
Photos in Transmotion: Images of Survivance in *Ledfeather*

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Stephen Graham Jones' *Ledfeather* (2008), a semi-epistolary, semi-historical novel, poses questions about how historical knowledge is made and what to do with it. While scholars have studied the novel's postmodern attributes as methods for subversive critiques of historiography in Indigenous colonial contexts, as of yet no study prioritizes the novel's use of photographs toward these aims. After situating Gerald Vizenor's framing of "the *indian* [as] posedlocked in portraiture" in histories of photography and Indigenous colonization, I illustrate through postcards archived at the Montana Historical Society how *indian* images work symbiotically with written text (146). I then examine the rhetorical role of photos in *Ledfeather*, showing how the photos enact Vizenor's sense of transmotion, or "the tease of creation in pictures, memories, and stories" (173). I argue that the photos in *Ledfeather* expand how postmodern historical fiction can push native art beyond the frame of "posedlocked portraiture."

Early photographs sent east from the American West were feats of tenacity as much as art: photographers hauled heavy equipment in wagons and to the tops of mountains and used snowmelt to clean glass exposure plates. In *Photographing the Frontier* (1980), Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler describe how Louis Daguerre and Nicéphore Niépce's 1839 invention was believed to "make permanent images from life," giving consumers of photographs the possibility that "A moment in history could be permanently recorded, accurate in every detail" (11). This sense of "accuracy" has since been challenged by postmodern theorists: in the words of Susan Sontag, "A photograph changes according to the context in which it is seen" (106). A snapshot

from a vacation stacked in a shoebox compels a different effect than the same image framed over a mantel or printed in a gift book. It is due to these multiple contexts, Sontag suggests, "that the presence and proliferation of all photographs contributes to the erosion of the very notion of meaning" (106). The wide-reaching roots of photographs as a site of "permanence" and accuracy" have not, however, been erased (Hoobler 11). To the contrary, photographs continue to support attempts to understand the past as something that is fixed and factual.

In Stephen Graham Jones' *Ledfeather*, photographs contribute to a narrative world in which the past overlays with the present and one narrator's perspective overlays with a dozen others.' The novel is set in Browning, Montana in both the present, through several narrators whose stories loosely circle around a young man named Doby Saxon, and the years following the Starvation Winter in the 1880s, from which the letters of a fictional Indian Agent named Francis Dalimpere eventually reveal his role in 600 Piegan people starving due to colonial conditions. Several scholars explore *Ledfeather's* postmodern aesthetic, which is readily identified by characteristics including multiple and "fractured" storylines (Gaudet 23); a structure that contains a "level of signifiers," such as the use of *sous rature* to "add a sense of direction, metafiction, and *différance*" (Baudemann 161); polyvocality and a "heteroglossic" narrative that moves "down corridors of event, memory, language itself—English, French, Blackfeet" (Lee 81-2); and a narrative structure that builds "a relationship between the past and the present that does not center on possession" (Pennywark 90). Building on these explorations, I trace how photographs contribute to the text's postmodern aesthetic and epistemology that questions meaning and values uncertainty.

Photographs contribute to the complex structure of *Ledfeather* as objects in the narrative in three forms: ID cards, postcards, and snapshots.¹ Gerald Vizenor describes

the expectations for permanence and accuracy in photographs as *indian* images, which can exist in the same space as photos that are in transmotion, moving stories of native survivance.² *Indian* images, which Vizenor also describes as simulations, are produced for viewers who are not native as “public evidence of dominance, not the private stories of survivance” (157). While orienting the novel in contexts of photography’s relationship with colonialism, tourism, and commodification of natives in the American West—an orientation that I supplement with material from postcard collections archived at the Montana Historical Society—I examine how photographs in the novel complicate these historical relationships. Just as the narrative itself moves between narrators, time, and protagonists, photographs do not provide “permanence” or “accuracy” but complexity, storytelling, and survivance.

I. *Indian* images and the “army of tourists”

In *Fugitive Poses* (1998), Vizenor shows how images have been used since the earliest settler colonies as rhetoric that establishes an idea of *indian* that erases native presence. Spanish and Portuguese “narratives of discovery” often included “drawings of natives” that were engraved and reproduced, creating “iconic enactments of the other” that “are seen with no sense of a native presence” (150,146). With the development of photography, Vizenor continues, images from drawings and engravings could include “captured countenance and action” (155); Vizenor’s word “captured” aligns with how the Hooblers describe early excitement around photography as an invention that could “make permanent images from life” (11). *Indian* images are attempts by non-natives to freeze the stories of natives into “permanent” interpretations.

The coinciding development of railroad infrastructure and photographic technology ignited a tourist campaign that fed on *indian* images. Photos of natives in the nineteenth-century show natives as "separated" from community, land, and presence, surrounded instead by objects that make up "the obscure simulations of *indianness*," such as beads, leather, pipes, and feathers (Vizenor 157, 160). Photographs of natives were constructed into *indian* images through several methods, including photographers paying natives to "pose and . . . revise their ceremonies to provide more photogenic material" (Sontag 64) and provision of costumes for any chief who arrived to be photographed in "white man's clothing" (Hoobler 24). It is these strategies, among others, that contribute to Vizenor's claim that "The *indian* is poselocked in portraiture," which is a "simulation of dominance" over "native presence" (146). Work from photographers such as Edward Curtis, who produced more than 40,000 images, continues to shape scholarship today, even among researchers (Vizenor 160-1). Zachary Jones shows how what he calls "contrived photos," which include staged scenes and non-Native impersonators, have been used in "academic conferences presentations, publications, and exhibits without knowledge of these images being contrived" (8-9, 13).³ The early understanding of photography as accurate and permanent becomes more ironic over time.

As colonial settlers moved west in the United States, *indian* images contributed to a campaign of tourism promotion and broader forms of white identity building. Philip J. Deloria explores the complex and paradoxical ways that natives have been implicated in white identity building: "There was . . . no way to conceive an American identity without Indians. At the same time, there was no way to make a complete identity while they remained" (37). In *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (2001), Marguerite Shaffer details how this identity-building manifested in the West through what she calls "national tourism" (4), a phenomenon starting in




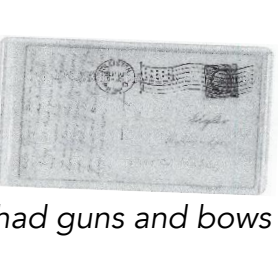
western lands newly available by rail. Tourism promoters, including railroad owners and hotel builders, “encouraged white, native-born middle- and upper-class Americans to reaffirm their American-ness by following the footsteps of American history” (Shaffer 4). Sontag describes the role of the camera during this process as “colonization through photography,” as “an army of tourists,” so “eager for ‘a good shot’ of Indian life . . . invaded the Indians’ privacy, photographing holy objects and the sacred dances and places” (64). Photographs gave potential and active tourists “an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal . . . [helping] people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (Sontag 9). Promotional campaigns used photography to sell not only vacations but participation in the formation of national identity.⁴

This booster campaign relied not only on *indian* images, but also on *indian* descriptions. When J.C.H. Grabill described one of his photographs as “The great hostile Indian camp on River Brule near Pine Ridge, S.D.,” for example, the Hooblers suggest that the word “hostile” was a deliberate attempt to “stimulate sales of stereo cards in the East” (161). Just as *indian* words like hostile might be added, so could native words be taken away: Morgan Bell shows how photographers deliberately erased native names, replacing them with titles such as “an unidentified Comanche woman delegate to Washington, D.C.” when the photographed person’s name was known (88). This relationship between *indian* images and text is particularly visible on postcards, which were one of the most successful devices of booster campaigns. By the late 1890s postcards emerged as one of the most popular categories of souvenirs, “allowing tourists to document and preserve a visual record of their journey and send personal messages to friends and relatives back home” (Shaffer 266-7). Later versions of similar postcards are archived in the Montana Postcard Collection and among the Thomas Mulvaney real-photo postcard collection at the Montana Historical Society.

The written messages on many of the postcards in these collections show how *indian* images furthered *indian* rhetoric. For example, the text accompanying a postcard of Chief Eagle Calf explains, among other information, that "Many of these native Americans spend their summers in the park and add much interest through their colorful tribal dress" ("Chief Eagle Calf"). The phrase "spend their summer" is an *indian* description of hotels employing natives to entertain tourists. Or, on the back of an image titled "Blackfoot Chief, Last Star or Weasel Feather," the postcard explains that "Blackfoot Chief, Last Star or Weasel Feather, proudly displays his elaborately fringed and beaded buckskin tribal dress" ("Blackfoot Chief"). The word "proudly" is an *indian* simulation, inserting characteristics that will be consumed by recipients.

Postcards also reveal the perpetuation of *indian* rhetoric by consumers: text is produced not only by publishers creating the product but by the tourists who purchase the images. While many of the cards in these collections do not have writing on the back (they were perhaps purchased with similar intents as *Ledfeather's* fictional tourist, not to send but to keep, a desire I explore below) several of those that are marked show text responding to *indian* images.⁵ Below I share four examples of *indian* images on postcards and the corresponding note on the back, transcribed from the handwritten text.⁶

<p>"Blackfeet Squaw and Papoose":</p> <p>A woman with her back to the camera, her head turned over her shoulder as she carries a baby on her back in a cradleboard.</p>	<p>"Untitled":</p> <p>A white man in a tuxedo stands between two chiefs. A sticker labels the image: "Glacier Nat'l Park Jul, 1930: Chief Two Guns White Calf at left."</p>
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 <p><i>Partial Transcription:</i> "This baby seems to enjoy his queer carriage + is quite comfortable. Wish you could be with me to enjoy the beautiful flowers etc."</p>	 <p><i>Partial Transcription:</i> What do you think about our being right around these Indians? They wanted us to dance with him last night; but we thought it more fun to watch the others do it. We are having the grandest time."</p>
<p>"Blackfeet Indians, Glacier National Park, Montana."</p> <p>Six Blackfeet people pose in front of a teepee: the men wear feather headdresses and the women wear long dresses.</p>	<p>"A Council of the Blackfeet Indians In Glacier National Park"</p> <p>Six Blackfeet people gather in front of teepees in front of snow-capped mountains: one man stands in a headdress pointing at the others who sit on the ground.</p>
 <p><i>Partial Transcription:</i> "We have seen quite a few Indians. Have had a very nice time and the weather has been fair. Love Grandma".</p>	 <p><i>Partial Transcription:</i> "Here is a bunch of wild Indians I [licked?] They all had guns and bows and arrows but I [skipped?] up and took the guns away from them, then I beat them up. I got all the guns if you want one. Write and I will send one to you."</p>

These notes range from trivial comments about the picture to violent *indian* fantasies. Both forms of commentary respond to and extend the *indian* images on the front. The tourist-author of "Blackfeet Squaw and Papoose" suggests that the baby is "quite comfortable" alongside the words "enjoy" and "beautiful flowers," portraying an idyllic experience. Or, in the postcard signed "Grandma," this woman includes having "seen quite a few Indians" alongside polite notes about having a "very nice time" with "fair" weather: everything, she seems to say, is going how they had hoped. No less dependent on *indian* images but more aggressive in the extension of *indian* rhetoric, the authors of the two postcards in the right column invent interactions with the people photographed. In the untitled image, the author conflates "these Indians" in the image with people who wanted them to "dance last night"; the question "What do you think about our being right around these Indians?" suggests that this proximity is both an event that is (literally) worth writing home about *and* an event the author expects to put him or her in high esteem with their audience. Finally, the last image puts into words violent fantasies that emerge without incitement, as the image itself portrays no hostility or guns. This last photo shows how quickly *indian* rhetoric can accelerate from image to text.

Native peoples resisted, and continue to resist, *indian* images through a variety of methods. The Hooblers list among the most insistent resisters Red Cloud and Crazy Horse: the first was "reported to have chased away a photographer who tried to take his picture" and was not "captured" by a photograph until visiting D.C. in 1870; and the second "always resisted capture" by photographers, so that "No authentic photograph of him is known to exist" (122, 133). Vizenor argues that *indian* images themselves show resistance: "Watch the eyes and hands in fugitive poses to see the motion of natives, and hear the apophatic narratives of a continuous presence" (165). While costumes and poses can be directed, eyes and hands are a person's own. Bell

explores how native photographers such as Benjamin Haldane (1874-1941) and Jennie Ross Cobb (1882-1958) contributed to early movements of photography in the American West (95-6), and Kimberly Blaeser explores techniques used by contemporary photographers to “re-vision . . . early colonized representations” (164). Blaeser identifies collections of “alter-native” photos as those using multi-temporal and sometimes multi-spacial compositions as a form of “humanizing” rather than “museumizing” people in the photos (164). The three materialized photos in *Ledfeather* are not revisionist in their own compositions but add to dimensions of the “alter-native” composition of the novel at large.

II. “His own”: ID cards and naming colonization

The first photos that the reader encounters in *Ledfeather* are not described but are implied as images on a spread of ID cards. An unnamed narrator drives Doby Saxon, the protagonist of the contemporary half of the novel, to the casino and watches how Doby “spread all his ID cards out on the dash of my car, then picked out his own” (20). The narrator explains that

The rest were for the liquor store, for videos, for off-rez, for wherever one Indian was the same as all the rest.

The casino’s different, though.

If their shiny new gambling license gets pulled, then fifty or a hundred people lose their jobs like that, come looking for whoever let that minor in the door. And then they go looking for that minor. (20)

These documents narrow Doby’s age to over 18 but under 21: he uses “his own” license to enter the casino, where the legal age is 18 and over, but needs a fake ID to buy alcohol. While using fake IDs is perhaps an American pastime for young adults on-

and off-rez, this passage emphasizes how the colonial context of the reservation shapes Doby's practice. He leverages his invisibility off-rez, where people will not distinguish him from other *indians*; this invisibility is countered by the hypervisibility of the "shiny new" casino where a license can be pulled by an off-rez authority. Doby's age range is framed by legal categories determined by off-rez laws; ID cards negotiate this framing and his identity within it.

Though this short scene is the only place in the novel in which ID cards are physical objects in the narrative, they engage with the power systems surrounding Doby and his community. Sontag explores how photographs became "enrolled in the service of important institutions of control . . . [I]n the bureaucratic cataloguing of the world, many important documents are not valid unless they have, affixed to them, a photograph-token of the citizen's face" (21-2). Further, that the ID cards are shown to the reader in front of the casino is no coincidence. The casino is next door to a museum that is described later in the novel as "The one that's shut down most of the time now, since the casino opened, like they can't be that close to each other" (89). In her exploration of how gaming functions in contemporary Native American literature, Becca Gercken interprets this relationship between museum and casino as indicating that "the museum's . . . version of Blackfeet history is not available for those who might choose to learn on their own. The energy and funds that could be supporting the museum have been diverted to the casino" (9). After Doby enters the casino, he goes on an early winning streak at the blackjack table and then loses everything before starting a fight. His mother, Malory Sainte, appears and physically defends him. Gercken suggests that "While Malory is indeed protecting her son, she is failing as an elder: she is encouraging Doby to escape the consequences of the gambling habit he learned from her" (8). While Malory's role as an "elder" is complex, interpreting the scene in the framework of Doby's many IDs emphasizes not the "failure" of Blackfeet

elders but a misalignment between the Blackfeet community and government-imposed systems.

III. "Achingly Beautiful": Postcards of the GLACIER PARK INDIAN

After Doby enters the casino with "his own" ID, the perspective switches to that of an unnamed, middle-aged tourist who witnesses Doby's rise and fall at the gambling table. Soon after the fight between Doby's mother and a security guard, the tourist retreats to the casino gift shop. She narrates,

I finally bought. . . a pack of postcards made from old brown and white pictures. Each one had a little history entry on back. It was the least I could do. The girl smiled when she gave me my change, and her teeth weren't perfect, no, but they were achingly beautiful, gave her just such personality. I hope she never fixes them. (26)

The phrases "the least I could do" and "achingly beautiful" (in the context of "imperfection") expose the tourist's perspective as not only an outsider, but an outsider who patronizes and commodifies locals. Sontag writes that "Photographic seeing meant an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects as too ordinary" (89). The gaze of a tourist can share the gaze of a photographer, both perspectives seeking the feeling of capturing beauty in what is "ordinary." Further, the tourist has specific plans for the postcards she has purchased, and her detailed description of these plans reveals their emotional role. She explains:

I wasn't going to send any of them, I'd decided. Instead I was going to leave them on the coffee table so Charlene's kids could find them, carry them to me, ask if I really went there, their little voices so pure and so hopeful. What I'd do then . . . would be to let the children look at each photograph while I read them

the historical entry from the back. That way the Indian on the front could look back at them, and they could know his story a little bit. The good one, I mean.
(26-7)

These postcards, depicting what Vizenor would describe as natives "poselocked in portraiture" offer the narrator a way to engage with her grandchildren (146). The striking phrase "The good one, I mean," is both a postmodern acknowledgment that there is more than one story to tell about history as much as it is an attempted erasure of the stories behind the postcards. The tourist's idea of a "good story" likely differs from one that the person on the postcard would tell, just as it would have one hundred years earlier.

After the tourist's purchase of *indian* postcards, she encounters Doby in the parking lot. He startles her and she drops her postcards; as she stoops to pick them up, he offers for sale what she describes as "just a bundle of crunchy animal skin tied together with rawhide" and "black with age" (27, 31). The scene continues:

"I--I--" I said, lowering myself all at once to the postcards.

He helped . . .

When we stood again, the bundle was on the ground between us.

He understood, nodded to himself about this and handed me the cards back, just stopping at the last instant to look at the top one, laugh a little.

. . .

"If you-- if you want I can..." I started, digging in my purse for the money anyway, for all of my money, but the boy was already shaking his head no, backing away, into the night. (32)

Though the reader does not know it yet, this "bundle" is an object that Doby has stolen from the neighboring museum of Blackfeet artifacts; in this bundle are letters written in the 1880s by the fictional Indian Agent Dalimpere, whose pages compose

nearly half of the *Ledfeather* novel. The reader also learns later that the postcard on top of the pile that makes Doby “laugh a little” is an image of Yellow Tail, Doby’s ancestor. Between them, then, are the *indian* postcards of Blackfeet chiefs and a bundle that has been stolen from a museum of Blackfeet history and artifacts. That the tourist desires the postcards and not the bundle—indeed, she would rather give Doby money than take the bundle when he offers it—emphasizes the desire for *indian* images as “possessory” (Vizenor 16). She desires something beautiful to remember her trip to Blackfeet territory, in the sense of the salesclerk’s “imperfect” teeth that the tourist hopes never change, rather than something “crunchy” and “black with age.” She wants to possess memories of this trip that will contribute to her own imagined identity as someone who is surrounded by her grandchildren, telling the “good stories” instead of the stories of the Starvation Winter, or about how Doby’s mom will go to jail for defending him when he lost her money at the casino.

However, history in this novel is superimposed with the present, so that this tourist brings with her alternatives to the “good stories,” too. As she and her husband drive their RV out of the parking lot, her desires are rejected. She looks down at the postcards on her lap:

On top was one of the old time Indians, his skin brown and greasy, the fingers of his right hand wrapped around some spear or staff. What he was doing was staring hard into the camera like he knew what I’d done, what I hadn’t done. The sign at his feet said GLACIER PARK INDIAN. Scratched into the print beside it like they used to do, his name, Yellow Tail.

I had to turn that postcard over. (32-3)

The tourist’s reaction to this postcard enacts Vizenor’s emphasis on the eyes as “the secret mirrors of a private presence . . . [that] hold the presence of the photographer

on the other side of the aperture" (158). More directly for the reader of the novel, the image "staring hard" at the tourist anticipates the way that Yellow Tail stares at Indian Agent Dalimpere, as described in his letters: "he watches me even as I write this"; he "is still watching"; "then Yellow Tail was watching me" (48, 50). Though the tourist participates in national tourism that depends on *indian* others, her purchase will not sit still with the "good stories" that she expects: the *indian* images are pasted over native stories, and after her experience with Doby, the edges of the image begin to curl.

IV. "I had to say yes": The photo from Kalispell

The third photograph that appears in the novel is taken by a white couple with a Blackfeet character called only "the boy" (who can later be identified as Robbie Cut Nose, a friend of Doby's).⁷ The boy recalls being taken to Kalispell as a child with an adult woman he didn't know: his mom's boyfriend left him with an ex-girlfriend, who had to go to Kalispell "for some reason" so took the boy with her (125-6). Sixteen years later, after what appears to be an attempted suicide that puts the boy in the hospital, the boy's nurse is the very woman who took him to Kalispell. This chain of relationships is confusing, and it is tempting to dismiss the connections; however, when the photo appears in the narrative, this list of peripheral characters and their relationships to one another is a form of storied presence behind an *indian* image.

When the nurse recognizes the boy in the hospital, she explains to him that her brother was dating a girl and that her brother "came back from her place once with this smelly old bundle, and hid it in my room"; but he owed her money, she continues, so "I took that pack, that bundle thing...and sold it in Kalispell. Forty dollars, yeah?" (136-7). This "bundle thing" is likely the same bundle that Doby tries to sell to the tourist outside of the casino, going by the bundle's index card listing it as "reclaimed from pwnshp [sic] (Kal)" as well as the parallel price of forty dollars offered to the nurse back

in Kalispell and forty dollars asked by Doby from the tourist (31). The nurse says, “We used to sell all that stuff back then It was in every closet, yeah? Oh, and some people wanted to take a picture with you too A white couple I had to say yes. They thought you were mine, I mean. It was all like a joke” (137). This moment brings the history of tourism and commodification through *indian* images to the present. More specifically, it implicates the photo from Kalispell in various *indian* economies, including white appropriation of *indian* images for their own identity building, and, more locally, commodification of Blackfeet objects in exploitative and coercive contexts.

Though it is not made explicit, it is likely that the white couple were tourists, so excited to see *indian* people that they want to take a photo. Their desire for this photo re-enacts Shaffer’s notion of “national tourism.” This kind of tourism, Shaffer observes, “allowed white, native-born middle-and upper-class Americans to escape the social and cultural confines of everyday life to liminal space where they could temporarily reimagine themselves as heroic or authentic figures” (5).⁸ One imagines the white couple flipping through photos from their trip to Montana, pointing out, *and here we are with some Indians...* A photo taken with local *indians* provides tourists proof of their presence in foreign space, a frontier that remains wild and unknown in the U.S. white imagination.

Though the nurse says that “it was like a joke” for the white couple to take a picture with her and the boy, she also says that she “had to say yes,” attaching this interaction to a century of coercive collecting of Blackfeet objects by white collectors. Bob Scriver’s gift book *The Blackfeet: Artists of the Northern Plains* (1990) illustrates not only his family collection of Blackfeet objects but also the historical relationship in Montana between white and Indigenous communities. Scriver explains:

Artifacts that museums and collectors of today deem extremely desirable were thought of in my dad's day as worthless 'old' things by the Indians themselves and were discarded in exchange for newer items . . . As this evolution occurred, there came to be many Indian items on the reservation that could be acquired.

(xv)

Hugh Dempsey, author of the foreword to the book of the Scriver collection, frames colonial-settlers as saviors of Blackfeet artifacts who are now wrongfully charged with taking these objects. He writes that in the 1960s, "Indians suddenly became aware that their culture was rapidly disappearing and a whole era of spiritual renewal began," so that some began to "object" to Scriver's collection of artifacts (vi). Dempsey's word "suddenly" stands out, as does his final presumption that "As time passes, more and more Blackfoot will come to appreciate what [Scriver] has done in seeing that their artifacts are preserved in a museum for the benefit of future generations" (vi). The dismissed status of the museum in *Ledfeather* suggests otherwise.

The white couple's sense of entitlement to a photo with local *indians* emerges from these systems and impacts the boy's relationship to the photo. The boy had no memory of the photo before the nurse told him of it; yet, when a few days later he wakes up in his hospital bed with "two crisp twenties folded into his hand," the narrator confides that "What he really wanted was the picture" (137). For the boy, this photo is a form of evidence in the sense that Sontag proposes: "Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it" (5). Though the trip to Kalispell is seemingly small in the boy's life, his knowledge of the photo emerges sixteen years after the photo was taken, so that his memory comes only from the photo. Sontag writes that "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have;

it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). This visiting white couple has information about the boy that he does not have.

A few pages later, the boy's desire for this photo clarifies: "What if that white family in Kalispell had just taken him, back then? He hated himself for even thinking it, but thought it all the same, on accident" (139-40). Because this thought occurs while the boy is in the hospital after attempting suicide, his desire for the photo is connected to his suffering; it also reverts the tradition of white appropriation of Indigenous identities. While the white couple desires an *indian* image and the nurse senses that she "had to say yes," the boy desires the photo to understand his own stories. Before the scene with the nurse, the boy remembers a man in town whose face is disfigured by the boy's father: "The way that he was broken meant that the boy's dad loved him, the boy. That he'd been mad the kid had gone to Kalispell that day. That he was protecting the boy, just after the fact, as best he could, the only way he knew" (130). Though the photo from Kalispell may no longer exist, it is part of the story of the boy's trip to Kalispell, which in itself is part of the story of how his "dad loved him." The snapshot is not only evidence of coercive historical relationships but also a detail in the story of how a boy understands his own identity.

V. "Posterity": native photos of survivance

By the end of *Ledfeather*, characters continue to be affected by the forms of colonialization explored above, among others; but the final photo in the novel reclaims the history of photography and dis-embeds it from colonialist systems. The novel ends back with Doby on the side of the road trying to get hit by a car, a scene that is related by several narrators, first by Gina (43) and later by Twice (193), who drives around with

two other young men. Near the end, Twice describes how Luther and Dally propose that he, Twice, takes a picture next time they try to hit Doby. Luther drives:

'Posterity,' Dally said . . .

'His or ours?' Luther said.

Dally shook his head at this, smiled, and said 'A camera, man. Twice can push the button just right before--'

He finished with his hands, so that Doby Saxon exploded against the front of the Caprice.

Luther smiled, liked it, and we cut back to Browning for a camera, but never could find one that worked, until Luther remembered Chris.

She'd bought one special for the game, had had it in her purse all week.

(195)

The reader has already met Chris from Gina's section, when Chris ran after Doby trying to get him out of the road. Now, when Luther, Dally, and Twice find Chris, she rides in the back of their car, initially unaware of their intentions. After the car almost hits Doby, Chris becomes upset. Luther is also upset, because Twice, who holds Chris's camera, did not take a photo of this attempt, as tasked. Luther says, "Tim would have [taken the picture]", evoking Twice's dead brother; Twice responds "I can take the picture" (197). For these boys, taking the photo is an act of bravery that compels Twice to prove to the others that he is as brave as his brother was.

Unlike the other images in the novel, the photo that the boys desire is outside of commodification—but not outside of violence. Their desire to record hitting Doby anticipates what might come after they hit Doby: evidence that they hit him. Bell writes that "Photographs . . . do not simply represent history; they are themselves historical objects. The way we perceive the world is shaped largely by not only personal experience but also . . . by our experience of, and our exposure to, visual images"

(102). When Dally has the idea to take a picture of this moment, he says "Posterity"; he does not answer Luther's question "his or our own?" (195). Their desire for this photograph is a desire for power in the present *and* a power that can inform how the future understands the past.

But Chris will not let them have that power. After Twice assures the others that he "can take the picture," Chris takes the camera and runs with it, "flitt[ing] away into the night like a deer, cutting across the pasture back to Browning, maybe" (197). Chris is soon seen by the reader again through the perspective of Junior, who narrates the next section and drives the daughter of his former love home from a basketball game. He and his ex's daughter see Chris running with the camera after she has left the boys in the previous scene. Junior describes seeing

a flashing out in the pasture.

Like somebody was taking a picture out there.

Of us?

I let my foot off the gas, said it: 'What the hell?'

Twenty seconds later it was a girl, the Cut Nose girl who's a Sainte, too, and so can run forever.

She had a camera in her hand, was holding it ahead of her.

I stopped and she popped the passenger door open, fell in, nodded ahead, fast.

'Get my good side,' I told her holding my chin up for the next picture, and she looked over to me for a long time then finally smiled, let herself start breathing hard like she needed to. (203-4)

Chris runs to prevent boys from taking a picture of hitting Doby and, in a sense, from hitting Doby; Junior's joke that follows her run does not make light of the young men's

desires but responds to it. Vizenor writes, "How should we now respond to the photographs that have violated the privacy of the natives? Cover the eyes? Whose eyes should be covered?" (163). It is as if the novel asks a similar question: how should we respond to the possibility of a photograph that would record one suicide in a narrative world that is saturated with suicide attempts? Chris refuses the history that leads Vizenor to describe photographs as "possessory, neither cultural evidence nor the shadows of lost traditions," and cameras as "the instruments of institutive discoveries and predatory surveillance" (154). Chris's camera flashing through the pasture documents not possession or lost tradition, but Doby *not* being hit by a car; her camera is not a tool of predatory surveillance but of native survivance.

The novel's final narrator is Chris's mom, recalling her conversation with Doby's mom, who is in jail following the event at the casino. In a chain of discourse that recalls the link of actors involved when "the boy" is taken to Kalispell, Chris's mom describes to Doby's mom what Chris told her about the night with Doby on the side of the road and the camera:

What I told her was just cut and dried, pretty much the way Chris told it to me when I picked up her film for her, asked her if that was who I thought it was?

At first she pretended like she didn't know what I was talking about, but I used to be fifteen too. (206)

The reader cannot be certain who Chris did and did not photograph, though the likely candidates are the young woman who turns out to be Claire, or Junior, as her mom might find it strange that she was driving with Junior. Further, the reader does not know how much time has passed (it is however much time it took for Chris to turn in her film to be developed, plus however long it took for her mom to pick it up). At this point in the novel, the reader is practiced in proceeding with uncertainty.

Chris's mom then describes the last photograph on the developed roll of film, as Chris has described it to her. Chris took the photo from the front seat of Junior's car, looking back at Doby and Junior's ex's daughter in the backseat:

In the picture . . . the girl's sitting close enough to Doby in the backseat that the sides of their hands are touching like they know each other, like it was a date they were on, and what she was saying to him about the elk right then was that he was going to shoot them all, wasn't he? Bam, bam, bam.

Doby smiled his dad's smile, that he was caught but didn't care either, and looked over to her, careful not to move his hand that was touching hers, and asked how she knew that? (210)

This scene recalls Vizenor's argument that the stories of natives, despite appropriative photographs, "are in the eyes and hands" (156); Doby and Claire's hands tell a story of what will happen. Seamlessly, Chris's mom continues to describe the scene, so that the reader feels that they are there, in the story that the photo tells rather than with Chris's mom describing the photo to Doby's mom in jail. The image in the photo exceeds the photograph, spilling into the final paragraphs of the novel with only one last reminder that Chris's mom speaks ("and what I told Malory happened next is that when he looked at her . . ."), until Doby speaks Claire's name for the first time and their hands touch again (211).⁹ The photos on Chris's roll of film do not document Doby's suicide attempt as they might have; what they do document is not easily known to the reader, i.e. "is that who I thought it was?" The photos on the roll of film are not permanent but dynamic, not stillness but stories, not suicide but survivance.

Many of the major themes in *Ledfeather* can be traced by the photos in the narrative, but it is what surrounds and connects these photos—writing—that employs the photos as objects that incite movement toward native stories. Counter to tourists'

written responses to *indian* images on the front of archived postcards, photos in the novel are written into survivance. It is only fitting then, that *Ledfeather* was inspired by a photograph. In the Author Note following the novel, Jones shares two source-origins for the story: first, a report about the Blackfeet Reservation; and second, a photo pinned to the bulletin board at a Game office, an "old yellowy snapshot of a moose skeleton and a human skeleton mixed together. And there was no story for it. It had just shown up in some old file. But there was a story – *is a story*" (214). Sontag writes that contrary to the early expectations for "accuracy" in photographs, "photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects. Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are" (6-7). Just as photographers interpret their subjects, so do authors writing with, to, or from images interpret the photographer's interpretation. In *Ledfeather*, describing photos through words prevents a stopping on images: to see them better the reader must keep moving, keep reading, stay in motion.

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Notes:

¹ In addition to employing photographs as physical objects, the novel occasionally alludes to photographs and photography metaphorically, a compelling use of language that I do not have the space to explore here. For example, Doby pieces together his fraught and complex memories of his father like a “slideshow” (83).

² In this chapter, I follow Vizenor’s use of *indian* as distinguished from native. He writes, “natives are the presence, and *indians* are simulations, a derivative noun that means an absence” (15).

³ Zachary Jones posits that many archivists are “not trained to address the complexities of these types of historical photographs” (13). He suggests that archivists provide “historical transparency” by identifying such photos as contrived, providing context, and engaging in “constructive dialogs” with tribes (18).

⁴ This need for a distinct American identity was advertised by images, but also embodied for tourists. Promoters of tourism produced performances of *indians*, such as the promoter who arranged for a “mock raid” of Pawnee natives so that early and wealthy railroad travelers could witness the promoter “pacify” *indians* with small gifts; “Unbeknownst to the admiring travelers,” the Hooblers write, this promoter had paid the Pawnees an advance of one hundred dollars in gold for the show (48). More explicit was the employment of “show Indians” such as Sitting Bull, who toured with Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show (Hoobler 135).

⁵ There are postcards on which the author does not pick up on the objectified image and extend it, though these are rare and the sender nevertheless participants in systems of *indian* commodification. For example, on one postcard labelled “Blackfeet Indian Encampment, St. Mary Lake,” whose note on the back is co-authored, neither author discusses natives from the image. One author asks, “Doesn’t this make you a wee bit homesick for St. Mary’s?” A second author adds, “The mosquitos aren’t so bad this summer, but the tourists are worse than ever. Come to help us answer their ridiculous questions.”

⁶ Rather than showing the *indian* images of these four examples, I follow Morgan Bell’s practice of refraining from “reinforcing the already prolific stereotypes” (88). This practice also emphasizes scrutiny of the author’s comments over *indian* images.

⁷ It is arguable that “the boy” is Robbie Cut Nose. I continue to call him “the boy,” as he is called in this section of the novel.

⁸ Shaffer emphasizes that the roots of this “detached tourist gaze” that helped tourists to shape their own new identities by distinguishing them from others that they encountered during their travels was not limited to natives: African Americans, Mexican

Americans, Chinese Americans, and Mormons were also subject to this "gaze," so that many groups of "social others became an extension of the tourist spectacle, further allowing tourists to define and distinguish their social status" (280).

⁹ This scene spills out of the photograph much like Blaeser describes happening in the photograph "Mabel Mahseet, Comanche" by the Irwin Brothers. Mahseet's head is placed within a picture frame—within the composition of the photo—and her hair and forearm "spill into another dimension" when they exceed this frame, "breaking the illusion of illusion" (170). Blaeser suggests that this "clearly intends to disrupt the boundary between image and reality," a statement that might easily be made about the world of *Ledfeather*, not to mention Jones' oeuvre in general (170).

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