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SOME THOUGHTS ON “TAKING” PICTURES IMAGING “INDIANS” AND THE COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF VISUAL SOVEREIGNTY

MORGAN F. BELL

The use of photography and the colonization of Indigenous North America form an historic intersection that is focused on a specific period in the contact narrative. . . . [The images presented here] do not represent all of Indigenous America. Nor can that history be unraveled through the photograph alone. The initial impact of contact was documented by European artists’ hands through drawings, paintings, and prints. . . . Most significant is the role the actual photograph had to play. It was a new phenomenon in the mid-1800s that was thought to capture the “truth” . . . . Photography became prominent at precisely the same moment that the American government was staging the take-over of the great Plains. The combination of these layered events created a powerful imaginary image in the mind of most Americans about the Indian.

Soon after its inception the camera became the primary vehicle for producing images of Native Americans. Without question, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century images of Native Americans have been integral in forming the stereotypical ideal of “Indian.” For many imaginations, these images have frozen North America’s indigenous people, not only in a timeless past but, in essence, outside time. This essay examines photographic images that illustrate this phenomenon and some that dismantle it. The fact that indigenous people picked up the camera long ago to commission and produce their own images, although long overlooked, is a topic that has received much attention over the last few decades and is now widely acknowledged. This is due in large part to the efforts of Native and non-Native scholars and artists who have tirelessly critiqued the colonialisst eye and deconstructed the persistent stereotypes of “Indianness”: from “noble” to “bloodthirsty,” “princess” and “maiden,” and on to the “vanishing race.” Photographic works by contemporary Native artists and the

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discourse of their critics have brought us far from these misconceptions with the creation of their own complex and fragmented counter-narratives. Recurring prevalent themes grapple with issues related to indigenous identity, sovereignty, methodology, political perspectives, and reciprocity. Additionally, to fully understand many works by contemporary Native artists it is important to acknowledge that historic images still operate as reactionary catalysts because they are more pervasive in today's visually dominated culture than they were during their period of origination. Today, due to ongoing technological advancements, the potential for more rapid visual communication of information about people, places and events continues to increase.

This essay presents an overview of the historic practice of imaging Native North Americans with the necessary inclusion of works by Native photographers. Although this type of overview has been done in the past, I believe the combination of artists and their works included here is relevant to an investigation of photographs of and by Native people. Moreover, what is presented here is a unique timeline, a trajectory from exploitation to autonomy, for the inquisitive viewer to follow. Together, the artists included form a brief art historical survey beginning with non-Native image makers and then countering with Native photographers from their earliest adoption of the photographic medium in the late nineteenth century to the present day.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE AND ITS USE IN AMERICA

The technology of the image grew in popularity in the decades following the American Civil War (1861–1865). Photography had been heavily utilized to record images from the front lines. These images carried back to a horrified public shocking displays of carnage left in the wake of conflict. The new medium was widely adopted by producers of popular culture, documentarians, anthropologists, and as is often overlooked by Native people. Historic images were widely disseminated and contain an inherent and many times unacknowledged conflict for the modern viewer: they are accepted as scientific truths but were also often highly contrived and/or romanticized. Quickly replacing the idealized drawings of artists such as George Catlin, the camera and its subsequent photographs soon became the primary vehicle for producing images of Native Americans. As a result, a majority of the nonindigenous western populace continues to conjure such images of the “Indian” even when attempting to visualize Native people in contemporary terms, living today. Native author Gerald Vizenor defines the word “Indian” as a falsehood from its very inception describing the inevitability of its use as a condition he calls “postindian”:

We are stuck with this word “Indian,” as unsatisfactory as it is, however inappropriate it is historically . . . and so it’s a condition I call “postindian.” We all now work and speak, and communicate in playing language after the invention of the Indian. So we are “postindian”: a postindian language game about who we are after the invention of the Indian by Columbus.”

I place the word “Indian” in scare quotes and use it in contrast to the word Native, not because the word Indian is derogatory in itself, but rather to foreground this condition. The existence of this imaginary “Indian” is often evoked in the European and American mind as an effect of the mythological visions resulting from historic photographs, as well as Hollywood filmmaking and popular culture. No one had the foresight to predict the intensity of layered meanings that would result from the legacy of such images and their ongoing mediation.

In the nascent years of photography and anthropology the dividing line between images created during scientific and commercial endeavors was extremely blurred. Indeed there was very little, if any, separation between the two exploits. Unavoidably, images produced for one purpose were eventually consumed by the
other. Photographs taken during government surveys of the land have been interpreted as intending eroticism, and accordingly images produced for sale as spectacle, entertainment, or art were often absorbed into the nascent discipline of anthropology and its subgenre, ethnology. In any case, whatever the catalyst for their production may have been, photographs of “the American Indian” often found their way onto the open market.

It has been said that the technology of the image and the discipline of anthropology developed in tandem. The opening of the American West captured the popular imagination in the United States, and with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 the brutal colonization of indigenous North America through photography soon followed. Noting the aggressive and predatory nature of photography, theorist Susan Sontag likens the camera to a “gun” that is “loaded” and “shot.” Often people were portrayed as “noble savage,” a common stereotype that arose from the belief that Native people lived in a perfect Eden before they were defiled by European contact. This view postdates the previous one of “Blood-thirsty Savage,” which was utilized to justify their eradication. The vision of the “noble savage” began to flourish only after their ultimate extinction was securely confirmed within the minds of non-Native people by the proliferation of images depicting “Indians” securely confined to reservations or in captivity awaiting trial or execution. The image of the “noble savage” rose in popularity due to contemporaneous nostalgia resulting from the (then) commonly held view that “Indians” were vanishing and would soon exist only in the past.

**HISTORIC NON-NATIVE COMPOSITIONS:**
**TYPOIFYING AND EARLY PORTRAIT GENRES**

Portraits of Native American leaders visiting Washington, DC, as official delegates provide evidence of a particular documentary perspective prevalent in the second half of the nineteenth century. A portrait by Alexander Gardner of a Native delegate in Washington, DC, on official business provides a critical example of this practice (Fig. 1). Moreover, despite the official purpose for its creation, it was not long before images such as this found their way onto the open market, substantiating the claim of blurred boundaries between scientific and commercial photographic endeavors. Having earned his reputation as Mathew Brady’s assistant while documenting the Civil War, Alexander Gardner was a prominent photographer with a studio in the capital. In spite of the woman’s official status Gardner’s title refers to her as “an unidentified Comanche woman delegate to Washington, DC.” Portraits like these were often shot in pairs, from a full-frontal view and in profile, and thus, were highly influenced by “scientific” racism and its emphasis on an anatomical description of racial types. This image is one of thousands held in the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution. Indeed, many historical portraits of Native Americans are
held in anthropological archives of one institution or another. Today, orphaned images of Native people float, unclaimed, on the open market, as evidenced by the contemporary artistic works of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie discussed later in this essay. Interestingly, Tsinhnahjinnie has noted that photographs of Native people in ceremonial regalia tend to be more highly sought after while those images of people in plain dress remain affordable enough that she is able to purchase them from websites such as eBay and thus incorporate them into her work. 9

Another common practice surrounding the imaging of Native Americans was to emphasize their relationship with nature. Taken on a government survey of the land, a photograph by John K. Hillers (1843–1925) illustrates this approach. The inclusion here of textual analysis related to this photograph is critically important to this argument. However, in an effort to avoid reinforcing the already prolific stereotypes I refrain from including a visual record in this essay of any images containing nudity or images that may be construed as intending eroticism. As theorist Mieke Bal has effectively asserted, the critique of colonialist visual practice can itself be a reaction that legitimizes a secondary exposure of such images. 10 Wu-na’v-ai “Gathering Seeds” is an albumen stereograph also held in the National Anthropological Archives. The viewer is presented with a full-length image of a woman positioned within a natural landscape. Her gaze is averted; she looks off to her left and not directly at the viewer. She wears a full-length skirt that covers her body from the waist down. In her left arm she holds a basket while her right arm is down and slightly outstretched suggesting the motion of “gathering seeds” from the waist-high vegetation beside her, which partially obscures her lower legs. On the ground in front of her is a larger conical basket that echoes the shape of her bare breasts. The emphasis on a strong bond between the earth and its indigenous people is, on the one hand, a positive and realistic viewpoint. Over centuries of occupying a particular place, Native people developed an intimate knowledge of their environment. However, when one takes into account the Western motivations for the practice of visually emphasizing the relationship between Native people and the environment—or landscape—it can be viewed in a completely different light.

When representing the “primitive other” an often-unacknowledged goal of the photographer is to communicate the level of technological advancement of the culture being represented. In paintings this is often represented in the depictions of American military leaders accompanied by “Indians” who have been—as the viewer is to assume from their presence, appearance, and subordinate position—successfully assimilated. Tuscarora scholar, artist, and educator, Jolene Rickard, suggests that in the photograph, Wu-na’v-ai “Gathering Seeds,” the association between the woman’s breasts with the basket on the ground places Native people on par with the natural environment, which is representative of the past in contrast to the modern world and progress of the future. In this way their place on (or in) the path of progress can be made apparent to the viewer and in turn provide justification for the need to subjugate the “primitive” culture (made evident by the exposed skin) to the onslaught of “civilized” society. Further, she posits that although the woman is shown as “part” of the landscape she is not imaged in a way that would cause the viewer to see her as its “owner.” I agree with her analysis that the bare breasts function as a signifier of availability, not solely to the woman’s body, but rather to the land that the Native female body invariably represents. 11

Pointing to Western ideology’s post-contact misinterpretation of “community” as Nation, Rickard also discusses the element of imposed individualism implied by the portrait photograph, which displays an isolated individual in contrast to a community. Social connection to community and an individual’s place within it is most often integral to an indigenous person’s self-constructed identity. Rickard states, “It is easier to defeat one person rather than an entire
the individual becomes another access point allowing critical examination of the ways in which photographic images influenced the Western colonialist agenda in the nineteenth century.

Another genre of historic images of Native Americans is commercial studio photography. The client—Euro-American and Native American alike—may commission images of this type, or conversely, photographers often paid their subjects in exchange for allowing their picture to be “taken.” In either case, the ultimate goal is an economic one on the part of the photographer. Aleta M. Ringlero, in her article, “Prairie Pinups,” wherein she explores the intended eroticism in historic photographs of partially nude Native women, cites Joanna Cohen Scherer, a curator and Native American specialist with the Smithsonian Institution, for pointing out a distinction between photographers in the West. “The anthropology photographer was primarily interested in documenting how the Indian currently lived,” while the commercial photographer “took pictures primarily to make money. These men often attempted to make their subjects look exotic, savage, or romantic to create more interest in their product—the Indian print they sold.”

Will Soule’s (1836–1908) studio photographs of Native women from Fort Sill, Oklahoma provide a poignant example of commercial images attempting eroticism or spectacle for the intended consumer and combine various characteristics relevant to this discussion. Soule’s images of partially nude reclining women carry connotations too numerable to mention here. Remaining in line with Mieke Bal, I refrain from perpetuating exposure of these images by means of any discursive justification. Suffice it to say that Soule combines the commercial studio enterprise of the professional photographer, and all the related economic endeavors, with a reliance on the Western artistic tradition of representing the reclining female in an enclosed space. These images were surely sold as entertainment in the form of popular postcards, and like most others by Soule, were accompanied by highly offensive titles. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century visual records continue to affect our knowledge of Native Americans. Ringlero comments on the power of the visual image and their subsequent mediation: “Attached to military campaigns, geographic expeditions, or as traveling entrepreneurs of the new photographic medium, photographers were agents through which the world saw the indigenous people of the Americas. Through formats rapidly developed in photography and print, the images reinforced public curiosity, fascination, and fear of the people they called “warriors, squaws, bucks, maidens, and braves.”

Ringlero draws attention to the use of slang as a title on many historic images she discovered during the course of her research. She notes that the terminology was sometimes added to images at a later date and by someone other than the photographer; speculating that these additions may have increased the level of sensationalism in order to sell images. Further, the bare breasts in Soule’s images, if read as Rickard suggests, imply access not only to the women but also to the land; land perceived by Euro-Americans as their Manifest Destiny on the Western march toward progress. Extending the association of bare breasts in relation to land access serves to align Soule’s images of reclining females with anthropological ones and continues to serve the argument that not only was there no finite division between scientific and commercial endeavors around the turn of the century, the two were in fact inseparable.

**The Case of Edward S. Curtis: Current Interpretations**

One of the most famous historic image makers whose works epitomize the blurred boundaries between photography for scientific/anthropological documentation and for commercial/artistic purposes is Edward Sheriff Curtis. Curtis frequently described himself as an artist/scientist and his American Indian series as a project of art and science. Nevertheless, he had little formal education in
either subjects [sic]." Although he considered himself a documentary ethnographer, Curtis's work falls firmly within the artistic pictorialist genre and is often interpreted as presenting a romanticized perspective. It is well known that he was driven by a desire to record the lives of Native Americans before their inevitable "vanishing" by providing necessary documentation of a disappearing race, and notably, he intended the project to be a financial investment, albeit a failed one in his day. Due to the documentary aspect of his work, Curtis kept detailed notes related to his images, but most viewers are unaware of this fact. Therefore, lack of respect for the individual is perpetuated by the repeated separation of image from Curtis's original text. The subject's cultural affiliation is generally the only accompanying information and serves to apply an overarching stereotypical identity to an otherwise diverse group of people (Fig. 2).

Curtis has been criticized for his stylistic homogeneity in his head-and-shoulders portraits of this type. Katherine Hauser, a researcher of twentieth-century American and European art and mass culture, provides analysis of another of Curtis's portraits, *Princess Angeline*, 1899, included in the 2001 exhibition *Staging the Indian: The Politics of Representation*, presented by the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College. The exhibition contrasts Curtis's historic images with new works by six contemporary Native American artists. Hauser's analysis can easily be applied to this Lummi woman's portrait, a condition that serves her argument well.

On this woman's face, and on those of most Indians in *The North American Indian*, we see a serious, straight-faced, potentially stoic expression. While the eradication of native lands and rights led to severe deprivation, the isolated woman's sober facial cast does not convey this injustice. Instead the stereotype of Indian melancholy that Curtis expressed justified the past Indian eradication and continued ill treatment, The remote, stoic, noble Indian was too virtuous to exist in sordid White dominated society. Meanwhile Curtis's construction of the noble Indian created an essential "Indianness" veiling differences between tribal cultures.

In my interpretation, this unnamed woman's expression contains an internal, and eternal, resistance. A resistance to what Jill Sweet, co-curator of *Staging the Indian*, describes as "the subtext of Curtis's Indian pictures [which feature] the idea that Native Americans are victims who see their own futures coming to a tragic end." In her review of *Staging the Indian*, Nancy Marie Mithlo, assistant professor of art history and American Indian studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, noted Sweet's surprise at the artists'
varied responses to Curtis's work. "I expected them to take issue with Curtis's image making, maybe even express some anger; but what I'm hearing more of is irony and humor."24

The work of Marcus Amerman (not pictured), an artist of Choctaw heritage featured in Staging the Indian, is relevant to note in this context. Amerman reinterprets Curtis's historic photographs by staging similar conditions. For instance, by juxtaposing Curtis's, Grinding Meal, 1907, and his 2001 A Day at the Beach, Amerman is explicitly calling attention to Native modernity. Curtis's image presents four young Hopi women seated in a row grinding meal in a traditional way, while Amerman's portrait shows four young Hopi women seated in a row preparing to eat food purchased from Burger King, as is evident by the neatly lined up soda cups and bags with the fast-food logo prominently displayed. Another parallel is that of Curtis's Before the White Man Came—Palm Canyon, 1924, and Amerman's After the White Man Came, 2001. Each image depicts a Native woman balancing a utilitarian object on her head, posed with bare back to the camera, long hair loosely flowing. Looking away from the viewer toward the dramatic landscape, her carefully turned torso slightly exposes the profile of her breast. The difference: in Curtis's photo the woman wears a skirt of animal fur and the utilitarian container is a basket, while Amerman's subject wears cutoff denim jean shorts and carries an ice chest. Mithlo notes, "The multitude of interpretive strategies (voyeurism, an innate relationship of women and nature, the averted gaze) holds for both works, suggesting Amerman’s intimate relationship with Curtis’s material."25 Mithlo describes Amerman’s approach as an “interpretive strategy that seeks to contradict rather than affirm notions of historic superiority.”26 In his statement for the exhibition, Amerman expresses admiration for Curtis, saying, "It doesn’t bother me that Curtis edited the content of his photographs. It was the way he wanted Indian life presented to the world. It was beautiful and romantic. Sometimes, I like to think of Indian life that way too. I also see the pain and the grief and the fear and the anger. And if you look closely into the eyes of some of Curtis's portraits, you can see it too."27

Occasionally we are surprised by Curtis’s unexpected and seemingly naturalistic depictions (Fig. 3).28 This woman’s nonchalant smile compels the viewer to ponder the possibility that an equal exchange has transpired between subject and artist. Still, she is pictured without her own name. Here, Amerman’s words are again appropriate. “In many of his photographs, I can sense the mutual trust and respect that Curtis must have had with his subjects in order to achieve the aesthetic and emotional depth that lives in his work.”29 Exhibitions that seek to problematize Curtis’s work in an effort to further the discourse surrounding dilemmas in contemporary Native American arts scholarship have become more prevalent. Inclusion of the Native voice and self-reflective curatorship
are now staples of museum practice dealing with Native American representation. Mithlo describes new collaborative exhibit methods that allow for tribal self-representation while simultaneously seeking to challenge rather than reify notions of historic authority, stating that this new exhibits era “may perhaps best be termed ‘postcollaborative’ in nature.”

Old Images/New Views: Perspectives on Edward Curtis, developed by the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) and the First Nations Studies Program at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver to complement the 2007 public presentation of the 1914 Curtis film, In the Land of the Headhunters, offers another example of, to use Mithlo’s term, a “postcollaborative” exhibition focusing on contemporary interpretations of works by Curtis. The exhibition featured reflections on Curtis’s work by contemporary scholars, artists, and community leaders of the Pacific Northwest. Their views offer diverse perspectives.

Pam Brown of the Heiltsuk Nation and Pacific Northwest Curator at the UBC MOA interprets this image, commonly referred to as Gathering Abalone—Nakoaktok 1910 (Fig. 4), as bittersweet and laments the loss of natural resources due to overfishing. Brown wonders whom this unnamed woman may have been and speculates that she surely would not have lived her daily life dressed in traditional cedar bark clothing as depicted in the image. However, Bill Holm, curator emeritus, Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Washington, Seattle, asserts that his own lifelong research with the Kwakwaka’wakw people of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, conflicts with Brown’s view. He states, “It’s true that people in Curtis’s time did not ordinarily wear cedar bark clothing, but many of them had in their youth, and the knowledge and skills needed to make and wear that clothing was known and practiced.”

Holm offers his own analysis of the same image asserting that the woman in the photograph is known to be Francine Hunt, wife of George Hunt. She made much of the cedar bark clothing for use in Curtis’s film and was also photographed by Curtis demonstrating the technique for shredding cedar bark. Holm points out that the very traditional life of Francine Hunt, also known familiarly as Tsaqwani, was documented in forty-five pages of a long family history published in Franz Boas’s “Ethnology of the Kwakiutl,” Thirty-fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Holm states, “Anyone assuming that this 1914 subject of Edward Curtis’s photography was not steeped in the culture and knowledge of the traditional Kwakwaka’wakw, and that she was merely following Curtis’s romantic notions of how she should act, is mistaken.”

In this case, the identity of the person was always known, as, according to Holm, the information was included in Curtis’s notes from the beginning. On the one hand, Brown’s analysis emphasizes that the woman is dressed up and staged by Curtis and that she is anonymous. In contrast, Holm asserts that she is not at all anonymous to Curtis despite his vague title. She was Francine Hunt, and much of her knowledge and her activities were specifically recorded by Curtis along with her Kwakwalan name in both his and Boas’s ethnologies. Why do publications featuring Curtis’s work most often not include the information he so meticulously recorded? Possibly, this is evidence of the time period and the fact that most of the images were made for sale to non-Natives. One can speculate that Curtis found the information personally important to his documentation process but not relevant to the open market and its consumers. Again, this reiterates just how blurred the divisions were between scientific and commercial photographic genres of the time.

Commenting on another of Curtis’s images in the same exhibition, Andy Everson, K’omoks First Nation and a descendant of Margaret Frank, née Wilson (George Hunt’s granddaughter), who played the heroine, Princess Naida (along with two other women), in Curtis’s film, praises Curtis’s 1915 still photograph of his grandmother as Naida. “I thank Curtis, not
for capturing his vision of our people before European contact, but for capturing a moment in time in my grandmother's life.\textsuperscript{35} As I mentioned before, Susan Sontag has referred to the "taking" of photographs as an aggressive act. I would agree that throughout this history of photographing the various cultures of Native Americans, when these images are composed by non-Natives, whether with an attitude of respect or disdain, the majority maintains a constant element of "taking." However, some benefits have been found among the layers of the historic photographic legacy:

Artists and educators are returning to the many historical photographs representing Indians and Indian life in order to speak back to the violations of settlement—to counter, as one contemporary Yuchi Creek photographer asserted, the "absence of [the indigenous] presence." In this way, photographic (mis)representations serve as entry points to redress the shameful treatment of Native Americans throughout history.\textsuperscript{36}

Additionally, as has been demonstrated here, in many cases historic images serve to benefit indigenous people through the assistance they can provide in aiding memory and offering evidence related to the personal histories of objects and previous generations of family members. The multitude of complex interpretations cannot—and should not—be compressed into any single essentialist notion, and sustains the fact that much disagreement exists related to Curtis's intentions and the (in)accuracies surrounding his work.

\textbf{NATIVE-COMMISSIONED PORTRAITURE}

Contrary to popular belief, by the late nineteenth century photographs were common in many Native American communities. Economically successful families commissioned their own formal portraits. However, it is interesting to take note of the backdrops and studio settings in images composed by non-Native photographers. Operating in Pocatello, Idaho, near the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, J. J. McEvoy took studio portraits of the Stinson Lavatta family in 1893 (Figs. 5 and 6). Despite the fact that this family is in well-to-do European-style dress, McEvoy has situated them within a "natural" landscape made evident by the presence of the grass strewn floor and the ambiguous rocklike shape upon which Edward leans and Nettie rests her elbow. In opposition, their daughter Emma is seated atop a piece of indoor furniture with an ornately upholstered arm. Nevertheless, these portraits provide more realistic views of the modern successful lives of Native Americans just before the turn of the century. But commissioned portraits like these were generally for private consumption and not widely viewed by a non-Native audience. Extensively circulated images of indigenous
people commonly depicted the persecuted and impoverished. Non-Natives rarely saw photographs of Native people who were prosperous according to the European definition of the word because this would have challenged the dominant stereotypes. Private portraits like these are historically significant because they provide evidence of increased personal control over representation of the self.37

Recently, through the scholarship of Migue'l Askren, the works of Benjamin A. Haldane (1874–1941), a Tsimshian photographer from Metlakatla, Alaska, have come to light. At age twenty-five, Haldane opened his first portrait studio there in 1899. Also a musician and composer, Haldane traveled to Native communities throughout southeast Alaska and British Columbia, Canada teaching music and taking photographs. Throughout the course of his life Haldane recorded images of daily life, historic events, landscapes, Native-owned industries, and musicians. In his studio Haldane photographed Native sitters using Western conventions emphasizing wealth and respectability in the same style as Euro-American portraits.38 Native-commissioned portraiture from both Native and non-Native photographers is a topic that admittedly deserves further investigation but is beyond the scope of this survey. Mention of it is made here in an effort to follow a trajectory related to the historic and contemporary practice of imaging Native people in photographs.

**AN OUTSIDER INSIDE**

Another photographer whose work does not perpetuate stereotypes is Kate Cory (1861–1958). A non-Native who trained as a fine artist in New York, Cory lived in the Hopi pueblos of Oraibi and Walpi from 1905 to 1912. The women pictured here appear unaffected by the photographer's presence and are engaged in the activities of daily life (Figs. 7–9). If any were asked to pause momentarily for the camera, it seems most plausible in the case of the young girl gazing out across the mesa. Of interest is the young woman's gaze away from the camera and thus toward her own interior interests, which are unknown to the viewer despite the long caption. This indirect gaze is present in all three images, lending them a noninvasive air. Cory's photographs do not seem to be taken for the purpose of creating a specific narrative in the mind of the viewer or to please a specified consumer. Instead, they appear candid and thoughtfully composed.


FIG. 9. Kate Cory (1861–1958). From the Kiskya or passageway through the centre of Walpi, a Hopi girl looks across the wide valley of Polacca Wash. Dressed in the fabrics of the white man’s school she goes barefoot in the manner of her own people, between 1905–1912. Courtesy of Museum of Northern Arizona (MS-1-75-658).

SELF-REPRESENTATION ACKNOWLEDGED: OLD AND NEW

The remaining analysis concerns itself with images made exclusively by indigenous artists, the first of which is Jennie Ross Cobb (1882–1958), a Native woman taking photographs inside her community (Figs. 10–12).39 Ross Cobb’s work further dispels common stereotypes with her candid approach. All three images depict people living within a modern Native community and are composed by a Native person. Each composition contains a receding line that pulls the viewer into the frame, drawing the gaze through the image and into the background. Commenting on Cobb’s work, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, a contemporary Native artist, educator, and community builder, has this to say:

I believe [Ross Cobb] truly imaged Native women with love, and a humanizing eye . . . images of Native women living in contemporary, relaxed poses, smiling to a friend.
Photographs by a Native woman photographing Native women... images Curtis... Hillers and the many others could not even begin to emulate, when the eye of the beholder possesses love for the beheld.40

With these words, Tsinhnahjinnie is drawing attention to the importance of photographs of indigenous people taken by indigenous people. In other words, the practice of self-representation reveals an inherent difference within these pictures when compared to images of Natives taken by non-Native photographers. This difference—the positioning of control and authorship in Native hands—is alluded to in Tsinhnahjinnie’s statement. Regrettably, even now, over one hundred years later, we still have not fully acknowledged this view. Thus, there remains a constant drive for the aboriginal perspective offered here to continue to gain prominence and become more widely acknowledged. Through the work of twentieth and twenty-first-century Native artists, this is precisely what has been, and is, taking place.

One more historic image will be examined here before moving on to view works by living Native artists. Working in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Horace Poolaw (1906–1984) is another Native photographer who was recording events and taking portraits within his own community. With his photograph, Trecil Poolaw Unap, Mountain View, Oklahoma, 1929 (Fig. 13), Horace Poolaw blatantly displays a Native woman leaning...
against the post of a sign that reads “Stop State Law.” During this period the U.S. government, in its futile attempts to eradicate the “other” continued to pressure American Indians to assimilate. This image offers a modern view of Native resistance through their efforts to be recognized as sovereign Nations by a government continuing to avoid its legal obligations to honor broken treaties. Rickard has referred to this photograph as an image of “active resistance.” Trecil is, without a doubt, a modern woman, as her styled hair and dress make clear. Interesting is the way the photographer’s own shadow intersects the photographic space, consequently drawing attention to his presence outside the frame. Trecil, likewise, gazes directly into the viewer’s space and thus invites us to recognize our interconnectivity. Rickard states,

“The figure and the sign become larger than that moment and represent the struggle of the 20th century for Native people. . . . This image is another demonstration of the intricate tie between the US legal political space and the inherent right to land by Native people.”

Jumping a bit forward in time, two well-established contemporary Native artists whose works deal with issues of sovereignty and the navigation of political space are Hulleah
Tsinhnahjinnie (b. 1954) and Jolene Rickard (b. 1956). Tsinhnahjinnie's Portraits against Amnesia series (Fig. 14) exhibits hybrid prints that are a mixture of antique "collectible" photographs, or postcards, and her own digital manipulations.43 The original ten portraits in the series were all of postcard size, but in their reanimation Tsinhnahjinnie prints them as 30 x 20 inch images, now too large to be ignored or forgotten.44 This image confronts the viewer with a toddler on the surface of the moon. Veronica Passalacqua, contemporary author and curator, shares Tsinhnahjinnie's words: "In this view of colonialism, Tsinhnahjinnie visualizes 'man going to the moon trying to claim it, but when he gets there, there is a little aboriginal baby floating around on her little space scooter. . . . This baby is out in space looking back at you, confronting your perceptions!'45 Using digital technology, Tsinhnahjinnie transports individuals on vintage postcards from the past into our present. Her choices are dictated partly by availability, as the photographs of people not in Native dress are less popular and therefore, ironically, more available on websites such as eBay, but it is also a conscious choice to represent real people. The artist's manifestation of "photographic sovereignty"46 becomes a collaborative effort as the subjects, refusing to be typecast, gaze directly at the viewer. Author Lucy Lippard reminds us that in 1993 Tsinhnahjinnie warned viewers
acquainted to a colonized image of Indians, that the camera is no longer held by an outsider looking in.47

Jolene Rickard also speaks of sovereignty as a central issue related to the production of indigenous art. For her, “sovereignty is the border that shifts indigenous experience from a victimized stance to a strategic one.”48 Her installation *Corn Blue Room* (Fig. 15) utilizes photographic imagery and the construction of a dialogical space in an effort to impress upon the viewer the aboriginal worldview. The corn represents the “good mind” of the collective cultural memory and the living community of the Tuscarora people. The surrounding images of electric power lines and dams denote an event of important political significance in Tuscarora history. During that year the power authority announced its plans to forcibly relocate the Tuscarora Reservation and flood the land to construct a new reservoir in order to utilize the hydroelectric power of nearby Niagara Falls. Other images include photographs of the annual “Crossing Celebration” held each July. Native people from the community march between Niagara Falls, Ontario and Niagara Falls, New York. Rickard refers to the yearly march as “at once a social event, a protest march, a victory parade, and a warning.”49 The overall space emulates the shape of an Iroquoian longhouse and connotes a
small Tuscarora community and their fight for cultural survival in the face of continual coloni­
alist disregard. Identity politics have been central to the definition of Native art and are a primary catalyst for the creation of works. Yet it is important to move beyond issues of assimilation and colonization by recognizing the sovereign territory of self-determination visually manifest in the works of today’s indig­
enous artists.  

Contemporary works are repeatedly inter­
preted as positive self-representations seeking to derail the dominant narratives of hegemonic power relations. Further, their purpose is not simply to dispel stereotypes for a solely non-
Native audience. Rather, they often intend a Native audience and contain deeper levels of meaning than may be apparent to non-Native viewers. Laura E. Smith criticizes interpreta­
tions of Rickard’s photographs that suggest the artist’s work presents a singular sense of self. Instead, Smith asserts that Rickard’s fractured images are a conscious refusal to be pinned down and defined as a particular holistic or sin­
gular identity, and represent an ongoing search for wholeness. Renouncing declarations of authentic “Indianness” avoids adding more layers to the hermeneutical problem resulting from the convoluted and controversial histo­
riography that has developed from attempts to image the “Indian.” Drawing attention to photography’s inherent paradoxical condition, Smith defines the photograph as both a mask and a revelation. The challenge for today’s artists (and their critics) is to avoid dawning another mask. From the realization that no work can be fully expressed by feigning some elusive finality comes an acceptance that negotiating identity, and by association, sovereignty, is an ongoing fluid process. Speaking again of Corn

Blue Room, Smith posits, “Its vision for a sovereign future lies in an unsteady and incomplete dialogue between images, ideas, memories, and experiences as embodied in photography,” expressing the need for artworks and criticism that raise questions and initiate dialogue rather than assert authoritative truths.

However, there is still much to be done in order to carve out and secure a well-deserved space for contemporary Native artists in today’s world of “fine art.” Much tension and segregation still exists surrounding the definitions of “Native art” and “fine art.” The works of today’s indigenous artists continue to reach an ever-widening audience while simultaneously creating insider narratives previously, and conveniently, absent from the popular view.

Photographs are highly constructed spaces, powerful vehicles that inform and shape our worldview. They do not simply represent history; they are themselves historical objects. The way we perceive the world is shaped largely by not only personal experience but also, it must not be forgotten, by our experience of, and our exposure to, visual images.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to recognize Jolene Rickard, Tuscarora scholar, artist, and educator for her original use of the term “visual sovereignty” as it relates to the issues discussed in this essay. “Photographic sovereignty” and “visual sovereignty” are both terms originated by Rickard and subsequently upheld and utilized, most recently (at the time of this writing) by Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie and Veronica Passalacqua in the C. N. Gorman Museum–hosted conference and exhibition titled Visual Sovereignty: International Indigenous Photography (April 3–September 4, 2009).

NOTES


2. The following is a list of Native artists (in alphabetical order) to include for further development of this project (birthdate are given when they are known or can be closely estimated):

   - Dugan Aguilar
   - Marcus Amerman
   - Carl Beam
   - Walter Bigbee
   - Lori Blondeau
   - Richard Bluecloud Castaneda
   - Peña Bonita
   - Dana Claxton
   - Jesse Cooday
   - Dustinn Craig
   - Rosalie Favel
   - John Feodorov
   - Nicholas Galanin
   - Shan Goshorn
   - Benjamin Haldane
   - Terrance Houle
   - Namen Inuarak
   - Nikki Isham
   - Stephen Jackson
   - Zig Jackson
   - Tom Jones
   - George Littlechild
   - Carm Little Turtle
   - Erica Lord
   - James Luna
   - Alexis Macdonald Seto
   - Lee Marmon
   - Larry McNeil
   - Da-ka-xeen Mehner
   - Brian Miller
   - Sam Minkler
   - Kent Monkman
   - Nadia Myre
   - David Neel
   - Shelley Niro
   - Horace Poolaw
   - Aimee Ratana
   - Arthur Renwick
   - Jolene Rickard
   - Natalie Robertson

   Pit River/Maidu/Paiute (1947–)
   Choctaw (1959–)
   Ojibwe/Oppewa (1943–2005)
   Comanche (1958–)
   Cree/Salteaux/Métis
   Salt River Pima
   Mescalero Apache/Seminole (1948–)
   Hunkpapa Lakota
   Tlingit/Tsimshian/Na'ga'a (1954–)
   White Mountain Apache/Navajo (Dine) (1975–)
   Cree Métis (1958–)
   Navajo (Dine) (1960–)
   Tlingit
   Eastern Band Cherokee (1957–)
   Tsimshian (1874–1941)
   Blood Tribe
   Inuit
   Ojibwe (b. circa 1980s)
   Tlingit
   Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara
   Hochkun
   Plains Cree (1958–)
   Apache/Tarahumara (1952–)
   Arthabaskan/Inupiaq
   Luiseño/Diegouyo (1950–)
   French Cree Métis
   Laguna Pueblo (1925–)
   Tlingit/Tsimshian/Na'ga'a (1955–)
   Tlingit
   Haudenosooee (Iroquois)
   Kühnichenhaka/Mohawk (1969–)
   Dine
   Cree (1965–)
   Anishinaabe (1974–)
   Kwakwaka'wakw (1960–)
   Haudenosooee (Iroquois)/Bay of Quinte
   Mohawk (1954–)
   Kiowa (1906–1984)
   First Nations (Haisla)
   Haudenosooee (Iroquois)/Tuscarora (1956–)
   Ngati Porou/Clan Donnachaidh (Maori) (1962–)
ship to the younger artists, thus fostering and argument of this sort is beyond the scope of this essay.

For the record, the discipline of art history itself? Why not, perhaps explicitly, remains unnamed. In the interest of the continued struggle on behalf of contemporary indigenous artists to claim space for themselves in the fine art world, does it not remain within the claimants to the genre. An adverse result is the lack of stylistic representation views their work too constrictively through the lens of what is more popularly considered acceptable as Native art. One adverse result is the lack of stylistic division applied to these artists and their works. If claiming space for these artists in the fine art world regardless of their Native identity is a desired goal, then surely, application of western genre terminology is a purposeful and necessary action. However, if this space exists to be claimed, does it not remain within the confines of a fundamentally Western ideological practice, the discipline of art history itself? Why not, then, adopt the canonical model?

The autonomy of the artists cannot be threatened, as the mature canonical artists provide much guidance and mentorship to the younger artists, thus fostering and defining for themselves the contributors to the genre. An argument of this sort is beyond the scope of the essay. However, these questions must be asked, and appear to be lacking in the current discourse.

3. The artists included are chosen because they can be defined as predecessors to the creation of an identifiable canon and/or fundamental producers of the canon itself—a canon that interestingly, and perhaps explicitly, remains unnamed. In the interest of the continued struggle on behalf of contemporary indigenous artists to claim space for themselves and recognition of their work in the fine art world, would an identifiable canon in line with Western art historical practice serve this endeavor? Surely one already exists. Resistance to this type of labeling is understandable. Arguably, one of the prevalent issues concerning indigenous art production is that most often the work is classified as Native art rather than placed within Western genres. This condition creates tension because it works both in favor of Native artists as well as against them. Many Native artists today would prefer to be accepted simply as artists. However, it is often their Native identity that helps them achieve artistic notoriety, yet, the larger audience views their work too constrictively through the lens of what is more popularly considered acceptable as Native art. One adverse result is the lack of stylistic division applied to these artists and their works. If claiming space for these artists in the fine art world regardless of their Native identity is a desired goal, then surely, application of western genre terminology is a purposeful and necessary action. However, if this space exists to be claimed, does it not remain within the confines of a fundamentally Western ideological practice, the discipline of art history itself? Why not, then, adopt the canonical model?

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5. For in-depth discussions of theories related to this issue, see Robert F. Berkhofer, The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian, from Columbus to the Present (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Philip J. Deloria, Playing Indian (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); and Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).


12. Ibid.

13. An example of Native-commissioned portraiture is given later in this essay.


17. Ibid.


19. For a discussion of Curtis and pictorialism, see Katherine Jane Hauser, “Edward S. Curtis's


21. The artists featured (Marcus Amerman, Judith Lowry, James Luna, Shelley Niro, Nora Naranjo-Morse, and Bently Spang) responded to Curtis images of their choosing. Skidmore's Special Collections houses one of the few extant collections of Curtis's project, The North American Indian, in its entirety.


25. Ibid., 158.

26. Ibid.


28. Curtis, Heart of the Circle, 47.


31. Ibid.


33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Carol J. Williams, Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 176.

37. Ibid., 64, 141.


42. Ibid.

43. Passalacqua, “Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie,” 95.

44. Ibid., 91.

45. Ibid., 96.

46. Tsinhnahjinnie, “When is a photograph,” 42.


50. For topics related to this argument, see Rickard quoted in Lippard, “Esthetic Sovereignty,” 1.


52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 66.

54. Ibid.