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**Review of *Defamiliarizing the Aboriginal: Cultural Practices and Decolonization in Canada*. By Julia V. Emberley.**

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*Defamiliarizing the Aboriginal: Cultural Practices and Decolonization in Canada.* By Julia V. Emberley. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. xviii + 319 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00.

This book examines how “representational technologies,” including photography and archival material, were used to establish colonial control over Aboriginal families in Canada. Case studies include a critique of photographer Mary Schäffer’s images of Aboriginal people in the Rocky Mountains, an analysis of an RCMP file concerning the disappearance of an Inuit woman and children, and a discussion of prairie writer Rudy Wiebe’s retelling of Yvonne Johnson’s life. *Defamiliarizing the Aboriginal* is a subtle addition to literature on the mechanisms of cultural representation and their dynamics within colonialism, placing these issues especially well within the framework of postcolonial and feminist politics.

That said, it’s a frustrating book: challengingly written (“There are three key features of representational violence operating spatially in the semiotics of subjugation . . .”) and refusing to engage with deeper aspects of the material explored. In the chapter on photography,

for instance, while the analysis of Schäffer’s thought itself is thorough, her work is not placed in the broader context of visual representations of Aboriginal peoples, nor are recent critiques of such imagery cited. The observation that “How subjects are categorized and organized . . . constitutes spatial modes of epistemic violence” is not a new thought in regard to photography and indigenous peoples, and recent analyses have critiqued sweeping theory, looking instead for local meanings, specificities of production, “fractures” in colonial mindsets, and indigenous agency (e.g., Elizabeth Edwards’s *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, 2001). This work, by contrast, seems determined to find total hegemony within the technologies examined.

While there is much current feminist and postcolonial theory quoted, the thoughts of the descendants of Samson Beaver and his family are not included in the analysis of Schäffer’s widely distributed image, nor is any Inuit commentary offered on the RCMP file regarding the disappearance of a French-Canadian trapper’s Inuit wife and infant son, which dates as recently as the 1940s: there must still be memories of this kind of colonial encounter, which might have added useful dimensions to the chapter. (Emberley’s analysis of this case applies ideas taken from the Chukchi, on the Russian side of the Bering Straits, to Inuit people near the western shore of Hudson’s Bay, without comment on the cultural differences involved.) One understands the Aboriginal people at the heart of this analysis through the lenses of the historical representations and of Emberley’s explication of these. The analysis floats along unencumbered by engagement with the actual communities in which the case studies are located—thus seeming, at times, to parallel the colonial forms of representation being analysed. What’s in here is rather good, but it often seems ungrounded.

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