

## **Black Indian With a Camera: The Work of Valena Broussard Dismukes**

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In this paper, I examine the liberatory photography of a living African-Choctaw-French American artist, Valena Broussard Dismukes. I am especially fascinated by the way in which Dismukes takes the camera, an object that had previously been used as a weapon of oppression against Native Americans and people of African descent, and uses it to capture the spirit of twenty-first-century Black Indians on their own terms. In her series of portrait photographs entitled “Red-Black Connection: The Cultural Heritage of Black Native Americans,” Dismukes highlights the varied experience of Black Indians in the United States and forces her viewers to reevaluate their notions of what a “real” Indian and what a “real” Black person look like.

Anthropologists and art historians have recently explored the ways in which photography has historically been used as a tool of oppression against people of color. Susan Sontag argues that photography was an integral part of Westward expansion in the nineteenth century. She asserts that taking pictures of the “vanishing” Native American provided a way for white frontiersmen to document their conquest of Native land and to relegate indigenous peoples to a static past.<sup>1</sup> Mick Gidley, a visual anthropologist, reiterates, “Photography was part and parcel of a colonizing movement which not only took possession of land from Native Americans but also appropriated – or attempted to appropriate – their cultures.”<sup>2</sup> In the twentieth century, however, many Native American people have taken cameras into their own hands and have taken the opportunity to represent themselves. Victor Masayesva’s decision to embrace photography is particularly interesting, especially since he views the camera and the missionary as equally dangerous tools in the attempt to decimate Indigenous peoples and cultures.<sup>3</sup> He and other Indian artists have reconciled with this painful past by affirming that photography of Natives by Natives can also be a “ceremony, a ritual that allows people to sustain and preserve their culture.”<sup>4</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo author whose work demonstrates a deep engagement with the visual, affirms that wielding a camera is a revolutionary act. In her essay, “The Indian with a Camera,” Silko re-imagines the camera in the hands of the people who had previously been shot by it (pun intended) as a tool of self-declaration. Silko asserts that Indians frighten European Americans with cameras because this image unsettles the Eurocentric desire to see Native people as dead, as relics of a tragic past.<sup>5</sup> Seeing Indians as agents of their own representation

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Mick Gidley, “Reflecting Cultural Identity in Modern American Indian Photography” in *Mirror Writing: (Re)-Constructions of Native American Identity*, ed. Thomas Claviez and Maria Moss (Berlin: Galda + Wilch Verlag, 2000 ), 262.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Partial Recall* (New York: New Press, 1992), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Lippard, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, “The Indian With a Camera” in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 177.

undermines this European-American fantasy. Moreover, the Native American photographer is an “omen” of the not-so-distant day when indigenous people will take back the land that was taken from them.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the conceptualization of the revolutionary and political power of photography for many Native Americans is widespread.

Like Native Americans, Black Americans have reclaimed their images by becoming photographers themselves. Clyde Taylor traces the rise of Black photography during the Civil Rights movement and the continued development of an African American photographic tradition.<sup>7</sup> Taylor emphasizes the political implications of Blacks as photographers by pointing out that African Americans’ right to look were denied during the Jim Crow era. One need only recall how many young Black men were taught from an early age never to look at a white woman if they wanted to avoid being lynched to understand the life-and-death implications of looking for African Americans. Taylor affirms that the work of contemporary Black photographers “testifies to the liberation of the Black gaze.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of being passive objects of a racist photographic gaze that perpetuated stereotypes about Black folk, African Americans are now challenging those misrepresentations and positing a diverse and multi-faceted image of Black life in America. Indeed, the camera has been used as a tool of liberation and empowerment for Black people, just as it has for many Native Americans. Yet the inevitable question arises: because we see the “same gestures, devices, and references that *Arthistory*<sup>9</sup> considered its own” in the works of Black photographers, does this mean that they are “capitulating” to Eurocentric values?<sup>10</sup> Naturally, there will be some elements of the dominant culture in the artistic production of a group that has been oppressed for so long. There is no escaping the paradigm in which we are born and raised. But as Deba Patnaik points out, most African American photographers are not simply miming the “white man’s” work; rather, they are giving traditional forms their own spice and making them their own. In fact, many Black photographers engage in what is known as “signifying.”<sup>11</sup> This aesthetic practice that involves subversion of the status quo is the foundation for Black literature, art, and music. While signifying is an ancient technique, only recently have scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. theorized about it in relationship to Black culture and to other theories of signification.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, uncovering the modes of signifying in Black cultural texts helps us to understand the ways in which people of African descent have manipulated the form and language of the dominant culture’s discourses in order to critique them.

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<sup>6</sup> Silko, 178.

<sup>7</sup> Clyde Taylor, “Empowering the Eye” in *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers*, ed. Barbara Head Millstein (London: Merrell Publishers, 2001), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, 15.

<sup>9</sup> “I use the term *Arthistory* to indicate the institutionalization and control of knowledge about the world’s cultural work, maintained through an inbred or very limited academic conversation. *Arthistory*’s judgments must remain suspect because of the narrow range of its sympathies and allegiances.” (Taylor, 25, n. 3)

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Deba P. Patnaik, “Diasporic Double Vision” in *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers*, ed. Barbara Head Millstein (London: Merrell Publishers, 2001), 35.

<sup>12</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Valena Broussard Dismukes' work can be situated within these two traditions of revolutionary photography in Native and African American cultures. As a woman of "African, Choctaw, French and Scotch-Irish ancestry,"<sup>13</sup> Dismukes herself represents the increasingly visible ethnic group of Black Indians in the United States. In her collection entitled "Red-Black Connection: The Cultural Heritage of Black Native Americans," Dismukes photographs over seventy African Native Americans of all ages in a wide range of settings. Her collection has been displayed in various venues, but most recently it was exhibited at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indian and Western Art in Indianapolis, Indiana between July 17 and October 24, 2004. The sheer number of photos is quite powerful, and the exhibit as a whole implies that Black Indians are alive, well, and much more common than most people think.

The ways in which African American identity and Native identity are read in Dismukes' photographs are directly related to the very different ways in which Blackness and Indianness have been constructed in the United States. The law of hypo-descent has determined Blackness ever since Africans first came to North America. Indeed, as F. James Davis writes, the one-drop rule "emerged to protect slavery and ...was consolidated in order to bolster Jim Crow segregation."<sup>14</sup> Because of the legal and social acceptance of the one-drop rule, people who are classified as "Black" possess an incredibly wide range of physical features, and thus "are not a race group in the scientific sense."<sup>15</sup> But "because that category has a definite status position in the society it has it has become a self-conscious social group with an ethnic identity."<sup>16</sup> Although the one-drop rule originated in attempts to oppress people of African descent, many Black Americans have embraced hypo-descent, largely in order to create a strong political contingent. Similarly, people from a wide variety of indigenous nations within the United States developed a pan-Indian movement in the late 1960s in order to achieve political and social change.

Yet the history of the construction of Native identity is quite different from the history of the construction of Black identity. While it takes only "one drop" of Black blood to make a person Black, it takes several drops of Indian blood to make a person Indian. Although the required blood quantum for Native status varies widely depending on who is quantifying and for what purpose, historically "proof" of Native blood has been a determining factor in "authenticating" Native identity. This is problematic for many reasons, not the least of which is that American Indian identity also depends upon socialization, language, tribal enrollment, community recognition, and cultural traditions. Yet even the power to determine who is a tribal member has been supplanted by the United States government. M. Annette Jaimes Guerrero explains that before the 1970s, "the tribes themselves determined who were members and thus would receive educational services and federal benefits. But during the 1970s, legislation was introduced that resulted in the infamous 506 forms, which were used to certify proof of tribal

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<sup>13</sup> "At Southwest Museum – Red-Black Connection: The Cultural Heritage of Black Native Americans," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 1, 2001, A4.

<sup>14</sup> F. James Davis, *Who Is Black?: One Nation's Definition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 139.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, 15.

membership. This process was regulated by the BIA.”<sup>17</sup> Because the George Bush, Sr. administration claimed the power in 1992 to “declare any Indian tribe in the nation extinct, even if the tribe has been recognized by a congressionally ratified treaty,”<sup>18</sup> many American Indians have little control over how they are officially counted (or whether they are counted at all). As a result, many people who should be eligible for government monies are denied opportunities for economic and personal advancement. Such attempts to disempower indigenous peoples in this country underscores the ruthless greed that has characterized the dominant culture’s interactions with Native Americans for the past five hundred years. Like the rationale for the one-drop rule for Blackness, this determining Indianness is economically driven. The fewer Indians there are, the fewer dollars need to be doled out. Thus, while the process of classifying people as Black is inclusive, the process of identifying people as American Indian is exclusive. This may explain why there are so many more visual expressions of Native American identity in these portraits of Black Indians. Their “Blackness” is often read through their features, but some of these subjects must openly assert their Native American identity in order to make visible that part of their heritage, which, historically, has been more difficult to prove.

Several photographs from Dismukes’ collection visually juxtapose Native and African cultures in especially provocative ways. The image of Bo Glasschild is the quintessence of her work on Black Indians. In his portrait, Glasschild, a shamanic healer of Choctaw, Cherokee, and Blackfeet descent, is standing in what appears to be his living room and is looking directly at the camera. He sports a mohawk and various Native-inspired jewelry, including a beaded choker. In his hand he holds a feather and a rattle, and he is wearing a Malcolm X t-shirt. Most of the objects in the picture “read” as Native American, even to an audience that sees only stereotypes of American Indians in the media. The African American part of Glasschild’s heritage is represented through the image and name of one of the most revolutionary Black leaders of the twentieth century. For many people Malcolm X is Black Nationalism incarnate.<sup>19</sup> His slogan “by any means necessary” is often contrasted with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s plea to “turn the other cheek.” It is this militant, uncompromising Malcolm X that most viewers would associate with the image on Glasschild’s shirt. Here Glasschild reclaims Malcolm X from essentialist Black Nationalist rhetoric and brings to light the significant change in his thinking about racial justice and equality near the end of his life. While he had previously called white people “devils” and asserted that there was no role for them in the movement, after going on hajj in 1964, Malcolm X developed a more inclusive world-view and saw the possibility of brotherhood between Blacks and non-Blacks.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it is this Malcolm X that Glasschild is identifying with in this portrait. Perhaps as a multiracial Black Indian in the twenty-first century, Glasschild commemorates the Malcolm X who saw the possibility and power of unity beyond racial and color lines.

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<sup>17</sup> M. Annette Jaimes Guerrero, “Academic Apartheid: American Indian Studies and ‘Multiculturalism’” in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, eds. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 54-55.

<sup>18</sup> Guerrero, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall Frady, “The Children of Malcolm” in *A Malcolm X Reader*, ed. David Gallen (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994), 300.

<sup>20</sup> Kofi Natambu, *Critical Lives: The Life and Work of Malcolm X* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2002), 303.

In two portraits from the series, the assertion of a Black Native identity is deliberately constructed in intellectual terms. Richard Procello, a Muscogee/Creek professor, is depicted in his office surrounded by books. He is a handsome, middle-aged man in his fifties who is smiling directly at the camera. Procello is pointing to a manuscript on the desk in the foreground, a manuscript of his mother's life that he recently researched and wrote. Behind him is a map of Creek territory, a large family tree, and various books. The two titles that can be read in the picture are *Black Men* (author unknown) and *The Greatest Generation* by Tom Brokaw. In no uncertain visual terms, Procello pays homage to his Native identity, his Black identity, his identity as baby boomer, and his family identity. Procello's personal statement reads, "I always knew my grandmother, Debra (Knoll) May, was part-Creek, and I was aware of my mother being a member of the Creek Nation . . . but I really did not identify myself as part-Indian. This changed since I wrote my book about my mother's family history. [It] gave me new insights and a new understanding. . . . To know who you are and where you came from is very empowering and exciting."

Like Procello, books that represent various aspects of her ancestry surround Melanie Midget, a Choctaw doctor from Los Angeles. Midget is a relatively dark-skinned woman with braids who is looking directly at the camera. To her right is a large stack of books, whose following titles I was able to discern: *Black Indians*, *Cherokee Americans*, *Black Genealogy*, *Black Frontiers*, *The Chickasaw*, *Creeks and Seminoles*, *Black People Who Made the Old World*, *Choctaw Language Dictionary*, *After Removal*, *Idiot's Guide to Genealogy*, and *The Five Civilized Tribes*. Midget's identity is represented through books, some of which are scholarly works that are central texts in the growing field of Black-Native Studies. Like Procello, Midget has spent time tracing her roots, thus showing that her investment in Black-Indian identity is both personal and intellectual. Her personal statement reads: "My great-great-great grandmother is first identified as Choctaw. . . . My genealogical research led me straight to the Choctaw nation by way of documents, including Choctaw slave records. My family has a tribal number that made them quasi-citizens of the nation, but as descendents we do not benefit or enjoy the same rights as other citizens of the Choctaw Nation." Here Midget illuminates the history of slaveholding among the Choctaw in the 1800s, as well as the second-class treatment that many descendants of Choctaw and Cherokee slaves received.

The verbal narratives that accompany many of the portraits highlight many issues that contemporary Black Indians face, including the difficulty of tracing their lineage and the responses they receive from others about their authenticity or lack thereof. However, generally the narratives celebrate Black Indian Identity. A few of Dismukes' subjects discuss how their own family members obscured their "true" ancestry. For instance, Elnora Tena Webb Mitchell (of Cherokee/Blackfeet descent) writes, "My grandparents and other members of my family were identified as Native American. However, there is much information about our ancestry that is kept secret. Being Native American is not revered nor honored by many family members." It is interesting to note here that it is not the Black blood that is repressed, but rather it is the Indian ancestry. It was not always advantageous to be identified as Black rather than Native. This choice depended upon

historical and geographical context. Still others note how they are viewed as “wannabes” who are trying to distance themselves from Blackness. Gene “Quietwalker” Holmes of Comanche descent says, “There have been people from both communities who react to my heritage on a negative basis and ask, ‘Who or what are you trying to be?’” But Carol Munday Lawrence of Cherokee descent responds to these attacks simply by saying that she is merely discovering her multiple selves: “I fully understand why some fear that to claim Native American, or any other heritage, is to reject one’s Blackness, but this is not about ‘going Native.’ Knowing who your people are, and embracing them all unconditionally, can only enrich your life.” And Stella Vaugh playfully embraces this historical moment in which she can identify as a multiracial person: “In fact, I’m having fun boasting about my mixed-race. I jokingly say I’m 57 Heinz Variety. My mother’s mother is Cherokee and Irish. My father’s mother is Bohemian and his father is Choctaw. I am told that one of my ancestors is black and I’m still searching for that beautiful person.” Vaugh proudly embraces her multiple heritage and openly acknowledges the mystery that still surrounds her ancestry. She symbolizes the twenty-first century Black Indian who is “coming out” after living much of her life in a space where she felt the need to repress parts of her identity. If Dismukes’ project can give at least one person the opportunity to feel a sense of dignity about who she is and introduce her to a community of people who also live at the crossroads of Native and African American cultures, then it is, without a doubt, a meaningful political and artistic endeavor.

Dismukes’ work is important not only for Black Indians who see themselves reflected in her photographs, but also for Americans of all backgrounds. Her work forces viewers to reconsider what a “real” Indian looks like and to reconsider static binary notions of race. Even though we live in a culture whose racial psyche often operates along a Black-White axis, the reality of race in America is much more complicated. I do not want to suggest that this series of portraits celebrates the tired “melting pot” metaphor, which is, in fact, simply a code word for assimilation to the dominant White culture; but it is important to embrace a continuum model of race rather than a dialectical one, and to recognize the overlap between putatively distinct traditions. By reclaiming the camera, a tool that has used to oppress Blacks and Native Americans, Dismukes makes visible the often invisible group of Black Indians and gives them a space to tell their stories in their own words.

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