

# The Vanishing Indian and the Pencil of Nature

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## I. Introduction

In its early years, photography was often described as a technology for creating objective visual records— the “pencil of nature,” as William Fox Talbot famously described it. Unlike drawing or painting, photography was understood as a mechanical process whose results were untainted by the tastes, skill, or prejudices of individual artists.

In the United States, the advent of photography coincided with a vast westward population movement, spurred by the discovery of gold in California, the addition of new territories gained in the Mexican American War, and the rapid expansion of railroads. This migration brought white populations into contact with Native American groups with whom they had previously had little interaction, and who generally had no formal relations with the United States government.

Images of Native peoples had been produced and circulated since the early days of white settlement. However, the availability of photography in the mid-nineteenth century made possible the creation of a new kind of image that was easy and cheap to reproduce and distribute widely, and that was apparently far more “objective” than earlier visual depictions. Such images not only promoted a conception of Native Americans as exotic and “primitive,” but also readily lent themselves to a pervasive trope in American thinking about Native peoples: the Vanishing Indian. As a form of documentation, photography could help to create an objective visual record of peoples and cultures that were, it was widely assumed, doomed to disappear before the advance of “civilization.” Photographers like Edward Curtis and Roland Reed explicitly presented their work as an attempt to preserve what would otherwise be lost.

This paper explores the ways in which efforts to produce a photographic record of Native Americans participated in the construction of a narrative of their inevitable disappearance and assimilation. In particular, I focus on the ways in which perceptions of photography as an objective mechanical and chemical process made it particularly suited to such use, while at the same time the aesthetic and conventional expectations of the (overwhelmingly white) audience for these images— as well as the photographers who created them— encouraged the creation of images that supported or reinforced this narrative. The idea of the photograph as “evidence” of the incompatibility of Native peoples with white civilization played a vital role in developing this narrative, and adapting it to new developments, through the nineteenth century. I explore this development by focusing on the work of the photographers Edward Curtis and Roland Reed, who worked around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century and whose photographs in many ways exemplify more general patterns in the photographic depictions of Native Americans.

## II. Themes

### *The Pencil of Nature*

There are several distinct threads, historical and intellectual, that come together in the photography of Native Americans. The first is the popular perception of photography as first and foremost a mechanical or chemical process, in which natural forces or laws were brought to bear in creating a new kind of visual record. For instance, in the introduction to his book *The Pencil of Nature*— the first book ever to be illustrated with photographs, published beginning in 1844— Henry Fox Talbot said that

the plates of this work have been obtained by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper. They have been formed or depicted by optical and chemical means alone, and without the aid of any one acquainted with the art of drawing. It is needless, therefore, to say that they differ in all respects, and as widely as possible, in their origin, from plates of the ordinary kind, which owe their existence to the united skill of the Artist and the Engraver.

They are impressed by Nature's hand; and what they want as yet of delicacy and finish of execution arises chiefly from our want of sufficient knowledge of her laws. When we have learnt more, by experience, respecting the formation of such pictures, they will doubtless be brought much nearer to perfection; and though we may not be able to conjecture with any certainty what rank they may hereafter attain to as pictorial productions, they will surely find their own sphere of utility, both for completeness of detail and correctness of perspective (Talbot 1844: n.p.).

Photography, in other words, was not an *art* akin to painting or drawing, but something fundamentally new and different. The camera was a machine for recording visual information in an objective, even scientific way. The photograph showed what *was there*, in fact, not just what the artist happened to notice or chose to depict. Photographs were not subject to the biases, whims, tastes, or talent level<sup>1</sup> of the artist. “Photography’s mechanical-chemical process was popularly perceived to have

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<sup>1</sup> Talbot’s explorations of photographic processes were inspired in part by his own dissatisfaction with his efforts at drawing (Daniel 2004: n.p.).

eliminated the subjectivity of human intervention which had been increasingly acknowledged in painting and other prephotographic processes (Lyman 1982:24). Edgar Allen Poe, writing about seeing early photographs, wrote that “in truth, the daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands” (in Orvell 2003: 19; emphasis in original). American judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing in 1859, referred to the daguerreotype as “a mirror with a memory,” and noted that the “very things which an artist would leave out, or render imperfectly, the photograph takes infinite care with, and so makes its illusions perfect” (Holmes 1859: 74, 79-80). Lyman argues that even today,

The applause, in recognition of photography’s potential to impart information, which greeted the medium upon its invention in 1839 has not yet faded away, and the original belief that the medium could preserve and present actual reality has maintained a peculiarly strong grip on our imaginations...Even in an environment saturated with photographic images, photographs continue to impress us in a way which we feel is different from other media, either visual or verbal (Lyman 1982:17).<sup>2</sup>

Importantly for my purposes, this understanding of photography also presents the photographer as a *witness* to what happened, to the presence of people or the unfolding of events. Unlike a painting, a photograph cannot be fabricated entirely out of the imagination of the painter. To produce the image, the photographer must have actually positioned the camera before the scene to be depicted, exposed the plate or film, and developed it. While a *painting* of Indians might, in principle, be produced by an artist at home in the studio and based entirely on verbal descriptions in books— and indeed, many were— a photograph showed, at the very least, that the photographer really had been out among them.

### *Photography and Anthropology*

The second thread is the development, more or less coeval with that of photography, of the discipline of anthropology. The Ethnological Society of London, one of the earliest anthropological organizations, was founded in 1843; Louis Daguerre's photographic process was first publicized in 1839, and Fox Talbot's competing calotype process the same year (Pinney 2011: 17). Photography was

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<sup>2</sup> Lyman was of course writing before the possibilities of digital manipulation and fabrication of “photographic” images had advanced to their present state. Whether photography still retains this aura of factuality is debatable, but that debate is outside the scope of this paper.

very early seen as an essential tool of the anthropologist, precisely because of the (ostensibly) objective view and degree of accuracy that it could provide. As Christopher Pinney says,

The emergence of institutional practices that claimed the name of ethnology and anthropology coincided, in Britain and in France, with the appearance of photography, and as these practices of anthropology started to formalize their interests in new forms and possibilities of data, photography would emerge as an increasingly vital mode of data capture and transmission.

Photography was particularly advocated as a superior alternative to drawing or painting, which was inevitably distorted by “artistic” concerns. For example, British anthropologist E. F. Thurn<sup>3</sup>, writing in 1893, noted that while George Catlin’s painting of Native Americans were vastly superior to many artistic depictions of “primitive” peoples, “even his drawings, valuable as they are, and as artistically superior as they are, are far from having the value of the accuracy of photographs” (Thurn 1893: 184). He argued also that written records of the appearance and customs “might be infinitely helped out by the camera” (Thurn 1893: 184). Similarly, M.V. Portman— a British naval officer who served as the warden of the Andaman Island penal colony, and documented the native people of the island— approvingly quoted from a guide book that advised the use of the camera, saying that “By these means the traveller is dealing with facts about which there can be no question” (Portman 1896: 76). Influential anthropologist E.B. Tylor, writing about a book of photos of people from all over the world, said that “most engravings of race-types to be found in books [are] worthless...Now-a-days little ethnographic value is attached to any but photographic portraits” (in Pinney 2011: 29; brackets and ellipsis are Pinney’s). Franz Boas, often considered a founder of modern anthropology, prepared for his first trip to the Americas by taking lessons in both drawing and photography, saying, in a letter to his parents, that “Photography is so important that I want to profit as much as possible from it” (in Fleming and Luskey 1986:141).

Also important is early anthropology’s focus on “exotic,” non-Western people and their ostensibly strange or outlandish ways of life. As Lyman notes, early anthropologists “attempted only infrequently to apply their researches to the changes in cultures around them. Instead, they focused on recording and understanding cultures they believed to be on the brink of disappearance” (Lyman

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<sup>3</sup> Famous to his contemporaries as the author of *Among the Indians of Guiana*, published in 1893.

1982:50). Native Americans were of course a target of such investigations— especially those seen as the most “authentic,” or least assimilated to white society. In the United States, in particular, anthropology was dominated by an “evolutionary”<sup>4</sup> perspective, according to which all human societies shared a similar course of development from a “savage” state to a “civilized” one, passing through the same general stages, each of which was marked by particular social, cultural, and technological characteristics. Lewis Henry Morgan’s book *Ancient Society*, published in 1877, was the most influential statement of this perspective, which was adopted (and adapted) wholeheartedly by John Wesley Powell, head of the federal government’s Bureau of Ethnology<sup>5</sup> from its founding in 1879 until his death in 1902 (Moses 2002: 25-30). Powell, and his emphasis on “evolutionism,” were profoundly influential, as Hoxie notes:

“Powell’s version of social evolution— the notion of culture stages, continuous progress, and the inevitable transformation of Indian life— became dominant within the discipline [of ethnology]. In short, he set the terms for informed discussions of Indian affairs in the 1880s” (Hoxie 2001:23).

In this “evolutionary” framework, people who are deemed more “primitive,” etc., are also seen as being in an earlier stage of development; means that “they” are what “we” were. “From the study of present survivals of a more primitive culture, according to Powell, much could be learned about the hidden past of present civilized society” (Moses 2002: 30). “Primitive” peoples such as Native Americans were, in a sense, living anachronisms, windows into an era so distant in the European past that no trace of it remained. That lost past could be recovered by studying primitive people alive today. Curtis, at least, was definitely aware of this theory and thought of his own work in these terms. With one photogravure published in 1913, Curtis wrote that

The American Indian [offers the] best opportunity to study primitive man as a living human document of supreme importance. His life history in its evolution of thousands of years is a unique story of beginnings early stages and developments [*sic*] in language, customs, manners and institutions” (in Gidley 1998:103).

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to *social* or cultural evolution, not biological evolution. Advocates of this view were explicitly opposed to ideas such as “polygenesis,” which suggested that different human groups were separated by significant biological differences.

<sup>5</sup> Later the Bureau of American Ethnology, BAE. The Bureau was the major influence on the development of anthropology in America for a couple of decades, if only because it was the main source of employment for American ethnologists.

It must be said that the predominance of this evolutionary perspective overlapped chronologically with the development of so-called “scientific racism,” though there was a significant tension between these two views. For evolutionists like Powell, the value of studying “primitive” cultures was predicated on the assumption that all human beings were fundamentally similar, and that differences between societies were cultural—otherwise “civilized” Europeans could learn nothing about their own pasts from the study of more primitive ones. Scientific racists, in contrast, also sought to observe and study “primitive” peoples, but did so in order to establish, measure, and explain the racial difference (and so reinforce the racial hierarchies that supported racial segregation in the United States, as well as the European colonial empires). Both anthropologists and scientific racists (categories which are by no means mutually exclusive) used many of the same tools, not only photography itself but refinements like “J.H. Lamprey’s 1869 proposal that anthropologists photograph their subjects against a background grid of 5-cm (2-inch) squares formed by hanging silk thread on a large wooden frame...” (Pinney 2002: 28). This “Lamprey Grid” would allow for a more uniform scale, assuring that images of different groups, taken by different photographers at different times, could be used for anthropometric comparisons. Officials in the Bureau of American Ethnology, as far as I have been able to determine, did not utilize this grid, but when making photographs of Native visitors to their photography lab in Washington did take care that they were “photographed against artificial backdrops or other known objects to permit physical measurements of sufficient accuracy for practical purposes” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:178).

A complication to this idea of photography as a more objective, scientific form of visual representation is the debate, in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, about whether photography could be considered an “art,” equal to painting, sculpture, etc. The pictorialist school, in particular, argued that photography deserved this status, and often supported their contention with the use of techniques (soft focus, dramatic manipulation of photographic negatives) that made the role of the photographer in creating the image more evident, more visible. These photographers, in other words, sought to make it difficult or impossible to see their images as merely the result of a chemical or mechanical process by highlighting the actions and choices of the photographer (Orvell 2003: 82-83; see also Lyman 1982:33).

The influence of this movement is clearly visible in the photographs made by both Edward Curtis and Roland Reed, and their work thus embodies a tension between the anthropological impulse to create an objective factual record and the competing desire to produce aesthetically pleasing images. As Lyman notes, speaking of Curtis:

If we say that his pictures are art, we imply that they are Curtis's subjective expression of his reaction to his subjects. But when we say that his pictures are documents, we imply that they are objective representations of what his subjects were (Lyman 1982:18).

To some extent, this is a false dichotomy. Curtis's photographs— like those of any other photographer— do not fit perfectly into either category. They do, necessarily, reflect decisions made by the photographer about what to depict, and how— decisions that we can reasonably describe as “artistic” choices. At the same time, as photographs, they also necessarily reflect the existence of something out in the world, of which they are in fact a kind of record. Lyman, again, points out that while “documents— as a species of fact— are not always true to their intention, they are usually true to something” (Lyman 1982:23). Thus even if we believed that a particular image were entirely, deliberately staged, with a hired model and fabricated props, etc., the resulting image would still be a record of that staging, and as such would still tell us *something* about the photographer and their intentions. The aesthetic choices made by photographers like Curtis and Reed similarly reveal something about their intentions and expectations, as well as those they believed were held by their intended audience. The fact that they also intended to generate *documents* of a particular reality simply brings to the surface the inevitable tension between these dual purposes.

### *The Vanishing Indian*

The final thread is the long-standing conception, among white settlers in the Americas, that “the Indian” was inevitably going to vanish, to disappear. There is a fairly large literature on this subject (e.g., Pearce 1971; Dippie 1982; Maddox 1991; Deloria 1998; Scheckel 1998; Bergland 2000; Huhndorf 2001), as well as many arguments for why it develops, why it appeared so early in American history, and why it remained so persistent. There are also different versions of the general claim. For example, in the 1790s Benjamin Lincoln, sent by the federal government to negotiate a treaty with tribes in the Old Northwest, explained the disappearance of the Indian in biblical terms, suggesting that Indians



were “children of Ishmael,” who would inevitably “yield or disappear” in the face of white civilization’s advance (White 1999:85).

More often, however, white observers simply perceived a clash, a radical incompatibility, between the “primitive” way of life associated with Native Americans, and the supposedly “modern,” “civilized” society of Europeans (and those of European descent) That is, Indians simply *could not* continue to live as they had— *as Indians*— in the modern world. Their way of life<sup>6</sup> was no longer viable. Therefore they would, without question, vanish, at least as distinct cultural groups; they would have to assimilate, or die. The *policy* question for the more liberal elements in American society was how to make it the former rather than the latter, but it was absolutely taken for granted that one or the other was inevitable.

One example of such an argument is that of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who in his 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer* “began writing the Natives’ obituary, announcing that Indians ‘appear to be a race doomed to recede and disappear before the superior genius of the Europeans’” (in Merrell 1999:335). Eighteenth century Americans like Crèvecoeur were deeply invested in both the idea that universal progress was inevitable, and that Western civilization was the agent of that progress. In this view, “the position of the Indian, as civilization’s antithesis...was fatally compromised” (Dippie 1982:29). Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, in 1828, was more explicit in drawing the link between the vanishing Indians and white “civilization” when he asked:

What can be more melancholy than their history? By a law of their nature, they seem destined to a slow, but sure extinction. Everywhere, at the approach of the white man, they fade away. We hear the rustling of their footsteps, like that of the withered leaves of autumn, and they are gone forever (in Dippie 1982:1).

The evident romanticism of such a description highlights the fact that, at least by the middle part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most saw the disappearance of the Indian as a loss rather than a victory to be celebrated. This naturally led to various kinds of efforts to save some fragments of Native cultures from destruction— to preserve a record of them as they were before their fateful encounter with white society. This goal would profoundly influence anthropology, not only in the United States but in Europe as well. In particular, it would influence the development of what has come to be known as

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<sup>6</sup> The use of the singular here is intentional.

“salvage anthropology”— that is, anthropological study undertaken to record whatever is left of vanishing, primitive societies and cultures in order to learn whatever can be learned before they succumb, in one way or another, to the forces of the modern world. For instance, as far back as 1839, James Cowles Prichard, in a paper presented to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, noted that

Wherever Europeans have settled, their arrival has been the harbinger of extermination to the native tribes. Whenever the simple pastoral tribes come into relations with the more civilized agricultural nations, the allotted time of their destruction is at hand; and this seems to have been the case from the time when the first shepherd fell by the hand of the first tiller of the soil (Prichard 1839:169).

Characterizing this destruction as imminent for “the aboriginal nations of most parts of the world,” Prichard then argued that

...it is of the greatest importance, in a philosophical point of view, to obtain much more extensive information than we now possess of their physical and moral characters. A great number of curious problems in physiology, illustrative of the history of the species, and the laws of their propagation, remain as yet imperfectly solved. The psychology of these races has been but little studied in an enlightened manner; and yet this is wanting, in order to complete the history of human nature, and the philosophy of the human mind (Prichard 1839:169-170; see also Pinney 2011:20).

It is in this context that much photography of Native American subjects should be interpreted.

Even before the invention of photography, in fact, attempts were made by artists to paint or draw as many different Native American groups as possible “before they are gone.” Brian W. Dippie suggests that these painted portraits of Native Americans can be delineated into two traditions. The first includes formal studio portraits in which they were “posed in their ceremonial best”; these are exemplified in the work of Charles Bird King (Dippie 1992:132). Over a twenty-year period beginning in 1821, King painted over 143 Native leaders who came to Washington, D.C., as part of official delegations; his efforts were part of a program, begun by Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas McKenney, to establish “a collection of items relating to our aborigines preserved there for the inspection of the curious and for the information of future generations and long after the Indians will have been no more” (In Fleming and Luskey 1993:19). With this disappearance taken for granted,

“making a pictorial record of their principal leaders [was] indispensable to posterity” (Dippie 1992:132; see also Fleming and Luskey 1993:19).<sup>7</sup>

The second tradition identified by Dippie includes depictions of Indians “in their own setting,” made by artists who traveled out to (mainly) western reservations (Dippie 1992:132). The painter George Catlin is the best known example of this tradition, and his was the most ambitious project of depiction of the pre-photographic era, involving visits to at least 48 tribes and the production of over 600 paintings through the 1830s (Fleming and Luskey 1993:18).

Artists working in both of these traditions were also heeding the call (knowingly or not) of the salvage anthropologists. They took it for granted that Native Americans were destined to disappear, and their work was important because it would preserve first-hand knowledge of, at least, their appearance for future generations. Catlin, for instance, said of Indians:

...I have flown to their rescue— not of their lives or of their race (for they are “doomed” and must perish), but to the rescue of their looks and modes, at which the acquisitive world may hurl their poison and every besom of destruction, and trample them down and crush them to death; yet, rise phoenix-like again upon canvass [sic] and stand forth for centuries yet to come, the living monuments of a noble race (in Fleming and Luskey 1993:17-18).

The artist Seth Eastman, who was an army lieutenant posted at Fort Snelling in Minnesota in the 1830s and 1840s, painted over 400 oils and watercolors of the region’s Native tribes. Some of these were published in 1849 in the book *Dakotan: or, Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling*, with text by Eastman’s wife Mary. The book described the Eastmans’ intentions:

It will still be my endeavor to depict all the customs, feasts, an ceremonies of the Sioux, before it be too late...They are receding rapidly, and with feeble resistance, before the giant strides of civilization (In Fleming and Luskey 1993:20).

So, when photography became available, it naturally emerged as an ideal way to record or capture the facts of Indian life while they could still be observed— in a form that was also “far more authentic and trustworthy,” as the Secretary of the Smithsonian put it in 1865, than the oil paintings of an artist like King or Catlin (in Fleming and Luskey 1993:21; see also Lyman 1982:19). Thus “By the 1850s

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<sup>7</sup> Sadly, most of King’s portraits, along with many by another artist, John Mix Stanley, were destroyed by a fire in the Smithsonian’s Gallery of Art in 1865.

photography began to replace artistry as a means of recording the likenesses of members of Indian delegations to Washington,” with the first such photographs made in 1852 of “leaders of the Plains Indian tribes who had signed the Fort Laramie Treaty” (Ewers 1986:9). By the latter part of the 1850s, “a trip to the photographer’s studio became an increasingly routine part of a diplomatic visit” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:20).

These were often understood quite explicitly as efforts at documenting Native peoples before their inevitable disappearance. James E. McCleese, owner of one such studio in Washington, began an effort to photograph all of the Indian delegations that visited the capital. In promotional materials from 1857, McCleese argued that

To the student of our history, as additions to libraries and historical collections, and as mementoes [sic] of the race of red men, now rapidly fading away, this series is of great value and interest (in Fleming and Luskey 1986:22).

Similarly, Joseph Henry, the first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, proposed the creation of a collection of photographs of the members of Indian delegations in a letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. In this letter, Henry said that “[t]he Indians are passing away so rapidly that but a few years remain, within which this can be done and the loss will be irretrievable and so felt when they are gone” (in Fleming and Luskey 1986: 22). Major efforts at collecting such photographs were made in 1868 and 1872, but delegations became much less common at this time, as the U.S. ceased making new treaties with Native American tribes in 1871.

The images made during this early period were largely limited to portraits, because the photographic technology of this period, with its need for very long exposure times, limited the possibilities for photographing Native Americans “in their own setting.” As Fleming and Luskey note of the various “wet-plate” photographic processes of the 1850s-1860s,

The emulsions were too ‘slow’ to stop action. Dances could be recorded only if posed. For one individual to keep still for what seemed like an interminable time was difficult enough...but for a group posed in unsteady positions it was almost impossible. Also impossible were candid photographs (Fleming and Luskey 1986:14).

As the technology improved, however, more and more photographers ventured west in order to photograph Native Americans, including those involved in conflict with the United States. For

instance, Eadweard Muybridge<sup>8</sup> took photos during the Modoc war in northern California, “creating for the first time an almost complete record of an Indian war” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:46)<sup>9</sup>. Other photographers accompanied military campaigns; Camillus S. Fly, for example, accompanied general George Crook’s campaign against the Apache and photographed his eventual meeting with the Chiracahua leader Geronimo, while George E. Traeger captured the aftermath of the Wounded Knee massacre, including the famous image of the body of Miniconjou Sioux leader Big Foot (Fleming and Luskey 1986:48).

Photography was becoming more accessible at the same time as white settlement in the West was increasing. Photographers like Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson<sup>10</sup>—both of whom also made many photographs of Native Americans—accompanied the ambitious government surveys of the 1860s and 70s, which sought to document the American West; these were initially focused on geology and geography, but later came to include ethnological studies under the auspices of the Department of the Interior, which focused on Native Americans; beginning in 1874, Congress requested that the results of the ethnological studies be published with photographs (Fleming and Luskey 1986:105, 110). Further, as Native Americans were increasingly confined on reservations where they were “infinitely easier and safer to photograph,” equipment became more available, less expensive, and easier to use. “Studios sprang up in most medium-sized cities, producing thousands of photographers available to record the Indians”; studios were even established at many military forts (Fleming and Luskey 1986:72). By “the late 1880s, the Kodak camera with its easy-to-use roll film, placed photography firmly in the hands of amateurs.” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:16). These would include missionaries, teachers, and others who lived and worked in Native communities.

### *The Assimilation Era*

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<sup>8</sup> Later famous for his motion studies, which revealed, among other things, that a galloping horse did in fact have all four of its legs off the ground at once. For an excellent examination of Muybridge’s life and work, including his photography of the Modoc war, see Solnit 2003.

<sup>9</sup> While it may have been “almost complete,” it was hardly a perfect or straightforward record. Lyman notes that Muybridge “was unable to get close enough to the besieged [Modoc] Indians to photograph them. Instead, he posed Warm Springs Indians, who were working as guides for the U.S. Army, aiming rifles amongst the gnarled rock. Returning to San Francisco, he sold these theatrical images as documents of the ‘Modoc War’” (Lyman 1982:28).

<sup>10</sup> O’Sullivan took the first photographs of the Grand Canyon, while Jackson was the first to record the Anazasi ruins at Mesa Verde, both as part of these government surveys.

In the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, efforts at documenting Native societies came to seem even more urgent and necessary. In 1890, the U.S. Census included the Indian Territory for the first time, and the Superintendent of the Census declared that the “frontier of settlement” had, for all intents and purposes, disappeared (a development which Frederick Jackson Turner famously called to the public’s attention in 1893) (Turner 1893:n.p.). In 1890, the slaughter at Wounded Knee signaled the end, for all intents and purposes, of the Indian Wars of the West and Great Plains. On the one hand, this facilitated the further growth of white settlement in the West; on the other, it helped to usher in a more romantic, nostalgic public perception of Native Americans. As Fleming and Luskey put it, “By the turn of the century, the Indians had ceased to be a threat for the average citizen. They were no longer viewed as bloodthirsty savages, but could be seen as the “noble red man” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:16). Similarly, Lyman notes that “Whereas the presence of Indians had generally been seen as a menace, the idea of their disappearance gave rise to a nostalgia that was often cloaked in the trappings of science” (Lyman 1982:48).

The years immediately preceding these historical landmarks were also marked by the most intensive governmental efforts in U.S. history at “civilizing,” or assimilating, Native Americans. While this had, broadly speaking, been the goal of American policy makers since at least the passage of the Indian Civilization Act in 1819, in the early part of the nineteenth century it had been pursued mainly via the comparatively passive “barrier policy,” which had the aim of keeping Native and white Americans separated while Indian societies gradually but inevitably transformed themselves. (Trennert 1975:2). This approach culminated in the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which relocated tribes in the eastern part of the country to new lands west of the Mississippi River.

While it “was hoped, as Prucha (1978:2) notes, “that the land thus assigned to the Indian nations [after removal] would not be desired by whites for generations,” by the late 1840s there was a growing consensus that these hopes had been dashed. Encouraged by the settlement with Britain of the Oregon border in 1846, the end of the Mexican American War in 1848, and the discovery, also in 1848, of gold in California, the westward expansion of the white population far outstripped what the policymakers of the 1830s had envisioned (Danziger 1974:1; Weeks 2016:75). Further encouraged by the Homestead Act of 1862 and the expansion of the railroads that connected the great cities of the east with the new western settlement, the pace of expansion would only accelerate in the coming years. As Weeks (2016:152) points out, “The settlement of the trans-Mississippi West in the last four decades of the

nineteenth century constituted the largest migration of people in the history of the United States.” Contact between these migrants and western Native American groups was inevitable— not only with those groups who had already been relocated from their eastern lands, but also the tribes of the Great Plains. Likewise inevitable were the more and more frequent conflicts that resulted when white settlers crossed or sought to occupy Native lands and slaughtered in vast numbers the bison on which many of the Plains tribes depended.

Increased military action followed, with the eventual defeat of the western tribes. “With shocking speed,” says Hoxie, “the Indians who had previously avoided American domination suffered complete military defeat. Every tribe and band was now encircled by a rising tide of farmers, miners, and entrepreneurs” (Hoxie 2001:xviii). Herbert Welsh, a founder of the Indian Rights Association, described Indian reservations as “islands, and about them a sea of civilization, vast and irresistible, surges” (in Hoxie 2001:12). This situation seemed clearly unsustainable, persuading many that, without the concerted efforts of both a concerned public and the U.S. government, Indians were doomed to destruction (an update to the old trope of the disappearing Indian). “Saving” the Indian from this fate would require coercive action, but faced with choice a between their civilization and their extinction, the morally correct course was obvious. Benjamin S. Coppock, a proponent of education for Native Americans, gave voice to the common view when he urged the “friends of the Indian” to “...do something, be quick, move, the frontier is not leisurely waiting” (Coppock 1886:108).

In response to such calls, the U.S. government in this period increased the pressure on Native Americans. Deloria and Lytle (1983:8) summarize the situation concisely, saying that “In the 1880s a radical reversal of thinking occurred: if you can no longer push Indians westward to avoid contact with civilization, and it is inhumane to conduct wars of extermination against them, the only alternative is to assimilate them.” Among other things, the last 30 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century included the cessation of treaty making with Native tribes (indicating that they were no longer be regarded as sovereign powers); the proliferation of schools, including off-reservation boarding schools, for Native children, with the explicit purpose of teaching them the ways of white society and alienating them from tribal life; and the General Allotment Act of 1887, which divided communal lands into individual parcels that were to become the private property of individual Native Americans.

### III. Photographing the Indian

It is in this context, of rapid westward expansion and increasing official pressure on Native Americans to assimilate to white society, that many photographers, including the two on whom I am focusing, set out to document the lives and cultures of Native peoples. Their conviction— shared with the majority of white society— that these cultures were rapidly disappearing and would soon vanish altogether, was consistent with the longstanding narrative of the Vanishing Indian, but was given new force and urgency by the intensifying efforts of the federal government to bring this disappearance about. These photographers, to varying extents, “thought of themselves as visual historians, belonging both to the scientific and artistic communities” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:214).

Given their shared conviction that they were working to preserve a visual remnant of a vanishing culture, it is not surprising that the work of these photographers was often infected by a sense of romantic nostalgia, or that they sought to create images that fit their (and the public’s) expectations of what Native Americans “in their original condition” ought to look like. Comparing Curtis’s work to the book *Black Elk Speaks*, Christopher Lyman notes that “Both works are so close to the reality we have been conditioned to see that we assume them to be authentic reproductions of the reality of long ago” (Lyman 1982:11). Such expectations, of course, often reflect stereotypes far more than the actual histories or cultures of the people being depicted. Dippie, quoting Paul Fussell, remarks of nineteenth-century photographs of Native Americans that “If they’ve not read *Hiawatha*, the photographer has.’ Many Indian portraits from the period raise this suspicion: that the photographer knew what a noble savage should look like, and did not hesitate to impose his vision on his subjects” (Dippie 1992:132). This was sometimes true even for the more scientifically-oriented observers; Powell, for instance, when leading government survey expeditions in the West, “had costumes made for his Ute and Paiute subjects to wear while posing” for photographs, “including feather bonnets which may have seemed ‘Indian’ to Powell but probably bore no relation to the subjects’ normal clothing” (Lyman 1982:26).

At the same time, the work of these photographers in some ways contributed to the changes they sought to document. As Lyman puts it, photography in this period

...was partially a useful tool for recording scenes in a West that was rapidly becoming domesticated; it was also a weapon in the final skirmishes of cultural warfare in which the natives of North America could be properly and finally embedded in their place in the cultural evolutionary incline (Lyman 1982:11).



All photography is selective; with limited time, film, and attention, the photographer must choose where to point their camera and when to release the shutter. Moreover, though we may occasionally forget the fact, it is obvious that a photograph represents a single instant frozen and extracted from an ongoing reality, of which it may be more or less representative. By choosing to depict Native Americans only “in their original condition,” however accurate their understanding of it, photographers helped to reinforce the belief that the Indian was *defined* by living in that condition. Speaking of Curtis, Lyman says that his “generation believed that Indians were only real Indians when they behaved as they were imagined to have behaved prior to Contact with Whites” (Lyman 1982:19-20). In other words, they took it for granted that, once they had adopted a Euro-American way of living, they would no longer *be* Indians. To claim that “the Indian” was rapidly disappearing at the end of the nineteenth century was really to say that soon there would be no more “real” Indians—which is to say, no more people who fit the expectations white observers had of what an Indian should look like. By focusing on depictions of Native Americans that *did* fit with these expectations, photographers reinforced the popular conception of a “real” or “authentic” Indian; by choosing to depict them *as vanishing*, and presenting their projects as efforts of salvage or preservation, they reinforced the assumption of the radical incompatibility of this Indian with “civilization,” or the modern world. The apparently objective, mechanical nature of a photograph, as opposed to a painting or drawing or written description, reinforced the sense of authenticity; it contributed to the feeling that popular expectations of what Indians “should” look like were in fact reasonable or realistic. As Dippie notes, most of these photographs

showed [Indians] bristling with bows and arrows, spears, pistols, rifles, and, especially, tomahawks. A tomahawk was the favourite all-purpose prop. It verified the savage in the noble savage...established the warlike qualities that made him a dangerous enemy and helped explain why the race— once so implacably resistant to civilization overtures— had been doomed in America (Dippie 1992: 134).

Lyman makes the point more bluntly: “When photographs depicted Indians as ‘savages,’ Indians were confirmed as savages in the minds of their eastern audiences” (Lyman 1982:29).

It is essential to understand that such reconstructions— or, simply, *constructions*, as Gidley (1998) suggests we more properly think of them— did not strike contemporary observers as dishonest or deceptive. It was known, in a general sense, that there were few if any Native peoples left in the

United States who did not evince some influence of white society— that, indeed, was central to the narrative of the Vanishing Indian that drove all of these projects. The achievement of this work was seen, precisely, in the way it pulled back the layers of “civilization’s” influence to reveal the “real” Indian underneath. One article from the *Seattle Times* in 1903 described Curtis’s work this way:

Instead of the painted features, the feathers, the arrows and the bow, we find [the Indian] in the blue jeans and cowboy hat of semi-civilization. Enshrined though he may be with the weird habits and mysterious rites of his forefathers, the mystery has vanished and the romance has gone in the actuality of the present day...[But Curtis] took the present lowness of today and enshrined it in the romance of the past...he changed the degenerated Indian of today into the fancy-free king of a yesterday that has long since been forgotten in the calendar of time. *He has picked up a bundle of broken straws and erected a palace of accuracy and fact.*<sup>11</sup> (in Lyman 1982:53; my emphasis).

A few years later, in 1907, an article by Sidney Allan, argued that

A painter is apt to let his imagination run away with him, [whereas] accuracy is what makes Curtis’s records valuable to posterity...being photographs from life they show what exists and not what one in the artist’s studio presumes might exist (in Gidley 1998:77).

Similarly, a 1916 magazine article about Roland Reed’s work said that Reed “lets the Indian speak to you for himself. His ideal is to remove the veil of time and false tradition and show you the real Indian. His pictures are not tableaux posed to fit an artist’s concept”<sup>12</sup> (Lawrence 2012:18). Later in Reed’s career, after he had moved to California, Charles Lummis, a journalist who founded the Southwest Museum of the American Indian, described Reed’s Indian photographs as “marvels not only of artistic beauty but of historical truth” (Lawrence 2012:161).<sup>13</sup>

What made work like that of Curtis or Reed “accurate,” in other words, was not that it depicted Native Americans just as the photographers found them, but precisely that it presented what seemed to the audience as a plausible or persuasive reconstruction of the “real” Indian of the past. The problem is that “persuasive” in this context could only mean that it was in accord with what that audience expected to see. Lyman goes so far as to argue that “popular illusions about ‘Indianness’ were

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<sup>11</sup> I have suppressed two paragraph breaks in excerpting this text.

<sup>12</sup> As I will discuss below, many of Reed’s photos were in fact precisely this.

<sup>13</sup> He also said they would make “Curtis turn in his grave if he had got to that turning point” (that is, if Curtis were not still alive at the time). (Lawrence 2012:161).

so ingrained that had Curtis's images been more accurate, his audience would most likely have thought them to be lying" (Lyman 1982:83). This is speculation, of course, but it is certainly likely that such images would have been less popular.

There are a great many photographers— of greater or lesser skill and ambition, and with a variety of motivations— who produced images of Native Americans throughout the nineteenth century. In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on the work of two such photographers: Edward Curtis and Roland Reed. Both did their most significant work in roughly the same period— the 1890s-1920s— the time when official efforts at assimilating Native Americans were at their most intense, and thus when the effort to create a visual record of their lives and cultures seemed most urgent. Curtis and Reed were also engaged in what Fleming and Luskey (1993:12) call "grand endeavors— conscious efforts, whose primary purpose was documentation." At the same time, the photographs that both of these men produced can be understood, to varying degrees, as staged or manipulated to produce or reinforce particular conceptions of Native Americans. As I have suggested above, however, the way in which such staging took place, and how it was achieved, reveals much about the intentions of the photographers and their understanding of the audience for their work. In the following section, I will explore how the various threads I have been describing were woven together in the life and work of each of these photographers.

#### *Edward S. Curtis*

Curtis's *The North American Indian* is easily the most famous, as well as the most ambitious, photographic project aimed at depicting Native Americans. When it was finally completed after more than two decades, it comprised hundreds of photographs, as well as thousands of pages of text, over 20 lavishly-produced volumes. With the financial backing of J.P. Morgan and the endorsement of public figures from the naturalist George Bird Grinnell to Teddy Roosevelt, Curtis sought to generate a complete record of Native Americans and their cultures, including everything from collections of myths and legends to transcriptions of Native songs. Curtis would also create a silent film about the tribes of the Pacific Northwest, and a "musicale"— a kind of magic lantern show using his Indian images, with his own narration and specially composed music (see Gidley 1998, Ch. 7 for a detailed description of this production).

Curtis was born in Wisconsin in 1868, but the family moved first to Minnesota and then to Washington, where his father died of pneumonia, leaving Edward as the family's primary support. Seattle would serve as his primary base of operations for much of his career. He taught himself photography as a teenager, and "may have worked for a time as an apprentice in a St. Paul photographic studio" (Fleming and Luskey 1993:107). In 1891, he borrowed \$150 to buy a share in a Seattle studio, and began his career as a photographer (*ibid.*: 107). He may have taken his first photographs of Indian subjects as early as 1895, but certainly was making photographs of Native Americans around Puget Sound and on the Tulalip Reservation by the end of the 1890s (*ibid.*:108).

A turning point in Curtis's life came when he was invited to join railroad tycoon Edward Harriman's expedition to Alaska in 1899. Prominent experts from many different fields were invited on the trip, which transformed in the planning process from a restful vacation for Harriman into "a lavishly financed variation on the earlier federally-funded surveys of the West" (Lyman 1982:37). His presence on the trip gave Curtis useful personal connections, as well as sparking his interest in ethnology (Fleming and Luskey 1993:110).

In 1900, George Bird Grinnell, who had also been present on the Harriman expedition, invited Curtis to accompany him to Montana, where they witnessed a performance of the Sun Dance— an experience that affected Curtis profoundly. Grinnell had himself tried to photograph Native Americans, with mixed results. "Having recognized the appeal that aesthetically pleasing photographs would bring to his field, Grinnell encouraged Curtis to pursue photography of Indians full time (Lyman 1982:43). Curtis took this advice, and the following year began his photographic trips to Native tribes around the West; Native Americans would remain his focus for the next two decades (Fleming and Luskey 1993:111). After several years of work, and the expenditure of many thousands of dollars of his own money, Curtis approached J.P. Morgan in 1906 with a proposal for funding the project. It was at this point that the vision of a twenty-volume set, produced to the most luxurious standards, was first proposed. Morgan agreed to fund the work, granting Curtis \$75,000 to cover his expenses in the field. Curtis would have to sell subscriptions to the set— initially priced at \$3000, a huge sum at the time— to cover the costs of producing the books themselves (Gidley 1998:110). All told, Morgan and his son, Jack, who continued to fund Curtis after his father's death, spent around \$400,000 to support *The North American Indian* (Fleming and Luskey 1993:116).

The final volumes of Curtis's massive project were not published until 1930, more than 30 years from his first trip with Grinnell to photograph the Great Plains tribes. He took around forty thousand pictures of eighty different tribes, as well as writing much of the text that appeared in *The North American Indian*. (Fleming and Luskey 1993:116). His marriage, his finances, and his health were all undermined, to a greater or lesser degree, by the work; at his death in 1952, he was an obscure figure, nearly forgotten until his Indian photographs were rediscovered beginning in the 1970s. Today, Curtis is far and away the best known photographer of Native Americans.

Curtis explicitly placed his efforts at photographing Native Americans squarely within the salvage tradition (without, of course, using this term). He made it clear in numerous statements over many years that he saw *The North American Indian* as an effort of preservation, an attempt to create a record of people and cultures that would soon disappear:

The passing of every old man or woman means the passing of some tradition, some knowledge of sacred rites possessed by no other; consequently, the information that is to be gathered, for the benefit of future generations...must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost for all time. It is this need that has inspired the present task (Fleming and Luskey 1993:112).

And, again, in a statement published by the American Museum of Natural History:

Many take issue with the thought that the Indian is a 'vanishing race.' As far as the ethnologist is concerned, this race is not only vanishing but has almost vanished. We are now working late in the afternoon of the last day...Each month some old patriarch dies and with him goes a store of knowledge and there is nothing to take its place...What is to be done in the field as far as original research is concerned must be done in the next few years (in Gidley 1998:33).

This is made clear as well in one of the most famous images from the project— and the one that served as the frontispiece to the first volume— entitled “The Vanishing Race” (*Figure 1*). Here, a group of Indians (specifically, Navajos), their individual features indistinguishable in deep shadow, literally recede into the background, marching in an orderly straight line toward the image's vanishing point. The symbolic weight of the image, its title, and its placement in the collection is both intentional and unmistakable.

Moreover, Curtis stated repeatedly that his aim was to capture “the Indian” as he *was*, prior to the arrival of the white man, insofar as this was possible. To that end, he photographed Native

Americans almost always in traditional garb, with objects tied to historical ways of life— regardless of how these individuals might have dressed or lived at the time that Curtis encountered them. He sometimes “asked the Indians to re-enact famous battles or conduct ceremonies for his camera,” particularly in the early years of the project (Fleming and Luskey 1993:112). He also seems to have accumulated a collection of clothes and objects that he used to achieve the desired effect, sometimes using the same ones in images of members of different tribes; he may have had men with short hair wear a wig to disguise the fact (Lyman 1982:90, 124).

At the same time, he sought out those Native groups that he considered to be the most authentic, the least influenced by white society; in his written proposal to J.P. Morgan, for instance, he described his intention to “make a complete publication, showing pictures and including text of every phase of Indian life of *all tribes yet in a primitive condition...*” (In Gidley 1998:44; my emphasis). He therefore had little interest in the tribes of the Indian Territory, whom he considered too assimilated to be worth investigating (although he did ultimately include them in the project) (Lyman 1982:125; Gidley 1998:153). In contrast, the Native people of Alaska were of the strongest interest, with one of Curtis’s assistants writing in 1927 that “On Nunivak we had the best of luck since the natives are primitive and unspoiled” (in Gidley 1998:164). As much as possible, Curtis deliberately excluded from his images anything that suggested contact with white society or the “modern” world— including, in many cases, by extensively retouching negatives after the photo had been taken. Perhaps the best known example of such practice is “In a Piegan Lodge.” In the original version of the image, taken direct from the negative, a small clock is clearly visible between the two seated figures; in the version published in *The North American Indian*, the clock has been edited out (*Figures 2 and 3*).

Other objects were also frequently removed through retouching of negatives: “Generally the objects removed were of white manufacture. Among these were wagons, parasols, hats, suspenders, and product labels” (Lyman 1982:76). Curtis also often shot with a shallow depth of field (that is, only objects within a narrow range of distance from the camera would be in focus— a shallow depth of field is often used in portraits to blur the background and focus attention on the subject). This, as Lyman also notes, has the effect of excluding certain features of a scene by making it impossible to

see them clearly; this if, for instance, there were obviously modern buildings, or a crowd of people, in the background, these could be reduced to masses of light and shadow (Lyman 1982:76-7).<sup>14</sup>

Curtis did somewhat less of this kind of manipulation as the project went on— or, at least, he was more willing “to make portraits of men with short hair wearing manufactured clothing, and pictorials of modern houses built with milled lumber,” and by volume nineteen of *The North American Indian*, the “illustrations have vastly greater integrity as ethnographic documents” (Lyman 1982:124, 137).

Yet Curtis also strove for accuracy, as he understood it. He criticized Catlin (whose project was, and is, often compared to Curtis’s own), saying that he “seems to have had his readers too much in mind and yielded to a desire to interest”— that is, he didn’t let the facts get in the way of a good story (or painting) (in Lyman 1982:17). According to Lyman, “Curtis seems therefore to have believed that by removing evidence of the influence of white culture from his photographs, he *was* being more *truthful* in his depictions of Indians” (Lyman 1982:63). As the article from the *Seattle Times*, quoted above, suggests, at least some of his audience shared this view.

We can also position Curtis as being closer to the first tradition of portraiture mentioned by Dippie; although nearly all of the photos in *The North American Indians* were in fact taken in the field, close to where their subjects were living, there are also many formal, posed studio portraits, with props, backdrops, and carefully arranged lighting. As Lyman notes, “Curtis did not bring Indians to his studio to photograph them, but he did take his studio to the Indians whom he photographed” (Lyman 1982:62). This portrait of Nez Perce leader Chief Joseph (the second time that Curtis had photographed him) is a good example (*Figure 4*).

### *Roland Reed*

The work of Roland Reed has many similarities to that of Curtis— and arguably took the staging of images even further. Reed also fits more closely into the second tradition of portraiture suggested by Dippie, that which depicted Indians “in their own setting”; rather than formal portraits taken in a

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<sup>14</sup> It should also be noted that this was a technique common among photographers in the pictorialist school; to the extent that Curtis was influenced by this group, that may also explain his choice of a shallow depth of field. Lyman does note this in passing, but perhaps accords it insufficient weight.

studio tent, the majority of his photographs are in outdoor settings, often with two or more individuals interacting (Lawrence 2012:9). These two characteristics— images of Indians taken in their own context and images that are highly staged— might seem to be in conflict, but Reed’s work illustrates how they could be combined.

Reed was almost an exact contemporary of Curtis, born in 1864 in Wisconsin—less than a hundred miles from where Curtis would be born just four years later (Fleming and Luskey 1993:100). Reed encountered Native Americans as a young boy, and so developed an early fascination with them that he retained throughout his life. He began his artistic career with drawing and painting, and taught these subjects as well. Many of his works depicted Native Americans, in particular the Blackfeet of Montana. Wishing to learn photography, in 1893 he became an apprentice to photographer Daniel Dutro, who had a studio in the town of Havre, Montana. In addition to studio portraits, the pair traveled and made photographs along the route of the Great Northern Railroad, which purchased some of their images of Indians to use in promotional materials. As Reed described it later, “Indians was [sic] plentiful along the Missouri River. We worked [together] for several years in furnishing pictures to the news department of the G.N. Ry. And doing some portrait work for our bread and butter” (Lawrence 2012:27).

After several years with Dutro, Reed struck out on his own, working briefly for the Associated Press in Alaska before opening his own studio in 1900 in Bemidji, Minnesota, which he described as “in the center of a real Indian country” (Lawrence 2012:32). From this point on, his work in the studio served mainly as a way to pay for trips to photograph Native Americans in the field (Fleming and Luskey 1993:100). By 1907, he was able to close the studio altogether and focus on this work. (Fleming and Luskey 1993:101; Lawrence 2012:32). Importantly, as Lawrence (2012:16) points out, Reed’s Indian photography, unlike Curtis’s, was entirely self-funded; this fact necessarily meant that the scope of the work would be comparatively narrower. He would eventually travel and photograph among the Ojibway of Minnesota, the Blackfeet, Piegan, Cheyenne, and Sioux of the Great Plains, and the Navajo and Hopi in Arizona and New Mexico.

Reed’s photos often suggest, more or less explicitly, a complete “scene.” He explicitly sought to reconstruct the past of the people he photographed, consulting with tribal elders to develop his sense of what that past had looked like (Fleming and Luskey 1993:101). Rather than depicting a single, carefully posed individual (as Curtis often did), Reed would arrange elaborate tableaux, with several



individuals posing as though in the midst of some event or activity, such as hunting or holding council. In some cases, these shots involved elaborate preparation, as well as requiring multiple “takes” before the desired effect was achieved. Reed also often gave the images titles that suggest a larger narrative of which the scene was a part (*Figure 5*).

Though he told different versions of the story of making the image, it is clear that “The Hunters” (*Figure 6*) required multiple attempts, with Reed supposedly placing coins in the branches of a nearby tree and telling the man with the bow that he could keep any he was able to shoot off; this allowed him to capture a “natural” looking image that was in fact nothing of the sort (Lawrence 2012:39-41). In another case, for a photo called “The Trailmakers,” which depicted several Blackfeet on horseback ostensibly blazing a new trail through the mountains, Reed later said “They did the best they could, but it was two days before they forgot me and really looked as if they were making a trail. I bet they rode by my camera 100 times before I snapped the shutter” (in Lawrence 2012:98).

For another photograph, entitled “The Wooing” (*Figure 7*), Reed claimed that because he found one woman and one man who had the look he wanted, but neither of whose spouses did,

I was compelled to transport the entire family of each of the two people whom I had selected, from their homes to the spot on Red Lake where I wished to take the picture. Parents, grandparents, younger brothers and sisters, dogs and other adjuncts had to be brought along. Then it took no small exercise of diplomacy to get the young people together without exciting jealousy on the part of their respective life partners, and even then it was days before they became well enough acquainted to enact their parts in the scene in a natural way (in Lawrence 2012:61).

Even allowing for some exaggeration, and for the fact that Reed was telling this story years after the event, it is clear that his images required elaborate preparation, and it is striking that he referred to the subjects “enacting their part in the scene.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Reed seems to have put a great deal of effort into getting his subjects to feel comfortable in their “parts” so that they would appear natural, waiting hours or even days before actually making a photo for them to “forget the camera. He even had them perform more of the implied scene than he actually intended to photograph; for instance, for “Watching the Herd” (*Figure 8*), he described how he had the men in the picture crawl up and onto

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<sup>15</sup> He also told a quite different version of the story another ten years later, in which the young man and woman in the photo were in fact married to each other (Lawrence 2012:62-3). Indeed, Reed seems to have frequently offered very different versions of how individual images were made.

the rock on their bellies, to instill the sense of cautiously approaching their imagined quarry (Lawrence 2012:108). He even envisioned very specific scenarios that he hoped to be able create; for instance, in a later visit to Red Lake in Minnesota, he said that he hoped to photograph an Ojibwa band “as it treks across the lake in a blizzard” (Lawrence 2012:158). This was decided without knowing, for instance, that there would in fact be a blizzard for them to trek through; this photograph was never made.

Perhaps the clearest example of Reed’s tendency toward the construction of narratives and scenes through photography is his work with the writer James Willard Schultz on the book *Blackfeet Tales of Glacier National Park*. For this book, Reed “took a group of Indians, with costumes and studio paraphernalia, into the romantic setting of the park. The Blackfeet had never lived there,<sup>16</sup> but they and the imagemakers recreated the stories and photographs as if they were true” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:216). Reed also continued to sell images to the Great Northern Railroad, some of which would be used in a promotional portfolio called *Among the Blackfeet Indians, Glacier National Park* (Fleming and Luskey 1993:102; Lawrence 2012:88-92).

Like Curtis, Reed certainly understood his work photographing Native Americans as an effort to preserve some record of a vanishing world, and he therefore focused on representing Indians “as they were,” in an imagined past, rather than as he encountered them in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He put a great deal of effort and energy into assuring that the costumes and props (the terms seem appropriate) used in his photos were accurate, consulting with tribal members whenever possible (see, e.g., Lawrence 2012:122). At the same time, he noted himself that, for instance, that the feathered bonnet worn by the young man in “The Wooing” was of a type not worn by his people (The Ojibwa) until recently, and that a man of his age would not be likely to have earned the right to wear one in any case (Lawrence 2012:61-2). He seems, therefore, to have chosen the most authentic costume that was also in accord with his, and his audience’s, expectations of what Indians should look like.

Reed’s ideal was always to find the most “authentic” examples to record. Early in his career, he spent time wandering in New Mexico and stumbled upon an Apache camp; in his retelling, it was only “because I was so ragged and had nothing that took their eye that I was allowed to pass.” Later,

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<sup>16</sup> The specific individuals in the photographs had never lived there, but were brought to the park by Reed from the Blackfeet reservation (Lawrence 2012: 78-9).

looking back on these events, he expressed regret that “I was not allowed thru [sic] circumstance to photograph the Apache as I found them, an Indian was really an Indian in those days” (Lawrence 2012:26). In planning a trip to both the Southwest and back to the Blackfeet territory, in 1923, he suggested that part of the appeal of the groups he meant to photograph was that “these Indians are isolated and have lived more closely to the old traditions” (in Lawrence 2012:184).

Like Curtis, Reed also excluded elements that would undermine the impression that the images were depictions of the Indian world of the past. In some cases, he apparently cropped photos to remove objects of individuals that would locate the image in the present day (Lawrence 2012:95). Lawrence (2012:87) includes three related images: one a carefully posed group portrait of several Blackfeet men, all wrapped in blankets and wearing beaded breastplates, feathers, etc.; and two candid images of the same group around a fire with two crates of Van Camps pork and beans. In at least a couple of cases, he combined printed a single image from two negatives in order to place figures in settings where they had not actually been photographed (Lawrence 2012:151, 155), though he seems not to have retouched photographs as Curtis did. By 1932, near the end of his life, he declared that it was “no longer possible to obtain authentic Indian pictures. The Indians’ historic costumes and accoutrements have all been sold to tourists and few examples of pure racial types are still alive” (in Fleming and Luskey 1993:102). He died in Colorado Springs in 1934, after suffering a fall that injured his spine and contracting pneumonia in the hospital.

#### IV. Conclusion

Edward Curtis and Roland Reed were only two of the many professional photographers (in addition to countless amateurs) making pictures of Native Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. Looking at some of the others (Gertrude Kasebier, William Henry Jackson, Joseph Kossuth Dixon) would undoubtedly provide a somewhat different impression of such depictions and, in particular, their evolution over time. But the work of Curtis and Reed evinces patterns that apply more broadly, and which reveal the influence of the cultural and historical context in which they operated. Both were deeply invested in, and benefitted from, the conception of photographs as objective documents of reality, innocent of artistic design or intention— even as they both imposed

their aesthetic standards and tastes on the images they produced. Both worked in a time of fevered interest in the ethnological study of “primitive” peoples, and both saw their work as connected to such study. Both believed implicitly in the narrative of the Vanishing Indian, and saw their efforts as a way to preserve a record of peoples and cultures that would otherwise be lost to future generations—and they were working in a historical moment when the rapid westward expansion of white settlement and the deliberately assimilationist policy of the United States government combined to make this belief seem more plausible than ever. Finally, both sought to depict Indians as they *were*, in an imagined past which they had to *construct*, but which they understood themselves as *recovering*. Both also therefore helped to *reinforce* the narrative of vanishing by emphasizing the aspects of Native cultures seen to be most incompatible with modern “civilization.”

While these two photographers may exemplify some of these themes more clearly or completely than some others might have done, it is difficult to find photographs of Native Americans made in the early twentieth century—or indeed, the preceding half century—that do not reveal these influences to some extent. With that in mind, I will conclude with one final image, noted by the writer and photographer Teju Cole in his *On Photography* column in the *New York Times Magazine* (Cole 2017). It is a portrait of a Native American woman, holding a small dog; she wears a simple patterned dress, earrings, and a bracelet (*Figure 9*). There is little background detail, and the photo could have been made at any time in the first half of the twentieth century; there is also little that obviously marks the subject as Native American. The photo was made by Horace Poolaw, a Kiowa and a professional photographer, and the subject is his sister. The image becomes more striking when we note that it was made in 1928—within the same time frame that Curtis and Reed were operating. This is precisely the kind of depiction that those photographers sought to avoid, believing it to represent the impact of assimilation, an individual “spoiled” by the accumulated layers of “false” culture that have obscured the “authentic” Indian underneath. In a sense, we can say that a photographer sees for a living; they are paid by, and for, their vision. Poolaw’s work is a reminder of some of the many things that photographers like Curtis and Reed could not see.

# Figures



*Figure 1: "The Vanishing Race" by Edward Curtis*



Figure 2: Portrait of Chief Joseph by Edward Curtis



*Figure 3: The original version of "In a Piegan Lodge," by Edward Curtis, in which a clock is visible between the two figures.*



*Figure 4: The published version, with the clock removed.*



Figure 5: "The Council" by Roland Reed



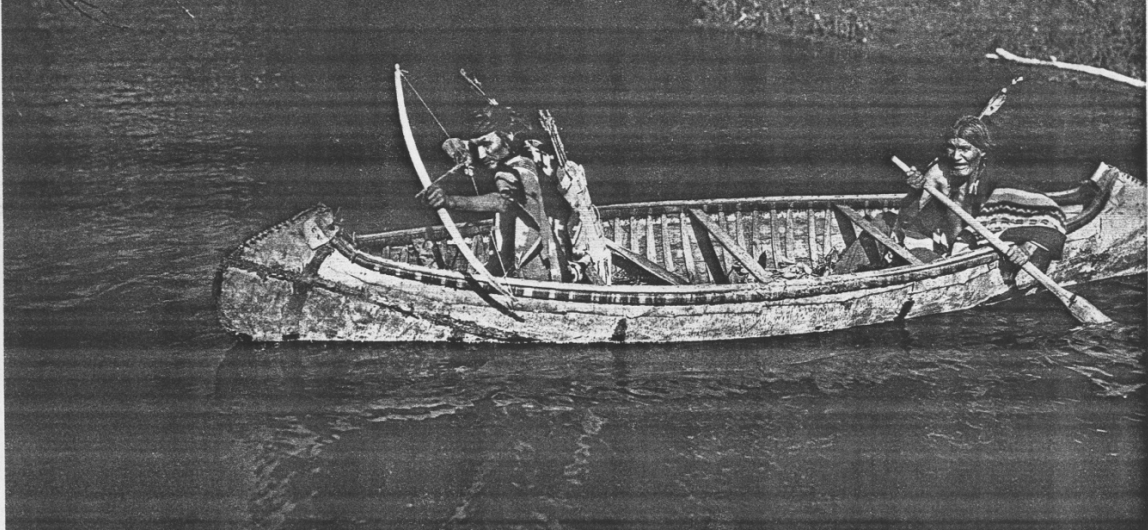


Figure 6: "The Hunters" by Roland Reed



Figure 7: "The Wooing," by Roland Reed



*Figure 8: "Watching the Herd" by Roland Reed*



*Figure 9: Trecil Poolaw Unap, by Horace Poolaw*

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