DISCUSSING PORTRAITURE, REPRESENTATION AND THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY: A PHOTOGRAPHIC CONVERSATION BETWEEN JEFF THOMAS AND EDWARD S. CURTIS

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"Look into the camera and think about what you want the photograph to say about you," is what photographer Jeff Thomas often tells his subjects before photographing them, which he described at a recent talk held at Concordia University. His artistic practice is based on demystifying the preconceived notions and assumptions held about Native people. He addresses issues of authorship and self-representation as modes to challenge photographic representations of identity and culture. Stereotypes of Native people have been undoubtedly reinforced by photography in its governmental, anthropological and artistic forms throughout history. Thomas's first portrait in his series of photographs of his son Bear, titled *Culture Revolution* (1984) re-purposes the euro-centric medium of photography to reclaim representation from within the evolving and changing Native community in North America (fig. 1). This photo in particular acts to expose the complicated history of First Nations photographic representation, while acting as a symbol of cultural evolution and shifting understanding.

This photograph in many ways functions similarly to Edward Curtis's many portraits of proud and timeless Native men and children (fig. 2 and 3); however, it delivers a very different message. The subject depicted is a young Native boy confronting the camera with a direct gaze. This child is clad in contemporary clothing and stands in front of a wall that bears the phrase: "culture revolution" in graffiti. The hat on the boy's head features a graphic image of a generic Native chief. This image is a graphic appropriation of a Curtis photograph of a man named Two Moons, "a respected Cheyenne leader who fought and defeated Custer at the battle of the Little Bighorn on June 25th, 1876." On his website, Thomas states that he was struck by the relationship between the text on the wall and the image on his son's hat when he took this black and white portrait in 1984 on Queen Street in Toronto. Like Curtis's works such *as In a Piegan Lodge, Little Plume and son Yellow Kidney*, 1910, this photograph is compositionally strong and is rendered in black and white, referencing photography's beginnings (fig. 4). The subject naturally encounters the camera and seems to merge elegantly with the respective backdrop. Yet, this photograph asserts a contemporary re-locating of time, memory, history, and culture that Curtis's work cannot offer.

In 1972, photographer Karl Kremberger discovered 285 000 prints made by Curtis of 75 distinct American and Canadian aboriginal peoples residing north of the Mississippi for the government. These works emerged during a highly politicized time for native North Americans, as well as were further commodified after the popularization of Native culture in rock and roll culture. Thus, Curtis's images were widely disseminated and understood as inseparable from the Native people they depicted despite their heavy staging and romanticized lighting and posturing. These images were featured in postcards, merchandise, band posters, governmental documents, and newspapers throughout North America. The hat Bear wears in this portrait alludes to the commodity fetishism of native imagery that still exists today, as well as the contradictory viewpoints associated with Curtis's photography. While Curtis has been criticized for manipulating his photographs by erasing signs of modernity in the scenes and posturing and staging his subjects, the photographs have also been understood as a visual tribute to the distinct Native

groups they depict.[1] Some believe that "the subjects of these photographs "were collaborators and thus share with Curtis authorship of these compelling photographs,"[2] others see Curtis's work as "an overt form of imperialist representation."[3]

This photograph of young Bear, evidently, goes much farther in asserting a real portrait of Native culture than does Curtis's works. Firstly, its production was spontaneous.[4] "The Bear Portraits series began in 1984 when my seven year old son Bear and I were walking down Queen Street in Toronto. I noticed some graffiti on a brick wall we had just walked by, and decided to take a photograph of Bear in front of it," is how Thomas describes the photograph. The spontaneity of this photograph is important to address because it challenges directly how, historically, ethnographic photography over-determined specific cultural and racial traits and created and perpetuated stereotypes.[5] Historically, visual depictions of colonized people helped to sustain imperialist expansion and supplied a framework for European identity based on race and culture, which contributed to white hegemony.[6] The emergence of photography coincided with the emergence of ethnography, which resulted in the problematic proliferation of photographs of native people in North America.[7] But because entering these communities was made complicated by the protective attitudes of Native communities and the remoteness of their settlements, these photographs were at first hard to come by.[8] When ethnographers first gained access to these communities, the lore of native civilization resulted in the romanticized and 'timeless emblems' characteristic of Curtis's work (fig. 5).[9] In Canada and America, government authorities were interested in documenting Native practices so as to spread the imperialist myth of the "dying race", which resulted in the exclusion of native people from society at large.[10] Meanwhile, and ironically '[North] Americans tacitly admired the Indians willingness to risk death for the sake of liberty" and respected their ability to connect with nature.[11] This resulted in the Native American becoming an honoured symbol of American culture, evidenced by the release of the American three dollar gold piece issued in 1854 and the incorporation of the native imagery into many business models.[12]

Later government associates photographed people on Native reserves to promote the civilization of native people in residential schools. These depictions resulted in a more savage visualization of native culture. Some ethnographers depicted their subjects more accurately, while commercial photographers, such as Curtis, were under no such constraints despite their associations with government.[13] In any case, photographs of Native people taken for governmental use and public proliferation contributed to a broad body of staged, romanticized and doctored photographs, which have idealized, diminished and confined the image of Native People to 'timeless emblems' or savages. This has not only been damaging to Native people, but has been damaging to the consumers of this imagery who have understood Native culture based on the stereotypes played out in these images. The fact that this photograph of Bear, although taken by an artist, wasn't staged, re-emphasizes a change in visualizing native people and a shift towards self representation, which is ultimately the most important way to counteract deeply ingrained viewpoints.

Jeff Thomas recognizes that cycles of knowledge emerge from photographic representation.[14] He is thus, interested in the construction of identity in photography and the ways in which different representations can shift the viewer's understanding of the subjects depicted. He achieves this largely by juxtaposing "the white man's representation of his people" with his representations (fig. 6). He self identifies as an "Urban Iroquois" and is dedicated to challenging the romanticized, negative and reductive

depictions of his people. Although these more intentional works are powerful, I believe they are more powerful when informed by accompanying text or discussion. Thomas himself explained that he is starting to add audio components to his art exhibitions, so that viewers can further engage with the works. The photograph that I have chosen to focus on here, however, can function exclusively as a family snap shot to pose powerful questions about the relationship between Native people and the history of photography. This photograph becomes a self-portrait of Thomas, his family and his culture-his child acting as a vessel for cultural continuity and the evolution of future viewpoints and new modes of understanding. The urban context apparent in this image and the graffiti on the wall assert that this photograph addresses the present and the future as well as a re-contextualizing of Native culture in metropolitan centres, a context outside of the perpetuated stereotypes. The child's clothing asserts the evolution of a culture and its now long history in urban contexts. These modern aspects of the photograph counter the privileging of the past inherent in Curtis's depictions of native people (fig. 7). Although twenty years old, this photograph still addresses deeply ingrained stereotypes that exist today, and optimistically invites the viewer to look to the present and future, instead of the past.

This photograph is powerful because it is not only an interesting personal visual document with weighty social and political significance, but because it reinforces the powerful social implications of photography, which Thomas aims to unearth in his artistic investigations. His work reminds us of the social responsibility we have to respect our subject matter in all visual practices. In underlining the violent impact photography has had on his culture, we are challenged to question our reasons to engage with different subject matter visually. This specific photograph acts as a proud depiction of family and history for Thomas, while challenging the photograph as an objective or truthful document of cultural identity, and the authorship of representation.

As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, "a photograph records, incriminates... and justifies."[15] Thomas although acutely aware of the problems associated with the medium, responds to the absolutes of photography optimistically. He sympathetically describes Curtis as "a genuine person dealing with a complex history."[16] Thomas's photography, instead of striving to antagonize the violent past depictions of his culture, and his artistic medium, aims to fuel contemporary engagement within his community about their past representation. This specific photograph offers a promising gateway for future conversation about the representation of Thomas's people. Furthermore, it raises important issues about the immeasurable power of photography to violate, indoctrinate, evoke memory and transform viewpoints.

LIST OF FIGURES

FIG. 1

Jeff Thomas. *Culture Revolution, Toronto, Ontario*. 1984.

(Image: The Author <http://www.scoutingforindians.com/index.html>)

FIG. 2

Edward S. Curtis. *Apache Nalin*. 1907-1930. Northwestern University Library, Edward S. Curtis's 'The North American Indian': The Photographic Images. 2001. (Image: The Author)

FIG. 3

Edward S. Curtis. Flathead childhood. 1911. Northwestern University Library, Edward S. Curtis's 'The North American Indian': The Photographic Images, 2001. (Image: The Author)

FIG. 4

(left) In a Piegan Lodge, Little Plume and son, Yellow Kidney. C.1910. (Image: March 11, Courtesy Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-051432); (right) Red Indian, Queen Street, Toronto. 2003. From Jeff Thomas's series: Scouting for Indians Diptych from Jeff Thomas's series: A Conversation with Edward S. Curtis. (Image: http://www.scoutingforindians.com/index.html>)

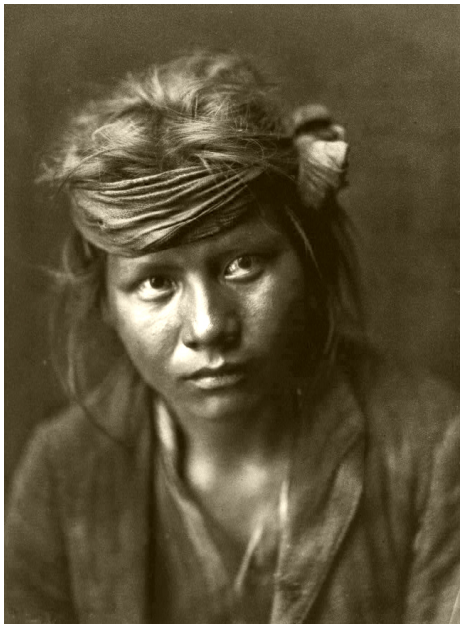

FIG. 5

Edward S. Curtis. Son of the Desert – Navaho. 1907. Northwestern University Library, Edward S. Curtis's 'The North American Indian': The Photographic Images, 2001. (Image: The Author)

FIG. 6

(left) Chief Black Eagle (Wa-budil-sa pa). 1908. Assiniboine.
Born in 1834 on the Missouri below Williston, North Dakota.
(Image: Courtesy Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-105371); (right) Kevin Haywahe. 1991.
Assiniboine. From Jeff Thomas's series: Strong Hearts Diptych from Jeff Thomas's series:
A Conversation with Edward S. Curtis.

FIG.7

Edward S. Curtis, Kashhila – Wishham. 1911. Northwestern University Library, Edward S. Curtis's 'The North American Indian': The Photographic Images, 2001. (Image: The Author)

ENDNOTES

[1] Rodger D. Touchie, *Edward S. Curtis Above the Medicine Line Portraits of Aboriginal Life in the Canadian West*, 16.
[2] W. Jackson Rushing III, "Native Authorship in Edward Curtis's 'Master Prints,'" *American Indian Art Magazine*, 62.
[3] Anne Maxwell, "Shifting focus: photographic representations of Native Americans and African-Americans," 107.
[4] Jeff Thomas A Study of Indian-ness.
[5] Anne Maxwell, "Shifting focus: photographic representations of Native Americans and African-Americans," 104.
[6] Maxwell, IX.
[7] Christopher M. Lyman, "The Emergence of Photography and the Movement toward Photographic Art," *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*, 27.
[8] Maxwell, 105.
[9] Maxwell, 105.
[10] Maxwell, 105.
[11] Maxwell, 104.
[12] Maxwell, 106.
[13] Lyman, 25.
[14] Jeff Thomas, Talk presented at Concordia University.
[15] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 5.
[16] Thomas, Talk.

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