Edward S. Curtis's Photographs: Post-Modernism, Re-enactment, and Contextual Value

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Edward S. Curtis’s Photographs: Post-Modernism, Re-enactment, and Contextual Value

Introduction

The perspective that characterizes anthropology today is the post-modernist discourse (Trawick, 2002, p. ix). It is a perspective centered on deconstructing the work done by earlier ethnographers in order to find what errors they made in the past, and to promote sensitivity among current ethnographers to their role in the discourse (Polier and Roseberry, 1989, p. 246).

Some post-modernists simply point out these errors and suggest ways in which anthropologists can improve their writing (Polier and Roseberry 1989), but the fundamentalists proclaim that past ethnography is so full of misrepresentations and falsehoods, especially with relation to objectivity, which post-modernists claim is impossible and oppressing, that they suggest past anthropological work is expendable and should be ignored (D’Andrade, 1995, pp. 557-566). From the fundamentalist perspective, the world of human interaction is so complicated and multifaceted that no person could ever write a “true” ethnography. Thus, all work produced is fiction: pieces of a collage tied together by the objective views of the anthropologist (Polier and Roseberry, 1995, p. 255). Given these arguments by post-modernists about the faults inherent in ethnography, I wonder why it should be conducted at all, if the falsehoods embedded within it are so great; and others have wondered the same (e.g., McGee and Warm, 2000, p. 519).

The work of Edward Sheriff Curtis is a prime target for post-modernists, due to his extensive, blatant, subjective manipulation of his photographs. Though he was a salvage ethnographer who worked with the support of the Bureau of Ethnology (Gidley, 1998, pp. 17-18, 87, 120, 122), he was a photographer first (Lyman, 1982, p. 51).
He intended his photographs to be aesthetically pleasing, posing his subjects, using re-enactment, using props, and wholly applying his subjective views of Native Americans as "noble savage" in his work (Lyman, 1982, p. 76; Makepeace, 2001, p. 38).

A post-modernist might conclude that Curtis’s work is the epitome of all that has been wrong with ethnography in the past. His photography treats individuals as representatives of the whole, as exotic "others," and employs stereotypes that the white community had about the Native American population. These are all post-modern critiques of past ethnography (Lewis, 1998; Polier and Roseberry, 1989). However, critiquing Curtis’s work from a post-modernist perspective can help to deconstruct the subject matter and to remove his subjective influences.

To deny any value at all to Curtis’s work, however, would be an error. Curtis may not have followed what we now consider to be the “correct” method of ethnography, but we must also realize that anthropologists of his day in no way deemed him misrepresentational in his methods. There are fundamentalists in every theoretical point of view, and fundamentalist post-modernists would discredit work such as Curtis’s entirely. Others suggest that the fundamentalists are incorrect in stating that past ethnographies have nothing to offer.

When examining Curtis’s work through a post-modernist lens, I will present the views of the critics of the fundamentalists (D’Andrade, 1995; Lewis, 1998; Polier and Roseberry, 1989). These scholars identified why the points made by the fundamentalists are sound, but they also note that the works of the past have details to offer from a first-hand point of view that current ethnographers have no way of reconstructing in the same context. I believe this perspective is a useful one to apply to Curtis’s work because it helps identify and remove Curtis’s subjective views, and reveals elements of Native American lifeways in the early 1900s. While numerous ethnographies containing information about Native American lifeways do exist for this time period, evaluating Curtis’s work and showing how it compares to the data in these ethnographies provides a framework for analyzing photographs of peoples for whom few other records exist.

Many of the fundamentalist post-modernists have made strong claims that past works should be deconstructed and reassembled into new collages, providing information deemed more relevant in today’s discourse (Polier and Roseberry, 1989, p. 255). Yet it seems that few have taken this step with past works. Many are performing modern ethnography from this new theoretical perspective, but ignoring the benefits that deconstructing past work could have on the current body of anthropological knowledge. By deconstructing Curtis, I aim to show the validity of past ethnography, so that other works can be evaluated in the future by similar methods.

This article is derived from my Gaines Thesis, a much longer and more complete treatment of this subject. The entire thesis and the complete list of references cited is available on-line at www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2003. Full-size illustrations are also available at the same site.

The goal of this article is to show that, through recognizing the problems outlined by post-modernists and acknowledging the subjectivity of photography, we can retrieve relevant cultural data from past works. Curtis’s photographs are a good case to study, because comparisons are available through other ethnographic works. Analyses of photographs can be done and can provide relevant information in areas of the world for which there is little outside ethnographic work.

**Edward Sheriff Curtis**

Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) believed that photography was a fusion of art and science, contrary to the critics of the time who claimed that photographs could not express artistic feeling (Lyman, 1982, p. 39). Early on, he specialized in landscapes and scenic views, due largely to his hobby as a mountain climber. Curtis was often the guide for climbing parties. One particular climb made headlines in Seattle and, when prospectors arrived, Curtis’s fame helped land him jobs in expeditions to the Klondike, during which he took numerous photos (Makepeace, 2001, pp. 30-33).

The cementation of Curtis’s interest in Native American ethnographic photographs occurred as a result of George Grinnell’s invitation to a Sun Dance in Montana. Curtis wrote that the experience was “wild, terrifying, elaborately mystifying... It was the start of my concerted effort to learn about the Plains Indians and to photograph their lives, and I was intensely affected” (Makepeace, 2001, p. 41).

Curtis was caught up in the movement of the time: salvage ethnography. Curtis noted that his work “represents the result of a personal study of a people who are rapidly losing the traces of the aboriginal character and who are destined ultimately to become assimilated with the ‘superior race’” (Fowler and Homer, 1972, p. 13). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, anthropology had not yet been recognized as a formal discipline. Thus, people received the title of “ethnographer” who had no formal training. Instead, they came from a variety of backgrounds, and Curtis’s background of commercial and artistic photography made him a candidate for “ethnographer” (Lyman, 1982, p. 51). During the period of Curtis’s work on Native Americans, from roughly 1898-1930, other scholars such as Lewis Cass, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Lewis Henry Morgan, George Bird Grinnell, and John Wesley Powell were interested in salvaging information on the cultures of the “Vanishing Savages” (Fowler and Homer, 1972, p. 9). Beginning in 1900, anthropologists from the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of Ethnology were recording the ways of the Native Americans “before it’s too late” (Fowler and Homer, 1972, p. 9).

Curtis developed the idea for a compilation work entitled *The North American Indian*. By 1905, his pursuit of publicity in order to financially
back this project finally paid off, and he even met with President Theodore Roosevelt (Lyman, 1982, p. 59). In 1906, Curtis sent a written proposal for a loan to fund his compilation to J. Pierpont Morgan. He outlined a twenty-volume document with 1500 full-page plates of pictures and he included 700 of the more important pictures (Lyman, 1982, pp. 60-61). Curtis received the loan from Morgan, and began working on The North American Indian.

In his work, Curtis included text with his photographs. His assistants wrote most of the text, but Curtis reviewed the work and chose those passages that would be included in his volumes (Lyman, 1982, p. 21). Curtis’s aim in The North American Indian was “to picture all features of the Indian life and environment—types of the young and old, with their habitations, industries, ceremonies, games and everyday customs” (Fowler and Homer, 1972, p. 13). Curtis did not completely fulfill this aim. To begin with, he only focused on Native Americans living west of the Mississippi River. He also never composed a complete ethnography on any one group (but this task is not possible in any circumstance, because there is always too much to record to ever be “complete”).

In an argument with Edward Ayer, Ayer told Curtis that he was attempting too large a task, saying that Curtis was “trying to do fifty men’s work” (Gidley, 1998, p. 135).

Curtis finished The North American Indian in 1930. It was composed of twenty portfolio volumes, each almost 300 pages long. The twenty portfolios contained a total of over 2,200 photographs (Fowler and Homer, 1972, pp. 14-15). Curtis organized the work by tribe, beginning with the Apache and concluding with a chapter about the Alaskan Eskimos, signifying the completion of the full circle of his journey (Makepeace, 2001, p. 15). For the first photograph in his portfolios, he chose The Vanishing Race-Navaho, 1904 (Image 1), and wrote “Feeling that the picture expresses so much of the thought that inspired the entire work, the author has chosen it as the first of the series” (Lyman, 1982, p. 80). It is an excellent example of how he “changed” his images; the photograph was enhanced in numerous ways: the sticks in the lower right-hand corner were enhanced with a stylus; the shapes of the Indian riders were defined by highlights using a negative retouching pencil; and the aura of light running along the horizon was retouched (Lyman, 1982, p. 80).

Curtis’s work soon lapsed into obscurity. The Great Depression made the twenty-volume set, that had been sold by subscription with the purchaser receiving each volume as it was completed, and which had initially cost $3000 or $3850 per set depending on the paper type, and which had risen to $4200 or $4700 by 1925, an item few could afford (Gidley, 1998, p. 110; Lyman, 1982, p. 147). Views about “the vanishing race” were changing, with most holding a stereotypical view of Native Americans, in terms of racial hierarchies and the unavoidable extinction of indigenous people (Berkhofer, 1978, p. 56; Lyman, 1982, p. 125). In the 1960s and 1970s, publishers and the public rediscovered Curtis’s work due to interest in his talent for applying aesthetically pleasing mystical attributes in his photography (Lyman, 1982, p. 12). Commentators, Curtis’s family, exhibition organizers, and anonymous and semi-anonymous dealers in photographs who promoted this “revival” intended to present the images as a new and sympathetic portrayal of Indian lifeways (Gidley, 1998, p. 11).

Revivals have continued since then, shifting focus according to who presented the material and whether they presented it in a romanticized or critical fashion (Gidley, 1998, p. 11).

Photographs and Controversy

Photographs have a long and intricate history. In the 1860s, Matthew Brady and others documented the American Civil War with photographic images. Photographs were first used to present legal evidence, as surveillance tools, by police in Paris in 1871. The photograph furnished proof and, while people acknowledged the distortions, the idea lingered that the “reality” had to be similar to that presented in the photograph (Sontag, 1977, p. 5). The photograph, however, is an interpretation, just as paintings and drawings are, and this idealism was present even in the 1840s and 1850s, the first two decades of photography (Sontag, 1977, pp. 6-7).

During the time Curtis was working, a controversy about whether or not to consider photography...
an art was in progress (Wells, 1997, pp. 20-24). Curtis contributed an aesthetic eye to all of his pieces (Makepeace, 2001, p. 38), and frequently manipulated the camera. Sometimes he left the camera slightly out of focus to give the photograph an impressionistic feel. Other techniques included removing unwanted detail during retouching, and burning in the sky during development (Lyman, 1982, p. 76).

What has caused so much controversy about Curtis’s photographs is the techniques he used of re-enactment, posing, props, and construction of the photographs. The photographs’ status as “found objects — unpremeditated slices of the world” makes some view these techniques as deceitful (Sontag, 1977, p. 69). As such, there is much debate about the “validity” of his photographs. Even this is complicated, because the notion of “validity” is contested by Elizabeth Edwards, who states that it is impossible to judge re-enactment from a value judgment such as “fake” (Edwards, 2001, p. 157). Curtis’s work represented the assumptions of the dominant culture in the early 1900s (Gidley, 1998, p. 11) and, thus, is what we today consider “ethnographic.” It has also been said that “Curtis trumpeted the need to catch real ‘Indianness’ quickly before it ‘vanished.’ But he knew that much of what he thought of as ‘Indianness’ did not exist, and in that knowledge, his work tended toward deception” [emphasis original] (Lyman, 1982, p. 148). The same critic also contends that “Curtis frequently confused his biases with objective facts” (Lyman, 1982, p. 148). Thus, we encounter a difficulty even deciding the definitions of concepts such as “valid” and “fake.”

Cultural anthropologists collect their data through fieldwork. To be a successful ethnographer is to be fully engaged in participant observation and to be objective in making observations. This is seen as a process of becoming part of the culture under study. Only that which happens without initiation of the ethnographer is considered “true” to the culture. Considering this definition of “truth” contextualizes the reasons for the criticisms of Curtis’s work by Gidley (1998) and Lyman (1982). Because much of Curtis’s photography involved posing or re-enactment, modern scholars see these techniques as contaminating the culture, reifying events through photography that did not happen “naturally.”

Photography was used extensively in the context of salvage ethnography, of which Curtis was a part, focusing on recording things not only before they were lost, for much already was, but before the cultural traditions were forgotten so that they could no longer even be re-enacted (Edwards, 2001, p. 158). “The 'authentic' was a central trope in salvage ethnography” (Edwards, 2001, p. 159), which, thus, justified representational practices. Edwards says that to evaluate photographs, we need to ask how they were made, what practices were involved, and what claims were made by them and of them (Edwards, 2001, p. 158). The process of re-enactment in the late 1800s and early 1900s came out of the natural sciences, in which the concept of the experiment was dominant. Scientists were re-enacting natural processes or reactions in a closed environment, and then documenting them so that the results could be salvaged (Edwards, 2001, p. 162). Because many anthropologists had come from other scientific disciplines, for example, Malinowski and Boas, they found it quite logical to apply these methods to the new science of anthropology.

“Salvage ethnography” implies the recording of what is still extant, before its disappearance. However, oftentimes, what the ethnographers desired to record no longer existed, but the moral urgency of the times demanded that they record the practices before the knowledge was lost (Edwards, 2001, pp. 168-169). In Edward Curtis’s photographs of Native people, he was using a widely accepted technique. When interviewed for the Seattle Times, he recounted in detail how he acquired photos of the Navajo Yebichai Dance (Image 2). He described how he convinced a small group to re-enact the dance for him, despite the protests of many other Navajo, and that he had made the costumes himself (Lyman, 1982, pp. 65, 67). In his salvage ethnography work, he recorded those things that were already present, in real time as it were, but he was also trying to photograph the way things were before the arrival of the white colonists.

However, as noted before, for the vast majority of Curtis’s photographs published for the general public during and after the 1960s, there was little accompanying text. The removal of the text from the photographs removes the acknowledgment of Curtis’s intentions when he took the photographs: as salvage ethnographic work combined with aesthetic appeal (Lyman, 1982, p. 19). Hence, I believe it is the republishing of
the work, in addition to Curtis’s initial methods, that caused problems.

To apply the above discussion of re-enactment photographs to Edward Curtis’s work, we must return to the questions Edwards says should be asked when looking at such photographs. We need to know how the photographs were made. It is clear that Curtis often asked others to pose for him, sometimes paying them, in order to record the desired circumstance (Lyman, 1982, p. 101). We know that Curtis used native actors in his work, and that they had input into the final product, and that he used props and camera tricks (Lyman, 1982, pp. 67-68).

We also need to know about the claims being made by and of the photographs. Ethnographers claimed they were accurate recordings of Native American ways of life, occasionally acknowledging in the accompanying texts that the photographs portrayed these people as they used to be, not as they were in the present (Hausman and Kapoun, 1995). During the early 1900s, scholars believed that “Indians” were only “Indians” when they acted “Indian;” once they changed and acculturated, they were no longer “Indian” (Lyman, 1982, p. 50). This issue of the claims being made by the pictures needs to be evaluated during the 1960s, that is, when these photographs became generally popular, which makes answering it much more complex. For the later, mass-published works containing Curtis’s photographs, each compiler had his or her own agenda in presenting Curtis’s photographs and, thus, the pictures make different claims. This is the nature of photographs: their rawness makes any one interpretation subject to the agenda represented by the presentation of the context.

Post-Modernist Critique

Roger Keesing’s Post-Modernist View

Roger Keesing argued that anthropology first treats the people it studies as “radically alter” or “exotic;” second, that anthropology has always been ahistorical; and third, that anthropologists treat cultures as isolated units (Lewis, 1998). It is instructive to apply Keesing’s critique of ethnography to Curtis’s photographs to illustrate the problems post-modernists see in works similar to Curtis’s.

First, Curtis did portray his subjects as “radically alter,” which is demonstrated by the fact that many of his photographs emit the aura of the noble savage. Often when he took his photographs, Curtis requested that the subjects dress in traditional garb, which sometimes were props that Curtis carried with him, rather than the “western” clothing, which was the style many Native peoples wore at the time (Lyman, 1982). He was very particular about the presence of “western” influence in his photographs during much of his photographic career. In his photograph, Fiesta of San Estevan, 1904 (Image 3), Curtis retouched parasols out of the photograph taken at Acoma Pueblo (Lyman, 1982, pp. 71-72). While some Native Americans still used traditional style lodging, close inspection of the photograph Assiniboine Camp on Bow River, 1926 (Image 4) reveals that these “teepees” were made from machine-woven fabric, possibly feed sacks, and product labels were retouched out of the photograph (Lyman, 1982, p. 72). By removing these elements of “western” culture from the photographs, Curtis portrays them as “exotic,” and without influence from outside cultures.
In order to assure that his subjects retained their aura of "Indianness," Curtis often carried props: wigs, "traditional" headdresses, and "traditional" clothing. This can be illustrated by juxtaposing photographs of the same man: one of Curtis's entitled Upshaw-Apsaroke, 1905 (Image 5a) and another entitled A.B. Upshaw-Interpreter, 1898 (Image 5b) credited to F.A. Rinehart, although probably taken by Rinehart's assistant, A.F. Muhr (Lyman, 1982, p. 90). The one credited to Rinehart was made approximately seven years prior to Curtis's, and depicts Upshaw as he normally appeared (Lyman, 1982, pp. 90-93). In Curtis's photograph, however, Upshaw, who acted as an interpreter for Curtis, donned a costume so as to appear more "Indian." The headdress especially served to cover up acculturation, because Upshaw had short hair, which did not portray "Indianness" (Lyman, 1982, pp. 90-93). The separate agendas of these two portraits are strikingly clear. Curtis intended to represent Upshaw as a "true" and "stolid" Native American, while Rinehart intended to portray Upshaw as a member of the "civilized" society. They represent two different subjective purposes, neither one more "correct" than the other, but Curtis's reflecting the intent to show Upshaw as radically alter, and Rinehart's reflecting the intent to show Upshaw as an integral part of the dominant culture.

As mentioned above, Curtis made the costumes for the Navaho people who had agreed to reenact the Yebichai Prayer Dance for him. Their agreement was highly controversial amongst the Navaho, because the dance was supposed to be sacred. In order to avoid a confrontation with the other Navajo, those who had agreed to the reenactment demanded that Curtis make the costumes, because their own costumes had religious significance, and they did not want to be sacrilegious. In addition, it is highly likely that they did not perform the dance correctly for Curtis, so as to make the act more secular (Lyman, 1982, pp. 67-69). Curtis's insistence on finding a way to photograph an event that was so controversial among the Navajo, shows his determination to photograph the events that would identify the Native people as "radically alter" (Image 2).

In response to Keesing's second critique, Curtis does present his subjects as ahistorical by removing items of Western influence. Careful inspection of the photos (e.g., Images 3, 4, and 5) reveals that some Western influence remains, especially when coupled with previous knowledge of Native Americans. Many times, the re-enactments that Curtis requested were those that were common in the past, although not in the present. Unfortunately, without the text or a detailed caption to accompany the photograph, a viewer would not know this. In Curtis's writings, he went into great detail concerning the history of the people.

For the Lakota Sioux, for example, he traced their historical movement across the country by comparing folktales and the Lakota Sioux's recording of years by winters (Hausman and Kapoun, 1995, pp. 138-139). He was thus able to determine that the Lakota Sioux, who were then living in the Black Hills and Central Montana, had originally come from the Great Lakes region, and possibly the Atlantic seaboard (Hausman and Kapoun, 1995, pp. 138-139). In this way, he shows an awareness of the Native American history, as this was certainly part of the salvage ethnography discourse in which he was a participant. The salvage ethnographers' concern, other than recording the current ways of the Native Americans
before they disappeared, was to record vestiges of their past before there was no one left who could remember the stories of their history (Edwards, 2001, pp. 164, 171).

Keesing’s third critique of ethnographic work was that ethnographers treat their subjects as isolated units, which Curtis certainly did. Today, anthropological research focuses largely on globalization, in the present and in history (Wolf, 1982, pp. 13-19). For example, Wolf (1982) focuses largely on globalization, showing that no culture was isolated, and that constant diffusion and integration was a part of all cultures. By the time Curtis began taking his photographs, Native Americans had not only interacted with each other through trade, and had integrated and diffused for millennia, but they also had interacted with people from numerous European nations steadily for at least 400 years. For example, the Native American societies of the Plains and West did not acquire the horse, which is so prominent in many of Curtis’s photographs, until 1630-1730, less than 2-300 years before the photographs (Wolf, 1982, p. 176). Yet, notwithstanding all of these influences, Curtis portrayed his images as being the “true” Native Americans, continuing traditions that remained unchanged, despite the reality to the contrary.

One of the most poignant examples I found of Curtis purposely treating his subjects as isolated from others, as well as “radically alter” and ahistorical, is a photograph entitled Lodge Interior – Piegan, 1910 (Images 6a and 6b). Two versions of this photograph exist. In one (Image 6a), the original, the photograph of Little Plume and his son Yellow Kidney shows an alarm clock (indicated by the arrow) between the two, placed as a symbol of luxury. In the photograph that Curtis published in The North American Indian (Image 6b), this evidence of contact with western civilization has been retouched and removed from the photo (Makepeace, 2001, p. 174). Coarseness in the grain of the published photograph revealed through either careful scrutiny, or a comparison with the original photograph, illustrates the efforts taken by Curtis to mask contact with the “western” world.

Curtis often grouped and labeled his photographs solely according to tribal affiliation. Presenting the photographs in this way eliminated any implication of interaction between groups, which he certainly could have shown through photographs of people of multiple tribal affiliations or presenting the photographs according to subject matter rather than tribal group. Some of his text does mention the interaction between Native American groups and Europeans (Hausman and Kapaun, 1995), but this is not present in the photos he published in The North American Indian. This leads viewers to believe that they are seeing a pure, isolated and unique group of people who have remained as they were for centuries. This form of isolationism in ethnography is common when researchers are discussing the “primitive,” to give a pristine account of that culture and that culture alone (Edwards, 2001, p. 164). This does not mean, however, that this was done intentionally. For Curtis’s purposes, it was logical to record groups separately, for they defined themselves as separate peoples and, thus, it made sense that he treat them as such. He was trying to record the unique differences and cultures of particular groups for salvage ethnography and, thus, he ignored cultural interactions.

If Curtis’s text had accompanied his photographs in the various modern republications of his photos, we might have a different outlook on his work. He notes in his ethnographies, for instance, that the
Piegan, Bloods, and Blackfeet all originated from Algonquian stock who migrated from the Atlantic seaboard (Hausman and Kapoun, 1995, p. 117). However, when others present his photographs without his text, these relations are not immediately apparent without an extensive knowledge of tribal histories.

For analyses of Curtis's work relative to other post-modernist critiques, see the text of the entire thesis at www.uky.edu/kalaidoscope/fall2003.

Reaction to and Deconstruction of the Post-Modernist Critique

The post-modern critics seem to agree that anthropologists are unable to derive an objective description of a culture. Post-modernists believe that, in the past, subjective lenses, which they proclaim were often intentionally set into place, tainted ethnography. Contraditorily, post-modernists also believe that objectivity dehumanizes the subjects (D'Andrade, 1995). This is apparent in Curtis's photographs, with his posing, costuming and framing. According to Buckland (2001, p. 34), "He (Curtis) is overrated... because his view of Native Americans is just that: his view. Romanticized and lyrical, it has become ours as well."

I believe that the critiques by post-modernists are flawed. One of the central tropes in anthropology is to evaluate groups from a culturally relative point of view. This means that actions taken in a culture should not be evaluated from the morals and rules of the investigator, but rather from the rules of proper conduct within the culture, and I believe this should apply to our critiques of anthropological work as well. Curtis was correct in evaluating the culture according to the accepted methods of his time. Props, posing, and re-enactment were accepted methods in salvage ethnographic photography, practiced by others such as DeLancey Gill (Fleming and Luskey, 1986, pp. 178, 180, 190-191), Alfred Cort Haddon (Edwards, 2001, pp. 165-167; Gidley, 1998, pp. 157-159), Frank La Roche, and Frank H. Nowell (Gidley, 1998, p. 64).

Post-modernists raise an important question: can we evaluate past anthropological work in terms of our current methods, or do we need to be culturally relative when critiquing past anthropological work? If we choose the first option, and evaluate work according to our current rules and methodology in anthropology, we will determine that many past anthropological works were "flawed." This can teach us how our theories and methods have developed and "improved" over time, and can also make us aware of where our biases might be in current anthropological work and help us overcome them. However, if we conclude that the past work is "flawed" and, therefore, not valuable in our collection of work, we lose primary sources of information from the past. If we choose the second option and take a culturally relative stance in critiquing past anthropologists, we learn what views and goals shaped anthropological work, and are possibly still shaping our own. By knowing what framework the anthropologists were building on, we can extract the framework, look at the information that is left, and apply our own interpretative methods to the material. This paper aims to reinterpret the material that Curtis gathered, and show how past work can be informative, rather than losing these valuable primary resources.

Application of and Concluding Remarks Regarding Post-Modernism

Post-modernists think anthropologists need to be more sensitive to the role their ethnographies play (Polier and Roseberry, 1989, p. 246). Post-modernists believe that anthropologists have made themselves the experts on cultures and given themselves power, thus tainting what should be the goal of anthropology, which is to provide an informative fiction of a culture (Polier and Roseberry, 1989). The post-modernists believe that objective models are dehumanizing and that they proclaim to be the "truth" when none exists (D'Andrade, 1995, pp. 556-557).

Many of the post-modernists' criticisms of anthropology are well-founded. Post-modernism is the dominant theory in current anthropology (Trawick, 2002, pp. ix-x). Without addressing Curtis's work in relation to these critiques, they can easily discard his work and any valuable content is lost. However, the postmodernists seem to spend most of their time saying that past ethnographies are irrelevant, rather than trying to deconstruct them as they say is possible, and deducing what has been beneficial. I found that Stocking (1992) does this to an extent with Malinowski's work, as does Kramer (1996) with respect to the Hopi potter Nampeyo, but neither does it in a reactionary response to postmodernist critique. Not only do post-modernists seem fixated on discrediting past works, but not nearly enough effort has been spent producing modern ethnographies from a post-modernist perspective that might illustrate the benefits of their perspective.

The post-modernists' critiques of anthropology actually destroy their own theoretical discourse. The purpose of anthropology has been to portray cultures as accurately as possible, while acknowledging that the perspective is only partial (McGee and Warms, 2000, p. 520). If post-modernists say that objectivity is impossible and dehumanizing, and that the only solution is to use "dialogic" writing, which is fiction, then, the work produced is completely subjective (Polier and Roseberry, 1989, pp. 253-256). Thus the work is no longer ethnography, and has the same flaws as the work of previous anthropologists: it is a work guided too much by the goals and influences of the anthropologist. If their critiques indicate that a flaw of Curtis's work is that it is subjective and fictional, then their argument is teleological and suggests that Curtis did nothing wrong by applying his subjective views to his photographs.

Post-modernists also promote using a "collage" method to portray a culture (Polier and Roseberry, 1989). Yet they argue that, in the past, anthropologists focused too much on individuals as representations of
the whole. If they simply use “fragments” to produce their “collage,” post-modernists are doing exactly the same thing they accuse others of doing. If the post-modernists think that the only way to conduct a proper ethnography is to use “fragments” (i.e., individuals) and collage them, then their critique of Curtis representing the whole of a culture through individuals is contradictory.

Despite these critiques, post-modernism does present important ideas for anthropologists to consider. Avoidance of viewing societies as though they are static is an important consideration when writing ethnography. The ethnographer can only observe what is occurring at a particular moment, it would be inaccurate and demeaning to present a group of people as though they are preserved relics of the past, which Curtis does in his work, by removing evidence of “western” influence and primarily photographing people in “Indian” attire rather than their “western” dress. It is also beneficial for ethnographers to keep in mind that not everything is purposeful and done according to a set plan; disorder in society does occur. Also, the individual cannot be portrayed as the whole. Numerous interviews should be done and, while not all participants in a culture can be included, it is important to give a broad range of data and to admit openly that the way this person does something is not the way that everyone does it. While Curtis took multiple photographs of people, thus giving a broader range of perspective than the individual, he purposely omitted certain categories of images. These omissions include the “western” style of living, wage labor, and utilization of modern transportation.

Post-modernism is an important theoretical perspective that can be used effectively in ethnography, but I conclude that anthropologists need to avoid taking the theory too far. They cannot completely ignore past ethnographic research simply because it was not done according to their preferred theory. If they ignore Curtis’s work they are ignoring the history of anthropology, despite the fact that these same post-modernists say that the ethnographer should never ignore the history of the culture being studied (Lewis, 1998, pp. 722-723). Application of post-modernist theory to Curtis’s photographs needs to occur, if post-modernism is going to help further the discipline of anthropology. If anthropologists apply these models to Curtis’s work, information can be derived that is beneficial to understanding Native American lifeways in the early twentieth century.

Reconstruction

Introduction

It is instructive to consider utilizing Curtis’s photographs to determine what ethno-historical data can be drawn from them. The purpose of this analysis is not only to show value in Curtis’s photographs alone, but also to show how an analysis of any ethnographic work can produce informative details. Despite all of Curtis’s efforts to remove “western” culture from his photos, and our knowledge of the vast numbers of props used, careful scrutiny can reveal whether or not elements were props, and in this way can provide information about Native Americans living in the early twentieth century. I will do this by comparing several photographs and contrasting their presented elements in an attempt to remove the layers of subjectivity imposed by Curtis. I will base my analysis on these results, and then compare my findings to other ethnographic information to assess the accuracy of the analysis.

I found that Curtis’s photographs fall chiefly into one of six major categories, with subcategories of “posed” and “natural” for each major category: portraits, ceremonies, “everyday life,” housing, scenery, and travel. For the purpose of this analysis, in my complete thesis, I discuss selected images from two categories: portraits and “everyday life.” In this article, one of the subheadings of portraits is discussed. For the other discussions, see the complete thesis at www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2003. The high frequency of props and re-enactment used in these photographs makes them more difficult to deconstruct and at the same time, more revealing to reconstruct. By critically evaluating the photographs, Curtis’s subjective influences can be revealed and removed to show details that give us information about the life of Native Americans in the early 1900s.

Portraits

Curtis was well-known for his portraits of Native Americans. Posed, with grand lighting effects and soft expressions, the portraits are thought to have given a face to Native peoples (Adam, 1999, p. 37). They were very popular with the public-at-large once interest in his photographs exploded in the 1960s (Lyman, 1982, pp. 11-12). In order to examine in detail what Curtis’s photographs can actually reveal about Native Americans, I will compare them with each other and scrutinize them individually to draw conclusions.

I will conduct this analysis by comparing photographs sometimes by tribal group as Curtis defined them, and sometimes across groups, to compare similar elements of clothing across a broad range of his photographs. My theory is that similar or dissimilar elements in style of dress within a particular group should reveal what was an indigenous cultural element as opposed to what was a prop used by Curtis. Similar stylistic clothing elements that are identifiably not the same piece will suggest that particular element is indigenous. Likewise, elaborate clothing elements that can be shown to match other stylistic elements within that culture, and that do not appear in Curtis’s photographs of other tribes, also will suggest that the clothing item was an indigenous part of that culture’s tradition in the early 1900s. It should be noted that although this analysis may reveal that clothing worn in a portrait was part of the cultural tradition when the portrait was taken, it does not imply that the clothing is a cultural relic.

Comparisons will also be done to show that, while a design may be unique to a culture, similarities to clothing worn by other groups may suggest that the wearer adapted the clothing in order to appear
more “Indian” to a white audience. If the clothing is particularly unique to a group, it will suggest that it is an indigenous part of that group. If the analysis shows similarities between clothing in different groups, it will suggest contact with groups has affected stylistic preferences. Conversely, extreme decorative differences within a culture will suggest that the different item is a Curtis prop.

I chose portraits due to their prominence in republished works of Curtis’s photography for the general public and their portrayal of a “stereotypical Indian” (Berkhofer, 1978). This analysis of these portraits will show that, while initially they appear to represent the “stereotypical Indian,” upon closer inspection, they contain relevant data pertaining to Native American life in the early 1900s.

Wishham Portraits (Images 7-12)

Portraits of the Wishham, also known as Wishram or Tlakluit, their name for themselves (Dictionary, 1993), form the first group of photographs to be analyzed. One of the most frequently encountered portraits of a person identified as Wishham by Edward Curtis is entitled Wishham Bride, 1910 (Image 7). A similar and also frequently encountered photograph is entitled Wishham Girl, 1910 (Image 8). Although the photographs are clearly of two different Wishham women, they are wearing very similar headdresses, shirts, and necklaces. The headdresses, in particular, could not be conclusively determined to be different items. They are identified as being composed of shells, shell beads, commercial beads, and Chinese coins (Coleman and McLuhan, 1972, p. xv). Curtis’s text says that girls between the age of puberty and marriage wore these headdresses for special occasions (Coleman and McLuhan, 1972, p. xv). We know that such Chinese coins reached the Columbia River region at an early date (Coleman and McLuhan, 1972, p. xv), thus justifying their quality of “Indianness.” Questions arise, though, with knowledge of Curtis’s frequent use of props in photographs: was the headdress truly a part of Wishham culture, or was it a prop?

When Curtis used props, he was not always particular about which tribes wore which items. An example is in Curtis’s photographs Sitting Owl-Hidatsa, 1908 (Image 9a) and Little Dog-Brulé, 1907 (Image 9b), in which these two men from different tribes are wearing the same buckskin outfit that Curtis carried around with him on his photographic tour (Lyman, 1982, pp. 94-95).

However, the elaborate headdresses shown on the Wishham women do not reappear in any of Curtis’s nineteen other photographs of Wishham peoples published in The North American Indian (Library of Congress, 2001). I also searched to find if the headdress appeared on any woman with other tribal affiliations, and it did not.

Further evidence that this headdress was indeed an authentic piece of Wishham culture comes from a photo entitled Wishham Child, 1909 (Image 10), which is less frequently encountered in collections of Curtis’s photographs. In this photograph, a small child wears a sash of beadwork and coins made in the same style as the headdress, shirts, and jewelry worn by the women. This sash does not seem to reappear in any of Curtis’s other photographs. Therefore, I suggest that this type of beadwork and usage of coins was, in fact, a part of Wishham culture. This may not have been an item of everyday wear though, for even Curtis noted that...
the Wishham reserved the headdress for special occasions (Coleman and McLuhan, 1972, p. xv).

This conclusion, drawn from viewing Curtis’s Wishham photographs, can be validated from other sources. Edward Sapir did his initial field work on the Wishham in 1905, shortly prior to Curtis’s photographs, and published an ethnography with Leslie Spier on the group in 1930. According to Sapir and Spier (1930: 27) the Wishham did decorate their hair with trade beads, dentalium shells, and Chinese coins, although I found no specific mention of bridal headdresses. The *Encyclopedia of American Indian Costume* describes numerous tribes’ traditional clothing. This resource acknowledges the changes in clothing over time, showing the authors’ attention to the changing nature of traditional dress, and tracing changes through contact with other Native American groups and Europeans. This resource cites Sapir and Spier’s work as being one of its primary sources, and under “Wishram” and the subtopic of “Headgear,” the *Encyclopedia* notes that

Beautiful wedding caps were made of multicolored beads and dentalium shells . . . from a velvet crown the beads and shells were festooned in long strands down the back and at the sides. Worn with the cap was a wedding veil, also of beads and dentalium shells, as well as bells, coins and other trinkets (Paterek, 1994, p. 233).

In addition to this description, which matches Curtis’s photographs, the *Encyclopedia* illustrates Wishram dress with Curtis’s photograph *Wishham Bride, 1910* (Image 7). This, combined with the unlikely event that Curtis would use Chinese coins in a prop, because they would not appear “Indian,” suggests that the headdresses were, indeed, part of the Wishham culture in the early twentieth century.

Additional investigation of Curtis’s photographs supports the conclusion that the headdresses are part of indigenous Wishham culture. The shirts worn by some of the Wishham women are of similar design or style to the headdresses. These could be a prop of Curtis’s; however, although the detailed designs on the shirts are different, the style of the overall shirt is the same, suggesting that the shirts were individually made items that were part of Wishham culture.

I selected four photographs in which three women of the Wishham tribe wear this style of shirt: *Wishham Bride, 1910* (Image 7), *Wishham Girl, 1910* (Image 8), *Wishham Maid, 1909* (Image 11), and *Wishham Girl-Profile, 1910* (Image 12). Image 8 and Image 12 are two views of the same woman. In order to determine whether these garments were the same in each photograph, the beadwork pattern from the shoulder, down over the top of the arm, was compared; this part of the shirt has the most intricate visible patterns of the garment, thus lending itself best to comparison. Although there are other features of the garment that could be discussed, the purpose of this analysis is solely to show whether the shirts these three women wore are the same or different. Thus a comparison of only one detailed part of each shirt is needed to come to a definite conclusion. The pattern is more visible in Image 12. Therefore, I will consider Image 12 rather than Image 8 in this discussion.

In the first photograph, *Wishham Bride, 1910* (Image 7), very little can be seen of the top arm piece of the garment, but from what can be seen, it is clear that it is sewn with patterns of beads that are outlined all the way around with light beads, and the center composed of dark beads. In *Wishham Maid, 1909* (Image 11), the beaded top of the sleeve consists of light and dark colored beads, with a single color per row, in a rough triangular shape, over a dark background. In the third photograph, *Wishham Girl-Profile, 1910* (Image 12), the patterns of these beads are horizontal and linear. The pattern alternates between approximately fifteen rows of light colored beads, to a space that might be either leather or dark beads, to two rows of light beads, to the dark space, and then repeats with fifteen rows of light colored beads. A large piece of triangular cloth borders this line of beads on either side.

To summarize, in Image 7, the beads are not in solid color rows, but form outlines and filled-in parts of what appear to be geometric shapes. In Image 11, the beads are in patterned solid color rows, but in geometric triangular shapes. In Image 12, all the beads are organized in alternating patterned solid color rows. From this examination of the beaded shirts it appears that these garments are not the same. I did not find these garments on any of Curtis’s non-Wishham subjects, and it is highly unlikely that Curtis would have used three different intricately patterned over-shirts as props in a single two-year span, because other evidence suggests he reused props. It, therefore, seems likely that these women were wearing their own clothing, and these garments were part of the Wishham cultural tradition of the time.

Sapir and Spier’s work gives more definitive information on these “shirts” than the headdresses. They say that the women wore long dresses made out of buckskin and “A heavy beaded yoke . . . crossing the shoulders and extending down on breast and back. The dress was gathered with a beaded belt” (Sapir and Spier, 1930, pp. 206-207). Especially in *Wishham Maid, 1909* (Image 11), the “shirt” does appear to be a yoke overlaying a dress. Referring to the *Encyclopedia*
of American Indian Costume again, this conclusion is verified. Under “Women’s basic dress” it reads, “Later, reflecting Plains influence, the women wore an ankle-length dress of tanned leather in the two-skin style, with the deer tail retained in the yoke. . . . The yoke was heavily beaded in a lazy-stitch technique” (Paterek, 1994, p. 233). This description is important because it identifies the beaded “shirts,” which we now know were part of a dress, as part of the Wishham culture. The Encyclopedia acknowledges the Plains as the source of this style of Wishham clothing. In the future, it would be interesting to look for similarities between the beaded outfits of the Wishham and any styles that may occur in Plains tribes.

Further examples of reconstruction are included in the complete thesis at www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2003.

Conclusion

Edward S. Curtis was primarily a photographer, but he hoped that through the combination of his photographs and text, those who read his twenty volumes of The North American Indian would obtain a broad understanding of the Native people he discussed (Lyman, 1982, p. 76). He used re-enactments, props, and posing in his photographs; but, during the early 1900s when Curtis worked, these methods were widely used and accepted, and Curtis readily acknowledged his methodology (Edwards, 2001, pp. 169-172; Lyman, 1982, pp. 65, 67).

Curtis’s romantic appeal spawned interest among the public in the 1960s and 1970s, and this interest continues today, resulting in numerous publications geared toward the general public. These publications usually present the photographs alone, without the context provided by Curtis’s text. Thus, my analyses have focused on what the photographs can provide to anthropological knowledge on their own, in the absence of their contextualizing text. I have examined issues of the “authentic,” “artistic,” and “reality” in photography, to show that photographs are interpretations. Thus, I presented the analysis of the uses of photography, especially in re-enactment, in order to contextualize both Curtis’s justification of his methods and the objections postmodernists have to these methods.

My analysis shows that one can use the post-modernist critique to determine the subjective views of ethnographers in the past, without taking the views of the fundamentalists who would disregard past works. Through the application of this knowledge and the filtering out of some degree of subjectivity, one can obtain culturally relevant information from the examination of past ethnographic works such as Curtis’s. This analysis implies that people can evaluate other past ethnographies in a similar manner to derive cultural information that was not necessarily the intent of the ethnographer. I used Curtis’s work precisely because other complementary, written ethnographies about the groups he photographed are available for comparison and evaluation of his photos.

My purpose in performing this analysis is to demonstrate a fallacy of the fundamentalist post-modernists, because I am opposed to ignoring past ethnographies. While I realize that the methods earlier ethnographers used are not equivalent to those we promote today, it does not mean that their work is irrelevant. Past ethnographies are our primary resources about the histories of a people. I believe that by ignoring these, we, in turn, treat the cultures they studied as ahistorical, as though we can go back to that culture today and record exactly the same things that the ethnographers of the past witnessed. We know in anthropology that this is not the case: cultures are dynamic and change through time. If we disagree with the methods, analyses such as mine should be conducted to determine the ethnographers’ methods, and to derive the information that we desire.

For the list of references cited and the full-size images, see the on-line version of this article at www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2003.