

INDIANS

When dream worlds collide

A hunter of the Beaver tribe sees a different land than company engineers for the pipeline do.

Maps and Dreams

By Hugh Brody
Pantheon, 297 pp., \$16.50

By Stephan Schwartzman

Maps and Dreams challenges some widely held misconceptions about Indians and other so-called subsistence producers, and in the process offers an honest, engaging account of life in a culture organized on very different terms than our own. But perhaps most important, Brody pays careful historical and ethnographic attention to the Indians' relations with and resistance to white society, so that he can give an account neither fatalistic nor romantic of their prospects for continued autonomy.

In debunking the myth of the "vanishing race" he also debunks the myth of the inevitability of progress.

Brody's focus comes from his experience in documenting needs and concerns of indigenous peoples so that they can affect public policy. Because of "land use and occupancy studies" he did for the Inuit Eskimo tribe, Brody was invited to work on a similar project on Beaver and other Indian groups. The study was funded by the Canadian government as a response to the Indians' opposition to the Alaska Highway natural gas pipeline. His job was to "map and explain all the ways in which Indian...peoples have used their land within living memory."

Brody presents his results in a way that shows the cultural clashes behind the questions in such a project. There is a white people's and an Indian people's view of what constitutes productive, reasonable use of the land. For a white to learn the Indian's view, he must first learn to see his own assumptions as only one set of possibilities among many. So Brody tells of his own process of discovery. In odd-numbered chapters Brody recounts incidents from his stay with one group of Beaver, incidents that broke through the preconceptions preventing him from comprehending the Indians' way of life. In even-numbered chapters he summarizes the ecology and history of northeastern British Columbia, the succession of treaties (he shows how these were based on misunderstanding and devaluing of Indian economy and society), and the present situation.

With letters and reports from the early 19th century, Brody brings out an early and consistent view of the Indians as poverty stricken, destitute and shiftless.

The opinion endures, as a 1933 official account testifies: "There are 170 Indians in the band, belonging to the Beaver tribe, and they are certainly a very poor type of Indian. They have become diseased, inbred and through poverty they are simply on their last legs. They have absolutely nothing. I have never seen a band of Indians that had less."

Conveniently for white economic interests, the brilliantly flexible and well-balanced hunting and trapping economy remained invisible to whites. So Indians, first seen as obstacles to development, also justified the process. Civilization offered ways to raise the Indians from the marginality and misery imposed on them by their technical incapacity to exploit the environment in a rational (profitable) manner. It passed unnoticed that the rationality of Indian cultures was—and, as Brody shows, still is—not the rationality of profit.

Take, for example, a hunt that Brody went on. For weeks before, men talked in a seemingly desultory fashion of going on a hunt "tomorrow," speculating on what animals there might be to hunt, where they might be found, who would go, all in an



From JAMES BAY PROJECT: A RIVER DROWNED BY WATER, by German artists R. Wittenborn and C. Biegert (Montreal Museum of Fine Art, 1981). The expanded exhibit catalog reproduces photos and drawings by the artists, who visited a Cree settlement threatened by a hydroelectric project in James Bay, Canada.

apparently vague and contradictory way.

To Brody this looked like poor planning. No one seemed to know when or where or if the hunt would really happen, or what outcome was expected. Then suddenly, for no discernable reason, it had already begun. After participating in many such hunts, he came to under-

stand what is involved in our own notions of planning activity. For us, discrete variables must be weighed one against another to make the best use of alternate means to desired ends. But this, he suggests, is inappropriate to the hunter's task. The hunter must take into account a large number of shifting and elusive factors—the weather, animal movements, other people's land use patterns.

"To make a good, wise, sensible hunting choice," he writes, "is to accept the interconnection of all possible factors, and avoids the mistake of seeking rationally to focus on any one consideration that is held as primary. What is more, the decision is taken in the doing: there is no step or pause between theory and practice."

Power of dreams.

In this hunt the men told Brody about the traditional dream maps that form a key symbol of the Beavers' relationship to their land. Traditionally hunters dreamed animal trails and made dream kills, then found the trails and killed the animals in the waking world. Strong dreamers could dream the sources of game and even the trails to heaven, which converge at the point where all game trails meet. Maps were made by powerful dreamers so that everyone could see the trails to heaven and know how

Continued on page 23

The durable myth of the vanishing race

The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions

By Christopher M. Lyman
Pantheon, 159 pp., \$14.95

Edward Curtis' photographs of Indians have become part of our national iconography. Most recently the photographs, taken in the first decades of the century, have popped up in posters defending Indian rights. Previous generations collected them in special editions and prints. Lyman now tells us, not only

that the photographs lie—we've known for some time that Curtis faked some of the moments he caught—he also explains the logic behind Curtis' stylization.

Lyman's careful analysis of the photos, which are reproduced beautifully in this low-priced edition, shows how they were altered. For instance Curtis apparently carried props with him; the same feathered bonnets and regalia appear in a variety of tribes from his life-



Curtis' interpreter, a Crow Indian, as he normally dressed (above) and as photographed by Curtis (below left).

long survey of American Indian cultures. (This was a monumental commercial project with its own fascinating history, also well-told here.) Curtis also scratched out of negatives modern items such as a car at a ceremony and a mass-produced object lying in a teepee. He staged certain ceremonies. He undressed Indian men whose normal clothing was jeans and flannel shirts, and he draped Indian women revealingly in blankets. His framing was aimed at the picturesque rather than the ethnographic, so that a riverbank rather than the Indian village behind it dominated the frame. (One of the side benefits of this book is a historical overview of aesthetic values in American popular photography.)

Lyman is careful not to call Curtis a liar. Curtis believed that Indians were noble, ahistorical primitives whose very

existence was destroyed by contact with historical and progressing civilizations. He was valiantly trying to capture "the Indians" as they once had been, at what he saw as a point of extinction. And he was far from alone. Consider praise lavished on him by the *Seattle Times* in 1903: "He changed the degenerated Indian of today into the fancy-free king of a yesterday that has long since been forgotten in the calendar of time." Teddy Roosevelt, who was fond of saying that in nine out of 10 cases a good Indian was a dead Indian, was one of his biggest fans.

Lyman doesn't let us off with easy contempt for the errors of the past, either. Curtis' photographs have endured, he argues, because the myth has also endured—even within modern indigenous movements for cultural regeneration.

—Pat Aufderheide

Hit records in an old tradition

By Kalamu ya Salaam

Rap records are hot sellers. Heavy funk rhythms, booming bass lines and catchy horn or guitar riffs mixed with a near hypnotic sing-song, semi-melodic vocal line on top are their basic ingredients. They are undeniably the best dance records around.

Most rap songs are also pun-filled (and often prurient) paeans to hedonism. There is a notable exception—"B Movie" by Gil Scott-Heron. Scott-Heron, a novelist and poet, is also a major recording artist with 12 albums. He is a link in a continuum of African-American rappers/poets.

"We relate what we're doing now to a thousand-year-old tradition, the griot tradition," Scott-Heron said to *These Times*. Griots (gree-ohs) are West African historians-story tellers-singers who preserve and perpetuate the history, culture and values of their people. "That tradition is part of a chain of oral historians. We compare what we do directly to the blues poems of the Harlem Renaissance done by Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen and others."

Anyone who has been touched by the power of a black Baptist preacher delivering a biblical message over the keen accompaniment of an organ or piano-led choir, or the ecstatic punctuations of "amen"s, and "well, well, wells" coming from the deacons and deaconesses; anyone who has studied the oratorical artistry of a Rev. C.L. Franklin, or marveled at the exhortatory powers of a Malcolm X even on the restrictive confines of a vinyl record; anyone familiar with the witticisms of the pool shark in the corner barroom or the wisdom of "mama say" in the household understands the popularity and power of a good rap. It is precisely the fact that rapping is woven into black life that contributes to the popularity of rap records, and perhaps contributes to its exploitation in the music industry.

Scott Heron represents the most socially conscious element of this tradition. Some artists insist that "message" is not "in" anymore, and that they wouldn't be able to get recording contracts or concerts if they did "heavy" material. Scott-Heron commented, "We work pretty much whenever we want to. I think many of those artists couldn't do it or wouldn't do it—that's why they say that. It's a cop out."

It don't come easy.

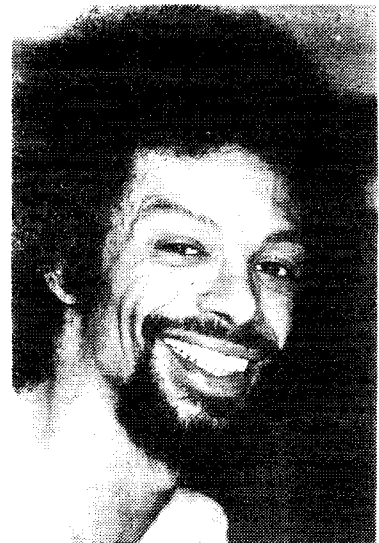
He is also a more accomplished artist than most of his peers, with a message-music that is popular and political, but not hackneyed. He argues that, although there is an art to producing propaganda and to being an effective politician, it is not the same art as producing poetry and song. And inspiration must

be matched with education.

"A lot of people think that I started writing poetry one day and songs the next day. But I've been playing piano since I was 15 and I've been writing poetry since I was 17. I'm 32 now and I have all of those years behind me," said Scott-Heron, who also has a master's degree in creative writing from John Hopkins University.

"I think that you have to be qualified, educated in a given area, to do whatever it is you do. A lot of musicians don't know much about the history of the music that they are playing. A lot of would-be poets don't know anything about our 200-year history of poetry in this country, as well as the oral tradition that takes us back to Africa. That's why I say some artists couldn't [create socially conscious art work], because they don't know how, or they wouldn't because they haven't tried."

Scott-Heron was lucky to be able to establish himself during the early '70s on noted producer Bob Thiele's Flying Dutchman label. He also, however, did the woodshedding necessary to create music whose popularity causes music industry executives to offer him contracts. "Arista



Steve Kagan

came looking for me; I didn't go looking for them. The arrangement that we made concerning the independence that we wanted in terms of putting our work together has never been challenged."

Message as hit.

Scott-Heron knows that doing what he wants to do within the context of today's economically hard-pressed music industry requires that his music sell to a public led to love commercialism, or as he aptly captured on a cut called "Show Bizness": *You're only as important to them as your latest hit. That's a precarious position for a plastic king to sit. The lawyer's game is double same. Your fate is in their hands. You're a millionaire without a dime and just don't understand.*

But he has successfully confronted that contradiction. His first major hit was "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," followed by the bigger hit, "The Bottle," a chilling chronicle of the socially debilitating effects of alcoholism. And in "We Almost



© Cindy Karp/Minnesota Daily

Lost Detroit" Scott-Heron made an important statement about nuclear power based on a best-selling book of the same name.

When "angel dust" became a trendy and destructive street drug, it was Gil Scott-Heron who made the definitive anti-

angel dust statement: *He was groovin',/ and that was when he coulda sworn/ the room was movin'./ But that was only in his mind./ He was sailin'./ He never really seemed to notice vision failin'./ 'cause that was all part of the high./ Sweat was pourin'.*

IN THESE TIMES MAY 19-25, 1982 21
he couldn't take it./ The room was exploding—/ he might not make it./ Angel Dust—Please, children would you listen./ Angel Dust—Just ain't where it's at./ Angel Dust—You won't remember what you're missin', but down some dead end streets there ain't no turnin' back. "Angel Dust" became one of Scott-Heron's biggest hits.

On *Secrets*, the album that contained "Angel Dust," Scott-Heron also wrote a piece for coal miners: *Coal dust in your lungs, on your skin/and on your mind./ I've listened to the speeches,/but it occurs to me politicians just don't understand;/ the thoughts of isolation, ain't no sunshine underground./ It's like workin' in a graveyard three miles down.*

That's a lot of ground for a popular artist to cover. He is a black artist who does not limit his concerns to fit preconceived notions of what black issues are.

Scott-Heron's raps are sharply satirical and are delivered with a masterful timing. Until the recent release of "B Movie," "H2O Gate Blues," a commentary on the Watergate affair, was Gil's best known and most popular rap. "B Movie," on its way to surpassing the earlier piece, is a brilliant piece full of puns and put-downs that work off the names of notables in the Reagan

The rap songs of Gil Scott-Heron depend on a style of oratory woven into the fabric of black American life.

administration. For example, Reagan becomes "Reagun" and Alexander Haig becomes "Attila the Haig." Behind the comic relief there is serious criticism.

"The idea concerns the fact that this country wants nostalgia. They want to go back as far as they can, even if it's only as far as last week. Not to face now or tomorrow, but to face backwards," Scott-Heron said.

Scott-Heron shrugs off hostility to "B Movie's" opinions. "There have been people who have never liked what I did and they don't particularly like this. But so what?"

And there have been people who have never liked art to be sharply critical, and to express opinions on social and political questions. But, as Gil Scott-Heron would say, "so what?"

Kalamu ya Salaam, editor of *The Black Collegian*, won the 1981 ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for excellence in writing about music. Recommended introductory Gil Scott-Heron albums: *The Mind of Gil Scott-Heron*, *Secrets*, *Reflections*.

by Nicole Hollander

SYLVIA

