

Disrupting White Settler Colonial Narratives:
Leslie Marmon Silko's use of Photography in *Storyteller* and *Sacred Water*.

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Abstract

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This history of photography of Indigenous communities and individuals in the United States of America is plagued with power imbalances, violence, dehumanization, appropriation, and cultural inconsistencies that stem from White settler colonialist practices. In Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* and *Sacred Water*, Silko responds to this history through the composition, organization, and placement of her Indigenous photographs within her text. The composition of the photographs re-centers Indigenous voices through camera angle, perspective, and form. The placement within the texts mimic Laguna Pueblo oral storytelling and worldview. The organization of the photographs possibly respond to and subvert the history of invasive ethnographic studies and the tradition of *surveillance*, *humanist*, and *commercial photography*.



1.

Family Photographs

In my household my father controlled the narrative and definition of art. The walls of my home were decorated with paintings and prints from Artists with a capital A. There were no family photographs in the public areas of our home, they didn't fit my Dad's definition of interior design. It wasn't that we didn't have pictures, they were just hidden away in albums and boxes in the basement. My dad was always recording or taking photos of our minor achievements, a spelling bee, a dance recital, a first communion, but they weren't fit to hang next to the Hundertwasser.

Other photographs did hang on the walls. In fact it is difficult to understand my paternal family without photographs. Mi Abuelito, my Dad, and all my Uncles were obsessed with photography. My Dad's landscape photographs of Nebraska, Colorado, and the Southwest were allowed to hang in the upstairs hall. Uncle Mike photographed flowers and the 70s in San Francisco. Uncle Robert his cars and his motorcycles. Mi Abuelito was always taking photos of us, grandkids. After he died we found secret albums dedicated to each of us in his basement. Quiet, somehow unobtrusive candid photos of me hugging Abuela, of my sister wearing one of her wigs, and images of my cousins stealing sips of stale Coca-a-cola. My grandfather's pictures marked the silences of our family with an urgency I didn't yet understand.

I came to realize, or rather my mother explained to me, that sometimes when you don't have much, or rather when the little you have is unstable you try to cling to it—to create proof that you have family, that you were loved, that there were these good moments. It is no surprise that my grandparents, former migrant farm workers and laborers, lined their entertainment center with the college graduation photos of their grandchildren.

On my White mother's side almost all of the family (300+ people) live in a twenty mile radius of each other and those that live outside the radius come back every three years for a family reunion. For the Alfrey's, community is a very physical space: Louisville, Nebraska, population 1,261, 96.7% White. No one in the family is forgotten, because everyone knows our stories, stories repeated every Sunday after church. No story is forgotten, because of multiple storytellers. After years of sitting on the laps of grandmothers, great aunts, and female cousins at family reunions, I too am one of the storytellers. If someone starts a story I can tie it off, no break in the yarn.



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On my father's side, my sisters and I are the grandchildren and great-grand children of Mexican migrant farm workers forced to move with the seasons. No banker would give them a loan to start their own farm. No office would give them a job to help them put down roots. Most schools wouldn't even give them an education, because the White farmers, and White bankers, and White teachers, didn't want them to put down roots, just wanted them to top the sugar beets and move on. To compound the loss of community my paternal grandmother died when I was eight. Our family storyteller was gone and there was no one to pick up the thread of the tale.

Community and the laps of great aunts, wise women, and curanderas are scattered to the corners of the earth, to haciendas in Guanajuato, Mexico, to farms in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and to the far away walnut groves of Modesto, California, so far from my center hall colonial in one of the Whitest neighborhoods in Nebraska. My creative thesis is a weary migration to gather up the parts of myself hidden in their voices.

When community is transient because home is transient, often proof of community is found in the faded family photographs stored in boxes in a basement, photographs filled to their borders with people. Landscapes are secondary when the thing you most want to cling to is the person you are forced to leave. I never understood my father's desire for landscapes. I ached to see myself on my own walls for I never saw myself outside them in White Omaha, Nebraska. I didn't want place I wanted people. I wanted proof.

Little Weather Glass

My collection of nonfiction essays, my *autohistoria-teoria*, is searching for that proof. An *autohistoria* "describe(s) the genre of writing about one's personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir; and an *autohistoria-teoria* is a personal essay that theorizes," (Anzaldúa 2009, 578). In my essays, I use my training for an amateur kickboxing fight in Seattle in the summer of 2018 after the death of mi abuelito, a boxer himself, to analyze, theorize, and rewrite my family's history and stories, creating an alternative to White settler colonial narratives of Chicana families and identities. Following the days of the Aztec calendar, I weave together my kickboxing fight training, family photographs, recipes, poems, stories and essays to investigate issues of naming, grief, loss of identity, loss of community, racism, colorism, gender roles, body issues, art, and valuations of worth.

I knew I could not represent the truth of these stories and issues in an inspiring bildungsroman with a Hollywood finish, because my family doesn't belong to that White settler colonial narrative. My family's stories are woven and unraveled, voices wrap around voices, and images bleed into each other in a non-linear form. To try and apply a prescriptive narrative would be to whitewash these stories even further.

I was unfamiliar with collage, *autohistoria*, and the use of images in memoir so my advisor had me read Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*. I loved it, but I wondered why it seemed so easy to me. I thought, Silko should be doing more with the images. She should exclude me more. This isn't literary enough. It wasn't until my advisor explained to me that maybe the reason it was easy for me, when it is not easy for many of her students, was because it was meant for me.

I never expect to be included in literature. To me literary merit meant I had to be excluded. I have been trained to expect exclusion. I thought I had read extensively, but no one ever had ever shown me myself in a book, let alone my family. A large part of seeing myself in Silko's *Storyteller* was in the images. The stories were similar to ones I had heard, but the images were almost identical to ones in basement boxes. Who doesn't have an image of their abuelito in a corn field?

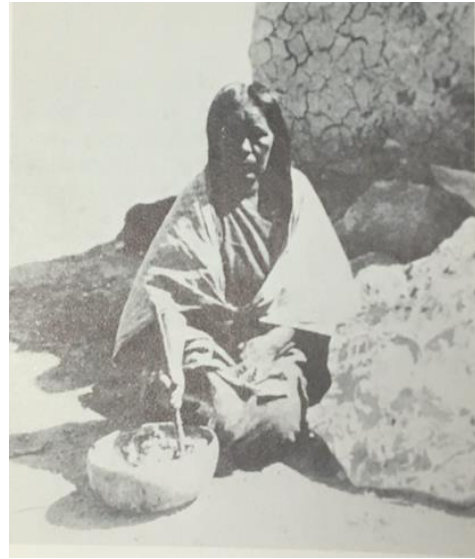
This essay is an investigation in how Silko disrupts White settler colonial narratives through her incorporation of family photographs in *Storyteller* and landscape photographs in *Sacred Water*. I then consider how use of images in my own *autohistoria-teoria* can similarly disrupt White settler colonial narratives about Chicax identity.

“The Indian With a Camera”: A Brief Historical Context

In her essay “The Indian With a Camera”, Silko explains that the Pueblo people’s aversion to photography and the camera didn’t arise because of their alleged belief in its soul-stealing ability (a common White narrative), but rather from the lived experience of the intrusion upon their privacy, and its use to prosecute and punish practitioners of sacred rituals that had been suppressed and outlawed by the United States government (Silko 1996, 176).

Richard Frost, professor of Native American Studies at Colgate University, states that photography came to New Mexico and the Pueblo people, in the years leading up to the Civil War via the daguerreotype (Frost 2009, 2). Erin Younger, Hopi photographer and historian, also confirms this, stating that after the United States won the Mexican-American War and took control of the now American Southwest, in 1848 Hopis were exposed to railroad surveyist and documentary photographers (Masayesva 1983). However, it wasn’t until after the American Civil War when less cumbersome photography equipment and an increase in railroad tourism allowed amateur photographers to gain access to the peoples of New Mexico and Arizona. This increase in photography of Indigenous peoples by White and non-Native photographers solidified the tropes and clichés of the White settler-colonial narrative about Indigenous peoples of the Southwest (Faris 1996, 17-23).

Between 1880-1915, ethnographers and tourists rushed to Hopi, Pueblo and Navajo reservations, drawn by railroad tourism and popular travel journalism. Photographers would often interrupt daily life, take photos without consent, and disrupt sacred spaces to capture what they perceived as exotic images that reinforced the narrative of the Otherness of Indigenous peoples of the Southwest (Masayeva 1983, 17 Figure 6). The number of interruptions dramatically increased during the U.S. Great Depression due in part to the rise in *humanist*



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photographers such as Dorothea Lange, and in part to the government sponsored surveillance photography required for the Meriam Report (1928), a report that would go on to influence the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (Masayeva 1983, 34).

Edward S. Curtis is one of the most well-known and reproduced photographers from this period. His *Humanist* and *Commercial* photographs were rediscovered in the 1960s and 1970s reaffirming the ongoing White settler narratives of Indigenous people in the White American consciousness. Curtis' photographs, widely considered authentic representations due to their mass distribution in the form of picture postcards, were filled with cultural details that were invented or appropriated from other tribes by the photographer to fulfill the Western audience's pre-conceived mental image of the Native American (Vizenor 1998, 157). Christopher Lyman, who critically examined Curtis' work in his book *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*, says, "the composite image of 'the Indian' that

Curtis bequeathed to us was a product of his consciousness and was designed to appeal to the consciousness of his audience” (Lyman 1982, 6).

An example of this White settler consciousness is demonstrated in Silko’s essay “Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit”. In this essay, Silko recounts her elementary school experience where White tourists would stop by during recess to take photographs of the children. Tourists would exclude her from the image, asking her to move aside, because of what they perceived as her part-White features. Silko is of Laguna Pueblo, Chicano, and White descent. Her image didn’t confirm or conform to the narrative the tourist wanted, which resulted in her erasure from the photograph and from the narrative the tourist was constructing (Silko 1996, 63).

In *Navajo and Photography*, John C. Faris, a non-Native former anthropology professor at the University of Connecticut, argues that photographs, especially photographs of Indigenous peoples need to be carefully and critically deconstructed. That often what is more important is outside the frame and under the editing (Faris 1996, 139). He encourages the viewer to strip away the tropes and clichés that continue to propagate White settler colonial narratives of Indigenous peoples, and to create greater space for self-representation through Indigenous photography (Faris 1996, 15-19).

Faris applies the categories of *surveillance*, *humanist*, *commercial*, and *alternative* photography to the photographs of Indigenous peoples (Faris 1996, 42). *Surveillance* photographs, according to Faris’, when applied to the photographs of Indigenous peoples include documentary (official, unofficial, advocacy), anthropological (archive, museum), and casual (early tourist, traveler, worker in area); *humanist* photographs portray Indigenous peoples either sentimentally (vanishing race, lost culture, family of man) or as victims (dead, dying, non-functional or dysfunctional in White perspective); *commercial* photographs often depict either

Indigenous aesthetics (color/silver/weaving/turquoise, fashion—body parts), landscapes (people as extension of trees, rocks, scenery) and studio (personal, postcard) images. (Faris, 1996, 42)

Surveillance, humanist, and commercial photographs when applied to photographs of Indigenous people are all often photographs taken by White or non-Native photographers. A single photograph may fall into more than one category. Faris defines *alternative* photographs as either photographs in which a different voice is privileged or are photographs taken by Indigenous photographers (often include political, resistance, silences, effacement, defacements) (Faris 1996, 42). (This is different from the common use of *alternative* in photography analysis. *Alternative* photography is most commonly photography that uses a non-traditional photo printing process and does not refer to content). The use of the word *alternative* by Faris to describe Indigenous photography is problematic, because it still describes Indigenous photography and narrative from a White settler colonial perspective and gaze. While, yes, Indigenous photography presents a narrative that is different from the artificial narrative crafted by a White settler colonial consciousness it is not secondary to it. The term *alternative* implies a secondary status and minimizes the vision, experience, and authority of Indigenous photographers on their own narratives. Faris might describe Silko's photographs in *Storyteller* and *Sacred Water* as *alternative*, but this essay will not.

Silko's use of photographs in *Storyteller* and *Sacred Water* are partially responding to a history of invasive *surveillance, humanist, and commercial* photography. The photographs and text images in *Storyteller* and *Sacred Water* strip away the tropes, clichés, and assumptions of a non-Native reader and viewer to more aptly demonstrate the Laguna Pueblo narrative, consciousness, and worldview. Silko shows what is outside the tourist's frame.

STORYTELLER

“The Indian with a camera is an omen of a time in the future that all Euro-Americans unconsciously dread; the time when the indigenous people of the Americas will retake their land,” (Silko 1996, 178).

Storyteller weaves together poems, stories, memoir and photographs of the Laguna Pueblo people. The photographs in *Storyteller* retake the land by retaking the narrative about Laguna Pueblo land, people, and worldview. The twenty-six black and white photographs were taken by Lee H. Marmon (Silko’s father), and sixty-seven prose pieces are by Silko, including the Index “Notes to Photography”. The choice to use her father and grandfather’s photographs instead of creating her own new photographs points to the importance of family tradition of storytellers, an idea that is underscored by other form aspects of the text.

Storyteller physically resembles a family photograph album with the width of the book greater than the height. This formal choice immediately signals the importance of photography and the familial community to the reader. Rather than focusing on a central linear narrative Silko organizes her memoir like the pictures in the Hopi basket. The Hopi basket is both the first text-image of *Storyteller* and the organizing principle for the entire book.

There is a tall Hopi basket with a single figure
 Woven into it which might be a Grasshopper or
 A Hummingbird man. Inside the basket are hundreds
 Of photographs taken since the 1890’s around Laguna.
 My grandpa Hank first had a camera when he returned
 from Indian School, and years later, my father learned
 Photography in the Army. (Silko 1981, 1)

This opening poem does multiple things. Firstly, it prepares the reader for the Laguna stories (Grasshopper & Hummingbird man), Laguna photographs, and family traditions the reader will encounter in this book. The contents of the basket disrupt the stereotyped narrative of

the “Indian” and show what is outside this limited lens. Secondly, it grounds the reader in the organizing principle of this book, the Hopi Basket. Thirdly, it positions Silko and this book as part of a family tradition of photographers and storytellers. The opening poem acts as a preamble to *Storyteller*.

If the first poem acts as a preamble, then the first main story begins with a family baby portrait. A reader might assume that this image is of the author, or potentially the central protagonist. This isn't the case. The first image is Silko's great-grandparents and her grandfather, Hank, who was named in the opening poem, but the reader is not given this information until the Index. Grandpa Hank is mentioned on the opposing page, but the main subject of the first poem is Hank's sister-in law, Aunt Susie, who is an incredibly important and central figure to *Storyteller*. For Silko, Aunt Susie is one of the main storytellers and Hank is one of the main photographers of the Laguna Pueblo community (Silko 1981, image 1).

By having the focus of the first poems and photographs be on extended family and not Silko herself, Silko underscores the interconnectedness between the communal stories and the individual stories. This interconnectedness is an important part of the Laguna Pueblo worldview (Silko qtd in Evers). According to Cynthia Carsten, religion specialist at the University of Arizona, “Silko intentionally rejects the literary conventions of Euro-American genres because they are inherently unsuited to the inscription of Pueblo worldview and lived experience. In addition, these conventions have historically served to maintain and propagate ideologies of domination over American Indian cultures” (Carsten 2006, 107). A White bildungsroman autobiographical form's emphasis on an individual destroys the heritage of communal groups and creates a false narrative of that group. Silko both centers and decenters herself in her own

memoir. By teaching the reader how to read the photographs and forms of *Storyteller*, Silko is also teaching the reader how to understand Laguna Pueblo communal dynamics.

Image 4 reinforces this idea of relational and communal identity. This photograph depicts Aunt Susie as a large figure resting a hand on a fence in the forefront to the vast New Mexico landscape with a small half-naked Silko in the bottom left of the frame. Silko is always in relation to others' bodies and others' stories. Even though she is presumably the protagonist of her memoir she refuses to conform to literary conventions that don't allow for the complexity of



communal memory and communal based identity. It's as if Silko is saying, "This is my story. It is not about me," and at the same time saying, "This is not my story, and it is about me."

The image of Aunt Susie emphasizes the importance of Silko's community of storytellers, especially women storytellers, and honors their voices. In the middle of the second poem, which details the events of Aunt Susie's life, her time at the Carlisle Indian School, her education, marriage, and community impact as a school

teacher, writer, and storyteller, the image of Aunt Susie formally interrupts the poem. In doing so, Silko makes Aunt Susie's image and voice from the past present. The "photographs in *Storyteller* remind her readers of the human and historical absences that written translations of oral literature represent." (Adams, 133). This content and the form of the photograph itself resists the spectacle of Curtis' composite Indian. Aunt Susie wears a simple button up dress with her

hair back in a bun. If Curtis were taking this portrait Aunt Susie would be clothed in a misrepresentation of tribal affiliations and aesthetics and she would be diminished in the frame. Silko's use of photography preserves both "poems and poet in history and in oral literature" (Adams 134). By having Aunt Susie's image interrupt the poem it recreates the oral tradition that Aunt Susie would be present for this story retelling and emphasizes her part in the web of stories.

In White and non-Native photography of Indigenous peoples, people of all ages are photographed from above and are rarely photographed directly with the exception of a few studio portraits. Whether the model is sitting or standing the downward angle of the camera lens belittles the subject. Individuals seem small compared to their surroundings and to the photographer. This angle choice is a strong indication of the power imbalance between



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photographer and subject (Faris, Figure 13). In Image 4, Aunt Susie is photographed by her nephew, Lee Marmon, using an upward angle. Aunt Susie looks large and statuesque in front of the landscape.

Silko uses this upward angle again and again in *Storyteller* to emphasize the importance, power, and position of the people in the portraits. Rather than seeing a stylized ideation of a storyteller, sitting on the ground in a diminished form, the reader sees a powerful and protective woman, comfortable in her landscape and comfortable in her power in relation to the people around her including the photographer outside the frame. Aunt Susie is not framed in the tropes

or aesthetics of *humanist* or *commercial* depictions of Indigenous people. In this image, Aunt Susie is tall and fills the photograph. She is not dwarfed by a downward camera angle nor by a wide shot landscape view. Aunt Susie's size, and composition within the frame of the photograph suggest that she is the main subject, but her gaze is focused on Silko. The viewer's eyes follow the gaze of Aunt Susie and it is again centered on Silko even though she is not the main subject of photograph or poem.

Silko applies these same compositional choices to the group portrait in photograph 22, which appears after "A Geronimo Story". "A Geronimo Story" takes place in the early 1880s when the Marmon Battalion fought with the Apache. It focuses on scouts that are supposed to be tracking Geronimo, but these scouts enjoy deer hunting and talking about Geronimo's escapes. The story instead becomes a story about the power of Geronimo as a storyteller, the rituals of storytelling while on a deer hunt, and the use of storytelling to cement a communal bond.

The image depicts a line of twelve unnamed men, hats removed, in suits, sports coats, and button ups. All are wearing name tags and are directly facing the camera. Some smile some don't, but the men fill the width of the



frame. This camera angle is centered at their chests, but still slightly looking upwards. Similarly, to the portrait of Aunt Susie, this group portrait demonstrates the different power dynamic and relationship of Indigenous photographer/ Indigenous model than White or Non-native

photographer/ Indigenous model. The index tells the reader that these twelve men, forty-three years earlier, were riders in the Apache Wars. The lack of captioning or explanation about its position after the Geronimo story, forces the reader to continually readjust how they perceive the relationship between the images and the text.

The landscape photographs Silko uses in *Storyteller* also respond to the White settler colonial narrative about Indigenous communities' relationship with land. Common depictions of the American Southwest by White and non-Native photographers include images of small towns and outposts against vast expanses of country. The angle of the camera, often, looks down from an overlook on to a small valley community, a group of horses, or a group of covered wagons. Ansel Adams' "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico 1941" is a famous example. Adams photographs the town of Hernandez, New Mexico from up on a ridge, using a downward angle. Like in portraits, the downward angle minimizes the Indigenous communities often portrayed in the foreground and does not accurately the area or demonstrate the relationship of the Indigenous community to the land portrayed. The town, the mountains, and valley seem lesser in stature to the viewer/photographer on the ridge, only the moon is Adams' equal in this photograph.

In *Storyteller*, the majority of landscape images, also taken by Silko's father, Lee Marmon, do not include a manmade building for scale, which defies White Western photographic conventions and understandings of visual perspective. The images use a



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low upward camera angle which instead of making a community look small in the foreground,

emphasizes the smallness of the photographer. This is beautifully shown in Image 13 and Image 23. Looking at both of these images I feel incredibly small in comparison to the landscape. I am no longer a conqueror over a vast valley, but rather is a supplicant at the base of the mountain and this change in relationship between photographer/point of view and landscape more accurately represents the Pueblo relationship to landscape (Silko 1996, 265-269).

The communal relationship to landscape and story is echoed in the structure of *Storyteller*. The sections of this book are gathered and arranged like the photographs within the Hopi Basket mentioned in the opening poem. As I said earlier, the sections are not organized linearly, but are rather organized in a web-like structure with each story, image, or poem unravelling from the previous piece (Silko, 1996). Stories are told, retold, and photographs interrupt poems and stories. Each piece is unspooled bit by bit to create a complex spider web of stories (Silko, 1996).

While I was doing research at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center (IPCC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico the importance of photographs as the center of these web of stories became readily apparent. Mike Canfield, Laguna Pueblo and President and CEO of the IPCC, when setting up an exhibit of staff chosen pieces, came across a print of Marmon's photograph of Apache War veterans in the archives. In a placard next to the image he details how he showed this print to his uncle and his uncle told him stories about the people in it, specifically Canfield's great-grandfather Gowityea, whom Canfield himself is named for, but had never seen a photograph of (Canfield, 2019). The photographs in *Storyteller* act as the waft of the communal weaving. They hold the different threads of the design together, pulling the stories within the book and living history of stories outside the book together.

“The oral tradition depends upon each person listening and remembering a portion and it is together—all of us remembering what we have heard together—that creates the whole story,” writes Silko (Silko 1981). When the photographs interrupt a poem or story it is like another voice adding a portion of information to the story. Photographs 14 & 15 that come at the end of *Estoy-Eh-Muut* and *The Kunideeyahs*, are an example of interjecting voices, giving examples or possibilities of the cliffs that *Estoy-Eh-Muut* was stranded on before Spider Woman rescued him.

“*Storyteller* epitomizes a metacritical text; every piece can be read for the story it tells and for its story about storytelling and the role of stories” (Krumholz 1999, 64). The repetition and variation of stories in *Storyteller*, specifically the Yellow Woman, also named Kochininako, stories are an example of this. The Yellow Woman stories often focus on her romantic encounters with Ka’tsinas or her use of her femininity to outwit or overpower others. The first story of Yellow Woman is a first-person narration and focuses on a contemporary variation of the Yellow Woman stories. The next variation of Yellow Woman comes in the story of Yellow Woman and Buffalo Man. This story seems to be a story told by the grandfather of Yellow Woman in the first story. The third iteration of Yellow Woman where she is first named as Kochininako in a story told by Silko’s Aunt Alice. The act of retelling and the variations of Yellow Woman’s name speaks to the unspooling and web-like oral tradition Silko describes. One story of Yellow Woman leads to another which leads to another and continues on throughout the piece in different variations. Yellow Woman is both a traditional oral tale, a present contemporary Laguna Pueblo woman, and a connector between multiple generations of women. The story of Yellow Woman is one example of how *Storyteller* blends the personal and the communal, the story and the metastory.

The final narrative section of *Storyteller* is “Coyote Holds a Full House in His Hand” in which Coyote, a Laguna man, tricks a Hopi woman, whom he believes lead him on, by pretending to be a medicine man who can cure her ill relative. His cure requires him to rub a salve on the thighs of all the woman in the pueblo. The “Coyote” story is one of only two narratives that use a male storyteller. After the final story a large portrait of Silko in the desert fills two seemingly final pages. This landscape-portrait combines both elements of Indigenous landscape photography and Indigenous portraiture. The image seems to reside in the middle of these forms. Silko is centered within the frame, and within the background of the desert. The angle and composition of the photograph creates an equivalency between photographer and subject and subject and background. Silko isn’t close up or magnified in the photograph like in most portraits, nor is her body used to place emphasis on the desert. The photograph lacks Western perspective and because of this the scale of the landscape behind Silko and her dog is undefined. This photograph seems like a succinct conclusion to the text and text-images of *Storyteller*, but this photograph isn’t. There are more photographs and more text images to be discovered. Another photograph, unnumbered though, of a pair of men in front of a convenience store follows Silko’s landscape portrait and on the opposite page the index “Notes to Photography” begins.

The index contains details such as specific locations, names, and some years, but it also reveals new full stories about the photographs that reframe the stories originally used in the main section of *Storyteller*. For example, there is a new story about a Presbyterian minister and how Silko and her siblings used to make fun of his car and even a new unnumbered photograph of a group of men and boys (Silko’s Great Grandfather, Grandpa Hank, uncles, and father Lee Marmon), added within the index.

Information is only revealed through reflection or hindsight. The form forces return and re-discovery, just like the repetition of oral stories. This form “casts long shadows both forward and back, lending different or complementary shades of meaning to those preceding them and offering perspectives from which to consider those that follow... is part of the dynamic oral tradition” (Silko 1988, 22). Only through the index is in the information that most of the photographs were taken by Silko’s father and grandfather revealed. The use of an index might mimic and perpetuate White ethnographic forms, but Silko plays with that form by making the index part of the structure. She withholds part of the story with a lack of in-narrative captioning, the information about the Apache War veterans for example. For viewers who are seeing something unfamiliar, who are outside of the Laguna Pueblo community, she is forcing the viewer to pause and confront their own outsidership. At the same time the index “Notes to Photographs”, serves to create new stories, such the and further reinforces the oral storytelling culture of the Laguna Pueblos rather than actually act as a traditional index.

This push and pull between the photographs and the text forces the reader to carefully examine the text as images. The camera functions as a tool of survival for Indigenous peoples, allowing them to survive “as the people they believe themselves to be” (Silko 1996, 176-178). Silko’s text also works in a similar fashion. Her texts become portraits and landscape images as depictive and representative as the photographs taken by her father and grandfather. “I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become,” writes Anzaldua when she discusses autohistoria. (Anzaldua qtd Pitts 2016, 359). While Silko isn’t writing myths, she is writing her story, the stories she is, and the stories she wants to become. Silko with her words and her family photographs, honors her people and herself by recentering their narrative against surveillance, humanist, and commercial photography. Through her text, Silko becomes a

storyteller like Aunt Susie, and also a photographer like her grandfather Hank, and her father. Silko's textimages act as her own photographic addition to the Hopi basket.

SACRED WATER: NARRATIVES AND IMAGES

Sacred Water, published in 1994, is similarly an *autohistoria*, but instead of an emphasis on storytelling its main theme is water and the Laguna Pueblo relationship and worldview to disappearing land and water rights. It consists of a blend of creative essays (forty-one narrations) and black and white photographs (thirty-nine pictures) of the area around Silko's Tucson home. *Sacred Water* is Silko's only attempt at self-publishing. Silko decided to self-publish *Sacred Water* after being exhausted and frustrated with the book tour of *Almanac of the Dead* and her limited power in editorial choices (Coltelli 22). In "As a Child I loved to Draw and Cut Paper," Silko elaborates: "[I] wanted to have complete control over the book, from the design of the book to the actual sewing and gluing of the book...I want a book that is unmistakably my book, a book that only I could make" (Silko 1996, 169).

The first editions of *Sacred Water* were printed, sewn, glued, and distributed by Silko under her own publishing company, Flood Plain Press. These black and White photographs were copied on a home copy machine. According to Silko, "[the] resulting image is more stark and abstract than traditional photographic print which tends to dominate the page regardless of the text" (Sayler 92). When choosing photographs for *Sacred Water*, Silko was interested in "photographic images that obscure rather than reveal...photographs that don't tell you what you are supposed to notice, that don't illustrate the text, that don't serve the text, but that form a part of the field of vision for the reading of the text and thereby become part of the readers experience of the text" (Silko 1996, 169). (This same impetus, for photographs to be integral to reader

experience, might have informed the use of photographs in *Storyteller*, even though Silko has not explicitly stated this.)

A second edition of *Sacred Water* was reprinted in 1994 to make it more accessible to academics and students and this edition used a similar printing and publishing process to other books. The early editions are unique and intimate, with typos and variations. The covers of early editions bear a hand drawn image by Silko of rain clouds, flowers, and toads. In both current and early editions the stark photographs have their own page and the text appears on separate pages. Throughout *Sacred Water*, Silko uses a lot of white space to create wide borders and backgrounds to the images and text.

Some compositional similarities exist between the texts of *Sacred Water* and *Storyteller*. In *Sacred Water* and *Storyteller* Silko tells stories, and tells stories about telling stories, but all of the stories in *Sacred Water* concern rain, water, or the lack of it. There aren't any formal divisions in *Sacred Water*, just as there aren't any formal divisions in *Storyteller*, but themes emerge for a few pages, and then disappear. Clouds fill the first photographs, land dominates the middle photographs, and water the ending photographs.

In *Sacred Water*, linear and thematic patterns begin to emerge in the text as well. In that the first few pages the text focuses on memories of childhood associations with water. The middle portion focuses on how rain impacts people in the community such as flooding of basements, and watering of crop land, not only in the Southwest, but also in Native communities in Alaska. After discussing rain Silko moves on to a discussion of roofs and then more specifically to a pool near her house that provides for animals. This move allows a repetition of toad images from childhood to reappear indicating a circularity rather than a single linearity. This circularity is further emphasized with the almost destruction of the toads and the water by

plutonium and poisonous algae. The water hyacinths return as an image and as heroes cleansing the water into a safe pool again.

In the Author's Note provided at the end of *Sacred Water*, Silko says, "I wanted to major in the visual arts, but I soon realized that years of looking at Pueblo pottery designs and Navajo weaving had made it unlikely that I would ever master the principles of 'visual perspective' needed to make 'realistic' drawings"(Silko 1994, 78). Silko's understanding and representation of visual perspective is one of the ways that the images in *Sacred Water* disrupt White settler colonial narratives about land, water, and people's relationship to them.

While I was able to access *Storyteller* in many ways through the portraits and the family stories included, the images in *Sacred Water* eluded me. I found myself drawn to the text, but pushed away by the photographs. I didn't know how to access this space. A large part of this distancing is due to the visual perspective of the photographs themselves. Silko's images actively reject Western understandings of perspective and this challenged my understanding of photographic forms. By questioning perspective, I began questioning my own relationship to the content and meaning of the photographs themselves, and to question my own relationship to water and land and how it might differ and be similar to Silko's.

Western landscape photography principles are derived from European fine art design principles (Lyman 19). Western landscapes utilize a grounding forefront image to create perspective. For example White & non-Native landscape photographs use a person in situ or tree in the foreground to give perspective and physical understanding of the size, grandeur, and hence importance of a landscape (Lyman 8, 9). In these images the human individual in the foreground is not the main point of focus, but rather is used to call into focus the landscape. Silko's photographs in *Sacred Water* do not contain this element of grounding perspective at all as in the landscape images of *Storyteller*. Without a grounding



8.

person, tree, or rock formation, her photographs seem to lack depth and proportion. The effect of Silko's own visual perspective is different in the different types of landscape photographs. Without a grounding object skyscape feel overwhelming as if the viewer will be swallowed by the clouds, the close-up photographs of flowers seem flattened and two-dimensional, realism

becomes symbolism, this photograph is no longer of a flower, but about the idea of flowers, rockscapes have the possibility of being pebbles or mountains.



This disruption to Western perspective forced me to pause and grapple with the photographs and also with the text. The text doesn't



necessarily underscore or explain the images. Only by questioning and recognizing the unfamiliar perspective does the meaning and continuity of the work become apparent. Silko demands the reader to no longer view or understand water in a White settler colonial perspective, but rather to view water in a Laguna Pueblo perspective, where water is a sacred gift and blessing from the Earth mother and that snakes are not scary evil creatures, but are the messengers of the people to the Earth mother asking for water. The photographs and stories about water are no longer just about water, but are about the Laguna Pueblo relationship to water as Sacred Water (Silko 1996, 272).

One thing that made the research and analysis of *Sacred Water* more difficult than *Storyteller* was the lack of critical essays about *Sacred Water*. This might be in part due to the limited number of editions, or possibly to the limited moments Silko herself writes about *Sacred Water* compared to how often she writes about the writing of *Storyteller*. On one hand it was more difficult for me to figure out what the photographs in *Sacred Water* might be doing without the guiding hand of other essayist, but on the other it was easier to just focus on what the text itself was doing and not having to synthesize so many other voices.



11

Ofrenda

The photographs in *Storyteller* and in *Sacred Water* are necessary to give a full dynamic portrayal of a community. Sometimes images and stories contradict each other, rewrite each other, or argue with each other, but that variation helps disrupt the White supremacist settler colonial image of what Indigenous communities looks like.

Silko says that the “Indian with a camera” is the most feared because with the camera Indigenous people will take back their land, but as she demonstrates in *Storyteller* and *Sacred*

Water part of that ongoing process of taking back the land is simultaneously take back the stories. Indigenous photography takes back, dismantles, and reconstructs the narrative that was placed upon Native Americans by White and non-Native photographers and ethnographers.

In my autohistoria, I also seek to disrupt and resist White narratives about my Mexican heritage, my community, my body, and my worth. One of the ways I attempt to do this is through the inclusion of photographs integral to the text. The images included in my own work also demonstrate a change in power dynamic, valuation, and aesthetic.

In Mexican culture, like many cultures, the remembrance of the dead is incredibly important. We believe that when we die we move to the land of the dead which is divided into the land of the remembered and the land of the forgotten. Each year we decorate altars to make sure our ancestors don't have to cross into the cold dark land of the forgotten. Photographs help anchor people to the land of the living. To be forgotten is worse than being dead, because then for the first time in your existence you are outside the community. During the process of writing my creative thesis I discovered the names and images of family members who had been forgotten. Upon seeing their images indescribable holy relief washed over me.

Not all the photographs found in Abuelito's boxes were accompanied by names, but they are still included on my altar. I work to remember them because they were loved by someone I love. Hands clasp waists, heads rests on shoulders, legs are thrown over laps. Holding on to a moment. I don't know them, but they are community y familia es mas que sangre. And we don't forget family, especially when systems of racial injustice made us unravel our warm woven rebozo wrapped community.

My sisters and I know our ancestors through their pictures and in some ways we know ourselves through the images, too. Like Silko, their stories are about me and my stories are about

them. My sisters and I were kept apart from half of our ancestral spaces, cousins were scattered to the winds, and planted in homelands far from each other. We define and our defined by our communities, by our web of stories. Maybe this absence of physical community, is what led my sisters and I, in our adulthood, to horde pictures and snapshots, cluttering our walls and turning every empty surface in our separate homes into a picture filled ofrenda. When it feels like we don't belong anywhere in the world. Neither White. Neither Mexican. We can belong in our photographs.



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Images Index

1. My eldest sister Kari, kisses my father's lips in 1974. This photograph was never displayed in our household. I found it in a box of photographs from my grandfather's basement the Christmas after his death in 2017. I put it on my father's art book bookshelf next to the alebrijes and the metal piggy bank filled with pesos. He looked uncomfortable. I later asked my mother why Dad didn't want it put up. She said probably because he didn't want to remember that day. The day of this photograph was the day my eldest sister Kari moved to Oregon with her mother. Mom's always said that the reason she and Dad waited so long to have Alise and I was that Dad was afraid he would lose us too just like he lost Kari and his heart couldn't have taken that.
2. Group portrait of the Alfrey family June 1996. I am clinging to my sister and she is leaning into our Dad in the bottom right corner of photo. My mother is mixed in among her cousins on the stairs. This is one of Alise's favorite photos of us because we look like a pair of Wednesday Addams among a sea of blonde cheerleaders.
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10. Marmon Silko, Leslie. "Sacred Water." *Sacred Water*, Flood Plain Press, Tucson, AZ, 1993, p. 62.
11. Marmon Silko, Leslie. "Sacred Water." *Sacred Water*, Flood Plain Press, Tucson, AZ, 1993, p. 71.
12. My sisters Kari, Alise, and myself with our grandparents Abuelito and Grandma Julie Summer 1998. Connie Road.