

Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape

Episode Two: The Archive, Revisited

VENUS WILLIAMS:

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Welcome back to *Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape*. I'm your host, Venus Williams.

In our first episode, we talked about the origins of landscape photography and its impact. We talked about human and ecological tragedies; journeys West; the founding of National Parks; and how all photographs of land tell us something about their makers—including the ones you take on your phone.

In this episode, we're going to hear a dialogue between interdisciplinary artist A.K. Burns and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Natalie Diaz as they discuss rivers, canyons, and dams; occurrences and disturbances; a dietary supplement called Spirulina; and why photographs are a little bit like ghosts.

But we also want to continue to think about this concept of "the archive." And, in some ways, the paradox of "the archive" when we look at it from the vantage point of where we are today.

Because while early American landscape photographs have directly and indirectly caused harm, they also provide a critical record. They *show* us what we've lost.

Yet the concept of "the archive" doesn't have to be relegated only to the history of photography. The land itself is an archive of geologic *and* human activity. And something that can be read and understood as it evolves over time.

Marcia Bjornerud: My name is Marcia Bjornerud. I'm a professor of geosciences at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. I'm a structural geologist, which means I study the architecture of the crust, how it's been formed and deformed by tectonic processes over time. And like most geoscientists, I came into the field almost by accident. I wouldn't have identified myself as a geologist, as a first year college student, much more humanities oriented, and I had

to take a lab science, happened to sign up for an introductory geology course, and had my eyes opened. It was the etymology of everything. It seemed like a field that had such great explanatory power, and engaged with the natural world in such a direct and unfiltered way that I found very different from any other sciences I had encountered.

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Marcia Bjornerud: It's definitely true that the geosciences have been funded and motivated in large part for resource extraction, oil, gas, coal, minerals. So many of the U.S. Geological Survey images were very much part of resource exploitation, or at least making a census of resources in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

But today those images have really new value being more than a hundred years old, telling us something about natural and human induced geologic change over a century sort of time scale. They're exceptionally important documents that are kind of baselines for future investigations as well, seeing how much erosion there's been in a particular place, or how the very profound manipulation of the Colorado River has changed the Grand Canyon. So they have a really important archival value and scientific value. And have opened people's eyes, even geologists' eyes, I think, to the fact that the earth changes.

Change is the norm. But change that's too rapid is the problem.

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Marcia Bjornerud: Many people find deep time off putting or diminishing. It is true that modern humans have just appeared in the last fractions of a second before midnight in the geologic day. But I think that's the wrong way of thinking about our place on Earth. Instead, we should be taking solace and comfort in the continuity. We are just the latest species and ecosystem privileged to be on this very old, resilient, durable planet. And the idea of continuity and durability, to me, is what I take from the rock record.

I think it's essential that more human beings adopt a geological sense of who we are, for both pragmatic and spiritual reasons. Most of the environmental problems we've created for ourselves stem from a lack of understanding of change over time and the way that human behaviors will inevitably interact in complex ways with natural systems.

But I think, perhaps equally important, is that the psychological and spiritual malaise that many of us feel is due to a failure to understand who we are as humans, as earthlings, and we could ground ourselves again if we had that deeper sense of our natural roots.

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Marcia Bjornerud: When we look at the landscape, again, it's a fallacy to think that this is how it is and how it always has been and how it always will be. It's just one iteration, one version of the world. So any landscape is literally the product of time, of the work of rivers and wind and plants. Time is a physical thing that we can learn to see in landscape. It's embodied in the landscape, in the contours of things. And certainly in photography, time is critical, exposure time and shutter time and capturing a moment in time, it's arguably all about time.

And nature photography is very powerful and can be wielded for good or ill, I think, like any imagery. I mean, at its best, it can inspire reverence. I think most famously, and maybe it's sort of a cliché, the image of the Earth from the moon, the Apollo 8 initial Earthrise image that allowed us to understand, wow, we are Earthlings on this little blue planet. But it can also be weaponized as a tool of nationalism and manifest destiny. And so, we need to be intelligent users of that imagery.

Marcia Bjornerud: And I think in taking images of the land, we have to see it more clearly and perhaps also see ourselves more clearly and in proper proportion to the place and in time as well.

I've quoted this [18th] century rabbi, Rabbi Bunim, who was Polish, before, but I do think there's wisdom in this quote. He said that we should always carry two slips of paper in our pockets: in the left pocket, it would read, 'I am ashes and dust,' and in the right, 'the world was made for me.' And I think that's the kind of geological worldview, that you realize we are not the permanent residents of this place. There have been many others, but we are here now, in this hospitable, wonderful planet, and we should make sure that we think of the next ones to come after us. And so we can hold both of those thoughts in our heads at the same time.

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A.K. Burns: I'm A.K. Burns. I'm an artist and educator, a professor at Hunter in New York City, and I live upstate in Stone Ridge, New York, where I am recording from. And I was born and raised in northern California, so I come from a landscape of the west coast. And my practice is kind of constantly exploring value systems and hierarchies. I don't have a specific medium because each idea or each inquiry requires a different mode of making and form of creation.

And I'm really excited to be here with Natalie Diaz to get to talk because reading Natalie's work was like you know, it's those moments when you're creating something where you're like, oh, someone has articulated something that I'm trying to figure out how to come up with other formal ways to manifest these concepts. And it was I don't know, just deeply resonant for me.

VENUS WILLIAMS: Burns's initial entrypoint to Diaz's work was her acclaimed poetry collection, *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Here Diaz is, reading from a poem titled: *exhibits from The American Water Museum*.

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Natalie Diaz:

exhibits from The American Water Museum.

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I can't tell you anything new about the river—
you can't tell a river to itself.

17.

A recording plays from somewhere high,
or low, floating up or down through the falling
dust-light.

It is a voice out of time, voice of quickness,
voice of glass—or wind. A melody, almost—of mud.
How it takes a deep blue to tumble wet stones
into a songline. The music any earth makes
when touched and shaped by the original green energy.
The song, if translated, might feel like this:

You have been made in my likeness.

I am inside you—I am you / or you are me.

Let us say to one another: *I am yours*—

and know finally that we will only ever be

as much as we are willing to save of one another.

4.

The guidebook single entry:

*There is no guide.
You built this museum.
You have always been
its Muse and Master.*

5.

Admission is general and free

except for what the children pay—
and they pay in the kidneys.

99.

From an original rock painting in Topock, Arizona, now digitized on a
wall-mounted monitor:

Before this city, the Creator pressed his staff
into the earth, and the earth opened—

it wasn't a wound, it was joy—joy!—!
Out of this opening leaped Earth's most radical bloom: *our people*—

we blossoms from the original body: water,
flowering and flowing until it became itself, and we, us:

River. Body.

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Natalie Diaz: I'm Natalie Diaz, [Greeting in Mojave Language]. And I'm based in California, Arizona, along the Colorado River, which is where my homelands, my reservation are. And I'm currently in between Phoenix, where I teach at ASU, and Brooklyn, New York.

Natalie Diaz: I'm primarily a poet. I feel a little bit more invested in the idea of language beyond poetry. I think poetry is one of our sensual manifestations of language. But I've worked a lot with my elders, the last speakers of the Mojave language, which has really shaped, partly the reverence and irreverence with which I approach the English language.

And so for me, of course, the water is extremely important. It's part of the name of my people. So we can't say Aha Makav without also invoking the river that we're carrying it, that it is like kind of coursing through us. And it's lucky to be alongside AK's work, I think especially in relationship to water, to land, to how both of those things relate to the body and to sensuality and how they kind of challenge spatial, temporal relationships of empire, hierarchy, power and things like that.

A.K. Burns: I'm just head shaking over here because I think this is what drew me to Natalie's work, essentially. Thinking about water and the landscape and the way it's inseparable, I guess I would say, from the body. And I think in the work that I've been working on, a lot of what I'm doing is trying to break down those borders that we in Western, colonial and white ideologies have brought, this notion that the body is autonomous and all these notions that come with especially I would say American nationhood.

There's a tremendous amount of ideology in what makes up living on this landscape and living in the United States in particular that if you're coming, I think, through queer theory, feminist thinking, indigenous thinking, like, there are so many other pathways of thought and experience that ask really big questions about personhood and notions of individuality. I think there's also this kind of necessity that's been long coming. It's not like climate change is anything new, but I just think like, as that threshold presses on us heavier and heavier annually, there is this deep, deep need to recognize the sort of entanglement of the body and the environment. And that all efforts to separate those things are working against our ability to kind of reconcile or to move forward, or to do anything positive, I think, to, like, transform our condition. So, I see it as, like, really necessary work, creatively, and then, of course, there's a larger project that's political.

Natalie Diaz: AK, I'm thinking a lot, too, about queerness as being constellated with the land and the water. I think there's something about nationhood and *the* state that wants us to have one central body. And when you have one central body, it's so easy to be the arbiter of it.

And I think something too, that's really powerful is land has been used so often as a weapon or we create so many weapons, even in weaponizing water so that we can make property of land. But I'm thinking also how water is kind of leading us back now to this pre-state relationship. Because as much as we have destroyed land and of course, continue to with water, I think there's something about water that we're going to be unable to deny in that there's just no moving forward, there's no living or life without it. And so I think there's something that, whether it's the Southwest or California, is kind of a portal in some ways. You know, as much as it is also for bad policy that ends up, you know, moving across the United States, I think it's also going to be a real window into the steps we don't yet know how we're going to take, you know, together and alongside. So I feel like the areas where our imaginations were shaped are places that are going to be very important for imagining, you know, what comes next for, for the entire collective of us.

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A.K. Burns: I would say I feel deeply ambivalent about photography, and I have a mostly obligatory relationship to photography [laugh]. Like documenting my life is not a thing that I take to intuitively. And I think in some ways that's why I lean towards video over photo, because I have a more intuitive relationship to images that encompass transformation in them.

I think it's very important that an image isn't just the limits of what the frame offers. That being said, I do use images, and they often end up in collages or in maybe, like the work, *Before the Wake*, which is, I would say, a critical response to an image. There's a kind of disturbance or destruction of an image in the process because I'm interested in when images become dynamic in terms of building a new relationship, like the way collage allows you to merge two things that previously seemed to be separate entities.

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VENUS WILLIAMS: *Before the Wake* is a body of work A.K. Burns made in 2014, though it continues to feel urgent and alive today.

It started with landscape photographs Burns tore out of a book called *Glen Canyon: Images of a Lost World*, by the photographer Tad Nichols. His sweeping black-and-white images capture a dramatic, canyon-lined stretch of the Colorado River in Utah that was revered and beloved by Native populations and intrepid visitors. The writer and environmentalist Edward Abbey even called Glen Canyon “a portion of the earth’s original paradise.”

This, of course, was before it was dammed. And Glen Canyon was flooded to create Lake Powell in the 1950s and 60s as part of an era of large-scale hydroelectric dam building throughout the U.S. While these dams were initially seen as harbingers of economic prosperity, especially for rural communities, they had negative impacts on Indigenous communities and river ecology.

The manmade Lake Powell—which is named for John Wesley Powell, who, uncoincidentally, led a U.S. geological survey expedition along the Colorado River in 1869—is a serpentine reservoir shaped by the former canyon’s curves.

The Lake Powell reservoir was, in theory, meant to serve dryer states like California, Arizona, and Nevada during times of drought, though its effectiveness has long been in question. It’s been a flashpoint of different environmental groups and movements too—and remains so today with water levels dropping rapidly and its effects on the surrounding ecosystem ever more clear. (It’s also become a super popular recreation area—its own tourism site calls it “the ultimate playground.”)

Burns smeared and splattered Nichols’s images of the pre-dammed Glen Canyon with a mixture of Spirulina, a blue-green algae often used as a dietary supplement, and polyurethane—the latter essentially working to freeze Burns’s Spirulina smears into place.

So what we see in these works are gritty blue-green dots, streaks, and masses. They mar, obscure, but also illuminate the black-and-white images beneath them, suggesting the brute force of intervention and the changes to come.

Which makes the resulting artworks both a gesture of remembrance for a landscape that no longer exists, and a reflection on the rapid destruction of an environment that took millennia to form.

Here’s A.K. Burns again:

A.K. Burns: The Colorado River, like for anyone who’s not like super familiar with this landscape is running along the border of Colorado and Utah, and then Utah and Arizona, and then along the California and Arizona border, and then into Mexico, the trickle down of what we have

allowed Mexico to have access to, having a relationship with a river, with something that should be in constant flow, right? that is supposed to feed an ocean on the other end, everything is disturbed in what makes a natural ecosystem function well when you dam it. And you have incredible water loss through damming. Specifically like the area that the *Before the Wake* works are responding to, which is Glen Canyon, now known as Lake Powell, which is and is at a crisis all time low. But what you have is, you know, you've got, sandstone canyons, which are basically like big absorbent sponges for stagnant water. So tons of water is getting sucked into the rock bed. Then you have one dam after another along the flow of the river, the Glen Canyon Dam being one of the major ones. And that stagnant water creates a large, massive surface area where it's also a huge absorbent surface for the sun. So this thing that's meant to facilitate humans prospering in this landscape as a resource is structured in such a way that it produces massive, massive loss.

So it's like one of these very short term human solution things that, like, creates so much more of a problem than allowing something to be active and useful for humans in the way that it was sort of meant to be if it's undisturbed. I mean, and I think we get into bigger problems of like, you know, growth, and that like, that might be a primary human conundrum is this assumption or push that growth is like a necessary outcome of human existence.

This is where it's like, when we get into ecological problems, really, we get down to not like what we can create to solve the problem better, like new batteries and new this and new that, so that everyone can use the same amount that we already use. But really, at the end of the day, it's going to be less. Consuming less, retracting, taking up less space and figuring out how to be much more economical as a person in the world.

[00:00:27] **The Story of Hoover Dam:** Build a dam in the wilderness and the world will beat a path to it. For many centuries, this was a lonely canyon, unseen and untouched by man, scorched by a desert sun, scolded by an angry river slashing its way to the mother sea. Now it lies peaceful and silent, except for the gentle hum of a hydroelectric power plant, the bubbling up of water as it leads mighty turbines, the cheerful sounds of America and the world on the move to see this pioneer, multipurpose reclamation project man built in Black Canyon.

VENUS WILLIAMS: That was from a promotional film made by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation about the Hoover Dam, which preceded the Glen Canyon dam on the Colorado River by more than 20 years. And a reminder: Black Canyon, what this narrator so confidently refers to as a "lonely canyon, unseen and untouched by man" is part of Natalie Diaz's ancestral homelands.

Here she is again.

Natalie Diaz: I mean, when you're talking about growth, I feel always very conflicted about the idea of sustainability, you know, because some things just should not be sustained.

And even thinking about how Glen Canyon came to be, we pretend that we're in these emergency situations that require us then to take action upon the land or the water or these nonhuman occurrences. You know, a river is a being and it's an occurrence, it's a happening, it's its own event, whether humans are there or not.

And I mean this kind of leaps us to the idea of landscape, Because one of the ways of thinking about landscape was once that it was actually a clearing. You know, it was a place kind of cleared and meant to be marked, so surveyed.

But often we create the problem because it's not that we are naturally growing, but it's that we force ourselves to grow and then overflow and overflow. We refuse to let anything be empty. And so I think there's something about that that is in direct conflict with our imaginations and the way that we've shaped this idea of sustainability.

And so I think there's really something about growth that is, it's kind of anti-life, you know, we think of life of course, as needing to grow, but I think in terms of like mass and, and mass production. And then just thinking about some of the values that we have as Natives who feel like the river is of our body and we are of that river's body, that it's, it's one body, that there is no human body separate from those things is that in my area, for example, we used to have unconditional water rights, my tribe. I mean, we couldn't imagine even needing them, but of course we had to negotiate them.

Now that the Colorado River is being fought over with such, like, intensive, you know, greed, capital, all of these things, we have to negotiate our water rights. It was every five years. And now I believe it's even more frequent than that. But we don't use that much water because we know how to use water, right? We learned how to use water from our desert, from the plants in the desert, the animals. But in order to show the government that we deserve those water rights, our tribal government has chosen to flood our golf courses. So that we will use enough water that registers with the government to say that we need that water. But when we were not using that much, they wanted to take it and give it to farmers up in the Imperial Valley or, you know, the cattle ranchers across Arizona who are now, like, really up in arms about their water rights.

And so again, these ideas of growth and sustainability, they're almost mythological. They're just feeding the idea that we have to make money off these things. And so I'm just constantly struck by that, in that, what do we do to try to solve the problem? Well, in some ways, like we, we have

to kind of not go forward into the future, but move backward. In times before capital or before we could buy and sell water.

It's something that really worries me, especially just with the Colorado River ~~is~~, we're, we're going to lose it at some point.

VENUS WILLIAMS: This brings us back to Tad Nichols and the images A.K. Burns appropriated for the series, *Before the Wake*.

And how Burns first came across Nichols—and Lake Powell itself.

A.K. Burns: It was a trip cross country [laugh]. And I like to like pick points on a map and drive. And that ended up at Bullfrog, which is one of the passes across Lake Powell with a car on a ferry, and I had my camera with me, so I was shooting some video of crossing that waterway, and I just was struck by how surreal that image was. And it took me a while and a discussion with my dad. He did OSHA laws for Stanford University and then worked in water management and now does lots of water politics and spends all of his retired life worrying about the Yuba River. I was raised by hippies. Let's just put it that way [laughs].

So when I was telling my dad about this trip and how odd I found that landscape and I was sort of trying to understand there's these like forms coming out of the middle of the river. And he was like, well, you know why it looks like that? And he's like, because it's dammed. So I wasn't at the area where the dam was, so I hadn't seen the dam. I know there are dams on the Colorado River. I know, had some general knowledge of that area, having grown up in the West and grown up with drought and understanding some of the politics of those spaces. But it really was the first time I really kind of was in the landscape and taking real stock of what that did visually to a space.

And, you know, the thing that I realized is what was so quote unquote surreal is that there are no banks, right? There's no particulation at the edge of the water. Which, in any natural quote unquote landscape, the beach, the riverbed, where water meets land, there's a kind of particulation that occurs. There's a way that the landscape transitions between erosion of water and land. And what I would see there is just these giant rocks with none of that kind of edge. And that's why it appeared to be so surreal. My dad actually at that time handed me the Tad Nichols catalog and said, This is how it used to be. This is what that landscape was.

VENUS WILLIAMS: It's important to reiterate here that Nichols was *not* making these pictures in the 1950s as part of any kind of government survey—though his images do place a similar emphasis on awe and seemingly untouched beauty. Indeed, Nichols's project was a

deliberate effort to create a record of a place he knew that the U.S. government would soon destroy.

Take a listen to this excerpt from *Operation Glen Canyon*, a 1961 promotional film also made by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Like the Hoover Dam narration we heard earlier, this too is so specific in the language it uses to talk about the river as an incursion into the land as opposed to the very thing that shaped it. The film also captures the moment the destruction of Glen Canyon began...

[00:02:55] Stained with the soil of five states, the river cuts deep into the desert, into the high walls of Glen Canyon. For 170 miles, Glen Canyon carries the muddy river through the parched red rocks of southeastern Utah, into the sandstone cliffs of northern Arizona. For 40 years, men planned and designed the means to regulate the flow of this river. Every contour of the canyons was mapped and surveyed in the search for the best dam site. In 1956, these men were rewarded for their efforts as the first blast began construction of the giant Glen Canyon Dam. [00:03:45] (BLAST).

A.K. Burns: For me a lot of work comes from reconciling different kinds of disturbances, and this was a deep sadness. To have the work of Tad Nichols was generous in the sense that I could more fully understand, not just in my imagination of what the canyon was, but to really be able to sort of witness it. That was a revelation for me to understand exactly the effects of what the dam is doing on that site.

VENUS WILLIAMS: Here's where the *Spirulina* comes in—that blue-green algae Burns smeared all over Nichols's photographs.

A.K. Burns: So the *Spirulina* splatters, they're very intentionally kind of ejaculatory, they're kind of like AbEx if we think about the art historical gesture that it is, and I draw a relationship between that kind of gesture historically in art and a sense of the expressiveness of self being like the most important sort of gesture that one can make. And I see that as not dissimilar to like peeing out the perimeter around your campsite to mark your territory. You know, there is a kind of way that that gesture or thread goes through time as a kind of marking of territory of saying, Oh, this is proprietary. Oh, this belongs to something. so part of it was about like those splatters showing you literally what happened in that landscape, like sometimes I've kind of filled them in, in a way that you can kind of see translucently through it, and you can see actually the canyon beneath the water, and sometimes it's about kind of playing with that art historical gesture as a way of acknowledging that there's been human intervention in this space that has really transformed it.

Natalie Diaz: Kind of circling back and through and alongside you just in regard to this idea of temporality and spatiality and what is proprietary, I think, you know, something that's always troublesome to me about the landscape photograph, especially in lands that I consider lands I

am of, the photograph, of course, creates a place or a space in this kind of field of, of photography. But at what point in that placemaking, and I'm not saying placemaking is a good thing, but at what point in that placemaking did the photographs occur?

So when we're thinking about Nichols, I mean, in order for them to even get to this point of the dam, so many things had to happen to the Natives there, as well as just to the water itself, right, to the land itself. And so I'm really interested in that, in like when the photo happens. And I think that's something that your work, your treatment of the images from the book are doing. They're kind of returning us back to, like you say, the disruption, the fact that we are not the singularity in the world, we're maybe even an aberration, right? Another life form that has like come about in it and affecting it and impacting it and yet not the, the sole focus of it.

A.K. Burns: Landscape even to me evokes something about aestheticizing that I find very complicated. And I think there's also something bound up in that history of the landscape and the sublime, which is a very Western notion that the value of a space has to do with its beauty.

Natalie Diaz: Yeah, I mean, I'm really interested, one, in the values of the actual eye, the person who becomes the eye of the camera. And I think a lot about some of the early photographs taken on the Colorado River down in my area, like the Black Canyon area. Timothy O'Sullivan would come down and take these photographs—

VENUS WILLIAMS: This would have been on the Wheeler Survey in the 1870s, which explicitly scouted the West for potential sites for military installations, railroads, and agriculture, and assessed the existing Native American communities in and along the way.

Natalie Diaz: —and in some ways it was like, oh, this is documenting Native life, you know, as close as you could get to its recent interaction with the white man or post military. But they were informational, they were data. They had to come across as knowledge for the state and I think there's something very violent about them.

The relationship of photographers during that time, I'm relating it to the survey and also the idea of surveillance today—it hasn't changed a lot. They're basically used as maps, right? And so I think a lot about where those values came from and then how those became foundational values for what the landscape photograph is. And I guess I wonder a lot about landscape photography, like, where is the creator? You know the absence of that creator.

And, you know, there's a reason I think why in a lot of Native cultures our words for photos have a lot to do with ghosts, like wait, how did they get that person into that thing? And we used to burn photographs, like you weren't allowed to keep photographs of persons who had passed

on because the person had passed on. So for us, it was like, why would you keep that kind of image of it?

And so I think there's just also really something about the temporal and the fact that human time is not the center and that things should degrade, which, if we can talk about your images, I think that's something that really struck me is coming back to these images and not just coming to the images I guess to not pretend they're pristine or to pretend they're outside of occurrences of life and how things change over time.

A lot of times with the photograph, we pretend what we have seen was the event versus what took place there. What is still occurring there or how that occurrence has resounded forward. But if you, if you would say more, A.K., about, about some of that, maybe, especially in relationship to the images.

A.K. Burns: I do think that Tad Nichols is really on the edge of that line, right? It's doing certain work. It's not coming through an actual government survey. It's not about actually trying to utilize those images as a resource to claim the usefulness of land and all those ways of looking at nature require the separation of the human from the natural world, right?

What Tad Nichols is doing, there's an importance in the documentation of what is lost prior to this massive human intervention that occurs when the dam gets built, when the canyon fills with water. And I think it's really interesting this idea you talked about burning photographs of people who are dead. And then thinking about these images by Tad Nichols, in some way, are images of a death. I don't know if we can say every photograph is that I mean, this is an interesting premise, but it's a record of what does not exist, currently. That just made me think about the kind of disturbing or obliterating of the image, having a sort of another layer there.

Natalie Diaz: I think a lot about how photography in general, the image in general, the still image anyway, I think it denies a kind of future death and it denies a kind of ecstasy, you know, it denies the possibility of those because it is kind of holding things in a time and place. So I think there's something that feels almost essential about an image, like a way to go back, or a way to use an image to not feel like a static thing, but also to understand that place has changed.

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A.K. Burns: What we know in the present is such a convoluted set of information and if we're not drawing from what has already occurred, I don't know how we have a path towards the future. In the way that I think politics repeats itself or wars repeat themselves, you know, everything we experience now is a culmination of all of those preceding events.

Natalie Diaz: I think right now I'm struck like in a kind of wondrous way or wondering or wandering way of - the necessity of the quick archive or the fast, the happening archive, like the

archive that is not in retrospect or is not having already arrived at a certain kind of legibility or knowledge.

And it seems that there's a way that the archive does feel like it has a role in the future. But it's already a predetermined role. Like I know we still discover things in the archive, but what is archived is usually something that has been assessed or ascertained as having a kind of value.

A.K. Burns: Yeah, no, I mean, I think you're bringing up something really important about the archive being this site of kind of certified knowledge acquisition, and that has so much to do with how we narrate history which, you know, historically has had a very particular, and especially again, in the United States, in Western Eurocentric cultures, right, has a very particular voice and agenda behind it.

I often think about the things that we already know is the thing that is dead, and the things that we don't know is what is most alive. And I think there is a way that an archive and I don't know if we need a different term for it, but that this resonant material of the past being reactivated or staying active. If it stays active, it must change. It must evolve. It must adapt to new narratives and to reconsiderations and different kinds of interventions.

So I would say, like, the way I interact with an archive is often to activate it, to reactivate it, to bring an element of the unknown into it. Like, what do we know about this image and what do we not know? Or what have we forgotten about potentially? Because it was sitting in an archive and we weren't looking at it. And we weren't bringing it with us into the present. If it sits in that archive, it doesn't do the work that it can do, and I do think there's a lot of potential for archives to be really valuable if they remain flexible and dynamic and we proceed with seeing them maybe through a different lens.

What we do as humans is just, we make our world. We're just shaping, constantly shaping, ~~um~~, as we speak, as we act, as we be, right? So I want to, like, dwell in that both metaphorical and actual potential, I guess.

Natalie Diaz: This is, I think, why this work kind of brings these things up in me because it's a river, right? And I think there's something really important about—and I think this generally, right, about water itself—but rivers in particular, as being a knowledge system with which we at one time really did learn how to live on the land and we have since forgotten because we're now using the water for our own ideas of what life should be, of comfort, of duration. But I do think there's something really important about the being and the presence and the energy of a river and seeing how it literally shaped that landscape.

And then of course thinking too about Nichols taking these images, knowing what was occurring. And then also realizing I'm taking these images of a thing that is dying and what that will mean, the thing that will never be again. And I don't mean like making it static, but will never occur in its same way. And what does that mean if a being can't occur in the ways that it occurs or, or lives or happens?

—

VENUS WILLIAMS: Here's Natalie Diaz reading, once again, from "exhibits from The American Water Museum":

Natalie Diaz:

78.

The first violence against any body of water
is to forget the name its creator first called it.
Worse: forget the bodies who spoke that name.

An American way of forgetting Natives:
Discover them with City. Crumble them by City.
Erase them into Cities named for their bones, until

you are the new Natives of your new Cities.
Let the new faucets run in celebration, in excess.
Who lies beneath the streets, universities, art museums?

My people!

I learned to love them from up here, through concrete.
La llorona out on the avenues crying for everyone's
babies, for all the mothers, including River, grinded
to their knees in dust for the splendid City. Still,
we must sweep the dust, gather our own bodies like
messes of sand and memory. Who will excavate

our clotted bodies from the banks, pick embedded
stones and sticks from the raw scrapes oozing
our backs and thighs? Who will call us back

to the water, wash the dirt from our eyes and hair?
Can anybody uncrush our hands, reshape them
from clay, let us touch one another's faces again?

Has anyone answered? We've been crying out
for 600 years—

Tengo sed.

VENUS WILLIAMS: There's a kind of postscript I want to add here, given that this has been a story partly about Lake Powell. Which is that because of drought and the lake's low levels, there are ways in which the canyons that Tad Nichols photographed in the 1950s—and that A.K. Burns smeared *Spirulina* over some 60 years after that—are actually starting to re-emerge. They're banded with scars corresponding to past water levels, first as they swelled after the dam, then as they fell ever more rapidly over time.

The Glen Canyon Dam remains controversial, with environmental groups like the Glen Canyon Institute and EarthFirst! still advocating for the site's ecological restoration.

And while the photographs of Tad Nichols still technically document something of the past, they also suggest the ways that archives aren't exactly static. As it turns out, these photographs also show us a landscape we could soon regain.

VENUS WILLIAMS: Thank you all for listening. Thanks to Professor Marcia Bjornerud, who, in her book *Timefulness*, from Princeton University Press, further explains how geologic thinking can serve us all. Thank you Natalie Diaz. Diaz read from "*exhibits from the American Water Museum*," which is included in her Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning poetry collection, *Postcolonial Love Poem*. It's published by Graywolf Press and we strongly recommend checking it out.

And thank you, of course, to A.K. Burns. The artworks we discussed are from Burns's series, *Before the Wake*. You can explore these works and many others at akburns.net.

Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape is a production of the Hillman Photography Initiative at Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. For more information on the people and ideas featured in this episode, please visit carnegieart.org/podcast.

I'm your host, Venus Williams. See you next time.

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