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Author

Powers, Willow Roberts

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Images across Boundaries: History, Use, and Ethics of Photographs of American Indians

WILLOW ROBERTS POWERS

Photographs, and work with photograph collections, are among the delights of archival research. We are visual creatures; images speak to us with an immediacy and on a different level from that of words. For that reason, photographs taken across cultural boundaries present problems and issues that need to be revealed and addressed. This essay is concerned with archival photographs of Native American tribes and pueblos in the American Southwest; it will describe issues specific to the Southwest that have been raised in a series of discussions carried on by archivists, curators, and members of the surrounding American Indian communities that have an interest in photographs. This informal group has been meeting at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe since 1990.

The use of historic images of Native Americans can be viewed from three different perspectives: that of archivists, that of Indian users, and that of non-Indian users. Each of these groups has special interests and each raises issues, and within each there are divisions and different voices. In this essay, I shall explore how these groups overlap, contrast, and differ, and I will explain how important some of these issues are, yet how they seem to collide.

Willow Roberts Powers has been the facilitator of a discussion group on issues relating to archival photographs of Native Americans since 1990 and is an archivist active in discussions, consultation, and outreach in New Mexico.

I shall briefly describe the discussions mentioned above as an attempt (as this journal issue is an attempt) to open dialogue and to learn and exchange points of view—an exchange, it is hoped, that may lead to solutions.

The role of an archivist is to help, to give access, to protect and preserve for all people the information, in small or in large things, that is carried in the papers and photographs of which we are guardians. There are conflicting demands: Use contributes to deterioration, yet we must both preserve and enable use of collections. Some researchers may distort information, through ignorance or intention, yet we must still give access and, above all, avoid censorship. Thought and care must be taken by the archivist to clarify in order to avoid assumptions, biases, and discrimination, yet archivists are not users and can only try to enlighten and educate.

The Indian user comes with knowledge of specific communities and histories, with a unique and sometimes special approach to images of the past. Southwestern Native American religious beliefs and perspectives regard use of any images of religious practice invasive, inappropriate, and dangerous for the community. Requests not to use such images, which include some archival photographs that have already been published, create a new situation for archivists. Yet it is a fact that sensitive issues of privacy do occur in archives and must be handled thoughtfully.

Non-Indian users are sometimes unaware of the rich and varied life of Native Americans, as is evident in some requests. Furthermore, there are differences between tribes and pueblos, differences between regions; sometimes nonnative archivists are also unaware of these differences. Although there are times when a specific image of a Native American can be used broadly for all Native Americans—just as a specific image of Euro-Americans can stand in for a wider meaning—it is often the case that the representation is inaccurate, stereotypical, and perhaps meaningless. Frequently, however, searches by non-Indians for Native American images are quests for knowledge, for better understanding, for increased exchange and communication. Ignorance does not necessarily indicate ill will.

In all the areas of difference—between user and archivist, between Indian people and non-Indian people, between popular and academic users—understanding can be promoted by knowledge and discussion. In the following remarks, I shall focus on four topics, trying to incorporate the different perspectives: the problem of images of the sacred; the related issues of access,

freedom of information, and privacy; the question of Native American “visibility” through photographs, and how this relates to stereotyping; and the clash of cultures, between archives and Southwestern Indian communities. By addressing areas of difference and conflict I want to try to clarify some of the aspects of archival work and show how and why they are important, what they mean for Indian and non-Indian people alike.

Photographs from the realm of the sacred pose the greatest challenge to archivists; it is here that the archivist may need to be a passenger between cultures. Photographs, if they belong to anyone, belong to the photographer. The concrete artifact of early photography is a Western one, conceptually and technologically. However, the question of ownership is becoming increasingly irrelevant in the face of computer technology and demand (as well as the often-cavalier attitude of the creators of publications on paper or on disk). Images that contain special knowledge—that is, images that pertain to the sacred—are, of all archival images, the most problematic for archivists. Not only may the archivist know little of native religion, which permeates much of native life, but such information is inappropriate for non-Indian archivists to know and is rarely imparted.

Religion and sacred matters constitute the problem most frequently mentioned by Indian people in discussions about inappropriate use of images. Publication of such photographs is a direct assault on a crucial core of their—of any—culture. Combating inappropriate use of images of the sacred is both a religious and a political necessity for Southwestern Pueblo people. Photographs may depict dances, religious leaders in regalia, holy objects, religious buildings (exteriors or interiors), and shrines (including some pictographs). Requests are being made to restrict access to, and refuse publication of, such images.

What constitutes the sacred—the area that ought not to be portrayed—differs in specific content and in approach for each tribe and for each pueblo, although there is much common ground. It is not always possible to have specific guidelines, nor even a list of which images are “good” and which are “bad.” Not only are the details of religion often closed to outsiders, they may also be closed to some tribal members—the young, the uninitiated, those not of a particular clan. Because these details may not be talked about, especially to outsiders, it is difficult for the archivist to ascertain which images of a religious nature are sensitive or ought to be restricted.

Among many Rio Grande Pueblo people, as well as the Hopi, the Zuni, and other tribes, photography is forbidden at dances. Publishing photographs of certain types of dances is not approved. For other, more "social," less deeply ceremonial dances, publication is not such a problem. The point raised about dances is that since the nineteenth century, many pueblos have explicitly requested that sketches and photographs not be made of certain religious activities and items, but the requests were not always honored. Thus many nineteenth-century photographs were taken in express disregard of the desires of religious and other leaders. Some pueblos prefer that such "stolen" images not be republished, even though the earlier publications containing sketches or photographs are extant in libraries.

It is certainly true that some of these images carry information that now is useful to tribal groups and communities that want to revive a dance or a costume. (The same troubling issues, by the way, also lie with sacred songs, both recordings and written text.) This does not always lessen the weight of disapproval from the community; rather, it may create a situation in which the leaders would prefer to control access to that image, especially within the community. The issue of the need for special handling of deeply religious texts and images must be addressed; it will not go away. Moreover, it must be compared to other archival situations in which sensitive material is dealt with in a special way, so that comparable, ethical solutions can be found.

The request to restrict access to images of the sacred leads to the issue of why archivists, in general, are reluctant to set foot in this territory. For archivists' work concerns freedom of information. This freedom, which is their deepest ethic, their most closely held philosophy, is the basic principle on which a democratic society must run. Although there are exceptions, especially in the area of rights to privacy, these exceptions must be carefully thought out and even fought out, because each one is, in a sense, an erosion of liberty.

Implied in freedom of information is the idea that censorship cannot be condoned. Archivists can educate, can assist in searches, can patiently enlighten, if possible, but must avoid becoming censors, no matter how benign. An illustration of this can be given in the requests handled by photo archivists. Lest you think such requests are minor players in the game of translation, many of them come from publishers, often for use in textbooks or other educational media. In other words, they influence and teach the

young; they are symbolic representations of elements of American culture. For example, one request came for a photograph or other picture of an Indian lighting a fire—to represent, as the publisher’s photo researcher said, “primitive man discovering fire.” This visual equation of American Indians with early man is inaccurate and problematic. One of the most creative requests I have handled was for a photograph of a specific piece of pottery, a modern olla from Acoma Pueblo, with a stunning geometric design, to be used in a textbook exemplifying mathematics in action. There is always a way to redirect poorly informed requests, and most publishers are interested in learning to use images wisely. However, too detailed an inquiry into the nature of use or, rather, too stern a hand with would-be iconographers, begins to look like censorship.

The archival principle of open access is one that goes to the heart of the matter; it means that knowledge is open to everyone. The ten-year-long legal battle over the Nixon papers and whether they belong to the National Archives (thus, potentially, for all to use) or to a president (thus restricted in use) has been fought over, among other things, this principle. What is private, what is public? Principles are continually in a process of dialogue, and the question becomes important in archives: Does religion lie outside dialogue? How ought images containing religious matters be handled? How can we respect Native American traditions, while respecting equally important but conflicting nonnative traditions on the other hand?

The question of Native American “visibility” has to do with representation. It has two sides: a positive side, in which representation by images ensures that a culture is recognized and included; and a negative side, in which misrepresentation results in stereotyping. Representation has to do with who uses images of Native Americans, how and why. Thus the kind of images used in the portrayal of Indian people reflects different visions: that of the outside society (as Rick Hill’s essay describes) and that of the Indian societies.

Representation by photographic image depends on a mixture of iconic images and pertinent content. Representation that employs archival photographs draws on the past and needs to acknowledge the context of history and the influence of political issues. More recent photographs, however, reflect this past and are influenced by images that are already part of the visual dialogue. Photograph collections are—as they should be—used

by everyone, academic and nonacademic, intellectual and commercial; old photographs are loved by everyone. Images are seductive, appealing, powerful. Images of Indians in general, and Southwestern Indians in particular, seem to be perennially popular: Southwestern Indian people see themselves as a source of images for a large number of publications.

American Indians experience mixed reactions to seeing their images (past or present) appearing with frequency in the different media. Rick Hill describes the heroic view of American Indians as a burden. There is frustration at the abundance of images, used especially for tourism, while economic stringency still hampers self-determination. Yet Indian people feel pride and hope when photographs from the past are published, because these images testify to the strength and power of cultures that have survived for so long. There is also a growing recognition that, with the longevity of interest in such images comes the ability to enter the field of the viewer and make known certain aspects of the image that have not been clarified.

Among the Rio Grande Pueblo people, two distinct attitudes illustrate the differences and the implications of perspectives on the use of photographs. Some pueblos would prefer to be unrepresented, invisible as it were to the outside world, because visitors so often appear as meddlers, misusers of information. Photographs can be problematic within communities also: They may carry information only certain people should have, or they may contradict accepted wisdom. On the other hand, some communities would like to use archival photographs in every way possible—in computer programs and exhibits, in schools, in senior centers, in community meetings—to illustrate their past, to strengthen the ties of the people to the community, and to teach their children pride and hope. On the one hand, visual representation is seen as exposing the community to the intrusion of outsiders and the dissolution of tradition; on the other hand, it is seen as a positive aid to memory, to pride, to maintaining the community.

However, representation can be done in stereotypical ways, by boiling down the complex and vital life of the tribe to an icon. This is a problem that archivists try to rectify by approaching it with caution and diplomacy because, in fact, Native Americans themselves are the only ones who can combat the problem directly. They are the only ones who can say of an image that it is inaccurate in a particular context, or that it is, in their view, stereotypical.

Many Native American community members, photographers, and intellectuals—among them Rick Hill, Larry McNeil, Tessie Naranjo, Hulleah Tsinhahjinnie, Jolene Rickard—have taken such direct action in lectures and publications.

Finally, I will present a few thoughts on the role of archives in exchanging information across cultural boundaries and the clash—or, at any rate, the fender-bender—of cultures that can result. In the Southwest, archives run counter to traditional perspectives. Words are not meant to be captured and kept, and even the idea of attending to tribal council records is not welcomed by all. Images, although far more popular and of greater interest among many in the communities, can hold dangerous information—information from the realm of the sacred that is not suitable for everyone to see or know.

Preservation is another area where the approach of Native Americans may differ from that of archivists. To preserve things beyond their natural life span, according to many Pueblo societies, is unseemly; while archivists stretch budgets to provide protection to papers and photographs in order to preserve them “forever.”

Furthermore, archivists are placed in the mediating, translating role of “culture brokers”—as traders were of old. Archivists often do not live near or see the tribes and pueblos whose images they carry, and they may know little about them. This is changing; many archivists in the Southwest consult with local communities now, encourage visits and discussions, and ask for help and advice. The discussion group that began at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe in 1990 is one of these efforts. The Smithsonian has worked hard, from its base in Washington, to do its share of exchange and communication. Many archivists try to be knowledgeable about their photo collections however far they are from the tribes and pueblos these images depict. Such efforts and results need to spread more broadly, because many images of Southwestern Native Americans—indeed of all Indian tribes and communities—are held outside their geographic regions.

Photographs taken across cultures make a very uneasy boundary crossing: On each side lie issues of meaning, of different philosophies of knowledge, of infringement of sacred areas, not to mention the sticks-and-stones of bad manners, unequal power relations (and occasionally force), and plain, unadorned ignorance. However, to say that a lack of sensitivity existed in the past is not saying anything new. The photographs of Native American subject matter are everywhere, and they are used.

An exchange of information, of requests, and beliefs must take place. Such an exchange requires honesty and a willingness to listen as well as to speak. Political correctness, often difficult to detect, is too easy and is not fruitful. If, from either side of the boundary, there are contradictory principles, neither side should throw them over without hanging them up, like negatives, to see exactly what the image is about and how it compares to those of the other parties. Suppressing discussion because it is not popular with one of the groups does not right the wrongs of earlier days. Suppressing voices—whether Indian or non-Indian—cannot be a solution. Courage lies in discussion, and archivists must join the circle of debate on issues relative to images across the cultural boundaries.

The issue involves ethics and principles, and conflicting ones at that: open access to knowledge versus control of knowledge; concern for traditions and cultural survival versus concern for constitutional freedoms; and the necessity of ongoing dialogue in learning and cultural exchange. American Indians, archivists, and anyone interested in the history, anthropology, and philosophy of photographs and their role in society have a rich source of materials and ideas in photographs of the Euro-American/American Indian past. In the discussions from which these ideas come, Rick Hill commented that photographs have been part of a dialogue about Indians, a dialogue in which Indians are now taking a definitive part. Alan Trachtenberg writes that “the history represented in American photographs belongs to a continuing dialogue and struggle over the future of America. It is a history of participation by photographers in the making of America, the illumination of its cultural patterns, the articulation of its social and political contradictions.”¹ To this I would add only that the ongoing discussion outlined in this essay reveals the creative possibilities in contradiction and disagreement.

NOTE

1. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History. Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 290.