

The Ethnographic Gaze

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The ethnographic gaze is a term used to understand historical photographic images, specifically those taken of people who exist outside the cultural framework of the photographer. The people placed before the lens are often considered the repository of some societal ideal now lost to the creators and consumers of the images. The vast majority of the historical photographic records of North American native people fit into this perspective: the subject is highly romanticized, invariably anonymous and aestheticized to the point of mysticism.

Knowing this history of representation, I was quite surprised to find myself confronted with over one hundred images of native people taken at the turn of the century that defied these norms in all aspects but one: they were indeed anonymous. This anonymity, however, is not created by the strain of the travelling photographer of exotica, but derives instead from the simple and human act of forgetting the names and faces of family from generations ago. C.D. Hoy, the taker of these images, knew the people in front of the lens. They came to his studio because they lived near the town of Quesnel, B.C., because his rates were reasonable, and because he was a Chinese man who had learned to speak the language of the Carrier Indian.

Hoy's photographs remind us that the ethnographic gaze cannot exist when both the photographer and the subject exist together within the realm of the exotic. The Victorian dresses coupled with Athabaskan moccasins reveal no pretence of romanticism, showing instead a culture in severe transition. The lack of rigidity in posture indicates an overall comfort with being in front of any camera or the camera of this one man, suggesting a familiarity that is lacking in most turn-of-the-century photographs. And the breadth of expressions on the subjects' faces imbues the images with an individuality that negates the concept that one person can symbolize a whole nation. These are family portraits, images of young lovers and grandfathers holding small children, all taken for the purpose of personal remembrance.

The importance of a photographic legacy that humanizes and personalizes the history of native people in Canada cannot be overstated. When the primary interest of photographic representation is the recreation of mythology and stereotypes, the truth of day-to-day existence is easily lost. C.D. Hoy's images go a long way in setting the record straight.