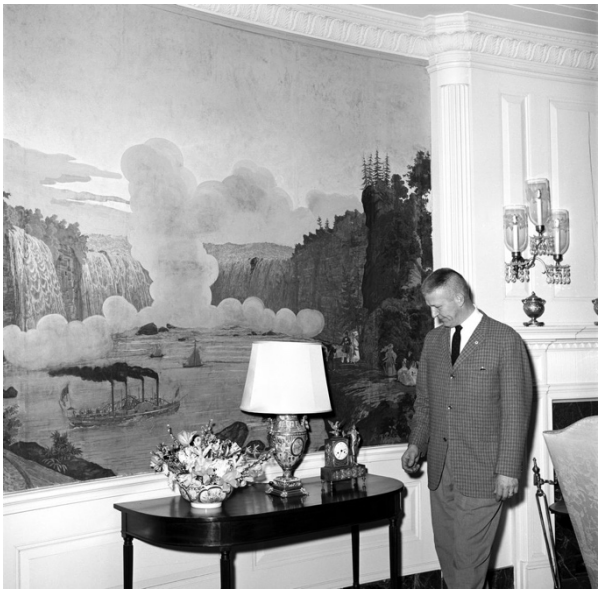
Views of a United Nation

a response by Sylvia Faichney

A black-and-white photograph from 1967 features a man in the Diplomatic Reception Room at the White House in Washington D.C. standing beside a console table, his hand moving towards the objects on it (fig. 1). A clock, a lamp, and a bowl-like vase with a bouquet of flowers appear to trouble this unknown figure, causing him to pause and consider his next move. In another photograph taken on the same day, the objects are gone (fig. 2). Since this room was meticulously designed in 1961 by the then First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, we can envision our unknown figure as being in the act of carefully moving the objects, so they no longer obstruct the "historic wallpaper originally printed in Alsace in 1834" that the photographs document.[1] In the second image, the Niagara Falls scene from the Zuber & Co. wallpaper titled "Views from North America" is now unobstructed.

[1]Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis Personal Papers, 1961: 21 September-27 November, undated. Draft press release from the National Society of Interior Designers, date unknown, https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JBKOPP/SF033/JBKOPP-SF033-014.



(left) Figure 1. Robert Knudsen, unidentified man stands beside a table in front of antique wallpaper panels in the Diplomatic Reception Room, White House, Washington, D.C. The wallpaper, entitled "Views of North America," was produced by French manufacturer Zuber & Company in 1834, and features various scenes of the North American landscape. 27 February 1962. Source: White House Photographs, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. Public Domain.
(right) Figure 2. Robert Knudsen, detail of antique wallpaper panels in the Diplomatic Reception Room, White House, Washington, D.C. 27 February 1962. Source: White House Photographs, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. Public Domain.

Except, it's not. Unlike panoramic paintings like those displayed at World Fairs or museum exhibitions that showcase the artistry of a nation or artist with expansive representations of landscapes wrapping around a room uninterrupted, wallpapers in domestic settings tend to be fragmented in their final form. The sequence of their imagery is often cut into many parts to fit a space: in the photograph cited above, the imagery is cut twice. Consequently, we can only see fragments of staged romantic depictions of nineteenth-century life in the United States. This sense of fragmentation is reinforced with the inclusion of other objects, such as those removed from the table, as they tend to block "the view" of the wallpaper. Visual access is further challenged when people occupy the space, exemplified in another image of the room in which First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy poses with the "Diplomatic Reception Room Planning Committee" at the press event showcasing the finished room to the media (fig 3).

In this issue of *react/review*, Thomas Busciglio-Ritter addresses the production and distribution of wallpapers such as "Views of North American" in the nineteenth century, arguing that they are intertwined with a history "of racially charged representation" that constructs and validates a white aristocratic identity. In this essay, I shift viewpoints to consider elements of this wallpaper that construct and attempt to

Figure 3. Robert Knudsen, antique wallpaper from 1834 entitled "Views of North America" presented to the White House by the National Society of Interior Designers (NSID). L–R: Dora Brahms, Co-Chairperson of Diplomatic Reception Room Planning Committee; Edith Gecker, NSID Vice-President; Michael Greer, Co-Chairperson of Diplomatic Reception Room Planning Committee; First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy; Edward White, NSID President; William Gulden, NSID President Emeritus. The group stands in front of the newly installed wallpaper. Diplomatic Reception Room, White House, Washington, D.C. October 1961. Source: White House Photographs, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. Public Domain.

validate the identity of a nation. From this vantage point, I argue that "Views of North America" is representative of a strategic fragmentation of conflict in pursuit of establishing a heritage for the newer nation, the United States.[2] The wallpaper's eventual installation in the White House in the 1960s showcases a political technique that uses representations of technological and social landscapes to obscure conflicts of exploitation and dispossession. This technique is related to the pursuit of constructing a shared heritage that undergirds a sense of community. Through a visual analysis of the technological and social landscapes I argue that "Views" is representative of a type of community knotted together by what historian David Nye calls the "American technological sublime." Additionally, taking into consideration of the wallpaper's placement in the White House during the Kennedy administration, it illustrates the U.S.

[2] For the remainder of the essay, I will refer to the title of this wallpaper as "Views."

as a diverse yet cohesive and powerful nation, composed of what President John F. Kennedy refers to as "a nation of immigrants."[3]

Depictions of Black and Indigenous people in visual media have a nefarious history: however, what is most surprising in "Views" is its harmonious integration of socially and racially diverse people. While Busciglio-Ritter notes this feature, I would like to extend his observation by associating this essence of harmony with an insidious quality of fragmentation. Firstly, the figures in this social landscape lack any traces of racial tension or segregation, specifically in the multiple depictions of fashionably dressed, racially integrated groups. Secondly, the wallpaper design showcases a working-class population who appear racially distinct yet equal.[4] And lastly, in depicting a scene of a group dancing to a drum, holding unidentifiable objects, and wearing regalia, the scene includes what we must presume is an Indigenous ceremony that has drawn an interracial audience.[5]

The significance of this harmonious, racially diverse community extends beyond confirming "multiple white American identities," that Busciglio-Ritter argues for.[6] Rather, harmony confirms the success of the great "American Experiment."[7] This type of representation is particularly significant in the nineteenth century, where the borders of the U.S. were in constant flux, wars were persistently on the horizon, and the process of fragmentating land-into-territory-into-property was bound to a relationship of

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[3] David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994); John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

[4] Though the interracial working-class groups are found by the harbor, there is not clear indication of enslaved individuals, or any utterance of the transatlantic slave trade although Charleston and Boston harbors were on this route.

[5] See Busciglio-Ritter's essay in this volume. It is important to note that from 1883 to 1978 ceremonies were banned. For an in-depth history of possible artistic references to these groups and scenes see Robert P. Emlen, "Imagining America in 1834: Zuber's Scenic Wallpaper 'Vues d'Amérique du Nord'," *Winterthur Portfolio* 32, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1997).

[6] To trouble this centering of whiteness and white experience, a question can be asked: what about people of other racial identities who consumed this imagery? For instance, enslaved individuals who installed the wallpaper in homes, or the Black and Brown people who labored in the rooms it was placed in, or the Indigenous peoples, banned in 1883 by the U.S. government from performing ceremony, who saw it at markets and trade fairs? It would be difficult to answer this, as the significance of this imagery to each person would be varied and depend on their individual tastes and background. However, the total erasure of racial conflict is linked with a larger strategy of fragmenting and abstracting histories of land and labor exploitation. For a twenty-first-century perspective of how Black students felt about this wallpaper, see: Rumaan Alam, "What to Do about a Room with a 'Vues'?," (*New Yorker*, June 29, 2020), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/06/what-to-do-about-a-room-with-a-vues.

[7] This phrase is first cited in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, 1835. It has been repeated frequently within pollical discourse.

dispossession of Indigenous land and exploitation of Black labor.[8] Ignoring this, the wallpaper celebrates a war for a democratic republic as rightfully won, made evident in its thriving, diverse, population of mostly well-dressed, employed, well-defended and entertained people. The wallpaper's exclusion of inequalities and brutalities extends the metaphor of fragmentation, and consequently highlights a crucial element related to nation building: the process of obscuring how limited and precarious access is to liberty, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness.

Another surprising element in "Views" is just that, the views. Although the wallpaper's name suggests that it encompasses a continent, in truth we only see a few snapshots of select Eastern states. At Niagara Falls, the billowing brown steam from a steamboat moves in tandem with the mists of water erupting from the bottom of the falls. Below the natural bridge, a horsecar follows a railroad trail woven between mountainous terrain. The forests surrounding West Point Academy are highly organized in comparison to the "wilderness" where a Black couple is standing. Busciglio-Ritter notes how the man in this couple is pointing outward, possibly towards the U.S. flag. However, in almost every group there are figures pointing, their arms stretching toward the scenes of industrial or natural wonders.

Of the identifiable places, West Point and Niagara Falls are both located in New York, and the natural bridge in Virginia.[9] In this imagined composite, the wallpaper offers up images of a varied landscape, highlighting its diverse population as well as impressive scenes of natural wonders and technological development. These scenes

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[8] Brooke L. Blower, "Nation of Outposts: Forts, Factories, Bases, and the Making of American Power." *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 3 (2017): 439–459. Blower's essay makes clear the uncertainty of spatial borders and claims to land within the nineteenth century. In a citation where she troubles the claim of land as US territory, Blower writes: "On-the-ground sovereignty differed greatly from wishful-thinking empires on paper. The fate of much of the territory Americans claimed under the Treaty of Paris and the Louisiana Purchase, which shows up so cleanly on maps as putative national territory, remained uncertain for decades. Even within the chartered boundaries of early states like Georgia, large sections of territory at first remained under foreign control. Until after 1812, many imagined that the lands between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River might be carved into European colonies, independent republics, or be ruled by Indian confederations, which were the region's reigning military powers. The status of the Trans-Mississippi West, in turn, remained unsettled until the second half of the nineteenth century" (443). For the abstraction of land into territory and private property see: Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Chapter 2 "Settler Colonialism" in *Not "a Nation of Immigrants": Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2021).

[9] The titles association of "North America" to be encompassed within this limited geography hints at the common misnomer of "America," as referring to only the United States. However, apart from the spatial obstruction which links the "U.S." to be representative of all North America, what is of particular interest are how the figures and the setting work together in an effort of picturing "America" as a united nation.

are reminiscent of the crowds and spectacles David Nye refers to in his book *American Technological Sublime*, which details a history of people in the U.S. coming together across color, creed, and class, to confront "impressive objects" in shared wonder, awe, and terror.[10] In this specific U.S. strain of sublimity, the group experience takes precedence over individual mediation, noted in European conceptions of the sublime. Nye cites the natural bridge in Virginia, railways, and Niagara Falls as the "impressive objects" to which swarms of people traveled to witness. The multiple figures in the wallpaper are pointing outward but are often painted doing so while looking at the person beside them, as if making sure they're seeing it too. The emphasis on the American technological sublime as a community experience works to downplay the conflicts emerging from spiritual, racial, and class differences across the new nation. This phenomenon highlights how a diverse republic is unified in their shared reactions to the expansiveness of the natural and industrial power of the United States.[11]

Of critical importance to the establishment of the U.S. was the abstraction of land into territory. U.S. ownership of land rested on the elimination of Indigenous possession. Ignoring Indigenous cultivation of the land, this "empty" terrain, sometimes referred to as "vast untamed wilderness," was cut into gridded territory and later into private property sold to settlers.[12] In 1830, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act and legalized the forceful relocation of Indigenous peoples to reservations, often far away from their ancestral homes. Notably, the Indigenous group in the wallpaper is the only group *not* admiring these scenes of sublimity, appearing instead to be another "scene." In "Views" the space the Indigenous group occupies is detached from the land surrounding it. It's as if they were on an island, performing on a circular stage where a fashionably dressed Black and white audience watches from the perimeter. They are excluded from the group experience, while visually included within the boundary of U.S. territory. Excluding the Indigenous group from participating in the technological sublime makes a claim for who defines the "American" community. Here, Indigenous people are a scene, bound to a limited space, both a part of "America" while distinct from being "American": that is, eliminated as active agents participating in the industrializing modern world.

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[10] Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, xxiii.

[11] Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, 43.

[12] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 389. He writes, "settler society required the practical elimination of the natives in order to establish itself on their territory." He also makes note that elimination is specific to claims of land and ownership, however, the physical presence of Indigenous peoples formally is a strategy for the new nation(s) to distant themselves from the European nations. Also see Brenna Bhandar *Colonial Lives of Property: Land, Law, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Raleigh: Duke University press, 2018).

This nineteenth-century visual representation of erasing racial tensions and fragmenting land to construct some ideal harmonious community continued into the twentieth century. Before Jacqueline Kennedy installed "Views" in the White House's Diplomatic Room, her husband, John F. Kennedy, published an influential book titled *A Nation of Immigrants* (1958). In it, Kennedy describes a sense of community equally formed through experience, though differently than Nye's framing of sublimity. Rather, the then-senator drew out a historic community formed through immigration.[13] Kennedy presents a whitewashed history of settlement that articulates a united community formed through a shared history of being "immigrants," or always with an ancestral lineage beginning elsewhere. This imagined immigrant community included enslaved Black people and Indigenous people: an egregious claim that has been debunked since Indigenous people have occupied the continents for at least 15,000-20,000 years and drawing slavery into the category of "immigration" ignores a history of forced relocation.[14]

In 1961, roughly 130 years since this wallpaper was produced, Jacqueline Kennedy selected "Views of North America" to be installed in the Diplomatic Reception Room.[15] Also selected were several decorative objects that were crafted in the United States in the nineteenth-century.[16] Considering this curation, the room zooms in on a heritage and people united in an appreciation for the nation's natural wonders, technological advancements, and artistic skill. The installation of "Views" and the other objects within the Diplomatic Reception room, the point of entry for officials and occasionally a conference room, contributes to the formation of a national identity founded on an overwhelming positive community experience. The Diplomatic Reception Room showcases a settled "American" landscape denoting a cohesive

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[13] Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*, 54.

[14] Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xix. Byrd uses the term "arrivants" to describe the Black experience of arriving in the Americas as distinct from the Euro-American "settler". Tiya Miles, "Beyond a Boundary: Black Lives and the Settler-Native Divide," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2019): 417-426. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *"All the Real Indians Died Off": and 20 Other Myths About Native Americans* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 14-22. It is also important to note that many Indigenous nations and tribes have creation stories that specify their origins in the Western Hemisphere.

[15] This wallpaper appears to still be installed in the Diplomatic Reception room. There is no found evidence of the room being renovated since the 1960s.

[16] Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis Personal Papers. Textual Materials. Pamela Turnure Files. Subject files: White House: Diplomatic Reception Room, National Society of Interior Designers, 5 October 1961. JBKOPP-SF033-014. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. It should be noted that prior to decorating this room, Jacqueline Kennedy received pushback from the press after decorating other rooms in the White House with exclusively European art. See, Alam, "What to Do about a Room with a 'Vues'?," 2020.

community in a new nation, bound together by a shared experience of immigration and wonderment of the technological sublime.

Doors breaking up a composition, or a lamp or person obstructing visual access to the wallpaper, are visual elements of obstruction that can function as visual metaphors of the wallpaper's ideological function. As the visual analysis illustrates, “Views” is an extension of a particular political strategy of defining “American”: economically, politically, and spiritually diverse, but united, forming a cohesive group that makes up the citizenry of what today is called the United States of America. The histories of oppression that were essential to the building of the nation become particularly poignant in the 1960s, when protests by the Civil Rights movement and the Red Power Moment were held in response to experiences of discrimination and exploitation of their labor and land on the lawn of the White House. A house that with its pristine sense of organization, its clean neoclassical geometries and lush lawn, obscures that fact that it sits on the ancestral lands Nacotchtank (Anacostan) and Piscataway nations and was built and maintained with enslaved labor.

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