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Cover Page Footnote
Formerly the Archivist & Collection Manager for the Sealaska Heritage Institute, Juneau, Alaska for seven years, Zachary R. Jones took employment with the Alaska State Archives in late 2014. Jones is also an Adjunct Instructor of History/Anthropology at University of Alaska Southeast and a Ph.D. student in Ethnohistory via University of Alaska Fairbanks, focusing on aspects of Tlingit Indian history. Jones would like to thank Cherity Bacon, Archivist for the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, Terry Baxter, Archivist for Multnomah County, Oregon, and the anonymous reviewers of the Journal of Western Archives for their critical review of this essay and their suggestions which improved this study.

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Images of the Surreal: Contrived Photographs of Native American Indians in Archives and Suggested Best Practices

Zachary R. Jones

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the complex history of contrived photographs of Native American Indians created by non-Native photographers around the turn of the twentieth century. Based on research and surveys this essay overviews issues associated with contrived photographs, colonial narratives of history, and offers perspectives and survey feedback on practices that could improve archival description of controversial historical photographs of American Indians found in archives around the world.

During the summer of 1888, merchant and photographer Edward DeGroff placed a new set of cabinet card photographs in the window of his curio shop and trading post, Northwest Trading Company, operated in Sitka, Alaska. Seeking additional sources of revenue, DeGroff occasionally photographed Southeast Alaska’s Native American Indian population, primarily Tlingit Indians. He then sold these photographs to tourists and those who passed through Sitka. This new set of pictures for sale by DeGroff purported to showcase Tlingit spirituality in practice. The photographic scene alleged to capture an elaborately dressed Tlingit “medicine man” (as DeGroff labeled it) torturing a Tlingit “witch.” At this time in history, Caucasian Americans were fascinated with Native American spirituality and religious practices, especially since American laws and boarding schools were attempting to detribalize Native Americans across the United States.¹

By offering this new set of images showcasing Tlingit shamanism, DeGroff tapped into a slightly more profitable niche in the American consumer consciousness. This market, images showcasing aspects of Native American spirituality, had become quite popular with photographers across the United States and Canada who sought to photograph Native American religious ceremonies and cultures. Imagery capturing indigenous spirituality was disseminated widely on cabinet card sets, stereograph series, and postcards. However, like many images produced during this time that purported to capture Native American spirituality, DeGroff’s images were staged false scenes.

Figure 1. Staged photograph of a non-Native impersonating a Tlingit shaman, Sitka, 1938 (Alaska State Library, Edward DeGroff Collection, Edward DeGroff, ASL-P91-29).

The photographs DeGroff had begun selling did not capture a Tlingit “medicine man” or “shaman” (appropriate Tlingit term is íxt’t’3) engaged spiritual practices. Rather these photographs were contrived scenes. DeGroff used paid models, costume, lighting, and a backdrop in his photography studio to create the illusion of authenticity. Additionally, the purported Tlingit íxt’ in his images was in fact a Caucasian in Native American dress impersonating a Tlingit íxt’.8 A fair question for any archivist who encounters such an image on the job would be: Exactly what is this photograph and how should it be addressed? This is important considering that archival science scholar Kathleen D. Roe has argued that as archivists work on collections, they should be “keeping in mind the context in which those records were created.”5 Understanding the context of creation for historical photographs is a fundamental part of an archivist’s job.

The photographic set produced by DeGroff is many things; on one level it is a photograph generated during a period of heightened racial discrimination about an ethnic minority and contains a non-indigenous man impersonating a Native American Indian and purporting an authentic view of Native American spirituality in practice. It is also an example of cultural appropriation in which the dominant culture takes the narrative of a minority culture’s history and culture and then misrepresents it. Unfortunately, scholars sometimes unknowingly use these faked images in their publications today, which they obtain from archives. Decades ago in the American Archivist William Hagen referred to American Indians as “archival captives” when articulating a problem then which still persists today; “To be an Indian is having non-Indians control the documents from which other non-Indians write their version of your history.”6

3. Íxt’ is the Tlingit word for someone who holds this spiritual position; no English word has been determined to accurately represent the role and position of an íxt’. Tlingit elders have respectfully asked that people use the term íxt’ because the terms “shaman” or “medicine man” are English words that carry certain implied connotation about indigenous (non-Christian) “witchcraft” practitioners, etc. and are disingenuous to the true role and nature of an íxt’.

4. It should be noted the DeGroff did attempt to photograph cultural events held by the Tlingit, but he was either forbidden to enter and/or refused to pay a fee named by the Tlingit that would have granted him permission. See one specific newspaper account of DeGroff’s rejection: “Indian dances held,” The Alaskan, April 2, 1897.


By default, archivists encounter historic photos of this nature in archives across the world. Such photography prompts a number of questions that archivists often should ponder upon arranging and describing historical photograph collections with this content. An archivist could ask: What prompted the creation of such a photograph? How should this genre of images be described by archivists? Should it be placed online via a digitization project? How would a respective Native American community today feel about images such as these? Would the archivist’s description of such an image in an online setting bring the institution criticism from a tribe or scholars? These are just a few of the questions that can arise upon encountering such an image. These and other factors, discussed in this study, seek to elucidate some of the issues an archivist could consider as they accession, arrange, describe, and perhaps even place images of this nature online.

This essay seeks to facilitate constructive dialog and discussion about this historic photographic phenomenon and share best practices feedback from surveys about how archivists could deal with this genre of photographs. The best practices feedback offered in this essay have been derived from surveys conducted at tribal and non-tribal academic archival conferences between 2012 and 2014, and from discussions with tribal and non-tribal colleagues. It is important to acknowledge that these suggested best practices should not be considered absolute, as more solutions or complex factors may arise, especially in light of the fact that each specific tribe may have differing feelings about historical imagery. Overall, this essay argues that archivists should play a positive role in providing historical transparency by applying professional practices to sensitive historical materials.

Theories on Native Americans and Historical Photography

Government practices, newspaper coverage, and academic studies prior to and during the late nineteenth century on Native Americans played a key—and controversial—role in presenting the American public with a narrative about Native Americans. The historical narrative put forth by Caucasian Americans predicted the decline and in some cases extinction or “vanishing” of Native Americans. Anthropologists also presented various academic theories to feed public understanding of Americans Indians. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists proposed the theories of polygenesis (the idea that biology creates destiny), monogenetic degeneration (the idea that human differences resulted


from certain ethnic groups’ lack of closeness to the Christian god), and monogenetic evolution (a Social Darwinian theory that some peoples evolve faster than others based on their varying characteristics). Even though these concepts evolved and even sometimes competed, many still viewed Native Americans (inaccurately) as a vanishing race, doomed to extinction because of their biological makeup, their supposed relationship toward the Christian god, or because their biosocial characteristics did not allow them to “evolve” and adapt quickly enough.

While some segments of American society embraced this narrative, some Christian-minded reformers felt that not all American Indians were vanishing and those living deserved a place in American society. Christian reformers felt that American Indians were not yet “ready” to enter American society, and they required a Christian education instructing them on the purported virtues of agrarian practices, American democracy, and Victorian values and dress. This ideology was most strongly embraced by the U.S.A. President Ulysses S. Grant administration (1869-1877), which facilitated the installment of Christian-minded reformers in government positions dealing with Native Americans and the creation of boarding schools for Native American youth.

Since theories presented Native Americans or their cultures as vanishing, for many Caucasian Americans the concept of “authentic” Indians possessed an exotic and mysterious appeal. The government, museums, and universities funded various ethnographic research ventures on the cultures, oral literature, languages, and especially the material culture (arts) of various American Indian tribes with hopes to document and capture the “last glimpses” of raw Indian life before it disappeared. Hundreds of photographers across the United States took part in this process by taking pictures of Native Americans. Since the 1980s many scholars have been examining how Euro-American perceptions of Indians influenced the way in which Native Americans were photographed. They have found that Caucasian American cultural biases and beliefs about Indians lead photographers to photograph Indians in ways that reinforced the beliefs of Caucasian Americans.

11. See Raibmon, Authentic Indians.
13. Carol J. Williams, Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 64-47); Raibmon, Authentic Indians.
prearranging the background, use of costume, altering images afterward, and other tactics to ensure that photographs of Indians met the idealized conceptions held by Caucasian Americans. Perhaps most popularly known, a number of scholars in recent years, often anthropologists, historians, and Native Americans, have examined how early twentieth century ethnographic photographer Edward Curtis’ photographs of Native Americans in his twenty-volume *The North American Indian* were not all authentic and some were altered by Curtis.14 Studies have noted how Curtis ensured that some of his Indian subjects posed majestically for dramatic effect, were adorned in Native dress not part of their respective culture, or the picture’s nature and angle functioned to convey an ideological viewpoint embraced by Caucasian American culture.15

Figure 2. Photo of unidentified Tlingit woman with photographer’s label “Yah-Yicks, a civilized Alaskan belle,” Sitka, circa 1890s (Sealaska Heritage Institute Archives, Richard Wood Collection, by Reuben Albertstone, PO049-58).


Examining Curtis’s *The North American Indian*, anthropologist Mick Gidley argues that Curtis’ work embodies Caucasian American perceptions of Native Americans during this period, including the idea that Indians were portrayed as a “vanishing race” because of their ethnic differences from Caucasian Americans. He argues that the notion of Native Americans disappearing furthered political ambitions by fostering “political pressure at multiple levels for the appropriation of Indian lands.” Curtis’ own 1904 photograph of a line of Navajo riding away from the camera at sunset, a picture Curtis entitled “The Vanishing Race,” is what Gidley calls “key tropes, so to speak, of Curtis’ pictorial representations of Indians.” The subject of manipulating and using historic images of Native Americans for ideological and political reasons has not gone unnoticed by scholars like Carol Williams.

Williams’ book *Framing the West* documents aspects of the photographic process and how missionaries and clergy, in need of justifying their ongoing proselytizing and church-operated boarding and day schools for Native American youth, used photography to make legitimacy claims about their labors. Reviewing historic lantern slide presentations given by mission leaders to Congress, Williams documented how through photographic juxtaposition, i.e. placing an image of a purportedly “civilized” Native American Indian woman (dressed in Western clothing) next to an indigenous woman in everyday working clothing, missionaries made claims about how their schools had fostered Natives’ embrace of Victorian values, progression, and cleanliness. In essence, these missionary arguments for Congressional funding presented a narrative that reinforced the mission school’s purported good works and figuratively patted Congress on the back for wisely allotting funds to support church education ventures. While a number of additional factors are overviewed by Williams and others, Williams cautions that “one must approach the photographic artifact from an oblique angle to gain a more nuanced understanding of the contest of power that was at the heart of colonial encounters between Euro-American settlers and indigenous populations.”

Other scholars, such as Sharon Gmelch, have documented how historic contrived photographs of Native Americans sought to rank race by elevating Caucasians to being the empowered observers and Indians as subordinate subjects. In her book *The Tlingit Encounter with Photography*, she expounds upon how photographers captured images of the Tlingit from the perspective of making Indians appear as ethnic specimens. Using the example of a commonly sold photograph of a Tlingit woman from the coastal village of Hoonah paddling in her canoe, Gmelch highlights aspects of how the photographer presented this photograph; “the photographer’s camera

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13. Ibid., 14.
15. Williams, *Framing the West*, 7.
looks down at her ... the view from above and from a distance suggest detachment, not intimacy." Continuing, "her contrastive primitiveness is highlighted by her position in nature, surrounded as she is by water and forest, and her use of simple technology." Gmelch concludes that "she is treated as a specimen—a racial or cultural type—captured by the photographer to be viewed, sold, and collected by whites."  

For a number of years at archival conferences around the United States, but especially at the Association of Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums conferences, presentations have been given by academics about the nature of select historic photographs of Native Americans. Many of these presentations have focused on how archivists can identify a whole genre of problematic historic photographs found in archives. It has become clearly evident from Native Americans communities that they resent individuals using these disingenuous images as authentic documentation of their past. These photographs have been articulated by presenters and tribes as being very sensitive, controversial, and as examples of racism and cultural appropriation. Although there have been conference presentations on this topic, archival literature on this subject is not currently available.

**Context of Creation and Contrived Photographs**

In this section, examples of contrived photography of Native Americans are provided for the purpose of illustrating and educating on how archivists can detect images of this nature. The term “contrived photography” is used because it has been applied before by scholars. Contrived, a term used to mean faked or fabricated, should be understood with historical photographs in the same way; historical fabrications or faked scenes captured in photography to represent some type of action, argument, or ideology. Since historical photographers found it difficult to convey an idea visually, they orchestrated placement and use of specific individuals, costumes, backgrounds, and other factors to portray a conceptualized notion. It is worth mentioning that the idea of photographs being fabricated is not new to library science or archivists, as the term “Contrived Photography” is an official Library of Congress subject heading.

To begin, examples of contrived photographs are provided and discussed. Many of these contrived images meet one or all of the following criteria: 1. contain mocked or staged scenes, 2. present non-Native impersonators as Native individuals, 3. convey

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Euro-American perceptions of Indians, and 4. transmit an ideological or political argument. The photographs provided are connected to—or purport to connect to—Southeast Alaska Natives, primarily the Tlingit and Haida Indians. These types of photographs, however, can also be found to purportedly represent many other tribal communities, as well as international indigenous groups, such as Australian Aboriginals or the Maori of New Zealand.

Figure 3. Studio photo of unidentified Tlingit woman and child with photographer’s label, Juneau, 1906 (Sealaska Heritage Institute Archives, Richard Wood Collection, by Case & Draper, PO049-15).

A historic photograph showing a staged or mock scene of Native Americans is a common theme, and these images were produced in various formats, such as cabinet

cards, stereographs, and postcards. As shown in the postcard photographed by Case & Draper, a Tlingit woman and a child sit on a fur blanket engaged in basket weaving. As noted by anthropologist Gmelch, the positioning of the subjects provides the viewer the ability to observe this spectacle from a superior and elevated angle, allowing the viewer to look down upon this indigenous woman and child as ethnic specimens. Case & Draper placed a fur rug on the floor for the weaver to sit upon and had her wrapped in a fur blanket to ensure she appeared—from a Caucasian American perspective—primitive and indigenous. Baskets as props were set up and the photographer ensured the background remained discreet and blank. This photograph is not an example of an authentic weaving context or culture, but rather a portrayal seeking to convey an aspect of what Caucasian Americans perceived Indian weaving was like. This is similar to a number of studio photographs showcasing purported aspects of Tlingit life, such as Tlingit artists selling art. The author and others have viewed these exact images enlarged and made into posters that hang in Alaskan museums, libraries, archives, businesses, and other, all without an explanation of context.

Figure 4. Staged photography of a purported Tlingit spiritual man (shaman) visiting an ill woman, Juneau, 1906 (Sealaska Heritage Institute Archives, eBay Collection, by Case & Draper, PO024-16).

Other contrived photographs generated in a studio setting include images featuring Tlingit ʼixtʼ. Case & Draper’s “Indian Witch Doctor Visiting Patient”
embodies three of the criteria earlier provided for contrived photographs, excluding only non-Native impersonation. In this mock and studio setting Case & Draper paid two Tlingit individuals to pose for a “shamanic healing” scene. While authentic Tlingit art items were used as props, which Case & Draper used to provide dramatic effect and purport authenticity, it could be argued that this image showcases not only aspects of Euro-American fascination with Indian spirituality, but also the eroticism of Indian sexuality, such as the bare breast shown.\(^{20}\) The shaman brings a bone to the bare breasted Tlingit women laying amongst primitive fur rugs, purportedly engaged in a healing ritual.

Further inspection of Case & Draper’s photograph reveals that this is a mock scene inside the photographer’s studio due the black background. For those familiar with Tlingit culture, it’s clearly evident that this scene is culturally inaccurate, from its portrayal of the shaman in his clothing and use of bone, the props used (including the adze in the forefront, a standard carving tool), to the placement of the Chilkat blanket and other props. Again, the image provides the viewer with the ability to look down and inspect the scene as an observer upon Native spirituality. This image applies a number of the criteria for being a contrived photograph, including its being a mock scene, showcasing Caucasian American views of Indian spirituality, and perhaps even conveying an argument of Indian “savageness.” It is important to note that for Native Americans, and the Tlingit in this case, mockery and inaccurate pictorial representation of their spirituality highly is offensive.

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\text{Figure 5. Non-Native impersonating a Haida shaman, Klinkwan, circa 1900 (Sealaska Heritage Institute Archives, Richard Wood Collection, produced by Underwood & Underwood, PO049-42).}
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\(^{20}\) It should be noted that Case & Draper issued a number of postcard nudes featuring Tlingit women, which are not featured in this article. These nudes, which included use of the woman featured in this
Moving into the genre of non-Native impersonators, similar to the DeGroff image provided in the introduction, Underwood & Underwood produced a stereograph photograph that captures what was labeled as a "Medicine Man" in the Haida Indian village of Klinkwan. As common with other images, the purported Haida spiritual man’s dress is inappropriate for that of an actual spiritual man for those familiar with Haida history and spirituality, in addition to the main actor being Caucasian American. Even though this image was not taken in a studio, but at the village of Klinkwan, it still seeks to show a Caucasian American perception of Native spirituality in photographic print for the observation of Caucasians. It purportedly contains textual information about Southeast Alaska Native spirituality, though culturally inaccurate, that allowed its viewer to “learn” about Indians within Caucasian American parameters. It is worth acknowledging that during this time period the American government was making laws that forbade Native Americans from practicing their religion (in violation of the constitution’s First Amendment). Stereographs like this, which enjoyed a wide circulation and audience, provided a legitimizing argument that Caucasian Americans used to maintain their narrative of history about Native Americans and perceptions of Native American spirituality.25

Figure 6. Non-Native collectors Fred Sepp (left) and Ernest Kirberger (right) impersonating Tlingit “chiefs,” Kake, circa 1900 (Sealaska Heritage Institute Archives, eBay Collection, by Case & Draper, POo24-37).

Other photographs showing non-Native impersonators may be more difficult to identify, but nonetheless remain painful reminders for Native communities today of difficult periods in their history. This is the case with the commonly sold postcard labeled “Chiefs and Totem Poles,” in Kake, Alaska. This photograph actually features non-Native merchants and art collectors Fred Sepp and Ernest Kirberger, not actual Tlingit leaders. Sepp and Kirberger are dressed in Tlingit regalia, but this regalia appears to be pieces they had removed from the Tlingit community to sell to collectors and museums.26 Such photos are not just misleading and inaccurately identified, but harken back to a period of intense missionary pressure on Native spirituality, the loss of significant cultural items, and the role of Caucasian Americans in appropriating Native material culture.

A factor not to be dismissed is that scholars and curators have used nearly all the images shown in this essay in academic conferences presentations, publications, and exhibits without knowledge of these images being contrived. While a large part of this problem derives from scholars using these images without contextual understanding, most academics are obtaining these from public archival institutions, including federal, state, university, and other archival repositories. Further study and conversation shows there are many archivists are unaware, unprepared, or not trained to address the complexities of these type of historical photographs. Since a fundamental purpose of archival arrangement and description is to “ensure that records so carefully and conscientiously brought into archives are indeed comprehensible and accessible for reference services,” archivists need training on how to respond to contrived photographs of Native American Indians.27

Case Example and Survey Results

This section showcases survey results and briefly summarizes interactions with a repository and state digitization portal. Findings derived from two surveys administered on this subject at academic conferences are provided, along with a review of Alaska’s Digital Archives (a public digitization portal in Alaska) and the author’s dialog with an Alaskan repository.

In 2012, the author presented a paper on the topic of contrived photographs at the national Association of Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums conference.28 A presentation was given, the room opened to discussion, and concluded with the dissemination of a survey to document the experiences and recommendations of the

26. Although this photograph has been identified accurately, it continues to be identified by archivists and used by scholars without knowledge of its content. For its initial identification see Edward Keithahn, Monuments in Cedar (Seattle, WA: Superior Publishing Co., 1963), 73.

27. Roe, Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts, xiii.

professionals in attendance. The survey included three yes/no and three open-ended responses. Twenty-three people took the survey, with eleven individuals self-identifying as Native American. Library science professors were in attendance, as well as archivists from across the nation. Below are the results from this survey.

**ATALM 2012 Survey**

**Yes/No Questions**

1. *Do you feel contrived photographs have value when described appropriately?*
   
   23/23 people surveyed say YES

2. *Have you ever personally encountered contrived photographs at an archive that were described poorly or inaccurately?*
   
   21/23 said YES, 1 said NO, 1 said they were UNSURE.

3. *In your experience, have most of the contrived photographs you’ve encountered in a non-tribal archive (such as a university, historical society repository, etc.) been described appropriately?*
   
   20/23 said NO, 2 said YES, 1 said they were UNSURE.

**Open Ended Questions**

4. *If you have personally encountered contrived photographs in an archival setting, how were these described and what was your reaction?*
   
   Responses ranged, but included notions that these images were described as containing or using “stereotypes, Western views of Indians, lacked description, described in ignorance, described with derogatory terms.” One remarked that this was “unfortunately typical.”

   As for reaction, people “recoiled,” were “offended,” and/or “disgusted.” One remarked that a “lot of work needs to be done.”

5. *What is most concerning about inaccurate description of contrived photographs in archives?*
   
   Responses were generally similar and included answers such as: “false perceptions of Native people and their culture is perpetuated;” “colonial
perceptions of Native Americans are presented, perpetuations of stereotype and inaccuracies; and perpetuation of ignorance, mis-educates the viewer, misconceptions, misrepresentations."

6. How do you feel contrived photographs should be described?

Responses were nearly unanimous in that these photographs needed to include photographic context, an explanation of what a contrived photograph is, and that these images should be identified as being of this genre. Responses encouraged cross-cultural collaboration.

Example responses included: “they should be described accurately;” “they should address the issues both visible and non-visible even if its unpleasant;” “described with rich context;” and “identified as contrived.”

Two years later, a similar proposal was given at the 2014 annual Alaska Library Association conference along with an administered survey. Sixteen people took this survey, four of whom were Alaska Native/Native American Indian. The survey asked three yes/no and two open-ended questions. The results from this survey are below.

Alaska Library Association 2014 Survey

Yes/No Questions

1. Have you personally encountered staged and/or contrived photographs of indigenous people in archives or via an archival digitization project that were described poorly or inaccurately?

10/16 people surveyed say YES, 2 said NO, 4 said they were UNSURE.

2. If a non-tribal archivist is curating and describing contrived photographs, and admittedly feels inadequate as to how to best describe the photographs at hand, should the archivist consult the appropriate tribal community to open a respectful dialog?

16/16 said YES

3. When an archivist is curating and describing contrived photographs, do you feel it is the job of the archivist to provide a fairly detailed description, historical context, and identify the image as being contrived for metadata/cataloging purposes?

15/16 said YES, 1 said they were UNSURE.
Open Ended Questions

4. If you have personally encountered staged and/or contrived photographs of indigenous peoples in an archival setting, how were these described and what was your reaction?

Of the respondents that had encountered contrive images, most wrote of feeling various levels of discomfort or anger. Responses included “dismay,” and “felt disconnection;” an Alaska Native wrote, “it’s shocking sometimes, depending upon how they were described. Others I just roll my eyes and gloss over it.”

5. What do you feel “best practices” for curating and describing contrived photographs of indigenous peoples could/should be?

Responses were largely unanimous in stating that full discloser and the context of creation should be presented alongside the image. One respondent wrote, “LOC category, and for sure—full disclosure that the photo was contrived, and how.” Another wrote that a possible best practice was “complete description—honest and comprehensive.” A number of respondents felt cross-cultural communication with tribal communities was a viable option.

These surveys provide information of value to archivists, librarians, and curators about contrived photographs. Although these images have educational value about race, colonialism, and cultural appropriation, due to the existent problems with contrived photographs of Native Americans, respondents argued that archivists should provide detailed and honest metadata about contrived photographs in order to ensure researchers are informed. Although some archivists do not typically provide item level description of materials or engage in interpretive analysis of photographs that have a specific context, respondents were nearly unanimous in stating that this is the responsibility of archivists. While this type of descriptive practice and analysis is more commonly undertaken in museums and by curators, respondent feedback suggests that the field of archival studies and archivists should consider interdisciplinary methods and evaluate the role of archivist versus curator. Respondents also encouraged and spoke to the importance of cross-cultural communication. Even though some may argue that dialoging with a tribal community could increase an archivist’s workload, it’s more plausible that as archivists receive training and education from tribal entities, the archivist’s work will become more streamlined in the long term. Overall, the content derived from these surveys gives archivists information to consider as they approach contrived photographs.

These surveys also found that archivists need more training on the topic of contrived photographs. The Protocols of Native American Archival Materials emerged in April 2006 as a group of nineteen Native American and non-Native archivists, librarians, museum curators, historians, and anthropologists gathered at Northern Arizona University’s Cline Library in Flagstaff, Arizona. The participants included...
representatives from fifteen Native American, First Nation, and Aboriginal communities. The group met to identify professional best practices for culturally responsive care and use of American Indian archival material held by non-tribal organizations. The Protocols issue a call for archivists to improve their methods of archival curation, to ask those unfamiliar with Native American history and the history of colonialism in America to learn more about the realities of American history, as well as a call for tribal and non-tribal archives to open a constructive dialog.

In regard to constructive dialogs and the placement of contrived photographs of Native American Indians online, nearly all of the images shown as examples in this paper have been placed online for digitization projects by a non-tribal archive. During research for this study all of these images (excluding the purported Haida photo) were available online within Alaska’s Digital Archives, which hosts digitized photographs, recordings, and manuscript papers from repositories across the state of Alaska. The primary contributing organizations to Alaska’s Digital Archives are the Alaska State Library’s Historical Collections Division, and the special collections departments of University of Alaska Anchorage and University of Alaska Fairbanks. Alaska’s Digital Archives uses CONTENTdm software to provide public access to digitized material, like many digitization portals across the United States. Alaska’s Digital Archives seeks to provide its content to the general public, the K-12 school system, and scholars.

In 2011, contrived photos on Alaska’s Digital Archives were examined and the metadata and other descriptive information given were recorded. Over forty contrived images were located in this online setting. As an example, the metadata given on Alaska’s Digital Archives for the DeGroff photograph of the non-Native dressed as a Tlingit ixt’ reads as follows: “Title: Medicine Man. Description: Studio portrait. Indian shaman standing behind prisoner in western clothing.” For the Case & Draper image of the purported “shamanic” healing, the metadata read verbatim: “Title: Indian witch doctor (or shaman) healing a sick woman. Description: Man leaning over prone woman. Chilkat blanket at right.” For the image of Tlingit women selling art, the metadata includes: “Title: Tlingit women selling curios, Sitka, Alaska. Description: Two Native women sitting in front of a wood partition wearing fur blankets, scarves, with baskets.” This type of description was common for all the contrived imagery examined.

As is evident, the archivist that placed these images online using the photographer’s title and description (which was written on the image by the original photographer) and then provided interpretation of what was visibly evident. The metadata did not discuss the context of creation or give information about the larger


processes embedded within these images. This pattern seems to be fairly common with other online digitization displays across the United States based on research and individuals surveyed in 2012 and 2014. However, it is fair to acknowledge that these descriptions were provided years ago by very well-intentioned archivists. It’s plausible that these archivists had not been trained about the issues associated with contrived photography, perhaps because no archival science scholarship existed to assist in the education process.

After finding these images on Alaska’s Digital Archives and studying the subject in 2012, the owning Alaskan repositories were approached. The nature of these images was broached in a friendly email and by phone, leading to a constructive dialog. Although the subject of contrived photography was new to the administrator of one archival department, this administrator was respectful, patient, asked good questions, called for more study, and committed to address the situation. A short time later some photographs were completely removed from Alaska’s Digital Archives (such as the purported shamanic healing image that showed a woman’s bare breast) and the other images had their metadata updated to acknowledge contrived imagery. It was a positive outcome for a complex situation.

Concluding Information

Findings from this research project provide information for archivists to consider and apply as they encounter contrived photographs of Native American Indians. Archivists should identify contrived photographs of Native Americans as being contrived, detail the context of creation, and that constructive dialogs with tribes are important. The archival profession needs to provide training for archivists about contrived photography, colonialism, and cultural appropriation so archivists are prepared to work with these types of historical materials during the arrangement and description process. An archivist faces a number of challenges in providing quality archival description of contrived photographs of Native Americans, but the archivist’s actions are worth the effort since they educate on injustices endured by Native Americans. As we learn from the mistakes of the past and work on the challenges of the present, we can build a better future.