

# Disappearance as Spectacle: Photography and Federal Indian Policy

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## I. Introduction:

Virtually from its introduction to the United States in the 1840s, photography was used by white photographers to document the appearance and behavior of Native Americans. These photographers had a range of perspectives and motivations, but nearly all believed that, in making the images they made, they were documenting a world on the verge of extinction. In this, they followed (consciously or otherwise) an older tradition of visual depiction in other media. Though the work of the painter George Catlin in the 1830s is perhaps the most famous example— and one that many of the photographers were aware of— this tradition had begun long before, with the first Europeans to arrive in the Americas. For these photographers, as well as for their audience, photography was generally understood as an objective, even scientific, method of image making, superior as a method of documentation not only to painting or drawing but to written description as well. It was seen as a mechanical and chemical process that mostly excluded the photographer themselves— their tastes, assumptions, and talent— from the creation of the image. A photograph depicted what was in front of the camera, precisely as it had appeared in real life; it was a statement of pure fact, not of personal impression or taste. As documents of a vanishing reality, then, photographs could make a claim to truth available to no other form of description.

At the same time, photographs of Native Americans— along with other images of the American West— were often produced and sold as a form of spectacle. In depicting a world that was, for eastern urban audiences as well as Europeans, exotic and romantic, photographs often capitalized on that romance to sell a version of “the Indian” compatible with white Americans’ expectations and assumptions— even as they were presented, whether explicitly or tacitly, as objective records of fact. In particular, photographic depictions of Native Americans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century almost universally, and often explicitly, supported and reinforced a pervasive trope in American thinking about Native peoples: the Vanishing Indian (see, e.g., Dippie 1991). This links photography with the political project of westward expansion, a project that both presupposed and effected the violent displacement of Native Americans.

This paper will explore the tension between the photograph as spectacle and as document in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century photographs of Native Americans. I argue that the combination of these two

facets in the of photography of Native Americans was particularly effective in reinforcing the narrative of their inevitable disappearance and assimilation— a narrative that underpinned American policy throughout the nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In particular, I focus on the ways in which perceptions of photography as an objective, mechanical and chemical process tended to foreground the documentary qualities of these images, deemphasizing the extent to which they catered to both the ideology and the tastes of their white audience. As depictions of exoticism and romance, these images located Native Americans firmly in the past, in a world that was rapidly disappearing; as ostensibly objective documents, they assured white audiences that this disappearance was inevitable and even desirable, and so helped to justify policies intended to bring this about.

I will examine the work of three photographers<sup>1</sup> — Joseph K. Dixon, James Mooney, and Laura Gilpin— all of whom focused on Native Americans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but produced very different bodies of work, with very different motivations. Each of them made images that, deliberately or not, engaged with and responded to the venerable and deeply troubled traditions of white representation of Native Americans. In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of those traditions, as they had appeared in photography. I then discuss the work of each photographer in turn, analyzing the relationship of their work to what had come before.

## 2. “The Indian” in American Photography

By the time that James Mooney and Joseph K. Dixon began to document Native groups with the camera in the 1880s (Laura Gilpin’s work began later, and is characterized by both important continuities and differences) three important cultural or intellectual trends had fundamentally shaped the context in which they worked: the belief among white Americans that Native Americans, at least as distinct cultural and political groups, were doomed to inevitable disappearance; the development, at more or less the same time as photography, of the science of anthropology (a development that Mooney would help to advance); and the idea of photography as an objective,

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<sup>1</sup> Mooney was not a professional photographer, and would never have identified himself as such; his case is quite different from either Gilpin or Dixon, who— though also very different from one another— were certainly producing images that both aimed for artistic quality and were intended for a popular audience, neither of which is broadly true of Mooney’s work. However, he *did* use photography as a means of documenting Native peoples and cultures, and did intend that his work would contribute to a factual record of those subjects. It seems reasonable to me, therefore, to refer to him generally as a “photographer” as well.

scientific mode of representation. Each of these threads came together to shape how Native Americans would be photographed, the assumed audience for these images, and the meaning that they were understood to convey.

### *The Vanishing Race*

The trope of The Disappearing Indian is the subject of a substantial body of scholarship, offering various, not necessarily competing explanations. (e.g., Pearce 1971; Dippie 1982; Maddox 1991; Deloria 1998; Scheckel 1998; Bergland 2000; Huhndorf 2001). There were also several versions of the general claim, which proved readily adaptable to changing social, political, and intellectual conditions. As Dippie notes, for instance, for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

...American opinion on the Indian alternated between two basic positions: he can be civilized; he cannot be civilized. The former assumes that what makes the Indian the Indian is his environment. Once his environment is changed, he will be transformed. The latter contends that heredity determines the nature of the Indian. Thus no amount of outside effort can make him other than what he is, a savage, congenitally incapable of being civilized (Dippie 1973:5).

Yet despite the fundamental difference between these two views, *both* took it for granted that Indians, *as* Indians— that is, living in accordance with indigenous traditions, as societies politically and culturally distinct from mainstream, white American society— would cease to exist, and probably sooner rather than later. White observers believed in the radical incompatibility of “savagery” and “civilization,” and that the former would inevitably give way as the latter advanced. The Indian way of life— and it was also taken for granted that it was reasonable to speak of *one* way of life characteristic of all Indians— simply could not be sustained in the modern world. To give just one example: George Bird Grinnell, writing in 1905, argued of Native Americans: “In all respects they are men of like passions with us, but, lacking our training, they are unable to bear their part in the struggle for existence with the white man” (Grinnell 1905: 267).

Those who understood Native “savagery” as a product of environment and those who saw it as hereditary, then, both “proceed from the assumption of the Indian’s decline so long as he remains a savage, the difference being that the one supposes he can be elevated above savagery, the other, that he cannot” (Dippie 1973:5). Or, in other words, the one believed that Native Americans could live on as a part of American society, assimilated into mainstream ways of life; the other, that they would

simply die off. Either way, Native Americans would no longer exist as distinct cultural or political groups.

### *Ethnographic Salvage*

Given the pervasiveness of this belief, it is not surprising that many writers, artists, scientists, and scholars would become convinced of the necessity of documenting Native peoples and cultures, of preserving a tangible record of them before they were gone. For the newly-emerging science of anthropology, in particular, Native Americans were seen— as were other “primitive” peoples around the world— as an invaluable but perishable source of data about human origins and development. Much early anthropological fieldwork, accordingly, fell under the heading of what is now known as “salvage anthropology,” the scholarly effort to record and preserve whatever was left of cultures and peoples whose time was believed to be perilously short. In 1839, very early in the development of anthropology, James Cowles Prichard argued before the British Association for the Advancement of Science that

Wherever Europeans have settled, their arrival has been the harbinger of extermination to the native tribes. Whenever the simple pastoral tribes come into relations with the more civilized agricultural nations, the allotted time of their destruction is at hand; and this seems to have been the case from the time when the first shepherd fell by the hand of the first tiller of the soil (Prichard 1839:169).

This clash between “civilization” and “savagery,” then, was inevitable, as was its outcome. Moreover, “as the progress of colonization is so much extended of late years, and the obstacles of distance and physical difficulties are so much overcome,” this process was likely to accelerate, with the result that “in the course of another century, the aboriginal nations of most parts of the world will have ceased entirely to exist” (Prichard 1839:169). The scale and immediacy of this disappearance, Prichard argued, meant that

...it is of the greatest importance, in a philosophical point of view, to obtain much more extensive information than we now possess of their physical and moral characters. A great number of curious problems in physiology, illustrative of the history of the species, and the laws of their propagation, remain as yet imperfectly solved. The psychology of these races has been but little studied in an enlightened manner; and yet this is wanting, in order to complete the history of human nature, and the philosophy of the human mind (Prichard 1839:169-170; see also Pinney 2011:20).

And, indeed, early anthropology focused almost exclusively on peoples and cultures deemed primitive and exotic by its European (and Euro-American) practitioners. As Lyman notes, these ethnographers “attempted only infrequently to apply their researches to the changes in cultures around them. Instead, they focused on recording and understanding cultures they believed to be on the brink of disappearance” (Lyman 1982:50). These, of course, included Native Americans.

In the United States, anthropology came to be dominated by a kind of teleological view, by which all human societies progressed in similar fashion from “savagery” to “civilization,” following a predictable path through the same essential stages. The book *Ancient Society*, published by Lewis Henry Morgan in 1877, was a seminal statement of this view, which was taken as the working theory of the U.S. Federal Government’s Bureau of Ethnology<sup>2</sup> and its head, John Wesley Powell, who led the Bureau from its establishment in 1879 until his death in 1902 (Moses 2002: 25-30). Powell was a highly influential advocate of this “evolutionist” perspective, as Hoxie notes:

“Powell’s version of social evolution— the notion of culture stages, continuous progress, and the inevitable transformation of Indian life— became dominant within the discipline [of ethnology]. In short, he set the terms for informed discussions of Indian affairs in the 1880s” (Hoxie 2001:23).

In this “evolutionary” framework, ostensibly “primitive” societies were not primitive in their own way; rather, they embodied an earlier stage of development from that attained by “civilized” European and American society. “From the study of present survivals of a more primitive culture, according to Powell, much could be learned about the hidden past of present civilized society” (Moses 2002: 30). “Primitive” cultures, like those of Native Americans, could offer white observers an understanding of their own distant and forgotten past.

In the United States, where the idea that Native people were doomed to disappear dated at least as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such arguments found a receptive audience, and of course Native Americans were a target of such investigations— especially the groups seen by white observers as the most “authentic,” or least assimilated to white society. Edward Curtis— probably the best-known and most prolific photographer of Native Americans in this period— was definitely aware of this theory

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<sup>2</sup> Later the Bureau of American Ethnology, BAE. The Bureau played a major role in the development of anthropology in America for a couple of decades, if only because it was the main source of employment for American ethnologists.

and thought of his own work in these terms. With one photogravure published in 1913, Curtis wrote that

The American Indian [offers the] best opportunity to study primitive man as a living human document of supreme importance. His life history in its evolution of thousands of years is a unique story of beginnings early stages and developments [sic] in language, customs, manners and institutions” (in Gidley 1998:103).

Curtis stands out here for the scope of his efforts, and the skill and dedication with which he pursued them, but his argument here is typical. Native Americans represented a trove of information about the development of human societies, but that information would become inaccessible when Native societies disappeared, as they inevitably would; it was therefore urgent to gather as much of it as possible before that happened. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the camera became an essential tool in the collection and documentation of the “Vanishing Race.”

### *The Photograph as Evidence*

“Ever since its invention in the 1830s,” notes Jennifer Tucker, “many have seen photography as a medium of truth and unassailable accuracy” (Tucker 2006: 1). While, as she also observes, it is easy to exaggerate the credulity of photography’s early audiences in this regard, it remains true that a photograph was seen to have a different, and greater, claim to truth or objectivity than other modes of representation. Moreover, even when *particular* photographs or photographers apparently failed to meet this standard, it remained an ideal to which photography, unlike painting or drawing or written description, might reasonably aspire. The “mechanical objectivity of photography as an empirical form of pictorial representation” held up the *possibility* of a perfectly accurate, truthful documentation of fact, even when actual photographs fell short.

Early advocates of photography often presented it in precisely these terms. In his introduction to *The Pencil of Nature*— the first book ever to be illustrated with photographs, published beginning in 1844— photography pioneer Henry Fox Talbot said that

...the plates of this work have been obtained by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper. They have been formed or depicted by optical and chemical means alone, and without the aid of any one acquainted with the art of drawing. It is needless, therefore, to say that they differ in all respects, and as widely as possible, in their origin, from plates of the ordinary kind, which owe their existence to the united skill of the Artist and the Engraver.

They are impressed by Nature's hand; and what they want as yet of delicacy and finish of execution arises chiefly from our want of sufficient knowledge of her laws. When we have learnt more, by experience, respecting the formation of such pictures, they will doubtless be brought much nearer to perfection; and though we may not be able to conjecture with any certainty what rank they may hereafter attain to as pictorial productions, they will surely find their own sphere of utility, both for completeness of detail and correctness of perspective (Talbot 1844: n.p.).

Of course, this statement partly reflects the fact that many in his audience may have been unfamiliar with how photography worked, making it necessary to explain how the new medium differed from printing, drawing, or painting. At the same time, though, Fox Talbot is also emphasizing the mechanical and chemical processes involved in taking a picture over his own role as photographer— note, for example, the claim that a picture's faults result from inadequate understanding of natural laws, not his own skill. To produce a photograph was simply to allow light into the camera's enclosure and thus initiate a chemical reaction on the treated plate; it was, in effect, to harness a natural process, rather than to *create* anything. A photograph was a document of what was actually, in fact, *there* in front of the camera, not simply what an artist selected for representation. "Photography's mechanical-chemical process was popularly perceived to have eliminated the subjectivity of human intervention which had been increasingly acknowledged in painting and other prephotographic processes (Lyman 1982:24). Edgar Allen Poe, writing about his first look at photography, argued that "in truth, the daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands" (in Orvell 2003: 19; emphasis in original). Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing in 1859, referred to the daguerreotype as "a mirror with a memory," and noted that the "very things which an artist would leave out, or render imperfectly, the photograph takes infinite care with, and so makes its illusions perfect" (Holmes 1859: 74, 79-80).

At the same time, the mere existence of a photograph also points to the presence of the photographer as a *witness* to whatever the work depicts. A drawing or painting might conceivably be entirely imagined by an artist who never laid eyes on the people or places shown in their work. To serve as a document of reality, therefore, it requires some kind of additional verification to be credible— a description of how the artist got to the place, or why they were there, for instance (which in turn must *also* be evaluated as more or less credible). A photograph, however, means that someone *had* to be there, positioning a camera in front of a scene and exposing the plate or film at the right



moment. Even if we do not believe that a particular photo is what it claims to be, that it exists at all means, necessarily, that someone was there to see that scene.<sup>3</sup> This alone means that photographs have a kind of credibility as documents that no other medium could have.

Anthropology— which was coalescing into a distinct field at very nearly the same time that photography was developed and growing in popularity<sup>4</sup>— immediately adopted the new medium as a means of documentation, including the collection of data about “vanishing races.” As Christopher Pinney says,

The emergence of institutional practices that claimed the name of ethnology and anthropology coincided, in Britain and in France, with the appearance of photography, and as these practices of anthropology started to formalize their interests in new forms and possibilities of data, photography would emerge as an increasingly vital mode of data capture and transmission.

One of the primary attractions, again, of photographs for such purposes was their apparent “mechanical objectivity,” which made them particularly suited to scientific endeavors— far better suited than drawings or paintings, which were inevitably and fundamentally shaped by the taste, perceptions, and skill of the artists who made them.

For example, in an 1893 article on “The Anthropological Uses of the Camera,” British anthropologist E. F. im Thurn<sup>5</sup> suggested that while George Catlin’s paintings of Native Americans were among the best artistic depictions of “primitive” societies, “even his drawings, valuable as they are, and as artistically superior as they are, are far from having the value of the accuracy of photographs” (Thurn 1893: 184). He also said that photographs should be used to supplement written description, which “might be infinitely helped out by the camera” (Thurn 1893: 184). Similarly, M.V. Portman, who documented the native people of the Andaman Islands while serving as warden of a British penal colony there, agreed with a guide book encouraging travelers to take photographs, arguing that “By these means the traveller is dealing with facts about which there can be no question”

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<sup>3</sup> The recent rapid development of generative artificial intelligence systems, which can produce digital images that are indistinguishable from “real” photographs, of course undermines this status, and the value of photographs as evidence is increasingly questionable. None of this, of course, was true at the time when any of the photographers I am discussing were working.

<sup>4</sup> The Ethnological Society of London, one of the earliest anthropological organizations, was founded in 1843; Louis Daguerre’s photographic process was first publicized in 1839, and Fox Talbot’s competing calotype process the same year (Pinney 2011: 17).

<sup>5</sup> Author of *Among the Indians of Guiana*, published in 1893.

(Portman 1896: 76). Influential anthropologist E.B. Tylor, writing in 1896 about a recent book of photos of people from all over the world, noted that "Now-a-days little ethnographic value is attached to any but photographic portraits" (in Pinney 2011: 29). Franz Boas, widely regarded as one of the founders of anthropology, studied both drawing and photography in preparation for his first trip to the Americas, explaining in a letter to his parents that "Photography is so important that I want to profit as much as possible from it" (in Fleming and Luskey 1986:141).

So, as a means of documenting Native societies, photography was quickly adopted as superior to older methods, and numerous efforts, both official and not, were made along these lines. Thus "By the 1850s photography began to replace artistry as a means of recording the likenesses of members of Indian delegations to Washington," beginning with photographs made in 1852 of "leaders of the Plains Indian tribes who had signed the Fort Laramie Treaty" (Ewers 1986:9). Before the end of the 1850s, "a trip to the photographer's studio became an increasingly routine part of a diplomatic visit" (Fleming and Luskey 1986:20).

Again, efforts such as these were often explicitly presented a way of documenting Native peoples and societies before they were gone. The Washington, D.C., studio photographer James E. McCleese, for instance, began an effort to photograph all of the Indian delegations that visited the capital, arguing in 1857 that

To the student of our history, as additions to libraries and historical collections, and as mementoes [sic] of the race of red men, now rapidly fading away, this series is of great value and interest (in Fleming and Luskey 1986:22).

Similarly, Joseph Henry, the first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, advocated for the creation of an official collection of photographs of the members of Indian delegations. In a letter to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Henry observed that "[t]he Indians are passing away so rapidly that but a few years remain, within which this can be done and the loss will be irretrievable and so felt when they are gone" (in Fleming and Luskey 1986: 22).

One reason for the emphasis in this period on formal, studio portraits was that the photographic technology required very long exposure times, which made photographing Native Americans "in their own setting" virtually impossible. As Fleming and Luskey note of the various "wet-plate" photographic processes of the 1850s-1860s,

The emulsions were too 'slow' to stop action. Dances could be recorded only if posed. For one individual to keep still for what seemed like an interminable time was difficult enough...but for a group posed in unsteady positions it was almost impossible. Also impossible were candid photographs (Fleming and Luskey 1986:14).

This would change, however, as the technology improved, and, especially in the years following the Civil War, a growing number of photographers traveled west with the intention of photographing Native Americans. As Krouse observes, "Particularly after the invention of the dry plate, a great improvement over the older glass plate negatives that had to be exposed wet, photographers rushed out to the Indian reserves in search of the Vanishing Race" (Krouse 1990: 214).

### *The Assimilation Era*

The growing accessibility of photography coincided with two connected historical developments: the increasingly aggressive efforts of the federal government to assimilate Native Americans, and the rapid expansion of white settlement in the West. Each of these developments, which were obviously closely linked, made efforts at documenting Native societies seem even more urgent and necessary.

The period following the end of the Civil War was marked by an intensification of governmental programs to "civilize," or assimilate, Native Americans. Although this can broadly be said to have been the goal of federal policy since at least the passage of the Indian Civilization Act in 1819, earlier in the nineteenth century the main method by which it was pursued was the so-called "barrier policy," which aimed to keep Native and white Americans apart while the former gradually but inevitably transformed themselves. (Trennert 1975:2). This approach reached its fullest extent with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which relocated tribes in the eastern part of the country to new lands west of the Mississippi River.

The barrier policy, as Prucha (1973:2) notes, was based mainly on the hope "that the land thus assigned to the Indian nations [after removal] would not be desired by whites for generations." This hope was soon disappointed. As early as the late 1840s, developments such as the settlement with Britain of the Oregon border in 1846, the end of the Mexican American War in 1848, and the discovery— also in 1848— of gold in California, drove westward expansion of the white population far more rapid than the policymakers behind the Removal Act had predicted (Danziger 1974:1; Weeks

2016:75). A bit later, the Homestead Act of 1862 and the expansion of the railroads accelerated this expansion even further. As Weeks (2016:152) notes, “The settlement of the trans-Mississippi West in the last four decades of the nineteenth century constituted the largest migration of people in the history of the United States.” Contact between these migrants and Native American groups in the West—including groups who had already been relocated from their eastern lands, as well as the tribes of the Great Plains—was inevitable, as were the increasingly frequent conflicts that resulted as white settlers attempted to cross, or to occupy, Native lands, all while slaughtering the bison on which many of the Plains tribes depended.

Predictably, such clashes led to greater military action, particularly once the end of the Civil War freed up troops for use in the West. Faced at once with the growing presence and power of the U.S. Army and the loss of a primary food source, western tribes were eventually forced to accept federal authority; with this defeat came the presence of even more white settlers. As Hoxie puts it:

With shocking speed, the Indians who had previously avoided American domination suffered complete military defeat. Every tribe and band was now encircled by a rising tide of farmers, miners, and entrepreneurs (Hoxie 2001:xviii).

Herbert Welsh, a founder of the Indian Rights Association, similarly described Indian reservations as “islands, and about them a sea of civilization, vast and irresistible, surges” (in Hoxie 2001:12). These circumstances persuaded many that Indians were doomed to rapid destruction<sup>6</sup> without a concerted effort to save them from this fate. Benjamin S. Coppock, an advocate of Native education, expressed the common sentiment when he urged the “friends of the Indian” to “...do something, be quick, move, the frontier is not leisurely waiting” (Coppock 1886:108). In response to such calls, the U.S. government in this period took increasingly aggressive action to force “civilization” on Native Americans. Deloria and Lytle (1983:8) explain the thinking of the period concisely, saying that “In the 1880s a radical reversal of thinking occurred: if you can no longer push Indians westward to avoid contact with civilization, and it is inhumane to conduct wars of extermination against them, the only alternative is to assimilate them.” Among other measures, this push for assimilation would include the cessation of treaty making with Native tribes in 1872 (indicating that they were no longer be regarded as sovereign powers); the increase in the number of schools, including off-reservation

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<sup>6</sup> Not, as we have seen a new idea, but one given new urgency and plausibility by the changing situation in the West.

boarding schools, for Native children, all with the explicit purpose of teaching them the ways of white society and alienating them from tribal life; and the General Allotment Act of 1887, which divided communal lands into individual parcels that were to become the private property of individual Native Americans. All of these occurred in the last 30 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1890, the U.S. Census included the Indian Territory for the first time, and the Superintendent of the Census declared that the “frontier of settlement” had, for all intents and purposes, disappeared (a development which Frederick Jackson Turner famously called to the public’s attention in 1893) (Turner 1893: n.p.). Among other things, the sense that the frontier, and the life that was associated with it, was gone, helped to usher in a more romantic, nostalgic public perception of Native Americans. As Fleming and Luskey put it, “By the turn of the century, the Indians had ceased to be a threat for the average citizen. They were no longer viewed as bloodthirsty savages, but could be seen as the “noble red man” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:16). Similarly, Lyman notes that “Whereas the presence of Indians had generally been seen as a menace, the idea of their disappearance gave rise to a nostalgia that was often cloaked in the trappings of science” (Lyman 1982:48).

It is in this context that the photographic documentation of Native peoples was situated. When they journeyed west<sup>7</sup> to photograph Native tribes, white photographers believed that growing white settlement and direct government pressure, in combination, made the disappearance of “the Indian” as he had been both inevitable and immanent. Each of three photographers I am focusing on took it more or less for granted that “authentic” Indians were rare and getting rarer, and each positioned their work as an effort to record what was left of this way of life while some trace of it remained.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, as Alan Trachtenberg notes, they were operating at a time when years of mass immigration had dramatically transformed American society, leading to “a setting filled with voices of alarm about the fate of the putative Anglo-Saxon character of ‘the American’...” (Trachtenberg

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<sup>7</sup> Nearly all of the major photographic projects focused on Native Americans were mainly or exclusively carried out in the western U.S. The earlier efforts to photograph tribal delegations in Washington, D.C., mentioned above, are of course an exception to this, but even these were focused mainly on western tribes (most groups in the east having been relocated under the Removal Act). The only major exception to this that I am aware of is Julian Dimock, who worked among the Florida Seminole in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Milanich and Root, 2011), although James Mooney also worked, and photographed, among the Eastern Cherokee in North Carolina.

<sup>8</sup> Gilpin, as I will explain below, is a partial exception to this. Although she began her work among Native Americans with the assumption that the “authentic” way of life was going, or even gone, she gradually came to see and to emphasize continuities between life in the past and that of contemporary Native groups. The title of her most important work, *The Enduring Navaho*, expresses this perspective.

1998: 2). In that context, efforts by white Americans to define and establish an “authentic” American identity found it useful to co-opt the image of Native Americans, linking themselves to these “first Americans” as, in some sense, upholders of their legacy and inheritors of their right to the country. The image of Native Americans as vanished, or in the process of vanishing, both negated the priority of their claim to the land of the United States and made possible their adoption as romantic, nostalgic mascots of a unified American identity. Many white photographers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries sought to produce images that would cement this mascot status at least as much as they hoped to document the life of a vanishing race. This double aim characterizes the work of Joseph K. Dixon, in particular.

### 3. Joseph K. Dixon

Joseph Kossuth Dixon was born 1856 in Hemlock Lake, New York, and after earning a degree in Divinity at Rochester Theological Seminary became a Baptist pastor, first in Auburn, New York and then in Philadelphia (Krouse 1990: 215; Lindstrom 1996: 210-211). He left the ministry “amidst controversy,” possibly over the cost of erecting a new church and possibly related to what a former parishioner called “an affair du coeur” (Lindstrom 1996: 211). Dixon and his family moved to London in 1902, where he continued to work for the church, writing for religious publications, and began to experiment with photography. By 1904, he was working for the Eastman Kodak Company, giving lectures with titles like “The Call of the Kodak” and “The Kodak: A Moral Force” (Krouse 1990: 215). These lectures led Rodman Wanamaker, the son of a Philadelphia department store founder, to hire Dixon as part of the store’s educational programs, giving lectures and producing pamphlets on a wide range of topics (Krouse 1990: 215; Lindstrom 1996: 210-211). As Tachtenberg characterizes it, Dixon’s work for Wanamaker “represented a new hybrid, the lecture hall ‘educator’ fused with the booster and huckster,” since these educational projects were also always tied, if indirectly, to the commercial fortunes of the Wanamaker stores (Trachtenberg 1998: 9).

In addition to sponsoring “art exhibits, concerts, lectures, and readings at the various Wanamaker stores,” The Wanamakers had a long-standing interest in “the Indian.” John Wanamaker, Rodman’s father, described a trip taken as a youth to Minnesota, where he was struck by the “desolation” of the Native Americans he saw there, while Rodman himself recalled staying up past his

bedtime as a child to read the work of James Fenimore Cooper (Krouse 1990: 216; Lindstrom 1996: 211). Like many white Americans of the period, Rodman Wanamaker shared the conviction that the Indian was “fast vanishing, and that if a permanent historical and pictorial record was to be made of the picturesque and interesting race of people, it must be done now” (in Lindstrom 1996:211).

Wanamaker gave Dixon the task of creating this record, leading to the three so-called Rodman Wanamaker Expeditions to the Indians in 1908, 1909, and 1913 (Lindstrom 1996: 211; Trachtenberg 1998: 4). In each of these expeditions, Dixon led a crew of photographers to various western locations, where they took photographs— most taken, and nearly all directed by Dixon himself— as well as motion pictures. The photographs were published in numerous books, pamphlets, and brochures, as well as being featured in exhibitions at the Wanamaker stores and used in illustrated lectures given by Dixon; the films were also shown around the country, especially in the theatre attached to the Wanamaker store in New York.

The expeditions explicitly sought to capture the vanishing way of life of the “real,” “authentic” Indian, but each they also involved a significant component of performance or reenactment. For instance, although the 1908 expedition to the Crow Reservation in Montana— which produced something like 1600 photographs, in addition to motion picture footage— was described by Dixon as intended “to study and photograph the Indian in his native habitat,” it in fact focused on creating a film version of Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* (Trachtenberg 1998:11). Both film and photographs were intended for use in educational lectures at Wanamaker stores, and Dixon would later claim that the film and lecture were seen by over 400,000 people, including many schoolchildren (Krouse 1990: 216; Lindstrom 1996:211; attendance figure is in Lindstrom). Dixon’s team also staged a reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, but the resulting film “did not meet Dixon’s exacting standards, and he never used any of it in his lectures,” relying instead on still photos (Krouse 1990: 217).

The choice of *The Song of Hiawatha* is, of course, telling. The poem, though ostensibly based on Ojibwa legend, is highly romanticized, catering to both white tastes and literary conventions far more than it tries to represent anything about Native American life or culture. Further, as Krouse notes, the fact that Dixon “apparently had no qualms about using Crow Indians in their own native dress for the characters,” further attenuates the already dubious claim to any link with actual Native societies (Krouse 1990: 216). Clearly, then— despite Dixon’s assurance that the “poem was pictured [that is, enacted] by real Indians, on real Indian ground”— the goal was not any kind of authentic or

accurate representation of a Native culture, at least in any straightforward sense (Dixon 1909: 83). As Krouse notes, the goal of everything the expedition produced was “to portray Indian life in the past,” and Dixon said that “in all these pictures made of Indian life, every effort was exhausted to eliminate any hint of the white man’s foot” (Krouse 1990: 217-218). Of course, depicting the past necessarily entails an act of imaginative re-creation, but the vision of the Indian past that the Wanamaker expedition generated emphasized the romantic melancholy of a once-proud race that was now a shadow of its former self. Dixon presented the situation explicitly in these terms, saying that “The Indian of falcon glance and lion-bearing, the theme of touching ballad, the hero of romantic tale is gone, and his degraded offspring crawl upon the soil where he once walked in majesty” (in Krouse 1990: 219). Titles of photographs from the 1908 expedition included “Sunset of a Dying Race” and “A Vanishing Race,” the latter of which depicted a Crow warrior literally riding into the sunset (Krouse 1990: 219).

Dixon’s second expedition for Wanamaker, in 1909, had a similar performative element, putting even greater emphasis on the trope of the vanishing Indian. Dixon reiterated his conviction that time was short for Native societies, at least in their “authentic” form, and that this made documentation of whatever remained of those societies both urgent and essential:

We have come to the day of audit. Annihilation is not a cheerful word, but it is coined from the alphabet of Indian life and heralds the infinite pathos of the vanishing race...Men are fast coming to recognize the high claim of a moral obligation to study the yesterdays of this imperial and imperious race. The preservation of this record in abiding form is all the more significant because all serious students of Indian life and lore are deeply convinced of the insistent fact that the Indian, as a race, is fast losing its typical characters and is soon destined to pass completely away. So rapidly are the remaining Western tribes putting aside their native costumes and customs, their modes of life and ceremonies, that we belong to the last generation that will be granted the supreme privilege of studying the Indian in anything like his native state. The buffalo has gone from the continent, and now the Indian is following the deserted buffalo trail (Dixon 1913: 5).

In pursuit of such documentation, Dixon’s team went again to the Crow Reservation in Montana, this time to document the “Last Great Indian Council,” a gathering of Indian leaders that Dixon himself organized (Figure 1). It included several men who had fought in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, among them several who claimed to have been scouts for Custer (Dixon 1913; Lindstrom 1996:211). The expedition produced around 1,400 photographs, as well as motion pictures and sound recordings of speeches and songs on wax cylinders; Dixon also assembled a selection of photos and



text description of the Council and the people it involved into a book entitled, inevitably, *The Vanishing Race* (Dixon 1913; Krouse 1990: 220).

Again, despite the repeated description of expedition as a project of documentation, of record making, Dixon was also frank about the extent to which he would stage the scenes he was recording to achieve specific effects. In a letter to Robert Valentine, then Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Dixon described his intentions:

I propose having these old Indian chiefs say farewell, a last good-bye, and then ride away toward the setting sun. This picture I intend to be a portrayal of the final dispersing of all the tribes to be swallowed up in the larger civilization which your work so effectively contemplates, but the record of such a good-bye has never been made and unless made now will never be made— can never be made (in Krouse 1990: 221).

It is unsurprising that no “record of such a good-bye” had been made before, since under normal circumstances leaders of tribes from all over the west would not assemble together in full ceremonial dress, arrange themselves in a line, and ride (again literally) into the sunset (See Figure 2). It is evident that for Dixon, the fact that such an event could only occur as the result of deliberate effort and arrangement did not undermine the documentary value of the photographs he made of it. Since “the Indian,” in Dixon’s mind and that of his intended audience, really *was* disappearing, an image depicting this disappearance was an accurate representation of reality, even if it was also elaborately contrived.

Indeed, Dixon often emphasized the amount of effort that such staging demanded, as in his description of the difficulty of obtaining an “original” birchbark canoe for the *Hiawatha* film (Dixon 1910: 84; Trachtenberg 1998: 13). He even went so far as to make a record of the production itself, filming and photographing himself and his team as they staged the scenes. Dixon would later use these in an illustrated lecture entitled “How We Photographed the Indian.” As Trachtenberg suggests, “Dixon apparently wanted to impress upon his audiences that his pictures were indeed performances, events created for the camera— or, in his language, expositions whose truth lies in their artistry” (Trachtenberg 1998: 15). In other words, the spectacle of the Wanamaker images was portrayed by Dixon as both true *and* contrived— indeed, as true *because* contrived. It was the intensive efforts of the Wanamaker team to strip away the signs of white influence and return to the past that enabled them to access the “authentic” Indian character that they sought to document. Or, put more simply: Dixon’s team did not depict “the Indian” precisely as they found him, but rather as they *would have*

found him in the past. This further emphasizes the idea of disappearance; that such elaborate contrivance was necessary only underlines the fact that what was being depicted was, to a large extent, a lost world. The degree of staging, rather than undermining the factual accuracy of the images, served as a kind of guarantee of that accuracy. “The aim,” Trachtenberg argues, “was to make of the already vanished a spectacle of finality, of sunsets, empty saddles, burial sites, last arrows, a spectacle in the manner of a record” (Trachtenberg 1998: 15).

The final Wanamaker Expedition occurred a few years later, in 1913. This time, the impetus was a plan developed by Dixon and Rodman Wanamaker for a national memorial to Native Americans, to be built in New York Harbor. If built according to plan, the memorial would have been 165 feet tall—taller than the Statue of Liberty— with a seventy-foot base that would contain a museum, including artifacts collected by the Wanamakers and prominently featuring Dixon’s own photographs (Lindstrom 1996: 212; Trachtenberg 1998: 17). The memorial was sidelined by the outbreak of World War I and never constructed, but idea received a surprising amount of support, including from Congress, who agreed to donate the land for the memorial if Wanamaker would pay for its construction. A groundbreaking ceremony was held on February 22, 1913— George Washington’s birthday— with President Taft digging the first shovelful of dirt. (Krouse 1990: 222; Lindstrom 1996: 212). The ceremony was also attended by thirty-two chiefs from eleven tribes, who “symbolically hoisted a large American flag and signed a ‘Declaration of Allegiance’” to the United States, which “emphasized the Indians’ loss of identity and their desire to join with the whites of the United States in ‘continued allegiance to our common country’” (Krouse 1990: 222). This aspect of the ceremony apparently filled Dixon with a desire to “allow every Indian in the United States the opportunity to share in that inspiration” (Lindstrom 1996: 212). Accordingly, a third Wanamaker expedition, to be known as the “expedition of citizenship,” was planned, with the aim of traveling to most of the reservations in the United States, where in addition to “making documentary photographs, they planned to have each Indian group reenact the flag raising and the signing of the Declaration of Allegiance, thereby linking all the tribes to the memorial” (Krouse 1990: 224). Dixon’s team would eventually visit 89 reservations and present flags to 169 tribes. The proceedings were, of course, extensively photographed, and the expedition ultimately produced around 2,700 still images as well as motion picture films (Krouse 1990: 223-224).

Once again, the performative aspect of the expedition was precisely the point, although in a somewhat different way from the previous two. As Trachtenberg characterizes the difference: “The scenario now called not for role-playing but for ritual” (16). At each reservation, an elaborate, carefully structured ceremony was conducted; Dixon would make a speech to the assembled Indians about patriotism and citizenship, followed by the playing of recorded speeches<sup>9</sup> by president Woodrow Wilson and the current Commissioner of Indian Affairs and Secretary of the Interior. The Indians would then be asked to raise the same flag used at the groundbreaking ceremony in New York and sign the Declaration. Each reservation was also given a new flag, donated by Wanamaker, following the ceremony (Figure 3) (Krouse 1990: 223-224; Lindstrom 1996: 212-213).

This ritual was intended to function as an explicit enactment of Indian assimilation. As Trachtenberg puts it, by participating in the ceremony, taking the flag, and signing the Declaration of Allegiance (which, it must be emphasized, had no legal force or effect), Native participation would “signify the native’s willingness to lay down his old Indianness as savage enemy and take up his new Indianness, as first American” (Trachtenberg 1998: 17). While the disappearance of the “authentic,” historical Indian way of life was cause for sadness, in the view of someone like Dixon it was also inevitable; thus the best thing that Native peoples could do would be to accept “civilization” and their role within it. The 1913 expedition, and the images that were made of it, enacted and documented that acceptance at the same time.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. James Mooney

James Mooney is, in many ways, a very different figure from Joseph Dixon. While Dixon undertook nearly all of his photography of Native Americans under the auspices of the Wanamaker company, Mooney was employed for most of his life by the Bureau of American Ethnography (BAE), a federal agency, and was paid to do anthropological study of America’s indigenous peoples. He produced important studies of both the Ghost Dance religious movement and Cherokee mythology,

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Edison donated a phonograph to the project for this purpose (Krouse 1990: 223).

<sup>10</sup> As Lindstrom (1996) argues, Native people’s reaction to the ceremony was actually much more complicated, and they frequently interpreted it in their own way, using it as an occasion to press specific, local concerns with BIA officials. I am speaking in this section only of what Dixon and his team *intended* their photographs and other documentation to express.

and became one of the foremost experts on the use of peyote in religious ceremonies, defending this practice before Congress. For Mooney, photography was partly a tool for research and partly a way of building relationships with the people he studied. He would almost certainly never have described himself a photographer, and his technical ability was far below that of either Dixon or Gilpin. (Jacknis, for instance, points out that “One endearing flaw, which almost serves as a visual signature, is the frequent shadow of Mooney with a tripod-mounted camera” [Jacknis 1990: 186]). The vast majority of the photographs he took also remained unpublished in his lifetime. But, like Dixon—and, at least in the early part of her career, Gilpin— Mooney understood his work as the documentation of cultures and societies that were rapidly disappearing, and focused on the depiction of what he perceived as “authentic” Indian life. His work is also useful for exploring the complex relationships between photography and anthropology around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Mooney was born to Irish immigrant parents in Richmond, Indiana in 1861. He had an interest in Native Americans from a very early age, attempting to compile a list of all of the tribes in the United States and their locations beginning at the age of twelve (Moses 2002: 1). After graduating high school and spending a few years working on a local newspaper as both typesetter and editor, he wrote in 1882 to John Wesley Powell, head of the BAE, asking for a job. He had no formal experience, no college education, and no connections, and so this first application was unsuccessful. Three years later, though, Mooney travelled to Washington and managed to get a meeting with Powell who, impressed by the work Mooney had already done on his own, gave him a position, first as a volunteer and, after August 1886, as a regular employee. He would remain at the BAE until just before his death in December, 1921 (Jacknis 1990: 180; Moses 2002: 11, 16-17, 20).

Mooney began his formal study of Native Americans with the Eastern Cherokee, in North Carolina, in whom he had initially become interested because of work being done with the tribe by the Society of Friends (Moses 2002: 11). He visited the Eastern Cherokee for the first time in 1887 and returned several times between 1887 and 1891; he would also make several visits later in his career. From his second visit on, he went equipped with a camera, using it first to photograph a Cherokee ball game in 1888 (Figure 4) (Jacknis 1990: 180; Moses 2002: 34). Beginning in 1891, he also traveled west, initially to study the spreading Ghost Dance movement, and again brought a camera with him (Figure 5). He worked among the Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and, especially, the Kiowa, who would become the focus of much of his later field work and scholarship (Jacknis 1990:180).

Like most white Americans of his time, Mooney was certain that Native American cultures were rapidly dying out, and that “he was in a race against civilization to record many of the eccentricities of Native American cultures, and, more purposefully, much of their beauty, before they were destroyed” (Moses 2002: 32). One of his major projects was the collection of sacred ritual formulas of Cherokee medicine men— of which there were only six living individuals with direct knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Mooney “regarded it as a duty...to acquire as many of the Cherokee mysteries as possible before the passed into irrevocable silence” (Moses 2002: 35). Later, in talking about the Sun Dance of the plains tribes, he said that “in five years it will be wiped [out]; it will not be there at all; it will have vanished” (Jacknis 1990: 194; brackets are his). He repeatedly resisted efforts to recall him to Washington, arguing for instance of his work among the Kiowa that “With the death of a few more old men it will become impossible” (in Moses 2002: 134).<sup>12</sup> In particular, Mooney was well aware of the corrosive effects of the General Allotment Act (or Dawes Act), and feared that it would open tribes up to far greater white influence, and with it rapid change (Jacknis 1990: 195; Moses 2002: 107). The study of Native cultures, he believed, “was dependent upon the maintenance of a precarious balance between ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ mankind. As long as Indians remained captives on the reservations, ethnology would prosper” (Moses 2002: 121).

Because of these concerns, he generally sought out the groups and individuals whom he considered to be most “authentic,” most familiar with the “old ways.” Of his work on the traditional medicine of the Eastern Cherokee— of whose scientific value he was strongly dismissive— Mooney said that it was “impossible to overestimate the ethnologic importance of the materials thus obtained. They are invaluable as the genuine production of the aboriginal religion before its contamination by contact with whites” (in Moses 2002: 33). Indeed, among the reasons Mooney wanted to study the Eastern Cherokee, rather than the much larger group in Indian Territory, was that the latter’s

removal, at a single stroke, had done more to extirpate Indian ideas than could have been accomplished by fifty years of development. But secluded in the mountain reaches of North Carolina, there remained a considerable group of Cherokees, the ‘conservative’ element, who preserved the ancient ways. Even in North Carolina, admittedly, civilization had

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<sup>11</sup> A valuable reminder that the sense that Native American cultures were endangered was not *only* a myth propagated by white society to justify forcible assimilation.

<sup>12</sup> This insistence on staying in the field and gathering more data would repeatedly cause Mooney problems with his superiors at the Bureau, and is also one of the reasons that much of the information he gathered was never published. Again, though, this reflected his belief that while the writing up of his findings could be done later, the data themselves would not be available for long.

changed the dress and village customs of the band— but for an Eastern Cherokee, “the heart of the Indian is still his own” (Moses 2002:122).

Similarly, he chose to focus on the Kiowa among the western tribes because he saw them as “the most conservative...the most Indian” of the groups in the region (Jacknis 1990: 194).

The photographs Mooney took generally fall into two broad categories: posed portraits and images of ceremonies. He seems to have mainly used a large, dry-plate camera— which is cumbersome and requires significant set-up time— for portraits, and, at least after 1891, a Kodak film camera— which produced lower-quality images, but was much faster and more portable— to photograph ceremonials (Jacknis 1990: 187). Mooney’s use of the Kodak emphasizes the fact that his goal was often to capture a record of events, not necessarily to produce an artistic or beautiful image. Similarly, Jacknis points out, most of the ceremonial images were taken outside, in daylight, which meant that some of the material and social context could not be shown, but made it more likely that the image would be usable and the vital elements visible (Jacknis 1990: 186). In perhaps the most obvious contrast with the work of Dixon, none of Mooney’s photographs of ceremonials are staged, but are candid shots, taken in the midst of the real events; more generally he did not make his subjects dress in traditional clothing or use props, as Dixon and other photographers, like Edward Curtis, sometimes did.

Mooney’s portraits, in contrast, may often have served as a means of building trust or rapport with the people from whom he was seeking information. For instance, Jacknis points out that Mooney convinced Wovoka, the Paiute shaman and originator of the Ghost Dance movement, to allow his picture to be taken by showing him portraits of other people that he knew. Mooney’s were the first photos ever taken of Wovoka, and once he had them, he could use them in turn to persuade Ghost Dance practitioners to let him photograph the ceremony (Jacknis 1990: 189). Jacknis suggests that this

instrumental and sentimental use of photography probably explains the great proportion of Mooney’s oeuvre devoted to portraits. Many individuals are simply seated or standing in an open field, often attired in white man’s clothes. The scientific value of these images seems meager, but attention to the sitters’ identities reveals that many were Mooney’s prime informants, leading one to conclude that the pictures were taken as an act of friendship, or at least in an attempt to facilitate data gathering” (Jacknis 1990: 189).

For Mooney, then, photographs *were* data, but they were also a useful tool for *getting* data.

Mooney's attitude toward Native Americans is difficult to characterize. He had far less disdain, and far more respect, for them and their cultures than did many of his contemporaries, arguing many times that they "were as noble or as base as any other members of the human race" (Moses 2002: 49). He did believe that white society was more advanced than that of Native Americans, but he seems to have understood the difference mainly in terms of science and technology, rather than character or morality. In his book about the Ghost Dance, he argued that

The human race is one in thought and action. The systems of our highest modern civilizations have their counterparts among all the nations, and their chain of parallels stretches backward link by link until we find their origin and interpretation in the customs and rites of our own barbarian ancestors, or our still existing aboriginal tribes. There is nothing new under the sun (in Moses 2002: 90).

Mooney was also far more attentive to the differences between groups, and so much less prone to treat all Native Americans as a single, undifferentiated mass. His insistence on spending months or years living full-time with any Native group, learning about its specific culture and beliefs, would come to work against him professionally, since it limited his output, but at least reflects a recognition that Indian societies differed in ways that mattered, and knowing about one did not mean you knew about them all.<sup>13</sup> (In this sense, Mooney might be seen as an early advocate of what Clifford Geertz would later call "thick description.") In several cases, he took photographs among particular groups for many years, creating a long visual record that captured changes as well as specific moments or events (Jacknis 1990: 194).

At the same time, he "often described Indians as savages or children,"<sup>14</sup> especially in intellectual terms, and throughout his career to the necessity of Indian assimilation to white society for granted (Moses 2002:21). When questioned about the idea that, by studying the "primitive" customs of Native Americans, BAE employees and other scholars were encouraging their continuation, Mooney said that "no one realizes so wel [sic] as the ethnologic student the immeasurable superiority of civilization over savagery, and the swift and inevitable decay of savagery befor [sic] the newer light" (Moses 2002:

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<sup>13</sup> This is a sharp contrast with Dixon, who, for instance in texts like *The Vanishing American*, describes all Native Americans as living in tipis, regardless of region or environment (though he also refers to the same groups' wigwams). There is little if any recognition of cultural specificity in any of Dixon's work.

<sup>14</sup> As, for instance, when in discussing Cherokee medicine he said that "it is absurd to suppose that the savage, a child in intelligence, has reached a higher development in any branch of science than has been attained by civilized man, the product of long ages of intellectual growth" (Moses 2002: 48).

147). He was strongly influenced by the “evolutionary” view of human cultural development, described above, and with it the belief that Native Americans represented an earlier, more primitive step in the process of social development than white society— an attitude clearly visible in the above quotation.

Yet he also characterized Native religious customs and beliefs as comparable to those of other societies, in some ways anticipating the structuralist anthropology of later figures like Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>15</sup> More specifically, he described controversial practices like the Ghost Dance movement and, in particular, the use of peyote as reasonable, even healthy responses to dramatic social and cultural change, arguing that “The doctrine of the Hindu avatar, the Hebrew messiah, the Christian millennium, and Hesuanin of the Indian Ghost Dance are essentially the same, and have their origin in a hope and longing common to all humanity” (in Moses 2002:87-88). Mooney often seemed to see Native groups as sources of valuable data which needed to be extracted, but it is evident from his work that he also gained the trust of the people among whom he worked, building many lasting relationships.

In any case, Mooney’s example is useful because he was a professional anthropologist, or at least the closest thing to it at the time. While someone like Curtis was a photographer engaged in ethnographic study— even if he put in a huge amount of effort to assure the historical and anthropological value of his work— Mooney was an ethnographer who also used the camera. This difference in perspective and priorities had a profound effect on the images he produced, and thus the idea of Native societies that his work presented. Mooney even criticized Edward Curtis on at least one occasion for his staging of images. Specifically, he objected to an image entitled “Cheyenne Warriors,” which depicts from behind two figures mounted on horseback; one is wearing an ornate feather bonnet (a feature far more common in photographs on Native Americans than in their day-to-day lives). Mooney’s point was that the image and its title suggested that the Cheyenne were still engaged in active warfare in the present day, and so played into harmful stereotypes. Curtis defended such images by arguing that they were realistic depictions of the life of the Plains tribes as they had been, when “An Indian of the old days was a warrior 365 days a year” (Lyman 1982:87).<sup>16</sup> In other

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<sup>15</sup> I don’t wish to take this comparison too far; all I mean by it is that Mooney tended to characterize specific customs and practices in terms of their function in the society where they were found, and argued that different customs could fulfill similar functions or play similar roles for different cultures.

<sup>16</sup> Another good example of Curtis’s sense that “truthful” images were not necessarily those that presented the lives of Native Americans as they were in his own day.



words, Curtis's concern was explicitly the Indian of the past, while Mooney was concerned with the present as well.

The contrast with Joseph Dixon is especially stark. Both Dixon and Mooney described their work as urgent and necessary because time was short; if not made now, the record of the Indian could never be made at all. But for Mooney, this mainly required acting quickly—diligently and carefully gathering as much data as possible from the most reliable (read: traditional or conservative) sources, those most familiar with or in touch with the "old ways." For Dixon, in contrast, the key was to *rebuild* or reconstruct the past as it had been. What this reconstruction looked like, however, was more a matter of meeting white Americans' expectations, and sending the message that Dixon wanted to send, than it was about historical or cultural accuracy.

The underlying assumption Dixon seems to have made is that there wasn't enough of the "real" Indian way of life left to record; what was really valuable was already lost, and had to be recreated as thoroughly as possible from available materials. Since the "real Indian" was already gone, or very nearly gone, producing an image of him required, precisely, an elaborate effort of construction and performance. The amount of labor and obvious contrivance involved in the production of Dixon's images, then, was evidence of the *care* with which the reality of the past had been sought out and enacted for the camera. For Mooney, in contrast, the operating assumption was that whatever was left of "the old ways" was all there was to be captured. Or, at the risk of oversimplifying the point: for Mooney, the real Indian was rapidly vanishing, but for Dixon he had already vanished, in every way that mattered.

A comparison with white American culture, and our assumptions about it, is revealing here. Certainly, the lives culture of Americans of European descent looks significantly different, in any number of ways, from what it was in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. But it is never said that Euro-American culture has vanished or ceased to be "authentic" because of these transformations; the possibility of continuity through change is taken for granted. The comparison is, of course, far from exact: white American culture was not transformed through the influence or impact of a colonizing power using the coercive power of the state to forcibly assimilate people. But the general point is, I think, still valid: some cultures are seen to be capable of development and change while remaining fundamentally themselves. For others, change is the same thing as disappearance. This highlights the sense that "the Indian" was, by definition, incompatible with the modern world. If that is true, then

to change in response to that world— to accommodate it or assimilate under its pressures— is to cease to be what one was, and become something else altogether.

My final subject, Laura Gilpin, began her work photographing Native Americans with a perspective that was generally similar to Mooney's, but over the course of her career also came increasingly to see, and to want to depict, continuity in the lives of Native peoples— the persistence of tradition and culture in the face of tremendous economic and social change. This view could sometimes lead her to romanticize the lives of the people she photographed, but it still makes her work different from that of other photographers in important ways.

## 5. Laura Gilpin

Laura Gilpin was born in 1891 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. She began experimenting with photography as a child, and from 1916-1917 moved to New York City to study at the Clarence White School of Photography, one of the country's first institutions dedicated to photography (Sandweiss 1986: 11-12). She then returned to Colorado Springs, where, in 1919, she became associated with the new Broadmoor Art Academy, which taught art classes using an approach similar to the one Gilpin had experienced in New York. Gilpin made brochures and other materials for the Academy, and joined their staff in 1921 as the lone photography instructor (Sandweiss 1986: 35). Relatively quickly, Gilpin established herself as a portrait photographer, photographing members of prominent families and visitors, as well as friends; she also made landscapes, and began exhibiting her work both nationally and, by 1920, internationally, with photographs in exhibitions in Copenhagen and London (Sandweiss 1986-35-36). In general her landscapes were her most successful works; one, of the Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs, "won honorable mention in the Wanamaker exhibition in Philadelphia in 1921" (an indirect link with Joseph Dixon, who was still working for Wanamaker at this time) (Sandweiss 1986: 36).

Throughout this period, Gilpin was gradually developing a sense of the importance of regional art, both as expressive of specific regional cultures and environments, but also as a document of historical value. (Sandweiss 1986: 36-7). This sense would lead her to focus almost entirely on the American West— and more specifically the Southwest— for most of her career. Through the 1920s and 30s, she was exploring Colorado and New Mexico and taking photographs that were a mix of

landscapes, architectural images, and portraits, including some of Native Americans. Some of these would eventually be published in books like *The Pueblos: A Camera Chronicle* and *The Enduring Navaho*.<sup>17</sup>

Gilpin took one of her first portraits of a Native person on a car trip through Colorado and New Mexico in the fall of 1924. The image was of a Zuni woman, and it was also one of the only times she ever paid a subject to pose<sup>18</sup> (Sandweiss 1986: 44). The creation of this image provides a good example of how Gilpin was working with her own expectations of what a Native American “ought” to look like and negotiating questions of accuracy and manipulation. According to a letter written by Brenda Putnam, a sculptor and life-long friend whom Gilpin had met while studying in New York, the image reflected deliberate choices about the impression that Gilpin wanted to convey. As Sandweiss explains,

Brenda noted that ‘this girl did not have the usual white moccasin-legging that most of the women wear, so Laura took her from the knees up.’ This approach to the Zuni woman characterized Laura’s early photographs of the Pueblos; though she would not distort the truth as she found it, should did not always reveal it fully. By framing her picture carefully, she could convey the desired impression of picturesque traditionalism, an impression of how things *used* and perhaps *ought* to be. It was a vision informed by a sense of loss for an imagined golden age. Like Edward S. Curtis...or Frederick Mosen...Laura wanted to create a timeless image of Pueblo life, which belied the realities of historical change” (Sandweiss 1986: 44; emphasis in original).

One can see a perspective in Gilpin’s first book— *The Pueblos: A Camera Chronicle*, published in 1941— when she describes the dress of women at Laguna Pueblo, in New Mexico, saying that “her buckskin boots give a necessary balance to her costume which is entirely destroyed when she wears high heeled American shoes” (Gilpin 1941: 110). Sandweiss also describes how, at Laguna, “Laura tried to photograph the fiesta activities and the buildings without including the cars that seemed to be everywhere” (Sandweiss 1986: 45). At this point in her work, then, Gilpin was consistent in both her desire to exclude the signs of white society from her photographs and her hesitance about going too far in manipulating the scenes she was capturing. On the same trip, in Taos, painter Bert Greer Phillips “introduced her to an experienced young model and lent her some of his studio props— a feathered head dress, beaded moccasins, a deer-skin quiver and bow— with which to adorn the young

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<sup>17</sup> Gilpin consistently used “Navaho” rather than “Navajo.” I will use the latter, more standard spelling except in direct quotations or titles.

<sup>18</sup> Such payments were the norm for other photographers; Edward Curtis, for instance, included such payments as a fixed part of the budget for his project, while James Mooney had to persuade Wovoka to accept a copy of his portrait in lieu of payment.

man. Nonetheless, Laura photographed her model, Juan, wrapped in a simple white sheet against an adobe wall” (Sandweiss 1986: 45; see Figure 9).

And yet Gilpin was not entirely unwilling, in the early years of her career, to make use of more elaborate contrivance in the production of images intended to depict the past, or a world that was rapidly vanishing. In 1925, she made a trip to Mesa Verde to photograph a pageant staged by Aileen Nusbaum, the wife of Jesse Nussbaum, an archeologist and the superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park from 1921-1931. Aileen was an energetic advocate of the park, designing many of its public programs— and several of its buildings— as well as publishing several collections of Native American legends and stories. The 1925 pageant was intended to recreate the lives of the ancient Anasazi at Mesa Verde. It mainly used Navajo actors, partly because they lived closer and partly because the Pueblos “feared the spirits that they thought lived in the ruins” (Sandweiss 1986: 45).

Gilpin saw photographing the pageant at least partly as an act of documentation, saying that

the life, the customs, the very types which the play represents are passing away with a speed that frightens one. Quite aside from my photographer’s interest in its scenes, I am eager to add one more bit of accurate pictorial information about these Indians to the pitifully small amount we possess” (in Sandweiss 1986: 45).

As Sandweiss notes, the resulting pictures

reflect the aura of mystery and the romantic setting that Aileen Nusbaum created and show more about Nusbaum’s notions of Indian life than about actual Indian customs. As Laura became increasingly well informed about Indian affairs, the soft-focus pictures of Navajos posing in the supposed costumes of their would-be ancestors became a source of embarrassment. It was not only the style of the photographs that bothered her but also the idea that she had photographed the Indians purely as types, without any regard for their individual character (Sandweiss 1986: 45).

Indeed, it is hard to see in what sense she could have seen the pageant or the resulting photos as “accurate” about much of anything. The Anasazi had left the ruins centuries before, and depictions of their daily life, however informed by archaeology, could only ever be highly speculative. A few of these images, however, were nonetheless used in her book about the Pueblos, and while the descriptions do contain phrases like “long ago some cliff dweller maiden may have leaned from this very window (Gilpin 1941: 28) or “This is a suggestion of a scene...from a bygone age” (Gilpin 1941: 30), which imply that they involve some degree of staging or reconstruction, there is no explicit mention of the pageant or the context of their production. According to Sandweiss (1986:68), she told her editor on the book that these images were being used “symbolically” (Figures 7 and 8).

Gilpin would also publish a small illustrated pamphlet about Mesa Verde, in 1927, in which she tried to link “three areas: the landscape and geology of the region, the ruins, and the culture of the Anasazi Indians who once inhabited them. This progression from a study of the land to a study of artifacts to a study of human culture would become the structure for her subsequent books on the Pueblos and the Navajos” (Sandweiss 1986: 47). As Sandweiss notes, the text in this work

...includes the idea of an ancient and genuinely *American* past rooted in the American landscape. For Laura, as for many of the artists who fled to Santa Fe and Taos in the 1910s and 1920s and for writers, such as Mary Austin, who found a new validation of American life in the Southwestern landscape, the discovery of this American past bestowed a new legitimacy on American life. No longer did America seem a raw, new nation. With the discovery of her Indian past she had a history seemingly as old and rich as Europe’s. Laura called Mesa Verde’s spectacular cliff dwellings ‘a living monument to a forgotten race’ and added, ‘The atmosphere of antiquity which emanates from the age-old ruins takes possession of all who behold them’ (Sandweiss 1986: 47).

Throughout her work, Gilpin was consistent in this tendency to see Indians as part of a distinctively *American* history and culture, with which contemporary American society was somehow continuous. As Dixon and Wanamaker portrayed Indians as part of American history— so much so that their stories images can work to encourage patriotism in immigrants and their children— Gilpin’s framing of her work co-opts Indians into an American past that is unified across lines of race or ethnicity. Like many other white Americans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gilpin drew comparisons between ancient American cultures and ruins to those of ancient Egypt, Greece, etc. “The great antiquity of American culture made it at least as good as the culture of the great classical civilizations, but for Laura, as for many other southwestern writers, the fact that it was *American* and not derivative made it even better” (Sandweiss 1986: 67). Like Willa Cather and others in the inter-war years, Gilpin saw the Pueblo cultures as embodying “a heritage of peace,” and the Pueblo book’s structure seems to reflect Gilpin’s

belief that contemporary Americans could legitimately lay claim to this ancient legacy of peace. In the same spirit of cultural possessiveness that led Mary Austin to refer to the earliest inhabitants of the American southwest as ‘our Ancients,’ Laura writes of ‘this land which contains our oldest history. As Tom Outland, the hero of Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, maintained, the relics of Mesa Verde ‘belonged to this country, to the state and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me that have no other ancestors to inherit from’ (Sandweiss 1986: 67).

There is also a clear sense in the book that Gilpin saw her work as the documentation of cultures and peoples, but of such work as part of a larger project for which time was limited.

Among the modern Indians, stories of the past are essentially poetic, and there is still a vast amount of traditional material awaiting the writer who is capable of winning the confidence of the old medicine men. It will not long remain available in its true form, for the old men are dying, and the young men, under the influence of the white man and his schooling, are fast losing interest in their own folk-lore (Gilpin 1941: 30; see also Sandweiss 1986: 67).

Similarly, when describing the pueblo of San Ildefonso, Gilpin noted that

Until very recently there was no individual ownership of land; it belonged to the pueblo, a grant from the Spanish Crown, and individuals farmed areas allotted by the council. Now, however one finds more and more frequently that diligent and aggressive individuals are controlling all the better lands (Gilpin 1940: 82).

Or, again in the section on San Ildefonso: “The homes are clean and neat, the possessions of the occupants few and simple, though the white man’s furnishings are finding their way into Indian homes at a rapid rate” (Gilpin 1941: 84). Later, in her description of Laguna Pueblo, she lamented that

In recent years Laguna has adopted white man’s methods and products in wholesale fashion, much to the regret of those who knew and appreciate the unique charm of the pueblo, for already tin roofs are replacing the old adobe ones, and many modern conveniences, which do not harmonize with the picturesque charm of the pueblo, are to be seen (Gilpin 1941: 107).

The pueblo book also made several sweeping generalizations about the people, for instance:

Wherever one goes among the Indians one is sure to find faces of unusual character. In many ways the Indians are a simple and childlike people, while in other ways they are exceedingly difficult to understand. Some people credit them with superlative qualities of character while others go to the opposite extreme. One trait which is universally found is an extraordinary dignity of bearing, even among entirely strange surroundings. Their chief desire is to be let alone and allowed to live their lives as they choose. They are a friendly, happy people, which an excellent sense of humor unsuspected by strangers (Gilpin 1941: 86).

Sandweiss (1986: 68) aptly contrasts such statements with Gilpin’s later book on the Navajo, which treated people much more individually, naming them in pictures, discussing their particular families and histories, and so on. “Similarly, the text of *The Pueblos* is suffused with a romantic sensibility as the Navajo text is not” (Sandweiss 1986: 69).

All of that said, there is still some suggestion in *The Pueblos* of the emphasis Gilpin would later place on cultural continuity and endurance. A passage about a ceremony performed at San Ildefonso seems to echo some of Mooney’s view of the adaptability of Native religious practices:

The ceremony described is entirely Indian in character. However, the influence of the early padres and Catholicism is maintained in many of the Pueblos, and their important annual ceremonies commence with a service conducted by the priest in the Pueblo Mission. After

this service a procession leaves the church carrying an image of the Virgin to a temporary altar which has been erected in the plaza. After their ceremonial dance the procession returns the image to the church. And so, with complete dignity and reverence, is blended the Christian with the pagan faith of these entirely sincere people (Gilpin 1941: 90).

This is a story of adaptation and accommodation, not simply the replacement or destruction of one culture by another. Somewhat more explicitly, Gilpin ends the book by saying that the Pueblo Indians

...have unbelievable patience. They have an inherent sense of beauty. As artists they are aware of the great rhythm of nature and are keen observers of her forms. They have given their art a virility and beauty of design beside which much of our own becomes weak and somewhat insignificant.

Above all they have endured (Gilpin 1941: 124).

This description combines romanticism and broad cultural generalization with an explicit statement about the durability of Pueblo cultures— a statement that seems in direct contradiction with her earlier observations about the influence of white society and the disappearance of traditional knowledge. Perhaps Gilpin here is already beginning to question the narrative of the vanishing race which she, and virtually all other white photographers before her, had taken for granted.

Probably the event that most deeply shaped Laura Gilpin's career as a photographer was an accident. In the fall of 1930,<sup>19</sup> she set out to drive to the north rim of Grand Canyon with her friend and life-long companion<sup>20</sup> Betsy Forster. After visiting several other sites in the area, the pair were on their way to Canyon de Chelly when they ran out of gas about 20 miles north of Chinle, AZ. They slept in the car, and in the morning Laura set out to find gas or assistance. She walked for more than two hours to a trading post, where she got gas and a ride back to the car from the trader's wife. When she got to the car, it was surrounded by Navajos, and Forster was playing cards with them (Sandweiss 1986: 51).

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<sup>19</sup> One of the characteristics of Gilpin's career is that her major projects were often many years in the making, as she struggled to fund the time and travel to take her photographs or worked with publishers to produce the books as she wanted. So, she began working among the Navajo well before the Pueblo book was actually published, though the pictures for the latter were taken mostly in the 1920s. *The Enduring Navaho*, in turn, would not be published until 1968, and Gilpin was still making photographs for it through the end of the early 1960s. So, the book was her primary focus for 18 ½ years, but the earliest images in it were taken more than 30 years before its publication.

<sup>20</sup> I have no wish here to indulge in euphemism; it is probably reasonable to describe Forster as Gilpin's partner. They lived together for much of their lives, and Gilpin spent many years caring for Forster as her health declined. However, they never publicly defined their relationship as either romantic or otherwise.

This experience would later lead Forster, who was growing bored with her nursing job in Colorado Springs, to apply for a job with the New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs at Red Rock, AZ. She moved there in fall 1931 (Sandweiss 1986:52). Gilpin still had family obligations in Colorado Springs, but she visited frequently, photographing the Navajo in the community “in the years just before widespread federal intervention,<sup>21</sup> a world war, and reorganized tribal government began to alter the long-established way of life” (Sandweiss 1986: 52). Forster seems to have developed very good relationships with the Navajo around Red Rock, and these relationships gave Gilpin access to the community that should not otherwise have had. She visited and took photographs on at least five occasions while Forster held this position (1931-33) (Sandweiss 1986:52-4). She returned to this work later as well, making multiple trips each year through the first half of the 1950s, and continued to visit when she was able well into the 1960s.

As Sandweiss notes, the photos Gilpin made among the Navajo are much less romantic, more personal and intimate, and were generally produced through a collaborative process. Gilpin never used her own props or costumes (as Edward Curtis had), but photographed the Navajo as she found them, and never took a photo without permission.<sup>22</sup> “Her vision of loss has disappeared, replaced by a fascination with the culture that remains” (Sandweiss 1986: 54). This does not mean that Gilpin did nothing to shape the images around a particular vision or understanding of Navajo society, however. Sandweiss (1986: 55) describes these photos from Red Rock as “fall[ing] in a category that lies somewhere between objective scientific reporting and the studied romanticism of much late-nineteenth century western American art.” (See Figures 10 and 11). In particular, she tended not to show the more negative aspects of contemporary Navajo life, minimizing for instance the problem of alcoholism on the reservation. Gilpin felt that such problems already got plenty of attention, and were not in any case unique to the Navajo. “Similarly, Laura deals with politics but not political factionalism, the economy of Navajo culture but not the dire poverty, the hope for improved

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<sup>21</sup> “Before widespread federal intervention” is arguable; this was long after the infamous Long Walk, for instance, when the Navajo were forcibly relocated to the Bosque Redondo reservation in New Mexico in 1864. But, it is true that few Navajo at the time spoke English, that cars, electricity, or indoor plumbing were rare, and sheep herding and weaving were still the main economic activities.

<sup>22</sup> As Sandweiss also notes, Gilpin was using a large-format view camera, which was heavy and required a tripod; this made it impossible for her to take pictures on the fly, without being noticed. Her subjects were necessarily aware of her, and had to be cooperating to some degree.



educational facilities but not the problems of illiteracy” (Sandweiss 1986: 102). She preferred to focus on their dignity and endurance.

This also led her to ignore or minimize some important political and policy changes affecting the communities she was working in. First, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 had provided for federal recognition of tribal governments and, to an extent, provided new means of self-government. This policy was especially contentious among the Navajo, who initially rejected organization under its auspices, in part because of their distrust of John Collier, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs at the time and the primary architect of the policy (see Kelly 1975). Second, the policy of Termination, beginning in the early 1950s, then stripped away that recognition from many tribes, if only temporarily, and imposed new disruptions— in particular the program of urban relocation, by which the Navajo were among the groups most affected, with families moved to cities as far away as Los Angeles or Chicago. The decades when Gilpin was working most intensively among Native communities, then, were a period of flux and instability, but one gets little sense of this from looking at her photographs.

The emphasis on continuity and adaptation is obvious in the resulting book’s title, *The Enduring Navaho*, but it is also evident in its structure. Gilpin had originally intended to end the book with a section on Navajo adaptation to the contemporary US, but as she worked she began to feel this was inappropriate, and decided to end instead with a section on “tradition,” saying that “Tradition is still going on and is the essence of the Navaho, and of course with this section, last, it completes the circle” (in Sandweiss 1986: 94).

Sandweiss contrasts Gilpin’s use of “enduring” in her book’s title with Curtis’s famous Navajo image, “The Vanishing Race” (Figure 16). As she puts it, “Curtis looked for what was gone. Laura sought out what was left. She focused on what had survived rather than what was being destroyed” (Sandweiss 1986: 101). We might draw a similar comparison with Dixon’s book of the same name, or indeed any number of other images, books, articles, and other cultural productions that both assumed and took for granted the disappearance of Native American people and cultures. Moreover, Gilpin’s work emphasizes adaptability and accommodation, rather than mere survival.

Laura now consciously recognized that what seemed most important about the Navajo was not how much they were changing but how much of their rich tradition they were able to retain, a bias apparent in her earliest pictures from the 1930s. What had come to fascinate

her was how these traditions could endure in the face of so much temporal change... (Sandweiss 1986: 94).

Yet the Navajo book is not entirely without some of the sweeping romanticism that characterizes *The Pueblos*, and despite its more individualized or personal representations, there are still broad generalizations. “The two salient qualities of these people,” Gilpin says, “are dignity and happiness,” rooted among other things their “deep rooted faith born of their Oriental origin” (Gilpin 1968: 20). This is also used, in fact, to explain the endurance which is Gilpin’s focus:

“Through all runs a vein of kindness, inherent good manners, and a special quality for which it is difficult to find the right word. Perhaps integrated personality is the attribute, for there is a ‘oneness’ about these people. Simply and quietly they abide by their tradition” (Gilpin 1968: 20-21).

Similarly, while many of the people in the photographs are identified by name—something that does not occur at all in the *Pueblos* book— there are also images with titles like “An Old Navajo Woman” and “A Typical Navajo Posture” (Gilpin 1968: 40, 44) (Figure 15).

And, despite the emphasis on endurance, the book is not entirely devoid of the idea that what it depicts is a vanishing world, a disappearing way of life. Gilpin notes that she conceived of the book in the 1940s, “As I realized the speed with which changes were coming to the reservation” (Gilpin 1968: 56). A bit later, she noted that

“Where Navaho people have moved to nearby towns and are living in regular houses, I have seen disorder and a slovenly way of living. The reason seems twofold, poverty and the example of white people of low caliber, for few Navaho have had much contact with cultured Anglo homes...At the present time...during this transition from the old life to the new, Navaho people are buying second-hand beds, tables, and chairs, and the old sense of order is disappearing” (Gilpin 1968:65).

Along similar lines, she notes that dress is changing; women were shifting from “the cotton skirt, worn for so long a time, to one of rayon and similar material, and shorter in length,” and that “All but gone is the old-type man’s costume” (Gilpin 1968: 71, 73). Similarly, paved roads now link areas of the reservation, so that “Distances seem to have shrunk” (Gilpin 1968: 84-88).

At the same time, though, Gilpin not only describes these changes, she also photographs them. There are many photographs of individuals and groups in non-traditional clothing, as well as people shopping at trading posts, sitting in or near cars, and so on. (Figures 12-14). So, while she may have felt melancholy at the changes she saw taking place, she did not exclude them from the photos, as she

had in earlier works. *The Enduring Navaho* cannot be described as an objective or impartial account, but at least it presents a fuller picture of Navajo life at the time.

## 6. Conclusion: Picturing the Vanishing Race

Nineteenth century Americans, especially at the end of the century, were fascinated by images of Native Americans. The end, more or less, of the so-called Indian Wars with the plains tribes with the massacre at Wounded Knee and the confinement of Native groups to reservations, along with the expansion of the railroads and the growth of western cities, meant that the West was no longer quite the dangerous place it had been, and there was a growing nostalgia among white Americans for the romance of the frontier, of which Indians were an integral part. At the same time, the end of the frontier served to reinforce the long-standing belief in American culture that the days of the Indian *as* Indian were numbered. Photography became widely available and easier to practice at just the time when the West became more accessible, and so it was probably inevitable that Native peoples would become popular subjects for photographers— including many who saw themselves as documenting their vanishing cultures. These photographers, to varying extents, “thought of themselves as visual historians, belonging both to the scientific and artistic communities” (Fleming and Luskey 1986:214).

It is wise to view many of these photographs with a good deal of skepticism, as far as the accuracy of their representation of Native American individuals or societies. As Krouse notes, however, “The real value of these images is as historical documents themselves, reflecting a time when whites deemed it imperative to document native populations before they were forever gone” (Krouse 1990: 214). They *are* genuine documents, in other words, but they probably tell us more about the people and the societies that produced them than their ostensible subjects.

The three photographers discussed in this paper illustrate, in their differences, how various the relationship between photography, policy, and cultural expectations could be— as well as how those relationships shifted over time. Joseph Dixon explicitly presented his work as both an effort at documenting a vanishing way of life and a form of public education, showing that way of life to people who would not otherwise have a chance to see it. He also believed that more widespread knowledge of Native peoples and cultures would have salutary effects for American society, although he was

often a bit vague about what exactly those effects would be. With these goals in mind, he set out to capture an image of Indian life and history that would suit these purposes— an image that positioned “authentic” or unassimilated Native Americans firmly in the past, and their way of life as radically incompatible with the modern, “civilized” United States. This depiction implicitly, and in Dixon’s case often explicitly as well, supported the federal program of assimilation. If “the old ways” could not survive in the modern world, then Indians who continued to live in accordance with them could not survive either. Assimilation, even coercive assimilation, becomes a way of protecting Native peoples from destruction, and photography a way to make a durable record of what would be lost in the process. In his endorsement of these views, Dixon is basically similar to photographers like Edward Curtis or Roland Reed, and, like them, his work suggests that he saw no conflict between the goal of accuracy or authenticity and the elaborate fabrication of scenes that presented the past as he believed it to have been.

James Mooney’s work contrasts sharply with Dixon’s in several ways, and yet maintains some of Dixon’s assumptions and priorities. Like Dixon, Mooney believed that traditional Native American ways of life were rapidly disappearing, and that it was imperative to document these cultures and practices before they were gone forever. Like Dixon, therefore, he focused his efforts on the most traditional or “conservative” groups and individuals, among whom he believed the link to the past was strongest. Like Dixon, he believed in the necessity of assimilation, although he was much more critical of specific policies and programs intended to achieve it, and he rejected the need for strongly coercive measures, seeing the Allotment Act, in particular, as both unnecessarily destructive and as a way to giving Indian land to white settlers. Perhaps most significantly, photography was secondary to him; his goal was never to produce beautiful or artistic images, but to supplement the written records and descriptions he was producing. His photographs were, in general, not made with public distribution in mind (though a few were used to illustrate his books, especially the work on the Ghost Dance), and certainly not with the idea of selling them. He was therefore less concerned with presenting an image of Native Americans that would appeal to white audiences, which is perhaps why his photographs present a more varied, if not exactly more *objective*, picture of Native American life.

Laura Gilpin presents yet another variation on these relationships. Perhaps most significant in her work among Native Americans are the ways in which it *changed* over time: from a highly romanticized, nostalgic image that largely fit within the tradition of people like Dixon—though never

with the same degree of deliberate contrivance— to a more nuanced, intimate view that emphasized continuity and endurance instead of loss or disappearance. At the same time, she never entirely shed her earlier romanticism, nor her sense of melancholy at the changes she saw in the Native societies she photographed. The emphasis on endurance in her later work was an important, and in many ways a positive, break with the past, but it nonetheless led her to exclude many significant aspects of contemporary Native American life in order to present the image of that life that she wanted.

All photography is selective. With limited time, attention, and film, the photographer must choose where to point their camera and when to release the shutter. Even a photographer like Gilpin, who was willing to spend many years developing relationships and visiting the same people and communities over and over again, could not produce anything like a comprehensive view of Native American life. It is an obvious fact, though we may occasionally forget it, that a photograph represents a single instant, frozen and isolated from an ongoing reality, of which it may be more or less representative. The links between the selections made by these three photographers and the actual lived reality of the Native Americans they photographed are never straightforward or unproblematic, but their work nonetheless provides valuable insight into the changing role that the image of “the Indian” has played in American life.

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