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Frederick E. Hoxie
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Prologue: Why are there no Indians in the twentieth century?

I do not care at all what historians have to say about the Crow Indians.

Plenty Coups, August 5, 1925[1]

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*[2]

I

The opening lines from Ralph Ellison's searing novel of black dispossession have haunted American readers for nearly half a century. It is perhaps jarring to begin a book about American Indians with an observation about African-Americans, for ever since the founding of Jamestown where John Rolfe married an Indian woman while laying the foundations of an economy based on African slavery, commentators have emphasized the different experiences of the two groups. The cultural traditions of African-Americans and Native Americans were formed on separate continents and have run through largely separate chronologies, but they converge in one essential element: conventional understandings of their separate histories have been shaped by the refracting mirror of racial fantasy and the narrow lens of economic need. According to Ralph Ellison, African-Americans are invisible because their fellow citizens refuse either to see their humanity or to confront the tragic dimensions of their historical experience. American Indians have suffered a similar fate.

[1] Memorandum of Conference . . . August 5, 1925, "Inspector's Reports, 1924–1925," Item 15, Box 60, Records of the Crow Indian Agency, Federal Records Center (hereafter cited as RCIA-FRC, Seattle).
[2] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 3. Originally published by Random House, 1952.

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The invisibility of Native Americans is a by-product of their military defeat and economic dispossession. Conventional history teaches that Indians lost control of the continent because they resisted economic development and rejected the ideology of American progress. In this view, the passing of native power was a tragic but unavoidable chapter in the evolution of North American civilization. By extension, modern Indians are typically viewed as noble relics: descendants of a proud race who had the misfortune to be born to a losing cause. Death figures prominently in popular histories of Indian communities, and the horrors of the Native American past count as evidence of cultural demise. "Almost overnight," the standard history of the nineteenth-century Indian wars declares, for example, "a whole way of life had vanished, and thus whole clusters of habits and customs, activities, attitudes, values, and institutions lost relevance and meaning and likewise began to vanish." Odd to read this statement in an age that has watched a revival of Jewish culture follow closely on the heels of genocide, and witnessed the persistence or reemergence of "extinct" ethnicities within the borders of modern nation states.[3]

The American public's willingness to accept the cultural death of Indian people is the reason for the group's modern invisibility. A generation ago, Sioux historian Vine Deloria Jr. devoted a chapter of his best-selling manifesto, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, to the distorted pictures of Indian life emanating from academia. Anthropologists, he declared, insist that "Indians are a folk people, whites are an urban people, and never the twain shall meet. . . . These insights," Deloria added, "propounded every year with deadening regularity . . . have come to occupy a key block in the development of young Indian people. . . . They are crutches by which young Indians have avoided the arduous task of thinking out the implications of the status of Indian people in the modern world." So long as Indians are defined as people whose histories end with the triumph of industrialization, Deloria explained, they will be invisible members of American society.[4]

The opposite of this statement should also be true: turning away from a foreordained story of defeat offers us an opportunity to connect modern Indian people with the past through the medium of history. "We cannot turn the clock back," Deloria has written, "but we can certainly make note of the past as a prologue to the future."[5] In order to make that connection, however, a historical narrative must begin from a new premise.

Instead of viewing the confrontation of Native Americans and Euro-

[3] Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846–1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 236. Textbook portrayals of Native Americans regularly reflect these popular attitudes. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Frederick E. Hoxie, "Historians Versus the Textbooks: Is There Any Way Out?" *D'Arcy McNickle Center Occasional Papers in Curriculum*, No. 1 (Chicago: Newberry Library, 1984), 25–28.

[4] Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Avon, 1969), 87–88.

[5] Vine Deloria Jr., "Foreword," in Michael L. Lawson, *Dammed Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944–1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), xvii.

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Americans as a tragic but inevitable episode in the triumphal growth of the United States, chroniclers of the past should recognize that the consequences of an encounter between two cultural traditions, while dramatic, are not foreordained. Such meetings are unprecedented, and therefore unpredictable. As they encounter one another, divergent cultural traditions enter a historical no-man's land where expectations are disappointed, messages are misunderstood, and innovation becomes commonplace. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins puts it this way: "In the clash of cultural understandings and interests, both changes and resistance to change are themselves historic issues." In such a setting, the future is open-ended.[6]

Once one sets aside the historical scripts that reduce cross-cultural interaction to simplistic melodrama, a range of new subjects present themselves. One finds more than befeathered, male warriors riding into purple sunsets. Turning away from ideologically driven scripts ("the end of the frontier," "the rise of the industrial state" or "the triumph of democracy") and focusing on the complicated interaction of cultural systems allows historians to identify human actors whose lives trace a path from the past to the present; these lives allow us to imagine events from the perspective of all those who participated in them.

Bringing Indian actors to the center of a historical narrative promises to transform the conventional treatment of native people. Objects become subjects; Native Americans cease to be faceless, tragic victims of "progress" or anonymous representatives of "lost" civilizations. Instead they are people who initiate, adapt and win as well as suffer and lose. In sum, they create a legacy that is independent of conventional, nationalistic narratives. Viewed in three dimensions, these Native Americans can drop their feathers, dismount from their ponies, join their families and enter the human arena that is history. They can thus become visible.

II

Parading Through History makes visible a story historians and the public have long ignored. Like all historical narratives, it begins with "facts" that seem to cry out for explanation. The first of these is the surprising survival of an Indian community whose demise has been predicted confidently for more than a century. Writing in 1855, a representative of the American Fur Company who worked the Missouri River observed that his principal trading partners, the Crow Indians, were doomed to extinction. The group suffered from disease, raids launched by neighboring tribes and pressure from Anglo-American settlers. "Situated as they now are," Edwin Thompson Denig reported, "the

[6] Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*, Association for the Study of Anthropology in Oceania, Special Publication, No. 1 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 68.

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Crows cannot exist long as a nation." Nearly 150 years later, there are more Crows in the Yellowstone valley than there were in 1855; most of them speak the Crow language and occupy a self-governing tribal homeland. Other features of their community life contradict Denig's predictions: the persistence of a lively indigenous art tradition, the emergence of new forms of religious expression and a relatively low rate of intermarriage with non-Indians. One of their number has recently enrolled at Oxford University as a Rhodes scholar.[7]

Second, contemporary Crows reject the proposition that they are heirs to an anachronistic social tradition. Rather than represent a modern version of a "stone age" culture, they insist that their reservation is, in many respects, a modern nation. Crow faith in this self-image is strong despite decades of insistent instruction to the contrary. Missionaries, teachers, government officials and business interests have long taught that Indian ways could not survive in the modern world. But governed by a general assembly, regulated by a tribal court, educated by their elders and represented effectively by lobbyists and attorneys, the Crow community insists that it maintains "government to government" relationships with the state of Montana and the United States of America.

Conventional views of Native American history can not explain these surprising outcomes. Instead of being overwhelmed by events or swept away by the tide of progress, this community has been deeply engaged in countless interactions with the outside world. Apparently something occurred after their confinement on their reservation that derailed the confident expectations of outside observers and made possible the survival of a distinctively Crow community occupying a distinctively Crow homeland. That "something" is the subject of this book. Its contents exchange rhetorical generalizations for an intimate portrait of worthy, but forgotten, Americans.

The description of Crow life that follows has a broad ambition. In addition to making the invisible visible, it explores the accuracy of anthropologist Sherry Ortner's bold assertion that "history is not simply something that happens to people, but something they make – within, of course, the very powerful constraints of the system within which they are operating." Few groups appear to have had as much history "happen" to them as Plains Indians, and few eras seem as dominated by powerful, impersonal "forces" than the first decades of the twentieth century. To follow historical actors belonging to a beleaguered group of Native Americans through an age when cities "rose" and the frontier "ended" should illuminate the process by which ethnic and racial groups experienced the onset of an industrial society. Their history might also suggest how it was that a group of forgotten men and women helped "make" the historical moment we all now occupy.[8]

7 Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, edited and with an introduction by John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 204.

8 Sherry Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26 (1984), 126–166, at 159.

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Between 1880 and 1920 the population of the United States doubled while the nation's urban areas tripled in size. The history that "happened" to millions of Americans who lived their lives in those decades is reflected in those crude statistics – that history established the social fabric of our own time and defined the political loyalties and ethnic identities that continue to mobilize our communities. In this sense, events and processes that took place a century ago forged our sense of who we are as Americans. The received narratives of this era – marked by plots of national progress, cultural homogenization or environmental decline – are less than satisfying because most people, whatever their background, find it difficult to connect them to their own experiences or the experiences of their families.

Tied to the question of how individual experiences relate to conventional narratives is the question of how individual experiences relate to each other. Did the Crows' passage through the early twentieth century, for example, bear any resemblance to the confused and uncertain voyages of the millions who journeyed to the United States from abroad during the same period? Did Indians and immigrants share common hopes and a common nostalgia for an irretrievable world they saw slipping away behind them? Or might the Crow experience more closely resemble the shorter trips African-Americans made from plantations to sharecroppers' cabins in Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama? Perhaps Indian suffering mirrored the oppression of blacks in the Jim Crow South – or perhaps the Crow experience was unique. Such musings can only end when we have a clear grasp of each community's history. Only then can one find both the areas of overlap and the corners of distinctiveness in the lives of those who shaped our world.

III

The central metaphor of *Parading Through History* is drawn from both ethnography and autobiography. As plains hunters whose prosperity and survival demanded flexibility and mobility, the Crow communities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently moved their camps in grand, mounted processions. "A Crow migration is a festive occasion," wrote one anthropologist who interviewed tribal members in the first years of this century. "Scouts ride far in advance to warn of enemies. Police guard the flanks. The chiefs and old men lead the procession. The various families follow with their horses, dogs and household possessions, the women dressed in their finest apparel. A moving column sometimes extends for several miles." The group moved forward in their world by arranging themselves self-consciously into a coherent unit and proceeding together. This practical parade was at once coherent and mobile,

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organized and adaptive. News of a buffalo herd would cause a shift in direction; the appearance of enemies would bring the group to a halt.[9]

Other types of parades have punctuated more recent accounts of Crow life. According to anthropologist Robert Lowie, for example, returning warriors would parade through camp, waving the spoils of victory and shouting flamboyant accounts of their comrades' bravery. Peter Nabokov has also demonstrated how processions form part of community ritual, most prominently in tribal celebrations of the Crow Tobacco Society. Parades have also become a favored way for Crow families to display their costumes and prize possessions at powwows and fairs. Today, parades are a typical feature of community celebrations and historic commemorations.

A historian's own experiences can transform ethnographic details into significant themes. The bulk of this book was written on the outskirts of Chicago. My green, suburban environment in the center of the table-flat heartland bears no resemblance to the rolling, brown prairies and heart-stopping peaks of eastern Montana, but our town's central avenue is the site of an annual, and widely celebrated, Fourth of July parade. Every year we join with our neighbors and thousands of visitors to watch the procession of old cars, floats and marching bands pass down Central Street in celebration of Independence Day. The event recalls the parades I witnessed as a child in a distant, rural community. There, national holidays were celebrated along a three-block-long main street. Perhaps five hundred people witnessed the largest of those parades, and easily half of them shuttled back and forth to their seats from turns with the Boy Scouts, the VFW or the Little League. These were the only occasions during which our one fire truck and police car flashed their lights and sounded their sirens. In memory, screaming fire engines and flashing emergency lights celebrate our persistence and the survival of our remote social order.

The link between Crow ethnography and my autobiography was forged in the summer of 1990 when my family and I pulled off I-90 at the "Crow Agency" exit after an early morning drive from Sheridan, Wyoming. We were on our way to visit friends and to witness the inauguration of a new tribal leader who had just been elected after a bitter political struggle. The atmosphere was tense; it was hot; we were late. But we never made it off the exit ramp. Traffic was backed up, and the people ahead of me had left their cars and started walking ahead to the foot of the grade. The inaugural parade was just stepping off – and it included a screaming fire engine.

This book is a description of a people who paraded, both literally and figuratively, into American history at the start of the nineteenth century. It begins with a description of the founding of the modern Crow Reservation in 1884,

[9] George Peter Murdock, *Our Primitive Contemporaries* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 267. I am grateful to Peter Nabokov for bringing this quotation to my attention.

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but quickly backpedals to describe the events that led the tribe to that place at that time. The narrative then starts forward again, tracing the community's history into the era of the New Deal. Throughout these events, the narrative will demonstrate that the Crows have maintained their tradition of marching together. Their insistence on this practice, like a childhood memory, is insignificant in itself, but it signals to those who pay attention that a group can maintain its traditions and its identity through a staggering era of change. Indeed, as the narrative to come will demonstrate, the Crows not only weathered and withstood the dislocation and conquest that was visited upon them after 1805, but acted in the midst of these events to construct a modern Indian community – a nation. Their efforts sustained the pride and strength reflected in Chief Plenty Coups's statement in 1925 that he did "not care at all what historians have to say about the Crow Indians," as well as their community's faith in the beauty of both its traditions and its inventions.

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Part One

Into history, 1805–1890

> In time, then, words will not stand still. Moralistic theories of history . . . dwell on [a] timeless pattern of being, not process, and therefore deal in absolutes. But a concern with process, becoming, ousts the language of fixity for the language of movement – the language of relativism. Absolutism is the parochialism of the present, the confusion of one's own time with the timeless. . . . This is the confusion one fosters when he judges other times by his own criteria. . . . No one has the norm of norms.[1]

While their relations with Europeans were frequently tense and occasionally marked by violence, the Crow Indians never launched a wholesale attack on the United States or its colonial predecessors. Unlike the Cheyenne, Sioux and Blackfeet with whom they fought, the Crows' passage into the reservation era was not marked by a bloody confrontation or a dramatic, battlefield defeat. Nevertheless, the transition to this new chapter in their history began with a single event: the relocation in April 1884 of the tribe's agency headquarters from a mountainous area in the Stillwater valley to the flatland alongside the Little Bighorn River. Prior to that event, the Crows were relatively free from the daily intrusions of white settlers and cattlemen; afterwards they lived amidst rail traffic, cattle drives and enterprising farmers. Before the relocation, missionaries and government schoolmasters were infrequent visitors; afterwards, missions and boarding schools became fixtures within the community. And before the agency moved to the prairies south of the Yellowstone, the tribe had been free to range across a large area in search of game and enemy raiders; afterwards the entire population was expected to locate permanently on a gradually shrinking reservation. Part One begins with a description of the events surrounding the agency's relocation.

But the need to understand how the Crows understood and experienced their new reservation home requires more than an account of a single event. A narrative constructed to counteract the simplistic tales of the past and to engage the experiences of long-neglected actors must move in at least three additional directions. First, the tale must move backwards. Where did this journey to a new reservation home begin? What bound the group together? Who were its leaders, and why were they followed? Answering these questions forces the

[1] Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958, 1964, 1965), Part Three, 87.

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narrative back from 1884, the subject of Chapter 1, to Chapter 2, which describes the Crows as they first appeared to non-Indians nearly eighty years earlier. Subsequently, Chapters 3 and 4 will trace the experiences of the group through the intervening periods of trade, warfare and diplomacy. These descriptions will clarify the extent to which merchants, American military officials, rival tribes and the relentless demographic pressures unleashed by white settlement affected the people who marched down from the Stillwater to take up new homes on the Montana prairies.

Second, an observer must move forward: what did this journey produce for this community? What was the nature of the "progress" the Crows experienced in the immediate aftermath of their relocation? Did it mark a sharp break with the past, the first step downward in a spiral of defeat, or something resembling the development witnessed in other parts of the Yellowstone valley during the early years of Montana statehood? Chapter 5 answers these questions as it traces the tribe's initial reaction to the reservation environment.

And finally, one must move outward. In what ways did the process initiated by the procession of the Crows to their new homes resemble the journeys of the 23,000,000 who immigrated to the United States in the forty years after 1880 or the additional millions who moved across other of the continent's boundaries and borderlands during the same period? Do passages across cultural and geographical barriers generate similar changes in the life of a community? Do they affect a group's structure as well as its idea of itself, and do those aspects of life evolve towards some common form? How many similar voyages might one identify, and how might the effort to understand them on their own terms illuminate an understanding of American social history? Such questions will remain on the outskirts of our discussion until the end of Part Three, but they will continue within sight, disrupting moralistic theories of history before they can grow too persuasive, protecting our narrative from both parochialism and the temptation to pronounce the Crow story, the "norm of norms."

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1

Immigration in reverse

> This earth was all covered with water. Old-Man-Coyote alone was going around on the water. Then a little coyote met him. "I am alone, I am looking for a companion, I'll meet one," he had said. Then they met. There was no living thing then. They went around together. "We are alone; it is bad; let us make the earth." "All right, how shall we make it?" After some time ducks came flying. "You dear younger brothers, dive here," he said. "How shall we do it?" "Dive into the water, bring earth, we'll make the world," he said. They brought some. "Is there any?" "Yes." "Go, bring some."
>
> Four times they brought some, he took it and made the earth.[1]

I

Running at a diagonal from Canada, down along the Idaho–Montana border, turning south across Wyoming and trailing deep into central Colorado, the Rocky Mountains form the western border of the northern Great Plains. Their ranges mark the edge of the rolling grasslands of the Missouri River drainage and form a dramatic marker of climatic and environmental change. Through the centuries their cloud-like peaks have also formed a border between cultural realms. For two thousand years before the arrival of Europeans in North America the region to the west of the Rockies – the arid ranges and high plateaus of the Great Basin – supported gathering peoples who felt the influences of communities located to their south, along the Colorado River and the Rio Grande. They received tools, artistic motifs and trade goods that passed northward from the villages in what would become modern Arizona and New Mexico. East of the mountains, groups of hunters and river-based farmers developed communities under the influence of migrants from the moist and heavily wooded prairies of the Mississippi valley and the Great Lakes. People travelled across the Rocky Mountain barrier, but their passage came at the expense of a shift in cultural tradition.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these dramatic ranges created a

[1] Robert H. Lowie, *Myths and Traditions of the Crow Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 17, originally published in 1918.

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