In spring 2021, the words “Indian Land” appeared in 45-foot-high white letters in the desert near Palm Springs, California. The installation, created by Tlingit and Unangax̂ artist Nicholas Galanin as part of the Desert X biennial exhibition, simulates the iconic Hollywood sign that overlooks downtown Los Angeles, about 100 miles west of Palm Springs. When it was constructed in 1923, the Hollywood sign served as an advertisement for real estate in new, whites-only communities in Los Angeles, thereby defining the land as a commodity for purchase while promoting racial segregation. It was also an act of erasure. By presenting the land as empty and available, the Hollywood sign obscured the long histories of Gabrielino Tongva people in the region along with their territorial understandings and claims. Like the Hollywood sign, Galanin’s installation advances understandings of land that bear on questions of possession but in altogether different ways. Galanin created the “Indian Land” sign, as he explains, to “challenge land ownership.” Titled Never Forget, the installation is an act of memory that calls up the enduring presence of Indigenous people within and beyond the Palm Springs area, even as the words “Indian Land” assert Native territorial claims in the present (fig. 1). As part of the project, Galanin established a GoFundMe page to raise money for the growing Land Back movement, which seeks the return of homelands to Native communities. Never Forget, then, is at once an act of cultural representation, a call to action, and a material intervention in Indigenous endeavors to reclaim traditional territories. I begin with Galanin’s installation because it exemplifies close ties between Indigenous cultural production and Native land reclamation as they have taken shape over the past fifty years. During this period, I argue in the following pages, Native artists, filmmakers, and writers have expressly used their work to represent
Indigenous histories and meanings of land in ways that support Indigenous territorial claims. In my reading, Native visual and literary culture of this period constitutes a radical political imaginary that challenges the political authority and territorial possessions of settler nation-states such as the United States and Canada, refutes extractive colonialism on Native lands, and envisions a future that draws together territorial reclamation with social justice, including gender justice, for Native people.

Galanin created *Never Forget* in the context of contemporary Native organizing that has drawn far-reaching public attention to Indigenous territorial claims. The best-known event occurred on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota in 2016, when the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) across Native lands prompted the largest Indigenous resistance movement in recent history. As representatives of more than three hundred Native nations gathered on the reservation, social media posts called global attention to the tribes’ battle against pipeline construction and prompted many non-Native allies, including Hollywood celebrities, to join the protest. The #NoDAPL movement represents only one of several recent events that have brought unprecedented attention to Indigenous campaigns for territorial rights. In 2020, in another prominent example, opposition to pipeline construction across Wet’suwet’en treaty territory in British
Columbia entailed blockades on community land as well as on rail lines across Canada, making global headlines. Through international movements such as Land Back and women-led Rematriation, as well as local organizing, Native groups seek to reclaim land, protect sacred sites, exercise environmental stewardship over traditional territories, impede resource extraction, and revive land-based cultural practices. The climate crisis heightens the urgency of these endeavors and strengthens public support for them. Widening recognition of Indigenous dispossession has given rise to the practice of land acknowledgments and prompted governmental and even private returns of homelands to Indigenous communities.\(^3\)

Indigenous dispossession and territorial control remain the principal features of ongoing settler colonialism, and struggles over land have always occupied center stage in Native politics in the aftermath of European invasion. But Native activism over the past fifty years departs from predecessor movements in some important respects. Responding to renewed federal assimilation policies and accelerated resource exploitation on Indigenous lands in the mid-twentieth century,\(^4\) Native organizers created political projects centered on collective land rights, political autonomy (or sovereignty) for Indigenous nations, and the revitalization of traditional beliefs and practices suppressed by colonialism (M. Johnson 2016; P. Smith and Warrior 1996). This focus distinguished Native organizing from the civil rights movements of the 1960s and aligned more closely with global campaigns for decolonization. In addition, it sparked renewed interest in treaties as the basis for nation-to-nation relationships and revived the legal use of Aboriginal title, the common-law doctrine that Native land rights arise from longtime use and occupancy of traditional territories. Activist claims have centered not only on legal rights to land but also on the place-based nature of traditional cultural practices and Indigenous identities, or the understanding that community identities themselves depend on access to ancestral lands and waters (M. Johnson 2016, 4, 7–8). Exemplifying this strategy, activist George Manuel famously insisted in a foundational text of the era, coauthored with Michael Posluns, that “our culture is every inch of our land,” and he became the first to propose the idea of a “fourth world” of Indigenous peoples united by a “common attachment to the land” (Manuel and Posluns [1974] 2019, 6). Shared relationships with the land and histories of colonization in turn provided the foundation for a new global concept of “Indigenous peoples,” which in the 1980s coalesced into an international political movement (Niezen 2003). The new global scale of Indigenous identities and activism, along with
the territorial and political rights that stem from the precontact status of Native communities, present fundamental challenges to settler nation-states such as the United States and Canada, calling into question their political authority, territorial possessions, and geographical boundaries. To be sure, Native organizing over the past fifty years has taken multiple and sometimes contradictory forms. But events ranging from the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island—where activists wrote “Indian Land,” the same term used in Galanin’s installation, on the walls of the former federal prison—to present-day reclamation movements are united by their shared emphasis on territorial rights that emerge from distinct Indigenous histories on the land and place-based cultural traditions.

Since the 1960s, Native organizing has yielded unprecedented restorations of Native lands. In 1970, the return of Blue Lake to Taos Pueblo became the first instance of the United States returning land to a Native nation, and the following year, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the largest Indigenous land claims settlement in US history. The Canadian Supreme Court’s decision in *Calder v. British Columbia* (1973) marked the first acknowledgment by the Canadian legal system of Aboriginal title and opened the door for a new era of treaty making and land claims in that country. Between 1970 and 1983, Indigenous communities in Canada filed 180 land claims; to date, the Canadian government has signed twenty-five modern treaties with Indigenous communities, some of which include rights to self-government. In 1993, the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement, the largest Native land claims settlement in Canadian history, established a separate territory under Inuit control. These settlements are undeniably complex, sometimes requiring Native communities to make significant concessions for limited territorial rights, leading some critics to charge that settler nation-states recognize Indigenous land rights only to extinguish them. Nevertheless, territorial gains have enabled some Native communities to rebuild social infrastructure, assert sovereignty rights, and revitalize languages and place-based cultural practices in ways that proved impossible in previous eras. Today efforts to reclaim Native lands continue, among other ways, in protests against extractive industry and legal endeavors to enforce treaty rights and restore land stewardship to Indigenous people. To make their claims, Native people invoke legal agreements such as treaties, long histories on the land that underlie Aboriginal title, and the brutality of dispossession, thus leveling both legal and moral charges against settler nation-states. Underscoring the significance of traditions in this era of Native resur-
gence, they emphasize cultural understandings of land as the center of Indigenous identities. The 2016 Standing Rock movement, for example, not only opposed environmental threats and treaty violations created by the pipeline. Organizers also asserted that extractive industry breaches beliefs, rooted in traditional Indigenous epistemologies, in the sacredness of land. “Defend the Sacred” became a rallying cry of the #NoDAPL movement, and participants designated themselves as “water protectors” to denote proper relations with a natural world viewed as sacred. These entwined strategies for asserting Native territorial rights, writes historian Miranda Johnson, depend on “the construction of a new archive . . . about [Native communities’] connection to place, their traditions regarding the use of specific lands and waters, and their memories of treaty negotiations” (2016, 9).

This new archive, I argue in this book, encompasses contemporary Native art, literature, film, and other forms of cultural production. Indigenous culture has long played a key role in representing Native histories and epistemologies in ways that challenge European expansion. But in the post-1960s era, many Indigenous artists and writers have created works that expressly align with the strategies of new Native land-based movements. Some of the works that I analyze—such as Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988), Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* (1994), and Zacharias Kunuk’s *Maliglutit (Searchers)* (2016)—thematize specific histories surrounding major land claims settlements in this period. Others challenge broader patterns of settler expansion and the mythologies that surround them. Such works, like the activist strategies described by Johnson, depict longtime Native presence on the land and the violence of settler expansion, thereby leveling a critique of dispossession that lends moral weight to Indigenous claims. Cultural works address the gaps and erasures in dominant narratives by representing the brutal effects of European expansion and Native peoples’ experiences of settler colonialism as grievous loss. They also endeavor to restore community knowledge and social practices suppressed by settler policies. Whereas dispossession is premised on Native erasure, culture itself becomes a site of encounter where viewers engage with ongoing Indigenous presence and relationships to land, including those shaped by traditions. As Native cultural production constitutes a means of self-representation that complements campaigns for political autonomy, the imaginative dimensions of culture enable these works to reconceive Indigenous-settler relations in the past as well as the future. Native writers and artists conceptualize possibilities for social and territorial justice premised on Indigenous epistemologies, including cultural beliefs.
concerning land. At the same time, the works I analyze here probe the limits of activist movements, particularly as they take shape around gender, and conceptualize a political project that positions gender justice as integral to territorial rights. In the following chapters, I focus on the ways that artists and writers engage colonial representations, especially those forms—such as the Hollywood sign referenced in Galanin’s *Never Forget*—associated conventionally with dispossession and the subjugation of Indigenous peoples. By calling up a long history of colonial representations that have advanced settler power, Native artists and writers endeavor to displace conventional ways of seeing and remake colonial images for their own purposes. But as their work exemplifies the role of culture in territorial transformations, it raises intriguing questions about the potential of dominant cultural forms and genres to advance Indigenous political claims.

**CULTURE AND COLONIALISM**

Throughout the colonized world, culture has always played an influential role in European expansion. “The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course,” wrote Edward Said in his classic study *Culture and Imperialism*, “but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative” (1993, xiii). From the origins of the novel in the eighteenth century and throughout the age of imperialism, literary narratives provided a means by which Europeans came to “know” nether regions of the world and ultimately to conquer them. In stories that Europeans told about the imperial encounter, colonized people appeared as inferior races, as people without history or culture who passively accepted European rule. Such representations proved critical in the expansionist project. Imperialism and colonialism, Said explained, are not “simple act[s] of accumulation and acquisition.” Rather, “both are supported and perhaps impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination” (1993, 9; emphasis in original). But, in imperial contexts, culture has played other roles as well. Said analyzed how the novel has constituted a form of resistance to European expansion by providing a means for colonized people to reshape understandings of imperial encounters, define their histories and identities on their own terms, and imagine narra-
tives of emancipation. Thus, in Said’s analysis, culture is a “battleground” where “various political and ideological causes engage one another” in contests for territorial control (1993, xiii).

Although Said took no account of Indigenous peoples in his work, the argument that imperial power relations are secured by ideological as well as physical force holds true in Native colonial contexts. Imperial discourse, Said contended, has hinged on the idea that “‘they’ were not like ‘us,’ and for that reason deserved to be ruled” (Said 1993, xi). To countenance the warfare, mass slaughter, and removals that freed Native land for occupation, settlers depicted Native people as the “savage” antithesis of European “civilization” or erased them altogether, thereby eclipsing their territorial claims. Indeed, the idea that Native peoples were inherently inferior—that they were a “dying race” reliant on the “guidance of a superior civilization,” in legal scholar N. Bruce Duthu’s words—provided the primary rationale for dispossession (Duthu 2009, 82–83). In settler states such as the United States and Canada, stories about encounters with Native savagery have provided the core of national origin stories, shaping literary canons and popular culture alike. In these narratives, settlers found assurance of their superiority and thus their rights to the land. In Indigenous contexts, however, dispossession has hinged not only on who inhabits the land and the meanings of Native bodies (e.g., the savagism-civilization binary that has long been a focus of scholarly attention) but also on ideological shifts in the meanings and uses of land itself. As scholars have more recently argued, the appropriation of Native territories was enabled by the European transformation of land into property, an object to be owned, exchanged, and exploited for profit. This transformation, too, took shape in part in the realm of culture.

This idea of land as property finds roots in the emergence of capitalism in early modern Europe, when it superseded contending beliefs in a transition that Max Weber famously characterized as the “disenchantment of the world.” In The Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre argues that space, including land, is created through social processes and power relations that shift over time. Every society “produces a space, its own space,” and under capitalism, the property principle becomes dominant (Lefebvre 1991, 31, 252–53). Capitalism subordinates land to the “unifying but abstract principle of property,” antithetical to the sacred and lived experience (Lefebvre 1991, 252; see also Herman 2008). Rendered as transparent, homogenous, and demystified object, devoid of animacy and spiritual presence, land becomes a commodity for exchange and exploitation. These capitalist transformations of land,
contends Robert Nichols, underwrite the dispossession of Indigenous people in settler colonial contexts. Dispossession “transforms nonproprietary relations into proprietary ones while, at the same time, systematically transferring control and title of this (newly formed) property. It is thus not (only) about the transfer of property but the transformation into property.” In this and other ways, Indigenous dispossession and capitalism are “historically coupled” (Nichols 2020, 30–31, 97; see also Harris 2004). Exploring this process in the American colonies, legal scholar K. Sue Park recounts how seventeenth-century colonists “turned land into an object that could be alienated like chattel, and into an equivalent of money” (Park 2016, 1014). This transformation departed dramatically from precolonial English property law and contrasted with Native practices, which might entail usage rights but not exclusive individual ownership, enclosure, or sale (Park 2016, 1010, 1023–29; Banner 2005, 81; O’Brien 2003). Imposing this new conception of property fueled European economic development and territorial expansion by making Native land available for purchase, thus enabling the formation of colonial nation-states (see, for example, Bhandar 2018, 355). Throughout the Americas, state formation, settlers’ desire for land, and capitalists’ pursuit of wealth depended on territorial acquisition and together drove the relentless dispossession of Indigenous communities.10

Culture facilitated the conception of land as empty space and its transformation into property, though this fact often remains overlooked in Indigenous contexts. The idea that culture “makes place,” that “places are real-and-imagined assemblages constituted via language” and other forms of representation, has become commonplace within and beyond the discipline of geography (Hubbard, Kitchin, and Valentine 2004, 7). Cultural representations disseminate, promote, and ultimately reify the spatial configurations associated with particular regimes of social power. In early modern Europe, writes geographer Neil Bromley, changing understandings of land found expression in cartography as the pictorial map gave way to maps and surveys drawn to scale. This new visual regime reduced land to a grid, an inert object disembedded from social relations and thus “desocialized and depoliticized.” In this way, maps and surveys, in Bromley’s words, became the “handmaiden[s] of property” because of their “active role in the inauguration of a revolutionary enframing of land.” This process of “imagining a space as a purely abstract and empty site that has meaning only in terms of the logic of private property” was also “organized forgetting.” It promoted settler expansion because “a native space—dense with meanings, stories, and tenurial relations—could
thus be conceptually remapped as vacant land” (Bromley 2003, 126–29). Artistic representations contributed to this transformation, blurring the boundaries between the work of painters and writers and that of cartographers and surveyors, who were often called “artists” in this period (Greer 2018, 276). In painting, developments in Euclidean geometry enabled the visual technique of linear perspective that created a sense of realism, the illusion of looking at land itself rather than at its representation. This facilitated a sense of mastery that geographer Denis Cosgrove labels the “visual appropriation of space” and that was “closely bound up with the practical appropriation of space” in emergent capitalism and European expansion (Cosgrove 1985, 45–46). As technique, linear perspective became the foundation of land surveys, maps, navigation and cultural forms alike, underscoring connections between cultural practices and material instruments of dispossession. Such renderings of land as abstract space, emptied of social meanings and reduced to a grid, worked in tandem with representations of Native people as “savages” in the Lockean sense—a race incapable of proper (proprieto- rial) land use and thus doomed to disappear in modernity—to facilitate dispossession (Bromley 2003).

Although the association between racialization and dispossession has received more attention, European expansion and settler projects of nation-building have relied equally on gender—as myth and metaphor as well as material practice—to facilitate the appropriation of Indigenous territories. Expansionist discourse drew connections between Native women’s bodies and land that in turn animated stories that colonists told about their imperial voyages. “Explorers and travelers,” writes historian Pamela Scully, “rendered the Americas through a gendered and sexualized reading that saw the land as a woman, often as a passive indigenous woman, therefore open to the embrace and penetration of Europe” (Scully 2005, 4, 13; see also Hulme 1985, 18; and Blunt and Rose 1994, 10). By portraying conquest as a sexual relationship and constructing land as sexualized space, such representations drew on the logic of patriarchy to naturalize the subordination and dispossession of Native people. This logic in turn obscured colonial violence by recasting conquest as (sexual) consent. The era of European expansion and the subsequent period of nation-building on Indigenous territories were characterized by such sexualized imaginings, as national mythologies relied on the figure of the acquiescent Native woman to depict settlers as legitimate heirs to the land. In this later era, colonialism proceeded, in circular fashion, through the reordering of gender. Reform policies, such as those regarding education and
land tenure, undermined community identities by supplanting traditional kinship networks with the patriarchal nuclear family as part of a broader scheme to free Indigenous land for colonial settlement. Indeed, the transformation of land into property itself depended on the removal of women from positions of power in order to privatize communally held Native territories (Lawrence 2004, 47; Bhandar 2018). Images played a part in these material practices by depicting gendered reform policies as racial uplift, thereby advancing an expansionist project that hinges on the imposition of Western gender hierarchies. Today connections between dispossession and gendered violence manifest, among other ways, in the heightened vulnerability of Native women in areas of resource extraction, in part because of the “man camps” that support extractive industry (see, for example, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019, 593; Knott 2018; and Amnesty International 2022).

Just as culture has advanced Indigenous dispossession, it is also a powerful tool for redefining Indigenous bodies, histories, and territories, with material consequences for land claims. Indeed, the era of Native land reclamation that commenced in the late 1960s has generated a renewed Indigenous critique of dispossession that finds expression, among other outlets, in cultural representations. As the following chapters demonstrate, this critique entails exposing the brutality of settler expansion and the policies designed to annihilate the beliefs, practices, languages, gender roles, and kinship structures at the center of Native societies. As this critique calls into question the legitimacy of settler political power and territorial claims, it unravels the racial logic that positions settlers as superior and the ideology of progress that underwrites expansion. Beyond their role as contestatory knowledge, cultural works also revive Indigenous territorial beliefs that counter the abstract principle of property and the notion of land as empty space, often by depicting what Leslie Marmon Silko describes in a classic essay as storied landscapes. “Our stories cannot be separated from their geographic locations, from actual physical places on the land,” she writes; “there is a story connected with every place, every object in the landscape,” and these stories endow the land with spiritual meanings (Silko 1996, 58). Indigenous meanings of land encompass long histories of use and occupancy that underlie Indigenous territorial claims along with spiritual understandings, such as those concerning the sacredness of land, that undermine rationalizations of resource exploitation and the status of land as property. This emphasis on traditional beliefs characterizes contemporary Indigenous land politics more broadly. “The theory