Critical Issues in Exhibiting Indigenous Photography

“The Darkroom Project; Taloyoak, 1972-73”

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Abstract

In 1972, photographer Pamela Harris visited Taloyoak, Nunavut and started to conceive of a space where the Inuit community living there could print photographs without the help of distant photo labs. During her second visit, Harris secured materials and with help from members of the community, including Selena Tucktoo, Theresa Qaujuaq and Utuqi Takolik, they built a darkroom in the local women's craft shop. Many of the photographs created by the Inuit photographers were exhibited in Toronto as The Spence Bay Project in 1974 during a week-long conference called The Arctic Women’s Workshop. Afterwards, Pamela obtained all of the exhibited photographs, which were eventually donated along with the rest of her “Spence Bay Collection” to the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO).

This report focuses on the conception and production of an exhibition of the photographic works mentioned, titled The Darkroom Project; Taloyoak 1972-73, held at the Ryerson Image Centre during the winter of 2017. Key issues faced in the formation of this exhibition are discussed, including:

- Indigenous representation in museums;
- Questioning how collections policies can perpetuate the structural oppression of Indigenous artists;
- Consultation with source communities; and
- Exhibition concept and design as institutional critique.

Keywords: Photography, Documentary, Exhibition, Inuit, Indigenous, Collections, Museums, Colonialism, Settler-Indigenous Relations

Ryerson University's Master’s in Film and Photography Preservation and Collections Management (FPPCM) program prepares students to enter fields related to the conservation and collections management of film and photographic materials. Despite FPPCM being a collections-focused program,
students are required to take a course titled *The Exhibition and Publication of Photography*. This course aims to give students practical experience with the full lifecycle of archived photographs and raises broader critical issues that arise outside of daily collections work. These issues can include the politics of the exhibition space or the roles of collections staff and curators in the interpretation of photographic meanings, which Moser highlights as “always shaped by context and circulation” (2013). The product of this course is an annual group project in which student groups work collaboratively to produce an exhibition, a publication, and a website related to a photography collection selected by the course instructors.

I took part in this annual project in 2016 as a member of the exhibition team whose job was to research, conceptualize, and design the exhibition while coordinating projects with the publication and website teams. I also added an interdisciplinary perspective in this course as I was enrolled as a transfer student from the Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) program at the University of Toronto. It was interesting to be working with students whose specializations lay outside of my own and I learned much more from my colleagues about photographic collections management than I initially expected. Courses taken in the MMSt program such as *Exhibition Project*, *Project Management*, and *The Photographic Record* provided resources that were both helpful to the organization and conceptualization of the exhibition, and which often provided alternative viewpoints to the experiences and resources of the collections-focused FPPCM students. Working in an interdisciplinary manner meant that diverse opinions were constantly being mediated between group members. This structure of working benefitted our project’s need for a critical consideration of its contents and intentions.

Instructors for the 2017 iteration of the project were Sophie Hackett (Curator of Photography, Art Gallery of Ontario [AGO]) and Gaëlle Morel (Curator of Exhibitions, Ryerson Image Centre [RIC]). Hackett and Morel chose two AGO collections for the class to work with for the project: *The Pamela Harris Photography Collection* and *The Pamela Harris Spence Bay Collection*. The resulting exhibition, publication and website were titled *The Darkroom Project; Taloyoak 1972-73*. The exhibition and publication were presented at the Ryerson Image Centre from January 18 – February 26, 2017 and the corresponding website can be found online at http://www.thedarkroomproject.net/home/.

This paper aims to review the research, conceptualization, design, and programming of *The Darkroom Project; Taloyoak 1972-73* as a means of investigating critical issues of Indigenous representation, consultation, and curation faced by the exhibition group during the production of this project.

**Investigating AGO Collections**

The collections assigned to the project, *The Pamela Harris Photography Collection* and *The Pamela Harris Spence Bay Collection*, both centre on documentary photographs taken by Pamela Harris in 1972-73 in Taloyoak, Nunavut (then Spence Bay, Northwest Territories). Harris is a self-taught American-Canadian documentary photographer best known for her publication *Faces of Feminism* (1992). In 1972, Harris travelled to Taloyoak to visit a friend Judy McGrath, a textile artist who had moved with...
her family to Taloyoak, and was helping to run a women’s craft workshop in the small, 300-person town. Considering this an invaluable opportunity to experience life in the North, Harris travelled to Taloyoak to photograph the people and the landscape she encountered (Harris Grant Report, 1972). The photographs Harris produced in 1972 focused on documenting the ways traditional Inuit life was changing due to influences from the south. Harris used many of these photographs in her publication *Another Way of Being* (1976).

In 1973, Harris wanted to return to Taloyoak, but knew her presence as a photographer could be perceived as exploitative. If Harris were to return, she wanted to give something back to the community (Harris Grant Report, 1973). The project Harris conceived of was a community darkroom that would provide the skills and materials needed for participants to develop and print their own photographs, freeing them from a reliance on distant photo labs in Yellowknife. With financial and material support from the Canadian Council for the Arts (CCA) and Kodak Canada, and with the help of local residents, including Selena Tucktoo, Utuqi Takolik, and Theresa Qauqujaq, Harris constructed a darkroom during the summer of 1973 in the small bathroom of the women’s craft workshop. During her three-month stay in the summer of 1973, Harris offered lessons on developing and printing photographs to all who were interested in learning.
Harris donated the majority of the photographs and documentation related to her two trips to Taloyoak to the AGO in 2013. Within the donated collection, there was a small group of photographs taken and developed in the darkroom by Tucktoo, Qauqjuaq and Takolik. These photographs were originally produced for an exhibition titled *The Spence Bay Project*, held in 1974 at the TD Centre in downtown Toronto. Coinciding with the Arctic Women’s Workshop, a five-day Toronto-based conference for artists from the North to gather and share knowledge, *The Spence Bay Project* exhibited images of women collecting lichens as part of a dye-making workshop. Tucktoo, Takolik and Qauqjuaq participated in this workshop and documented, developed, and printed images of their excursion onto the land; women kneeling and scraping rocks for lichen, boiling tea, and gathering for lunch on a rocky outcrop. They also wrote exhibition panels about their experience on the land, explaining the process of collecting. The exhibition was installed by Takolik and Harris, who both were participating in the Arctic Women’s Workshop. Due to Takolik’s limited time in Toronto, it was agreed that Harris would collect the remaining works when the show finished, at which time these photographs found their way into Harris’ personal collection.
When the accession was made in 2013, AGO staff decided that Harris’ full collection should be divided into two, resulting in creation of The Pamela Harris Photography Collection; stored in the main AGO photography collection, and the Pamela Harris Spence Bay Collection; in the E.P. Taylor Research Library & Archives (otherwise referred to as ‘special collections’).

The Pamela Harris Photography Collection

Contents:
- 172 silver gelatin prints taken by Pamela Harris in Taloyoak, Nunavut in 1972 and 1973

The Pamela Harris Spence Bay Collection

Contents:
- Correspondence between Harris and Taloyoak residents
- Grant reports related to the Taloyoak darkroom
- Audio and written interviews with Taloyoak residents and darkroom participants.
- Journal/news articles related to the Spence Bay darkroom and Harris’ documentary work in the North
- Contact sheets, developing/printing instructions for the darkroom
- 30 silver gelatin prints made by Selena Tucktoo, Theresa Qaujjuaq, and Utuqi Takolik in 1973

One of the first issues that arose while creating this exhibition was understanding how the accession of Harris’ collection was handled by the AGO. When the AGO staff split Harris’ donation into two
collections it was decided that Harris’ work would be stored in the main photography collection, while the photographic works of Tucktoo, Takolik, and Qauqjuaq were put into special collections with the rest of the supporting documentation for the darkroom project.

This division brought up a lot of discussion between our groups and the AGO staff over the structure of the collection. When discussed, there was no objection that there exists a hierarchy between the main photography collection; which holds finished work of prominent artists, and the special collections; which stores supporting documentation related to main collections or particular artists. Project groups worried that this structuring did not recognize Tucktoo, Takolik, or Qauqjuaq as photographers in the same way it did Harris, and questioned how this could affect public interpretation of the photographs and of the collection’s intentions. Discussions with collections staff who oversaw the original accession revealed that practicality was in mind when the original choice to divide the collection was made; it simply kept all of the darkroom-related material in one central location and arguably provided easier to access to materials. Despite perceived hierarchies, collections staff stressed that a more fluid relationship between collections exists, but were also open to discussion on the matter and suggested that there was a possibility of reorganizing the collections in the future.

It is also important to note that upon accession, neither Harris nor the AGO staff working on the project made efforts to contact Tucktoo, Takolik, or Qauqjuaq to discuss the accessioning of their photographs into the AGO collections. As a result, this lack of contact resulted in no influence from the Inuit photographers over their own representation within the collection. Looking further into the accession documentation and collections records (Nazar & Kalkstein, 2013), Tucktoo, Takolik and Qauqjuaq are never referred to as “photographers” despite all of their work in the collection being directly from an exhibition of photographic works in which they assumed such titles. Instead, AGO accession and finding aid documentation refers to Tucktoo, Takolik and Qauqjuaq only as “participants” or “residents of Taloyoak” (Nazar & Kalkstein, 2013). Overall, it was disheartening to see a lack of input from the Taloyoak photographers in the collection, especially given that Harris intended for the darkroom to provide participants with access to the power of self-representation (Harris Grant Report, 1973). Consider then, the irony in Tucktoo, Takolik and Qauqjuaq’s photographs being categorized under the title: *The Pamela Harris Spence Bay Collection*. The erasure of the Inuit photographers in the language of the collection’s documentation buries their works deep within the archival records, making them harder for researchers to search and discover. Furthermore, their placement in special collections meant the photographs did not undergo the digitization that was granted to the main photography collection, leaving the photographs and perspectives of Tucktoo, Takolik, and Qauqjuaq essentially inaccessible to the general public.

Held in one of the largest art museums in North America and a center for art historical research, the collection of photographs taken by the Taloyoak photographers risked oversight or misinterpretation due to the lack of consultation with the photographers upon accession. Canada’s lack of federal policies around accession, consultation or repatriation of Indigenous artworks or artifacts leaves museums and
archives with the full responsibility of deciding how these objects enter and exist within collections (Bell & Napoleon, 2008). Many Canadian institutions have their own policies relating to the accession of objects and artworks made by Indigenous people (Canadian Archaeological Association, 2017; The University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, 2017), commonly guided by reports or policies such as *The Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples* (1994), the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) or The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Calls to Action (2012). Over recent years, the AGO has also begun to consider these trends towards decolonizing practices by including Indigenous artists and professionals such as Wanda Nanibush into their stream of activity (Berry, 2016).

Why, then, have these mentalities not permeated through the institution and into collection and accession practices? In the case of the *Pamela Harris Spence Bay Collection*, acts of permission and contact would not only be recommended by such entities as the TRC as good museum practice, but are vitally important for creating relationships and, thus, accountability with the individuals whom the artworks represent. Colonial erasures of indigeneity have long standing presence in the context of museums and galleries (Karp & Lavine, 1991), and scenarios like this remind us that there is more to decolonizing museums than simply appointing Indigenous staff or including Indigenous artwork in exhibitions. It demonstrates how colonial frameworks can permeate deeper into institutions and highlights the importance of considering collections beyond their materiality, recognizing the importance of social, historical, or political meanings.

**Exhibition Conception**

With only three months to research and design the exhibit, there was much hesitancy from group members to take on a project with difficult, political content. Groups questioned: was there enough time for us to research, consult, design, and present this exhibition ethically and effectively? And, given our position as non-indigenous student-curators, was it our place to do so?

Project groups were lucky to consult with Wanda Nanibush (Curator of Canadian and Indigenous Art, AGO) early on in the research phase, and questioned her directly about concerns of our position as non-Indigenous curators representing Indigenous perspectives. Nanibush’s response made a striking point: worrying about our separation from these perspectives, 

> feeds too much into the current segregation of things . . . part of the problem is that [indigenous and settler communities] don’t have relationships. One should ask questions and figure it out rather than not doing it at all, and grappling with these ethical dilemmas will teach you more than ignoring it entirely. (2017)

Nanibush’s assertion that the act of not grappling with ethical dilemmas may in fact be an ethical dilemma itself provided a new way of conceptualizing this project for the exhibition group. As a result,
it was decided that the exhibition would focus on the relationships built through the intersectional space of the darkroom project. The exhibition would highlight the works of all four photographers equally as a means of countering accession practices and recognizing the Inuit women as more than just participants in a project, but as photographers in their own right. With this proposed direction, the necessary next step would be to contact Tucktoo, Takolik, and Qauqjuaq.

**Consultation**

Before committing to this direction for the exhibition, project groups knew it was important to make contact with Tucktoo, Qauqjuaq and Takolik to discuss the exhibition and to ask for permission to show their photographs. Given the lack of prior contact by the AGO, group members speculated that there might be feelings of resentment by the three photographers towards our project. Making contact was a long and difficult process. We had no contact information for the photographers and the expensive and unreliable internet and telephone services that limit residents of the North lengthened our efforts. Luckily, we were able to make contact with Tucktoo early on into the project, who was both surprised and supportive of her photographs being exhibited again in Toronto. The group made contact with Takolik two months into the project, gaining her support, and contact was made with the late Qauqjuaq’s family at the time of exhibition and compensation arrangements made.

Given our tight timelines, we were extremely fortunate to make contact with Tucktoo and Takolik early into the project and to gain their support for the exhibition. The project groups were also glad to be offering proper exhibition and copyright fees to the photographers (CARFAC Minimum Fee Schedule, 2017), but there was still something not right. As mentioned, our contact with Tucktoo and Takolik was limited. Slow download speeds and restricted access to working telephone and internet prevented collaboration with the photographers when it came to the conception and design of the exhibition. If the AGO had previously made contact with Tucktoo, Takolik or Qauqjuaq, or had the instructors anticipated the inclusion of the Inuit photographers’ works, better means of collaboration could have been established prior to the exhibition.

While paying the photographers their proper fees is a positive outcome of this project, it also meant that we were offering payment at the time of first contact between the photographers and the institution. The inherent hierarchy created within this scenario is reminiscent of the colonial relationships that have long existed between museums and Indigenous people (Mackenzie, 2009), relationships in which the institution ultimately controls cultural objects, never fully relinquishing existing colonial hierarchies and, thus, never truly decolonizing its practices.

During the creation of *The Darkroom Project; Taloyoak 1972-73*, the exhibition group considered suggestions made by ‘new museologists’ to question the authority of the museum, and to encourage self-representation and collaborative practices with source communities (Stam, 2005). While our timeline limited our ability to collaborate, project groups felt we should give more than just monetary compensation to the photographers. Luckily, the inclusion of these photographs in the exhibition
resulted their digitization and thus allowed us to share photographs with Tucktoo, Takolik, and members of Qaujuaq’s family who had not seen these photographs in over 40 years. Prints of the Taloyoak photographer’s works, along with exhibition catalogues, were sent to Taloyoak.

**Exhibition Design**

In selecting the content and design for our exhibition, the group established an ethos influenced by Meszaros, which holds the exhibition space “responsible for the diverse interpretive realities of its audience and source communities” (2008, p. 158). As a result, the overall intention of the exhibition became centered on presenting works from Tucktoo, Takolik, Qaujuaq, and Harris together, as a means of flattening hierarchies that persisted in previous circulation and accession of the works. Furthermore, the project groups felt there was great value in exhibiting works of Tucktoo, Takolik and Qaujuaq given their rare insight into the lives of Inuit women and their ability to provide a counter-narrative on the photographic representation of Indigenous peoples in general. Nearly all of the photographs taken by Tucktoo, Takolik, and Qaujuaq were presented in the exhibition along with a small selection of Harris’ work. Given the broad selection of photographs, interviews, and correspondence in the AGO collections, the exhibition group made a priority of incorporating the voices, images, decisions of the Inuit photographers and other Taloyoak residents into the exhibition whenever possible.

Divided in three wall sections, *The Darkroom Project* presents works by the four photographers along with archival documents and correspondence. On the east wall, one section focuses on the darkroom project, its origins and outputs, while the other section, titled *The Spence Bay Project*, presents the exhibition produced by Tucktoo, Takolik, and Qaujuaq in 1974. The gallery's west wall offers a dialogue between photographs taken by Tucktoo, Takolik, Qaujuaq, and Harris that raises questions about shared topics and aesthetics and which reveals daily life in Taloyoak.
The east wall of the exhibition focuses on the Taloyoak darkroom as well as the *Spence Bay Project* exhibition. In the darkroom section, photographs, contact sheets, interviews, and grant reports tell the story of the conception, construction, and use of the darkroom from various perspectives. By incorporating grant writing and correspondence, the exhibition highlights the relationships Harris built with women in the workshop, as well as the bureaucratic systems that supported her in doing so as a CCA-recognized artist. To the right of this is a section dealing with the *Spence Bay Project*. This section highlights a selection of photographs from the original exhibition, along with various journal articles to highlight the circulation of images produced in the darkroom. An explanation of the *Arctic Women’s Workshop* was paired with a catalogue documenting both the conference and the exhibition are on display, highlighting both the independent work of the Taloyoak photographers and the general strength and mobilization of female artists from the Arctic in the 1970s.
The gallery’s west wall was dedicated to exhibiting the works of all four photographers together in a non-hierarchical fashion. The exhibition group decided on a salon-style wall without labels that would promote visitors to assess the photographs from a non-biased perspective. If curious, image details and a wall map could be found on a hanging card nearby.

Images for this wall were selected strategically and based on a variety of reasons. Some images were chosen to reflect similarities of quality and content between the work of Harris and the Inuit photographers (as seen above). Other images were chosen for their ability to reflect differences or their ability to defy possible public assumptions about what sorts of photographs each photographer may take (as seen below). These images highlighted Harris’ consciousness of, and departure from, the tropes of ethnographic photography, as well as the ability of the Indigenous photographers to produce staged images reflective of the same ethnographic tropes Harris was attempting to avoid. By selecting images in this manner, the group aimed to blur the line between vernacular and documentary photography and to challenge unconscious biases that visitors might hold against the Indigenous photographers through the exhibition’s departure from the hierarchical structures in which the photographs were originally stored.
Public Programming

Aware of our outside perspective as non-Indigenous students, groups felt it was important to reach out to Inuit in Toronto during the process of creating the exhibition. This led to our contacting the newly formed Toronto Inuit Association which put us in contact with Katherine Minich, an Indigenous Studies Lecturer at McMaster University who was interested in leading an exhibition talk.
In her talk on February 8th, 2017 at the Ryerson Image Centre, Minich highlighted the broader social and historical context of the photographs taken in the summer of 1973, and explained their connection to colonial histories and struggles for Indigenous-prioritized representation and space. Minich also provided a “reading” of a selection of exhibited photographs, explaining qualities of the landscape or of Inuit culture that re-contextualized the images towards an Inuit perspective. Without living with Inuit or walking on the land, it is hard for a settler-society to imagine the unique experience of Inuit women. Minich’s talk opened up new ways of interpreting these photographs for many who attended and was vitally important for adding a perspective that the exhibition group could not provide.

**Conclusion**

Given that exhibitions are often heralded as a central product of museum work, it was interesting to witness how actions peripheral to the exhibition space, such as Minich’s talk, the sharing of digitized photographs with Tucktoo, Takolik, and Qaujuaq’s family, or Harris’ reconnection with the Taloyoak photographers, seemed to carry more meaningful outcomes than the exhibition itself. Collections, a space also in the periphery of exhibitions, played a surprisingly significant role in the deconstructing of colonial frameworks that exist within the AGO and opening up conversations with staff to question existing collections practices. Through this experience, it became evident to the teams presenting the exhibition that too much pressure is put on museum staff to deliver ‘impact’ solely through exhibitions and that instead, they could benefit from considering how their various structures and activities support or deny the intended impacts they are striving to make.
Image List:


Harris, P. *The day the boat came in: dead seal, seven-up*, 1972 [silver gelatin print]. Retrieved from the Art Gallery of Ontario Pamela Harris Photography Collection.


References


