julian Ralph, “Canada’s El Dorado,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 84 (January 1892), 176. ⁶ *Ibid.* ⁷ See Susan Roy, *These Mysterious People: Shaping History and Archaeology in a Northwest Coast Community* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), chapter 2. ⁸ Carol Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 73. See also *ibid.*, chapter 2. ⁹ *Ibid.*, 77. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82–83. Dan Savard, *Images from the Likeness House* (Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 2010), 103. ¹¹ George Wharton James, “Indian Basketry in House Decoration,” *Chautauquan* (1901), 619. ¹² “Alaska’s Call” postcard, folder 42, box 17, John G. Brady Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. ¹³ Ralph, “Canada’s El Dorado,” 188. ¹⁴ Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia:*

A History (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958). ¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 57.

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