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High-Speed Film Captures the Vanishing American, in Living Color

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Indians and photography are inextricably intertwined in strange and persistent ways. From the earliest beginnings of photography to the most recent prints from the trip to Santa Fe, Indians are subject matter for generations of non-Indian photographers. Their cameras search out our homes, our clothing, our kids, our arts, our hands, and our faces in an attempt to capture our spirits through photography. This search parallels the development of photography and western expansion. It has become an American tradition to photograph the Indian. Why has the Indian been so important to white photographers, and what ethical questions arise from the use of 150 years of photographs of Indians?

From the time of the arrival of Columbus to the current argument about the use of Indians as sports mascots, conflicting images of Indians have emerged and re-emerged in American popular and high culture. Often based on historic cultural and racial stereotypes, these persistent images give us a distorted view of Indians, a distortion that affects the past as well as the present.

In one sense, we are surrounded by images of Indians. We grow up with these images in our cartoons, in textbooks, in films, in television shows, and in the names of sports teams. Museum collections are full of paintings and photographs of Indians from our collective past. Toy stores are full of plastic Indian warriors on

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horseback, tomahawks in their hands. Hollywood continues to bring stereotyped images right into our homes. Company logos continue to use Indian images for advertising everything from baking powder to bullets.

It is in this context that I first envisioned the conference that led to this publication. How could we possibly deal with the Indians of today if we do not understand the origin and nature of the stereotyping of Indians of the past? I chose photography as a way to explore the thinking behind stereotypes of Indians because it was my chosen field when I went to art school. Indians were viewed as subjects for photographs, not as photographers, so I found myself something of an artistic misfit. I might add that photography is the only art form that still has not received proper recognition in the Indian art world; although this has been slowly changing since 1993, the paradox of that situation makes photography a particularly apt field to explore for the existence, creation, and maintenance of stereotypes of Indians.

In 1923 D.H. Lawrence wrote about the dichotomy between the positive image of Indian and the negative image, and why he believed that the negative would always exist: "The desire to extirpate the Indian and the contradictory desire to glorify him. Both are rampant today. The bulk of white people would like to see this red brother exterminated . . . because of the silent, invisible, but deadly hostility between the spirit of the two races."[1]

However, by the 1930s, positive Indian images began to be used, signaling a trend away from the negative likenesses of Indians from the previous centuries of open conflict. This can be seen in the names or logos of popular products: Indian chief as logo for Royal Sewing Machines (1904); Sheboygan carbonated beverages (1908); Argo Corn Starch (1913). The U.S. Mint used a headdressed Indian on the nickel (1913); Land O' Lakes used an image of an Indian maiden (1924); Pontiac, Chief of the Sixes, became the name of a car model for General Motors (1926). In these cases the manufacturer thought the Indian logo would represent good qualities to the consumer.

I believe we must understand the nature and extent of stereotyping about Indians if we are to decide how to use historic photographs of Indians in a contemporary context. It is also important to see how Indians themselves are using photography to counteract such stereotyping. First, we need to clarify what the stereotypes are. What can we see in historic photographs of Indians that is still apparent in new photographs, and what has

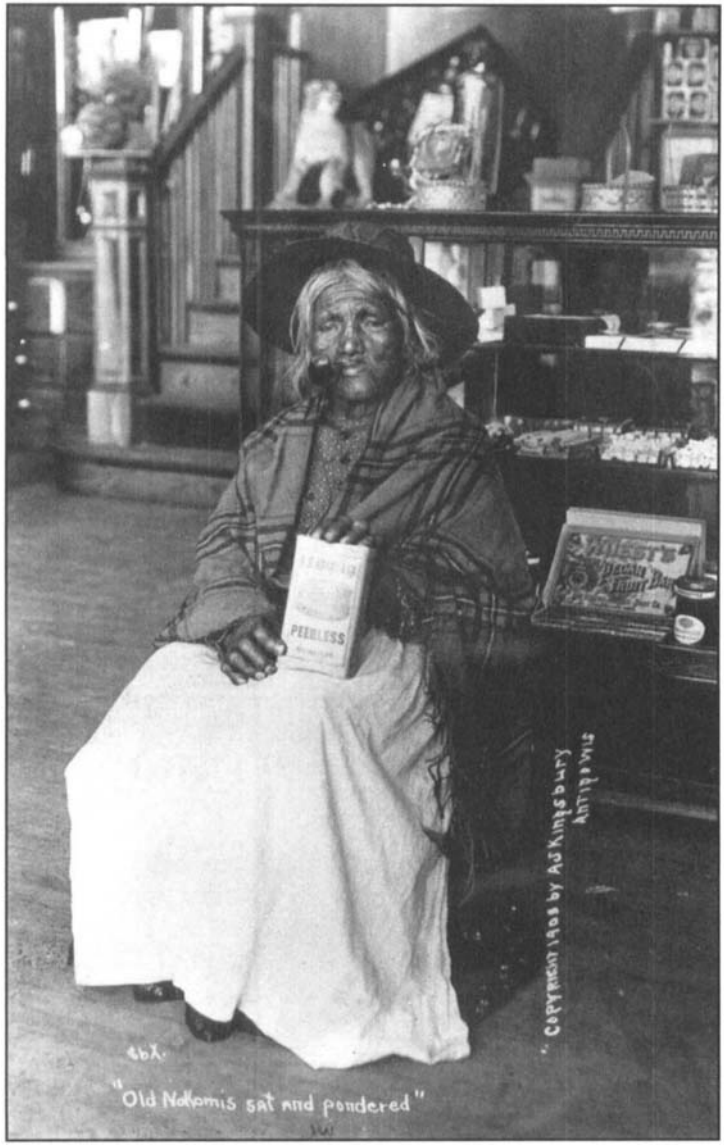

PHOTO 1. *"Old Nakomis sat and pondered," reads the caption of this 1908 postcard that uses a Menominee Indian woman as a visual advertisement. Indians have been associated with tobacco shops and trading posts for centuries, and wooden Indians, often comical caricatures, can still be seen in stores across the West. (Photo no. 56, 825, A.J. Kingsbury, photographer, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)*

changed? How have Indian photographers addressed these stereotypes in their own work? Nearly every stereotype of Indians that exists in literature, painting, and more popular writings, especially newspaper articles of the past, can be seen in photographs of Indians. These include the following:

(1) The Indian as warrior: The Plains Indian stereotype with tomahawk, headdress, and unsmiling gaze reveals the savagery of the past just under the war paint on his face.

(2) The Indian as chief or medicine man: The Indian man is the leader in a noble but doomed fight against the tide of civilization. Indian women are not seen as leaders.

(3) The Indian as naked savage: Skin was in vogue when photographing Indians during the Victorian era, when nakedness shocked whites. Photographs of nearly naked Indians served to reinforce the view of white society as morally and culturally superior.

(4) The Indian maiden as sex fantasy: Bare-breasted women, often seen in semiseductive poses or kneeling passively next to their mates, serve as a mild form of pornography, a remake of white male fantasies from early literature and painting.

(5) The Indian as prisoner: The Indian wars were alive and well when photography was born, bringing images of those hostile Indians right into the parlors of whites. The still photograph captures the savage, holding him harmless, frozen in American myth.

(6) The Indian as noble savage: Majestic portraits of pensive Indians looking into an uncertain future (usually to their left) serve as a metaphor for the American spirit of conquest, or as a testament to guilt about that conquest.

(7) The Indian as vanishing American: Indians caught in the timeless past, never seeming to make it in the real world, riding off into the sunset, serve as a reminder that, as part of both Manifest Destiny and cultural Darwinism, Indians are an inferior race, meant to disappear because of their own cultural flaws.

(8) The Indian as object of study: Indians were an anthropological delight, ready to be photographed, measured, and defined for the sake of future generations of scholars. Indians were part of the exotic landscape of the New World, to be collected like rocks, flowers, and dead animals.

(9) The Indian as tourist prop: Trips to reservations continue to be "steps back into time" where the sole purpose of Indians is to verify the cultural and racial stereotypes held by the tourist-

PHOTO 2. *The gentle, painted backdrop was used in the photographer's studio to neutralize the Indian. The fake pose of Bone Necklace, a Dakota, tends to render the warrior harmless. This style of image-making was popular at the turn of the century, when Indians began to perform at major celebrations. Most likely, the Indians were proud of these images, being less aware of the stereotypes they generate and more concerned with the novelty of it all. (Photo no. 3696-e-59-e, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)*

turned-photographer. The stoic or dancing Indian serves as a backdrop for the reaffirmation of the myths of literature, Hollywood, and photography.

(10) The Indian as victim: Caught between two worlds, master of none, the Indian is seen as disenfranchised in his own homeland, looking poverty-stricken, sad, angry, or drunk.

Is it any wonder that we are confused about Indians? Generations of Indians grew up with these very same negative images of themselves. With every generation of Americans, the Indian image suffers from increased exaggeration and exploitation, to the point where most people think of Indians as role models for either bloodthirsty violence or spiritual nirvana.

How did these stereotypes come about and how do they affect our thinking about Indians today? Part of the answer lies in reexamining the historical images of Indians to understand how they have become a common part of our own thinking when we hear the word *Indian*. We also have to understand the political forces that came into play to create the image of the "vanishing American."

For three centuries before the advent of photography, Euro-Americans were out to destroy Indians and remove them from the land. French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, in his 1848 *Democracy in America*, found that Americans held a great disdain for Indians and wrote of the native peoples, "Their unconquerable prejudices, their indomitable passions, their vices, and perhaps still more their savage virtues delivered them to inevitable destruction. The ruin of these people began as soon as the Europeans landed on their shores. . . ."[2] To see the Indian vanish was desired, and military campaigns against Indians were intense. It was General Philip Sheridan in 1868 who is said to have declared, "The only good Indians I ever saw were dead."

America has vacillated between hating Indians and loving Indians. When Indians are a threat to white society's pursuit of happiness, they are depicted as obstacles to progress. When Indians are safely pacified, they become the objects of paternalism and guilt. Is this the reason that nearly three hundred films feature scenes of the military fighting "hostile" Indians; that more than one hundred films contain scenes of Indians attacking wagon trains; that another hundred films show Indians attacking settlers (often taking a white female captive); and that nearly seventy-five films show so-called good Indians as friends of the whites? I would argue that the creative arts of America document these

changing views. The photographic image becomes the most subtle tool for manifesting those divergent beliefs.

Since the time of contact, the Indian has been the obstacle on white society's road to success. Indians had to be removed, converted, or annihilated so that whites could fulfill their own spiritual destiny. By creating an image of the Indian as uncivilized, un-Christian, unclean, and incapable of salvation, whites could justify their actions against Indians. Armed with God, guns, and guts, whites set out to make the Indian the barometer of their own progress. With the conquest of Indians, America became safe for the Euro-American.

American culture has had a love affair with the concept of conquering: first the ocean, then the Indians, then the animals, then the land, then the air, then the moon, and now the stars. Indians represent what is "wild" about America and what needs to be conquered. Indians have become a symbol of whites' preoccupation with winning and, more importantly, of their fear of losing. Conquering Indian men meant killing them, removing them to reservations, converting them, or controlling their public image. To conquer Indian women meant to possess them, to use them as sexual beings until white women were available to fulfill that function. These images come through in much early photography of Indians. Indian men are viewed as the warriors, the prisoners, the dispossessed. Indian women are regarded as war booty.

The photograph was a way to conquer the Indian. The early daguerreotypes show "savage" Indians in their animalistic finery, complete with tomahawk, yet placed against a neutral photographer's backdrop, or, even more strange, against a painted Victorian backdrop. The result was that the Indian was removed from his wild surroundings, tamed by the photographer, and made safe for the viewer. Through the early photograph, the white viewer could see dangerous Indians and either celebrate their defeat or feel bad that such a conquest was required as part of America's Manifest Destiny.

Photographers capitalized on pre-existing stereotypes. Images of Indians from paintings and the sensationalized press were used to fuel the imagination. In particular, the Indian swinging his tomahawk became a staple. Photographs replaced images seen in earlier paintings such as *The Death of Jane McCrea* (1804) by John Vanderlyn, in which two Indian men grab the helpless woman by her hair, as one of the warriors is about to kill her with his

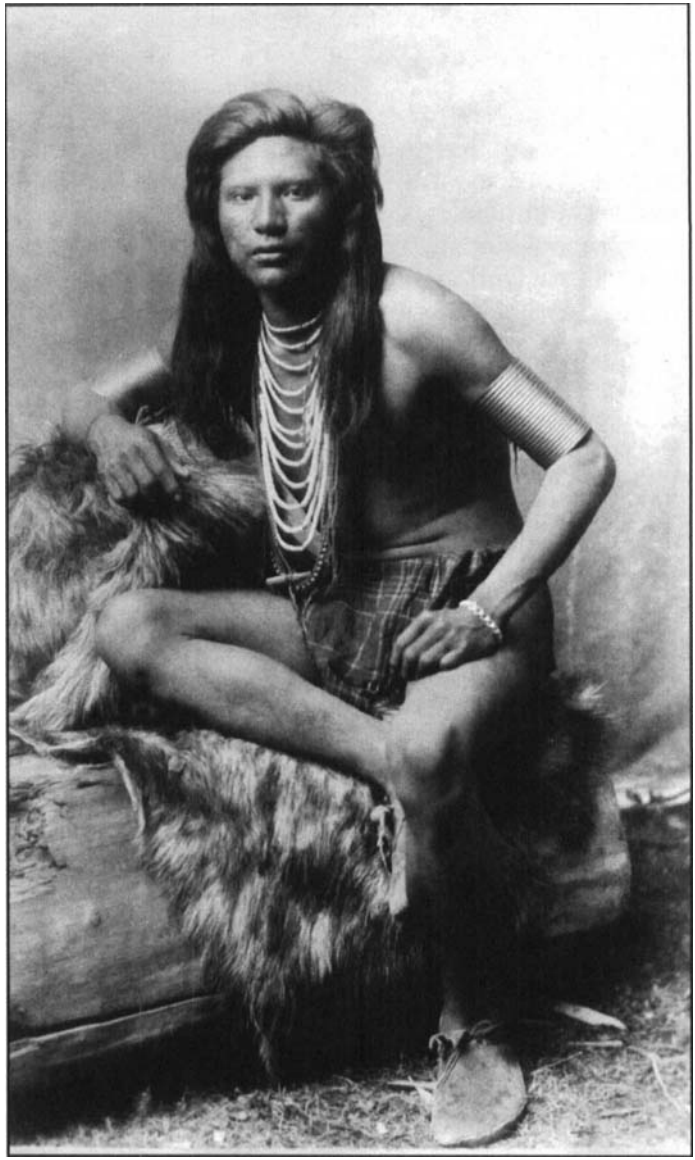

PHOTO 3. *The naked savage image is replayed in this photo of a man (possibly Crow) taken in the 1890s. Although his pose is not threatening, nakedness was still considered taboo at that time. His exposed skin would have both offended and titillated the viewers. As in many historical photographs, the name and proper tribal affiliation were not recorded. (Photo no. 42 017-A, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)*

tomahawk. Her breast is almost bare as she regards the Indians with horror. McCrea was, in fact, a frontier casualty of 1777 whose story was quickly turned into political propaganda. The Vanderlyn painting was commissioned for the book *The Columbiad* by Joel Barlow, which emphasized racial conflicts.

It is not just the past images of Indians that haunt our memory; the process of dehumanizing Indians continues to this day. Despite the fact that some dictionaries define the term *redskin* as derogatory, the National Football League continues to support its use, saying that it somehow honors Indians. No one seems to understand why Indians are offended by white and Black Americans dressing up in fake headdresses, wearing lipstick war paint, and waving a tomahawk or a scalp as a way of inciting their teams to victory. The smiling, big-nosed symbol of the Cleveland Indians is an offense. The Indian protests at the World Series and the Super Bowl are thought by some whites to be a waste of time; many think Indians should be more concerned about economics and their own winning spirit than the image that their children have of themselves.

In 1992, the year of the sinking of the mythic Columbus, the Indian was seen on more magazine covers than ever before. Between March and December of that year, *American Way Magazine, Audubon Magazine, Camera and Darkroom–The Magazine for Photographers, Civil War Magazine, Green Magazine* (England), and *The New Mexico Magazine,* to name only a handful, contained photographs depicting Indians—dancing Indians, painted Indians, Indians as warriors. These images of Indians were saleable in 1992, while words from Indians were less appreciated.

The Indian has continued to be part of Madison Avenue's bag of advertising tricks. Mazda advertised its four-wheel-drive vehicle, the Navajo, with the statement "No one knows the land like a Navajo." Kodak celebrated both the stereotype and the popularity of the Indian as mascot in recent film advertisements containing an image of a Washington Redskin fan, complete with her brightly colored headdress and a snarl on her face. "Show your true colors," states the ad. This is not the past, this is today.

The strangest images are coming from a new line of adult toys that have emerged in popular magazines and supermarket tabloids: commemorative plates and ceramic dolls that are recycling Indian images. These must include every stereotypical, romantic, and overused image of the Indian in existence, including a "Noble Indian Women" series. The Franklin Mint has given in to these

fantasies as well. This is a disappointment, because the Franklin Mint had sponsored some innovative projects in the past, using Indian artists to design series of commemorative coins that gave two sides of American history. However, their newest ventures, such as the series they produce for the American Indian Heritage Museum, repeats the stereotypes of the Plains Indians.

With the introduction of dramatic films at the turn of the century, the Indian image became larger than life once more. In the movies, Indians remained the enemy, dressed in warbonnets, swinging their tomahawks, stealing or killing white women, and falling victim to white men's superiority. The acts of savagery committed by Indians in these films forced whites to kill them in retaliation, in a form of justifiable homicide that has become a primary dramatic device in most modern action films. Movies replay the drama from the colonial literature, and the stereotypes long held by Americans about Indians have found renewed life on the silver screen. Indians attack white settlers on the frontier. Indians side with the British against the American freedom fighters. Indians attack the fort. Indians attack the wagon train. Indians kidnap white children. Indians torture white men. Indians steal white women. Hollywood has perpetuated hatred toward Indians by keeping the war between Indians and whites alive, with all the gory details in wide-screen, living color. This creates a drama to make every white man protecting his family the hero.

Sex has become such an essential part of most films that it is difficult to separate stereotypes of Indian women from those of all women. But despite protests and some rethinking about Indian images in film, the sexual stereotypes remain. In the pivotal 1972 film *Little Big Man*, a new view of Indians as human beings was projected. Yet the hero, a white man, gets to fulfill a common sexual fantasy—making love to three sisters in one night, creeping from buffalo robe to buffalo robe.

The image of Indians on film has been transformed in the last twenty years, mostly for the good. In many cases, however, that transformation has been simply cosmetic, with Indians used as the backdrop of a dramatic story about white people. Contemporary films range from the ridiculous *(Revenge of the Nerds II)* to the sublime *(Dances with Wolves)*. The majority of films in the last two decades have dealt with several new aspects of Indians' lives, but most have relied on romanticized stereotypes of the Plains Indian warriors and the hostilities between Indian peoples. It is assumed that a film from an Indian point of view will not sell to a white

audience; there must be a way for the white ticket buyers to feel a part of the solution of the Indian dilemma. Hence all the recent films are really about how white people interact with Indians. The white guys are still the heroes of these stories.

This is the bottom line for *Dances with Wolves*, where the white protagonist becomes heroic by teaching Indians how to use guns to kill other Indians. The same storyline was used in *A Man Called Horse* two decades earlier. Locations have changed, times have changed, but movie Indians still await a non-Indian savior. Films such as *Emerald Forest*, *The Mission*, and *The Forbidden Dance* focus our attention on the destruction of the rainforest and the Indian societies that live there. In each case, however, a white man must be the hero.

The Indian story on television has become the vehicle for delivering a sermon on ethics to the viewer. Most of these new television shows depend on one storyline: The white hero saves the day for the poor Indians who are being exploited by some other, unscrupulous white man. Over and over again, from the television series *Stingray* to *MacGyver*, the white hero rushes in to save the Indians. This approach is not new, and many films of a generation ago used the same device, letting a smart and sensitive white hero ride to the rescue of the Indians.

Television is certainly beginning to change, but if ABC's *Son of the Morning Star*, the remake of the remake of the story of George Custer, is an indication of that transformation, it is time to change the channel. Based on Evan S. Connell's novel of the same name, the story is supposed to demythologize Custer, who led the Seventh Cavalry to their defeat in 1876. This version, however, makes Custer into a love machine of the Plains, for both white and Indian women. It contains no judgment about his actions; he merely dies in battle. The Lakota Sioux still say that Custer killed himself; their version of the Battle of the Little Big Horn would certainly be a different story.

Many current television Indians are placed in a modern context, which helps the viewer deal with issues such as treaties, land claims, religious rights, and burial issues. The western is making a comeback on television; the producer of *Young Riders*, Jonas McCord, believes that "today's television westerns are more realistic stories which provide honest characterizations of Indians and Whites, Blacks, and women." The West as a myth is itself being explored by scholars, curators, and artists. We are just now beginning to see a new side of history, but some denounce as

"revisionist" any attempt to find a more accurate image of the West. At the same time, the profusion of cable channels assures that even the most racist images of Indians still find their way into the hearts and minds of American viewers.

The Indian version of *Roots*, also on ABC, appeared in the form of *Mystic Warrior*. Despite the objections of the Lakota people about the book on which the miniseries was based, Wolper Productions charged ahead and tried to make the series more sensitive. The film was about the early history of the Sioux, from the coming of the white traders to their battles with the U.S. Army. The theme was a vision quest of the principle Indian character, and the vision sequences were probably the best part of the film. But the series lacked heart, as if the actors were going through the motions, not believing in what they were saying. It was a hollow reflection of the past.

Amazingly, Indian films are very well received, attesting more to the desire on the part of the viewer for material about Indians than to creative filmmaking about Indians. For example, the *Lonesome Dove* miniseries on CBS, based on the best-selling novel by Larry McMurtry, was very popular. The Indian in this series was a distasteful fellow named Blue Duck, described in the promotion as a "half-breed renegade," a classic Indian bad guy, who killed and tortured just for the hell of it. Imagine how Indian children feel about being Indian when these kinds of films come into their home. Many grow up not wanting to be Indians, because they associate Indianness with evil and death. Balance is required.

Jim Conway, the supervising producer of the recent CBS series *Paradise*, which featured an Indian as a regular character, summarized the new approach in an interview in "Broadcast Week" of the Canadian *Globe and Mail:* "The American consciousness caught up to itself in regard to how we basically stole land and changed the laws to suit our fancy. . . . Now it's become the job of the storytellers and filmmakers whenever possible to put the native American into the proper light." What remains is the question, Are the media ever going to let the Indians speak for themselves?

Think for a minute of the effect on Indian children, growing up surrounded by such images in school, on television, in movies, at sporting events, and in the very toys they play with. Now imagine what your own child's image of Indians must be, after being exposed to the same kind of stereotypes. It is no wonder, with such a bombardment of negative images, that prejudice toward Indians continues to exist.

The most recent topic that has put Indians into print has been the controversy over the repatriation of Indian remains and sacred objects from museums. This issue has generated more attention in periodicals, newspapers, scholarly journals, museum newsletters, and legal reviews than any other subject. Hundreds of articles have been written to tell of the new move to recognize Indian religious rights. But there has also been a backlash. William Murchison, a Heritage Features syndicate writer, wrote a piece titled "Enough about Bones and Guilt," in the *Arizona Republic*. He stated that although he agreed with the basic principles, he was bothered by the implied reinterpretation of American history in the issue of repatriation: "Rest in peace, indeed. Enough bickering about Indian corpses and white guilt alike. What's done is done, and I'm dingbusted, as my forebears might have said, to see how it can be undone, or even why it should be."

An interesting and slightly different approach has appeared in a work by *National Geographic* writer Harvey Arden and photographer Steve Wall, titled "Wisdomkeepers–Meetings with Native American Spiritual Elders." This essay reflects a growing desire to learn from the original people of this land as we become more obsessed with the doom of pollution. This is not a New Age self-help manual to spiritual enlightenment. It is a highly personal journey made to meet Indians on their own terms, in their own homes, and in their own times. The essay simply presents what the authors learned from traditional elders from across the country: "We uncovered no 'secrets,' no soul-bewitching gurus, no miraculous healers, no hitherto unknown sacred ceremonies. Life itself, we learned, is a sacred ceremony. From the Wisdomkeepers we learned a different way of thinking, which profoundly affected our views about the Earth, about sovereignty, about family and community, and about the future."

Perhaps what Wall and Arden learned is the lesson of this whole work. We need to hear directly from the Indians about the things that affect them directly. We do not need to re-create the Indians. We do not need to dramatize their story. We do not need to embellish. We need only to listen and take it for what it is: reality through Indian eyes. Given the history of this country, we are lucky that those eyes still look around and that there are still Indians who have something to say to us.

Our image of Indians is not real. History, literature, art, and the movies have created images of Indians to fuel white fantasies. Walt Whitman summarized the problem of Indian images as

Photos 4 & 5. Indian babies in their cradleboards became a favorite image of photographers once the hostilities decreased. Photographers were known to retouch their photos for dramatic effect, as is evident in these two images. The first (left) shows the Apache baby in a chair covered with a Navajo rug. The second (right) shows the baby crying,

but the baby's face has been altered to make it appear more fearsome. On the photo has been written, "Poor little tootsy-wootsy." Such images were meant to evoke humor and thus be more saleable. (Photo nos. 2580-B-3 and 2580-B-2, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)

early as 1884. His words ring true today as they did one hundred years ago:

> There is something about these aboriginal Americans, in their highest characteristic representations, essential traits, and the ensemble of their physique and physiognomy—something very remote, very lofty, arousing comparisons with our civilized ideals—something that our literature, portrait painting, etc., have never caught, and that will almost certainly never be transmitted to the future, even as a reminiscence. No biographer, no historian, no artist, has grasped it—perhaps could not grasp it. It is so different, so far outside our eminent standards of eminent humanity. . . . There were moments as I looked at them or studied them, when our own exemplification of personality, dignity, heroic presentations anyhow (as in the conventions of society, or even the accepted poems and plays) seemed sickly, puny, inferior.[3]

As we leave the five-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Columbus, we will finally discover the Wisdomkeepers that Arden met. The chances are good that Indians will let themselves be known; it is clear that the Vanishing American is not, after all, about to disappear.

In conclusion, it is difficult to assess how America is being affected by all the new images of Indians. Certainly Indians are enjoying increased attention and exposure for serious issues. More and more writers and film producers want the Indian view to get across. Unfortunately, photographers seem to retreat to old stereotypes more often than not. On a recent visit to the Sioux Trading Post in Rapid City, South Dakota, I picked up two postcards that showed new/old images of Indians. The first was a photograph of a U.S. soldier's helmet, canteen, flack jacket, and M-16 from the Vietnam era. Placed in the center was an eagle feather. This image by Lakota photographer David Little was intended to honor the Indians who fought in defense of America. The other postcard was a photograph by Kirtus Allen of Santa Fe, titled "Custer's Last Haircut." The photo shows an Indian in war paint, about to scalp Custer as he sits in a barber chair on a high mesa, looking at himself in a mirror. I am sure that it was meant to be funny, but it only goes to prove that stereotypes about Indians are here to stay, and photographs of Indians will always run the risk of repeating those stereotypes.

Photographs of Indians have been bathed in stereotypes, making their use in modern publications difficult to assess. Although many older photographs of Indians are important historically or anthropologically, we must question their use as an educational tool for the next generation. How can we show these old photographs in a new context, one that removes the cliches, stereotypes, and fantasies, and speaks of deeper realities? There is a renewed hunger for photographs of Indians. More books are published

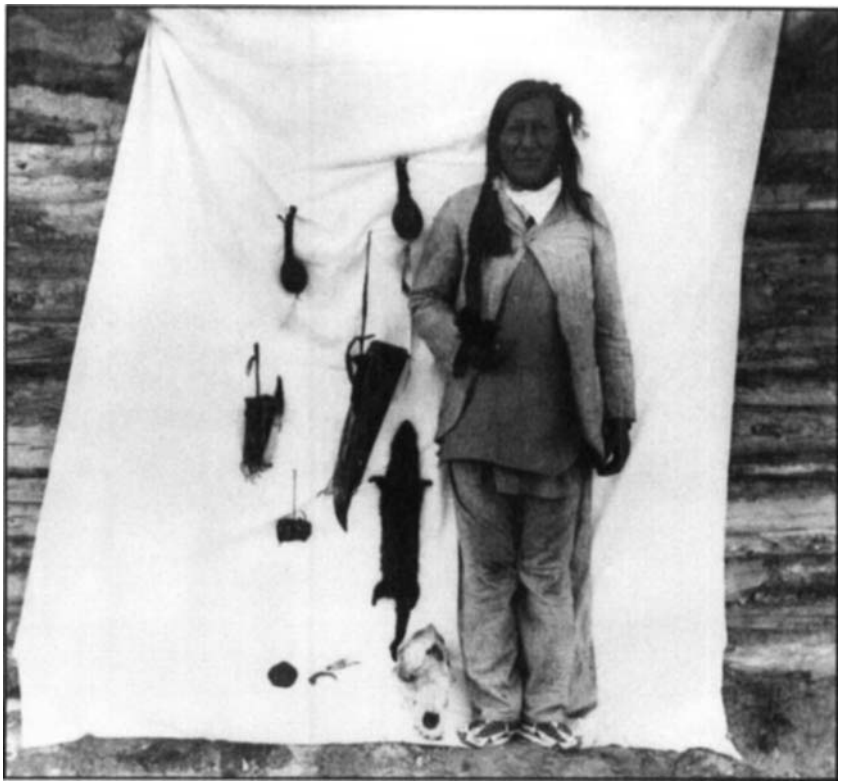

PHOTO 6. *Knife Scabbard, a Dakota medicine man, was photographed by J.H. Bratley in 1896, in this very perplexing pose. All of his medicine objects have been attached to a sheet, and Knife Scabbard looks like a museum specimen. How did he feel about this photograph? Did he want us to see his medicine? Was he forced to display these items, which are now considered too sacred to be photographed? Should such a photo be published? (Photo no. SI 53,326, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)*

each year bringing out these old images. Even contemporary photographs become "pretty pictures" that capture Indians in a whirlwind of colors and feathers. We need to look more critically at such images. We need to understand the realities of both the photographers and the Indians they have photographed. We need to understand that some of the photographs of the past might not be appropriate for use today. Some scenes that were photographed are sacred and, out of respect, might best be left unpublished. This is not a form of censorship but a demonstration of respect. A more intelligent approach to the use of photographs of Indians, as suggested in the essays in this first major discussion on the rereading of the Indian photograph, can teach us more about both Indians and non-Indians.

NOTES

1. D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; Harmondsworth, NY: Penguin Books, 1977).

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., Anchor Books edition, 1969), 30.

3. Walt Whitman, "An Indian Bureau Reminiscence," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (1884; New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948).