Title
‘Things are on a new scale, the standard one brings with him will not hold’: Land and Race in Edward Curtis’ Landscape Photography of the Harriman Alaska Expedition of 1899

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8818v674

Author
Smith, Jen

Publication Date
2017-11-08

Data Availability
The data associated with this publication are within the manuscript.
‘Things are on a new scale, the standard one brings with him will not hold’: Land and Race in Edward Curtis’ Landscape Photography of the Harriman Alaska Expedition of 1899

by Jen Smith

Department of Ethnic Studies
University of California, Berkeley
November 8, 2017
Due to the unique colonial history of Alaska, Alaska Native peoples find themselves operating and engaging in a set of conditions that diverge from many experiences of Native peoples in the contiguous U.S. This paper explores some of those differences by tracking how questions of land and concerns about race were made together in Alaska from 1867-1899. I argue that the discursive formations of land definitions and the racialization of Alaska Native peoples as “of Asian descent” are mutually constitutive in ways that draw from prior configurations of racialization via geography. I do so by looking at racialized federal policy, geographical and geological surveys of land, and photographs of landscape as curated by Edward Curtis on the Harriman Alaska Expedition of 1899. Drawing from these materials, I argue that land and race in Alaska are co-constituted through law, geography, and popular culture and that the accumulation of these colonial impositions continues to inform the current political status of Alaska Native peoples and the ongoing dispossession of land.
“Things are on a new scale, the standard one brings with him will not hold.”

Edward Curtis, Harriman Alaska Expedition

Since the U.S. purchased Alaska in 1867, Alaska has been a place of invention, and in that process landscape and peoples have escaped the definitions, terms, and existing literatures on measurement and categorization. As John Burroughs writes, “the standard one brings with him will not hold”—and this has held true through the years. Alaska keeps a unique place in the minds of Americans. It is at once a land of aesthetic nature and a fount of extractible resource, among other things. Such imaginaries of Alaskan landscape are not by chance; they are curated and maintained over time. Lands and peoples in Alaska have been variously and purposefully defined, narrated, and ordered over time and under specific sets of colonial conditions as separate and divisible from one another. In this paper, I analyze the desires for order in Alaska, particularly through the aspects of ordering land and ordering race. I argue that definitions of land and the formations of indigenous peoples are made together and inherently related. Put another way, the determinations of Native peoples and the determinations of land are co-constituted.

The Harriman Alaska Expedition (HAE) of 1899 stands as a great example of the ordering of both Alaska lands and peoples. In 13 volumes, the HAE works to document, order, and designate lands and peoples into containers of geology, botany, entomology, ornithology, and anthropology. The broad range of academic expertise held by those onboard the ship was directed to scientifically capture the Alaskan coastline using literatures from previous expeditions, particularly surveys of geographic and geological natures. A notable watershed survey named the Coast Pilot of Alaska, by George Davidson, offered an important precedent for the HAE in terms of exploring the Alaskan coast. In fact, the HAE could not have made its voyage around the coast of Alaska without Davidson’s work on archiving navigable waters. Davidson’s text also provides insight into the processes of making Alaska through maps, geological and resource data collection, and other documentation of the natural world. Again, however, these surveys should not be read without addressing the simultaneous narration of indigenous
peoples that inhabit those lands, which Davidson’s work also participated in. Davidson’s text, then, is an important pre-cursor to the HAE, and I offer a reading of the Coast Pilot together with the HAE volumes to demonstrate the genealogy of land documentation in Alaska. Similar to Davidson’s report, embedded in the HAE’s desire to scientifically document Alaska’s lands is also the need to document the indigenous inhabitants of Alaska. This task was haphazardly accomplished by George Bird Grinnell, Native American culture ‘expert’, and John Burroughs, a well-known natural historian of the time. However, instead of analyzing materials by Grinnell and Burroughs, I offer a reading of Vincent Colyer’s 1869 report “Indian Tribes and Their Surroundings in Alaska Territory, From Personal Observation and Inspection.” These two sources by Davidson and Colyer illustrate the co-productive nature of land and race, and demonstrate that the HAE was not anomalous but built upon the predetermined inventions of Alaska land and Alaska Native race.

From the HAE, turning to Edward Curtis’ HAE landscape photography is illustrative in that Alaska is not solely made through geologic and geographical data and documentation of racial characteristics of indigenous peoples, which are often privileged as determiners of land and race. Alternatively, Curtis’ landscape images illustrate how land and race in Alaska is also invented through cultural production, and is equally as important and informative as geological and anthropological knowledge production. Curtis documents the multiple facets of order emplaced in Alaska in 1899 through settlement and economic resource extraction, and also demonstrates the inherent ordering power of photography as a technology that documents and utilizes normative and problematic modes of seeing land and bodies. Curtis’ landscape photography also provides content for an alternative reading of Curtis’ well-known photography of Native Americans of the continental U.S., which focuses on Indian faces. By centering images of landscape, the concerns of the co-constitutive relationship of race and land become much clearer and necessary to the analysis of Curtis’ larger oeuvre.

At the center of the HAE were questions of land, race, and their interrelationships—similar concerns to those that have long occupied scholars of Native American and Indigenous studies, and Native American politics generally. Historical and ongoing relationships to land and land dispossession
animate analyses and activisms around the U.S. in regard to tribal sovereignty, governance, land tenure, political and cultural identity, language revitalization, among other important concerns for Native studies scholars and Native peoples. Questions of race and racializations similarly inform Native studies as Native American peoples have been and continue to be racialized in myriad forms that merit race be taken as a main topic of concern. Yet, the question of race in Native studies is complicated by the ways that race is utilized to minoritize Native peoples in ways that can elide or overwhelm priorities of sovereign nationhood and autonomy. Moreover, questions of racialization and racism based on skin color do not account for Native polities’ distinct forms of recognizing membership and belonging that do not necessarily operate around racial phenotype. Concerns about race-and-land are infrequently sustained in analyses that move beyond the claim that the elimination of the Native was meant to make land available for settlers, i.e. the structure not the event of the land-centered project of settler colonialism. My inquiries instead work to historicize the terms Native and Land as they are spatially located and colonially generated.

A few likely culprits for the lack of substantial engagement with race-and-land is rooted in the turn away from ideologies of “the natural” as determinative of race, racial difference, or human difference. The invented sciences of the natural have historically worked to violently oppress, oftentimes fatally, those who have not measured up to a racial hierarchy that has white men placed at its apex. Similarly, geographical or environmental determinism of racial or human difference has often been tracked through a relationship between land and race, for instance the categorization of indigenous peoples as savage fauna. In this vein, Native American peoples are consistently stereotyped as “closer to nature,” which translates Native knowledges as anachronistic and primitive if not romanticized. Relatedly, mainstream environmental politics have been rightfully criticized as non-inclusive to communities of color and Native communities by eliding human history of land, and appropriating Native concerns of land dispossession and treaty rights and translating them into environmental issues untethered to social or legal histories.
In the spirit of these ongoing legacies, it is thus crucial to investigate the ways that land and race have been simultaneously made particularly in the context of Native American studies and especially as Alaska is situated in the field. For Alaska Native studies, race cannot be dismissed as a category of analysis. As described below, the racialization of Alaska Native peoples is an essential element of Alaska Native relationships to federal and state governments, and to how their lands were uniquely dispossessed. In this way, land cannot be taken as an enduring entity that statically holds and carries, or where history unfolds—it too must be historicized and read critically as constitutive to race and racialization. Land, just as race, is not a given category unfettered from social manipulations. The orderings of land and race through various modes have very real material and lasting consequences that alter lives, livelihoods, and political power. In this paper, I read land surveys of Alaska, landscape photographs, and racial legislation from the mid to late 19th century to illustrate how land and race have been made together in Alaska. Additionally, in thinking about the constitutions of land and race, I ask that readers take one step further to examine inquiries of the human, and how spatialized questions of the origin of the human have informed constitutions of race, racialization, and land meanings.

**Northern Narratives: The HAE, George Davidson, and Vincent Colyer**

In 1899, the Harriman Alaska Expedition travelled for two months around the coast of what has come to be known as Alaska and Russia. Railroad tycoon Edward Harriman, namesake and financier of the voyage, was a popular figure in the American social imagination. On the day of the ship’s departure from the port of Seattle, a crowd gathered to bid farewell, and the departure graced the headlines of newspapers transnationally. The ship carried 126 passengers, some of whom were the nation’s most illustrious academics and figures of the time including John Burroughs, Edward Curtis, William Dall, George Bird Grinnell, and John Muir. These and other men aboard practiced a wide range of disciplines and trades on the journey including ornithology, comparative anatomy, botany, paleontology, mining engineering, geology, forestry, geography, anthropology, natural history, zoology, agriculture, glaciology, mineralogy, taxidermy, bird artistry, stenography, and photography. The “floating university” generated over 12 volumes of data, ordered 13 genera and 600 species, named and mapped several glaciers and
other landforms, and captured thousands of photographs. Scientists onboard measured the Alaskan atmosphere and mapped forested regions. Artists painted landscapes, flowers, birds, starfish, and insects with watercolor and charcoal. Historians and anthropologists narrated Alaska Native communities with whom they interfaced. The expedition members were rigorous, thorough, and sweeping in their ordering of peoples, places, and things and their findings and recordings were shared with scientific, private and popular communities alike.

Natural historian John Burroughs’ 100-page narrative remarks on the Alaskan coast with awe, but also with disdain. For Burroughs, the Native peoples left much to be desired as they were far from the authentic specimens of indigeneity Burroughs sought, in fact they were illegible in their apparent distinction from American Indians of the Plains, and alternatively malleable in their assimilatory potential. For Burroughs, the whites were low-class and illiterate, and the landscape was mostly impenetrable and unchanging. Interspersed throughout the 13 volumes produced by the HAE are poems about Eskimos, landscape paintings of mountains and rivers, drawings of mermaids holding seals, maps of inlets, and photographs of Alaska Native peoples.11

Yet, the HAE was hardly the first set of researchers to intricately and intimately narrate and document lands and peoples. Before moving to an analysis of the HAE and Curtis’ landscape images in particular, it is important to contextualize some of the colonial history of Alaska that gave rise to exploratory journeys like the Harriman expedition. In 1867, through the Treaty of Cession (Alaska purchase), the incorporation of the territory of Alaska was the first non-contiguous acquisition by the U.S. By that time coastal Alaska and parts of the interior accessible by waterway had already been subject to centuries of colonial occupation by Russia, Britain, France, and Spain. Explorers with surnames Bering, Cook, Vancouver, Leperouse, and Malaspina, among others, had already visited Alaska, left their names on waterways and landforms, and reported back to their respective states on the lands and peoples of the North Pacific.

These travel narratives were constituted by scientific documentations concerning navigable land and waters, ethnological details about indigenous peoples that lived in the lands these explorers visited,
and descriptions of how each was constituted by the other. These men were concerned with not only tracking resources, but also the characteristics of indigenous peoples: their diets, their art, their industriousness and amicability, their physiology, and most importantly, how the land, climate, and general geographical details influenced or informed these characteristics. Put another way: how were they using their land, and how was land forming them? Relatedly, a major point of concern for those early travelers in the North Pacific was the enduring question of the origin of inhabitants. Particularly for the space that would later become understood as Alaska, many individuals procuring information and building on the information procured by others before them were convinced that Alaskan inhabitants were migrants from Asia.\textsuperscript{12} Less concerned with what indigenous peoples themselves knew to be their own beginnings in conjunction with intact stretches of presence and land use, musings on racial strains of those who would later become termed Alaska Natives not only informed the trajectory of legal definitions of Alaska Native peoples, but also informed the way that land would be read and managed.

Directly following the Alaska purchase in 1867, geographer George Davidson was sent by the U.S. government to make sense of the newly acquired territory, and delimit the space of “Alaska” through the aid of Native peoples that lived there and previous cartographic materials composed by the explorers mentioned above.\textsuperscript{13} His contribution to the 1867 text \textit{Coast Pilot of Alaska} painstakingly detailed, and co-created with the help of archives, Alaska’s coast through charts, maps, surveys, geographical descriptions, and annotated bibliography of each relevant policy, legislation, convention, and treaty made in the history of “Alaska’s” lands.\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{Coast Pilot} also “translated and gathered much material upon the subject” of the “divisions and subdivisions of the Indian races that inhabit the seaboard of Alaska” (50). Davidson attended carefully to indigenous inhabitants of Alaska in \textit{Coast Pilot}, recording population density across geographical location, physiological characteristics, gender divisions, personality traits, cultural object use, art, skill sets/industriousness, and racial makeup. He connected his own observations to an archive constituted by other texts that worked to make similar distinctions as a point to compare and contrast Alaskan inhabitants to other peoples who travelers had been documenting in their tours around the globe.
Davidson also made note of each possible and concurrently used coastal landscape for the extraction of gold, fur, fishing, and mining economies.

Davidson’s report is important because it stands as the first American survey of the imperially acquired territory of Alaska. Moreover, it is the first survey that attempted to delineate the borders of Alaska, the resources within and along those borders, and how Alaska Native peoples fit into the future of that space. The *Coast Pilot* also further sedimented understandings of Alaska as bountiful yet largely undocumented, and Alaska Native people as of ambiguous racial descent. The various forms of documenting achieved by Davidson are similar in spirit to that of the HAE, which also endeavored to further map, chart, and name the Alaskan coast, along with recording anthropological qualifiers to compare and contrast Alaska Natives to American Indians. Moreover, an important contributor to the *Coast Pilot* would later participate in the Harriman Alaska Expedition: William Dall.¹⁵

Davidson’s report was a helpful place to begin for other documentarians, like Vincent Colyer. Colyer, a landscape artist by trade, was appointed to the board of United States special Indian commissioners and travelled to Alaska in 1869 to conduct a survey of the “sixty thousand Indians in that Territory” (533) to help designate those indigenous inhabitants as under the purview of federal Indian policy.¹⁶ As Anthony and Sally Urvina write, up until this point “opinions ranged from there being no Indians…to all Alaska’s people were Indian, interspersed with the possibility of Chinese, Japanese, and Hawaiian racial influences in the Aleutians and along the northern coastal regions. There was even speculation that Alaska Natives were one of the ten ‘lost tribes’ of Israel” (22). The results of Colyer’s report informed one of the most influential legal designations for Alaska Native peoples as racialized subjects of imperial America.

Similar to those opinions found in the reports by participants on the HAE, Colyer discussed Alaska Natives as “far superior in habits and industry to the crafty, marauding, and wandering Indians of the plains who scorn to do anything but fight and hunt” (552). This comparative approach in identifying the characteristics of who would later become known as Alaska Natives was not unusual.¹⁷ In the mid 19th century, well-circulated arguments attempted to get to the root of human origin, human difference, and
whether all humans were in fact human or another species entirely. The ordering of American Indians had already long factored into the thinking of philosophers on human origins, and became the first attempts of what we understand to be anthropology today. New terms were invented to order the various distinct Alaska Native groups, including “Orarian.” Colyer’s extension of these concerns and curiosities are found throughout his report—racializing Alaska Native peoples and their objects and art forms as “Chinese in form” and of “Mongolian origin” (533, 536). Colyer’s most explicit racialized endorsement of Alaska Natives is cited from Major General Halleck’s trip to Alaska in 1868,

I do not hesitate to say that if three-quarters of them were landed in New York as coming from Europe, they would be selected as among the most intelligent of the many worthy emigrants who daily arrive at that port. In two years they would be admitted to citizenship, and in ten years some of their children, under the civilizing influence of our eastern public schools, would be found members of Congress (560).

These descriptions demonstrate the various forms of racialization that were concurrently circulating in regards to Native American peoples of the contiguous U.S. and emigrating peoples coming to the U.S., and the supposed civilizing and assimilatory powers of citizenship and public schooling, of which I can not attend to fully here. However, these blatant investments in cultural and political erasure for the purposes of supremacist nation-making have been thoroughly and rigorously attended to elsewhere. Moreover, it is important to attend to the various forms of racialization that occur under conditions of colonialism to trouble the binary of settler/native. The iterations of racialization of Alaska Native peoples offer an example of the ways that race categories are invented and deployed in constitutive modes to other oppressed peoples. Migrant racialization happening at main U.S. ports was constitutive to the nature of racialization of Alaska Native peoples. In this case, comparing Alaska Natives to immigrants from Europe reinforces a migrant-status of Alaska Natives that effectively displaces sustained land use and social history of space.
In this way, these quotes are significant in demonstrating the unique ordering of Alaska Native land and Alaska Native peoples in a longer genealogy of the ordering of bodies via race, difference, and land. Although racialization is made possible in part through the constitutive and comparative racialization of other non-white bodies, race is also made through designations of land. For instance, Davidson’s report made the traversing of Alaska’s coast a feasible pursuit: It brought information to those who were curious about the resources of Alaska’s lands, and whether or not the indigenous inhabitants posed a significant threat to exploiting those resources. *Coast Pilot* helped to invent and colonially concretize the boundaries of Alaska based on its own observations, and the geographical and geological reports that had been made before it. It is important to understand the detail-oriented tasks of survey-making that are sedimented and compacted overtime to become normative understandings of land and spatial delineations as represented by the map and legitimated by state forces. This is true of land as much as it is true of race. In fact, as we see in the context of Davidson and Colyer, the land and space of Alaska can be imagined and realized in ways that diminish indigenous claims to land. Alaska’s proximity to “Asia,” and theorizations that the landmass of Alaska was at one time congruous with Siberia in effect makes migrants out of Alaska Native peoples. It opens them to a unique and specific kind of racialization and dispossession that is contingent upon an invented racial designation via spatial approximation. Furthermore, other surveyors, including members of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, would utilize Colyer’s and Davidson’s reports as scientific fact.

For instance, Francis Walker, commissioner of the Office of Indian Affairs at the time of the Alaska purchase, operationalized Colyer’s report to argue that Alaska Native peoples were divergent from American Indians in the eyes of the law. Walker argued that Alaska Natives should not receive the same treatment as American Indians, as they were of “Asiatic origin.” Walker maintained that Federal Indian law should not be “extended unnecessarily to races of questionable ethnical type, and occupying a position practically distinct and apart from the range of undoubted Indian tribes of the continent.” Walker based this decision on Colyer’s report, which sang the praises of Alaska Native groups as virtually distinct from Native American peoples of the continental U.S., who were apparently
inassimilable, and compared Alaska Native citizen-subject potentiality to the “most intelligent” emigrants that entered the U.S.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Making Indeterminacy | Making Land}

At the time of the purchase of Alaska, the U.S. was assessing its efforts in fighting the Indian Wars, as well as the Civil War. Due to these expenditures the federal government was averse to spending another undetermined amount of funds to slaughter Native peoples for the ‘opening’ of land, and instead opted for an alternative in the incorporated territory of Alaska. To legally designate Alaska Natives in the same juridical category as American Indians, the federal government would become financially responsible for their social wellbeing. The turn to racial indeterminacy of Alaska Native peoples therefore worked to the benefit of the U.S., as under U.S. law, indigeneity entailed a claim to land (aboriginal title) and contractual obligations (such as healthcare).\textsuperscript{24} In Alaska, from 1867-1931 Alaska Natives were not legally designated as occupying the same juridical category as American Indians—a status that was created through the legal binding documents of treaties, federal support in the form of annuities, the spatial compartmentalization of reservations, as well as more contemporary forms of interface like federal recognition and blood quantum.

For purposes of U.S. colonial powers, indigenous peoples of Alaska were writ as a divergent racial strain—unfamiliar to the material and narrative worlds that had heretofore made up the expanding nation. American Indians, as objects of culture and war, were necessary to America’s founding and maintenance of white superiority and masculinity. The landscape of the American West as material for the continuance of manifest destiny, grounded colonial land grabs and buoyed American identity, in part through the creation of wilderness areas. The (ongoing) dispossession of Native lands promised the futurities of state and capital. The American Indian juridical status as ‘wards of the state’ solidified their invented role of Constitutional Indians—uniquely foreign and domestic sovereign nations.

The desire to order, categorize, and possess is replicated and reiterated by the men onboard the Harriman Alaska Expedition, but this desire also predates it. The HAE, understood, read, coded, and narrated Alaska Native peoples and their lands, which added to and maintained ongoing narrations of
questionable racial descent. By reading the HAE documents in the context of Davidson and Colyer, it becomes clear that this expedition also reiterates dominant understandings of land as scientific and economic resource. For purposes of this analysis, the visual narrative by Curtis offers insights into the aesthetic mode of production of land and race—of which scientific and ethnological modes of data collection are imbricated. Seeing, ordering, and documenting land and race as a scientific production is also a cultural production. In this way, formations of cultural production like poetry, painting, and drawing are also a necessary part of what becomes coded as science.

The Harriman Alaska Expedition is a fantastic example of this as the participants of the expedition were not only thorough documentarians of insect genera and glacial formation, but they also worked to build creative narratives of landscape and Native peoples through nature writing, poetry, watercolor paintings of sunsets and mountains, ad hundreds of photographs of Alaskan lands and Alaska Native peoples and their objects. The spectacle of Alaska as a unique expanse of land of towering glaciers, sweeping landscapes of rivers and lakes, and fields of wildflowers and tundra is also constitutive to Alaska as it is rendered on a map, through geographic coordinates and geological formations, through exploitable economic resources, and Alaska Natives as they are rendered juridical racialized subjects. Curtis presents Alaska as an aesthetic of boundless glacial landscape, expansive and minimally settled vistas, and sparsely populated by racially ambiguous peoples.

*Edward Curtis, Land, Race, and the Human*

Edward Curtis’ role in the Harriman Alaska Expedition was as official photographer. At the time, photography was used in multiple venues to meet various ends—whether it was through visual anthropology that worked to evidence human difference by documenting corporeal variation, or to capture aspects of middle class daily life. Importantly, photography at the turn of the century remained an ambiguous and multivalent representational genre—a hybrid between a science and an art form. The tension of photography being understood as science or as art was enduring and continued to haunt Curtis’ career as he was neither fully accepted as a scientific anthropologist conducting visual ethnography, nor was he fully welcomed as a photography artist. Whether or not popular culture critics could decide on
photography’s main import, what remains clear is that the liminal status of photography as in between science and art lent itself well to another mode of documenting and ordering both land and peoples in a way that generates control.

In the case of Curtis and the HAE, landscape photography specifically allows for a kind of possessive order—photographs of objects can be held and circulated, and photographs of land elicit a sense of ownership or involvement with the depicted landscapes. Additionally, Curtis’ photography creates a kind of narrative order in describing who Native peoples supposedly are, what they look like, where they go, and what they do there. These narrations of ‘the Native’ lend to the control of material reality, largely through the technologies of policymaking and its enactment. Anthropological science has long contributed to the creation of federal Indian policy, and control and management of indigenous land. In this way, juridical Indian relations are unthinkable without the contributions of photographic evidence, as it has played a central role. Furthermore, these legacies are ongoing, as Audra Simpson writes, “[t]his body of work has a deep resonance today, in a settler-colonial nation-state that uses anthropological and historical archives to determine legal presence, to adjudicate claims to land”. In these ways, it is important to problematize images that seek to order Native American peoples and their lands.

In the readings of Edward Curtis’ prints from the HAE that follow, his images of Native peoples and Native lands are understood as mutually constitutive; the racialization of Native peoples in images happens constitutively with the ways that land is depicted visually. Moreover, because Curtis’ photographs of the Harriman Alaska Expedition are overwhelmingly of landscape and non-human entities, this suggests a needed expansion of critical race analytics to include historical questions of the human as it has been created in conjunction with land. It is important to perform readings of land and as more than data, aesthetic, purchased and owned as property, or that assume land can only be contested on these grounds. In the section that follows, notions of racialization and notions of land are expanded to incorporate various bodies, human and more-than-human, and how those bodies and their differences have been constitutively ordered. In this case, Curtis’ photography on the Harriman Expedition is
exceptionally demonstrative in showing how formations of land and bodies have been colonially ordered and categorized in relation to one another.

Additionally, this reading also offers an alternative route to reading material from Curtis’ larger body of work. Scholarship on Curtis has focused primarily on his portraiture, and the problematic tendencies of his sweeping project The North American Indian (NAI). This paper offers a significant contribution to Curtis scholarship as it reads constitutions of race and indigeneity and figurations of land as made together in Curtis’ work. In focusing on the landscape images of Curtis’ oeuvre, of which there are hundreds in NAI, it’s clear that Curtis’ project was not only about the Indian face, but also about Indian land and capturing that land through landscape photography.

Landscape painting, photography, and other forms of aesthetic portrayal have long been understood as a mode of documenting land with aims to control forms of knowledge production and politics of representation—that land is curated in a specific way to transmit specific kinds of relationships to land, namely ones of ownership, taming wilderness, or pastoral thematics. Other landscape scholars argue that landscape aesthetics are not just about literary or artistic realms, but that landscape and its representation are integral to nation-making and imbricated in forming common law. In both cases, landscape is understood as an entity that is not static, but is in fact actively produced to meet certain ends. Therefore, landscape must be understood as a social relation that is actively produced, and in fact landscape and race must be understood as generated simultaneously. Moreover, not only are landscape and race represented in ways that are related, but the separation between peoples and land is also integral to this process.

*Flowers, Glaciers, Baskets*

Curtis’ photographs from the Harriman Alaska Expedition demonstrate a desire to capture, contain, and narrate the Alaskan landscape through multiple perspectives. Curtis took photographs mostly of landscapes and geological features: glaciers, mountains, sunsets, ocean vistas, rivers, bays and inlets, flora and fauna. Included in the souvenir are Curtis’ photographs of American settlements and architecture, as well as Alaska Native homes and belongings. The figures discussed below were chosen
from the souvenir album created at the behest of Edward Harriman for the members of the voyage. The album consists of two volumes that contain a visual chronology of the two-month journey.  

The souvenir was curated and printed by Curtis in his Seattle studio; Curtis took 113 of the 253 images included in the souvenir. The figures are demonstrative of several ways that Edward Curtis attempted to create an order of Alaska land and Alaska Native peoples through his photography.

The souvenir album provides a scope of landscape, from small clusters of flower buds to gargantuan ice fields. Many of Curtis’ images in the souvenir are depictions of glacial formations along the Alaskan coast—there is a large quantity of photographs specifically of the glaciers that the Harriman Expedition participants named after themselves and after their respective academic institutions.

Interspersed between the many images of glaciers are photographs of plants—flowers, trees, grasses, and berries. This scope works to portray and classify a visual mapping of Alaska’s coastal surfaces through photography. This production of nature knowledge obscures the violence of colonialism, and works to perpetuate the concept that an interest in nature is benign, it is for popular consumption (for the average citizen), and it is sans politics. This is a common technique of natural history: to produce an order out of that which is seemingly naturally chaotic. This is a related goal to those of George Davidson and Vincent Colyer in their surveys and reports on the lands and peoples of Alaska. Each of these men worked with equally pernicious systems that necessitated the invention of order and the displacement of previously existing relations. This production of order maps virtually every inch of surface space and importantly has “the potential to subsume culture and history into nature”—in effect eliding social and relational human history. This desire becomes manifest in Figures 1 and 2.
The close-up image of the flower (re)named Arenaria, Figure 1, was photographed on the land mass that was (re)named Hall Island, as the title of the image demonstrates. The photograph centers tiny blossoms and the moss of the muskeg around them creates a dark frame. This image is one among many of Curtis’ prints from the Harriman Expedition that depict close-up images of plantlife. The small flowers in Figure 1 grow close to the earth’s surface and are thriving in an environment that should not support their existence—a conclusion that may be drawn if this image is read in conjunction with the icy landscape of Figure 2. Figure 2’s image is titled “The Way to Nunatak—Ridged Ice.” It centers the glistening ice of the Nunatak, Inuit (nunataq) for glacier or icefield. Similar to Figure 1, the image follows the conventions of a landscape photograph that interprets land as reduced to “vegetation and form.” The ridges in the ice guide the eye and in following the lines of the glacier, they mimic movements of waves.
The perspective of the photograph is not an aerial view or panoramic view taken from above, like Figure 1, but it is low to the ice, which creates the illusion that the viewer inhabits the space of the glacier.

Curtis’ glacier photograph is one that pleases aesthetically, translating an Alaska Native nunataq to an enchanting icefield for viewers in the continental U.S., who had been familiar with images of the supposedly frozen, barren North. The glaciers of Alaska fell easily into this repertoire, particularly images that presented glacial features as both enticing and passive, both dangerous and beautiful—a sea of ice halted only by a mountain range that reached up toward the sky. Curtis presents a stark contrast between the anxiety-producing glacier that seems endless and impassable, and the domesticated flower buds that have been sorted into a botanical taxonomy for the pleasure and ease of the viewer. In putting the glacier image in proximity to that of the flower blossoms, Curtis creates a narrative that helps the glacier become just as legible, knowable, and containable as the Arenaria plant.

The action and aesthetic of ordering glaciers and flowers not only makes entities legible but it also displaces the relations and histories that exist there. The Latin name Arenaria enables an abstraction of this plant to be folded into the universal code of Western botany, making it knowable through taxonomy categorization. This gaze renders the glacier as frozen and inert—not as a moving agent changing the social and material landscape. Julie Cruikshank suggests that “[t]he impact of glaciers on regional history lies not simply in their immense physical presence but also in their contributions to social imagination.” The First Nations women that help to coauthor her scholarship understand glaciers as sentient beings, which is reflected in oral narratives in which glaciers are “conscious and responsive to humans,” not as objects for appropriation or exploitation. The understanding of the glacier we find in Curtis’ photograph is meant for the aesthetic commodification of space without relations. Native people and their socialities, the glacier and its own socialities, are both displaced by the conjured fantasy of a sparkling barren icefield. This form of landscape photography is generative of a colonial way that land is perceived, imagined, and related to in ways that are inherently racialized.

Similar to Davidson and Colyer’s reports on Alaska and Alaska Natives, Edward Curtis’ images center and reiterate specific understandings of land and race. However, and perhaps more insidiously,
Curtis’ photography is legible and accessible to a much wider audience than the surveys and reports that were meant to inform federal policy in the management of land and Native peoples. Curtis’ photography allows for a consumption of Alaska that does not need to be translated from geographical coordinates, resource data, or racial taxonomies. Photography allows for an easily metabolized imagining of Alaska as however Curtis wishes to portray it. Yet, Curtis’ methods of documenting flowers and glaciers also reveal the colonial logics at play. For instance, the juxtaposition of domesticated flowers and immense glaciers as producing order and control also informs his visual documentation of the baskets that are pictured in Figure 3.

![Figure 3, “Eskimo Baskets”](image)

The image of the baskets is meant to convey some kind of information about those that made them, as the title “Eskimo Baskets” suggests. This racial referent and image of baskets demonstrates that those who see this image are meant to gain information about “Eskimos”—who they are, what kinds of objects they build, the skill of their craft, the continuance of this craft, etc. When contextualized as placed between images of glaciers, flowers, and other landscape images, this photograph is meant to convey information about how landscape influences Native peoples and their lifestyles. Furthermore, when contextualized with the contemporaneous circulation of Native American objects and belongings in the contiguous U.S., this image illustrates the similarities and differences to American Indian peoples and their handicrafts. Importantly, Alaska Native peoples at the time were not recognized legally as indigenous, but their belongings and perceived identities were still subject to appropriation, theft,
commodification, and misinterpretation by colonial powers and individual settlers. For the image of baskets to convey information about the indigenous peoples who made them, the baskets too must undergo a production of meaning and ordering, like the glacier and the flowers. Much like the glacier and flowers, the baskets are severed from their social context, historical and ongoing relationship with specific groups of Alaska Native peoples that created these baskets, as well as the individual that made each one of these baskets. In Curtis’ photo, the baskets are stacked with a kind of purposeful haphazardness, thrown together in a chaotic bunch, but they are still highlighted as objects of interest. These baskets are, apparently, worthy of a photograph, but are made to blend together in a perceived sameness; the individual craft become a wash of equal, materialized Eskimo labor, open for interpretation and ordering.

In addition, in each of the photographs of the flowers, glacier, and baskets, nonhuman entities are lumped together as nonsocial beings, as not only susceptible to human inscription, indigenous or otherwise, but dependent upon it. Yet, the glacier, the plant, and the material of the baskets are not only a space of colonial (mis)interpretation of Native history, Native claims and use—these entities should be understood as productive on their own and constitutively through the surrounding landscapes and relations. Therefore, landscape scholarship must be complicated in order to think of landscape not simply as “reduced to vegetation,” but to understand ‘vegetation’ itself as an actant in its own form. A similar critique could be levied to rethink the role of objects and matter, imagining a conceptualization other than simply matter taking form through multiple histories of labor, or seeing matter through passive representationalism. Alternatively, as Karen Barad writes, “matter is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification …it does not require the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always already an ongoing historicity.” “The social,” therefore, must be expanded and complicated to look at how nonhuman actors have capacities that are relational to human sociality, but not defined by or reducible to it alone.

As Rebecca Solnit states, part of creating landscape is to reimagine and manage material relations out of the picture. Solnit writes that landscape photographs become “the habitual way of imagining what’s out there,” which is troubling “when their version of the world becomes the limits of our imagination.”
W.J.T. Mitchell similarly posits in “Imperial Landscape” that landscape must represent itself as the antithesis of land, as a poetic property rather than a material one. However, in the context of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, Curtis’ photography ranges from the landscape representations that Solnit and Mitchell problematize to images of colonial settlement and Native domesticities. In each of the figures Alaska is simultaneously represented as ‘poetic’ and ‘material.’ In Curtis’ images of the Alaskan coastline, he works to present an aesthetic imaginary of the landscape, to be sure, but his photography also works to document settlements as they make material changes to the land. The poetic and material properties of landscape-making do not need to be separated. More importantly, Alaska exists in a material way for Alaska Native peoples that inhabit those spaces.

This imperial mode of seeing land confuses the material existence of land and its use by indigenous peoples. Bruce Braun argues that visuality acts as legibility, which renders space claimable and open for incorporation through the translation of “land” into “nature”: “a space that holds no signs of ‘culture’ and therefore can be appropriated into the administrative space of ‘nation.’ For Braun, part of producing spaces of visibility was not to erase indigenous presence from land entirely, but to narrate their relations to land as contained and temporal—not as erased, but displaced. In this way, Native belongings are contained as ‘culture’ in Figure 3 as apart from land and landscape in Figures 1 and 2. This displacement and division creates a monopoly on how land can be related to and understood. In a similar fashion to George Davidson and Vincent Colyer’s reports, along with the more ‘scientific’ documenting that happened cotermiously to Curtis onboard the HAE, questions and concerns around Native peoples in Alaska are reduced and relegated to topics of anthropology, racial and cultural characteristics. The relationships between Native peoples and land, the enduring land tenure and use by Native peoples is displaced by the ordering systems utilized by men like Curtis, Davidson, and Colyer. Although they used differing systems of classification and order, it becomes very clear that concerns of land, landscape, and race are all constitutively generated whether it be through sciences of the earth, aesthetically centered landscape photography, or racially driven surveys that influence juridical status.
Edward Curtis’ photography aims to displace Alaska Native relations from their environments through the spectacle of aesthetic landscape, the freezing and domestication of flowers, landscapes, and belongings, which renders Alaska as territory and as visible, legible, and claimable. Moreover, through these orderings, the role of object and landscape become flattened and reduced as incorporable property, items for sale or for theft, and markers of human difference but not agential beings in their own mode. In Figures 1-3 several details about Alaskan space are made legible for viewers in the ways that portray it as malleable through technologies of order: its enormity is awe inspiring, much of it is seen as uninhabited and empty, and Native presences and their “cultures” can be representationally and spatially compartmentalized. Curtis’ photography then builds upon and co-creates the imaginings of Alaska that depict landscapes as aesthetically pleasing or rich in resource, land and objects as a-social containers for history to unfold, and supports the juridical inequity for Alaska Native peoples that aids ongoing dispossession.52

Conclusion

Edward Curtis’ landscape photography spans beyond the Harriman Alaska Expedition portfolio. A browse through the North American Indian (NAI), which has now been digitized, reveals that landscape photography makes up nearly one-third of Curtis’ images in this, his most well known work. Portraiture, which Curtis is most famous for, makes up less than one-third of the expansive body of work that takes the form of a twelve-part anthology. In the NAI, Curtis attempted to describe 80 tribes west of the Mississippi through salvage ethnographical text and images and was subsidized by Teddy Roosevelt and J.P. Morgan. Scholarship on Edward Curtis, which is extensive, has focused most centrally on his portraiture and problematized his work as part of a colonial project at the turn of the century that strived to document Native peoples and their distinct cultures “before they disappeared.” Curtis’ images were doctored to erase signs of modernity and were also staged so that Native American peoples were pictured as naturally and inevitably, albeit unfortunately, destined to disappear through no fault of the white settler. For the consumers of Curtis’ prints, Native Americans seemed primitive, hopeless, noble, pitiable—and most importantly, their lands appeared as underused and soon to be uninhabited. Considering his
landscape photography, like Figures 1-3, in conjunction with his portraiture, demonstrates the integral connections between meanings ascribed to bodies and those ascribed to land, and thus sheds light on the role of racialization in dispossession. Curtis must be read not only as a portraiture artist, but also as a participant in the management of land as he played an active role in its documentation in conjunction with Native bodies and Native presence. The NAI should therefore be read in the context of human-making, race-making and land-making, and Curtis should be read as an anthropologist and also a natural historian.

In Native American and Indigenous Studies, land and race are central concerns. In that tradition, I focused on land and race in the context of the mid-late 19th century Alaska. I centered Alaska to bring an illustration of the unique racialization of indigenous peoples there, and how race is integral to thinking about indigeneity and land as historically and spatially situated. I traced the terms “land” and “Alaska Native” as they have been made together over time in particular from the time of the Alaska purchase in 1867 to 1899 when the Harriman Alaska Expedition travelled around the coast of Alaska documenting the landscape and the peoples that live(d) there. I argued that land and race are not given, stable categories, but undergo active making through surveys and reports that are geographical, geological, and racializing in nature. These reports and surveys directly inform policy, and in the case of Alaska, reports from Vincent Colyer and George Davidson influenced the legal racialization of Alaska Native peoples as non-Indians but of “Asian descent” from 1876-1931. This sixty-year period of legal indeterminacy significantly shaped the future of Alaska Native politics, and created an unprecedented form of land dispossession in American history. Moreover, I demonstrate how landscape photography taken by Edward Curtis on the expedition is demonstrative of another mode of land and race making through cultural production that is legible and easily accessible to the average American citizen during this time period. In this way, land and race are made not only through data collection and what is considered contained “science,” but are co-constituted. In addition, I pushed the scholarship of landscape and race to accommodate the ways that land and peoples have been formed simultaneously and as ontologically separate. Colonial designations of land as inert, measurable, quantifiable, and aesthetically commoditized as opposed to moving, social entities came about under the same conditions present when peoples were
racialized and ordered by their apparent human differences and distinctions from one another. In this way, land and race must be read as mutually constitutive.
Endnotes

1 John Burroughs and John Muir. Alaska: The Harriman Expedition, 1899. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1986). Quote taken from John Burroughs’ narrative written aboard the Harriman Alaska Expedition. Burroughs goes on to write: “I never succeeded in bringing my eye up to the Alaska scale…forms were so distinct that one fancied them near at hand when they were not” (71).

2 In using the term colonialism I refer to Alyosha Goldstein’s notion of settler colonialism as he outlines it in the edited collection Formations of United States Colonialism. Goldstein offers an analytic of colonialism that is heterogeneous across time and space, and “underlines the complicities, adaptations, and antagonisms that interconnect global, national, regional, and local relations of power” (4). Goldstein builds from previous Native American and Indigenous studies scholars to refuse a progressive teleology of national history that relies on discrete social and political categories such as colonizer, native, and coerced or intentional migrant, which supports a potentiality limited frame of domination and resistance, and temporally relegates indigeneity to a violent past (3).

3 I use the terms indigenous, Native, and Indian interchangeably throughout this paper, but there are important historical differences among these terms, and strategic uses of each. Each term has unique but overlapping genealogies that play out distinctly in varying spatial contexts. Nonetheless each term can be traced back to historical colonial roots of governmental definition and management of Indigenous peoples. When speaking about the space of Alaska specifically, I use the term Alaska Native, and when speaking about indigenous groups in the continental U.S. I use the term American Indian. Alaska is also stratified into three subgroups of Native peoples: Eskimo, Aleut, and Indian, which are determined geographically, but there are also 229 federally recognized tribes in Alaska. When possible, I refer to specific tribal or cultural group. As you’ll see in this chapter, ‘Alaska Native’ as an identifier has an entirely different history than that of American Indian.

4 Kim Tallbear writes in Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science in the tradition of Donna Haraway and other STS feminists like Sheila Jasanoff: “Rather than being discrete categories where one determines the other in a linear model of cause and effect, ‘science’ and ‘society’ are mutually constitutive—meaning one loops back in to reinforce, shape, or disrupt the actions of the other, although it should be understood that, because power is held unevenly, such multidirectional influences do not happen evenly (11).”

5 John Burroughs and John Muir. Alaska: The Harriman Expedition, 1899. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1986). As recorded in John Burroughs’ narrative on board the Harriman Alaska Expedition, their ship sails past the Davidson glacier, named after George Davidson during his time completing the Coast Pilot: “…the Davidson, on our left. It flows out of a deep gorge and almost reaches the inlet. Seen from afar it suggests the side view of a huge white foot with its toe pressing a dark line into the sea” (30).

6 In particular: anti-miscegenation policy, boarding schools, and Jim Crow in Alaska are all examples of explicitly racist aspects of U.S. colonialism targeting Native Americans.

7 See Jodi Byrd’s Transit of Empire, Audra Simpson’s Mohawk Interruptus, Mark Rifkin’s Manifesting America and Beyond Settler Time, as well as works of American Indian literary nationalism that work to trouble the centralization of race in Native American Studies analytics.

8 I refer here to Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” Journal of Genocide Research (2006), 8(4). However, recently there have been multiple scholars who have pushed back on Wolfe’s binary of settler/Native. See essays by Jean O’Brien, Robin Kelley, and J. Kehaulani Kauanui in American Quarterly Volume 69, Number 2.

9 Here I must stress that I am aware that Native peoples have their own understandings, definitions, and histories of what is modernly referred to as “land” and “n/Native.” Often these words do not have literal translations from indigenous languages because they are colonial terms meant to manage and control individuals, groups, and lands. My project here is to track instead how colonial terms “land” and “race”
have been formed in specific spatial contexts under specific colonial conditions that vary locally. In particular, I am interested in how Alaska Natives oscillated between legal definitions of racial subjects and indigenous subjects, and how the land of Alaska was thus constitutively managed.

10 Smithsonian Institution Archives blog: https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/harriman-alaska-expedition.

11 Such narratives were typical of the genre of travel writing that was meant to narrate foreign spaces to a domestic literate population. American travel narratives of Alaska had already been circulating for over a decade, including those by John Muir, which would later become his posthumous publication, *Travels in Alaska*. Settlers, pioneers, surveyors, tourists, and homesteaders had already added to the literary imagination of Alaska since before it was considered a territory—including novelists like Jack London.

12 The theory of “Asian origins” of all Native American peoples is more modernly known as the Beringia Land Bridge Theory. However, in this context, the geographical proximity of Alaska to “Asia” apparently renders Alaska Natives racially distinct from American Indians. According to the theory American Indians may have crossed the land bridge, but are understood as “less migrant” and more historically situated in a geographically distant location further from “Asia.” The Land Bridge was originally imagined in 1590 by Jose de Acosta, but standardized in the 1930’s by Swedish botanist and geographer Eric Hultén.

13 Of particular interest for scholars has been the map drawn by Kohklux, also known as Shotridge, and his wives (who go unnamed), for George Davidson in 1869 during a subsequent trip to Alaska to view the solar eclipse. Kohklux was from Klukwan and helped Davidson navigate the Chilkat trade routes in Southeast Alaska that spanned into the Yukon. Davidson traded this map for a painting of the solar eclipse.

14 These original Coast Pilot surveys would eventually become what is now known as NOAA.

15 Dall was also responsible for creating a map in 1875 for the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Distribution of Tribes of Alaska and Adjoining Territory, in which he maps onto George Davidson’s geographical positionings from 1867 and 1869 the families of languages of Alaska Native peoples.

16 These are only a few surveys among the many that have been generated about Alaska as an American space—there are dozens of reports, charts, maps, and surveys that work to document Alaska as an Arctic zone, a part of the Pacific, an extension of Russia/Asia.

17 Unlike federal Indian policy in the contiguous U.S., Alaska was not subject to the reservationization of the state, aside from one reservation in Metlakatla. This history I cannot attend to fully here, but the lack of reservations was a purposeful mixture of Alaska Native responses, and federal legislation that reflected the government’s wish to see Alaska Native people as something other than landed peoples like American Indians.

18 In particular see Lewis Henry Morgan, and Franz Boas among others.

19 The term “Orarian” was coined by William Dall, contributor to the *Coast Pilot* and participant on the Harriman Alaska Expedition, in his book *Alaska and its Resources* in 1870.

20 See in particular, Mae Ngai’s *Impossible Subjects* for a sophisticated historical contextualization of nation-making through exclusionary practices. Applicable for the turn of the century citizenship and subject making is also Beth Piatote’s *Domestic Subjects*.


25 Walker again stated that “I have never believed that the natives of Alaska were Indians within the meaning of the Constitution…and I am disposed to avoid entirely the use of the word Indians as applied
to them,” meaning that unlike Indian peoples of the continent, who were apparently undoubtedly Indian, Alaska Natives were unworthy of government-to-government interface. Quoted in Anthony and Sally Urvina, *More than God Demands: Politics and Influence of Christian Missions in Northwest Alaska 1897-1918* by Anthony and Sally Urvina, 2016.

20 Photography was incorporated into anthropological regimes of tracking human difference as early as the 1880’s, see Fatimah Rony’s, *The Third Eye*.

21 Curtis’ studio in Seattle was made for this very purpose: taking portraits of and for middle class individuals.


26 See Denis Cosgrove’s works.

27 See works by Kenneth Olwig.

28 One copy of the HAE souvenir is located in the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley.

29 Shamoon Zamir, *The Gift of the Face*, 34.

30 I refer here to the naming of the “College Fiord” that holds glaciers by the names of Harvard, Yale, Vassar, Columbia, Bryn Mawr, Amherst, Smith, and Wellesley. The names of women’s Ivy League colleges were bestowed upon one side of the landmass, and the names of men’s Ivy League colleges were dedicated to the other. See *Looking Far North* by William Goetzmann and Kay Sloan for a full account.

31 This characterization was originally formulated by Karl Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae*, published in 1735. *Systema* is a watershed text for imagining and concretizing a system of classification of natural history for the everyman, a transformation from the hyper-violent militaristic forms of imperial domination of nature to a seemingly benevolent non-professional pseudoscientific enjoyment of the natural through systematic ordering and naming.


34 See Michael Robinson’s *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Robinson writes: “Arctic voyages thrilled…millions paid admission to see explorers narrate their journeys at public lectures, world’s fairs, museums…glittering hummocks became the setting of American stories, its bays and capes entered the American vernacular” (3).


36 Ibid, 8.

37 Dr. Carolyn Smith’s dissertation on California Indian Baskets provides a brilliant example of the depth and intricacies of Indigenous materialisms.

38 See Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory.

47 I gesture here to Eduardo Kohn’s work How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human (University of California Press, 2013). Kohn’s book questions not that ‘do they think?’, but states of course they think, but how?
48 Rebecca Solnit, “The Limits of Landscape.”
51 Ibid, 17.
52 In my readings above I have chosen to center landscape photography in order to highlight a form that goes nearly entirely under-analyzed. I realize that in doing so I have ended this paper in such a way that may reinscribe the violence of “emptied landscapes”, but this strategy is intended to push Curtis’ landscape images into view.