

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

Episode Three: Dominion

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J. Drew Lanham: My name is J. Drew Lanham. I am an ornithologist, poet, and professor. I teach at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. I'm also the poet laureate of my home county of Edgefield, South Carolina. More than a bird watcher, I'm a bird adorer and I worship birds with words. I also try to identify with birds more than identifying birds and in that way our plights on earth as combined.

As a kid, you know, we only had three channels. My parents never bought us an Atari system, so I didn't even have Pong to play. So bird sounds were sort of self-entertainment. I learned early on, I mean the calls of Bobwhite quail, which were: *[bird calls]*.

Is just this plaintive sort of asking of a bird of my boyhood that, it sort of, is a bittersweet story because it was a bird that was once so common that's largely disappeared from the landscapes that I knew and that second call that *[bird call]* was the rejoined call after a cubby had sort of exploded from a thicket and these birds had gone in 12 different directions was sort of the request to, to come together again. And it was just this sound that was always on the landscape. And in the evenings, barred owls would call from the bottom and hardwoods: *[bird calls]*.

And so it was this combination of barred owls and bobwhite quail, but just so many other birds. And I would entertain myself in part by trying to imitate them, but I also wanted to talk to the birds. I wanted to identify with them. I wanted those birds to know me in a different way than they knew everybody else.

VENUS WILLIAMS: Welcome back to *Widening the Lens*. I'm your host, Venus Williams. And that was ornithologist, poet, and professor J. Drew Lanham giving us the sounds of the land of this youth.

Because in this episode, we're going to talk about land ownership. Of the idea of a "home place," as Lanham calls it—a place to live on and live from and live *with*—much like his beloved birds do. But also the idea of dominion. Of possessing land. Of claiming it, dominating it. And taking from it without care, acknowledgement, or restraint.

As we've talked about, photography was an important tool in visualizing distant lands primed for settlement and development. Just consider the language associated with taking pictures: capture, shoot, record.

We want to think a bit more about how photography can fuel a sense of ownership over land—and over people ripped from their own lands to tend to land claimed by others. We also want to think about land in ways beyond state possession, as sites that can forge and reveal solidarities.

So how does history become embedded in the landscape? What happens when you make property out of place? And how can we understand historical struggles and inequities through landscape photography, and maybe even the land itself?

Let's start by returning to the home place with J. Drew Lanham:

J. Drew Lanham: My home place is, was a farm, roughly 200 acres in the Sumter National Forest in Edgefield County, South Carolina, the Long Cane Ranger District to be specific. That 200 acres or so of forests and fields and creeks and a little bit of swamp and springs was the place that nurtured me, that nurtured my family for a very long time.

Edgefield County, South Carolina is in the western Piedmont of the state of South Carolina and sits on the Savannah River, a brown water river once untamed, but now dammed and backed up into hydroelectric lakes. And so Edgefield, that land that nurtured me, that natured me, was once covered with rich soils and loamy soils, but soils that over time were abused because of the greed of human beings, to grow tobacco, to grow cotton, to grow these crops that would be tended and harvested by enslaved Africans to provide the engine for a nation.

This land has seen the history of indigenous peoples who lived on and stewarded the land in ways that sustained them, but land that was then taken from them, and subjected to the bitter management of chattel enslavement, and then land, now, that holds all of these histories of displacement and abuse, but now serves as places to perhaps think about how we reconcile our differences in wildness, how the land can support us all in ways that brings us together rather than pushes us apart.

And so I think about land a lot. I think I'm probably obsessed by it and my home place in Edgefield is where that obsession was born. And I will always be forever grateful to my mother and father but especially to my grandmother for reinforcing in me this whole idea that I am part and parcel with the land, not separate and above the land.

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J. Drew Lanham: The guess is that when my grandfather, Joseph Samuel Lanham, came back from combat in World War I, that he secured that land upon his return somehow. So probably

around 1919. But then beyond that, for my grandfather during the Depression to set up a successful milk and egg business during one of the toughest times for Americans, but doubly, triply tough for Black Americans, that somehow my grandfather was successful and holding on to land and having that land produce, is an example of persistence that still inspires me in a way that hopefully produces some of the same fruits of labor that my grandfather and my father produced for our families.

The state of the home place is tenuous as the land has lost the people who understood it, who wanted to be there, who ask really nothing more from the land than what it was willing to give, means that it's a limited acreage now because of sort of dissolution by family.

[And] you know, it's funny, there are very few photographs of the land. My father was a photographer and there are pictures sometimes of maybe, I don't know, a few trees that are a backdrop of some photograph of one of us, one of the kids that was taken, but nothing that I've been able to find that really describes or sort of circumscribes the land that I knew.

It is a place that I miss greatly, that in ways I crave, that when I have the opportunity to go there it feels like the grandest of reunions, but also it feels like sort of the saddest of departures because it feels ever like it's slipping away in ways that you can't quite grasp as it slips through your fingers.

The opportunity for me to regain some of that land love has been through a farm that we recently had the opportunity to purchase in the upstate of South Carolina. And so that 46-acre farm that is full of trees and wildness, white tail deer and coyotes and wood ducks and wild turkeys and, and, and warblers, hopefully, in the Spring.

It provides an opportunity for me to regain some of what was lost with the home place. And so now I spend a good bit of time here on this new farm walking it and getting to know it and putting my feet on it in ways that will help me intimately connect with it, to sort of zealously guard it against leaving me. And hoping that it's the place that I can not only live and thrive, but it's the place where one day maybe my ashes get to fly and to, and to become oaks and hickories and beech and dogwood and redbud and whitetail deer and black and white warbler and wild turkey and all those wild things that exist on this land that I knew in my boyhood home place that this new home place, hopefully provides, will provide that opportunity to reconnect more deeply.

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J. Drew Lanham: So much is about control. And land, at least in, in so much of American history, but really Western civilization has been about dominion: over land, dominion over indigenous peoples on the land, and then subjecting that land to the dominion of Black enslaved, for example, indigenous enslaved. And so that the idea of land being dominated is deeply rooted. And so I think that for me, part of the reconciliation of all of that bitter history comes first in recognizing that it happened, right? And writing about it. So as a writer, I need to make

sure that people see words that tell the truth of a history, but also give us some ideas about how maybe we go forward from the bitter history of land being stolen, being taken, and being subjected to the trauma of enslavement. That trauma that's visited upon people to be transferred to land, to me, is sort of a thing that we need to think about.

And so when I'm on land, I need to understand what happened on that land. I need to know the history of that land and in knowing the history of the land, I can then work to not repeat those same sins on the land. So if land has been abused, if a soil has been abused, if it's eroded, if it's gullied, if the land has been subjected to crop rotations that would deplete the land, then I work to not do those things.

If the forests have been ravaged and abused and not stewarded in the right way, then I can work to not replicate that abuse of the land, to not visit that trauma on the land. And in that way, after I've recognized what's happened, I can then work towards reparation. I can work towards partnering with the land and you'll hear the word management slip in there sometimes, but I'm really trying to get away from that idea of managing and more partnering with. The land has its own desires, I think of, for example, of what wants to grow where. The bald cypress wants its feet wet and the post oak wants dry sand between its toes.

And so in understanding when you see those trees on a landscape, that it tells you where you are. whether you're uphill and dry or downhill near the creek or swamp and wet. Why would I then try to make what wants to be dry grow where it's wet or what wants to be wet grow where it's dry?-To have that land be a being that you partner with, that you can visit with, that you respect, that you acknowledge the trauma that's been visited on it, and then work together to heal, in ways that allow it to be what it is. That's how I go to, towards some idea of, of what I call ecological reparation.

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VENUS WILLIAMS: Ecological reparation... Keep that idea in mind as you listen to this conversation between three innovators in their respective fields.

Xaviera Simmons: I'm Xaviera Simmons. I am currently in Los Angeles, California, though I am from New York City. I am a visual artist. I'm an organizer actually, and a bunch of other things, a happy human being actually and I feel really fortunate to be in this conversation.

Julian Brave NoiseCat: Okay. Um, Weyt-k xwexweytep Julian Brave NoiseCat ren tsetswe7. Secwecwpemc-ken ell St'at'imc-ken. Te Tsq'escen re tste7kwen. Le7 ren pupsmen ne7elye te tmícw w7ec re Lenape-ulucw.. My name is Julian Brave. I am Shuswap and Lillooet. My family mostly resides on the Canim Lake Indian Reserve. I'm currently in New York City, Lenape Territory. I just had my first documentary come out, it's called *SUGARCANE*. I'm one of the directors and I'm also a nonfiction writer. I'm finishing up the manuscript to my first book called *We Survived the Night*, which will be published by Knopf.

Candice Hopkins: My name is Candice Hopkins, and I'm a curator and writer. I also teach at Bard. I'm a citizen of Carcross Tagish First Nation. I was born in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. And just really excited to have this conversation. Xaviera, I've been following your work for a long time and, and Julian reading your writing. So it's really nice to be in this dialogue.

VENUS WILLIAMS: To start the conversation, we asked Simmons, NoiseCat, and Hopkins to talk about their own home places, to use Lanham's term. And some of the ways they think about land and landscape through their work.

Julian Brave NoiseCat: Our people are fortunate enough to live on a river that is still mostly wild and mighty, and that's the Fraser River, and we're still fortunate enough to have salmon, that run up our river, and since time immemorial, our people have been dip netting for salmon on that river. We do it the way that we've always essentially been doing it, since the trickster coyote led the salmon up the rivers and taught our people how to fish and made the fishing stations and all that sort of stuff. And so, you know, I really appreciate the time that I get to spend with uncles and cousins and with my dad, both fishing and then also, like, talking about fishing and being on the land in that kind of a way.

All cultures, in a sense, come from rivers, right? Like, we all need fresh water and things like that to connect us. And so I feel really grateful that I get to, at least once a year, go back to that main artery of our culture and civilization and fish.

Candice Hopkins: I resonate with that. I'm also come from fishing people. I realize now in my life that I had a very privileged upbringing in that it wasn't divorced from the land and we always saw land as something that we're not only in relation to in our family, but the source of all things good. You know, my grandmother was a hunter and a trapper, she started when she was eight years old, and she actually ran the family's trap line between eight and thirteen and that was near Carcross, Yukon, and that provided, you know, everything that the family needed. And so that the land is that kind of source of not only sustenance, but also cultural production was part of the way that I grew up.

And I would say something that I think you pointed to, Julian, that I was deeply aware of. It was there isn't necessarily this disconnect between what we consider land and what we consider water, because they both work in relation to one another. And they're both kind of necessities for life and culture and language. I learned recently when I was looking at this mapping project that my community had done, Carcross Tagish First Nation, that was that there were very little names for the mountains, but there were a multitude of names for all of the waterways, the lakes, the rivers and multiple points along the water. And they give you a sense of what that particular part of the lake or the river might have offered. So, I think that for us, really, the hierarchy was shifted, you know, focused on that relationship, but really on the water as well.

Xaviera Simmons: One of the first images that comes to my mind when I think of land and landscape in particular is I grew up in New York City. My family are all, on either side of me, are descendants of chattel slavery. So that complicated mixture of psychologies and individuals and

all the things, so I grew up in New York, but because my mother went to boarding school in Maine, my mother and I would go to Maine like maybe once a year. And one of the memories that I have is being on the water outside of Portland and being around this small black community of people who had lived in Maine for a really long time. And, you know, we would have a lot of like, outdoor cooking, eating seafood, boiling things in the earth, in the land.

So my relationship to land is, I feel like my head always spins with it because I find it, of course, the ultimate nourisher. And then I also find it the ultimate destroyer because of the relationship that my people have had to the land. And what our bodies, souls, minds, spirits have had to do to even exist in this land. So it's very complicated, but then in terms of being an artist, when I think about the history of art, I think that's one of the first artworks that you kind of encounter is the land and the landscape itself and or an image of it that you've been given or you've lived with. So my head kind of wants to turn in every direction when I think of land and landscape.

Julian Brave NoiseCat: One thing I think about a lot is that in the Shuswap language, Secwepemctsin, but then also in all Salish languages, as I understand, because there's been a lot of linguistic studies of our languages in part because, as you might have heard when I introduced myself, they're kind of complicated sounding. And so if you look at some of the, like, Salish etymological dictionaries that are doing this sort of cross-Salish language studies of different roots and, And, suffixes and affixes because our words are composed of like these different linguistic building blocks.

One of the ones that can be traced all the way back to what would be described as, like, proto Salish, the ancestral tongue of all the Salish speakers, like, 5,000 plus years ago, is this root and suffix, tmicw or "emc", which means both land and place and soil and also, person.

And so sort of embedded within our language, whenever you say, you know, like, Tsq'escenemc-ken, I'm from Canim Lake or I'm Secwecwpcmc-ken, is this notion that like our humanity is intimately and inherently tied to the place that we come from, right, and that to be human is to have a place and to be a place is also to have some connection to the humans of that place.

And I think that there is some, some deep human wisdom in that, right? That, like, there is something important about understanding and coming from a particular place. Because that's something that through various histories of displacement, dispossession, the realities of increasingly globalized and seemingly homogeneous world that people are being alienated from. And I think that as we are alienated from place, we are actually, I think, also being alienated from something that is essential to who we are, to, to our humanity, something that we need to hold on to and retain.

I think that it's also sometimes interesting to think that people who not so long ago were dismissed as people who were supposed to be resigned to the, you know, dumpster bin of history, might actually have some insightful things to say about what it is to be human, what our humanity is, and what the things are that we need to remember and hold onto despite the fact

that those were exactly the things that they tried to take away, you know, because my kyé7e was taken away to a residential school and she was a little kid on a cattle truck and, you know, they abused her for speaking this language.

Candice Hopkins: I think in my present position at Forge Project—

VENUS WILLIAMS: Forge Project is a Native-led arts and culture organization in what is now called the Hudson River Valley and Hopkins serves as its executive director and chief curator.

Candice Hopkins: I've really thought a lot about the kind of radical, colonial act of displacement, and I acknowledge that I work and I now live on Moh-He-Con-Nuck territory, folks who were displaced from this region seven times since the early 1700s, and so I'm really conscious of what does it mean to be an Indigenous person, but not just in the homelands of another, but how do you hold space for that uncomfortable history, but also how do you enable, return to this place as well. So that's part of what we're doing too.

I feel like land is never innocent. It's always fraught with the kind of overlays of human history and our tendency towards violence as well as being the source of, you know, all of the things good that we can do, but I feel like, you know, land itself always holds those complexities. And I see that as distinct from the idea of landscape, which is, I feel inherently a projection, a representation. So it's something else. And I think as soon as this land was transformed into landscape, that gesture of picturing, that's really what enabled settler colonialism to create the idea that they could place themselves here. So I feel like, particularly in the Americas, the idea of landscape can't be kind of understood without thinking of that history at the forefront of it.

Julian Brave NoiseCat: Yeah, I totally agree with that. I was just, like, as a quick aside, I was thinking just the other day, it really struck me that like, cause I'm in New York at the moment, so, you know, I'm a little bit inundated with the Western civilization thing in a way that I'm not always where I live. And man, the Europeans just love to paint landscapes and then the boats that they were going to take to go take over those landscapes. It's such a thing for them.

It's like so clear in their artistic history, like what they cared about. It was like, here's our nice boat that we're going to take across the ocean, potentially probably with, like, slaves in it, you know. And then here is the land that we are depicting with the natives running off into the distance or just completely gone already, that we're going to take over.

Xaviera Simmons: No, it's really interesting that you, you're just talking about that because I've been looking at a lot of the different explorer journals and the European whiteness exploratory impulse really has a lot to do with that. Yeah. The beauty of the land, just as you said, Julian, like all this, this land and then the apparatus to acquire the land.

I was thinking about being a descendant of slavery here in the United States. So this is this is the only place that I would exist actually because it was made through, like, that voyage on

those ships through the ocean to the land and that mixture of beings that made this entity called the Black American, which people say African American, which is not really Black diasporic, it's really like particular to the United States and the Caribbean and like this northern, right? Like that's a specific individual, or specific group. And so, when I think about my own work, I really tried for many years to complicate the relationship between the land, the landscape, the figure that is the Black body, or the Black person, which is not, there's no such thing, really. There are people, but the Black body was constructed in service to doing things to the land for the benefit of, you know, white Europeans.

So, I don't know, I'm just trying to tie all these things together, but I feel like that's kind of where my project or my work, some aspects of my work have come in. And so it's not like a straightforward, linear conversation or pathway. It's like how do you negotiate all of those things when you're part of like the main psychologies that make up the kind of trauma slash beauty slash abundance of the United States in particular.

Candice Hopkins: One thing that I've been thinking a lot through the research that I've done and exhibitions, particularly one that took place in 2014 at Site Santa Fe that was curated in collaboration with a colleague, Lucia San Roman. It was called Unsettled Landscapes, which was our own kind of projection as well, but through that research, we became really invested in the point at which landscape even became an idea. And we learned that it really became an idea when there was this sort of parallel concept that land could be owned, which is its kind of transit into territory.

Territory of course, implies a kind of claiming of a place, but also it was really antithetical, I think, to the ways that my ancestors lived, the way that many people live now, and that was the most absurd idea that you could own something as profound as the land—that you as a human, could do that. The other thing we learned is that that gesture of demarcating the land, through the creation of fences has to come along alongside that idea of private property as well.

And I was really interested in learning and looking at some of these earliest landscapes and, and many of them, of course, being paintings. And, you know, I think inherently what's at work in those is that these were very often white painters, so they're representations of whiteness. And they're not often seen that way. They're highly subjective and not all cultures make them. Because I think it has to go in tandem with that idea of ownership.

It makes me realize that these histories of the representation of land here in the Americas kind of haunts us now and isn't always looked into.

Julian Brave NoiseCat: One of the things that I think a lot we're circling around in all of our comments about the land and landscape as a representation of land from a sort of imperial gaze and a settler gaze, is like if you come from the other side of that gaze, right? If you inhabit a, Indigenous, I hate using the grad school term, so I'm going to use some of them, like subjectivity or, you know, perspective or a Black body and perspective and, and also, actively embrace and are engaged in, in those traditions and carrying those traditions forward in the ways that feel

right and true to you, then you inevitably run up against, especially if you're doing artistic or creative things, this big, for lack of a better word, like, turd that they left in the middle of all of it, which was, you know, this horrible history of how it was taken, how people were enslaved and the ways in which their culture in every single conceivable way, and I'm part white, so I guess part of my culture too, was oriented around that act of theft of land and property and, and all that sort of stuff. So I'm really interested in, personally, just like building off of the ways that within my own people's traditions we have always sort of poked fun at this reality, and subverted the ways in which it's represented and told.

So the first little thing I mentioned about connections to land, right, I mentioned the Fraser River, which is obviously not named for us, it's named for the second white man to ever cross Canada to the Pacific Ocean, this guy named Simon Fraser, who in 1808 showed up in our territory and said, 'Hey, I'm going to try to get to the Pacific Ocean.'

And he ran into one of the Secwepemc chiefs, this guy named Khakhusam Clellcwúsem up by Williams Lake. And he told Klahoosam's people, 'Hey, like, you know, I'm a white man. Like, you know, check out my canoes.' Like he had one of his guys shoot off a gun at the back of the canoe. And it was like a real slapstick entrance. Cause the gun literally, he says this in his, in his journal, the gun literally explodes and the gunner like wounds himself, you know, cause he's trying to shock and awe the Natives when he shows up. And then our people tell them like, 'well, buddy, like if you're trying to get to the Pacific ocean, there was a guy named Alexander McKenzie who came through here, like, 15 years ago, he went this way. That's one option. The other option is we could lend you some horses and you can take them across this plateau to this other river, which is now called the Thompson, named after another white man and take that to a lake and then go across those lakes. And those eventually get you the Columbia River. And then you'll be able to get the Pacific because the Columbia River is more navigable than the Fraser River.' And Simon Fraser heard all this and he's like, 'You know what? That's an interesting idea, but I'm gonna stick with my plan instead.' And so he, like, toboggans his way down the Fraser River in these canoes. And the natives, particularly this guy, Clellcwúsem, are nice enough to be like, 'Okay, buddy, if you insist on doing this, I'm gonna ride ahead of you and tell each village before you arrive, that you're coming so that they don't just like kill you on sight, you know.' Because the river is, you know, really important and sacred and we get our salmon from there and you mess with that stuff, you're messing with, you know, 60 percent of our calories any given year. Especially back then. Anyways, so it's, it's just this like comedy of errors, is my point, is this guy's journey of discovery and exploration trying to get his furs to some markets over in China is a just complete buffoon's errand where he almost dies, almost kills everybody with him. And one of the ways that it's remembered, and I find this to be very fascinating, is in Lytton, which is the place where the Fraser and the Thompson Rivers meet, so it's kind of like the center of our part of the Salish world. There's a really interesting oral history where they remember Simon Fraser as the return of Coyote the Trickster.

Because what he's done In tobogganing his way down the river, nearly getting himself and everyone else killed, making a complete fool of himself, and then turning into a pirate by the end of the journey, and stealing a canoe from the coast Salish, and getting turned around in

Musqueam, and chased back up the river, is like, just about as coyote a thing as anybody could imagine ever happening. It is like such a, like, foolish, tricksterly thing to do.

And so I really like the idea that Fraser's name on our river, even though he gets the name on the damn river, is actually, in point of fact, a marking of his failure to get to the Pacific Ocean and his furs to the to market in the Pacific Ocean. And that the right way to tell it was actually the perspective of the people whose land he traversed, which is as one of the genres of trickster narrative, which is the narrative of exactly how you shouldn't be and how you shouldn't act. And also of how the world is not just made through feats, but also through failures because in a broader sense, right, the act of colonization was this epic, horrendous failure to try to wrestle this continent away from its first people, often through stolen labor, through people who were ripped away from their continent of origin, and I personally think the correct way to get at the real truth, which is not one of exploration and discovery, but one of just failure, is actually to tell it as a trickster narrative.

And so those are the kinds of things that I try to look for when we're, when we're wrestling with this history of landscape and land and the awful things that happened and how do we relate to that through our own traditions and our own ways of being, how do we grapple with that and take it on but, like, subvert it. Like, those are the kinds of things that I am really, like, drawn to and interested in and try to look for, I guess, in my own learning and then in my own storytelling and art.

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VENUS WILLIAMS: As NoiseCat's story affirms, when it comes to the landscape, *many* stories and experiences are hidden beneath the dominant, romanticized narrative of exploration and discovery.

For Xaviera Simmons, this process of historical reckoning becomes a visual exercise focused on stories that landscapes withhold, specifically histories of labor and violence. With a combination of photography and performance, Simmons shows how land-based injustice is not simply a relic of the past.

Xaviera Simmons: The *Sundown* series really came about because I wanted, I think before I die, I want to make sure that any children I know, any young people, anyone to have an understanding of where I am, where I was, where I came from, what were the things that were happening in the time, what is the history, that I was clear, that I was able to say like, this is part of the narrative. That is especially crucial to you, young person, that may be my child, who descends from chattel slavery in the United States and its complicated history. So it's, it's kind of like an impossible project in a way. I feel like it's something that I can do for a long time, which is a lot of my creative practices. I try to set these kind of impossible tasks for myself. So this one looks at a lot of images inside of the public domain. Because for me the United States in particular, the empire that it is, it has the receipts. There's no confusion about what happened and when and, you know, I mean, there's some things that dip out, but for the most part, we can

summarize a lot of the things and we know what happened and what's owed, what needs to be given back.

So I'm just kind of like going through the history and using the archives of what is already publicly available to build these characters. I'm thinking a lot about the apparatus of photography, of looking, of how images in the history of photography in particular, how images change over time. But then also how do you also have pleasure?

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VENUS WILLIAMS: The images in *Xaviera Simmons's Sundown* series each feature the artist herself—posed against a decorative backdrop, sometimes floral, sometimes geometric. Simmons is strikingly sheathed in bright colors or patterns; in hats of various styles; in garments that create structure, beauty, and visual interest in their shape.

Simmons poses in profile, averting her gaze. Or turns her back to the viewer. Or hides her face with an African mask; or a bouquet of flowers; or behind a camera or binoculars, as if capturing the viewer or staring them down right back.

In each image, she holds an enlarged archival photograph or a placard of text in front of her body. The images are often from the Public Domain, with many even commissioned by the U.S. government. They depict freed slaves on a plantation; white farmers posing with the Black sharecroppers from whose labor they profit; and, in one case, a 19th century image of a white family posing with their horses and buggy over a headline from 2018 that reads: “The myth of the American Frontier still shapes U.S. racial divides.”

The artist’s performance in each image is part of their overall effect. It’s up to the viewer to consider what she reveals and conceals; why she directs and averts her gaze; and what all of that might say about *her* and your own feelings toward the image she holds.

The title of the series—*Sundown*—has resonance too: the term “sundown town” refers to a place where, particularly in the Jim Crow era, it was understood that Black people were not welcome and were not safe after dark for risk of beatings, imprisonment, and even lynching.

In the context of this conversation, Simmons invoked an image where she wears a bright red overcoat. She stands against a black and white geometric backdrop and holds a pair of binoculars in front of her eyes, the lenses of which offer a glimpse of the space and land she’s facing. She holds a placard with the enlarged text of a headline...

Xaviera Simmons: And it says “Black farmers are being forced off of their land by longstanding government discrimination.” I think that work is tied to a reparative framework. Right? I also think that the text inside of that work is complicated because as a Black person who descends from chattel slavery, I think that there are not enough discussions between Black people who

descend from chattel slavery and indigenous people. You know? I mean, white folks, it's a whole nother can of worms, but I do think that there are some solidarities that need to be articulated between us as the people who either were displaced and or those who had to labor. And were displaced and all extracted from.

Candice Hopkins: Will it's making me think of this and Xaviera, also what you were saying, you know, your emphasis on labor. It reminded me of some photographs that are from my area, distinctly about the Alaska Highway and the building the Alaska Highway was a was a Second World War effort and there was a black battalion and they were built by the military and they were segregated from from the others and they were also restricted to only working with their hands. So they weren't allowed to use any of the other tools that were available to all of the other workers. They had a black photographer that was within, within the group. And he was the one who was able to be more mobile, which was a point of fascination. But then when I was doing research as well into a Tlingit photographer, his name was George Johnston. He lived near Tagish Lake, and when he was photographing, he started about 1920, and he was documenting what was considered the golden age of Tagish and Tlingit life, but also kind of like early modernism. For example, he was able to acquire one of the first cars, so they're posing by the car, and he had to bring it over to his territory via a barge. But some of those oral histories around that time also indicated that there was a very early a kind of kinship relationship that was developed between that Black battalion and local Native communities because they're immediately trading food because what they had for rations, as laborers wasn't great. And even though they weren't allowed to do it, they found ways of having those relations.

And I think historically that's been seen as, like, a real point of threat is, you know, Black Indigenous relations, and I feel like there's a lot of silences in the archives about those relations. And it's only been, I think, fairly recently, like in the last 20, 25 years that even the history of this Black battalion and his photographs of that time have come to light

VENUS WILLIAMS: The official photographer of this Black battalion—the 97th Army Corps of Engineers—was William E. Griggs. You can find some of his remarkable images online.

and so I feel, actually feel pretty optimistic about our moment in time because I feel like there's a lot of uncovering of these relations and whether they're being represented through and applied through some of the images that you're making now, but they're also in the archive.

Julian Brave NoiseCat: Yeah, I think they exist in actual communities and lived experiences too. I just don't think that people talk about them that often.

Also, you know, just like the histories of activism and politics and the origins of a lot of native activism with the occupation of Alcatraz, the story is not really told very widely, but that came out of, in part, like organizing at San Francisco State University for the first ethnic studies departments, it was called the third world strikes. It was through those kinds of relations between, Native student activists and Native activists and all sorts of other activists from many

different backgrounds, including many Black activists, that movements like that came to be and were inspired, right?

This country was largely built to stop Black uprisings and Indian uprisings. Like, that's part of what it was founded to do. You know, like that, that stuff is not remembered or is pushed the sidelines

Xaviera Simmons: It's not something that is at the forefront and my thing is that I think that like the three of us can articulate that intermingling a bit more, but the institution and or whiteness doesn't acknowledge its position. And that's the part that keeps things invisible. And I'm not gonna say like white people are this or that because there's individuals who do all sorts of things, but as a structure, as a group of people, the white body gets to be invisible amongst all of this other stuff, right? These positions are what's missing from me in the narrative.

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Xaviera Simmons: When I look out my windows every day, I can see this land that is the United States currently, I can see its return to itself. And I think it's because I've had so many conversations with so many people across the United States whose ancestors have been here since the dawn of this time. And it's a strange thing to be able to see that something's happening that is something that maybe like 40 years ago, I don't know if I could have seen it happening, but today I can see it happening, right?

I'm thinking now about how to picture that, right? Like how to visualize that—that for me feels like some of the most complicated work that I'm doing because I can talk about it more than I can, like, visualize it right now.

Candice Hopkins: That was really beautiful, Xaviera. You know, I've been thinking about your work as you're speaking and I'm looking outside, I'm looking at the land and I'm here at Forge right now and we are custodians of just under thirty-eight acres and we're in the process of, rematriating this place, which according to, you know, the maps and the photographs that we found, some of the photographs from the 1800s, early 1900s has been cleared for a long time, and likely cleared for agriculture. And the first thing that we did was to stop mowing, you know, the place looked like a golf course, and it was probably like heavily sprayed before it was acquired by us, and so we stopped mowing, and by doing that, dormant seeds and seeds can stay dormant for more than 100 years some of them started sprouting, especially milkweed.

And now we're getting to the point where we'll be able to plant a native seed mix. But even before that, this fall, everything changed. The diversity of birds, animals, but also the insects—we didn't really have the same kind of insects. Now, when you walk, there's a kind of carpet of them beneath your feet.

And it makes me realize that they were just waiting. So I've been thinking a lot about the actions that we can take to not think of our relationship to land as passive, because it wants to be as

diverse as possible, it wants to be resistant. If humans just stop trying to control it and territorialize it, then things start to change and shift.

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VENUS WILLIAMS: In closing, let's travel back to South Carolina with poet and ornithologist J. Drew Lanham, who is also working toward what he termed earlier as this kind of ecological reparation—of finding ways to work *against* extraction and capital; of finding ways to honor what it means to live on, from, and with the land.

He thinks photography could actually play a role in this—if we stop intervening quite so much in that, too.

J. Drew Lanham: There's certainly opportunities for disruption. But I think sometimes what the photographer has to do is to zoom out. I think about all the bird festivals that I would attend and I've never seen so many large lenses, maybe at sporting events, but to see people and to see kids, very young children with lenses that are almost as long as they are tall, with a bird that's sitting in the first place, only 20 feet away and that you can't watch the bird for taking a picture of it. And that the bird super close up then becomes a possession. I mean, I did a lot of that with this little point and shoot camera. Right. And then it all became about the zoom-in. And then, you know, in part because the camera was malfunctioning, and in part, because I got tired of carrying it around. I just started using my phone and the best pictures from this phone are landscapes, the wide angle view. And I started playing this trick and I would know where the bird was. I would see the bird. And sometimes you could see the bird in that photo.

But it would just be almost a pinprick and there would be this other landscape. And I remember at times the frustration with people, because I'm just posting most of these on social media, if I do anything with them at all, and people would say, yeah, but where's the bird? And I would say, it's right there, can't you see it? And someone might say, yeah, I can, but it's so small. Right. It's a small bird. Look at this landscape that it's in. What do you think about that? What do you think about the context of this bird's being? Is this a good place for this bird?

One of my favorite birds is this raptor called a swallowtail kite and swallowtail kites are just sort of the epitome of flight. I mean, they're birds that just effortlessly soar and their strongest association is with the South Carolina low country where they're sailing over all these old rice fields that enslaved peoples built that were formerly Cypress swamps where indigenous people lived, but here are these birds that are such powerful flyers that they can just ride the wind a couple of hundred miles and a few hours, right?

So here I am four hours from Charleston and I'm coming to the farm one day and there's a swallowtail kite. And I stop and this kite is just soaring and it's just beautiful and you know, ideally you want to get a picture of that bird against the clouds and to show the wide wing spread and this whole idea and this freedom of flight, but this bird was soaring over a Dollar

General. And I couldn't edit the Dollar General out of the frame with the bird. Well, why should I? Why would I do that?

It presented, at least in that instance, this whole idea of contrast of tension between wildness and development. And so I'm, I'm learning to present what's there. And what the camera sees. So I think photography has that power, right? It has that power to show that moment that a shutter blinked when the shot went off and there we all are, and we're stuck at that moment in time, and we can't get past it. And I sort of lament the ability for people to go back and say, okay, well, imagine that if we had taken this out and this out and this out and this out and this out that suddenly here we go, everything's fine and dandy. You know, all the sudden there's the photo and JFK's brains aren't on the trunk of that car. That honest moment that photography can deliver in a way that that's, I won't say it's inarguable, right? But certainly it's less culpable to doubt.

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VENUS WILLIAMS: Thank you J. Drew Lanham, Candice Hopkins, Julian Brave NoiseCat, and Xaviera Simmons. Lanham's memoir, *The Home Place*, is available from Milkweed Editions and his latest book, *Joy is the Justice We Give Ourselves* is recently out from Hub City Press. NoiseCat's film *SUGARCANE* will be available to stream on Nat Geo later this year, and his book *We Survived the Night* is forthcoming from Knopf. For more information on Hopkins's recent institutional and curatorial work, please visit forgeproject.com. To see more of Simmons's work, including the *Sundown* series, you can visit her artist page at davidcastillogallery.com.

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 Venus Williams. See you next time.

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