REFLECTIONS ON "THE PRINTS OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN" by Jan Howard


How can something be remembered or forgotten when it was never known? In the United States school children do not forget the intricacies of Native American Indian history; they were not taught. The formation of knowledge, discourse, or images about the “Indians” begins on an elemental level—but it is not the level of history. Within 20 years of the devastating battle of Wounded Knee, after thousands of Native Americans had died of starvation and deprivation, what took the place of history were the hundreds of films, Cecil B. DeMille to John Ford, baseball teams called the Indians or Braves, quaint stories of Pocahontas, and the ridiculous image of the Lone Ranger with his Tonto. All this hyper-cultural debris proliferated to further erase the fact that something did happen to the people of the Apache, Cheyenne, Hopi, Navajo, Nez Perces, Plains, Zuni, and multiple other nations. Once history has passed into the mythic or been sequestered by the ridiculous, the effort to know and remember is arduous and complex.

As if from a crash that continues to reverberate, we suffer not a forgetting but a collective amnesia toward the history of these people. In 1865 the 13th Amendment abolished slavery, and in 1866 the 14th Amendment granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States. Collectively, we remember these events as historic; yet, in a parallel inverse manner, we block from historical memory the 14th Amendment’s implicit exclusion of Native Americans from that same status. In 1877 Tolstoy published Anna Karenina, and the Oglala Sioux Crazy Horse was killed at Fort Robinson. Tolstoy’s publication exists at the level of a celebrated fact; the death of Crazy Horse, however, resides somewhere between amnesia and fable.

In his essay “Colonial Alchemy: Reading the Boarding School Experience” in Partial Recall, Gerald McMaster, a Plains Cree from Canada, asks, “Can photographs answer the elusive question of history that has been repeatedly suppressed?” “Could Native people,” or any of us, “scrutinize photograph collections and find a ‘historicity,’ a ‘true America’ somewhere beneath the exota, erotica, simulacra?” In a series of recent publications, McMaster’s question is raised from various and at times devastating perspectives: how can we approach Native American history through the archives of photography?

In Partial Recall, editor Lucy Lippard has compiled a book of inquiry and imagination. Rather than write a theoretical text from her singular point of view, she chose 12 essays on the subject by such Native American writers and artists as Jimmie Durham, Rayna Green, and Jaune Quick-To-See Smith. Following the 12 essays are 76 photographs that go against the grain of stereotypical images and thereby humanize the individuals portrayed. These images are problematic and disturbing precisely because they disrupt a calcified layer of assumptions built up over years of idealization and mythification of the American Indian. Each author in Partial Recall, including Lippard in her introduction, focuses on one or two photographs; Rayna Green looks at Frank Matsura’s Two Girls on Couch (c. 1910) in her essay “Rosebuds of the Plateau”:

I am transfixed by this photo. From the moment I saw it, hanging on the wall, surrounded by other photographs of Indians, contemporaries from the turn of the century, I loved it. There they were, these girls surrounded by Curtis boys dripping dentia, and fur—the sepia kings, shot through spit and petroleum jelly, Lords of the Plains, Potentates of the Potlatch, the Last-Ofs. I take out my immediate distaste on them, but it’s Curtis and the other pinhole illusions I’m after. Get a life, I want to say to them. Quit taking out your fantasies on us. Just give me one in overalls and a cowboy hat. Then we can get serious about what was happening to these people.

Green, who is Cherokee and director of the American Indian Program at the National Museum of American History, has chosen as her place of departure a studio photograph taken by a Japanese immigrant of two Native women on a love seat. The oddity of combinations of people and place invite her fantasy of possible interactions, interiority, and projections.

In her introduction, Lippard initiates this practice of looking intensely at a photograph to cull from it something of a particular history. Through Lippard’s looking, we learn to look at Mary Sharples Schaffer Warren’s 1907 photograph Sampson, Frances Louise, and Leah Beaver. As with Green and her love-seat girls, this photograph arrests Lippard. As a photograph of Native Americans, so unlike the ones we often see, it transmits an aura of lived lives and subjective interactions across and through the lens of the camera. There is dialogue within the photograph that Lippard attempts to elicit:

The Beavers’ portrait seems a classic visualization of what anthropologists call ‘intersubjective time.’

It commemorates a reciprocal moment (rather than a cannibalistic one), where the emphasis is on interaction and communication; a moment in which subject and object are caught in exchange within shared time.

Throughout Partial Recall, such bits and pieces reveal Native American histories caught in webs of complexity. There are myriad comments on how the technology of photography was enlisted to proffer stereotypes and soft-focused idealizations of tribes believed to be on the verge of extinction. However, the main substance of these interwoven essays is how to contemplate the multiple sides of photographs, how to look at the Native American subject caught within, a subject that eludes the photographer, collector, or ourselves looking. The fruits of such an effort are archaeological shards that begin a Native American history. Like an enormous glacier beneath the surface of warming water, amnesia begins to melt.

Since Partial Recall, there have been several books published on the subject of Native Americans and photography. The mid-19th-century advent of photography and the mid-19th-century genocidal campaign against Native Americans converge in our late-20th-century curious minds. Certain authors and editors of this simultaneous phenomena—the birth of a technology and the attempted extirpation of a race—sense and portray the complexity of their chosen subjects; others cleave to the Victorian ideals of photographic truth and noble savages.

In The Photograph and the American Indian, Alfred L. Bush and Lee Clark Mitchell have compiled a text dedicated to the “tension” between Native American cultures and that of a frontier society equipped with heavy artillery and the camera. This book grew out of a conference at Princeton sponsored by the Program in American Studies, Princeton Collections of Western Americana of the University Library, and the New Jersey Department of Higher Education. The diversity of images reflects the selection of scholars intent on raising the difficult questions of photographs as artifacts of a colonial encounter whose ramifications are still felt. Mitchell writes:

It was no mere accident of historical circumstance that linked photography with imperialism: quite the contrary, the expertise crucial for first a photograph, then a photographic industry, accrued directly as a result of the centuries-long process of colonial acquisition.

Mitchell’s introductory essay moves through Susan Sontag’s critique of photography to the conspicuous dearth of images produced by early pioneer and professional photographers. The last section of the book includes several photographs taken by contemporary Native Americans. Over a hundred different photographers are represented in the book, with a short biography of each provided at the back of the book.

The strongest component is the chapter “Transformation,” which documents incidents
in the deliberate U.S. government campaign to socialize Native Americans. Hundreds of Native Americans, forced off their ancestral lands and onto reservations, were mandated into several vocational schools throughout the country. The most famous of these was the Indian Training School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. There from its inception in 1879 and until his death in 1902, John Choate was the official school photographer. His work was not simply that of a class photographer; he was an integral part of the school’s intent.

In addition to shooting group portraits of Navajo adolescents making leather shoes or holding bonnets and hats on their Victorian dresses and woolen trousers, Choate specifically photographed them upon their entry to the school and once again after their transformation by the civilizing force had taken effect. The most striking of these before-and-after photographs is of the Navajo Tom Tlorino, photographed on his arrival to the Carlisle School in 1885, and later that same year. The two photographs are the same size, with the same soft oval focus around the figure, yet the person Tom Tlorino has been radically altered. Between the first and second image the violent, step-by-step erasure of Native culture and the imposition of late-19th-century American mores have occurred. In 1885, Tom Tlorino is seen as a dark-skinned Navajo with large round earrings, long dark hair, an elaborate necklace with two large and numerous small crosses, and a handwoven blanket over his shoulder. Later that same year he is, strangely, lighter-skinned, with short, parted, cropped hair and dressed in a suit and tie with tie pin. Was the lighting changed to alter the tone of his skin, to present him literally as more “white” in his Western clothes? Or has the indoor life of school, of separation from his land, begun to draw the blood away from his body? The intention of Choate’s photographic mission is obvious: to show the good deeds of the Carlisle school in its domestication of the Natives. Yet the photograph, in its own nature as a photograph, reveals much more beyond intention. Details of clothing, of those countless crosses, and the changed look in his eyes surface and resurface, artifacts to be wondered at and fashioned as the trace of his particular experiences.

In stark contrast to Partial Recall and The Photograph and the American Indian are the recent Bulfinch publication of a selection of Edward Curtis photographs entitled Native Nations and the Smithsonian archivist Paula Fleming’s and anthropologist Judith Luskey’s collection entitled Grand Endeavors of American Indian Photography. The Curtis photographs are reproduced in quadratones by Richard Benson. Four layers of ink from four different films are laid down in varying shades to allow for the closest simulation of Curtis’ original gravures. The 110 photographs in this edition were selected by Christopher Cardozo from over 40,000 negatives that Curtis produced between 1898 and 1928. Once he began, Curtis committed most of his life to pursuing the project of photographing Native North American life. He lost his family wealth, his wife, and was shot at several times in the process, yet from his own perspective, voiced many times, Curtis was driven to capture the image of Native Americans before they vanished. This strange combination of melancholy and driven acquisitiveness pervades the entire project. And, aptly, Benson’s process of reproduction, with sepia tones and mat finish, envelop us in those aspects of Curtis’ perception of Native Americans.

Curtis wrote in the introduction to his 20-volume edition of photographs, “While primarily a photographer, I do not see or think photo-

editors of Native Nations only detract from these fine simulacra when they present them as true documents of Native people. In an attempt to justify Theodore Roosevelt’s 1906 praise for Curtis and Curtis’ own introduction, the editors juxtapose these texts to a 1993 essay by George P. Horse Capture, an A’ani of the Fort Belknap Reservation. Roosevelt and Curtis speak an antiquated language of romantic awe and condescension that cannot help but appear ironic and illusory. Especially difficult to accept is Roosevelt’s hulking language of praise for Curtis’ project to capture in a photograph glimpses of Native lives, when Roosevelt with his power as President could have spared these lives from ravishment and deprivation. But next to the calloused voices of Roosevelt and Curtis, the uncritical, echoing praise of Curtis’ photographs by George P. Horse Capture has a harrowing effect. As for other Native Americans who have felt trapped by the ubiquity of Curtis’ photographic record, a record that elevates and exudes to the point of abstraction, George P. Horse Capture depicts them as “foreign” detractors, who do not speak for us. These “Indian” critics lack a genetic or geographical connection with us and cannot represent us. Real Indian people are extremely grateful to see what their ancestors looked like or what they did and we know they are not stereotypes. No one staged the people. And we see them at their classic finest.

The 12 Native American essays on photography in Partial Recall offer another way of looking at Curtis and his legacy; collectively, for them, there is much at stake in exposing the mechanisms of idealization. This certainly is not the case with the Smithsonian publication Grand Endeavors of American Indian Photography, which appears caught in a kind of numb suspension. From the 350,000 photographs in the Smithsonian archive, authors Fleming and Luskey chose the “Grand Endeavors” of those who photographed Native Americans in the late 19th and early 20th century. From painters to photographers, they chart a seamless traversal of depiction presented as transparent documentation. Their third chapter, “Expositions and World Fairs,” is especially problematic. Here they write, “As the conflicts with the North American Indians in the West subsided, various tribes participated in expositions and world fairs as ‘living exhibitions.’” The subsiding of conflicts to which the authors refer had given way to the more insidious, systematic institutionalization of Native Americans in reservations, schools, and such displays as World Fairs. The authors go on to say, “Never before had there been so many Indian people in one place at one time, to be photographed in a peaceful situation.” Alarming here is the absence of any reflection on the actual circumstances of Native Americans as “living exhibitions.” What active role Native Americans had in these exhibitions, or any benefit derived, would be of interest, yet it is not discussed in this chapter. Were they paid? Where did they live? How did their visual appearance change through the process of becoming a static display item? In 1904, two studio photographers, Mamie and Emma Gerhard, photographed an unidentified man, known as “San Diego,” at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. As on many of their photographs they title the person, give a number to the image, and indicate their copyright. Their “San Diego” is in profile with steel beads and feathers in his long hair; he appears to have white makeup on and dark markings around his eyes. By his left eye, the one in view, is drawn a series of five round dots, like icons of tears echoing the steel beads of his hair. There is an unmistakable sense of the embalmed in this image of a Native man on exhibition. The formal details of his painted face and other accoutrements speak of the ongoing commodification of Native Americans. For a collection of photographs from one of the largest archives of Native American artifacts to focus uncritically on this grand trajectory of stereotypes sadly reveals how we can be

Gerhard Sisters, Profile of an Unidentified Man, Known as “San Diego,” Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1904. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

impelled to fill the space of history with clichés and staged agendas. Some of the only records of Native lives and events that exist are photographs. And, very different from the hundreds of written peace treaties and soldiers’ notes, these photographs contain something particular of the sleeping giant of Native American history. In Indian Lives: A Photographic Record from the Civil War to Wounded Knee, Ulrich Hiesinger compiles images by a range of photographers, from anonymous amateurs to government officials producing still portraits, ethnographic images, and landscapes. The text of this book is modest and informative about specific battles, warriors, and peace-treaty signings. The aggregation of these images reveals the complexities of historic events, and photography is seen not simply as a tool of recording, but often as instrumental in the war and peace efforts throughout the final government campaign against Indian sovereignty. Just before the last photograph, a bleak white expanse that was the battlefield of Wounded Knee, Hiesinger includes an 1891 photograph of a Sioux campsite near Pine Ridge, South Dakota, by John C. H. Grabill. Grabill officially worked for the Home Stake Mining Co. and photographed extensively before and after the battle of Wounded Knee. This landscape from 1891 must have been taken on a large field camera. In the foreground is a cluster of horses drinking from a quiet, nearly frozen river. Off in the background in the middle of the image a series of Native Sioux tepees extends out to the horizon. Among the tepees, people are in motion, blurred and transient. Whatever was lost or whatever happened is still there in that photograph; despite water frozen to the closest edge of our field of vision, we must begin to imagine.

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