

Urban Indigenous Self-Expressionism from 1960s to Present and its Impact on  
Indigenous Identity

Brentley Sandlin

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## Introduction

As Native identity is increasingly discussed in modern politics and media, representation of Native cultures is paramount in the broader implications of Indigeneity. Forms of representation, such as self-representation through portraiture and photography of Indigenous persons by Indigenous persons, is necessary in reconceptualizing the contemporary formations of Native culture and identity in the current era.

This paper aims to study how urban North American Indigenous communities represent their identities and cultures; specifically, it will analyze how these practices have evolved since the rise of Native activism in the mid-20th century, catalyzed by the creation of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the late 1960s. As there is little existing research in this field, especially by Indigenous scholars, my argument will be primarily circumstantial and will advocate for further development of the analysis. Furthermore, as my research is interdisciplinary, I will utilize multiple theoretical frameworks and contextual analyses to develop my argument and subsequent close visual analysis. More specifically, I will utilize the frameworks from the fields of visual studies and Native studies in formulating my work. Throughout my research, I will interchange Indigenous and Native when speaking of North America Indigenous communities. Scholarship that I cite throughout this paper often use terms such as, “American Indian” or “Native American.” For the purpose of my work, these terms will refer to the same peoples and communities in which I am examining.

The temporal framework I have chosen is intentional: I am particularly interested in the contemporary representations of Indigenous peoples, because much of Native scholarship is situated in a historical lens of understanding. That is, Native persons are often confined to the notion that Indigeneity is foregone in modern society or is intrinsically tied to the past. It is

important to deconstruct the existing narrative that guides much of the current research and ideology of Native identity. Scholar Mark Rifkin, in *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, provides an important analysis in the temporal frameworks in which scholars and the public tend to create a lens of representation.<sup>1</sup> Rifkin primarily argues that defining Indigenous persons through a settler temporal lens limits the ability for Native peoples to define themselves contemporarily. As he writes, “Native peoples occupy a double bind within dominant settler reckonings of time. Either they are consigned to the past, or they are inserted into a present defined on non-native terms.”<sup>2</sup> Native persons are rarely given the power or opportunity to represent themselves in both history and the present, and representations have been historically curated by non-Native persons and were not accurate depictions of Indigenous identity or culture. Acknowledging the existence and structure of this settler temporal lens allows the deconstruction of this framework when understanding Indigenous representations.

Rifkin calls attention to the notion that temporal sovereignty of understanding for Native persons also shifts the colonial framework that systematically destabilizes Native presence and continual struggles of political and physical sovereignty. Rifkin states, “The temporal trick whereby Indians are edited out of the current moment [...] emerges out of the refusal to accept the (geo)political implications of persistent Indigenous becoming.”<sup>3</sup> The continuing and contradictory settler claims towards Indigenous lands adds a nuanced layer that further complicates the denial of Indigenous peoples to operate contemporarily in identity. Because Rifkin’s scholarship is recent, its impact is ever-growing in shaping Indigenous research regarding identity and existence in the contemporary world.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, vii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 5.

## Background

The contemporary temporal framework prioritizes the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the momentum from the late stage of the Civil Rights Movement. AIM was founded in 1968 to create both cultural and legislative change against the discriminatory policies regarding North America Indigenous persons in the United States. It is important to state the AIM was neither the beginning of Native activism, nor was it even the only organizing towards social issues impacting Indigenous peoples in that time period. In fact, many scholars view Indigenous existence as resistance itself; Native activist and scholar Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “By the time of the birth of the US republic, indigenous peoples in what is now the continental United States had been resisting European colonization for two centuries.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Joy Porter attests that the reorientation of thinking “so as to view Indian survival as protest in this period [...] makes it possible to see Indian peoples as part of, rather than discrete from, the larger and more familiar trends of the time.”<sup>5</sup> In understanding AIM’s positionality in relation to the broader history of Indigenous activism, Donald L. Fixico contends that the leaders of AIM were “also inheritors of a tradition of dissent, direct action, and ideational parallel making,” understanding that AIM was not necessarily revolutionary in its approach or founding.<sup>6</sup> However, I have chosen to focus on AIM as a temporal schism, due to its unparalleled media and political attention from its direct action tactics. The correlated sit-ins in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as well as the nineteen-month occupation of Alcatraz Island, encouraged onlookers to

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<sup>4</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 79.

<sup>5</sup> Joy Porter, “Progressivism and Native American Self-Expressionism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century,” *Native Diasporas: Indigenous Identities and Settler Colonialism in the Americas*, ed. Gregory D. Smithers & Brooke N. Newman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 274.

<sup>6</sup> Donald L. Fixico, “From Tribal to Indian: American Indian Identity in the Twentieth Century,” *Native Diasporas: Indigenous Identities and Settler Colonialism in the Americas*, ed. Gregory D. Smithers & Brooke N. Newman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 462.

participate and understand the intentions of the movement. Though AIM was very much a result of continual organizing since colonial contact, AIM received an influx of media and political attention that helped catapult its political and representational impact.

The lens and prioritization of self-representation is deeply significant in this research. I will utilize this term in characterizing both the artists' autobiographical artwork as well as works where both the subject and the artist identify as Native. I want to acknowledge that this lens does implicitly center the pan-Indian narrative by indicating that any production of art of a Native person by a Native person is self-representative. Fixico writes that "since the late nineteenth century, outside pressures on Indians to assimilate into the American mainstream have played an important role in altering the identity of Native people from tribalness to a generic Indianness."<sup>7</sup> However, I contend that this definition can empower Native artists rather than further contribute to the narrative, especially when the artists' explorations of self-representation insert agency into the historically-forced pan-identity. Additionally, there is a notable difference between the generalization of Indigenous identity versus the power of acknowledging similarities due to shared trauma. Thinking through such rhetoric, I call on Indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor's concept of "postindian" and how this ideology is "bound in a relationship with the public's perception of Natives and then uses this relationship to displace beliefs and perceptions circulating in public discourse."<sup>8</sup> In Vizenor's words, the term "postindian" is a condition in which "[Natives] now work and speak, and communicate in playing language *after* the invention of the Indian" by colonial standards.<sup>9</sup>

Self-representation is crucial throughout this research because it repositions the power of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 473.

<sup>8</sup> John D. Miles, "The Postindian Rhetoric of Gerald Vizenor," *College Composition and Communication* 63, no. 1 (2011): 47.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan F. Bell, "Some Thoughts on 'Taking' Pictures: Imaging 'Indians' and the Counter-Narratives of Visual Sovereignty," *University of Nebraska Press* 31, no. 2 (2011): 86.

the perspective. Rather than representation being defined implicitly by the lens of someone not sharing the same identity, self-representation allows Indigenous persons to highlight specific forms and discreet ways of identity that may not be noticed by persons that do not share such connections to culture. As Brett Douglas Burkhart writes, “American Indians historically have been exploitatively represented and characterized in the world at large, particularly in the United States.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Vizenor defines these stereotypical representations by coining the term *manifest manners*, leaning on the well-known phrase of *manifest destiny* to indicate the “course of dominance, the racist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as “authentic” representations of Indian cultures [that] court the destinies of monotheism, cultural determinism, objectivism, and the structural conceits of savagism and civilization.”<sup>11</sup> To counter this issue, Arianne Eason et al. specifically argues that “Native-defined representations offer accurate, nuanced understandings of Native Americans that have always existed but have been obscured by biased portrayals created by non-Natives.”<sup>12</sup> Manifest manners create a fixed time and place for Native peoples in history, specifically in the past, and Others their very existence, which is precisely why self-representation is so significant in reimagining Indigenous identity. Representation of self deconstructs such imposed narratives thereby empowering authentic identities to be shown and honored.

I assert that AIM and the rise of Native representation has forced the American public to reconcile with contemporary self-representation which has subsequently shaped modern Native and urban Native identity. The focus on Indigenous identity and representation has long been

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<sup>10</sup> Brett Douglass Burkhart, “Native Stories: American Indian Representation and Self-Representation in Rhetoric and Literature” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2018), vii.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, vii.

<sup>12</sup> Arianne E. Eason, Laura M. Brady, and Stephanie A. Fryberg, “Reclaiming Representations & Interrupting the Cycle of Bias Against Native Americans,” *Daedalus, The American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 147, no. 2 (2018): 76.

circulating in academia, especially with the rise of Native scholars as well as Native issues in media. My research builds upon existing scholarship by examining the role of photography and visual arts in both shaping and having been shaped by social movements and transitions of identity formation for Indigenous communities. Specifically, I am examining how photography works alongside these cultural shifts in achieving aims of self-representation. As described above, self-representation is essential in redefining public identity for Indigenous persons. Forms such as rhetoric and literature, explored in Burkhart's dissertation, or performance and film, as discussed in S. E. Wilmer's *Native American Performance and Representation*, are important forms of such self-representation.<sup>13</sup> I have chosen to focus on photography as a form of reclamation of identity. Photography has historically been utilized in shaping and "perpetuat[ing] the exoticization of the American Indian, as well as reinforcing the negative stereotypes of the Indian's alterity to the dominant white discourse."<sup>14</sup> Nanibush writes that "photography, which developed hand in hand with colonialism, has largely been responsible for the continued stereotype of the noble savage."<sup>15</sup> Comparing the intentionally harmful ways in which photography has been used to subjugate Native persons by forcing them into a settler temporal lens to the ways in which Native photographers have reshaped the lens of representation, specifically in relation to organizing and the momentum of the American Indian Movement, develops a gap in the scholarly literature that I plan to examine. As I discuss several images and photographs throughout my research, I include in-line only the most impactful photos, with the remaining images mentioned in an index.

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<sup>13</sup> S. E. Wilmer, *Native American Performance and Representation* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Burkhart, "Native Stories: American Indian Representation and Self-Representation in Rhetoric and Literature," 27.

<sup>15</sup> Wanda Nanibush, "Notions of Land," *Aperture*, September 27, 2019, <https://aperture.org/editorial/indigenous-artists-visual-sovereignty/>.

I will first discuss existing scholarly research on Indigenous representation and identity to situate my research within the field. I will then examine historical representations of Indigenous peoples within North America, to contextualize and contrast the role of AIM in shaping such representation both from and moving forward beyond the movement. I will specifically focus on the curation of Indigenous identity by non-Native persons, and how this has impacted the contemporary representations; notably, I will focus on urban Native identity, as this is both my identity and has a tangibly different perspective when compared to Native persons who are from reservations or tribal communities. Lastly, I will provide close visual analysis on contemporary Indigenous portraiture and photography in relation to the rise of representation, and the importance of such photography in redefining and constructing Native identity in the present. Ultimately, I assert that AIM and the rise of Native representation has forced the American public to reconcile with contemporary self-representation which has subsequently shaped modern Native and urban Native identity.

### **I. Native Representation before the American Indian Movement**

To fully understand the shift that the American Indian Movement (AIM) and additional activism throughout this period had on transforming Indigenous identity, it is necessary to examine identity and representations of North America Indigenous communities prior to this timeframe. As Ivaca Radman argues in “Native American Stereotypes in Film and Popular Culture,” while some pervasive stereotypes originated in the film industry, such as “all Indians wore feathered war bonnets,” stereotypes present in other industries, such as in “education, sports and comics,” also remain prominent and widespread.<sup>16</sup> Eason et al. write that “in historic and contemporary legal policy and practice, Native Americans have been represented as

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<sup>16</sup> Ivaca Radman, “Native American Stereotypes in Film and Popular Culture” (master’s thesis, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, 2013), 39.



uncivilized, incapable of behaving according to mainstream American norms.”<sup>17</sup> These representations were furthered through the use of media and visual narratives; Eason et al. additionally assert that the media is the “institution most responsible for creating and transmitting biased representations,” alongside legal institutions.<sup>18</sup> Historically, media either continue to perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Native peoples, or media neglect a Native perspective which allows the marginalization of Native peoples “without attracting media attention.”<sup>19</sup> Visual stereotypes such as tomahawks, headdresses, and deep red skin on caricatures tainted understandings of Indigeneity and Native life to the average onlooker. Suzan Shown Harjo presents four categories of stereotypes that portrayals of Indigenous persons tend to fall into: “the ‘safe savage,’ the ‘noble savage,’ the ‘good savage,’ and the ‘savage savage.’”<sup>20</sup> Harjo contextualizes these labels as follows: the “safe savage” as the “diminutive, harmless form” of a Native; the “noble savage” as the one that cares for the earth and nature; the “good savage” as “any Native nation or person who ever blazed a trail [...] for the historic whiteman [...] or deceased Indians; and the “savage savage” as the “hideous, inhuman, insulting or just plain dumb-looking caricatures.”<sup>21</sup> Though the four stereotypes Harjo outlined are significant, much of photographic representation surrounds the “noble savage.”

Similarly to Harjo, Burkhart identifies the “noble savage” stereotype as one that insinuates “qualities inherent in the American Indian that make him pure because he is

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<sup>17</sup> Eason et al., ““Reclaiming Representations & Interrupting the Cycle of Bias Against Native Americans,” 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>19</sup> Amanda B. Chastang, “Reclaiming Identity: How the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement Challenged External Media Misrepresentations Through Self- Representation,” (master’s thesis, University of Tulsa, The Graduate School, 2018), 91.

<sup>20</sup> United States Senate Committee On Indian Affairs, *Stolen Identities: The Impact Of Racist Stereotypes On Indigenous People*, 112th Congr., 1st sess., May 5, 2011. (Susan Harjo, President of the Morning Star Institute).

<sup>21</sup> United States Senate Committee On Indian Affairs, *Stolen Identities*.

untouched by the negatives that accompany Western civilization, such as greed and ambition, but also simultaneously make him unfit for civilization”<sup>22</sup> Further examining this stereotype, Emily Dorrel cites its origins as rooted in the “ignoble savage” trope, which “eroticized and exoticized Native American [people] as objects of fear and desire;” and the “noble savage” stereotype is “tamer, more complaisant” than its predecessor.<sup>23</sup> The “noble savage” stereotype quickly grew in popularity and worked alongside the “vanishing Indian” ideology, which believed the growing extinction of Native more broadly in North America due to assimilation and exploitation. Intrinsic to each stereotype is the need for civilization and education in combating the presence of Natives, and photography played a large role in developing this push.

Photography had a unique power in furthering such narratives and stereotypes. Christopher Lyman writes that “photography’s chemical-mechanical process was popularly perceived to have eliminated the subjectivity of human intervention which had been increasingly acknowledged in painting and other pre-photographic processes”<sup>24</sup> That is, the utilization of photography in reinforcing the “savage” representations of Native peoples cemented such beliefs because of the seeming objectivity of the medium. Bell asserts, “Without question, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century images of Native Americans have been integral in forming the stereotypical ideal of “Indian.”<sup>25</sup> White photographers, such as Edward Curtis, revolutionized this exploitation of representation through photography.

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<sup>22</sup> Burkhart, “Native Stories: American Indian Representation and Self-Representation in Rhetoric and Literature,” 5.

<sup>23</sup> Emily Dorrel, “White Gaze Dehumanizes: The Case of Indigenous Americans,” *Social Psychology and World Peace: A Primer*, ed. Halford H. Fairchild and Heather Feigá Fairchild (Kingsway Camp: Indo American Books: 2018), 268.

<sup>24</sup> Burkhart, “Native Stories: American Indian Representation and Self-Representation in Rhetoric and Literature,” 26.

<sup>25</sup> Bell, “Some Thoughts on ‘Taking’ Pictures: Imaging ‘Indians’ and the Counter-Narratives of Visual Sovereignty,” 85.

Edward Curtis was a renowned photographer who found immense interest in documenting Native communities upon meeting an anthropologist studying Native cultures.<sup>26</sup> The accumulation of this documentation was titled *The North American Indian*, a multiple-volume series of photographs captured from 1907 to 1930 “with the intent to record traditional Native American cultures.”<sup>27</sup> His artwork included both photos in tribal communities and studio portraits, utilizing props to cement the “Indian” character within the Native subject.<sup>28</sup> One of his most famous photographs and the first photograph of the edition, “The Vanishing Race” (1904), illustrates the voyeuristic lens in which Curtis framed his photography and illuminates the role of the “noble savage” and “vanishing Indian” stereotypes in his work.

“The Vanishing Race” captures a line of Navajo persons riding horses down a dirt road toward the horizon, with their backs facing the camera (Figure 1). To the left of the focal point is



Figure 1, “The Vanishing Race,” Edward Curtis, 1904.

a horseback rider alongside the road. The Native subjects are the priority in the photo, as the background are mountains; to the right of the riders are dry bushes, demarcating the east boundary of the dirt road. Their faces are not seen, and only their silhouettes are captured. The photograph implies a duality of

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert King, “Edward Curtis’ Epic Project to Photograph Native Americans,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/edward-curtis-epic-project-to-photograph-native-americans-162523282/>.

<sup>27</sup> “Edward S. Curtis’s *The North American Indian*,” *Northwestern Libraries Digital Collections*, <https://dc.library.northwestern.edu/collections/55ff2504-dd53-4943-b2cb-aeaa46e77bc3>.

<sup>28</sup> Allison C. Meier, “Native Americans and the Dehumanizing Force of the Photograph,” *Wellcome Collection*, March 29, 2018, <https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/WrUTGh8AACAA1FH8>.

movement in both the use of the subjects on horses and the utilization of line photography to draw the viewer from the foreground to the background in following the movement of the riders. As the viewer moves from the foreground and the closest rider, the people become more blurred into the background. The rider closest to the foreground is merely a vague silhouette, their color blending well into the blurry mountain range. In studying the photo's structure, Shannon Egan eloquently describes the intentional silhouette use as "conveying the impression of an entire race passively fading away."<sup>29</sup> As written on Curtis's website, "The Vanishing Race" was the signature piece that showcased his "over-arching goal to create a record of [Native Americans] and their world before they disappeared forever."<sup>30</sup> Curtis's stated goal directly illustrates Vizenor's concept of manifest manners, such that it attempts to document Native persons in a specific temporal moment and cultural practice for memorialization;

Curtis also conducted studio-style photography and portraiture in documenting Native persons. These styles of photographs often included the subjects in traditional attire and stoic expressions, focusing on specific cultural adornments or features. It is important to note, however, that props and garments were utilized in these photographs to heighten the focus on expected cultural objects. Simon Ortiz writes, "the real and actual Indian vanished into the image contrived by non-Indian interests, since he became [...] an Indian fashioned, styled, and costumed so that he could be identified as nothing but an Indian."<sup>31</sup> Ortiz's analysis is particularly significant because it illustrates the true intentionality behind these photographs; Curtis's work was not to truthfully represent Native culture and identity, but rather to foster stereotypical beliefs of Indigenous cultures. As Ortiz points out, if the subject was not perhaps

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<sup>29</sup> Shannon Egan, "'Yet in a Primitive Condition': Edward S. Curtis's North American Indian," *American Art* 20, no. 3 (2006): 59.

<sup>30</sup> "The Vanishing Race – Photo-Litho," *Edward S. Curtis*, <https://edwardcurtis.com/product/the-vanishing-race/>.

<sup>31</sup> Meier, "Native Americans and the Dehumanizing Force of the Photograph."

Indian enough to Curtis's standards or expectations, props and adornments would be used to make him more authentically Indian.<sup>32</sup> The nuances of identity and culture were not to be visible.

Current museums and archives continue to describe *The North American Indian* as "the most important photographic/ethnographic project ever undertaken in the United States," and as an "epic project," from the Museum of Wisconsin Art and the Smithsonian, respectively.<sup>33</sup> Laurie Lawlor, who studied Curtis's art, is quoted by an author for the Smithsonian Magazine as writing, "Curtis was far ahead of his contemporaries in sensitivity, tolerance and openness of Native American cultures."<sup>34</sup> The continued admiration attributed to his photographs and series by archives and institutions diminish the harmful systemic impacts it had on the representation of Indigenous communities and their alleged inevitable extinction. Meier asserts that "in presenting a living, diverse group of people as a race that was fading, they encouraged the enduring popular perception of Indigenous people as absent from contemporary American life, except in images."<sup>35</sup>

To understand the impact of Curtis's works, as well as the broader exploitation and imposed narrative of Native cultures and lives through photography, it is necessary to re-examine Rifkin's argument as well as Dorrel's conceptualization of the white gaze in visual narratives. Curtis's primary intention behind the examined photograph and his series was to document and eternalize Native cultures through his perspective, as he believed the cultures were vanishing. Inherent within this belief is the temporal colonial lens that Rifkin introduces, that "if Native peoples are portrayed as always in the process of vanishing and as ceasing to be truly Indigenous

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> "Exhibitions: Edward S. Curtis and the Vanishing Race," *Museum of Wisconsin Art*, <https://wisconsinart.org/exhibitions/Edward%20S.%20Curtis%20and%20the%20Vanishing%20Race.aspx>; King, "Edward Curtis' Epic Project to Photograph Native Americans."

<sup>34</sup> King, "Edward Curtis' Epic Project to Photograph Native Americans."

<sup>35</sup> Meier, "Native Americans and the Dehumanizing Force of the Photograph."

if their practices deviate from a (stereotypical) model implicitly pegged to a particular moment in the past, usually the eighteenth or nineteenth century, then the answer seems to be [...] to insist on their coevalness.”<sup>36</sup> At the time of Curtis’s expeditions in the early 20th century, systematic efforts towards the assimilation of Native communities were omnipresent. Since, as Rifkin articulates, the evolution and adjustments of culture denotes a form that is not “truly Indigenous,” Curtis was able to position the existence of his subjects as vanishing, alongside their cultures.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, Curtis’s photography can be understood through the concept of the white gaze. Dorrel defines the white gaze as “a contrived construction of Native [people], prescribed by the “Indian identity foisted on them by White [society].”<sup>38</sup> Because Curtis photographed through the lens of the “noble savage” stereotype, hoping to preserve the memory of Native life in nature before its destruction by colonial forces, Curtis’s perspective inherently operates through a white gaze, deeply altering the lens through which one views his artwork. Therefore, when examining Curtis’s photography, the viewer must first understand the frameworks of its colonial settler lens and the use of the white gaze through which Curtis crafted his perspective.

In addition to individual photographers like Curtis, institutional photography was key in shaping historical representations of North America Indigenous peoples. A primary example of this is the utilization of photography within industrial schools. Industrial schools became popular in the 19th century, with the Carlisle Indian Industrial School—the first and most infamous schools—opening in 1879.<sup>39</sup> These schools were a primary method used to assimilate and forcibly

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<sup>36</sup> Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, viii.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Dorrel, “White Gaze Dehumanizes: The Case of Indigenous Americans,” 267.

<sup>39</sup> Addison Kliever, Miranda Mahmud and Brooklyn Wayland, “‘Kill the Indian, Save the Man’: Remembering the Stories of Indian Boarding Schools,” *Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma*,

remove Native cultural practices from society: “Indian Schools were designed to destroy American Indian cultures, languages, and spirituality. Molly Fraust discusses how Superintendent of Carlisle Indian School Richard Henry Pratt saw photography as “a powerful tool of propaganda that could be used to effectively demonstrate his civilizing mission.”<sup>40</sup> In order to prove the utility of these institutions, photography captured moments of “education,” as



Figure 2, “Tom Torlino - Navajo,”  
John N. Choate, 1882/1885.

well as before-and-after shots of Native youth forced into White attire and customs.

A well-known example of the before-and-after photo is one of Hastiin To’Haali (more commonly known as Tom Torlino in archives), a Navajo man who went to the Carlisle Indian school from 1882 to 1885 (Figure 2).<sup>41</sup> The “before” photograph from 1882 highlights traditionally phenotypical features, such as

dark skin, long Black hair with a headwrap, high cheekbones, and traditional clothing, with a blanket draped over his shoulder. To’Haali is looking off into the distance with a stoic face, little emotion reflected in his expression. In contrast, the photograph from 1885 portrays To’Haali starkly different than three years prior. His skin is much lightened, and he has short, finely parted hair. His cheekbones are less defined and in place of his traditional attire is a suit and coat

<https://www.ou.edu/gaylord/exiled-to-indian-country/content/remembering-the-stories-of-indian-boarding-schools>.

<sup>40</sup> Molly Fraust, “Visual Propaganda at the Carlisle Indian School” (student paper, Dickinson College), [http://chronicles.dickinson.edu/studentwork/indian/5\\_propaganda.htm](http://chronicles.dickinson.edu/studentwork/indian/5_propaganda.htm).

<sup>41</sup> “Tom Torlino, 1882 and 1885,” Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/images/tom-torlino-1882-and-1885>.

modestly covering his body. Rather than looking forward and to the right, his eyes and mouth have slight upward tilts. The after photograph highlights and celebrates the anglicization of To’Haali. Importantly, Cindy Yurth from the Navajo Times writes, “modern photography experts have speculated the photographer used a green filter when taking the original photograph to darken Torlino’s skin.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, Eric Margolis writes, in regards to facial expressions often denoted in such types of photographs, “they suggest the facial expressions of those who have no ability to resist the gaze of the lens or the power of the photographer to *take* a picture.”<sup>43</sup> That is, the expressions illustrated are significant because they imply a lack of control over the gaze that is placed upon the subject, or in this case, To’Haali. He is merely subjected to the white gaze and temporal colonial framework that places him either under the “noble savage” stereotype, seen in the “before” photo with the intentional attire and darkened skin, or the assimilated, not “truly Indigenous” figure represented in the “after” photo.

These two photographs, side-by-side, as well as the broader role of “before-and-after photographs,” were utilized to indicate the ability of the industrial schools, and particularly Carlisle Indian School, to assimilate and deconstruct Native cultures and customs within Native bodies. However, these photographs were not simply to document the forced assimilation. Margolis states that “photography played two roles in the project to develop total institutions to de-Indianize young Native Americans: the photographic image system was both a record and a functional element of the project itself.”<sup>44</sup> The contrast between stereotypical phenotypes of Indigenous Americans, such as the dark skin and dark hair, which were likely emphasized

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<sup>42</sup> Cindy Yurth, “Manuelito’s Legacy,” *Navajo Times*, February 14, 2013, <https://www.navajotimes.com/news/chapters/021413coy.php>.

<sup>43</sup> Eric Margolis, “Looking at Discipline, Looking at Labor: Photographic Representations of Indian Boarding Schools,” *Visual Studies* 19, no. 1 (2004): 80.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Margolis, “Looking at Discipline, Looking at Labour: Photographic Representations of Indian Boarding Schools,” *Visual Studies* 19, no. 1 (2004): 80.



through the use of filters and such, and whiter features, furthered the exaggerated and stereotypical expectations of Native appearance. Such photography then not only documented the forced transformations, but also perpetuated and reinforced these stereotypes through the contrasting display of two images.

Photography as a medium was frequently and systematically utilized to both create and continue North America Indigenous stereotypes and harmful representations. However, there are documented instances that photography and visual narratives were used as forms of self-representation by Indigenous people and communities, even those subjected and from within these institutions. Nicole Strathman, a scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles, produced research regarding visual sovereignty in industrial schools in the 1870s-1930s. Strathman defines visual sovereignty as “involv[ing the examination of] Native self-representations as the (re)claiming of Indigenous identities to counter colonial imagery that has dominated the archives.”<sup>45</sup> Strathman particularly focuses upon student-produced photographs within industrial schools and emphasizes the significance of self-representation and portraiture of Native life *by Native students* and those directly impacted by the institution. Strathman’s writing provides a key case study in examining self-representation prior to the American Indian Movement, analyzing the few publicly-available images of this form.

Strathman particularly examines photographs by industrial school survivor Peter McKenzie, a Kiowa man who attended both Rainy Mountain Indian School in Oklahoma and Phoenix Indian School in Arizona. McKenzie and his future partner Nettie Odlety both documented their time in industrial schools, utilizing Kodak cameras as their medium. The photos provide a “humanizing eye” that connects the viewer with the subject, as the connection

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<sup>45</sup> Nicole Strathman, “Student Snapshots: An Alternative Approach to the Visual History of American Indian Boarding Schools,” *Humanities* 4 (2015): 726.

between McKenzie and the persons in the photographs created a sense of intimacy.<sup>46</sup> The chosen photos that Strathman analyzed provided variety in subject matter and in location, but the role of self-representation and its impact on the images is stark in comparison to the examples of representational photography analyzed prior. Through the lens of another Native student, the person in front of the camera softens, able to show more expression, emotion, and life. It is a more genuine reflection of character and experience than that highlighted within the institutional photography in industrial school settings.

Strathman concludes her detailed analysis, asserting, “by visually recording their own experiences, these marginalized students subverted the otherwise oppressive institution and claimed parts of it for themselves. In doing so, they created a counter-archive that documented their visual sovereignty.”<sup>47</sup> Her examination and concluding argument, though specific in scope, is significant in conceptualizing the broader implications of self-representation in repositioning power in Indigenous identity formation and development. Additionally, Strathman incorporates the concept of “compensating imbalances,” conceived by Seminole-Muscogee-Diné photographer Hulleah Tsihnahjinnie, who writes, “no longer is the camera held by an outsider looking in, the camera is held with brown hands opening familiar worlds. We document ourselves with a humanizing eye, [and] we create new visions with ease.”<sup>48</sup> That is, the repositioning of the power of the lens diminishes the white gaze and othering that photography imposes upon Indigenous peoples, through the use of “Native photographic self-representation.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Strathman, “Student Snapshots: An Alternative Approach to the Visual History of American Indian Boarding Schools,” 735.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 744.

<sup>48</sup> Strathman, “Student Snapshots: An Alternative Approach to the Visual History of American Indian Boarding Schools,” 729.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Examples such as Strathman's highlight that such instances of self-representation, including through visual means and narratives, have always existed and worked in resistance to the imposed representations in popular culture and media. The role of self-representation through visual narratives in creating visual sovereignty is a key theme throughout this paper that also applies to the examination of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the photography focused on and beyond the movement. The particular momentum and energy surrounding the American Indian Movement era, in partnership with the rising accessibility of photographic equipment and media attention regarding civil rights movements globally, greatly shaped the role of visual sovereignty and self-representation in regards to Native identity formation.

## **II. The American Indian Movement and its Visual History**

The American Indian Movement (AIM) formally began in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1968, during the late stage of the Civil Rights Movement; though it is important to restate that “the movement existed 500 years without a name”, and that Indigenous existence is rightfully viewed as its own form of resistance.<sup>50</sup> Before analyzing AIM's initial motivations, it is first necessary to contextualize urban Native communities, as AIM is intrinsically intertwined with the Indian identity formation and urban immigration of Indigenous persons.

As Rosenthal writes, “scholars [...] have characterized Indian urbanity as a post-World War II phenomenon,” due to the varying relocation programs and efforts occurring in the mid-late 1940s; however, there is a larger history of urban Native migration in the reimagining of Native settlements in contemporary United States.<sup>51</sup> The establishment of reservations, in partnership with removal acts and efforts that spanned much of the 1800s and the beginning of 1900s, siloed

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<sup>50</sup> Laura Waterman Wittstock and Elaine J. Salinas, “A Brief History of the American Indian Movement,” *Arizona State University*, <http://www.aimovement.org/ggc/history.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Nicolas G. Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration & Identity in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 11.

Native persons into rural and isolated territories.<sup>52</sup> This forced movement also developed a public perception that Native communities either began to cease to exist or simply only existed on reservations.<sup>53</sup> Rosenthal further explains the urban migration as follows: “The movement of Indians back to the growing cities and towns of North America is explained by the harshness of reservation life and the dispossession of Native land and resources.”<sup>54</sup> The lack of resources and poor living quality of the reservation encouraged Native individuals to seek economic opportunities in more populated areas, leading to greater urban Indigenous communities forming in American cities. As individuals began craving familiarity, communities began to create urban Indian centers to institutionalize support systems and physical spaces for engagement. Additionally, urban migration systematically developed the collective Indian identity. Nancy Shoemaker asserts that “cities helped foster the development of a pan-Indian identity” to “cope with social problems and discrimination,” as well as to “express ethnic identity.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, this pan-Indian identity allowed for more community building in urban areas, which the community centers then fostered. This newfound sense of community gave way to the formation of the American Indian Movement.

Building from the community centers, urban migration, and the pan-Indian identity, a distinct “urban Native” identity formed. Scholar Susan Lobo writes that “urban doesn’t determine self-identity, yet the urban area and urban experiences are contexts that contribute to

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Kristen Inbody, “Survey: People think Native Americans Don’t Exist/Aren’t Discriminated Against,” *Great Falls Tribune*, <https://eu.greatfallstribune.com/story/news/2018/08/07/survey-people-think-natives-dont-exist-arent-discriminated-against/923250002/>.

<sup>54</sup> Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Nancy Shoemaker, “Urban Indians and Ethnic Choices: American Indian Organizations in Minneapolis, 1920-1950,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 19 no. 4 (Oxford University Press: Oxford), November 1988), 432.

defining that identity.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, scholar Kathleen Lynch writes, “urban Native community centers play a role in fostering an urban Native identity.”<sup>57</sup> The role of the urban Native is significant because it was crafted in this time period, and it is the urban Native individuals and communities that spearheaded AIM and the adjacent campaigns towards Native equality in this era.

The movement is understood to be inspired by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, established in 1966, and its primary mission was to protect Minneapolis’s native community “from a pattern of rampant police abuse and the creation of programs for jobs, housing, and education.”<sup>58</sup> The movement’s founders are often credited to Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt, Dennis Banks, George Mitchell, Mary Jane Wilson, with many other Minneapolis Natives assisting and in support.<sup>59</sup> Dennis Banks proudly stated, “only by reestablishing our rights as sovereign nations, including our right to control our own territories and resources [...] can we hope to successfully address the conditions currently experienced by our people.”<sup>60</sup> Though the movement started locally and had more intermediary goals, it quickly expanded its reach and mission. The rising frustrations expressed through the American Indian Movement were mirrored nationally, with smaller independent organizations planning direct action tactics; the most notable example is the Occupation of Alcatraz that began in November 1969.

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<sup>56</sup> Susan Lobo, “Is Urban a Person or a Place?” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 22 no. 4, 1998, <https://meridian.allenpress.com/aicrj/article-abstract/22/4/89/211403/Is-Urban-a-Person-or-a-Place-Characteristics-of?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

<sup>57</sup> Kathleen A. Lynch, “‘The land tells our story’: Urban Native place-making and implications for wellness,” *Boston University*, 2016, 145.

<sup>58</sup> Ward Churchill, “The Bloody Wake of Alcatraz: Political Repression of the American Indian Movement during the 1970s,” *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching*, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5948733cf5e23161d7d8bf60/t/5bc63789e5e5f0e806a61664/1539717002351/BloodyWakeofAlcatraz.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> “The American Indian Movement, 1968-1978,” *Digital Public Library of America*, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-american-indian-movement-1968-1978>.

<sup>60</sup> The American Indian Movement, 1968-1978,” *Digital Public Library of America*, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-american-indian-movement-1968-1978>.

The Occupation of Alcatraz is arguably one of the most known events during the American Indian Movement; however, it is incorrectly credited to AIM. Though it was during the same period of AIM's rapid growth, it is an independent direct action. It is additionally important to note that there was a smaller and shorter occupation of Alcatraz in 1964 led by Russell Means' father, but the Occupation of 1969 often receives sole attention. San Francisco was one of the primary cities that participated in the relocation program efforts following World War II for Indigenous persons, drastically increasing the Native populations in the Bay Area.<sup>61</sup> Richard Oakes, a young Mohawk man who had traveled throughout the States and eventually settled in the Bay for education, organized 89 Native community members from all different tribal nations under the name Indians of All Tribes and claimed Alcatraz on November 20, 1969.<sup>62</sup> The occupation quickly grew internationally, with hundreds of participants, and it lasted nineteen months in total. The Occupation produced the Alcatraz Proclamation, a centralized newsletter, and a radio station; but most notably, the Occupation grasped the attention of the federal government and international media outlets.<sup>63</sup> Suddenly, the plight of Natives, and particularly urban Natives, were unavoidable in American media and society. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Time*, to name a few, covered the occupation, with buy-in from celebrities, such as Jane Fonda and others.<sup>64</sup> The occupation is often known as the "cradle of the modern Native American civil rights movement;" and though the Occupation was not actually

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<sup>61</sup> Troy Johnson, "The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Roots of American Indian Activism," *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 10 no. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 65, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1409133?seq=3#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1409133?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 67-68.

<sup>63</sup> Katie Jean Davey, "American Indian Movement (AIM): Overview," *Gale Family Library* (Minnesota Historical Society Library), <https://libguides.mnhs.org/aim#:~:text=AIM%E2%80%94the%20American%20Indian%20Movement,De%20Banks%2C%20and%20Clyde%20Bellecourt>.

<sup>64</sup> David Milner, "'By Right of Discovery': The Media and the Native American Occupation of Alcatraz, 1969-1971," *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 33 no. 1 (Australia and New Zealand American Studies Association), July 2014, 80.

organized by AIM, it caused AIM to gain significant traction. As AIM Co-founder Banks wrote in his memoir, “Our time on Alcatraz had woken us up to the realization that we were part of a larger movement.”<sup>65</sup>

Many other key events occurred throughout AIM’s height in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the Wounded Knee occupation and the Trail of Broken Treaties March that concluded with the Bureau of Indian Affairs sit-in in November of 1972.<sup>66</sup> Due to AIM’s newfound media presence and attention, these events continued to gain the broader Native communities important recognition of necessary demands for political and economic change. However, as briefly aforementioned, AIM notably was not the beginning of Native activism. Rather, it was the pivotal moment in which mainstream media and society could no longer ignore the plights of Indigenous peoples in the US due to intentional direct actions that utilized the growing role of visual media to raise attention. Horace Poolaw is an important case study, as he documented visual history of Indigenous living prior to, and following, the creation of AIM.

### **A. Visual Analysis of AIM**

Horace Poolaw was born in 1906 into his Kiowa family. Poolaw first began to photograph in his early teens, beginning with life events between his friend and family, but then began to document his Native community more broadly.<sup>67</sup> His ability to unapologetically capture authenticity of Native existence in an ever-changing era, as well as capture the intimacy displayed between Native persons is significant in examining the role of portraiture in representation. Poolaw’s photo from the late 1920s of three Kiowa persons depicts such intimacy.

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<sup>65</sup> Dick Bancroft and Laura Waterman Wittstock, *We Are Still Here: A Photographic History of the American Indian Movement* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2013), 10.

<sup>66</sup> Davey, “American Indian Movement (AIM): Overview.”

<sup>67</sup> “For a Love of His People: The Photography of Horace Poolaw, NY,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=899>.

The black-and-white photo centers a man in his car, gazing softly into the lens and leaning his arm partially out the window. The man is centered and in the middleground, but it is the two women on either side of him that truly create the compositional detail. A young woman stands to his right, left in frame, with her elbow resting on the rolled-down window frame, close to the man's. Her gaze is playful, as her body faces the right of the frame, and her eyeline rests on the third person in the shot. The third person, Poolaw's sister Trecil, confidently stares at the camera with wide smile; Trecil has her left hand on her hip with her body rotated a small way towards the left of the frame; notably, her right arm hangs deeply into the window frame, as she grabs the interior car frame from the inside. Her hand placement, as well as the two women's body language conveys familiarity with one another, while the wide range of emotions convey familiarity with Poolaw and his positionality as photographer. All three of the subjects wear white, which contrasts with the darker car and trees in the frame. This photo is an important example of the way in which Native photographers are able to capture such intimacy and accurate representation of Native lifestyles due to their identity and place in the tribal nation: the photo is of Poolaw's fellow tribal members, and he has this access because of his own identity as a Kiowa man.

In addition to capturing such intimacy of identity, Poolaw also captured specific moments of the celebration of Native culture. Arguably his most famous photo, Poolaw captured a black-and-white image of a young Seminole woman Eula Mae Narcomey Doonkeen from the 1941 American Indian Exposition Parade in his hometown of Anadarko, Oklahoma.<sup>68</sup> Doonkeen has her back and right shoulder turned to the lens, emphasizing the beadwork and ribbons on her top. Her face is in profile, with a beaded and designed headband, streaming with ribbons in the

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<sup>68</sup> Holland Cotter, "Going Mainstream on Their Own Terms," *New York Times*, 8 January 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/arts/design/photographs-by-horace-poolaw-at-national-museum-of-the-american-indian.html>.





Figure 3, Eula Mae Narcomey Doonkeen, by Horace Poolaw, 1941.

back and with a feather standing up to the sky. She looks off-frame to the right, while her regalia takes the spotlight. Similarly to the display of intimacy, Poolaw's respect and illustration of Doonkeen's Seminole culture displayed visually through Poolaw's eye relies heavily on his positionality. Ultimately, Poolaw and his work demonstrate the role of self-representation in understanding and redefining Native identity in the contemporary era.

Poolaw's work and impact have been recently recognized by scholars in the field. Author Laura

E. Smith writes that viewers should see "Poolaw's photographs as representations of twentieth century life and communal identity and not as static portrayals."<sup>69</sup> In contrast to the still shots that white photographers took of Native subjects to indicate modernity or civilness, Poolaw's photos capture movement and liveliness of their subjects whilst still maintaining such cultural significance. As Holland Cotter from the *New York Times* writes, "No more savage, no more timeless, no more vanishing. Instead, we saw Native American life from the inside, people inventively fusing a complex cultural past with [an] equally complex modern present."<sup>70</sup> Though Poolaw's work prior to AIM is important to see that this work has always existed, as also illustrated by the self-portraiture in industrial schools, Poolaw's work during the beginning

<sup>69</sup> Laura E. Smith, "Horace Poolaw: Photographer of American Indian Modernity," *Museum Anthropology Review* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 2016, 42.

<sup>70</sup> Cotter, "Going Mainstream on Their Own Terms."

stages of AIM shows the growing mainstream recognition that Poolaw has always seen in his subjects.

Due to the immense media recognition of AIM, the movement is well-documented, but there are a few photographers in particular that played pivotal roles in archiving many of AIM's important moments, including Dick Bancroft, Vince Maggiora, and Bob Fitch. Dick Bancroft produced an anthology of photography spanning AIM's trajectory, while Vince Maggiora was the *San Francisco Chronicle* photographer for the Alcatraz Occupation. Bob Fitch was a wide-spanning activist photographer who was inspired by multiple campaigns throughout the Civil Rights Movement, including the New Mexico Navajo Protest in 1974. All three men painted a wide-ranging experience of the Native activism throughout and concurrent with AIM; however, it is important to note that all three of the men are non-Native-identifying. I will supplement the analysis of their art with later works from Horace Poolaw.

Dick Bancroft first began working with AIM in 1970 after Pat Bellanger, a White Earth Reservation member, urged his photography skills in documenting the rising efforts of the organization.<sup>71</sup> Notably, Bancroft does not identify as Native, but rather as a visual advocate for the movement, having been invited into the space by its Native leaders. Though his photography is therefore not self-representation of Indigenous identity within the movement, it provides an important and otherwise not well-documented experience within AIM with the support and encouragement of its members. Many of his photos illustrate the lesser-seen or acknowledged parts of the movement.

Within Bancroft's photographic history of AIM, he includes a photograph of a young girl Lisa Bellanger wearing a traditional shawl and hairpieces. She is dancing at a powwow the night

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<sup>71</sup> Dick Bancroft and Laura Waterman Wittstock, *We Are Still Here: A Photographic History of the American Indian Movement*, xi.



Figure 4, Lisa Bellanger, by Dick Bancroft, 1971.

before a direct action in 1971. Her red shawl contrasts the nature and woods in the background, and Bellanger appears concentrated on her next step. In addition to Bellanger and other youth highlighted throughout the anthology, Bancroft also includes intimate portrayals of elders in communities that he photographs. For example, in categorizing his experiences in South Dakota throughout the American Indian Movement, he features a photo of spiritual elder Bill Eagle Feather Schweigman.<sup>72</sup> The photo is a close shot of his face with his hands perched; it is filtered in black-and-white so as to emphasize the incredible detail of his facial and hand features, such as his

wrinkle lines and pronounced nose. Schweigman has a soft smile with his lips pursed as he looks off into the distance.

The inclusion of Bellanger and Schweigman is significant in this narrative. What is often focused upon within the narrative of AIM are the young persons directly involved, or the leaders that took the brunt of organizing. However, within Bancroft's visual anthology are photographs of children, elders, and all those who played pivotal roles that are often not given recognition within the more mainstream narrative. That is, Bellanger and Schweigman's inclusion in the narrative are not the exception but rather the normality in Bancroft's book, as he is able to capture a holistic visual experience of the movement. These photographs directly contrast the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 65.

more volatile photos often utilized in media of AIM, such as the photos of direct actions; while direct actions were key tactics utilized, the visual prioritization of these events in media mischaracterize and represent the movement as a whole, and help shape the narrative or misperception of the movement as a violent or aggressive series of actions. In fact, these visual and verbal portrayals from media helped link AIM as potentially a domestic terrorist organization.<sup>73</sup> Bancroft's narrative storytelling through his photographs illustrate the hidden parts of the movement not often seen or visible by outside observers. They allow the reframing of the movement with a more humanistic approach, centering participants of all ages and in all formats, whether that be through dancing like Bellanger or ceremonial leading like Schweigman. However, though Bancroft's photographs are intimate at times in their portrayals, there is a tangible sense of distance seen between the photographer and the subject due to his identity as a guest in these spaces, as a non-Native participant. Poolaw's positionality as a Native photographer allows his photographs to contrast against Bancroft's in regards to their intimacy of portrayal.

As aforementioned, Poolaw's work extends from the early 1920s into the 1970s when he passed away. However, his most recognized works are from the 1930s-1950s. One of his later portraits from 1955 highlights a woman, Lucy Whitehouse Beaver, and her daughter, Donna Beaver, from his own Kiowa Tribe. The young woman is adorned in traditional dress and accessories, with an eagle plume upon her head, a beaded medallion necklace, and a dress made of "five brain-tanned deer hides."<sup>74</sup> Her child sits on her left hip, to the right in the frame, wearing detailed beaded leggings. Both Lucy and Donna gaze at the viewer, with Lucy donning a

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<sup>73</sup> Chastang, "Reclaiming Identity," 100.

<sup>74</sup> Nancy Marie Mithlo, *For a Love of His People: The Photography of Horace Poolaw* (Washington D.C. and New York: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution and Yale University Press, 2014), 152.

smile and Donna looking intently. The familiarity felt in the photograph is noticeable: the subjects are challenging the viewer through direct eye contact; in Bancroft's photos, the viewer is often looking elsewhere. While this may also be due to their different styles of photography, with Poolaw's being more staged and Bancroft's being more candid, eye contact in photography is significant in acknowledging comfort and intimacy between photographer and subject. Additionally, the traditional cultural attire illustrated in many of Poolaw's photographs center the culture that both Poolaw and the Beavers share.

Around the same time Bancroft was taking his images in the beginning of AIM, Poolaw



Figure 5, Horace Poolaw, 1967.

continued his documentation efforts, particularly of Native expositions. In Poolaw's visual anthology is a photo he took in 1967, at the American Indian Exposition Parade in Anadarko, Oklahoma.<sup>75</sup> The photograph centers a convertible car's hood and windshield, with a man (Robert Goombi, Jr., Kiowa) standing up in the driver's seat with his

arms raised high. He is wearing a feathered headdress and arm ribbons, with three other persons dressed traditionally sitting up on the back seats. Notably, the man to the left (Roy Rogers, Choctaw) in the back seat's posture indicates respect, as he holds his hat on his head, with his head tilted down; the fringe on Rogers's beaded jacket is in movement, despite the inherent stillness of the image. On all sides of the car are crowds of persons participating in the parade, most of whom are either photographing/filming the subjects of the photograph or gazing at them

<sup>75</sup> Nancy Marie Mithlo, *For a Love of His People: The Photography of Horace Poolaw*,

and their presence. The photo captures a sense of energy and excitement from the moment in the parade, in part due to its skilled imagery but also due to the liveliness of the subjects and the parade's participants.

Though Poolaw did not necessarily document the connected or structured events of AIM, his photography throughout the Era provides a more holistic view of the state of Native America at the time. Poolaw repeatedly asserted that he did not wish to live on through his photographs, but rather he wished for the subjects and their cultures to carry on.<sup>76</sup> Though his photography did refine over the decades he captured Indigenous persons in their most authentic forms, his style remained fairly stagnant, involving mostly portraits of individuals in their traditional and ceremonial attire. As scholar Ned Blackhawk aptly writes, "[Poolaw] subverts the representational power of early American photography, challenging the naturalized and timeless suggestions made about Native peoples."<sup>77</sup>

In addition to Bancroft and Poolaw's production of photographs throughout AIM, Vince Maggiora, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter, produced canonical photographs specifically of the Alcatraz Occupation. Similar to Bancroft, he also identifies as non-Native and explains that he felt he fell into the role as the Occupation photographer due to the lack of interest from his coworkers.<sup>78</sup> One of the most poignant photos in his series is a wide shot, in which a man leans against a wall covered in graphic painted art in support of the movement and highlighting specific individuals participating in the Occupation. Closest to the man is a detailed graphic of the iconic raised fist, with the words "Red Power" above it. Maggiora also chose to use his

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>78</sup> Peter Hartlaub, "The Occupation of Alcatraz: 50 Years Later," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 November 2019, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/oursf/article/Occupation-of-Alcatraz-discovery-640-unpublished-14836597.php>.

platform to highlight less stereotypical occurrences on Alcatraz. For example, in his reflective piece, Maggiora includes one of his photos of a young Native child interacting with a make-shift bowling game outside on one of the paved pathways of the island. The child is moving towards the frame and bowling pins, staring directly at the subject, acknowledging he is aware of Maggiora's presence in the moment. Just as Bancroft also highlighted children and elders in creating a well-rounded view of the movement, Maggiora's inclusion of this image challenges the expectation of the Occupation's participants by reminding the observer of the young children that were also on the island.

Maggiora's work is significant to highlight because the Occupation, though not officially a tactic or campaign by AIM, was one of the most-documented moments of the AIM era. Additionally, because the Occupation consisted largely of urban Native peoples, his work further provides the additional lens of urban Native organizing and the role that the Pan-Indian identity played throughout the Occupation. In other words, Maggiora's work not only captures one of the more well-known events of the AIM era, but also provides representation of urban Native organizing throughout the movement. While Bancroft's work spanned the entirety of AIM, it tended to focus on and inside more reservation/ancestral lands, while Maggiora's focus on the Occupation allowed the emphasis to be intrinsically connected to urban Native identity and organizing. When understanding the representation of AIM and the renegotiation of narrative control, Maggiora's work is fairly neutral despite his positionality as a large-scale media platform's photographer. However, his perspective is not without bias. In his written reflection of his time as the Occupation photographer, he states that there was "infighting" that led towards

the downfall of the Occupation, and he does not recall any personal connection to the organizers.<sup>79</sup>

Lastly, Bob Fitch's photographic archive of the New Mexico Navajo Protest illustrates an additional narrative, as the protest is from the later stage of the AIM era and is not directly affiliated with AIM; though the protest was led by some unidentified leaders of AIM.<sup>80</sup> Fitch, similarly to Bancroft and Maggiora, is not Native-identifying; however, his photography specifically specialized in capturing the vast campaigns of the civil rights movements in the mid-late 20th century. The New Mexico Navajo Protest of 1974 was sparked due to the inhumane violence and murder of three Diné high schoolers by white teenagers in Farmington, New Mexico.<sup>81</sup> The photos share the journey that the Native protesters experienced in raising attention to the atrocity, and they particularly highlight the emotions faced throughout the trauma processing of the deaths. Fitch's archive remains poignant, as it illustrates one of the last events throughout the broader AIM-umbrella of campaigns towards Native civil rights issues.

The photos include a wide array of events throughout the protests, such as active marching and speaking at the protest, intimate photos of the memorial and of one of the victims at the open-casket memorial, and families of the victim's posing with photos of their lost loved ones. Fitch's narrative arc throughout the archive showcases the varying moments that occur throughout multidimensional movements, such as AIM. At its root, the movement was formulated from a sense of urgency, of the brutality and lack of support and acknowledgment

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<sup>79</sup> Hartlaub, Peter, "The Occupation of Alcatraz: 50 Years Later," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 November 2019, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/oursf/article/Occupation-of-Alcatraz-discovery-640-unpublished-14836597.php#photo-18618039>.

<sup>80</sup> "About: The Bob Fitch Photography Archive at Stanford," *Stanford Libraries*, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/fitch/about/the-bob-fitch-photography-archive-at-stanford>.

<sup>81</sup> Shannon Mullane Herald, "After 45 Years, Have Race Relations Improved in Farmington?" *The Durango Herald*, 17 October 2020, <https://www.durangoherald.com/articles/after-45-years-have-race-relations-improved-in-farmington/>.



that Natives faced in the contemporary United States. A particular photo focuses upon two speakers of the protest (Figure 6). The man on the right is actively speaking into his megaphone



Figure 6, "American Indian Movement Speaker, Navajo Protest March," Bob Fitch, 1974.

while the man on the left has his fist raised and his megaphone sitting on the car in front of them; behind them are protesters with their fists up in solidarity or with makeshift posters supporting the protest. The photo acts as a parallel to Maggiora's image captured of the artistic representation of the raised fist, as the

man on the left raises his own fist in solidarity during his co-organizer's speech.

It is important to reiterate that most of the known photographers throughout AIM were not Native-identifying and therefore were unable to capture the movement and its events in the same perspective as someone who shares Indigenous identity with their subjects. However, these photographers' works are significant in analyzing the ways in which representation evolved and shifted due to the impact of and throughout the movement. Additionally, these works highlight the growing power that Native persons held in gaining recognition for their own ways of representing their identities throughout the work and spotlight.

### **III. Impact of AIM in Self-Representation and Contemporary Forms of Self-Portraiture**

AIM had many institutional and systemic impacts on Native rights and power held within the United States. I assert that a byproduct of the immense coverage AIM received was the representational power that Native persons gained in media and in narrative control. As aforementioned, the events and occurrences throughout AIM received widespread attention,

particularly because many of them were affronting to the status quo. That is, sit-ins in government offices and occupations of former federal prisons are apt events to receive media coverage and focus; throughout these efforts, the Native peoples showcasing the intentions and missions behind their work were given the opportunity to reframe their own external perceptions through their respective spotlight. There was also a greater ability to choose how to be represented; for example, Bancroft was welcomed into the space because Pat Bellanger found it necessary to have a photographer that could capture the internal narrative and occurrences within the movement itself.

Because there was little option but to acknowledge the reframing of narrative control, AIM forced public perceptions to be challenged regarding the existing stereotypes or representations of Native peoples that existed. Chastang summarizes this by stating, “although many mainstream media outlets aid in maintaining oppressions, marginalized groups, historically and currently, use the media to their advantage to gain visibility [and] express their social justice agenda.”<sup>82</sup> This gave way to the backing of more Native photographers, artists, and voices to be highlighted following the movement and moving into the contemporary era. Shelley Niro’s work as a First Nations multimedia visual artist directly challenges such perceptions, as does Camille Seaman’s portraiture as a Shinnecock photographer.

Niro’s *The Shirt* (2003) is both a short documentary and a series of nine still photographs.<sup>83</sup> The short film is less than six minutes, alternating between picturesque views of nature and of Tsishnahjinnie. The still photographs are shots from the film, mostly of the primary subject Tsishnahjinnie. The film is particularly impactful because of its emphasis on the connection between Indigenous identity and nature, but the photographs most clearly align with

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<sup>82</sup> Chastang, “Reclaiming Identity,” 144.

<sup>83</sup> “A Description of ‘The Shirt’ - Shelley Niro art,” <https://www.bombessays.com/a-description-of-the-shirt-shelley-niro-art/>.

Niro's intentions of "challenging the clichés and stereotypes associated with the Indigenous community, especially women, through bold imagery and words that resonate across various



Figure 7, "The Shirt," Shelley Niro, 2003

cultural backgrounds."

The black screen fades into the landscape of the environment, with audible deep breaths indicating the snowy hills rising and falling in pace with the inhales and exhales. Soft music enhances the natural aspects, as Seminole-Muscogee-Diné photographer and subject Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie is panned into the frame; she laughs with someone off-camera, and then begins to look at the camera with a stern face, arms crossed. She demands the engagement

of the viewer, with her shirt stating the name of the project in bold and underlined, "The Shirt." Artist Shelley Niro's narrative regarding the importance of Indigenous self-expressionism begins to take form, as Tsinnahjinnie fades out of screen and the rolling snow-covered hills reappear.

The first and last photos of the set are notably empty of a subject, simply displaying the environment highlighted in the background of the other seven photos, which grounds the importance of environment before the two featured subjects are introduced. In the second photo is the introduction of Tsinnahjinnie, who consecutively appears for the following four photos, each wearing similar white t-shirts, with different writings that describe colonial and systemic violence against Indigenous peoples through the Americas' histories. The utilization of white tourist-type shirts is intentional, as it both brings attention to while simultaneously subverting the

role of colonialism and theft of land and personhood through the utilization of a shirt that traditionally advertises travel and “experiences.” Interesting is the American flag being worn as a headwrap, calling the role of patriotism and the American legacy into direct question on her body as well. With her clothing being so significant to the ironic message and call towards colonialism’s impact, the flag is its own confrontation of American symbolism and its relation to the land.

Additionally, the clothing choice of a shirt and jeans, of Tsinhnahjinnie adorned in modern Western clothing rather than traditional attire to her tribal culture, also calls attention to the “civilized” form in which Tsinhnahjinnie is presented. The sixth photograph has Tsinhnahjinnie bare, her shirt removed and taken. As written in “Shelly Niro’s ‘The Shirt’ and Manifest Destiny: A Discussion on Halloween And Colonialism,” “the role of colonialism and the “stripping” of [Indigenous] peoples of their land and sovereignty, an action perpetrated by the Europeans.”<sup>84</sup> The stripping is both metaphorical and explicit with one of the nine select photographs showing Tsinhnahjinnie without her shirt, decorative bandana, or sunglasses, looking to the right out of frame. Notably, the following and final photo of human subjects is of a white woman then wearing the white shirt. Because Tsinhnahjinnie is looking to the right in the previous photograph, and the photograph of the white woman is placed in the exhibit to the right of the photograph with Tsinhnahjinnie, it indicates that she is looking at the white woman’s theft through material clothing and confronting it in her stance and eye placement.

Tsinhnahjinnie’s body becomes the exhibition’s message itself: she wears the genocide through both intergenerational trauma as well as the ironic writings displayed on the plain shirts.

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<sup>84</sup> “Shelly Niro’s ‘The Shirt’ and Manifest Destiny: A Discussion on Halloween And Colonialism,” *Decolonize the Narrative*, October 25, 2012, <https://decolonizethenarrative.wordpress.com/2012/10/25/shelly-niros-the-shirt-and-manifest-destiny-a-discussion-on-halloween-and-colonialism/>.

Her existence and identity inherently is its own statement, alongside the explicit statements, such as “My ancestors were annihilated exterminated murdered and massacred.” And as Tsinhnahjinnie wears the effects of colonialism both externally and internally, the white woman simply wears the shirt that states, “And all’s I get is this shirt.” She reaps the benefits of colonialism, illustrated through the shirt, bandana, and glasses, while Tsinhnahjinnie is left “stripped” and bare in the environment. It is also important to note the differences in which the glasses and bandana are displayed on each woman. For Tsinhnahjinnie, the sunglasses are obscuring her eyes, allowing for her expression to be somewhat private. However, the white woman wears the glasses atop her head and her full expression is shown, smiling widely. Additionally, the bandana is more confrontational and expanded on Tsinhnahjinnie than on her white counterpart, as it is on her head rather than simply tied around her neck, respectively.

Niro’s *The Shirt* exemplifies the significance of self-representation through visual sovereignty. Nicole Strathman defines visual sovereignty as “involv[ing the examination of] Native self-representations as the (re)claiming of Indigenous identities to counter colonial imagery that has dominated the archives.”<sup>85</sup> Strathman incorporates the concept of “compensating imbalances,” conceived by *The Shirt*’s primary subject Tsinhnahjinnie, who writes, “no longer is the camera held by an outsider looking in, the camera is held with brown hands opening familiar worlds. We document ourselves with a humanizing eye, [and] we create new visions with ease.”<sup>86</sup> That is, the repositioning of the power of the lens diminishes the white gaze and othering that photography imposes upon Indigenous peoples, through the use of “Native photographic self-representation.” It is particularly significant that Niro’s work features a Native photographer and scholar who has previously worked on the importance of featuring

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<sup>85</sup> Nicole Strathman, “Student Snapshots: An Alternative Approach to the Visual History of American Indian Boarding Schools,” *Humanities* 4 (2015): 726.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 729.

Native identities in front of the lens. Having Tsinhnahjinnie featured allows Niro to honor her goal of “compensating imbalances,” and ultimately illustrates how self-representation and the highlighting of Indigenous subjects, captured by Indigenous artists, is in fact a form of protest and in working against the traditional purposes of photographing Indigenous persons and cultures.

Niro’s work is one of many examples of Indigenous photographers raising attention to the disproportionate representation of Native subjects by non-Native photographers. By reclaiming the narrative power, she is able to craft a multi-layered reflection of Native identity and intergenerational trauma due to colonialism in her subject. Her work has been credited greatly as having immense importance in the symbolism behind self-representation, and it is still being showcased in exhibitions and galleries across the continent.<sup>87</sup> Shawnee photographer Heidi BigKnife adopted a similar style as Niro in utilizing one’s own body and identity in the analysis of representation.



Figure 8, “Bloodlines or Belief Systems,” Heidi BigKnife, 1991.

BigKnife produced a series of self-portraits titled “Bloodlines or Belief Systems” when she was an arts student in 1991.<sup>88</sup> The photos are close-ups of her face, with half her face painted, and the other half with minimal makeup. BigKnife maintains a stern face in all of the portraits; she is often looking away

<sup>87</sup> “Through the Lens of Shelley Niro,” *AgoInsider*, 4 February 2019, <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/through-lens-shelley-niro>.

<sup>88</sup> Heidi BigKnife, “Bloodlines or Belief Systems,” *Savages and Princesses: The Persistence of Native American Stereotypes*, Museum of Science and History, Memphis, 2022.

from the lens, but there is one photo included in the series in which she gazes directly at the viewer, challenging their perception of her. In the *Savages and Princesses: The Persistence of Native American Stereotypes*, in which her series is included, BigKnife writes in her informative label that she produced these portraits at a time where she felt uncertain about her own identity as a mixed race Native person.<sup>89</sup> She aptly reflects, “Forced for so long to identify ourselves to the outside world, we sometimes assume the stereotypes and hierarchical judgments that these stereotypes propagate.”<sup>90</sup> Through her work, she subverts such expectations through her gaze and ownership of her own appearance and identity. The larger exhibition utilizes multimedia approaches, such as buckskin works, sculptures, and various forms of arts, in order to both call out perpetuating stereotypes whilst also creating individualized representations through the works.

Additional Native photographers have similarly challenged the existing perceptions and stereotypes of Indigeneity throughout their broader works. Most notably, Shinnecock photographer Camille Seaman created a series titled, “We Are Still Here,” where she traveled to many different tribal nations and created staged portraits highlighting what contemporary forms of Native identity may look like throughout the United States.<sup>91</sup> Though the series is predominantly studio portraiture, she does include several photos she captured from a powwow. Seaman’s photos alternate between capturing persons in their traditional culture attire and capturing persons in contemporary streetwear. Notably, the persons in streetwear still have subtleties and celebrations of their cultures, including t-shirts that have tribal designs or are merchandise from Native-led organizations. However, even when these small details are not seen

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> “We Are Still Here: A Native American Portrait Project,” *Camille Seaman Photography*, <https://www.camilleseaman.com/photographs/we-are-still-here>.



Figure 9, Portrait from “We Are Still Here,” Camille Seaman.

in the portraits, these photos are significant examples of contemporary forms of self-representation for North America Native peoples, as they subvert the assumed features. Seaman includes photos from a diverse array of tribal nations, identities, and ages, and an intentional emphasis within her work is challenging the stereotypical expectations of Native appearances. She writes, “When you see these portraits, you may find we no longer look like you thought we ought to [...] It’s time for a new record of Native America.”<sup>92</sup>

Seaman’s portraits are especially poignant when contrasted against Curtis’s 19th century photographs that exaggerated and perpetuated the “vanishing Indian” stereotype. While Curtis “fashioned” and “styled” his subjects, Seaman allowed for freedom of cultural expression and modes of being.<sup>93</sup> The life and identity shines in Seaman’s studio photography, while it is forced in Curtis’s works. For example, some of her photos maintain the similar stature and pose of Curtis’s with the subject gazing sternly at the camera. However, her work includes more liveliness and expression, allowing the subjects to express themselves in the way they choose rather than being posed by the photographer. Seaman allows silliness within her work; one of the images shows a man with a determined look on his face holding up the “rock on” gestures with

<sup>92</sup> Camille Seaman, “Photo Essay: We Are Still Here” *Global Oneness Project*, <https://www.globalonenessproject.org/library/photo-essays/we-are-still-here>.

<sup>93</sup> Meier, “Native Americans and the Dehumanizing Force of the Photograph.”



both of his hands hovering over his chest. The subject is captured as he wishes to be; he is part of the “new record.”

It is both encouraging and significant that Seaman has also captured well-known photographs from current Native campaigns, such as the recent #NoDAPL movement. The inherent connection between activism and representation is captured in this niche within her work. As Chastang asserts, “the perception of media fueled the development of the contemporary [...] No Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL) protest” as well.<sup>94</sup> Seaman’s most iconic image from the movement is of a man in his traditional head dress and attire, turquoise shirt that brought out the turquoise beads on the crown of his headdress and seen on the design of his medallion, with his arms and hands out open by his sides and smoke billows from behind him. A cluster of



Figure 10, Portrait from “Standing Rock: No DAPL,”  
Camille Seaman, 2016.

Native organizers stand in support behind him. In contrast to the AIM era, Native photographers are capturing contemporary movements and are creating unique visual narratives regarding modern activism. The allowance and support of such photography by Native artists is built on the backs of those that came before them:

Bancroft, Poolaw, Maggiora, and many

others not mentioned throughout this research. The shift in narrative control of representation provided the space for photographers like Seaman and Niro to share their own stories, as well as stories of Native persons around the nation, in their continued efforts towards Native rights and

<sup>94</sup> Amanda B. Chastang, “Reclaiming Identity,” 140.

activism. Highlighting such work encourages self-representation to take priority in the contemporary visual narrative of Native America.

#### **IV. Institutional Support of Self-Representation and Impact on Identity Formation**

I am thankful to not be the only scholar writing about the importance of self-representation, and the need to recognize Native photographers' artistry as a pivotal and essential part of reconceptualizing Indigenous identity, both in the past and in the contemporary era. This topic has recently gained momentum by both scholars and institutions alike. Institutionally, museums and curatorial sites are also beginning to recognize and uplift self-representations of Indigenous identity. For example, the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian continues to host and emphasize self-representation through the artwork and photography they display. The Museum uplifts Native artists through their displays, thereby encouraging their works and their respective impacts in the field. The Wheelwright Museum was founded in 1937 and was co-founded by a Diné man, Hastiin Klah.<sup>95</sup> The intentions behind the museum were to help document and protect the artwork of Native persons over generations through the establishment of an institution. The Museum has adapted over its time to center more diverse Native identities in its arts, and works to challenge and disrupt the primary narrative of Native representation through their exhibits. More specifically, it previously hosted the "About Face: Self-Portraits by Native American, First Nations, and Inuit Artists" exhibit. This exhibit included multimedia works from 47 North America Indigenous persons, from sculptures to sketches. This project is particularly poignant because it prioritizes Native perspectives throughout their ways of expression. The co-curators Zena Pearlstone and Allan J. Ryan write that "what distinguishes Native American self-portraits from those of the dominant culture is that

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<sup>95</sup> "About: History," *Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian*, <https://wheelwright.org/about/history/>.

these speak to identity through the negotiation of cultural conflict.”<sup>96</sup> Pearlstone and Ryan acknowledge that self-representation efforts inherently disturb the primary stereotypes of Native persons through ownership of identity. Reviews of the exhibition call attention to the supplemental writing pieces that contextualize the importance of the artwork, but few reviews analyze the photographs themselves.<sup>97</sup>

In addition to “About Face,” a current exhibit of the Wheelwright Museum is “Portraits: Peoples, Places, and Perspectives,” which opened March 2020.<sup>98</sup> It is similar to “About Face” in that it centers Native artists and artworks in their mission to explore Indigenous identity; however, “Portraits” primarily highlights the medium of oil paintings rather than multimedia works. The exhibit’s mission is to directly contrast the forced photographic representations by non-Native artists, including those mentioned throughout this research, through individual Native interpretations of contemporary identity. Both “About Face” and “Portraits” create a complex and nuanced addition to the larger conversation about Indigenous identity and reclamation; and though neither are focused on photography or portraiture, it indicates a shift in institutions in focusing upon this important topic.

Additionally, the Smithsonian Institute released a titular article about their exhibition, “Developing Stories: Native Photographers in the Field,” that recognizes the significance of Native photographers in developing and spotlighting Native identity and experiences. As the author and curator Cécile R. Ganteaume asserts that Native photography “is at a transformation

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<sup>96</sup> “Exhibitions: About Face: Self-Portraits by Native American, First Nations, and Inuit Artists,” *Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian*, <https://wheelwright.org/exhibitions/about-face-self-portraits-by-native-american-first-nations-and-inuit-artists/>.

<sup>97</sup> Mario A. Caro, “Review,” review of *About Face: Self-Portraits by Native American, First Nations, and Inuit Artists*, edited by Zena Pearlstone and Allan J. Ryan, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 32 (2), 2008, 111.

<sup>98</sup> “Exhibitions: Portraits: Peoples, Places, and Perspectives,” *Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian*, <https://wheelwright.org/exhibitions/portraits-peoples-places-and-perspectives/>.

point,” and current Indigenous photographers are utilizing their positionality to capture moments and experiences “that are largely invisible to mainstream society.”<sup>99</sup> The exhibition includes three visual series from different Native photographers that span the range of diverse experiences of Indigenous peoples in the contemporary United States.<sup>100</sup> From blood quantum requirements impacting persons’ perceived marriage eligibility and interest in family to the disproportionate impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic, these photo essays capture the unfiltered experiences of Indigenous communities by their respective community members. The support of a museum within the Smithsonian Institution, a trust instrumentality of the federal government that is legally backed through Congress, is significant in its far reach and its relationality to power.<sup>101</sup> Multiple Native news outlets have covered this multi-installation exhibit, focusing primarily on the photographic series rather than the emphasis on the Smithsonian; the coverage rather seems to be prideful of its large-reaching audience, but the information shared regarding the Smithsonian’s involvement is sparse. For example, in both *Indian Country Today* and *Navajo-Hopi Observer*’s coverage of the exhibition, they include the same short paragraph provided directly from the Smithsonian Institution, stating that the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) “fosters a richer shared human experience through a more informed understanding of Native peoples.”<sup>102</sup> With the governments’ prior stance to surveil AIM and its

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<sup>99</sup> Cécile R. Ganteaume, “Developing Stories: Native Photographers in the Field,” National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institute, 24 March 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2020/03/24/developing-stories/>.

<sup>100</sup> *Developing Stories: Native Photographers in the Field*, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institute, <https://americanindian.si.edu/developingstories/>.

<sup>101</sup> Office of the General Counsel, “Legal History,” The Smithsonian Institute, <https://www.si.edu/ogc/legalhistory#:~:text=The%20Smithsonian%20Institution%20is%20considered,its%20own%20buildings%20and%20grounds..>

<sup>102</sup> “National Museum of the American Indian’s ‘Developing Stories: Native Photographers in the Field’ to feature work of photojournalist Donovan Quintero,” *Indian Country Today*, 14 May 2022, <https://indiancountrytoday.com/the-press-pool/national-museum-of-the-american-indians-developing-stories-native-photographers-in-the-field-to-feature-work-of-photojournalist-donovan-quintero>; “Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian’s ‘Developing Stories: Native Photographers in the Field’ to

leaders, to now indirectly advocating for the rise in self-representation of Indigenous identity through a Smithsonian Institution, it is clear that AIM and its following efforts had systematic impacts.

Assistant Director Michelle Delaney is excited about the National Museum of American Indian's future exhibit on Native photography and representation to be released in the next decade.<sup>103</sup> Delaney acknowledges that there is much to be done regarding institutions' advocacy for proper representation and the need to uplift Indigenous artists.<sup>104</sup> Though institutions are slow-moving in their approach, the anticipated momentum this topic has in both academia and within the very institutions that once perpetuated such harmful representations is an optimistic step forward in the future of self-representation and the continuing formation of what it means to be a Native person in the contemporary era. The continued emphasis on this topic will likely have systematic implications towards the formation and view of Native identity. In developing a new narrative control of identity and the ways Native persons are perceived, It is helpful to extrapolate the works of Stephanie Fryberg and additional Native scholars regarding their research towards public Native representation in understanding impact on Indigenous persons.

In a co-authored writing with Fryberg, “‘Frozen in Time’: The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding”, Leavitt et al. write that the “narrow depictions [...] inhibit the ability of Native Americans to see their group or to imagine themselves as anything other than the limited media portrayals.”<sup>105</sup> We can conversely utilize Fryberg’s scholarly work to theorize the impact of positive self-representations on

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feature work of photojournalist Donovan Quintero,” *Navajo-Hopi Observer*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.nhnews.com/news/2021/may/18/smithsonian-national-museum-american-indians-devel/>.

<sup>103</sup> Michelle Delaney, Meeting by Brentley Sandlin. Virtual via Zoom, 15 April 2022.

<sup>104</sup> Michelle Delaney, Meeting by Brentley Sandlin. Virtual via Zoom, 15 April 2022.

<sup>105</sup> Peter A. Leavitt, Rebecca Covarrubias, Yvonne A. Perez, and Stephanie A. Fryberg. “‘Frozen in Time’: The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding,” *Journal of Social Issues*, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell) Vol. 71, No. 1, 2015, 44.

Indigenous identity and self-perceptions. If a lack of visibility constrains how Native persons may perceive themselves, accurate and positive portrayals may have a constructive effect Native identity formation. In a subsequent article, Fryberg provides a case study, finding that the role of accurate representations positively influences educational outcomes of Native students in American schools.<sup>106</sup> While not directly related Fryberg does establish that shifts in representation have proven effects on Native persons, and this can circumstantially be applied to discussing the role of self-portraiture as a positive form of crafting and supporting Native identity formation.

## **Conclusion**

Native activism is intrinsically intertwined with Indigenous identity since colonialism; however, AIM catapulted a rise in acknowledgment and recognition of complex Indigenous identities in the contemporary era. Through the analysis of visual portrayals of Native peoples prior, during, and after the movement, it is clear that AIM's overt tactics forced a renegotiation of narrative control regarding Indigenous identity and representation. From the utilization of photography as a tool to further colonialist missions by artists such as Edward Curtis and industrial school photographers, Native persons reestablished the medium and its use in their communities by taking control of the lens. The analysis of such visual representations indicates the significance of this shift, especially when looking at comparisons between similar styles of photography with white and Native photographers. Looking at scholars' works surrounding the impact of representation of Native persons' self-perceptions, I assert that self-representation therefore has positive effects on contemporary identity formation for Native peoples. Institutions

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<sup>106</sup> Eason et al., "Reclaiming Representations & Interrupting the Cycle of Bias Against Native Americans," 76.

are beginning to recognize the need for this through exhibits, sponsorships, and articles; however, most have only recently made this shift in the last few years.

When looking forward to future research in the field, it seems significant to understand this renegotiation is inherently connected with dominant viewpoints. That is, the self-representational opposition narrative interacts with the white narrative through counteracting it. Seaman's "We Are Still Here" visual project implicitly acknowledges Curtis's series by replicating and developing an authentic representation of various tribal persons and communities. While Poolaw's work is momentous in capturing significant moments of his community and larger Indigenous events, such as 1941 American Indian Exposition Parade, his intention was also just to document his friends and family, not to be a working archive. However, because of the novelty of his work, as one of the most renowned Native photographers capturing everyday life of Indigenous communities, his work was propelled into the forefront of Native representation in photography. Had there not been a need for this counter-representation, Poolaw's work would likely have not created such an impact. That is not to say that his work should be any less renowned within the field or its impact, but rather that the need for such self-representation still intertwines itself with the dominant narrative, despite working against it. When examining where this research may continue to grow, examining how representations of Native folks may stand independently, or rather not necessarily rely on past forms of imposed representation, is a significant part of the discussion.

Ultimately, the role of self-representation is still deeply significant in creating and shaping positive impacts on contemporary North America Indigenous identities. Rather than attempting to portray Indigenous communities as vanishing, or within a specific trope, there are nuances within Native artists' self-representational work, as they are more familiar and more

well-intentioned. Providing additional visibility and support in such work, for both individual photographers and Native-led institutions that foster this art form, allows for greater representation and positive self-image. In promoting such work, the ability for Indigenous representation can and will hopefully develop its own arc independent from portrayals imposed beyond the community.



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