

**Touring an Other's Reality:
Aboriginals, immigrants, and autochromes**

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In the summer of 1914, a North American Aboriginal family and a German immigrant photographer made (and left) a record of their encounter in Edmonton, Alberta. It took the form of two 5x7" autochromes—colour glass-plate transparencies—one of which you see here (*Fig. 1*).¹ If we conceive of the west as "a cultural crossroads...formed through exchanges among many different people," as Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage do, then this image presents the opportunity, as those writers urge, to "imagine how a common historical space appeared from many different lines of sight" (1997:9, 5). If it is agreed that the shared geographical and temporal space registered by the photograph can be counted "a common historical space,"—but not a "contact zone" of interchange (Pratt 1992:4) nor a hybrid, newly structured "third space" (Rutherford 1990:211), both a product of sustained interaction—then the image offers two discrete lines of sight that are viewed less often. For as Lucy Lippard has written, "most literature about tourism is written from the standpoint of the visitor...rather than that of the visited. ...Immigrants and the internally displaced are rarely asked how they see their surroundings. Yet every place is both local and foreign" (Lippard 1999:2). Rarer still is an opportunity such as this to explore views of the common historical space traversed by the internally displaced and an immigrant for whom room was made through treaty.

At first glance, the family autochromes read as classically ethnographic images common in the early-20th century: frontally composed with details of Aboriginal faces, hair, and clothing fully on display, and centrally framed from an observant distance

rather than at an interactive proximity between the examining viewer and the indigenous subjects who stand on barren land. The family is isolated on this patch of dirt, seemingly stranded in an environment once their own but no longer so: brick buildings and tents, not teepees, are their backdrop. Almost a century later, however, the ethnographic imperative of these images is less vigorous. Mindful of James Clifford and George E. Marcus's contention in *Writing Culture* that "ethnography...[is] caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures" (1986:2)² and Susan Sontag's claim that photographers invent the past (1973:6), it becomes apparent from the subjects' presentation of themselves—their poses, expressions, gestures, and accoutrements—that these images portray as much about the photographer as the family, as much about the culture hovering behind the camera as the one exposed in front of the lens, as much about an immigrant's experience as that of indigenous people in their common historical space. Reading the autochromes as the product of a cognizant exchange of those involved in the encounter is key to parsing the complex of meanings and knowledge made in these images. (*Fig. 1a damaged view*)

In this well-conserved image (*Fig. 1b*), the family variously resists our gaze: the woman wraps her blue and white trade blanket around her, obscuring our view of her body or clothing, except for the skirt hem and moccasins beneath; her head is tucked toward her shoulder, her gaze directed at the camera, photographer, and viewer, but her expression is closed.³ The man, whose clothes are also on display but reveal little more—typical early-20th century Plains native dress of shirt, trousers, hat and multi-coloured blanket (red, orange, green, blue)—looks away from the camera in much the same way that Aboriginal men were typically cast in paintings and photographs gazing into the distance, but here the expression is closed also, the look more defiant, resistant, or indifferent than contemplative, with no feathered headdress, skin clothing, or beads in

sight. His face is weathered, lined, and lived-in, displaying neither youthful and idealized beauty nor grotesque and savage ruggedness. The girl, whose red and black plaid blanket is about her shoulders leaving her calico dress on display, seems to retreat from the camera, her chin too bent down and no smile on her face. In short, this family appears to refuse the performance of display for the camera.

The contradiction in this image—the subjects' seeming compliance with being photographed and yet refusal to portray anything of themselves—both entices and confounds the contemporary viewer's desire to know these people's individual identities and histories. And yet, in keeping with the family's own desires perhaps, the contradiction does force today's viewer to look, if only obliquely, along an Aboriginal line of sight out of the picture and back at the photographer, his surroundings, and his location in their common historical space. In his short essay "Their Shadows Before Them: Photographing Indians," Louis Owens argues that tourist photographs of indigenous inhabitants function in paradoxical ways: for indigenous people who are subjects, the photographs become illustrations in the story that the photographing culture tells about itself (2003:191). It is in this way that the autochromes refute the one-way gaze of ethnographic classicism and in so doing depict as much about the immigrant as the family. Conversely, such images ultimately, Owens argues, "play a crucial role in giving a people a picture of themselves... Admittedly... filtered through the lens of the dominant, invasive, culture...but nonetheless what adheres is the living air of a people and a culture" (2003:192).

The names of the family members, their band, and tribe remain unknown because any oral or written accounting that may have been made of the encounter is absent. The lack of defining accoutrements, especially traditional clothing decoration or style of teepee, compounds the problem. While the moccasins might offer a clue (Wissler 1975:104-114), the details of their cut and decorative pattern are not clear

enough to allow identification. It is likely that they were members of one of the largest tribes in the Edmonton area, Plains or Woodland Cree, whose common ancestors had immigrated from the Ontario and Quebec region to the western prairies and parkland in the late-17th century. The Cree had migrated in response to new economic opportunities and endeavours as trappers and traders, pursuing furs along the Red and Saskatchewan Rivers for trade with the Hudson's Bay Company. HBC trading posts followed the Cree, including Fort Edmonton established in 1795, an economically- and culturally-vibrant crossroads located near the site of this photographic encounter until 1915, when Fort Edmonton was finally dismantled.⁴

Comprehending the disparity of the Aboriginal family's line of sight with that of the immigrant photographer is possible when we consider the disparate historical viewpoints on the treaty made between the Cree and the British Crown and which made possible the encounter photographed. In 1871, four Cree chiefs of what is now Saskatchewan and central Alberta, concerned about non-Native appropriation of land and diminishing buffalo stock, requested to treat with the lieutenant-governor of the Northwest Territories. Treaty Six was subsequently negotiated in 1876. In exchange for sharing the land with immigrant settlers for the purpose of agriculture, the Cree negotiated reserved land for settlement and farming, treaty money, education, and farming implements.

Andrew Gray, who accompanied a United Nations Special Rapporteur to a forum with Treaty Six Elders in 1989, explains that the difference between the two sides in the Treaty "was in the form of the two powers - state power vs. spirit power" (IWGIA 1997:28). The difference would seem to abide in the understandings of the significance of the Native pipe ceremony that opened negotiations: whereas the Cree negotiators understood the ceremony to mark the treaty as a statement of truth, the government negotiators understood it, as they would their own sworn oaths on the Bible, as a statement of "sincerity of intent" quite separate from the treaty itself (IWGIA 1997:47).

Furthermore, although neither Elders' oral accounts of the negotiations nor government representatives' written accounts explicitly recount discussions about selling or ceding land (IWGIA 1997:26-27), the English-language text version of the treaty appears to reveal what Gray calls the "hidden agenda" of the state power to obtain land.

Such cultural and historical differences of expectations, aspirations, and understanding are inherent in the autochromes made by the family and photographer. As members of a tribe that had agreed with the British Crown to share its land with a third group, immigrant settlers, this family's control of their response to the newcomer's gaze and his desire for a visual document of their encounter suggest divergent expectations of the purpose and outcome of the exchange. For while the immigrant's photograph would seem to document the indigenous family's reality, Owens's argument suggests that the image also documents the immigrant's reality in this common historical space.

The photographer was Hugo Viewegar, a 39-year-old resident of Leipzig who immigrated to the prairies with his wife, Luise, and their three children in 1912 (**Figs. 2 & 3**). He was a man of considerable means, a prosperous second-generation international financier who imagined and sought out the life of a country gentleman in a colonial space. The Viewegars joined tens of thousands of immigrants from central and eastern Europe who responded to Canadian and British appeals for settlers to homestead 160 acres of free land on the Canadian prairies.

The Viewegars first settled on a farm near Stony Plain but by 1913 had moved 32 kilometers east to Edmonton when a recurring health problem prevented Viewegar from farming. The modern, prosperous, industrializing city proved an ideal place and opportunity for Viewegar to benefit financially from his long-time avocation of photography, itself a modern, industrial enterprise (**Fig. 4 Brown**). Exceptional economic prosperity and population growth that had marked Edmonton in the decade following its

incorporation as a city in 1904 culminated in the summer of 1914 when Viewegar was making his autochromes. The city had been named capital of the new province of Alberta in 1905, and established academic, cultural, and industrial institutions in the next few years sparking a construction boom and rapid economic and social expansion. Among the projects fueling the city's growth were the Beaux-Arts style provincial legislative building constructed on the north bank of the river above Fort Edmonton, the first buildings of the new University of Alberta campus facing the legislature from across the river on the elevated south bank, as well as the Canadian Pacific Railway's steel High Level bridge linking the two banks and allowing for rail, vehicular, and pedestrian traffic. **(Fig. 5 Viewegar)** There was construction also of the CPR's traditional chateau-style Hotel Macdonald to provide first-class accommodation for rail passengers. The decade's cultural and industrial growth was accompanied by a nine-fold increase in the 1904 population of 8350. In 1911, the Census of Canada recorded the population of Edmonton as 24,900 people, 67% (16,727) of whom were of British origins. German immigrants made up the next largest group at 6.6% (1647 residents) of the city's population, and eight residents, or .03% of the recorded population, were Aboriginals. By the time Viewegar moved to Edmonton in 1913, the population had risen to 67,243, and in 1914, on the eve of the First World War, reached 72,516 people (City n.d.).

Viewegar opened a studio downtown on Jasper Avenue, advertising on his business card "Artistic Portraiture, Natural Color Photography, and Commercial Work." **(Fig. 6 Family)** Because of the outbreak of war with Germany, he was in business for little more than a year, and few of his photographs survive. Making an autochrome was a specialized and comparatively expensive undertaking. Few photographers produced them and it is believed that only a few hundred survive worldwide. Viewegar learned the process from the inventors themselves, the Lumière brothers of France, shortly after they introduced the format in 1904. Furthermore, the autochrome was a rarely seen

image, a direct positive that could not be printed on paper nor replicated as a transparency. Because it was not reproducible, its image could not be widely circulated or viewed and so held little financial potential for the commercial photography trade. In contrast, the singularity of the autochrome medium lent itself well to a fine art photography practice and Viewegar counted himself among pictorialists in Germany prior to trying his hand at commercial photography in Edmonton (Vieweger 2001, 18). Not only were autochromes one-of-a-kind, Viewegar's work was a one-of-a-kind practice on the prairies at the time. This makes them all the more interesting in light of the sepia-toned aura that washes over posterity's knowledge and imagining of the historical west. Thomas King observes in *The Truth about Stories: a Native Narrative*, an examination of Euro-North Americans' conceptions of Aboriginal people, that "tripping the shutter captures nothing....What the camera allows you to do is invent, to create. That's really what photographs are. Not records of moments, but rather imaginative acts" (2003:43).

Had the autochromes been seen in Germany by those who had not visited the Canadian or American prairies, they would have been startling for their unique colour rendering of the west (**Fig. 7**). Viewegar made the only known colour photograph of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* troupe of Native American performers, the first-known colour photograph of a Royal Northwest Mounted Police officer (**Fig. 8**) dressed in red serge and posing alongside his horse, (both members of the Musical Ride which like the *Wild West* performed in Edmonton in the summer of 1914), and the two images of the Aboriginal family, living remnants of the original societies of the prairies encountered in the urban environment of settler immigrants.⁵ The autochromes of the *Wild West* and the Musical Ride would seem to confirm that Viewegar had found, and was living in, the legendary west of European imagination, with the colourful, exotic characters of Indians and mounted police in full dress.

The *Wild West* and Musical Ride performances of the summer on 1914 were not Viewegar's first encounter with the legendary west, however (**Fig. 9 Family**). In 1890, he had seen Buffalo Bill's troupe when the *Wild West* performed in Leipzig. Viewegar's interest and imagination were clearly engaged when he chanced upon the show again in the real geographical space of its narrative, a space historically distanced, however, from the days of the frontier as evidenced by the presence and modernity of cities such as Edmonton. Nevertheless, the heightened verisimilitude of Viewegar's colour photographs of western icons would seem to lend documentary authority and historical truth to the two-centuries-old European imaginings and representations of Aboriginal North Americans and conquest of the frontier.⁶

In many ways, Viewegar was visually documenting and preserving the west he had imagined and found again in the spectacles of "Show Indians," American military scouts, and Canadian mounted police who performed the legends of what they had been. At the same time, his path crossed that of Cree Aboriginals whose lives were lived outside the spotlight, as present reality rather than performance of a mythologized past. (**Fig. 10**) The autochromes seem to offer the Cree family as evidence that Aboriginals remained real-life characters in the west. While Viewegar framed and exposed the photographs of the Cree family, he and the family members together produced an expressive portrait that profoundly marks the ambiguity of the "reality" rendered. On the one hand, the intact portrait, arranged in the traditional European pictorial manner as a stable triangular form, presents the family as evidence of the successful instigation and integration of western European ideals and values in Aboriginal culture as a model patriarchal, nuclear family. Furthermore, the sophisticated photographic medium used to represent the Europeanization of western North American culture—like the trains, bridges and architecture demarcating the urban space—is subtle physical evidence of

the modernity of that time and place, as a site of both advanced photographic technology and cosmopolitan fine art.

On the other hand, given the family's contribution to the standard portrait composition, the autochromes make visible the sharp contrast of the romantic ideal embodied by the *Wild West* "Show Indians" with the contemporary reality of Treaty Indians on the Canadian prairies. The dire social and economic consequences of Cree-European political, economic, and social relations is distressingly rendered by the images of the family. The fluidity of meaning is all the more apparent when we consider the disparate cultural and ethnic lines of sight that meet in the space claimed by British imperial action. From the viewpoint of the non-British European immigrant, the image resonates with both the dominant European culture's imagined west and the dissonance of that mythology with the reality encountered, but not recounted in immigration promotion, in the Canadian west. From the viewpoint offered by the Cree family, the autochrome discloses Aboriginal perspectives of the same historical space as markedly diverse, and elusive to documentation by traditional, material European methods of image and text.

The common historical space occupied by Viewegar and the family was brief, little longer than the time taken to make the autochromes. On August 4, Britain declared war on Germany, and Canada immediately enacted the War Measures Act. With it, Viewegar's status as settler immigrant inverted to "enemy alien."⁷ German immigrants were no longer eligible for work and, as was Viewegar's experience, their property could be seized and confiscated, and they could be relocated. Viewegar and his family moved to a homestead near Edgerton, Alberta, 244 kilometres southeast of Edmonton where they remained under RCMP surveillance for the duration of the war (Vieweger 2001:25).

Roland Barthes has written that "essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own" (Barthes 1981:110). The fragile

autochromes that render visible the common historical space shared by the immigrant photographer and the Aboriginal family are an evocative testament to the complexity and fluidity of the cultural crossroads of the prairie a century ago. No matter the line of sight along which they are viewed, the photographs present the story Euro-colonialist culture was telling about itself, a story in which both Aboriginals and immigrants were integral. What is made visible by the autochromes today are the settler immigrant's recognition of the price paid by Aboriginal societies, and Aboriginal recognition of the benefits possessed by settler immigrants. The image renders tangible the space and time in which those whose land and those whose labour constituted the strength and success of the British colonial enterprise in North America met—and held—one another's gaze.

¹ The autochrome was the first colour photographic technology. Invented by the Lumière brothers in France in 1904, it was used until about 1914 (Wood 1993).

² To illustrate their argument about ethnographic writing, Clifford and Marcus use a photograph of an ethnologist writing notes. Relying on a photograph for documentary authority, they ironically if inadvertently fail to apply their critical insights to visual constructions of cultures.

³ As part of treaty annuity payments in Canada, Hudson's Bay trade blankets were received by every Native person (Tichenor 2002:43). The acceptance of blankets as partial treaty payment is not specified in Treaty Six, however. The blankets worn by this family appear to be American trade blankets possibly made by the Pendleton Woolen Mills in Oregon. The roles and significance of trade blankets in visual culture and identity in Canada is the subject of Fiona McDonald's forthcoming master's thesis at the University of Alberta.

⁴ Today the area, known as Rossdale Flats, is a contested site between the municipal power utility that occupies the land and Aboriginals, Métis, and others defending its sacred and archeological integrity (Gregoire 2001: B1; Howell 2004a; Howell 2004b).

⁵ In total, ten Viewegar autochromes remain. The additional six include studies of his wife, Luise, and their children, a still life and a house exterior. All are in the collection of the Provincial Archives of the Alberta, with the exception of one in the collection of the Edmonton Art Gallery. Four colour reproductions are found in Skidmore 2003.

⁶ The impact of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* on European immigrants' expectations of North America is discussed in Slotkin 1982:43.

⁷ 'Alien' referred to persons not of British origin (*The law and regulations of Canada* 1910:10).

Figures

1. Aboriginal Family (conserved)
 - 1a. damaged
 - 1b. conserved
2. Luise Viewegar
3. Viewegar children
4. Brown (north bank)
5. Viewegar (river)
6. Aboriginal family (conserved)
7. Buffalo Bill's troupe
8. RNWMP
9. Buffalo Bill's
10. Aboriginal family

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