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Edward S. Curtis and the Complex Legacy of *The North American Indian* Project

Abstract

In 1907 Edward S. Curtis published the first volume of *The North American Indian* – the 20-volume series which was his life achievement, completed in 1930. During thirty years he took probably about 40,000 photographs of Native Americans belonging to various tribes. These included both portraits and depictions of everyday life of the peoples his generation believed were vanishing. During the field work he also collected textual material documenting the tribes' histories, legends, rituals as well as biographies of individual people. The project, in its immensity, exhausted the resources and did bring Curtis the recognition he hoped for. His works were rediscovered in 1972 and since then photographs have been either criticised for being staged and not depicting the Native tribes' life as it really was, or appreciated both for their aesthetic quality and documentary value. The article provides an overview of the project, discusses the controversies surrounding it and its significance from today's perspective. It also refers to the legacy of Curtis's work and the way contemporary artists remain in a dialogue with it.

Key words: Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Native Americans, history of American photography, ethnography

Introduction

Edward S. Curtis, born in 1868 in Whitewater, Wisconsin and brought up near Cordova, Minnesota, became an apprentice photographer at the age of 17, and at the age of 19 a partner in a photographic studio in Seattle, where his family moved in 1887. In 1895 he took the

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first portrait photograph of a Native American. It was princess Angeline, the daughter of Chief Sealth of Seattle, being allowed as the only member of her tribe to remain in the city. Due to his friendship with George Bird Grinnel, an anthropologist and historian, Curtis became the official photographer of the Harriman Alaskan Expedition of 1899, exploring the coast from Seattle to Alaska. Grinnel's interest in Curtis's photography resulted in an invitation for Curtis to join in 1900 an expedition to photograph the people of the Blackfoot Confederacy in Montana. All that experience developed Curtis's life-long interest in Native American people and their culture, which eventually resulted in his *North American Indian* project.

Curtis gradually built his reputation as a photographer, his photographs – both of the landscape and of people, including indigenous Americans – appeared in quite a wide circulation, winning various prizes. Having some larger projects in mind, he sought patronage from various sources, including government agencies, scientific institutions, industrialists, and philanthropists. In 1904 he was invited by Theodor Roosevelt to photograph the president's family. The photographs were to commemorate Roosevelt's first presidential inauguration and appeared in *McClure*'s magazine. That acquaintance resulted in the president's future support for *The North American Indian* project, the first volume of which includes a Foreword by Roosevelt himself.

The North American Indian, Edward Curtis's magnum opus, was published between 1907 and 1930, in 20 volumes, as its author had originally planned. J.P. Morgan, one of the richest Americans at that time, secured the funds for the five-year field work to gather material, but completion of the project took place years after the original funds had been exhausted. Morgan was to receive 25 sets and 500 original prints as repayment. A number of industrialists, such as, Andrew Carnegie and the railroad tycoons such as E.H. Harriman and Henry E. Huntington were also patrons of the project (Gidley 2003: 13). Despite the financial difficulties, with the assistance of, among others, William E. Myers, who recorded and wrote down interviews with the Native Americans, Bill Philips, who was responsible for logistics and fieldwork, and Frederick Webb Hodge, an anthropologist who edited the series, the last volume saw the light of day in the midst of the Great Depression. The financial problems Curtis was facing forced him to sell the rights to the project to J.P. Morgan Jr. in 1928. In 1935 the Morgan estate sold the rights to both the published and unpublished material, including the glass-plate negatives, to Charles E. Lauriat Company in Boston, in whose possession most of the material remained untouched until 1972, when it was redis-

covered and brought back into circulation, reviving interest in Edward S. Curtis and his work. Eventually, the 20 volumes and the portfolios (additional large-format, loose-leaf photogravures accompanying each volume) have been digitalised and are now available online.

The copies of *The North American Indian* which were originally published and sold on a subscription basis to wealthy individuals, constituted a limited edition of leather-bound books. It was not intended for a wide general distribution. It was a quality publication, very expensive, so as Shamoon Zamir notices, "[a] complete set could therefore have been acquired only by libraries or institutions with considerable funds at their disposal" (Zamir 2014: 16). A cheaper edition was planned but never prepared due to the financial crisis of 1929.

The photographic material published in the 20 volumes (nearly 5,000 pages and 2,200 photographs) is a fraction of all that Curtis collected over the years of fieldwork. As planned – and that really requires respect and admiration, taking into consideration the circumstances – 80 different tribes west of the Mississippi and their lives were documented, which makes Curtis's project "the largest anthropological enterprise ever undertaken" (Gidley 2003: 3).

The collection consists of over 40,000 photographs and 10,000 recordings, for which Curtis used a wax cylinder-recording machine. The photographs can be divided into a number of groups. Those include, first of all, portraits, which are of unquestionable artistic quality, stunningly beautiful, and also showing Curtis's changing attitude to this type of photography – with the passage of time, the less formal the portraits become, with the 20th volume showing none of the formal features of Victorian portraiture, characteristic of the early volumes. The portraits include both those of acknowledged Native American chiefs, like Red Cloud, Chief Joseph, or Geronimo, and anonymous members of a given tribe, described in the captions as, e.g., "Cheyenne maiden," "Hopi girl," or "Mandan hunter," representing a certain age group or profession in a given tribe. Another group are staged community scenes, rituals, celebrations, forms of everyday activity, which, being staged, are frequently criticised for lack of authenticity (like, e.g., Ogalala War Party). Curtis also photographed artefacts, ranging from ritual objects, through arts and crafts, to forms of housing. The last group of photographs are landscapes, showing the photographer's appreciation of natural beauty. What was recorded – and used in the publication – are tribal lore and history, including stories of individual tribal leaders. The publication also includes descriptions of traditional foods, housing, garments, rites and ceremonies. As is stated in the online advertisement of the Reference

Edition: "Much of the information in *The North American Indian* is found nowhere else, including personal histories and detailed information about Native religion, spirituality and Native Lifeways" (Reference Edition).

The project was carried out for over two decades and swallowed most of Curtis's money, leading to personal problems, bankruptcy and the loss of the rights to the project. He died in 1952 at the age of 84 at one of his daughters' house in Los Angeles. The obituary which appeared in "The New York Times" consisted of six sentences only, the first of which defined Curtis as "an authority on the history of the North American Indian," and the last one admitted that he was "also widely known as a photographer" (Curtis Legacy Foundation). Quite a paradox it seems, taking into consideration the future evaluation of Curtis's achievements.

At present, the entire 20 volumes can be accessed online[2], digitized by Northwestern University. Very few paper copies of the original complete sets still exist, and one of the complete sets is held by the University of Wyoming in Laramie, deposited in the Toppan Rare Books Library. The present value of the original complete set is estimated as $3.5 million (Jenkinson 2023), while the Complete Reference Edition in hardcover costs about $6500. The recordings of tribal songs are housed at the University of Indiana at Bloomington.

Critical reception of *The North American Indian* after its rediscovery in the 1970s

Since the rediscovery of Curtis's oeuvre in the 1970s, his work has been both praised and strongly criticised for a variety of reasons. There have been numerous book publications on him and his works, the most notable of which are Mick Gidley's *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated* (2000) and *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian Project in the Field* (2003), Christopher Cardozo's nine monographs on Curtis's photography (published between 2005 and 2015), Anne Makepeace's *Edward S. Curtis: Coming to Light* (2001) as well as her award-winning documentary released a year earlier under the same title, Laurie Lawlor's *Shadow Catcher: The Life and Work of Edward S. Curtis* (2005), Timothy Egan's *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward*

[2] The digitalised version is available at the website of Northwestern University https://dc.library.northwestern.edu/collections/55ff2504-dd53-4943-b2cb-aeea46e77bc3.

Curtis (2012) and Shamoon Zamir's *The Gift of the Face Portraiture and Time in Edward S. Curtis's The North American Indian* (2014), as well as a strongly critical interpretation of Curtis's photographs by Christopher M. Lyman in *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions – Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* (1982), with Introduction by Vine Deloria, Jr.

What is worth stressing, is the fact that those photographs which were published within the project are only part of the entire corpus of the material collected. At the same time most of the people writing on Curtis refer only to a fraction of the whole work, and most of the publications focus on the visual representation of Native Americans, discarding the mass of ethnographic information found in the text. As Zamir underlines, the photographs included in the volumes in most cases complement the text, and that connection is lost when Curtis's project is approached selectively: "Access to selected images through exhibitions and numerous books has distorted the photo-textual nature of the book because this mode of presentation disrupts the arranged sequence and divorces the image from the text" (Zamir 2014: 22). Gidley expresses a similar opinion, stressing that extension of Curtis's oeuvre makes it difficult to study and the method of selection of photographs to be studied might lead to unjustified conclusions or manipulation. A good example of such a manipulation is an accusation made by Christopher Lyman, who suggested that Curtis portrayed men as active agents and women as aesthetic objects. That accusation was overthrown by Bill Holm's study, which proved that 45% of photographs showing women in all twenty volumes and the portfolios represent them in an activity, while the respective percentage in the case of men was 37, which led Holm to a justified conclusion that it was actually men who were more frequently represented as aesthetic objects, surprising as it might seem (discussed in Zamir 2014: 201–202).

As Gidley notices, one of the first contradictions of *The North American Indian* may be seen in the fact that JP Morgan invested some of his money in "a project dedicated to studying, recording, and reporting upon the lives and cultures of peoples who stood in the way of their considerably larger investments" (Gidley 2003: 13). Gidley explains that, in fact, there is no inherent contradiction – the basic assumption of Curtis's project was "that Indian lives must inevitably be given up, and that Indian cultures must progressively be swept away, precisely to enable the triumph of 'civilization'", represented by such capitalists as Morgan, his bank, and their investments. As Gidley suggests, part of the project's cultural work may have been to show the "truth" of the inevitable pro-

cess of disappearance of the traditional ways of life of the Indigenous peoples. As Clay Jenkinson stresses in his lecture at Vail Symposium (2023), at the moment Curtis embarked on his project, the fact that Native Americans were to vanish as a race was a general belief. However, as Laurie Lawlor puts it, "[w]hen judged by the standards of his time, Curtis was far ahead of his contemporaries in sensitivity, tolerance and openness to Native American cultures and ways of thinking. He sought to observe and understand by going directly into the field" (Lawlor 2005: 6).

Volume 1 of *The North American Indian* opens with Theodore Roosevelt's Foreword, which contains the following statement: "The Indian as he has hitherto been on the point of passing away. His life has been lived under conditions thru which our own race past so many ages ago that not a vestige of their memory remains."[3] The same volume includes also Curtis's Introduction, in which he states: "The value of such a work, in great measure, will lie in the breadth of its treatment, in its wealth of illustration, and in the fact that it represents the result of personal study of a people who are rapidly losing the traces of their aboriginal character and who are destined ultimately to become assimilated with the 'superior race'." Despite representing the dominant group, Curtis signalled in the Introduction his sensitivity to the Native American lot and seemed to question the superiority of the race he represented.

What distinguishes Curtis from ethnographers photographing the peoples they were describing is the aesthetic dimensions of the photographs he was taking, "an understanding of the deliberative photographic composition as a picture" (Zamir 2014: 6). We can assume that this is the project's major asset, but at the same time its major drawback: the fact that the volumes are neither artistic albums, nor ethnographic studies. Curtis hoped them to be both: he believed he was creating a beautifully-illustrated ethnographic study. As he puts it in the Introduction to Volume 1, "…the fact that the Indian and his surroundings lend themselves to artistic treatment has not been lost sight of, for in his country one may treat limitless subjects of an aesthetic character without in any way doing injustice to scientific accuracy or neglecting the homelier phases of aboriginal life." He wanted to create a document, which at the same time would have considerable aesthetic value. Many believe he succeeded, while many believe he did not. The paradox lies in the fact that what is of actual documentary value, that is the text, including de-

[3] All quotations from *The North American Indian* come from the digitalised version available at the website of Northwestern University https://dc.library.northwestern.edu/collections/55ff2504-dd53-4943-b2cb-aeea46e77bc3.

tailed characteristics of individual tribes, life stories of their most prominent members, rendering of myths and legends, descriptions of rituals, does not catch too much of the contemporary recipients' attention. Most of the studies and publications refer to the visual material only. The reason why it is so is quite easy to explain. In the photographs lies the greatest artistic value of Curtis's work, in portraits in particular, since in them he specialised as a photographer. The question whether Curtis's material is an aesthetic record or an aestheticized record remains unanswered, although the fact that the influence of pictorialism, which, as an artistic movement, aimed at lifting photography to the level of visual art, beyond the simple mechanical reproduction, diminished the documentary value of the photographs is unquestionable. However, even if the reality photographed was constructed rather than documented, the people Curtis photographed were real and the photographic material is of extreme value for descendants of the individuals photographed, frequently being the only visual representation of long-departed ancestors. Those fortunate to have recognised their ancestors, like Joseph D. Horse, whose great-great-grandfather, Horse Capture, was photographed by Curtis, find the legacy invaluable, enabling him to relate to his ancestor as a real person (Contemporary Native Perspective). Also, people interviewed by Anne Makepeace for her documentary *Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians* (2001), whose ancestors can be found among the photographs, seem in most cases grateful. On the other hand, though, the photographs constitute the most frequently – and most fiercely criticised – part of the project. In the same documentary we can hear people who condemn Curtis for cultural exploitation. In the paragraphs which follow I would like to discuss the major controversies surrounding Curtis's work and the contemporary perspective on them.

The controversies

The most frequently formulated accusation against Curtis is that of ignoring the existing problems and focusing on the depiction of his vision of Native American lives, locking the Indigenous in a romantic past. The critics point out that he does not acknowledge the wrongs done by the federal government, and by the dominant group in general, to Native Americans and he does not document the actual everyday problems, focusing on what he finds visually attractive.

In the Introduction to Volume 1 Curtis acknowledges the aesthetic aspect of his work, as he cannot ignore "the marvellous touches that

Nature has given to the Indian country" and the fact that "the environment made the Indian much of what he is." In this introductory text he refers also to the fact that there are white people whose relatives "have been killed or captured by a party of hostiles forced to the warpath by the machinations of some unscrupulous Government employee" and those people "can see nothing that is good in the Indian." Roosevelt in his Foreword in a way suggests looking at the Native Americans as "us" centuries earlier, Curtis writes about inevitable assimilation, calling the dominant group the "superior race", in inverted commas. He also talks about the "worse than criminal" treatment which Indians frequently received from those who claimed to be more civilized, but admits that "a rehearsal of those wrongs does not properly find a place here."

Curtis, thus, opens his publication, sponsored by, and addressed to rich, white people, with admitting his awareness of the difficult situation Indians found themselves in, but also in a way trying to explain that his aim is to present what the recipients might find of value and what may change their perception of the Indian. Curtis was showing the beauty, without showing what the government was doing to the people. He did not document the ill treatment, the abuse of power, the forced assimilation. He focused on what he found most appealing – the beauty and dignity of the people and on recording as much of the traditional way of life as was possible in the circumstances. What remains unquestionable is that Curtis showed great respect to his subjects, which is reflected in the way they present themselves in the photographs.

Another accusation concerns Curtis's occasional manipulation of facts and hence a certain unreliability of his photographic record. Undoubtedly, one of the major problems with Curtis's photographs is their questionable value as documents. A large number of the photographs showing various types of everyday practices or forms of social behaviour, customs and rituals, were staged. That is by all means understandable, taking into consideration the stage technology was at and the actual effort connected with technicalities: long exposure time required cooperation with the photographed, and there was practically no possibility of taking a photograph of somebody who would not actually sit for the photograph and pose. Since Curtis declared his urge to document life rather as it used to be – and was ceasing to be – it by definition required a certain degree of reconstruction. One conspicuous example of staging is the mentioned earlier herein Ogalala War-Party, photographed at the moment when no war-parties could possibly be witnessed, the Plains Wars were long over. As Zamir puts it, "Curtis's images of what was past or passing could only be posed or artificial because they were by definition

re-creation of what no longer existed or of what had already been radically transformed by the experiences of modernity and empire" (Zamir 2014: 245).

Opinions on the extent to which Curtis created his own vision of a given tribe are divided. Critics, like Gerald Vizenor (quoted in Burgan 2015: 52) or Christopher M. Lyman (1982) stress that Curtis removed or inserted details, gave false captions to the photographs, selected the ornaments and gear of his models, and his photographs are simulations rather than actual documents. Clay Jenkinson in his lecture at Vail Symposium (2023) confirms that Curtis did bring with him some props, but always encouraged his models to wear what they found suitable and bring with them what they considered traditional and worth documenting. One of the points that can be made in defence of Curtis's staging his models in celebratory clothing is that in times when photography was practiced by relatively few people, when the poor were photographed, they never exposed their poverty, but were wearing their "Sunday best." It is true about any country at that moment in history. Sitting for a photographer was a formal event and people tried to look their best, and so did Curtis's sitters.

Another problem are photographs which have been retouched. Zamir claims that there are only a dozen or so examples of manipulations among more than two thousand published images. Curtis's photographs are more than just documentary material and it is not falsification, but aesthetisation that drives him. As Zamir stresses: "[t]o speak of such effects as distortions of a documentary ethics and practice, even as lies, is to judge them by inappropriate criteria since mere facticity or objectivity are not the motivations behind the images" (Zamir 2014: 24). Curtis was not an anthropologist, neither was he an ethnographer, which exposed him to criticism of his contemporaries, like Frank Boaz. In the photographs Curtis took and collected we do not get a typology - we get aesthetic portraiture, influenced by pictorialism and Victorian conventions.

Another question that keeps being posed is whether Curtis exploited the Native Americans he photographed. Zamir argues that at the beginning of the 20th century the tribes Curtis worked with were fully aware of the situation they were in, knew what he was doing and were modelling consciously. Even when reconstructing certain traditional activities, as Curtis asked them to, they knew that what was being documented was the past: "a way of life had collapsed, and as a consequence is became possible to say that things ceased to happen" (2014: 6). Zamir argues that the images we get can be also read as "a work of Native American autobiography and visual self-representation, and … the hundreds of Native

individuals who worked with Curtis… be considered as its co-authors or co-creators" (Zamir 2014: 10). What is being argued and stressed is that there must have been conscious cooperation between Curtis and Native Americans. Curtis's informers and models must have realized that his work was "salvaging in the form of an ethnographic record of what survived of Native cultures or of what was still available through living memory" (Zamir 2014: 66). Curtis showed his earlier photographs to the sitters, so they knew what kind of images would result from the encounter. And in most cases they presented themselves, co-creating the final image. Curtis's portraits, especially those from the first volumes of the project, are consistent with the conventions of Victorian portraiture, but can be also read as a form of self-expression of the sitters.

The most general question that can be posed with reference to Edward S. Curtis and his oeuvre is whether a member of the dominant culture can represent another culture accurately. Curtis focuses on what is different, exotic, what represented his assumptions about what or who the Indians were, portraying Natives in an antiquated pre-contact setting. Curtis's tone reflects the white perspective of the times, and although he shows Indians respect, he does sound from time to time patronising and categorises Indian peoples. He worked, as Gidley puts it within "ideological constraints of the dominant culture of the time" (Gidley 2003: 3).

Conclusions

Curtis was one of a number of photographers of Native Americans, who at the beginning of the 20th century sought to photograph American Indians pushed into reservations and no longer posing a military threat. However, what distinguishes Curtis is the aesthetic value of his photographs. This is where, I believe, his major problem was also to be found – in finding a balance between a documentary record and his urge to create something that would have unquestionable aesthetic value. He was too ideological for pictorialists to be worthy of more than a mere mention in historical references to them, too aesthetic to be respected by ethnographers, who criticized him for staging the ceremonies, making his models pose, etc.

The value and significance of Curtis's *North American Indian* does not derive solely from the photographs. The descriptive section of each volume contains the history of a given tribe, information about its organization, rituals, myths, customs, dwellings, everyday chores. There are also biographical sketches of some of the most notable individuals.

Hence, it can be perceived as contribution to Native American biographical (or even autobiographical, as the life stories were recorded as told by the individuals) literature.

Nevertheless, it is the photographs that remain in unceasing circulation and can be found in recently open exhibitions, such as *Rediscovering Genius: The Works of Edward S. Curtis.* Depart Foundation, Los Angeles, 2016–2017, or *Light and Legacy: The Art and Techniques of Edward Curtis* Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West, Scottsdale, Arizona, 2021–2023. Contemporary Native American visual artists respond to Curtis's representation of their ancestors by entering into dialogue with him. One such artist is Jane Ash Poitras (Cree), who uses Curtis's photographs, framing them with her large, pained canvas containing drawings whose patterns derive from Native blankets, rugs, or ceramics (e.g., "He is One of Us") or including them in in collages she creates ("No One Catches the Wind"). Pierre Sioui (Huron) created collage-like seriographs including Curtis's photographs, e.g., *Genocide I* (1986), where eight portraits by Curtis frame a scene of martyrdom of missionaries. Liz Magor, as Patricia Vervoort puts it, emulates "Curtis's aesthetics and titles to record her own camping" (2004: 463). Native American photographers naturally confront the romantic representation of their ancestors, solidified by Curtis's photographs. Will Wilson (Diné) explains in the following way his project titled *The Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange* (2012–):

> I am impatient with the way that American culture remains enamored of one particular moment in a photographic exchange between Euro-American and Aboriginal American societies: the decades from 1907 to 1930 when photographer Edward S. Curtis produced *The North American Indian*. For many people even today, Native people remain frozen in time in Curtis' photos. […] I intend to challenge the documentary mission of Curtis from the standpoint of a 21st century indigenous, trans-customary, cultural practitioner. I want to supplant Curtis's Settler gaze and the remarkable body of ethnographic material he compiled with a contemporary vision of Native North America (Wilson).

Within Wilson's CIPX tintype, photographs are produced in a process which he calls "an exchange", referring to the way in which he collaborates with his sitters, engaging them in "a cultural conversation". From September 2018 to February 2019, in Crystal Bridges Museum of American in in Bentonville, Arizona, an exhibition titled "In Conversation: Will Wilson and Edward Curtis" was held, during which Wilson's photographs of contemporary Indigenous people were juxtaposed with selected photographs taken by Curtis. As is explained in the description

of the exhibition: "The photographs of Wilson and Curtis in conversation offer a chance to see different depictions of Native peoples and to think critically about how they have been portrayed in photography over the past century" (Crystal Bridges).

The concept of "vanishing race", not originally Curtis's, but characteristic of his times and the dominant group view of the conquered peoples, was used by a British photographer, Jimmy Nelson, in his first project culminating in the publication of an album presenting customs and traditions of the Indigenous communities around the world, titled *Before They Pass Away* (2013). The response to the publication resembled the criticism Curtis's work receives – on the one hand, representatives of the peoples depicted protested in various media that they are not passing away, on the other reviewers criticised Nelson for generalisations and inaccuracies in his attempt to make the photographed people look exotically attractive. An accusation formulated by Julia Lagoutte in an article for OpenDemocray sounds exactly like those formulated against Curtis: "Nelson's work freezes tribal peoples in the past and effectively denies them a place in this world" (Lagoutte 2014). Nelson did admit being inspired by Curtis's work and aiming at recording tribal cultures around the world, while they still exist. His intentions were similar to Curtis's, the photographs are stunningly beautiful, and the reception polarised: some appreciate the effort and the beauty of the product, others see the outcome as misrepresentation of cultures that a white European perceives as exotic. Unlike Curtis, though, Nelson had both time and resources to correct himself, and his later publications show a less "colonial" view, being titled, respectively, *Homage to Humanity* (2018), aimed at presenting the ethnic diversity of our planet, and *Between the Sea and the Sky* (2022) presenting twenty Dutch communities in traditional dress and the environment that formed them.

The above examples illustrate the continuous presence of Curtis's work and the role it has the potential to play. The website dedicated to Curtis, created by the late Christopher Cardozo, an art collector and curator, the founder of the Edward S. Curtis Foundation, includes a selection of highly positive opinions expressed by contemporary Native American writers and activists, Navarro Scott Momaday (who calls Curtis's photographs "an American treasure") and Louise Erdrich. Even though Curtis's "narrative of Indianness (…) served the artistic and political needs of an Anglo-American culture," as Shannon Egan puts it (Egan 2006: 81), he managed to create a work of great value: artistic and documentary, when approached cautiously and critically.

As Gidley notices, Curtis's own fragility let him notice fragility in others. Susan Sontag in her collection of essays on photography calls photography "an elegiac art, a twilight art", because, as she explains, "[t]o take a photograph is to participate in another person's … mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (Sontag 2001: 15). Curtis was aware of that. If he was not photographing a vanishing race, he was, most certainly, photographing vanishing individuals. Whom we all are.

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Edward S. Curtis i złożoność dziedzictwa jego projektu pt. *The North American Indian*

Streszczenie

W 1907 r. amerykański fotograf Edward S. Curtis opublikował pierwszy tom dzieła *The North American Indian* – 20-tomowej serii ukończonej w 1930 r., opisującej i ilustrującej życie 80 plemion żyjących w zachodniej części Stanów Zjednoczonych. Przez trzydzieści lat Curtis wykonał prawdopodobnie około 40 tysięcy fotografii Indian amerykańskich i zgromadził ogromny materiał etnograficzny dotyczący codziennego życia plemion, ich legend, mitów, historii. Wykonane zdjęcia to zarówno portrety, jak i przedstawienia różnego typu zajęć przedstawicieli „znikającej rasy", jak postrzegano na początku wieku rdzennych mieszkańców kontynentu. Projekt został ukończony ogromnym kosztem i nie przyniósł Curtisowi doczesnej sławy. Jego prace zostały odkryte na nowo w 1972 r. i od tego czasu są zarówno krytykowane za zafałszowywanie rzeczywistości oraz niewielką wartość dokumentalną, jak i doceniane za walory estetyczne i sam fakt zaistnienia, umożliwiający potomkom zobaczenie swoich odległych przodków. Artykuł omawia założenia projektu, jego efekty, źródła kontrowersji, a także współczesne znaczenie kulturowe tego ogromnego i jedynego w swoim rodzaju przedsięwzięcia.

Słowa kluczowe: Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, rdzenni mieszkańcy Ameryki Północnej, Indianie amerykańscy, historia amerykańskiej fotografii, etnografia