The Native Roots of Modern Art: Rereading the Paintings of Leon Polk Smith

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Rereading the Paintings of Leon Polk Smith

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You can't explain a painting. It explains itself, if you give it a chance.
Leon Polk Smith, *Artdeal*

In 1983 Serge Guilbaut published a book with the provocative title, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art.* No one had to open the book to know that the author thought New York had probably "stolen" the idea from somewhere in Europe – at least, no one operating from the Eurocentric perspective that has long been the "default option" for thinking about modern art. Slipping automatically, often unconsciously, into this perspective, the casual bookbuyer who picks up Guilbaut's volume might think the relocation of the Parisian avant-garde to New York makes perfect sense, as does the idea that individual artists working in New York during the 1940s and 1950s would look first and foremost to European "masters" for their inspiration. In many ways he or she would be correct. Yet in other ways that assumption would gloss over the intricacies of creative expression, replacing it with a simpler myth of Europe as the exclusive wellspring of avant-garde art.

What is often neglected in this Eurocentric scenario is the multicultural nature of New York as a place, and the notion of "American" artists as individuals. The reduction of "modern art" to having a purely Western trajectory has led to misreadings that have compromised our understanding of modern art in general and more than one artist in particular. Sometimes the artist has offered his or her own correction to this narrowness of vision. In the mid-sixties the Sioux painter Oscar Howe expressed his frustration with audiences who could not see his cubist paintings as both Native and European in ancestry. More recently, scholars have sought to set the record straight and broaden our understanding of the roots of modern art. In two separate but equally important works, Ann Eden Gibson and W. Jackson Rushing have shown the hidden dependence of the New York avant-garde on non-Western artistic forms, es-

pecially on American Indian art.[1] No waggish scholar has followed up Guilbaut's classic with a book entitled "How New York Stole at Least Part of the Idea of Modern Art from Native America," but the general idea has begun to take root. Today few scholars would doubt that the New York art scene in the era of Pollack and Gottlieb borrowed heavily from non-Western traditions.

With this general principle established, what remains to be done is to reclaim individual artists, along with their paintings, sculptures, and drawings, and reassess their contribution from a multicultural vantage. To this end I will examine the work of abstract painter Leon Polk Smith (1906–96), who spent the first third of his life in Oklahoma and the rest in New York City. For many reasons that I will soon describe, mixed-blood Indian artists such as Smith were often reluctant to draw too much attention to the Indian elements of their lives and work. I want to reinterpret Smith's work in light of his Indian background and experiences, something that no critic has explored in depth, and show how much of his Indian experiences made their way onto his remarkable canvases. Rethinking the nature of this artist and his work allows us to appreciate his accomplishment in its full richness, rather than in one narrow sense, and such rethinkings are the responsibility of the culture critic. As Pierre-Félix Guattari has written, "We do not stand before a subjectivity already given, fitted or packed; rather we are called to produce it – being is above all becoming, event, production. All dominant subjectivity is constructed to prevent this alternative."[2] What follows, then, is a counter-hegemonic reading of an artist whose "Indianness" has been minimized in the effort – sometimes his own – to fit neatly within a Euroamerican context.

Leon Polk Smith grew up in a particular climate of creativity in Oklahoma where he lived for the first three decades of his life, and much of that climate was Indian. He was born in 1906 near the town of Chickasha in Indian Territory, just a year before it became part of the new state of Oklahoma. Both of his parents, William Elliott and Samantha Pauline, were "part Cherokee," as the artist pointed out in one of his final interviews.[3] His parents had migrated from the original Cherokee homeland in eastern Tennessee, just before the land rush of 1889.[4] "When my folks went to the Indian Territory in the 1880s," he recalled, "there weren't so many white people there. There were many more Indians than there were whites."[5] The second of nine children, Smith was brought up on ranches and farms of the west-central Oklahoma countryside, an arid terrain with patches of trees and gentle hills as well as great expanses of flat, tall grass prairie. Chickasha was on the western end of the Chickasaw tribal lands, and its name was probably a misspelling of the tribe that had ceded much of the land for a town that sprouted from dust, mud, and nothingness just after 1900.[6] An hour southwest of Oklahoma City towards the tribal head-

quarters of the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache, Chickasha has not changed much from the way it must have looked to Smith in the late teens and twenties. The wide muddy streets of the old downtown have given way to paved roads and a few shopping centers, but many of the same structures remain in place in a town that saw its aspirations peak sometime in its first three decades of growth, before settling into a more humble pattern of development during the depression.

Indians near Chickasha, like in much of the rest of Oklahoma, did not live apart from whites on reservations. As Smith remembered, "The Indians with whom I grew up, the Chickasaws and Choctaw, weren't given a reservation. They were given individual tracts of land." Because of the proximity of Native peoples in his household and community, Indian traditions were very much a part of the fabric of Smith's early life. Many years later he reflected on the importance of the Indian aspect of his youth:

> Say someone in the Indian family's house a mile away was sick. We would hear that they were going to have a powwow there. What does that mean? That means that they would sing and dance for the person to get well. And we were always free, or invited, to attend. And maybe some of their children were some of my closest friends and we wouldn't think of not attending. Many of those events I experienced. Or it could be a celebration of a wedding or someone's return from a trip. The Indians had their own way of celebrating these events in song, dance, and decoration.[7]

Living between Indian and Euroamerican cultures, Smith said that "I had friends both red and paleface," and we can see the intermingling of cultural influence in his own family.[8] In addition to his parents both having mixed ancestry, one of his older brothers married a Chickasaw woman when Leon was a child, and she taught Leon her native language.[9]

While he was a teenager his family moved to Ada, Oklahoma, in Pontotoc County, where most of the residents were Choctaw or Chickasaw; he ended up at the local college, East Central State. He began as an English major in the hope of becoming a teacher, but during his senior year he discovered his interest in painting. "I had never been to a gallery nor a museum," he recalled. "I had never seen an original painting nor an artist up to that time." Taking a course in studio art changed all that. "Early in that term I felt I had always been an artist."[10]

His first years as an artist were tentative due to the intrusion of the depression and the economic necessity of taking on work as a laborer, but in his spare time he painted "cows and oil wells and Indians and so forth."[11] His earliest style was a blend of surrealism and expressionism that he refined at Teacher's College, Columbia University, where he earned his master of fine arts degree

in 1938. After graduation he returned to Oklahoma for a year, but soon realized that his career would be limited there and took a teaching position at Georgia Teachers College in Collegeboro. Life in the Deep South under Jim Crow did not suit him any better, and after two controversy-filled years on the faculty he resigned in protest over the school's segregationist policies. Most of his subsequent career was spent in New York, though he retained an abiding connection to Oklahoma and the Southwest in general. Awarded a Guggenheim Foundation grant in 1944, he spent several months traveling through Oklahoma and New Mexico, expanding his understanding of nonobjective art and working on new paintings in a more "geometric" abstract style. After that sojourn he settled in New York City, where he taught at Mills College and gained increasing attention as an artist, until 1958 when he was able to devote himself full-time to his painting.

Smith's career had taken him to the East Coast, yet in spirit he never completely left the Southwest and the influence of Native cultures he knew there. When he was a student at Columbia and was introduced to the European modernism with which he is so often linked, he understood what he was seeing from his unique cross-cultural vantage. For example, he first encountered the geometric style of Mondrian in 1934, and saw it as extension of the Indian art of the Southwest, including objects of everyday use such as the baskets and blankets he knew at home as a child.[12] For Smith, the abstraction he saw in Mondrian was also present in Indian art, and in a sense it was a universal visual language. "In the Indians' philosophy, thinking, and way of talking or telling stories, so much detail was left out, so much was abstract," he once said. Smith admired this quality of laconic abstraction in the art of Indians, of a few European or Euroamerican artists, and of those artists, such as himself, who were working somewhere in between.[13]

His respect for simplicity of form, devoid of extraneous brushstrokes or imagery, was cultivated during his three decades in Oklahoma, on the southernmost Great Plains and the edge of the arid Southwest. From the mid-1940s on, a distant echo of the Southwestern landscape resonated through Smith's mature work. Arthur Danto said as much when he observed the "emotional shape" of the geometry animating the images in Smith's paintings. Danto claims that our sense of geometry comes from the landscape we know as home, from "the nature of space constructed as human habitat." Geometry, or at least our perception of it, is rooted in place; it "presupposes a primordial situation in which we stand firmly on the ground."[14] For Smith this original ground was in Oklahoma and New Mexico. When he arrived in New York City for the first time in his mid-thirties, he wrote that the city "revealed its physical self to me through the mountains and the canyons of the Southwest."[15] Danto suggests that even the most lofty abstraction can be rooted in physical place; he notes

that Mondrian's mature paintings do not "correspond to sites and spaces in the Netherlands in the way in which Vermeer's *View of Delft* refers precisely to a specific estuary in that Dutch city. It nevertheless remains altogether possible that Mondrian's paintings preserve, in some magical way, the feeling of Holland."[16] Although Danto does not explain how Smith's work might "magically" preserve the feeling of Oklahoma, this is a natural extension of his argument. He does observe that Smith came to New York with his Southwestern "spatial memory" intact – "you can take the boy out of the country, but it is not so easy to take the country out of the boy."[17] The same could be said of "Indian country," for the artist invariably intertwined the "Southwest" with "Indianness" in its influence on Smith's artistic development: "I grew up in the Southwest where the colors in nature were pure and rampant and where my Indian neighbors and relatives used color to vibrate and shock."[18] Interestingly, his very first reviewer was attuned to this quality. Having seen Smith's first solo show at the Uptown Gallery in New York in 1941, the critic for *Art News* wrote, "His quite original style bears more traces of the Southwest than of the Deep South for it has breadth of feeling and assurance rather than a tendency to be tradition."[19]

Yet art critics have not explored these traces of the Southwest in any detail. With rare exceptions, critics have placed Smith's geometric abstractions in the tradition of European and Euroamerican modernism, rather than looking for the deeper, often concealed contexts that I am probing here. In the Eurocentric reading of his work, Smith comes across as the talented, if underappreciated heir to the geometrical abstraction of the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. "Working on a large scale," wrote Lawrence Alloway, "Leon Polk Smith poses lessons from Mondrian with an exceptional and grand colorism."[20] Alloway also described Smith's 1946 painting *Gray-Yellow-Black Exchange* as "derived ultimately from Mondrian's plus-and-minus works of 1914," and stated flatly that "Smith's art developed out of European geometric art."[21] Smith often encouraged such interpretations and even claimed that Mondrian was his "great influence."[22] Yet critics have been slow to see past this one facet of his work and have focused on it to the exclusion of other avenues of investigation. In a 1993 interview done in conjunction with the Brooklyn Museum's retrospective of Smith's work, the first two questions hone in on his debt to Mondrian. "Many look to your work and say that you come from Mondrian," the interviewer begins, forgetting that Smith literally comes from Oklahoma and culturally from Native America, at least in part. In the same exhibit catalog, the director of the Brooklyn Museum chimes in that "it was Mondrian's work above all that persuaded [Smith] to devote his career to geometric painting."[23] Even a scholar as penetrating as Arthur C. Danto, in his brilliant short article, "Leon Polk Smith and Real Space," seems to embrace this limited reading when he writes that

"the determining moment of Smith's life as an artist came with his encounter with the work of Piet Mondrian."[24] No doubt the Eurocentric interpretation is a valid way of seeing Smith's work, yet even the artist was wary of its dominance.

Toward the end of his life Smith grew tired of the way critics saw him on the trail of the celebrated Dutch painter, oblivious to all else. After a 1993 interviewer returned several times to Smith's debt to Mondrian, the eighty-seven-year-old artist objected: "The fact is that writers have made too much out of Mondrian with me, and I've resented that. Because he's the only one ever mentioned. It's almost as if he laid an egg and I hatched out of it, and no, I don't like that."[25] Yet, just three questions later the interviewer asks about a series of Smith's paintings entitled *Homage to "Victory Boogie-Woogie"*: "Can you comment on those paintings and their link to Mondrian?" With a hint of reluctance, Smith acknowledges the reference to Mondrian, but points out that he also "wanted to make them as much my own as possible."[26] In doing so he evokes the second major trope in the Eurocentric reading of Smith's work, one which the artist used to shape the public understanding of his art: individualism.

In their book on contemporary Native American art, Ed Wade and Rennard Strickland put Native artists into four categories: historic expressionism, traditionalism, modernism, and individualism. Because Smith has not been known as an Indian painter, he was not considered in this book, but I suspect he would have been slated into the final category. Much has been made of the modernism of Smith's work, but Strickland and Wade probably would not have categorized Smith in their "Indian modernist" camp, which they reserve for artists who "experiment with mainstream contemporary techniques, yet remain visually identifiable as Native American art . . . [and] portray Indian motifs and themes."[27] Smith did not usually produce work that fit this description, at least in the prevailing interpretation of his paintings. However, he often was celebrated as a true individualist, someone who seemed blessed with a rare level of autonomy. For Strickland and Wade the "individualist" is an Indian artist whose work is "indistinguishable from mainstream contemporary art . . . the artist's allegiance is to self, not to movements of ethnic identification."[28] As if to support such claims, Smith said he was a "much freer person" than anyone he had met in the art world, and a 1979 *Artforum* article on Smith even enshrines his individualism in its title: "Leon Polk Smith: The Completely Self-Referential Object."[29] A more recent critic, Carter Ratcliff, has gone so far as to cast Smith as an "isolato," a term from Melville that describes someone who has left the "common continent of men" to live on "a separate continent of his own." Ratcliff even claims that Smith's "isolation is the basis of his integrity as an artist."[30]

Without question, Smith must have felt some isolation as a gay interracial modernist arriving in mid-century New York. Yet the term "isolato" denies one salient point of connection: his experiences with and as a Native American. Smith and his admirers protest too much in their effort to distance him from certain historical contexts and to situate him in a creative vacuum where his work can be judged "on its own terms" (often a euphemism for Eurocentric readings). Something rings slightly false in these protestations, even when they come from Smith himself, because his work is rooted deeply in his multicultural experiences in Oklahoma and New Mexico. I will demonstrate the extent of these roots, which remained in place no matter how often he or his admirers pulled his paintings away from them.

In refusing to foreground his Indian identity in the art world, Smith was avoiding the difficult problems of "primitivism" as it was manifest in the 1940s and soon thereafter. In *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, Ann Eden Gibson shows how an artist's ethnic identity played an all-too-important role in determining how their production was viewed during that period, and that "Indian artists" were sometimes loathe to describe themselves as such because they feared that Euroamerican audiences would fail to see beyond their own expectations of "primitive art."[31] Not infrequently these expectations were based on some ugly assumptions. If Western art was the work of original, individual geniuses, primitive art was intuitive, spontaneous, and savage.[32] If Western art was daringly intellectual and innovative in its creativity, primitive art was what the "other" did naturally. Such racist assumptions of "primitivism" were demeaning to Indian artists, even one as much in the ethnic closet as Smith. He protested that "there is no such thing as primitive art – Africa, Precolumbia – these were highly developed aesthetics, not intuitive superstitions."[33] But, given the widespread acceptance of primitivist ideology in the art world as well as in U.S. society in general, it makes sense that Smith would not volunteer for inclusion as a token savage in an imaginary racist landscape. Gibson argues that Smith downplayed his Indian heritage because he worried that "any association with an inaccurate interpretation of 'primitive' art would misrepresent himself and his art."[34] The struggling young artist was light-skinned enough to pass as white, so why complicate matters by playing into the prevalent ideology?

His other option might have been to present himself as an interracial individual, though this was difficult given the awkward cultural position of interracial individuals in U.S. society. What place would an interracial artist have in the dichotomous identity politics of the New York art world of the 1940s? An artist could be Euroamerican or could be something else, but being two things at once was difficult to sustain in the (white) public sphere. The racial logic of Euroamerica, with its "one drop" ideology of hypodescence, left no room for

a subtle métis sensibility such as Smith's. Rather than embracing dual allegiances, he may have decided to choose one camp and stick to it in his public presentation of self.[35] Trying to straddle the two seemed untenable when being part Indian was viewed the same as being fully Indian – art that was "part Indian" was simply seen as "Indian art."[36] Had Smith advertised himself as an interracial artist in mid–twentieth century New York, the "Indian part" of his creative work would have become its dominant characteristic in the minds of white viewers, many of whom would have challenged the "authenticity" of his Indianness as it appeared on the canvas. After all, his ostensibly "modernist" canvases did not "look Indian" as the public had come to expect it.

By forfeiting the Native aspect of his work, especially early in his career, Smith was free from such dilemmas – and so were his predominantly white art audiences. Art buyers and critics were glad to accommodate Smith's preference for situating himself in an exclusively Euroamerican framework because it fit the reductive racial ideology of the period. Such ideology was projected onto artwork as a discursive site, where it was expected to provide "artificial resolutions to real contradictions in society" – such as those about racial identity – and to utilize "the ambiguities and tendencies of the process of signification itself in order to effect its apparent closure."[37] Closure and ambiguity are key words here: when it came time to "appreciate" art in relation to the identity of the artist, audiences expected closure and rejected ambiguity. Closure required discrete categories, and "mixed-blood" or "interracial" were too ambiguous as designations.

The ambiguity came, in part, from the question of authenticity, always the great obsession of the primitivist mindset. Whenever art becomes racialized as something other than white in the United States, these questions arise with considerable force and it is easy to understand why an interracial artist might want to avoid them altogether. By choosing not to define himself as an "Indian artist," Smith was able to have his work viewed without the baggage of ethnic authentication, without well-meaning critics asking, Is it really Indian? Is it sufficiently Indian? Such questions about the "authenticity" of Indian art have long been an unfortunate burden imposed on Indian artists, and they carried particular weight during the 1930s and 1940s, the heyday of primitivism when Smith was maturing as an artist. In more recent decades scholars can state with confidence that "there is no single Indian painting style," yet for much of Smith's early career white audiences expected "real" Indian artists to work in a limited style that was recognizably Indian.[38]

Because "Indianness" was freighted with troublesome concepts such as "primitive," "exotic," and "authentic," Smith may have chosen not to foreground his Cherokee background, as Ann Eden Gibson has argued. In her thoughtful examination of the ethnic politics of abstract expressionism, Gib-

son focused on Smith and established the importance of his multicultural experiences. Yet no one has shown how Smith's Indian background actually shaped his work, making it more than simply "modernist," more than simply "individualist." Is his work, in fact, "indistinguishable from the mainstream" as "individualist Indian art" is defined? I doubt that it is. The reality of identity, in art as in life, is more complex than categories such as "modernist" or "individualist" can hold; in the case of a painter like Smith, his experiences in the Southwest among various tribes and his own background as a mixed-blood Cherokee informs his art in a way that does distinguish it from the mainstream. If we know where to look we change what we see, and looking at multicultural artists such as Smith may require greater breadth of vision and shifting depth of focus for us to appreciate the full complexity of what is going on.

Toward the end of his life Smith seemed more open to seeing his art through a multicultural lens. For example, in 1993, when asked about the influence of Indian traditions or art on his life, he said:

> Without going through the works, that's not an easy question to answer. I was always impressed by the high quality of aesthetics in design and craftsmanship in their art. In 1938 I did my most abstract painting to date. It was called *A Stroll in the Forest*, and I think that was very much influenced by Indian art – the simplicity of it and the directness of it, and not putting in anything that wasn't needed. Nothing there but these vertical tree trunks. I also never had any inhibitions about color. I was never afraid of it. I think that freedom of color came out of my relationship with Indians.[39]

Later in the same interview Smith made a revealing critique of Willem de Kooning, who he said "was always too complicated – put in too much, a lot that was not needed. And he had a hard time abstracting." Without consciously making the connection to the words he had spoken a few minutes earlier, Smith finds fault in the great European modernist using the very terms by which he thought Indians excelled.

Ironically, no one judged Smith on these terms until recent critics such as Ann Eden Gibson. When Smith first began to receive the attention of the art world, he was invariably set in a Eurocentric context with not even a nod to other possible interpretations. Championed simply as a modernist "master," Smith started to receive some national recognition with the rising popularity of nongestural abstraction in the 1960s, when color field, minimalist, op, and hard edge painting were making inroads on the dominant position of abstract expressionism.[40] To several important critics he was a pioneer among "hard edge" American painters, such as Robert Indiana and Ellsworth Kelly, two of the young stars of the sixties art scene. ("Hard edge" described work which

"combined economy of form and neatness of surface with fullness of color without raising memories of earlier geometric art.")[41] In the same vein, Nicholas Calas celebrated Smith in his influential survey of this fertile decade in the visual arts, *Images and Icons of the 1960s.*

Despite such promising signs of critical appreciation, Smith never received full credit for his accomplishment, even in the strictly Eurocentric framework. While he watched as other painters such as Ellsworth Kelly became famous for work that sometimes seemed derivative of his own, Smith persevered on the respectable margins of art world recognition, where he was highly appreciated by a few critics, dealers, and buyers though not by a wide audience. Many critics who followed his later work as it emerged were taken with its power and intensity. In 1981 Lawrence Alloway hailed him as an "extraordinary colorist," two years after Ted Castle enthroned Smith as the "father of abstract art as we know it today . . . a modern master."[42] "His is an achievement of heroic proportions," Castle wrote in *Artforum*, "but as yet he is an unsung hero."[43] Perhaps not until the Brooklyn Museum mounted a major retrospective of Smith's work in 1996 did he begin to receive the attention he deserves, though even then he was presented to the world in mostly Euroamerican terms, as a great modernist who had been wrongly denied his place in the Western canon. What remains to be done, then, is to re-envision Smith's individual paintings as the product, at least in part, of his Indian experiences and identity.

Rereading Smith's paintings in a Native context does not take any great leap of imagination when one is open to seeing it. In fact, the neglect of Smith's "Indianness" becomes even more telling when we realize how much of it he put into plain view. His painting titles, for instance, were often taken from his experiences in the Southwest with Indian peoples, though no one seemed to notice. "I do know most of my paintings in the fifties [had] Indian names that the general public wouldn't know the meaning of," he once said.[44] Throughout his career, many of his works took their titles from his youthful experiences: *Midnight Pyramids (Midnight Teepees)* (1986), *Red Wing* (1979), *South West* (1959), *Get Along Little Doggies* (1943), *Square Dance* (1990) – and applied them to apparently nonobjective "modernist" canvases. Smith's refraction of Indian and Southwestern experience through modernist conventions extends far beyond the titles he chose and continued on the canvases he created.

For example, a sense of the land of the Southwest is evident in paintings such as *Twilight* (1990), a broad rectangle of blue with two black slopes across the bottom, suggesting a remote landscape that any night driver of I-40 through New Mexico would recognize. *Black White Repeat* (1953) is the traditional two-color pottery of the Southwest transposed to a modernist canvas, just as his tondos such as *Black-White Duet with Red* (1953) are not simply

round canvases but also evocative of the decorated shields of the Plains tribes. This quality is most striking in a work generally seen as nothing more than a clever riff on Mondrian, *Homage to "Victory Boogie-Woogie" #2* (1946–47), a round wooden piece with a 29.5-inch diameter (approximately the size of a shield) with bold red, yellow, blue, and black squares on a white background. Other paintings bring to mind the Navajo blankets woven in Arizona: *N.Y. City* (1945) and *Center Columns, Blue-White* (1946) are typical of a number of Smith's paintings that resemble blankets used as wall-hangings. The dimensions, the colors, the interwoven quality of the lines all suggest, quite strongly, the blankets that Smith knew as a child in Chickasha and during his adult travels in New Mexico.

I am not the only person to see Indian blankets in Smith's paintings. In a 1974 *Art in America* article entitled "Leon Polk Smith: Dealings in Equivalence," Lawrence Alloway mentioned that "some of Smith's all-over paintings seem like a mixture of plus-and-minus Mondrian and Indian blankets."[45] When I read these words in the library not long ago, I thought that at last someone was going to explicate the Native aspect of Smith's work – until I read the next sentence, in which Alloway decides to follow the well-worn Eurocentric path: "However, it is the Mondrianesque rather than the Native American source I want to follow here as a fundamental topic in Smith's development." Once again Smith is boxed in by the rectilinear grid of Eurocentric criticism and our understanding of his work is only half complete.

Sticking to the path of Eurocentric interpretation has also led viewers to overlook the deep spirituality of Smith's oeuvre, thereby ignoring a sensibility that ties him to traditions of religious art not just in Europe but also in Native America. Late in his life he expressed frustration that few critics mentioned the "spiritual quality of [his] work" (which he saw as the essence of his art), not, as one critic suggested, his "isolation." "If you don't feel that there's a very strange quality in [art] that can only be called a spiritual quality, then . . . you are missing practically the whole thing and are following a fad."[46] His frequent use of round canvases might even come from some residual sense of the power of the circle or the sacred hoop in some Native cultures, further contributing to the spirituality of his painting.[47]

Foregrounding the Native aspect of his work also changes the political implications of his paintings. If we view his canvases as pure abstraction in the Euroamerican sense, work that refers to nothing but itself, the politics of Smith's work is diminished or disappears entirely. Yet I suspect that a lifelong civil rights activist with progressive ideas, such as Smith, was not so dedicated to abstraction that some political content could not have seeped into his work, especially when it came to Indian issues. For example, an important early painting entitled *OK Territory* (1943) is more than a formal experiment with

geometry – it is about geography as well (not surprising, given that Smith had just produced a similar painting of a large shape with two dots: it is a map of Oklahoma with Ada and Oklahoma City marked). On a background of black, yellow, and white, a variety of squares and rectangles are arranged like elements on a flag. Four colors suggest the four cardinal directions, just as five main patches of color might signify the five tribes that were "removed" to Oklahoma in the nineteenth century. If we look at Smith as a "Cherokee artist" with deep connections to the "Five Tribes" (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, Creek), then this painting begins to seem like a visual representation of allotment, or the geography of conquest, with long strips that resemble the area of Oklahoma known as the "Cherokee strip" and arbitrary boundaries marking the end of each racialized piece of territory.

If we continue to look at Smith as a "Cherokee artist" with a political voice, his work also begins to reveal a fixation on race – a natural interest for someone born of mixed heritage and occupying a liminal place in U.S. society. One of his earliest works is the semirepresentational *White Woman* (1940). On a tall rectangular canvas stands a curvy white figure, with a head like an empty bowl, situated on a background grid of black and red. Ironically, this work has a later echo in Smith's own *Self-Portrait* (1953), on which a massive, curving white form, not unlike a monstrous bald head (perhaps his own?) overpowers the dark background. The effect is that of a yin-yang illustration in which the yang has conquered some new territory, bleaching the swirling circle of life.

I see another revealing self-portrait of Smith in *Event in Red* (1994), one of his last works. On a tall narrow canvas the basic form of a human being is covered in a brilliant redness without even a minor variation in hue. No brushwork is evident. In the center, bowed to the right, is a single black line running almost the full length of the canvas. The vertical line suggests either an archer's bow or a figure alone against the bright Southwestern sunset, alone in redness, alone in Nativeness. The painting suggests the predicament of the artist: the "Indianness" (I use quotation marks in deference to my own anti-essentialism) is both obvious and easy to miss. It is hidden on the surface, shielded by abstraction, like much of what is "Native" in modernism. I might be teasing out a reference where none is intended (though Smith thought all of his abstractions were referential in some sense), and I realize that Smith made other paintings (*Event in Blue* and *Event in Orange*) the same year.[48] Yet none of these paintings are free from some connection to the Southwest. The round canvas of *Event in Orange* looms large like a fiery desert sun, its surface broken only by three tooth-like brackets, each a mysterious presence – perhaps the steps of a ladder leading up a pueblo dwelling? The rectangular *Event in Blue* offers a blue field divided neatly by two thin black lines, suggesting the cross-hairs of a gun-scope or, alternatively, the four cardinal directions. Somehow in his final

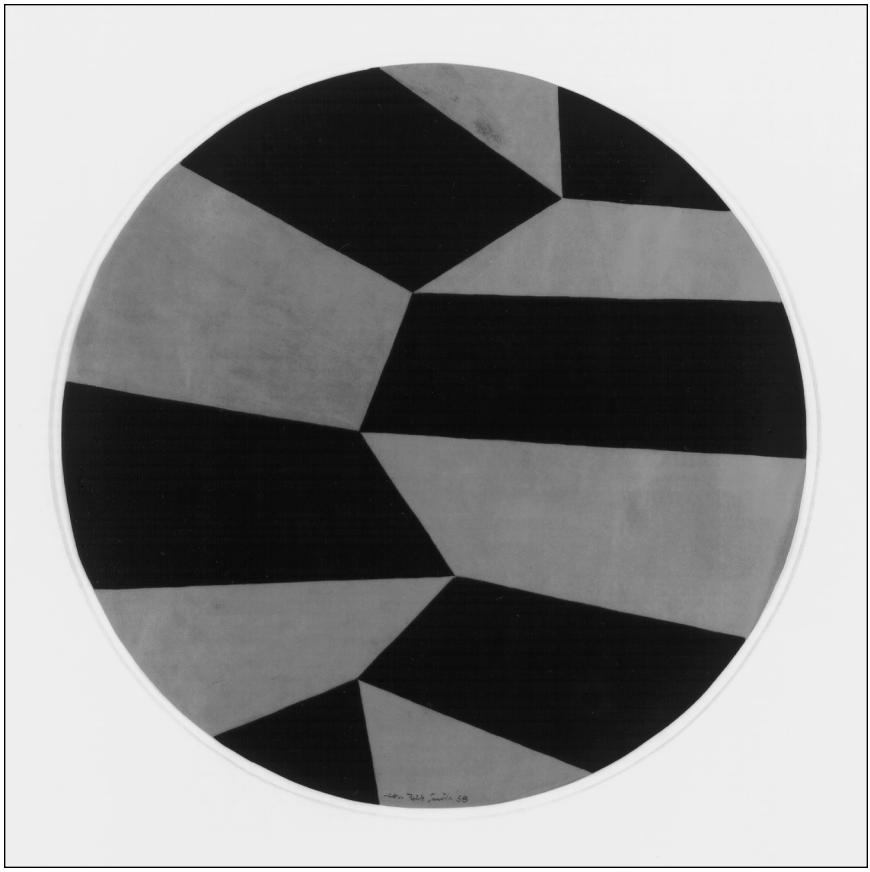

FIG. 1. Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, the University of Oklahoma. Gift of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Speicher Purchase Fund, 1989. © Estate of Leon Polk Smith. Licensed by UAGA, NY.

years Smith was returning to ground zero of his creative life, and I believe this is why we can see the artist himself in *Event in Red*.

Today one of the best places to see Smith's work in its full context is at home in Oklahoma, where his painting *Red Black* (1958) can be found in the Fred Jones Jr. Museum on the campus of the University of Oklahoma. At first glance the painting is presented just as it might have been in 1958 or 1978. For example, the exhibit label puts the standard frame on the artist: "Smith is most often linked with geometric abstractionist such as George L. K. Morris . . . however, he never officially participated in any organized art movement." Again, we learn of Smith as the rugged individualist, indebted only to the school of Mon-

drian, not the product of the very place we are standing. The curators seem to have taken the official line on Smith and extended it without a second thought.

However, if you look away from the labels on the wall and take note of the specific context of *Red Black* within the museum, a different picture emerges. Smith's large red and black painting is not hanging next to Stuart Davis's *Waterfront* (1935) or George L. K. Morris's *Shipbuilding Construction*, on a wall devoted to mid–twentieth century European-American paintings. Spatially it exists quite some distance from these paintings. Just ten feet away is a display case filled with Native American art of the Southwest and West: a Maidu bowl basket from 1920; Pomo baskets from the 1910s; an 1890s olla from Western Apache; and a 1910s Tohono O'ohham basket tray from southern Arizona. Each of these works is marked with beautiful abstract patterns that echo, in some cases almost exactly, the forms in Smith's *Red Black*. Because the curators have given us a subtle thematic placement that encourages a multicultural reading, it requires no stretch of the imagination to see that Smith's work reverberates with the same jagged, almost monochromatic zigzag patterns that can be seen on the Maidu basket. Interestingly, this was not the first time the small Oklahoma museum sought to broaden our reading of Smith's work. In the mid-1990s it laid the plans for a major exhibition that would have shown Smith in his full multicultural context, without shearing off the ambiguities.

Scheduled for 14 June 1996 through 8 September 1996, the proposed exhibition of more than forty large paintings would have been Smith's first one-man show in his home state. Reading the correspondence that emerged during the exhibition's planning stage provides some insight into how Smith viewed his relationship with Oklahoma, with Indianness, and with the art world perception of his work as a multicultural artist during his final years. The early plans for the exhibition went well. Smith expressed his gratitude that Oklahoma was finally giving him the attention he had received elsewhere. In his conversations and correspondence with museum staff, Smith had kind words for the president of the university, David Boren, the former U.S. senator and Oklahoma governor, and for his home state in general. He told one assistant curator who worked closely with him (even visiting him in his studio in New York City), that "I spent forty years of my life in Oklahoma and it has a very warm place in my heart and it is everywhere in [my] paintings. . . . I give all the credit to Oklahoma."[49]

In all his dealings with the Fred Jones, Smith made no secret of his Indianness, and neither did the museum in its publicity plans for the major exhibition. Indeed, all of the drafts of press releases from the exhibit describe Smith as someone who was one-quarter Cherokee and who had grown up where "at least half of his community was Native American."[50] The timing of the exhibition was also relevant. During the 1990s the large summer exhibitions at the Fred Jones were devoted to Native American art in some fashion, so putting up

a show for Smith from July to September would have been understood, at least by those familiar with the museum, as an acknowledgment of his Indianness. The proposed title of the exhibition, "Leon Polk Smith: Oklahoma's Native Son," would have complemented this understanding because many locals, at least, would have inferred both "Indianness" and "from Oklahoma" in the word "Native."

But the exhibition never came to fruition. Smith grew frustrated with the financial limitations of a university museum, perhaps because he was also working with a major art institution, the Brooklyn Museum, on his retrospective at the same time. The Fred Jones budgeted a relatively large sum of money for the exhibition and sought various sources of outside funding, but it could not satisfy the concerns of an artist with an exacting sense of how his large paintings should be shipped, newly framed, and presented. Yet even after plans for the exhibition came to a disappointing standstill, the museum staff remained on good terms with the artist until his death. The curators continued to reach out to Smith, even nominating him for inclusion in the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. Certainly the curators at the Fred Jones thought and continue to think of Smith as an Indian artist. But why did this understanding come so late in Smith's career?

One response is to blame the art world for its prevailing Eurocentrism. However, the failure to accept the multicultural nature of Smith's work is not solely that of the European-American art establishment. We must also look at Smith and ask why he allowed, or even encouraged, this cloistered interpretation of his work for most of his career. I give him a good deal of credit for the way in which he creatively infused Native aspects into ostensibly European-American work, but I am also aware of his shortcomings. Let me explain my view on Smith's positionality in the most explicit terms I can muster.

From a more skeptical perspective on Smith's career, one might argue that he failed to stake his claim as an Indian artist at a time when it could have made a difference. One could argue that Smith sold out to the more profitable European-American art tradition and deserves to remain stuck in that camp, even if he expressed some wistful second thoughts in his later years. This tough-minded point of view has some merit. At many points in his career Smith failed to take the high road, at least as it appears to many of us today, and instead chose a path of less resistance toward success in the Eurocentric art world. I am willing to add Smith's name to the long list of artists who have sacrificed solidarity to their creative visions to gain commercial success. Without question Smith missed some chances to break new ground for Indian artists, to expand the public perception of what "Indian art" could be, in choosing to identify himself most often as white rather than as a multiracial Native American.

This type of "either-or" thinking, in which Smith chooses whiteness and

abandons Indianness, is imprecise in dealing with cultural production and identity formation. Scholars dealing with such topics need to be more nuanced in their interpretations. The reality is that Smith's work and life, like that of most multicultural individuals, was "both-and," that is, he was heir to Mondrian *and* he was heir to Indian artistic traditions in the Southwest; he assimilated *and* he resisted. Instead of viewing Smith in the most uncharitable light and accusing him of selling out, we could see the ostensible assimilation of an interracial artist as a potentially subversive move – as "infiltration" rather than "assimilation." For example, in her essay "The Two Lives," Chickasaw poet and novelist Linda Hogan describes "infiltration as resistance."[51] I believe we can apply this idea to Smith's work and see how the process of infiltration can coexist with assimilation just as well as Indian and European-American influences coexisted on Smith's canvases.

Skeptics may raise an eyebrow and wonder if I am offering an overly sympathetic interpretation. In response I would say that I share the preference of the poet Czeslaw Milosz for expressing "sympathy for people who are caught, without regard to their wishes, by systems which are alien to them, and who tried to save themselves by whatever means they could."[52] Trapped in a racist, homophobic society, Smith had to make difficult decisions about his public identity. Some of his decisions may disappoint us today, but the Indianness of this significant artist was present in his work whether he intended it to be or not, whether he always announced it to the world or not. Even when he seemed to minimize the Indian aspects of his work, the influence of Indian cultures still made its way onto his canvases, sometimes blatantly, sometimes cryptically.

It is also important to remember that scholars know too little about the nuances of multiracial identity formation to make stern judgments about Smith or other multicultural artists. As one scholar has pointed out recently, "There is little research addressing how and why American Indians make their identity choices."[53] With this in mind, rather than condemn Smith for whatever internalized racism might have shaped his public persona, I celebrate him for infusing his work with the various influences of a life lived among both Euroamericans and Native Americans. I celebrate the confluence of cultures that created modernism in general, rather than accepting as its only source the narrow channel of artistic emigration from Western Europe to New York City. I celebrate what artists of Smith's generation were able to accomplish given the limitations under which they were laboring.

I hope this is the context in which multicultural modernists like Smith will be viewed in the years ahead, rather than using the limited interpretation they have received in the past. Emboldened by the work of Ann Eden Gibson, Jackson Rushing, and other scholars, mainstream art critics are already beginning

to view Smith's work through an ethnic kaleidoscope instead of the narrow lens of European modernism, thereby allowing "both-and" thinking into their assessments. For example, in his brief review of Smith's posthumous show at the Washburn Gallery in New York in fall 2000, Stephen Westfall became one of the first critics to discuss both sides of Smith's heritage without diminishing either.[54] Westfall argues that geometric abstraction aspired to divorce the canvas from history and place, leaving little room for the kind of autobiographical, historical, and even political readings that I am giving to Smith's work. Yet, according to Westfall, "this seemingly idealist mode can unexpectedly accommodate profoundly quirky and personal components and be linked to specific places and period styles." Looking at Smith's *Cattlebrand* paintings of the late forties and early fifties, Westfall recognizes how Smith was "intent on integrating tribal decorative patterns . . . into his Mondrian – and Bauhaus-influenced planar abstractions," adding an "otherness," blending colors in a way that could be "Attic or Navajo," and in a sense "discover[ing] his Classicism in his backyard."[55] It only took sixty years for the art establishment to start seeing the whole of Smith's work.

Although critics have been slow to perceive the Indianness of his work, Smith was always quick to spot it in the paintings of other European artists. For example, he saw Mondrian's geometric forms as a natural analogue of the Navajo basket weaving he had seen during his travels as a young man in the Southwest.[56] In making this observation about his "great influence," I suspect that he was in some ways also talking about his own work, which evokes the same Southwestern patterns but from direct experience. Such circuitous, even unconscious, connections come with the territory of multicultural individuals who live between cultures and might even develop what we could term a multicultural aesthetic or sensibility, a form of what Gregory Stephens calls an "interracial consciousness."[57] Even at times when he minimized his Indian background as a part of his identity, Smith's art was always a reflection, not a rejection, of his mixed-blood identity. His art is the art born of an interracial consciousness, in which the struggle for influence and allegiance is often a turbulent personal and political process.

Smith died in 1996, the year of his major retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum; that same year Arthur C. Danto had high praise for his accomplishment as an artist: "His long life enabled him to compile an astonishingly varied oeuvre sparkling with formal adventure but nonetheless stabilized by a constancy of purpose altogether unparalleled in twentieth-century art. It remains, in the present landscape, an anomaly – a rich vein of Modernism in the Postmodern era."[58] Danto goes on to celebrate that "this robust, optimistic, affirmative work should at last be getting its due," a sentiment I share, though I have tried

to show how his work is less "anomalous" when understood in its full multicultural context. Part of the celebration must include an awareness of the Indian experiences which are woven throughout his elegant paintings. Only then can we understand the real depth of Leon Polk Smith's accomplishment as an interracial artist working in more than a single cultural tradition.

NOTES

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1. Gibson argues that for artists in the United States, "interest in Native American culture was widespread during the 1940s" when it replaced African sources as "the primitivism of choice." Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 65. See also W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), xi. These are the first significant book-length studies of the role of Native American art within modernism; some articles on the subject had appeared previously, the most significant of which was Kirk Varnedoe's "Abstract Expressionism," in *"Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, William Rubin, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1984) 615–60.

2. *The Guattari Reader*, Gary Genesko, ed. (New York: Blackwell, 1996), 214.

3. Carter Ratcliff, Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Arthur C. Danto, and John Alan Farmer, *Leon Polk Smith: American Painter* (Brooklyn NY: Brooklyn Museum, 1996), 19.

4. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 19, 38.

5. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 18, 19, 38.

6. The only other artist of note to come from Chickasha was born a year later, in 1907. Art professor at the University of Oklahoma and longtime chair of the art department of Drake University, Leonard Good was a realist painter of Midwestern landscapes until his death in 2000, just three years after Smith's. For more information about Good see the exhibition catalog published in 1998 by the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha, Oklahoma. USAO's art gallery hosted a retrospective of Good's work from 19 September 1998 to 15 January 1999.

7. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 19.

8. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 61.

9. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 38.

10. Ted Castle, "Leon Polk Smith: The Completely Self-Referential Object," *Artforum* 18 no. 1 (September 1979): 37.

11. Castle, "Smith: Self-Referential Object," 37.

12. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 61.

13. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 19.

14. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 28.

15. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 29.

16. Danto's essay on Smith appears in Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 19.

17. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 32.

18. This Smith quotation comes from an unpublished statement, ca. 1961, quoted in Lawrence Alloway, "Leon Polk Smith: Dealings in Equivalence," *Art in America* 62 no. 4 (July–August 1974): 58.

19. This *Art News* review is quoted in Ted Castle's excellent appreciation of Smith's work, *Smith: Self-Referential Object*, 36.

20. Lawrence Alloway, "Leon Polk Smith: Large Abstract Paintings, 1969–1981," *Arts Magazine* 56 no. 4 (December 1981): 149.

21. Alloway, "Dealings in Equivalence," 58; and Lawrence Alloway, *Topics in American Art since 1945* (New York: Norton, 1975), 71.

22. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 15.

23. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 5.

24. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 27.

25. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 16.

26. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 16.

27. Rennard Strickland and Edwin L. Wade, *Magic Images: Contemporary Native American Art* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 53.

28. Strickland and Wade, *Magic Images*, 5.

29. Castle, "Smith: Self-Referential Object," 35. The title refers to Smith's work, but it carries an ambiguous second meaning about the artist himself.

30. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 1.

31. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 60.

32. Ironically, in 1974 Smith was dubbed "essentially intuitive" in a short article that also noted Smith's Indian background. See Alloway, "Dealings in Equivalence," 58. I should clarify that I am not intimating that the esteemed critic was unconsciously racist in this instance; however, I do think the connecting of "intuitive" with "Indian" art is often more than coincidental and is worth noting for further scrutiny.

33. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 63.

34. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 63.

35. "People who do not neatly fit into a clearly defined race category threaten the psychological and sociological foundations of the 'we' and 'they' mentality that determines so much of an individual's social, economic, and political experience in the United States," writes Cynthia L. Nakashima in "An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed Race People in America," in Maria P. P. Root, ed., *Racially Mixed People in America* (Newberry Park CA: Sage, 1992), 162. Nakashima's article includes a fascinating discussion of race theorists of the 1930s and 1940s who dubbed multiracial individuals "marginal men" (171–72).

36. On this point Nakashima quotes a leading historian of popular culture repre-

sentations of Indian people in the United States: "Curiously enough, fiction writers generally saw more difficulties in being part Indian than in being all Indian, primarily because of the consequences of living in two worlds." R. Stedman, *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 198.

37. The term "artificial resolutions" comes from Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 145.

38. Strickland and Wade, *Magic Images*, 102.

39. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 19, 20.

40. For more on the competing strains of modernism see John Alan Farmer, "Leon Polk Smith: A Life in Abstraction," in Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 47.

41. The definition of "hard edge" comes from Lawrence Alloway, "Systemic Painting," in his *Topics in American Art since 1945* (New York: Norton, 1975), 79, as quoted in Castle, "Smith: Self-Referential Object," 39. Alloway's volume includes an essay on Smith from 1968 (67–75).

42. Alloway, "Large Abstract Paintings," 150.

43. Castle, "Smith: Self-Referential Object," 38, 39. Interestingly, in 1996 Polk was named the fifty-eighth greatest artist of the twentieth century by *ArtDeal Magazine*. See http://www.artdealmagazine.com/20thc_greatest_artists.html

44. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 17.

45. Alloway, "Dealings in Equivalence," 58.

46. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 24.

47. Regarding the "sacred hoop" in Native traditions, Paula Gunn Allen points to the Plains tribes' idea of a medicine wheel, "a concept of . . . singular unity that is dynamic and encompassing, including all that is contained in its most essential aspect, that of life." See Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 56.

48. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 20.

49. All information on the preparations for Smith's show come from the files in the administrative offices of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma. I am grateful to Dr. Eric Lee, the director of the museum, and Gail Kana Anderson, assistant curator, for granting me access to these files.

50. When Smith's *Red Black* came to the Fred Jones in 1989 as a gift from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, it received minor coverage in several Oklahoma newspapers, some of which noted Smith's Indianness in their thumbnail sketches of his career.

51. Linda Hogan, "The Two Lives," in Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat, *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 244.

52. Czeslaw Milosz, "Milosz's ABC's", *American Poetry Review* 2.1 (January–February 2001), 11.

53. Devon A. Mihesuah, "American Indian Identities: Issues of Individual Choice and Development," in Duane Champagne, ed., *Contemporary Native American Cultural Issues* (Walnut Creek CA: Altamira Press, 1999), 13.

54. Just barely more than a decade earlier, *Art in America*'s review of Smith's show at the Ruth Siegel gallery did not mention his Native connections at all (*Art in America*, April 1987).

55. Stephen Westfall, "Leon Polk Smith at Washburn," *Art in America* (December 2000), 118. Westfall is an abstract painter who also writes about art.

56. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 61.

57. See Gregory Stephens's fascinating book, *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

58. Ratcliff et al., *Leon Polk Smith*, 37.