10.22439/asis.v58i1.7792

Reetta Humalajoki
University of Turku
0000-0001-8603-4081

SEEING INDIAN IN CHICAGO:

Photographic Resilience in an Urban Indigenous Community, 1958-1980

ABSTRACT: In the summer of 1985, the Newberry Library hosted a photography exhibition titled *Seeing Indian in Chicago* featuring photographs taken by members of the American Indian Center's camera club. Pairing these photographs with archived oral history interviews of the photographers, this article explores the multiple meanings and interpretations vested within these images through their exhibition for audiences visiting the Newberry Library. Taken between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, the photographs capture life in the decades following the conclusion of the federal relocation program, which was geared towards assimilation, moving Indigenous individuals and families away from their homelands to work in urban areas. The photography exhibition, then, worked to display the adaptation and resilience of this community as both Indigenous and familiar mainstream Americans while also subtly challenging stereotypes of "Indians" that visitors to the exhibition likely held. As such, this article contributes to the growing scholarship challenging victim narratives of Indigenous urbanization.

Keywords: Indigenous urbanization; sovereignty; photography and visual culture; Chicago; cultural resilience

From 22 July to 21 September 1985, the Newberry Library hosted a photography exhibition titled *Seeing Indian in Chicago*, which displayed the work of members of the American Indian Center's Camera Club. Taken between 1958 and 1980, the photographs were housed in the Hermon Dunlap Smith gallery, which was open to the general public. During those three months in 1985, visitors to the Newberry were introduced to images of American Indians as participants in contemporary urban life—images they were unlikely to see elsewhere. Most remarkably, the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition documented the early years of a vibrant and active Indigenous community in the heart of Chicago, established during an era in which the United States federal government explicitly aimed to acculturate American Indians by relocating them to urban areas, away from reservations and ancestral homelands. This article will demonstrate the significance of the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition, both in documenting the resilience of Chicago's American Indian community during a period of heightened settler-colonial policy and in subtly subverting deep-rooted "Indian" stereotypes.[1]

Relocation, launched in the early 1950s, was designed to move Indigenous individuals and families away from their reservations and into urban areas. The basic principle behind the policy was that "Indians," separated from their communities and provided with paid employment, could be successfully integrated into modern American life. In essence, the policy aimed, alongside termination—the removal of the federal trust status of tribes—to assimilate individuals and families into mainstream society. The program expanded throughout the 1950s; in 1956 Congress approved a threefold increase of relocation funding, and by July of that year, around 12,625 Native people had relocated from reservations to cities through the program (Fixico 142). While Indigenous movement to urban areas had already occurred well before the start of the relocation Program, the policy significantly shaped this migration, increasing numbers, channeling people to specific cities, and impacting their experiences there. The program also reflected dual assumptions underpinning federal policy in this period: first, that even the mere act of leaving reservation lands would lead to the eventual assimilation of Native people into mainstream American society; and second, that urban spaces could not be *Indigenous*. Rather, city life would counterbalance Native cultures and foster the adoption of "American" lifestyles.

Moreover, Indigenous individuals and families continued to move to urban areas of their own volition throughout the second half of the twentieth century, despite the waning of the federal relocation program in the 1960s. Before World War II, most Native people lived on reservation lands, but by 1990, over two-thirds of the Indigenous population was located in cities (Jackson 35). The number has continued to grow since, and as of the 2010s, at least seventy percent of Native Americans resided in cities (Blansett et al. 1). Despite the reality of Indigenous communities emerging in US cities since the mid-twentieth century, much scholarship on urban Indigenous communities characterizes these as "little more than the collateral damage of settler colonialism" (Thrush 111). Indeed, early historiography on urban Indigenous experiences tends to focus exclusively on the relocation era, and most established literature on the period presents victim narratives of the formation of ghettoes, racial discrimination, alcoholism, and high return rates to reservations (Fixico 134–57). More recent scholarship has challenged these analyses. As historian Douglas K. Miller puts it, victim narratives of relocation obscure the lived experiences of Native people, who "bent relocation to their own purposes and influenced its outcomes in unpredictable ways" (4).

This article contributes to the growing literature that highlights the "beauty, sophistication, and resilience of Indigenous lives and communities" in cities (Blansett et al. 3). In focusing specifically on photography by members of the American Indian community in Chicago, it also responds to historian Ned Blackhawk's 1995 call for new "conceptual and methodological tools for understanding contemporary American Indian experiences" (20). It demonstrates that photography is a significant methodological tool for understanding urban Indigenous experiences, working as a form of both documentation and expression. The *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition provides an exceptional insight into the self-identification of the members of one of the longest-standing urban American Indian centers in the United States today. Compiled of photographs taken over several decades, the images selected for the exhibition offer indications not only of how these Native photographers viewed themselves and their community, but how they wished to present themselves to the predominantly white, middle-class visitors of the Newberry Library.

The thriving of Chicago's Indigenous community is a story of adaptation and persistence in the face of settler-colonial policy geared toward assimilation into mainstream American society. The American Indian Center of Chicago was initially established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Citizens' Advice Bureau in 1952 as the American Indian Club, based on the idea that mutual support between Native people in urban areas would ease assimilation, more quickly acquainting newcomers with work, life, and events in the city (LaGrand 138). The revamped All-Tribes American Indian Center was opened in September 1953 with Thomas Segundo (Tohono O'odham) as Executive Director and a predominantly Indigenous board. The center's mission statement was vague, stating that it would "promote fellowship among the Indians of all tribes living in metropolitan Chicago" (LaGrand 140). Despite initial BIA involvement, the center developed according to the needs and for the purposes of its Indigenous members, growing into a hub of social and cultural activities, which included a basketball league, Boy and Girl Scout groups, powwows, craft fairs, and the Camera Club.

Photographs taken by members of the center capture the community's development, adaptation, and resilience in visual form. Historians have demonstrated the significance of photography for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, as it holds the collective memory of that era (Hamdan 110). As Leila I. Hamdan writes, photographs "have the power to expose and create alternative narratives that have the potential to subvert the lacunae within dominant histories" (110–11). While a photograph should not be considered a simple representation of a static truth, it can challenge accepted narratives surrounding an event, a place, or a community. Many photographers of the Civil Rights Movement saw their battle in "spatio-symbolic terms" (Trodd 26). By framing and capturing a moment on film, the photographer's artistic imagination can work to remove the gap between reality and hopes for what reality *should be*, challenging the historical memory of an event (Trodd 27). As implied by the title, the exhibition allowed Native photographers not only to present how they hoped their community would be perceived and remembered, but also to present life in Chicago through Indigenous eyes—not "seeing Indians" but "seeing *Indian*."

In the popular imagination, speaking of American Indians and photography together commonly evokes nineteenth-century salvage ethnography, which claimed to document a vanishing race. The most famous example of such work is Edward Curtis's frontier photography (Deloria, *Playing* 118; Faris 19). For mainstream Americans, even in the late twentieth century,

"Indians" were typically seen as incongruous with urban life and contemporary technologies, even cameras (Deloria, *Indians* 145). Visitors to the Newberry Library in 1985, then, were presumably used to thinking of Indigenous people as the *objects* of photography, as the observed rather than the observer. The members of the American Indian Camera Club, although they were neither professional artists nor necessarily activists, counteracted stereotypes even in simply taking up the hobby of photography. Although the images were displayed to all visitors of the Newberry Library during the exhibit, they were not initially taken with an "outsider" audience in mind; instead, photographers documented their lives for themselves, their families, and their community. As such, they engaged in what Taskigi/Diné photographer Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie has called "photographic sovereignty," creating images through their own perspectives and avoiding the "over-romanticizing and simplification of Native existence" (41–44).

While the photographs were not initially taken with the audience of the Newberry Library in mind, within this space they took on multiple potential, complex meanings and interpretations. The Newberry Library is a research institution, housed since 1893 in an affluent area of Chicago across from Washington State Park ("Newberry Library History"). In contrast, the American Indian Center moved between various locations in North Chicago, where the majority of its members lived (LaGrand 145). The exhibition was part of the Chicago American Indian photography project coordinated by the library, which aimed to create an archive of photographs taken by members of the community. It was an offshoot of the American Indian Oral History Project, which was run by the then-brand-new D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian (now the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies). The oral history project, funded by the Illinois Humanities Council, aimed at documenting experiences of relocation and fostering a broader awareness of the history of Native people in Chicago (López, "Native").

An advisory group selected photographers to be included in the Chicago American Indian Photography Project, in the end choosing three Native and three non-Native men (López, "Seeing Indian"). The final exhibit was the product of collaboration between the American Indian Center and the Newberry Library's staff and curators. Before the exhibition was opened, meetings were held with American Indian community members to view the selected photographs and help identify individuals appearing in them. While it is known that the exhibition was housed in the Hermon Dunlap Smith gallery of the library, the archived photographs and exhibition labels do not indicate exactly how or in what order the photographs were exhibited. The opening ceremony was attended by over four hundred people, at least half of whom were American Indians from Chicago. The event honored the community with a moment of prayer and included performances by dancers and singers (López, "Seeing Indian"). Nevertheless, due to the location of the Newberry Library, it is safe to assume that a large proportion of viewers over the course of the three-month exhibition were likely white, middle-class Americans. The exhibition was regularly listed in the *Chicago Tribune*, as well as in multiple local newspapers (see e.g., the 'Exhibits' listings of the *Chicago Tribune*, *Cardunal Free Press*, *Northwest Herald*, and *The Herald*).[2]

This article draws on archived oral history interviews conducted with the Native photographers in the early 1980s to contextualize the images within their lived experiences. Their names were Ben Bearskin, Leroy Wesaw, and Dan Battise. Battise, a member of the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe, was born in 1917, in—as he put it—"'piney woods' country between the Indian village and Livingston, Texas" (Battise 2). A World War II

veteran, he moved to Chicago after he was discharged from service and developed a career in the city as a plumber, and later as an industrial laborer for a steel company (*Native Voices* 53). Ben Bearskin (Ho-Chunk) moved to Chicago in 1947 and became very active in the early Native community there, acting as board chair of the American Indian Center for some years and even establishing a short-lived activist organization known as the Inter-Tribal Council (LaGrand 64–66; Miller 138). He was also part of the local arrangements committee for the famed 1961 American Indian Chicago Conference, which brought together hundreds of representatives from different Indigenous nations to draft a political statement titled the *Declaration of Indian Purpose* (LaGrand 171–73).[3] Leroy Wesaw, a member of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, was born in Michigan in 1925 and moved to the city in 1950 to settle with his Chicago-born Mohawk wife Pat. Wesaw had various jobs throughout his time in Chicago, including truck driver, salesman, shipping clerk, and chemical worker (*Native Voices* 67). Wesaw gained a bachelor's degree in 1978 through the Native American Education Services College in Chicago (*Native Voices* 50). Notably, all the photographers were men, reflecting the influence of patriarchal mainstream American society on the images of the Indigenous community displayed in the exhibition.[4]

How did *Seeing Indian in Chicago* portray life in the American Indian community to the visitors of the Newberry? In what ways did the exhibition challenge prevalent views about Native people? As this article will show, the three Native photographers featured in the exhibition exercised a sort of "photographic sovereignty" (Tsinhnahjinnie 41–44), presenting their community as both maintaining a thriving pan-Indigenous culture and identity *and* as recognizably American. The photographs show these two aspects as intertwining and overlapping naturally, not as existing as a binary or in tension with one another. Rather than projecting an exact or uncomplicated window into American Indian life in Chicago, the exhibition's photographs subtly critiqued and challenged the prevailing stereotypes of Indians as either relics of the past or militant, disorderly, and drunk.

Insider/Outsider Images in the Exhibition

While the main focus of this article is on images by the American Indian Camera Club, the exhibition did not exclusively feature Native photographers. Photographs by German American Peter F. Weil, Japanese American Joe Kazumura, and Filipino American Orlando Cabanban were also displayed. Kazumura lived near the American Indian Center and was a member of the Northwest Camera Club while Weil was the supervisor of the Photoduplication Department at the Newberry Library and an experienced photographer. Cabanban was a professional architectural photographer and friend of the AIC and photographed the center's events for over fifteen years. Since photographs by non-Indians were included, the exhibit's title of "Seeing Indian" carried a dual meaning, suggesting both documenting Native visions of life in their own community *and* the ways in which non-Natives viewed Indigenous people in Chicago and the relationships they built with them.

Though it proposed to challenge viewers' perceptions of urban Native people, the exhibition in itself to some extent contained an insider/outsider dichotomy. The difference in perspective is clear in some of the photographs chosen for the exhibit. Kazumura and Weil's shots were taken at American Indian Center powwows and other public events, and they prominently feature movement, dancing, and regalia. It is not clear how exactly photographs were selected, or where each was displayed. The photographer's name is attached in the bottom right corner of each exhibit label, but it is unclear who wrote the

texts. The images were also displayed alongside their short biographies and headshots. While there appears to be no record of how the images were arranged within the exhibit—whether chronologically or by photographer or theme—a viewer of the exhibit could have distinguished Kazumura and Weil's photographs from the others with relative accuracy.

Figure 1. Joe Kazumura, "Men's Fancy dancer at the 1982 American Indian Center powwow at Navy Pier." Photo Courtesy of the Newberry Library. This image is not included under the article's Creative Commons licence.

Kazumura's photograph reflects the type of images by non-Native photographers that were featured (Kazumura 13–14; see fig. 1). The young male dancer was captured in motion, though neither the type of dance nor his specific Indigenous nation is specified. His face is slightly blurred in the image, catching not only the expression of focus in his closed eyes, but also a feeling of movement. The sense of motion is also communicated by the array of shifting fringe and feathers in the young man's powwow regalia. The motion and regalia of the image work to reinforce a romanticized image of American Indians, fostering a fascination with "exotic" Native powwow culture. However, situated within the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition, the image also transposes this "exotic" dance to a well-known Chicago landmark, Navy Pier, highlighting the urban presence and persistence of Indigenous cultures. As such, these non-Native photographs of Chicago's urban Indian community could both challenge and reinforce the expectations of the audience.

This is not to say that Kazumura and Weil were complete strangers to the Chicago American Indian community. Kazumura's biography mentions that while he lived near the American Indian Center, he attended many events and "became particularly interested in photographing Plains Indian costumes" (Kazumura 2). Weil's biography for the exhibition states that his involvement with the American Indian community began when he was asked to photograph the 1971 opening of the D'Arcy McNickle Center (Weil 2). Many of his exhibition photographs are of that founding event, as well as of a powwow conducted during the 1961 American Indian Chicago Conference. Weil thus evidently had some interest in the political action of urban Native people, as demonstrated by a couple of images showing American Indians and supporters deep in conversation. For instance, in a photograph from the McNickle Center opening, Weil shows fellow exhibition photographer Ben Bearskin talking to Richard McPhearson, another member of the urban American Indian community (Weil 9–10; see fig. 2). The photograph is taken from the side, and the men are looking intently at one another as McPhearson speaks, a hint of a smile on his face. But since the men are shown in a moment of close discussion, hunched slightly toward each other—neither taking note

of the camera—the viewer is distanced as an outsider from their conversation.

Figure 2. Peter F. Weil, "Richard McPhearson and Ben Bearskin chat between songs during the McNickle Center's founding event in 1971." Photo Courtesy of the Newberry Library. This image is not included under the article's Creative Commons licence.

It is this sense of distance that distinguishes the images by Kazumura and Weil from those taken by members of the American Indian Camera Club. For instance, Ben Bearskin's photographs contain only two images of American Indians in powwow regalia. One of these features three men dressed in regalia, one of whom is playing a large drum and singing (Bearskin 3–4). Based on Bearskin's photographer biography, the men may have been members of the Chicago Drum singing group in which Bearskin himself was active. Critically, the accompanying exhibition label states that "Dave Fox, Ely Powless, Willard LaMere strike a pose." This makes clear to viewers that the photograph has been set up and does not reflect the day-to-day reality of Chicago American Indians. Unlike the documentary-style photographs by Weil and Kazumura, here the photographer planned the setup and framing of the image. It sets a scene, with its subjects neither looking at the camera nor at each other, but rather at undetermined points out-of-shot.

Bearskin also included a portrait of himself in powwow regalia, wearing a beaded headband with feathers in the back, and a beaded belt and cuffs (Bearskin 5–6). The image evokes Edward Curtis's ethnographic photography, with Bearskin staring forward, expressionless. Yet this photograph was labelled "Ben Bearskin in 1960 posing for the camera club," foregrounding the sense that the image was carefully staged. While such images may thus at first glance appear to present an exoticized image of Native people as cultural "Others," their framing and exhibition labels make evident that the images are photographic experiments, not documentary snapshots. Bearskin's agency is clear; the photographs fulfilled a specific purpose—practice for the Camera Club.

Orlando Cabanban's photographs complicate the insider/outsider dichotomy that otherwise permeated the exhibition. While Cabanban's photographs—like Weil's and Kazumura's—were largely focused on AIC powwows, day camps, canoe races, and other events, he additionally photographed broader community organizing. Included in the exhibition was his photograph of a 1971 sit-in demonstration at the BIA's offices in Chicago, which was arranged by the Native American Committee, an activist group formed in Chicago during the era of increasing Indigenous activism known as the Red Power movement. In the image, a group of young people and teenagers are assembled in an office, with some sitting at or on desks and others standing huddled close together wearing or holding warm jackets, looking past the camera at something beyond the frame. Everyone in the photo appears settled and calm, either smiling or frowning slightly ("Returning and Renaming").[5]

Yet even with the inclusion of this protest image by Cabanban, the photographs by the three Native photographers stand out in contrast to the photographs by non-Native photographers in

their representations of the broad spectrum of daily life within the American Indian community. Not a single exhibition photograph by Bearskin, Wesaw, or Battise shows dancing. Their images instead foreground family ties, home life, and the streets and parks of Chicago. Though some photographs were taken at powwows, these feature friends and community members either smiling and posing or preparing for the powwow (Battise 7–8, 17–18; Wesaw 3–4). This major difference in subject matter in these photographs reflects a refusal—whether conscious or subconscious—to reproduce imagery exoticizing American Indians in Chicago.

The photographers' position as insiders is also evident in the varied activities of the American Indian Center captured in the photographs. Bearskin was a leading figure at the Center. During the 1961 American Indian Chicago Conference, Bearskin was the chair of the AIC's board of directors and gave a calumet ceremony at the opening dinner of the conference (LaGrand 173). Bearskin's photographs, including a group photo taken at the center in the early 1960s at its original LaSalle Street location, reflect this involvement with the AIC (Bearskin 7–9). The photo features some of the original board members including Ernest Naquayouma (Hopi), as well as Father Peter John Powell, an Anglican priest and scholar who worked actively with Chicago's Indigenous community (LaGrand 144). The seventeen men and women posing for the photograph are dressed in suits and formal dresses and streamers line the ceiling of the Center, indicating that the photograph was taken following a party or celebration.

While the exhibition label merely states, "Community gathers at LaSalle Street Indian Center," a note with information provided by Powell in 2001 shows that the photograph was taken during the visit of the Principals of Bishop Hare School in Mission, South Dakota (Bearskin 8). The note states that the Principals, Mr. and Mrs. John Artichoker, Sr., who were both Native—likely Ho-Chunk—are seated in the front row of the photograph. Mrs. Artichoker is wearing a large, shining cross around her neck. While this background is interesting, and explains the decorations in the room, viewers of the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition would not have been aware of it. For them, Bearskin's image would have shown a community gathering not unlike those of other local communities, particularly for church-going Chicagoans.

Though it carried additional significance for those who remembered the event, it is precisely the *ordinariness* that Bearskin's photograph communicated to the white, middle-class visitors of the Newberry Library that is significant. In 1960, the Bearskin family had encountered racist violence on moving to the affluent and predominantly white neighborhood of Humboldt Park. Returning home from an AIC event, the family found their windows broken by stones, with a note signed by "The Whites" having been left behind, referring to them erroneously as Mexicans. The incident led to the Bearskins being evicted, with their landlord presumably fearing further damage (Miller 138–39). Bearskin's photographs contain no hints of the racism his family experienced in Chicago and instead focus on the community he and his family were part of fostering through the AIC.

Familiar "Americanness"

Considering Bearskin's experience, the photographers were undoubtedly aware of the prevalence and harm of stereotyped and racist imagery. The photographs of all three subtly addressed and challenged prevailing stereotypes surrounding Indians by foregrounding the familiarity of their everyday lives to viewers. Interviewed in the 1980s, Leroy Wesaw described the moment when he realized such imagery was impacting his daughter (*Native Voices* 99). She came

home from school bursting with excitement because her teacher had said there were Indians living in their neighborhood—but she had not realized she was one herself. This surprised Wesaw: "I had to sit down and teach . . . tell [her] she's the Indian she's talking about. . . . And she said, 'Well Dad, how can you be the Indian you don't got feathers growing out of your butt like them on T.V.' Stereotyped Indians, even to my child. I was an Indian and automatically I would figure, she would figure, she was the Indian. We all don't grow feathers" (*Native Voices* 99). Wesaw's photographs show his daughter in her teenage years, participating in activities at the AIC, and he also mentions that she later worked in the center's day care system (Wesaw 17–18). As such, this moment from her elementary school days may have been a wake-up call for Wesaw to more overtly foster his children's identities as American Indians. Wesaw, who maintained strong ties to the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians throughout his time in Chicago, led the AIC's well-known Canoe Club. Wesaw described the club, which participated in races in Chicago and beyond, as not only good fun and exercise, but a method of "preserving our Indian heritage" (Low 153–57).

As Wesaw's interview and leadership of the Canoe Club indicates, he did not see feathers and powwows as the defining characteristics of his community, or of what it meant to be an Indigenous person in Chicago. Most of the photographs taken by Wesaw, Battise, and Bearskin worked, in practice, to counteract images of Native people as "exotic." In addition to powwows, the exhibit particularly showcased the AIC's basketball team and Boy Scout groups. Basketball was popular amongst the members of the center and it was a personal passion of Battise's—he himself played as a teenager in high school in Texas (*Native Voices* 53). One of his images included in the exhibition was the cover of *The Chicago Warrior*, the Center's newsletter, which featured his photograph of eight basketball players (Battise 3–4; see fig. 3). The image thus not only portrayed the basketball team as relatable and recognizably American youths, but as part of the larger organization of the American Indian Center and a source of pride to the wider urban Indigenous community.

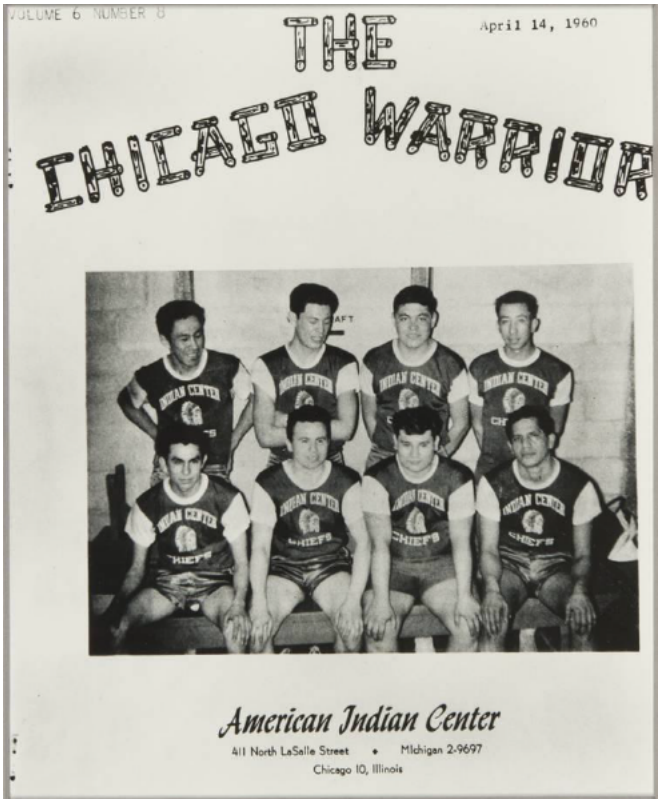

Figure 3. Dan Battise, "A cover of the American Indian Center Newsletter, The Chicago Warrior, 1960." Photo courtesy of the Newberry Library. This image is not included under the article's Creative Commons licence.

Strikingly, in the image the team members' jerseys were adorned with the name "Indian Center Chiefs" and a mascot. Though the image is not very clear, the outline of the mascot appears similar to typical Indian "chief"-themed sports logos, featuring the profile of a man in a feathered headdress. The American Indian Center was an explicitly pan-tribal institution, with members from Native nations all over the country. The choice of mascot with a Plains-style headdress, then, did not reflect any cultural uniformity amongst the basketball team, but rather

was an emulation of mascots popular at the time. While such mascots are the cause of significant controversy and protest today, in the early 1960s they were common motifs in American sports. In choosing such a team name and mascot, the Indian Center Chiefs reclaimed "Indian" imagery for their own purposes.

In the context of the Newberry Library exhibition, Battise's basketball team photographs served the purpose of presenting a safe image of modern "Americanness" to the middle-class visitors of the Newberry Library. In another image by Battise, the basketball team wears black tops with the white text "WARRIORS" printed on them (Battise 5–6). They are accompanied by four female cheerleaders with their dark hair fashioned in 1960s beehive style, wearing skirts and white sweaters with a black capital letter W. The cheerleaders are clearly adorned in the popular fashions of the day, and are virtually indistinguishable from any other group of American cheerleaders.

A sense of "American" familiarity is equally prominent in one of Bearskin's photographs, labelled "Leroy Wesaw and Ben Bearskin with the American Indian Center boy scout troop" (Bearskin 10–11; fig. 4). Not only does the photograph include fourteen unnamed boys who were members of the Boy Scout troop, Bearskin and Wesaw themselves are visible in the background. Indeed, Wesaw was a Boy Scout Master for the AIC (Low 149). Looking closely, we can see that some of the boys are holding a sixth edition of the *Boy Scout Handbook*, which was in use from 1959 to 1965 ("Boy Scout"). Standing in front of a flag with the word "CHICAGO" emblazoned on it, the boys, in their neat uniforms, look like a typical American Boy Scout troop. On their own, such images may even have worked to support federal claims that relocation aided in the assimilation and acculturation of Native Americans into mainstream society. Within the context of the "Seeing Indian" exhibition and the many photographs showcasing the enactment of a pan-tribal Indigenous identity in Chicago through powwows and other AIC events, the photographs instead communicated a sense of a hybrid identity as both American *and* distinctly Indian.

Figure 4. Ben Bearskin, "Leroy Wesaw and Ben Bearskin with the American Indian Center boy scout troop." Photo Courtesy of the Newberry Library. This image is not included under the article's Creative Commons licence.

The early 1960s timing of the photographs selected here, however, reflects more than just pride in the community and their similarity to other Chicago inhabitants, but also a nostalgia for past times at the center. In his 1980s interview, shortly before the exhibition was hosted at the library, Battise described the center as having seen better days, stating, "when I joined the Indian Center in 1954, I used to observe how everything was done so that I could assist too. It was good in those days. I volunteered to help. . . . Everything went different, I mean all the way" (*Native Voices* 204). This sense of nostalgia attests to the longevity of Indigenous presence in Chicago—by the early 1980s, this was no longer a new and budding group, but rather an organization that an entire generation had already passed through and was handing over to younger members. To an extent, the exhibition as such presented an ageing generation harking back to the good old days. Wesaw expressed

similar views in his interview, saying he was no longer as involved with the center as he had been in the past. One of the most impactful images from Wesaw's collection is a simple shot of the original sign for the American Indian Center, taken some time in the 1950s (Wesaw 5–6). The photograph was featured on the AIC's website into the 2010s and has become a symbol for the development of urban Indian communities in Chicago and beyond.

Resisting Red Power Imagery

The *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition was certainly influenced by this generational gap. Beginning in the 1960s, Indigenous youth across the country became involved in activist groups, contributing to the growth of the Red Power movement. In this era, the direct-action protest group known as the Native American Committee splintered off from American Indian Center activities (Furlan 176). The image of the "militant Indian" no doubt pervaded the minds of many Chicagoans. Within Chicago, a variety of activist groups were active in the late 1960s and 1970s, protesting local issues such as sub-standard housing and discriminatory evictions. The most visible of these groups, the Chicago Indian Village, led by Mike Chosa (Chippewa), occupied land across from Wrigley Field, as well as the Argonne National Laboratory in Fort Sheridan, and finally, in 1971, an abandoned Nike missile base (*The Divided Trail*; Furlan 176). The occupation was plagued by bad press, with some reports claiming that participants abused alcohol and behaved aggressively. Finally it culminated in a two-hour violent battle with Chicago law enforcement and the arrest of twelve protestors, an event widely reported on by the local press (LaGrand 234–40).

As I mentioned above, only one image of a Native American Committee sit-in protest, taken by Cabanban, was included in the exhibition. The image of Native youths sitting and standing in an office space served to counteract prevailing stereotypes of militant Indians from that era, and instead presented members of the Native American Committee as calm, neat, and organized. Cabanban's collection of photographs for the broader Chicago American Indian Photography Project included at least one other image of a BIA office takeover, as well as an image from O-Wai-Ya-Wa Elementary School, a community school run by the Native American Committee, but these do not appear to have been included in the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition ("Returning and Renaming").

Interestingly, the images taken by Native photographers included within the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition include no signs of any form of protest or direct-action activism. Instead, they work to subtly counteract the media imagery around these Red Power protests, emphasizing the similarity of the Chicago American Indian community to its surrounding urban society. Indeed, while Bearskin was involved in more moderate political organizing in the 1960s, Wesaw and Battise evidently steered clear of Red Power activism. Battise, a war veteran, commented on the Red Power movement, referring to his own experience of combat in the Second World War: "I'm an older person and I fought the war, and I fought to protect the people. The war is dead; we did it; nothing can run over us. We got power already; we can stop anything. Maybe they were just trying to make their voice known. I believe in a different way myself" (qtd. in LaGrand 237).

In fact, a couple of exhibition photographs appear to address the negative media portrayals of Indigenous people in Chicago indirectly. The image below, taken by Battise, was accompanied by the label "Harvey Sun and friend in 1958" (Battise 11–12; fig. 5). The image captures an Indigenous man and a police officer standing side-by-side, the latter with his arm around the former. The location of the photograph is not stated, but

an intersection, some traffic, and passers-by are visible in the background. That this image was included amongst the twelve photographs of Battise's featured in the exhibition indicates that it was significant, despite the police officer's not being named. In his youth, Battise struggled with alcohol abuse, until an exchange with a police officer put an end to it. As he put it, "[i]n my drinking days I told off a policeman. I was driving too fast etc., I used to get away with it. That's bad isn't it? I stopped drinking alcohol for good then" (*Native Voices* 128). Moreover, this is one of the only photographs in the exhibition showing a member of the Chicago American Indian community in the company of a white person. It was not a coincidence that this image of a smiling police officer was chosen for the exhibit, projecting positive relations between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous authorities in the city. In this light, the inclusion of Battise's photograph could be considered a conciliatory move on both a public and a personal level, projecting an image of the Chicago Indian community as law-abiding citizens to the visitors of the Newberry Library.

Figure 5. Dan Battise, "Harvey Sun and a friend in 1958." Photo Courtesy of the Newberry Library. This image is not included under the article's Creative Commons licence.

Wesaw also had a history of alcohol abuse. When he was interviewed in 1980, he noted that he started drinking at the age of fifteen, long before he arrived in Chicago: "When I first came into Chicago it was hard to hack, coming out of the woods as I did. Moving into Chicago with this constant activity. It was pretty rough, especially with, we had two kids, another one on the way. I was working all the time, but I used to have my bouts with booze" (*Native Voices* 116). Eventually he checked in for two weeks of treatment at County Cook Hospital. Wesaw described his struggle as stemming from the pressures of city life after having grown up in rural areas and attending an Indian boarding school in Michigan. The high return rate of relocation participants indicates that many Native people shared this difficulty in adjusting to urban life; it has been estimated that up to seventy-five percent of relocatees returned to reservations, at least temporarily (Fixico 149).

Figure 6. Leroy Wesaw, "Young girl getting a drink at DePaul American Indian Center function." Photo courtesy of the Newberry Library. This image is not included under the article's Creative Commons licence.

While the Native photographers featured here chose not to display the hardships faced in the

city explicitly, some of their images belie the exhibition's construction of a wholly positive experience. Wesaw's photographs do not directly reference his initial difficulties in Chicago and his battle with alcoholism, but he did include an image in the exhibition that subtly challenges the stereotype of the "drunken Indian." The image shows a girl in a fringed dress standing on her tiptoes to reach a water fountain (see fig. 6). At first glance, the photograph appears to be a simple image of a child taking a break from the hustle and bustle of the AIC function. However, in the upper right corner of the photograph, a hand-written sign is visible, taped to the brick wall of the hallway. The sign reads, "NO ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES ALLOWED!!" The girl is farther away than the sign and does not take notice of the photographer. As such, the framing of the photograph to include the sign seems purposeful, and conveyed a message to visitors at the Newberry counteracting prevailing stereotypes around alcohol abuse. Since the subject of the photograph is a girl so young she had to stretch to reach the water fountain, it also indicates to viewers that future generations within the American Indian community were being brought up in a safe and respectable environment.

Resilience through Community, Culture, and Family

Counteracting stereotyped imagery, the little girl's dress plays a particularly important role. Her clothing makes clear that she is Indigenous without the viewer's even having to read the exhibition label. It also reflects the most significant aspect of the work of these Native photographers. While Battise, Bearskin, and Wesaw's photographs pushed against the boundaries of stereotyped imagery in the media and "exoticized" outsider views within the exhibition itself, they simultaneously foregrounded the identity of community members as *American Indians*. Alongside images of urban American familiarity and good relations with surrounding communities, the majority of the photographs foregrounded community, culture, and—most importantly—family.

Both Battise and Wesaw photographed AIC craft fairs in addition to taking pictures of friends and family at powwows. In one of Wesaw's photographs Battise himself stands at his stall at an American Indian Center Folk Fair, grinning and surrounded by beadwork (Wesaw 7–8; see fig. 7). While these fairs were open to the public and not just members of the American Indian community, Wesaw's photographs mainly feature Indigenous youths in fashionable clothing posing for the camera, holding items like canoe miniatures or shopping bags (Wesaw 9–10, 13–14). In these photographs, the juxtaposition of smart suits and trendy winter coats within the setting of a folk fair emphasizes that Indigenous arts and culture were an integral part of their lives as modern Chicagoans.

Figure 7. Leroy Wesaw, "Dan Battise at American Indian Center Folk Fair." Photo Courtesy of the Newberry Library. This image is not included under the article's Creative Commons licence.

Significantly, such images also demonstrate unity within urban Native communities that encompassed many different Indigenous nations. While the specific nation of each of the photographers is stated in their biographies in

conjunction with the exhibition, the labels accompanying specific photographs do not mention tribal enrollment. Nor do they explicitly note who is Native within the images. Viewers who were community members would be able to make such distinctions themselves, and the information was not relevant to outside viewers. Rather than singling out tribal nations and emphasizing the diversity of Indigenous cultures, almost all of the people photographed were presented as members of a cohesive American Indian community within Chicago.

As I have discussed so far, the Native photographers involved with the *Seeing Indian* exhibition included photographs from powwows and folk fairs, as well as other AIC activities such as the basketball league and Boy Scouts. Battise, Bearskin, and Wesaw's photography also shares a foregrounding of kinship and family. Battise's photographs include two portraits of his daughter, as well as varied images of American Indian men and women, including no particular details of the date, time or place, just smiling for the camera (Battise 7–10, 13–24). Bearskin's photographs include one of himself with a toddler, a friend posing with Bearskin's children, and a heart-warming shot of a group of laughing children gathered around a birthday cake (Bearskin 12–17). In addition to his images of friends taken at folk fairs, Wesaw's photographs include one of a group of young children smiling and a shot of his daughter with some younger girls, all wearing beaded headbands and necklaces (Wesaw 13–18).[6] These photographs demonstrate that for these Native photographers, their American Indian identity was most dependent not on the outward performance of Indigeneity, but on the community and kinship networks they created and maintained throughout their lives in Chicago.

Even the images taken at powwows and other American Indian Center events were predominantly focused on the people within the photograph, not on their clothing or visual cultural signifiers. Kinship is a core value to Anishinaabe people in the Upper Great Lakes region, who uphold the authenticity of their identities as American Indians through the connections maintained with tribal homelands and reservations (Jackson 158). For the American Indian community in Chicago, maintaining such links to one's own nation was often more difficult—particularly for those like Dan Battise, whose homeland was a thousand miles away in Texas. As he recounted, maintaining his own language was challenging:

> We speak Indian in our family home. We know our language. We speak English most of the time, only I speak Indian. The children try to speak Indian. One of the girls really knows how to speak Indian well. She was too small when we went away and she doesn't remember how to speak Indian too well now. The other daughter was born here. My son speaks Coushatta-Alabama. We speak the Coushatta-Alabama language. I speak English, German, French and our own Coushatta Indian language. (*Native Voices* 139)

Battise's comment shows how much he valued his own language, continuing to pass it on to his children no matter how challenging this was. When this statement is placed within the context of the many photographs of community members from other tribes, it appears that for Battise, having been part of a vibrant pan-tribal community was particularly important in maintaining an identity as both an American Indian *and* a member of the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas.

As the photographs of Battise, Bearskin, and Wesaw show, despite its initial strong ties to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the American Indian Center of Chicago fostered the building of new types of kinship networks within a community

comprised of Indigenous people from all over the country. As the photographs demonstrate, it was their families and these friendships that primarily upheld their identities. Whether they were engaging in powwows and folk fairs, sports leagues or church events, it was the *people* involved who made the Chicago American Indian community resilient in the face of assimilation. The community faced challenges, with the American Indian Center struggling to secure funding and having its legitimacy challenged by Red Power groups (LaGrand 194). Members of the community faced adversity on a personal level as well, as some struggled with unemployment and alcoholism. But this was not the image of Chicago American Indians that the exhibition represented. Within the context of the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition, their images challenged prevalent media portrayals and the exoticization of Native peoples, and instead showed themselves and their community as both Indigenous and modern Chicagoans. While the discerning eye might grasp hints of this background, the photographs of Battise, Bearskin, and Wesaw foreground Native resilience through their community, asserting photographic sovereignty in creating their own visual narratives.

From September 2024 until January 2025, some of the *Seeing Indian* photographs were again displayed at the Newberry Library, as part of an exhibition hosted by the Indigenous Chicago research project, which was a collaboration between the Newberry, local Indigenous nations, and the American Indian Center.[7] Here the photographs were not the main focus of the exhibit, but were instead placed within the broader context of the long history of Indigenous people in the area today called Chicago. The Indigenous Chicago exhibition was a major endeavor led by members of the Chicago Native community, the Newberry Library staff, and Indigenous Studies scholars. It reflected "the dynamic and complex aspects of Native life in Chicago from the seventeenth century to the present," presenting maps, material items, artwork, and photographs from the Newberry's collection alongside new work by contemporary Native artists ("Exhibition"). Comparing the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* photography exhibition from 1985 to the expansive effort of 2024's *Indigenous Chicago* demonstrates a shift in how institutions in the United States include, develop resources for, and communicate Indigenous histories. Whereas *Seeing Indian in Chicago* presented Native families as predominantly recent relocatees to the city, in *Indigenous Chicago* relocation was introduced as just one phase of an enduring story.

As part of the *Indigenous Chicago* exhibition, the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* photographs contributed to delivering the message, "Chicago is, and always has been, a Native place" (*Indigenous*). In portraying the American Indian community of Chicago during the years of and immediately following the termination-era relocation program, the photographs challenged narratives of Native victimization and urban displacement. Now in the present, as part of the broader *Indigenous Chicago* exhibition, they take their place as part of the multivocal history of Native people in Chicago. Both in the 1980s and today, these photographs convey to non-Native viewers a message not just of Native existence and resilience in urban spaces, but also of their vibrant lives and active roles in shaping life and creating community in the city.

Notes

1. A note on terminology: in the period in question, "Indian" and "American Indian" were the most commonly used terms by members of the American Indian Center of Chicago to refer to people from diverse Indigenous nations from across the United States. In this article I use these to reflect the community's own terms in that specific time period. Where I speak more broadly, I use the umbrella terms "Native" and "Indigenous."

2. Unfortunately, despite an extensive search, I did not find any reviews or articles on the original run of the exhibition, so I was unable to gauge how Chicagoans received and reacted to it.

3. The AICC was hosted by the University of Chicago and organized by anthropologist Sol Tax and members of the National Congress for American Indians. The conference was organized to prepare a unified American Indian statement on federal policy.

4. If you are the copyright holder of any photographs in the article and believe you have not been properly identified, or you do not wish for your materials to be available here, please contact the author and journal to have it removed.

5. Cabanban's photographs have not been digitized, and so were largely unavailable for use in this chapter. Cabanban's collection is extensive, but it is unclear how many of his photographs were featured in the exhibit itself. Two of Cabanban's photographs can be viewed on the *Indigenous Chicago* project website, but according to the inventory of the *Seeing Indian in Chicago* exhibition records, only the image of the NAC's protest was featured in the exhibition. (See "Returning.")

6. I have chosen not to include identifiable names and photographs of children at family events within this article out of respect for the privacy of those still possibly living, whom I was unable to contact to obtain their consent.

7. An online audio-visual tour of this exhibition can be viewed on the project's website (see *Indigenous*).

Works Cited

Battise, Dan. *Seeing Indian in Chicago Exhibition Records: Dan Batisse Photographs*. Adam Matthews Digital. Newberry Library.

Bearskin, Ben. *Seeing Indian in Chicago Exhibition Records: Ben Bearskin Photographs*. Adam Matthews Digital. Newberry Library.

Blackhawk, Ned. "I Can Carry on From Here: The Relocation of American Indians to Los Angeles." *Wicazo Sa Review: A Journal of Native American Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1995, pp. 16–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/1409093.

Blansett, Kent, Cathleen D. Cahill, and Andrew Needham. "Introduction: Indian Cities." *Indian Cities: Histories of Indigenous Urbanization*, edited by Kent Blansett, Cathleen D. Cahill, and Andrew Needham, U of Oklahoma P, 2022, pp. 1–24.

"The Boy Scout Handbook, 1910–Today." *Troop 97*. http://www.troop97.net/bshb_ed6.htm.

Deloria, Philip J. *Indians in Unexpected Places*. U of Kansas P, 2004. https://doi.org/10.1353/book111312.

---. *Playing Indian*. Yale UP, 1998.

The Divided Trail: A Native American Odyssey. Directed by Jerry Aronson, 1977. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcYGfT9Zwl4.

"Exhibition." *Indigenous Chicago*. https://indigenous-chicago.org/exhibition-overview/.

"Exhibits." *Cardunal Free Press*, 6 Sept. 1985, p. 21.

---. *Northwest Herald*, 23 Aug. 1985, p. 19.

---. *The Herald*, 6 Sept. 1985, p. 35.

Faris, James C. *Navajo and Photography*. U of New Mexico P, 1996.

Fixico, Donald. *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945–1960*. U of New Mexico P, 1986.

Furlan, Laura M. *Indigenous Cities: Urban Indian Fiction and the Histories of Relocation*. U of Nebraska P, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vjqnb4.

Hamdan, Leila I. "Culture and Resistance: Civil Rights Photography: Memphis, 1968." *Fire!!!*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, pp. 109–48. https://doi.org/10.5323/fire.2.2.0109.

Indigenous Chicago. https://indigenous-chicago.org/.

Jackson, Deborah Davis. *Our Elders Lived It: American Indian Identity in the City*. Northern Illinois UP, 2002.

Kazumura, Joe. *Seeing Indian in Chicago Exhibition Records: Joe Kazumura Photographs*. Adam Matthews Digital. Newberry Library.

LaGrand, James B. *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945–75*. U of Illinois P, 2002.

López, Analú María. "Native Voices in Zhekagoynak, Zhigaagoong, Šikaakonki." *Illinois Highlights*, 30 Nov. 2021.

---. "Seeing Indian in Chicago Exhibition Featuring the Ayer Indigenous Studies Librarian at The Newberry." *Illinois Highlights*, 15 Dec. 2021. https://www.library.illinois.edu/idhh-highlights/index.php/2021/12/15/seeing-indian-in-chicago-exhibition-featuring-the-ayer-indigenous-studies-librarian-at-the-newberry/#:~:text=A%20collection%20of%20photographs%20titled,the%20Native%20American%20community%20in.

Low, John N. *Imprints: The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians and the City of Chicago*. Michigan State UP, 2016.

Miller, Douglas K. *Indians on the Move: Native American Mobility and Urbanization in the Twentieth Century*. U of North Carolina P, 2019. https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469651385.001.0001.

Native Voices in the City. 1985. Newberry Library, Chicago American Indian Oral History Project Records, 1982–1985.

"Newberry Library History." *Newberry Library Research Guides*. https://www.newberry.org/collection/research-guide/newberry-library-history.

"Photography Events." *Chicago Tribune*, 19 July 1985.

"Returning and Renaming." *Indigenous Chicago*. https://indigenous-chicago.org/storymap/returning-and-remaining/.

Thrush, Coll. "Placing the City: Crafting Urban Indigenous Histories." *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, edited by Chris Andersen and Jean M. O'Brien, Routledge, 2017, pp. 110–18.

Trodd, Zoe. "A Negative Utopia: Protest Memory and the Spatio-Symbolism of Civil Rights Literature and Photography." *African American Review*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2008, pp. 25–40.

Tsinhnahjinnie, Hulleah J. "When Is a Photograph Worth a Thousand Words?" *Photography's Other Histories*, edited by Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, Duke UP, 2003, pp. 40–52. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384717-004.

Weil, F. Peter. *Seeing Indian in Chicago Exhibition Records: F. Peter Weil Photographs*. Adam Matthews Digital. Newberry Library.

Wesaw, Leroy. *Seeing Indian in Chicago Exhibition Records: Leroy Wesaw Photographs*. Adam Matthews Digital. Newberry Library.