Indigenous Land as Common Ground: Understanding Decolonization through Unsettled Landscapes
by Ellyn Walker
The traces of many footprints lie buried at various levels with recent ones evident on and near the surface of that land. Deeply buried, the first human ones are those of Indigenous people—some are made recently; some longer ago than most of us can imagine. Since those first tracks were made, other sets of footprints have walked at different times on the same ground, layers upon layers upon layers. Through colonization, Diaspora, and immigration, feet of non-Indigenous peoples have arrived in traditional First Nations territories. In the layers, somewhere, our prints and perhaps those of our ancestors are lying. Regardless, we are all here now walking around in relation to one another and to the land.

— CEILIA HANG-BROWN

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.: 29.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.

FOR TEN THOUSAND YEARS, the land that I know and call “home” has in fact been home to many others, as “beneath all our feet is land which existed and does exist first of all in relation to Indigenous people.” Beneath my own feet, in my hometown of Toronto, is the “meeting place” of many cultural groups and their respective histories, which continue to unfold on this land whose name means the “trees that stand in the water.” What is now known as Toronto in the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation who “signed” a series of questionable treaties with the British Crown during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though the land had been home to numerous other indigenous groups, including the Wyandot, Neutral and Petun peoples, long before Europeans arrived. This essay seeks to explore some of the complexities of the ways in which cultural and geographic histories collide through the representation of land, in particular, in the works in Site Santa Fe’s robust exhibition Unsettled Landscapes.

In If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?, Canadian scholar J. Edward Chamberlin reminds readers of the importance of land, “how [its] stories give meaning and value to the places we call home.” Illustrating his central point, he recounts an exchange that took place during a land-claim dispute between the British Columbia government and the Gitksan peoples—an exchange in which an elder asked B.C. officials, “If this is your land, where are your stories?” The elder gave an intimate account of his people’s history and the ways in which his ancestors’ stories continue to permeate the West Coast. Speaking in his native tongue, the elder at once distanced those who did not understand his language and made clear the long-standing relationship of indigenous peoples to the land.

This book accompanied me on my trip to Santa Fe, unexpectedly providing many points of connection between the text’s underlying philosophical questions and Site Santa Fe’s exhibition.

Chamberlin illustrates the disparity between indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives on land, noting the European “classification of land as idle” when it is unowned or unused for agricultural or other purposes. At the same time, this Western ideology, which “has provided the basis for countless colonial adventures in the settlement of aboriginal territory,” reflects the fact that the West, too, appreciates the collective value of land. For Chamberlin, this recognition constitutes common ground across all cultures; land is as much shared as it is divided.

The land on which Santa Fe sits demonstrates the complexity of Chamberlin’s point. The region’s diverse historical identities—originally (and still) indigenous land, subsequently claimed as a Spanish kingdom, a Mexican province and eventually an official territory of the United States—exemplify the ways in which histories collide, collapse and, for a time, prevail. These overlapping (and in many ways buried) histories make clear the fact that the genre of landscape is never neutral; rather, it is an “instrument of cultural power.”

Like history, landscapes are highly subjective and have most often been framed by “a dominant perspective,” namely, settler-colonialism. The curators of Unsettled Landscapes disrupted this dominant narrative, animating the exhibition instead, around critical discussions of land and its varied uses—an innately unsettled topic.

Addressing the subject of land and landscape through the mode of the biennial is especially significant as it allows the curators to call attention to the biennial’s origins as a World’s Fair and colonial exposition. Originating in Venice in 1895...
as a platform to display and celebrate the achieve-
ments of emerging nations, the biennial, in effect, has functioned as a larger-than-life cabinet of curiosities, a form that has largely positioned cul-
tural and national identities in relation to grand narratives of settler-colonialism. Since its origins, the biennial has proliferated, and it continues to play an important role in the presentation of contemporary art on a national and international scale, a role that requires critical scrutiny.

Founded in 1995 by a group of private citizens, Site Santa Fe notably “provided an institutional platform for the only international biennial in the United States”¹⁰ and, since its inception, it has taken numerous artistic and curatorial risks in both its temporary biennial mode and its more permanent institutional programme. Site Santa Fe operates as an international reputation for presenting cutting-edge art and curatorial projects, and as such, has been a site of extra-national networking and collaboration. However, in the context of the inter-national explosion of the biennial form, Site Santa Fe has continued to reflect on the meaning and function of the biennial, repositioning itself in 2011 with plans for a series of three thematically linked exhibitions and curatorial projects, and after each biennial, Site Center focuses on collaboration and connectivity between artists and communities before, during and after each biennial.

The first exhibition of the SiteLines biennial series, Unsettled Landscapes, was the result of four years of collaborative development between institutions and community organizations that included professional stakeholders from across the hemisphere. Allowing for a “diversity of voices at [the] curatorial table and in [Site’s] exhibition spaces,”¹¹ a team of staff and advisors negotiated a strong curatorial vision despite the breadth of the subject. Incorporating local and transnational perspectives, curators Janet Dees, Irene Hofmann, Candice Hopkins and Lucia Sanroman demonstrated the multiplicity of “picturings” of land in order to challenge “the historical amnesia exacted by colonialism … [which] has obscured the full range of lived experience in the Americas.”¹²

Art historian W.J.T. Mitchell, whose scholarship is cited as an important influence in the catalogue’s curatorial essay, describes the genre of landscape as an apparatus for “turn[ing] site into sight.”¹³ Implied that landscape has the ability to construct history as much as it can render others invisible. Mitchell’s comment reinforces the exhibition’s curatorial vision: that landscape is a device that is always framed by the perspective from which it is seen.¹⁴ This ideological function has inevitably served the colonial project, which reflects both the political and cultural context that unites the exhibition’s vast geographical range. Unsettled Landscapes looked at the historical narratives and current political conditions that inform contemporary artists working across the Americas, comparing regional differences and artistic practices from Nunavut to Tierra del Fuego as seen through the lenses of landscape, territory and identity.

While colonialism is a shared history for all who reside within the Americas, particular relationships to and experiences of colonialism are unique. In their text on settler colonies, scholars Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson contend that “the occupation of land formerly owned by others always translates into the cultural politics of representation.”¹⁵ Presenting nuanced works that demonstrate the ongoing effects of settler-colonialism in relation to land, Unsettled Landscapes thoughtfully explores such politics. Artworks by artists such as Brazil’s Anna Bella Geiger, New York-based Pablo Helguera and Canada’s Raymond Biejalo, to name but a few, illustrate these effects through their diverse yet interrelated projects.

No Man’s Land (2014) by Chilean artist Gianfranco Foschino and Offensive/Defensive (1988) by Canadian artist Edward Poitras, for example, comment on the shared history of colonization while engaging distinct materials and cultural histories. In Foschino’s video work,
Gianfranco Foschino
Video stills from No Man’s Land
2014

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Argentine conceptual artist Leandro Katz has explored some of the colonial realities of Latin America. In *The Catherwood Project* (1985–1995), he pays particular attention to the landscape of Mexico. The series of photographs that make up this project juxtapose past and present representations of prominent Mayan sites in the Yucatan Peninsula, as well as in Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras, sites that were mapped out by English-speaking explorers Frederick Catherwood and John Lloyd Stephens more than one hundred and fifty years ago.19 Whereas Catherwood and Stephens used engraving to document their findings, Katz uses photography, which reflects both the passing of time and the development of new technologies since the early depictions of explorers. Furthermore, the photograph allows Katz the opportunity to feature Catherwood and Stephens’s works within his own images—an astute use of appropriation and juxtaposition that highlights the ways in which history has been constructed and by whom. Through the replication of a particular view, Katz’s work plays with questions of who—the explorer, the archaeologist, the photographer, the tourist?—constructs history. Focusing on the “sight” of architectural and cultural ruin, he offers us the vantage point of the colonizer who “sees” the land and deems it to be *terra nullius*.20

Viewing Katz’s poetic and subtle images within a darkened corridor allows an intimacy with the depicted landscapes to unfold. One of the photographs, *Uxmal–Casa de las Pájaros* (1993), features a scene of deteriorating Puuc architecture—the remains of roof-combs from the House of the Doves.21 The image also features the artist’s fingers, which clutch Catherwood and Stephens’s original etching in the foreground, an intervention and juxtaposition that allow Katz to compare the same landscape through different temporal lenses—one an example of colonial cartography, the other an example of cultural tourism. By representing both the past and present “remains” of the Mayan site, the photograph illustrates how colonialism and neocolonialism continue to displace the land’s first peoples.

With colonization comes the notion of territory, a concept that implies ownership, authority, occupation or control of an area and thus reflects an inherently Western ideology in relation to land. The idea of territory represents a conceptual shift from the earlier notion of “land as commons” to the idea of “land as commodity”—what the exhibition’s curators deem to be a kind of “alibi”
Shuvinai Ashoona, an Inuit artist who works out of the Kinngait Studios® in Cape Dorset, Nunavut, demonstrates the interconnectedness of humans and nature in her large-scale, minutely detailed drawing Composition (Overlooking Cape Dorset) (2003). In this work, she rejects the notion of territory as something bounded by arbitrarily drawn borders and, instead, pictures an ever-expanding cartography achieved through the piecing together of multiple, smaller drawings on paper that portray a monochromatic landscape from an aerial point of view. The scale of Ashoona’s work allows her to set a number of details against the backdrop of Cape Dorset’s boundless terrain; sealskin dwellings, gravel footpaths and electrical infrastructure are combined with landforms such as dark, ominous cliffs that virtually appear to be animate. This innovative combination of obsessive detail with narrative experimentation marks Ashoona as one of Cape Dorset’s new generation of artists. Recognizing the history of Inuit art making, however, Unsettled Landscapes also includes work by one of Kinngait’s more senior artists, Obedaq Mikkigak. The inclusion of works by two prominent Inuit artists alongside several other works that focus on the Arctic is hugely important to any exhibition that aims to address issues of colonization in the Americas—especially as the region has so often been overlooked—and it produces a much more nuanced exhibition. The Arctic—the northernmost part and one of the least-populated places on earth—has long been a site of indigenous inhabitation and today represents the new frontier of colonization, known as the “Warm War.” At global warming is causing the Arctic’s sea ice to melt at an alarming rate, circumpolar nations continue to battle over the expansion of resource extraction as well as the maintenance and control of what may soon be year-round shipping routes in the North. Engaging with the politics of the North, Canadian artists Kevin Schmidt and Charles Stankievech each offer timely colonial critiques.

Echoing Chamberlin’s notion of land as common ground, Kevin Schmidt’s A Sign in the Northwest Passage (2010–ongoing) utilizes environmental and indigenous concerns. Consisting of photogrammetric, video and audio documentation, the complex installation documents Schmidt’s intervention in Canada’s Northwest Passage, wherein the artist transposed apocalyptic messages from the Book of Revelation—for example, “The sun turned black” and “The sea turned to blood”—onto a giant makeshift sign supported by floating barrels. After transporting the sign to the remote Inuvialuit hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk in the Northwest Territories from his home near Vancouver, he dragged it out onto the ice offshore. Upon the melting of the ice in the following summer, the signpost was intended to pass through the waters of the North as a warning of impending disaster, should the region continue to be environmentally and economically exploited. The project, however, remains incomplete, as Schmidt continues to search for remnants of his sign, last seen in 2010. The exhibited work therefore presents us with evidence of Schmidt’s intervention—an elegant, framed photograph of the sign perched on the ice, accompanied by a small single-channel video of the artist’s aerial search for the sign and headphones through which one hears the diegetic sounds of the artist’s quest.

Schmidt’s record of the distance travelled by the sign, as well as its transformation and disappearance, offers many points of comparison with Charles Stankievech’s 35mm film installation, The Soniferous Athor of the Land Beyond the Land Beyond (2013), which also explores questions of colonial transformation. Nunavut, Canada’s most recently declared territory, represents a particular model of decolonial governance (like Ecuador or Bolivia) that privileges indigenous world views, which conceive of humans as having an ongoing relationship with and responsibility for the land. However, long before the introduction of Nunavut’s territorial autonomy in 1999, the area of Alert, which lies just outside of traditional Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit territories, was co-opted by the Canadian Forces and transformed from a remote weather station to an occupied military and surveillance base known as the Alert Signals Intelligence Station. During the last thirty years of the Cold War, Alert, thanks to its relative proximity to the former Soviet Union as well as its long periods of darkness, which allowed for clandestine observation, functioned as a listening station in order to facilitate the interception of Soviet communications.

Stankievech’s film, exhibited in its own viewing room adjacent to the room in which Ashoona’s and Mikkigak’s drawings were displayed, highlights Alert’s function as an apparatus of the Cold War. The monumentality with which the artist conceives of the former Soviet Union, and theInuvialuit hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk in the Northwest Territories from his home near Vancouver, he dragged it out onto the ice offshore. Upon the melting of the ice in the following summer, the signpost was intended to pass through the waters of the North as a warning of impending disaster, should the region continue to be environmentally and economically exploited. The project, however, remains incomplete, as Schmidt continues to search for remnants of his sign, last seen in 2010. The exhibited work therefore presents us with evidence of Schmidt’s intervention—an elegant, framed photograph of the sign perched on the ice, accompanied by a small single-channel video of the artist’s aerial search for the sign and headphones through which one hears the diegetic sounds of the artist’s quest.

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Kevin Schmidt
A Sign in the Northwest Passage
2010
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CATHERINE YVONNE GALLERY, VANCOUVER
nation-state through its ominous depiction. For Westerners, the Arctic has long represented a place of exile, uncertainty and harsh conditions—think, for example, of the final words of Mary Shelley's <i>Frankenstein</i> or the menacing description of Siberia in popular science-fiction novels. In <i>The Soniferous Æther</i>, Stankievech references cinematic tropes of sci-fi and horror in his portrait of Alert as a dark and desolate landscape, akin to the settings in apocalyptic outer-space movies. This evocation of menace is heightened by the sound, which consists of the pulsations of Siberia in popular science-fiction novels. In <i>The Soniferous Æther</i>, Stankievech references cinematic tropes of sci-fi and horror in his portrait of Alert as a dark and desolate landscape, akin to the settings in apocalyptic outer-space movies. This evocation of menace is heightened by the sound, which consists of the pulsations of the slave trade. In addition to this evocation of the slave narrative, the hoisted “flag” represents the declaration of territorial occupation, the neatly folded towels represent tourist objects, and the coming and going of the cruise ships references the abduction of bodies in the name of the conquest of new lands. But, always, one must ask, whose land? The first step toward decolonization is to reframe the question: To whom did the land traditionally belong? Doing so acknowledges indigenous sovereignty and opens the way to a deeper understanding of one’s own history and relationship to the colonial project. In <i>Unsettled Landscapes</i> successfully demonstrated this reorientation: the exhibition’s extensive content and critical framing “unsettled” viewers’ perspectives on and assumptions about land, thus compelling them to consider anew the land on which they stand. The diversity of landscapes presented in this outstanding biennial made explicit the fact that land is not a single, homogenous thing, but is, rather, many things to different people. It is the living and breathing history of how we relate to one another, “a place that separates and connects us [and] a place of possibility for both peace and perilous conflict.” Throughout much of the world, but especially within the Americas, indigenous land is the land on which we all stand, and is thus our common ground.