

PHOTO ESSAY 1

“At the Kitchen Table with Edward Curtis”

JEFF THOMAS



Looking at First Nations peoples' pasts through a frame of photographs, paintings, and films produced by white society has always left me feeling uneasy due to the silences coming from these images. I would wonder what the indigenous sitters were thinking about during their experiences of being photographed, painted, or filmed. How did they see their world in comparison to how their world was being represented through the lenses and paintbrushes of white artists and anthropologists?

With so many questions in mind, I could not simply turn my back on photographic archives of indigenous peoples and let them languish in their stasis. And rather than feeling like another armchair tourist, I was determined to challenge the silences in the archive. I was faced with a complex question: How could I go about moving Eurocentric images from a passive position to an active one? I began by looking to my childhood for a point of departure from which to begin my journey.

I have a childhood memory of my mother hearing me crying and coming into the TV room where I was watching a Hollywood Western movie. She asked what was wrong, and I pointed at the TV and said that the Indians scared me. To settle me down, she said I that was an Indian but that I needn't be afraid, that I wasn't "that kind of Indian." So the question I had to live with was, What kind of Indian am I? I was reminded of this when the director Ali Kazimi was filming a documentary about my work called *Shooting Indians* (1997). Kazimi organized a trip to Seattle and Vancouver Island to interview people associated with the reedited Curtis film *In The Land of the War Canoes*,

such as Bill Holm and Maggie Frank. What kind of Indian did Curtis see?

I have another early memory of the first time my father took me to a library. It was at the suggestion of my teacher, because I was having a hard time learning to read. While my father filled out the form for my library card, I wandered around the stacks and saw a book lying open on a table. I began paging through it and came across a portrait of a very distinguished-looking Indian man wearing buckskin clothing and feathers. When my father came over to get me, I looked up at him and saw a similarity between their faces.

These connections would eventually form a foundation for my work in the visual arts, influencing my photographic practice, my research, and my role as an independent curator. Like that young boy in the library, I continue to be fascinated by the past and with the challenge of building a new paradigm that unites the past and the present. The gateway to that past for me would be found in the work of photographer Edward S. Curtis and his monumental social and cultural study of indigenous people, *The North American Indian (NAI)*.

This twenty-volume series, which records tribal life among indigenous communities throughout the North American west, came about because of Curtis's interest in the plight of Native North American peoples at the dawn of the twentieth century. Although many aspects of cultural tribal life had already ceased to exist in their original state by the time Curtis arrived, he tapped into the memories of elders for his text and their faces for his camera.

My first encounter with a Curtis photograph was in the 1970s. I was in a gift shop and came across a series of large-format cards adorned with faces of Native Americans, faces that had a power and luminance unlike others I had seen before. These were not the ubiquitous stiff and static Indians I was familiar with.

This encounter coincided with my emerging interest in photography and with teaching myself to use a camera. I had been searching for First Nations role models to build my artistic practice upon, but was unable to find any established Native photographers. Was I the only person who felt uncomfortable looking at representations of indigenous peoples from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Where were the discourses challenging the silences put forward by such images? Why was no one else asking these questions? Or, if they were, how come they weren't being heard?

It was this void that influenced my decision to make a career out of photography. From my first encounters with Curtis's images I felt that I had found a potential gateway to the past, to a way to challenge the traditional format for imaging Indians. I was drawn to Curtis's unique framing—to the

close physical proximity Curtis had with his sitters. From my perspective, the sitters exerted far more control over the image-making process than they had been given credit for.

This question of indigenous agency emerged from personal experiences with family elders living on the Six Nations reserve in southern Ontario. While staying at Six Nations as a child, I would sit in the kitchen and listen to my elders tell stories about life on the reserve. Topics ranged from politics to everyday gossip to the price of pigs. The best stories took place when visitors stopped by the farm or while driving back and forth between Buffalo and the reserve.

Given my fascination with conversations and storytelling, it is not surprising that I was uncomfortable with the silences I perceived in most photographs of First Nations peoples. But the Curtis photographs hint at conversation. They made me long to hear their subjects' voices. They made me lonely for my elders and reminded me of the powerful influence they had had on me.

One day, one of my elders, Emily General, spoke about an anthropologist from Ottawa who had come to the reserve to see her father when she was a child. She wondered what had happened to the information that the anthropologist collected. As an impressionable young boy, I made a vow that one day I would find out and bring that information back to her. I did, in fact, find that information, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and subsequently curated an exhibition—*Emergence from the Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspectives*—based partly on the photographs made by the anthropologist Sir Francis Knowles at Six Nations in 1912. One of the photographs was of Jacob General, Emily's father. Unfortunately, Emily had passed away by this time.

Yet Emily's story of the Ottawa anthropologist influenced the conversation I would eventually pursue with Curtis. I could imagine Curtis stopping by the family homestead on the reserve in 1912 and sitting at the kitchen table and describing his reason for being there. I could imagine Curtis talking about what he had witnessed and experienced—it must have been much more than what the *NAI* gives evidence of. I could imagine how it would have changed the look of his work had he included evidence, for example, of the cross-cultural effects he saw.

The quest for me then, in this photo essay, is to search for these “out-takes” and to use my own work to suggest what they may have looked like. With this in mind, I began my journey into the world of photography with the belief that what I saw in books and magazines was only a small part of

the archive. These were photographs that nonindigenous people thought were worth taking. These were photographs that nonindigenous people thought were worth publishing. Perhaps an indigenous person like me would choose to highlight different aspects of the photographic archive. When, in the *NAI*, Curtis says that he doesn't know what was on the "other side" of assimilation (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 3: xii–xiii), he left the gateway open to someone like me to pick up where he left off. Perhaps I could have a conversation with Curtis around the metaphorical kitchen table.¹

Indian Time



Fig. E.1.1. Jeff Thomas, *Indian Time*, 2005.

Left: Edward S. Curtis, *In a Piegan Lodge [Little Plume and His Son Yellow Kidney]*, March 11, 1910. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-61749. Right: Jeff Thomas, *Red Indian*, Queen Street, Toronto, Ontario, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

Edward Curtis attributes the genesis of his project to a visit he made in 1898—at the invitation of naturalist George Bird Grinnell—to a Piegan summer ceremonial gathering in northern Montana. Curtis was very impressed by the ceremonies that he witnessed, and, due to his belief that such events would inevitably die out because of white society’s pressure on indigenous people to assimilate, he decided to gather existing information from tribal elders.

Curtis’s experience at the Piegan gathering is one of the possible catalysts for the development of his photographic stagings and strategies that, in many cases, omitted any evidence of contact with white society. Throughout the thirty years that Curtis devoted to the production of the *NAI*, he remarked that he saw himself as a historian first and as a photographer second. This is a significant point, because the restaging and photographing of scenes of tribal life were done mainly to illustrate his text. It is my view that the photographs cannot be separated from the text—they must be seen in the context of the overall publication.

Unfortunately, however, the Curtis images are rarely discussed in conjunction with his text. It is this omitted context that I am continuously searching for in images that catch my attention. In photographs of indigenous

peoples, far too often the absence of such context produces an isolated figure in an imaginary world, much like a museum. I continue to search historical photographs for signs that may give clues to when and where they were made, who the people were, and why they were photographed.

In addition to the insight that the text provides on Curtis's work, looking at unedited photographs provides another layer of information that is critical to my engagement with it. The Library of Congress has several versions of a photograph of Yellow Kidney and his family, one of which includes a clock on the ground between the two men (see also Zamir, this volume). He did not include the clock in the version in the *NAI* in order to remove any signs of modernity. But, from my perspective, the inclusion of the clock is a poignant reminder of how quickly the Piegan world was changing. It prompts me to tell a story about Indian Time:

I am sitting in the research room at Library and Archives Canada and look up to see Edward S. Curtis walking through the large glass doors. Here is my opportunity to ask him all of the questions I had been carrying for many years. I introduce myself as a photographer who is also First Nations and explain how provocative I find his work and how the questions it raises help me develop my own practice.

JT: I am curious about *The Piegan Lodge* image I found on the Library of Congress website—the one that includes the clock. I responded to your image with a photograph of an antique store in Toronto that has the words “Red Indian” on its sign. For me, the name on the store front has photographic value in itself, but it is the large clock that made it far more appealing. You edited the clock out of *In a Piegan Lodge* for the final version in the *NAI*. Why did you do that? Was it symbolic of how you felt pressure to stop time before the traditions and knowledge of the people you were photographing were lost?

EC: The great changes in practically every phase of the Indian's life that have taken place, especially within recent years, have been such that had the time for collecting much of the material, both descriptive and illustrative, herein recorded, been delayed, it would have been lost forever. 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, respecting the mode of life of one of the great races of mankind, must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost for all time. (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 1:xvi–xvii)

Culture Revolution



Fig. E.1.2. Jeff Thomas, *Culture Revolution*, 1984,
Queen Street, Toronto, Ontario. Courtesy of the artist.

My conversation with Edward Curtis took an unexpected turn in 1984 while making a portrait of my son, Bear, during a photo walk. I stopped to photograph a brick wall spray painted with the words “Culture Revolution” and decided to pose Bear in front of the wall, thinking it would make a nice memento for him. But when I saw the print in my darkroom, I realized something new had emerged.

I was intrigued by the contrast and juxtaposition of the elements within the frame—over the brim of Bear’s baseball cap is a Curtis portrait of Two Moons, a renowned Cheyenne warrior and leader who was also a veteran of the infamous Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876. The brick wall represented the wall I felt myself running up against as I attempted to address questions

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of representation and of who or what makes an “authentic” Indian. I saw my reflection in my son and recalled the feeling of invisibility I felt growing up as an urban Iroquoian person and the absence of photographs showing First Nations people living in cities.

JT: The first time I saw Two Moons was on my son’s baseball cap, the same portrait I found in portfolio 6, plate no. 213, of the *NAI*. Can you tell me something about Two Moons?

EC: Two Moons was one of the Cheyenne chiefs at the battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, when Custer’s command was annihilated by a force of Sioux and Cheyenne.²

JT: What is your impression of the Cheyenne people?

EC: The Cheyenne character instinctively resents imposition. Even to-day the poor fragment of a tribe existing on the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Montana displays individuality and courage worthy of consideration. The majority of Indian tribes, realizing the utter hopelessness of resistance against the wrong done them by individuals and by the Government, accepted such imposition sullenly, perhaps, but without conflict. Not so with the Cheyenne, who ever retaliated even when he must have known his cause to be hopeless. (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 6:91)

JT: It is said that Two Moons belonged to the Kit Fox warrior society. What role did warrior societies play among the Cheyenne?

EC: In addition to their dances and their raids, the warrior societies performed the duties of the so-called soldiers common to all plains peoples. They were the camp police, and they preserved order on the general buffalo hunt. They enforced the orders of the chiefs. But more than that, their wishes were consulted before any matter of public interest was settled. They were in fact the real ruling power, the only body that could compel obedience. (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 6:108)

JT: You might be interested to know that Two Moons was one of three Indian men that designer James E. Fraser used for the Indian head nickel. The other two were Chief Adoette (Big Tree), who was a Kiowa, and a Cheyenne chief named Chief Iron Tail. The model for the buffalo on the reverse was a bison from the New York City Zoo named Black Diamond.

**Returning the Gaze:
Black Eagle and Kevin Haywahe**



Fig. E.1.3. Jeff Thomas, *Returning the Gaze: Black Eagle and Kevin Haywahe*, 2005.
Left: Edward S. Curtis, *Black Eagle [Wa”būdi-sápa—Assiniboin]*, ca. 1908. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-105371. *Right:* Jeff Thomas, *Kevin Haywahe in Powwow Dance Attire, Assiniboine tribe, Carry-the-Kettle Reserve, Saskatchewan*, 1991. Courtesy of the artist.

JT: I am intrigued by two images of Assiniboine men. My image is of powwow dancer Kevin Haywahe, whom I first met at an urban powwow in Winnipeg in 1990. He is a renowned “traditional” dancer who performed with the American Indian Dance Theater. The traditional dancer category draws its style from the old-time Plains warrior society. Your photograph is of Black Eagle. Your daughter, Florence Graybill Curtis, related a story about your attempt to photograph Black Eagle and his refusal, his determination not to give the white man any more information. Black Eagle eventually relented when you told him, through an

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interpreter, that Black Eagle's descendents would look for him among all of the photographs of prominent men, and would feel a sense of disappointment and loss by not finding him there. People who see your work are often not aware of the extensive information you provide in the *NAI* on the people you photograph. They see a stereotypical generic "Indian" and nothing more. Who was Black Eagle?

EC: [He was] Assiniboin. Born in 1834 on the Missouri below Williston, North Dakota. He was only thirteen years of age when he first went to war, and on this and on the next two occasions he gained no honors. On his fourth war excursion he was more successful, alone capturing six horses of the Yanktonai. While engaged in a fight with the Atsina near Fort Belknap, Montana, he killed a man and a boy. In a battle with the Yanktonai he killed one of the enemy, and in another repeated the former success. Black Eagle led war-parties three times. He had a vision in which it was revealed to him that he would capture horses, and the vision was fulfilled. He had the same experience before he killed the man and the boy. He claims no medicine. Black Eagle married at age of eighteen. (Curtis 1907-30, vol. 3:182-183)

Medicine Crow



Fig. E.1.4. Jeff Thomas, *Medicine Crow*, 2010.

Left: Edward S. Curtis, *Medicine Crow—Apsaroke*, ca. 1908. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-106886. *Center:* Jeff Thomas, red-tailed hawk photographed at the Alberta Birds of Prey Foundation, Coaldale, Alberta, 2006. Courtesy of the artist. *Right:* Edward S. Curtis, *Medicine Crow*, ca. 1908. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-98537.

When I saw Medicine Crow’s portrait for the first time I was curious about the bird he wore on his head and wished I could see it in greater detail. I was reminded of the way I photographed powwow dancers by first making a full-length portrait—both front and back—and then moving closer and making detailed studies of their outfits. I was intrigued by the transformation dancers made from their everyday lives into dancers, and how it literally transformed each into an ancient personality, one handed down from generation to generation. During this process, a thousand years of cultural development and survival appeared before my eyes.

I searched through volume 4 of the *NAI* for additional information on Medicine Crow and found a short description by Curtis of plate 117: “The hawk fastened on the head is illustrative of the manner of wearing the symbol of one’s tutelary spirit.”³

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- JT: Although you did not single Medicine Crow out for an extended description of the hawk he is wearing on his head, could you elaborate on your overall impression of North American Indian people and their sense of connection to their world?
- EC: Rather than being designed for mere embellishment, the photographs are each an illustration of an Indian character or of some vital phase in his existence. Yet the fact that the Indian and his surroundings lend themselves to artistic treatment has not been lost sight of, for in his country one may treat limitless subjects of an aesthetic character without in any way doing injustice to scientific accuracy or neglecting the homelier phases of aboriginal life. Indeed, in a work of this sort, to overlook those marvellous touches that Nature has given to the Indian country, and for the origin of which the native ever has a wonder-tale to relate, would be to neglect a most important chapter in the story of an environment that made the Indian much of what he is. Therefore, being directly from Nature, the accompanying pictures show what actually exists or has recently existed (for many of the subjects have already passed forever), not what the artist in his studio may presume the Indian and his surroundings to be. (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 1:xiii–xiv)
- JT: You highlighted Medicine Crow, of the Mountain Crow band, in the biographical sketch section of volume 4. What were your impressions?
- EC: [Medicine Crow was] born [in] 1848. Mountain Crow; member of the Newly Made Lodge clan and of the Lumpwood organization. At eighteen he fasted four days and three nights, and on the morning of the fourth day a spirit resembling a white man appeared and foretold the passing away of the buffalo and the coming of many white men with cattle, horses, and steamboats. His medicine of hawk was purchased from another man. Counted three first coups, captured five guns and two tethered horses, and led ten successful war-parties. In a fight with the Nez Perces he killed a warrior, counted first coup upon him, and captured his gun—two regular honors at one time, besides the distinction of killing an enemy. This act he twice repeated in battles with the Arapaho and the Sioux. Twice he fought on the side of the white men when “their flag was on the ground”: once against the Nez Perces in Chief Joseph’s retreat, and again under General Crook when the Sioux under Sitting Bull were fleeing across the Canadian border. (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 4:203)

JT: What is the Lumpwood society?

EC: There were four tribal societies—Lumpwood, Fox, Big Dog, and Muddy Hand. While all embodied minor features designed for social entertainment, they were in reality military organizations. Among them existed a spirit of intense rivalry in war, and in the case of the Lumpwood and Fox societies, their members extended this rivalry to affairs of the heart. (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 4:13)

Indian Families



Fig. E.1.5. Jeff Thomas, *Indian Families*, 2010.

Left: Photographer unknown, Jim Abikoki and family in front of the fence surrounding the Anglican Mission on the Blackfoot (Siksika) Reserve, Alberta, ca. 1900. Glenbow Museum Archives, NC-5-8. *Center:* Edward S. Curtis, *Yellow Bone Woman [Arikara tribe]*, ca. 1908, North Dakota. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-101183. *Right:* Jeff Thomas, *Good Eagle Family*, Bismarck, North Dakota, 1996. Courtesy of the artist.

- JT: The undercurrent of pressing issues facing the communities—poverty, government paternalism, restrictions of ceremonies, pressures to assimilate, and a forced program of residential school training for children—are not evident in your images. But once I began to research the *NAI*, I found that you had, in fact, addressed social issues in your texts. For example, you noted the great pressures the Sioux were under. Could you tell me more about that?
- EC: The great change that now comes to the Sioux and to other tribes of the plains with the opening of their reservations to settlement and in the consequent increased contact with alien influences will, within the present generation, further demoralize and degenerate. This, however, is one of the stages through which from the beginning the Indians were

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destined to pass. Those who cannot withstand these trying days of the metamorphosis must succumb, and on the other side of the depressing period will emerge the few sturdy survivors (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 3:xii–xiii).

JT: During the years you worked in Alberta and Saskatchewan, the Indian residential school system was in place and indigenous children were being forced to leave their families and attend schools that were often far from their communities. In Canada, the Indian commissioner Hayter Reed wrote in 1908 that it was imperative for schools to prevent parents from taking away their children “as the whim might seize them” and to stop “Indian visitors hanging about the schools, and so unsettling the minds of the children, as well as too often insisting upon carrying them off for visits to their homes, from which they would only be recovered with much difficulty if at all.”⁴ Did you encounter anything like that while working in the United States?

EC: [Hopi Reservation, Arizona, 1906.] The determination of government officials to enforce education crystallized sentiment, and the party that favored active resistance to restraint packed up their goods and chattels, marched forth from the pueblo, and built the new village of Hotala about four miles distant. Here they live with only the unavoidable minimum of contact with the white race, whom they unostentatiously but cordially hate.... Their chief, recently released after a prison term of several years, during which no doubt he had abundant time to ponder on the futility of a Hopi insisting that his children be educated in his own ancient fashion when some individual two thousand miles away ordered him to cut their hair and deliver them at the schoolhouse.... Henceforth they will formally obey orders, because they know of the force that lurks behind them, but many years will pass before they enter into the spirit of American education for their children. (Curtis 1907–30, vol. 12:15)

The End Is Near



Fig. E.1.6. Jeff Thomas, *The End Is Near*, 2010.

Left: Edward S. Curtis, *Ndee Sangochoh, Apache*, ca. 1906. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-106797. Center: Jeff Thomas, *Construction Site*, Ottawa, Ontario, 2007. Courtesy of the artist. Right: Edward S. Curtis, *N'ó va—Walpi [Pursuing a Butterfly, Badger Clan, Hopi, Walpi-Pueblo]*, 1906. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-124180.

Curtis opens the *NAI* with the image *The Vanishing Race*, which shows a group of Indian people riding single file toward a murky horizon (see fig. E.2.5). The image conveys the sentiment of the time—“the Indian race was dying out.” This sentiment was based on the fact that at the dawn of the twentieth century the death rate in Native American communities exceeded the birth rate, and that indigenous peoples were being absorbed into mainstream society through forced assimilation programs such as the residential school system. But by the twenty-first century, a new sense of self and perseverance had surfaced in the indigenous world, and self-determination was increasingly political and being culturally asserted, visualized, and performed.

While admittedly idealized and incomplete, Curtis’s photographs can be used, on our own terms, in our efforts to heal. They are a gateway for indigenous people to revisit their own histories and to remember and recall stories that their elders may have passed on to them. I imagine that the metamorphosis Curtis alluded to in the first photograph of the series—*The Vanishing*

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Race—was not a statement of fact; it was a question. The question mark had just been left off. Would we be completely absorbed into mainstream society, without a trace of our Indianness left? Or would we do as all previous generations had done—adapt to the new challenges but remain Indian?

- 1 Throughout this essay, the words attributed to Curtis are direct quotations from *The North American Indian*. All page numbers are taken from the online edition of the *NAI* derived from a copy held by the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library (<http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/>).
- 2 This description is taken from the caption to plate 213 featured in portfolio 6 of Curtis (1907–30, vol. 6).
- 3 This description is taken from the caption to plate 117 featured in portfolio 4 of Curtis (1907–30, vol. 4).
- 4 Dominion of Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 1891* (Ottawa: MacLean Roger & Co., 1891), 201.