

Thank you to the people who listened patiently, and shared their stories with me.

I only hope that everyone else can see the beauty that I saw within each of you.

Thank you to the ancestors who were with us throughout this entire process.

Thank you to Theresa Ganz and José Itzigsohn for their insight and guidance on this project.

I have titled this project *Experiential Aesthetic(s): Storytelling & Photography*. It was a collaborative project between myself and the people photographed here.

Together, we had conversations trying to comprehend who they are, how do they identify, and how they would describe their unique 'aesthetic'. This was an effort for them to think about how they might want to be photographed and what we could envision together.

They were given the freedom to control their own imagery and tell their own story, contributing to what I have named the 'sentient archive', and subsequently becoming their own representation of knowledge(s).

The term 'aesthetic' draws from Steven Leuthold (1998) definition in which the 'aesthetic' "refers to the real aspects of lived experiences that have a social dimension" (Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media, and Identity*, 1998, p. 6). The aesthetic is bodily and sensory, meaning that it not only exists in the abstract and theoretical but is real and material.

As a photography, I aimed at trying to decolonize photography and used it as a medium of empowerment, re-imagining 'beauty', and providing people an avenue to understand their own unique aesthetic(s).

Decolonizing photography was no easy task because of its own roots and branches within colonialism and imperialism. Many of the people you see here had difficulty taking ownership of the camera. They would ask for directions, and cues, and I would smile and remind that they are the ones in control here. This is as much as their project as it is mine. All I do is follow their directions, listen to their stories, and capture their own unique beauty.

By finally realizing and presenting their own aesthetic(s) brought to fruition an understanding of what the 'sentient archive' is. Personal narratives became living entities. Images and texts were their own stories. Both mingled together in a relationship that allowed the archive to become alive.

What we made together is in the following pages. Poetry, quotes, stories and photographs worked together producing something so beautiful and genuine. What you see is that knowledge does not exist in a singularity. It is not produced within a vacuum. Knowledge is relation and it is shared with all of creation. What we learn, and how we learn comes from the experiences and personal narratives that we share and that we encounter both within and outside the archive. Through constructing and 'producing' these images outlines the social relationships that the subject has with themselves, alongside each other, and with us, the readers.

'Sacred Fragility'

Charlie Scott

Photographer: Najatee'
McNeil

*"In my dreams, I hear the ancestors
They whisper to me the stories
Reminding me of our traditions
Our knowledge
Our essence.
Their heart beats.
Thumping alongside my own.
Our voices mold together
Turning and shooing away Father Time.*

*In my dreams, I feel the rhythms.
The vibrations of the land,
Echoing throughout the canyon
Swirling and twirling, gathering and building
up its strength
Waiting for us to dance and shape-shift with
the land." - excerpt from 'In My Dreams' by
Charlie Scott (2017)*



