

# NEWS

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# VISUALIZING GENOCIDE: INDIGENOUS INTERVENTIONS IN ART, ARCHIVES, AND MUSEUMS

Edited by Yve Chavez and Nancy Marie Mithlo

University of Arizona Press, 2022, 296 pp, \$35

Reviewed by Ishmael Elias



THOUGH ITS TITLE MAY SOUND LIKE A HISTORICAL THEATER OF THE GROTESQUE, *Visualizing Genocide: Indigenous Interventions in Art, Archives, and Museums* is actually a collection of essays co-edited by professors Yve Chavez (Gabrieleno Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians) and Nancy Marie Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache).

Originating from a session chaired by the co-editors at the 2018 College Art Association conference, this volume is an expansion of the conference session, offering visual and written decolonial strategies from the personal perspectives of the contributors. The book is broken into three parts: “Reclaiming Space Through Presence Making,” “Control of Historical Resources, Reappropriation,” and “Embodiment and Performance.”

The first section speaks to the “theater of the grotesque” notion mentioned at the top of this piece. Rather than address the “hard truths of colonization” by visually traumatizing the viewer, the artists instead incorporate signature icons and create histories that focus on decolonizing through Native visibility, reclamation of place and space, and cultural values and beliefs. The pieces forgo the mainstream expectations to “wait for the oppressor to recognize harm,” “seek to include the perpetrator in the frame,” or “anticipate reconciliation.” This concept is well-illustrated in Chavez’s essay, “Remembering Our Ancestors: Photographing Mission San Gabriel’s Cemetery,” in which she provides a visual analysis of historic and contemporary photographs of Mission San Gabriel’s cemetery and historic *campo santo* (burial ground) “to deconstruct the layers of colonization, religious accommodation, and resilience that spaces embody.”

The two photographs she uses are Charles Pierce’s (1861–1946) *San Gabriel Mission Cemetery Where Several Thousand Indians Are Buried* and George Washington Hazard’s *Cemetery at San Gabriel Arcangel*. Both are black-and-white scenes, which may represent “dead Indians” to some as well as “a distant and romantic” era in California’s history. To others, however, it is a reminder that the Tongva and other California Native peoples survived genocide and that the cemetery is a space of remembrance and resistance.



*San Gabriel Mission Cemetery Where Several Thousand Indians Are Buried*, Charles Pierce (1861–1946).

Part II—“Control of Historical Resources, Reappropriation”—focuses on reclaiming visual records of the past, including items such as maps, photographs, and treaties. The artistic strategies used in this section include overlaying, repurposing, collage, and reconfiguration.

“Embodiment and Performance” is the third part of the work and focuses on “the physicality of participation” in genocidal histories in roles such as museum visitor, viewer, central actor, or community member.

The conclusion of the work is Mithlo’s essay on Yuchi-Muscogee/Creek artist Richard Ray Whitman’s signature work *Street Chiefs*, which depicts homeless Oklahoma men in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Readers may find, to varying degrees, that one of the most impactful aspects of this volume is its ability to inspire. The usual dread that accompanies having to confront colonial paradigms in mainstream museum exhibits is nullified due to the decolonial strategies or “Indigenous interventions” mentioned in the book’s subtitle. Accompanied with the intellectual, yet approachable, analyses of the artworks discussed, this method of “visualizing genocide” paves a way for the future through creatively unpacking the past.