WILD REVIVAL: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF EDWARD CURTIS AND THE FETISHIZATION OF THE WILD WEST

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Edward Curtis's portraits of early 20th century Native Americans are an infamous marker on the timeline of American photographic history. Between 1897 and 1930, Edward Curtis went on a mission to visually document as many Indigenous peoples as he possibly could and compile them into a forty-volume collection entitled *The North American Indian*. It was a task met with a deep fervor as Curtis was haunted by the looming pressure that these cultures and traditions would die off before they could be recorded. Upon closer exploration of Curtis' prolific body of work and its commentary, I found the notion of "revival" repeatedly evoked—specifically, the revival of interest and increased circulation of Curtis' work in the 1960s and 70s. Why was this happening? Although typically mentioned briefly or in passing, the concept of revival inspired me to research further into the trends or events may have influenced a resurgence of public interest in *The North American Indian*. I found that Edward Curtis's photographs increased in popularity simultaneously with the film genre known as the Western. Utilizing the tropes of "cowboys and Indians," the influx of these films that began in the late 60s served a different purpose than those before them as the Western took upon the role of allegory for the Vietnam War. In order to find a common theme between what initiated support for Edward Curtis's photographic excursions in the early 1900s and its consequent revival later in the century, I have concluded that the traditional way in which Curtis chose to present Indigenous bodies complimented the fetishization of the "Wild West" in popular culture that had spiked in relation to the American desire for escapism. Using Curtis's photography and legacy as a guide, this paper considers American militaristic and political upheavals as motivating factors towards the nostalgia-driven revival of Native American stereotypes in popular culture in the 1960s and 70s.

Before proceeding, I find it pertinent to acknowledge my position as a first-generation Canadian woman of European descent. My lived experience in Canada is far different from that faced by Indigenous peoples in this country. I am not attempting to speak on behalf of the Indigenous experience, my only intent is to contribute to the discourse around the inaccuracies of representation of Indigenous peoples in American popular media. I will also take this opportunity to note that any use of the outdated term "Indian" in this paper is purely within quotation or context.

Edward Curtis was born in Whitewater, Wisconsin in 1868, and grew up during the post-Civil War decade that instigated Euro-American expansion into the American West.[1] In the decades preceding the Civil War, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 was heavily enforced and Native Americans were moved deep into the continent to occupy the vast expanses of yet-unsettled land known as the "Indian Frontier in the West".[2] After unprecedented violence at the hands of European settlers, the Indigenous populations were disenfranchised enough to no longer be considered a military threat, but rather, a bureaucratic one.[3] The centre of the American continent became a temporary holding solution while the Euro-American leaders contemplated a fix for the "Indian Problem." However, after concluding in 1865, the American Civil War had reinvigorated a new course towards national unity--and the direction was West. North America, previously considered limitless by its European settlers, was starting to feel smaller; it could now be seen as a land of finite resources reaching its capacity. Hence, the highly mythicized Western Frontier became the next big American adventure and lived in the collective imagination as "a wild region inhabited by even wilder humans, some white and brown, but mostly red."[4]

The very existence of Indigenous peoples has nearly always been regarded as an inconvenience for Euro-America's colonialist agenda, and in the late nineteenth century the pressure was building to find a non-violent solution. Just as with the North and South after the Civil War, Euro-American and Native American relations were also enjoying a post-war period of tentative peace. After countless wars earlier in the century, more bloodshed was an unattractive notion. Rather, it was proposed that the American government dedicate efforts to "domesticate and civilize Wild Indians" in order to make them a "blessing instead of a curse to themselves and their country".[5] To systematically create the "detribalized Indian," Congress made the General Allotment Act, or better known as the Dawes Act, in February of 1887.[6] This legislature was used to divide up reservation land and provide a compulsory education system that split up families in order to displace and destabilize communities.[7] The motivation for such a systematic cultural extinction of Indigenous peoples was to prevent their physical extinction, and by extension, encourage assimilation.[8] Civilization and savagery could not coexist, and so the only option was to "kill the Indian and save the man."[9] Consequently, the American public believed that the traditional lifestyles of Native Americans were leading them towards inevitable decimation and embraced the misguided belief that they were indeed a vanishing race.[10]

Edward Curtis was well aware of the drastic changes his Native American subjects were undergoing during the time he photographed them; yet, he made an active choice to present the "traditional Indian" in his work rather than a contemporary one. In advertising Native Americans as if untouched by white settlers and in a pure, primitive form, Curtis actively cultivated the fictitious Noble Savage in his portraits. According to L.G. Moses, the Noble Savage is one who "lived a sylvan idyll free from the encumbrances of civilization [and] offered European social philosophers a vision of a simpler time, a golden age, when humans lived in harmony with nature."[11] Playing into this trope, Curtis often depicted his subjects clad in cultural garb with stoic, wizened poses. His portrait *Upshaw - Apsaroke* (fig. 1), taken in 1905, depicts A. B. Upshaw, a Crow Native American who worked for Curtis as an interpreter. The photograph is a tight frame of Upshaw leaning casually against a non-descript ledge; he is wearing a large feather headdress upon his head, with layers of beadwork laid upon his bare chest. He is looking off-frame, staring out into the distance with a contemplative expression. The "Indianness" in this photograph is not subtle, it is loud and conspicuous, with the elaborate costume overshadowing the subject himself. The man, the individual, is not as important as the cultural artefacts he is adorned with. The exposure of the photograph is low, making Upshaw appear darker and the fine-lines in his face are more apparent. His skin looks tanned and wind-swept, implying that this is a person who spends much time outdoors and in the sun, as opposed to being indoors and laden with the trappings and responsibilities of civilized life. The background is out of focus, and while it was most likely manipulated in a studio, appears as if in a natural setting. The background doesn't matter because context is irrelevant—Upshaw as an individual is irrelevant. The only significance is his body as that of a wise and Noble Savage.

Compare Curtis's image *Upshaw - Apsaroke* to that of a portrait taken of the same individual seven years prior in 1898, *A. B. Upshaw - Interpreter* (fig. 2) by F. A. Rinehart. This image of Upshaw is entirely different from Curtis's, and depicts him seated within a studio upon a white background and dressed in European clothing. In Rinehart's image, Upshaw is looking directly at the camera, and seated obviously within a studio, which implies the intent for the photograph to have been taken—rather than a seemingly stumbled-upon sense of spontaneity, such as in Curtis's image. Upshaw is wearing clothing that (as a working professional) he most-likely wore on a daily basis. His hair is carefully gelled and combed back, his position is relaxed, and overall Upshaw is performing highly typical American portraiture expectations from the time period. The titles of the two particular images are also telling--while Curtis chooses to identify his portrait of Upshaw with

his tribe *Apsaroke* (Crow Nation), Rinehart chooses Upshaw's profession, *Interpreter*. Rinehart's portrait is not pretending to be anything more than it is, while Curtis's plays upon a fiction.

Often employing ethnologically inappropriate clothing and props, Curtis was constructing the ideal Indian for Euro-American consumption under the guise of preservation. Christopher M Lyman writes that "Curtis, like most other ethnographic photographers, saw truthful depiction of Indians as showing only what he believed to be part of their 'primitive' Indianness."[12] Lyman stresses that this "conception of primitiveness, although never clearly defined, appears to have been based on the popular illusion that change depleted Indianness--that true Indianness was that which was unaffected by white culture."[13] Curtis intended for his audience to view the image as one that offered a glimpse into a pre-contact era. What is depicted may not be accurate, but is exactly what the artist wanted his audience to believe. Through acts such as posing his subjects in studio tents, providing costumes and cultural paraphernalia, and even resorting to retouching and cropping, Curtis attempted to undo the effects of European influence on Native American communities in order to display a generalization of Indianness that would be considered fascinatingly primitive and foreign to the American public. Using original negatives and the vast available archive, Lyman found examples of Curtis's heavy hand: the two different portrait subjects from unrelated tribes seen in *Pipe Stem* (fig. 3) and *Wakonda* (fig. 4) are wearing the same feather headdress; a modern clock on the floor of a tent in *In a Piegan Lodge* (fig. 5-6) was removed; and a picture originally called *Preparing Wedding Feast* was, with the addition of a painted-in pot, renamed *Firing Pottery* (fig. 7).

Since European contact, the Indian body had been consistently exploited, even considered as "curiosities" and appearing in ethnological exhibits, medicine shows, circuses and fairs.[14] By the nineteenth century this fascination had bled into popular culture in the form of artworks, movies, dime novels and Wild West live shows; all steadily popularizing a new, adventurous, yet uniquely American genre known as the "Western." The Euro-American narrative nostalgically captured a fictitious authenticity of Western past, problematically restoring an ideological wild that was slowly being replaced by settlers' domestication. L.G. Moses points out that "once Hollywood absorbed whatever was useable in the Indian stereotype from the Wild West…history dismissed the Indians as a shaping force in American experience," thereby enforcing the cultural genocide that was already being systematically enacted by measures such as the Dawes Act.[15]

Edward Curtis's body of work was supported by the heavy romanticization of the "Wild West," and had enormous popularity and patronage. His landscape photographs of Native Americans in traditional clothing on horseback, often titled in reference to war-parties, call upon legendary battles that occurred in the early 1800's. Such battles, like Little Big Horn or the El Paso Gunfight, were often the premise of Western films. The photo *Ogalala War-Party* (fig. 8) mirrors popular filmic imagery of the time period that evokes no-longer relevant military strife.[16] Curtis's concern with providing the American public with didactic and marketable imagery of Indians took priority over an honest survey, thereby denying the cultural complexity of contemporary Native Americans and reducing them to the clichés and stereotypes of a genre. By employing his medium of photography to stage an untrue Indian experience, he was less of an ethnologist and more of an entertainer playing to the imaginations of the American public.

The celebrity status of Curtis's work eventually subsided after the completion of his project in 1930. While no single factor can be attributed, the most likely cause for the initial lull is attributed to the Great Depression. *The North American Indian* was a remarkably expensive set; at a price point of $3,500, it was a luxury few could afford.[17] Furthermore, in 1934 the Indian New Deal was passed in an effort to try and repair some of the damages made to indigenous communities,

promising "a reconstruction of family and community life, and the emancipation of native cultures."[18] As L.G. Moses recognizes, people throughout the nation would come to "know the shameful record of government-Indian relations…every child in school [would] learn that Indians, instead of vanishing, were to be a permanent part of life."[19] And hence, the romantic notion of the vanishing Indian was no longer fated, the novelty of Indianness wore off, and Native Americans were no longer considered a disappearing peoples. America preoccupied itself with world ascendency after massive success in the Second World War, and "the optimism of postwar years overwhelmed any efforts to recapture past glories."[20] *The Native American Indian* and all its success had slipped into obscurity and Edward Curtis died in 1952 a forgotten man.

After the victorious postwar high of the early 1950s, America was facing military disaster in the Vietnam War (1955 to 1975). The conflict in Vietnam was the first war to be heavily reported on television news stations, and every household in America stayed glued to their screens to be updated and informed.[21] Not only was the influx of televisions in America making media even easier to consume, the constant negative news broadcasts cultivated a need for escapism. And what better than the glory days of a wild, adventurous past? A western means action, chase scenes, and showdowns. There are good guys and bad guys, and the American always wins. A nostalgia for a great American frontier swept through popular media, and the Wild West isn't complete without its Indians.

Inspired by Sam Peckinpah's 1969 film *The Wild Bunch*, a slew of imitative films emerged in the early 70s that positioned their Wild West landscape as an immediate political and allegorical background to the highly publicized conditions of the Vietnam War.[22] Philip French indicates their closeness to contemporary concerns by pointing out that both the 1970 films *Soldier Blue* and *Little Big Man* offer "direct parallels with the Vietnam situation, and perhaps even with [the] My Lai [Massacre], in their presentation of cavalry massacres and the deliberate policy of exterminating Indians."[23] The 1972 film *Ulzana's Raid* opens with a cavalry troop playing baseball in the middle of a dusty Western outpost, referencing New England activities being brought to the frontier. French notes how the effect of this type of organized gameplay occurring in the open wilderness is "absurd and melancholic;" and quite clearly intended to reference American soldiers being displaced to Vietnam and pursuing their all-American pastimes in a foreign land, thus creating the political ambience for the film's proceeding action "where the Indians equated with Asians, and American domestic colonization with later imperial activities."[24] These films display that infamous Indian stereotype of a figure meant to be confronted and defeated "in the name of civilization".[25] French defines these characters as the "terrifying all-purpose enemy ready at the drop of a tomahawk to spring from the rocks and attack wagon trains, cavalry patrols and isolated pioneer settlements".[26] It was not uncommon to have Native American antagonists depicted slaughtering the Euro-American settlers in grotesque ways, either burned alive or skewered to trees, a particular kind of killing that was "carefully calculated to invoke the napalm bombing and bizarre weaponry employed in Vietnam."[27] These allegories to Vietnam were so prevalent throughout this period that some may wonder if any films were made referencing the war directly. The answer is that yes there was, but only one. The singular film that directly referenced the war before its conclusion in 1975 was released in 1968 and titled *The Green Berets*; it was codirected by its star John Wayne—a prolific actor that participated in over 70 Western films throughout his illustrious career.[28] The plethora of movies about cowboys and Indians were a safe undertaking, as they were not critical of the government and were based upon the pre-existing historical infrastructure of the American experience. Wild West films released in this period of conflict allowed American consumers back home to embrace the collective escapism of a fight already "won."

While the turbulent 1960's and 70s witnessed the reemergence of the Wild West in popular film, a newly invigorated fascination with romantic Indianness was met with a "rediscovery" or "revival" of Edward Curtis's photography.[29] The massive influx of low-budget Western films took off around the same time that Curtis's body of work was recirculated in the form of coffee-table books, calendars, posters and cards.[30] Major exhibitions of Curtis's photographs were displayed at the Morgan Library & Museum in 1971, the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1972, and the University of California, Irvine in 1976. Curtis's work was also featured in various anthologies on Native American photography published in the early 1970s, and original editions of *The North American Indian* began to reach high prices at auction with a complete set sold for $20,000 in 1972 only for another similar set to be sold for $60,500 only five years later.

Edward Curtis's manipulated photography stripped Indigenous peoples of their agency and hijacked their narrative to present them as part of a primitive culture doomed to vanish forever. By contributing to the fabrication of a golden age of Noble Savages being conquered by Euro-American settlers, these images will always be associated with the championing of European civilization. *The North American Indian*'s revival of popularity in the 1970s alongside stereotype-ridden Western films shows us that in a time of American anxiety, these images represented success, and proof of American superiority. Curtis's portrayal of Indianness thrived in a time of American moral and political unrest, because his objectification of Native American culture made these individuals an icon for the glory days of an America that never was.

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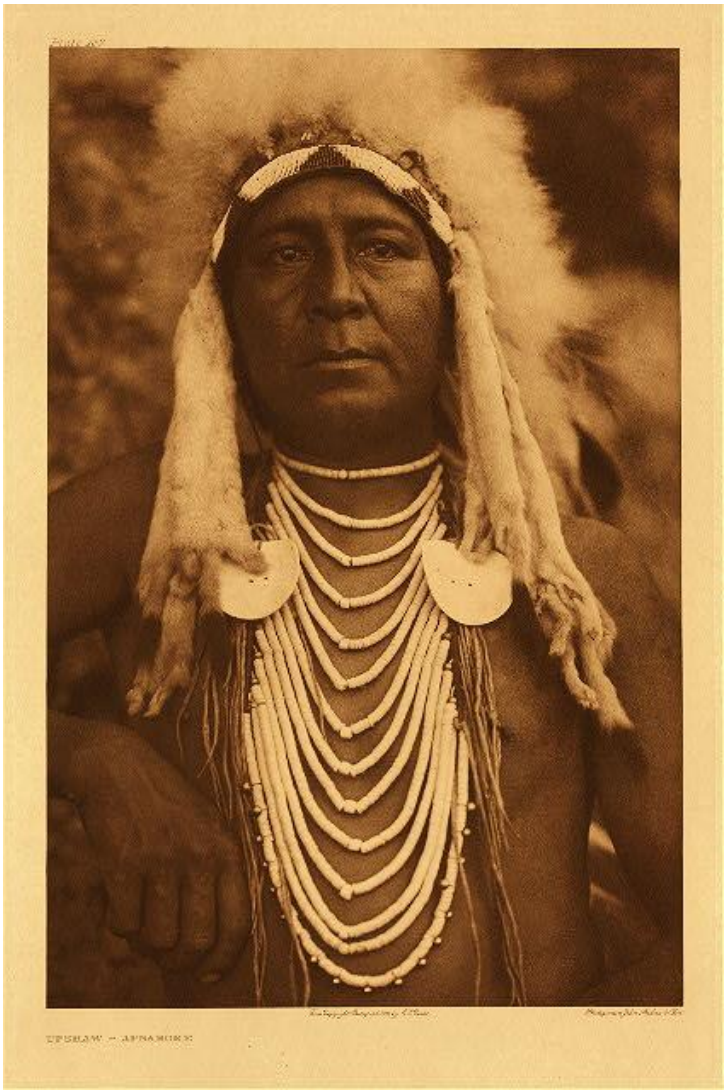

Figure 1. Edward S. Curtis, *Upshaw — Apsaroke*, ca. 1905. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/99471734/.

Figure 2. F.A. Rinehart, *A. B. Upshaw — Interpreter*, ca. 1898. From the collections of the Omaha Public Library.

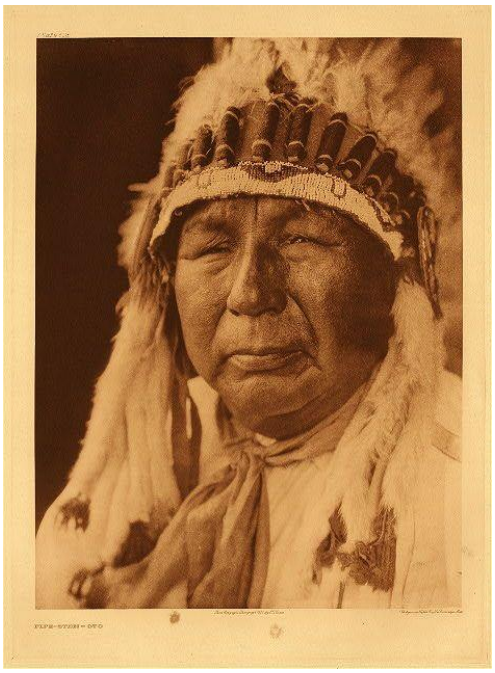

Figure 3. Edward S. Curtis, *Pipe-Stem — Oto*, ca 1927. Photogravure on tissue, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

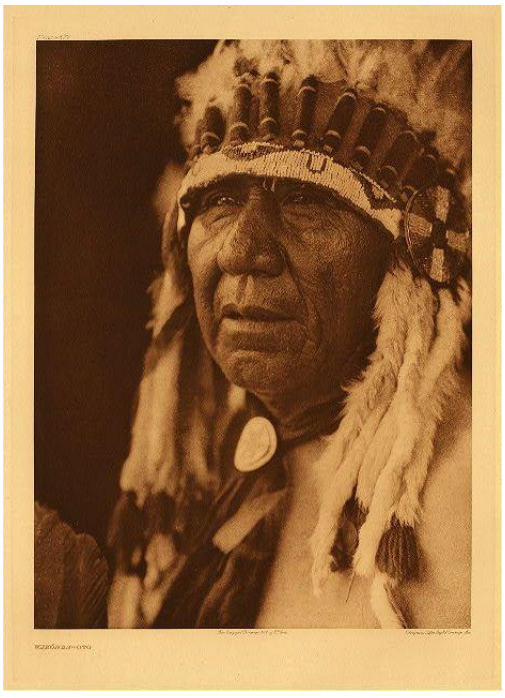

Figure 4. Edward S. Curtis. *Wakonda — Oto*, ca. 1927. Photogravure on tissue, Smithsonian American Art Museum

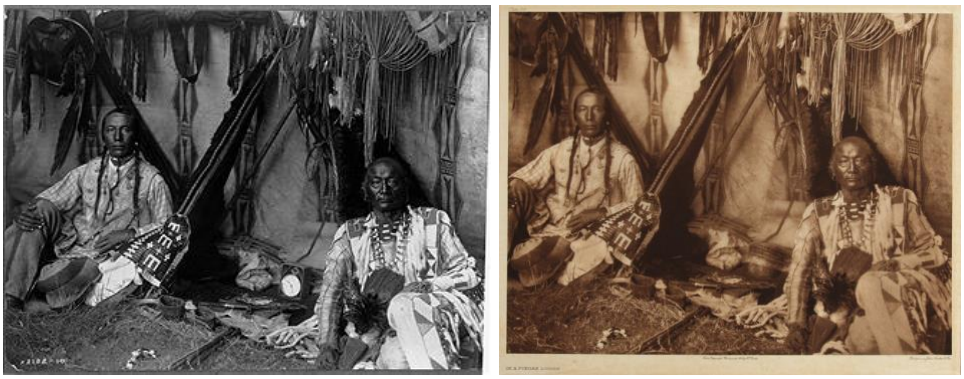

Figure 5, 6. Edward S. Curtis, In a Piegan Lodge, ca. 1910. Photogravure. Library of Congress.

Figure 7. Edward S. Curtis, Firing Pottery, ca. 1905. Photogravure.

Figure 8. Edward S. Curtis, *Ogalala War-Party*, ca. 1907. Library of Congress.

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NOTES

[1] Christopher M Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*. (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 1982),

[2] L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933*. (Albuquerque, N.M: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 3.

[3] Lyman, *The Vanishing Race,* 113., Moses, *Wild West Shows*, 3.

[4] Moses, *Wild West Shows*, 5.

[5] Moses, *Wild West Shows*, 61.

[6] Ibid., 63
[7] Michael Johnson, *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 199.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Lyman, Moses, Johnson, Martin, Curtis.
[11] Moses, *Wild West Shows*, 3
[12] Lyman, *The Vanishing Race*, 4.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Moses, *Wild West Shows,* 21.
[15] Ibid., 6.
[16] Lyman, *The Vanishing Race,* 86.
[17] Lyman, *The Vanishing Race*, 147.
[18] Moses, *Wild West Shows*, 171
[19] Ibid.
[20] Lyman, *The Vanishing Race*, 12
[21] Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[22] French, 48.
[23] French, 96.
[24] French, 192.
[25] French, 85.
[26] French, 85.
[27] French, 177.
[28] French, 204.
[29] Mick Gidley, *The Plains Indian Photographs of Edward S. Curtis*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001)
[30] Aaron Glass, "A Cannibal in the Archive: Performance, Materiality, and (in)Visibility in Unpublished Edward Curtis Photographs of the Kwakwaka'Wakw Hamat'Sa." *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 25, no. 2 (2009), 129.