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To cite this article: Christine Howard Sandoval & Jessica L. Horton (2023): 'Genocide is climate change': a conversation about colonized California and Indigenous futurism, World Art, DOI: [10.1080/21500894.2023.2183520](https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2023.2183520)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2023.2183520>



Published online: 09 Mar 2023.



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‘Genocide is climate change’: a conversation about colonized California and Indigenous futurism

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(Received 20 September 2022; accepted 19 February 2023)

ABSTRACT

This written conversation unpacks a phrase, ‘genocide is climate change,’ which co-author Christine Howard Sandoval wrote and featured in her video artwork, *Niniwas- to belong here* (2022). The authors discuss scholarship linking the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas to climate change and contextualize the assertion within an expanded archive of the Spanish missions in California. They address Howard Sandoval’s multimedia work in dialogue with Indigenous women’s basket weaving and land care practices, including the cultural use of fire, in order to consider how Indigenous arts can illuminate the intertwined apocalypses of colonization and climate change.

KEYWORDS: Archive; baskets; contemporary art; ecology; Native American; American Indian; weaving; wildfire

The following exchange unfolded during the summer after our first meeting in São Paulo in June, 2022, where we were participants in a Terra Foundation for American Art-funded workshop, entitled *Fertilizing an Empty Future?*. Co-designed by Dominika Glogowski (artEC/Oindustry) and Gabriel Ferreira Zacarias (Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp)), featuring the work of Indigenous artists and activists and multidisciplinary scientists, and attended by graduate students from Unicamp, Universidade of São Paulo (USP), and Universidade Federal de São Paulo (Unifesp), the event aimed to explore responses to ecological destruction across a global North/South divide. The organizers posed questions such as, ‘How can we break with the anthropocentric, reductionist, and mechanistic mindset that

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

is the cause of our contemporary ecological dilemma?’ and ‘How shall we navigate between corresponding and contradicting knowledges, terminologies and approaches to imagine the environment of tomorrow?’ (2022). Howard Sandoval, a multidisciplinary artist and enrolled citizen of the Chalon Indian Nation of California in Bakersfield, gave a keynote address alongside an installation of her video work at the Museu de Arte Contemporanea de USP. Horton, a non-Native scholar working at the intersection of art history and Indigenous Studies, joined the workshop as a Terra Foundation visiting professor while teaching a graduate seminar titled *Indigenous Art and Ecological Futures* for the three universities.

Our respect for each other’s creative and intellectual work preceded the event, anchored in distinct approaches to the history and future of unceded Indigenous lands in colonized California. At the workshop, we explored our shared skepticism toward methods for addressing planetary ecocides that seek to resolve differences and achieve consensus about a singular human path into a sustainable future. We continued our conversation in writing after returning to our residences in Vancouver and Philadelphia, focusing on a haunting phrase that Howard Sandoval wrote and featured in her video, *Niniwas- to belong here* (2022): ‘Genocide is climate change.’ In this resulting essay, we contextualize the assertion within an expanded archive of the California missions that includes Indigenous women’s basket weaving, fire-setting, and other land care practices. We demonstrate how Indigenous arts can illuminate the intertwined apocalypses of colonization and climate change and offer tools to ensure Indigenous futures.

July 14, 2022

CHS: Jessica, language is at the top of mind as I sit down in my studio on this warm summer’s day in the unceded and traditional homelands of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam Nations. Acknowledging that I am here on unceded land of the three host Nations is an ongoing practice. Learning how to speak and write their tribal names is a daily exercise alongside learning how to speak and write words in Chalon; I practice with the flowers and vegetables I grow in my garden in East Vancouver. Chalon and its southern sister languages Mutsun and Rumsen are part of the Penutian language family. The Penutian family of languages include Native languages from California north along the Pacific Coast, through Washington, Oregon, and British Columbia. I find it interesting that my attempt to iterate the tribal names here and at home also gives breath to our long history of kinship.

This summer I am applying my love for and skill with archival research to our Chalon Council’s archive that is simultaneously being digitized by our Council Leader; we are working together to better organize ourselves.

For me, the process has been about learning how much incredible work our tribe has done to recover identity, relationship, and knowledge of our history. It's humbling to see how much has been accomplished by our Elders. Hopefully I will be able to offer support and my skills as an artist.

I was not raised with the guidance of a traditional knowledge keeper, but I did have a close relationship with my grandmother Agnes Feliz. She taught me about medicine plants in her garden, taught me how to fish in rivers, and loved playing pool and card games. She also struggled with the many violences she experienced in her life. I think her alcoholism was ironically also the way she expressed her will to live. My great grandfather Antonio Feliz, my grandma Aggie, and my auntie Norma left me an archive of Bureau of Indian Affairs documents, detailed photo albums of our ancestors, genealogical research, and family stories that detail our migration from Mission Soledad, to San Luis Obispo, and finally to Bakersfield, California. Recovering their stories alongside their negotiation with governmental agencies, silenced cultural knowledge, and forced migrations have been central to my work as a mother, a daughter, and an artist.

July 15, 2022

JLH: Christine, there is a heat warning in effect as I write these thoughts to you from my home office in Philadelphia. Lenapehoking (Lenape land) encompasses my place of residence as well as the campus where I teach, an hour's drive south. 'The University of Delaware occupies lands vital to the web of life for Lenape and Nanticoke, who share their ancestry, history, and future in this region' – these are the opening words of a living land acknowledgement (2021) crafted by myself and other members of the university's American Indian and Indigenous Relations Committee in dialogue with tribal leadership in the Delaware watersheds, in order to begin an actionable path toward justice (University of Delaware American Indian and Indigenous Relations Committee 2021). The process has included primary research into how the institution benefitted from the United States land grant system that expropriated approximately 10.7 million acres from some 250 Indigenous groups to fund colleges with a mandate for agricultural and/or mechanical training. Through the Morrill Act of 1862, 90,265 acres were sold for \$82,853 to build University of Delaware's endowment. The map of these land grabs – and thus the acknowledgement – encompasses unceded Indigenous territories across California, the state where we both grew up (*High Country News* 2020).

From a screen in my home office, I watch you walking across a field in central California. A body camera allows me to follow your deliberate steps, barefoot on cracked, desertifying earth (Figure 1). The dry wind rustles a lone green plant (Figure 2). You pick up a desiccated root, turn

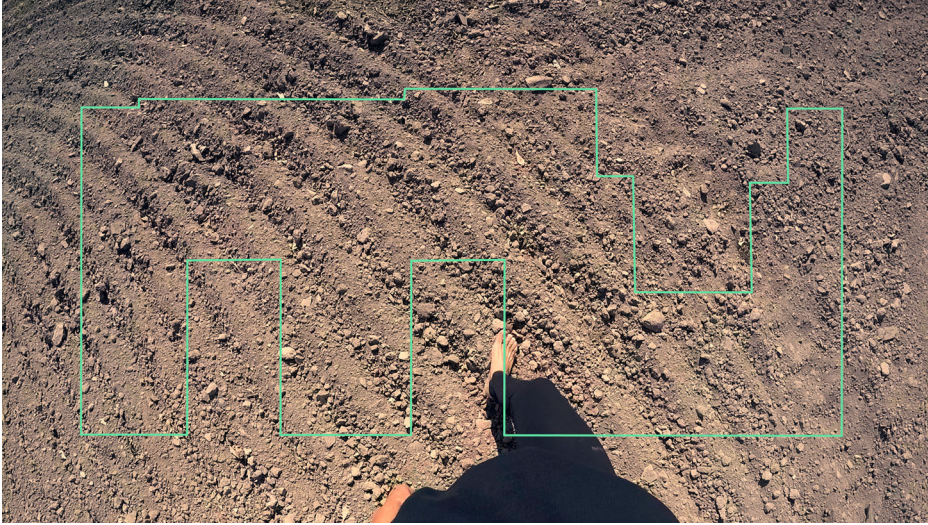


Figure 1. *Niniwas- to belong here* (video still), 2022. Single channel video with audio, TRT 9:01.11 Sound design in collaboration with Luz Fleming. Courtesy of Christine Howard Sandoval and Parrasch Heijnen.

it gently, lay it back on the ground. Later, near aged adobe walls, you repeat the gesture, this time selecting a small bone. It could be the body of a coyote, or a human relative. Reanimated by your hands, these materials bookend my experience of your journey through Mission Nuestra Señora de la Soledad in the video, *Niniwas- to belong here*.



Figure 2. *Niniwas- to belong here* (video still), 2022. Single channel video with audio, TRT 9:01.11 Sound design in collaboration with Luz Fleming. Courtesy of Christine Howard Sandoval.

Here, as you shared with me, colonial agents incarcerated your Chalon Ohlone ancestors, exploited their labor, converted their harvesting grounds into fields, buried them, and bulldozed their resting places to make way for a parking lot (Pedelty 1992, 81).

‘Genocide is climate change.’ Your words appear partway through the video, sharing the screen with the geometrical outline of the Mission Soledad facade – or rather, a laser-cut styrofoam model of the mission, currently on sale as a kit from Amazon for \$24.99 (Figure 3). It’s the ‘easy to assemble’ version of an assignment that we both completed as fourth-graders attending public schools in California: Construct a miniature version of one of the twenty-one missions built by the Spanish on the coast between 1769 and 1823 (Imbler 2019).¹ Growing up in a white family that settled in unceded Pomo territory north of the mission chain, I was unaware of my assigned complicity in this act of educational erasure until many years later. I wonder what consciousness you nurtured when selecting a red marker to outline the eyes of Father Junípero Serra, who is credited as the visionary founder of the mission chain (Figure 4). I’m intrigued that your family saved this striking portrait, which you’ve recently incorporated into creative projects that interrogate and radically expand the archive of California missions.²

I read ‘genocide is climate change’ as a challenge to the truism that climate change will bring about mass human destruction in the future if it is not ‘solved’ in time. The phrase reorders causation and temporality

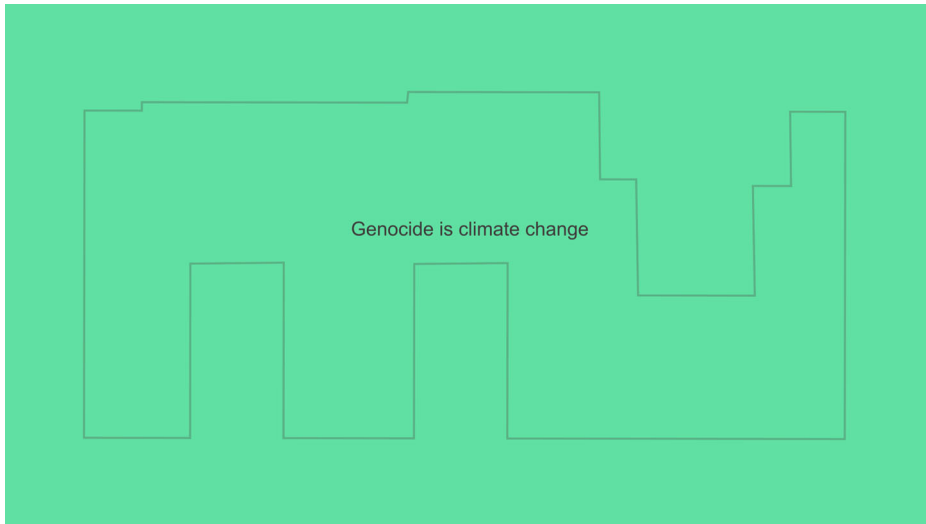


Figure 3. *Niniwas- to belong here* (video still), 2022. Single channel video with audio, TRT 9:01.11 Sound design in collaboration with Luz Fleming. Courtesy of Christine Howard Sandoval.

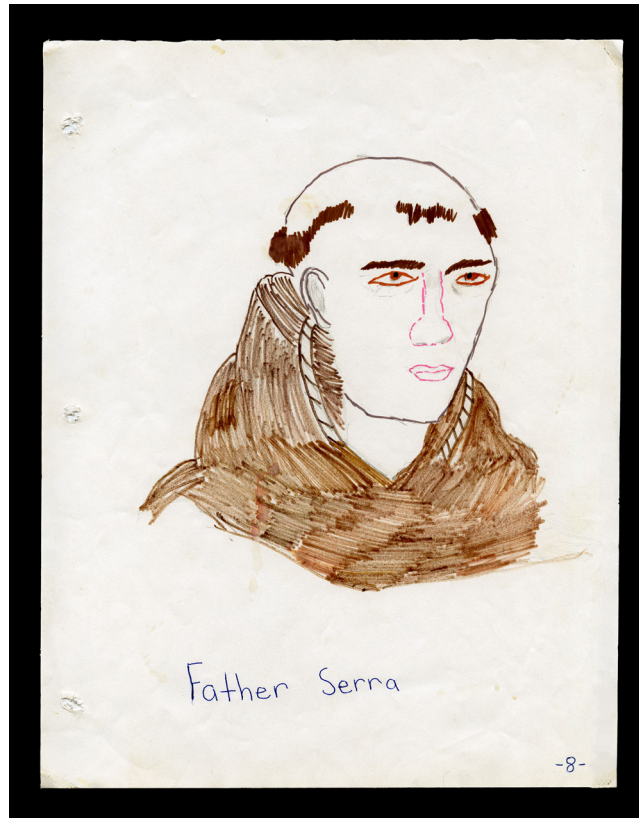


Figure 4. *Mission Report*, drawing of *Father Serra*, 1985. Marker pen on paper, 8.5 × 11 in. Courtesy of Christine Howard Sandoval.

to assert that climate change is a consequence of genocides, past, present, and future. Paired with the faux façade of Mission Soledad, it prompts a reeducation in the colonial histories that connect Native California to Lenapehoking and the rest of the planet. The phrase urges us to see Indigenous peoples' oppression and death the world over as a catalyst for climate chaos, while recognizing that a damaged biosphere is a recipe for further violence. It demands that we unlearn myths about the benevolence of missionary 'fathers' that were until very recently codified in the state's curriculum. That we refuse the universalizing singularity of the 'Anthropocene' to insist on such 'fathers' as perpetrators. That we recenter stories of Indigenous women, whose horticultural knowledge shaped California before and after the land was emptied, tilled, fenced, dammed, and bulldozed by colonizers, in our narratives of climate change. 'Genocide is climate change' also seems to propose that we cannot think of willed acts of human erasure (and survival) apart from the entire web of life – soil and biosphere, root and bone.

July 21, 2022

CHS: When I wrote the words ‘genocide is climate change’ I was re-reading parts of a scientific text that was published in 2019 titled, ‘Earth system impacts of the European arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492.’ The study concluded that the mass death of Indigenous peoples in the Americas during Contact greatly reduced human cultivation of the environment, creating a massive decline of CO₂ in the atmosphere. The environmental shift accelerated a climate change event now known as The Little Ice Age, which lasted for about 500 years (Koch et al. 2019).

‘Genocide is climate change,’ as it appears in *Niniwas-to belong here*, is meant to dig into the site itself and how the barrenness of the land can be understood as a result of genocide. The first chapter of the video is filmed in what is believed to have been the traditional ‘Native village’ while the mission was being built by enslaved Coastal Indians; at least this is what the Catholic caretakers and docents of Mission Soledad teach their visitors. However, this was not a traditional village site for the Esselen or the Chalon or any of the other tribes who were transferred to Mission Soledad. The site was a native village as much as prisoner camps are cultural centers. The currently barren and plowed farmland at the border of Mission Soledad can be considered a liminal space for the transfer of bodies as the walls of the mission were being erected. It is in this place that I reflect on how the removal of an element within the complex ecosystem of Turtle Island, the Native population, triggered a massive 500-year freeze on the opposite side of the globe. It is in this place that I want to consider the consequences of the abrupt and violent disruption of active ancient modes of coexistence not only for Native people, but for the more-than-human kinships that were affected, including the planet itself. ‘Genocide is climate change’ addresses the intentional destruction of a people, in whole or part, as a force that fundamentally alters the climate and the ecosystem of the entire Earth.

As of January 16, 2020, United States Code, Section 1091 of Title 18, explains Genocide (n.d.) as ‘violent attacks with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.’ The United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect elaborates that the term was first introduced ‘by Polish lawyer Raphaël Lemkin in 1944 in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. It consists of the Greek prefix *genos*, meaning race or tribe, and the Latin suffix *-cide*, meaning killing.’ My assertion ‘genocide is climate change’ proposes an update to this definition by refocusing on Indigenous ecological practice and consciousness. If the term ‘genocide’ can be officially expanded to include the interspecies kinships destroyed by colonization, can we then also acknowledge that war, capitalism, and fascism are instigators of climate change?

July 27 2022

JLH: On October 8, 2017, a fire raced through Pomo homelands in Redwood Valley, California, driven by 70 mph winds that toppled electrical lines. My father, a Vietnam veteran, hollered, 'I'm in the war again!' before losing his eyebrows to a fight with the flames. The Redwood Complex Fire killed nine people and destroyed roughly one quarter of the homes in the rural community where I grew up (St. John 2017). It was but one of the many megafires that torch California annually and serve to dramatize climate change as an apocalyptic battlefield in news media. My dad unwittingly voiced an imagination in which fire has been criminalized, militarized, and defined as an agent of war, a threat to white middle class property that must be contained at all costs.

As a scholar of Native North American art, I was drawn in the wake of the 2017 events to research an alternative understanding of *fire as family*. This is a phrase spoken by Yurok fire manager Elizabeth Azzuz, who is participating in the revitalization of cultural burning and basket weaving in Yurok homelands to the north of Redwood Valley. In *Niniwas- to belong here* and in my (Horton 2021) essay, 'Fire Oppression: Burning and Weaving in Indigenous California,' we independently quote M. Kat Anderson's *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*, noting that across California, fire-setting has long played a critical role in Indigenous women's cultivation of plants for baskets, medicine, food, ceremony, and the mitigation of larger fires (2021; 2005). The distortion at work in rebranding fire, an agent of growth, creativity, and kinship, as an enemy of war, dates to the earliest years of colonization in California. The first official policy of fire oppression (my take on 'fire suppression') was instituted at the Spanish missions in coastal Chumash territory in 1793, along with guidelines for the corporal punishment of elderly women who dared set fire to fields deemed valuable for agriculture and animal pasture. The criminalization and militarization of fire was again formalized after California statehood in 1850, setting the standard for fire policy nationally and around the world.

The long violence of California's colonial fire regimes does not register in the United Nations' definition of genocide. Yet fire oppression is a significant factor in the willed destruction of Indigenous horticulture and population across California, as well as the explosive release of CO₂ from the megafires that both index and accelerate climate change today. Robyn Maynard wrote to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson about the incineration of land in California, British Columbia, and Pará, Brazil in a beautiful book you recommended to me: 'These forest fires, like the pandemic, are not tragedies with no author. ... In today's skylines, we are witnessing the unfinished catastrophes of ecocide and genocide' (2022, 241).

Contextualized by your larger artistic project, these shared concerns prompt me to wonder: What else would be revealed if we were to privilege an expanded archive of the California missions (including unofficial and more-than-human records) as an archive of climate change? And what more still might we learn by locating Indigenous women's arts at the center of the inquiry?

Because they are made of land cultivated by Native hands, Indigenous baskets are a compendium of radical changes to California ecologies since the earliest moments of colonization. They also demonstrate weavers' brilliant adaptations to bring about healing and reciprocity with damaged homelands. Near my childhood home, the Grace Hudson Museum and Sun House in Ukiah displays Pomo vessels alongside photographs and paintings of the mostly women who wove them. The retired museum director, Sherrie Smith-Ferri, a member of the Dry Creek Rancheria Band of Pomo Indians and a descendant of Coast Miwok, has spent a lifetime caring for the archives of these makers and publishing their stories. From her I learned that in the midst of the Victorian 'craze' for Native baskets at the turn of the twentieth century, several Pomo communities were empowered to buy back parcels of their dispossessed land, creating a foundation for cultural transmission in the wake of genocidal policies that accompanied California statehood (1996).³ During the 2017 fire, Corine Pearce, a basket weaver and member of the Redwood Valley Little River Band of Pomo Indians, witnessed the devastation of what she called her 'plant family,' members left uncounted in official recordings of loss. 'Oak trees that I harvest cradle basket rims from. ... [A]ll the redbud that I harvested, they're all gone. My basket garden totally burned down.' I met Pearce when she presented her cradle baskets at the museum the following summer. At that time, she was holding community classes in which participants were invited to 'weave what they lost' (2019). In her view, baskets made from oak and redbud are integral to the mutual regeneration of humans and plants. With baskets as teachers, I'm continuously challenged to make art history bigger, to put its tools in the service of understanding colonialism and its wreckage, as well as creative practices of survival and revitalization.

August 1, 2022

CHS: In 'Fire Oppression,' you write, 'Woven from roots, stems, feathers, and shells, baskets assemble more-than-human collectives... [T]hey catalog the radical transformations of colonialism on the habitat and habitus of Native Californians – a process that I argue is driven by conflicting fire imaginaries that differentially define relationships between humans and land' (2021, 67). Your use of 'fire imaginaries' suggests the

possibility to re-imagine our collective relationship to fire, calibrating it towards reciprocity over extraction.

The first Governor of California during the Spanish era, José Joaquín de Arrillaga, wrote a letter to the Padre President of the Missions to instate the first fire control regulation in 1793. He cites a series of complaints regarding the ‘serious damage that results from the fires that are set each year by Christian and Gentile Indians.’ Arrillaga’s image of savage and child-like Native people, specifically the elder women, is used to codify the first laws to ban Indigenous land management practices in California. The proclamation that he wrote accuses the women of widespread damage, childishness, harmful practice, malice, transgression, and threatens Native people with severe punishment (Timbrook, Johnson, and Earle 1982, 129–130). Arrillaga was eventually buried at Mission Soledad. In one of the outtakes for *Niniwas- to belong here* I walk across his burial site, pausing at the edge of the concrete platform that marks the place where his remains are said to be (Figure 5). The fire proclamation is just one of the many formal imaginaries that contributed to the genocide of Indigenous peoples of California, and continues to serve the dominant narrative today.

When I read these documents from the late eighteenth century, I see an alternative imaginary, one where women’s work, spiritual practice, and knowledge is deeply embedded in the land. My reading recognizes the power that women had and how it threatened the colonial apparatus and the regime of private property. The colonial and patriarchal idea of



Figure 5. Video still from outtake footage, artist performing at Mission Soledad, California, 2021. Courtesy of Christine Howard Sandoval.

domesticity and the relegation of women's work to the space of the home was a European fabrication. Native women understood that home is much more expansive than the interior of a set of adobe walls. I learned to read between the lines of archival documents from strong Indigenous women thinkers like Deborah Miranda, whose memoir reads like one long poem of correction and recovery (2012). Deborah has re-created the imaginary of her ancestors, pulling out and resuscitating with great care blades of knowledge that have been lodged in the record for generations, like those adobe bricks that hold our Native plant species such as spike bent-grass, sedge, goosefoot and pigweed, forget-me not, foxtail barley, rush, and pineapple weed (Allen 1998, 43).

There are many traditional stories throughout Turtle Island about the techniques of environmental cultivation. Recently I have started to learn about how Native Californian women are bringing back the practice of traditional fire management, including members of the Karuk and Amah Mutsun tribes in northern California. The Amah Mutsun, like Chalon, consider the Pinnacles to be a shared sacred homeland, which is included in the designated Amah Mutsun Land Trust zone (Atencio 2020). Our Chalon language shares many similarities with Mutsun. The Chalon word for fire is *šoton* and the Mutsun word for fire as a noun is *sattow* (Warner, Butler, and Geary 2016, 337). Today, the state of California is also starting to benefit from inter-tribal-led fire management groups, like the Indigenous Peoples' Burning Network initiated in 2015 by the Karuk, Yurok, and Hoopa tribes (Sevigny 2021).

August 4, 2022

JLH: In *Niniwas- to belong here*, you pause at the base of a statue of the Virgin Mary in the courtyard of Mission Soledad (La Misión de María Santísima Nuestra Señora Dolorosísima de la Soledad [Mary Most Holy, Our Most Sorrowful Lady of Solitude]). During our public conversation at the *Fertilizing an Empty Future?* workshop in Campinas, Brazil, you shared that, like your own bare feet, those of this Catholic icon touch the earth. Skin on soil conjures not an eternal heaven elsewhere, but Indigenous cosmologies in which the immanent and vulnerable land is a mother. Such knowledges endured assimilation mandates in missions and residential schools in part because Indigenous artists wove Christian crosses into baskets, creating new assemblages of ecology and spirit. You seem to pay homage to such practices with sculptures that encase mission iconography and your ancestors' federal Indian enrollment papers in adobe mud, masking tape, and steel (Figure 6). The woven mounds conjure the inverted forms of twined burden baskets (Figure 7). I wonder if we could consider the syncretic arts of the missions not only as an archive of climate change, but also an Indigenous futurism poised to survive it?



Figure 6. *The Eaters*, 2020. Adobe mud, masking tape, postcard, steel, dimensions variable, photo by Rachel Topham. Courtesy of Christine Howard Sandoval.

August 8, 2022

CHS: Looking at and being with the ruined façades of Soledad have shifted my thinking about the mission sites. I experienced the place as more than just a reminder of our history, and recognized our language and culture in the green that was emerging from the barren field and the melting adobe bricks. In *Niniwas- to belong here*, during the second chapter of the video titled *Lase* or *tongue* in English, I pose a question: ‘If linguistic boundaries are territorial boundaries, can language reemerge from a state of dislocation?’ In asking this question I was thinking about the way that our language is tied to our traditional territories. What happens to original language when its speakers are removed and cut off from original territory? Does the language cease to exist? Do peoples who lose their languages become extinct?

I am just beginning to learn Chalon history. My education is starting with the Chalon archives. I am reading the Elder and General Council



Figure 7. *Stretcher- For The Transportation of Water*, 2021. Adobe mud, tape, steel, wood, wire, 54 × 56 × 27-1/4 in. Courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen.

meeting minutes going back to the 1990s, which is all that has been digitized so far. I am creating a chronological summary of efforts, actions, concerns, changes, etc. that are based on the incredible amount of work the tribe has done for its members. I am also reading all of the historical research and intertribal correspondence and bureaucratic work Chalon has done towards tribal sovereignty. This learning process was made possible through the generous invitation of our Chairwoman Audrey Alvarado. The work is emotional, slow, and very enriching, and I hope it eventually amounts to something that gives back to the community. Through this work I have come to learn that there are many gaps in our knowledge; for example, we do not know where our pre-Contact Chalon village(s) were originally located. Recapturing original teachings requires us to work with the colonial archive, a process that is filled with a sense of melancholy for what was lost and what is required to attempt to recover that knowledge.

There are seeds embedded in the archive that have been left by our ancestors, specifically in the transcription of oral stories that were

recorded from Indigenous informants. An example of this work is the Chalon dictionary, a short list of words that have been extracted from Catholic hymns and prayers that were translated into Chalon during the 1700s for the indoctrination of Indian slaves in the mission. Extracting the words from the Catholic prayers and reassembling the language and phonology was originally the work of anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, and then continued by linguists at the University of Fresno and now by Chalon tribal members (Kroeber 1910). Kroeber founded UC Berkeley's Anthropology Department and is most known for his connection to Ishi, the last known member of the Yahi, and his predilection for collecting Indigenous human remains. I have been thinking about how imagination is a force in the work I am doing to understand and pronounce Chalon language. Drawing the symbols of the phonological guide that we have, which is something that I am doing in my studio currently, is part of the process of learning to read. Imagination is also at play in Kroeber's scientific writing as he documented and analyzed languages that he claimed were already extinct. He wrote the definitive text on our culture which categorizes us as extinct due to death or miscegenation during Mexico's occupation.

A lesser-known fact is that Kroeber is also the father of science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin. The echo of her father's imaginary is most obvious and transparently at play in her novels, which detail very complex interplanetary Indigenous societies set in the future. Her novel *Always Coming Home* is set in California and directly cites California Indigenous belief systems ([1985] 2019). In her introduction to an earlier novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin writes, "The scientist is another who prepares, who makes ready, working day and night, sleeping and awake, for inspiration. As Pythagoras knew, the god may speak in the forms of geometry as well as in the shapes of dreams; in the harmony of pure thought as well as in the harmony of sounds; in numbers as well as in word' (1982, 8). Data and words become vehicles for the imagination, both for the science fiction writer and the scientist. She continues, 'I talk about the gods, I am an atheist. But I am an artist too, and therefore a liar. Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth. The only truth I can understand or express is, logically defined, a lie. Psychologically defined, a symbol. Aesthetically defined, a metaphor' (1982, 8). I find it interesting that she wrote and inserted this introduction eight years after the book was first published, and that she felt compelled to argue the right of the science fiction writer to be an agent of lies that are also truths. I have thought about the possibility of Le Guin's writing as an extension of her father's work. Kroeber, a linguist who specialized in California Indigenous languages, epitomized anthropology's use of language and observation to fabricate Indigenous erasure.

In a strange web of historical and artistic connection, I am in dialogue with Kroeber and Le Guin, just as I am also in dialogue with my ancestors,

both when I am reading Chalon words and while I walked the ground at Mission Soledad during the filming of *Niniwas- to belong here*. I wonder if this is what you mean by ‘the syncretic arts of the missions’ – that my work attempts to comprehend the seemingly contradictory condition of Chalon identity, that we are an uneasy combination of both the colonizer’s and Chalon cultural formation while also being true and authentic as Indigenous people?

August 24, 2022

JLH: When I read Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* in college, I was inspired by her utopic feminist vision of a planet in which men and women were not organized as a dualism, but united in the same body. But why locate that idea in an otherworldly space of the future, when multiple and fluid genders have been the lived reality of the Majority World for most of human presence on this earth? When I think about Indigenous futurisms, I am reminded of an account by Potawatomi scholar Kyle P. Whyte, in which the spiraled shape of Native temporalities enables living peoples to have an ongoing dialogue with ancestors (2019, 228–229). His futurism does not subscribe to the fear of a world-ending apocalypse to come, nor the avant-garde fantasy of imagining an entirely novel technological and cultural future. It is presaged by the ingenuity of ancestors, who already survived numerous apocalypses of colonialism and developed adaptive tools and wisdom for generations to come. Whyte doesn’t mean that contemporary peoples are held to replicating verbatim the cultural forms from the past, an impossible demand in the service of a colonial fantasy of authenticity. The spiral enables proximity and relationship, not sameness. To me, your work of reading colonial archives for the seeds of ancestral knowledge, coupled with exercises of the imagination necessary to activate language and practices in a lived space following waves of genocide and displacement, rhymes with Whyte’s account of the spiraled time of Indigenous futurism.

At the same time, I don’t mean to exclusively credit contemporary artists for articulating Indigenous futurisms. When I spoke of ‘syncretic arts of the missions,’ I meant to relate your work to the creative forms that women made to survive the imposition of Catholicism, which often involved hinging Indigenous spiritual and ecological knowledges to Christian iconography. I think that baskets are among the clearest expressions of an historical Indigenous futurism because they are so brilliantly adept at holding prior systems of knowledge together inside the carceral space of the missions, guaranteeing those practices a future. From them it is possible to glean environmental management techniques, embodied weaving practices, more-than-human kinships alive in basketry materials, and spiritual iconographies. For example, the mission padres wore wide-brimmed



Figure 8. Padre's hat made of grass, Chumash, late eighteenth century. Sedge root, bulrush root, 2.76 × 16.3 in (7 × 40 cm). Collected by George Goodman Hewett, The British Museum, London, United Kingdom, VAN.196.

hats woven from local plants and decorated with crosses (Chavez 2017, 101–102) (Figure 8). Such items are evidence that women quickly learned the new colonial system and bent its rules to hold council with their own ancestors. Their arts indexed the cultural and ecological transformations of colonized California, the very changes that accelerated the climate crisis and are fueling megafires and floods from Canada to Brazil. So, I think that baskets are futurist in at least two senses: They have weathered apocalypses that have occurred on a cyclical pattern since contact, and they have established hard-won continuities with ancestral knowledges to withstand devastations in the rotation to come. Coiled baskets are literally three-dimensional spirals, their structure and imagery cohering because the weaver kept returning to stitch a new layer to the previous one.

Christine, you may remember that during the discussion following your keynote in São Paulo, a woman spoke about rivers as orienting devices in her native Amazonia. She was born in Santarém at the confluence of the Amazon and Tapajós rivers. In her final essay for the *Indigenous Art and Ecological Futures* seminar, this student, Jéssica de Miranda Matos, offered a reading of contemporary Santa Clara Pueblo sculptor Rose B. Simpson's work *Genesis*, a life-size clay sculpture of a mother

clutching a newborn, through the lens of her own people's cosmology. Growing up, Matos was taught that 'nothing is separate from the land.' There were 'beginnings and continuity: as if the clay, the animals, the earth, the rivers, the forest, and the birth of a human baby were intrinsically related to ... the interdependent flow of life and death of all living beings on earth.' Waterways and landforms contain original instructions for harmonic coexistence, including the necessity of recognizing 'other beings as subjects.' But creation stories, perhaps because they adapt with each telling, are also maps for navigating future traumas, worlds turned upside-down. The sculpted woman and child bear marks in their clay-skin, perhaps scars passed down from wounded ancestors and land (2022). Like icons of the Virgin Mary, the mother is sanctified by a halo – only it is made from a vehicle's clutch plate (Barrientos 2022). As Matos beautifully put it, '*Genesis is the beginning of becoming. A beginning full of the past*' (2022).

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CHS: Walking the ground barefoot in the tilled and barren section of the mission, the winds were strong enough to push me over and to force me to lower my body closer to the ground in order to balance. The tilled lines in the soil were unbroken except for the occasional green shoot, which felt emergent and ancient simultaneously. Those tilled lines curved, looping across the expanse of the field; the beginning of a spiral. The field led to the entrance of the ruins of the original mission facade where only the bottom halves of the walls remain, melted and fragmented by the floods that inundate the Central Valley every 100–220 years. Geologists have found evidence of recurrent floods that destroyed much of the original mission building in 1828, only 37 years after it was first erected (Mendoza 2014). I have been able to deepen my understanding of this recurring flood thanks to the essay you shared from journalist Tom Philpott (2020).

When I am running my hand along the melted adobes in *Niniwas- to belong here*, I am feeling bits of objects poking out from their worn surfaces, I am noticing with my body the breaks between bricks, the stacked patterns, and I am realizing that the construction is a living art work and possibly the truest form of a monument because it will ultimately go back to the land.

Notes

1. The assignment, encoded in the state curriculum since the 1960s, was removed in 2017, but evidently teachers have continued to use it (Imbler 2019).
2. An enlarged version of this portrait appeared in *Archival – for Rosario Cooper and my 10 year old self*, a public installation at Yaletown – Roundhouse

Station as part of Howard Sandoval's solo exhibition, *A wall is a shadow on the land* at Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, 2021.

3. Smith-Ferri discusses the formation of *yokaya* or Yokayo Rancheria, *xaabé maath'ólel* or Middle Creek Rancheria, and Coyote Valley Rancheria (2016).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Christine Howard Sandoval is a multidisciplinary artist whose work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including at Museu de Arte de São Paulo (Brazil), The Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver, BC), Oregon Contemporary (Portland, OR), Designtransfer, Universität der Künste Berlin (Berlin, Germany), El Museo Del Barrio (New York, NY), and Socrates Sculpture Park (Queens, NY). She has had solo museum exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Diego (2021) and Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (2019, as Mellon Artist in Residence at Colorado College). Howard Sandoval has been awarded numerous residencies including UBC Okanagan, Indigenous Art Intensive program (Kelowna, BC), ICA San Diego (Encinitas, CA), Santa Fe Art Institute (Santa Fe, NM), and Triangle Arts Association (New York, NY). Her artworks can be found in the Hammer Museum and at Forge Projects (NY), and also represented by Parasch Heijnen (Los Angeles, CA). She currently lives in the unceded territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam First Nations. She is Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Praxis at Emily Carr University (Vancouver, BC). Howard Sandoval is an enrolled member of the Chalon Indian Nation of California in Bakersfield.

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