

Horace Poolaw: Photographer of American Indian Modernity. Laura E. Smith. Foreword by Linda Poolaw. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 197 pp.¹

Reviewed by Joanna Cohan Scherer

This reviewer is no stranger to the photographs of Horace Poolaw (1906-1984). Since the 1960s, while working on the *Handbook of North American Indians*, I have admired the remarkable images taken by this Native American photographer. Our office first contacted Horace Poolaw (through Linda Poolaw) in the summer of 1979 and he graciously agreed to give us a number of his images. As a result of his kindness, the Smithsonian was gifted several photographs for use in the project (DeMallie and Sturtevant 2001, 920; 1014-1015). Poolaw asked in our correspondence if he would be credited as the photographer because “many of his photographs are now being used without credit or permission.” I found this query distressing but understandable in that so many photographers’ images (non-native as well as native) have been pirated and used unattributed over the years. For too long photographs have been seen as decorations to break up text, rather than primary materials. Both scholars and non-scholars are guilty of treating photographs as second-class documents. I am happy to report that over the forty years that I have worked with historical photographs, the seriousness with which they are perceived has changed dramatically. Today, researching images is regarded as a legitimate scholarly endeavor.

Over the years, I applauded scholars such as Nancy Mithlo (2008) and Laura Smith who have taken up the difficult undertaking of placing Horace Poolaw’s photos into scholarly discourse. I say difficult because Poolaw left no documentation of his images or writings regarding his photography process (xxvii). Subject identification, location, date taken, as well as his reason for taking the images, his intended audience, and how he distributed them are not recorded. Despite this handicap, Smith was able to weave a credible history about the photographer’s oeuvre based on interviews with his relatives and Kiowa community members. Poolaw’s original negatives are currently in the Nash Library of the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, Chickasha, and the Poolaw family maintains the copyright to all of the material.

This book includes chapters entitled, “Kiowa Homeland,” “Poolaw’s Family,” “History and Pageantry” (mostly from the Craterville Indian Fair and Pawnee Bill’s Wild West Show, 1920s, and the Medicine Lodge Treaty Pageant, 1932), “Warbonnets” (multiplicity of meanings), “Postcards and Art” (contrasting Poolaw’s photography with well known Kiowa artists: Stephen Mopope, Spencer Asah, Monroe Tsa-toke, Jack Hokeah, and James Auchiah). Smith challenges us to look at Poolaw’s photographs as representations of twentieth century life and communal identity and not as static portrayals of traditional Kiowa lifestyle. When analyzing the clothing in many of Poolaw’s portraits, for example, she interprets the wearing of historical items “as subversive messages of native perseverance and self-determination” (38) rather than a simple display of older fashions for tourist entertainment. In reviewing the theme of dancing, prominent in the works of the Kiowa artists and Poolaw’s photographs, the author interprets its portrayal as an act of political defiance (dances were in many cases outlawed) as well as a celebration of

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Kiowa heritage (132). The presentation of the eighty-five photographs throughout this book is unique in that the author first gives the maker's name in the caption and then identifies the subject. This places the emphasis on the image-maker who is usually invisible to the reader and truly befits a book about a photographer.

Smith describes Poolaw's early life and work from 1925 to 1945, integrating the political challenges the Kiowa community experienced as a result of federal Indian policies surrounding assimilation efforts. She sees in Poolaw's photography manifestations of indigenous cultural continuity despite overwhelming challenges to eliminate their traditional lifestyle. Smith discusses the photographer's early creation of postcards in the 1930s, portraits of prominent men of the tribe that do not have captions; the majority of which are now in the Oklahoma Historical Society. In his later postcards (from the 1940s to the 1950s), many scenes from the American Indian Exposition in Anadarko, Oklahoma, are captioned. The author correctly observes that "Text was more likely to appear on cards made for a national audience, whereas a lack of text suggest they were more likely made for local consumers who would recognize the subject" (110). However, there are no clear records, such as ads in newspapers, to prove that Poolaw actually sold his photos nationally. Further, Smith notes that some of the men in Poolaw's postcards are "specially dressed and feathered enough to conform to the standards of the popular Plains Indian chief or noble warrior imagery;" their attire probably having been supplied by the photographer for the shoot (104; 165). Using studio props was a common practice among photographers, both Native and non-Native, but must be carefully scrutinized as the Native sitters may have adopted such items of clothing by choice or borrowed or inherited such items from friends or relatives. Pan-Indian attire was widespread at the time and the appearance of the same item of clothing on several Kiowa taken by the photographer thus may have more than one cause (Scherer 2006, 80; 101-104).

In the final chapter, Smith integrates early Native American modernist art production of the period and compares it with Poolaw's work. The Kiowa artists copied several of Poolaw's photographs and a number of their paintings are reproduced in the book. The significance of color in the paintings is discussed in the text (131), but none of the paintings are reproduced in color. My sole criticism of the book is that none of these paintings are printed in color. Such reproduction would have greatly enhanced the publication.

This book advances the scholarship of photography about and by Native Americans. It is a joy to read.

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