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

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ABSTRACT

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

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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.”

Keywords: photograph, Navajo, reform, vulnerability, portrait
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There are several people I would like to thank for helping me throughout this process. I owe much to my family and friends for their constant support. I am especially grateful to my fellow art history graduate students who offered much needed donuts and pep talks along the way. I am most indebted, however, to two art history professors who proved to me that passion is the most important element to any good thesis: my advisor James Swensen, whose patience still astounds me, and Martha Peacock, who first inspired me to pursue the amazing field that is art history.
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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² Handwritten notes, box 1, folder 2, Helen Post Papers, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Ft. Worth, Texas.
resulted in the creation of major government programs and monetary expenditures.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{5}

The portraits she created of the Navajo comprise the greater part of her collection, introducing a sensitive dialogue between observed and observer.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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,

\textsuperscript{4} Jennifer McLerran, \textit{A New Deal for Native Art: Indian Arts and Federal Policy, 1933-1943} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 65-84.
\textsuperscript{5} Peter Modley, “A Short Interpretive Biography of Helen Post, Photographer.” Helen Post Papers.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{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).\textsuperscript{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, \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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,

\textsuperscript{8} Kenneth R. Philip, \textit{John Collier’s Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954} (Tucson: University 
\textsuperscript{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, \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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.


\textbf{Origins}

\textsuperscript{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, \textit{Brave}, 5-35.

\textsuperscript{11} Post formed the captions from the text of another of La Farge’s works, \textit{The Enemy Gods}, originally published in 1937. La Farge’s fourth novel, \textit{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, \textit{The Enemy Gods} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937).
Post’s skill as a photographer developed prior to her first travels west in the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{12} It was during her upbringing in New Jersey that she first experimented with the camera. The new outlet was a welcome respite from turmoil at home.\textsuperscript{13} An emotionally distant father and an outspoken mother ruled the household.\textsuperscript{14} Her father engaged in several extramarital affairs and Post’s mother, perhaps in response to her husband’s behavior, likewise searched for companionship outside their marriage. Though Post developed a bond with her younger sister Marion, that too would lose its strength in later years.\textsuperscript{15} The isolation she experienced at home may have prompted her to look elsewhere for activity and purpose. Photography likely filled that void. Over time Post’s confidence increased and she began to flourish as an amateur photographer.

Post left the United States in the early 1930s and traveled to Europe, ending up in Vienna where she resided off and on for several years. Post learned German, immersing herself in the culture. Artist friends influenced Post’s style tremendously and particularly her approach to portraiture.\textsuperscript{16} Prior to Europe the photographer did not adhere to any specific style. She did admire, however, Pictorialism, the hazy, dream-like style used by her mentor, Trude Fleischmann. Fleischmann, an Austrian-born photographer, was arguably the most influential person in Post’s life during the years in Vienna (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.
\textsuperscript{13} As a teenager, Post and her sister Marion visited a photography studio in East Orange, New Jersey on at least one occasion. It was there that they first handled “black boxes,” and this was likely the initial source of Post’s interest in the craft. Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Paul Hendrickson, \textit{Looking for the Light: The Hidden Life and Art of Marion Post Wolcott} (New York: Knopf, 1992), 41.
\textsuperscript{16} Post discusses her artistic circle in Vienna, but does not list any names. Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.
\textsuperscript{17} Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.
physicist Albert Einstein. At one point Fleischmann and Post shared a studio space and they often traveled together throughout the country. It was during this time that Post, at the age of 25, opened her own studio in Vienna and became a more confident photographer. She wrote about her attempts to manipulate lighting as well as the development process in her personal journal, indicating she enjoyed the overall routine.\(^{18}\)

Following several years in Europe, which included sporadic travels with her sister Marion, Post returned to the United States in the late 1920s. In the early 1930s Post worked in New York City where she photographed nursery school children and produced family portraits.\(^{19}\) Marion similarly developed an interest in photography and would receive acclaim later in life for her work, unlike Post.\(^{20}\) It was in New York where Post met her husband, Rudolf Modley, a Jewish-Austrian refugee. Post and Modley engaged in the same political and social circles, sharing intellectual and artistic interests as well as a penchant for liberal thinking. Similarly they were both passionate about the arts and supported many of the New Deal programs initiated during the time. They likely admired the New Deal’s socialist tendencies due to their previous experiences in more liberal European communities.\(^{21}\)

Though there is a discrepancy with the date of her first visit to the American West it is known that Post made the initial venture with her husband around 1936 or 1938.\(^{22}\) Business

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
\(^{19}\) Though the number of commissions she received during this time is unknown, her photographic collection contains at least several dozen school images. Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.
\(^{20}\) Marion Post Wolcott worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the 1930s-40s—the same time her sister was photographing in the West. Post Wolcott, unlike Post, has since received considerable recognition for her post-Depression era images. Hendricksen, *Looking for the Light*, 11-15.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) Post told radio host Alma Kitchell in 1941 that she made her first trip to the West during the summer of 1938. However, Post’s digitized collection found at the Amon Carter Museum lists
obligations required Modley to travel west on a semi-regular basis; it was on one of those business trips that Post joined her husband. Modley worked as a surveyor for the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), a product of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program, and the nature of his work necessitated that he inspect the terrain in the Southwest throughout the year. One of his assignments included compiling educational texts regarding erosion and conservation practices on reservation land. His employment situation and the necessity to travel afforded Post the chance to experience new professional endeavors in the American Southwest.

While her husband travelled across the country as an SCS employee, Post returned often to the Navajo reservation between 1938-1942. Her interest in the Navajo—and Native American culture more broadly—preceded her advent at the BIA. The travels west with her husband and temporary residence among the Navajo occurred prior to any sort of commissioned project. Even while in New York she wanted to experience something totally outside her normal routine. The West represented liberation from the strictures of daily life. For Post, it also provided inspiration in the form of different cultures and peoples. She desired to become as engrained in Navajo life as she could, evident by her eating and sleeping in her sitter’s homes.

the beginning date of her record as “1936.” Likewise, in a short biography written by Post’s son, Peter Modley, he too gives “1936” as the first year. While a specific date would strengthen this thesis, it appears that no photograph included in the Amon Carter collection was taken before the singular date of 1938. Hence, for this purpose I will accept Post’s admission in the radio interview as having first traveled to the reservations in 1938. Helen Post, interview by Alma Kitchell, Alma Kitchell’s Brief Case, WJZ, February 17, 1941.

24 The Soil Conservation Service (SCS) was in charge of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), another New Deal venture. The CCC operated roughly from 1933 to 1942; it is interesting that Post’s Native American project ends in 1942—the latest date in her collection. It is possible that Post stopped photographing the Navajo in conjunction with her husband, who would have left his employment with the SCS in 1942. McLerran, Native Art, 106-115.
She spent numerous evenings conversing with her hosts well into the night. 26 The photographer’s swift loyalty to the Navajo is displayed in the rousing, tender scenes she photographed; the friendships she made defined her experience. After receiving a commission from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to photograph on the Navajo reservation, Post furthered her interest in tribal customs.

She embraced the prospect of moving away from the familiarity in New York City and photographing in an unknown, yet fascinating environment. She brought with her a worn Rolleiflex camera and tripod. Though initially viewed by friends as detrimental to her husband’s work because she was a woman, Post challenged convention and made the trip. The caution arose primarily due to the tight living quarters Post and her husband would have to maintain while living on the reservation. Some friends thought it improper for her to impose herself on the Natives’ generosity though they found it acceptable for her husband to do so. 27 She dismissed the warnings and took her first photographs of the Navajo the summer of 1938. In a personal field notebook Post remarked on her hosts’ kindness and hospitality. 28 Her thoughtful preparation prior to entering the reservation indicates her desire to better understand her sitters.

It is important to note the turning point in Post’s photographic style during the late 1930s-40s. While on the reservation she embraced the documentary-style popular during the period, rather than follow the Pictorialism trend of the previous decade (Fig. 4). The reason for the shift in her creative process is unclear, yet it may be attributed to the larger creative context. Government-employed photographers, like Post’s sister Marion and other FSA photographers, produced images that emphasized subject matter rather than aesthetics.

26 Helen Post, Kitchell, Brief Case. Peter Modley also states that Post would sleep in her car, placing a hat on the dashboard to suggest a man’s presence. Modley, “A Short Biography,” 3.
27 Handwritten Notes, Helen Post Papers.
28 Helen Post, Kitchell, Brief Case.
Post’s sensitivity to the situation manifests itself in not only her photographs, but also in her preparation prior to arriving on the reservation. In a radio interview from 1941 Post dispelled mischaracterizations concerning Native Americans in general.\textsuperscript{29} She specifically refuted accepted misconceptions of Natives as silent, hostile individuals. Existing stereotypes promoted by literature and the media presented Natives as naïve, cultural oddities. The Navajo specifically have been portrayed as extensions of their physical environment, suggesting they are props merely to beautify the landscape or add visual interest.\textsuperscript{30} Hoping to eliminate possible feelings of tension and distrust, Post composed and sent letters of introduction to the Navajo prior to photographing.\textsuperscript{31} Though sending letters was not common practice, Post sought to establish a safe environment for her subjects, or at least signify that that was her primary goal. Her attitude and approach differed somewhat from other BIA photographers, whose methods ranged from unconventional to adverse. Several photographers commissioned by the BIA along with Post were: Charlie Wunder, Lawrence Kafer, Peter Mygatt, and Marion Palfi. A few of these of these individuals would ignore tribal leaders and photographed sacred ceremonies; others would forcefully insert themselves into family homes and events without regard for the Navajo’s personal wishes.\textsuperscript{32} Post instead considered the demands of her sitters and heeded them.

Post’s desire to render the Navajo as complex individuals results in poignant images that questioned convention (Fig. 5). It is important to situate her goals and desires against the backdrop of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was during this time that the idea

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Helen Post, Kitchell, \textit{Brief Case}.
\textsuperscript{32} Faris, \textit{Navajo}, 212-218.
of the Navajo and other tribes as “Other” had been promulgated. Society generally believed that the Navajo should be photographed in the name of preserving their Native culture. The medium proved controversial; photographs could expose the deeply personal, but they could inversely foster misunderstanding.

As tourists descended on the Navajo reservation in the early twentieth century so too did feelings of mistrust, confusion, and anger among tribal members. They were wary and justifiably so. Many Navajo viewed the literal act of picture taking as something to be feared. The sitter is left mute and open for observation. Thus, the Navajo generally resented photographers coming to the reservation due to their already being subject to scrutiny. Post, however, avoided the intrusive behavior. In *Navajo and Photography*, James Faris identifies Post as someone who uses, “a more sophisticated compositional style than that of mid-century anthropologists...and displayed some of the subtle contempt for photographic subjects noted earlier.” The significance of Post’s photographic collection of the Navajo is based in part on the varying individuals she photographed.

Her use of translators on the reservation also signifies a yearning to better communicate with potential sitters. She viewed Navajo as equal partners in her photographic pursuits and thus valued the opportunity to see them communicate in their own language. They taught Post several words and phrases that she retained throughout her life, as evident from personal notebooks. Likewise, Post abstained from wearing a straw hat and slacks while on the reservation, both items considered appropriate solely for white men to wear. Though she did not disclose her

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33 Faris, *Navajo and Photography*, xi.
35 Faris labels photography as a destructive mechanism, as it introduced a “death effect” by capturing and draining the soul out of the subject. Faris, *Navajo and Photography*, 14.
36 Faris, 218.
37 Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.
typical “working” outfit, it can be implied that she purposefully avoided anything that could be considered offensive. Again, this reaffirms her considerable thoughtfulness in a foreign environment. Post’s sensitivity aided her in being able to view her sitters as human beings who knew both real joy and pain. Post’s original sitters welcomed her into their homes for years thereafter. The friendships developed during these first few months in the West proved indispensable in later trips, reinforcing her connection to the West.38

Employment

The date of Post’s appointment to the Bureau of Indian Affairs is unknown; however, evidence suggests that she began working for the BIA no later than 1940.39 Additionally, she received an invitation that year to provide images for As Long as the Grass Shall Grow, a socio-historical commentary on the Navajo written by anthropologist Oliver La Farge (Fig. 6). It is likely that the text may have been created under the aegis of the BIA, however, that fact remains unclear. La Farge became aware of Post’s photographs through John Collier, then commissioner of the BIA. 40 In describing the writing process, Post recorded how she, “paced up and down in

38 Ibid.
39 A letter written by John Collier to Indian Office Employees and Officials is dated “6/deb/20/40.” This is the only specific date given regarding Post’s commencement at the BIA. Handwritten notes, box 2, folder 4, Helen Post Papers, Amon Carter Museum of American Art.
40 Included in several pages of handwritten notes is Post’s description of her introduction to La Farge. She states that following a trip with her husband, her photos came to the attention of Charles Collier’s daughter-in-law, which then made their way to La Farge. The dates here are somewhat confusing; it seems unlikely that Charles Collier—who was born in 1909—had a daughter-in-law by 1940. Additionally, Post identifies him as “[ ]upt. Collier.” This infers that Post was perhaps instead referring to John Collier’s daughter-in-law. Or, that John Collier was in fact the recommender and not Charles. Regardless, Post’s photographs were received by government officials at some point before the publication of La Farge’s text in 1940. Handwritten notes, box 1, folder 2, Helen Post Papers, Amon Carter Museum of American Art.
his [La Farge’s] work room verbally creating text to go with the photos.”41 La Farge’s connection with Post is a vital part of her professional pursuits, as is her connection with the BIA.

Originally formed in 1824, the BIA sought to manage the relationship between the federal government and Native American tribes. One of the most damaging acts in relation to Native American rights and the limiting thereof was the Dawes Act. Passed in 1887, the Dawes Act stipulated that individual Natives could receive plots of land in exchange for US citizenship. The outcome, however, benefitted non-Natives as they swindled Native Americans out of their land while also subjecting them to destabilizing educational programs. White federal administrators attempted to dissemble Native cultural pride, leading many Natives to question their identity, unsure about which “side” to hold on to: the reformed civilian or the traditional Native.

The Dawes Act defined the Native experience for decades following its passage. It was not until Franklin D. Roosevelt’s election in 1933—and the appointment of Collier that same year—that a new approach to Native polices was adopted. The New Deal policies in particular defined Roosevelt’s presidency; the policies offered recovery and reform. Included in the New Deal framework were attempts to undo the damage caused by the Dawes Act and provide relief to Native Americans. Perhaps the most crucial changes occurred with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

Signed into law on June 18, 1934, the IRA—originally called the Wheeler-Howard Act—proposed to abandon lot allotment and return to a communal-type living system. Native Americans could exchange plots of land voluntarily with other Natives in the hopes of once

41 Handwritten notes, Helen Post Papers.
again creating more unified reservations. Additionally, Congress was authorized to spend $250,000 on scholarships and tuition credits for American Indians, and tribal councils were also created to bolster self-government. 42 Ultimately, the IRA succeeded in fulfilling some of Collier’s goals, but failed with others. While it protected Native land and afforded resources for educational training, some tribes along with politicians and other government officials favored assimilation. Despite occasionally challenging the commissioner, La Farge generally supported Collier’s desire for tribal self-government due to a shared belief in the value of Navajo culture.

During the twentieth century, the BIA’s main objectives included administering funds to reservations, providing agents to assist on the reservations, and overseeing educational programs. John Collier, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs at the time of Post’s employment, directed these tasks.43 Collier promoted the idea of Native individuals maintaining and displaying semblances of their heritage rather than assimilating into white society. While his appointment was somewhat controversial, President Roosevelt approved his nomination in 1933 and Collier quickly attempted to implement Indian reform. 44 From his youth Collier empathized with the voiceless and the friendless. He worked in capacities as a social worker in New York in the early 1900s and as a reform advocate, writing for various magazines.45

Art patron Mabel Dodge introduced Collier to the Taos Pueblo Indians in 1920, his first real exposure to Native Americans. Dodge was a wealthy socialite who entertained popular artists and literary figures in her home at Taos. Collier was one who, “could not seem to love his

42 Philip, 159-163.
43 Though the BIA did not receive its official name until 1947—after Post’s employment—for consistency I will only refer to it by that name, rather than the previous title of Office of Indian Affairs. Philip, Indian Reform, 46-49.
44 Philip, Indian Reform, 15-20.
45 Philip, 14-16.
own kind of people…so he turned to other races and worked for them.”46 His desire to help the less fortunate in different racial and cultural groups than his own strengthened over time.47 Interacting with the people there at Taos and on other reservations left an indelible impression on the reformer. The practice of communal living he witnessed in Taos and elsewhere became the linchpin of Collier’s future tenure at the BIA. He observed and appreciated the attitude of goodwill common among the various tribes and wanted to implement that idea on larger scale, in other words, among as many tribes as possible.

For Collier, Navajo way of life in particular represented a sustainable and more beautiful, harmonious endeavor. He opposed the kind of individualism susceptible to selfishness and isolation, the kind that permeated through society as a whole.48 Collier’s infatuation with the Navajo did not waver during his lifetime. He even cautioned Navajos, “that if they turned away in scorn and shame from their heritage, they would throw away that part of their being which made them powerful…as individuals, and cancel the great spiritual contribution required in the future by American civilization.”49 Collier openly criticized the conventional “Euro-American” lifestyle, claiming it would do well to become more interconnected and cooperative.50

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program cultivated the kind of communal and cooperative living Collier advocated, for both whites and Natives. The Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division (CCC-ID), an offshoot of the Civilian Conservation Corps, provided Navajo with an opportunity to foster self-reliance by promoting tribal-run government. Collier directly aided in the formation of the CCC-ID, emphasizing the need for jobs on the reservation.

46 Ibid., 15.
47 Ibid., 17.
48 Ibid., 24.
49 Ibid., 118.
50 McLerran, Native Art, 29-30.
to be filled by Navajo themselves rather than outsiders.\textsuperscript{51} Workers were sent to camps comprised of about 200 men. Post spent some of her time between 1938 and 1942 photographing workers in the CCC-ID, whose living conditions were similar to regular CCC workers. (Fig. 7)\textsuperscript{52} It is likely that Post’s husband worked for the non-Indian division of the CCC as a soil erosion surveyor and thus would have been familiar with Collier’s policies.

Collier fiercely combated the assimilationist practices that were popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He requested a team of sociologists and anthropologists to gather statistical information in order to gauge tribal well-being. The compiled information was used to better tribal welfare, specifically food rationing, medical resources, and employment opportunities. Collier advocated for the preservation of Native life ways, affirming that Native American educational models, artistic practices, and cooperative customs surpassed accepted white traditions due to their interest in the collective good. He proposed that the Navajo could enhance white culture by sharing portions of their own heritage, rather than having to assimilate.\textsuperscript{53} Collier was not alone in this endeavor: one of the scientists he collaborated with was Oliver La Farge.\textsuperscript{54}

While Post does not specifically discuss La Farge’s work or his attitude toward Navajo in her personal journals, the two shared an interest in tribal culture and life ways. La Farge, a social anthropologist, immersed himself in academia and research while in his youth. How he gained interest in Native Americans generally is unclear, however, he participated in several archaeological excavations in the 1920s that likely strengthened his convictions. La Farge traveled to Central America and the Southwest while a graduate student at Harvard, completing

\textsuperscript{51} Philip, \textit{Indian Reform}, 120.
\textsuperscript{52} McLerran, \textit{Native Art}, 199-203.
\textsuperscript{53} McLerran, 30.
\textsuperscript{54} McNickle, \textit{Indian Man}, 100-104.
fieldwork that included documenting ceremonial events and artistic practices. He wrote a letter to his mother, dated 1924, during what was possibly his earliest venture to the Navajo reservation.\textsuperscript{55}

Initially La Farge sympathized with those on the reservation due to their lack of medical resources and government funds. He maintained—at least during his time as a graduate student—the belief that extinction was imminent.\textsuperscript{56} In this instance, extinction refers to the disappearance of functioning tribes \textit{and} their distinct cultural elements. To La Farge, the Navajo’s current situation was merely an extension of past treatment imposed on them by government officials.\textsuperscript{57} La Farge’s attitude evolved, however, following his move to New Mexico in the early 1930s.

With more direct exposure to the Navajo as well as other Southwestern tribes, La Farge increased his social and political involvement in the region. This was due in part to his appointment in 1930 to the Eastern Association of Indian Affairs as a member of its board of directors. The Association—later renamed the Association of American Indians Affairs—was established for the purpose of improving the welfare of those living on reservations across the United States as well as promoting Native arts and crafts.\textsuperscript{58}

As part of his new role in the Eastern Association, and bolstered by his passion for writing, La Farge published \textit{As Long as the Grass Shall Grow}.\textsuperscript{59} The text includes discussion on the “de-Indianization” that resulted from the Dawes Act and the need to demolish that mode of...

\textsuperscript{56} McNickle, \textit{Indian Man}, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 77-78.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 80.
\textsuperscript{59} La Farge became president of the EA in 1933, the same year Collier was appointed head of the BIA. La Farge published more than 20 literary works during his lifetime, both fiction and non-fiction. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1929 for his novel \textit{Laughing Boy}, which centers on the Navajo and their struggles with identity. Robert A. Hecht, \textit{Oliver La Farge and the American Indian; A Biography} (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1991), 61-64.
thinking. La Farge argued that Native Americans are artistic, spiritual beings whose rich heritage increased the overall quality of society. In *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow*, the author presents a timeline of Navajo history culminating in a plea for tribal independence. La Farge asserted that “de-Indianization” disregarded Native talent. He sought association with those who held similar ideals like Collier and, in extension, the BIA and Post.

Realizing that they shared a mutual interest in the Navajo, as well as for the social sciences, Collier and La Farge joined efforts in demolishing prevailing assimilationist attitudes. They became closely associated in 1934 following the passage of the IRA. Collier requested that La Farge temporarily live on the Hopi reservation in order to assist the tribe in establishing tribal government. La Farge accepted the position as an opportunity to apply his reformist training; the Hopi, like other tribes in the Southwest, were wary of government involvement due to past grievances. His time spent among the Hopi and the years afterward proved pivotal to his publication of *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow*, for which he contacted Post to provide the photographs.

La Farge’s book is a formidable addition to discourse on twentieth century Native Americans. There are striking similarities between La Farge’s words and Post’s attitude towards American Indians. In an early passage the anthropologist praises the beauty and artistic sensibilities of Native daily life. Another statement from La Farge appears to be something Post could just have easily exclaimed: “When I look in my own memory for the essence of what I

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60 La Farge described the text as, “a study of the realities of Indian affairs and the Indian problem, a social document, and the possibilities excite me.” McNickle, *Indian Man*, 119.
62 The Hopi in particular experienced hardships regarding their farming practices, as well as their sacred ceremonies that were displayed to the public. Furthermore, the Hopis’ inherently peaceful nature and abhorrence of weaponry suggested—to outsiders—that they were weak and needing outside leadership. McNickle, 110.
have so loved in Indian camps, the summation of it, I find a tricky rhythm tapped out on a drum,
a clear voice singing, and the sound of laughter.”63 Like La Farge, Post had resided in Indian
camps and had witnessed firsthand their hospitality, admiration, and humor. A wide variety of
Post’s photographs are used in the book to portray the admirable and often neglected aspects of
Native life, such as metalworking, cattle ranching, and weaving. It is likely that Post and La
Farge selected the images together considering she helped him in choosing captions, yet, the
extent of her involvement remains unclear. Post’s images in As Long help to create positive
sentiments regarding American Indians.

Post shared Collier’s and La Farge’s vision for the Navajo. For example, she maintained
that the Navajo should not have to assimilate to society at large. This is manifested in the
sensitive manner she portrays her subjects (Fig. 8). It is difficult to label her portraits as
government commissions only because they contain a profound sense of pathos. Post depicts
each subject not as “Native American,” “Navajo,” or “Other,” but as a vulnerable human being.64
Her sitters attract the viewer’s gaze with their direct eye contact and upright postures,
establishing connection on an emotional level. It is a shared experience: photographer, subject,
and viewer observe one another in the same moment.

Correspondence from Collier suggests that he fully endorsed and supported Post’s work
among not only the Navajo, but other tribes as well. In an undated letter he remarked how she
had, “brought an enthusiasm for the Sioux Indians.”65 Collier then discussed Post’s joy of living
and working on the reservation. He stated: “There among the Sioux, she saw the distress of

63 Oliver La Farge, As Long as the Grass Shall Grow (New York: Alliance Book Corporation,
1940), 6.
64 Faris, Navajo, 14.
65 Collier recounts to the unknown recipient Post’s time spent on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge
reservations. Handwritten Notes, box 1, folder 2, Helen Post Papers, Amon Carter Museum of
American Art.
poverty but she felt the happiness of the spirit…They made these two months seem like a period of heightened intensity in her own humanly rich life.” This enthusiasm clearly carried over to her work with the Navajo.

As seen in *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow*, Post’s images are not unique in their ability to elicit emotionality. They are unique, however, in that her depictions vary from traditional representations that emphasized stereotypes rather than dismantle them. A proponent of this approach and probably the most well known photographer of Native Americans was Edward S. Curtis, the man who historically dominated the types of Native representations. Spending a significant amount of time on the Navajo reservation and others at the turn of the twentieth century, Curtis sought to gather lasting images of a “vanishing race” that could be looked upon in later years. He re-entrenched tropes like the noble savage, romantic warrior, and defeated hero (Fig. 9).66 These stereotypes persisted throughout the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth and are still evident in twenty-first century culture.

A cursory glance at Post’s photographic collection reveals character and personality distinguishable from Curtis’s work, as well as that of her contemporaries. While other, primarily white, photographers followed the conventions promoted by Curtis, Post developed refreshingly provocative images that stand out. To better understand her unique angle, it is necessary to place her next to a prolific twentieth century photographer who largely adopted Curtis’s style: Laura Gilpin.

Gilpin compiled a vast collection of images that contrast significantly with those being created by Post at roughly the same time.67 She began photographing the Southwest in the early

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66 Faris, 107-121.
1920s, but it was not until the late 1940s that she worked exclusively with Navajo. The term “worked” is used generously in this context. Gilpin did not work with Navajo so much as she worked to get images of them. An in-depth study of Gilpin’s work reveals the detached relationship between sitter and photographer. The tenderness present in Post’s scenes is not apparent in the majority of Gilpin’s images. Gilpin, like Post, created portraits; however, the same sensitivity found in Post’s images is absent (Fig. 10). According to historian James Faris, Gilpin, “…resurrected an old notion—the “romantic enlightened,” the dignified, stoic Navajo.” The “old notions” to which Faris refers were those perpetuated by Curtis.

Though aesthetically striking, Gilpin’s portraits lack the emotional intimacy that is apparent in Post’s work. This is not to suggest that Gilpin’s images are inferior to Post’s, but rather that the former photographer chose to emphasize different aspects in her works. Instead of focusing on the individual—like Post—Gilpin concentrated on design. Moreover, Gilpin sold her photographs to various individuals and institutions in order to make a living—Post did not, or at least, did not need to. This might have been an incentive for Gilpin to create images she knew would receive wider reception, like the earlier images by Curtis. Besides being able to rely on her husband for additional income, Post created photographs solely for the BIA during this period. This difference in patronage is significant. Gilpin likely emphasized technique and form to appeal to a wider audience and thereby increase the chance for commissions. Post, however, perhaps did not experience the same kind of pressure as Gilpin, as she was employed by one agency and could produce a wide-range of images.

Gilpin’s photograph of the Navajo medicine man (figure 10) embodies technical sophistication, bearing similarities to the earlier images by Curtis (Fig. 11). The strategically

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69 Faris, *Navajo*, 236.
draped blanket beautifully frames his face. The close proximity of subject to photographer eliminates the chance to do little more than confront the man’s gaze. Edges have been softened and tones imbued with extra warmth to attract the eye. Yet, the composition only emphasizes the rigidity inherent in the piece. The sitter’s expression is void of emotion; though he stares directly at the lens his eyes are glazed over. The viewer is unable to gauge a sense of the man’s character. The only thing ascertainable is the lack of emotional connection between subject and photographer.

It is important to note that both Gilpin and Post “posed” their sitters, however, there is a clear distinction between the two photographers. Gilpin provided blankets—like the one seen in Figure 9—and other props to make her scenes seem more genuine. Post conversely did not outfit her subjects with extra accouterments. This is one reason why Post’s sitters appear in both traditional and more modern attire. Her interests lie in documenting the Navajo sensitively and accurately, not in altering appearances to fit a particular trope. A brief comparison of Laura Gilpin’s photographs in *The Enduring Navaho* and Post’s work in *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow* further illuminates the photographer’s differences. The overall tone of *As Long* is hopeful, whereas *Enduring Navaho* does appear so. Gilpin’s subjects appear to be caught at a certain time and place, a romantic past. Post’s sitters, on the other hand, look as though they are conscious of their situations and environment.

Post challenges Gilpin’s representations by infusing a sense of vitality into her images. Little space is spared in the frame. As with Gilpin’s photographs, shallow field of depth emphasizes the sitter. Post’s subjects’ vulnerability is evident by their unguarded postures and poignant facial expressions. Sitting Eagle gazes off to his right with an intensity that overwhelms

70 Ibid., 119-121.
the scene (Fig. 12). His face is caught in a dramatic moment of uncertain, overpowering emotion.
The three-quarter view directs the eye to his furrowed brow down his weathered face and on to
his worn shirt. He is more than a type; he bears the weight of past experiences on his aged frame.
There is a kind of beauty in Sitting Eagle’s countenance. From the now grey braids to each
incised wrinkle on his face, the marks of time are clearly manifest. Both tradition and current
realities are on display. Post’s sensitivity to this man and his situation conveys a kind of heroism
that is absent in Gilpin’s images. Sitting Eagle assumes a position of authority as one who shares
solicited advice. Post gleans wisdom from the older man and illuminates his “experience” for the
viewer. It is a balanced relationship. She avoids the conventional inclination to present him like
one of Gilpin’s—and Curtis’s—removed, yet beautiful figures. He sits open for viewing, but still
retains an enigmatic presence.

While Post emphasized Sitting Eagle’s vulnerability Gilpin did not do the same with her
sitters. Gilpin portrays the Navajo as a type: the fascinating oddity in a modern world.
Undeniably striking, her photographs share more similarities with Curtis’s prints than Post’s
contemporaneous collection. The mother (figure 13) engages with the photographer while the
child looks on. A pervading sense of detachment defines the scene. Although the woman
physically connects with Gilpin the dialogue is lacking. It is a one-sided conversation in which
little more is offered to the viewer than a glimpse of clothing and location. Though Gilpin almost
exclusively focused on design, a wanting for more emotionality persists.

Post manages to capture varying degrees of emotion. A photograph similar to Sitting
Eagle is [Portrait of a Navajo man] (Fig. 14). The subject sits on bent knees, hands relaxed yet
assertive. His hands are positioned in a way that emphasizes the metal-worked cuffs on his
wrists. The man is at once proud of his culture, but also willing to submit—at least to the
photographer. He looks straight ahead, locking eyes with the lens and perhaps Post just beyond. His palpable confidence dispels any awkwardness; he appears to be at ease and unguarded. Post has created an environment in which the sitter embraces his vulnerability. Trust has been established. The emotional connection formed between observed and observer overrides minor details.

The complex individuals in Post’s collection, like Sitting Eagle and the Navajo man, portray types seldom seen in other photographic volumes of American Indians prior to the late 1930s. Post’s sitters contradict the characters that Curtis championed and which gained popularity during the late nineteenth century.71 The United States government treated Natives as part of a vanishing race and consistently pressed them to assimilate—some cooperated, but most pushed back in opposition.72 A major factor of resistance can be directly credited to the implementation of boarding schools.

Youth

Governed in the West primarily by white missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century and government officials after the Civil War. While proclaiming to teach and prepare Native students for assimilation into white society, the schools were fraught with turmoil. The majority of schools were rife with neglect, disease, and abuse. Influenced by the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, boarding school officials followed the adage popularized by Richard Henry Pratt: “kill the Indian and save the man.” Pratt, an active military man throughout his life, headed the Carlisle Industrial School and became known for his severe teaching and training methods.

71 Faris, Navajo and Photography,107-121.
72 Philip, 159.
Carlisle was the first federally recognized boarding school for American Indians that was not on reservation land. Its main objective, and that of similar boarding schools, was to destroy Native identity and replace it with a white one, typically characterized as Christian and English-speaking. This entailed cutting the students' hair upon arrival, outfitting them in conventional, restrictive clothing, and punishing those who spoke their tribal language. The verbal, emotional, sexual, and physical abuse prevalent in the boarding school system contributed to its eventual demise in the 1970s. One such federally recognized school inspired by Carlisle’s practices was the Phoenix Indian School, nicknamed PIS. Post spent time photographing students enrolled at PIS.

Opened in 1891 in Phoenix, Arizona, PIS was formed with the purpose of offering a western alternative to Carlisle as many Native American children in the Southwest could not travel the distance to the eastern United States. It also differed in its aim from Carlisle in that PIS superintendents did not expect their students to assimilate into general white society. Following the publication of the Meriam Report in 1928, policies at PIS were officially changed to promote vocational work rather than assimilationist ideals. This development set PIS apart from other boarding schools. The vocational training students received was intended to aid them in civilizing their own families back on the reservations. The majority of students at PIS came from the Pima and Navajo tribes, with others coming from the Maricopa and Papago reservations. One known connection between Collier and PIS are the attempts the reformer made to have it shut

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74 Philip, *Indian Reform*, 99-100.
75 The Meriam Report was a compilation of statistical reports on the conditions of Native American reservations and boarding schools in particular. The data gathered from the findings—which were unfavorable—acted as the foundation to the IRA, passed in 1934. Robert A. Trennert Jr., *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 7-42.
down in the late 1920s. Collier cited beatings and floggings that occurred at the school and called for its closure, as well as that of other boarding schools throughout the nation. Considering Post was photographing PIS students nearly 10 years later, it may be due to a shift in Collier’s attitude toward that particular school. By the time Post visited the school, the crucial policy changes had been enacted that helped to prevent the kinds of abuse happening ten years prior.

In one of Post’s PIS photographs, with an administration building clearly in the background, the student appears to be at ease (Fig. 15). The boy sits only a short length from the photographer, smiling gleefully into the lens. His posture implies openness. The casual placement of his arm and slightly tilted head underscore the safe space in which photographer and subject reside. There is a kind of camaraderie between Post and the boy, heightened by the low vantage point; in this moment they are no longer observed and observer, but friendly acquaintances. A mutual understanding has been established between the student and Post. They are physically on the same level, both sitting across from one another. Regardless of whether or not the boy should trust Post, the image’s power comes in the fact that he does. He exudes contentment though he wears a uniform with no indication of his Native culture. Post emphasizes the boy’s energy of youth.

In another PIS image the distance between photographer and subject is of a considerable length (Fig. 16). The boy does not seem as readily open to the viewer, but this does not negate the sensitive nature of the scene. He looks directly at the lens as if surprised about what is taking place, yet he does not shy away from Post. Once again, the photographer has created a safe space. That the sitter does not so easily give in to complete exposure affirms that Post photographed a diverse group of individuals whose experiences prior to PIS varied greatly. She
was able to foster just enough understanding to achieve as accurate representations as circumstances allowed.

Post’s photographs of PIS students starkly contrast with the severe portraits that were produced at other prominent boarding schools (Fig. 17). A now famous comparison that originated from the Carlisle School emphasizes the gravity of assimilation. In the double portraits of Navajo student Tom Torlino all vestiges of his Native culture were expunged. The boarding schools dispelled Native customs including clothing, language, and tribal religion. While many Navajo remained in boarding schools during the twentieth century, numerous charges were leveled for injustices to the students. Politicians and reformers, like Collier and La Farge, were critiquing the broken school system at the same time Post was documenting PIS students. Collier’s agenda from his first days in the BIA was, as opposed to Pratt, but to, “save the Indian and kill the man.”76 Thus it seems likely that aside from BIA objectives, Post sympathized with those students in the boarding school system and hoped to portray the myriad of emotions they were experiencing.

Post’s ability to capture not only intimate interludes, but also moments of elation further strengthens her position as a sensitive observer. Her photograph titled Smiling Girl emphasizes this point (Fig. 18). A departure from the more pensive pieces in her collection, Smiling Girl evokes joy. Though other figures occupy the frame the girl immediately engages the viewer with her carefree posture and beaming smile. She bends forward easily to face the lens, assuming a comfortable pose. The exchange is marked by honesty and openness; the image seems as though not taken by a stranger, but a close friend. Unlike Curtis and Gilpin, who intentionally discarded

76 Philip, 73.
the playful, happy images of Navajo to fit the stoic type, Post made no distinction. Post humanizes the girl, as she does others. The girl’s willingness to interact with and react to Post posits there is a trust between sitter and photographer.

Post’s interaction with the smiling girl was the kind of interplay that Collier hoped would be adopted by the general public. He consistently applauded Navajo achievements in his own publications, such as in *The Indians of the Americas*. He particularly praised their commitment to honoring the past. The Commissioner delighted in personal heritages and histories due to the rich, cultural customs that could be found within them. Navajos shared with one another as a way to honor their personal and communal ancestries. Post’s photographs display this type of devotion toward Navajo that Collier himself exhibited. However, Post extended further in developing a tender rapport with her sitters by actually living among the Navajo. She entered each creative space with a sensitive eye and appreciation for the subtle differences of those she photographed. Post seems to have been both friend and confidante to her sitters, unlike Gilpin who at least appeared to focus on design rather than establishing emotional connection.

Confidante

Though Gilpin and Post were both white, from the upper class, and relatively independent, Post’s work bears a closer likeness to that of Native American photographers. In particular, Kiowa photographer Horace Poolaw produced comparable images. Working over a period of roughly 40 years beginning in the mid-1920s, Poolaw’s record of a people in transition

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78 Philip, *Indian Reform*, 111-112.
should be considered. Few Native photographers have produced as extensive a collection of quality work.

One of Poolaw’s compositions, for example, bears a close resemblance to Post’s work (Fig. 19). The two women bracket the man seated in the car. Poolaw captures a seemingly candid moment that appears to be genial as well as genuine. Poolaw posed his subjects, like both Gilpin and Post, yet his images are strikingly similar to the latter photographer’s work. The two possess a similar sensitivity toward their sitters. The subjects’ easy countenances imply they are relaxed. The women stand casually against the automobile while gazing at something off to the right side of the frame, smiling and seemingly content. The man too appears to be satisfied with the situation and manifests such with his non-threatening glance. There is a kind of amity between the photographer and his subjects. The three figures could be old acquaintances of Poolaw just as they could easily be strangers. Poolaw’s already established position as “insider,” due to his Native heritage, allowed him to gain access to typically closed-off moments. A striking similarity exists between Post’s images and Poolaw’s that must be analyzed.

Poolaw’s strength lay in his ability to depict Native Americans not as antique oddities, but as modern, productive members of society at large. Post too developed a bond with her subjects; though she could not claim Native ancestry her statements and actions regarding Native Americans solidify her position as sensitive observer. Just as Poolaw presented his sitters as dignified beings, so too did Post. They supported the vision set forth by the BIA, and Collier specifically, that Native Americans could and should be portrayed as hard-working, humorous, complex human beings.

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80 Mithlo, Horace Poolaw, 72.
This understanding is displayed in an affectionate moment between child and grandfather (Fig. 20). The grandfather seems pleasant, displaying the hint of a smile. Though he averts his eyes from the viewer his body language suggests comfort. He sits aware and relaxed before the photographer. The child is perhaps a bit more wary. The young boy stares directly into the lens, asserting his presence. He offers not a warm smile, like his grandfather, but instead a kind of grimace. However, his obvious facial expression belies the ease of his posture. A string twisted around his forefingers occupies his attention, suggesting that he looks up reluctantly upon Post’s instruction. Like Poolaw, Post has inserted herself into a tender, familial scene.

Post’s ability to foster friendships was pivotal to her success in acquiring provocative images. She embraced the style forged by Poolaw and other Native photographers: pared down accessories, uncluttered frame, and simple design. Post differs from Curtis and Gilpin in that she humanizes her sitters and illuminates openness. For example, Sr. Mrs. Yellowtail sits with her body slightly turned as she gazes toward the lens (Fig. 21). There is no pretext—she is calm and resolute. She does not wince nor does she place a barrier between herself and the photographer. Any figurative walls have been dissolved and she sits unguarded. However, she assumes a quiet strength that is illuminated by Post’s smart cropping. Poolaw also used this kind of family-style portrait, which helped in fostering a more personal atmosphere. Sr. Mrs. Yellowtail has become, through Post’s lens, a symbol of strength. The deep wrinkles that cross her forehead and define her chin further emphasize the weathering that appears with time and experience. The idea that she could easily conform to an entirely different culture seems unthinkable. She radiates a surety of self that cannot and must not be limited to misunderstanding. Post portrays her as one who should be admired rather than tolerated, or worse, assimilated.
“The Indian Spirit”

As commissioner, Collier sought to improve the health conditions on the Navajo reservation. After his appointment in 1933 he began construction on several hospitals and other medical facilities. Additionally, due to funding provided by the New Deal he was able to hire nurses and doctors to work in the facilities on the Navajo and other reservations in the Southwest.81 In a remarkably pared down portrait, a female Navajo medical patient gazes intensely out toward the viewer (Fig. 22). The woman is likely a patient in one of the newly built hospitals. The most interesting aspect of the image is that despite the contrast between the subject and her environment, Post humanizes her and emphasizes her self-assurance and will to live.

Her vitality is compelling. The mystery surrounding her persona heightens the tension in the scene. She is a Navajo woman who also happens to be outfitted in modern attire. There is no known information about the woman, but she is striking. It is a significant departure from Gilpin’s emotionally detached portraits. It is interesting that Post photographed her in a hospital setting. On the Navajo reservation medicine men and other such healers would normally have been brought to family homes in the case of illness.82 The sterile, industrial environment only affirms the influence of outside forces that appeared in the twentieth century.

She sits readily open and waiting. She submits easily to Post, allowing the photographer in this photo to gain a glimpse into the innermost parts of her self. Immeasurable complexities define the situation; the title signifies she is Navajo, but nothing in the photograph would suggest so. Her identity is based on the brief, but tender moment between photographer and subject. Post

81 Philip, Indian Reform, 129-130.
82 This was common practice up until the early twentieth century. Philip, Indian Reform, 146-150.
exhibits sensitivity to the sitter that overpowers other features. She is an intriguing, dignified being. The bare composition forces the viewer to interact with the woman, thus participating in an intimate dialogue. She is, as Collier once proclaimed, one who has, “willed above all that the Indian spirit—the Indian being—should live on.”

This Navajo patient is the figurative culmination of Post’s attitude and beliefs towards Native Americans. She photographed individuals in both traditional and modern dress, reaffirming the notion that Post was trying to document everyday life, rather than how she wished it would be. Her images are provocative and powerful, which could directly be attributed to Post’s general acceptance of all types of people.

Conclusion

Helen Post began documenting the Navajo in 1938 and ending in or around 1942. While the exact reasoning remains unclear, Post left the Southwest and her employment with the BIA when her husband stopped working for the CCC in the early 1940s. From that point on, Post devoted her time solely to photographing her family and close friends. She moved to Connecticut with her family and resided there for the rest of her life. However, she did return at least once to Southwest in the 1970s with her former mentor Trude Fleischmann and visited with families and individuals Post had met during her time spent on the reservation in the late 1930s to the early 40s (Fig. 23).

Years earlier, Post’s employment with the BIA and specifically her association with John Collier, Sr. afforded her the opportunity to travel extensively to the reservation and create an impressive oeuvre. Post’s photographs provide insight into the daily life of her subjects, offering

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83 La Farge, Changing Indian, 118.
an intriguing perspective of the Navajo. Post sympathized with both Collier and Oliver La Farge and shared similar beliefs concerning the Navajo, which is evident in her impressive photographic collection. This dynamic between her and the two reformers directly influenced Post’s images; while not a social crusader on behalf of the Navajo—like both Collier and La Farge—Post undoubtedly shared similar feelings. Her tender depictions of the Navajo so suggest.

Post’s interest in and appreciation of her sitters is manifest in the humanity she grants them in her photographs. She illuminates emotionality of her sitters, unlike Gilpin who focused primarily on aestheticizing the Navajo. In comparison, Gilpin reinforced the tropes promulgated by Curtis—Post sought to do the opposite. Her collection is a refreshing addition to dialogue on the twentieth century Navajo—and Native Americans generally—and should be used to destroy the conventional myths and ideas about a misrepresented people. To mimic Bourke-White’s comments from the *Saturday Evening Post*, Post widens her range to enhance detail, but more importantly, character.
Figure 1 Trude Fleischmann, Helen Post, 1974. (Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 2 Helen Post, [Portrait of Navajo man], ca. 1936-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 3 Annie Schulz, Trude Fleischmann in Atelier, Wien 1929. (Fritsch Antiquariat, Wien)

Figure 4 Trude Fleischmann, Sybille Binder, 1935.
Figure 5 Helen Post, [Child and grandfather, Flathead Reservation], ca. 1941-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 6 Oliver La Farge, Frans Blom and their guide “Tata” Lazaro Hernandez in Guatemala, 1925 in Tribes and Temples by Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge. (Smithsonian Institution)
Figure 7 Helen Post, Crow Indian CCC at Work on Dam, ca. 1936-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 8 Helen Post, [Student at Phoenix Indian School], ca. 1936-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 9 Edward S. Curtis, The Vanishing Race, 1904.
Figure 10 Laura Gilpin, [Tsetah Begay, Navajo medicine man], 1932. (Laura Gilpin/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 11 Edward S. Curtis, Acoma Woman, 1905.
Figure 12 Helen Post, Sitting Eagle, 1941. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 13 Laura Gilpin, [Navajo woman, child, and lambs, Red Rock, Arizona], 1932. (Laura Gilpin/Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 14 Helen Post, [Portrait of Navajo man], ca. 1936-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 15 Helen Post, [Student at Phoenix Indian School], ca. 1936-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 16 Helen Post, [Student at Phoenix Indian School], ca. 1936-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 17 Navajo student, Tom Torlino, when he entered the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, (left) and then three years later. (National Museum of the American Indian)
Figure 18 Helen Post, Smiling girl, ca. 1936-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 19 Horace Poolaw, Lela Ware (Kiowa), Paul Zumwalt (Kiowa), and Trecil Poolaw (Kiowa). Carnegie County, Oklahoma, 1928-35. (National Museum of the American Indian)
Figure 20 Helen Post, [Child and grandfather, Flathead Reservation], ca. 1941-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 21 Helen Post, Sr. Mrs. Yellowtail, ca. 1940. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 22 Helen Post, [Portrait of female Navajo patient], ca. 1936-1942. (Helen Post/ Amon Carter Museum of American Art)
Figure 23 Trude Fleischmann, Helen Post, 1974. (Amon Carter Museum of American Art)


La Farge, Oliver. *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow.* New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1940.


