

Visualizing Genocide: Indigenous Interventions in Art, Archives, and Museums.

Edited by Yve Chavez and Nancy Marie Mithlo. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022. 296 pages. \$35.00 paperback; \$100.00 hardcover; \$35.00 e-book.

In a collection of essays organized thematically, *Visualizing Genocide: Indigenous Interventions in Art, Archives, and Museums* investigates the manner in which cultural institutions and archives have historically and contemporarily framed the violence of settler colonialism. Addressing antiquated and romanticized narratives, the fourteen essayists adopt a multitude of interdisciplinary approaches, including both scholarly and artistic interventions deployed in museums, libraries, archives, and community settings. Examining indigeneity globally, the authors investigate the topics of genocide, land theft, forced assimilation, mass incarceration, and the resulting intergenerational trauma caused by these atrocities. Historically, the violence and trauma associated with settler colonialism has been sanitized or altogether ignored in museum presentation, with cultural institutions contextualizing Indigenous objects and cultures within a strictly colonial framework. Effectively positioned as the spoils of war, the objects have served to document the imperial project, buttressing notions of settler-colonial collective self and statehood.

In “Reclaiming Space through Presence Making,” the first of the three themes is addressed: visible presence seeks to counter erasure. Editor and author Yve Chavez reclaims the space of the San Gabriel Mission Cemetery in “Remember Our Ancestors,” suggesting the site serve as the locus of collective memory, with continued presence as a form of resistance for the Tongva community. Referencing All Souls Day and Día de los Muertos, Chavez argues for the reclamation of the cemetery as a site of celebration and remembrance, retaking not just the space itself but the ancestral bodies laid to rest there, in essence giving name to those who have languished in unmarked graves for centuries. Throughout this part of the volume, presence-making counters erasure and confronts historical efforts of denial. In the second essay within this theme, “The Aftermath: Visualizing Genocide,” author Stephen Gilchrist examines *The Aboriginal Memorial* in the National Gallery, Australia, which comprises two hundred *dupun* or hollow-log coffins. Though the ritual practice is specific to the Yolngu people of the north-eastern Arnhem Land, as Stephen Gilchrist details, the memorial is dedicated to all Aboriginal people who lost their lives defending their lands against colonization. The location of the monument is significant, in that it occupies what has traditionally been settler-colonial space, a national museum. As institutions work toward countering erasure and healing, as the authors emphasize, centering Indigenous perspectives is crucial; to do otherwise would enact a further form of violence, ultimately serving as the institutional equivalent of gaslighting.

In the collection of essays dedicated to the second theme, “Control of Historical Resources, Reappropriation,” Iris Colburn examines Kanza-Osage-Lakota artist Chris Pappan’s material and conceptual work with ledger art. An artistic medium that serves as an apt metaphor for the theme of reclamation addressed within this section, ledger art was created through the reappropriation of authorship. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Native artists repurposed United States government ledgers and related documents as surface media. The art form has provided a means for Indigenous artists to document their own history on their own terms. A palimpsest comprising layers of meaning, the compelling juxtaposition of imagery challenges dominant historical narrative.

As Colburn details, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago held a solo exhibition of Pappan’s work beginning in 2016, in which the artist staged an institutional critique of the museum’s Native North American Hall. In an expansion of the ledger art medium, Pappan utilized the museum itself as a form of substrate. Desperately in need of renovation, the hall perpetuated the “vanishing Indian” myth, presenting Native cultures as frozen in a romanticized version of the colonial past. Having changed little since the 1950s, the presentation in the hall included dioramas and vitrines containing objects that could not be handled due to past preservation practices involving arsenic. Doused in toxins and starved of touch, these heritage items remained separated from the hands who created and once cared for them. Unable to access the objects directly, Pappan created a palimpsest on the exhibit cases and displays, approaching the museum as a vast ledger on which to layer and reappropriate cultural authority. In doing so, he “intervened in the very space where warped perceptions of Native peoples are often formed and disseminated: the museum” (160). As a result of the exhibition, museum administrators came to realize the urgent need to renovate Native North American Hall.

In the collection’s essay “Emily Arthur: Final Determinations: ‘Cherokee by Blood’” (dedicated to the last of the three themes, “Embodiment and Performance”), editor and author Nancy Marie Mithlo examines the artistic practice of Emily Arthur, an artist of Eastern Cherokee descent. In her work, Arthur draws comparisons between the eradication of the California gnatcatcher to Manifest Destiny and its agenda of genocide and cultural extinction. As Arthur explains, the creation of a hierarchy of avian species in order to strategize the eradication of unwanted birds is hauntingly reminiscent of the strategy of mass removal, fundamental to which was the effort to taxonomize and quantify indigeneity. As documented in the census rolls, during the late nineteenth century individuals were denied their indigeneity, with the United States government rejecting tribal affiliations in an effort to diminish citizenship. This emphasis on ideological constructs such as blood purity and the quantification of indigeneity has resulted in lasting implications and the continuation of trauma. In connecting to the theft of land, Arthur’s artwork speaks to theft of another kind, Indigenous identity.

Positioned as a definitive cultural authority, the museum of the past was primarily object-focused. Traditionally, the establishment, control, and hierarchization of bodies of knowledge have been fundamental to the museum project. However, in the past

few decades, the contemporary museum has shifted from a predominant focus on the presentation of collections to becoming more human-centered institutions. This paradigm shift demands that cultural institutions approach not only their collections differently but their communities and, as a result, their humanity. *Visualizing Genocide* addresses the complexity of these painful topics in an unflinching and empathetic manner, offering hope and a glimpse of the path forward. Museum and archive professionals will find the collection an invaluable resource in the crucial work of decolonization. Moreover, the volume is engaging and accessible for all of those interested in Native art and alternative space-making; numerous images of the artwork discussed are included, reproduced in both color and black and white. The essays summarized above reflect the diversity of approaches found within the collection. Fundamentally, the volume examines the cultural institution and object-collecting as a human project. It asks of us, as author Ellen Fernandez-Sacco articulates, “Who can own what?”—and ultimately, “Who can own whom?” (222).

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