Healing Through the Photographic Murals of James "Chip" "Jetsonorama" Thomas

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HEALING THROUGH THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MURALS OF JAMES “CHIP” “JETSONORMA” THOMAS

by

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B.A., ART HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2017

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ABSTRACT

James “Chip” “Jetsonorama” Thomas is an Indian Health Services physician who moved to the Navajo Nation in 1987. Although he is not culturally Native American, Thomas depicts Navajo in large-scale black and white photographic murals. His work has been discussed in online articles and books about street art in terms of their relationship to street art, specifically the art of JR, as well as their role as activist art on the Navajo Nation. There has been a lack of substantial research, though, into the way in which his photographic murals respond to or engage with nineteenth and twentieth-century photographs of Native Americans that were utilized to substantiate the erasure of Native American peoples and culture fueled by Anglo-American imperialism. In this thesis, I explore this and another important context for his murals, the work of contemporary Navajo photographers.

I examine the ways in which Thomas’ murals act as an extension of his medical practice on the Navajo Nation by discussing issues such as uranium mining and its health effects and the protection of sacred sites. Unlike nineteenth and twentieth-century
photographic depictions of Navajo that sought to present them as a “vanishing race,”
Thomas’ murals are intended to represent the persistence of Diné. It is instead, his murals
that are ephemeral and disappear over time as they alter with the surrounding landscape.
His murals are predominantly placed on and around the Navajo reservation so that his
images are shared with the people who originally allowed him to photograph them.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures .........................................................................................................................vi

Introduction ..............................................................................................................................1

   Literature Review ................................................................................................................6
   Methodology .....................................................................................................................10

Chapter One: Chip Thomas’ Photographic Work and Role as an Author .............21

   Photographic Work .........................................................................................................22
   Wheatpasting and Street Art .........................................................................................24
   Photographic Murals .....................................................................................................30
   What is Healing and Community? .............................................................................35
   Challenging Concepts of Authenticity and Authorship ..............................................46

Chapter Two: The Medium of Photography .................................................................51

   Photography ....................................................................................................................52
   Thomas and Anthropological Photography ................................................................58
   Thomas in the Context of Contemporary Navajo Photographers ..........................74

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................83

References ..........................................................................................................................88

Figures ..................................................................................................................................97
List of Figures

Figure 1, 1.1, 1.2, 1.3. Chip Thomas, *Triptych*, 2019.

Figure 2, 2.1. Chip Thomas, *Untitled*, 2017, courtesy of flagstaffartscouncil.org.


Figure 7. Chip Thomas, *Welcome to Diabetes Country*, courtesy of justseeds.org/chip-thomas-interviewed-by-chris-stain/.

Figure 8, 8.1, 8.2. JR, *Women are Heroes*, 2008-2009, courtesy of jr-art.net.

Figure 9. Chip Thomas, *Navajo Jewelry*, 2009, courtesy of Chip Thomas, jetsonorama.net/portfolio.

Figure 10. Chip Thomas, *Navajo Code Talkers*, 2009, courtesy of Chip Thomas, jetsonorama.net/portfolio.

Figure 11, 11.1. Chip Thomas, *Vivian and Erica*, 2011, courtesy of Chip Thomas, jetsonorama.net.

Figure 12, 12.1, 12.2, 12.3. Chip Thomas, *Green Room*, 2019.
Figure 13. Chip Thomas, *John, Sam, and Steph*, 2011, courtesy of Chip Thomas, jetsonorama.net/portfolio.

Figure 14. Chip Thomas, *Native Pride*, 2013, courtesy of Chip Thomas, jetsonorama.net/portfolio.

Figure 15. Chip Thomas, interior of a market stand off of Highway 89, 2019.

Figure 16. *Certificate of Native American Authenticity*, 2019.

Figure 17. John K. Hillers, *A rich Navajo*, ca. 1879, courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, NAA BAE Neg. No. 2419.

Figure 18. John K. Hillers, *Hedipa, a Navajo Woman*, 1894, albumen silver print, courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1994.91.76.


Figure 20. Timothy H. O’Sullivan, *Witches Rocks*, 1869, courtesy of UNM Bunting Library Digital Image Collection, 51376.


Figure 22. Edward Curtis, *The Vanishing Race, Navaho*, 1904, platinum print, courtesy of Clark Art Institute.clarkart.edu, 1998.8.

Figure 23. Joseph Kossuth Dixon, *Sunset of a Dying Race*, after 1908, courtesy of a negative from National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 24. Laura Gilpin, *Navaho Woman*, 1932, Gelatin silver print, courtesy of Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Bequest of the artist,
Figure 25. Laura Gilpin, Navaho Silversmith, 1939, courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-36127.

Figure 26. Will Wilson, Zig Jackson, Citizen of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, Professor of Photography, Savannah College of Art and Design, CIPX, 2012, courtesy of willwilson.photoshelter.com.

Figure 27. Will Wilson, Barbara Tyner, CIPX, 2013, courtesy of willwilson.photoshelter.com.

Figure 28. Will Wilson, Andy Everson, a Citizen of the K’ómokos First Nation, CIPX, 2018, courtesy of nationalgeographic.com.

Figure 29. Don James Jr., March 2, 2008 5:44 PM, from One Nation, One Year: A Navajo Photographer’s 365-day Journey into a World of Discovery, Life, and Hope, 2008.

Figure 30. Don James Jr., September 29, 2008 4:29 PM, from One Nation, One Year: A Navajo Photographer’s 365-day Journey into a World of Discovery, Life, and Hope, 2008.

Figure 31. Don James Jr., February 29, 2008 3:56 PM, from One Nation, One Year: A Navajo Photographer’s 365-day Journey into a World of Discovery, Life, and Hope, 2008.
Introduction

During the summer of 2019, I travelled to Flagstaff, Arizona and experienced the photographic murals of James “Chip” Thomas whose work I was introduced to in 2017, when I took my first art history course on muralism. In the class, I developed an interest in the ways in which contemporary muralism or public art responded or connected to larger art historical contexts. Physician and artist James “Chip” Thomas was one of the guest lecturers who visited the class to discuss his work. Researching his murals further, I found that most authors described his artistic process as an extension of his healing practice, but no author discussed his work in relation to the larger history of the photography of Native Americans to the photography of contemporary Native American artists.

Many of Thomas’ murals are on the sides of buildings along Highway 89 between Flagstaff and Tuba City on the land of the Navajo Nation, where Thomas resides. Although I had done some research before going to Arizona to have an idea where some of the pieces would be, I had to keep my eyes peeled so that I would not miss a single work. The first piece that I visited was on the front of a salmon colored abandoned building that had three images pasted on the façade (Figure 1). Beginning from the left, the first image is of a woman, Nez Begody Bancroft, getting her hair brushed by her granddaughter, Ana (Figure 1.1). Nez sits in the foreground with her eyes closed while Ana leans over her left shoulder with her right arm extended behind her as she holds a hairbrush. Despite being pasted on the side of a public building on a busy highway, the image reads as a record of an intimate and personal moment. The central image is pasted over the door of the building, and it depicts a cornstalk in front of a white sheet held up
by someone hidden from view by the sheet they are holding (Figure 1.2). The third image is of a woman, Lula, pouring water into a bowl for a kid at the sheep corral (Figure 1.3). Alongside the images was a wicker chair and a stool with written notes from previous visitors underneath the feet of the chairs, thanking Thomas for his art. As I travelled along Highway 89, searching for Thomas’ murals, I recognized that although they are public works of art on the side of a major road traveled by tourists to reach the Grand Canyon, the images are meant specifically for audiences who travel the road frequently and know that the murals are there. Even knowing where I would find some of the specific works, I had to travel the highway multiple times over two days to find each of the murals between Flagstaff and Tuba City. It was a rewarding and moving experience, and my research would not have been possible without such a direct, personal engagement with the work.

In this thesis, I examine the way in which James “Chip” Thomas, who uses the artistic pseudonym Jetsonorama, looks to extend his medical practice into the landscape through his photographic murals, engaging through his work with issues such as uranium mining and the protection of sacred sites as well as trying to present the strength of the Navajo culture. In order to understand his practice better, I situate his work within the broader history of the photography of Native Americans and in relation to the photography of Native American artists. While Thomas creates murals throughout the Southwest, I will focus on the murals that either feature Diné subjects or have been

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1 I identify the subjects who are present in the photographs using the captions from Thomas’ Instagram account.
2 The terms Diné and Navajo are often used interchangeably. Diné translates to “the People” and is the term that many Navajos use to identify themselves, however, Diné and Navajo are terms that are often used interchangeably as personal identifiers. In their text, The Navaho (1974),
realized on the Navajo Nation. This allows me to situate his work in the larger historical context of ethnographic photographs and the narratives these crafted about Navajo. My approach blends an interview I conducted with Thomas with information from articles addressing his work and scholarship on the broader history of photography, specifically material dealing with anthropological and ethnographic photographs.

Chip Thomas/Jetsonorama, is both a doctor and a street artist who is not Native American. Originally from North Carolina, Thomas, who is African American, moved to the Navajo Nation in 1987 to work as an Indian Health Services Physician. Before his move to the Navajo Nation, Thomas was a photographer, but increased his level of seriousness regarding photography in 1991 after he was encouraged by “documentary photographer Eugene Richards” “to take advantage of his location” and to use his photographs to connect with the Navajo community outside of his medical practice. Thomas explains that due to his artistic background in documentary photography, he has an interest in people and their stories, resulting in his interest in photographing people.

Clyde Kluckholm and Dorothea Leighton explain that the name, Navajo, comes from the late 18th century via the Spanish Apaches de Navajó which was derived from the Tewa word navahû. Although, the identifier, Navajo, was given to the Diné, they have adopted it as can be seen on the official website of the Navajo Nation: www.navajo-nsn.gov/index.htm. Throughout my thesis, I will use both terms—Diné and Navajo (in some cases with the spelling Navaho if labeled as such in the scholarship I refer to). Ruth B. Phillips explains that naming is an active tense of identity and the trading identities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “the act of naming presents a conundrum” (xvi). Like Phillips in the text Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900 (1998), I use both terms interchangeably out of respect of the Navajo and in order to preserve the “coloration of texts” (xvi).

After moving to the Navajo Nation, he began taking black and white photographs of people on the reservation.

He eventually moved from photography to street art and began wheatpasting photographs anonymously under the tag name, Jetsonorama.6 Inspired by the work of street and graffiti artists, Thomas began using his photographs to create public art around the Navajo Reservation. These works, undertaken beginning in 2009, featured photographic depictions of local people on the sides of “wooden market stands where the Navajo sell their crafts…to tourists.”7 His later work became increasingly focused on discussing health and land issues.

This thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter is devoted to exploring Thomas’ earlier photographic work. I examine the documentary photographs of people in his community that Thomas began taking soon after moving to the Navajo Nation. After a trip to Brazil in 2009, Thomas began to paste large-scale reproductions of his photographic work around the Navajo Nation in the style of street artist JR, whose work Thomas saw and admired in Brazil. The transition from small-scale, intimate photographs to large-scale photographic murals around the Navajo Nation introduces Thomas’ work to a larger audience within Thomas’ own community, as well as addressing tourists and people who encountered his images. In chapter one, I also analyze the subjects that Thomas chooses to depict. Thomas views his photographic murals as an extension of his healing practice and a means of community formation. He engages with issues such as uranium mining, which has affected many of his patients. In many of his works, he

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6 Ibid.
strives to present the strength of Navajo culture. Many of Thomas’ photographic murals, though, portray nostalgic, positive imagery as a means of countering racist stereotypes of Native Americans stemming from theories of the “vanishing Indian” that were perpetuated by salvage ethnography and photography in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Chapter two focuses on how Thomas’ photographic murals compare and relate to anthropological and ethnographic photographs of Navajo taken by non-Native American photographers such as John K. Hillers and Laura Gilpin. Nineteenth and twentieth century photographs of Native Americans were meant to represent typologies as well as create a record of a supposed “vanishing” race. Although Thomas’ photographs are similar to these earlier photographs in his use of black and white photography and nostalgic imagery, the ephemeral nature and display of Thomas’ work in the community in which he photographs, demonstrates his care to create predominantly for the people he photographs rather than outside institutions or groups. In the second chapter, I also compare Thomas’ photographic murals to the photographs of contemporary Navajo photographers, Don James and Will Wilson. James’ photographic endeavor is best seen in his photographic book, One Nation, One Year: A Navajo Photographer’s 365-Day Journey into a World of Discovery, Life and Hope which has color photographs with short explanations of the images. The photographs in One Nation, One Year are meant to depict the daily lives of Navajo and counter earlier photographs—like those of Hillers and Gilpin—that depicted Diné as frozen in time. Wilson, on the other hand, utilizes the language of nineteenth and twentieth-century anthropological photographs with his studio portraits to spur discussion and reflection of Native Americans and photography.
Thomas, James, and Wilson have various aims that they wish to achieve with their photographic work. Despite these differences, the three artists take the technology and medium of photography and adapt it to create new ways to depict contemporary Native American life and encourage a dialog within the larger context of photography.

**Literature Review**

The majority of the literature that discusses Thomas and his photographic murals exist as either online articles or interviews or as short excerpts in larger surveys about printmaking and street art. Although these are helpful in providing background information about Thomas, his artistic practice and intent, and the way in which his work relates to public or community, none of these texts critically analyze Thomas’ work. All the currently published articles about him lack an in-depth analysis of the imagery that Thomas chooses to employ or any discussion of how Thomas’ photographic murals relate to other forms of photographic imagery. Additionally, existing literature about Thomas and his work lack an analysis of how his murals actually function and what they accomplish. Articles that focus on Thomas typically discuss his background, including addressing where he is from, his education, why he moved to the Navajo Nation, and how he became interested in photography and street art.

In her article, “Jetsonorama Creates Social Justice-Minded Murals on the Rez,” Nicole Rupersburg provides a succinct synopsis of Thomas’ background, beginning with his travel from North Carolina to Arizona in 1987 “as part of a four-year obligation to work in a health shortage area for medical school” and his developing interest in
photography and street art. Various authors briefly mention that Thomas attended a Quaker Junior High School, but Amelia Rina’s interview with Thomas connects the way in which his time at the school influenced Thomas’ artistic practice. Rina explains that the “early exposure to pacifist thinking stayed with [Thomas] through his years in medical school, punctuated by trips to New York City to experience the ‘80’s street-art scene, and his eventual medical residency on the Navajo Nation.” When asked about his artistic practice, Thomas also explains that his experience at the Quaker institution stressed a focus on a “consistency of not only belief but of action” in “one’s work and in one’s politics” as well as a spiritual practice. His educational background, therefore, deeply influences his photographic practice.

In addition to providing background information about Thomas, many of the online articles and scholarship about Thomas discuss his artistic process including the media he uses and his artistic intent. Thomas is a self-taught photographer and “developed a darkroom photography practice” while maintaining his medical practice. His photographic practice changed following his visit to Brazil in the mid-2000s, after he saw the work of JR. Following his visit to Brazil, Thomas began posting his

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
photographic images as posters around the Navajo reservation using wheatpaste.\textsuperscript{16} He later enlarged his photographic images “into two-by-two-foot tiles, cutting them out on his kitchen floor, and installing them, strip by strip, onto the sides of buildings, water towers, and fences.”\textsuperscript{17} Rafael Schacter explains that with his photographic murals that Thomas pasted around the reservation, “Thomas wanted to illustrate the hope that existed across the reservation and counter the...overly melancholic photography taken of the Navajo people” through the projection of “‘positive imagery.’”\textsuperscript{18} Although Thomas’ work is viewed by a number of tourists who pass through between Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon, Thomas sees his work “as a conversation with the people here on the reservation.”\textsuperscript{19} Thomas says that his ultimate goal “is to create an environment of wellness within the community.”\textsuperscript{20} His artistic practice is deeply tied to street art and graffiti art as well as photography.

Although Thomas’ work is predominantly related to photography, his intervention into the landscape through the public display of his large-scale photographs connects his work to the genres of street art, graffiti art, and muralism. A large number of articles on Thomas discuss the way in which he was influenced by the hip-hop movement and graffiti in New York, so that he carried a similar spirit with him when he moved to the reservation in the 1980s, including through an initial interest in anonymity.\textsuperscript{21} Prior to unveiling himself as Jetsonorama, Thomas anonymously posted his work around the

\begin{flushright}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Brandon Specktor, “Dr. Chip Thomas’ Incredible Attempt to Heal Through Art,” \textit{Reader’s Digest}, https://www.rd.com/culture/dr-chip-thomas-art/.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Schacter, \textit{The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti}, 57.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Rina, “Putting Interiors on Exteriors: Chip Thomas Interviewed by Amelia Rina.”
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Schacter, \textit{The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti}, 57.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
reservation. In his article “Recap of an Epic Week: Chip Thomas Visits Milwaukee,” however, Nicolas Lampert supplies an insightful discussion about the way in which Thomas’ work differs from other examples of street art. Lampert explains that street art is prevalent in urban areas and that Thomas adopts the aesthetics of street art and pastes his work in rural landscapes. In addition to his own artistic practice of pasting his photographic murals on the Navajo Nation, Thomas pursues his Painted Desert Project, through which he invites street artists to the reservation to create public art that addresses “environmental justice issues that deeply impact the Navajo Nation.” In his own work as well as his Painted Desert Project, Thomas’ artistic practice emphasizes collaboration which is an integral part of street art.

The existing scholarship provides a basis for further research. However, there is little to no engagement in the way in which Thomas’ photographs respond to or differ from other kinds of photographs of Native Americans. Schacter’s excerpt on Thomas’ work briefly mentions that Thomas’ murals are meant to “counter the usual self-fulfilling, overly melancholic photography taken of the Navajo people.” It can be inferred that the photographs that Thomas’ photographs are countering are anthropological images that were archived and often “utilized for the political purposes of maintaining hierarchies of peoples, races, ethnicities, and sexes in the production of a proscriptive ideal of an American identity.” There is no thorough analysis, though, of the imagery that Thomas

22 Lampert, “Recap of an Epic Week: Chip Thomas Visits Milwaukee.”
chooses to depict and how his images compare to earlier photographs. Upon reviewing the literature, it is clear that there is also a lack of discussion about Thomas’ work in comparison to contemporary photographers who belong to the Navajo Nation and take Navajo people as their primary subject.

Thomas’ work is often placed in context with other street artists and muralists as well as photographers who he has been influenced by, but none of the authors have connected Thomas’ photographic murals to the photography of artists like James and Wilson. Each photographer engages with photography in different ways and with various intents, but they each photograph individuals who are Diné. Thomas’ work exists alongside that of James and Wilson, though he is not directly influenced by their work. I will draw on the existing scholarship on Thomas and his photographic work along with art historical methodological and theoretical frameworks of authorship, social activist art, and critical race theory to situate better his work within a wider history of photography.

Methodology

Throughout my thesis, I incorporate several art historical methods, theories, and texts to contextualize Thomas’ photographic murals. I employ three primary methodological and theoretical frameworks to analyze Thomas’ murals and the way in which they function in the spaces in which Thomas chooses to display them: authorship, relational art, and critical race theory. Although my discussions throughout Chapter One and Chapter Two incorporate these ideas, I feel that it is necessary to elaborate on each framework and situate Thomas’ work in relation to each of them.
Since Thomas’ photographic work on the Navajo Nation can be analyzed within the theoretical frameworks of authorship, relational art, and critical race theory, in this section, I am going to look at his mural, *Untitled* (Figure 2 and 2.1) from the exhibition, “Hope and Trauma in a Poisoned Land: The Impact of Uranium Mining on Navajo Lands,” to elaborate a discussion of each of the methodological approaches. *Untitled* served as an advertisement for the exhibition, “Hope and Trauma in a Poisoned Land,” in Flagstaff.26 “Hope and Trauma in a Poisoned Land” “explore[d] the impact of uranium mining on Navajo lands and people.”27 The mural is an image of Cyndy Begay holding an image of her father Kee Roy John who was a “uranium miner on the Navajo Nation who died of a uranium-related cancer.”28 Around the edge of the photograph written by hand, is a message that says “Dad—working in the Slick Rock mine to provide for his family” at the top and “during the cold war—Early 1960’s” at the bottom. Four neon green atomic symbols are placed within the photograph being held. On the left of the mural, is the exhibition title as well as the logo for the Coconino Center for the Arts, the location—Flagstaff, AZ—, and the dates for the exhibition.

To examine the notion of authorship as it pertains to Native American art and culture, I rely on the work of Shelly Errington and W. Jackson Rushing III. Errington analyzes the notion of authenticity and artwork that has been categorized as “authentic primitive art.” She explains that “discourses of ’authenticity’ and ‘the primitive’ were...
made possible by the metanarrative of progress,“29 which viewed “colonialists, of the market, and therefore of history” as the death or reason for the decline of authenticity in indigenous art. To guarantee the supposed authenticity of an object, it is “transferred from the object to the author.”30 Therefore, the creator or author of an object must be culturally Native American for it to be considered authentic. The idea of authenticity, Errington, explains is tied to the “politics of cultural identity” and the control of the market of authentic Native American objects and “who therefore speaks legitimately through these creations as a voice of Indian identity.”31 While Errington explains that the idea of authenticity has been applied to the author rather than the artwork or object as it pertains to indigenous art, the question of where authenticity and authorship reside as it pertains to the photography of Native Americans by non-Native photographers like Edward Curtis or Thomas remains. In his short article, “Native Authorship in Edward Curtis’s ‘Master Prints,’” Rushing acknowledges the fact that Curtis has been criticized for removing “signs of dislocation, assimilation, and modernity” from his photographs of Native Americans.32 Rushing argues, though, that the Native Americans who were photographed by Curtis share authorship with Curtis due to them actively sharing their culture and allowing Curtis to photograph them.33

Like Curtis, Thomas shares authorship with the people who allow him to photograph them. *Untitled* is attributable to Thomas, there is no sign of authorship

30 Ibid, 141.
31 Ibid, 144.
33 Ibid, 62-63.
present in the work itself in the form of a signature or tag. In many of Thomas’ murals, there are multiple authors or collaborators. *Untitled* represents a collaborative or shared authorship between Thomas, Begaye, and the original photographer of the photograph that Begaye holds. Thomas is the author of the photographic mural as he photographs Begaye holding the image of her father. Begaye is a collaborative author as she writes about her father on the edge of the photograph and she allows Thomas to tell her family’s story. There is another layer of collaborative authorship between Begaye’s father and the person who captured the original image. This multi-layered authorship role, may transfer the idea of the authentic from the object to the authors, like Errington suggests, but Thomas does not strive to depict an “authentic” representation of Navajo experience, but rather his own experience living and working on the Navajo reservation.

Thomas’ photographic murals on and about the Navajo Nation, are deeply tied to a specific site and working with a specific community. I approach this aspect of Thomas’ work from the perspectives of Miwon Kwon, George Baker, and Claire Bishop. In her text, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Kwon discusses the history of site-specific art and analyzes specific cases. She explains that “site-specific work in its earliest formation…focused on establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site, and demanded the physical presence of the viewer for the work’s completion.”³⁴ Site-specific art has also become increasingly more about the process rather than the object that is created so that the “specific relationship between an artwork and its site is not based on a physical permanence of that

³⁴ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002), 11-12.
relationship…but rather on the recognition of its unfixed impermanence.”

Rather than thinking of a site as a physical place, Kwon writes that conceiving a site “as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, [or] a disenfranchised social group” “is an important conceptual leap in redefining the public role of art and artists.” Therefore, site-specific art has evolved from the 1960s and 70s, by not only emphasizing the importance of the process rather than the object along with the importance of the viewer in completing the work but also has removed the physical place of a site to encompass larger ideological frameworks. *Untitled* represents both the physical and conceptual notion of a site as Thomas speaks specifically about the impact of uranium mining on Navajo lands both off and on Navajo land—Thomas also pasted *Untitled* on the side of a billboard off of Highway 89, near Gray Mountain, Arizona (Figure 2.1).

This notion of a site being a concept, or an idea rather than a physical manifestation of a place is furthered by Baker in his article, “Photography’s Expanded Field.” Baker argues that photography is an ever-expanding field that requires continued investigation to map the changes. He explains that the medium of photography, though still used by artists, seems to be “an insufficient bridge to other, more compelling forms.” Baker writes that “we are dealing, in other words, with the question of meaning and its construction in photographic terms.” Thomas’ photographic images are representations of the expansion of the medium of photography into public, site-specific murals which rely on its environment, audience, and various interventions in the images

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36 Ibid, 30.
37 George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October*, vol. 114 (Fall, 2005), 123.
38 Ibid, 127.
themselves (e.g. text and other images added to the photographs) to further construct meaning. An example of this, looking at *Untitled*, is the way in which audiences interpret what the “impact” of uranium mining on Navajo lands is from the image itself. Thomas’ focus on Begaye and her father demonstrates that he is not only speaking about the impact uranium mining has had on people’s health but also portraying the personal cost of uranium mining.

In her article, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” Bishop explains that “relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience” and that “moreover, this audience is envisaged as a community: rather than a one-to-one relationship between the art and viewer.”39 She also explains that the “tasks facing us today are to analyze how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the quality of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.”40 Thomas expands the medium of photography by enlarging small photographs and in the case of *Untitled*, enlarging two smaller images, and placing them on the side of a building. The public display of his photographs is relational to the sites he chooses—predominantly on the Navajo Nation, but throughout Arizona—and his audience who may be Navajo or non-Native. It is apparent, due to the nature of his work, that his photographic murals relate to the sites he chooses to display and his audience, however, what I am expanding on is how his works speak to a larger community and better defining what that community might be.

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40 Ibid, 78.
Public art, specifically muralism and street art are often considered as representations of a specific community due to their relationship with the site that they are placed. Jill Chonody states in her chapter, “Painted on the Wall: How Street and Mural Art Can Be Transformative” that public art accomplishes a myriad of goals “including communication of political/social discontent, representation of the community, a point in history, and as a therapeutic outlet.”\textsuperscript{41} Thomas is often discussed as a community artist in that he “employs photography, text, and graffiti to communicate messages that reflects the pulse of his community where he operates as both an insider and outsider.”\textsuperscript{42} The term “community,” though, in the discourse of public art often is used interchangeably with other terms like “’audience, ‘site,’ and ‘public.’”\textsuperscript{43} It is then imperative to determine what creates or forms a community, whether it be culture, a place, common beliefs, etc. Critiques of community-based art are often that it can “easily obscure the effects of the broader socioeconomic, political, and cultural forces” by producing “’empowering’ and ‘spiritually uplifting’ community (self-) portraits.”\textsuperscript{44} Due to the pitfalls of community-based art, Kwon believes that there needs to be the idea of the community needs to be reconceptualized and evaluated. In the subsequent chapters, I will break down the concept of the “community” that Thomas communicates with to better situate his work within the context of the places and people he represents.

\textsuperscript{42} Lampert, “Recap of an Epic Week: Chip Thomas Visits Milwaukee.”
\textsuperscript{43} Kwon, One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity, 94.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 143.
In the case of *Untitled*, Thomas speaks to a community of people on the Navajo reservation who are personally impacted by uranium mining. As a physician who works for IHS, Thomas treats patients who have been affected by uranium mining. In their article, “The Ethical Issues in Uranium Mining Research in the Navajo Nation,” Bindu Panikkar and Doug Brugge note that “the Navajo lands became one of the prime targets for mining, contributing thirteen million tons of uranium ore to military use from 1945 to 1988.”\(^45\) In the mid-1950s, uranium mining “became a flourishing occupation for many Navajo men”\(^46\) and it is estimated that out of 10,000 miners who were employed at that time, “approximately 3,000 were Navajo.”\(^47\) There are a number of health issues related to mining uranium including lung cancer, but the full “extent of health threats to the [Navajo] community, those exposed to…unreclaimed [mines] and who drink contaminated water, is unknown.”\(^48\) With his photographic murals, Thomas speaks specifically to the people who he works with and knows personally, but, at the same time, his audience extends past his community because of the public nature of his work and his use of social media sites like Instagram.

I also draw from critical race theory in order to articulate the role that photography played in the United States of depicting categories of race and the relational nature of difference to place Thomas’ photographic work in relation to earlier photographers who were not Native American who utilized the medium to produce categories and concepts of race. In “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of


\(^{46}\) Ibid, 123.

\(^{47}\) Ibid, 121.

\(^{48}\) Ibid, 122.
America,” Barbara Jeanne Fields asserts that race is an ideology that “came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons” to exclude some people from the ideology of freedom that was viewed as natural law. Fields argues that the ideology of race is not inherited or passed down but rather repeated and created through repetition and action. Though race as an ideology or construct is not a material object in and of itself, the repetition of race is produced through creating and distributing controlling images. Patricia Hill Collins discusses controlling images in regard to African American women, in “Mammies, Matriarch, and Other Controlling Images.” Collins explains that the portrayal of African American women as “stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mammas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women’s oppression.” The repetition of stereotypes regarding African American women reaffirms and continues the ideology of race in the same way that photography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced race. The text, Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self was helpful to examine the role that photography played in the continuation of the ideology of race. In her opening chapter, Coco Fusco explains that the premise of the text and the related exhibition is that “photography produced race as a visualizable fact” rather than “recording the existence of race.” I will expand on this

50 Ibid, 117.
idea as it relates to the photography of Native American peoples in Chapter Two by analyzing how these photographs produced a visual image of a Native American race or type.

The notion of difference and its relational nature is also helpful in analyzing the ways in which indigenous people were represented in opposition to American settlers. In her article “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” Elsa Barkley Brown explains that the problem facing historians to understand difference is that it is assumed that, in regards to women’s history, it is believed that women have the same gender, “despite race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other differences.”53 However, Brown argues that difference is relational and that difference is often lived at the expense of others.54 Like Brown, Cornel West explains in his article, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” that in the practice of the new cultural politics of difference, “diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity” are promoted rather than unifying notion of difference.55 I will draw from Brown and West’s ideas of difference as relational in order to critically examine the photographic works of John K. Hillers, Timothy H. O’Sullivan, Edward Curtis, and Laura Gilpin. Therefore, allowing me to analyze how Thomas compares and contrasts to these earlier photographers.

*Untitled* represents Thomas’ efforts depart from earlier photographs that sought to represent racial types and hide evidence of Native resistance. Thomas does not produce or reproduce Native American racial types in his photographic murals. He works with the

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54 Ibid.
people he photographs, like Begaye for *Untitled*, to create images that depict them the way they would like to be portrayed. Unlike Hillers and Gilpin who hid any representations of Native resistance or discontent in their photographs, Thomas uses the medium to publicly display the personal cost and impact that uranium mining has had on the health of the Navajo to resist the mining of uranium on Navajo land doing so on their own terms.

By combining the existing literature about Thomas along with theoretical frameworks and a personal interview, I am attempting to situate Thomas’ work within a larger social and historical context of visual representations of the ideology of race. It is not enough to discuss Thomas’ artistic intentions—though it is integral to his work. Rather, I hope to build on his artistic intention of healing and communicating with his own community through the investigation of the ways in which his site-specific photographs relate to the community he seeks to represent and critically examine how his images fit within the larger history of photography.
Chapter One: Chip Thomas’ Photographic Work and Role as an Author

Thomas moved to the Navajo Nation from North Carolina in 1987 to work as an Indian Health Services Physician at the Inscription House Health Center. The Indian Health Service or IHS was established in 1955 and is a part of the Department of Health and Human Services. IHS offers free healthcare services to two million users on reservations and other urban areas. An IHS clinic in Shonto, Arizona on the Navajo Nation, Inscription House Health Center caters to patients whose reasons for visits to the Inscription House Health Center include “respiratory illness, preventive health activities, diabetes, well child exams, and prenatal care.” Thomas’ career as a physician for the IHS is unusual, because he has worked for the agency for over thirty years despite originally coming to the reservation to fulfill a “four-year obligation to work in a health shortage area for medical school.” Thomas began working with photography and street art in the 1990s, after moving to the Navajo Nation. In his small-scale photographs and large-scale photographic murals, Thomas has combined his artistic work with his work as a physician addressing health issues that he treats such as diabetes and respiratory illness. Thomas’ photographic process is most closely related to social documentary photography. Stephanie Young defines a social documentary photographer as someone who uses the camera less as an artistic tool and more as “an instrument for social reform

and political action—a way to reveal the struggles, strife, and strength of individuals on the fringes of society”—whose “images reflect not only the harsh material conditions confronted by individuals but also the faces of human resilience and dignity.” Thomas utilizes his camera in both his small photographs and his large murals as an instrument to document people’s health struggles as well as Navajo dignity, grace, and strength.

Photographic Work

Thomas became increasingly interested in photography soon after he moved to the Navajo Nation. Specifically, he was interested in “visually documenting the lives of the residents on the reservation.” In 1991, Thomas was encouraged by the photographer Eugene Richards to take advantage of his location on the reservation and “to try and tell true ‘humanistic stories’ about people who are often maligned in the mainstream media.” A self-taught photographer, Thomas built his own darkroom to develop his black and white photographs. He describes himself as a social documentary photographer who uses the medium of photography to “tell stories.” The stories he often “tells” or represents in his photographic work are those of the people in his community with whom he works as a physician or whom he knows personally.

Much of Thomas’ earlier photographic work is available on his website. There, he explains that these images were shot on film, developed in a darkroom, printed, and then scanned and represents his photographic work from 1988 to about 2007 before he

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began pasting his images around the reservation. There are three categories of photographs on the site: “Africa Images,” “Images from the Navajo Nation,” and “Sights Seldom Seen.” For the purpose of this thesis, I looked specifically at “Images from the Navajo Nation” which is further divided into two categories that Thomas labeled “Around the Rez” and “Transhumance.” All of his photographs in “Around the Rez” and “Transhumance” include people, though they are not always the focus of the image. In the photograph, *Happy at Muley Point* (Figure 3), from “Around the Rez,” two blurry figures are shown at the top of a hill. One figure faces the left of the photograph while the other figure is in the air with their hands above their head. The image *Diné* (Figure 4), from “Around the Rez,” shows an individual with their back turned to the camera lifting their shirt to reveal a tattoo on their right shoulder that reads “DINÉ” as a child in front of the man looks toward the Thomas as he takes the photograph. Not in frame is a group of two or three people who are behind the tattooed man and who—from left to right—hold up two fingers, three fingers, and one finger. “Transhumance” focuses on Lula, Ben, and Minnie as they move their sheep and goats from one grazing ground to another. In *Minnie Chasing her Sheep and Goats Through Navajo Creek* (Figure 5) Minnie is show running towards sheep and goats in the upper left of the image. Another image, *Ben Drinking from Canteen, Lula in Background* (Figure 6) depicts Ben wearing a button-down shirt and a dark hat drinking from a canteen while Lula holds a sheep in the background.

Thomas’ earlier photographic work are informal images that are unposed as the subjects are often in motion or face away from Thomas and his camera. This is significant in the broader context of viewing Thomas’ photographs of Diné compared to earlier

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photographs of Native Americans that are stoic or posed and that were used to support racial biases or perpetuate the idea of the “vanishing race”—which I will elaborate on more in chapter two. Thomas’ photographs are also significant to his body of work as he often takes his earlier photographs, enlarges them, and pastes the larger-scale images on the Navajo Nation. This process transforms Thomas’ photographs so that they are no longer personal prints or traditional fine art photographs but rather, public works of art that function within the community to promote tourist visits, an open dialog, healing, and action from the viewer.

Wheatpasting and Street Art

Before pasting large-scale photographs around the reservation, Thomas engaged with graffiti or street art on a smaller scale. Early on he engaged with graffiti to communicate health issues that he encountered specifically in his community as a physician. In his black and white photograph, Welcome to Diabetes Country (Figure 7), Thomas presents an image of a billboard standing above a barren, dirt ground. The billboard has images of four cans of beverages including Pepsi, Slice, Diet Pepsi, and Mountain Dew. Below them is ice with text that reads “WELCOME TO DIABETES COUNTRY.” The “DIABETES” portion of the text, though, has been spray painted over what originally read “PEPSI,” by Thomas, “to comment on the high incidence of diabetes in the Navajo community.” He also posted small prints around Flagstaff in the early 1990’s under the pseudonym, Jetsonorama.

Thomas’ photographic work shifted after he traveled to Brazil and saw the work of JR. In 2009, Thomas took a sabbatical to Brazil where he spent his time with a community of street artists and saw the large-scale photographic collages or murals of the French street artist JR. There he saw the mural project, *Women are Heroes* (*Figures 8, 8.1, 8.2*), for which JR wheat pasted black and white portraits onto the exteriors and stairs of the Morro de Providencia favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Jennifer Orpana describes JR as an artist who “mixes ‘art and action’ using collaborative art, portrait photography, and street art techniques to draw attention to the lives of people in marginalized, or misrepresented communities.” *Women are Heroes* began in 2008 when JR traveled to Rio de Janeiro where he had conversations with women in the favelas and observed that they were “the backbone of the community but also often the victims of violence.” In *Women are Heroes*, JR sought to pay tribute to local women by giving the hill and the favela a “female gaze” to demonstrate their “pivotal role in society and highlight their dignity.” For six weeks, in the summer of 2008, JR worked with people who lived in the Morro de Providencia favela listening to them recount their stories and he “asked the women if they wanted to pose for portraits for his project.” The pre-established favela community agreed to allow JR to paste portraits throughout the favela so that the hillside overlooking Rio’s city center were covered with the faces and eyes of the “favela women

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70 Ibid.
73 “Women are Heroes,” https://www.jr-art.net/projects/women-are-heroes-brazil.
were looking over the whole city.”\textsuperscript{76} JR replicated the \textit{Women are Heroes} project in the Kibera slum in Kenya as well.\textsuperscript{77} JR’s project \textit{Women are Heroes} relies on the community interaction Miwon Kwon describes as mythic unity. Mythic unity community interactions rely on an image of a community that can be “an overgeneralized and abstract projection of commonality” that gathers a range of “particular persons and their experiences.”\textsuperscript{78} Through his efforts to demonstrate various women’s dignity and importance to their communities, JR unifies them as a group in order to represent a marginalized community. Thomas adapted JR’s artistic process to his own work in his own community, however, the community interaction for Thomas differs due to his long relationship with those whom he depicts which I will discuss further in another section.

After seeing Thomas’ \textit{Women are Heroes} project in Brazil, Thomas returned to Arizona and began combining his photographic work with JR’s wheat paste process and posting his images around the reservation. Thomas began fixing his photographs as street art using wheat paste. “Stencils, stickers, paste-ups [or wheatpasting], and murals” are different methods of creating and putting up street art or graffiti.\textsuperscript{79} Wheatpasting is often used to fix posters to a surface, in a similar manner to wallpapering.\textsuperscript{80} In her article “Street artist Jetsonorama tries a new kind of healing in Navajoland,” Sarah Gilman describes Thomas’ process for wheatpasting his murals. According to her, he “enlarges [his photographs] in two-by-two foot sections at a print shop, cuts them out on his kitchen

\textsuperscript{77} Thompson, “If a Smile is a Weapon,” 37.
\textsuperscript{78} Kwon, \textit{One Place After Another}, 120.
\textsuperscript{79} Chonody, “Painted on the Wall: How Street and Mural Art Can Be Transformative,” 27.
floor, and uses wheatpaste—a mixture of Bluebird flour, sugar, and water—to attach them, piece by piece, to ruined buildings, roadside jewelry kiosks, market walls, [and] water tanks.”81

*Navajo Jewelry* (Figure 9) from 2009, is a mural on the side of a market stand which depicts a young child looking upwards at a ceramic vessel pasted onto the side of a blue-green wooden stand with a red sign that reads “NAVAJO JEWELRY” painted in yellow. Wooden market stalls like that of *Navajo Jewelry* line the edge of Highway 89 near the Grand Canyon where vendors sell souvenir art—jewelry, pottery, etc.—to passing tourists. Ruth Phillips explains that over time Native American souvenir arts have been inconsistently and erratically “represented and identified in both ethnological and fine-art collections” because non-Native collectors were ambivalent towards “indigenous commoditization” and “stylistic hybridity.”82 The ambivalence towards stylistic hybridity of souvenir art was due to the fact that collectors viewed these objects as less authentic thus discouraging hybridization and innovation of earlier styles. Thomas often works with the vendors of the market stands and places his images on the exterior or interior walls—like *Navajo Jewelry*—which helps to attract people to the market stands. In his online article, “Recap of an Epic Week: Chip Thomas Visits Milwaukee,” Nicolas Lampert writes that Thomas chooses to paste on the sides of market stands because “community members appreciate the attention that the images bring” because a tourist stopping “might lead to more tourist dollars being spent at their stand.”83

81 Gilman, “Street artist Jetsonorama tries a new kind of healing in Navajoland.”
83 Lampert, “Recap of an Epic Week: Chip Thomas Visits Milwaukee.”
Navajo Code Talkers (Figures 10) is another market stall mural that depicts three Navajo men dressed in military uniforms against a red background. The first figure is cropped below his knees. He is shown looking downward with his right leg in front and his left arm in front of his body. The two other figures are pasted behind the first figure with their arms hanging loosely by their sides and their left leg in front of their right. They are not cropped, and one stands in front of the other. All of the figures are shown in motion as they are walking in a line. The figures are isolated from the background so that they appear to be life sized and walking aside from the first man whose lower legs are cropped. The cropping of the figures makes it appear as if they are walking alongside the stand and therefore physically present. Navajo Code Talkers honors the soldiers who were part of the Navajo Code Talker program during World War II. The Navajo Code Talker Program began after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in California.  

Phillip Johnston, an engineer in Los Angeles, grew up “on the Navajo reservation and spoke Navajo.” Johnston came up with the idea to create a secret code “based on the Navajo language” that could not be deciphered. In addition to honoring the Navajo Code Talkers, Thomas’ mural attracts visitors to the stall and begins an open dialog with the visitor and the vendor.

An integral aspect of using wheatpaste is that it is ephemeral and that his murals began to peel after a day of being up.  

85 Ibid, 141.
86 Ibid.
87 Specktor, “Dr. Chip Thomas’ Incredible Attempt to Heal Through Art.”
was first pasted, is crisp and fixed to the brick surface so that the texture of the wall’s surface can be seen through the image itself. Sometime after, though, the mural *Vivian and Erica* ([Figure 11.1](#)) can be seen peeling away from the wall so that portions of the image are missing. To combat this issue, Thomas started using acrylic matte medium to fix his photographs.  

Acrylic matte medium is similar to wheatpaste in that it can be applied by hand or with a broom but, unlike wheatpasting, acrylic matte medium allows the murals to last for about two years, making it last longer, yet keeping it ephemeral.  

Regardless of the amount of time that the mural remains intact, using any kind of fixing method—wheatpaste, acrylic matte medium, paint, spray paint, etc.—the process of deterioration of street art is an integral component to the work itself. In his chapter, “Street Art and the Cultural Heritage of the Contemporary City,” Giovanni Caffio notes that it is “essential to consider…[street art’s] temporal variations documenting how the work changes over time.”  

Unlike a typical work of fine art, street art like the work Thomas creates, is meant to become part of the landscape and change over time. Therefore, their ephemerality is an intrinsic part of their aesthetic quality and materiality. In Thomas’ printed murals, the monumental size of his photographic prints provides the images with a sense of permanence despite the impermanent material. The interest of his murals lies in juxtaposition including the transitory and the permanent; street art practices and the more rural landscape of the reservation; and the monumentality of murals and private glimpses into people’s lives. The ephemeral nature of his work is largely related

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88 Ibid.
to the materials that Thomas uses and the notion of street art, but it also demonstrates that
the images are not meant to be preserved. Although he repeats images on various
surfaces, they are never the same as he alters the placement, the location, and other
elements. Unlike the salvage ethnography photographs that sought to capture a race that
was seen as bound to vanish, Thomas’ murals are intended to change and ultimately
decay. They are meant to be an ever-evolving part of the Navajo community.

**Photographic Murals**

In his photographic murals, Thomas addresses health or environmental issues on
the Navajo Reservation. In his mural installation, *Green Room* (**Figure 12, 12.1, 12.2,
and 12.3**). Thomas calls the visitor to action in a short message placed inside the “room”
urging people to learn more about uranium mining and contamination as well as
communicate with elected officials or donate to nonprofit organizations. *Green Room* is
an installation set behind the abandoned Wauneta Trading Post. The structure is
constructed of cinder blocks with wooden beams at the top. It is an open-air structure
with a single doorway and one window on each of the side walls that are boarded up with
wood. Black and white images of sheep line all of the exterior walls except for the back
wall which is painted white and blue. Many of the sheep in the photograph face toward
the viewer as they enter the structure. The interior is covered in repeating images of
Thomas’ “corn portrait”\(^{91}\) painted over with neon green paint. On one of the interior
walls, is a white piece of paper with text urging the viewer to action pasted onto the side.

\(^{91}\) Jetsonorama, “Window display with ‘corn portrait,’” *Instagram*, February 15, 2019, accessed
August 1, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/Bt5Npplgxme/.
The text reads:

the green room, a place of meditation + contemplation.

green references the long history of uranium mining on the colorado plateau/navajo nation (90% of our nuclear arsenal during the cold war came from diné land), and the resulting contamination of the land, water, livestock and humans since 1942 (leaving over 500 abandoned, unsealed mines littering the land + water sources.)
to learn more about ongoing threats of uranium mining in and around the grand canyon (our national treasure and one of the 7 wonders of the world), check the grand canyon trust or #haulno for more info.
to quote citizen susan jane heske “we can make a difference by reading the grand canyon trust report and calling/emailing our elected officials supporting the ban on uranium mining and protecting the grand canyon, and/or donating to legal funds and nonprofit organizations.”
#keepitinthe4round
jetsonorama may 5, 2019

Thomas’ integration of text with his photographs demonstrates the long-standing practice of using text to help elucidate his narrative. Elizabeth Edwards argues that “photographs themselves have no true narrative in the classical literary definition; they cannot forward the action” so “even a series of photographs requires language or text to fill the gaps in the narrative.” In Green Room, Thomas uses his visual imagery to tell the story of the land that he is urging viewers to protect. Traditional Navajo subsistence is “based on a combination of farming (primarily corn) and livestock raising (primarily sheep).” In the 1930s, the Navajo Livestock Reduction program began and the United States Department of Agriculture “cull[ed] 80 percent of the goat, sheep, and horse herds of the Navajo

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92 Text can be seen in Figure 12.3.
people” in order to reduce the issues of overgrazing which caused erosion. The reduction of sheep, though, had a profound impact on Navajo women, as they harvested wool from the sheep they owned for the creation of rugs and textiles.” Thomas combines imagery of corn and sheep in *Green Room* to represent visually land use on the Navajo Reservation, the place he is calling viewers to protect. By connecting his photographs with the short bit of text provided inside, Thomas seeks to fill in the gaps of the photographic narrative and give his viewer’s not only the resources they need to take a political stand as well as background information about uranium mining on the Navajo Nation and the work of the Grand Canyon Trust.

Thomas also creates murals that speak about the preservation of sacred sites. His artistic process is collaborative for these in that he asks Navajo people their thoughts on issues. For example, for murals like *John, Sam, and Steph* (*Figure 13*), Thomas asked “Navajo community members their thoughts about a proposal to use reclaimed wastewater for snowmaking at a ski area in the San Francisco Peaks [which] is considered sacred by local tribes.” The answers are painted on the face of Sam in the center. The text says, “Faces are sacred. Faces are beautiful. We walk on the face of the earth. The mountain is a beautiful, sacred place that needs to be protected. In beauty I

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96 Ibid.

97 Grand Canyon Trust, https://www.grandcanyontrust.org/. The Grand Canyon Trust is a non-profit conservation organization founded in 1985 that seeks to safeguard the Grand Canyon and the Colorado Plateau, while also supporting the rights of the Native American people who live in these areas.

walk.” In examining issues with sacred land, though, Thomas has also encountered economic problems on the Navajo Nation such as high rates of unemployment. Thomas talks about how a piece he made in opposition “to a development on the rim of the Grand Canyon” that “used an image of a Navajo woman with the words: ‘Protect and preserve the holy spaces’ written across her face” had to be buffed—painted over or removed—due to condemnation from some people in the local community. Lindsey Hanson notes that “many reservations [including the Navajo Nation] persistently have unemployment rates much higher than . . . 25 percent.” Therefore, in communities where a large number of people are unemployed, issues such as the preservation of sacred sites, may be seen as irrelevant or less important than other pervasive problems. This response demonstrates that through his work as a photographer, Thomas has sometimes inadvertently revealed fractures in his community in regard to how topics related to the Navajo Nation, like the protection of land and the high unemployment rate, should be discussed, presented, or dealt with. Additionally, this demonstrates that Thomas does not address each issue that is relevant to the Navajo Nation.

For example, Thomas does not address specific issues like the Navajo-Hopi land dispute and the introduction of Mormonism on the Navajo Nation. In 1974, the Navajo-Hopi Indian Land Settlement Act “authorized the division of the jointly [Navajo and Hopi] owned land into two equal pieces and authorized the relocation” of the people who

99 Ibid.
found themselves on the wrong side.\textsuperscript{102} A federal agency, the Navajo and Hopi Indian Relocation Commission, was also created to carry out the relocation of those who were not on the right side of the newly created partition line.\textsuperscript{103} Both Navajo and Hopi people were displaced and forced to move from their homes, sometimes being placed in Village Homes that were often hastily built hastily without quality.\textsuperscript{104} Mormonism was introduced to the Hopi and Navajo in 1872, when John K. Hillers, Clem Powell, Andy Hattan, and “famed Mormon explorer and Indian missionary Jacob Hamblin set out…for the Hopi mesas.”\textsuperscript{105} Tuba City, one of the larger settlements in the region, is named for Tuuvi who was a Hopi leader who converted to Mormonism.\textsuperscript{106} In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Mormons founded the city that near where Thomas works. Many of Thomas’ work line the edge of Highway 89 between Flagstaff and Tuba City, however, he does not address the introduction of Mormonism on the reservation. Thomas’ artistic work also does not address issues of the Navajo-Hopi land dispute or the introduction of Mormonism into the area. While he is not responsible for representing every issue that has faced the Navajo Nation, it is important to note that the list of issues he does address in his work is not exhaustive and that he is selecting what he does or does not address in his art.

Besides creating his own street art on the Navajo Reservation, Thomas also invites artists to create work in his community as part of what he calls the Painted Desert Project. Thomas explains that the Painted Desert Project was inspired by the Underbelly

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, 174.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, 222.
Project in New York City where street artists were invited to create work on abandoned subway stations. Additionally, Thomas wanted to replicate the community of artists he worked with in Brazil during his sabbatical. In 2012, Thomas began inviting artists to the reservation to create work in the same community that he lives and creates work in. The artists come to the reservation, spend time with people and learn about the Navajo culture, and then create a piece based on their experience. Another portion of the project has artists visit schools and teach students about their own style and “various styles of street art.” The aim of the project, for Thomas, was to “boost tourism on the reservation, to supplement the incomes of families with roadside stands, and to nurture the creative talent of local youth.”

What is Healing and Community?

Thomas’ work is often discussed as a continuation of his work as a physician for the IHS, and Thomas himself states that he attempts to “create an environment of wellness” through his artistic work as well as his work as a physician. It is critical to understand what Thomas means by healing and wellness when he discusses these concepts in relation to his work as an artist. In his work as a physician, Thomas often focuses on the health of a single individual, but scholars like Marian McDonald, Caricia Catalani, and Meredith Minkler argue that the health of an individual is linked to the

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109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
wellbeing of the collective.\textsuperscript{113} Although Thomas is not Navajo, his artistic work helps to empower the larger community he lives and works in to heal the community. Thomas’ photographic murals contribute to the wellbeing of the larger community, as he photographs his interactions with individual people and represents them in a positive light rather than using racist stereotypes. It should be noted that Thomas’ artistic work is not the antidote for the longstanding history of the mistreatment, misrepresentation, and murder of Native Americans. This history and continued misrepresentation of Native Americans cannot be fixed or rectified by the pasting of positive imagery alone. Additionally, Thomas’ work as a physician does not make his work as an artist intrinsically healing. His photographic work, though, does begin a process of communication, dialog, and activism that departs from the images of previous photographs that were utilized to thwart Native resistance and agency that were part of the active practice of the extermination of Native Americans.

In her article, “Adjusting the Focus for an Indigenous Presence,” Theresa Harlan explains that photography in the nineteenth century was actively used to portray indigenous peoples as wild savages or as a vanishing race to serve “Eurocentric frontier ideology” that helped to maintain the power structures incepted by colonization.\textsuperscript{114} Rafael Schacter, for his part, argues that Thomas uses his photography to illustrate the “‘misperceptions’ and ‘misrepresentation’ that persons of color are often subject to in the

\textsuperscript{113} Marian McDonald, Caricia Catalani, and Meredith Minkler, “Using the Arts and New Media in Community Organizing and Community Building: An Overview and Case Study from Post-Katrina New Orleans,” 293-296.

like those described by Harlan. Thomas seeks to utilize photography to counter earlier photographs that perpetuated racist tropes about indigenous people. He intends his images to “reflect the strength of the Navajo and their perseverance—Native pride, traditions, and history” in the face of imperialist efforts at forcefully removing and erasing Native Americans in the United States.

Artists like Miranda Bergman have discussed the mural as a means of empowerment and healing in that “it breaks down apathy, low self-esteem, and hopelessness, while transforming a space” specifically in her discussion of the mural We Are Not a Minority. We Are Not a Minority is a mural “from the housing projects of the East Los Angeles barrio” which was completed by Mario Torero in 1978. Torero was selected by the Congreso de Artistas Chicanos en Aztlan to paint the mural. An image of Che Guevara points to the viewer alongside text that reads “We Are Not a Minority” against a blue background. Each of the words is painted with a different font and style so that the viewer reads the message with emphasis on particular words such as “not” and “minority.” Bergman describes the mural as a representation of the “rage, pride, and vision of oppressed communities…reflecting and contributing to the struggles for self-determination, justice, and equality.” Despite not being Navajo, Thomas uses his public art as a platform to communicate and reflect the dignity of Native Americans in

116 Lampert, “Recap of an Epic Week: Chip Thomas Visits Milwaukee.”
118 Ibid, 361.
120 Bergman, “Mural, Mural on the Wall,” 361.
their traditions, history, and culture. This is evident in works such as *Native Pride* (Figure 14) where an outstretched arm is placed on an orange billboard with the text “Native Pride” written or tattooed on the arm. *Native Pride* is a powerful image that represents the pride of Native peoples in their culture despite being historically oppressed while also demonstrating that Native Americans are not frozen in a romanticized past.

While art can provide a means for communicating, representing, or reflecting the struggles for oppressed communities, art has also been discussed as a means of healing. McDonald, Catalani, and Minkler note connections between art and health arguing that art can promote organizing for health by getting people involved, illuminating community, increasing awareness, attracting attention, promoting community formation, promoting healing, addressing health disparities, and empowering marginalized communities.121 Their discussion of the connection between art and health, though, is vague in regards to their discussion of community and their definition of healing.

Thomas Csordas goes further in his discussion of healing by tying spiritual or ritual healing to identity politics in his essay “Ritual Healing and the Politics of Identity in Contemporary Navajo Society.” Csordas provides a diagram demonstrating the relationship between ritual healing and the politics of identity in which the two are connected by three levels of relation: representation between societies (body politic), negotiation within society (social body), and transformation person in society (individual body).122 He defines the body politic as the resistance between Navajo society and non-Naavo society, the social body as the intersection of traditions, and the individual body

121 McDonald, Catalani, and Minkler, “Using the Arts and New Media in Community Organizing and Community Building.” 293-296.
as a “person with a contemporary Navajo identity in the politically charged space between tradition and postmodernity.” Csordas concludes that the “concepts of self and identity belong both to the psychological analysis of individuals and the social analysis of collective processes.” Therefore, the overall health of the individual person is tied to that of the collective group.

Additionally, the ephemerality of Thomas’ photographic murals relates to Navajo concepts of the ephemeral nature of Navajo healing ceremonies. In his article, “Documenting the Multisensory and Ephemeral: Navajo Chantway Singers and the Troubles of a “Science” of Ceremonialism,” Adam Fulton Johnson discusses an ethnographer Washington Matthew’s documentation of Navajo spiritual practices and healing ceremonies in the 1880s and 1890s. Chantways are healing ceremonials “overseen by a ‘singer,’ who directed a multiday sequence of events designed to heal certain ailments and oversaw the myriad elements of singing, prayer, recitation, fumigation, anointments” as well as “the illustration (and ritual dispersal) of elaborate sandpaintings on the ground of the medicine lodge.” Johnson explains that the “process of coalescence and dispersal was, for singers, an essential part of the healing process” in regard to sandpaintings. These chantways were healing ceremonies that were “designed to maintain hózhó” which is the “harmony and balance of people and environments.”

123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
126 Ibid, 231.
127 Ibid, 232.
128 Ibid, 237.
photographic murals shares similarities with the Navajo chantways, although, there is no indication that he is directly trying to replicate or mirror this practice. His process of creating photographs and pasting them using an ephemeral method that is meant to be impermanent demonstrates the notion that, similar to sandpaintings during a chantway, both the creation and transient nature of the photograph are essential elements of Thomas’ own healing process.

Thomas’ murals enact both the idea of art impacting health propagated by McDonald, Catalani, Minkler, and Csordas’ argument that individual health is often tied to the health of a collective community. In his clinical practice Thomas says that he is “trying to create an environment of wellness within the body, mind, and soul of [a] person” and in his work as an artist he is “attempting to create an environment of wellness within the community.”129 Although Thomas’ murals often focus on an individual, the public nature of the art speaks to a larger group or community to empower the collective and highlight the strength and honor of the community.

Nicolas Lampert describes Thomas as a “community artist” whose artistic work “reflects the pulse of his community” and that his work is in “dialog with the community.”130 Thomas, likewise, explains that his practice is about “trust, integrity, community and…love.”131 When discussing the way in which Thomas’ photographic murals relate to the concept of “community” it is ambiguous as to what might be meant by the term in this context. Kwon explains that terms such as community, audience, site,

130 Lampert, “Recap of an Epic Week: Chip Thomas Visits Milwaukee.”
131 Morales, “Doctor Unmasked As Artist Provokes, Inspires On The Navajo Nation.”
and public are often used interchangeably in community-based public art discourse.\textsuperscript{132} To better understand how Thomas’ work functions in his community it is imperative to analyze what community model fits Thomas’ work as well as to identify the community in which his site-specific work functions. Kwon argues that there are four models of community interaction: community of mythic unity,\textsuperscript{133} “sited” communities,\textsuperscript{134} invented communities (temporary),\textsuperscript{135} and invented communities (ongoing).\textsuperscript{136}

Thomas’ work does not easily fit within any of these models, but it can be best understood as creating “sited” communities and invented communities (ongoing). The

\textsuperscript{132} Kwon, One Place After Another, 94.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid, 118-120. On page 120, Kwon describes mythic unity as a model of community that often overlooks diversity and difference in order to present an “overgeneralized and abstract projection of commonality.” She uses the example of Suzanne Lacy’s project Full Circle to demonstrate the way in which mythic unity functions. Full Circle is a boulder commemoration to one hundred women in Chicago. Lacy’s Full Circle seeks to create a sense of community or unity by showcasing women as unified and hoping to encompass all of their differences including their ages, their social standings, ethnicities, etc. However, Kwon argues that these differences are overtaken by Lacy’s search for a commonality or a unifying denominator of gender.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, 120-126. “Sited” communities are the second model of community which Kwon explains are the most common in community-based public art. “Sited” communities are preexisting organizations or groups that have “clearly defined identities.” (120). The “sited” community model often requires a mediator between the artist(s) and the local groups which contradicts the promotional aspect of this model as being an organic relationship between the artist and the community.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid, 126-130. On page 126, Kwon describes invented communities (temporary) as an interaction in which “a community group or organization is newly constituted and rendered operational through the coordination of the artwork itself.” The artwork, therefore, is the mechanism that forms a community group around a collective idea, event, or activity which is defined by the artist. What differentiates the temporary invented community from an ongoing interaction is the former’s conceptual and financial reliance on the art project for the community’s meaning and purpose.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid, 130-135. Invented communities (ongoing) is similar to the third community interaction model but the defining difference between the two is the community’s sustainability beyond the lifespan of the art project. Kwon provides two examples of ongoing invented communities which were both projects in “Culture in Action” by Chicago-based artists—the artist team Haha and Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. In both cases, Kwon argues that the key reason for the sustainability for the projects are the artists’ intimate and direct knowledge of the neighborhoods they worked with and the people who lived in those neighborhoods. Due to the artists’ connections to these neighborhoods, there was a foundation of familiarity, trust, and dialog between the artists and the people within the community allowing for a longer lifespan of the community interaction.
“sited” community model is when an artist works with existing organizations or sited communities that have “clearly defined identities in the sense of having established locational bases, modes of operation, or a shared sense of purpose.”137 In this community model interaction, a mediator is often required to facilitate the interaction between the artist and the local group.138 Invented communities (ongoing) interactions is related to invented communities that are temporary in that a community group is formed “around a set of collective activities and/or communal events,”139 however, the community continues beyond the exhibition of a public artwork.140 The continuation of the event or activity beyond the life of a public artwork in the invented communities (ongoing) interaction is often due to the artist’s own relationship to the community and if there is a foundation of trust between the two.141 Thomas’ interaction as an artist and physician in his community is an example of a sited community model in that he came to the preestablished place of the Navajo Reservation and through the mediation of Inscription House Health Center and the people he met in his work and personal life he worked with the community in both contexts. The model, though, has shifted since he first moved to Arizona as he has fostered deep-rooted relationships over thirty years in his work with IHS. His relationship to the people whom he works with as an artist will therefore continue beyond a specific work of art because of his time within the community and his work as a physician.

137 Ibid, 120.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid, 126.
140 Ibid, 132.
141 Ibid.
Thomas’ photographic murals are site specific as they are physical works posted on particular locations, but the “community” with which Thomas is in conversation with is not as easily defined due to the presence of many of his murals on the side of Highway 89 and his use of social media sites like Instagram. To better analyze how Thomas’ work functions, one must examine the community with which Thomas is in conversation, the sites at which he chooses to paste his murals, and who understands as his audience. When speaking with Thomas, he says that he has a “long term relationship with a community of people” specifically those who he interacts with as a physician, a friend, or a neighbor. The people that Thomas depicts in his photographs are the community that Thomas looks to communicate with predominantly. The actual sites or location of his work—the sides of market stands, buildings, and water tanks—are along Highway 89 between Flagstaff and Tuba City and on the way to the Grand Canyon. These sites are available to the group of people who live and work in this area, though, the audience is much larger. Due to the physical locations of many of his photographic murals, being along a major highway on the way to a tourist attraction like the Grand Canyon, there are tourists and visitors who travel along this route and stop at market stands that have images of Thomas’ like the one located near Tuba City (Figure 15), which has photographs of sheep pasted on the side walls. Thomas has been told by vendors that “more tourists stop and engage [with] them” and that he has heard stories of people stopping to look at the art and meeting a local person and being invited to someone’s home for a meal. The audience expands exponentially from the many tourists who happen upon Thomas’ work along their drive when his work is posted and shared online or on sites like Instagram. The sites of

143 Specktor, “Dr. Chip Thomas’ Incredible Attempt to Heal Through Art.”
Thomas’ murals become tourist destinations for people to visit and take photographs of/with. Thomas has 11.1 thousand followers on Instagram in addition to the thousands of people who travel along Highway 89 and see his work in person. In expanding his audience, though, the community with which he originally sought to reach with his work can become lost.

The relationships fostered by Thomas and his public photographic murals demonstrate the relational nature of his work. Bishop asks how the ‘structure’ of a relational artwork comprises, and whether this is so detachable from the work’s ostensible subject matter or permeable with its context.” Likewise, she explains that the curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud argues that “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them” and that these encounters and the relations that “permit ‘dialogue’ are automatically assumed to be democratic.” However, she goes further by arguing that “if relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?.” The initial relations exist between Thomas and the people he photographs, produced for them to demonstrate the strength and grace of Navajo culture. The expansion of his audience, though, alters the relations that are produced by his public photographic murals and their purpose. The purpose behind Thomas’ work also changes to thwart misperceptions through the use of positive, nostalgic imagery or urge viewers to take

146 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 65.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
political action against uranium mining. These various relations created by Thomas’ large audience also produce varied reactions from viewers.

Much of the reaction to Thomas’ murals on the Navajo reservation is positive, but his images can be controversial due to the subject matter he emphasizes and his being non-Navajo. Some of Thomas’ murals have been buffed or removed due to resistance against the subject matter of protecting sacred landscapes in a community that suffers from high rates of unemployment.¹⁴⁹ Muralism or street art as an art form “fights the individualism and privateness” of art¹⁵⁰ which allows public opinion to shape the content that is addressed either through a mural’s creation or through the removal of the mural. Many of the online articles that discuss Thomas and his photographic murals, also discuss his being an “outsider” on the Navajo Nation. Likewise, Thomas observes, “‘Who am I as an outsider to use images from the [Navajo] culture and give them back to the people?’”¹⁵¹ His own self-reflection also calls into question his right to name his photographic subjects. Many of his photographs and murals, like John, Sam, and Steph (Figure 13), provide the name of the people who are depicted. Although he does not present them as types, he does not have the capability to provide his photographic subjects, who allow him to photograph them, with their own subjectivity.

Navajo artists like Shonto Begay have stated that Thomas has earned the right to utilize images of Navajo people in his work that he pastes on the Navajo Nation in his years of working with people in his capacity as a medical doctor.¹⁵² Though Begay does

¹⁵⁰ Bergman, “‘Mural, Mural on the Wall,’” 361.
¹⁵¹ Gilman, “Street artist Jetsonorama tries a new kind of healing in Navajoland.”
¹⁵² Ibid.
not speak for everyone who is a part of the Navajo community, his testimony
demonstrates the effect that Thomas has had in the Navajo community as a doctor and an
artist as well as the care he takes with the images he uses to represent Diné. The public,
democratizing quality of his murals thwarts preservation and undoes nostalgic ideas of
Navajo people while also allowing dissenting public reactions to impact the permanence
of his work.

**Challenging Concepts of Authenticity and Authorship**

The terms authenticity or authentic are ambiguous terms\(^{153}\) that often are used in
discussions of Native American art as a means of labeling which objects are made by
artists who are Native as well as separating Native American art into categories of high
art and low/souvenir art. In her book, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other
Tales of Progress*, Errington argues that, like art history, “discourses of
‘authenticity’…were made possible by the metanarrative of progress” which “rests on the
notion of linear time.”\(^{154}\) Scholar William Rubin, in an effort to define and defend the
concept of authenticity in 1984 stated that “[a]n authentic object is one created by an
artist for his own people and used for traditional purposes.”\(^{155}\) This definition, therefore,
eliminates art created for sale to outsiders like tourists and ethnologists as inauthentic. In
the early twentieth century, there was a common narrative that the authentic work of art
was declining in production due to the “penetration of colonialists, of the market, and

\(^{153}\) Kymberly N. Pinder, “Black Representation and Western Survey Textbooks,” *The Art
Bulletin*, vol. 81, no. 3 (Sep., 1999), 533. Kymberly Pinder explains that in her review she leaves
the term “authentic” vague, unstable, and without clear definition because this is how the term
exists in the larger cultural discourse.

\(^{154}\) Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress*, 3.

\(^{155}\) Ibid, 72.
therefore of history, which brings about degeneracy and inauthenticity” in Native Americans and their artifacts. Many argued that prior to outside contact, Natives “produced beautiful, curious, finely worked, ingenious, and therefore collective things” and that the contemporary productions lacked the “admirable qualities of craftmanship and genuineness.” This pervasive narrative expressed “nostalgia for the community of the organic whole and for the…’artists’ working in ‘traditional’ modes for ‘traditional’ religious functions, untouched by the market, by filthy lucre, by the restless forward movement of history” or progress. To fit within an outside view of what authentic art is at the time, Native American artists had to work within a tight framework of reproducing objects that were already deemed authentic and/or traditional including technologies and materials used—for example, photography is not considered an authentic Native American art form. Errington argues, though, that more and more “authenticity” designates the identity of the artist and that “authenticity has been transferred from the object to the author.”

This was especially apparent when I visited the roadside vendors off of Highway 89. In one of the jewelry display cases was a laminated paper that read “Certificate of Native American Authenticity” “signed or trademarked by Native American Artists Workmanship Guaranteed” (Figure 16). The paper certifies that the objects being sold are made by Native American artists and are thus authentic objects. This shift of authenticity from the object to the artist is important in that it allows Native Americans

156 Ibid, 118.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid, 71.
159 Ibid, 141.
more control of who “legitimately makes arts, crafts, or art-crafts with Indian themes, and who therefore speaks legitimately through these creations as a voice of Indian identity.” While the concept of authenticity is still, at times, ambiguous and problematic, the shift of it residing in the artist rather than the object demonstrates the importance of the role of the artists as the author of the larger narrative surrounding the work.

As I previously discussed, when looking at Native American art and objects, the authenticity of the work is often seen as being held by the creator, however, the question of what role Native Americans play in objects like photographs taken of them by people who are not Native still needs to be addressed. Rushing argues that the Native Americans who Curtis photographed share authorship with the artist, in his article “Native Authorship in Edward Curtis’s ‘Master Prints.’” I will discuss Curtis’ photographic work in more detail in the next chapter, but at this point I want to stress that Curtis’ photographs are often criticized for the way in which he staged the sitter. Many discussions of his work place agency solely with Curtis. However, Rushing claims that the Native Americans who worked with Curtis “were not unwitting or passive participants,” rather they “were conscious and willing partners who actively shared their identity, character and values through Curtis and his work.” In this context, the people who are photographed are not merely subjects, but collaborators who share some of the authorship of Curtis’ photographs.

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160 Ibid, 144.
Like Rushing, I believe that the people who allow Thomas to photograph them collaborate in the role of the author, as they choose to share their lives and stories with Thomas. Though it should be noted that Thomas works in a different era than Curtis, where Native people more generally have more agency to self-represent and negotiate and that the agency that Native sitters enacted with Curtis were more subversive, particularly in relation to the photographer. When asked about his interactions with those who allow him to photograph them, Thomas responded that there is a trust between him and those who he photographs so that he is “with people, in their space, having conversations with them” and the images that are produced to be pasted are done so with the understanding that they are going to be used for the project.163 There is an open dialog and collaboration between Thomas, the people whom he photographs, and the community within which he pastes the images. People’s reactions to seeing the final photographic mural of themselves vary according to Thomas. He explained that, “more traditional people are blown away,” while “younger people…think it’s cool.”164 These responses demonstrate the continued communication and collaboration.

As I previously discussed, the notion of authorship is linked to the idea of “authenticity” in regard to indigenous or Native American art. Thomas, though, is not Native American so he exists in the liminal space between insider and outsider. If the “authenticity” of the work of art associated with indigenous cultures is held within the identity of the author and Thomas exists in the liminal space between insider and outsider, it begs the question of what authentic experience Thomas’ work may represent.

164 Ibid.
Thomas does not claim to create authentic Native American art. He explains that he sees his work as depicting his “authentic interaction with people over time.” The authenticity still resides within the author—Thomas—but does not arise from a presentation of his work as a representation of Native American identity. Thomas’ work demonstrates his own legitimate and truthful experience with the community of which he is a part. The authenticity of Thomas’ art is also integral to the site where the majority of his works are presented. According to Kwon, site-specific art is described as “refuting originality and authenticity as intrinsic qualities of the art object or the artist, these qualities are readily relocated from the art work to the place of its presentation” so that the art work is now integral to the site. There is a relationship between Thomas’ photographic murals and the places where he places the murals. The murals represent Thomas’ own experience with the people who allow him to photograph them and his placement of these images in the same community where these people live, connects the physical object to the specific place so that the two reinforce the other’s authentic representation. Thomas’ art represents his role as an author or the creator in collaboration with those he photographs through imagery that reflects his own experiences and the sites he chooses to present these experiences reinforces the authenticity of the art as it is often within the same community as that where the works were created.

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166 Kwon, One Place After Another, 53.
Chapter Two: The Medium of Photography

A fundamental aspect of Thomas’ photographic mural practice is its relationship to the history of photography, specifically to anthropological photography and to the work of contemporary Navajo photographers like Will Wilson and Don James Jr. In this chapter, I will consider Thomas’ artwork more as photographic objects rather than as large-scale murals in order to analyze the way in which he draws artistic inspiration from earlier anthropological photographers while also departing from their reliance on stereotype. This analytic frame also allows for comparison between Thomas’ photographs and that of Navajo photographers Wilson and James, as Thomas engages with the medium in a similar manner. All three seek to alter misperceptions about Native Americans—specifically Navajo—that have been perpetuated by these earlier images.

Photography has aided in the production and construction of the ideology of race as a means of visually recording racial difference. Photography has also aided in the production and construction of space to not only lay claim to a place but also provide “proof” of its openness and its readiness for conquest.167 Discussing the larger history of photography and its relationship to documenting Native Americans and their lands demonstrates the way in which Thomas draws artistic inspiration from these earlier images, but resists their reliance on constructing race and difference as well as space to highlight the resilience, pride, and strength of his community often in their own space.

Photography

In the United States, photography was a tool used to document, categorize, and study Native American cultures and their traditions due to the dominating theory of the “vanishing Indian” that led to the introduction of salvage ethnography. Ethnography is the “descriptive study of a culture” that carries “nuances of otherness, subordination, and marginality.” Ethnography and anthropology have a historical relationship in which ethnography has been “closely associated with, and developed by, the emergent anthropology in the 19th century which itself was given form by colonialism and imperialism.” An extension of ethnographic study was the practice of salvage ethnography which was institutionalized in 1879 with the establishment of the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE). It was an operation “characterized as a mediating, and arguably appropriating, gesture of Western science to ‘save’ the object of study from vanishing irretrievably” due to the belief that Native Americans were threatened with extinction as a result of modernization and progress. This salvage effort relied on creating a visual record of Native American or indigenous cultures using the medium of photography. A fundamental aspect of salvage ethnography was the desire to rescue, document, or preserve “‘the real thing’” or the “authentic.” Through re-enactment and the framing of their Native subjects “a perceived cultural essence, an authenticity, was

169 Ibid.
These photographs, though, were also used to construct the idea of Native Americans as a race and a culture as well as present their land as empty and void of life.

Photography in the United States helped to produce and construct the ideologies of race. Barbara Fields’ describes race as an ideology that “came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons and is subject to change for similar reasons.” As such, race as an ideology is the language used by people to “deal with their fellows” and the “interpretation in thought of the social relations through which they constantly create and re-create their collective being” as well as used to represent difference. In “‘What Has Happened Here:’ The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” Elsa Barkley Brown explains that it is vital to not only understand differences “but also the relational nature of those differences” specifically in regard to women as she argues that not all women share the same gender. While Brown specifically discusses the relational differences in regard to women, the idea of difference as relational applies both to the understanding of the difference of indigenous people and American settlers as well as between various indigenous groups. Theresa Harlan explains that “Eurocentric frontier ideology and the representations of indigenous people it produced were used to convince American settlers that indigenous people were incapable of discerning the difference” between their own culture which was deemed “‘primitive’” and the “presumed civilized existence” of

175 Ibid, 110.
American settlers.\textsuperscript{177} It was believed that Native peoples were either unable to embrace civilization and progress and were therefore primitive, or that through modernization Native cultures would cease to exist requiring photography to document them. Photography also represented the relational difference between different Native groups.

Lee Baker details that the “Navajo, Zuni, or Ojibwa” were viewed as “exotic” and therefore were the “subjects of detailed ethnographic description and depiction.”\textsuperscript{178} The “exoticness” of the Navajo was in direct relation to tribes such as the Eastern Cherokee who were “God-fearing Christians” who had assimilated into the dominant culture.\textsuperscript{179}

Photographers who utilized the medium of photography to photograph Native Americans and the Western landscape actively participated in this repetition of the ideology of race furthering the notion of racial difference. Coco Fusco argues that “rather than recording the existence of race, photography produced race as a visualizable fact,”\textsuperscript{180} due to longstanding notions of photography having a “’truth effect.’”\textsuperscript{181} Jennifer González points out that photography has “always been allied with truth claims: as evidence in courts of law, as necessary supplement to historical narratives, as the existential proof for the passing of time, or as the unquestioned framework for…the family romance.”\textsuperscript{182} The idea of photographs as representations of an intrinsic truth, however, does not question who is constructing the images, what narratives they are crafting, what they decided to include in the photographs, and most importantly what was

\textsuperscript{177} Harlan, “Adjusting the Focus for an Indigenous Presence,”136.
\textsuperscript{178} Lee D. Baker, Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 75.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{180} Coco Fusco, “Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors,” 16.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
excluded from the image. Earlier photographs created for the purpose of, what is now known as, salvage ethnography produced the visualized “truth” of race as fact, even as scholarship of the last many decades concerning photography has done much to deconstruct the idea of photograph as “truth.”

To better comprehend the context of anthropological photographs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the way in which Thomas departs from these images, and the way in which photographs were treated as “fact,” it is important to examine what anthropology is and what role photography played in this field. Anthropology is the study of people, and, by the 1860s, it “had emerged as an organized scientific enterprise.”  

The rise of the anthropology as an organized scientific enterprise mirrors the emergence of the medium of photography. The relationship between anthropology and photography was successful because photography facilitated the “systematic organization and analysis, in the service of scientific inquiry…with little interference, outside influence, nor allowing—within the photograph—room for the viewer’s investigation.”  

Although photographs of indigenous people were believed to provide “objective evidence and to portray reality, the authentic image of Native life,” Susan Sontag argues that “the picture may distort” and while the “camera does…capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world” like paintings and drawings.  

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187 Ibid, 6-7.
Photographs and anthropological photographs are not neutral objects that merely capture a subject. Rather, they are changing images that represent the photographer’s own thoughts and beliefs as well as allow for changing interpretations from changing audiences. The changing relationship between producer, anthropological subject, and audience as well as the way in which photography acts as an interpretation of the anthropological subject, problematizes the notion that photography is evidence or fact. Jennifer Nez Denetdale explains that anthropological portrayals of Navajos, still “inform our understanding of Navajos” and that particular images are repeated. For example, Denetdale explains Navajos are often portrayed in a setting “associated with the beginning of the reservation period” so that men are depicted wearing “cotton shirts and trousers with moccasins” and women are shown wearing “either the biil, a woven dress of their own manufacture, or blouses and tiered skirts modeled after those of white or Hispanic women’s fashion.” This can be seen in the photographs of John K. Hillers and Laura Gilpin, which I will discuss in the next section. Many of the anthropological images of Navajos were meant to either identify “individual[s]…as the official representatives of their ‘race’ and as stewards of the land” or to confirm “the popular American belief that Indians would vanish because of their inability to adjust to modern society.” Many anthropological photographs of Navajos, therefore, did not represent fact, reality, or the “authentic” life, but rather an interpretation of Navajo culture. Closely

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190 Ibid, 87-88.
191 Ibid, 89.
related to photography and the way in which it interprets and represents the photographic subject, landscape also represents and interprets space.

The term “landscape” has often been used as a noun to describe an artistic genre representing nature or a specific space. W.J.T. Mitchell, though, argues that landscape ought to be changed “from a noun to a verb” and thought of “as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.” Mitchell makes a list of nine claims in his chapter “Imperial Landscape,” including that “landscape is not a genre of art but a medium” and that “it is a natural scene mediated by culture” that “is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum.” These claims about landscape closely resemble the role of photography as a medium that both represents its subject matter but also presents the subject matter in a specific way. The connection between landscape and photography is furthered by the use of photography in the exploration of the western United States. Joel Snyder explains that between 1867 to 1879 marked “a transition from army surveys and management of the largely unknown and uninventoried interior (unknown, that is, to non-Native Americans) to civilian surveys managed by the…expanding class of scientists and engineers.” Photographers such as Timothy O’Sullivan—whose work I will discuss further in the next section—produced photographs of the western landscape or the interior that described the landscape to those who had not experienced it before. Emily Scott and Kirsten Swenson also detail how “photography has a long history…in relation

to the visual documentation of land from its central role in nineteenth-century
topographic surveys…to current photojournalistic exposés on environmental devastation
around the world.” Various surveys in the nineteenth century sought to document the
interior of the United States including geologic change and topographies through the
medium of photography. The mediums of photography and landscape culminate in
various anthropological and ethnographic photographs in the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries.

**Thomas and Anthropological Photography**

Thomas’ role as a photographer on the Navajo Nation seemingly continues the
vein of non-Native photographers like John K. Hillers, Timothy H. O’Sullivan, Edward
Curtis, and Laura Gilpin, who produced anthropological photographs in the nineteenth
and twentieth centuries. However, Thomas departs from their anthropological depictions
of the Navajo. Anthropological and ethnographical photographs of the Navajo
demonstrated an effort to ignore or hide images of Navajo resistance, construct a vision
of the Southwestern landscape as void of life, document the traditions of the Navajo as
they were viewed as on the cusp of extinction, and present Navajo as stoic and passive
through the artistic medium of black and white photography. While Thomas is influenced
by these earlier photographers in some way, and while he is a non-Native photographing
Navajos, he resists earlier images of Navajo by consciously depicting their resistance,
resilience, and strength.

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195 Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten Swenson, “Introduction: Contemporary Art and the Politics of
Land Use,” *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*, edited by Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten
Anthropology and ethnography of Native Americans were part of an effort of salvage ethnography. Photography was a means of “recording traditional ways of life faced with major and destructive change” as a means of rescuing these traditional ways that were thought to be doomed to disappear.\footnote{Elizabeth Edwards, “The Resonance of Anthropology,” \textit{Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography}, edited by Jane Alison (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998), 190.} This resulted in various survey expeditions in which anthropologists and photographers traveled throughout the United States to photograph Native Americans and the places that they inhabited. Photography served as a means of taking possession of space. People “wielded cameras” and used photographs “as a way of taking possession of the places they visited.”\footnote{Mick Gidley, “A Hundred Years in the Life of American Indian Photographs,” \textit{Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography}, edited by Jane Alison (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998), 157.} Therefore, the medium of photography served to aid in “nation-building and myth churning” in the United States through the representation of indigenous people.\footnote{Harlan, “Adjusting the Focus for an Indigenous Presence,” 138.} Because of this, early tropes recorded in early photographs created within the context of salvage ethnography, after 1860, continue to inform and shape our knowledge of Native Americans as photographers were the agents or producers who shaped how the “world saw the indigenous people of the Americans…reinfor[ing] public curiosity, fascination, and fear of the people they called ‘warriors, squaws, bucks, maidens, and braves.’”\footnote{Aleta M. Ringlero, “Prairie Pinups: Reconsidering Historic Portraits of American Indian Women,” \textit{Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self}, edited by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 185-186.} One of the earliest photographers who produced such images of Native Americans was John K. Hillers.
Hillers photographed people in the southwest in the late 1870s\textsuperscript{200} for the U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories.\textsuperscript{201} The Bureau of Ethnology, later the Bureau of American Ethnology, was created in 1879 under the direction of John Wesley Powell who, for a time, was also the director of the U.S. Geological Survey.\textsuperscript{202} Under Powell, Hillers worked as the “official photographer of the Bureau of American Ethnology and one of the first professional anthropological photographers.”\textsuperscript{203} Hillers worked with Powell from 1871 to 1894\textsuperscript{204} and on October 9, 1872, Hillers traveled to the Hopi mesas in Arizona to “photograph the Hopi people and their villages and to purchase artifacts for the Smithsonian Institution.”\textsuperscript{205} Over the course of his work for the U.S. Geological Survey and the Bureau of American Ethnology, Hillers created two sets of photographs, one which he took back to “Washington for use in the Philadelphia exhibit” and a “second set he gave to George Ingalls.”\textsuperscript{206} Hillers also was one of the first photographers to photograph the Navajo\textsuperscript{207} after the Long Walk in which the Navajo were forcefully removed from their homes and forced to walk 400 miles in the winter of 1864 to Fort Sumner.\textsuperscript{208}

\textsuperscript{200} Banta and Hinsley, “Nineteenth-Century Visions of the Exotic: Travel and Expeditionary Photography,” 40.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid, 178.
\textsuperscript{203} “Nineteenth-Century Visions of the Exotic,” 40.
\textsuperscript{204} Don D. Fowler, \textit{The Western Photographs of John K. Hillers} (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 11.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid, 29-35.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid, 61.
\textsuperscript{208} Amanda Bishop and Bobbie Kalman, \textit{Life of the Navajo} (New York: Crabtree Publishing, 2004), n.p.
The majority of Hillers’ portraits follow the standard for anthropological photographs in which the subject is seated and photographed either looking directly at the camera or in profile. The photograph *A rich Navajo* (Figure 17) from 1879 follows this formula as the woman is seated and facing the camera, however, her gaze is diverted from the camera. She is seated with her arms crossed in her lap. She is wearing a skirt with a patterned long-sleeve shirt. Around her waist is a silver belt. She wears a multi-strand necklace as well as bracelet and multiple rings, these items denoting her as a “rich Navajo.” Behind her hang various weavings. Although she is the subject of the photographic image, her diverted gaze to something outside of the frame, suggests to the viewer that there is something or someone drawing her gaze who is not pictured. Another of Hillers’ photographs, *Hedipa, a Navajo Woman* (Figure 18) from 1894 is similar to that of *A rich Navajo* in that a Navajo woman is photographed sitting with her arms crossed in her lap. She wears a patterned garment along with a necklace. She appears to be of a lower social or economic status as she is not described as “rich” and she is only shown in one necklace. In the background hang patterned blankets. She looks directly at the camera and the photographer with a slight smile. Hedipa in the latter photograph appears to be increasingly comfortable in front of the camera or with the photographer in that her facial expression is less tense than that of the former photograph and she looks directly into the camera. The two images, though, demonstrate the formulaic and standardization of portraits of Native Americans.

Unlike Thomas’ photographs, Hillers’ portraits do not depict or comment on the conflict between the Navajo and the United States government that imposed policies on them. Hillers was photographing Navajos after they were allowed to return to the Navajo
Nation in 1868, four years after they were forced to travel to Fort Sumner during the Long Walk. During this event, people were led by a military escort from the traditional Navajo land to Fort Sumner and “[m]any people froze, starved, became ill, or were shot to death along the way.”²⁰⁹ Those who escaped were often “caught and killed by soldiers or kidnapped by Mexican slave traders.”²¹⁰ Nearly 200 Native Americans died during the Long Walk.²¹¹ Additionally, when these displaced people returned to the land of the Navajo Nation in 1868, they were allowed to return to a parcel of land that was “only about one-tenth of the original size of their homeland.”²¹² Hillers’ photographs do not depict nor comment on the atrocities of the Long Walk or its effects on the people.

Hillers’ formulaic survey portraits were meant to present specific types that demonstrated who inhabited the Southwest, therefore erasing the ways in which the Long Walk and the return to a smaller portion of land affected the Navajo. Thomas has not created work referencing the Long Walk, but through his photographs, he focuses on related forms of injustice, rather than shying away from them. In *Untitled* (Figure 2) and *Green Room* (Figures 12-12.3), Thomas does not present a standardized portrait of a Native American but rather focuses on the personal cost of uranium mining to the Navajo and urges his audience to take action to help ban uranium mining. Thomas embraces these issues and uses his photographs to speak on them to a larger audience. He draws attention to them, in contrast to hiding or obscuring them.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.
²¹⁰ Ibid.
Working around the same time as Hillers, Timothy H. O’Sullivan differed by predominantly surveying the landscape photographically. O’Sullivan served as the photographer for two major western survey expeditions: Clarence King’s Geological Explorations of the Fortieth Parallel (1867-70 and 1872) and the Geographical and Geological Exploration West of the One Hundredth Meridian (1871 and 1873-74). He worked primarily in the Great Basin areas of Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. The two surveys that O’Sullivan photographed for were some of the first “modern surveys of the American interior” that were “managed and directed by civilians working for the government.” O’Sullivan’s images for the King survey were not widely published or exhibited, though, they were included as lithographs in the official King survey reports and “images were exhibited at both the Vienna Industrial Exposition in 1873 and the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876.” Unlike the images from the King survey, many of the images that O’Sullivan created for the Wheeler survey were “published in multiple editions in the 1870s and survive in many archives and private collections.” The two surveys also had different aims and, therefore, different audiences. The King survey was focused on representing geologic history including King’s theory of catastrophism—or “a landscape in upheaval, a stage for the dramatic conflict of geologic forces.” Therefore, the principal audience for O’Sullivan’s

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213 Snyder, “Territorial Photography,” 190.
214 Ibid, 191.
217 Ibid, 171.
photographs from the King survey were “geologists [and] fellow members of western surveys.” Although his images were intended for educated and professional viewers and were included in the final scientific reports, some of his images were skewed or altered in order to represent ideas of catastrophism. Wheeler’s survey differed from King’s in that it was focused on topography and mapping rather than geology.

O’Sullivan’s photographs of the western landscape are often described as representing vast, empty, and with little to no signs of human presence as well as dramatic—due to trying to visually represent the idea of catastrophism. The photograph Sand dunes, Carson Desert, Nevada (Figure 19) demonstrate the way in which many of he portrayed the western landscape as vast and empty. In the photograph, O’Sullivan’s darkroom wagon sits at the base of a sand dune on the right-hand side of the image. The only other sign of a person is O’Sullivan’s footsteps leading to where he stands behind the camera. Keith Davis argues that the photograph is not a “simple record of a landscape” but rather a “suggestion of the fleeting human presence—his own—within a landscape that is itself unstable and shifting.” Likewise, Snyder describes the photograph as representing “one man in the great vastness of the Great Basin” that is depicted as a place and its “incapacity to support life.” Snyder also explains that the image is misleading in that the flat landscape is cropped out of the photograph so that only a “representative sample’ of the region” is depicted with the focus on the sand

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219 Ibid, 25.
220 Ibid, 28.
222 Ibid, 75.
dunes which suggests a “boundless desert.” Another one of O’Sullivan’s photographs, *Witches Rocks* (Figure 20) from 1869, was altered to suggest the ideas of drama and upheaval in the landscape as the rocks jut upwards vertically. During his work on the Rephotographic Survey Project in 1978, Rick Dingus found that O’Sullivan tilted the camera nine degrees from horizontal to photograph the rocks in Echo Canyon, Utah. This slight tilt of the camera along with the cropping of the image creates a dramatic intensity that is not as present in Dingus’ photograph *1978 Witches Rocks* (Figure 21) which shows the angle with which O’Sullivan originally took the photograph with a black rectangle. Though he was creating images to visualize King’s theories of geological change, O’Sullivan’s *Witches Rocks* demonstrates a construction of the landscape through the medium of photography. Both of these examples of O’Sullivan’s photographs of the western landscape demonstrates Mitchell’s argument that landscape is a verb rather than a noun that is constructed, represented, and presented. In his photographs, O’Sullivan developed a contrived vision of the land that masqueraded as fact. He presented images that implied a vast, barren area that offered few representations of the people who inhabited those spaces.

While O’Sullivan constructs a vision of the land as vast, barren, and empty, Thomas’ photographs predominantly present people in the landscape, inhabiting their own space. For example, in his photographs *Minnie Chasing her Sheep and Goats Through Navajo Creek* (Figure 5) and *Ben Drinking from Canteen, Lula in Background*

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224 Ibid, 194.

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(Figure 6), Thomas depicts Minnie, Ben, and Lula inhabiting the desert landscape as they are in action. He also depicts people in their own interior space like in the triptych mural (Figures 1-1.3). The image on the left (Figure 1.1) shows Nez Begody Bancroft getting her hair brushed by her granddaughter, Ana. Although the image is pasted on the side of a building, there is a sense of intimacy as Nez Ana leans over Nez’s shoulder and Nez looks down. Thomas’ work is deeply tied to site and landscape as he posts his photographic murals on the Navajo Nation, but he does not often focus solely on photographing the landscape. Both Thomas and O’Sullivan are constructing the landscape, but Thomas is doing so by inserting images of people who inhabit the landscape into the visual field of that same site. Thomas’ photographic work, thus, reflects the reality of the landscape as inhabited and alive rather than barren and empty in O’Sullivan’s photographs.

Unlike O’Sullivan, photographer Edward Curtis’ photographic portraits focused on depicting Native Americans. Curtis initially had a commercial photography studio in Seattle in the 1890s. He is best known, though, for his twenty-volume work, The North American Indian (1907-1930), which depicted “western tribes from the plains to the Pacific Northwest, from the Southwest to California”. The North American Indian contained “fifteen hundred pictures” detailing the “history, life, manners, ceremony, legends and mythology” of the people who he photographed. The main funder for

Curtis’ twenty-volume project was the railroad entrepreneur, J. Pierpont Morgan.\textsuperscript{230} Morgan’s funds were used to help cover Curtis’ expenses for about fifteen years, including payments to the people he photographed.\textsuperscript{231} Jill D. Sweet, though, points out how Morgan’s financial backing of \textit{The North American Indian} was ironic because “Morgan’s wealth was in large part result of the displacement of Indians for the railroads.”\textsuperscript{232} The reception of Curtis’ photographic project, \textit{The North American Indian}, was mixed, due to the staging of his subjects and its status a work of salvage ethnography. Curtis has been criticized for posing his subjects elaborately or inaccurately, and he sometimes required his subjects to wear inconsistent tribal garments. Formally, he employed soft focus for an aesthetic effect.\textsuperscript{233} Curtis also edited out signs of “dislocation, assimilation and modernity.”\textsuperscript{234} On the other hand, Curtis’ work has been lauded for the opportunity he provided for rituals to be accompanied by oral histories for future generations.\textsuperscript{235} Additionally, W. Jackson Rushing III explains that the Native Americans who Curtis photographed were not “unwitting or passive participants” but rather “conscious and willing partners who actively shared their identity, character and values” so that the subjects had their own authority and authorship.\textsuperscript{236} Curtis’ project, \textit{The North American Indian}, was a type of salvage anthropology in which Curtis attempted to “record all North American tribes before they had altered or passed away” or in other

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{234} Rushing III, “Native Authorship in Edward Curtis’s ‘Master Prints,’” 62. \\
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid, 63. \\
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid, 62-63.
words “vanished.” The staging of Curtis’ photographs, therefore, create a “reconstructed…construction of a historical past, informed by a sense of nostalgia and salvage desire.”

Curtis conducted a form of salvage ethnography with his photographic project, The North American Indian. Sweet explains that what modern anthropologists now refer to as “salvage ethnography” was the “collecting of ethnographic data from tribal elders who remembered and could help reconstruct the ways of their people before sustained contact with the Western European invaders.” Salvage ethnography also involved the “collection and cataloguing of detailed observations about…music, dance, dress, food preparation, language, religion, and burial customs.” The salvage effort was driven by the belief that the disappearance of Native American people and lifeways was inevitable. Photography was used as a means of constructing a visual record suggesting Native Americans as a “doomed and vanishing race.” The ideology of the “vanishing race” or the “vanishing Indian” was perpetuated through the constant repetition of the phrase, through the use of photography, and the active practice of the murder of Native Americans so that it “acquired the aura of truth.” Curtis’ photograph The Vanishing Race, Navaho (Figure 22) represents the continuation of the ideology of the “vanishing

Indian.” The photograph depicts seven individuals riding on horseback away from the photographer. One rides alone in the shadow of the mesa on the left-hand side of the image while the other six rides in a single line. The photograph has a soft focus so that the figures are non-distinct. Though Curtis later moved away from the idea of the “vanishing Indian,” *The Vanishing Race* continues to be one of his most famous works of photographs. Other photographers also replicated this idea of the “vanishing Indian,” like Joseph Kossuth Dixon and his photograph *Sunset of a Dying Race* (Figure 23) from after 1908 which depicts a single figure moving away from the viewer on horseback. The stark contrast of the photograph creates dark frame around the edge of the image with a bright section of sky in the center of the image. The contrast and movement of the figure away from the viewer, presents a melancholy and melodramatic image of a vanishing figure.244 Both Curtis’ and Dixon’s photographs present aestheticized images in which the figures face away from the viewer as they fade away into the image. Thomas always constructs his images so that the figures are the main focus and appear to be in motion. *Minnie Chasing her Sheep and Goats through Navajo Creek* (Figure 5), for example, depicts Minnie facing away from Thomas and his camera as she runs toward her sheep and goats. Minnie is shown in motion as she runs and her skirt swings around her. Additionally, Thomas’ photograph *Happy at Muley Point* (Figure 3) depicts two people who are presented as silhouettes against the sky. The figure on the left stands contrapposto as the figure on the right jumps into the air with their arms stretched above them and their legs kicking up. Both images can be read as nostalgic or aestheticized,

however, they do not represent the same melancholy or sadness as in Curtis’ and Dixon’s images. In both of Thomas’ photographs, there is a sense of joy, excitement, or urgency as the figures move in the frame.

Sophie Engel asserts that she believes that some people still see indigenous people through an antiquated lens of the “vanishing Indian” without taking into account that “Native Americans…are very much alive, powerful and resurgent.” Thomas along with other artists have worked to thwart antiquated images and to demonstrate the strength of Native American cultures. Native Pride (Figure 14) proclaims the pride, strength, and resilience of Native American people despite policies of erasure and assimilation throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Other photographers, such as Laura Gilpin have utilized photography in an effort to construct a visual record of Native American people and culture.

Like Curtis, Gilpin photographed people on the Navajo reservation as part of an effort of salvage ethnography. Gilpin grew up in the western United States and first came to the Navajo Nation in 1930 when she accompanied her friend Elizabeth Foster who was a field nurse on the reservation. James C. Faris explains that Gilpin wanted to depict the Navajo as “successfully adapted, stoic and nonresistant rather than…succumbing to conquest.” Gilpin compiled her photographs into her book, The Enduring Navaho. Her photographs did not depict people who did not conform to her image of the Navajo or

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246 Faris, Navajo and Photography, 235.
those who “resisted Bureau of Indian Affairs policies.”\textsuperscript{248} John Collier was the commissioner of Indian affairs who was known for the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) that was “meant to curtail future allotments, empower tribal governments, and put structures in place to enable improved health, education, land acquisition, and cultural preservation.”\textsuperscript{249} Passed in 1934, the IRA “meant soil conservation and livestock control” for Navajos and Hopis which was met with opposition.\textsuperscript{250} Navajo and Hopi resistance to the IRA is absent, though, from Gilpin’s romanticized and nostalgic photographs despite her working on the reservation when it was passed. An example of this is Gilpin’s photograph \textit{Navaho Woman} (Figure 24) from 1932, two years before the IRA was passed. The woman leans against a wall as she holds a woven basket filled with some kind of grain in both hands. She wears a long-sleeve button-down shirt with a long, full skirt. A blanket or shawl is on one shoulder and she wears a multi-strand necklace. She stares at the viewer with a blank face. Another image, \textit{Navaho Silversmith} (Figure 25) from 1939 depicts a man seated at a work bench. His face is in profile as he looks at something that he holds in his right hand. Between his legs is a metal anvil with a hammer. There is a stark contrast in the image with the inky black tones of his outer shirt, his hair, and the shadows of his bench and the bright whites of his long-sleeve undershirt and the highlight off of his metal belt as well as the light on his face. Gilpin’s images like \textit{Navaho Woman} and \textit{Navaho Silversmith} portray a romanticized and nostalgic view of the Navajo during a time of resistance. In addition to creating images that portray a romanticized version of preservationist documentary photography, Gilpin’s photographs

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid, 61.
\textsuperscript{249} Baker, \textit{Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture}, 1-2.
\textsuperscript{250} Benedek, \textit{The Wind Won’t Know Me: A History of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute}, 36.
of the Navajo act as a means of propaganda for the IRA and stock reduction programs on the Navajo Nation.

In the introduction to her book, *The Enduring Navaho*, Gilpin writes that “there is no pretense…of a scientific or an ethnological approach.”\(^{251}\) Despite this claim, her photography acts as a type of salvage ethnography as well as a propaganda for the IRA and the stock reduction program. Her photographs can then be read as what Patricia Hill Collins describes as “controlling images.”\(^{252}\) Though Collins is addressing controlling images of Black womanhood in her chapter, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” her analysis can be applied to Gilpin’s photographs of Navajos. Collins explains that “controlling images…take on a special meaning because the authority to define these symbols is a major instrument of power” and “in order to exercise power, elite white men and their representatives must be in a position to appropriate symbols concerning Black women.”\(^{253}\) Gilpin’s photographs help to define symbols for the Navajo as she labels them as a Navaho Woman and a Navaho Silversmith in order to dominate the suppression of Navajo resistance to reforms like the IRA and the stock reduction program. Thus, allowing the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Collier to control the way in which the public saw Navajos and what was deemed as acceptable behavior from them.

Although both non-native and working on the Navajo reservation, Gilpin and Thomas’ photographic imagery differs in that Gilpin’s images act as controlling images that present Navajo as successfully assimilated and stoic whereas Thomas creates

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\(^{252}\) Collins, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” 119.

\(^{253}\) Ibid.
photographic murals that are designed to reveal the multifaceted complexity of contemporary Navajo life. Schacter claims that Thomas is strongly influenced by the photography of Laura Gilpin, but, in his photographs, Thomas does not seek to hide Native American resistance or strength. His photographic subjects are not passive participants or representative of specific types but share the role of the author with Thomas as they allow him to photograph them. In John, Sam, and Steph (Figure 13) in which the three are photographed with text written on their faces of what they answered when asked about a proposal to use reclaimed wastewater for snowmaking at a ski area in the San Francisco Peaks. John, Sam, and Steph are the authors of their individual answers as well as through their collaboration with Thomas as he speaks with them and he photographs them. Additionally, Thomas is willing to show Native courage and defiance unlike Gilpin as can be seen in Native Pride (Figure 14). In both John, Sam, and Steph and Native Pride Thomas counters the notion of Navajo as stoic and controlled that Gilpin promotes in her photographs by placing photographs that demonstrate their resistance and strength.

Thomas’ presence as a photographer on the Navajo Nation, can be compared to the work of Hillers, O’Sullivan, Curtis, and Gilpin in that he is not Native and he came to the Navajo Reservation by way of the United States governmental program—the Indian Health Services—where he used the medium of black and white photography to document his interactions with the people he met. Thomas’ photographic work departs from the work of these earlier photographers, however, as his photographs demonstrate a closer relationship with those he photographs an attempt to depict of people in his

community as they actually are rather than as he sees them. He is also willing to show what was edited out of earlier photographs. Unlike O’Sullivan’s constructed landscapes that depict the land as vast and devoid of life—seen in images like Sand dunes (Figure 19)—or cropping images to suggest dramatic geological upheaval—seen in Witches Rocks (Figure 20)—, Thomas creates photographs of people and places them directly into the landscape which they inhabit. This can be seen in murals such as Navajo Code Talkers (Figure 10) or Untitled (Figure 2). Some of Thomas’ work also contrasts with the work of Gilpin. Although Schacter writes that Thomas is strongly influenced by Gilpin’s photographic work on the Navajo Nation, Thomas uses the photographic language of earlier photographers like Gilpin to promote images of Native empowerment and resistance. Thomas’ photographic mural, Native Pride (Figure 14), makes a loud statement of power and endurance on a public billboard. Other murals like Untitled (Figure 2) and Green Room (Figures 12 - 12.3) which have an activist message pushing for an end to uranium mining by highlighting the human cost of mining on the Navajo reservation. Whereas Gilpin’s images hide Native resistance to policies like the IRA and the stock reduction program, Thomas’ murals focus on depicting, revealing, and amplifying what Gilpin tried to hide by blowing up his original images.

**Thomas in the Context of Contemporary Navajo Photographers**

Although Thomas is not Native, his photographic murals bear relation to the photographic practice of Will Wilson and Don James, which is a key point of context for his work. Contemporary Navajo photographic artists like Wilson and James engage with the medium in a manner similar to that of Thomas. All three photographers foreground the interactions that they have with the people who are the subjects of the images. Despite
their use of photographic imagery to incite discussion and thwart narrowed ideas perpetuated by earlier anthropological and ethnographic images, each artist approaches photography differently in order to depict contemporary Native American daily life.

Wilson utilizes the tintype to directly address the work of Curtis, specifically the photographs from *The North American Indian*—which I discussed earlier—in his photographic series, *The Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange (CIPX).* Unlike Wilson, James created color photographs for his book, *One Nation, One Year: A Navajo Photographer’s 365-day Journey into a World of Discovery, Life, and Hope* that are read more as an artistic and technical family album with short captions about the individuals pictured. Thomas is not directly influenced by Wilson or James, but his photographs bear similarities to both Wilson’s studio portraits and James’ social documentary images, which yields images that adopt both the aesthetic quality of the studio portrait with the candid nature of social documentary photographs.

Wilson is a Santa Fe-based Diné artist who spent a large part of his early life on the Navajo Nation, mostly in Tuba City, Arizona.255 His photographic series, *CIPX* directly addresses the photographic work of Curtis, which I have discussed previously. Wilson explains that he “intend[s] to resume the documentary mission of Curtis from the standpoint of a 21st century indigenous, trans-customary, cultural practitioner” and therefore “supplant Curtis’s Settler gaze.”256 He makes tintype photographs to create one of a kind portraits which he gifts to the person being photographed with the understanding that he will create a large-scale scan of the image and use it as part of his


body of work. A tintype is 19th century photographic technology that involves the use of a thin sheet of metal that is coated with light-sensitive chemicals and need to be “coated, sensitized, exposed, and developed in a matter of minutes.” Like Curtis, Wilson works in the tradition of studio portraiture, but Wilson differs in encouraging his “collaborators,” the subjects of his photographs to bring significant items to include in the photographs. CIPX directly engages with Curtis’ photographic process as well as the notion of Native Americans as a “vanishing race.” Wilson explains that he thinks that “many people still see indigenous people through this antiquated lens” and that “Curtis’ images function…to illustrate some…understanding of what authentic Indians should look like without taking into account that Native Americans today are very much alive, powerful, and resurgent.” An extension of his CIPX series is Wilson’s Talking Tintypes which uses an app called Layar to attach video to the image itself so that the image is the code that allows the viewer to view a video related to the image, granting his subjects a high-tech option to talk back to the viewer in a manner both impossible and unthinkable for Curtis’ subjects.

In his CIPX series, Wilson produces portraits of individuals using an older method of photography—the tintype—which he then scans to produce larger productions of these images. The photograph, Zig Jackson, Citizen of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, Professor of Photography, Savannah College of Art and Design (Figure 26) depicts a man seated wearing a button-down shirt and a hat. He holds a Canon

257 Engel, “No Reserve.”
260 Engel, “No Reserve.”
camera in his left hand that points at the photographer and the viewer. Behind him stands another individual who holds up an object hiding their face from view. Another image, *Barbara Tyner* (Figure 27) portrays a woman with short hair facing directly into the camera. She wears a necklace, ring, and bracelet. Her left hand is uplifted as she holds a pen. Wilson’s photograph *Andy Everson, a Citizen of the K’ómokos First Nation* (Figure 28) also shows Everson dressed as a K’ómokos Imperial Stormtrooper261 combines tribal dress with a popular culture character. Wilson’s CIPX photographs demonstrate a focus on depicting Native Americans the way they would like to be represented giving them increasing authorship and authority, as opposed to those pictured in Curtis’ photographs, who were instructed how to pose and given specific props.

Thomas’ photographic murals are similar to the black and white tintype portraits from the CIPX series in the physical objects that are produced as well as the interactions that the artists have with the people portrayed. While Wilson operates in the context of studio photography and his sitters are photographed within that space, Thomas photographs people in their own spaces. Still, Thomas strives to create a similar sense of intimacy and connection. Thomas spends time with the people he photographs, “in their space, having conversations with them and from that [interaction] comes images that [he uses] with the understanding” that they are going to be blown up into photographic murals.262 Both photographers work in collaboration with their sitters with the understanding that the interaction will result in a smaller production of a photographic image as well as be reproduced in larger-scale for larger photographic projects.

The main difference between the photographic work of Wilson and Thomas is that Thomas does not work in the context of studio photography. Thomas takes his camera with him as he interacts people in their space and in the community much in the way of social documentary photography. This is evident when viewing Thomas’ photographs where the sitter is sometimes out of focus or not fully in frame. Thomas does not capture an image of a single individual or individuals in the way that studio photography does, but rather comments on social issues through his photographic work. When asked if or how he felt his work might relate to the work of Wilson, Thomas explained that he feels that they are both telling stories “using different techniques of the same medium;” whereas Wilson comes from a tradition of studio portraiture, Thomas views himself as coming from a tradition of social documentary photography. Thomas’ interest in bringing his camera out into the spaces of his community and influence of social documentary photography is similar to the practice of photographer Don James.

James, who is Navajo, grew up on the Navajo Nation. In 2008, James set out to spend a year traveling around the Navajo Nation and capturing “the Navajo people and their stories…on his Nikon D200 digital camera” for Albuquerque The Magazine, a project which developed into the photographic book One Nation, One Year: A Navajo Photographer’s 365-day Journey into a World of Discovery, Life, and Hope. Combining images of people on the Navajo Nation with short descriptions or text written by Karyth Becenti, the book presents a selection of more than 105,000 color photos taken

263 Ibid.
264 Don James Jr., Karyth Becenti, and Lexi Petronis, One Nation, One Year: A Navajo Photographer’s 365-day Journey into a World of Discovery, Life, and Hope (Los Ranchos, New Mexico: Rio Grande Books and Albuquerque the Magazine, 2010), front cover.
265 Ibid, back cover.
by James, which provide a glimpse into modern Navajo culture.\textsuperscript{266} James explains that the project was a means of celebrating the ways people on the Navajo Nation define themselves as individuals.\textsuperscript{267}

James’ photographic project is organized by the month, beginning in February 2008 and ending in February 2009. Most of the photographs are color portraits, often including some landscape and architecture. The photograph, \textit{March 2, 2008 5:44 PM} (\textbf{Figure 29}) depicts a man riding on a motorcycle wearing a black, leather jacket, a scarf covering his mouth, and sunglasses. It is apparent that the motorcycle is motion as the building in the background and the parked cars are blurred. The description reads: “James Yellowman, Andorra Holly, Parnell Thomas, and Samuel Captain, Jr., ride together as part of the Mossi Riders from Montezuma Creek, Arizona. The 45 Cat Riders are a group of family, friends, and coworkers who frequently explore the Four Corners area on their motorcycles.”\textsuperscript{268} James’ photographs, \textit{September 29, 2008 4:29 PM} (\textbf{Figure 30}) shows a woman leaning outside of a window with one hand supporting her chin. She is named in the description that says: “Alena Sayitsey works at the Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park in Arizona, where she meets people from all over the world who come to see and photograph the wind-carved sandstone columns that spread across the park’s 140 square miles. Picture-taking is also in Alena’s future; she has plans to own a photography studio, where she will take school and family portraits.”\textsuperscript{269} Though each of James’ photographs

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid, front cover.
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid, 127.
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid, 27.
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid, 84.
skillfully taken, they are candid and appear as if they could be part of a personal photo album of family or friends.

Thomas’ photographs are closely comparable to James’. Thomas works with a specific community on and near the Navajo Nation as a physician and as a photographer rather than traveling around like James, but both speak to people and document their interactions by taking photographs. James’ photographs from One Nation, One Year depicts his interactions with has with the people he photographed as he traveled around the Navajo Nation and photographed various people that he met along the way. Additionally, the photographic images that are produced through James’ and Thomas’ interactions are very similar not only in subject matter but also in the way in which the photographs are candid and the photographic subjects are shown in motion.

The similarity between the work of Thomas and James is best seen in Thomas’ photograph Minnie Chasing her Sheep and Goats Through Navajo Creek (Figure 5) and James’ photograph February 29, 2008 3:56 PM (Figure 31). Both images depict women facing away from the camera going after their sheep who are present in the background. Thomas’ photograph, though, is read as increasingly dramatic and has more movement as Minnie’s skirt swings to the left of her body, her right foot is straightened behind her, and her right arm is outstretched behind her body as her left arm is bent in front of her providing momentum to move her forward. James’ photograph, however, seems much more documentary as the woman is shown with her back facing the viewer as she walks along the road after her sheep. James’ photograph portrays a wider field of vision as he photographs the entire landscape including the sky, the desert hills, and the street signs as well as the woman and her sheep. The field of vision in Thomas’, however, is much
narrower as he crops his photograph so that Minnie and her sheep and goats are the main focus of the image. In comparison to Thomas’ photographs, James’ images from One Nation, One Year are more documentary. Although both are skilled photographers, Thomas’ photographs and his photographic murals are much more focused on aesthetics of the image whereas James’ photographs are more straightforward and literal snapshots of his interactions as he hears the stories of the people he meets along his journey around the Navajo Nation.

Contemporary Navajo photography offers a context for Thomas’ work, even if he is not Native American. He has lived and worked on the Navajo Nation for more than thirty years. But, despite the length of time he has spent on the Navajo Nation, as I discussed in the first chapter, he is still an outsider, and identifies himself as such. The implications of discussing Thomas in this particular context may seem to advance the history of outsiders or people who are not Native American using photography to observe, study, and exoticize Native people, however, Thomas’ approach to photography and those he photographs does not follow the same trajectory as earlier photographs produced by outsiders. Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie is a Seminole, Muscogee, and Diné photographer who discussed the way in which photography serves the interests of Native photographers as they “dismantle Eurocentric representations of indigenous people” as the camera is “[n]o longer…held by an outsider looking in, the camera is held with brown hands opening familiar worlds…[as] we document ourselves with a humanizing eye.”270 In her excerpt “When is a Photograph Worth a Thousand Words?” Tsinhnahjinnie also explains that her father’s family who are Diné did not have many

photographs due to a philosophy which she describes as protective. Thomas exists in that liminal space of being an outsider and an insider in his community as he is not Navajo, however, he is not an outsider looking in. Rather, Thomas is an outsider living with, working with, and photographing people in his community which he has been a part of for more than thirty years. Like Tsinhnahjinnie, Wilson, and James, Thomas looks to dismantle, resist, and counter Eurocentric, romanticized misperceptions of Native Americans—specifically Navajo—with his photographs.

Thomas’ photographs and photographic murals exist somewhere between the studio portraiture practice that Wilson operates within and James’ social documentary photographs. The underlying similarity between the three, though, is the desire to connect with individual people and tell their individual stories through the medium of photography. This places him in contrast to photographers like Hillers, O’Sullivan, Curtis, and Gilpin whose processes were tied to efforts of salvage ethnography and the pervasive belief that the Navajo were destined to vanish. Situating Thomas’ photographic work within the larger history of anthropological photography for a deeper understanding of the way in which he counters ideas of race and difference that photography historically presented as truth or fact. Additionally, this context allows for a deeper analysis of the way in which Thomas draws artistic inspiration from these photographs, but challenges the narratives associated with them in a way that more closely aligns him with the efforts of contemporary Navajo photographers like Wilson and James who also engage with photography to depict people who are Native the way in which they want to be portrayed.

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Conclusion

James ‘Chip’ Thomas’ photographic murals function as an extension of the artist’s medical practice by resisting imagery that presents Navajo as a racial type who are passive and destined to vanish to help to heal past misperceptions of Native American people. He resists these stereotypes by presenting the strength, pride, and resilience of the Navajo in his community and pasting his photographs predominantly in the same sited community that allowed him to photograph them. Having lived and worked on the Navajo Nation for more than thirty years, Thomas has built a foundation of trust and respect with the people in his community whom he photographs.

With his public murals, Thomas has an ongoing conversation with his community that allows for public support but also public criticism about the subjects that he chooses to highlight. His art counters the fictitious stereotypes presented in earlier anthropological photographs and he, like Wilson and James, seeks to collaborate with the people he photographs to present their stories and experiences as well as his own. As a physician, Thomas’ artistic work often focuses on creating an environment of wellness and images he sees as healing. His murals demonstrate the relationship and trust between Thomas and the people who allow him to photograph them. They also represent his role as an author who works in collaboration with the people who trust him to photograph them in reflecting his own experiences. Remaining questions, though, are how effective and if Thomas’ murals achieve his goal of presenting images that are meant to heal and create a community of wellness. This is difficult to quantify; however, further research could be undertaken in order to examine the impact of Thomas’ murals as a means of healing a larger community.
In the context of Native American art, the notion of authenticity is often applied or transferred from the object to the author or creator. The term authenticity is often unclear and problematic, but the transfer of the authenticity from the object to the author demonstrates the importance of the role of the author. In his photographic murals, Thomas does not claim to be Native American or to represent a quote on quote authentic Native American experience. Rather, he focuses on representing his own experience with the people he photographs. His photographic murals visually depict his relationship or conversation with various individuals who are often culturally Native. He exists in a liminal space in that he is an outsider as he is not Navajo but an insider who has lived and worked on the Navajo Nation for more than thirty years. Thomas addresses the fact that he is an outsider in all of his interviews, but his interactions with the people who allow him to photograph them demonstrate his close relationship with them. He collaborates with his subjects so that they too are the authors of the story that they tell with the photographic murals.

If I continue my research on Thomas and his photographic murals, I will more closely examine Thomas’ work in the context and history of street art and muralism. Street art, graffiti art, and muralism are often associated with urban and population dense areas. Thomas works predominantly on and near the Navajo Nation in the Painted Desert, an area much more rural than urban, spread out and less densely populated. There is still a large amount of traffic as it is around Highway 89 and situated between Flagstaff and Tuba City, on the way to the Grand Canyon. Analyzing the contrast in landscape of street art in urban centers versus street art in more rural landscapes would further advance my topic.
Another aspect of Thomas’ work that I think warrants future research would be the impact of social media on his work as an artist. I briefly discuss Thomas’ use of social media like Instagram, but my discussion is not exhaustive, and I believe more can be done on this topic. Instagram and other social media sites help to create a virtual community of people from all over the world. Using these sites to promote artwork allows artists to share their work with a larger audience. Social media also presents self-curated exhibition of an artist’s work, their collaborations, their lives, etc. Questions that I think should be addressed in the future are: How Thomas’ Instagram, @Jetsonorama, functions as an extension of his photographic work? Does his Instagram account function separate from his work as a photographer and a muralist? Does the larger audience or virtual community alter the dialog that Thomas is having with his original community that he lives within? and, lastly, Do the interactions and audience reception online differ from those in person?

Other theoretical frameworks, like reception theory, would advance knowledge on the topic of Thomas and his work as a photographer and a muralist. Thomas’ work as a muralist has various levels of audience whom he is creating work for and who interact with his work. The original group that Thomas creates his photographic murals for are the people in his community who he knows personally. His work, however, is accessible and meant to be viewed by people outside of his community as well in that he places them on the sides of market stands and structures that are on the side of Highway 89 near the Grand Canyon. This second audience group can then be divided into two smaller sets: people who happen across Thomas’ work and those who seek out Thomas’ work. Thomas’ work is discussed on some travel blog sites and various comments on Instagram
discuss where to find his work, demonstrating that some visitors specifically visit Thomas’ public murals as tourist sites or destinations. Finally, Thomas has a virtual audience for his photographic works on his website and Instagram. Framing his work in relation to reception theory would further the investigation into how Thomas’ work functions within the various communities he works within and how his audiences respond to his public works. In Chapter One, I discuss some of the audience reception of Thomas’ work, but reframing the discussion in terms of reception theory and delving deeper would benefit the analysis of Thomas’ work even further.

My thesis contributes to a broader analysis of Thomas’ photographic work by situating it within the larger art historical and anthropological discourse about the photography of Native Americans by non-Native photographers as well as the work of contemporary photographers who are legally and culturally Native American. Most of the literature about Thomas and his artistic work focuses solely on him, the formal qualities of his photographs, and his work as a physician. While these sources are helpful and begin a discussion about Thomas’ artistic work, they do not critically analyze his photographs and how they function within the larger history of anthropological and ethnographical photographs of Native Americans as well as the work of contemporary Navajo photographers and other photomuralists in general.

In my research for my thesis, I have found that it is often difficult to find scholarship about contemporary muralists or street artists, like Thomas, outside of online articles, blog posts, and short surveys about street art. While these are helpful, they do not provide a scholarly analysis of the work that they discuss. This thesis is a jumping off point for future art historical scholarship focused on contemporary street artists or
muralists. It could function as a model for future studies of situating the work of contemporary street artists, like Thomas, within a larger art historical context. Understanding the larger context of a street artist’s work allows for a better grasp of how the artist’s work functions within art history. Thomas, for example, was explicitly influenced by Gilpin’s photographs and JR’s photographic murals. His work does not exist, though, outside of the context of other anthropological photographs produced of Native Americans or the work of contemporary Navajo photographers. Situating his work in this specific context demonstrates, more fully, the ways in which Thomas resists the work of anthropological or ethnographical photographers.

Likewise, Thomas is in a larger conversation with the contemporary photographs of Navajo photographers like Wilson and James. Although he is not directly influenced by the work of Wilson and James, the three artists alter the dominant narrative of anthropological photographs that portray Native Americans as a disappearing and passive or stoic racial group. Thomas’ photographic murals invite a larger discussion concerning the function of photographs in healing communities.
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Figures

Figure 1

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.3
Figure 3

Figure 4
Figure 5

Figure 6
Figure 9

Figure 10
Figure 11

Figure 11.1