



**“Out of the Photograph”**

**Indian Resistance against 19<sup>th</sup> Century (White) Photographic Portrayals**

Ashley Williams

History of Photography

Agnes Scott College

Spring 2011

## Introduction

The image of the Indian<sup>1</sup> is all around us. The noble savage. The scalping Apache. The demure Indian squaw. The trusty guide. The tragic, disappeared race. We see these images in our Thanksgiving celebrations, in our athletic organizations, in our children's toys, adult Halloween costumes, Hollywood films, and more. These representations have a long visual history, owing much of their mass-cultural popularity to photographic representations of Indians from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The conquest of North America by Europeans was not only territorial, but visual and psychological as well. With the European as the shutter-happy explorer or pseudo-anthropologist, the Indian became the objectified subject. However, there was and is resistance. Though Indians have been historically subjugated through the use of photography, Indians have played both subject and artist to subvert the colonial power dynamic and assert their power as more than mere victims of the photographic eye.

## 19<sup>th</sup> century White depictions of Indians

Before looking at how Indians have used photography to subvert racist photographic representations of them, one must first become familiar with the dominant visual representations of Indians. Edward Curtis was the most prolific photographer of Indians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1907, Curtis began publishing his magnum opus, *The North American Indian*, an anthropological work that covered hundreds of tribes across the continent, and contained years worth of photographic work. While *The North American Indian* was a multi-volume work that was not

---

<sup>1</sup> Just as photographs are power, language is power. This is why I feel it is necessary to clarify a term I will be using throughout this paper: *Indian*. Though many Americans use the term *Native American* instead, believing it to be more respectful and politically correct, throughout my research I have noticed that every single author I read (including Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie and Vine Deloria, Jr., cited in this paper) who was a descendent of indigenous peoples self-identified as *Indian*. Though the very term *Indian* recalls the history of European imperialism and domination, Indians seem to be reclaiming the term, and it is for this reason that I will use it.

purchased by many, Curtis’ photographs were (and continue to be) reproduced in many different formats and publications, until they became the signature reference images for White Americans of Indian life.<sup>2</sup> As Vine Deloria, Jr., historian and activist, writes in the introduction to Christopher M. Lyman’s *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*, “From personal experience I can testify to the sense of utter futility these [Curtis’] pictures are capable of producing. When starting to discuss Indian problems with a prominent senator, I found him shoving a book of Curtis pictures over his desk at me with the remark that he ‘knew a great deal about Indians.’”<sup>3</sup> Deloria’s comment references the idea that just as humans tend to believe that a photograph is visual evidence that something took place or was a certain way, White Americans came to believe that Curtis’ images were truthful



documents of Indian life—never mind that Curtis manipulated the settings and dress of his Indian subjects.

During his lifetime, Curtis saw the height of the Indian Wars and the final White domination of the North American continent at the turn of the century. As someone who came into maturity at the tail end of Western expansion and White-Indian conflict, Curtis viewed Indians as a noble people whom it would be tragic to forget. And so, Curtis began a photographic index to document what he called “the vanishing race.”<sup>4</sup> However, in his efforts to document and

**Figure 1: Edward Curtis, A.B. Upshaw—Apsaroke, undated.**

Introduction to *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*, Christopher Lyman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

preserve his White-tinged understandings of Native peoples, he sought to depict Indians in a way that fully expressed their “primitiveness,” that “true Indianness... which was unaffected by White culture”—even if it meant trading his subject’s trousers for buckskin breeches.<sup>5</sup> For example, one can look to his portrait of A.B. Upshaw, his Crow translator (Fig. 1). The image is closely cropped, with Upshaw in full tribal regalia, looking into the distance. Upshaw’s chest is bare, except for the white beaded breastplate that drapes down his chest, creating a smooth verticality from his head to the bottom of the portrait. However, E.A. Rinehart’s portrait of Upshaw in a turn-of-the-century suit with combed-over hair actually portrays the translator in the attire he chose to wear (Fig. 2). According to Lyman, Curtis’ impulse to clothe his subjects in Indian garb, whether or not they normally wore it, depicts his desire to preserve the “true primitiveness” of his Indian subject.<sup>6</sup>

As one scholar, Anne Maxwell suggests in her book *Colonial Exhibitions and Photography*, Curtis saw himself as a sort of intermediary between White and Indian culture. Curtis often bragged that because he first gained the trust of the Indians he photographed, he was made party to tribal secrets, or even honorarily inducted into some tribes. As Maxwell states, “portraying the vanishing Indian as a romantic hero not only salved his [Curtis’] conscious but permitted him to claim the role of photographer-explorer”—thereby referencing certain notions that photography was a tool



**Figure 2: credited to E. A. Rinehart, *A.B. Upshaw—Interpreter*, undated.**

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

of fantasy and discovery.<sup>7</sup>

However, photography's enormous power was even better described by another White photographer of Indians, Frank A. Rinehart, in his 1899 book entitled *Rinehart's Indians*. He states of the camera at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it "was ever busy recording scenes and securing types of those interesting people who with their savage finery are rapidly passing away. In a remarkably short time education and civilization will stamp out the feathers, bead and paint—the sign language, the dancing—and the Indian of the past will live but in memory and pictures."<sup>8</sup> The "stamp[ing] out" of the "feathers, bead and paint" references the intensified destruction of Indian peoples at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1899, the Indian Wars were over and the West was considered settled White territory. Indian tribes had been forcefully relocated to reservations hundreds of miles from their own ancestral grounds, often leaving them in conditions of abject poverty. And children had been stolen from their families and sent to re-education schools, where they were forced to don Western clothing, learn English, and abandon their traditions. In short, at the time that Rinehart published his collection of Indian photographs, the Indian had undergone a near-complete cultural genocide. Rinehart's even entitling his photographic collection *Rinehart's Indians* reveals a peculiar sense of ownership of Indians that Rinehart seems to have felt he possessed—a possession that resulted from domination.

This domination can be most gruesomely seen in George Trager's photographs of the massacre at Wounded Knee, on which J. Marshall Beier has written in his article "Grave Misgivings: Allegory, Catharsis, Composition." Beier describes how on December 29, 1890, the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry opened fire on the 300 Sioux that constituted the camp of Lakota Chiefs Bigfoot and

---

<sup>7</sup> Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: representations of the "native" and the making of European identity* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), 110.

<sup>8</sup> Bonnie M. Miller, "The Incoherencies of Empire: The 'Imperial' Image of the Indian at the Omaha World's Fairs of 1898-99," *American Studies* 49, no.3/4: 39.

Red Cloud. After the shooting, eighty-four men and sixty-two women and children lay dead.<sup>9</sup> Six days later, George Trager photographed the frozen bodies where they still lay strewn in the snow, and then documented the mass burial of the dead by US soldiers.<sup>10</sup> These photographs later became distributed as popular postcards, of which the *Chadron Democrat* wrote just after publication in January 1891: “there are a number of beauties among them, and they are just the thing to send to your friends back east.”<sup>11</sup> Among these images of days-dead Indians, frozen in awkward positions with expressions of death marked on their faces, the most iconic was the image of Bigfoot (Fig. 3). Frozen in a strange position with his arms sticking up and his chest



**Figure 3: George Trager, *Bigfoot [Minneconjou Lakota] lying dead in the snow at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, January 1891, 1891.***

elevated on some unseen support, Bigfoot is a contrasting form of black against a background of white snow. Trager cropped the image closely, drawing attention to the mangled nature of Bigfoot’s body by trying to fit it within his square frame. Another odd element of the image is the

<sup>9</sup> Frank H. Goodyear III, *Red Cloud: Photographs of a Lakota Chief* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall J. Beier, “Grave Misgivings: Allegory, Catharsis, Composition,” *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 2: 251.

<sup>11</sup> John E. Carter, “Making Pictures for a News-Hungry Nation,” in *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee*, eds. Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul & John E. Carter (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 50.

high angle at which the picture was taken—it appears that Trager snapped the camera while standing over Bigfoot, thus positioning the viewer physically and psychologically above him. There is no empathy in this image, and one almost forgets that the photograph's subject is a corpse. Curtis, Rinehart, and Trager's images acted as justifications for White expansion, in which photographic domination of Indians became equivalent to political, social, and cultural domination.

### **Early uses of photography to resist White expansion and racist visual rhetoric**

Though photography was a tool of subjugation for Indian peoples, Indians found ways to subvert the power dynamic of artist and subject. Perhaps the most powerful example of an Indian using photography intentionally to gain power is that of Red Cloud from the Oglala Lakota tribe. From the 1870s until the turn of the century, Red Cloud posed for 128 photographic portraits—which makes him the most photographed Indian in history.<sup>12</sup> As a prominent warrior-turned-diplomat, Red Cloud understood photography's potential in his cause to win more favorable land negotiations in with the US government. As Frank H. Goodyear III states in his book, *Red Cloud: Photographs of a Lakota Chief*, “although one can only speculate as to why Red Cloud was drawn to photography, it was the case that photography's “punctum”—its capacity to grasp or “sting” a viewer psychologically—not only appealed to him but also presented him with a potentially powerful medium through which to communicate.”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, because of Red Cloud's infamous warrior days, photographs of him were widely circulated and exchanged as postcards, thus subscribing a greater social impact to his portraits.

Red Cloud appears within his many photographs in different guises and identities. Sometimes he is dressed in full chief regalia, or Western dress, or a hybrid of the two.

---

<sup>12</sup> Goodyear, 189.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Sometimes he is posed alone, while other times he is posed with White men. However, despite Red Cloud's use of photography for subversive purposes, his agency within the image was still extremely limited—he was still a subject, and thus at the mercy of the photographer. Figure 4 shows Red Cloud having posed himself in a combination of White and Indian dress. He wears the Euro-American shirt and waistcoat, yet his hair is long with a feather in it, a Lakota blanket is spread across his lap, and elaborate beaded moccasins cover his feet. Red Cloud cradles a peace pipe—a common theme in his portraits—which held special meaning because peace pipes were “often brought out at diplomatic proceedings with outside nations.”<sup>14</sup> Always intentional in his dress and presentation, Red Cloud wears a silver peace medal he had just received earlier in 1877 from Washington for agreeing to relocate his tribe in exchange for food and supplies.<sup>15</sup> For Indians like Red Cloud who understood the US government's history of renegeing on promises, photographic evidence of treaties and



**Figure 4: James E. Meddaugh, [untitled, Red Cloud, late 1870s], Nebraska State Historical Society.**

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 41.



accords was crucial. Red Cloud's choice to wear the medal also communicated to the American public that he considered himself a diplomatic partner who would cooperate with Washington only if it would benefit his people.

In most of his portraits, Red Cloud's gaze does not meet that of the viewer—suggesting that he was still the subject of voyeurism and could not actively gaze at White America. Behind him, a painted backdrop situates Red Cloud in an imitation of nature—thereby reflecting the fantastical aura that was projected upon Indians as inhabitants of a time and place that no longer existed. Balancing both the welfare of his people and the demands of Whites, “Red Cloud used photography as a means of simultaneously paying deference to and resisting those Euro-Americans who sought to subjugate the Lakotas”—a tactic that revealed his pragmatism against the onslaught of White expansion.<sup>16</sup> Even if Red Cloud could not create the kind of radical political change that would prevent Euro-American expansion, he could use photography to negotiate the terms through which this transition would take place, thus regaining at least a portion of power for Lakota diplomacy.

Though conditions for Indians in America did not improve within the coming decades, by the 1920s Indians were beginning to take hold of the camera and record their own images of their people and culture. Horace Poolaw was one such Indian who recorded images that both honored Indian identity and subverted the historical power dynamic inherent in photography. In one example, *Trecil Poolaw Unap, Mountain View, Oklahoma, 1929* (Fig. 5)<sup>17</sup>, Poolaw shows a relative of his posed against the pole of the a sign. The sign, however, is critically important to understanding the subversive nature of the image: it is the legal boundary between reservation and non-reservation soil. Trecil, the subject, boldly returns the gaze of the viewer with her back

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, I couldn't find this image anywhere on the internet, so I had to photocopy it out of the book—which explains the poor quality of the image.

up against the sign. Poolaw juxtaposes her defiant body language with the sign, thus challenging Indian experience with land, law, and borders.

Trecil is shown not in traditional Indian dress, but in the style of cotton dress that was popular at the time. Poolaw's depiction of Trecil in contemporary dress is extremely important, because it subverted the American myth that the Indian no longer existed. The Indian was not a noble race that had died out, and that could only be represented in past centuries. The Indian, as Poolaw reminds us, was and still is living in contemporary America, very much alive and very much adapted to modern life. As



**Figure 5: Horace Poolaw, *Trecil Poolaw Unap, Mountain View, Oklahoma, 1929*. Silver Gellatin print. Horace Poolaw Photography Collection.**

Jolene Rickard says of this image in her article “The Occupation of Indigenous Space as ‘Photograph,’” “Gone are the guns and ponies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, now signs and ‘legal’ systems are the battlefield of Indian resistance.”<sup>18</sup> And for Poolaw, this “battlefield” of “signs and ‘legal systems’” was on the Indian reservation—a space where the effects of Euro-American expansion still stung.

---

<sup>18</sup> Jolene Rickard, “The Occupation of Indigenous Space as ‘Photograph,’” in *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, ed. Jane Alison (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998), 67.

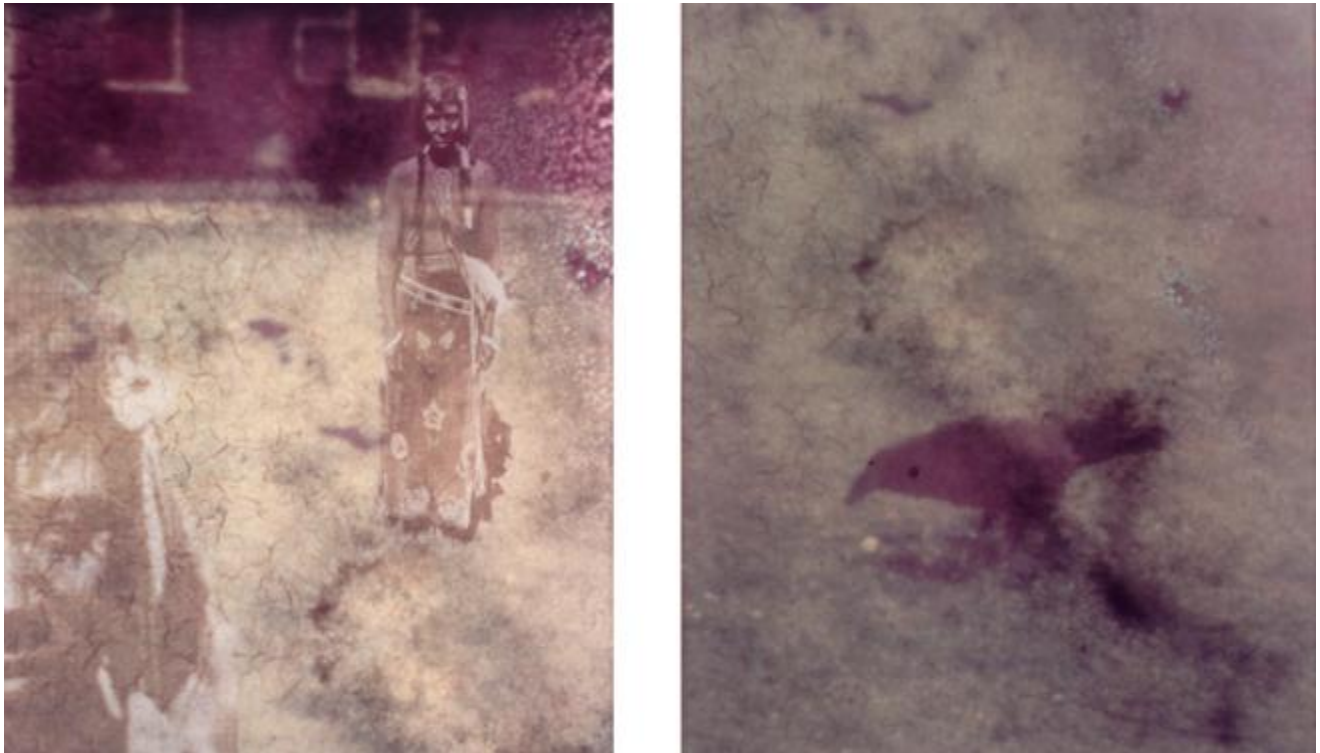
Also significant in the image is the presence of the photographer. Unlike the White images of Indians where the photographer is the invisible voyeur, in this Indian-made image we see the shadow of the photographer, reminding us of the dynamic between subject and artist. This sort of consciousness of power and hierarchy serves as a critique of White photography—made even more dissident by Poolaw’s choice to title the image in a way that doesn’t directly acknowledge his intentions. The title situates the viewer by letting them know who, where and when they are seeing—another reminder that the image is contemporary and placed within reality.

### **Contemporary Indian photographers revisit the past**

As the decades have unfurled, Indian resistance to White photographic power has only increased. The identity-consciousness movements of the 1970s and 1980s, along with the foundation of the American Indian Movement, sparked the development of increased Indian agency in art. While some sought out new subject material, other Indian artists chose to revisit the racist, essentializing depictions of Indians that dominated visual culture. One such photographer is Pamela Shields of the Blackfoot/Blood Band. Shields’ *Bird Woman, 1997* is a digitally manipulated print that appropriates a 19<sup>th</sup> century image of a Kanai woman to make a statement about the historical relationship between Indians and photography (Fig. 6).

The piece is a diptych, with the left panel depicting overlaid images: the Kanai woman, an outdoor scene by a building, a close up of the Kanai woman’s face, and various textures. The right diptych is an image of a raven with overlaid textures. The colors of the both images are muted and sepia-like, with slight hints of purple and green. There is not much contrast between the lights and darks of the diptych images, creating an eerie, nostalgic atmosphere in which the Kanai woman appears as a ghost, or an impression that will soon fade away. As scholar Theresa

Harlan writes about the image, “With *Bird Woman*, she [Shields] reaches out to a woman caught in a warp of photographic time and pulls her back to the land of her origin, reconnecting her to Kanai memories and place.”<sup>19</sup> Harlan’s comment suggests the activist nature of Shield’s work—an activism that seeks to rescue those Indians caught in the “warp of photographic time,” and return them to the tribal “memories” that existed as a sufficient means of documentation before White photography emerged.



**Figure 6: Pamela Shields, *Bird Woman*, 1997, 1997, digitally manipulated print**

Like Pamela Shields, Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie is a contemporary Indian photographer working to subvert problematic images of Indians. In her digital print *Damn! There goes the Neighborhood!*, Tsinnahjinnie juxtaposes a 19<sup>th</sup> century image of an Indian holding a gun with an image she took of an Oscar Meyer wiener car in a dry landscape (Fig. 7).<sup>20</sup> With digital

<sup>19</sup> Theresa Harlan, “Indigenous Photographies: A Space for Indigenous Realities,” in *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, ed. Jane Alison (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998), 214.

<sup>20</sup> The text has been partially cut off on the right side, but in the original image, it appears in its entirety.

technology, Tsinhnahjinnie has added smoke to the Indian's gun, and the quippy line "Damn! There goes the Neighborhood!" in a thought bubble above the Indian's head. This piece is part of the *Damn!* series, in which Tsinhnahjinnie appropriated 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs of Indians, placed them in a modern context, and added text to reveal the subject's thoughts.

Tsinhnahjinnie's appropriation of 19<sup>th</sup> century images is similar to that seen in Shields' work, however, Tsinhnahjinnie uses this contrast to poke fun at the old images, and to give a voice to the Indian in the photograph who became a voiceless subject. Like Poolaw's image of Trecil, *Damn! There goes the Neighborhood!* references the idea of territory and space. The text that Tsinhnahjinnie inserts—which amusingly doesn't seem to match the tone or facial expression of the original photograph—reveals that the character is concerned about encroachment on land which he considers his "neighborhood." That it is an Oscar Meyer wiener truck adds a note of



**Figure 7:** Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, *Damn! There goes the neighborhood*, digital print.

irony—that this is what White American culture removed the Indians from their homelands for: commercialism and hot dogs. The phallic nature of the hot dog may also reference White aggression towards Indians throughout history and their desire to overwhelm indigenous peoples through a genocide that could be described as hyper-masculine.

However, the image does not display the Indian as helpless to these territorial invasions, as most historical photographs do. Instead, the Indian is placed in the foreground, gazing directly at the viewer—a position of power. Additionally, his gun is smoking, signifying that he has just taken action. Though the phallic hot-dog-truck-of-White-culture is imposing, the Indian's phallic gun is the more powerful weapon. With sardonic wit *Damn! There goes the Neighborhood!* comments upon the material-obsessed White culture while giving agency to Indian subjects of old photographs.

### **Conclusion**

The damage of 19<sup>th</sup> century photographic rhetoric can still be seen today in stereotypical construction of Indians and white appropriations of Indian identity. The images of Curtis, Rinehart and Trager still hover around us. Yet, there have been Indians who have creatively taken advantage of the potential of photography. Red Cloud used photography as a politically charged tool of diplomacy and resistance. Horace Poolaw picked up a camera and produced images of his Indian culture through his own eyes, questioning the American legal system and reservation politics. Following in their footsteps, contemporary artists such as Shields and Tsinhnahjinnie continue to explore and subvert the visual rhetoric of 19<sup>th</sup> century photography by creating a new rhetoric—one that seeks to liberate the Indian from photographic subjection entirely.

It is with this idea of freeing the Indian from the photograph that I would like to conclude. In her essay “When is a photograph worth a thousand words?” Tsinhnahjinnie tells the story of her viewing George Trager’s photograph of Bigfoot laying dead in the snow following the massacre at Wounded Knee (Fig. 3). She writes:

I had a vivid dream of this photograph. In my dream I was an observer floating, I saw Big Foot as he is in the photograph, and my heart ached. I was about to mourn uncontrollably when in the scene walked a small child of about six-years old. She was searching for someone. Small moccasin footprints imprinted the snow as she walked over to Big Foot, looking into his face. She shakes his shoulders, takes his frozen hand into her small warm hand and helps him to his feet, he then brushes the snow off of his clothes. She waits patiently with her hand extended, he then takes her hand and they walk out of the photograph.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, “When is a photograph worth a thousand words?” in *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, ed. Jane Alison (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998), 47.

## Bibliography

- Alison, Jane, ed. *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*. London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998.
- Beier, J. Marshall. "Grave Misgivings: Allegory, Catharsis, Composition." *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 2: 251-269.
- Boehme, Sarah et al. *Powerful Images: Portrayals of Native America*. Seattle: Museums West, 1998.
- Bush, Alfred, and Lee Mitchell. *The Photograph and the American Indian*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Carter, John E. "Making Pictures for a News-Hungry Nation." In *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee*, edited by Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul & John E. Carter, 39–60. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.
- Deloria, Jr., Vine. Introduction to *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*. Christopher Lyman. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.
- Edwards, Elizabeth, ed. *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Faris, James. *Navajo and Photography: a critical history of the representation of an American people*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.
- Fowler, Don D. and John K. Hillers. *The Western Photographs of John K. Hillers: "myself in the water."* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.
- Goodyear III, Frank. H. *Red Cloud: Photographs of a Lakota Chief*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Hathaway, Nancy and Kurt Koegler. *Native American Portraits 1862-1918: photographs from the collection of Kurt Koegler*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990.
- Harlan, Theresa. "Indigenous Photographies: A Space for Indigenous Realities." In *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, edited by Jane Alison, 233-245. London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998.
- Lyman, Christopher. *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.
- Maxwell, Anne. *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: representations of the "native" and the making of European identity*. London: Leicester University Press, 1999.



- Miller, Bonnie M. "The Incoherencies of Empire: The 'Imperial' Image of the Indian at the Omaha World's Fairs of 1898-99." *American Studies* 49, no.3/4: 39-62.
- Pratt, Stephanie. "Reynolds' 'King of the Cherokees' and Other Mistaken Identities in the Portraiture of Native American Delegations, 1710-1762." *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (1998): 135-150.
- Rickard, Jolene. "The Occupation of Indigenous Space as 'Photograph.'" In *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, edited by Jane Alison, 57-71. London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998.
- Rosen, M. "American Indians; portraits by Charles Bird King." *Arts Magazine* 44 (May 1970): 33-34.
- Scherer, Joanna Cohan. "You Can't Believe your Eyes: Inaccuracies in Photographs of North American Indians." *Exposure* 16 (winter 1978): 6-19.
- Tsinhnahjinnie, Hulleah. "When is a photograph worth a thousand words?" In *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, edited by Jane Alison, 41-55. London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998.
- Wyatt, Victoria. "Interpreting the Balance of Power: A Case Study on Photographer and Subject in Images of Native Americans." *Exposure* 28 (winter 1991-92): 23-33.