



ARCHIVOPAPERS

JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL CULTURE

ISSN (Online) 2184-9218

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To cite this article:

PITTNAUER, Beate. "Photography's Enduring Life: A Hundred Years of (De)colonial Imaginaries of North American Indigenous People," *ARCHIVO PAPERS* 3, nº 2 (2023): 127-135. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10038224>

Published online: 26 October 2023

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REVIEW

PHOTOGRAPHY'S ENDURING LIFE: A HUNDRED YEARS OF (DE)COLONIAL IMAGINARIES OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

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Artists: Edward S. Curtis – Will Wilson

05 February to 30 July 2023

Kunstwerk, Sammlung Klein, Germany

Museum Kunstwerk is hosting a special exhibition that explores Native American photographic portraiture and questions its ambivalent status as both fine art and a powerful political tool. Displaying the works of two US-American artists, Edward Sheriff Curtis and Will Wilson, the exhibition not only bridges a century of different modes of representation, but also confronts irreconcilable (de)colonial imaginaries: Curtis' non-Indigenous American point of view on the one hand, the Indigenous American perspective of the Diné photographer Wilson on the other. Although Curtis' work was rediscovered in the 1970s and has since been widely exhibited as well as generated a steadily growing body of research, the presentation of this exhibition away from the main art metropolises must surely be seen as one of the rare offerings to the public in German-speaking countries, all the more as the engagement stems from a private collection.¹ Whilst bringing the two artists into dialogue, this duo exhibition presents works by Santa Fe-based multimedia artist Will Wilson for the first time in Western Europe.²

The very title of the exhibition *As if these images alone would remain*³ already hints at the historical significance of the enormous visual oeuvre with which Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868-1952) not only shaped ideas about the Indigenous American of his own time, but also left an important legacy for subsequent generations. All in all, his photographs form a bundle of more than forty thousand images, that mirror the various cultures, customs and traditions of about 80 Native tribes he encountered during three decades of travelling across the country. When starting his ethnographic project in 1907, Curtis himself could hardly outline the dimensions it would take on over time. What had begun with individual photographic excursions to local Native People around Seattle, where he run a portrait studio, evolved into a generously funded endeavour, that enabled systematic fieldwork aiming “to form a comprehensive and permanent record of all the important tribes of the United States and Alaska that still retain to a considerable degree their primitive customs and traditions.”⁴ As a result of this ethnographic field research Curtis conceptualised and published *The North American Indian* (1907-1930), a twenty-volume edition of richly illustrated writings, each accompanied by a portfolio of approximately 36 large-size photogravures intended for framing.

From this encyclopaedic oeuvre, the show at Museum Kunstwerk presents around 60 works placing a clear emphasis on the historical view of the Indigenous Peoples of North America, albeit from a non-Native perspective. As Mick Gidley pointed out in his article *Pictorialist Elements in Edward S. Curtis's Photographic Representation of American Indians*, Curtis' mode of depicting Indigenous Americans had been deeply embedded in “political, economic, and ideological constraints and contexts”⁵ of the time, as well as tied to his own artistic aspirations. A framed self-portrait of the photographer from 1899 next to the bound edition of *The North American Indian*, which unfolds before the viewer's eye on the second exhibition floor, are the prelude to discovering the now controversial work. For what Curtis attempted to depict as ‘authentic’ Native American culture was already less reality than staging at the beginning of the 20th century. Gidley has drawn attention to this discrepancy: “Many views were actually reconstructions or, more accurately, constructions produced at the behest of a prevailing ideology. The Plains Wars were long over, all these people were incarcerated on reservations, and none of them roamed the prairies at will.”⁶ Curtis' idealising, even romanticising view “in what were presumed to be disappearing subjects and scenery”⁷ is revealed to the viewer through a representative selection of images. The hanging of the exhibits essentially follows Curtis' own ordering scheme, i.e. “a geographic rather than an ethnologic grouping,”⁸ and invites the viewer to contemplate the Indigenous American life and environment of various tribes along sections entitled *The Apache*. *The Jicarillas*. *The Navaho* (1907) or *The Mandan*. *The Arikara*. *The Atsina* (1909), followed by *The Hopi* (1922), *The Tiwa*. *The Keres* (1926) and many others.

Curtis' photographs reveal on the one hand a great appreciation of the Indigenous American culture, but on the other hand also an awareness of this long-threatened culture. Certainly, the traces of assimilation that had already taken

place can be read in the English names Curtis added to the portraits as titles, like *Spotted Bull* (Mandan), *Bear's Belly* (Arikara) or *White Man Runs Him* (Apsaroke), in the latter case a translation of the Indigenous American name *Maschídit-kudush*. This is even more true for the portrait of *Chief Garfield - Jicarilla* (1904), which is remarkable because he obviously wears Euro-American clothing and Native regalia at once (fig. 1). This shows, that in times, when Curtis intended to picture the 'authentic' Indigenous American, the governmental policies had long and inexorably forced cultural assimilation of Indigenous Americans into contemporary American society.

With this historical fact in mind, one cannot help but view these atmospheric, well composed images, which show the Indigenous American on horseback in the open Plains or dancing at traditional ceremonies in a pictorialist style, from the perspective of an irretrievable loss. When passing the section *Masterprints*, one discovers a row of *Orotones*, also labelled and sold as *Curt-Tones*, a technique the studio adopted in 1916 to increase the value of the images. Among these exhibits, one of the most recognized is the iconic motif *The Vanishing Race, Navajo* (1904). Much has been written about it, being the opening picture of the first portfolio, and insofar foreshadowing the programmatic and often repeated process of disappearance of one of the 'lower races', if not to say of Indigenous American extinction.

These pictures had been sold for high prices. They had been conceived as Fine art photography to find their wealthy buyer's market. Against this backdrop, one would expect that the exhibition would have dwelt more on this ambivalent side of Curtis' project, bringing to light its hidden implications: how it intermingled with European modernists aesthetics and art, in what ways it served - or was even driven by - national assimilation policies, or even tended to promote emerging theories of eugenics.⁹

Research has addressed several of these aspects, but is highly divided in its assessment. As Shannon Egan argues, Curtis' long-term project was subject to changing paradigms of his time, noting a shift from formerly progressive beliefs about Indigenous American assimilation to a nativist stance in the 1920s: "... imagining the Indian as an ancient ancestor in the process of vanishing, clearly echo national assimilation policies by embedding the Indian in the Western artistic and historical canon."¹⁰ Placing Curtis' work within the aesthetic context of New York's art scene, Gidley has pointed out the Photo-Secessionists around Alfred Stieglitz as most influential to him. Alongside renowned figures like Clarence White, Frank Eugene, Gertrude Käsebier, and Alvin Langdon Coburn, Curtis' work was exhibited and critically acknowledged as being at the "forefront of art photography."¹¹ However, posing his models as ancient figures in an Arcadian setting, and thus conflating Indigenous American cultures with that of Greco-Roman antiquity, nowadays earned him the reproach in many quarters of further establishing the image of primitive man, of an inevitably declining race threatened by civilization. The fact that massive funding was provided by a circle of patrons from the American power

elite, leading heads of high finance, industry, government, but also academia, also proves to be discussed controversial.¹² Moreover, President Theodore Roosevelt assumed patronage.¹³

As such, being embedded in the American political, financial and scientific establishment, Curtis' Indigenous American art photography must be read as a cultural product, closely interwoven with a historically specific network of interests and beliefs. Curtis' representation of Native peoples played an active role in creating and reproducing racist views, that crystallised into the idea of a 'vanishing race'.¹⁴ His intensive efforts to disseminate these ideas to the public should be seen in the light of promoting the ideals and politics of the white American elites – their struggle for race supremacy and the vision of a white man's country.¹⁵ Insofar, the project is closely intertwined with American expansionism and has been marketed on the ideology of Indigenous decline.



Figure 1.

Edward Sheriff Curtis, *Chief Garfield - Jicarilla* (1904), Portfolio 1, Plate 21
 "Some years ago the Jicarillas were all officially given Spanish or English names. Many of them expressed a preference. This old man, who was head-chief of the tribe at the time, selected the designation Garfield." Public domain. Retrieved from The Seattle Public Library. Source: <https://cdm16118.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16118coll16/id/157/rec/1>

Honouring the artistic and scientific value of the early photographs, George Bird Grinnell, a significant mentor and travelling companion of Curtis, sought to assess the impact of this mighty legacy, when asking: "What will they be a hundred years from now when the Indians shall have utterly vanished from the face of the earth?"¹⁶

It is precisely this persistent narrative of the 'vanishing race', to which artist Will Wilson (1969), who belongs to the Navajo/Diné Nation, responds to from within a contemporary indigenous perspective. Rejecting the "old paradigm of assimilation", he seeks a "re-imagined vision of who we are as Native people", a shift in perception and representation based on reclaiming new forms of authority and autonomy.¹⁷ To achieve this, for more than 20 years, he is active in the field of photography, since 2014 right to the present instructing as the Head of the Photography Program at Santa Fe Community College. Wilson, who earned an MFA in Photography from the University of New Mexico, has exhibited internationally and been awarded numerous prestigious grants and fellowships, such as the *NM Governor's Excellence in Art Award* (2017) and the *Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant in Photography* (2016). His photographic practice is based on an understanding of art as a social practice, which is why he develops collaborative projects involving Indigenous communities, bringing their interests to the fore. Insofar, his work and cultural-political engagement sets out for a different, contemporary viewpoint, thereby employing modern technologies such as drones for aerial photography alongside old-fashioned camera techniques or building up complex visual systems within virtual environments. Displaying Wilson's multimedia work on the upper gallery's floor, the exhibition presents some of his recent photo and video projects, that critically engage with Indigenous Americans' past as well as future living.

A series of strikingly expressive portraits is taken from the ongoing project *Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange (CIPX)*, Wilson started in 2012. Due to the mid-19th-century technique of tintype, one encounters apparently out-of-time pictures, with each sitter surrounded by an enigmatic aura. Indeed, by working with a historic photographic process, Wilson conceived this mode of portraiture in direct engagement with Curtis' work.

Furthermore, Wilson has carried out his project in exchange with tribal communities, aiming to involve the descendants of those formerly portrayed.¹⁸ Among them, the exhibition visitor encounters renowned personalities active in the field of visual arts, the film industry, or politics. What makes Wilson's portraits so different from Curtis' is the changed understanding of authorship, which is now supposed to be a mutual exchange between the photographer and the participant. Following this dialogical principle, the photo project gives everyone the leeway to decide for oneself how to be portrayed, quite in contrast to Curtis, who intended to capture images of stereotypical 'Indianness' that should perfectly fit into national ideologies.

In the exhibition space, as a viewer one gets part of this dialogue and with the support of the free Talking Tintype app, is enabled to animate the portraits and literally bring them to life. At this magical moment, when the still is transitioning to

video, what is named the *Talking Tintypes*, reveals as an artistic-technical device of AR, to bring to the visitor's senses the most vivid impression possible of each individual represented: Be it through some words of spiritual wisdom or one's pride in Indigenous American ancestry, or through the touching sound of violin playing or the performance of a *Jingle Dress Dancer* 2017 [Figure. 2], all these voices testify to a lively engagement in today's cultural production. Stressing the perpetuated traditions of a vibrant Indigenous American culture, this growing body of artistic work intends to shake off what might be called 'the burden of visual history'.



Alongside this series of portraits, the exhibition features Wilson's project *Auto Immune Response (AIR)*, a series of artworks created since 2005 that addresses pressing environmental issues. With Wilson himself as the protagonist wearing a respirator and eye protection, the videos *East and West* (2011) confront us with filmic sequences of a post-apocalyptic vision, captured in a tight, circular camera frame through which the devastated earth appears as a whole, giving the illusion of no escape. A large-scale photograph of this series expands the frame to a wide panorama of Navajo land, with canyons carved over millions of years. Again, the masked figure stands allegorically for the endangered Navajo Nation¹⁹, thus reminding the viewer of national policies of Curtis' times, a constant land's trauma, now overshadowed by four decades of uranium extraction. As Wilson commented on his project: "The series is an allegorical investigation of the extraordinarily rapid transformation of Indigenous lifeways, the disease it has caused, and strategies of response that enable cultural survival."²⁰

The exhibition furthers the debate on the persistence of historical, US-national ideologies and undertakings with their long-lasting effects on Indigenous People and their land. It draws attention to the ongoing threats to their present and future livelihoods, bringing evidence of the destroyed environments through resource extraction and exploitation. Nevertheless what is lacking from the

Figure 2.
Will Wilson, *Talking Tintype*, Madrienne Salgado, *Jingle Dress Dancer*/ Government and Public Relations Manager for the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, Citizen of the Muckleshoot Nation, 2017, from the series *Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange* Courtesy of the artist.

exhibition is a broader cultural and historical context with particular information around assimilation policies, life on reservations, deportation and education in state schools, the role of various organizations in white settlement policies etc. This would enable the visitor to develop a better understanding of the historical scope of Curtis' project against Wilson's contemporary response.

Given Curtis' significant photographic legacy, the viewer is invited to reflect on visual representation as a powerful tool that unfolds its effect in larger, complex social, cultural and economic systems and in this case, supporting hegemonic narratives of a 'vanishing race'. Wilson's artistic work responds to it, by reasserting agency to his subjects and creating a 'living' archive in its own right.

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1 Of the few institutions with solo exhibitions on Curtis, I would like to mention: Kultur- und stadthistorisches Museum Duisburg (Duisburg, 2020/2021), Nordamerika Native Museum (Zürich, 2019/2020), Amerikahaus (München, 2009) and Camera work (Berlin, 2005); Group exhibitions were on view at Suermondt Ludwig (Aachen, 2017/2018), Sprengel Museum (Hannover, 2016/2017) and Albertina (Wien, 2016/2017).

2 The pairing of these two photographers has indeed a more recent precursor in the US: in spring 2019, the exhibition *Mingled Visions: The Photographs of Edward S. Curtis and Will Wilson*, on view at the Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, already focused on both works. In 2018, Curtis and Wilson were part of the group exhibition *Double Exposure: Edward S. Curtis, Marianne Nicolson, Tracy Rector, Will Wilson* at the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington.

3 The exhibition title quotes a syntagma from the short essay "Curtis: Beim Beobachten der Tänzer", Stiegler, Bernd and Felix Thürlemann. *Meisterwerke der Fotografie*, 154-155. I would like to thank Valeria Waibel, Head of Collections, Museum *Kunstwerk*, for this hint.

4 Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Vol. I, 13.

5 Gidley, "Pictorialist Elements", 182.

6 Gidley, "Pictorialist Elements", 189.

7 Egan, " 'Yet in a Primitive Condition' ", 62-63.

8 Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Vol. I, 17.

9 See Egan, " 'Yet in a Primitive Condition' ", 73: "In the 1910s the delineation of race and culture and the progressive faith in the process of 'Americanization' came under increased scrutiny. New theories of eugenics replaced earlier notions of the melting pot and a belief in the ability of the environment to shape cultural identity. Curtis's commitments to illustrating the 'vanishing race' appealed to contemporary eugenicists as reassurance that the disappearance of one of the 'lower races' would not affect the 'good race strain' of 'native American aristocracy'."

10 Egan, " 'Yet in a Primitive Condition' ", 80.

11 Gidley, "Pictorialist Elements", 185.

12 Among them Henry Fairfield Osborn, director of the American Museum of Natural

History in New York and eugenicist. Osborn did not only grant further financial support, but also opened up contacts to proponents of eugenics. On Osborn's search for the origins of the human race and the construction of his human evolution theory, see Brian Regal. To learn more about the influence of eugenic ideas upon American social and economic reform during the Progressive Era concerning immigration and labor policies, see Thomas C. Leonard.

13 On the influence of Darwinism on Theodore Roosevelt and his imperialist philosophy, see the studies of David H. Burton, Gregory Claeys and Gary Gerstle.

14 For a thorough analysis of the decades-long perception of the 'vanishing race', see the contributions by Brian W. Dippie and William H. Truettner.

15 Many are the examples, that could be given here to illustrate Curtis' white settler's gaze, even if sometimes metaphorically expressed: "At the end of a long day in the saddle the visitor [of the reservation] will begin to wonder where the 20,000 Navajos have concealed themselves. To answer that question, just as the long shadows of evening are creeping on he has but to go to the summit of some of the many low mountains and look about. Here and there in every direction he sees the smoke of camp-fires as they are preparing their final meal of the day. In this clear, rare atmosphere the horizon is the only limit to his vision.", Curtis, "Vanishing Indian Types. The tribes of the Southwest.", 529.

16 Grinnell, "Portraits of Indian Types", 273.

17 Wilson, "The Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange (CIPX)".

18 To gain insight into how Wilson developed this project in collaboration with Native communities of Oklahoma, Curtis in turn once documented at the end of his mission in 1930 (portfolio Vol. 19), see the indepth study by Janet Catherine Berlo.

19 As William H. Lyon well describes in his study, focusing on the contact zones of the Navajos and American civilization, the role of certain organizations like the *Indian Rights Association* (IRA), or the *Bureau of American Ethnology* (i.e., the Smithsonian Institution) had been crucial in popularizing Indian culture through their various allied journals. The latter one commissioned photographers to take documentary films of the Indians in the Southwest in the last decade of the century. Indian photography circulated widely, in the popular press like in *Scribner's Monthly*, illustrated magazines such as *Land of Sunshine* or the *Illustrated American* as well as in cabinet cards, reaching the mass public.

20 Wilson, "Auto Immune Response (AIR)".



PORTFOLIO

ANCESTRAL GRATITUDE BRIDGE: 360 VIRTUAL REALITY EXPERIENCE

TAHILA MINTZ

Tahila Mintz is a multidisciplinary artist and cultural technologist whose practice works to facilitate a greater intersectional understanding of Indigenous cultures. Mintz engages with ancestral systems of matriarchy and gender equality, land relationships, genocide and mental health within the framework of contemporary issues impacting native peoples. Predominantly creating alongside Indigenous communities of the Americas, Mintz strives to reclaim bodies of knowledge that have been suppressed through colonial intervention and foster a closer connection to the natural world.

Most of Tahila Mintz's work is created in direct relationship with community. Addressing their needs is a primary motivation. Secondly, the work is for sharing between Indigenous communities and thirdly for the world. This engagement tiering does not negate the relevance or importance of the work across all of the tiers but rather highlights her focus in creating for them, with them, by them. Some works are not shared beyond the first tier, only intended for the community. *Ancestral Gratitude Bridge* (2023) is the first of a collection of experiences, growing to encompass diverse Indigenous communities, ancestral teachings and ecosystems.

Ancestral Gratitude Bridge was created in response to the high suicide rate of Native youth. The immersive experience is rooted in original teachings of gratitude expressed through the *Thanksgiving Address* with recognizable environmental and cultural scenes. The experience is a reminder of all of their relations, from the bugs, to the winds, to the birds and people. The teaching and experience are a reminder that they are never alone, but always supported and surrounded by community, not only the two- and four-legged kind. It is being engaged with across Haudenosaunee territory and an expanded version with additional landscapes representing the Emirate territory was recently on view at the Sharjah Art Biennial 15: *Thinking Historically in the Present*.

Tahila is an Indigenous Yaqui and Jewish woman who has been photographing for 30 years, living, and working throughout the Americas, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. She worked for some years as a university lecturer and is the Founding Executive Director of OJI:SDA' Sustainable Indigenous Futures. Her speaking engagements range from speaking at the United Nations to being a Pecha Kucha presenter. Her chapter "Integrating Immersive Technology Tools and New Media for Indigenous Culture and Wellness" will be published in the upcoming book *Resilient Health: Leveraging Technology and Social Innovations to Transform Healthcare for COVID-19 Recovery and Beyond*. Her artwork was shown in such places as the Sharjah Biennial 15: Thinking Historically in the Present, the MAC, Project Row House, Photoville, and Contact Photo Festival. She has won various awards and fellowships.

FUNDING

The work "Ancestral Gratitude Bridge" was funded by Insta360; Goethe-Institute; Cornell University; and Sharjah Art Foundation.

© Tahila Mintz. From the series *Ancestral Gratitude Bridge*, 2023. Images courtesy of the artist.









