

Through the Lens: Confronting History and Memory in Xaviera Simmons's *Sundown*

Author's Statement

This essay was written for *How Do We Remember? The Politics and Cultures of Memory* (79-314) with Professor Emanuela Grama. The assignment required us to engage with an artifact from an exhibit at the Carnegie Museum of Art called *Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape* at the Carnegie Museum of Art and reflect on our own experience with and interpretation of the artifact alongside its broader context based on what we learned from a related podcast interview with the artist. For this work, I chose to engage with Xaviera Simmons's *Sundown* series and the focus of my reflection stems from its striking visual language and commentary on land, labor, and historical erasure.

Through close analysis of Simmons's work and her interview in *Widening the Lens*, I explore here how photography can serve both as a tool of oppression and as an instrument of resistance. The piece prompted me to reflect on the power of visual storytelling, the politics of historical framing, and my role as a viewer in engaging with narratives of injustice. The binoculars in *Sundown* became a compelling symbol, and they challenged me to interrogate what I chose to see.

This essay deepened my understanding of how art intersects with historical memory and activism. By analyzing Simmons's work, I engaged critically with themes of archival silencing, radicalized land dispossession, and the ethics of remembrance.

- Andrew Salzman