



# American Necroecology: James Luna's *The End of the Trail* Examined

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Americans like romance more than they like the truth.

—James Luna

## Introduction

The United States remains a colony and too often this fact is obscured. This fact is no clearer than in the artwork and culture produced by artists like the sculptor James Earle Fraser. Fraser's work is indicative of the United States' vision of itself. His neoclassical sculptures of larger-than-life figures like Alexander Hamilton and Theodore Roosevelt feature heroic poses often seen in Greek and Roman art: towering individuals riding horses or perusing documents. You may not know the name James Earle Fraser, but you have surely seen one of his iconic images either as a full-scale reproduction or a miniature kitsch object. His biographer, A.L. Freundlich, identifies Fraser's enduring popularity in his dedication to creating images of the "American ideal—the pioneer West" (Freundlich 2001: vii). Freundlich is correct in his assessment that "Fraser is important because he and his sculpture are an almost perfect expression of the life and spirit of his country in the late Nineteenth and first half of the Twentieth Centuries" (2001: vii). Yet, Fraser's importance is not for the reasons stated in his biography. Fraser's image of the pioneer West reflects the colonial fantasy of Westward expansion, which deliberately shrouds the violent oppression of Indigenous peoples and the destruction of land in the name of progress, democracy, and freedom.

The falsehood of Fraser's imagery is laid bare in Luiseño artist James Luna's subversive response to Fraser. Luna's photo performance *A.A. Meeting/Art History: The End of the Trail* (1990) satirically reinterprets the formal elements of Fraser's iconic image to reveal a necroecology unique to the United States. Without the romantic flourishes that Fraser adds, the scene Luna crafts is horrifying: an exhausted rider grasping for a bottle of vodka on a sawhorse while traversing a vacant industrial wasteland. Luna fixates on this horror with a



grim sense of irony. His work implicates the colonial gaze of white Americans who—as he states in another irony-laced performance titled *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, first performed in 1991—prefer romance to the truth.

A close visual analysis of both works as well as a proper historical contextualization of Fraser's sculpture *The End of the Trail* (1915) will illustrate how Luna's ironic gestures uncover the United States' cultural fixation on Indigenous death and the destruction of land for the sake of production. Furthermore, it will exhibit how the history of art in the United States perpetuates this necroecological relationship. The framework of necroecology is important for unpacking Luna's critique of Fraser. In his analysis of Victorian colonial literature, Gautam Thakur identifies that the works of British authors like Rudyard Kipling often employ the colonial strategy of conflating Indigenous peoples with the colonized and occupied land upon which they reside (Thakur 2016: 203). Colonial societies implement systematic violence on Indigenous peoples and their land for the sake of the colony's security.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, every colony is an ecology of death and decay (2016: 203). This aim is reflected in colonial art, which treats Indigenous people and land as a nightmarish terror. These cultural works subconsciously justify the atrocities of the colonial state in their necroecological aesthetic. This aesthetic is, as Thakur notes, "foreclosed, disavowed, and repressed" (2016: 203). It projects the colonial imagination on the Indigenous population and denies them access to their own cultural identity. This aesthetic is an extension of the colonial state's oppression and the visual representation of the colonial ecology of death.

### **Fraser's *The End of the Trail***

In a Northern Wisconsin town called Waupun, on a hill overlooking a graveyard, a reproduction of James Earle Fraser's *The End of the Trail* slumps dramatically (**Figure 1**). It is spotlit and isolated from other artworks in the park—a searing vision of American history. The sculpture features an anonymous rider slouched upon a horse that seems equally exhausted. The rider also clasps a spear and is draped in a blanket. Ponytails drape over the rider's head and emerge like horns, resembling an Americana reinterpretation of the pagan god Pan. Underneath the sculpture there is a plaque crediting Fraser and his patron, the industrial capitalist Clarence Shaler.

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<sup>1</sup> Thakur is elaborating on Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (2003), which views the state as the arbiter of death in society. Thakur's necroecology expands Mbembe's original idea to understand how the colonial state vilifies not only Indigenous people, but the flora and fauna of the land as well.



**Figure 1.** James Earle Fraser (1929/1894). *The End of The Trail*. Waupun, WI. Photo by Janice Jensen Adomeit (2012).

Freundlich identifies the influence that Fraser's childhood experiences of the frontier had on his later art. Fraser recounts that his earliest memories were of sleeping in railcars and playing with Indigenous children as his father worked, expanding the railroad in the Dakota territories (Freundlich 2001: 2). Freundlich is seemingly not concerned with how Fraser's view as a white settler affected his interpretation of the events he witnessed as a child. Is there an artist whose adolescent worldview was so informed by Westward expansion and the lie of American exceptionalism? Later in his life, Fraser noted his memories of these childhood experiences in letters:

Here and there buffalo bones would begin to show, the great gray ribs first, then the skulls with their sculptural contours would seem to rise, until finally endless white trails of bleached bones would wind in serpentine bands across the slowly greening prairie... Is it surprising that the Indians were aroused by this ruthlessness? They took only what was needed for their immediate use and wanted fiercely to resist the extermination of their source of food. It was terrible that such slaughter was



necessary, but railroads wanted by the government had to be built, and the buffalo stood in the way. (Freundlich 2001: 3)

This account speaks to the necropolitical policies of the U.S. state which sought not only to exterminate Indigenous peoples, but also all wildlife that stood in the way of the railroads. The U.S. in particular embeds its necroecology in its ideological foundation. The Enlightenment philosophy which underscores the theoretical framework of the United States advocates for the domination of nature through reason (Nanibush 2019: 67). In practice, the people and buffalo were treated as one and the same obstacle to the railroad's establishment and security.<sup>2</sup> Fraser laments the flagrant destruction. However, he does not condemn it. This discrepancy is not merely overlooked in Fraser's sculptural work, but in Freundlich's insufficiently critical biography. The colonial implications of Fraser's adolescent outlook and artwork are perceived as ancillary to the supposed cultural value of the artworks themselves.

Fraser's work perpetuates the colonial myth of extinction. This myth imagines that the Indigenous peoples of the United States were completely executed by the state during its conquest of the West without remainder. The building of the railroad was considered a necessity for the burgeoning nation and thus the geocoding of Indigenous peoples, animals, and the destruction of land was justified—or at least logical. This logic is the reason why a necroecological critique of colonial cultures is so necessary. The colonial state presides over the deaths of millions with impunity and artists like Fraser launder their reputation in history through works of propaganda like *The End of the Trail*. Even if Fraser intended his sculpture as a critique of Westward expansion, it reaffirms the myth of extinction perpetuated by the state. The romantic stylistic flourishes of Fraser mask the piles of burnt human and animal bodies stacked on burning planar vistas.

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<sup>2</sup> The technological progress of the railroad was not merely the product of industrial capitalism but marked the evolution of the philosophy extolled by Thomas Jefferson, who painted a picture of the Indigenous people as a violent plague upon the enlightened democratic colonizers. This outrageously racist claim recalls John Stuart Mill's early support of the colonization of Australia. The colony is seen as a bringer of logic, freedom, and equality, which stand opposed to the colonized land subsequently portrayed as violent, amoral, and arcane. It could be said that necroecology is de facto the ecological position of the Enlightenment. Curator Wanda Nanibush (2019) juxtaposes this oppressive assumption with the idea that the Indigenous worldview is pre-Cartesian. The Indigenous worldview does not separate subjects, objects, time, and space into separate categories, but views them all as a network of interactive forces.



### Luna's *The End of the Trail*

James Luna's *A.A. Meeting/Art History: The End of the Trail* (**Figure 2**) does not share Fraser's rose-tinted view of U.S. history. Across his entire body of work, the Luiseño performance artist obsessively unmaskes the necroecological aesthetic of the United States, subtly undermining the myths of extinction and colonial fantasies. In the photo performance, Luna is slumped over a wooden sawhorse, dressed casually in all black with his feet just barely dangling off the ground. In his left hand, his index finger loosely clings to an open handle of vodka. His right hand tepidly grips the sawhorse beneath him. Luna and his sawhorse stand on a dirt ground, yet with a vacuous white wall behind them. At first glance, Luna's piece does not seem an adequate response to the United States' necroecological art history. The piece is so simple in its irony, it is easy to miss the deeper spiral of contradictions at the heart of Luna's interaction with Fraser. If we keep in mind Thakur's qualification of colonial ecology as inherently oriented towards death, the absence of the natural world becomes indicative of the United States' necropolitical agenda. Luna substitutes nature for the materials of industrial culture—the sawhorse, the white wall, and the dirt masquerading as nature. Luna's construction is an industrial parody of nature. This depiction of nature under capitalism is alienating—pointedly unnatural and uncanny. The barren wasteland stripped of all life reflects the exhaustion of the rider.<sup>3</sup> By further conflating himself and the constructed environment, Luna pushes Fraser's metaphorical image into satirical absurdity.

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Luna's vacant landscape implicates the rich history of landscape painting in the United States. As the colonial state and capitalists exterminated the existing ecology in the expansion westward, artists followed behind and crafted ironic images of elysian beauty predicated on violent genocide.



**Figure 2.** James Luna (1990). *A.A. Meeting/Art History: The End of the Trail*. Digital Photograph. SAIC Special Collections.

Yet, Luna's bleak reinterpretation of Fraser expresses a revolutionary politics of *native survivance*.<sup>4</sup> Gerald Vizenor adapts the idea of native survival into survivance to more accurately describe how Indigenous communities resist colonial occupation and oppression. Native survivance is active; it is a state that one exists within. "Survivance, then, is the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb *survive*, to remain alive or in existence: to outlive, persevere with a suffix of *survivancy*" (Vizenor 2008: 19). Luna is constantly referring back to contemporary life on the reservation in his ironic embodiments of native stereotypes. Luna's repurposing of the anonymous native in Fraser's sculpture for contemporary times also signals the continued presence of native

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<sup>4</sup> Vizenor is clear that *survivance* is intentionally obscure and hard to define. It is a negative category in that it intentionally exists to resist myths of absences and nihilism (2008: 1).



people in the United States. Luna constructs the rider as a figure of resistance in the face of annihilation.

During his life, Luna made a conscious choice to move to and live in the La Jolla reservation. His belief in the revolutionary potential of the reservation is not cursory or superficial. He accurately treats it as a center of contemporary native life. As a community site, it embodies history and tradition in the face of oppression. Yet, the endemic problems of the reservation push back against the idealization of native people. Alcoholism is a recurring theme across much of Luna's work. This is not just a personal exploration, as it is tied to oppression by the U.S. state. It is well-documented that colonizers utilized alcohol as a weapon against Indigenous populations and, as a result, alcoholism remains a problem in many Indigenous communities in the United States (Lesley 2019: 91). Alcoholism is a reality of contemporary native life and Luna embraces the authenticity of that reality. His study of alcoholism is not an indictment of Indigenous people, but a further example of colonial oppression. As a symbol in his photo performance, alcohol acts as an extension of the United States's ecology of death. In spite of this, native communities survive and persist through the ecology of death. The reservation itself is a symbol and site of resistance. As hard as the U.S. colonial state tries, it cannot exterminate Indigenous people. Indigenous traditions and cultures endure in the face of a violent industrial machine of death. Vizenor connects this continued survival with an inherent revolutionary politics in his idea of "native survivance," and Luna's work situates the reservation as the heart of that survivance and of native sovereignty. Luna recounts that white Americans have an idea of what the reservation is: elders gathered around a fire teaching the younger generations through stories. However, for Luna it was the everyday relations of his family and the reservation that preserved his Luiseño heritage. It was relatives giving cryptic hints of advice like *know who you are* that communicated the principles of his people (Ah-Sue 2018). What Luna describes echoes Vizenor's conception of native survivance; the interactions of the family constitute revolutionary action and a form of resistance to colonial power.

### **Native Kitsch and Necroecology**

Freundlich acutely observes that while Fraser himself is relatively unknown as an artist, his imagery is a defining part of U.S. culture (Freundlich 2001: vii). If you happen to be traveling through Northern Wisconsin, you will no doubt see Fraser's silhouette appear in numerous logos of motels, bars, and gas stations. Fraser's sculpture survives past him as an enduring colonial image of Native Americans.



Fraser's image endures in kitsch objects and symbols in a very precise way. Though it may be old-fashioned, I want to refer to Clement Greenberg's definition of *kitsch* as a form of distraction. This definition offers a lot to post-colonial and ecological critique. Greenberg is clear that a precondition for a kitsch object is the reference back to another, more authentic cultural tradition (Greenberg 1972: 10). Kitsch objects are formed by taking surface formal elements and turning them to their own ends. In the case of Indigenous culture, objects of native kitsch take patterns, colors, and figures from a wide variety of Indigenous cultures and reduce them to one and the same culture. The pastoral quality of native kitsch solidifies the mask of romanticism embedded in Fraser's original sculpture. On a broader scale, kitsch reifies Indigenous identity and produces images of the colonial ecology of death as cheap, populist commodities.

Fraser's sculpture operates in the following way. He takes specific formal signs of Indigenous people and amalgamates them into a fictional image. The industrially-produced versions of Fraser's work—those found in signs, logos, and ceramic miniatures—provide a vicarious experience of Indigenous existence divorced from reality. The horrors committed against Indigenous peoples are obscured in commodities and sold to an audience that lacks any context for the image. The necroecological aesthetic of the United States is clearly expressed in the reproductions of Fraser's image precisely because they depict the worst atrocities of the colonial state (the violence and destruction of Indigenous peoples and lands) as harmless provincial images. These objects attempt to supplant Indigenous peoples' sovereignty by denying them an autogenic identity. Native kitsch is the suppression of Indigenous culture by way of a necroecological aesthetic.

### **Romance Versus Truth**

Across Luna's works, but especially with regard to *The End of the Trail*, his deft ironic disposition speaks truth to power. His images and performances implicate the institutions that collect and display his work through the adulteration of native kitsch images, mocking the very idea that Indigenous identity is a monolithic or singular category. Despite recent institutional attempts to collect and exhibit the work of Indigenous artists, the issue remains that a historically repressive cultural institution is attempting to craft an image of Indigenous identity for a predominantly colonizer audience. If Luna was invested in the revolutionary implications of the reservation, he was just as critical of the way art institutions are mechanisms of the colonial state.

The United States continues to fund and perpetrate genocidal actions around the world while contributing to the greater ecological devastation that humanity and nature will





surely face in the coming years. In the face of such fears, what can art say? Luna said, “Art is my weapon of choice” (Ah-Sue 2018). Art does not have to be reduced to a luxury commodity. Around the world, there are artists on the frontlines of activist and revolutionary activity. Their work does not shy away from the travesties of the world and is often censored, poorly documented, or ignored. In the hands of artists like Luna, art is a weapon. It challenges the propaganda of states and imagines new ways of living beyond extractive capitalism. As a weapon, perhaps art can reclaim its revolutionary potential to assist in overthrowing the colonial state all together.

### List of Figures

**Figure 1.** Fraser, James Earle (1929/1894). *The End of The Trail*. Photo by Janice Jensen Adomeit (2012). Waupun, WI.

**Figure 2.** Luna, James (1990). *A.A. Meeting/Art History: The End of the Trail*. Digital Photograph. SAIC Special Collections.

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