

# **Waasaabikizo: Our pictures are good medicine**

**Celeste Pedri-Spade**

*Laurentian University*

## **Abstract**

This article explores the role of Anishinabe photography in the ongoing struggle to decolonize, among Anishinabeg with ancestral and present day relationships to lands now occupied predominantly by settler peoples in northwestern Ontario. Drawing on work carried out with several families, this article connects the collection and experience of photography to decolonization, emphasizing its processual nature and role in mediating memories of the past in ways that are respectful of, and privilege, Anishinabe culture and knowledge. By contextualizing this work within a context of Indigenous photography and decolonization, this article furthers understandings of the significance of Indigenous photography to Indigenous led efforts directed towards reclaiming identity, cultural memory, intergenerational knowledge, and sovereignty. This work reveals how Anishinabe photography privileges Anishinabe narratives and experiences that, in turn, counter dominant versions of history and operate as a powerful decolonial force. Overall findings of this research reveal methodological and applied understandings of how photography contributes to ongoing Anishinabe efforts towards decolonization.

**Keywords:** *Anishinabeg photography; decolonization; visual sovereignty; family*

## Introduction

This article explores the relationship between Anishinabe photography and decolonization. It examines the role of historical photographs (taken approximately between 1917 to 1969) in Anishinabe efforts aimed at reclaiming histories, restoring intergenerational ties and cultural survivance. The photographs under study are of Anishinabe children, women, men and youth - people who are still with us today and individuals who have journeyed on to the spirit world. They are photographs of Anishinabeg with significant ties to areas of Anishinabe territory west of the City of Thunder Bay, around areas that include Shabaqua, Shebandowan, Kashabowie, Atikokan, Raith, Savanne, Upsala and Dryden.

As a result of imposed colonial legislation, Anishinabeg in this region have been displaced from their traditional territory, which has had direct consequences on their ability to retain their language, culture, and life skills. Today, Anishinabeg live in the aftermath of colonial violence perpetuated against their ancestors, including Indian Residential Schools, Indian hospitals, and colonial child welfare legislation and policy. The strategies aimed at erasing Anishinabeg and their histories from the Canadian landscape has had devastating effects on Anishinabeg. The severing of land and kin connections has left many Anishinabeg struggling with issues including loss of identity and sense of belonging. This history of ongoing colonialism includes not only the strategies employed by colonial officials aimed at eradicating or assimilating Anishinabeg in this region, but also the perseverance of Anishinabeg in countering this violence. By using the term “perseverance”, it signals not only their ongoing struggle to survive as Anishinabeg, but also the strength and tenacity displayed in doing so.

Over the past decade, Anishinabeg in this area have engaged in an increasing number of varied projects aimed at reclaiming their culture, history and language, and restoring a sense of belongingness and individual and collective identity. Central to all of these initiatives is the importance of *gathering*, the coming and being together of people in safe and welcoming environments. While some gatherings are intended to draw many people, most of them are smaller, more intimate gatherings that include different generations, from babies to kitchi-anishinabeg (Elders). Within this territory there is a growing interest and commitment to work that helps Anishinabeg move beyond the devastating effects of colonialism towards a future where Anishinabeg may live their lives in a good way.

In this article, I draw on the work carried out through the collective efforts of several Anishinabeg who utilize Anishinabeg photography in order to contribute new ways of learning from, and engaging with, their ancestral past. This work reveals the significance of these efforts to decolonization, specifically, the regeneration of memories and reclamation of stories and cultural teachings that are significant to the development of healthy kin and community relationships, and cultural continuity. First, I situate this work by connecting it to a broader context of Indigenous photography, drawing on examples that exemplify the linkage between photography and decolonization. In doing so, I argue that the taking up of photographs within a context of decolonization reveals a particular way of thinking with and thinking about photographs—a way that emphasizes the relational and processual nature of photographs. I then

present the specific project, carried out over the course of several months. I provide specific examples of how the process of bringing together and experiencing these historical Anishinabe photographs contributes to the ongoing decolonial work of Anishinabeg in this region.

## **Indigenous photography and decolonization**

Indigenous peoples have a longstanding and complex relationship with the camera. This relationship is evident by the extensive collections of iconic turn-of-the-century photographs taken by individuals driven by American Romanticism, the glorification of the past and the desire to find and photograph the kind of ‘Indian’ that corresponded to their own ideas and visions of what Indians were and looked like (King, 2011). Both Glass (2009) and Wilmott (2008) illustrate how these kinds of colonial photographs become elevated to historical “truth” through the employment of colonial aesthetics and visual genres linked to specific Eurocentric ideologies around what photographs were and could achieve: photographs were seen as neutral documents that provided undisputable evidence of some person or event at a particular past time and place. Of course, these realist views were well suited to the colonizer’s work of surveillance and infiltrating the lives of Indigenous peoples in the name of science, territorial expansion, or some “moral” responsibility to help civilize, and indeed, *make*, the savage. Subsequently, much research has attended to the role of photography in the colonization of Indigenous peoples, highlighting issues that include abuse of power, cultural appropriation, racism, assimilation, misrepresentation (see Alloula, 1986; Faris, 1996; Margolis, 2004; Maxwell, 2000; Willmott, 2005). While this research provides significant findings that illustrate the colonizers urge to wrap Indigenous peoples into, as Trouillot (1995) aptly states, “particular bundles of silence” (p. 27) in a broader agenda aimed at erasing Indigenous peoples and their histories, it may also unintentionally create a misconception that Indigenous peoples were merely the subject of the camera and not active participants in the photographic process.

A growing body of research on Indigenous photography has strived to “flip the lens” back onto the overshadowed photographic practices of Indigenous peoples. Grounding photography within Indigenous peoples’ creative practices, photography becomes a “historical force” (Bajorek, 2012, p. 148), or an expression of agency that Indigenous communities use to achieve different goals linked to confronting and countering the ongoing legacies of colonial violence, with the aim of moving forward towards decolonization. Photography has been used around the world by Indigenous peoples to struggle against colonialism, disrupting dominant colonial narratives attached to colonial ways of looking and representing the other (see Askren, 2009; hooks, 2011; Jones, 2011; Tsinhnahjinnie, 2009). Through photography Indigenous peoples address many of the issues entrenched in colonialism including land, identity, family relationships and culture (Edwards, 2001; Lidchi, 2009; Passalacqua, 2011). Indigenous communities have used photography to struggle to maintain their autonomy and self-integrity (see Bajorek, 2012; Buckley, 2000; Pinney 2011; 1997). These photographic acts contribute to decolonization as it unfolds through strategic activities that work against imperialism and

colonialism at different levels, reclaiming and empowering Indigenous identities, histories and cultures (Smith, 1999; Corntassel, 2012; Laenui, 2009; Ritskes, 2012; Sunseri, 2007).

There are at least four key conceptual links between Indigenous photography and decolonization that must be highlighted in order for them to be positioned as “good allies”. First, decolonization and photography are both social and relational processes that require individuals to think, feel, look, listen and act. Both decolonization and photography are creative, emergent and fluid processes that happen at a particular time and place. Edwards and Hart (2008) state photographs are unrealized documents that are active, powerful, open, and impossible to restrict in terms of meaning. Cruz (2012) shares similar words about decolonization when she discusses how decolonization is about visioning and the movement towards the unknown. Third, Indigenous photographs are significant historical documents rich with information about Indigenous beliefs, customs and practices (Askren, 2009, Bell, 2010; Herle, 2009), kinship and ancestry (Driessens, 2003; Marr, 1996; Brown & Peers, 2006; 2009) and life histories and important cultural sites (Fallat & Moore, 2001); thus, photographs are well-positioned to assist in the aspect of decolonization that requires reclaiming our Indigenous knowledges, which have been suppressed and misappropriated by the colonizer (Kovach, 2009; Laenui, 2009; Smith, 1999). Lastly, Indigenous photographs are technologies of memory that may help individuals reclaim a hidden or lost past, providing much personal and collective value as they open up discussions related to colonization and decolonization (see Margolis, 2004; Payne, 2006; Brown & Peers, 2006; 2009; Walsh, 2006).

Establishing these linkages helps develop a different way of thinking about and thinking with photographs. Bell (2008) makes this imperative clear:

[D]ecolonization involves unsettling Eurocentric conceptions of what photographs are, their history, as well as the identities, histories, and experiences of those who are the subjects of the camera. (p. 124)

## **Waasaabikizo Project**

This project began with an ongoing relationship I have with one photograph that is part of my own collection. It is of my grandmother, Shirley Shebobman, shown in Figure 1.

This is the only photograph I have of her at this age and what makes it so special to me is that here, she is pregnant with my mother. Of course, the fact that she is pregnant is something that cannot be seen to the average viewer, but when I look at it time and time again, I never see just my grandmother; I always see Shirley *and* my mother, Marcia. If one were to “read” this image, at first glance, through her reluctant smile and the slight tilt of her head, one may simply see the apprehensiveness and secrecy of a young 16-year old girl. But when I look at my grandmother, nothing appears simple at all. When I look at this picture, I see a thriving presence of strength, womanhood, and love.



**Figure 1:** Shirley Shebobman in Kashabowie, Ontario. 1962. Collection of the author.

From this image and other images in our family collection, I also learned a great deal about where my ancestors lived throughout our territory. I learned about the responsibilities and strength of women. I learned about the ongoing struggles with the colonial violence inflicted upon their physical, emotional, and spiritual being. In short, my photographs were a rich repository of teachings that I could use to understand how my life as an Anishinabekwe<sup>1</sup> was linked to the lives of my ancestors, their stories, and the places they fought for. Having had this personal experience, I began to wonder about other photographs that may exist in other shoeboxes, cookie tins, albums and frames: Pictures of our extended relations, friends and community that emitted the same strength and beauty. I wondered what it would be like to see photographs of all our ancestral relations come together. How could that happen? What would result if this was done? What could we do with

these photographs and how could this work possibly contribute to our ongoing efforts of healing and combating historical and contemporary colonialism?

### *Visiting with photographs*

I brought these questions to my greatest teacher, my mother. She suggested that I consult with my grandmother and my great aunts. She also suggested that I reach out to other kitchi-Anishinabekwewag (female Elders) in my life; the women with whom I had good and respectful relationships, that mentored, taught and inspired me. This approach was consistent with Indigenous knowledge sharing practices, where access to knowledge is grounded in meaningful relationships with members of your family and community (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; 2001). This approach also reflected the significance of Elders to Anishinabe knowledge sharing practices and to the role of women in this process. I met with my grandmother, two of my great aunts as well as two kitchi-Anishinabekwewag with whom I had existing relationships. Under the guidance and support of these kitchi-Anishinabekwewag I identified and met with ten (10) Anishinabe families whom had ancestral ties similar to those held by my immediate family. The selection of these individuals was based again on my existing relationships with members of these families, people who had demonstrated a commitment to re-building community and reclaiming cultural teachings through their ongoing involvement in group-based programs and activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Like my grandmother, mother, and many other individuals in my Anishinabe community, I identify as an Anishinabekwe (an Anishinabe woman). While other Anishinabekwe may have different understandings of what this means or entails, I embrace it as a mother, educator, researcher, and artist which influences the way I see,

When I asked people what they thought should be done with these photographs, people voiced their interest and desire to see their photographs grouped together. People were interested in a tangible visual resource that they could share with their extended family members and friends; a resource that would reveal real bodies in real places and that could include information about who was in the picture, where it was taken and its cultural significance.

### *Gathering our photographs*

Over the course of several months, I worked with different family members to gather images that would become part of this resource. Sometimes only two people were present and, at other times, three generations of family members were involved. People were asked to contribute photographs based on their own unique relationships with their images, with the people and places pictured. Each historical photograph was taken as a “kind of memory bookend” (Harper, 2002, p. 18) or a starting point from which to access information about the past, and to also explore how the past operates in the present and into the future. People offered personal reflections as they began to see themselves—their experiences and visions for the future—through the filter of the photograph.

One of the main challenges with bringing together this number of photographs, taken of different people, in different situations, over a long time period, is how to gather and present them. This is of importance because there is a relationship between the photographs that is integral to determining how they come to acquire meaning and value to their viewers. Once again, I consulted with my kitchi-Anishinabekwe for direction. Together we talked about how this project was grounded in our continued practice of honouring ancestors and acknowledging their presence in our lives. We discussed how these are the same principles underlying many of our Anishinabeg ceremonies. She encouraged me to look at the entire grouping of these photographs through my own relationship with ceremony and spirituality as an Anishinabekwe.<sup>2</sup> I listened, put my tobacco down and asked the Creator for guidance and direction. I allowed myself to be open to help and I prayed for clarity—to be able to identify and accept that help when it came to me.

One day on a drive with my husband, I started to reflect about the significance of “gathering” to our way of life as Anishinabeg. How through our ceremonies and other cultural practices, we recognize the importance of physically and spiritually coming together as Anishinabeg. I thought of how many Anishinabeg accept the responsibility to carry and look after sacred bundles that include items like drums, feathers, and medicines that are part of these gatherings. I thought of how bringing together this collection of photographs could be like assembling a bundle that could be shared within our families and to outside people as a kind of medicine; because, in many ways, the memories and stories these photographs embody are

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<sup>2</sup> This approach is consistent to the way I have learned about and practiced ceremony in my own life. Many of our ceremonies were and continue to be facilitated by the women in my family. This includes the naming ceremony, cedar bath ceremony, drum birthing ceremony, and feast ceremony.

“good” medicine. At different ceremonies we take the time to honour different groups of people and stages of life. We do songs, offerings, and prayers for our children, our women, our men, our Elders, and the land. Viewing the photographs through the filter of ceremony also included thinking about tradition, protocols and responsibilities. Remembering the words of my Elder, I decided to group the photographs according to “rounds” (similar to the rounds in our sweat lodge ceremony) that honour the journey and lives of our children, women, men, and Elders and honour our the roles and responsibilities as mothers, life partners and caretakers of the land.

Through this process of gathering photographs emerged a 66-page community-based catalogue entitled, *Waasaabikizo: A Gathering of Ojibwe Photographs*. The title, chosen in consultation with an Elder, is Anishinabemowin for “he/she shines or reflects”. It encapsulates the idea that the photographs in the catalogue emit powerful storied medicines that wash over us, acknowledging that our ancestors left us these items that we could use in our healing journey

### *Recreating the photograph*

As an artist I was also interested in recreating some of our ancestral photographs that were part of *Waasaabikizo*, by employing a process similar to what researcher/artist Trudi Smith (2007) calls “repeat photography”. Repeat photography is a process whereby old photographs are used as “reference points” for the remake of an image in the same place/from the same vantage point. I visited several areas within our Anishinabeg territory around Thunder Bay - Kakabeka, Burchell Lake, Fort William First Nation, Kashabowie, Upsala, Savanne, and Lac Des Mille Lacs - and re-took the photographs with the descendant(s) of those originally pictured taking the place of his/her/their ancestors. Following this process of remaking images, I met again with each person who had their picture taken, some people preferred to meet alone and some people brought members of their family with them. I drew on “photofeedback” (Samson-Cordel, 2001) to facilitate the sharing of personal truth/experience around the new image juxtaposed to the old one.

Through this collaborative process of visiting with, gathering and recreating our ancestral photographs, we contributed to and evidenced Anishinabeg survivance, continuance, and presence in action through the centering of intergenerational relationships, storysharing, and creativity. Our work began to reveal how our family photographs may serve as a powerful archive of social relations (Borggreen & Gade, 2013) and that within every image exists the opportunity to reconnect with our ancestral past in the present and discuss what that past means to us in the present (Edwards, 2009). Moreover, as we experienced the “footprints” of our ancestors (Martin, 2013) this process became a powerful way to counter colonialism and re-assert Anishinabeg sovereignty because this was an intentional act of Anishinabeg going back out onto their traditional lands to re-inscribe Anishinabeg presence in lands that are predominantly “owned” by settler colonial governments.

In the following section, I first outline key aspects of Anishinabeg photographs that deepen our understanding of their role in Anishinabeg presence and survivance. I then move on

to provide a synthesis of key insights into our decolonial journey, grouping ideas into themes that emerged through our continued engagement with the photographs in *Waasaabikizo*. These include: 1) Countering stereotypes and colonial myths 2) Reclaiming identities, knowledge and intergenerational healing, and 3) Acts of resistance and strengthening Anishinabeg sovereignty. In an effort to better situate our work and establish a more intimate connection, I include specific photographic examples from the catalogue, and from the repeat photographs, to exemplify how these images contribute to our efforts towards decolonization

## **Our journey with Anishinabeg photographs**

What is profound about these photographs in *Waasaabikizo* is that they are Anishinabeg-based. I use the term “Anishinabeg-based” to denote three aspects that make these photographs significant to Anishinabeg way of life. First, unlike the majority of historical photographs of Anishinabeg that circulate through various channels and locations (e.g. social media, libraries, books, archives, museums) that are taken largely by non-Indigenous photographers who are not members of the Anishinabeg community where they conduct their work, these images are taken of Anishinabeg within an Anishinabeg community context. Second, these images have been cared for within our Anishinabeg families since their production, some for almost 100 years. Third, they have come together as a collection - a gathering - through the collaborative efforts of Anishinabeg, through the ongoing participation of different generations of families who are struggling to reclaim their histories and culture and to reconnect with one another and the lands from which they were displaced.

As an Anishinabeg-based collection, they present a unique pathway into Anishinabe life because people take pictures, in part, because of what they believe is important. Gerald Vizenor (2008) comments on the significance of native photography not as evidence of “Indianness” (which is something created and propagated by the Western, distant observer bent on collecting, cataloguing and defining the Native) but, rather, that native photographs must be taken up as rich sources of Indigenous stories and as remarkable traces of Indigenous presence and survivance. In the context of decolonization, these photographs may operate as a powerful decolonial force that contributes to new ways of combatting contemporary colonial violence, ways that challenge and equip Anishinabeg to work through present day struggles with the strength, perseverance and resilience of their Anishinabeg ancestors.

### *Countering stereotypes and misconceptions*

One of the most commonly held misconceptions is the notion that Anishinabeg were/are present only on reservation lands, which normalizes the belief that Anishinabeg lands are only reserve lands. Yet, nearly all of our historical photographs in *Waasaabikizo* were taken of Anishinabeg within lands that fall outside the Indian Act. This signals a vibrant ongoing presence of Anishinabeg within lands that may not be recognized by governments or members of the public



as “Indian land” but nonetheless are lands that ground our history, identity and culture as Anishinabeg.

What has fueled this trope of the vanishing/disappearing Indian is the colonial extinguishment strategy that aimed to assimilate all Anishinabeg into “civilized” society. This created a niche for colonial photographers whose success was dependent on their ability to salvage what was left of the “dying Indigenous cultures” (Edwards, 1992). Western photographers often refrained from taking pictures of Anishinabeg in “Western” clothing because these kinds of images were not aligned with the salvage paradigm that focused on preserving what was left of authentic ‘native’ cultures. At the same time, colonial photographers more interested in ethnographic fieldwork portraiture<sup>3</sup> did contribute smaller collections of historical photographs that depict Anishinabeg in “Western clothing” in front of structures like cabins and stores (see White, 2007; Willmott, 2009). What is interesting is that differing anthropological interests and objectives (salvage versus fieldwork) contributed to a void of photographs with Anishinabeg together in both ceremonial/traditional clothing *and* everyday “Western” dress. This absence contributes to an oversimplification and absorption of Anishinabeg life into an imagined dichotomy of the authentic/traditional Indian of the past and the assimilated/modernized Indian. However, the photographs in *Waasaabikizo* work to transcend this dichotomy.



**Figure 2:** *John and Rose Deafey with their children, family and friends. Circa 1926. Collection of the Author.*

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<sup>3</sup> Iroquois photographer Jeff Thomas (2011) reveals two (2) distinct types of colonial portraits. The first contains dispassionate photographs of Indigenous Peoples wearing “Indian” items while the second is comprised of more unstaged, relaxed pictures of Indigenous Peoples working, socializing, etc.

For example, Figure 2 is a photograph taken from a gathering likely in the Bass Lake area in northwestern Ontario. My great-great grandfather appears with members of his family and friends, some dressed in their dance regalia, and others in a more Western style of dress. This photograph replaces the narrative of cultural loss and assimilation with one of cultural continuity. From the feather headdress worn by my great-great uncle to the cloche hats of my great-great grandmother and great-grandmother, these images present a visual allegory of innovative, dynamic and flexible Anishinabeg who resisted imposed colonial identity categories and strived to negotiate what it meant to live their lives as Anishinabeg at a particular time and place. These pictures present Anishinabeg who strove to carry forward their important spiritual and community-building activities. This image shows me that that which is sacred is not stagnant but emergent and stylish.

A dominant historical narrative shaping the ongoing relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples is one of segregation. For example, Canada's Indian Residential School system was predicated on Eurocentric and colonial ideologies that positioned Anishinabeg as less civilized than settler Canadians. Many Anishinabeg students were sent to IRS for long durations to "de-Indianize" them with the ultimate goal of assimilating them back into Canadian society as a civilized community member. Just as the reservation system contained Indians to bounded parcels of land, IRS was an education system that separated Indigenous peoples from settler Canadians.



**Figure 3:** *Young boys are playing in Kashabowie, Ontario in the early 1950s. Collection of the author.*



**Figure 4:** *two families pose for a portrait somewhere on Lake Shebandowan around the late 1930s. Collection of M. Rosskogler.*

Yet, Figures 3 and 4 reveal a very different relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, specifically between children and families. In the Figure 3, two of my great uncles are

playing with a childhood friend, who is of non-Indigenous ancestry. This photograph conveys a different kind of cross-cultural relationship.<sup>4</sup> A relationship between children who, despite the colonial and racist influences that shaped a society where Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations were prevented and discouraged, were connected through childhood friendship. While some may posit that this photograph simply reveals a youthful ignorance to colonial pressures, this photograph articulates the resiliency of children to imposed social norms and behaviours stemming from Eurocentric, colonial and racist ideologies. In Figure 4, Anishinabekwe Polly Jordon poses with her baby and non-Indigenous children somewhere in the Lake Shebandowan area. Both Polly and her baby are surrounded by young children who were identified by one of Polly's family members as "members of the Smith family" a non-Indigenous family who used to live in the area. Like the previous photograph, this image projects a very different cross-cultural relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples within a family context. The photograph reveals evidence of intimacy, kindness, and pride. The boy standing to the right of Polly has his right hand extended, helping support the tikinagan, his expression reflecting a certain familiarity and protectiveness.

*Reclaiming identities, knowledge and intergenerational healing*

When I look at my own family pictures, I often do so with the understanding that my ancestors made these images, in part, because they wanted to create something meaningful that could be shared with their family members in the future. In this way, photographs reflect what our ancestors want us to remember about their lives. Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel (2012) states:

Our stories need to be re-told and acted upon as part of our process of remembering and maintaining balance within our communities. It is the stories that sustain us and ensure our continuity as peoples. (p. 89)

Similar to our stories, a continuous engagement with our family photographs is integral to our process of remembering and working towards living a good life. Memory signals a link to the past, a sense of a living connection, and it is powerfully mediated by technologies like stories, books, and photographs (Hirsch, 2012; 1997). For Anishinabeg who continue to grapple with issues of identity loss, self-worth, and self-esteem, memory is important because, as Assman (2008) illustrates, "memory is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood or identity" (p. 109). When photographs are witnessed or experienced in a group setting, they also play an integral role to the development of collective memory, or a shared memory composed of group experiences. Collective memory is often dependent on intergenerational ties within a community whereby younger generations listen to, understand, absorb and contribute to the collective memories of the various groups to which they belong (see Connerton, 1989;

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<sup>4</sup> Several scholars have illustrated the significance of photographs to the negotiation and development of cross-cultural relationships, highlighting how photography is a highly social act involving the photographic subject(s), producer and viewer(s) (Edwards, 2009; 2005; Pink, 2006; Walsh, 2006).

Halbwachs, 1992). Yet, one of the lingering effects of colonial violence is the severing of intergenerational familial ties, which has greatly hampered the transmission of information from one generation to the next. *Waabaabikizo* brought together younger and older members of generations, drawing on family photographs to help bridge this intergenerational gap.



**Figure 5:** Anishinabekwe Jean Tenniscoe poses for two portraits sometime around the early to mid 1940s. These photographs were likely taken around Savanne, Ontario where Jean was employed in the local sawmill. Collection of L. Sawdo.

Figure 5 depicts two portraits of Anishinabekwe Jean Tenniscoe taken sometime during the early to mid 1940s. These photographs were contributed by her son and throughout the duration of the project three generations of Jean's family were able to come together to reflect on her life, where she worked, how she met her husband, her talents and life skills and what it meant to them today. As Jean's grand-daughter expressed:

I can't believe how hard she must have worked to look after her children in the bush! She must have been so strong and resilient. I look at my life today and think about how who I am as a mother is related to her experiences and life. (D. Aho, personal communication, December 14, 2014)

As Wickam (2012) illustrates, decolonization is about rebuilding Indigenous relationships within the family, which are integral to the transmission of Anishinabeg values, knowledge and beliefs. Anishinabeg family photographs, when experienced by descendants, strengthen the connection to past experiences, which provide a strong foundation for the development and maintenance of present day kin relationships. *Waasaabikizo* contributes to decolonization through the rebuilding and strengthening of family relationships, which in turn, contributes to a form of Anishinabe cultural memory that is linked to cultural identity. As a collective body of photographs,

*Waasaabikizo* provides key insight into Anishinabeg culture and teachings, which are significant to Anishinabeg today.

The photographs in *Waasaabikizo* give rise to stories that fall outside Canada's Indian Act or "official" dominant versions of history as powerful counter narratives that not only destabilize widely accepted colonial myths but also help reclaim integral familial information and Anishinabeg knowledge.



**Figure 6:** *A portrait of John and Peter Deafey circa 1921. Collection of Author.*

From the photographs, people learned that their ancestors had names in Anishinabemowin (Ojibwe language), different than their English first and last names. They learned how individuals received these names and the significance of these names to the Anishinabe way of life.

For example, Figure 6 is a portrait taken of brothers Peter and John Deafey. During this research, when family members were reviewing the photographs grouped together, one Elder took pause to remember and recite the Anishinabemowin names of these men, known to him as a little boy as Boon na kut (Winter Cloud) and Boon na penaise (Winter Thunderbird). This information was returned to the immediate descendants of these men, who were thankful to receive this information. One family member stated that from the picture and the style of the men's dress, she had always thought that these men weren't "traditional" (had been assimilated into mainstream culture); yet this misconception was challenged in learning this information.

Reclaiming familial histories often provides insight into Anishinabeg cultural norms and practices that had been suppressed/forbidden by colonial institutions.

### *Restoring language and teachings*

Elizabeth Edwards (2005) argues that photographs function not simply as visual history but as oral history, linked to sounds, gestures and the relationships in which and through which these practices are embedded. In the presence of some of the Elders involved in the process of bringing together *Waasaabikizo*, these images "spoke" not the language of English (the language of colonialism) but Anishinabemowin. During her experience of the photographs, one Elder felt compelled to speak in Anishinabemowin and share teachings around the language, and stories around strategies she used to keep her language as a young child in residential school. She shared how children told traditional stories to each other in Anishinabemowin, many of which have been forgotten and are no longer told. She spoke about Memegwesi(suk), the small winged beings that visit you when you are on your fasting/vision quest and how they only live by shorelines where there are high rocks/cliffs. She shared the Anishinabemowin term for our neighbouring tribe, "Bowanhk," referring to the Lakota Peoples. She explained how this term

was related to the fact that Anishinabeg medicine people could see when the Lakota were coming in ceremony and that is how our tribe was able to defeat them in battle.

During one particular visit we discussed the process of receiving our Anishinabe spirit names in ceremony and I shared with her that my sons had recently received their names from my grandmother. When I shared the spirit name of my second child, “Nitaw Gamik,” I shared that my grandmother had explained there was no English translation and that Nitaw Gamik is best described as a young Earth spirit. Upon hearing this name, this Elder also remembered that Nitaw Gamik often visited us in the form of a small frog in the shaking tent ceremony. These types of experience reveal that our pictures often serve as a gateway to Anishinabe knowledge and language that can only be accessed by being together with the photographs and letting them lead us in new direction (as opposed to relying on solely their representational value). Reclaiming this knowledge is integral to our decolonization efforts and reconnecting with who we are as Anishinabeg; as the Elder stated,

When you are speaking the language, it is like living in another world...you can feel what is in the hearts of your ancestors. (S. Churchill, personal communication, August 31, 2015).

### *Acts of Resistance*

Several authors have illustrated that, through the eyes of the colonized, historical photographs of Indigenous peoples reveal the struggles of people fighting to retain and practice their way of life amidst great uncertainty and oppression (see Askren, 2009; Lidchi, 2009, Lonetree, 2011; Payne 2006; Racette, 2011). Images that reveal the tenacity and strength of our ancestors contribute to decolonization because decolonization is not about grounding our identities and histories in in victimhood (Wheeler as cited in Waziyawintawin, 2005a) but in the continued struggle against those colonial forces that threaten our very existence as Indigenous peoples.



**Figure 7:** *Josie Kabatay ricing on Whitefish Lake near Thunder Bay, Ontario around the late 1940s. Collection of M. Rosskogler.*



**Figure 8:** *A young Josie Kabatay poses with the family dog while her mother, Polly Jordon watches over her. Circa late 1930s. Collection of M. Rosskogler.*

In Figure 7 young Anishinabekwe Josie Kabatay is seen ricing for manoonim (wild rice) near Whitefish Lake, near Thunder Bay, Ontario. In Figure 9 she is out on the family trap-line with her mother looking on. Many of the images in *Waasaabikizo* were taken during a period when mandatory attendance at Indian Residential Schools (IRS) was heavily enforced. Parents who refused to send their children to IRS were often imprisoned; yet, photographs of Josie ricing evidence a resistance to imposed colonial systems of education which perpetuated many forms of violence towards Indigenous children. These images reveal that this resistance is grounded in Anishinabe knowledge and education - an intense land-based pedagogy that is integral to Anishinabe survival and way of life.



**Figure 9:** *John Deafey (man on the right) drums while family and friends dance. Circa 1925. Collection of the Author.*

In Figure 9 my ancestors are participating in our culture/ceremony involving the big drum and jingle dancing. My family used to host ceremonial gatherings at a location termed “secret” and “far away” from any non-Indigenous settlement. My grandmother described how someone used to stand guard at the pathway to the opening of the clearing where people met. During our research, one of my kitchianishinabekwe presented me with a copy of a letter written by the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs approximately four years prior to this picture. The following is an excerpt from the document:

I have, therefore, to direct you to use your utmost endeavors to dissuade the Indians from excessive indulgence including dancing. You should suppress any dance that causes waste of time, interferes with the occupations of the Indian, and unsettles them for serious work. (Graham, 1921)

Even though our ceremonies and cultural practices were prevented, our ancestors strived to carry out these activities within their home territories with their families, friends and children.



**Figure 10:** *Jean Tenniscoe is with her son somewhere along their family trapline, circa 1950. Collection of L. Sawdo.*



**Figure 11:** *Julia Berkan holds her young son Eric around the mid 1960s in Kashabowie, Ontario. Collection of M. Berkan.*

What is also striking about this gathering of photographs are the multiple of images that depict strong, and vibrant women and children (see Figures 10 & 11). This presence is particularly telling given the broader historical context in which these photographs were created. Our colonial history is one of forced absence, of children rendered absent from the land or community through imposed racist educational legislation, and women frequently made absent through gendered violence directed at their physical, mental and spiritual beings. Yet, in these photographs, one witnesses a present resilience to these absences. In essence, these photographs



reveal an Anishinabe cultural identity that is shaped not only by a legacy of colonial interference but also a struggle to resist the most devastating forms of colonial violence - violence that took children away from their mothers and that attacked the lives and wellbeing of our Anishinabekwewag (Ojibwe women). Simply put, these images reveal that we challenged and opposed colonial violence with a fierce and steadfast love of our children.

### **Dreaming in/with portraits for Anishinabeg sovereignty**

Several of the photographs in *Waasaabikizo* are close up portraits of family members. When met with nothing but the gaze our ancestors, participants often experienced a wide range of emotions. While everyone agreed it was a gift to have images of our relatives as a reminder of their presence, the portraits also reminded individuals of their disconnect from these people. Of the loss and absence due to the intergenerational effects of colonization as one participant stated:

It is in this portrait that this loss cannot be hidden because there is not too much else happening in the photograph to distract attention...not like the ones where they are ricing or doing some kind of activity (M. Pedri, personal communication, July 4, 2015)

Many of our portraits in *Waasaabikizo* are of intimate strangers, close afars, meaningful voids. They are enigmatic. During the research process, the question of what do with this loss and how to work through/with this absence was raised and consequently answered through the process of re-making 15 portraits out in our ancestral lands.

Anishinabekwe scholar Maguire Adams (2009) states decolonization is about transformation. It involves changing negative and reactionary energy into positive experiences and outcomes for our families and communities. In a related point, Raheja (2007) states that Indigenous sovereignty is a creative act of self-representation that has the potential to strengthen the intellectual health of communities battling colonialism. Expanding on Dowell's (2008) position that locates visual Aboriginal sovereignty in the act of production, I have argued elsewhere (Pedri-Spade, 2014) that Anishinabeg sovereignty includes creative photographic acts that reclaim and re-story Anishinabeg lands claimed by settler colonial narratives and dispossession/occupation, and re-inscribe Anishinabeg presence in/on their ancestral homelands.



**Figure 12:** *Left photograph: Mary Peters (Weweji) stands in front of her family cabin located at Burchell Lake, circa 1949. Collection of E. Moore. Right photograph: Reena Legarde, the great grand-daughter of Mary at Burchell Lake in December 2014. Collection of the Author.*

Figure 12 depicts Mary Peters (Weweji) the great grandmother of Reena Legarde. Both pictures were taken at Burchell Lake, where Mary used to live with her family. Before the remake of this portrait, Reena had not been to Burchell Lake. She had never met her great grandmother in person. During our trip to Burchell Lake, Reena brought her son and we were able to spend time on a beach where an older family member told us many Anishinabe families used to gather to socialize, swim, have fires and eat together.



**Figure 13:** *Left photograph: Fred Peters with his daughter Frances and several of his grandchildren around the mid 1960s in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Collection of E. May. Right photograph: Ernie May with several members of his family in his home in Thunder Bay Ontario on January 2, 2015. Collection of the author.*

Figure 13 is a portrait of Fred Peters with his daughter and several of his grandchildren, including Ernie May (the smallest boy sitting on his sister's lap on the far left). It was taken in the Thunder Bay, Ontario. The repeat portrait accompanying this photograph is of Ernie May, now a grown man with a growing family. Ernie as a proud father, uncle and great-uncle.

Both of these repeat images re-inscribe an Anishinabe presence within Anishinabe territory defined by and through love - love for our children, our ancestors, and our continued commitment to building strong relationships *within* our families *within* our Anishinabe territory.

Throughout the repeat process, we learned to transform spaces of loss, and uncertainty through our own creative work with the historical images. The process of re-producing our photographs revealed that out of absence comes more than loss; that out of absence comes possibility and imagination, a space where we can exercise our freedoms, rearticulate and expand our understanding of Anishinabe sovereignty.

Through the embodied act of making a new image, we were redefining what it means to be related to our ancestors, where relations were not necessarily bound by genealogy, knowledge, similar experiences, or even a similar connection to the land. Rather, the concept of relations or ancestry transformed into an unrestricted space of creative production where people intentionally honoured their relatives, performing a continued Anishinabe presence. Also, to put something, another photograph, out into the world simultaneously extends this presence forward to future generations and backward to those who still continue to guide and teach us.

“Relations” as a fluid and unrestricted space of creative production is also a sovereign space because it is a territory generated and controlled by Anishinabeg. It contributes to sovereignty because these photographs were about putting an image into the world in the way people wanted to be seen as opposed to being interpreted by others. So neither ancestral relations nor rights to lands are bound by particular moments or sutures in history, like land claims settlements, the establishment of lands reserved for Indians, or Indian Residential Schools. Rather, these processes are about enacting our responsibilities to live out our relationships - to land and people - in intuitive, artful, innovative and emergent ways. Anishinabekwe researcher and teacher Yerxa (2014) makes a similar connection in relation to her family and community reclaiming their Anishinabeg Rights to harvesting manoonmin (wild rice):

As active agents of liberation, our imaginations and visions shattered colonial confinements; the past, present and future came alive at the same time. (p. 160)

## **Discussion and concluding remarks**

The photographs in *Waasaabikizo* reveal a rich history of Anishinabeg actively engaged in the tradition/practice of taking a variety of photographs, including portraits of people and families, pictures of people in significant places, and pictures of people engaged in important life activities. In this final section I will summarize/reflect upon key findings in order to address the question of how Anishinabe photography contributes to decolonization more broadly: How does it challenge us to expand our theory and practice?

Anishinabe photographs, as highly social and relational tools, help reveal, configure, and congeal a host of relationships among people, the land, and our ancestral past that are integral to our survivance and perseverance. As stimulating and insightful documents, our photographs work to firmly situate ourselves within our own histories within our own territory. Our engagement with our photographs facilitated opportunities for reconnecting and strengthening our present day relationships with one another and the land. This demonstrates how integral Indigenous photographs are to developing a renewed sense of community (Askren, 2009; Lonetree, 2011, Brown & Peers, 2006). Moreover, in recreating our photographs we contribute a powerful visual sovereignty because the two images together reveal a continued presence *and* an ongoing collective responsibility to carry forward the relationships and teachings that were/are integral to our lives. As one participant stated,

When I see the photographs, there is a connectedness there. Things were really tough back then and you look at the pictures now... you look at yourself and your life in relation to theirs and you appreciate their struggles even more. So, it is almost as if the experience of their struggle is heightened...and you feel so much appreciation. It strengthens your resolve to carry on and live in a good way. My life takes on new importance and meaning in relation to their lives and their histories. (M. Pedri, personal communication, September, 2014)

This quote demonstrates how there is a connectedness to community and immediacy that is present in photographs, potentially, more than in any other media (Aird, 2003; Evans, 2012; Hirsch, 1997; Racette, 2011; Tsinhanahjinnie, 2003)

The stories we shared and the photographs we made were our responses to our ancestors' "visual call to action" (Racette, 2011, p. 89) because, as Thomas (2011) states, our ancestors were leaving us an intentional mark of their evidence in this world which they intended for us to discover and relate to in our own way. As we came together, we looked to the photographs searching for and sharing not only stories about our ancestor's lives, but evidence of ourselves within these stories. In a way, our ancestors are looking back at us, checking up on us as any good teacher or caretaker would. Thus, our work embodies the existence of the ongoing fight for self-determination, pride, and a deep bond with our ancestors that we strive to maintain (Thomas, 2011). As one participant stated,

In looking at these images, I feel so proud to tell my son what it means to be Anishinabe. (D. Sawdo, personal communication, November 2014)

Lee (2012) demonstrates how by sharing the stories of our Anishinabe ancestors within our lands, we put Anishinabe knowledge back into creation for future generations in ways similar to the knowledges placed onto/within the land by our ancestors as rock paintings or birch bark scrolls. In coming together to share our stories, gather our bundle, and leave our own marks, we present and place a version of ourselves and our relationships back into Creation as a mark of gratitude—as a thank you and an acknowledgement of our responsibility to our ancestors.

Just as we have been gifted with songs, ceremonies, and other tools, our ancestors left us photographs. These photographs were intentional. They exist because our ancestors wanted to show us something. They wanted to share their lives with us. So as we continue on our path towards decolonization, our photographs help guide us in a good way because these images provide us with valuable teachings and knowledge that are essential to Anishinabeg life. From the photographs of our mothers embracing their children to the images of our ancestors living and learning on the land, we learn that decolonization has direction. Our ancestors are showing us what we need to strive for. In a way, we learn that our ancestors have known all along what it means to struggle towards decolonization. We learn significant teachings about life and what made them *strong* Anishinabeg. I emphasize the word strong because strength radiates from every image in our collection. In every face, I only see skill, determination, pride, and love. I see people who are survivors, innovators and courageous leaders. In our photographs I find good medicine.



**Figure 14:** *Left photograph: Shirley Shebobman in Kashabowie, Ontario. 1962. Left photograph: Shirley Shebobman and her great grandson “Nitaw Gamik” in Kashabowie, Ontario. 2014. Collection of the author.*

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