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When and Where Does Colonial America End?

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Introduction

When and where does colonial America end? Put simply, it doesn't. When I initially posed this question to our contributors, I envisioned a Colloquium that made a case for how the field of American art would benefit from further incorporating the art and material culture of the colonial Americas into its arena. My experience as a scholar who focuses on this period is that in American art circles, I am often one of only a very few members engaged in study that predates 1800. In my professional life, I have turned to adjacent fields such as eighteenth-century studies to connect with a broader network of scholars focused on historic colonialism. However, as someone who trained and identifies as an Americanist, I believe strongly that the field of American art, as a community of scholars and educators, needs to bring a greater focus to the study of colonial art histories in order to truly understand and contextualize the cultural and political forces that animate the full history of the nation and the American hemisphere at large.

Beginning with the consensus that colonial America has not yet ended, the resulting contributions move beyond this question in order to complicate our understanding of the colonial period in North America that precedes the American Revolution, and to demonstrate how colonialism is a relevant keyword across the history of American art. Attending to the origins of our contemporary coloniality and engaging with methods drawn from decolonial studies that seek to disrupt colonialism's power can and should inform the praxis of American art history. Through reflections on artworks and makers from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, the authors assembled here demonstrate that in America—broadly defined—we are still living in a colonial moment.



Fig. 1. Anonymous, *The Corregidor Pérez*, Series of the Corpus Christi, c. 1670–80. Museo Arzobispal del Cusco, Cusco, Peru; photo: Raúl Montero

“American Art” as an art-historical field has traditionally denoted the art of the United States from approximately 1750 to 1950. This categorization means that, as a field, American art has historically focused narrowly on the development of a national US art that privileged the contributions of white settler artists. These temporal boundaries reflected a lack of close study in the field of the complex and transnational colonial histories that predate 1750, and its narrow geographic focus erased American places north and south of the United States. This construction of the field has been reified and enforced in textbooks of American art that, even as they may increasingly gesture beyond these borders, still largely hew to the temporal and geographic contours of the US nation state. In recent years, much-needed reconsiderations of the field have sought to diversify the places and voices of American art history—gesturing to the hemispheric dimensions of the Americas that include the many nations of North and South America as well as the Caribbean; stretching further back in time to the colonial period after 1500 and forward to the twenty-first century; and centering the work of artists who are Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC). Narratives of migration and the immigrant experience have also been increasingly centered in histories of the United States and its art. Coinciding with these valuable expansions is the movement of the field toward the modern and contemporary periods. As a disciplinary field, American art’s chronologic center is increasingly found in the twentieth century—a shift made visible through the topics and scholars that predominate in the profession’s conferences and research-fellowship cohorts. This turn to the contemporary in American art has made space for the voices and productions of artists from historically marginalized and oppressed groups.

At the same time, decolonization movements bring to the fore the duration of coloniality, highlighting the ways in which colonial America—and American colonialism—have not ended. Such interventions challenge the settler-colonial ideologies that continue to order American institutions, including the museum and the Academy. Moving beyond a simple critique of the privileging of white culture and history in studies of the past, decolonial approaches also question methodologies rooted in Western colonial enterprises of knowledge building. Artists and scholars alike have taken up praxes such as Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation” to disrupt white supremacist narratives of the nation by reconstructing Black and Indigenous lives through and against the archive.¹ Christina Sharpe’s formulation of the wake and the practice of “wake work” demonstrates the nearness of the colonial period by placing contemporary American life within the afterlife of slavery and property—practices that have perpetuated and justified imperial and colonial enterprises, and continue to do so today.² For American art history, the engagement of contemporary artists such as Titus Kaphar, Kerry James Marshall, Kent Monkman, and [Wendy Red Star](#), among many others, with historic American artworks in their own artistic practice has also meant that contemporary art has become a locus for decolonial approaches to the colonial past.³

The field’s expansion in these ways is an undoubted benefit in decentering the settler-colonial voices that have long dominated narratives of the United States and in making space for imagining the nation’s decolonial futures through the eyes and hands of BIPOC creators and thinkers. However, American art’s gradual de-emphasis of historic periods of American colonialism, especially seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art histories, in favor of more modern and contemporary histories means that we lose the opportunity to apply these reconsiderations across the field at large. Without closely attending to the origins of the colonial Americas, we cannot fully account for the ways in which colonizing structures

shaped American art—its peoples and materials as well as its formation—as a contemporary disciplinary field. The current inequities of America—as a stand-in for the US nation state as well as a designator of the hemisphere as a whole—are rooted in the conditions of early modern empire and its attendant practices of settler colonialism, human enslavement, and genocide. A lack of attention to the relationship between the origins and ongoingness of these colonial realities compromises our assessment of the legacies of colonialism in the development of a national art history and limits our point of view on the transnational dimensions of American art. Renewed focus on the conditions of coloniality in the Americas and US history highlight the ways that attending to the historical conditions of colonialism can expand our understanding of the nation, the continent, and its people. For American art history, a greater focus on historic periods of settler colonization can serve the field by providing theoretical structures and case studies for understanding settler colonization’s impact on artistic production and the material world. As the contributors to this Colloquium demonstrate, the methods of colonial American art and material culture studies offer models for articulating the complex relations between settler-colonial and colonized peoples that are manifest in the material world across time.

By pushing against the geographic and chronologic borders of the colonial past, these writers expand and complicate the boundaries and methods of American art. In so doing, they offer a model for art historians to reckon with the relationship between American art and the still-present colonial past. These essays probe the chronologies of American colonialism and expand its geographies. Contributors point us beyond the Atlantic world to consider how other colonial realms have bearing on the construction of coloniality in North America. What lessons do colonial art histories of South America or the Pacific world have to teach scholars of the United States? How do the entanglements of colonial and imperial worlds across the hemisphere enlarge our understanding of material and cultural pasts and presents? Pieces also point us beyond the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, demonstrating how settler-colonial ideologies rooted in the period before the nation were developed and refined to shape US social and federal approaches to Indigenous and Black peoples throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Decolonial theorists Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us that “decolonization is not a metaphor;” its purpose is the restitution of land and sovereignty to Indigenous peoples violently displaced by settler-colonial enterprises from the fifteenth century through to the present.⁴ However, Tiffany Lethabo King and Lisa Lowe, among others, have also pointed to the ways that settler-colonialism creates rifts between oppressed peoples and, in particular, to the importance of thinking together through the resistance and scholarship of Black and Native studies.⁵ Thus, essays here also suggest ways that decolonial theory can provide fresh commitments for combatting histories of racism and racial oppression in American art beyond the prenational period.

The contributions in this Colloquium examine how the American colonial period, conceived broadly, can inform approaches to the discipline of American art—its geography, chronology, and purpose. By considering the impact of settler-colonial conditions on the wider art history of the Americas, these writers reveal the colonialist ideology embedded in aligning the field of American art primarily with the US nation, and they consider how that blinkered perspective has limited the questions the field has asked. Transdisciplinary scholarship on critical race and postcolonial theory, as well as the praxis of decolonization, provide strategies for making visible and resisting colonialist structures. Contributors writing from the vantage point of the academy and the museum consider how specific

works, histories, scholarly debates, and archives can challenge our consideration of where colonialism’s structures begin and end in American history and what colonial art history can offer to the field of American art at large.

Notes

I would like to thank Janine Yorimoto Boldt, Jacqueline Francis, and Naomi H. Slipp for providing feedback on this introduction. I wrote the introduction and edited the contributions to this Colloquium in the colonial city of Philadelphia, the Indigenous territory of Lenapehoking, home to the Lenape people. No discussion of colonial America can proceed that is not rooted in the local colonial situations of its participants and does not recognize the lasting devastation of settler-colonialism on the Indigenous peoples who have occupied this land both in the past and present. I acknowledge the Lenape people’s unceded claim to this territory and their care of it over time.

¹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *small axe* 26 (June 2008): 11.

² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 15.

³ These artists have offered compelling rereadings of American art history’s canon, especially by participating in and transforming traditions of painting, sculpture, and photography that are rooted in Western colonial cultures. However, it is also worth considering which artists leveling critiques of American history are valorized by fields such as American art. The field’s relative comfort in incorporating artists who draw from the canons of American and European art history, at the exclusion of those who reject these traditions in favor of a decolonial artistic future that does not participate in the practices of the colonizer, is its own limitation. While not undermining the important intervention that artists who place themselves in dialogue with the canon provide, American art as a field should be reaching beyond itself to learn from artistic practitioners who are not engaged with its familiar forms.

⁴ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

⁵ Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); and Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).