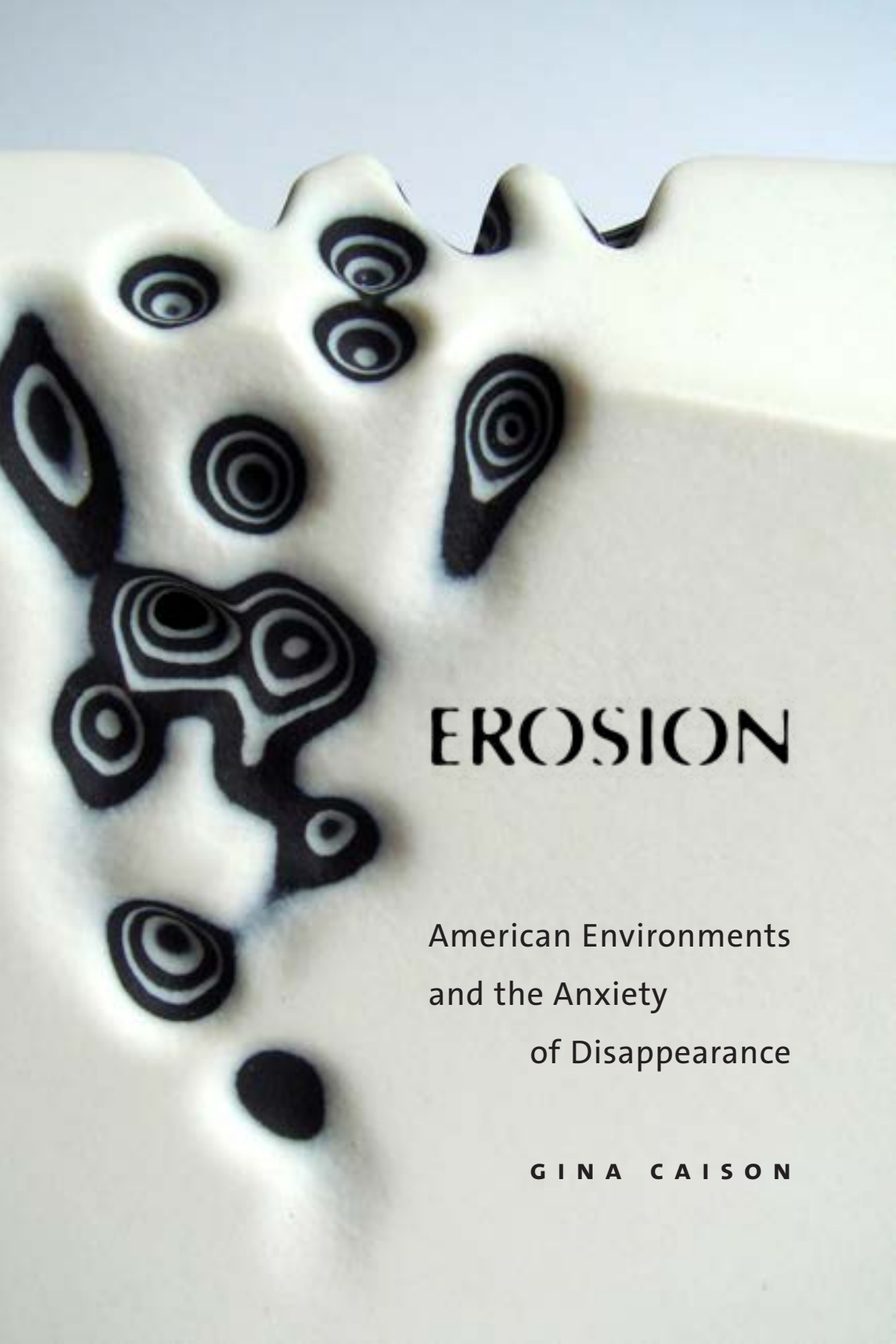




EROSION

American Environments
and the Anxiety
of Disappearance

GINA CAISON

EROSION



BUY

EROSION

American Environments and
the Anxiety of Disappearance

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For
Fannie Mae, who loved poetry

and
Anchor, who loved the soil

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Acknowledgments

I've heard it said that one can always tell an author's first book from her second because in the first, the author thanks everyone she has ever met, and in the second, the acknowledgments list is a much tidier, direct affair. I find myself somewhat at odds with this trend. As I age, I see that my list of debts has only grown longer and my gratitude wider. There is no solitary scholarly life. The collaborations and conversations are what make this work both possible and worthwhile. The best parts of this book are owed to the following people and organizations; the shortcomings are mine alone.

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Last, none of the words I have written here matters if I do not honor in some material way the work of those Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations who are fighting for a better way to live on their homelands and waters. Therefore, my royalties from *Erosion* will be donated equally to three Indigenous-run organizations and projects doing this work: the Rou Dalagurr Food Sovereignty Lab and Traditional Ecological Knowledges Institute in northern California, the Land Memory Bank and Seed Exchange in southern Louisiana, and the Waccamaw Siouan Tribe's Tribal Healing Garden in southeastern North Carolina. Indeed, academic works rarely make anyone a lot of money, but I hope that in some small way this book contributes to more than simply a conversation. Thank you for reading and for considering your own way you might do the same.

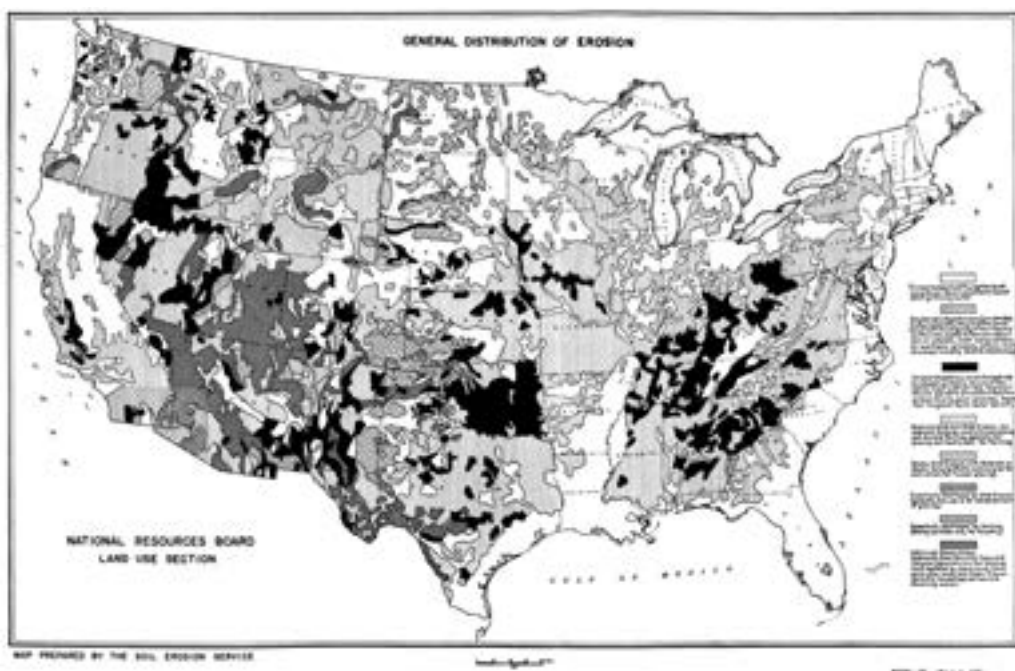
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Introduction: Erosion

THE IDEA FOR THIS BOOK resulted from an encounter with a map. When I first saw the US National Resources Board map of soil erosion assessment from 1934, while researching literature set in southern Georgia, I was struck by how the locations marked as high-concern areas aligned nearly perfectly with areas closely associated with specific conflicts over theft of Indigenous homelands (figure 1.1). In several cases, these areas marked in black, indicating “Severe Sheet Erosion with Gullying,” are familiar to those who study the bookended nineteenth-century policies of Removal and Allotment: the US Southeast of Georgia and Alabama, eastern Oklahoma, and farmlands of the upper Mountain West. Notably, however, the places marked in white, where erosion was deemed “unimportant,” are all spaces that are often cited today for their acute erosion concerns: southern Louisiana, the Chesapeake Bay and



1.1 *General Distribution of Erosion, 1934. From National Resources Board, Report on National Planning.*

eastern North Carolina, portions of northern California, and low-lying lands in South Florida. Interestingly, another factor that many of these “erosion-unimportant” locations share is that they are spaces where Indigenous peoples ranging from the Hupa to the Seminole and from the Houma to the Lumbee had managed to hold on to their homelands either collectively or individually. Therefore, this 1934 map became instructive in at least two ways.¹

The first and perhaps most obvious conclusion is that places where settler agriculture moved into a region saw extensive topsoil erosion soon afterward. For example, as federal and state governments carried out southeastern Indigenous Removal and as white settlers cleared forestland for cash monocrop agriculture, the soil washed away. Following the allotment of tribal lands in Indian Territory and the creation of Oklahoma statehood, a similar phenomenon occurred. As this book demonstrates, these connections have been both directly and tacitly acknowledged by soil scientists since at least the 1930s and in some cases even as far back as the first half of the nineteenth century. The second conclusion this

map allows us to draw relates to how one defines *unimportant*. The marking of erosion as unimportant in certain locations does not necessarily indicate that erosion was not occurring in those places. Rather, it's possible to infer that the unimportance of erosion in these spaces had much more to do with the question of importance *to whom*. For example, we know that sites such as southern Louisiana and the Eastern Seaboard are experiencing profound battles with erosion and sea-level rise today. However, in 1934, if the people affected by these erosion challenges were largely Indigenous people in rural eastern North Carolina or Native people living at the end of the bayous, it seems likely that the federal government did not consider these concerns to be of immediate importance for their considerations of agricultural productivity in the 1930s. The perceived erosive threats, then, reflect not only values in place but also values in time. Together, these two conclusions indicate the idea that frames this book's larger concern: a careful analysis of when and how some people evoke ideas of erosion and what that means for a nation built on stolen Indigenous homelands.

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This Natural Resources Board map from 1934 illustrates how fundamentally questions of erosion are tied to settler colonialism in both geological and narrative arenas. As a geological phenomenon, erosion is both mapped and lived—a geological process with a narrative footprint. It is limited neither to oceanfront towns (just ask US Great Lakes residents) nor to shores at all (think of the Dust Bowl). Importantly, it is not wholly a positive or negative process. Geologically speaking, some sites need to erode to produce sediment in others.² While the humanities have seen a recent investment in narratives of climate change and the grand scales of the Anthropocene, this project zooms in to examine a smaller scale: the individual particles of soil. Although a handful of popular scientific texts have engaged questions of erosion, these texts—written largely by geologists—tend to neglect the very real humanities questions of land attachment and narrative affect that undergird much of colonial history and contemporary nationalism.³ In other words, erosion narratives are almost always about who claims the material earth to what ends and whether or not those claims are recognized.

Additionally, erosion narratives often merge with erasure narratives. Many non-Indigenous narratives of ecological crises simultaneously draw from and erase the Indigenous dimensions of the story or subsume Indigenous loss into white pathos. Conversely, many Indigenous-authored texts about erosion disrupt previous discussions of land loss that are tied to anxieties about the disappearance of whiteness and white supremacy. These works also challenge a romantic logic of incorporation. To demonstrate this difference in perspective is not to supplant one holistic myth with another but rather to engage

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Stephen Nathan Haymes's concept of "small ecologies," which LeiLani Nishime and Kim Hester Williams describe as a concept that attempts to account "for multiple ways of being and multiple scales for conceptualizing the ecological."⁴ This attention to small ecologies establishes this book's organizational logic of focusing on a specific region in each chapter as it faces an erosion event. Furthermore, this attention to the "small" joins the conversation of Elizabeth DeLoughrey in *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, where she asserts, "To parochialize the Anthropocene is to uncover its place-based allegories."⁵ Via critical regional studies, *Erosion* attaches these analyses to the humanities' geological turn to illuminate moments when historical and agricultural contingencies quickly calcify into naturalized narratives of place. Thus, these erosion narratives become "sense of place" formulations within regional studies that produce troubling affinities with settler colonial practices. These practices include what Kevin Bruyneel calls the "*work of settler memory*," whereby settler society alternately remembers and disavows "Indigenous political agency, colonialist dispossession, and violence toward Indigenous peoples" in order to maintain its own narratives across the multiple ideological registers of a colonialist nation-state.⁶ In this way, I argue that erosion texts help us think critically about the *conserve* in *conservatism* and *conservation*—two words that might evoke different US political alignments—in deeply local contexts.

To pursue this argument across the following chapters, I center three guiding questions. The first question is, How much of contemporary humanities-based Anthropocene rhetoric is born of settler colonial anxiety about the physical disappearance of stolen Indigenous homelands? In considering this question, it's useful to turn toward work from scholars such as Kathryn Yusoff, who explains in her preface to *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, "The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence. The Anthropocene as a politically infused geology and scientific/popular discourse is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom."⁷ This critique from Yusoff rightly disjoints a temporal fantasy in which all communities are experiencing the ongoing climate crisis in the same way at the same time. Or as put more simply by Eric Gary Anderson and Melanie Benson Taylor, "The Anthropocene unsettles but does not decolonize."⁸ When these Anthropocene concerns are placed in the context of conversations about erosion, the stakes of material land claims come to the forefront all the more vividly. As Métis/Michif scholar Max Liboiron outlines, settlers under Land (capitalized as Liboiron renders it) available in reserve for

settler futures, making erosion a clear threat to such futurity.⁹ In other words, the apocalyptic Anthropocene may only be on academia's tongue because it is finally on settler colonialism's doorstep. Up until now, it was in the blank white spaces on the map where erosion remained unimportant.

These blank white spaces are related to part of Bruyneel's concept of the work of settler memory as it buttresses a posture of settler distress toward crises of the Anthropocene. These blank white spaces call up a concern similar to that of Métis scholar Zoe Todd, who calls for "an examination of art and the Anthropocene as variations of 'white public space'—space in which Indigenous ideas and experiences are appropriated, or obscured, by non-Indigenous practitioners."¹⁰ Repeatedly, the discussions of erosion follow this model, where the specific problems facing Indigenous peoples and homelands become subsumed into a flattened global community that takes no stock of the material history of the settler state's anti-Indigenous attitudes and policies. An erosion crisis exposes the instability of a capitalist settler state dependent on the myth of the individual property owner. If the rendering of Indigenous homelands into property serves as the bedrock of the settler state's wealth and thus its very existence, then erosion becomes not only a material crisis but a slippery metaphor.¹¹ Put another way, the erosion of land is not the erosion of democracy. However, in the ubiquity of these phrases, an uncomfortable lurking tenet of environmentalism in the settler state comes forward whereby the preservation of lands (often rendered as the property of the individual citizen or the national "public") works alongside the preservation of the settler colonial nation as a political entity. It demonstrates what Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena argue when they state that "now the colonizers are as threatened as the worlds they displaced and destroyed when they took over what they called *terra nullius*."¹² In this way, the work of settler memory leaves its footprints in the work of the Anthropocene discourse. As DeLoughrey articulates, "The lack of engagement with postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives has shaped Anthropocene discourse to claim the *novelty* of crisis rather than being attentive to the historical *continuity* of dispossession and disaster caused by empire."¹³ For my part, this book seeks to keep the concepts of novelty and continuity in view in order to demonstrate how a settler anxiety of disappearance often subtends critical and cultural conversations about erosion, particularly within the US context.¹⁴

The next guiding question of this book is, How does literary regionalism shape popular discourse around the geological processes of the earth and the ways humans respond to these changes? As with the first question, much of the answer may be found in considerations of temporal scale and orientation as they relate to narratives of place. As Rob Nixon queries, "Beyond the optical

façade of immediate peril, what demons lurk in the penumbral realms of the *longue durée*? What forces distract or discourage us from maintaining the double gaze across time? And what forces—imaginative, scientific, and activist—can help extend the temporal horizons of our gaze not just retrospectively but prospectively as well?”¹⁵ This looking beyond asks us to think about deep pasts as well as possible emergent or even deep futures. As Nixon continues, “How, in other words, do we subject that shadow kingdom to a temporal optic that might allow us to see—and foresee—the lineaments of slow terror behind the façade of sudden spectacle?”¹⁶ Narrative form is but one imaginative—and occasionally activist—force that helps jostle assumptions of homogeneous empty time as well as the limits of only understanding events by delineations of “crisis.” When writers attempt to narrativize specific regions, they often use the constriction of space to move more capaciously across time, drawing from historical narratives in order to predict futures for the places they center. Moreover, over and above local color, literary regionalism also allows writers to show repeating historical patterns and the ways these prescribe various future options. These options have long been complicit in the settler futurity that Liboiron outlines, but texts that center place as conceit can also be used for imagining productive futures, particularly in the work toward Indigenous homelands reclamation. This possibility for place echoes Kristina Lyons’s reflection on how the campesinos and Indigenous communities that partnered in her work on soil science oriented her toward the idea of “knowing where one is standing.”¹⁷ In this way, literary regionalism across multiple registers complicates and extends Nixon’s structure of time, which remains relatively linear in his theorization, by showing cycles, repetitions, and recurrences across a spiralic time grounded in a specific location.¹⁸ Together, these varying registers engage audiences to ask themselves if they know where they are standing.

Moreover, the question of literary regionalism (an approach that might appear to some as a bit retro for the present moment) animates a productive return to critical grounds that some might assume have been well covered. It allows critics to create a framework for analysis that challenges tacit assumptions around spaces of exceptionalism and fantasies of the local and its supposed healing power. While my previous work has focused more directly on southeastern Indigenous contexts, the methodologies of interrogating the residue of regional fantasies across the nation offer a broader application that undoes narratives of a “we” who experience crisis in temporal lockstep and, further, conceptions of an “out there” where those facing crisis are not “us” but rather a “them” quarantined safely at a remove, brought under by their own supposed folly of location choice. To this critical extent, this endeavor is in

conversation with that of scholars such as Anderson and Taylor who work to understand the “challenges of regionalizing a global crisis” as well as with that of DeLoughrey, who argues that even though “global climate, a planetary phenomenon, is not reducible to local weather,” nonetheless “scalar telescoping follows a long tradition in postcolonial studies in which universalizing narratives are troubled, contested, and provincialized.”¹⁹ A focus on literary regionalism, then, can challenge narratives of a universalizing “we” of the crisis while still holding space for Scott Romine’s argument about how invented or “fake” regional spaces such as the South *become* “real . . . through the intervention of narrative.”²⁰ As I demonstrate in this book, these narrative interventions work at the level of locale, especially when literary authors attempt to grapple with narratives of land and belonging in which the work of settler memory buttresses the nation through nostalgia for regional particularity across the mainstream political spectrum.²¹ In other words, regions delineated and invented through narratives of settler colonialism, with their various exceptionalist paradigms, often serve to undergird fantasies of a coherent settler national identity and a universalizing “anthropo” identity within the crisis of the Anthropocene.

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The final question I consider traverses more metaphysical territory even as it appeals to a literal sense of groundedness: To what extent does the material disappearance of the land following the removal of Indigenous peoples force a recognition of Indigenous knowledges that have long asserted a physical connection between the presence of the people and the presence of their homelands? The popular hashtag #LandBack has gained traction across media platforms ranging from Twitter (X) to the FX series by Sterlin Harjo, *Reservation Dogs* (2021–23), and from the Peacock comedy *Rutherford Falls* (2021–22) to TikTok. Indeed, the return of homelands to Indigenous control is central to the movement for Indigenous sovereignty on this continent. At the same time, when land disappears due to sea-level rise, sediment depletion from damming and river engineering projects, and harmful agricultural practices, what is left to return? This is not to say that control over waterways and shorelines is insignificant but rather to create a more exacting inventory of the myriad ways that settler colonialism has created damage that cannot be simply undone with a transfer of legal title. Moreover, many Indigenous nations and communities across the continent have long asserted the core relationship between the people and the earth given to them by their creator. While some might be tempted to read these knowledge traditions with a skepticism of spirituality born from Western Enlightenment science, a study of erosion tells another story. I argue that when, following Indigenous Removal, erosion and erosive practices have caused the material earth to disappear, it behooves us

to pause and think about what Indigenous knowledges have been trying to tell the rest of the world about landed connections. In addition to offering a core lesson about spiritual and religious responsibilities, it is just as likely that Indigenous lessons about connections between lands and people are also about the human stewardship of the material soil in highly particular places. In the absence of these knowledges developed for thousands of years in a specific place with specific soil and water conditions, settler colonialism has removed the physical land in addition to removing Indigenous peoples.

8 This slippage between land as title and land as soil is one of the core tenets that undergirds this entire project. In many ways, it follows the conceptual recursivity laid out by Robert Nichols in *Theft Is Property!* As Nichols explains in his critique of colonialism and capitalism, “Dispossession can rightly be said to exhibit a ‘recursive’ structure because it produces what it presupposes.”²² He continues, “In a standard formulation one would assume that ‘property’ is logically, chronologically, and normatively prior to ‘theft.’ However, in this (colonial) context, theft is the mechanism and means by which property is generated: hence its recursivity.”²³ In other words, the idea of property is *made* by the act of colonial theft whereby Indigenous peoples become merely “prior owners” of territories, imbricating them politically into a structure of perpetual acknowledgment of the property terms of colonial capitalist exploitation. In this structure any attachment to territory or land becomes one of title and valuation within a Western capitalist context. In this work I attempt to acknowledge this critically slippery territory while also not according it absolute prominence in the totality of an analysis of homelands’ loss and return. I find the phenomenon of erosion one among perhaps many key ways to think both within and without this recursivity. Because material erosion exposes the fiction of land title as coterminous with land existence, it likewise allows some space for critics to loosen the concept of lands as colonial property to acknowledge land as Indigenous homelands.

Therefore, I frequently use the term *homelands* to signal a variety of connections and kinships that an Indigenous worldview might animate via what LeAnne Howe calls *tribalography*, where “Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history) seem to pull all the elements together of the storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieu[s].”²⁴ In this formulation Howe articulates an Indigenous narrative vision similar to Nixon’s call to think both retrospectively and prospectively. These lands of Howe’s tribalography are not simply reducible to the fiction of paper land title. However, the land as soil is

not immune to the manifold desecrations brought about by erosion via settler land mismanagement. Together, these considerations encourage grappling with the stakes of material erosion for those who claim land as property and those who claim it as home.

Together, these three core questions of the book bring into dialogue ongoing concerns about climate change, lost-cause pathos born of white supremacy, the use of narrative to inspire large-scale policy, and the role of Indigenous studies in the traditional disciplinary divides of the humanities. *Erosion* contributes to an understanding of the way that narrative construction and visual framing shape our understanding of planetary crises, including climate change. In many ways, narrative allows humans to experience the necessary affective investment required for action. Alternatively, as I illustrate in the following chapters, narrative can also limit our possible responses as well-worn assumptions of declension narratives involving settler colonialism and lost cause-ism map all too easily onto stories about the demise of the earth.²⁵ Because erosion events often generate a visual archive, I consider each literary text within its larger visual context, as many famous works that I examine—for instance, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *Gone with the Wind* (1936)—exist alongside iconic imagery in the American imagination. Therefore, each chapter places its central texts in dialogue with a visual archive. I make use of the formal features of this visual archive (e.g., sfumato, horizon line, background composition, aerial imagery) to elucidate a reading of the written works. Combined, the visual and literary archives offer a way to understand the legacy of settler colonialism for the soil that takes into account the affective bridges humans have constructed to make sense of both how the earth has been actively changed and how it has refused attempts at human-imposed stasis.

To pursue this analysis, *Erosion* employs two core methodological frameworks: critical Indigenous studies and critical regional studies. While the project speaks to larger theoretical conversations in environmental humanities and American studies, it does so in a way that always foregrounds the methods of Indigenous studies and regional studies together. This allows the book to address the long history of place, as demonstrated by the chapter organization, which zooms in on the literature of particular spaces as they have encountered erosive events over time. I pull together threads from the humanities and earth sciences to demonstrate that how we talk about the dirt matters for how we regard our role as a human species on the planet. At the sixth meeting of the International Soil Conservation Organization, geographer Piers Blaikie called for “an interdisciplinary and multi-level explanation of the

problems of land degradation, allowing for a variety of different perceptions of what the problems are.”²⁶ This project seeks to extend this interdisciplinary conversation into the realm of literary and cultural texts. Importantly, my previous scholarship queries the limitations of traditional periodization for organizing our understanding of American literatures, particularly as that approach engages colonial and Indigenous texts.²⁷ Therefore, this book is equally recursive in its temporal scope in order to more fully grapple with the question of what regionally specific literatures can add to discussions of large-scale planetary events.

10 *Erosion* is grounded within my background as a non-Native scholar trained in a Native American studies department. This fact influences my approach to erosion texts in at least three key ways. The first is that on the basis of work in Indigenous storytelling traditions, I view any given text as a continually informed, dynamic exchange between creator and receiver. Texts are indeed of their moment of telling and/or publication, but they also exist for receivers in their moment of reception. Neither tells the entire truth of the story.²⁸ Together, these two simultaneous truths build a spiralic time of engagement. As Greg Sarris explains of his work with Pomo storyteller and knowledge keeper Mabel McKay, “Remember that when you hear and tell my stories there is more to me and you and that *is* the story.”²⁹ Thus, when I examine an image or a novel, for example, I place the object in its own present and in the ever-shifting present of various receivers across spirals of time. Such an approach paradoxically values and displaces both (new) historicism and affect theory to help us understand how texts make meaning recurrently and recursively over time.

This project’s investment in questions of temporality aligns with work on what Mark Rifkin calls *settler time* and what Kyle Powys Whyte has theorized as *kinship time*. Rifkin’s theories of settler time demonstrate how, in his words, “‘natural’ time appears as if it were a singular, neutral medium into which to transpose varied experiences of becoming, such that they all can be measured and related through reference to an underlying, ‘real’ continuity—a linear, integrated, universal unfolding.”³⁰ The investment of settler societies in creating a singular narrative of unfolding time affects not only how settlers attempt to control and contain Indigenous epistemologies but also how settlers perceive their own existence within the anxiety-inducing crises of the Anthropocene. As Whyte offers, “When people relate to climate change through *linear time*—that is, as a ticking clock—they feel peril and seek ways to stop the worst impacts of climate change immediately.”³¹ This peril generates anxiety. This book argues that this temporal anxiety merges

with settler anxieties about whiteness, nation, and property. As an alternative, Whyte offers kinship time, which in an Indigenous worldview focuses on “establishing and repairing shared responsibilities” and views time as a web of connections, not unlike Howe’s tribalogy.³² In order to think with both theories of settler time and kinship time, this project works with a methodology of layering texts across temporal spirals of meaning as well as considering how these appeals to temporality work within the selected texts. Each of these approaches is consistent with my focus on erosion, for as soil scientist Jo Handelsman explains, “Time influences soil, varying across an enormous scale, from seconds to billions of years.”³³ A focus on erosion doesn’t simply benefit from complicating received wisdom about the structure of time; it necessitates it.

11

This adjustment of temporality is not simply about thinking with a deep time of the Anthropocene that can, in some instances, shuttle too quickly from the settler-state contemporary moment to a universalizing deep global crisis defined by a geological epoch. This risks speeding past the significant time of Indigenous preeminence on the American continent, becoming what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call “settler moves toward innocence”: “those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all.”³⁴ Thus, when discussing the problems of erosion, I often turn to a “deeper” Indigenous history of the continent that seeks to avoid the erasure performed by the universalizing Anthropocenic “deep.”

The second key value I bring from my background in Indigenous studies is that Indigenous studies is not merely an object-focused discipline where Western-based interpretations are applied to Indigenous texts and objects. Rather, Indigenous studies encompasses a set of epistemological and methodological practices for engaging all facets of the world around everyone, settlers such as me included. As complex epistemologies, Indigenous studies methods have the capacity to undertake and support readings of settler-produced texts and objects. Indigenous methodologies can offer rich interpretations and analyses of settler objects, cultures, and practices not because they were designed to or chose to but because the survival of Indigenous peoples and communities often was at stake. Put another way, John Steinbeck cannot offer the tools to understand the Cherokee diaspora of the Dust Bowl. But Cherokee epistemologies offer profound insight into Steinbeck’s misguided vision of 1930s Oklahoma. My commitment to Indigenous-generated theories and methods of interpretation—combined with my allegiance to seeing time and literary periodization beyond a linear, settler-imposed Gregorian calendar—structures

this book's anticolonial approach to understanding narratives of erosion.³⁵ I do not, however, seek to appropriate these epistemologies for my own claiming. Rather, at every turn I seek to engage these epistemologies on their own terms, in their own contexts, and in ways that respect the relationships and responsibilities they necessitate among their own past, present, and future milieus.

12 The third way that my education in critical Indigenous studies informs this study is in my consistent interrogation of my own relationship to the concepts of land and soil that I address. Knowing where one stands includes understanding the stakes of being in that place at that time. Throughout the book I attempt to keep my own complicity in settler colonialism in view without making this interrogation simply about myself. I do not wish to re-center my own identity through a constant recursive nod to my role as settler. Nonetheless, I also work carefully not to collapse my specific response to texts, ideas, and concepts as totalizing. Rather, as a settler I interrogate the mechanisms by which settler colonialism attempts to avoid calling attention to itself. I also foreground the fact that "deconstructing coloniality is *not* the same as decolonization."³⁶ While some of the authors and artists that I examine here are themselves engaged in the active work of decolonialization, my own work in and of itself cannot be considered work in decolonialization, as it emerges from my perspective as a settler scholar. Nonetheless, I am invested in pulling apart the mechanisms by which the settler colonial project attempts to steal material ground. I take the liberty and opportunity to call attention to the way supposedly good white liberal politics (a structure I myself am certainly implicated in, as perhaps are many of my readers) is also buttressed by investments in ongoing settler colonialism. In other words, this project about the soil follows Astrida Neimanis's work on the water to navigate the space between the narcissistically inflected refuge of the "I" and the troubling collapse of the "we" of the Anthropocene. As Neimanis articulates in *Bodies of Water*, "From a feminist perspective, [bodies of water] insist that I find a way of challenging the myth of the 'we' within a *nonetheless mutually implicating* ontology."³⁷ She continues, "As bodies of water, 'we' are all in this together . . . but 'we' are not all the same, nor are we all 'in this' in the same way."³⁸ Settler scholars have the responsibility to work against both a universalizing "we" and a mythically isolated self-referential "I." Instead, as Zoe Todd cautions, settler scholars must interrogate their own efforts at establishing the responsibilities Whyte calls for in his articulation of kinship time without appropriating Indigenous frameworks.

In addition to my training in Indigenous studies, much of my career has engaged with critical regional studies via southern studies. This methodological

commitment means that I am consistently skeptical of any regional exceptionalism, as I alluded to earlier in the discussion of literary regionalism. While southern exceptionalism may be the first and foremost exceptionalism people imagine outside of American exceptionalism, critical regional studies challenges *all* settler-delineated regions as particular fictions generated by and for specific affective uses. Rightly, very few contemporary scholars hold on to Cold War–era narratives of American exceptionalism; however, I argue that taking a close look at considerations of Indigenous histories of place reveals how non-Native scholars can accidentally lapse back into exceptionalist narratives about the United States via southern exceptionalism and an incomplete consideration of Native American literature and history. This insidious creep of American exceptionalism appears today in casual discourse as social media users regularly evoke ideas of “this isn’t my country” in response to Trumpism or suggest that “red state” politics thrives only in southeastern states. In other words, from an Indigenous studies perspective, this *has always been* America, and that America *is everywhere*.

Indeed, American exceptionalism still creeps into our assumptions about literature, and it is buttressed by southern exceptionalism—the belief that the US South represents a distinct region that serves as the exclusive repository of the nation’s worst ideologies and simultaneously its downhome authenticity and hospitality. Most recognize that the idea that the United States is somehow a unique nation founded on the equality of persons is quickly undermined by the fact of the enslavement of Africans and African Americans. However, many times the problems of the nation were and are imaginatively quarantined to the southern states, as Jennifer Rae Greeson demonstrates in *Our South*. Both within the field of US literary studies and more broadly in US culture, the region of the US South is imagined as holding all of the nation’s ills and moral failings, allowing the rest of the nation to float free of its material and psychological investments in enslavement economies and white supremacy. Although scholars may no longer structure their analyses around tenets of progressive fantasies based on American exceptionalism, the idea that the US South and its enslavement system signify an aberration from American ideals unwittingly reinforces exceptionalist narratives. In other words, unexamined southern exceptionalism continually bolsters American exceptionalism even for those who may claim to denounce the latter.

Regional exceptionalism does not, however, stop at the imagined borders of the US South. For example, Curt Gentry narrates an apocalyptic California landscape as it breaks off from the rest of the United States in his novel *The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California* (1968). Despite its clever

geological premise that California floats away in a political-continental drift, Gentry attempts to critique the California fantasy while erasing the material history of settler colonial land management that disproportionately affected Indigenous communities in the state. In other words, the visual and literary erosion narratives of a California dream are not so much about the loss of the land as about the loss of settler colonial prosperity. Thus, even though the erosive mudslides of the California coast may seem a continent away from the vanishing Outer Banks in North Carolina, and though these regionalized communities may have vast differences in wealth and political ideology, the way each space engages questions of erosion and land loss reveals a consistent anxiety about white American disappearance. Put simply, no region is exceptional when it comes to the politics of erosion.

Popular work in geology and the natural sciences, while informative about the physical processes of erosion, frequently relies on clichéd colonial narratives of pathos that reveal more about the cultural assumptions of Euro-American civilization than about geological thought. A prime example of this is David Montgomery's *Dirt*, which, although informative about how Western cultures have engaged questions of the soil, offers little regard for the historical details or stakes of settler agriculture for Indigenous peoples. In more local contexts, Paul Sutter's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* and Mike Tidwell's *Bayou Farewell* also foreground white pathos and regional exceptionalism in attempting to discuss land degradation. Rather than challenging the agrarian fantasies of settler colonialism, these works merely extend them to evoke concern for a vanishing earth via assumptions of white pathos. This troubling trend continues across popular work in soil science, even from respected erosion specialists such as Orrin Pilkey and Rob Young (*The Rising Sea*); climate change writers, including Roy Scranton (*Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*); and legal scholars such as Jedediah Purdy (*This Land Is Our Land*). Scranton and Purdy in particular never pause to consider in their above-named works exactly whose land is "ours" and whose "civilization" is supposedly now tragically coming to an end. The conflation of anxieties over climate change and anxieties over the end of empire and white settler colonialism often leans on the powerful metaphor of erosion, which links land to nation.

Rather than spend too much time outlining the shortcomings of the natural and social sciences for addressing humanities concerns, I would prefer to offer that it's best to follow the lead of Tuck and Yang in the assertion that "decolonization is not a metaphor."³⁹ Tuck and Yang offer, "Decolonization, which we assert is a distinct project from other civil and human rights-based social justice projects, is far too often subsumed into the directives of these

projects, with no regard for how decolonization wants something different than those forms of justice. Settler scholars swap out prior civil and human rights based terms, seemingly to signal both an awareness of the significance of Indigenous and decolonizing theorizations of schooling and educational research, and to include Indigenous peoples on the list of considerations—as an additional special (ethnic) group or class.”⁴⁰ I am not arguing that we decolonize Western-based soil science. Present-day Western soil science—as a field with a genealogy emerging from figures such as Charles Lyell and Hugh Hammond Bennett (as critical as he was of Euro-American agricultural practices)—is a colonial science.⁴¹ This is not to pass judgment on Bennett, who led an immediately necessary agricultural reform movement during the first half of the twentieth century, but rather to acknowledge the incongruity of decolonization with “reform.”

Instead, my cue from Tuck and Yang comes in the second half of their often-quoted phrase. I assert that erosion is not a metaphor. Despite what I prove to be its near-ubiquitous appearance in metaphorical language for the demise of entities ranging from democracy to public health, I want to maintain that this book considers real land that is imperiled by settler colonial practices and real people who are likewise imperiled by that fact. It would be understandable and even tempting as a literature scholar to lean on the vehicle and tenor of erosion as others have done. At times this may seem like an exceptionally small needle that I am trying to thread—how to talk about literature, a medium that relies heavily on metaphor, without making a metaphor of material land abuse. To do so, I pay extra attention to the geological settings, events, and historical contexts of the texts I examine. Additionally, I work to show how metaphors within the text often have a residual relationship to material erosion events just outside the edges of their universe. In other words, I make every attempt to keep the real ground in view.

Despite this imperative, *Erosion* is not necessarily an entry into discussions of the new materialism. As Chadwick Allen describes in *Earthworks Rising*, those trained in Indigenous studies come to discussions of physical matter and objects from perspectives not overdetermined by trends in Western philosophical movements. He writes, “Sustaining the fiction of the ‘newness’ of the so-called new materialisms depends on the foregrounding of European and Anglo-American epistemologies and perspectives and on the continued erasure of relevant Indigenous epistemologies and perspectives.”⁴² Similarly, to some readers the framework I use for understanding questions of erosion may seem akin to concepts of hyperobjects that are nearly invisible in their quotidian ubiquity. While I do not deny anyone’s connective entry point into

understanding the material stakes of my analysis, *Erosion* emerges from Indigenous studies scholarship that has a long tradition of acknowledging the materiality and material agency of objects and forces that exist within various kinship relationships that are included in Howe's "past, present, and future milieu."

16 In my attempt to keep the real ground and the real people who live on it or who were removed from it in view, I have found myself turning time and again to the visual archive that often follows erosion narratives. This was not an area I intended to explore when I initially conceived of this project. My training in Indigenous studies has long encouraged me to listen to the archive rather than speaking my own plans into it. When I looked to the West Coast, Lewis Baltz's landscape photography came up time and again. Similarly, the Dust Bowl is dominated by Dorothea Lange's portraits of migrant farmworkers. If we look back in time, the visual register of the Mississippi Gulf Coast was largely shaped by John James Audubon. And the frequency with which contemporary Indigenous women writers such as Deborah Miranda and Monique Verdin include photographic archives in their written works also began to stand out. Even as I researched geological sites in Georgia such as Providence Canyon, I realized that the same awe and terror that inspired my own literary investigations had also captivated visual artists such as Elizabeth Webb. In this realization, I began to follow a line of inquiry informed by Audrey Goodman's work when she asserts, "Women writers have used photographs to revise and reimagine landscape, identity, and history in the U.S. West. Looking beyond the ideologies of wilderness, migration, and progress that have shaped settler and popular conceptions of the region . . . women's photo-texts disrupt colonial geographies as they tell stories of contact with the land, of encounters between cultures, and of environmental destruction and change."⁴³ Although not all the visual artists I examine are women, I began to think about the interrelationship between image and text as it considers the physical earth within a history of colonialism. As Nicholas Mirzoeff explains in *White Sight*, settler colonial whiteness maintained itself both through the use of the visual as surveillance and through the creation of whiteness as naturalized background.⁴⁴ This framework appears across the archive to buttress the work of settler memory while some Indigenous creators challenge these sight lines to offer a different view.

In the following chapters, I examine visual and written archives from different creators that exist side by side while often presenting profoundly different perspectives on the erosion crises before them. Rather than try to draw one-to-one connections between these visual and written bodies of work, I

instead began to use each form to allow me to read the other. In other words, how does narrative analysis shape an understanding of the visual archive? And how do the formal tools of the visual arts, such as photography, give literary scholars productive language for thinking about written narrative forms? Taking these together, I ask throughout this work how the crisis of erosion draws creators across media forms to try to “capture” disappearing lands.

When this archive of literary and visual texts is read through the logic of settler colonial systems, an uneasy tension emerges between white pathos and what we might think of as the “liberal” politics of earth preservation. As Liboiron says, “Colonial relations are reproduced through even well-intentioned environmental science and activism,” and as K. Wayne Yang argues, “Sustainability is the present story of the settler colonial future.”⁴⁵ To illustrate this, I turn to a book that shares a title with my own: Terry Tempest Williams’s 2019 collection of essays, *Erosion*. In this work Williams subsumes Indigenous knowledges into her own anxiety about the death of American democracy amid Trumpism and the destruction of “public lands.” Crucially, Williams rarely pauses to interrogate the fact that American democracy is, for Indigenous nations, a colonial government and that “public lands” have been stolen from Native nations and held in a collective fantasy of the white possessive *our*.⁴⁶ Leaning heavily on erosion as a metaphor, she writes, “This is a collection of essays written from 2012 to 2019, a seven-year cycle exploring the idea of erosion: the erosion of land; the erosion of home; the erosion of self; the erosion of the body and the body politic. It is a book of competing dreams and actions—the arc between protecting lands and exploiting them and, for many, not seeing them at all; between engaging politics and bypassing them; and the spectrum between succumbing to fear and choosing courage.”⁴⁷ On its face, this is a powerful meditation. Although she occasionally references Indigenous thinkers, Williams subsumes the material erosion of Indigenous homelands into a pathos of vanishing American democracy, as the above description suggests. The conflation of these various losses strikes me as American exceptionalism by simply another, more poetic name.

This general conflation continues across the collection as Williams writes:

People often ask how we can stay buoyant in the face of loss, and I don’t know what to say except the world is so beautiful even as it burns, even as those we love leave us, even as we witness the ravaging of land and species, especially as we witness the brutal injustices and deep divisions in this country—as exemplified by the separation of families seeking asylum at the southern border; the blatant racism

exposed in Charlottesville; or the students' encounter with a Native elder drumming at the Indigenous March in Washington, D.C. The erosion of democracy and decency feels like a widening crack on the face of Liberty.⁴⁸

18 There are number of liberally coded "good politics" gestures in this passage, and yet at its core, this sentiment is awash in a pathos of a lost cause; a quarantining of national problems to the geography of the US South (where notably all of her examples occurred); and a valorization of an America endowed with an unquestioning allegiance to democracy, decency, and liberty.⁴⁹ Williams's erosion metaphor belies the role of the settler state in upholding the very things that this passage suggests are consequences of its demise.

If it seems as if I am beating up on one of the good guys here, it is perhaps because I am. However, I find few things as dangerous as unquestioned "good" politics that rests on the same core foundation that buttresses settler colonialism. So while I agree in many ways with Williams's hope—"May justice rule on the side of deep time and a storied landscape that has been held in place by the roots of indigenous wisdom"—my affirmative nod is stalled by the assertion a few lines earlier:

But so many of us in the United States of America are suffering from amnesia, both forgetting and losing track of who we are and what we stand for as a nation. The American landscape *becomes us*. If we see our natural heritage only as a quarry of building blocks instead of the bedrock of our integrity and cultural identities, we will indeed find ourselves made not only homeless but rootless by the impoverishment of our own imaginations. The cruelty of our ambitions and the ruthlessness of our priorities are undermining the ground beneath our feet. We are in a societal rockslide. Our democracy is collapsing.⁵⁰

The problem here is in the parts of speech. Who is the "our" whose natural heritage she laments? And who is the "us" that the "American landscape becomes"? When authors fail to interrogate the specificity of their language when considering climate issues, they seek reconciliation ahead of accountability, replicating a settler move toward innocence that cannot approach the actual solidarity and relationality needed to address these global problems.

The conflation of an Indigenous wisdom with a settler becoming one with the land, as Williams forwards, reads less like a lesson in conservation than like yet another appropriation of Indigenous knowledge to salve the tacit, lurking

anxiety that the white settler state should not exist. It illustrates what Yang, writing as La Paperson, describes as “settler environmentalism,” which refers to “efforts to redeem the settler as ecological, often focusing on settler identity and belonging through tropes of Indigenous appropriations—returning to the wild man or demigoddess, claiming of one’s natural or ‘native’ self and thus the land, again.”⁵¹ In other words, less than a lament for the land, Williams’s work is a lament for the disappearance of America. Her work illustrates the problem of making erosion a metaphor of (tacitly white) American loss. She asserts, “As westerners, we take our public lands seriously. We know they are our birthright as American citizens.”⁵² This claim to a birthright reveals the disturbing tenet on which much of the contemporary American ecological conservation movement is built: a conservative understanding of American exceptionalism where public lands are a settler birthright. I imagine this point is uncomfortable for many readers, and some might even feel that this argument undermines what at its core is surely a good thing: preservation of land, away from privatized mining and logging companies. I don’t make this critique of Williams’s work lightly. However, as a fellow settler, I argue that there is an ethical imperative to interrogate the root of our core anxieties beyond the facade of the “good” and ask ourselves when we’re fighting for the earth and when we’re simply fighting for the settler state that has made our place on this earth more comfortable for the past four hundred or more years.

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Amitav Ghosh counsels on this issue in his 2016 book *The Great Derangement* when he notes, “In accounts of the Anthropocene, and of the present climate crisis, capitalism is very often the pivot on which the narrative turns.”⁵³ While he offers that he has “no quarrel” with this line of analysis, he continues, “This narrative often overlooks an aspect of the Anthropocene that is of equal importance: empire and imperialism. While capitalism and empire are certainly dual aspects of a single reality, the relationship between them is not, and has never been, a simple one.”⁵⁴ What Ghosh endorses here is the same point that Williams alludes to in superficial ways but never fully interrogates: imperialism—and in the case of the United States, its cousin settler colonialism—is a key component in understanding how the Anthropocene and its effects have been created and absorbed by people around the globe in profoundly unequal ways based on their relationship to empire. Indigenous peoples have experienced far different effects of and entanglements with climate change as they have borne the brunt of various iterations of the global imperial project.

I want to be clear, however, that this project is not about simply romanticizing a mythical Indigenous past where earth preservation and conservation

came “naturally” to Native peoples. It is counterproductive to fall into myths of the so-called “ecological Indian,” which serve only to burnish settler sensibilities about contemporary conservation.⁵⁵ However, a clear distinction needs to be made between Indigenous knowledges built for thousands of years about a specific place and generic stereotypes about Native ecological warriors. Anderson and Taylor outline how a “renewed appreciation of the deep time . . . offered up by Indigenous memory” is “distinct from non-Native notions of Indians as paragons and icons of ecological wisdom.”⁵⁶ Conservation and land-responsive agriculture did not just come naturally or mystically to Indigenous peoples, then or now. These knowledges were and continue to be built through careful observation as well as attempts *and* failures at survival in varying climatic conditions. As Handelsman argues, these practices are learned, refined sciences developed by dedicated practitioners focused on longevity in place.⁵⁷ This longevity in place can allow a misreading of traditional ecological knowledges as *static* ecological knowledges, when they are anything but. James Scott highlights this problem in *Seeing Like a State*, demonstrating how “‘traditional peoples’ will embrace techniques that solve vital problems.”⁵⁸ As Scott explains, these knowledges are developed in highly specified, local spaces that make them “unassimilable for purposes of [settler] statecraft.”⁵⁹ In other words, the romantic ecological Native depends on the projection of flattening stasis onto Indigenous epistemologies that are ever working against the work of settler memory.

However, in the effort not to romanticize the ecological practices of Indigenous societies, some settler scientists and popular narratives of science can lean too far toward various ecocide models that rely on “the philosophical argument that humans are inherently destructive to the environment.”⁶⁰ These ecocide models have been applied to Indigenous societies to explain why various cities and towns were “abandoned” before colonial invasion. While in some cases these models may have some basis, they have also been overapplied and overextended in a way that gives cover to an anti-Indigenous relativism that justifies continued colonial erasure, dismissal, and damage to Indigenous homelands and peoples.

One place where an ecocide model has been overextended without supporting physical data is the large Indigenous “Mound City” of Cahokia, whose collapse has been popularly attributed to erosion. In 1993 two researchers forwarded the “wood-overuse hypothesis” to explain the supposed abandonment and collapse of the site. As Caitlin Rankin and her coauthors explain, “The wood-overuse hypothesis suggests that tree clearance in the uplands surrounding Cahokia led upstream erosion, causing increasingly frequent and

unpredictable floods of the local creek drainages in the floodplain where Cahokia Mounds was constructed).”⁶¹ However, this hypothesis, which depended on deforestation resulting in large-scale erosion, was only ever intended to be just that: a hypothesis. In fact, as Rankin and her cowriters explain, “[Neal] Lopinot and [William] Woods . . . made it clear in their chapter on the wood-overuse hypothesis that there were insufficient data to move their narrative from hypothesis to a probable cause for collapse at Cahokia.”⁶² Nonetheless, “despite the lack of data to support this hypothesis, the ecocide narrative has been maintained in the literature as a potential contributor to Cahokia’s abandonment . . . Since the publication of the wood-overuse hypothesis, no attempts have been made to evaluate if erosion in the uplands and/or increased flooding in the floodplain did indeed occur during Cahokia’s occupation.”⁶³ In 2021 Rankin and her colleagues attempted to test the hypothesis through geoarchaeological methods at the site. Rather than evidence of Indigenous wood overuse, they found evidence of stable soil conditions throughout Cahokia’s inhabitation. In fact, on the basis of the core and soil samples from their research, destabilizing soil events did not appear at the site until the opening of industrialized coal mines near the area in the 1800s. Thus, for several decades the myth persisted that Indigenous peoples at Cahokia contributed to their own demise through deforestation, and subsequently erosion, when, in reality, it’s more likely erosion appeared at Cahokia with settler extractive practices.

Rankin and her fellow researchers offer some speculation about the persistence of this narrative via the work of Jane Mt. Pleasant, who “argued that archaeologists tend to underestimate and/or ignore conservation strategies employed by North American pre-Columbian people in agricultural and arboricultural activities).”⁶⁴ They continue, “Perhaps, in attempt to push away from the pristine myth of the pre-Columbian landscape, we have ignored the capabilities of these people as purposeful conservationists of their landscape and resources.”⁶⁵ I do not disagree that many Western-based academics have done important work to shed dehumanizing myths of romanticized Indigenous peoples and societies. However, I also think narratives that fault Indigenous peoples for land mismanagement that results in erosion events find an audience with a mainstream settler culture that simply wants evidence that justifies, or at the very least relativizes, colonialism. While land mismanagement narratives are not the same as colonial relativisms that seek to show how “all peoples” have been colonized, as Tuck and Yang explain, they do run in a similar vein in an ecological context, allowing settler conservationists to imagine themselves as better land stewards than Indigenous peoples and justify their own investment in stolen property. Thus,

while I eschew clichéd, generic eco-Native discourse in this work, I also reject the settler fantasy that Native societies were *just as* implicated in ecocide erosion events as the settler state has been since its inception.⁶⁶

22 Importantly, the concept of erosion in the English language begins with denotations related to the body and temporality. The oldest English usage of *erode*, moving from the Latin via French, appears in 1612 and denotes “of the action of acids, canker, ulceration, etc.: To destroy by slow consumption.”⁶⁷ This eating away at the body by slow processes eventually evolved to a geological usage, which is often credited to the so-called father of geology, Charles Lyell, who uses the words *eroded* and *eroding* in his *Principles of Geology* in 1830.⁶⁸ Despite Lyell frequently being credited with the geological usage of *erosion*, Oliver Goldsmith uses the noun form *erosion* in 1774, in volume 1 of his *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*.⁶⁹ While in later chapters I consider the colonial contours of the verb *erode*, whose usage coincided with peak colonial dates, including the 1830 signing of the Indian Removal Act, I want to pause in this introductory moment to consider how the denotations of the verb *erode* and the noun *erosion* force us to adjust our temporal frame. Destruction by slow consumption challenges the immediacy we often give to our understanding of what constitutes an event. The event of colonial conquest is not discrete. In fact, as Liboiron argues via Tiffany King, it “is not an event, not an intent.”⁷⁰ For as King puts it, “conquest is not even a structure, but a milieu or active set of relations that we can push on, move around in, and redo from moment to moment.”⁷¹ It works through slow consumption, and likewise, as Nixon posits, the resistance to colonial conquest also can occur slowly, even imperceptibly to those who don’t know what to look for.⁷²

As I explain above, in order to understand erosion, we have to let go of a linear calendar time that moves in an assumed predictable fashion and instead think with a timescale that adjusts with outside factors and challenges received wisdom about how “history” supposedly moves across the continent. Therefore, the following chapters are deliberately arranged to undo typical colonial teleology that pushes narratives across the continent from east to west. Instead, the analysis here begins in present-day California and moves east, a method that Indigenous studies scholar Jack Forbes often encouraged his students at the University of California, Davis, to think with in order to jostle a lifetime of the American education system’s narrative structure of “history.” Together, these chapters engage regional particularity to complicate studies in literary regionalism and to query how lost-cause ideologies and romantic ideas of “vanishing Natives” may very well subtend

present-day, well-meaning ecological calls to action. In each chapter I set up a kind of balanced tension where, in some cases, I begin with an analysis of how Western-based science narratives have addressed or cataloged an erosion event and then show how an Indigenous artist or thinker has complicated that understanding. In this way, the chapters do not simply begin with Indigenous voices and then move on to colonial texts, a re-creation of the American education system's own obsessive love of making all Indigenous history a prequel to "America." However, in some cases, I set up an Indigenous thinker's understanding of place to then show how it can offer a productive methodology for interrogating later settler creators' interpretation of events. In these cases, I always return to the Indigenous works later in the chapter to mirror my contention that settler colonial states may very well be a discrete moment preceded by thousands of years of Indigenous control *and* ultimately outlasted by Indigenous landed sovereignty on this continent.

The first chapter, "Landslides and Horizons of the West," takes on literary and visual narratives of exceptionalism amid the retrospective and prospective imagination of California. This chapter, then, works from the call I quote earlier from Nixon that we examine what "forces—imaginative, scientific, and activist—can help extend the temporal *horizons* of our gaze not just retrospectively but prospectively as well."⁷³ In examining this space of the horizon, I take up Lewis Baltz's landscape photography and Octavia Butler's novels of the speculative near future alongside Indigenous studies sources about traditional Indigenous land management in the region. This constellation of Baltz's and Butler's contemporaneous careers allows me to demonstrate how even progressively minded discourses of erosion and climate change often rely on the erasure of Indigenous homelands claims and on California exceptionalism. Baltz and Butler both theorize the limits of futurity in their work, and they each cast a critical eye toward fantasies of the West Coast landscape that promises fulfillment of so-called American promises. In this analysis I examine one of the most significant formal features of Baltz's photography, which is his use of the horizon line to complicate the viewer's relationship to the American landscape tradition. The horizon line becomes the place one cannot see past regardless of one's own possible well-meaning intentions. For many in conservation and land-preservation movements, this horizon line is the return of homelands to Indigenous peoples. Even for Butler, who is known for her prescient work, particularly the *Parable* texts I analyze in chapter 1, there is a particular horizon line around what role Indigenous peoples play in California's past, present, and future. By taking two artists invested in the prospective imagination encouraged by Nixon and then reconsidering

their creations with an understanding of Bruyneel's concept of the work of settler memory, I demonstrate the profound difficulty of building a decolonized future when settler memory attempts to cut off such horizons of possibility. In grappling with this tension between prospective imagination and settler memory, I close this chapter with an analysis of Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians* to demonstrate how an Indigenous understanding of California complicates received wisdom around the state's paradoxical status as a space beleaguered by climate issues and simultaneously invested in its own progressive fantasies of exceptionalism.

24 Chapter 2, "Surfaces and Allotments of the Heartland," places the history of surface erosion alongside the Indigenous history of Allotment in the region. I begin by placing Dorothea Lange's most famous image of the Dust Bowl, *Migrant Mother*, firmly within the historical conditions of its subject, Florence Thompson. Lange did not name Thompson and did not realize or learn that she was a Cherokee woman originally from just outside Tahlequah, Oklahoma. I analyze how this nonrecognition of the Indigenous woman by Lange perpetuates a surface reading of the Dust Bowl that reifies abject whiteness. I then take this nonrecognition as a cue to examine how previous considerations of the Dust Bowl have not engaged the Indigenous contours of the story, specifically in how it relates to Indigenous women and their traditional roles of agricultural management in southeastern Native nations. I begin with a brief overview of how specific policies related to Indigenous oppression and settler expansion, such as the General Allotment Act of 1887, created the environmental conditions of the Dust Bowl. I then trace how these concerns resonate across the popular texts regarding the event. I offer a reading of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) that accounts for his conceiving of the Joads as from eastern Oklahoma (Sallisaw, Oklahoma, which notably is in the Cherokee Nation) rather than the western part of the state, which was most affected by the Dust Bowl. I outline how Steinbeck continuously places moments of anxiety regarding disappearing whiteness alongside mentions of Indigeneity throughout the novel. I go on to explicate Lange's (with husband and intellectual partner Paul Taylor) *An American Exodus* (1939) for how it also traffics and attempts to refuse an anxiety of loss around whiteness. However, because of what Lange and Taylor could not see—Indigeneity—their work manages to cement erosion as part of a white pathos. I then turn to a sustained analysis of two of Cherokee playwright Lynn Riggs's works—*Green Grow the Lilacs* (1930), which served as the basis for the musical *Oklahoma!*, and the lesser-known play *The Cream in the Well* (1940)—for how each depicts the often

unrecognized Cherokee characters as they struggle make sense of their lives and their relationship to the land on the eve of Allotment.

The third chapter, “Disappearing Grounds and Backgrounds of the Gulf,” uses the visual and narrative concepts of background and foreground to analyze texts that address the constant and ever-present land loss in the Gulf wetlands. In particular, I look to how this loss affects Indigenous communities in this area, building from ideas forwarded by Louisiana Indigenous writers/artists Rain Prud’homme-Cranford and Monique Verdin. I then examine erosion in John James Audubon’s Louisiana writings and paintings of the early nineteenth century alongside George Washington Cable’s representation of this period in the short story “Belles Demoiselles Plantation” in his collection *Old Creole Days* (1879). Each author relies on anxieties of loss as they attempt to examine what whiteness means in a plantation context for southern Louisiana. By examining the visual background to Audubon’s work (focusing more on the land in the background than the birds of the foreground) and the narrative background of Cable’s short story, I build the direct and present links to questions of erosion, Indigenous control of homelands, and the pathos of loss in the plantation economy. The majority of the chapter focuses on Verdin’s 2019 photographic essay collection *Return to Yakni Chitto* to illustrate how an Indigenous understanding of the land and waterways along the bayous complicates popular narratives of the region that often focus on lost causes rather than long-held strategies for continued survival. Through an analysis of the way that Verdin uses the background of landscape within her portraits of foregrounded Indigenous community members, I build from my examination of Baltz’s landscape work in chapter 1 and my interrogation of Lange’s non-recognition of Indigeneity in her portrait work in chapter 2. Whereas Baltz’s landscapes rarely include people, and Lange’s portraits rarely include wide shots of the landscape, Verdin generates work that shows the profound connections between Indigenous homelands and Indigenous peoples. These connections challenge myths of Indigenous disappearance and ask audiences to re-see the foregone conclusions of land loss in the Gulf.

Chapter 4, “Gullies and Removals of the Plantation South,” considers the stakes of erosion within a critical context that draws from both histories of southeastern Indigenous Removal and analyses of what Katherine McKittrick theorizes as “plantation futures.”⁷⁴ In doing so, this chapter examines Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* and the popular archive surrounding the geological site of Providence Canyon in the southwestern part of the state, including the understudied African American poet Thomas

Jefferson Flanagan’s depiction of the eroded site. This analysis builds from the Removal history subtending the Allotment narratives of chapter 2 and the white pathos explicated via an analysis of the background and foreground in chapter 3. Mitchell’s novel repeatedly refers to both erosion and Removal, often in deeply interrelated ways. Most tellingly, the title of the book, which was written during the Dust Bowl, is itself an erosion metaphor, signaling how prominent concerns over agricultural instability were during the period. At the same time, Providence Canyon—a massive eroded gully created following forced Muscogee Creek Removal from the area in the nineteenth century—was being touted by tourism boosters in the state as a new kind of “natural wonder” despite the well-known fact that it was the result of the unsustainable agricultural practices of the enslavement and sharecropping systems. I place each of these objects within the contexts of the geological and geoscience theories laid out by Charles Lyell, who traveled and recorded gully-ing in the US South during the 1830s on the heels of Indigenous Removal, and Hugh Hammond Bennett, who revolutionized soil science during the 1930s era of Mitchell’s and Flanagan’s writing and the “rebranding” of Providence Canyon. I close the chapter with a consideration of visual artist Elizabeth Webb’s 2019 installation *For the Mud Holds What History Refuses* (*Providence in Four Parts*) and Flanagan’s short collection *The Canyons at Providence* (*The Lay of the Clay Minstrel*) (1940). While both Webb’s and Flanagan’s works attempt to make sense of the canyon and the legacy of plantation enslavement for the erosion of the material earth, neither project seems entirely able to account for the legacy of Indigenous Removal and homelands theft that subtends the history of the US South. This limit point demonstrates the legacy of entanglements that make reading the work of settler memory alongside the projection of naturalized plantation futures difficult but nonetheless all the more necessary. Taken together, the texts examined here demonstrate the insidious ways the plantation attempts to replicate its form through the repackaging of its thefts and horrors as natural.

The final chapter, “Littoral Cells and Literal Sells of the Atlantic,” focuses on the Eastern Seaboard, examining the clash of real estate development with erosion along barrier islands designed by nature to shift and adjust within the littoral cell system of the Atlantic currents. This tension between change and stasis informs nearly every erosion controversy along the Eastern Seaboard. Beginning with an analysis of Monacan poet Karenne Wood’s work in *Markings on Earth* (2001), I take on subsequent stories of coastal erosion as bound up with the legacy of early English colonization along the Atlantic coast. As Wood’s poetry illustrates, both Indigenous homelands and communities have

long had to be dynamic to survive in this space. However, settler colonialism has consistently attempted to fix each in a static place or identification. To illustrate this point and how it works within an anxiety over white settler disappearance, I offer a short analysis of Ellyn Bache's 1993 short story "Shell Island" alongside the history of the island as a resort for Black beachgoers in the early twentieth century. I go on to examine the effort to save Cape Hatteras Lighthouse during the same period that Bache's story appeared, showing how the lighthouse works as a literal beacon of settler colonialism. The debates over how to best protect the enormous structure relied heavily on the visual rhetoric exemplified in well-known North Carolina photographer Hugh Morton's aerial photography. From there, I analyze Earl Swift's *Chesapeake Requiem* (2018), in which he recounts living on a quickly eroding Tangier Island where the population almost unanimously supported Donald Trump in 2016 and is skeptical of climate change. Instead, residents refer to their central problem as "erosion," a telling elision of the scale of perceptible local change versus unfathomable global change over time. I place the island in its historical context as recorded by John Smith in the sixteenth century, as a kind of tempestuous "Limbo," and I query what perpetual limbo defines the global condition of living under a regime of climate change and erosive sea-level rise. I close the chapter with a return to Wood's poetry, reminding the reader that in this particular landscape, Indigenous people know that change has long been the way to survive.

I conclude the book by considering the global scale of erosion. Rather than view this closing as a return to the universalizing global, I intend for it to be understood as a thought exercise in the multiplicity of the local, where erosion is never exceptional even as it may always be as particular as it is particulate. This multiplicity of the local mirrors Blaser and de la Cadena's discussion of the pluriverse, or the Zapatista theory of the one world where many worlds fit. I focus on international debates, including the history of apartheid and erosion in South Africa; the rising tides of Venice, Italy; Edward Said's gestures to erosive agricultural projects by the Israeli state in Palestine in *After the Last Sky* (1986); erosion in Hungary (the location of the first international conference on soil science, in 1909); and the soil conservation practices of pre-invasion Peru. These international examples demonstrate how anxieties about erosion engage narratives of the Global North and the Global South in locally specific ways. This concluding material also allows me to return to Baltz's European work alongside Bennett's clear 1930s summations regarding colonialism and erosion. This closing international scope reframes the relevance of literary regionalism when facing planetary problems and

illustrates how visual and literary narratives can both limit and enliven possibilities for the future.

28 Across these chapters, I find that although I am examining the long narrative life of erosion in the Americas, this topic has consistent resonance with and relevance to many present-day concerns in areas across the globe. The way people understood erosion in the past matters for how they will handle the challenges of the future. These obstacles face humans in regions of the world as different as Alaska and Indonesia, and yet routinely the brunt of these uncertain futures crashes against the lives of Indigenous peoples fighting to hold on to homelands that are eroding away. While many readers might imagine that the traditional hard sciences will offer the singular path for humans' continued existence in the era of extreme climate change, all of my previous intellectual work leads me to believe that what we learn from narrative study might ultimately be the thing that carries humans forward on this planet and allows us to retain our humanity.

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INTRODUCTION

Notes

INTRODUCTION: EROSION

- 1 National Resources Board, "General Distribution of Erosion" insert, 170–71; see also Sutter, *Let Us Now Praise*, 88.
- 2 See Handelsman, *World without Soil*, 60.
- 3 Jo Handelsman's recent work, *World without Soil*, stands as a productive example against this trend.
- 4 Nishime and Williams, "Why Racial Ecologies," 8. See also Haymes, "Africana Studies Critique."
- 5 DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 34.
- 6 Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, xiii.
- 7 Yusoff, *Billion Black Anthropocenes*, xiii.
- 8 E. Anderson and Taylor, "Letting the Other Story Go," 87.
- 9 Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 66.
- 10 Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," 243.
- 11 For a discussion of the recursivity of this process, see Nichols, *Theft Is Property!*
- 12 Blaser and de la Cadena, "Pluriverse," 3.
- 13 DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 2.
- 14 This experience is not necessarily synonymous with *ecoanxiety*, which the American Psychological Association links to mental health concerns over

feelings of “watching the slow and seemingly irrevocable impacts of climate change unfold, and worrying about the future for oneself, children, and later generations.” Ecoanxiety and mental health are often attached to post-traumatic stress issues from experiencing extreme climate events and affect communities already made vulnerable by other failures of infrastructure. See Clayton et al., “Mental Health,” 27.

15 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 62.

16 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 62.

17 Lyons, *Vital Decomposition*, 4.

222 18 See L. Brooks, “Primacy of the Present”; and Caison, *Red States*, 14–27.

19 E. Anderson and Taylor, “Letting the Other Story Go,” 88; and DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 10.

20 Romine, *Real South*, 9.

21 This push and pull also works within the tension described by Mimi Sheller in *Island Futures*, where she outlines how, on the one hand, nations participate in an *islanding* of environmental degradation to the offshore spaces of empire and, on the other, nations remain aware of how these problems often “overspill these regional boundaries” (21).

22 Nichols, *Theft Is Property!*, 9.

23 Nichols, *Theft Is Property!*, 9.

24 Howe, *Choctalking on Other Realities*, 31.

25 Ursula Heise lays out a similar approach to understanding narratives of extinction in *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*.

26 Blaikie, “State of Land Management Policy,” 42.

27 For example, see Caison, *Red States*; and Caison, “Removal.”

28 See T. King, *Truth about Stories*.

29 Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 46.

30 Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 19.

31 Whyte, “Time as Kinship,” 39.

32 Whyte, “Time as Kinship,” 54.

33 Handelsman, *World without Soil*, 44.

34 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” 10.

35 I want to acknowledge that methodological appropriation is something that non-Native scholars such as myself must take incredibly seriously. For starters I ask myself continually, What good does my work provide for the Indigenous community from which the knowledge derives? Who are you learning from, and how do you honor that learning? I would also like to

say, however, that I see far too many non-Native scholars reject Indigenous methodologies under the guise of not wanting to appropriate, when in reality I suspect that they don't want to do the hard work of trying to learn, to get it right, and to be accountable to the best of their ability. In this move they can maintain their privilege in the praxis of Western research methodologies and perform a certain "right-speaking" liberalness that simply means they don't have to work to learn Indigenous methodologies. So while non-Native scholars should be vigilant when working through something like an Indigenous methodology of temporal construction, they shouldn't simply reject the work because it seems hard and then paper over that rejection with the buzzword *appropriation*.

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- 36 La Paperson, "Ghetto Land Pedagogy," 124.
- 37 Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 14.
- 38 Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 15.
- 39 Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor."
- 40 Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 2.
- 41 As Lyons explains, "Soil scientists' practices tend to take place in laboratories and depend on state research funding cycles, alliances with industrial trade associations, and soil samples transported from rural violence to relative urban safety." *Vital Decomposition*, 6.
- 42 Allen, *Earthworks Rising*, 26.
- 43 Goodman, *Planetary Lens*, 3.
- 44 Mirzoeff, *White Sight*, 1–23.
- 45 Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 7; and Yang, "Sustainability as Plantation Logic," 1.
- 46 See Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive*; and Treuer, "Return the National Parks."
- 47 T. Williams, *Erosion*, xi.
- 48 T. Williams, *Erosion*, 4.
- 49 T. Williams, *Erosion*, 16–17.
- 50 T. Williams, *Erosion*, 20 (emphasis added).
- 51 La Paperson, "Ghetto Land Pedagogy," 121.
- 52 T. Williams, *Erosion*, 184.
- 53 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 87.
- 54 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 87.
- 55 See Krech, *Ecological Indian*; as well as Harkin and Lewis, *Native Americans and the Environment*.
- 56 E. Anderson and Taylor, "Letting the Other Story Go," 75.

- 57 Handelsman, *World without Soil*, 136–52.
- 58 Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 331.
- 59 Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 323.
- 60 Rankin, Barrier, and Horsley, “Evaluating Narratives of Ecocide,” 369.
- 61 Rankin, Barrier, and Horsley, “Evaluating Narratives of Ecocide,” 370 citing Lopinot and Woods, “Wood Overexploitation.”
- 62 Rankin, Barrier, and Horsley, “Evaluating Narratives of Ecocide,” 384.
- 63 Rankin, Barrier, and Horsley, “Evaluating Narratives of Ecocide,” 384.
- 64 Rankin, Barrier, and Horsley, “Evaluating Narratives of Ecocide,” 383 citing Mt. Pleasant, “New Paradigm”
- 65 Rankin, Barrier, and Horsley, “Evaluating Narratives of Ecocide,” 383–84.
- 66 See also Handelsman’s discussion of mistaken, and yet nonetheless persistent, theories of Maya city collapse as a result of soil mismanagement. *World without Soil*, 136–41.
- 67 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “erode, v., 1a” Oxford University Press, July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1062137317>.
- 68 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “erode, v. 1a”
- 69 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “erosion (n.) 1a.” Oxford University Press, July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4026214323>.
- 70 Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 66.
- 71 T. L. King, *Black Shoals*, 40, quoted in Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 66.
- 72 Nixon, *Slow Violence*.
- 73 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 62 (emphasis added).
- 74 McKittrick, “Plantation Futures.”

CHAPTER 1: LANDSLIDES AND HORIZONS OF THE WEST

- 1 Xia, “California Coast Is Disappearing.”
- 2 Xia published her reporting in a book titled *California Against the Sea* in 2023. The book does show more of an awareness of Indigenous peoples and communities in California than the initial reporting, but I would not say it *centers* a Native perspective of the Land Back movement as integral to the questions of the California coast.
- 3 Xia, Kannan, and Castleman, “Ocean Game.”
- 4 Xia, Kannan, and Castleman, “Ocean Game.”
- 5 See Whyte, “Time as Kinship.”
- 6 See Akins and Bauer, *We Are the Land*; Bauer, *California through Native Eyes*; and Baldy, *We Are Dancing for You*.