

## **Edward S. Curtis: The Paradox in the Making. Pictorialism & the PostIndian Survivance of Will Wilson.**

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### **Abstract**

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*During the turn of the nineteenth century, Edward S. Curtis embarked upon an epic mission to photographically document the Indigenous peoples of North American. His pseudo-ethnological, pictorialist approach often portrayed romanticized images of 'the vanishing race' through representations of a simulated and constructed Indigenous subject. Curtis' photography reinforced the reduction of unique Indigenous identities by absorbing, assimilating, and re-translating his subjects into a monoethnic identity. His published body of work *The North American Indian* became the source document by which all future North American Indigenous cultures' ethnographic information would be archived, romanticized, and caricaturized by the dominant Western world. Curtis' photographs of Indigenous peoples are compelling, in part because of the impetus they provide for critical reflection, but more importantly, for the visual analysis of the past, present, and future of contemporary Indigenous people. Through postIndian theorist, Gerald Vizenor's concepts of survivance, and a postcolonial mode of critical visual analysis, this essay deconstructs and reinterprets selected works of Edward S. Curtis' paradoxical representations of Indigenous people, and in contrast, highlight the acts of contemporary Indigenous survivance by examining contemporary Diné photographer, Will Wilson.*

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**Keywords:** *Visual Critique, Indian, Native American, Indigenous, Photography, Pictorialism, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Semiotics, Critical Theory, Stereotypes, Gerald Vizenor, Edward Curtis, Will Wilson*

### **1. Context is Everything.**

Indigenous people live a subjugated existence in the historical canon of the United States. During the turn of the nineteenth century, photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis embarked upon an epic mission to photographically document the Indigenous peoples of the North American continent. His pseudo-ethnological, pictorialist approaches often portrayed his romanticized image of 'the vanishing race.' Curtis' photographic representations of a constructed identity aided to reinforce and galvanize unique Indigenous identities by absorbing, assimilating, and re-translating them into a monoethnic identity. His published body of work *The North American Indian* became a source document by which all future North American Indigenous cultures' ethnographic information would be archived, romanticized, and caricaturized by the dominant Western world.

Though, to deny any value to Curtis' work would be negligent. He did not follow, what we today consider, correct methodologies for ethnographic documentation, and upon critical reviews of his work, we now recognize Curtis as a pictorialist photographer, influenced by artists such as Leonard Misonne and Alfred Steiglitz.

However, in the early twentieth century, anthropology was not yet recognized as a formal scientific discipline and the title of ethnographer could be bestowed to anyone with little to no formal training. These photographic representations leave the canon of Indigenous cultures to be viewed through an artistic settler's-lens, circumventing the more complete picture of colonial American history, one of violence and brutality against the Indigenous peoples of this continent. With this in mind, to some tribes across the continent, Curtis' photographs are some of the only connection they hold to their past because Curtis' images are some of the only images left of these communities and family members. The paradox of Curtis' photographs of Indigenous peoples is compelling, in part because of the impetus the photographs provide for critical historical reflection, but more importantly, for the opportunity his images provide for an Indigenous critical thinker to visually analyze the past, present, and future of contemporary Indigenous people.

Ranging from disreputable to romantic, Curtis' photographs provoke powerful emotions. His images are the indexical sign of a repressive colonial practice used to reinforce the ideals that Indigenous people are inferior, and in turn, justified the inhumane federal policies brought on by the United States Government, determined to destroy Indigenous culture. The United States simultaneously sought to preserve elements of the vanishing race in forms of human remains, museum exhibits, ethnographic images, recorded folk tales, and early recorded films.

Curtis' photographs illustrate the paradoxical relationship that the United States has towards native peoples.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the presence of Indigenous people in his photographs exudes a paradox of defiance, pride, and nonconformity with *their* contemporary social norms, a time when it was extremely difficult and unpopular to be Indigenous. Though, when a dominate culture engages in the act of representing a conquered minority, it is prudent to question the motives behind the act. Only then can considerations of the subject be made, such as, did the subject have any measure of control over their agency in their representation?

Through a postcolonial mode of critical visual analysis, this essay will deconstruct and reinterpret selected works of Curtis' *The North American Indian* and detailing the concepts of Indigenous *survivance* as a way to examine the works of contemporary Indigenous photographer Will Wilson.

## 2. A Not-So-Minor Paradox

Postmodernism, and a significant offshoot, postcolonialism, bring about new methods of viewing and reading images by considering a shared thematic approach: in order to make progress, one has to acknowledge the past, in order to construct a new future. Both offer unique possibilities of thinking, postcolonialism asserts that this world cannot be measured by Imperialism alone, because a colonized view only works to marginalize the *Exotic Other*.<sup>2</sup>

Critical theorists assert that postcolonialism universalizes marginalization, and works to deconstruct, and reinterpret colonial ideologies. However, labeling the world as being *post*, as in *postcolonial*, suggests that colonialism is over and assumes the complete inculcation of Indigenous epistemologies to that of the dominant society. Therefore, to have an Indigenous perspective poses a paradox. To the five hundred and seventy-four federally recognized tribes, two hundred and forty-five unrecognized tribes, and countless other Indigenous communities throughout the United States, colonization is an on-going institution of subjugation. Moreover, the ideals of the word *post*, frees White researchers of their moral responsibility of accurate historical analysis. It is my assertion that colonialist ideologies, as a power structure, are still very much a part of the practiced contemporary American identity, an identity that was reinforced and galvanized during the American Nationalism movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism and Transculturation in American Art, 1890-1915* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Saïd. *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

This paradox aside, postcolonialism's methods of visual analysis rejects notions of the contemporary, and as such, a postcolonial-lens would reject the modern ideals of the American Identity, with its stained nostalgic connections of Manifest Destiny. Postcolonialism works to trace the history of the colonial apparatuses that were specifically designed to organize and promote Western culture.<sup>3</sup> As an institutional practice, colonization is the physical act of domination and violence meant to sever humans from their relationship with their environment.<sup>4</sup>

Postcolonial theory makes sense of the contradictions of Indigenous identity that arises from this paradox of dual accountability - the Indigenous community and the dominating society. Engaging the world through a postcolonial-lens helps to see the justification for postcolonial artists to explore this space of dual-identity. This hybridity stems from another fundamental paradox: the survivors of a colonized nation brought about a hybrid-paradigm, forced upon by the colonizers, to make them more civilized. Their cultural hybridity challenges the dominate culture's power structures through self-expression fostering a change in global perception. This way of critiquing allows postcolonial Indigenous thinkers and artists to seek out new languages and lens for reading, critiquing, and producing in the wake of colonialism.

### 3. Curtis' Nod to Modernism

Postmodernism as a concept, and theory, has been widespread in its use by artists and academia, for nearly forty years. It can be said to be a mere moment or general condition. Yet, others denigrate it to a style or elevate it to a historical period.<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson states that thee defining characteristics of postmodernism are the imitations of recognizable styles, known as play, pastiche, parody. This also includes appropriation, fragments, hybridity and camp. Furthermore, postmodernism can be used as the word to cover any and all aspects of the above.<sup>6</sup> One issue with defining postmodernism, however, is that many of the features also appear in modernism, causing a sense of paradoxical logic. The dialog that it carries to various art movements of the past is apparent in the very name, postmodern; it carries within itself, the 'modern' – from which it both derives and deviates.<sup>7</sup> In this thinking, making distinctions not choices, creates the either/or paradox that forces the viewer to equally consider both sides of this binary opposition. The blurring of these opposing binaries produces new discourse and values and call into question existing paradigms.<sup>8</sup>

Modernism can be applied to a wide range of trends that appeared within the art world during the middle of the nineteenth century and continued through the twentieth. It was a time of grand narratives where works favored the avant-garde and experimental, seeing the traditional norms of the academy rejected. Take pictorialism, a movement in photography that sought to emphasize the intrinsic beauty of the subject through tonal composition rather than merely documenting reality. The basic tenants of pictorialism can clearly be derived in the craftsmanship and formalist aesthetic rendering of his subjects in soft focus, exaggerated atmospheric perspective, and the tonal warmth of Curtis' *The Vanishing Race – Navajo*. [Figure 1.1]. The melancholy narrative constructed through the backlit silhouettes of riders on horseback, dispiritingly moving towards a dark, unknown hazy future, coupled with the misrepresentative title, leaves very little room for argument of Curtis' implicit bias.

Curtis wrote about the union of technology and art in 1900:

*“photography is the perfect union of art and science and is able to stand for itself. Let us study light, shade, composition and perspective both as it is seen in nature and in the work of the masters, not to copy but to learn. Once we know the rules of art will it soon be shown in our work.”*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Simon Malpas & Paul Wake, *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 137.

<sup>4</sup> How I use the word *environment* in this essay can also be used to discuss the effects of colonialization in terms of social, cultural, political, and economic environments of Indigenous people.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory* (New York: Rutledge, 2006), 120.

<sup>6</sup> Glen Ward, *Postmodernism* (Blacklick: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 217.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 121

<sup>8</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Keller, *Post Modern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Palgrave: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1991), 164.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Curtis, *Western Trails 1*, (Seattle: The Western Trail Publishing Co, 1900), 187

This illustrates his study of pictorial practices through careful study of his contemporaries, and very likely, the conventions of the impressionists. Curtis took these conventions to heart in his photography. His work shows a radical reductive process that emphasized the study of light and composition over subject. Curtis' reductive approach to the human subject is one of the prime reasons that his work is so problematic.

#### 4. Seeing is Believing

There is a common misconception that images do not lie, and that *seeing is believing*. Generally speaking, when a photograph is seen directly by the viewer, that photograph is viewed as reality. Vision gives the illusion that the viewer is seeing the *thing* itself directly, and therefore, believes that they are seeing an unmediated reality. The physical act of being captured through a photographic medium, renders a subject frozen, static in time, and therefore, ceases to be real, but becomes an image, an artifact. The artificiality of an image, as well as the mediation of vision, is a difficult concept for most to recognize, since it seems to go against the conventional evidence that, *seeing is believing*. Susan Sontag's writings on photography helps to illustrate that images are imparted with emotional and meaningful subtexts, and all too often, these emotional connections, made from the mediated image, create a short cut in logic that is rationalized as: If the *thing* seen is close enough to the *real thing* itself, then it must be *real* and consequently, the image must be *real*.<sup>10</sup>

However, the viewer is disconnected and removed from the process that makes the image possible – the *Real* world – and through this disconnect, they default to short-cuts in logic: *seeing is believing, images never lie, and a picture is worth a thousand words*. If Curtis' images are taken on face value, then the *thing* in the image, and in the viewer's mind, is real; or at least a suitable substitute. It's worth noting again, that the principal idea of representation is that an image is not the *thing* itself, but a thing in *itself* with its own formal properties. This may seem like a redundant and obvious statement, but when the viewer's predisposed biases enter into the perception of viewing the image, such as colonial American epistemologies, they then view the represented image as something that uniquely represents the original *thing*. This short-cut in logic acts as a triggering mechanism for an emotionally constructed nostalgic connection. In the case of Curtis' work in *The North American Indian* the nostalgic connection for the dominant white society is the constructed antagonist of the American myth, the *Indian*.<sup>11</sup>

#### 5. Framing the Fantasy

Curtis' style represented the assumptions of the dominant culture by choosing how the subjects in his photographs would be presented. His denial of agency through a pictorialist aesthetic exhibited romantic scenes of the sublime and grandeur, despite the fact that a photograph purports to represent truth. His photographs of Indigenous people can be considered highly suspect of what is seen, but more importantly, of what is unseen. The seen may represent family members or tribal affiliations, whereas, the unseen are the traumas of colonization and the experience of being watched and recorded by the penetrating stare of the colonizers.<sup>12</sup> Sontag says that to photograph is to "appropriate the thing being photographed."<sup>13</sup> This appropriated image then works to propagate the fantasy of *Indians* living as static historical figures that have succumb to the fate of conquest. These images create a power structure, by which, dominate society bolsters their superior stature and serves as a standard for measuring the material and economic progress within American society.

The existence of Curtis' photographs proves the existence of their original subjects. The visual experience of seeing his images carries far more emotional weight, as opposed to analytically, while making cognitive connections, regardless of rational considerations. These assumptions are based on visual information used to recall the nostalgic connection to that original subject. Curtis' photographs are then misleading because they do not show the totality of their original subjects' experience.

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 1-23

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this essay, I will use the italicized word, *Indian*, and variations thereof, as an all-encompassing word that refers to the simulated, representation of Indigenous identity, terms, culture, and epistemologies. I will contend that the *Indian* is a false, or hollow *sign*, that displaces Indigenous identity to colonial antiquity, and allows for dominant White society to construct false narratives that are used to oppress and subjugate. Likewise, I use the term Indigenous as a more appropriate and accurate way to refer to the people living, and specific band affiliations, where known and applicable.

<sup>12</sup> Theresa Harlan, *Indigenous Photographies: A Space for Indigenous Realities in Native Nations: Journey in American Photography*, (London, Barbican Art Gallery, 1998), 232.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 4.

Therefore, in this scenario, the mental image of Curtis' photographed subjects is more real in the minds of the viewer and over time, the mental image will grow to replace the real existence of Indigenous people, and be viewed as a factual representation.

With regard to visual imagery, there are two major responses: 1) the contemplative, analytic and 2) the nostalgic, emotional response. As visual rhetoric scholar Charles Hill argues, persuasion is directly correlated with an emotional response.<sup>14</sup> Humans like to categorize, compartmentalize, and minimize information. Traits and similarities between objects get generalized, compartmentalized, and upon further acquisition of information, reduced, re-generalized, re-compartmentalized, so on and so forth, until the total collective emotional memory of the trait is the stand-in for all things related to that trait, regardless of the accuracy of the representation. From this, it is understood that the viewer is more likely to process information in a way that requires less thought, and these generalizations are the mental shortcuts that are emotionally triggered, rather than rationally considered.<sup>15</sup>

Once this association is made, the image then becomes a simulation of the *sign* and will trigger nostalgic connections and their associated emotions. Put simply, this stand in for all traits, is what leads people to believe that all *Indians* wear feathers in their hair, live in tipis, and ride pinto ponies. To be persuasive, the image needs to manipulate the linkage between the viewer's emotions and values. The persuasiveness of a particular image influences the process of thought and decision making through the transference of an emotional connection to an unrealistic representation of the *real*, allowing for its manipulation and use as a form of social conditioning.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. The Rhetoric of PostIndian Survivance

Visual images have always been used as a form of propaganda and control when referencing the *Indian*, whether they were paintings by Charles Bird King, George Catlin, or photographs by C.S. Fly. Many paintings, etchings, and drawings were made of Indigenous people in the early days of colonial America. Through a critical lens, these early images persuaded settlers that the *Indian* was an uncivilized heathen whose very being justified conquest. As the eradication of Indigenous people progressed, photography became a way to preserve and romanticize the ideals and nostalgic connections to the 'winning of the West'. However, by the time Curtis had created most of his work, the *Dawes Act* of 1887 had relocated most Indigenous communities to reservations outside of their ancestral territories to restrict and regulate their movements, freedom, and self-determination.<sup>17</sup> But despite this fact, Curtis did not stop from depicting his *Indian* as free roaming in their natural landscape, and in doing so, severed any control of agency to the person being turned into an image. Curtis' nostalgic connection to the *Indian* was more palatable than the *real*. His photographs illustrate the paradoxical relationship that society has towards Indigenous peoples. In contrast, the presence of *Indian* people in his photographs exudes a defiance, pride, and nonconformity with their contemporary social norms, a time when it was extremely difficult and unpopular to be Indigenous.<sup>18</sup>

In a direct response to dominant culture's view on Indigenous identity, in the ongoing aftermath of colonialism, White Earth Tribal member and self-coined postIndian thinker, Gerald Vizenor, reframed the traditional Western semantical theory through an Indigenous-lens. In his book, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, he defines manifest manners as "the course of dominance, the racist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as 'authentic' representations of [Indigenous] cultures".<sup>19</sup> Vizenor is referring to the simulations of Indigenous identity through acts of misappropriation and colonialization, implicitly seen in Curtis's constructed representations and romanticized conceptions of Indigenous epistemologies.

Vizenor cleverly subverts the effects of coloniality by appropriating and redefining the terms of critical discourse. Vizenor views the *Indian* as nothing more than the accumulation of various simulations and representations that shape the thinking of Indigenous people.

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<sup>14</sup> Charles A. Hill. "The Psychology of Rhetorical Image" from *Defining Visual Rhetoric*. (Oshkosh: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 29.

<sup>15</sup> Charles A. Hill. *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-35.

<sup>17</sup> United States Government, "The Dawes Act", [www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov), 1887.

<sup>18</sup> Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on PostIndian Survivance*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 12.

More importantly, it's how these representations were used, and continue to be used, towards Indigenous people in our modern visual culture. The physical presence of an *Indian* in a photograph, however, does show a glimpse of the true person for whose image is being appropriated. However, misrepresentative Curtis's photographs may be, the subjects in his photos are human beings. By allowing the photograph to be taken, they project a resistance and individuality within the social norms of the time. The reading of Indigenous participation is what Vizenor calls *survivance*; the physical presence of Indigenous people in public discourse *and* the practice of actively resisting the dominant colonial representations.<sup>20</sup>

With the acknowledgment that Curtis' images are a medium through which these constructed representations are perpetuated throughout dominant society, and likewise, that survivance creates a presence that upsets and unravels discursive control over Indigenous identities, then we can begin to see how contemporary Indigenous people can use Curtis' images to re-shape public discourse, and foster a reemergence of agency.

The decolonizing practices of contemporary Indigenous artists and thinkers, will allow for the manipulation of the subject, by resisting the static representations that are embedded in the psyche of dominant society. New narratives can be written to challenge the long-standing colonial tropes tied to *Indianness*, savagery, and civilization.<sup>21</sup> PostIndian survivance allows contemporary Indigenous artists to face their enemies with the same courage in discourse as their ancestors did with a horse. "They create their own stories with a new sense of survivance [and] bear the simulations of their time to counter domination."<sup>22</sup>

## 7. Decolonizing an Image

The term decolonization raises some very challenging questions. It questions authority with identity, it confronts simulations and representations, and it allows for a greater inclusion of Indigenous voices in public discourse, once reserved only for select few. It can be a liberating action taken, or a state of mind. Decolonization can be understood through the resurgence of traditional Indigenous foods, medicines, education, cultural ceremonies, as well as, traditional and contemporary artistic practices. That said, the American stereotypical trope of the *Indian* generally falls into three categories: 1) the merciless savage or 2) the noble savage. Both representations are overshadowed by the third, the spiritual *Indian*, one who possesses mystical ties to the supernatural world and can commune with animals. These classifications are predicated on racial prejudice and bigotry. *Indians* are neither true nor false, they are constructions of a colonizing system of domination. This racial imagery and language serve an important psychological need for the American identity, because it allows for the United States to absolve itself from genocide. Decolonization offers a vision of the historical context of our country, it explains the coming of Europeans, and legitimizes the subsequent dispossession of Indigenous lands. Such narratives are laden with power.

The absence of a relationship with the subject is the main reason that we call Curtis' images into question. We question the authenticity of the images based on culturally biased and artistic decisions made while creating the work. With that, images created by Indigenous photographers can offer honest views of their own realities. Indigenous photographers capturing other Indigenous people engaging in everyday moments with a loving and sentimental gaze, allows for the most authentic glimpse into their personal lives and experience – rather than, non-native photographers attempting to qualify the authenticity its native subjects. This division of self and other, us vs. them, brings forth new distinctions of the universal rhetorical situation, Indigenous artists practicing a silent resistance by using photography as a means to define and control meaning in their own communities. The reclamation of individual sovereignty and sense of agency in works of contemporary Indigenous art fills the gaps that are missing, or forgotten, in the American historical canon.

While other artists have produced photographic responses to Curtis' aesthetic of romanticized *Indian* stereotypes, contemporary Diné artist, Will Wilson, enters into a direct conversation with Curtis by re-appropriating archival images. Wilson's work is critical of the established normalcies of Curtis and offers an awareness of the attitude that contemporary Indigenous people hold towards the propagated romanticized simulations of the *Indian* in, *The Vanishing Race – Navajo*. Wilson has an intimate paradoxical relationship with this particular photograph from Curtis. 'Navajo', as the identity of the nation is a common inaccuracy by the greater society.

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<sup>20</sup> Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, vi.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

The word they (Navajo) use to refer to themselves in their language is Diné, simply meaning ‘The People.’ With the addition of this single word, *Navajo*, to the title of his image Curtis effectively persuades the viewer into believing what they are seeing is fact, and the *Navajo* as a people were vanishing into distance memory. If the Diné people had actually vanished, then the mere fact of Wilson’s existence directly refutes that claim.

Wilson creates contemporary images, utilizing an antiquated process, that assert the continuity of Indigenous people into the public critique. His photography usurps the settler-gaze and stimulates a critical reflection on the representations of Indigenous people as the *Indian*. In his photograph, *How the West Was One*, 2012, [Figure 1.2], Wilson presents himself in a self-portraited diptych, casting himself in opposing roles: the *Indian* and the cowboy. The *Indian* appears in a traditional squash blossom styled necklace that has been tinted a vibrant turquoise-blue. Wilson limits the application of color in his image to the necklace, enhancing the visual connections of the necklace as a signifier for the *Indian*. This style of necklace acts as a fashion vestige the dominant culture comes to expect from an *Indian*. Though Wilson’s hair appears in a bun, held by the small piece of white cloth to the rear of his head, the implication is that he has a full head of long dark, flowing hair; adding a sensual element to his portrayal as the exotic other.<sup>23</sup> Next, staring eye-to-eye with the proto-*Indian*, we see Wilson assume the role of the cowboy, wearing a white cowboy hat, white gloves, and vest. The juxtaposing of these two opposing archetypal characters mimic George Catlin’s early colonial paintings of the *noble/ignoble savage* dichotomy, or more directly, cowboys and *Indians* from pop-culture references birthed from America’s myth of the West.

Breaking from the redemptionist perspective of Catlin, Wilson recalls the murky atmospheric perspective of Curtis’ *The Vanishing Race – Navajo*. The ominous darkness enveloping Wilson’s *Indian*, poignantly reflects the United States’ sentiment towards Indigenous populations. The vague black background in Wilson’s *Indian* is reminiscent of the dark void the ‘Navajo’ were traveling towards. On Wilson’s cowboy character, the white cowboy hat is a clear reference to the Western pulp cereal comics, early television shows and movies, where the hero wears the white hat, and the villains wear black. Though the irony of the *Indian* as the heroic antagonist wearing the white cowboy hat is not lost, the idea of the villain being the hero, or worse, the victim, in the saga of the West, is an American literary impossibility. Although a pragmatic solution to early black-and-white on-screen identification, the white hat is synonymous with the purity of colonial values in the folk tales of the American West.

Moving down Wilson’s figure, we see a white leather glove held over his vest. The viewer could initially read this as a call to the nineteenth century fashion trend of gentlemen wearing white gloves and waistcoats, however, the leather work glove is that of a laborer not an aristocrat. It signals the viewer to the irony of the power structures currently in place in America. It is a hierarchal apparatus made to exclusively deny entire Indigenous populations access to basic human necessities, and often the only options for survival were to become laborers. The glove reminds the viewer of the generations of hard work that it took, and still takes Indigenous populations, to endure colonization. As a glove protects the flesh, so to does it shield the wearer of the traumas of the attempted extinction of Indigenous people. The civilized cowboy works to emphasize the latter’s sense of *Indianness*. The viewer calls into question the expectations and underlying assumptions of what actually constitutes an *Indian*. The profile view, typical of the ethnographic practices of the day serve as a visual cue to call the viewers to question notions of contemporary ethnographic practices. By utilizing a wet plate process, Wilson fashioned an image that is indicative of the time period while simultaneously conveying the irony of the aesthetic beauty of the image, in that, Indigenous photography was and is used as a means of control and dominance.

Wilson educates the viewer of the survivance of his culture through time by creating an authentic image of Indigenous people, being Indigenous. Wilson’s work takes up the documentary mission of Curtis, only as a twenty-first century practitioner. His image usurps Curtis’ settler-lens by providing visual pathways to Indigenous autonomy and self-actualization.

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<sup>23</sup> A preoccupation on the length of a *real Indian*’s hair has been a fixture of debate in the dominant society’s portrayals of Indigenous people for more than a century.

## 8. Reaching for a Better Understanding

PostIndian survivance is a critical way of being that has the ability to cover a wide range of applications and understandings. It can be thought of as skeptical of Western industrialized progress or a critique on the dominant culture's power structures. It can be said to be the abandonment of Anglicized historical truth because of its relationship between reality and repression. If you call something *postIndian*, then you are placing it into a framework that allows the artifact to transcend the constructed identity, and doing so, giving agency back to Indigenous people.

Often celebrated by non-Indigenous as historical fact, Curtis' images cannot be taken as true ethnographic documents, but instead, as artful contrivances presenting his own romantic vision of the *Indian* in their natural habitat. His photography, in part, fed a demand to preserve and re-remember the *Indian* as a main character in the sage of the West. To the dominant public consciousness, his images cemented the foundations of the mythic *Indian*, as they vanished into myth. The narratives that are understood from Curtis' work can only be explained as colonization. It signaled the end of the frontier fantasy; the great American saga of the West was over. Curtis' images are static and forever emotionally frozen in the minds of the viewers; however, they only see what they want to see, and it is not the United States government's brutal *Indian* removal policies, Westward industrial growth, or economic expansion into Indigenous lands, depriving millions of people their basic human dignity. Curtis transformed his subjects into the exotic other, whether intentional or not, mirroring the United States' sentiment towards Indigenous people. The actual significance of Curtis' work is in the critical analysis made from the paradox of his constructed representations of the *Indian*. *It's a paradox of his own making.*

### Figures



Figure 1.1. Edward S. Curtis, *The Vanishing Race—Navajo*, 1904 (published in *The North American Indian*, vol. 1, 1907). Photogravure. Dibner Library of the History of Science and Technology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.





Figure 1.2. Will Wilson, *How the West Was One*, 2012. Diptych. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art, 2013.

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