

# **Native footprints: Photographs and stories written on the land**

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## **Abstract**

This essay examines the work of Native photographers and artists and the ways their work addresses the decolonizing practice of the study of visual images, as well as stimulating anomalous and unexpected interpretations. It situates representations from a starting point of power, oppression and hegemony as central components of visual imagery, and also as an opportunity to promote dialogue and encourage new interpretations and narratives. This manner of investigation may function as a way to stimulate what wa Thiong'o has conceptualized as "decolonizing the mind" as it applies to images, and to re-imagine Native life as integral and continuous on this land. The goal is to present a variety of "readings" of photographs that highlight conceptions, interpretations and understandings and grapples with the enduring presence or "footprints" of Native and First Nations Peoples upon the land. Capturing and explicating footprints through images and stories may work to dispel and decolonize notions of the "vanishing Indian". These social and contextual dimensions consider perspectives that illuminate the land we live on and the footprints we leave, not ones that historicize peoples and events as ongoing stereotypic constructions, but rather as part of an active interpreted present. Examining the work of First Nation/Native visual artists may help to unpack ideas of the hegemonic power of visual imagery that challenges representations through an array of ironic, sardonic and poignant displays.

**Keywords:** *Native/Indigenous peoples; visual studies; photography; interpretation and representation*

## Introduction<sup>1 2</sup>

This essay considers visual images within a contextual narrative frame that situates interpretations from a starting point of power, oppression and hegemony. It endeavors to take action regarding images and photographs that contribute to what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o similarly has conceptualized as the politics of language and "decolonizing the mind" (1986). And it provides the opportunity to highlight a variety of conceptions, understandings and interpretations in the use of visual images to counter misrepresentations and stereotypic representations of Native/Indigenous Peoples (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007). It also suggests "a reading practice for thinking about the space between resistance and compliance" in which Native photographers can "revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic conventions" (Raheja, 2010, p. 193). The paper's specific purposes are: first, to address the work of decolonizing representations and make visible Native/Indigenous interpretations of the visual world; and second to investigate a variety of "readings" of photographs that highlight and grapple with multiple perceptions and cultural attitudes.

Visual images are presented, viewed, created and used as exemplars of cultural beliefs and attitudes, and images have the ability to evoke emotions and memories. From this basis, colonizing (and more recently public relations firms and the general public) expect images to perpetuate and stimulate hegemonic interpretations. Through investigation, we may not only highlight colonial interpretations, but also work at the practice of "decolonizing the mind." In this way, we may address what wa Thiong'o (1986) characterizes as the "cultural bomb" that attempts to annihilate a people's belief in themselves and their cultures. Rather, we may address the evidence of the footprints we leave, as Victor Masayesva, Jr. (2006) has conceptualized: "On this land, I, too, leave my footprints with the photographic intuitions and experiences of places I have been" (p. 3). Capturing and explicating these footprints through images and stories may work to dispel notions of the "vanishing Indian" and facilitate the re-imagining of Native life and stories as integral and continuous on this land. These social and contextual dimensions consider perspectives that illuminate the land we live on and the footprints we leave, not ones that historicize peoples and events as ongoing stereotypic constructions, but rather as part of an active interpreted present.

To address the conditions that surround photographs and images, I begin with an examination of the work of Edward S. Curtis since his work is held up as the most valued

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<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented April 8, 2011 at the American Educational Research Association session "Witnessing Indigenous Stories in Film/Painting/Photography/Theater", Sponsored by Division B, Section 1: Curriculum Studies, Critical Perspectives and Communities in Actions, and the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas Special Interest Group.

exemplar, yet one that situates representations of Native Peoples unmistakably in the past. Then, I expand the discussion to an examination of the work of contemporary Native and First Nations photographers and artists including Victor Masayesva, Jr., Jeff Thomas, and Samuella Samaniego<sup>3</sup>. These efforts by Native visual artists help to unpack ideas of power in the form of visual imagery that challenges and makes explicit representations through an array of ironic, sardonic and poignant displays. More specifically, these efforts can be interpreted as “resistance” carried out through the vision of photographic artists as a means of addressing imperialist incursion and struggle.

Finally, I consider my own photographic work in light of both Lucy Lippard’s (1992) notion of crossing the “cultural abyss” and Masayesva’s (2006) claim of “footprints” upon the land. As a child growing up in Fairfax and New Ulm, Minnesota, along the “bottom-road” in the 1950s, I lived this “cultural abyss.” I heard one-sided versions of the history of the “Sioux Uprising” now referred to as the “Dakota Conflict.” I heard of the Dakota’s 1862 march to Mankato and imprisonment in Fort Snelling; I heard of the expulsion of the people. And I wanted to know more of the story, but this was not something to talk about except in short phrases. “Then it happened--the destruction--the killing--they got what was coming--they’re gone.” I heard about the many poor immigrants who were murdered by the “savage Indians.” I could not understand the stories, but at nine years of age I would ride my bike to the library to look at the Dakota artifacts and history that were on display in the basement. I wondered about the people who were pictured and talked about, and I wondered about the hands that held the objects displayed. Who did they belong to and what were they like? How did they come to be in the library? What were the stories that went with these objects from history? For many years, no one in my family talked about our Dakota heritage; We were German. Yet I was always drawn back in one way or another to investigate this history in cemeteries, in libraries, in photographs and, much later, in truthfully talking to family members. This investigation is built on this long history of trying to find the footprints of my own family and heritage through photographic images. As Ted Jojola (2013) suggests, the metaphor of footprints asks a basic question, “How is contemporary interpretation wrought upon images of the past?” This then, is my attempt to find my own footing in the struggle of decolonization, representation and transformation.

## **Visual studies and photographic practices**

Ideas, philosophies and epistemologies surround, inform and construct photographic inquiry and practice. Through historical production, contest, creation and reclamation, images hold a powerful sway over ways of looking as insider and as outsider. The study of visual images can

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<sup>3</sup> These three visual artists and photographers are meant to provide only an introduction to the range and wealth of exemplary Native/Indigenous artists working in the field. I might also have included the work of individuals such as Lee Marmon (Laguna Pueblo), Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie (Diné/Seminole/Muskogee), Richard Ray Whitman (Yuchi/Muskogee/Creek), Pamela Shields (Blackfoot/Blood Band), Peña Bonita (Apache/Seminole) and many others.

contribute to an understanding of contemporary attitudes and perceptions of reality mediated through material culture, understood as decolonizing practice. Images are a visual text and physical record that represents and reflects the integration of traditions and symbols (Stanczak, 2007). And methods of visual study may assist with interpretations that challenge notions of self-representation, imagination and perception. As a medium, photography affords objectivity, subjectivity and staging; the photographer frames the image, and the image remains a centerpiece of analysis. Thus, to examine images and photographs can be thought of as a cultural dance with many different and intersecting steps to challenge, constrict, illuminate and propel new interpretations. This section provides an investigation of these issues with regards to the fields of visual studies, photographic practice, and methodology.

### *Visual studies and inquiry*

Visual images are part of a cultural system of production, representation and expectation that demands examination of not only the image itself, but also of its role in narrative, interpretation and display. An underlying assumption of the study of visual culture is that it “concentrates on the cultural work that visual images do in constructing and maintaining (as well as challenging, destroying, and replacing) a sense of order in a particular place and time” (Morgan, 2005, p. 29). By illuminating some of the cultural consequences of historical and current photographs and images, we may address the ways in which visual images influence, shape, represent and marginalize the history and cultures of Native Peoples both in the past and present.

As a medium that provides a concrete record, visual images have been used to reflect and perpetuate dominant ideologies, and they provide a structure in which viewers compose and interpret knowledge about their social world. Images have the power to convey, construct and manipulate not only a sense of time but also feelings, sentiments and attitudes, and to frame responses in a somewhat static form with some amount of permanence. In fact, through the static medium of visual images and photography, cultural attitudes and perceptions are formed, supported and fixed. As Susan Sontag (1977) indicates, “in the real world something *is* happening and no one knows what is *going* to happen. In the image-world, it happened and it *will* forever in that way” (p. 168). There is no changing the image as object, and although photographs can aid understanding, they do not explain. They serve to acknowledge and reinforce interpretations already established. Representations of Native Peoples continue to bear witness to the “juncture of a historiographic examination of the discourses which portrayed First Nations peoples as a ‘vanishing race’ and the visual forms of salvage ethnography (epitomized by Edward S. Curtis) where being photographed often meant bearing witness to one’s own demise” (Francis, 2002, p. 6). Not only does the photograph “kill you off” and supposedly salvage what remains of peoples and cultures, but it also maintains the image in a static form in which unlike the real world you forever remain “ghostly” even if you live.

Since the beginnings of lithography and photography, images of Native Peoples have tried to capture portraits of a “vanishing people,” not interpretations of the lived world of



experience and affect. Images have been used in the colonizing craft of documentation and memorializing those peoples who are destined to vanish in the wake of a more powerful “other.” In fact as Gerald Vizenor (2000) suggests in his online essay, *Edward Curtis: Pictorialist and Ethnographic Adventurist*, “the absence of natives was represented by images of traditions, simulations of the other in the past; the presence of natives was tragic, the notions of savagism and the emotive images of a vanishing race.” Further, in an investigation of Ferdinand Vandiveer Hayden’s photographic report published in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* in 1863, Martha Sandweiss (2002) observes that images “functioned as an apologia for federal Indian policy, as it argued for the inevitability of the disappearance of native cultures” (p. 136). The fixed form and static realism of images contributes to notions of the “other” that are difficult to refute or challenge once established as a visual record (Martin, 2010), particularly when a more powerful “other” has motives for fortifying and maintaining images in the historical past.

Over the decades, photographic and visual images supported erroneous perceptions of Indians, as well as created alternative interpretations that often have little to do with the lived reality of Native Peoples. “White people made drawings, paintings, and eventually photographs of the indigenous peoples referred to today as Native Americans, for oft-cited purposes of commemoration, veneration, and glimpsing supposedly mystic realms” (Singer, 2006, p. ix). Often, the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of the “other” so clouded the images that what was represented was unrecognizable from what was. However, these same representations were used to make interpretations that “accepted the photographic images as proof that Indians were uncouth, unchangeable, and backward people” (Riding In, 2004, p. 52). Yet, ironically, while trying to document those considered to be vanishing, non-Native photographers were simultaneously preserving that which could not be destroyed. In fact, within the historical images there resides the opportunity to examine the footprints of Native Peoples upon the land, and simultaneously to re-inhabit and re-claim these Native places in the active interpreted present. More specifically, they may be used to bring to light issues of settler colonialism and the definitional and emotive power of visual images.

Maybe most obvious in the photographic archives is evidence of a deeper more pervasive desire by non-Native peoples. This is “the desire to *be* ‘the other,’ a kind of cultural cannibalism that is still being played out in popular culture [and] ... that we are rediscovering today began in 1492” (Lippard, 1992, p. 15). There is evidence of a desire to preserve in the coffee table books of Indian chiefs that become “conversation pieces;” in the Edward S. Curtis photographs that work to capture those who are vanishing albeit by extermination; and in the desire to own, represent, display or possess that which is Native. Philip Deloria (1998) has aptly explored these ideas in his work *Playing Indian*, concluding that the colonizers need to become that which they actively destroy. Thus, capture, consume, and even “become” the Indigenous to alleviate guilt; ultimately it is an attempt to construct an “authentic” past and mediate a search for individual meaning.

*Photographic practice*

Photographs are a longing. Once taken, they capture a moment, but it is always unclear what of the moment we as viewers see. No one is left to ask, and old photographs may cause us to reflect – to see if we can hear the voices in the seconds before and after the snap of the shutter. We may search the image for the real – the reality – for evidence of what we imagine. We might search for some source of authentication of the event or even of ourselves. At once each photograph is an object, but also a moment in time retained forever as it were in an object. It is within the photograph that we hope to find answers to our queries. As Roland Barthes (1981) contends, we believe photographs to possess “an evidential force, and its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation” (p. 89). Sometimes we struggle to believe that such a time existed, and there is an “unprecedented conjunction between what is here now (the image) and what was there then (the referent, or object, thing, or place) ... This conjunction relies on a myth of photographic truth” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 17). These ideas suggest a process and power of authentication inherent in the viewing of photographs and images that can be considered and overlaid by conjecture, imagination and myth, as well as history, attitudes and beliefs.

For viewers, some photographs or images inspire an emotive response, satisfy a voyeuristic or egocentric need, or authenticate a place in history. However, not all photographs engender these responses, and viewer responses cannot be generalized to particular types of photographs. Yet, Barthes (1981) declares, “suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it. ... The photograph itself is in no way animated (I do not believe in ‘lifelike’ photographs), but it animates me” (p. 20). Viewers may experience a heightened curiosity or interest, or engage in something more intangible, a quality that causes them to imagine. Sometimes viewers seek that which represents and describes (or explains) experiences or possibly even our very lives. Louis Owens, in his self-reflective piece, *I Hear the Train* (2001) grapples with his mixed blood identity by examining his family’s old photographs. In reference to an image of his grandmother’s mother, he searches for details in the photograph that might tell him about her – a hand on a shoulder – an expression – or clothing that might help him to verify his Indian history and identity. Yet he notes, “This family from whom I am descended wears no recognizably Indian cultural artifacts; nor are they surrounded by any such signifiers” (Owens, 2001, p. 91). The experience of hybridity catches Owens in the reality of unknowing, and connections to his grandmother’s mother remain elusive. He postulates that the connections are “too fragmentary for weaving, too thin to cohere. In the end is only the maze and monster hybrid potential at its center. I remain in the labyrinth, puzzled, hearing the approach of my own footsteps” (Owens, 2001, p. 97). His commentary suggests the illusive and often opaque qualities of images even as they challenge, constrain and instill a longing for more. Yet significantly, only the sound of his footsteps echo is his mind, not that of the people whose images he searches. Thus, conjecture and imagination are poignantly engaged in the search for identity, history and belonging.

For photographers, often the reasons for a choice of subject and object are obscured in the image or an unconscious or instinctual response to something in the visual world. The idea that we “take” photos, but that once produced they may stimulate a reinterpretation of the context, setting or action changes the meaning. We may see the image in one way based on past encounters, but a reinterpretation causes us to stop, re-align our thinking on the topic, or make adjustments subsequent to the encounter. This occurs for viewers, but also for photographers not only when studying the photographic images that are created, but also within the context of taking the photograph. Thus, there is an action focused on “looking” either in the taking or the viewing of photographs. The action of looking is a reciprocal process between photographer and subject, but also as a collaboration among viewers and photographers; this can contribute to a lived ideology and a sense of timelessness in which we gain knowledge about some thing whether accurate or not. “Between the viewer and the recorded object, the viewer encounters, and/or projects, a screen made up of dominant mythologies and preconceptions that shapes the representation” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 7). The image shapes and re-shapes interpretations in ways that suggest some amount of control over images, even though often illusory, and “the control of photography and other forms of documentation in Native communities is part of a new cultural polemic involving tribal sensitivities and commerce” (Singer, 2006, p. x). Changing our encounter is dependent, to some extent, on the photographer or artist “confronting the ratio of social construction in any process of looking” (Lippard, 1992, p. 17), hence viewers become complicit collaborators in the act of “looking”.

First Nations artists and photographers aim to contest the caricatured legacy of stereotypical representations of Native Peoples within their visual work. This fabricated or created “reality as such is redefined—as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance” (Sontag, 1970, p. 156). Yet, representations are difficult to extricate from “those ‘Indians’ embedded in the white North American consciousness through western movies and consumer and sports icons” (Francis, 2002, p. 5). Viewers must be willing to engage in the discussion more ostensibly than simply as observers, and they must understand that they are animated by images in the very real present as Louis Owens was in searching for recognition and confirmation in his family photographs. This discussion of the roles of viewers and of photographers makes explicit the difficulty in voicing alternative perspectives, attitudes and cultural beliefs.

### *Methods and photographic images*

Set within an ethnographic research context identified by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999/2012) in *Decolonizing Methodologies* as an approach situated in the decolonization politics of the Indigenous Peoples Movement, this work is focused on self-determination. This approach is situated not so much with the actual technique of selecting a method but much more with the context of which “research problems are conceptualized and designed, and with the implications of research for its participants and their communities” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. ix). In this essay,

the voices of Native photographers and scholars assist in the interpretations as a means to decolonizing and de-emphasizing the voices of non-Native people, in other words, allowing the subject to determine the meaning. With self-determination, there is agency in how we choose to interact (or not) and how we choose to be animated (or not) by photographs and their embedded images.<sup>4</sup>

As well, this investigation addresses the ways that disenfranchised groups in “capitalist societies participate in shaping media and consumption-based representations of themselves in the dominant culture” (Raheja, 2010, p. 6). The intention is to present a “perspectival accounting” of what exists both photographically in image and sociologically in attitude. In this ethnographic process, the goal is to try to probe “appropriate cultural domains [and] to tease out subtle patterns and meanings” in order to gain insight and make interpretations (Kawagley, 1995, p. 145), and then, to raise philosophical questions regarding the field of visual imagery and photography more explicitly. The intention in this process is to expand our awareness of the power of imagery, and the point of investigation is to examine images for their ability to provoke questions in the study of social and relational issues (Martin, 2010). Specifically, “the visual--particularly film, video, and new media--is a germinal and exciting site for exploring how sovereignty can be a creative act of self-representation that has the potential to undermine stereotypes of Indigenous peoples” (Raheja, 2010, p. 194). This includes posing questions such as: How and what do images convey about Native-white history? How are decisions about representation, outcomes, or the use of images made? And in what ways does the work of contemporary Native photographic artists engage viewers with “those struggles that take place on the terrain of culture” (Raheja, 2010, p. 229)? Images are set within “*systems of representation* that produce meaning through the display of objects” (Hall, 1997, p. 153).<sup>5</sup> Native/Indigenous Peoples have often been the exoticized subject of displays that generated and supported interpretations located in the past and worked to maintain settler colonialism.

Displays or exhibits in settings of prominence separate images or symbols from specific traditions, features of the land, and knowledge given to individuals to which they are most effectively tied. In fact, displays can fix them permanently in a particular time and location that may transform them into something not of the purpose they were intended, but for a new purpose. Situating the study and investigation of images within socio-cultural and individual perspectives, and refusing to see them as fixed, aesthetically permanent entities is an intricate undertaking (Stanczak, 2007). Viewers today often remain steeped in ideas of the savage western frontier, and similar to historic photographers who “stole shots of Ghost Dancers” or fabricated images (Taylor, 2010, p. 103). Viewers are generally unaware that their own cultural worldview is not the only way from which to view the world.

Yet, with these ideas in mind, Simon Ortiz (2004) contends that historic photographs of Native Peoples are valuable today since they hold memories and stories of the past, but the exact time period is insignificant to the discussion. Examining the work of Frank Rinehart and Adolph

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<sup>4</sup> This interpretation is with special appreciation to one of the essay reviewers for this insight.

Muhr from the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Ortiz says looking at these past moments in historic photographs brings the people, their actions, and the places to life. “You’re not really looking at the past or appreciating or seeing a moment in past history, but you are in a direct and immediate sense experiencing that past moment as the present” (Ortiz, 2004, p. 3). The people photographed come alive through the stories, dances and songs they invoke stimulating memories of the past – of communities – and of place. And the historical work by non-Native photographers has shaped opportunities for Native photographers to reframe and revisit these older images and engage them in dialogue. With these ideas, we look specifically at the work of Edward Curtis to explore the past, and then that of Native photographers to explore the present and the interpretations they stimulate.

## Photographers and their images

The impact of work by non-Native photographers, such as Edward S. Curtis, has contributed to misinterpretations and misrepresentations of Native Peoples. Curtis believed in notions of vanishing not just as a philosophical idea but also as the inevitable occurrence of a people less endowed than Euroamericans intellectually, culturally and economically. As Thomas King (2003) ruefully observes,

This was a common concern among many intellectuals and artists and social scientists at the turn of the nineteenth century, who believed that, while Europeans in the New World were poised on the brink of a new adventure, the Indian was poised on the brink of extinction. (pp. 32-33)

The relationship with the camera framed impressions and understandings to such a degree that it is almost impossible not to examine the work of non-Native portrait artists and photographers. As Sandweiss (2002) indicates, “Curtis and his contemporaries would present Indian culture as timeless, unchangeable, and therefore doomed, but these early daguerrotypes record a more complicated cultural present” (p. 215). This has led Native/Indigenous photographers to grapple with representations and interpretations in more complex and dynamic ways that address issues of historic representations, cultural loss, and active collaboration.

### *Edward S. Curtis*

The most prominent and well-known portrait photographer of Native Peoples, Edward S. Curtis, made numerous trips to Native Nations to capture what he perceived was vanishing. Photographing and writing about Native Peoples ostensibly between 1897 and 1928 and taking over 40,000 photographs, Curtis completed his twenty-volume set *The North American Indian* in 1928. Influenced by the American photographer Alfred Stieglitz and the “pictorialist style” of the early twentieth century, Curtis sought to capture through portraiture the dramatic and spiritual

nature of Native Peoples, and to capture images that would stand on their own as works of art, portraits with artistic merit as well as documentation. Ironically, “Curtis is lauded as a pictorialist, but not favorably reviewed as an ethnographic photographer. Yet, his pictures are rarely mentioned in historical references to the pictorialists” (Vizenor, 2000). In his work, he blurred edges, framed striking silhouetted figures amid dramatic scenery, and set cultural objects and artifacts to reflect peoples’ material culture.

Curtis’s images seized the Euroamerican imagination, only to fall into disfavor and be rediscovered in the later part of the twentieth century. Initial rediscovery and revival of interest in his work coincides with social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and those engaged in social movements who longed for a utopian life. In other words, the revival of interest in his work coincided with the nostalgic reinvigoration of the back-to-nature, hippy, new age social worlds. Yet, then as now, “If you don’t look like that savage Indian in the window, mister, you might as well consider yourself an extinct Cree, Sioux, Crow, Assiniboine, or Gros Ventre” (Young Man, 2002, p. 140). Curtis’ photographs “caught” the real Indian, and those who did not look the part were not included or the image was altered to suit public perceptions.

Yet in his role as photographer, Curtis also was influenced by his experiences. At a Piegan Sundance he attended in 1900, he was moved to a profound religious awareness. Images from this period are significantly different from his portraiture and pictorialist efforts. They capture more of the entire scene, are more available for interpretation regarding the action that is taking place, and most importantly, seldom were staged to reflect his artistic interpretations. George Horse Capture (A’aninin Gros Ventre) wryly comments that Curtis’ photographs are “romantic for the most part, but I think we were more than ‘happy snaps’ ... but if he didn’t come along and record this, the loss would be tremendous. Incalculable loss. I look at my grandfather--powerful people and he recorded that” (in Makepeace, 2000). This is the irony of the photographs since they combine memory and loss. If not for colonialism, the theft of land, extermination of culture and language, and the genocide of a people, the need or use for Curtis’ photographs may not have the same importance. Yet without them, the loss would be “incalculable” as Horse Capture observes.

George Burdeau (Piegan) also comments on his experience when viewing Curtis’ images of Piegan peoples, particularly “Three Chiefs”, in which the composition of the photograph captures the immense character of the Plains landscape.

I still hadn’t come home yet, so for me it was like coming home. I looked at this landscape and it felt so familiar even though I’d never seen it except maybe as a young child. It allowed me to go on my journey and finally go home, and everybody said, “I’m glad you finally made it.” I think Curtis understood something of the power of that cultural spirit. (in Makepeace, 2000)

The interpretations and experiences of the photographs by Horse Capture and Burdeau are not reflective of the images as objects or representations, but rather indicate more ambiguous meanings rooted in interpretation. These responses are less tangible and more obscure than the

practice of looking; they generate the stimulation of a heart's desire and the need to return to the land. The grounding of experience and practice is in specific "knowledge in the land" (Kenny, 1998, p. 80). Reinvigorating the peoples' footprints in the present is the primary purpose, thus crossing a cultural abyss that linear conceptions of time cannot inhibit.

*Victor Masayesva Jr.*

Known for his intense visual imagery, insightful filmmaking and striking photography, Masayesva, Jr., (Hopi) has said that he never wanted to be a portrait photographer along the lines of Edward Curtis. Yet, he found the value of portraiture while photographing the "Butterfly Dancer." He remarks,

It is not the same stereotypic image captured by Curtis; it is that which the "the Indian images himself, dressed in his costume, far beyond the moment, given momentum by the pollen release into a future where he or she is alive on his or her own terms". (Masayesva, 2006, p. 6)

As a Hopi photographer, he suggests a self-reflexive view of images that characterizes his photographic work and one that Leslie Marmon Silko (1992) interprets as the "spiritual integrity of the person behind the camera matters most" (p. 10). These ideas reflect interpretations of images, whether portrait or scenery, that seize on alternative notions of time and personal response. Some of his photographs present a story in which "meanings are evident after exposure onto transparent emulsion" (Masayesva, Jr., 2006, p. 65). This may be evident in images that reflect a living presence, being alive on our own terms, and being intimately associated and contextualized within the natural world.

*Jeff Thomas*

In the art and photography of Jeff Thomas, specifically the exhibit, "A Study of Indian-ness" and the film *Shooting Indians*, similar moments and re-interpretations of not only Edward Curtis' work, but also non-Indian attitudes and perspectives are presented. Thomas, a self-described "urban-Iroquois of the Six Nations Reserve in Brantford, Ontario" (Thomas, 1992) confronts viewers with ironic twists and contradictions, sometimes with startling clarity. He indicates that his work entitled "Study of Indian-ness" seeks to create an image of the urban-Iroquois experience, and to re-contextualize historical images of First Nations people (Hill, 2004). Ultimately, he endeavors to dismantle long entrenched stereotypes and inappropriate caricatures by confronting representations.

The trick is turning an absence into a presence, to find himself in his history of the world. He can do this because he has found places to engage with history on his own terms. They seem to be unlikely places, the most impenetrable; yet he



finds his way in because he understands image and story and he uses them as Aboriginal forms of knowledge, or more precisely, as processes of knowledge making. (in Hill, 2004, p. 18)

Similar to Lippard's (1992) analogy, "Stereotypes boomerang. As the old children's ditty has it: 'I'm rubber and you're glue; everything you say bounces off me and sticks to you'" (p. 17), Thomas challenges and revises reverberations and stereotypes in ways that are difficult for viewers to ignore and leave without questioning. For some, this is the considerable action of decolonization that investigates, studies, explores and produces work useful to our communities.

In Thomas' work, viewers are able to question, be surprised, and confronted by their own expectations. Intentionally, as Philip Deloria (2004) says, "when you encounter the word *expectation*... I want you to read it as shorthand for the dense economies of meaning, representation, and act" (p. 11). In the series of "monumental" images,<sup>6</sup> Thomas presents plaster and bronze-cast sculptures of Indians that dominate historical and cultural landscapes juxtaposed with living First Nations and Aboriginal peoples. All viewers may find they struggle with their own expectations built on the established history. The photographs work to reclaim images of families and communities, and to transform the past, challenge stereotypes, and creates a new visual history (National Gallery of Canada, 2008).<sup>7</sup> Thus, expectations are exposed, questioned and may lead to new reflections and interpretations.

In the photograph, "Bear at Champlain Monument, Ottawa, Ontario" (1996), Thomas juxtaposes the sculpture of a First Nations man on bended knee in front of a monument to Champlain.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Thomas' series of photographs of his son at the Champlain monument and a "Study in Indian-ness," <http://travelpod.wordpress.com/2010/03/02/indians-ad-infinitum-the-conceptual-legacy-of-fritz-scholder/>.

<sup>7</sup> See The National Gallery of Canada. (2008). "Steeling the gaze: portraits of Aboriginal artists," [http://www.gallery.ca/english/540\\_2530.htm](http://www.gallery.ca/english/540_2530.htm). Viewed 20 February 2011.



**Figure 1:** Jeff Thomas. “Bear at Champlain Monument, Ottawa, Ontario,” 51.2 x 41.1 cm, gelatin silver print (1996), on view National Gallery of Canada. Used with permission of the artist, August 2013.

The sculpture supports historical characterizations and interpretations of Native Peoples and Euro domination. However, with the addition of Thomas’ son Bear, wearing an F.B.I. (Full Blood Indian) tee shirt and standing in front of the monument, viewers are pushed to re-interpret this historical moment and explore new meanings. Thomas in effect re-claims footprints upon the

land and brings forward the recognition that First Nations peoples are still here in the present. In some ways, the challenge for current artists is to help viewers understand that Curtis' images are manipulative and representative of dominant attitudes, while Thomas' are self-evidently resistant. They also acknowledge that any cross-cultural "looking" is enmeshed in relations of inequality and the subject/object binary (Francis, 2002, p. 6). Those who were treated as objects in history are represented as subjects in the present. Thomas (1994) speaks posthumously to Edward Curtis saying:

As an Indian and a photographer I feel the work you produced for *The North American Indian* is my inheritance to claim and engage with. I want to thank you for having the opportunity to engage with you through the personal comments I found in your writings. I believe that Curtis thought that there was potential for *The North American Indian* project to engage in a future dialogue with their descendants. Technology has allowed me to /"rebind"/ Curtis's images and bridge the void between myth and reality.

Thomas utilizes images of the past, captured in sculpture, as opportunities to engage in dialogue and reconstruct and reclaim spaces.

### *Samuella Samaniego*

Kust'aak Tlingit photographic artist Samuella Samaniego captures highly action-oriented movement in her photographs; she is recognized for her striking portraiture and stunning landscapes. In photographing the 1982 *Elders Celebration*, she reviewed many sheets of negatives prior to choosing photographs to show and publish. She notes about the work:

[It] felt much like traveling back to that very time and place. There were times when I was paralyzed by the intensity of what was being spoken or performed. ... 'Celebration' is a time when we are in complete recognition of who we are, individually and as a people. (Samaniego, 2002, p. 45)

Viewers see the active power and intensity of the orators and dancers, not simply static portraits. Gail Tremblay (2002) points out that looking at Samaniego's photographs is culture in action.

It is as if each person is caught in the act of making culture live. In this world, people are re-enacting the legends and stories, the histories, the dances, and songs; they are playing drums, creating the environments, wearing the robes and clothing, masks and headdresses, tattoos and face paint, that are essential to preserving particular traditions. (p. 2)



Samaniego's work captures Tremblay's notions of re-enacting the legends and creating environments for all generations.



**Figure 2:** *Samuella Samaniego, Celebration (2002), p. 40. Sealaska Heritage Institute. Seattle, WA: Best Dog Editions.*  
*Used with permission of the artist, August 2013.*

In Figure 2, viewers can almost hear the drums, feel the motion of the dancers, and sense the intensity of the people pictured. As one image from the “Millenium” series and part of the *Celebration* text, the photograph in Figure 2 provides viewers with “a vantage point of the past twenty years few have experienced” (Samaniego, 2002, p. 45). This image requires viewers to engage more directly, not simply as viewers outside of the ceremony, but rather as spectators intimately privileged to participate and view the legends, histories and places.

*kate j martin*

In my own work, I try to capture sections or “glimpses” of objects or scenes that can be interpreted and re-framed from alternative vantage points and may help myself and others to cross “the cultural abyss.” Photographs for me reflect a world of impressions, histories and perspectives. Often it is the photographer’s ability to capture moments, ironies or to re-contextualize representations and taken-for-granted interpretations that shock or startle us with

their honesty. Similar to Lippard's (1992) interpretation, the goal is to bring to the photographic art "a simplicity that recalls the form's beginnings" (p. 23). These are opportunities to re-imagine the ordinary or to present perspectives of the world that suggest something interesting. Sometimes the result is unanticipated, and then, as the viewer, I have the opportunity to look at the image and review, re-align or re-imagine. In 1998, while traveling through South Dakota, a flag and fencepost presented an interesting scene. However, it was not until later that the image took on new meaning and interpretations for me.



**Figure 3:** *kate j martin. (2004). "Protest and Constriction," South Dakota. Used with permission of the artist, July 2013.*

Figure 3, "Protest and Constriction," presents notions of desperation and trouble in the display of an upside down US flag stuck to a barbed wire fence post. This modest flag conjures notions of individual freedom and liberty, yet it is inverted signaling distress and surrounded by constriction in the presence of barbed wire. The image conveys Lakota trouble, desperation and contradiction, yet also abandonment. It invokes notions of forced eviction and imprisonment, as



well as locked out and forcibly limited from access. The image spurs my interest, and as Barthes (1981) suggests, two aspects of human interest come together to generate our strongest responses to a photograph. “It is by *studium* that I am interested” (Barthes, 1981, p. 26); it is by *punctum* that I feel the “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice ... that accident which pricks me” (Barthes, 1981, p. 27). As photographer and viewer, this is the point at which I feel the loss and limiting of potentiality for Lakota people and the sting of cultural contradiction. The sting is similar to Owens’ (2001) feelings regarding pictures of his ancestors. “It is as if a ghost had ceased its rattling and moaning to finally show itself for the first time” (p. 92). Sometimes we are able to glimpse at the shadows and the ghosts of images through context and story, and then we recognize in the image the colonial power of one group to dictate history.



**Figure 4:** *kate j martin. (2002). “Redpath.” Toronto, Canada. Used with permission of the artist, July 2013.*

As photographer, my interpretation of the image in Figure 4, “Redpath,” may be different than viewers of the image. For me, the sight of the Redpath sign from a Toronto hotel window is substantiation of the “co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world” (Barthes, 1981, p. 23). Yet still existing undeniably along the same path. They are embedded in the same world, starkly reflected in red colors in the adjacent office window, and ironically contrasted with the grayed industrial smoke-filled city. Following

the redpath (or red road) conveys notions of community, tradition, honesty, generosity and respect. Yet, the sign is displayed in discordant contrast with the industrialization of the city and the western world's dominance on First Nations' lands. It connotes the idea that paths were created and footprints of First Nations peoples upon the land still mark the paths that have been traversed and followed even in city centers. The photographic artist brings recognition of these two discontinuous elements and provides documentation of continued existence.

Similar to the ideas presented regarding "Redpath," the image in Figure 5, "Green Turtle Back," suggests and reveals a presence. On the wall of a building in Minneapolis, created and displayed by an unknown artist, it is located near South High School, an area of the city designated for those who participated in the US relocation program of the 1950s and 1960s.



**Figure 5:** *kate j martin. (2005). "Green Turtle Back." Wall art, artist unknown. Minneapolis, Minnesota. Used with permission of the artist, July 2013.*

My family was not part of the program, but we moved to this area of Minneapolis from New Ulm in 1962. My mother taught at the Catholic School across from the public South High School, and my sisters and I all became uniformed students. For me, Green Turtle Back resonates with the story of the world and living on Turtle's back. The image brings to mind stories, some that touch the place of memories buried deep.



Upon Turtle's back Charm rode  
Amid peeling insignia  
A summer's day in Minneapolis 2006  
My auntie and I travel along Lake Street  
Stopping at the St. Vincent de Paul Mission Store  
as my mother and sisters and I did some fifty years ago  
We check the racks of clothes  
Searching to find something new among the old giveaways  
not just hand-me-downs  
Giveaway  
Ironic entendre  
This green-backed Turtle with signs of life  
stuck as decoration on a wall off Lake Street  
reminds me of the smell of used clothes  
and childhood games that defends and deflects  
lies and embarrassment. (kate j martin, 2011)

When I was a child, you never saw turtles along Lake Street, and Minneapolis in the 1960s was rife with challenges and suffering and abuse. Now however, there are signs and evidence of spring as the time has been referred to and with it the revisiting of enduring stories.

Growing up in New Ulm in the 1950s and then in Minneapolis in the 1960s was a difficult time, particularly for Native peoples. In 1962, the New Ulm paper printed a commemorative edition of the "Dakota Conflict" to remember the 100-year anniversary. There were politicians making speeches; there was an Indian camp for spectators to look at with real Indians; and of course there was food and memorabilia for sale. Yet, this was not the story that held my interest, rather it was my family's story, the one no one talked about. Slowly, I found some of this history; an inscription on a gravestone; a conversation with a librarian; historical records; old family photographs; and my visits to places. Then, I was able to talk about what I found with family members, and to find validation for a history still being uncovered. These conversations and investigations led me to southwestern Minnesota.

Not far from New Ulm and Mankato at Jeffers Petroglyphs handprints remain upon the land. Something so ancient and indelible that they cannot be erased, rather forever encased in slide rocks upon the land.



**Figure 6:** *kate j martin. (2005) "Handprints Upon the Land." Jeffers Petroglyphs, Comfrey, MN. Used with permission of the artist, July 2013.*

We might not always see the footprints and paths the ancestors travelled, but these prints are permanent, impossible to remove, and now protected at this Minnesota Historical Site. Those forcibly expelled remain in rock as memory – memory as long as *Inyan's* – making sure the people are remembered no matter the attempts to expunge. In 2002, my father's cousin, at age 86, would participate in the march known as "In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors" (Wilson, 2006). She would recall memories of her father and talk about family history with pride, yet still speaking carefully guarding her words as she had found it necessary to do in the past.

## Conclusions

Our world is an image world if only we are able to catch the monstrous flow and stop it for a moment so we can glimpse something of ourselves and recognize what we see. I have tried in this essay to, not only investigate a variety of "readings" of photographs, but also to highlight and grapple with the multiple perceptions, interpretations and cultural attitudes that images engender. This is the act of "looking" with eyes that are able to shed some of the settler colonialist weight of influence, and allow other perceptions more prominence. In the past, images created by Edward S. Curtis and others shaped and marginalized interpretations and

understandings of Native/Indigenous Peoples, yet perhaps more recently, they provide the opportunity for dialogues, interpretations, and voices to tell another story. As Jeff Thomas (2001) reports in his posthumous conversation with Curtis,

I suspect that the elders you photographed had similar feelings, and by allowing you to photograph them, they could speak to their future generations. I have carefully navigated your work to ensure that we hear the voices of the elders you photographed. (Thomas, 2001)

Through these photographs, Thomas endeavors to bring to conscious awareness a connection to the broader social, cultural and historical contexts that have constrained and contradicted the lives of Native Peoples through the “voices of the elders.” This is the conscious act of “decolonizing the mind” in the image world, and learning how to challenge and overcome what has been described as barriers to critical thinking (Yellow Bird, 2005). It is an act that concentrates on bridging “across the years and cultural abysses” (Lippard, 1992, p. 15), and by struggling with the evidence of the past, we may have the opportunity to become present and move on to the future. This is the “intellectual project of decolonizing” that sets out to seek compassion and collaboration and can be open to possibilities (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Photographs are not just documentation, or possession, or even desire, they also are the embodiment of stories, histories, emotions and memories. Learning to hear and tell these stories in new ways and see them through new eyes is the active work of decolonization, particularly as interpreted and translated through cultural production, aesthetics and creative action. Native and First Nations photographers grapple with these issues in both the context of physical land spaces, as well as through creative and aesthetic spaces.

The inherent challenges in representation, aesthetics, and artistic production that may lead to reclamation applies to the broader interpretation of decolonization that remains embedded in the settler colonialist tradition. It requires us to grapple with the consequences of the past. Without addressing the past it is difficult to move on to a more active interpreted present. To paraphrase LeAnne Howe (2013), “time opens like a coffin to the past, present and future. Change came to Indian Territory like a tornado. Land shudders under the power of the tornado.” Without looking back to this history, the land still shudders and it is difficult to engage Native/Indigenous understandings of the present and the future. Yet as Ted Jojola (2013) cautions, the larger question is: “How do we inadvertently contextualize the past based on contemporary experience? It’s a question that is still in the jury, particularly when with discussions around someone like Curtis.” Reading the photographs, recognizing myself in them, and contextualizing the content are acts of identity and familiarity, but these actions cannot heal the wounds of loss of a child even as the images continue to mark spaces on the land or as new interpretations are made.

The ideas presented in this essay are important when working to understand and negotiate the difficult terrain of images and perceptions. And again as Jojola (2013) suggests, the footprints metaphor asks a basic question of how contemporary interpretation is wrought upon

images of the past and the images created in the present. For some, Curtis' images are memories that are critical to life in the present. "All of these Indians--their life's breath is still hovering cloudlike in the brief heat of our gaze. I think of all the people we will love forever. I think of all those who have gone on, and all of those who will follow after. ...They return to remind us that we go on" (Earling, 2004, p. 101). For others, the work of Native and First Nations photographers and scholars serves as the point of cultural interpretation. They are liaisons to the past and decolonizing advocates for bringing to life Native/Indigenous conceptions, stories, and histories. Although these ideas demand further investigation, through the work of Native photographic artists, we may be able to facilitate and contextualize learning situated within memory, listening to the stories, seeing the handprints and footprints of evidence.

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