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## Review of *Spirit Capture: Photographs from the National Museum of the American Indian* Edited by Tim Johnson

Mick Gidley

University of Leeds, g.m.gidley@leeds.ac.uk

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*Spirit Capture: Photographs from the National Museum of the American Indian.* Edited by Tim Johnson. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998. Photographs, notes, selected bibliography, index. xvii + 205 pp. \$60.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

*Spirit Capture*, unlike all too many of the proliferating collections of photographs of

American Indians, is a rich, attractively designed book with several distinguishing features.

First, it acts as a showcase for a judicious selection of images from the enormous archive of some 90,000 photographs held by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and, as such, anticipated and paralleled the exhibition of the same title mounted during the spring of 1999 at the NMAI's George Gustav Heye Center in Manhattan. The NMAI inevitably possesses large numbers of famous pictures, but this collection's editor has avoided reproducing too many of them. Indeed, when such images as Charles M. Bell's portrait of a seated Red Cloud, with a single feather in his hair, or George Trager's sobering depiction of the mass grave of the massacred at Wounded Knee do appear, they serve a specific purpose, usually contrasting with a lesser known image that constitutes the subject of discussion.

As is true of the NMAI archive itself, the book includes images from the whole of the Americas, but with an emphasis on North America, especially the western regions of the United States. It offers images from all phases in the evolution of photography, from daguerreotypes to recent color snaps, with a concentration on images made during the early twentieth century by the anthropologists and others who collected artifacts for George Gustav Heye. Natasha Bonilla Martinez, in an authoritative historical survey of the archive, records the role of patronage in its formation, a discussion worth extending to patronage's role in determining how Indians have been represented. Pamela Dewey's brief essay moves in this direction pointing out that while artifacts were carefully identified in photographic captions, the Native people portrayed often went unnamed.

A second notable feature of *Spirit Catcher* is its determination, in the manner of such groundbreaking collections as Lucy Lippard's *Partial Recall* (1992), to foreground *Indian* experience, an emphasis found in a major recent British exhibition and book, *Native Nations*:

*Journeys in American Photography* (1998), curated and edited by Jane Alison. Portfolios of present-day work by a variety of Native photographers—including gloriously informative yet unpeopled Taos casino scenes by Larry Gus (Navajo) and deliberately conventional portraits by Dorothy Grandbois (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) of student life at Riverside's Sherman Indian High School—punctuate *Spirit Capture*. Moreover, several essays are by Indian scholars, most notably those by the editor Tim Johnson (Mohawk), Richard W. Hill Sr. (Tuscarora), and Linda Poolaw (Delaware-Kiowa), who contributes a chatty study of the large body of work produced by her father Horace Poolaw (also featured in *Native Nations*). Throughout, contributors speculate appropriately on the *responses* of the indigenous subjects of these images. The often described "other" looks and writes back.

The book's third major distinction is its application, if not quite fully enough, of the lessons taught by certain recent writers on the photography of Indians, particularly that the products of this complex medium should rarely be judged as mere transparent records, for they encode, in a multiplicity of ways, the assumptions of the dominant culture. Nigel Russell and, in a second essay, Martinez survey whole ranges of images in this light. Thus new contextual information is supplied regarding photographs made by such figures as artist Frederick Catherwood, amateur anthropologist Edward H. Davis, professional anthropologist Frank Speck, and the archaeologists who worked under Frederick Webb Hodge in the major Heye-sponsored excavations at Zuni. Richard Hill, whose essay is a highlight of the book, examines some of the stereotypes of Indians created in—or, more often, perpetuated by—photographs and brings to light the ambiguities in a variety of images, many previously (paradoxically for stereotypes) little known. My only cavil, and it applies to the other essays too, is with the exclusive concentration on content, when style of composition is an equally significant determinant of meaning. In just a few instances the book is too

reliant upon existing, sometimes outdated, scholarship, but on the whole it is a must for open-minded readers interested in either Native American culture or photography.

MICK GIDLEY  
School of English  
University of Leeds