

Book Review:

Scherer, Joanna Cohan. *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians: Benedicte Wrensted*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006: xiii+157pp., notes, bibliography, index, 91 illus. \$29.95 (hdbd.).

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As I write this review, I am deeply involved in directing a historic American Indian photography preservation project in rural Oklahoma. The photographic legacy of Kiowa photographer Horace Poolaw (1906-1984) challenges my students in multiple ways. Hundreds of rich images beckon to us in their beauty and composition, yet we find ourselves burdened with innumerable uncertainties. Beyond the obvious questions of subject attribution, date, event and location, remain the more compelling problems of photographic intent, audience, production, consumption, reception, circulation, and disposition. These endless visual mysteries seem to unravel continuously - distracting, confusing and often minimizing the productive output of scholarly analysis that can result from a serious interrogation of the collection. How does one begin to truly understand and value the full implications of these visual treasures? What premises are central? Which curatorial methodologies yield the most productive and meaningful results?

Scherer's sensitive and thorough analysis of one photographer among the Northern Shoshone, Bannock and Lemhi people of southeastern Idaho provides a succinct case-study example of an applicable and systematic visual research methodology. This book is also a stunning visual feast offering rich 5 x 7 and full page images that entice you to fall into the evocative faces, clothing, postures and props of the poised and handsome Indian people of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation community. This central tension evident in *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians: Benedicte Wrensted* mirrors broader applications for visual communication studies in general – how to reconcile the evocative nature of photography (especially portraits, which comprise the majority of Wrensted's American Indian collection) with the social and cultural histories of specific people and places. Scherer encourages the reader to “go beyond consideration of Wrensted's portraits as art,” by advocating for the identification of the individual people portrayed in the photos as a means of avoiding stereotyping and the characterization of generic Indians as “noble savages” (p. 10).

Her microanalysis of the Wrensted collection is informed by three core values: A) the belief that, “Although photographs are often used uncritically as illustrations to break up a text, they are in fact primary documents that respond to analysis using the methods of ethnology and history” (p.9), B) the necessity of “returning the sociocultural history to the photographs and identifying the people they portray,” (p. 10), and C) the value of “reidentifying the work of women photographers” to “compensate for decades of neglect,” (p. 3). Although not addressed directly by Scherer in a straightforward political critique, it is clear that similar societal forces have worked to equally marginalize women, American Indians and visual evidence. The manner in which these three variables play out in the town of Pocatello, Idaho at the turn of the twentieth century in the career of

Danish photographer Benedicte Wrensted may appear as an anomaly, but as Scherer goes to pains to point out in her introduction, some twenty-three other women photographers were similarly photographing American Indian people at roughly the same time frame.

Scherer's history with the Wrensted photos dates from 1984, as she searched the National Archives for photographs to illustrate Volume 11 of the *Handbook of North American Indians*. Wrensted's images struck her as "so aesthetically compelling that, even though they were completely unidentified, I had several prints made for possible inclusion" (p.4). According to her estimates, today 170 of Wrensted's Shoshone Bannock images are known to exist in various collections, including a substantial number at the Idaho Museum of Natural History. One gets the impression that it was her work as an illustrator which led Scherer to advance a theory of visual communication that challenges the purely aesthetic use of photo documentation. Her systematic methodology follows a detailed analysis of the photographer, her subjects, and the viewer's response. Evident also, is her informed use of a collaborative model of community-based research with Sho-Ban families over a two decade period.

While Scherer clearly states that both aesthetic and sociohistorical forms of visual analysis are valid, this work plainly takes the scholarly, individual identification route as its major point of reference, therefore solidifying what appears to be insurmountable conceptual divides. A rigid dichotomy can easily develop out of the aesthetic vs. science debate whereby contrasts are sharply drawn: illustrations vs. primary documents, evocative beautiful images vs. proper identification, anonymous "noble savages" vs. named individuals. The reader can certainly tease out a less dichotomous philosophical analysis than appears readily available in the book, yet certain political realities can also productively be brought to bear on the issues.

Political analyses are inescapable when dealing with Native North American histories at the turn of the century and Scherer is well aware of the "still turbulent pasts and ongoing political struggles" (quoting MacFarlane on p. 5). For example, on page 53 Scherer (citing Susan Sontag) states that the creation of an extensive photographic record of North American Indians became possible only after Indians were deemed to be no longer threatening – once their colonization had become a reality. I don't quite agree with this analysis (my tribe, the Chiricahua Apaches, were relentlessly photographed by C. S. Fly before we surrendered to General Miles in 1886), but I do want to know more of what Scherer thinks about the racial disparities and legacies of warfare, colonization and trauma as they intersect with photographic documentation and analysis.

A case in point is the lack of attribution for Wrensted's Native American photographs. Why is it that Wrensted's photos of the Anglo residents of Pocatello, Idaho remained with their families, preserving their identifications, while the photographs of Sho-Ban people were largely unidentified? These often painful historical contexts are at the heart of the sociocultural analysis that Scherer advocates as a research methodology, but they are tread upon softly. The disposition of the Indian photographs was informed by the same racial policies that resulted the excavation and alienation of American Indian human remains to large cultural institutions as artifacts. Wrensted's photographs of her

Indian subjects were not left with the people of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, but were as Scherer tells us “uprooted from their place of origin and put into impersonal hands—namely, the National Archives in Washington, D.C.” (p. 10).

Scherer’s conclusion states that “the practice of history is always an exercise of power” (p. 127), and the reader can clearly sense the purpose of her mission to repatriate these valuable visual records to their original places of belonging. She describes how the images “cried out to be put back into sociohistorical perspective” (p. 5). The entire process to uncover, remember and return visual legacies is, as she tells us “an act of perseverance and love” (p. 5). The most compelling politicized arguments of our times addressing genocide, loss and reclamation of visual and material cultures are not fully addressed in this specific work, but this is not the intent of her present project. I do not expect the analysis to foreground the politics of cultural survival, yet, I wish to ask why the erasure of anonymity is viewed as a cure for derogatory or racist sentiments as these social ills, I believe, have more to do with competition for scarce resources than purely humanistic reactions or learned biases.

Representational debates of the past have uniformly advocated for self-representation, or in the absence of first-person narratives, at least a more sensitive rendering of history. Our current cultural agendas have asserted that if only the general public knew more about Native people, or had more accurate information, racial typecasting would be diminished. Yet even with the advent and proliferation of tribal websites, educational training, curriculum development, and pro-active public relations campaigns, this “knowledge is power” approach has largely not been born out in practice. For educators, “A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians” offers a useful tool for potential learning opportunities (the tempting lush photographs will certainly entice students to purchase the text), but this case study analysis should be paired with readings that address institutional critique, the new museology and or associated repatriation scholarship in order to fully appreciate the significance of her decades-long recovery work.

The literature addressing popular culture, racist stereotyping, and Indian mascots can also productively be taught in association with “A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians,” yet I would advocate a more nuanced critical reading of how individual attribution may not satisfactorily address all the ills of racist type-casting. Social meaning can be drawn from generic “noble savage” images as well as from clearly identified individuals in historically specific locations. Individualism itself is not an exclusive end goal of photographic analysis, for as we learn from Scherer’s research, many Sho-Ban descendants were initially unable to name individuals in the historic photos yet they could identify the families they resemble and likely belong to. (p. 10). Community and family references then may appear to be another level of meaningful analysis. I am not convinced that photographs necessarily need “rescuing...from the realm of exotica,” by individual naming as Scherer does (p. 16). Her analysis however does make it clear that Sho-Ban community members agree with Scherer’s attribution agenda as those community members who worked extensively on this reclamation project did wish to have individuals family members identified as a primary goal.

To complicate matters further and to carry my point about attribution and stereotyping, Scherer's text discusses Sho-Ban individuals who appear to enjoy their presentation as exotic, non-acculturated peoples. A vividly illustrated example in Chapter Four is the photograph of Jack Edmo and his family dated to 1897-98. In this photograph, Jack Edmo stands to the right of the image in traditional dress, with his wife and children seated nearby. All eyes gaze into the camera. Scherer creatively reproduces the many uses this image has been put to, including its adoption as the cover image for the National Archives staff telephone book in 1991. The image gained wide circulation as an unidentified Indian family in several cultural institutions and museums over the past few decades, evidently indicating a disservice to the tribal community from which these historic individuals originated.

Yet, Scherer's research also alerts the reader to the fact that Jack Edmo was an extroverted person who enjoyed traveling, trading for unusual goods and showing these items off by way of photographic documentation. Edmo's image is considered valuable in non-Indian circles because it represents to them a generic nuclear family unit, suggesting perhaps a universalism-type impulse or an everyman association. Using her cultural historically-specific research methodology, Scherer argues the counter proposition - that Edmo, as a fun-loving, apparent extrovert, was atypical for his family. Jack Edmo was fond of presenting his family at public gatherings and having photographs taken. He was "always in front of a camera" (p. 80). It is this type of complex micro-analysis that readers will find fascinating, for this is where Scherer's talent as a researcher and writer really shines. Students will be drawn to the complexities of Indians who did perform and this perspective can assist in the inevitable "Indian as victim" association that anti-stereotyping arguments often take.

I was less interested in the biography of the photographer Wrensted (Chapter One: "Benedicte Wrensted Comes into Focus"), although this chapter is engagingly drawn. Central to the analysis is the fact that Wrensted was uninterested in the ethnography of the Sho-Ban people, preferring only to actively recruit them as potential paying or trading photographic subjects, not ethnographic specimens. This fact, when considered in combination with Scherer's own analysis that Wrensted did not appear to have any problems in photographing Sho-Ban people, leads the reader to the conclusion that the Indians who were photographed in her studio came on their own terms. The resulting photographic product resulted in more sensitive and dignified portraits than those produced by other photographers of the same time period, reported by Scherer in Chapter Three: "Shoshone-Bannock Images by Other Photographers."

I suggest the reader begin with Chapter Four: "Shoshone-Bannock Photographs through Wrensted's Lens" as this section is the heart of her project. Look for the many instructive examples of photographic analyses, including the "before and after" photos, the use of props and backdrops, lighting choices, a discussion of clothing and acculturation, as well as "the Wrensted Touch" a section devoted to her retouching techniques to hide her subject's blemishes or signs of aging. This editorial predisposition is not viewed as a scientific manipulation, but as a desire to gain customer satisfaction and avoid presenting her sitters with physical imperfections. Students will be challenged to discuss how this

photographic manipulations differs from Edward S. Curtis's editing processes as critiqued in Christopher M. Lyman's 1982 *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*. Although both Curtis and Wrensted could be described as portrait photographers, key differences appear to be the economic arrangements (Indians commissioned Wrensted) and her apparent lack of interest in ethnography, "It does not appear that she sought them out except as clients of her photographic business" (p. 124). Thus, Indians as active consumers of visual records emerges as a potent variable in the larger project of historic reclamation. Perhaps we should not look to the moment of colonization (as Sontag suggests and Scherer reports) for the beginning of extensive photographic records of American Indians to become possible, but to the establishment of an economic base allowing Indian people to commission their own visual records. This historical material analysis which Scherer so aptly captures clearly indicates the future direction of the field.

I consider Scherer's important text as a "best practices" manual for its comprehensive research effort, its clear examples of photographic reclamation methodologies and particularly her reliance on and responsibility towards the sitter's descendants – the Northern Shoshone, Bannock, and Lemhi people of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, Idaho.