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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Vestiges of Vulnerability: Helen Post's Photographs of 20th Century Navajo

Carlyle Delia Schmollinger

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

PREVIEW

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June 2016

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ABSTRACT

Vestiges of Vulnerability: Helen Post's Photographs
of 20th Century Navajo

Carlyle Delia Schmollinger
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Master of Arts

Helen Post (1907-1978) was a twentieth century American photographer, whose images of the Navajo offer sensitive insight into the lives of individuals residing on the reservation from 1938-1942. An employee at the time for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Post traveled to the West on numerous excursions, each time gaining perspective and understanding into the intricacies of Native life. Her ability to portray the Navajo in unguarded and intimate moments stands as a significant contribution to discourse on visual records of American Indians. Examining Post's work provides an opportunity to not only reexamine her work, which has largely been overlooked, but also acknowledge misrepresented facets of the Navajo. Unlike other well-known white photographers working prior to and concurrent with Post, she avoided portraying her sitters in the common tropes, instead choosing to humanize the Navajo.

Theoretically this examination utilizes Post-colonial theory in order to better understand Post's position as both outsider and friend to her sitters. It also explores the social interactions and cultural differences between photographer and subject. She emphasized rather than neglected the many complexities evident among the Navajo in the late 1930s to early 1940s. Post documented the effects of crucial reform policies and by so doing comprised a poignant collection of images. In her photographs of the Navajo, one sees a celebration of character and emotion, underscored by the simplicity of Post's thoughtful compositions. As stated by John Collier, Sr., Post's employer and former commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Post was one who, "willed above all that the Indian spirit…should live on."

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Keywords: photograph, Navajo, reform, vulnerability, portrait

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DEDICATION

To Anthony,
whose love is everything

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Introduction

In a May 1940 article from the *Saturday Evening Post*, renowned documentary photographer Margaret Bourke-White offered a candid review on the book *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow*. The volume is a compelling array of words and images that presents a dialogue of Native American histories primarily during the early twentieth century. Besides author Oliver La Farge another name is featured on the cover of the book: photographer Helen Post. Of Post, Bourke-White declared:

> Miss Post attains professional position with ease…these [scenes] clearly demonstrate her ability to grasp the handling of light and shadow. As her work progresses she will undoubtedly widen her range to include a more precise selection of detail and character.[1]

Such acclaim of Post might warrant place in academic discussions, however, she has remained largely absent from any dialogue on photography. Post created nearly 2,700 images during her lifetime, working in the cultural context of pre-World War II America (Fig. 1).[2] Borrowing from Bourke-White's early description of Post's collection, it is specifically the "detail" and "character" of Post's later images that deserve discussion. Her photographs are both poignant and provocative. Embracing the roles of wife, photographer, and government employee, Post concentrated her energies on trying to understand the complex social issues of the era in which she lived.

1930s America, set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, was defined by hardship, fear, and isolation.[3] In particular, the laws executed on behalf of Native Americans

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[1] Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, "The American Indian: 1940," The *Saturday Evening Post*, May 11, 1940.
[2] Handwritten notes, box 1, folder 2, Helen Post Papers, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Ft. Worth, Texas.
[3] Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 26-33.

resulted in the creation of major government programs and monetary expenditures.[4] Post's collection of photographs of Native Americans is the product of several years' worth of traveling to and from the West documenting responses to the changes.[5]

The portraits she created of the Navajo comprise the greater part of her collection, introducing a sensitive dialogue between observed and observer.[6] This thesis will examine Post's photographs of the Navajo between the years of 1938 and 1942 and how they offer an intimate, sensitive portrayal of her sitters. Exploring Post's photographic volume will serve in dismantling pre-existing notions concerning visual representations of Navajo and offer a different kind of record.

Her photographic volume reinforces the ideals of the Bureau of Indians Affairs (BIA) under John Collier, Sr., with whom she was employed during the time, as well as the reform efforts perpetuated by anthropologist Oliver La Farge.[7] The sensitivity she granted her subjects' contrasts sharply with other images of the Navajo, particularly those produced by her peer, photographer Laura Gilpin. Post's contribution lay in her ability to humanize her sitters by portraying vulnerability. In this manner she is comparable to Native American photographers rather than her white counterparts. Post assumed her position as "outsider" with relative ease,

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[4] Jennifer McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art: Indian Arts and Federal Policy, 1933-1943* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 65-84.
[5] Peter Modley, "A Short Interpretive Biography of Helen Post, Photographer." Helen Post Papers.
[6] Post photographed on various Native American reservations such as South Dakota's Pine Ridge and several in upstate New York. While she most likely spent the majority of her time among the Navajo, it would be a disservice to not mention her efforts among the Crow, Salish, Sioux and other tribes. While her work with those tribes will not be examined in this thesis, it should be noted that she too portrays those families and individuals with sensitivity. Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.
[7] There are only two known sources of correspondence in which Collier directly mentions Post. In one, Collier gives his approval of Post in a new commission to photograph New York Indians. The other is an undated, unaddressed letter in which Collier glowingly discusses Post's work among the Sioux Indians on Pine Ridge reservation. Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.

manifested in her remarkably personal images of a people who sustained a complicated, disheartening relationship with the United States government and those associated with it (Fig. 2).[8]

Examining Post's work provides an opportunity to not only reexamine the work of Post, but also acknowledge misrepresented and overlooked facets of the Navajo. Discussion of societal implications will form the foundation of this argument, with an investigation into Post's attitude toward her Navajo sitters. She avoided portraying the Navajo in the common tropes produced by other photographers. Rather Post created a safe space for her sitters in which observed and observer exhibit the vulnerability not readily apparent in other images of Navajo. The term vulnerability has various meanings attached to it. For the purpose of this thesis it will be defined as the willing submission of one's emotions to the viewer, emphasizing openness.

While some anthropologists have included Post's images of the Navajo from the late 1930s in their publications, no in-depth analysis exists of her work. Ann Nolan Clark's fictional narrative written in the 1940s, *Brave Against the Enemy: T'oka wan itkok'ip ohitike kin he: a story of three generations – of the day before yesterday, of yesterday and of tomorrow*, features several of Post's Navajo images.[9] In the book, Post's photographs accompany Clark's story about a father and son's bull riding hopes at a Sioux reservation fair. However, the author incorporates Post's images solely as visuals; she does not expound on their relation to the text,

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[8] Kenneth R. Philip, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 127.

[9] During her lifetime Clark published over 15 children's books about Native American life ways she experienced through travels to the West. Clark, Ann Nolan, *Brave Against the Enemy: T'oka wan itkok'ip ohitike kin he: a story of three generations – of the day before yesterday, of yesterday and of tomorrow* (Lawrence, Kansas: Haskell Institute, 1944).

though relevance is meant to be apparent.[10] Regardless, without context it is difficult to glean understanding of Post's own views from the text. It should be noted that the educational branch of the BIA published Clark's book. This is likely a result of Post's employment by the Bureau, which will be examined further in this thesis. Likewise, La Farge presents a similar setup in *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow*. In his book Post's photographs correspond to specific captions yet, they fail to reveal the complexities of the photographer's specific methods and beliefs.[11]

Theoretically this investigation of Post's photographs of the Navajo explores the social interactions and cultural differences between photographer and subject. Post's position as a visitor to the Navajo reservation will be examined by utilizing Post-colonial theory. Understanding Post-colonial theory in this context will aid in illuminating the ways in which Post blurs the line of authority. In conjunction with this, there will be discussion about Post's role in this shared creative space and her refusing to assume power over her sitters. Placing Post's photographs in a larger discourse will help elucidate the depth of character she afforded her sitters.

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[10] Post's photographs correspond to the chapter themes. For example, the chapter on bull riding includes images of cattle; the chapter titled "Blizzard" contains scenes of Native individuals affected by winter weather as well as snow-covered land. Clark, *Brave*, 5-35.

[11] Post formed the captions from the text of another of La Farge's works, *The Enemy Gods*, originally published in 1937. La Farge's fourth novel, *Gods* centers on the story of a young Navajo boy's attempt to assimilate into white culture and his eventual demise after returning to the reservation. Based off this information it seems that Post adapted text for the captions from another source rather than forming her own. La Farge, Oliver, *The Enemy Gods* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937).

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