

Overwriting: Reflections on  
Landscape, Post-Colonial  
Society and Colonial  
Artifacts



The influence of settler colonialism permeates society today in ways that are visible and hidden as well. My most prominently captured land and its buildings, Spanish-Mexican colonial architecture Rancho Guajome Adobe, directly resulted from Native servitude and labor (Magliari, 2004). Most people may not have even heard the name Luiseño or Payómkawichum, the name of the first people to inhabit the present land of San Diego County. This phenomenon shows the power of settler colonialism and its process, which I like to dub and symbolize as 'overwriting.' As a technical term, overwriting illustrates settler colonialism's property of erasing to replace. This doesn't just include replacing ideologies, cultures, and ways of life to build their own, but the fleeting concern for the "fragments of Indigenous worlds, animals, plants and human beings" that were built over, replaced, and obscured (Tuck & Yang, 2012). At the same time, the surrounding civilization represents the myriad of global realities of people whom colonists transferred, exterminated, disenfranchised, and dehumanized to make the home and hegemony of the West today. The photos in this collection will not just be used as a showcase of this unending process and its themes, but can also inspire exploration of changing society with a sense of mindfulness of the colonial past and its effects, make connections to the present, and introduce nuances that follow. It requires a variety of locations rather than just historical artifacts, due to colonial influence connecting and altering countless ways of knowing and existence between a multitude of lands and cultures. The photos captured reify this diverse and complex quality, and support my reflections and observations from my limited but enlightening study of the arrangements of colonialism, resistance, and indigeneity.



Women of Luiseño nation



*What relationships can be built with land?*









Edward Curtis, *Chief Hector-Assiniboin*, 1926

Based on recent research done in another class, I made another parallel between the past and the present and the consequences of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is a process, but is also accomplished by a collective of individuals. Among them are figures such as Edward Curtis and other photographers in the 20th century who would take pictures of Native people whom he had researched, inspired by his fascination and pity for a “dying race.” He and many others did nothing to combat the systemic erasure of these people and would eventually benefit from the colonial methods they suffered from. This includes his exercising of power by manipulating the photos he took to impose his narratives of the subjects onto them. Contradictions such as these still remain. Indigenous artifacts are protected within the walls of Western institutions, yet their land continues to be jeopardized by colonial projects such as intrusive pipelines, Native reservations receive no support for food sovereignty, and the mass deaths of their women and children are undermined. Similarly, this signage is symbolic of the conquest they were subject to. It represents the care that settler colonialists have for the land of their new permanent home after its intrusion and alteration were completed to their liking, yet the amount of care given for its first people is questionable.



"The information that is to be gathered...respecting the mode of life of one of the great races of mankind, must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost." Edward Curtis, 1907

"The second thing that must be done is to secure the land for settlers. This can be accomplished by imposing a modernist property regime that transforms land and resources (sometimes including people) into "things" that can be owned. This regime consists of such elements as mapping and marking boundaries to delimit an object that is to be owned, a system for recording ownership, and legal rules for ownership and sale of objects defined as property" (Glenn, 2015).

Overall, Curtis and other settlers' actions would not just be considered a contradiction, but his work in particular is controversial because it represents the strategy of delimiting the subjects and their cultures, altering, and marking ownership over their histories and state of being.



Edward Curtis, *Nespilim woman*, 1905

A photograph of a wooden structure, possibly a fence or wall, with a warning sign. The sign is rectangular and has a white top section and a blue bottom section. The text on the sign is in bold, sans-serif font. The background is a dark, textured wooden surface.

**NO CLIMBING**

**UNSTABLE  
HISTORIC  
STRUCTURE**



View of Guajome Sports Park and Guajome Adobe from a hill near my home





Graffiti symbolizing overwriting

Graffiti is also an anti-colonial, anti-hegemonic tool. It is an antithesis of erasure, assimilation, and marginalization. Graffiti overwhelms cities and land not just as an art form, but as a tool for marginalized communities to be heard. As with most art, people use graffiti to express themselves, spread a message, and conceptualize relevant sociopolitical or socioeconomic conditions. But to me, its foremost cultural significance is its placement by marginalized communities wherever they desire without authorization by the powers that be. This resistance makes it a widely known and innately progressive art form. Its role as a global form of speech and presentation also connects people, realities, and stories across all landscapes. In light of this, it is another reality that deserves protection but is continuously obscured as a violation of settler colonial land in tandem with the individuals that make it. I also believe that it is a substantial facet of what Tuck and Yang (2012) title "internal colonialism." Graffiti is not just physically present in the land through which people are geopolitically managed and transported (prisons, cities, suburbs, ghettos, and schools) but is also a significant obstacle to internal colonial strategies of surveillance, criminalization, and policing. No matter the amount of control, its presence still remains, to the point it has also become an exalted art form. And because its criminalization had once begun a culture war and continues to be an illicit activity today, I believe graffiti to be an invaluable and widespread symbol of autonomy and rejection of "internal" colonial projects, and a symbol of decolonization and re-overwriting.

As such, graffiti should be valued as intrinsic to the historical and contextual assessment of civilization, not only by subjective aesthetic value. Yet, similar to Native people, their value is removed, and the new colonial society insists they do not belong.





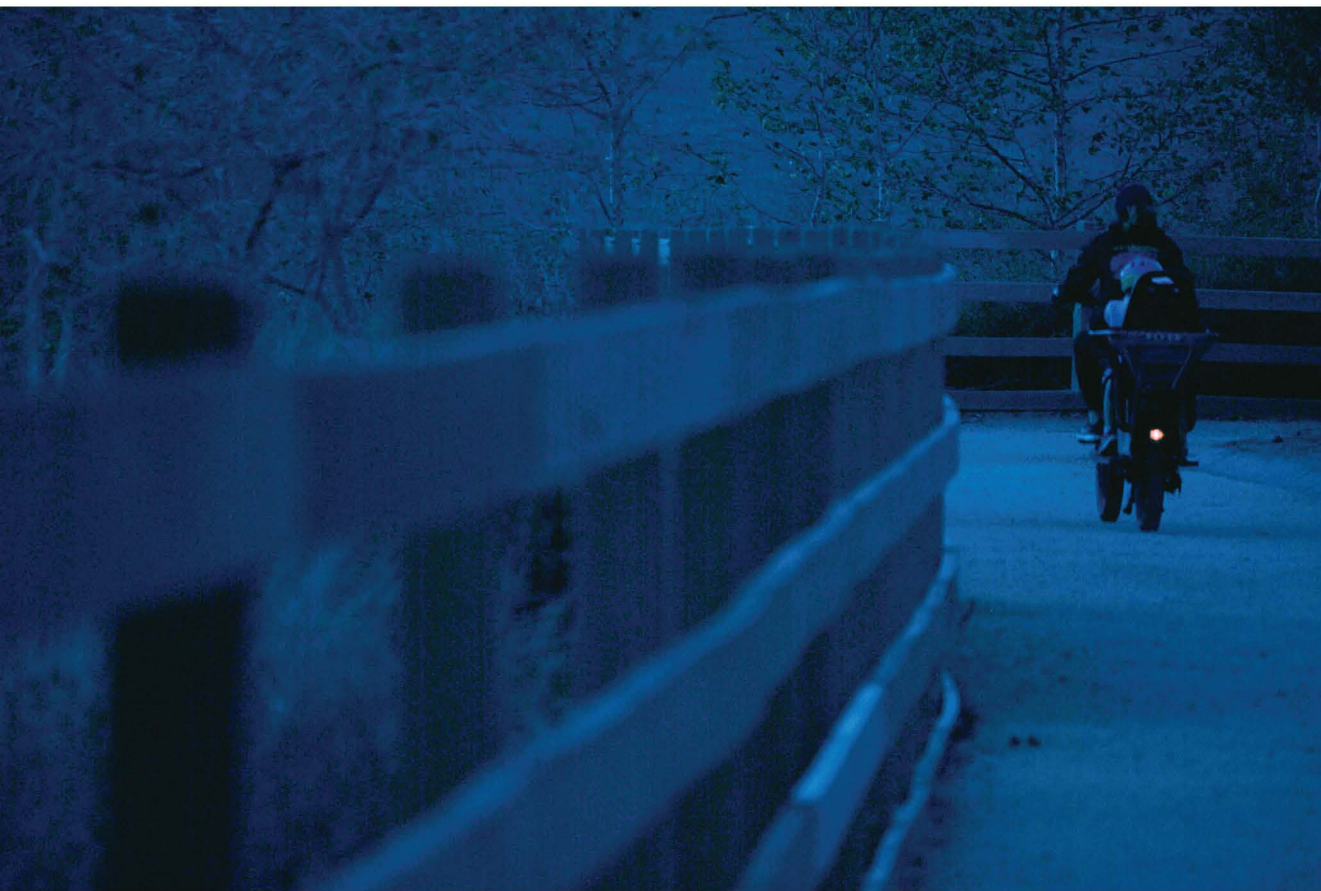




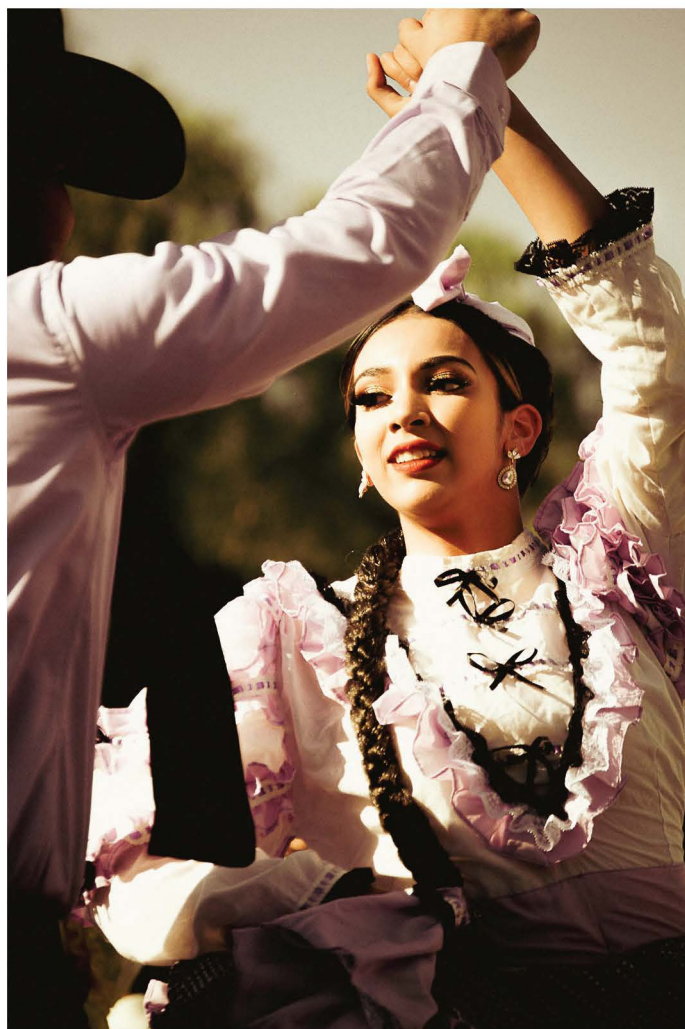


Most people who learn about colonialism and its negative influence may not even be aware of contemporary arguments for its positive benefits. It is wiser to regard these "benefits" only as secondary effects of one exclusive goal of domination. American society is now diverse, but many people within these diasporic communities long for their lost history and home, and people are not given the privilege of belonging. Only a small number of Americans can enjoy the productive economy and recreation we see today. Lower-class individuals continue to be exploited and face human rights violations while producing the resources and capital we have. Capturing people of varying races, ethnicities, and ages existing but also actively enjoying a colonial site as a recreational location and as a way to share their culture is reifying the complexities of the process of settler colonialism.

"Most non-Natives think we should be grateful for the alleged opportunity of American citizenship, even if this has meant termination as an independent country" (Haunani Kay Trask, 2004).









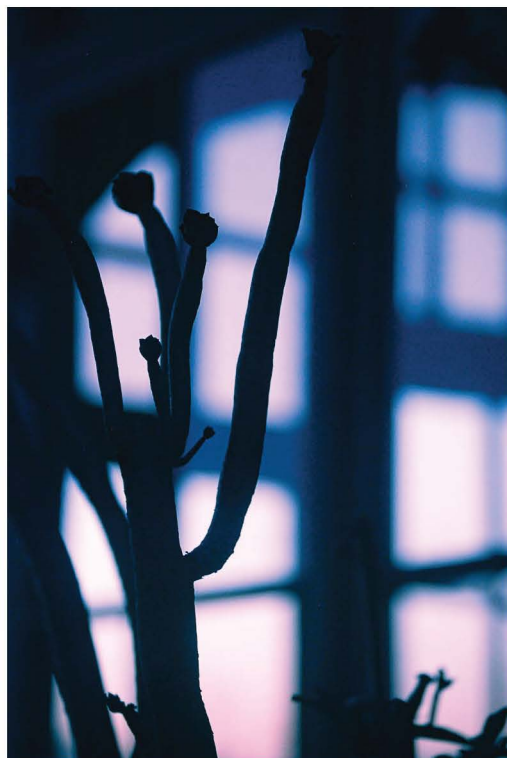












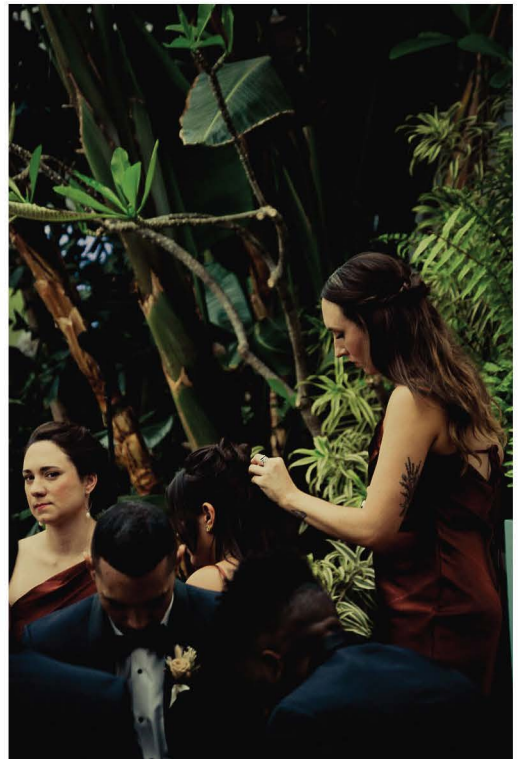




Regarding tonality, I repeatedly use warmer tones for pictures capturing people co-existing. As mentioned earlier, this could be considered one positive consequence of colonialism. Photos with cooler tones emphasize the darker implications behind conquest, such as violence and separation, and are made blue to signify their role of accentuating the contrast between land with human existence and without. Nature is beautiful but appears solemn and sullen because of a lack of presence. This sentiment of mine does not negate the reality that we were not here first. I am usually inclined to take photos of nature because of its beauty, but its relevance to this book is also its indigenous qualities. Blue is also associated with this regal, noble role of indigeneity accordingly.









"At this political moment, in an administration committed to secrecy and deception, lies and acts of violence appear hidden on the surface, and the unpacking of a complex ideological construct seems irrelevant" (Kaplan, 2003).



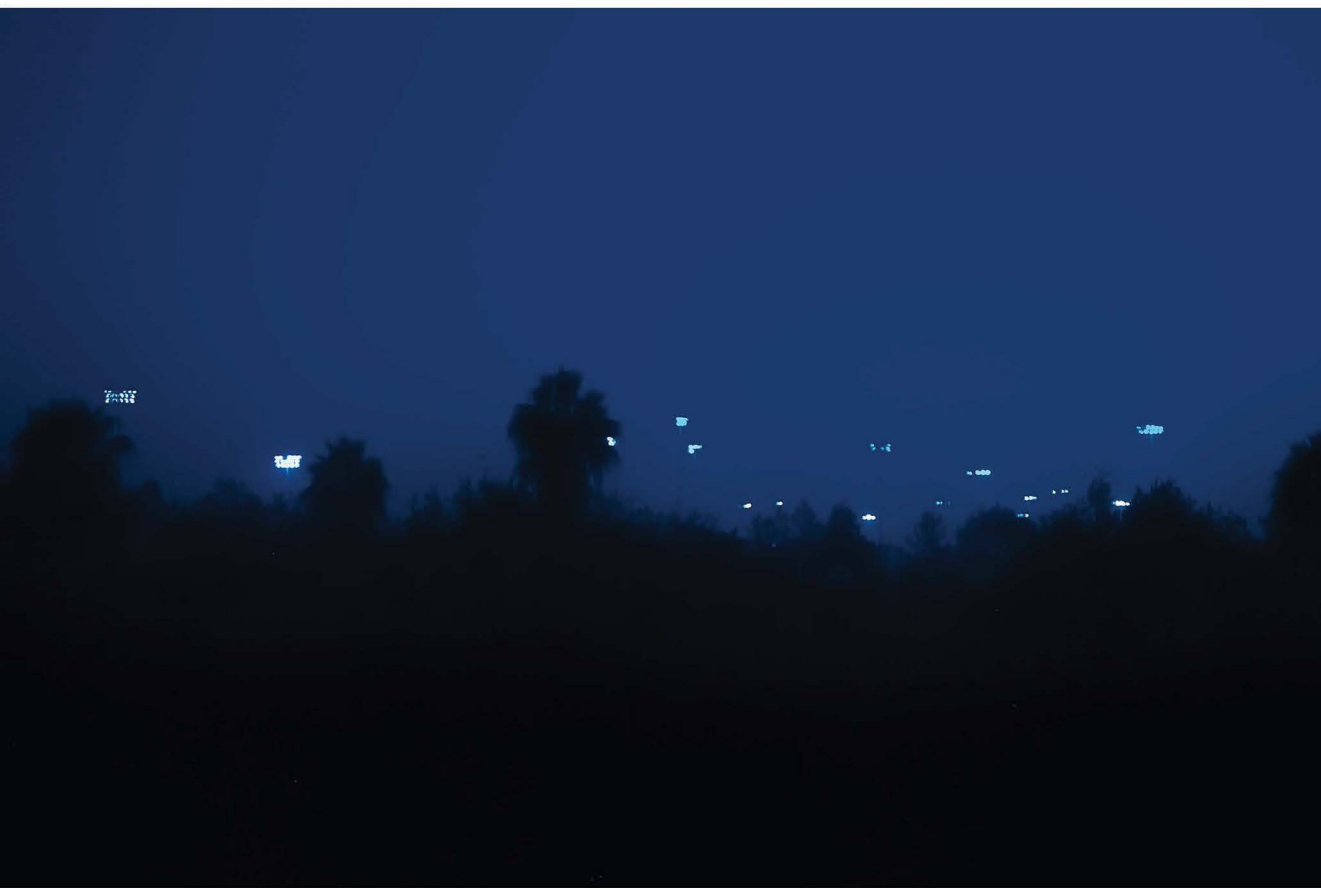




A colonial civilization in late capitalism is like night and day. At whose expense are we existing and thriving? How often do institutions consider those in need and who will be in crisis over profit and development? How do colonial epistemologies of who is human and who is not truly affect our welfare, belonging, and economy?















African Americans and Native Americans share many commonalities in their oppression and enslavement within settler colonialism, but not the role of being an actor. Whether voluntary or involuntarily, it has been observed by scholars such as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) that we are also occupants, settlers, and actors in the creation of a new regime and home. I was drawn to the pole protruding out of the grass because of its bold yellow color, and its figure appearing as if it was growing up outwards from the land. This coordinated protrusion out of the land between the model and the pole represented obstruction of a relationship to land that once was. Our relation to colonizers and the colonized becomes complicated as our ancestors were relocated and settled onto stolen land, and soon became occupants who were used to help transform land into property, and later on, help build and utilize capital.



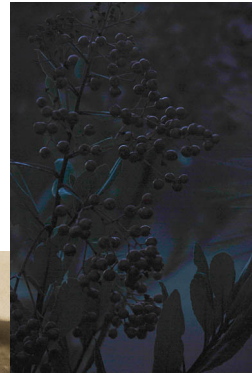








Relations between nature and technology are also complex. Nature and native species are simultaneously preserved and depleted by privatized institutions, both being for profit. Power and land ownership come at the expense of these resources as well. This is because settler colonialism transforms one's relationship with land. The people who were first on this land built a relationship of connection, and they had to be eliminated along with their epistemologies of coexistence, land and ownership. When I look around and see barren plots of land and nature, I know they will soon be buried and overwritten, as land must only exist under ownership.



Edward Curtis, *Apache Indian Reaping Grain*, 1906

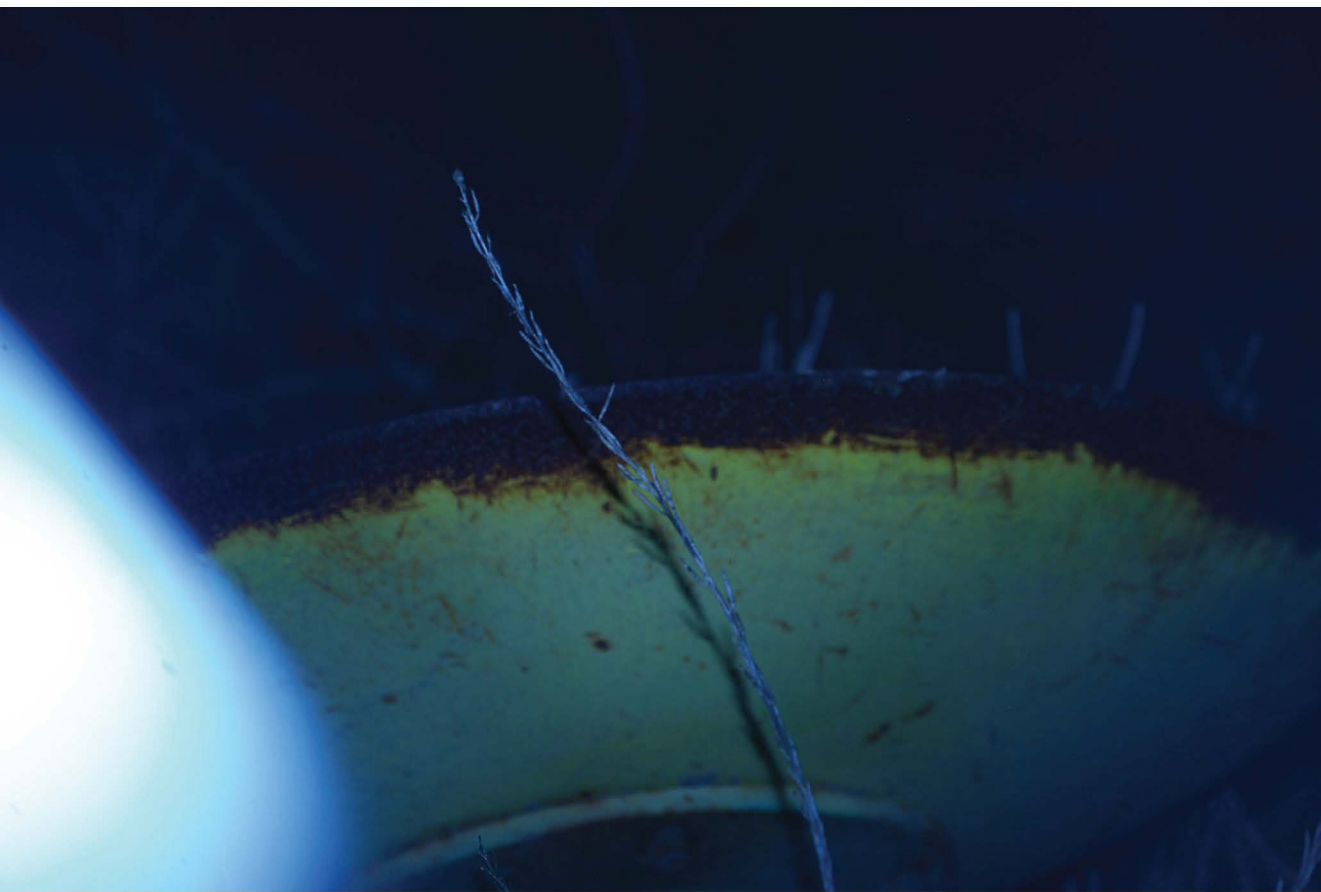
"Some would like to believe that the values of the Roman Catholic Church and the values of the Native American tribal religions are one and the same. Hah! being totally traditional seems wrong as well as it seems the task is first to find out what was our tradition—feel it through the skin" (Moraga, Anzaldúa, Valerio, 1981).





















Frantz Fanon's (1963) theory of decolonization, Tuck and Yang's (2012) titling of decolonization as "unsettling," and my research on the settler process helped put into perspective the severe degree to which it permeates society. Fanon's philosophy of the "last" and the "first" and Tuck and Yang's insistence on the unsettling incommensurability of (de)colonization compared to other social justice projects is part of how returning sovereignty to the first people of the land means reversing society and civilization completely. By delineating how American civilization was built on another through methods of complete erasure and control of land and ways of being, one can see that it is a unique process of restoration unequal to those founded on requesting to share colonist resources, power, and capital. Settlers changed the order of the world by making the first the last through perpetual violences. Seeing how indigenous people are effectively invisibilized, it makes me wonder what Fanon's call to decolonization through violence would look like. To elaborate, he argues this level of social violence can only be reversed by returning an equal amount. "For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists" (Fanon, p. 37). Coming across this location has led me to reflect on a profound theory that makes me see what is around me in a different light, along with the meaning of solidarity and activism. All subjects and locations are part of a complication of relations expanding past us versus them, as it also includes the land and ways of knowing. This leads to a complete re-framing of the pictures I take, making it possible to include every single photo rather than a curated and select few.



o·ver·write

Verb

To write (something) over other writing.

To destroy or lose by recording new data over it.

To record in such a way as to replace data that is already there.

