

We Are Still Here by Camille Seaman

Most of us have seen the photographic works Edward Curtis made during the early part of the 20th century. In 1906, he received \$75,000 from JP Morgan to produce a series on North American Native Americans. The unspoken subtext: indigenous Americans were a disappearing race, and thus important to document. It was only a matter of time before they would all be culturally and/or physically extinct.

Just over one hundred years later, the history, politics, and experience that comprise Native identity are as controversial as ever. Not one treaty made between indigenous peoples and the U.S. government was ever honored. Each one was amended and altered, and sometimes outright revoked. Stereotypes remind us that there are multitudes of problems and indigenous populations have high rates of suicide, poverty, violence, and addiction. If we are to become the country we say we are, there are many past hurts that need acknowledgment, many injustices that require resolution.

Neither a history of injustice nor stereotypes tell the whole story. There is also resilience, strength, beauty, and self-defining identity. The Indigenous Rising and Idle No More movements have signaled a new phase in Native consciousness, not only as Americans but as citizens of this planet. In this critical time of climate change, native voices are resounding with wisdom and perspective about the importance of honoring and protecting our planet.

As a child, I knew I was different from the other children at school, but I could not articulate what that difference was. I was troubled when the textbooks we read spoke about Natives in the past tense—always implying that we no longer existed.

We are still here.

That's why now, in the 21st century, I am setting out to make a new record. It's time for us to tell our own stories of who we are and what is important to us. Why portraiture? I am interested in one powerful aspect of the process. I make a portrait as a message to the future—as a statement about who my subjects are in this moment. I ask, just before I press the shutter: "What, through this image, would you like your descendants to know about you, your life—your experience?" With this question, something happens: a gravitas, a moment worthy of recording.

When you see these portraits, you may find we no longer look like you think we ought to. But that doesn't mean we are not here. It's time for a new record of Native America.