The native as image: art history, nationalism, and decolonizing aesthetics

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Chapter 2

Curtis Today: Recuperating Nostalgia

Figure 10. Poster announcing Edward Curtis’s film *In the Land of the Headhunters*, 1914.

It is astounding to consider the great hold that Curtis’s images continue to hold on the imagination today. While the nostalgic aesthetic he developed make his photographs always already things of the past, their currency, particularly within Native communities, is undeniable. And it is a popularity that operates at many levels, from the exchange of popular kitsch paraphernalia to the attendance of fine art exhibitions featuring his work.

Although my focus is primarily imagery regarded as high art, Curtis’s work oscillates between the realms of pictorialist photography and popular culture. There is no doubt that the intended audience for the original project was not wide—$3,000.00 per subscription was a prohibitive sum but for the wealthiest individuals and institutions at the turn of the century—nor was it a project intended for the art world.\(^{33}\) Although Curtis produced *The North American Indian* as a scholarly ethnographic project, there were times when its presentation to the public is more like a sideshow. This was particularly the case at the last stages of

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\(^{33}\) The price per set began at $3,000, printed on vellum, to $3,850, printed on Van Gelder paper and later increased to $4,500.00 (Curtis Graybill and Boesen 20, 82).
compiling the final volumes, when the funding from wealthy patrons such as the Morgan family began to dry up and Curtis was forced to literally take the show on the road. In order to raise money, Curtis put together a multi-media production that included "motion pictures of esoteric rites, incomparable art slides, [and] a full orchestra rendering special Indian music."  

Current research on the implications of Curtis’s project for the development of a national imaginary at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly those of Gidley and Trachtenberg, do not address the relevance of Curtis’s archive today. Since the 1970s, there has been a resurgence of interest in these images, a renewed interest that coincided with many social movements that advocated civil rights. Curtis’s images quickly became icons for expressing Native pride, both publicly within political movements and privately within many Native homes. The Native scholar Vine Deloria notes that in the 1980s:

Everyone loves the Edward Curtis Indians. On dormitory walls on various campuses we find noble redmen staring past us into the sepia eternity along with poses of W.C. Fields and Humphrey Bogart. Anthologies about Indians, multiplying faster than the proverbial rabbit, have obligatory Curtis reproductions sandwiched between old clichés about surrender, mother earth, and days of glory. (Lyman 1982 11)

And Curtis’s aesthetic is prevalent enough that news media often invokes it when covering issues dealing with Native America before contact, as if somehow Curtis’s really had been here “before the white man came.” The cover of the October 12, 1998 issue of U.S. News & World Report features an image meant to be a generic representation of a Native American (Figure 11).  

This theatrical side of Curtis’s oeuvre has been the focus of the anthropologist Aaron Glass, who has recently restored Curtis’s In the Land of the Headhunters. While the irony seems to be lost on him, Glass himself reproduced Curtis’s showmanship by touring his film along with a dance troupe, members of the same Kwakwaka’wakw tribe that were featured in Curtis’s film.

The sepia-

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35 The image is simply identified as “photo illustration by James Porto.” The nationalist implications of locating origins is clearly illustrated by controversies surrounding the discovery of Kennewick Man, the skeletal remains of a man who died along the Columbia River about 9,300 years ago. The carbon dating of these remains, which were found in 1996, invigorated controversies around the dating of the earliest “Americans.”
toned image is in the format of a portrait and features an elderly man with long dark hair, traces of gray barely visible. He stares out in a stereotypical stoic pose and appears to be nude. The backdrop is barely legible but over his left shoulder we can see a generic aerial photograph of a coastline. The headline reads: “America before the Indians: New Discoveries are Rewriting Our History.” It is clear from the article that, despite an effort to cover a variety of perspectives, the “our history” of the headlines refers to a Western perspective. The article describes a number of competing scientific theories of how the Americas came to be populated. At no point are any Indigenous explanations considered and, in fact, the implication of some of the new theories considered point to the possibility that “America before the Indians” may have been populated by peoples from Europe rather than Asia, as has commonly been believed. And, of course, the significance of the publication date of this issue, Columbus Day, would not be lost on most readers.

Figure 11. Cover of U.S. News Report, October 12, 1998.

The complicated nature of Curtis’s archive—as ethnographic documentation, as avant-garde photography, and as popular iconography—makes a critical response difficult without addressing all of these aspects of his work, requiring an interdisciplinary practice. This archive is continuously activated by mu-
seums who own these images, institutions that are themselves fairly hybrid. These “western museums,” as they are called, such as the Autry Museum of the American West in L.A. or the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis, mainly focus on displaying “cowboys and Indians” as a celebration of Western expansion. These are often spaces that feature ethnographic and aesthetic objects, without making a distinction. It is in these spaces that Native artists are often invited to participate and to voice a response to the collection of Western artifacts, to offer “the Native perspective.”

Figure 12. Marcus Amerman, Hopi Snake Priest, 1994, antique and cut glass beads appliqué.

The ideological dimensions of this kind of response are exposed in the practice of the Choctaw artist Marcus Amerman. He is well known for his use of

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36 In addition to the Autry and Eiteljorg, other “western museums” include the Rockwell Museum of Western Art, Corning, NY; the Sid Richardson Collection of Western Art, Fort Worth, Texas; the Museum of Western Art, Denver, Colorado; the Museum of Wildlife Art of the American West, Jackson, Wyoming; the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. This list does not include museums that exclusively focus on Native American art.
traditional beadwork techniques in producing non-traditional imagery, including interpretations of portraits by Curtis, such as his Hopi Snake Priest (Figure 12). The work is deceptive in its seemingly straightforward translation of a sepia toned photograph to a colorful image made of translucent glass beads.

Before analyzing the differences between his interpretation and Curtis’s original, it is helpful to keep in mind that much of the meaning here is gained from Amerman’s choice of medium. Beading, like photography, is an appropriated medium; neither was developed within Native communities but both are now very much part of the history of Native art. However, the beadwork has often been used as a decorative technique mostly applied to garments. In this image, Amerman takes a photographic portrait and converts into a painterly image by adding rich fields of color. The substitution of hundreds of beads instead of pigment is an aesthetic means of reclaiming the image, to render the photograph of the nameless Hopi snake priest in a medium readily identified as Native.

Figure 13. Edward Curtis, Snake Priest, The North American Indian, v. 12, plate 418.

There are other ramifications of his use of colored beads. One significant effect is the way in which the beads, like the tesserae of a mosaic, limit the
amount of possible tonal transitions from one color to the other, thus making the work look pixilated. There is a way in which Amerman’s use of beads invokes the possibility of a digital practice, allowing us to consider the evolutionary transition from analog to digital within photography, an evolution disrupted by the use of beads. Another feature to think about is his choice of strong colors, which allude to a mechanically reproduced practice, such as silkscreen printing. In fact, the vibrancy of the tones recalls the strong colors frequently used by Pop artists. This association also challenges us to consider the easily reproduced images that artists such as Warhol manufactured versus the painstaking process of beadwork. Amerman’s technique is intensely laborious—each bead is applied by hand, obscuring Curtis’s image one bead at a time. Once again, a playful intervention that disrupts a modernist approach to reading his image.

In terms of the composition, we can see that Amerman has made a striking alteration when we compare his image to Curtis’s original (Figure 13). While the original image shows the subject carefully posed in an interior against a blank background, Amerman places the subject against a colorful landscape, returning this priest to his proper place, enacting a kind of felicitous siting. The colorful sunset behind Amerman’s subject can be seen as a return home, a strong contrast to the nebulous darkness into which the subjects of Curtis’s Vanishing Race disappear (Figure 3).

Another sort of response to Curtis was enacted by Amerman for an exhibition held in 2001 at the Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, titled “Staging the Indian: Politics of Representation,” Here he chose photography as his medium. In addition to Amerman, the exhibition featured works by Judith Lowry, James Luna, Shelley Niro, Nora Naranjo-Morse, and Bently Spang. Jill Sweet and Ian Berry, the co-curators of the exhibition, commissioned this prominent group of Native artists to respond to the college’s collection of Curtis images, a selection of which was also included in the exhibition. While the Curtis images were hung separately from the contemporary works, the point of the exhibition was to allow the Native artists to engage his work from a Native perspective.
In making the five images he included in the exhibition, Amerman’s strategy was to use mimicry to re-enact some of Curtis’s more iconic compositions. One example is *After the White Man Came*, a playful image in which the artist has copied the composition of Curtis’s *Before the White Man Came*, which I discussed above. A female figure is seen from behind, set against a pristine landscape (Figure 14). What is immediately apparent to the viewer of Amerman’s image, is that the figure in this idyllic scene is very much contemporary; she wears cut-off shorts, carries a plastic Igloo cooler on her head, is tattooed on her arm and leg, and even closer inspection reveals that her nails are painted black. Amerman’s strategy may be to address the methodological rigor that Curtis attempted to observe during his project. Curtis was fastidious about representing Natives in settings and garments devoid of any Western reference:

> Above all, none of these pictures would admit anything which betokened civilization, whether in article of dress or landscapes or objects on the ground. These pictures were to be transcriptions for future generations that they might behold the Indian as nearly lifelike as possible as he moved about before he ever saw a paleface . . . (Curtis Graybill and Boesen13)
Although it is tempting to read Amerman’s work as deconstructively playful, his is an ambivalent response. The essay he contributed to the catalogue for the exhibition disrupts an easy reading of his work as antagonistic. Amerman states that:

Many of Curtis’s Indians have long served as my models of fashion and integrity. I wanted to look like them, and moreover, I wanted to be like them, full of love and virtue, and confident in the value of their people, their religion, and their way of life. . . . Like warriors of old, they are able to bypass individual glory and material accumulation for the greater good of the people. To me, this is an essential quality and symptomatic trait of being a “real” Indian. (48)

It is unclear whether he is rupturing the artifice of temporal stability claimed by Curtis or whether his contemporary view pays homage to Curtis’s aesthetics while maintaining the primacy of Curtis’s work as the origin of this kind of imagery.

It is this sort of ambivalence, one that fluctuates “between mimicry and mockery,” that Homi Bhabha describes as the process by which:

the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double . . . What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable. (1994 86)

And yet, Amerman’s images are not alone in expressing his ambivalence toward Curtis’s archive. He has also written about his engagement with Curtis’s work:

In my opinion, Edward Curtis was a “real” Indian. I always say, some artists make money, and some artists make art, and some artists make “history.” Curtis knew what he was making and he did it for the illumination of Indian people. I thank him for that. (49)

It is not clear how ironic Amerman is being here. Although his gratitude appears genuine, the list of artistic figures he invokes is varied: the artist as entrepreneur; the artist as devoted to process, and then the kind of artist who, like Amerman’s Curtis, self-consciously and altruistically is focused on “making history.” The reality,
of course, is that Curtis fits all these descriptions.

This comparative exercise prompts the viewer to imagine this image as part of a series. Amerman’s “after” photograph becomes the latest in a chronological sequence of photographic moments that entices us to look for yet another image that precedes Curtis’s “before,” thus emphasizing that Curtis’s picture is also itself a simulation. In his analysis of the representation of Native Americans, titled *Fugitive Poses: American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*, the Native scholar Gerald Vizenor considers the simulacral function of certain kinds of representations Natives, those that are “proselocked in portraiture, intaglio, photogravure, captivity narratives, and other interimage simulation of dominance; . . . one simulation is the specious evidence of another” (1998 146). The approach of adding yet another image to the chronology implied by Curtis enacts what Bal has termed a “preposterous history.” In *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, she explains how contemporary interventions that reference earlier works do not just cite those works; they reconstruct them. Bal writes that “the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead” (1999 1).

Amerman’s reconstruction further deconstructs an image that, as I discussed earlier, is always already imploding. He highlights the ways in which Curtis exploited the camera’s ability to not only capture but also manufacture a moment in time. Photography is an optimum process for the rendering of a diegetic space that produces—and fulfills—a nostalgic longing for an imaginary place and time. Amerman’s project allows for a clearer view of the processes involved in the production of nostalgia within Curtis’s overall project.

**Nostalgia and Nation**

To fully consider the nationalist implication of the nostalgia invoked by Curtis’s

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37 Vizenor is here referring to Jean Baudrillard’s notion of simulacrum, which he describes as “the generation by models of a real without origin.” In terms of the representations of Indians as simulacra, Vizenor includes an interesting discussion of Andy Warhol's *American Indian* series, which featured the likeness of Russell Means (152-53).
oeuvre, it will be helpful to analyze more explicitly how nostalgia operates within nationalist discourses. The etymology of the term “nostalgia” explains much about its relationship to nationalism. It was first coined by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss physician, in 1688 in his “Dissertatio Medica de , oder Heimwehe” in which he described nostalgia as “the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one’s native land” (Anspach 380-81). He constructed the word by combining , ‘return home,’ and  ‘pain,’ in order to inscribe homesickness into medical discourse as a pathological disorder.

Since its use as a medical term, the word has had a complex history, including its application in the analysis of social relations. However, I am here concerned with the ideological implications of the production of nostalgic imagery. As Susan Stewart states:

[Nostalgia] is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire . . . nostalgia is the desire for desire. (1993 23)

In terms of its use as a visual category, nostalgia is invoked by images of invented idealized pasts, by representations of events as they should have happened but never did. Nostalgia can be thought of as a yearning for a past that never was.

In many ways the workings of nostalgia can be contrasted to the process of trauma. While the experience of trauma is the eruption in the present of a past event that has been repressed, nostalgia metaleptically attempts to conjure up a past by producing an absence in the present.39

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38 For a sociological history of nostalgia, see Davis, Yearning for Yesterday. Also see Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country.

39 Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams,
In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym, another theorist of nostalgia, has carefully outlined the production of nostalgia within the framework of nationalism. She notes that one of nostalgia’s sources of power is its ability to operate on both the individual as well as collective realms. She states that, “Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of the individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (2002, xvi). In terms of its use within nationalist narratives, nostalgia is an emotion optimally poised to function simultaneously on the personal and political levels.

Boym further distinguishes between two distinct and opposing types of nostalgia. One, which she terms *restorative nostalgia*, is the kind of nostalgia that idealizes the past in such a way as to eliminate any trace of history allowing a view of a pristine past without the blemishes of time, an ahistorical past. Curtis’s work is a complicated example of this sort of nostalgia. As Boym elaborates, “restorative nostalgia has no use for signs of historical time—patina, ruins, cracks, imperfections. . . . The past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot” (45, 49). For Curtis, however, the patina of time is already there from the beginning, the pastness of the image is built in; the Native image is already incased within sepia-colored historicity.

This type of nostalgia is quite different from *reflective nostalgia*, which hangs on to loss as a means of retrieving history. Boym states that for the reflective nostalgic “the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development” (50). It is tempting to place Amerman’s works based on Curtis as this kind of engagement, a redressing of Curtis’s legacy that is inconclusive about its role in the present. For Amerman, Curtis’s images are familiar readymades, ripe for Duchampian intervention. However, instead of drawing in a mustache, as Duchamp did with the Mona Lisa, Amerman dresses Curtis’s subjects in lustrous beads, much more appropriate regalia than the dull thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (4). For an overview of theories of trauma, see Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*. 
veils of sepia used by Curtis.

Boym’s summary of these two kinds of nostalgia underlines the differences in possibilities for the invocation of nostalgia within nationalist projects. “Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (41). The absence required by restorative nostalgia is that purposeful erasure that theorists of the nation-state have described as “a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.”40 The duplicity of this process has been described by Renato Rosaldo as “imperialist nostalgia.” Simply put, the production of imperialist nostalgia is a process by which the “agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed. . . . [It] uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (69).

We could say, then, that the systematic effort during the nineteenth century to incorporate the Native into the narrative of nation included the production of visual archives that provoked an imperialist nostalgia.41 In her study of how this process worked in literary representations, Scheckel states that: “[B]y claiming Indians, with their long history and mysterious origins, as part of their own national story, nineteenth-century Americans found a way to ground national identity in the distant, inaccessible, ‘immemorial past’” (8). Scheckel is referring to the process outlined by Benedict Anderson: “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of the immemorial past and, still more important, glide into the limitless future” (11-12). The Native image reifies the “immemorial past” that gives way to the nation’s origin. It is this relationship between the production of an ahistorical Native past and the representation of their impending vanishing future that is at work in Curtis’s

40 Ernst Renan’s lecture “What is a Nation?” has formed the basis for much discussion about the relationship between historiography and the process of nation building: “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle] of nationality” (11).

41 On the discursive construction of the nation as narrative, see Bhabha, Nation and Narration.
images.

In the meantime, the Native gaze continually attests to its own presence. And, in the form of media such as the photograph, it is a gaze capable of testifying to its own history. The recognition of a nostalgic desire, whether termed restorative, reflective, or, as I will discuss below, anti-imperialist, is central to the process of engaging with contemporary Native art that re-historicizes the visual representation of the Native. What follows is a further examination of how the medium of photography permits the production of alternative and productive nostalgic gazes.

Photography’s Testimonial Effect

The photographic medium has intrinsic qualities—particularly when it functions as a record of the past—that makes it phenomenologically a nostalgic medium. The relationship between the past presence depicted in photographs and the present of the viewer seems certain: the photograph must necessarily be a depiction of what once was. There is no assurance, however, that that past has any remnants in the present, except for the photograph itself. Reading a photographic image, therefore, is always a metaleptically reconstructive process. One sees the effect, the image, and is forced to produce its cause, the past recorded in the image.

In musing on the functions of photographs, Roland Barthes describes what I call the “testimonial effects” of the photograph, a process whose purpose is “to ratify what it represents.” He proposes that, “From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation” (1981, 85, 88, 89). To illustrate this metaleptic relationship between memory and representation that photographs produce—what I will call their testimonial effect—Barthes recounts:

One day I received from a photographer a picture of myself which I could not remember being taken, for all my efforts; I inspected the tie, the sweater, to discover in what circumstances I had worn them; to no avail. And yet, because it was a photograph I could not deny that I had been there (even if I did not know where). (85)

The fixedness of relating a past event to an image in the present makes a pho-
Barthes adds that, "The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time" (87-89).

It is the photograph’s ability to testify to a Native presence in the present that disrupts the national narrative of mythic origins found in Curtis’s work. As Scheckel explains: “Much as Americans might wish to incorporate Indians into a legitimating national narrative . . . any attempt to do so was inevitably undermined by the fact that living Indians remained to challenge the narratives by which they were relegated to a place in the history of a nation not their own” (39). Photographic representations of Natives demand a temporal reconstruction that cannot avoid the presence of Native resistance. As Chow states in the epigraph above: “[the Native image] needs to be rethought as that which bears witness to its own demolition—in a form that is at once image and gaze, but a gaze that exceeds the moment of colonization.”

The denial of the Native presence in the present not only has been essential for mythologizing the origin of the nation-state; it has also been part of the formation of “natural man” as the precursor to Western epistemology. Vine Deloria notes how this persistent primitive, ahistorical state of the Native has come to function as a necessary foil for the development of Western metaphysics:

We need the primitive so that we can distinguish Western civilization from it and congratulate ourselves on the progress that we have made. John Locke and Thomas Hobbes may have articulated the idea formally by beginning their theories of social contract with a hypothetical stage wherein primitive people established a society, but subsequent generations of Western people have wholeheartedly accepted the image without any critical examination of its validity. (2004 3)\textsuperscript{42}

In the West, the ahistorical primitive functions as the base, the origin, the ontological starting point for the development of all thought. In fact, modernity is de-

\textsuperscript{42} The process of conflating contemporary Natives with the mythological primitive who provided the “in the beginning” point of origins needed by these political theorists is discussed by Ranjana Khanna in her analysis of Freud’s Totem and Taboo. See “Freud in the Sacred Grove” in Dark Continent, 66-95.
fined as a distancing from this origin, as a development away from primitivism. Thus, the Native must remain outside the modern present, forever locked in the primitive past. When such a presence in the present is detected, it must be perceived as a trace, a remnant, a vanishing form whose act of disappearance assures the modernity’s progression.

In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian notes how this has functioned in the development of the discipline of anthropology. He describes this process of temporal distanciation as the denial of coevalness: “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (1983 31). This notion of the denial of coevalness is useful in thinking about the negation of a contemporary Native presence that seems to be necessary for the production and maintenance of Western nationalism.

My analysis of Curtis’s photography and its role in the production of an imperialist nostalgia leads us to a further consideration of Native perspectives and photographic practices. What kinds of resistance are possible to Western nationalist projects? What are the possibilities for Native nationalisms? How do Native artists represent these alternative perspectives?

Sovereignty has been at the core of most indigenous anti-colonial engagements. Self-determination, in terms of the religious, cultural, political, and economic practices of Native groups, is the goal of most efforts to maintain coherent Native communities. Although this may be the common objective, the form of this process of decolonization varies according to the traditions and histories of each group.⁴³

It is important to keep in mind that all subjugated Native groups had, and some continue to have, variant forms of nationalisms that predate contact with the West. It is not necessary to assume that Native decolonization will automatically lead to the establishment of states based on Western models of the nation-state. Since the present situation of most Native communities in North America is

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⁴³ For an excellent collection of essays dealing with Indigenous sovereignty, see Jaimes, *The State of Native America*. 
that they exist as nations without states, it is necessary to nuance the analysis of possible responses to colonialism. In his analysis of Native nationalism, the Mohawk political scientist Gerald R. Alfred considers non-Western theories of nationalism that transcend “outmoded conceptions equating nationalism with statehood and territoriality” (10). One theorist he examines is Uri Ra’anan, who posits a spectrum of nationalisms “ranging from primary cultural, religious and educational endeavors, via political organization, to the ultimate step of struggling for territorial or state power” (8). This range of possibilities takes into account ethnic and sub-political communities, which are categories that can be used to describe the organization of many Native communities today. Alfred proposes the term “‘non-statist’ nationalist ideologies” to describe alternative ideologies to those that advance the nation-state as the standard model for statehood.  

Considering the multiple possibilities for the constitution of Native nationalisms along with the varied approaches for the aesthetic production of nostalgia allows us to take a more complicated approach to the interpretation of contemporary Native art production, particularly that work which is overtly focused on a re-examination of Native history, both personal and communal.

In my analysis of Curtis’s project thus far, I have identified the aesthetics he used to invoke a nationalist, restorative nostalgia. I will now turn to an examination of works by two Native photographers who exemplify a genre of Native artwork that also produces a nationalist nostalgia, only in these examples the nationalisms they invoke promote ideologies based on Native epistemologies. These are projects that attempt to recover a nostalgia productive of Native histories.

While opportunities for Native artists to respond to the Western archive, such as that presented by the Staging the Indian exhibition I discussed above, are rare, these occasions are always fraught with expectations for authentic Native perspectives that promise to provide the appropriate insight, all the while maintaining the primacy of the Western archive. Art critic and curator Margaret Archuleta (Pueblo/Hispanic) has criticized the kinds of projects that force the Na-
tive artist to occupy the essentialized position of the Native. In a catalogue essay for a similar project, she writes: “The great irony of this is that while the premise of the exhibit is to offer an opportunity for the voice of the Other to speak for itself, it requires the responding voices to be compressed into a single voice, the Native voice” (1996 15). Native artists who accept invitations to these kinds of exhibitions are forced to produce reactive responses to an archive, often leading to a defensive posture. 45

There is, however, no need to elicit responses to the Western archive from “authentic Native artists.” In fact, many artists are not interested in responding to this archive but, instead, in expanding the archive Native American imagery with their own work. Much of the art by Native artist being done today is not reactive but, instead, proactively demonstrates a tendency to produce what I would call an “anti-imperialist nostalgia,” a set of aesthetic practices that still operate to invoke nostalgia, but, in this case, a nostalgia that is productive of a Native national imaginary. 46

An approach to constructing an archive of Native imagery that invokes anti-imperialist nostalgia is found in the work of various contemporary Native photographers. In addition to Amerman’s work, I will provide examples of two of the most visible contemporary Native photographers: Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Diné, Muscogee, Seminole) and Larry McNeil (Tlingit, Nisga’a). In their choice of

45 Another example of the possibilities for this kind of project was an exhibition titled “Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography” held at the Barbican Art Gallery in 1998-99. The catalogue for this exhibition serves as a supplement to this archive (Alison Native Nations). For the catalogue of another exhibition with a similar premise, this time featuring Native responses was to paintings of North American Natives by the nineteenth-century Swiss painter Peter Rindisbacher, see Oakes, Red River Crossings. I am grateful to Joanna Bigfeather for bringing this text to my attention and for providing me with a copy. For an exceptional project that solicited written responses from Native authors to photographic images of Native subjects, see Lippard, Partial Recall.

46 I first became aware of the deployment of nostalgia as an anti-imperialist strategy while watching Ke Kulana He Mahu: Remembering a Sense of Place, dir. Kathryn Zian and Brent Anbe, 67 min., Zang Pictures, 2001, a documentary dealing with Native notions of gender identity in Hawai‘i. Segments of the video featured black and white images that, at first sight, appeared as romanticized images of Hawai‘i during the 1940s. These images, however, were not being presented as records of an idealized imperial project but, instead, were shown as images of native Hawaiians who espoused traditional Native beliefs, images representing an extremely significant era for Hawaiians today.
subjects, as well as their formal treatments, these photographers are only some of the Native artists contributing to a photographic archive of Native representation that invoke a productive nostalgia that seeks to recreate and maintain Native communities.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 15.** Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie, *Portraits against Amnesia, Dad*, digital platinum lambda print, 2002, 30” X 20”.

This sense of community often begins at home, with family histories. “Portraits against Amnesia,” a series of ten digitally enhanced photographs produced in 2002 by Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, includes images of the artist’s father, her grandmother, as well as some images of what could be described as a kind of extended family—photographs of Native subjects that Tsinhnahjinnie has been collecting, or rather rescuing, from various commercial venues.\(^{47}\)

The image titled *Portraits against Amnesia, Dad*, features a snapshot image of the artist’s father, Andrew Van Tsinhnahjinnie, taken when he was nineteen years old (Figure 15).\(^{48}\) This photograph of her father, who was a well-known Navajo painter, is set against a background filled with elements from some of his own paintings. The semicircular forms at the bottom of the image, for example,

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\(^{47}\) The series is reproduced in Passalacqua, “Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie”.

\(^{48}\) Father and daughter spell their last names differently.
are elements taken from his painting of a weaver (Figure 16). The same is true for the mule rider seen to his right, and the Dine’ hogan at his left, which he used as his signature (Passalacqua 2003 91).

![Figure 16. Andrew Van Tsihnahjinnie. Untitled, casein, 12”; X 10”, c. 1950.](image)

Tsihnahjinnie’s image is not merely a tribute to her father; it is also a work that continues to develop what she describes as “that creative fire . . . of a long life full of prismatic complexities” (Tsihnahjinnie 2001 12). The piece not only refers to her father’s imagery, it also refers to another one of her own works that features the same photograph. That image, titled Dad (#4) and produced in 1994, is part of a series titled Photographic Memoirs of an Aboriginal Savant (Figure 17). The series is a set of fifteen digitally enhanced photographs with text entries that form an “electronic diary.” Each page is an observation on a variety of topics ranging from forced assimilation, sexuality, sovereignty, and colonization. In terms of the artist’s formal approach, this series also employs a nostalgic aesthetic. The images and text are printed on the yellowed pages from old books, which connote authenticity to her “memoirs.” Her use of digitally pro-

49 For other images of his work, see Passalacqua, Andrew Van Tsihnahjinnie. I am grateful to Veronica Passalacqua for providing me with a copy of this catalogue.

50 The full series is reproduced in Passalacqua, “Hulleah Tsihnahjinnie”.
duced images printed on aged paper, however, creates a temporal disjuncture: these pages from the past bring messages from the present. Tsinhnahjinnie’s work can be read as being part of a process of “writing back,” of retroactively constructing the archive.

The reemergence of her father’s photograph in her art is emblematic of Tsinhnahjinnie’s attempts to return to the photographic archive images that have been long out of view—a Native view. These images not only include personal family photos but also those photographic images of Natives found within a specialized economy of collecting—the collecting of early photographs of Natives by non-Natives. A project that Tsinhnahjinnie has been pursuing for some time is the recovery of these images, which at times become available for sale through the internet, by purchasing them herself.\(^{51}\) She has used some of these rescued

\(^{51}\) Presentation at the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute titled “Working from Community: American Indian Art and Literature in a Historical and Cultural
images in her work and, thus, reincorporates them into the visual history of Native America.\footnote{52}{Tsinhnahjinnie’s investment in the recovery of Native imagery includes the historizing of native photographers. She explores the importance of a Native perspective in historizing photographs of natives, especially early works by Native photographers, in “When is a Photograph Worth a Thousand Words?”}

Earlier I discussed Baer’s work on the relationship between the Holocaust and photography as exemplifying a traumatic encounter with representation. The parallels between the properties of that archive and the legacy of photographic representation of Native Americans are many. The kind of restorative work performed by Tsinhnahjinnie is akin to the use of archive sources by artists engaged in addressing the history of the Holocaust. In “Visual Archives as Preposterous History,” Ernst van Alphen applies Bal’s notion of “preposterous history” I discussed earlier to the work of artists who use the archive as sort of medium. Because the archive, as an accumulation of testimonies, autobiographies, and other documentary evidence, is often conceived as a raw, formless mass, it is ripe for artistic manipulation, a practice that Van Alphen calls the “archival mode of representation” (2007 365).

In fact, Tsinhnahjinnie’s endeavor to collect early photographs of Native Americans is similar to the massive collecting project of the artist and collector Ydessa Hendeles, which Van Alphen includes in his discussion of the Holocaust visual archive. For many years, Hendeles has been amassing a vast collection consisting mainly of photographs that share one detail: each contains an image of a teddy bear. She brought thousands of these images together to form an installation she titled \textit{Partners (Teddy Bear Project)}, which was exhibited at the Haus der Kunst, Munich in 2002. The photographs covered the walls to the point that she has built a mezzanine to allow visitors to see all the images. Another part of the exhibition was an empty room, except for a small figure kneeling on the floor. On closer inspection, the viewer is confronted with a figure whose body is that of a child but whose face is that of a mature Adolf Hitler, a startling combina-

Context” organized by Gail Tremblay and myself at The Evergreen State College during the summer of 2003. Tsinhnahjinnie’s presentation was on July 21, 2003.
tion of innocence and evil.

Although the connection between these two rooms, between the teddy bear and Hitler, is not immediately apparent, we learn from Hendeles that she means to point at the contradictions inherent in both. The figure of the teddy bear, whose referent is a dangerous wild animal, is also a cuddly companion. Similarly, Hitler, who devised the atrocious mechanics of the Holocaust, was also a figure who was a source of comfort for the Nazis. As she stated in the catalogue for the exhibition,

The system of the teddy bear archive raises the notion of other systems created with strict stipulations, and how they can, because they appear to make sense, persuasively manipulate reality. The purity of race to which Hitler inspired was the application of a system of rules. Like the teddy bear, Hitler shares a duality of origin, where danger is domesticated. (qtd. in Van Alphen 2007 376)

In drawing this parallel, Hendeles is emphasizing not so much the focus of collecting an archive, its focal object, but the organizing schema that already persuades because of its own consistency.

The logic of the archive, the sense it makes of a collection even before being compiled, is an important aspect of Hendeles’s work. At first, her enormous accumulation of photographs appears to defy any coherence. However, chaos quickly turns into disciplined archive when the viewer begins to understand that the project is mainly about order, about classification, about the typological administration of these images. As Van Alphen puts it, “the Nazis were master archivists” (369).

Keeping the specter of such archival projects in mind, one can begin to consider the archive of Native American imagery within a context that takes into account not only the variety of imagery that constitutes it but also the typology that drives its accumulation. Hendeles, and other artists working within the archival mode, point to the possibilities of intervening in these master archival projects. However, there is a difference between Hendeles’s critique and Tsinhnahjinnie’s approach to the archive. While Hendeles’s work points to the monstrous possibilities of the archive, Tsinhnahjinnie’s project sees the productive possi-
bilities of accumulating imagery that reclaims an obscured history, one whose scattered elements can be reunited with their source communities. Hers is not a project that merely deconstructs the legacy of an existing archive, but one that also produces a supplementary archive, a supplement that demonstrates a different structuring logic, one based on Indigenous epistemology.

Tsinhnahjinnie is adamant about the possibilities for an art that affirms the preciousness of Native identity. And she insists that: “we have to instigate that preciousness.” It is a process that allows for the appropriation of the photographic image, for attaining what she has termed “photographic sovereignty.” She recounts how she came to see the possibility of owning these images:

At first when I began reading ethnographic images I would become extremely depressed and then recognition dawned. I was viewing the images as an observer, not as the observed. My analytical eye matured, I became suspicious of the self-appointed “expert” narrative. . . . That was a beautiful day when the scales fell from my eyes and I first encountered photographic sovereignty. A beautiful day when I decided that I would take responsibility to reinterpret images of Native peoples. My mind was ready, primed with stories of resistance and resilience, stories of survival. My views of these images are aboriginally based, an Indigenous perspective, not a scientific Godly order, but philosophically Native. (1999 42)

It is a perspective that most likely benefits from the Dine’ principle of hózhó, which guides people to “live in peace, balance, and well-being.” Dine’ artist Jimmy Toddy explains that to have this worldview means to “walk in beauty, beauty road, beauty way. Beauty behind me and beauty ahead of me, where I am going, where the grandfathers lived” (Tsinhnahjinnie 1999 42).

One of Tsinhnahjinnie’s aesthetic approaches is to enhance the photographs digitally, often employing visual strategies that invoke nostalgia. In Portraits against Amnesia, Grandma, the sepia toned image of her grandmother, most likely a family photograph that shows her wearing contemporary dress and

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53 In presenting these images, Tsinhnahjinnie stated that it was our responsibility to recover this quality: “We have to instigate that preciousness.” NEH Institute, July 21st, 2003.
hairstyle, is rendered in sharper focus, bringing her forward against the blurred background. This very present figure is also surrounded by abstract orange dots, which appear to float around her and vary in transparency (Figure 18). It is difficult not to associate these elements with the iconic dots of Yayoi Kusama, whose obsession with this element led her to cover a variety of surfaces with an infinite number of similar dots. One severe effect of Kusama’s blanketing with dots is the flattening of space. Kusama’s dots function like camouflage, such that the obfuscating pattern prevails, beating out the rest of the visual field. An important difference, however, is that Tsinhnahjinnie’s dots imply a three-dimensional space; they vary in size and density, and there are even some that are partially obscured by the subject. They work to emphasize that these forms should be read as floating and surrounding the central figure. As such, these enigmatic dots may be a visual representation of hózhó, to walk in beauty. Another culturally relevant iconographical detail is the orange color of these dots, which can be read as a signifier that relates to corn pollen, an extremely significant substance used in most Diné traditional ceremonies.

Figure 18. Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie, Portraits against Amnesia, Grandma, digital platinum lambda print, 2002, 30” X 20”.
Whatever the meaning one attributes to these orange elements, they alter the kind of passive ethnographic reading elicited by Curtis’s images. The viewer is forced to negotiate the alteration of the image and the artist’s exercise of “photographic sovereignty,” her self-declared authority to recode the image.

Figure 19. Hulleah J. Tsilhnahjinnie, Portraits against Amnesia, Che-bon, digital platinum lambda print, 2002, 30” X 20”.

Another significant image from this series is Portraits against Amnesia, Che-bon, which the artist acquired from the e-Bay (Figure 19). The digital manipulation of this image is much more subtle. She has added blotches and other marks to accentuate the already aging photograph. The addition of this visual patina charges the image with a sense of fragility, decay, and history. Unlike the portrait of her grandmother, the subject of this image is unknown and not directly related to the artist. Nonetheless, its inclusion in this series highlights the loss of an archival record of imagery representing subjects whose dignity is visually regained. These kinds images, for which there is a vibrant market of non-Native collectors, supplement the more canonical archive of Native photographs. Tsinh-
nahjinnie brings the image into a context beyond the ethnographic gaze of the collector.

Unlike imperialist nostalgia, which works to obscure the violence of colonization, the aesthetic invocation of nostalgia employed by Tsíhnahjinnie serves to make visible the process of restoration and decolonization, the reemergence of a past that reaffirms the Native presence in the present. Her project is a metaleptic reversal of the before and after images produced for the Carlisle Indian School, a recovery of lost nostalgia.  

This affirmative contextualization is also visible in the work of Larry McNeil, a Tlingit and Nisga’a artists who is primarily a photographer. He, too, uses family photographs to produce a vision of a precious past, a worldview particularly informed not only by Native history but specifically by his Tlingit and Nisga’a iconography, a view colored, quite literally, in a different light than Curtis’s.

An excellent example of the formal approach to the nostalgic picture making I have been describing is Grandma, We Who are Your Children (Figure 20). The image is heavily layered; in order to see the allusions to a national identity it is important to identify the various layers that are significant to a Tlingit perspective. At first sight, we see a photograph of the artist’s maternal grandmother and her clan family, taken around 1918, visible through a haze of colors that bring to mind the various colors of a copper patina. This particular tone, Chilkat Blue, is highly significant to the Tlingit: it is a color that explicitly connotes wealth. The Tlingit had an exchange system based on copper, and the metal, along with color of its oxidized state, are still powerful signifiers of status. A particularly valuable item used in exchanges, and opulently gifted during potlatch ceremonies, is called a copper, which is the name given to a valued breastplate made of this precious metal (Figure 29).

Another element that is particularly Tlingit is the dark vertical figure that occupies the center of the image. This form may not be readily legible as a representation of the fin of a killer whale, particularly because of the hole found

For an excellent analysis of the history of the photographic representation of the Navajo, which includes a short analysis of Navajo self-representation, see Faris, Navajo and Photography.
towards its top. However, it is a particularly Northern Tlingit rendition of the fin, easily identified by the members of the community as well as those familiar with Tlingit iconography. This element refers to the fact that McNeil’s Tlingit family was born into the Killer Whale House in Juneau, Alaska. Although the work would appear to be primarily a group portrait, the artist identifies it instead as a “monumental landscape.” He explains that for him the notion of a Western landscape, with its emphasis on depicting empty land, is not part of a Tlingit pictorial tradition. His approach, in fact, sets the figures he depicts in a nebulous space, a landscape without land. The killer whale fin and the family group, then, function as markers of place; they become metonyms for the Tlingit nation.

Figure 20. Larry McNeil, *Grandma, We Who are Your Children*, monotype, photo transfer, 2001.

55 Interview with the artist, May 14, 2004.

56 According to McNeil, his use of inks and a printing press, rather exclusively working to the digital approach he had been using, enabled him to come up with the correct shade of blue. Interview with the artist, May 14, 2004. A similar challenge in replicating this blue oxide color for Chilkat weavers is dramatically recounted in Samuel, *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket*. I thank Janet Berlo for this reference.

For a brief summary of the historical and economical significance of these copper crests, see Jonaitis, *Chiefly Feasts.*
Another of McNeil’s images, In the True Spirit of White Man, plays with the notion of nostalgia, only this time he seems to be directly addressing the absence imposed by imperialist nostalgia (Figure 21). As with the image of his grandmother, there is an abstract field, which he identifies as a landscape, against which a photograph has been placed. It is a contact image from a large format black and white negative depicting the artist casually posing against an old car, which has been digitally colored with the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag. The soft black and white tones of the image are disrupted by the harshness of the car’s red, white, and blue.

Above the image, there is text that narrates a story of the artist’s relationship to this nationalist vehicle: it is a vehicle in the process of being stolen (Figure 22). The text reads:

In the true spirit of the white man, I stole this car in my search for america. Just call it manifested destiny. I asked the owner to take my picture in front of his car before I took it and assured him that it was god’s will that I take his car. god meant for this fine machine to be flying down the freeway, I told him. Are you a real indian he asked. I thought you were all vanished.
As soon as you give me the keys I’ll be another vanishing Indian I told him. Can you look more noble? I told him sorry, this is as stoic as I can manage for now. He asked if I had any regalia to put on, you know, to make it look authentic. This is as real as it gets I told him. I saw in a book that you people were all vanished, he said again. I asked him if he still has his native culture and who is the vanished one, you or me . . . He told me that his grandfather was Edward Curtis and that he made some of the best photographs ever of Indians before they vanished. Like me? Yes he said, exactly like you. Thanks for the car I told him, but I’ve got some serious vanishing to catch up on . . .

Figure 22. Larry McNeil, In the True Spirit of White Man, 2002, black & white film, palladium spills and digital imaging, detail.

As viewers, we are placed in the position of the photographer, who, according to the narrative, is Edward Curtis’s grandson and now the former owner of the garishly patriotic vehicle. As such, we are left with the photograph as the memento of the encounter with McNeil, who has otherwise vanished with the car. The humor employed in the narration is the kind often associated with the figure of the trickster. In his assessment of the use of humor by Native artists, Allan Ryan defines a trickster sensibility as “most often characterized by frequent teasing, outrageous punning, constant wordplay, surprising association, extreme subtlety, layered and serious reference, and considerable compassion” (1999 xii).

Various Native communities represent the figure of the trickster as embodied in many guises: often a clown, sometimes a coyote, or a hare, or, as in this case, it is a raven. The raven is the traditional trickster figure among many Native com-
munities in the Northwest, including the Tlingit, and McNeil often employs this figure in his work. In this instance, we are given a clue when we read the imprint on the left margin of the negative film used to produce this smaller image, which reads “ravenchrome” instead of the expected Kodachrome.

Despite the humorously sarcastic tone of the dialogue, McNeil notes that this work was done as a response to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, and the patriotism and jingoism that followed. In an editorial that appeared in the Idaho Statesman on March 14, 2002, McNeil equated the terrorist attacks to the genocidal campaigns of the U.S. against Native peoples. He stated that, “What most Americans do not want to acknowledge is that this is what happened to the people that first inhabited America. . . . For many First Nations people, the memory of the wholesale killing is recent and raw, just one generation ahead of my parents’ generation.” Images of the dead are barely visible behind the palladium spills, where one can make out images of skulls announcing the traumatic return of the death that is continually experienced in the name of empire (Figure 23).

![Figure 23.](image)

Figure 23. Larry McNeil, *In the True Spirit of White Man* (Detail), 2002, black & white film, palladium spills and digital imaging.
McNeil’s posture appears to fluctuate from a confrontational to an ironic stance. His sly sense of humor, often originating from a specifically Tlingit cultural perspective, is sharply focused on conveying truths that use photographs as a way to mediate that “blurred space between History and Myth.” The trickster effects of his camera at times can include the production of nostalgia, an anti-imperial nostalgia that reclams and sustains a Tlingit past.

Conclusion

The nostalgia that I have tried to identify in the artistic production of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie and Larry McNeil depends on an approach to reading their imagery that is informed by specific historical and cultural perspectives. There are many other contemporary artists who have employed similar strategies, such as Richard Ray Whitman (Euchee/Creek), Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora), Shelley Niro (Mohawk), Carm Little Turtle (Apache/Tarahumara), Jesse Cooday (Tlingit), and Pamela Shields (Blackfoot/Blood Band). Their use of what I have defined as a nostalgic aesthetic recodes images with meaning useful in the present, which is also the aim of an imperialist nostalgic practice. A critical difference, however, is that the former involves acknowledging the presence in the present of specific Native nations while the latter relegates the Native to a bygone era. Another difference is the self-conscious deployment of these aesthetic practices by Native artists in order to point to the agency of the Native vis-à-vis the vast photographic archive, of which Curtis’s massive project is but a small sample.

The production of visual representations from a Native perspective, however, is only part of the process of disrupting the archive. An analysis of the discursive contextual framings of these representations that takes into account a Native perspective is also necessary. The following chapter examines how academic scholarship is complicit in the process of framing the Native as image within a colonial gaze. As a case study, I focus on the scholarly fascination with Aby Warburg as a figure who appeals to scholars within a variety of academic fields—such as art history, visual studies, film studies, and performance studies.

57 Interview with the artist, May 14, 2004.
And it is his brief experience with the Hopi snake dance that has become emblematic of his interdisciplinary approach, an interdisciplinarity that continues to elide Native history and avoid possibilities for recuperating the Native image from a colonizing gaze.