

DIGITAL KINSHIP: STORYING AND REMEMBERING OUR ANCESTORS

An Interview with Paul Seesequasis

COURTENEY MORIN

*Paul Seesequasis is at the forefront of gathering historical memories encapsulated in photographs.¹ His Indigenous Archival Photo Project mobilizes community online to identify subjects of the archival photos. The project, inspired by his mother, is facilitated online through social media, and his curations have been featured in physical exhibitions across Canada. Online communities can engage with Seesequasis's selected collection of archival photographs – both to witness and to name the ancestors whose image is captured in time. By highlighting the inheritance of Indigenous memory, Seesequasis, author of *Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun: Portraits of Everyday Life in Eight Indigenous Communities* (2019) and *People of the Watershed: Photographs* by John Macfie (2024), illuminates what is often left out of the historical record. That is, Indigenous resistance has always been a presence throughout time and is, in part, what contributes to Indigenous survivance and continuity today. Seesequasis's work exemplifies relational technologies by using photography and digital platforms to connect deeply with communities, stories, and places. Seesequasis's Indigenous digital archival project tends to community and builds kinship across lifetimes.*

Through identifying and contextualizing portraits of individuals, families, and communities on social media, ideas of the past about Indigenous people are challenged. By presenting the mundane, the ordinary, and the everyday, Seesequasis's digital archival project brings life back to historical photos through a relational and storytelling process. Likewise, the digital representations of archival photos inherently confront and dispute ethnographic facsimiles of Indigenous Peoples throughout history, such as the misrepresentations of

¹ Find Paul Seesequasis on social media at: [instagram.com/pseesequasis](https://www.instagram.com/pseesequasis); [x.com/PaulSeesequasis](https://www.x.com/PaulSeesequasis); and paulseesequasis.substack.com. To buy *Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun*, you can go to paulseesequasis.com, where you will also find updated information about Seesequasis's work. For more information on his Indigenous Archival Photo Project, go to <https://shekonnechie.ca/2018/06/21/turning-the-lens/>. Seesequasis is available for select talks, presentations, and online lectures.

Edward S. Curtis's photography subjects. Through careful curation, Seesequasis brings forth a thoughtful selection of ancestors to be named, honoured, and remembered by way of digital relationality and kinship catalyzed through the affordances granted by social media.

In this interview, we discuss the politics of Indigenous historical photography, repatriation and visual reclamation, and the urgency felt to identify and story ancestor's memories. Seesequasis provides additional context for the Nelson exhibition Turning the Lens: Indigenous Archive Project, which exemplifies the complicated historical experiences of Sinixt and Ktunaxa Nations in the Nelson region. Seesequasis shares how mislabelled and unlabelled photographs in the Nelson Museum Archive spurred discourse around which photos belong to which Nation, thus rendering the forthcoming book Turning the Lens's chapter on British Columbia contentious. Seesequasis's commitment to and passion for representations of visual survivance and authentic community connections are made clear by his patience and support of the process in Nelson and the book. Moreover, throughout our interview his reverence for ancestors in the archival photographs, respect for cultural protocols, and caring methodology is made clear.

Seesequasis was a delight to speak with, and my hope is that archivists, activists, and academics take note of his steadfast responsibility to community and principled ethic that not everything needs to be digitized and not everything in the archive needs to be public facing. Cultural and community protocols and governance should be at the forefront of museums' and archives' engagements with Indigenous ancestors and materials. The Nelson Museum, Archives and Gallery is a case study that underscores best practices in territories with complex and layered histories.

Courteney Morin: Do you want to just dive right in, or ...?

Paul Seesequasis: Oh yeah, let's just dive in.

Courteney Morin: Okay perfect, do you want to start with introducing yourself and anything you feel is important for the readers to know about you?

Paul Seesequasis: My name is Paul Seesequasis. I am currently living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I've lived in Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and all around the province. I'm an urban band member of Beardy's and Okemasis' First Nation, just outside of Saskatoon, about a forty-five-minute drive. Writer, curator, researcher. I've written several books,

Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun, a few others, and magazine features. I've also worked as a program officer for Canada Council for the Arts years ago. Publisher, producer, at different times of my life – so I've worn a few hats. Now I'm just kind of in my own little cubbyhole doing my own thing, so to speak.

Courteney Morin: One of your websites describes your archival project. You talked about how priests and natural resource worker photographers were in this position to represent Indigenous people in a different way. I'm curious about why you think they were able to represent the mundane and the alternative side to Indigenous life in your archival findings. As a follow-up, how does their positionality contribute to a non-invasive perspective, and how would you define this non-invasive perspective?

Paul Seesequasis: Just to start off, I wouldn't call it a "non-invasive eye." If I used that term, I was completely incorrect. I feel all photography is invasive to some degree. If I took a screenshot of you right now, that would be invasive of your privacy. So it was invasive to an extent.

Why it was MNR [Ministry of Natural Resources] people, priests, RCMP officers, or wives of RCMP officers, like Geraldine Moodie, et cetera, was because those were the only people through much of the period this project is focused on (thirties, forties, fifties) who were travelling to different Indigenous communities. During the pass system, there weren't Indigenous people doing that. The only exception would be James Brady, a Métis photographer from Saskatchewan, and that's because he worked for MNR and CCF [Canadian Commonwealth Federation, precursor to the NDP]. His job got him travelling and he also happened to be an amateur photographer. So these priests, MNR workers, et cetera, knew the communities through the nature of their vocation – they have a relationship with those communities. And they also happen to be amateur photographers. There was no interest from the general media or photojournalism to photograph Indigenous people, unless it was a powwow or something, where it was exoticized, but normal community life or on the rez – no one cared, the media didn't care. Priests, like Rene Fumoleau, and MNR workers, like John Macfie, that's why their photography was important to me, because it's kind of a record of the people, or the individuals in those communities, doing day-to-day things. And that's what struck a chord with me. Their work also happened to be recorded or preserved.

Recently in the project I've encountered other people in a similar situation, but their work was never archived. A woman called me six months ago or a year ago, saying, "My dad worked up in the Northwest Territories, in all these communities, he was also an amateur photographer, he passed away and there's this box of photos under his bed" or whatever it was. And it's all these people from these communities, right, but, unlike John Macfie or Rene Fumoleau, they were never archived or reproduced. It's those kind of people in these specific roles and circumstances into the thirties, forties, and fifties, because there was nobody else doing it, other than, like I said, James Brady. George Johnston was a Tlingit photographer up in Teslin, but he was really just in Teslin, he didn't travel the Yukon. Peter Pitseolak was up in Kinngait; he didn't really travel outside of there. So these were the people who were kind of the roving recorders of photography and that's why they were important for the project.

Courteney Morin: How do you feel the priests and natural resource workers, RCMP officers, and wives of RCMP officers differ from early ethnographers and anthropologists who were photographing and posing Indigenous people in specific ways for specific reasons?

Paul Seesequasis: First, they weren't like Edward Curtis,² they weren't on this project to record a vanishing way of life. And they weren't ethnographers with their rulers to measure people's noses or foreheads. I'm not trying to romanticize them and say they were all perfect individuals, or they weren't outsiders to the community, because they still were in their own ways. But they weren't engaged in a process of research of that nature, or seeking the exotic, if you will. They were really photographing day-to-day stuff, so when I was going through these works, that's what I was looking for – that day-to-day life. For some of the priests, about 75 percent of the work is about the congregation and inside the church. I skim over that stuff, but the 25 percent of it is people on the land or people and their family in their homes, and that's what I honed in on.

² Edward S. Curtis (1868–1952) was an American photographer and so-called ethnographer known for his extensive work photographing Indigenous Peoples. However, he romanticized Indigenous people and staged, propped, and edited photographs to remove any signs of modernity or contemporary life coinciding with Indigenous life. By fictionalizing Indigenous life and histories, Curtis's body of work contributes to misrepresentations and assumptions about Indigenous Peoples and their ancestors. Curtis's famous 1904 photograph titled "The Vanishing Race" undergirds his entire philosophy and approach to his Indigenous photographic subjects.



Figure 1. Margaret Wilson Frank (Dzawada'enuxw) photographed by Edward Curtis as "Tsawataineuk girl" ca. 1914.

Courteney Morin: How do you see your various archival projects creating histories counter to the dominate narratives of the time?

Paul Seesequasis: I think what they do, firstly, is foreground adaptation and lack of stasis. As you know, the Indigenous image is viewed through stasis, the past – the vanishing race through Curtis or tradition and powwow being the only manifestations of Indigeneity. It's not to say that tradition and regalia are not important, but it's what the gaze was focused on. Or the gaze was set to tragic mode, and here I'm thinking about paraphrasing Susan Sontag's *On Photography*: the camera was as destructive to and as much a part of manifest destiny as Remington rifles and alcohol. Those three things were so destructive to the communities, and they dehumanized Indigenous people by making them something Other. That's something you even see today: it's always about dehumanizing those people who are being colonized, those people who bear the brunt of colonization. And I think that's what you see when you reduce photography to the past – the Ghost Dance or Sundance, all those sorts of things, or to Curtis and his travelling suitcase of props to wear. These archival photos liberate the image a bit from that, but that's

not to say we don't have to contextualize it or be critical of it – we do. But it gets outside of that framing.

Courteney Morin: How do you go about contextualizing the photos to bring the human element back to them, and why do you think that is important to do?

Paul Seesequasis: I wouldn't say I've always done this; in the beginning I think I interpreted more. This has been going on about ten years now. So when I began, I think I made what I would call now the error of trying to interpret the photos. I don't do that now, or, rarely, I will quote the caption by putting it in quotation marks. I leave it to the community. So if I post, say, a photo of a community on Facebook, and it's usually on Facebook where the responses are, almost entirely on Facebook, someone from the community will contextualize the photo for me. Comments on the photos begin this narrative arch through the thread on Facebook. For instance, people will comment, "That's my auntie" or "They were with so and so." In this way, the comments develop this whole story that is so completely outside of anything I would suggest.

For me, that's one of the most interesting parts of this project: when a photograph is re-engaged in the community. And my part in that is only just posting it from an archive or a private family or wherever it came from. It has a re-engagement in that point in time, which is really difficult to achieve without Facebook or social media. Because the only other way to achieve it is by people going to the archives. That does happen, but it's limited because, in the archives, you're there and there's a limited amount of time and it's hard to know if you've invited the right people. Social media really makes broad, accessible engagement possible [in a way] that archives can't.

Courteney Morin: So, then, how do you see your work presenting images, stories, and histories that otherwise might be invisibilized by the archival process? And how do you see social media enabling that?

Paul Seesequasis: Most of these images have been digitized or scanned or whatever. On one level that democratizes them. What I do is kind of act as a middle person in finding the ones that interest me, and that's a flawed process – because what interests me may not be what I should be picking up. I am who I am. So I find the ones that interest me, and I put those on social media and then that engagement potentially

happens. The further back, however, you go, anything pre-1940s, it's rare that image has been properly captioned. It's rare you're going to get a connection because no one knows anymore, you're going back several generations. This happens even with photos of my family that I've surfaced and I've put on the Beardy's historical Facebook page. Anything prior to 1930, everyone's guessing. No one knows, right? That's when it becomes less useful and it just becomes of interest, y'know, how people dressed. "Oh, look, she's wearing a ribbon skirt back in 1905" or whatever. That's what interests people, it's no longer who they are, unless it's previously named.

Courteney Morin: As time goes on through your archival project, does that date shift? Where it was maybe 1930 when you started, but with the passing of Elders that connection is now 1940.

Paul Seesequasis: Oh, probably. I am probably too old to see when it gets to the 1960s, but yes, the further back it goes the further decontextualized [it becomes] and those threads get thinner, y'know. But with the photos particularly from the forties, fifties, and sixties there are people who were children then who will potentially recognize their parents or their grandparents. Those family connections are still there, and it's really dependent on those family connections being there in order to identify those people. Even up to the early fifties now, you can still get a story out of it. It's not just naming them, but there's a story to what that person did or what they were doing at that time. Which offers a whole other level of engagement with the photograph.

Courteney Morin: Is this why you feel that sense of urgency to identify people and the stories involved?

Paul Seesequasis: Entirely. When I did *Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun*, I interviewed Rene Fumoleau, John Macfie, a couple other Elders from communities – they're all gone now. They were in their eighties or nineties. Most of the people I interviewed were very sharp. They had that record; they had that knowledge. I was just fortunate at that time. I only wrote *Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun* in 2019. That's not that long ago. I couldn't do it today, y'know, I wouldn't be able to write that book today – all those people are gone. Those were the photographers of the fifties and sixties. That's not that long ago, when you think about it. So I don't see how I could do a book based on the 1940s; it would

be impossible. I would be interpreting everything, and that's not really something I would feel comfortable doing. So that sense of urgency is definitely time-based.

Courteney Morin: Why is representing the mundane through your archival project important to you, and has that changed throughout your project?

Paul Seesequasis: I think in the beginning it was really a part of what I was trying to experiment with, the day-to-day. As we talked about earlier, the stasis and the idea of the exotic gaze, and the outsider gaze, regalia, and Edward Curtis and all that – it gets out of the framework. We are people with day-to-day lives; we are people influenced by contemporary culture. Whether that's now in 2024, or then in 1955, it's the same thing. There are marvelous photos of some Dene women dancing to rock 'n' roll in the late fifties. It's just people being people. That's really, I think, an important part of this project. It was really a sense of adaption and being a living culture, not simply holding on to the past, or having to hold on to the past: it's a culture that's always evolving and it always has. And thankfully that's why we're all still here talking about it. And it was important for those photos to be in that framework and to show that.

Courteney Morin: How do you see reclamation and repatriation playing out in your archival project, either for individuals, families, or broader communities?

Paul Seesequasis: It's engagement. It is communities. It's families within those communities where that photo is from. When that engagement happens, that's where it's at. That's the reclamation if you will – that's when the photo takes on its life again. I did an exhibit on a guy called Arnold Lupson. He was an Englishman who married into Tsuut'ina First Nation just outside of Calgary. He was also a photographer. He took an interest in what we think an Englishman would only be interested in, like Banff Indian Days with everyone in feathers. But then the more he was in community the more his photography changed to what people were actually doing day to day. I did this exhibit in Calgary and a woman named Glenna Cardinal came, who was also one of the descendants of the people in the photos. And at the end of that exhibit, all those photos that had been part of the Glenbow Archives went back

to the community. So, for me, that was the best scenario. That's what I would view as reclamation. I don't know where they are, probably in different places in [the] community, and that's where they should be. It's taking them out of the Glenbow Archives, who were very supportive of it, it's not like the British Museum who aren't letting them go, and it was given back to the community. That's what I view reclamation as.

Courteney Morin: Have you had private archival photos returned to the community in that way too?

Paul Seesequasis: Yes, I've had families contact me and they arranged to have the prints sent to [the] community. That's happened on several occasions, where a family has contacted me, and a couple of those prints I post on Facebook, and they're identified. And then as long as it's okay, I put the community in contact with the family. I am not a middleman in that process at all. It's between them, and they arrange that and do all that. But I know of it happening successfully a few times in the past few years.

Courteney Morin: When the public eye is often synonymous with a colonial, or at least capitalist, eye, how do you feel about placing the archival images online on these massive platforms where there's the potential for them to turn into a kind of commodity or be meme-ified? We talked about this earlier in that the mundane isn't something you can really extract from, but do you feel there is still that risk of turning them into a commodity?

Paul Seesequasis: There is certainly, and I have posted powwow photos when I found them of historical interest – y'know I've posted photos from the fifties, partly because we read that people couldn't go to powwows or the Sundance. I don't do the Sundance photos for obvious reasons, but I will do photos around the perimeter of the Sundance – where it's obvious they're heading to the Sundance because it shows acts of resistance, but not the ceremony itself. Because those are our communities conducting ceremonies that were outlawed, and you read some history books – well, we didn't challenge that, when actually we did. So when I see that kind of expression of resistance, I will post those. So some of those powwow images, yes, they could be used.

It's always a complex question because we're dealing with Facebook and what was Twitter. We're dealing with platforms that are commercialist capitalist enterprises that are owned by two libertarian men.

I am old enough to remember when the internet first came out and social media was first coming out. It was probably Myspace then. And it was going to be the great democratizer: y'know, let everyone have equal say, we'd be rid of monopolies, we'd all have our own voice and own expression. Well, the opposite has happened, through algorithms, through the ownerships, it's becoming increasingly a narrow tool that's being manipulated. At some point it makes the use of those platforms questionable. It's something I certainly question. I don't have the answer yet, but there will be a point in time – probably sooner rather than later, maybe within a year – I'll decide that this is not the way to go with it anymore and I will stop using both X, ex-Twitter, and Instagram. Instagram, I found it easier, because I could simply post the photos without interruptions, and you get less trolls, but even those algorithms are changing. So it becomes where do you post this that is a safe place, so at some point in time I'm sure I will refocus and probably withdraw them, and just stop doing that in the way I've been doing it.

Courteney Morin: Do you feel that the community you've built around your archival project outweighs that potential risk?

Paul Seesequasis: I think on Facebook it does to an extent, and I would still find ways of doing it on Facebook to reach communities. Like I said earlier, when I started there were hardly any community Facebooks or history sites, and now there's probably more than I know of, where people are posting photos of their ancestors or of past events in the community. It's there, there's a grassroots thing there. And if I find something of interest to that community, I might just post it there and may not on Twitter or Facebook. I may just seek out those places, and there are other places you can do research like Substack where you can get into articles.

Courteney Morin: How have you seen the algorithm change and impact your archival project over time on any platform?

Paul Seesequasis: My platform itself, not so much, because there's a following there that knows what it's about and is still there. But more the general enjoyment factor of going on Twitter, say even five years ago, that sense of "community" is gone. When you look at what was "Native Twitter" it's a ghost town now. Most of the accounts I used to follow through Idle No More, through Standing Rock, and some of

the mascot stuff, most of those people are deactivated or dormant. The engagement from different activists and artists in the communities has changed in the past few years, particularly on Twitter. The Facebook communities I think are still there – but the algorithm has changed so much, it's difficult to find people now and to know what they're saying. I couldn't imagine Idle No More happening with social media now, as it did then, with the hashtag the way it is. I have trouble seeing that being as effective nowadays.

Courteney Morin: Do you have a protocol or process of asking permission from families or communities, or do you have a different relationship with photos given their place in an archive or private collection that, as you had said earlier, is more democratized? What role, if any, does consent play in posting or publishing?

Paul Seesequasis: It depends on the context. If they're public archives, I feel those images are public. They're particularly public for us to see. I have no qualms about taking a photograph that, say, hasn't been captioned and that nobody's identified that person [in the photograph], and posting on social media depending on the context of the photograph. Obviously, a ceremony or a dead person, y'know, even residential schools, I don't do. I get residential school photos sent to me, and I forward them to the TRC site in Ottawa because that's where they belong – and I'm not doing that and I don't want to traumatize; this is about positivity. In terms of archives, that's the approach. And that carries over to personal collections – it's the content of the photo, whether it's appropriate. If they are appropriate, it's great to have people named and have families see those photos for the first time.

For institutions like the British Museum, I do what I can to subvert whatever they're doing. Because their attitude of "this belongs to us, but you can come see it," I'll do anything I can to subvert that institution. So I have no qualms dealing with those kinds of institutions. I've had a few instances where I've taken a photo down because it came to light something had happened to that person's life. I took it down immediately because it was triggering for people, which I was unaware of at the time, but it was there. Particular photos of ceremony – no; of people suffering – no; of exploitation – no; of violence – no. There's a lot that I personally don't and would never post. What I post is really just a percentage of what's out there in terms of archives and photographs. I would never post a photograph of Batoche after the battle, or of Wounded Knee. Those photos should not be online.

Courteney Morin: Your exhibition, *Turning the Lens: Indigenous Archive Project*, in Regina last year at the MacKenzie Art Gallery featured photos from before 1920 of Chiefs and leaders in Treaty 4. How did that differ from your social-media-based archival project, and what was the motivation behind that?

Paul Seesequasis: First, it's different because it's a physical exhibition. I like physical exhibitions because they engage people differently: they actually get to see the prints. It's also different because they were taken by a guy named Edgar Rossie, who was a Regina-based photographer. He took them around the time the Prince of Wales visited in 1919. It was a rare instance where Treaty 4 leaders were actually encouraged to come into a city, into Regina. This was long before urban migration. They were actually encouraged to come in and be together. That's something that the Canadian government – different reserves talking to each other – but they were all there and they took that time to actually have political meetings. I found this out while doing the research. But the photographs themselves, I just thought were beautiful. They are [in] the vein of an Edward Curtis, but I really felt it was important for them to be seen together and seen together in Treaty 4. I had no qualms about that. I wasn't in any way trying to be ironic or trying to challenge what was in those photographs.

Those were the photographs that were taken on that day or days in Regina in 1919, when Treaty 4 leaders – they weren't all Chiefs, there were community leaders, and some women in there. It was about having them together. For the few days that I was around Regina, it seemed to resonate with the people from the Treaty 4 area who came and saw them. There was an Elder who came and smudged them, people recognized some of the people, et cetera. For me it was an important thing to do, and I was pleased with it, with having them seen together. Now they're back at the First Nations University. They have a Treaty 4 home, if you will.

Courteney Morin: Can you tell me a bit about your 2018 Nelson Museum, Archives and Gallery (formerly Touchstones) exhibition? As well, could you talk about engaging the First Nations there and the process of repatriating those images in that context?

Paul Seesequasis: First, I wanted to mention the work that's been done by people like Lou-ann Neel through the *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook*, and I'm thinking of the 2017 Repatriation Symposium.

Lou-ann Neel, Lucy Bell, and Nika Collison were among those who met at the symposium, and out of that came a handbook. I know this work is continuing. I am on the outside of this of course, as an independent curator. I neither represent any museum nor any community in BC, so I am very aware of my own distance from this. But I think it's that kind of engagement that is important and serious: it always involves time, it involves a willingness to listen and a real commitment. And I think with what we saw with this initiative was first steps in that commitment and opening that avenue both for repatriation – where it's possible and what's needed, what you need to establish in communities to repatriate objects, to ensure, if they're meant to be long-lasting, that they are stored correctly and all that. Also, the whole issue of protocols and what in collections can and cannot be displayed, and that certainly carries over to photography and archival photography for sure.

It's something I've encountered during my work with the Indigenous Archival Photo Project: instances where I've felt it was inappropriate or it's come up in conversation that these photos are not to be reproduced or put on public display. So it's that kind of thing, which I think a lot of museums and galleries are starting to consider, and archivists are starting to consider, as they digitize their collections and make them available online: what should not be available online. If you go to a lot of places, they've done this kind of work, like at the Smithsonian, where a lot of objects or photos now that were once visible are no longer visible online, you need special permission from the community or the archivist to actually get those photographs. So I think that's part of this engagement, which has many layers to it.

With the Nelson Museum, I completely neglected to mention an upcoming book called *Turning the Lens*, which is a collection of archival Indigenous photo essays written by not just me but other activists, photographers themselves, or Indigenous curators looking at different aspects of archival Indigenous photography. Part of this sprang up from the exhibition *Turning the Lens* at the Nelson Gallery in 2018, pre-COVID. We did this exhibition that was partly taking photographs from Rosemary Gilliat Eaton from Library and Archives Canada and teaming up with local archival photography from whatever region the museum was responsible to. It was kind of a travelling exhibition that went from Calgary to Nelson to Lethbridge, and then of course COVID happened, and it came to a grinding halt. But in that time of that exhibition, various issues were raised. In Calgary, I focused on the Arnold Lupson photographs, that English photographer who spent

time on the Tsuut'ina reserve just outside of Calgary in the thirties. He actually married into the community and took hundreds of photographs of the community; he produced a couple books out of that, mostly the beads-and-feathers kind of books.

That is what Lupson figured would sell, so it was a lot of headdresses and people in traditional clothing. But he also took hundreds of photographs that were not published in books that were just day-to-day life. This is what I was more interested in, was the day-to-day life on these reserves. How people were actually living – adapting in modernity – how people were farming or whatever they were doing through the thirties and forties. And then I met with Glenna Cardinal who is from the community, and I met with other people too, to ensure that those images were okay with the community and also that at the end of the exhibition they went back to the cultural centre. Which was an agreement between the Glenbow and the Tsuut'ina First Nation.

So this kind of agreement is also under way in Nelson, between the Nelson Gallery and the First Nations in the area. Why it came up is because the Nelson Gallery has an archival collection that includes photographs of Ktunaxa and Sinixt Nations, but some of them are not labelled or [are] mislabelled, and there was dispute about which Nation these people in the photos are from; there's overlapping territory. And as you probably know, the Sinixt Nation was only recently recognized by the Canadian government – they were forcibly exiled to the States, if you will. It's only now that land issues are being dealt with, but it brings about an interesting inter-Nation relationship in that area, as well as what the responsibility of the Nelson Gallery is with these archives.

This has all risen because of the BC chapter in *Turning the Lens* and this uncertainty as to who are in these photos and whose property they actually are, which Nation, et cetera, and the complex history of the Kootenays and that valley. So, [because] of this chapter, it's held the book up probably a year, which is fine – I'm fine with that. It's an important process of this unwrapping. I'm not directly involved because I'm not from either of those Nations; I'm not employed by the Nelson Gallery. It's between those three parties – the two First Nations, their cultural representatives, and the Nelson Gallery. Out of that, they will determine what is published in this chapter. We may end up publishing the chapter just about this process and leave the images blank just to show this relationship and the importance of dealing with these photographs with [the same] gravity as we would deal with any ceremonial or sacred item. So this is the process [now] under way. I don't have the answer [to]

how it's going to end up, when the book will come out, but I am very interested to follow it. I think that outlines some of the complexities here that your question raises, and this process is an ongoing process, not just with the Royal BC Museum but the Nelson Museum as well.

Courteney Morin: Was the Nelson Museum exhibition limited to Sinixt and Ktunaxa people and experiences, or were there other photos there as well?

Paul Seesequasis: There were other photos; the exhibition was teaming up the existing Rosemary Gilliat photos that I had selected from Library and Archives Canada. So it's Rosemary Gilliat who travelled in the north and across western Canada in the late fifties and early sixties and took a lot of photographs of Indigenous people on reserves or in communities in what is now Nunavut – Kinngait and Iqaluit. It was her photos, and we teamed them up with archival photos from whatever region that museum was located. So in Calgary it was the Arnold Lupson photos, in Lethbridge it was Blackfoot photos, and of course in Nelson they had these photos in their collection. We displayed them with very generalized captions and with notes – so basically, “these are the original captions, we don't know” – rather than try to interpret them and perhaps make mistakes. And that's how this discussion arose through a meeting that took place at the time of this exhibition. As the book project began to take form after the pandemic, and these discussions renewed, that's when it became more formalized. The Nelson Museum brought on an Indigenous advisor/curator, this whole idea of working towards this memorandum of understanding (MOU) and approaching this chapter of this book – that's what initiated it.

Courteney Morin: Okay. For the photos that were from Rosemary and Library and Archives Canada that weren't about the local communities in Nelson, how do you feel those photos exist digitally in diaspora or physically in diaspora in the exhibition itself? And what was the community engagement like with those photos?

Paul Seesequasis: The engagement was, I think really, two things – people really enjoyed the photos because the photos are reflective of people, of Indigenous people at that time. Her photographs and photojournalism don't feel like a construct, if I, say, compare Gilliat to Richard Harrington. I just find there's an intimacy with Gilliat which

may have to do with her own personality, the approach she had, that she was a woman – she was much more interested in women’s work, she had [more of] an inner acceptance there than, say, a man or Richard Harrington would, if he was interested in women’s work, which I don’t think he was. So that’s why I was interested in Gilliat as a photographer. Her images have been digitized by Library and Archives Canada, they’re all around. I see them in catalogues and books all over the place, usually accredited properly, and they’re kind of a go-to for a lot of art books and books on, particularly, artists and artists in Kinngait. You’ll see Gilliat’s photos often with artists’ stories in those books.

I feel the openness of availability has been a positive thing. So what I think what it did with this exhibition was open up another level, which I didn’t anticipate at this time, of local archives. A lot of these local archives have not gone through the process we’re talking about that’s under way in BC, and at the time the photos at the Nelson Gallery had not been. A few of them had been digitized and seen online, but the majority weren’t. So this was like a first opening, if you will, to the diaspora to the public eye of these images, and the ensuing reaction is what we’re talking about – this first step on repatriation.

The very fact of putting this collection for public display, with all the question marks about it, was necessary because it left that door open for the discussions that were going to happen and the MOU to deal with a process of collaboration and finding a belonging for these photographs. And that’s always the central thing with archival Indigenous photography, is finding that home and that proper narrative to look up any of them. So this is part of what we talk about in terms of the work involved, the seriousness it takes, and the time it takes. It is an investment in that way, and it is a serious investment, and I am happy to see it is taking place both with the Royal BC Museum and the Nelson Museum, regardless of all the behind-the-scenes hiccups which I’m sure arise in this kind of negotiation.

Courteney Morin: One of the questions I would like to ask you is what is the role of the museum and the archive with regard to storing the photographs, if any, or do you feel that role should remain in respective communities?

Paul Seesequasis: Good question. First, ideally, through a process like we’re talking about in Nelson, where there’s a re-engagement with the photos, or what happened in Calgary, where the prints were given back

to the community – I think that's repatriation, that's visual reclamation. Glenbow still has the negatives for the Arnold Lupson because they have the facilities to store them safely, which the reserve does not have, the cultural centre does not have, and doesn't have the funding currently – to my knowledge, unless things have changed – to establish that kind of archival infrastructure. That is the first issue, does the community have the ability to store these objects in a safe and lasting way for future generations? I think that's something that the museums and the communities, through MOU's, can come to some sort of agreement, and then you look for the funding to do that. Whether it's provincial or federal governments – y'know, whatever funding bodies are available for that. For me, it is a responsibility of museums and galleries to assist communities, if they choose to, reclaiming these photographs and having them in their communities. I'm talking about the negatives as well, not just prints of the photographs, which is an entirely simpler thing – it's easy for the museum or archive to print out some high-quality prints. It's a question of the storage and the handling and the communication in terms of information.

As information is gathered, museums have the responsibility to keep that up to date and update their own archival captioning, et cetera, in reflection of the information they're getting from the community. It's communication as well. It's an ongoing engagement, it's a never-ending communication. I want to underscore their importance as an educational body: I feel when people see these exhibitions, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities learn from it. It maybe challenges their perceptions, or maybe they're just beautiful photographs – whatever. But it has that educative value, and I don't want to underestimate that. The galleries and museums have the staff, have the archivists, have the facilities to safely store these objects. These exhibitions can tour across the country. They have the resources. We're still very much in the early stages of communities [having] their own museums or galleries, other than individual artists who happen to be successful. I'm talking about culturally centred institutions and galleries within the communities themselves.

That's only starting, it's infant stages. It's up to the museums and galleries to support the growth of that where it's possible. And it's happening, I mean, different communities in Saskatchewan – Poundmaker's reserve now has its own museum, et cetera – these things are starting to happen. But it's never going to be easy, and because I think these community-centred galleries and museums are so new, and

newly funded, they're fragile. So if a government changes or things get cut back, their ability to survive may be cut back too. That's why this partnership between galleries and museums, and Indigenous cultural institutions in the communities, is so important. It's a two-way process. It must be.

Courteney Morin: You talked about how there's a more intimate connection with viewing a work, an archival work in person, and that's it's much different. How is it different and what kind of varied reactions do you see?

Paul Seesequasis: First, you're not looking at a screen. You're in a physical space and you're sharing that space with other people. It's different if those photos are based in that territory, which is always the best thing, like the Treaty 4 photos, or the Lupson photos [that] were in Calgary near the Tsuut'ina reserve. When they're based in that community and they're from the community – like the James Brady photos that I curated in North Battleford and then Prince Albert – they're all where families can come see them, where they are in those photos or if they have a relation to them. So the relational aspect of the exhibition happens on a much higher level, on a deeper level. Even if fewer people see them than if they were on social media, there's a deeper level of engagement than if they're posted online or even in a book, for example. It's like comparing doing a ceremony online to a ceremony in person: they're both just totally different things.

Courteney Morin: It's really interesting that you said there's a different level of engagement even if fewer people see them. How have people in remote communities engaged or accessed your work? People who may be facing a digital divide and can't necessarily access Facebook or have the technology to view? And is that what the physical archival exhibitions supplement? And is there more engagement there?

Paul Seesequasis: Sadly no, and I mean sadly no in terms of engagement. Unless people are on Facebook or have social media, I can't engage them. I have no means to engage them unless I somehow had those photos and travelled to those communities. And I have no budget or ability to do that, so engagement is reliant on some sort of access to social media. What could work, and I haven't done it in a remote area, is a physical exhibition in a remote area. I think what does resonate

though with people, in different communities, is when these photos are seen ... quite often these communities are dealing with major issues, whether it's drugs, violence, et cetera. These photos can almost have a healing kind of effect, and I don't want to exaggerate that: these photos aren't going to suddenly get rid of these problems. They kind of show a time when the families haven't been torn asunder. And not to say we're not turning those photos into an exercise of nostalgia; rather, it is to say that we have strength, we have family, we have kinship, and that's what we get out of these things – and these photographs can be a small part of doing that.

Courteney Morin: Do you see the relationship change between the observer and the photographed subject when the photograph is contextualized with those stories? And how is that different from seeing a decontextualized photo in a setting like a museum, where the tagline just says “Indigenous family”?

Paul Seesequasis: Oh, totally different. If it's just “Indigenous family” there's no connection, that photograph is not alive, it's not resonating with anyone. It's just as objectified as much as a pair of moccasins on display where the maker is not identified; it's just another Indian thing on display. Whatever, Indian, Métis, Inuit, whatever – it's just another Indigenous thing on display. But when it's taken out of that museum or gallery context and connected with people from the community, and they take over the narrative, then it comes home. I think that's the most beneficial part of this project, is when that happens. I'm not the only one that's doing it: there's Project Naming that's going on,³ there are other communities that have their own projects going on, I know there are specific research projects taking place. I know that most of us are aiming toward that goal of community building.

Courteney Morin: Do you think there's an authenticity of representation for the subject of the photograph that's contextualized then?

Paul Seesequasis: Entirely. Because they're named, their family is seeing it, even maybe their stories are being told. The photos, for lack of a better word, come alive again. They're repatriated to the community, and it's

³ Library and Archives Canada's Project Naming is an initiative in which people can identify First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people in the Canadian archives. See x.com/project_naming and facebook.com/project.naming or contribute to the naming process in the Library and Archives Canada Collection Search.

no longer just an object without a name, a context, a place, y'know; it's returned home and that gives it meaning.

Courteney Morin: Why do you feel digitizing private collections, for example, which would otherwise exist online, is important?

Paul Seesequasis: Because it gives people a chance to see them, who can't get to the museum or never go to the museum. I think museums and galleries, while they may talk about reconciliation, and they may talk about decolonization, they really are colonial institutions that some of us are comfortable to go in because we're kind of acclimatized to those power structures. Y'know, the wine and cheese openings, and all the stuff that goes around these places, but they're definitely places that intimidate a lot of people from our communities, whether they're urban or on reserve. They don't go to galleries or exhibitions. That's always been an issue, not just for photography, but Indigenous arts more broadly. The moment you're just performing to a settler audience, and you see people from your community, there's something happening there. The way success is built, and the art is structured, is profoundly alienating. So taking photographs out of those institutions where anyone with a Facebook account can access it gives them a chance to engage it in a way they would not otherwise.

Courteney Morin: Where does making the archival photographs broadly online challenge the way individuals might relate and understand their family, or community stories, or even themselves? What impact are you seeing unfold?

Paul Seesequasis: The impact is more about the narrative that develops with the story; it's giving substance to it. Like we've been saying, thematically it brings that image alive and into the present because that thread is reconnected between the past and now through that photograph that was not there beforehand. I don't want to exaggerate that it somehow changes the community or the people; but it does, I think, change the photograph. It allows the photograph to have a home again, to actually be brought home to whatever community it's from, and for whatever person to be named – and it's important for that process to happen, so it does more than just being an object in a museum or a collection, an archive. It is separate and divorced from its place. And it also does a bit of what we talked about before: it shows continuity, adaptation, and

resistance. All those things we were talking about earlier, it reinforces that our ancestors got through this, and we can too – maybe it can have that resonance as well for people.

Courteney Morin: Do you think the community that's built around the social media archive project or even the physical exhibitions you present are different from the individualized process of going through a city museum or archives, trying to search for that information – and that contextualization offers something more and a different relationship?

Paul Seesequasis: I think it does, but I don't want to be critical of people doing archival research. Because if their aim is to find these photos of ancestors to get them back to communities, they're doing precisely what we're talking about. They are reframing the photographs and bringing them home. If the photograph is simply researching a paper about Cree life in the 1890s and it's for a paper or a book, then it's a different process, it's not going to repatriate that photo. I'm not saying it's a bad process because, you know, if that person does their proper research, then maybe that photo will be an important part of their thesis or their book, whatever their doing, but it's not going to bring it back to the community.

And that's the difference, I think – that kinship, that aspect of kinship that exists. I even had someone recognize a photo today. They said, "That's my grandfather." So, it happened, it's there, it's a connection. And this photo has never been named, and it's a fairly well-known photo of the Alcatraz occupation. The young man in that photo has never been identified, and now he's been identified, and the family has seen that photo. There's something real and tangible in that. It's not only being on Facebook but seeing the photo at the time it's been posted, because even if they're on Facebook it goes past the feed and into the void, it's dependent on that chance, of someone seeing it or being passed on.

Courteney Morin: Do you think the relationship you have to social media, predominantly Facebook and what you identified as what used to be Twitter, has that changed over time as your archival project has evolved?

Paul Seesequasis: It has evolved, it's become much more focused [on] regions that I'm comfortable with. And that's for a couple reasons. I'm

not comfortable going and posting photos of areas that I am far removed from and have very limited knowledge of – not that my knowledge is infinite. There are other people doing that work, on a regional level, the best example is what we see on Facebook community history sites and family sites. That was not as prevalent when I started out, and that's [what] I see this project devolving into, in terms of a social media aspect, is to feed more into those regional, localized sites that are there for people. As opposed to having to try to have a wide berth on three platforms, have a more focused approach to specific communities and Nations.

Courteney Morin: My final question for you is, what are some of your favourite photographs that you've seen and been able to share?

Paul Seesequasis: Oh, my goodness, so many. I have your email; I'll pick four and send them to you.

Courteney Morin: Well, it was so wonderful to connect. Thank you for your generosity in time and answers. I'm thrilled that I got to do this.

Paul Seesequasis: I enjoyed the interview, and I want to thank you for taking the interest and the time.