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Photography by Native Americans: Creation and Revision

Mick Gidley

The first analogy I found for some of the trends I had noticed in Native American photography came from postcolonial literary criticism. I thought it would be possible and profitable to pursue a parallelism between the role of the English language as deliberated in that critical discourse and the way I saw American Indian photographers, especially during recent decades, handling the earlier heritage of their chosen medium. I believed it would follow that there would be a relationship between the generic imperatives of western literary forms, such as the novel, as felt by indigenous writers and discerned by postcolonial critics, and the generic and iconographic constraints of photography as inherited by Native American camera workers. As the pertinence of the parallelism grew upon me I also increasingly realized that in postcolonial literary criticism the degree to which indigenous writers must inevitably adopt the tongue and the forms of their colonialist conquerors has long been a matter of contention.

Nevertheless, though the procedure inevitably represents an oversimplification, let me quote three short passages that between them evoke what I mean; in reading them, if you substitute the term "photography" for "language" and "English," you will see their relevance. The first passage is from the popular postcolonial textbook by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, first published in 1989:

Appropriation is the process by which the language is made to "bear the burden" of one's own cultural experience. . . . Language is adopted as a tool and utilized to express widely *differing* cultural experiences. (38-39)

The second quotation is from Salman Rushdie (the person who coined the phrase "the Empire writes back" appropriated by Ashcroft and his co-

authors), and is taken from his essay "Imaginary Homelands," published in 1992:

Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of [English] to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that *it needs remaking for our own purposes*. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps *because* of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. *To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free*. (17, my emphasis)

The third passage, a variation on this theme, is nearer to the specifically American focus of this essay. It is by Gerald Vizenor, from his *Manifest Manners* of 1994:

The English language has been the linear tongue of the colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, the simulation of tribal cultures, manifest manners, and the unheard literature of dominance in tribal communities; at the same time, this mother tongue of paracolonialism has been a language of invincible imagination and liberation for many people of the postindian worlds. English . . . has carried some of the best stories of endurance, the shadows of tribal creative literature, and now that same language of dominance bears the creative literature of distinguished postindian authors in cities. . . . The shadows and language of tribal poets and novelists could be the new ghost dance literature, the shadow literature of liberation that enlivens tribal survivance. (105-106)¹

Photography is clearly not as all-embracing as a language, but, to put it crudely, I am wondering whether photographs by Native Americans might reveal the same or similar ambiguities and possibilities. In some ways, the tensions could be even more fraught, in that photography is so overtly a *western* medium, one that has arisen out of the pronounced development of "technology," so often seen as intrusive and antipathetic to tribal cultures. And, of course, there is all too much evidence of the intrusive nature of photography in Indian country: witness, for example, the image titled *Tourist Photographer at Blackfeet Sun Dance*, probably made in 1910 by J. H. Sherburne, yet another tourist photographer there that day. It centralizes a white man among teepees – visually lord of all he surveys – with a huge

¹ Discussions of such ideas, with reference to Native American literature, are numerous: see, for example, Weaver, especially chapter 1.

view camera ready to record one of the last sacred ceremonies of the Blackfeet, a ceremony already outlawed by the US government.² Given such tensions between the actual situation of Native Americans and the practice of photography in their midst, if there is “writing back” by indigenous authors, could we say there is “photographing back”?

It has become ever more noticeable that major Native American writers, including N. Scott Momaday, Vizenor and Leslie Marmon Silko, have been interested in and have used photography. Momaday deployed family photographs in his Kiowa memoir *The Names* (1976) and has introduced several books of photographs of Indian life. Vizenor deployed photographs of tribal scenes in *The People Named the Chippewa* (1984) and has written extensively about the medium. And Silko wove wonderful Pueblo images, many made by her father, Lee Marmon, into her mixed mode book *Storyteller* (1981). Other American Indian writers, including George Horse Capture and James Welch, have introduced and, more significantly, have *authenticated*, as it were, collections of photographs. The Creek/Navajo poet Joy Harjo even went so far as to produce exciting prose poems, *Secrets From the Center of the World* (1989), to illustrate – and be illustrated by – Stephen Strom’s color photographs of Navajo desert sites. In 1992, Silko wrote the Preface to the book *Partial Recall* edited by Lucy R. Lippard, the first collection of essays by Native Americans to interrogate the role of the photograph from a Native perspective, an anthology that includes an essay by Vizenor.³ Clearly, in the interactive field of force that is culture, very much including Native American culture, ideas of photography have had their own magnetism.

In another brief Silko essay, “The Indian With a Camera,” first published in 1990, she came near to speaking of “photographing back,” and in terms somewhat reminiscent of those used in postcolonial criticism. She remembered her childhood fascination with the pictures taken by her grandfather Henry Marmon, which were kept in a large Hopi basket, and she recalled that even traditional Laguna homes often had “a great many photographs of family members.” That is, as she herself generalized from her experience,

² Sherburne’s image is reproduced in Farr’s *Reservation Blackfeet* 194.

³ Much more could be said about the mixed mode texts mentioned here; Shamoan Zamir (Kings College London), at a symposium on American Cultural Encounters at Goldsmith’s College London in June 1998, presented the outline of such a study, and then delivered a substantial part of it to the annual conference of the Netherlands American Studies Association, held in Middelburg in May 2003. For Harjo, see Harjo and Strom. Lippard’s *Partial Recall* contains not only Silko’s preface and Vizenor’s essay on a photograph of Ishi, but interesting pieces by Jolene Rickard and other Native practitioners of photography.

“Native Americans synthesized, then incorporated, what was alien and new” – including the camera. To Euro-Americans, on the other hand, while traditional Indian artists are reassuring – they show that Native Americans, “while not extinct, . . . are not truly part of American society” – “the Indian with a camera is frightening.” “Euro-Americans,” Silko asserted, “desperately need to believe that the indigenous people and cultures that were destroyed were somehow less than human; Indian photographers are proof to the contrary.” “The Indian with a camera is an omen of a time in the future that all Euro-Americans unconsciously dread: the time when the indigenous people of the Americas will retake their land. Euro-Americans distract themselves with whether a real, or traditional, or authentic Indian would, should, or could work with a camera. (Get those Indians back to their basket making!)” (175-179). I have written elsewhere, if briefly, about a photograph taken in 1938 by the anthropologist Wolfgang Von Hagan of a half-naked Jicaque man “looking” as the caption has it, “at a Leica manual,” an ambiguous image that plays precisely upon the attitudes Silko evokes (Gidley, “Reflecting Cultural Identity” 259).

In 1984, William E. Farr published *The Reservation Blackfeet, 1882-1945: A Photographic History of Cultural Survival*, and he, too, declared that photographs were much revered by Indians: after 1910, he said, “portraits of loved ones . . . were . . . protected” and “by the 1930s and 1940s snapshot albums and Kodak Brownie cameras were almost as popular on the reservation as beyond its boundaries.” (One of the many images he reproduced by unnamed – and perhaps now unnamable – Blackfeet photographers is a 1930s photograph of fellow Blackfeet Medicine Boss Ribs selling miniature teepees at Glacier National Park, adjacent to the Blackfeet Reservation.) Moreover, Farr claimed that it was, as he phrased it, the “mechanical aspect of the medium,” “the camera as an impartial witness,” that “relaxed many concerns Indian people traditionally have entertained” about “other forms of historical documentation.” “Original white bias,” he asserted, “could be filtered through Blackfeet eyes or a different generational interest. And gradually that interest could be focused on what the photographs said about the daily life and interests of *Indian* people” (xiii).

Novelist James Welch wrote a personal Foreword to Farr’s book, and revealed that he shared such views. (They are views that have, of course, a long history: too many commentators to cite have felt that photography has a special purchase on material reality, that its renditions of the external world are somehow more “true” than those of other media of representation. And these views, as we will see, have also been the basis of play by Native pho-

tographers.) Interestingly, Welch placed great faith in the indexical power of the photographs; he called upon his readers to “look into the faces” depicted in them as if into the actual faces of his Blackfeet ancestors. He saw the photographs as conveying a narrative of “a people trying to adapt to a new way of life and of a government’s often misguided attempts to recreate a people consistent with its notion of a homogenous America. As the photographs witness, many of the Blackfeet went along with the program, learning to farm, to read, to make baskets.” And, he might have added, to take photographs. “Others resisted,” he continued, “not out of innate hostility toward things white but because they could foresee the day when white culture would replace their own” (viii). He did not add that resistance, too, might come – at least partly – *through* photography. And that is what I want to turn to now.

I confess that this essay had its actual origins more in three empirical observations than in postcolonial thought. Much of my previous work has been about the representation of Indians in historical photographs. I have been especially interested in the work of Edward S. Curtis, historically perhaps the most influential image-maker of Indians. When I started to work on modern and contemporary Native American photographers, I could not help noticing that they frequently referenced the historical legacy, including Curtis, in overt ways. This was my first empirical finding. Let me give just two examples.

In 1994 Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, who is of mixed Creek, Seminole and Navajo descent, produced her extraordinary *Photographic Memoirs of an Aboriginal Savant (living on occupied land)*. These “memoirs” have received quite a lot of attention; all I wish to point up here is that its collages deploy manifestly recognizable photographs from the past. For example, one “page” of the *Memoirs* reproduces images of such figures as Geronimo and Wovoka (Fig. 1). The one of Wovoka, the Paiute leader of the pan-Indian Ghost Dance religion of the late 1880s, was cut out from a double portrait with silent movie star Tim McCoy taken in 1926 by an unknown publicity photographer (Fig. 2). The 1926 image was most likely made to reinforce a sense of the “dangers” of the Indian West played upon by McCoy’s films, in that the spread of Wovoka’s Ghost Dance movement fed white fears of an Indian uprising and led to the massacre of hundreds of Sioux Ghost dancers at Wounded Knee in 1890. In Tsinhnahjinnie’s “page,” the Wovoka portrait, like those of other Native American leaders, is used as the basis of identity cards. With their names, tribal affiliations and occupations (“Activist”) printed below, the identity cards are then arranged seemingly haphazardly –

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and including one for Tsinhnahjinnie herself (designated “Indian Artist”) – below the words “Don’t leave the Rez Without It!” The “past” and its injustices zoom into the “present,” and vice versa, which implies a kind of equivalence between Wovoka, Tsinhnahjinnie and, say, Black South Africans under apartheid, each segregated into their own supposed “homelands.”⁴

In 1989, David Avalos, who is of Mexican *mestizo* descent and a co-founder of the Border Art Workshop in San Diego, exhibited a very large (eight feet long) installation piece. He superimposed the word “wilderness,” letter by letter, onto the faces – or, more accurately, the photographed faces – of ten of the original inhabitants of the continent. The faces are sequenced to alternate between female and male and to “represent” most of the aboriginal culture areas of North America – *if* you recognize them. They are all, in fact, Curtis photographs, the fourth from the left, for instance, being a haunting portrait of Joseph of the Nez Perce, made when Joseph visited Seattle in 1903, a year before the chief’s death. Avalos’s incorporation into the installation of the dictionary definition of “wilderness” – “a tract or region uncultivated or uninhabited by human beings,” “an area essentially undisturbed by human activity,” and so on, but also ending on “a bewildering situation” – points up the dominant culture’s frequent vision of the status of the continent’s aboriginal peoples, and brings to mind Puritan notions of the “errand into the wilderness.”⁵

I would want to go a stage further, and read the piece partly as a work of protest against such a primitivist vision of the continent’s aboriginal peoples, but even more as one granting at least symbolic agency to Native Americans. You may remember the vivid phrasing of Sioux autobiographer Luther Standing Bear: “Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’ and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people. To us it was tame. . . . When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from [the white man’s] approach, *then* it was that for us the ‘Wild West’ began” (xix). On the one hand, Avalos’s installation sees these people as defined and demeaned by the dominant culture, designated as no more than the flora and fauna – and Curtis himself had paternalistically claimed in his caption for

⁴ Pages from Tsinhnahjinnie’s *Aboriginal Savant* series are reproduced in Alison, *Native Nations* 284-285, and are discussed, among other places, in Lippard, “Independent Identities” 134-148.

⁵ Avalos’s *Wilderness* is reproduced as a two-page spread in Lippard, *Mixed Blessings* 174-175. Still the fullest treatment of the “errand” trope is Miller’s *Errand into the Wilderness*.

the image of a young Mojave woman, Mosa (1903; Fig. 3), used fourth from the right in Avalos's *Wilderness*, that she was akin to a "fawn of the forest" (caption in portfolio to Vol. 3 [1908]). Certainly, in his image, with the highlights falling only on her bright eyes, her painted cheeks, and her braided necklace, she seems to make a direct appeal to the viewer while also intimating timidity. There is *something* fleeting about her. But on the other hand, Avalos's installation also grants the Native figures an abiding presence, perhaps even enhances it. (Of course, it might be argued that this is a presence only in photographic representation, and that is theoretically the case; but, as I have argued elsewhere, what makes the Curtis portraits so powerful, despite the often otherwise damaging support his project gave to the dominant culture's view of Indians, is their testimony to the ontological presence of their subjects [Gidley, "Edward S. Curtis's Photographs"].)

In effect, in creating new work, photographers such as Tsinhnahjinnie and Avalos are also engaged in the revision of the past – indeed, revision is creation. We see the same thing in the work of the Canadian Mohawk artist Shelley Niro, some of whose photographic output was featured in the Native Nations show in London in 1998. In *Always a Gentleman*, the incorporation of the historical photograph, along with the (ironic?) caption *Always a Gentleman*, serves (as do other historical shots in a variety of her sequences) to punctuate two contrasting self-portraits set on either side of it that, visually speaking, subvert straightforward gender identification. Without the historical photograph, we would have only a composite self-portrait. With it, Niro has created a reflexive *commentary on* identity, making it an issue not only of gender but also of Indian-ness.⁶

My second empirical observation was that in modern and contemporary Indian photography – even when recognizable photographic allusions appear to be absent – there is often still a degree, sometimes a high degree, of reflexivity. An image (probably made in the 1940s) of a boy clown figure by the Hopi photographer Owen Seumtewa is typical of what I mean. The most noticeable thing is that it depicts a moment of rest, a moment aside, as it were, rather than a high point in the ceremonies. The boy's painted face is caught in close up, in repose: this, in itself, marks a contrast with influential early twentieth-century ("white") images of Hopi ceremonies, where photog-

⁶ Examples of Niro's work may be found in Alison's *Native Nations* 274-279; I have not yet formally identified the original of the historical image in *Always a Gentleman* (279).

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raphers, such as Curtis, Adam Clark Vroman and Richard Townshend, almost inevitably went for high drama, especially during the Snake Dance.⁷ And of course, traditionally, while the clowns might make fun, their fundamental purpose is serious: to lead the people on the right path.

More recently, in 1996, Dorothy Grandbois of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa made a series of color images of students at the Sherman Indian School in Riverside, California. When you look at just one of these pictures – a typical one is that of three young men in modish casual wear – they seem straightforward documents, what in the late nineteenth century was called “record photography,” but when viewed as a sequence, they start to look like superior studies for an American high school senior yearbook. In effect, that is what they *are*, and – in the face of low graduation rates among Native Americans – they affirm, even champion, an Indian academic presence. And they do this precisely by reanimating the genre of the high school yearbook photograph. (One image, for example, depicts young women attending with pride to one another’s hair.) In doing so, they provide a contrast with another of the pages from Tsinhnahjinnie’s *Memoirs of an Aboriginal Savant*, this one titled *Chinle High* and named after the biggest high school on the Navajo reservation. Its caption, under lines of school full-face portraits, each with the eyes blotted out by a black line, as if to indicate the subject’s metaphorical blindness or, even, individual erasure, reads: “Non-native teachers preparing / native students / for the / outside world / Outside the reservation / Outside an aboriginal existence / They meant well.”⁸ While Grandbois affirms and Tsinhnahjinnie questions, the works of *both* are reflexive, and the reflexivity involves the very nature of photography as a medium.

Empirical observation number three – doubtless already apparent – was that Indian identity has been, and is, one of the key recurring subjects for Native American photographers. Horace Poolaw was a Kiowa who began to take pictures professionally during the inter-war years. As well as doing run-of-the-mill studio portrait work, he increasingly undertook the task of documenting the public life of his people. Interestingly, he is on record as wishing not to be remembered himself but as wanting his people “to remember themselves through [his] pictures.” His *Kiowa Group in American Indian Exposition Parade, Anadarko, Oklahoma, 1941* (Fig. 4) frames a big auto-

⁷ Seuptewa’s clown image is reproduced in Masayesva and Younger’s *Hopi Photographers* 56; this book also includes relevant “white” images. For further discussion of Snake Dance photography, see Gidley, “R. B. Townshend’s 1903 Snake Dance Photographs in Focus.”

⁸ A portfolio of the Grandbois images is included in Johnson 107-111. Tsinhnahjinnie’s *Chinle High* may be found in Alison’s *Native Nations* 285.

mobile “advancing” towards us, with women figures atop the car’s roof, hood and mudguards, all wearing full and flamboyant traditional dress for the parade. That is, the photograph captures their *performance* of their identity as Kiowas. There is a virtual line of descent from such an image to one made in 1995 by Onondaga artist Jeffrey Thomas. It depicts a Lakota named Shoots the Crow in his powwow regalia. According to Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, Thomas photographs such figures precisely because their outfits testify to the self-construction of their identities: the beaded flags and army insignia mark his place in “American” society in the same way that his eagle feathers signify a role in Lakota society (20).⁹

By contrast, Richard Ray Whitman, who is of Yuchi and Pawnee descent, created in 1988 imagery that shows very fraught identities. Titled *Street Chiefs*, it is a series of portraits of homeless and often derelict Indian men and, according to autobiographical notes quoted by Lucy Lippard, it was produced as a comment on the continual dispossession and displacement of indigenous Americans – “the ultimate paradox of the host people Native Americans being homeless, landless in their own homeland” (*Mixed Blessings* 216). And there are manifest and multiple ironies in the juxtaposition of a homeless man below an Oklahoma Department of Agriculture billboard that reads “Buy Oklahoma” (Fig. 5) when, as supposed “Indian Territory,” much of Oklahoma was *given away* to whites. Moreover, the series was specifically meant to combat what Whitman saw as the romantic Curtis images of Indians, which in the 1980s were becoming ever more financially valuable. “The contemporary Indian,” Whitman said, “in the isolation of city canyons and rural reservations is avoided. The boredom, pain, frustration, poverty . . . of our lives is harsh, unattractive and *unmarketable*” (quoted in Lippard, *Mixed Blessings* 216). It is interesting that – in visual terms, in photographic terms – this typical *Street Chief* image is reminiscent of earlier documentary work by such photographers as Dorothea Lange. For example, in *Southern Pacific Railroad Billboard* (1937) Lange depicted two dispossessed migrant men tramping the highway alongside a huge advertisement for the luxury of train travel, its slogan “NEXT TIME TAKE THE TRAIN RELAX” acting as a kind of internal caption: those in the ads could travel while they slept, those on the road had to sleep while they traveled.¹⁰ That is, in order to combat one photographic heritage, Whitman draws upon an-

⁹ Berlo and Phillips also reproduce the Jeffrey Thomas photograph. For more on Poolaw, see Linda Poolaw’s book and her contributions to Johnson 167-186.

¹⁰ Lange’s image is reproduced in numerous places, including Guimond 115.

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other. Needless to say, several of the Native American photographers who have treated Indian cultural identity have done so in overtly autobiographical ways – as we saw in the cases of Shelley Niro and, to some extent, Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie. Lucy Lippard has eloquently analysed a double self-portrait of the New York-based Tlingit photographer Jesse Couday, made in 1984: in it he superimposed a photograph of a traditional Northwest Coast mask over his own likeness. This way, identification with the “traditional” is affirmed, even asserted, but the “individuality” of the subject is, precisely, *not* masked.¹¹

It is interesting that this autobiographical element even appears in the much earlier work of Horace Poolaw. Jolene Rickard has annotated an image of one of Poolaw’s relatives, Trecil Poolaw Unap (Fig. 6), taken in 1929 at Mountain View, Oklahoma, as representing “active resistance in the 20th century.” She sees the road sign as marking the modern “battlefield of Indian resistance.” She interprets what she calls the “provocative” posing of the young woman as a “subtle recognition of woman as representative of the land for both Native and non-Native imaginations.” “Ownership of the space,” she declares, “is reclaimed by the Native by patently rejecting the ‘state.’” At first I thought this might be an *over*-reading of a picture snapped at what is obviously an ordinary road marker. But the shadow of the photographer gives pause for thought. Rickard says merely that it “touches the shadow of the young woman, forming an interesting connection” (Rickard 66). For me that shadow is a Barthesian *punctum*: it is un-gendered or feminine, and says, “I am the person, I was there,” *and* it says, “This is a photograph.” Could it be that Poolaw, at the outset of his professional photographic career, is not interested in “resistance,” as such, but in marking boundaries, precisely *by* blurring them – boundaries of legal control of social actions, of land ownership (as Rickard sees), and even of personal and cultural identity?

My final image, also produced in 1929, is by an unidentified Blackfeet photographer who was employed by Calf Tail, the man depicted in it (Fig. 7). Calf Tail also signed it (at the top) with his mark. Calf Tail sold these postcard images to white visitors at Glacier National Park, adjacent to the Blackfeet Reservation. Of course, in one sense, such activity could be viewed as demeaning. However, in another sense, it is far from it. When times are hard – and in 1929 they were very hard for the Blackfeet – such

¹¹ The mask portrait by Couday (there spelled Cooday) is reproduced, with a commentary emphasizing other things, in Lippard’s *Mixed Blessings* 183.

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trade could ensure physical survival. Moreover, it constitutes a trade in, precisely, the value of *Indian* identity, and represents a thorough appropriation of the medium of photography. May I remind you, as I turn them slightly, of the quotations deployed at the outset of this essay: "Appropriation is the process by which the medium is made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience. . . . Photography is adopted as a tool and utilized to express widely *differing* cultural experiences." I hope I have shown that, so appropriated, photography is remade for Native purposes. It is well known that some American Indian peoples at first thought of photographs as "shadows" and of such photographers as Curtis as "shadow catchers" (Sandweiss 221-224). We have seen that in Horace Poolaw's image of Trecil Poolaw Unap the photographer's own shadow gently touches that of his subject. This could be read as a sign of self-conscious revision. It does not seem contentious to claim that those Indians who, in Rushdie's words, have conquered the medium, are engaged in the process of "making" themselves "free." In so doing, they are bringing into being what Vizenor might well dub "shadow" photography: a photography of their own.

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