

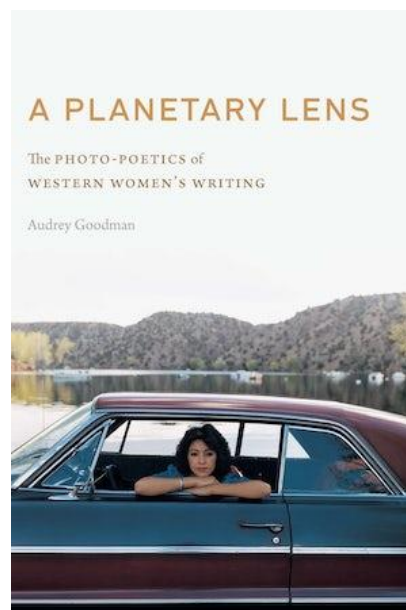
Audrey Goodman

# A Planetary Lens

## The Photo-Poetics of Western Women's Writing

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Review by Serena Fusco



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Audrey Goodman's rich and composite book combines several topical approaches of contemporary criticism, in American Studies as well as beyond. To put it slightly differently, it entangles—and analytically probes—several topical issues that inform a regional American perspective and connect it, well beyond the American territory, to the planet. Among such issues are the environment, visuality and image-making as human and artistic practices, and reclaiming one's body. Goodman engages and moves across the fields of landscape studies, art history, social geography, feminist theory, western American literary studies, and Indigenous studies. Her focal point for holding together such a broad vision is photography as a matter and a practice of planetary relevance. In the first chapter, Goodman suggests that a multiplicity of scales is inherent in photography, because it paradoxically evokes and relies on what is left out of its own frame. Showing the limits of image production, photos encourage one to imagine *beyond*: “Necessarily particular and partial, they are constrained by viewpoint, framing, and history, but they can also be viewed aslant, reframed, and reclaimed at any point in the future” (Goodman 2021, 17).

Visualizing through a “planetary lens,” as Goodman's title has it, requires a crucial awareness of—and a reflection on—matters of *scale*. “[C]ritical reappraisals of [...] positions and scales” (31) are necessary if one wants to see things in a planetary dimension. The problem of scale is central to Goodman's work because, and to the extent that, focusing on the regional, the ‘local,’ is coterminous with deploying a “critical local” (32) vision, a way to look at the space one inhabits

to find pathways, as well as forms of critical praxis, to be applied (with inevitable variations) as far as the other side of the globe.

*A Planetary Lens* is divided in six chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. It also reproduces thirty-four photographic images. The first instance of “critical local” perspective is presented in Chapter One, “Photographers and Storytellers in the US West: Toward a Regional Photo-Poetics,” where Goodman discusses the work of western photographer Meridel Rubenstein. “As Rubenstein’s work attests, the US West, particularly New Mexico, provides especially powerful sites for visualizing ‘critical locals,’ rethinking senses of place from the ground up, and telling new stories of relation, because the terrain exposes the human and environmental costs of globalization so starkly” (51). At the same time, Rubenstein’s work “integrates [...] long-term projects that respond to diverse imperiled environments around the world, including forests in Vermont, volcanoes in Indonesia’s Ring of Fire, and marshes at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in southern Iraq,” thus demonstrating “how attentive witnessing of a local landscape can open pathways to action and change in distant places” (48). This outreach precisely starts by engaging local perspectives. Goodman remarks how Rubenstein connects with local communities by means of a specific reimagining of the tradition of landscape photography. Far from being aloof or seeing things from a detached, external vantage point, photographers can become characters in the very stories they are visually telling. This very approach is effectively conveyed by Goodman’s own writing style, which becomes occasionally—and effectively—narrative.

Chapter Two, “Western Women’s Camera Work: Reassembling California Photo-Books,” discusses texts that belong to a genre that blends and arranges photographic images and writing side by side and/or in sequence. Goodman analyzes photo-books that were realized or planned along the twentieth century by four western US women photographers: Anne Brigman, Alma Lavenson, Dorothea Lange (with Pirkle Jones), and Joan Myers (in collaboration with writer William deBuys). Goodman argues that “women photographers have been at the forefront of redefining senses of place in terms of their practices of located seeing and storytelling that link communities and regions [...]. [W]omen’s photo-books began to model such revisionary feminist practices as early as the first decades of the twentieth century;” ever since then, they “followed a different path from that commonly described in histories of the form” (55):

Compared with those publications by male photographers commonly associated with California (such as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Garry Winogrand, and Robert Adams), the photo-books women artists construct around environments they know intimately tend to lack instantly recognizable, large-scale views or clear-cut arguments. Instead, they dwell in

the places of the everyday and observe how histories of use gather power through successive views. (61)

Moreover, “women photographers and writers initiated an ongoing process of critiquing the colonial assumptions that underlie popular conceptions of California as an exceptional western region” (63). Goodman quotes Krista Comer to define how this “critical regional work” resists a logic of mobility that envisions westward movement as geared toward “‘optimistic horizons, new chances, hope, openings, progress, national exception, freedom’—all ‘dimensions of settler mobilities’” (63). This chapter is especially detailed in tracing the strategies which the women artists it discusses employ for questioning the widespread narrative of settler mobility: “Women writers and photographers in California resisted the ideologies of mobility in order to realize personal or communal visions or to reveal mobility’s social and environmental costs,” thus rethinking “California as place and ideal” (63).

With Chapter Three, “Joan Didion’s *White Albums: Notes and Snapshots from a ‘Native’ Daughter*,” Goodman addresses “those written narratives in which photographs variously generate, interrupt, and/or challenge the coherence of one powerful and popular story of California and the West: that of its Anglo-European settlement” (106). This chapter mainly discusses how fiction and (especially) nonfiction writer Joan Didion confronts photography and, more generally, the question of the image. In Didion’s work, through a critical engagement with a visual/photographic heritage (as well as with previous narratives), a durable mythology of California is both evoked and questioned. “Because Didion views photographs as both accurate and unreliable narrators, they incite her to document affective experience and to measure and recalibrate the pictures of place she carries in memory. By providing only verbal descriptions of images in her essays and memoir [...], Didion controls the power of the photographs to perpetuate California’s ‘pioneer story’ and revises this story by superimposing her own shifting and layered narratives” (106). Reading Didion’s memoir *Where I Was From* (2004), Goodman discusses the thematic key role of the pioneer crossing and how Didion reconstructs this from a subjective, embodied perspective; and she also retraces the estranging anchorage provided by photographic images (124). *Where I Was From*, Goodman suggests, problematizes narrative authority by placing photographic images and family stories side by side. Accordingly, Didion also problematizes her own ‘sense of place,’ her being a Californian by birth, experience, and discursive/visual inheritance. Didion’s writing, especially her nonfiction, “wrestl[es] [...] with the legacies [she] received from the powerful women who preceded her and with the distortions and absences that their stories reveal” (111). Goodman’s question about Didion, “What happens in the white spaces framing the pictures or at the end of the settler story?” (107) resonates with

broader implications that are germane to recent studies of intermediality, transmediality, and storytelling. Finally, in the last part of the chapter, Goodman compares Didion's work to that of Latinx borderland writers Sandra Cisneros and Norma Elia Cantú—who, differently from Didion, do not limit themselves to expressing 'images' in verbal form; besides, they enlarge Didion's idea of family and anticipate the collective, communal perspective that emerges from the work of Leslie Silko and Joy Harjo further on in the book.

Chapter Four, "Visual Passageways: Restorying Native Portraits," is devoted to rethinking the visual memory of Native settlements in the Southwest:

Native writers have been contesting both the archival record and the discourse of photography by reframing selected images, sharing their own interpretations of the situation or posture depicted in a portrait, telling their extended family or community histories, and taking cameras into their own hands. [...] Momaday's recollection of the Navajo woman, Smith's interrogation of her family portraits, Belin's writing back to the portrait of imprisoned Hopi men, and Silko's essay 'On Photography' offer just a few examples of how writers refute the colonial narratives implied by the fixed frame and counter the absences in still photographic representation through narrative and poetic engagement. (147-148)

This chapter suggests that the photo-poetics behind Leslie Silko and Joy Harjo's works (which will be further examined in Chapters Five and Six) implies imagining oneself as a photographic subject, entering a frame—and an objectified body—to reimagine already-told stories. Goodman maintains that Silko—in a way comparable to Didion in the previous chapter—approaches photographic images not as given or immutable items; to the contrary, to each photography, materially included in the text or ekphrastically present, "she applies her experience of seeing, talking about, and revising its meaning as she makes her own stories, responding to and transforming the image as needed" (154). The perspective of these Native artists reclaims an expropriated and colonized region and *imagines real ways* to enact such reclaim. Imaginative visual and verbal storytelling is the only way to seek justice for a history of dispossession (151). Again, one of the consequences (or premises) of such approach is the creation of links and chains of signification with other stories/locales. Goodman suggests that both Silko and Harjo, in their photo-texts, extend their use of words and images, gradually broadening their (autobiographic) vision to include the stories, bodies, and ways of seeing of other members of an (ever-expanding) community.

Chapter Five, "Circling Out from Laguna: Leslie Silko's Planetary Storytelling," is an engaging, multifaceted discussion which analyzes Silko's storytelling as visual (even when it is composed of words) and across scales. Goodman focuses on Silko's production in a broad sense, devoting plenty of space to *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko's most ambitious and broadest-range fictional

work. She also discusses Silko's photo-essay "An Essay on Rocks" and her memoir *The Turquoise Ledge*. In Goodman's reading, the whole of Silko's work is predicated on a nonhierarchical relationship between words and images—not only in photo-texts proper but also in the sense of retracing an intermedial texture in texts that, at glance, belong to one medium only (a strategy also deployed when reading Didion in Chapter Three). "[R]esisting the assumption that images included in texts merely reinforce the written meaning, Silko articulates [...] a radical rethinking of the relationship between images and texts, a relationship that she tests and revises in all of her published work" (191). One of the ways in which Silko enacts such rethinking is by exploring a specifically photographic "obscurity" that paradoxically suggests alternative ways of seeing. Goodman maintains that Silko elaborates on photography's potential not for revealing reality, but for veiling, and obscuring it. Photography then becomes part of a way of seeing that is to be reimagined. For instance, Silko's photo-poetics includes taking pictures and later looking for the stories that emerge when the imagination reframes them, creating instances of 'visual' storytelling. This idea of visibility embraces what is 'obscure,' hidden, not immediately evident nor present.

Especially in the earlier phase of her work, Silko "transforms the Laguna stories she heard and the images she received into an ongoing narrative of survivance; her later novels test the capacity of fiction to articulate multiple conflicting experiences of modernity, barely linking plots and perspectives across continents and historical periods" (218-219). Silko's writing, Goodman seems to suggest, is a way to reconnect to the land(scape) as a different way to reconnect (to) the planet. The topic of kinship in a broad sense permeates the whole study, and is especially relevant to this chapter. Reimagining home also means finding ways to see geological patterns, learning the language of rocks, and envisioning relationships across species. For Silko, "to redefine and reclaim home in ever-broader terms" (201) overlaps with the project to vindicate the land that was stolen from the Natives. Silko's photo-poetics posits vision as a critical act, in the sense of going beyond what is immediately visible, *to see* possible stories as well as possible futures.

Finally, Chapter Six, "Apertures into the Next World: Joy Harjo's Visionary Poetics," zooms in on 2019 poet laureate Harjo's work from the volumes in *A Map to the Next World* (2000), *How We Became Human* (2002), and *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (2015). Harjo's poetry, in Goodman's terms, "approaches place as a location where routes of connection between inner and outer landscapes, between different peoples and cultures, and between present and future worlds intertwine" (234). Similarly to Silko, Goodman suggests, Harjo makes a new home for herself and, from there, she looks back to her own land as a crossroads of different realities and

possibilities. Goodman emphasizes how Harjo cuts out for herself a region by retracing the paths of her Mvskoike roots, thus traversing many conventional, present borders such as State lines, finding sap for her own writing from this act of critical reterritorialization. Tackling Harjo's engagement with photography, Goodman discusses her "recurring interwoven motifs of darkness and light, sunrise and dawn to explore in detail how this poet deepens her embodied and relational photo-poetics to provide critical foundations for envisioning futurity" (237).

Overall, Goodman's book is a rich analysis of the use of imagination on the part of several artists. The concept of 'imagination' includes for Goodman both its 'literal' meaning of image-making and in its extended meaning of envisioning possibilities that do not (yet) exist. Imagination 'writes back;' it attempts to decolonize the future starting from the locations where the effects of colonization (including its environmental effects) are the most evident: in the Southwest, those are also the effects of the dispossession of Indigenous lands on the part of white settlers, but the artists discussed by Goodman broaden the perspective towards other realities of dispossession. Goodman builds on Neil Campbell's concept of regionality as alternative to, in fact opposite of, regionalism. Regionality provides the basis for an antinationalist and antiexclusivist approach. Such region-based perspective with a planetary thrust finds its aesthetic and stylistic correlative in the idea of photo-poetics, which Goodman introduces from the subtitle of her book and which "provides a means to re-vision the planet through mobilizing the images and stories that constitute our shared and evolving world" (53).

Next to a broad and composite theoretical framework, Goodman's in-depth engagement with her selected case studies and the related close readings constitute perhaps the most interesting parts of her work. The case studies are a point of interest in themselves in their sheer scope and variety, ranging from fiction to nonfiction, from photographic exhibitions to photo-texts. In each chapter, Goodman clearly yet subtly presents both the richness of each artist's perspective and the multilayered theoretical implications which such perspectives make visible.

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*photography, and dialogues between literature and photography; and the internationalization of education.*