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## A Conversation with the World



Lonnie Graham  
Professor of Visual Art  
*The Pennsylvania State University*

**Abstract:** “A Conversation with the World” was compiled by Audrey Maretzki, *IK: Other Ways of Knowing* editor, and is based on telephone conversations with Mr. Graham who provided personal biographical documents as well as information about the youth whose photos were selected for inclusion in this article.

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In a 2013 TEDx talk at Penn State, Lonnie Graham—who was named the Pennsylvania Artist of the Year in 2006 and developed a program at the Manchester Craftsmens Guild in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania that was cited by the White House as a National Model for Education--described his efforts to teach a Pittsburgh youth how to become a photographer and how this student taught Lonnie what to photograph. This [video](#) is an introduction to Lonnie Graham as a person, and provides a backdrop for *Conversation with the World*, one of Graham’s ongoing projects.

Graham, a native of Seldom Seen--a town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is a Pew Fellow and Professor of Visual Art at the Pennsylvania State University. In 1984, while living in San Francisco, California, he conceived *A Conversation with the World*. His initial idea was to use recorded interviews and large-scale photographs to document individuals he encountered at random. As the proposed project took shape, Graham collaborated with Professor James Wiley at the Cooper Union for Arts and Sciences in New York City to develop a series of eight questions that could be directed to an individual before being photographed. Graham believed that individuals, given the opportunity, would respond in a relatively candid manner, thus providing a measurement of the universality of the human condition.

For nearly thirty years, Graham has traveled the world talking with people and photographing them. Through his conversations, he has learned that, as humans, we want a safe place to live and the ability to function in the context of our traditions, our culture, and our values relative to a spiritual tradition. A Conversation with the World helps to clarify preconceptions we hold about one another and enables us to establish a climate in which we are more likely to seek support from one another than to abandon one another in ignorance. Graham notes, “Within the pool of cognition, fear is dispelled and understanding prevails.”

### **The Youth of Calgary**

In 2009, Professor Laura Swart, of the University of Calgary in the Canadian Province of Alberta, invited Graham to conduct interviews with the local First Nations population. Alberta is in the foothills and prairies east of the Canadian Rockies, an area where pre-Clovis people lived more than eleven thousand years before the arrival of Europeans. When Europeans arrived in this area, a confederation of the Blackfoot, Blood, Peigan, and Tsuu T’ina tribes occupied the region of the Bow and Elbow Rivers, at whose confluence the modern city of Calgary is now located. The early settlers that arrived in Alberta were ranchers that grazed their cattle on the prairies where First Nations people had hunted buffalo for millennia. Between 1896 and 1914, the Canadian Homestead Act brought new arrivals to the area, intent on farming the rich soils of Alberta. In 1902, oil was discovered in the Alberta sands, leading European entrepreneurs to make incursions into the oil-rich lands of the Blackfoot Confederation.

Graham’s process of interviewing and photographing was profoundly significant in the revelation of First Nations peoples’ personal stories, traditions, struggles, and culture, which is the result of generations of rich and enduring heritage. Because of the imposition of western culture, many First Nations individuals have had extreme difficulty not only in assimilating culturally and overcoming the injustice of that imposition but also in articulating any resonant definition of a true self, since many of their ancestors were forced to endure unimaginable hardship at the hands of invading Europeans. Through the course of ill-conceived guidance, First Nations peoples have been forced to adopt European customs and values that are inherently misaligned with their own.



*Sean Soop – Blackfoot*

Do not place transparent grids in front of me,  
Obstacles soaked in colonial bliss,  
I remember the way home.  
It is time for a new resonance,  
Paint with the fingertips of your soul,  
Until you know every color by touch alone,  
Forget boring conventional horizons,  
Start with the shadows,  
Must have contrast,  
Must have balance,  
Know that when your shadow is casting a lengthy coat,  
The sun is shining hard on your face.

Sean Soop



*Duran – Blackfoot*

*“I want to be remembered not just as someone who tried,  
but as someone who actually did positive things and made a difference.”*



*Jacie Alook – Blackfoot*

*“My kookum (grandmother) didn’t speak English, so every time I was around her I felt like my heart was going to explode. I just wanted to talk to her. She was so strong, so powerful. I don’t know what it was. She was greatness.”*



*Craig Ball – Mixed ancestry of First People and early French Canadians*

*“Identity is determined by an exchange between those values transmitted by tradition  
and applied in the interpretation of their meaning.”*



*Jason – Other First Nation youth understood his tribal heritage as being Blood.  
It is important to Jason that the contribution of his Blood ancestors is depicted.*



*Jordan Crowchild – Blackfoot*

*All of the Crowchild family were photographed by Lonnie. Jordan had reached the age at which he was faced with the cultural choice of cutting his hair or letting his braid grow. Lonnie thought he might not see Jordan with his braid when he returned to Calgary.*



*Sarah Scout – Blackfoot*

*Sarah is an outspoken First Nations activist. She conducts a radio program on the local station and organizes a weekly writers' group. Sarah's mother was sent to a Native boarding school as a child where her long, black hair was cut. Sarah wants people to know what her mother went through during the Canadian boarding school era.*

Using the visual arts as a starting point, Graham and Swart established a fluent literary voice for this population based on the oral tradition. The individuals that were interviewed and photographed in *A Conversation with the World*, Calgary had the opportunity to have their voices heard and to raise questions to the non-Native population, using their own written language and pictures. Graham recalls the five-by-four foot photos with poignant messages written on the photos by the individuals he had photographed as being some of the most powerful images he has taken.

### **The Youth of Christchurch**

Graham is currently engaged in A Conversation with the World that involves Te Ora Hou, a Maori youth organization in Christchurch, on New Zealand's South Island. On September 4, 2010, a devastating 7.1 earthquake destroyed much of Christchurch, the most beautiful city in New Zealand. In the subsequent five years, Christchurch has experienced more than fourteen thousand aftershocks. The Maori youth in Christchurch are exhibiting and employing their photos taken by Graham to tell their own story of cultural as well as physical devastation.



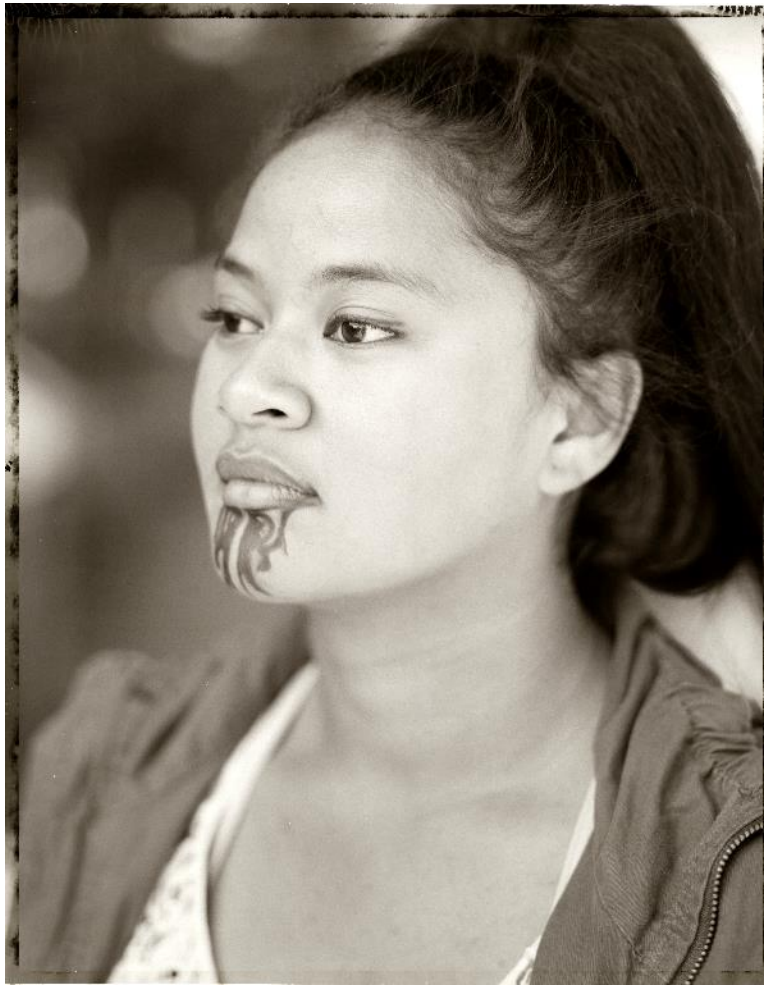
*Maia*

*Maia is from the North Island of New Zealand and has come to Christchurch on the South Island to study art at Canterbury University. He is a talented artist who uses Maori traditional representation in his drawing and painting. He is active in the Maori community, but is a humanist in accepting the importance of all cultures.*



*Mele*

*Mele is known as a “bounty” in New Zealand, meaning that her parents were of mixed race. Despite the prejudice she has experienced, Mele has a strong sense of personal integrity. She has gone about her life with the attitude that being a bounty is “their problem, not hers.” She is a mom and is currently expecting a baby.*



*Tapedia*

*Tapedia is firmly committed to the revival of her Maori ancestry, a position that is not completely accepted by the Maori youth community in Christchurch. She is a talented singer.*



*Kala*

*Kala is an amazing young woman who is immersed in her Maori culture. “Revive or Remember” is her slogan, meaning that if the Maori do not bring back their cultural past, they will have nothing but memories to identify themselves as Maori.*



*Danette*

*Danette's father is Maori and her mother is Irish. She is a dedicated community youth activist and a mother. She wants her child and other New Zealand youth to have the choice of their cultural identity.*

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