



Chasing Shadows: An Analysis of the Historical Significance of the Shadow Catcher, Edward S. Curtis

Zack Henderson
Ramapo College of New Jersey, Mahwah, NJ, 07430

The Photographer

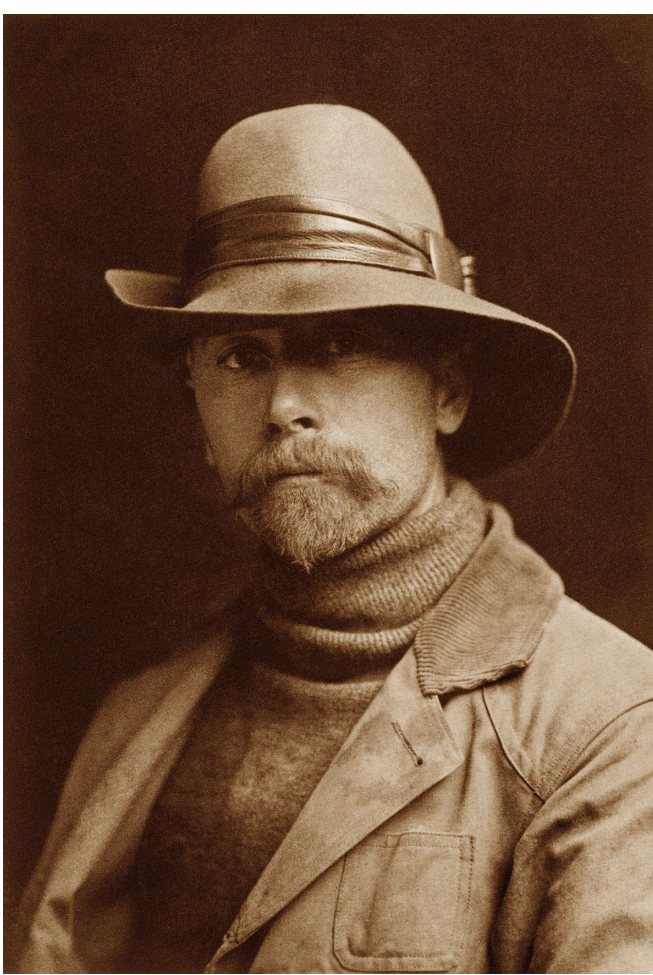
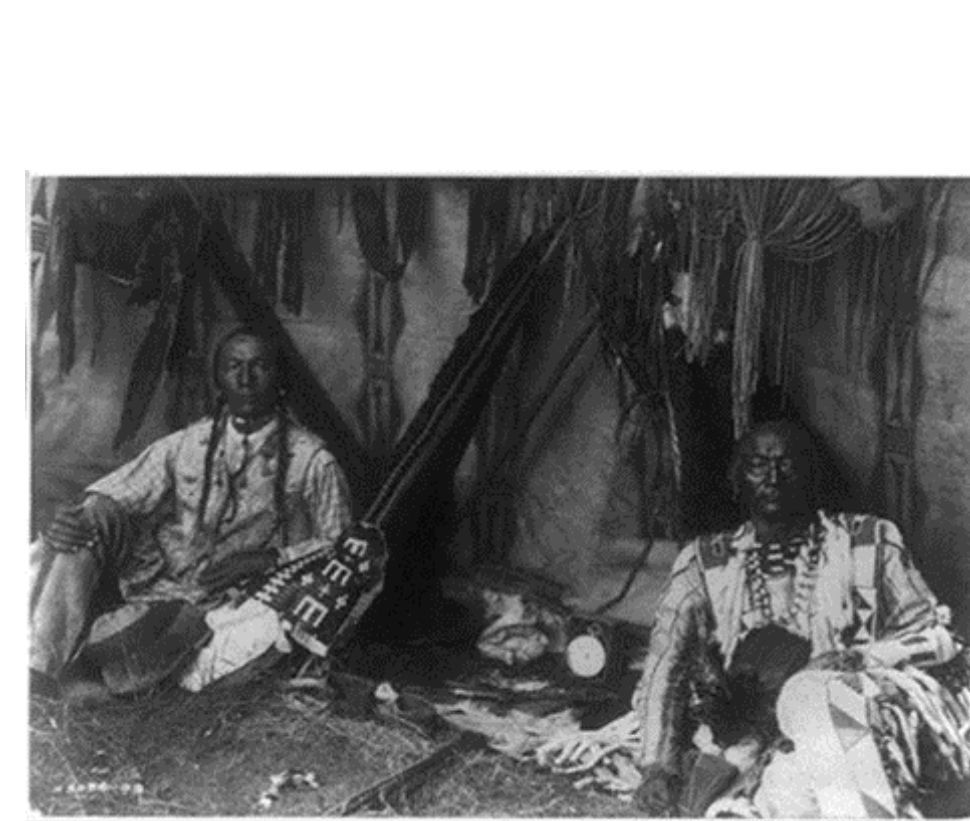
Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) was a self-taught photographer with a passion for capturing the image of the American Indian. More than twenty years of his life were spent photographing and documenting these people. His journey, however, is ripe with controversy—Curtis has since been accused of tampering with his photographs. This accusation, combined with the fact that he was not the only ethnographer of the American Indian, makes one wonder why it is that we remember him so well today. I argue in my own work that Curtis is remembered most out of other ethnographers of his kind *because* of his unique ability to manipulate the message of his photographs, even as his motivations for doing so evolved over time.

The North American Indian Project

Edward Curtis had begun photographing Native Americans late in the 19th century, after he had met a woman named Princess Angeline. Angeline was the last living daughter of Chief Seattle, and was the only known native living in the city at the time. Curtis was fascinated by her, especially her tenacity in retaining her traditional lifestyle on the fringe of what he knew as civilization. This encounter spurred the photographer's interest in the American Indian, and he undertook the North American Indian Project in 1907. Twenty volumes of photographs and text comprised his life's work and his greatest accomplishment.

The project, however, did not go as smoothly as one might initially believe. Curtis was off to a good start, and even received funding from J. P. Morgan to complete the twenty volumes. Interestingly enough, none of Morgan's money went to Curtis directly, as the money was essentially only a loan. The volumes were meant to be sold on a subscription basis when completed at about \$500 each, all of which would be returned to Morgan. The photographer only received funding for his field work, so in reality Curtis went his entire life without seeing a profit from his work. Additionally, he was only able to sell about half of the subscriptions, which was a result of the project's completion coinciding with the Great Depression. To make matters worse, the project had overshot its five-year deadline more than threefold.

Lastly, it is essential to note why Curtis was so adamant about finishing the North American Indian Project. His attitude is summed up quite well in his own words to J. P. Morgan regarding the project—its purpose was to display “pictures and...text of every phase of Indian life of all tribes yet in a primitive condition.” In Curtis' time, it was believed that as Western civilization expanded, old civilizations fell further and further behind. In the eyes of many Americans at the time, there was no place for the American Indian in the modern world. As a result, a popular belief that the Indian himself was beginning to disappear began to circulate. Curtis was a subscriber to this belief, often referring to the American Indian as a “vanishing race.” He even chose a photograph of Navajo people that he captured, entitled *The Vanishing Race* (top center), as the centerpiece of his project. The following caption, written by Curtis himself, was included with the image: “The thought which this picture is meant to convey is that the Indians as a race...are passing into the darkness of an unknown future.” Therefore, the purpose of the American Indian Project, at least for its creator, was to preserve the memory of a supposedly vanishing people.



Top Center: Edward S. Curtis, *The Vanishing Race*, 1904. This was the first photograph in Volume I of the North American Indian Project, and pictures several sepia-toned Navajo riding away from the camera.

Bottom Left: Edward S. Curtis, *In a Piegan Lodge*, c. 1910 (original). In this image, one can clearly see a clock placed between the two men. This particular copy did not make it into the North American Indian project.

Bottom Center: Edward S. Curtis, *Self Portrait*, 1889.

Bottom Right: Edward S. Curtis, *In a Piegan Lodge*, c. 1910 (edited version). This copy of the image on the bottom left was published by Curtis, but only after he edited out the clock between the two men. When examining the picture closely, one can observe a smudge where the clock is located in the picture on the left.

Other Ethnographers

During this project, I found myself wondering why Edward S. Curtis is so well-remembered if there are countless other ethnographers who undertook the documentation of the American Indian. To better understand this phenomenon, I looked into the work of these other men to determine what it was that Curtis did differently. My findings are listed below.

George Catlin (1796-1872)

Catlin, a portrait painter by trade, became fascinated with the American Indian early in his life, much like Curtis. He was an early advocate of the “vanishing Indian” trope, his particular brand of the idea being brought on by fears of Indian removal. After examining his work, I concluded that although their motivations were similar, Catlin's work is not as prominent as Curtis' today because he preached of the disappearing native decades before Curtis even began his journey. Thus, early 20th century Americans probably viewed Catlin's fears as we view Curtis' today—unjustified.

Adam Clark Vroman (1856-1916)

Vroman, a wealthy business owner with a personal interest in the American Southwest, was a photographer of American Indians who lived during Curtis' time. He took a great deal of photographs of Southwestern tribes, including the Navajo and the Hopi, although not much is known about his motivations for doing so. It is known that he was an avid art collector, and enjoyed exotic pieces. It seems as though he was merely interested in photographing these people for the artistic value, which is shown in that his images do not perpetuate the vanishing Indian trope as much as Curtis' do. This, along with the fact that his work is concentrated in only one region of the country, contributes to the fact that Vroman's photography simply did not captivate the nation as Curtis' did.

Walter McClintock (1870-1949)

McClintock's work on the Blackfeet people of Montana is some of the most extensive to come out of his time period, and Curtis' for that matter. Between 1896 and 1900 he actually lived with these people, befriending them and even taking part in their intimate rituals. He documented everything he could in scientific writing and with some photography. However, although his account is fairly lengthy and accurate, it does not play into the idea that the Indian is vanishing during this time. In fact, McClintock's work suggested that the Blackfeet way of life was thriving. Additionally, his work is quite dry and his photographs do not contain any sensational elements—thus, they pale in comparison to Curtis'.

Curtis' Methods

Finally, as Edward Curtis' work began to resurface in the 1960s, Americans began to notice that some photographs had been tampered with. By scrubbing out any signs of modern life and handing out props to his subjects, he proved that he would do anything he could to show the American Indian in his “primitive condition.” Because of this, the accuracy of some of Curtis' work can be called into question. His project as a whole, on the other hand, is still the largest collection of native photography that we have from this time period. Thus is the contradictory nature of the photographer Edward S. Curtis and his life's work, the North American Indian Project.