



Edward Curtis and Moral Tragedy

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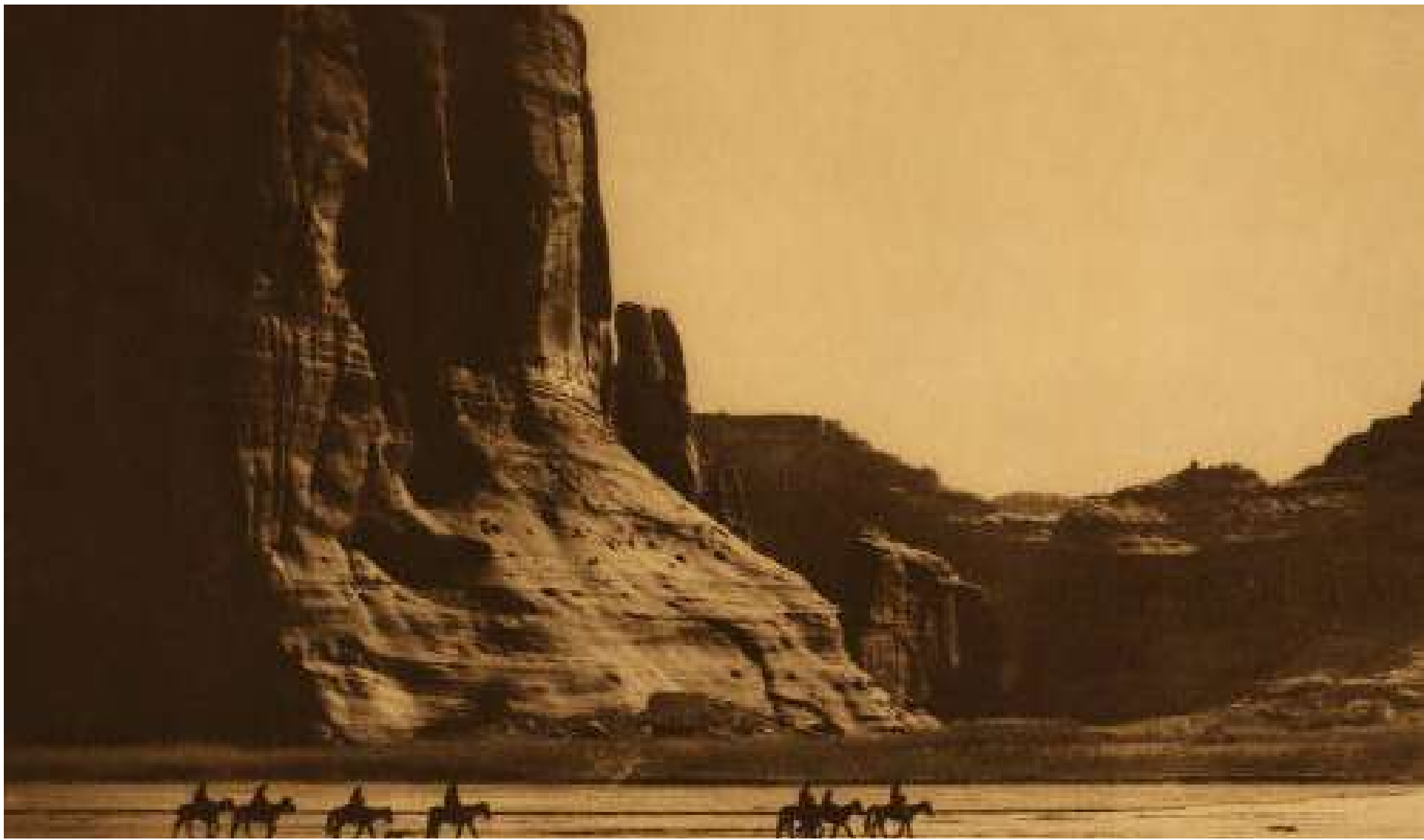




At the Old Well of Acoma c. 1904



An Oasis in the Badlands c. 1905



Canyon De Chelly c. 1904

Two Views of Curtis

“Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher restores [Curtis] to his rightful place as a sensitive master photographer and a staunch advocate for indigenous rights..... Genuine documentary photographs and films record people and situations as they are, not as they once were. But the photographs that resulted from Curtis's craft are among the most haunting and beautiful pictures ever taken. As Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday wrote about his early encounters with Curtis's oeuvre, "Taken as a whole, the work of Edward Curtis is a singular achievement...,a moment lost in time, a moment I had known only in my imagination....Never before have we seen the Indians of North America so close to the origins of their humanity, their sense of themselves in the world, their innate dignity and self-possession" (222).....As a younger man, Curtis was reluctant to publicly criticize the treatment of Native Americans. As time passed, he expressed his views openly. "We have wronged the Indian from the beginning," he told the press. "The white man's sins against him did not cease with...the final cartridge in the wars which subjugated him in his own country. Our sins of peace have been far greater than our sins of war" (218). As Curtis's compulsion to complete *The North American Indian* grew, so too did escalating demands from his estranged wife for financial support. In the end, he lost nearly everything to his wife in a divorce settlement and to his creditors as a result of increasingly stringent agreements. He died penniless, like Civil War photographer Matthew Brady and other visionaries who abandoned stable careers to pursue massive documentary projects.”

Jeffrey Mifflin *The American Indian Quarterly*, 2013



Two Views of Curtis

- “Since the photographs did not in the slightest degree speak to the reality of the American Indian, either past or present, they became the perfect format for expression of the wistful reservoir of emotions that lay behind the general perception of Indians. If people could not take cocoa and cookies to Dull Knife’s fleeing Cheyennes and piously separate themselves from advocates of Manifest Destiny, they could at least mount a Curtis print prominently in their homes and silently proclaim their solidarity with Indians....This romanticization of Indians was well received by the Indian community itself... Indians saw in the Curtis pictures an opportunity to universalize the nobility and wisdom suggested there and claim it as a natural, sometimes even a genetic, Indian trait. ..Wiser and more experienced Indians detested the fawning over Curtis. They had previously experienced such periods of intense euphoria inspired by the white majority only to find the climate radically shifting and producing substantial hardships when people forgot their pledge of undying guilt toward the nation’s first citizens. Thus a weak smile and an uncomfortable shrug was about the only response that Curtis pictures evoked in older Indians, and many tried to indicate, without condemning, that while these pictures certainly hinted at past glories and innate righteousness, they presented such a sanitized view of Indians that many believed them to be harmful to the cause. From a personal experience, I can testify to the sense of utter futility these pictures are capable of producing when starting to discuss Indian problems with a prominent senator, I found him shoving a book of Curtis pictures over his desk at me with the remark that he “knew a great deal about Indians.”” -- Vine Deloria Jr, Introduction to *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions*, 1982



Art or Documentary:
Shadow Catcher or Shadow Snatcher?



“Chain Nose Pliers” Walker Evans c. 1955



“The Vanishing Race” c. 1904

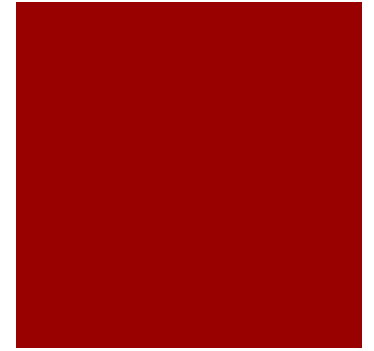
Curtis on Photography- 1900

“I do not think that the most radical...can deny that a photograph can show artistic handling and feeling. After all, it is the finished picture that hangs upon our wall, and not the implements with which it is made.”

“When I say that we should study for a greater art education I do not mean that we should try to make our work like a brush or pencil artist. Photography is one of the greatest **art sciences** and is able to stand for itself. Let us study light and shade, composition, perspective, both as it is seen in nature and in the work of the masters, not to copy but to learn. Once we know the true rules of art it will soon be shown in our work.”

“Try to make your work show some individuality, or in other words, make it look yourself; let it show that you have put part of your life into it.”

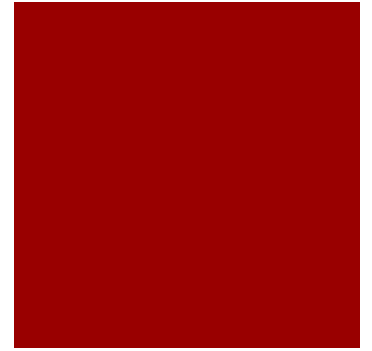
From *Western Trail* January & February 1900



Curtis on *The North American Indian*

“a comprehensive and permanent record of all the important tribes...that still retain to a considerable degree their primitive customs and traditions.”

“To the workaday man of our own race, the life of the Indian is just as incomprehensible as are the complexities of civilization to the mind of the untutored savage.”



Understanding Curtis

1. How did he see photography: as document or art?
1. Why did he treat these tribes as one, stereotyped race when he was intimately aware of the great diversity of these groups who lived hundreds or even thousands of miles apart?



Photography a (Brief) History



"Scene Showing Deserted Camp and Wounded Soldier" - Mathew Brady c. 1863

Photography a (Brief) History



Ethnology and Ethnography



Ethnology (study of cultural variation)



Ethnography: Descriptive/Observational,
not interpretive.

Ethnography and Manipulation



“A Modoc Brave on the Warpath” Eadweard Muybridge c. 1873

Photography: art or document?



"A Snapshot: Paris" Alfred Stieglitz c. 1911

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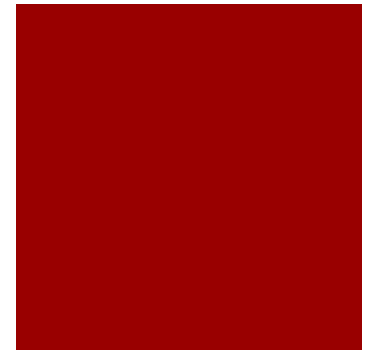
"Sun and Clouds" Edward Curtis c. 1899



“Why?” Edward Curtis 1900



"A Desert Queen" Edward Curtis c. 1900



"The Egyptian"
Edward Curtis c. 1900

Curtis Focuses

“Let me urge you to make a specialization of some one thing. This is a day of concentration, and to make a showing you must be a specialist.”

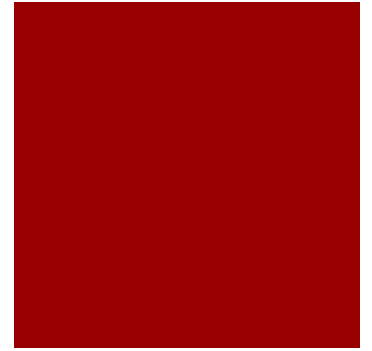
Edward Curtis, *Wester Trail*, 1900.



Darwin on Race and Diversity

“...all races agree in so many unimportant details of structure and in so many mental peculiarities that these can be accounted for only by inheritance from a common progenitor; and a progenitor thus characterised would probably deserve to rank as man.”

Descent of Man 1871 (pp 198)



Darwin on Race and Diversity

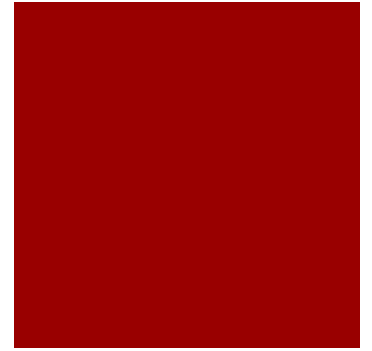


“...there can hardly be a doubt that we are descended from barbarians. The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind – such were our ancestors...He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins. For my own part I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper...as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practices infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions.” Descent of Man p. 208

Early Ethnography and Western Expansion

“The great boon to the savage tribes of this country...has been the presence of civilization, which, under the laws of acculturation, has irresistibly improved their culture by substituting new and civilized for old and savage arts, new for old customs – in short, transforming savage into civilized life. The great body of the Indians of North America have passed through stages of culture in the last hundred years achieved by Anglo-Saxon ancestors only by the slow course of events through a thousand years.”

C.C. Royce “Investigations Relating to the Cessions of Lands by Indian Tribes to the United States” *First Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* Government Printing Office, 1881.



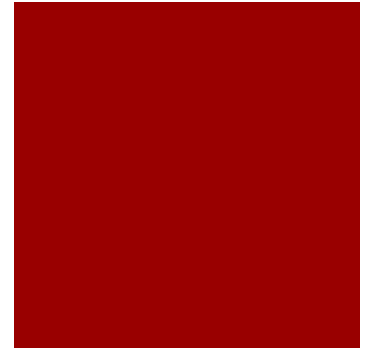
The Vanishing Race?

Indians had changed since contact with Europeans b/c of something – apparently the superiority of European culture – that made them acculturate.

To the extent they were acculturated, Indians lost their “indian-ness” and, in effect, became less Indian.

Thus, when Indians changed they were no longer Indians and, so, the Idea that Indians do not change can remain in tact.

(Source: Christopher M. Lyman “The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions”)



The Ethnographic Present



Ethnologists/Ethnographers at the time attempted to study Indian cultures in terms of what they were like prior to contact with Europeans – or, in reality, what they were *imagined* to have been like prior to contact with Europeans.

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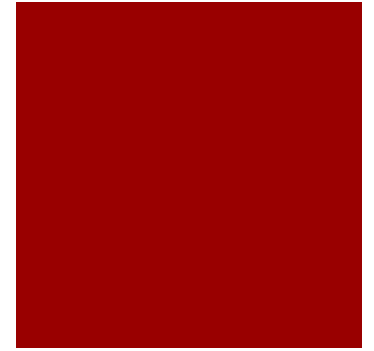
Moral Luck and Moral Tragedy

Moral luck occurs when someone can be correctly treated as an object of moral judgment, despite the fact that a significant aspect of what he is assessed for depends on factors beyond his control.

Simplistic Example:

The successful murderer vs.

The attempted murderer



Moral Luck and Moral Tragedy



Resultant Luck: Luck in the way things turn out. The successful and the unsuccessful murderers in my example are influenced by resultant luck. This is the luck involved in the outcomes of what one does.

Circumstantial Luck: Luck in the circumstances in which one finds oneself. We do morally assess German citizens who did not resist (or were, in various ways, complicit) in Nazi Germany, even though, if they had been raised in different circumstances we recognize they might have lived exemplary lives.

Constitutive Luck: Luck in who one is, or in the traits and dispositions that one has. Genes, care-givers, peers and other environmental factors contribute greatly to who we are. It seems that who we are is largely a matter of luck.

Moral Tragedy

Typical moral dilemma, one is in a situation where two different courses of action, A or B, recommend themselves, but it is not clear which one to choose.

“They look great!” vs. “They don’t really fit”

Resolvable moral dilemma: There is a plausible/justifiable answer as to whether to do A or B.

Irresolvable: There is not a plausible/justifiable answer as to whether to do A or B, and they both look wrong.

Tragic: Irresolvable dilemmas where the stakes are particularly high.





“The Curtis Indians have come to occupy a particular place in the pantheon of cherished symbols that inform us about our American identity. As such they relate less to the reality of Indians that we would like and testify to less precise aspects of the American experience – *the history we would have liked to have possessed*. In this sense they will no doubt always be popular and represent in the public’s mind a West and a people that subsequent yearning for certainty has *created*. If we can learn to view them as photographic art, as the genius of a particular person’s efforts to transcend mere photographic recording, then Curtis’ work will have made a major contribution to our understanding of the media we use to express our perceptions of reality. But if they come to represent an Indian that never was, and color our appraisal of things Indian with romantic shibboleths that shield us from present-day realities, then our use of them is a delusion and a perversion of both Indians and the artful expressions of Curtis.”

☰ Vine Deloria Jr Introduction to *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions*

