Necessary Fictions:
Warren Neidich's Early-American Cover-Ups
by Christopher Phillips

Stratagems for forgetting. "They from the beginning announced that they wanted to maintain their way of life... And we set up these reservations so they could, and have a Bureau of Indian Affairs to help take care of them... Maybe we made a mistake. Maybe we should not have humored them in wanting to stay in that kind of primitive lifestyle. Maybe we should have said, 'No, come join us.'... You'd be surprised. Some of them became very wealthy, because some of those reservations were overlaying great pools of oil. And so I don't know what their complaint might be." (Ronald Reagan, in response to a question at Moscow University about the condition of Native Americans, quoted in *Time*, June 13, 1988.)

A childhood memory. Only a few days after Reagan provided students in Moscow with this hallucinatory account of the winning of the West, an item in the *New York Times* (June 5, 1988) reported that the designer Oleg Cassini planned a vast "Navajo Nation" complex in Arizona to repackage for the tourist industry the history, art, and culture of that apparently willing tribe. This odd conjunction of events sent me back in thought to the several summers, long ago, when our family paid regular visits to the Appalachian resort town of Cherokee, North Carolina. We were usually accompanied by a friend of my parents... a woman whose interest in the trip sprang principally from the fact that one of her own friends, a New York dancer, migrated to Cherokee every summer to earn a few dollars performing in a popular "outdoor historical drama."

Minus the feathers and war paint that went with his role as a leaping Cherokee warrior, Louis proved unremarkable, aside from a rasping Brooklyn accent and the purple sports car in which he raced around the mountain roads. I remember, though, being puzzled when I was taken backstage before one evening's performance, and discovered there an assortment of equally improbable characters donning their costumes and makeup. Very interesting, I thought, but where were the real Indians?

The play itself proposed a relatively bland answer to that question. Situated in a past so hazy as to be utterly remote from the concerns of the present day, it unfolded in a series of melodramatic incidents the tale of the Cherokees' encounter with the homespun agents of Manifest Destiny, their expulsion from their mountain homeland, and their arduous trek to a new, ostensibly happier home on the plains of Oklahoma. Nevertheless another, more ominous possibility was planted in my already suspicious ten-year-old mind each time we passed a crowded burger drive-in situated in the heart of Cherokee. It announced its specialty in brazenly flashing red letters that I can still see: Squawburgers.

Contra Curtis. It's from a similar unmarked crossroads of historical representation and popular memory that Warren Neidich's "Contra Curtis" photographs begin. Disinterred from the vast necropolis of American culture comprised of late-night TV's reruns of the pulp entertainment of earlier decades, Neidich's images are at once perfectly innocuous and
painfully provoking. All-too-typical examples of the estimated 12,000 acts of mediated mayhem witnessed by all of us who have grown up in the television era, these achingly familiar specimens focus on moments of ritualized violence directed against "Indians." Of course we know that these aren't real Indians being burned, shot, knifed, or burst asunder, but actors, actresses, and stuntmen dressed up for the part. These figures serve as stand-ins or surrogates for a "historical actor:" long pushed off the main stage of American life, but preserved in cultural memory in the long line of phantasmic Others against whom any violence is permitted.

It's the way that such phantoms weave in and out of our culture's interlocking networks of personal memory, popular memory, and archival memory that furnishes the real subject of much of Neidich's work. But aside from this general predilection, "Contra Curtis" has a more specific target in mind. Neidich seems clearly to wish that these photographs be approached as permanently as a shadow to the famous body of work produced around the turn of the century by the celebrated photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis. Curtis's elegiac images of Native American tribes turned a benighted paternal gaze upon the "picturesque" tribespeople whom he singled out, costumed, and directed for his camera. Printed (like Neidich's) on platinum paper, Curtis's photographs were circulated in lavish volumes and portfolios to such discerning patrons as J. P. Morgan and Teddy Roosevelt. Neidich, using images drawn from a later, less dis-