



Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun: Portraits of Everyday Life in Eight Indigenous Communities

Paul Seesequasis. Alfred A. Knopf, Toronto, 2019. 192 pages, with 47 colour and 27 black & white illustrations. Softcover £20.15/\$32.95, ISBN 978-0-735-27331-3.

Mark Turin

To cite this article: Mark Turin (2020) Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun: Portraits of Everyday Life in Eight Indigenous Communities, *History of Photography*, 44:1, 68-70, DOI: [10.1080/03087298.2020.1846335](https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2020.1846335)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2020.1846335>



Published online: 30 Nov 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 18



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

call ‘camp’, a sensibility that emphasises artifice and stylisation over substance. Charity pageants helped legitimise camp excess while, in the gossip columns of the society magazines, the participants could be seen to be ‘doing good works’ while partying until dawn.

Muir’s focus is upon those figures, mostly literary, theatrical and aristocratic, who helped Beaton advance both his artistic and social standing. Wanting only success, fame and all the trappings of celebrity, he sought out and clung to those who might help him reinvent himself in suitably disguised form. Muir provides the reader with an impressive pantheon of willing assistants to this act of aesthetic and social *déguisement*. The figure of Stephen Tennant was to reign supreme in Beaton’s mind, the epitome of the Bright Young Things. The Hon. Stephen Tennant was the youngest son of Pamela, Lady Glenconner, of Wilsford Manor, Wiltshire, and Tennant became a kind of unofficial collaborator. He carried with him all the kudos of the landed aristocracy that Beaton craved, combined with a devotion to his self-image that rivalled Beaton’s own. Theirs was a kind of informal, aesthetic collaboration whereby the photographer bathed in his sitter’s glory as the latter’s image was increasingly enhanced by Beaton’s camera. Almost as significant was Rex Whistler, a painter and set and costume designer whose virtuosity Beaton greatly admired. Thereafter, Muir chronicles a virtual *Who’s Who* of Beaton devotees: Sheila, Lady Loughborough, heart throb of Rudolf Valentino, whose head Beaton photographed under a Surrealising bell-jar in 1927; or Lady Edwina Mountbatten, whose ‘bravura sense of chic’ remained undimmed, we are told, while her husband helped British India transition to independence. With Dorothy ‘Dolly’ Erne Wilde we even get an indirect reference to Social Darwinism because of ‘her outstanding genetic inheritance [which] no doubt thrilled Cecil’. Included in this list of Bright Young Things are his benefactors, Edith and Osbert Sitwell, the most conspicuous of the era’s literary couples. It was Osbert who wrote the glowing foreword to Beaton’s first exhibition at the Cooling Galleries in 1927, and largely thanks to him that Beaton’s album, *The Book of Beauty* (1930), appeared in print. Muir offers the reader a catalogue of worthies whose task, so far as Beaton was concerned, consisted of accelerating the photographer’s upward mobility. Muir is clearly enamoured of his subject, sometimes cloyingly so, in that it reads like an extended encomium, and there is little sense of any critical distance. Many of the exhibition’s idiosyncrasies have been carried over into the book. Each chapter title is prefaced by a term drawn from the world of music or the stage: an introduction becomes an Overture; experiments in transvestism are Travesti; patrons are Maestri; and so on. While such gestures to gentility may be in keeping with Beaton’s sense of whimsy, here they lend the text a whimsicality that the author could well do without. While the reproductions are good, the designers seem overly fond of coloured papers, in marked contrast to the design sobriety of Pepper’s *Beaton Portraits*.

Writing in 1986, the Barbican Gallery curator John Hoole noted how, ‘At a time of deprivation and austerity, it might seem untimely to reflect upon an artistic character as flamboyant and grand as Cecil Beaton’. I have to admit to similar reservations, but it is worth remembering that the success of that earlier publication was won by locating Beaton’s work within the broader culture, rather than solely within the constraints of its subject’s biography.

Brian Stokoe

brianstokoe@gmail.com

© 2020 Brian Stokoe

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2020.1823064>



Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun: Portraits of Everyday Life in Eight Indigenous Communities

Paul Seesequasis. Alfred A. Knopf, Toronto, 2019. 192 pages, with 47 colour and 27 black & white illustrations. Softcover £20.15/\$32.95, ISBN 978-0-735-27331-3.

This beautiful book is an impressive byproduct of a much larger digital research project that speaks to the resilience and cultural strength of Indigenous communities in what are now Canada and the USA. Its creator is Paul Seesequasis, a *nîpîsîhkopâwiyiniw* (Willow Cree) writer, journalist, cultural advocate and commentator based in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, whose mother is a survivor of the Canadian residential school system.

Canadian residential schools were government-sponsored religious institutions established to assimilate Indigenous (previously referred to as Indian, Native and Aboriginal) children into dominant Euro-Canadian culture. Even though Indian residential schools in Canada, American Indian boarding schools in the USA, native schools for Māori in New Zealand and Christian missionary schools in Hawai’i were governed and shaped by diverse motivations, they were united by a prejudiced belief that Indigenous cultures were backward, primitive and incompatible with modernity and Western values.

Active in Canada from the mid 1800s to the late 1990s, these racist and demeaning establishments have caused profound disruption to the livelihoods and lasting damage to the lives of Indigenous communities. Moreover, they offered little educational value to those who were forced to attend. Through brutal and punitive mechanisms that intentionally devalued Indigenous languages, cultures and traditional practices, the state sought to weaken family ties in Indigenous communities and assimilate or exterminate the Indigenous populations of this recently settled land.

In 2015, the Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its report detailing the history of Indigenous peoples' lived experiences through the residential school system. The Commission heard and documented over six thousand testimonies from survivors and their families. When Seesequasis found himself grappling with the Commission's devastating findings and coming to terms with this violent period in Canada's colonial history, his mother told him that she was 'tired of hearing just negative things about those times', reminding him that there had also been 'positive and strong things in Indigenous communities then'.

Galvanised by her words, Seesequasis began to search through archives, libraries, museums and private collections for images of Indigenous life that reflected 'integrity, strength, resourcefulness, hard work, family and play' rather than suffering and exploitation. *Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun* is tangible proof that he found what he was looking for. His exploration would soon mature into a multiyear, collaborative social media project through which Seesequasis collected archival photographs of everyday life in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities from across Canada from the 1920s to the 1970s, and harnessed the connective and communicative power of the Internet to 'assemble, digitize and distribute' them. Three years and hundreds of photographs later, Seesequasis still feels that he is just 'scratching the surface' and that this uncovering and retelling process holds much potential. In a 2019 interview, Seesequasis describes his work as more of a marathon than a sprint: 'It's not the type of book you can rush. Everyone had to have a sense of patience and just go with the flow' (*Maclean's*, 19 October 2019).

Organised by geographic and administrative region, *Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun* is representative rather than comprehensive or encyclopaedic. First-person narratives and poignant, historical vignettes contextualise the images that make up the eight chapters of the book. A humbly-worded 'Introduction' and a forward-looking 'Epilogue' bookend the collection, through which we learn how aware Seesequasis is of the seductive historical logic of the visual records that he has helped to unearth. Just as he approaches the 'narratives that make up this book as stories inspired by the photographs, not ultimate truths', Seesequasis observes that not all of the accompanying archival notes that he identified in his research were 'accurate in name, location or cultural identity'. By exposing the vulnerabilities of historical reconstruction and memory, and being transparent about his methodology, Seesequasis offers readers a practical handbook on effective engagement with compromised colonial archives: 'Never add your assumptions to the captions. Reprint the archival captions as they are, but expect, in many cases, they will be wrong or inaccurate'.

Seesequasis weaves language, culture and history into the text panels that accompany the images in ways that are skilful and effortless. We learn, for example, that in the northern Quebec territory of Nunavik, government-sponsored dog slaughters – the goal of which was to sever Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories and diets – resulted in the needless and wanton destruction of more than twenty thousand active sled dogs in the course of just two decades. On a more uplifting note, in the text accompanying a 1973 photograph of the Fort George Rockers, an Indigenous band, the reader is treated to a description of what was 'probably the first-ever rock tour by canoe, visiting three James Bay communities'. Seesequasis's masterful pairing of image with text help animate the story of the first generation of Indigenous photographers, visionaries such as Peter Pitseolak and George Johnston, who led the way in turning their 'lenses outward with their gaze on the dominant societal structures'.

Reading this book – and reviewing Seesequasis's tremendous mobilisation on Twitter and his sustained engagement with more than sixteen thousand followers who regularly respond, amplify and share his posts – I returned to Audre Lorde's timely statement that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change' (*Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* 1984). We know that the digital return of visual records of marginalised and colonised communities cannot redress the wrongs of the past, and neither does such a process necessarily result in a more equitable present. Yet, by harnessing the power of publishing and social media to connect photographic subjects and their descendants with their own visual record, Seesequasis is advancing a decolonial agenda – in both image and text – that is both highly relevant and extremely effective. As he writes, 'the story is only a small part of the picture and the picture is only a small part of the story'.

Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun is a profoundly humane and optimistic book, and, at the same time, serves as a gentle act of resistance and reclamation. In reasserting representational sovereignty, Seesequasis is resetting history, centring specific Indigenous

individuals – not imagined cultural collectives or anthropological others – at the heart of this visually gripping story. Integrating collaborative, community-based research, instruction, curation, publishing and outreach in ways that have long been practised by Indigenous communities the world over, and are now the aspirational standard of almost all neoliberal universities, Seesequasis achieves something exceptional. He humanises our shared past, invites us into the present and outlines a path on which we may walk together to create a less racist and more respectful future.

Mark Turin

© 2020 Mark Turin

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2020.1846335>



Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa: Shades of Difference

Lorena Rizzo. Routledge, London and New York, 2020. 278 pages, with 61 black & white illustrations. Hardcover £96.00, ISBN 978-1-138-34301-6.

Lorena Rizzo's latest monograph is not a chronological account of the progressive development of photography in Southern Africa during the colonial period, but instead something much more audacious and rewarding. Rizzo examines a series of archival encounters, focusing on a specific photographic collection per chapter. These collections, and the order in which they are presented, confound a teleological chronology and dart across temporalities, regions and institutional sites. All of the collections relate to either South Africa or Namibia, whose intertwined histories are often overlooked. Such an approach, which embraces circuits and ruptures over linearity, reflects the propensity of photographs to weave together different temporalities and spaces, as well as photography's role in the shaping of colonial networks between the two countries.

What defines Rizzo's approach is a concern with specificity. Rather than approaching the discrete collections with a priori assumptions about the nature and purpose of colonial photography, analysis starts and ends with the photographs themselves; how any meanings they may have are contingent on their shifting position within paper regimes, archival practices and bureaucratic assemblages. Each archival encounter is unpacked using a different theoretical concept. Rizzo's candid descriptions of her archival research are not only a joy to read but allow her to keep 'theory to the ground' and avoid abstractions that might serve to obscure the peculiarities of specific photographs. This is also rooted in a recognition of the ambiguity of historical photographs. In choosing her theoretical concepts, Rizzo is not presuming to have the final say on the full significance and functions of the photographs, but merely illuminating one level on which they might have worked or failed to work. Also key to this is the refreshing observation that photographs used by colonial institutions often fell short of the grand claims made of them by colonial administrators. The semantic slipperiness of photographs, and their uneven use across disciplinary sites, often undermined photography's instrumental promise for colonial governance.

Chapter 1 focuses on a photographic album compiled by the German South West African Police, after the announcement of a Police Records Office in 1911 and the publication of guidelines for the use of photography in policing. The inconsistent conventions used in the album, culminating in the collapse of any organising logic in its last few pages, show that the promised role for photography in rationalising identification was largely pretence. Seeking to match the album to an equally erratic written register of inmates, Rizzo finds the album of little practical use, as very few of the written descriptions of prisoners correspond to any of the numbered photographs. What, then, was the point of the album? Rizzo considers its productive value by thinking beyond the narrow confines of its utility to a detective. Theorising the album as part of an open-ended series of assemblages, Rizzo considers the benefits of police photography to different institutions and practices beyond police work, including the strengthening of colonial bureaucratic networks, racial mapping, labour recruitment, settler family photography and physical anthropology.

In Chapter 2, Rizzo examines two collections to unpick how photography made bodies legible as differentiated categories of persons during both the segregationist and apartheid periods in South Africa. First, Rizzo considers a collection of applications for passports and visas following the unification of South Africa in 1910. Such applications required identity photographs, but did not demand a standardised format. They encouraged many to submit honorific studio portraits, thereby making their own claims to personhood by projecting codes of 'respectability'. Applicants supplemented photographs with written documentation that remains within the collection, such as family trees and written biographies. In doing so, applicants made claims to cosmopolitan notions of personhood, with multiple loci of belonging, which exceeded the crude formulations of