**Midterm Paper: Photography Analysis**

Edward Curtis’ portrait of Native American people 1907-1930

Today I want to analyze The Native American people by Edward Curtis. This paper will argue the understanding and misunderstandings of the Native American culture through Curtis’s photography. Edward S. Curtis was an entrepreneur and photographer who dedicated most of his career to recording traditional American Indian customs. He wanted to show them as historical figures. He sought to document the assorted tribes to show them as noble human beans. He wanted to show “the old time Indian” with the way they dressed, with their ceremonies, with their way of living and their manners. So for over two decades, Curtis turned his pictures and observations into a collection called *The North American Indian,* which is a 20-volume chronicle of 80 tribes. One of the most famous photos in his project was *the vanishing Race,* a picture of Navajo riding off into the distance. This photo had really set the scene for the project.

To him the photos emphasized the plight of the Indians, who were “passing into the darkness of the unknown future.” To Curtis, his work did more than just convey the theme-it cemented the stereotype. Native Americans were the great casualty of the U.S.’s grand westward advance. As most of you know new settlers to North America evicted the Indians from their ancestral land, there Home. This is where they lived. This is all they knew. However, they were forced to assimilate, to “forget” what and who they were to become “Americans.” Settlers pushed them to go to reservations. Later Railroad companies would lure tourists west to get a glimpse of the last dying people. The Indians came to be seen as a relic out of time and not as a part of modern American society. Sadly it is a perception that still persist to this day.

Some will argue that his photos of the Native American Indians are not a realistic idea of the Indians. That in some of his examples Indians were pictured in little clothing, nude or half naked spear fishing around 1903. However, in the 1870’s another photographer by the name of Timothy O’Sullivan photographed Native Americans out in the West wearing denim while they fished (Thackara, 2016) I would argue that yes over time Indians have changed clothing and wear more modern attire. But I think Curtis in my eyes was giving a better interpretation of the past. Not trying to show how they fished today. Obviously they would be wearing different clothing. He wanted to show the “original state” of the natives. His project has provided a valuable archive of information about Native Americans and also an entry point for the general public.   “I believe that a contemporary Native photography show may not have pulled visitors through the door,” says Deana Dartt, curator of Native American art at the Portland Art Museum, who is herself of Native American descent. “But you put Curtis on the outside of the building and they’re flocking in. So they’re being exposed to these incredibly talented contemporary artists they might not otherwise be introduced to.”

I thought that was an important statement. His work did bring people in. It did inform about the culture. And without him, taking the time to photograph 80 tribes. Who else would of? All of his photos in this collection were black and white, sepia, or colorless. I liked the look of this. It gave them an interesting look. I think the shadows he used played a big part in setting a look to this collection. Back then they may not have been able to take colored shots. I am unsure, but I think he would have done it this way anyways. A photo that I enjoyed was one of the chief. He was in full headgear and has a serious face. Typically guys don’t seem to like to smile anyways. But it shows power to me. He looks powerful, by his face, by his dressings, by the lighting and headshot style.

Then you see a picture of a young boy. Similar pose. He is smiling. I also enjoyed this, because it is the only one where I actually seen someone smiling at all. He looks joyful. As a child there had to be joyous times. Kids play and have fun. He may have enjoyed getting his photo taken. He may have had a good day that day. If you look at the collection, most seem to be sad in a way. So this photo gave me a light that there was not only sadness.

Next, there are two photos of villages. One with tepees, on a flat terrain, that seem to be made out of cloth or animal skin of some sort. They have sticks sticking out of the top. When I think of traditional Indian villages in my mind this is what I always thought they would look like. This is kind of what we grew up on seeing in shows, and with toys or even museums. The other photo showed a village of clay-like buildings. Possibly stucco I’m assuming since they are out west. I never knew Indians lived like this. It was a good depiction to me of a different way of living. These buildings have levels and no doors. It was interesting to me. It would have been more supportive for storms than a tepee though.

A few photos showed duties that Indians would have been doing, such as paling for water and hunting. It showed different clothing that they would have worn. Like I said earlier, this was controversial. I believe this is what they would have worn traditionally, and later on would have moved to more cotton or denim like pieces of attire.

Overall, I enjoyed Edward Curtis’ work. I liked the color and textiles he chose. I see a lot of photos of people standing alone. Getting a better idea of what the Native Americans looked like. Somewhere close to home is Cahokia Mounds. I am from Collinsville and I have always enjoyed going to the museum and learning about the culture. This is why I choose this topic. This project gave a piece of history and the Indians in these photos agreed to let Curtis photograph them. They most likely wanted people to see who they are. That they were still here and were not going anywhere. In my mind it showed a desire to want to be seen. That this race still exist and does not want to vanish. I think photos will always be misunderstood. When there is not a full text behind every single photo, it can be interpreted in so many ways.

[Native American Rights Fund](http://www.narf.org/) and [Survival International](http://www.survivalinternational.org/)

**Resources:**

<http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/aboutwork.html>

<https://scalar.me/anvc/showcase/performing-archive-edward-s-curtis-the-vanishing-race/>

<http://100photos.time.com/photos/edward-curtis-vanishing-race>

<https://hyperallergic.com/383706/a-critical-understanding-of-edward-curtiss-photos-of-native-american-culture/>

<http://scalar.usc.edu/works/performingarchive/ideavanishingrace>

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-challenging-america-s-most-iconic-and-controversial-photographer-of-native-americans>

 

 