

UNCERTAIN FUTURES

This sculptural installation is meant to express my understanding of the experiences of indigenous peoples in Western Sahara, the last colony in Africa. I researched the oppression and colonization of the Western Sahara and the Sahrawi people by Morocco. One aspect that stood out to me was the 40-year exile of the Sahrawi refugees, who fled their land of the Western Sahara in the 1970s to escape their occupation by the Moroccan government. An entire generation of Sahrawis have grown up in a refugee camp in northern Algeria, and the occupation of their homeland shows no signs of ending. When I visited my sister in Morocco last year, I saw no signs of this oppression. The average Moroccan, just like the average American, remains ignorant of the effects of their nation's colonial structure.

When imagining how to visualize this topic, I kept returning to the idea of the uncertain futures of peoples who have been dismissed from their homelands. I constructed a large-scale sculpture to instill discomfort and uncertainty in the viewer. I hope to create a space in which the viewer can imagine the daily feelings of displacement and anxiety experienced by the Sahrawi people. The large, curving walls come together as the participant moves forward through the piece, and they turn sharply to obscure the exit. The inability to find the exit creates a sense of unease. These feelings of entrapment represent the uncertainty of the future for displaced peoples.

William

The Belief of a Nation

William



This paper addresses the similarities between the colonization of America by European settlers and the current occupation of Western Sahara by the Moroccan government. I argue that the American colonial mindset, built on the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” is an often-overlooked ideological motivation for the United States to support Morocco’s colonization of Western Sahara. I address the history and effects of colonization as well as the current problems and solutions.

I have always had an interest in the complex topic of colonization both abroad and at home. I live in a country that, like many others, is a product of colonialism. I was under the illusion that colonialism was a practice of the past and that it had largely ended. In the summer of 2015, I had the privilege of traveling to Morocco to visit my oldest sister, who had been working in the country for the past year. I traveled across the country with her, navigating through Fez and the mazes of the old city, walking across the lively plaza of Jamaa el Fna in Marrakech, and waking up with a bright red sunburn on the windy beaches of Essaouira. Like many other Westerners, I left only seeing one, fairly benign, side of the Moroccan government. I knew nothing about Morocco's illegal occupation of Western Sahara, just five hundred miles south of where I had been visiting. I came across the topic of the occupation of Western Sahara fairly recently. It stood out to me because the Western Sahara was named by many different sources as “Africa's last colony.” I was shocked that I had visited the country, which is the last occupational force in Africa and had not been aware. I thought it was strange how no one talked about Morocco's occupation in comparison to other occupations around the world that are in the news regularly, such as the Israeli occupation of Palestine. After doing some research on the conflict, I found that the United States government seems to have no issue with the occupation of Western Sahara and, in fact, supports Morocco when the subject of Western Sahara’s colonization is brought up in the United Nations. The more I learned about this, the more I realized that the colonization of the Western Sahara by Morocco is very similar to the historical colonization of North America by European settlers. Even the way in which the United States currently treats Native American communities is shockingly similar to the treatment of the Sahrawi people by the Moroccan government. There are important economic and geopolitical factors behind the United States’ support of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. However, the American colonial mindset, built on the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” has served as an often overlooked ideological motivation for the United States to support Morocco’s colonization of Western Sahara. Similar to the American colonial mindset of Manifest Destiny, the native Moroccans have their own colonial mindset of Le Grand Moroc, or Greater Morocco. This is the belief that Western Sahara is Moroccan and the people living there are Moroccan. Both countries, America and Morocco, have historically and currently justified their respective occupations based on the belief that the land that they have taken was, and continues to be, “rightfully” theirs.

The area known as Western Sahara is on the west coast of the African continent, with Morocco to the north, Algeria to the east, and Mauritania to the south. The area is mostly desert, with the exception of its lush coast. The region was ruled by various nomadic tribes prior to the Spanish colonists’ arrival in 1885 (*Sons of The Clouds*). The people native to Western Sahara are known as the Sahrawi*, and they were suddenly kept within the Spanish drawn borders. In the early 1960’s, nationalism rose prominently throughout Africa with passionate leaders and activists, such as Kenneth Kaunda¹, who was the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Ghana

¹ Kenneth Kaunda was one of the most well known and influential nationalist leaders in Africa. Kaunda had a vision of a united states of Africa, and lead a movement that resulted in Ghana’s independence from Britain on March 6, 1957 (“Gold Coast”)

(“*The Scramble for Africa*”). Along with many other native African peoples, the Sahrawi wanted to be free from Spanish control and have an independent state of their own. Spain was opposed at first, and they were subject to intense pressure from the UN and Morocco (Fregoso). Selfishly, this was an opportune time for Morocco to occupy Western Sahara based on the current state of their nation. Specifically, King Hassan II of Morocco had faced two attempted military coups, and his kingdom was suffering from a great recession. Hassan II needed something to shift Morocco's attention away from their own problems. As a result, Hassan II made the decision to announce Morocco's claim of Western Sahara in 1975, furthering the Moroccan belief in Greater Morocco. The King called for all Moroccans to leave their homes and take part in the Green March² to liberate Western Sahara from the Spanish (*Sons of The Clouds*). Spain withdrew from their colony of Western Sahara, leaving Morocco and Mauritania to take joint control (Fregoso).

Despite Morocco's claims to peacefully liberate the Sahrawi people from Spanish colonialism, military force was exerted upon Sahrawi civilians, causing 100,000 Sahrawi women, men, and children to flee to refugee camps in southwestern Algeria, where they have stayed for forty years (*Sons of The Clouds*). The Polisario Front*, a movement and political party that aims to represent the Sahrawi people and liberate Western Sahara from Morocco, took up arms and began a brutal sixteen-year-long civil war with Moroccan forces. The Polisario, fighting to declare the independent nation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), used guerilla desert warfare tactics to effectively combat Morocco's stronger military. After sixteen years of fierce fighting, both sides were exhausted and the UN formed a peacekeeping mission named MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), which aimed to keep the ceasefire in place and gather votes from the Sahrawi people for a referendum on independence from Morocco (“Polisario Front”). The vote, however, failed to be held due to disagreements over issues such as voter eligibility, specifically the likelihood of Moroccans voting as Sahrawis, leading Morocco to reject the proposed vote in 2000. Other political resolutions were later offered, however. The Baker plan³ was approved by the UN in 2003, accepted by Algeria and the Polisario, but rejected by Morocco (Fregoso). Furthermore, the US and France blocked the UN from persuading Morocco to comply with the plan regardless. With international consensus on the issue lacking, Morocco continues its occupation of Western Sahara to the present day unhindered, justifying it by claiming the land as rightfully theirs (Fregoso).

Morocco's colonization of Western Sahara, unlike many other processes of colonization, was not carried out through military force alone. King Hassan II made a bold move in calling for the Green March and the popular demonstrations that formed it. By presenting the Spanish with the option of either firing on unarmed Moroccan civilians or backing down to Moroccan forces, Hassan II forced a victory. The Moroccan government proceeded by flooding its illegal settlements in Western Sahara with native-born Moroccans. Currently, Moroccans outnumber Sahrawi people inside Western Sahara three to one (McManus). Morocco has put massive amounts of resources (3 billion US dollars-worth) into developing Western Sahara's

² The Green March took place in November of 1975 and was named “green” to represent Islam, even though most all of those living in Western Sahara were Muslims. The march consisted of 350,000 unarmed Moroccans civilians marching on Western Sahara in support of its annexation (“Hassan II.”). Currently, Morocco has made November 6 a national holiday to remember and honor the Green March.

³ Former Secretary of State James Baker's proposed that Western Sahara would be self-rule under a Sahrawi government for a period of five years, with a referendum on independence following. The vote would take place within Western Sahara involving both Sahrawi and Moroccan settlers in the vote.

infrastructure and has constructed a 1200 kilometer-long wall, closing off three quarters of Western Sahara from the one quarter liberated by the Polisario. The wall, also known as the Sand Berm⁴, encompasses virtually all of the region's natural resources and has an estimated one million active landmines bordering it (McManus). As a result, the Sahrawi people living in refugee camps in Algeria are stranded in the desert with no natural resources, few means of communicating with people at home, and almost no opportunities for work. The Sahrawi people have been put in an extremely difficult situation with little room for change. A former Polisario leader, Mohamed Abdelaziz Ezzedine said: "The Sahrawi don't fight because they want to, they fight because they have to" (Sons of the Cloud). The Sahrawi refugee camps are completely reliant on foreign aid, and many of the people who fled Western Sahara in 1975 are still living in the same camps (Isidoros). An entire generation of Sahrawi youth have been raised outside of their homeland, with no signs of ever returning in the near future.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, similar forms of colonial struggles can also be found. Native Americans within the US are treated like foreigners in their own homeland. All of the Native American tribes in the US have faced methods of colonization similar to those used in Western Sahara, but over a much longer period of time. For example, the natives of the Dakota tribe that inhabited the areas now known as North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota signed the Treaty of Mendota on August 5, 1851, which resulted in the Dakota ceding large tracts of land in Minnesota territory to the US government. This was signed in exchange for promises of money and goods provided by the US. The US government relocated the Dakota onto small reservations in upper Minnesota, not allowing them to leave the property without permission. Furthermore, the Dakota were not allowed to hunt or track wildlife, including buffalo, their main source of food prior to their placement in reservations. They were given rations by the US government, but as time passed the flow of rations from the government was cut shorter and shorter to the point at which the US government was starving the Dakota people. Having had their homes and resources stolen and their ability to travel taken away, the only option for the Dakota people was to revolt against the oppressive occupation of the US. Lasting only three months, the revolt was a failure and ended with President Abraham Lincoln executing 38 Dakota men - the largest mass execution in the history of the US (*Dakota 38*). Forcibly moving the Dakota off of their own lands to make room for a flood of arriving settlers crippled the Dakota people. Moreover, it allowed the US to quickly alter the notion of who the land's rightful owner was.

These methods of colonization used against the Sahrawi and Dakota people halt all forms of growth within these communities. The younger generation suffer the long-lasting and destabilizing effects of colonialism. According to Stephen Zunes, a Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco, "Unemployment within the Algerian refugee camps has been in a deadlock and is currently at an estimated 95%" (Zunes, Stephen. Personal Interview). As another example, Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Nation in North Dakota has an unemployment rate of over 60% according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, compared to a national unemployment rate of 6.2% (Peralta). By isolating these communities from the outside world, their growth is trapped in a system that is plagued with poverty and a lack of opportunities, thereby preventing any chance of escape. The United States and Moroccan governments see the land that they are colonising as rightfully theirs, and it is evident that they have no concern about the wellbeing of those who originally inhabited that land. Even today, the

⁴ The Sand Berm construction was started during the civil war and was funded majorly by US and French aid (Zunes, Stephen. Personal Interview).

US government has tried to approved the Dakota Access crude-oil pipeline, a decision that directly affects the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's water source and is built on sacred burial grounds (Crane-Murdoch). The United States has a history of not upholding treaties and agreements, especially with Native American tribes. In total the US has made around 500 treaties with Native Americans and has broken, nullified, or amended all of them (Native American Blog). The government of the United States stands for justice and freedom only when it does not compromise the development of US growth.

Similar to the dishonesty of the US, the Moroccan government has consistently broken treaties and international laws throughout its occupation of Western Sahara for the sake of their own growth. The occupation itself is a violation of the International Court of Justices's (ICJ) decision of October 1975, when it ruled in favor of Western Sahara's independence. The ICJ determined that "the materials and information presented to it [the Court] do not establish any ties of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco" (ICJ Opinion of 16 October 1975). Despite this, the United States and France consistently support Morocco and its lack of cooperation with these international standards. For example, MINURSO is a UN peacekeeping mission that does not have a human rights component due to the US and France repeatedly blocking it when it is voted on in the UN Security Council ("Dispatches: A Firestorm Over the Word."). If there were to be a human rights component added to the MINURSO mission, Moroccan forces could be exposed to the international community for committing human rights violations. This exposure could ultimately aid the Sahrawi people's efforts to have an independent nation.

Because the US and France are voting against the human rights component of MINURSO, Morocco is able to censor the Sahrawi citizens regarding what they can and cannot say. Lack of freedom of speech has made it very difficult for Sahrawi activists to protest Moroccan occupation. In 2010, Sahrawi protests outside of the city of Laayoune were quickly shut down by Moroccan police forces, and 19 protesters were killed (Zunes, Stephen. Personal Interview). This led to riots and violence toward Moroccan forces for the first time since the 1991 ceasefire, which then resulted in the burning and looting of Sahrawi houses by Moroccan riot police (Konstantina). The current king of Morocco, King Mohammed VI, has done little to take steps towards progress on free speech, but has instead allowed the police in Western Sahara to continually bully, beat up, and torture activists and protesters*. The Moroccan government has made it so that the Sahrawi people are living in a police state, where every form of protest - even waving a SADR flag - can result in one's abduction by security forces ("Dispatches: Not-So-Free Expression Online in Western Sahara.").

Aminatou Haidar is one of Western Sahara's most prominent human rights defenders and has been working for over 20 years in nonviolent resistance against Morocco's occupation of her homeland. Moroccan authorities have illegally detained Aminatou, imprisoned her, beaten her, tortured her, and threatened her with death. She once spent four and a half years in isolation, blindfolded (Kennedy). Despite the brutal oppression facing the Sahrawi people, they continue their nonviolent movement to protest the occupation. Along with taking away the Sahrawi people's freedom of speech, Morocco engages in an ongoing practice of illegally extracting and selling the natural resources within Western Sahara, with none of the benefits they produce reaching Sahrawi Communities. This is just another example of Morocco's violation of the human rights of the Sahrawi people in order to achieve their vision of Greater Morocco.

The natural resources of Western Sahara fuel the vision of Greater Morocco, yet contribute to the violation of the Sahrawi people's rights. Western Sahara is a resource rich area,

providing two thirds of the world's phosphates (Afrol). Additionally, fishing on the coast is a huge industry, and in 2011 a US oil and gas exploration firm known as Kosmos Energy signed an agreement with Morocco's state oil company, the Office National des Hydrocarbures et des Mines (ONHYM), to begin looking for crude oil in Cap Boujdour, Western Sahara (Stevenson). Morocco has profited from the extraction and exportation of these resources, even though the resources are legally under the control of the Sahrawi people (Afrol). According to Stephen Zunes, the occupation has cost Morocco more economic loss than gain from the natural resources of Western Sahara. He reported, "Currently it has cost them [the Moroccan government] more money to fight the civil war, maintain the occupation's security, pay for all the infrastructure they have put in place, and to try to win the hearts and minds of the people"(Zunes, Stephen. Personal Interview). Despite negative economic consequences, Morocco continues its occupation. All of Morocco's activities and business in the Western Sahara is justified in their eyes by the idea that the land and its resources have been and will always be the rightful property of Morocco.

The US, like many other countries, buys phosphates from Morocco, and is the only country other than the UK to search and drill for oil in Western Sahara (Stevenson). The US has openly done business with Morocco and has shown no sign of criticising Morocco's exploitation of Western Saharan resources. The US actively supports Morocco's illegal claims of the Western Sahara, and in doing so the US is supporting the mindset of Greater Morocco.

Similarly, the US has a long history of forcefully taking over land and natural resources from its own native communities. The US is responsible for the theft of 3 billion acres of land within the continental US (*Dakota 38*). Most of the land and resources taken from Native Americans was done in the name of "Manifest Destiny" - the belief that the White European colonists used to justify their colonial actions. Manifest Destiny is similar to the idea of Greater Morocco in that both ideas justify the colonization of foreign land by claiming that the land is rightfully theirs to colonise, either by alleged historical ties, or simply by the will of God.

Manifest Destiny is a term used to describe the westward expansion of the colonists in the "New World". The phrase "Manifest Destiny" was invented by a US journalist in 1845 to explain the idea that the people of the east had a divine and God-given right to settle in the West (Weinberg). European colonists believed that God put the land there for the taking, and so by immigrating westward, they were answering God's call for expansion. My belief is that Manifest Destiny was harmful and not a valid justification. On the one hand, Manifest Destiny expanded the US west, providing homes and jobs for settlers, but on the other hand, it drove the Native Americans away from their land and kept pushing them further and further westward (Powers). This is the ideology that this country is based on, and it is the mindset that led Native Americans to where they are right now, living on impoverished reservations. The US still supports others with similar ideologies, such as Morocco and its belief in Greater Morocco. By supporting Morocco in the international court and by supporting the country's economy, the US encourages Morocco to carry out its belief in expanding Morocco's borders.

The idea of Greater Morocco originates from a long lasting conflict over Western Sahara. Greater Morocco's borders, in theory, go beyond the Western Sahara, and stretch into western Algeria, Mauritania, and northern Mali (Harrell-Bond). Morocco fought with Algeria in the early 1960s for control over the land that the French annexed to French Algeria. The war was in part over mineral resources in the land, and it was supported by the ideological belief in Greater Morocco. The war resulted in the borders staying the same, but tensions heightened significantly between the two nations. Furthermore, Morocco did not acknowledge the independence

movements in countries that it saw as part of Greater Morocco, and it did not recognize Mauritania's independence in 1960 until 1968 (Benmoussa).

Similar to the US, Morocco has made sure that the indigenous people of the lands involved in its colonial vision are not a part of it. The Sahrawi people have been treated like second-class citizens by the occupation. They have no freedom of speech and do not benefit from the economic growth gained from the natural resources in the region. For example, almost all of the jobs needed for the extraction of the natural resources are taken by Moroccan settlers (Zunes *The Last Colony*). The US and Morocco have both put the people of their colonised lands in situations of poverty, but they still expect the natives to be compliant and supportive of their colonial vision.

In the United States, the removal of most Native Americans from their lands to US-made reservations resolved, for a time at least, the question of land property. However, many white Americans still felt it was their duty to help improve the lives and character of "Indians". This meant assimilating Native Americans into Euro-American culture and eliminating their Native American cultures. In 1882, a former Army captain named Richard Henry Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian boarding school, promising to kill the Indian and save the man by forcing children to stop their existing practices and assimilate into white society. White Americans continued to view Western European (especially British) and US culture to be superior, more advanced, and more civilized than that of other peoples. Native American children were taught the importance of private property, material wealth, and monogamous nuclear families. The reformers assumed that it was necessary to "civilize" Indian people and make them accept white men's beliefs and value systems. By forcing Native American communities to send their children to assimilation boarding schools away from their homes, the US was destroying the cultures of native communities (Nathan). Native American culture and tradition is mainly passed down to younger generations by word of mouth, but with the youth absent from the communities there was nobody to pass it onto. Not only were the Native American youth prevented from experiencing and learning the culture of their ancestors, but they were also kept away from their homes and families, almost never being allowed visits until the boarding school program finished (Native American Blog). The boarding schools were considered constitutional and were active up until the Supreme Court passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (*American*). This reform deemed the boarding schools unconstitutional. However, Native American spiritual dances and ceremonies continued to be banned by the US until 1978 (Dakota 38).

It is remarkable how the US government expects Native communities to assimilate and stand with a government that has put their people through such misery and sorrow, even to the extent that some say that the US government committed genocide against the Native Americans (Dakota 38). This genocide can best be understood through an analysis of some statistics. In 1500, there were an estimated 16 million Native Americans in the continental US, but by 1900, the US Census Bureau had estimated there were only 237,000 Native Americans left (Dakota 38). Nevertheless, the white American's role in the genocide of Native American people has never been addressed by the US government, and it is not taught to the American people as part of their formal schooling. This enforces the ignorance of Americans regarding the brutal treatment of Natives at the hands of the US. Even when the Native Americans were forced to be "one of us," they were still treated as "against us."

The concept of "either you are one of us or you are against us" is similarly found within the colonization of the Sahrawi people. The Moroccan government oppresses the Sahrawi people

to the extent that Sahrawis are considered Moroccans, thereby considering them “one of us.” To elaborate on this problem, by labeling the Sahrawi people as Moroccan, the Moroccan government is white washing the complex and rich culture of the Sahrawi people. Morocco claims that Western Sahara is Moroccan and those living there are Moroccan, and those who say otherwise are considered a traitor. Just by labeling oneself as a Sahrawi person, that is enough for one to be considered a traitor according to the Moroccan government. Although the Sahrawi people are labeled as Moroccan, they are seen as against the Moroccan state. The Moroccan government treats the Sahrawi people as potential threats through forms of heavy policing, but this same government also expects them to become a part of Morocco and its ideal future for the Western Sahara. On November 6, 2009, King Mohammed VI said in his speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Green March, “One is either a patriot, or a traitor. There is no halfway house” (Morocco World New). This is the colonial double-standard that colonists hold for those whose lands they invade. Both the US and Morocco treat the indigenous people of the lands they colonise as different or savage, but expect them to stand as one of them. This is a catch-22 for people living under colonial rule, who have to assimilate into a society that treats them as other.

Art is a pathway for those affected and oppressed by colonial powers to share a first hand point of view about their world and what it is like living under colonial oppression, indefinitely. Artists from around the world have brought awareness to the occupation in Western Sahara through festivals and larger organisations. Festivals such as the The Western Sahara International Film Festival, or FiSahara, bring people from all over the world to the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria once a year to screen films about and by Sahrawi people. Other festivals, like ARTifariti, bring visual artists together to work on art relating to the occupation. It has even hosted well known international artists, such as Spanish graffiti artist MESA in 2012. The younger generation of Sahrawi people share their mixed feelings and thoughts on the uncertain future to come, while at the same time raise awareness about their situation for hope that one day others might take action in order to help enact lasting change.

The Sahrawi people are not alone in the use of art to capture the struggles of communities under colonial oppression. Native American artists also share a vital perspective of what it is like for them as individuals and also for their people living in a colonized country. Artists such as Sonya Kelliher, Nicholas Galanin, and Will Wilson form a narrative that help people who have no understanding of what it is like to be a Native American, nor of the history of oppression and genocide that Native Americans have experienced. These artists are important for growing awareness of the history and present day situation of Native Americans. Today, not much attention is given to the condition of the Native American communities, and by using different forms of activism and art, Native Americans are trying to shift the way in which we perceive them away from a colonialist point of view.

An entire generation of Sahrawi people are experiencing life under occupation and the lasting effects of colonialism. These are the future voices and leaders in the conflict, and they will decide what path they want to take to achieve their goal of independence. A political resolution of the conflict in Western Sahara seems impossible due to the US and France’s support of the occupation. However, the nonviolent movement of the Sahrawi people has brought a lot of attention to the conflict. Through these different methods, including art and activism, the Sahrawi people work towards achieving acknowledgment from the international community that the occupation of Western Sahara is illegal, and they hope to start an international solidarity movement to pressure Morocco to end its occupation. Native Americans

are making similar efforts to help their communities grow and heal. We all as individuals have the opportunity to help those trying to escape colonial oppression by letting their voices be heard and understood. With that understanding, it is vital that we take action and challenge ourselves to be activists and allies.

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