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“Look at These Faces, Sandstone and Woman:” Three Women’s Search for Identity in Landscape

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"Look at These Faces, Sandstone and Woman."
Three Women’s Search for Identity in Landscape

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors to the Department of Languages and Literature at Carroll College, Helena, Montana.

Crystine Miller
April 24, 2008
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Language and Literature.

Dr. Kay Satre  Co-Director  4-24-08

Dr. Debra Bernardi  Co-Director  04/24/08

Murphy Fox  Reader  4-24-08
My body and the desert are the same shape, a perfect fit of rock and flesh. The river draws off my madness and calms me. It knows nothing of my love for it; it can, like love and mystery, prove unattainable even in the moments of profoundest intimacy. [...] There is no end to appetite here. This lusty feast of province may be better suited to nourish our souls than our material excesses.

Ellen Meloy
The Anthropology of Turquoise:
Meditations on Landscape, Art, and Spirit
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Abstract

Nature writing as a genre has traditionally been one of the most prominent ways in which nineteenth and twentieth century writers have explored identity and the individual’s place in the world. Among this vast category, there is a group of women who explore landscape as a means to understand the self. While this is a fairly common theme in the genre, their perspectives offer something new in terms of how this knowledge of self is accessed. In challenging traditional Western philosophy’s insistence on using subject-object relationships to define identity, Annie Dillard, Ellen Meloy, and Leslie Marmon Silko develop their own philosophies for exploring the relationship between landscape and the self. Because both women and landscape have been marginalized and made the other by the subject-object model, these women, through lack of finding identity by conventional means, explore alternative ways to understand the self’s relationship to landscape. Although each writer’s philosophy is distinct, there are also vivid commonalities. Through essay, novels, and short stories, Dillard, Meloy, and Marmon Silko all discuss the extent to which language hinders interaction with landscape, sensory experience as opposed to reason as the preferred medium to access knowledge, and the identity formed out of seeing landscape in such a way. Ultimately, these perspectives offer a vision that challenges individualism and embraces these writer’s relationship to landscape as one of community.
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An Introduction

From early American nature writers like Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Isabella Bird, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold to contemporary writers such as Edward Abbey, Jack Kerouac, Annie Dillard, Gretel Ehrlich, and Terry Tempest Williams, perception of nature has played a primary role in constructing social, political, and spiritual identities. Because the American landscape is so vast—geographically, socially, and politically—the identities formed in relation to landscape naturally take different shapes in different writers’ texts.

As each writer’s identity emerges within an experience of a specific landscape, they differ according to cultural and geographic locale. For example, James Welch’s *Fools Crow*, a novel about the Blackfeet in 1870s Montana, is radically different in content, purpose, and presentation from Al Gore’s “Environmentalism of the Spirit,” an essay arguing that ecological problems are as much a spiritual matter as they are a scientific one. Other differences occur in a text set in the Rocky Mountains, such as Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*, as compared to a text about England’s countryside, such as Wordsworth’s “A Few Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey.” To interpret a text outside of its cultural origin would be to lose the fundamental ideas and beliefs that helped to form a writer’s consciousness about the world. To interpret a nature text as universal and not specific to a particular geography would be to lose the unique meaning that a writer derives from that particular place. Even though a writer may come to a particular observation about the universality of, say, beauty, he or she comes to that insight because of his or her connection with a specific landscape. In this way, each
landscape exerts a distinctive influence on an individual writer’s perceptions of the self and world.

Two writers exemplify this point. Although coming from different cultural and social backgrounds, Ellen Meloy and Leslie Marmon Silko are both writers whose work grows out of the American Southwest desert. Ellen Meloy is originally from California, and spent her writing life in the deserts of Utah. Leslie Marmon Silko lives in the lands of her native Laguna Pueblo people in northern New Mexico. Both women write about the desert in a way that brings to life the idea that within each unique landscape develops an identity intrinsically tied to that landscape. Ellen Meloy says, “It seems as if the right words can come only out of the perfect space of a place you love” (15). For Leslie Marmon Silko, her identity and her work are imbued with the Laguna Pueblo way of life, which depends upon the place to which her people were guided: “Not until they could find a viable relationship to the terrain, the landscape they found themselves in, could they emerge” as a people (“Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” 298).

In addition to the social, political, and geographic variations that guide different writers’ perceptions, there are also philosophical influences that shape how an individual comes to know the self and the world. The way in which an individual accesses knowledge about the self’s relationship to landscape determines that individual’s sense of identity. How we perceive experience dictates the understanding that arises out of these interactions. René Descartes is among the most notable of recent philosophers who have defined Western ideas about perception. In the introduction to Descartes’ *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, Desmond Clarke writes,
Descartes quickly acquired the status of one of the canonical philosophical writers of the early modern period. He joined the ranks of Aristotle and Aquinas and, subsequently, of Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel as foremost among Western philosophers who have helped shape the way in which we currently think about the nature and limits of human understanding.

(xxxvii-xxxviii)

In this tradition, Descartes and his followers claim that there are two different ways of knowing: through the intellect and through the senses. For Descartes, thinking is the only true way to know:

To think? That’s it. It is thought. This alone cannot be detached from me. I am, I exist; that is certain. But for how long? As long as I think, for it might possibly happen if I ceased completely to think that I would thereby cease to exist at all. I do not accept anything at present that is not necessarily true. I am, therefore, precisely only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, soul, intellect or reason. (25)

Descartes, while still acknowledging the body and the imagination to a certain extent, privileges the mind as the superior vehicle for accessing knowledge. Furthermore, because distinctions are made between these capacities for knowledge, the intellectual, thinking self becomes the subject—Descartes’ famous philosophical model for viewing the self in the world, “I think, therefore I am”—while the physical body and all that does not exist in the mind are relegated to the role of the object or the other. While this is obviously simplified in philosophical terms, we can recognize that this system generally
dominates the ways in which Western thought traditionally accesses knowledge and establishes identity through the “I am” sensibility.

In addition to the subject-object dualism of Western tradition, there exist very specific ways of defining the “I am.” As reason is the capacity of the thinking mind that establishes a sense of self in this model, the medium through which the intellect works is held as the privileged mechanism for representing experience: language. Language, in this philosophical model, reflects human’s perceptions of nature and identity because it acts as the vehicle through which the thinking mind can reason.

The major implication of this dualistic philosophy is that it acts on the premise that if there exists a subject—the self—there must also exist an object—the other. In her introduction to The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir writes, “Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other against itself” (33). Herein lies the problem; the object is marginalized by the subject and relegated to a position of significance only insofar as it becomes that which the privileged subject is not. De Beauvoir asserts that men are the subject and women are the object: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (33). In this hierarchy, the object as the other cannot have an identity besides one of marginalized relation to the subject. Therefore, groups and entities that have traditionally been deemed as the other by this model have, out of necessity, had to find alternative methods for accessing knowledge of the world and finding identity within it. Some within these marginalized groups have challenged this dualistic concept of identity by suggesting that experience, knowledge, and the identity
thus formed and recognized exist in a realm that transcends subject-object relations.

Ellen Meloy and Leslie Marmon Silko, as women who have been marginalized by the subject-object relations of traditional Western philosophies, have needed an alternative way of defining themselves. Because their lives are so embedded in a landscape that has been othered by the same system they find connection there. As opposed to the Western method of identifying the self as subject in contrast to all that is other, or object, each writer sees the landscape and herself as being in unity.

Additionally, these groups have struggled with language as a structure inculcated with the subject-object ideologies. The dualistic model locates meaning in reason, which uses languages as the privileged tool for understanding experience and reflecting knowledge. Thus, Western language in itself supports dualism. Groups classified as the other may find language as a barrier in developing alternative forms of experiencing and reflecting knowledge. While it may seem contradictory, Ellen Meloy and Leslie Marmon Silko share their experiences that exist intrinsically outside of Western language and its inherent ideologies of dualism, but they must use language to do so. These writers describe how they experience the world in ways that transcends the ideologies of traditional Western thought, including language; at the same time they acknowledge that their texts, while an imperfect medium, nonetheless have the ability to communicate these unconventional methods for seeing the world.

As a key figure in contemporary nature writing, Annie Dillard provides a framework for constructing identity in a way alternative to the dualistic Western model. In her 1974 book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Dillard sets out to learn about the world by visiting the same creek each day. With Tinker Creek as her backdrop, Dillard more
clearly defines the distinction between seeing nature in the traditional logical, discursive way and an alternative sensory way. To define these two different ways of seeing, Dillard uses the metaphor of seeing with and without a camera. She associates the former with Cartesian duality and the latter with her alternative method of seeing the world. In this model, only the way without a camera allows her to experience nature profoundly.

In our search for meaning, Dillard asserts that we have lost sight of our original connection to the natural world because of the structures that dictate life within a society. She describes this as a process beginning in childhood and ending in our losing our way:

An infant who has just learned to hold his head up has a frank and forthright way of gazing about him in bewilderment. He hasn’t the faintest clue where he is, and he aims to learn. In a couple of years, what he will have learned instead is how to fake it: he’ll have the cocksure air of a squatter who has come to feel he owns the place. Some unwonted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover at least where it is that we have been so startingly set down, if we can’t learn why. (11-12)

What matters to Dillard is our fundamental need to reconnect with the place where we live, with landscape. For Dillard, if we are unable to understand why we exist, we may as well try to understand where we are. She goes on to explain that, if looked at in a certain way, the where and the why of life coincide. When Dillard can see nature in a way other than through the “unwonted, taught pride,” she experiences a connection between self and place that creates meaning. About these encounters she says,
Something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell” (12). How does she come to this brush with meaning?

“Seeing with a camera” is Dillard’s metaphor for seeing the world from a dualistic perspective, while “seeing without a camera” is her metaphor for disintegrating the boundary between herself as the subject and the landscape as the object. In seeing with a camera, Dillard observes by consciously “analyz[ing] and pry[ing]” into what is happening around her; when seeing in a direct and intentional way, she will “hurl over logs and roll away stones” (31). In order to derive any kind of meaning from this kind of seeing, she must keep in her “head a running description of the present” (30-31). By this, Dillard means that she keeps an internal dialogue of what is happening around her in order to acknowledge that it is in fact happening. Just as a literal photograph describes a particular place, Dillard’s first way of seeing allows her to create a discursive account of the natural world. By using language as the means to understand her experience, this mode of seeing is upholding the reasoning mind as the privileged way to access knowledge. When seeing with a camera, Dillard compares measuring the value of her experience to walking “from shot to shot, reading the light on a calibrated meter” (31). The interaction’s value is measured in specific, empirical knowledge about a place: what bugs live under certain rocks, what kinds of fish live in the creek. This metaphor also indicates that there are two separate entities involved in the observation: an observer and that which is being observed. “Seeing with a camera” automatically necessitates a photographer, the subject matter, and the camera that separates them. In Dillard’s metaphor, the photographer is the subject, the landscape is object—that which is outside
of the subject—and the camera is the reflective vehicle—language—that separates the
subject from the object.

While she certainly attributes great value to this way of seeing, Dillard’s second
way of seeing proves to be more profound because it allows her to experience, rather than
simply to observe, nature. She describes this second way as a departure from the willful
meticulousness of the first way:

But there is another way of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see
this way I sway transfixed and emptied […] When I walk without a
camera, my own shutter opens, and the moment’s light prints on my own
silver gut. When I see this second way I am above all an unscrupulous
observer. (31)

In contrast to the prying, analyzing, and verbalizing that accomplish the first way of
seeing, the second way requires a letting go of these things. Of what exactly is Dillard
letting go? What does she see without her metaphorical camera that she cannot see with
it?

First, Dillard must let go of the idea that things exist only and exactly insofar as
they can be described, quantified, and measured. Then, she must let go of the conscious
thought that structures her observation as she must be “unscrupulous” in her second way
of seeing. This word suggests that she must not only be un-meticulous in her experience,
but must also abandon scruples—that is, the morals and social values that guide
conventional life. Dillard suggests that because scruples are a social construct and are
therefore built into the exchange between nature and self, she must resist those things
which reinforce social constructs. In renouncing social structures as boundaries that can
inhibit interaction with landscape, Dillard names language as the primary hindering structure. Dillard realizes that, to overcome this boundary, all she “can do is try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps [her] from seeing just as surely as a newspaper dangled before [her] eyes” (32). By letting go of language and its built-in constructs, she is emptied and thus able to experience nature in a different way than her analytical lens allows.

The meaning that results from this way of seeing allows Dillard to find herself in landscape and transcend traditional Western commonsense perceptions of what mediates experience. In “seeing with a camera,” Dillard determines that language inhibits interaction with landscape because, in language, the reasoning, speaking self must distinguish between the self as subject and the landscape as object. By “seeing without a camera,” she is able to experience the world as part of herself because she eliminates the boundary between herself and landscape by eliminating that faculty which necessarily makes the distinction. The following description is the result of Dillard seeing without a camera.

I was sitting on a sycamore log bridge with the sunset at my back, watching the shiners the size of minnows who were feeding over the muddy sand in skittery schools. Again and again, one fish, then another, turned for a split second across the current and flash! The sun shot out from its silver side. I couldn’t watch for it. It was always just happening somewhere else, and it drew my vision just as it disappeared […] Then I noticed white specks, some sort of pale petals, small, floating from under my feet on the creek’s surface, very slow and steady. So I blurred my
eyes and gazed towards the brim of my hat and saw a new world. I saw the pale white circles roll up, roll up, like the world’s turning, mute and perfect, and I saw the linear flashes, gleaming silver, like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time. Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh-flake, feather, bone. (32)

In this passage, Dillard clearly explains the movement from seeing with a camera to seeing without a camera. At first, she is simply trying to watch the fish rising as the sun hits them, but then slips into her second ways of seeing and she becomes part of the experience itself. Emptied, she becomes the lip of a fountain, ether, the leaf and bone. She locates in this experience an identity enmeshed with the natural world.

Dillard expresses a way of knowing and being that challenges our Western commonsense ideas in which we see reason as the vehicle of knowledge, language as a tool for representing what we perceive, and human self and nature as clearly separate entities. Dillard’s “without a camera” model testifies to a kind seeing in which sensory experience is a way to access knowledge, language becomes a barrier in this understanding, and the boundaries between self and place blur into a shared identity.

What follows, then, is an awareness forged from a profound interaction between self and landscape. As opposed to defining the self by that which the other is not, Dillard is able to define herself through landscape because her “without a camera” perspective does not delineate a subject and an object.
Ultimately, Dillard’s premise is that to understand the natural world is literally and metaphorically to look at it in a way unmediated by traditional logic and language. This alternative model for seeing the world explores how landscape becomes an entity that supplies the context in which a more profound identity can be experienced.

As she is writing of her experiences at Tinker Creek, Dillard is looking for small spaces of wildness among a relatively vast expanse of civilization. Dillard looks at the intersection of civilization and nature through two different perspectives. Although these perspectives on how to see the world are authentic, she takes the lenses on and off for the purpose of trying to learn about who she is in the place where she is.

Ellen Meloy and Leslie Marmon Silko use and adopt Dillard’s model as they similarly explore alternatives to Cartesian duality in their experience with landscape. Meloy transforms Dillard’s concept of “seeing without a camera” into a way of living rather than simply a way of seeing; she deconstructs subject-object relationships in order to experience the landscape as an extension of self. In her philosophy of what she calls discovering “a deep map of place,” Meloy attempts to re-member her identity as a woman in the American Southwest desert. Through natural history writing and reflection, Meloy collects a myriad of correspondences between herself and the desert that helps her to create an identity that is genuinely of the landscape. Meloy goes into the desert to escape the boundaries of social conventions and to reconnect with the landscape.

In moving even a step further away from traditional Western thought, Leslie Marmon Silko writes about a sense of identity that is already intrinsically part of the landscape. Whereas Dillard is looking at a small space of nature with and without the metaphorical camera, and Meloy is living through a sensory experience in the vast
wilderness to find a “deep map of place,” Marmon Silko is exploring the ways in which an entire culture’s identity is fundamentally rooted in the perception that human and landscape are not separate entities. Marmon Silko writes from within a Pueblo worldview that she calls the “Pueblo Imagination.” In this philosophy, the Pueblos, as individuals and an entire culture, experience landscape as intrinsic to their history and identity because there is a common spirit running through everything in the desert, a landscape from which the people have emerged and with which they have lived in harmony.

Ellen Meloy and Leslie Marmon Silko offer alternative visions for looking at the world and seeing themselves within it. By rejecting the rational mind as the paradigm for accessing knowledge and instead exploring the body and the imagination, respectively, as more profound ways to know, these two women overcome the subject-object relationships that dominate traditional Western ways of being in the world. In this way, they come to know themselves in and through the landscape.
Chapter 1

Ellen Meloy:
A Deep Map of Place

For Ellen Meloy, place is not merely an external setting or an entity residing outside of personal engagement. Place, and specifically Utah’s red slickrock desert, is where she “can’t tell where [her] body stops and the desert begins” (“All Things Considered”). In her 2002 book, The Anthropology of Turquoise, Meloy explores her connection to the desert and how she has come to understand her own identity from this relationship. Through a collection of fifteen personal reflections, narratives, and natural history essays, Meloy takes a literal and metaphorical walk across various landscapes in search of what connects her so deeply to the desert. Just as Meloy meanders on her walks around her home in Bluff, Utah, with no particular destination in mind, the text meanders along stories about the desert landscape and occasionally digresses into histories about the origin of the word blue in different languages or the value of turquoise rock in ancient Persian cultures. Throughout tales about the people who currently do and historically did inhabit the land, records of things that have been left by each generation of people, narratives of her journeys to the place before she made it her home, her trips to different parts of the world, and stories that the landscape tells in itself, Meloy reflects on her deep connection with landscape and tries to understand why she is able to know herself through it so profoundly. While the text never comes to one conclusion or a climactic elucidation of yes, this is the secret to understanding human relationship to landscape, it does explore the ways in which Meloy is able to find herself and develop a way of living in her place.
In contrast to the rational, discursive thought that controls much of human life, Meloy suggests that sensory experience allows her to have profound interactions with the desert landscape. As Meloy defines it, sensory experience is, at the most basic level, what connects us to nature, and when this connection is lost, we are lost also, both in terms of place and in terms of identity: “Each of us possesses five fundamental, enthralling maps to the natural world: sight, touch, taste, hearing, smell. As we unravel the threads that bind us to nature, as denizens of data and artifice, amid crowds and clutter, we become miserly with these loyal and exquisite guides, we numb our sensory intelligence. This failure of attention will make orphans of us all” (17). The text then, explores how sensory experience with nature allows humans to get back to their most fundamental ways of understanding the world. The book is also a re-membering of the senses, both in that sensory experience is a recalling of the senses that have been discarded in favor of reason as well as a putting back together of the self with the senses. By allowing the senses, as opposed to the rational mind, to direct experience, Meloy is able to develop a deep connection with place.

Before looking at what facilitates her experiences with landscape, Meloy makes it clear that she, much like Dillard, experiences these profound interactions by seeing the desert in a specific way that is not through direct and rational thought. While Dillard and Meloy are similar in this aspect, Meloy extends Dillard’s model for seeing and transforms it into a way of existing and living in the world. As a metaphor for how she sees landscape, Meloy muses about what finger painting will be like in old age:

Finger paints will be next in the life of media and with their slurpy nonchalance a release from the weight of a cerebral life [...] because there
is a possibility of an abrupt slide into chronic befuddlement, I thought it might be useful to acquire some basic motor and tactile skills, like pushing around cool, gooey paint in mindless, repetitive motions. [...] I hope to make pictures like I walk in the desert—under a spell, an instinct of motion, a kind of knowing that is essentially indirect and sideways. (4-6)

To come to any understanding about self and landscape, she must give herself over to the desert. Just as the desert guides her walking, it must guide her thinking. She suggests that in order to have deeply connected experiences with landscape, the way in which she sees must be like walking in the desert: "instinctual" as opposed to methodical or "cerebral" (4). "A kind of knowing that is essentially indirect and sideways" is in contrast to what Western thought has used as a means for knowing (6). In order to use reason, the mind must know in a way that is direct and logical. For Meloy, this way of knowing is wholly inadequate.

While Meloy's collection of essays meanders from subject to subject and story to story, her metaphor here is no accident. In explaining how she sees and knows, Meloy uses metaphors that are physical: finger painting and walking. These physical actions are carried out through the senses of sight and touch. By using these sensory perceptions as a metaphor for how to see the world, Meloy is already privileging the senses over reason.

While Meloy covers a broad range of sensory experiences, she primarily explores two in particular that seem to most poignantly punctuate her interactions with the desert: perception of color through light and a shared sensuality between herself and desert flora. In exploring how humans perceive color as a shattering of light, Meloy tells stories of what color means to different cultures and to her as a woman living in the desert. In the
first chapter, “The Deeds and Sufferings of Light,” Meloy tells about one of her occasional walks to the top of a mesa near her home. She begins early in the day and sits on top of the mesa with her late brother’s painting supplies, trying to capture the colors of the desert. Reflecting on her painting, she says,

I am not that presumptuous to think I could speak or paint or write the natural history of my home colors. I know only that they are to blame for intent and motion, for an asymmetrical journey of wonder and of trouble. Light can run a person’s time and moods; it can explain everything [...] It can draw a person right down to the skin of the world. The tidal pull of light can shape an entire life. Every heart-warmed pulse of blood and breath. (15-17)

This passage intimates what in color connects the human to it. For Meloy, the connection between what the eye can perceive in the form of light is so powerful that “it can explain everything” (15). As illustrated here, she cannot explicate a color—she can only feel what a color is doing to her. While her journey to this conclusion cannot be know, Meloy finds a quality in color from which she gleans understanding. From experiencing color through the faculty of the senses, she is able to have a profound understanding of life.

In addition to exploring the effects of color on the human, this passage also raises another, more philosophical point. Even though Meloy indicates that language is insufficient in representing her experience of the colors of her home—“I am not that presumptuous to think I could speak or paint or write the natural history of my home colors”—she still uses language as an imperfect medium to reflect upon what color does to the human (15). Meloy recognizes that language is inadequate, but this passage
attempts to relate a semblance of the feelings that color prompts in her. Additionally, as the intellectual mind is traditionally the faculty that humans use to explain phenomena through language, Meloy’s assertion that sensory perception of light can “explain everything” challenges the same Western ideas about language that Dillard challenges (15).

To convey the idea that language and, therefore, reason are inadequate means to express and process knowledge, Meloy provides a myriad of examples throughout the book. One prominent example comes from the story of a trip Meloy took with her husband to Mexico’s Gulf Coast on the Yucatan. On the trip, she is struck by the abounding colors of the Caribbean. They become friends with Israel, the owner of the cabana in which they stay. For a time, she finds herself lost in a world where neither she nor her husband speak the language proficiently. She says, “I understand nothing. I lose my tongue […] I have no voice for this complicated landscape, no language of perception” (138). However as she begins to see the landscape and understand it just as she sees and understands her desert home, she realizes that words are as useless here as they are in the desert for learning about a place. To illustrate this point, Meloy compares her own experience of being in this place and the relationships she develops with the landscape and the people to Earl Shorris’ essay about how language mediates our perception of the world. Reflecting on Shorris’ observations of the colors of the Caribbean and the Mayan words used to describe them, she quotes, “‘It is not merely a writer’s conceit to think that the human world is made of words and to remember that no two words in all the world’s languages are alike […] Of all the arts and sciences made by man, none equals a language, for only a language in its living entirety can describe a
unique and irreplaceable world” (143). Meloy’s argument, of course, refutes this point as she describes her sensory experience and how she understands the blues of the sea, the rhythms of the sun and tides, and the patterns of the flora and fauna. She shows this through her and her husband’s developing relationship with Israel. Although he speaks little English and they speak little Spanish, they teach each other where they are from, make gestures about the landscapes to which they respectively belong, and share a tacit understanding of the power of the Caribbean colors.

In exploring the knowledge that her tongue-less self gleans, Meloy reflects that without language, color still exists; without the word “blue,” blue, in all its forms, will still be real. She describes with sorrow the loss of certain indigenous language and their butterflies of color, but she maintains that the colors that each language describes still exist. While this seems a somewhat obvious statement, the reasoning behind it is imperative to Meloy’s pursuit of exploring the relationship between human and landscape. Without language mediating experience of color, we can interact more closely with color through the senses. Instead of learning turquoise as the name of a color, we can perceive and experience a shattering of light that we might then name turquoise. However, the perception’s importance does not lie in the naming, but in the experience with what is later named. Meloy explores how humans understand perception of color through the senses, and the philosophical implications of how we understand this perception. Color, then, becomes more complicated than a simple blue or red hue.

The other sensory experience that Meloy frequently reflects upon is touch. Through touch, Meloy interacts directly with the desert landscape. In what she calls a “shift from cerebral to carnal,” Meloy asserts that the body becomes another faculty
through which knowledge can be gleans from landscape. Meloy explores the sexuality and sensuality shared between herself and the desert. In the chapter “A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry,” Meloy develops a field guide that gives the expected drawings, Latin names, physical characteristics, and likely locations as well as her own musings on the blatant sexuality of the desert plants. Through recollections of her first experiences as a young woman in the desert and her current daily life in that same desert that has now become her home, she reflects freely about the physical bond between her body and the desert’s body, the landscape. In explaining this connection to landscape, Meloy uses desert flora as a literal metaphor for her sensual experience with landscape. She says, “Desert flora are sparse and ephemeral. There are spines, thorns, uncertain seeds, long periods of dormancy and, when moisture comes, a passion of flowers so accelerated, you feel their demands on your heart, the mounting pleasure, the sweet exhaustion” (221).

This passage, with its clearly sexual language and imagery, provides a pointed example of Meloy’s understanding of self and landscape as having the capacity to share experience. Meloy indicates that she is so literally and intimately in touch with the desert that she can actually feel and experience what she perceives as the sensuality and sexuality of desert plants. Of another interaction between the desert landscape and the body she says, “Spring in the desert grew beyond the reach of intellect and became a blinding ache for intimacy, not unlike beauty, not unlike physical love” (223). These moments of sensuality are so striking because most associate such interactions with humans. However, they are no less profound because they occur with the landscape. Through the senses, Meloy understands that the landscape and humans share a physical experience that ties them together.
Meloy’s work delves into the ways in which identity can be understood through sensory perception of her desert homeland. The moments of sensory experience, such as perceiving color and sharing sensuous interactions with desert flowers, are moments of profound connection Meloy feels with the natural world. From these connections come moments of understanding about herself and her place. At the end of “A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry,” Meloy writes,

There is the reassurance that this is not a place with too much rain, that the thirst of its sandstone, of juniper and pinyon, cliffrose and scarlet paintbush, is as true an edge as human longing. Look at these faces, sandstone and woman; both hold the history of the wind. Read the heart as geological terrain, as slip faults and slow persuasions, states of ecstatic disintegration and tectonic fate, angular unconformity, angle of repose.

The fierce bond between the body and this piece of earth tells what rapture feels like, how it consumes and transforms us. (254-55)

In this passage, Meloy highlights the similarities between the landscape and humans: the plants thirst for water is like “human longing,” there are wrinkles of age on both the woman and the desert sandstone, the human heart has “terrain” just as the desert (254, 255). These similarities, these shared experiences develop into a bond that teaches this woman about herself.

The moments that precipitate from sensory perception of landscape are marked as correspondences between Meloy and the landscape. The points of correspondence reflect moments in which there is no boundary between Meloy and the landscape. In these unbounded moments, Meloy locates her sense of identity. For example, at the end of the
first essay, Meloy writes, “An aesthetic sense, an intuitive link between a chromatic band and emotion, can then grow as strong as a fingerprint, defying logic and inviting the helpless surrender of a love affair. Intoxication with color, sometimes subliminal, often fierce, may express itself as a profound attachment to landscape” (15-16). In this example, the landscape’s color is perceived in an indirect way through sight. This sensory perception of color is then internalized as something that can form individual identity or “shape an entire life” (17). These correspondences signal Meloy’s sense that her identity is not a separate entity from but rather inextricably interwoven with the desert.

Meloy banishes the distinction between the subject and the object in these correspondences because she is part of the desert and the desert is part of her. In subject-object ideology, everything outside of the self is the other and is therefore opposed to the self. Meloy challenges this premise two ways. First, she explores the relationship between the subject and the object and finds what connects them instead of what separates them. In these connections, Meloy discovers that the subject is bound to the object. She then determines that the boundary between the subject and object disintegrates. Because the supposed subject and object are bound to each other, there is not a distinction between them as two separate entities. Because Meloy and the landscape are no longer distinguished as two separate entities, there are shared qualities that define both at the same time. As Meloy’s example of physical intimacy with the desert landscape suggests, she is able to access meaning and identity that are intrinsically and at the same moment of the land and of herself.
The points of connection at which Meloy comes to profound understanding about herself and the world and her ability to dissolve the boundary between the subject and the object help her develop a philosophical model for being in the world. In what she calls a "deep map of place," Meloy finds an internal identity that is formed by the external landscape. As a metaphor for explaining the "deep map of place," the chapter "The Angry Lunch Café" tells the story of Meloy’s encounter with a group of armed men looking for a couple who had committed what the men thought to be a major moral transgression: swimming nude in the Colorado River. As Meloy beings unloading her raft at the takeout point, the men begin questioning her, supposing that she is part of the offending party. After determining that she is in fact alone on the river and that she has spent four days camping without a GPS or a single gun, the men begin to question her about where they are: "What’s this place? Did you get coordinates?" I told them the name of the place and how the dirt road from the boat ramp connected to the main highway. I did not have a global positioning system [...] I was lost but knew where I was. They were not lost but did not know where they were" (287). Meloy goes on to comment,

No one with these glorified compasses would become lost in the wilderness. They were, after all, in touch with satellites. People in touch with satellites followed their way points assiduously. Like leaving a high-tech trail of Hansel and Gretel cookie crumbs, they programmed their route so they could retrace the exact same steps on the return route. (287)

As opposed to a written, recorded map with fixed points of coordinates and directions for following an exact path, Meloy meanders through the desert with an internal map that she
follows by sensing rather than by thinking. Meloy is lost in that she does not know precisely where she is on a map created by satellite images and coordinates, but she senses where she is in her place. In Meloy’s “deep map of place,” her physical correspondences between the desert landscape and her body mark ordinance points and the way the light falls on the desert red slickrock cliffs tell here if she is facing east or west. Meloy’s “deep map of place” marks an instinctual and internal awareness of the landscape because it is so intricately woven into her awareness of her body and her identity.

By seeing the world instinctually and indirectly, Meloy is able to discover that the story of self and land are the same, and sensory experience prompts us to fully discover the heart of this relationship. She says of one particular exchange with the Colorado River, “Along the river are strewn stories that make me who I am, that tell me what binds my life together, what to value and what to lay aside. We know few ways to tell the river’s story other than through our own” (217). She finds in the river and in herself the same story. For Meloy, the desert is a place where the senses take over and language flees. It is the place where she abandons that which obstructs the bond between nature and self. She can experience in the desert the carved out canyons, the red rocks crumbling beneath the mighty weight of a cricket, the blushed desert primrose bursting with sensuality. When the cerebral life slips away, the desert life holds her fast. In this desert life, Meloy re-members that which has been forgotten by the rationing mind. She looks to the body and its senses for a way to understand the connection between the landscape and the self. Through touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell, Meloy remembers what has been forgotten by the dualistic, reasoning mind: the commonalities between the
land and the human. From this recollection of experience, she re-members an identity that weaves the self and the landscape together: “For me the bond between self and place is not conscious—no truth will arrive that way—but entirely sensory. Instinct and intimacy bring the feast closer, the river celebrates things we forget how to celebrate: our own spirits, the eternity of all things” (216).
Chapter 2

Leslie Marmon Silko: The Pueblo Imagination

While Annie Dillard develops a method for looking at the world and Ellen Meloy develops a way of being in the world, Leslie Marmon Silko arrives with a worldview that explores a human connection to landscape that characterizes an entire culture. Throughout Leslie Marmon Silko’s novels, essays, short stories, and poems, one thread remains constant: the Pueblo Imagination. As Marmon Silko writes from the consciousness of her Laguna Pueblo people, her texts certainly reflect a worldview that is alternative to traditional Western thought. The Pueblo Imagination, which sits at the heart of this worldview, rests on the idea that the human is not an entity separate from the landscape. Marmon Silko does not talk about this as a strictly metaphorical or philosophical concept. The Pueblo Imagination has a strong literal and physical meaning as well. In her 1986 essay “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” Marmon Silko explains that humans, land, animals, and all of nature are of one origin:

The dead become dust, and in this becoming they are once more joined with the Mother […] Rocks and clay are part of the Mother. They emerge in various forms, but at some time before, they were smaller particles or great boulders. At a later time they may again become what they once were. Dust. A rock shares this fate with us and with animals and plants as well. A rock has being or spirit, although we may not understand it. The spirit may differ from the spirit we know in animals or plants or in ourselves. In the end we all originate from the depths of the earth.

(Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination 290)
The Pueblo Imagination does not separate the human from the landscape; more importantly, it explains the intricate nature of this relationship. The nature of the human relationship to landscape is dual, part quite literally physical and part essentially spiritual. Because this perception of landscape is so intricately united with both the spiritual and physical world, the Pueblo cannot separate him or herself from the landscape and maintain an intact identity.

Even though everything in the natural world is connected by the same spirits, the Pueblo Imagination recognizes the uniqueness of the human. This idea arises out of Emergence narratives in which the Pueblo people emerge from the earth to travel to the place where they are supposed to live. The concept of emergence is a common theme among many native cultures, particularly those of the Southwest: “The emergence tradition is another widespread form of creation history, developed with complexity by the Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache in the Southwest, and by the Creek in the Southeast. Emergence stories have the people climbing out from under the earth, their existence bound up with the character of the world itself” (“Origin Myths Involving the Concept of Emergence”). More specific to Marmon Silko’s texts, Emergence for Pueblo cultures is a journey symbolically marked by features of the landscape with particular trees, boulders, and mesas guiding the Pueblo on “a ritual circuit or path” (“Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination 297). While the journey and the path are physical, they mark an “interior […] journey of awareness and imagination in which [the Pueblo people] emerged from being within the earth and from everything included in earth to the culture and people they became, differentiating themselves for the first time from all that had surrounded them” (“Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination 297).
The idea of Emergence, while recognizing the distinct nature of humans, does not separate the human from the landscape. The narratives and symbolic physical journeys marked by the physical landscape
delineate the complexities of the relationship which human beings must maintain with the surrounding natural world if they hope to survive in this place. Thus the journey [is] an interior process of the imagination, a growing awareness that being human is somehow different from all other life—animal, plant, and inanimate. Yet [they] are all from the same source: the awareness never deteriorated into Cartesian duality, cutting off the human from the natural world. (Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination 297)
Pueblo people understand that because their symbolic journey is marked by the physical landscape, so too is their interior journey. Furthermore, because the interior journey, an awareness of identity, cannot exist without the landscape that guides it, identity cannot exist separate from that which defines it. This idea helps explain Marmon Silko’s description of human distinction, not separation, from the rest of the natural world. The interior journey is an individual one; however, because every individual of the Pueblo people makes this journey, the awareness becomes a definition of the entire people and culture. Additionally, the concept of an interior journey is bound up in the cultural and historical identity of this people. As the awareness of being distinct but not separate from the landscape is always embodied in daily practices, rituals, histories, narratives and life in general, the Pueblo Imagination develops into a culturally all-inclusive mode of thinking, an entire culture’s way of seeing the world rather than a more simplistic,
individualistic search for the self's identity. In comparing Marmon Silko’s alternative model for looking at the world with Dillard's and Meloy's, Marmon Silko's philosophy is the most far reaching. Whereas Dillard’s "seeing without a camera" is a model for seeing the world and Meloy's “deep map of place” extends into a way of living in the landscape, Marmon Silko’s “the Pueblo Imagination” represents a philosophical model that defines an entire culture’s identity as existing within and through the landscape. Because the Pueblo Imagination is built into the practices of everyday life, this philosophy extends to an entire culture’s way of being in the world, as opposed to providing, as Dillard does, a lens to look through or describing, as Meloy does, an individual search for identity.

Marmon Silko represents this tradition in her 1999 novel *The Gardens in the Dunes*. The novel follows a Pueblo girl, Indigo, from the Sand Lizard tribe on her physical and metaphorical journey to find identity in the Pueblo way of life. Her journey takes place during early twentieth-century expansion of what America saw as the West when white settlers invaded and displaced native populations. Indigo’s journey represents the triad that Marmon Silko sees as the contemporary struggle for the Pueblo. First, it involves a discovery of individual identity as Indigo undertakes a quest to be reunited with her mother and sister. Second, beyond her search for self identity, her journey symbolizes the conflict between native culture and the perpetual intrusions of the white way of life. As Indigo is repeatedly removed and distanced from her native Sand Lizard way of life by white American ways of life, we see the threatening dissolution of native culture. Third, because she is successful in reuniting with her sister in the gardens
of the old Sand Lizard people, the novel reaffirms the value and longevity of the Pueblo way of life.

As Indigo’s story also represents the Pueblo journey of awareness, it is both a physical and internal journey. After being captured by white law enforcement and placed in a school, Indigo sets off to find the old gardens where her late Grandma Fleet had taught her the ways of the Sand Lizard people. Throughout this journey that spans continents, Indigo becomes aware of herself both as a daughter of the Pueblo people and an outsider on the fringes of white American society. Through both these forms of self discovery, Marmon Silko represents each culture’s contrasting views of the human relationship to landscape.

Because the Pueblo Imagination, as Marmon Silko describes it, is necessarily bound to a physical journey across the land, so too is Indigo’s. Her journey begins when she escapes from the school and finds herself in the garden of well-to-do white Americans, Hattie and Edward. After the school decides that they cannot house Indigo for the summer, Hattie persuades Edward to bring Indigo on their extended trip to New York and then to Europe where Edward will be collecting plant specimens for graphing and mass selling. All along their train journey, Indigo watches out the window and “memorizes the landmarks to get her back home” (117-118). Marmon Silko is using Indigo’s memorization of landmarks to set up her journey as a Pueblo Emergence story.

Along the way of her physical journey, Indigo also begins the internal journey of awareness. At this point in the novel, Indigo has already been through many trying situations: she loses her mother when a ceremonial dance is broken up by white law enforcement, she and her sister have traveled alone to the old gardens of the sand lizard
people, her grandmother has died, she and her sister have been captured and separated, she has escaped from the US government school for Indians, and now she is on a train going far away from her homeland with two near strangers. Indigo begins to develop an awareness of herself because she is in almost constant contrast with those around her. These situations and her reflections on them help to make her more aware of who she is as Indigo, but even more so as a Sand Lizard girl. For example, at a train stop in Albuquerque, Indigo encounters other native peoples with whom she is unfamiliar: "Beyond the depot platform Indigo was surprised to see five or six Indian women in the shade of the overhand from the depot roof [...] Hattie noticed Indigo's interest in the women and thought perhaps the child might be comforted to greet people of her own kind" (123-124). Indigo, however, shyly refuses Hattie's offer and is relieved to see that none of the Indian women had noticed her, dressed as she was like a white girl. What did Hattie think? Those women were strangers from tribes Indigo knew nothing about; what was she supposed to say to the Indian women? They would see the clothes and hat she wore and they would laugh and say, "What kind of Indian are you?" (124)

In this scene, Indigo becomes aware of her individual identity in that she is a particular Indian girl in a particular situation in which she is wearing a white girl’s clothes. Beyond the identity of being an Indian and the girl she is, Indigo becomes aware of the cultural identity to which she also belongs. She recognizes the women as Indians, but knows that they are not of her same tribe. While Indigo becomes more aware of herself as a Sand Lizard person, her journey is more representative of the entire culture.
The novel also emphasizes the intrinsic relationship to landscape that is central to “the Pueblo Imagination.” One example of this is Indigo’s connection to the land through her care of plants and gardens. Throughout the novel, her connection to plants is highlighted in various ways: she is named after a plant, her goal is to get back to the old gardens, and she constantly collects seeds throughout her journey. Her connection to the landscape is simple, pure, and unfettered by motives of dominating the land. The old gardens quite literally sustain Indigo and her family. Because of this, their lives are much more closely bound to the land, which therefore cannot be abused or treated as a replaceable commodity. This idea is evident in the creed by which the Sand Lizard people cultivate their gardens:

Don’t be greedy. The first ripe fruit of each harvest belongs to the spirits of our beloved ancestors, who come to us as rain; the second ripe fruit should go to the birds and wild animals, in gratitude for their restrain in sparing the seeds and sprouts earlier in the season. Give the third ripe fruit to the bees, ants, mantises, and others who cared for the plants. (15)

As this passage indicates, Indigo’s people live in harmony with the land and are thus sustained by it. In this harmony, they understand that their existence, and therefore their identity, is intertwined with the natural world.

As foils to Indigo, Edward and his sister Susan see the landscape as an entity to be manipulated and used for profit. While Edward is associated with plants by his work and Susan by her construction of elaborate gardens, these associations are adulterated by material profit. Neither Susan nor Edward has any kind of attachment to the land except for the profit that it might bring. Susan goes to great lengths to make her garden beautiful
for a fundraiser without concern for how her actions affect the land. Whereas Indigo learns from Grandma Fleet that she should try to plant all kinds of seeds in the old gardens and then let nature take care of the rest, Susan has no concern for what will grow naturally or what kinds of plants her environment will sustain. For example, Susan imports plants from various regions around the county and must keep them in cooling or green houses until the night of the party. She even has old trees uprooted and transplanted for the party: Susan’s “gardener had located two great copper beech trees at an old farm on the south shore, and now preparations were completed to move and transplant the beech trees together on the new hills” (183). Susan’s connection to the land is purely superficial. Unlike Indigo, she has no personal connection to any of the plants, she does not raise them herself, and her livelihood does not depend upon them. In continuing to use plants to symbolize characters’ connections to landscape, Edward’s relationship to plants is one of pure profit. Edward, a horticulturist, has made a career of traveling to foreign countries to gather specimens of various kinds of plants that will then later be grown for profit. Such endeavors include obtaining samples of orchids in Brazil and citrus clippings in Italy. For these services, Edward is confident that he will receive “a generous honorarium” (129). Just as Susan’s relationship with plants is superficial, Edward’s relationship is purely material.

By exploring the various characters’ relationship with plants, Marmon Silko explores their relationships to the land as well. The contrast in the characters’ relationships to plants highlights the contrast between these two cultures’ ways of seeing themselves in the world. For Edward and Susan, their relationship to the landscape is one of separation. Neither Edward nor Susan see themselves as being a part of the landscape
that they exploit. In this way, Susan and Edward uphold subject-object relationships; they are the subjects who exploit the object for their own purposes. For Indigo, her relationship is one of harmony and reciprocity. In this relationship, Indigo is one with the landscape because she depends upon it so heavily and because her identity as a Sand Lizard girl is rooted in the landscape of the old dune gardens of her ancestors. By living in harmony with the landscape, Indigo does not see herself as separate from it. Unlike Edward and Susan, Indigo does not make a distinction between herself and the landscape, but is instead unified with it because of her dependence upon it. The contrast between these two views clearly emphasizes the Pueblo’s deep connection to the landscape.

Whereas Indigo, her journey of awareness, and her connection to landscape through plants represents “the Pueblo Imagination” in her narrative, Marmon Silko also explores these elements in a more philosophical way. The Pueblo journey of awareness and their maintenance of an ancient way of seeing the world implies that everything originating in the culture automatically participates and upholds the Pueblo Imagination. For example, Indigo practices the Pueblo way of life when she collects seeds throughout her journey. This is a material practice that carries with it understandings built into the Pueblo worldview. The distinction between the rituals and material practices that developed organically within the Pueblo culture and those that developed outside is important because Marmon Silko, writing in the mid to late twentieth century, is concerned about the outside influences changing the practices of everyday Pueblo life. Language is another ritual, material practice of everyday life that is culturally specific. As traditional Western thought and material practices rely heavily upon what Marmon Silko calls “Cartesian duality,” so does its language (Landscape, History, and the Pueblo
Imagination 297). In describing the Pueblo identity and its intrinsic connection to landscape, it becomes necessary to discard the traditional Western view of what landscape is. Marmon Silko writes,

The term landscape, as it has entered the English language, is misleading. “A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view” does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. This assumes the viewer is somehow outside or separate from the territory he or she surveys. (Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination 291)

For Marmon Silko, the English term “landscape” cannot adequately express the Pueblo’s connection to landscape because this language, as a symptom of “Cartesian duality,” automatically separates the self as the subject from the landscape as the object.

Meloy and Dillard, both native English speakers, suggest that their experiences with landscape take place beyond language; in contrast, Marmon Silko’s culture uses language in the form of narrative and oral tradition to pass on Pueblo culture. This difference suggests that it is not the language itself that inhibits oneness with landscape, but the ideologies carried within a particular language that prompt one to see the self as subject and the landscape as object. As Marmon Silko grew up literally tottering on the border of English-speaking, white American culture and reservation, Keres-speaking Laguna-Pueblo life, the differences of perspective carried by the English language versus native Pueblo languages becomes a central theme in much of her writing. How the Pueblo Imagination and its language cement the bond between the human and the
landscape emerges clearly as she contrasts it with the mechanisms that operate in and through the English language.

This contrast becomes a cultural aspect of “Lullaby,” a narrative from Marmon Silko’s 1981 book *Storyteller*. The story is about an aging woman, Ayah, who has lost one child to a white man’s war, two more who were forcibly taken from their home, and her husband, Chato, to alcoholism. While this story’s message about being at home in one’s own culture is obvious, the suggestion that the differences between cultures are rooted in language is less conspicuous.

The short story is built around Ayah’s living the Pueblo way of life in union with the natural world. In times of hardship throughout the story, Ayah thinks of her previous life before it was interrupted by white culture. Upon finding herself and her alcoholic husband wandering homeless through a cold blizzard, she sits in a cove blocked from the wind. While presumably waiting for her earthly death, “the snow drifted […] up around her black overshoes […] She could remember a time when they had no black rubber overshoes; only the high buckskin leggings that they wrapped over their elkhide moccasins. If the snow was dry or frozen a person could walk all day and not get wet” (44). Ayah’s comparison of buckskin leggings and the man-made rubber boots suggests that the buckskin leggings are more conducive to living in that specific land. The comfort and warmth that the leggings provided also suggests that there is a harmony between nature and the human. Another example of Ayah’s connection to nature happens when she recalls her children being taken away. When the white doctors come, she and her children run “south into the foothills of juniper trees and black lava rock” (45). Even after her pursuers give up, she stays in the hills with her children. Here,
immersed in nature, Ayah finds refuge; “The sun’s warmth relaxed her and took the fear and anger away. She lay back on the rock and watched the sky. It seemed to her that she could walk into the sky stepping through the clouds endlessly” (46). Surrounded by nature, Ayah feels safe and finds reprieve from the white world that is threatening to disrupt her life. That she feels “she could walk into the sky” suggests that she is not only physically in the landscape, but a part of it. The repetitive images of Ayah finding her home, comfort, and meaning in the landscape reinforces the Pueblo’s idea of living closely in harmony with nature. In these examples, she is closer and more intimately connected to nature. She identifies herself and her life with the natural patterns of the earth.

However, the white world is threatening this way of life and is doing so through language. When the white doctors come to take her children, just before she runs to the hills, she unintentionally signs her children away:

They were wearing khaki uniforms and they waved papers at her and a black ball-point pen, trying to make her understand their English words. She was frightened by the way they looked at the children, like the lizard watches the fly […] Ayah could see they wanted her to sign the papers, and Chato had taught her to sign her name. (45)

Because Ayah does not know the English language, she doesn’t understand that in signing her name, she is giving her children away. In this passage, the disruption of the natural order of life, specifically children being with their mother, becomes associated with the white ideology of separation of the human from the natural world and is carried out through white language. Ayah solidifies this point as the story goes on;
She hated Chato, not because he let the policeman and doctors put the screaming children in the government car, but because he had taught her to sign her name. Because it was like the old ones always told her about learning their language or any of their ways: it endangered you. (47)

This passage implies that simply by learning the language, the Pueblo way of life is threatened. Because white people and their language are already associated with creating a division between the natural world and the human world, this passage further exemplifies the idea that the beliefs held in a culture are constructed by and practiced through its language.

As Marmon Silko’s novel Gardens in the Dunes and short story “Lullaby” illustrate, the Pueblo perspective on the relationship between humans and landscape offers a radical alternative to traditional Western thought. Indigo’s association to and relationship with plants and Ayah’s rejection of Western language show how Marmon Silko challenges the subject-object dualism of Western ideology. As Indigo lives the philosophical concepts of “the Pueblo Imagination” through her material practices of every day life, such as collecting seeds in order to grow food in the land, her character represents how the Pueblo people are not confined to see the landscape and the self as separate entities. Ayah and her story represent the way in which Western language promotes subject-object ideologies and how these ideologies are destructive to a culture that does identifies itself in how it relates to the other.

These characters represent how the Pueblo people live in and through the Pueblo Imagination, at the heart of which is the desert landscape. The Pueblo Imagination thus becomes a cultural perspective that guides the lives of an entire people. In their journey
as a people whose lives and histories are inextricably bound to the land, the Pueblos have a profound reverence for the desert to which they owe their livelihood. Marmon Silko describes this reverence as it relates to the Hopi people:

Hopi Pueblo elders have said that the austere and, to some eyes, barren plains and hills surrounding their mesa-top villages actually help to nurture the spirituality of the Hopi way. [...] But there on the high silent sandstone mesas that overlook the sandy arid expanses stretching to all horizons, the Hopi elders say the Hopi people must ‘live by their prayers’ if they are to survive. The Hopi way cherishes the intangible: the riches realized from interaction and interrelationships with all being above all else. (Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination 299)
A Conclusion

Throughout Dillard’s, Meloy’s, and Marmon Silko’s work, there runs a thread connecting them all to each other. This thread, woven to make a slightly different pattern in each writer’s work, represents that which has been stifled, that which has been dulled, that which has nearly been cut out of Western consciousness. In recognizing that the mind is not inherently and unquestionably superior to the body, these women reconsider what identity means. Western thought positions the mind as superior to the imagination and the body, whereas Dillard, Meloy, and Marmon Silko claim that the latter faculties both have the capacity to access a profound knowledge of the self. By privileging the intellect over the body and the imagination, these writers would suggest, we become impoverished. We forget that part of ourselves which makes us whole. We deny ourselves sensation. We are blind to the world that the reasoning mind fails to explain, but that is no less real.

These women and their works represent a reclamation, a re-membering, and a celebration of that which has been pushed to the edges of Western consciousness. Annie Dillard tells the story of a young girl who was afflicted with a severe vision impairment and her initial reaction upon seeing for the first time after a corrective surgery. When asked to recount her first experiences upon regaining sight, the young girl told the doctor she saw “the tree with the lights in it” (33). In response to this, Dillard writes, “It is for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years” (39). In a moment when she stops searching with her cognitive mind, Dillard undergoes a transformation in which she is able to reclaim the untainted vision with which the young girl sees:
Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing that like being for the first time seen [...] I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until that moment when I was lifted and struck. (33-34)

In exploring her own ways of seeing the world and how the reasoning mind cuts us off from those earthly experiences which only the body can realize, Dillard has this moment of revelation. This passage emphasizes Dillard’s reclamation of that unadulterated spirit, that way of seeing before someone tells us how.

Meloy affirms that the body and its senses connect us to who we are and where we are. Her work is an effort to recall these senses as a profound, instinctual medium to assess the world. She says, “Lives without sensation are lives that edge out the earth’s raw, pervasive sweetness, that deeply biophilic connection to all life” (252). Meloy realizes this connection to landscape through experiences in which she has regained her ability to live through her senses. She then puts back together, or re-members, these experiences to create an internal map that guides her through the external desert.

Leslie Marmon Silko celebrates the value of a culture whose identity is threatened by Western standards. The Pueblo people, whose culture is rich in its connection and dependence upon landscape, are ill-equipped to categorize their thinking into terms of the subject-object relationships that dominate traditional Western ways of being in the world. Her narratives, short stories, and essays celebrate a way of being in the world that is
intrinsically communal. In talking of the Hopi people, Marmon Silko further describes this sense of community with the landscape: “So little lies between you and the sky. So little lies between you and the earth. One look and you know that simply to survive is a great triumph, that every possible resource is needed, every possible ally [...] Thus it is that the Hopi elders are grateful to the landscape in aiding them in their quest as spiritual people” (Landscape History, and the Pueblo Imagination 299).

These writers, though significant in their own rights, are not unique in finding alternative ways to look at the world. Many women have punctuated social, cultural, artistic, and political atmospheres by challenging conventional ways of looking at the world and locating the self within it. However, the legacies of such women are dimmed in the shadow of that which conventional thought privileges. For example, Emily Dickinson, Rachel Carson, and Anne Brigman certainly bring different perspectives to poetry, environmentalism, and art than their more conventional contemporaries. However, their perspectives are often discredited because they are the “other.” For example, in their pursuits of characterizing a nineteenth-century American consciousness, do we take Dickinson’s poetry as seriously as Walt Whitman’s? Why do we value Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring for its emotion and Aldo Leopold’s body of work for its science when these two are writing essentially about the same subjects? Who has heard of Anne Brigman and not Henri Matisse? My guess is very few. Was one of these artists less innovative than the other? Was one less modern? Maybe the questions should be, was it less socially acceptable for one to be modern? In society’s mind, did one have less of a capacity to be innovative? To me, Anne Brigman represents a woman who did in photographs what Dillard, Meloy, and Marmon Silko do in words. Just as these three
writers try to capture in the imperfect medium of language their connection to landscape, Brigman creates a visual representation of her experiences of looking at the world in a way alternative to the conventional thought of the time.

Inducted in 1903, Anne Brigman was one of the last photographers to be invited to join Alfred Stieglitz’s elite Photo Secession, a group of artists and photographers who attempted to define modernism and elevate art to a higher level. Although she photographed a large body of subject matter, she is most well known for her female nudes in landscape and for the legacy that was to be later developed by Georgia O’Keeffe. Although each of Brigman’s photographs tells a particular story, the photos in which she pictures female nudes are typified by a female form set in a harsh landscape. In these photographs, it often appears that the woman’s body is part of the landscape. Through her photographs, Brigman illustrates her personal connection to the natural world by highlighting the synchronization of the female form and the landscape. Although Stieglitz would later use her personal journey of self-discovery as a paradigm for what it meant to be a modernist woman, Brigman’s photographic story more importantly records the discovery of herself as a woman. At the heart of Brigman’s work is what critic Kathleen Pyne refers to as “woman’s psyche as it could be evoked through as lexicon of natural forms: the female body choreographed to harmonize with rhythmic movements of trees and rock formations” (85). In this photographic exploration, Brigman begins to know herself through her physical relationship with the rugged California landscape.

In understanding how Brigman’s photography challenges early twentieth-century ideas about a woman’s identity, it is necessary to understand her pursuit. In a letter to
Stieglitz in 1904, Brigman told him what she saw her work doing: making "the picture respond to her own story [...] of a woman in early middle age [...] taking up an artistic medium and attempting to make it her own, to reveal herself" (Pyne 69).

Fundamentally, Brigman's work is an exploration of her identity as a woman at the turn of the century.

After she became a member of the Photo Secession, the appreciation of her work, not her own engagement with it, took on a more universal agenda: "Steiglitz was thoroughly taken with the way in which Brigman made the female body speak of woman's universal nature and modern predicament—from a woman's point of view" (64). Being from a woman's point of view, Brigman's perception of the woman and her entire collection of work clashed with the traditional view of women. To challenge the accepted views of a woman's identity and the appropriate means for her expression, Brigman explored the power of the female body. While the female nude was a common subject in the modernist movement, the males of the Photo Secession "engaged the female nude as a formal vehicle of universal human need" (63). Pyne suggests that male artists of the time denied "the body the body, only to eroticize it by veiling the form as a spirit or mood" (75). Because males generally photographed the female nude, the subject of the woman was seen through a man's perspective. Brigman individualized her style because she examined the nude as it "related to the struggle of modern woman giving birth to herself" (Pyne 63). As many of her nudes are self-portraits, Brigman more specifically explores her personal identity as a woman connected to landscape. The female body is the one entity in traditional Western society that is undeniably and uniquely feminine. This is not to say that women have not been any less marginalized
because something exists that is “woman,” quite the opposite actually. While the female body has been objectified by certain ideologies and social structures, it remains a strictly feminine quality. Thus, the body works as a medium through which feminine identity can be explored particularly if it is seen through a woman’s vision. Brigman said, “‘woman’s creative voice would speak through her body’” (64). By using the nude female form as the focus and the locus of meaning in her photographs, Brigman asserts that the creative force of the female body coincides with the creative voice of the woman.

Although the female form has a primary role in Brigman’s work, the landscape that this form is set in is equally important. Because the bodies have the same movements and shapes as natural forms, such as trees and rocks, within the frames, the photographs suggest a unity or synchronized connection between the woman and the landscape. While nature has traditionally been described as feminine, Brigman’s photographs delve deeper into the woman’s relationship with nature and why it is so profound:

Brigman always located the female body in landscape, framing feminine identity in traditional terms as harnessed to nature. Yet, posed like a dancer, her typical female body [...] is choreographed into an ambivalent relationship with its surroundings; the viewer is hard-pressed to know if the woman’s body struggles against nature—its own nature—or is in harmony with the natural. (64)

As women are traditionally classified, especially in terms of the body and female sexuality, as being singular, Brigman sought to exploit this idea and show the multiplicity of women. As is characteristic of many of her photographs, the *Soul of the Blasted Pine*
and *The Dying Cedar* represent the female identity as being multiple by showing the struggle within the self and the struggle against nature, but also the harmony among and within these entities. For Brigman, feminine identity is not one entity fated to be content within its singularity, but a multiple being torn, sometimes violently, within herself. Her landscapes composed of jagged rocks and twisted trees heighten the violence and struggle of the woman being able to identify herself. The contrast of the smooth feminine nude against the harsh, jagged lines in the landscape also accentuate Brigman’s idea of how the female and the landscape are connected beyond the traditional categorization of landscape being a feminine entity. Just as the landscape is beautiful and serene in an overview, so too is the female form. However, just as there are points of rupture, violence, and struggle in the landscape, these points of tension exist in feminine identity as well. Perhaps Brigman captures in her photographs this struggle as a contrast to show that the feminine identity is a constant search and a constant communication between the struggling forces.

This sense of communication and of being in community with nature is heightened in that Brigman is both the subject and object of her photographs. As most of her photographs are self-portraits within landscapes, her work eliminates the boundary that traditionally separates the human from the landscape. Many of her photographs depict her body as being part of or as having a foundation in the landscape. In *Soul of the Blasted Pine*, she photographs her nude body as growing out of the center of a hollow tree trunk. Brigman poses as the subject of her own photographs and shows the body within them as connected to the landscape. In this way, her work becomes an enterprise in which Brigman can establish her identity as being a part of the landscape. In this
endeavor, Brigman is in a constant, although sometimes conflicted, communication with the natural world.

Beyond my interest in Brigman or any of these writers independently, I often find myself coming back to the question, why is this alternative way of looking at the world important? Why do I feel such a strong affinity with these artists? As a woman living in the American West where Meloy, Marmon Silko, and Brigman are all working, I am particularly attracted to their interpretation of the West and the identity they share with it. It seems that these women are marked by their landscape in such a way that they cannot separate themselves from it. I find this fascinating in that the West represents a place in the American psyche that is traditionally characterized by a masculine trait of fierce independence. In the West, there exists a wilderness of harsh landscapes, vast open spaces, and a sense of being separated from civilization’s rules. A fierce independence and need to overcome the elements of such a place characterize an ideology of what the West represents. In an historical, a literary, and even a popular cultural sense, independence and individualism have permeated American consciousness of what the West symbolizes. From historical events such as Manifest Destiny to literary works such as Edward Abbey’s Desert Solitaire, to pop culture trends such as John Wayne’s portrayal of the infamous and immortal cowboy and John Krakauer’s Into the Wild, American ideals of the West are characterized by masculine independence. While the West is qualified in multiple ways, independence is certainly among the most prominent of characteristics.

However, Meloy, Marmon Silko, and Brigman all challenge the idea that to be in the West is to be independent of the vast and sometimes threatening landscape. Instead
of pitting the individual against nature in a quest for survival, these women suggest that the self can be established by being in communion with the landscape. While individualism does, to a certain extent, have reverence for the power of the landscape, these women suggest that a more profound way of realizing this power is to share experience with landscape, not cut ourselves off from it.

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Behind my childhood home there is a very small stream, a creek rather, that trickles its way down through our little valley of the world. The creek ambles through a ditch narrow enough to hop over just as a schoolgirl hops over a jump rope. The meandering creek runs further east until it leaps down a small waterfall. The pool of the waterfall is the lowest point in the narrow valley and is shaded well by ponderosa pines and Douglas firs. The moss grows thick on the rocks as the sun rarely touches it and there is always enough water to support its odd reproductive cycles. As the creek is very small, the waterfall is of no great force, but of simple beauty. The water does not come crashing to the shallow pool, but instead flows down hugging the rocks and occasionally jumping off in bursts of white. This is one of my favorite spots. I like to sit in a small opening between the rocks just in the middle of the top and bottom of the waterfall. When I was young, I used to ardently believe that this cove was the home of a mountain lioness and that she would surely come out in an angry pursuit were I to stay too long in her claimed spot in the world. Sometimes when I sit there I still have a feeling that I am not alone. Now, though, it is a comfort rather than a fear. When I come to these places of
calm, I feel that I am whole and at peace. I no longer feel the agitation that eats at my insides and makes my skin itch.

In these moments, I have a feeling akin to what I imagine Annie Dillard feels when she saw the “tree with the lights,” what Ellen Meloy feels when she sees the sun setting over the red sandstone cliffs, or what Leslie Marmon Silko feels when she weaves the stories of her people and their desert home. In moments like these, I feel at home with place. I feel calm where the golden plains meet the blue mountains. I look at the river cradled in their union and all chaos flees. Sometimes I look at the world around and I understand. At these times, I feel the purpose and pattern in nature in the way the water runs through my hands. In that elusive crevice in my mind where these purposes and patterns are translated to language, I find my imagination coming alive. Instead of seeing mountains, plains, and rivers as geological formations, they become a unity that rises above my misunderstandings about the order of the world and my life. In this, I find a truth. It is not the great Truth, if such a thing exists, but it is a truth about understanding myself in the world and in this place. I am not separate from these things. I am in them, and they are in me.
Works Cited


