

From the **Lens-Based Image Making** research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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Documentary Photography/ Visual Activism

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Module: Research in Context (ADAD5003/C)

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The decision to document; A critical Analysis of *The Native American Indian* by Edward Curtis

Since the mid 1850s when photography began being used as a device to document people and places, it has been a disputed medium when it comes to considerations of ethics and representation. Thus, this essay will act as a critical analysis of the project *Native American Indian* by Curtis Edwards. It will look at the gaze of the Native American by Curtis Edwards in this project and the lasting cultural impact of this project. This essay will also consider the importance of the project *Native American Indian* as a cultural artifact while also criticizing its flaws as a project. This essay will be split into multiple chapters because of how wide reaching the body of work is. First we will look at the historical context of where this work falls, second we will analyze the legacy and cultural impact of the work. In the third section we will consider the flaws of the project and look at the modern context of Native American people as well as the ethical considerations related to the ideas and issues of cultural representation around the work.

Chapter 1: Historical Context



Image 1: Before and After Carlisle- John Choate Photographer at Carlisle 1882

It was in 1900 when *Edwards* project began, he saw what he called the “*vanishing race*” of Native Americans and saw their cultures quickly disappearing so he embarked on a thirty year project attempting to document these ways of life before they were gone. Throughout the project *The Native American Indian*, *Curtis Edwards* traveled to more than eighty Native American tribes. This project includes over ten thousand wax cylinder recordings of music, language, and tribal lore and forty thousand photos of Native Americans, their land, cultures, ceremonies, and traditions.

In 1496 when the first colonizers came to North America the Native Population was estimated to be fifty million, by 1900 when *Edward Curtis’s* project began the

population of Native Americans was two hundred and thirty seven thousand.

Populations of Native Americans had been demolished and were not expected to begin to rise anytime soon. In 1892 *Captain Richard R. Pratt*, the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School famously stated in a speech "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man." This quote articulates and contextualizes the attitude of the United States toward Native Americans in the late 1800's and early 1900s perfectly. Between 1869 and 1960 hundreds of thousands of Native children were taken from their homes and sent to reform schools like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, where they were forced to forget their culture, history, language, and identity. This was done in an attempt to divide and conquer Native Americans and culturally assimilate them into the machine of the United States. This was and is still cultural genocide, which largely all of the United States at the time had no issue with, the government saw Native Americans people as a sore thumb and a race of people that they need to kill and wipe from the United States. The cultures and ways of Native people would easily be wiped from the memory of the United States if documentary photographers like *Edward Curtis* hadn't stepped in. This is not to say that the Native Americans were helpless and would bend to the United States government easily, but most tribes did not have the facilities to document their way of life and culture before it was further taken from them.

Chapter 2: Lasting Impact of work



Image 2: A Corner Of Zuni by Edward S. Curtis



Image 3: *Atsina Camp Scene* by *Edward S. Curtis*

When looking at work from this project it allows you to see the great diversity between all of the different tribes that *Edwards* encountered and documented, at a time when Native people were being taken away from their homes and cultures this project acts as a cultural artifact that allows you to remember how Native people lived at one point and it allows you to understand that not all of these people lived in the same ways. In the two photos shown above this is clear, within the second image, *Image 2: A Corner Of Zuni* by *Edward S. Curtis* you see a pueblo style house and you see the complex developed housing in which they lived in. These photos give the context that

these people were not nomadic and had what was most likely an agrarian society. This by no means is a captivating photo, but it allows you to see and understand how these people lived without biases. It is not politicized, it is just there. When you compare this photo to the third image, Image 3: *Atsina Camp Scene by Edward S. Curtis* you can see the huge cultural difference between the two tribes without even looking at the people. You can see the *Atsina* people lived nomadically, and they traveled in large bands. These observations may not seem like huge revelations and may seem quite obvious, but these images act as artifacts of the time, they allow for modern societies to see and understand the complexities of Native Americans. For me this is a big revelation, as a kid growing up in the United States you are often fed the idea that Native American societies were uncivilized and all nomadic. But when confronted with these images it shifts the perspective and begins to make me understand how different every single culture was. *Susan Sontag* in *On Photography* states “A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture” (*Page 3*). This quote contextualizes the work perfectly, while Native people all across the United States were dying and their cultures were being taken from them these photos are proof that they were there and they existed at one time like this. They are also proof that every single tribe was vastly different and had their own culture.



Image 4: Grass House Ceremony Wichita- Edward S. Curtis

The photograph shown above is of the grass house ceremony. This is a ceremony that is performed by the medicine man within the Wichita tribe and takes place at three times in the year, when grass begins to grow, when corn begins to ripen and when corn is harvested. When looking at this photo you can see six men performing the ceremony while there is a large crowd behind watching in a grass house. At this time the people from the *Wichita* people would live in these grass houses in the summers. This photo is documenting an important ceremony and the houses in which

the *Wichita* people would live. This photo once again is not a particularly well composed photo, but it is a historical document that allows for people to remember and see the different ceremonies that would take place within the different tribes and allows for people to see the cultural richness that each tribe has.

Chapter 3: Ethical Considerations and Representation



Image 5: Pose de l'homme de la nature... Pose de l'homme civilisé. (Croquis Parisiens No. 2), from Le Charivari By: Honoré Daumier 1843

The drawing above is a drawing of two Parisians being photographed and depicts the gaze that comes with both of these photos. The drawing on the top is called "Pose of the Natural Man" and the drawing on the bottom is called "Pose of the Civilized

Man". As you can see the "Pose of the Natural Man" is straight on headshot with him sitting still in a simple wooden chair as his wife stands next to him, to me this photo looks like a photo for the purpose of documentation. The photographer isn't looking at the subject and the subject looks like he is being captured in a simple clean way that can be replicated anywhere. While the bottom photo called "Pose of the Civilized Man" is of a man sitting proudly with a complex and individual facial expression while leaning onto a fancy blue desk. This cartoon drawing depicts the gaze of the photographer perfectly. It juxtaposes the two gazes and forces the viewer to question the difference in gaze and asks the question why are these two people photographed differently? The image above reinforces the ideas that not all photos are made equal and this would have been equally true for *Edwards* in the project *Native American Indian* his pictorial style comes through and these photos are shot with a purposeful style, which is not unflattering to the subjects, but it changes the context in which you see them.

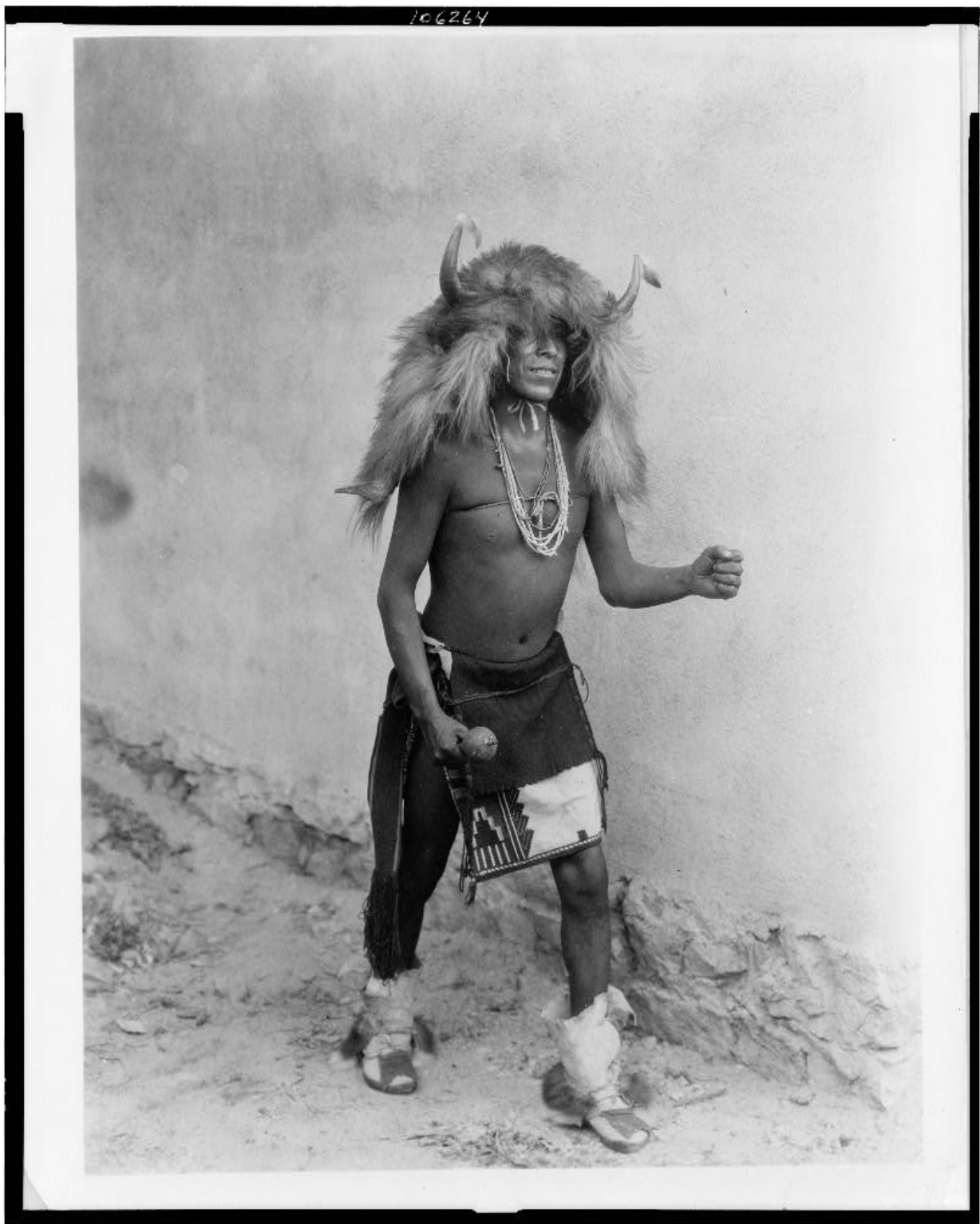


Image 6: Edward S. Curtis Native American Indians - Sia buffalo dancer. Full-length, standing, facing right ca. 1926

The photo shown above Image 6: *Edward S. Curtis Native American Indians - Sia buffalo dancer. Full-length, standing, facing right ca. 1926* This photo is of a Native Sia buffalo dancer, wearing minimal, but traditional clothing. This photo was shot outside, against a wall. When looking at this photo I see two things, the man is not given a name, which to me takes away from the depth of this photo. It makes me feel when *Edwards* shot this photo he either didn't believe the man was important enough to include his name or he didn't know the man well enough to know his name. And the second thing I take from this is the clothing the man is wearing, the traditional clothing of a Sia buffalo dancer. It makes me wonder why he decided to photograph the man in this context. I believe his attempt when photographing this man was to show the world an idea of how Native people lived. He wanted to document these people as they were in the past, but, while this idea may have reflected how they lived in the past it was not an accurate representation of how most Native Americans were currently living when he shot the photos.

When you compare this photo to the photo below by *Timothy O'sullivan* it makes you wonder how Native people were really living at the time *Edwards* was working on this project. In the photo below you can see a group of Shoshone people that were photographed in 1867, from this photo you can see that they seem to live in nomadic groups. But more importantly you can see that they are clearly wearing denim clothing and non-traditional clothing. This photo was taken about thirty years before *Edwards'* project began. When you compare what the Shoshone are wearing in 1867 to what the Sia Buffalo Dancer is wearing in 1926 you really begin to question the authenticity of the work that *Edwards'* created and makes me the viewer question *Edwards'* gaze, because

Edwards' work pushed the idea that Native Americans were still living in these older ways, and wearing traditional clothing while this was often the opposite of the truth.



Image 7: *Shoshone* by Timothy H. O'Sullivan (American, born Ireland, 1840–1882)

Taken 1867

In *Photography the Intersection of Gazes* by Cathrine Lutz and Jane Collins state “Homi Bahaba (1983), on the other hand, argues that the gaze is not only crucial to colonial regimes, but that a tremendous ambivalence must accompany colonial looking relations because the mirror which these images of the other hold up to the colonial self is “problematic, for the subject finds or recognizes itself through an image which is simultaneously alienating and hence potentially confrontational (29).” Page 191. I think

this quote is very important to consider when looking at Edwards work. The *Native American Indian* in many ways has impacted how the rest of the United States sees Native Americans. But furthermore it has impacted how Native Americans see themselves within this gaze. I cannot speak on how Native Americans see themselves because I am a white man who is not Native American, but the artwork below by *Wendy Redstar* can help articulate the impact of this gaze.



Image 8: Wendy Red Star, Summer, from the series Four Seasons, 2006 Wendy Red Star

What is shown above is a self portrait of *Redstar*, a Crow Native American who is wearing traditional clothing, similar to what you would see someone wearing in a portrait made by *Edwards*. Surrounding her is a fake scene of mountains, trees, and flowers. To her left there is a fake deer and to her right there is a fake buffalo skull. This image is loaded with historical contexts and is heavily questioning the colonial gaze of Native Americans. This Image shows the attitude of *Redstar* on how Native people were documented. From looking at this image I can perceive she thinks the documentation was theatrical, shallow and inaccurate of the time. Furthermore, what the viewer is confronted with in this work is how Native Americans see themselves within the colonial gaze, as she is sat next to a toy deer. It makes you think of the commodification of their culture and the shallow ways in which they are commonly represented. "Being one with nature" or "being in the mountains". While some of that may be accurate it is a great generalization and insulting to a whole race.

Largely speaking what *Edwards* described as the "*vanishing race*" has now vanished. Today Native Americans are living on small underfunded reservations that have conditions that are akin to those of third world countries. On reservations today most work is provided by tribal and federal governments and there is very little economic opportunity outside of this. This leads to some of the highest unemployment rates in the United states with typically four to eight of ten Native Americans living on reservations being unemployed and most who are employed earn wages below the poverty line. There are over ninety thousand homeless Native Americans today. Thirty percent of Native American housing is overcrowded, and less than fifty percent of

Native housing on reservations today is connected to public sewers. Native Americans are one hundred seventy seven percent more likely to die from diabetes than other Americans, five hundred percent more likely to die from tuberculosis than other Americans and eighty two percent are more likely to die from suicide than other Americans.

These stats speak for themselves when it comes to the context of modern Native Americans conditions. They are inhumane conditions and the attitude of the United States toward these conditions is similar to as they were in 1892, “to kill the Indian and save the man” but today it feels more like the attitude is to kill the Indian and kill the man. Thus, It begs the question did *Edwards'* work achieve anything other than documenting the cultures and Native American people semi accurately. Did he do anything for the people he documented other than take their photos. While I believe he has created an outstanding body of work that serves as a powerful historical document of the times. And created a body of work which remembers how Native people lived for a period of time. I don't personally believe he did anything to help or change the fate of Native Americans. I believe he could have helped the cultural awareness of the conditions of these people if the work was more accurate to their current living conditions, their growing death, their forced movement into reservations, their cultural assimilation. But what he did was photograph the idyllic moments, the traditional clothing and the people in nature. He didn't photograph the truth, he photographed the people not as they were, but as he wanted them to be.

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