

Breeding Colonial Photo-Literacy

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Photography, while sometimes thought of as an objective medium, has played a significant role in generating a cohesive national image for Canada. The notion of *breeding* colonial photographic literacy refers to the way images were manipulated in order to generate a way of reading photographs. In this paper, I will focus on Canadian residential school photographs as archival documents and how their contextual presentation impacted generations by presenting false understandings of these schools. Through this research, I will begin to unpack colonially imposed ideals of progress on our photographic literacy—that is, the way we read and interpret photographs—to further understand where these ideals are constructed. Through curated photographic propaganda, the Canadian government suppressed the horrifying reality of residential schools. The photographers never portrayed the ways Indigenous children were taken from their families and stripped of their culture and traditions. Instead, they were instructed to capture domestic school scenes to promote the national project of Indigenous assimilation into Canadian culture. To begin, I will briefly examine one photograph of a residential school in Kamloops, B.C., to illustrate the disconnect between curated documentation via photography versus the lived experiences of many. Then, speaking to Allan Sekula's work, I will break down what photographic literacy means and approach some delicate aspects of what Sekula calls "photographic discourse." I engage with the work of Indigenous scholars Crystal Fraser (Gwichya

Gwich'in) and Zoe Todd (Red River Métis/Otipemisiwak) to address the colonial nature of the archives themselves and how this affects various interpretations of Canadian residential school photographs. Taking up the work of Krista McCracken and Gabrielle Moser, I will address the use of archival photography and the role the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee (COVIC) played in forming a hegemony within the colonial national image both within and outside of Canada. Then, circling back to the photograph, I will further my analysis of the image, revealing how assimilation and colonial progress become synonymous through these propagandistic photographs of reformation and how colonial hegemonies are maintained through visual representations of Indigenous peoples.

First, I would like to acknowledge that as a mixed-race woman of Canadian-Turkish descent, I have not lived the same experience of oppression as Indigenous peoples have in Canada. As such, I am not attempting to convey the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples subject to the residential school system or the experiences of those still enduring the continual disruption caused by ongoing legacies of colonialism. Rather, I write with the intent of acknowledging the imperially driven nature of the photographs to produce a more dynamic understanding of the one-sided photographic narrative.

In order to understand the nature of these photographs, it is critical to review the social and political landscape of the time. Passed in 1876, the Indian Act granted



Figure 1. Basil Fox, Photographer. "Practical sewing class at the Kamloops Indian Residential school."

From: Canadian Government Archives: Residential Schools: Photographic Collections, c.1958 or 1959.



Figure 2. Photographer Unknown. "The hockey team of the residential school of Malietenam, Quebec."

From: Canadian Government Archives: Residential Schools: Photographic Collections, c.1950.

“These photographs were taken with an agenda; one that abides by the imperialist understanding that Indigenous people will benefit from adopting the hegemonic way of life. This notion, in and of itself, is intrinsically colonial.”



Figure 3. Basil Fox, Photographer. “Chemistry Class Kamloops Indian Residential School, British Columbia, ca. 1959.”
From: Canadian Government Archives: Residential Schools: Photographic Collections, c. 1959.

the Government of Canada an unprecedented amount of control over the lives and land of Indigenous peoples. This included the regulation and definition of status, the decentralization of women in communities, the creation of reserves, and many other paternalistic policies which still impact communities today. In this spirit, residential schools began to open across Canada as a way to enforce the government's policy of assimilating Indigenous children into Canadian society. These schools were portrayed as centres for learning made to benefit Indigenous children, but in fact worked to conform students to new norms. This included the eradication of Indigenous languages and culture, effectively creating a rupture between many parents and their children who left home at age four and did not return until they reached sixteen. In many cases, educational classrooms were abandoned in favour of having the children do manual labour to maintain the schools themselves. Furthermore, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse was common in many residential schools and, overall, children who attended these schools had a mortality rate higher than those Canadians who served in the Second World War.¹ Ultimately, the intention was to teach children in accordance with imperial pedagogical ideals to prepare them to enter into Canadian society. Photographers were sent by the government to the schools to take pictures of daily activities which would then be used to portray the success of assimilation. The Library and Archives Canada (LAC) website hosts a collection of residential school images including class photos, images of the schoolhouses, and of domestic scenes such as young girls learning how to sew or young boys playing hockey (Figures 1, 2). These photographs were taken with an agenda—one that abides by the imperialist assumption that Indigenous people will benefit from adopting the hegemonic way of life. This notion, in and of itself, is intrinsically colonial.² The images were curated to foster an idyllic understanding of residential schools and promote the narrative that these schools were benevolent tools of Anglicization. This narrative was predicated on the false settler assumption that their way of living was superior to that of the Indigenous peoples.

Figure 3 is an example of one such photograph demonstrating the colonial agenda of propagating Indigenous assimilation.

The photograph was taken in a classroom and there are five full figures in the frame. The camera is fo-

cused on the foreground where four Indigenous students, all boys, can be seen leaning over a table with a scale and other contraptions on it. The title of the image, "Chemistry Class Kamloops Indian Residential School," leads the viewer to surmise that they are in the middle of a science experiment. The four boys are gazing down, each one looking at a slightly different place as if they each have their pre-designated tasks in this moment. All are involved and none is portrayed as idly watching. According to the archives, this photo was taken in 1959; however, even without the date a viewer can estimate the era the photograph would have been taken, based on the Euro-Canadian outfits the boys are wearing: long-sleeved shirts with collars and letterman bomber jackets with the school patch on the front. These outfits were common among Canadian schoolboys in the mid-1950s to early 1960s. The fifth full figure in the photograph is standing in the background. A white man, presumably the teacher, is watching the boys work. The photo appears to be glued to a paper background and is stamped "Indians of North America." Under this heading there are a few handwritten notes; one reads "Education-Academic Courses" and near this is a scratched-out line which reads "Kamloops Ind. Res. School." Many elements in this photograph speak volumes about the power structure at play through the tendentious arrangement of the photograph, which I will speak to. However, because my argument speaks not only to this photograph but to a broad range of colonial archival photos, it is necessary to delve into some of the theory behind this discourse.

To allow for a more comprehensive reading of the image, it is important to look into what photographic literacy means and note some things to be aware of when engaging in photographic discourse. In his work "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," Allan Sekula, American theorist and photographer, postulates that "Photographic 'literacy' is learned, [it is the result of understanding that] 'reading' is the appropriate outcome of contemplating a piece of glossy paper."³ For some cultures, recording visual snippets of the three-dimensional world as photographs is not something of concern. However, for others, recording the world photographically is part of information exchange and there is an understanding that the photograph symbolizes something in the real world. This concept has been learned over time and through prolonged exposure to the medium of photog-

raphy. It is important to be aware of the subjectivity involved when photography is used as a mode of communication, or as Sekula calls it, “photographic discourse.” He points out that “[a]ll communication is, to a greater or lesser extent, tendentious; all messages are manifestations of interest,” which stands as a precaution to viewers.⁴ Sekula argues: **“[B]e wary of succumbing to the liberal-utopian notion of disinterested ‘academic’ exchange of information. The overwhelming majority of messages sent into the ‘public domain’ in advanced industrial society are spoken with the voice of anonymous authority and preclude the possibility of anything but affirmation.”**⁵

People must be aware that the images they are viewing are biased, regardless of whether or not an individual or a governing body is behind the creation of the image. There is no such thing as completely unbiased knowledge production. Thereby, viewers must be hyper-mindful of both their sources for information and the motives of the producers creating that information.

When unpacking colonially imposed ideals of progress in regard to our photographic literacy, it is important to consider who holds the archives. In Canada, there are a few sites that hold archival information that pertains to Indigenous peoples. Traditionally, universities, the state, and churches held the bulk of the archives; however, recently this has been expanded to include private and corporate archives, as well as Indigenous governance archives. In Fraser and Todd’s work *Decolonial Sensibilities: Indigenous Research and Engaging with Archives in Contemporary Colonial Canada*, they point out the importance of acknowledging the “colonial realities of the archives themselves.”⁶ Regardless of who has the records now, the documentation that makes up Canadian archives relating to residential schools was recorded by government staff and church administration who worked in conjunction with government programs. Because of this bias, it is hard to grasp the full narrative behind the images. Due to the fact that “the majority of archival documents in Canadian archives have been produced by non-Indigenous people: namely white men who dominated exploration, political,” and, I would argue, academic and artistic realms, our national archives are implicitly colonial in perspective and entirely colonial as a construct.⁷ This colonial archiving stood to produce national imaginaries and one-sided histories

which were conceived to be the complete collective national experience during the construction of the imperial nation.

This kind of one-sided contextualizing of documentation is what Sekula advises people to be wary of as he points out where the misconception of photographic truth comes from. He argues that this myth stems from the perceived transparency of the medium itself. A photograph is understood to be a literal re-presentation of the world, thereby any propositions made with this medium are seen to be truthful. What people don’t always understand is “that the photograph is an ‘incomplete’ utterance ... That is, the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context-determined.”⁸ Photographs in and of themselves are not the full picture, so to speak. The images are restricted to what the photographer chooses to include in the frame; therefore, the information conveyed through the image itself is limited. This is particularly relevant when photography is used in knowledge production; any text that accompanies the image can influence a viewer’s perception of that image and therefore their perception of the truth of the situation itself. This unequal contextualizing of documentation stands as a crucial factor in creating biased histories and allowing colonially imposed ideals of progress to be perpetually read into archival residential school photographs.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness regarding the colonially hegemonic nature of archival information relating to Indigenous peoples in Canada. Krista McCracken, a public historian, addresses this in their essay “Archival Photographs in Perspective: Indian Residential School Images of Health” and notes how, as of 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been working to re-document the history of the Canadian residential schools as a means of creating a more complete historical narrative, one that considers not just the perspective of the colonizer, but also the voices of Indigenous peoples. They point out how “the TRC’s process brought to light [archivists’] colonial relationship with Indigenous communities and the impact which that relationship has had on the archival record.”⁹ McCracken explains that “[h]ow a photograph is named and described shapes how researchers understand the events depicted in the image. Oftentimes, in residential school images, the photographer and the archivist would silence the student point of view”

by posing the students in certain ways and leaving out the students' names.¹⁰ This knowledge production, being done from a place of authority, allowed residential school images to manufacture partial and false narratives through providing incomplete context for the photographs. As such, they can easily mislead a researcher's comprehension of the narrative.

Writer and educator Gabrielle Moser speaks to the importance of context—how a photo is named and described—in her essay “Photographing Imperial Citizenship: The Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee’s Lanternslide Lectures, 1900–1945.” She notes the distinction Shawn Michelle Smith makes regarding the difference between photographic evidence and photographic meaning; what visual cues can be seen in the photograph itself, and what the viewer’s understanding of the visual cues are. Moser explains, quoting Smith, that “photographic meaning is contingent, malleable and notoriously unreliable: ‘Photographs as *evidence* are never enough, for photographic *meaning* is always shaped by context and circulation, and determined by viewers. Photographic meaning results from what we *do* with photographic evidence.’”¹¹ In other words, it is not enough for a photograph being used to depict history to stand alone, void of context. Since photographic meaning is determined by the framework it is presented with, it is crucial that the framework has not been skewed by the agenda of those producing the images. It is this subjectivity in providing photographic context that produces one-sided narratives which are then studied as historical fact, further perpetuating the settler-colonial hegemony in Canada and other settler nations.

Because photography as a medium was historically understood as a transparent re-presentation of the world, people did not think to question the nature of the display or contextualization of photography. Today, with the Internet and continually expanding media resources, it has become easy to acquire a diverse range of information from a variety of sources on a given topic. As long as we consider the subjective nature of many sources of information, we can use this range of knowledge to piece together a more accurate version of a given story through contrast and comparison. However, this has not always been the case. Before the chaos of mass media, knowledge production was generally limited to mobile nations who could afford to travel

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and spread information. Who got to tell whose story? This is where colonial ideals begin to play heavily into our photographic literacy.

One particular project that stands out to me as extremely influential in constructing and promoting colonial ideals was the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee, or COVIC. Gabrielle Moser has written extensively on COVIC and describes it in her essay “Developing Historical Negatives: The Colonial Photographic Archive as Optical Unconscious.” A collection of over 7,600 photographs taken by amateur photographer Alfred Hugh Fisher documented the peoples and land held by the British Colonial Empire. These images were viewed as lanternslides, images that would be projected onto the wall, in classrooms around the world between 1907 and 1910.¹² This project was propagated to stand as a compiled geography lesson for children in Britain and among the newly developing colonies. However, “the COVIC project not only attempted to capture the empire and its people, but to build a photographic catalog of what it meant to look and feel like an imperial citizen.”¹³ In this way the project had a covert—yet in retrospect, blatant—imperial agenda. The slides were not intended as a simple teaching aid; they were created to foster a preconceived and unified understanding of what the imperial nation looked like in attempts to unify the colonies. Children living in England would view slides about the colonies whereas children living in the colonies would view slides about the “Mother Country.” The project did not vary its approach from audience to audience; each lecture was meant to be conducted uniformly and, in this way, it disregarded the individual lived experiences of people in the imperial nation. COVIC was a geography lesson teaching a false one-sided narrative of colonization. In her work “Photographing Imperial Citizenship,” Moser points to how the context in which the photographs were presented made a one-sided narrative possible. She notes how the project fostered colonial photographic literacy as it “stressed the importance of sight in encouraging feelings of imperial sympathy in students.”¹⁴ The lanternslide lectures were structured to form a unified image of the colonial saviour which stood to perpetuate hegemonic hierarchies of “us” verses “them”; or, the colonizer over the colonized. In the case of COVIC, supposedly objective photographs were used to promote an extremely subjective narrative about

what imperial life was like, fostering a notion of colonial success and progress through the spreading of colonial education.

If we consider the role of photography in both Canadian residential schools and the COVIC lanternslides, we begin to see how the perpetuation of colonial racial hierarchies connects to the medium itself. Photographs, in the context of lanternslides, peaked around the nineteenth and were used until well into the twentieth century in churches, classrooms, and city halls as visual aids for anyone telling a story. Moser makes a poignant argument, stating, “By choosing to employ the same technology, the COVIC series borrowed lessons about racial inferiority and imperial improvement from concurrent religious, anthropological and propagandistic presentations, drawing from the visual databank they would have constructed in the minds of viewers to construct similar hierarchies of race, class and gender.”¹⁵ Photographs as lanternslides were used to support and promote a narrative, often one with a religious or colonial agenda, which bred a form of photographic literacy embedded with racial superiority among its viewers. Moser points out that missionaries would take “before and after” photographs of colonial citizens “to demonstrate the ‘benefits’ of religious and imperial intervention in [I]ndigenous life,” and justify the projects of assimilation.¹⁶ The concept of “before and after” photographs became a way to prove reformation projects were beneficial to colonized peoples; the “after” photos were documentation of assimilated individuals which meant the reformation projects were a success in the settler’s eyes, thereby making assimilation synonymous with colonial progress.

Looking through the residential school photographs posted on the LAC website, it is easy to see a trend in the kind of photographs taken in the schools. There are many class photos of students, as well as photographs of children during lessons or taking part in sports. However, there are no photographs that indicate anything negative regarding this assimilation project. The photos tell a narrative of education and community which is far from the whole story. Figure 3 stands out as an intense representation of colonial hegemony and the staging of narratives that promoted successful assimilation. As previously mentioned, one of the first things noticeable about the photo is the clothing the boys were wearing. A patch on one of the

boys' jackets is clearly visible. The patch is a large letter "K," which stands for Kamloops, with the letters "I," "R," and "S" sewn on to the larger letter. In the 1950s and 1960s, these school patches were a feature of letterman jackets indicating which school a student belonged to; in this case the patch denotes that the student attends the Kamloops Indian Residential School. The patch indicates a sense of ownership over the individual, working as a confirmation of assimilation. By wearing this jacket, the Indigenous boy in this photograph is seen to have adapted to Western culture; this statement in and of itself would have been read as a marker of colonial progress which is indicative of why the boy wearing the jacket would have been carefully framed in the centre of the picture. The second noticeable aspect is gender; the people in this image are all male. This is interesting, as most of the other classroom images contain both male and female students, with a few exceptions; only male students were photographed while participating in sports and in science class, whereas the only images of female students were captured during sewing class. Historically, like many other fields of study, science and sports have been male dominant whereas sewing was seen as a woman's task, as caretaker of the household. Thereby, stressing this type of education in regard to Indigenous students allowed gendered learning to be sustained in Canada. Through this perpetuation of traditional Western learning methods, Indigenous children could be integrated into the pre-established gendered hierarchical structures in colonial culture.

In her essay "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race and Nation," African American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins speaks to these "notions of naturalized gender hierarchies promulgated by the family ideal," speaking in particular to the "sex-typing of occupations in the paid labor market and male domination in government, professional sports"¹⁷ and a variety of other fields of study. Collins speaks to the ways in which the Western nuclear family unit propagates hierarchies that are then paralleled and naturalized in society. Because the nuclear family promotes a patriarchal household, this male dominance is then translated into society and into the workplace. It is interesting to note, however, that Indigenous children were not being educated to follow high-paying career paths, like many of the white settlers were, and yet they were photographed

in ways that implied they were receiving well-rounded education through these government programs.

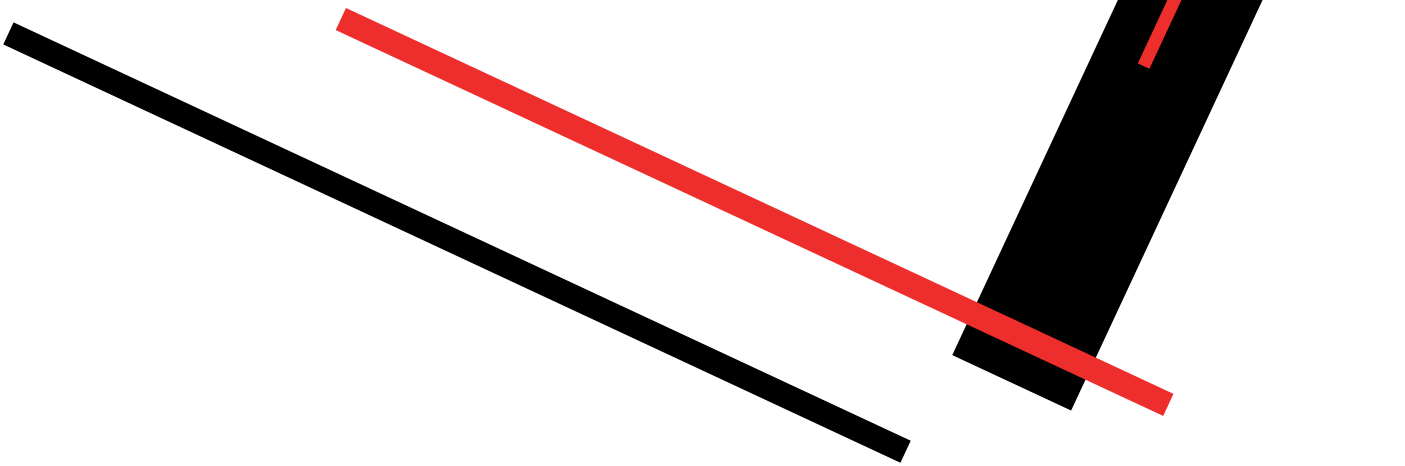
Another striking thing about Figure 3 is the placement of the figures, with the four boys arranged around the table and the teacher looming behind them. This set-up of figures is a loud visual demonstration of colonial hegemony. The white male teacher standing and watching the young Indigenous male students plays into naturalized age hierarchies that intersect with racial hierarchies. As Collins explains: "racial ideologies that portray people of colour as intellectually underdeveloped, uncivilized children require parallel ideas that construct Whites as intellectually mature, civilized adults," which, based on the logic of the Western family ideal, entitles the "adult" figure to authority over the "child."¹⁸ The photograph can be simply read as the teacher teaching the students, or further understood as the white settler teaching the Indigenous, as the latter is seen to be intellectually inferior to the former. It is in this way that this photograph serves a dual purpose in establishing hierarchies of age (man over child) and race (white settler over Indigenous resident).

While researching the LAC website, it is impossible not to notice that the majority of subjects in the residential school photographs are left unnamed. However, some photographs have had names added to the original annotations. In 2002, Murray Angus, a teacher at Nunavut Sivuniksavut Training Program, proposed *Project Naming*, a project intended to foster intergenerational communication and give Indigenous peoples the chance to re-contextualize images from their history which are situated within the archives. There is an open call up on the website asking members of the public to reach out if they have information regarding any of the photographs in the collection. The descriptions on the website heavily reflect the biases of settler society since most of the annotations in the archives were taken from handwritten captions found on the physical photographs themselves.¹⁹ The students were left unnamed in the photographers' notes because they, as the subjects, were not the real focus—rather, the photographers were employed to capture scenes of assimilative progress within the school's walls. By identifying and naming students, this project begins to give some agency back to the subjects photographed. *Project Naming* holds the ability to decolonize archival information and begin chang-

ing the general understanding of the structure or colonialism.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the research done here only begins to unpack the complex history of where colonially imposed ideals of progress come from, and how these preconceived standards have come to affect our collective photographic literacy. However, recognizing the subjective nature of archival information is a crucial starting point in re-claiming and re-writing false narratives of colonial history, particularly in regard to the Canadian Residential Schools. An understanding of perspective will allow room for new narratives to surface, giving a voice to those who have been systematically silenced throughout the history of this colonial nation. The manipulation of photographic evidence did not start with digital photo-editing programs; it came from long-standing de-contextualization of images, which, in cases of the residential schools and the COVIC photographs, were driven by a very politically colonial agenda. The assimilation of Indigenous peoples into settler society was propagated to seem like a mutually beneficial process through images that perpetuated racial hierarchies and made assimilation synonymous with national progress. Subjective knowledge production remains

a powerful tool in swaying people's opinions of a given topic; however, understanding the historical impact these hegemonic narratives have had may begin to change how we see things in the future. Initiatives such as Project Naming are particularly relevant in regard to the residential school photographs as opening up communication between those who hold the archives and those whose histories make up the documentation is one way to re-contextualize these photographs and begin to decolonize the narrative of Canada's archival information.



Notes

1 Daniel Schwartz, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission: By the Numbers" CBC News (June 03, 2015). Accessed February 03, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-by-the-numbers-1.3096185>.

2 In this context, colonial refers to the ideology of European settlers invading and replacing existing societies.

3 Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Artforum*, 13, no. 5, (1975): 36–45, Reprinted in *Thinking Photography* ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), 86.

4 *Ibid.*, 84.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Crystal Fraser and Zoe Todd, "Decolonial Sensibilities: Indigenous Research and Engaging with Archives in Contemporary Colonial Canada," *L'Internationale* (2016). Accessed November 14, 2017. http://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/54_decolonial_sensibilities_indigenous_research_and_engaging_with_archives_in_contemporary_colonial_canada.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Sekula, 85.

9 Krista McCracken, "Archival Photographs in Perspective: Indian Residen-

tial School Images of Health," *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 30, no. 2 (2017): 164.

10 *Ibid.*, 167.

11 Gabrielle Moser, "Photographing Imperial Citizenship: The Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee's Lanternslide Lectures, 1900–1945," *Journal of Visual Culture* 16, no. 2 (2017): 200.

12 Gabrielle Moser, "Developing Historical Negatives: The Colonial Photographic Archive as Optical Unconscious," in *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, ed. Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (Duke University Press, May 5, 2017): 229.

13 *Ibid.*, 231.

14 Moser, "Photographing Imperial Citizenship," 197.

15 *Ibid.*, 201.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Patricia Hill Collins, "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race and Nation," in *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (Black Well Publishing, 1998): 66.

18 *Ibid.*, 65.

19 Archives Canada. *Project Naming*. Library and Archives Canada (September 28, 2018). Accessed February 04, 2019. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/project-naming/Pages/introduction.aspx>.