

2018

"THIS SACRED LAND IS OUR SHIELD": Deploying the Sacred in Indigenous Art and Activism

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Charlotte, ""THIS SACRED LAND IS OUR SHIELD": Deploying the Sacred in Indigenous Art and Activism" (2018). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1206.
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**“THIS SACRED LAND IS OUR SHIELD”: DEPLOYING THE SACRED IN
INDIGENOUS ART AND ACTIVISM**

**BY
CHARLOTTE G. JONES**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR BILL ANTHES
PROFESSOR ERICH STEINMAN
PROFESSOR JULIET KOSS**

APRIL 20, 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you first and foremost to my phenomenal professors turned thesis readers, Erich Steinman and Bill Anthes. Erich, thank you for instilling in me a new foundation with which to decolonize my mind and the world around me. Being your student has challenged me to ask difficult questions, seek creative solutions, and live more compassionately. Bill, thank you for giving me the opportunity back in Fall of 2016 to be a part of this incredible project; researching for *Defend Sacred Mountains* followed by writing this thesis has transformed my relationship to art history as a discipline and my understanding of what art and artists can achieve as catalysts of change. You both have played a major role in my growth as a person and scholar, and for that I am endlessly grateful.

Thank you to my friends and family for supporting me this past year and always! Mom, thank you for providing me with the many opportunities that led me to Scripps and enabled my accomplishments here—I love you!

Finally, thank you Edgar for your work which disorients, challenges, moves, and humors me. *Defend Sacred Mountains* has shown me the power of resistance, survivance, and love of the land in the face of enduring colonial regimes. To those whose stories of loss and reclamation carry the weight of this thesis, it has been a privilege to follow and write about your processes of decolonization and resurgence. I can only hope that this project bolsters your efforts in some small way.

PREFACE

This thesis takes Edgar Heap of Birds's print series *Defend Sacred Mountains* (2018) as its point of departure, drawing parallels between his decolonial tactics and the activists featured in his work. To do so I examine multiple histories of settler encroachment on sacred Indigenous land across what is today known as the United States, highlighting strategies and frameworks of Native resistance. To evaluate Heap of Birds's role as a decolonial figure, I consider his practice in light of other like-minded Indigenous artists. To say the least, this piece handles very challenging and sensitive events/topics, of which as a non-Native, white woman I am inevitably implicated. Before beginning, I would like to introduce myself and my involvement in this topic, in hopes of establishing trust with my audience.

My name is Charlotte Genia Jones, and I was raised in the traditional territory of the Wappinger people, in what is today known as the Lower Hudson Valley, New York. My mother, Carol Lynn Francolini—of Irish and Italian descent—and my father, Arthur Joseph Jones III—of Irish, Polish, Norwegian, and Welsh descent—were raised in the traditional territory of the Shinnecock people, in what is today known as Eastern Long Island. As a student of the Claremont Colleges, I acknowledge that my education has come at the expense of the Tongva, Serrano, and Gabrieleño peoples who have hosted me during my time at Scripps. This thesis would surely look a lot different without the dialogue and relationships built with some of those very people, of which I am very grateful.

As settlers of European descent, my family and I have invariably benefited from the structures of settler colonialism in both the past and present. It is from reckoning with that reality that I have steered my secondary education along a path of Indigenous studies, both in sociology and art history. My academic interests led me to community engagement with local Native populations and ultimately to the undertaking of this project, which would not have been possible without several semesters' worth of personal decolonizing efforts (which is not to say that I don't still have a long way to go, or that this thesis couldn't be edited ad nauseam).

“THIS SACRED LAND IS OUR SHIELD”: Deploying the Sacred in Indigenous Art and Activism” began as a summer fellowship in which I was researching the colonial histories of four sacred Indigenous mountains in order to provide sociopolitical context to Heap of Birds's (then) upcoming print exhibition at Pitzer College Art Galleries. Before long it became clear that this would be an appropriate choice for a senior thesis topic, meaning this paper is the culmination of a year's worth of research, writing, and personal growth.

My hope for this thesis is that those who read it become invested in the struggles and victories of the tribes protecting the sacred mountains of Bear Butte, Bear's House, San Francisco Peaks, and Mauna Kea, or develop an affinity for one of the profiled artists and their respective missions. Or, at the very least, I hope that readers (and myself) will probe deeper into examining our own participation in settler colonialism: whose lands do we occupy? How are we complicit in the colonial structure's attempted suppression of Indigenous spiritualities and cultures? What role can and should we play as decolonizers?

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INTRODUCTION

Language, and its intersection with memory and history, is a critical component of Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds's artistic practice. For nearly four decades, Heap of Birds (b. 1954, Wichita, Kansas) has wielded words "like weapons" across multiple genres and media, asserting (and re-inserting) an Indigenous presence within contemporary landscapes and challenging dominant historical narratives.¹ The Cheyenne-Arapaho artist has worked nationally as well as internationally with Indigenous communities from Australia to South Africa to Zimbabwe on the shared perspectives of colonization, seeking to articulate "forgotten" colonial histories to settler societies.²

Social-political theorist Alexis Shotwell argues that collective forgetting of historical fact is integral to the settler colonial regime; in fact, a "collective *loss* of memory could perhaps be understood as a theft of memory, a dispossession" that *upholds* settler colonialism and white supremacy.³ There are unequal stakes to memory and forgetting (or remembering), and Shotwell's advocating for decolonizing tactics as an affront to forgetting is very much employed by Heap of Birds.

Defend Sacred Mountains (2018; Figures 10-14) is a blazing-red suite of sixty-four text monoprints that tackles active remembrance, or re-narrative history, head-on. Heap of Birds uses terse and puncturing language to reveal and protest years of environmental

¹ William S. Smith, "Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds in the Studio," *Art in America* (October 2017): 112.

² Phoebe Farris, "Visual Power: 21st Century Native American Artists/Intellectuals," *American Studies* (2005): 256.

³ Alexis Shotwell, "Remembering for the Future: Reckoning with an Unjust Past," *In Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 37.

degradation and capitalist development occurring at four mountains (Bear Butte, South Dakota; Bear's House, Wyoming; San Francisco Peaks, Arizona; and Mauna Kea, Hawai'i) each held sacred by Native Americans. These ongoing acts of colonization affect not only the land's sanctity and environmental purity but Native American and Native Hawaiian sovereignty and cultural continuity. In this creative endeavor, Heap of Birds joins cohorts of activists in the social, legal, and political battles undertaken to protect the sacred landscapes that uphold Indigenous lifeways, knowledge systems, languages, and spiritualities.

In order to address the modes and processes of resistance engaged by both activists and artists in this text, I follow Steinman's lead in his study of Indigenous resistance to American settler colonialism that

a settler colonial framework provides the foundation for bringing into clear view the *ongoing* modes of domination that contemporary indigenous peoples are resisting, for understanding a variety of nationhood based actions as potentially *decolonizing* in nature, and for understanding similarities and differences between these dynamics and the experiences of other groups.⁴

He goes on to provide a nuanced definition of the social formation that is settler colonialism:

Settler colonialism aims to create a new version of the home or metropolitan society in a different land; settler supersession of indigenous nationhood and presence is the underlying goal for settler colonial societies. This requires settlers to displace the indigenous nations and populations rather than, as in "classic" colonialism, coercively control their labor in the process of extracting resources. Thus settler domination is for substitution or elimination rather than for extraction.⁵

As Patrick Wolfe has succinctly stated: "Settler colonialism destroys to replace."⁶

⁴ Erich Steinman, "Decolonization Not Inclusion: Indigenous Resistance to American Settler Colonialism," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2, no. 2 (2016): 221.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 388.

Furthermore, in their foundational piece on settler colonialism and decolonization, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” Tuck and Yang stress the role of land in settler colonial structures from an Indigenous and colonial perspective. They write:

Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and also because the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation. This is why Patrick Wolfe (1999) emphasizes that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event. In the process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property. Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. Made savage.⁷

An understanding of the profound impact disrupting Indigenous relationships with land had and continues to have on cultural vitality/indigeneity is essential to fully appreciating the work of activists and Heap of Birds.

As Indigenous populations have resisted the structures and domination of settler colonialism, their actions have come to be understood as decolonial in nature. As Steinman writes, “Challenging settler colonialism involves advancing possible alternatives to the logic of substitution.”⁸ These alternatives are understood by some scholars to be rather strict. For example, Tuck and Yang argue that “decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone,” because “decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, *all* of the land, and not just symbolically.”⁹ Similarly, Battell Lowman and Barker, in their analysis of the relationship between settlers and First Nations in Canada, describe decolonization as “an intensely

⁷ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 5.

⁸ Steinman, “Decolonization Not Inclusion,” 229.

⁹ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” 7.

political transformative process with the goal of regenerating Indigenous nationhood and place-relationships while dismantling structures of settler colonialism that oppose or seek to eliminate Indigenous peoples from the land.”¹⁰ More than anti-colonial or endless resistance, decolonization is “the act of *becoming something other than colonial*,” (authors’ emphasis).¹¹ Finally, Linda Tuhiwai Smith invokes an exhaustive ridding of the many manifestations of colonial structures, writing that decolonization is a “long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power.”¹²

•

A salient example of decolonial visual activism, *Defend Sacred Mountains* represents a crucial intervention into colonial frameworks, frameworks whose power relies on communal forgetting and denial of a violent history against Indigenous peoples. By reconciling the past and present (a dichotomy enforced by settler society), addressing issues of non-Native encroachment on sacred Indigenous sites, and working with activists to convey their stories, Heap of Birds is in a unique position to reframe colonial narratives that uphold settler colonialism.

In order to theorize on the specific intervention that Heap of Birds makes as a decolonial figure with *Defend Sacred Mountains*, I use the first chapter to locate him on a continuum of other artists, both older and younger, who operate according to similar decolonial frameworks. Together these artists represent the evolution of art as a decolonial,

¹⁰ Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker, *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*, (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2015), 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (London: Zed, 1999), 98.

activist tool, in which generating new spaces of Indigenous visibility and self-determination is an important objective. In the second chapter, I begin to look more closely at the series, providing a formal analysis of the prints in terms of style and content; in order to contextualize the content, I provide overviews of the major events and resistance occurring at each mountain.

In the third chapter, I highlight the decolonial frameworks that Heap of Birds operates under and establish the major themes present in the series. With these frameworks and themes developed, it is possible to see parallels between the dispositions/tactics of the surveyed artists and activists as decolonizers. Finally, I return to the notion of efficacy, highlighting visual and other expressions of sovereignty as a possible quantifier. In closing, I consider the ways in which intercultural communication and collaboration can be utilized to have the greatest decolonial impact; I argue that by working with Indigenous peoples to convey their stories, Heap of Birds increases grassroots visibility while decolonizing viewers and creating multi-dimensional spaces of Indigenous self-determination.

Additionally, throughout the text I seek to convey the ways in which activists and artists share comparable tactics and frameworks, especially Heap of Birds in visualizing *Defend Sacred Mountains* and the grassroots efforts of the Indigenous communities addressed in the series. Heap of Birds's interventions into various levels of settler society occur in tandem with grassroots movements to protect/reclaim sacred landscapes, promote Indigenous ecological ontologies, and address forgotten histories—providing a dynamic contribution to tribal advances towards decolonization and survivance. The Indigenous communities at the forefront of these campaigns to protect ancestral lands share and utilize

the frameworks employed by the artists surveyed here (tailored to their respective traditions and pedagogies), which makes collaboration with someone like Heap of Birds possible.¹³

An important note to make is that this thesis focuses on the efforts of Indigenous peoples as intertribal collaborators, working, for example, with artists of different Nations or activists from neighboring tribes. Unfortunately, I was not able to broach the topic of non-Native to Native alliances, or even the complexities that abound among Indigenous folks within a single tribe. However, it should not be assumed that these alliances or complexities are not present; settlers and Natives have formed powerful, if not complicated, alliances in the name of environmental protection, and within any group of people or culture there will always be philosophical disagreements and fractures. Due to the scope of this project, some overviews regrettably lack the full nuance they deserve.

In the end, it is a collective deployment of (a common notion of) the sacred in different social arenas that makes the collaboration between Heap of Birds and grassroots activists effective. While activists wager their claims to sacred landscapes in court battles and mountaintop sit-ins, Heap of Birds creatively conveys these notions of sanctity to a larger audience. The amplification of Indigenous struggles to reclaim and protect ancestral lands in a colonial institution (and those it may travel to) creates opportunities for new alliances to form and for viewers to engage in decolonial processes. Finally, *Defend Sacred Mountains* is a powerful visual representation of Indigenous resistance and survivance, and wherever the series may travel, a decolonial space of visibility and self-determination will follow.

¹³ These frameworks are, I argue, foundational relationships with the land, sovereignty as an embodied and lived experience, and a commitment to Indigenous survivance or resurgence.

CHAPTER ONE

Defend Sacred Mountains: A Legacy of Colonial Intervention

In his *Defend Sacred Mountains* series (2018) of sixty-four text monoprints confronting the colonial histories of four sacred mountains across the United States (Bear Butte, South Dakota; Bear’s House, Wyoming; San Francisco Peaks, Arizona; and Mauna Kea, Hawai‘i), Edgar Heap of Birds continues a legacy of what Standing Rock Sioux activist and legal scholar Vine Deloria Jr. calls “spatial thinking.”¹⁴ Indigenous communities have a unique and reciprocal relationship with the land in which language, spirituality, storytelling, and history are inextricably tied to communal landscapes.¹⁵ Cosmologies, traditions, and lifeways are intimately connected to and affirmed by what Erich Steinman calls “place-specific multi-species relationships” with the land.¹⁶ Deloria’s concept of spatial thinking thus acknowledges the primacy of Native peoples’ worldviews and ways of being that depend upon relationships with specific places. Grounded in spatial thinking, Native artists like Heap of Birds and others explored in this chapter prioritize foundational relationships to land in their work.

In turn, Jessica L. Horton argues in *Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation* (2017) that this allegiance to spatial thinking—worldviews

¹⁴ Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1972), 66-67.

¹⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, “The Council of Pecans,” In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 17.

¹⁶ Erich Steinman, “Why Was Standing Rock and the NoDAPL Campaign So Historic? Factors Affecting American Indian Participation in Social Movement Collaborations and Coalitions,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2018): 13.

inseparable from the sanctity of the land and events that unfold upon it—motivated the art and activism of a cohort of Native American artists working in the era of the American Indian Movement (AIM).¹⁷ These contemporary artists placed an increased emphasis on exposing colonial regimes' suppression of indigeneity while simultaneously asserting survivance and sovereignty.¹⁸ Though Heap of Birds is not a central figure in Horton's analysis, his commitment to catalyzing active remembrance of settler colonialism throughout his career leading up to and including *Defend Sacred Mountains*—informed by spatial politics centralizing foundational relationships with land—runs parallel to the practices of other AIM generation artists such as George Longfish, Kay WalkingStick, and Rebecca Belmore (slightly younger though also producing critical performance pieces in the 1980s and '90s).

As can be seen particularly in the work of Belmore and Heap of Birds, Indigenous artists collaborated with grassroots activists and local communities in the wake of AIM “on behalf of occupied land,” in an attempt “to maintain and recover relationships with particular places”, especially through an environmental context.¹⁹ Though considering the philosophical influences of AIM helps to ground the work of Heap of Birds and others

¹⁷ Jessica L. Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 59.

¹⁸ Survivance was coined in 1999 by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor, and he defines it as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.” Survivance is embodied through active survival and evolution of Indigenous culture in the postmodern era. The revitalization coupled with active practice and growth of Indigenous ways of being, knowledge systems and culture are celebrated by survivance. It establishes Native communities' agency in positive decolonial advancements. (Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* [Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999], p. vii.)

¹⁹ Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth*, 5, 17.

practicing in that era in their sociopolitical context, it is also salient to consider the work of a younger generation of artists as maintaining and expanding that legacy of collaboration. In the digital age, multidisciplinary collaboration is kept alive in unique ways by thirty-four-year-old artist Demian DinéYazhi', who forges connections between the spatial politics and active remembrance employed by his predecessors and recent trends to broaden the scope of decolonial strategies through art. Like *Heap of Birds*, DinéYazhi' wields a warrior framework and "weaponizes" his art practice to dismantle settler colonialism and honor Indigenous survivance.²⁰ DinéYazhi''s work offers important insights into how a younger generation of Indigenous artists and activists are shaping the decolonial campaign in the twenty-first century.

Before analyzing the colonial intervention that *Heap of Birds* makes with *Defend Sacred Mountains* (which will come in later chapters), I want to consider the visual activism of other Indigenous artists employing similar frameworks. From there, the evolution of decolonial aesthetics and the salience of *Heap of Birds*'s specific intervention can be better understood. I will evaluate the work of all the artists profiled in this chapter through the lens of Jolene Rickard's theory on generating spaces of Indigenous visibility and self-determination.

AIM Era Spatial Thinking

For the purposes of this analysis, the American Indian Movement (which spanned over a decade beginning in 1969) will be considered in the broadest terms to the extent that it radicalized a generation of artists, activists, and intellectuals committed to challenging

²⁰ manuel arturo abreu, "Embodying Survivance," *Art in America* (October 2017): 95.

the colonial structures that hinder Indigenous cultural and political sovereignty, and pushing for a global resurgence of indigeneity.²¹ As Janet Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips succinctly illustrate in their survey of Native North American Art, AIM's multinational "episodes of political activism and confrontation reinforced a sense of shared history and purpose among artists, together with a determination to make art that would serve as a weapon for social and political change."²² Growing international attention within and outside the art community to settler governments' intentional suppression of indigeneity, especially in relation to Native communities' relationships with land, prompted artists to work more explicitly as agents of change. In "Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene," Jessica Horton examines some of the creative and critical responses contemporary Indigenous artists have developed towards environmental injustice in the colonial state. She argues that AIM era artists were especially concerned with exploring "the interdependencies among colonialism, capitalism, and ecological devastation" as it related to the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples.²³

The following artists employ different mediums, from traditional oil and acrylic to performance art, in an effort to visualize spatial thinking and historical remembrance. Placing their work in conversation with Heap of Birds's fosters a dialogue on the historic and ever-developing intervention of Indigenous artists in decolonizing campaigns, in which a shift to include or collaborate with a broader public offers a paradigm for greater

²¹ Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth*, 5, 22.

²² Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 296. The authors share their thinking with Horton.

²³ Jessica L. Horton, "Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene," *Art Journal* 76 (Summer 2017): 51.

decolonial impact.²⁴ While I don't intend to suggest that the individual works selected by each artist are representative of their larger career and efficacy as decolonial figures, I hope that these examples can reveal changes in visual activism as a decolonizing tool in which intercultural collaboration and engagement ultimately offers the strongest colonial intervention.

The Artists

Seneca-Tuscarora artist George Longfish's (b. 1942, Ontario, Canada) *The End of the Innocence* (1991–1992, Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3) critically addresses the intersection of “colonialism, capitalism, and ecological devastation” that Horton conceptualizes. Kate Morris offers a relevant reading of the triptych in her essay, “Picturing Sovereignty,” in which she considers the ways that the unique landscapes of Longfish, Kay WalkingStick, and Edgar Heap of Birds, among others, carry messages of decolonization by challenging the policies of the colonial nation-state.

The End of the Innocence, which spans a horizontal length of twenty-five feet, appears at first haphazard and incongruous, but carries a message of the balancing and restorative force of Native-exercised sovereignty.²⁵ The left panel, titled “Appropriate Goods”, features a late nineteenth century photograph of Crow Nation war chief Joe Medicine Crow seated across a dissected landscape. Between the land and sky, Longfish juxtaposes the destruction of a sacred pine grove for the creation of a golf course with an

²⁴ This shift is directly associated with the postmodern movement relational aesthetics of the 1990s, in which artists sought to be facilitators of human interaction or audience participation. The intent was that collaborators would also have the opportunity to create meaning or social change, rather than artists solely occupying this role.

²⁵ Kate Morris, “Picturing Sovereignty: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art,” In *Painters, Patrons, and Identity: Essays in Native American Art* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 205.

amalgam of morally-charged businesses (“Apache Ski Resort” is an “Appropriate Good”, while “Gambling” is an “Inappropriate Good”) and Indigenous philosophies belittled by commodification (“Self-Determination”; “Spiritual”; “Survivors”). Mirroring Medicine Crow in the right panel, titled “History Repeating Itself”, sits Pawnee leader Pitaresaru; behind him Longfish showcases the atrocities (“Termination”; “Assimilation”; “Acculturation”; “389 Broken Treaties”) North American governments have committed against Native peoples. Thus, both left and right panels confront a legacy of “colonialism, capitalism, and ecological devastation.”

In contrast to its flanking panels, “Owning Your Cultural Information”, the central image, is pictorially balanced, bounding “land” and “warrior information” (culture passed down from ancestors) between “spirituality”. As Morris contends, “the stability of the panel is owed to the recognition, and application, of cultural knowledge.”²⁶ By confronting the collisions of “commercialism, spirituality, and history” via spatial thinking in the flanking panels, Longfish proposes in his central image that cultural agency and sovereignty will enable decolonization of the colonial past and present. By using the warrior information passed down from ancestors, Native peoples will, Longfish has said, be in a position to defend their lands.²⁷

Kate Morris also considers the landscapes of Cherokee artist Kay WalkingStick (b. 1935, Syracuse, NY), who uses the style to assert Indigenous conceptions of time, memory, and spatial thinking while confronting environmental despoliation. In her characteristic landscape-abstraction diptychs, WalkingStick brings two interrelated discourses into

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

dialogue with one another; at play is the representation of present time and memory in the landscape image, while time and memory that spans a continuum from the past to the future is conceived as an abstract or symbolic image.²⁸ Further, WalkingStick revealed that these two representations of time and memory also convey distinct types of knowledge about the earth. As she writes in a 1992 essay, “One [type of knowledge] is visual, immediate, and particular, the other is spiritual, long-term, and nonspecific...”²⁹ Applying this duality to the lived experiences of Native peoples today, WalkingStick pays homage to historical and ongoing issues of physical and spiritual displacement.³⁰

In her 1997 diptych *Venere Alpina* (Figure 2), WalkingStick applies these philosophies of time and memory to a confrontation of environmental degradation.³¹ On the left, the ridge of a mountain is rendered in multiple earth tones; in the right, abstracted panel—in what WalkingStick refers to as an “extension” of the representation image—the steel mesh composition is sliced down the middle, revealing multicolored sequins and glitter. While the gash and its undertones appear anthropomorphic, it also evokes “a legacy of exploitation of the earth’s resources,” and in WalkingStick’s words, “represents the economic urges underlying the rape of our land.”³² *Venere Alpina* subtly addresses a colonial history of land exploitation, one that stems from divergent views of the land and humans’ relationships to it. Implicating time and memory in her images, WalkingStick illustrates that active remembrance of America’s past yields salient understandings of

²⁸ Ibid., 197-198.

²⁹ Kay WalkingStick, “Native American Art in the Postmodern Era,” *Art Journal* 51, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 16.

³⁰ Morris, “Picturing Sovereignty,” 199.

³¹ Ibid., 198.

³² WalkingStick, “Native American Art in the Postmodern Era,” 17.

settler colonialism in the present and future. The spatial politics inherent in *Venere Alpina* ensures that environmental despoliation will not be ignored or misinterpreted.

A third AIM era artist—cited by Jessica Horton in her aforementioned essay, “Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene”—is Rebecca Belmore (b. 1960, Ontario, Canada; Anishinaabe), who draws important connections between Indigenous land claims and traditions, capitalist developments, and ecology.³³ Her 1991 performance piece *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother* (Figures 3.1 and 3.2) was a response to what is now known in Canadian history as the “Oka Crisis.” In the summer of 1990, the Mohawk Nation of Kanesatake (west of Montreal in Southern Quebec) protested the development of a golf course and luxury condominium on sacred burial grounds by erecting road barricades at the development site’s entrance; the Kanesatake’s struggle to maintain their territory prompted violent altercations with the provincial police for eleven weeks. In *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan*, Belmore’s giant wooden megaphone—which she toured around urban, suburban, and rural First Nations communities—acted as a transmitter and amplifier of Indigenous voices ignored by media coverage of the events at Oka.³⁴ As Belmore wrote in descriptions of the performance, she “was particularly interested in locating the Aboriginal voice on the land,” and believed that “asking people to address the land directly was an attempt to hear political protest as poetic action.”³⁵

Belmore’s megaphone, evoking the birch-bark cones used for moose calling in northern Ontario, provided a means by which First Nations peoples could simultaneously

³³ Horton, “Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene,” 58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁵ Rebecca Belmore, “*Speaking to their Mother: About the Exhibition*,” www.rebeccabelmore.com/exhibit/Speaking-to-Their-Mother.html, accessed Nov. 20, 2017.

address the Canadian government and honor sustained relationships with sacred land. Engaging in the traditions of Indigenous oratory practices, those who employed their voices in the megaphone implicated the land and other-than-human entities into a dialogue on the structures of the modern nation-state.³⁶ Participants' conversations with the urban or rural landscape operated from a shared notion of First Nations land claims and environmental knowledge, enabling activists to address Canada's colonial and capitalist regimes responsible for commercial development and exploitation of sacred landscapes such as that at Oka.³⁷ *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan* initiated a dialogue between First Nations, the Canadian government, and the land mass known as Canada in which the spatial politics of contested landscapes and the impact of colonial legacies on the environment and Indigenous communities was confronted. Like *Heap of Birds*, Belmore's use of Anishinaabe language in the title addresses the suppression of Indigenous languages and articulates a fundamental relationship with the land. In effect, Belmore joins a cohort of Indigenous artists in the Americas facilitating decolonial discourse and environmental activism reliant on active remembrance of settler colonialism.

Decolonizing in the New Millennium

Before exploring the interconnections between *Heap of Birds*'s wider career, the work of other artists of his generation, and *Defend Sacred Mountains*, it is pertinent to consider the practice of a younger artist who represents the implementation of AIM era philosophies in contemporary circumstances. The art and activism of Diné (Navajo) artist

³⁶ Horton, "Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene," 58.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Demian DinéYazhi' (b. 1983, Gallup, NM) provides insights into how multidisciplinary frameworks (art-making, social engagement, Indigenous knowledge systems, niche and online communities, spatial thinking, and historical remembrance) are being integrated to reach wider audiences and enact broad social change by millennial-aged political agitators/artists. DinéYazhi''s far-reaching decolonial campaign is paradigmatic of the activist role many young people can take on in the digital world today, and therefore is suggestive of the future of this ever-evolving discourse.

In his essay for the October 2017 *Art in America* issue on contemporary Indigenous art, fellow artist and writer maneul arturo abreu celebrates DinéYazhi''s "DIY spirit" employed in the artist's multidisciplinary activist career. DinéYazhi''s motley practice "encompasses research, community organizing, print publication, image and video production, poetry, merchandise, and curatorial projects."³⁸ The recurring theme throughout these varied projects is an explicit confrontation of settler colonialism and a championing of Indigenous survivance. Coined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor, survivance is "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry."³⁹ Celebrating the revitalization of Indigenous ways of being, knowledge systems and culture, the concept of survivance establishes Native communities' agency in positive decolonial advancements. Through multiple platforms and mediums,

³⁸ abreu, "Embodying Survivance," 92.

³⁹ Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. vii.

“DinéYazhi’ strives to honor and embody the concept of survivance...make space for Native healing and urge non-Indigenous people to decolonize.”⁴⁰

One such initiative is Radical Indigenous Survivance and Empowerment (R.I.S.E.), which engages the public through arts festivals, a poetry zine called *Survivance: Indigenous Poesis*, and a Tumblr site (burymyart.tumblr.com) circulating politically-charged, provocative graphics and images tied to decolonization. R.I.S.E. embodies a commitment to the “teaching, dissemination, and evolution of Indigenous art and culture”—a commitment that encourages Indigenous survivance and, by extension, challenges/subverts colonial structures (capitalist development, land dispossession) that depend on the subordination of indigeneity. The product of one of DinéYazhi’s local interventions into a settler institution, *Make Native America Great Again* (2016, Figure 4) is a repurposed, topographic “Indian Reservation” map designed by the federal government over which the artists printed the words “Make Native America Great Again” in letterpress. At an “alternative identities workshop” for LGBTQ youth hosted by the Portland Art Museum, DinéYazhi’ utilized a shared political perspective to coalition-build among different groups allied against a common oppressor. *Make Native America Great Again* brings the past into the present by utilizing the temporality of the landscape. Represented by the repurposed map is a colonial history of affronts to Indigenous homelands; the letterpress overlay of a spin on Donald Trump’s campaign slogan acts as a reversal to conservative American patriotism and romanticized notions of the past. *Make Native America Great Again* reiterates that settler colonialism is far from over, and current

⁴⁰ abreu, “Embodying Survivance,” 92.

sociopolitical realities reflect long-standing legacies of suppressed indigeneity and environmental degradation.

In a more pointed materialization of “the impact of environmental injustice against Native people in light of the sacred relationship with ancestral land,” DinéYazhi’ simultaneously alludes to a history of Indigenous resistance, specifically in using “language as a weapon.”⁴¹ For a 2016 collaboration with photographer Kali Spitzer at the Portland Art Museum’s Center for Contemporary Native Art, DinéYazhi’ presented two vitrines as single-material sculptures—one filled with red dirt and the other with coal—extracted from the Navajo reservation. The titles, *KA-HA-TENI KAY-YAH—Native (Native) Land (Land)*—and *KAY-YAH CAH-DA-KHI TA-GAID AH-CHANH—Land (Land) Wound (Wound) Without (Without) Self Defense (Protect)*—(Figure 5), are drawn from the Navajo Code Talker Dictionary, a code-within-a-code system used during World War II to prevent Axis forces from deciphering Allies messages; they also honor the artist’s maternal grandfather who served as a Navajo Code Talker during WWII. The literal translation of the Navajo word is followed by the “military vocabulary” in parenthesis; thus DinéYazhi’'s vitrine of lush soil is simply “Native Land”, while the vitrine of lacquered coal imparts a darker message: “Land Wound Without Self Defense”. A wall text accompanying the exhibition stated:

It is estimated that 7.8 million tons of coal is extracted each year by Peabody Western Coal Company on the ancestral lands of the Diné (Navajo). Strip mining and extracting the coal provides jobs for the Diné, electricity for the Southwest, but it also plays a significant role in the perpetuation of displacement/relocation, and health and environmental genocide.⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴² Demian DinéYazhi’, “Make Native America Great Again,” *The Offing*, May 27, 2017. accessed November 21, 2017, <https://theoffingmag.com/art/make-native-america-great/>.

KA-HA-TENI KAY-YAH and *KAY-YAH CAH-DA-KHI TA-GAID AH-CHANH* make a double-edged commentary on relations between the nation-state and sovereign Indigenous Nations. First, DinéYazhi' illuminates the power of language as a weapon; while the Navajo language was ironically deployed to dispossess and fight others in WWII, it is reclaimed by the artist in his condemnation of environmental injustice. This reclamation of language relates to the second point—the implications of “approaching aesthetics as a battlefield,” that is, urgently confronting the effect of federal policies and commercial development on Native peoples and the land.⁴³ Despite (or in spite of) such realities, DinéYazhi' and Spitzer prioritize the survivance and sovereignty of Native people in the exhibition text, writing: “We have traded firearms, atomic bombs, & disease for instruments of creation & resistance in the relentless battle of survival...Through art we construct various routes back home after the battle.”⁴⁴ This metaphor for using art and visual activism as a tool for healing and Indigenous resurgence aptly lends itself to the practices of the other artists, including Heap of Birds, profiled in this chapter.

DinéYazhi' is part of a continuum of artists reckoning with historical injustices against Indigenous peoples and cultures, their ancestral lands, and the environment. As an activist, his reach is widespread in community projects, research, internet presence, and more. The ability afforded by the digital age to reach wider audiences enables greater mobilization against structures of settler colonialism, and it is this increased ability of the artist to act as mobilizer (outside of traditional academic/artist circles) that sets DinéYazhi' and others of his generation apart. While his practice is informed by his predecessors and

⁴³ abreu, “Embodying Survivance,” 94.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

cultural, warrior knowledge, DinéYazhi's fluency in the language and interconnectedness of the internet age has important implications for the future of concrete decolonial action.

Heap of Birds: Rectifying Historical Amnesia

Along with George Longfish, Kay WalkingStick, Rebecca Belmore, Demian DinéYazhi', and many others, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (b. 1954, Wichita, Kansas; Cheyenne-Arapaho) addresses a colonial history and present unified by the land's role as common denominator. In part catalyzed by the American Indian Movement, Heap of Birds has founded a career informed by spatial politics, measures for sovereignty, and honoring survivance. W. Jackson Rushing III, in his overview of Heap of Birds's work at midcareer, adds a postmodern perspective to Heap of Birds's influences and objectives. He writes that the artist's conceptual approach is largely rooted in the postmodern impulse of the 1980s that sought "to investigate the complex relationship among language, 'reality', and power."⁴⁵ Expanding upon Rushing's thesis, Bill Anthes—in the first book-length study of Heap of Birds's career—proposes that the artist's grounding in Cheyenne epistemology is a prominent way through which he confronts colonial narratives and "weaponizes" his practice for community protection.⁴⁶ Viewing Heap of Birds's work through a decolonial and postmodern lens enables an understanding of the artist's commitment to exposing colonial power structures and celebrating Indigenous presence/survivance in the process. An overview of several phases in Heap of Birds's

⁴⁵ W. Jackson Rushing III, "'In Our Language': The Art of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds," *Third Text* 19, no. 4 (2005): 369.

⁴⁶ Bill Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2015): 21.

career illustrates how he has been in conversation with the practices of his contemporaries, as well as how *Defend Sacred Mountains* advances a decades-long discourse on historical remembrance, Indigenous sovereignty, and ecological preservation.

Neuf

When Heap of Birds and his wife moved back home to the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation west of Oklahoma City in 1980, he began painting his three decade-long *Neuf* series (Figures 6.1 and 6.2) —feather-like abstractions rendered in bold colors that evoke elements of nature. The sense of rhythm that flows across each set of four canvases may suggest changing seasons, or, as the series' title means 'four times' in the Cheyenne language, may resonate with deeper aspects of Indigenous culture such as the four sacred colors or four directions.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, these abstracted landscapes are encoded with an Indigenous philosophy of place and time, in which “there are no edges, no sure footing, no borders.”⁴⁸ By extension, this sense of place is bound by permanent landscapes to the history that unfolded upon it, to which Heap of Birds explains, “This [visual] language, while not tied to specific icons or symbols, speaks of both our Native past and the present in an open, original, and creative manner.”⁴⁹ Like the landscapes of Longfish and WalkingStick, the *Neuf* series confronts a colonial legacy and establishes Indigenous resistance by nature of its connection to specific places.

Further, these unconventional landscapes (in their lacking a horizon, as well as the invitational image characteristic of European landscape painting⁵⁰) established Heap of

⁴⁷ Morris, “Picturing Sovereignty,” 201.

⁴⁸ Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, 45.

⁴⁹ Rushing III, “In Our Language,” 369.

⁵⁰ Morris, “Picturing Sovereignty,” 195.

Birds's visual or "painting language".⁵¹ This "language" is informed by Indigenous relationships with the land—a reciprocal dynamic based on spiritual and physiological immersion in one's environment, which Native American Studies theorist Hertha D. Sweet Wong argues is "portable".⁵² This notion of connection to the land as portable is significant because Heap of Birds is *more* than rooted in his own place; he has produced his *Neuf* paintings for multiple cities nationally and internationally.⁵³ Through the *Neuf* series, Heap of Birds creates environments capable of crossing cultural boundaries; they are representative of Indigenous relationships to the land—the pulsing abstractions, Jackson Rushing writes, "offer a positive notion of movement and change which always holds hope".⁵⁴ Furthermore, the creation of an aesthetic which can be adapted to new locations mirrors his strategy in the *Native Hosts* series.

Native Hosts

Realized for the first time in 1988, the *Native Hosts* series (Figures 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3) represents a multi-perspective intervention into settler society. Commissioned by the Public Art Fund to be installed in Lower Manhattan's City Hall Park, the seminal *Native Hosts* consisted of six, commercially-printed aluminum panels asserting the presence of tribes with traditional ties to the New York area. They did so in a way that unsettles and displaces the settler, as the signs read: NEW YORK (spelled backwards)/TODAY YOUR HOST/IS/SHINNECOCK (or Mohawk, Tuscarora, etc.) The reversal of the settler place name is significant, for it "calls into question the 'reality', the legitimacy of New York," at

⁵¹ Rushing III, "In Our Language," 368.

⁵² Hertha D. Sweet Wong, "Native American Visual Autobiography: Figuring Place, Subjectivity, and History," *The Iowa Review* 30, no. 3 (2000/2001): 147.

⁵³ Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, 46.

⁵⁴ Rushing III, "In Our Language," 368.

the same time that it alerts viewers to the sovereign Nations that have literally been erased from historical records, but continuously play host to settler society.⁵⁵ Further, Heap of Birds's use of language to re-assert tribal presence and sovereignty acts as a counterpoint to the legacy of violence (often employed through language, as well as federal policies prohibiting the use of Indigenous languages) waged against Native peoples throughout colonial history.⁵⁶

Similar to Belmore's engagement with multiple First Nations communities using the power of relationships to land to dismantle colonial structures, Heap of Birds works directly with local Native communities when conceptualizing a *Native Hosts* installation. Collaborating with local stakeholders to choose the names (both tribal and settler) recognized and the location of the authoritative signposts, Heap of Birds strives to ground the series in the tribal voices of local communities.⁵⁷ *Native Hosts* makes visible the "hidden histories of displacement, of ongoing claims to territory, of sovereignty lost, stolen, reclaimed, and regained" through an Indigenous perspective—tribal languages, active remembrance, a reframing of colonial narratives—that is all the while tied to place and land.⁵⁸ This multi-tiered, decolonial approach is one that Heap of Birds shares with like-minded contemporaries and continues to evolve in later series.

Wall Lyrics & Monoprints

In the mid-1980s, Heap of Birds developed a new style of expressive, hand-drawn lettering conveying lyric prose on rectangular sheets of rag paper. Rendered in vigorously

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁵⁶ Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, 49.

⁵⁷ Smith, "Edgar Heap of Birds in the Studio," 114.

⁵⁸ Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, 50.

scrawled pastel, the short phrases are “coded, stylized, and abstracted,” and satisfy Heap of Birds’s affinity for “word play and ambiguity.”⁵⁹ One such series made in the wall lyrics style from 2009—*Crosses for Diné/Tepoztlan* (Figures 8.1 and 8.2)—organizes the rectangular sheets of paper into the form of the missionary cross carried by Spanish missionaries in the Americas. In these testimonials to imperial destruction and conquest of the Tlahaica Nation in present-day Morelos, Mexico, and the Navajo in present-day Arizona, Heap of Birds nonetheless asserts the survivance and endurance of both peoples into the present. The phrases of resistance: “DINÉ CLIMB HIGH” (*Cross for Diné*) and “FEATHERS CONQUER FRIARS” (*Cross for Tepoztlan*) illuminate incredible resilience despite the genocidal campaigns wielded by the Spanish in the name of Christendom.⁶⁰ Again, Heap of Birds rectifies a colonial history that has been largely ignored and/or misremembered; by exposing the histories of conquest enacted by Spanish missionaries, *Crosses for Diné/Tepoztlan* implicates a global, imperialist force into the decolonizing discourse.

From Heap of Birds’s wall lyrics style evolved his monoprints series in 2004, in which the artist began to confront more explicitly “the history of Native American genocide and images of horrific violence.”⁶¹ Maintaining his style of succinct, poetic, and emotionally raw phrases from the wall lyrics, Heap of Birds utilizes the monoprint series to interrogate, reflect, incriminate, and express grief and joy. He unifies past and present and imagines a decolonized future, as in “DO NOT WAIT FOR A BETTER AGE” (Figure 9). At this point in his career, Heap of Birds is consolidating, reflecting upon, and returning

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

to the many themes and people he has worked with, evident in his recycling of previously-used phrases (which the afore-mentioned print is an example of).⁶² His allegiance to re-narrative history informed by spatial politics and survivance critically connects his work and activism to that of his contemporaries, and, as subsequent chapters of this thesis will argue, intimately ties him to those on the frontlines of protecting sacred landscapes and thus, indigeneity.

Generating Spaces of Visibility

Tuscarora artist and scholar Jolene Rickard, in an essay on Indigenous visibility and continuity prepared for the 2005 Venice symposium *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity*, writes about the power of reimagining an “Indigenous space” through the arts.⁶³ Rickard contends that while artists of the 1990s “deconstructed a colonial space,” Indigenous artists in the new millennium must focus on communicating with fellow Native peoples and together work towards conceptualizing and generating spaces of visibility and self-determination.⁶⁴ She argues that the way in which “indigenous artists address their communities and other indigenous people...may well be the most important,” also writing that “we need to make art for each other...we need to articulate local knowledge globally...we indigenous people need to recognize our success.”⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid., 115.

⁶³ Jolene Rickard, “The Local and the Global,” In *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2006), 64.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 64-65.

I believe that this is a salient philosophy from which to evaluate the practices of the surveyed artists as agents of colonial intervention. Compared to works such as Longfish's *The End of the Innocence* and WalkingStick's *Venere Alpina* (which certainly celebrate indigeneity and imagine a decolonized future), Belmore's *Ayumee-aawach Oomamomowan: Speaking to their Mother*, DinéYazhi's *Make Native America Great Again*, and Heap of Birds's many collaborative pieces better achieve Rickard's directive. For instance, Longfish and WalkingStick both construct a visual representation of sovereignty, survivance, and re-narrative history in their visual art, but lack the interaction with an Indigenous public that opens up new decolonial spaces.

Belmore, with her interactive performance piece *Ayumee-aawach Oomamomowan: Speaking to their Mother*, engages participants in a multi-species, intercultural dialogue that gets to the heart of generating visibility and decolonizing landscapes through collaboration. As an interdisciplinary artist-activist working across multiple platforms, Demian DinéYazhi is another figure redefining what it means to be a critically engaged artist and facilitating opportunities for youth and other activists to become involved in decolonial work, especially with his workshop to create *Make Native America Great Again*. Heap of Birds, who crosses cultural boundaries in most of his pieces to "articulate local knowledge globally," is an exciting example of an artist fulfilling Rickard's philosophy.⁶⁶ Of course, these singular works cannot be representative of each of these artists' wider careers, but are rather meant to highlight different degrees of decolonial action in light of my analysis of *Defend Sacred Mountains*.

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⁶⁶ Ibid., 64.

The stock of contemporary North American Indigenous artists and their collective vision is encouraging of art's efficacy in the sovereignty movement. Locating Heap of Birds along a continuum of artists—George Longfish, Kay WalkingStick, Rebecca Belmore, and Demian DinéYazhi'—concerned with decolonizing landscapes and history, promoting environmental justice, and honoring Indigenous survivance illustrates the development of art as an activist and decolonial tool. This political marriage (including Heap of Birds's support for grassroots activists) and the implications it has on decolonial processes will be further developed in the ensuing analysis of *Defend Sacred Mountains*.

The artists surveyed in this chapter increasingly achieve Rickard's philosophy, and it is in that spirit that we turn to Heap of Birds's efforts to use visual activism as a tool to enhance Indigenous visibility and promote self-determination. In order to evaluate Heap of Birds's role as a decolonial actor, I will provide sociopolitical context for his text monoprints. This includes the legal and political work and other forms of direct action taken by several Northern Plains tribes on behalf of Bear Butte, South Dakota and Bear's House, Wyoming; the Hopi, Navajo, and a dozen other Southwestern tribes on behalf of San Francisco Peaks, Arizona; and Native Hawaiians on behalf of Mauna Kea, Hawai'i. These grassroots endeavors and the prints illuminating them by Heap of Birds will be addressed as complementary tactics in a greater decolonial campaign.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction to the Series

Edgar Heap of Birds begins each new project or art piece with a memorial acknowledgement. A Southern Cheyenne tradition, the memorial song honors those who have died as a commencement to social gatherings.⁶⁷ The memorial song facilitates collective healing and reckoning with historic acts of violence. Heap of Birds has extended this ritual to his art practice, especially when working with a new community and seeking to understand the place. On this he says in a 2017 interview for *Art in America*, “Sometimes I’ll come to a certain location and find that no one has sung the memorial song yet. No one’s really acknowledged the loss...Whenever I come to a new place, I try to understand the memorial aspect first, and then we go on and do formal experiments...or whatever else typifies contemporary art...I [see] it as my mission to have that song sung.”⁶⁸

At its heart, Heap of Birds’s *Defend Sacred Mountains* series (2018) memorializes an ongoing history of ecological and cultural violence at four sacred Indigenous mountains. Bear Butte, South Dakota; Bear’s House, Wyoming; San Francisco Peaks, Arizona; and Mauna Kea, Hawai‘i have each been under unique forms of ecological and cultural siege for varying lengths of their colonial histories. However, his text prints are more than somber memorials of the cultural contempt endured by Native Americans. By (what Heap of Birds calls) “resetting history,” his words incite active remembrance, illuminating a dichotomy between settlers/capitalist development and indigeneity/Indigenous ecological

⁶⁷ Smith, “Edgar Heap of Birds in the Studio,” 116-117.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

ontologies.⁶⁹ In her book on ecological consciousness and Indigenous science, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer hauntingly describes this disconnect and alludes to the power of land as a decolonial framework:

In the face of such loss, one thing our people could not surrender was the meaning of land. In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold. These are the meanings people took with them when they were forced from their ancient homelands to new places. Whether it was their homeland or the new land forced upon them, land held in common gave people strength; it gave them something to fight for. And so—in the eyes of the federal government—that belief was a threat.⁷⁰

This place-based, multi-species relationship to land that Kimmerer describes is an essential component of Indigenous identities and sovereignty. A threat to settler colonialism's reliance on land theft, this notion of land is also a primary decolonial framework and thus a double-edged sword.

Furthermore, both *Heap of Birds* as an artist-activist and the tribal nations signified in his prints exemplify decolonizing action in response to myriad manifestations of colonial forms of domination.⁷¹ The series' message of sovereignty and promotion of Indigenous ecologies or spatial thinking as it relates to survivance has implications for disrupting colonial frameworks. Jessica Horton's description in "Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene" of what Native North American artists have accomplished in their creative

⁶⁹ Smith, "Edgar Heap of Birds in the Studio," 112.

⁷⁰ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 17.

⁷¹ Table 2 ("North American Settler Colonialism and Contemporary Indigenous Resistance: Nonpolity Domination and Decolonization," 233-234) in Steinman's "Decolonization Not Inclusion: Indigenous Resistance to American Settler Colonialism," (2016) details the various theoretical colonial forms of domination with concrete manifestations and illustrations of decolonizing action.

responses to ecological devastation is fitting to consider during the following analysis of *Defend Sacred Mountains*. She argues that:

Some of the most insightful recent projects by Native North American artists insist on a historical approach to the altered earth that exposes continuities with earlier imperialist projects. At the same time, they register the local, intimate and embodied impacts of contemporary resource exploitation. Interwoven with critiques of the interdependencies between corporate and colonial violence, they creatively repurpose Indigenous environmental knowledge to the ends of survival.⁷²

Throughout the series' sixty-four monoprints, Heap of Birds weaves history lessons, local knowledge and value systems, condemnations of colonial-capitalist regimes/developments, and the impact of settler colonialism on those who claim these sites as sacred landscapes. Heap of Birds challenges viewers to consider their positionality in respect to the prints' content, works to decolonize landscapes and history, and promotes Indigenous ecological ontologies (intricately connected to sovereignty and survivance). Despite the intensity and urgency of Heap of Birds's message, the tone of survivance and resistance does not go unnoticed. Phrases such as "WE ARE LAND LAND IS US" from *Mauna Kea* and "BEARS LODGE NOT FOR THE EMPIRE" from *Bear's House* convey the resistance of those at the frontlines of legal and political action to protect these mountains.

Formal Considerations

In a recent exhibition (January—March 2018) at Pitzer College Art Galleries entitled *Defend Sacred Mountains* (Figure 10), Heap of Birds illuminates issues of insensitive development, non-Native encroachment, and environmental despoliation at four sacred Indigenous sites across the United States. His text monoprints passionately and

⁷² Horton, "Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene," 60.

simultaneously express frustration and reverence, covertly revealing the hypocrisies and injustices occurring on traditionally sacred land.

Defend Sacred Mountains consists of a suite of sixty-four text monoprints divided into four subsets according to the four mountains chosen by Heap of Birds (Figures 11, 12, 13, and 14).⁷³ In each subset of the larger piece, two rows of eight prints are aligned horizontally, stretching ten feet wide and just over three and a half feet tall. Heap of Birds's signature monoprint style is the ideal medium for an explicit confrontation of colonial violence, combining terse phrases that appear with varying translucency against the demanding red ink. On the color choice, Heap of Birds seeks to mimic the appearance of "a crime scene when blood pools up on a flat surface," as well as to allude to the racism and violence associated with the term 'redskin'.⁷⁴

The artist created the series between Santa Fe, New Mexico's Fourth Dimension Fine Art Studio, and Santa Monica, California's Josephine Press. The monoprints are made by painting each phrase in reverse on a plexiglass plate in oils of various grades; this cuts the ink in different ways, causing the messages to speak in different volumes across the set as some words appear bolder and others more transparent. Working with a master printer, Heap of Birds pulls a single monochrome image from each original, meaning each non-

⁷³ Heap of Birds often incorporates multiples of four elements in his work. On his reasoning for employing another quad in *Defend Sacred Mountains*, he cites the four cardinal directions, though likely just as relevant is the influence of the philosophy and iconography of the Earth Renewal ceremony. An annual event in the Cheyenne and Plains spiritual traditions, the Earth Renewal emphasizes "the individual's responsibility to the community, land, and universe," and Heap of Birds has assumed significant responsibilities within the event. These themes can be located throughout all of his work and certainly in *Defend Sacred Mountains* (Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, 19).

⁷⁴ Smith, "Edgar Heap of Birds in the Studio," 114. Also in-class communications with the artist, January 2018.

editioned print is unique from the next. In this series, Heap of Birds has limited each phrase to six lines of text; his words are tirelessly selected to carry the maximum effect of his message.⁷⁵ Words are also wielded playfully and ironically, allowing different readings of the prints (both among viewers and as a returning viewer), that instill *Defend Sacred Mountains* with an added dynamism.

Prior to putting ink to plexiglass (though sometimes intertwined with Galaxy Note8 phrase-building), however, is Heap of Birds's personal relationship-building with those communities who inspire his work. His research process for the historically- and culturally-rich series is based in his own personal experiences, connections to, and investment in the issues he chronicles.⁷⁶ *Defend Sacred Mountains* evolved out of a trip to Hawai'i where Heap of Birds would be participating in the Hawai'i National Parks' 2016 Centennial Juried Exhibition at the Maui Arts and Cultural Center. Meeting with Native Hawaiian poets who had a spiritual stake in the preservation of the dormant volcano on Hawai'i's Big Island, Heap of Birds later created his *Mauna Kea* set with his ties to Hawai'i providing the foundational aspect of the prints' poignancy and urgent message.⁷⁷

His knowledge on the other three sites also stems from experiences and relationships with those who hold them sacred and have fought for their protection, including a Navajo family member connected with San Francisco Peaks, personal visits to Bear's House, and the Cheyenne priest Vernon Bull Coming—his spiritual instructor—

⁷⁵ Heap of Birds will mention that he relies on his Samsung Galaxy Note8 for on-the-go note taking when a new word combination or phrasing occurs to him. Much of his creation process for a new piece like *Defend Sacred Mountains* occurs throughout and is inspired by events in his everyday life.

⁷⁶ Based off of in-class communications with the artist, January 2018.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

who leads spiritual retreats at Bear Butte.⁷⁸ I argue later that this collaboration and relationship-building is paramount to the decolonial impact that Heap of Birds is able to achieve. Significantly, Heap of Birds's art is derived from a fundamental place of activism and decolonial purpose that is tied to his ceremonial role as protector in the Cheyenne Warrior Society. As he tells William S. Smith for *Art in America*: "I see protecting Indigenous people around the world as a big part of my job as an artist."⁷⁹

Contextualizing the Prints: About the Mountains

The controversies at Bear Butte, Bear's House, San Francisco Peaks, and Mauna Kea that Heap of Birds addresses in his work all stem from contested notions of the land's proper use; this is the fundamental dichotomy between Western/capitalist and Indigenous ecological ontologies that the artist reveals.⁸⁰ Because the mountains exist within state parks and as national monuments, providing equal access to the public has historically been emphasized over protecting the full expression of Native belief systems.⁸¹ Equally problematic is that capitalist developments such as winter recreation, oil rigs, and

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Smith, "Edgar Heap of Birds in the Studio," 113.

⁸⁰ As Battell Lowman and Barker explain in their book *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*, what "prevents simple political or economic solutions to settler colonial dispossession and displacement" is the separation of ontology and epistemology regarding place and land in non-Indigenous ways of thinking, that is, the separation of ways of thinking about the land and the experience of being on the land. On the other hand, "in Indigenous traditions, ontology and epistemology are inseparable. The way of thinking about the land and the experience of relating to it are essentially the same." They argue that this dichotomy is the root of Indigenous and Settler political conflicts as well as Indigenous struggles for sovereignty (p.49, "It's Always All About the Land" in *Settler*).

⁸¹ George Linge, "Ensuring the Full Freedom of Religion on Public Lands: Devils Tower and the Protection of Indian Sacred Sites," *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review* (1999-2000): 310.

astrological technologies have been prioritized at the expense of the sanctity of these sites. Considering the histories of settler encroachment and environmental desecration at these sacred landscapes reveals the overwhelming failure of the United States political system to equally protect or uphold the rights of its original inhabitants. Despite this well-known reality, activists continue to defend these sacred mountains and, by extension, their cultural survivance and vitality. Furthermore, these accounts facilitate a historically-informed reading of *Defend Sacred Mountains* that opens an avenue for thinking critically about Indigenous artists' roles in decolonial processes. By illuminating the current and historical structures under which artists like Heap of Birds operate, it is possible to further interrogate the specific intervention that Native artists make as decolonizing agents alongside grassroots activists.

Bear Butte, South Dakota

Located eight miles northeast of the Black Hills and the small city of Sturgis, Bear Butte is a 4,422-foot land mass of volcanic formation that has been revered as a sacred site to multiple Northern and Great Plains tribes for thousands of years.⁸² As a sacred landscape, Bear Butte is central to the traditional knowledge systems and spiritualities of several neighboring tribal Nations, whom Heap of Birds acknowledges in one print: "CHEYENNE KIOWA LAKOTA ARIKARA HIDATSA MANDAN."⁸³ A series of treaties (later ruled illegal in 1980) exchanged between the Sioux people and colonial settlers in the mid-nineteenth century ultimately ceded the entirety of the Black Hills and

⁸² Kari Forbes-Boyte, "Litigation, Mitigation, and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act: The Bear Butte Example", *Great Plains Quarterly* (1999): 25.

⁸³ Linea Sundstrom, "Mirror of heaven: cross-cultural transference of the sacred geography of the Black Hills", *World Archaeology* (1996): 182.

the sacred landscapes located within to the United States government.⁸⁴ The Sioux tribes were removed to reservations and prohibited from visiting Bear Butte or publicly performing ceremonies or other forms of spirituality. It wasn't until 1939 that a large delegation of Cheyenne people was allowed to visit the site.

In 1965, Bear Butte was dedicated as a state park and registered as a National Natural Landmark, bringing the sacred land under the jurisdiction of the National Parks Service (NPS) and, more locally, the South Dakota Fish Game and Parks Department. This department is responsible for implementing a multiple-use policy within the state park as a means for accommodating all visitors to Bear Butte; however, this policy prevents land managers from truly protecting Indigenous religious freedom as hiking trails and observation platforms encircling ceremonial grounds facilitate a problematic viewing of spiritual ceremonies by non-Native recreational visitors.⁸⁵

The contentions over the multiple-use policy came to a head in 1982 when the Lakota and Cheyenne sought a declaration of their right to unrestricted and uninterrupted religious use of Bear Butte against the state of South Dakota. The court defended the multiple-use policy in place, setting a judicial precedent for Native peoples to prove the centrality and indispensability of sacred sites to their belief systems.⁸⁶ Despite the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) just four years earlier, the case revealed the ineffectiveness of the new legislation to protect Indigenous rights and sacred

⁸⁴ Charles Rambow, *Bear Butte: Journeys to the Sacred Mountain* (South Dakota: Pine Hills Press, 2004), 38.

⁸⁵ Forbes-Boyte, "Litigation, Mitigation", 29.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

places, especially on public land.⁸⁷ In the print “FISH GAME AND PARKS DEPT DENY,” Heap of Birds addresses the policies upheld by the South Dakota Parks Department which deny local tribes a full and unrestricted expression of their spiritualities.

Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, local tribes have combatted increasing development in and around Bear Butte, especially the Bear Butte Water Pipeline, oil field and rigs constructed by Nakota Energy LLC, and the Sturgis Buffalo Chip Shooting Complex (all eventually developed). Also, strongly opposed by those who hold Bear Butte sacred is the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally—“10 Days/Nights of Riding, Food, and Music”—which brings hundreds of thousands of bikers to the nearby city of Sturgis each August. Those engaging in spiritual ceremonies just eight miles away view the event and its culture as deeply disruptive to the sanctity of the site. In response to the Rally’s popularity, an enormous campground and saloon—advertised as “The World’s Largest Biker Bar”—was developed in 2006 just 2.5 miles from the base of the sacred mountain. Heap of Birds tackles these disappointing commercial encroachments in several prints: “24 OIL WELLS DRILL POLLUTE PRAYERS,” “GUN RANGE LIQUOR LICENSE STURGIS SHAME,” and “MOTOR CYCLE RALLY HOLY BIKER BARS.”

Since the 1970s, several Sioux tribes have acquired thousands of acres of land surrounding the Butte, overturning a large settlement offer for the illegal compensation of the Black Hills in the belief that full return of the Black Hills (and the two major sacred sites within) is the only true compensation for the violation.⁸⁸ The consortium of Native

⁸⁷ Kari Forbes-Boyte, “Respecting Sacred Perceptions: The Lakotas, Bear Butte, and Land-Management Strategies”, *The Public Historian* (1996): 108.

⁸⁸ Edward Lazarus, “SAME BLACK HILLS, MORE WHITE JUSTICE: Senator Daschle's Provision Granting Barrick Gold Company Immunity from Liability,”

tribes purchasing more of the surrounding land every few years serves a literal as well as symbolic reclaiming of the land; because land-based knowledge and ways of being are integral to the vitality of Indigenous cultures, land possession enables Native peoples to sustain their traditions and languages while increasing resistance and survivance.⁸⁹

Bear's House, Wyoming

A second major site of spiritual significance located in the Black Hills of northeastern Wyoming is Bear's House—a columnar-structured formation of igneous rock sacred to over twenty Great Plains tribes, including the Lakota, Shoshone, Kiowa, Crow, and Cheyenne.⁹⁰ Bear's House is an important pilgrimage site for the Sioux peoples and is considered paramount to the tribes' self-determination and health as a nation. Worshippers to Bear's House gain sacred knowledge that enables preservation of traditional culture and way of life.⁹¹ Heap of Birds acknowledges the site's sanctity and spiritual significance in multiple prints, including, "1200 FEET ABOVE SEND FASTING PRAYERS" and "A PLACE TO PRAY FOR PEACE." The politics of dispossession concerning Bear's House are tied up in the confiscation of the Black Hills and removal of the Sioux tribes to reservations in 1889 (as discussed above).⁹²

In 1906, Theodore Roosevelt designated Bear's House the first national monument; though legally called Devil's Tower National Monument, many Native peoples find this

FindLaw, Jan. 24, 2002, <http://supreme.findlaw.com/legal-commentary/same-black-hills-more-white-justice.html>.

⁸⁹ Jim Robbins, "For Sacred Indian Site, New Neighbors are Far from Welcome," *New York Times*, August 4, 2006, http://www.sacredland.org/PDFs/Bear_Butte_Bikers.pdf.

⁹⁰ Andrew Gulliford, *Sacred Objects and Sacred Places: Preserving Tribal Traditions* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 162.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Mark Jenkins, "Devils Tower, Sacred Space," *Virginia Quarterly Review* (2013): 235.

appellation extremely offensive for its derogatory affiliations, and the Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Association has taken strides to have the title changed.⁹³ The unique structure of the butte has rendered it high recreational climbing status since the first ranchers' ascent to the summit in 1893.⁹⁴ By the 1960s the amount of yearly climbers was increasing dramatically, and in recent years has reached a range of 5000 to 8000 annual climbers. Besides the obvious desecration of this sacred landscape by climbers scaling the rock, Indigenous groups must endure the disturbance of crowds and onlookers during their spiritual ceremonies and the overall desecration of the site's sanctity.⁹⁵ The print "DO NOT DISTURB PRAYER BUNDLES PRAYER CLOTHS" alludes to the disturbance of offerings (prayer bundles) left by worshippers at the site, while "MOUNT RUSH MORE POUND SPIKES IN" confronts the irony of how two National Monuments, both within the Black Hills, are disparately treated by the national government.

The tensions between climbers and tribal Nations warranted the interference of the NPS in 1995; a three-year consulting period with local tribes and other stakeholders resulted in the Climbing Management Plan (CMP), which, among other things, instituted a voluntary ban on climbing during the culturally significant month of June.⁹⁶ "BAN THE CLIMB OF ROCK TREE" signifies a cosmology story associated with Bear's House while advocating for a permanent moratorium on the climbing of the site. However, in 1998, a

⁹³ Gulliford, *Sacred Objects and Sacred Places*, 163. See also: Jack McNeel, "Devil's Tower: Name is 'Offensive, Disrespectful, Repugnant' to Tribes," *Indian Country Today*, April 7, 2017, <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/history/sacred-places/devils-tower-name-offensive-disrespectful-repugnant-tribes/>.

⁹⁴ Jeffery R. Hanson and David Moore, "Applied Anthropology at Devils Tower National Monument," *Plains Anthropologist* (1999): 54.

⁹⁵ Eric Freedman, "Protecting Sacred Sites on Public Land: Religion and Alliances in the Mato Tipila-Devils Tower Litigation," *American Indian Quarterly* (2007): 2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

group of climbers and commercial guides sued the NPS and the Secretary of the Interior on the grounds that the June moratorium on climbing represented an unconstitutional establishment of religion by the state. The climbers argued that the voluntary ban “went so far in enabling the Indians’ free exercise of religion so as to breach the Establishment Clause.”⁹⁷ Though neither the district court nor federal appeals court dealt with, as Eric Freedman writes, “the more contentious question of whether the CMP constituted an unconstitutional establishment of religion or whether it was an appropriate accommodation of Native Americans’ free practice of religion at sacred places on federal property,” the voluntary ban was upheld twice.⁹⁸ Since its implementation, the June moratorium has been largely successful in lowering the number of non-Native visitors to Bear’s House, though numbers in recent years have been on the rise.⁹⁹

Bear’s House has not lost its spiritual significance despite the presence of climbers and tourists year-round. Established in 1983, the annual Sacred Hoop Run is a five-day, 500-mile run beginning at Bear Butte and ending at Bear’s House that retraces the sacred story of how the Lakota first came to the Black Hills. The event connects youth and elders in the sacred landscapes—reviving language, history, and Native spirituality.¹⁰⁰ Also established in the 1980s, the Cheyenne River Youth Project is an essential youth and family services organization on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. In 2015, the NPS funded a two-day trip to the sacred sites of Bear’s House and Bear Butte for Lakota

⁹⁷ Linge, “Ensuring the Full Freedom of Religion on Public Lands,” 313, 336.

⁹⁸ Freedman, “Protecting Sacred Sites on Public Land,” 15.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁰⁰ Jim Kent, “Sacred Hoop Run Preserves Lakota Culture, Battles Substance Abuse,” *Lakota Country Times*, July 7, 2016, http://www.lakotacountrytimes.com/news/2016-07-07/Headlines/Sacred_Hoop_Run_Preserves_Lakota_Culture_Battles_S.html.

youth, seeking to reintroduce teens to the sacred sites and the power of place inherent in those landscapes.¹⁰¹ Heap of Birds's "BE ROOTED HOLD TO THIS EARTH" emphasizes the survivance of local tribes in resisting these encroachments and maintaining their fundamental connection to the land.

San Francisco Peaks, Arizona

Situated fifteen miles northwest of Flagstaff, Arizona, the San Francisco Peaks are a dormant volcanic mountain range made up of four major summits and with elevations topping 12,000 feet. The Peaks fall under the regulation of the U.S. Forest Service, whom Heap of Birds displays no restraint in critiquing: "DAMAGE DINE FAITH U.S. FOREST SERVICE." Though at least twenty-two tribes throughout Arizona and the Southwest consider the San Francisco Peaks spiritually and culturally significant, this overview focuses on the Hopi and Navajo's (or Diné in the traditional language) particular connection to the site which is "indispensable to their religious beliefs and practices."¹⁰² Heap of Birds references the Peaks' more-than-human significance and healing powers in the print, "HOLY PLANTS ALIVE HAVE A BEING," while honoring Native relationships with the sacred landscape in "YOUNG DINE WALK PRAY FOR PEOPLE."

Government subsidized explorations of the Peaks occurred throughout the nineteenth century, and the site's value as a winter recreational arena has produced tensions

¹⁰¹ ICMN Staff, "Connecting Youth and Sacred Places: NPS Grant Provides Field Trip Opportunity," *Indian Country Today*, May 28, 2015, <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/history/sacred-places/connecting-youth-and-sacred-places-nps-grant-provides-field-trip-opportunity/>.

¹⁰² Katie Showalter, "A chill over Agassiz; Tribes fight an Arizona ski resort's plan to make snow from wastewater," *L.A. Times*, Feb. 10, 2004, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/feb/10/news/os-peaks10>.

with tribal nations since early settlement of the area.¹⁰³ The primary contention at this sacred site is the ongoing development of the ski resort Arizona Snowbowl, which, established in 1937, is one of the oldest operating ski resorts in the country. Heap of Birds dryly protests this use of the Peaks: “DEFEND DEVINE MTNS OR SPRING BREAK FUN.” Skiing operations have always been run by a private contractor on permit from the Forest Service, and a 1980 proposal for major expansion and development of the Peaks (approved by the Forest Service) marked the beginning of almost thirty years of legal battles between the Hopi and Navajo and the Forest Service.¹⁰⁴

In 1981 and in an appeal in 1983, members of the Hopi and Navajo Nations sought prevention of expansions and the removal of existing facilities at the Snowbowl on the grounds that the operation and expansion of the Snowbowl constituted a violation of their First Amendment rights, and that the development would impair their ability to pray, conduct ceremonies, and collect various sacred objects essential to the performance of religious practices. The court ruled that the newly approved development plan did not impose an “impermissible burden” on the tribes’ religious beliefs and practices.¹⁰⁵ At this point, Heap of Birds’s denunciation of the situation—“NATURE PERFECT PURITY GOVT A DISGRACE”—seems warranted.

A second round of legal action was prompted in 2006 by the Forest Service’s approval of the construction of a pipeline that would carry reclaimed wastewater for

¹⁰³ Platt Cline, “The Mountain,” *Plateau* 45, no. 5 (1977): 15.

¹⁰⁴ Boone Cragun, “A Snowbowl Déjà Vu: The Battle between Native Americans and the Arizona Snowbowl Continues,” *American Indian Law Review* 30, no. 1, (2005/2006): 169.

¹⁰⁵ Maria Glowacka, Dorothy Washburn and Justin Richland, “*Nuvatukya’ovi*, San Francisco Peaks Balancing Western Economies with Native American Spiritualities,” *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 4 (2009): 547-8.

artificial snowmaking on the Peaks. The Hopi, Navajo, and eleven other Southwestern tribes charged the Forest Service with failure to comply with the requirements of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, passed in 1993 to prohibit government action that—though neutral to religion—substantially burdens religious freedom.¹⁰⁶ The tribes saw the spraying of reclaimed wastewater on the sacred mountain as an utmost desecration of the Peaks’ spiritual and ancestral nature. Several rounds of court rulings and appeals ended in the ruling that “the diminishment of spiritual fulfillment—serious though it may be—is not a ‘substantial burden’ on the free exercise of religion.”¹⁰⁷ In 2012, the Snowbowl implemented the use of reclaimed wastewater in their snowmaking technologies, and in 2014, the city of Flagstaff and Snowbowl entered into a new agreement to increase the amount of reclaimed water used and to extend an existing five-year contract to twenty years. This utmost desecration is met with the artist’s piercing words: “CITY OF FLAG CHEAT WATER SPIRIT,” “SEWAGE PUBLIC HEALTH MARGIN OF PROFIT,” and “WASTE WATER SNOW VIOLATE EXPLOIT SPIRIT.”

As a final resort, the Navajo Nation filed a complaint against the U.S. with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2015, alleging violations of their rights to practice religion and culture. Created in 1959 by the Organization of American States, the Commission is tasked with protecting fundamental human rights, specifically those of historically discriminated-against populations. If the case is heard, the issue will be framed

¹⁰⁶ Joshua A. Edwards, “Yellow Snow on Sacred Sites: A Failed Application of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act,” *American Indian Law Review* 34, no. 1 (2009/10): 152.

¹⁰⁷ Glowacka et al., “*Nuvatukya’ovi*,” 550 and *Navajo Nation v. U.S. Forest Service*, 479 F.3d (2007) at 1070.

in terms of an international human rights violation, rather than as an Indian rights issue—which has proven unsuccessful—to hopefully sway public opinion and policymakers.¹⁰⁸

Mauna Kea, Hawai‘i

The dormant volcano standing 13,800 feet above sea level on the Island of Hawai‘i is the sacred mountain Mauna Kea—the zenith of Native Hawaiians’ ancestral ties to creation. The mountain is the home of divine deities and ancestors and acts as a symbolic link between the Heavens and earthly life.¹⁰⁹ The summit of the mountain is considered the most sacred location in the Hawaiian archipelago.¹¹⁰ Similar to other Indigenous groups, the belief system of Native Hawaiians is rooted in the place-based reality of island experience; thus, Mauna Kea has been a significant landscape in Hawaiian culture and faith for thousands of years.¹¹¹ Honoring the cosmologies and epistemologies associated with Mauna Kea are multiple prints, including, “THE SPIRIT RIGHTS OF OUR MAUNA” and “ORIGIN SIX MILES ABOVE SEA FLOOR,” as well as several prints rendered in the Hawaiian language.

¹⁰⁸ Alysa Landry, “Navajo Nation Reaches out to IACHR in San Francisco Peaks Battle,” *Indian Country Today*, March 17, 2015, <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/politics/navajo-nation-reaches-out-to-iachr-in-san-francisco-peaks-battle/>.

¹⁰⁹ Dominique Saks, “Indigenous Religious Traditions: Mauna Kea,” ColoradoCollege.edu, 2011, <http://sites.coloradocollege.edu/indigenoustraditions/sacred-lands/sacred-lands-mauna-kea/>.

¹¹⁰ Doug Herman, “The Heart of the Hawaiian Peoples’ Arguments Against the Telescope on Mauna Kea,” Smithsonian.com, April 23, 2015, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/heart-hawaiian-people-arguments-arguments-against-telescope-mauna-kea-180955057/>.

¹¹¹ Marie Alohalani Brown, “*Mauna Kea: Ho‘omana Hawai‘i and Protecting the Sacred*,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture*, University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, published by Equinox Publishing Group, (2016): 152-162.

As Haunani-Kay Trask, Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of Hawai‘i writes, Native Hawaiians “suffered all the familiar horrors of contact: massive depopulation, landlessness, Christianization, economic and political marginalization, institutionalization in the military and prisons, poor health and educational profiles, and increasing diaspora,” since the archipelago was colonized in the eighteenth century.¹¹² In 1893, the U.S. military invaded the Hawaiian archipelago and overthrew the reigning constitutional monarchy in place there.¹¹³ Indigenous culture—language specifically—were heavily suppressed even through the end of the twentieth century; the cultural revival of Native Hawaiian culture and push for sovereignty that gained momentum in the 1970s would play a significant role in the resistance movement at Mauna Kea.¹¹⁴

In 1968, the state government offered the University of Hawai‘i a sixty-five-year lease to operate the summit of Mauna Kea as a science reserve, of which the University began subleasing portions of the summit to observatory facilities. This unleashed a fury of telescope-building initiatives (the tally went into double digits in 1999) to which growing opposition exploded by the 2000s, validated by the 1998 Hawai‘i State Auditor report documenting thirty years of mismanagement of Mauna Kea by the Land Board and University of Hawai‘i.¹¹⁵ Many Native Hawaiians believe that any development on the

¹¹² Haunani-Kay Trask, “The Struggle for Hawaiian Sovereignty – Introduction,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine* 24, no. 1 (2000).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Doug Herman, “The Heart of the Hawaiian Peoples’ Arguments Against the Telescope on Mauna Kea,” *Smithsonian.com*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/heart-hawaiian-people-arguments-arguments-against-telescope-mauna-kea-180955057/>.

¹¹⁵ “Timeline of Mauna Kea legal actions since 2011.” See also: <http://kahea.org/files/1998-audit-of-the-management-of-mauna-kea>.

sacred mountain equated to complete desecration of the site.¹¹⁶ Tensions between Native Hawaiians and the astronomy and University communities continued to grow at the turn of the century as the University expanded development and facilities on the summit (granted, they consulted heavily with concerned groups throughout the process). An initiative by NASA to build two Keck Outrigger Telescopes faced such strong opposition and legal setbacks that in 2006, NASA dropped the project.

With the print “THE THIRTY METER TELE SCOPE TMT,” Heap of Birds alludes to the most recent and acrimonious battle between those Native Hawaiians who oppose development (because it is not necessarily a unified camp) and the astronomy community. Proposed in 2009, the Thirty-Meter Telescope (TMT) would be ten times more powerful than any existing telescope—and therefore extremely large, measuring 34,000 square feet; its development plan was met with a five-year opposition campaign led by a group known as Mauna Kea Hui, which appealed each legal step forward made by the TMT developers.¹¹⁷ When the sublease to the TMT Corporation was approved in September 2014, protesters disrupted the groundbreaking ceremony in October and occupied the summit continuously from April through September of 2015, preventing construction crews from reaching the summit in June.¹¹⁸ Both prints “HAUL THEM AWAY WHILE THEY PRAY” and “MAUNA KEA ARRESTS LOVE OF LAND” reference the arrests of worshippers and/or protesters en masse from the summit.

In the fall of 2015 at the request of Governor Ige, the University of Hawai‘i began decommissioning several of the summit’s telescopes and returning that land to its natural

¹¹⁶ Alexandra Witze, “Mountain Battle,” *Nature* 526 (Oct 2015): 25-26.

¹¹⁷ Saks, “Indigenous Religious Traditions: Mauna Kea.”

¹¹⁸ Witze, “Mountain Battle,” 28.

state.¹¹⁹ Finally, in November of 2015, the Hawai‘i Supreme Court issued an indefinite moratorium on construction of the TMT, and the following March, the TMT Corporation announced its plans to look for alternative sites to build the telescope. A major victory for Native Hawaiians and their allies was watching the construction vehicles leave the site after such tumultuous five years. The print “SACRED SEAS OUR RULE OF LAW” can be read as a nod to Native Hawaiians’ resistance and resilience in protecting the sanctity of Mauna Kea from further astronomical developments.

Looking Forward

This chapter has sought to contextualize the sociopolitical issues and land claim disputes that Native Americans have confronted at four sacred sites, as well as Edgar Heap of Birds’s creative approach to illuminating these struggles. Next, I will look in greater depth at the themes of historical remembrance, condemnation of colonial-capitalist regimes, and promotion of Indigenous ecological ontologies that arise out of Heap of Birds’s text prints and correspond to the efforts of activists at these four sites. These themes stem from and help reproduce the decolonial frameworks of the land’s primacy, sovereignty as an embodied and lived reality, and resurgence of indigeneity. Despite different manifestations of resistance, the shared tactics of Heap of Birds and grassroots activists ensure greater success of undermining colonial structures. Put differently, together the decolonial processes of Heap of Birds and Indigenous protectors of the sacred mountains have greater momentum and visibility than they do separately. As collaborators, the artist and grassroots activists create a space for Indigenous visibility and self-

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

determination, in the literal sense of the gallery exhibition, as a manifestation of the creative process (enabled by Indigenous survivance), and hopefully back home through greater gains achieved through new alliances and visibility.

CHAPTER 3

In the suite of sixty-four text monoprints that is *Defend Sacred Mountains*, Cheyenne-Arapaho artist Edgar Heap of Birds uses language as a weapon on behalf of Indigenous populations who have witnessed the desecration of their sacred sites by a colonial-capitalist nation state. Furthering a conversation from the American Indian Movement era grounded in Vine Deloria Jr.'s concept of spatial thinking, Heap of Birds utilizes historical remembrance, condemnation of colonial-capitalist regimes, and promotion of Indigenous ecological ontologies to undermine the structures of settler colonialism. In doing so, he implicates himself into what Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes as a “long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power,” or decolonization.¹²⁰ In addition to this definition of decolonization as an exhaustive divesting of colonial power in all of its manifestations, Battell Lowman and Barker in their analysis of the relationship between settlers and First Nations in Canada describe “an intensely political transformative process with the goal of regenerating Indigenous nationhood and place-relationships while dismantling structures of settler colonialism that oppose or seek to eliminate Indigenous peoples from the land.”¹²¹ More than anti-colonial or endless resistance, decolonization is “the act of *becoming something other than colonial*,” (authors’ emphasis).¹²² Multidimensional and open-ended, decolonial frameworks employ (and reify) an understanding of the land as foundational or what Battell and Lowman call “place-thought” (what I have referred to as spatial thinking);

¹²⁰ Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 98.

¹²¹ Battell Lowman and Barker, *Settler*, 111.

¹²² *Ibid.*

the lived reality of sovereignty; and Indigenous resurgence or survivance.¹²³ These theoretical frameworks inform Heap of Birds's work as well as the resistance of Native communities. Through the very act of aesthetic production as a contemporary Indigenous artist, Heap of Birds asserts his agency as a decolonial actor actively creating spaces of Indigenous visibility and sovereignty through intercultural collaboration.

Decolonizing Frameworks: Land, Sovereignty, and Resurgence

In *Defend Sacred Mountains*, Heap of Birds supports and augments the efforts of Indigenous activists to reclaim and defend sacred landscapes in order to fully experience the relationships with land that sustain their lifeways. Recalling Kimmerer from the previous chapter, land held in common nurtures and gives strength to Indigenous resistance of settler structures that dispossess and develop sacred land for a profit. Heap of Birds's prints signify the power of Indigenous ecological ontologies—of being spiritually and culturally rooted to a place—in the face of environmental and cultural siege; while his words reveal a fundamental rift between a capitalist settler society and the traditional epistemologies of its Indigenous inhabitants, the survivance and resistance of Native peoples is written all over the series.

These place-based realities and relationships are fundamental to the lived experience of Indigenous sovereignty and survivance. In their piece on Indigenous resurgence against contemporary colonialism, Alfred and Corntassel promote the Holm model of peoplehood as a means of grappling with the dynamism of Indigenous identities; “sacred history, ceremonial cycles, language and ancestral homelands” all play an equal

¹²³ Ibid., 112.

role in the construction of indigeneity.¹²⁴ Nurturing and strengthening these cultural roots enables greater resistance of non-Native land encroachment and development. The authors contend that in many Native communities this model is more of an aspiration than a reality, and the events at the four mountains certainly reiterate that.

Additionally, Glen Coulthard argues in his book *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* for a refocusing on the protection of the land and Indigenous ways of life, rather than on a politics of recognition operating within settler frameworks.¹²⁵ In his article “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” Patrick Wolfe shows how settler colonialism operates on and is upheld by the dispossession of Indigenous lands; therefore, resistance to the settler structure must be centered on land defense.¹²⁶ If the series’ title doesn’t already convey this point, the resistance of Northern Plains tribes at Bear Butte and Bear’s House, the Hopi and Navajo at San Francisco Peaks, and Native Hawaiians at Mauna Kea to land encroachment and despoliation is rooted in a protection and defense of the mountains. Simultaneously, their respective activism works to restore the peoplehood model of identity (which is understood and conceptualized in their own languages and/or epistemologies). In this way, we can see how the primacy of the land and Nation is a decolonial framework utilized by both activists and Heap of Birds.

Native Americans’ sovereignty as distinct political entities—sovereign nations—is an inherent, lived reality. In the vein of Coulthard’s belief that Native governments seeking official state recognition actually limits Indigenous self-recognition, Native scholars such

¹²⁴ Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism,” *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005): 609.

¹²⁵ Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

¹²⁶ Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 388.

as Eve Tuck promote the concept of sovereignty as an epistemology. She contends that sovereignty is not a state of mind but the catalyst of knowledge and ways of being, “a *real thing*,” (author’s emphasis).¹²⁷ This notion of sovereignty as knowledge-producing and a lived reality is indispensable from Indigenous relations with the land. Therefore, sovereignty and the ability to protect the land go hand in hand; embracing sovereignty as an inherent aspect of indigeneity poses a threat to settler colonialism’s theft of indigenous lands and resources. As Jolene Rickard succinctly states, “the concept of Indigenous sovereignty is perceived as an erosion of U.S. authority over Indigenous autonomy.”¹²⁸

Furthermore, In *Defend Sacred Mountains*, Heap of Birds actualizes Rickard’s philosophy (introduced at the end of the first chapter) that the collaboration of Indigenous artists and activists yields important spaces of self-determination and visibility for Native communities. Alongside the resistance of activists, his words challenge the power of settler colonialism and assert the self-determination and agency of Native peoples. In this way, Heap of Birds also engages with a form of intellectual sovereignty, or what Lenape scholar Joanne Barker has described as an “attempt...to decolonize the theoretical and methodological perspectives used within analyses of indigenous histories, cultures, and identities from the legacies of intellectual colonialism.”¹²⁹ Heap of Birds is actively involved in decolonizing colonial knowledge systems, pedagogies and histories—asserting the intellectual sovereignty of Native peoples.

¹²⁷ Eve Tuck, “Re-Visioning Action: Participatory Action Research and Indigenous Theories of Change,” *The Urban Review* 41, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 65.

¹²⁸ Jolene Rickard, “Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 466.

¹²⁹ Joanne Barker, *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 25.

Finally, according to Battell Lowman and Barker, at the heart of a decolonial framework is the concept of resurgence, that is,

a regeneration and re-empowerment of collective, place-based Indigenous identities, expressed through unique political formations, from clans to confederacies. This approach is not about centering colonialism, but rather about focusing on the resiliency and vibrancy of Indigenous peoples, and re-energizing Indigenous peoples, relationships, practices, and protocols. It is about building capacity and strength within Indigenous communities so that colonial structures are not needed and not welcome.¹³⁰

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson also emphasizes the fundamental aspect of cultural resurgence in decolonial frameworks, as the revitalization and resiliency of Indigenous languages, spiritualities, ecological ontologies, and traditions of governance is a direct threat to colonialism's tactics of elimination, which are rooted in land dispossession.¹³¹ Comparable is Gerard Vizenor's concept of survivance—or the active survival and evolution of Indigenous culture in the postmodern era—introduced in the first chapter. Survivance honors not only the active practice of Indigenous epistemologies, languages, and traditions, but their continued growth over time.¹³² Through a creative platform, *Heap of Birds* builds on and supports the concepts articulated by these authors. His work is instrumental in expressing the overall trends of survivance and resurgence to a wider audience.

With adequate context for the social, legal, and political struggles occurring at the sacred landscapes of Bear Butte, Bear's House, San Francisco Peaks, and Mauna Kea, *Defend Sacred Mountains* can be (literally) read as a crucial intervention into and disruption of settler colonialism. Informed by the decolonial frameworks discussed above

¹³⁰ Battell Lowman and Barker, *Settler*, 112-113.

¹³¹ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Aboriginal Peoples and Knowledge: Decolonizing Our Processes," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 21, no. 1 (2001): 137-48.

¹³² Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. vii.

(land as foundational, sovereignty as lived reality, and resurgence and survivance at the heart of decolonization), *Heap of Birds* again and again returns to the overarching themes of historical remembrance, condemnation of colonial-capitalist regimes, and promotion of Indigenous ecological ontologies to subvert the power of settler structures. Significantly, this agenda is complementary to the grassroots resistance of Native activists. Through direct action, they too seek to re-narrate history, correct environmental injustices committed by a capitalist nation state, and assert ecological ontologies that challenge the very structure of settler colonialism. Recalling Jolene Rickard's sentiment that contemporary Indigenous artists have a responsibility to work with fellow Native peoples to conceptualize and generate decolonial spaces, it is possible to view *Defend Sacred Mountains* as engaged with grassroots activists in a resurgence of indigeneity centered on the protection of sacred sites.

The Words: Themes, Discourse, and Implications

*Historical Remembrance*¹³³

Defend Sacred Mountains advances a decades-long discourse on historical remembrance (in addition to Indigenous sovereignty and ecological preservation) through creative means. As a recap from the first chapter, social-political theorist Alexis Shotwell advocates for collective “unforgetting”, or actively remembering and confronting racial oppression and violence, as a form of resistance against the structures of settler colonialism which rely on the elimination of Native people and the confiscation of their lands and

¹³³ Though these themes are structurally separated into distinct categories, they all naturally overlap and blend in practice.

resources.¹³⁴ Heap of Birds employs active remembrance of colonial injustices throughout the series in order to correct/subvert historical narratives that fuel settler colonialism's entrenchments and desecrate sacred landscapes. The effect is a call to action and responsibility within his prints, as Heap of Birds bluntly asserts the abuses of the nation state and corporate entities against Indigenous sovereignty.

The print "DIS HONORS 1851 FORT LARAMIE TREATY" from *Bear Butte* is one instance of "unforgetting" colonial injustices in the series. Here Heap of Birds alludes to the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie which ensured the Sioux peoples unrestricted access and ownership of 60 million acres of the Black Hills (known as the Great Sioux Reservation). Meant to reduce intertribal rivalries and disputes with incoming settlers, the Treaty was ultimately eliminated for subsequent treaties that reduced the Sioux territory to near-nihility.¹³⁵ Therefore, all ensuing developments of Bear Butte—from its designation as a State Park to oil drilling and mining near the site—are a violation of a Treaty made between the sovereign Great Sioux Nation and those claiming the authority of a United States government.

Heap of Birds brings an element of humor to another print attempting to redress historical wrong-doings, especially acknowledging the oppressive power of language in colonial structures. "DEVILS TOWER WRONG NAME CONFUSED WHITE MAN" from *Bear's House* refers to a colonizer's misinterpretation of one of the Great Plains Indigenous words (there are a dozen appellations in numerous tribal languages) for Bear's

¹³⁴ Shotwell, "Remembering for the Future," 18.

¹³⁵ "Tribal Historical Overview - Lakota Migration - The 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty", nd.gov, accessed June 28, 2017, <http://www.ndstudies.org/resources/IndianStudies/standingrock/1851treaty.html>

House.¹³⁶ This occurred in 1875 when Colonel Richard I. Dodge led an expedition through Wyoming; Dodge's interpreter confused the words 'bear' and 'devil', naming the igneous monolith 'Bad God's Tower', which was eventually shortened to Devils Tower.¹³⁷ As mentioned earlier, Indigenous Nations who revere this site as sacred believe the current National Monument's name to be an added offense to the desecration that occurs when climbers scale the mountain's ridges and have taken legal steps to have the title corrected. At Bear's House, the colonial structure oppresses Native spirituality in the form of language as well as land dispossession.

Condemning Colonial-Capitalist Regimes

Heap of Birds's condemnation of colonial-capitalist structures and developments is closely related to and overlaps with his commitment to historical remembrance. The prints explored here connote slightly more contemporary issues than those addressed above. His criticism of the multidimensional nodes of power and development at these sacred sites reveals a major divide between the interests of the corporately-minded nation state and Indigenous ways of being and ecological ontologies. In a 2015 article for the Smithsonian on Native Hawaiians' responses to the Thirty-Meter Telescope (TMT), Senior Geographer at the National Museum of the American Indian Doug Herman succinctly describes this dichotomy in the context of the sacred Mauna Kea:

What is really at stake, however, is a conflict between two ways of knowing and being in the world. For many Native Hawaiians and other Indigenous peoples, sacredness is not merely a concept or label. It is a lived experience of oneness and connectedness with the natural and spiritual worlds... This experience is very much at odds with the everyday secular-humanist approach of Western thinking that emerged out of the Enlightenment, and

¹³⁶ The most widely-used name today is Mato Tipila, which means "Bear's Lodge" in Lakota.

¹³⁷ McNeel, "Devil's Tower: Name is 'Offensive, Disrespectful, Repugnant' to Tribes."

which sees no ‘magic’ or ‘enchantment’ in the world. And of course, seeing nature as inert facilitates both commercial exploitation and scientific exploration.¹³⁸

Heap of Birds’s illuminating of this dangerous ideological divide is one necessary measure that complements active resistance of settler colonialism’s oppressive structures.

“TMT MONEY SCIENCE AND THE SACRED” from *Mauna Kea* is one of several prints that reveals the discord between Indigenous spiritual traditions (and Native peoples’ right to be in and of a place that provides cultural/spiritual nourishment) and capitalist development. Non-Native environmentalists and Native Hawaiians alike opposed the development of the TMT—which would put the number of observatories on Mauna Kea in the double digits—at the summit of the most sacred landscape in the Hawaiian archipelago. Like other observatories operating at Mauna Kea’s summit through subleases from the University of Hawai‘i, the TMT would have been a major source of revenue-building for the University and even the entire state.¹³⁹ Intent on making the record-breaking telescope a reality, the TMT developers and the astronomy community employed a rhetoric of scientific and social progress reminiscent of the history of conquest in Hawai‘i and the Americas. Many in support of the TMT viewed the planned observatory’s potential scientific advancements and economic benefits as priorities to be pursued over preserving the sanctity and usability of the summit as a ceremonial site for Native Hawaiians.¹⁴⁰

In another instance of subverting the capitalist influences that tarnish the sanctity of spiritually-imbued sites such as San Francisco Peaks, Heap of Birds asserts, “CLEAN

¹³⁸ Herman, “The Heart of the Hawaiian Peoples’ Arguments Against the Telescope on Mauna Kea.”

¹³⁹ Witze, “Mountain Battle,” 25-26. See also: Saks, “Indigenous Religious Traditions: Mauna Kea.”

¹⁴⁰ Herman, “The Heart of the Hawaiian Peoples’ Arguments Against the Telescope on Mauna Kea.”

YOUR CHURCH WITH SEWER WATER”. To the Hopi, Navajo, and as many as twenty other Southwestern tribes, the San Francisco Peaks embody the essence of their spiritual lives, imbued with healing powers and more-than-human entities.¹⁴¹ As outlined in the previous chapter, the Hopi and Navajo fought the further desecration of their sacred peaks by the use of reclaimed wastewater to produce artificial snow in court for nearly a decade. Failing to protect the rights of Indigenous Nations, the courts instead prioritized outdoor recreation and economic interests. Heap of Birds facetiously provokes viewers to imagine having their own place of worship cleaned with “sewer water.” His words expose that Indigenous peoples have been denied the basic human right to fully exercise one’s faith, and, speaking on behalf of the Southwestern tribes that revere the mountain range, he demands justice for the ecological and spiritual desecration of the sacred site.

Promoting Indigenous Ecological Ontologies

Heap of Birds devotes over a dozen prints to honoring the ecological ontologies that sustain and are rooted in Indigenous spiritualities at each sacred mountain. Without attempting to speak on behalf of the intricacies of multiple Indigenous belief systems, it merits an analysis of *Defend Sacred Mountains* to acknowledge Heap of Birds’s multifaceted engagement with the communities featured in his work. In order to amplify the voices of those pursuing grassroots change, Heap of Birds gains a dynamic understanding of the assaults against each sacred site and tribal nation (the memorial aspect), as well as the ecological ontologies that deem these landscapes sacred. By touching on some of the elements that imbue these sites with their sanctity, Heap of Birds achieves a well-rounded message of survivance and pride, quiet reverence, and fierce resistance.

¹⁴¹ Glowacka et al., “*Nuvatukya’ovi*,” 555.

Honoring and promoting the continuity of Indigenous relationships to place is one of the many ways in which Heap of Birds seeks to decolonize—the minds of viewers, art institutions, and landscapes—in this series. From *San Francisco Peaks*' "THIS SACRED LAND IS OUR SHIELD" to *Bear Butte*'s "THE HILLS WHERE THE PEOPLE ARE TAUGHT", Heap of Birds succinctly instills viewers with a taste of the foundational significance of land to Native peoples.

Evaluating Efficacy

As a socially engaged and politically outspoken artist, Heap of Birds demonstrates the salience of visual activism as a decolonizing tool. Here I decide to evaluate Heap of Birds's efficacy as a political artist from an Indigenous perspective, as I believe doing so best captures the spirit of his work and practice, which is grounded in a Cheyenne-Arapaho epistemology and a passion for activism¹⁴². In her essay on the application of traditional media to socially relevant works by contemporary Indigenous artists, historian Sherry Farrell Racette provides a definition of visual activism that lends itself easily to Heap of Birds's practice: "The sharp, witty social critiques and engaged creative processes employed by many artists using traditional media become a form of visual activism when they reveal unknown histories and move viewers and participants to action."¹⁴³ As has been discussed, Heap of Birds is actively involved in re-narrative history that seeks to challenge the dominant philosophy of conquest accompanied by and upholding settler colonialism. However, Racette's contention that visual activism involve the ensuing participation and

¹⁴² In-class dialogue with the artist, January 2018.

¹⁴³ Sherry Farrell Racette, "Tuft Life: Stitching Sovereignty in Contemporary Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76 (Summer 2017): 120.

call to action of concerned viewers is more challenging to quantify for *Defend Sacred Mountains* (and arguably other visual art pieces as well, such as George Longfish's *The End of Innocence* or Kay WalkingStick's *Venere Alpina*).

Other Indigenous scholars evaluating the efficacy of activist art/artists who place less emphasis on direct action stemming from visual activism may provide a more appropriate lens for considering the work of Heap of Birds. While the amplification of Indigenous voices of resistance at Bear Butte, Bear's House, San Francisco Peaks, and Mauna Kea in an attempt to bolster solidarity and political momentum is a major part of *Defend Sacred Mountains'* mission, equally important is the creation of a visual representation of survivance by and for Indigenous peoples. For instance, Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson calls attention to the importance of Iroquois artists who visualize an "Iroquois self, society, and tradition within this past that is both ours and not ours," which "helps us to construct and live within a present that belongs entirely to us."¹⁴⁴ She argues that, through the creative process, "the pieces suggest movement, the passing of time, the dialectic of history, and, most importantly, the process of tradition."¹⁴⁵ This decolonial notion of traditionally-engaged art (whether through medium or subject matter, or both) complements Rickard's call for generating Indigenous spaces of visibility and presence through art as a form of decolonization.

In her essay "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," Jolene Rickard makes a case for using the nuanced concept of sovereignty—with its many

¹⁴⁴ Audra Simpson, "The Empire Laughs Back: Tradition, Power, and Play in the Work of Shelley Niro and Ryan Rice," in *Iroquois Art: Visual Expressions of Contemporary Native American Artists*, ed. Sylvia S. Kasprzycki, Doris I. Strambrau, and Alexandra V. Roth (Altenstadt, GER: European Review of Native American Studies, 1998), 48.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

connotations beyond the legal sense of the word—“as a framing device to interpret the work of Indigenous artists.”¹⁴⁶ She argues that “visual expressions of Indigenous artists are as crucial to the sovereigntist’s agenda as legal reform,” because artfully deploying traditional epistemologies as a resistance tactic enables “a reinvestment in a shared ancient imaginary of self and a distancing strategy from the West.”¹⁴⁷ In fact, Rickard regards visual sovereignty as “one of the most dominant expressions of self-determination... among sovereignty’s many interpretations.”¹⁴⁸ Therefore, recognizing visual sovereignty and visual activism as valid forms of decolonization acknowledges the power inherent in Indigenous expression that is independent of the colonial gaze. Aesthetic practice in and of itself represents colonial intervention as Indigenous artists imagine and generate their own present realities and futures accomplished through collective survivance.

Heap of Birds elegantly intertwines traditional content into the series—such as references to the sites’ sanctity and spiritual histories, use of Hawaiian language in *Mauna Kea* and names of significant figures and leaders—suggesting, according to Simpson, continuity, resurgence, and a dynamic Indigenous presence in the twenty-first century. His use of Hawaiian terminology and phrases in *Mauna Kea* sets up a relationship between viewers and the work (and by extension Native Hawaiians) in which those who cannot read the language are given the choice to learn about our history of colonization, rather than Heap of Birds/Native Hawaiians offering to teach this history. Stó:lō scholar and artist Dylan Robinson argues in his essay “Public Writing, Sovereign Reading: Indigenous

¹⁴⁶ Rickard, “Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors,” 478.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 478, 472.

¹⁴⁸ Jolene Rickard, “Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art,” *Art Journal* 76 (Summer 2017): 82.

Language Art in Public Space” that a refusal to translate Indigenous language text is an exercise of sovereignty and self-determination. Withholding “easily consumable knowledge”—which Heap of Birds arguably does in some form in every print—takes some of the burden off Indigenous peoples as teachers, challenges settlers to become informed viewers, and affirms the agency of Native peoples as owners of their own languages, cultures, and histories.¹⁴⁹

Employing traditional epistemologies is a significant decolonizing tool for these reasons, but I see this work occurring on an even more basic level. I believe through *Defend Sacred Mountains*, Heap of Birds fulfills Rickard’s proposal for intercommunication between Indigenous artists and activists in which spaces of visibility and self-determination are realized. Literally, the gallery exhibiting *Defend Sacred Mountains* was transformed into such a space of Indigenous visibility and sovereignty, especially on the night of its opening reception. Heap of Birds was joined by family, friends, local Native peoples and Native students of the Claremont Colleges, among others, to receive and celebrate his latest print series at the Pitzer College Art Galleries. Despite the challenging content of Heap of Birds’s prints, the event was filled with an air of excitement and progress, as the collaboration that occurred between the artist and many involved activists—as well as the decolonial struggles at the four mountains—was shared with a larger community. In addition, a series of timelines for each mountain that I had produced to offer sociopolitical context to Heap of Birds’s prints enabled viewers even greater understanding of the many afflictions at and work being done to protect these sites. Surely this was an important space

¹⁴⁹ Dylan Robinson, “Public Writing, Sovereign Reading: Indigenous Language Art in Public Space,” *Art Journal* 76 (Summer 2017): 96.

of visibility for the many people connected to these mountains, both in building new alliances and establishing a dynamic, resurgent Indigenous presence in a colonial institution.

I would also argue that there is merit in viewing aesthetic practice in and of itself as colonial intervention. To do so widens our frameworks of who can be meaning-makers and decolonizers, and what can be recognized as decolonial work. Simpson's notion of creating and living within a present that belongs entirely to Indigenous peoples is especially at play here. Inherent in creative measures taken by Indigenous peoples is the survivance and cultural resurgence enabling meaning production. Disregarding whether identifiable or quantifiable sociopolitical change (or beneficial alliances) may stem from Heap of Birds's visual activism, his work represents intercultural collaboration on multiple levels and asserts the survivance and agency of Indigenous peoples, and that is decolonial.

•

In this chapter I have attempted to convey the ways in which Heap of Birds and activists at Bear Butte, Bear's House, San Francisco Peaks, and Mauna Kea operate according to the decolonizing frameworks of the land's primacy, sovereignty, and Indigenous resurgence. Grounded in these concepts, they work to expose the historical desecration of sacred landscapes while illuminating their respective ecological ontologies that stand in stark contrast to the structures of settler colonialism. Finally, I have argued for Heap of Birds's evaluation as a decolonizing figure on the basis of his collaboration with fellow Native peoples to generate spaces of Indigenous sovereignty, which can be interpreted on several levels: that of *Defend Sacred Mountains* as a visual representation of survivance, that of *Defend Sacred Mountains* as a decolonial exhibition space, and that

of the visibility afforded the efforts of activists and (hopefully) newfound alliances that will enable greater decolonial momentum in the grassroots.

CONCLUSION

From as far west as the Hawaiian archipelago, to the Great Plains' Black Hills, and southwest to Arizona's expansive forests, Native Americans have sustained "place-specific, multi-species" relationships with land for thousands of years.¹⁵⁰ These relationships are integral to cultural vitality, and they often include an intrinsic spiritual component, as "Indigenous peoples... can claim genealogical and cosmological roots in the land stretching back millennia."¹⁵¹ When these sacred landscapes come under threat, entire lifeways, linguistic systems, ontologies and epistemologies also become threatened. Because settler colonialism hinges on the confiscation of Indigenous ancestral lands, Native peoples around the globe have combatted cultural depletion for over five hundred years. In his text monprint series *Defend Sacred Mountains*, Edgar Heap of Birds stands in solidarity with just a few of the many Nations who have taken direct action to protect their sacred lands.

In this piece, I have situated Heap of Birds on a continuum of other Indigenous artists who came out of the same sociopolitical moment of the American Indian Movement—weaving common themes into their practice—in order to highlight the different manifestations visual activism can take and to make a case for Heap of Birds's specific colonial intervention. Relying on Jolene Rickard's call for collaboration among Indigenous peoples in order to generate new spaces of visibility and self-determination, I

¹⁵⁰ Steinman, "Why Was Standing Rock and the NoDAPL Campaign So Historic?" 13.

¹⁵¹ Zoltán Grossman, "Resource Wars and Sharing Sacred Land," in *Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017), 168.

contend that artists who actively create these opportunities as well as concrete spaces of Indigenous resurgence are most successful as decolonizers. This is a strategy Heap of Birds has utilized throughout his career and achieves again with *Defend Sacred Mountains*, “articulating local knowledge globally,” recognizing the success of Indigenous peoples, and creating literal and symbolic spaces of Indigenous survivance.¹⁵²

For the artists and activists profiled throughout this thesis, a common notion of the sacred—landscapes, traditions, languages, sovereignty—is under threat in some capacity. As decolonizers, these figures all operate from similar frameworks, deploying this notion of the sacred in direct action and aesthetic practice. Rooted in spatial thinking, lived experiences of sovereignty, and the empowerment of Indigenous resurgence, they wager active remembrance, condemn colonial structures, and promote ecological ontologies—and vice versa. Resistance is fueled by survivance, and survivance by resistance. Ultimately, it is the hope of future generations’ full enjoyment of the sacred which motivates and sustains their resistance of colonial structures. Perhaps it is in working together that this goal has the greatest chance of being realized.

¹⁵² Rickard, “The Local and the Global,” 64.

APPENDIX OF FIGURES

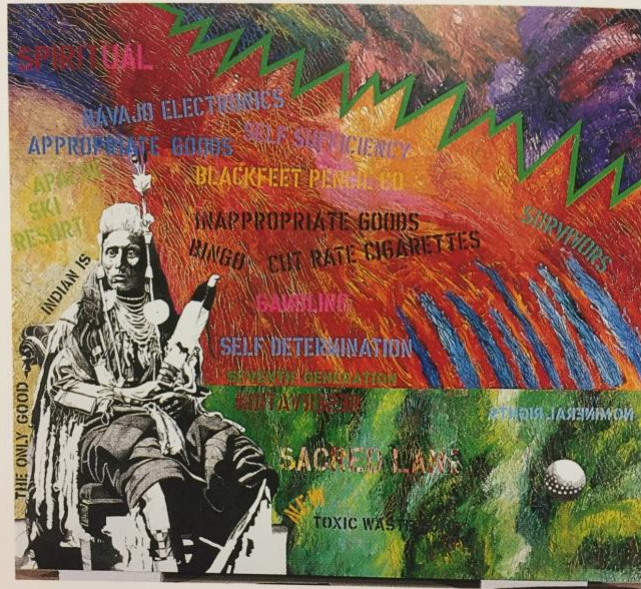


Figure 1.1. George Longfish, “Appropriate Goods” from *The End of the Innocence*, 1991-92. Installation, mixed media, 96 x 102 inches.

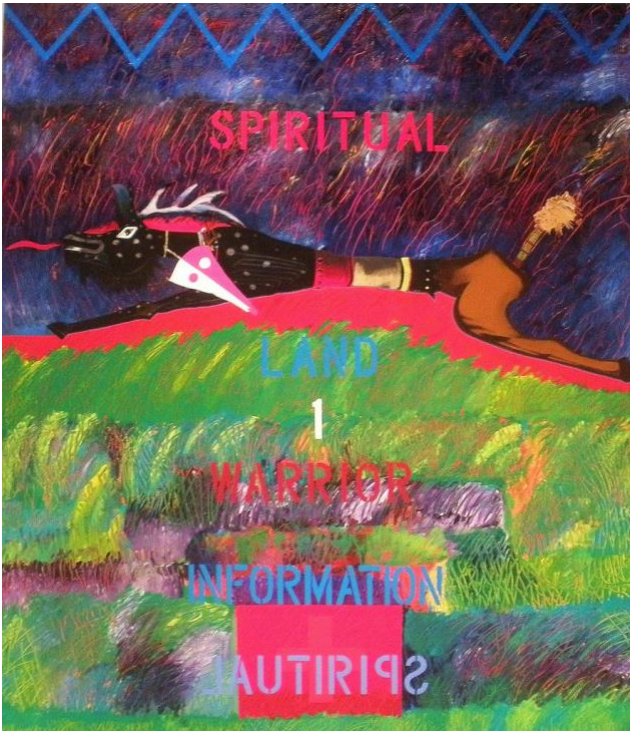


Figure 1.2. George Longfish, “Owning Your Cultural Information” from *The End of the Innocence*, 1991-92. Installation, mixed media, 96 x 84 inches.



Figure 1.3. George Longfish, “History Repeating Itself” from *The End of the Innocence*, 1991-92. Installation, mixed media, 96 x 102 inches.

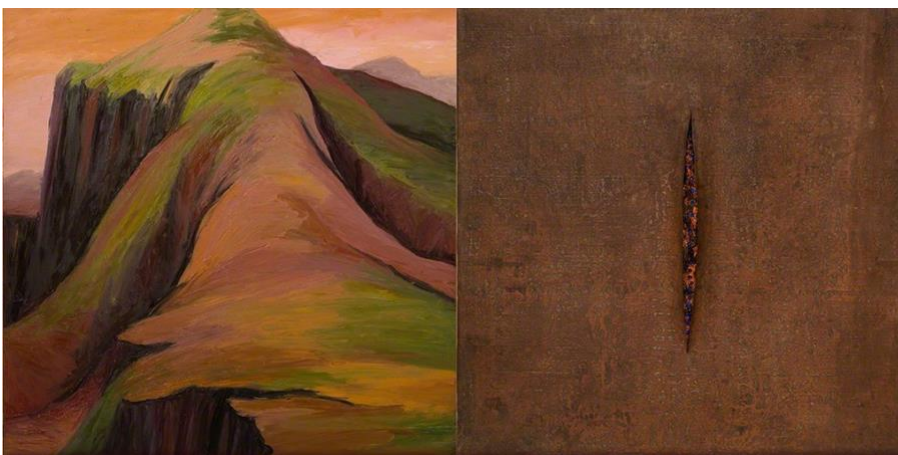


Figure 2. Kay WalkingStick, *Venere Alpina*, 1997. Oil on canvas (left), steel mesh over acrylic, wax, and plastic stones (right), 32 x 64 inches. Image courtesy of Lee Stalsworth, Fine Art through Photography, LLC Courtesy American Federation of Arts.



Figure 3.1.



Figure 3.2. Rebecca Belmore, *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother*, 1991. Performance with a woven megaphone, multiple locations. Images courtesy of Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity and of the artist.



Figure 4. Demian DinéYazhi', John Henry, and Tracy Shclapp, *Make Native America Great Again*, 2016. Letterpress printing on repurposed Indian reservation map.



Figure 5. Demian DinéYazhi', (Left to right), *KA-HA-TENI KAY-YAH*, [*Native (Native) Land (Land)*], dirt; and *KAY-YAH CAH-DA-KHI TA-GAID AH-CHANH*, [*Land (Land) Wound (Wound) Without (Without) Self Defense (Protect)*], 2016. Dirt and coal.



Figure 6.1. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Nuance of Sky #4*, *Neuf* series, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 44 inches. Image courtesy of Bockley Gallery.



Figure 6.2. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Nuance of Sky #1*, *Neuf* series, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 44 inches. Image courtesy of Bockley Gallery.



Figure 7.1



Figure 7.2



Figure 7.3. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native Hosts*, 1988. 3 of 6 aluminum signs installed in City Hall Park in New York City.



Figure 8.1. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Cross for Diné*, 2009. Pastel on rag paper, each sheet 30 x 22 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8.2. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Cross for Tepoztlan*, 2009. Pastel on rag paper, each sheet 30 x 22 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Do Not Wait for Better Age*, 2017. Monoprint on rag paper, 22 x 15 inches. Image courtesy of Bockley Gallery.



Figure 10. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Defend Sacred Mountains*, 2018. Installation view at Pitzer College Art Galleries. Image courtesy of Ruben Diaz, Pitzer College Art Galleries.



Figure 11. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Defend Sacred Mountains, Bear Butte*, 2018. Ink on rag paper, monoprint. 120 x 44 inches.

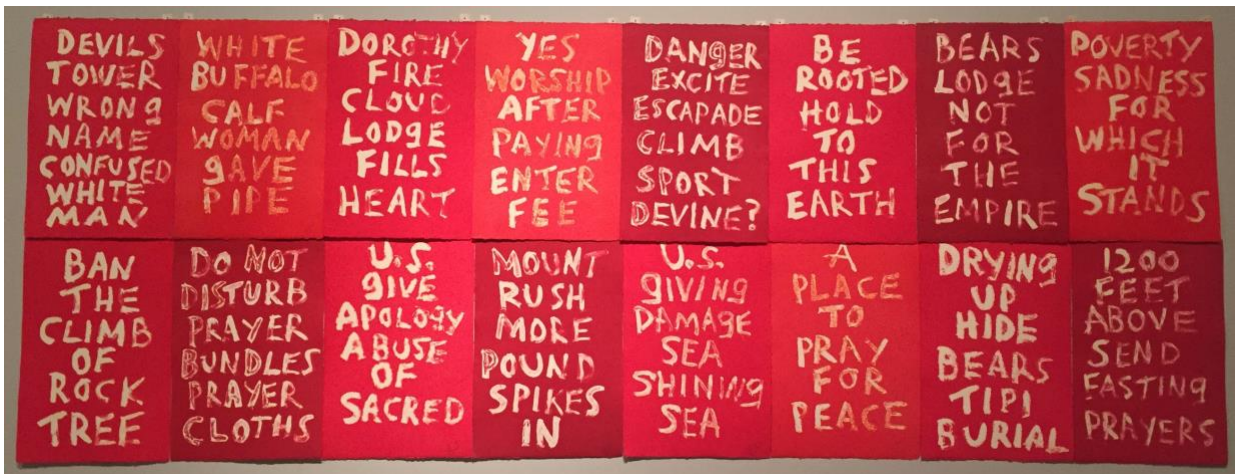


Figure 12. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Defend Sacred Mountains, Bear's House*, 2018. Ink on rag paper, monoprint. 120 x 44 inches.



Figure 13. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Defend Sacred Mountains, San Francisco Peaks*, 2018. Ink on rag paper, monoprint. 120 x 44 inches.



Figure 14. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Defend Sacred Mountains, Mauna Kea*, 2018. Ink on rag paper, monoprint. 120 x 44 inches.

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