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Stepping Out of Photographs

Stopping the Myth of the Vanishing Native through Reclaiming Personhood in *The Edward Curtis Project*

Mari Murdock

“We were making our own pictures out of our own beliefs and they were adding up. We were inside the lies and beauty of history, of gender, and of class, we were making a case for the future.”

—Marie Clements

The Edward Curtis Project is the collaborative brainchild of both Marie Clements (Métis-Dine) and Rita Leistner. Both a play and a photographic collection, it was originally released as part of the 2010 cultural Olympiad in Vancouver, introducing aspects of living Indigenous culture to the world. Due to its potential worldwide audience, the project hits on many contemporary issues—like Indigenous feminism, inaccurate media coverage, and racial markers such as skin color—and Clements dramatizes this assemblage of issues as a seemingly insurmountable legacy of complex historical, social, political, and even moral consequences of settler colonialism originating in Edward Curtis’ famous narrative of the “vanishing race.” In

light of the sheer number of these problems, Clements wonders, “How does an Indigenous man or woman overcome any of the grossly oppressive realities that makeup Indigenous lived experience?” Her intersectionality of complex issues, coupled with multimedia presentation, brings Clements’s audiences into intimate contact with both the experience of getting crushed beneath overwhelming suffering and the process of self-discovering solutions. Clements highlights the need to get at the core of these problems: what if, instead of having to fight the centuries of escalating momentum for stereotypes, racism, sexism, and domination, we reach the source—the basic right to exist? This question of the privilege to be a real person, rather than a photograph or a perceived stereotype, is where her protagonist goes to rebuild herself rather than taking these issue on one by one.

This theme of affirming personhood to conquer settler colonialism is taken up by Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) in his essay “Re-Envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination,” wherein he poses similar questions to Clements and proposes his own solution. Corntassel asks, “What recourse do we have against those destructive forces and entities that have disconnected us from our longstanding relationships to our homelands, cultures and communities?” (87). These questions demand answers to an often overpowering abundance of issues that threaten to snuff out Indigenous life in all its forms. To overcome the seeming impossibility of the task, he invites Indigenous people to adopt “a peoplehood model” that would renew “the complex spiritual, political and social relationships,” disrupting that process of erasure and destruction (89). The heart of this model stems from the basic need to be recognized as human, not as a settler stereotype, making the struggle more of a resurgence of life than a specifically political, social, economic, or spiritual resurgence. This is done by simply enacting and living one’s Indigenous traditions, reconnecting every day to “language, homeland, ceremonial cycles, and sacred living histories” (89). While Corntassel applies his model specifically to nationhood, in this paper, I make a more individual application of his model, responding to the more personal need for life resurgence in combatting depression and suicide which are common psychological responses to seemingly insurmountable situations. I explore the food-based version of the peoplehood model solution adopted by Clements’s protagonist Angeline in *The Edward Curtis Project* to illustrate her journey toward asserting her humanity, which allows her to conquer the feeling of being psychologically defeated.

The play's story follows Angeline, a Métis journalist tasked with reporting on Native issues. After winning an award for reporting the story of three Aboriginal children, who "were found frozen to death in the snow . . . and their father, age 24, was found drunk," Angeline develops depression, which escalates into a mental breakdown as she realizes her involvement in perpetuating settler narratives and stereotypes about Indigenous people (12). As an Indigenous woman herself, she feels death might be her only escape from such a self-defeating, damning situation. In her examination of the play, Jennifer Henderson observes that this situation constructs "a socially distanced but empathetic spectatorship of Indigenous tragedy read as pathology: an alcoholic father has neglected his children" (300). This means that Angeline's tragedy comes from her culpability in adding to the stereotypical journalistic voyeurism dedicated to delivering the settler audience the tragedy of their preconceived pathological expectation and nostalgia for a "vanishing Indian" narrative. However, this burden does not fall on Angeline's shoulders alone. Clements also invites the audience to share the blame, holding them responsible for their power to create and perpetuate these stereotypical narratives. As Beverly Yhap observes of the play's performances, "To some extent, each show enacted a kind of exhumation: received ideas of culture and privilege—of who occupies and creates any given artistic 'canon'—were brought to light and held up to account" (106). Thus, as Angeline longs to escape her guilt through death, Clements also connects audiences with the experience of being overwhelmed, generating a shared empathy for the threat of depression and suicide. The audience must then join Angeline in her journey through mental breakdown in the attempts to discover freedom.

Due to the complexity of the historical, social, political, and moral consequences of settler colonialism that Angeline faces, her depression conjures hallucinations: mental manifestations of her tangled thoughts which she can examine and address. Her hallucinations begin with an encounter with Edward Curtis, the controversial photographer who took pictures of Native peoples in the early twentieth century and one of the originators of the American "vanishing Indian" myth. In this relationship, she confronts Curtis's legacy of trauma, prejudice and political neglect directly, looking for a solution at the problem's source rather than attempting to solve these issues one at a time. During their interaction, Curtis fixes Angeline a pot of buffalo stew, a Native recipe, and tells her he was the grand preserver of

Indigenous cultural elements like this. He says he took “a picture so no one would ever forget they [Indigenous peoples] were here. . . . Because pictures are . . . realities” (28). Angeline immediately stiffens, contesting, “Or are they [pictures] just perceptions? And if so, of whom? Those who take the picture or those who pose for them” (28). In these questions, she wonders how he could think that what he took was really anything more than his version of history, not Indigenous realities. In her review of the play, Selena Couture observes that Clements recognizes “that photographic documentation is seductive in its apparent truth-telling, but that it is always a process of choosing what to include in the frame and what to exclude from it,” and in Curtis’s version, he excludes the possibility that the Indigenous people could endure (13). Angeline herself is living proof of this endurance. This complicates his narrative of the vanishing Indian immediately. One cannot imagine real Natives who, looking toward their seemingly inevitable demise, would ask Curtis to save their stew rather than their own lives or the lives of their children. Therefore, his narrative appears false.

The stew thus acts as an artifact of Curtis’s myth-making, his process of taking Indigenous dances, customs, and pictures to preserve them while the people they come from die. By producing this stew recipe, Curtis perpetuates the reality in which the people who invented this dish have disappeared, reenacting his myth before Angeline’s eyes, preserving only the vanishing Indian stereotype. This is the same myth which condemned the “drunk” father, turning him into a stereotype, freezing him into a picture “reality” that Curtis helped create and the audience and Angeline helped perpetuate. When faced with the reality where this myth is still prevalent, Angeline despairs, overcome by this complex, settler colonial dilemma. She searches again for an escape, her depression driving her into a psychological fracture, and she even begs for death, saying, “Why can’t a person die if they want to? . . . I just want to die” (32).

Angeline’s reaction converses directly with the suicide epidemic commonly plaguing Indigenous communities, and through Angeline’s despair, Clements helps her audiences experience the brutal psychological results of extended trauma and racism. For example, in her exploration of Indigenous psychology, Luana Ross (Salish and Kootenai) asserts that an oppressive settler legacy is not only “complex, it is also unyielding” and has “the power to eliminate the desire for survival” (61). As a specific instance, Ross observed incarcerated Native women, confirming, “Many Native women, indeed, do not survive the violence. Some go crazy . . .

while others exist in a depression they cannot—or dare not—name” (61). Ross’s observations cover only a fraction of the rampant instances where trauma and racism generates defeatism, insanity, and depression, potentially life-threatening psychological disorders that further scourge Native communities. Angeline’s breakdown illustrates these threats, drawing the audience’s attention to the ongoing, significant consequences of the settler legacy. She is trapped in an emotional prison perpetuated by her pain, and as she suffers psychologically, her social connections break down, and she thrusts away those she loves, ready to abandon them completely through death. This reaction, however, is also part of the settler stereotype for the “vanishing Indian” as her death would culminate in the “proper” demise dictated by the stereotype. This is similar to E. Pauline Johnson’s (Mohawk) long-standing observation of the literary stereotype of the Native woman, a figure destined to die because “she is too unhealthy and too unnatural to live” (122). Settlers tell stories to match their narratives of the vanishing Native and expect real Indigenous peoples to follow suit, crafting a society that adds pressure on the Indigenous populations to do so. Likewise, Angeline feels forced to follow suit, beaten down by the “complex” and “unyielding” oppression that seems to give her only one way out. Her suicide would fulfill Curtis’s prophecy of the vanishing Indian, and Angeline would be back where she started, living out the fate of that myth.

Despite Angeline’s bleak situation, Curtis’s stew also introduces the life-saving personhood model by becoming an ironic symbol of the most basic of human functions, the natural requirement that separates a photograph from a body of flesh: food. This is suggestive of Corn tassel’s “peoplehood model” because where a two-dimensional photograph of the “vanishing Indian” would have no use of food, indicative of a people’s supposed plea for Curtis to take and preserve it for them, a living people looking for resurgence requires “daily acts of renewal,” literally like eating, in order to survive (89). Therefore, Angeline—in order to move from photograph to flesh, stereotype to human being, and choose life over death—must find real food that represents her “personhood” to preserve herself. Thus enters the Hunger Chief, the timeless bear-like entity who acts as a “leader of all nations and peoples” (8). Embodying the hardship of these forgotten people, the Hunger Chief stands by Angeline to guide her subversion of Curtis’s destructive myth. He first appears in the form of Angeline’s boyfriend Yiska.

Yiska plays the part of champion for Angeline's initial challenge to Curtis's narrative, supporting her ideas and even physically taking action to defend their personhood. As Yiska enters the hallucination, Curtis cooks eggs and bacon for them, again offering his food artifact symbolic of the myth. However, Yiska is suspicious, eventually tearing up Curtis's photographs, demanding, "What, you think you can cook a pair of eggs and everything is fine?" Yiska directly confronts the vanishing Indian myth by tearing up the photos, claiming his right to exist outside of their restrictive borders. This forces Curtis to admit in a fit of rage, "I cooked for them, and I cooked for them, and I cooked for them . . . do you want to know why? Because I couldn't stand watching them starve to death over and over and over . . . everywhere I went . . . starvation, death, incarceration, hunger" (54). Here, Curtis reveals his solution to Native suffering: feed the starving, vanishing Indians with his empty food until they disappear, fulfilling his narrative. However, this is not the solution Yiska and Angeline desire. Yiska then transforms into the Hunger Chief and, speaking with the voice of all Indians, simply says, "I am and remain thin. I want to eat. We want to eat. I don't want to be sick. I want to get well" (62). Instead, the Natives demand the right to real nourishment to satisfy their hunger, not to vanish to erase it all together. The Hunger Chief then tells Curtis, "I am very poor. I am very rich, weak, strong, short, tall, fat, skinny, alive, blind, dead. . . . We eat together," a list that invokes all forms of existence. This timeless deity asks for the right of his people to just live, regardless of their condition, as real human beings, to share in the simplest act of mortality: to eat.

The Hunger Chief's powerful claim upon life, this right to peoplehood, dispels Curtis's myth of the vanishing Indian. In fact, after this, Curtis himself literally fades from the stage, as if vanishing from history, unable to take a photograph of Angeline, the picture that would be the first of his collection, cutting his toxic legacy off at its root. This disruption of the photographs' limiting stereotypes allows Angeline a chance to reclaim her true identity as a real human being through resurgent peoplehood. Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) declares, "To assert our self-determination, to assert our presence in the face of erasure, is to free ourselves from the ghost-making rhetorics of colonization" (353). As Angeline has seen the Hunger Chief act, now she must make this effort for herself to outlive Curtis's vanishing Indian narrative in the real world beyond her hallucination. She resurfaces from her hallucination, but the threat of Curtis's legacy remains in this world where she is still a journalist winning an award for reporting the deaths of those children. However, after her

experiences with Curtis and the Hunger Chief, she finds herself armed with her newly discovered pathway to personhood, using her humanity to declare, "I am ready to see everything. Please" (66). The Hunger Chief, transformed back into Yiska, responds, "Touch me . . . Remember me . . . Smell me . . . Look at me Ange, . . . love me and we can move forward . . . you have to see love because it is the only thing we have that can't be starved from us" (66). He once again invokes her right to be human, not a photograph, and asks her to use her body to experience and partake of the food that proves she can exist, the food that nourishes her best: love. Unlike the buffalo stew, a temporary artifact capable of being stolen by Curtis, Yiska reminds Angeline that love is a nourishment forever preserved. As an eternal food, she should turn to love to nourish and strengthen her body, her life. Angeline grasps this lesson, adopting it as her own resurgent peoplehood model, a preservation of a powerful cultural aspect that can reverse settler colonialism, thus reversing her decay under Curtis's destructive legacy.

This ending explains why Angeline describes her mental breakdown as a breakthrough. In the beginning of the play, she cries, "All I wanted to do was get out. Get out of the picture that was made for me—get out of the picture I had made for myself. Get out of all the lies that framed me" (13). This signifies her original desire to succumb to her depression, to die crushed beneath the weight of the unyielding settler legacy. Angeline avoids being overcome by the rising tides of immensely complex historical, social, political, and even moral consequences of settler colonialism by confronting Curtis's myth directly. She faces the root of these issues: the denial of simple humanity. Through asserting her humanity, she has no more need of escaping the stereotype and can choose life instead of death. She identifies her own resurgent pathway to personhood, reemerging as her true self: a human being instead of a half-vanished stereotypic specimen of an interrupted settler nostalgia. In the final line of the play, Angeline declares, "We have survived across time, across place, to love each other towards a new day," banishing the myth from her future endeavors in a triumphant reclamation of her own life and the lives of her Native brothers and sisters. Through this powerful protagonist's change, Clements encourages her audience to likewise stand firm against unyielding odds and lay claim to the basic right to exist and hold onto love as their sustaining, unifying proof of personhood. Rather than disappearing, forced into depression and suicide through victimized helplessness, they can realize the truth Clements declares in her artistic statement found on the first page of *The Edward Curtis Project*: "There is no Vanishing Indian, never was. . . . We are everywhere and it is beautiful" (5).

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