In 1970 Queen Elizabeth II visited Beaver House, the headquarters of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) in London, to view a special exhibit commemorating the tercentenary of the company’s founding. In one portion of the display, a series of sepia-toned photographs were arranged, many of them depicting Edmonton and various points along the Athabasca-Slave-Mackenzie river system that linked fur-trading periphery to regional metropole. The opening panel explained the purpose of the gallery:

The advent of the camera brought a novel dimension to the historical records of the Hudson’s Bay Company. For the first time the actual conditions in the Company’s operations could be properly represented and permanently recorded. These pictures give their own vivid account of life as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Within the wider context of the exhibition, the photographs might appear to reinforce a straightforward and celebratory narrative of expansion, commerce,
and progress, despite the almost complete lack of explanatory captions. But how exactly did these historical images speak to the audience? How could they “give their own vivid account”?

The majority of the photographs employed in the 1970 exhibit were taken by professional photographer Charles W. Mathers in 1901, but over time, his images have been employed to support multiple, and sometimes competing, narratives of the North. From souvenir booklets to scientific reports to historical accounts and works of fiction, Mathers’ photographs of the Athabasca-Mackenzie river basin circulated far and wide, and new meanings accompanied these sites of reproduction. Mathers’ photographs were reframed by new exhibitionary spaces and given new archival meanings as the avenues for “displaying history” were transformed in the twentieth century. In particular, Mathers’ successor, Ernest Brown, resituated these Northern photographs within a new context that spoke to history, while simultaneously projecting a modern utopian vision of a Northern future.

As a collaborative excavation of the multiple meanings attached to Mathers’ photographs of the North, we move beyond a single, static reading of these images. We focus particularly on the intertwining threads of economic development and constructions of race that were reshaped over time and across space. In comparing Mathers’ and Brown’s visual orderings of place and race, we suggest that photographs constituted an important site of engagement in the early twentieth century where the often-competing meanings of modernity and history were arranged and negotiated. For both Mathers and Brown, photographs carried evidential meanings, but as John Tagg argued twenty years ago, the very nature of “evidence” and how such images should be read also needs to be historicized. If the mobility of Mathers’ photographs served fluid purposes across time and space, Brown worked tirelessly to stabilize their meanings within a comprehensive historical framework. Even as the tercentenary exhibition claimed that through photographs, the operations of the company “could be properly represented and permanently recorded,” such assumptions were layered on top of seventy years of shifting discourses surrounding the role of the HBC in the North, and the evidential value of photographs in shaping these views.

In the course of retracing some of the historical pathways taken by Mathers’ photographs, our chapter reflects on the circulatory power of photographs to envision, remember, appropriate, and join history/memory with geography/place. Within these reimaginings, race was central to the visual rendering of the North, binding the temporal and spatial orderings produced through photographs of the Athabasca-Mackenzie river basin. The change in narratives attached to this series of photographs was not simply a product of
Charles W. Mathers

In early June 1901, Edmonton’s only professional photographer, Charles Wesley Mathers, joined the fur brigade of William Connor on a three-month journey to the Arctic Ocean, travelling down the Athabasca River, onto Lake Athabasca and, by way of the Slave River and Great Slave Lake, down the Mackenzie to Fort McPherson on the Arctic Circle. In training a camera on Canada’s “Far North,” Mathers aimed to recoup the cost of his three thousand-mile journey by selling copyrighted images to newspapers, magazines, and research institutions. Like previous voyages to Calgary and the Rocky Mountains, the photographer would also release souvenir albums depicting the amateur exploration. The Edmonton Bulletin helped to ensure Mathers’ success by vaunting his expert status to readers: these would be “the only views taken in the north country by a professional photographer using the latest and most complete appliances.”

In the popular imagination, photography was understood as the mechanical ability to produce, in both composition and character, the image of an original scene. At the close of the nineteenth century, the camera’s power to represent a truthful picture of reality was readily accepted in Western society. To properly view the photographs that a camera produced, however, required more than accepting the veracity of an image. Viewers also brought the social and cultural codes of the nineteenth century to bear on and explain the objects before their eyes, searching for cues about the appearance and the order of what they saw. The world of appearances suggested that things (people, objects, and places) conveyed innate qualities and moral bearings outwardly. When William Connor arrived in Edmonton from the north for the summer of 1900, city residents were shocked to see him arrive in the company of three Déh Gah Got’iné men. The Edmonton Bulletin assured readers that “they are the first Slaveys who ever visited Edmonton, and the wonders of civilization are a revelation to them.” Euro-Canadian readers were encouraged to discern the civilizing process at work in the minds of the Native people now in their midst and, through the supposed moral appearance of Edmonton to the Déh Gah Got’iné men, were given an explanation of how the gaze would be returned. Equating the business of town life with morality, the newspaper imagined that “their ideas of the whiteman’s mode of living as they see it here is highly edifying.”

Another powerful visual logic of modern Europeans was the feeling that order existed naturally and was decipherable in the world, and that its proper identification would lead to progressive goals. As James Murton discovered in
early photography of British Columbia’s industrial potential, photographers carefully conceived of images that appealed to the “language of order and the rationalization of nature” to speak to investors. The introduction of photography to the North was no exception. Mathers’ 1901 photographic narrative recorded economic potential by drawing upon a language that attempted to arrange and assemble the meanings of racial and gendered appearances in the river systems north of Edmonton. Photographs, however, are inherently unstable platforms in which to fix meaning, as later circulations of Mathers’ images would demonstrate.

From all appearances, C.W. Mathers’ chief patron in Edmonton was Frank Oliver, founding editor of the Edmonton Bulletin and member of parliament for the district of Alberta in Laurier’s Liberal government. A self-proclaimed pioneer and relentless champion of Edmonton, Oliver also recognized the power of images to mobilize and transmit ideological messages. During the gold rush of the 1890s, he promoted travel through Athabasca as the only suitable “All-Canadian” route to the Klondike, using Mathers’ images of industry and transportation in Edmonton to support his arguments. Mathers specialized in photography celebrating Edmonton’s ascendancy to a metropolis at the centre of regional progress in farming, fur trading, and mining. His first book, Souvenir of the Edmonton District, emphasized the quality and abundance of arable land adjacent to the former fur-trading depot, reflecting the views of Oliver’s political backers, A.C. Rutherford and J.H. MacDonald, that “[i]t is of the utmost importance to all Canada that the vast tract of fertile agricultural land in the North should be opened for settlement and placed under cultivation. The government should carry out a vigorous immigration policy.” By the time of his 1901 voyage into the Far North, Mathers’ stock images were mainstays for representing a productive and civilized hinterland surrounding Edmonton. Now, images captured heading down the Athabasca-Mackenzie would help envisage economic modernization in the river systems. Frank Oliver vouched in the Bulletin that Mathers’ images would speak for the North, suggesting that readers feel “a sufficient assurance that they will do justice to the subject.”

Coming from Oliver, the praise of the Bulletin was hardly disinterested.

After his return from the Arctic Circle, Mathers meticulously indexed, labelled, and copyrighted his photographs. The Department of Agriculture published some of these pictures in a pamphlet titled The Far North, which the photographer reproduced himself the next year as A Souvenir from the North. Although close to four hundred images were made during three months of travel in the North, these souvenir books each contain no more than twenty prints and are limited to a small range of subjects: river travel, the men in the scow brigade, trading posts dotting the Mackenzie basin, and images of Sub-
No written source explains why these images were chosen and not others. Apart from the labels and captions Mathers used on the photographs, the only textual record connected to his original voyage is a 1903 article in *The Farmers Advocate* recreating the voyage. The popular Western digest approached Mathers to contribute an expert piece on the North for a special issue on progress in agriculture in the regions of Canada. In Mathers’ submission, an adventuring photographer emerges, enduring harsh environments and conquering great distances to provide his camera with the best views. Many Euro-Canadians associated Northern adventure narratives with ideas of unchecked freedom and rugged masculinity. American author and sportsman Caspar Whitney justified his hunting trip down the Mackenzie in 1896 as a retreat from progress: “I went that I might for a time escape the hum and routine sordidness of the city, and breathe air which was not surcharged with convention and civilization.” Mathers’ impression conveyed the spirit, if not the flare of Whitney’s account: travelling in the North “was decidedly bad.” Indeed, it grew worse, and as the harshness of nature increased the further the expedition moved from Edmonton, the physical difficulty of travel and the mechanical difficulty of acquiring images increased in turn. As the Northern days grew longer, he recorded that “[i]n order to get the photographs we found we had to follow the natives’ example and stay up all night and sleep in the daytime.”

Photographic captions and the published narrative worked to establish this kind of referential connection among the images, the “conquest of distance,” and movement northward. Mathers knew that the right visual narrative would increase the value of his photographs. The opening plate in *A Souvenir from the North* presented what was for many a quintessential scene of hard life in the north, tracking scows up the Athabasca (plate 1).

Such images of tracking indicated arrival in the North and conjured a powerful mystique. Agnes Deans Cameron remembered how the scow brigades, after lazily drifting downriver to the Arctic, made the return voyage against the current: “Towing the boats, weary mile after mile, ‘by the power o’ man,’ the half-breed boatmen scrambling now on the bank, now in the water, tugging the heavily-laden craft after them. It is a mode of transportation that neither written word nor camera can do justice to.” Mathers was well aware of this. Although tracking upriver always took place at the end of a Northern voyage, he kept these images at the start of the books. Doing so established a clear visual narrative of adventure in difficult terrain. It also kept the visual imagery of the journey segregated between what transpired in the Subarctic region and what happened in the “Far North.” As will be demonstrated, Mathers was careful not to let the tracking done by the Native brigades or the hauling of scows by modern steamers take place inside the geography of the Inuit.
The relative ease involved in the ordering and reordering of images enabled the mapping of a racialized narrative across the real and imaginary spaces of the North. In the nineteenth century, the ability of photographs to “picture place”—to order dynamic social space into a static and apprehensible scene with a singular meaning—merged powerfully with colonial attitudes about ethnicity. Landscapes were embodied with racial characteristics, Lynda Nash argues, because modern society “insisted that races were associated with particular places and that ‘race’ itself was both an outcome of location and the principal determinant of one’s fitness for any particular land.” Heading north down the Athabasca on a scow, Mathers’ voyage also unfolded through a sequence of places and narratives that reinforced racialized understandings of place, projecting differences between European and Native, modern and authentic, or progressive and traditional along a spatial arc that began in Edmonton and ended at the Arctic Circle. As Northern peoples increasingly overlapped with the infrastructure of the modern Northwest, the bounds of what constituted an “authentic” Native person had to be continually negotiated. Native labourers were prominent in the early transportation photographs of the scows, but more
modern modes of transportation, such as the river steamer, were never associated with Native peoples. Instead, Mathers was fascinated with the strength of the packers he saw at the Grand Rapids north of Athabasca Landing and was insistent on the premise that these people were somehow natural labourers: “The packing of the goods across this portage was really the first work I saw the Indians do, and the loads they carried were truly astonishing…. I saw one of
them packing an ordinary No. 8 cook stove, and another—a small, skinny individual—walking off with a barrel of sugar.” While Euro-Canadians imagined themselves to be strong in the North away from “civilization,” Mathers’ persistent depiction of Native and Métis people freighting goods, portaging scows, shooting rapids, and carrying furs emphasized the place of Native people as workers in the labour economy.

The shift to economic visions replaced an earlier trope in the Euro-Canadian colonial imagination that saw Native people mostly as timeless, anthropological objects incompatible with civilization and modernity. “An Indian Packer” (plate 2) and the many photographs Mathers took of Native people at work stand in marked contrast to the early photography Mathers undertook in southern Alberta during the 1890s, where a wide collection of ethnographic portraiture of the Tsuu T’ina (Sarcee) and Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) make up the corpus of his work. Mathers started working for Calgary stock photographers Boorne and May in 1892 and purchased their Edmonton studio the following year. The firm lauded itself as the first to photograph “authentic” Sundance images, while at the same time capturing for posterity the “vanishing races” of Western Canada that many thought would soon disappear in the wake of modernity. Mimicking ethnographic imagery and exotic display, Boorne, May, and Mathers found a healthy market in Native “views” and “types” alive in the East, provided buyers accept their caveat that the “Indians with which our neighbourhood abounds—although not exactly up to the standard of the ‘noble red man’ of Fennimore Cooper—are very interesting.” Throughout the 1890s, Mathers continued photographing Native men and women in the face-forward and inert ethnographic poses used by Boorne and May. When he focused his camera on the Dënesųłiné (Chipewyan), Déh Gah Got’iné (Slavey), Tłįchǫ (Dog-Rib), and Métis people north of Edmonton in 1901, his compositions differed significantly. Native men were depicted hard at work in occupations related to Northern commerce. The visual moment of the photograph, however, often conceals the history of its making. Whether individual Native men and women that Mathers’ pictured hoped to control the effects of their own representation is difficult to recover. Looking at Mathers’ souvenir albums suggests that the effect was not to erase Aboriginality, but, in the words of Adele Perry, to “reformulate First Nations men as economic subjects.”

So the landscape of the adventuring photographer became filled with the otherwise routine practices of Native labourers “opening” the North, making it into a Euro-Canadian place for the growing city to the south. Frank Oliver thought it natural that the region should be “annexed to the trade territory of Edmonton.” But while the role of trade and the Native people working in it were highlighted, some elements of the exchange system remained notoriously
absent in this souvenir book image. Despite having taken extensive images of
HBC posts, in Mathers’ souvenir books, the Hudson’s Bay Company received
close to no representation. To be sure, the HBC was not without its critics, and
Frank Oliver was among the most vociferous. Epitomized by journalist and
historian Alexander Begg, anti-HBC sentiment generally assumed that before
the Canadian purchase of Rupert’s Land in 1871, the Northwest "had been re-
garded as a land fit only for the hunter and trapper; and the fur traders knowing
that the advent of civilization meant the destruction of the fur trade, spared
no pains to circulate the idea that it was a cold, inhospitable, and barren coun-
try." Oliver’s distrust of the HBC’s power in the North was nurtured working
with Begg and the Canada Firster, John Schultz, at the Nor’Wester in Winnipeg
during the 1870s. However, while ardent nationalists such as Begg and Schultz
portrayed the HBC as a foreign and imperial entity dominating the Northwest
at the expense of a nascent Canadian dominion, for Oliver the crime was dif-
ferent. The view from Edmonton saw the honourable company falling increas-
ingly out of step with an emerging liberal-order framework in the region.\footnote{31}
The monopsony strength the HBC had enjoyed since the incorporation of
the rival North West Company in 1821 was stalling the progressive effects of
a laissez-faire market economy in the region.\footnote{32} In other words, the Northwest
would need modern capitalism in order to develop, and the HBC represented
an antiquated mercantilism. In Edmonton, Oliver determined that the northern
fur country must be opened to new trades, agriculture, and settlement, and
he saw the 1897 Klondike rush as a step in this direction—he railed against the
HBC’s counter-efforts to deter travellers from using the Athabasca-Mackenzie
route to the goldfields.\footnote{34} The company had good reason to be hostile, as Oliver
had made significant inroads leading toward his vision of the North during the
1890s. By 1893 free-traders could operate on the rivers, introducing paper mon-
ey as a challenge to the barter system.\footnote{35} Four years later, with Treaty 8 in view,
Oliver brought the state to bear directly on the region when he convinced the
North-West Mounted Police to reconnaissance the area. When viewed through
the context of Oliver’s ambitions in the North, Mathers’ photographs appear
to speak against the HBC unequivocally for the value of free trade and capital
practices of exchange.

The new order of capitalist exchange and geographical expansion was ap-
parent in Mathers’ depictions of opening of the North for modern Edmonton.
Recalling how a Tłı̨chǫ trapper traded at Fort Resolution with the HBC, the
photographer laments the archaic inexpediency of the company’s barter sys-
tem. After a day of celebration, he writes, the trapper “returns and talks about
his fur and the price, the scarcity of game, his dogs, and how many miles they
can travel in a day…. Three or four days are taken up in this way, as if he were

reluctant to part with his much-prized peltries. To him this is the one event of
the year.” Not only slow, the HBC also unfairly retained its suppliers, in his
opinion: “After the sorting and counting is done, the trader hands the Indian
two pieces of paper. On one is marked the value of the fur and on the other
the amount of his ‘gratuity.’ It seems a very absurd mode of trading. I give you
so much for your furs and so much for nothing.” Mathers’ photographs of
Native men at work appear within a larger framework. In a new North of free
exchange and commerce, Native people liberated from the grip of the HBC
could be the vanguard of industrial civilization in Edmonton’s hinterland.

Transforming Native men and women from ethnographic subjects into
economic individuals required more than changing their appearance on film.
The order in which European and Native were displayed was also contested
through photography. If Native men and women were represented as part of
capitalist modernity, this reimagining also left vacant a position of “uncivilized”
other. As the expedition continued north, their entry into a new geographical
space brought a resolution to the shifting order Mathers was recording. While
in the lower Mackenzie, the river voyageurs were “not long anchored until we
saw what we came to see. The Esquimaux in their kayaks … a perfectly uncivi-
lized tribe.”

Witnessing the Inuit was a prized opportunity for Europeans at the turn
of the century. Using his camera, Mathers both emphasized the spectacle of
the encounter and used it to mediate the place of the Inuit relative to the new
North in the Subarctic. His images pronounced the difference between these
new people and the Dene and Cree to the south. In the early part of his voyage
on the Athabasca, he had employed panoramic views of Métis and Natives hard
at work in the service of trade. Beginning down the Mackenzie River, Mathers
began to picture his voyage through the symbolic reversal of the order of the
Subarctic. Once he encountered the Inuit, Mathers returned to the essential-
ized photography of “racial types” presented for ethnographic scrutiny that he
had used in southern Alberta. Captions such as “Group of Esquimaux taken
at Midnight” underwrote such posturing, where people at the mouth of the
Mackenzie “were up during what we called night.” Unlike the Dene people of
the Subarctic, whose place was as labourers, Mathers presented viewers of his
souvenir books with the Inuit people of the Far North deeply situated in their
decidedly non-Western environs. In “Esquimaux, Peel’s River – 269” (plate 3),
he positioned a family in front of their summer dwelling. Each member, un-
named in the scene, carries a curio of daily life: a knife, a sealskin coat, a pipe
in the child’s mouth. The Edmonton Bulletin described the meaning of these
encounter images quite succinctly, explaining that “the Esquimaux were met
only at McPherson on Peel river and are the most interesting, not only because
they are the most distant and the least known, but because they are most independent of civilized influences and show by far the greatest ingenuity and industry in the manufacture of their tools, utensils and weapons.”

For audiences disenchanted by the “taming” of Native people in Western Canada, the Inuit became the new “noble savage” removed from the cities in the south where, in the words of northern sportsman Warburton Pike, “we carry this civilization too far, and are in danger of warping our natural instincts.”

For Edmonton to really annex the Athabasca territory as Oliver hoped, the spatial boundary of otherness needed to move northward. As the labouring Dene and Cree people became labourers, the Inuit of the Far North became the
new limit of familiarity. The otherness of the Inuit, for many Euro-Canadians, was still open to cultural interpretation—were they “defective Europeans” or “perfect Indians”? Rather than a problem at the margins of the colonial world, debates over the nature of such bodies in question were often central to the production of difference and fundamental to the discursive reinscription of racialized essentialisms. When extended to the question of “what” the Inuit were, Frank Oliver’s *Bulletin* sketches a familiar hierarchy of races: “in appearance they resemble the Japanese much more than they do the Indians and their skill and industry would indicate such a relationship rather than with the Indians.” Despite the “skill and industry” demonstrated in commerce and transportation on the Athabasca, which Mathers’ many images testified to, once Native people were judged at the mouth of the Mackenzie, they paled before the Inuit. Retaining this spatial division was essential in bringing the Athabasca territory of the HBC into Edmonton’s orbit. The *Bulletin* continues: “The Esquimaux and Indians have no intercourse whatever. They look upon each other as of different and hostile race.”

Mathers’ images arranged and narrated both civilization and savagery through the different spaces of the North by writing them onto the bodies of
his subjects—Native bodies at work and Inuit bodies in ethnographic display. This helps explain why “Eskimo in their Kayaks” (plate 4), displaying two Inuit men facing the photographer directly and in semi-profile, remained unselected for inclusion in the booklet. The image Mathers did use, “Eskimos and their Kayaks” (plate 5), has close similarities with what might be a more suitable alternative but betrays the conventional logic that guided booklet production and circulation. Mathers did not see the men as Western subjects but felt content to depict them as ethnographic others, turning one backward so as to open him to the gaze of scrutiny and display. The photograph simultaneously reduces individuality as it creates a static anthropological model of “Eskimo”—another man turned backwards substitutes a perfect copy of the facing man. Placing these images at the end of his souvenir books allowed Mathers to differentiate the “perfectly uncivilized” nature of Inuit kayaks and set them apart from the labour performed by Native peoples.

Peter Geller suggests that while images of the Inuit bore the meaning of “primitive” to Euro-Canadians, photographers also tried to explain that “they are also hardy and cheerful and resilient and worth admiring: here are the heroic qualities of Inuit lifestyle, of humans against the elements.” 43 The Inuit provided
a benchmark for Euro-Canadians’ own status as moderns, but a large part of this relationship also rested on geography and Mathers’ camera being in the North. Coates and Morrison claim that “[t]he goal of newcomers was not to adapt to the North, but by the use of technological superiority or the expenditure of a great deal of money, to conquer the North and make it irrelevant to them.”

Although Mathers’ track south to Edmonton must have been longer and more arduous than his entrance to the North, images of the return are not pictured in his albums. The visual narrative portrayed in the books closes with the Inuit discovered at the northern reach of a voyage from Edmonton to the terminal point of civilization. In between lay the territory “annexed” to Edmonton from the possession of Native peoples and the economic control of the HBC.

**Ernest Brown**

In 1904 Mathers sold his portrait studio and some of his equipment to his assistant, Ernest Brown, who had recently arrived in Edmonton to help run the portrait business while Mathers concentrated on views. The sale agreement stipulated that Mathers would not undertake portraits for five years, while Brown would similarly refrain from entering into the business of views. However, it was not long before Brown was in arrears, unable to maintain the mortgage, and was undertaking his own view photography. In 1907, after moving to Vancouver, Mathers arranged a new financial contract with Brown that included the sale of Mathers’ entire view collection. Since Mathers had previously purchased the photographs of the defunct Calgary firm Boorne and May, this transaction was significant, involving the transfer of tens of thousands of negatives. Brown aggressively pursued photographic negatives from other local photographers until his total collection numbered more than fifty thousand, allowing him to claim that his views covered more than “6,000 subjects,” and could “illustrate Edmonton from 1867 to last week,” forming “the largest collection west of Montreal.”

After a decade of success in which he had managed to build his own modestly named edifice, the Ernest Brown Block on Jasper Avenue, business declined in the war years, and when the post-war recession hit, eviction from his building followed in 1920. Although he managed to hang on to his collection of negatives, they were cold comfort at the time. Brown’s financial woes would transform both his present politics and his later historical consciousness. He ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for the Independent Labour Party in 1921 and operated a short-lived newspaper, *The Glowworm*. He repeatedly attacked creditors, banks, the financial system, and partisan politics as obstacles to achieving a co-operative society.
Despite the fact that he held “all the photographic records of anything that happened in the West for nearly 40 yrs back,” Brown remained bitter over his financial decline, complaining that “the people of today have no sentiment when it comes to paying money to back that sentiment, consequently my collections of records bring me no return whatever.” And yet Brown’s words point to an important conceptual shift in his understanding of the photographic images he had accumulated. The original primary value of the massive collection had been to serve as stock for Brown’s store, reproduced as souvenirs. This transfer of negatives between photographers was common practice at the time. From the 1920s on, however, Brown came to view his archive as a documentation of history, a marketable heritage commodity, even if few were willing to pay for such “sentiment” at the moment. It was not as glimpses of the exotic or scenic that the images held value; rather, it was the specific reference of a time now considered to be past.

This transformation in the meaning of the image archive was part of a broader development in how photography itself was understood. Miles Orvell describes the visual transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as moving from a “culture of replication” to a “culture of authenticity.” The expansion of amateur photography in the early twentieth century altered notions of what it meant to experience place through photographs. Simply buying postcard views of professional photographers was no longer deemed to be “authentic” when amateurs could “capture” the scene on their own. As Nancy Martha West notes, Kodak’s own advertising shifted from the camera as an item of leisure to an indispensable tool of nostalgia, reinforcing a discourse of personalized, “authentic” experience. Thus, Brown was left to reconfigure the collection to meet the new demand for, in Orvell’s words, “the real thing.” In the end, producing a visual narrative of history proved to be a simpler task than extracting a remunerative value from photographs deemed to be historical artifacts.

Although devastated by his bankruptcy, Brown had trained his former assistant, Gladys Reeves, as a photographer and had helped her to establish the Art League Studio in Edmonton. As the market for old postcard views and dated souvenir books evaporated, Brown and Reeves turned to producing large albums of photographs that were marketed distinctly as history. One of the earliest customers for this memory project was the Hudson’s Bay Company, which was in the midst of reinventing its public image from that of a London-based relic of colonialism to a Canadian retail department store. The HBC had used a number of Mathers’ photographs in its 1920 commemorative anniversary history brochure. Although the company had paid copyright fees to Brown through its public relations agency, only a few Canadian officials were aware of the archive until 1926, when Governor Charles V. Sale encountered
samples of Brown’s work during a tour of Canadian operations. A strong advocate for promoting the company’s history, Sale quickly arranged for a large selection of them to be printed.  

Rather than simply reproducing a series of prints, Brown and Reeves designed three separate photographic albums of pictures. According to Brown’s calculations, the three albums collectively included 192 “subjects,” which were expanded into 291 separate pictures. Bound in leather, the albums were substantial in size, measuring 16 in. x 11 in. and weighing 17 to 18 lbs.; when delivered in 1927, Brown and Reeves received a princely sum of $750 for their efforts. The sale sparked a similar album project for the Canadian Pacific Railway (which sold for $500) and launched Brown and Reeves into a new field, selling a variety of historical albums centred around themes, such as the history of Calgary and “The Birth of the West.” The weight and size of the albums signalled the monumental nature of photographs as documents of history, in contrast to the thin and cheaply produced touristic souvenir booklets of “views” produced by Mathers. And unlike the earlier booklets, which reproduced each photograph at roughly the same size, Brown’s reprinting also resized the photographs so that some filled an entire page, while others were smaller in order to fit multiple images on the same page. In comparing the two, we need to be aware of the differences in materiality that mark their production.  

The three HBC albums were initially destined for three different locations: one was intended specifically for the Edmonton Hudson’s Bay store, one for the Canadian Committee head offices in Winnipeg, and the third for Beaver House, London. At Sale’s request, all three albums were sent to London, but then they seemed to disappear. Only the Winnipeg album has survived intact, having reappeared under mysterious circumstances at Beaver House in the late 1950s.

The *Hudson’s Bay Company Album* is heavily dependent upon Mathers’ images, and in many ways, the narrative is similar to that presented in *A Souvenir from the North*. The album follows a strict order in leading from south to north, and like Mathers, Brown uses at least one photograph that shows the tracking of scows “up” the Athabasca at a narrative point when, spatially and temporally, the photograph should be signalling travel down the river. As with his predecessor, Brown ends the northern journey with two images of the Inuit. However, Brown noticeably begins the album not at Athabasca Landing, but rather with a number of photographs of Edmonton, especially focusing on Jasper Avenue (plate 6), with no small amount of civic pride: “Great has been our advance, from a Hudson’s Bay fort to Capital of a province; our foremost thinkers believe we have but touched the fringe of our future greatness.” Without criticizing the company directly, Brown purposefully marks the point of greatness as the year in which the HBC land reserves were opened up, allowing the city to expand and develop.
From Edmonton, the visual narrative moves northward, but unlike Mathers’ souvenir albums, Brown includes maps to mark the journey. While Mathers emphasized his own role as the adventurer/photographer, the camera interacting dynamically with the mobility and travails of the river that carries him, Brown employs a cartographical framework to situate and solidify the metropolitan centre of Edmonton itself as the heroic influence upon the North. In the *HBC Album*, four different maps, all highlighting the central geographical position of Edmonton, reinforce this posturing. It was not the details of the maps as much as their “representational force” that mattered. In Mathers’ visual narrative, the viewer is carried downriver, the journey itself unfolding first-hand before the camera in a uniform series with little textual interruption. But for Brown, these images alone were too fluid and too flexible in meaning to be allowed to sit on the page spatially untethered. Instead, Mathers’ successor situates the viewer in place, allowing geographical abstractions to define the scale and relationship between the city and its hinterland. Brown’s album even includes a chart of northern transport rates published by the HBC in 1898. In the original document, all distances are listed from Athabasca Landing, but

**Plate 6.** Edmonton’s Jasper Avenue. Most of the markings on this negative were added by Ernest Brown. Photograph by C.W. Mathers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, B5352. Reprinted in *Hudson’s Bay Company Album, 1987/24/13, box 18(OS), Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba.*
Brown inserts a handwritten note indicating “100 miles Edmonton to” in front of the Athabasca Landing title, reinscribing metropolitan control over northern transportation routes.

A close reading of the *HBC Album* reveals other differences in the visual narrative it presents. Mathers, having experienced the journey first-hand, focuses about half of his published images on the question of transportation: by scow, by steamboat, by oxcart, and by dogsled. Not only does this imagery reinforce the trope of the adventuring photographer, but it also speaks to wider political demands for increased access to the North, freer trade outside of the Hudson’s Bay monopsony, and the mobility of goods. Brown, in recasting the photographs as evidence for rather than against the HBC presence, downplays the mobility suggested by the river and instead draws upon Mathers’ images of the settlements, largely HBC posts, along the Athabasca-Slave-Mackenzie river system. As noted earlier, in *A Souvenir from the North*, the “settled” presence is almost completely erased in visual terms. Photographs of Fort Simpson and Fort McPherson are two of the rare views of HBC posts that appear in the booklet, while other posts are alluded to in captions but never pictured (or only pictured in the far distance). In contrast, Brown delves into the Mathers’ archive to produce close to a dozen different images of a wide variety of buildings erected by the HBC. In these photographs, such as the image of Fort Resolution (plate 7), the buildings fill the width of the frame, dominating the barely distinguishable people at the gates and enclosing the land in the foreground. This visual strategy might have been initially conceived by Mathers to emphasize the “emptiness” of the Northern posts and the company’s unproductive use of the land. In the hands of Brown and Reeves, deployed as historical documents removed from the earlier battles over trade and governance, the photographs of the company’s buildings offer a narrative of material progress and civilization in the North rather than suggesting obstacles to modernity.

However, for Brown and Reeves, the photographs of buildings were also markers of localized histories of specific places. Their understanding of the material imprint of the HBC required a particular spatial and temporal positioning. As Brown explains in the forward to the album:

> In making our selection it has been somewhat difficult to know which to include and which to omit. We have thought it advisable to include a few pictures of some of the towns, showing their early beginnings, for the purpose of making comparison with present day views which may easily be obtained.
For Brown and Reeves, the photographs do not just depict company posts; rather, they present the past of “towns” that still exist, and these scenes need to be compared to “present day views.” This pedagogical technique, designed to enhance the value of photographs as conveyors of historical truth, also serves to constrain the history of the HBC in the North. Rather than viewing these settlements as products of a company history, Brown and Reeves imply that, like Edmonton, the places mapped out on the Athabasca-Mackenzie have their own historical trajectories that extend beyond the parameters of the company. Invoking “present day views” situates the viewer geographically and temporally within a contemporary space. From this vantage point, the HBC presence is but the beginning of a progressive history that extends beyond the stage of the company fort into the present and on to the future. Just as Edmonton’s “greatness” begins with the loosening of the HBC land holdings, so too does the North emerge as more than the history of the company, despite the very concentration of photographs that would appear to suggest the opposite.

Although enamoured with the patronage of the HBC (which was almost constantly mentioned in later promotional material), Brown clearly saw its role in the North as part of history and not the future. In a manuscript ad-
dendum to the historical album *The Birth of the West*, Brown makes it clear that while the company explorers had once performed heroic deeds, the whole enterprise of the fur trade was guided by selfish motives, “skimming the cream from the country explored and trying to keep out settlement.” Brown, the critic of unrestrained capitalism, viewed the HBC with suspicion, especially when it interfered with his perception of “real” settlement, which was embodied by civilized agriculture. Indeed, for Brown in the late 1920s, the North remained in its “primitive state,” equivalent to what the “west” had been like “sixty years ago.” The historian turned prophet in announcing that “sixty years hence would prove the potential for the north,” an assertion demonstrated visually within his historical album: situated between two pages with ethnographic photographs of Inuit in traditional dress, Brown superimposes a map of Tobolsk, Siberia on the Prairie provinces, showing how much agricultural production could be achieved at higher latitudes, a map that also makes an appearance in the *HBC Album*. Apparently inspired by Vilhjalmur Stefansson’s popularization of the “friendly north” in the 1920s, the “Frontier” of the Prairie West had clearly shifted northward. Brown’s alignment with the local interests of Edmonton as the regional centre for northern activity certainly shaped his understanding of what part of the West was destined for greatness, but in this narrative the Hudson’s Bay Company’s role was clearly confined to history.

The shift of Mathers’ photographs from souvenirs to artifacts of history also restages narratives of race. In a short textual note in the *HBC Album*, Brown comments on a series of photographs of a portage near Fort Smith (plate 8). While Mathers employed space to direct a hierarchical ordering of Indigenous peoples that improved the further one travelled down the river, Brown reframes the photographs to speak to historical imaginations:

As may be seen from the pictures, the taking of one of these scows overland is no ‘child’s play’, but one requiring great strength of muscle and endurance. It is said that in the early days of the fur trade, the English men or French men of the Traders were unequal to the strenuous demands of tracking or postaging [*sic*]; and that the Indians would not do it. However with the marriage and intermixing of the white races with the Indians, a new race of Métis or halfbreeds were produced, who fulfilled the essentials required of one engaged in the arduous task of either portaging or packing.

By isolating the activity of portaging as his reference point, Brown extends a historical commentary on race, while simultaneously ignoring the question of race in the actual photograph. The clear photographic evidence of Tłįchǫ (Dog-Rib)
labourers meeting the “strenuous demands” of the portage is obscured by the textual framework, which recasts the activity as the particular historical domain of the Métis, who are constructed as being more racially suited to the task. Despite the visual evidence that offers an alternative reading, one suggesting that Native peoples were active and essential contributors to the economic activity of the North, Brown insists on presenting these photographs within a historical fantasy of exotic otherness. Although Mathers’ captions on other photographs (permanently etched onto the large glass negatives) explicitly identified the labourers as “Indian” packers (plate 2), Brown is clearly determined to use the image to project his own narrative of race as historically situated.

This understanding is evident from the forward of the album, where Brown explains, “The original types of Indians and Eskimos, with whom the Company so long did business, have mostly passed away, we therefore include a few pictures showing these people, their habits and their customs.” If Mathers saw his images as capturing a “vanishing” race, in Brown’s mind, authentic Native peoples had already vanished, a position that also increased the value of his photographs as both historical artifacts and documentary witnesses.67

For Mathers, the spatial and racial boundaries of the North were still fluid as the processes of modernity remade Native peoples into economic subjects and distinguished the Inuit as premodern ethnographic curiosities. Brown, however, attempts to fix these meanings in space by reframing them inside the spaces of history. Rather than simply reproducing Mathers’ images, or even just rearranging them, Brown overpowers them with text and maps. History is deployed to empty the landscape of obstacles to modern progress, clearing the way for a renewed utopian vision of the North. Both the HBC and the Aboriginal inhabitants along the Athabasca and Mackenzie rivers found themselves represented in photographs, but with roles tightly circumscribed and restricted.

In the late 1950s, almost a decade after Brown’s death, the Hudson’s Bay Company rediscovered him and published a glowing tribute to the man in The Beaver.68 The article tells a somewhat tragic tale of Brown’s sacrifices to preserve the visual history of the West and his difficulty in finding a buyer for his collection. Eventually the Government of Alberta stepped in, purchasing the collection from Brown even though it had no proper facilities to house the massive stockpile of negatives until the establishment of its own provincial archives in 1967. By the time of the HBC’s tercentennial celebrations in 1970, however, the Brown collection was publicly archived and accessible, promoted as an indispensable heritage resource for the province.

With the full Mathers/Brown archive available to the company through the newly established Provincial Archives of Alberta, the HBC rewrote the visual narrative on its own terms. The photographs that filled the wall of the gallery at the 1970 Beaver House exhibition were all sepia-toned, invoking a deep sense of the past, even though many of the images had likely never been printed that way before. There was no chronological or geographic order to follow. Instead, the viewer was confronted by a dominant grouping of HBC forts and various settlements, spread out from Fort Smith to Prince Albert to Moose Factory. These were followed by a cluster of ethnographic images of First Nations and Inuit peoples, punctuated by photographs of Edmonton “pioneers” and even of Ernest Brown himself. Absent from the display were any of the images of the Northern river systems. Gone were the tracking of scows and scenes of Native labour. The HBC, from the vantage of Beaver House almost seventy years after Mathers’ journey, represented itself as the benevolent governor of far-flung lands, marked by the buildings that signified its civilizing influence. In the opening panel of text, which celebrated the arrival of the camera, the claim that “[f]or the first time the actual conditions in the Company’s operations could be properly represented and permanently recorded” implied that the photographs were produced for the HBC rather than against it. In the course of rewriting its own history, the HBC rewrote the history of Brown’s collection and Mather’s photographs, while simultaneously reordering the landscape of the North.
Conclusion

CHARLES W. MATHERS started down the Athabasca with an eye toward using his photographs to "open" the North to freer trade. And while selected images circulated widely, the point of his expedition was not simply to take a few representative images, but rather to produce a visual archive of the North. As Scott McQuire suggests, the camera offered a "means of producing an archive on a scale and rhythm in accord with the demands of capitalism. Capitalism needed the camera as a means of negotiating the social disjunction produced by its convulsive expansion." Photographs established and narrated a past anchored by the stability non-Aboriginals desired to see in the timeless and retrogressive world of the Inuit. The Athabasca-Mackenzie basin north of Edmonton, however, was anything but stable during the turn of the twentieth century. The
1890s had been a period of rapid technological, social, and industrial change, of which image making was itself part and parcel.

Just as the North was itself changing, so too was the archive, which cannot be seen as a neutral or stable entity but rather serves as, in Allan Sekula’s words, “a kind of ‘clearing house’ of meaning.” In reordering the visual narrative, Ernest Brown produced an album that simultaneously appealed to the Hudson’s Bay Company while employing history to confine its role. As photographs were transformed into historical artifacts, the meanings of economic development and race were reconfigured; authenticity was deployed to erase Aboriginal presence and clear the way for a new period of pioneer settlement in the North. Brown’s Northern visions became the reach of Edmonton over its hinterland and with a scale and scope that even Oliver likely could not have imagined.

Despite their important differences, Mathers and Brown both saw these photographs of the North as speaking to past and present, and understood photography as a distinctly modern form of “making” place. Indeed, to return to McQuire:

The status given to photographs as a material form of memory, and the deference to photography, film and videotape over other forms of record and recall, signals an important threshold of modernity. If … the key political struggle of the twentieth century is the struggle of memory over forgetting, the camera has been a crucial force in this contest.

The Northern experience must be reconsidered, and a reconsideration of this kind requires identifying photography as a particularly modern discourse. Yet we cannot simply restore a single, “authentic” reading to Mathers’ photographs, for the circulation and continuing afterlife of his images produced new imaginations that were not without consequence to how the North was perceived. Here too, place emerges as not simply imagined but as a contested vantage point. The massive rivers that carried Mathers and his heavy camera equipment downstream in 1901 also carried the weight of interpretation in supporting his political goals, but the river recedes as time and space carry the viewer further away from the North. From Mathers to Brown to Beaver House, London, distance from the Athabasca-Mackenzie river system played as great a role in transforming the narrative as the passage of time. If we are to follow Joan Schwartz’s advice that we bring “context to the image, better to understand the context,” we must also be aware of the multiple contexts produced by time and place in the circulation of images of the North.*
Notes

Research for this chapter was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1 Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (HBCA), Winnipeg, Manitoba, introductory panel, 1 June 1970.


4 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 September 1901, 2.


6 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 6 April 1900, 6.


8 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 6 April 1900, 6. Kim Greenwell adds that the “colonial gaze was predominantly White, male, and bourgeois in its inclinations, thus it should come as no surprise that its vision tended to reinforce the hierarchies of power that privileged its perspective.” Kim Greenwell, “Picturing ‘Civilization’: Missionary Narratives and the Margins of Mimicry,” *BC Studies* 135 (2002): 6.


12 City of Edmonton Archives (hereafter cited as CEA), Edmonton, Alberta, Northern Alberta Pioneer and Old Timers Association Collection, “Address Read to Mr. Oliver on Return from 1st Parliamentary Session He Attended,” MS172/25.

13 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 September 1901, 2.

14 Evidence of the importance Mathers placed in this respect is given in that he left an uncannily detailed description to an assistant on the proper techniques to follow in photo-engraving. Most commercial and stock photographers used engraving to claim copyright, index their images, and promote themselves. Provincial Archives


19 Mathers, Far North, 2.

20 Agnes Deans Cameron, The New North: Being Some Account of a Woman’s Journey through Canada to the Arctic. With Many Illustrations from Photographs by the Author (New York: D. Appleton, 1910), 88.


23 Mathers, “Trip to the Arctic Circle,” 1121.

24 At the time of Mathers’ voyage, the neo-Lamarckian theory that racial characteristics matched environments was long established in the tradition of geographical exploration and the standard narrative of contact experience. David Livingstone explains that “climate’s moral economy” was a powerful force in rationalizing the European exploitation of “lesser” peoples: the idea that Europeans could not be acclimatized to work in the antipodes was an early justification of slavery. David Livingstone, The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 219–25. Also see Felix Driver and Luciana Martins, eds., Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).


27 William H. Boorne, “With the Savages in the Far West,” Canadian Photographic Journal 2 (1893): 372. Also see Brian Street, “British Popular Anthropology:


30 CEA, Frank Oliver fonds MS172/2, Frank Oliver, “The Founding of Edmonton.”


33 Arthur Ray has pointed out that focused study on the period after 1821 is complemented by scant historical scholarship examining the HBC and its competitors after 1871. A monopsony is the market condition of control by a single buyer. Arthur J. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), xvi.

34 Somewhat corroborating Begg’s opinion, and no doubt to Oliver’s ire, HBC officer E.B. Nixon informed Klondikers that “semi-starvation, if not worse, and cold await the prospectors who make a late start via the Edmonton route.” “Shuts Door to Gold,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 30 August 1897, 2.


36 Mathers, “Trip to the Arctic Circle,” 1122.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.


41 Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); and Ann Laura Stoler, *Race

42 Edmonton Bulletin, 16 September 1901, 2.


47 In many of Brown’s later recollections, the date is uncertain or sometimes combined with the original purchase of the studio. The appended contract is vague about the exact transfer of the negatives. See PAA, file 467, box 10, 74.173, indenture, 1 June 1904, between Charles W. Mathers and Ernest Brown.

48 PAA, file 511a, box 11, 74.173, typed draft copy of classified advertisement, c. 1904.


51 For example, Richard and Hannah Maynard, photographers based in Victoria, had purchased the collection of Frederick Dally, repackaging his images of Native life as scenic stereocards and cartes-de-visites. See Carol Jane Williams, “Framing the West: Race, Gender and the Photographic ‘Frontier’ on the Northwest Coast 1858–1912” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1999), 187–90.

52 Orvell, Real Thing.


56 PAA, file 112a, box 17, 65.124, Charles V. Sale to Ernest Brown, 29 December 1927.
57 PAA, file 69, box 3, 74.173, Gladys Reeves, “The Ernest Brown Collection.”
59 In 1958 or 1959, an anonymous workman walked into Beaver House with the Winnipeg album in hand, claiming that he had “acquired” it to use as a scrapbook but his employer had advised him to return it to the company. Efforts to find out more about the disappearance and return did not produce any results. See HBCA, Beaver File acc. no. 1987/174, A.M. Johnson to F.B. Walker, 7 October 1959.
60 HBCA, box 18(OS), Text accompanying image 1987/24/13, Hudson’s Bay Company Album, 1987/24 (hereafter cited as HBC Album).
61 J.B. Harley notes that “the influence of the map is channelled as much through its representational force as a symbol as through its overt representations.” See J.B. Harley, “Maps, Knowledge, and Power,” in The Iconography of Landscape, eds. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 303.
64 Ibid., 45.
67 Undoubtedly, the company itself would have been surprised at this assessment, since just seven years earlier, the HBC had celebrated its 250th anniversary with a large pageant at Fort Garry, attended by a wide range of Native participants. See Peter Geller, “Hudson’s Bay Company Indians: Images of Native People and the Red River Pageant, 1920,” in Constructing the Indian: Representation of Native Americans in Popular Culture, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 65–77.
71 McQuire, Visions, 110.