Unraveling Edward S. Curtis's *The North American Indian*

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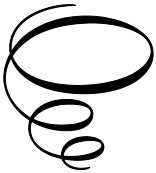
By

Herman Cohen Stuart

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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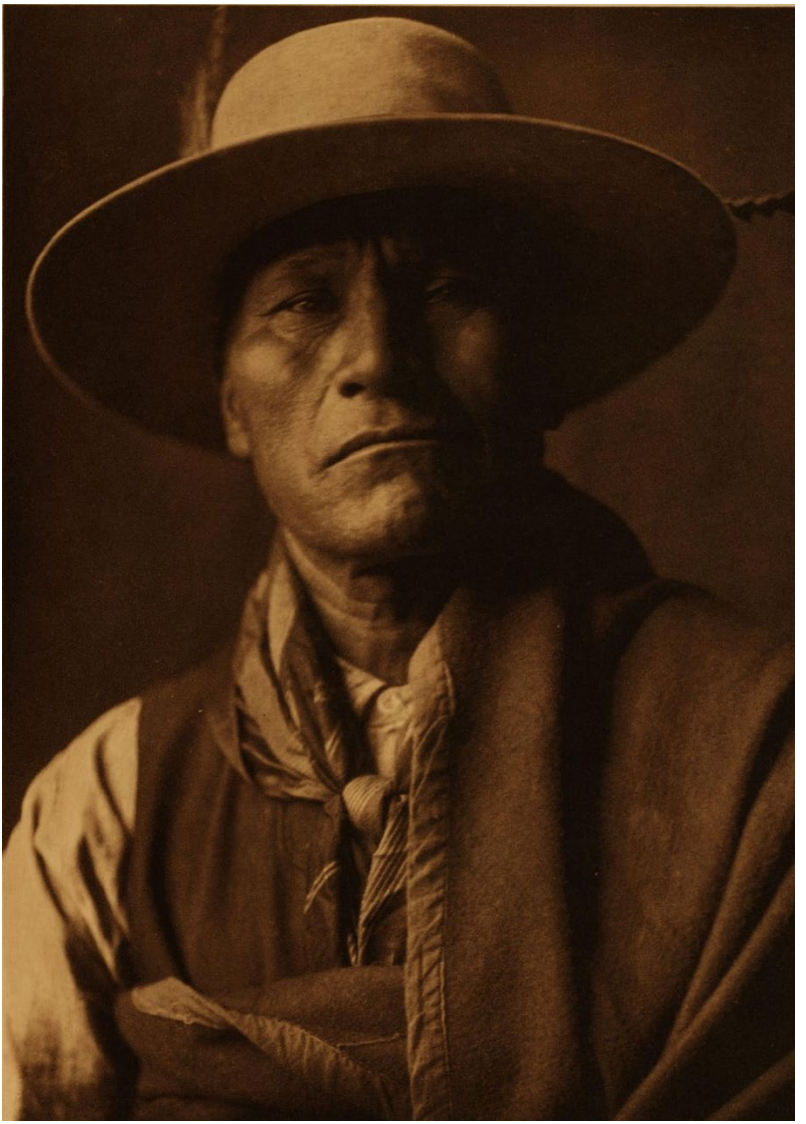

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PREFACE

The work of Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952), the American photographer who intended to capture the cultures and history of the original inhabitants of "the United States, the Dominion of Canada, and Alaska"[1] in his life's work, the twenty-volume book series *The North American Indian* (hereafter: NAI), has often been praised, but it has also been controversial for decades now: scholars and other authors have held, and still hold, very divergent views on the man and his work. This has to do, on the one hand, with his thirty-year endeavor to photograph and describe all indigenous peoples with their cultures that he was able to visit, combined with his high-quality photographic work, and, on the other hand, with a plethora of more recent criticisms that focus–very succinctly put–on a few central points: he manipulated his photographs in a number of ways, rendering them unsuitable for scientific use; he painted a romantic picture of a life that no longer existed–if it had ever existed at all–and his central premise was the erroneous and now highly controversial concept of the Vanishing Race. I will return to all of this, but for now suffice it to say that this controversy inspired me to research his work, the entire NAI book series with its portfolios, to find out exactly what Curtis wrote and showed in the NAI. In 2016, after many years, this research earned me a doctorate. The present work is an adapted and supplemented account of my findings.[2]

My premise is that in order to perform a truly thorough analysis of the NAI, one must see and study it as a whole, that is, both photographs and texts, each in their own right, but also in their interaction with one another. Working from this premise, I made a precise and comprehensive *quantitative* inventory of the *content* of texts and photographs. This quantitative approach allowed me to determine the extent to which a number of specific themes are present (or in some cases conspicuously absent) in photographs and texts. First, I identified the actual presence of these themes in both. Second, I analyzed them in terms of the information they provide about indigenous cultures, as well as about Native histories and Western influences on Native life. A further description of my research method can be found in Appendix 1.

My research has produced some conclusions that run counter to a number of current and widely held opinions about Curtis and his work. The most persistent misconception about Curtis is that he systematically erased

(all) Western influences in his NAI photographs–a misconception rooted in Lyman and which has persisted, notwithstanding Gidley's and Zamir's scholarly research.[3] Other misconceptions include the idea that Curtis only photographed and described Natives as if they were immutable, i.e., impervious to historical change, that he only showed stereotypical Natives (stoic, noble, belligerent), and that he deliberately changed his method or focus sometime during the course of his project. In addition, it turns out that Curtis was not so much an uncritical friend of the Natives, like for example Andrews and Timothy Egan portrayed him, as an explicit supporter of assimilationism, more so than has been assumed to date.[4]

In Curtis's days, Western-American society exerted enormous pressure on Native peoples to adapt to that society. This development, which provides the historical context for this study, deeply affected Native communities and Native lives. As a consequence, much adaptation had taken place at the time, although this had not resulted in actual assimilation.[5] Descriptions in the NAI focus on traditional Native cultures. Hereafter, because this book is also about imaging, I will occasionally give an indication as to how American readers, the NAI's primary target audience, may have viewed some Native American customs.

The last volume of the NAI was published in 1920. Since then, of course, the world has thoroughly changed. One of these changes pertaining to the NAI involves the use of specific terms. For many years the term "Indians" has been in common use. More recently, "Indians" have become known as "Native Americans," and the names by which peoples were referred to–some of these originating from their enemies–were replaced by names they use to name themselves: Sioux was replaced by Lakota, Kwakiutl by Kwakwaka'wakw, Papago by Tohono O'odham, and Navaho by Dine, to name just a few. For this book, I have chosen to stick to the names Curtis used: not out of disrespect, but because I assume that in this way the reader will be better able to understand what Curtis wrote about whom–any reader who wants to look up information about specific peoples will have to take these names into account. I have added a list of names used by Curtis and names utilized by Native peoples as an attachment. In addition, I will mostly refer to Native Americans as Natives or indigenous people, and use the term "Indians" only when the context seems to make it appropriate or for textual reasons. Similarly, I prefer the use of *people* to *tribe*, although the latter is still used today by many, including Natives. Finally, in a slightly different vein, when I speak of "Western influences," I am referring to Western-American or Western-European cultural influences, not movies.

One final point needs to be made. In recent decades there has been increasing attention for racial inequality and racism, and the pain and suffering of those who were and are victims of it. In Curtis's time, this racism was common, and it is reflected throughout his work, for example in his use of pejorative terms, his characterization of individual people as "types," and probably most poignantly in his central theme of the Vanishing Race, a much criticized concept that to this day prevents many Native Americans from participating fully and equally in society, and even sometimes implies to others that they are indeed no longer here–while at the same time some Native communities are actually thriving. Indeed, it feels almost bizarre to cover the Vanishing Race topic at a time when a Native American Secretary of the Interior can be followed on Twitter. As a person I strongly distance myself from both those terms and the concepts and values behind them. As a researcher, however, I have an obligation to examine them and the ways they have been used and occur in the NAI–always in full awareness of their possible impact on readers and with all due respect to the peoples and individuals it concerns.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In particular, Mick Gidley's pioneering research has inspired me to delve into Curtis's work. An earlier version of the present manuscript was my 2016 dissertation, which was co-authored under the invaluable guidance of Hans Bak and Peter Rietbergen, Radboud University Nijmegen. Furthermore, my thanks go to Northwestern University Library, Evanston, Illinois, in particular Nick Munagian; Braun Research Library, Southwest Museum, Los Angeles; McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; Pierpont Morgan Library, New York; Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque; and Studiecentrum voor Amerikaanse Indianen (now: Native American Studies), Antwerp, Belgium, all of whom made it possible for me to conduct my research; and to Rob Kroes, Tim Greyhavens and Chris Hennessy for sharing their expertise and resources.

Andra, thank you for inspiring me.

INTRODUCTION

THE CURTIS CONTROVERSY

Between 1895 and 1927 Seattle-based photographer Edward S. Curtis took a series of 40,000 photographs of nearly all Native American peoples, who at the time lived west of the Mississippi River.[1] He photographed many aspects of Indian life: people, landscapes, villages and homes, religious objects and customs, hunting and fishing, boating and horseback riding, as well as utensils, ancient buildings, war scenes, and art. Over 2,200 of these photographs were published in his book series *The North American Indian*,[2] which was printed in a limited edition, and which also included twenty portfolios of photographs and captions. In it, Curtis described indigenous cultures in detail based on information he and his collaborators had received from Natives who had experienced the "old days." He intended to document traditional cultures as long as it, as he believed, would still be possible to do so–that is, as long as there were people alive who could tell about them. Indeed, Curtis's starting point was the idea that the Natives would inevitably pass away, which also implied that the culture of this "Vanishing Race" would be lost forever. In the introduction to Volume 1, he wrote:

> The passing of every old man or woman means the passing of some tradition, some knowledge of sacred rites possessed by no other; consequently the information that is to be gathered for the benefit of future generations, respecting the mode of life of one of the great races of mankind, must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost for all times (VI, xvi).

When Curtis attended the Piegan Sun Dance in 1900 in the company of, and at the invitation of his friend and mentor George Bird Grinnell, well-known scientist and Native American expert, they viewed the large camp from a nearby high rock. Grinnell invited Curtis to "take a long, long look."[3] This event was a crucial moment of inspiration for Curtis. Partly as a result, he developed, as he wrote to Grinnell, the idea

> … to make them live forever–in a sort of history by photographs. No, I mean in both photography and words, if I can write them. You and I know, and of course everyone does who thinks of it, the Indians of North America are

> vanishing. They've crumbled from their pride and power into pitifully small numbers, painful poverty and sorry weakness. There won't be anything left of them in a few generations and it's a tragedy–a national tragedy. Thinking people must realize this. So, I want to produce an irrefutable record of a race doomed to extinction–to show this Indian as he was in the normal, noble life, so people will know he was no debauched vagabond but a man of proud stature and noble heritage.[4]

In his introduction to Volume 1, Curtis stated his mission "to form a comprehensive and permanent record of all the important tribes of the United States and Alaska that still retain to a considerable degree their primitive customs and traditions." (V1, xiii) He wanted to prevent Natives from being "forgotten, misconstrued, too much idealized or too greatly underestimated" by future generations.[5] His first goal was to record ethnographic data, and also to inform the general public.[6] Combining art and science, his work should appeal to experts and the general public alike.[7] Curtis himself referred to his intended audience as "the general reader" and "the average student."[8]

With his project, Curtis does not seem to have sought fame. He was already famous, through his portraits and some awards he had won. In 1896, "everyone" in the Pacific Northwest had a "Curtis & Guptill" (Thomas Guptill was his business partner at the time) hanging on their wall.[9] His letter to Grinnell substantiates the idea that he was driven primarily by the urge to document that which he sincerely expected to disappear.

Much has been published about Curtis and the NAI, both in books and essays. The approaches were both descriptive and analytical. The purport of these publications varies widely: some authors were admiring, others were primarily critical, and still others chose a middle ground. Full of admiration, for example, were Andrews and Cardozo. Of those who dealt with Curtis in a critical way, Fowler was one of the first, focusing mainly on Curtis's choice to photograph only peoples who lived west of the Mississippi River and the redundancy–in some cases–of his research given the scholarly work previously done by anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Clark Wissler.[10] Lyman[11] was, and still is, certainly one of the most influential of those who were critical. His critique–which boils down to the fact that Curtis was a manipulative photographer who created his own reality–still resonates, both in books and articles specifically devoted to Curtis and in books about photography of Native Americans that also cover him, as well as in general reference books on photography.[12] His influence is even supposed to have extended to the field of Native American photography in general.[13] Although his work is now decades old and much research has been done on Curtis since the final NAI volume was published

in 1930, this surprisingly enduring influence is all the more reason to examine his work from the perspective adopted in this study.

Other authors have evolved their own perspectives, some of which are highly informative and innovative, and have explored specific topics in Curtis's work: portraits, women in indigenous cultures, built structures (in a broad sense), styles of photography, the ways contemporary Native people look at Curtis's work, detailed analyses of photographic NAI content, Curtis's feature film *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, and many more. Evans and Glass have offered a fascinating collection of essays covering a wide range of aspects of the NAI, each with the film as its common denominator, and actively connecting with contemporary Native cultural expressions. Zamir has addressed many NAI aspects and issues, including a complex consideration of multiple temporalities, Native agency and conscious design, NAI portraits, the art-science debate, and he even provided an estimate of the number of photographs showing Western influences. In scholarly work on Curtis, Gidley's work stands out: he has thoroughly analyzed the entire project as well as dozens of photographs and set a standard for Curtis research. Timothy Egan wrote a positively worded and popular biography in which he addressed many issues, descriptively and partly analytically.[14]

Taken together, these publications represent a multicolored palette of approaches and an enormously varied picture of Curtis and his product, but they seem to lack a common denominator–apart from the NAI itself, of course. Also, a real debate seems to be absent: all authors start from their own premises and perspectives and add their specific–big or smaller–pieces to the puzzle, but the number of references to each other is relatively small, and mutual responses are even fewer. Few, moreover, have told the story of the entire NAI "product," both text and photographs, and what exactly is to be seen there. The combined work of Gulbrandsen and Youngblood does, but theirs is primarily a descriptive work, and not analytically focused. Although Lyman mentioned and quoted NAI texts, he concerned himself primarily with its photography, and Zamir's analysis focuses on seven volumes (2, 4, 6, 10, 12, 19, and 20) out of twenty.[15]

Almost all authors have referred to the above-mentioned critique regarding manipulation–as I will describe below, some indigenous authors were also quite outspokenly critical. Although such criticism was nuanced and put into perspective by Gidley and authors such as Makepeace, Solomon and Solomon, and Upham and Zappia, and firmly addressed by Bill Holm (a rare example of a "debate"),[16] it has formed the basis for the current image of Curtis as a manipulative photographer.

Criticism of Curtis, Elaborated

As mentioned earlier, a major reason for me to investigate Curtis and his work was the fact that both have been abundantly praised and strongly criticized. In the wake of Christopher Lyman's work, many authors have claimed that Curtis erased Western influences from his photographs by retouching them–some have even claimed that he omitted all such influences, a claim that even Lyman did not explicitly make, although he mentioned the "lengths to which Curtis went" to remove Western-related objects and other material.[17] The criticism implies that, because he was actually too late to achieve his goal of capturing "the" culture of the North American Indians while that was still possible, he staged events, had people pose with clothing that he himself provided, and retouched and edited photographs to produce images that met his own ideas. Moreover, he used a photographic style that was consciously and deliberately artistic. According to critics, he thus created his own reality rather than representing the actual situation, and furthermore, they claim that an artistic approach, due to its essentially manipulative nature, cannot be combined with a scientific approach aimed at analyzing objects as they are. He also applied soft focus, which made details less visible, and used a large aperture, which allowed him to focus on details he wanted to emphasize, but also to hide unwelcome, i.e. Western, elements such as tourists who happened to be on the scene.[18] According to Youngblood, he often used blankets to conceal Western-style clothing that people wore underneath.[19] In *In a Piegan Lodge* (Photo Int-1) a clock-like object has been removed.[20] The original and edited versions of his photograph, the one with which Lyman most poignantly illustrated his claim about Curtis's brushing away of Western influences, is probably one of the most frequently cited in discussions of manipulations in NAI photography. Zamir devoted an extensive analysis to this photo and to the significance of the clock. He argued that because the men in the photograph, Yellow Kidney and Little Plume, displayed many of their own traditional objects in addition to the clock, they indicated by their own agency that they were modern guardians of their culture. According to Zamir, Curtis erased the clock thinking that his white readers would not understand the message of Yellow Kidney and Little Plume because of the clock's "startling" presence.[21] Sometimes, on the other hand, Curtis actually added objects, such as the pot in *Firing Pottery* (Photo Int-2), or created a specific atmosphere that he apparently felt suited the scene: photographs taken during the day were given a dark background, making them look more "dramatic." He also recreated a past that no longer existed

by having dances performed that were obsolete, and he had costumes and masks made, and even had a hut built.[22]

In addition, Curtis is said to have depicted Natives as unchanging in a number of photographs. In the early 20th century, this perception was widespread. Any cultural change supposedly implied a vanishing, which by definition meant a loss of "Indianness." This thinking was based on a widely

Photo Int-1. *In a Piegan Lodge* (1910, PF6), the best-known and incessantly cited example of manipulation by Curtis: just to the left of the right arm of the man seated at the right, a clock has been retouched away.

shared view of culture as a static concept. Quoting from Francis Parkman (1847), "The Indian is hewn out of rock … He will not learn the arts of civilization, and he and his [habitat] must perish together," Gidley argued that in a number of Curtis's photographs, Natives are portrayed as unchanging as the rocks in the vicinity of which they are located in some photographs.[23]

As a final criticism, it has been claimed that Curtis's subjects had little say in how they were presented: "Subjects presented themselves to the camera more as what Curtis imagined they should be than as what they felt or actually were." [24] At the time this criticism was made, the concept of Native agency did not yet play a role in the discussion. According to this

concept, Native people actually exerted a great deal of influence over the way they were photographed, and even purposely used photography as a way to present themselves.[25]

It is noteworthy, especially in light of later discussions about Curtis, that virtually no author from the *early* 20th century criticized Curtis's combination of art and science. Indeed, scholars such as Frederic

Photo Int-2. *Firing Pottery* (1921, V12): the pot seen on the left of the photo was added by retouching.[26]

Ward Putnam (1839-1915), one of the founders of American anthropology,[27] and Harvard anthropologist William Curtis Farabee (1865-1925), were explicitly positive, as will be shown hereafter. At the time, this combination was very common. Geologist and scientist William Henry Holmes (1846-1933), himself an artist, combined the two in his work for the Hayden Survey that took place in Yellowstone in 1872, and for the 1881 U.S. Geological Survey in the Grand Canyon.[28]

Two views can also be distinguished with respect to the way Natives themselves perceive Curtis and his work. First, Curtis has been criticized by a number of contemporary Native American authors. Rayna Green, of Cherokee descent, wrote: