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JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL CULTURE

ISSN (Online) 2184-9218

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To cite this article:

Esther Scholtes (2022) Sky Hopinka and Entangled Indigenous Identities: On the triangular relationship between photography, time and colonialism, *Archivo Papers Journal*, 2(1), 39-55.

Published online: 31 May 2022.

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ARTICLE

SKY HOPINKA AND ENTANGLED INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES: ON THE TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHY, TIME AND COLONIALISM

ESTHER SCHOLTES 

Abstract

Since its official inception in 1839, photography has held a complex relationship with time and colonial power. The introduction of photography in the Americas coincided with the colonisation of the Great Plains in the interior of the present-day United States. Ambitious projects to document Native peoples undertaken by photographers such as Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) have fed the public imaginary and have led to static, stereotypical ideas of the 'North American Indian.' This pinpoints an issue hidden in the heart of American identity: what exactly is Native American identity, who is entitled to it and who decides in these matters.

This article explores the problematic consequences of (tribal) citizenship as devices of colonial power through the photographic series *The Land Describes Itself* (2019), by American photographer and filmmaker Sky Hopinka. Hopinka, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation, reflects on his Indigenous identity in our contemporary world through photography and film. I will explore his practice of rephotographing as a post-photographic and non-representational gesture that opens up new perspectives on the triangular relationship between time, photography and colonialism. Finally, this essay argues that to decolonize or indigenize the American West, we should rethink American identity as intricately layered and entangled in both time and space, and therefore necessitates a methodological approach that supports the dissolution of boundaries.

Keywords: post-colonialism, multiple temporalities, Indigenous identity, palimpsest

Since its official inception in 1839, photography has maintained a complex relationship to time and colonial power. The introduction of photography in the Americas coincided with the colonisation of the Great Plains in the interior of the present-day United States. Ambitious projects to document Indigenous peoples undertaken by photographers such as Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) have fed the public imaginary and have often produced static, stereotypical ideas of the 'North American Indian.' In the twenty-first century colonisation lives on through so-called blood quantum laws, that are directly linked to those stereotypical ideals tracing back to Curtis' photographs. This pinpoints an issue hidden in the heart of American identity: what exactly is Native American identity, who is entitled to it and who decides in these matters.

This article explores the problematic consequences of (tribal) citizenship as devices of colonial power through the photographic series *The Land Describes Itself* (2019), by American photographer and filmmaker Sky Hopinka¹. Hopinka, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation, reflects on his Indigenous identity in our contemporary world through photographs and films². *The Land Describes Itself* is a series of rephotographed photographs of landscapes around the American West. The outcome is a layered document in which different temporalities coincide. It defies distinctions between the 'traditional' and the 'contemporary' as fixed temporal categories and thereby resists the objectification of Native American culture.

I will examine the practice of rephotographing as a post-photographic and non-representational gesture that opens up new perspectives on the triangular relationship between time, photography and colonialism. Finally, this essay argues that to decolonise or indigenise the American West, we should rethink American identity as intricately layered and entangled in both time and space, and this conceptual shift therefore necessitates a methodological approach that supports the dissolution of boundaries.

TIME I: OBJECTIFICATION AND DEHISTORISATION OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

Soon after the public announcement of Louis Daguerre's (1787-1851) invention in Paris in August 1839, reports of early photographic processes found their ways across the Atlantic where the practice of photography first established itself in cities along the Eastern shore³. In the period after the Civil War (1861-1865) until the early 1900s, the vast expanse of the Great Plains became populated with settler farmers or homesteaders, large territories of flatland that had hitherto only been passed by colonists on the way to the western shores. It was also the period in which photography started to gain a place in American culture. Although the daguerreotype was a French invention, the process became much more popular in the United States in the 1850s. Photography historian Beaumont Newhall proclaimed there were more daguerreotypists in New York city than in the entirety

of England during this period⁴. Following the popularity of the new visual medium, the camera soon became a vehicle for ideas about Native Americans. Perhaps the most well-known photographic project was that of Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868-1952) who, financially backed by banker J.P. Morgan, set out to document Native American tribes to be published in a twenty-volume portfolio titled *The North American Indian*⁵. This was the first extensive printed record of many Indigenous customs, peoples, and ceremonies, and, as such, turned into a lauded example of representation of Native Americans.

However, the very first plate of the first volume clearly sets the agenda. This image depicting a group of Navajos seen riding on horses towards the horizon is coupled with the caption 'The vanishing race.' The soft tone of the image adheres to the stylistic principles of pictorialism, an aesthetic movement dominant in photography around the 1900s. Within this period, cultural traditions of Native tribes were quickly becoming obsolete, a consequence of forced processes of assimilation that tribal members were subjected to⁶. By creating this monumental piece, Curtis adhered to a narrative of 'Indianness' that served both the artistic and political needs of an Anglo-American culture, yet follows the fluctuations of general attitudes towards Native Americans⁷. Furthermore, Curtis has often been criticised for staging compositions and other forms of image manipulation that he carried out in order to create more compelling images. A persuasive image should be one that would sustain his goal of capturing the tribes' 'natural' way of life. There are numerous examples of erasing 'modern' elements that had already seeped into the daily lives within tribes. The photograph *In a Piegan Lodge* (circa 1911) depicts Little Plume and his son Yellow Kidney, two members of the Piegan tribe, sitting on the floor of their lodge, a clock between them (Figure 1). In a later print of this particular scene, Curtis has retouched the glass negative (or the copper plate) and erased the clock altogether. This seemingly mundane act among numerous examples of image manipulation – retouching negatives has been a common practice since photography's very beginning – is symptomatic of a larger issue and foregrounds the central thesis of this article.

Time and colonialism have been intricately related, in particular since the European cultural expansion that took place during the long nineteenth century. European settlers started imposing a Western view of time upon its colonies, which meant a sense of time that was measurable and profitable. The standardisation of time and the introduction of the modern international time zone system has been one of the conditions for the emergence of a globalised economy. The age of mechanised labour following the industrial revolution had its effects on the perception of time that was now rationalised. Undeniably this is not a universal law of nature, but something that emerged in industrial and capitalist societies as a precondition for efficient labour⁸. The Western European rationalisation of time, based on accurateness and profitable use of time, and the portrayal of Indigenous societies as being in a sense 'time-less' and therefore inferior, provide means to



rationalise and justify settler-colonialism's claims upon Indigenous land. Following this rationale, Native Americans have been framed as 'out of time' within the time frame of colonist routines, boldly reflected in Curtis' gesture of erasing the clock in the image of the Piegan Lodge. As such, Curtis' *The American Indian* advances the discursive constructions of a 'temporal' other.

In the subsequent years (and especially since the 1970s, when collecting vintage photographs became more widespread) the work of Curtis and a handful of other non-Native photographers (such as Frank Rinehart and Fred E. Miller) have come to dominate 'Native American photography.' In her recent study *Through a Native Lens* (2020), art historian Nicole Stratham provides a vital argument against the dominant Western gaze in Native representation. Stratham resurfaced an important body of photographs that had been hidden in tribal and state archives, private collections, but also collections of many libraries and museums. She argues that these objects unearth stories of Native resilience and agency. Since the very beginning of photography, Native Americans have acted before and behind the camera, as photographers, sitters and patrons. In particular, these Indigenous photographers did not emphasise or de-emphasise the Indianness of their subjects⁹. Instead, she argues, they create a powerful image of peoples who hold on to their cultures yet adopt new technologies. Furthermore,

Figure 1.
Edward S. Curtis, In a Piegan Lodge, ca. 1910, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Edward S. Curtis Collection, LC-USZ62-6174.

she provides examples of some of Curtis' Indigenous subjects claiming agency by performing a ritual dance in reverse, a deceptive act that was probably unknown to Curtis¹⁰. These stories are crucial to counterbalance hegemonic ideas of the Native American as a 'temporal other' and provide fuel for the decolonial effort of forming the American West.

DIAGNOSE: A STATIC NOTION OF CITIZENSHIP TO BE CHALLENGED

During the last decades an increasing number of Western scholars and institutions have acknowledged that the hegemonic iconography of the historical frontier of the American West has led to the misconception, misrepresentation and caricature of Native Americans. This paradigm shift is highly necessary, as contemporary American-influenced cultures are laced with elements of Native American culture¹¹. Companies, brands and sport clubs such as Indian Motorcycle, the Cleveland Indians and Jeep Cherokee address a puzzling inconsistency within the sense of Americanness that, according to Paul Chaat Smith, curator of the National Museum of American Indian and of Comanche-descent, reveals that to "most Americans, the vast majority, Indians are not present and Indians are invisible. Yet paradoxically, Americans are deeply familiar and emotionally connected with Indian imagery, with Indian place names, with Indians in the fabric of American life"¹². Likewise, art and ethnographic museums have long dealt with Native Americans as idle objects of historical interest. Within these museum discourses, Native American art is similarly perceived to have a consistent and recognizably "primitive" visual language. Consequently, the incongruities of contemporary Native artistic practice, being part of global(ised) art markets, yet retaining their own discourses, has provoked many conflictual conditions. This article therefore attains a decolonial commitment that allows for the inclusion of alternative epistemologies in defining American identity¹³. It proposes to do so through the analysis of the artwork *The Land Describes Itself* (2019) by Sky Hopinka, a series of photographic prints created with a highly sophisticated act of layering that firmly resists simple categorization or reduction to a static and historically based Native identity¹⁴.

The Land Describes Itself is a photographic series that is constructed through multiple acts of rephotographing. Analogue 35mm-slides are positioned in slightly overlapping compositions that are projected through an almost obsolete Eiko overhead projector onto a wall. Subsequently, these are photographed digitally and printed in inkjet prints, with etched subtitles (Figures 2 and 3). Sky Hopinka says the following about this series: "Their construction was guided by a desire to remove the intelligibility of a topography and the weighted memory of that production. Not the memory entirely, I've got nothing against nostalgia, but to create remembrance without longing or desire. An accretive scene so far removed from the place that was photographed, where the texts etched into the image are as hypothetical as they are hesitantly descriptive"¹⁵.



Figure 2.
Sky Hopinka, *The Land Describes Itself: This is you describing what I saw*, 2019, Inkjet print and etching, 33 x 33 cm, edition of 3, SH-19-06.1. Courtesy of Sky Hopinka, The Green Gallery

The slides capture a variety of spaces and places as geographically dispersed as the Pacific Northwest, the Western Southwest and the Great Lakes region. Although the images depict landscapes, they are by no means static topographical vistas. Hopinka digs through the surface into the geological layers beneath.

Politicised discussions on Native American art often pivot around the reduction of Native American identity to Indian Nation citizenship¹⁶. Correspondingly, a crucial question is: who can be considered a Native American artist, and who has the right to speak on behalf of these communities? This implies an uncertainty regarding the boundaries of Indigenous cultural membership or citizenship.

The problematic conditions of citizenship have been addressed by critical theorists Dave Beech and Irit Rogoff in the volume *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*¹⁷. One of the most critical issues they discern regards how national (or tribal) borders are artificially constructed and do not simply or unproblematically reflect the cultures living within them. Indeed, the legal status of Indigenous citizenship is often narrowly defined by DNA lineage and blood quantum laws, a way to define Native American identity by determining the percentage of ancestors who are registered as full-blood Native Americans. However, these laws were devised by Euro-Americans¹⁸ and ignored Indigenous practices of adoption



Figure 3.
Sky Hopinka, *The Land Describes Itself: These are the moieties*, 2019, Inkjet print and etching, 33 x 33 cm, edition of 3, SH-19-08.1 Courtesy of Sky Hopinka, The Green Gallery

and other forms of tribal inclusion and the subsequent unproblematic continuity of tribes. Additionally, blood quanta measures contemporary Native Americanness against the characterisations that were written into history by American colonists. As such, blood quantum laws actively narrow down the categorisations of Native-Americanness, which will eventually and ultimately mean that the population of Native Americans will become extinct. In contrast to this, Beech asserts that groups of people can be constituted in different ways, institutionalised through different mechanisms and belong to different apparatuses¹⁹. More importantly, the people, as a social body associated with the nation-state, has always been an unstable and politically troubled concept and does not accurately reflect a reality 'out there'.

To propose an alternative, theorist Irit Rogoff describes how "recent theorizations of citizenship characterise it as a state beyond the individual receipt of safeguards and benefits, and rather as something contingent and shared"²⁰. Subsequently, she argues that "the art world [...] has actually been an exceptional location for the stretching of citizenship, for its sharing, not as care work and advocacy, but as forms of relocations of the self"²¹. This implies that the self is never fixed, and identities and social formations co-emerge with their environments.

TIME II: PHOTOGRAPHY AS TEMPORAL PRACTICE

The medium of photography is imbued with temporal qualities in a myriad of ways²². First there is the exposure time, closely associated with the medium's history of technical innovation. Philosophically, a photograph has often been perceived to be an arrest of time, i.e. a moment forever frozen on the light-sensitive plate. This makes it an object that conveys stillness and invites contemplation. Pertaining to the physical object there is the temporal aspect of preservation and decay. The material object will eventually evolve, both chemically and mechanically, which means that its physical state will change over time.

To most people, however, their personal engagement with photographs is connected to memories. Memories have a complicated temporality that is tripartite, i.e. they connect past, present and future. It is the past event that triggers the memory and the present that retrieves it. Ultimately the future will always unfold against the backdrop of both past memories and the present engagement with those same memories. In a way, a memory operates as a palimpsest²³. This mediaeval written manuscript is a paleographic object but its characteristics make it also productive as a figurative entity²⁴. A palimpsest is a piece of parchment from which the original text has been scraped off in order to reuse the writing surface – parchment was scarce in the early Middle Ages and, therefore, recycling this writing material was common practice. Since it was not possible to erase the entire text, parts of it would remain on the slate to be overwritten by a new text. With the passing of time, pieces of the original text would reappear. As such, a palimpsest is a document that contains a layering of texts over a period of time. The different layers on the document shine through one another, thereby creating a multi-temporal record.

Similarly, Sky Hopinka's series *The Land Describes Itself* projects a layered time, in which past, present and future collide and collapse into one another in the simultaneity of the viewing experience. Photography is, from its outset, a medium of traces and therefore, lends itself to a palimpsestic reading. The images of *The Land Describes Itself* are hard to read, but when foregrounding the 'palimpsestic' qualities of the artwork, relationships emerge that privilege heterogeneity and diversity. Notably, this collapsed sense of time reflects the layered histories of American identity. The fragmented imagery draws upon the contingency and open-endedness of remembering, both the land and its description will continuously be reconfigured.

The landscapes that are captured can be viewed as palimpsest, in which multiple traces override one another. A geographical site is what theorist Andreas Huyssen calls "the capital site of a discontinuous, ruptured history...saturated with memories," and therefore constitutes a place that is perpetually becoming²⁵. Especially since the cultural turn in the 1970s, the idea of a multivocal landscape was adopted across the humanities and social sciences. The idea of a palimpsestic landscape was first formulated by geographer Donald Meinig, who argued that a

landscape "is at once a panorama, a composition, a palimpsest, a microcosm; [...] in every prospect there can be more and more that meets the eye"²⁶.

This fragmentation of a landscape's history and its ties to a collective memory are especially poignant in the case of Indigenous communities. The land itself is an important element: the land they live on and their connections to it make a people Indigenous. It ties them to their sovereignty. Hopinka's *The Land Describes Itself* draws upon lost material connections in a comparable manner. In Washington and Oregon, and elsewhere in the United States, many places bear names of Indigenous origin, yet many of their histories and meanings have been forgotten. In other words, these once meaningful places have become objectified due to their disconnection from the environments that conceived and shaped them. In other words, these histories have become inert ideas severed from time and space.

The multiple temporalities confined within one photograph resembles the complex existence of Indigeneity in a contemporary world. Here the photographic image and its inevitable boundaries are tools to comprehend Native contemporaneity. This suggests that time in a colonial context could perhaps be perceived as a two-edged sword. It is not only an instrument of colonial power, but can also be a tool for anti-colonial or decolonial resistance²⁷. The neoliberal idea of human progress that has ultimately been coupled with sustained economic growth and the advancement of efficiency presupposes a linear concept of time. A palimpsest emerges by layers that shine through one another. It can be described as multi-linear – i.e. multiple linear lines that are coexisting – yet the idea of linearity suggests a fixed reading direction. *The Land Describes Itself* ascribes a sense of multi-temporality, that is a characteristic of the palimpsest, to our viewing experience. Whereas linear conceptions of time close off everything that once 'was,' a multidirectional conception of time does not privilege one reading direction. *The Land Describes Itself* is rather multidirectional and underpins how past experiences and memories work through in current situations, while simultaneously current experiences could alter perceptions of the past. It advances the complexities of the 'contemporary' that have puzzled historians and theorists²⁸. Ultimately, the past is not a dead and buried object but an actor that actively impacts the present.

The landscapes depicted in the artwork have travelled across at least three pairs of lenses. The ordinary categories of subject, camera and photographer have become diffuse. As such, central to *The Land Describes Itself* is a deep sense of ambiguity, layering and in-betweenness. The act of rephotography Hopinka exercises can thus be understood as post-photographical²⁹. The post-photographic condition disintegrates into two different strands. On the one hand the rise of digital cultures has facilitated instantaneity and immediacy and massification of images. On the other hand, the continuing critique of modernism and the related traditional discourse on photography has put forward new ideas on agency and frustrated the boundaries between the separate categories of camera, image and photographer. As *The Land Describes Itself* destabilises the single image it subtly extended

the parameters of the photographic medium, a possibility that paradoxically has always been a latent potential of photography. Double exposures and montage, for instance, were known since the 19th century and have been an integral part of modernist art. Yet, modernist categorisation of arts and media suggests closeness and completeness, echoing the categorisation of Native Americans into blood categories. Whereas media are in constant fluctuation as they are embedded in a changeable society, the flexible nature of the work undermines an essentialist reading of the photographic medium and stresses a more abstract conception of the term³⁰.

INDIGENEITY IN A CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Photographic mediation and photographically mediated ideas still form the nexus of ideas on American Indigeneity, especially in Europe. The perpetually vanishing Native American as a stubborn stereotype marks the uneasy position of Native Americans in contemporary America. As a result, the idea of Native Americans as forming a backward, impoverished community prevails in popular culture. Ideas that negatively impact their rights to sustain self-governance and the rights to land-ownership. In 2020, the United States Supreme Court decided in favour of five Native tribes concerning the alleged disestablishment of their reservations in the state of Oklahoma, yet only after a two-year legal battle and procedural drama. This case highlights how plain bureaucracy, prejudices and judiciary minefields pose a continuing risk to Native tribes of losing their lands and sovereignty³¹.

Like many Native tribes, the members of Ho-Chunk nation have been forcibly relocated, perhaps multiple times, which made it more difficult to lay claims on these lands based on their historic existence. By photographing his contemporary encounter with mediations of historically meaningful places through an act of rephotography, Sky Hopinka critiques conventional ideas of tradition. Native American art and heritage are still subjected to romanticised ideas of Native identity that are formulated into temporal binaries. However, the distinction between the traditional and the contemporary is not a natural divide but rather a result of "settler pain," the feeling of discomfort in American society with the continued existence of Native Americans³². Likewise, the reductive description of Native identity that has been coerced into forms of tribal citizenship ultimately dictates the limits of Native American art through 'The Indian Arts and Crafts Act,' passed in 1990 to protect 'authentic' Native American art from 'knock-offs.' Its objectives were to prevent artists from selling their work as Native American art, unless they were officially registered within one of the nations. Despite its noble intentions this act reduces Native American art and thus Native identity to the legal limits of tribal nations.

There are hundreds of Native American communities that are federally recognized as nations within the United States, and each of them has their own distinct cultures, languages, histories and conventions which are easily overlooked

in limited definitions of Indigeneity. As such, the concept of tradition gives rise to the continuous act of separating and categorising art by artists of Indigenous descent. In this act thresholds are created that dictate certain percentages, material and dates, and thereby limit the scope of Indianness. This in itself can be considered a colonial mechanism that is ultimately aimed at containing and controlling Native populations. Thus, the evaluation of work according to the binary tropes of tradition and contemporary is not merely an aesthetic judgement but rather a form of control.

Along similar lines, many Western efforts of preservation have resulted in temporally fixing a culture by turning it into a historical object, i.e. as something passive that only exists in the past and as such cannot be contemporary and cannot engage in our world. This seemingly innocent enterprise in fact rather is the oppressive power of ethnography. The ethnographic documentary emerged at the turn of the twentieth century "as a Western academic discourse which assigned itself the task of representing non-westernized people"³³. Within this tradition, salvage ethnography developed as a type of documentary aimed at capturing a people's way of life that is threatened to become extinct due to colonial efforts.

These ethnographers approached Native cultures as if they possessed an essential core that reflects the culture in its purest 'a priori' form. However, since the dawn of cultural studies and particularly the work of theorist Stuart Hall there has been an academic consensus that cultures are always in a dynamic process of adaptation to their environments. Environments that necessarily include other cultures³⁴. Even more, cultural identity is not only a matter of 'being' but of 'becoming', "belonging as much to the future as it does to the past"³⁵. Furthermore, as sociologist Bruno Latour has argued in his seminal work *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), a distinction between nature and society cannot be made, this is merely a modernist invention that does not reflect actual reality³⁶. The terms or even concepts of nature and culture often cannot be translated into languages of non-Western origin and the nature-culture divide seems to be a gendered construction³⁷. Subsequently, the Cartesian divide dissecting object and subject is thus not so much a natural division as an illusion, these notions are rather the result of historical processes³⁸. This means notions are themselves non-representational, i.e. concepts do not passively reflect a reality that pre-exists somewhere 'out there,' but they are themselves indisputably part of that ever-changing reality. This realisation leads to a different understanding of Native identity and citizenship. The underlying claim is that all knowledge, in whatever format, is *situated*. As biologist and feminist Donna Haraway asserted, knowledge is produced in specific temporal and spatial circumstances and these circumstances have a formative impact on the way it is produced and institutionalised³⁹. This is what philosopher Walter Mignolo describes as the "colonial difference," that is always tied to a locus of enunciation⁴⁰. Objectivity is not external and disembodied, in which the object is split apart from the subject and viewed from a distance. Knowledge is rather embodied and therefore only offers a partial perspective.

In this light, Native identity can thus only partially be known. Hopinka's self-conceived strategy of folding historical layers back into the here and now is a way of adapting the colonial binary of tradition and contemporaneity and putting it to his own advantage.

NATIVE IDENTITY: SUBJECT WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

To wrap up the previous discussions I will refer to feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad. She proclaims that "relata do not precede relations," which means so much as entities do not exist prior to their encounter with other entities⁴¹. Barad argues that the entirety of reality is formed within those relations. The ethnic groups we today refer to as Native Americans only exist in that capacity after European migrant-settlers invaded the continent. Subsequently, there is no natural state of delineation that separates Native Americans from non-Natives. This is the reason that Barad prefers the notion of intra-action above interaction, as the former does not entail a link between two pre-established entities. In other words, there are no objects that precede entanglement. They have no intrinsic properties nor an essential idea that holds true in any manifestation. *The Land Describes Itself* resists objectification, emphasising that we can no longer speak of objects as no such contained entities exist. A Baradian account of identity as a phenomenon thus not only addresses the performativity of identity formation, but also the porosity of its borders and the uncertainty of its limits. It builds on the idea that identities are rather fluid constructs. The artwork *The Land Describes Itself* is thoroughly about these boundary drawing practices. Being simultaneously an insider and an outsider – having ancestral relations to different Indigenous nations – Hopinka defies rigid borders between nations, identities and bloodlines. It raises fundamental issues surrounding the existence of the human in a material world and furthermore challenges the nature and culture binary, or the dualism between blood and culture pertaining to Native blood laws.

Whereas Native Americans have for centuries been conceptually framed into neat categories that makes them passive and silent, *The Land Describes Itself* obstructs this colonial practice. Concerning formation of a national identity, Stuart Hall writes "it has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself," and as such American identity is emotionally connected to and with Native imagery, place names and customs⁴². Curator Paul Chaat Smith, referred to before, even puts forth the courageous argument that "the most American thing ever is in fact American Indians"⁴³. With the above in mind, the question remains whether we can imagine a possible future condition as we still have to come to terms with the contemporary order. The concept of 'contemporary' has been debated extensively. For instance, art historian Claire Bishop points at the semantic flexibility of the term. The meaning of 'contemporary' fluctuates with time, as it used to stand for 'post-war' during the 1990s, and is now affiliated with

the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Moreover, a fixed definition of what it means to be contemporary is impossible, and no chronology is able to encompass what has been going on in every single part of the world⁴⁴. Rather, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes, "Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it"⁴⁵. Such a theorisation of the 'contemporary' foregrounds particular aspects, namely its status as existential marker rather than a label of periodisation. It becomes a discursive category or a question of temporal disjunction, and, as such, the 'contemporary' opens up any new relationship to past and future.

To theorise the contemporary we thus need a methodology that supports what theorist Marion von Osten perceives as the dissolutions of boundaries between methodologies and disciplines⁴⁶. As philosopher Susan Buck-Morss has underscored, we have now entered an era in which all the imagined blocks of the West, Europe and the United States will no longer be the reference points⁴⁷. All that remains is a subject without boundaries.

FINAL REMARKS

American identity, frequently characterised as a melting pot that is based on the assimilation of different immigrant groups, often neglected the intricate ties with Native American history and culture. As a result, in popular culture and policy, the link between Native history and is still discerned into a binary opposition through which Native Americans are seen as a homogeneous group, opposed to non-Natives. Whereas they are in fact a diverse group of individuals and Indigenous art and culture is complex and differential, conceptually Native Americans are often placed under one heading. To decolonise or indigenise the American West entails to comprehend it as a dynamic and heterogeneous phenomenon that defies rigid boundaries between settler and Native identities, considering that these boundaries reflect a temporal distinction between a passive past culture and an active living culture.

The Western frontier of American history was never fixed. Likewise, identities and citizenship cannot be deemed static. Accordingly, this article attempted to argue against essentialist readings of culture and identity by tracing the lines of thought carved out by keystone scholars such as Stuart Hall. It implies reframing, re-contextualising and even redefining what it means to be American. Similarly, it implies a critique to the modernist historical periodisation of the contemporary.

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1 I am aware that, as a European outsider, I have framed the work of Sky Hopinka exclusively within the politicised debate on American and Native identity in this article, whereas his work cannot be solely reduced to these issues. Neither should it be viewed solely through a political lens.

2 The term 'Indigenous' has had a complex history. Following the diversity of Indigenous peoples there has not been a catch-all definition for the term Indigenous. It is often employed to refer generally to peoples that have long been settled or connected to specific lands and have been negatively impacted by the industrial and economic takeover of their traditional territories by others. This definition is rooted in the era of colonisation and European expansion when the term was imposed on Indigenous communities from the outside. Yet more recently, an activist use of the term describes contemporary realities and an orientation for fights for self-representation, recognition, and rights. Following the *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* I will capitalise the term 'Indigenous' to reflect this recent usage.

3 Davis 2007, 15.

4 Newhall 1976, 11.

5 *The American Indian* is a set of twenty large picture portfolios, each with approximately thirty-nine photogravures intended for framing, and twenty accompanying text volumes, printed in a leather-bound edition and made available by subscription for three thousand dollars between 1907 and 1930. The Northwestern University in Evanston and the University of Wyoming hold an entire 20-volume set in their collections.

6 The first part of the twentieth century was characterised by different political and social agendas with regard to Native Americans ranging from progressivist tendencies that promoted the assimilation of tribes into American society to nativist tendencies that, by contrast, encouraged specific 'Indigenous' traditions. See: Shannon Egan. "Yet in a primitive condition." *American Art* 20 (2006) 3: 58-83.

7 Egan 2006, 58-83.

8 See for an elaborate account on the intricate ties between early industrialist society, time and colonialism: Giordano Nanni. *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.

9 Stratham 2020, 3.

10 Ibid., 40-43.

11 This reflects the nativist movement that emerged after World War I and proposed an idea of America with its own history distinct from Europe. See: Walter Benn Michaels. *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, Pluralism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

12 Smith 2017.

13 I employ the term 'decolonial' here to refer to the twofold idea that there is no modernity without coloniality and a decolonial act entails a decoupling of Western epistemological narratives. See: Gurinder K Bhambra. "Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues," *Postcolonial Studies*, 17 (2014) 2: 115-121; Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2007) 2-3: 168-178.

14 Sky Hopinka (b.1984) is an American filmmaker and artist born in Ferndale, Washington State. He is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin through his father's family and descendant of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians on his mother's side.

15 Hopinka 2019.

16 In 2017, a debate on the identity of American artist Jimmie Durham (1940-2021) and his presumed Cherokee-descent caused upheaval in the art world. As he was not formally enrolled in the Cherokee-nation, some deemed him a 'white imposter.'

17 This volume was published as a culmination of the research project *Former West*, organised by Dutch art space BAK (Utrecht, NL), with the explicit aim to former the persistently hegemonic conjuncture that is "the West"; to be able instead of simply refer to "the west," and with it, suggest the possibility of producing new constellations, another world. Although the project primarily focuses on the European situation after the dissolution of the 'iron curtain,' similar principles may be applied to the American West.

18 Blood quantum laws are laws in the United States that define Native American status by fractions of Native American ancestry. These laws were enacted by the American government as a way to establish legally defined racial population groups. A precursor to this law was first implemented in the Virginia colony in 1705, in order to reduce Civil Rights of Native peoples. Blood quanta were officially anchored in the Indian Reorganisation Act of 1934, whose goal was to reverse the earlier policies of forced assimilation and to strengthen the tribes in the preservation of their historic cultures. As the bloodlines grow increasingly diluted, within a few generations, recognised tribes might legally disappear. Therefore, many tribes and nations do not include blood quantum as part of their own enrollment criteria.

19 Beech 2016, 559.

20 Rogoff 2016, 619.

21 Ibid., 628.

22 Baetens, Streitberger and Van Gelder, 2018.

23 In this light it is important to mention how our relationship to past events always privileges certain events over others. The acts of remembering and forgetting thus hold a reciprocal relationship that impacts the very way that history is written. See: Paul Ricoeur. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

24 Dillon 2007.

25 Huyssen 2003, p. 53.

26 Meinig 1979, p. 6.

27 For an elaborate temporal characterisation of the post-colonial. See: Stuart Hall, "When Was The "Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the limit," in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common skies, divided horizons*, edited by Iain Chamber and Lidia Curti, London: Routledge, 1996, 242-60.

28 See for instance the elaborate discussions on the contemporary in relation to art in: Hal Foster, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Grant Kester, James Elkins, Miwon Kwon, Joshua Shannon, Richard Meyer, et al. "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary.'" *October* 130 (2009): 3-124.

29 Shore 2014.

30 Essentialist readings of artistic media have been critiqued by many scholars, especially in reaction to art critic Clement Greenberg's notions of medium-specificity formulated in: Clement Greenberg (1940), "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986, 23-28.

31 The case was the motivation for the podcast series *This Land* (2019-2020) produced by members of Oklahoma Native tribes and focuses on the complex territorial and judiciary issues founded on historical stereotypes that contemporary Native Americans still have to deal with, enduring instances of land theft and the devastating effect it has on Indigenous communities. <<https://crooked.com/podcast-series/this-land/>>.

32 Several Indigenous artists have spoken out against the prevailing traditional/contemporary binary projected onto the work of Indigenous artists. See Nicholas Galanin 2018.

33 Beattie 2004, 44-62.

34 Hall 1996, 274-275.

35 Hall 1999, 225.

36 Latour 1991, 10.

37 It has been further argued that culture (everything brought forward by human thought and technology) is universally valued as being superior to nature (the unregulated); and that female is universally associated with nature (and is therefore inferior and to be dominated) and male with culture. See: Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies* 1 (1972) 2: 5-31.

38 DeLanda 1997, 3.

39 Haraway 1988, 576.

40 Mignolo 2002, 63.

41 Barad 2007, 334.

42 Hall 1996, p.89.

43 Smith 2017.

44 Bishop 2013, p. 18.

45 Agamben 2009, p. 41.

46 Von Osten 2016, 72.

47 Buck-Morss 2016, 159.