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Review Essay

North American Indian Photographs/Images

Side Trips: The Photography of Sumner W. Matteson, 1898-1908. By Louis B. Casagrande and Phillips Bourns. Seattle: University of Washington Press, distributors for Milwaukee Public Museum and The Science Museum of Minnesota, 1984. 256 pp. \$24.95 Paper.

Coast of Many Faces. By Ulli Steltzer and Catherine Kerr. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979. 224 pp. \$25.95 Cloth.

Inuit: The North in Transition. By Ulli Steltzer. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983. 224 pp. \$29.95 Cloth.

A Haida Potlatch. By Ulli Steltzer, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985. 96 pp. \$14.95 Cloth.

The Enduring Navaho. By Laura Gilpin. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1980 [1968]. 264 pp. \$37.50 Cloth.

Hopi Photographers, Hopi Images. Compiled by Victor Masayesva, Jr. and Erin Younger. Tucson: Sun Tracks and the University of Arizona Press, 1983. 111 pp. \$25.00, Cloth. \$14.95 Paper.

The Blackfeet Reservation, 1885-1945: A Photographic History of Cultural Survival. By William E. Farr. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1984. 232 pp. \$19.95 Cloth.

Window on the Past: The Photographic Ethnohistory of the Northern and Kaigani Haida. By Margaret B. Blackman. Ottawa: National Museum of Man Mercury Series, Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No. 74, 1981. 236 pp. N.p. Paper.

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Side Trips constitutes further evidence of the marked rise over the last two decades of serious consideration of the history and meaning of photography. Insofar as this increasing awareness has affected our understanding of the photography of American Indians, one aspect of the progress may be charted in the discovery or rediscovery of photographers, such as Sumner Matteson, whose images might otherwise have been consigned to oblivion. I am thinking—to give just two examples—of the anonymous British Royal Engineers who in 1860 or 1861 made the earliest known photographs of interior Pacific Northwest peoples and of Edward H. Davis, who worked in Mesa Grande.¹ Initially Matteson might seem less important than such others as these in that he counted no photographic *coups*, as it were, and only part of his output, if a significant part, was devoted to Native American subject matter. But, on reflection, this means that his Indian work, represented by approximately half of the images in this book, each as meticulously documented as possible, *must* be seen in context.

For a ten year period Matteson was a freelance itinerant entrepreneur of a photographer, freewheeling in every sense (including that of riding his bicycle through hundreds of miles of the West), and seemingly possessed of a ready camera—what his biographers call “an unblurred vision”—for the sights he beheld. He contributed photographs to popular magazines like *Leslie's Weekly*, to such promotional literature as George A. Dorsey's booklet for the Santa Fé Railroad on the *Indians of the Southwest* (1903), and to learned studies for the Field Museum by the missionary ethnologist H. R. Voth. This was an adventurous but risky career, and Matteson was not notably successful in it (Dorsey, for example, did not even grant him name credit for his work). His production of images—as Casagrande and Bourns sometimes admit but do not fully develop—was heavily subject to the demands of the illustrated magazine market and the lantern slide lecture business, the vicissitudes of the illustrated postcard trade and, to a lesser extent, the whims of Field Museum anthropologists. He may have been fresh on the scene (as, say, in his view of two young Assiniboine men “putting on the paint”); he often adopted interesting vantages for his compositions (as in “Painter F. P. Sauerwen sketching Francisco, the Governor of Santa Clara, New Mexico”); and his photographs were certainly sharply focused; but the “vision” he presented,

to use our authors' word, *was* nevertheless blurred, so to speak, by the context in which he worked in a variety of ways (e.g., a predilection for the bizarre and dramatic).

Matteson—as is needless to add, I hope—was not unique in this respect, and it is good to have his pictures available, perhaps especially those of the image-making process itself (such as Dorsey taking notes while an underling photographs a Snake priest or photographers gathering for the Walpi Snake Dance in 1901). Rather, his example serves to remind us that the period of thinking of photographic images as unproblematical is over. The central insight associated with the increased sophistication of photographic inquiry is that, despite photography's position as the acknowledged standard bearer of the tenets of realism, photographs are nonetheless not fragments of captured reality, but *representations*. They do not "speak for themselves," as it were, but require readings and interpretations akin in thoroughness to those we are used to devoting to written texts in order to determine as precisely as possible what it is they represent.

In this respect, certain more recent images, such as those in the works by Ulli Steltzer under review here, are almost as difficult to categorize as historical ones. The "coast" of the first title is that of British Columbia: thousands of miles of inlets, fjords, islands and beaches with numerous small communities, whether Indian villages, canneries, logging camps, fishing harbors, or homesteads, almost all remote and usually dependent on home-generated electricity. Over a two year period Steltzer took pictures and she and her co-author, Catherine Kerr, tape recorded comments and conversations up and down the coast. The resulting book is an attractively laid out collage of visual and verbal impressions. Several of the individual photographs are evocative compositions in their own right: the anonymous figures in traditional Haida robes in "Old Masset," for instance, with their faces turned away from the camera, possess a surreal beauty, and "Skedans Rocks: Sea Lions" or "Female Orca near the Mouth of the Tsitika River" readily appeal to our sense of how the wild things of the world *should* look (which is to say, of course, how they have traditionally been depicted). There are many stories of suffering and patience so that the photographs of faces, both Indian and non-Indian, in this context, seem lined and furrowed by hardship, time, and the weather, accenting the book's stress on the values of living close to the elements. While the book

emphasizes diversity—"many faces"—there is a curious homogeneity to it. Indians tell of obstructed land claims and members of several communities of all sorts bemoan the fickle nature of commercial interests which left them in the lurch, it is true, but there is very little conflict *in* the book, between members of a community, between communities, or between communities and government or commercial parties. That is, the implicit rhetoric of the book is liberal and, with regret, defeatist.

My first impression of *Inuit*, with its evocative cover image of a Nanook-like seal hunter at the edge of an ice floe, was similar, but the book's subtitle, *The North in Transition*, actually does provide the bulk of its subject matter. As well as sled-borne hunters, there are pictures of some of the seventy-two thousand cans of Pepsi being stacked ready for the winter months in the Hudson's Bay store at Holman Island, home for only three hundred people; ones of Telesat receivers and wires above vulnerable-looking communities at the edge of a vast emptiness; and others of ubiquitous ski-doo snowmobiles, of electric pin-ball machines and of bingo sessions. Again Steltzer adopts the techniques of ostensibly letting people "speak for themselves" in recorded extracts gathered over some eighteen months of doubtless arduous travel. Nobody is allowed to speak for long enough, so as readers we can only pick up scraps of conversation, a kind of aural kaliedescope; but here there is a sense of genuine unity in diversity, despite the fact that Steltzer visited very varied Inuit communities, speaking several dialects, throughout the frozen north, a distance, as she puts it, greater than that "between Moscow and Madrid." This is the book's *raison d'être*—and to this reviewer, ignorant of virtually everything beyond the basics of "traditional" Inuit culture, it served to arouse a sympathetic interest and a desire to learn much more about what is going on, today, in Canada's enormous arctic regions.

A Haida Potlatch is partly a continuation of the same working methods (with the addition of the use of videorecordings as a mnemonic device in recalling the ceremony, which took place in 1981, three years earlier than the book's compilation). But it is also, for Steltzer, something of a new departure: from the sinuously written brief Foreword by Marjorie Halpin, author of such Northwest Coast works as *Totem Poles: An Illustrated Guide* (1983), onwards, there is an implicit acknowledgement that to provide

only pictures and extracts from spoken recordings would not, could not, convey enough. The image of a fur-clad Inuit fisherman, line in hand, squatting above the winter ice-hole has an accumulated iconic power of its own and a consequent place in a kaleidoscopic presentation, but a two day potlatch, to mean anything, has to be seen in context, over time, as a *narrative*. Pictures may hint at, but do not tell, stories. And because the potlatch treated in this book was not a strictly "traditional" one, Steltzer could not assume that it would necessarily evoke a narrative already known. In fact, as a reading of Margaret Blackman's book would reinforce, the potlatch depicted here was a conscious project of cultural revival: Steltzer's book, with justifiable pride, constitutes both the story of it and testimony to it.

Laura Gilpin's book, which was first published in 1968 and is now in its fifth big printing, could easily absorb the entire space available for this essay, especially if looked at in the context of the recent biographical study by Martha Sandweiss.² It is an expansive work, nearly twenty years in the making, contains commentary (distilled from much reading, discussion and observation) on virtually all aspects of Navajo culture, and presents an array of photographs, both duotone and color, some of which were taken as long ago as the early thirties. *The Enduring Navajo* is a classic, if I may use that ill-defined word, of the documentary heritage out of which Steltzer comes. I will restrict myself to just a couple of photographic points.

The first is that the book precisely negates such an artificial separation of image from word. For instance, in the first part Gilpin subtly intersperses her memories of an airborne excursion to take pictures of the four mountains sacred to the Navajo with an overview of Navajo history, and the resulting images are interleaved into the account. There are numerous other points at which reminiscences are tied in to photographs or *vice versa*. The book—especially given its title and some of Gilpin's less guarded comments—could so easily have presented the Navajo people as living in a kind of continuous present coexistent with the book's creation, but her manner of deliberate movement between distant memories and only yesterday and her willingness to divulge the dates of earlier pictures at least offer the opportunity to register changes over time.

The portraits—especially those in duotone, but also some of the

color ones—are particularly arresting, and my second point concerns them. In one case, with reference to her series of 1955 portraits of the widows of a man named Hardbilly, whose final illness she had witnessed in 1932, Gilpin remarks, “we arranged to come back in two days, when their clothes would be freshly washed and they would all be ready for more pictures” (p. 32). There may have been an element of manipulation in such moves, but there was also cooperation; Gilpin did not simply catch the images of her people, or worse, catch them out. Some of the portraits are slightly dramatized by the way they are framed or cropped, but mostly their power comes from our sense that these people have *composed themselves* for the camera.

Unfortunately, such cooperative endeavors are not conspicuous in the history of photography of Native Americans, and all three other books under review here directly tackle this fraught image-making process. Each is a worthy text and by concentrating on a single tribe each avoids to some extent the major problem that the sheer *mass* of Indian imagery in general poses, that of arbitrary selection and the consequent impossibility of thorough analysis and decisive judgment.³ (However, it is surprising that Erin Younger’s “A Century of Photography on the Hopi Reservation, 1880–1980” contains no reference to William Henry Jackson as the very first person to photograph the Hopi, in 1875, or to the work of Ben Wittick, an important figure in the early years; similarly, a significant omission from William Farr’s book is any mention of Roland Reed’s romantic studies.⁴) Each book contains a sufficient number of photographic illustrations to support its argument, though those in Margaret Blackman’s book are poorly printed and those in Farr’s study are not as well reproduced as we have come to expect from University of Washington Press publications.

Younger’s contribution to *Hopi Photographers, Hopi Images* outlines the history of photographic activity in the Hopi pueblos and pays due attention to the contexts in which the resulting images were sold and exhibited. She writes particularly well about the uses that *Arizona Highways*, the travel magazine, has made of Hopi photographs and makes a start on the important task of assessing the nature of imagery purveyed by the Fred Harvey company, especially at their Hopi House on the rim of the Grand Canyon. She also rightly ponders the question—to which we must return—of whether or not Indian images made by Indians

possess or should possess any privileged status. My only quarrel is that she uses the term "documentary" as though it *must* mean something other than "snapshots" on the one side or "art" on the other and implies that such pictures are necessarily "true"—both, as I hope may be inferred from this essay, dubious assumptions.

The Blackfeet Reservation, to my mind, is more seriously flawed. Nevertheless, it has a moving personal Foreword by novelist and poet James Welch, its verbal text offers a graphic account of Blackfeet history, it makes available a range of worthwhile images, and it presses some good photographic points, for example, on how Blackfeet imagery was appropriated in publicity for nearby Glacier National Park. The problem is that Farr continually asserts a contradiction. On the one hand, he claims repeatedly that photographic images, unlike written texts, present reality directly: in them, he says, "history spoke with a new and clear voice" (p.xi); "the neutral lens . . . objectively . . . registered life in a frame . . ." (p.xiii); "it is no longer necessary to play fruitless, imaginative games as to what reservation life was like—now much of it, at least the exterior part, can be seen" (p. xvii); and "reality could be held not only between the eyes, but magically between the fingers" (p.187). On the other hand, he also repeatedly reminds the reader that most of the photographers were white and that they were "men with a mission" (p.189), or had a strong commercial interest, or were looking for the exotic, or "were not even sure *what* they had included in their snapshots" (p.190). This contradiction can be negotiated if, unlike Farr, one is aware of its existence. Photography, as was stated near the opening of this essay, is a form of *representation*. It may be, in chemical terms, the most "realistic," but it is never simply a replication of reality itself. The odd thing is that Farr actually uses the term "representation" himself when he says that "whatever the photographers told of Blackfeet life, they represented the perspective of an outside observer and not that of a tribal participant" (p.192). A closer adherence to a *concept* of representation would have both prevented confusion and enabled the forging of a closer, if more analytical, link between the well-told word story of the reservation Blackfeet and their images.

Margaret Blackman, for her part, uses the words "window on the past" and concludes her main text with the claim that that

window does "command a view" (p.158), but in her case these are strong metaphors, not to be taken literally. And this befits a scholar who has probably grappled longer than most others with the theoretical issues raised by Indian photographs. Not surprisingly, along with two other authors here, Casagrande and Masayesva, she was billed as a principal contributor to the Princeton conference on "The Photograph and the American Indian" in September 1985, an event which in retrospect may well mark the coming of age of this area of investigation.⁵ *Window on the Past*, which is much more academic, even technical, in its orientation than the other books discussed here, offers, in my view, very valuable contributions in a number of ways. First, it gives new information on the history and culture of Haida people around the turn of the century—and in this endeavor the historical photographs were, as Blackman puts it, "a means to an end." If she is correct in her readings of the content of her available images, the photographic record offers insights in precisely those areas—settlement patterns, material culture, and crucially, cultural change—that the early verbal ethnographic accounts tended to ignore.

Second, the commentaries on methodology interspersed through the book, although somewhat self-satisfied and repetitive, do attest to a scrupulousness that many other researchers would do well to emulate. (Though it has to be admitted that the comprehensiveness of photographic coverage at which Blackman aimed probably could not be achieved in the case of more frequently photographed tribes like the Hopi, at least not unless the period of history to be covered is severely limited.) Third, the detailed accounts of photogrammetry (which is the use of photographs to provide evidence of the size and proportions of buildings which have since ceased to exist) make a well-argued case for the merits of such an approach in more widespread retrieval of vanished American Indian architecture.

Finally, the book includes a brief summary of the history of the systematic use of photographs by anthropological researchers (pp.44-50) and throughout there are pertinent observations on such matters as the biases inherent in the circumstances of various photographers' employment, the time(s) of the year in which they worked, technical limitations, etc. The only significant dimension omitted is any consideration of photographic style in the manner of some of the comments in the Matteson

book, such matters as vantage point, framing, lighting—especially in evaluating professional photographers. For example, in the case of figures like Hannah and Richard Maynard, it would be easier to assert or deny that the portrait of an Indian exhibits a tendency to see all Indians as curios if the photographers' style is consistent for portraits of both Indians and whites. Blackman excludes treatment of images by Edward S. Curtis on the grounds that his Haida pictures, in which some subjects wear wigs, were "reconstructions"; this is not a hundred per cent true (e.g. his views of totems, tombs and other aspects of material culture), and I suspect that an unconscious reason might well have been that his inclusion would inevitably have necessitated some stylistic analysis of the sort I am advocating in order to distinguish the components of his distinctive "vision."

At one point Blackman asks herself, thinking of Haida people as potential photographers, "How would they show themselves?" (p.73), and the "how" of a photographer's style, as much as his or her chosen subject matter, must be an area of concern when the work of Indian photographers themselves is considered. Farr remarks that "after 1920 it was up to the Blackfeet themselves to take their own pictures" (p.192) and some are included in his book; similarly, in her essay "Copying People" (1982), Blackman reports that "photography became part of Haida culture and they turned it to their own purposes, recording themselves as they wished to be seen";⁶ but I think it is fair to say that *Hopi Photographers*, *Hopi Images*, like the travelling exhibition upon which it is based, offers the best opportunity to date to examine a body of work by Native American photographers.

The book includes eight varied pictures by Jean Fredericks, who was born in 1906, but the bulk of the recent images selected for publication are by six photographers in their 30s or 40s who are probably working at or near the height of their powers. I will mention only some of them. Owen Seumtewa offers some beautiful understated portraits: his subjects have composed themselves, perhaps sitting by the stove or laboring at some daily task, and they are framed with more than a conventional amount of space around them. I think this is not so much to record the objects around them (as an anthropologist might), but to register a kind of visual correspondence between the stillness of these

rooms and the stillness of the figures. Merwin Kooyahoema's photographs are richly colored landscapes of the Hopi country (walls, the bluest skies), while Fred Kootswatewa's landscapes are more dramatic, especially in coloration: the sky before a storm over the mesa or deep shadows over the pueblo. It is notable that when aspects of Hopi ceremonialism are depicted the resulting photographs are nothing like those of turn of the century artists like A. C. Vroman, Curtis or Matteson. For instance, when Freddie Honhongva presents a ceremonial performer—I'm thinking of the boy clown figure—it is emphatically not at a dramatic moment: he simply sits on a wall facing the camera as a sort of footnote or aside to the main action which goes on, unseen, behind.

Most interesting of all, to me, are Victor Masayesva's photographs accompanied by poems. In these, the poems and photographs reverberate against/within one another. There is a picture of a well-stocked corn store, to give but one example, accompanied by a poem, "Famine":

Flies shelled and husked by the blowing sand
It was a windy year

We dug our cornplants out of the sand
And lived on watermelon seeds

There was a lot that we ate that year
In the winter-time we ate our children.

Both picture and poem could stand alone (and the power of each is the more fully discharged, the greater the reader's knowledge of the place of corn in Hopi culture and mythology) but in juxtaposition they enrich each other. While (like any caption) the verbal text will ultimately take precedence in the assignment of meaning, neither poem nor photograph can easily claim *the* definitive view, and the picture certainly cannot float free, as it were, as a purely formal construct. . . .

Younger's essay includes several quotations from the photographers stressing the Hopi-ness, so to speak, of their work, one of them going as far as to assert, "I take the kinds of photographs that other people [non-Hopis] can't take" (p.33). Essentially we have here, with photography as its arena of debate, a version of the vexed question of how much credence is to be given to the claims of ethnicity in consideration of art works. We

have seen it aired repeatedly over fiction and poetry by Indian authors. I have no dogmatic position with reference to literature anyway, but I am certain that the beginnings of such a debate with reference to photography is at least a sign of vitality. Looking thoroughly at photographs is not, as I have probably overstressed, a simple business. Images like those in *Hopi Photographers*, *Hopi Images* indicate that some of us will derive much pleasure, of an increasingly complex kind, from the contemplation of future American Indian photographs. We'll look to learn to see.

NOTES

1. See Robert D. Monroe, "The Earliest Pacific Northwest Indian Photograph (c. 1860)" in James L. Enyeart et al., *Three Classic American Photographs: Texts and Contexts* (Exeter: University of Exeter, American Arts Pamphlet Series, No. 7, 1982), pp. 12-20; the essay by Bud McKanna in *Shadowy Images of the California Indian Woman: Photographs by Edward H. Davis* (San Diego: San Diego State University, Department of American Indian Studies, Exhibition Catalog, 1986) is to be followed by a longer study.

2. Martha Sandweiss, *Laura Gilpin: An Enduring Grace* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1985).

3. This factor mars even such a responsible collection as Joanna Cohan Scherer's *Indians: The Great Photographs that Reveal North American Indian Life, 1847-1929, From the Unique Collection of the Smithsonian Institution* (New York: Crown, 1973); the bulk of imagery Scherer had to choose from (over 30,000 pictures) inevitably undermines the claims of such words as "great" and "reveal" in the subtitle.

4. For five of Jackson's 1875 Hopi images, see Clarence Jackson, *Picture Maker of the Old West: William H. Jackson* (New York: Scribner's 1947); for Wittick, see Tom Wittick, "An 1883 Expedition to the Grand Canyon: Pioneer Photographer Ben Wittick Views the Marvels of the Colorado," *American West*, 10, No. 2 (March 1973): 38-46; for Reed, see "Photographs of the Piegan by Roland Reed (Photo Essay)," compiled by Jay Ruby, *Studies in Visual Communication*, 7 (Winter 1981): 48-62.

5. Interested readers might wish to consult Blackman's "Posing the American Indian," *Natural History* 89, No. 10 (October 1980): 68-74, and "'Copying People': Northwest Coast Native Response to Early Photography," which overlaps to some extent the concerns of the volume under review and appears in a special issue of *British Columbia Studies* containing other relevant items: *The Past in Focus: Photography and British Columbia 1858-1914*, ed. Joan M. Schwartz, *BC Studies* No. 52 (Winter 1981-82), 86-112. Details of the Princeton conference may be obtained from Lee Clark Mitchell of the American Studies Program there.

6. Blackman, "Copying People," 110.