

Architectures of Coloniality: The Sherman Institute and the Indigenous Labor behind the Development of Southern California

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Abstract

The Owens Valley Paiute, traditional caretakers of the “Land of Flowing Water,” face continued threats to their livelihood due to decades of water extraction from the region by the city of Los Angeles. The precarious state of Indigenous lands and peoples across California is entangled with historical processes supported by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the off-reservation boarding school system. During the first half of the twentieth century, Paiute, Mission Indian and other Indigenous youth were sent to the Sherman Institute in Riverside, the last of twenty-five boarding schools to be built and operated by the BIA. Accompanying its Mission Revival style façade and the associated narratives of racial uplift, the school aimed to distance students from tribal affiliations, teaching them Anglo, heteropatriarchal forms of domesticity, and training them to become wage laborers in the farming, construction, and domestic service trades. After graduation, many students were employed by the federal government to convert tribal lands to agricultural plots and private property, while many others found low-wage, unskilled positions in the building and maintenance of Southern California’s expanding metropolis. This paper investigates the role of the Sherman Institute in the exploitation of Indigenous lands and labor for regional development, and therefore, the production of racialized precarity for Indigenous peoples. By engaging with Indigenous epistemologies, the paper works to stretch the limits of history/theory, to expose systems of confinement for their racialized underpinnings, and to introduce more fluid conceptions of land, property, and personhood.

Keywords: coloniality, Indian boarding school, construction labor, domesticity.

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INTRODUCTION: LEGACIES OF INDIAN¹ POLICY, PRECARIETY OF THE PAIUTE

The Northern Paiute (Nüümü), who traditionally built irrigation canals and ditches that brought vibrant flora and fauna to the Owens Valley (Payahuunadü) where they lived along bodies of water in extended family structures, face continued threats to their livelihood due to over a century of public extractive operations in the region. Following the settler colonization of lands during the Gold Rush, the Paiute were forcibly removed by the military to Fort Tejon. By the turn of the century many had returned and found low-wage labor positions on the farms of White² settler colonists while living in nearby camps. In 1913, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) completed the construction of an aqueduct from Owens Valley to support the burgeoning suburbanization of Los Angeles. By 1932, the city of L.A. owned 85 percent of the property in the Owens Valley, having withdrawn 67,000 acres from the Paiute trust. The distinct contrast between the LADWP and the Paiute's relationship with the Owens River Gorge can be seen in the city's mapping of the site for the construction of the aqueduct and associated power plants in 1913 (Figure 1). Following Jefferson's vision of a nation of yeoman farmers, the city's square grid divided the gorge and surrounding lands into plots in conjunction with narrow definitions of property. The gridiron cut across flows of the landscape cultivated for centuries by the Paiute, for the benefit of White ownership and sale. Today, the groundwater under the remaining Paiute reservation lands is declining due to decades of poor water management by the city of L.A. (Owens Valley Indian Water Commission). The precarious position of the Paiute can be attributed to the tripartite structure of settler colonialism: the erasure of Indigenous peoples, exploitation of land as property, and exploitation of labor (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013). Despite the geographic and ideological separation between Los Angeles and the Owens Valley tribal lands, they were deeply entangled through labor and the building industry. The Paiute, Shoshone and Mission Indians across the Colorado River Basin and parts of Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and California

were funneled into laboring positions that supported the privatization of property and suburban expansion.

The growth of the metropolis is linked in expansive and systemic ways to the establishment of off-reservation boarding schools from the Allotment Era through the Assimilation Era into the "Indian New Deal" Era. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Paiute, Mission Indians, and other Indigenous youth of California were sent to the Sherman Institute, the last of twenty-five schools to be built by the U.S. government and operated through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The school aimed to distance students from tribal affiliations physically and ideologically, teaching them the purported superiority of Anglo, heteropatriarchal forms of domesticity, and training them to become wage laborers in the farming, construction, and domestic service trades. After graduation, many students were employed by the federal government to help convert tribal lands to agricultural plots and private property, while many others found low-wage, unskilled positions in the building and maintenance of Southern California's expanding metropolis. This paper investigates the role of the Sherman Institute in the exploitation of Indigenous labor for regional development, and therefore, the production of racialized precarity for Indigenous lands and peoples. Historian K. Tsianina Lomawaima explains the falsities of the government's assimilationist approach, stating that federal Indian boarding schools taught Indigenous students instead to "adopt the work discipline of the Protestant ethic and accept their proper place in society as a marginal class" (1993, 237). The taking of Indigenous lands, displacement of Indigenous people, and training of Indigenous laborers demonstrates what Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh call a colonial matrix of power, or the concept of modernity/coloniality (2018). For it is under discourses of modernity and progress that the government justified the Indian boarding school and its assimilationist agenda, and it is through the upheaval and training of Indigenous youth that settler colonial structures of land, property, and extractive infrastructures were cemented across California.

The recent digitization of the Sherman Institute archives has expanded scholarly understandings of the paradoxes and complexities of Indian boarding schools.³

- 1 I utilize the term "Indian" when it is the name most historically accurate to the person, policy, land, or object of focus. When possible, I use the specific name of the tribe to which I am referring. Otherwise, I use the term "Indigenous" to refer to the peoples who first lived on/with, protected and cultivated the region of interest to this research, in Southern California. I acknowledge the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (the Los Angeles basin and So. Channel Islands), from where I live and work. As a member of a land grant institution, I pay my respects to the Honuukvetam (Ancestors), 'Ahihirom (Elders) and 'Eyoohiinkem (our relatives/relations) past, present and emerging.
- 2 I capitalize "White" to acknowledge that Whiteness is also a racial construct, opposed to an assumed baseline or neutral identity (Nguyễn and Pendleton, 2020).

- 3 Lorene Sisquoc helped facilitate the digitization of more than 13,000 items from the archives as the first Elder/scholar-in residence at the Sherman Indian Museum. Her personal history with the material provides context for her scholarship. Sisquoc is a member of the Fort Apache Sill Tribe and descendant of the Mountain Cahuilla of Southern California. Her grandmother was a Prisoner of War at Fort Sill Apache in Oklahoma, after which she moved to Arizona and graduated from the Phoenix Indian School. Sisquoc has contributed to several of the most influential publications to date on the Sherman Institute (now the Sherman Indian

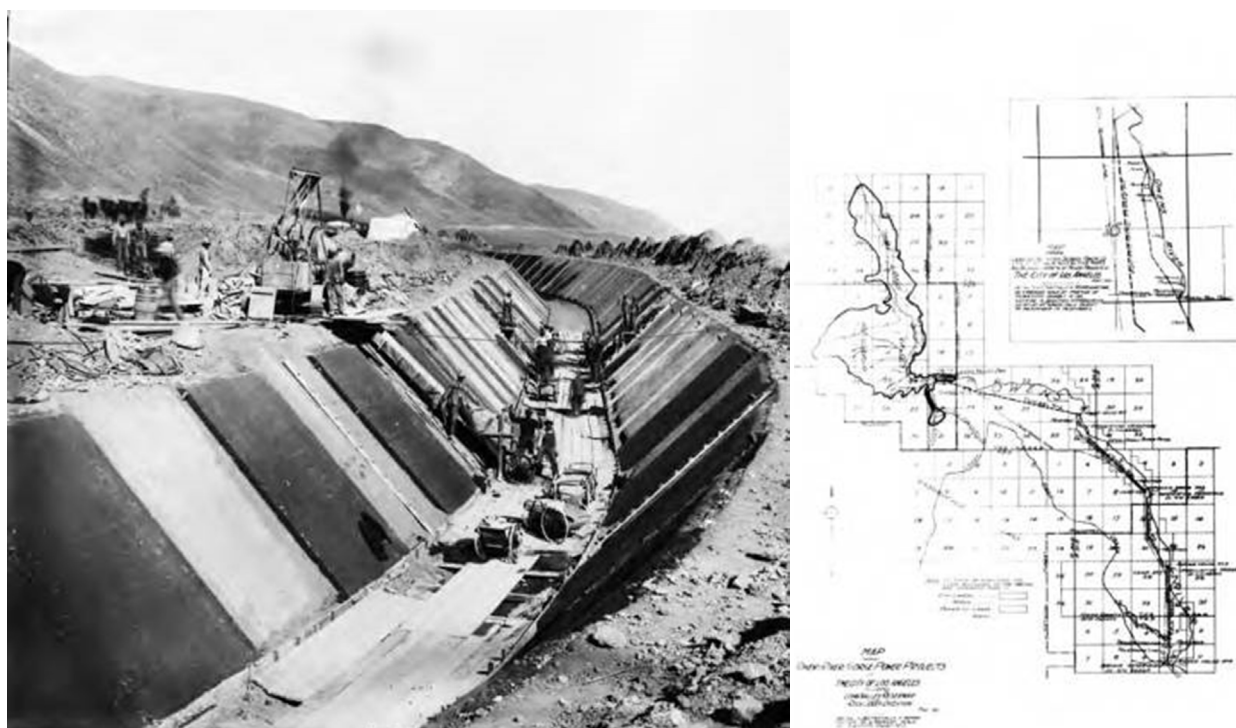


Figure 1: Images from the construction of the L.A. Aqueduct and associated power plants along the Owens River Gorge (Historical Photo Collection of the Department of Water and Power, City of Los Angeles).

As Mishuana Goeman's research demonstrates, through the gendering process and controlled migration, Indigenous peoples were organized into a progressive labor force (2009). Domestic advice literature portrayed Indian minds as uncivilized and bodies as undeveloped, supporting Indian boarding school teachings of moral and manual development (Lomawaima 1993). Although Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homelands, distanced from their families, forbidden from speaking their tribal languages, and coerced into laboring roles, they also found ways to assert protest, resist assimilation, reassert their identities, seek agency, or form new practices, roles, and identities from these experiences. The stripping of Indigenous students' cultural identity and Indigenous languages could be both isolating and integrating, as Clifford Trafzer, Lorene Sisquoc and Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert demonstrate with their comprehensive history of the Sherman Institute (2012). Many alumni who returned to their reservations speaking, thinking, and looking like Anglo-Protestant Americans were seen as traitors by their tribal networks, while others helped their reservations communicate to the U.S. government and work within the dominant capitalist economy to achieve their own economic and political goals, as Diana Meyers Bahr illustrates with her scholarship on *Viola Martinez, California Paiute: Living in Two Worlds* (2010). This essay

High School).

extends from this work, demonstrating how narrow constructs of property depended on the formation of an increasingly hierarchical building industry, underpinned by vocational training programs and low-wage Indigenous labor. Following Indigenous epistemologies, it contends with the limits of history/theory to expose hidden migratory labor patterns occluded by the dominant spatial narrative.

MISSION NARRATIVES AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE SHERMAN INSTITUTE

The history of the Sherman Institute, like much of the development of California, begins with water. At the turn of the century, developer Frank Miller and Superintendent Harwood Hall lobbied to relocate the state's Indian boarding school from Perris to Riverside, where a greater water supply could be tapped into for the maintenance and expansion of the school. The relocation aligned with Miller's interest in Riverside's tourist economy, as much as the city's water supply. According to the romanticized narrative of Southern California's Spanish colonial past, the missions were designed as a local response to the lack of skilled Indian laborers encountered by the Spaniards. The large uninterrupted plaster facades and simplified forms of the California missions required minimal skill and cost to build, a step back from the Baroque, Spanish colonial churches of Mexico. Architecture journalist



Figure 2: The front entrance courtyard of Frank Miller's Glenwood Mission Inn in Riverside, Ca, highlighting the Campanile, bell tower and arched portico as an example of the "mission renaissance" (Stoll 1911, 32).

George Wharton James described this as a mitigating factor, between the "priests and soldiers on the one hand; savage Indians on the other" (James 1904, 459). Architecture critics applauded Riverside's Glenwood Mission Inn for its allegiance to mission narratives, with an absence of lines or joints as would appear in skilled brick or stonework. Images of the Mission Inn commonly highlighted the campanile, a replica of the bell towers at mission churches like that of San Luis Rey (Figure 2). Riverside's Mission Inn, described as an example of the "mission renaissance," formed an aesthetic, ideological and temporal link between the region's Spanish colonial and modern periods (Stoll 2011). The Inn was initially built as a cottage of brick and adobe for the Miller family in the 1870s, as a boarding house for missionary travelers. Frank Miller assumed ownership and began renovations on the cottage in 1880. With the relocation of the Sherman Institute, Miller hoped to form a cheap labor supply for the maintenance of the Mission Inn, undergoing its first phase of expansion in 1902 (Gonzalez 2002). As with the architectures of Riverside's modern tourist industry, the Indian boarding school was founded on narratives of Indigenous inferiority, White tutelage, and racial uplift. According to Miller's plan, these narratives could be extended in support of the low-wage employment of Indigenous students in the construction and maintenance of the Mission Inn for the benefit of White tourists.

The Sherman Institute was designed in the Mission Revival Style with a \$215,000 grant from Congress. Upon its completion in 1902, there were thirty-five buildings situated on the forty-acre site, including classrooms, dormitories, mills and shops, and an auditorium. While the arched corridor was stated to allow for "servants [to] move about noiselessly and almost invisibly" (*The Craftsman* 1915, 280) at the Mission Inn, its deployment at the Sherman Institute along with its Indigenous students served as a spectacle along Miller's tourist route. Upon entry to the campus, visitors were

presented with a large, landscaped park, with a flag circle in the center. Within the park-like frontage were individual cottages for the superintendent, the main office, and the instruction of girls in home economics, connected by paved walkways through the grand lawn. Riverside tourists visited the school to watch students perform military drills on the parade grounds just beyond the grand lawn. Lining the opposing edge of the parade grounds were four, almost identical dormitory buildings where the students were housed. With names like the Minnehaha, Tepee, and Wigwam, the dormitories conflated, caricatured, and romanticized Indian identities. The buildings were connected by arched corridors to form a continuous, grandiose façade, serving both as a backdrop for the staging of Indigenous military drills, and as a propagandistic device in regional postcards (Figure 3). David Wallace Adams' scholarship on Indian boarding schools considers how rigid geometries and exacting timetables supported militant operations to rid students of their cultural identities and enforce discipline and subservience at the hands of White superintendents and teachers (1995). The Mission Revival style and symmetrical planning of the Sherman Institute, then, projected the importance of Anglo instruction in religion, morals, and lifestyles based on the region's Spanish colonial past.

A facade of order, control, and cleanliness projected this image to the public, while hiding the often unsanitary, unhealthful, and dangerous realities of the boarding school for its Indigenous occupants. Viola Martinez watched her cousin being carried away from the Sherman Institute in a casket, illustrating the deadly effects of poor living conditions on boarding school campuses (Meyers Bahr 2010, 2014). Sleeping porches were often added to create more room at minimal expense to the schools. The sleeping porch was advertised as an economic solution to healthful living and the prevention of tuberculosis in the early twentieth century, in combination with Southern California's



Figure 3: Postcard featuring view upon entrance to the grounds of the Sherman Institute, 1903. Published by Brück & Sohn.



Figure 4: Paint shop students at Sherman Institute, 1915. Published by Sherman Indian High School, Riverside, Ca (Sherman Indian Museum).



Figure 5: Intermediate sewing class at Sherman Institute, 1915. Published by Sherman Indian High School, Riverside, Ca (Sherman Indian Museum).

temperate climate. Unlike in its application in the single-family home, however, the sleeping porch of the multi-unit dorm prevented light and ventilation from reaching interior rooms. Despite the curated, Mission Revival style facades of the dormitories, the interiors consisted of narrow hallways with multiple beds placed a few feet apart from one another in long rows. While the four primary dormitory buildings cost \$15,000 each to build, the two employee quarters and the superintendent cottage cost \$9,000 and \$4,000, respectively (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1901, 11). In other words, \$50 was allocated per student and \$4,500 was allocated for one employee, or roughly ninety times more than was spent on a single student. The superintendent's residence was two stories plus a basement, and featured a large, raised and covered porch on the ground floor, screened porches on the first and second floor, and a curated garden that was tended to by students. Renato Rosaldo has described this display of nostalgia for the colonized culture as a paradox, posing "'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination" (1989, 108). White spaces, such as the classroom and the administration, were placed in clear view of the front gate, while Indian spaces, such as the dorms, hospital, laundry, dairies, and workshops, were placed in another

part of the campus, hidden from the tourist gaze.

The salaries and superior accommodations afforded to BIA employees were supported with savings made through the usage of unpaid student labor on campus. In an article on the "race building" efforts of the Sherman Institute, it was stated that the student labor of carpenters and masons saved the government over \$55,000 (*Christian Science Monitor* 1912, 7). School repairs and building projects were often performed by Indian boys, while Indian girls took care of the school's cooking, housekeeping, and domestic science. A staged photograph of paint shop students published by the Sherman Institute in 1915 illustrates the interest in vocational over professional training (Figure 4). Indigenous boys in matching overalls and buttoned shirts are posed while holding paint cans and brushes in front of a simple concrete building on campus. In the image, Indigenous cultural identities are suppressed in favor of an expression of homogeneity and subservience. Identically clad and posed in a line, the boys are portrayed as unskilled laborers ready for instruction. A photograph of girls in a sewing class from the Sherman Institute that same year reflects how these racialized expectations were also gendered (Figure 5). Indigenous girls are sat in neat rows within the classroom, each with

identically pinned hair, Victorian dress, and white apron. The desks and books typical of an Anglo classroom have been replaced with sewing machines. Rather than focusing on cultural expression, professionalization or a liberal arts education, the program was devised to “divert [students] into agriculture and the ordinary trades and train them to supply the local demand for labor” (Curtis 1911, 113). With a focus on construction and maintenance, the school’s program predicted a need for low-wage laborers within an expanding and increasingly hierarchical building industry.

LOW-WAGE LABOR IN THE CALIFORNIA CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

In total, the vocational training of the Sherman Institute served two agendas: it provided free labor in the construction and upkeep of ill-funded boarding schools, and it prepared Indian students to build and maintain homes and farms for themselves or employers after graduation. In the latter years of their education, through what was called the “Outing Program,” Indigenous boys were sent to work in construction industries with ties to the boarding school, and Indigenous girls were sent to work as domestic servants in the homes of White families who petitioned the school for inexpensive help. Labor was not only a mechanism for oppression, but also a site of negotiation; Quechan and Mojave women working in L.A. as housekeepers for White families, for example, gained access to urban and personal networks they may not have without the facilitation of the school’s Outing Program (Whalen 2016). Sherman alumni updates further demonstrate some of the paradoxes of boarding school education. According to the Sherman Graduate Report from 1931, former students were mostly employed by private companies in low-level industrial positions (Vocational Education Reports 1936-41, Sherman Institute. National Archives Riverside). Romaldo Helms, who focused on masonry at the Sherman Institute, was employed as a laborer in San Jacinto; Martin Napa, who focused on engineering, was employed as a janitor at the Mission Inn; and Florentine Angelo, who focused on masonry, was working as a plasterer in Los Angeles. Several were employed by Indian boarding schools, like Galen Townsend, Paiute from Fort Bidwell, who returned to the Sherman Institute to work as an Assistant Carpenter as had his father, Ross Townsend.⁴ Ultimately, most alumni were employed in low-level positions that did not commonly require education to acquire. The BIA’s curriculum sought to standardize Indian education across the United States, but with the localization of certain

industries and the fluctuating job market, there would not have been equal demand in different cities. The offering of skilled concentrations like engineering may also have been wishful thinking, unable to be applied in a racially discriminatory job market. Painting, plastering, rail construction and janitorial work were among the few occupations available to those categorized as Black, Mexican, or Indigenous at the time. It appears that the confines of race and gender still weighed most heavily on the kind of employment Indian boarding school graduates could hope to attain.

Without access to skilled positions, boarding school alumni would have found it especially difficult to achieve urban integration and homeownership in line with the Anglo, heteropatriarchal expectations set forth by the BIA and the boarding school curriculum. By the 1930s, many alumni from the Sherman Institute were employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for the construction of public infrastructures across reservations, due to their simultaneous experience with government labor and connection to Indigenous lands and peoples. Obtaining employment on public works projects outside of the reservation proved more difficult for Indigenous peoples, despite skills in excavation, irrigation and plumbing attained at Indian boarding schools. In a series of exchanges between the Superintendent of the Colorado River Agency and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the distinction between on and off reservation opportunities is exposed (Central Classified Correspondence, Sherman Institute. National Archives Riverside). Having authorized the Chairman of the LADWP a temporary right of way on the north end of the Colorado River Indian Reservation to be used in the construction of a highway, the superintendent advocated for Indians of Arizona and California to be employed in the construction of the L.A. Aqueduct. Because these projects were dependent upon the usage of reservation lands, it would be appropriate to employ Indigenous peoples in their construction. However, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was designed to provide employment to ex-service men and residents of the county where the work was being performed, rather than for Indians living on reservations. Furthermore, NIRA funding did not apply to farm or domestic workers, where many former Indian boarding school graduates were employed. So, while their skill sets were suited to federally funded projects that could have provided greater opportunities, Indian students and graduates were placed at a disadvantage when it came to government-funded large-scale operations outside of Indian reservations.

According to narrative and inspection reports from the WPA’s publication of “Indians at Work”, those employees that were hired by the government to build public works projects were housed in temporary camps

⁴ Ross Townsend, a laborer in Mill and Cabinet, was noted to be a farmer and Indian Assistant, an example of “self-supporting citizens on reservations and in white communities,” according to the Boys Vocational Training Department records, Sherman Institute. National Archives Riverside.

or small bunkhouses (White 2016). Typical camps of the Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC-ID) like those photographed at Pine Ridge and Crow Creek featured temporary tents aligned in rows across remote landscapes (Bromert 1978). If bunkhouses were utilized, they were constructed by their Indian inhabitants, like the mobile bunkhouses featured in CCC-ID camp photographs under construction across the Southwestern United States during the Indian New Deal Era. Assembling and disassembling post-and-beam bunkhouses as crews moved along a job site, as in the construction of a reservoir, for example, would have been labor intensive. Moreover, these were not the single-family homes that the BIA touted as indicative of self-sufficiency and successful integration into White society. To acquire property as recognizable in the colonial context, the Indian “must do so by encoding the geography in the same gendered spacemaking terms as colonist – private, individuated holdings that only men can alienate and heir” (Saldana-Portillo 2016). Regardless of the social and financial benefits experienced by some Indigenous alumni of government boarding schools, many were isolated as model citizens on government schools outside of tribal networks, relegated to temporary housing and low-level employment, or were confined to the limits of the reservation. Given the lack of permanent accommodations, it is unsurprising that those former students that attempted to find employment and accommodations independently in the industrial sector often returned to the reservation a short time later.

CONCLUSION: DECOLONIZING DISCOURSES OF PROGRESS

Through mechanisms of conquest, termination, relocation, and enclosure, Indigenous lands were converted into property, and through the construction of narrow categories of race, gender and nation, Indigenous bodies were displaced, disciplined, and exploited. Central to these transformations were representations and discourses of architecture and social evolution. By depicting tribal, communal, and self-built forms of society as a threat to civilization and progress, those that benefitted from a heteropatriarchal single-family structure could ensure their sustained superiority in the domestic American context (Simonsen 2006). Architecture was instrumental to the fabrication of narratives of Indigenous subservience. The Mission Revival Style buildings of Riverside were not only romanticized snapshots of the past, but their very construction and maintenance also depended upon the continued division of labor, between skilled and unskilled, White and Indian. By 1930, 42 percent of Native American men were working as farm laborers and 48 percent of Native American women were working as servants in California (Bureau of the Census

1933). Regardless of their educational background, most Indigenous people were relegated to unskilled positions with low pay in the city, making it especially difficult to establish a home in accordance with Anglo narratives of progress.

This research illustrates the persistent tripartite structure of settler colonialism. Though spatial justice is a multifaceted, multiethnic, and multiracial issue, the conversion of land into property in the U.S. is intimately tied to Indigenous precarity. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue, decolonization is not a metaphor; it is directly tied to the repatriation of Indigenous land and life (2012). The discipline of architecture must also reckon with its ties to settler colonialism. The architectures of the BIA—the private lot, the reservation, the Indian boarding school, and the labor it produced—were supported by discourses of modernity and progress that undergirded the racialization of labor and the architecture profession. Scholarship on the formation of urban Indigenous communities before the relocation programs of the 1950s and 60s remains sparse, but research suggests Indian boarding school graduates found work and settled in the “ethnoburbs” of South Los Angeles in the early twentieth century (Whalen 2016; Weibel-Orlando 1999). These histories have been occluded by the dominant spatial narrative, and yet, as the training and employment of Sherman Institute students demonstrates, were deeply enmeshed with the construction of the metropolis.

Native feminist spatial practices offer a counterpoint to the mechanisms of enclosure and erasure that characterized settler colonization (Goeman 2009). Native feminism works against forms of erasure, displacement, and enclosure, by foregrounding storied, continuous, flowing conceptions of space. To these ends, Vivienne Jake (Kabab Paiute) and Matthew Leivas Sr. (Chemehuevi) of the Southern Paiute (Nuwuvi), co-direct the Salt Song Trail Project (The Cultural Conservancy; Trafzer 2015). The trail visits fourteen bands of Indians from the confluence of the Bill Williams and Colorado River to the Pacific Ocean and back through the Mojave Desert, along which traditional Paiute songs are sung that connect living tribal members to their ancestors. In 2004, the collective visited the Sherman Institute cemetery where fifty-nine students who died of disease on campus were buried, singing Salt Songs to assist with the transition of the deceased to the next world. Reparations may take several forms, including work to “unmoor ‘truth’ maps from knowledge based on Imperialist projects and assert Native ways of knowing that incorporate Native women’s knowledges into the project of decolonization” (Goeman 2009, 184). The modernity/coloniality construct was similarly at work behind the taking of lands from the Owens Valley Paiute for the construction of the L.A. Aqueduct. Racialized

depictions of domesticity and building labor are formative of the precarious position of Indigenous lands and peoples to this day. By engaging with Indigenous epistemologies, we may stretch the boundaries of architectural history/theory to denaturalize the very systems that have led to this position.

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