

## Statement of Interest

Student Name:

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### *"A Critical History of Early Photography in Northern Alberta"*

The arrival of photography in Canada during the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century parallels the emergence of a conceptual backdrop: 'modernity,' which many historians (Ranger, McKay, Hobsbawn, Schwartz) have employed in explaining major changes occurring then in Western culture and society. As photography's unchallenged ability to convey reality altered visual culture and modernized 'ways of seeing', developments in Canada revolved around this new and unfolding power of representation. Representation holds that the objective truth of an image will always be hidden behind what the photographer intended and also includes the theoretical framework within which an image may be read or 'decoded' by a viewer. In examining the cultural and historical currency possessed by visual reproductions, this study will show how cultural meaning is derived, negotiated and reciprocated through the outcomes and uses of photographic production and reproduction.

The Canadian government serves as a perfect example of the employment of the power of images. Scholars have studied how photography glamorizing the immigrant experience in the west served exclusionist and colonialist settlement initiatives (Osborne). More recent work has used amateur collections to add to the historical picture of settlement societies, or the relationship between natives and whites in the colonial era (Langford, Williams). My research examines the connections between state or corporate photographic narratives of western Canada in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, and those produced by the settlers themselves. How did the settlers represent, through photographs, to the collision of the national settlement dream and the reality of homesteading in the harsh climate of northern Alberta? How did those who were successful choose to present their experience? That is, what reciprocity is there between the federal government and the immigration department's visual propagandizing, and the experience recorded by immigrants? In undertaking to circumscribe much larger discourses of colonialism and the social history of western Canada, my interdisciplinary approach will engage current historiographical debates between historians of Canada; geographers studying settlement patterns; art historians studying the connection between environment and expression; and cultural theorists who study the nature of communication, arguing over what meaning -- if any -- a photograph can retain and transmit between image-maker and viewer.

Many community holdings in Alberta contain documentation and the material history collections of settler families. The National Archives, in close proximity to Carleton, houses documents relevant to immigration history and, more specifically, the CN Rail photographic collection has recently been endowed to the Museum of Science and Technology. In examining all these collections, the goal will be an informed historical reading of the photographs' location in time, with sensitivity to the 'unwritten' notions of space and attitude which they contain. This study obviously raises questions about the validity of images as historical evidence. Questions regarding the danger of romantically 'gazing' into the past, or concerns over using the malleability of meaning in photographs to alter their message in order to suit the present, will be duly addressed (Samuel).