

BEFORE. THEN. NOW.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE PEAK OF
INDUSTRIAL SETTLER COLONIST UNITED
STATES IN THE FORMER CITY OF WASHINGTON D.C.
(+ RADICAL SPECULATIVE PLAY WORKSHOP)

LDES 713: CRITICAL SPECULATIVE
DESIGN FOR ANTI-RACISM
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Point of Departure	1
Concept	2
Influences and Inspiration	3
Use of Artifact in Education	4
Photographs and Captions	4
Effects and Depths	13
Reflection	14
Annotated Bibliography	15

**WHAT
IF?**

**THIS MOMENT
IS THE CLIMAX
OF WHITE
COLONIZATION
OF THIS LAND?**

**HOW WILL WE REMEMBER THIS LAND,
AS IT IS NOW, IN A FUTURE WHERE IT HAS BEEN
RETURNED TO THE DESCENDANTS OF ITS ORIGINAL STEWARDS?**

CONCEPT

A series of 8 black and white photographs taken on a medium format camera with descriptive exhibit labels, showing areas that had once been inhabited by the Nacotchtank tribe in the present day DC area. The idea is to play off the way that many anthropological photographers captured their subjects decades ago by framing our current moment in the same way. After coming up with and latching onto the creative concept, I wrestled with how these photographs could be used in an educational setting. The vision is for this work to be used in a workshop or lesson on speculative play. Having struggled with speculative play early in the semester, my hope is that I have designed a project that can help students visualize, retell, and speculate about a fully decolonized future, using visual mediums to anchor their thoughts and ideations.

INFLUENCES AND INSPIRATION

The first inspiration for this project was the work of Jacob Lawrence, whose collection *Struggle: From the History of the American People* was on display this summer at the Phillips Collection in Dupont Circle. He spent 5 years reading and researching for this project, and another 2 years painting the panels that would comprise the exhibition. This work was instrumental in my understanding of how to combine art and scholarship. While I certainly did not put the time into my work that Lawrence did, his exhibition helped me understand how I might do this in the future. The second point of inspiration was Caitlin Gunn's work on critical speculative play. Though I did not realize it at the time, her framing of the importance of speculative play and imagination allowed me to move more deeply into the possibilities of speculative design. My final, major source of conceptual influence was the politics of refusal, as outlined in our class reading *Refusing the University* by Sandy Grande and further expanded upon by Audra Simpson in her book *Mohawk Interruptus*. Central to this work is the definition of decolonization put forth by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in their article *Decolonization is not a metaphor*, which reads "decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically," (Tuck and Yang, 7).

This project would not have been possible without the work of Armande Lione, who created a map called *Once As It Was*. He compiled evidence of Nacotchtank artifacts found in Washington, D.C. over decades of construction. He uses news articles, photographs and first-hand accounts to build this map.

Finally, the use of photography as a medium, while primarily guided by my own personal interest and expertise, also has some theoretical underpinnings. Jane Recker wrote about photography as a tool of empowerment for *Smithsonian Magazine*. She outlines how photography was often used to denigrate African-Americans and perpetuate racism, but around the turn of the century became a tool for crafting their own narrative. Photography has often been weaponized against populations white folks sought to dominate. However, this project seeks to weaponize photographs against those same white supremacist institutions, framing their development as fundamentally negative for society.

USE OF ARTIFACT IN EDUCATION

This artifact, which ultimately takes the form of a virtual exhibit, is designed to be used in a speculative play workshop. This could be done with groups of activists and organizers through training they might receive in or outside of education institutions. This could also be done in future versions of LDES 713, as another way to engage students with speculative play and speculative thinking. I plan to use this with a group of students at The Nora School, where I teach, who will be traveling to the Pine Ridge Reservation in North Dakota this spring. When they return from the trip, we will hold a workshop together where they can link their experiences on the reservation with the realities of Washington D.C. and imagine a decolonized world they might inhabit one day.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND CAPTIONS

These prompts and captions appear in the virtual gallery, which can be found [here](#).

Imagine the year is 3051 and you're standing in some version of a history museum [maybe it is virtual?]. The majority of the white settler class is gone. [you can decide how they left—did they go colonize Mars? Did a plague that solely targeted them sweep through earth? Was there a mass movement that uprooted the capitalist white system and returned the land to other people?]. As you move through the exhibit, you'll be prompted to think about what these spaces would look like, sound like, smell like in 3051. How can we imagine this space in a decolonized world? What does the future we are fighting for actually look like?



Caption: Before colonization, this space was a village, located around a spring, which provided much needed water and resources for those living there. During the colonial period, this site changed hands and forms many times, starting as a mansion, and ending as a series of residential houses for wealthy families. In 2021, this land was covered in concrete and the spring was nowhere to be found. Even on a warm winter afternoon, few were outside, engaging in their community and neighbors. While this location was chosen due to its proven history of indigeneous soil, it is representative of the isolation of white settler colonist life.

As we think about a decolonized world, where do we find shelter? Where do we live? How would we reimagine these physical structures that currently exist? How might we reuse what is here, in this picture? What is worth preserving? In what ways does our future encourage community and connection in our living spaces?

As you answer these questions, create a mindmap or a sketch of what you envision. Consider sending your sketches to the curator of this exhibit to be posted under the “Now” category.



Caption: Before colonization, this land was used as a burial site. While countless people may have been laid to rest here, the only evidence that remained after centuries of paving and repaving were a comb, pendant stones, an arrowhead and shark teeth. During colonization, this space served as a highway, a conduit for fumes, aggression, light and noise pollution, and danger to those walking and moving in more sustainable ways. This area is representative of the speed of white settler colonization both in its development and in daily life.

As we design a decolonized world, how will we move around? What pace will we move at? Is there utility in maintaining roadways, or should they be dismantled and destroyed altogether? How will we foster connection between communities?

What does this exact spot sound and smell like in the future? What sensory experience should we be moving towards?

As you answer these questions, create a map of this space and a description of the sights, sounds and smells. Consider sending your work to the curator of this exhibit to be posted under the “Now” category.



Caption: In the time before colonization, this land was a soapstone quarry, providing natural resources for the Nacotchtank tribe to create, use, and trade, such as cooking pots, bowls, and pipes. Some of the quarry remained undeveloped in a public park, but most of the quarry site was covered with apartment buildings. During peak colonization, these buildings were located on so-called private land, barring anyone who did not pay to live there from entering the area. While the area is quiet and surrounded by nature, you can hear the distant buzz of construction of large homes through the park.

As we imagine a decolonized future, how do we use and distribute natural resources? How can we ensure we do not overuse what is available and make sure all can benefit? What natural resources will we need in the future and how can we get them? What doesn't need to be present?

As you answer these questions, sketch out an alternative use for this large building or plan out a resource sharing strategy. Consider sending your work to the curator of this exhibit to be posted under the "Now" category.



Caption: It is unknown what this place was used for before colonization. However, in later construction of this monument to white supremacy, fragments of pottery and other artifacts were found. During colonization, this was the residence and office of the President of the United States of America. Despite the nickname “The People’s House,” this structure and space was largely off-limits to most people, as evidenced by several barriers and signs, restricting movement and interaction. Moreover, much of the house was built on uncompensated labor by enslaved people, further undermining the ideals this building supposedly represents and protects.

As we think about a decolonized future, what does power and governance look like? What structures might remain in place? Is there a role for a government in the future? How would the people have access to those with power?

As you consider these questions, write down your proposal for a new system of organization, along with the physical or conceptual structures that would support it. Consider sending your work to the curator of this exhibit to be posted under the “Now” category.



Caption: Before colonization, this land was the intersection between two creeks that flowed down into the river and the bay. Multiple burial sites were found on this land during its development as a local, public park. During colonization, this space was preserved as a public park, allowing for trees and other forms of nature to exist outside of development. However, several manmade structures have been put in place, to increase use and leisure in the park. This space was often used for walking dogs, playing with children, and exercising. The creeks that used to flow here are either dry or run underground.

What role does leisure have in a decolonized world? How can we reimagine public spaces to be used for many purposes? Could this space be largely kept the same, after decolonization? What may remain here? What needs to leave? How can our future spaces foster community and interaction?

As you reflect on these questions, consider drawing or writing about fun, leisure and community in a decolonized world. If you'd like, please send your work to the curator of this exhibit to be posted under the "Now" category.



Caption: Before colonization, this space was likely used for fishing. Throughout the construction and development of this land during colonization, artifacts such as arrowheads, pestles, and an entire canoe were found by those excavating the space. During colonization, this space was largely used for industry, such as waterworks, electricity, and later, large apartment buildings and entertainment. At the end of 2021, these somewhat raw materials were unused, in the middle of constructing a large new structure.

As we think of a decolonized world, what might we build with these materials, instead of the luxury apartments that were being created in the moment above? If we raze the other large buildings in the city, how might we do so thoughtfully so that the materials can be repurposed? What other uses might we have for the wood and metal stacked above? What would development look like in a future decolonized world?

In considering the questions above, you may want to sketch out some renderings of future buildings and structures that could house multiple families. If you'd like, please send your work to the curator of this exhibit to be posted under the "Now" category.



Caption: Before colonization, the land pictured across the river was used as an ossuary, storing the remains of members of the Nacotchtank community. Notably, no evidence of any European materials, such as glass or metal, were found at the site during its excavation. During colonization, this land was used as a military base for aircrafts and jets. Many men and later women who fought to protect the United States, lived and operated out of that base. In 2021, approximately 17,000 people lived on the base, including family members of those serving in the military.

As we imagine a decolonized world, what role does military and defense play, if any? How might we protect the lifestyle that took centuries to reclaim from those that seek to destroy it? What does a world or country without a military industrial complex look like?

As you answer these questions, create a mindmap or a sketch of what you envision. Consider sending your sketches to the curator of this exhibit to be posted under the “Now” category.



Caption: Before colonization, this space was likely inhabited by members of the Nacotchtank tribe, as over 140 artifacts have been found, without disturbing the immediate land of the monument, including a knife and various arrowheads. During colonization, this land has largely been used to memorialize various figureheads in the founding of the government of the white settler state or military triumphs. This particular monument featured above, commemorates the first President of the United States.

As we imagine a decolonized world, how might we reimagine these monuments and memorials to commemorate different events or figures? Should these monuments be dismantled completely? How can we memorialize important people, events, or values in our future world without white supremacy?

As you reflect on these questions, sketch out a design for a future monument or use for this large public space. Consider sending your sketches to the curator of this exhibit to be posted under the “Now” category.

EFFECTS AND DEPTH

This design is meant to spark radical speculative design towards a truly decolonized future. Ultimately, I hope it helps my students and others envision this world and work to build towards it. In an educational setting, this artifact may push other instructors to use speculative thinking in their discussions of social justice. This artifact also challenges notions of what decolonization would mean for our physical spaces. We often discuss a decolonized world, but rarely imagine or understand how it would impact our daily lives and the spaces we inhabit. This is not a metaphorical decolonization of curriculum or language, but a physical decolonization of space and place. For this artifact to truly exist as a historical primary source, there would need to be a major shift of mass consciousness, a mass exodus to another planet, or a mass extinction of many humans. I'm sure there are other scenarios, but these are the big three that pave a way forward for this artifact to exist in the future world it seeks to create. I hope the design complicates what decolonization requires of all of us—it's not as simple as reading or reparations. I also hope this helps us interrogate current colonization that's happening globally. As we consider how challenging decolonization will be, can we stop current colonization now. In the forefront of my mind is Palestine and the slow, physical colonization by Israel. If we understand the impacts of colonization 200 years into the future, don't we have a responsibility to stop it when it's easiest to dismantle?

The two major ideas that come together in this artifact are 1) the value of radical speculative play and 2) decolonization is not metaphorical. In Caitlin Gunn's piece (cited below), she argues for radical speculation and speculative play in framing Black feminist futures. Tuck and Yang argue that decolonization is real, physical and structural. They also argue that decolonization is unsettling. In an effort to make decolonization more tangible, less metaphorical, this artifact puts visuals, many of which are familiar, at the center of the conversation. What would happen to the Washington Monument if we decolonize? While this is unsettling, it may also be empowering in the framing of radical speculation. By bringing these two ideas together, decolonization can be full of possibility, centering what is gained. Finally, In some ways, this artifact is in conversation with the final chapter of *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, where a decolonized world exists. In this chapter, the main character travels back in time to 2016. This artifact travels forward about the same amount of time, and seeks to write a narrative about the future we hope will exist.

REFLECTION

This artifact is evidence of how my thinking and perceptions have changed throughout the semester. In September, I had no idea how art could be used as evidence of knowledge or a tool in knowledge production. I also was resistant to radical speculation as a tool for organization and world building. Living in the immediate, I was looking for present-based solutions and ways that I work to dismantle white supremacy, particularly in the institutions where I have power (namely, school). What I didn't account for was the need for a vision of the future we are working towards. The value of radical speculation has been nothing short of transformative. I have also internalized the belief that formal written papers are the only type of product that can demonstrate scholarship and knowledge. Throughout this course, I have reconsidered art, in all of its forms, as significant demonstrations of knowledge, understanding, and empathy-building. It is a testament to this transformation that I chose to create an art-based artifact that promotes radical speculation as my final project, when much more tangible straightforward projects were also possible. As I think back on my initial reflection, I feel proud that I essentially achieved the goal I set out for myself throughout the semester and creation of this artifact. On the other hand, it took far too long to figure out how to connect this artifact to education. With more time, I could have pushed the educational aspect of this project further, perhaps engaging with members of the Piscataway tribe. Certainly, with more time, I could have pushed this project much further into something that could be useful and shared beyond this class.

Finally, I want to name the challenge I had in doing a project on decolonization, which explicitly must decenter whiteness, as a white person. As Tuck and Yang argue, decolonization must not allow white moves towards innocence. Though not mentioned elsewhere in my analysis, I hope this artifact does not seek to reconcile or ease the burdens of the guilt of colonization, but instead recognizes the real and tangible work that must exist for decolonization to take place.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Alliance of Museums. *Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition*.

<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/awards-competitions/excellence-in-exhibition-label-writing-competition/>.

This source is provided through the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), in their role in recognizing excellence in museums. For the purposes of this project, I am focusing on their awards in Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing. This source is primarily being used as a reference for writing detailed exhibition labels that tell the stories behind the photographs, thus allowing me to ground the artistic work in research and bring in elements of the speculative world where my exhibition would exist. I was particularly inspired by the exhibit “A River and Its City,” which took place at the McCormick Bridgehouse and Chicago River Museum. They start the exhibit with a speculative prompt, asking viewers to imagine the space as it was 350 years ago. This type of introduction is exactly how I’m looking to frame my work. I am using this source to create labels that would closely resemble how this might look in an actual museum, today or in the future.

Deerchild, Rosanna. *This Place*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/thisplace/this-place-podcast-hosted-by-rosanna-deerchild-explore-150-years-of-indigenous-resistance-and-resilience-1.6073883>.

This Place: 150 Years Retold exists as a graphic novel anthology and as a podcast. While I have engaged with both sources, I am choosing to reference the podcast primarily. The podcast allows the consumer to hear from indigenous voices in a multisensory way, and while it does not have the benefit of illustrations, it does require the listener to imagine on their own. Though this book and podcast do not always speculate about the future, they do reframe the present moment and history as post-apocalyptic. In this way, it fits neatly into some of the work we have engaged with in class so far, as post-apocalyptic worlds are typically future oriented. The final episode takes place in the year 2350 and features a character who is sent back in time to our present day. This particular episode has helped frame my own thinking on how we might look back at today’s world from a futurist perspective.

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*. Beacon Press, 2014.

This text follows the path of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* in prioritizing different narratives than are typically heard in U.S. history classes, textbooks, and popular understanding. Dunbar-Ortiz retells U.S. history from the perspective of Native Americans and highlights their forms of resistance over the years. This source details the genocide and colonization that took place and helps to make sense of the present moment. For the purposes of my project, this source helps to round out my understanding of the violence of the colonization process. While my project is rooted in the future, if I am to frame this moment as history, I will need to better understand the events, policies, and narratives that got us here. As we think about a decolonized future, understanding the brutal process of colonization is key.

Genetin-Pilawa, Joseph. *The Indians' Capital City: Native Histories of Washington, D.C.* 27 Mar. 2015,

<https://blogs.loc.gov/kluge/2015/03/the-indians-capital-city-native-histories-of-washington-d-c/>.

This source is a transcript of an interview with Joseph Genetin-Pilawa, Ph.D, who is professor of history at George Washington University and is currently writing a book about the Indigeneous peoples of Washington, D.C. Though his book, entitled *The Indians' Capital City* is not yet published, this interview, which also exists on video, talks about the role and lives of Indigeneous people in Washington, D.C. Dr. Genetin-Pilawa outlines several primary sources written by primarily white people living in the D.C. area during the 19th century. From his research, I've learned that the experience of some Indigenous people in the D.C. area was quite different from the removal experience of many Native Americans across the United States. Because this is a hyperlocal project, it's vital to have historic information about the peoples who lived here specifically and their influences on the urbanization of Washington, D.C.

Gunn, Caitlin. "Black Feminist Futurity: From Survival Rhetoric to Radical Speculation." *Feral Feminisms*, no. 9, Fall 2019, pp. 15–20.

This source is a journal article outlining the value of radical speculation and speculative play in Black feminism. Gunn argues for the use of radical speculation in the movement as a way to imagine futures beyond trauma. She cites the work of adrienne maree brown, who frames speculative play as a "way to practice the future together." As my project shifted focus from existing only in the future, to being a tool for speculative play in the present, Gunn's work around speculative play became the foundation of the educational value of the artifact.

Lione, Armande. "The Once As It Was: Map of Washington, D.C. ." *Once As It Was*, <http://onceasitwasdc.org/>.

This resource is an interactive map showing where artifacts have been found around Washington, D.C., with links to the news articles or scholarly articles documenting these artifacts. This map also comes with a blog post (cited below) that explains these "discoveries" in more depth. While this map does not show where Indigeneous peoples were living throughout the D.C. area, it

provides some guidance as to specific locations where evidence was found. For the purposes of this project, this map will be used to plan locations where the photographs will be taken.

Mabry, Hannah. "Photography, Colonialism and Racism." *USFCA: International Affairs Review*, Fall 2014.

This resource is an article in an undergraduate journal that outlines the role of photography in the colonization of sub-Saharan Africa. Mabry unpacks the idea of photography as a medium that shows absolute truth, which is an idea we've discussed in class. Like our class discussion, she addresses that the photographers own bias and who has access to producing those images. She also discusses the way photography has been used as a tool to promote the narrative of uncivilized peoples that need to be educated, conquered, and exploited. This article provides some of the foundation for the use of photography as the artistic medium for this project. The hope is to use these tools, which have been used to subjugate native populations, to subjugate white supremacy.

Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Duke University Press, 2014.

This book is a study of the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke, a reserve community in modern-day southwestern Quebec. Simpson examines the community's refusal to assimilate into U.S. or Canadian governments. In contrast to many of the narratives around recognition, which has been to the detriment of native populations. As a tool of speculation, the Mohawks ask us: what if Indigenous populations were allowed to coexist, without domination or elimination? Though this group exists in the present moment (and has existed), they can provide a blueprint for what a truly decolonized world would look like. For the purposes of this project, *Mohawk Interruptus* helps to provide the mindset for the decolonized future where the project will exist.

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–40.

This journal article critiques the now casual use of decolonization to mean decentering whiteness or promoting social justice. They use a particularly compelling phrase: domesticating decolonization, which neatly summarizes the way that decolonization has been popularly understood. They argue this reconciles settler guilt and does not allow for the radical transformation that must happen for true decolonization to happen. They also provide the definition of decolonization that I will use for my project, "decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically," (Tuck and Yang, 7). Overall, this article provides the theoretical foundation for decolonization that undergirds my entire project.

"Vision and Justice: A Civic Curriculum." *Aperture*, <https://visionandjustice.org/civic-curriculum>.

Vision and Justice: A Civic Curriculum is a written magazine that was created alongside the Vision and Justice convening at Harvard University in 2019. The civic curriculum includes articles and interviews from various scholars studying the intersection of art and anti-racism. The entire publication was read and used for this particular project, there are a few articles that were particularly informative. 1) "Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura," by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who unpacks Douglass's relationship with photography throughout his life. 2) "How Gordon Parks Became Gordon Parks," an interview between Deborah Willis and James Estrin, who talk about Parks contribution to documenting black life. 3) "Racial Bias and the Lens," by Sarah Lewis who discusses the role of racial bias and photography. These three articles provide important historical context for the role that photography has played in the racialized lives of Black Americans.