

Decolonizing the Anthropocene:  
An Ecocritical Reinterpretation of Visual Culture

by

Katleen Schuenemeyer

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Approved April 2017 by the  
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

J. Gray Sweeney, Chair  
Joni Adamson  
Matthew Delmont

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2017

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ecocritical, art historical inquiry into colonization, globalization, climate change as well as perceptions of American nationalism and Manifest Destiny through the overarching concept of the Anthropocene. The focus is on the United States specifically and entails an analysis of American society and culture from a global standpoint. First, an overview of origins and impacts of the Anthropocene concept is given. The thesis then explores works of visual culture by ten different artists through diverse subconcepts. Colonial history, neocolonialism, and globalization are examined through the Roanoke watercolors (1585) by John White, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (May-July 2014) by African American artist Kara Walker, and the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* series (1970-ongoing) by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles. In a further step, anthropogenic environmental destruction as part of visual and conceptual art is traced over a period of 130 years. The works *Lower Manhattan from Communipaw, New Jersey* (1880) by Thomas Moran, *Erosion No. 2 - Mother Earth Laid Bare* (1936) by Alexandre Hogue, and *HighWaterLine* (2007) by contemporary artist Eve Mosher provide a basis for this analysis. Finally, *The Consummation of Empire* and *Destruction* from *The Course of Empire* series (1836) by Thomas Cole, Emanuel Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1862), John Gast's *American Progress* (1872), and Amy Balkin's *Sell Us Your Liberty, or We'll Subcontract Your Death* (2008) are examined to reveal how American exceptionalism and nationalism have influenced domestic policy as well as foreign policy in the past and the present. Visual works have agency while, on the one hand, functioning as a means for propagandizing Anthropocene

symptoms and consequences. On the other hand, they can serve as leverage for ecocritical readings and as catalysts for social change.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee for their determined support and dedication to my thesis project and academic development. Dr. J. Gray Sweeney has been the earliest proponent of my topic, always encouraging me to voice my opinion and to believe in my intellectual capacity. Dr. Joni Adamson, thank you for introducing me to the Environmental Humanities and Ecocriticism. Your teaching and knowledge has enriched and inspired my own research. Dr. Matt Delmont, thank you for your guidance and support throughout my program.

To my parents, thank you for making this possible and to Ryan, who has been there for me since the very beginning, listening, reading, and editing.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION: ORIGINS AND IMPACTS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE	1
2 FROM COLONIALISM TO NEOCOLONIALISM - THE CONCEPT OF GLOBALIZATION .....	17
3 VISUALIZING ANTHROPOGENIC ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION .....	32
4 AMERICAN NATIONALISM AND CONCEPTS OF MANIFEST DESTINY .....	47
5 CONCLUSION .....	62
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	67
APPENDIX	
A FIGURES .....	72

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: ORIGINS AND IMPACTS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

The initial ideas for this thesis began to fall into place during the 2015-16 United States election year with its turbulent campaign and unexpected outcome.

Simultaneously, I moved back to the U.S. to pursue my master's degree after having spent a year on the East Coast in 2010-11. To me, coming back during these unsettling times stimulated questioning and analyzing U.S. society and its influence on the rest of the world in a way that I might never have done before. The election raised many questions and brought up myriad issues concerning not only American society, but also the globalized world: Climate change, the unequal distribution of wealth, world capitalism, free trade agreements; on the other hand protectionism and nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and sexism - just to name a few. Since the inauguration of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States most of these issues consolidated themselves and have turned into serious problems that will have a lasting effect and influence on future politics and polity worldwide.

I argue that the problems and fears which (re-) emerged and were addressed during the election and beyond are the epitome of what determines human life and coexistence right now, in the age of the Anthropocene, in the age of humans. The recently inaugurated president of the United States is fittingly a climate change denier as well, and thereby takes on the role of “the first demagogue of the Anthropocene.”<sup>1</sup> Robinson Meyer, an editor writing for *The Atlantic*, is persuaded that one day the consequences of climate change and global warming will create a political climate that could produce a

---

<sup>1</sup> Meyer, “Donald Trump Is the First Demagogue.”

leader such as the one we are seeing in Donald Trump now with “support coming from a movement motivated by ethnonationalism, economic stagnation, and hatred of immigrants and refugees.”<sup>2</sup> However, Meyer would have assumed a scenario like that to be happening in the course of this century, but not as early as 2016. Indeed, many people were taken aback at how the election turned out and did not see Trump’s presidency coming. Yet, Trump’s success must be regarded as a break or caesura on the one hand clearly ending the world order of the twentieth century and on the other hand bringing up long existent, underlying issues and problems of an *anthropocentric* society in the twenty-first century. In Meyer’s opinion, “Trump is, in essence, a double case - a preview of what’s to come and a way to practice dealing with it.”<sup>3</sup> Not only is Trump acting as the first demagogue of the Anthropocene, but sociopolitical ‘symptoms’ of the Anthropocene, besides the tangible and measurable effects of climate change, are also uniting in his persona.

In these times of a global state of emergency it is an obligation to scrutinize, restructure, and contextualize the events and issues that range from climate change to neocolonialism to excessive nationalism. No one should look away and feel unaccountable. It should always be the goal to create sensibility and awareness for the above named urging issues and questions. One possible way is through inter- and transdisciplinary examinations involving a variety of intellectual approaches and methodologies. For example, through ecocriticism literary scholars have explored environmental problems, questioned our Western belief systems, and sparked activism

---

<sup>2</sup> Meyer, “Donald Trump Is the First Demagogue.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

since the early 1990s. Ecocriticism examines “ecological interconnectedness, sustainability, and environmental justice in cultural interpretation.”<sup>4</sup> Further, its goal is to increase the relevancy of scholarly pieces and emphasize the environmental importance of creative works. The principle of interconnectedness guides ecocritical analysis and interpretation while integrating the human species and its work into a larger context, that of an overarching ecosystem for which humans bear responsibility. Another significant aspect is that “ecocriticism does not limit itself to explicitly “green” creators and works, but insists that all have some sort of ecological meaning, for better or worse.”<sup>5</sup> Greg Garrard, Professor of Sustainability at the University of British Columbia, argues that it indeed “should be the business of ecocriticism to bring critical intelligence and humanistic scholarship to bear, and seek either to resolve or, more likely, to help us endure” the dilemmas of a globalized world that is more occupied to exploit the environment to the benefit of capital, than to actively support leaders who do not speak for transnational corporations and polluters.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the creative works analyzed by ecocriticism have infrequently included works of visual art and culture. This may imply a lack of ecocritical inquiry ensuing from the academic discipline of art history. As the art historian Alan Braddock explains, it were Americanists who joined the ecocriticism movement in order to “make art history more sustainable by raising new questions and fostering greater awareness about the visual background.”<sup>7</sup> When applied to visual analysis, ecocriticism can ask more probing

---

<sup>4</sup> Braddock, “From Nature to Ecology,” 448.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>6</sup> Garrard, “Ecocriticism,” 64.

<sup>7</sup> Braddock, “Ecocritical Art History,” 27.



questions, and integrate as well as combine cultural interpretation with postcolonial discourse and environmental history. Ecocriticism bears analytic and interpretative opportunities that enrich the field of art history in times of anthropogenic change perceivable in the environment and in society.<sup>8</sup>

This thesis will therefore contribute towards this large field of research by focusing on exploring the correlation between environmental criticism and the interpretation of visual culture placed in the context of ecological change and the concept of the Anthropocene.

Historically, humans constitute one of the greatest factors of influence on the Earth's ecosystems. Actually, the word 'influence' might be better replaced by 'danger'. Climate change is real; there is no denying it. Sea levels are rising; Bio- and agrobiodiversity is declining. Capitalism defines who holds political power in this world and money is the embodiment of its power and prevalence. Yet, when the naturalist Comte de Buffon wrote "arguably the first evidence-based geological history of the world – *Les Époques de la Nature*, published in 1788", in which he discerned humans as geological agents warming the Earth, he nevertheless did not identify that the warming was damaging.<sup>9</sup> This belief continued throughout the twentieth century. According to most geologists, human impact was rejected as "insignificant when set against the broad canvas of Earth history" including "mountain building, volcanic outbursts, [and] meteorite impacts."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Braddock, "Art in the Anthropocene," 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Zalasiewicz, Williams, and Waters, "Anthropocene," 14

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

However, these mindsets changed in 2000 when the Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen proposed that “we were now living in the Anthropocene, because of the scale of the human-driven chemical, physical, and biological changes to the Earth’s atmosphere, land surface, and oceans.”<sup>11</sup> An important debate that arose in the context of Crutzen’s proposal revolves around the question of the Anthropocene start date and its current state. From a purely scientific standpoint this debate goes hand in hand with the official acceptance of the Anthropocene as a geological epoch and the adding of the Anthropocene to the Geological Time Scale by the International Commission on Stratigraphy. For that reason, the International Commission on Stratigraphy has launched the Anthropocene Working Group, consisting of a variety of natural scientists who are gathering evidence from myriad sources to determine a Global Stratigraphic Section and Point (GSSP), also known as a golden spike.<sup>12</sup> If the Anthropocene is officially confirmed and accepted it will either succeed the Holocene, the geological epoch that began around 12,000 years ago with the end of the last Ice Age, or it may be characterized as a subdivision (age) of the Holocene.

When Crutzen proposed the Anthropocene epoch in 2000, he referred to a potential start date in the late eighteenth century “when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane”, coinciding with the invention of the steam engine in 1784.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, literary scholar Daniel Hartley claims, “the dating of the Anthropocene to some time around 1800 points to its technological bias - the steam engine changed the world.

---

<sup>11</sup> Zalasiewicz, Williams, and Waters, “Anthropocene,” 14.

<sup>12</sup> Hamilton, Bonneuil, and Gemenne, introduction, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” 23.

But did it?”<sup>14</sup> Hartley’s assertion makes clear that the Anthropocene concept cannot solely be pinned down to geologic and stratigraphic matters. Anthropogenic destruction derives from interconnected and interwoven historical, political, social, and technological controversies that determine life on earth.

According to the current state of knowledge, the Anthropocene Working Group proposes another approach towards determining and defining the beginning of the Anthropocene placing it into the chronological context of the ‘Great Acceleration’ after World War II. The ‘Great Acceleration’ describes an “enhanced population growth, global economic growth and associated environmental change” which can be seen in, for example, the global spread of artificial radionuclides, the global dispersion of human-made materials such as plastic and aluminum, an increase in the burning of hydrocarbons, and species invasions that “alter species compositions in a wide spectrum of terrestrial and marine communities.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, the Working Group suggests an Anthropocene start date that falls on July 16, 1945 when Americans conducted the first detonation of a nuclear weapon, the Trinity A-bomb, in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Following the first detonation and ongoing nuclear tests, radioisotopes have been attested in ice at North and South Pole, and on all continents.<sup>16</sup>

Parallel to the scientific approaches of categorizing and defining the Anthropocene and its environmental impacts, other, more comprehensive and humanities-oriented, approaches towards the Anthropocene have been introduced in recent years. One of them, for example, can be found in Donna Haraway’s essay

---

<sup>14</sup> Hartley, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene,” 156.

<sup>15</sup> Zalasiewicz et al., “When did the Anthropocene Begin,” 198-200.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 200.

*Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin* (2015) in which she argues that since the human species has been identified, anthropogenic processes, especially through extensive agriculture with the beginning of the Holocene, have always had global effects. Furthermore, instead of using the term ‘Anthropocene’, she calls for a multispecies, non-anthropocentric conceptualization, the ‘Chthulucene’.<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to Haraway, another approach, called the Orbis spike hypothesis, introduced by the ecologist Simon Lewis and the climatologist Mark Maslin in 2015, centers the beginning of the Anthropocene around the year 1492 and its aftermath when the Old and New Worlds collided. In their hypothesis this is explained scientifically while also acknowledging the historical context and turning point.

The conquest of the Americas entailed, on the one hand, widespread deaths of indigenous peoples through diseases and war brought about by Europeans and, on the other, hand the beginning of global trade networks.<sup>18</sup> In the course of this collision, also known as the Columbian Exchange, regional population numbers “rapidly declined to a minimum of about 6 million people [from 54 million people] by 1650 via exposure to diseases carried by Europeans, plus war, enslavement and famine.”<sup>19</sup> Due to the decimation of populations, farming and agricultural activities stagnated or came to a halt and “resulted in the regeneration of over 50 million hectares of forest, woody savanna and grassland with a carbon uptake by vegetation and soils estimated at 5-40 Pg<sup>20</sup> within

---

<sup>17</sup> Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene,” 159-160.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” 174.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>20</sup> Petagram: 10<sup>15</sup> grams.

around 100 years.”<sup>21</sup> The resulting dip of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> was attested in two independent Antarctic ice core samples taken at the Law Dome and the Western Antarctic Ice Sheet. Based on both records, the lowest CO<sub>2</sub> concentration was detected at 285.2 m depth in the Law Dome ice core and can be dated to 1610. According to Lewis and Maslin, the year 1610 can therefore function as a GSSP marker or golden spike in determining a start date for the Anthropocene. Another term for the 1610 GSSP is the ‘Orbis spike’ referencing the post-1492 restructuring of the world and the beginning of transoceanic colonialism as well as global trade which, however, leaves out developments in terms of agriculture, crop domestication, and trade in the Eastern Hemisphere at the same time.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the Orbis spike theory is of particular significance as it combines historically, politically, and socially important events that permanently altered human coexistence on this planet. In other words, the Orbis spike emphasizes how the “systems of globalization and trade were dependent on genocide and slavery” as seen through European imperialism and hegemonic power.<sup>23</sup>

The introduction of the hypothesis by Lewis and Maslin can be seen as a different, but at the same time compelling approach in the field of Anthropocene thinking and theory. It can be utilized to question and explain correlations between today’s globalized world and historical events. Further, the Orbis theory connects and reveals links between forms of violence, suppression, and agency, as well as power structures and prevalence that have shaped human life in the past and determine human coexistence in the twenty-first century. Additionally, introducing the historical burden of colonialism

---

<sup>21</sup> Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” 175.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Davis and Turpin, introduction, 8.

to the discourse bears new possibilities of identifying various actors that have contributed to the evolution of the current state of the Anthropocene.

Further, the argument made by Lewis and Maslin directly links geological evidence with important and established historical facts. Particularly, it “highlights social concerns, ... the unequal power relationships between different groups of people, economic growth, the impacts of globalized trade, and our current reliance on fossil fuels.”<sup>24</sup> To this day the legacy of colonization informs the lives of the descendants of the colonized as well as the worldview and mindset of the descendants of the colonizers. The legacy did not perish with the end of colonization, instead it lives on through the systems of neocolonialism and globalization. It is no coincidence that countries, peoples, and communities mostly affected by Anthropocene symptoms of all kinds are the ones that have already suffered and are stigmatized by the burdens of colonial power and violence. It is also no coincidence that the disadvantaged and underdogs of the Anthropocene are largely inhabitants of the Global South. The Global North (the former colonial powers) keeps expanding its influence and authority over the worldwide capital market, the world economy, and its production of carbon emissions at the expense of the Global South. Thus, in this context, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty reinforces that analytic frameworks criticizing global capitalism or capitalist globalization are essential in highlighting inequities precipitated by the Anthropocene.<sup>25</sup> The visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff goes even further stating that an ‘autoimmune climate-changing capitalism syndrome’ is “determined to extract the last moment of circulation for

---

<sup>24</sup> Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” 177.

<sup>25</sup> Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 212.

itself.”<sup>26</sup> To visualize this statement, Mirzoeff adduces a diagram that was published in *The Lancet* in 2009 depicting nation states by size according to their carbon emissions and according to how tremendous the consequences of climate change are. These dynamics of capitalism, neocolonialism, and climate change can best be understood when one becomes aware of the fact that the biggest emitters of carbon emissions are states that are located in the European Union and the United States. However, the nation states that will suffer the greatest consequences all lie in the Global South.<sup>27</sup> This economic supremacy is further accompanied, characterized, and fueled by notions that are based on racism, especially focusing on the dominance of whiteness as opposed to other skin colors and ethnicities. Whiteness means power and privilege.

Lewis and Maslin’s hypothesis allows a reading of the Anthropocene through postcolonial concepts and inquiry not fixated on a certain point in time. The Orbis spike theory makes it possible to explore the Anthropocene as a continuum by highlighting correlative historical events. The state of the Anthropocene must not be accepted as a prevailing status quo. It is essential to question and resist this state and to break from an entrenched and one-sided anthropocentrism. Even though humans are the driving force of the Anthropocene, the focus must be on counteracting the idea that humans depict a positive factor and influence during the course of earth’s history. The destructive power emanating from humans must not be underestimated. Another point that is misleading involves the term ‘Anthropocene’ itself. The fact that the Anthropocene was not caused by all members of the species it alludes to in its name underlies the critical analyses of

---

<sup>26</sup> Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene,” 215.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-227.

this thesis. As Joni Adamson emphasizes, “at no time did the species as a whole vote for a fossil fuel economy or exercise any shared authority over the destiny of Earth systems.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, human societies that did not bring about the Anthropocene are suffering the most from its consequences.

Ultimately, considering Lewis and Maslin’s proposal, it can be argued that colonialism laid the foundation for the Industrial Revolution which in turn furthered advancement in areas such as nuclear technology as part of the ‘Great Acceleration’. As the anthropologist Kent Lightfoot et al. affirm, “colonialism and the growth of the early modern world both preceded and stimulated the development of the Industrial Revolution” whereby the exploitation of indigenous resources by the Europeans played a crucial role in supplying “material means [and] world markets ... to launch full-scale industrialization in Great Britain by the 1800s.”<sup>29</sup> This rapid development was accompanied by the invention of the steam engine and the switch to and usage of fossil fuels. Hence, the Industrial Revolution and the ensuing ‘Great Acceleration’ must be regarded as key steps towards today’s state of globalization precipitated by European colonization. Going even one step further, it can be argued that it is capitalism under the pretext of the Anthropocene “that represents the heightened hierarchical relations of humans, the continued violence of white supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy ... all of which exacerbate and subtend the violence that has been inflicted upon the non-human world.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, as Davis and Turpin illustrate, “if the Anthropocene calls us to

---

<sup>28</sup> Adamson, “We Have Never Been *Anthropos*,” 160.

<sup>29</sup> Lightfoot et al., “European Colonialism and the Anthropocene,” 102.

<sup>30</sup> Davis and Turpin, introduction, 7.



imagine humanity written into the rock of the Earth itself, capitalism is the instrument of this brutal inscription.”<sup>31</sup>

No matter which Anthropocene starting point officially gets selected by the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Union of Geological Sciences, the Anthropocene epoch is already upon us. According to Ian Angus, “what we face is not just extensive pollution, not just rising temperatures, not just rising sea levels, but many centuries in which a safe operating space for humanity may no longer exist.”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that the Anthropocene narrative not only evolves around humans treating nature in irresponsible ways, but also other humans through expressing disdain. As the cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter argues, in the context and aftermath of 1492 the notion of otherness or the ‘Other’ started to play an increasingly central role. The stigmatizing of the other (the indigenous peoples and the African slaves) served to “suggest that our present model of being “Man,” as totemized in the Indo-European middle-class physiognomy (together with European cultures, ways of life, and rationality) was and is the only possible model of biologically ...selected “normal being,” and therefore of a “way of life”.”<sup>33</sup> Since 1492 the concept of otherness has spread even further forming subtypes, besides the one based on ‘race’, such as “the lower classes as the lack of the normal class, that is, the *middle class*; all other cultures as the lack of the normal culture, that is, *Western culture*; the nonheterosexual as the lack of *heterosexuality*... ; women as the lack of the normal sex, *the male*.”<sup>34</sup> Wynter’s described

---

<sup>31</sup> Davis and Turpin, introduction, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Angus, “When did the Anthropocene Begin,” 10.

<sup>33</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” 42.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

notions of otherness have become so ingrained in our today's society. In a divided world, defined and characterized by these notions as Anthropocene symptoms, it is critical to seek answers and to get to the bottom of their causes.

After delineating and contrasting the most important theoretical and scientific approaches in determining how the Anthropocene is defined, when it started, what it means for humans and nature, and what its historical and sociopolitical contexts are, this thesis is going to adopt the 1610 Orbis spike as a start date. On the one hand, the adoption of the 1610 Orbis spike takes place due to the theory's relevance concerning the colonial history of the Americas in particular and, on the other hand, because the selected works of visual culture bear specific significance when analyzed and interpreted in an American context. Furthermore, my thesis combines postcolonialism and globalization as essential concepts in order to reach a holistic Anthropocene approach. It is essential to raise awareness and to generate understanding as well as reactions to the new historical-geological epoch to develop social structures that are sustainable and livable for future generations.

The application of the Anthropocene concept will happen by focusing on the concepts and systems of 1. Colonialism, Neocolonialism, and Globalization; 2. Anthropogenic Environmental Destruction; and 3. American Nationalism and Manifest Destiny. Ensuing from the analysis and interpretation of selected visual works in the individual chapters, I break down the comprehensive concepts and systems even further by exploring overlaps and connections between the discourses of race, nature, and gender through interdisciplinary as well as intersectional methodology. The overall goal of my thesis is to offer answers to the question of how the Anthropocene has been visualized

and imagined since its onset. I argue that artists have always responded to and documented the consequences of human intervention on the environment and natural world as well as the accompanying negative changes in human coexistence, appreciation, and the hegemony of certain ethnicities. Visual works were used as a means of propaganda for colonization, but also as leverage for ecocritical readings and social change. They have agency and are able to give us vision for the scope and impacts that human activity, ensuing from the overdeveloped parts of the world, entails. The selected artworks cover in no way every Anthropocene manifestation, rather they only function as exemplary case studies for my inquiry into American society and culture from a global standpoint. The works were chosen based on their relationships with and inclusion of American subjects.

This introduction depicts the first chapter of the thesis. The second chapter explores colonial history and neocolonialism through postcolonial inquiry. I will start with an analysis of John White's watercolor drawings from 1585. White was a colonist and artist working under the patronage of Sir Walter Raleigh and part of the Roanoke voyages. An aim of his watercolor drawings was pure promotion of land as ready for 'colonial appropriation' by investors in England. This entailed the replacement of indigenous labor by English and the exploitation of Native American agricultural resources. The second artwork discussed is *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* by African American artist Kara Walker. Walker's work explores the intersections of race and gender, especially in the context of slavery and black women. Her *Marvelous Sugar Baby*, a site-specific, temporary public artwork, examines the history of sugar and its industry in the Americas in the context of slavery and colonialism from a present

standpoint. Chapter 2 will end with an analysis and contextualization of the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* series by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles challenging the state of globalization, world capitalism, and neocolonialism.

Chapter 3 traces experiences of anthropogenic environmental destruction through visual and conceptual art over a period of 130 years. I will focus on *Lower Manhattan from Communipaw, New Jersey* by Thomas Moran, a painter of the Hudson River School, *Erosion No. 2 - Mother Earth Laid Bare* by Alexandre Hogue, and the public performance work *HighWaterLine* by contemporary artist Eve S. Mosher. An examination of shifts in climate change perception over time helps to address questions regarding Anthropocene aesthetics and anaesthetics, as well as visibility as explained in Nicholas Mirzoeff's article *Visualizing the Anthropocene*.<sup>35</sup> Further, I argue that the gendered conquest of nature through Western imperialism plays an important role in understanding today's climate change consequences.

In chapter 4, I deal specifically with the concept of Manifest Destiny and how American exceptionalism and nationalism have affected and influenced domestic policy as well as foreign policy in the past and in the present. These concepts are explored through the five-part series of paintings *The Course of Empire* by Thomas Cole, Emanuel Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, and John Gast's *American Progress*. The chapter ends with a juxtaposition of the discussed nineteenth century artworks with Amy Balkin's conceptual work *Sell Us Your Liberty, or We'll Subcontract Your Death* from 2008. I analyze the ways in which nationalism has informed foreign policy in the context of war and the military-industrial complex.

---

<sup>35</sup> Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene," 220-226.

Each of these artworks contains elements that can be applied to the other chapters and topics as well. The chapter structure of my thesis must be seen as flexible. My aim is to cover as many subjects and themes and use the artworks as profound case studies to make my argument. Some of the works discussed in this thesis such as White's watercolors, Moran's *Lower Manhattan*, or Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire* serve to aestheticize and propagandize Anthropocene notions. Some works such as Walker's *Sugar Baby* or Meireles's *Insertions* deliberately criticize and other works covertly criticize (e.g. Cole's *The Course of Empire*).

Ultimately, this thesis tries to offer answers to the question of how the Anthropocene has been visualized and imagined since its onset. Through ecocritical, visual inquiry I explore how nationalism, globalization, and climate change have informed and interacted with each other in the past and the present.

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM COLONIALISM TO NEOCOLONIALISM - THE CONCEPT OF GLOBALIZATION

Following a chronological framework, this chapter contextualizes and interprets visual works through the lens of colonialism, neocolonialism, and globalization. The works examined reveal powerful connections between varying concepts of capitalism, race, and gender.

In 1585, under the patronage of Sir Walter Raleigh and the queen of England Elizabeth I., the artist John White was among the Roanoke voyage exploring the North Carolina shores and their environment. This was White's second voyage to the 'New World' and he was instructed to map and record the lives of the Carolina Algonquian Indians as well as their agricultural practices. During the journey White produced seventy-five watercolor drawings that were utilized five years later by engraver Theodor de Bry to produce copperplate engravings. These prints served as illustrations for Thomas Harriot's book *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* who also accompanied the second Roanoke voyage.<sup>36</sup> White's watercolors and Harriot's book are the earliest testimonies to document Native American life in North America. They are impressive testaments to early encounters between Europeans and the New World.

White's watercolors encompass a variety of genres such as maps, natural history illustrations, genre scenes, landscape drawings as well as town views and portraiture. Today, the extensive cartographic and illustrative elaborations done by White might be considered as 'anthropological science' or a mixed form of science and art. Art historian

---

<sup>36</sup> Sloan et al., *A New World*, 11-12.

Timothy Sweet explains that these visual artifacts were “conjoined components of a comprehensive approach to the visual field” in the sixteenth century and simultaneously served as “powerful tools of colonization.”<sup>37</sup> Certainly one purpose of the drawings was a pure promotion of the land as ready for ‘colonial appropriation’ by investors in England. That would entail the replacement of indigenous labor and people by English and the exploitation of Native American agricultural resources, especially their seeds and crops. Further, Sweet’s ecocritical reading of White’s drawings suggests an application of European agricultural and environmental methods by the English over indigenous management. That is, “the filling of actual fields in the New World through the material practices of colonization.”<sup>38</sup> The Roanoke watercolors highlight the anthropocentric colonial aims of the Europeans, specifically the English, while using the “power of art to imagine the opportunities as well as the limits of economic growth.”<sup>39</sup> Through White’s work European spectators were able to *visualize* the New World in terms of economic and natural resources.

To better elucidate these means of colonial propaganda, this section analyzes and interprets two watercolor drawings in depth. The first, titled *Indians fishing*, or as the inscription reads: “The manner of their fishing” and “A Cannow” depicts a fishing and hunting scene on the Atlantic shore of Roanoke island (Figure 1). A large dugout canoe steered by two standing Carolina Algonquian natives dominates the drawing. Two other people are sitting in the middle of the canoe, torches lit between them. The dugout canoes, characteristic for the Carolina Algonquians, “were made by splitting a cypress

---

<sup>37</sup> Sweet, “Filling the Field,” 27-28.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Braddock and Irmscher, introduction, 10.

log, [and] then burning and scraping out the interior with shells” while this undertaking proved to be an arduous and tedious process.<sup>40</sup> The ocean surrounding the canoe is inhabited by a variety of edible fish species including catfish, burrfish, skates, a hammerhead shark, sturgeon, and king crabs. Additionally, a weir in the drawing’s middle ground filled with fish enhances the abundance depicted in the ocean and along the shore. Furthermore, the watercolor presents diverse fishing methods with the use of dip nets and fire torches in the foreground, and weirs along with natives spearfishing in the background.<sup>41</sup> The sky is abundantly filled with birds including pelicans, geese, and ducks. Also noticeable in White’s watercolor is the doubling and mirroring of the portrayed Algonquian natives. All of the delineated tasks are performed by two natives at the same time while the great abundance of marine life and natural resources suggests endless availability of labor opportunities. As Sweet explains, “From the promoters’ [English European] perspective, the indigenous labor depicted ... could be supplemented or replaced by that of the idle English poor.”<sup>42</sup> Exaggeration in terms of environmental representation was useful in encouraging English colonizers to see the economic potential of conquering the lands and peoples of the New World.

A second example of colonial propaganda is White’s watercolor *The town of Secotan* (Figure 2). From a bird’s eye-view, the drawing represents a large town with a street running through its middle; the houses are built alongside the road. Fields with crops are planted next to the houses. In the background some Secotans are hunting and in the foreground others attend a religious ceremony. On three fields depicted on the right

---

<sup>40</sup> Sloan et al., *A New World*, 108.

<sup>41</sup> Harkin, “John White and the Invention of Anthropology,” 226.

<sup>42</sup> Sweet, “Filling the Field,” 34.



side of the drawing maize is grown and the inscription reads: “Corne newly spronge”, “Their greene corne”, and “Their rype corne”.<sup>43</sup> Even though the fields seem cultivated by using monoculture farming, the art historian Kim Sloan, suggests that “they had developed a way of growing [the maize] in mounds surrounded by beans which gave nitrogen to the soil and increased the yield.”<sup>44</sup> This method was superior to the European technique of row planting and plowing. Actually, White’s rendering of the Secotan town corresponds more to the composition of a common English village with its nicely arranged paths and rectangular fields than to the typically radial structure of Algonquian villages. Further, the inscriptions used by White to comment on agriculture and other activities by the natives simplify the experience for the English colonizers and patrons and counterfeit the facts. According to the anthropologist Michael Harkin, the landscapes depicted through White’s hands familiarize the exotic while making them accessible and usable to the colonizers.

This first representation by White and his contemporaries represented an “opening move in the colonial game.”<sup>45</sup> Besides the watercolors’ subtle intentions, it is apparent that the colonizers were never drawn together in any meaningful interaction with the natives. However, Harriot’s written account *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* provides valuable insight into the early encounters between colonizers and colonized. He recorded the beginning widespread deaths of natives triggered by diseases brought to the continent by the English: “Within a few dayes after our departure from euerie such towne, the people began to die very fast, and many in short space. ...

---

<sup>43</sup> Sweet, “Filling the Field,” 37.

<sup>44</sup> Sloan et al., *A New World*, 110.

<sup>45</sup> Harkin, “John White and the Invention of Anthropology,” 233.

neither knew what it was, nor how to cure it.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, one of the first acts of violence against the natives by the English was documented and happened during the second Roanoke voyage. Philip Amadas, a naval commander and explorer, set the town of Aquascogoc on fire after accusing the people of the town to have stolen a silver cup. The inhabitants were able to escape, however, the English destroyed crops and stored foods leaving the natives without supplies forcing them into starvation.<sup>47</sup>

White’s watercolor drawings can be considered as early propaganda pieces endorsing European colonization, commissioned by the English monarchy. White was instructed what to record and draw, but his drawings also reflect a subjective point of view. He provided exactly what his patrons back in England wanted and expected to see: Myriad reasons to legitimately colonize the New World. In this context the depiction of “landscape is always a form of symbolic possession of a territory, always existing in some structured relationship with a regime of power.”<sup>48</sup> Colonial landscapes in particular constituted spaces that were used to validate hegemonic power and authority. The Roanoke watercolors provide compelling evidence of the early interest in global trade as well as capitalist expansion. Richard Hakluyt, a writer and promoter of colonization, who was decisively involved in advertising the de Bry engravings, claimed “the New World would provide a field of labor that could be directed to the production of import commodities to enrich England’s economy while providing a market for England’s manufactures.”<sup>49</sup> That is, the generation of an economic approach for exploiting the

---

<sup>46</sup> Harriot in Sloan et al., *A New World*, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Sloan et al., *A New World*, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Harkin, “John White and the Invention of Anthropology,” 223.

<sup>49</sup> Sweet, “Filling the Field,” 25.

environment of the New World as well as its peoples to the benefit of English economic interests.

After Columbus landed in the Bahamas in 1492, the Spanish rapidly colonized the Caribbean soon enslaving native populations. But, imported diseases quickly drove the indigenous people to near-extinction and that necessitated a need for additional labor. Simultaneously, with the trade of goods in the course of the Columbian Exchange, a Triangular Trade developed. The term 'Triangular Trade' described trade routes between Europe, Africa, and the Americas exporting weapons and ironware from Europe to West Africa which in turn imported African slaves to the Caribbean and other European colonies. African slaves worked under extremely harsh conditions on sugar plantations, as sugar and molasses were then reshipped to New England to be processed into refined sugar. The last stage of the Triangular Trade consisted of exporting sugar, tobacco, cotton, and coffee back to England. With the decline of the Spanish Empire the Triangular Trade especially gathered pace when the French and the British established a powerful presence on the Caribbean islands controlling trade routes as well as slave trade.

A contemporary work of conceptual art that represents and critiques this Triangular Trade is Kara Walker's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (Figure 3). It was commissioned by the arts organization Creative Time and exactly ties in with the history of beginning globalization, colonialism as well as gendered racism in the Americas. Exhibited from May - July 2014 at the old Domino Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the site-specific artwork's provocative title is: *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby: An Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the*

*Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant.* In a dark, satiric, and challenging way Walker alludes to the countless African American slaves working on sugar plantations in the Caribbean British and French colonies from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century who died or suffered in ways that are unimaginable.

The *Sugar Baby* has the form of an ancient sphinx sculpture and is huge, measuring seventy-five feet in length and thirty-six feet in height. It was created with polystyrene blocks and then covering these with a thick layer of white powdered sugar. Yet, the sphinx exhibits “undeniably black features [while] wearing only an Aunt Jemima kerchief and earrings.”<sup>50</sup> Her long forearms and breasts dominate the front of the sculpture. The back exhibits a rear which is revealing her vulva. The highly sexualized sculpture plays with exaggerated black stereotypical features and represents the power relationships between the white, male slave-owning colonizers and the female slaves from whom all freedom and self-determination were taken. It is noticeable that the sphinx’s left hand does not lie flat on the ground, but her thumb is sticking out between the index and middle finger. According to the writer Hilton Als, this configuration either connotes good luck, fuck you, or fertility.<sup>51</sup> The interpretation, however, is left to the viewer. In front of the *Sugar Baby* and to its sides are fifteen, sixty inch tall statues of little boys depicting child slaves. Some of them carry bananas; others carry baskets on their backs or are holding them in front of them. Five boys are purely made from sugar and corn syrup and the other ten consist of a resin base coated in molasses. Due to the temperatures in and outside of the factory during the exhibition months, the boys started

---

<sup>50</sup> Smith, “Sugar? Sure, but Salted with Meaning.”

<sup>51</sup> Als, “The Sugar Sphinx.”

melting and collapsing leading Walker to chop up the remains and place them into their own baskets. The melting of the little boys, while the sugar remnants on the floor resemble blood, is the embodiment of the slave trade itself: The slow perishing of millions of people through hard work, violence, and contempt.

The power of Walker's art is even more emphasized through its ironic location in the old Domini Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn. The original factory was built in 1856 and operated by the American Sugar Refining Company. By 1870 the refinery was producing more than half of the sugar consumed in the United States from raw cane extracted from the Caribbean.<sup>52</sup> As depicted by the art critic Roberta Smith, the artwork's site is sugarcoated, dark, and rusted and "when it rains, the ceiling drips molasses as evidenced by the dark spots forming on Sugar Baby."<sup>53</sup> The smell inside the old refinery is described as one of burnt marshmallows, sweet and odorous at the same time. The site-specificity of the artwork takes full effect in combination with its location. The brutal history, incarnated through the *Sugar Baby*, is palpable in every corner of the factory.

Returning to the title of Walker's work, the term 'subtlety' needs further explanation. The Oxford English Dictionary states, a *subtlety* was a decorative figure or scene made out of sugar which was used as a table ornament or consumed between the courses of a meal in wealthy and aristocratic circles. The phrase was especially used in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century when sugar was an expensive luxury good. Today, it has become a popular commodity for the masses whose "excessive consumption [leads] to diseases like obesity and diabetes that disproportionately affect

---

<sup>52</sup> Als, "The Sugar Sphinx."

<sup>53</sup> Smith, "Sugar? Sure, but Salted with Meaning."

the poor.”<sup>54</sup> The historical spiral, that is signified in Walker’s artwork, of racism, exploitation, the brute exercise of power, and discrimination continues in the power of the sugar industry and it is still damaging many preventing them from achieving full potential in all aspects of life.

In a sense, through the compelling implementation of Walker’s *Sugar Baby*, the history of colonization, slavery, global trade, and capitalism is brought full circle. History does not reverse itself; instead it affects generation after generation. Race is a social construct, yet racism is very real. According to Walker, skin colors are “signifiers about power—the power separating those who have the language to make the world and map it, and those who work that claimed land for them with no remuneration, no hope, and then degradation and death.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it is all the more impressive how Walker plays with the dichotomy of black and white in her work. The bright sphinx, coated with a layer of white refined sugar, lets everyone in front of her appear black. At the same time, the sphinx is also coated with the product that once propelled her into slavery at the hands of the white European capitalists. In her very own distinctive way, Walker morbidly pays tribute to “the workers who chopped the cane, hauled it to port, retched in the slave ships below decks on their way to another port, boiled the molasses in great vats at fiery temperatures, stripped off its blackness - its flavor, its richness, its health-giving nutrients - and turned it into sugar, that is, turned it into nutritional poison, the color of cocaine.”<sup>56</sup> Walker, being African American herself, knows exactly what is at stake with her dramatic artwork. Probably no one else could have done a more effective and more

---

<sup>54</sup> Smith, “Sugar? Sure, but Salted with Meaning.”

<sup>55</sup> Als, “The Sugar Sphinx.”

<sup>56</sup> Larson, “A Subtlety, Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,” 509.

critical job than her. Understanding, she believes, is always a first step towards reflection and self-awareness.

The history of slavery goes hand in hand with the emergence of capitalism. The gradual dispossession and degradation of the enslaved laid the groundwork for “modern global capitalism and its attendant political form, the nation-state.”<sup>57</sup> Hence, it can be argued that slavery in the United States is inextricably linked with U.S. economic development in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Especially after World War II the United States underwent a time of strong economic growth and prosperity that became noticeable in a global context. The evolving free market economy counterbalanced the Soviet Union’s planned statist economy and totalitarian ideologies during the Cold War. While the United States stood firm against the ‘East’, the wounds of a society resulting from colonialism and slavery at home were still raw. However, the rising civil rights movement tackled some of the issues and problems which had traumatized African Americans for generations. Besides its troubled domestic history, the United States greatly expanded and consolidated its global military and economic power. One of the most prominent examples embodying American cultural imperialism through economic instruments is termed ‘Coca-Colonization’. The term signifies the circulation of American commodities and the influencing of other countries with American capitalist cultural values. In other words, Coca-Cola, representative for a range of transnational mega corporations, came to stand for the Americanization of almost every corner of the planet. This economic domination became known as ‘neocolonialism’ or neocolonial governance describing indirect political and military forms of control. Transnational

---

<sup>57</sup> Kazanjian, “Colonial,” 49.

corporations exert so much power through market dominance which in turn leads to relationships of dependence between countries as well as exploitation.<sup>58</sup>

The series *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles ties in precisely with this issue. While living in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s, Meireles began taking Coca-Cola bottles out of circulation and started etching and printing critical political messages on them. According to Calirman, Meireles “used a silkscreen process with vitreous white ink to transfer text.”<sup>59</sup> He inscribed messages such as ‘Yankees Go Home!’, ‘To register informations and critical opinions on bottles and return them to circulation’, or even instructions on how to build Molotov cocktails with the empty Coca-Cola bottles. Meireles altered over a thousand bottles in this process and returned them into the consumer economy made possible through the bottle deposit system in Brazil at that time.

First and foremost, however, the *Coca-Cola Project* and the *Banknote Project* were objects conceived for the INFORMATION exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. The exhibition was considered a milestone as it made “first attempts to historicize the art of the emergent information age.”<sup>60</sup> Organized by the curator Kynaston McShine, the exhibition contained works of one hundred artists from around the world which were asked to center their work around “the moment in history when the speed of information and the interconnectivity of the various parts of the globe brought the world’s disparities to human consciousness.”<sup>61</sup> Most pieces conceived for

---

<sup>58</sup> Dawson, “Imperialism,” 142.

<sup>59</sup> Calirman, *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship*, 127.

<sup>60</sup> Jardim De Santa Cruz Oliveira, “Systems and Feedback,” 99.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.



INFORMATION transcended the traditional categories of painting, sculpture, and printing. Instead, they depicted innovative conceptual works further consolidating conceptual art as a leading movement. Meireles's contributions to INFORMATION depicted two Coca-Cola bottles and two banknotes which were untitled at the time of the exhibition.

After INFORMATION he began the actual 'circulation' process described. The aim of and motivation behind the *Coca-Cola Project* (Figure 4)<sup>62</sup> according to Meireles was to tackle and question "the American system of politics and culture and its expansionist, interventionist, hegemonic, centralizing ideology."<sup>63</sup> American interventionism not only displayed itself in the Vietnam War at that time, but also through political intervention in countries in Central and South America. The United States supported and facilitated right-wing governments as well as dictatorships in Latin America by entering arms agreements. The overall goal was to ensure and help establish economic expansion engendering an advantaged position for the U.S. in the context of the Cold War.<sup>64</sup> As a consequence, transnational corporations such as Coca-Cola quickly became the symbol for these radical policies and strategies. Meireles's criticism is also directed against capitalism and capitalist culture. This critique becomes especially visible in the second part of the *Insertions* series: *The Banknote Project* (Figure 5).<sup>65</sup> Conceived

---

<sup>62</sup> Figure 4 in the Appendix depicts three Coca-Cola glass bottles with adhesive text labels. They were given to Tate Modern by the artist in 2006 and accessioned as well as catalogued in 2007. They function as relics or symbols for the original work.

<sup>63</sup> Meireles in Jardim De Santa Cruz Oliveira, "Systems and Feedback," 106.

<sup>64</sup> Jardim De Santa Cruz Oliveira, "Systems and Feedback," 107.

<sup>65</sup> Figure 5 in the Appendix depicts the front of a one-dollar bill and the back of a Brazilian cruzeiro. Twenty-seven banknotes (cruzeiro and dollar notes) were given to

and started at the same times as *The Coca-Cola Project*, Meireles also printed critical political statements onto the notes such as ‘Yankees Go Home’, ‘Down with dictatorship’, or ‘Quem Matou Herzog?’ which translates into ‘Who killed Herzog?’ alluding to Vladimir Herzog, a Brazilian journalist, who was tortured to death in police custody of the military dictatorship. Whereas the inscriptions on and the circulation of the Coca-Cola bottles are criticizing cultural imperialism in a globalized world, *The Banknote Project* directly attacks the embodiment of capitalism itself: money. Both *Insertions* series function as powerful examples of how the system of circulation created through globalization and capitalism can be used to critique the very system itself.

The three Coca-Cola bottles and the banknotes that are part of the Tate Modern collection symbolically stand for the still ongoing initial work started in 1970. For the artwork to fulfill its purpose it is absolutely necessary that the bottles and banknotes stay in circulation. A differentiation needs to be made between the actual *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* and the readymade objects presented in exhibitions and museums. Meireles’s objects in the Tate Modern collection represent items modified by artistic intervention which were never meant to be circulated. They not only function as symbols, but also as replicas of the objects of the *Insertions* series. On the other hand, the *Insertions* depict actions and not art as such. They circulate through systems and generate feedback and reactions.<sup>66</sup>

The three discussed works could not derive from more differing backgrounds, however, the contextualization, comparison, and juxtaposition of the works reveals

---

Tate Modern by the artist in 2006 and accessioned as well as catalogued in 2008. The notes at Tate Modern function as symbols for the original work.

<sup>66</sup> Jardim De Santa Cruz Oliveira, “Systems and Feedback,” 68.

intriguing correlations and illustrates what artists are capable of. As seen in all three works, the system of capitalism cannot be separated from culture. In the past it functioned through the means of colonization while exploiting and enslaving those of color and destroying and dividing indigenous culture; be it in Africa or the Americas. In the present, capitalism relies on the globalized world as its catalyst and operates through the means of neocolonialism while exerting cultural imperialism.

Since the beginning of the modern era with the discovery of the New World, the acquisition of power, hegemony, and wealth has run like a common thread through the course of history. As the examples of White's watercolors and Harriot's book show, artists have either furthered and propagated the gain of these attributes, or, as in the case of Meireles, contested and questioned this state. Walker's *Sugar Baby*, however, serves to critically reevaluate the colonial past while creating self-awareness in the present.

According to the art critic Kay Larson, this act of achieving self-awareness through the artwork has partly been accomplished. She explains that "if there is a self-awareness index, it would be easy to fill in the lower levels with the men who stood in front of her and 'held up' her breasts as their companions took photos."<sup>67</sup> Here, self-centeredness functions as the opposite of self-awareness. Yet, Walker's work sums up "a culture, a people, a gender, and a spirituality unbowed and unapologetic" even though exploited in order to generate profits through the circulation of the commodity of sugar.<sup>68</sup>

Interestingly, the symbol of sugar also surfaces in Meireles's work in the context of coca-colonization. Sadly, it must be noted that nothing has changed. In our today's globalized

---

<sup>67</sup> Larson, "A Subtlety, Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby," 511.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

world we are merely whitewashing the past, inventing new terms for the same conditions, and are unable to step outside the self with the aim to enter the existence of others.

Following Lewis and Maslin's Orbis spike hypothesis, this chapter has disclosed the historical contexts of colonialism, capitalism, and globalization ensuing from the American continent. Further, these systems and concepts have been applied to today's western social structures through art historical inquiry. The goal has been to reveal the importance of the discussed works in terms of propagandizing Anthropocene imperialism, but also criticizing the state of slavery and globalization. Additionally, the works show to what extent artists are able to contextualize and conceptualize controversial notions and help explain anthropocentric manifestations.

## CHAPTER 3

### VISUALIZING ANTHROPOGENIC ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

This chapter examines visualizations of the Anthropocene through paintings and conceptual art. The focus is on discussing the effects of anthropogenic environmental destruction and climate change as well as the gendered conquest of nature through Western imperialism. Additionally, concepts of Anthropocene aesthetics/anaesthetics and visibility will be introduced to the discussion.

In 1880 the painter Thomas Moran produced a work titled *Lower Manhattan from Communipaw, New Jersey* (Figure 6) depicting rather unusual subjects for him: A rendering of the beginning industrialization of New York City and its surroundings through factories and its busy harbor. Moran was especially well known at that time as a landscape painter of the Hudson River School who portrayed the western American ‘Wilderness’ in all its facets from Yellowstone to the Grand Canyon. However, in the early 1880s Moran turned to a series of industrial scenes from which *Lower Manhattan from Communipaw, New Jersey* resulted as the most prominent one. According to the art historian Vanessa Schulman, *Lower Manhattan* “addresse[s] the factual existence and interconnection of technological systems while still appealing to the picturesque or Romantic associations of its viewers.”<sup>69</sup> Whether and to what extent this assertion is verifiable in relation to environmental pollution and the exploitation of nature is analyzed in the following section.

There are three tiers of space discernable in Moran’s *Lower Manhattan*. The foreground is dominated by a swampy grass area, depicting an undeveloped inlet of the

---

<sup>69</sup> Schulman, *Work Sights*, 125.

Hudson River. On the left two men are working in what looks like a stone quarry. On the right numerous people are working in shipping ports and wharfs. Moran employs a warm, but muddy color spectrum with colors ranging from brown to yellow and from red-brownish to light green. Yet, a splash of red color is noticeable as one of the quarry worker's jacket. The depiction of the barren wasteland in the foreground points to the roughness of early industrialization. The middle ground is dominated by factories and more shipping docks. The loosely applied colors range from yellow-brownish to red and from gray to light blue. In the background, behind the factories of the Communipaw peninsula, the island of Manhattan with great factories emitting smoke, dust, and steam is discernable painted atmospherically in light yellow, blue, white, and gray tones. The scene's viewpoint is located in Jersey City on the north side of the old Morris Canal on the Hudson River facing towards Manhattan.<sup>70</sup>

The foreground of the painting forms a strong contrast to the middle ground and the background. While the depiction of the wasteland is characterized by clear vertical and horizontal brushstrokes, the factories seem to dissolve and become one with the idealized sky and its puffy clouds. This contrast is further supported by Moran's deliberate color scheme. The darker and earthier colors in the foreground stand out from the creamy and luminous colors in the background. However, the seemingly warm yellow hues are an indication for coal smoke that is leaving the smokestacks of the factories.

Through *Lower Manhattan* Moran is, in many regards, implementing what Mirzoeff has termed an Anthropocene 'aesthetic'. He argues that "the aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics - it comes to

---

<sup>70</sup> Schulman, *Work Sights*, 125.

seem natural, right, then beautiful - and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, Moran’s euphemistic, aestheticizing depiction of a beginning American industrialization and ensuing air pollution seduces the viewer’s perception and senses and leads to a softening and even obliviousness to the resulting environmental destruction. Additionally, through Moran’s rendering, “the degradation of the air is seen as natural ... and hence aesthetic [which describes] a key step in any visuality: it produces an anaesthetic to the actual physical conditions.”<sup>72</sup>

The term visuality was first coined by the controversial Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle in 1840. Carlyle defined visuality as “the clear picture of history available to the Hero as it happens and the historian in retrospect.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, visuality constitutes the means by which a hegemonic power claims to visualize the course of historic events. At the same time this demand also serves to validate hegemonic power itself. According to Carlyle, visuality was only reserved for the *hero* and not “visible to the ordinary person whose simple observation of events did not constitute visuality.”<sup>74</sup> From an imperialist, white supremacist point of view, these ordinary people included all people of color, indigenous people as well as homosexuals, and women, linking directly to Sylvia Wynter’s account of ‘Otherness’. As a counteraction to the prevalent definition of visuality in the late nineteenth century, the claim to visual subjectivity by “women, the enslaved and their free descendants, and people of alternative sexualities” became more

---

<sup>71</sup> Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene,” 220.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>73</sup> Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 92.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

and more demanding.<sup>75</sup> Mirzoeff states that exactly this two-sided use of the term  
visuality, as a keyword for visual culture studies, is contradictory as it can be “both a  
mode of representing imperial culture and a means of resisting it by means of reverse  
appropriation.”<sup>76</sup> In the context of Moran’s *Lower Manhattan* it is the visuality of the  
dominant white and masculine European Americans who conquer and colonize nature  
and the atmosphere for the benefit of a new capitalist economy and industrialization. The  
idealized depiction of smog disguises its danger and transforms the perception “of its  
difference into a sign of human superiority.”<sup>77</sup>

Especially in the Reconstruction period after the Civil War a reunified United  
States struggled to find a common identity. This quest resulted in the emergence of a new  
American nationalistic, masculine archetype that dominated the field of visual culture  
during that period. As Schulman explains, one of its goals was to dissociate from  
European influence and counteract “European art, which U.S. critics often characterized  
as feminized.”<sup>78</sup> *Lower Manhattan* falls exactly in this time period when Moran decided  
to turn away from portraying western ‘wilderness’ and towards an intensive phase of  
depicting industrial scenes in New York City and its surroundings which lasted roughly  
from 1879 to 1884. By applying techniques and styles of his landscape paintings to  
representing urban cityscapes and industrialized wastelands, Moran turned these elements  
into picturesque subjects that led the viewer to believe that the sublimity of nature could  
be represented through rising economic structures and an exploitation of the natural

---

<sup>75</sup> Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 90.

<sup>76</sup> Mirzoeff, “On Visuality,” 54.

<sup>77</sup> Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene,” 222.

<sup>78</sup> Schulman, *Work Sights*, 132.



environment. Further, Moran's work contained "an insistence ... that scenes of industry could be pleasing in the same way as more traditional landscapes."<sup>79</sup>

Another important aspect of *Lower Manhattan* which directly ties in with Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* is the rendering of a certain type of factory in the middle ground and background, particularly sugar refineries. At the time of *Lower Manhattan's* implementation, the U.S. sugar industry, initially made possible through slavery, was at its peak. As discussed in chapter 2, imperial networks expedited the global economic and capitalist growth of the United States at the turn of the century. Hence, the factories presented in *Lower Manhattan* directly link to American endeavors of expanding global market dominance and circulating a western and Eurocentric worldview. Additionally, the artist's portrayal of the factories, powered by coal and water, also points to atmospheric degradation through smoke and steam.<sup>80</sup>

Overall, Moran's painting, contrary to the interpretation of the curator Nancy K. Anderson as "a silver dazzle of sugar-baking palaces rising among the mists and exhalations of a universal thaw", depicts an embellishment, or an aesthetic, of anthropocentric pollution in the course of industrialization.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the emitted toxic by-products, in this case of sugar refining, emphasize the conquest of nature as seen through the atmosphere and on the ground (Hudson River and the adjacent industrial wastelands).

This gendered conquest of nature is the main subject of *Erosion No. 2 - Mother Earth Laid Bare*, a painting by the American artist Alexandre Hogue finished in 1936.

---

<sup>79</sup> Schulman, *Work Sights*, 137.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>81</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 115.

Unlike Moran's Anthropocene aesthetic, Hogue's painting functions as a counter concept to Anthropocene visibility denouncing exploitative, capitalist agricultural practices that shaped America's Mid- and Southwest during the early decades of the twentieth century.

*Mother Earth Laid Bare* (Figure 7) depicts a female figure lying in front of an abandoned farm. The exposed body is shaped by and one with an eroded landscape, or with the "buff clay subsoil of the Dallas area with a lethal gash running through her neck."<sup>82</sup> Her torso and the surrounding area are defined by gullies from water and wind erosion. In some gullies small water streams have formed. The sky is dominated by dark rain and storm clouds. In front of the female body lies a plow and its "dark spikey form against the light-colored, organic shapes of the female-ground constitutes an ominous, sinister presence."<sup>83</sup> On closer observation, the plow resembles a phallus which has penetrated the ground and precipitated the erosion of protective vegetation and the topsoil. Hence, symbolically, the plow stands for the rape of nature, of Mother Earth, while laying her bare through sexualized violence.

The meaning and importance of *Mother Earth* is inextricably linked with Hogue's childhood and career. He was born in 1898 in Memphis, Missouri, but immediately after his birth his family moved to Denton, Texas where his father accepted a new pastorate as a Presbyterian minister. Hogue's early childhood, characterized by helping his mother tending the family garden and spending time on his sister's ranch near Dalhart, Texas, laid the foundation for his deep appreciation and respect for nature. Early on, Hogue was told stories and familiarized with 'Mother Earth' and the "fertile force lying just beneath

---

<sup>82</sup> White, "Alexandre Hogue's Passion," 172.

<sup>83</sup> DeLong, *Nature's Forms/Nature's Forces*, 120.

the surface.”<sup>84</sup> In 1920 Hogue first visited Taos, New Mexico and began working and living there in 1926. His visits to New Mexico lasted from three to seven months at a time during which he painted, connected with other artists in the art colony, and learned about the culture of the Taos Pueblo Indians.

The belief in Mother Earth is central to Native American spirituality and cosmology. Yet, the term has often been used to make stereotypical assumptions about indigenous worldviews as well as a transfigured symbol by romanticism. In 2010, however, the ‘World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth’ was held in Bolivia where representatives from the Global South and myriad Indigenous groups came together to pass a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (UDRME). The declaration reinforces, among other things, that the Earth must be conceived as a living being with whom all other beings share inseparable and interdependent relationships. Further, attacks on and the exploitation of Mother Earth are at the same time regarded as assaults on all beings.<sup>85</sup>

Decades before UDRME, Hogue visually denounced aggression towards the land through *Mother Earth Laid Bare* and other works of the Erosion series while the cosmology of the Taos Pueblo Indians had a lasting effect on his art.<sup>86</sup> Hogue recounted a Taos Indian agricultural rule which says that “until all crops are sprouting all iron tools are stored, even shoes removed from horses’ feet for fear of injury to the Earth Mother.

---

<sup>84</sup> DeLong, *Nature's Forms/Nature's Forces*, 7.

<sup>85</sup> Monani and Adamson, introduction, 1-4.

<sup>86</sup> See *Drouth Survivors* (1933), *Drouth Stricken Area* (1934), and *The Crucified Land* (1939).

When time for cultivation comes all activity is resumed.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, the depiction of the metal plow in *Mother Earth* does not only stand for the wounding of the soil, but also for a violation of Native American principles and peoples. Putting such an emphasis on the feminine gender of nature, Hogue simultaneously decries her conquest through masculine Euro-American imperialism while also associating this conquest with the countless atrocities against as well as the genocide of indigenous peoples.

For a fuller understanding of Hogue’s work, it must be analyzed in its socio-historical context during the time of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. After World War I, in the 1920s, the United States underwent strong economic growth and prosperity, also referred to as the ‘Roaring Twenties’. The economic boom was accompanied by an advancing industrialization and expansion of agriculture in the Great Plains and arid Southwest. A focus was on monoculture crop production of wheat and corn in order to generate quick profits. To make the wide grasslands and prairies arable, farmers cleared and plowed up the prairie grass thereby removing an essential layer of protective vegetation. Besides over-plowing, overgrazing by cattle and sheep herds was also a destructive factor. These conditions were preceded by the decimation of indigenous peoples whose well-adapted agricultural practices and lifestyles made use of nature and the land responsibly. Additionally, the near extinction of the American bison, adapted to the habitat of the Great Plains, further laid the groundwork for a devastating exploitation of western landscapes. At the beginning of the 1930s, severe droughts hit the Midwestern and Southern Plains. They were accompanied by powerful storms that destroyed crops and buried whole areas in dust. The Dust Bowl mostly affected the five-

---

<sup>87</sup> Hogue in DeLong, *Nature's Forms/Nature's Forces*, 120.

state region “including the Panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma, the southwest corner of Kansas, the southeast corner of Colorado, and the northeast corner of New Mexico.”<sup>88</sup>

Families were forced to leave their homes and farms. Many moved to California to find new work or became migrant workers.

This migration, human displacement, and devastating poverty during the course of the Dust Bowl is also subject of John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939. Steinbeck decried the industrialization of agriculture through machines such as the tractor, and capitalist greed to discount “all aspects of nature except for its potential monetary value” that ultimately “prompted the death of the land through mechanistic efficiency.”<sup>89</sup> Also, it is no coincidence that the Dust Bowl came into being during the period of the Great Depression. The historian Donald Worster argues that the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression were both caused by the same society and culture. On the one hand, a society “that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth” and on the other hand a society that was shaped by a set of values or an economic order under the name of capitalism.<sup>90</sup> This economic system was a reason for westward expansion that first brought farmers to the arid Great Plains to conquer the land. Clearly, the collapse of the farming economy in the Great Depression and the resulting Dust Bowl were interconnected and signified a larger failure of the capitalist system.

Alexandre Hogue was aware of these reasons because they related to his own experience growing up in the region of the Dust Bowl. *Mother Earth Laid Bare* is a

---

<sup>88</sup> DeLong, *Nature's Forms/Nature's Forces*, 19.

<sup>89</sup> White, “Alexandre Hogue’s Passion,” 178.

<sup>90</sup> Worster, *Dustbowl*, 4.

visual testament to the anthropogenic, greed driven destruction of nature. It exhibits the artist's sympathies with the land, but not with the farmers whose greed destroyed the landscape, however also suffered from its desolation.<sup>91</sup> Hogue's art not only denounces land misuse and destruction, but it also sends a strong message that argues for change in land conservation. As the art historian Mark Andrew White has argued, "Hogue offers a visual sermon of sorts, critiquing Americans' faith in a boundless, inexhaustible nature as a dangerous ideology that resulted in the tragedy of the Dust Bowl."<sup>92</sup> This visual sermon has deep resonance with Native American cosmology and also proposes an opportunity to 'make things right again'. There is hope discernable in *Mother Earth Laid Bare*: Little blades of grass sprout in the erosion gullies. After the drought comes the rain and carries with it new life. Nature is able to regenerate itself, albeit not indefinitely. That is why environmental stewardship and land preservation is imperative for creating sustainable habitats.

Unlike Thomas Moran, Hogue pursues a fundamentally different goal with his art. Instead of anesthetizing the viewers' perception, he galvanizes them. Instead of offering an Anthropocene aesthetic, he offers reality. Considering the historical context from which his paintings emerged, one can argue that Hogue made use of his creative leeway thoroughly while provoking social rethinking. Yet, what is missing is the component of real social engagement.

Fast forward to the year 2007: The contemporary environmental artist Eve Mosher took up the intention of creating socially engaged art in the context of climate

---

<sup>91</sup> DeLong, *Nature's Forms/Nature's Forces*, 19.

<sup>92</sup> White, "Alexandre Hogue's Passion," 185.

change visualization and turned it into *HighWaterLine*, an internationally renowned and carried on public art performance. The idea for *HighWaterLine* (Figure 8) came into being after Mosher had read a report by Vivien Gornitz, a scientist working for the Center for Climate Systems Research at Columbia University. Gornitz explains that “anticipated sea level rise, stemming from global climate warming, will affect the coastal zone of the Metropolitan East Coast Region through permanent inundation of low-lying areas – particularly coastal wetlands, acceleration of beach erosion, and greater frequency of flooding episodes.”<sup>93</sup> This implies that a 100-year flood will happen much more frequently with a chance of recurring “once in 43 years by the 2020s, once in 19 years by the 2050s, and once in 4 years by the 2080s, on average.”<sup>94</sup> Hence, neighborhoods in New York City close to the water would be mostly affected in floods that could reach up to ten feet above sea level.

To visualize and make the findings from Gornitz’s study more comprehensible, Mosher decided to draw a blue chalk line with the help of a chalk dispenser, also called a ‘Heavy Hitter’, marking the 10-foot above sea level line highlighting the areas that would be inundated. During the course of her project she covered seventy miles of coast line in Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan which translated into walking nearly 150 miles from May to October 2007. In areas where Mosher could not continue her chalk line, she placed temporary solar-powered light beacons along the way.

Mosher’s overall goal with the *HighWaterLine* public art performance was to become involved in meaningful two-way conversations with people about climate

---

<sup>93</sup> Gornitz, Couch, and Hartig, “Impacts of Sea Level Rise,” 85.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

change. She wanted to “set up a space for dialogue about how climate change affects us as individuals and as communities [that] is so often missing from media and scientific reports.”<sup>95</sup> While drawing the line, Mosher had so-called ‘action packets’ on hand which she distributed to “neighborhood residents, encouraging them to compost, bike, buy local produce and write lots of letters to politicians as ways to diminish the risk that water will one day engulf their homes.”<sup>96</sup> Excerpts from the conversations with residents were later included in her self-published book, also titled *HighWaterLine*, documenting the course of her project. Mosher talked to and integrated people from various backgrounds, different social classes, and with different ethnicities.

One example is from Canarsie where Mosher worked in June 2007. Canarsie constitutes a working class neighborhood within the southeastern part of the borough of Brooklyn with demographics revealing a high population of African Americans. A woman approached Mosher and they ended up discussing the overflowing of the Paerdegat Basin, as well as how to engage other community members in environmental protection and raising awareness for climate change. Also surfacing in their conversation were the bitter challenges that an overpopulated, but underfunded and poor neighborhood, like Canarsie, faces in terms of creating more sustainable habitats, and being exposed to environmental pollution disproportionately.<sup>97</sup> The environmental studies and literary scholar Rob Nixon has addressed and termed this disproportion ‘slow violence’. In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* he defines ‘slow violence’, in a global context, as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight,

---

<sup>95</sup> Mosher in Nadir, “Walking the Edge of the Earth,” 110.

<sup>96</sup> Kennedy, “The Handwriting on the Road.”

<sup>97</sup> Mosher, *HighWaterLine*, 29.



a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, [and as] an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”<sup>98</sup> This creeping violence mostly affects the poor whose poverty is even aggravated as a consequence. According to Nixon, ‘the poor’ constitutes “a compendious category subject to almost infinite local variation as well as to fracture along fault lines of ethnicity, gender, race, class, region, religion, and generation.”<sup>99</sup> In connection with Mosher’s encounter(s) in Brooklyn, slow violence regarding environmental pollution and rising sea levels coupled with health and flood hazards along with intersectional discrimination becomes particularly evident. At the end of the conversation the woman asked Mosher what she would be getting out of the project or who she represented. Mosher replied that she, as an artist, merely tries to help people visualize global warming and climate change while encouraging them to take action in the fight to save the earth. And, after thinking about her statement, she realized that that was actually asking for a lot.<sup>100</sup>

Yet, Mosher’s work resonated so powerfully with the result that it evolved into a community-based grassroots collaboration in other coastal cities as well. The environmental artist Heidi Quante, founder of the San Francisco nonprofit *Creative Catalyst*, organized *HighWaterLine* Miami in 2013. Miami was followed by Philadelphia and Bristol in 2014 and Delray Beach in 2015. Quante’s approach centered around interactive workshops with local residents conducting their own research while learning about the impact of rising sea levels on their neighborhoods and communities. Moreover,

---

<sup>98</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Mosher, *HighWaterLine*, 29.

people from diverse backgrounds worked together to draw and trace the blue chalk line in their respective cities.<sup>101</sup>

Mosher's main idea for her socially engaged conceptual public artwork opens an important dialogue. *HighWaterLine* has shown that art has indeed the power to raise awareness and incite social rethinking while following an inclusive approach. Scientific data is joined with personal life stories and local experiences. As the artist Leila Nadir sums it up, "*HighWaterLine* is an invitation to understand, to act, and to prepare. But if political solutions to climate change don't materialize soon, it may also be an invitation to come to terms with loss."<sup>102</sup> Climate change mitigation propelled by twenty-first century political leadership must not be debatable. Yet, what we are seeing right now in U.S. politics depicts the terrifying opposite: Climate change denial while questioning scientific work and data as well as severe proposed budget cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency. Additionally, the 2018 federal budget blueprint declares to eliminate some of America's independent cultural agencies that include the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities whose removal would mostly affect regional and local programming. In a political landscape that wants to silence the arts, humanities, and sciences as well as their mutual collaboration it is imperative to keep working towards a goal and to not resign. The arts can provide the crucial link by introducing urgent issues through powerful emotional connections that resonate with people.

---

<sup>101</sup> Nadir, "Walking the Edge of the Earth," 112.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

This chapter has dealt with diverse visualizations of anthropogenic destruction, ensuing natural disasters, and finally climate change. Art can take on a wide range of roles, yet these roles need to be examined and interpreted in their historical contexts. For example, Moran's *Lower Manhattan* cannot directly be compared with Hogue's *Mother Earth Laid Bare* as they were produced in different periods as well as from different cultural contexts and with differing intentions. The goal here has been to provide an overview of the purposes visual works served in the past and the opportunities art brings in the present. By embedding this chapter into the larger concept of the Anthropocene it becomes clear how intertwined the discourses of race, gender, and nature are. On the one hand, they have served to justify a white, masculine Eurocentric visuality, and on the other hand a countervisuality driven by indigenous, female, and black voices.

## CHAPTER 4

### AMERICAN NATIONALISM AND CONCEPTS OF MANIFEST DESTINY

This chapter analyzes concepts of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism as well as nationalism through works of visual culture from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The focus is to examine how these concepts have influenced U.S. domestic and foreign policy in the past and the present and how they have furthered colonization and slavery, sustained racial discrimination, and led to a radical defense of the nation-state.

American identity has always been inextricably linked with an ambivalent relationship to nature and the environment since the earliest colonization of the American continent. Westward expansion stimulated the development of a national consciousness of exceptionalism that took place at the expense of indigenous peoples and their habitats. Simply put, the westward movement of the frontier “was facilitated by racist ideologies that viewed Indians as ‘lesser breeds’ whose removal or extermination was necessary to the establishment of Anglo-Saxon civilization.”<sup>103</sup> Additionally, the centuries-long history of slavery including the disenfranchisement of Africans led to the creation of whiteness as a property, as coined by the Law professor Cheryl I. Harris.<sup>104</sup> Whiteness made possible and guaranteed access to citizenship rights as well as to a Eurocentric national identity and national belonging.

In 1836 Thomas Cole completed a five-part allegory *The Course of Empire* that subtly denounced early American exceptionalism and westward imperial expansion

---

<sup>103</sup> Weinbaum, “Nation,” 179.

<sup>104</sup> See “Whiteness as Property” by Cheryl I. Harris in *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707-1791.

during the presidency of Andrew Jackson. It implied a critique of the American destruction of the environment and colonialist land grabbing.

Cole is acknowledged as the founder of the Hudson River School. He was born in 1801 in England and emigrated to the United States with his family in 1818. After moving to New York in early 1825, he produced extensive sketches of the Hudson River Valley and the Catskill Mountains. Later that year, Cole came to fame that same year when three of his landscape paintings were bought by the influential painters John Trumbull, Asher B. Durand, and William Dunlap. After a stay abroad in Europe from 1829 to 1832, Cole began to implement his long-considered plans for the series *The Course of Empire*. In 1833, Luman Reed, a wealthy New York merchant and patron of the arts, commissioned the five painting series.

*The Course of Empire* represents the rise and fall of an allegorical empire in five paintings that included *The Savage State*, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, *The Consummation of Empire*, *Destruction*, and *Desolation*. For the purpose of this chapter, the focus is primarily on *Consummation* and *Destruction*. The lifespan depicted in the paintings traces one day, in the same location, from dawn in *The Savage State* to high noon in *Consummation* to twilight in *Desolation*. In *The Savage State* hunters with bows and arrows, a clear allusion to indigenous people, roam the wild forest and landscape which together with the untamed sea in the background suggests unspoiled nature. *The Arcadian or Pastoral State* is dominated by “a domesticated nature harmoniously integrating wilderness and civilization” while a new city on the water is discernable.<sup>105</sup> The centerpiece of the series, *The Consummation of Empire* (Figure 9), exhibits a

---

<sup>105</sup> Miller, “The Fate of Wilderness,” 90.

maritime empire with monumental buildings resembling ancient Greek and Roman architecture. Vast crowds populate the scene admiring the conquering emperor in his triumphal march across a bridge in the center of the painting. The civilization's luxurious decadence and wealth is reflected in Cole's colors ranging from pastel colors to gold. Red is used to signal the dominance of the emperor and his empire. As the art historian Angela Miller explains, "a place-defining mountain peak seen in the first two canvases has virtually disappeared behind elaborate classical architecture."<sup>106</sup> However, on closer observation, the profile of the mountain resembles a human face which is even more emphasized by a diagonal leading from the emperor's face on the stone bridge to a projected stone sculpture in the middle ground to the distant mountain in the background.

But Cole warns that imperial corruption, decadence, and arrogance end disastrously for the civilization in *Destruction* (Figure 10). An outside army invades, destroys, and sacks the imperial city alluding to the sack of Rome in 455 by the Vandals. The apocalyptic atmosphere in *Destruction* is accentuated by a sudden change in the weather: A powerful storm accompanied by a fierce sea and lightning ravage the city. Especially noticeable is how Cole depicts acts of violence and death. He dramatically shows dying and drowning people, including children, pools of blood, and gruesome bodies. Perhaps the most striking passage is a woman in the foreground who is wearing a white dress and is about to leap from the quay wall while fleeing from a barbarian. The same woman already appeared in *The Arcadian or Pastoral State* and offers room for interpretation. White is the color of purity and peace which reflects the civilization's state in the second canvas. In *Destruction*, however, the suggested suicide of the woman in the

---

<sup>106</sup> Miller, "The Fate of Wilderness," 92.

white dress represents the collapse of peace and therefore also the collapse of the empire including the demise of civilization. The last canvas of the series, *Desolation*, shows the total collapse of civilization. Humans have completely vanished and the ruins of the once glorious empire are all that is left. Yet, there is life discernable: Animals and plants have reclaimed their habitats and the mountain in the background watches over the scene, unaffected by the demise of the once great empire.

*The Course of Empire* depicts a multilayered, socio-critical allegory that subtly questions political developments in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1829 through mobilizing forces that would make up the early version of the Democratic Party. Yet, the policies of the early Democratic Party under Jackson reveal major differences in comparison with today's Democratic Party platform. Jackson brought about fundamental caesuras to American domestic policy that endorsed the westward expansion of the nation. It also promoted the cruel Indian Removal Act of 1830 that expanded the belief in America's Manifest Destiny. The concept of Manifest Destiny focuses around the conviction that the United States has a divine mission to imperial expansion. This belief draws upon the ideas of "New England Puritans as God's chosen people in the Promised Land [,] ... John Locke's influential argument that land ownership was justified by use, as well as Jeffersonian theories that agrarian democracy extended freedom's space."<sup>107</sup> The doctrine of Manifest Destiny developed from white supremacist views that emphasized a Euro-American episteme. Closely allied with Manifest Destiny are varying beliefs in American exceptionalism. The Americanist scholar Donald Pease explains that exceptionalism in

---

<sup>107</sup> Streeby, "Empire," 96.

the context of the United States “has been taken to mean that America is ‘distinctive’ (meaning merely different), or ‘unique’ (meaning anomalous), or ‘exemplary’ (meaning a model for other nations to follow), or that it is ‘exempt’ from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an ‘exception’ to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations).”<sup>108</sup> Hence, American exceptionalism combined with the belief of Manifest Destiny led to aggressive expansionist policies in the past and the present. These beliefs must also be seen as an extension of colonialist thought on the American continent fueled by an early national identity as well as nationalism.

Jackson also pursued a laissez-faire economics policy and campaigned against government intervention that escalated into the Bank War. As a consequence, after a bitterly fought political battle against Nicholas Biddle, the president of the Bank of the United States, and Senator Henry Clay, the Second Bank of the United States was privatized in 1836 and liquidated in 1841. Controversy and eventual rejection of Jackson’s politics spurred the creation of the Whig party in the 1830s. Given the heterogeneity of the party, the Whigs were united in opposition to Jackson’s politics regarding westward expansion as well as executive autocracy.

Thomas Cole strongly sympathized with Whig opposition to Jacksonian policies. As Miller explains, “when Cole did express political opinions, however, they were distinctly anti-Democratic and Whiggish. He commented scathingly on Jacksonian political behavior [and] he supported the Whig candidate William Henry Harrison in the campaign of 1840.”<sup>109</sup> In *The Course of Empire* Cole exactly translates this discontent

---

<sup>108</sup> Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 9.

<sup>109</sup> Miller, “Thomas Cole and Jacksonian America,” 67.



into myriad visual metaphors. The robed and crowned emperor in *Consummation* alludes to Whiggish conceptions of a corrupt imperial power. The art historian Allan Wallach has even argued that the emperor resembles Andrew Jackson while also hinting at “Caesar – military hero, usurper of republican government (senators, like captives, follow in his train), and idol to the multitudes assembled to hail his triumphant return.”<sup>110</sup> When compared with the mix of agrarian and industrial lifestyle in *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, the scene in *Consummation* depicts, according to Cole, “a serious decline in the standard of public life; the citizens of the empire idolatrously worship the emperor they bear aloft rather than jealously guard the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.”<sup>111</sup> Cole’s criticism is directed at the accumulation of immense wealth that benefits individualistic power and is accompanied by the decay of nature and moral values. He was persuaded that under Jackson the “American society was the victim of its own self-serving pursuits. Loyalties to anything beyond the immediate interests of the individual (usually economic in nature) were drowned out”<sup>112</sup> Jackson’s laissez-faire policies facilitated the expansion of easy credit for individuals that in turn led to excessive land speculation. In 1837 the real estate bubble burst with the result of one of America’s first financial crises with great economic hardship.<sup>113</sup> In *Consummation* Cole already foresaw this imminent ‘destruction’ of the empire: In the painting’s foreground, two boys are playing with their toy ships in a fountain’s water basin. What first seems amicable appears to be a battle after closer observation: One boy is willfully sinking the other

---

<sup>110</sup> Wallach, “Thomas Cole,” 94.

<sup>111</sup> Miller, “Thomas Cole and Jacksonian America,” 71.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>113</sup> Jordan, “Thomas Cole’s Intemperate Empire,” 344-345.

boy's ship. Another hint regarding an upcoming destruction can be seen in the depiction of an Athena statue in the painting's middle ground: Athena, a goddess of Greek mythology, symbolizes war. Additionally, the militarized civilization shown in *Consummation* alludes to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, that is westward expansion, and to the conquest of nature. Further, giant plant vases and artificially created fountains and water features picture a manmade environment. Returning to the described diagonal, it can be argued that the mountain stands above the scene monitoring the emperor (Jackson) and his nation (U.S. society), unwaveringly and everlastingly. The fight culminates in Cole's *Destruction* and nature prevails. Symbolically, the mountain returns to the center of the painting.

In summary, Cole imagines through visual allegory how American society might perish from an excessive and aggressive implementation of Manifest Destiny and through an arrogant belief of exceptionalism fueled by imperial, illiberal leadership. Though *The Course of Empire* series was praised by contemporary viewers and critics, "the generic classical trappings ...reminded [them merely] of ancient Rome, not the United States."<sup>114</sup> Most people did not discern the underlying moral lesson of the series. Likely, they deliberately "overlooked or resisted [the series'] implications for the American republic of the 1830s."<sup>115</sup> The majority of American society at that time considered themselves on the 'right' side of history. They were convinced that God had given white America the mandate to develop the land while the native people were doomed to extinction.

---

<sup>114</sup> Braddock and Irmischer, introduction, 8.

<sup>115</sup> Miller, "The Fate of Wilderness," 92.

And in this statement lies the contradiction of Cole's own work. The covert allegory in *The Course of Empire* (not actively calling on the public to become involved in activism or form oppositions) distracts attention from the fact that Cole is also part of that same white Euro-American society. The preservation of 'wilderness' and 'pristine nature' is only important to him when it intersects with a romanticized perception in the context of landscape painting. Cole had no real intention to prevent environmental destruction or to stand up for the rights of exploited, expelled, or killed indigenous peoples. For example, in *The Savage State*, as the title suggests, native people are portrayed as barbarians and in Cole's *Essay on American Scenery*, first published in the *American Monthly Magazine* in 1836, he refers to them as "savage beasts, and scarcely less savage men."<sup>116</sup> When humans are depicted in Cole's works, whites is given preeminence. They predominate and fulfill a hegemonic role compared with native people who are virtually absorbed by nature and coalesce with the background. As Pease emphasizes, 'Virgin Land' or 'wilderness' "narratives placed the movement of the national people across the continent in opposition to the savagery attributed to the wilderness as well as the native peoples who figured as indistinguishable from the wilderness."<sup>117</sup> Hence, the displacement of indigenous peoples in the course of Manifest Destiny is romanticized and downplayed by Cole.

The creed of Manifest Destiny in pre-Civil War America culminated in the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Mexican-American War from 1846 to 1848 that led to vast territorial gains of what is now Arizona, Nevada, California, Utah, as well as parts

---

<sup>116</sup> Chung, "American Legends," 55.

<sup>117</sup> Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 160.

of Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico. American artists of that time translated the westward ‘spirit’ into paintings that function as outright counter concepts to Cole’s early covert criticism of expansionism. Two works that particularly heroize and idealize concepts of American cultural nationalism and exceptionalism in the course of westward expansion are Emanuel Leutze’s *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* from 1862 and John Gast’s *American Progress* from 1872.

Emanuel Leutze was born in Germany in 1816 and immigrated to the United States as a child in 1825 with his family. Later, he trained as an artist in Philadelphia and then at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and is often regarded a member of the Düsseldorf School of Painting. In 1861 Leutze produced an oil study that would provide the basis for his big mural *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*. In July 1861 the civil engineer Montgomery C. Meigs, superintendent of construction of the Capitol extensions, commissioned the idea for the mural for \$20,000.<sup>118</sup> During the Civil War Leutze painted the mural from July 1861 to November 1862. He used a special painting technique called stereochromy that was invented in Germany around 1846 based on the Fresco method. The pigments were applied to plaster directly and then sealed with waterglass which is a silica solution that preserves and enhances the colors.<sup>119</sup> The mural is located in the House Wing of the U.S. Capitol in the west stairway.

*Westward the Course of Empire* (Figure 11) depicts a scene of American settlers and pioneers followed by a train including covered wagons, horses, mules, and cattle. They are standing on the continental divide beholding the land of California and the

---

<sup>118</sup> “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way.”

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

Pacific Ocean in the distance. The figures are arranged in a spiral form that is oriented upward towards the 'Promised Land'. A family forms the center of the composition. Adding to the biblical metaphor is a "mother with an infant child and her husband in the coonskin cap [who] are purposefully reminiscent of pictures of the Holy Family on the flight into Egypt."<sup>120</sup> The allusion to the Holy Family is emphasized by a triangular composition within the spiral formation encompassing only the family. The other figures depict stereotypical conceptions of pioneers and settlers prevalent at that time: For example, woodcutting men on the left side of the mural, armed men on horses accompanied by dogs in the foreground, and an injured or ill woman on the right side. Especially noticeable is a young African American man in the foreground leading a mule. In the background, on a rock overhang, two pioneers are about to wave the American flag. The mural is framed by a border that features portraits of the pioneers William Clark and Daniel Boone. William Clark together with Meriwether Lewis led a federal survey of the Oregon Territory from 1804 to 1806, opening the way for western settlement and Daniel Boone explored and settled the Kentucky territory in the 1760s and 1770s.<sup>121</sup>

In *Westward the Course of Empire* Leutze employs a powerful visual language depicting the embodiment of Manifest Destiny while at the same time blatantly propagandizing westward expansion. In the mural the 'Promised Land' is represented as uninhabited; in other words as a 'Virgin Land'. Like Cole, Leutze deliberately omits native people in his picture. The myth of the 'Virgin Land', as Pease explains, "depopulated the landscape in the imaginary register so that it might be perceived as an

---

<sup>120</sup> Sweeney, *Masterpieces*, 52.

<sup>121</sup> "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way."

unoccupied territory in actuality. The metaphor turned the landscape into a blank page, understood to be the ideal surface onto which to inscribe the history of the nation's Manifest Destiny."<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, the myth of the 'Virgin Land' went even so far that it enabled denial concerning the resettlement and the extermination of native populations.<sup>123</sup> The title of Leutze's mural together with Thomas Cole's title for his five-part series comes from Bishop George Berkeley's poem *On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America* that was written in the early eighteenth century. The last verse reads: "Westward the course of empire takes its way;/The first four acts already past,/A fifth shall close the drama with the day:/Time's noblest offspring is the last."<sup>124</sup>

Despite Leutze's racist ostracism, he included a young African American, apparently a free man, in the foreground of the mural who was not part of the oil study produced in 1861. He decided to portray the freed slave as a sign and an allusion to the emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia which took place in 1862.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, it becomes clear how intertwined the concepts of Manifest Destiny and exceptionalism are with a white Christian episteme and how they informed American cultural identity.

In the second work, John Gast's *American Progress* 1872 (Figure 12), the concept of Manifest Destiny and exceptionalism are carried to extremes. The painting shows an allegorical figure of progress personified as Columbia, moving westward across the American continent. She holds a 'school book' in her right hand and in her left hand she

---

<sup>122</sup> Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 160.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Berkeley, "On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America," 25.

<sup>125</sup> "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way."

carries a telegraph wire. Progress is on a civilizing mission bringing with her communication, industry, and the ‘white men’s’ way of living. Native people, bison, a coyote, and a bear open the way for her who is accompanied by pioneers and settlers with covered wagons, stagecoaches, the pony express, farmers with livestock as well as the railroad on the right side of the painting. The sky on the left shows dark clouds that are receding towards the Rocky Mountains. On the right, a golden light follows Progress across the continent. At the far right, the city of New York with the Brooklyn Bridge is visible.<sup>126</sup>

The painting was commissioned by George A. Croffut, a publisher of western-themed tourist guides. In 1873 he reprinted *American Progress* from a duplicate chromolithography of the original painting in his journal *Croffut’s Western World*.<sup>127</sup> As a consequence, the image was widely disseminated and the painting’s subject became very popular among Americans at that time. During and after the Civil War, Manifest Destiny continued to guide and shape American domestic policy. For example, the Homestead Act was signed in 1862 by Lincoln and the transcontinental railroad allowed easier settlement in the West. Ultimately, Gast summarized “the successive phases in the history of the Transcontinental American Empire” resonating with the majority of society.<sup>128</sup>

Leutze’s and Gast’s works exhibit deep American ideological convictions that continue to this day and have informed American foreign policy in the twentieth and

---

<sup>126</sup> Sweeney, *Themes in American Painting*, 25.

<sup>127</sup> “Croffut’s Western World,” accessed March 28, 2017, <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3440646>.

<sup>128</sup> Sweeney, *Themes in American Painting*, 25.

twenty-first centuries. The fact that Leutze's mural was commissioned for the U.S. Capitol, the heart of political decision-making, says much about how Americans perceive their own national identity as well as how they want the outside world to perceive it. The way Euro-Americans have conquered and exploited the continent from East to West in the course of the nineteenth century is reflected in U.S. warfare today, especially since 9/11. Donald Pease refers to George W. Bush's address to the nation on September 20, 2001 in which Bush reemploys the myth of the 'Virgin Land' in order to attest the American people their complete innocence (in relation to the disavowal of the country's brutal colonial history). Due to this innocence, the wound inflicted upon the nation by the events of 9/11 is therefore all the worse.<sup>129</sup> The response to 9/11 was the declaration of the Global War on Terror and the introduction of the Homeland Security Act in 2002 which led to the creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Maintaining the myth of the 'Virgin Land' and the innocent American people turned into the narrative of 'Homeland' protection while waging war on foreign soil still guided by concepts of Manifest Destiny and exceptionalism.

One conceptual artwork, titled *Sell Us Your Liberty, or We'll Subcontract Your Death* (Figure 13) from 2008 deals with the links between nationalism, exceptionalism, and capitalism in the context of war profiteering. The work is by Amy Balkin who practices as an environmental artist in San Francisco. *Sell Us Your Liberty* is a series of large lumber crayon rubbings that were traced from architectural signage of San Francisco Bay Area-based entities engaged in the everyday production of war. According to Amy Balkin's description of the work on her website *Tomorrow Morning*, these

---

<sup>129</sup> Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 157-159.



entities are specifically “involved in activities including military-industrial development and production, illegal surveillance, [and] remote sensing.”<sup>130</sup> Some examples are: AT&T, Crossbow Technologies, Dust Networks, Space Systems/Loral, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Balkin explains that the artwork’s title and the activity itself were inspired by a pseudonymous comment that was left on the *Threat Level* blog, which is part of WIRED’s website, in 2007. The comment was related to the whistle-blowing of the former AT&T technician Mark Klein in 2006 on the cooperation of the NSA and AT&T. Through a splitter, located in Room 641A at 611 Folsom Street in San Francisco, the NSA connected to AT&T’s network and conducted warrantless wiretapping as well as domestic internet surveillance via data duplication and redirection.<sup>131</sup>

It is a complex task to disentangle the nexus entailing the links between American national identity, exceptionalism, the war on terror, surveillance, the securing of resources, and capitalism. Around six weeks after 9/11, Congress passed the U.S. Patriot Act that was signed into law by George W. Bush on October 26 in 2001. The act “effected the most dramatic abridgement of civil liberties in the nation’s history” and the Emergency State was “empowered to suspend the articles of the Constitution protective of personal liberty, freedom of speech and assembly, the inviolability of the home, and postal and telephone and Internet privacy.”<sup>132</sup> The NSA – AT&T warrantless wiretapping must be placed in this historical-political context.

---

<sup>130</sup> “Sell Us Your Liberty, or We’ll Subcontract Your Death.”

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 168.

However, with *Sell Us Your Liberty* Amy Balkin goes even one step further and includes a critical reflection on the United States' role in waging the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq while denouncing specific corporations and the Department of Homeland Security. She openly criticizes the capitalist structures that help the corporations gain profits. Capitalism and war represent two sides of a coin as seen in the military-industrial complex in Afghanistan and Iraq. By this means, the nexus of this chapter becomes especially clear: The concepts of Manifest Destiny and exceptionalism have informed the Euro-American self-image and identity since the onset of colonization in the 'Virgin Land' or 'Homeland' and abroad in the conduct of war. These concepts translated into excessive forms of nationalism enslaving or exterminating those that did not fit into this self-proclaimed image (See Wynter).

This chapter has dealt with diverse visualizations of the ingrained concepts of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. The goal here has been to untangle the ideological network that these concepts form with each other. By embedding this chapter into the larger concept of the Anthropocene it becomes clear how hard it is to separate climate change from the histories of colonization, conquest, and ultimately nationalism. As in the chapters before, on the one hand the discussed works have served to justify a white Eurocentric visuality (Leutze and Gast), and on the other hand a countervisuality (Balkin). Cole's *The Course of Empire* exhibits elements of both visuality and countervisuality.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

On March 28, 2017 the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States signed an executive order to revoke his predecessor's climate change mitigation efforts and revive the coal industry. In signing the order, Trump confirmed that the United States does not plan on upholding President Obama's commitments in terms of containing planet-warming carbon dioxide pollution. With the order, Trump will turn denials of climate change into national policy.<sup>133</sup> What that means on a global scale is apparent. Even though the United States has not officially withdrawn from the Paris Agreement, it is unlikely that it will fulfill the agreement's requirements: Keeping global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius. Following that goal, Obama's 'Clean Power Plan' would have entailed, among other things, the closing of hundreds of coal power stations and the building of wind and solar plants in an effort to cut the United States' emissions about twenty-six percent from 2005 levels by 2025. Thus, Trump's disregard and denial of climate change and its consequences is all the more alarming at a time when a new geological era, the Anthropocene, demands that humanity fundamentally rethinks human coexistence and behavior on the planet it inhabits. The future is very uncertain.

In this context, pointing to current developments in U.S. politics reinforces the objective of my thesis. My attempt has been to offer an ecocritical, art historical analysis disentangling the intertwined systems of colonization, slavery, globalization, capitalism, and climate change as well as the concepts of exceptionalism and nationalism. I have examined through a selection of works of visual culture how these systems and concepts

---

<sup>133</sup> Davenport and Rubin, "Trump Signs Executive Order."

have affected and informed each other while triggering and shaping the emergence of the Anthropocene. The Euro-American-centric approach has been employed to signify the degree of responsibility and blame and not primacy. As the cultural anthropologist Eduardo Brondizio et al. correctly remark, the Anthropocene concept “motivates deep ethical questions about the politics and economics of global change, including diverse interpretations of past causes and future possibilities.”<sup>134</sup>

Particularly through the visual works of John White, Kara Walker, Alexandre Hogue, and Thomas Cole I have revealed how the system of capitalism depends on the exploitation of the land and natural resources which has led to colonization and slavery furthering an immense economic growth of the Western world. The profits gained from this growth have never been distributed evenly which in turn has generated severe inequality among countries, social classes, and ethnicities. The Orbis spike theory by Lewis and Maslin, suggesting an Anthropocene start date around 1610, underlines and helps explain this historical development.

Through two specific examples symbolizing the United States’ economic power, the dollar bill and the Coca-Cola bottle, Cildo Meireles’s work has shown how capitalism relies on the globalized world as its catalyst in the present and operates through the means of neocolonialism while exerting cultural imperialism. The symbol of Coca-Cola, as Adamson notes, “represent[s] the material realities of global capitalism, with their associated environmental consequences, including the movement of consumer goods, waste, toxins, disease, and pollution.”<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup> Brondizio et al., “Re-Conceptualizing the Anthropocene,” 319.

<sup>135</sup> Adamson, “We Have Never Been *Anthropos*,” 159-160.

The artworks of Thomas Moran, Alexandre Hogue, and Eve Mosher demonstrate the inseparability of anthropogenic destruction and climate change from the histories of colonization and conquest accompanied by racial segregation and discrimination. The underlying discourses of race, gender, and nature have, on the one hand, served to incite and justify a white, masculine Eurocentric visuality, and on the other hand a countervisuality driven by indigenous, female, and black voices.

The enduring way the concept of Manifest Destiny has shaped an American national consciousness fueled by beliefs of exceptionalism becomes clear in the works of Thomas Cole, Emanuel Leutze, and John Gast. In chapter 4 I have considered how these conceptions helped to further colonization and slavery, sustained racial discrimination, and led to a radical defense of the nation-state. Particularly Balkin's work discloses the powerful nexus between capitalism and nationalism in the brutal context of war profiteering and the military-industrial complex.

The artworks discussed not only help to contextualize multilayered historical processes and connections, but they also function as cultural products and testimonies speaking to how diverse people have imagined and visualized these processes and belief systems. Visual culture is crucial to make sense of the past. But if employed as countervisualities in the present, visual works can be the driving force in building an essential bridge from scientific awareness to personal awareness concerning climate change or Anthropocene symptoms in general. Countervisualities can change apathy into activism. However, the Anthropocene "presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our commonsense understandings and beyond that to

contemporary culture in general.”<sup>136</sup> Hence, this thesis has only examined and discussed a fraction of a comprehensive and complex Anthropocene discourse.

Our globalized world makes us believe that humanity has overcome the ingrained structures of colonial dependency, however, these structures are the roots to myriad modern conflicts. The first step must be to dismantle the hierarchy underlying humanity generated through the systems of colonization and slavery. As Mirzoeff argues, “if all living people were considered fully human ... [and] equal, there would already be dramatic action to protect those whose way of life is radically under threat, such as Pacific islanders and other residents of low-lying nations like Bangladesh threatened by rising sea levels.”<sup>137</sup> Another important step is to turn away from an entrenched anthropocentrism and consider all non-human species equal as well.

In his 2015 second encyclical *Laudato Si’* with the subtitle *On Care for Our Home* Pope Francis discusses issues of climate change, its roots in human behavior, anthropocentrism as well as poverty and social inequality. The encyclical is regarded as a call for worldwide rethinking concerning the world we inhabit and as a turning point within the Catholic Church. Pope Francis powerfully sums up:

Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism which today, under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds. The time has come to pay renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes; this in turn is the condition for a more sound and fruitful development of individuals and society. An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 9.

<sup>137</sup> Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene,” 226-227.

<sup>138</sup> Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’*, 87.

He identifies that Christianity in the past has led to ideological formations that have severely impacted relationships between humans on the one hand and, on the other hand, between humans and the natural world. A rethinking needs to take place urgently as “there can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself.”<sup>139</sup> If awareness of the Anthropocene calls upon us to fundamentally rethink our relationship with nature and the environment, it takes leaders such as Pope Francis to guide and advance the process of keeping the planet livable for future generations. Francis asks, “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?”<sup>140</sup> These are urgent questions and are still largely ignored by many industrialized nations, with the United States leading the way under its current political leadership.

---

<sup>139</sup> Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si'*, 88.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adamson, Joni. "We Have Never Been *Anthropos*: From Environmental Justice to Cosmopolitics." In *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman, 155-173. New York; London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017.
- Als, Hilton. "The Sugar Sphinx." *The New Yorker*, May 8, 2014.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-sugar-sphinx>.
- Anderson, Nancy K. *Thomas Moran*. Washington, DC; New Haven: National Gallery of Art, 1997.
- Angus, Ian. "When Did the Anthropocene Begin...and Why Does It Matter?" *Monthly Review* 67, no. 4 (2015): 1-11.
- Berkeley, George. "On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America." *College Music Symposium* 16, (1976): 25.
- Braddock, Alan C. "From Nature to Ecology: The Emergence of Ecocritical Art History." In *A Companion to American Art*, edited by John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain, 447-467. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015.
- Braddock, Alan C., and Renée Ater. "Art in the Anthropocene." *American Art* 28, no. 3 (2014): 2-8.
- Braddock, Alan C. "Ecocritical Art History." *American Art* 23, no. 2 (2009): 24-28.
- Braddock, Alan C., and Christoph Irmscher. Introduction to *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, Edited by Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, 1-22. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009.
- Brondizio, Eduardo S., Karen O'Brien, Xuemei Bai, Frank Biermann, Will Steffen, Frans Berkhout, Christophe Cudennec, et al. "Re-Conceptualizing the Anthropocene: A Call for Collaboration." *Global Environmental Change* 39, (2016): 318-327.
- Calirman, Claudia. *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197-222.
- Chung, Tzu-I. "American Legends: Nation, Nature, Natives and Others, 1608 to 2001." PhD diss. University of Arizona, 2004.



- Crutzen, Paul J. "Geology of Mankind." *Nature* 415, no. 6867 (2002): 23.
- Davenport, Coral, and Alissa J. Rubin. "Trump Signs Executive Order Unwinding Obama Climate Policies" *New York Times*, March 28, 2017.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/28/climate/trump-executive-order-climate-change.html>.
- Davis, Heather, and Etienne Turpin. Introduction to *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, Edited by Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, 3-29. London: Open Humanities Press, 2015.
- Dawson, Ashley. "Imperialism." In *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, edited by Joni Adamson, David N. Pellow, and William A. Gleason, 139-143. New York: New York University Press, 2016.
- DeLong, Lea Rosson. *Nature's Forms/Nature's Forces: The Art of Alexandre Hogue*. Tulsa, Oklahoma: Philbrook/University of Oklahoma Press, 1984.
- Garrard, Greg. "Ecocriticism." In *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, edited by Joni Adamson, David N. Pellow, and William A. Gleason, 61-64. New York: New York University Press, 2016.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Gornitz, Vivien, Stephen Couch, and Ellen K. Hartig. "Impacts of Sea Level Rise in the New York City Metropolitan Area." *Global and Planetary Change* 32, no. 1 (2001): 61-88.
- Hamilton, Clive, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne. Introduction to *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*, Edited by Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, 1-13. New York; London: Routledge, 2015.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." *Environmental Humanities* 6, (2015): 159-165.
- Harkin, Michael E. "John White and the Invention of Anthropology: Landscape, Ethnography, and Situating the Other in Roanoke." *Histories of Anthropology Annual* 7, no. 1 (2011): 216-245.
- Hartley, Daniel. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the Problem of Culture." In *Anthropocene Or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore, 154-165. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016.

- Jardim De Santa Cruz Oliveira, Teresa Cristina. "Systems and Feedback: Cildo Meireles's 'Insertions into Ideological Circuits', 1970–ongoing." PhD diss. University of Illinois, 2013.
- Jordan, Guy. "Thomas Cole's Intemperate Empire." *Visual Resources* 28, no. 4 (2012): 340-354.
- Kazanjian, David. "Colonial." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. 2nd ed., edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 48-53. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- Kennedy, Randy. "The Handwriting on the Road: An Artist Draws the Flood Line." *New York Times*, June 16, 2007.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/16/arts/design/16chal.html>.
- Larson, Kay. "A Subtlety, Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 57, no. 4 (2014): 505-511.
- Lewis, Simon L., and Mark A. Maslin. "Defining the Anthropocene." *Nature* 519, no. 7542 (2015): 171-180.
- Lightfoot, Kent G., Lee M. Panich, Tsim D. Schneider, and Sara L. Gonzalez. "European Colonialism and the Anthropocene: A View from the Pacific Coast of North America." *Anthropocene* 4, (2013): 101-115.
- Meyer, Robinson. "Donald Trump Is the First Demagogue of the Anthropocene." *The Atlantic*, October 19, 2016.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/10/trump-the-first-demagogue-of-the-anthropocene/504134/>.
- Miller, Angela. "The Fate of Wilderness in American Landscape Art: The Dilemmas of 'Nature's Nation'." In *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, edited by Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, 85-109. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009.
- . "Thomas Cole and Jacksonian America: The Course of Empire as Political Allegory." *Prospects* 14, no. 1 (1989): 65-92.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "Visualizing the Anthropocene." *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 213-232.
- . *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. 2nd ed. New York; London: Routledge, 2009.
- . "On Visuality." *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2006): 53-79.

- Monani, Salma, and Joni Adamson. Introduction to *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos*, Edited by Salma Monani and Joni Adamson, 1-19. New York; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.
- Mosher, Eve S. *HighWaterLine*. Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press, 2007.
- Murphy, Patrick D. *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015.
- Nadir, Leila Christine. "Walking the Edge of the Earth: Eve Mosher's Art Project HighWaterLine Takes Climate Science to the Streets." *American Scientist* 103, no. 2 (2015): 110-113.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Pease, Donald E. *The New American Exceptionalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Pope Francis. *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home*. The Holy See: Vatican Press, 2015.
- Schulman, Vanessa Meikle. *Work Sights: The Visual Culture of Industry in Nineteenth-Century America*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015.
- "Sell Us Your Liberty, or We'll Subcontract Your Death." *tomorrowmorning.net*. Accessed March 29, 2017. <http://tomorrowmorning.net/sellus>.
- Sloan, Kim, Joyce E. Chaplin, Christian F. Feest, and Ute Kuhlemann. *A New World: England's First View of America*. Chapel Hill, N.C: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Smith, Roberta. "Sugar? Sure, but Salted With Meaning." *New York Times*, May 11, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/arts/design/a-subtlety-or-the-marvelous-sugar-baby-at-the-domino-plant.html>.
- Streeby, Shelley. "Empire." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. 2nd ed., edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 95-100. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- Sweeney, J. Gray. *Masterpieces of Western American Art*. New York: Mallard Press, 1991.
- . *Themes in American Painting*. The Grand Rapids Art Museum, 1977.

- Sweet, Timothy. "Filling the Field: The Roanoke Images of John White and Theodor de Bry." In *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, edited by Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, 23-42. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009.
- Wallach, Allan. "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of Empire." In *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, edited by William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach, 23-111. Washington, D.C.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Weinbaum, Alys Eve. "Nation." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. 2nd ed., edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 175-180. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way." *aoc.gov*. Last modified April 29, 2016. <https://www.aoc.gov/art/other-paintings-and-murals/westward-course-empire-takes-its-way>.
- White, Mark Andrew. "Alexandre Hogue's Passion: Ecology and Agribusiness in *The Crucified Land*." In *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, edited by Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, 168-188. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009.
- Worster, Donald. *Dustbowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "1492: A New World View." In *Race, Discourse, And the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, edited by Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, 5-57. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.
- Zalasiewicz, J., C. N. Waters, A. D. Barnosky, A. Cearreta, M. Edgeworth, E. C. Ellis, et al. "Colonization of the Americas, 'Little Ice Age' Climate, and Bomb-Produced Carbon: Their Role in Defining the Anthropocene." *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 2 (2015): 117-127.
- Zalasiewicz, Jan, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams, Anthony D. Barnosky, Alejandro Cearreta, Paul Crutzen, Erle Ellis, et al. "When did the Anthropocene Begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level is Stratigraphically Optimal." *Quaternary International* 383, (2015): 196-203.
- Zalasiewicz, Jan, Mark Williams, and Colin N. Waters. "Anthropocene." In *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, edited by Joni Adamson, David N. Pellow, and William A. Gleason, 14-16. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

APPENDIX A  
FIGURES



Fig. 1. John White, *Indians fishing*, 1585, watercolor over black lead, 35.3 x 23.5 cm. The British Museum, London, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=22109001&objectId=753504&partId=1#more-views](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=22109001&objectId=753504&partId=1#more-views)







Fig. 3. Kara Walker, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, May-July 2014, sugar-coated polystyrene, pigmented polyester resin with polyurethane coating with molasses and brown sugar. Domino Sugar Factory, New York City, <<http://www.dilettantearmy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/a-subtlety-installation.jpg>>





Fig. 4. Cildo Meireles, *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project*, 1970-ongoing, three glass bottles, three metal caps, liquid and adhesive labels with text. Tate Modern, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/meireles-insertions-into-ideological-circuits-coca-cola-project-t12328>



Fig. 5. Cildo Meireles, *Insertions into Ideological Circuits 2: Banknote Project*, 1970-ongoing, ink on banknote. Tate Modern, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/meireles-insertions-into-ideological-circuits-2-banknote-project-t12525>



Fig. 6. Thomas Moran, *Lower Manhattan from Communipaw, New Jersey*, 1880, oil on canvas, 64 x 114.9 cm. Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, Hagerstown, <<http://wcmfa.pastperfect-online.com/30893cgi/mweb.exe?request=image&hex=A0303400001.JPG>>





Fig. 7. Alexandre Hogue, *Erosion No. 2 - Mother Earth Laid Bare*, 1936, oil on canvas, 111.8 x 142.2 cm. Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, <<https://philbrook.org/explore/art/erosion-no-2-%E2%80%93-mother-earth-laid-bare-0>>



Fig. 8. Eve S. Mosher, *HighWaterLine*, 2007, blue chalk. New York City, <http://www.evemosher.com/2007/highwaterline/>





Fig. 9. Thomas Cole, *The Consummation of Empire*, 1836, oil on canvas, 130.2 x 193 cm. New-York Historical Society, New York City, <<http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibit/course-empire-consummation-empire-0>>



Fig. 10. Thomas Cole, *Destruction*, 1836, oil on canvas, 99.7 x 161.3 cm. New-York Historical Society, New York City, <<http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibit/course-empire-destruction-0>>



Fig. 11. Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1862, stereochrome, 6.1 x 9.1 m. House Wing, west stairway U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C., <<https://www.aoc.gov/art/other-paintings-and-murals/westward-course-empire-takes-its-way>>





Fig. 12. John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872, oil on canvas, 29.2 x 40 cm. Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, <http://library.artstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3ooe198eSs%3D&userId=hzJNfTAm&zoomparams=>>





Fig. 13. Amy Balkin, *Sell Us Your Liberty, or We'll Subcontract Your Death*, 2008, crayon rubbings. San Francisco, [http://tomorrowmorning.net/images/sellus\\_install\\_425.jpg](http://tomorrowmorning.net/images/sellus_install_425.jpg)