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The Vanishing Race: Dealing With Native Stereotypes Through a Lens

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Early twentieth-century photographer Edward S. Curtis is renowned for photographing and documenting around eighty different native tribes in his immense work titled *The North American Indian*. His more than 2,200 photographs assist in portraying the unfounded stereotypes placed on indigenous people of North America - that they are an “uncivilized,” “red skin,” “hostile savage,” race of the past. These are just a few of the stereotypes and labels that have been placed upon Native Americans by the Anglo-foreigners, and many of them unfortunately are still thought to be true today. However, the research for this project will be focusing on the stereotype regarding Native Americans as a “vanished race.” This label was started because of the decline in native populations thanks to the rapid spreading of diseases, and genocide, as well as the mass amounts of people who were forced off their homelands. Contemporary artist Will Wilson, a Native American from the Navajo nation, is using Curtis’s photographs as an inspiration for his own photography to rewrite the narrative for indigenous people today. Through his project titled, *Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange (CIPX)*, Wilson demonstrates that the stereotype of Native Americans as a “vanished race” is one that is unsubstantiated as well as dangerous to the Native American people of today.

Looking at how these stereotypes originated leads to some dark places within American history. For example, the history behind the racist term “red skin” in actuality has nothing to do with skin tone. The term first came into use by the European colonizers. According to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, there were bounties for the scalping of indigenous men, women, and children, turning this violent act into a “profitable privatized enterprise... [and they] gave a name to the mutilated and bloody corpses they left in the wake of the scalp hunts: redskins.”¹ Contrary to popular belief, it is documented that Europeans had utilized the practice of scalping for centuries before bring the violent act to the Americas.² Cringe-worthy facts such as these cause one to question how it is acceptable to have a professional football team called the Washington Redskins, among many other sports franchises who incorporate racist terms and iconography into their brand. The list could go on forever in regard to how and why these racist stereotypes came into being. As Devon Mihesuah explains, when colonists first arrived in North America, there was a population of approximately seven million indigenous people: “by 1880, Indians numbered 600,000, and by 1900 just twenty years later, their population was at its lowest: 250,000. In this same period, the non-Indian population in the United States increased from five million in 1800 to 75 million in 1900.”³ The desire for the extinction of the indigenous race can be seen through the decrease in native lands, the sterilization of women, and the involuntary removal of indigenous children from their families, forcing them into repressive boarding schools to live out their childhoods. In the advent of the Civil Rights era around the 1960’s, the Native population started to receive better health care and see higher birth rates, and as of 2007 the population was approximately four and a half million.⁴ If the native population

continues to grow, then why is it that the general population still believes that the Native Americans are a “vanished race”?

With regard to Curtis’s photography, his ethnographic studies were not done to maliciously hurt the native community. That said, his photographs have done a lot more harm than good. In his photographic practice, he used the state-of-the-art photographic technique for producing tintypes. A tintype is a photograph made by creating a direct positive on a sheet of iron metal that is blackened by painting, lacquering or enameling and is used as a support for a collodion photographic emulsion.⁵ Curtis traveled throughout the western North America for more than thirty years, from the mid- 1890s through the late 1920s, methodically recording what he perceived to be the vanishing civilizations of the continent’s native peoples.⁶ Curtis believed what he was attempting to do was noble and on behalf of the preservation of the dying race. It seems to be rather ironic, this idea of documenting a vanishing race, when the Anglo-foreigners spent so many years destroying it. Former American senator, Edward Everett, said it best when he stated, “[w]e would take measure to preserve present stock. But what is it we would preserve? Not their language, apparently, since the friends of the Indian were eager to replace these with English. Is it their mode of life, tenure of property in common, their manners-that which makes them in externals to be what they are: -is it these which we deplore as lost, and would fix and perpetuate where they still exist?”⁷ The response to this question is a resounding no, but through this we see the twisted idea of “preserving the race” that was systematically abused and unwanted.

When Curtis spent all those years documenting the native people through his tintype photography, he was looking at them through a white settler’s gaze. He was not seeing the people for who they actually were, but for whom he thought they should be. “When we remember that photographs result from manipulating light and reflection, the problematic nature of the early photographic representation of Native Americans becomes more understandable. Through subject pose, camera position, staging, focus, sepia toning, and other techniques, the subjects were rendered into time-bound, romantic stereotypes of primitive warrior, noble savage, tragic half-breed . . . vanishing Indian.”⁸ It is known that Curtis would stage photographs and would often pay or trade with the natives for their compliance.⁹ He would take away anything within the shot that may have seemed to be western and would replace with objects and clothing that fit his narrative. An example is his photograph titled, *The Old-Time Warrior, Nez Percé*, 1910. In it we see Percé on horseback, dressed in a loincloth and moccasins, holding what appears to be a weapon. This image echoes the idea of the native man as a noble savage. There is also a photo titled *Oglala War Party*, 1907. In this image we see a group of men horseback, wearing feathered headdresses, appearing to head off to battle. One problem in this image is that traditionally, the chief of the community is the only member allowed to wear feathered headdresses yet we see everyone depicted wearing one. A second problem with this depiction is that by this time, there were no wars going on with the native community. One last illustration that shows Curtis’s inaccurate reconstruction method is the photo titled, *The Three Chiefs- Piegan*, 1900. Martha H. Kennedy who is Curator of the Great Plains Art Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, describes how Curtis “presents traditionally dressed Plains Indians

(identified as Four Horns, Small Leggings, and Mountain Chief) on horseback as they pause for a moody back-drop of the prairie. Curtis's caption reads: 'Three proud old leaders of their people...A glimpse of this life and conditions which are on the verge of extinction.' Though he clearly describes the homeland of the Piegans, he also intentionally omits any acknowledgement that the old ancestral way of life had already become extinct."¹⁰ There are many other different examples of how Curtis reconstructed and manipulated the photographs as well as the people in order to show the stereotypical Native American. Among the thousands of others Curtis took, these images told the story he and others wanted to remember the natives by. The feathered headdresses and teepee dwelling iconography, as seen in his photography, do not represent the entirety of the indigenous peoples cultures.

The photographer Will Wilson's nationality is Diné, and for his most formative years, he grew up in the Navajo nation. He attained his MFA with a focus in photography at the University of New Mexico. Wilson's project CIPX, which started in the summer of 2012, is more of an addition to Curtis's photographs rather than an opposition to the project. He stated, "I intend to resume the documentary mission of Curtis from the standpoint of a 21st century indigenous, trans-customary, cultural practitioner. I want to supplant Curtis's settler gaze and the remarkable body of ethnographic material he compiled with a contemporary vision of Native North America."¹¹ Wilson acknowledges all the work that Curtis put into his project, but he sees the need to get rid of the stigma that has followed the native community ever since the publication of Curtis's portraits.

"Photographs do two things simultaneously, they evoke both the presence of time, the sense of being there (in that place) then, and they evoke the passage of time, the space between that which transpired in the photograph, and the distance traveled to where we stand now, beholding the image."¹² With CIPX, Wilson plays on this notion of time. As viewers we see Wilson's portraits, which allude to their ancestors from the time period of Curtis, as well as to their present day and their future. He makes sure to use the same wet-plate collodion photographic process that Curtis used. When looking at Curtis's tintypes we see this greyscale or sepia tint he gets from the wet plate collodion process. The tints allude to this nostalgic feeling of the past. Wilson does not shy away from this nostalgia. He embraces his past as well as the past of his subjects because the history is important. Nevertheless, his subjects are modern-day Native Americans and he represents the present.

One picture from CIPX in particular that reiterates this notion is titled *Joe D. Horse Capture, Citizen of the A'aninin Indian Tribe of Montana, Associate Curator of Native American Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2012*. In this portrait we see a contemporary native man seated while in his hands, he is showing the camera a photograph displayed on his iPad. The photograph is a portrait of his great great great grandfather that was taken by Curtis. The notion of acknowledging and respecting the past, as well as claiming the present can be viewed in this portrait. Another powerful portrait from CIPX is titled, *How The West Is One, 2012*. This image contains two self-portraits of Wilson. On the left we see Wilson facing right, and he is wearing casual clothing along with what appears to be a traditional native necklace. Wilson processed the portrait with the monochromatic sepia tint, but also emphasized color so we could see the turquoise in

his necklace. On the right we see Wilson sitting and looking to the left in order to make the two portraits appear as if he is looking at himself. In this portrait he is wearing more ostentatious clothing, for instance a vest and tie. In this picture he is also seen with his hand over his heart. This gesture may indicate that although he is wearing contemporary apparel his heart and being is still native. When observing the two portraits we are reminded of the Frida Kahlo painting titled *The Two Fridas*, 1939. In both Wilson and Kahlo's pieces we see two sides to the same person: one representing their roots, while the other representing the western influences of their native cultures, as well as one representing their past, and the other representing their present. Romanek Devorah suggests that these works, "while reliant on a gesture of looking back, reliant on memory, are also reliant on presence, and on the aspect of memory that give photographs their 'proper arrangement and relationship' in contemporary context through creative invention."¹³ With CIPX there is a balance of past and present.



Julia Bogany, an elder of the Tongva tribe, was asked during an interview, what does it feel like to be a Native American woman in today's age? Her heartbreaking response to this question was, "invisible." Although Curtis's portraits were taken a century ago, they are still referred to today when discussing Native Americans. The use of his pictures indicates that indigenous people are of the past. The photographs reiterate the reason behind him spending so many years documenting their disappearing culture. In school we are not taught about all the horrors that surround our country's history when it involves the indigenous people. The general public gets most of their knowledge about native people through stereotypical media such as movies, books, and sports. With CIPX, Wilson is forcing the general public to see that their culture is deserving of acknowledgement and the truth about who they are today. This is vitally important for our generation because without this knowledge the public may not become aware of the social injustices that plague the native community even today as significant. There is a need for the knowledge of the injustices that are happening in order that there to be a warrant for change.

One of the first times the general public was able to see the native community resisting to the injustices caused by government was back in the 1960's during the civil rights movements. This was called the Red Power Movement. Indigenous people across the country protested for their rights. One of the protests that caught the most attention was the occupation of Alcatraz. According to the 1868 Sioux Treaty any abandoned federal lands that used to belong to the Sioux nation would be given back to the Sioux nation, and when that did not happen they decided to occupy it. Professor of history and American Indian studies, Troy R. Johnson explains, "Perhaps the most profound effect of the Alcatraz-Red Power Movement (ARPM) was to educate and change the consciousness of people in the United States and around the world... the ARPM made the point that Indians have cultures, traditions, history, and communities that they want to preserve – but that they also want equal justice, economic opportunity, access to education, and more accurate portrayal of Indians in the media and history books."¹⁴ The Movement brought to the forefront issues that had been silenced for so many years, and it made those who were unaware of the struggles that native people dealt with more educated. Ultimately, the federal government suppressed all the resistance, but it could not take away what the people who were paying attention now knew.

The Red Power Movement ignited a need for their voices to be heard and provided a blueprint for future protests to come, comparable to what we saw this past year in 2016 at Standing Rock. The Dakota access pipeline protests drew thousands of people to stand along with the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. These unarmed protesters were met with attack dogs, water cannons in freezing temperatures, and even armored vehicles. This type of violent retaliation by the law enforcement against protesting is something we have not seen since the civil rights movement. Unfortunately, the Dakota are still fighting for the rights to their land, and they are not the only native community still doing so to this day. Tradition Bearer of the Lummi Tribe, Pauline Hillaire argues, "Breaking through a history starts with knowledge. But it does not stop with knowledge. Knowing about events and remembering rights are just the start of righting wrongs. We need respect and effort, along with knowledge, to make things right."¹⁵ Whether that is through activism, social action, or even photography such as Wilson's, it is action resembling the CIPX project that motivates others to think about their own ideals and encourage people to make a difference.

All in all, Curtis traveled throughout the United States to document indigenous peoples because there was, in fact, a sharp decline within their population. This decline was a result of all the oppression that they had faced ever since the first Anglo-foreigner set foot on their shores. It is possible that Curtis's photographs may have actually been a good reference to the natives of that time if he photographed them in their truth, rather than what he interpreted as the true native. When looking at Wilson's CIPX, we see Native Americans for who they are today. They do not adhere to the negative stereotypes that they have been portrayed throughout the media. We are able to see them through Wilson's lens rather than Curtis's. Wilson's portraits open up a conversation about the photographic exchange of natives of the past and of today. With

CIPX, the portraits give a voice to those who have been silenced for far too long, and a deeper understanding of who they are today.

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