

# Against the Romanticization of Settler-Colonialism

By Liz Godbey



On March 17, 2022, the Visual and Critical Studies department hosted a lecture by Dr. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, a renowned historian of Western European colonialism and white supremacy, titled "Settler-Colonialism and the Founding of the US State," the topic of her upcoming book project. Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz is known best for the *New York Times* best-selling book *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, which details the history of US militarism and capitalism based on the violent military conquest of the continent and the ongoing occupation of this land by the U.S. State. Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz's most recent release is [\*Not "A Nation of Immigrants": Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion\*](#). In line with her writing and her background in history, this talk elucidated how immigration rhetoric is vital to settler-colonial aims, particularly when it came to the justification of westward expansion and violent land-grabbing.

The talk began with Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz clarifying the difference between the terms "immigrant" and "settler." Immigrants, she explained, arrive at a new location, faced with an already-established political order into which they are subsumed. Settlers create new polities and retain their sovereignty. If the original settlers were really immigrants as the romanticized "nation of immigrants" concept purports, then they would have joined the existing nations on this land instead of destroying and evicting these societies, taking their land, and constructing a new, militarized colony.

Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz traced the historical establishment of the capitalist fiscal-military state known as the United States as founded upon land theft, genocide, and slavery. Land dispossession was prefaced with the myth of terra nullius, or land deemed

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to “belong to no one.” Terra nullius was the grounds upon which The Doctrine of Discovery was enacted by European colonizers for centuries. This concept completely invalidates the sovereignty of the hundreds of Indigenous nations<sup>1</sup> on this land and the fact that they have lived on and tended this “vacant” land for millennia. This land has never been vacant.

Land dispossession was also dependent upon the concept that land is not only empty but something to be commodified, like real estate. The value of the land was not only based upon what resources could be extracted through mining, logging, or other industries. Rather, the possession of the land itself was the most important commodity<sup>2</sup> in the accumulation of capital. This, Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz argued, is a vital frame of reference to fully comprehend the genocidal policies of the U.S. government.

The lecture was presented without a visual component. Yet, it brought art and other visual media to mind. There is a multitude of Indigenous artists across so-called North America who have considered the legacy of land dispossession through settler policymaking. For example, I think of Nadia Myre’s (Algonquin) exhibition *Cont[r]act* in 2002, where over 230 people joined her in beading over Canada’s Indian Act.<sup>3</sup> The beaders replaced the words with white beads and the negative space

1 In 2022, there are 572 federally recognized nations in the so-called U.S. There are 634 in Canada. These numbers still leave out further hundreds of communities who are not ‘recognized.’ This is the case especially here in so-called California, which underwent several waves of genocide and colonialism. The California College of the Arts itself is located on the land of the Ohlone who are not federally recognized despite having claims to this land for millennia.

2 Chattel slavery was the other major foundation of the U.S. economy

3 From the Canadian Encyclopedia: “The Indian Act is the primary law the federal government uses to administer Indian status, local First Nations governments and the management of reserve land. It also outlines governmental obligations to First Nations peoples. First introduced in 1876, the Act subsumed a number of colonial laws that aimed to eliminate First Nations culture in favour of assimilation into Euro-Canadian society. The Act...is an evolving, paradoxical document that has enabled trauma, human rights violations and social and cultural disruption for generations of Indigenous peoples.”

with red. The choice to bead over rather than destroy this document shows an acknowledgment of the continuing influence of this act. Yet, the act of beading serves as a collective act of crossing out and denying the legitimacy of the words of the Indian Act as well as asserting the power of Native art over settler-colonial lawmaking.

Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz didn't refer directly to the Indian Act, but she did note the significance of several U.S. policies that often go undiscussed. The first of which was the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, which served as a map of roads to reach the Pacific with goal of selling, and thus seizing, the continent. Then there were the Homestead Act and the Morrill Act of 1862. Under the Homestead Act, roughly 300 million acres were granted to settlers, largely to land speculators, while the Morrill Act transferred large amounts of Indigenous land to the state. Finally, she drew attention to the Pacific Railroad Act, which provided railroad companies with nearly 200 million acres of Indigenous land, breaking multiple treaties with numerous Indigenous nations whose people were still living there. The state used genocidal military force to evict those who, rightfully, resisted. The government also promised free land to Europeans and Euro-Americans as a plot to recruit settlers to squat on Indigenous lands. To drive the Native people out, the paper deeds, representing units of land, made up the commodity market that built the United States.

The work of Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith (French-Cree, Shoshone, and Salish), one of the most well-known Indigenous artists and a personal favorite of mine, comes to mind when thinking about land dispossession. Smith uses collage techniques and painting to confront the historical archive of colonialism and the oppression of Native people by





the U.S. state. Along with a variety of other works, Smith has dealt with maps in her artwork throughout her career, considering how mapping is used as a political tool of the U.S. state. Two recent examples include *Stolen Map*, 2021, and *Amerika Map*, 2021, from her series “Indigenizing the Colonized U.S. Map.” These works express anger over how Indigenous land was stolen, divided, possessed, and occupied without respect for existing nations and communities. Smith rotates the maps, dislodging them from how they are typically seen. She labels them “Stolen,” for obvious reasons, and “Amerika,” using the “k” to reference the racist foundations and continuing realities of the U.S. state, like in the terrorist white-supremacy group the Ku Klux Klan. In *Stolen Map*, a piece of paper collaged onto the map reads “maps have been the weapons of imperialism” next to another piece that reads “more than guns or warships.” In *Amerika Map*, a collaged paper reads “Manifest Destiny is a name for stealing and murder,” reminding the audience of the power of colonial documents in the efforts to expand U.S. power and steal land across the continent using genocidal tactics.

An important point that Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz made was how the romanticization of settler sovereignty and the ensuing erasure of the truth of colonialism happens on all sides of the settler political spectrum. One of the historical examples she gave was the “New Frontier” speech John F. Kennedy gave at his acceptance of the Democratic nomination for president. In this speech, Kennedy stated, “For I stand here, tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind us, the pioneers gave up their safety, their comfort, and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West.” Moving toward the present, Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz also cited



the 2009 inauguration speech of Barack Obama. “Echoing Kennedy in an attempt to revive frayed liberalism,” as Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz put it, the former president continued to romanticize settlers. In this speech, he said:

In reaffirming the greatness of our nation, we understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of shortcuts or settling for less. It has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things. For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West, endured the lash of the whip<sup>4</sup>, and plowed the hard earth. For us, they fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg, Normandy, and Kazan.

Both of these democratic presidents frame early settlers as brave pioneers who faced hardship in their efforts to settle the West. Yet, this is an erasure of the violent nature of this settlement—the land dispossession and the genocidal tactics that came with it. These democratic presidents are celebrated amongst liberals for their seemingly progressive actions and attitudes. Yet, their violent actions and attitudes towards Native peoples go overlooked. For example, in 2016, Obama authorized the use of the National Guard against primarily Indigenous land protectors protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline. The Guard proceeded to shoot protestors with rubber bullets, tear gas canisters, and spray them with a water cannon in the freezing cold weather. The pipeline was completed the following year.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz also made note of the questionable choice to include enslaved Africans as settlers.

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Moving even more into the present, on his first day of the presidency, Joe Biden put a stop to the Keystone XL pipeline. Yet, shortly after, he backed the now-complete construction of the Line 3 pipeline running through Anishinaabe land. More recently, he has seemingly turned towards the development of green technology and energy independence. While under the guise of “environmentalism,” this “green” energy still relies upon the extraction, destruction, and desecration of Native land. In 2021, Biden “gave” [the land of Oak Flat](#) to a foreign mining company for the extraction of copper. Oak Flat is also known by the name Chi’chil Bildagoteel and is sacred to the Apache, as well as other groups, as a place to gather medicine and to hold ceremonies. There is also [the Thacker Pass development](#) of the largest open-pit lithium mines on the land of the Northern Paiute and Western Shoshone, again supported by the Biden administration. Is creating rechargeable batteries—one major use of lithium—really worth the harmful and anti-Indigenous effects of lithium extraction? I think not. This is just a further continuation of land dispossession for the sake of capitalist extraction and the bolstering of U.S. imperial power. Yet, this frequently goes unremarked upon by the settler population.

Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz concluded her lecture with a quote from Alyosha Goldstein: “Settler colonialism [is in the present], it is not a relic of the past but a historical condition remade at particular moments of conflict in the service of securing certain privileges and often to symbolically negotiate inequalities among white people.” In the present, we see how settler-colonialism continues to be romanticized in the American imagination. Meanwhile, the violent practices of resource extraction and land dispossession abound, all for the benefit of the U.S. state.

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