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There's no Such Thing as the Indian Dress

The Clothing Regime of a Sioux Reservation (1868-1968)

Thomas Grillot

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Illustrations: **Léa Hybre**



Standing Rock store

by **Thomas Grillot**

There's no Such Thing as the Indian Dress

The Clothing Regime of a Sioux Reservation (1868-1968)

If stylistic variation in elements of clothing is to be taken as an index of fashion, fashion has probably always been part of native life in Northern America. Since the early decades of the 20th century, anthropologists have distinguished so-called tribal groups by the patterns and designs of their dress in several regions of the continent, revealing in the process several periods in the history of native clothing. Whether before or after Contact with Europeans, patterns and techniques circulated between groups, by direct imitation and sometimes as part of trade[1]

Immediately after Contact, "Whites" and "Indians" started paying an inordinate amount of attention to each other's dress and ornaments. Through trade and marriage, composite dresses appeared and a native taste for European imports developed that was strong enough to influence the production of fabrics and cuts that could appeal to it. By the 18th century, native tastes had created a specific Indian market in the European textile industry, most notably among blanket makers. It lasted well into the 20th century.[2]

Even if one adopts a more specific definition of fashion and looks at it as a European institution associating and periodically reconfiguring a relationship between producers, merchants, advertisers, consumers and specific types of clothing, fashion did not have to wait until the 20th century to be part of the lives of the continent's indigenous populations. Focusing on the late 19th century and 20th century allows us to follow the continuation of a centuries-old process of assimilation and appropriation of European fashion by native people, a process that neither the brutally assimilative policies of the US government nor the supervision of Christian churches, nor the relative geographical isolation and the frequent poverty that plagued reservations created at about that time were powerful enough to stop. Because each group had its own long history of contact with European fashion, reservation life never resulted in a uniform "reservation dress". A focus on the Sioux (Lakota/Dakota) reservation of Standing Rock, which straddles the states of North and South Dakota, brings to light the elaboration of local clothing traditions that were as many local solutions to what, for Indians, was a universal problem: the relentless insistence on the part of Euro-Americans that Indians adopt non-native clothes, and their own desire to dress as they pleased – and needed. Dress on Indian reservations was

an adaptation to a rural lifestyle, to poverty, to fashion, and, more often than not, a gesture towards the past. And if colonization did not abolish differences between groups and between individuals into a uniform "Indian dress", it did develop a specific dressing regime – a set of specifically Indian social attitudes towards clothing adapted to life on reservations.

DRESS AS AN AGENT OF CIVILIZATION

In 1873, the town of Fort Yates became the seat of the Standing Rock agency of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the administration in charge of supervising Indians' relationship with the federal government since 1849. In the 1880s, a few years after the reservation had been created, the agent working at Fort Yates was in charge of applying the US government's policy of assimilation. One of his most time-consuming duties consisted of taking a census of his wards, the 3000 some Lakota and Dakota whom the US policy of "pacification" had concentrated on this part of the Great Sioux reservation, a territory created on paper in 1868. So solemn and picturesque a duty census taking was that the photographer D.F. Barry traveled the more than 60 miles separating Fort Yates from his own city of Bismarck, to immortalize the event. In the center of the picture Barry took, the BIA agent and census taker in chief, James McLaughlin, has given himself pride of place. He's wearing a vest and a bowler hat. Standing behind him, his wife and interpreter, also dons a European-style dress and a hat. At the other end of the table sits John Grass, one of the chiefs of the Indian bands gathered in the reservation. His hat hides most of his face. Next to them, leaning against a second table, stands another chief, Gall. Behind the two native leaders, their wives are clearly identifiable.

Citizen's clothing

Evidently, census taking on the Standing Rock reservation in the 1880s came as an opportunity to display rank and order. Both are manifested through proximity to power (the BIA agent) as well as in dress. Aside from the most prominent individuals, few are identifiable on the photograph today. Most seem to be wearing the exact same clothes. Women, wrapped in blanket and standing aside, are rarely distinguishable, out of focus even. They have not, however, been entirely pushed out of the frame by men: a group of them, in particular, appears conspicuously on the right-hand side of the picture. They are the teachers and employees of the government-sponsored boarding school whose pupils are lined up in their uniforms – a testimony to the efficient work of the local BIA agent in assimilating Indians. Children and adults on this side of the photograph represent the avant-garde of civilization. The impeccable state of their dress testifies to the earnestness of their instructors in erasing traces of sartorial non-conformity in the native population: there, no sign of the paint, feathers and semi-nakedness that Europeans and Euro-Americans had come to associate with Indianness.[3] European-style clothes are displayed as signs and vectors of assimilation. Trousers, hats, waistcoats, shirts and vests form an outfit that is commonly designed as Indians' "citizen's clothes". Wearing it is tantamount to waving a white flag, or conceding submission. After all, most of the clothes worn by the Indians immortalized by Barry have been issued to them by the state as payment for lands ceded to the US. The presence of Indian policemen, and US soldiers, in the background leaves no doubt as to the constraint exerted on most people in attendance. Whites, men

and women living in the agency or in the nearby military fort, have come to enjoy the comforting sight of a difference tamed and mastered. They pose in the various costumes of the clerk, the pioneer or the civil servant.

Dress, even when it is not a uniform, is a strong marker of identity and a powerfully distinguishing mark between Indians and non-Indians. Even when they dressed as "citizens", Indians could not "pass" as whites. The clearest marker of their difference was the blanket, worn as a coat by members of both sexes. But to the shrewd observer, Indian difference lay not in a piece of apparel, but in the sheer diversity of the ways Indians accommodated elements of clothing. As Mrs. Aaron Wells, the wife of a "mixed-blood" Indian working for the BIA, remembered it, the 1880s were a time of considerable dressing creativity: "Indians wore all kinds of clothing, overalls, shirts (most of them let the shirt tail hang down over their trousers), shoes or moccasins, army issue clothing, trousers, leggings, chaps made of tanned skins. Some wore hats, caps or a cloth on their heads. All dressed differently, with the exception that they all used blankets on their shoulders, men included."[4] Indians may have followed their own ideas of fashion; but, most importantly, these ideas varied according to each individual, making each dress a matter of personal taste and composition.

Looked at more closely, Barry's picture reveals just such individuals, some hidden in the mass, others actually quite visible. With them, several clothing regimes emerge. Amidst individuals wearing shirt and trousers, bodies appear that are wrapped in blankets, faces half-hidden in white fabric; moccasins adorn feet, feathers ornament hats, and fur traders bonnets and turbans decorate several heads. Citizen's clothing is worn, but in different degrees of completeness and refinement. Sometimes, Indianness is prominently displayed, as it is by the man on the right of the agent who carries a peace pipe, or by the child next to him who holds a bunch of arrows. Far in the back, a warrior maintains a strong grasp on his tomahawk. Others who perhaps didn't want to display signs of sartorial conformity have remained in the back, where the photographic gaze is powerless to detail their clothing choices.

Dress is Personal History

Sartorial diversity on Standing Rock was not predicated on taste and opinions only, or even on social distinctions. It was also rooted in a great diversity of modes of production and acquisition. At the turn of the 19th century, clothes could be gotten from the US government; they could also be made by hand, or bought from traders licensed by the BIA and located close to its agency in Fort Yates. Before the Standing Rock agency was created (first as the Grand River Agency in 1869, then, around Fort Yates and under its current name in 1873), Lakota and Dakota people had for several decades already made contact and traded with Euro-Americans. Clothes had played an important part in these exchanges, either as spoils of war, objects of trade or imitation, or gifts.[5] Dress, in other words, was by the end of the century more than a symptom of acculturation or a symbol of adhesion to the new regime. It was the product of various personal itineraries that all led to the same place: the reservation. What reservation life put to the test was not, in other words, an Indian dress theretofore preserved from all outside interference, but the leeway that individuals had in defining the manner in which they would dress and distinguish themselves from other Dakota and Lakota – and from whites.

















Previous pages and right: David F. Barry, "Census taking at Standing Rock Agency", c. 1880s. © Denver Public Library.

➜ W.H. Jackson, Portraits of American Indians, Photographs Of Indians Selected From The Collection In The Possession Of The U.S. Geological Survey Of The Territories, c. 1876, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts.



Early on, visitors remarked on the individualistic attitude of the Dakota and Lakota people, and found a brilliant illustration of it in their dress, regalia and ornaments, which all closely reflected the wearer's personal history and accomplishments. The buffalo hide that men and women wore in the winter as protection against the cold was heavily decorated, for the former, with patterns and drawings commemorating exploits in the hunt or on the warpath. Clothing displayed its owner's prowess, a principle that was also evident in tattoos, feathers, necklaces, horses and tipis, which equally displayed marks signaling the strong connection of an individual's personal identity and name to specific events in his life. Apparel also distinguished a man's belonging to groups of restricted membership such as the warriors' societies or chiefs' societies whose role it was to oversee camp activities and make important collective decisions. Individual valor and status were thus strongly connected to external appearance, and most outstandingly displayed in the warbonnet headdress in which each feather stood for a "coup" or sanctioned feat of bravery – this piece of clothing, in particular, soon became a powerful symbol of Indianness for non-natives.[6] Albeit distinct, women's dress followed the same principles. For women too, designs could be acquired after specific personal experiences, most notably during dreams. So prominent was the valorization of male prowess that women's dress could also celebrate the feats of their male kin.[7] The capacity of clothing to thus display values would become evident in time of danger: a warrior would wear his finest dress as a taunt to his enemy or as a way to elegantly finish a life brilliantly lived.[8] It was also in his finery that he would require his relatives to dress him up after his death.[9]



↑ "Graduating Class, 1912, Carlisle Indian School", featured in *The Red Man*, vol. 4, no. 9, May 1912.

Dakota/Lakota clothing was thus the product and the sign of a competition for honors, a determination to make a name for oneself as well as one's family. It was eminently autobiographical, and would lead its wearer to tell or sing the story of his life in order to explain why and since when he started donning specific ornaments or designs. Often produced by the individual himself, Dakota/Lakota clothing could hardly have been more personal. However, because it was sported by a group of people who, having successfully adopted a nomadic way of life based on the horse-mounted hunting of buffaloes, managed to efficiently delay Euro-American invasion, it soon became a symbol of Indianness – and an object of biting criticism. From the middle of the 19th century, travelers and soldiers alike criticized Sioux warriors, in paper if not to their face, for their propensity to behave like savage dandies or coquet "little girls".[10]

As they reached the threshold of the reservation, Sioux' coquetry relied for a growing part on material and products Euro-Americans themselves procured them. While a good part of their dress was still fashioned by relatives or by themselves using hides and animal products, hats, shirts, coats and blankets coming out of Western European or US factories, first encountered at the end of the 18th century, were becoming more common. As had been the case in other regions of the Americas, new pieces of clothing did not result immediately in new clothing norms. Where other Indian groups acted as go-between, buying them could even happen without a direct encounter with non-natives. Thus, even as they turned to cotton, Dakota and Lakota women did not modify patterns first designed for hides.[11] Luxury articles gifted to chiefs by whites remained confined to ceremonies or even diplomatic encounters. By mid-century, however, change started accelerating.

Before and After

Chiefs were indeed the first ones among Dakota and Lakota to feel the pressure to adjust their dress to changing times and to greater non-Indian presence in the Great Plains. They received pieces of clothing as gift or traded them, and added them to their own, native-made dress – sometimes only temporarily. Those of them who were invited to Washington, D.C., to negotiate treaties often

went home with complete sets of European-style outfits, some civilian, most of them military, all of them following the latest fashion. A stay in the US capital was also a time to have one's photographic portrait taken, alone or with other tribal representatives. Such practice constituted a way to display the gift and affirm its owner's status as a leader recognized by the government. Clearly too, it imparted at least some of the visitors with a sense of shame at one's native dress, a shame brought about by the inquisitive and often disapproving looks of non-Indians.[12] Even if they could be discarded at home, "white" clothes thus acquired a powerful political, ideological and emotional charge.

As, between 1868 and 1882, the US army pushed back Dakota and Lakota populations towards the Great Sioux reservation in a series of difficult military campaigns, clothing received new meanings: leaving the sphere of diplomatic and military contacts, it became a focus of white-Indian interractions, an essential way to reinforce distinctions, even as more mixture, both sartorial and genetic, happened. "Mixed-bloods" with both white and Indian ancestry became strongly associated with the wearing of "white" clothes. Indians who settled reservations, whether "mixed blood" or "full blood", would later distinctly remember their installation as a time when they became "whites", a change that they saw as symbolized by the cutting of their hair and the wearing of European-style clothing.[13] The transformation was strongly encouraged by the US government, which saw reservations as a transitional space towards a civilized way of life. But change could also be spectacularly enacted by those willing to demonstrate their determination to adjust properly to their new situation. Even if not all turned immediately to such drastic measures, settling the reservation was very often a symbolic break that resulted in the partial or total adoption of white clothing. Women, who had had time to appropriate fabrics and dresses, and adjust them to Indian patterns, seemed to have felt the transition less brutally than men, many of whom did not take kindly to the abandonment of their traditional clothes and regarded the change as a form of symbolic death, at the very least a degradation or emasculation that encapsulated the end of a free life. While citizen's clothes were the epitome of this change, they were but the most prestigious (and unpractical) incarnation of a shift that, indeed, brought Lakota men closer to women: becoming more like whites meant making a living as farmers – a distinctly female activity. For most of Dakota/Lakota men, work outfits and overalls logically became the regular form of dress.

The generalization of white clothing was part of a larger social engineering project supported by the US government and Christian churches, whereby Indians would become productive members of the US society and, for all intent and purposes, white themselves. Photographs of Indians in full citizen's garb reflected this ambition. They became a proof of an individual's advancement towards civilization, sometimes in an explicit display of transformation as in those sets of "before and after" photos that immortalized students' appearance as they reached their boarding schools and later, as they donned their scholarly uniforms; sometimes implicitly, when an individual's white dress displayed for all to see his conversion to a new way of life and abandonment of the old "red road."

Slowly, new clothing norms entered Indian lives, pushed mostly, at first, by missionaries. Of course, members of various Christian denominations were themselves distinguished by their dress, and Indians had learned to recognize the difference between the Catholic "black robes" and the Episcopalian "white


BIG SALE STANDING ROCK RESERVATION INDIAN LANDS AT FORT YATES, NORTH

Sioux Count

Only Newspaper Published in Sioux County, North

VOLUME I. FT. YATES, SIOUX COUNTY, NORTH DAKO

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↑ Advertisement for "The Big Store"(Fort Yates), in *Sioux County pioneer*, 28 May 1915, p. 1

↗ Frank B. Fiske, "The Big Store", c. 1900s, State Historical Society of North Dakota.

robes". Missionaries were actually quite insistent that conversion could not happen without a change of dress. Their stance benefited from the sudden impoverishment that accompanied Indians' settling of the reservations. Deprived of food and clothing after strenuous military campaigns, reservation denizens often turned to the charity of churches, the members of which showed no compunction in trading goods for religious observance and respect of Christian moral values, especially those touching the institution of marriage.[14] While they encouraged the abandonment of native clothing as a sign of renunciation to "heathen" practices, missionaries also used clothing as an instrument of internal reform. Following US middle class' attitudes, they made clothing into a reflection of individuals' sense of morality. Clean, well-pressed clothes were to be worn in religious schools as well as houses of worship. Through rituals and the teaching of work ethics, the new norm was instilled in generations of Indian students and churchgoers. As early as the 1880s, the churches separated men and women and organized activities to promote their own understanding of the distinction between the sexes, often by way of clothes. Shawls and headscarves became a sign of Christian respectability for Dakota/Lakota women. Church-sponsored organizations promoted sewing, kept track of their wards' wearing of white clothing and of Indian women's production of clothes, and encouraged participation in fairs where women's homemakers' skills could be displayed and rewarded.[15] Church service promoted the wearing of one's "Sunday best".[16]

Showing Indians in white clothes was also a powerful way to counter critics that denounced the inefficiency of civilizing efforts by pointing at the persisting semi-"nakedness" of some Indians – a criticism directed in particular at BIA agents.[17] By the end of the 19th century the state had replaced churches as the primary agent of civilization in Indian country. Wielding both the stick of military repression and the carrot of food rations and free clothes, benefiting from a larger budget, its agents behave like the missionaries – on a grander scale. Barry's photograph immortalized precisely this new power, as census taking was visibly

accompanied with a distribution of food, clothing and clothing material. For the Dakota and Lakota people, the conversion to white garb was part of a more general transaction whereby they entered into a new relationship with the state, a relationship that implied specific duties for each side. Did not Article 10 of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 specify that the government should furnish "for each male person over 14 years of age, a suit of good substantial woolen [sic] clothing, consisting of coat, pantaloons, flannel shirt, hat, and a pair of home-made socks. For each female over 12 years of age, a flannel shirt, or the goods necessary to make it, a pair of woollen hose, 12 yards of calico, and 12 yards of cotton domestics. For the boys and girls under the ages named, such flannel and cotton goods as may be needed to make each a suit as aforesaid, together with a pair of woollen hose for each"?[18] Such transaction made Indian agents and their superiors into symbolic fathers: from the local employee to the President of the United States, whites were understood by Dakotas and Lakotas as having taken upon themselves the paternal role of feeding and clothing their Indian children. Intent on developing Indians' self-dependency and entrepreneurial spirit, federal authorities rapidly showed, however, that they did not take this role too seriously.

A NEW INDIVIDUALISM

While the BIA could take advantage of large gatherings to showcase its efforts at civilizing Indians' dress, it was in its schools that its agents could most efficiently teach a orthodox dress code, and attempt to change individuals by changing their dressing habits. There, the ambition of a transformation embracing all aspects of an individual's personality was most in evidence. For women, sewing, in particular, was to impart thrift and capitalist values. Taught as part of the science of "home economics" which purported to teach women how to make a rational use of the resources at their disposal in the home, it also supported the teaching of reading and writing (in English), arithmetic, and the use of books, measurements, and written instructions in tasks that had theretofore been a matter of imitating one's elders and relatives.

A new individualism was thereby promoted, that indexed one's value on one's work ethics and ability to make a living without the help of the state. Such performances found direct expressions in the cleanliness of the dress and the erect posture of the body.[19] Clothes that were dirty, wrinkled, torn, loose (and therefore reminiscent of the blanket) or on the contrary too tight (especially for children, who were traditionally swaddled) were firmly vilified.[20] A refinement of taste in the matter of clothing was at the same time encouraged and given narrow limits, as Indians' new clothes were to remain appropriate for a life in the rural "wilderness" of the reservations. Consequently, and somewhat paradoxically, fashion remained out of the picture. BIA teachers and employees themselves, especially women, were only to display the most sober and modest apparel. Always intent on criticizing the vanity of the "fashionable savage" and natives' "aping" of whites, and wary of mixed-bloods' capacity to cross over to whiteness,[21] they also severely censured transactions with traders, always suspected on cheating their helpless Indian wards. While some voices pleaded the cause of comparatively more comfortable native artifacts, such as moccasins,[22] insistence on complete conversion to modest white dress remained the norm in BIA schools. Conversely, until at least the 1920s, the "blanket Indian" was a powerful symbol of resistance to assimilation, and failure of the civilizing mission.

Feathered hats and the art of Indian *bricolage*

How did Dakota and Lakota receive such relentless emphasis on the adoption of the "white" dress? There are signs that "white" clothes were not exclusively regarded as a sign of white power or as vehicles of conversion to white values. The maintenance of sartorial diversity on reservations is a good index of individuals' continued determination to make their own clothing decisions. Even when they adopted specific pieces of clothing to display a project of becoming white, their clothes reflected a personal understanding of the meaning of whiteness. Conversely, a feathered hat was not necessarily a symbol of resistance. Clothes could point to an insistence that one could be Indian and white at the same time and become ways to bridge the gap between supposedly irreconcilable positions. The example of Indians having to wear uniforms as part of their occupation is an interesting if paradoxical example of this possibility. As soldiers, policemen or even members of the clergy, Indians could manifest through their uniforms a clear will to embrace whiteness, even at the cost of their neighbors or relatives' hostility.[23] The wearer of a clerical outfit displayed his adhesion to white values. As such, he was strongly censured by the most strident opponents of the conversion to a white lifestyle. In 1889-1890, on Standing Rock and throughout the West, the Ghost Dance manifested just such rejection. White clothing was destroyed by its proponents and ghost shirts made in their stead – albeit in non-Indian fabric.[24] Because this was part of a prophecy that predicted the end of white domination and the return to Indian ways, the movement was brutally repressed by the US army, leading to the killing of Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee massacre. A ban on dances and a strict control of what were now regarded as "traditional" outfits followed. Yet some of the interactions that preceded this violent episode also testify to the willingness of Indians to regard white clothes in a way that accommodated both Indian and non-Indian values. In 1888, a Dakota chief could thus readily addressed ambassadors of the US government as "wise people and clothed with power", a direct quotation of the Gospel (Luc 24:39) but also a distinctly Lakota way of associating power, sacredness and clothes.[25] While the ideal of a total conversion to white values severely limited Indians' freedom to negotiate this complexity as they pleased, assimilation efforts, even when violent, did not erase it entirely. And an Indian policeman uniform could in certain cases be regarded as fairly comparable to the marks that, but a few years prior, had distinguished members of warriors' societies. As had been the case before the reservation era, clothes expressed distinctions and statuses, not simply the submission to white norms. They also carried with them native values. Sartorial change, in other words, did not prohibit surprising continuity in the social role of clothing among reservation denizens.

The Big Store

In the first decades of the 20th century, Indians could benefit from even greater access to different types of clothes – and devise their own norms in the process. The middle class respectability adjusted to a rural environment that the BIA promoted was easily challenged on Standing Rock. Dakota and Lakota compliance rested more on their dependence than on their embracing of the government's teachings. Even when they could afford to follow middle class norms, they did it on their own terms, taking advantage of models and sources





↖ Frank B. Fiske, "Josephine Gates Kelly", c. 1900s. © State Historical Society of North Dakota.

↑ Frank B. Fiske, "Harry Poor Dog and Rose High Cat wedding", 1931. © State Historical Society of North Dakota.

of supply that, while not outside of governmental purview, nevertheless promoted other norms – and fashion was one of them. Off-reservation boarding schools, for example, promoted adherence to urban clothing fads. On Standing Rock, as settlers began pouring in in the 1910s, traders started catering to their needs and in the process brought fashion to the doorstep of those natives who had remained on or returned to the reservation. A more complex way of consuming clothes became possible.

New distinctions emerged as well, and reinforced old chasms: individuals living more closely to whites, because of family relations or employment in white businesses, were more likely to benefit from (and embrace) the new opportunities than the others. Anyone however who was able to turn labor or land into monies could find in Fort Yates fabrics and clothes that came from the nearby town of Bismarck or, by rail, from Saint-Paul-Minneapolis or even Chicago. One shop, in particular, known as "The Big Store" offered yards of fabric, shoes, shawls and all manners of apparel. It advertised its luxuries to all sorts of patrons, whites or Indians. Licensed by the BIA, it catered to Indians who came to do business at the agency and run errands before returning to their land allotments. In 1910, a lady familiar with the place pointed with pride to "the good stock in these stores, fine silks, good grade of shoes, good clothing" and signaled to her correspondent that it was first on Indian women that she saw the plaits that then distinguished fashionable women's dress in the region – even as she noted that Indian women wore shawls and avoided hats, contrary to their white counterparts. The writer, the daughter of a local merchant, had an obvious agenda in extolling the good taste prevalent in the little reservation town: as usual, modernity in clothing stood for a degree of advancement in civilization; writing to a friend in Chicago, she was insistent that North Dakota was not a wilderness any longer, and indeed a suitable place





↑ "Family in front of their house", 1938, RG 75. © NARA.

↗ "Indian women and young girls in front of tents", 1938, RG 75. © NARA.

to settle.[26] While Fort Yates was a little like an island amidst the surrounding prairies, its urbanity was not to be denied – the Frontier was no more. But Indians in fashion were not the product of the boosterism only. Pictures can testify to it.

Feathers and Flowers

Josephine Gates Kelly is a good example of the mastery of fashion that some Indians achieved on Standing Rock. Born in 1888, the grand-daughter of Dakota chief Two Bear, and daughter of a woman who had married a "mixed-blood", Josephine spent seven years in an Eastern boarding school. After her return to the reservation, she worked for the newly created Sioux County and clerked for her brother-in-law, a mixed-blood trader living in the majority-white town of McIntosh, in the Southern part of the reservation, where she also married an Irishman.[27] This was the itinerary of a mixed-blood lady who took full advantage of her education and family connections to work in the few non-governmental and non-agricultural positions opened to Indians on the reservation. A photograph that must have been taken not long after her return from boarding school shows her wearing a large hat, abundantly decorated with flowers and feathers, a fitted dress with a close-fitting collar and an embroidered vest. Josephine might not have own these clothes, but the picture testified to her ease in wearing them – and to her absolute exclusion of all Indian patterns. In fact, aside from the clothes themselves, a medallion apparently engraved with her initials was as the only explicit sign of personal identity visible on this portrait. The photograph was used in correspondence or displayed at home, where it joined the portraits of Josephine's father in citizen's clothes and of her mother in "Indian dress" – indeed, white photographers often encouraged Indians to sport Indian regalia, and sold their pictures as postcard. This photograph was not the first such picture Josephine had had taken of herself: in boarding school already, she had posed in a long, ballroom-type dress. Back on the reservation, photographs however served a new purpose: they allowed her to make a record of her mastery of non-Indian dressing mannerisms – and of the fragile prosperity that supported it.

THE DRESS OF POVERTY?

State charity

Forty years after the census taking immortalized by D.F. Barry, the colonial imposition of an alien lifestyle and the non-Indian clothing that went with it appeared to have created a definite distinction between the Dakota/Lakota

able to use the new context to their advantage and others. Clearly, not all reservation denizens wished to or could make use of the new sources of clothing available in Indian country. At about the same time as Josephine Kelly was having her picture taken in Fort Yates, others were reduced to begging for their outfit. In 1914 William Cross, in the far-off southern district of Wakpala, pleaded his case to the highest authorities of the BIA. "I am a common Indian (*ikce wicasa lakota*)," he wrote, which meant his dress was composite and often second-hand. He wore old moccasins, stockings he had "picked up", patched-up trousers, a shirt and an undershirt he had found somewhere, a vest gifted by a missionary, an overcoat left to him by some "white people", and a pair of gloves made of horsehide. As for his coat, he had loaned it to an acquaintance, never to retrieve it.[28] His claim to the BIA was for new clothes for himself, a dress and a shawl for his wife. His was a familiar request, indeed a stereotype that whites and Indians alike manipulated for their own purposes: old Indians, isolated and impoverished, were not expected to survive without the support of the state. While a minority managed to reach independence and buy their own clothing, by the 1920s not of a few of the reservation's population, unable to support themselves by agriculture, required the state's help in outfitting themselves. For many families, boarding schools on and off the reservation acted as social services, feeding their children and sending them home once a year with a new set of clothes.[29]

Depression clothes

In 1921, with the high agricultural prices of World War One an already distant memory, Standing Rock's economy entered into a recession. The number of needy individuals increased. Refinement and fashion were now a rarity. While most if not all Indian reservation denizens wore "white" clothes, they requested the state's help to acquire them. The situation became worse with the onset of the Great Depression. In a few years, the remaining independent farmers on the reservation lost their livelihood, and in the process, their ability to benefit from the diversity that colonization and the railroad had brought to Indian country. In 1931 Harry Poor Dog could still don a costume (maybe borrowed from an acquaintance, if his turned up trousers are any indication) and sport patent-leather shoes in a show of middle class Christian respectability. He was, after all, posing at his own wedding in front of a Fort Yates church. Two years later, such display seemed all but impossible, and Poor Dog had to write North Dakota representative Lynn Frazier to enlist his help in getting food and clothes. In 1932 already the BIA, using military surplus, and the Red Cross had issued him, his wife and their children, a blanket, one suit of underwear, two pairs of socks, mittens and gloves, a sweater, one pair of stocking, one pair of shoes, one pair of bloomers, and 16 yards of various fabrics. Poor Dog now needed more.[30]

The Great Depression thus marked the end of a twenty-year-old process of decline for Indian farming in the Northern Plains, and the failure of the state to make Indians self-supporting through agriculture. As he asked the BIA for help, Poor Dog ceased to be an Indian that was to be civilized by dress. He became suspected of trying to take advantage of a support system designed to provide only for the needs of indigents. If the Indian who went "back to the blanket" had been the principal nightmare of the previous generation of BIA agents, now it was the "dependent" Indian, unable to manage without

a hand-out, that haunted their imaginations, and behind it, an even more loathsome figure: the improvident poor that would dissipate his modest income in luxury items such as silk stockings instead of saving it for a rainy day.

Poverty, not conversion to civilization, was now immortalized in photographs. Two pictures taken at Standing Rock in 1938 as part of a Senatorial investigation brought the change into stark relief. Following a tradition started in the first years of the century, they associated an individual's prosperity or lack thereof, with the state of his house. The first photograph is a family portrait reminiscent of the many pictures of struggling families taken during that decade, and most famously by the likes of Dorothea Lange and the Farm Security Administration.[31] The frame house in front of which the family stands, which had been a powerful symbol of assimilation, has, in its 1938 dilapidated state, become a symbol of rural poverty, as have the printed dresses of the women and the overalls of the men. The second photograph only strengthens this association between clothing and housing: the tent in front of which a mother and her two daughters are posing has had to be insulated with a blanket – the same kind of blanket that serves to protect the mother's body from the cold. Once a symbol of Indianness, the blanket had now become an object of scandal: abandoned by the federal government, Indians had regressed towards their origins and become poor among the poor, instead of the regular Americans the government had wanted them to be.

The reservation's clothing regime

And yet, as anthropological research made clear in the 1930s-1950s, despite the strong correlation between occupation, patrimony, income, the economy and Indians' sartorial opportunities, the reservation's clothing regime could not be reduced to a mere adjustment to poverty and/or personal tastes.

The anthropologist's viewpoint

Margaret Mead, in particular, a strong proponent of documenting and analyzing cultural change among Indian populations, paid great attention to clothing matters in her 1932 ethnography of the Omahas, a Siouan population culturally close to the Lakota/Dakota.[32] While she remained aware of the incidence of poverty on these issues, Mead insisted on understanding clothing not (or not only), as BIA agents would have it, as an index of progress or regression towards civilization, but as part of complex social events. While she pointed out a regression and saw a sign of it in Indians' sartorial diversity, it was first and foremost the regression of "pure" Indian cultures under non-Indian pressure – but she immediately signaled the survival of the values that those cultures promoted. She paid special attention to the type of social control that had developed on reservations, and to the clothing norms that it promoted. At dancing events among the Omahas, young people usually fond of using "white" clothing to demonstrate their independence vis-a-vis their elders, temporarily abandoned their fashionable clothes which had "become suddenly too conspicuous and inappropriate", and dressed like their parents. Some, young or not so young, even donned an "Indian costume", a throwback to pre-reservation days that turned Indian identity into a show for the consumption of Indians and non-Indians alike. On Standing Rock, witness Josephine Kelly's second portrait, taken in the 1940s: as the same time as she chaired the tribal council



← Frank B. Fiske, "Josephine Gates Kelly", c. 1940?
© State Historical Society of North Dakota.

of the Standing Rock reservation, she also took a picture of herself wearing a beaded buckskin dress she had probably inherited from her mother, an expert beader and seamstress. By the mid-twentieth century, two types of costumes had indeed become "traditional": the garb of the free Indians of the pre-reservation era, and the outfit of the first generations to adopt white clothes. Adaptation had gone full while: if in the past, imported material was cut according to Indian standards, it was now imported fashion that was imposed on Indian materials like buckskin, and thereby "traditionalized".[33]

Old ways, new ways

On Standing Rock, Ella C. Deloria, a Lakota anthropologist born and raised on the reservation, has documented the emotional underpinnings of this clothing regime. Writing of the situation in the 1930s, she notes the older generations' inability to control youthful sartorial tastes, but also the occasional ridicule they inflicted on young folks who hastily put on traditional garb, sometimes over their fashionable clothes, just to be able to take part in a dance.[34] Deloria pointed out a phenomenon already well documented by BIA agents: clothing conditioned acceptance in small reservation societies and as such was controlled by laughter, derision, ridicule or approbation, on a daily basis. While she bemoaned the decline of shaming as means of social control in the 1930s, she and other observers documented not the absence or the dissolution of clothing norms but rather their fragmentation: control was exerted in priority

by one's own generational peers, rather than by older generations. The shame of having parents too fond of the "old ways" determined children to make compensatory clothing decisions at an early age and to learn fashion directly from magazines.[35] Shawls worn as headscarves became a sign of middle- or old age.[36] Rural non-Indian fashion was adopted, especially the "cowboy" outfit with its denim pants, shirt, boots and hat, which slowly became less the practical dress of ranchers and more of a symbol of rural masculinity.[37] Change, indeed, was slower than even anthropologists recognized. Even after World War Two, women rarely donned hats, and men attached to their traditional comforts still wore moccasins.[38]

Generational fragmentation appears strikingly on Harry Poor Dog's wedding photograph. Behind the newlyweds, women can be seen using shawls as a cover for the body, as a child-carrying device, as scarves and headscarves. While men seem more obviously individualistic in their dress, distinct differences also appear between women of different ages. Behind the bride, a young woman dons a light-colored scarf that covers only the crown of her head, and below her shawl another scarf of the same color can be seen around her neck. Children are obviously made to follow another norm. In their Sunday best and light-colored clothes that strike a contrast with their female parents' shawls, they have been made to wear stockings, boots and head coverings acquired at the local trading store. Clearly, middle-aged and older women are confined by reservation morality to a conservative, "traditional" dress – but they will not deprive their children and grandchildren of the luxury of middle-class American fashion.[39] True, this new norm was also acquired by children in schools, which also emphasize cleanliness, ironing, tasteful matching, and competition between students. But wearing fashionable clothes required financial support from parents – indeed parents dressed their children fashionably even before they reached school age, if they could afford it. "Spoiling" one's child was not a blank endorsement of non-Indian values either. At the same times as such ostentatious expense inserted Indian families into non-Indian trading networks, it reinforced a specifically Lakota value: parents should indulge their children, even if poverty or distress was around the corner.

Elvis and Miss America

Contrary to the rest of the US, World War Two did not bring Indian reservations out of poverty into an age of abundance. As the contrast with the rest of the country became stronger, schools became places of heightened competition by clothing for Indian children. Those who wore clothes too reminiscent of their rural origins could easily called "Indian" or "squaw" by their more fashionable "mixed-blood" comrades.[40] In the 1960s, clothing continued to materialize class and race differences between those able to follow fashion and those unable to outfit themselves for school without governmental help.[41] In 1957, ten years before the start of the Red Power movement that made such a public use of elements of clothing associated with "tradition" (whether feathers, bandanas, embroidered shirts, or cowboy hats), a visitor at Fort Yates marveled at his encounters with Indian teenagers who were "proficient duplicate[s] of Elvis Presley" and youngsters sporting a "duck-tail haircut and droopy trousers." The visitor was familiar with the Pueblo Indians, whose children "dressed white" but

stayed away from fashion. In Fort Yates, however, "the children do not look, act or talk like Indians. They are more like a group of 'better children' one would find in the slum district of a large city." The conclusion was inescapable: "It required considerable adjustment to realize they were Indians".[42] The idea that the young were driving reservations towards fashion and non-Indianness, was, however, misleading. The 1950s did not only see the spread of fashion fads and youth culture. It was also at this time that traditional Indian dancing brought to life a "powwow circuit" that formalized a traditional Indian garb and promoted a Miss Indian America competition – which two Standing Rock women won in 1954 and 1955. Far from disappearing, the clothing regime identified in the 1930s was becoming an institution. While fashion disturbed old Indians and non-Indians' sense of appropriateness, it was also perfectly integrated in reservation life.

If there was a clothing regime on Indian reservations, there never was a unique Indian dress, nor a straightforward itinerary that led to greater conformity with supposedly irresistible national clothing norms. Standing Rock denizens dressed to look more white or more traditional, to work in the field or defend their status in social functions, to face poverty or show off temporary or durable prosperity: their dress varied in time, between prosperity and depression, celebrations and daily life, school and domestic chores. True, colonization shaped their decisions. Schools, churches, sewing clubs and county fairs promoted white clothing well after the 1970s. Their efforts supported a program of turning Indians into self-dependent and productive American citizens. But such pressures never prevented Indians from appropriating clothing as they pleased, of selecting and adjusting "white" clothes to their needs – even in the midst of the Great Depression. There never was a unique Indian dress, but there certainly existed distinctly Indian ways to understand the place of clothes in social life. Building on earlier values, clothes emphasized individuality; they also testified to Indians' increasing economic marginalization. On Standing Rock as elsewhere, they reinforced intergenerational differences, and to do so made use of the ready access to white fashion that railroads and automobiles afforded Indians – allowing them to develop complex appropriations that photographers have carefully immortalized. This regime had specific emotional underpinnings: clothes could demonstrate an individual's pride in her mastery of white sartorial codes, or material success; they could also show off one's parent's love for her children to the rest of the reservation community. More often than not, they supported racial categorization, such as the difference between so-called full-bloods and mixed-bloods. Whether full-bloods or mixed-bloods, many, however, participated in the creation of a "traditional" garb that incorporated white and Indian elements, or donned an equally "traditional" Indian costume to dance or display their Indianness. Reservations formed an Indian archipelago in the US and remained a pioneering front for non-Indian fashion. But they also developed as original social spaces that harnessed clothing to deploy and make sense of their own complexity. ■

Notes

1 On so-called tribal styles in the Plains, see Candace S. Greene "Art Until 1990," in William C. Sturtevant, *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 13, no. 2, Plains, Raymond J. DeMallie (dir.), Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 2001, p. 1046-1048; on the historical variations of Indian clothing, cf. Clark Wissler, *Costumes of the Plains Indians*, Anthropological papers of the AMNH, v. 17, n°2, Washington, GPO, 1915, p. 84-89, and John C. Ewers, *Plains Indian History and Culture: Essays on Continuity and Change*, Norman, Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1997, p. 119-149.

2 See, for the French Empire in North America, Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. On blankets, cf. Robert W. Kapoun, Charles J. Lohrmann, *Language of the Robe: American Indian Trade Blankets*, Salt Lake City, Gibbs Smith, 1997, and W. R. Swagerty, "Indian trade Blankets in the Pacific Northewst. History and Symbolism of a Unique North American Tradition," *Columbia, The Magazine of Northwest History*, Summer 2002: Vol. 16, No. 2.

3 The description of ceremonies was especially insistent on the association between nakedness, paganism, dance and hostility; see, e.g., Clyde Holler, *Black Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism*, Syracuse, University of Syracuse Press. 1995, p. 50-62.

4 Mrs. Aaron C. Wells, "Indians, Sioux" in "Wells, Aaron C.," box 21, State Agency Records 2 - Historical Data Project Pioneer Biography, MSS 30529, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND [SHSND].

5 For an episode mixing hostility and appropriation, see Gary Clayton Anderson, *Little Crow: spokesman for the Sioux*, St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986, p. 162-179.

6 Clark Wissler, "Decorative Art of the Sioux Indians", *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. 17, New York, 1904, p. 259-275.

7 For female dresses celebrating male prowess, see Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*, Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office [GPO], 1918, p. 367 [plate 55]; on the transmission of decorative patterns between women, Frances Densmore, *A collection of specimens from the Teton Sioux*, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, v.11 n°3, 1948, p. 194.

8 Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*, p. 320.

9 David I. Bushnell, *Burials of the Algonquian, Siouan and Caddoan Tribes*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin LXXXIII, Washington, DC, 1927, p. 38.

10 Albert J. Brackett, "The Sioux or Dakota Indians," *Smithsonian Institution Report*, Washington, DC, 1876, p. 468-469; "The Resurrected Soldier. A Romance of Dakota," [Fort Rice] *Frontier scout*, 14 September 1865, p. 1 and 4.

11 Clark Wissler, *Structural basis to the decoration of costumes Among the Plains Indians*, Anthropological papers of the AMNH, vol. 17, no. 3; New York, (1915-1916), p. 39-114.

12 Herman J. Viola, *Diplomats in Buckskins; A History of Indian Delegations in Washington City*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1995, p. 117-120.

13 Henry Murphy, "History of Henry Has Holy," p. 3, Henry Murphy Collection, 1926–28 [Biographical sketches of Indians.] MSS 20063, SHSND.

14 Thomas W. Foley, *Father Francis M. Craft, Missionary to the Sioux*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2002, p. 135.

15 David J. Clements, *"Built on a Firm Foundation:" Standing Rock Centenary, 1873-1973*, Commemorative Booklet, Catholic Indian, Fort Yates, ND, 1973, p. 39; Marielle Frigge, "Ancient way in a new land Benedictine education in the Great Plains", *Great Plains Quarterly* vol. 3, 2003, p. 322-340, p. 239.

16 United States, Office of Indian Affairs, Annual report of the commissioner of Indian affairs, for the year 1903, Washington, DC, GPO, 1903, p. 118; "Report of Visits to Homes, Standing Rock Agency, 1907," Standing Rock Agency records, RG 75, NARA, Kansas City, Missouri.

17 Territory of Dakota, Department of immigration and statistics, 1887. *Resources of Dakota*, Sioux Falls, SD, Argus Leader Company, 1887, p. 252-253.

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20 For an official pamphlet warning against swaddling, see Department of the Interior, Office of *Indian Affairs, Indian babies, How to Keep Them Well*, Washington, DC,GPO, 1916, p. 15-16.

21 Such ambivalence in the French colonial Empire is well described by Emmanuelle Saada "Entre 'assimilation' et 'décivilisation:' l'imitation et le projet colonial républicain," Terrain, vol. 44, mars 2005, "Imitation et Anthropologie", p. 19-38; on distrust for the mixed-bloods in the Lakota/Dakota context, see Thomas N. Ingersoll, *To Intermix with Our White Brothers: Indian Mixed Bloods in the United States from Earliest Times to the Indian Removals*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2005, p. 244.

22 Elaine Goodale Eastman, *Sister to the Sioux. The Memoirs of Elaine Goodale Eastman: 1885-1891*, Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1978, p. 43.

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29 "Extract from Report Date June 19, 1918, of C.M. Knight, Inspector, on the Standing Rock School (part IV)", Ewald C. Witzleben's personal file, National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, Missouri.

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32 Margaret Mead, *The Changing Culture of An Indian Tribe*, New York, Capricorn Books, 1966 [1932], esp. p. 159-163.

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