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Book Review: *Women Photographers of the Pacific World, 1857–1930*

Abstract

Book review: Anne Maxwell, Women Photographers of the Pacific World, 1857–1930, New York: Routledge, 2020. ISBN: 9781032174655, 334 pages, black and white illustrations. Softcover \$USD 48.95.

Keywords: *Photography, gender studies, settler colonialism, pictorialism, ethnography, portraiture, race, landscape photography, Hawai‘i, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada, United States*

Women Photographers of the Pacific World, 1857–1930, part of the Routledge Studies in Cultural History series, provides valuable case studies of settler women’s photography in the Pacific. While not comprehensive in its scope, the text provides a long overdue look at women’s engagement with this technology in the colonial contact zones of Hawai‘i, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and the western coasts of Canada and the United States.

The book begins with a general introduction to the subject matter and is followed by four chronologically ordered sections; the first two are devoted to early women’s settler photography, while the third and fourth address settler women’s involvement with ethnography and pictorialism from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Author Anne Maxwell states in her introduction that the text is a response to histories of photography that have overlooked not only women photographers in general, but especially those who practiced their craft outside of Europe and the East Coast of the United States. She notes that the low value placed on objects and writings related to the lives of women during the period under review is an enduring issue for those studying women photographers, one that is related to western archival and museum collecting practices. As such, the number of women engaged in both professional and private photography during that time is likely much higher than the surviving material record indicates (13).

The book's introduction also highlights several important historical crosscurrents that impacted these women's practices, including the gendered ramifications of new technologies, suffrage movements, changing labor practices, and the particularities of settler colonialism in several geographic, national, and cultural contexts. Maxwell touches on all of these at various points throughout the book, but individually these large-scale topics are each worthy of their own research project. Maxwell's book demonstrates that there are a variety of productive areas for further investigation that sit at the center of women's lived experiences and women's visuality. Finally, the author situates her approach as both historical and comparative, with an emphasis on biography and description as tools crucial to conjuring the everyday lives of these photographers and as "powerful means for reinscribing women in history" (13–14).

Several key similarities between the women at the center of Maxwell's book and their photographic careers are conspicuous throughout the manuscript as a whole. These include the commercial success of these women during a period when it was difficult for women in general to achieve economic parity and thus independence from their male relatives and peers. Maxwell attributes their successes partly to the fact that colonial contact zones often provided women with more freedom from the social strictures placed on them by motherhood and the domestic sphere. Maxwell foregrounds the fact that many of their careers were shaped and, in some instances, cut short because of marriage and motherhood. Among the most interesting points Maxwell raises is that many of these women's photographic styles held a strong appeal to female clientele, suggesting that one way they were able to distinguish themselves within a male-dominated field was by engaging with the interests and concerns of other settler women. Maxwell goes one step further and points out that it is precisely this commercial appeal that often led art historians to discount these women photographers, their technical capabilities, and visual output.

Part One concerns settler women's photography between 1850 and 1880 and includes case studies that focus on Elizabeth Pulman (1836–1900), who immigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand, and California-based photographers Julia Rudolph (1829–1890) and Elizabeth Withington (1825–1877). From this point forward in the book, Maxwell draws heavily on the work of "amateur historian" Peter Palmquist for her analyses of Rudolph and Withington; Palmquist wrote one of the only extensive histories of women photographers in California during the nineteenth century (23). In the case of Elizabeth Pulman, the misattribution of many of her photographs to her husband underscores a lack of scholarly attention (24). Along this vein, the book points to an ongoing issue facing scholars interested

in studying histories of photography and women within patriarchal societies: women have been/are treated as ornamental and their lives as ephemeral. This approach to women and their lived experiences has had an enduring impact on the development of history and art history as academic fields of study.

Chapter Two, on Elizabeth Withington, has a distinctly biographical tone. It and Chapter Three, on Julia Rudolph, are noteworthy for their discussions of these women's technical abilities vis à vis portraiture. Withington, for instance, was noted for creating photographs that were extremely "lifelike" and "spontaneous," despite often using photographic processes which made such effects difficult to render (34, 37). Rudolph appealed to her female clientele by using the vignette process to evoke the composition and atmosphere of Old Master paintings of the Madonna and Child (53).

Chapter Four, on Elizabeth Pulman, is the most conceptually-driven chapter in Part One, especially as it relates to Pulman's Māori portraits. Of the three photographers that this section addresses, Pulman was the only one to photograph the Indigenous peoples of her new home. Maxwell begins her discussion of Pulman by presenting key historical facts that would have impacted Pulman's work, including her arrival in Aotearoa New Zealand at the height of the land wars (67). Withington and Rudolph did not photograph Native people in California largely due to fact that settler colonialism in that area, unlike New Zealand, proceeded with targeted massacres and the removal of local tribes from their traditional lands prior to these women's arrival in the region. Māori people were dispossessed of their land through the machinations of British settler colonialism, but they were not removed to reservations and missions as was the case in many parts of the United States. These varied levels of engagement with the Indigenous populations in the locations these women settled stands out as one of the main comparative differences in the book. While Maxwell's focus is not on the differences of settler colonialism based on geography, the book does foreground the importance of comparative processes and the varied—and often ambivalent—uses that media like photography were put to in colonized places.

Maxwell's visual comparison of Pulman's Māori portraits to her husband George's portraits of Māori chiefs is an interesting point in this chapter (68). Maxwell argues that, unlike her husband, Pulman depicted her Māori sitters in more relaxed and introspective ways. Her sitters also tended to appear in contemporary clothing with less emphasis on things like their *moko* (tattoos), suggesting that Pulman, in contrast to her husband, was better able to capture their humanity and that her images were not necessarily intended to suit the needs of Euro-American audiences (74–79). While intriguing, Maxwell's argument

would have benefited from elaboration, including more comparative examples and analysis between Pulman's portraits and her husband's, as well as an examination of how the New Zealand government's purchase of Pulman's portrait negatives and subsequent use of her images in the tourist market complicates these claims (81).

The case studies in Part Two of the book focus on Hannah Maynard (1834–1918), Abigail Cardozo (1864–1937), and Margaret Matilda White (1868–1910), who were all active from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. In this section, Maxwell notes that Maynard, White, and several of the photographers discussed later in the book had more interaction with local Indigenous peoples, but their approaches to them as photographic subjects varied. Chapter Five, on Hannah Maynard, is notable for its discussion of her extremely modern approach to photography, including her use of photomontage and double exposures which anticipated the techniques of later art movements including Surrealism and Dada (109). As Maxwell situates her work, it is among the most imaginative approaches to photography among this group of women. Similarly, Maxwell highlights Cardozo's modernist aesthetics, especially the way her portraits drew from the tenets of Impressionism (133). As with the earlier case studies in the book, both women seem to have been overlooked by the scholarly community because of their commercial appeal.

In Chapter Seven, Maxwell singles out Margaret Matilda White as the only photographer among those discussed whose work offered a challenge to the tenets and values of settler society in Aotearoa New Zealand. Maxwell indicates that White may have had a greater sense of how her own society had negatively impacted Māori communities. She states that White's use of a realist photographic style was intended to critique her society's approach to Indigenous people, as well as people with mental and/or physical disabilities (143). The author's analysis within this chapter raises issues surrounding the implications of cross-cultural dressing, the returned gaze of the "other" in photographs and their ability to subvert possession by the viewer, and the power dynamics of photographic representation within settler colonial spaces (155–156). The chapter stands out for its ability to connect the biographical details of White's life and practice to the larger stakes of photographic practices in settler colonial spaces, and provides a strong entry point into the second half of the book.

Part Three concerns the period between 1903 and 1930, and looks at the work of Caroline Gurrey (1874–1927) in Hawai'i, Laura Adams Armer (1874–1963) in the southwestern United States, and Emma Freeman (1880–1927) in and around Eureka, California. As a whole, this section delivers an important

investigation of the intertwined nature of early ethnographic practices with modernist art movements like pictorialism. While the concept of salvage ethnography and the recognition that the resulting photographs of Indigenous peoples are imbued with settler romanticism are well established, Maxwell's argument that pictorialism was intertwined with the former is a more recent development. It certainly calls into question the place of such artistic movements within anthropology, and their capacity to produce images of Indigenous communities that are simultaneously—with the impact of systemic racism and generational trauma brought on by colonialism—sympathetic yet discordant. This is especially clear in the chapter on Armer's work among the Hopi and Navajo. Maxwell presents Armer's own words—as well as those of her son, reflecting on his mother's self-identification with aspects of Navajo culture—as supporting evidence that Armer cast herself in the role of a Native informant, one who, Maxwell claims, thought of herself as having come to an understanding of the “essence” of Navajo religious beliefs (206, 210–211). Armer did this without acknowledging the power dynamics at play between herself and the Indigenous communities she worked with and the weight that settler colonial history would have brought to bear on these relationships.

The fourth and final section of the book addresses the persistence of pictorialism in settler women's photography in the Pacific, long after the movement had gone out of vogue in Europe and America's East Coast. In this section, the case studies discuss the works of Mina Moore (1882–1957), May Moore (1881–1931), Anne Brigham (1869–1950), and Una Garlick (1883–1951). While there are short, isolated excerpts on women and landscape photography in the chapters on Elizabeth Withington and Julia Rudolph, this section provides the most sustained discussion of the topic. Chapter Eleven discusses May and Mina Moore's successful business photographing celebrities. Despite working in the commercial market, the sisters' techniques and keen sense of lighting gave their portraits an aestheticized quality that jettisoned them to fame in Australia. The final chapter in Part Four, on Una Garlick, explores how concepts of the picturesque became shaped by colonialism in places like Aotearoa New Zealand (300).

Overall, *Women Photographers of the Pacific World, 1857–1930* has a great deal to offer readers from diverse disciplines, including art history and visual culture, history, and anthropology, and Maxwell's volume provides readers with a plethora of pathways and questions for further research.

Emily Cornish is pursuing a PhD in the history of art at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation is a comparative analysis of the ways chiefly women from Hawai'i and Aotearoa New Zealand engaged with photography during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and used this technology as tool for innovative self-expression and maintaining cultural continuity in the face of settler colonialism.