

Land-Based Art Criticism: (Un)learning Land Through Art

Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis
Pennsylvania State University

This article provides an overview of how land-based settler colonial critique can re-orient art criticism and art education to expand the scope of art and art practice to critical considerations of land politics and social justice, particularly in terms of the repatriation of Indigenous lands. In particular, land-based perspectives can help to rethink place/land by offering decolonizing methods for critiquing Western works of art that address place. Art educators' ability to understand and critique settler colonialism in art has been hindered by Eurocentric art criticism. This article seeks to reveal settler colonial imperatives and ambitions regarding land through a critical analysis of American landscape paintings and land art. This piece further examines contemporary Indigenous artists' site-specific works through adopting decolonial, land-based inquiry. Land-based art criticism interrupts the dominant mode of art inquiry to more comprehensively analyze art associated with place/land and expand the scope of social, cultural, and political understandings of social equity.

KEYWORDS: Art criticism, land-based inquiry, decolonization, contemporary art practice, Indigenous art, social justice art education

Art criticism enriches understandings of art through interpretive analysis and aesthetic judgment, providing a deeper appreciation of art as a significant way of critically engaging and responding to social, cultural, and political issues (Barrett, 1994, 2011). Art criticism can enhance students' critical thinking and knowledge of art, which in turn helps to advance art projects toward social justice (Broome, Pereira, & Anderson, 2018). The social, cultural, and political contexts in which works of art are produced, distributed, and presented are especially important

concerns for critical inquiry, as these contexts shape and are shaped by art and the people who view, make, promote, interpret, sell, collect, and fund it. In accordance with the visual culture paradigm in contemporary art education, art criticism encourages students to engage critical readings of images by considering relationships between politics and art (Duncum, 2009; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). Social justice art educational paradigm expands the scope of art criticism by heightening consciousness of power relations within interlocking structures of power based on class, race, and gender that produce social inequity (Bell & Desai, 2014; Dewhurst, 2011; Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, & Carpenter, 2018). Critical multicultural approach further plays an important part in advancing art criticism by challenging the Western canon that has been the singular dominant apparatus of “authentic” interpretation and has rarely invited other perspectives to be on an equal standing (Acuff, 2018; Ballengee-Morris, 2008). With those efforts, the art educational approach adopts contemporary art criticism, moving away from traditional Western formalistic approaches to understanding art, and instead promotes social, political, and cultural analyses as necessary tools for understanding and clarifying what art means and how it functions at a given time and place. Given this, I argue for a decolonizing, land-based perspective to intervene in the dominant practices of art criticism. Instead of promoting this perspective as better or more authentic, I argue it can amplify absent interpretations. In accordance with the valorization of multiple perspectives over a singular one, this paper utilizes land-based, settler colonial critique to highlight an alternative understanding of art centering on decolonizing perspectives, which primarily function to identify, make comprehensible, and evaluate art works. While art educators often focus on the cultural and social contexts in which art is produced, they tend to do so using the Western art canon for interpretive guidance, and thereby miss significant sociopolitical components of art works while re-inscribing settler colonialism.

In response, this article proposes land-based settler colonial critique¹ in order to foreground the elided historical, political, social, and cultural underpinnings of settler colonial narratives. This critique thus reveals alternative insights through the practice of reading and understanding art in the pursuit of social equity. This worldview is inseparable from concerns of land and therefore highlights the critical role of place/land in the creation of art.

Tuck and McKenzie (2015) have noted that, for many centuries, place has been relegated to the background in Western social science scholarship. However, a few genres of art do highlight place as a central theme. Artists in the United States have developed landscape painting; land art; and contemporary, site-specific works, addressing different meanings, objectives, motivations, and contexts. It is necessary to question how each genre engages meanings of place/land differently. This article introduces land-based inquiry as a mode of art inquiry, and applies a

settler colonial critique to attend to U.S. settler colonial intentions and contexts that have produced place/land-centered art. I contend that this mode of art criticism fosters practitioners' abilities to learn and explore issues of social justice and equity pertinent to place/land.

In what follows, I review the key foci of land-based art inquiry as a mode of art criticism. I then apply the foci to examine how land has been viewed and valued differently in the genres of American landscape painting and land art. I go on to introduce an Indigenous art collective's land-based, site-specific art as an example of how to advance social justice-oriented art criticism.

Land-Based, Settler Colonial Critique as a Mode of Art Criticism

The model of decolonizing, land-based inquiry I propose in this article is comprised of two key foci that guide how art criticism can critically assess the Western settler colonial desire that shapes how art is viewed. Such an approach has the ability to intervene in the dominant discourse of art criticism, counteracting the neglect and erasure of decolonizing perspectives within art education. I outline the foci of decolonial, land-based thinking while recognizing that they are connected to and intersect with one another. These foci are (1) critiquing White, Eurocentric settler colonial portrayals of land/place in art works; and (2) recognizing settler colonial intentions through emplacement and replacement as a representational scheme.

The first focus introduces a decolonizing approach to art criticism that seeks to address "the profound epistemic, ontological, and cosmological violence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5) of Western colonization embedded in U.S. art. As settler colonial violence is inexorably tied to land (Goeman, 2014; McCoy, Tuck, & McKenzie, 2015; Wolfe, 2007), a decolonizing perspective in art criticism is necessary for comprehending how art works function and how they are produced, distributed, and interpreted. This perspective encourages art educators to identify and challenge settler colonial imperatives that prohibit Indigenous repatriation.² Decolonizing, land-based inquiry critiques a settler colonial view of land as property for settlers' futurity³ while presenting an Indigenous view of land as a source of life (McCoy et al., 2016; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). This form of inquiry encourages art educators to attend to how place/land has been widely portrayed as the background and foreground of White settlers' desires and ambitions in and beyond art.

When place is backgrounded, it functions as an unimportant element and forecloses acknowledging land in terms of Indigenous sovereignty. In works of art, place is generally portrayed as static—a container that holds objects or dwellers. This view of place as a container often implements a spatial metric⁴ for organizing time-space coordinates and capturing land use and change (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Tuck and McKenzie (2015) have indicated that such a perspective totalizes

place by reducing it to a tool for the organization and territorialization of subjects. They juxtapose this with the Indigenous worldview that land is inseparable from life. Refusing to define place through such Western epistemological traditions, decolonial art criticism offers a necessary entry to investigate and critique how art has been a vehicle to view land as property that the settler holds. It furthers investigation into how art criticism can be epistemologically integrated with decolonizing, Indigenous views of the fundamental significance of land.

The second focus, that art criticism must consider settler colonial relations to land, necessitates identifying how settler emplacement/replacement operates as a normalized, dominant practice in the U.S. art world. For instance, White European settlers' cultural legacy of subjugating Indigenous presence not only veils and normalizes White supremacy, but also reifies settlers' sovereignty over stolen lands. According to McCoy et al. (2016), settler emplacement is a "drive to replace the native as the rightful claimant of the land" with European ownership to ensure settler futurity (p. 16). The element of the settler emplacement/replacement functions to turn Indigenous presence and reality into a legacy of extinction. One of many examples is *American Origin*, an ongoing 2021 exhibit in the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. This exhibit introduces "people who shaped their times, from the colonial era through the Revolution and the Civil War to the end of the nineteenth century contributing in extraordinary ways to the country's continuing reinvention."⁵ While the exhibit's official statement notes that it does not revolve around a particular group of people, the exhibit itself is primarily composed of portraits of White European settlers, while about 10% of the portraits are of Indigenous people. By presenting and perpetuating a discourse of scarcity in regard to Indigenous peoples in America, the exhibit centers land ownership at the expense of Indigenous relations to land and glorifies a single history that suggests the meaning of American origins belongs to and is determined by White settlers.

Settler emplacement is not merely measured by the ratio of White settlers' portraits to Indigenous people's portraits. A decolonizing, land-based inquiry requires us to rethink and re-examine what such a ratio suggests; what rationale and intentions drove the disproportionate representations; and how the ratio speaks to and/or endorses the underlying structure. According to demographic information from the 1600s to the 1800s, the White population in the United States was outgrown from approximately 350 to 55 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975). In 1800, about 600,000 Native Americans resided in the coterminous U.S. territory and reduced to approximately 237,000 during the 1890s, which was 0.4% of the U.S. population (Thornton, 1987). The genocide of Indigenous peoples significantly reduced the Indigenous population, and the resulting asymmetry between White and Indigenous populations has been magnified over the years. Comparing this data with the ratio of portraits in the exhibition, it seems the idea of American

origin in the exhibition is arbitrary in that the overtly disproportionate ratio of portraits of White people compared with those of Indigenous people promotes a narrative that deems Indigenous people extinct or unimportant. Indigenous absence is made to appear “natural, foregone, inevitable, indeed, evolutionary” (Tuck & Gatzambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 88). In turn, the overrepresentation of White people’s portraits can be seen as testament to their claim to American origin. As a result, the exhibit does not provoke questions about settler sovereignty, nor does it recognize Indigenous absence via settler colonial occupation. Furthermore, as Tuck and Gatzambide-Fernández (2013) have pointed out, settler futurity is the main driver of settler emplacement/replacement. In the context of art, settler colonial emplacement/replacement is closely linked to representation. The discursive system of settler colonial representation aims to obscure Indigenous presence and land sovereignty, and justifies settler colonial violence that transforms the land for White settler futurity (Wolfe, 2006). Land-based art criticism helps to identify and examine how settler emplacement/replacement, as a settler colonial representational scheme, asserts White settler occupation, naturalization, and futurity.

Unsettling Settler Colonial Legacies of American Landscape Painting

A key Western art genre in the United States that can benefit from such an analysis is American landscape painting, exemplified by the Hudson River School in the early 19th century. Led by the artists Francis Guy, Thomas Cole, Thomas Birch, and others, artists of this school portrayed places found in nature as the foreground rather than the background of their paintings. In particular, their landscape paintings rendered the vast grandeurs of the new land, in which a tiny figure in the paintings—depicted in a high location—communicates ideas of “discovery, exploration, and settlement” (Kornhauser, Ellis, & Miesmer, 2003, p. vii). For instance, Thomas Cole’s *Distant View of Niagara Falls* (1830) depicts a panoramic view of the Niagara Falls landscape, in which a couple of tiny Native Americans are on a cliff staring down at the water. Using a land-based mode of inquiry, a critical viewer could read this painting as a product of settler colonial politics—especially the religious and historical factors embedded in American expansionism. The idealized beauty and magnificent vistas of the wilderness reflect the boundless prospects of territorialization that are a key part of the U.S. settler colonial agenda. To assert this agenda, Indigenous presence and sovereignty must be forcibly purged and obscured.

As settlers continued to set their eyes westward, American landscape painting continued to document and celebrate the presence of modern (or White European) civilization in the Western United States, recording progress and exalting industrial development (Fairly, 2011; Georgi, 2003). Such symbolism served to

commemorate European settlers' monumental achievements over land and ultimately supported the settlers' territorial project by replacing Indigenous presence and sovereignty with settlers' desires, occupations, and enterprise, all of which visually reinforce sovereignty. This visual narrative justifies White settlers' emplacement by portraying the land as empty in origin, and European discovery and expansion as worthy of historic commemoration.

Rethinking Land Art With Settler Colonial Ambition

The practice of land-based art inquiry can also be used to analyze the Western genre of land art,⁶ also known as Earthworks. Land art developed in the U.S. art world during the 1960s and 1970s as a counter to museum-based, commercialized artistic activity and expanded the boundaries of dominant artistic practices in terms of the materials and sites of works of art. Presented as a challenge to the industrialization, commercialization, and suburbanization that was raising a number of environmental concerns during this era, land art was influenced by Western Conceptual and Minimalist art movements, embodying artists' geophilic attitudes toward and relationships with the land (Kaiser & Kwon, 2012; Tufnell, 2006). According to Rigaud (2012), the artists in the genre primarily intend to exalt and romanticize the land's inherent sublime beauty in particular places, and human-land or human-heaven relationships are deliberately erased. For example, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971), and *Amarillo Ramp* (1973) all illustrate his attraction to landscapes with prehistoric environments and unusual ecological and geological markers (Smithson, 1996). According to Rigaud (2012), land art tends to codify and redefine the sublimity of a new continent, which reiterates White mythic notions of the United States as a mythical pristine land of primeval bounty. On the other hand, land art also involves "marking the land . . . [which] equals orienting oneself in new lands through artworks that seem to re-enact a mythical first encounter with the continent" (p. 3).

From the land-based perspective, these features of land art are reminiscent of early European settlers' view of North America as a wild land that was available for their marking, surveying, exploring, and altering (Nash, 1982). In that sense, land art subscribes to the narrative of discovery, alteration, and domination of the land for the purposes of serving the settler colonial territorial project and the violent erasure of Indigenous peoples and perspectives (Scott, 2018). Similarly, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Surrounded Islands* (1980–1983) offers a monumental display of fabric and plastic, wrapping around an island near Sydney; Michael Heizer's *City* (1972) comprises several gigantic geometrically shaped monuments in the Sierra Nevada desert; and Michelle Stuart's (1975) *Niagara Gorge Path Relocated* features a 460-foot-long roll of paper descending a gorge. These pieces of land art

appear to align with the discourse of White settlers' "discovery" of and domination over the land, with artists seeming to replace Indigenous stories of land with their own aesthetic discourses. In other words, land art functions to obscure Indigenous land and presence by presenting a new form of aesthetic experience that privileges a settler-centered human-land relationship.

This artistic emplacement/replacement resonates with McCoy et al.'s (2016) view of White settlers' emplacement/replacement as enforcing the event of erasure and abstraction of Indigenous presence and land by replacing it with settler presence and imperatives. Decolonial, land-based inquiry can enable practitioners of art criticism to use critical thinking to show how art is implicated in land politics in ways that vanish Indigenous presence and sovereignty and normalize settler occupation. Such critical inquiry can cultivate a historical consciousness of land in the study of U.S. social and environmental inequity. Advancing this mode of analysis in art criticism is a group of Indigenous artists who bring land to the foreground from a decolonial Indigenous perspective. As I show in the following section, their works are exemplars for using land-based inquiry to rethink decolonial aesthetics for the repatriation of the land.

Understanding Land Politics Through Contemporary Indigenous Artists' Land-Based Site-Specific Art Works

The ways contemporary Indigenous artists practice land-based site-specific art are often significantly informed by their views and experiences of the land. Through these experiences, they create paths by which art practice can operate as a decolonizing endeavor. As Scott (2018) states, the decolonizing perspective in art criticism identifies the "interpreting [of] Indigenous land-based art practice through the lens of contemporary Western ideations" as problematic and calls into question the category of land art. Indigenous artists engaging land-based work place the land in a distinctly Indigenous context as a repatriation, often pursuing keen lines of inquiry and providing analyses of the land's complex stories.

One example of this type of Indigenous land-based art is Postcommodity, an Indigenous interdisciplinary art collective created by Cherokee artist Kade L. Twist, Diné artist Raven Chacon, Navajo/Laguna-descent artist Steve Yazzi, Pawnee/Kiowa tribe artist Nathen Yang, and Tewa-rooted Mexican American artist Cristóbal Martínez. Postcommodity supports and promotes Indigenous Americans' lands, lives, health, justice, and perspectives through site-specific installations, sound work, and experimental art forms. The project uses new artistic modes to share Indigenous perspectives and stories, specifically regarding complex forms of violence inflicted on the land, in communities, and in contemporary environments (Postcommodity, n.d.-a).

One notable Postcommodity project is *Repellent Fence* (2015), a 2-mile long temporary outdoor land art installation with 26 inflatable balloons that are 10 feet in diameter and tethered to the ground (Postcommodity, n.d.-b). These balloons, emblazoned with bird-chasing scary eyes, floated 100 feet above the desert on the U.S.-Mexico border in Douglas, Arizona. The project appropriates the scary-eyes balloons found on ineffective commercial bird repellent products. The red, yellow, and black colors around the eyes signify Indigenous medicine colors as culturally and spiritually empowering. The use of the ineffective balloons communicates with birds instead of repelling them, since birds signify spiritual communicators (Postcommodity, n.d.-c). This iconography has been present in Indigenous cultures “from South America to Canada for thousands of years” (Postcommodity, n.d.-b).

Moreover, by standing astride the U.S.-Mexico border, they symbolize a suture, the stitching together of cultures that inhabited the land long before borders were drawn (Postcommodity, n.d.-b). As such, as the artists note on their website, *Repellent Fence* illustrates “the interconnectedness of the Western Hemisphere by recognizing the land, indigenous peoples, history, relationships, movement, and communication” (Postcommodity, n.d.-b).

Kade Twist stated that Postcommodity chose Douglas, Arizona, as the site of the work because of its high rates of cartel-driven criminal activity, especially activities involving drugs, human trafficking, weapons, violence, real estate development, labor disputes, resource/trash management, mining, and more (CentralTrakUTD, 2015, 1:12:50). The site is also known as being heavily fortified and militarized due to the U.S. military’s heavy occupation and the historical presence of border control. Twist explained that the U.S. military and border control officials have largely fueled Douglas’s economy and brought significant employment opportunities to the area. Amid this contested, “very charged, emotional, and paranoid” landscape (CentralTrakUTD, 2015, 1:13:37) is the Tohono O’odham Nation’s reservation, which is divided by the U.S.-Mexico border on the west side of Arizona, with 60% of the Tohono O’odham Nation’s reservation in the United States and 40% in Mexico. The Tohono O’odham Nation’s people have thus been tremendously affected by this governmentally enforced geopolitical demarcation.

Repellent Fence was purposefully created on Indigenous ancestral lands, wherein Indigenous stories and presence have been buried and replaced by U.S. settlers’ hegemonic border stories—that is, stories of the rightful separation, displacement, and dispossession of Indigenous people and land under settler colonial rationalization. One such story is that of the Tohono O’odham Nation’s land (Náñez, n.d.; Schulze, 2018), which was occupied by foreign governments during the early 18th century and has been ruled by Mexico since 1823. In 1853, the United States purchased a portion of Mexico (southern Arizona) in the Gads-

den Purchase, also known as the Treaty of Mesilla, which divided the Tohono O'odham land between the United States and Mexico. In the contract, the United States agreed to honor all land rights held by Mexican citizens in the area, offering them the same constitutional rights as any other U.S. citizen, including O'odham people. Yet the U.S. settler colonial government broke the contract and demanded that the land be used to build a transcontinental railroad for economic gain. The Mexican government had desperate financial needs, causing them to gradually sell to the U.S. significant portions of their portion of O'odham land over time. As a result, the Tohono O'odham Nation lost most of their land.

Since the 1970s, restrictions at the U.S.-Mexico border have become stricter, so that U.S. immigration law prevents Tohono O'odham people from freely crossing their reservation (though Mexico does not ban their crossing). Such U.S. settler colonial land policies weaken the Tohono O'odham people's ability to sustain their culture, as this barrier separates them from the kinships and land that are essential to their economy, spirituality, and cultural traditions. Moreover, the Tohono O'odham government is not allowed to involve itself in or exercise authority within the social and political discourses surrounding border issues, including the problematic demarcation and militarization of their ancestral homeland (Schulze, 2018).

Lamenting this instantiation of Indigenous dislocation and dispossession of land, *Repellent Fence* works to reclaim the environment for individual liberty and shared sacrifice, thereby subverting ongoing settler colonial violence over the land. In this border rhetoric, the artists have attempted to disclose the complex realities of the border experiences of Indigenous peoples, including ongoing structures and forms of dispossession. Most of all, the artists' work seems to be recapitulating that there was no border, yet only land, as they use 26 stitched large balloons across the U.S.-Mexico border to amplify Indigenous voice and experience of the border and acknowledge the Indigenous land on which both the art and the border were installed.

Repellent Fence opens a space for viewers to rethink place/land by provoking critical dialogue regarding how borderlands have been formed, transformed, (re) (mis)appropriated, and storied; how Indigenous communities understand and experience the border; and how human action can respond to ancestral Indigenous places and create layers of land-based stories from the communities' positionality. Through this and other projects, the artists raise inquiries about—and foreground—the historical, cultural, geographical, and political contexts of Indigenous presence and relationships with the land.

The work created by these artists gestures at possibilities for restoration and repatriation, while also showing how the use of decolonizing practices and land-based inquiry in art can challenge individuals to rethink their notions about

land. From a critical stance, such an Indigenous decentering work is tremendously important in understanding the land, providing a space to distinguish land-based art in tribal contexts from conventional land art. Sam Wainwright Douglas admits that Western-centered land art and Indigenous land-based work, particularly the work of the artist collective Postcommodity, do not sit together comfortably; at the same time, he sees that Western land art contributed to Indigenous land-based art by “pav[ing] the way to bring the land and all its cultural inscriptions into the purview of art” (as cited in Scott, 2018). Nevertheless, Indigenous artist Kade Twist does not see his land-based site-specific work as being in the category of land art (CentraltrakUTD, 2015).

Such indigenously driven art practices provide critical spaces for using art to provoke decolonizing understanding of land and sovereignty that can advance art criticism toward social justice. The questions these practices explore invite practitioners of art criticism to critically consider the social and historical contexts from which works of art emerge. Specifically, practitioners might apply a land-based mode of inquiry by situating representations of land in the context of decolonization. They might also ask how site-specific art installations address representations of land in terms of settler colonialism and settler colonial land politics. Furthermore, practitioners can examine how Indigenous site-specific installation functions as a vehicle for remembering place-based stories of past, present, and future for decolonizing purposes; how decolonizing, land-based artwork evokes alternative aesthetic experiences; and how this artwork can more clearly present relationships between aesthetics and politics. These inquiries would all help us to better understand, interpret, and judge works of art beyond the limited principles of Western art.

Afterthought

Engaging land-based thinking can re-introduce social justice to art education in that art criticism offers a critical space for identifying, critiquing, challenging, and refusing settler colonial imperatives, attitudes, legacies, and practices in the U.S. art world. These imperatives and practices must be challenged for how they hinder the repatriation of Indigenous lands and belonging. This alternative mode of art criticism moves beyond mere acknowledgments of Indigenous land, and thus can transform art practice into social and political action for social equity and repatriation. Critique of settler colonialism is necessary in order to liberate art criticism from the Western—particularly settler colonial—canon. I suggest that practitioners and learners in art criticism engage the following areas of inquiry: (1) How are strategies of representing land used to naturalize and erase settler colonial occupation and Indigenous sovereignty?; (2) What deep ideologies of place/land represented in art

works are shaped by settler colonial logic?; (3) How do the settler colonial canon and land-based perspectives differently organize and shape the themes, meanings, styles, and aesthetics of art works?; (4) How will be place/land justly portrayed through art works in ways that foreclose settler colonial desire and ambition?

Through these questions, alternative modes of art criticism like that shown here have the potential to introduce more inclusive practices of art criticism and art education that move beyond the Western, settler colonial centered perspective to advance social justice and the repatriation of Indigenous land.

Notes

1. I use these terms interchangeably, as they often share views, methods, and goals. Land-based inquiry centers land as an analytic and examines its relation to both Native Americans and settlers. It is inherently associated with decolonization in its challenge and subversion of colonial systems, policies, and attitudes, particularly toward the ultimate purpose of land repatriation in the context of settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Settler colonial critique is a necessary method for decolonization and land-based inquiry to identify and critique sites and events impacted by settler colonial systems.
2. This term refers to Indigenous peoples' call for European settlers to return stolen land and Indigenous belongings.
3. This term means a future of endless settler dominance over the land. It specifically foregrounds the erasure of Indigenous peoples and their land sovereignty in the past, present, and future.
4. The term means numeric measurement of spatial patterns to quantify and capture physical dimension of urban growth and land use (Herold, Couclelis, & Clarke, 2005).
5. See <https://npg.si.edu/exhibition/american-origins-0>.
6. The term was first used during the first major exhibition of Earthworks at the New York Dwan Gallery in 1968. This exhibition presented works by conceptual artists such as Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris, as well as artists who would later become key figures of the land art movement, such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria (Rigaud, 2012).

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