The Poetics and Politics of the Desert

Landscape and the Construction of America

Catrin Gersdorf

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The Poetics and Politics of the Desert

Spatial Practices

An Interdisciplinary Series in Cultural History, Geography and Literature

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The *Spatial Practices* Series

The series *Spatial Practices* belongs to the topographical turn in cultural studies and aims to publish new work in the study of spaces and places which have been appropriated for cultural meanings: symbolic landscapes and urban places which have specific cultural meanings that construct, maintain, and circulate myths of a unified national or regional culture and their histories, or whose visible ironies deconstruct those myths. Taking up the lessons of the new cultural geography, papers are invited which attempt to build bridges between the disciplines of cultural history, literary and cultural studies, and geography.

Spatial Practices aims to promote a new interdisciplinary kind of cultural history drawing on constructivist approaches to questions of culture and identity that insist that cultural "realities" are the effect of discourses, but also that cultural objects and their histories and geographies are read as texts, with formal and generic rules, tropes and topographies.

Robert Burden
Stephan Kohl

For my parents,
Eckhard and Ingelore Gersdorf

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Acknowledgements

My journey through the American desert began a long time ago. I first entered this wide, open space in the summer of 1991, as one of the participants in the Fulbright American Studies Summer Institute at NYU. In those early days of post-Cold War financial abundance the six-week program included several field trips, including one to New Mexico. As someone who was born and grew up on an island in the Baltic Sea I was skeptical about spending time in a parched, waterless, scarcely vegetated landscape. However, upon arrival I was immediately drawn into this space of wide horizons under skies piled with incredible clouds. Little did I know then that eventually I would write a book, this book about *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*. And neither did I know that somewhere along that journey Fulbright would yet again support my work.

Over the years of reading, thinking, and writing about a space as topographically, historically, and culturally unique as the American desert I enjoyed the support and encouragement of many institutions, of colleagues, friends, and family. In addition to the Fulbright Commission, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) issued generous grants that allowed me to conduct research in the United States. During the early phase of developing the project I spent several months at the Critical Theory Institute of the University of California, Irvine. John Carlos Rowe, then the Director of CTI, patiently listened to my rather sketchy ideas, read and commented on a first project outline, and introduced me to one of his UCI/CTI colleagues interested in similar theoretical questions, cultural phenomena, and literary texts. I am deeply indebted to Gaby Schwab who invited me to join her graduate seminar on "Ecocriticism," the site of my initiation into new ideas and concepts about intersections of space, culture, and ecology. Gaby's intellectual curiosity, her critical enthusiasm, and unwavering belief in the value of my desert project supplied me with the scholarly energy and the confidence that is necessary during the long haul of writing a book. Back at home in Germany, I was able to continue the conversations on the project of ecocriticism with Sylvia Mayer, Christa Grewe-Volpp, Heike Schäfer, and, later, with Hannes Bergthaller – an exchange that finally resulted in the founding of the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Envi-

ronment at a conference organized by Sylvia Mayer at the University of Münster in 2004.

Other colleagues and friends have accompanied me during the travels through the real and textual landscapes of the American desert. Trips to the Mojave and the Four Corners area of the Great Basin Desert enhanced my understanding of the desert's visual beauty, not the least because Karin Wieckhorst, travel companion and photographer friend, taught me where to look and how to see. Gesa Mackenthun was always willing to listen and respond to my ideas, even when they were still raw and rather unrefined. Janice Monk at the University of Arizona's Southwest Institute for Research on Women was a wonderful academic hostess during a crucial part of my research and writing. In Tucson, Mary Willie's Navajo tacos and our conversations about culture, language, and landscape demonstrated to me that there is more to the desert than aridity.

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Berlin, August 2008 C.G.

Introduction

Mapping the (Critical) Territory

> What might be termed the "idea of America"
> integrated a set of apparently untroubled
> assumptions about nature, progress, and the past.
>
> Lee Clark Mitchell

The transformation of nature into civilization, land into landscape, landscape into text, and text into a social and political tool for producing and reproducing a nation's cultural identity is a process foundational for our understanding of America. Originally a European idea projected onto a continent that was mistaken for a historically and culturally blank slate, America came to represent both the Old World's utopian dreams, and the promise and possibility of their realization in a territory located outside the geopolitical and historical confines of Europe. The (European) flight from history to the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (F. Scott Fitzgerald) may and in fact has been interpreted as a regressive fantasy of patriarchal cultures (see Kolodny 1975; Westling 1996). But Fitzgerald's famous image of America as a wet nurse's welcoming body is also a powerful symbol of modern civilization's paradoxical and troubled relationship to nature. The intense longing for cultural and historical innocence, articulated in the closing scene of *The Great Gatsby* (1926) in gendered metaphors of natural opulence, did not prevent colonists and settlers from turning what they imagined as a place of paradisiacal abundance into landscapes expressive of their strong will to make history all over again. Observations like that of Orsanus Turner, author of *Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase of Western New York* (1849), that the 'virgin soil' of the so-called new world constantly turns up "evidences of antiquity," and that, therefore, it would be more appropriate to speak of Columbus not as the discoverer of a new world, but as the man who

"helped to make two *old* ones acquainted with each other" (quoted in Mitchell 1981: 7) went largely unheard at the time. During the course of American history, the nature of the Western hemisphere has been resignified from Edenic wilderness to source material for economic opportunity and prosperity. Images like that conjured up by Fitzgerald, semiotically anchored in allusions to guaranteed maternal nurture and dependable fertility and growth, were indispensable rhetorical tools, first to advertise America as a location for promising new beginnings, and later to forge and articulate the cultural self-confidence of an evolving young nation. When Americans crossed the Mississippi and entered the arid and semi-arid plains of the West, a process that began early on in the 19th century when the first pioneers left for new opportunities along the Pacific coast, many of them were disturbed by what they saw, or rather, what they did not see – green, arboreal, well-watered lands signaling fertile soil. Thus the Great American Desert was born and with its birth the suspicion that, contrary to earlier assumptions, not all of the continent held the promise of cornucopian abundance.

The conceptually troubling realization by Europeans and their American descendants that not all of the North American continent was fresh, green, and fertile, that westward progress faced a 'natural' barrier of arid lands, and that even those seemingly uninhabitable regions had a cultural past, this moment of geographical recognition prompted my critical interest in a study of the poetics and politics of the desert and its function in constructions and reconstructions of America. To say that experiences of desert and semi-desert lands disturbed existing notions of America as a place of natural plenty implicates this study in a historical narrative that conceptually locates the cultural origin point of America in European topographies. Granted, this runs the risk of reinforcing Eurocentric conceptions of America and American nationality. But it also provides opportunities to further investigate how the contact and confrontation with an Other – in this case a topography that is foreign to European and Euro-American geographical and ecological sensibilities – disturbs, challenges, and troubles pre-conceived and taken-for-granted notions of the Self, forcing it to re-conceive and re-construct the cultural and social conditions of its own existence. In the logic of America-as-fresh-green-breast, the desert functions as the topographical manifestation of difference; it is

the real-and-imagined territory that confirms America's difference from Europe.

The desert is a materiality that resists familiar forms of economic, political, and cultural appropriations and, therefore, prompts reconceptualizations of America's function in a trans-Atlantic, transnational cultural imaginary. For many European writers, intellectuals, and artists the desert is *the* American landscape par excellence, an iconographic and textual sign of difference. Witness Baudrillard's *Amérique* (1986; trans. *America*, 1988) or Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984), two works in which the desert becomes the metaphoric and iconographic sign for each author's idea of America. The cultural and intellectual implications of European appropriations of the desert are discussed elsewhere (Gersdorf 2008). In this book, I will concentrate on the American scene. The historical scope of this investigation spans a little more than a hundred years. However, the critical narrative of this study follows a topological rather than a chronological order. It begins in the second half of the 19th century, a moment in time when the first concerted efforts were made to *incorporate* the desert *into the discourse of America, not as a foreign but as a domestic territory*. And it concludes at the turn of the 21st century when the United States began to occupy the exterritorial deserts of the Arabian world to secure the domestic comfort of its citizens. In a compelling piece that appeared in a 2003 issue of the *London Review of Books*, Rebecca Solnit commented on a blizzard of patriotic road signs that had begun to appear since the U.S. had commenced the 'war on terrorism:'

> On a freeway clotted with roadside businesses south of Salt Lake City, a car dealer flashed a signboard: 'Our Troops. God Bless Them.' And maybe all the talk about freedom means freedom to drive around for ever on $1.67-a-gallon petroleum, out here in a terrain just a little less harsh than Afghanistan. Thomas Jefferson was afraid of the red lands, afraid that where the arable soil ended so would his arcadian yeoman ideal, and that Europeans would revert to nomadism. There's something roving and ferocious about the Euroamerican West that suggests he's right; the US is really more like the lands it's been bombing lately than like Europe. (2003: www)

Solnit's comparison not only provides historical depth to the current political, economic, and military preoccupations of the United States. It also locates the origins of contemporary, cultural prejudices in the fear of topographical otherness, while at the same time utilizing to-

pographical similarities between "the red lands" of the American West and "the lands [the US] has been bombing lately" as a rhetorical tool that ties the political culture symbolized by "the US" to that symbolized by "Afghanistan." In so doing, Solnit concurs with those European writers, artists, and intellectuals who maintained that *the desert is the most appropriate symbolic representation of America*. But what is the desert? And what makes it such an attractive critical concept?

1 The Desert

Desert is a term with many meanings; the 1994 edition of *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* provides five different, albeit semantically related definitions. What unites them is "lack" – lack of water, lack of vegetation, lack of animal life. As "a region so arid that it supports only sparse and widely spaced vegetation or no vegetation at all" (*Webster's*), the desert has inspired cultural fantasies and enabled real and imagined experiences of solitude, contemplative repose, divine revelation as well as anxieties of loss, disorientation, and death. With the expansion of two world religions (Judaism and Christianity) originating from the arid topographies of Egypt and Palestine across the moderately humid geographies of Europe, the desert's cultural significance as geographical and ecological materiality gradually shifted. Removed from its geo-ecological referent, the terrain became a trope, a cipher signifying deficiency, lack, absence. 'Desert' henceforth represented 'any place lacking in something,' so much so that it became a kind of Wittgensteinian *Urzeichen*, the semiotic sign for otherwise inexpressible apprehensions and concerns. Nietzsche, for example, thought of a small room in a German hostel as his desert, a place of solitude and contemplation, thereby echoing early Christian writers who populated the desert with ascetic saints.[1] In "The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert," James Goehring argued that the textual desert of early Christian writing thus "participated in the fash-

[1] Goehring points at the etymology of the desert's metaphoric character, observing that the Coptic word for mountain, *toou*, "came to be associated with monastery and desert, so the meaning of 'desert' itself came to equate less the nature of the land than with the general concept of ascetic withdrawal" (Goehring 2003: 446).

ioning of new subjectivities and the creation of the new Christian culture" (Goehring 2003: 439). At the same time, it was crucial to respond to and imagine the desert in more realistic, corporeal terms. Goehring maintains that by "alluding to the actual conditions of the real landscape, the mythical landscape remains believable" (440). In other words, acknowledging a landscape's ecology was necessary to authenticate the myth and to naturalize the ideology underlying that myth. However, during the course of the desert's linguistic history, its character as a specific landscape gradually yielded to its metaphoric character designating a specific mode of being.[2] Based on two significant studies of power and ideology in the discourse of landscape – W.J.T. Mitchell's *Landscape and Power* (1994; 2002) and Ann Bermingham's *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (1986) – Goehring's inquiry into the "ideological power" of an "artificial" (439) or textualized desert landscape, and its entanglement in the creation of Christian culture provides a useful paradigm for my own inquiry into the ideological power of the desert in the construction and reconstruction of modern American culture.

When European civilization arrived in the Western hemisphere and reached beyond the Mississippi, the experience of arid landscapes acquired a specifically American idiom: the authors writing the entry for *Webster's Dictionary* characterized the desert within their national domain as "(formerly) any unsettled area between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains thought to be unsuitable for human habitation." The parenthetical insertion indicates the desert's historical and linguistic contingency. Following a nomenclatural custom presumably established by Stephen H. Long of the United States Topographical Engineers around 1820, cartographer Thomas G. Bradford named the area the GREAT AMERICAN DESERT, the capitalized lettering running

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2 For an excellent semiotic genealogy of the desert in the European literary tradition from antiquity to the present see Lindemann 2000. In "The Desert Fathers," the third chapter of *Nature and Madness* (1998), Paul Shepard alludes to the significance of the desert for the emergence of Western, or Occidental civilization and as the origin point of modern history, observing that "If ideas have habitats in which they originate and prosper, then the desert edge might be called the home of Western thought" (47). Clearly writing from the perspective of temperate climatic zones, Shepard further describes the desert as "at once a place of sensory deprivation and awesome overload – too little life, too much heat, too little water, too much sky" (ibid.).

along the 102nd meridian on his 1835 map of the United States (Fig. 1). The designation represented a territory located west of what Wallace Stegner described as "the isohyetal line of twenty inches, beyond

Fig. 1. Thomas G. Bradford, *United States*, 1835. Courtesy Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Kartenabteilung.

which the mean annual rainfall is less than the twenty inches normally necessary for unirrigated crops" (Stegner 1992: 59). Meandering somewhere between the 98th and 100th meridians, this line is both a climatological and a cultural borderline, separating climates and modes of agricultural practice. By the middle of the 20th century, the Great American Desert had disappeared from the maps, surviving only in the niches of history and literature. Today's maps show a desert that is located further west and southwest and smaller in size, and that straddles national boundaries. Divided into four areas differing in topography, vegetation, and climate, the American desert comprises the landscapes known as the Great Basin Desert, the Mojave Desert, the Sonoran Desert, and the Chihuahuan Desert (Fig. 2). The changes and shifts in cartographic representation are suggestive of the alterations

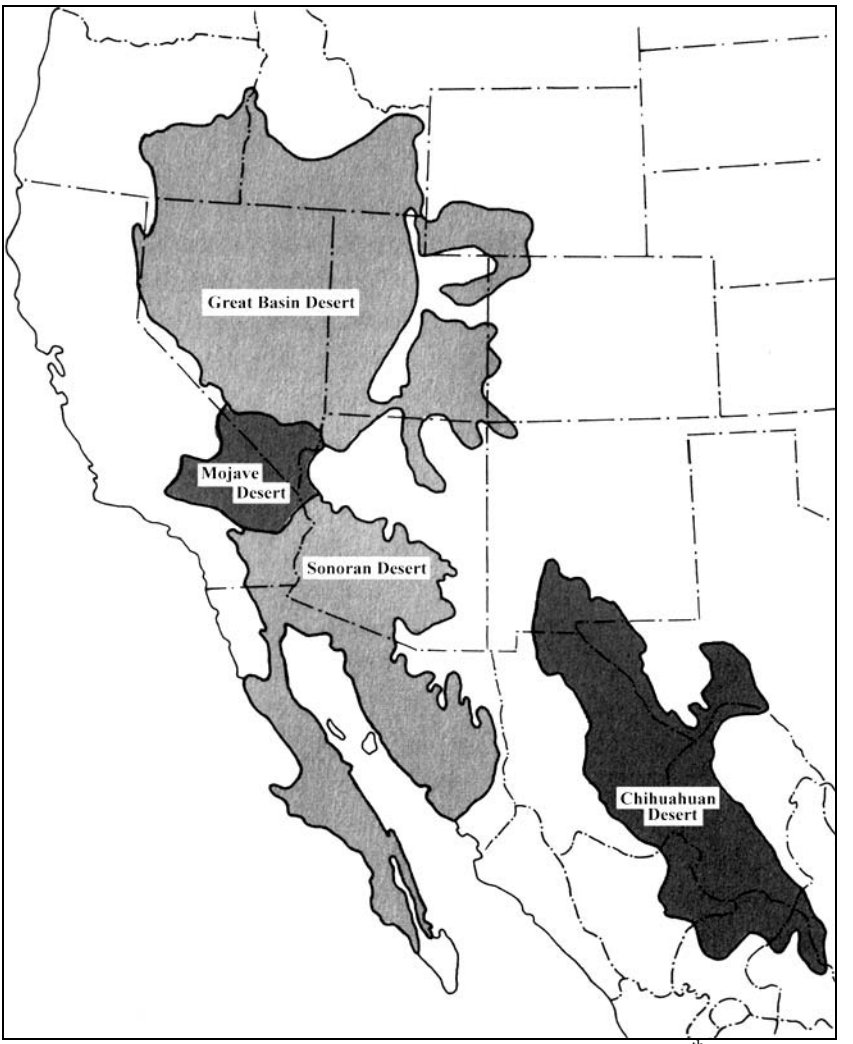

Fig. 2. A common representation of the American Desert in the late 20th century is illustrated by this map, found in Bowden 1977: 34.

and modifications in cultural attitudes toward the desert. It is the aim of this book to show that these alterations and modifications were generated by a mix of experiential encounters with the actual desert landscapes of the American West and a need to find new tropes and metaphors for the ongoing process of defining and redefining America.

2 Desert/Landscape as Critical Concept

In *Killing the Hidden Waters: The Slow Destruction of the Water Resources of the American West* (1977), Charles Bowden, a journalist and cultural critic working out of Tucson, Arizona, represents the desert as a bioregion whose unique character is jeopardized by the presence of industrial culture. Recording the impact of Euro-American cultural habits and tastes on the Sonoran desert, *Killing the Hidden Waters* tells the story of how Spanish conquerors and missionaries, followed by Anglo-American farmers and ranchers, introduced crops, herbivores, and agricultural methods dependent on many more times the amount of water on which native plants and animals subsisted. Bowden became "interested in the desert and groundwater problems while working at the Office of Arid Land Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson" (Bowden 1977: xi), and received encouragement for writing this book-length essay, among others, from Lawrence Clark Powell, one of the most dedicated historians of the American West's unique cultural and literary heritage, and an ardent advocate of its preservation. Unlike other writers, Bowden conceived of the desert not as fallow, underused territory but as an environment demanding a radical change in the cultural and economic concepts underlying Anglo-American modes of appropriating space. The desert in *Killing the Hidden Water* functions as an incentive to rethink, from an ecological perspective, the political prerequisites of a culture fixated on ideas of mastery and conquest, giving priority to private ownership over and against concepts of shared, communal property, and convinced of the absolute value of technological and economic progress. A jeremiad in tone, Bowden's narrative ends on a note that has repercussions for the world beyond the precise boundaries of the Sonoran desert:

> It is not a revelation to learn that cheap energy makes societies boom, that groundwater in arid regions has negligible recharge, that humans tend to use as much of anything as they can lay hands on. We can ignore these facts and pump, mine, and combust with abandon, or we can recognize these facts and attempt to construct a sustainable society. There will be no painless answers, nor were there any in the past. (138)

Killing the Hidden Water is a narrative that maps the desert as an exemplary territory, allowing insights into the complex and complicated

co-dependence of nature, culture, and history, while at the same time provoking questions about the future shape and character of America. More generally speaking, in *Killing the Hidden Water* Bowden's desert assumes poetic functions and obeys a rhetorical politics that we usually ascribe to classic American spaces such as wilderness, frontier, or virgin land. Based on the thesis that, in Radhika Mohanram's formulation, "place and landscape are not inert but things which actively participate in the identity formation" of individuals and nations (1999: xii), my project in *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* is to more specifically investigate the employment of the desert in articulations and negotiations of America's cultural identity. As Monhanram also suggests, this involves an inquiry into the articulation and re-articulation of race and gender politics mediated through discourses of place and landscape.

David Jacobson's *Place and Belonging in America* (2002) is a study more specifically geared toward the question of "how the land came to define and represent American nationhood and identity" (20). That is, it examines how various historical and geographical configurations of the land constituted the United States as a place belonging to Americans. Land, as Jacobson uses it, is a rather loose term and refers to the bounded geo-political and social space that defines and, at the same time, is inhabited by the nation. Land, in other words, is synonymous with territory. Although he renounces a clear conceptual distinction between land and territory (to the disadvantage of ecological aspects of *land* such as topography, geology, climate, fauna, and flora), I still find Jacobson's suggestion that space and place need to be understood as significant critical instruments for the study of America and American nationality relevant to my own project in this book. More concretely, I understand desert as a space whose character as an ecologically specific, and culturally and historically distinct landscape opens up new possibilities for comprehending what America means, what it is.

Furthermore, I agree with Rebecca Solnit that the desert, during much of the 20th century a test site for military technology, "could also be used as a test site for the last few decades of critical theory" (1996: 42). Solnit quarrels with contemporary theory because it "presumes as normal or even definitive another kind of space, the realm in which the theory itself is generated: an urban, indoor, disembodied […] social space" (ibid.). From the myopic perspective of the urban metropo-

lis, "landscape is often imagined as a sentimental anachronism" (ibid.). Her provocative comparison of critical theory with belligerent technology has not gone unnoticed, and – as I will show in more detail later – has resulted in the development of Ecocriticism as a combative methodology. *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* responds to Solnit's proposal in two ways: first, by examining the poetic function of the desert in the discourse of America, I literally locate my critical position in the desert; and second, in doing so I acknowledge the significance of landscape as a serious category of literary and cultural studies. Landscape, the effect of human efforts to literally or figuratively manage, organize and thus control wild nature, is indicative of a culture's real and imagined relationship to the material and physical foundation of its existence. In other words, landscape points toward the value that any given culture places on ecological and symbolic aspects of organizing social and economic communities. With W.J.T. Mitchell I understand landscape in general and the desert in particular as "a cultural practice" (Mitchell 2002: 1), an entity that *does* something rather than *being* or *meaning* something.

In *Death Comes For the Archbishop* (1927), a novel set in mid-19th-century New Mexico, Willa Cather represented Euro-American sensibilities regarding the desert by capturing the moment her protagonist, the French missionary Father Latour, is introduced to the mesa country. Scanning the rock formations and the wide spaces of the plains between them, Latour sees the land as God's incomplete project. The priest imagines how the Creator had assembled "all the material for world-making" but then got distracted before He finished the work. As a result, "The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape" (Cather 1947: 95). By implication, the transformation of land into landscape is represented in this early 20th-century American novel as a mission divined to Euro-Americans as part of their self-creation as a nation. With *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* I want to suggest that the desert is a significant medium of American self-creation and identification.

Accordingly, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* is an investigation of the rhetorical participation of the desert, a territory of geographical and symbolic significance, in the construction of America. The title indicates a double interest. On the one hand, this project is guided by what Stuart Hall called the semiotic approach, i.e., the critical concern "with the *how* of representation, with how language pro-

duces meaning" (1997: 6). Thus the *poetics* of the desert. The investigation of its *politics*, on the other hand, looks into "the *effects and consequences* of representation" (ibid.; emphasis in the original). This approach exceeds the limits of a given text and asks how the knowledge produced by what I will call the desert discourse "connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities" (ibid.). As such, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* is designed as a contribution to two mutually influential critical discourses. It is an American studies project in that it investigates the implication of the desert in the *production of images, ideas, and concepts of America* and *American nationality*. And it is an ecocritical project because it investigates the *implication of the desert* – a topographical reality freighted with semiotic, historical, and political meaning – *in the discursive production of America and American nationality*.

3 Moving American Studies into the Desert

Metaphors such as garden, wilderness, frontier, the West, and virgin land are not only rhetorical constants in America's national master narrative. They also provide the conceptual anchor for the discourse of post-World War II American studies. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), Leo Marx' *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) evidence the long-standing disciplinary concern with space, geography, and nature as foundational elements of the U.S. national master narrative. During the late 1960s and 1970s, when race, class, and gender became the leading categories in social and political critiques of what John Carlos Rowe called "the monolingual and monocultural myth of 'America'" (1995: 262), and in the wake of the canon debates that followed in the 1980s, concepts such as place, space, nature, and wilderness were relegated to the background of disciplinary conversations. However, with the emergence of postcolonial studies during roughly the same period, inquiries into what constitutes America, both conceptually and geographically, brought questions of space and place back to the fore. The challenge was to shift the conception of America from that of "a monolithic and self-contained whole" to, as Amy Kaplan has suggested, a construct whose "conceptual and geographical borders" are a product

of political and cultural power struggles and, therefore, "fluid, contested, and historically changing" (1993: 15). In the age of globalization, "New Americanists"[3] on both sides of the Atlantic are engaged in a debate about the validity and value of the notions of nation and nationality as categories of cultural and literary criticism. German Americanist Heinz Ickstadt contends that

> between the local and the global there is still the "national" as a category requiring continuous analysis. To abandon the concept of the nation together with that of 'America' in order to extricate the discipline from its ideological foundations eliminates a middle ground on which the United States must be studied as a distinctive collective entity (however heterogeneous or divided it may perceive itself to be) within a network of global and transnational interrelatedness. (2002: 551)

Consequently, Ickstadt suggests conducting "national American studies with a transnational consciousness," which means "not to expand the borders of our discipline but the horizon of our questioning" (555-556).

Recognizing the conceptual borders of the nation and of America, yet acknowledging the transnational and transgeographical implications in their formation, the present study will investigate the cultural and discursive processes of how the desert, once a foreign territory and a topography unfamiliar to America's agrarian imagination, was incorporated into the conceptual borders of America and American nationality. Inspired by questions raised by Patricia Nelson Limerick, one of the most prominent new Western historians of recent years, this study asks: How, confronted with the deserts and semi-deserts of the American West, did people "figure out what to make of it, both conceptually and literally" (Limerick 1985: 166)? How did the deserts revise, challenge, and rearticulate the concept of America as Edenic garden, agricultural haven, blissful prosperity, and model of a democratic society?

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3 The term originates with Donald E. Pease and includes, among others, John Carlos Rowe, Walter Benn Michaels, Myra Jehlen, Jane Tompkins, José David Saldívar, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Mary Louise Pratt. Despite considerable differences in their individual projects, these scholars question the privileged authorial position of white male Anglo-Saxons in the literary, historical, and political discourse of America (see Pease 1990).

With this project I take seriously Limerick's suggestion that Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis be challenged, and interrogate the significance of the desert in 19th and 20th-century constructions of America. Implicit in Limerick's demand for a revision and reconceptualization of the frontier paradigm is an emphasis on the ecological reality of the so-called frontier. Limerick's critical intervention reprimands Turner for his representation of nature as an "abstract" entity, and his historiographic narrative for "providing little sense of particular places with particular qualities" (165). Because "Turner's wilderness took water for granted, […] a large share of the continent – Nevada, Arizona, much of New Mexico, California, Utah, and eastern Oregon and Washington – vanished from frontier history" (165-66). Yet these states comprise a large part of the American West. Limerick's project is to be understood as a historical counter-narrative to the myth-and-symbol-school of American studies which, practiced after World War II, relied heavily on Turner's frontier thesis. While she does not deny the cultural power of the symbolic and mythical meaning attached to the West and to the desert, Limerick does insist that such "meaning rests on a very solid basis of physical actuality –aridity set against human needs for water" (166). This physical actuality provides the semiotic anchor for the desert in the discourse of America.

Limerick's subsequent work – *Desert Passages* was her first book, followed by *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987) and *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (2000) – accrues from this basic insight, although placing it within a larger conceptual framework. In *Something in the Soil*, she offers a list of historical, political, economic, cultural, geographical, and social characteristics that comprise the West, among them such aspects as the presence of a comparatively large number of "Indian reservations and many visible, unvarnished Indian people" (2000: 23), the border with Mexico, the still existent federal (as opposed to state) control over large portions of the land, its continued presence in the cultural imaginary "as a place of romantic escape and adventure," and its "long history as the nation's dumping ground – either for troubling populations of Indians and Mormons or for toxic and radioactive substances" (25). At the top of her list, however, ranks the West's aridity, its desert condition. For Limerick,

> this is a fact full of consequences, because most of what Anglo-Americans considered and consider normal in a landscape requires much more water than the West would provide. The scarcity of water would inspire a distinctive regional campaign to change nature: to build – with heavy support from federal government – a vast network of dams, reservoirs, and canals to 'normalize' this anomalous landscape. (23)

What Limerick describes as *normalization of an anomalous landscape* will be read in the present study as *the (Anglo-) Americanization of the desert*. It is the struggle to come to terms with a geographical reality in which the perceptive and interactive mediations established on the green and fertile grounds of the East were bound to fail. Because of its desert (or semi-desert) character, the land west of the isohyetal line of precipitation resisted acquired forms of economic, aesthetic, and narrative appropriation. Where Limerick's work concentrates on the complex, historical practice of translating the anomalous West into a normal American landscape of economic prosperity, my own critical interest is primarily in the implication of narrative literature (manifesting itself in various genres, ranging from travel and nature writing to essays and novels) and visual art (painting and photography) in these processes. How do aesthetically organized representations of the desert relate to a national politics of environmental normalization? How, under which circumstances, and due to what personal, political, and/or environmentally inspired motivations do writers and artists use the desert to reinforce or subvert notions of nationality, nationalism, and of America as a convenient yet ideologically charged shorthand for the complex reality of U.S. national culture? In other words, what role does the desert play *conceptually* in the discourse of America?

In addition to suggesting a serious revision of Frederick Jackson Turner's influential frontier thesis, Limerick takes issue with Roderick Nash's theory (in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, first published in 1967) that the formation of America through the destruction of arboreal wilderness was the effect of an anthropological imperative. For Nash, the pioneers' obsession with cutting down trees and clearing the land was indicative of both the continued presence of a prehuman survival instinct (the ability to see "compensated for the superior sense of smell and hearing and the speed, size, and strength of other animals") and the universal human desire to "bring light into darkness" (Nash 1982: xv; xvi). "By this argument," Limerick counters,

> the pioneers should have felt very good indeed when they reached the deserts. No trees obscured the view; horizons stretched into the distance. Contrary to the theory, the more they saw, the worse they felt. With sparse, unfamiliar vegetation, spotty water sources, and the endless exposed ground to look at, free vision was not much of a consolation. (1985: 8)

Reframing Roderick Nash's speculations in economic and geo-political terms, Limerick wonders: "Why would a nation with a dominant interest in agricultural expansion want so much unwatered land?" Her answer: "California and a few river valleys in the interior were territories of recognized value. The intervening arid space had the primary function of connective tissue; something, after all, had to connect Texas to California" (166). By the end of the 20th century, such pragmatic, utilitarian considerations, which had forced American settlers and their cultural and political representatives to grapple with and make sense of the desert, would shift to perceptions of the desert as a landscape that is one of the most potent symbols representing America and Americanness. This phenomenal transformation is symptomatically evidenced by the desert's iconographic presence in the Western[4], perhaps the most genuinely American of all narrative genres, but also by Baudrillard who, posing as representative European, contends that "for us the whole of America is a desert" (1988: 99).

4 The Desert as Ecocritical Environment

If the social and political protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s entailed a radical revision of America's cultural constitution along the conceptual lines of race, class, and gender, resulting in the canon de-

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[4] A note on the Western, a genre that is absent from this study. Its cultural function as a popular medium through which American (and world-wide) audiences learned about, related to, and thus appropriated both the American desert and America cannot be underestimated. However, because of the formulaic character of the genre, desert landscapes are subject to a limited range of narrative and/or rhetorical functions. In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992), Jane Tompkins provided a detailed, comprehensive discussion of the desert's semiotics in this specific narrative context. She particularly emphasized the mythical character of the desert as a scene of new beginnings, another "*vacuum domicilium* […] waiting to be peopled," as well as "a stage on which to perform and as a territory to master" (74).

bates of the 1980s, the new environmental sensibility emerging in the same period and heralded by writers, critics, and theorists like Rachel Carson, Herbert Marcuse, Gregory Bateson, and Arne Naess, the Norwegian 'father' of deep ecology, made no significant academic impact until the early 1990s. This is hardly surprising, given that in the Euro-American cultural tradition nature – whether in its configuration as pastoral scene or wilderness – often signaled a desire to escape the complexities of social and cultural environments. In *What Is Nature?* (1995), British environmental philosopher Kate Soper addressed the deep-seated suspicions held against nature on the part of Marxist and other leftist critics and intellectuals. Her case in point is the deployment of nature in sexual politics. Soper quotes John Dollimore who, in *Sexual Dissidence* (1991), wrote:

> If, in the process of 'recovering' nature, Marxism or any other political movement ignores the violence and ideological complexity of nature as a cultural concept, it will only recover nature imbued with those ideologies which have helped provoke recent crises. In short, there is a danger that *much reactionary thought will return on the backs of nature* and of those who rightly recognise ecological politics as of the utmost urgency. (Dollimore quoted in Soper 1995: 119; emphasis added)

Dollimore is aware that there are "fundamental distinctions […] between the ecological and the ideological conceptions of nature," but he warns that "they are distinctions which the concept traditionally slides across and between" (ibid.). Justifiable as these apprehensions are, Soper insists that "the problem lies in the *arbitrary and prejudicial* use of the concept to police and suppress," in this case, "specific forms of sexual practice and bodily behaviour" (140-41; emphasis in the original), which are perceived by cultural conservatives as so-called 'crimes against nature.' What makes Soper's argument so pertinent to my own project is that it helps to explain the "nature-scepticism" (121) among the otherwise progressive social and political movements that emerged during the latter half of the 20th century. And it also helps to keep in mind the cultural, social, political, and ideological implications in the use of 'natural' metaphors such as the desert.

In an interpretative study on Thomas Jefferson and nature, Charles A. Miller observed that "insofar as nature symbolized Amer-

ica in its entirety, nature *was* America for Jefferson. His interest in nature and his use of the word are therefore a form of nationalism" (1988: 3; emphasis in the original). It is the goal of this study to examine how and in what way tropes of the desert, a natural landscape, stabilize or destabilize established forms of defining America. Transposing Dollimore's apprehensions from the realm of the sexual to the realm of the national, I will investigate the degree and the extent to which the desert, in its discursive configurations as garden, Orient, wilderness, and heterotopia, is used to authorize or challenge conservative constructions of American cultural identity. As such, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* was conceived as a contribution to the discourse of ecocriticism, a scholarly project that emerged in the U.S. in the early 1990s. Catastrophes like the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident in the former Soviet Union in 1986, and the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska in 1989 – two events that have become symbols for the precarious relation between industrial culture and its natural environment – made it necessary to rethink and redefine environmental politics on a global scale. For American ecocritics and ecocritical Americanists, this included a revision of U.S. history as the history of nature's nation as it developed in a transnational, or at least transatlantic cultural and intellectual context.

Carolyn Merchant is one of the scholars who suggest to read America as the product of a European environmental imagination. In *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1995) she notes that the "controlling image of the Enlightenment," modern culture's epistemological foundation, "is the transformation from desert wilderness to cultivated garden" (33). Merchant maintains that the "Enlightenment idea of progress is rooted in the recovery of the garden lost in the Fall" (ibid.). Reading the impulse to bring "light to the dark world of inchoate nature" as the secularized version of this Judeo-Christian version of the hope trope, she concludes: "As a powerful narrative, the idea of recovery functioned as ideology and legitimation for settlement of the New World, while capitalism, science, and technology provided the means of transforming the material world" (ibid.). Consequently, if the New World (or America) is largely defined through a discursive practice evolving from the idea of cultural recovery through the mastery of nature and spatial conquest, the failure of this mastery, becoming evident in environmental problems caused by industrial society, must entail a revision of America's conceptual and cultural constitu-

ents. This nexus not only explains the launching of a host of publications,[5] beginning in the 1990s, that deal with the interdependence of American nationality and "the environmental imagination" (Lawrence Buell), it also demonstrates the close links between the two critical discourses that provide the conceptual frame for this study. As Buell pointed out in his pivotal *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), during the antebellum period the American environment and American literary nationalism formed a close rhetorical alliance, to the effect that the former "became one of [the] most distinctive cultural resources" for the latter (56). Buell agrees with other ecocritics that science and technology, but also art, literature, philosophy, and other discursive media produce images and values with far-reaching environmental consequences. For him, today's "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it" (2). Buell's suggestion that to understand America as the imaginative product of Europe's "new world dreams" (51), dreams that materialize when transposed to the "environmental actualities" (ibid.) on the North American continent, not only highlights America's trans-cultural and trans-national character, but also the conceptual importance of the (natural) environment in its construction and reconstruction. Looking at specific regions or landscapes – in this case the desert – can thus provide a better understanding of the symbolic constitution of America from an ecological perspective.

One of the few scholarly studies specifically focusing on the significance of the desert in American culture is David W. Teague's *The Southwest in American Literature and Art: The Rise of an Desert Aesthetic* (1997). Teague's project draws on Buell's work, on Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975) and *The Land Before Her* (1984), and Neil Evernden's *The Social Creation of Nature* (1992). Noting that literature and art played an important part in defining both the historical period known as the Progressive Era *and* "the arid Southwest" (7), a territory that came into national focus during that time, *The Southwest in American Literature and Art* exposes the impact the imagination exerts on the actual treatment of the natural envi-

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5 These publications include, in order of their appearance, Slovic 1992, Buell 1995, Glotefelty and Fromm 1996, Westling 1996, Roorda 1998, Mazel 2000, Jacobson 2002. An early precursor is, of course, Kolodny 1975.

ronment, in this case the arid landscapes of the American Southwest. Citing Annette Kolodny's observation that "our actions in the world […] are shaped by the paradigms in our head," Teague's major interest is in exploring how authors such as John Wesley Powell, John C. Van Dyke, Mark Twain, and Stephen Crane, artists such as Frederick Remington, and magazines such as *Century*, *Scribner's*, and *Atlantic Monthly* made "a place for the desert in the collective imagination of the United States" (38). While in part *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* follows a similar approach, it differs from Teague's study in that it more specifically investigates the formative influence of pre-existing conceptual, symbolic, and geographical paradigms (garden, Orient, wilderness) on discursive configurations and cultural appropriations of the desert.

In doing so, I want to combine a New Americanist with an eco-critical approach and contribute to the ongoing conversations concerning the impact of ecology on the formation of America. With Gregory Bateson, I want to support an understanding of ecology as more than a biological sub-discipline devoted to the study of the interaction between organisms and their environment. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, originally published in 1972, Bateson proposed an understanding of ecology "in the widest sense" as "the study of the interaction and survival of ideas and programs (i.e., differences, complexes of differences, etc.) in circuits" (2000: 491). The ideas and programs examined in this study are those that feed into or interrupt the simultaneous articulation of the natural and the national in America's master narrative. More specifically, I will examine the translation of the desert from an alien, foreign, unfamiliar territory into a "canonical landscape," a term David Mazel defined as an environment "which matters to the culturally dominant" and whose canonization "is itself an exercise of power" (2000: 2).

Mazel's subject is the creation and preservation of national parks, a project he describes as the transformation of "the most spectacular New World landscapes […] into a canon of Great Texts that could discipline an entire society" (4). Drawing on Lauren Berlant's *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991), Mazel defines the "double articulation of subjectivity and landscape" as a key concept of his work, arguing that "it is always possible to *re*imagine America through the environment" (xx). For Mazel, the practice of constructing an American subjectivity through textual representations and interpre-

tations of New World nature is a cultural tradition operative from the colonial period to the creation in 1864 of Yosemite, America's first national park, and into the present-day political culture of environmentalism. It is important to note that the discursive construction of an American subjectivity through descriptions and interpretations of landscape, nature, and wilderness is an act that not only establishes the American national subject as white and masculine, but also as the authorized owner of the territory thus created.[6] This practice I propose to call *the eco-spatial rhetoric of America*. I will argue that the integration of the desert into this rhetorical practice, a practice catering to the entire spectrum of ideological and political responses to America, occurs within the idiomatic parameters and in reaction to the historical and cultural presence of four eco-spatial metaphors: garden, wilderness, Orient, and heterotopia.

5 Garden, Orient, Wilderness, Heterotopia: The Eco-Spatial Rhetoric of America

Garden and wilderness are the two most prominent ecological metaphors at the ideological core of America. Identifying America with either a peaceful garden or a howling wilderness is a European legacy dating back to the Renaissance and the Age of the Enlightenment, a period during which Europe's literary and intellectual elite turned to nature as the normative model for social institutions and moral virtues. With this book I offer two additional metaphors for reading and understanding America: Orient and heterotopia. The purpose of the final section of this introductory chapter is to sketch the thematic structure of *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*. While garden represents a primarily economic response to the desert, Orient, wilderness, and heterotopia primarily signify, respectively, an aesthetic, ethical, and socio-cultural response to this space.

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6 For Mazel, the figure of the environmental interpreter – whether the national park guide or Cooper's Natty Bumppo – "enunciates and authorizes an interpretative stance loosely summarized by the equation *interpretation = whiteness + masculinity = ownership*" (2000: xxi).

Garden

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), French critics Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari point at the dominance of the tree in "Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy" (18). Because European landscapes were dominated by trees, they argue, "arborescent structures" (17) became the dominant social, political, cultural, and epistemological organizing principle of the West. And Western culture developed "a special relation to the forest, and deforestation" (18). The forest symbolized the wild and the unruly (witness Shakespeare, the German Romantics, or Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*), whereas the deforested clearing, embodied by fields and gardens, was a manifestation of cultural progress. The garden conjures images of an ordered, controlled and blissful existence amidst nature's riches, while wilderness represents the (material and mental) space outside the realm of the ordering influence of civilization. Where the garden points to nature as being in a state of refinement, wilderness displays nature's raw and unimproved character. For White Man, sovereign of the Garden of Eden and ruler of European history, anything that escaped his control – territories, beasts, women, or members of other races – was wild. The garden, on the other hand, was the symbol of divine benevolence, a cornucopian space that man was forced to leave because of woman's sinful desire to taste of the Tree of Knowledge. Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden into an earthly desert, their lapse from innocence into knowledge, also marks another lapse, i.e., the fall out of an environment of eternal abundance into an environment of scarcity and unpredictability. Survival in such an environment is predicated on hard labor in the earth, yet the ultimate reward will be the recovery of Paradise. Carolyn Merchant argues that this recovery project, i.e., "the long, slow process of returning humans to the Garden of Eden" (1995: 29), forms the ideological core of both Judeo-Christian mythology and capitalism, with modern science as the tool that accelerates the return to the Garden.

The technological translation of the desert into a garden, a proposal presented in William E. Smythe's *The Conquest of Arid America* (1899), illustrates the ideological power of the recovery narrative. Succeeding the cautionary tale of John Wesley Powell's *Report on the*

Lands of the Arid Region of the United States (1878), a text that dispelled both the myth of the American West as a homogeneous Great American Desert and as the Garden of the World, Smythe's technological hubris notwithstanding, his book incorporated the desert into the cultural imaginary of America, albeit as a negative point of reference. As Patricia Nelson Limerick observed: "Most nineteenth-century Americans, those in a position to have an opinion at all, had felt that progress lay in the advance of civilization and the retreat of the desert" (1985: 168).

On the other end of the historical and cultural spectrum, the work of Gary Paul Nabhan, an ethno-botanist with a keen sense for the significance of story (i.e., literature and culture) in the preservation of a cultural landscape, demonstrates that the desert is *already* a garden, albeit one catering to other culinary tastes and sensibilities than those America developed in its Eastern territories. Like Smythe, Nabhan engages in a project of translation, of re-defining the desert and relieving it of the universalist stigma of being seen as humanity's worst topographical adversary. Yet while Smythe's ultimate goal was to write and then irrigate the desert out of existence, Nabhan engages in uncovering the desert's life-sustaining qualities. This implies the foregrounding of cultural traditions (Native American, Mexican, organic farming practices) that were and still are backgrounded in narratives of technological and geographical expansion. Nabhan's alternative representational strategy, relying heavily on images of agriculture and gardening, can also be read as a contribution to re-presenting the desert as a heterotopic alternative to traditional Euro-American responses to aridity.

Orient

If we accept with Deleuze and Guattari that arborescence is "the root-foundation, *Grund*, *racine*, *fondement*" (1987: 18) of Western culture, then it must also be accepted that the East is imagined through a different eco-spatial figure, namely the rhizome. The rhizomatic structure underlying Eastern cultures derives from "a relation to the steppe and the garden (or in some cases, the desert and the oasis), rather than forest and field" (18). I find Deleuze and Guattari's differentiation between the field and the garden as markers of geo-cultural difference

less convincing than their commentary on the cultural significance of aborescence (witness Merchant's argument on the significance of the garden as a crucial projective space within the cultural and religious imaginary of the West). Yet their implied suggestion that topography be acknowledged as a definitive factor in the cultural and political organization of societies and in the structural formation of their institutions should not be dismissed as simply French theoretical acrobatics. Drawing on Hegelian political philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari argue that "States are made up not only of people but also of wood, fields, gardens, animals, and commodities" (385). They describe the difference between the West and the East or, to use another nomenclature, between the Occident and the Orient, in topographical and spatial terms. While Western states, due to the restricted space over which they reign, have hardly any problems "holding their components together," the "great empires of the Orient, Africa, and America run up against wide-open smooth spaces that penetrate them and maintain gaps between their components" (385). For Deleuze and Guattari the association of America with the Orient here indicates that "America is a special case" (19), not only the real and imagined contact zone of East and West but also the space that inverts the geographical logic of cultural difference. In America, "the search for arborescence [i.e., rootedness, genealogy] and the return to the Old World occur in the East," while the open deserts and steppes of the American West conjure landscapes of the Oriental East. "America reversed the directions: it put its Orient in the West, as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle; its West is the edge of the East" (19). Deleuze and Guattari's playful inflection of America as inverted Orient may appear intellectually flamboyant, but in the decades framing the turn of the 20th century, the Orient indeed became a rhetorical tool for making sense of the West's topographical and cultural foreignness. In his 1920 guidebook to Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley in California, Charles Smeaton Chase observed: "The late Charles Dudley Warner used to apply to Southern California the term 'Our Italy.' The territory described in the following pages may certainly be better designated Our Araby" (1920: n.p.).

The Orient, or, more precisely, the discourse of Orientalism, offers a completely different comment on the desert's effect on conceptualizations of America. It demonstrates that understanding and appreciating a topographical and ecological Other such as the desert de-

pends on pre-existing discursive paradigms and images. In the second chapter of this book I will argue that 19th-century Orientalist painting and literature, with their prominent cultural positions in fin-de-siècle America, provided non-fiction authors such as Charles F. Lummis and John C. Van Dyke with narrative and iconographic models for representing the American desert as a historically, culturally, and aesthetically valuable landscape. It is through their discursive politics of desert appreciation that Lummis and Van Dyke *reinforce* the cultural authority of the white male bourgeois subject, yet *relocate* it from the Eastern metropolis to the Orientalized region of the American West and Southwest. The desert's character as the signature landscape of the Orient and its representation in 19th-century art (Elihu Vedder, Sanford Robinson Gifford) and literature (Bayard Taylor) provided these authors with a rhetorical apparatus capable of altering their audiences' perceptions of a landscape otherwise seen as utterly worthless. Travel writer and poet Susan Wallace is a notable exception to this paradigm – she looks at the Southwestern desert with an Orientalist gaze, registers similarities, but then dismisses them as being inferior to Oriental beauty. Yet paradoxically, her negative response to the Southwest presupposes some knowledge of Oriental landscapes and assumes the basic commensurability of the American Southwest and the Orient.

Wilderness

Wilderness is one of the oldest eco-spatial tropes in the discourse of America. The real and imagined presence of large areas uninhabited by Euro-Americans was important not only in establishing cultural differences between the young American nation and Europe, but also as a mental and material space that would allow critical perspectives on the social and political development of the Republic to develop. Together with the garden, the metaphor of wilderness helped European explorers and colonists to intellectually and visually organize the otherwise unorganized material space of the North American continent, a tradition that continued when the new, independent Republic expanded westward. The perception of wilderness as benign and regenerative rather than malignant and destructive had started in the 19th century with the transcendentalist and national park movements, and

came to an institutional peak with Theodore Roosevelt's endorsement of wilderness as a significant space for the restoration of masculinity and the perpetual renewal of a sense of national identity.

Wallace Stegner and Edward Abbey best represent a narrative tradition in which the desert, as one of the last remaining wildernesses, is cast as "the breathing-space" (Van Dyke 1980: 59) for both individual men and the nation. Stegner's construction of the desert as a "geography of hope" is an implicit rather than explicit recognition of arid landscapes as wild. For Stegner, it is the spaciousness of the desert that causes traces of civilization and culture to disappear on the horizon. Of the two authors, Abbey is most often and most prominently associated with the desert's representation as wilderness. Originating from early 20th-century skepticism towards the evolution of the U.S. into an urban-industrial and technologically powerful nation, and nourished by elements of a Rooseveltean ideology of a strenuous life in wild nature as the precondition for the continuation of a strong, masculine, and powerful nation, Abbey's self-stylization as a "desert solitaire" and his rugged defense of a feminized, vulnerable, 'virgin' landscape is widely read as a passionate, unconventional, and rebellious form of wilderness advocacy. Arguing for the psychological and cultural significance of wilderness for a particularly American national identity, Abbey's work foregrounds the importance of the natural environment for the continuation of America as nature's nation. But at the same time, the absoluteness with which he represents the desert as civilization's spatial Other, as a natural, ahistorical, regenerative space, requires eradicating from his view and from his texts the disturbing presences of other humans. Ultimately, this invalidates the ecocritical implications of his writing. As an example, Abbey demonstrates that the protection and preservation of the desert's wild nature is but a rhetorical front for the protection and preservation of America's social, racial, and gender status quo. While Abbey's shadow looms large over the genre of desert writing, he does not totally obliterate subsequent literary attempts to come to representational terms with the desert.

Charles Bowden is a writer who has become increasingly annoyed by romanticized and mythologized representations of the West as a rural, almost pastoral landscape, and he vehemently draws his readers' attention to the region's urban realities. However, underneath this turn to the Western 'real' lurks the author's grief over the disap-

pearance of wilderness from the continent. The desert – a landscape that still contains pockets of wilderness – becomes the platform and the metaphorical reference point for a critique of (post)modern America's single-minded, persistent attempts to conquer nature as a symbol of the nation's progress and economic success. Like Abbey, Bowden's concern about the disappearance of wild nature, legitimate as it is from an environmental point of view, also expresses the author's (unacknowledged) cultural anxiety about the disappearance of a space of 'wild,' undomesticated masculinity. The desert texts of Barry Lopez and Ann Haymond Zwinger provide evidence for a rhetorical synthesis of nature and culture through representations, images, and metaphors of the desert as wild nature. Like Abbey and Bowden, Lopez and Zwinger question America's cultural imperative of environmental conquest and emphasize the desert's 'wild' (i.e. natural) aspects. But unlike Abbey and Bowden, the natural is not primarily culture's undomesticated, external Other; rather, nature and culture appear as interdependent, intricately interwoven parts of each other. It is in Lopez' and Zwinger's writing that the desert comes closest to being the root metaphor for a reconstruction of America from an ecological perspective.

Heterotopia

The fourth eco-spatial metaphor investigated in its relationship to the desert is heterotopia. Conceptually and historically, heterotopia constitutes a different case than garden, wilderness, and Orient, primarily due to its comparatively late arrival on the scene as a discursive model in cultural and literary theory. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), Edward Soja traces the emergence of heterotopia as a category in postmodern social and cultural theory (feminist geography, cultural geography, postcolonial theory) back to Michel Foucault's strong critical interest in space and spatiality as crucial aspects in the institutionalization of power/knowledge. In a 1982 interview, Foucault defined heterotopia as "those singular spaces to be found in some given spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others" (Foucault quoted in Soja 1996: 149). Heterotopia's location "in some given spaces" marks its difference from utopia, that utterly imaginary place of ideal perfection

literally existing nowhere; yet the characterization of heterotopia as a space whose function follows a different order and serves different purposes also marks it off from the surrounding, or dominant space. Soja defines heterotopic existence in Thirdspace dynamically rather than statically, i.e., as "a creative recombination and extension" of existing elements, a space built "on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the 'real' material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through 'imagined' representations of spatiality" (6).

The discussion of a heterotopic perspective on the desert differs from the critical *modus operandi* in the first three chapters insofar as "heterotopia" is not a paradigm consciously applied by the authors and artists under discussion in the last chapter of this book. Neither Mary Austin, nor Joseph Wood Krutch, Richard Misrach, or Alfredo Vèa, Jr. make any reference in their work to the desert as heterotopia. Yet the concept most effectively describes the operation of the poetics and politics of the desert in their respective artistic work. All of them employ the trope of the desert as a *site of discursive resistance* against the cultural authority of those ideas and concepts that traditionally represent America. Austin challenged the intellectual and aesthetic hegemony of the metropolitan East as the place that defines American literature. Krutch found in the desert a metaphor that allowed him to question the conceptual dominance of progress and abundance in definitions of America's modernity. Misrach's photography shows the desert as a landscape that is marked by the nation's expansionist politics and underscores the wastefulness of an economy of abundance. And finally, Vèa represents the desert as an historically, culturally, and symbolically rich terrain, one that inspires and allows for new forms of social and cultural ordering.

The narrative trajectory of this study will lead from garden, to Orient, wilderness, and heterotopia, a structure that corresponds with the chronology of the historical appearance of these spatial paradigms in cultural attempts to come to terms with the desert. However, there are overlaps and parallel developments that may suggest a different narrative logic. But then, any taxonomy runs the risk of misrepresentation and of truncating the phenomenal complexity of individual authors, artists, and their work. It would be easy, for example, to read Gary Paul Nabhan's texts as adopting a heterotopic approach, or Mary Austin's stories as contributions to the Southwest's orientalization.

Categories can never totally escape arbitrariness. But I believe that these paradigms offer, at the very least, a critical frame for a renewed and renuanced understanding of the desert's poetics and politics within the cultural history of America.

I. Garden

We go on praising apples as if eating them
were an injunction of the Ten Commandments.
Wallace Stegner

This chapter examines some of the foundational rhetorical strategies that prepared, supported, and challenged the technological translation of the desert into a garden. Stegner's use of "apple" in the epigraph metaphorically refers to irrigation technology. Because of its semiotic implication in the horticultural symbolism of the Bible, "apple" also connotes the absence of the desert and the presence of the divinely tended landscape. Stegner's commentary not only demonstrates America's aspiration as empire of technology and agriculture; it also draws attention to religiously prejudiced culinary conventions that favor the eating of apples above the consumption of foods native to more arid climes. Underlying the story of 20th-century desert irrigation is a combination of technological megalomania, the desire to domesticate and incorporate foreign, 'wild' territories, and the need to feed ever larger populations. As environmental and science reporter Russell Clemings observed in *Mirage: The False Promise of Desert Agriculture* (1996):

> Egyptians invented irrigation, Sumerians improved it, and various other cultures practiced it for seven millennia. But it took the British in India to perfect it, and it took the Americans to set about remaking the earth with it. (25)[1]

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[1] Clemings describes the British engagement in irrigation as an exercise in both technological and colonial power, the result of which was projected as the transformation of resisting subalterns into compliant farmers. "In 1847," he writes, "British civil engineers, full of hubris after lacing their homeland's isles with railways and barge canals, took their newly honed skill to the Crown's newest possession, the arid alluvial plain of the Punjab in northwestern India. A few years earlier, the British army had overrun the Punjab from the east, wresting control from the Sikhs who had governed for the previous half century. Among other effects, the takeover idled a professional army of

Needless to say, such projects had ecological, economic, political, and cultural consequences of hitherto unknown proportions. At the end of the 20th century, irrigation was no longer seen as a simple blessing. Estimates are that "one of every four acres of irrigated farmland" in the world "may already have been damaged by salt" (36) and thus are threatened by desertification.[2] And Americans, who for almost a century had engaged in irrigation in order to duplicate their Eastern gardens in the arid West, slowly started to become aware of the horrendous costs of and environmental damage caused by irrigation. Clemings, somewhat more optimistic than Stegner, contends that "the nation simply stopped building [irrigation projects] sometime around 1980" (29). This may be true, but it did not bring the urbanization and industrialization of America's arid West to a halt. Yet what is of more interest in the context of this study is that, as Stegner had it, "millions of Americans continue to *think* of water engineering in the West as one of our proudest achievements" (87; emphasis added). I will argue that this psycho-cultural response has a long tradition and is rooted in a deep-seated distrust and/or misunderstanding of the desert. In articulating this distrust – either literally, in its textual representation as a barren, bald, and desolate space, or metaphorically, by engineering it out of existence – America articulated its identity as a nation. Its representation and self-representation as the Garden of the World reaches back geographically and historically to Renaissance Europe.

1 The Garden and the Political Economy of America

From a European perspective, America, the new world discovered in 1492 by the Italian Master Mariner and Navigator Christopher Co-

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thirty thousand Sikh soldiers who had a well-deserved reputation for fierceness. The British quickly realized that a city-sized corps of restless, dispossessed men might prove difficult to govern, so they decided to turn the soldiers into farmers" (9-10). One of the largest irrigation projects ensued from this realization, including the diversion of the Indus river and five tributaries.

2 Desertification is the term that describes the result of a process of increasing the sodium level in irrigated soils; "soil particles release their grip on each other to combine with the sodium" (Clemings 1996: 13) which causes the collapse of the fertile soil structure and produces a powdery, sandy soil no longer capable of supporting crops.

lumbus and his crew, was both an empty, disorderly wilderness and a space full of paradisiacal promise. As soon as Europeans reported what they saw and experienced in this strange new world, the western hemisphere became synonymous with bonanza. Without exception, the first accounts from the shores of the new-found land commented on its fertility, the cornucopian availability of edible plants and animals, and the abundance of precious metals. Columbus initiated the tradition when, on March 14, 1493, he announced to Raphael Sanchez, Lord Treasurer for Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, that the islands he had 'discovered' during his first voyage were "exceedingly fertile" (Columbus 1847: 4) and that Española "abounds in various kinds of spices, gold, and other metals" (6). About twenty-five years later, Hernán Cortés added accounts of large amounts of gold and silver, gifts he had received from the Aztecs. If the uncountable references to gold in Cortés' letters to the Spanish Crown are not enough to demonstrate his thorough enjoyment of incredible riches, Bernal Díaz Del Castillo, who participated in the conquest of Mexico, witnessed how "Cortés accepted the gifts with delight."[3] But Castillo not only commented on the greed displayed by his fellow conquistadors as they "agreed that all the gold and silver and jewels in Mexico should be collected together" (37), he was also, in contrast to them, sensitive to "sweet-smelling trees" in "the orchard and garden" of an Itztapalapa palace, which he described as "a marvelous place both to see and walk in" (27). The garden and visions of Edenic bliss were tropes to which most early contact narratives were anchored. In the middle decades of the 16th century, Bartolomé De Las Casas observed that on Hispaniola, the island known today as Cuba, "all settlements of the Indians in this fertile land were situated in the midst of gardens and orchards" (De Las Casas 1992: 55).

Beginning in the late 16th century, English voyagers and colonists, among them Arthur Barlow and Michael Drayton, followed the Spanish conquistadors to the New World. In their descriptions, references to gardens and orchards were frequently accompanied by remarks on the fertility of the land and the abundance of plants and animals. Barlow reports that "after thanks given to God for our safe arrival," he and his crew "went to view the land" and "to 'take possession

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3 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*. repr. in *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 4th ed., 26.

of the same in the right of the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty as rightful Queen and Princess of the same'" (1584). What they saw, or rather, what Barlow reported they have seen, was a terrain "sandy and low towards the waterside, but so full of grapes […] that I think in all the world the like abundance is not to be found" (ibid.). For Leo Marx, the "idea of America as a garden is the controlling metaphor of [Barlow's] entire report" (1967: 37). Barlow was seconded by Michael Drayton, who, in his "Ode to the Virginian Voyage" (1606), praised Virginia as "Earth's only paradise" and waxed poetic about "the luscious smell/Of that delicious land" (1606).

In a study on New England ecology, William Cronon summarizes the reports of such 17th-century explorers and colonists as Martin Pring and Francis Higginson. However, Cronon hesitates to consider these early reports comprehensive and reliable accounts of the ecological state of precolonial America. Europeans, he argues, looked at the new lands with "selective emphasis on commodities." But at the same time, Cronon noticed that

> there was one European perception that was undoubtedly accurate, and about it all visitors were agreed – the incredible abundance of New England plant and animal life, an abundance which, when compared with Europe, left more than one visitor dumbfounded. (1997: 22)

The descriptions of the New World as garden and paradise comes complete with images of a simple and wholesome life represented in the figure of the primitive yet noble savage. Captain John Smith utilized Barlow's report in his own descriptions of New England and Virginia published between 1612 and 1624. Like his predecessors, he emphasized the fertility of the land, and he also commented on the easy and pleasurable living possible for man, woman, and child on the new continent.[4]

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[4] See also Payne 1996: 10-12. Payne cites half a dozen or so other early 17th-century writers reporting on America's natural plenty. In her analysis of colonial texts, Kolodny 1975 came to a similar conclusion. She detects an emphasis on the fertility and profitability of the land, and on the abundance of game and crops in such 16th and 17th-century writers as Arthur Barlow, Thomas Morton, and John Hammond.

These two rhetorical inflections of the garden metaphor – as a pre-lapsarian Eden furnished with unlimited food supplies, and as a pastoral scene of a "primitive utopia" (Marx 1967: 80), with the Indian in its imaginary center – become more visible in 18th-century texts. Leo Marx cites Robert Beverley's 1705 *History and Present State of Virginia* as an early example of the narrative humus enriching the ground on which ideas of what he called the middle landscape, "a mild, agricultural, semi-primitive terrain" (87), would germinate. As a prospect that reconciled the primitive, Edenic garden with the garden as a product of human cultivation, the middle landscape was to become the "controlling metaphor" of Jeffersonian ideas about America's national identity.

The age of European discovery and colonial expansion in the centuries following Columbus' discovery in 1492, and the formative years of the American Republic following the Declaration of Independence in 1776 coincided with the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, during which a tremendous expansion of scientific knowledge produced a burst of technological progress. This created a cultural climate in which a plethora of land, of energy and mineral resources, and of free (i.e., slave) labor, combined with a profound trust in science and technology as instruments enabling human governance over nature, became synonymous with modern existence. During this "era of apparently endless abundance" (as William Ophuls and A. Stephen Boyan called the age of European territorial and scientific expansion), Europeans and their American descendants consolidated the image of America as the Garden of the World (Ophuls and Boyan 1992: 10). The level of their enthusiasm was not only determined by what they saw (or maybe even just imagined seeing) in the New World. It was equally fed by what they had left behind: a condition of cycles of scarcity, whether naturally, economically and/or socially induced.

To be sure, scarcity was not a new threat, arriving in the wake of modernity. Anxieties about insufficient supplies of food and other vital resources for survival engendered early political theory and practice. The question of who would get what, when, how, and why had preoccupied political philosophers since antiquity, and it has underscored theories of political and social organization ever since. As Ophuls and Boyan point out, "In Book One of *The Politics*, Aristotle discusses scarcity and other ecological limits, implying that because of them slavery may be necessary for civilized life" (12). However, dur-

ing the modern era, political and economic philosophers regarded the "return of scarcity in any guise" as "a serious challenge to the modern way of life" (10). Preceded in the 17th and 18th centuries by John Locke, David Hume, and Adam Smith, 19th-century European social philosophers and political economists like John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx placed the dialectics of scarcity and abundance in the center of the logic of wealth and progress. In the United States, George Perkins Marsh alerted his audience to the dangers of ecological depletion and to "man's" inclination "for profligate waste" (Marsh quoted in Lowenthal 2000: 294). Nevertheless, he still held on to abundance as a central value of economic thinking. Shawn Loewen observed that "Unlike Cooper and Thoreau, both of whom associate progress with the destruction of abundance, Marsh is optimistic that progress will provide a remedy for scarcity" (2001: 110). In an age when cyclical patterns in agricultural production could (and in fact did) lead to extremely short food supplies, "the promise of abundance" became identical with the idea of progress, and progress, in turn, was rendered "the mechanism for a deliverance from scarcity" (Xenos 1989: 35).

For Europeans, industrial development marked the road to the realization of utopian dreams. Americans, on the other hand, projected their hopes for a better and wealthier existence on the nation's large undeveloped estate in the West. Whether abundance is an effect of Nature's Providence or the result of fruitful labor – two versions William Cullen Bryant suggested in "The Prairies" (1834), an early example of how the desert is poetically replaced by the garden – 19th-century Americans were prone to look at the West as the key to breaking the cycles of scarcity (see Loewen 2001). The untapped productivity of that land would not only guarantee the nation's wealth, it would also promote the production of a distinctly American national identity. Frederick Jackson Turner's influential frontier thesis would amalgamate more than a century of dominant American thought and perpetuate the ideas of writers such as Thomas Jefferson and Hector St. John de Crèvecœur for whom frontier society, that conglomerate of men and women transforming an uncultivated wilderness into a landscape of farms and gardens, was the epitome of America. Accordingly, and in contrast to European concepts of progress as a universal process which, *over time*, would result in a betterment of the human condition and in the creation of social justice, *American notions of progress*, de-

spite their focus on the future, *were spelled out in spatial rather than in temporal terms.*

Gardening the Republic

During the era preceding the Revolution and in the early years of the American Republic, the garden – with its implications of never dwindling resources and a simple life of good moral standing – became the "master symbol" (Henry Nash Smith) of American nationality. One of its most articulate early proponents was Thomas Jefferson for whom, in Leo Marx' formulation, a "well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size" (Marx 1967: 141) became the ideal model for the nation. Jefferson transformed the literary project of pastoralism, a secularized version of the religious narrative of the return to paradise, into the political project of agrarian republicanism. Today, his role in establishing agrarianism as the master metaphor for American social and political ideals is a matter of much debate. On the one hand, he is described as a man who reluctantly surrendered his practical politics to the demands of a society that was leaning more and more towards trade and early forms of industrialism, while keeping "the ideal society of the middle landscape […] in view as a kind of model, a guide to long-range policies" (Marx 1967: 143). On the other hand, he is portrayed as a man whose political instincts were such that he recognized "an expanding international commerce in foodstuffs" as "the material base for a new social vision" and who, therefore, promoted agrarianism as the economic core of "a progressive, prosperous, democratic nation" (Fowler 2000: 146). Paramount, however, was his fierce promotion of the garden as a model for America's political and social institutions. The nation, he was convinced, should construct itself as a decentralized agrarian republic which, by spreading across the continent, would avoid conglomerate settlements and the social and moral corruptions associated with Europe and the city.[5]

In Jefferson's political scheme, the individual farmer (sometimes referred to as yeoman, sometimes as husbandman) working the land was the pillar of the republican nation. In *Place and Belonging in*

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[5] For a more extensive discussion of Jeffersonian notions of imperial expansion and the creation of the American nation, see Onuf 2000.

America, David Jacobson summarized the symbolic dimensions of this American archetype:

> The abiding symbol of antebellum America, in the North at least, is that of the independent farmer. The farmer represented the organic relationship with nature that was America. The farmer represented independence. The farmer represented sobriety, orderliness, hard work, methodical determination, and the Protestant ethic. The farmer was a thorough individualist. The farmer was civic minded, participating in and building his or her (occasionally the farmer was imagined as a woman) community. The farmer's life and community took place unmediated with those he or she knew face to face, in churches, schools, and business. The farmer lived in carefully organized (usually geometrically shaped) farms and organized time according to a rigid schedule as well. The farmer was forward-looking, "progressive." The farmer represented, above all, the land, and the land represented, for Americans, expansiveness, freedom, and liberty. (2002: 79)

The farmer, it turns out, is an ideal figure, representing the nation's topophilic relation to the land, a territory that combines ideal natural conditions of soil and climate with scientifically grafted directives for efficient and productive settlement. The farmer was the symbol of the virtuous man (Jacobson fails to provide any evidence that "occasionally the farmer was imagined as a woman") who, by working what Crèvcœur described as the precious soil that feeds and clothes Americans, transformed the natural abundance of the land into a truly democratic polity.

When Americans discovered that large portions of the land their leaders had purchased from France in 1803 did not display the same fertile abundance of the original thirteen states, that much of it was a desert unimaginable as farm land, a political controversy about what to do with these landscapes of scarcity resulted. For a nation whose sense of identity rested on visions of abundance and which imagined its territory as an endless garden, the realization that deserts and semi-deserts were part of the national topography posed a considerable challenge. How could these landscapes be rhetorically integrated into the national master narrative? And what were the political, social, ideological, and cultural consequences this integration would entail? In other words, how could the American nation, facing the desert,

maintain its eco-mental[6] identity as a "landed democracy" (Jacobson 2002) and an agrarian society of farmers and gardeners? I will address these questions by looking at three representative voices that shaped ideas about the desert-garden nexus at the end of the 19th and 20th centuries, two historical moments in which cultural attitudes towards the desert underwent significant changes. These voices belong to John Wesley Powell, William E. Smythe, and Gary Paul Nabhan.

The Desert as Garden of the World

During much of the 19th century, two major and contradictory ecological myths shaped the idea of the American West. The first myth (Desert Myth) is that this territory west of the Mississippi constituted the Great American Desert, a vast terrain of useless land unfit for settlement. The second (Garden Myth) was that this same territory was a huge, undeveloped Garden of the World, a utopian space of cornucopian dimensions. Both myths played crucial roles as rhetorical instruments in the discourse of the American nation at a time when it was still struggling to define the exact terms of its geographical, economic and political identity.

Great American Desert

The proprietors of the Desert Myth, accustomed to associating agricultural practice with regular rainfall, riparian and forest ecologies, and moderate climates, saw the entire West – a treeless, mountainous area, part grassland steppe, part sandy desert, interrupted here and there by arable land, and with only a few riparian corridors – as a land that

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6 The term 'eco-mental' or rather 'eco-mental system' was introduced by Gregory Bateson to represent the co-dependence of ideas of self and environment. In a chapter called "Pathologies of Epistemology" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (originally published in 1972), Bateson points out that there is a correspondence between mental health and the ecological health of the environment. He writes: "You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is part of *your* wider eco-mental system – and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of *your* thought and experience" (2000: 492).

would not yield easily, if at all, to what Marc Reisner called "the principles and habits of wet-zone agriculture" (1993: 47). In their eyes this was land unfurnished and unfurnishable with seeds, and hence, a desert wasteland. What was designated in the 19th century as the Great American Desert, in fact, varied greatly.

A rather loose, imaginary term from the very beginning, geography books and maps of the period differed tremendously in their descriptions of this territory. *Smith's Atlas* of 1839, and the 1840 edition of *Mitchell's School Atlas* agree on the Great American Desert as an area covering the Western parts of present-day Nebraska and Kansas, the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, as well as the northeast corner of New Mexico, eastern Colorado and the southwestern corner of Wyoming. In contrast, Thomas G. Bradford's *Comprehensive Atlas, Geographical, Historical & Commercial*, published in 1835, contains a map of the United States in which the phrase Great American Desert begins at the Canadian border and runs down into the northern parts of Texas (Fig. 1).[7] Clearly, some of the territories covered by these designations are not, strictly speaking, deserts. Within the Great American Desert, there were regions with sufficient annual precipitation to support large animals and plants. The assumption of the presence of desert lands in the trans-Mississippi West extend as far back as the early decades of the 19th century to two men commissioned by the U.S. government to explore the West, to gather additional geographical information about a mostly unknown territory, but also to establish American control over fur trade. These men were Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike and Major Stephen H. Long of the United States Topographical Engineers.

Zebulon M. Pike and his expedition left St. Louis in the summer of 1806 and returned to the Louisiana territory in the spring of 1807. In their efforts to escape the harsh winter conditions in the southern Rocky Mountains, Pike and his party crossed over into Spanish territory, were taken prisoners and escorted to Chihuahua via Santa Fe, and eventually through Spanish Texas to the border of the Louisiana territory. During these enforced travels, Pike observed a territory which, if it occupied any part of Americans' mental geography at all, was mainly through the reports of the Spanish explorers searching for

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7 See also Prucha 1963. In the beginning of this essay, Prucha discusses extensively the problem of the exact location of the Great American Desert.

the fabled cities of gold. In his journal, published in 1810, Pike depicted the landscape of his captive sojourn as uninhabitable and desert-like,[8] setting the tone and suggesting the metaphors for describing to his American audience an unfamiliar territory that, as a result of Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase in 1803, was now United States property. However, it was not specifically in the nomenclature of the "Great American Desert" that Pike thought or wrote about the region. This designation is attributed to Dr. Edwin James, botanist and chronicler of the Stephen H. Long expedition of 1819-20.

Long's expedition led him along the Platte and Missouri Rivers to the Rocky Mountains, and from there south and east to Oklahoma and Arkansas. It was on the map resulting from this journey that the space between the 98th meridian and the Rocky Mountains[9] was labeled the Great American Desert, thus creating one of the most persistent yet also controversial geographical myths of 19th-century America. The topographical designation was based on the expedition's experience of a country that James described as "almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course, uninhabitable by peoples depending on agriculture for their subsistence" (James quoted in Boorstin 1991: 229).[10] Given these conditions, desert seemed to be the most appropriate linguistic representation. From an agricultural perspective, the desert may have been useless. Nevertheless, James claimed the desert as national territory by changing its geographical nomenclature from Great Sandy Desert or Mexican Desert, designations common at the time, to Great *American* Desert. As an act of cultural translation, this discursive gesture highlights the desire to integrate the arid regions acquired from Spain and France into the symbolic economy of America.

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8 For a discussion of Pike's expedition see Simpson 1999 and Goetzman 1993.

9 There are variations from the 98th meridian as constituting the eastern boundary of the desert. At the beginning of his essay, Ralph C. Morris designates the 100th meridian as the eastern boundary of the Great American Desert. Later, he moves two meridians further east (see 1926-27: 190/194). Martyn J. Bowden confirms that the 98th meridian was finally established as the eastern border of the desert when geographers such as Joseph Worcester and William Woodbridge followed Stephen Long's descriptions and accepted 'desert' as the major description for the territory west of the Mississippi (see Bowden 1971: 53).

10 See also Morris 1926-27: 193-94.

Identifying themselves as Hamiltonians rather than Jeffersonians, government explorers like Pike and Long pointed out that desert country would bar the nation from uncontrollable and politically dangerous expansion, providing a natural barricade that would, as Long's chronicler James put it, "secure us against the machinations or incursions of an enemy, that might otherwise be disposed to annoy us in that quarter" (James quoted in Hollon 1966: 65). Pike expressed similar sentiments. He was convinced that

> from these immense prairies may arise great advantage to the United States, viz: the restriction of our population to some certain limits, and thereby a continuation of the Union. Our citizens being so prone to rambling and extending themselves on the frontiers will, through necessity, be constrained to limit their extent on the West to the borders of the Missouri and Mississippi, while they leave the prairies incapable of cultivation to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country. (Pike quoted in Limerick 1985: 16)

These 19th-century conceptualizations of the desert as a safety zone, a territory which, though useless for agriculture, would secure the racial, social and political unity of the Anglo-American nation of family farmers, protecting them from undesirable intrusions by racial and social Others, resonate into and throughout the 20th century. The political topology of the desert as barricade against foreign incursions can be observed in the placement of Japanese internment camps in the California desert during World War II, and in the use of the Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico deserts as gunnery and bombing ranges, and as nuclear test zones. On the other hand, the 19th century also produced the desert as a lawless space which, according to Washington Irving, was the territory of marauders and the rallying point of America's social and racial "debris," unpredictable elements who threatened the nation's progress across the continent and towards imperial power (Irving 1863: 217). Considered together, such texts as authored by Pike, Long, and Irving represented the integration of the desert into America's national discourse. Or, as Wallace Stegner put it, "By the mid-thirties the Great American Desert was firmly established on the maps and in the American mind, and it continued to be acknowledged for more than a generation" (1992a: 215). During that period, the arid West became many things: desert, Indian territory, land bridge between the gardens of the East and the luscious lands of the California and Oregon Territories. For most 19th-century Americans, the desert

West was a transitional space, a territory one crossed at life's risk and where death could descend on the weary pioneer in the form of unfriendly Indians, heat, or lack of water. It was not until after the Civil War that attitudes towards the desert started to shift towards a more benevolent view, and Americans began to discover the desert as "a gold mine for the imagination" (Wild 1999: 37).

Garden of the World

Imaginative projection, rather than precise topographical description, was an important instrument for the indefatigable proprietors of the Garden Myth, those latter-day Jeffersonian idealists who, after the Civil War, were joined by ruthless land speculators and railroad barons in an effort to literally sell off the West to an ever-growing number of immigrants from Europe, migrant freedmen from the South, and surplus laborers from cities in the increasingly industrialized East. As prone to geographical hyperbole as their opponents, and encouraged by a cyclical increase in rainfall in the 1870s and early 1880s, they revived the myth of the undeveloped trans-Mississippi West as the Garden of the World. The unusually large amount of rainfall during that period seemed to validate people like Josiah Gregg, trader on the Santa Fé trail and author of *Commerce of the Prairies* (1844), who had suggested to his mid 19th-century audience that "the genial influences of civilization – that extensive cultivation of the earth – might contribute to the multiplication of showers, as it certainly does of fountains" (Gregg quoted in Smith 2001: 179).

Gregg was among those who perpetuated the Jeffersonian idea of the Western territories as the unreclaimed garden of the nation, a philosophy more prominently advocated by William Gilpin. An ardent supporter of Manifest Destiny and deeply influenced by Alexander von Humboldt's theory of isothermic zodiacs, a theory according to which all the world's great empires existed inside a topographical and climatic corridor stretching along either side of the fortieth parallel, Gilpin firmly believed in two things: first, that the landscape of the North American continent displayed the requisite "physical characteristics and configuration" (Gilpin quoted in Smith 2001: 39) to fulfill the criteria of Humboldt's scientific theory; and second, that westward expansion was the prerequisite for insuring the historical continuation

of great empires, a history that would culminate in the creation of the United States as a civic empire. If Humboldt provided the scientific justification for Gilpin's expansionist thinking, the patriotism of his ideas was fed by Thomas Hart Benton who, according to Henry Nash Smith, saw commerce with Asia as "a symbol of freedom" from the still powerful influence of the European market, and as a road to "national greatness for America" (23). Gilpin was convinced that "The untransacted destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent" (Gilpin quoted in Smith 2001: 37). Sharing Benton's allegiance to Jeffersonianism, Gilpin saw the farmer as the main figure in the historical drama of American empire building, and a transcontinental railroad as the indispensable artery of migration and trade. In this scenario, even the *idea* of a Great American Desert was disruptive.

First of all, deserts always suggest scarcity to someone accustomed to terrains and climates that allow sufficient amounts of food to be produced. A territory associated with sand, dryness, and extreme heat hardly promised to support the population of an expanding nation. Furthermore, as a zone presumed unfit for agricultural development and settlement, the desert had been established in the 19th-century American mind as a kind of border zone, a natural barrier to national expansion. As such, the desert was a metaphor supporting an ideology of containment rather than expansion, not exactly what Gilpin and other promoters of Manifest Destiny had in mind for the United States. Gilpin's 1890 statement in *The Continental Railway, Compacting and Fusing Together All the World's Continents* that "The PLAINS are not *deserts*, but the OPPOSITE, and the cardinal basis for the future empire now erecting itself upon the North American continent" (Gilpin quoted in Simpson 1999: 94) represents the frame of mind as well as the language employed to divert the public's attention from a simple fact – that he was referring to an arid region. For Gilpin and other political arbiters of the nation's future as the world's most powerful empire, a landscape of scarcity posed a conceptual challenge to their vision of national progress.

Transformed into major landowners in the West through federal land grants, the railroads were particularly interested in representing their property as veritable gardens. Uninhabited, the land along their tracks was worthless. In *Cadillac Desert* (1993), Marc Reisner quotes the founder of the Great Northern railroad company as remarking to an acquaintance: "You can lay track through the Garden of Eden. But

why bother if the only inhabitants are Adam and Eve?" (37-38) In *Western Trail*, a newspaper owned by the Rock Island Railroad, Kansas was advertised as "the garden spot of the world" (38) where the right amount of rain fell at the right time, watering any crop the farmer wanted to grow. To lure settlers into buying these lands, the railroads also emphasized the West's healthy climate. Their agents would often travel as far away as European ports, where they enticed the Old World's 'surplus' populations with the promise of the garden, a rather effective rhetorical tool. As a religious metaphor, garden promised perpetual access to food with a minimum of physical effort; as a social metaphor, garden represented wealth and social standing, comfort and convenience. If the American West was indeed the garden of the world, it was the place where the "paradox of poverty and plenty that has beguiled the modern age" (Xenos 1989: 55) could finally be undone.

But railroad interests, and politicians like Gilpin, in turn, enticed the public by replacing one ecological hyperbole with another. True, if the Plains had supported large herds of buffalo, they could not be deserts. Ranchers had proved that European livestock (sheep and cattle) could be grazed on that land if the ranges were large enough. When post-Civil War settlement of Kansas and Nebraska coincided with a cyclical surge of ample rainfall, reports about lusciously green plains east of the Rocky Mountains contradicted the area's designation as the Great American Desert, and the idea that cultivation of the land would inevitably lead to an increase in precipitation, began to seriously circulate in America during the late 1860s when the Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories, a federal government agency under the directorship of Ferdinand V. Hayden, began work in Nebraska.

Hayden, also a supporter of the notion of an American empire and an adamant student of European meteorological theory, was convinced that the planting of trees in the Plains would precipitate a considerable increase in rainfall, a hypothesis that was shared and vehemently supported by Samuel G. Aughey, a member of the Hayden survey who became Professor of Natural Sciences at the University of Nebraska in 1871. These men gave scientific credence to Gregg's fantastic beliefs. And their support of these theories influenced Charles Dana Wilber, a man described by Henry Nash Smith as "a speculative town builder and amateur scientist" (2001: 181), and who is credited

with coining the phrase "Rain Follows the Plow." This slogan became an integral part of what Marc Reisner called one of "the most mendacious propaganda campaigns in history" (1999: www). For Wilber, it was "indeed a grand consent, or, rather, concert of forces – the human energy or toil, the vital seed, and the polished raindrop that never fails in answer to the imploring power or prayer of labor" (Wilber quoted in Smith 2001: 182). In Wilber's rhetoric, the plow deployed by the determined hand of the yeoman farmer replaced the tree and the forest as a means of changing the quality of the soil and the climate in the arid and semi-arid zones of the West. In fact, what he suggested to his audience (to whom he wanted to sell the land he had acquired as a speculator) was that by adhering to a Puritan work ethic, and with a little technological assistance (the steel plow and, later, the barbed wire that would protect the farmers' crops from the ranchers' roaming livestock), they could transform the desert into a garden paradise.

Politics, economics, science, and myth, four major and intricately interwoven discursive forces converged to form a bogus theory; and a period of exceptional weather conditions facilitated the reconstruction of the Great American Desert as the Garden of the World. This imaginary transformation obscured the region's most important topographical feature – the (relative) scarcity of water – and reinforced the myth that America was still that geography of "incredible abundance" that English explorer Arthur Barlow had encountered in 1584. The desert, as an emblem of scarcity rather than abundance, would have simply been an ineffective metaphor for representing the land and communicating America's progressive potential.

2 Report from Arid America: John Wesley Powell

John Wesley Powell's *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* (1878) was written as an endeavor to dispel the two ecological myths about the American West, and the politics they entailed, with measured topographical, geological, and meteorological knowledge. As such, the text can be read as an exercise in geographical realism, one whose measured, descriptive language reflects the author's attempt to replace the idiom of projective fantasy with a rhetoric of historical and ecological feasibility. For Powell, the territory known as the Great American Desert, comprising the Great Plains, the Rocky

Mountain region, and the lands along the Colorado River, was neither worthless nor useless. But neither was it one huge, potential garden. If Americans wanted to take possession of this land (and that they should Powell had no doubt), they needed to be conversant with its topography, geology, and history so they could create laws, institutions, and economic structures that would allow them to reclaim its resources most effectively. David Teague points out that Powell, far from being sentimental about it, saw the desert "as a huge problem to be solved by the growing country" (Teague 1997: 43). Three years prior to the *Report*, Powell had published *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons* (1875), a text well-known to a larger American audience because early versions had been published in *Scribner's*. In *Exploration*, the desert appeared as a sublime landscape, and as a space of adventure and thrills. Yet for Powell, aesthetic appreciation was but one, and not the most important avenue to understanding an unfamiliar landscape. The more significant approach was that of the developer. In that regard, Powell was no different from the men who were to become his most formidable political opponents – Western politicians, big ranchers, and industrialists interested in exploiting the ores and minerals lodged in the lands of the West. Powell was capable of rhapsodizing about the awe-inspiring beauty of the Grand Canyon, and, at the same time, regard wilderness as substance and matter waiting to be molded by the ingenious hand of civilization. Both attitudes were supported by and, in turn, nourished the self-confident spirit of 19th-century American nationality. Donald Worster, Powell's most recent biographer, describes the author of *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* as "an intensely nationalistic American" (2001: xii) who saw the expansion of the nation across the continent, and eventually across the world, as its inevitable destiny.

In this section I argue that Powell's geographical realism was undergirded by an ideology of racial superiority. This ideology justified the expansion of white Anglo-Saxons across America and the world, a process which, at the turn of the 20th century, Theodore Roosevelt was going to describe as "the most striking feature in the world's history" (1924: 3). Powell's language bears striking similarities to the imperial rhetoric of Roosevelt. When the Civil War broke out and President Lincoln called for volunteers, Powell did not hesitate to fight for what he believed to be a righteous cause – the preser-

vation of the powerful nation to which he had given his unquestioned allegiance. In a letter to a friend, he described his motivation:

> It was a great thing to destroy slavery, but the integrity of the Union was of no less importance: and on and beyond it all, was to be counted the result of the war as an influence which should extend far into the history of the future, not only establishing in North America a great predominating nation, with a popular and powerful government; but also as securing the ascendancy of the Anglo-Saxon branch of the Aryan family, and the ultimate spread of Anglo-Saxon civilization over the globe. Perhaps it is only a dreamer's vision wherein I see the English language become the language of the world; of the science, the institutions, and the arts of the world; and the nations integrated as congeries of republican states. (Powell quoted in Worster 2001: 96)

Worster makes light of the racist overtones in these musings. He suggests that Powell felt as much of a moral obligation towards fellow human beings who were treated as commodities as he felt a political obligation towards the Union, whose Manifest Destiny lay in becoming the most powerful force on the continent and, ultimately, in the world, but was jeopardized by the secession of the Confederate States. Worster contends that Powell "was not a racist who believed in the innate biological inferiority of people of color," but he concedes that Powell "did maintain all along a confidence that English and Anglo-American culture was best and deserved to triumph over others" (ibid.). Later, as an ethnologist studying Native American cultures, and then as director of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology, Powell operated on the assumption of the biological unity of the entire human race. He considered phrenology and other methods to establish racial differences and hierarchies scientifically counterfeit. But true science was the discursive property of white Anglo-Saxons, was the marker of his race's cultural superiority. And it was the method that needed to be applied to survey and then take possession of *all* American lands.

Topography and Race

To say that Powell's determination to provide the American public with a better understanding of the continent's vast interior was embossed with an ideology of racial hierarchy implies that his texts do not simply represent a benign desire to enlighten his fellow citizens.

Confident that knowledge is a prerequisite for successful appropriation, he approached this task with the verve of a pragmatic scientist surveying the land in order to produce an inventory of its usable resources. Worster acknowledges that early anthropology, or as it was mainly known at the time, ethnology, viewed Indians as "a vital natural resource to be mined" for "insights into the broader human condition" (Worster 2001: 399). Powell represented no exception to this position. Knowing native people, their language, cultural habits, traditions, and tribal animosities would make assimilating them into white culture, and relocating them onto reservations, much more efficient. As Worster points out, stability and peace on the reservations was much more likely to be achieved if the government avoided locating traditional enemies in close proximity to each other. Powell's primary interest was in producing knowledge for effective control and rational government, not for creating social justice. His attitude towards Indians, who were considered wards of the federal government, remained largely paternalistic. A passage in *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* illustrates Powell's sober rationalism. Having come across great areas of dead forest in the Rocky Mountain Region, the *Report* provides an explanation for this phenomenon. Contrary to the mythology that Indians set fire out of spite for "that which is of value to the white man," Powell demystifies these fires, identifying them as part of native hunting methods. The demand for fur, "the wealth and currency of the savage," had increased "during the rapid settlement of the country since the discovery of gold and the building of the railroads." Indians, who had been driven out of the area that had served as their source for food, had to rely on alternative sources of income for their survival, and furs could be easily traded for food and other provisions. With this description Powell proves himself to be a keen observer of settlement patterns and their ecological effects. He even implicates white Americans in the destruction of precious resources. But in his offered solution to this problem, Powell reverts to an imperialist stance. "The fires," he suggests, "can, then, be very greatly curtailed by the removal of the Indians" (1962: 28).

The same logic of rational imperialism is at work in Powell's topographical inventory of the lands of the arid region. Powell, who saw the West as "a region of vast and inexhaustible wealth"(Powell as quoted in Worster 2001: 362), was a scientist with strong utilitarian leanings. While in his estimation zoology and botany had no conceiv-

able practical value for the nation's progress and, therefore, should depend on private funding, geography, geology, and ethnology were scientific disciplines of utmost public value. Geography was instrumental in mapping the territory, thus providing a precise understanding of the extent of the national domain. Geology, because it marked the locations of valuable mineral resources and classified the land along the lines of agricultural utility, was indispensable for securing personal as well as national prosperity. And ethnology would provide answers for the so-called Indian problem Americans faced in their mission to spread across the continent (Worster 2001: 362). Powell drew considerable fire for his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*, because, as Wallace Stegner observed, his political adversaries suspected that he was "trying to talk the Great American Desert back into existence just after it had finally been established as a garden" (1992a: 237).[11] But in his heart, Powell too was a Jeffersonian and an advocate of the idea of America as a Garden Republic. He believed that the human right to "subdue" the earth was God-given, but he also believed that such subduing should be done effectively and at the lowest cost possible.[12] Aridity posed an obstacle to this divine charge, particularly for a culture more familiar with humidity, but one that was not insurmountable. For Powell, the key was *not to deny* the desert's existence, but to *investigate* its character and to *know* it scientifically. When he handed the *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* to James A. Williams, Commissioner of the Public Land Office, Carl Schurz, Secretary of the Interior, and to Congress, Powell submitted to the American public a document based on more than a decade's worth of his experience exploring the Colorado River and Rocky Mountain regions, supplemented by statistical data on rainfall collected and published in 1870 by fellow scientist Charles Schott. Schott's map of isohyets, or lines connecting spaces with equal annual or seasonal rainfall had established the view that there was not enough rainfall in most of the territory hitherto known as the Great American Desert, the critical amount for agriculture being twenty inches.

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11 For a detailed discussion of the opposition to Powell's *Report* see Smith 1947.

12 The word 'subdue' appears at least twice in the first chapter of the *Report* (14).

Classifying Western Lands

Because the territories were so susceptible to drought and long periods of fruitlessness, Powell even submitted that "it may be doubted whether, on the whole, agriculture will prove remunerative" (1962: 13). His choice of words is crucial here. Although taken as a whole the territory did not yield to visions of settlement and strong regional economies, Powell's text suggests that dividing the land into conquerable units serving specific agricultural purposes would solve the problem. Excluding mining areas that hold "a great abundance of lignitic coals" (30), Powell recognized "three great classes" (16) of land: irrigable, timber, and pasturage. Citing the example of Mormon and Spanish/Mexican endeavors in cultivating desert lands, Powell recognized irrigation as the key to development in the West, even though "[w]ithin the Arid Region only a small portion of the country is irrigable" (16), and its extent "is dependent upon the volume of water carried by the streams" (17). Not only farmers, but also the "men engaged in stock raising" on lands not yielding to the cultivation of crops yet peppered with nutritious grasses, would "need small areas of irrigable lands for gardens and fields where agricultural products can be raised for their own consumption, and where a store of grain and hay may be raised for their herds" (31-32). And these lands, because they must be irrigated in order to produce at all, carry a singular advantage: "agriculture will be but slightly subject to the vicissitude of scant and excessive rainfall" (20). Therefore, "the lands redeemed by irrigation in the Arid region will be highly cultivated and abundantly productive" (20). Acutely aware of the enticing magic of the rhetoric of abundance, Powell catered to a nation eager to take profitable possession of its continental estate while, at the same time, advising against the adoption of rash generalizations about the physical and meteorological characteristics of the land itself. A case in point: Yes, there were the "true deserts" (30), areas too high or too low in altitude to support the growth of grass or timber. But the entire Great American Desert is not a dry, arid wasteland. Following the linguistic convention of the Desert Land Act of 1877, Powell redefined "desert land" as "irrigable lands" (38). Irrigated farming in Utah produced a large variety of crops, among others corn, wheat, oats and rye, but also garden vegetables and fruits, "and even the fig tree and sugar canes are there raised" (98). But unlike Gilpin and other garden mytholo-

gists, Powell expanded his description. He knew that "the area of arable land is greater than the area of irrigable land" (98). Many sections were simply too far away from any water sources to make irrigation feasible.

Powell's detailed description of the West's heterogeneous topography insisted on one major fact: that the nation, as Donald Worster has it, was "divided into two parts – humid and arid," and that this ecological reality had "momentous institutional and technological implications" (2001: 349). Whether irrigable land or true deserts, the territory encompassed by the American West, land the nation had seized either from indigenous inhabitants or from colonial competitors as a result of military and political actions, presented a materiality that resisted established forms of economic appropriation. Governed by a strong sense of Jeffersonian responsibility to the small farmer, Powell came to the conclusion that "the preemption, homestead, timber culture, and desert land laws" (39) devised to organize and regulate the orderly expansion of the American agrarian empire across the continent were inadequate to meet the conditions of aridity. The provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed any individual to file for a quarter-section (160 acres) of the public domain and secure ownership after building a house, living on the land for five years, and cultivating at least 10 acres, was unsatisfactory because it contained no specific guidelines or regulations for watering the land. In addition, a quarter-section was too large to function as a successful farm and too small to prosper as a ranch. And the 1877 Desert Land Act, passed in order to mend the gaps in the Homestead Act, was an open invitation to fraud. Full sections (640 acres) were available for $1.25 per acre, provided that a portion of the land would be irrigated. But the Act did not specify the minimum area that must be irrigated, the amount of water that needed to be used, or how exactly the water could or should be obtained. What had been devised as a law to help individual farmers and families build new lives in fact ended up being used as an instrument to enlarge the property holdings of Western livestock grazers.

In theory, these laws, based on the geometrical grid system, reflected a commitment to rational and scientific forms of land distribution, a method that Powell theoretically supported. But in practice, these Jeffersonian principles of scientific rationalism and individualism were in need of reform. Based on the arid region's topography

and climate, Powell offered two proposals for the disposing of lands in the public domain in the West, but both would entail fundamental revisions of American traditions and ideals. His first recommendation was to eliminate the grid as the principal instrument for dividing land and abandon a rigid loyalty to the quarter-section as the basic unit for a farm or ranch. Instead, he envisioned a system of land surveys that responded to the actual topography (rivers, mountain ridges, water sheds) and not to the demands imposed by abstract geometrical shapes. Powell also called for a reform of the existing land distribution system. Farms that depended on irrigation could be run successfully on as few as forty acres, while ranches required "not less than 2,560 acres" (35) in order to operate profitably. The second major recommendation concerned the social organization necessary to irrigate the land. "Small streams can be taken out and distributed by individual enterprise," Powell wrote, "but cooperative labor or aggregated capital must be employed in taking out the larger streams" (21). While the first solution smacked too much of socialism, the latter, in conjunction with the recommended size for ranchland, conjured up the specter of monopolization. Still, Powell's suggestions held the potential to effectively use the desert lands and make settlers less susceptible to the vagaries of climate and politics. Although based on an ideology of dominance and submission that was blind to the possible environmental effects of diverting large streams and rivers into a system of canals, Powell's *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* was ecologically more realistic than either of the two great myths reigning (and raining) supreme on the American West.

At the same time, however, Powell's solutions tapped into too many political fears and ideological prejudices to form the intellectual basis of a major late 19th-century land reform. Charles Dana Wilber, in his *The Great Valleys and Prairies of Nebraska and the Northwest* (1881), ranted and raved at both western ranchers and the Public Land Commission, the government institution that promoted Powell's report. One of the main targets of his attack was the rhetorical representation of the West as desert. Obviously ill-informed about specific details of the report, Wilber was convinced that ranchers and the federal government were politically united in a conspiracy against small farmers. "The ranchmen or herders," he called out in his warning, "insist that the country will never raise grain, is only fit for cattle and sheep, *is a desert*, without water for irrigation, and insufficient rain. It

is by nature the herdsman's country, and the national law must be made to coincide." Wilber further maintained that a "powerful ring" in Washington dictated the report of the Public Land Commission, a paper that was "*full of desert, as usual*" and written "to force these lands, from their present equable distribution in farm sizes, in quarter sections, into larger tracts or districts, as may suit the aristocratic tastes of the lords of the herds" (Wilber quoted in Smith 1947: 187).

In the end, Powell was defeated by Wilber and men like him. And although later in the century irrigation became the accepted method for conquering the desert, no official support emerged for Powell's ideas about cooperative forms of working the land. Yet the *Report* remained one of the most important 19th-century treatises on the arid West. Wallace Stegner called it "a blueprint for laws and human institutions that would, if adopted, remake society and thought in the area they affected" (1992a: 219). But the *Report* is more than a blueprint for legal and institutional structures. It is a literary blueprint as well, for it introduced the desert and aridity as two ecological metaphors that expressed the need for social and intellectual change. Its language and its form are poetically uninspired, but within the text the imaginative potential for a desert-based critique of the ideology of inexhaustible abundance and unhindered progress, the driving force of capitalism, is eminently present.

3 The Conquest of Arid America: William E. Smythe

William Ellsworth Smythe made a name for himself as one of the most ardent promoters of irrigation, of Jeffersonian agrarianism, and of the idea that national greatness could be achieved through continental conquest. His political and authorial activism was catalyzed by an epiphanic experience in 1890, a year that brought severe drought to Nebraska. Smythe recalled the incident in *The Conquest of Arid America*, his opus magnum first published in 1899.[13] Working as an editorial writer for the *Omaha Bee*, he watched desperate men "shooting their horses and abandoning their farms," virtually within sight of

[13] The book was reprinted in a revised edition 1905. In 1969, Lawrence B. Lee edited and introduced the University of Washington Press Americana Library edition.

"several fine streams flowing through the state" (1969: 266). On a trip to New Mexico the previous year, he had "for the first time [seen] men engaged in turning water upon land to make good the deficiencies of rainfall" (266). Recalling this trip in view of the Nebraska drought, it occurred to the young journalist that irrigation could permanently end "the childlike dependence on the mood of the clouds for the moisture essential to the production of the staple necessities of life" (21-22). Irrigation, he realized, was "the secret of prosperity" (266). And it was more: "a philosophy, a religion, and a programme of practical statesmanship rolled into one" (267). His mind set on visions of "thrifty orchards and gardens" (266), Smythe took up "the cross of a new crusade" (267). Inspired by John Wesley Powell's ideas yet also generalizing them, Smythe launched the National Irrigation Congress, founded the influential journal *Irrigation Age*, and wrote for one of the most important western journals at the time, Charles F. Lummis' *Out West*. Not confining his activities to local and regional pursuits, he also contributed pieces to national publications such as the renowned *Century* and *Atlantic Monthly* magazines. The combination of an economic with a social and political vision, articulated through a religiously inspired rhetoric, was to have a lasting impact on the cultural perception of the national relevance of an hitherto neglected region, the American West, and the landscape that represented it in the nation's cultural imaginary, i.e., the desert.

The Conquest of Arid America crowned Smythe's career as a writer and political lobbyist for the American West. In his introduction to the 1969 library edition, Lawrence B. Lee positioned Smythe's book in the context of changing attitudes towards the West and described its author as "a major force in creating a western [and, one may add, a national] public opinion favoring irrigation development" (Smythe 1969: xxxii). As a creator of public opinion, Smythe actively participated in turn-of-the-century efforts to amend images of the West as a culturally, historically, and economically insignificant, albeit geographically indispensable territory, a tremendous task that united politicians (Theodore Roosevelt, Francis G. Newlands, the Senator after whom the 1902 Newlands Reclamation Act was named), artists (Fredrick Remington), and writers (Owen Wister, Mary Austin, John C. Van Dyke). Smythe's *The Conquest of Arid America* contributed to this mosaic of new images of the West, portraying the West, as Lee puts it, as "a sanctuary for the traditional American society nour-

ished in agrarian simplicity and protected from the forces that were undermining the old order in the East" (xxxv). Yet if it was to be a sanctuary, the West had to be relieved of its desert image. Smythe's text was written in order to fulfill exactly this purpose.

Where previous generations[14] had seen nothing but worthless land, necessary only as a land bridge between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, Smythe discerned a "vast margin of undeveloped resources" that "call loudly for men and capital to come and make use of them" (Smythe 1969: xxiii). George Burton Adams, a contemporary commentator writing for *The Atlantic Monthly*, subscribed to a similar view. Referring to the territorial expansion that was a result of the Mexican-American War of 1848, he admitted that "history will hardly be able to characterize [it] in its final account as anything but a war of deliberate conquest, forced upon a weak neighbor." However, far from taking a self-critical perspective on U.S. imperial expansion, Adams immediately resumed the self-congratulatory tone of his essay, explaining to his readers that "we obtained a territory destined to make real for us the early dreams of El Dorado" (Adams 1897: 536). Adams' recourse to the dream of El Dorado bespeaks a certain ideological nonchalance with which he appropriated fantasies of European colonialism on behalf of his own imperial nation. But it also indicates his acute awareness of the need to justify the nation's expansion into territory that encompassed the desert. If these questionably acquired lands were of no practical value, they could at least provide the symbolic benefit of the dreams attached to them. But Smythe saw more in the desert than a screen for the projection of dreams. He saw it as a stage for their realization, and, with *The Conquest of Arid America*, wrote a script for their performance.

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14 Yi-Fu Tuan cites the representative example of John Russell Bartlett, who was appointed United States Commissioner of the United States and Mexico Boundary Commission in the summer of 1850. A bibliophile and former bookstore proprietor, Bartlett was familiar with exotic travel literature. When he encountered the New Mexican landscape in 1851, he was "sickened and disgusted with the ever-recurring sameness of plain and mountain, plant and living thing" (Bartlett quoted in Tuan 1974: 67).

Scripting the Drama of Desert Conquest

If John Wesley Powell's *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* was a cautionary tale, written to correct the (mis)representation of the entire Great American Desert as the Garden of the World, alerting the nation to the West's limited agricultural potential, William Ellsworth Smythe's *The Conquest of Arid America* epitomized the tall tale of the nation's aspiration to triumph over the desert. Appearing at a critical juncture in America's history, the book, described by Lawrence B. Lee as the "classic of the Progressive Era reclamation movement" (Smythe 1969: xxix), imagined the emergence of America as a continental empire through the desert's transformation into an agri- and horticultural landscape.

As I will argue in the following analysis of *The Conquest of Arid America*, the text served two major political and economic functions: the promotion of (1) the territory still known as the Great American Desert as an agricultural domain, and (2) the technology – irrigation – that would release this territory's dormant potential as a garden. Smythe knew that in order to achieve these two goals he had to construct the conquest of arid America as a socio-economic *and* cultural project. Hence, he employed a literary style (marked by the author's propensity for exuberant metaphors) and a rhetoric that appealed to his readers' imaginative capacities as much as to their economic fantasies. The result is *The Conquest of Arid America*, a discursive exercise in translating images of the West and Southwest as "hot desert" and "bare mountain" into visions of a socially, economically, and politically revitalized America. In his writing, Smythe joins the "men of the Forward Look," who stand at the head of the West's universities and colleges, "clearing the intellectual forests, rooting up the social sage-brush, irrigating the arid wastes of politics and economics" (Smythe 1969: xxvii). The conquest of arid America is not just projected as a technological but also as a cultural challenge. Only if the nation at large is willing to overcome its prejudices against the desert will the work of translating aridity into fertility and of scarcity into abundance be crowned with success. But far from being solely a technology that turns nonarable land into fertile, productive fields and gardens, *irrigation* also becomes *a nation-building metaphor*. The narrative self-fashioning of *The Conquest of Arid America* as a compendium of useful information for the prospective settler obscures the

text's literary impetus, its representation of the desert (or arid America) in imaginative and imaginary terms, its implied intertextual references to the discourses of empire and domesticity, and its open embrace of a rhetoric of conquest and colonization.

Here, in the rhetorical nooks and niches of intertextuality, hides this second, less obvious communicative purpose of *The Conquest of Arid America*. Clad in a rhetoric of home and domesticity, this narrative of conquest provided an opportunity to further disseminate and popularize ideas about America as a powerful world empire. Moreover, it consolidated the ideological foundation of the nation at a time when the forces of modernization (immigration, industrialization, urbanization) seemed to threaten its (imagined) social cohesion and challenge its ethnic and racial hierarchies. In this situation of social and cultural flux, *Smythe's desert represented the (conservative) possibility of historical continuity and social regeneration*. What are the terms and concepts that Smythe employs to produce these new meanings of the desert?

The Poetics of Desert Conquest

Whereas John Wesley Powell based his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* on a scientific survey of the topographic reality of the American West, cautiously differentiating arable and irrigable land from sections that were impossible to reclaim, Smythe's text boldly neutralized Powell's geographical realism and described the region on the basis of a simple paradigm of environmental dualisms. On the one hand, there were the world's arid regions – Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine ("the land of milk and honey"), Persia, Arabia, Northern India, and even "our own Southwest" (Smythe 1969: 34). On the other hand were dark forests, swamps, marshes and moors. Here lived ancient civilizations that built "great irrigation canals" (35), "silent witnesses which have survived the centuries to testify to the engineering skill and the perfection of social organization of those who were swept into oblivion" (35). There were the humid lands where human survival did not depend on such techno-cultural achievements as irrigation. On the contrary, the forests and swamps provided a home for civilization's "savage enemies, both animal and human" (35) and were a hotbed for diseases and other potential calamities. Smythe mobilized this

neat partition of the world into arid = civilized and humid = savage as an authoritative rhetorical instrument that allowed him to project arid America as a space whose conquest would turn the nation into the modern heir to the great desert civilizations of the ancient past. After all, as "the glories of antiquity sprang from the heart of the desert" (34), so would the glories of 20th-century America. As we will see later in Chapter Two, this inverts anthropogeography's classification of the desert as the domain of the barbarian.

Like the world at large, according to Smythe, the North American continent is neatly divided into a western arid and an eastern humid half along the 97th meridian (and here the author slightly diverts from the more popular 100th meridian as the dividing line). In the East, forests were cleared and prairie sod was turned, but the "greed for land resulted in large farms, and this involved social isolation" (31). With the exception of banding together to defend themselves against Indians, Eastern farmers acted as individuals and for their own benefit. "Individual enterprise" became "the conspicuous product of the time," and inevitably led to a culture of "competition" that "has latterly tended towards monopoly" (31). But in the West, the critical element necessary for the fertile soil to produce – water – "lay beyond the reach of the individual" (31). As long as settlers understood that in the West farming was an "associative enterprise" (32), a matter of organization and cooperation, this obstacle would not prevent individuals from becoming prosperous citizens. The desert's topographical imperfection – lack of sufficient amounts of rain water – is translated here into the prerequisite or, more accurately, an incentive for the nation's social perfection through cooperation. The argument echoes Powell's cooperative approach to desert conquest.

At least part of Smythe's enthusiasm for the country's Western lands derived from his belief that aridity produces "a healthy race" (30), a sentiment shared by many turn-of-the-20th-century advocates of the West. Ray Stannard Baker advertised the climate of the Southwest as "the most healthful of the United States, California not excepted" (1902: 7); and John C. Van Dyke praised the desert as the country's "breathing-space" (1980: 59).[15] However, unlike Van Dyke, who demanded that the desert "should never be reclaimed" (ibid.) but enjoyed in its wild beauty, Smythe saw its reclamation through irrigation

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15 For a more detailed discussion of John C. Van Dyke see Chapter Two.

agriculture as a fundamental prerequisite for the nation's vigor and strength. His advocacy of the desert as an unrecognized or dormant garden is based on three ideological premises: (1) Civilization is the outcome of the human mastery of nature; (2) The impulse to master nature originates from God's assignment to the first humans to subdue nature through their earthly labor; and (3) The Anglo-Saxon race is the most successful executor of this divine assignment. Smythe situated desert reclamation on a historical continuum that began with the arrival of the Pilgrims on the North American continent. If, in traveling to the New World to build a City upon a Hill, they turned their backs on England, then their descendants should turn their backs on the "overgrown cities and over-crowded industries" (Smythe 1969: 19) of the East and move West to build the Irrigated Farm Community in the Desert. As Stephanie L. Sarver, author of *Uneven Land: Nature and Agriculture in American Writing* (1999) observed, Smythe dreamed of "a Jeffersonian democracy – ideal communities of neatly tended gardens, tidy houses, and well-organized schools that will rear upstanding citizens who will steer arid America toward an ever-more idyllic future" (126).

Despite the pragmatic political and social intentions of his work – to popularize irrigation and to encourage America's "surplus population" (19), ousted from the exhausted soils and the industrial centers of the American East and Europe, to settle in the West – Smythe was acutely aware that the desert had to be reconstructed semiotically before it could be conquered physically. He presented the Great American Desert's transformation into an agri- and horticultural landscape inhabited by Anglo-Saxon farmers in conspicuously semiotic terms. Convinced that the careless glance cast by "the casual Western traveler, looking at the country from car-windows in the intervals between his daily paper" was responsible for the continued ignorance of his fellow citizens of "the economic possibilities of the country" (21), he believed it necessary to deconstruct images of the desert as a worthless, useless domain beyond the reach of civilization, and subsequently to reassemble its shattered fragments into one of the nation's canonical landscapes. *Century Magazine*'s Ray Stannard Baker saw the conventional perception of the Southwest as monotonous and barren desert and habitat of wild men and beasts in a similar light. He also believed that the derogatory view of the nation's Southwestern backyard

was less an inherent problem in its geography or ecology and more a cognitive error:

> This impression is based in part on the stray paragraphs from this unknown land that occasionally creep into the metropolitan newspaper, but it is chiefly founded upon the hasty observations and reports of dusty transcontinental travelers, car-weary for three or four days, the edge of their interest quite blunted with longing for the green wonders and soft sunshine of California. (1902: 5)

In the second essay of his three-part series on "The Great Southwest," this observation culminated in Baker's hyperbolic declaration: "After all, there is no desert." The desert, he insisted, was merely a figment of "a cramped and mendicant imagination," and indicated nothing but "a weak faith in humanity" (213).

Translating the Desert in the Name of Empire

The consonance of the topology in Baker's essay with that in Smythe's text is remarkable. Note the implied juxtaposition in both Smythe and Baker of their own narrative perspective with that of the traveler merely traversing the desert, and of the textual authority of the daily newspaper with that of their own descriptions. Both writers use this technique to distinguish their own positions from that of the traveler merely passing through, and of their own texts from the fleeting business of sensational news reporting. They authorize their own representation of arid America by questioning the accuracy of the traveler's passing gaze. In the introduction, Smythe had already replaced the traveler with the potential settler as the implied reader of *The Conquest of Arid America*. He declared that the book "is for all optimistic Americans, but especially it is for those who have the courage of their optimism – for the *homeseekers*, who, under the leadership of the paternal Nation, are to grapple with the desert, *translate* its gray barrenness into green fields and gardens, banish its silence with the laughter of children" (Smythe 1969: x-xi; italics added).

With this strategically placed authorial address, Smythe prepared the ideological ground for his promotional desert narrative. The creation of an agricultural paradise out of the bare desolation of the desert is presented as a national task of economic, psychological, and

symbolic dimensions. In just one sentence, he combines the powerful economic metaphors of home and garden with the abstract political concept of the nation and its paternal responsibility for its citizens, all of which coalesces in a complex symbolic translation into psychological dispositions such as optimism and the innocent joy of children. This is an author totally aware of the persuasive power of language, and some of his rhetorical tricks were adopted by some of his contemporaries, thus becoming linguistic conventions of literary desert boosterism. For example, in an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* Harriet Monroe employed children, music, and laughter as tropes to decorate her fantasies of civilization's ultimate victory over the Arizona desert. Visiting "a kindly German housewife" in "her little foothold" in the desert, Monroe emblazons this woman's life and home by setting them off against the glamour of Florence and the aristocratic power of the Queen of England. Remembering this domestic scene, she "felt the coming of new empires, the burden of unborn centuries." And although the place looks as if only "barbarians cowering on their lofty mesas" and "savages scouring their thirsty plains" could inhabit it, Monroe's visionary instinct told her that "hierarchies and civilizations shall surely inherit it, shall make the wilderness blossom as the rose, and fill it with children and music and laughter." Even more so, "The stubborn problem of drought will surely be solved by the united energies of the genius of man, and these sad inclement solitudes will yield up at last the stored riches of ages" (1902: 781).

Underlying such visionary translations of the desert from an abode of barbarians and savages into the home of America's aspiring civilization is what cultural critics call the *translatio*-tradition, which, in Peter Freese's words, interlinks "the heliotropic concept of civilization's westward course" with "the Biblical notion of imperial succession as a fulfillment of divine dispensation" (Freese 1996: 268),[16] implying ideas of rejuvenation and the reformation of existing social orders through colonial expansion. In America this notion obtained a distinct environmental shape, manifesting itself in the creation of a national geography of gardens and national parks, "a collection of Great Landscape Texts" whose construction, as David Mazel aptly suggested, is "an exercise of cultural power" (2000: 2). As canonical landscapes, their "political utility has been to embody a particular vision of

[16] See also Cheyfitz 1997.

the nation" (3). In Smythe's case, the irrigated farm not only translated an otherwise worthless landscape into a symbol of growth; it became the symbolic center of a landscape that embodied America's predestination to imperial power.

To fulfill his task of translating the desert into a landscape of better homes and gardens, the author of *The Conquest of Arid America* relied on three closely related rhetorical strategies. First, he embedded the desert in the concepts of empire and domesticity. Second, he silenced the desert's past and present as a cultural landscape, representing it as a vast, natural terrain with dormant riches – minerals, precious metals, and, most important, fertile soils. And third, he subjected the desert's reinvention as an agri- and horticultural landscape to the cultivating influence of Anglo-Saxon Americans.

The Conquest of Arid America was first published at a time when, as Donald Worster formulated it, "driving toward empire was an established national preoccupation" (1985: 115), and the United States was pushing into the Pacific and the Caribbean to expand its sphere of political and economic influence. The issue of irrigation and desert reclamation was becoming a subject of heated political debates. In the book's 1905 edition, Smythe commented on the squabble between the Democrats and the Republicans over which party could claim credit for jump-starting the nationwide discussion of the irrigation issue. Once the proposal of reclamation through irrigation was on the national agenda, due at least in part to the passing of the 1902 Newlands Irrigation Act, the controversy resurfaced in the presidential campaign of 1904. Smythe remarked that it "raged fiercely throughout the arid region and was sharply accentuated by the Democratic demand for a policy of domestic development as opposed to foreign expansion" (Smythe 1969: 287).

Ignoring the confines of abstract political affiliation, Westeners tended to support the party that favored desert reclamation through a federal irrigation program. In the last of his three essays on "The Great Southwest," published early in the summer of 1902 and almost coinciding with President William McKinley's signing of the Newlands Irrigation Act in June of that year, Ray Stannard Baker informed his east coast readers that "these Westerners do not believe in the necessity of foreign islands as an outlet for American colonization" but rather in the reclamation of "their own expanses of unclaimed, cheap,

rich land in a climate that is nearly perfect" (Baker 1902b: 368). Baker's account echoed what had been common rhetorical practice in the West for more than two decades. In the 1870s, Morris Estee, a Republican lawyer from California, characterized by Donald Worster as "the most expansive of the irrigation imperialists," employed the concepts of empire and colonialism to promote the American West and undo its image as worthless, useless territory. Summarizing a report of the State Board of Trade's Committee on Arid Lands, which Estee chaired, Worster writes:

> Territorial acquisition overseas offered one possibility of replenishing American *Lebensraum*, but the morally superior course was to reclaim a like amount of space from the arid lands. 'We see what an empire would thus be brought into practical use,' Estee's board enthused, for there would be room for hundreds of millions in that reclaimed land, while abroad there were vast indigenous populations in the way. The American empire lay waiting in the western desert, and with the irrigated produce from it Americans could go overseas as agricultural merchants, opening up markets throughout the world, opening up the hungry, insatiable markets of China and India, winning through trade what Europeans must win through bloody arms. (1985: 116)

Assuming that Worster's summary accurately represents the cultural logic underlying the politics of reclamation, two aspects demand special attention because they highlight the intersection of the desert with colonial/imperial aspirations and the implications for American domestic politics. The construction of (domestic) desert conquest as a morally superior course in empire building depends on the assumption that the desert is a cultural void, a space lacking an indigenous past and, more importantly, an indigenous or, for that matter, a Spanish colonial and Mexican present and presence.

With *The Conquest of Arid America*, Smythe colluded in this practice of blissfully denying, or at least belittling the importance of the pre-industrial desert agriculture practiced by such desert tribes as the Tohono O'odham and Yaqui Indians in the Sonoran desert of Southern Arizona and Northern Mexico, or the Mojave desert Paiute, who practiced irrigation in the Owens Valley. True, he briefly acknowledged "the advice of friendly Indians" and "the example of Mexicans" (Smythe 1969: 55) as possible sources of inspiration for the irrigational systems built by the Mormons in the Salt Lake Valley, but he quickly abandons this route to concentrate on Mormons as the

"first of the Anglo-Saxon race" (54) who successfully settled in the desert. Thus, the desert's translation from the foreign idiom of a cultural landscape shaped by pre-industrial technologies of Native American and Mexican societies into the domestic idiom of modern Anglo-American industrialism was predicated on an intricate rhetorical interplay of race, gender, and landscape.

Race, Gender and the Domestication of Arid America

While the Mormon practice of polygamy might be morally reprehensible to Smythe and his contemporaries, and therefore rightfully condemned,

> no candid mind can study the problem which confronts the American people – the problem of opening the door to the masses of our citizenship upon the unused natural resources of the nation – without realizing that Brigham Young and the State he founded furnish stronger and clearer light for the future of domestic colonization than any other experience that can possibly be discovered. (1969: 75-76)

This overwriting of Native American, Mexican, and, by implication, Spanish colonial history with the history of the Mormon Commonwealth and other irrigation colonies established by white Anglo-Saxons in arid America (for example, the Anaheim and Riverside colonies in Southern California and the Greeley colony in Colorado) allowed Smythe to reimagine the Anglo-American encounter with the desert as yet another encounter with "virgin land." In doing so, he normalized the desert by integrating it into the narrative continuum of American history (a history traditionally defined as the domestication of a wild, foreign continent) while at the same time reinforcing the Anglo-Saxon core of this racially biased history. In addition to his textual advocacy of the wild virgin tamed and domesticated by the Anglo-American sons of civilization, Smythe himself acted out this scenario of historical reinforcement as one of the founders of the New Plymouth colony in Idaho. But New Plymouth was not only a practical application of Smythe's political and social ideas: As a descendent of Governor Edward Winslow of Plymouth Plantation, Smythe's contribution to the establishment of New Plymouth served as a bridge, linking both his personal as well as America's colonial past with the present.

For Smythe, the conquest of arid America through irrigation was the last act in the "wonderful drama of American colonization" (18), whose performance began with the arrival of Anglo-Saxon pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. As their production of a new England on the American stage traveled West to the Mississippi Valley, and the Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas territories during the 19th century, "New England" lost its definition as "a mere geographical term," so much so that Smythe could redefine it as "a certain spirit of civic pride and individual enterprise," and conclude: "In this sense, New England is very much in evidence in the Far West. Its sons go forth to conquer the waste places. They plant their traditions, and raise a crop of institutions" (xxvi). This direct reference to one of the foundational origin points of Anglo-American cultural identity highlighted the historical and cultural significance of irrigation as a domesticating enterprise. Its conservative political character is supported and, at the same time, naturalized by metaphors of 'planting' and 'crop raising' which represent the cultural and social translation of New England's historical and cultural topology into the Western deserts. Farming, indisputably a civilizing project, is thus reconstituted semiotically as the core economy of 20th-century America. It is hardly surprising that Smythe's irrigation pastoral abstains from commenting on what critic Stephanie Sarver described as the impact on desert ecology of "great earthmovers and cranes" and "tons of dynamite that will blast the tunnels to divert river flows" (1999: 115). Instead, Smythe exploits the authority of science to further emphasize the desert as simply a fallow field and the arena "for future settlement and development" (Smythe 1969: 33).

In a chapter dedicated to outlining "The Blessing of Aridity," the author quotes at some length the "distinguished director of the agricultural department of the University of California," Prof. E.W. Hilgard. Based on analyses of "more than one thousand [samples] of the soils of the arid and the humid regions of the United States," the professor came to the conclusion that "the soils of the arid region lying west of the one hundredth meridian, when compared with the soils of the humid region lying east of the Mississippi river, contain on the average three times as much potash, six times as much magnesia, and fourteen times as much lime" (38). This "phenomenal fertility" (34), Smythe contends, although a prerequisite for the evolution of great civilizations, was worthless without engineering and social organization. If, however, these skills and practices were applied to the desert,

they will turn it into a veritable garden, generating a "wide diversity of products required for a generous living" (44). Smythe's text is interspersed with lists of produce that grows in arid America's irrigated soil – oranges, prunes, peaches, olives, figs, almonds, apples, strawberries, and sugar beets. The textual inventory of these domestic crops not only erases indigenous desert plants but also eclipses the survey of cruder crops such as alfalfa, barley, wheat, and oats.

The result of this selective pruning is the paradisiacal décor of a domesticated desert, with the irrigation canal as a symbol of independence from and control over nature. It terminates the "childlike [i.e., savage] dependence on the mood of the clouds" (21-22), and serves as "an insurance policy against loss of crops by drought, while aridity is a substantial guarantee against injury by flood" (43-44). In short, aridity, instead of threatening life, guarantees "certainty, abundance, variety" (44). During an era when industrialization, urbanization, and immigration were rapidly changing the economic, social, and ethnic composition of America, and when farming country was being periodically ravaged by droughts, such as the one Smythe had experienced in Nebraska in 1890, the irrigated desert held out hope that agrarian America and the social, ethical, cultural, and racial values it represents could be resuscitated. It is an America epistemologically resting on what Australian environmental philosopher Val Plumwood called "the hegemonic construction of autonomy and agency" (2002: 28). At the center of this construction is a master subject, or Self, who, in America, is white, male, Anglo-Saxon, and middle-class. His physical existence depends on the contribution of Others "whose collaborative agency is assumed but denied or backgrounded." These Others include "women," "non-propertied citizens," "the colonised," and "nature, the sphere of the non-human including animals, plants and the biospheric cycles and processes of which they are a part" (ibid.).

Smythe actively engaged in the ideological practice of denial and backgrounding when he depreciated Native American and Mexican experiences of irrigation. Yet it was exactly these experiences that had inspired his vision of desert agriculture. Amidst the desperation of the horrible drought in Nebraska, he "thought of the thrifty orchards and gardens I had seen on the Las Animas and the Vermejo a few hundred miles further southwest" (Smythe 1969: 266). For Smythe, irrigation was not simply an instrument to ensure survival under difficult environmental conditions; it became "a religious rite" (330), exer-

cised by "the English-speaking race" (327) to exert their god-given power over nature and all other subjects associated with it. The direct reference to Theodore Roosevelt's rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon racial and cultural dominance (see Roosevelt's essay on "The Spread of the English-Speaking Peoples," first published in 1896) underscores the implication of Smythe's thinking, which was congruent with the racist dogmas of his time. In his famous essay on "The American Wilderness," first published in 1893, Roosevelt saw "the adventurous hunters" and the "hard, dogged border farmers" as the economic avant-garde of "a masterful race" who wrested the country from Indians and Mexicans, "the original lords of the western and southwestern lands" (1923: 9). He also described the terrain southwest of the Rockies in moral terms as "evil and terrible deserts" (4). As the territory, so were its original inhabitants. As late as 1935, Walter Prescott Webb, author of *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, assigned "a cruel streak [to] the Mexican nature" (Webb quoted in Saldívar 1991: 52). "This cruelty," he speculated, "may be a heritage from the Spanish of the Inquisition; it may, and doubtless should, be attributed partly to the Indian blood" (ibid.).

Smythe did not engage in such blunt conjecture, yet by encouraging the translation of the desert into a home for white Anglo-Saxon farmers and their families, he promoted a politics of edging out the desert Southwest's original inhabitants and fed into Roosevelt's rhetoric of world history as the advance of English-speaking peoples. Furthermore, appending a modern metaphysical significance to the desert, he described it as a terrain where man can enter into a partnership with God and, "blending science with religion, and the material with the spiritual" (Smythe 1969: 328), complete the task that God has assigned to Adam after the Fall – the re-creation of a perfect, paradisiacal world. In this scenario the desert becomes, as David Teague so aptly observed, "the upcoming race-reforming challenge in the 'Anglo-Saxon experience'" (1997: 102).[17] It is no longer evil, but "palpably crude material" to be used "upon divine terms" (Smythe 1969: 331). Like his cultural ancestors from the Puritans to the Jeffersonians, Smythe saw the cultivation of wilderness at the heart of what it meant

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[17] The phrase "Anglo-Saxon experience" is a direct quote from William E. Smythe, "Ways and Means in Arid America," *The Century Magazine* 51 (March 1896): 742.

to be American. In the closing sections of *The Conquest of Arid America*, Smythe invokes the idea of the covenant, i.e., of "men" who, by "imperative necessity," are "compelled […] to make the acquaintance of God and work hand-in-hand with Him in finishing the world" (331). Thus, he completes a narrative trajectory that is strategically aimed at erasing the desert's cultural history as one informed by diverse racial and ethnic presences, and at reinventing it as a garden that nourishes white Anglo-Saxon fantasies of mastery, control, and abundance. These fantasies are further undergirded by the presence of gender in Smythe's text.

At the end of the introduction to his book, Smythe directly addresses the potential pioneer as a "young man" whom he urges to "Go West," a move that the author suggests to his reader, provided that "you are the *right* man, with the Western temperament" and that "your wife is willing!" (xxviii) Western pioneering is represented as a family enterprise that needs the consent of the domesticated (i.e., married) woman, thereby defining the enterprise itself as a domesticating project. Amy Kaplan's theorization of "manifest domesticity" as a process "which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien" (1998: 582) in the nation's domestic interior *and* its foreign exterior helps to understand Smythe's call for desert conquest not in opposition to but as an integral, ideological aspect of America's imperial aspirations. Kaplan's main argument is based on her historical observation that "the development of domestic discourse in America is contemporaneous with the discourse of Manifest Destiny" (583). Both discourses were actively engaged in defining the concepts and material manifestations of the foreign, the wild, and the natural in order to either keep them at a distance from, or to control and contain them by incorporating them into the geographical and spatial boundaries of the domestic (the nation and the home). According to Kaplan, the representation in 19th-century American literature of "the home as an empire" (586) and of empire as a homebuilding enterprise reveals the extent to which the two discourses are rhetorically permeated and ideological interdependent.

Smythe's rhetorically strategic appeal to his implied, male reader to not forgo his wife presents the ideology of Manifest Destiny clad in protofeminist language. It tightens the ideological bond he had tied earlier in the text between colonization and domestication and directs the historical hermeneutics of his text. Symthe had already conjured

up the "Pilgrim Mothers," at whose expense the Pilgrim Fathers "were glorified" (xix). He had then urged his readers to take the Pilgrim Mothers' perspective and imagine how they "felt as they looked upon the receding shores of Old England" (xix), suggesting that the "newness, the bigness, the essential masculinity of the sparsely-peopled wilderness" (xix) may be attractive to the "average man" (xix) but not to "the average woman" (xx). Woman, Smythe speculates, "is more sensitive to her surroundings," and may even lack the fantasy to imagine a new social order and to "see the fields and towns which are to be, through the clouds of dust that come swirling from the treeless land" (xx). Smythe even allows that – "more likely" – the woman "gets the heavier end of the burdens peculiar to the pioneer" (xx). Yet despite, or because of all this, men, if they want to succeed in the conquest of Arid America, need to make allowances for the presence of women.

Smythe's recourse to Pilgrim Mothers and pioneer wives as indispensable supervisors of the conquest of Arid America echoes with 19th-century notions about women's foundational influence on the welfare of family and nation. In 1841, Catherine E. Beecher published an entire treatise on the "peculiar responsibilities of American women" for the nation's "domestic economy" (1849: 3), declaring that their education was necessary for upholding the social and cultural wellbeing of the family as the nucleus of American civilization. "The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual," she wrote, "but *educate a woman*, and *the interests of the whole family are secured*" (37; emphasis added). This proposition is immediately followed by a conclusion in which Beecher employs an ecological metaphor in order to authorize the 'natural' duty of the American woman to foster her nation's Manifest Destiny at home *and* abroad:

> If this be so, as none will deny, then to American women, more than to any others on earth, is committed the exalted privilege of extending over the world those blessed influences, which are to renovate degraded man, and 'clothe all climes with beauty.' (ibid.)

The quote in her text comes from William Cowper's epic poem *The Task* (1785), a quasi-autobiographical piece in which the poet explains his retirement from the city to the English countryside, using the scriptural rhetoric of Kingdom come. Cowper rejoices that

> Rivers of gladness water all the earth,
> And clothe all climes with beauty; the reproach
> Of barrenness is past. The fruitful field
> Laughs with abundance; and the land once lean,
> Or fertile only in its own disgrace,
> Exults to see its thistly curse repealed. (1785)

Both Cowper and Beecher employ a territorial cipher ("climes") to signify a state of psychological and cultural elation; and they attach aesthetic value ("beauty") to the landscapes of civilization. Beecher's text acquires additional meaning if related back to the original context of the Cowper quote. There, the semiotics of "clothing all climes in beauty" is embedded in a poetic competition between images of the desert (barrenness, thistles, lean and disgraceful land) and images of a watered landscape (rivers, the fruitful field, abundance), leading to the exulting finale of the "thistly curse repealed." The poetic I/eye still sees the remnants of an arid landscape, but it fades into the horizon of the past. Now, by including Cowper's line into her own text, Beecher translates divine power into the gendered power of Manifest Domesticity, thereby further secularizing the English poet's allusions to the Bible's revelational rhetoric while, at the same time, sanctifying the American women's role in spreading their nation's idea of a modern civilization across the world. She employs, as it were, the technique of "double hermeneutics" (Giddens), interpreting and re-contextualizing Cowper's interpretation and re-contextualization of "the visionary language of *Isaiah*" (Jones 1971: 245). But Beecher also invests women's domestic/imperial duties with a rather distinct, eco-spatial chime, one that will resound in Smythe's text half a century later, albeit in a somewhat different key.

Whereas Beecher perceives the perfections of women's domestic skills as preparation for the larger task of extending the culture of Anglo-American civilization "over the world," Smythe seeks to redirect his contemporaries' attention from the "quaint foreign scenes and the fame of historic places" in Europe (20) to the domestic arena of the "sleeping empire"[18] in the western half of the continent, appealing to the "home-building instinct of the American people" (12). Conti-

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[18] The representation of the Desert as a "sleeping empire" is suggested by an unacknowledged poem (possibly written by himself?) that Smythe quotes as an epigraph to his book.

nental, not foreign conquest is the foundation for the greatness of the Americans, a people who turned into "a race of empire-builders" with "the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown and the subsequent inauguration of George Washington as the first President of the United States" (3). Smythe projects "the home" as the guiding star for the "American colonist, from Plymouth in Massachusetts to Plymouth in Idaho" (12), thus locating it in a spatial continuum with the Puritan beginnings on the North American continent. The rhetorical pacification of U.S. continental expansion by representing it as a non-martial, home-building enterprise overwrites the disturbing history of war, violence, and atrocities committed on both sides of the confrontation between Euro-American and indigenous inhabitants, an experience which, according to Patricia Nelson Limerick, haunts America to the present day (2000: 33-73). By concentrating his narrative attention on desert conquest as an expression of the nation's technological capability to conquer nature, and declaring that, in order for it to be successful, this enterprise needs the consent of the conquerors' wives, Smythe tapped into a well-established cultural imaginary, one in which "domestication" correlated with "empire-building" and progress was expressed in metaphors of "stricken forests" that "spring to life again / upon the forsaken mountains" (Smythe). In *The Conquest of Arid America*, Cowper's "rivers of gladness" become Smythe's "streams obey[ing] their/master." The language may be different, but the ideology underlying these ecological images is still the same.

Desert Conquest – A Success Story?

As it turned out, less than a century after Smythe's enthusiastic promotion of large-scale irrigation, the profitability of desert agriculture proved a "false promise" (Russell Clemings). Yet while economically the reclamation of the desert caused more problems and costs than originally envisioned by Smythe and his fellow irrigation boosters, the cultural and socio-political aim was crowned by success. According to Russell Clemings, this aim was "to establish a beachhead for civilization in the vacant West" (1996: 3). In *Desierto: Memories of the Future* (1991), Charles Bowden, one of the most critical of the late 20th-century commentators on Western American history, described the Great American Desert, now known as the Sunbelt, as "the new world

beyond earlier imaginations, the place where houses erupt from the earth, roads unwind and whip across the passive ground, glass towers shoot their cold shafts into the sky, bankers lick their fingertips and count" (39). This, one could say, is the outcome of Smythe's vision of a translated desert: not a garden cooperatively tended by farming families transplanting New England industriousness to the West, but a hothouse of ecological havoc and economic greed, its foundation sealed with the concrete and asphalt of modern civilization.

4 Arid America as Natural Habitat: Gary Paul Nabhan

A Caribbean Prelude

Let me open this section with a view from Barbados. In the "Epilogue" to her imaginary autobiography *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (first published in French as *Moi, Tituba, Sorciere…Noire de Salem* in 1986 and translated into English in 1992), author Maryse Condé's narrator-protagonist speaks from the land of the dead announcing that she and her beloved Caribbean island "have become one and the same" (2000: 177). The woman, hanged by white colonists for revolting against their insufferable reign, identifies with the paths, rivers, mountains, plants and animals of a land that has empowered her with medical and magical knowledge. In her death, she becomes Barbados; Tituba *is* the land. It is noteworthy that "[t]his constant and extraordinary symbiosis" of a woman's spirit with a lush and fertile island "is my revenge for my long solitude *in the deserts of America*. A vast, cruel land where the spirits only beget evil!" (177; emphasis added) The contrast between Barbados, an island beleaguered by colonial forces but, nevertheless, teeming with life and erotic power, and America, the place of Tituba's involuntary and painful sojourn, gains poetic intensity through the metaphoric identification of America with solitude and deserts. It is hardly surprising that Tituba, a woman from a tropical island forced to live through the cold and dark winters on North America's Atlantic coast and threatened with death because of her race, her creed, and her medical talents, speaks of Puritan New England as "the deserts of America." Still, the author's choice of words and images speaks yet another story. It tells of the desert's semiotic fate as the symbolic habitat of everything that opposes, resists,

fears, or otherwise contradicts life's wonderful continuation. Often, this cultural heritage obstructs the view of desert lands as spaces 'teeming' with a different kind of life. It prevents us from recognizing that the desert is not inimical to life. It simply follows a different logic, and, therefore, suggests metaphors and images different from those rooted in other lands.

My intention here is not to take Maryse Condé to task for resorting to a well-established and effective linguistic device – the desert as cultural and moral wasteland. Nor do I mean to accuse her of committing a literary misdemeanor – the use of a worn metaphor. After all, the desert plays but a minor rhetorical role in a narrative that geographically straddles Barbados and the Northeastern part of the American continent. Yet its brief, emblematic appearance as the spatial antagonist to the heroine's quasi-Arcadian home is such a brilliant, shining example of the desert's position in cultural, economic, and social fantasies congruent with the contours of well-watered landscapes. William E. Smythe has little, if anything in common with Maryse Condé. As the descendant of a New England minister and ardent advocate of Anglo-American dominance in the world, Smythe could expect little sympathy from Condé. Yet what the two writers do share is the topophilic response to the garden as an expression of cultural, political, and individual identity. And both place garden and desert at opposite ends of an ecologically imbued figurative spectrum.

America's Other Desert Gardens

This is emphatically not the case with Gary Paul Nabhan. A conservation biologist by vocation and an essayist by avocation, Nabhan arrived in the Sonoran desert in the 1970s intensely curious about its natural and cultural history. The recipient of a number of honors, including a MacArthur Award for his pioneering work with Native Seeds/SEARCH, Nabhan has published almost a dozen books, among them *The Desert Smells Like Rain* (1982), *Cultures of Habitat: On Nature, Culture, and Story* (1997), and most recently *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods* (2002), which received advance praise from some of the most prestigious members of

a newly emerging group of cultural authorities – celebrity chefs.[19] In many of his books, he speaks about the desert like others speak about gardens, an observation that is particularly true for *Coming Home to Eat*, a book that documents the author's experience with "the sensual delights," the tastes and aromas of the desert (2002: 261). In contrast to both Smythe and Condé, the deserts of Nabhan's America are a "cornucopia of native foods" (305). The author lists 27 wild plant foods, 14 cultivated plant foods, 35 wild animal foods, and three domesticated animal foods, among them various cactus fruits, teas, herbs, greens, and vegetables like squash, tepary beans, jalapeño chiles, and other "drought-tolerant foodstuff" (59), quail, mule deer, turkey, jackrabbit, and, yes, rattlesnake.

Coming Home to Eat is first and foremost a contribution to the growing canon of literature on the cultural politics of food.[20] It is designed as a petition for a new ethics of food, and a tongue-in-cheek supplication for Eve's pardon, asking the mythical mother of Jews and Christians to "please forgive us for our sins, the freeze-dried ones, the ones we have spiced with MSG [the flavor-enhancing monosodium glutamate], and all the others we heave into our shopping carts" (26). Nabhan maintains that more and more people growing up around the turn of the 21st century "are so laughably clueless about the origins of their food" that they are likely "to mention Safeway" (or any other

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19 Alice Waters (*Chez Panisse*, Berkeley, California) and Peter Hoffman, chef owner of the *Savoy* Restaurant in New York City and national chair of the Chefs Collaborative wrote blurbs for the hardcover edition.

20 At this point, it is already impossible to give a comprehensive bibliographic survey of food-related studies. Representative of what I see developing as both a popular and academic interest in food and culinary culture is the resurgent interest in the work of women like MFK Fisher and Vertamae Grosvenor, the publication of literary cookbooks like Ntozake Shange's *If I can Cook/ You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), anthologies like Jo Brans' *Feast Here Awhile: Adventures in American Eating* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1993), and international bestsellers like Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (London: Penguin, 2002). Of the many academic publications, I want to mention Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions Into Eating, Power, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food* (London: Routledge, 1996); David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Sherrie A. Inness (ed.), *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2001).

grocery chain operating on national and international food markets) "as the Garden of Eden" (ibid.). Alluding to the spatial mythology of what Carolyn Merchant called the "agricultural origin story of Adam and Eve" whose blissful chapter ends with the couple being "cast out of the garden into a desert" (1995: 28), Nabhan constructs the world outside Safeway as a desert. After a trip to visit some of his family in Lebanon, the author returned to his "Sonoran Desert home" (27), determined to "emulate" the food habits of his cousins "by filling my larder as much as possible from the foodstuffs found in my own backyard, within my own horizons" (ibid.). After leaving the culinary paradise of his Lebanese family, the author resolved to also turn his back on Safeway's Eden, and literally enter the desert in search of the foods that would fill his stomach but also please his taste buds and olfactory senses. In telling the story of his postmodern Fall from the Garden, Nabhan also engages in reconstructing, or as he would prefer to call the process, "restorying" the desert as a gastronomically "sonorous landscape" (1997: 311).

In my reading of *Coming Home to Eat*, I will analyze the poetic significance of the desert in a project that is both a literary effort in ecological consciousness raising and an ecocritical commentary on the devastating effects of the modern epistemological divide between culture and nature, garden and wilderness. I will argue that Nabhan's desert becomes the core metaphor in a new (postmodern?) poetics of the garden. The desert garden he describes in *Coming Home to Eat* is not simply an oasis, i.e., the anti-thesis of the desert devised by civilization's technological ingenuity and created as both a social space and a sign of man's power over nature. Nor is it a moderately regulated yet still largely unspoiled patch of wilderness.[21] Rather, it becomes a metaphorical landscape that signifies the cultural imperative to rethink and reorganize the culture-nature relationship, a process that demands an epistemological paradigm shift from a predominantly technological and economic rationality to what Australian environmental philosopher Val Plumwood called "ecological rationality." By this, she means any given culture's "capacity to correct tendencies to damage or reduce life-support systems" and "to maintain viable ecological relation-

[21] In Chapter Four I will discuss in more detail the conceptualization and concomitant cultural function of the desert as uninhabited, unmanaged, unregulated, wild nature.

ships and coordinate them with its social organization" (2002: 68). It involves the adaptation of "a cultural 'mind' […] to its material 'body'" (15), a task that necessitates the participation of literature and art as well as philosophy and science to provide new and challenging metaphors, images, and epistemes that allow us to know and understand the world in ecological terms.

Desert Cornucopia: Restorative Stories

Gary Paul Nabhan develops his ecological desert poetics in direct response to early 20th-century attempts (à la Smythe) to translate the desert into an irrigated garden paradise. His books mark a shift from the predominant conceptualizations of the desert as either fallow land or sublime wilderness to its representation as a region exemplifying an ecologically, historically, and culturally integrated and animated space. It is, however, a space whose unique character is endangered by traditional notions of progress. Nabhan's work as a conservation biologist interested in the restoration of the native fauna is inseparable from his work as a writer eager to restore those "ancient voices" of the desert "drowned out beneath the rumble of trucks hauling semitrailers of post-NAFTA products from one nation's market to the next" (1997: 287). Represented here in the figure of a recklessly liberalized and globalized market economy and elsewhere as "modern agriculture's assault on the desert with pump and pesticides" (Nabhan 1982: 13-14), Smythe's conquest of arid America appears as an ecologically *and* culturally dubious blessing. *Coming Home to Eat*, an autobiographical documentary of a culinary experiment, is also a text committed to the "ecological restoration" (Nabhan 1997: 318) of the desert. In "Restorying the Sonorous Landscape," an essay functioning as the epilogue to *Cultures of Habitat*, Nabhan notes:

> To restore any place, we must also begin to re-story it, to make it the lesson of our legends, festivals, and seasonal rites. Story is the way we encode deep-seated values within our culture. Ritual is the way we enact them. (319)

In *Coming Home to Eat*, the author puts himself exactly to this task. He does so by engaging in two different discursive strategies. (1) He *collects the stories* and taps the narrative archives of agricultural

knowledge and culinary traditions of marginalized desert people, i.e., O'odham (formerly known as Papago), Pima, Yaqui, and Seri Indians (the major indigenous nations living in the Sonoran Desert), as well as Mexican and Anglo farmers practicing sustainable agriculture by producing crops native to the conditions of arid lands. (2) He *re-writes*, *re-imagines*, and *re-conceptualizes* the stories and popular symbols that represent the desert in the traditional Anglo-American imagination. The chapter on "Saguaro Fruit and Cactus Icons" is a good example of how Nabhan's strategy of re-presenting the desert works.

Because of its pervasive corporeal and iconic presence, the saguaro seems particularly suitable for the project of re-storying the desert's food and food-related traditions. Nabhan had commented on its dietary culture as early as 1982. In *The Desert Smells Like Rain*, he observed:

> While the desert appears unproductive to most visitors from tropic or temperate zones, it served the Desert People well, given their population level. There is reason to believe that during most years, the desert produced more food than could be harvested by local Papago villages. This includes greater quantities of favored foodstuffs than could be gathered even if the Desert People had the time: mesquite pods, palo verde and ironwood beans, saguaro seed and pulp, cholla cactus buds, prickly pear pads and fruit, greens, chia and tansy mustard seeds, rabbits, game birds, and underground stems, roots, and bulbs. (1982: 105).[22]

These and other "drought-tolerant foodstuff[s]" (Nabhan 2002: 59) comprise a traditional desert fare that provided people with the calories, energy-rich carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, and minerals necessary for a healthy and balanced diet while being adapted to the

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[22] Other critics have made similar observations about the nutritionally balanced diets of desert-dwellers. In *Topophilia*, Yi-Fu Tuan comments on the abundance of food supplies in the Kalahari desert: "Although an active Bushman's daily energy requirement is around 1,975 calories, the food that is available to him on an average day yields 2,140 calories. Thus contrary to popular belief the Bushman does not lead an existence on the edge of starvation" (1974: 78). A similar observation is cited in Charles Bowden's *Killing the Hidden Waters*: "Primitive food-gathering systems are being reexamined by scholars. It has been found that some surviving hunting and gathering groups are characterized by stable populations, sound diet, and abundant leisure. One group, the Kung!, roam the Kalahari desert, consume 2,100 calories per day, and spend only three days a week gathering food" (1977: 141).

strong seasonal fluctuation in the availability of water. On the other hand, state-of-the-art irrigation technology makes it possible to grow large quantities of (genetically engineered) crops more familiar to Americans but not native to the desert. In *Coming Home to Eat*, Nabhan points out that "a pound of edible hybrid corn […] was seldom grown in the desert without consuming two hundred gallons of water, whereas a pound of tepary beans required a fraction of that" (2002: 59). In addition to the ecologically alarming waste of water in modern irrigation agriculture, the implementation of new crops and technologies "obliterated" (104) foraging, farming, and culinary traditions native to the desert, i.e., the ecological assault is a concomitant of a cultural assault and vice versa. Moreover, it effects Native people's health on an immediate, corporeal sense – the more a community relies on an 'American' diet, the higher the level of diabetes among that population. Given this complex interdependence of ecology, culture, and corporeal identity, baldly visible to Nabhan, he "wanted to do something more than merely chronicle the decline of foraging and farming traditions" and "ensure their persistence and revitalization," an endeavor that he knew "was impossibly enormous." Therefore, he "had to find a way to break it down into tangible tasks" (104). It is against this background of reducing to a more manageable scale the project of overcoming ecological amnesia (elsewhere, he refers to the present as "a new era in which ecological illiteracy is becoming the norm" [1997: 164]), that his chapter on the ecology and iconography of the saguaro cactus needs to be read.

A large part of the chapter relates how Nabhan delights in the saguaro fruit harvest, a foraging technology he had "learned […] from a mischievous old lady named Juanita Ahill," a Tohono O'odham woman who taught him how to use the "*kuipod* cactus pole," the tool that makes it possible "to pick the saguaro fruit off the towering arms of columnar cactus" (104). The narrative represents the harvest not simply as a fruit-picking enterprise, but also as an opportunity to socialize and exchange stories and recipes with Stella Tucker Wilson (one of Juanita Ahill's kin and a "full-time cook at a nearby school for O'odham children" [105]) and Ely, Stella's African American friend who is also a chef and an expert turkey smoker; furthermore, the harvest is an occasion to essay a description of the taste and texture of saguaro fruit (comparisons with watermelon, peaches, tuna, and champagne all turn out to be hopelessly inadequate to represent the 'real'

thing), and an incentive to remember the commentary of a friend, Carlos Martínez del Río, about the relationship between the cactus and the dove feeding from saguaros. "'To say in scientific terms," del Río is quoted as having asserted, "that the doves are utilizing the water and energy of saguaro nectar and fruit for most of their own metabolic needs does not explain what is occurring. The doves, isotropically at least, are literally *becoming* saguaros.'" (107, emphasis in the original) When he finds "an old harvesting pole of spliced-together cactus ribs" (107), a tool that reminds him of the one so dexterously used by Juanita Anhill, Nabhan feels he "had stumbled upon the archeology of an old friendship, still well preserved in the dry heat of the desert" (108). Remembering the lesson he learned from Juanita about opening the cactus fruit, he pulls out a jackknife and samples one of the newly harvested fruits, not without reenacting the ritual of offering "sustenance to the sky" (108) in order to prevent drought. With this, the narrative moves on to remarks on the symbolic and mythological value of the saguaro as "something akin to lightning rods, cloud seeders, and swamp coolers" (109), i.e., forces whose proper treatment ensures a stable and reliable climate. This, then leads to the narrator's thoughts about the cyclical development of the cactus from seed to fruit-bearing plant, which ends in a playful meditation on a philosophical paradigm shift that would involve a radical change from an anthropocentric to a "cactocentric" (109) perspective. Cactocentrism, Nabhan explains, means that "saguaros produced delicious fruits merely to attract a number of us in the local faunal community to disperse their seeds, to ensure their regeneration" (109).[23] A different world indeed, if man relinquishes his claim to supreme power over nature.

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[23] Readers of American writer Susan Griffin will find some of these thoughts familiar. In *The Eros of Everyday Life* (1995), she writes about a similar experience and makes a similar observation, albeit in more poetic terms. Eating a plum, Griffin contends, is an experience of erotic joy, and, literally, an act of embodying memory. "The fruit of many months of sunlight and earth and water has entered me, becomes me, not only in my stomach, my blood, my cells, but because of what I have learned. The plum has been my lover. And I have known the plum. Letting the plum into the mind of my body, I will always have the taste of sweetness in my memory." Griffin also contends that her pleasure in eating a plum derives as much from actually partaking of the fruit as from her knowledge that "The tree exists for the sake of its own being" (151-152).

The description of saguaro fruit harvest and its personal, social, cultural, and epistemological implications is juxtaposed with a critical commentary on the saguaro cactus' iconographic ubiquity "in the advertising of food, fiber, and frolic in the American West", a semiotic practice designed to evoke in the consumer a feeling "as though we were in the Wild West" (110). Nabhan lists such peculiar practices as shooting at these strangely anthropomorphic plants, dressing them in Santa Claus gear, and uprooting, transporting, and replanting saguaros in other parts of the country and the world for the simple reason "to accommodate the many folks who fall in love with the sunsets and stickers of cactus country" (111) as examples of a culture inhabiting the desert yet living totally out of touch with its environment. For several hundred years saguaros have contributed substantially to the nutritional sustenance of a people for whom the desert was not at all barren, bald, and desolate. To include the images of saguaros on labels for beer, potato chips, and salsa – foods containing not so much as a trace of cactus juice – may be a clever sales trick. From a semiotic perspective, however, the saguaro on the beer bottle or in Santa Claus garb is an expression of nature's commodification and disneyfication. As a sign disconnected from its material referent (the image on the potato chip bag says nothing about what's actually *in* the bag), 'cactus' becomes a symbol for the extent of the disjunction of culture's mind from nature's body. At the same time, the ubiquitous image of the saguaro, an iconographic proxy for a landscape (the desert) and a region (the Southwest) consolidates responses to the desert as spectacle and aesthetic object, a cultural practice I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two.

In *Coming Home To Eat*, Nabhan offers an alternative to these cultural perceptions and uses of the desert. Not only does he leave the cactus in the desert, as it were. He also reconnects the saguaro's symbolic character (cloud seeder) to its culinary value and function within the ecological system of the desert. In doing so, he re-presents the desert as habitat, that is as "a place worth dwelling in, one that has *abiding* qualities" (1997: 3; emphasis in the original). This epistemologically restorative act is predicated on a revision of the two eco-spatial core concepts of America, garden and wilderness.

If garden is understood as the economic leitmotif of subjugating nature, then Nabhan's view of the desert is hardly a garden view. If, however, garden is simply seen as an interface of nature and culture, a

place where the two "coexist without one overwhelming the other" (1997: 4), then Nabhan's desert has distinct features of a garden. The conceptual revision from desert as wasteland to desert as (indigenous) garden also entails a revision of wilderness. In "Cultural Parallax: The Wilderness Concept in Crisis" (1997), Nabhan hinges ecological restoration to concerted efforts to overcome what he calls the "cultural parallax of the wilderness concept" (1997: 157). Parallax, a term originating from the world of optics, denotes the difference between two views of an object seen from two different perspectives. It is, as Nabhan explains, "the discrepancy between what you see out of the viewfinder and what the film 'sees' through the lens" (158). Applied to the context of environmental perception, "cultural parallax" then means "the difference in views between those who are actively participating in the dynamics of the habitats within their home range and those who view those habitats as 'landscapes' from the outside" (158). The essay discusses the problem of cultural parallax within the context of differences in view between indigenous and European Americans looking at the land. What possessed "abiding qualities" for the former appeared of formidable character for the latter group. For Nabhan, to conceive of pre-Columbian America as "pristine" and "untrammeled by man" – characterizations of wilderness codified in the 1963 Leopold Report to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and in the 1964 Wilderness Act – has two cultural consequences: it means either denying indigenous Americans their humanity or acknowledging that "indigenous management of vegetation and wildlife as it was done in pre-Columbian times is compatible with and essential to wilderness quality" (ibid.). Nabhan points out that "the latter interpretation offers a rationale" for Native Americans to serve "as co-managers" (155) of contemporary wilderness areas in national parks. But such a view also erases the traditional, highly contested differentiation between garden and wilderness. Even more so, it reduces to absurdity the official convention of conceptualizing wilderness as untouched, uninhibited terrain. This does not entail an outright dismissal of wilderness, but its redefinition or re-storying.

Nabhan achieves this re-storying by drawing on Tohono O'odham poet Ofelia Zepeda's essay "Where the Wilderness Begins" (1997), a text in which she presents the desert as "the place of wilderness," marked in her cultural tradition as "the place of dreams" and "songs," "the place where nightmares hide," and "a place of power"

(1997: 86). Agriculturally undeveloped, the "'wild' desert" of the Tohono O'odham is a place of tremendous symbolic and psychic significance. As such, Nabhan observes, it is separate from "domesticated space" but "also part of her people's habitat" (1997: 162). This perspective, borrowed from his O'odham neighbors, combined and synthesized with the collected stories about the desert as a veritable food source and the critical commentaries about its commodification, enables Nabhan to create in *Coming Home to Eat* a desert of new metaphoric possibilities, a desert whose strange and exotic foods suggest a critical revision of the ecological, economic, and historical terms on which America, or to borrow Daniel R. White's formulation, "the great American technological utopia" was built (1998: 192). Writing out of another landscape and in another age, an early 20th-century colleague of Nabhan, ethnobotanist Melvin Gilmore, advocated the "adjustment of American consumption to American conditions," warning his contemporaries that "[t]he country cannot be wholly made over and adjusted to a people of foreign tastes and habits" (Gilmore quoted in Nabhan 2002: 154). A little less than a century later, Gary Paul Nabhan promotes the rediscovery of desert foods such as tepary bean and cactus fruit. While the adaptation of the American palate to grasshopper, chuckwalla, or rattlesnake (three items on a list of 35 wild animal foods Nabhan provides in the book's appendix) may be a culturally complicated and tedious process, it seems ecologically unavoidable if the desert is going to have any real chance of serving as a food source. Inhabiting the desert will involve the re-examination and re-evaluation of long-held conceptions of progress as the conquest of the desert in particular, but on a broader scale, of (bio)engineering nature out of existence. And Nabhan, through the universal subject of food and the ultimately intimate act of its consumption, forces us to recognize the vast reach of the consequences of that act and the decisions and choices it entails.

II. Orient

> […] their Orient was not so much grasped, appropriated,
> reduced, or codified as lived in,
> exploited aesthetically and imaginatively
> as a roomy place full of possibility.
>
> Edward Said

In 1866, Julius C. Birge, a self-proclaimed student of geography and young businessman from Wisconsin, was invited to join a group of like-minded men and embark on an expedition from the Missouri River to the Pacific coast. Traveling along the Oregon Trail, the journey would lead them across the Great American Desert, at the time merely a roughly charted territory whose cartographic "indefiniteness" stimulated the young man's "imagination" and lured him with the promise "of something new to be discovered" (Birge 1912: 13). Almost half a century later, when Birge finally decided to publish *The Awakening of the Desert* (1912), the book that would commemorate his mid-19th-century Western voyage, the autobiographical experience functioned as the narrative nutrient for reciting the nation's historical success in scattering "thriving cities and towns, thoroughly abreast with advanced civilization, […] over the expanse defined on the old maps as the Great American Desert" (429). Birge's narrative, which literally ends with the affirmation of advanced civilization's victory over a desolate territory, begins with a recitation of the representational compensations of past and present cartography. Quoting two lines from Jonathan Swift's "On Poetry: A Rhapsody" (1733), Birge states:

> The great American Desert was represented as extending hundreds of miles along the eastern slope of the mountains. Other deserts were shown in the unoccupied spaces beyond, and
>
> 'As geographers in Afric's maps [sic]
> With savage pictures fill their gaps,'

> So here and there on our maps of the western territories was inserted the name of some Indian tribe which was supposed to lead its wild, nomadic life in the district indicated. (13-14)[1]

In a later passage, the author picks up the trope of African deserts again. Birge remembers that at some point on his journey he was looking at the arid landscape before him, unable "to have in any degree forecast the future of that country" and unwilling to "[give] his jackknife for all the land in sight, with forty years' exemption from taxes" (69). Yet he also confesses that "to me this *waste* was *profoundly interesting and impressive, not unlike the great deserts of Africa*, although I could see in it no promise or potence of prosperity" (ibid.; emphasis added). While failing to activate the young traveler's and aspiring businessman's *economic* imagination, the desert (or desertlike) landscapes along the Oregon Trail and east of Salt Lake City "profoundly" captured his *aesthetic* imagination. The reference to the sublime topography of "the great deserts of Africa," a popular topos at the time, not only explains Birge's awe in view of the "waste" domestic lands, but also legitimates the value of the desert as a narrative subject.

With *The Awakening of the Desert* Birge celebrates the desert's transformation from waste land to cultural space, and its subsequent territorial integration into "the galaxy of American states" (429). The book bears witness to the author's ideological proximity to Smythe's philosophy of desert conquest. Birge shared with Smythe an enthusiasm for their nation's progress as it manifested itself in the changing face of the desert. Yet while Smythe's narrative relies on the metaphorical potential and the persuasive power of irrigation technology as a tool of transformation, the imaginative allure of Birge's text is hinged upon comparative reference to the deserts of Africa and Arabia, locations which the author's contemporaries readily associated with the Orient. Edward Said famously described the Orient as the

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[1] The passage in Swift's poem reads: "So Geographers, in *Afric*-Maps,/With Savage Pictures fill their Gaps;/An o'er unhabitable Downs/Place Elephants for want of Towns" (Swift 1937:645-646). While the omission of the second half of Swift's poetic judgment of the geographer's work evades the direct equation of beasts ("elephants") and humans ("some Indian tribe"), Birge's emphasis on the cultural and historical emptiness of the desert still depends on the functional definition of indigenous cultures as expressions of savagism.

central element in modern European epistemologies of geographical and cultural otherness. As such, it is

> less a place than a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these. (1994: 177)

Birge exploits this Orientalist topology when he juxtaposes the desert's (seemingly non-existent) economic value with its aesthetic and metaphysical merits as a "profoundly interesting and impressive" landscape. Moreover, in doing so his narrative rides the wave of a paradigm shift in American cultural responses to the desert that emerged during the decades framing the turn of the 20th century. David W. Teague described this phenomenon as "the rise of a desert aesthetic" (1997), a development that he observed in literary and journalistic writing as well as in painting. What escaped Teague's attention, however, are the Orientalist underpinnings of this change in perceptions of the American desert.

In this chapter, I want to argue that the conspicuous visual and discursive presence of the Orient in fin-de-siècle American culture, combined with the emerging anthropological and aesthetic interest in so-called primitive cultures, provided a particularly vibrant context for imaginative remodelings of the Great American Desert (particularly its Southwestern parts) as a national landscape. After the U.S. had extorted large tracts of what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California from Mexico as a result of the Mexican-American War in 1848, these newly acquired territories, now an interior part of the U.S., required mapping, reorganization, and assimilation into the discourse of American national identity. This involved two major tasks: first, the obligation of coming to terms with topographical conditions utterly dismissed by the Eurocentric ecological and economic imperative of fertility and abundance; and second, the domestication (or Americanization) of a landscape created by the combined forces of Native American, Mexican, and Spanish history. As I will argue, the topology of Orientalism provided a pattern and a reference point for the appropriation (or rejection) of the desert as an American space.

1 The Orient in America

The significance of the Orient for conceptualizations of America and American nationality follows a historical trajectory and cultural logic different from those underlying the garden and wilderness paradigms. Despite Deleuze and Guattari's evocative association of the New World with the Orient (see the Introduction to this study), research on the mutually enhancing relationship between two of the most commanding topoi in the modern cultural imaginary is still at its beginning. The semantic convolution of the New World with the Orient began with Columbus who, when he first landed on Española, was convinced that he had found proof of the hypothesis "that the Orient can be reached more quickly by sailing westward rather than by traveling overland eastward" (Watts 1985: 81). Soon after this brief guest performance during the era of first contact, the Orient faded away from the discourse of America, only to re-emerge during the 19th century when the young republic, now politically independent from Great Britain, began to develop a national rhetoric that would insist on America's cultural difference from Europe and that would peak in the Orientalist craze in the fin-de-siècle. The Orient's topographical location in non-European landscape types provided a welcome tool to mark this difference and loosen America's cultural ties with Europe.

Edward Said's insistence in *Orientalism* that it was not until after World War II that the United States replaced Britain and France as the dominant Western power in Northern Africa and Arabia eclipsed the *culturally productive ties* between America and the Orient that existed *before* the shift in the region's *political power structures* since the middle of the 20th century. More recent studies have corrected this picture. In the introductory essay for *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (2000), the catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same title, Holly Edwards draws attention to an increased interest among "the white male elites of the northeastern United States" (2000a: 14) in the Orient as a source of "refinement" and as the provider of "artifacts and cultural traditions of greater antiquity than their own" (12). *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures* records the construction and visualization of the Orient as a space that "offered opportunities" for America's emerging middle-class "to imagine, vicariously experience, and ultimately incorporate new options into their lives" (16) during an era when their

country was being transformed from an agrarian and rural into an industrial and urban society and when Victorian values of ethical and moral propriety slowly but surely eroded. Painting, literature, tourism, the collection of Oriental artifacts and memorabilia, their representation on consumer products such as tobacco, in architecture, interior design, silent movies, and the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 reflect the Orient's transformation into a fashionable cultural commodity and its arrival in American *popular culture*. Prior to this development, the Orient had already become a crucial topos in the *literary and intellectual culture* of the so-called American Renaissance.

America's Oriental Renaissance: Literature, Tourism, and Social Reform

In *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient* (1989), Luther S. Luedtke describes the author of *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Marble Faun* as the intellectual prototype of "an age that thought in terms of universal history" (xv), one that placed America's new civilization on a geo-historical and cultural continuum with the ancient East, the Mediterranean Renaissance, and England. The era around the turn of the 19th century was also the age that William H. Goetzmann called the Second Great Age of Discovery, a time when Europe and the United States competed with each other in blazing the passage to India, both geographically and culturally. The Orient, particularly Egypt and India, moved towards the center of Europe's cultural and political attention, so much so that the French called the decades between 1770 and 1850 *La Renaissance orientale*. Luedtke defines this Oriental Renaissance as "a time when the language, literature, and imagination of Europe were reborn through Indic rather than Hellenistic inspiration" (xix). The United States were not uninfluenced by these developments and shared Europe's linguistic and aesthetic fascination with the Orient. Witness Edgar Allan Poe or Washington Irving, American storytellers who, as Luedtke observes, "experimented with Oriental narratives" (xvii). Witness also the history of commercial ties between the New World and the Orient, a history reaching back to the 17th century and creating "the tangled lines of India and New England" fictionalized by Bharati Mukherjee in her 1993 novel *The Holder of the World* (11). Against

this historical background, it is hardly surprising that the Orient represented a "possibility" to break away from Europe's cultural and historical guardianship. Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, a literary figure challenging the authority of the Puritan ethics of self-abnegation as well as Puritanism's legitimacy as the origin point of American history, is represented as a woman who "had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic, – a taste for the gorgeously beautiful, which, save in the exquisite productions of her needle, found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life, to exercise itself upon" (Hawthorne 1937: 133). Note Hawthorne's emphasis on cultural production and influence, emblematized by the needle and the narrator's admiration for Hester's dexterity and aesthetic taste, in describing the "nature" of his heroine. Clearly, it is in this "Oriental characteristic" where Hawthorne saw the path towards Hester's personal (and America's cultural) independence. Like many of his educated New England contemporaries, he embraced the Orient as America's true intellectual and cultural birthplace and, as Luedtke suggests, imaginatively "incorporate[d] the Oriental birthplace in the American Renaissance" (1989: xxi).

It is through this process of *imaginative incorporation* that the Orient joined ranks with garden and wilderness as significant locations in the formation of American cultural nationality. Yet there seems to be one important conceptual difference: while garden and wilderness define America through its relationship to nature, Orient appears to register less as an eco-spatial category than as a geo-cultural category, an impression corroborated by two major studies of American Orientalism, Fuad Sha´ban's *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought: The Roots of Orientalism in America* (1991) and Timothy W. Marr's *Imagining Ishmael: Studies of Islamic Orientalism in America from the Puritans to Melville* (1998).

Sha´ban defines American Orientalism as "a national cultural dialogue which derives from European background, heritage and influence on the one hand, and, on the other, stems from particular American factors and experience" (vii). For Sha´ban, one of the major factors was the American self-perception as the chosen people. This explained an intense interest in the Orient among Americans, a fascination with a region basically synonymous with the "Holy Land and its immediate surroundings." And it was this restrictive geo-religious definition that determined "American Orientalist thinking and behav-

ior throughout the [19th] century" (viii). Other factors listed are the Barbary Wars 1801-1805; commercial and diplomatic relationships established in the aftermath of these wars; missionary activities based on a profound belief in the superiority of the Christian religious tradition; widespread popularity of the *Arabian Nights*; and, towards the end of the century, an increase in tourism to Oriental countries. But Sha´ban's introductory attempt to refer such a variety of Orientalist engagements back to "the American vision of Zion" (177) and to Puritan self-representations as a people "entrusted with the task of rebuilding the Kingdom of God, the 'little American Israel'" (195) not only runs the risk of reducing cultural criticism to an ideological exercise whose only concern is to display the one and only foundation for the proclivities and prejudices of late 20th-century U.S. politics in the Near East, it also comes dangerously close to reducing politics simply to a matter of religious zeal. Fortunately, the analytical chapters of *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought* present American Orientalism as a much more complex phenomenon. They also suggest that the Orient, perceived as an amalgamation of religious, commercial, political, cultural and imaginative phenomena, enjoyed a strong presence in 19th-century American public discourse. Whether social reformer or middle-class tourist on tour in what was known at the time as the Levant (i.e. present-day Syria, Lebanon, and Israel) – Americans appropriated the Orient as a reference point in discussions of appropriate social and cultural behavior and brought it back home, as it were, as an exotic commodity, a souvenir from travels abroad.

By the end of the 19th century, the Orient had become one of the most persistent fads in American popular culture, fueled to a large degree by literature and the arts. Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) illustrates this new development. Published two years after Twain undertook a "pleasure excursion" (as the often omitted subtitle describes the trip) on board the *Quaker City*, the book was not only a satire on the modern tourist as "an intolerable and incorrigible relic gatherer" (Twain quoted in Walker 1974: 201);[2] it was also a conven-

[2] Twain's scorn for the tourist as a vandal destroying the antiquities he or she pretends to love echoes Bayard Taylor's quip against tourists chipping away at Egyptian antiquities. "Not only Turks," Taylor writes, "but Europeans are engaged in the work of demolition, and the very antiquarians who profess the greatest enthusiasm for these monuments, are ruthless Vandals towards them when they have the power" (1860: 99).

ient way for Twain to cash in on the growing interest in stories from far away and exotic countries. Following the example of American Orientalist writers such as John Lloyd Stephens, George William Curtis, and Bayard Taylor who, unlike Twain, are now mostly forgotten, but who were extremely popular in their day, Twain undertook a profitable lecture tour in order to promote his book.[3] Gathering relics and collecting artifacts as souvenirs, the target of Twain's biting humor ("God protect the relics of Jerusalem when our tribe gets there," ibid.), was a practice that allowed tourists to remember their trip, prove to friends and family that they were 'really there,' and furnish their homes with a touch of cosmopolitan flair. Further emulated in architecture, dress, interior design, literary tastes, and in patterns and forms of socializing, the Orient was brought 'home' to America.[4]

Another discourse that instrumentalized the Orient as a crucial point of reference was 19th-century social reform. In *Imagining Ishmael* (1998), Timothy W. Marr describes how activists of both the temperance and anti-slavery movements increasingly engaged Islam and Oriental society as a measure of America's national destiny. Marr identified three contradictory modalities of strategic Orientalism operative in 19th-century American reform rhetoric. "Domestic orientalism" applied traditional stereotypes of Islam (sensuality, polygamy, indolence, despotism) to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities at home and "excommunicated them from the province of American ideals" (133). Accordingly, "domestic orients" were "cultural spaces within America stigmatized through their connection with Islamic behaviors" (134). They became targets of reformers who, by eradicating the "few remaining pockets of domestic barbarism and backwardness," sought to reinforce "their own vision of America as a nation with a Christian mission" (ibid.). The second modality – the rhetoric of "comparative orientalism" – engaged the Orient "as the idealized antithesis" (ibid.) of American social and moral values. It came into focus subsequent to increased travel to Egypt and the coastlands of Asia Minor and Syria beginning in the late 1830s. Comparative Orien-

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3 *The Innocents Abroad* immediately became a bestseller, with about 67,000 copies sold during the first year after its publication (Sha´ban 1991: 117). The lecture tour provided additional income and earned the author about $ 4000 in four months, the equivalent of approximately $ 55,000 today.

4 For a comprehensive summary on the popularity of the Orient in America see Sha′ban 1991, esp. chapters 6, 7, and 8, and Edwards 2000a.

talism depicted Oriental societies as being "more successful in preventing some of the social problems most pressing on ante-bellum Americans, problems such as xenophobia, drunkenness, exploitation, and sectarianism" (137). Marr argues that while this tendency to idealize the Orient may have paradoxically "disseminated a somewhat more realistic portrayal of the practices of Ottoman life" (136), at the same time it encouraged 18th-century European practices of associating the Orient with the exotic and the sensational. Such "romantic orientalism" comprises the third rhetorical modality operative in 19th-century American approaches to the Orient. According to Marr, it helped "less moralistic and more capitalistic writers (like purveyors of popular fiction or entrepreneurial advertisers) […] to manufacture audiences for the more secular productions and commodities that emerged as the nineteenth-century [sic] progressed" (139).

Luedtke, Sha´ban and Marr's studies address the significance of the Orient in aesthetic, political, social, and ethical discourse in 19th-century America, yet they pass over a conspicuous eco-spatial moment in representations of the Orient during that century: a fascination with *Oriental landscapes*, a genre that renders palm groves, riparian landscapes, coastal views, and desert sceneries through an intricate interplay of color and light, and whose existence is hard to overlook despite the overwhelming presence of domesticated odalisques, heroic warriors, and architectural portraits of bazaars and tranquil street scenes in the iconographic archive of Orientalist painting. Yet it is this genre that provides the 'roomy' possibility to reimagine American deserts as a cultural asset.

Enter the Oriental Landscape: Writing and Painting

America entered the Oriental landscape during the 1850s and 1860s – by way of the literary and visual faculties in some of the nation's most popular writers and painters. I want to draw attention here to three American artists – a poet and prose writer (Bayard Taylor) and two painters (Elihu Vedder and Sanford Robinson Gifford) – whose celebration of Oriental deserts provided an iconographic and rhetorical pattern for representing the American desert. The man whose work had perhaps the most lasting impact on the American public's perception of the Orient was Bayard Taylor (1825 – 1878). According to his

biographer, Albert H. Smyth, Taylor's letters, published in the New York *Tribune* and reporting the latest adventures of his travels, "were eagerly looked for, and every exaggerated report of his wanderings found ready credence" (Smyth 1896: 87); his "books of travel in their time were highly esteemed" (94); and his contemporaries expressed their admiration for Taylor's ability to "vividly" bring "home to thousands of firesides clear pictures of the remotest regions of the earth" (98). Between 1851 and 1853, Taylor had traveled intensively in Egypt, Palestine, Asia Minor, Sicily, Spain, India, China, and Japan. Upon his return, he prepared three lectures – "The Arabs," "India," and "Japan and Loo Choo" – and embarked on a tour throughout the United States, delivering about 220 lectures in 1854. During the same year, he published three books, *A Journey to Central Africa; or, Life and Landscapes from Egypt to the Negro Kingdoms of the White Nile, The Lands of the Saracen; or, Pictures of Palestine, Asia Minor, Sicily and Spain*, and *Poems of the Orient*. Smyth reports that one of his contemporaries considered Taylor as "the best landscape painter in words he had ever known" (101). Taylor's travelogues, delivered to his American audiences in prose and poetry as well as in oral and written forms, stimulated a shift in aesthetic responses to arid landscapes that had repercussions for the perception of the American desert and peak about half a century later in the publication of John C. Van Dyke's *The Desert* (1901).

How did this shift manifest itself in Taylor's writing? In the "Proem Dedicatory" to his 1854 collection of *Poems of the Orient*, Taylor defines his own poetic location by marking it off against that of his close friend and fellow poet Richard Henry Stoddard (1825-1903):

> You strain your ear to catch the harmonies
> That in some finer region have their birth;
> I turn, despairing, from the quest of these;
> And seek to learn the tongue of Earth.
> In 'Fancy's tropic clime' your castle stands,
> A shining miracle of rarest art;
> I pitch my tent upon the naked sands,
> And the tall palm, that plumes the orient lands,
> Can with its beauty satisfy my heart. (1907: 52)[5]

[5] The original copyright of Houghton Mifflin's "Household Edition" of Bayard Taylor's poetry dates back to 1879. The collection saw nine new editions in

In these lines, rhyme clearly functions as a tool for establishing the material landscape of the Orient as a source of poetic inspiration. Taylor employs this device to convince the addressee (and his readers) that "the naked sands" of the "orient lands" are as legitimate a ground as "Fancy's tropic clime"[6] on which the poet-friend's "castle stands." Moreover, Taylor relies on the "tongue of the Earth," rather than the spherical "harmonies" that waft through Stoddard's highly Romantic "Castle in the Air" (Stoddard 1852: 3-9). Taylor literally grounds his work in the desert sands of the Orient, thereby valorizing a landscape which, to an American audience, still signified a barrier to the nation's (agri-)cultural and economic progress. In a later passage of the poem, Taylor draws attention to the poetic potential of nature's "myriad shows" (53), juxtaposing his "late content/In Nature" with Stoddard's "starry trances" that "breathe the air/Of lost Elysium" (52). Unlike his friend, Taylor found "in the forms of Earth a deeper joy/Than in the dreams which lured me as a boy" (53). And while Stoddard's lyrical alter ego rushes across the desert on his "Arab Steed," "Outspeeding the pillars of rolling sand" towards the place "Where the groves are green and the fountains bright" (1852: 109), Taylor pitches his tent "upon the naked sands" and admires the "beauty" of a landscape with palm trees. Unwittingly though it may have happened, Taylor's firmly grounded images of the desert as a beautiful landscape that satisfies the poet's heart and the large-scale dissemination of these images through the author's popular success as a writer and lecturer provided convenient points of reference for representing American desert lands. These images were convincing exactly because Taylor presented them as translations of 'real' experiences in an unfamiliar, yet aesthetically attractive landscape.

From the call-and-response pattern of Stoddard's *Poems* (first published in 1852 and dedicated "to my friend Bayard Taylor, whom I admire as a poet, and love as a man") and Taylor's *Poems of the Orient* (first published in 1854 and beginning with a poem dedicated "To Richard Henry Stoddard") emerges a shift in representational strate-

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subsequent years, the last in 1907. If nothing else, this is testimony to the commercial

6 Taylor's quote is slightly inaccurate. The corresponding phrase in Stoddard's "The Castle in the Air" reads: "My Castle stands alone,/In some delicious clime,/Away from Earth and Time,/In Fancy's Tropic zone,/Beneath its summer skies" (Stoddard 1852: 4).

gies: while Stoddard responds to the Orient as merely a poetic fantasy, Taylor introduces it as a topographically recognizable territory. In the narrative of *The Lands of the Saracen; or, Pictures of Palestine, Asia Minor, Sicily and Spain*, the desert's most frequent function is that of geographical reference point rather than occasion for spectacular fantasies. Nevertheless, the desert also assumes certain rhetorical functions. For example, Taylor describes Damascus as "the best remaining type of an Oriental city," which

> away from the highways of commerce, [and] seated alone between the Lebanon and the Syrian Desert, still retains, in its outward aspect and in the character of its inhabitants, all the pride and fancy and fanaticism of the times of the Caliphs. (1863)

In this passage, the desert, primarily serving as a marker for Damascus' geographical location, also becomes a measure of cultural authenticity. Unlike Constantinople, a city which "is semi-European," and Cairo which "is fast becoming so," Taylor's Damascus still provided the experience of an unblemished Orient. And as the text implies, two deserts prevented the modernization or Europeanization of the city's Oriental culture. The desert's power to maintain differences between cultures (in this case between the Orient and Europe), and to preserve (and rhetorically frame) the authentic in an increasingly synchronized world of modern commerce constituted a cultural value which, in addition to its hitherto unrecognized aesthetic value, was going to provide the necessary context for the *American* desert's ultimate recognition as a nationally significant space. On the road toward that recognition, the genre of landscape painting was another important landmark.

The first pictorial representations of desert landscapes appeared on the American art market in the 1860s. They were either depictions of the mysterious and ominous, or light-flooded terrains of sand, rock, and dry grass in which the human presence is dwarfed to the vanishing point. The two artists who turned to the unadorned desert (i.e., a landscape not framed by otherwise imperative palm trees) as a legitimate subject of art were Elihu Vedder (1836-1923) and Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880). Today, Vedder is considered a minor painter whose work, nevertheless, "has maintained its popularity through the changing tastes of a century" (Ackerman 1994: 224); and Gifford was one of the leading painters of the Hudson River School.

Sanford R. Gifford traveled to Egypt and the Near East in the winter of 1868-69. When he first arrived in Alexandria, he compared the reality before him with the paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) – to the disadvantage of the latter, yet still praising the French master as one of the best at his craft (see Ackerman 1994: 88). Covering a broad variety of themes, Gérôme is best remembered for the overt eroticism and display of fantasies of interracial and homoerotic relationships (see, for example, *The Grand Bath at Bursa* [1885], *The Serpent Charmer* [1880] and *The Slave Market* [1866]).[7] Yet Gérôme was at least as interested in the Orient's natural environments, particularly in the stark beauty and power of the desert. Human figures and animals are in the center of paintings like *Egyptian Recruits Crossing the Desert* (1857), *A Relay of Hounds in the Desert* (1865), *Arabs Crossing the Desert* (1870), and *The Arab and His Steed* (1872). Art critic Gerald M. Ackerman relates that Gérôme was particularly proud of *A Relay of Hounds* and, therefore, saw to it that it was widely copied and distributed (1986: 220). A male figure in a turban holds two elegant greyhound dogs on a tight leash. He stands barefoot on yellow desert sand, his garment and head gear ruffled by a strong wind. A huge sand dune and a dark, sinister sky complete the background. Both human and animals stare out into what seems to be a bare nothingness, but their concentrated gaze into the space beyond the frame and the cautious attention of their bodies suggest the presence of something important out there in the great unknown. In Gérôme's paintings, the desert features as a topographical type that signals the Otherness of the distant countries of the Orient. Yet it is still a backdrop rather than the central subject of the French master's work. However, his pictorial idiom exposed the desert as an aesthetically attractive and semiotically complex landscape. What Gifford saw in Gérôme's work was an aesthetic potential of the desert, a landscape

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7 The focal point of *The Grand Bath at Bursa* is two women. Beams of light draw the viewers gaze from the upper left corner of the picture to its right side where the women walk along the rim of a pool, their arms wrapped around each other and their skin colors, hyperboles of black and white, are set off against each other in stark contrast. *The Slave Market* is less explicit about the racial difference of the female figure, and instead emphasizes heterosexual and heterosocial hierarchies. *The Serpent Charmer* emphasizes the eroticism of a young boy on the verge of manhood whose snake (!) performance is watched by an exclusively male audience. Interestingly, the painting serves as the cover illustration for Said's *Orientalism*.

whose beauty and metaphysical depth was clearly visible, even though it was still dominated by the human figure.

By the time he traveled the Orient in the winter of 1868-69, Gifford, whose career began in portrait and history painting, was a well-established landscape painter. The landscapes Gifford painted prior to his Oriental sojourn are already distinguished by a clear sense of spaciousness and wide horizons. Paintings like *Morning on the Hudson* (1866) and *Long Branch Beach* (1867) exemplify Gifford's approach to landscape as a combination of plain surfaces of color and forms such as boats, houses, dunes, and distant mountains, which unobtrusively punctuate the horizontality of the image and form spaces that appear to be empty, semantically blank *and*, at the same time, charged with meaning. The objects and figures on Gifford's canvases do not primarily represent the materiality of a given landscape. Rather, they guide the gaze of the viewer into what Bachelard called "the space of elsewhere" (1994: 184). Gifford's landscapes are prerequisites for an experience of the "intimate immensity" of space which, according to Bachelard, refers the viewer back to his or her "imagining consciousness" (ibid.). Once he traveled to the Orient, Gifford adds the desert to his repertoire of landscapes which, like his beaches and rivers, function as a screen for the imaginative self-perception of individuals and cultures. In *The Desert at Assouan* (1869; Fig. 3), the landscape is released from its iconographic function as background and elevated to

Fig. 3. Sanford Robinson Gifford, *The Desert at Assouan*, 1869. Photos ACR Edition-G. Ackerman.

major subject of pictorial representation. A high sky, the warm colors of earth and sun, and a caravan that, almost unnoticed, enters the

scene in the lower third on the left margin and heads towards the unknown territory at the end of the distant horizon together produce a peaceful, concentrated calm. Gifford's desert scenery bears witness to the philosophical, if not religious appeal the Egyptian landscape held for this prominent American artist.

The art of Elihu Vedder points in a somewhat different interpretative direction. His most famous piece, *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863; Fig. 4), was not only painted earlier than Gifford's landscapes

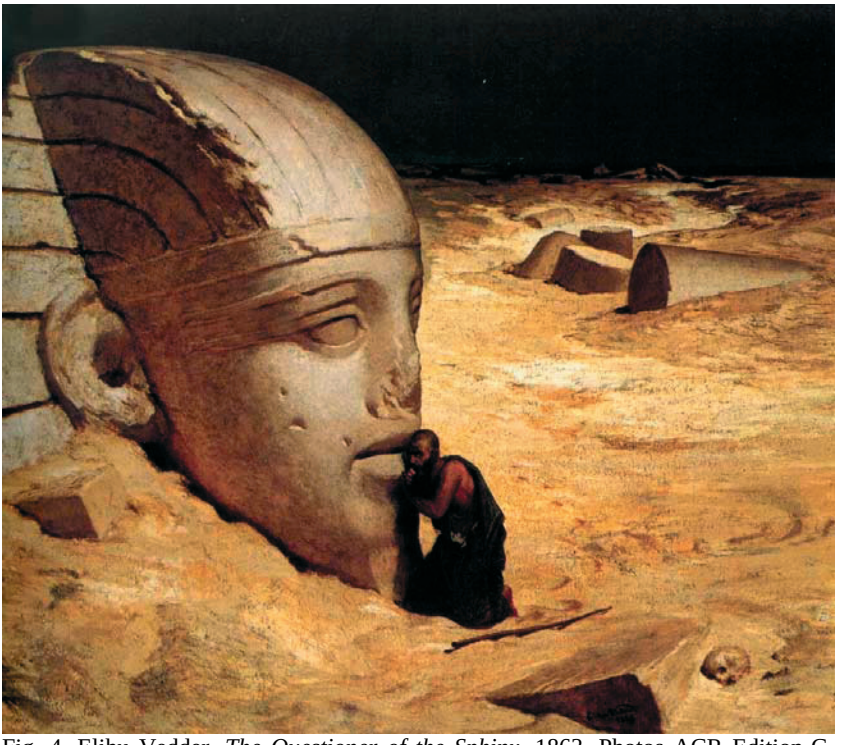

Fig. 4. Elihu Vedder, *The Questioner of the Sphinx*, 1863. Photos ACR Edition-G. Ackerman.

but also long before Vedder actually traveled to Egypt. It depicts the human head of a sphinx, dominating the left half of the image sitting quietly and solitarily in the desert, the sand covering the sculpture's animal body. The questioner's ear is pressed against the statue's mouth but its lips remain sealed. The image itself offers no explanation for the debris around the sphinx. There is no sign of life except in

the questioner himself, only death and decay. Giant columns have tumbled and are covered by sand. A human skull in the lower right corner of the painting emphasizes the transitoriness of life – or, read in the historical context of the painting's first presentation in the middle of the Civil War – the insignificance of human life in times of war. Ultimately, this canvas suggests, the questioner's search is of no avail. A dark sky further dramatizes the tension between the urgent quest of the man and the reposed indifference of the sphinx, a figure that asks questions but does not answer them. *The Questioner of the Sphinx* locates the Orient's enigmatic and mysterious character in the middle of a sandy desert, a landscape captivating because of its symbolic rather than its representative character.

Vedder again took up the subject of the sphinx in his 1890 painting *The Sphinx*. Interestingly, *after* he had visited Egypt the desert landscape gained in iconographic presence, commanding more space on the canvas than the pyramid behind the figure of the sphinx which dominates the field of vision. The existential tone of *The Questioner* is replaced here by archeological accuracy: the sphinx as an object in and the signature of a particular cultural landscape becomes more important than the statue's symbolic presence as a figure of doom and destruction. A light blue sky illuminates the scene in which the desert literally becomes a place of enlightened history, an impression that is further emphasized by a human figure crouching in repose behind the head of the sphinx. Gerald Ackerman stated about this work: "Reality has tamed Vedder's imagination, but not his power" (1994: 226), an observation that is corroborated by *Egyptian Nile*, a small painting that was also finished in 1890 and in which the landscape becomes the sole subject of Vedder's artistic interest. In a letter he wrote to his wife while traveling along the Nile in January 1890, Vedder described his enthusiastic response to the scenery which he would translate onto the canvas later that same year:

> Such a perfect bit of desert just exactly what I had imagined it to be […] the sand lodged in the hills like yellow snow, the absolute barrenness of all – the cold wind and a bit of steel blue water to the south made it seem to me like a strange winter scene. (Qtd. in Ackerman 1994: 228).

If nothing else, this implies the artist's increased sensibility for the aesthetic power of the desert as a *natural* rather than a *purely symbolic*

landscape. No longer did the desert signify death and destruction but rather the "naturalness of things;" and "the way people seem to belong to the ground and partake of its color" filled Vedder "with delight" (ibid.).

While Vedder was not the first among American painters to respond to the desert's naturalness, the shift in representative mode from dark symbolism to an expressive realism that accentuated natural objects and their ontology of form and color paves the way for a similar shift in attitude towards the American desert. If, as Stephanie LeMenager suggests in *Manifest and Other Destinies* (2004), "Deserts or lands suspected of being deserts made for recurrent crisis in nationalist symbol making" (32), the Orient provided a solution to such crises through the mediation of writers like Bayard Taylor and painters such as Sanford Robinson Gifford and Elihu Vedder. Taylor "found Desert life not only endurable but very agreeable" (Taylor 1860: 180). Moreover, he developed "an unspeakable fascination in the sublime solitude of the Desert" (181), one that evoked experiences of quasi-religious joy and aesthetic delight. George W. Curtis (an editor, Curtis was also a temporary member of Brook Farm, friend of Hawthorne, and lifelong associate of the transcendentalist circle around Ralph Waldo Emerson) went into similar raptures. A hopelessly romantic zealot, he attributed "the national character and manners" of an idolized Orient, "its silence articulated in art and life" (Curtis quoted in Sha´ban 1991: 181) to its location in the desert. His fantasies about the Orient as a space of repose, simplicity, and poetic indulgence, not uncommon among 19th-century transcendentalists, made a paradise of cultural refinement out of a topographical condition – the desert – that was still dismissed at home as counterproductive to the nation's manifest destiny. Yet it were exactly these literary and artistic images of the Arabian desert, as well as the 'Oriental' culture associated with it, which provided a useful, anthropological and aesthetic frame of reference for a nation that saw itself forced to come to terms with those territories that passed into its possession after the military victory over Mexico in 1848 – territories that were foreign both topographically and culturally, and which seemed to be of no use economically. In the following sections I will discuss three major writers – Susan E. Wallace (1830-1907), Charles F. Lummis (1859-1928), and John C. Van Dyke (1856-1932) – who, in the closing decades of the 19th and the beginning decades of the 20th century, tapped the discourse of Orientalism in order

to make an argument either against or for the inclusion of the desert into the pantheon of canonical American landscapes.

2 Orientalist De/Construction: Susan E. Wallace

Susan E. Wallace was among the first writers who put New Mexico (and the Southwest) on the cultural map for an East coast, middleclass reading audience. During her nine-month sojourn in Santa Fé in 1879, the wife of then New Mexico Governor, soldier, inventor, and author Lew Wallace spent a lot of time traveling the territory and writing accounts of her experiences for the New York *Tribune*, the *Independent*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. The travelogues were later collected and published in book form as *The Land of the Pueblos* (1888). The time that passed between her first dispatches from New Mexico and their anthologizing marked the decade in which interest in the Southwest, its landscapes, histories, folklore, and indigenous cultures had noticeably increased. Americans, still processing the ruptures within their nation caused by the Civil War and longing for a usable past rooted in the American continent, sought relief in the rustic narratives of local color stories and began to create an "American genealogy" (McFeely 2001: 26) through the anthropological appropriation of the continent's indigenous heritage. Novelist Willa Cather captured the sensibility dawning in the 1880s and continuing into the 1920s in her 1925 novel *The Professor's House*, through the character of Tom Outland who, growing up an orphaned boy in the New Mexico territory, discovers the ancient ruins and artifacts of Blue Mesa (the fictionalized version of Mesa Verde) while working the range as a cowboy, claiming them on behalf of the nation. "They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all people," Cather's protagonist harangued his companion, who had sold the collected items to a German anthropologist. "They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from" (242).

Tom Outland is an imaginative embodiment of America's search for a cultural past that can be literally as well as figuratively dug up from the American soil. His real-life counterparts are anthropologists like Frank Hamilton Cushing, who left for his "adventures in Zuñi" in 1879, the same year Wallace went to New Mexico and John Wesley Powell became the founding director of the Bureau of Ameri-

can Ethnology, and Matilda Evans Stevenson, author of half a dozen books on the Pueblo cultures of the Southwest and unpaid assistant to her husband James Stevenson, the leader of the first expedition to Zuñi, the one that also included Cushing. They steered the public attention of an increasingly urban society, one that began to feel the disagreeable and unpleasant side effects of modernization and industrialization, away from the metropolitan center towards the nation's cultural hinterlands. Their work as collectors of artifacts and stories brought the once foreign Southwest a little closer to the homes of their metropolitan readers. Cushing's *My Adventures in Zuñi*, first published as a series in the *Century Magazine* in 1882-83, and Stevenson's *The Zuñi and the Zuñians*, a monograph on the position and role of children, and privately printed for a popular audience in 1881, were two of the first widely disseminated anthropological narratives[8] and 'scientific' supplements to Wallace's journalistic travelogues. Through the backdoor of an emerging anthropological interest in the Pueblo culture of the American Southwest – a culture described by Cushing as "this curious civilization of an American desert" (1970: 23) – the desert itself became an object of cultural interest. As a closer look at Susan Wallace's *The Land of the Pueblos* will demonstrate, the discourse of Orientalism was highly instrumental in gauging the significance of the desert for the cultural and historical imaginary of the United States.

Desert, Ruin, and the Comparative Power of Orientalist Imagery

Returning from a trip to the Los Cerrillos turquoise mines near Santa Fe, New Mexico, Susan Wallace passed through a country whose "worn-out look" she later described as "desert-like and depressing to the last degree" (1888: 93). When she and her companions approached a recently abandoned camp in this land created by volcanic activity, Wallace eagerly seized the chance to impose on this bleakness a gloss of romantic repose. The grassland they passed through – "sere and parched as the plains of Arabia" (ibid.) – induced a "dreamy mood" (ibid.) in which the author imagined that "the last tent of the Moslem

[8] For a more detailed discussion of early anthropology and the role of Cushing and Stevenson see McFeely 2001 and Creese 1998.

had just been struck, the heavy standard folded by slim figures in sweeping burnous" (ibid.) Over the next few lines, Wallace completes the transformation of her narrative from mimesis to phantasmagoria with an image that is reminiscent of the "intimate immensity" in Gifford's desert painting:

> […] we glanced along the horizon for a gleam of slender spears, and the long caravan, made spectral by distance, slowly vanishing into the mystic silence of the desert. Involuntarily, we looked for valuables dropped by Haroun and Mohammed, as they untethered the camels and packed hampers; scattered spices; a jeweled cup of gold, with the lump of ambergris at the bottom; a white turban; a shawl of price. (ibid.)

With a firm and resolute "No such thing," she interrupts her projective fantasy right at the moment when readers start to indulge in her Oriental daydream, and alerts them to the reality of "a battered sardine-box, a sliver of wagon-tongue, the broken end of a saw […], four greasy cards […], two used-up paper collars, and an empty black bottle," objects that are, she concludes sarcastically, "strong testimonials to the high superiority of our arts, and the refinements of our boasted civilization" (ibid.). Clearly, Susan Wallace loathed the artifacts of modern history before her eyes for spoiling the scene of her romantic fantasy. Despite its unfamiliar and, at times, unwelcoming topography, New Mexico's landscape held the potential for Romantic indulgence. The author/narrator's imagination, obviously trained by the visual grammar of Orientalist imagery, struggles valiantly to make a landscape of mysterious and wondrous beauty out of empty barrenness. If there was a country with the potential to contradict Hawthorne's famous lament about the lack of the poetic element in America then it was to be found in the Southwest where there was "every requisite of romance, – the enchantment of distance, the charm of the unknown, – and, in shadowy mists of more than three hundred years, imagination may flower out in fancies rich and strange" (15). If her contemporaries wanted to taste "the wild charm" of this land, they would have to "hasten to catch it before the wear of every-day travel tramples out its primitive customs" (95).

Two things are remarkable in Wallace's account of the Los Cerrillos scene: First, the glossing over of topographical reality with Orientalist fantasy that suggests a cultural approach to the yet unknown

lands of the Southwest as domestic Orient. And second, the competition between New Mexico's fantastic, or poetic potential and the region's historical reality as object of territorial conquest. It seems that in Wallace's narrative, desert landscape and Orientalist imagery blend into an implicit critique of the cultural 'barbarism' of a modern, industrial nation fulfilling its Manifest Destiny of continental expansion. In an earlier passage of *The Land of the Puebelos*, Wallace had allowed that Pueblo culture's "quaint primitive customs, curious myths, and legends afford rich material for the poet," and that "their antiquities open an endless field to the delving archeologist" (32). In other words, the region is an aesthetic and scientific mother lode, as rich in customs, laws, and history as the Holy Land and no less exotic in rituals, manners, and architecture than the Orient. But then, what to make of the observation that, compared with "Bible pictures" (51), "the barren magnificence of New Mexico" can hardly be "more than a suggestion of the land once the glory of all lands, with its verdure of plumy palms, beauty of olive orchards, the dark foliage of cypress trees, and white and scarlet blooms of orange and pomegranate" (ibid.)? Is this a sign, as Brigitte Georgi-Findlay suggests, that "Wallace locates herself in opposition to the prehistoric craze and the fascination with antiquity that had struck her contemporaries" (1996: 219)? Or is the textual meandering between Oriental analogy and cultural skepticism towards the historical potential of a "barren" topography indicative of something else? I want to argue that in *The Land of the Pueblos*, the strategic juxtaposition of references to Oriental culture with New Mexico's climatic and topographical conditions leads to the dismissal of this region as a culturally worthless acquisition. Its poetic potential for romance notwithstanding, the desert country of the American Southwest ultimately lacks both historical depth and aesthetic complexity.

Wallace's response to contemporary predilections of the white, middle-class traveler for "visiting ruins" (26), quoted below, reveals the author's refusal to unconditionally participate in the romanticization of the cultural geography of the indigenous Southwest. Asserting her role as an educated Victorian woman, Wallace sideswipes the interest of "rambling Bohemians" in the ruins of ancient civilizations by declaring that

> [t]hese edifices are not mysterious except to fevered fancies, and their tenants were not divers nations, but clans, tribes of one blood, and

> civilized only as compared with the savages surrounding them – the tameless Apache, the brutish Ute, the degraded Navajo, against whose attacks they devised a system of defense […] and threw up 'impregnable works,' which are only low embankments wide enough for the posting of sentinels. (26-27)

In the narrative of her sojourn in the New Mexico desert, Wallace dismisses as "fevered fancies" contemporary anthropological interpretations of prehistoric sites as evidence for the presence on the American continent of great civilizations comparable in cultural achievement to those of Rome, Greece, and Byzantium, ready to be appropriated as the historical and cultural foundation of the American nation. Despite the topographical, geological, and climatic correspondence between "this high, dry country" and "Western Asia" (76), the American desert ultimately lacks the charm and aesthetic elegance of the Orient. The environmental similarity may result in "the tendency of the human [i.e. indigenous] body […] to Arab leanness" (ibid.) but not in the same degree of beauty. Looking at a woman selling fruit from under "a little green bower called by the orientals *succôth*" may be "a refreshment to the eyes" after long hours of gazing into "the shadeless stretch of [New Mexico's] parched valleys" (52). But the ocular tonic does not completely soothe the pain because, as Wallace regrets, the "lofty presence, the high eagle features of the Jewish race, the lustrous eyes of the Orient are not here" (51).

In Wallace's narrative the celebratory Oriental rhetoric, inspired by topographical similarities between Arabia and New Mexico, repeatedly collides with the author/narrator's underlying ecocultural bias against the desert as a real, topographical condition. It surfaces in her description of a visit to Montezuma's Castle, a five-story, twenty-room cliff dwelling in northern Arizona, believed to have been the most northern seat of the Aztec emperor but actually abandoned a century before Montezuma was born, and a place that attracted many travelers and prompted many fantastic stories. In the account of this visit, the desert is employed to flout popular interpretations of pre-Columbian ruins as architectural vestments of a noble and poetic past in much the same way as the Orient is employed in other passages to downplay and devalue Native American existence.

Susan Wallace's disappointment at what she saw on the fabled site of Montezuma's Castle was enormous, amplified by what she endured to get there. Pulling out all stops in the romantic topology's rep-

ertoire, Wallace produced the following retort to contemporary enthusiasms for this particular ruin:

> It is merely a tremendous mud house, on which the centuries have spent their strength in vain, standing in the hush of utter solitude, battling time and the elements. There is nothing picturesque about it. No friendly lichen, running creeper or trailing ivy can live in this dry dewless air and with tender verdure clothe the nakedness of the ragged structure. Against the sand blast no wreathing vine can cling, and in its embrace soften the mass of ugliness harshly outlined against the bare, brilliant sky, unflecked by cloud or shadow. Our spirits went down, down before the legendary Palace of Montezuma we had come so far to see. For this we had strained over lava beds, through sunburnt ways of the wilderness, across valleys of sand, sage desert, and greasewood plain, breathing, eating, drinking alkali, and wearing its dust like a dingy travelling suit! Instead of poetry here was certainty. (225)

While at the beginning of *The Land of the Pueblos* Wallace had assured her readers that this country provided "every requisite of romance," the famous palace prompted extensive revision of that initial optimism. The dry, dewless air may "hold decay in check" in which regard it "almost equals the atmosphere of Egypt" (136). But the barbaric desert thwarts the imaginative translation of the historically destitute into the picturesque spectacle of an aesthetically pleasing scenery. Thus, the desert assumes a function similar to that of the paraphernalia of modern existence left behind in the abandoned camp that Wallace had encountered on one of her earlier trips – it destroys the possibility of romance and leaves nothing but the certainty of a disenchanted present. "After actual sight and touch," she concludes her report on Montezuma's Castle, "there is no room for dreams and visions" (228).[9]

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[9] The "epic history" (96), which the author cannot find in prehistoric ruins, is "recorded in mouldy chronicles" (15) of Spanish colonialism. Occasionally, inscriptions of this history may be found directly on the land, as the carvings on Inscription Rock (El Moro) testify. They stimulate the imagination and historical fantasy but cannot replace the literary archives of Spanish colonial history, the true "requisite of romance" in the Southwest. The only promise that the country itself holds in stock for the traveler is its "wild charm." And even that is endangered by the progress of modern civilization, a development that Susan Wallace observed with great skepticism, presenting the Southwest as an alluring but disappearing "borderland between civilization and barbarism" and "the last footing of phantoms peopling the unknown, till the whistle of the lo-

Paradoxically, whereas the *desert* landscape, with its blasting sand, pitiless sun, and dewless air *destroyed the romantic potential* of Montezuma's castle (the destruction being symbolized in the absence of "friendly lichen," "trailing ivy," and "wreathing vine") and, subsequently, of the Southwest's indigenous past, in the abandoned-camp scene it had *occasioned romantic fantasy* until rudely interrupted by the overpowering presence of modern civilization's trash. What is the explanation for such an overt functional contradiction? The short answer: Wallace wrote under the ideological influence of two historically and intellectually different discursive traditions – Orientalism and the rhetoric of the frontier; and she anticipated some of the central tenets of anthropogeography, a deterministic paradigm of scientific inquiry emphasizing the effect of nature and geographical space on cultural history.[10] The functionally asymmetrical presence of the desert in Wallace's narrative results from the desert's functional variety among these discourses.

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comotive, which has broken so many illusions, put the pale shades to flight, and brushed away the cobweb and rosebloom of the old Spanish poets" (220).

10 A combination of the methodologies of anthropology and geography that gained some prominence towards the end of the 19th century, anthropogeography's major concern was to assert the influence of the physical environment on the course of history and the evolution of human culture, as well as to establish cultural and racial hierarchies based on geography and climate. Represented in the U.S. by geographer Ellen Churchill Semple, anthropogeography reinforced the denigration of the desert as a landscape with positive cultural values. Like her mentor Friedrich Ratzel, professor of geography and ethnography at the University of Leipzig, Germany, and with whom she studied in 1891, Semple described (Arabian) deserts as an environment unconducive to cultural, social, and economic progress or to a politics of law and order. Although she allowed that (male) Arab culture inclined towards bravery and courage, she still contended that "All the Saharan tribes are marauders, whether Arabs, Berber Tuaregs, or Nigroid Tibbus." And she was convinced that "The desert has made them so" (1911: 491). Semple's chapter on "Plains, Steppes, and Deserts" (473-520), from which this quote originates, translates and slightly expands Friedrich Ratzel's chapter on "Ebenen, Steppen und Wüsten" in *Anthropo-Geographie*, 209-228. Although Semple's English translation did not appear until 1911, its debt to Ratzel locates it historically in the closing decade of 19th century.

Orientalism and Frontier Rhetoric

If the extent of Susan Wallace's exposure to Orientalist imagery cannot exactly be reconstructed, it can at least be approximated. References to Oriental scenes, types, and landscapes indicate the author's familiarity with the discourse of European and American Orientalism. The paintings of Sanford Robinson Gifford, and the tales and poems of Bayard Taylor may very well have provided her with the perceptual and discursive paradigms for relating to and representing the New Mexico desert.[11] The rhetoric of *The Land of the Pueblos* strategically engages in Orientalism, representing the Southwest through repeated metaphorizations as domestic Orient. Detailed descriptions of the physical stature of the author's Mexican muleteer, the Indian woman selling fruit, and a boy hunting rabbit are reminiscent of pictorial Orientalism's infatuation with the embodied figure of racial and gendered Others. Yet while Wallace's portraits are infused by a touch of romantic pastoralism, the narrative maintains a comfortable distance between observing subject and observed object. Unlike Cather's Tom Outland, who crosses racial boundaries when he declares pre-Columbian culture as the historical foundation of his own identity, Wallace constantly reinforces these boundaries by assuming the authorial position of observer and, almost literally, avoiding too close proximity with or literal touch of the native. For example, it is the muleteer, not the author/narrator herself, who approaches the Indian woman and purchases fruit from her; the hunting boy remains in the distance and silent; and finally, in contrast with "the worn wrinkles" in the face of a young Indian woman Wallace describes herself as "the angelic portion of our [traveling] party" (222). Thus, construing the Southwest as domestic Orient, a space in which she, an upper class white woman, claims the superior racial and social position of observer and interpreter, allows her to maintain a position of cultural and social power otherwise jeopardized by her movement through semi-foreign (frontier) territory.

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[11] Susan Wallace traveled and wrote about Turkey and Egypt once her husband was appointed to a political post in Constantinople, but this occurred after Lew Wallace's assignment in New Mexico. In *The Repose in Egypt: A Medley* (1889), she mentions schooling as a major source of information about the Orient.

While Wallace's narrative excels in well-crafted textualizations of the New Mexico landscape and its people, it also displays the author's environmental bias against the country's arid topography. For example, Wallace allows that the Little Red River valley, home of the modern Zuñi communities, exhibits "[e]nchanting effects of light and color" and accommodates "sun sets as on the Nile," effecting the sudden unveiling of the landscape's "hidden splendor" (126-27). In contrast, the high desert country over northern Arizona, home of the Hopi villages, elicits a much less favorable reading. Ecologically, i.e., in terms of providing the means for physical subsistence, the desert may but serve the meager needs of Hopi Indians, whose cultural strength is long past its prime. Wallace submits what she perceives as their demise to a regime of natural causes. Her narrative suggests that the inevitable termination of indigenous communities is foreshadowed in a land "where nature's fires are burnt out, in a barren country, arid and inhospitable, absolutely worthless to white men" (245). This echoes denigrations of the desert in both representations of Western American territories earlier in the 19th century and in the discourse of anthropogeography whose advent coincided with Wallace's emergence as a writer.

The Land of the Pueblos recounts not only one white Anglo-Saxon woman's discomfort in an unfamiliar environment, but expresses the larger, class-based environmental apprehensions about the desert and desert cultures. Susan Wallace's implied refusal to unconditionally accept the Southwest on its own topographical, historical, and racial terms reflects the uneasiness of WASP intellectual elites with a territory whose history, culture and racial mix threatened to interrupt the trajectory of the dominant national narrative, and whose topography frustrated the aesthetic and ecological sensibilities of a culture whose values are infused by an ideology of pastoralism and whose ideal social form was the Garden City. Since the early 19th century, the question had been how to integrate the Great American Desert, a topography symbolizing lack and scarcity, into the metaphoric system of a national master narrative that thrived on images of fertility and abundance. Wallace solved that problem through paradox, by representing the desert as a free range for the romantic imagination and, simultaneously, as a condition that thwarts any attempt to install the Southwest as alternative ground for the romance of American history.

In a statement issued to the U.S. Senate in 1843, Senator Daniel Webster dismissed the idea of transforming the territory referred to as the Great American Desert into U.S property, asking:

> What do we want with this vast, worthless area, this region of savages and wild beasts, of deserts, of shifting sands and whirling winds, of dust, of cactus and prairie dogs? To what use could we ever hope to put these great deserts or those endless mountain ranges, impregnable and covered to their very base with eternal snow? What can we ever hope to do with the Western Coast, a coast of 3,000 miles, rockbound, cheerless, uninviting, with no harbor on it? (Webster quoted in *Out West* 1903: 140)

At the eve of the Mexican-American war, Webster made it clear to President William H. Harrison that he would "never vote one cent from the public treasury to place the Pacific Coast one inch nearer Boston than it now is!" (ibid.) Josephine Clifford, like Susan Wallace a traveler and writer, displayed similar reservations when, as late as 1877, she wrote: "The first desert we crossed [on the way to Arizona] was still in California – though why California should feel any desire to claim the wilderness of sand and rattlesnakes lying between Vallecito Mountain and Fort Yuma, I cannot see" (299). To be sure, the geographies represented in these exemplary 19th-century texts as deserts feature rather different topographical and ecological characteristics. Obviously, topology is more important to these writers than mimetic accuracy. And it was often expressed through images of and references to the Orient.

In *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith points out that the denomination of western Native American tribes as "American Tartars," "Arabs of the New World," or "ruthless red Tartars of the desert" (2001: 286, Fn.13) was common after the trans-Mississippi West was first characterized as desert. He traces these designations back to 18th-century fears of the British empire that it would lose control over its subjects once they entered the unrestrained wilderness of the Ohio Valley. This fear was adopted by American authors and transposed to the arid West, whose geography was more similar to the deserts and the steppes of Asia and Arabia than to other parts of the country. Smith cites two major 19th-century texts to illustrate how the desert functioned as a metonym for Orient, itself a concept symbolizing ethnic and racial Otherness. As symbolic Orient, the Great American Desert

fueled fears and anxieties about America's ability to resist its disintegration as a racially and socially homogenized western civilization. As early as 1817, Henry M. Brackenridge wrote in *Views of Louisiana* that

> the prevailing idea, with which we have so much flattered ourselves, of these western regions being like the rest of the United States, susceptible of cultivation, and affording endless outlets to settlements, is certainly erroneous. The [Indian] nations will continue to wander over those plains, and the wild animals, the elk, the buffaloe, will long be found there; for until our country becomes supercharged with population, there is scarcely any probability of settlers venturing far into these regions. A *different mode of life, habits altogether new, would have to be developed*. (Brackenridge quoted in Smith 2001: 175; italics added)

In a similar vein, Washington Irving characterized the desert as a zone hardly inhabitable yet filled with Indians, outlaws, and outcasts. In *Astoria* (1839; 1863) he wrote:

> It is a land where no man permanently abides; for, in certain seasons of the year there is no food either for the hunter or his steed. The herbage is parched and withered; the brooks and streams are dried up; the buffalo, the elk and the deer have wandered to distant parts, keeping within the verge of expiring verdure, and leaving behind them a vast uninhabited solitude, seamed by ravines, the beds of former torrents, but now serving only to tantalize and increase the thirst of the traveller.
>
> Occasionally the monotony of this vast wilderness is interrupted by mountainous belts of sand and limestone, broken into confused masses; with precipitous cliffs and yawning ravines, looking like the ruins of the world; or is traversed by lofty and barren ridges of rock, almost impassable, like those denominated the Black Hills. Beyond these rise the stern barriers of the Rocky Mountains, the limits, as it were, of the Atlantic world. (1863: 216-217)

Surprisingly, on Irving's map the desert is part of the "Atlantic world," the Rocky Mountains marking the border of Euro-America. Within this borderland, but already outside the zone of Western culture's influence and, as it were, within the realm of natural phenomena, he locates "restless and ferocious bands of savages, [...] who carry into their mountain haunts the fierce passions and reckless habits of desperadoes" (217). In its racial bluntness, the conclusion of Ir-

ving's description pales Brackenridge's rather moderate rhetoric of geopolitical skepticism. Irving writes:

> Such is the nature of this immense wilderness of the far West; which apparently defies cultivation, and the habitation of civilized life. Some portions of it along the rivers may partially be subdued by agriculture, others may form vast pastoral tracts, like those of the East; but it is to be feared that a great part of it will form a lawless interval between the abodes of civilized man, like the wastes of the ocean or the deserts of Arabia; and, like them, be subject to the depredations of the marauder. Here may spring up new and mongrel races, like new formations in geology, the amalgamation of the 'debris' and 'abrasions' of former races, civilized and savage. (217)

These geological, zoological, botanical, and cultural descriptions, apart from constituting the desert as a domestic Orient, represent the landscape in intensely racialized terms. While Irving borrows metaphors from the archive of Orientalism's spatialized racism, the historical and geographical reality is unmistakably marked as American. The groups that drift towards the desert are "the remains of broken and almost extinguished tribes; the descendants of wandering hunters and trappers; [...] fugitives from the Spanish and American frontiers; [...] adventurers and desperadoes of every class and country, yearly ejected from the bosom of society into the wilderness" (217). Clearly, the desert was a space unfit for American habitation. As a space absorbing the country's racial and social "debris," the desert catalyzed America's self-construction as a WASP nation. But at the same time, it also constituted a threat to fantasies of social and racial order.

These examples, taken from representative 19th-century discourse, expose the ideological circuits that informed Susan Wallace's text. The cross-references and mutual representations of (desert) landscape in terms of racial and gendered Other, and of Native American cultures through images of an other real-and-imagined geography – the Orient – and the confluence of these rhetorical strategies in *The Land of the Pueblos* mark Wallace as an author embodying the cultural transition at the end of the 19th century from desert prejudice to desert appreciation. The desert, embellished and ornamented by the Orient, functions as a rhetorical device to approximate the meaning of an unfamiliar environment. Wallace's New Mexican sketches, representing both a still unfamiliar landscape and the author's complex and complicated relationship to it, disclose the ambivalences and contra-

dictions as well as the racial implications underlying modern appropriations of and subsequent relations to natural and cultural geographies. While the translation of the useless and "weary land" (1889: 84) of New Mexico into a romantic landscape of Oriental repose remained in Wallace's travelogue an imaginative hypothesis whose realization is frustrated by the joint forces of desert ecology and technological progress, her historical, ethnographic, and geographical descriptions did stimulate her American audience's curiosity about a region that already belonged to the nation politically but not culturally. This country, Wallace maintains, "is still to a good degree […] apart from the rest of the United States" (95). And, her narrative further suggests, it better stay that way. After leaving the Southwest Wallace lost interest in the region as a subject of her writing, and with the publication in 1889 of *The Repose in Egypt: A Medley*, she turned towards the 'real' Orient. This redirection of cultural and historical interests from the domestic to the foreign scene put Wallace back in sync with her generation's fascination for the Orient. At least one of Wallace's contemporaries vehemently disapproved of middle-class America's late 19th-century infatuation with the Orient and boosted the American desert as domestic Orient.

3 Orientalist Boosterism: Charles F. Lummis

> The great American Desert was almost better known a generation ago than it is today. Then thousands of the hardy Argonauts had traversed that fearful waste on foot with their dawdling ox-teams, and hundreds of them had left their bones to bleach in that thirsty land. The survivors of those deadly journeys had a very definite idea of what that desert was; but now that we can roll across it in a day in Pullman palace-cars, its real – and still existing – horrors are largely forgotten.

Thus begins the chapter called "The American Sahara" in Charles Fletcher Lummis' *Some Strange Corners of Our Country: The Wonderland of the Southwest* (1892). The passage describes the American desert's ambiguous position in the cultural imaginary at the end of the 19th century: On the one hand, it is no longer a historical blank – the bleached bones of the pioneers bear witness to the ordeal of settling the continent. On the other hand, technological progress, once again embodied by the railway, enabled the modern Argonauts to traverse

the space of history without being aware of the traces it has left in the landscape. For Charles F. Lummis, this was an insufferable situation. Instead of being "an endless, level waste of burning sand," he saw in the "American Sahara" a "record" of a painful and tragic past and the material for "a story […] of unearthly sufferings and raving death" (31). As Robert E. Fleming, one of his biographers, observed, Lummis looked at the Southwest as "a rich source of colorful history, a history of which most Americans were ignorant" (12).[12]

One way of uncovering this history to a larger audience was writing essays and articles for major American newspapers and magazines. Among the publications that printed Lummis' stories from an unknown region in the mid-1880s were the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *Century Magazine*. The fact that the pieces were collected and published in book form as *Some Strange Corners* in 1892, and then republished as *Mesa, Cañon and Pueblo* in 1925 is indicative of Lummis' untiring work as a promoter of the Southwest. His love for that region was catalyzed during the fall and winter of 1884/85. Emulating, in a very literal way, Thoreau's famous allegorization of walking as an act of social liberation and religious conquest,[13] Lummis decided to walk from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Los Angeles, where he had been offered a job as city editor for the L.A. *Times*. For all its demonstrative masculinity and vitality – by the 1880s, trains were the common means of transportation for travel towards the west coast – this tramp across the continent opened an important chapter in the cultural and literary history of the American desert. Lummis was of course not the first to make the topography, history, and culture of the nation's arid regions the subject of his writing. As noted earlier, women travel writers and anthropologists preceded Lummis, if only by a few years. Other 19th-century

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12 For detailed biographical information see Gordon 1972, Fleming 1981, and Thompson 2001.

13 Thoreau's essay "Walking" is based in two lectures he delivered in 1851 and 1852. The essay combines the two lectures and was first published in 1862, just after the author's death. Therein Thoreau described "every walk" as "a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquest this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels" (Thoreau 1894: 252). A few paragraphs later he wrote. "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, – if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk" (252-253).

writers had moved away from representing the desert as a totally useless territory as well. According to Peter Wild, J. Ross Browne's *Adventure's in Apache Country* (1867) and Samuel W. Cozzens' *The Marvelous Country: Three Years in Arizona and New Mexico* (1876) introduced "desert lands" to a larger audience as "a vast playground, exhilarating for both body and soul" (1999: 44). These books notwithstanding and unlike the 'original' Sahara, its American counterpart lay beyond the cultural horizon of most American travelers.

Drawing on the work of Charles F. Lummis, I will argue that the rhetorical strategy of *interpreting* the American desert as the domestic version of the Oriental landscape served two distinct purposes: First, representations of the Great American Desert (and its Southwestern flanks) as domestic Orient, by titillating the curiosity of middle-class Americans for that region and its history, promoted the cultural recognition of a hitherto unrecognized arena of American history. Second, in spite of their cosmopolitan aura, the application of Orientalist analogies to the American scene signified a politically and ideologically conservative form of cultural nationalism, in which expressions of historical and ethnological difference – Spanish conquest, Pueblo culture – became the discursive and artifactual property of U.S. culture.

Desert Interpreter

In her famous essay "Against Interpretation" (1964), Susan Sontag describes interpretation is a reaction to a "discrepancy" (6) between appearance and meaning, i.e., between the iconographic or lexical surface of a painting or a text and the underlying meaning. Interpretation, she further suggests, "seeks to resolve that discrepancy" by "reading off a sense that is already there" but no longer "acceptable" (6). Accordingly, interpretation has two opposing functions. Depending on the cultural context, it can be a reactionary strategy, aiming at "conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it" (ibid.). Or it is "a liberating act" (7), bringing to the fore "the latent content" (ibid.) and suppressed meanings of cultural texts, images, and practices. Actual, material landscapes were certainly not on Sontag's mind, but her definition of interpretation as semantic "revamping" provides a useful frame for approaching Lummis' use of

Orientalism in his interpretation of the desert landscapes of the Southwest. Because it was such a strange, foreign topographical idiom for Americans of European descent, the desert was particularly susceptible to geographical and cultural interpretation. What is the use of a landscape that is part of 'our' political geography but which we do not own culturally, at least not outside the symbolic confines of the Orient and the Holy Land?

In Chapter One of this study I argued that turn-of-the-20th-century efforts to make use of the Great American Desert by transforming it into the Garden of the World were predicated on the desert's translation from wasteland into a terrain which, apart from sufficient amounts of water, features all the other aspects of a potentially profitable agricultural domain. Irrigation boosters like William Smythe no longer "accepted" the desert's meaning as a vast, monotonous space unfit for settlement by Anglo-American civilization, and created texts that sold the desert as potential garden. Charles F. Lummis employed the Orientalist rhetoric to "revamp" the desert as a nationally significant and culturally valuable territory. This rhetoric allowed him to convert the desert from a merely geographical phenomenon to a culturally significant institution. That is, he interpreted the desert landscape of the Southwest as museum. In other words, Lummis introduced the desert as an *institutional space*, in which natural and cultural objects are submitted to the disciplinary control of scientific inquiry and narrative order, and as an *archive* of anthropological, geographical, and folkloristic material with a value similar to or even greater than that of the Orient.[14]

Lummis' approach to the desert as institutionalized text and archive dates back to his walking trip from Ohio to California in 1884/85. A collection of the weekly dispatches to the *Los Angeles Times*, *A Tramp Across the Continent* (1892) recounts the author's initial experience with Mexican and Pueblo culture, strange religious sects, the natural wonders of the trans-Mississippi West, and the material traces of frontier legends. During that first journey, Lummis was born as interpreter of the Southwest. While he witnessed the "ghastly scenes" of a crucifixion, a ritual performed every year on Good Friday by the members of the Catholic Penitente Brotherhood, the geographical, cul-

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[14] For an instructive survey of the cultural history of the museum in late-Victorian America see Conn 1998.

tural, and historical information he had accumulated during his trip condensed into an epiphany:

> We read with a shiver of the self-tortures of East Indian fakeers, most of us ignorant that in the oldest corner of our own enlightened nation as astounding barbarities are still practiced by citizens and voters of the United States. My eyes were beginning to open now to real insight of the things about me; and everything suddenly became invested with a wondrous interest. It is not an inevitable thing. Thousands live for years beside these strange facts, too careless ever to see them; but the attention once secured never goes hungry for new interest. Years of study since have not worn out for me the fascination of the real inner meaning of this unguessed land – its history, its habits, and its mental process. It is a world by itself – a land much outside the United States ethnologically as within it geographically. Every pettiest act of life is new and strange to the intelligent man from the East – tinged sometimes with humor, sometimes with pathos, always with interest. (1982: 190)

I quoted this passage at some length because not only does it capture the primal scene of the young author finding the subject of his writing. It also defines the relationship between the man and the land as one between interpreter and text. And it displays the two cardinal methods of approximating the meaning of "this unguessed land." The first – study – is empirical, i.e., learning about the Southwest through observation in the field, reading books and historical documents, and collecting cultural artifacts, activities that became an essential part of Lummis' life. The second method is rhetorical: by calling up popular orientalist imagery (the fakeer), Lummis availed himself of analogy, a method commonly accepted as a means of extending the authority of previously established knowledge (or simply popular opinion) to an unexamined phenomenon or unfamiliar terrain, in this case the Great American Desert, in order to make sense of it. "[W]e are not yet in any immediate danger of being a nation familiar with and proud of its heritage of nature and antiquity," Lummis ranted in the introductory chapter of *Mesa, Cañon and Pueblo*. "The snobbish tradition [of looking to Europe and the Orient for inspiration] is still dominant – in travel even as in art and letters" (8). The crest of the oriental hype was reached in 1923 when The Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, a Masonic society, chose the national capitol as the destination of their annual pilgrimage. Producing a spectacle along Pennsylvania Avenue, the Nobles were invited to a White House reception by Presi-

dent William G. Harding, rumored to have been a member of the brotherhood. Art historian Holly Edwards described this event as an "act of cartographic symbolism" in which "the American landscape was conflated with that of the Orient to define the arena of noble dreams" (2000a: 53), manifest in principles of patriotism, brotherhood, and philanthropy.

It is against the background of such symbolic conflations of Orient and America (or American national ideals) that Lummis' Oriental allusions unfold their meaning. The author's rhetorical strategy of re-interpreting the desert as a canonical American landscape does not deny already existing preconceptions and anxieties about the arid land as a threat to white Anglo-Saxon agrarian civilization and its values of efficiency and abundance. In *Some Strange Corners of Our Country*, Lummis described the desert as a space of gothic horror, or "fearful waste" (28), one that accommodates grotesque sideshows exhibiting "strange freaks of vegetable life," and contains "weird and deadly valleys" (36). Furthermore, Lummis confirms the view prevalent during most of the 19th century that the territory west of the Mississippi-Missouri-line is "a desert as absolute as the Sahara" (31). This is a skillful rhetorical move, for in the cultural imaginary of fin-de-siècle American travelers the Sahara registered as a foreign, exotic landscape promising cultural and aesthetic pleasure. These travelers, members of the nation's privileged social class, also formed Lummis' target audience. In contrast, Smythe's representation of the Great American Desert as a dormant garden, emerging at roughly the same time, targeted a different audience, potential settlers with little interest in foreign travel.

As an interpretative sign for America's desert lands, "Sahara" carried the semiotic potential to deactivate the existential anxieties of the pioneers and to alleviate some of their visceral reactions to the American West's aridity, recasting it as a quasi-Oriental space containing yet unidentified but extremely valuable historical and cultural riches. Their discovery and appropriation became a patriotic duty. "In and about the edges of the Great American Desert are many of the strangest corners," Lummis writes. "It seems as if Nature has crowded her curiosities into that strangest and most forbidding of museums, that they may not be easily found" (43). With a stroke of a pen, nature becomes the great curator, and the desert becomes her showcase, displaying the "grandest gorge in the world" (Grand Canyon), "a forest

of agate" (Petrified Forest), but also the past remains (ancient ruins, petroglyphs, graffiti) and present customs (snake dance, Penitente crucifixion) of indigenous and Spanish colonial cultures. In fact, the desert is not only museum showcase, it is also designated as nature's chief conservator: its dry climate preserves artifacts such as "a basket of slender vegetable threads" (111) or rock inscriptions, which in more humid climes would have decomposed and disappeared without leaving any trace.

Because the Orient contained cultural relics of past human generations; and because Oriental topography exposed the earth's geological past, thus providing additional access to historical knowledge, Oriental travel brought sophisticated Westerners in close proximity to their own beginnings. Similar geological and topographical features and a comparable archive of pre-historic wonders made it possible for Charles F. Lummis to construct the Great American Desert as domestic Orient. No longer perceived as a cultural waste, the desert landscapes within the United States territory could be interpreted as historical textbook and anthropological museum. "The Land of Poco Tiempo," an essay originally published in *Scribner's Magazine* in December of 1891 and included two years later as the introductory chapter of a book by the same title, is a particularly illustrative example of how Lummis' appropriative interpretation of the desert Southwest as a space with a "usable past"[15] relied on the rhetoric of Orientalism.

The Land of Poco Tiempo as Domestic Orient

In "The Land of Poco Tiempo," Lummis described New Mexico as "the Great American Mystery – the National Rip Van Winkle – the United States which is *not* the United States" (1891: 760). Lummis' use of metaphor is rather telling here: Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) is generally known as a fictionalized comment on the early history of the United States, one that is narrated from the puzzled perspective of a man who fell asleep as a subject of the British

[15] While the concept of the "usable past" did not come into intellectual vogue until after the publication of Van Wyck Brooks's essay "On Creating a Usable Past" in *Dial* 64 (April 11, 1918), my argument in the following section will show that the idea was underlying Anglo-America's cultural conquest of those territories that became the property of the United States after 1848.

Crown and woke up as a citizen of the new American Republic. As literary character, Rip Van Winkle provides his author with an opportunity to examine the beginning of United States history from the critical distance of the skeptical observer. As literary text, "Rip Van Winkle" is one of the earliest efforts to fictionalize American history and to create a narrative anchor for the young nation's cultural imaginary. The problem was that in order to present his story in an aesthetically attractive form, Irving still had to turn to European sources, in this case to German folktales. The "tapeworm of Europe," to use Emerson's unflattering description of trans-Atlantic cultural exchanges, still plagued this early American story. Roughly seven decades later, during the closing years of the 19th century, the cultural material for imaginative approaches to American history could be found in the desert regions of the Southwest, a culturally mysterious territory *within* the geopolitical boundaries of the United States. Consequently, the problem that needed to be solved was not so much a political one – Lummis informed his readers that the indigenous inhabitants of the Southwest "had nearly a hundred republics in America, centuries before *the* American Republic was conceived" (763). Rather, the challenge was a poetic one: How could he authorize the historical and cultural significance of a territory which, for many of Lummis' contemporaries, had value only as a land bridge between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts? Alluding to one of the founding texts of the nation's literary mythology was a clever first move, but one that would not suffice. Tapping the persuasive power of romantic Orientalism was another strategy, one that promised to give pause to an audience still feeding their literary hungers with the poems and stories of Bayard Taylor.

Lummis pulled his readers into "The Land of Poco Tiempo" by unequivocally describing the land in ekphrastic terms as "a picture, a romance, a dream, all in one" (760). From an anthropological and aesthetic perspective, New Mexico is

> a land of quaint, swart faces, of oriental dress and unspelled speech; a land where distance is lost and the eye is a liar; a land of ineffable lights and sudden shadows; of polytheism and superstition, where the rattlesnake is a demigod, and the cigarette a means of grace, and where Christians mangle and crucify themselves – the heart of Africa beating against the ribs of the Rockies. (ibid).

Architecturally, Pueblo adobe houses and Spanish mission churches easily compete with Egyptian Pyramids (762) – structures Lummis would describe later as "monument[s] of patient toil" (1989: 263).[16] At the height of his authorial enthusiasm, Lummis denaturalizes the desert and turns topography itself into cultural artifact:

> Under that ineffable alchemy of the sky, mud turns ethereal, and the desert is a revelation. It is Egypt with every rock a sphinx, every peak a pyramid. (764)

This identification of American topography with the quintessential icons of ancient Oriental civilization not only bespeaks Lummis' radical disagreement with views like those of Susan Wallace; it also evidences the vehemence of his attempt to redirect the cultural and historical attention of America from the foreign to the domestic scene. Paradoxically, his rhetoric reinforces what his nationalism tries to deconstruct: the fixation of American cultural interest on an exotic Other. If the idealized Orient provided a space for nostalgia and anti-modern sentiments, here, within the geopolitical confines of their own national territory, Americans could find a space that would not only satisfy their desire for individual and collective reassurance vis-à-vis an Other; they could also find a space that would support a social and ethical critique of modern American life.

With a sensibility reminiscent of Bayard Taylor who celebrated Nubia, the ancient desert country in northeastern Africa, as a culture that "hath built an altar to Repose" while the rest of the world has submitted to "Action and Toil" (1855: 97), Charles F. Lummis described New Mexico as a region where the "opiate sun soothes to rest" and "the adobe is made to lean against" (1891: 760). In contrast, life in the United States that *is* the United States is governed by "unseemly haste" and a "self-tripping race for wealth" (765). The ideological parallelism is striking. Both authors engage pre-industrial landscapes and cultural Others to express their nostalgia for a world untouched by modernity. Moreover, their comparative Orientalism depends on the presentation of the desert as a cultural and social alternative to an in-

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16 In "The Land of Poco Tiempo" Lummis made a similar comment by proxy, describing Pueblo Indians as "peaceful, fixed, house-dwelling and home-loving tillers of the soil" and "good Catholics in the churches they have builded [sic] with a patience infinite as that of the Pyramids" (762).

creasingly modern society. Whereas the Bedouin became the representative figure of the 'genuine' Orientalist's social idealizations, the peasant cultures of indigenous and Spanish New Mexico embodied the anti-modern social ideals of the domestic Orientalist. His personal friendships with Native Americans and his political advocacy for their rights notwithstanding, Lummis' desert narrative underpins 19th-century stereotypes of the desert as the habitat of non-white populations. The author drops undifferentiated charges against the generic Red Man as savage (a characteristic he dispels for the "home-loving" pueblo tiller but retains for the nomadic Navajo herdsman and the Apache warrior), and of the Mexican as sluggish and lethargic. But when he presents the Land of Poco Tiempo as a social and cultural alternative, he conveniently edits white Anglo presence and, subsequently, imperial politics out of the picture. Describing the racial set-up of New Mexico, he states that "it would be wrong to include the ten per cent. 'American' interpolation as a type," simply because "[t]hey are potential, but not picturesque" (762). Thus, he actively silences the political and historical implications of his own authorial presence in this "wonderland."

Charles F. Lummis constructed himself as the chief archivist of the Southwest's natural and cultural history. And he authorized New Mexico as the Holy Land of American beginnings ("Every New Mexican Rebecca had a Rebecca's father, and Jacob's lot was multitudinously hard" [770]). In doing so, he challenged U.S. America's perception of the desert as useless territory. Yet at the same time, he also fixated it as the spatial opposite of both whiteness and modernity. Lummis is a late romantic who resents the increasing cultural power of the modern metropolis and the industrial, corporate East. But unlike Cooper or the advocates of transcendentalism, his is not a romanticism of wilderness but that of an unknown yet wondrous cultural space where nature created the likes of pyramids and sphinxes, and a social order in which humans operated under a different set of ethical and economic norms and values. Lummis' desert is a museum of natural history, a living anthropological collection, and an art gallery of picturesque landscapes (the first three pages of "The Land of Poco Tiempo" are cluttered with references to the picturesqueness of the land and its non-white inhabitants). The author offers it to his American audience as an exotic space that they can enter either imaginatively (as readers) or literally (as tourists/travelers), and that allows them a

glimpse into the region's pre-Anglo past but also a view of a living alternative to the social and economic mechanisms operative in the modern world.

The anti-modern ideals Lummis promotes in his writing, particularly in "The Land of Poco Tiempo," are embodied by the pastoralized cultures of Pueblo Indian tillers and Mexican *paisanos*. Their (seemingly) undemanding life style of repose and indolence is presented as less invasive than modern approaches to reclaiming the land's resources. "*Lo que puede* – that which can be – is enough. It needs not to plough deep, nor to dun the land with fertilizers" (765). As a result, the "land has taken it easy, too, and after three centuries of uncrowded fruition appears not exhausted, but restful and conservative" (ibid.). But such commentary is rare in Lummis' writing. An environmentalist critique of industrial agriculture, or, in more general terms, of modernity was not the main concern of the man who was most of all a collector and interpreter of regional artifacts, stories, and curiosities. Yet lurking behind Lummis' nostalgia for America's lost agrarian past, and for the simple life commonly associated with it, are valid concerns about the ecological consequences of modernity. Lummis' environmentalist sidebar anticipates the emergence in the 20th century of the desert as a metaphor in ecological critiques of abundance and progress.

While this development is the subject of Chapter Three, I want to draw attention here to another aspect of Lummis' Orientalist nostalgia: that the portrayal of New Mexico as a haven of tranquility and simplicity competes with and seeks to substitute the Orient as a scene of American cultural interests and activities. If Susan Wallace conjured up Oriental fantasies to relieve psychological strain and aesthetic displeasure experienced while gazing at a barren landscape and in doing so rejected the domestic in favor of the foreign, Charles F. Lummis, much more of a nationalist than Wallace, imbued the domestic with the foreign and the exotic, thereby suggesting new ways of looking at a landscape still thoroughly misunderstood by most of his contemporaries as utterly worthless. Inevitably and paradoxically so, Lummis, who adamantly contested the historically and geographically privileged position of the American East as the definitive national region, depended on the Orient for the authorization of the West as a region of national import. By the turn of the century, he was no longer alone. As David Teague observed, numerous contributions by writers,

photographers, and artists to magazines like *Scribner's*, *Century*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's* "give evidence of a remarkable struggle going on in the minds of educated Americans over the question of how to approach the landscape" (1997: 91). This question coincided with another cultural concern that began to resurge in the closing decade of the 19th century – the problem of defining, yet again, the parameters of American national identity.

In *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995), Walter Benn Michaels described the revival of nativist debates around the turn of the century as a reaction to the cultural pressures of immigration – mostly of Eastern and Southern Europeans, and particularly of Ashkenazic Jews, i.e., ethnic groups who, although they wholeheartedly embraced their political responsibilities as American citizens, were unwilling to forfeit their cultural and religious traditions and identities. This, nativists were afraid, might further erode the social cohesion of a nation already beset by a history of racial tensions between black and white and with the effects of industrialization and urbanization. What, they wondered, makes Americans Americans? When Crèvecœur had asked the same question in 1782, he came to define an American in cultural, political, and social terms, as a European "who, leaving behind him all his antient (sic) prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds" (1997: 44). More specifically to be an American was not a matter of birth or heritage, but of *becoming*, of growing into a political, social, and cultural identity by engaging in the respectable work of a farmer. Now, about a century and a half later, a new wave of European and Asian immigrants, not to speak of Mexicans migrating back and forth across the U.S.-Mexico borderline, although they were willing to embrace the social, economic and/or political aspects of 'being' American, maintained core elements of their primary cultural and ethnic identities. Nativists responded to these developments, insisting that political allegiance to the U.S. constitution (i.e., citizenship), industriousness, and the pursuit of social and economic happiness, formerly core characteristics of a good American, were no longer sufficient. Under these circumstances, Benn Michaels observed, modern Nativism emerged as a movement that entailed "the invention of American identity as cultural identity" (15), and this involved the invention of "Indians […] as the ancestors of whites" (51) and as prototypical Americans. Classic

examples of this cultural production are Zane Grey's *The Vanishing American* (1925) and Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925), two novels which erased the colonial "opposition between Indian and white" (39), thus claiming a historical and cultural continuity between ancient and modern America.

There is but little difference between Cather's Tom Outland and Charles F. Lummis. Outland is an orphan who has "no other ancestors to inherit from" (Cather 1925: 242) than the Anasazi cliff dwellers and who appropriates the excavated remnants of their past for authorizing his own American "indigeneity." As interpreter of New Mexico's cultural and topographical landscapes, Lummis not only prepared the *narrative* ground for writers like Cather and Grey; by refashioning Orientalism as nativist discourse, he also prepared the *ideological* ground for appropriating a hitherto "foreign" territory as the cultural property of the United States. At the turn of the 20th century, Lummis was joined in the effort of the desert's literary Americanization by two writers: Mary Austin and John C. Van Dyke. The more complex of the two writers, I will discuss Austin and her work in a later chapter. In the following section of this chapter I will discuss Van Dyke's *The Desert* (1901) as a text that marks the transition in American desert representation from comparative Orientalism to a modernist aestheticism from which the *key figures* of Orientalism are largely absent but whose rhetorical persuasiveness still depends, at least in part, on the *ideological structure* underlying Orientalism.

4 Orientalist Aestheticism: John C. Van Dyke

The perception of the American desert as a picturesque landscape is indisputably the most memorable effect of John C. Van Dyke's *The Desert* (1901). A practicing art historian and admirer of John Ruskin (1819-1900), the eminent British landscape theorist, Van Dyke was familiar with the aesthetic standards of landscape representation, based on the scenic combination of mountains (verticality and massiveness), water (fluidity and, paradoxically, reflective translucence), and forests (darkness and mystery). Against this representational background, the establishment of the desert – i.e., of sand, plains, and horizontal mountain ridges – as an aesthetically gratifying scenery entailed the modernization of traditional modes of landscape perception

and representation. Van Dyke knew that such modernization was more acceptable if presented in a recognizable form. This form was provided by the Romantic tradition of the picturesque tour, a mode of spatial appropriation and cultural self-assertion that combined the activities of (real or imaginary) traveling, viewing, and writing. Becoming a fashionable pastime among the ruling classes in England and the United States in the wake of William Gilpin's essay "On Picturesque Travel" (1794), the picturesque tour's primary objects were aesthetic pleasure, entertainment, and historical education.[17] From a generic point of view, Van Dyke's *Desert* salvages this 19th-century tradition for 20th-centruy readers. From a representational point of view, the text is an ekphrastic anticipation of the pictorial modernism in the landscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe and Mark Rothko, two 20th-century artists whose canvases, in spite of obvious differences in the treatment of their landscape material, are distinguished by a high degree of formalization and abstraction.

The Desert: From Romantic Orientalism to Orientalist Aestheticism

John C. Van Dyke's *The Desert* owes its existence to a circumstance that is rather Melvillean in its character. Like Ishmael, who seeks to escape "the damp, drizzly November" in his soul by going to sea, Van Dyke took out to the desert, hoping that its climate would cure the equally damp pain of his asthmatic condition. Yet unlike Ishmael, who begins his narrative by citing recurring psychological afflictions as the reason for his departure from the shores of civilization, Van Dyke refuses to deliver the immediate raison d'être for his desert sojourn. Instead, he introduces his book as "an excuse for talking about the beautiful things in this desert world that stretches down the Pacific Coast, and across Arizona and Sonora" (1980: ix), leaving it to the reviewers and biographers to reveal the dark side of his motivation for roving a

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17 For an extensive discussion of the picturesque tour and its impact on the discourse of national identity see Lueck 1997. According to Lueck, "published tours such as Gilpin's often included historical anecdotes, local legends, and accounts of colorful personalities encountered on the tour, all of which contributed to the associations that were necessary for true picturesque beauty in a landscape" (12-13).

landscape beyond the horizon of the average American traveler. Of course, Van Dyke's potential readers 'knew' the desert. Their Puritan heritage, Biblical mythology, and the discourse of Orientalism provided them with images and ideas about the desert's identity and meaning. But were they willing to unburden themselves of such cultural baggage and take a new, fresh look? Would they be willing to view and appreciate the desert for what it is – an arid topography of unfamiliar beauty? The narrative composition of *The Desert* suggests that Van Dyke was aware of these or similar question and organized his text accordingly.

The text begins with a chapter appropriately called "The Approach." Van Dyke presents himself as an author/narrator caught between the Scylla of uncontainable elation and the Charybdis of unanswerable questions about the source of this elation in view of the desert. Van Dyke asks:

> What was the attraction, wherein the fascination? How often have we wondered why the sailor loves the sea, why the Bedouin loves the sand! What is there but a strip of sky and another strip of sand or water? (18-19)

Behind the tone of skeptical curiosity about the desert's metaphysical and emotional power emerges a rhetorical strategy that allows the author to simultaneously acknowledge and deconstruct the reader's reluctance to accept the desert as a legitimate subject of aesthetic representation. Both, the figurative presence of the Bedouin in this passage, and the syntactical parallelism between the sea and the sand signal the author's awareness of the discursive authority of Orientalism in turn-of-the-century American culture. Yet soon after he effectively utilizes the strategy of comparative Orientalism, Van Dyke questions the expediency of this representational mode for opening up the desert as an American territory. At the beginning of the second chapter, in which he describes "The Make of the Desert," the author deconstructs the earlier analogy between sea and sand, asking:

> Where and how did we gain the idea that the desert was merely a sea of sand? Did it come from that geography of our youth with the illustration of the sand-storm, the flying camel, and the over-excited Bedouin? Or have we been reading strange tales told by travellers of perfervid imagination – the Marco Polos of to-day? (23)

The Bedouin appears again as the human correlative to the sandy desert, this time, however, as the signature of an ethnographic fantasy rather than the representative inhabitant of a foreign geography. From Van Dyke's perspective, the figures and stories proliferated by Orientalist literature obstruct the view on the aesthetic originality of the Southwestern geography. In order for this view to be cleared, the author of *The Desert* deauthorizes the popular version of Orientalism as a discourse of Romantic drama ("the sand-strom," "the over-excited Bedouin") and pure imagination ("the flying camel"). However, he does not totally abstain from Orientalist references to ultimately establish the American desert's representability and subsequent cultural usability.

The Paradox of Orientalist Desert Aesthetics

The head librarian at the Gardner A. Sage Library of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary and a prominent art professor, John C. Van Dyke was an avid reader of poetry, history, science and travel writing as well as aesthetic theory. In his autobiography he revealed that he "ransacked" "a storehouse of medieval and Oriental literature" and "hundreds of volumes of biography, archeology, geology, and natural history" (1993: 49). Among the major Orientalist texts that he was familiar with are Victor Hugo's cycle of poems *Les Orientales* (1829) and Charles M. Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888), two works that hold the desert in the highest regard for its appeal to spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities. Pierre Loti's *Le Désert* (1895), a travelogue that Van Dyke read, possibly even before he wrote his own desert book, describes the desert as a place where "the East [is] made eternal in its dream and its dust" (1993: 105).[18] It contains a "primitive and magnificent past" (32). It is the land of amazing colors, pure air, exotic fragrances, unfamiliar sounds, but also of danger and adventure (although for Loti, the danger was minimized by the presence of two travel companions, a caravan of twenty camels carrying everything from water to furniture, and the attendance of two dozen servants), and a territory where "you find all measurement impossible" (75). In

[18] For a detailed discussion of Loti's possible influence on Van Dyke see Wild 1992.

short, the desert was a place where the world-weary Western existentialist could establish new historical and spiritual meaning. Yet it was also a place where the European artist, tired of the dull colors and the damp atmosphere of European cities could find new artistic stimulation. In general, the Orient had become a cultural space that offered new and exotic sights (the harem, the souk, the desert), and an intensity and lusciousness of color and light hitherto unseen by Europeans. John C. Van Dyke had met and studied the work of many of these artists, including the French Orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. And there is good reason to believe that he was familiar with the major trends exhibited by such artists as Elihu Vedder.[19] The works of these writers and artists offered an iconography and vocabulary that could render appealing and comprehensible the deserts of the American Southwest and provide a discursive frame for Van Dyke's own project, the investiture of the desert as an aesthetically valuable landscape in need of protection against the destructive invasion of all-powerful "practical men" (Van Dyke 1980: 60) – irrigationists, miners, ranchers, and other harbingers of modern America. The author of *The Desert* knew that the "love of Nature is after all an acquired taste," and that it was possible to move from "admiring the Hudson-River landscape" to "loving the desolation of the Sahara" (viii). But how to convince his readers?

Structuring his desert narrative as a picturesque tour was Van Dyke's first step. After the first chapter ("The Approach") follow descriptions of "The Make of the Desert" and "The Bottom of the Bowl." Although it does not (and cannot) rely on images of rushing streams and sublime waterfalls, the description of the Colorado river in "The Silent River" signals the author's recognition of running water as a necessary element for creating a picturesque scenery. The narrative continues with observations on "Light, Air, and Color," "Desert Sky and Clouds," phenomena such as the mirage, and with descriptions of the desert's fauna, flora, and topographical features. The

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19 See *The Autobiography of John C. Van Dyke*, Chapter 7 "Reading," 49-55; Chapter 8 "Art and Artists," 56-60; Chapter 9 "Authors and Painters," 61-72. In these chapters, Van Dyke talks about studying Egyptology, and he summarizes his involvement in the art world. Among others, he mentions having met Gérôme in a Paris gallery. He also seemed to be familiar with Elihu Vedder, who had designed the cover of *The Studio*, an art magazine of which Van Dyke became editor shortly after it was created.

text's persuasiveness certainly benefits from the author's background in art history. Similes erase the difference between the natural forms of a "sahuaro" and the architectural shapes of a "Moslem minaret" (144/145); the "ethereal blue" of the desert sky is favorably compared with the "ceramic blue" of "a certain Oriental school" (97). Echoes of Lummis' landscape patriotism sound in these comparisons, in which the Orientalist reference serves a paradoxical function: it signifies the desert's aesthetic merits while simultaneously invalidating the supremacy of the Oriental signifier. If Oriental architecture and folk art cannot compete with the hues and shapes of the desert, neither can the canvassed landscapes of European painters. For Van Dyke, the desert that lies before his (mind's) eye is "the most decorative landscape in the world" (56). Nature is by far the greatest "modern landscapist," getting on "with the least possible form" and suggesting "everything by tones of color, shades of light, drifts of air," an effect which "men like Corot and Monet have told us, again and again" (56), was the pinnacle of aesthetic achievement in the art of painting. Van Dyke clearly poses as nature's attendant, someone intimately familiar with her aesthetic projects. Beyond the structural ruins of preconceived Oriental forms and figures appears a landscape more perfect than a painting. In 1893, Theodore Roosevelt gave voice to popular perceptions of arid lands as "evil and terrible" (1925: 4). In *Art For Art's Sake*, published the same year, Van Dyke showed a more benevolent attitude towards the desert: like many of the landscapes in Classic and Romantic painting which merely served as background for heroic figures like Robin Hood, Medusa, or the medieval knight, the desert in most Orientalist painting, he complained, "existed not so much for its white light, rising heat, and waving atmosphere, as for the home of the roaming lion, or the treacherous highway of the winding Bedouin caravan" (1893: 26). By writing *The Desert*, Van Dyke eventually liberated his subject from this background position as stage for dramatic action and celebrated the desert in its own right: "In sublimity – the superlative degree of beauty – what land can equal the desert with its wide plains, its grim mountains, and its expanding canopy of sky!" (1980: 232) His desert book became an instruction manual on how to see the desert, not from a position of moral or economic judgment but through the benevolent eyes of an aesthete trained in a tradition of modern landscape appreciation that began with John Ruskin.

The John Ruskin of the Desert

An entry on Ruskin, written in 1896 for Charles Dudley Warner's *Library of the World's Best Literature*, reveals Van Dyke's indebtedness to the Englishman, whose "advice to go to nature – selecting nothing, rejecting nothing, scorning nothing" (Van Dyke 1896-97: 12511) Van Dyke took seriously. Hence his insistence "that there is nothing ugly under the sun, save that which comes from human distortion" (1980: 192). By the time he wrote *The Desert*, Van Dyke had published two books – *Art for Art's Sake* (1893) and *Nature for Its Own Sake* (1898) – in which he espoused an aesthetic philosophy that combined his love for nature with his enthusiasm for the art of painting. In *Art for Art's Sake* Van Dyke revealed himself as a follower of Ruskinean aesthetics, regarding "form, color, light, shade, atmosphere, and their kind" as the epitome of beauty (Van Dyke 1893: 36). Furthermore, Van Dyke's definition in *The Desert* of the beautiful as "the large, full-bodied, well-expressed truth of character" (1980: 172) or that which is characteristic in a landscape (a plant, an animal) echoes the distinction Ruskin made in his second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846) between "the external qualities of bodies" called "typical Beauty," and "the felicitous fulfillment of function in living things" which he called "vital Beauty" (Ruskin quoted in Stillman 1901: 338).[20] In a key passage in *The Desert*, Van Dyke challenges his readers' classical notions of the beautiful as "something of regular form, something smooth and pretty" (1980: 143), and, echoing Ruskin's vitalist concept of beauty, presents them with a modern, functionalistic definition of the beautiful. "Are you dragging into nature some remembrance of classic art," he begins his inquiry:

> [A]nd are you looking for the Dionysius face, the Doryphorus form, among these trees and bushes? If so the desert will not furnish you too much of beauty. But if you mean something that has a distinct character, something appropriate to its setting, something admirably fitted to a designed end (as in art the peasants of Millet or the burghers of

[20] Van Dyke's art writing also reveals a certain fondness for British landscapist J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) whose impressionistic style and emotive response to nature resulted in intensely colored canvases, which, in turn, served to illustrate many of Ruskin's theories. For a more detailed discussion of Turner's impact on Van Dyke's nature writing see Wild 1996.

> Rembrandt and Rodin), then the desert will show forth much that people nowadays are beginning to think beautiful. (143-44)

While Van Dyke's reference to the changing aesthetic predilections of "people nowadays" in this passage remains vague in terms of his projected audience's class, race or gender, a close reading of the entire text of *The Desert* reveals the social and racial ideologies beneath the surface of Ruskinean aesthetic theories.

A condensed version of these theories is preserved as a series of *Lectures on Art* which Ruskin delivered and published in 1870, after he had accepted the position as first Slade Professor of Art at Oxford University.[21] In retrospect, he considered them "the most important piece of my literary work done with unabated power, best motive, and happiest concurrence of circumstance" (Ruskin quoted in O'Gorman 1999: 74-75). At the time, "art" was an entirely new discipline in higher education, and thus still in the process of validating itself as a legitimate pedagogical enterprise. Ruskin tackled this task in his inaugural lecture in which he described the study of natural history and of landscape painting as the two key elements of aesthetic education. Observation was the main principle in the development of keen visual faculties, and detachment of the observing subject from the practical aspects in nature the prerequisite for its enjoyment as beautiful landscape. "Landscape," Ruskin professed, "can only be enjoyed by cultivated persons," whereas "a true peasant cannot see the beauty of cattle; but only the qualities expressive of their serviceableness" (1870: 22).

This sentiment, displaying the class prejudice and sense of urban superiority of one of the leading intellectuals of the 19th century, is echoed in Van Dyke's *The Desert*. Ruskin's American disciple was convinced that

> The peons and Indians in Sonora cannot see the pinks and purples in the mountain shadows at sunset. They are astonished at your question

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21 Felix Slade was a wealthy art collector who not only donated to the British Museum but also endowed three Chairs of Fine Art (Oxford, Cambridge, London). While this act of philanthropy was received with skeptical eyes by representatives of traditional academic fields such as medicine, philosophy, and theology, the endowment of art professorships points at the modernizing impact of the new bourgeois elite on education and the definition of the nation as a cultural as well as economic and political entity. See Bradley 1984: 18.

> for they see nothing but mountains. And you may vainly exhaust ingenuity trying to make a Papago see the silvery sheen of the mesquite when the low sun is streaming across its tops. He sees only mesquite – the same dull mesquite through which he has chased rabbits from infancy. (Van Dyke 1980: 12-13)

The syntactic parallels and rhythmic similarities between Van Dyke and Ruskin are conspicuous: Van Dyke translates Ruskin's disparagement of the English peasant's environmental utilitarianism into the American racialized trope of infantilized indigenous and Mexican responses to the environment. For Van Dyke, "A sensitive feeling for sound, or form, or color, an impressionable nervous organization, do not belong to the man with the hoe, much less to the man with the bow" (13). The alleged failure of "the man with the hoe" and "the man with the bow" to recognize beauty are assumed to be "indicative of some physical degeneration" and as "premonitory symptoms of racial decay" (13). Van Dyke's blunt assumptions about the artistic practices and sensibilities of Mexicans and Native Americans, presented as the objective assessment of a disinterested observer, erases any possible contribution to a theory of aesthetics or formations of the nation's cultural identity on part of indigenous and other less 'enlightened' people. Later in the book, what might appear as a revision of this judgment via the author's comments on "the wonderful endurance of the desert Indians" (151), a quality that was acquired over centuries of living in a physically demanding landscape, is undercut by the textual placement of these sentiments in a chapter called "Desert Animals." Van Dyke reasserts his social position as standard bearer of cultural and social virtue through what Terry Eagleton called "the mediatory category of the aesthetic" (1990: 7). In Van Dyke's case, the potential of the aesthetic as a tool for modernizing ways of seeing landscape, and for the installation of landscape as a category for the critique of a purely pragmatic approach to nature, is undercut by the representation of the desert's indigenous inhabitants as creatures "almost as hardy as the cactus, and just as distinctly a type of the desert as the coyote" (Van Dyke 1980: 151).[22]

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[22] The effectiveness of Van Dyke's identification of Native Americans with nature can be observed in Peter Wild's critical work. As late as 1992, Wild claims that "There are no humans in [Van Dyke's] desert musings," thereby perpetuating the obliterative racial politics operative in *The Desert*. In an even more recent publication, Wild compares Mary Austin to Van Dyke and con-

These two interpellations of racial and ethnic Others – as signs of cultural degeneration and elements of nature – demarcate the political limitations of *The Desert* as a text that presents aesthetic innovation as a form of social renovation. Van Dyke's text exemplifies Terry Eagleton's description of the aesthetic as "an eminently contradictory phenomenon:" while it is a formalized expression of the bourgeoisie's claim to political and ideological dominance and speaks of matters such as freedom, self-determination, autonomy, and universality, it also "provides an unusually powerful challenge and alternative to […] dominant ideological forms" (1990: 3) such as pragmatism or utilitarianism. In Van Dyke's case the aesthetic serves two major purposes: it conveys the author's legitimate environmentalist "challenge" of modern industrialism, while simultaneously authorizing a discourse of social and racial hierarchies through an anthropological rhetoric of perceptual differences. It is in this latter sense that Van Dyke's desert

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tends: "The pivot showing their radical difference is people. In Van Dyke's *The Desert* there are none." Wild is right in that it seems "as if on his grand tour of the desert [Van Dyke] met not a single cowboy, snaggletoothed sourdough, Indian, or storeowner." I agree with his view that Van Dyke was "a cynic when it came to human beings" and that "for his masterpiece Van Dyke idealizes his landscape, ridding it of those perverse, meanspirited invaders who could be only blots on nature's lovely scenes before him." However, lumping together cowboys, Indians and storeowners obscures the presence of Native Americans in Van Dyke's text – as part of the desert's natural accessories. See Wild 1992: 68; Wild 2001: 45. Randall Roorda needed the experience of being shocked into realizing the racist undercurrents in Van Dyke's desert classic by another Van Dyke book, his 1908 *The Money God*. Roorda remembers: "Tracing the faint library trails of academia, I strayed across *The Money God*, the mere title of which seemed to confirm the positive impression of its author I'd derived from Shelton's [the author of the biographical introduction to the Peregrine Smith edition of *The Desert*] story, from my own participatory engagement with the text, and from the vaguely formed comparison of Van Dyke to Thoreau I'd contrived. What a guy, I thought: a wandering naturalist and social critic to boot! But eventually I took up the book and turned to the chapter on immigration, discovering the [racist] sentiments reproduced above. Imagine my surprise. The desert solitaire was revealed as a racist; also, it turned out, as an apologist for robber barons, most likely eugenicists, too, with whom he seemed to differ over methods but not intents. In a flash, my appetite for my project [of retracing the self-effacement of the author through his subject] vanished" (1998: 94-95). Writing a critique of *The Desert*, or rather of the first chapter's gesture towards a retreat from America's racially and ethnically changing civilization, was the method Roorda used to recover his appetite.

aesthetics consolidates middle class values and expresses America's imperial project of westward expansion. His imaginative gaze takes possession of those spaces that John Wesley Powell had called "true deserts" in 1878. The disciplining of these lands that had no economic value and their transformation into an aesthetically pleasing and orderly landscape was not politically innocent at all, as further examination of Ruskin's aesthetics will demonstrate.

Ruskin's valorization of landscape painting as the innate aesthetic expression of British nationality was premised by his argument that in an age of pragmatism and utilitarianism, the teaching of art, art history and aesthetics is indispensable to securing the established order of social hierarchies within the nation, and of racial and political hierarchies within the British Empire. Delivering one of the *Lectures on Art* at Oxford, Ruskin asked:

> Ought we not rather to aim at an ideal of national life, when, of the employments of Englishmen, though each shall be distinct, none shall be unhappy or ignoble; when mechanical operations acknowledged to be debasing in their tendency, shall be deputed to less fortunate and more covetous races; when advance from rank to rank, though possible to all men, may be rather shunned than desired by the best; and the chief object in the mind of every citizen may not be extrication from a condition admitted to be disgraceful, but fulfillment of a duty which shall be also a birthright? (1870: 4)

Deeply convinced that "the art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues" (26), Ruskin considered the cultivation of aesthetic faculties a racial obligation and a prerequisite for achieving and maintaining national power. Exposure to a long tradition of the best of English landscape painting would allow "the child of an educated race" to develop "an innate instinct for beauty" as well as an "instinctive love for landscape," or more specifically, for the "landscape of their country as *memorial*" (23). Predicated on the pursuit of historical and scientific knowledge and the close observation of nature, Ruskin's theory exemplifies the intellectual entanglement of 19th-century aesthetics (defined as the product of a reiterative cultural practice-education) with a politics of imperialism and colonial expansion. For Ruskin, the ability to recognize a beautiful line or the intricate interplay of color and light was the moral obligation of a responsible citizen. It prepared England's social and political elite for the task of

building a global empire.[23] Ruskin reassured his Oxford audience that "We are still undegenerate in race" (28). But he also cautioned them that if they did not develop their aesthetic faculties the nation was in danger of falling into decline. In order to prevent this, England "must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men" (29). Thus, the cultivation of either productive or cognitive aesthetic skills, or more precisely, an education in landscape appreciation had a political purpose, and that purpose was to secure the glory of a nation.

Van Dyke's inauguration of the desert into the American national imaginary as a regenerative and aesthetically valuable terrain is based on a very similar logic. Under his literary auspices, desert appreciation became a mode of taking possession of an area (Powell's "true deserts") that resisted other modes of establishing territorial authority and control, such as agriculture. Moreover, it also became a form of articulating the desire for social stability and cultural continuity in an era of accelerated modernization and increasing nativist anxieties.

Since the end of the Civil War, American society had undergone dramatic changes. The liberation of African Americans into citizenship and the mass immigration from less prosperous parts of Europe as well as from China had altered the nation's racial and ethnic proportions; technological inventions and industrial development accelerated Western civilization's dispersion across the globe, making it much easier to conquer nature and exploit its resources. In *Nature For Its Own Sake* (1898), Van Dyke mourns the defeat of the forest under the reign of the axe. As a prelude to his rant against the "practical man" now encroaching even upon the desert, Van Dyke writes: "The forerunner of civilization is destruction, and its follower is always

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23 During the course of his lecture, Ruskin wraps the rhetoric of discipline, duty, birthright and social destiny in a language of aesthetic responsibility akin to religious and moral responsibilities. For him, art fulfills two major purposes: first, as artistic practice it serves in "the production of beautiful things" (1870: 6); and second, as an object of education it is indispensable in the formation of "English gentlemen" (12), the British Empire's social and political elite. As artists, this elite should be able to translate national virtues into aesthetic ideas and express them in well-balanced arrangements of light, color, shade and line; as art patrons, their responsibility is to recognize and support those living artists whose skills best express the country's merits.

desolation" (1898: 202). Being comfortable as long as change was instigated by nature's divine power, Van Dyke was on the edge when life took more mundane, i.e., cultural routes of altering the landscape. In this vast sea of change the world had become, the only island of permanence was – the desert. In order to drive home his point, the Van Dyke of *Nature For Its Own Sake* utilized the cultural authority of comparative Orientalism, describing the Sahara of his own days as "still the same Sahara that Menes knew" almost five thousand years ago. In Van Dyke's view, it "has remained quite undisturbed." And this is how he imagines the scene:

> The traveller may strike off from the Nile and ride – ride west for days without a change. With him always is the glaring sunlight, the sand and rock, the torn and ragged wady, the star – like glance of light from quartz and mica, and overhead the rose-hued sky. Nothing but barren waste below and burning heat above. […] How silent and motionless the vast desert! Simoons may blow and drift the sands hither and thither, but the general appearance does not alter. It never alters. The desert steeds of the Pharaohs perished in these wastes ages ago, as yesterday the caravan of Mecca pilgrims. The Sphinx with its face to the sun and its back to the desert, has felt the far-travelling waves of sand lapping its shoulders through no one knows how many centuries of desolation, but the sands were there before ever it was carved. Will they always remain as now? Who knows what changes the engines of civilization may work? The northern Libyan desert may yet form the bed of a great inland sea. (203-204)

While this passage attests to Van Dyke's philosophical inclination to brood over the impermanence and the insubstantiality of existence, and, by way of analogy, to fuss about modern civilization's technological and utilitarian hubris, it also reveals tendencies not uncommon among intellectuals at the time, and that is to look to nature for metaphors of law and order, and to search for a unified ideal substance rather than for functional particulars to explain the meaning of life. Science – particularly Darwinian biology and the still new discipline of anthropology – claimed to have ultimate explanations for life's mysteries and for the biological and cultural evolution of humankind. It even threatened to assume the authority to define beauty by tying it to a pragmatic evolutionary function – as the basis of the sexual attraction between female and male that secured the procreation of a given species. Or worse, by denouncing beauty as merely a reflection of individual taste rather than the expression of an innate and unalterable

quality in nature. Consequently, art, art criticism, and the humanities moved to prevent science's cultural take-over and its attempt to subjugate the beautiful to mere practical purpose and the unreliability of individual judgment.[24] And this is the context for John C. Van Dyke's work. When, in the passage from *Nature For Its Own Sake* cited above, he represents the sands of the Sahara as something insubstantial yet more permanent than the Pharaohs or even the Sphinx, Van Dyke reassures his contemporary audience of the ultimate insignificance of all human history. A passage towards the end of *The Desert* echoes the metaphysical agony expressed in the earlier work, but substitutes the American for the Oriental scene, and irrigation technology for the Sphinx. Placing his narrator on top of a mountain range with a view of the Mojave to the East and the irrigated fields of Southern California to the west, Van Dyke observes:

> Nature is always driven with difficulty. Out on the Mojave she fights barrenness at every turn; here in Southern California she fights fertility. She is determined to maintain just so much of desert with just so much of its hardy, stubborn life. When she is pleased to enhance it or abate it she will do so; but in her own good time and way. (1980: 228-229)

While this passage reveals an author in awe of nature's ambivalent attitudes towards life, a few passages later Van Dyke engages in an even more fatalistic view:

> And yet in the fullness of time Nature designs that this waste and all of earth with it shall perish. Individual, type, and species, all shall pass away; and the globe itself become desert sand blown hither and yon through space. (230)

Time will eventually erode all power. Life is a relentless struggle for existence in which the individual is infinitely less significant than the species. And this is true for plants, animals, and humans. In nature's larger scheme they may play a role, but taken by themselves, any individual or group of beings will ultimately be irrelevant. "Nothing

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24 The contemporary debate took place on the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine devoted to literature, science, art, and politics. See particularly William James Stillman's two essays on "The Revival of Art" (Stillman 1892) and "Beauty" (Stillman 1901), and Irving Babbitt's article on "The Humanities" (Babbitt 1902).

human is of long duration," Van Dyke had mused earlier in his text. "Men and their deeds are obliterated, the race itself fades; but Nature goes calmly on with her projects" (1980: 62). Patricia Nelson Limerick commented on the pretentiousness of Van Dyke's position: "Protestations of insignificance aside, judging by the effortful grandeur of the prose, one insignificant and ephemeral human, at least, was taking himself quite seriously" (1985: 110).[25]

The sardonic accuracy of Limerick's observation notwithstanding, with *The Desert* Van Dyke continues a tradition in American writing that is associated with the names of Emerson and Thoreau, and which presents the imaginative immergence, or retreat into nature and natural landscapes as the key to an American education and to the formation of American culture. Randall Roorda's *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing* (1998) provides a comprehensive reading of *The Desert* as an ideologically reactionary critique of a racially and socially changing culture, articulated as a drama of retreat into an uninhabited, sublime, and feminized nature. More specifically, Roorda describes Van Dyke's text as "an ineradicable and generative gesture, 'raising the issue' of culture in the recognition of its absence" (1998: 98).[26] The acme of the desert's recognition as a place of negative culture comes early on in *The Desert*, when Van Dyke engages in a rhetorical string of observations about the dependence of California's "productiveness" on the "warm air of its surrounding deserts" and "the healthfulness" of "the dry air and heat of the deserts" (1980: 59). It culminates in the author's environmentalist demand that "The deserts should never be reclaimed. They are the breathing-spaces of the west and should be preserved forever" (59).

Sentences like these constituted *The Desert*'s reputation among scholars and general readers as "an early aesthetic critique of industrial capitalism" (Teague 1995: 169). Lawrence Clark Powell, the doyen of Western American literary history, dubbed Van Dyke's book a Southwest classic and claimed that "All Southwestern book trails

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25 Limerick's chapter on Van Dyke gives an excellent summary on the subject of metaphysical reflection in *The Desert* (1985: 95-111).

26 For a more general discussion of nature as discursive instrument for the legitimization of social conventions and cultural norms see Soper 1995 and Evernden 1992.

lead to *The Desert*" (in Wild 1988: 7). Among the writers following in Van Dyke's path are Mary Austin, who was right on his heels. Later in the century, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, Ann Zwinger, Charles Bowden, and Terry Tempest Williams, all authors who received critical accolades as literary environmentalists, followed suit, describing the desert in minute detail and often with a poetical power reminiscent of their literary forbear, each contributing to an increasing acceptance of the desert as a canonical American landscape. I have argued that Van Dyke's celebration (and romanticization) of the desert as a picturesque landscape, and as one of the last remaining spaces of retreat from modern civilization was concurrent with a deauthorization of Orientalism as an instrument for the desert's discursive endorsement as a culturally valuable landscape. In the concluding section I suggest that although Van Dyke disapproved of the figures and images of Orientalist art and literature as suitable entrance points for understanding the value of the American desert, his text is *structurally Orientalist* because it mimics the rhetorical gestures utilized by the discourse of Orientalism for appropriating space.

The Structural Orientalism of Van Dyke's The Desert

By staging his desert narrative as a representation of pure yet aesthetically captivating nature, and by advocating its preservation as an existential imperative (the West's breathing space), Van Dyke joins literary ranks with American writers who, like the Thomas Jefferson of *Notes on the States of Virginia* (1784), interpellated nature as a subject through which they could define their nation's identity and authorize its cultural independence from Europe. Vindicating America's nature from charges like that of Comte de Buffon[27] who maintained that the American continent produced an animal and plant life inferior of that springing from the European soil, this tradition culminated in publications such as Motley F. Deakin's *The Homebook of the Picturesque, or American Scenery, Art, and Literature* (1852) in which American landscapes were presented as compatible with if not superior to the sublime views of Europe, and in the transcendentalist movement, par-

[27] Buffon developed his theory of American degeneracy in his monumental *Histoire naturelle*, a thirty-six volume work published between 1749 and 1788.

ticularly in the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, in essays like "Nature" (1844), "The American Scholar" (1837), and "Wealth" (1860) advocated the study of the Divine Soul expressed in a capitalized nature as the keystone of an American education and a prerequisite of a prosperous society. With his call to preserve the wild "desert world that stretches down the Pacific Coast, and across Arizona and Sonora" (1980: ix), John C. Van Dyke contributed to a literary tradition deeply involved in defining America and American nationality through references to and metaphors for the continent's natural topography and ecology. It matters little that much of what he sold to his readers as scientific fact or first-hand experiences of nature was actually knowledge acquired by reading or listening to other people's (desert) stories, if not simply the product of his own authorially vivid fantasy. As Peter Wild's untiring biographical excavations revealed, *The Desert* poses as a text representing a tough man's experience riding on horseback over the wildly beautiful landscapes of the desert Southwest, when in fact its author watched the sunsets from a rocking chair on the porch of his older brother's California ranch or admired the sand dunes from behind the window of a Pullman car. As a naturalist's description of a specific region and its biota, *The Desert* may indeed be a "compendium of falsehoods, a hoax" as Wild so impressively tags it (1999: 84). But this does not diminish the book's literary quality, or the poetry of this desert portrait. Much less does it call into question its position as a contribution to the genteel tradition of American nature writing. Yet this tradition is far from being an ideologically and politically innocent literary practice.

David Teague's archival research, published as "A Paradoxical Legacy: Some New Contexts for Van Dyke's *The Desert*" in *Western American Literature*, reveals that the author of *The Desert*, like other advocates of early environmentalism, "develop[ed] a case of selective blindness" (1995: 174) to the fact that in the name of progress his patron, Andrew Carnegie (who most likely paid for Van Dyke's desert trip) was involved in the destruction of nature in Pennsylvania. While Teague agrees with the major gist of earlier critics and considers *The Desert* a book in which "Van Dyke mounts a sophisticated critique of his own society's heedless material exploitation of nature" (169), his contextual reading shines klieg light onto the classism at the heart of Van Dyke's nature writing. Teague convincingly argues that Van Dyke's ecological absolutes are based on his privileged social position

and an education that not only "provided him the aesthetic vocabulary necessary to make the visual phenomena of the desert accessible to his audience," but also entrusted him with "ideas of hierarchy" that allowed him "to set the Mojave, Colorado, and Sonoran deserts above the Mesabi Range and the Monongahela River" (175), areas in Pennsylvania suffering from the environmental pollution caused by the Carnegie steel industry. Urging readers to "see in it the landscapes it ignores […] as well as the landscape it would protect" (176), Teague's critical exploration into the biographical and socio-cultural contexts of *The Desert* demonstrates that "the process of representing wild nature to Americans is more complex than it appears" (175).

For David Mazel the cultural gesture of retreat into the natural environment points to yet another ideology, that of imperial expansion and conquest. Locating the beginnings of American environmentalism "in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century American West, a time and region that place it directly upon the heels of imperial conquest," Mazel urges us to recognize the historical genesis of literary environmentalism as "a quite interested style for knowing territory that at the time was *not* undisputed United States soil, a style generally predicated upon an imperial teleology that always took for granted the eventual domination of the region in question" (1996: 144). As such, literary environmentalism is "a seamless refinement of earlier styles for knowing, restructuring, and finally controlling the land and life of the continent" (ibid.; see also Mazel 2000: 21-22), and thus structurally akin to Orientalism. As a *modus operandi* for knowing and exerting authority over the Western United States, a space whose integration into the political geography of the U.S. was predicated on war (the Mexican War and the resulting Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo), political and economic power (the Louisiana and Gadsden Purchases), and colonial expansion into indigenous territory, American environmentalism served functions similar to those of European Orientalism, an enterprise which, as Said pointed out, involved "the scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier" (1994: 7). In one way or another, they all participated in the production of the Orient as a suitable object to illustrate theories about the natural world and about cultural, religious or national developments. As historical studies such as William H. Goetzmann's *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (1966) exemplify, the frontier West served similar epistemological purposes for the U.S. as

the Orient did for such European powers as Britain and France. This functional parallelism is the basis for Mazel's provocative thesis that employs Orientalism in a rather grammatical way. According to Mazel, Orientalism and American environmentalism adhere to the same ideological syntax of exercising power over territory by representing it as both Western civilization's Other and, at the same time, as a space containing a yet uncorrupted stage of cultural development.

In Van Dyke's case, Mazel's argument can be pushed even further and corroborated by the fact that, as an art historian, the author of *The Desert* was familiar with the specific sensibilities of Orientalist painting. In other words, the inclusion of the desert in the pantheon of canonical American landscapes, i.e., its integration into a national symbolic vested in the concept of beautiful nature, is directly informed by a combination of Orientalism's visual interests with the more general politics of 19th-century transatlantic landscape aesthetics. In particular, the Oriental genre paintings of Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps (1803-1860) seem to have opened the American art critic's eye to the representative capacity and the sensual, emotional impact of the Orient's color and light. In *Art For Art's Sake* Van Dyke insists: "Nature, yes, but nature tinctured by the peculiar view, thought, or feeling of her interpreter, or, as Alfred Stevens the painter has put it, 'Nature seen through the prism of an emotion'" (31). As an example of a painter with a "peculiar view" and an instinct for the beautiful Van Dyke cites Decamps, whose "individuality pervades his art and turns his canvas […] into the bright light and life of the Orient" (ibid.). Earlier in the same text, Van Dyke had remarked on "the white hot sunlight beating into an oriental court" (9) as an example of those objects or moments of beauty that should be the sole subject of art. When encountering similar scenes in the desert he would appreciate them with similar passion. Decamps was a painter whose work, according to John La Farge, visualized a "desire for an expression of a beauty in the use of great lines" and the beauty that the artist "found in the spread of the horizon, in large spaces, in great horizontals broken by abrupt perpendiculars" (1908: 100). It may well have been Decamps' ways of seeing Oriental spaces that shaped Van Dyke's appreciation for the geometrical beauty of mesas, as much as Decamps' handling of color and light sharpened his eye for the beauty of desert colors.

In a manner reminiscent of Gifford and Vedder's approaches to the deserts of the Orient, Van Dyke's text liberated the American desert from its position in the cultural imaginary as mise-en-scène for the drama of irrigation and as a gauge for agricultural progress. But his representation of the desert as beautiful landscape was not a disinterested project, detached from any ideological purpose. Van Dyke perceived of the desert as "the most decorative landscape in the world, a landscape all color, a dream landscape" (1980: 56), as a perfect piece of art, a painting as faultless and as ideal in its representation of color, light, and form as only a few European artists could render it. Van Dyke's desert is immaculate nature because the author eradicates all traces of history and culture that marked the landscape prior to his arrival. Thus, while his appreciative representation and his call of desert conservation may ring with environmentalist concerns, Van Dyke's desert advocacy does not so much follow an ecological impulse as we understand it today, but a political impulse akin to that of Orientalism. His environmentalist apprehensions were imbued with social anxieties and cultural prejudices not uncommon among the members of the American social and cultural elite. In his editor's introduction to Van Dyke's autobiography, Peter Wild describes the author of *The Desert* as a member of the "exclusive circles of educated and refined Northeasterners, a small and privileged group thinking itself the 'culture bearers' of what was best in America" (Van Dyke 1993: xxii). A more detailed characterization of Van Dyke depicts him as "A mossback proud of his sterling heritage, at least of what he imagined it to be," who was annoyed

> that the values of his class, the nation's unofficial aristocracy, were under assault by millions of ignorant immigrants, by women, and the reforms of such brash upstarts as Mary Austin. For years he feuded, trying to keep Edith Wharton out of the all-male ranks of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Van Dyke, a person of power and culture, felt himself besieged, about to be toppled from his privileged status, yet instead of supporting the ways of good grace and upper-class gentility, the world kept changing, the rude masses pushing, rocking his pedestal. (Wild 1999: 84-85)

Nature, particularly in its supposedly uninhabited and uninhabitable domains, that is in the desert, provided a real and imagined space in which to turn away from the dense atmosphere and the social demands of a new epoch. In this sense, *The Desert* constitutes an example of

what Lauren Berlant called "the double articulation of subjectivity and landscape" (1991: 35): it expresses Van Dyke's attempt to secure for himself and his peers a regenerative space, a territory that affords the white, male, bourgeois subject a place in which to indulge in reassuring fantasies of his own exclusivity and power.

The three authors discussed in this chapter – Susan E. Wallace, Charles F. Lummis, and John C. Van Dyke – represent a paradigm shift in approaches to the American desert as it occurred towards the end of the 19th century. The surging popular as well as scientific interest among Victorian Americans in the culture, social structures, and landscapes of the so-called Orient provided a well of tropes, images, and figures that could be used as rhetorical tools for examining the desert's viability as a constituent in the American pantheon of "Great Landscape Texts" (Mazel 2000: 3). Unlike Wallace, whose comparative approach rendered the deserts of New Mexico unfit for an appreciation similar to that of its topographical equivalent in Arabia, Lummis took possession of the American desert by interpreting its geological formations as similar in quality and significance to the architectural and sculptural achievements of 'Oriental' culture, and by exoticizing the Spanish, Mexican and Native American inflections of the Southwest's cultural history. Van Dyke neutralized the traces of desert Southwest's cultural history by naturalizing its human inhabitants and by aestheticizing the natural materiality of its topographical and atmospheric features. Both Lummis and Van Dyke prepared the ground for subsequent approaches to the deserts of the American West and Southwest. However, as the 20th century progressed, the discursive authority of Orientalism, which provided the referential core for defining the future of the American desert in the nation's cultural imaginary, was substituted by two eco-spatial paradigms that will be the subject of the following chapters – wilderness and heterotopia.

III. Wilderness

"Wilderness" misnames an anxiety as a geography.
David Mazel

With the passing of the California Desert Protection Act (CDPA) in 1994 – legislation that granted national park status to Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Monuments and rededicated the region between Interstates 15 and 40, formerly known as the East Mojave National Scenic Area, as the Mojave National Preserve – Americans, through their political representatives, finally granted cultural privileges and canonical status to a landscape they had long despised. In contrast to the 1877 Desert Land Act, which defined and regulated the settlement of desert lands based on ideas and notions of agricultural use, its 20th-century counterpart constructed the desert as an aspect of wild nature worth protecting, and it set aside more than 70 so-called wilderness areas to shelter the desert's fragile ecological subsystems.[1]

In 1996, during the October 9th vice-presidential debate, Democratic incumbent Al Gore cited the 1994 act as evidence of the Clinton administration's successful efforts to place environmental protection and preservation on the national policy agenda. Earlier that year, Michael Parfit, writing for *National Geographic* magazine, seemed struck with wonderment over the apparent audacity of this law when he observed that the land that had been perceived by most Americans as nothing but "the blazing desolation you had to cross to get from

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1 Section 2 of the 1877 law described it as "An act to provide for the sale of desert lands in certain States and Territories," decreeing "That all lands exclusive of timber lands and mineral lands which will not, without irrigation, produce some agricultural crop, shall be deemed desert lands […]". (*Statutes at Large* 1877: 377) The definition given here concurs with definitions of wilderness as land unimpinged upon by agricultural development. This definition does not, however, imply notions of wilderness protection. Elsewhere (Gersdorf 2000) I have discussed the ideological and cultural implications of the public debates preceding the passing of the 1994 California Desert Protection Act.

Los Angeles to Las Vegas, the blank space on the map that denies Arizona the sea," had been added "to the system of protection we use to honor our most precious landscapes" (1996: 64). For him the act translated the desert into a "tribute to sublime desolation" (54). Yet in view of so much governmental engagement in 'creating' wilderness areas in the desert, Parfit felt the need to reassure his readers that what is protected is 'authentically' wild: "This place isn't just wilderness because Congress said so. It's wild all on its own" (67).

Parfit's allusion to the national park system as a significant cultural icon, his citation of an imaginary national subject ('we') interested in both landscape protection and an authentic wilderness experience, and his evocative titular use of the sublime, a genre that according to Rob Wilson "helped to consolidate an American identity" (1991: 5), as well as Al Gore's rhetorical reverence for the desert as an endangered (as opposed to dangerous) territory – all this indicates that the idea of wilderness as conceptually definitive in the formation of an American national identity survived well into the 20th century. As Roderick Nash so aptly formulated,

> wilderness was the basic ingredient of American civilization. From the raw materials of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give that civilization identity and meaning. (1982: xi)

It is this second purpose of wilderness – to provide a semiotic frame of reference for defining America as a nation – that is most germane in this chapter.

Desert lands were protected as wilderness early on in the 20th century. The first national park located in an arid desert region was Grand Canyon, set aside by Theodore Roosevelt as a national monument in 1908 and promoted to national park status eleven years later in 1919. A little more than a decade later, Grand Canyon was to be joined by the Big Bend region (southwest Texas) in the still young pantheon of national parks. These legislative activities of desert appreciation were seconded or prepared by writers like John C. Van Dyke (see Chapter Two) and Mary Austin (more on her in Chapter Four). Yet it was not until the middle decades of the 20th century that the desert became one of the main subjects of a literary genre – nature writing – that best expresses the significance of wilderness in the dis-

course of America. This chapter looks at the work of some of the most prominent nature writers in the United States and examines the significance of the desert in their articulations of a critique of modern America. The texts discussed in this chapter are by authors as diverse as Joseph Wood Krutch, Wallace Stegner, Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, Charles Bowden, and Ann Haymond Zwinger. In spite of stylistic and ideological differences, their work is deeply rooted in the tradition of speaking about America and the relationship between its ideals and it realities by evoking the cathartic effect of wilderness.

1 Wilderness and the Ethics of America

Wilderness is the metaphoric domain of the Other. It was imagined as habitat of Satan, 'savage' men either noble like Cooper's Chingachgook or ignoble like his indigenous opponents, and unruly women like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne. Wilderness was also and continues to be envisioned as a space of freedom, a domain yet untouched by civilization and, thus, unfettered by its laws, regulations, and institutions, be they legal, social, or religious. Representing the quintessence of the natural, the concept of wilderness, as it evolved in the context of American cultural and literary history, was shaped by two distinct traditions: Puritanism and Romanticism. In order to fully understand the ideological and political implications of 20th-century approaches to the desert as wilderness, it is necessary to briefly survey the discursive and narrative conventions of associating America with wilderness, a tradition that goes back to the early years of British colonial activities in the Western hemisphere.

Puritan Mission and (American) Wilderness

One of the most famous and earliest responses to America as wilderness is William Bradford's observation that what the English Puritans saw before them when they stepped off the *Mayflower* in 1620 after a long and tedious journey was "but a hideous and desolate wilderness,

full of wild beasts and willd men" (1912: 156).[2] This imagery clearly contrasts with the visions of America as garden discussed in Chapter One. But that is hardly surprising. The *Mayflower* Puritans arrived at the American coast in November, a month that offered "litle solace or content in respecte of any outward objects. For summer being done, all things stand upon them with a wetherbeaten face; and the whole countrie, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage heiw" (ibid.). Bradford's report can be read on two levels: First, as an eyewitness account of an immediate, rather existential experience of a first encounter with the geographical and seasonal reality of a place otherwise only existing as text, i.e., as the reports of Spanish, French, and English colonizers. On a second level, Bradford's text can be read as a self-reflective report of the beginning, progress, and ultimate success of the Puritan enterprise of building a new stronghold for a purified religious community. In "Puritanism, the Wilderness, and the Frontier" (1953), Alan Heimert argued that the Pilgrims' "concept of the American 'wilderness' […] was not, as it were, carried to America on the *Mayflower* and *Arbella*, but came out of that wilderness itself" (361). Heimert's historical interpretation is based on the first way of reading *Plymouth Plantation* (and similar accounts), a necessary move for making the case that "the subjugation of the American wilderness" (ibid.) was not an original element in the Puritan rationale for settling the New World. However, on a rhetorical level, the American wilderness was an excellent trope, one that underscored the perils Puritans were willing to endure for their religious believes as well as the greatness of their predestined project. If *garden* was the preferred trope for the *commercial* colonization of America (see Chapter One), *wilderness* became one of the core concepts for the *religio-ethical* justification of a European colonial presence in the New World. In Puritan rhetoric, the land west of the Atlantic Ocean was the location where the moral reformation of self and community, a precondition for their religious recovery, could be pursued unfettered by their Old World opponents. Wilderness suggested danger, but also a culturally, socially, and religiously clean slate.

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[2] Marx 1967: 41 and Payne 1996: 9 quote the same passage. For more examples of Puritan responses similar to Bradford's see Bercovitch 1994 and Nash 1982.

However, recent criticism has pointed out that pre-Columbian America was not an entirely uncultivated, pristine wilderness but exhibited features of a rather well-groomed landscape.[3] So if Spanish conquistadors waxed rhapsodic about America as a garden, they were responding to what they actually saw – cultivated fields, well-tended or even cleared forests – as much as to what they wanted to see. As to the actual number of Native American inhabitants and their impact on the landscape, there is considerable controversy. Estimates range from 1.8 million to 18 million native inhabitants in 1491, the year before Columbus' arrival, a difference that reveals more about the speculative character of statistical methods and our modern obsession with the authority of numbers than anything else. There is, however, little debate about the fact that the introduction of Europeans, their animals, and their crops altered the bioregional topography significantly, mainly by effecting the demise of a large percentage of the Native American population through warfare and disease. From an ecological perspective, humans can be understood as a "keystone species." The disappearance of a keystone species from or its introduction to an ecosystem results in dramatic changes in the environment.[4] When Indian populations declined due to the introduction of germs by Europeans and their animals the impact on the American landscape was enormous. Settlements were deserted, forest underbrush grew back, and closed clearings, fields and gardens disappeared under wild overgrowth. Where Captain John Smith had marveled at gardens and corn fields in 1614, Bradford and his fellow Puritans would only find deserted Indian villages. When they arrived in America, more than a century of European presence on the continent had turned much of the territory back into a wild, chaotic space. Even when that was not the case, Europeans – particularly those coming from the enclosed landscapes of the British Isles – were unable to recognize farm and pasture

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3 See Denevan 1998. Denevan's essay gives an excellent summary of precolonial and colonial environmental history, supplemented by a comprehensive bibliography on the subject. The resurgence of popular interest in America's early environmental history is discussed in an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* (see Mann 2002). See also Cronon 1997. My discussion of colonial responses to the land in the following section draws on these sources.

4 On the concept of the keystone species see "Keystone Species Hypothesis," http://www.washington.edu/research/pathbreakers/1969g.html (August 22, 2007).

land as such because Native American patterns of cultivation differed substantially from European practices. Summarizing roughly three and a half centuries of ecological history after Columbus, William M. Denevan writes:

> The roots of the pristine myth lie in part with early observers unaware of human impacts that may be obvious to scholars today, particularly for vegetation and wildlife. […] Equally important, most of our eyewitness descriptions of wilderness and empty lands come from a later time, particularly 1750-1850, when interior lands began to be explored and occupied by Europeans. By 1650, Indian populations in the hemisphere had been reduced by about 90 percent, while by 1750 European numbers were not yet substantial and settlement had only begun to expand. As a result, fields had been abandoned, while settlements vanished, forests recovered, and savannas retreated. The landscape did appear to be a sparsely populated wilderness. (1998: 433)

Obviously, Puritans entered the American scene at the beginning of the wilderness timeline suggested by Denevan. Granted, the land seemed to be depopulated. As John Winthrop pronounced: "God hath consumed the natives with a miraculous plague, whereby the greater part of the country is left voide of inhabitants" (Winthrop quoted in Jacobson 2002: 57; see also Payne 1996: 12). But even though wild nature had already begun to reclaim Native settlements, signs of previous cultivation were still visible. Nevertheless, David Jacobson observes, "it was the Puritans who first imagined America, not as a colony, not as an expansion of a European or British enterprise, but as the wilderness, the landscape in which humankind would be reborn" (2002: 27). Needless to say, the Puritan imagination was not at all innocent but thoroughly inscribed by the propositions and prescriptions of the Bible. When the Pilgrims and their descendants looked at the landscapes of the New World, they saw it through the textual screen of a religio-historical narrative that communicated very specific ideas about nature, the human place in it, and the actions that were to be taken by man to fulfill God's commandment in Genesis 1:28, i.e., to "replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (*King James Bible*). This was nothing less than the moral mandate to transform nature into history, a process that implicated the reversal of humanity's fall from God's favor.

The Puritans were deeply convinced that this project had gone awry in Europe, where worldly pleasures and desires had by then won the upper hand over spiritual aspirations. By contrast, America, that vast and empty wilderness inhabited by only a few surviving "savages" was the place where Christianity could erect a model society, Winthrop's "citty upon a hill" where "the riche and mighty should not eate upp the poore nor the poore and dispised rise upp against and shake off theire yoake" (Winthrop 1996: www).[5] Wilderness, an edited version of pure nature from which the Puritan mind erased indigenous as well as colonial inscriptions, was the raw material out of which a morally just, yet socially hierarchical community was to be wrought. The transformation of the chaotic space of wilderness into the habitable place of a garden was the activity through which Puritans hoped to fulfill the terms of their covenant with their God who had given them this new land to serve his glory. As David Jacobson argues, America in its wild, uncultivated state meant new orientation and direction, "home from the storm, a home built by God" (2002: 32). It was a refuge from corruption and sin, the place in which Puritans felt "located once more, historically, geographically, and, above all, morally" (31). An unintentional but nevertheless inevitable byproduct of figuratively and physically turning wild-natured America into a New Jerusalem was a tight bond between the Puritan community of chosen people and the land itself. This topophilia not only resulted in a strong "sense of territoriality" (43), i.e., a clear idea of boundaries and of a politics of inclusion and exclusion among the Puritans. It also became, Jacobson insists, "the sacred and conceptual center of the modern nation-state" (ibid.). Moreover, the topophilic bond between Puritan community and American wilderness (in its paradoxical disposition as both refuge and as nature-in-need-of-cultivation) facilitated communal cohesion, and, eventually, provided the emotional and moral center of a strong sense of national identity.

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5 Jacobson 2002 argues that for the Puritans "people that are nomadic, or have no fixed, 'bounded,' and enclosed territories with exclusive, sovereign control, cannot make a moral or legal claim to that land. Native American groups that were nomadic, or had amorphous boundaries, or shared lands with other Native American tribes, failed on the test" (56).

Romantic Discontents

Many of the discursive functions the concept of wilderness acquired during the Romantic age, when it became both a source of metaphysical inspiration and a marker of America's cultural difference from Europe, can be traced back to Old Testament representations of wilderness as a place imbued with meanings that were often contradictory. The biblical wilderness is the space that allows for an unmediated experience of God's presence. It was in the desert where Jahwe spoke to Moses and the people of Israel who had fled to the wilderness from a sinful and persecuting society. The topology of wilderness as a sanctuary of religious freedom and refuge from a corrupt society survived through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and the Age of the Enlightenment, and it was reinvigorated by Romantic philosophers and poets for whom modern civilization, in its celebration of science as the doorway to truth, the machine as the symbol of progress, and the city as the embodiment of reason, law and authority, had taken the wrong course. In his seminal *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (1991), Max Oelschlaeger argues that Romantics juxtaposed the scientific with a poetic view of nature and "gravitated toward its wild and mysterious aspects, the felt qualitative rather than measured quantitative dimensions of experience, known through immediate contact rather than through experimentation" (99).

In their celebration of wilderness as a real and imagined alternative to modern civilization, American Romantics created a cultural paradox: if wilderness was a space that could not only be visited imaginatively, or symbolically, it would soon be crowded by hundreds and thousands of individuals who, in their search for a space of solitude and contemplation, would replicate the city. Similarly, the Romantic fascination with the figure of the pioneer was paradoxical: in forging a path into the wilderness for a whole nation to follow, the idealized pioneer who turned his back towards a socially and economically exhausted civilization transformed the wild spaces so much revered by his Romantic admirers. For Roderick Nash, this paradox constitutes the tragic center of American history. And it reinforces the social function of wilderness as moral resource. As Cooper's Leatherstocking novels illustrate, Romantic rhetoric gives 19th-century Americans "reason to feel both proud and ashamed at conquering the wilder-

ness" (Nash 1982: 77). Proud because, in the Puritan tradition, conquest of wilderness was equivalent to moral and communal self-assertion; and ashamed because with the disappearance of wild nature America lost the cultural location of its national self-esteem, so meticulously mapped in the late 18th century by writers like Abigail Adams who, in a letter written from Europe, resorted to ecological hyperbole in an effort to assert her American identity against the overwhelming presence of what Nash so adequately described as the thick crust of history and cultural tradition deposited on the natural scenery of Europe. "Do you know," Adams asked her correspondent, "that European birds have not half the melody of ours? Nor is their fruit half so sweet, nor their flowers half so fragrant" (A. Adams quoted in Nash 1982: 69).

By the middle of the 19th century, writers like Washington Irving, painters like Thomas Cole, and contributors to *The Home Book of the Picturesque: or American Scenery, Art, and Literature* (1852) had shifted their attention from Adams' concentration on the sound, smell, and taste of wild American nature to its looks. Scenery, the imaging of birds, fruit, flowers, trees, and hills as landscapes, became an obsession with American Romantics. In the opening essay of *The Home Book of the Picturesque*, Elias Lyman Magoon represented America's "wild spots," "unstained fountains and virgin hills" as elements of a place "where avarice has little dominion, and whence thought may take the widest range" (1967: 37-38). Such wild landscapes, he exulted, "have ever developed the strongest patriotism, intensest energy, and most valuable letters of the world" (38). Magoon's text marks the shift from a primarily religious to a national, psychological, and literary significance of wilderness, one that entails the ethical obligation of the American citizens to venerate their wilderness as a space that allows them to distance themselves, both imaginatively and physically, from the moral corruption and social bankruptcy associated with Europe. On tour as a lecturer during the 1850s, Henry David Thoreau declared that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World," thereby consolidating wilderness as a place of regeneration and self-realization.[6] A tradition was born, one that survived way into the 20th century.

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[6] Thoreau, "Walking," 1894: 275. Developed and delivered as a two-part lecture during the 1850s, "Walking" was first published posthumously in 1862.

Modern Contentions and the Wilderness Legacy of Theodore Roosevelt

More than a hundred years after the Romantic revaluation of wilderness, Wallace Stegner demanded its continued preservation "because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed" (1961: 97).[7] Before him, the cultural heirs of Cooper, Emerson, and Thoreau, among them John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt, kept the Romantic idea of wilderness as a spatial antidote to the modern city alive. "No American wilderness that I know of," John Muir proclaimed, "is so dangerous as a city home 'with all the modern improvements.' One should go to the woods for safety, if for nothing else." Muir's wilderness offers a rather pastoral scene. "Bears are a peaceable people, and mind their own business, instead of going about like the devil seeking whom they may devour." And "as to the Indians, most of them are dead or civilized into useless innocence" (1901: 28). Thus, it is hardly surprising that Muir and his contemporaries invented another kind of garden – the national park, designed to protect the last remaining sections of a geographical condition that the earlier gardens had transformed almost out of existence. But Muir's commentary is interesting not only for its defense of wilderness but also for the implicit social and racial framing of wilderness. His rhetoric is clearly aimed at a specific audience: white, middle-class American city dwellers. This social class was represented by an intellectual elite who displayed what Yi-Fu Tuan called an "aristocratic disdain toward the farmer," a figure mythologically displaced since the middle of the 19th century by the "lonely denizens" of the wilderness – the woodsman, the hunter, and the trapper (1974: 63).

Roderick Nash observed that wilderness appreciation was not only a product of the city. It began in Europe as "the primitivist ideali-

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7 This idea was originally presented in Stegner's "Wilderness Letter," written to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (see Stegner 1960: www). In a more recent *New York Times* article on industrial footprints left in natural landscapes by such technologies as oil drilling, Darcy Frey remembers "the larger question" involved in decisions about designating new drilling sites. He quotes Margaret Murie who, in the 1980s, testified in the Congressional hearings on behalf of expanding the Arctic wildlife refuge. Murie reminded the members of Congress of the national value of wilderness, asking: "Having been the basis of all our sophisticated society, doesn't wilderness itself have a right to live on?" (Frey 2002: www)

zation of a life closer to nature" (1982: 44). This, historians and critics have amply explained, was an intellectual and social reaction to the unveiling of life's mysteries rendered by science's revelations, the representation of nature as mere matter in motion, and its metaphorization as machine. This universal view on the discursive, economic, and political paradigm shift known as modernity overlooked class, race and gender as categories constituting the modern subject. And statements such as the one by Stegner quoted above are a result of this development. Towards the end of the 20th century, Marvin Henberg, in an essay critically examining what he calls "the character thesis" in American debates about the virtues of wilderness, posed the question "Whom do we conceive as having their characters formed by the 'challenge' of wilderness?"

> Not American Indians; according to Standing Bear, an Oglala Sioux, the land of North America was never wild in conception, but tame. Not African Americans, first enslaved on plantations of the New World and later confined, many of them, to urban ghettos – 'city wildernesses' in the parlance of Robert A. Woods' turn-of-the-century book, *The City Wilderness*. Not Polly Beamis, a young woman kidnapped in her native China and carried off to Oregon Territory. Her character was formed by fending off lustful drunks in saloons, where she served as a hostess and eventually purchased her way to freedom by surreptitiously sweeping and collecting gold dust from the floor. (1998: 503)

Henberg's list of exclusions or, to paraphrase Val Plumwood, of multiple erasures of the Other from wilderness, highlights the problematic character of a concept so closely and reiteratively linked to the imaginative origin of American national identity. Nowhere is this more visible than in Theodore Roosevelt's political thinking.

Roosevelt is still officially celebrated as an "Icon of the American Century," the title of an exhibition organized by the Smithsonian Institution in 1998/99 and now available on the Internet. Celebrating the twenty-sixth President of the U.S. as "the wielder of the Big Stick, the builder of the Panama Canal, an avid conservationist, and the nemesis of the corporate trusts that threatened to monopolize American business at the start," the virtual catalog's introductory text somewhat uncritically describes the exhibition as "a retrospective look at the man and his portraiture, whose progressive ideas about social jus-

tice, representative democracy, and America's role as a world leader have significantly shaped our national character."[8]

Roosevelt's contribution to U.S. politics is not in dispute. But his role as an "avid conservationist" has become the subject of critical debate. The sincerity of his environmentalist concerns has come under scrutiny based on his presidential politics which, his critics argue, were less radical than often assumed. In spite of his great admiration for wilderness, Roosevelt firmly believed in the wise use of natural resources and followed a path of utilitarian conservation. As Joshua S. Johns reminds us, Yosemite and Yellowstone were protected as national parks because "the land in question offered no economic value beyond that of scenic interest" (2002; see also Roosevelt 1925). While these economic factors discredit some of Roosevelt's reputation as an "avid conservationist," what still remains mostly unnoticed is the link between his avid *racism* and his love of the outdoors and wild nature, which he describes in both exuberant and reverential terms. Henberg, otherwise so conscious of the ethnocentrism of the character thesis attached to American concepts of wilderness, only finds Roosevelt's assertions of virility and male camaraderie "less than palatable in these decades of deep ecology and ecofeminism" (1998: 504). But he offers no further comment on the overt racism in Roosevelt's position. On the other hand, Howard Zinn, one of the most radical historians and social critics on the American left, and author of *A People's History of the United States* (1980), proposes reading Theodore Roosevelt's representation on Mount Rushmore as "a permanent reminder of our historical amnesia about his racism, his militarism, his love of war" (2002). But Zinn's radical criticism does not make the connection between Roosevelt's conceptualization of *wilderness* as a patriotic space and his explicit construction of white Anglo-Saxon men as the master race of the world.

The association of wilderness with whiteness, masculinity, patriotism/nationalism, imperial expansion, and cultural domination is a consistent theme in Roosevelt's writings. For him, hunters and frontier farmers, plainsmen and mountain-men, ranchmen and cowboys, trappers and soldiers form the core of "a masterful race [of] good fighters and good breeders" (1923: 9) who, by leading a life of strenuous en-

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8 "Theodore Roosevelt: Icon of the American Century" is available under http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/roosevelt/

deavor, will meet the lofty duties of the Anglo-Saxon race and of the American nation destined to dominate the world.[9] He is deeply convinced that despite "occasional wrong-doing […] the white administrator and the Christian missionary have exercised a profound and wholesome influence for good in savage regions" (1925d: 344) in that they have provided for "the physical, the intellectual, and the moral betterment of the people" (350) who are the indigenous inhabitants of those regions. According to Roosevelt, the advance of the legal and moral systems of white Christianity over many regions of the world in the four centuries prior to the turn of the 20th century justified further conquest and colonization. In a revealing passage in the "The Spread of the English-Speaking People," Roosevelt merges the colonial practices of territorial expansion and occupation of productive and fertile lands with ideas of racial purity and the right of white Anglo-Saxons to claim the nominal privilege of being called Americans. Writes Roosevelt:

> The English-speaking peoples now hold more and better land than any other American nationality or set of nationalities. They have in their veins less aboriginal American blood than any of their neighbors. Yet it is noteworthy that the latter have tacitly allowed them to arrogate to themselves the title of 'Americans,' whereby to designate their distinctive and individual nationality. So much for the difference between the way in which the English and the way in which other European nations have conquered and colonized. (1924: 13)

In Roosevelt's thinking, the colonial success of white Anglo-Saxons who have conquered the wild and savage terrains of America has not only earned them their national identity as Americans; it also entitles them to continue to pursue the project of imperial expansion, which, to legitimize it further, was represented as the natural order of things (European and Euro-American civilizations are cast as forms of "higher and better existence," Roosevelt 1925d: 341). If men lead a strenuous life they fulfill the manifest destiny of national duties within a larger world. Regular immersions into the country's grand wilderness were a man's way to regenerate his virility, to strengthen his

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9 For Roosevelt's take on the manifest destiny of American imperial power and white Anglo-Saxon superiority see also "The Spread of the English-Speaking Peoples" (Roosevelt 1924), and "The Monroe Doctrine" (Roosevelt 1925b). Both essays were originally published in 1896.

body and mind, and to reassure himself of his worth as an American citizen. In contrast, "The man who becomes Europeanized, who loses his power of doing good work on this side of the water, and who loses his love for his native land, is not a traitor; but he is a silly and undesirable citizen" (1925a: 20).

At times, Roosevelt's rhetoric (coming uncannily close to the language of German National Socialism), is reminiscent of Puritan apocalyptic thinking. "When men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom," he writes in "The Strenuous Life" (1925c: 269). And, he concludes, "well it is that they should vanish from the earth, where they are fit subjects for the scorn of all men and women who are themselves strong and brave and high-minded" (ibid.). Needless to say, man's sphere is wild nature where he can hunt "to keep himself, and to keep those dependent upon him", while "woman must be the housewife" (ibid.), hatching and nursing the off-spring and keeping the order of the house. So when Roosevelt advocates wilderness preservation and the love of nature, as he does in "Wilderness Reserves; The Yellowstone Park" (1924a) and other writings, his ulterior motive is the preservation of the racial and gendered order of the nation, dominated and controlled by the white, male and heterosexual descendants of English-speaking Europeans.

The political recruitment of the wilderness concept for the installation of racial, gender, and, by implication, sexual hierarchies within colonial communities during the 17th and 18th centuries, and for the reinforcement of these hierarchies during the 19th century, constitutes the problematic position of wilderness in the discourse of America and of American nationality. The inclusion of wilderness in the blood-and-soil discourse of the nation, the underlying moral bigotry of its rhetorical use, and the exclusion of those groups who, according to men like Roosevelt, threaten the nation's racial purity call into question the legitimacy of wilderness/wild nature as a conceptual tool for a critique of rationalism, science, and technology, modernity's three discursive pillars. Due to its purpose of framing the U.S. as a space appropriated by white middle-class men and their archetypal heroes – Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Henry David Thoreau – the rhetorical recruitment of wilderness as a white, male space not only damaged its discursive credibility as a revitalizing location for a multiracial, multi-

ethnic, and multicultural nation, but dented wilderness as a conceptual tool for an ecological critique of modernity.

Desert/Wilderness

The narrative association of "wilderness" and "desert," and their discursive designation as spaces of religious confrontation, repentance, and moral challenge has its textual origin in the Bible. Representing an exceptional space, the two words usually signify a spiritual state of emergency, or, perhaps more accurately, a spiritual process of emergence, one that will eventually lead to religious, social, and cultural renewal. The Puritan concept of desert/wilderness, well-grounded in the text of the Old Testament and combined with Romantic visions of wilderness, became a benchmark for a new paradigm of responses to and appropriations of the North America's desert topographies. The garden paradigm of *economic* approaches to the desert (Chapter One) provided a mode of dealing with anxieties about survival under the inhospitable circumstances of arid lands; the Orientalist paradigm of *aesthetic* responses to the deserts of the Near East provided the ground for the perception of North American deserts as an object of literary and artistic representations. While these two paradigms dominated the practice of integrating the desert into the discourse of America during the second half of the 19th century, the tradition of integrating the desert into the discourse of America through tropes of wilderness set in later, at the beginning of the 20th century. Under the sign of wilderness, the desert eventually became an instrument for America's *ethical* self-evaluation.

How does this process unfold during the course of the 20th century? And what are the ideological implications and cultural consequences of casting the desert as one of the last remaining wildernesses in an increasingly urban, progressively modern world? In response to these questions I will discuss representative, 20th-century writers such as Wallace Stegner (1909-1993), Edward Abbey (1927-1989), Barry Lopez (*1945), Charles Bowden (*1945), and Ann Zwinger (*1925). Their literary celebrations of the desert as a space of individual and national self-reflection were informed by the wilderness tradition in the discourse of America. In one way or another, all of these writers looked at the desert as a "geography of hope," a term coined by Wal-

lace Stegner in 1960 to describe the function of the American West[10] in the U.S. cultural imaginary as a location of psychological and cultural regeneration.

2 Wild Hope: Wallace Stegner

Hope's most prominent philosopher, Ernst Bloch, identified the longing for a better, more fulfilled life as the motivating principle at the heart of all utopian thinking. Hope points towards the future. Fairy tales, dreams, religion, myths, fairs, the theater, circuses – these are among the sites and spaces that make clearly evident the persistence of hope in human history and culture. Geographically, hope manifested itself in visions of Eden and El Dorado – metaphoric spaces associated with spiritual and economic riches – long before Renaissance travelers and adventurers left Europe to circle the globe in search of their earthly locations. With the arrival of Columbus in the Western hemisphere, geographic hope materialized as the presence of a 'new,' historically innocent topography soon to be known as America. However, hard as Columbus and his conquering heirs tried to ignore it, the new land was not a place outside history. Rather, it was a cultural and historical landscape, one that departed so radically from what Europeans had learned to recognize as a product of history and culture that often the only aspect they saw in the new geography was a state of wilderness. As Bloch would point out centuries later, discovery is the act of finding something new, be it a continent (America) or a planet (Uranus). But the newness is an attribute bestowed to a space or place by the subject who enters it, either corporeally or imaginatively, not a property of the space or place itself.[11] Bloch's discoverer, the subject encountering a yet unknown and uninscribed terrain, is one of the earliest protagonists in the narrative of a geography of hope – and definitely European. Gradually, the European discoverer was transformed into an American settler, and eventually into the founders and citizens

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10 "Aridity, and aridity alone," Stegner famously insisted, "makes the various Wests one" (1992: 61), thus declaring a very specific combination of topography and climate as the unifying feature of an otherwise large and heterogeneous region.

11 "Entdeckung ist der Akt, wodurch ein Neues aufgefunden wird (Amerika, der Uranus), das nur für das dazukommende Subjekt neu ist" (Bloch 1985: 874).

of a new nation self-confidently declaring its political independence from Europe. However, as far as cultural ideas and ideals were concerned, Americans still shared a lot with their European cousins.

Hope and the (American) West

One of those ideas – the existence of a better world elsewhere, found expression in the trope of geographical hope. Re-dressed as wilderness and frontier, El Dorado and Eden continued to exist in the new nation's cultural imaginary as the geographical possibility of economic, social, and psycho-cultural renewal. At first, the horror of the West (Bloch's "Westgrauen," which had kept ancient Greeks, Phoenicians, and Babylonians, and later Christian Europeans from pushing ahead into the Atlantic Ocean beyond the fabled Pillars of Hercules) continued in the Puritan response to what they saw as "the hideous and desolate wilderness" west of their New World settlements along the northeastern part of the Atlantic seaboard. Outside early Celtic traditions, which, as Leslie Fiedler reminded us, knew visions of "the *happy* land in the West" (1968: 32; emphasis added), pre-Columbian Europeans developed an ambivalent imaginative relationship with the West. They associated it with cultural extinction (Atlantis), a Dantean inferno, and the fall of man from God's grace, while at the same time they saw, somewhere on the western horizon of their geographical imagination, "a Paradisal Isle at the end of the Ocean" (37). If the Puritans relied on the horror trope in their visions of the western wilderness, by the middle decades of the 19th century, the (American) West had become synonymous with hope. Out there, beyond the confines of the domestic and the civilized, America's mythological heroes (from Cooper's Hawkeye and Twain's Huck Finn to Ken Kesey's Randall McMurphy and Salinger's Holden Caulfield) and their anonymous real-life counterparts found the space in which to escape a life they experienced as socially and morally corrupt. They translated the ancient horror of the West into another, albeit familiar idiom – that of renewal, regeneration, and re-creation in a pristine, historically and culturally unsullied space.

In "The Problem of the West" (1896), Frederick Jackson Turner described the West as "the region whose social conditions result from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming in-

fluences of free land" (1994: 61). The Turnerian West was rather flexible, ever moving away from the Atlantic coast; it was also quasi-religious: there, in "West after West, this rebirth of American society has gone on" (62). America's origin point was no longer in Europe, it was out there in the Western wilderness, that space that the "Western man" wrested and continues to wrest from "the Indian, the Spanish, and the Englishman" (68). Turner draws on Henry Adams when he describes the Westerner as the quintessential American, of white, male, and Anglo-Saxon stock, and looking "at this continent of mine, fairest of created worlds, as she lies turning up to the sun's never failing caress her broad and exuberant breasts, overflowing with milk for her hundred million children" (69). Feminist critics like Annette Kolodny and Louise Westling have disclosed the psycho-sexual complexities and ideological power games operative in such geographical metaphors. But the point I want to make here is that Turner's observation illustrates the nationally normative character of the imagination by contending that where Americans saw luxuriantly fertile landscapes, "the foreigner [i.e. the European] saw only dreary deserts, tenanted by sparse, ague-stricken pioneers and savages" (69).

The persistence of myths notwithstanding, by the middle of the 20th century the American West had lost its innocence. An industrialized and urbanized area, it had become a military training ground and secret atomic test area peppered with gigantic hydro-electric projects and mined for borax, uranium, oil, and other minerals vital to an ever growing industrial society. However, the West's most eminent ecological characteristic – aridity – had hindered its total transformation into an urban-industrial garden. In the deserts of the West, those parts that is, that could not be reclaimed through large-scale irrigation, wilderness survived well into the 20th century, often preserved and protected in national parks located in the deserts of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Southern California. Ironically, the desert, once a codeword for horror and a dreadful region that hampered access to the earthly paradise,[12] now became one of the last remaining geographical refuges of wild nature, and thus, at least from the perspective of America's master narrative, a place of individual and national reassur-

[12] For instance, the *Lucidarius*, a medieval compilation of spiritual and mundane knowledge, imagined paradise as located at the edge of the world, surrounded by a wall of fire and a great desert inhabited by monsters and evil spirits (see Koschorke 1990).

ance. In other words, the desert enabled the survival into the 20th century of one of the national narrative's most effective tropes – the frontier. Synthesizing the confrontational double figure of civilization and wilderness, the frontier expresses the desire for and the possibility of the nation's perpetual, cultural renewal precisely because it privileges the perspective of wilderness over and against the perspective of civilization. The writer, who most effectively translated the trope of the frontier into that of the desert was Wallace Stegner.

The Desert as Geography of Hope

In his famous 1960 "Wilderness Letter," Wallace Stegner (1909-1993) – according to Krista Comer "one of the few comprehensive theorists of western regional culture" (1999: 39) – declared western wilderness to be the core element of what he called "the geography of hope" (1960: www).[13] Simply put, this denomination declares the West to be *the* location where the dreams and hopes of America can be best grasped, understood, and remembered. Concerned about the surrender of natural landscapes to the advance of urban civilization and the yielding of wild, undisciplined nature to the ordering impulse of culture, Stegner reminded the American public (represented by the addressee of the letter, David E. Pesonen of the Wildland Research Center and Agricultural Experiment Station at the University of California, Berkeley) of the psycho-cultural value wilderness held in America's national history. Wilderness preservation, he allowed, was of scientific and recreational import: "both as genetic banks and as beauty spots," wilderness guaranteed the continuation of life's diversity and splendor. Equally important, yet severely neglected, was the significance of wild nature as "a spiritual resource, a leftover from our frontier origins that could reassure us of our identity as a nation and a people" (Stegner 1980). The letter, and in particular the trope of hope on which it is built, was enthusiastically received by Stewart Udall (then Secretary of the Interior), the Sierra Club, the *Washington Post*, and wilderness aficionados in Canada, Australia, Kenya, and South Africa. Evidently, the letter "struck a chord," Stegner recalled twenty

[13] If not noted otherwise, all quotes in this section are taken from the digital versions of the "Wilderness Letter" (Stegner 1960) and "The Geography of Hope: Introduction to the Wilderness Letter" (Stegner 1980).

years later, no doubt because of "an earnest, world-wide belief in the idea it expresses." And this idea concerns the human "need of what Sherwood Anderson called 'a sense of bigness outside ourselves'" (ibid.). In other words, in addition to a sense of national identity, wild, undeveloped, unimproved, undisciplined nature had a more universal meaning, providing the ground to develop a humble sense of Self in relationship to a non-human Other.

Alluding to what, in the jargon of constructionists, can be called the interpellative character of wilderness, Stegner's letter stated:

> Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed […], so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste. And so that never again can we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural world and competent to belong in it. […] We need wilderness preserved – as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds – because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed. The reminder and the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it. It is good for us when we are young, because of the incomparable sanity it can bring briefly, as vacation and rest, into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there – important, that is, simply as an idea.

Clearly, Stegner assigns a double character to wilderness. On the one hand, it is a physical space, a wild geography allowing the members of industrial mass society to experience themselves as literally upright individuals, turned towards the reassuring and, at the same time, awe-inspiring horizon that frames a landscape that mocks, on a grand scale, the petty pretensions of the suburban front lawn. On the other hand, the western wilderness is an imaginary geography, a territory that is of mnemonic and poetic rather than experiential value. As an "idea," the "remaining wilderness" would provide an alternative referential field to counter the dominant, and quintessentially urban aesthetics of modernity. Admits Stegner:

> […] if I had not been able to periodically to (sic) renew myself in the mountains and deserts of western America I would be very nearly bughouse. Even when I can't get to the back country, the thought of the colored deserts of southern Utah, or the reassurance that there are

> still stretches of prairies where the world can be instantaneously perceived as disk and bowl, and where the little but intensely important human being is exposed to the five directions of the thirty-six winds, is a positive consolation. The idea alone can sustain me.

The emphasis on individualism and the possibility of an unmediated experience of the self in an environment fundamentally different from that tightly-knit space of social norms and cultural references called the city implicates Stegner's letter in a rhetoric of national self-invention and self-determination, a rhetoric representing the dramatic confrontation between wilderness and civilization on the western stage which formerly figured as frontier and is now reconfigured as desert. With a nod towards Frederick Jackson Turner, he attributes "the distinct downturn in our literature from hope to bitterness" to the closing of the frontier in the early 1890s and the transition of the U.S. from an agrarian to an urban and industrial society. Summarizing Stegner's aesthetic and political reservations about the urban East as the nation's cultural avant-garde, Krista Comer observed that in his "judgment, modernist aestheticism made American literature hypersexual, angst-ridden, nihilistic. Stegner believed that the modernist movement assaulted national identity in ways that were both un-western and un-American" (1999: 41). Anticipating, or perhaps even instigating the counter-cultural proclivity for articulating critiques of Western civilization in psycho-pathological terms,[14] Stegner contended that Americans depended for their sanity, both as individuals and as a nation, on the maintenance of the natural world, that "timeless and uncontrolled part of earth" which, by means of contrast, allows for a critical perspective on, and thus a potential correction of social and cultural developments associated with the metropolis. For Stegner, the wilderness experience is central to, if not synonymous with the American experience, defined as "the confrontation by old peoples and cultures of a world as new as if it had just risen from the sea. That," he continued,

> gave us our hope and our excitement, and the hope and excitement can be passed on to newer Americans, Americans who never saw any

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14 Ken Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), a novel allegorically anchored in a psychiatric ward, while he was taking Stegner's writing class at Stanford. Michel Foucault's *Folie et Déraison* appeared in 1961 and was published in the U.S. as *Madness and Civilization* in 1965.

> phase of the frontier. But only so long as we keep the remainder of our wild as a reserve and a promise – a sort of wilderness bank.

Cast in these terms, wilderness becomes the central part of "the geography of hope," the real-and-imagined space that reminds Americans of the core of their identity as "democrat[s]" and "believer[s] in human individual dignity." Moreover, it serves as an example to the nation that "some other criteria than commercial and exploitative considerations" may be or become the definitive basis of the culture-nature relationship in general and of America's relationship to nature in particular.

In this context, it is important to note that Stegner put the West, and the hope trope he assigns to this continental region, in topographically concrete terms: it is mountains, prairies, and – last but not least – deserts that perform the function of reminding people of non-utilitarian, even non-material modes of relating to the natural environment. Since the middle of the 20th century, the West had gained significance as an ecological barometer. Comer points out that Stegner not only "aimed to wrestle control of the West away from the mythmakers" (1999: 42), those cultural and political authorities nostalgically turning towards the 19th century as the most glorious and heroic epoch of the region. He also "protested the idea that the West was a land of inexhaustible abundance" (41). Stegner explicitly questioned the booster rhetoric that had turned the American West into the Garden of the World. Yet while economics provided a crucial epistemological mode in which American culture relates to and makes use of its wild western expanses, at the same time, the West had long remained the symbolic epitome of America's spiritual, social, and political recovery project, informing the way in which its landscapes were perceived. It was not until 1987, that Stegner was able to see the West as a boom-and-bust region with severe environmental problems. "Sad to say," he writes in "Striking the Rock," "that the West is no more the Eden that I once thought it than the Garden of the World that the boosters and engineers tried to make it; and neither nostalgia nor boosterism can any longer make a case for it as the geography of hope" (1992: 98).

As I discussed in more detail earlier in this chapter, the representation of the North American continent as wilderness is based on its (mis-)perception as a culturally and historically empty space. In his otherwise laudable effort to alert the politically influential Outdoor

Recreation Resources Review Commission to the degradation of natural landscapes, Stegner stabilizes the cultural, social, and racial prejudices on which the wilderness concept was originally built. I, therefore, agree with Krista Comer that, by implication, Stegner's work is marked by "a very Anglo-centered bias," that occurred "at precisely the historical moment when the civil rights movements called such biases into question" (1999: 43). And even though his representation of *The West as Living Space* (thus the title of a collection of three essays on his favorite subject) became more inclusive in later years – acknowledging for instance the impact of Native Americans, Mexicans, and Asian Americans on the American West's social and cultural formation (African Americans, however, seem to have somehow gone missing), and the decisive influence of Chicana/o, Native American, and Anglo-American women writers on the West's perception by the larger public – Stegner did not manage to entirely revise the gendered and ethno-racial biases underlying the concept of the formation of an American national identity through confrontation with wilderness.

As late as 1987, when his essay "Living Dry" first appeared in *The American West as Living Space*, Stegner identified the national subject as the restless male descendant of European emigrants, eager to "escape from history and oppression and law and irksome obligations" (1992: 71).[15] In "Striking the Rock," the second essay in the 1987 collection, Stegner lamented the destruction of the geography of hope by what he described as the immoral arrogance of developers who "tried to make the arid West into what it was never meant to be and cannot remain, the Garden of the World and the home of multiple millions" (1992: 78). Lurking behind this critique is the author's persistence in seeing the West not as an entirely ahistorical, untouched natural domain, but as a region whose unique character is defined through natural or naturalized phenomena, that is by "the watersheds and spawning streams, forests and grasslands, geological and scenic splendors, historical and archeological remains, air and water and serene space" (84). The preservation of this West is described as a national responsibility, executed by federal land bureaus (such as the

15 Stegner further writes: "Ever since Daniel Boone took his first excursion over Cumberland Gap, Americans have been wanderers. […] With a continent to take over and Manifest Destiny to goad us, we could not have avoided being footloose. The initial act of emigration from Europe, an act of extreme, deliberate disaffiliation, was the beginning of a national habit" (71).

Bureau of Land Management) that should protect the wild, undeveloped spaces that surround the urban areas of the West "as water surrounds fish" (85).

The analogy employed in defense of non-commercial interests in the public domain over private and state interests in western lands as an economic and financial resource is crucial here. Foregrounding an ecological perspective, it draws attention to the existential significance of wild nature for the survival of human culture. As owners of vast portions of the West, federal land bureaus, Stegner suggests, should see it as their premier duty "to maintain the health and beauty of the lands they manage" (84). The nation, represented by the federal government and its executive offices, is defined in cultural terms; its survival hinges upon ecological and aesthetic rather than economic considerations. The ideological implications are, however, a little more complicated. For on the one hand, Stegner's essayistic argument is intent on dismantling industrial civilization's favorite doctrine: the technological domination and economic exploitation of nature. His essays are self-critical in that they name as the source of the West's ecological problems some of the core elements of the American master narrative, most prominently the Jeffersonian yeoman and his inalienable right to the 160-acre family farm. In a very literal sense, aridity challenged this central economic tenet of westward expansion. As Marc Reisner, commenting on the 1902 Reclamation Act, formulated it: "You could grow wealthy on 160 acres of lemons in California and starve on 160 acres of irrigated pasture in Wyoming or Montana, but the act was blind to such nuances" (1993: 115). This implies that legislative discourse was unable or unwilling to acknowledge topographical differences and adjust the structure of the nation's domestic economy according to ecological criteria. Drawing attention to aspects such as environmental health and beauty, Stegner implicitly calls for a reorganization of geo-political thought, which while not excluding economic factors places more emphasis on ecology and aesthetics. Foregrounding the importance of non-pragmatic concepts, Stegner, in an essay titled "Thoughts in a Dry Land" (1972), had already argued that the appropriation of America's arid West was dependant on a change of perceptual habits: "You have to get over the color green; you have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns; you have to get used to an inhuman scale; you have to understand geological time" (1992: 54). The imperative character of this statement reveals

the author's ultimate interest in the larger project of inserting the desert into the canon of valuable national landscapes. Unlike historians and politicians who "resent any admission of aridity, as well as all 'deficiency terminology'" (51), Stegner makes a strong point for realism when he, like Walter Webb, describes the West, as "a semi-desert with a desert heart" (Webb quoted in Stegner 1992: 46).

By the time he died in 1992, Stegner had substantially revised his optimistic view of the West as "hope's native home, the youngest and freshest of America's regions, magnificently endowed and with the chance to become something unprecedented and unmatched in the world" (1992: xv). He strikes a rather disenchanted tone when he notes in the introduction to *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, that "Other regions have recovered better from the impact of our high-energy civilizations and our habit of liquidating the resources that support us" (xvii). But still, even though the West may be heavily marked by an economic mindset that knows no limits, its desert character has prevented the total transformation of wilderness into civilizatory space, a constant reminder of the limits of economic and urban growth. In Stegner's texts, "desert" (sometimes dressed as aridity) functions as the figure that best articulates the importance of values other than those defined by the logic of abundance and perpetual economic progress.

3 Wild Insolence: Edward Abbey

A generation younger, Edward Abbey (1927-1989) shares with Wallace Stegner the position of wilderness advocate, but much more radically employs the trope of the desert for articulating his critique of industrial America's attack on wild nature as the last abode of free man. "I regard the wilderness as my home, my true ancestral home," he confessed in an interview. Angry that "now it's being invaded by clear-cutters and strip-miners," Abbey felt he had "not only the right but the duty and the moral obligation to defend it by any means I can" (direct transcript from Temple 1993). Writing became the means of his choice. The author of two dozen books of fiction and non-fiction, Abbey has become known primarily for *Desert Solitaire* (1968) and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1978), the first a book-length, autobiographical report of a man's sojourn into the wilderness, the second a

novel about a small group of environmentalist, neo-Luddite pranksters defending the wild desert West against unrestrained technological progress and as the last domain of radical individualism. These two books have become classics of environmental literature, earning their author a place in the "Ecology Hall of Fame," a virtual memorial in honor of the heroes and heroines of the American environmental movement and a space that Abbey shares with such advocates of the American wilderness as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Theodore Roosevelt.[16] Barry Lopez spoke for many Abbey admirers when he memorialized the author as both an "an iconoclast" and "a galvanizer" (Lopez quoted in D. Rothman 1998: 69).[17] Ernst Callenbach celebrated Abbey as "the greatest environmental writer since John Muir" (Callenbach 1999: www). Yet he hastened to add that

> Abbey was not your kindly, gentle, neat, clean sort of environmentalist. He did not go in for transcendental meditation. He threw beer cans on the roadside. He made fun of Indians. He drove perfectly usable cars over impassible desert tracks until their engines fell out. He loved the hot, dangerous, spiny, relentless desert. He despised not only civilization as we know it but the soft life of temperate, forested, rainy areas.

In his introduction to *Coyote in the Maze* (1998), a collection of essays "tracking Edward Abbey in a world of words," Peter Quigley strikes a similar tone. He insists that "If only for his unique treatment of the desert – which goes beyond many superb passages that capture the lightning, juniper, red rock, glistening pines, and chasms – Abbey deserves consideration" (1998: 2). Yet like Callenbach, Quigley also hastens to present Abbey as a rebellious, insolent thinker and writer who chose the desert as "a focal point […] for one of the most classic literary reasons: tension" (ibid.). In other words, Abbey's literary desert is not so much the textualized version of an existing materiality as

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16 This cyber-memorial was created by EcoTopia/USA, a California nonprofit organization promoting ecological thinking and behavior and operating out of the Santa Cruz / Palo Alto area. http://www.ecotopia.org/ehof/index.html (December 21, 2002).

17 Lopez was joined by other environmental activists and writers who spoke at the memorial service for Abbey two months after the author's death, among them Wendell Berry, Dave Foreman, Doug Peacock, Anne Zwinger, and Terry Tempest Williams.

it is a natural resource in the Emersonian sense, one that provides the author with images, words, and symbols for challenging "conventional definitions of beauty and pleasure" (ibid.). I agree with this assessment on a formalistic level: Abbey's textualization of the desert is not an aesthetic end in itself but, like Thoreau's *Walden*, a critique of cultural, social, and intellectual conventions articulated through figures of wilderness. Yet as I will argue in this section, Abbey's provocations – figuratively anchored in the desert and dependent on a rhetoric of carnevalesque insolence – are an expression of the author's radically conservative ideology, thus ultimately consolidating rather than challenging America's cultural status quo.

Patricia Nelson Limerick's comments on Abbey in *Desert Passages* (1985) provide a cue for my own argument. On the one hand, Limerick acknowledged Abbey's genuine and rightful concern about the pending displacement of wild nature with the products and structures of industrial mass society. On the other hand, she disclosed the self-righteousness of the author of *Desert Solitaire* who, from a philosophically detached position, welcomes the desert death of an elderly tourist as a contribution to population control while representing the struggle against the possibility of his own (premature) demise in an isolated part of Havasu Canyon as a dramatic confrontation of man and nature. "Even a self-declared believer in the commandment 'Be true to the earth' had to admit in the right circumstances," Limerick notes, "that contributing his own body to the nutrient cycle was an expression of loyalty he wished to postpone" (156). Yet in spite of her obvious impatience with Abbey's intellectual vanities, Limerick still presents the author (and his autobiographical *alter ego*) as the heir of a tradition – British Romanticism – in which nature and natural landscapes are constituted as both refuge from and discursive antidote to the gross materialism and ecological indifference (or ignorance) of modern industrial society. The fact that Abbey "had applied an old formula to a landscape" (the desert) which "Wordsworth probably never imagined" (161), remains a reason for Limerick to celebrate a writer whose inconsistencies and contradictions she otherwise exposed. A closer look at Abbey's desert poetics will show, that the politics underlying his texts render it highly problematic to claim this author as a 20th-century "environmental guru" (Slovic 1992: 113).

The Great White Dude in the Desert: Gender, Race, and Space

Like Thoreau, Abbey spent considerable time in the place that was the subject of the book for which he was to become famous.[18] Like his 19th-century predecessor, Abbey – a writer with a degree in philosophy – displayed a fair amount of interest in the meta-physical, imaginative significance of the natural environment: "A man could be a lover and defender of wilderness without ever in his lifetime leaving the boundaries of asphalt, powerlines, and right-angled surfaces" (Abbey 1968: 148). Clearly, wilderness is not only a geographical reality that can be entered by the body, but also a space that could be entered by the mind. Echoing Wallace Stegner's "Wilderness Letter" almost verbatim, Abbey defends wilderness on psychological and political terms: wilderness guarantees the sanity of the collective subject of American males who "need the possibility of escape as surely as we need hope" (149). Displaying his penchant for hyperbole, Abbey maintains that without wilderness "the life of the cities would drive all men into crime or drugs or psychoanalysis" (149). At the same time, wilderness secures the democratic political structure on which America is built. Asks Abbey: "What reason have we Americans to think that our own society will necessarily escape the world-wide drift toward the totalitarian organization of men and institutions?" (149) Wilderness, protected in such national parks as Grand Canyon, Big Bend, and Yellowstone, may one day surpass its function as "a refuge from excessive industrialism" and become the "bases for guerilla warfare against tyranny" (ibid.). If Thoreau saw wildness as a state of mind, a perspective on the world unimpaired by the dominant epistemological paradigm of science and technology and, therefore, as a potential corrective to the self-centered humanism of western civilization, Abbey continued this tradition but cast wilderness in distinctly spatial terms, thinking of it as a territory, a terrain whose "value" derived from its

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18 Abbey was allegedly surprised about the success of *Desert Solitaire*. He had hoped to be better known for his novels than this piece of non-fiction. Angry that he was primarily identified as the author of *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey prohibited his publisher granting any further rights to anthologize sections from this book. On the other hand, asked by writer Terry Tempest Williams' grandmother which of his books he would recommend as the one book she should read, he apparently urged her to read *Desert Solitaire*. The story is told by Terry Tempest Williams in Eric Temple's Abbey documentary (see Temple 1993: www).

importance as "a base for resistance to centralized domination" (ibid.). Oscillating between the representation of wilderness as mental *and* geographical, an imaginative location on the one hand, and a starkly material refuge of political resisters to tyranny on the other, Abbey's work preserves wilderness, i.e., undeveloped and sparsely inhabited territories, as the bedrock for a democratic America.[19] For Abbey, "the freedom of wilderness may well be the central purpose of our national adventure" (Abbey 1984: xv). According to Abbey, this purpose is in constant danger of being curbed by the tyranny of the domestic, alternately represented in his work by hydroelectric technologies, consumerism, tourism, and other cultural, often gendered and racialized presences whose purpose it is to confine the freedom of wilderness.

Gender

The gendered perspective on wilderness and civilization in Abbey's writing is neither an original sin on the author's part, nor has it been ignored. In an attempt to rescue the writer and his work from recurring critical charges of sexism, Paul T. Bryant, in an essay entitled "Edward Abbey and Gender," correctly observes: "Women do not play a prominent role in Abbey's novels except for *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and its sequel, *Hayduke Lives!* Consequently, charges of sexism in his fiction focus on these two novels" (1998: 231). For Bryant, the character of Bonnie Abbzug, the only woman in a gang of four monkey wrenchers and somewhat of a feminist, indicates that Abbey "had some understanding of the feminist viewpoint and considerable sympathy" (233). Does Abbey make a chuckling allusion to feminist Bella Abzug whose last name is German for both 'withdrawal' and 'trigger' while, at the same time, casting her as the modern heiress of female outlaws mythologized in westerns like *Bonnie and Clyde*? Does he, indeed, pay homage to a tradition of female (or feminist) resistance

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19 The 20th century witnessed an accelerated disappearance of terrestrial wildernesses. However, in an essay appearing in 2002 in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, author Hubertus Breuer reported that half our planet's landmass is still natural wilderness area. Breuer based this statement on a definition according to which any region of 10,000 km^2 still containing its original vegetation and with a population density of less than five human inhabitants per square kilometer is considered a wilderness area.

against social and political constraints of patriarchy? Or was Bonnie Abbzug's name inspired by the author's visit in the late 1950s to Bonnie Claire, a Nevada ghost town?[20] Perhaps she represents a combination of all these reference points. Abbzug's rants about men as dumb, crude people whose feelings are as dense as rocks and whose thought and behavioral patterns are simplistic seems to prove this thesis. Yet Bonnie Abbzug does not represent the authoritative voice of Abbey's narrative. Nor is she the organizational head of the group. As a trigger-happy Greta-Garbo look-alike, Abbzug literally serves as supporting actress in a drama of masculine regeneration through violence set in the wilderness of the American West. She is desired by and sleeps with all three of the male protagonists, thus confirming their heterosexual virility in a story otherwise embedded in a narrative tradition that articulates America's cultural difference from the European model in terms of homosocial, if not homoerotic bonding, a tradition analyzed by literary historians and critics like Leslie Fiedler and Walter Benn Michaels.[21] It is not the description of Abbzug as a sexy, perhaps even brainy rebel in a woman's body that constitutes Abbey's sexism. Bryant is right that beauty and brains, sexual attractiveness and intelligent talk may and should go together in the literary creation of women. But that is hardly the point, at least not in Abbey's work where women characters remain two-dimensional caricatures, often representing clichés rather than a broad range of possible experiences, behaviors, and psychologies. As smart, sexy and aggressively defensive of her beloved wilderness as Bonnie Abbzug may be, her authority as a literary character is contained, directed, and functionalized by her male counterparts whose differences in class, mentality, character and experience provide a much more differentiated picture of men's motivations for defending wild nature. In other words, Abbzug's representation as a character with feminist leanings and thoughts does not exonerate her creator from charges of sexism. Rather, the contextuali-

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20 Abbey mentions this brief visit in "The Great American Desert" (1984b: 112).

21 See Fiedler 1992 and Michaels 1995. Walter Benn Michaels' comparative reading of Stephen Crane's *The Bridge* and Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* succinctly summarizes this tradition. He writes: "*The Bridge* eroticizes the relations between men that in Cather serve as the model for a purified Americanism, which is to say that it deploys homosexuality on behalf of nativism and, in so doing, legitimates the homosexual as the figure for a purified American identity" (1995: 49).

zation of her thoughts and actions and the light she casts on her male counterparts is what needs to be taken into account.

In a representative scene, Hayduke, the Vietnam vet and proletarian philosopher, transgresses the group's agreement to forego the use of firearms in any of their sabotage actions by suggesting the self-defense function guns serve. While Doc Sarvis, the group's intellectual, reprimands Hayduke for this transgression and refuses to touch the .357 magnum handed to him, Bonnie takes the weapon, a narrative gesture with Freudian implications through which the author questions Sarvis' resolve in view of impending danger. The fact that the woman in this scene is more resolute than the intellectual and head of the group has many implications. I want to suggest that Abbzug's fortitude can function in many interpretative directions. On a simple representational level, it may be read as homage to a woman's resolve to fight for what she thinks is right using the means she thinks are appropriate. On the level of implied narrative strategy, Abbzug's willingness to accept the gun and exercise a radicalized mode of activism operates as a critique of the intellectual's hesitation to accept and follow through the implications and consequences of one's politics. Given woman's traditional cultural role as pacifier, to have Abbzug abandon that position, and thereby bond with the radical amounts to a vicarious critique of intellectualism without completely undermining Sarvis' authoritative position. At the same time, Hayduke's radicalism, endorsed by Abbzug, a woman, a member of the sex culturally dispossessed of the capacity for intellectual reflection, and an opinionated woman (with a strong set of prejudices against men at that), allows Abbey's narrator to locate himself as an implied critic of either position – that of ultimately inconsequential intellectualism but also that of spontaneous, gut-level radicalism. While Sarvis and Hayduke represent the two sides of the political coin of environmental activism, that is, while they represent apparently contradicting yet complementary political positions, Abbzug's character functions as an implied narrative tool to articulate the pros and cons of these positions. This is what makes Abbey's text sexist, not Abbzug's representation as an erotically attractive and sexually active woman but her casting as a commentary, a gauge of men's actions. The inability to imagine woman outside of this role, her narrative containment as an indicative attribute of political, intellectual, and cultural shortcomings is crucial for an understanding of Abbey's wilderness concept.

There is no doubt that Abbey ultimately conceives wilderness as the proper domain of socially uncommitted men. The desert solitaire (the author's *alter ego*), working as a seasonal ranger in Arches National Monument, despite being a husband and a father, mentions no regular visits from his family. When asked by a visitor, one of those "industrial tourists" of which the narrator is so disdainful, whether he is married, the narrator replies: "'Not seriously'" (Abbey 1968: 236). For "A Walk in the Desert Hills," or a boating trip down Glen Canyon before it was dammed, the author prefers to be on his own or in the company of other men. His wife is expected to wait at the edge of the desert and chauffeur the wanderer home after his ten strenuous days of life in the wilderness. Abbey recorded one of the rare instances of traveling with women in a prose piece called "A Colorado River Journal." A comparative reflection on the Colorado River before and after its "damnation," the story narrates one man's rejuvenation through riding the untamable rapids of the Colorado River. It begins, however, with a death announcement:

> The real Colorado died in 1964 when the engineers of the Bureau of Reclamation closed the gates at Glen Canyon Dam, changing the Colorado from a wild and free river into the domesticated, well-regulated conveyer belt for baloney boats that it is today. (1984a: 106)

Following "The Damnation of a Canyon," a piece about the devastating effects of artificial reservoirs on the riparian fauna and flora of North America's canyon lands that includes a description of the paradox of desertification through flooding, "A Colorado River Journal" enhances the preceding story by commenting on the absurdity of trips into a domesticated and widely accessible wilderness that no longer deserves the name. The boats are advertised as "'virtually' unsinkable" (106), thus "virtually" erasing the "toil and danger" (108) experienced on the same river a century earlier by John Wesley Powell and his Colorado River Expedition. For aesthetic and sanitary reasons, the latter-day Powells, coming to experience the river by the hundreds and thousands, relieve themselves in portable chemical toilets. And the river water, no longer naturally potable, is "chemically purified" (111). Each of these aspects is part of the paradoxes of late 20th-century wilderness experiences. Interestingly, Abbey authenticates the inauthenticity of the Colorado River's virtual wilderness with the presence of women. The river's transformation into "domesticated, well-

regulated conveyer belt" notwithstanding, after casting his eyes on the "seven little wooden boats" and the "seven furtive, grinning boatmen" (107), left to his own devices, the narrator's impulse is to run away, scuttling the trip altogether. But

> my escape is interdicted by the approach of two of my twenty or so fellow passengers. Some fellows. One is a brown exotic wench in a tiger-skin bikini; she has the eyes and hair of Salome. The other is a tall slim trim sloop of a girl with flaxen hair and perfect sateen thighs emerging from the skimpiest pair of Levi cutoffs I have ever seen. I pause, hesitate, reconsider. One of the two is Renée – my wife. But which? (107)

Abbey's strategy here, posing as humorous surrender to an expedition that holds no other attractions than tiger-skin bikinis and sateen thighs, is as obvious as the Levi cutoffs are skimpy. Again, textual women serve the narrator in multiple ways. They provide if not the toil certainly the danger (the "brown exotic wench" Salome) the domesticated river has ceased to afford its male traveler while, at the same time, their presence at the scene reinforces the theme of surrender and subjugation of the wild to the domestic (the wife), otherwise marked by the river's dam, the virtually unsinkable boats, life jackets, chemical toilets, tourist hostels, and other contraptions of man's making. And yet the rapids of the Colorado still promise some of the excitement, or rather the anxieties in view of the unknown, reminiscent of the descriptions Powell recorded in his 1869 expedition diary. When they approach Lava Falls, "the greatest rapid in North America" that "[d]rops thirty-seven feet in two hundred yards" (120), the (domesticated) narrator, unlike his wife, opts to forgo the ride and bypass the rapids by walking along the river bank. It is a friend, one of the boatmen, who coaxes Abbey into facing the danger and ride the foaming rapids with him and a fifteen year-old girl from Kentucky. The sexual innuendo of this incident is confirmed when the narrator states that "Running the big rapids is like sex: half the fun lies in the anticipation. Two-thirds of the thrill comes with the approach. The remainder is only ecstasy – or darkness" (123). The company of a male friend, a 'virgin maiden,' a river that seems indifferent to any attempts at its domestication, and the "violent current" that "bears [his wife] away, out of sight" (122) – these are the images that for the narrator repre-

sent the restoration of a "sense of exhilaration and victory" (124) absent from the origin point of the journey and the narrative.

"A Colorado River Journal" pronounces Abbey's philosophy of wilderness as enabling, liberating space. Like many environmental writers before him, he engages in what David Mazel has described as the naturalization of "a particular vision of masculinity" (2000: xxv), a strategy which, as we will see in examining the larger context of his work, caters to the reconstruction of racially and sexually conservative notions of the mythic core of America. At first glance it appears as if, by including women in the scenario of wild river rafting, Abbey has departed from the paradigm in his writing in which wilderness is cast as an exclusively male sphere. However, the first-person narrator casts the women characters as performers of the mythological (Salome; the cover-girl type with flaxen hair and shorts; the Kentucky Lolita[22]) and the wild (the tiger-skin bikini), thus making them an integral part of rather than independent actors in the imaginative landscape of the Grand Canyon. Once again, wilderness is imagined as a feminine body, in Abbey's case not as nurturing mother, but as erotically dangerous, albeit invigorating sphere. A feminine presence in the wilderness is only imaginable if the identity of the wife is obscured, her body dressed in metaphoric animal skin and, ultimately, obliterated from the narrator's vision and the text. In this story, Abbey proves to be true heir to James Fenimore Cooper whose *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), as David Mazel suggests in a perceptive reading, is a novel concerned with fixing the 'natural' order of class, gender, and race hierarchies. Although situated in thematically and historically different locations, the texts of Cooper and Abbey display striking sym-

[22] If the figure of the river riding teenager from Kentucky suggests a rather obvious conjunction of Nabokov's and Abbey's imaginative erotic fantasies, Scott Slovic proposes reading Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* "as the *Lolita* of the environmental movement. Just as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* throws its reader into richly conflicting states of disdain, pity, admiring sympathy, and aesthetic pleasure," he explains, "Abbey's novel heightens our attentiveness to issues of the environment (while providing little explicit dogma) by presenting disturbing extremes toward both preservation and development of the land, within a literary context aimed to *please*" (1992: 11). In a 1980 interview for the *Bloomsbury Review*, in which Abbey expressed his admiration for Nabokov "chiefly as a stylist, a master of the language," Slovic finds evidence in support of his thesis (106).

bolic and semiotic similarities. A brief summary of Mazel's argument will support this argument.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of the performative and Marjorie Garber's notions of transvestism, Mazel argues that "episodes of nature-culture cross-dressing" (2000a: 106) in Cooper's novel can be understood as a response to or at least "an index of broader cultural crises" (107). He reads the famous rescue scene (in which Alice Munro, the angelic white woman, is salvaged from Indian captivity by the combined effort of Natty Bumppo and Major Duncan) "as another fictionalized origin, a (re)birth of a white race and an American civilization that will be reared on the grave of Alice's unfortunate counterpart" (113), her 'dark' half-sister Cora. Presented to Cooper's readers as the prerequisites of Alice's liberation from the womb-like cave to which her wild and savage captors had banished her, cross-species and cross-cultural drag (Natty Bumppo in the skin of a bear and Major Duncan in the paint and apparel of a Huron, respectively) reinforce a perception of wild nature as midwife of (American) history while, at the same time, drawing attention to the performative character of wilderness in America's historical master narrative. As if frightened by the destabilizing implications of his own plot, Cooper has Natty Bumppo, the authoritative character of his *Leatherstocking Tales*, interfere when in the last chapter of the book Munro, Alice and Cora's father, imagines a time "when we may assemble around his throne without distinction of sex, or rank, or color" (Cooper 1994: 411). According to Mazel, "Natty proceeds not simply to reject this liberal plea but to stabilize sex, rank, and color all at once by subsuming them in the overarching category of nature: 'To tell them this,' he insists, 'would be to tell them that the snows come not in the winter or that the sun shines fiercest when the trees are stripped of their leaves!' " (2000a: 108). With this utterance, and paradoxically, Cooper's character desperately seeks to reinstate the social authority of prehistorical, prediscursive nature that the plot has so elaborately disturbed.

Edward Abbey employs a similar strategy when Salome in tiger-skin bikini, the performer of mythic and natural danger, is swallowed by an ostensibly overpowering cataract, thus clearing the way for the male narrator's flight from emasculation through domestication and into fantasies of an unobstructed reunion with untrammeled, wild nature. Ironically, the performativity trope at the beginning of "A

Colorado River Journal," and the conspicuous absence of women and of ethnic and racial minorities from the center of so many of Abbey's texts call from the distance of their marginalized position and keep disrupting the author's attempt to present wilderness as a conservative heterotopia, i.e., as a space that 'naturally' belongs to a figure Andrew Ross dubbed "the Great White Dude." During the socially, politically, and culturally tumultuous 1960s and 70s, this figure – historically and mythically embodied by "the frontiersman, the cowboy, the Romantic poet, the explorer, the engineer, the colonizer, the anthropologist, the pioneer settler, and so on" (Ross 1995: 174) – lost its historical status as America's premier cultural hero and social avant-gardist, being supplanted by students, African Americans, social scientists, Native Americans, gays and lesbians, postmodernist artists, and deconstructionists. During the second half of the 20th century, the defense of wilderness, often manifesting itself as ideologically and politically radical environmentalism of the Earth First! variety, remained one of the few domains where, according to Ross, "straight white males, even self-identified rednecks" were still "able to play leading activist roles on the political frontier," undeterred by "questions about race, class, gender, and sexuality" (ibid.), and ecofeminist interventions notwithstanding.

Abbey struggles with these challenges and, in an attempt to defend himself against attacks on patriarchal power, occasionally lashes back in fictional form, for example when he has Henry Lightcap, the narrator of his last novel, *The Fools Progress* (1988), and the author's not so alter *alter ego*, dismiss feminism as "[a]n intellectual neurosis for which our psychiatric technicians have yet to devise a name" (Abbey 1998: 38).[23] Readers of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Michel Foucault will recognize that charges of mental illness were a popular disciplinary instrument wielded against subjects who resisted their subjugated position in social, political, and cultural hierarchies. In light of this, pop goes the intended provocation of Abbey's insolent *bon mot*. Yet it underlines once again the double articulation of wil-

[23] The quote opens a one and a half page rant about the errors and mistakes of feminism, ostensibly criticizing early feminism's blindness to differences of class but primarily venting a disgruntled husband-patriarch's anger at his wife's feminist leanings and quite obviously aiming at silencing her attempts to challenge male power. The passage ends with the hero's comment: "I won the argument, I think, but lost my third and final wife" (40).

derness and masculinist subjectivity operative in his work, or, more precisely, of wilderness and *white Anglo-Saxon* masculinist subjectivity.

Race

In her essay on "The Legacy of Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*," originally delivered as a public lecture at the Boulder Public Library in 1998, Karla Armbruster comments on Abbey's treatment of racial and ethnic minorities, particularly Navajos in this his most famous book. She observes that Abbey "does tread on some dangerous territory when he talks about their problems with growing population," and points out that "it is difficult to critique the population growth of any group of people of color without invoking racist ideas about invading hordes of brown people encroaching on the rightful territory of white people" (2002).[24] From an ecological point of view and in a world of diminishing resources, overpopulation is indeed a pressing issue. For Abbey, however, it was the exclusive problem of the Other. On September 23, 1984 he confesses to his diary: "It's not enough to halt immigration. We will also have to find ways to reduce the birthrate among Negroes, Mexicans, Indians and – [ironically, in light of their own historical positions on race] Mormons! Now *there's* a popular program" (1994: 316). Abbey made no secret of his racist positions. A year earlier he had responded to the rhetorical question of whether he was a racist by saying, "I guess I am. I certainly do not wish to live in a society dominated by blacks, or Mexicans, or Orientals. Look at Africa, at Mexico, at Asia" (307). That was the same year one of his most controversial essays, "Immigration and Liberal Taboos," was printed by the Phoenix *New Times* after being rejected by *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Newsweek*, the *New Republic*, and *Playboy*. Striking a nationalistic, if not fascist tone,

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24 SueEllen Campbell notes that Abbey's views on population growth are marked by "a stunning oversimplification and falsification. For one thing," she wrote, "as Richard White points out in *The Roots of Dependency*, between 1860 and 1930, while Navajo population quadrupled, Arizona's total population grew by a factor of 67, New Mexico's by a factor of 7 – while nobody 'argued that Anglos or Chicanos … had a problem of overpopulation'" (1998: 42).

Abbey hollers that "it might be wise for us as American citizens to consider calling a halt to the mass influx of even more millions of hungry, ignorant, unskilled, and culturally-morally-genetically impoverished people" (1988: 43). Some of Abbey's defenders want to make us believe that sentences like this should not be taken literally, that they are, rather, rhetorical irreverences from the trickster's bag, pulled out to shock people across the political spectrum out of sentimental complacencies about the social make-up of this world. Karla Armbruster, for example, although apparently troubled by his blatant chauvinism, nevertheless ends her lecture/essay by describing Abbey (the writer) as a modern trickster, the white cousin of Old Man Coyote, Native America's legendary provocateur who is "an insatiable glutton, a gross lecher, an inveterate thief, liar, and outlaw, a prankster whose schemes regularly backfire."[25]

Armbruster's reaction is understandable in light of her ultimate pedagogical aim – to recommend to her public library audience a book with a valuable ecological message. "*Desert Solitaire* says," she concludes her lecture, "that we are not tourists on this earth, here temporarily until we move on to a better place. This is our home, and we need to respect and enjoy it while we can." Forgotten in this rather mildly worded rebuke is the fact that Abbey championed some rather dubious criteria in terms of who should determine who would and who would not be accepted into the circle of the (American) first-person singular.[26] When he defends wilderness, he defends it not so much for its own sake but, in a Rooseveltian sense, as an Anglo-Saxon male domain, an exclusive space. In a list of despicable features of Mexican culture, Abbey includes "poverty and misery, filth and squalor, injustice and oppression, class and caste, corruption and cruelty." He ends with "fear and hatred of the natural world" (1994: 306). Compared to this, his demand in *Desert Solitaire* that "wilderness should be pre-

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25 Armbruster quotes this description from Bright 1993.

26 Chicano writer Luis Alberto Urrea is similarly ambivalent. Referring to "Immigration and Liberal Taboos," he admits that "Edward Abbey once stuck a knife in my heart." This, however, did not keep Urrea from siding with Abbey because of "the aching love he ignited in me for the land. The world. The tierra." Decrying "his ignorance and his duplicity," Urrea also "admire[s] Edward Abbey," "enjoy[s] his books," and "love[s] his bad taste car." In the end, and post mortem, Abbey the "lowrider" with "feet of clay" finds mercy with the heir of a culture he so much despised. See Urrea 1995.

served for *political* reasons" (1968: 149, emphasis added) sounds ideologically mellow. But it grew from the same rhetorical and ideological humus which becomes evident in comments on "uncontrolled population growth" (118) among the Navajo and the observation that "Indians are making a great numerical comeback, outbreeding the white man by a ratio of three to two" (117). Masquerading as environmentalist rhetoric, Abbey's plea for wilderness preservation articulates the Great White Dude's claim to cultural, if not political authority.

Another threat to wilderness, both the actual location and the idea, was urban-industrial society. In the middle decades of the 20th century there was still a strong current of public opinion holding that, as Roderick Nash observed, "civilization [was] an unalloyed good" (Nash 1982: 239), a "protective layer" sheltering humans from wild nature's cruelty, violence, indifference (1982: 241).[27] Against this background and put into a historical and trans-Atlantic perspective, wilderness sojourns turned out to be the privilege of an aristocratic minority. To illustrate his point, Nash cites a *Saturday Evening Post* guest editorial from November 5, 1965. The writer, Robert Wernick, saw wilderness as a domain exclusively enjoyed by English aristocrats who eventually had to render their hunting reserves up to farms and factories. For Wernick, this historical example demonstrated the social injustice intrinsic to wilderness and the democratic implications of civilization. Most likely, Edward Abbey would have dismissed such an argument as 'baloney.' For him, "the massacre of the English forest," Robin Hood's (alleged) betrayal by a nun, and the disappearance of freedom were related events (Abbey 1998: 47). As I showed earlier in this chapter, for Abbey wilderness was the indispensable prerequisite for a democratic society. At the same time, Abbey's wilderness advocacy continued the modern, early 20th-century veneration of the primitive as a more authentic way of life, with allusions to the corruptive influence of modern technological and bureaucratic America on Native America running through the entire text of *Desert Solitaire*.

When Abbey notes that Navajos come "from a tradition which honors sharing and mutual aid above private interest" (Abbey 1968: 122) and suggests to his readers that "we will have to borrow from

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27 Nash borrows the notion of civilization as "protective layer" from Hoffer 1967.

Navajo tradition and begin a more equitable sharing of national income" (124), his observations are in stark contrast to his earlier malevolent remarks on indigenous populations. And this is only one of many contradictions and puzzling paradoxes critics have detected in Abbey's work. Again, however, a closer look at the narrative and/or argumentative context of those remarks suggests more consistency than one might suspect at first sight. Abbey's praise for indigenous social and ethical values fulfills a specific function – it is a polemical device employed for the critique of American cultural and social institutions, i.e., civilization. If he is sympathetic to Native American cultural traditions it is because like many of his historical predecessors on both sides of the Atlantic – Rousseau and Montaigne in France, Hobbes and Locke in England, Jefferson in America – Abbey needed a memorable, catchy shorthand for illuminating the advantages of the wild and primitive over the domesticated and artificial. In *Desert Solitaire*, good and useful Indians are figures of the pre-Columbian past; they are "primitive savages" "[u]nburdened by the necessity of devoting most of their lives to the production, distribution, sale and servicing of labor-saving machinery" who, nevertheless, left behind "graven images" on rocks and stones, works of art that bear witness to a creativity that came to them "as naturally […] as making love" (116-117). This hymn to wild, primitive creativity is supplemented by the observation that Navajos have nothing "to gain by becoming factory hands, lab technicians and office clerks;" that they are "are *people*, not *personnel*," with "nothing in their nature or tradition [that] has prepared them to adapt to the regimentation of application forms and time clock" (121). Comments like this, rather than being genuinely attentive to the economic and social complexities and complications caused by a history of colonial encounter, project the Indian as a figure foreshadowing, or rather embodying, the complete obliteration of wilderness. In other words, rather than articulating a genuine critique of America's historical involvement in colonial politics, Abbey utilizes the Indian in *Desert Solitaire* to authorize his own position as a critic of modern American industrial culture. Through the voice of his first-person narrator, Abbey speaks in defense of wilderness, and 'uncorrupted' Indians are an integral part of this space. Through the act of describing and/or interpreting indigenous art (the graven petroglyphic and pictographic images produced by members of pre-modern tribal cultures) and wild nature (the desert and canyon lands in Arches Na-

tional Monument), Abbey enunciates his claim to (symbolic and intellectual) ownership of a territory still somewhat of a *terra incognita* for many of his contemporaries. Most of all, he joins, and even energizes the public conversation surging in the 1960s and 70s about the value of wilderness for American civilization.

Summarizing an intellectual and cultural development that Yale law professor Charles A. Reich described as *The Greening of America* (1970), Roderick Nash declared that wilderness advocates, troubled by spatial and cultural expansion of technocratic society and the corporate state, started to argue that "wilderness deserved a place within the totality of American civilization as one of its distinguishing and valuable assets" (1982: 248). The major functions ascribed to the wilderness were genetic pool, library of historical knowledge, sanctuary of political and social freedom, resource for mental health, and space for religious worship. In addition to poet Gary Snyder and novelist and historian Wallace Stegner, Edward Abbey serves as one of the main justifications for Nash's assertion that the (re)emergence of wilderness is one of the leading critical concepts in the middle decades of the 20th century. The publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, a shocking report on the destructive, lethal ecology of insecticides, and the passing in 1964 of the Wilderness Act, a legislative text defining wilderness in contradistinctions to "areas where man and his works dominate the landscape" as areas "where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man" (Wilderness Act, Public Law 88-577, 1 (c)) heralded the change in public attitude towards wilderness and the growing realization among Americans of the ecological and cultural significance of the natural environment.[28] With *Desert Solitaire* (his most anthologized text), Edward Abbey participated in and significantly shaped the debate.

For Abbey, wilderness is the true source of knowledge – biological, existential, political. Both as a material and a mental space it is a corrective tool, an instrument that puts the doings of civilization

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28 David Mazel points at the conceptually problematic implications of the codification of wilderness as terrain "untrammeled by man" and as space "where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." For the context of the present study it is important to note that the Act's "stress on wilderness as uninhabited land […] effaces the history of early nonwhite presences on the land," and that "its universalization of 'man' similarly obscures a set of nonmasculine presences on and interpretations of the land" (2000: 171, n.5).

into perspective. Confronted with the accusation of a visitor to Arches National Monument of "being against civilization" (Abbey 1968: 274), park ranger Abbey plunges into a philosophical reflection on the differences between civilization and culture. The reader is prepared for this by an earlier comment about wilderness as the complement and completion of civilization (148). Whereas culture, "an anthropological term referring always to specific, identifiable societies localized in history and place" (275), is embodied by normative, disciplinary, authoritarian institutions and organizations (examples listed by Abbey include the police, the judge, the law book, the inquisition, the doctoral dissertation, the electric chair, and the inevitable hydroelectric dam), civilization is "the vital force in human history" embodied by "the brotherhood of great souls and the comradeship of intellect, a *corpus mysticum*" (276). That is, civilization is the all-male and mostly white western "Invisible Republic" (ibid.) whose citizens – "Lao-Tse, Chuang-Tse, Gautama, Diogenes, Euripides, Socrates, Jesus, Wat Tyler and Jack Cade, Paine and Jefferson, Blake and Burns and Beethoven, John Brown and Henry Thoreau, Whitman, Tolstoy, Emerson, Mark Twain, Rabelais and Villon, Spinoza, Voltaire, Spartacus, Neitzsche (sic) and Thomas Mann; Lucretius and Pope John XXII, and ten thousand other poets, revolutionaries, and independent spirits, both famous and forgotten, alive and dead" – give "to human life on earth its adventure, glory and significance" (ibid.). Thus, for Abbey wilderness is the origin point and the warrant for the continuation of a polity shaped by the philosophical, aesthetic, and religious aristocracy of the West, and whose claim to universality is hardly disturbed by the presence of a few Eastern thinkers.

Desert(ify)ing Space

From Edward Abbey's perspective, wilderness and desert are two semantically related, yet functionally different concepts. "Mountains complement desert", he writes in *Desert Solitaire*, "as desert complements city, as wilderness complements and completes civilization" (1968: 148). Syntax reveals the sentence's implicit ideological and conceptual meanings. For as it turns out, Abbey does not suggest looking at desert and city, wilderness and civilization as symbiotically interdependent entities. Rather, he constructs city and civilization as

incomplete spaces that depend for their perfection on desert and wilderness. That is, his celebration of civilization as "the vital force in human history" makes sense because in Abbey's understanding, wilderness is as fundamental to civilization as desert is fundamental for the continued existence of the city. A closer inspection of Abbey's text reveals that the desert is the trope that enables the author to radicalize wilderness as an anti-establishment, anti-regulatory, pro-individualist, and pro-masculinist space. In the "Author's Introduction" to *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey writes: "I have tried to create a world of words in which the desert figures more as a medium than as material. Not imitation but evocation has been the goal" (x).

A recurring theme in *Desert Solitaire* is the assertion that civilization *needs* wilderness ("wilderness is a necessary part of civilization" [54]) and, by extension, "the Explainer" (205), a figure who, upon his return from the scene of his retreat, delivers insights about his culture and the world at large. Terry Gifford suggested that this pattern of retreat and return constitutes "the essential paradox of the pastoral" (1999: 82) – the experience of retreat has no significance without a return, without a voice addressing "an audience for whom what happens in Arcadia has some interest" (81). Abbey evokes the trope of pastoral bliss when, at the beginning of *Desert Solitaire*, he has his narrator take "inventory" of "the garden which lies all around me" (1968: 26), and later in the narrative, he speaks in paradisiacal terms of Glen Canyon before its damming. However, he immediately revokes any narrative equating of "his" garden with idyllic imagery.

> When I write 'paradise' I mean not apple trees and golden women but also scorpions and tarantulas and flies, rattlesnakes and Gila monsters, sandstorms, volcanoes and earthquakes, bacteria and bear, cactus, yucca, bladderweed, ocotillo and mesquite, flash floods and quicksand, and yes – disease and death and the rotting of flesh. (190)

Abbey's Paradise appears to be more like Dante's Hell, and intentionally so. For this description serves two functions: to deter the casual recreationist and "industrial tourist" from taking over the desert, thereby preventing them from disappropriating the author not only of the space that he claimed as his own but also of his subject. Abbey affects a possessive relation to the desert when, in a later piece called "The Great American Desert" (1977), he talks about seeing "my desert un-

der attack" (1984b: 108). The best way to survive the desert, Abbey insists, is to

> Stay out of there. Don't go. Stay home and read a good book, this one for example. The Great American Desert is an awful place. People get hurt, get sick, get lost out there. Even if you survive, which is not certain, you will have a miserable time. The desert is for movies and God-intoxicated mystics, not for family recreation. (ibid.)

In this passage, Abbey engages in another double articulation. The desert is presented as a dangerous *geographical* reality. Yet at the same time, and quite vehemently, it is also rendered as a *virtual and textual* reality, one that alternately functions as a stage for the performance of cultural myths, existential dramas, and exceptional religiosity. The author/narrator not only claims the function as mediator of desert truths achieved through first-hand desert experience, he claims this function as an exclusive position for himself – and a few select kindred spirits. For surprisingly, his imperative to stay out of the desert is qualified soon after it is stated: "Anyway – why go into the desert?" (115)

This rhetorical question opens up into a sermon on the dangers of the desert, including the "ubiquitous buzzard, so patient – but only so patient," "the scorpion in your shoe at dawn," "quicksand lapping at your crotch," "[h]ollow, mummified horses with forelegs casually crossed, dead for ten years," "sullen and hostile Indians, all on welfare," and "Salt, selenium, arsenic, radon and radium in the water, in the gravel, in your bones" (115). The images are familiar. They echo 19th-century descriptions of the Great American Desert, demonizing the land and its indigenous human inhabitants. What we are confronted with here, as in *Desert Solitaire*, is a wilderness radicalized through a mixture of clichéd desert imagery and matter-of-fact observation. Abbey closes his soliloquy by repeating "Why go there?" (ibid.), finally coming to the conclusion that

> there was nothing out there. Nothing at all. Nothing but the desert. Nothing but the silent world.
> *That's why*. (117, emphasis in the original)

Desert travel is thus advertised as a supreme existential experience. It is finally constituted as the absolute counterpoint of the city, the latter being a space weighed down by social, political, and architectural

meaning and conflict. This almost completely humanized environment is governed by "the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus," with the city as symbolic of the technological and institutional annoyances Abbey seeks to "evade" through a temporary retreat into wild nature (Abbey 1968: 6).

The desert's value is in the absence of such meaning and confusion, and Abbey actively constructs this void. In "The Great American Desert," he completely erases the Southwest as a cultural and historical landscape, maintaining that "in the American Southwest only wilderness is worth saving" (1984b: 112). As an opposition to contemporary attempts to "californicate" the Southwest, such a response makes total sense. But vis-à-vis the Southwest's history as a trans-national cultural geography inhabited by desert tribes such as the Tohono O'odham in Arizona, the various Pueblo cultures in New Mexico, the Shoshone and Paiute in Utah, Nevada, and California, not to mention the imprints of Spanish colonialism and the cultural, political, and social history of Mexico, declaring the Southwest's only true value as that of a wilderness is a questionable rhetorical gesture. Yet paradoxically, Abbey depends on the highly cultured tropes of gender and race for establishing the desert as an alternative space to modern civilization. "Something about the desert inclines all living things to harshness and acerbity," the narrator of "The Great American Desert" observes.

> The soft evolve out. Except for sleek and oily growths like the poison ivy – oh yes, indeed – that flourish in sinister profusion on the dank walls above the quicksand down in those corridors of gloom and labyrinthine monotony that men call canyons. (110)

The desert, represented here as a space inimical to softness, is thus semiotically refurnished as a male territory, in which the feminine (or soft) cannot survive and the effeminate ethnic Other – evoked by terms that conjure stereotypes of Mexicans as greasy and insidiously criminal (oily, sleek) – increases its forbidding character. If, in *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey celebrated the desert as a landscape "inviting not love but contemplation" (1968: 270), "The Great American Desert" confirmed the object and location of such contemplative activity as daringly masculine. An empty desert, a desert without meaning is, of course, a more sympathetic sounding board for such contemplation than a territory resounding with the voices of history. At the very

most, Abbey allows history to be visible in the pictographic inscriptions of ancient yet vanished indigenous civilizations. Human subjects or societies historically rooted in the desert become visible at the text's surface but are ultimately negligible, voiceless, and unintelligible. From the narrator's hegemonic perspective, gendered and racial Others are either absent, dead or drunk and thus need not seriously be reckoned with as signifying rivals.

What Abbey is most interested in is a space that provides possibilities for escaping from the white noise of technocratic culture and to shedding the Nietzschean burden of history. "Under the desert sun, in that dogmatic clarity, the fables of theology and the myth of classical philosophy dissolve like mist" (219). The desert as a semiotic and social void which, Abbey wants us to believe, enables the desert wanderer to assume a position of critically distant commentator on civilization, or "syphilization" (183) as he puts it, delighting here as elsewhere in an embarrassingly adolescent sense of humor. Yet in spite from such rhetorical gaffes, Abbey critics have been quite busy making a case for the author's significance to the pedagogical project of raising the public's ecological consciousness. As editor of *Coyote in the Maze: Tracking Edward Abbey in a World of Words* (1998), Peter Quigley contributed to these efforts.

The Ecocritical Relevance of Abbey's Desert

The underlying agenda of Quigley's *Coyote in the Maze*, a collection of scholarly essays focusing on the *literary* value of Abbey's work, was to redirect criticism away from the author as environmental activist and rebel – a role Abbey himself vehemently rejected, stating more than once that he "never wanted to be an environmental crusader, an environmental journalist" but "a fiction writer, a novelist" (Abbey quoted in Slovic 1992: 107) – to the aesthetic value and organization of his work. But *Coyote in the Maze* was also inspired by the resolve to move Abbey criticism from the corridors and sidebars to the podiums and panels of academic conferences. Quigley's mission corresponds with one of the central goals of ecocriticism, that is as editor of a collection of essays on Abbey, he was not only involved in the newly emerging discipline's attempt to define the subject and the object of its work, but he also participated in establishing a canon of

pedagogically usable, ecologically or environmentally instructive, and aesthetically engaging texts.

One of Quigley's forerunners was Scott Slovic. In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992), Slovic argued for Abbey's reception as a writer whose "chief preoccupation […] is with the psychological phenomenon of 'awareness'" (3). For Slovic, writers like Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez serve as prime examples for (American) nature writers who "are constantly probing, traumatizing, thrilling, and soothing their own minds – and by extension those of their readers – in quest not only of consciousness itself, but of an understanding of consciousness" (ibid.). Their personal encounters with nature (or wilderness) as an Other, and the articulation and communication of this encounter through their nature writing, is described as a crucial way to become aware of and define the location of the Self in the world, and to test its boundaries and the possibilities of challenging them. Slovic believes "that Abbey's true project, his essential consciousness raising effort, hinges upon the conflation of pure aesthetics with volatile moral issues (such as the sacredness of the wilderness, the inviolability of private property, and the appropriate use of public lands)" (11). Abbey raises environmental awareness, Slovic contends, through "emotions of fear, disorientation, and surprise" (94). By employing a narrative technique aimed at defamiliarizing the familiar in order to shock readers into a heightened consciousness of the reality surrounding the human world, Abbey's alleged intention is to draw attention to "a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours, a world which surrounds and sustains the little world of men as sea and sky surround and sustain a ship" (Abbey 1968: 42). The desert – already perceived by most of Abbey's potential audience as a harsh and unfamiliar territory, and depicted by the author in images described earlier in this study – actually offers itself for such a purpose.

Slovic quite deftly captures Abbey's fascination with and communication of the desert's "paradoxical unity" (Slovic 1992: 96), its splendor and resilience epitomized by the cactus flower, a fragile beauty aggressively protected by pointed thorns. And he foregrounds the "dialectical tension" in *Desert Solitaire* "between correspondence and otherness" (5) in regard to the relationship between self and nature. But Slovic's concentration on Abbey's consciousness-raising rhetorical strategies sidesteps a discussion of the author's concomi-

tant, and rather obvious, effort to renaturalize the desert by obliterating or at least downplaying the significance of cultural presences and historical inscriptions. In an essay "On the Need for a Wilderness to Get Lost In," Abbey defends wilderness as a sanctuary for man, Boy Scout, and "the foulest murderer of the sweetest wife" (quoted in Slovic 1992: 113), a space where the rules of adult social responsibility and interaction are both temporarily suspended *and* exercised, and where even the most atrocious criminal can live a fantasy of regained innocence. In that sense, Abbey's desert is what another critic, William Chaloupka, calls a "crisis heterotopia," i.e., a space serving as a temporary exile for "individuals who are, in relation to society … in a state of crisis" (1998: 129), and who, by taking temporary shelter in a non-social, natural environment, have a chance to (re)define and come to terms with their social place.[29]

In "Wild Years: From the Environmental Literature of the Sixties to the Ecological Criticism of the Nineties," an essay placing the ecological criticism of the 1990s on a discursive continuum stretching back to Romantic pastoralism via the environmental literature of the 1960s, Heike Schaefer cites Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* as texts that "encourage their readers to reflect on the conditions that enable and delimit an ecological perspective that positions humans with nature while recognizing that the nonhuman exists in its own right" (2001: 448-449). Drawing on Glen Love's influential observation that in the American pastoral tradition, garden and rural landscape are substituted with wilderness "as

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[29] A similar argument is made by Werner Bigell who reads Abbey's nature as a semiotically diverse, open and heterotopic space. Referring to *Jonathan Troy* (1950) and *Black Sun* (1982), he observes that "In both novels, natural spaces such as deserts and forests play a central role because questioning and crisis take place there" (1998: 291). Defending deconstructionist and poststructuralist complications of nature as an entity that is no longer culturally innocent (if it ever was), Bigell proposes viewing Abbey's heterotopic desert/wilderness as a conceptual opening through which nature can reenter language, "not only as a concept with 'myriad of meanings' but as a material entity, a [Barthean] second-order signifier" (ibid.). What Bigell, not unlike Slovic, fails to notice or chooses to neglect, is that Abbey's heterotopic nature is a renaturalized space. That is, by implication, the desert's otherness vis-à-vis the city is achieved at the cost of the narrator/protagonist's partial historical and cultural amnesia. (The quote in the quote is from Langdon Winner's *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994]).

the locus of stability and value, the seat of instruction" (Love 1992: 203), Schaefer reads Abbey's desert "as an Arcadian refuge in a troubled world" (443), a space radically juxtaposed to urban industrial America whose disconnection from the natural world is rather critical. In search of texts that inspire us to "question and transform literary conventions, conceptual frameworks, and social practices" (449) counterproductive to the development of ecologically self-critical perspective on the nature-culture nexus, Schaefer is willing to propose that

> although Abbey engages the myth of a redemptive encounter with the wild and although his appeal to white male middle-class environmentalists may rest to a certain extent on the macho charisma of his narrative voice, *Desert Solitaire* is not a mere regression to the Progressive Era wilderness cult (446).

The cautious use of the qualifier "mere" is important here. Clearly, Schaefer cannot and does not want to leave Abbey's masculinism uncommented upon. Yet at the same time, she feels the need to draw attention away from Abbey's confrontational rhetorical performance towards the underlying epistemological core of his text, which, Schaefer suggests, is to promote "an ecological understanding of the natural world and our place in it" (449).

However, Abbey's description of Arches National Monument as "undoubtedly a desert place, clean, pure, totally useless, quite unprofitable" (1968: 33) rings with the same discontent with the city as a morally tainted and culturally contaminated realm that Roderick Nash saw as one of the ideological foundations of the wilderness cult. "In the primitive, specifically," Nash observed, "many Americans detected the qualities of innocence, purity, cleanliness, and morality which seemed on the verge of succumbing to utilitarianism and the surge of progress" (1982: 157). It seems to me then that instead of 'regressing' into perceptive and interpretative modes that historically precede his narrative, Abbey *continues* or *perpetuates* progressivism's articulation of masculinity and nationality through tropes of wilderness by inscribing them in narratives that also, and indubitably, promote an awareness and better understanding of the ecological embeddedness of human existence. Abbey's work is an example of what Andrew Hazucha, writing about Wordsworth, has called "eco-nationalism" (2002: 61). In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey's nationalism seems to

be less pronounced than those of his Romantic predecessor. But if one bears in mind that for Abbey, wilderness is a word that "suggests the past and the unknown" and carries the potential to "[invoke] nostalgia, a justified not merely sentimental nostalgia for the lost America our forefathers knew" (1968: 189), then the implications of his desert narrative in the stabilization and conservation of a nationalism à la Theodore Roosevelt become more obvious.

But should ecocriticism, in search of the pedagogically usable and educational text downplay or sidestep such ideological implications? Should we, for the sake of ecological consciousness raising, overlook what David Mazel has described as the rhetorical purging and rehabilitation of environmentally conscious discourse from "a discomfiting history of colonialist and capitalist 'penetrations' […] which precipitated the Euro-American environment in the first place" (2000: 37-38)?

As I have shown earlier in this section, Abbey knowingly and wholeheartedly participated in such acts of 'penetration,' eliminating from his desert narrative any objectionable or disagreeable human presence. Therefore, on a political level, it is problematic to advertise Abbey's work as supporting ecological awareness because it suggests that a major way to achieve this awareness is by turning a blind eye to America's imperial history. David Teague is right when he proposes that Abbey "recognizes the desert's ability to subvert, both practically and aesthetically, the United States' mainstream progressive cultural ideology" (1997: 162). But to conclude that Abbey's desert "provide[s] a geographical and ecological zone of human possibility" (ibid.)[30] – or, in Wallace Stegner's terminology, a geography of hope – obscures the fact that Abbey's rhetoric, in the guise of provocative disrespect for *any* ideologically sacred cow, runs the risk of playing into authoritarian discourses it claims to challenge. I agree with SueEllen Campbell who argues in "Magpie" that Abbey's professed confrontation with the bare bones of existence in the sublime desert landscape of Utah's Arches National Monument correlates with an

[30] I would contest Teague's contention that with this recognition, Abbey "locates new and important literary ground." The critique of progress (if progress is understood as the increasing mastery of nature through science and technology, and the increasingly profitable production and availability of consumer goods) is a central tenet of earlier desert writers, including John C. Van Dyke and Joseph Wood Krutch.

evasion in *Desert Solitaire* of the cultural and social complexities of an era defined by cold war politics, civil rights and other social movements, and a series of nuclear tests that resulted in the contamination of a large part of the American wilderness by radioactive fallout. In light of these social and environmental realities, Abbey's retreat into a sublime desert, his philosophical and literary support of environmental anarchism, his radical defense of the desert as a refuge for rugged individualists from authoritarian government, and his call for (minority) population control amounts to a celebration of the white male as the exclusive hero in the story of America. This in turn fosters a way of thinking which, Campbell infers, comes dangerously close to an ultra-right-wing political mentality and the kind of mindset whose expression was made explosively apparent in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995.

From an ecological perspective, however, Abbey's critical assessment of industrialism's devastating impact on the natural foundation of human life is not only justified but legitimate *and* necessary. (Though this raises the obvious point that a genuine ecology needs to be aware of the possibility of being politically and philosophically appropriated by fascism, bigotry, or any other form of exclusion and oppression under the sign of nature.) "We in America are being systematically robbed," he noted in his diary on December 6, 1956, when he was living in Hoboken. "Robbed of the most elementary decencies of life – clean air, sunlight, pure unmedicated water, grass & woods to play in, silence solitude and space, even time, even death" (Abbey 1994: 139). Living in the middle of one of the most heavily urbanized and industrialized regions in the U.S., the disadvantages of modern progress no longer remained abstract and achieved a corporeal quality of discomfort that intensified the author's will to resist. However, the ideological underpinnings of his desert discourse weaken the force of an ecological critique of big government, big industry, and big science. Abbey's extreme aversion to totalitarianism does not prevent him from flirting with totalitarian rhetoric when he writes about population growth and immigration, or when he notes in *Desert Solitaire*: "By society I do not mean the roar of the city streets or the cultured and cultural talk of the schoolmen (reach for your revolver!) or human life in general" (111).

The parenthetical remark once again indicates the problematic mindset of Abbey's environmentalist rhetoric. It refers to the infamous

line from the Nazi propaganda play *Schlageter* by Hanns Johst. "When I hear the word culture," Johst has one of his characters say, "I release the safety cock of my Browning."[31] A modified version – "Whenever I hear the word culture, I reach for my revolver" – is alternately ascribed either to Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels or Hermann Göring, and signifies Nazi Germany's reactionary position on modern cultural developments. The knee-jerk reaction of Johst's literary character represents the Nazi's fear of art and literature (i.e., culture) as expressions that could challenge their ideological and political power. In a reading of Romanticism's celebration of art and literature as counterforces to the calculated rationality of the capitalist marketplace, Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton played with the metaphor, observed that "The word '*poetry*' […] no longer refers simply to a technical mode of writing: it has deep social, political and philosophical implications, and *at the sound of it the ruling class might quite literally reach for its gun*. Literature has become a whole alternative ideology, and the 'imagination' itself […] becomes a political force" (1983: 20, emphasis added). To be sure, Abbey's definition of culture differs both from that of Eagleton and the Romantics on the one hand, and from that of the Nazis on the other. His provocative call to arms against presumptuous advocates of modern culture may have been intended as another rebellious gesture towards those in power. However, in the original quote as in Eagleton's use of it, the person who reaches for the gun is not the underdog but represents (totalitarian) power. Thus, Abbey's allusion to this line is rather problematic, for his first-person narrator shares the subject-position of a Nazi who sees his power position threatened by culture. If wilderness, and the desert as one of its last remaining geographical manifestations, is indeed "a necessity of the human spirit" (Abbey 1968: 192) and a prerequisite for the survival of civilization, then its defenders should be hard-pressed to mind the ideological repercussions and political implications of the tropes and images engaged in its defense.

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31 This play was first performed in April 1933 for Hitler's birthday and was written by Hanns Johst (1890-1978), who became President of the Reichsschriftumskammer (Reich Chamber of Literature) in 1935. For a summary of Hanns Johst's life and work see "Datenbank Schrift und Bild 1900-1960," http://www.polunbi.de/pers/johst-01.html (December 21, 2007).

4 Wild Legacy: Barry Lopez, Charles Bowden, Ann H. Zwinger

In 1999, Tucson-based English Professor Peter Wild declared Edward Abbey's 1968 *Desert Solitaire* "the point of desert writing's most recent culmination" (1999: 163), mostly because it "evokes the mystery of very real and particularized places" (161). It is the book that "also represented, if perhaps not the death thereafter, then the severe etiolation of the genre" (163). Wild's choice of words (*death* and *etiolation*), as well as his observation that "Abbey had effectively and perhaps permanently wounded the dominance of nature writing in the classical tradition of rational, gentlemanly Joseph Wood Krutch" (162)[32], celebrates Abbey's raw, undisciplined language and the wildness of his thoughts as the quintessential gauge of good desert writing. One of the texts Wild cites as an example for desert writing's lapse into "etiolation" is Barry Lopez' *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven* (1976). One can hardly miss the implied charge of narcissism in Wild's critical remark that authors like Lopez "compete in outbidding one another to create psychedelic deserts, creations, furthermore, not with nature as the focus, but […] the tormented writer himself" (164). In fact, Wild further contends, after Abbey, desert writers "divide rather neatly into old-fashioned naturalists who would prefer to keep their private lives in the background and the freewheeling exhibitionists" (165), who create "an ersatz desert writing gushed over by a few cult followers" (a group including academics) but "largely ignored by the wider public" (164). If we can believe Peter Wild then being obscure to a wider public is an experience that Lopez shares with Ann Haymond Zwinger. However, her books do meet Wild's standards of good desert writing. With publications like *The Mysterious Lands: A Naturalist Explores the Four Great Deserts of the Southwest* (1989), Zwinger continues the "mainly realistic tradition" (163) Wild ascribes to Abbey, yet "despite her large talents, she is hardly a household name in well-read America as were Abbey and Krutch before him" (163-64).

If the sales ranking information issued by large internet booksellers accurately reflects how widely an author is read, Zwinger's old-school naturalism is in fact in much less demand than Lopez' literary extravaganza *Desert Notes*, an indication for Wild that some-

[32] More on Joseph Wood Krutch in Chapter Four of this study.

thing has gone seriously wrong with America.[33] When it comes to nature writing in general and to desert literature in particular, Wild is a purist: non-fiction's business is information, not the creation of atmosphere by way of personal anecdotes nor a style that employs "colorful, though solidly negative, emotionalism […] at the expense of understanding the desert's shifting complexities" (174), an offense committed by Charles Bowden in *Blue Desert* (1982).[34] For Wild, Bowden is, very much like Lopez, a latter-day Tacitus, bemoaning the state of an empire corrupted by wealth and power and "lacking in natural goodness," a virtue that the Roman still saw in place in the misty Northern forests inhabited by "barbaric Germanic tribes" who "were the very embodiment of what we'd today call Political Correctness"(164).

Peter Wild's strong opinions provide refreshing perspectives on some of nature writing's tiresome idiosyncrasies, especially its tendency to idealize nature and naturalized Others as normative instruments of social criticism. Yet in the end, his critical decrees say much more about Wild's literary tastes and preferences or aversions than about the discursive politics underlying the writing of Lopez, Zwinger, or Bowden. I am taking it on faith that the ideological charge of political correctness issued against a writer and his work is, beneath its crankiness, an attempt at serious critical conversations about the poetics and politics of literary representation.

A closer look at Barry Lopez' *Desert Notes*, Charles Bowden's *Blue Desert*, and Ann Haymond Zwinger's *The Mysterious Lands* will support my thesis that although they are writers who follow different poetic strategies in representing the desert, their narratives embody a similar politics. That is they describe the desert as a complex natural, cultural, *and* historical landscape. In doing so, they authorize it as an environment that is neither dead nor useless. Lopez, Bowden, and Zwinger suggest that knowing and experiencing the desert holds the potential for changing, correcting, and challenging traditional perspec-

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33 On December 21, 2007, Ann Zwinger's *The Mysterious Lands* (1989) was No. 1,253,601 on the Amazon.com sales rank, while Barry Lopez' *Desert Notes* (1976) held position 356,847. Both books will be discussed in some more detail later in this chapter.

34 The Amazon.com sales ranking is at position 289,175. It went into its third printing in 1992.

tives on America's relationship to its natural environment and the direction of its historical development. These three writers authorize the desert as a space that – because of its wild, original, resistant nature – serves as a reminder of America's imaginative potential as a trope that challenges modernity's technological fixations.

Barry Lopez: Wild Imagination

Barry Lopez begins his *Desert Notes* with a quote from Charles Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* (1836) in which the great 19th-century naturalist reveals his ambivalence towards the plains of Patagonia, a landscape he had visited in 1834. Remembering this voyage, Darwin found that "images" of the Patagonian scene "frequently cross before my eyes." Mystified by the fact that although "[t]hey can be described only by negative characters" (no habitations, no water, no trees, no mountains, and "merely a few dwarf plants") "these arid plains [have] taken so firm a hold on my memory," he wonders:

> Why have not the still more level, the greener and more fertile Pampas, which are serviceable to mankind, produced an equal impression? I can scarcely analyze these feelings: but it must be partly owing to *the free scope given to the imagination*. (Darwin quoted in Lopez 1990: 5; emphasis added)

Caught between the required pragmatism and rationalism of his profession and the need to produce descriptive records of yet uncharted terrain on the one hand, and the tight grip a seemingly meaningless landscape has placed on his imagination on the other, Darwin admits to "deep but ill-defined sensations" in response to deserts, which, like oceans, constitute one of the "last boundaries to man's knowledge" (Lopez 1990: 5).

The desert's sensational appeal to the imagination, its lingering presence as the imago of Darwin's Patagonian journey, symbolize Lopez' literary interest in the desert. The author grew up in a rural landscape in Southern California, spending "a lot of time in the Mojave desert" (Lopez 2003). This experience, combined with a thorough education in the history of ideas, provided him with the images and metaphors through which he viewed the world. The subject of *Desert Notes* is not an actual, material desert, characterized by specific topog-

raphical, geological, and ecological features, but the imprints this landscape leaves behind on the human imagination. Although Lopez plays with scientific representational strategies, for example in a chapter called "Perimeter" in which he defines it by simulating the exacting categories of the discourses of geography and natural history, his desert can only be entered through the mediation of his text, which *performs* rather than *represents* an actual landscape. This is underlined by Lopez' characterization of the individual pieces in *Desert Notes* as stories. The last chapter of *Desert Notes* dismisses the authority of conventional maps, usually made up of lines, dots, and other geometrical symbols, in favor of narrative maps. Conjuring up a man, Leon, who will be able to give the interested visitor "Directions" (the title of the chapter), the narrator directly addresses the reader, informing her that Leon might "sketch a map for you on a white paper napkin" (Lopez 1990: 56). But he also warns her: "Be careful. The napkin will tear under the pressure of his blunt pencil and the lines he draws may end up meaning nothing at all. It is his words you should pay attention to. […] *You may never again hear a map so well spoken*" (56-57; emphasis added). Apart from being a rather obvious case of authorial self-referentiality of the kind that annoys Peter Wild, this remark may serve as a key to the discursive politics underlying the project of *Desert Notes*.

Elsewhere, Lopez states: "What one thinks of any region, while traveling through, is the result of at least three things: what one knows, what one imagines, and how one is disposed" (1986: 271). Knowledge of a region or a landscape is information "gathered firsthand or learned from books or indigenous observers" (ibid.) and depends to a large degree on the traveler's "cultural predisposition" and "personality" (ibid.). The imagination, which is the formation of mental images or concepts of a landscape independent of features and characteristics immediately accessible to the senses, "represents the desire to find what is unknown, unique, or farfetched" (272). It is the desire to reach beyond the realm of the familiar, the customary, and the conventional. Disposition, Lopez contends, is a more nebulous category, but refers to attitudes, physical and mental conditions ("The reluctant traveler, brooding about events at home, is oblivious to the landscape" [ibid.]), or previous experiences ("If one has […] gone broke speculating in a northern mine, one might regard the land as antagonistic[…]" [ibid.]). To sum this up one may say that according to

Lopez, the interplay of knowledge, imagination, and disposition determines the value we attach to the land. It is this conceptual triumvirate that ultimately defines our relationship to and concomitant interaction with the land. Regarding the desert, there is still a strong undercurrent of dislike and rejection in Western culture's response, mainly due to its aridity and the absence of familiar topographical and ecological features like trees. *Desert Notes* aims at deconstructing 'false' images of the desert as a "deathbed" (Lopez 1990: 11), not so much by detailing the natural and cultural history that created present-day desert landscapes, but by describing its appeal to the imagination and its subsequent presence in a broad variety of discourses.

In addition to the desert of the geographer/naturalist, Lopez examines the desert's imprint on the imagination of the mythologist, the New Ager, the world-weary escapist, the anthropologist, the desert sage, the descendant of pioneers, and the poet. Lopez does not name these types but characterizes them through their rhetoric. They are figures who represent various forms of cultural uses of the desert.[35] Their

[35] One of the images that Peter Wild pokes acrid fun at is this: "Already I have seen the priest with his Bible bound in wolves' fur and the blackbirds asleep in his hair" (Lopez 1990: 26). Wild assumes that it is "Barry Lopez" who "exults" (Wild 1999: 170) in such imagery, missing that the "I" in this sentence is not representing the author and the author's state of mind respectively, but one of the characters, in this case the New Ager. Wild's error – the confusing of the author's autobiographical "I" with that of a fictitious character – stems from a basic misunderstanding of Lopez' work as non-fiction. Lopez has repeatedly referred to *Desert Notes* as a work of fiction, a collection of short stories. In several interviews he discussed the fictionality of the book, forming a trilogy with *River Notes* (1979) and *Field Notes* (1994). For example, addressing the stylistic and aesthetic development of the trilogy, Lopez observed that "from the time of *Desert Notes* through *River Notes* into *Field Notes*, the *characters* have become more complicated and the situations more complex" (2003: www; emphasis added). The author's choice of terminology clearly indicates that he adheres to a mode of writing different from that in Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* or, as I will discuss later in this chapter, from Ann Zwinger's *The Mysterious Lands*. While Abbey's and Zwinger's texts rely on a first-person narrator as the structural fundament of their narratives, Lopez operates with different narrative perspectives and personae. In a 1998 interview, Lopez responded to the interviewer Nick O'Connell's observation that "some reviewers have thought that many of your short stories were nonfiction," by clarifying: "They're all fiction. There's no character as far as I know that corresponds to a character in the real world. The places are real – Nebraska, North Dakota, Madrid – but the rest of it is completely fictional" (O'Connell 1998: www).

well-spoken maps represent the desert as a resonant space for memories, fantasies, allegories, philosophical reflections. The escapist takes off "his clothes, all of them" (16), thus symbolically slipping off civilization, and dips into a desert hot spring. Looking out across the desert at the end of the day, he "imagined that he had come to life again" (17). The mythologist (or allegorist) tells stories about crows and ravens, coyotes and rattlesnakes, agents in fables about life in the city and in the desert, about the moral corruption of the masses vs. the power and the grace of the individual, about death and survival. While the New Ager, stretched out on a Navajo rug on the desert floor believes that "there is someplace out there where you can see right down into the heart of the earth" (27), the descendent of pioneer settlers returns to the ruined school building of his childhood, reminiscing about the prosaic past of desert conquest that it symbolizes, a past "[t]hey'll have to push over with a truck or something before they get rid of it" (44). The desert sage employs the metaphor of a spider's web to teach the visitor about patience and persistence; the poet, fascinated by the erotics and economics of bodies interacting with the land, observes a woman observing a male ant "rolling a grain of white granite" (43) half the size of his own body into a crack of the earth. Finally, the anthropologist grapples with trying to understand the Blue Mound People, who "in exchange for food, water, and other necessities […] were bound up in an unusual relationship with the desert" (37).

These characters (or narrative personas) differ in their attitudes towards the desert, in what they expect from it, see in it, feel in it. They speak about the same subject, but each chapter tells a different story about the desert, giving it a different form or *gestalt* which in turn suggests different meanings. Common to all the stories comprising *Desert Notes* is their heteroglot character – they are narratives challenging both the traditional western perception of the desert as wasteland and the imaginative dominance of capitalism's techno-industrial culture, one that looks at landscapes and nature primarily in terms of productive and reproductive values.

Where is the author located on the book's heteroglot desert map? Which figurative position does he espouse? The answer is, of course, all and none. And ironically it is in the Introduction and its epigraph where the author most clearly emerges from behind the stories: The epigraph is "you have the characteristic of a clean break with a conventional, accepted social context in order to swim for one's life

into an apparently irrational void" (7), from poet Thomas Merton's "With the Desert Fathers." The topos of a clean break with social convention and of entry into an empty, wild space in which the community is reconstituted is suggestive of two historical events: the biblical story of the Exodus and the history of the European exodus to America. Lopez anchors his narrative upon the same ground on which the American master narrative conflates spiritual (or religious) and socio-economic history. We read the ideas of reorientation and redirection in both; they also appear in the Introduction to *Desert Notes*, albeit in a modernized version. The representative symbols for the "conventional, accepted social context" are the motor vehicle and its rational "systems of roads, road signs, and stop lights" (8). The first-person narrator crosses the desert, irrational void and emblematic nemesis of the disciplinary regulations symbolized by the traffic system, realizing "how easily the vehicle's tendency of direction and movement could be abandoned" (8). This is classic American imagery: the (male) individual lighting out into unregulated territory to enjoy his freedom and independence from the laws of society. Lopez' desert poetics does not entirely escape conceptual and rhetorical clichés. It becomes apparent in the escapist's stripping off of clothes/civilization in the desert, but perhaps even more so in the reworking of modernism's primitivist project in the story of "The Blue Mound People." However, it is also the story most revealing of the author's position towards the desert.

In a 1998 interview, Lopez noted that together with natural history, anthropology "has been an area of concentrated reading for me since leaving the university." These two discursive fields are the author's preferred source of metaphors to discuss subjects such as "tolerance and dignity" (O'Connell 1998) – clearly ethical concerns. The Blue Mountain People – a vanished culture of (imagined) cave people without a voice ("although they looked as we do they lacked vocal cords" [Lopez 1990: 31]) or any other currently visible system of communication ("No paintings, no writing, no systems of marking, no sequence of any sort" [36]) – spark the narrator's anthropological imagination. Inhabiting the edge of the desert, these ancient people left evidence of a mixed economy of cultivation (indicated by "fossilized seeds" of "many cultivated varieties of melon, tomato, cucumber, celery and other vegetables" [34]) and hunting (meat was part of the diet), but archeologists were unable to find "hunting implements" or "agricultural tools" (35). What these people did is as much of a mys-

tery as how "they provided for themselves" (35). Even more puzzling is the absence of any

> evidence of elaborate religious ceremonies [or] extensive artwork nor are there tools or ovens to work the glass and metal objects found in the caves (and it is extremely unlikely that these were obtained in trade as we know of no other cultural group with such skills in existence at this time). (ibid.)

Lacking many of the traditional artifacts on which the interpretation of cultures is usually based, archeologists and anthropologists hope to find the "key to understanding this people in determining the purpose of a series of blue earth mounds," one of which "was found in each cave and the remains of four of them have been detected out on the desert, approximately a mile from the caves" (35), all of them enclosing "a hard white stone […], perfectly round, smoother than dry marble, as if it had been washed for hundreds of years in a creek bed" (35-36). In spite of their stone-like appearance, there "is reason to believe that they are the fossilized remains of some sort of organism" (36). But apparently, the meaning of these mounds cannot be deciphered, for the narrative offers no explanation other than that "[we] are dealing here with a people entirely out of the order of things" (36). The obvious incapability of institutionalized anthropology to read this culture is seized upon by the narrator as an opportunity to offer "my own ideas" (37). His approach to anthropological interpretation takes natural history as its starting point, ascertaining that "[t]he alkaline desert was here at the time these people were," surrounded by an area that was "swamp-like" (37). This geo-historical reality, combined with the knowledge gathered by reading the relevant anthropological and archeological literature and a first-hand inspection of the caves, leads the narrator to suggest

> that in exchange for food, water, and other necessities these people were bound up in an unusual relationship with the desert. I have examined the caves closely enough myself to have determined that these were both a comfortable people, free from want, and a sedentary or perhaps even meditative people. This seems most reasonable. (ibid.)

Reading the mysterious blue mounds as "evidence of a bond between the people and the desert" (ibid.), the narrator concludes:

> I assume that the desert was the primary force in this relationship, but I could be wrong. It could have been the people who forged this relationship; we have no way of knowing exactly what they were capable of doing. Perhaps they were blue-skinned, and each had the thought of the desert at his heart, like the white stone in the blue earth, maybe this is the meaning. Perhaps this is what they are trying to say, that the desert is only a thought. I don't know. (ibid.)

Amalgamating anthropology and poetry, Lopez' fantasy recasts the desert as the location of an Other, voiceless America, home to a "comfortable," "sedentary," and "meditative" people. He juxtaposes it, in "Coyote and Rattlesnake," with the America of the Shisa, an imaginary people who had stopped re-cycling ("In the old days the Shisa had planted, they had put things back. Now they planted nothing, they returned nothing. Each winter there were fewer rabbits." [51]) but not consuming. Each day the insatiable Shisa, who "had broken the circle and made it straight like a stick," "came closer to the desert" (ibid.). In Lopez' narrative scenario, the desert – defined through intratextual reference as both a fossilized organism *and* as the habitat of an ancient people (whose existence eludes explanation within the parameters of the Foucauldian order of things), as a landscape *and* a "thought," a natural *and* a cultural entity – this desert becomes the origin point of America's re(dis)covery.[36]

Desert Notes is an early articulation of Lopez' firm belief that in the end, "the accumulation of material possessions, really counts for nothing" (Margolis 1990). Emulating modernism's fascination with the primitive as the site of alternative social, cultural, and aesthetic paradigms, Lopez simultaneously launches an ecological critique of conventional (i.e., dominant) American values. It involves substituting the desert for the garden as America's root metaphor. For Lopez, this includes replacing concepts and images of cornucopian abundance with images that do not equate limited resources and scarcity with cultural and social deprivation, much less with economic abstention. The Blue Mound People may be nothing but a neo-Romantic fantasy of a starry-eyed writer, but they are also an early poetic expression of the ecological imagination underlying much of Lopez' later work. The de-

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36 *The Rediscovery of North America* (1990) is a book-length essay in which Barry Lopez deconstructs the imperial definition of America as a source of wealth by pointing at its ecologically destructive side effects, and suggests that it be rediscovered in spiritual and cultural terms.

sert, a wild, yet entirely invaded space is one of the first marginal geographies that provide him with a panoply of metaphors from which to formulate eccentric (read ex-centric) cultural and social visions.

Charles Bowden: Desert Blues

From a color perspective, Charles Bowden's *Blue Desert* and Barry Lopez' ethnographic fiction of the Blue Mound People seem to be related texts, but the resemblance ends there. Where Lopez fictionalizes his experiences and observations, Bowden documents his; where Lopez invents, Bowden records; where Lopez chronicles the desert's impact on the imagination, Bowden registers (and chastises) the desert landscape's fading into fantasies of private and corporate paradises. "Here the land always makes promises of aching beauty and the people always fail the land," he writes (1986: 1). Bowden shares with Abbey a sense of personal ownership that is absent from Lopez' text. Claiming the desert as *his* terrain – he speaks about "[m]y world" (ibid.) and "[m]y Southwest" (4) – Bowden at the same time asserts his authority and legitimacy as interpreter and representative of the desert, a territory straddling national boundaries. The "here" he writes about "stretches from the New Mexico line across the southern part of Arizona to the Colorado River," "dips south into Mexico and drifts north to the edge of the Colorado Plateau where the hot deserts surrender to the high, cold ground of the Central Rocky Mountain West" (ibid.).

The dominance of topographical and climatic coordinates on Bowden's Blue Desert map (river, plateau, mountains, hot deserts, cold ground) marks the author's primary interest in writing *Blue Desert*, and that is the defense of the land and of wild America against the onslaught of urban-industrial boomers. A little less than ten years earlier, in *Killing the Hidden Waters* (1977), Bowden had addressed the threat to the desert's ecosystem by focusing on environmental problems as a consequence of modern technological progress. Yet while "talk of ecology, pollution, resource depletion, groundwater declines, and the carrying capacity of the land" gave him reason to believe that "We are becoming aware of what our history means" (1977: 137), *Blue Desert* is less optimistic. While the communal subject of the earlier book seemingly heeded a more ecological approach to deal-

ing with the land, thus giving reason for hope, the "we" in *Blue Desert* has reverted to hard-core economics and technological self-centeredness. Addressing the enormous efforts put into the production and transregional distribution of energy, Bowden observes:

> Such grids of energy and rivers of energy-flows are the stuff of life in the Southwest and they do not produce a state of mind that cottons to the issue of endangered species. It is not that we are too busy building the empire to tend to details but simply that we are too busy running to ever look back at the ghosts trailing behind us or down at the ground where the writhing beasts shudder with their last convulsion of life. We haven't got time for this nature stuff. We were born to drive, not park. (1986: 35)[37]

Krutch's *modern temper*, shaped by a belief in the power of science and technology to subjugate nature's unpredictability and harness it to human will, and Abbey's *industrial tourist*, demanding easy road access to view spectacular landscapes are figures representing the creation of a region "fat with contradictions" (1). For as Bowden observes, "my fellow citizens flee their old American lives for a shot at a new answer" (2), lighting out for the territory ahead of the rest like Twain's Huck Finn, but in the end imposing on the desert the styles and tastes of a culture developed in and thus accustomed to different climates and topographies. Over the course of his career, Bowden has become more and more impatient with the continued equation of the Southwest with the mythical landscape of the Western, "the very term" being "synonymous with fraud, sentimentality, and flim-flam." In the early 1990s, he urged his contemporaries, especially his colleagues in the visual and literary arts, to acknowledge in their work "that we live in booming instant cities full of tanned bodies, vigorous crime, healthy doses of narcotics, and endless streets of ugly, mass-produced houses" (1994: 15) and not in a fantasy land decorated Santa Fe style, complete with desert sunsets, saguaro cacti, and droll roadrunners. Mimicking Abbeyean provocativeness, he also lashed out at academics, a target always in demand by the writer truly concerned

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37 Elsewhere in the book, Bowden disagrees with Earth First!'s Dave Foreman that environmentalists have "the ethic" and "the courage…to put our bodies between what we love and the agents of destruction." He concedes, "We are beginning to realize what we have lost with our wonderful inventions and our monstrous new powers," but seriously doubts that "we […] have the courage to back away, to stop, to restrain ourselves" (144).

with the general public's mental health. "The best of all writing in the Southwest today," stated the former journalist, "appears in newspapers and magazines." He concluded that he'd "rather read *The Texas Monthly* than most of the drivel produced by our universities" (16).[38] With such rhetoric, Bowden presents himself as strictly *au fait*, as the enlightened cynic turned prophet in the desert. Yet underneath the posture of the cynic often hides the disappointed idealist. And as often as not, the disappointed idealist, quaintly uncomfortable with his own emotional attachment to the idea of an ideal world, seeks to fight stirrings of sentimentalism by donning the role of relentless Jeremiah.

Sacvan Bercovitch, in his eminent study on the subject, defined the American jeremiad as "a mode of public exhortation" that "helped sustain a national dream through two hundred years of turbulence and change" (1978: xi). Ever since New England Puritans brought this literary genre to the New World, it has stood as one of the most common rhetorical forms of American self-reflexivity, self-criticism, and self-assurance. It is a discursive instrument that has been employed by religious and political leaders as well as poets and prose writers to define America or, more precisely, "America as it ought to be" (181) and to "enlist individualism itself, aesthetically, morally, and mythically, into the service of society" (182). Bowden's rhetoric in *The Blue Desert* lacks the metaphysical hubris underlying much of the 19th-century transcendentalist thought that linked the failure of America to the failure of "the cosmos itself – the laws of man, nature, and history, the very ground of heroism, insight, and hope" (190). But like his transcendentalist forebears, notably Emerson and Thoreau, he criticizes American realities while upholding American ideals. But what exactly are these ideals for Bowden? What represents an ideal America? And who qualifies as a model American?

The short answer is: the Sonoran pronghorn. These antelope-like animals "have always been Americans" (22). Moreover, the pronghorn "blend so well into this minimal landscape that they are almost invisible," and they survived "because the military needs a

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38 Bowden was a reporter for the *Tucson Citizen* from 1981 to 1984, stating at the beginning of *Blue Desert* that "much of this book comes from that experience" (n.p.). After quitting the job, he continued as a freelancer, writing for various local newspapers and magazines, among them Tucson's *City Magazine* and *Phoenix*. See also Bowden 1991: "A Note on the Text."

place to train for war and this kind of work keeps just about everyone else out" (23). Behind the literal surface of these remarks lurks metaphorical meaning – and a longer answer to the questions just posed above.

With the metaphor of the pronghorn, Bowden offers a tongue-in-cheek alternative to conventional definitions of an ideal America: it is embodied by a wild, undomesticated, albeit endangered species that survives under surprising and paradoxical circumstances and whose major characteristic is its symbiotic relationship with the environment. In Bowden's text, the pronghorn's ability to "blend in" with the "minimal landscape" of the desert contrasts conspicuously with the propensity of modern American society to leave its marks on the landscape. Resentful that "the economic spree called Sunbelt" assaulted the Sonoran Desert, "a great living thing," and "buried [it] alive" (61), Bowden does not tire of criticizing modern America's fixation on what I described, in the context of this study, as the garden paradigm of national self-identification. At the center of this paradigm lies a utilitarian approach to (wild) nature as raw material for economic progress. As we have seen in the case of W. E. Smythe, the conquest of the desert and its translation into an agricultural and horticultural paradise symbolizes economic power. In other words, its disappearance is a measure of the nation's economic success.

Bowden's employment of the "minimal landscape" of the arid Southwest follows an entirely different symbolic trajectory. In his work, the desert becomes the major indicator that America is on the wrong track completely. It is the landscape that displays the disastrous effects of the free reign of a purely economic rationality, displaying the "history of the Southwest" as "a history peopled by men and women almost empty of any vision larger than money" (1994: 18). It is, Bowden rages, a history of

> vandals – cattle barons looting the grass; Eastern capital ripping minerals out of the soil; the military seizing large patches of the earth for playing with the toys of war; federally subsidized agriculture growing redundant crops, gutting aquifers, and slowly stilling the ground with salt; American culture confining and browbeating Native American views of the world. And now real estate fortunes based on slicing land into various configurations and peddling off the remains. (ibid.)

And while similar descriptions could apply to other parts of the country, there is one major difference:

> in the Southwest the arid landscape makes the work of human beings incredibly visible and naked. What passes for growth and progress in other regions, here makes people wince. (18-19)

In *Something in the Soil* (2000), Patricia Nelson Limerick made a similar observation. "From the presence of the majority of the conquered people," she wrote, "and the unresolved status of their rights to the ways in which aridity refuses to mask the impact of conquest, leaving everything from abandoned mine to the effects of erosion exposed and unmistakable, the West displays the ongoing legacy of conquest in everyday life" (2000: 25-26). Apart from their corresponding views on the revelatory capacity of aridity, Bowden and Limerick also share a perception of the desert (or arid landscape) as an *agent* of truth: the landscape *makes visible* and *refuses to mask*. While Bowden agrees with Limerick that the desert exposes the colonialist character of U.S. history, he seems to see exposing the value of wilderness as an ethical gauge for cultural and social developments and as the true location of America as its ultimate function. This is not only made evident in his metaphorical equation of pronghorns and Americans, but also in the rhetorical performance of a Thoreauvean distrust in government. An erstwhile ardent supporter of "every law, executive order, and petition to salvage the dwindling biological wealth of the earth," Bowden laments that "every decent impulse in my society" eventually "become[s] that ugly thing, government" (1986: 34). This characterization divests government, commonly accepted as the representative location of a nation's political identity, of its self-proclaimed right to define America at large and, by implication, restores this right to the cultural institution of literature.

Two of *Blue Desert's* three sections focus on animals and landscapes. Bowden writes about "Beasts" that have "no known value to man" (42) – bats, tortoises, lions, Yaqui topminnows (an almost extinct fish), and antelopes – but represent both the genuine *American* character of the arid Southwest and its biological diversity. The narrative aims at deconstructing the symbolic power of "cattle and tumbleweeds" which, Bowden scoffs, "are as American as, well, borscht" (47), and at replacing them, at least imaginatively, with those species

that are considered abject or useless by the cultural majority.[39] In doing so, Bowden joins ranks with "ecologists, nature lovers, and assorted cranks" (48) who preach that "a world with fewer species is less beautiful," "less stable," and "immoral," and who are usually not taken seriously. This does not keep the author from pursuing his project of re-presenting the desert – "not the kind of country most Americans call beautiful" (34) – as a source for images and metaphors that have their referents outside the confines of the pragmatic and utilitarian. "Life is not about industrial economies," Bowden's first-person narrator tells his readers. "Imagine," he asks, them, "that it is a mystery" (49). And look at "endangered and often useless species [as] messengers" who "report to us that the world is not especially designed for people and progress or machines or civilization" (ibid.).

In a similar vein, "Deserts" (the title of part three of *Blue Desert*) have messages for those willing to look and listen. The cultural imaginary of Euro-America, equally informed by "a tongue forged on another continent, one rich with words spawned in green forests under gray, soggy skies" (135) and the economic rationality of growth and progress, has marked the desert as the quintessential landscape of scarcity. Thus

> The desert, which produced a society for the Papago based on abundance, based on enormous sharing between people, was the same desert that became a wasteland terrifying early white settlers with fears of water shortages. (136)

Techno-industrial society has learned to keep this kind of cultural terror in check, and in fact settle and prosper in a landscape that its members once feared and avoided. However, at the turn of the 21st century, the Southwest's biggest problem is diminishing groundwater levels[40], a condition whose only solution is the substitution of an eco-

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39 For Bowden, cattle are "those exotic monsters Americans love to put out on the land so that everywhere they look, they can delight in seeing the same biological monotony" (1986: 46).

40 In January 2002, the Tucson-Pima Public Library organized a lecture series on *Moving Waters: The Colorado River & the West.* The panelists for the January 29 session – Charles Bowden, Roy Elson (the author of the original legislation creating the Central Arizona Project, redirecting water from the Colorado River to Arizona's urban and agricultural areas), and David Modeer, Director of Tucson Water – looked at the topic of "Tucson's Water Problem." Unre-

logical rationality for a purely economic one. Bowden's *Blue Desert* can be read as a contribution to this project. From his perspective, the Southwest does "not have a water problem or a resource problem but a water reality, a resource reality" (136). And an intrinsic characteristic of this reality is

> that resources are limited and that technology, invention, and industrial voodoo cannot increase the amount of a resource but simply accelerate the destruction of a resource through consumption. (136)

While this is true for resources worldwide, the heritage of the late 20th-century desert's "water reality" has an immense symbolic capacity because it touches upon such a vital, uncompromising need. The activation of this symbolic capacity, in concert with desert wild life's metaphoric potential, qualifies *Blue Desert* as a significant ecological critique of modern America. Once again wilderness, one of the figures signifying culture's natural Other appears in the concrete *gestalt* of the Sonoran Desert, and as such, functions as a vehicle to transport ideas of "a life closer to nature" (Nash 182: 44).

Blue Desert evidences the meeting of the postmodern with the Romantic. In adopting the Romantic pose of outsider and individualist deeply disappointed by society's corruption, Bowden addresses a serious epistemological and ethical problem: the precarious position in which industrial culture is placed by its distance from the corporeal foundation of its existence. *Blue Desert* is a literary text blending nature writing with historiography and investigative journalism in an effort to counterbalance the discursive logic of economic profitability with a logic of ecological accountability. The narrative juxtaposes a disembodied modernity with the author/narrator's corporeal experiences and sensations in the wild, archaic world of the desert. Bowden may sarcastically chastise some factions within modern America for being blind to the Southwest's urbanity and for courting the myth of

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stricted urban growth and the exhaustion of usable groundwater were discussed as two of the most central issues. In addition to obvious consequences of water loss due to evaporation (in canals and from fields) and insufficient replenishment of aquifers (more water is pumped from them than can be returned to aquifers in the course of natural cycles), the city of Tucson was faced with another difficulty. Apparently, it is not a technological problem to tap into deeper aquifers. The problem is cooling down the water pumped up from these low-level sources.

the Southwest as a space still not quite civilized and therefore offering a more authentic access to reality than can the city. But he is not unaffected by the Romantics' quasi-religious celebrations of nature and wilderness as places of social and cultural salvation. The Puritans linked spiritual growth to the cultivation, i.e., the disciplining of their inner wilderness. And even though the struggle for control and power over the wild lingered on into the 19th century, finding its literary manifestation in, among others, Captain Ahab's metaphysical obsession with the great white whale, the Romantics began to think of wild nature in different terms. Witness Thoreau's famous conviction "that in Wildness is the preservation of the World" (1894: 275). With "Walking," the essay in which this quote appears, Thoreau "wish[ed] to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness" (251), a measure he considered necessary to offset the "champions of civilization," specifically "the minister and the school-committee" (ibid.). Obviously, Thoreau understood "Walking" as a literary as well as a religious and pedagogical project. It was part of the Romantic endeavor to turn the erstwhile profane (wild nature) into the sacred (literary text). "Walking" recasts the Puritan myth of America as both a place and a project of spiritual and cultural revitalization in naturalist terms, maintaining, however, its religious foundation. It is with writers such as Melville, Thoreau, and Emerson in mind that Sacvan Bercovitch observed: "all our classic writers (to varying degrees) labored against the myth as well as within it" (1978: 179).

Without granting to Charles Bowden the status of classic American writer, *Blue Desert* nonetheless bears the marks of the classic legacy of simultaneous labor against and within the mythical perception of wilderness as the vital core of America. His quarrel with Sunbelt-Americans who, although "truly my people" (1986: 137), threaten the existence of "a great living thing" (whether out of ignorance, topographical bias, or technological hubris) echoes the Thoreauvian sentiment that "The most alive is the wildest" (1894: 277), and that the wildest is also the sanest.[41] Like his 19th-century forbear who defended Nature and Wildness against civilization, Bowden speaks a word for the desert, not the urbanized desert of the Sunbelt

[41] In "Useless Deserts & Other Goals," his contribution to a conference on the literature of the Southwest (Nolte Lensink 1987), Bowden stated that "we must maintain wild ground for our own sanity (a plea that goes back to the Thoreau I have never gotten around to reading)" (135).

imagination, but the rugged desert that (still) survives beyond the confines of the metropolis. For him, there is no doubt that the distorted dreams of murderers, ranchers killing so – called predators, "farmers raping the soil and poisoning the land" (1986: 137), real-estate developers, and politicians, in short, "the rush and tumble of human hunger in this new word, Sunbelt" (ibid.) can be attributed to their distance from and bias against the wild. In contrast, Bowden measures his own sanity and the sanity of his narrative position by regularly "going back into the desert," the place that "teaches other dreams" (ibid.).

Upon close inspection, it becomes clear that while Bowden is a gifted analyst and cultural critic with a keen sense for the desert's metaphoric potential, he is a rather corny, unoriginal dreamer. Most of his dreams are hardly more than fantasies of virility in which "the exiled desert" (174) is imagined as the last frontier of masculine self-assertiveness. For example, the figure of "a 350-foot man with an enormous sexual organ [that] lies sketched against the earth by an outline of stones" (144) awakens

> some wild part of myself and my blood that I sense was walled off by stout doors and barriers during the early days of the Industrial Revolution when my people were lured from the village festivals and dark rites into the mills. (144)

Dating from Annette Kolodny's pivotal *The Lay of the Land* (1975) we know that analogies of topography and human anatomy have been all-too common (and consequently well-worn) rhetorical devices for framing gendered responses to and identifications with the land ever since Europeans first set foot on the American continent. A variation of *Blue Desert*'s wild fantasies, and a more open expression of chivalrous responses to nature can be found in Bowden's *Desierto: Memories of the Future* (1991):

> We are still cavaliers, and we enter this ground with an air of bravado. It is the only safe way for us to do it. Those with piety, with caution rippling through their anxious hides, we believe that these the road eats, these the Devil waits for. […]
>
> And those of us who go now, we are mainly men, and in our dreams and the accounts we scribble, we go womanless. The Devil's road is always a hundred miles of white light, no soft breasts for a pillow, and if you get out, the dream of a whore at the other end. She will wear satin and smell strongly of perfume and her tongue will flick

> against her teeth. Every night as you lie there alone you will think of her and so she is part of the road, always. When you get out you will admit this to no one. You will go to mass or go to your wife, but you will not admit the real fact. But the proof of what has happened is everywhere – the desert is crowded with tales of strange women coming out of the dunes, the bosques, the cactus. Virgins with auras glowing around their saintly faces, weeping women who beckon but whose sockets are empty of eyes. So we go womanless and dream of women. That is part of the desert, and a lot of the heavy traffic on the Devil's Road. (1991: 16-17)

The heavy traffic on the Devil's Road, Bowden's metaphor for man's secret desire to escape the domesticity of matrimonial relations and the sanctimonious embrace of institutionalized religion for the sexual delights and the religious bliss of the desert/whore, demonstrates the author's unfortunate inclination to fall back on exhausted gender clichés in order to communicate his critique of the cultural and psychological effects of (post)modern life. This approach is already operative in *Blue Desert*. It is an unfortunate one because it jeopardizes the text's political edge as an ecological critique of contemporary America by reinforcing patriarchal perspectives on gender roles and gender relations. Bowden attacks the "wildlife business" as "this new religion of the mid- and late-20th century that seeks to stop the clock and perhaps wind it backwards to a time when the land was relatively unpeopled and the beasts held sway" (1986: 37), but he sticks to his own version of "wildlife business," a business concerned with the defense of the desert as the last real and imagined refuge that still allows men to have sensuous experiences similar to "the feel of your hand caressing a woman's breast" (158). In *Killing the Hidden Waters*, Bowden managed to articulate a critique of modern America without conjuring images of society's emasculative drive. He effectively unmasked Western industrialism's devastating environmental impact by tracing the movement of the Tohono O'odham (or Papago) Indians "from a society perfectly adapted to aridity and absolutely independent of groundwater to a society independent of the desert and based on groundwater" (1977: 30). While the scarcity of water, due to unpredictable rainfall, was "the glue that held their societ[y] together," wells that tap the groundwater "undercut the reason for the group" (136). Observations like these reveal the author's keen sense of connection between landscape, ecology, and social structure on which communities are built. While this sense is still at work in *Blue Desert*

(and later in *Desierto*), Bowden constantly shifts back and forth between the rhetoric of the cultural analyst and that of the rugged male individualist defending his hereditary territory – the American wilderness. Instead of dreaming about how to bridge the distance between culture and nature, his narrative, time and again, gives in to the wailings of a narcissistic voice that equates civilization with an attack on masculinity. While Bowden vehemently criticizes the ideology of conquest underlying the garden paradigm of America's response to nature, he also refuses to topple the gendered rhetoric that supports it. This refusal not only undermines the plausibility of *Blue Desert*'s ecological critique; it also marks as a politically conservative project Bowden's call to redefine America from a desert perspective.

Ann Haymond Zwinger: Mysterious Lands

Despite its alluring title, Ann Haymond Zwinger's *The Mysterious Lands* is a rather sober-minded, matter-of-fact book that records a naturalist's explorations of the "four great deserts of the Southwest," as the subtitle reveals. Zwinger represents the deserts as wilderness, not in the traditional sense of being completely untouched terrain, but as a space where human presence is at most transitional, and where, for the most part, nature exists undisturbed by modern civilization and its desire to discipline and control. Zwinger's tone is calm, her narrative is poised and collected, serving, it seems, but one purpose – the writing of a natural history that will enlighten her readers and add to the store of knowledge about lands that are still a "mysterious" *terra incognita* for many people. In order to achieve this goal, Zwinger presents her narrator as a rational, self-contained subject who, in carefully measured doses, dispenses with her emotional relationship to the object of her epistemological desire. Zwinger's observation that Charles Bowden has "a desert fixation" (1989: 105) is as much an attempt to define her own and her first-person narrator's relation to the natural world in contradistinction to a state that, in psychological terms, is classified as "a partial arrest of emotional and instinctual development at an early point in life" (*Webster's* 1994: 537), as it is a comment on her fellow writer's intense topophilia. Her narrative propriety is in stark contrast to the carnivalesque exuberance and masculinist narcissism surfacing in the countless sexual innuendoes of both Abbey's and

Bowden's writing. Her male colleagues take off for the desert and direct communion with a powerful environment in order to restore their sense of self as subjects resisting the disciplinary influence of an overpowering civilization.

Zwinger succumbs to the same allure. When she sees herself confronted with a number of "sandy channels" that all "look alike" and cannot decide which will return her to the meeting point with her daughter, Zwinger experiences a sense of panic and anxiety which, however, soon yields to a sense of emancipation and metaphysical exhilaration:

> Not for the first time the implications of being alone in the desert and the potentials for disaster strike me: stumbling onto a rattlesnake, spraining an ankle, confronting an irritable peccary, or getting embarrassingly lost.
> And my next thought is Good, *Good*. The desert grants me expanded time, time to perceive, to enjoy, to ask questions, to learn. I may get to be here for a while by default, the sensible, responsible housewife freed into a maze of dry channels that feed only into each other. (1989: 16, emphasis in the original)

To underscore the profundity of her intellectual excitement, Zwinger even quotes Abbey's observation that "'the desert, any desert, suggests always the promise of something unforeseeable, unknown but desirable, waiting around the next turn in the canyon wall, over the next ridge or mesa, somewhere within the wrinkled hills'" (16). Yet while Abbey communicates the promise of the desert through tropes of desire and physiology (wrinkled hills), Zwinger replaces the fear of the body with the elation of the mind. The full extent of the difference between Abbey and Zwinger is evident in a comparative reading of two similar scenes.

Abbey represents his escape from near-death – being trapped in an isolated part of Havasu Canyon – as the dramatic confrontation of man's body with the (feminized) body of nature, in this specific situation an "obstacle" (1968: 229) that the narrator strives to overcome. Abbey's rhetoric relies heavily on erotic imagery and sexual allusions. Man and nature are entwined in an orgasmic embrace. With the help of a "stick," Abbey's first-person narrator is "pushing my body upward until I was again stretched out full length above it." He then proceeds to feel for "a fingerhold" in a "chute […] smooth as polished

marble." But it turns out that this channeled orifice was "not quite that smooth":

> This was sandstone, soft and porous, not marble, and between it and my wet body and wet clothing a certain friction was created. In addition, the stick had enabled me to reach a higher section of the S-curved chute, where the angle was more favorable. I discovered I could move upward, inch by inch, through adhesion and with the help of the leveling tendency of the curve. I gave an extra little push with my big toe – the stones collapsed below, the stick clattered down – and crawled rather like a snail or slug, oozing slime, up over the rounded summit of the slide. (229)

In contrast to Abbey's voluptuous language, Zwinger relies on rather spheric imagery and presents the possibility of her death as serene evanescence, an ascent "in a fine spinning flurry of contemplation," leaving her body and nothing but "a swirl of dust" (1989: 16) on which someone else might speculate as to its origins. Her escape is engineered by power of mind rather than body. Instead of submitting to despondency and certain desert death, Zwinger's narrator decides to "concentrate for a moment, choose my channel, and walk up to meet Susan" (16). While Abbey's narrator takes rhetorical delight in the physical struggle for survival, Zwinger's female counterpart envisions a less corporeal, yet equally intense confrontation between self and nature. For Abbey, the unpredictability of desert wilderness provides a wild, orgasmic reassurance for the male body, an experience that the author suggests has become almost impossible for modern man to experience due to the overpowering presence of culture's disciplinary institutions and regulations. For Zwinger, the "sensible, responsible housewife," the desert is transformed into the outdoor version of Virginia Woolf's room of one's own, a space of perceptual, intellectual, and epistemological freedom that allows woman to momentarily escape the confines of traditional social expectations and engage in intellectual intercourse with her environment.

Zwinger's narrative self-representation as "housewife" is, however, somewhat surprising. By the time she published *The Mysterious Lands*, she had already made a name for herself as the author of several successful nature books, among them *Beyond Aspen Grove* (1970) and the prize-winning *Run, River, Run* (1975). Is the rhetorical stylization of the author-narrator as housewife merely a coquettish gesture? Perhaps. But as the structural similarity with Woolf's yearning for in-

tellectual and creative space indicates, there is something else at work here. The linguistic sign of "housewife" – one of the most traditional female gender roles – serves a crucial function: it signals the power and significance of the social. The desert maze may hold the promise of independence and freedom from social responsibilities, yet Zwinger knows that it is an emancipation by default. In the end she realizes the need and the desire to return to the space of social relationships, marked in the text by another familial sign, "daughter." Moreover, strategically located at the end of the first chapter of *The Mysterious Lands*, the passage assumes projective character: it defines the larger cultural purpose of Zwinger's desert discourse, and that is to educate her American audience about the innate beauty of a landscape still so foreign to so many people. One aspect of this schooling seems to be particularly important to Zwinger: the dispelling of the most durable misrepresentation of the desert – that it is a space empty of life yet with great economic potential and that it must be developed and transformed into something else, e.g., a garden, a ranch, a farm. Zwinger's goal is to effect a radical change in this perspective.

This becomes obvious in a passage where the narrative point of view shifts from the quasi-omniscient perspective of an airplane to the close-up observation of the burrowing activities of grouse locusts, with the author-narrator lying on her stomach for "a delightful hour" (257). Up in the air, the author is struck by the "uncanny" realism of the landscape's topographical representation. Both "man's map and nature's map" are marked by the absence of "green" and the prominence of "a subtle series of tans and burnt siennas" (247). Yet the narrator interrupts the illusion of "resemblance" (ibid.) between terrain and map, stating: "I know something the map doesn't know" (ibid.). The authority of the map, still commonly accepted as an infallible instrument of navigation despite evidence to the contrary, is challenged because it "records no harvester-ant mounds, no doughnuts of bare soil" that "stud the ground below" (ibid.). It is simply another text, not representing bioregional reality but topographical bias, an epistemological condition Zwinger looks to correct with her own text. This pedagogical impulse locates Zwinger's literary project in a tradition of nature writing stretching back to the middle decades of the 19th century.

By this period, America's educated classes considered knowledge of their physical environment and an understanding of non-hum-

an life as an indispensable aspect of their moral education and a prerequisite for cultivated living. In an essay on the subject, Rochelle Johnson cites Andrew Jackson Downing's *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841) as a work whose aim was "to persuade Americans that the outward appearance of their rural homes and landscapes reflected both their personal virtue and the nation's cultural refinement" (Johnson 2000: 49), and contrasts it with Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours* (1850), a book in which the daughter of the great American Romantic advocated natural history education as a means of improving the nation. Johnson reads *Rural Hours* as a manifestation of an ethics that predicated cultural refinement and civilization's progress on the individual's perceptive relationship with the natural world as it exists, not on the transformation of wild nature into a manicured landscape. Responding to the fascination among many of her well-to-do contemporaries with rural landscape-design and gardening, Cooper "sought to extend the relationship that Downing assumed existed between morality, virtue, and the design of landscape and architecture to include a somewhat 'wilder' element" (ibid.). Unlike Downing, for whom the taming of nature's wild elements into aesthetically pleasing shapes and structures was the perfect method of producing refined taste in cultivated citizens, Cooper targeted "the underpinnings of America's infatuation with shaping the natural to please aesthetic and consumer desires" and exposed "the nation's radical ideological distance from its surrounding natural environment" (50). At the dawn of her country's transformation into a modern, industrial, and urban society, the author of *Rural Hours* was alarmed by the extent to which natural resources were being depleted in the name of progress. According to Johnson, "In Cooper's view, the morality and dignity of Americans depended upon their gaining accurate understandings of non human life forms" (49). With *Rural Hours*, she promoted an environmental ethics that saw the preservation of nature, unique landscapes, and irreplaceable fauna and flora as the crux of civilized life. Awareness of the great variety of forms and functions in an *actual* landscape, not the creation and celebration of an *ideal* landscape, guaranteed the continuation of the nation. In her seminal 1993 study on American women and nature, ecofeminist literary critic Vera Norwood held that *Rural Hours* "established a tradition carried on by botanists, entomologists, birders, and other nature lovers throughout the 19th century," and that this tradition "culminated in the

20th century with the work of such contemporary essayists as Ann Zwinger and Josephine Johnson" (1993: xviii).

Following a narrative convention of the genre, Zwinger employs a first-person narrator. Yet she does not succumb to the impulse of getting lost in elaborate autobiographical and metaphysical commentary or explicit cultural critique. Rather, she presents herself as a medium through which knowledge of the natural world – gained by personal experience and observation out in the field, intensive study of scientific literature, and conversations with scientists and naturalists – is filtered and transmitted to the reader. Zwinger's narrative voice is that of the rational observer, enthusiastic about her subject but going easy on commentary, interpretation, and advice and concentrating instead on representing the nature of America's four great deserts in a language more accessible to the reader than the cumbersome prose of most, if not all scientific publications. (Although for the uninitiated reader, *The Mysterious Lands* may in fact contain too many botanical, zoological, and geological longueurs.) Passages like the following are vintage Zwinger:

> Much of this vegetation is difficult or impossible to walk through, armed with spines and thorns of invidious intent, developed in many plant families to conserve water and discourage being eaten by animals. I avoid at all costs the close-packed, calf-high, slightly curving leaves of the Chihuahuan Desert's endemic agave, lechuguilla. *Lechuguilla* is the diminuitive of the Spanish *lechuga*, "lettuce," a rather unlikely name for a plant whose leaves can inflict such nasty injury: the sap contains a strong muscle contractor that makes the wound unusually painful. Not only are the leaves edged with gray spines, an eighth to a quarter of an inch long, but at the tip the edges fold together, joining into a finger-length needle that indurates, as lethal as a stiletto, and explains the common name of 'shin digger.'(1989: 7)

This section is framed by a factual account of desert land formation during the Pleistocene, as well as an even more detailed botanical description of the lechuguilla, including a brief mention of its practical uses in prehistoric and modern times (source of fiber; commercial brush production in Mexico), and ranchers' disapproving response to it (the plants form impenetrable thickets).

Yet challenging as such attention to mostly undramatic detail may be for those among us for whom fine reading is identical with a good story, a plausible plot, and heroic, tragic, or comic actions of

admirable or quaint and quirky characters, if we stay with Zwinger long enough, the lyricism of her prose and the metaphoric potential of her emotionally reserved descriptions of the desert will finally emerge. She describes the natural desert as a great panoptic spectacle. Unlike Walt Disney's narrative in *The Living Desert* (1953), which anthropomorphizes desert life as the perpetual drama of survival, sometimes manifesting itself as unintentional comedy, sometimes as tragic battle, Zwinger relies on rationalistic modes of representation. Scientific details are, however, framed by references to both the visual and performing arts, an indication, perhaps, of her academic background as an art historian. On a river trip down the lower Rio Grande with a group of herpetologists studying the reptile fauna on both sides of the river, she feels "as if we are figures in a Piranesi stage set, full of rococo grottos and blind arcades" (26); a hole perforates the pad of a Mormon tea brush "like a Henry Moore sculpture" (13); the light creates shadows of human figures whose shapes are reminiscent of Giacometti figurines (136); and a "festive and ebullient morning" in the desert "is worthy of a Shakespearean sonnet or a Dufy painting" (170). The visual pleasures in which Zwinger delights are highlighted by her pencil illustrations, which bring to mind images from 19th-century natural history books; and activities like the author watching (and counting) mountain sheep in the Sonoran desert or her husband taking photographs while she sketches plants and animals underscore the Van Dykean emphasis on the desert's picturesque character. Summing up her description of the Mojave Desert (for some observers the definitive American desert [See Darlington 1996]), she wonders "why anyone would want to convert this beautiful, empty salty desert into anything other than what it is" (225). This not only echoes Van Dyke's famous dictum, which also serves as epigraph for *The Mysterious Lands*, that the desert is the nation's last "breathing-space," it also continues Susan Cooper's politics of promoting undeveloped, wild nature as the nation's primary educative space.

Zwinger's deserts are territories still widely unmodified by human culture. Their natural state defines their cultural value, not least because as a terrain barely marked by modern industrial society's infrastructure it enables the author (and various companions) to visit the desert as the transit space of American history and imagine the hardships experienced by 19th-century pioneers navigating a rough terrain on their way to the agricultural paradise of California. "We speculate

about how difficult it must have been for emigrants to jockey their wagons through, sagebrush close enough together to thwart easy wagon passage, wagon wheels raised and lowered in a cadence of jerks and bruising lurches" (233). Historical reminiscences like this are actually rare in *The Mysterious Lands*. Zwinger is too restrained a writer and too much of a naturalist to use such speculations as a springboard for lectures on America's national heroism. Nevertheless, such rhetorical asides on the nation's past lend a patriotic tinge to a narrative otherwise concerned with a subject – nature – of transnational proportions. Zwinger's portrait of the four major deserts within U.S. territory concentrates on natural history, never completely erasing human history but selectively choosing from it. While the story of the West's Anglo-American settlement surfaces here and there in the text, suggesting some relevance to present audiences, Native and Spanish American presences are either categorized within a self-contained, pre-historic past or virtually unrepresented. Not to mention allusions to the desert's cultural history as waste dump, bombing range, or nuclear testing ground.

With *The Mysterious Lands*, Ann Zwinger reconstructs the desert as a residue of the wild. In *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey castigates culture's assault on everything that is wild in man and nature, a practice that he saw most prominently symbolized in the damming of Glen Canyon. Zwinger visits the same country and, following a neo-Romantic impulse, fine-tunes her own and her readers' senses in order to perceive what she considers to be authentic nature. When she visits Utah's Salt Flat Desert, "(reputedly) the world's best racecourse for cars and bicycles attempting to set speed records" (293), she emphasizes the perpetuity of the natural desert rather than its use as a laboratory for state-of-the-art vehicular technology. "Where it not for the dirt roads taking off across the countryside," she mused, "Terry [Tempest Williams] and I would be seeing the Great Salt Desert as John Charles Frémont saw it on his way to climb and name Pilot Peak in 1843" (ibid.). Erase the dirt road from your view, this suggests, and you have in front of you the sublime desert that enthralled or appalled the 19th-century traveler. As important and (in the end) as poetic an homage to a still fascinating natural landscape, and as much as it differs from Abbey in approach and tone, Zwinger's narrative in *The Mysterious Lands* shares with *Desert Solitaire* a rhetoric of evasion. Both books re-naturalize the desert, thereby re-signifying nature as culture's most

important epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical resource. Either by expressly addressing the subject or by implication, Abbey and Zwinger link America's cultural revitalization to an intimate knowledge of the desert, one of wild nature's last great, albeit endangered manifestations. Yet paradoxically, both *Desert Solitaire* and *The Mysterious Lands* depict the desert as a counterpoint to rather than an integrated part of culture.

IV. Heterotopia

The world is what happens and the fiction is what is and only what is,
not what has happened, but what must happen.

Percival Everett

In 1997 British sociologist Kevin Hetherington published *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*, a book written as a contribution to conversations about space, a concept that had become a major focus of social and cultural critique since the mid 1980s. Intentionally ironic, Hetherington employs the topographical metaphor of the badlands "to show the significance of what others have described as marginal space in relation to modern societies, while at the same time avoiding a romance with the margins because they are marginal, Other and different" (vii-viii). The badlands he discusses "are not so terrifying as some might lead us to believe nor are they 'bad' in the more contemporary vernacular sense of being good because they represent some form of counter-hegemonic site or practice" (vii). Hetherington's badlands are heterotopic in character because they suggest forms and patterns of social organization that differ from the structural paradigms and ordering processes in the world around them. This "allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things" (viii). Accordingly, heterotopia (literally 'places of otherness') are spaces situated *outside the center* of social and political order at a given historical moment *yet not totally disconnected from that center*. That is, the reformatory (or even revolutionary) impulses emanating from heterotopic spaces are as much an effect of *resistance to* as they are *dependent on* contact with the spaces representing dominant forms of social and cultural ordering. At the same time, and paradoxically so, the dominant order depends for its continuity on mechanisms for absorbing and incorporating the reformatory impulses from the so-called margins.

One of the examples Hetherington discusses to support his theory that heterotopia are spaces of resistance to, and at the same time,

laboratories for social ordering, is the Palais Royal in Paris. At the end of the 18th century, the Palais was a space for shopping, dispute, sauntering, entertainment, trade, consumption (everything from coffee and food to ideas and sex), observing, and performing: "[I]t was a site of openness, tolerance and civility as well as a space for rational and enlightened debate that played a significant part in the emerging civil society of the bourgeoisie" (2), and, therefore, instrumental in generating the political, social, commercial, and cultural paradigm shifts commonly associated with the French Revolution of 1789.[1] Hetherington suggests that the Palais Royal can be read and understood as a space where the modernity of mid-19th-century bohemian Paris had "crystallized […] some seventy years earlier" (3).

In this final chapter, I will discuss texts and images in which the American desert is presented in much the same way as Hetherington's Palais Royal – as an enabling space for new modes of social and cultural ordering. Published at different points during the 20th century, the works of Mary Austin, Joseph Wood Krutch, Richard Misrach, and Alfredo Véa, Jr. all articulate a critique of modern America, yet they also represent highly diverse social, artistic, and ideological positions. Although I use his *Badlands of Modernity* as the conceptual starting point for this chapter, my focus differs from Hetherington's in two significant ways: first, my concern is not so much with social and cultural spaces as such as it is with textual and iconographic representations of alternate spatiality and, thus, with the *heterotopic potential of discourses* rather than spaces. Second, by looking at the desert as a space of imagined heterotopic potential, *the social and cultural perspective* on that potentiality will be *complemented* by an *ecological perspective*, thereby broadening the scope of critical responses to modernity. The works discussed in this chapter indicate that their authors are fully aware of "the heterogeneous combination of materiality, social practice and events that were located at this site" – in this case, the deserts of the Southwest – and of what it "came to represent in contrast with other sites" (Hetherington 1997: 8). Their perception and subsequent employment of the desert as a socially, politically, cul-

[1] Hetherington observes: "On 12 July 1789 at the Café de Foy, one of the most famous of the many coffee-houses to be found in the Palais Royal, that Camille Desmoulins clambered up onto a table and delivered his speech that was to lead to the storming of the Bastille, an event which has been seen as the spark for the French Revolution" (5).

turally, and historically inscribed landscape is not only an invitation to revisit traditional representations of America as garden, wilderness, and Orient. It also constitutes the semiotic power of the desert as a heterotopic metaphor for alternative ways of imagining America. If the Palais Royal, one of the badlands of European modernity, was a heterotopic space prefiguring the social ordering at work in 19th-century Paris, the deserts (as represented by the writers and artists discussed in this chapter) are the imagined badlands of American post-modernity, projecting alternate eco-spatial orderings at work since the beginning of the 20th century.

1 Moving Towards Desert Heterotopia: Mary Austin

A rather prominent public figure in her day, Mary Hunter Austin (1868-1934) disappeared into the shadows of American literary history for several decades after her death in 1934. Carl Van Doren, one of her contemporaries and among the most influential literary critics of his time, said of Mary Austin: "She herself prefers less to be judged by any of her numerous books than to be regarded as a figure laboring somewhat anonymously toward the development of a national culture founded at all points on national realities" (1922: 141). For Austin those realities included the American Southwest, i.e., the topography and climate of the desert, the history of Spanish and Anglo-American conquest, and the past and present cultures of Mexican and Native American communities. With about three dozen books of fiction and non-fiction, numerous articles published in such leading national journals as *The Century Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, and *The Bookman*, and a busy lecturing schedule, Austin was an active participant in the most controversial political, social, and aesthetic debates of the early 20th century. She covered a broad variety of subjects from literature, science, art, anthropology, and folklore to women's lives and rights, the cultural antagonism between the American East and West, Native American rights, American cultural identity, and what in today's parlance would be called ecological awareness. Because her literary interest in the Southwest was not limited to endorsing regionalism, Austin's work provides an entry for analyzing the heterotopic uses of the desert in this chapter. As Van Doren's comment implies, Austin was much more concerned with contributing

to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural, historical, and geographical forces that shaped America as a whole than with merely promoting one particular region. While still containing traces of the eco-spatial paradigms discussed in the previous three chapters, Austin's texts move beyond the rhetorical promises of garden, wilderness, and Orient. They mark the beginning of a literary process that continues during the 20th century, one in which the desert emerges as the matrix for a critique of the cultural, social, and epistemological conditions of modern, metropolitan America.

From City to Desert

At the turn of the 20th century, when Austin came of age as a writer, the city was *the* representative center of modern American culture. As Darwinian jungle (Upton Sinclair, Stephen Crane), powerful magnet of consumerism (Theodore Dreiser), standardized main street drained of all vitality and originality (Sinclair Lewis), or as rallying point for European immigrants (Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska) and destination for the Great Migration of African Americans (Claude McKay, Jean Toomer), the city became the epitome of modernity. Austin's own attitudes towards the city changed over the course of her life. After spending the first part of her professional career as a writer in rural California – interrupted by repeated sojourns in San Francisco and Carmel and trips to England and Italy – she moved to New York in 1910, where she lived for more than a decade before finally settling in Santa Fe, New Mexico. According to her biographer Esther F. Lanigan, Austin moved to New York for two major reasons: first, she hoped to obtain better deals for her books and journalism projects by negotiating directly with her publishers and editors; and second, she thought that living in New York "presented the best opportunity for arguing the importance of the [American] West in person" (1997: 119), a mission that was to shape her intellectual and artistic life.

If in the beginning Austin was open to the city's possibilities, she became more and more disillusioned during her years in New York. Two of her books – the 1912 novel, *A Woman of Genius*, and *Cactus Thorn*, a novella written around 1927 – show indications of Austin's shifting attitudes towards the cultural significance of the Eastern metropolis. Melody Graulich notes that the novel's main char-

acter, Olivia Lattimore, "makes peace with the modernist city and emerging consumer culture by negotiating various compromises, while in *Cactus Thorn*, Dulcie Adeleid Vallodón, like her creator, flees the corrupt and corrupting city for a more life-affirming landscape" (1999a: xxi). This landscape is the desert. Its "life-affirming" properties are represented in the novella through erotically charged imagery of fire, heat, and wildness, and an enigmatic aura surrounding both Dulcie and the landscape. Austin found none of these qualities in the modern city nor in its literary representations.[2] In a 1920 letter to Sinclair Lewis, for example, Austin reprimanded her colleague and friend, "Sex and art and religion, the mystical experience of each I mean, these are the things that are missing from Main Street" (quoted in Lanigan 1997: 168).

As a fervent advocate of a region summarily dismissed by America's cultural, literary, and intellectual elites as irrelevant to their modernist projects, Mary Austin insisted on the national significance of those geographical, cultural, and symbolic realities located beyond the realm of the Eastern city – in the arid landscapes of the American West. In so doing, she participated in a discourse that Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis instigated towards the end of the 19th century – the position that the continental West, not Europe, is the origin point of America's democratic culture. Yet, although Austin portrays some of the archetypes of frontier society – the gold seeker known as the pocket hunter, the pioneer settler, the Indian, the Mexican desperado, and legendary figures like Kit Carson – her work exceeds by far the generic boundaries of the frontier tale on which Turner depends for his historical narrative.

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[2] Mabel Dodge Luhan, an influential patron of the arts who left New York for New Mexico in 1917, expressed a similar discontent with the city in her autobiographical narrative *Edge of Taos Desert: An Escape to Reality*, first published in 1937. Writes Luhan: "Surely no one had ever been able to dominate and overcome this country where life flowed unhampered in wave upon wave of happiness and delight in being. [...] How faint the life of Italian earth seemed to me as I recalled it; how faint and dim and dying out. And New York! Why, when I remembered that clamor and movement out here beside this river, listening to the inner sound of these mountains and this flow, the rumble of New York came back to me like the impotent and despairing protest of a race that has gone wrong and is caught in a trap. How unhappy, how horribly unhappy, the sound of New York was in my ears!" (1993: 33)

That the desert became the metaphoric core of Austin's vision of a future America is attributable to biographical contingencies. In 1888, Mary Hunter moved from the Midwest to California to join her mother and older brother on their desert homestead, "with the ink on my diploma scarcely dry," as she remembers later. An intellectually curious person since childhood, for her "the problem of aboriginal life and its relation to the environment was the only meat upon which the avid appetite of youth could feed" (Austin 1923: 38). Many years later, the mature writer would confess that she "lapped up Indians as a part of the novelist's tormented and unremitting search for adequate concepts of life and society, and throve upon them" (ibid.). Her marriage to Stafford Wallace Austin, who tried his luck with several agricultural ventures before he accepted a teaching position in the Inyo school district and was appointed registrar of the Desert Land Office in Independence, California, further tied her to the desert, but also, as Kathryn DeZur noted, "to the colonizing network of American expansionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (1999: 21).

DeZur reads Austin's early work, particularly 1909's *Lost Borders*, as evidence of her "endeavor to distance herself from that imperial network – and in fact, to write against it" (ibid.).[3] For the critic, "lost borders" is the root metaphor in the work of an author who challenged "the artificial boundaries" established by the colonial (or imperial) translation of land into property, Native bodies into Others, and the generic boundaries and hierarchies that structure various cultural narratives. DeZur's observation that Austin "enters the debate about land value" with a story ("The Land") that conceptualizes the desert as terrain that "resists the texts of culture" (23), i.e., a culture that evaluates land according to its use value as economic resource, is helpful here because it highlights Austin's discomfort with modern constructions of the land, and ultimately of America, in purely mechanistic and economic terms. In the imperial logic underlying the practice of agricultural expansion, the desert was land that "was not worth parcelling off", as Austin wrote (1995: 155). For a long time, this attitude had saved desert land from large-scale translation into property. Yet with

[3] In a similar vein, David W. Teague characterizes Austin as one of the few writers of her time who avoided "the contradiction of applauding arid beauty while at the same time applauding Anglo America's desert conquest" (1997: 127).

the advent of technological modernization during the closing decades of the 19th century, the arid West moved back into the focus of irrigationists and mining companies, for whom the desert had previously been nothing but a wasteland.

In contrast to these pragmatists, Austin perceived of the desert as an essential part of "the mysterious complex called Nature" (1991: 78). At the same time, her self-proclaimed interest in anthropological interpretations of the interdependence of the social structure and dynamics of a community and its organizational relationship to the land or natural environment made her sensitive to the desert as a cultural and historical landscape. At the same time, her self-proclaimed interest in anthropological interpretations of the interdependence of the social structure and dynamics of a community, and its organizational relationship to the land or natural environment, made her sensitive to the desert as a cultural and historical landscape. All this eventually resulted in the author's topophilic response to the desert as a poetic blueprint for articulations of an alternative, ecological rather than technological and economic vision for America. Like John C. Van Dyke before her, Austin shifted the focus from the *heroes* of Western history to the scene, *the place and space* in which the drama unfolded. Yet unlike Van Dyke, she did not dehistoricize the landscape but presented it as an arena for human actions, thus furnishing it with a heterotopic quality. She re-imagines and re-conceptualizes the desert – for most Anglo-Americans still nothing but a waste land or transitory space *en route* to California's gardens and emerging cities – as *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), the country of *Lost Borders* (1909), and *The Land of Journey's Ending* (1924).[4] These texts, comprising what I will call Austin's desert narrative, implicate the desert in a vision of America that, as she insisted in her autobiography *Earth Horizon* (1932), was emerging as "the expression of the life activities of the environment" (1991: 368).

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[4] Mary Austin's *Stories from the Land of Lost Borders* (1995), edited by Marjorie Pryse, contains the collections *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) and *Lost Borders* (1909).

American History in the Desert

Halfway into *The Land of Journey's Ending*, Austin recalls an almost forgotten curiosity in U.S. history – the experimentation of the Army with the use of camels[5] in conquering the desert West after the nation's victory over Mexico in the war of 1848. "I have wondered," Austin writes

> if ever there passed by here[6]the camels that, in the secretaryship of Jeff Davis, were expected to find our Southwest footage as native to them as the Syrian desert from which they had been imported with much diplomacy and expense. For it was our American way to think of our newly acquired desert merely as a place to be crossed, and its aboriginal population, unfriendly to invasion, as creatures to be hunted. 'What,' said Mr. Davis, who as Secretary of War was keen upon the hunt, 'could be of more use in that business than the Ship of the Desert?' (1985: 225)

The passage is remarkable for several reasons. It plays with the trope of the Orient as a recognizable signifier of the country's topographical and cultural otherness. Yet at the same time, the author marks the rhetoric of orientalization as an inadequate mode of cultural appropriation. For Austin, political efforts to deploy camels in the conquest of the desert West were not only indicative of the nation's imperial ambitions but also of its failure to recognize or even imagine the new territory's cultural potential. Merely a place to be crossed, the desert remains the habitat of a foreign, "aboriginal population" unwilling to step out of the westward path of progress. In the next few paragraphs, Austin relates stories she has heard about the use of imported camels as pack animals "on the plains of Arizona" (226) and "at Papago Tanks" (228), and of the two camel drivers who "came from Syria with the camel band" and "must have found many a touch of home" in "the country between the Rio Grande and the Colorado" (ibid.). While the last real camels loose in the Southwest were sighted in 1891, they

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5 For a compact history of that experiment see Joe Zentner's "The Great Southwestern Desert Camel Experiment" on *Desert USA: The Ultimate Desert Resource*. http://www.desertusa.com/mag05/sep/camel.html (February 8, 2008).

6 "Here" refers to the location of today's El Morro National Monument in New Mexico.

survived in the tall tales of old Westerners and in patterns "wrought into the native black-and-white basketry" (228) of the Papago Indians.

In spite of its idiosyncratic character, Austin feels compelled to relate to her readers this eccentric element in the history of westward expansion. The tone reveals the author-cum-popular-historian's delight in the imaginative luxuriance of otherwise insignificant material. Yet it is precisely in the historical ex-centricity of stories like this one about the Army's camel experiment that provides Austin with the narrative ground for introducing the desert as a cultural heterotopia, i.e., a space which allows for an alternate ordering of the American cultural imaginary. The use of the trope of the Orient indicates that, indeed, Austin perceives the American desert neither as wilderness nor as future agrarian paradise, but as a historically and culturally distinct space with topographical and ecological features akin to those of the camel's original habitat. Yet the fact that she tells the story of a failure – by the end of the 19th century the camel, the signature animal of the Orient, had disappeared from the free ranges of the Southwestern plains – also suggests that Austin considered the Orientalist paradigm as an insufficient instrument for integrating the desert into America's national imaginary, as were the paradigms of garden and wilderness. Still, it was in the desert of the American Southwest where she located the origin point of both a new sense of an American cultural identity and, in truly Emersonian fashion, the material ground for a genuinely American literary idiom.

Describing *The Land of Journey's Ending* as "a book of prophecy" *and* "a book of topography" (xxviii), Austin places her text in a poetic space that is neither romantic nor realistic yet both. One could call this space an imaginary heterotopia, the literary equivalent of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier, which, described by the historian as pivotal for the construction of an American social and cultural identity, is the functional equivalent of Hetherington's Palais Royal. At the same time, Austin's imaginary heterotopia continues Emerson's project of "extract[ing] this tape-worm of Europe from the brain of our countrymen" (Emerson 2000: 649). Observing that "the topography of the country between the Colorado and the Rio Grande cannot be expressed in terms invented for such purpose in a low green island by the North Sea" (Austin 1985: xxviii), Austin considers the renovation of the English language as the precondition for expressing American

realities. Concerning the topography of the American desert she writes:

> A *barranca* is terrifyingly more than an English bank on which the wild thyme grows; an *arroyo* resembles a gully only in being likewise a water gouge in the earth's surface, and we have no word at all for *cañada*, half-way between an *arroyo* and a *cañon*, which – though, naturally, you have been accenting the syllable that best expresses the trail of the white man across the Southwest – is really *pronounced* can-*yon*. (xxviii).

As part of the "Author's Preface" to *The Land of Journey's Ending*, Austin's remarks on the unavoidable modification of English through the seminal influence of Spanish topographical nomenclature have an introductory function: metonymic in character, they exemplify the author's poetic project of moving the location of a modern American literary, and ultimately, cultural identity away from the East Coast and New York.[7] In "New York: Dictator of American Criticism," an essay published in *The Nation* in the summer of 1920, Austin called the city otherwise known as the epicenter of American modernity "a little less than a half-way house for European thinking" (129). While she exhibits a nativist rejection of the "preponderance of the foreign-born or foreignly derived among our self-constituted literary mentors" (ibid.), her criticism of New York's literary and aesthetic prejudices cannot be completely dismissed. And even though she scoffs at the cosmopolitan provincialism of New York's leading artists, writers, and intellectuals and their "detachment from the vast extra-Manhattan territory" (ibid.), she welcomes another "foreign" element as a necessary ingredient of American literature. This component can be found in "non-New York American writers" who "absorb into their work the aboriginal, top layer of literary humus through which characteristically national American literature, if we are ever to have it, must take root" (ibid.).

Four years later Austin reiterates this thought in "Hasta Mañana," the last chapter of *The Land of Journey's Ending*. Conceiving the Southwest as the contact zone of "the Indian, the Spanish, and the so-called Nordic-American" (1985: 442), Austin presents the region "between the Rio Colorado and the Rio Grande, between the Colorado

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7 The narrative of *The Land of Journey's Ending* is peppered with Spanish words and phrases. A glossary at the end of the book provides the reader with translations into English.

plateau and the deserts of Sonora and Chihuahua" (438) as the space from which a new culture will emerge, one that will continue the evolutionary pattern begun by "the great cultures of the past" (439). By "great" she means "the capacity to affect world culture and human history" (ibid.). Austin's vision of America as the latest in a historical succession of cultural empires is sustained by a set of metaphors that expose the author's reliance on a deterministic ideology and cast imperial expansion as merely horticultural improvement.

> In Greece, in Rome, in England, world power began with aboriginal cultures of sufficient rootage to have already given rise to adequate symbols, in art and social forms, of their assimilation to the land, upon which were engrafted later, invasive types, superior at least in their capacity to interrupt with determining force, the indigenous patterns. So, in our Southwest, we began with an aboriginal tip-soil culture, rich in the florescence of assimilation, to which was added the overflow from the golden century of Spain, melting and mixing with the native strain to the point of producing a distinctive if not final pattern before it received its second contribution from the American East. (439)

The rhetorical cannibalization of indigenous life forms in this passage notwithstanding, Austin's notion of great cultures is remarkable because it includes the aboriginal as an integral element. Without an aboriginal root capable of nourishing the engrafted stock, the stock itself will die. In other words, a root culture's extinction inevitably makes survival in an unfamiliar environment impossible for a new arrival. As Austin puts it: "Where two or three racial strains are run together, as coöperative adventurers in the new scene, or as conqueror grafting himself upon an earlier arrival, the land is the determining factor in the new design" (438). The centrality of "the land" in Austin's theory of American literature and culture reflects the discursive power of anthropogeopgraphy's environmental determinism (see Chapter Two). It also brings us back to the trope that is at the core of this study – the desert. Its radical difference from the landscapes along the eastern seaboard, combined with a history of settlement that diverges from the Plymouth-Rock model of the American saga, these ecological and historical differences virtually present the desert as a space of alternate cultural ordering, i.e., as heterotopia. In her essay for *The Nation* on New York as dictator of American criticism Austin used America as shorthand for a "country" whose literary and intellectual life was "centered in New York, with a small New England ell in

the rear and a rustic gazebo in Chicago" (1920: 129). Her books call for including the West in the national construct of America, a literary project in which *desert* is translated into a rhetorical instrument that challenges the established social, ethical, and economic patterns of modern U.S. culture.

Translating the Desert

In Western cultures, desert is a name loaded with negative connotations – danger, death, disorientation, devastation. It signifies a land whose topography and climate resist familiar forms of appropriation: the lack of rain makes it impossible to turn the land into agricultural acreage, and the scarcity of surface water and "workable conditions" turn "the promise there of great wealth in ores and earth" (Austin 1995: 15) into an illusion. Austin begins *The Land of Little Rain*[8] with the confession that the linguistic conventions of her own culture inadequately represent the land that she came to know in her "twice seven years' wanderings" (17). In the title story, the territory is loosely mapped as "east away from the Sierras, south from Panamint and Amargosa" (9). Native American tribal communities such as the Ute, Paiute, Mojave, and Shoshone who "inhabit its frontiers, and as far into the heart of it as man dare go" (ibid.) call this terrain "Country of Lost Borders," a topographical nomenclature unfamiliar to Austin's contemporaries. Introducing this country as a territory where "Not the law, but the land sets the limit" Austin's narrator lectures:

> Desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man; whether the land can be bitted and broken to that purpose is not proven. Void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil. (9)

After drawing the reader's attention to this representational fraud, or at least to a misrepresentation resulting from her culture's fixation on agricultural use value, the narrator proceeds to outline a topographically and ecologically more precise map of the territory in question.

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8 See note 4.

Inspired by Native American onomastic conventions, Austin appropriates the desert as "The Land of Little Rain."[9]

There are conspicuous conceptual parallels here between William E. Smythe's practical project of translating the desert into a garden and Austin's literary project of translating the desert into the land of little rain. Like Smythe, Austin suggests that what confronts the nation concerning these vast and arid spaces is not the territory itself but its nomenclature. Departing from Smythe, however, Austin's project was not the promotion of the desert as agricultural reserve but as a resource for metaphors and rhetorical figures to be utilized in a critical stocktaking of the condition of modern America. Paradoxical as it may seem, this puts Smythe and Austin back on common ideological ground. As I demonstrated in my earlier discussion, for Smythe, the "conquest of the desert" made it at least theoretically possible to alleviate the growing social tensions of the city, a concern that is evident in Austin as well. In reconnecting America with the land, and disempowering the city as the definitive space of a new era, both authors saw a solution to problems brought on by modernity. Yet whereas Smythe was a literalist whose text portrayed the desert as a garden in order to convince his readers (potential settlers and policy makers) of the technological eloquence of irrigation as a method that would literally translate the desert into an agricultural paradise, Austin was more concerned with toppling the power of the city and the machine as directive symbols of social and cultural progress, replacing them with a desert translated into the "land of little rain," the "country of lost borders," and the "land of journey's ending." The most significant difference between Smythe's and Austin's projects is that Smythe's call to conquer the desert through the translational power of technology asserts civilization's power over nature. Austin's goal, on the other hand, is to foreground nature's implication in the creation of civilization and its citizenry, their behavior, social order, and cultural expressions. Launched under its new names, the desert would become the ground on which America's technological power could be displayed (Smythe) while at the same time, it also emerged as an effective sym-

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9 In the Preface to *The Land of Little Rain*, the author "confess[ed] to a great liking for the Indian fashion of name giving" (3), a fondness she reasserted in the opening story of *Lost Borders*, maintaining that "you can always trust Indian names to express to you the largest truth about any district in the shortest phrases" (156).

bol of and a crucial rhetorical instrument in a critique of modern, technological America (Austin).

As I will illustrate through close readings of representative passages from *The Land of Little Rain*, *Lost Borders*, and *The Land of Journey's Ending*, Austin's texts refer to the desert in a manner not unlike that of early European travel narratives, which as Eric Cheyfitz reminds us, gestured towards America, (or the New World) not so much as a site that was essentially different from Europe but as "a place where the Old [World] will be reformed or perfected" (1997: 87). Such a conceptualization of the New World was predicated on its imaginative representation as a blank slate, a Lockean wild common of Nature not yet claimed by human labor. For the U.S., the frontier West fulfilled a similar function. There, 'out West,' where land was still free and unparceled, "social development has been continually beginning over again," as Frederick Jackson Turner once observed (1994: 32). Mary Austin retained the idea of social, ethical, and cultural renewal operative in both the European concept of America and the American concept of the frontier, but projected it onto the desert, a landscape she saw neither as a blank slate nor as *deserta horribilis*, but as ecologically, historically, *and* culturally meaningful. I argue that Austin's writing is an early formulation of the integration of ecological ideas into concepts of social and cultural reform, evidencing an attempt to dissolve rigid conceptual boundaries between nature and culture. Austin distanced herself from the appropriative attitudes prevalent in the economy and political practice of U.S. expansionism. But unfortunately – and here I disagree with DeZur's contention introduced above – by replicating this practice on a cultural level, she fails to completely dissociate her writing from the rhetorical conventions and attitudes of imperialism. It is a discursive irony that Austin's desert simultaneously functions as a textual index for an alternative vision of America and for the author's participation in the nation's imperial project of cultural appropriation.

Nature, Culture, and the Politics of Austin's Modern Desert Poetics

The ecological grounding of Austin's literary revision of America manifests itself on both the structural and thematic levels of her desert texts. If *The Land of Little Rain*, *Lost Borders*, and *The Land of Jour-*

ney's Ending are conceived as three parts of a continuous account, the narrative literally originates from a description of "the nature of that country" (1995: 9). Drawing on the conventions of pre-Renaissance natural history writing, the eponymous first story of *The Land of Little Rain* charts the desert's topographical, botanical, and zoological features, comments on the medicinal and economic value inherent in some of these features, and refers to its indigenous inhabitants (Ute, Paiute, Mojave, and Shoshone). The text also conjures "The palpable sense of mystery in the desert air" which "breeds fables, chiefly of lost treasure" (16). This observation lays the foundation for a remark that occurs towards the end of the story about the country's similarity to the homeland of the Chaldeans who, under their ruler Nebuchadnezzar, rebuilt Babylon and created an empire that included Babylonia, Assyria, Syria, and Palestine. The Chaldeans were, as Austin's narrator reminds the reader, "a desertbred people" (17), the implication being, of course, that the desert environment was a crucial element in creating and shaping their cultural and political power.[10] By highlighting a puissant, ancient people, Austin consolidates the change in the discursive register of her narrative from observation and description of the natural world to interpretation, a technique that structures her entire desert project. More specifically, the focal shift at the end of "The Land of Little Rain" from natural to cultural history calls attention to Austin's use of analogy as an important rhetorical strategy, employed to establish the desert as the new metaphoric ground for an imaginative revision of American history and culture. In other words, Austin replaces the key metaphors of modernism (the city and the machine) and traditional Americanism (wilderness and garden) with a new metaphor for understanding and evaluating the current state and future potential of United States culture. While she discards 'desert' as the proper name for the landscapes of the American West and opens up new ecological (land of little rain), cultural (country of lost borders), and historical (land of journey's ending) perspectives on the Mojave, the Sonora, and the Chihuahua, *desert* remains an important semiotic element in her narrative, one that signals the author's critical position towards the moral, social, and cultural standards still prevalent in turn-of-the-20th-century America.

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10 Legend has it that Nebuchadnezzar was not only a powerful politician but also arranged for the creation of incredibly beautiful architecture and wonderful gardens.

Austin perceived the desert as a territory that "forces new habits on its dwellers" (15). The sentiment is familiar. In 1817, as noted in Chapter Two of this study, Henry M. Brackenridge was fearful that the desert would forge a "different mode of life" and "habits altogether new" for Americans, an anxiety echoed some three decades later in Washington Irving's description of the desert as "a lawless interval between the abodes of civilized man" (1863: 217). The desert, Brackenridge and Irving both insinuated, might turn out to be a problematic geopolitical and cultural issue for America. Austin's tone, however, is much more optimistic. She knew that geopolitically the desert presented the U.S. with a significant challenge. Its topography and climate resisted the geometrical and agricultural logic of federal and state legislators. "Out there, a week's journey from everywhere," she writes in "The Land" (from the collection *Lost Borders*), "the land was not worth parcelling off" (1995: 155). Yet it is precisely the land's resistance to American forms of agricultural appropriation that advertises its heterotopic value. In the ecological capacity of desert plants and animals to cope with aridity Austin discovers the metaphoric material that allows her to express a new, heterotopic vision for America, one that is defined by beauty and existential composure rather than frantic attempts to adjust the external world to human needs.

> The desert floras shame us with their cheerful adaptations to the seasonal limitations. Their whole duty is to flower and fruit, and they do it hardly, or with tropical luxuriance, as the rain admits. (11)

Austin illustrates her point using Amaranthus, an annual found in Death Valley whose growth varies from four inches to ten feet, depending on the amount of available precipitation. By storing water and reducing surface areas to prevent evaporation, other plants, like the various kinds of cacti described in botanical and historical detail in "Cactus Country," a chapter in *The Land of Journey's Ending*, adapt their physiology to the physical conditions of low rainfall and plentiful sunshine. And in this environment, birds may have to keep their eggs cool rather than warm in order to hatch their offspring. In the desert's fauna and flora Austin observed an economy whose primary concern was geared towards survival. Contrary to "the accepted note of desertness" as "life defeated," Austin declared: "the secret charm of the desert is the secret charm of life triumphant" (1985: 56). It is important

to note that this redefinition of the *desert* as *a sign of life triumphant* is rhetorically and ideologically anchored in the author's advocacy of science – a discipline she had studied at Blackburn College – as a medium of cultural adaptation and not simply as an instrument for producing conveniences or technological fixes for all kinds of social, political, and cultural ills.[11]

In *The Land of Little Rain*, Mary Austin imagines the desert as a Darwinian space forcing life to adapt to its specific environmental conditions. Her characterization of this process as "cheerful adaptation" not only echoes Darwin's concept of "beautiful co-adaptation" (see Worster 1994: 156), but it translates ecological aesthetics into an ethical imperative. Moreover, since *cheerful* adaptation implies a moment of conscious intent or at least happy acceptance of ecological principles, it mitigates the gloom underlying unmodified forms of Darwinian environmental determinism. For as beautiful as evolutionary mechanisms may be, they are also subject to the inescapable laws of nature. Yet for Austin, humans remained the crown of creation, or rather of evolution. If physiological adaptation is the mechanism that grants survival to non-human species, cultural adaptation, i.e., the acquisition and communication of topographical, ecological, and anthropological knowledge, serves the same purpose for human individuals and societies. Again, the desert provides a perfect illustration. Commonly perceived as a waterless hell, "There are many areas in the desert where drinkable water lies within a few feet of the surface, indicated by the mesquite and the bunch grass (*Sporobolus airoides*)" (1995: 11).

Austin's narrator suggests that legendary desert deaths, a major component in the narrative history of the American West, have nothing to do with the territory but everything with the human inability to read the botanical and topographical inflections that appear on its surface. In fact, as the narrator contends, it is "this nearness of unimagined help that makes the tragedy of desert deaths" (11). As this quote demonstrates, Austin considers death in the desert the result of cogni-

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[11] Science, Austin explained in an essay she published in *The Bookman* in the summer of 1922, should be regarded as a system of knowledge derived from the study of nature and assembled "to produce adaptive alterations in the thought pattern" that would allow the "average mind" to partake of epistemological progress and become the author of his or her own life (1922: 563).

tive error and imaginative failure, not as an inevitable act of fate: There *is* water in this arid landscape. After all, "In Death Valley, reputed to be the very core of desolation, are nearly two hundred identified species" (13), all dependent on water for their survival. Yet in order to find water and recognize its presence, the newcomer from the verdant regions of the country must learn another hydrological idiom, a cultural adaptation as indispensable as learning another architectural and culinary idiom.[12]

The Land of Journey's Ending includes a chapter on "Papagueria," a territory "at the utmost limit of habitableness" (1985: 148) in the Sonoran desert. It stretches out on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and is the homeland of the Tohono O'odham, a people known to the Western world as the Papago. The geographical, historical, and anthropological account in "Papagueria" provides the grammar of this new, 'American' idiom of the desert. Describing a ceremonial hut, Austin explains:

> Following the rule that the ceremonial building of any people represents an older, perhaps the oldest, type of dwelling known to them, it may be inferred that the Papagos once lived in round, grass-thatched huts, as the California tribes do to this day. But since the time in which Gothic art gave its confirming touch to our own sacred edifices, they have made their houses of wattles, daubed inside and out with clay, roofed with sahuaro ribs, which are given a slight pitch by being supported in the middle on crotched poles of mesquite. Over this is

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12 Austin is quite literally concerned with America's idiomatic adaptation to the desert, as the introductory remarks on Indian name giving in *The Land of Little Rain*, referred to earlier, demonstrate. The subject of language as an immediate expression of the environment and its topography, and of the life forms dictated by a specific environment is one of the central themes in Austin's thinking. In an essay on "The American Form of the Novel," Austin demanded that the novel "be presented in the idiom, that is to say, in the life pattern, of the audience for whom it is presented" (1922a: 15). A year later, in 1923, she published *The American Rhythm*, a book-length essay in which she developed the poetics of the "landscape line" (56), an aesthetic theory that concerns itself with the representation of environmental and emotive rhythms in the structure and development of poetic thoughts and images. Commenting on the links Austin makes between poetic structure and the land, Ruppert remarks: "We are not dealing with anapests for the desert and couplets for the plains, but a deeper idea of the structure and flow of emotion and idea. The structure of a thought and the rhythm of its development, as molded by the environment and the emotion, more closely describes what Austin meant by the landscape line" (1983: 382).

> laid a thick thatch of brush and another of clay, rendering the windowless interior cool and dark, as desert dwellings should be. (151)

Note that Austin, even though she invokes Gothic art to situate her description along an historical timeline, does not stage it as a play-off against the implied primitivism of indigenous architecture. Rather, she emphasizes the rootedness of the latter in the ecology of the desert – the saguaro and the mesquite provide the sustaining framework, the brush and clay provide protection from the heat, while "the widely spaced huts, low, and self-colored like the soil" blend so seamlessly into the landscape as to become invisible to "the stranger in Papagueria" (151). What all this boils down to is not so much a nostalgic celebration of primitivism but the author's sense of admiration for the ecological principles that manifest themselves in indigenous architecture. It is the principles – and the emphasis here is on *principles*, not so much on execution – of protection (from fierce environmental conditions or potential invaders), and of reverence for and connection to the land that draws Austin's attention and elicits her admiration, not the decorative display of religious power (as in a Gothic cathedral) or the flaunting of technological and commercial prowess in the increasing verticality of American cities.[13]

Architecture is one of several examples cited in Austin's work that illustrates her effort to retrieve the meaning of America from the land. Once she established a desert ethics of "cheerful adaptation," in a manner more suggestive than evidentiary, Austin proceeds to institute an allegorical relationship between the ecology of the desert and the landscape's cultural history. The ecological insights presented in the opening stories of *The Land of Little Rain* authorize the critical

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13 In 1892, for the first time a structure – the sixteen-story, skyscraping Pulitzer Building – towered above the Trinity Church in New York City. Ten years later, it was supplanted by the sensational Flatiron Building, which housed twenty floors. In 1913, three years after Austin moved to New York and slightly more than a decade before she published *The Land of Journey's Ending* and decided to move back to New Mexico, President Woodrow Wilson marked the opening of the sixty-story Woolworth Building in lower Manhattan by switching on the lights of this "cathedral of commerce" from the White House. Joachim Oltmann, in a September 5, 2002 article in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, surveyed the ambiguity underlying European, and particularly German reactions to these buildings and technological inventions (such as the elevator) as symbols of modernity and of the U.S. as its avant-garde.

discussion of cultural, social, and ethical relations within modern American society, relations that in Austin's narrative are often embodied in terms of gender and race. Many of Austin's Anglo-American and European contemporaries, like some of their 19th-century predecessors, tended to associate the desert with moral degradation and savagery (see the anthropogeography of Ratzel and Semple discussed in Chapter Two), while regions with more moderate topographies and climates (and predominantly white populations) were represented as the spatial epitome of civilization. Mary Austin repudiates this discursive tradition, and instead, represents the desert as a key symbol for an ethically responsible existence.

Testing Conscience in the Desert

In "A Case of Conscience" (a story collected in *Lost Borders*) Saunders, "an average Englishman with a lung complaint" (Austin 1995: 168) drifts through the Western American landscape until, attracted by "a range of purplish hills lying west from Lost Valley," he decides to end his peregrinations in the vicinity of the "rounded, swelling, fair twin peaks called Ubehebe (Maiden's Breast)" (169).[14] While living there with a group of Shoshone Indians, he falls in love with Turwhasé, a woman of mixed white and Native American background,

[14] In all probability, Austin, otherwise highly sympathetic to "the Indian fashion of name-giving," substitutes fantasy and metaphor for topographical reality and indigenous mythology. Ubehebe is the official cartographic name of a crater (and a single peak) in the northwestern part of what is known today as Death Valley. For the Timbisha Shoshone, a tribe native to the valley, Ubehebe is known as *Wosa*, or Coyote's Burden Basket. Legend has it that when Coyote came to this place, he fell asleep and people started to crawl out of his basket, scattering in all four directions. There is no way for me to know whether Austin was aware of this origin story. However, because of her symbolic employment of Ubehebe as the origin point of new life, embodied by the birth of a baby girl, it's possible that she did know the story. In that case, Austin's reliance on official cartographic nomenclature and its translation as Maidens Breast is a concession to her Anglo readers' cultural expectations. For more detailed information on Native perspectives on the Timbisha homeland and its cultural and political history see *The Timbisha Shoshone Tribe and Their Living Valley* (Keepsake No. 34), by the Historical Preservation Committee of the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe (Bishop, CA: Chalfant Press, 1994).

"first because he was lonely and had to love somebody; then because of the way the oval of her cheek melted into the chin, and for the lovely line that runs from the waist to the knee, and for her soft, bubbling laughter; and kept on loving her because she made him comfortable" (170). Saunders drifts into and through this relationship just as he drifted into and through the landscape – in search of comfort, company, erotic and aesthetic pleasure, and recovery. From his perspective, the land and the Indian woman, (desert) topography and (feminine) anatomy merge and become the agent of (masculine) regeneration and recovery: Saunders fathers a child and regains his health. When he realizes that his physical condition has improved, Saunders decides to return home. He leaves the (desert) land and the (native) woman behind but takes their two-year-old daughter because of "the old, obstinate Anglo-Saxon prejudice that makes a man responsible for his offspring" (171). In the transitory space between the desert and the metropolis (in this case, Los Angeles), Saunders realizes that the child, plucked out of her familiar desert environment, "might die," and ponders that this "would be the best thing for it" (173). But before the child wastes away from her father's neglect, Turwhasé appears, reclaims the child and returns with her to their desert home.

Largely as a result of Annette Kolodny's seminal work *The Lay of the Land* (1975), we have learned to read metaphoric conjunctions of nature, the land, and woman as a strategy to consolidate patriarchal power structures and masculinist identities, to politically and psychologically justify the colonization of unknown territory, to foster fantasies of erotic involvement with gendered and racial Others, and to escape both real and imagined social and cultural constraints. Whether it is early colonialist celebrations of the New World's fertility and promise of abundance, Puritan anxieties about the seductive potential of a feminine landscape, or the "strong suggestions of sexual tension and infantile regression" (Kolodny 1975: 90) in Romantic narratives of retreat from civilization into wilderness – from the time Europeans and their American descendants first tried to make discursive sense of the New World, the trope of land and nature as woman has played a crucial role. More explicitly than Kolodny, but following her conceptual and critical lines of thought, Louise Westling pointed at the ecological implications of gendered representations of nature and the land. In *The Green Breast of the New World* (1996), Westling characterized "the European appropriation of North America" as "a peculiarly self-con-

scious chapter in the human exploitation of the ecosystem," and her own ecofeminist project as an attempt "to look closely at the gendered semiotic practices that have been used to mask and excuse destructive behavior" (169).

Linking her narrative examinations of gender relationships to the examination of nature and the desert as socially, culturally, and ethically enabling concepts, Mary Austin anticipated the work of ecofeminist critics such as Kolodny and Westling. "A Case of Conscience" re-articulates two ideological assumptions upon which the discourse of (modern) America is built: first, the author takes recourse in and deconstructs the foundational assumption of the North American continent as virgin land waiting to be conquered and compelled to bear the fruit of man's creation; and second, Austin argues against the Victorian contention that 'conscience' is solely the property of civilization and ensures man's distance from 'savagery.' Austin had prepared the ground for the argument she presents in the story "A Case of Conscience" on two earlier occasions. At the end of "The Land," the opening story of *Lost Borders*, the first-person narrator constructs a subjunctive identity between the desert and woman:

> If the desert were a woman, I know well what like she would be: deep-breasted, broad in the hips, tawny, with tawny hair, great masses of it lying smooth along her perfect curves, full lipped like a sphinx, but not heavy-lidded like one, eyes sane and steady as the polished jewel of her skies, such a countenance as should make man serve without desiring her, such largeness to her mind as should make their sins of no account, passionate, but not necessitous, patient – and you could not move her, no, not if you had all the earth to give, so much as a tawny hair's-breadth beyond her own desires. (1995: 160)

Westling would probably find this gendered and anthropomorphized image of the desert as a self-confident, self-determined, and mysteriously sensual woman highly problematical, given that one of the linguistic reforms she saw as necessary for the creation of an ecologically more benign language was the creation of "new metaphors for the land that are neuter and non-anthropomorphic" (1996: 167). Although his point of reference is *The Land of Little Rain*, a collection more documentary in character than *Lost Borders*, William J. Scheick has a similar reaction, finding the "obliteration of difference" (1992: 42) between human and non-human forms as disconcerting as does Westling, maintaining that "Austin […] unconsciously resorts to a

form of colonization of the land" (43). While I agree with Scheick that, indeed Austin exhibits signs of an imperial mentality, I see them less in the anthropomorphizing strategies of her narrative and more in unquestioned uses of certain metaphors such as engrafting. Indeed, I agree with DeZur that "Austin's anthropomorphizing of the land" has a different function, working "in opposition to common contemporary paradigms of perceiving the frontier as 'virgin territory' to be sexually desired and conquered by men" (1999: 25-26).[15]

In "A Case of Conscience," the imaginative identification of the desert with a powerful woman realigns the perception of Turwhasé as being self-determined and self-confident. The reader sees Turwhasé through the double refraction of Saunders' account and the narrator's critical response to and summary of that account. Still, both narrators perceive the Indian woman with prejudice: For Saunders (male), she is merely a servant whose role is to insure his comfort, and for the female narrator Turwhasé represents "the primitive woman's capacity" "to take our men from us" (Austin 1995: 170). When the narrative associates "Maiden's Breast" with "virgin land, clear sun, unsullied airs, Turwhasé" (171), it performs the perspective of the conqueror. Saunders' story, it seems, proves that "the myth of the renewal of life in a virgin embrace" "come[s] true in the big wilderness" (171). Yet Turwhasé, who may or may not have been sexually innocent before she met Saunders, is marked as a person who is neither culturally nor historically innocent. She is "a gray-eyed Shoshone" (169), the descendant of an emigrant who was saved from near death in the desert, nursed by the Shoshones, and adopted into their community. As such, Turwhasé literally embodies the history of cultural contact, expansion, and colonialism. At the same time, Austin's text closely associates Turwhasé with the desert and its topography. After reclaiming her child, Turwhasé "turned with dignity and began to walk desertward" (173), returning into the landscape that Austin had described with so much reverence in earlier stories. When the author/narrator draws attention to "the swing of [Turwhasé's] hips" (ibid.), she connects this theatrical description with the earlier passage in which the desert itself

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15 It should not go unmentioned that DeZur also notes the limits of this strategy. While Austin reverses the traditional binaries underlying the virgin land paradigm and "privileges the 'subordinate' element […], she does not offer an alternative to the binary structure itself" (26). What she does provide, however, is a fantasy of female power.

is rendered as a broad-hipped woman. Intratextual cross-references like this provide an evaluative frame for the reader within which Turwhasé's character can be appraised, its poetic context located in opposition to the rhetorical and ideological conventions of the virgin land tradition.

The thematic heart of the story is the re-evaluation of the concept of conscience. In the last paragraph of "The Hoodoo of the Minenietta," the story immediately preceding "A Case of Conscience," Austin opens the discussion about the topic, defining conscience as "a hereditary prejudice in favor of a given line of behavior" (167). The ethical implications of their conscience are tested in the heterotopic space of Austin's narrative in which Saunders and Turwhasé are located. Because of his contagious lung disease, Saunders is a pariah: "society, life itself had cast him off" (171), granting him the moral liberty to live in a quasi-matrimonial relationship with Turwhasé and without the consent of "Church and State" (171). His conscience is quiet, and neither his ethical nor racial transgression makes him the target of censure out there in the desert, a place for the most part still beyond civilization's moral and legal authority. Yet as soon as he regains his health, thus shedding the cause of his social banishment, he reverts to the clutches of "hereditary prejudice." Vaguely aware "that there was something more than mere irresponsibility in the way of desert-faring men who formed relations such as this and left them off with the land" (173), the implication is that as soon as he, like other men, "felt the grip of the desert loosen on him with the tension of a spring released" (179), when he is once again surrounded by "the fenced lands, farms and farmhouses, schools, a church" (173), he falls back into old patterns, assuming the conqueror's paternalistic responsibility for the conquered but, in fact, acts irresponsibly. Emotionally detached from the physical consequences of his behavior in the desert, his "conscience" or Anglo-Saxon sense of duty causes both his daughter and his common-law wife great pain. Physically recovered but emotionally still depleted, Saunders has no way to express his sense of responsibility other than through the medium of money, which he "poured in [Turwhasé's] bosom" (173). But Turwhasé, scattering the coins with "a flirt of her blanket" (173) and a laugh, refuses to accept the terms of the social contract encoded in Saunders' gesture; she "turned with dignity" (173), journeying back to the desert.

Austin's story upsets one of the core epistemes of imperial rationality: the binary opposition of the conceptual cluster white=male=civilized=city with its counterpart colored=female=savage=wilderness. Pointing at the genetic proximity of 'man' to 'brute,' Darwinian evolutionary theory had challenged the fundamental difference implied in this opposition. But this difference was reasserted through the introduction of *conscience* as the characteristic that differentiates between the two. Initially, Austin's narrative confirms the logic underlying this codification. Saunders is represented by his nationality, his literary tastes[16], and his adherence to Anglo-Saxon ethical traditions and moral codes, while Turwhasé is characterized through identifications with the land, signs of the body, and 'primitive' behavior. In other words, while Saunders' identity is marked as cultured and 'civilized,' Turwhasé's is marked as natural and 'savage,' precisely because the narrative draws attention to the outline of her body. And yet it is Turwhasé whose sense of duty towards her child is more authentic, more convincing, more powerful than Saunders'. Both mother and child turn away from the city and civilization and back towards the land that had healed Saunders physical illness and which had suspended the power of Victorian morality and social norms, but was also the stage upon which the abdication of familial and ethical responsibilities towards child and partner had taken place. With this story, Austin not only comments on the ethics of race and gender relationships, she also suggests that Turwhasé's dignity, her moral superiority and emotional integrity, are products of the desert, while linking Saunders' reprehensible behavior and his ultimate lack of conscience back to the city.

In the title story of *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin described the desert from the perspective of a naturalist still aware of "[its] palpable sense of mystery" (16). Here, in "A Case of Conscience," she exemplifies this sense of mystery, not in the Van Dykean manner of highlighting its aesthetic sublimity, but by associating the desert with ethically virtuous behavior. In contradistinction to the discourse of anthropogeography, which identified aridity with 'uncivilized' and unethical behavior, an argument that further substantiated the ecological misperception of the desert as wasteland, Austin valorizes the desert's

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16 Saunders travels with "a Shakespeare, a prayer-book, and a copy of *Ingoldsby Legends*." The narrator reveals that "there is nearly always a copy of *Ingoldsby Legends* in the vicinity of an Englishman. Englishmen think them amusing, though I do not know why" (168).

position in the ecological imaginary by presenting it as a landscape that provides comfort, restores health, and creates people like Turwhasé, who exhibit a 'natural' sense of responsibility. Turwhasé is the feminine, fin-de-siècle version of Rousseau's *l'homme naturel*, a modern noble savage, whose 'raw' tastes become cultivated ("Saunders taught her to cook" [170]) while her 'natural instincts' remain intact. Austin does not escape the essentializing convention of representing maternity as instinctual behavior, and of civilization as the domain of white men. But at the same time, Turwhasé comes to embody the author's ethical and cultural ideal of American identity as the hybrid product of various cultural and geographical influences.

As the narrative antagonist of Saunders, Turwhasé fulfills three functions: she is the harbinger of an ethics superior to that of white Anglo-Saxon patriarchal society; with her mixed racial background and her education in the ways of two different cultures, she exemplifies the proximity of the 'primitive' and the 'civilized,' i.e., an ideal that served to express the discomfort of modern society's critics with the increasing mechanization and rationalization of life.[17] And finally, Turwhasé becomes an early incarnation of nativist fantasies about a national identity whose cultural genealogy reaches beyond the historical beginning of the Republic and even beyond the history of European colonization into both a prehistoric past and a territory (the desert) genuinely American. This territory is located beyond the borders of what Austin, in a story immediately following "A Case of Conscience," called the "Ploughed Lands" (176-180), a metaphor for civilization's social confines and moral strictures.

In "A Case of Conscience," Austin reinvents America as an indigenous, maternal subject, an act that can be described, with Eric Cheyfitz, as translating the foreign into the proper, and identified as the core practice in a poetics of imperialism. Austin recreates herself as an indigenous subject inhabiting an outlandish terrain, and in fact, publicly admitted to fantasies of being Indian. In *The American Rhythm* (1923), she confessed that when she "wished to know what went into the patterns of the basket makers" (40) she imitated the procedure of basket making, from gathering the material to preparing the fibers and "singing medicine" (41) during that work. This, she main-

[17] For a more detailed commentary on the functional ambivalence of the 'primitive' in fin-de-siècle critiques of modernity see Barkan and Bush 1995: 1-19.

tained, not only made her feel "caught up in the collective mind" but "carried with it toward states of super-consciousness that escape the exactitudes of the ethnologist as the life of the flower escapes between the presses of the herbalist" (ibid.). In this description she assures her audience "that when I say that I am not, have never been, nor offered myself, as an authority on things Amerindian, I do not wish to have it understood that I may not, at times, have succeeded in being an Indian" (ibid.). We know now that, as the late writer and critic Louis Owens remarked, "[in] imagining the Indian, America imagines itself" (2001: 15).[18] For Owens, texts like Whitman's poem "Facing West from California's Shores" articulate "Euro-America's narcissistic desire to not merely negate indigenous Otherness and possess the American continent, but to go far beyond North America to 'my' sea, 'my' Hindustan, 'my' Kashmere, 'my' Asia, and so on" (ibid.). Postcolonial theorists (Said, Spivak, and Cheyfitz perhaps most prominently) have exposed the European or Western striving for knowledge, which Whitman addresses in his poem, as another expression of an imperial will for power and control. Austin seems to distance herself from the company of imperial experts by refusing to adopt the authorial position of an ethnologist. Yet in grounding her own narrative authority in an *identification* with the Amerindian, even if that identification is only occasional or temporary, she "negates indigenous Otherness." And by simply moving into the imagined space of an idealized and feminized Indianness geographically located in the desert, she performs this negation in order to valorize her own Otherness (from metropolitan and European culture).

Austin's novella *Cactus Thorn*, first published in 1988 but probably written in 1927, displays the complicated (and unfortunate) entanglement of feminist text and imperialist subtext found in Austin's desert narrative. Justly celebrated as a work that "made her one of the foremost feminists of her time," the narrative assumes the per-

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18 In his essay, Owens references Philip J. Deloria's *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998) as a book whose author "documents exhaustively and persuasively America's obsession with first constructing the Indian as Other and then inhabiting that constructed Indianness as fully as possible" (18). Owens' conceptual distinction between this construct – "the artifactual 'Indian'" – and "the indigenous Native" (19), supported, if not enabled by Deloria's book, is helpful for understanding the underlying politics of fusion of the ecological and the anthropological in Austin's desert narrative.

spective of Dulcie Adelaid Vallodón, "a self-sufficient woman wanderer" (Graulich 1988: viii) who defends her integrity against Grant Arliss, a well-known man and aspiring young politician. Erotically and intellectually attracted to Vallodón, Arliss has difficulty recognizing her "as a separate item of the landscape" (Austin 1988: 3). In spite of (or perhaps because of) this conflation, desert and woman cast their spell on him and a passionate romance ensues. But as soon as Arliss returns East he forgets both the land and the female bewitcher, complying with the social expectations that accompany his political position. When Vallodón follows him to the city and discovers his engagement to another, socially acceptable woman, she kills him – with a dagger in the shape of a cactus thorn.

From a feminist perspective, Vallodón can be read as a figure whose sense of self, as Heike Schaefer suggests, is rooted in her perception of the desert as "a source of alternative knowledge and values" and "a ground on which to resist social restraints without forcing her to consider herself an outcast" (2004: 139). As an independent and self-defined woman, Vallodón reflects the character of the desert as an uncompromising landscape as much as the desert reflects her character as an uncompromising woman. As "the female and regional antagonist of Arliss and dominant Euro-American society" (190), Dulcie represents Austin's project of ascribing cultural and social agency to both woman and nature. Killing Arliss then, "signifies a rejection of the popular Progressive era concept of wilderness as a space in which to recuperate a masculinist sense of selfhood" (192).

There is a striking resemblance in plot and characterization between *Cactus Thorn* and "A Case of Conscience." Both stories negotiate the subject of responsibility in terms of gender and space, and both reimagine the power differential between man and woman, culture and nature, city and desert. But where "A Case of Conscience" complicated the concept of responsibility through the use of racial and ethnic elements, in *Cactus Thorn* race is literally backgrounded as an agent in the power struggle for a new cultural and social ecology. Vallodón's "gentle wildness" (45), her "primitiveness" (41) is a product of her exchange with both the land and "Indian women" who create their culture out of an intimate knowledge of nature ("they learned to make baskets by knowing willows" [41]); it is, in Austin's own words, "a primitiveness that was not the fierce, food-snatching struggle of the cave men of fiction, but a surrender to informing and creative intima-

cies with earth and fire and root and stone" (41-42). Indian women are, however, not the central agents of the narrative but relegated to the position of enabling figures. In a rather Darwinian sense, Vallodón, the descendent of a (white) Southern mother and a (white) father whose name was Kennedy (see 34), replaces Turwhasé as the representative of the desert and of an ecological world view correlating "industrial despoiliation" (40) and the perpetuation of social and cultural gender imbalances. Thus, *Cactus Thorn* not only manifests Austin's reinvention of the desert as a spatial metaphor suggestive of new, ecologically conscious forms of gender (and other social) relations; it is also indicative of the persistence of an imperial ideology operative even in narratives whose aim is a radical critique of modern civilization's status quo.

2 Desert Temper: Joseph Wood Krutch

A Professor of English at New York's Columbia University, a theater critic, editor and full-time writer for *The Nation*, Joseph Wood Krutch (1898-1970) was also the author of numerous books on questions of genre (the drama and the novel), literary genius (Edgar Allan Poe and Samuel Johnson), aesthetics as the property of art and literature, and on the history and state of modern civilization. Yet while his critical and scholarly work is mostly forgotten today, his reputation as the author of *The Desert Year* (1952) prevented the complete erasure of Krutch's name from American literary history. More than a generation younger than Mary Austin, Krutch shares with his literary predecessor a perception of the desert as an environment that defines American history by limiting the scope of economic expansion. Yet unlike Austin, who ultimately questioned the rhetorical usability of *desert*, and, instead, renames the landscape as "land of little rain," Krutch insisted on the critical potential of the desert to function as a poetic stimulus for correcting and redirecting established ways of thinking. In *The Desert Year*, he wrote:

> If what I find in the desert is no example to be imitated, it suggests a metaphor which to me is meaningful. What I learn by way of this metaphor is not the kind of thing I learn from a treatise in economics or even on morals. But it is very much the kind of thing I learn from an essay by Emerson or a poem by Emily Dickinson. And a world

> which seems to have passed long ago the point where treatises on economics or on morals begin to pay a sadly diminished return in wisdom might do well to pay more attention to what poets – and deserts – have striven to communicate in their own way. (1985: 183)

One of the insights communicated by the desert was that "much can be lacking in the midst of plenty" and that "where some things are scarce others, no less desirable, may abound" (184). Behind this rather simple, if not simplistic wisdom lurks the author's concern with modern America's euphoria about post-war affluence. In the desert, Krutch discovered the poetic agent for actuating a discourse which is critical of such notions as progress and unlimited growth. The functional equation of the desert with both literary texts (essay, poem) *and* their producers (represented by Emerson and Dickinson) significantly contributes to consolidating the desert as a heterotopic trope. Krutch discovered the poetic power and rhetorical potential of the desert shortly after he moved to Arizona in the early 1950s. This discovery was marked by the publication of two book-length essays: *The Desert Year* and, two years later, *The Voice of the Desert: A Naturalist's Interpretation* (1954). However, while the metaphor that held the narrative together was new in Krutch's rhetorical arsenal, the ideas and concepts were not. They had found expression as early as 1929, in a volume which Krutch described as "the most widely read – certainly the most vigorously discussed – of my books" (1962: 184). It is to this book, *The Modern Temper: A Study and A Confession*, that I will turn now in order to uncover the conceptual foundation which Krutch solidified poetically by employing the desert as the central trope in his later work.

Nature, Culture, and The Modern Temper

Published on the eve of the 1930s depression, *The Modern Temper* is a secular jeremiad. In the book, Krutch discussed the major dilemma of modern existence, which he saw in "those more fundamental maladjustments which subsist, not between man and society, but between the human spirit and the natural universe" (1929: 242). This is the voice of a socially well-established philosophical mind, speaking of the spiritual and intellectual discontent growing directly out of the good life of the prosperous American 1920s. Patricia Nelson Limer-

ick's criticism that Krutch ignored the social and economic problems that faced members of the less fortunate classes (cf. Limerick 1985: 148), and that he presented as universal a modern dilemma that was indeed the dilemma of a particular social and intellectual class is inarguably justified. However, as an insider's cultural critique of the idea of progress and the promise of material wealth, Krutch's *Modern Temper* provides a valuable context for understanding the function he assigns to the desert as a central trope in an ecological critique of the idea of affluence and an economy of abundance. In *The Modern Temper*, Krutch particularly focuses on the implication of science, modernity's leading discourse, in the assumed maladjustment between what he called man and nature.

For Krutch, the modern temper results from a state of mind ruled by disillusions, paradoxes, fallacies, and phantoms, the philosophical roots of which lay in the epistemological paradigm shifts made during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, when the authority of a Divine Creator, or God, began to dwindle, only to be replaced by the authority of scientific facts and laws. Nature was no longer the imprint of His creative mind and the subject of metaphysical speculation, but an object to be examined, analyzed, dissected, and synthesized in the laboratory. At the same time, sensory, imaginative, and literary modes of knowing nature – or, as Krutch had it in *The Modern Temper*, "the world of poetry, mythology, and religion" that "represents the world as man would like to have it" (1929: 8) – were successively replaced by the rational, ordered, and pragmatic discourse of science, whose curiosity about the universe grew out of the same impulse as religion, myth and poetry – to solve the mystery of how, and perhaps even why this world was made – but whose methodology (the application of logos and pure reason) did not automatically increase human happiness and well-being.

"Science," Krutch observed, "has always promised two things not necessarily related – an increase first in our power, second in our happiness or wisdom" (61). But after roughly four centuries of scientific and technological progress, Krutch is convinced that "we have come to realize that it is the first and less important of the two promises which it has kept most abundantly" (ibid.). The most convincing illustrations of the beneficial power of science are the progress of medical knowledge and surgical technology. Krutch is enough of a realist, and, shall I say, modernist, to allow that "one can hardly wish for

the return of those good old days when there was nothing but prayer to oppose to the ravishes of a plague or when a wounded limb rotted slowly but inevitably away" (78). He is also grateful to "the realism of science," which fostered freedom of expression and the concomitant existential advantage "that we are no longer likely to be burned at the stake because we hold too tenaciously an unpopular opinion concerning the nature of Trinity" (ibid.). But while *The Modern Temper* stops well short of science bashing, at the same time it refuses to unquestioningly accept the prevailing scientific attitude towards human emotions, desires, and spiritual needs as "merely troublesome anachronisms destined to pass away" (74) into a wholly mechanized, artificial future. While the laboratory had produced significant knowledge of nature, it had also created a fallacy that "consists in basing an estimate of our welfare upon the extent to which our material surroundings have been elaborated" (61). The laboratory, Krutch contended, is responsible for the false notion that happiness, that inalienable American right, springs from "the ingenuity of the machinery which surrounds us" (ibid.).

Krutch's quarrel with science was prompted by its arrogation of the right to define reality, by its epistemological occupation of nature, and by the materialist assumption that science could improve and enrich life. From the perspective of science a table is composed of "dancing atoms," not "a solid and motionless object," and color is nothing but "vibrations in the ether" (71). Thus, by denouncing the validity of organic perception (e.g., the naked eye) and, in turn, by privileging instrumental or mechanical perception (e.g. the spectroscope or the interferometer) as providing the only possible access to reality, science bluntly renounced even the possibility of metaphysical truth. Against these assertions, *The Modern Temper* defends the value of illusions and appearances. Not disputing that "the most important part of our lives – our sensations, emotions, desires, and aspirations – takes place in a universe of illusions which science can attenuate or destory," Krutch nonetheless urges his readers to realize that science "is powerless to enrich" (72) the spiritual and sensual realms of human existence. In other words, the author of *The Modern Temper* does not so much reproach science for its success in wresting epistemological authority from theology and metaphysics, but for its failure to fill with new meaning the spiritual and moral vacuum created in the process. Convinced that modernity's materialism – whether it figures as com-

munist utopianism or as capitalist consumerism – is based on the false belief in material well-being as the prerequisite of felicity, Krutch's rather pessimistic credo is that

> This world in which an unresolvable discord is the fundamental fact is the world in which we must continue to live, and for us wisdom must consist, not in searching for a means of escape which does not exist, but in making such peace with it as we may (247).

Unwilling to follow the example of G.K. Chesterton or T.S. Eliot and completely renounce secularism for "an old and unfeebled religion" (230) such as Catholicism, Krutch instead retreated to the Connecticut countryside, and almost three decades later, to the "old and unfeebled" desert, a landscape valued for its spiritual and symbolic as well as its natural history, and one that becomes the spatial antipode to the laboratory. Although Krutch's intense skepticism concerning the moral and intellectual direction of human society had somewhat softened by the time of his 1952 move to the desert, his critical perspective on the profound materialism of American life and the spiritual side effects of prosperity had not changed.

"Beauty and joy are natural things," Krutch wrote in *The Best of Two Worlds* (1953: 16). "Art becomes sterile and the joy of life withers when they become unnatural" (ibid.), i.e. when they become detached from what he repeatedly referred to as the mysterious thing called life and become exclusively attached to the mechanisms and technologies of modern existence. The residues of the natural in the city – pets, houseplants, parks – were as essential for a good life as "the sleek chrome chair" (ibid.) or reproductions of modern artists like Braque and Miro. For Krutch, however, these possessions were merely reminders of nature's plenty; in and of themselves, they were simply "not enough" (ibid.) to satisfy his own intellectual curiosity about nature. Thoreau's *Walden* played a central role in Krutch's emergence as a literary naturalist. He began reading it in 1930 while on a lecture tour of the West Coast to promote *The Modern Temper* and was immediately drawn to the "criticism of the social system" in the transcendentalist's work. But more importantly, Krutch admitted, *Walden* "illuminated my own growing interest in the world of nature as spectacle, refuge, and teacher of lessons" (ibid.). In *The Modern Temper* the author relocated the inquisitive human subject from the

laboratory back into nature, and nature, eventually, was best represented by the desert.

Modern Man, as Krutch would say in an age whose dominant rhetoric was not yet linguistically challenged by feminism, is caught in an unsolvable paradox, the "paradox of humanism" (1929: 27). Humanism, the Renaissance ideology signifying the contrast between the human and the divine in a culture that was no longer theological, increasingly became an instrument used to demarcate the difference between humans and the rest of animate nature. If religion, at least in its western variety, had separated the human from the natural by insisting on the immortality of the soul and its disembodied afterlife, and by exercising control over the body by asserting the moral value of concepts such as immaculate conception or by rigorously regulating human sexuality and other physical needs and desires, science, although it fully recognizes the human implication in the natural world, as evidenced by Darwinism, also seeks, in the tradition of René Descartes and Francis Bacon, to unshackle human existence from nature's bonds. Thus liberated from the confines of divine providence, and with the fulfillment of the scientific promise of a life independent from nature's vagaries pending, the modern subject had lost touch with both the spiritual and the material foundation of human life. As genuinely human activities, both religious and scientific cultures illustrate the paradox of humanism.

Drawing on the social behavior of animals – the selfless parenting of birds, for whom species survival overrides self-realization, and the social structure of the ant hill, whose stability rests on the total submission of the individual to the will of the community – and comparing these "cultural" patterns with those prevalent in western civilization, particularly its historical corroboration of individualism as one of the core values of its political and social culture, Krutch concludes that not only has "modern man" removed himself spiritually from God, he has also forgotten his biological duty: species survival. In Krutch's universe, sensibility and intelligence are not exclusively human qualities. While the original purpose of the former was to enable the animal "to distinguish those things which favor the survival of it and its race," the latter was a means for the animal "to go about in a more efficient manner to secure" its survival (42). This being said, Krutch raises strong charges against "the philosopher-artist" (ibid.) who has detached both sensibility and intelligence "from their natural

places as mere devices" (ibid.) to achieve pleasure and beauty as ends in themselves. To the degree that being human means denying one's animalism, the humanly valuable becomes biologically useless. And being thus detached from what is biologically necessary to live (and survive), human sensibility and intelligence "are capable of becoming impediments to the attainment of the superhuman aims they were developed to promote" (ibid.).

To the 21st-century reader Krutch's notions may sound like the rallying call of Christian fundamentalists or the political credo of totalitarian zealots, particularly when he declares that western civilization is caught in "a process which renders us progressively unfit to fulfill our biological duties" (248). There are numerous critics throughout the 20th century who have not grown tired of warning their readers that nature or the biological has been invoked time and again by those in power to legitimize political and social pressure or outright oppression against and eradication of individuals and groups who, in one way or another, do not fit within an established norm. For example, from feminist and queer perspectives, to speak of "biological duties" in the context of a discussion of species survival evokes the specters of compulsory motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality. Drafting *The Modern Temper* as a narrative on the demise of Western civilization, and suggesting more than once during the course of the book that primitive societies are not afflicted by these symptoms of apocalyptic doom visible throughout the refined cultures of the West, Krutch's rhetoric of biological duties also invites racist interpretations. *The Modern Temper* does not steer clear of these ideologically dangerous waters – after all, the book is not only the product of an age much less conscious about race and gender than our own, but also of an author who, as Patricia Nelson Limerick so perceptively suggests, has never overcome his condescending attitude towards other races, an attitude he acquired growing up as a white, middle-class boy in segregated Tennessee (cf. Limerick 1985: 145-146).

However, read in a different context, Krutch's observation that western culture lives in denial of its biological obligations assumes a different meaning. First of all, Krutch is realistic enough to know that he cannot turn back the clock of human cultural development. Moreover, in 1929 he is still too much of a cultural connoisseur to launch a neo-romantic campaign in favor of primitivism and a return to nature. Krutch closes *The Modern Temper* knowing that "Ours is a lost cause

and there is no place for us in the natural universe, but we are not, for all that, sorry to be human. We should rather die as men than live as animals" (249). But bleak as this message may sound, Krutch could not have been totally pessimistic.

> Despair of the sort which has here been described is a luxury in the sense that it is possible only to those who have much that many people do without, and philosophical pessimism, dry as it may leave the soul, is more easily endured than hunger or cold. (248)

Quoting this same passage, Limerick notes that "Krutch […] saw material abundance as a precondition of modern despair" (1985: 130). The other source was the declining value of the individual in modern society. Krutch could accept that nature was indifferent, but he was devastated to observe that science and philosophy followed suit. According to Krutch, the three most influential thinkers of the 19th century, Darwin, Marx, and Freud, finished what nature had started. All three, he maintained,

> rob man of his self-respect – the first making him the accidental result of blind accident, the other two by calling him so little the master of his soul that all his acts, choices, preferences, and thoughts are simply the product of either 'the dialectic of matter' or the psychological accidents, influences, and traumas to which he has been subject (1962: 321).

I now want to concentrate on Krutch's sense of futility concerning modern society's economy of abundance, a society whose material wealth is the result of culture's detachment from nature. It is in this context that concepts such as "biological duties" assume a rather perilous meaning. Moreover, and this is most significant within the framework of the present study, Krutch's ecological critique of modern civilization contains a distinctly imperial, even nationalistic subtext. He writes:

> Historians looking back upon the rise and fall of civilization have always been perplexed by the fact that societies are most admirable just before they collapse. They have been embarrassed by the necessity of interrupting the description of every golden age in order to point a warning finger at the signs of decay which have a way of manifesting themselves just at the moment when perfection seems about to be reached. To escape from a dilemma they have assumed that the asso-

> ciation so often noted between *the flowering of the intellect and the decline of national vigor* is merely fortuitous, but it may very well be that it is instead *the inevitable result of that detachment from nature* […] *which is at once the condition of human greatness and the destruction of animal health.* (52; emphasis added)

Against this background, Krutch's own project of (re)turning to nature, and eventually to the desert, as "refuge, spectacle, and teacher of lessons" is not only an attempt by a disillusioned, 20th-century urban intellectual to find and embrace what Limerick called "a tentative new faith" (1985: 147). It can also be understood as the project of a patriotic citizen concerned about the general direction in which his country is moving. At the peak of the prosperous 1920s, and just a historical second before the great crash of 1929, Krutch joined ranks with other historians of Great Civilizations in dampening America's traditional optimism with predictions of imminent collapse. The fact that the U.S. survived the depression of the 1930s, entering another cycle of prosperity in the late 1940s, did not invalidate Krutch's observation that material progress was no guarantee of spiritual well-being and happiness. It only delayed within the larger society the realization that if humanity were to survive as a species, and as a cultured species at that, nature needed to once again become part of the equation, not as a subject to be exploited and conquered, but as a partner in the economy of life.

Throughout his entire writing career, Krutch remained highly critical of American society's addiction to material prosperity. In his op-ed column "If You Don't Mind My Saying So……" for *The American Scholar*, which he wrote regularly between 1955 and his death in 1970, Krutch repeatedly targeted what in one column, he described as "the whole intellectual and emotional complex associated with getting and spending – including the attitudes toward profusion and waste" (1956: 468). He argued that a society, which in order to secure its economic stability makes "profusion and waste" if not a moral then at least a patriotic imperative, and which devotes most of its energy to subduing nature and replacing it with the machines and contraptions of its own making, is bound to suffer serious psychological and social consequences.[19] Despite continuing to be a stern be-

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[19] Here, Krutch was before his time. In recent years, the nexus of consumerism, ecological depletion, and psychological well-being has come under more in-

liever in individualism and the essential virtue of capitalism,[20] he still demands that society redirect its attention from a focus on "'what industry needs'" to a concern about "what men need" (1959: 477), eventually reaching "an optimum degree of mechanization, complexity and perhaps even abundance" (1960-61: 95).

An Economy of Scarcity

It is against this intellectual background of apprehensions about the path taken by modern American civilization that I now want to discuss the ascent of the desert, an "economy of scarcity" (Krutch 1966: 99), as the central trope in Krutch's critique of modernity as an economy of abundance. But what was the initial attraction of the desert for this discontented intellectual? The opening chapters of *The Desert Year* (1952), the book that recorded his experience of living in Tucson during a sabbatical leave from Columbia University in 1951, provide some preliminary answers. What attracted Krutch to the desert – apart from and perhaps even more important than the promise of improved health – was the possibility of finding in "the visible forms which nature assumes here" answers to questions "which another much-loved countryside left, for all its richness of the things it did express, unsaid, even unsuggested" (1952: 11). During several previous trips to the Southwest, Krutch had become fascinated with the desert's potent otherness, its mysteriousness. Gripped by an insistent but inexplicable feeling of kinship with this stark and austere landscape and the life it housed, Krutch decided that in order to really know and understand the desert he had to actually live with it instead of just look at it as a tourist. The desert was everything modern society and even the green hills of Connecticut were not. "In my familiar East," Krutch marveled, "the crowding of the countryside seems almost to parallel the crowding of the cities. Out here there is, even in nature, no congestion" (24). The desert was a "sparse wilderness" (22), but "[b]ecause of a spacing

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tense scrutiny. See Roszak et al. 1995, particularly the chapters by Chellis Glendinning on "Technology, Trauma, and the Wild" (41-54), Allen Thein Durning's "Are We Happy Yet?" (68-76), and Allen D. Kanner and Mary E. Gomes' "The All-Consuming Self" (77-91).

20 "I approve of capitalism," Krutch wrote, eager to disassociate himself from possible charges of communist propaganda (1959: 477).

which nature has attended to," it also "has a curious air of being a park" (23). In other words, the charm of the desert lay in its spatial hybridity, in its perceptual and imaginative location between nature and culture.

The emphasis is, of course, on *imaginative* and *suggestive*. For as enthralled as Krutch was by the desert, his topophilia was inspired by philosophical questions and cultural observations rather than by scientific curiosity. He came to the desert as a linguistic and philosophical prospector, in search of metaphors, as it were, digging for a mother lode of philosophical enlightenment, poetic inspiration, and cultural criticism that was both fresh and effective. In *The Voice of the Desert: A Naturalist's Interpretation* (1954), published two years after *The Desert Year* and in many ways a sharpened version of the earlier book, Krutch asserts that "since life itself is not completely explainable in merely physical terms, moral and aesthetic questions should be discussed in connection with what we know about living creatures without any attempt to reduce such questions to merely physical terms" (1966: 209). The main target of his critique had not changed since the publication of *The Modern Temper*. The disappearance of the individual in the overcrowded and mechanized environment of the city and the absurdities of a wasteful economy of abundance were still major concerns. What shifted, however, was his attitude towards the possibilities of counterbalancing this process. Encouraged by the fact "that there is an increasing number who feel that the attempt to account for life in purely physical terms has failed" (211), Krutch now enthusiastically subscribed to George Bernard Shaw's interpretation of evolution not just as a blind Darwinian mechanism but as an expression of "the effectiveness, throughout all time, of the imagination which can dream of something better and the will which can make the dream come true" (210). The desert not only provided the space that enabled Krutch to move away from the congested centers of the East; it also presented a wide intellectual space that offered, in mythological and metaphorical rather than scientific terms, imagined alternatives to social and cultural developments.

In the *American Scholar* column for the winter issue of 1960/61, Krutch contrasts the "economy of almost unqualified scarcity" that he had encountered on numerous trips to Baja California during the preceding three years with the economy "of almost unqualified abundance" in the United States:

> Sociological observation was not my purpose, but one would have to shut one's eyes not to realize that here in *this barren, very sparsely populated area* immediately adjoining our own is *a perfect antithesis to the American Way of Life*: poor rather than rich, spread thin rather than crowded, lagging at the rear of technology and industrialization instead of leading the way toward greater and greater complexity. (1960-61: 94; emphasis added)

By implication, Krutch relates the economic poverty on the peninsula in northwestern Mexico to the desert landscape. Here, people not only live and act differently, they also think and feel differently. "'Use up' and 'make do' are more than merely necessary habits," the American traveler observed, "they are moral injunctions" (ibid.). If he had been a zealous moralist and someone radically opposed to all the conveniences of modern life, Krutch would possibly have indulged in a mood of imperialist nostalgia for a life that seemed so much simpler, happier, and less rushed. If he had been a zealous nationalist, Krutch could have launched a harangue on the superiority of the economic and technological genius of America. The emphasis here is on 'zealous.' For although there were moralistic and nationalistic undertones, his text was neither that of a full-grown moralist nor that of an ardent nationalist. Krutch was mainly a mid-20th-century liberal intellectual deeply concerned about the psychological and moral price modern society was paying for its worship of consumerism. Thus, Baja California was valuable not as an economic alternative, but as an occasion for sincere and uncompromising questions about the social and moral state of American society. "Do we have to rest content with the simple assumption that while Baja has much to learn from us she, on the other hand, poses no questions that it might be worth our while to consider?" he asked his readers. And he further disturbed their assumed self-complacency with a string of rhetorical questions: "Is there really no choice except that between overdevelopment and underdevelopment; between desperate scarcity and almost suffocating abundance; between a lack of tools and a tyranny of machines; between deprivation and surfeit?" (95) A little more than thirty years earlier, the author of *The Modern Temper* was preoccupied with similar questions. In the interim, he had encountered the desert, a landscape whose metaphysical, or as Shaw would have said, whose metabiological potential had restored the author's will to live.

For the Easterner, or for anyone accustomed to landscapes shaped by regular or even excessive rainfall, the desert is a landscape of scarcity par excellence. Turn-of-the-century irrigationists like Smythe had simply declared that the problem of the desert was the lack of sufficient water to develop the features of familiar Eastern landscapes and to support the kind of life that was common in more moderate climes. From a geographically less biased perspective, however, the desert was simply the topographical expression of the combined forces of geological, biological and climate history. "For the jack rabbit and the ground squirrel, as well as for the dove and the cactus wren, this is obviously paradise," Krutch observed in *The Desert Year*, continuing: "Only a kind of provincialism will take it for granted that forty inches of rain is 'normal,' eight or nine inches 'abnormal'" (1985: 27). And yet neither of his two desert books completely overcomes the perspective of the Easterner, albeit one that is indicative of the author's positive bias towards the desert. In *The Voice of the Desert*, he ascribes "character" to desert life because plants and animals "have solved" the "problems" of survival in a difficult environment (1966: 24). Clearly, the word choice here reveals the intention of substituting a constructive image of desert life with a history of associating the desert with deprivation and destruction. Krutch's rhetoric is intentional, not representational. For any life form anywhere on this earth has to "solve" the "problem" of surviving in a particular environment, whether there is little, enough, or a lot of water. Obviously, Krutch was unable to completely overcome the ecological predispositions of someone who grew up in Tennessee and spent the first half of his life in the land- and cityscapes of the Atlantic Northeast and Europe. Or he merely succumbed to the common view of the desert as the stage for the tense drama of survival, further popularized by the 1954 Disney production "The Living Desert,"[21] simply accommodating the perspective of his East coast audience in order to draw their attention to his messages from the desert.

More obvious though, particularly since the publication of *The Voice of the Desert*, is the installation of the desert as the author's ven-

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21 A 60-minute film called *The Living Desert* was part of the True-Life Adventure series produced to familiarize Americans with the natural history of their country. The film is still available on video. Based on the film narration, Simon and Schuster published a fully illustrated book version of the story. See Werner 1954.

triloquist. And what the desert has to tell an audience dwelling in the false certainty of unlimited material wealth and boundless natural resources is that the idea of unrestricted bounty is an illusion. Through the voice of the desert, Krutch communicates his message of material restraint and spiritual abundance. Echoing (but never disclosing any knowledge of) Mary Austin's famous remark[22] that in the desert the land and not the law sets the limits, Krutch's project is not to advertise the desert as an alternative living space but to offer modern Americans an *alternative perspective* on life, a perspective that is, by implication, ecological rather than economic. "In the desert," Krutch expounds, "it is the environment itself which serves as the limiting factor" (1985: 94), an observation that, from the perspective of an ecologically much more conscious 21st century, is a truism. However, in the early 1950s, the desert seemed to be the only environment that gave credence to

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22 Krutch's autobiography never mentions him reading *The Land of Little Rain* or knowing Mary Austin. This silence is rather strange. Carl Van Doren, the literary editor of *The Nation*, took an active part in Krutch's career as a critic and hired him as theater critic in 1924. In the two preceding years, Krutch had earned his first merits as an occasional book reviewer. When still a student at Columbia, Krutch had formed a life-long friendship with Van Doren's younger brother Mark. All this illustrates Krutch's close personal and professional relationship to Carl Van Doren, the man who was one of the first critics to acknowledge Mary Austin as an emerging new writer. Van Doren published several of Austin's articles in *The Nation* during the 1920s; he included her in his 1922 publication on *Contemporary Novelists, 1900-1920*, and wrote the introduction to Houghton Mifflin's 1950 edition of *The Land of Little Rain*. Given all these circumstances, it is surprising that Krutch never mentions Austin's work. But then, his entry on "the prophetess Mabel Dodge Luhan," and his comments on the social role of women reveal Krutch as rather conservative man as far as social and cultural gender roles were concerned. By the time he may have encountered Mary Austin or heard of her, she was a divorced woman, self-confidently demanding her recognition as a genius. Krutch, on the other hand, was a young man who only half-heartedly recognized a woman's right to her own professional career. "Why should girls have careers," he wonders in his autobiography, "and why should these careers always (as it seemed to me) take them somewhere else? […] Marcelle [his wife-to-be] was committed to going to France in the fall, there to enter upon her duties with the Rockefeller Foundation. […] Despite all my pleas she sailed away before the end of the summer. But my letters must have been persuasive for less than six months later she was back in New York" (1962: 126-127). In this context, Krutch's silence about Austin reverberates rather loudly and speaks to his discomfort with and sweeping disapproval of the kind of independent woman Austin represented.

such a statement. Based on two epistemological approaches, phenomenological description and philosophical interpretation, both *The Desert Year* and *The Voice of the Desert* are texts in the best tradition of American nature writing. The author employs the vocabularies of science (most prominently botany and zoology) in order to describe the desert fauna and flora as accurately as possible, and then switches rhetorical registers to philosophical interpretation and metaphysical (or metabiological) speculation about the moral lessons beneath the biological facts. Citing the example of the kangaroo rat (or Dipodomys, "the mouse that never drinks"), the tone in *The Desert Year* is matter-of-fact, and the account of this animal's physiology is technically straight-forward. The key to the riddle of the kangaroo rat's survival, Krutch explains,

> is the fact that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen and that these elements, otherwise combined into carbohydrates, exist in the starch of even the driest seed the never-drinking rodent eats. In the laboratory of his digestive system he breaks the carbohydrates down, and by recombining two of these elements he makes for himself the water he must have. (1985: 64)

Relying on basic scientific knowledge, but sidestepping too much detail or jargon, this passage, like many of the other observations of the animal and plant life represented in Krutch's desert narratives, not only prepares the ground for the philosophical interpretation of desert existence as ingenious, creative, economical (as opposed to wasteful), and yes, thoughtful. By rhetorically emulating the discourse of popular science, the author lends further authority to the moral lessons manifest on the phenomenological surface of the desert.

Krutch's desert is everything modern American society is not: "It suggests patience and struggle and endurance. It is courageous and happy, not easy and luxurious" (9). The road-runner, a bird that does not fly but runs quickly, and at times, appears to be rather cocky, is a reminder that the desert is not just a space of sublime spirituality and peace of mind, but also a stage for "unconscious absurdity" (15). The seed that lies dormant during long periods of drought exemplifies the reward of perseverance, and marks the difference between the rush of mechanical time and the serenity of natural time. During his frequent returns to Paris up until the outbreak of World War II, Krutch "was always amazed to discover not, of course, that Notre Dame and the

Louvre were still there but that one might be reasonably sure that nearly every little shop, café, or even newsstand would be precisely where and what it had been before, even though the proprietor might have died and his widow or his son-in-law taken over." And he concludes: "The sense of stability which this gave is something no one brought up in an American community can have experienced at home. It is the antithesis of Progress but, when met for the first time, it may strike those of a certain temperament as something reassuringly better" (1962: 105). Later, Krutch would find in the desert what he had so much appreciated in Paris – a sense of stability and repose.

Krutch was not the only and not the first member of the American middle-class concerned about the effects of accelerated modern life. One of his prominent predecessors was William James who taught "The Gospel of Relaxation" to the nation's teachers and students in the 1890s. James was convinced that "our dear American character is weakened by all this over-tension" produced by the demands of modern life (1983: 125). In a book of essays on *The Tempo of Modern Life* (1931), eminent historian James Truslow Adams, who lived much of his time in London, complained that returning to America he is "at once conscious of increasing difficulty in concentrating and of a marked difference in the kind and quality of my work, a difference which my publishers recognize as well" (89). Exposed "to an incredible number of passing impressions," but unable to sit quietly and ponder them, Adams fears that by "Losing the power of concentration in thought, we sink lower and lower to live our lives on the plane of sensations" (ibid.). The "we" in Adams' text is clearly defined as white, male, economically comfortable (i.e., middle and upper middle class), and intellectual. Underlying his critique of an accelerated modernity and his comments on the diminishing returns of modern life is the cultural power elite's fear of losing control over the Other, the working class "mob," the economically independent woman, and the irrational, sensual barbarian. Against this ideological background, Krutch's assertion of the desert as "the last frontier" of contemplation, must be considered carefully. After all, contemplation has always been the privilege of the ruling classes.

The construction of the desert as pure nature falls in the same category. As Patricia Nelson Limerick so aptly commented, for Krutch, "actual property ownership and resource control" were insignificant, and the presence of "contemporary Indians or Chicanos in the

Southwest" was irrelevant (1985: 142). These subjects appear, if at all, only marginally in Krutch's narrative, and, in the case of Native American societies, as relics of the past. What *is* significant and what *is* relevant though, is the restoration of the modern self through immersion in a decelerated space inhabited only by plants and animals, not by culturally different human communities. And therein lies the paradox of Krutch's ecological critique of modern America.

While his critique of materialism and an economy of abundance come from a place of profound concern about American society's separation from nature, and although he questions whether "the endless multiplication of goods and gadgets" is "necessarily an approximate index of welfare" and progress (1985: 183), thus challenging the concept of the garden on which America rested ideologically, Krutch continues (perhaps unwittingly) the ideology and rhetoric of discovery, conquest, and forceful appropriation.[23] *The Desert Year* contains a chapter extolling the desert as yet another last frontier. Containing patches of "Undiscovered Country" (as the title heading of the book's last chapter describes it), the desert is an arena that fosters the reenactment of the emotional and intellectual experience of discovery. In a passage reminiscent of Charles Fletcher Lummis, who tried to convince his late 19th-century contemporaries of the Southwest's ability to compete with the exotic allure of the Orient, Krutch informs his readers that, "when seized by the desire to know what the lonely places are like," many may not be able to afford a trip to the Gobi. Yet they can "get what must be a good deal the same effect somewhere in either the Arizona Strip or the even lonesomer country in southeastern Utah"

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23 The link between discovery and title to foreign territory originates in the middle ages and was the legal principle that legitimized the European conquest of the North American continent. In his 1823 Supreme Court decision concerning Johnson v. McIntosh, Chief Justice Marshall embraced this so-called doctrine of discovery as the legal foundation of land title, giving the U.S. (as opposed to private citizens or corporations) the "exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or by conquest" (Getches et al. 1993: 75) Although Marshall granted that "the conquered shall not be wantonly oppressed" (ibid.) he did not challenge the historical function of discovery and conquest as the nation's foundational practices. Bracing his decision with the ideological premise of "the superior genius of Europe" (72) and European-derived institutions, Marshall advocated the principle of "incorporation" and ultimate disappearance into the political and legal body of "the victorious nation" (75).

(1985: 242). As he continues to describe a trip to the desert as "an expedition upon which even the not very rugged can dare to embark" (ibid.), Krutch's narrative probes even more deeply into "the few remaining 'white spots' on the map of the United States" and into a territory that "may fairly be called unexplored" (244). He then proceeds to report the "discovery" of a "spectacular section" (245) in a valley named "Cathedral Valley" right after it was discovered in 1947 or 1948. Krutch maintains that this piece of land soon "became a region where one might with a minimum of effort become, if not a Balboa, then at least a pilgrim sufficiently early to feel that he had escaped the shame of being a mere vulgar sight-seer" (ibid.). In the remainder of the chapter, the author-narrator arrogates the role of discoverer/pilgrim, marvels at the beauty of the land untouched in any visible way by human presence, meditates on Kant's theory of the aesthetic experience as a phenomenon occurring "in the presence of something which provokes no reaction other than contemplation" (249), and admits to the sensational feeling of sublime terror in "a country where the inanimate dominates and in which not only man but the very plants themselves seem intruders" (252). Constructing his narrator as a latter-day pilgrim in search of the ultimate truth about the universe and man's place in it, Krutch arranges the narrative of his desert experience in relation to familiar experiential and narrative patterns of American history. By commenting on the vagueness and the implied arrogance of the concept of discovery, Krutch scoffs at the assumption that Cathedral Valley was "discovered" only a few years prior to his own visit. But his text makes much of his own discovery of Cathedral Valley as a place that puts the significance of human existence into humble perspective. The fact that neither of his two desert books makes any explicit reference to any of the other desert writers further underscores the author's self-construction as intellectual discoverer and pilgrim.

Krutch's sense of philosophical and aesthetic propriety in dealing with the desert and with nature depends on a strong sense of his entitlement to the landscape as (intellectual) property. *The Voice of the Desert* begins with the narrator's comment that "On the brightest and warmest days *my* desert is most itself because sunshine and warmth are the very essence of its character" (1966: 11; emphasis added). And in *The Desert Year*, Krutch nonchalantly announces that the Papago (Tohono O'odham) Indian Reservation "occupies part of *my* home de-

sert" (1985: 259; emphasis added). As Peter A. Fritzell observed, the narrator of American nature writing is "a figure alternately possessed […] by its need to possess or appropriate […] and by its need to be completely dispossessed" (1990: 162-63), the need, that is, to be dispossessed of an historical past and/or a morally and socially corrupt present, and to recreate history and a more perfect human society out of the clean slate of a not yet inscribed landscape. Colonial responses to the land, the Puritan "desire to extract a socioreligious moral from observed phenomena" (Slovic 1996: 87) and the Romantic celebration of untouched nature as a source of individual as well as national regeneration constitute the historical pillars of Krutch's project of a poetic reconstruction of the desert as heterotopia. In the arid nature of the Southwest, the author of *The Desert Year* and *The Voice of the Desert* found new metaphors for redirecting America's cultural and historical development. He wanted 'his' country to move to the desert, not literally but imaginatively. Krutch perceived the desert as an aesthetic object, as did his predecessors, including John C. Van Dyke and (as David Teague illustrated) even John Wesley Powell. But for Krutch, it is not just the desert's ontological status, its mere existence in beauty that is important. The desert also has epistemological qualities, qualities, however, that are not communicable through the cool discourse of measuring and classifying science. Since for Krutch, the desert was first and foremost a poem and a poet, its value needed to be measured poetically rather than economically.

3 The Legacy of Desert Conquest: Richard Misrach

Richard Misrach's *Desert Cantos*, an ongoing photo-based series begun in 1979, articulates an ecological critique of America through paradoxical images of the desert as an enchanted, spectacular, yet extremely injured and maltreated landscape, whose natural surface is inscribed with historical and political meaning. Misrach highlights the effects on the desert of an economic rationality that ascribes to aridity the lowest possible rank in the eco-spatial hierarchy. While he refuses to recreate or commemorate the desert as a quasi-pastoral retreat figuring as a kind of arid Arcadia, Misrach also relies on aesthetic veneration as a device to attract public attention, thus stylistically emulating a tradition, which, by implication, he simultaneously challenges in

terms of iconographic content. *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* (1990), the book that I will take a closer look at now in this section, is an illustrative example of this strategy, one whose heterotopic character rests in the visualization of past, present, and possible future uses of the desert as a tool of cultural self-reflection and self-criticism.

Bravo 20 (in fact the entire *Desert Cantos*) enters into a critical dialogue with historical, photographic, and cinematic traditions that render the desert a natural Other existing outside of history and culture, or as a proto-pastoral scene providing real or imagined refuge from the complexities and complications of civilized existence. Misrach's work recasts the desert as a territory severely affected by the historical foundation and the power politics of (post)modern America. Aesthetically, however, these photographs follow the conventions of landscape representation exemplified by *National Geographic* magazine and illustrated nature books. This paradoxical contrast of (often repellent) content with aesthetically pleasing style and composition blurs the formal boundary between the photograph as document and as aesthetic object. But it also reveals Misrach's awareness of what, in Deleuze and Guattarian terms, can be called the schizophrenic presence of the desert in the cultural imaginary of (post)modern America. In a 1998 interview with John Paul Caponigro, Misrach remembered that when he was "was [a] kid growing up the desert horrified" him (Capinagro 1998). Later, however, when he spent time photographing the brown, treeless, wide open landscape of the Bravo 20 bombing range, the adult's experience of "the light, the space, the solitude, the silence" (ibid.) triggered a shift in attitude towards the desert as "a really powerful place" (ibid.). To be sure, the terrain was clearly bearing the stamp of what Americanist Valerie Kuletz called "the wasteland discourse" (1998: 13).[24] Its semiotization in the wasteland discourse as a kind of topographical "body without organs" established the desert as the perfect spatial symbol of "the unproductive, the sterile, the unengendered, the unconsumable" (Deleuze and Guattari

[24] In *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West* (1998), Kuletz suggests that "[a]long with their Indian inhabitants, […] dry, arid regions are perceived and discursively interpreted as marginal within the dominant Euroamerican perspective" (13) of agrarian and environmental science discourses. Accordingly, *desert* had become a synonym for dispensable, economically worthless land.

1996: 8); and it informed the economic practice of turning otherwise unprofitable lands into waste dumps, bombing ranges, and nuclear test sites. Often shrouded in secrecy, this practice was also concerned with insuring that the desert wasteland remained unrepresented, fixing its existence as "the body without an image" (ibid.). Richard Misrach's *Bravo 20* interrupts these visual and discursive politics, now representing the desert as a memento to the ecological irrationality (or insanity[25]) at the heart of America and of modern Western civilization. As he stated in the preface to the book, the desert landscape around Lone Rock, the only natural elevation on the Bravo 20 bombing range, is "a graphic reminder of our failing stewardship of this earth" (1990: xv). As such, the desert becomes a medium and a tool for examining "different ways to think about the overall picture" (Caponigro 1998).

The aim in this section is to show that with *Bravo 20* (and, by implication, with the entire series of *Desert Cantos*) Misrach continues the tradition of utilizing the desert's heterotopic qualities for articulating an ecological, political, and cultural critique of America. I propose that the visual rhetoric of Misrach's photography depends for its critical effectiveness on creating a disconcerting tension between the aestheticism of the photographic surface and the relentlessness of a photographic gaze which focuses on the maltreatment resulting from its interpretation as wasteland.

The Desert as Sandbox and Wasteland

The sandbox, that gritty, familiar staple of childhood playgrounds, is a virtual space where children learn about social interaction and exclusion. They discover and exercise their power over nature, or the lack

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25 Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize the body without organs in pathological terms, the schizophrenic product of the culture-nature divide implicit in modernity. The desert embodies this schizophrenia in unexpected ways. At the end of the 20th century, as a consequence of desertification, desert has become the sign of an ecological crisis of global dimensions. At the same time, it was also considered an ecologically fragile part of nature and was legally protected as valuable wilderness. Asked by John Paul Caponigro about this contradiction between desert preservation and the threat of desertification, a process in which "we are turning what was green into something less fertile," Misrach responded: "Oh Yeah. The rain forests. We're out of control. It's unbelievable what we're doing. It's insane" (Caponigro 1998).

thereof, when they mold matter into form, whether in concentrated and cooperative action or through individual effort. They learn about the glory of their constructions through the encouraging words of their parents and playmates, but they also experience a sense of transience when the foot of an angry opponent or the gushing rain of a sudden summer storm destroys their sand-made architecture. The sandbox, one could argue, is the heterotopic space *par excellence*, "a major source of ambivalence and uncertainty" as well as a "[threshold] that symbolically mark[s] not only the boundaries of a society but its values and beliefs as well" (Hetherington 1997: 49). The sandbox is also a crucial instrument for devising military strategies. Like the childhood version, the military sandbox is a testing ground, a space outside the reality of the social, the cultural, and the political, which they nevertheless simulate and will, eventually, influence and shape.

Deserts in the U.S., when they are not converted into national parks or developed into mining sites or cities, have been inflated into real-life sandboxes for military training and nuclear testing, and turned into adult playgrounds and waste dumps. The *Desert Cantos* series (of which *Bravo 20* is a part) records these uses. Images of bomb craters filled with orange and pink water, of floods and fires, of rusting bomb shells and military vehicles, of abandoned atomic bomb test sites, of tourists watching the landing of a space shuttle or navigating the wide open plains on their roller blades, along with pictures of high-speed vehicles heading out for test drives on Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats, of oversized balls for "Desert Croquet," and of outdoor dining areas catering to the hungry players and curiosity seekers, all mark the desert as a cultural landscape. Misrach variously supplements these portraits of late-20th-century American deserts with photographs of such cultural artifacts as an 18th-century portrait of George Washington, an early 19th-century Edenic landscape painted by Thomas Cole, and Albert Bierstadt's famous *Indians Hunting Buffalo*, works owned by or housed in art museums in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and California. Like the railroads, which simultaneously symbolized and inspired the westward advance of progress on the North American continent, these paintings inspired and now symbolize the conquest of the desert by an ecological sensibility and a historical imagination nourished in completely different geographies, and deriving its progressive energy from a compound of erotic fantasies about Edenic recovery, democratic idealism, religious propriety, and heroic battle with and against

nature. As Misrach remarked in the introductory note for "Canto XVI: The Paintings," "art has […] played its role in the dissemination of European values" (1996: 160) into a non-European, arid environment, thus contributing to its radical change, if not ecological demise.

Fig. 5. Richard Misrach, *Bomb Crater and Destroyed Convoy*, 1986. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, SF, Marc Selwyn Fine Art, LA, Pace/MacGill Gallery, NY.

In a similar vein, Cantos VI, IX, and XI represent the "violent legacies" of U.S. history through disquieting images linking symbolic brutality with destructiveness, carelessness, and secrecy. The phrase "violent legacies" was used as the title of a book comprising these three cantos. "The Pit" assembles pictures of various animal waste dumps; "Project W-47 (The Secret)" contains images of Wendover Air Base in Utah, the location of the atomic bomb's final stages of development; and "The Playboys" represents images from *Playboy* magazine that were used for target practice and found on the Nuclear Test Site in Nevada (see Misrach 1992). Iconographically, ammunition bunkers, bomb loading pits, shrapnel, abandoned and vandalized buildings share the same location with defaced pictures of naked and busty

women, artists and performers (Andy Warhol, Madonna, Ray Charles), or even romanticized representations of the American past such as a silhouette of cowboys and horses in Marlboro country, and with skeletons and bloated horse and cattle carcasses dumped into the desert. The documentation in these three cantos of American culture's violent legacy is extremely disturbing, not so much because of its immediacy or corporeality (although that aspect appears in the dead-animal images). It is disturbing to a large degree because Misrach's photographs indicate a psychology of cultural and political violence that underlies U.S. nationalism and is exercised against the defenseless (the civilian populations of Nagasaki and Hiroshima; non-human creatures; devalued land), against nature (represented by the desert and by dead, surplus animals), but also manifested in the violence-by-proxy against symbolic representations of subjects whose sex, gender, race, or socio-cultural status differs from the Anglo-Saxon norms of patriarchal, mainstream America, marking them as dispensable Others.

Ironically, the desert both hides and displays these realities. It hides them because "Euroamerican cultural knowledge regimes" (Kuletz 1998: xvii) are oblivious of the desert as human habitat, albeit of an other cultural order. And it displays them because, as Misrach's images demonstrate, once you enter the desert, this landscape, due to the absence of thick vegetation, practically flaunts its cultural history to every visitor. Because the desert exists in the dominant cultural imaginary as a huge, dangerous space full of nothing, it can be easily converted into an ideal location for planning, practicing, and executing secretive operations undisturbed by the larger public. On the other hand, the residual signs of such activities, if not meticulously removed once a project is finished, remain there, out in the open for anyone to see. And because of the desert's specific geology and climate, it will take an extraordinarily long time to cover up, as it were, the ruins and relics of human occupation and activity.

In *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West* (1998) Valerie Kuletz reveals the cultural ecology underlying the relationship between epistemological systems and material landscapes. As Kuletz demonstrates, the deserts of the American West are not only the virginal product of sublime geological and climatological forces, an image discharged by the highly polished images in coffee table books and travel brochures and perpetuated in designations of restricted areas as national parks. Deserts are landscapes

whose cultural, historical, and political existence is widely unknown and unseen by the larger public. Where Deleuze and Guattari, with their predilection for metaphor, described the modern condition of separation between self and nature as a regime of bodies without organs, Kuletz targets the same condition in spatial terms. Her subject is the transformation of desert topographies into "nuclear landscapes," i.e., deterritorialized "sacrifice zones" set aside by the nation for nuclear weapons testing and as dumps for nuclear and other highly toxic waste. The deterritorialization of deserts as "sacrifice zones" is not only "a particularly dramatic form of disembodiment," she writes. Because it conflicts with local Native American perceptions of desert landscapes as territories that constitute cultural and religious identities, "the practice of deterritoriality can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism" (1998: 7). The desert, then, emerges as a postmodern landscape, informed by natural (i.e., geological, climatological, and other natural phenomena) and by cultural, social, and political forces.

This is where Kuletz and Misrach meet. *The Tainted Desert* and *Bravo 20* are generically different yet complementary desert narratives about competing and conflicting ecological and cultural paradigms. The concepts and terminology in Kuletz' social and cultural ecology of the desert as "nuclear landscape" intersect with and echo Misrach's iconography of the desert as a besieged and tortured landscape and vice versa. Both narratives reveal that the desert's representation as, or rather ecological denigration into wasteland or national sacrifice zone is tantamount to the continuous production of America as an imperial power. On a trans-national level, the deserts of Kuletz and Misrach expose the deeply rooted connection between imperialism and ecological ignorance and arrogance. On a psycho-cultural level, they demonstrate that the distinction between and ecological hierarchization of wasteland and useful land materializes in the creation of actual wastelands whose existence then seems to confirm and legitimize the original misperception. The following close reading of *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* will further illustrate this point.

Bravo 20: The Story

Misrach's *Bravo 20* is a multi-media art piece which, in the form of a triptych that combines a historical narrative with photographic images

and an architectural proposal for the creation of a National Park, engages the desert in a critical stocktaking of America's relationship to the land, its various historical and cultural meanings, and the current significance of defining the nation's political and cultural identity. Inspired in form by Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1915-1962) and in subject matter and mode of representation by John C. Van Dyke's *The Desert* (1901), *Bravo 20* is the second major publication extracted from Misrach's postmodern epos *Desert Cantos*. Like Van Dyke, Misrach is intrigued by the desert's aesthetic potential, the paradoxical beauty of a topography which, in the 20th century, was celebrated as the archetypal American landscape and, at the same time, abused as a waste dump and bombing range. Unlike Van Dyke, whose desert aestheticism was blind to the historical, social, and racial realities of the territory, Misrach seems to be enthusiastically convinced of the social and political function of the aesthetic, albeit with an ironic twist. Misrach's irony targets the pastorialization of the desert in the tradition of Van Dyke, its mythologizing in the Western, its commercialization as pure, wild nature in National Parks, and its Disneyfication in fashion, car, and other advertisements. A work that blurs the boundary between photography as mere documentation and photography as aesthetic object, *Bravo 20* can also be understood as a reply to such Land Art pieces as James Turrell's "Roden Crater Project," which totally disconnects the desert from the mundane interests of urban America and ties it into the religious tradition of constructing it as a place allowing the undisturbed communion with a Divine Spirit.

In contrast, Misrach's project documents the history and environmental effects of a 20th-century case of illegal land grabbing, and of deeply ingrained differences in psycho-cultural perceptions of and responses to the land. The first part of *Bravo 20* is a text written by Myriam Weisang Misrach and recounting the story of this particular piece of desert. One of four Navy bombing ranges near Fallon, Nevada, Bravo 20 was constructed in the wake of World War II in a terrain of rock, sand, shrub, and a pyramid-like volcanic rise known as Lone Rock. After Pearl Harbor in 1942, the U.S. expected a Japanese military attack on its west coast and sought to concentrate armed forces in a secure location close enough to the Pacific; the official gaze was cast in the direction of Nevada. Only a few hundred miles away from the Pacific coast, scarcely populated, exhibiting a topography of dry, wide, open plains stretching towards a vast horizon, and

having the benefit of only a few pockets of arable land and a few gambling oases like Las Vegas and Reno, the state seemed synonymous with a landscape of apparent nothingness and the ideal location for organizing the nation's defense and training its troops for combat. After a brief period of quiet immediately following the end of World War II, the military bases in Nevada were reactivated with the 1950 entry of the U.S. into the Korean Conflict. Since that time, the Navy has continued to function as one of the largest segments of Nevada's economy. And for the most part, Nevadans continue to welcome the Navy's financial contributions (by the mid 1980s, revenues mounted to double-digit millions for the town of Fallon in west central Nevada), and out of patriotic duty tolerate the audible presence of the military's bombers and jets. However, the Navy's growing encroachment on public and private space (both aerial and terrestrial), and accompanying impacts on health and security began creating dissatisfaction among some of the citizenry who saw themselves in a situation that was reducing their quality of life and jeopardizing their property values. When news spread in the early 1980s of plans to establish a 5,500-square mile Supersonic Operations Area (SOA) over central Nevada, the opposition mounted the barricades and founded the Concerned Rural Nevadans, a grassroots group alerting the larger public to the Navy's blatant evasion or sheer ignorance of the procedures and laws regulating the transfer of ownership and the use of land.

A battle ensued in which public and private interests in Nevada's desert lands were weighed against military interests. In 1986 the military won the upper hand, resulting in a fifteen-year land lease, including the right to use the land as a bombing range on the condition that the environmental impact be monitored and its results made publicly accessible. In 2001, Bravo 20 was withdrawn as publicly accessible land for another twenty years. At first glance, this appears to be a lost battle for those opposed to the presence of the armed forces in the area – the land remains off-limits to the public. But what was a victory of sorts was the disclosure during this course of events of the political arrogance of the military establishment, a government institution deeming itself beyond the democratic and communication conventions of negotiating diverging claims and interests, as well as the decided reluctance to acknowledge, much less reveal the potentially harmful environmental and health effects of its military operations. Attempts were made to undermine the credibility of the Navy's critics by accus-

ing them of being anti-military, anti-American, and anti-patriotic. However, as Dr. Richard Bargen, a general practice physician and one of the leaders, explained: "Personally, I don't consider myself anti-military in any way. We need a strong military. But I feel that there is a tendency with the armed forces to do things destructive of human rights and that there's no system to keep them in check" (Misrach 1990: 35).[26] In fact, expressions of patriotism, manifesting themselves as much in the display of national symbols as in demands that democratic rights of accountability and public participation in decision-making processes be taken seriously, were an important part of the protesters' political strategy, a topic I will discuss in more detail later.

In the context of debates over the implementation of a SOA and a Continental Operations Range (COR) for the Navy it turned out that Bravo 20, part of a COR planned by the Navy, was neither military property nor had it been officially withdrawn from public land use for military purposes.[27] In other words, the Navy was illegally bombing public *and* private land (the territory was split between the Bureau of Land Management on behalf of the nation and the Southern Pacific Railroad). The land was strewn with military debris – rusting bombs, burned-out targets, and hundreds and thousands of bomb craters, many of them filled with yellow and orange water. Located in the Carson Sink, part desert, part marshland, which had emerged after the disappearance of Lake Lahontan, a prehistoric inland sea, Bravo 20 occupied part of the space considered to be the point of creation by the Numa (or Northern Paiute) Indians. Lone Rock, the sole naturally-occurring elevation located within the Bravo 20 area, was known to them as Wolf's Head. It was a ceremonial gathering place for Paiute and other Native tribes and in active use as late as the 1940s. Bombing it was not only an ecological disaster but a religious sacrilege. Dis-

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26 In a similar case occurring in the 1990s – the withdrawal of public land to create an Air Force bombing range in Idaho's Owyhee Canyonlands – Lisa Schultz, attorney for The Wilderness Society in Boise, asserted: "This is about more than a bunch of environmentalists and outdoors people crying that their playgrounds are being snatched up. It is about allowing for fully informed public participation in a process that has been wrapped in a shroud of secrecy regarding what the military is really trying to do in the West" (quoted in Stuebner 1998: http://www.hcn.org).

27 Filing a withdrawal proposal would have provided an opportunity for the military to block public access to public land without going through an extended legal process.

cussing the spiritual significance of topography and the land in various

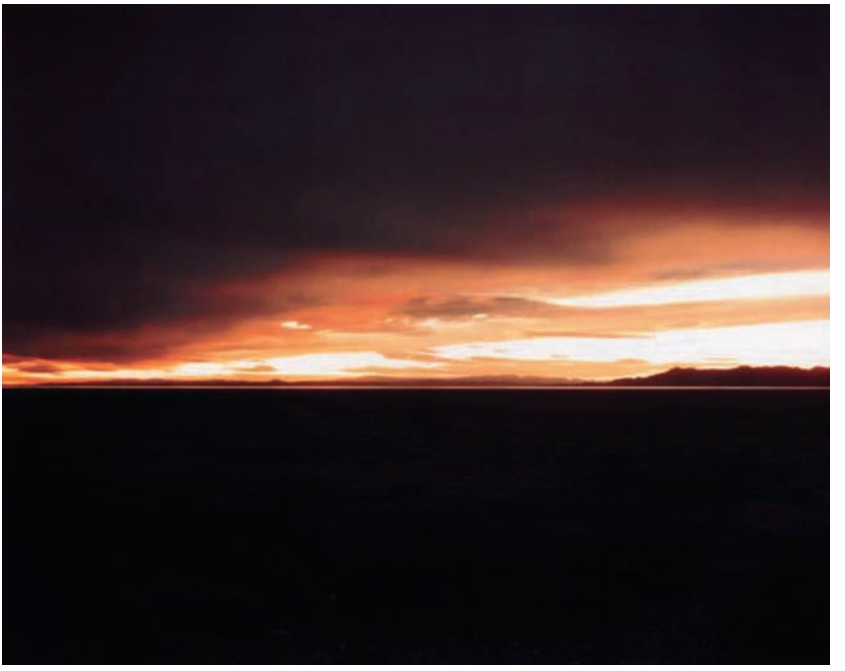

Fig. 6. Richard Misrach, *Waterline of Carson Sink from Lone Rock (Looking West)*, 1986. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, SF, Marc Selwyn Fine Art, LA, Pace/MacGill Gallery, NY.

Native American cultures, Paul Chaat Smith, a Comanche writer and co-author of *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (1996), observed:

> Most Americans might not be aware of it consciously, but I think they know perfectly well that it is in Western landscapes that we find our Dome of the Rock, our Notre Dame, our Wailing Wall. It helps explain why American attics are filled with generations of ancient, faded black-and-white photographs, yellowing Instamatic color prints, Super 8 home movies, and high-band videos of desert canyons. (1997: 12).

Although it has long been a cliché, the equation of spectacular desert landscapes with sacred sites of the Judo-Christian religious traditions is still a plausible explanation for its allure. But even more importantly, the reference in Smith's observation to the spectacular, the pic-

turesque, and the photogenic highlight the condition under which Western culture is ready to accept, or at least acknowledge to some degree, the cultural significance and spiritual effects of the land. It is to the disadvantage of the Carson Sink, particularly the northeastern section, where Bravo 20 is located, that it is "part of a dry lakebed, or playa, characterized by an almost complete lack of relief" (Brewer-yarts 2002a). This description, cited from the Legislative Environmental Impact Statement (LEIS) the Navy was required to submit in order to support their application to extend their lease of the Bravo 20 area, hermeneutically revolves around the operational phrases "dry lakebed" and "complete lack of relief," reflecting the authority that moisture levels and variety in visual topography exercise in determining ecological and cultural value.[28] The comment of one Navy official, interviewed by Richard and Myriam Weisang Misrach in 1989, represents a mindset completely ensconced in the rhetoric of the wasteland discourse and completely unaware of the rhythms of what is termed climax ecology: "It's desert out there," the interviewee remarked. "Nothing grows on it" (Misrach 1990: 47).

Climax ecology describes the ecological balance and cycles, not in seasonal but in climactic rhythms such as irregular floods and fires. These rhythms not only affect a given region's fauna and flora to the point that habitats seem lifeless during anti-climactic periods, but also significantly influence hydrological systems. Ecological ignorance of such realities, whether voluntary or involuntary, and braced by culturally prejudiced attitudes towards aridity, in turn led to hazardous results. The Fallon Naval Air Station (NAS) Toxicity Report of 1988 documented "a total of 27 potentially contaminated sites" under Fallon NAS responsibility, 21 of which "pose a potential threat to human health or the environment." The types of waste registered in the report include napalm, PCB oils, asbestos, elemental lead, paint thinner, and diesel fuel. The report further states that these contaminants, "carried downstream by surface water," could not only "threaten wetland and aquatic habitat use by two federally-listed endangered species (bald eagle and peregrine falcon)" but also the "livestock" present in the area (quoted in Misrach 1990: 39). Radioactive residue from the nearby Nevada Test Site and other areas that have been used for sur-

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28 No longer available now, the text of the LEIS was accessible online when I first began to work on Misrach's *Bravo 20* in 2002.

face and underground nuclear testing since the 1950s have created another set of environmental and health problems; these have only reluctantly been admitted to by the authorities. Paradoxically, the off-limit spaces created in the interests of national security continue to take precedence over ecological security, producing unsafe conditions for the area's residents, who suffer from high rates of cancer, leukemia, and other diseases. But they also take precedence over the area's cultural ecology.

The full extent of the Carson Sink's cultural history was literally uncovered in 1984 when floodwaters from two exceptionally wet winters receded and exposed pre-historic graves only a few miles south of Bravo 20, marking a history of human settlement of at least two thousand years.[29] Neither this surprising discovery, the evident spiritual and cosmological significance of the area for local Native tribes, nor the area's significance as a marshland ecology providing a way station, winter harbor, and foraging and breeding ground for migratory birds changed the public perception of the territory as dispensable land. In 1986, Public Law 99-606, commonly known as The Military Lands Withdrawal Act, legalized the military use of Bravo 20 for "testing and training for aerial bombing, missile firing, and tactical maneuvering and air support." And it decreed that military use takes precedence over other "forms of appropriation under the public land laws (including the mining laws and the mineral leasing and geothermal leasing laws)." The withdrawal was granted for 15 years, and practically speaking, the military was given full authority over the use of the withdrawn land (Public Law 99-606, 1986).[30] Some of the provisions – management of the land in a manner permitting continued use as grazing land, wildlife habitat, and recreational space, filing an environmental impact report, and the installation of a program of decontamination – demonstrate the impact of environmentally motivated local resistance to the continued "bombing of the West." These provisions at least show an attempt to reconcile military and ecological concerns. As critics have pointed out, however, the "board of overse-

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29 For a more detailed description of archeological finds see Baldrica 1997.

30 Section 2 (b) (1) decreed: "If the Secretary of the military department concerned determines that military operations, public safety, or national security require the closure to public use of any road, trail, or other portion of the lands withdrawn by this Act, the Secretary may take such action as the Secretary determines necessary or desirable to effect and maintain such closure."

ers" charged with monitoring and enforcing compliance with these provisions provides for "no civilian representation and is made up exclusively of officials, many of whom 'don't know jack shit about what's going on down there'" (Misrach 1990: 39). The larger area's cultural history, i.e., its past as a Native American cultural landscape, was not taken into account at all. In 2001, the Bravo 20 land withdrawal was renewed for another twenty years. Apparently, public resistance against its use as a military training zone had receded. In a narrative on the structure and function of the Fallon Range Training Complex, published on the internet by GlobalSecurity.org, the author laconically stated that as required by the law, public hearings on the Bravo 20 renewal were held and that "A total of 11 comments were received, with no significant environmental issues raised". In other words, in contrast to the mid-1980s when resistance against the continued military use of Bravo 20 caused such a local uproar, this time "The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Environmental Impact Statement process was uneventful" (GlobalSecurity.org 2002).

Documentary in style, the narrative representation of the Bravo 20's story precedes the photographic record of the effects of roughly forty years of bombing the northeastern part of the Carson Sink. As the linguistic message accompanying a photographic sequence, "The Story" provides an interpretative frame for the images that form the center piece of Misrach's *Bravo 20*.

Bravo 20: The Photographic Record

For French semiologist Roland Barthes, a text that is clearly related to an image (whether it is an integral part of the image, a caption, or an accompanying narrative) serves three major functions: it provides "*anchorage* of all the possible (denoted) meanings of the object [represented in an image] by recourse to a nomenclature" (1980: 274); it "*directs* the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others" (275); and "by means of an often subtle *dispatching*, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance" (ibid.). In the *Bravo 20* project, "The Story" anchors the ambivalent beauty of the military desert in a political dispute about the use of public lands and directs attention towards a desert whose character as a waste land is a human creation rather than a natural given.

Of the twenty-eight photographs comprising Part 2 "The Photographs," ten feature Lone Rock, either as a part of the frame or as the location of the camera surveying the land at this particular elevation. Established in the narrative preceding "The Photographs," the double character of Lone Rock as a mythical place and as the only 'natural' target in the entire area suitable for military sorties, creates the images' semiotic tension. Lone Rock melts into the horizon, slightly off-center and surrounded by craters, bombs, shrapnel, and the rusty ruins of destroyed vehicles. Or it is visible through the glassless windows from the inside of a vandalized school bus. In another shot, the foot of Lone Rock recedes into the upper right margin of the image, pushed out of the center by a huge, gaping bomb crater. Then again, an image of pyramidal Lone Rock at dawn displays surprising serenity and peacefulness in spite of the destructive atmosphere surrounding it. And finally, the long afternoon shadow of Lone Rock reaches towards the mountain ridge on the horizon, veiling but not completely covering the countless craters and military debris. The photographic section of *Bravo 20* closes with an image of a landscape at dusk. The camera points at the "Water Line of the Carson Sink from Lone Rock (Looking West)" (Fig. 6). The bottom half of the image is an almost solid red-brown verging on burgundy black; the water line is an extremely thin, precise, horizontal line cutting the image in half; the evening sky above this line starts with sandy white, yellow and orange hues, grading into a solid mass of purple clouds towards the upper edge of the image. This Rothkoesque abstraction of a mistreated and battered landscape does not undo the charges articulated in the preceding photographs. Quite the contrary, some of the colors representing the evening sky look disturbingly familiar – they pick up the orange and pink hues of standing water in craters surrounded by white-yellow sand. Yet the colors signaling the poisonous after-effects of bombing the desert in images like "Bomb Crater and Standing Water (Orange)" or "Crater and Destroyed Convoy" (Fig. 5)[31] are radically recontextual-

[31] The image was included in the 1995 issue of *Merian*, a glossy German travel magazine that featured the American Southwest. Usually relying on a visual aesthetics akin to National Geographic, "Crater and Destroyed Convoy" was the only image that did not romanticize or mythologize the Southwest. Although this particular issue features an article about the problematic history of the Southwest as a nuclear test site, Misrach's photograph is the only visual documentation of this (still largely underrepresented) reality (*Merian – USA: Der Südwesten* 8.48 [August 1995].

ized in the closing image of *Bravo 20*. While the danger still literally lurks in the sky above the horizon, "Water Line" confronts the "geography of sacrifice" (Kuletz 1998: 79) documented in this canto with a revision of Wallace Stegner's "geography of hope" (see Chapter Three).

Ending the photographic section of *Bravo 20* with a vision from Lone Rock which trades images of the desert's ruins, wounds, and scars for the ethereal, mystical, and metaphysical aspects of the place has significant implications. The exchange visually foregrounds what "The Story" has already introduced narratively: that from a Paiute perspective, Lone Rock is a sacred place. The text informs the reader that "due to constant aerial assault, Lone Rock shrunk from 260 feet down to 160 feet" (Misrach 1990: 22), a loss that is ecological *and* cultural in scope. The reduction in size of what, from a military perspective, is nothing but a pile of rock and sand, symbolizes the pervasive intrusiveness of the hierarchical ecology underlying the geographical imagination of Western modernity and the dependence of military practice on strategies of discursive devaluation of their targets. In this case, the wasteland discourse is a powerful legitimizing instrument used by the military to present the desert not just as unworthy of protection, but even further, as being culturally and ecologically worthless, and therefore deserving of active destruction. Misrach, who has come to realize that "sometimes it's the conceptions that we have that are the problems" (Caponigro 1998) places "Water Line" at the end of this canto as an iconographic counterpoint to the aestheticized images of devastation, demolition, and ruin. The visual power of destruction dominating the photographs of *Bravo 20* is replaced by an image that, in conjunction with the narrative, points back to the (Native American) past and, because it is "Looking West" (the parenthetical subtitle), it points forward to the mythical location of America's future. Thus, by highlighting the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of place, "Water Line" also functions as a reminder of the non-material values of human relations with the land, a characteristic threatened with drowning in the economic and militaristic arrogance of the U.S. power elite.

If the desert is a sandbox with heterotopic qualities, as I have suggested earlier, then *Bravo 20* is an unsettling commentary on the values and beliefs (or the absence thereof) America holds about its past and present as a cultural contact zone. The first two parts of the

book bring to light the violent legacy of territorial and cultural conquest, a legacy built on the continuous denigration of discourses that represent the desert as something other than a wasteland. While Lone Rock and the surrounding desert playa continue to be used as a military training area – a practice which, by implication, reinforces the dominance of the wasteland discourse – Misrach's *Bravo 20* circulates as one of those alternative desert narratives (or discourses) which, as Valerie Kuletz insists, are necessary to "counterbalance the powerful wasteland discourse" (1998: 14). The photographs fulfill this function by surveying the terrain as a material geography created by that discourse.

In adopting the gesture of survey photography, Misrach continues (and modifies) a tradition originating in the 19th century. In the 1860s and 70s, photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, and Carleton Watkins replaced landscape painters like Thomas Moran who, in the earlier decades of the century, introduced the landscapes of the American West to their eastern audiences. As an 'objective' art, photography was understood as a medium that realistically represented geographical reality. Like scientists, who archived the continent's fauna and flora, mapped its topography, and recorded its meteorological rhythms and indigenous history on behalf of a nation poised to expand its sphere of political, cultural, and economic influence, photographers documented the land with a focus on its beauty on the one hand, and its emptiness and commercial potential on the other.[32] As Martha A. Sandweiss observed: "Survey photographers like Jackson or Watkins photographed the West that their government employers wanted to see: an exotic and majestic land shaped by awesome natural forces, unpopulated and ready for American settlement" (1997: 63). In other words, 19th-century photographic surveys of the Western wilderness were governed by distinctly national, if not imperial motives. Stylistically, Misrach picks up this impetus, thereby underlining the national significance of his art. Yet in terms of subject matter, he diverts from what some critics call "the Sierra Club School of Nature-as-God photography" (N. Campbell 2000: 59) and focuses on the open wounds, scars, and ruins left behind by a cultural mentality generated by a drive for territorial and political mastery. Instead of

[32] For a more detailed description of the intersections of landscape photography and territorial expansion see Trachtenberg 1989: 120-143.

representing the West as an essentially empty space, a desert awaiting transformation into a prosperous garden, Misrach's photography shows the West as a territory suffering the ill-effects of out-of-scale occupation, which implies the prior existence of a space, a "there there" that possessed an integrity, a wholeness, capable of being fragmented and destroyed.

The edge of Misrach's criticism emerges if the photographs of Canto V "Bravo 20" are linked with images from other cantos. For example, in "Waiting, Edwards Air Force Base, California," collected in Canto II "The Event I" we see a presumably white family – mother, father, and presumably son and daughter – whose tents are pitched in the middle of the desert and whose pickup truck is parked next to a flagpole flying the Star-Spangled Banner. They are awaiting the landing of a space shuttle, a spectacle emphasizing America's technological might. The nuclear family, the pickup, the American flag, and the tents not only constitute a superfluity of American icons staking their claim on the desert's surface but are at the semantic center of the photograph as well. Interestingly, they occupy the same aesthetic position as the abandoned military vehicles and bomb craters in the Bravo 20 series, or the dead animals in "The Pit" and the high-speed vehicles "defy[ing] the limitations imposed by nature" (Misrach 1996: 152) on the Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah. By ascribing a similar structural position to the family, the truck, the tourist, the animal carcass, the bomb crater, and to rusting military debris, Misrach connects these objects and agents; not, however, as a cynic maliciously suggesting a relationship of identity between the bomb, the family, and the animal waste, but as an artist bringing to light, as it were, a circuit of ecological relations and ethical responsibilities in which the unsuspecting, fun-seeking family is connected with or implicated in the desert's more traumatic reality.

Crater Land as National Park: Heterotopic Ambiguity

The third and final part of *Bravo 20* is "A Proposal" to turn the bombing range into a National Park. Given the history of national parks in the U.S., Misrach's proposition further emphasizes the political impetus behind the photographic project. In *National Parks: The American Experience* (1997), national-park historian Alfred Runte described

how the cultural translation of geographical space into canonical landscapes was conceived, from the very beginning of the national parks movement in mid-19th-century America, as a politically significant measure for maintaining the nation's social and cultural coherence. The original reason for creating national parks was not ecologically motivated. "Rather," Runte notes, "America's incentive for the national park idea lay in the persistence of a painfully felt desire for time-honored traditions in the United States" (11). And he continues:

> Unlike established, European countries, which traced their origins far back into antiquity, the United States lacked a long artistic and literary heritage. The absence of reminders of the human past, including castles, ancient ruins, and cathedrals on the landscape, further alienated American intellectuals from a cultural identity. In response to constant barbs about these deficiencies from Old World critics and New World apologists, by the 1860s many thoughtful Americans had embraced the wonderlands of the West as replacements for man-made marks of achievement. The agelessness of monumental scenery instead of the past accomplishments of Western Civilization was to become the visible symbol of continuity and stability in the new nation. (11-12)

As "ageless" monuments and spectacular landscapes, national parks endowed nature with emblematic immortality, thus securing the place of the natural in the archive of national symbols and ascribing to it the role as marker, or in Runte's words, "proof of national greatness" (14). By the beginning of the 20th century, national park advocates saw themselves faced with the task of recasting the significance of national parks in economic terms without losing sight of their cultural and symbolic value. Triggered by attempts of foresters, reclamationists, and civil engineers to open up parks to sustained-yield forest management,[33] preservationists and proponents of the *See America First* movement changed their rhetorical strategy and emphasized the economic advantages of national parks as "playgrounds of the nation," a designation coined in 1909 by George Otis Smith, then director of the U.S. Geological Survey. Smith's phrase was inspired by John Muir's understanding of parks as "fountains of life," i.e., as recreational spaces that make "for increased and maintained efficiency" (G.O. Smith quoted in Runte 1997: 96). The idea behind this argument was,

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33 Runte notes that the 1864 Yosemite Park Act described the park as "reserved forest lands" (1997: 84).

of course, that the value of national parks is not only aesthetic or symbolic but also economic. For one thing, quality recreation would increase labor productivity; for another, it would keep more American tourist dollars within the country's own borders. In a speech delivered at the National Parks Conference in January 1917, Scott Ferris, Chairman of the House Committee on the Public Land, estimated that "more than $ 500,000,000 is expended by our American people every year abroad vainly hunting for wonders and beauties only half as grand as nature has generously provided for them at home" (Ferris quoted in Runte 1997: 105). For Runte, this strategic shift in preservationist rhetoric is important because it "considerably strengthened the park idea in the United States" (Runte 1997: 105) and made it acceptable in governmental circles otherwise concerned only with the nation's economic and technological progress.

Runte's national park history is not only a comprehensive narrative of the conception and creation of one of America's most distinct and distinguished cultural icons. It also reveals, more by implication than by critical intention, the cultural and political complexities of ecological thought, particularly in showing the persuasive function of monumentalism (i.e., the rhetorical casting of landscapes as cultural monuments) in debates about environmental protection. But most of all, Runte's historiographic account reminds us of the representative function and the referential character of national parks. Although their function as natural preserves and reminders of our ecological embeddedness cannot and should not be denied, national parks are trademarks of cultural identity – they represent America and evoke patriotic sentiments. In 1923, preservationist Robert Sterling Yard referred to national parks as "the Exposition of the Scenic Supremacy of the United States" (quoted in Runte 1997: 210). And, as Runte observed, he spent a lifetime defending national parks "as evidence of the country's spiritual evolution and cultural superiority" (211).

When he proposed turning Bravo 20 into a national park, Misrach tapped into this American tradition of articulating national identity and patriotism through references to landscape. The designation of less spectacular, less monumental landscapes as national parks, proponents of this view argued, would profit from their association in the public imagination with non-material, albeit nationally significant values. And, therefore, the expansion of national park territory carries the potential to promote a shift in thinking about the effects of urban and

industrial development. Although inspired by comparable environmental concerns, Misrach's proposal is anchored in an argumentative logic originating from the late 1920s. In an effort to expand its sphere of authority, the National Park Service, a federal office created by an act of Congress in 1916, promoted the establishment of local, regional, and urban national parks in locations that were considered unable to compete in scale with the grandeur, sublime scenery, ruggedness, and primeval nature of its Western prototypes (Yellowstone, Yosemite), but whose historical and archeological topography was as worthy of preservation as majestic scenery. Significantly, many of the sites granted national park status under this new, extended doctrine were military parks, Civil War battlefields, cemeteries, and memorials hitherto under the auspices of the War Department (see Runte 1997: 219). Misrach was fully aware of this precedent. Explaining the unique quality of the Bravo 20 site, and in concurrence with the idiomatic conventions of national park application rhetoric, he writes:

> Bravo 20 National Park would be a unique and powerful addition to our current park system. In these times of extraordinary environmental concern, it would serve as a permanent reminder of how military, government, corporate and individual practices can harm the earth. In the spirit of Bull Run and the Vietnam Memorial, it would be a national acknowledgment of a complex and disturbing period in our history. […] A contemporary version of a Civil War battleground, Bravo 20 National Park would not only provide a graphic record of our treatment of less celebrated landscapes but also help to deter their destruction in the future. (1990: 95)

"A Proposal" grew out of the collaborative work of Misrach with landscape architects Burton & Spitz of Santa Monica, California, and two visual artists, Mathew Miller and Rico Solinas, who provided the ground plans and architectural drawings for a visitors' center, museum, café, and other infrastructure, as well as illustrative sketches of the scenery and biota constituting the character of the future park (Fig. 7). The site as envisioned by Misrach and his collaborators would be complete with a driveway ("Devastation Drive"), a system of boardwalks modeled after that of Yellowstone, a viewing tower, and a site for "primitive camping." Combining historical and environmental education with an opportunity to enjoy "a dramatic and revealing aerial view" (98), structurally, Bravo 20 National Park would not differ from other parks of its kind. Yet the history it preserved would not be

presented as heroic (unlike presentations of the Civil War's history). It would memorialize more of the devastatingly tragic and traumatic dimensions of the Vietnam War experience, an event that seriously disrupted the nation's social and political cohesion and its domestic peace. In addition to the unflattering history of the military's land grab

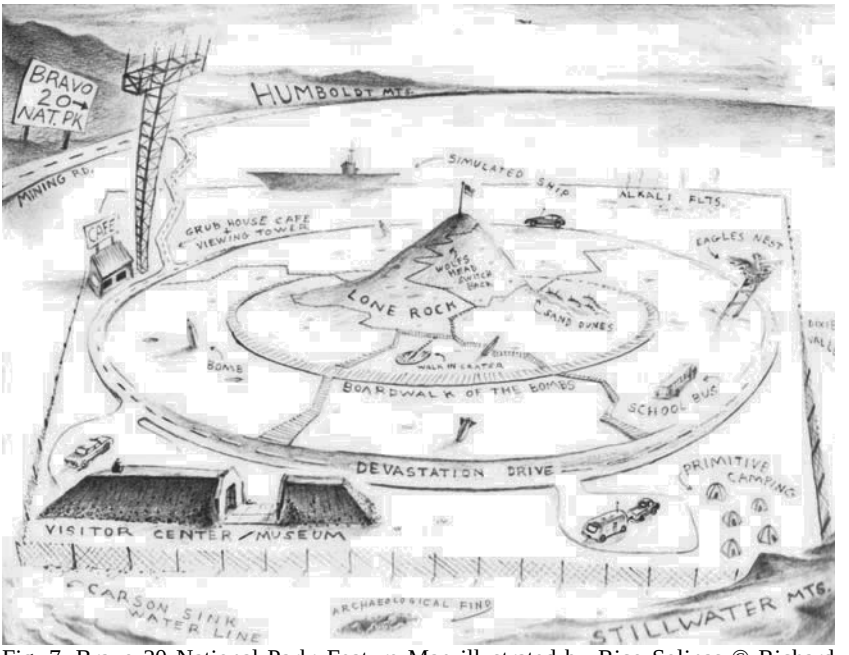

Fig. 7. Bravo 20 National Park: Feature Map illustrated by Rico Solinas © Richard Misrach, 1990. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, SF, Marc Selwyn Fine Art, LA, Pace/Mac Gill Gallery, NY.

narrated in Part 1 of *Bravo 20*, and the environmental havoc wrought on the desert documented in Part 2, the "Proposal" also foregrounds the ecological and cultural devastation resulting from the bellicose mindset bolstered by the wasteland discourse: The land is interlarded with dangerous military debris (which would be viewed in a Walk-In Crater), giving the visitor "a sense of both the often deceptive scale and the power of an explosive blast" (108). The Subterranean Window in the museum complex would make it possible to glance at the shrapnel buried in the ground. And Lone Rock's spiritual significance for Numa Indians would be remembered with a site plaque at the trailhead. Each of these proposed aspects point beyond the boundaries of

the proposed national park and raise questions about the state of America's cultural and ideological constitution and its psychological side effects.

The transformation of Bravo 20 from a military into an educational sandbox would liberate the desert from its confinement in the wasteland discourse and integrate it into a heterotopic discourse. Kevin Hetherington argues, that the "power of the concept of heterotopia lies in its ambiguity" (1997: 51) as both a site of order and a site of resistance, and in its revelatory character. A Bravo 20 National Park meets these criteria on several counts. It suggests new ways of ordering modern society's relationship to the land and fosters its recognition as an ecologically, culturally, and spiritually significant factor, first, by exposing the contaminative effects of established modes of acting and ordering in an exemplary area. Second, by exposing the conflicted history of land ownership and legal maneuverings employed to withdraw the terrain from the public domain and turn it over to the military, Bravo 20 National Park would function as a chronicle of resistance. And third, the proposed project's revelatory character would emerge from its structural similitude with both the bombing range and the national park. For Hetherington, the "process of similitude is revelatory," because

> like a collage, it brings forward the out-of-place and offers it up as a basis for alternative perspectives and orderings, revealing what is hidden among the ruins: little fragments of past, forgotten lives, found objects, strange, unsettling novel things that have poetic wonder about them. (50)

Far from being turned into a place that reveals "what is hidden among the ruins," Bravo 20 is still a bombing range closed off from the public and a site where new ruins are created daily. With the passage of the Military Lands Withdrawals Act of 1999, Congress renewed the Bravo 20 land lease for another twenty years after the first term expired in November of 2001. However, unwilling to wait (perhaps forever) for Bravo 20 National Park to be realized, Misrach created an imaginative heterotopia, accessible in book form. Part of *Desert Cantos*, *Bravo 20* is a work that acknowledges the ecologically complex, and historically and culturally complicated legacy of conquest, etched into the Nevada desert by Indians, settlers, soldiers, and tourists.

4 Desert Matters in the Borderlands: Alfredo Véa, Jr.

In recent decades, the border between Mexico and the United States has moved closer to the center of public attention (both inside and outside academia). Two intersecting issues dominate the debates within and about this highly complex space: the politics of territoriality, and the politics of cultural identity. The title of this section calls up two tropes: borderland and desert. Both terms, although they do not represent identical geographical territories, do refer to more or less the same region. While "desert" draws attention to topography, climate and ecology, "borderlands" highlights the presence of a geopolitical dividing line between two national economies that has far-reaching cultural, social, and personal consequences.[34] It is the space, as Gloria Anzaldúa so pointedly remarked in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds," and "the lifeblood of two worlds merg[es] to form a third country – a border

[34] The Mexican-U.S. border is a site where experiences of violence, humiliation, hostility and other forms of power abuse are nothing unusual and are particularly directed against people of color, no matter what their citizenship, as well as against their white allies. In "The Border Patrol State," first published in *The Nation* on October 17, 1994, Leslie Marmon Silko describes the end of an era when "cruis[ing] down the open road and across the vast desert plateaus" of New Mexico and Arizona provided her "with a wonderful sensation of absolute freedom" (1996: 115). As a result of then President Reagan's launching of the War On Drugs in the 1980s, the disciplinary arms of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Border Patrol "have implemented policies that interfere with the rights of U.S. citizens to travel freely within our borders" (118). Summarizing experiences of harassments at the border, she writes: "I was detained once at Truth or Consequences, despite my and my companion's Arizona driver's licenses. Two men, both Chicanos, were detained at the same time, despite the fact that they too presented ID and spoke English without the thick Texas accents of the Border Patrol agents. While we were stopped, we watched as other vehicles – whose occupants were white – were waved through the checkpoint. White people traveling with brown people, however, can expect to be stopped on suspicion they work with the sanctuary movement, which shelters refugees. White people who appear to be clergy, those who wear ethnic clothing or jewelry, and women with very long hair or very short hair (they could be nuns) are also frequently detained; white men with beards or men with long hair are likely to be detained, too, because Border Patrol agents have profiles of 'those sorts' of white people who may help political refugees. […] Alleged increases in illegal immigration by people of Asian ancestry mean that the Border Patrol now routinely detains anyone who appears to be Asian or part Asian, as well" (118-119).

culture"(3). The third-space character of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands has elicited another spatial metaphor, that of heterotopia. Drawing attention to particular forms of social and cultural ordering, heterotopia supplements and, at the same time, expands the conceptual implications of desert and borderlands. Yet this triumvirate of desert, borderlands, and heterotopia is critically unbalanced. Unlike borderlands and heterotopia,[35] desert is a neglected, under-theorized aspect of, yet a prominent semiotic element in Chicano/a writing.

For example, in Benjamin Alire Sáenz' 1995 novel *Carry Me Like Water*, Maria Elena Ramirez, one of the central characters reinvents herself as Helena, a white middle-class woman of Italian background, moves to California's Bay Area, and keeps her 'true' identity a secret from her friends and husband. She eventually confesses: "I was born in the desert, and I was poor, and I had nothing, and I wasn't raised in a suburb, and I'm not Italian – ". (1996: 98) Her social and ethnic/racial origins are located, not in a particular town, nor in "the borderlands" but "in the desert." For another of Sáenz' Chicano characters, Joaquin, who lives in San Francisco and is sick with AIDS, the desert carries different meanings: "The desert loved him, was good to him, gave him food, provided a place to run and play" (109). And for a group of Anglo characters, it is "a place that was foreign and strange and barren" (357). Sáenz' textualized desert – catering to emotional, nutritional, and ludic needs for some characters while embodying social stigma and representing the strange and unfamiliar for others – becomes a marker of cultural and ethnic/racial but also of gender and generational difference. Juanita Angel, a first generation American in Arturo Islas' modern classic *The Rain God: A Desert Tale* (1984), and Ygnacia Delgado (or Lobo), Pat Mora's maternal aunt and one of the major informants for the author's autobiographical memoir *House of Houses* (1997) exemplify the gendered and generational nature of cultural approaches to the desert. Juanita is a woman born early in the 20th century "who would have gotten rid of the dust in the desert if she could" (Islas 1984: 147). Like Mama Chona, her mother-in-law and the Angel family matriarch, Juanita associates the desert with a low

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35 Of the two, border/borderlands is the concept drawing most attention from Chicano/a writers and their critics. See Anzaldúa 1987, Anzaldúa 1993, Calderón and Saldívar 1991, Saldívar 1997, Michaelson and Johnson 1997. For critical employments of heterotopia in the context of Chicano/a writing see Morales 1996 and Görling 1997.

social and ethno-racial status. For both women, the desert's domestic defeat is a sign of success and arrival in America. Likewise, "Lobo, the frustrated, frenzied sweeper and cleaner, struggled to control the gritty desert and its wildness" in order "to clear space for a more genteel life, a clean life, a pure life" (Mora 1997: 41). In both cases, the defeat of the desert, its conquest so to speak, is perceived as the equivalent of arrival in America, or more precisely, as the realization of the social and economic utopia called America.

These representative examples illustrate: desert matters in the borderlands. If America is signified by the absence of the desert, its erasure from the lives of those who were born and raised in that landscape, then what is the meaning of the desert's literary affirmation in a novel such as Alfredo Véa, Jr.'s *La Maravilla* (1993)?

I want to suggest that the significance of the desert for the constitution of the borderland's heterotopic character should not be underestimated. As a topography *straddling geopolitical boundaries*, whose borders are fuzzy, and whose definition is a matter of cultural parallax,[36] the desert offers itself as a metaphor that links the borderland's social, cultural, and political history to its topographical and ecological corporeality; and it emphasizes the shared identity of border culture in spite of and beyond the historical arbitrariness of political boundaries. I will elaborate this argument in two steps. First, I will formulate a critique of the urban biases in critical Chicano/a and border discourse. Against the background of a brief discussion of Alejandro Morales' 1996 essay on "Dynamic Identities in Heterotopia," I will focus on José David Saldívar and Rosaura Sánchez' respective readings of Arturo Islas' *The Rain God*, and juxtapose them with feminist commentaries on the desert's presence in Chicana writing. And second, I will offer my reading of Alfredo Véa, Jr.'s *La Maravilla* (1993) as a retrospective heterotopia, and as a novel whose author represents the desert as an enabling landscape that affects change, provides perspective and shelter, generates knowledge and culture, and thus ultimately redefines (metropolitan) America.

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36 For a definition of cultural parallax see my discussion of Gary Paul Nabhan in Chapter One.

Urban Biases in Critical Chicano/a Discourse

In America's cultural and political imaginary, the Mexico-U.S. borderland exists as a peripheral, de-centered, rhizomatic formation, represented by the wide and open spaces of the desert as well as such urban conglomerates as El Paso/Ciuadad Juarez and San Diego/Tijuana. These border cities find their inland counterparts in San Antonia and Los Angeles. These cities are the real and imagined locations of past and present Chicano/a existence. Born and raised "in Montebello, California, a region with the greatest Chicano population in the world" (Morales 1996: 22), Alejandro Morales, in "Dynamic Identities in Heterotopia," offers five possible names for the culturally and historically rich mix of urban and non-urban landscapes he inhabits. Gradually expanding the borders of his 'home territory,' he lists them as Southern California, the Southwest, the West, the United States, and North America. For Morales, Foucault's concept of heterotopia – a space characterized by the disorderly coexistence and simultaneous presence of "fragments of a large number of possible orders" – "explains the border culture experienced daily in the urban zone between Santa Barbara, California, and Tijuana, Mexico" (23). Furthermore, citing Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* (1990), Morales represents the borderlands as a metropolitan space clustered around the two "supercores" (Davis) of Los Angeles and San Diego-Tijuana. He then claims that, in a very literal sense, the urban-suburban conglomerate covering Southern California is "a place that for the last hundred years my ancestors helped build" (22). Many of them, who came to California in the early 20th century, found employment with Simons Brick Company. Founded in 1906, the company soon became the world's largest brick-producing enterprise, fabricating most of the material used in urban development during the opening decades of that century. Because Chicano/a laborers participated in the transformation of (the California part of) the borderlands from a rural landscape into a gigantic metropolis, urbanity became an important marker of new Chicano/an identities. How does this connect to the desert?

While some geographers would contest the indiscriminate definition of Southern California as desert, others have argued that a city like Los Angeles was originally conjured from the desert.[37] Of course,

[37] See Davis 1992: 50; Reisner 1992: 52-103.

the conjurors were the tycoons of America's economy and their political collaborators. Yet as Morales pointed out, they depended for a large part on Mexican and Mexican-American labor to realize their versions of the American Dream. The participation in what early 20th-century irrigation boosters celebrated as "the conquest of the desert" (William Smythe) implicates Mexican migrant workers and their Chicano/a descendents in America's imperial project of 'civilizing' the continent's 'wilderness' and of transforming indigenous nature into American culture. This culturally symptomatic context of Chicano/a social history may explain the equation of desert with (Mexican) past and city with (American) present and future, as well as the poetic juxtaposition of these two spaces in Chicano/a writing. But does it also account for the urban bias in critical Chicano/a discourse?

In *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997), Saldívar reads Arturo Islas' two autobiographical novels *The Rain God: A Desert Tale* (1984) and *Migrant Souls* (1990) as representative examples for the semiotic and structural significance of space and spatiality in Chicano/a writing. "Typically," he writes of *Migrant Souls*, "the spatial poetics revolve around not only hemispheric migrations but also rooms that are disturbing spaces within spaces" (Saldívar 1997: 82). And he proposes that "a map of spaces – an architecture of rooms – rather than a history proper is the central aim of the novel" (ibid.). In *The Rain God*, Saldívar detects "an intense physical feel for rooms – parlors, sickrooms, hospital operating rooms, and writing rooms" (ibid.). This critical concentration on architectural spaces obscures the eco-spatial significance of the desert in Islas' writing.

However, images of the desert invading the enclosed private spaces of *la familia*, their houses and bodies, appear throughout *The Rain God* and determine the poetic rhythm of the narrative. For example, from the perspective of Mama Chona, the matriarchal center of Islas' semi-fictional family saga, the borderland is coterminous with a "desert of thorns and ashes" (Islas 1991: 173), a place "far from the green and tropical place of her birth" (165). The hyperbolized topographical differences between the desert and the tropical interior of Mexico not only indicate the geographical distance Mama Chona has covered on her life's journey but the imaginative and imaginary aloofness from the entire spectrum of her ethno-racial origins. Yet her self-construction and the construction of her family as heirs to a genteel

Spanish tradition – *la gente decente* – turns out to be built upon an extremely precarious scaffolding. The desert brings this to the fore in a very corporeal manner. Here, intense sunlight threatens to accentuate Mama Chona's (and some other family members') brown complexion. Located in the desert and exposed to its strong light, her body reveals the truth that her constructed family history is frantic to cover up – an indigenous lineage and heritage. As the natural environment surrounding the social and ethno-racial order of her rigorous Hispanicism, the desert functions as the entropic challenge to Mama Chona's "fairy-tale world" (27) of ethnic and racial purity, not to mention its moral and religious propriety. When her grandson Miguel Chico – Saldívar characterizes him as "the central consciousness" (1997: 80) of the novel[38] – watches as his father Miguel Grande (Mama Chona's son), begins an affair with the widow of his best friend, "he saw his mother's romantic dreams for herself vanish into the desert" (Islas 1991: 56). Here, the desert assumes an entirely different function. It is a sanctuary for unrealizable dreams and hopes, but also quite literally a refuge for those who, although they seem to fulfill Mama Chona's dream of Anglo-Americanization, do not comply with her sense of respectability: her sister Cuca who "was secretly proud of having lighter skin than Mama Chona" (147) lives with Mister Davis, an Anglo man – but in a common-law marriage; their house is "out in the desert beyond the canyon" (147). Miguel Chico, struck by a terminal sickness and bound to "his own deathbed at the university hospital" (4), reviews his life and longs "to return to the desert of his childhood, not to the family but to the place" (5). Here, the desert designates home, belonging, and origin point, a place surpassing in comfort that of the otherwise beloved city "far from the place of his birth" (5). These examples illustrate the semiotic importance of the desert, and its poetic equality to architectural spaces in the work of one of the most prominent Chicano writers.

As a critic, Saldívar is not, however, totally unaware of the cultural weight of (natural) landscapes in the borderlands. In *Border Matters*, he concedes that "the U.S.-Mexico borderlands were once an ecological whole, with Mexico blending into the present-day southwestern American landscape" (1997: 18) But then he immediately

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38 Saldívar refers to *The Rain God*'s sequel, *Migrant Souls*, but the definition also applies to the earlier novel.

proceeds to quote Américo Paredes and describes the territory along the border as a space that "'shows a clustering of farming towns' and sprawling urban contact zones along both riverbanks, 'with lonely gaps to the north and to the south'" (ibid). Ecological assessments of the borderlands play a role in discussions of the environmental devastations caused by the rank growth of "*maquiladeros* pouring out toxic waste and endangering life chances and life experiences on both sides of the border" (19). The effects on the physical constitution of bodies living in the borderlands is horrendous, as the increase in the late 1980s and 90s of anencephalic births (births of babies with incomplete brains) in the Rio Grande Valley indicates.[39] But the desert, topographical symbol for the "ecological whole" of a terrain cut in half by the political vagaries and calculations of North America's imperial history, disappears from Saldívar's discussion of the poetry, songs, and fiction of the borderlands. Although this absence is regrettable, it is hardly surprising. Because of its disciplinary origins in socio-political activism (Martí; the Chicano Movement), historiography (Paredes), and anthropology (Renato Rosaldo), and due to its intellectual affinity with the Birmingham school of cultural studies and the public institutions of urban America, "the emergent Chicano/a cultural studies movement" has not only "focused on the strategies of racial formation and ethnicity in the U.S.-Mexico border culture" (25), but also on the aesthetic engagement of Chicano/a writing (and art) with the geopolitics and architecture of urban spaces.

Rosaura Sánchez' critique of "Ideological Discourses in Arturo Islas' *The Rain God*" is not primarily concerned with space as a poetic and rhetorical category. A powerful and detailed Marxist reading of the novel's critical performance and (re-)articulation of the ideologies underlying patriarchy, ethnic and class prejudices, and Catholicism, her essay focuses on "the representation […] of the social practices of three generations of the Angel family as well as on the ideological discourses used by the characters to represent, interpret and make sense of their experience" (Sánchez 1991: 117). But does Sánchez pay attention to the social practice of and the ideology underlying the repression of the family's Mexican heritage and its cultural, social, and

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39 Saldívar cites Ana Arana's 1992 *San Francisco Examiner Image* magazine article. Its title, "The Wasteland" alludes to the devastating effects of an out-of-control Western techno-scientific culture depicted in T.S. Eliot's famous poem of the same title (see Salidívar 1997: 19).

racial/ethnic genealogy, a procedure that is articulated in *The Rain* God through metaphors of the desert?

Sánchez notes in passing that Miguel Chico perceives of the place he was born and grew up in as "the desert of his youth" (118) and "the desert of his childhood" (119); and she acknowledges that the novel was conceived by the author as a "desert tale" (119), set in a "border Texas town in the desert" (124). In the closing paragraph of her essay, she offers an interpretation of the desert's poetic function as a Bakhtinian chronotype, and as a narrative element that "provides the text with a unifying thread that ties various deplorable acts together: suicide, murder, poverty, infirmity, death" (126). While this is a valid observation, the association of the desert with "various deplorable acts" puts Miguel Chico's longing for the desert of his childhood in a rather dark light. After all, he dreams of returning to a place that not only tolerated these "deplorable acts," but also signified all that his family sought to repress. The return to the desert, then, does not signify the sublimated death wish of a sick man, but his desire to re-visit the inadmissible sites of his cultural, social, and ethical heritage.

At the discursive interface of Chicana/o Studies with Feminist Theory and Gender Studies on the one hand, and Ecocriticism and Environmental Studies on the other, the significance of the desert as a crucial metaphor attracts more critical attention. In the closing chapter of *The Southwest in American Literature and Art* (1997), David W. Teague intimates the emergence of new forms of desert writing responding to and yet diverging from the paradigms that first surfaced during America's Progressive Era. According to Teague, Gloria Anzaldúa represents the Chicano/a experience with the land in this ensemble of new voices. The desert in her *Borderlands/La Frontera* is the geographical marker of historical continuance and cultural resistance, and the "center" that will hold amidst the social, political, and linguistic "revolution" in the borderland. For Anzaldúa, he argues, "It is the desert landscape, the arid country that Western European culture has never quite understood, the Borderlands, *la Frontera*, a land that has […] survived possession and ill use by five countries: Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the United States, the Confederacy, and the United States again" (Teague 1997: 169). Important as Teague's discussion of the desert in Anzaldúa's text is, it remains epigrammatic.

Tey Diana Rebolledo's essay on "Tradition and Mythology: Signatures of Landscape in Chicana Literature" (first published in 1987, the same year *Borderlands/La Frontera* appeared), lays open the rich and multi-layered pattern of a Chicana desert/landscape poetics that preceded Anzaldúa's text. Rebolledo provides exemplary readings of novels, poems and short stories by Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, Cleofas Jaramillo, Rebecca González, Denise Chávez, Pat Mora, Patricia Preciado Martin, and others, women who represent different generations and social experiences within what was once referred to as Mexican-American history. While de Baca and Jaramillo represent a generation of women who perceived themselves primarily as Hispanic, González, Chávez, Mora, and Martin, in acknowledgment of their variegated Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and American heritages, identify as Chicana. Despite "a vast ideological and political gulf between these two terms" (Rebolledo 1997: 97), both generations articulate their sense of cultural identity and belonging, and the significance of past and present values for their daily lives through metaphors and images of the desert/landscape. In contrast to Anglo-American conceptualizations of the desert "as a waste of wilderness," many of these writers depict it "as a landscape where people are integrated with nature" (103). Landscape functions as "a link with old traditions" and affords "a sense of survival" (114); or it is "vibrant with eroticism engendered through images of the land as sensual woman" (117), thus indicating a strong tie between the authors' sense of self and the land. Last but not least, these "early writers saw the desert […] as a bountiful garden with wild plants to be harvested and used for nourishment or for healing" (123), also reflected by the central role the figure of the *curandera*, or healer, plays in Chicana writing.

Not all feminist critics meet the imaginative symbiosis of (Chicana) women and the desert/landscape with the same enthusiasm as Rebolledo. For example, German Americanist Heike Paul critically submits that while the "semiotization of nature in border discourse functions as empowerment, as a claiming of space and land – as a means of locating one's self" (1999: 192), in some cases – as in Pat Mora's poems – this "may account for [an] ambiguous, often romantic and idealistic symbolism," and for an "essentialist ring and […] emphasis on a 'naturalized' rootedness" (193). Concluding a reading of Mora's "La Migra," Paul contends that the narrator in this prose poem "re-enforces binary oppositions – man/woman; technology/nature –

which contrary to the theoretical claims of borderlands theory do not leave any hybrid, in-between space for the fluidity and the resignification of meaning at the border" (189). Granted, Mora's (strategic) essentialism[40], surfacing in recurring associations of desert and woman in her poetry, runs the risk of consolidating the dividing walls between 'us' and 'them' that she purports to rock. But her use of the desert in "La Migra" does not so much gesture towards an identification of (immigrant) woman and nature (in its configuration as desert) as to the woman's *intimate knowledge* of the desert, a challenging terrain, which becomes the prerequisite of her (imagined) power over border patrol technology: "All you have is heavy: hat / glasses, badge, shoes, gun. / I know this desert, / where to rest, / where to drink" (qtd. in Paul 1999: 187). With these lines, the lyrical I, an underprivileged Mexican woman (a maid), reclaims her home territory, controlled and appropriated by but not 'belonging' to America. From the culturally dominant perspective of the border patrol, the Mexican woman is a foreigner and trespasser. Yet her close acquaintance with the (allegedly) 'foreign land' – she knows exactly were to rest and drink – tells a different story. The desert in "La Migra," cautiously marked as 'natural' via allusions to water, is primarily a spatial symbol for 'home' and 'belonging.' It represents the cultural parallax of territoriality rather than physical essence or nature. Mexican maid and American border patrol represent a national conflict rooted in an economic and social power differential. Yet at the same time, they also represent the power of geo-topographical knowledge as juxtaposed to the instrumental power of technological control. In a world of historically shifting geopolitical affiliations, Mora employs (desert) topography and landscape as figures that legitimize, rather than essentialize or naturalize, a Mexican presence on U.S. territory.

The refusal of critics like Saldívar, Sánchez, and Paul to accept the critical poetic potential of a 'natural' landscape such as the desert is understandable, given the foundational role of nature in discourses and politics of subjugation. The naturalization and concomitant commodification of subaltern subjects (women, people of color, queers) is a strategy used by the agents of dominant cultures and ideologies to neutralize the counter-hegemonic, subversive power of the Other. In

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40 On the link of woman and nature as a form of "strategic essentialism" employed by ecofeminist writers and critics see Alaimo 2000.

her essay on "Border *Arte*" (1993), Anzaldúa cites the example of a 1992 exhibit *Aztec: The World of Moctezuma*, mounted in the Denver Museum of Natural History. The choice of this particular location exemplifies the ongoing subjugation of indigenous cultures under the sign of nature. Yet to banish nature from culture, or in other words, to bar it from entry into the realm of the social and the cultural is not only impossible (the gritty desert keeps 'invading' the home); it also forecloses critical rearticulations and reevaluations of the concept of nature itself, a major task in the age of ecological crisis.[41] How can the desert be mobilized for that task? If Anzaldúa is right and "Metaphors *are* Gods" (1993: 109), divine creators of meaning and significance, then what are the meanings and what is the significance created by the metaphor of the desert? With the following reading of Alfredo Véa's *La Maravilla* I hope to generate answers to these questions.

Alfredo Véa's Desert Heterotopia

Twisted Desert Marvels

Set in the late 1950s, the story of Véa's *La Maravilla* is located at the fringe of the fringe, in the U.S.-Mexico borderland near Phoenix, Arizona. The narrative's topographical center is Buckeye Road, a small-town community crouched between Phoenix, a metropolitan outpost of WASP America in the Southwest, and the desert landscape of Southern Arizona.[42] Buckeye Road is a microcosmic border culture, inhabited or traversed by Mexicans, Native Americans of various tribal backgrounds (Yaquis, Mayos, Papagos, Apaches), "Arkies," white migrant workers from Arkansas, African Americans, and two Chinese-American families; the people of Buckeye Road are prostitutes and reverends, farmhands and laborers, hairdressers, grocers and food service people; and they are straight couples or singles, old and young, lesbians and transvestites. From the 19th-century perspective of Washington Irving, the personnel of Véa's novel would represent nothing

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41 I have adopted and assimilated to my critical purposes in this study Stacy Alaimo's ecological critique of "feminist theory's flight from nature." See Alaimo 2000: 1-13.

42 Phoenix' population grew from 65,000 in 1940 to 439,000 in 1960 (Reisner 1993: 259).

but an "amalgamation of the 'debris' and 'abrasions' of former races, civilized and savage" (Irving 1863: 217). *La Maravilla* is a deconstructive response to this tradition of imperial rhetoric, granting a main role not only to otherwise marginalized actors in mid-20th-century American culture but also to the landscape that is the stage of their lives' performances. The novel tells a story about those who live in the backyard of America's white, middle-class prosperity and under the moral and racial bigotry of the post-war era. As this brief summary indicates, the novel presents the reader with an abstract version of the geopolitical coordinates of the Mexican-American border without relinquishing its ethnic, racial, social, economic, or sexual implications. Véa transposes the national border to Buckeye Road, thereby redefining the political boundary between two unequal nations as the social, cultural, and economic dividing line *within* the (American) nation. In the narrative universe of *La Maravilla*, Buckeye *is* the borderland. It is the spatial metaphor for what Gloria Anzaldúa, borrowing a Nahuatl concept, called "a state of '*nepantla*'" (1993: 110). Nepantla is "an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity" (ibid.).

At first glance and in spite of its obvious emphasis on space and place, *La Maravilla*'s narrative follows a temporal rather than a spatial design. Véa's novel tells the semi-autobiographical story of Alberto (or Beto), a descendant of Spanish and Native American ancestors growing up in post-World War II America. The novel's narrative impulse is mnemonic, and the story takes its initial cue from Beto's grandmother, Josephina, a devout Spanish Catholic and *curandera*. In the "Prólogo" Josephina speaks directly to the reader from her grave and reveals that "The only reason I can speak to you now is because I've hovered around my grandson's head for so long, nagging at him," "teas[ing] at his mind, coax[ing] him with images" (Véa 1994: 2). As a constant presence "in his dreams and in his memory" (2), she "has become part of the organic fabric of things: a set of waves on the pool, a weave in the cloth" (2). Consequently, the figure of the absent grandmother morphs into a permanent symbolic occasion for Beto's autobiographical project of self-determination and self-identification. Dream and memory become the rhetorical spaces in which the story of Beto's coming-of-age and of the formation of his (and his genera-

tion's) cultural identity unfolds, and they are the textual foundation of *La Maravilla*.[43] At the same time, Beto's memories and dreams, mediated through a third-person narrator, spread out horizontally, across a map of distinct topographical locations in and around Buckeye Road. Gradually, the temporal structure of the coming-of-age novel yields its narrative authority to the spatiality of the narrative location.

It is Buckeye's location between desert and city that signifies its symbolic location between Mexico and America and, ultimately, defines the novel's heterotopic character. Although placed within sight of each other, the distance between Buckeye and Phoenix is astronomical:

> When streetlights went on in Phoenix, Buckeye stayed in the dark. For Buckeye, the lights of Phoenix were only a constellation, low on the horizon, one that did not move with the seasons. (23)

Through the poetic spatiality generated by images of light and darkness, and by the metaphoric representation of the city as an immovable, astral figure detached from terrestrial rhythms, Véa creates a postmodern literary topography that casts the dichotomous juxtaposition of city and countryside, the urban and the rural so characteristic of Romantic and modernist literary traditions in a larger, cosmological context. In this topography, the city is located on the distant, low horizon, still closer to the land than to the sky and yet strangely hovering above the ground. At the same time, it is a material threat to Buckeye's very existence. Like other small communities "on the spreading fringe of Phoenix," it was "forced outward into the desert by malls and convalescent homes and peewee golf courses for the retired gringos who had come down for the air," or for the profits to be yielded from "Glendale and Paradise Valley, Arizona's two miracles of modern irrigation" (24).

Pushed into the desert by the city, Buckeye seems to adapt to the landscape. With its dusty roads, its tireless trailers, rusty cars, tar-

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43 In an essay about *The Silver Cloud Café* (1996), Véa's second novel and, like *La Maravilla*, part of a trilogy dealing with the subject of cultural identity and memory in the context of Spanish and American imperial histories, Roberto Cantú suggests that "the rhetoric of memory and forgetfulness […] serves as the novel's textual foundation" (2001: 212). This was also true for Véa's first novel.

paper houses, and old-fashioned adobes, and symbolically located on the dark side of modernity, Buckeye is a place where people "still live on mud and […] shit down holes in the ground," as Beto's mother, alienated from her childhood home, drastically observed (22). For her, Buckeye is a "junk heap of a town" (22), for the man delivering stationery to Buckeye's local store it is "an eyesore" (183). From the dominant perspective of the metropolis, Buckeye's desolation equals that of the desert. But Véa's desert is far from being a cultural and historical void. Marked in the text as Aztlán (the mythical location of Chicano/a identity), as the Yaquis' "beloved desert" (45), and as the place where "people […] spoke […] with a hundred different tongues long before Spanish and longer before English" (44), the desert is presented as a landscape deeply saturated with mythical and historical meaning, inscribed by the eventful communications and miscommunications, interactions, exchanges and confrontations between indigenous Americans, Spanish colonists, and their Mexican descendants. Even Josephina's strict Catholicism – she instructs her grandson that he can bring anybody into their home but "no *ateos*. Do you hear me? No atheists!" (98) – eventually succumbs to the force of seemingly impossible life which nevertheless is generated in and by the desert. Laughing out loud, Josephina

> startled herself with the force of laughter and wondered at its origin. For all the desolation of this place, there was a lot of life here, she thought. Nothing fancy. Basic life like the cactus and the wildflowers. Twisted life like the desert plants that had learned to live on nothing but a drop of rain a year. (98-99)

Even though Josephina still perceives desert life as "twisted," it provides her, and the novel, with a paradigm to acknowledge and appreciate life forms otherwise dismissed, marginalized, or simply invisible to a culture oblivious to the desert. The "twisted" life that survives in this unassuming ecology is metaphorically linked with the "queer" life of the Buckeye community. In this symbolic association of the ecological and the socio-cultural lies the character of the novel as an imaginative heterotopia. That is, by clothing Josephina's acceptance of the "abominations" (98) flocking to Buckeye Road in environmental references, Véa's novel introduces the desert as crucial for defining the heterotopic parameters of the borderland.

Locating his narrative in an interstitial space between city and desert, the author of *La Maravilla* shifts the focus of Chicano/a discourses of the border as the geo-political space between nations to a more succinctly metaphorical perception of the border as a heterotopic space between cultures, ideologies, and established social orders. Following Hetherington's conceptualization of heterotopia as "spaces of alternate ordering" (1997: viii), yet extending his emphasis on *social* ordering and organization to include environmental questions, my analysis of spatiality in Véa's *La Maravilla* is interested in Buckeye Road as an imaginary *ecological* heterotopia. In other words, I am concerned with uncovering the novel's ecological subtext, which I see semiotically anchored in images of the desert. If, as Hetherington contends, heterotopia "are spaces in which a new way of ordering emerges that stands in contrast to the taken-for-granted mundane idea of social order that exists within society" (40), then an ecocritical reading of *La Maravilla* implies an examination of the novel's relation to the dominant (or 'taken-for-granted') ideas of the American desert as garden, Orient, and wilderness.

Interstitial Badlands

Through his grandparents, his neighbors and friends, and his restless mother (who escaped the restraints of her own mother's Catholic morality by becoming a teenage mother, taking off for the big city with Beto's father), Beto is exposed to a variety of lives that converge on Buckeye Road, a liminal space in the sense that the regulatory mechanisms of otherwise effective legal and moral codes are suspended there. "The nearest courtroom was fifteen miles away" (Véa 1993: 183); and several days pass before the police appear to investigate the violent death of one of Buckeye Road's inhabitants. Meanwhile, the community protects Boydeen, the perpetrator and previous target of her victim's violence, from arrest by the city's representatives of law and order. Her transgression is recognized as an act of self-defense; she does penance for her crime by going underground (into the basement of Buckeye Road's market place) and becoming the community's secret chronicler. A similar leniency is exercised towards transgressions of the dominant society's racial and sexual order. Buckeye Road is the domicile of Vernetta, a Cajun woman whose father and

brother killed her Black Caribbean lover, father of her unborn baby; she makes her living as a prostitute and is a good friend of Josephina, who eventually helps Vernetta find her lost son. The five *maricones*, "two blacks, two whites and one Mexican, boys who met at college, the University of Texas, and who had managed to turn their mutual misery and alienation into an odyssey" (102), "quickly became the social and cultural center of secular Buckeye Road" (104), competing with the local bar and the Chinese fast food service, and supplementing its religious center, the Black "Mighty Clouds of Joy Church of God in Christ" (70).

Buckeye Road is also home to Beto's grandparents: Josephina who was born and raised in Andalusia, and Manuel, a Yaqui Indian, whose people originate from the Mexican province of Sonora. Their marriage, although it inverts the original gender positions of Native woman and European male conqueror, is a symbolic reminder of the origin point of Mexicano/a and Chicano/a existence – the transgression of racial boundaries that runs through the hierarchically structured sexual and social order of colonial America. "Did you know that you are blood of unthinkable blood?" Manuel asks his grandson. Continuing the history lesson, Manuel tells Beto that in the "caste system" implemented by the Spanish in "Mexico after the Conquest" "there was no category for a Spanish woman mating an *Indio*. It was unthinkable" (246). The obsessive claim of racial (and cultural) purity, operative at the ideological core of European colonialism, was subverted if not invalidated by colonial practice. Sexual relationships between colonizer and colonized (whether real, imagined, or feared) provided only one of several heterotopic sites whose existence challenged the established order of the dominant society.

Territorial conquest, and its practice of exploiting a territory's natural and human resources, was not only an "ecologically transformative" process that changed the land and life's conditions for its aboriginal inhabitants, as William Cronon has so aptly suggested (1997: 79).[44] It was also a process that affected the cultural identity (and as-

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[44] Although Cronon is referring to New England, a geographical space different from that represented in Véa's novel, his paradigm of reading colonization as ecological transformation also applies to the region that eventually became the American West. Cronon belongs to a group of Western historians who, since the early 1990s, reclaimed the trans-Mississippi West as a relevant subject of American history. "We believe," they wrote, "that one cannot understand the

sumed purity) of the conqueror's society as well. Véa addresses this topic through the complex character of *abuela* Josephina whose 'American' identity is closely associated with the desert. Unlike Arturo Islas' Mama Chona, a Mexicana who anxiously seeks to obliterate her indigenous heritage to the advantage of her Spanish legacy, Josephina is indeed of Spanish origin, having come "all the way from Andalusia into a desert in America" (2). But not even her Spanishness is racially or culturally 'pure.' As a *curandera* she is gifted with "a special understanding of signs and spirits," a streak that Manuel, her Yaqui husband, attributes to "the Moors" "in her family" (34). Véa further amplifies Josephina's hybridity by attributing her powers as a "curing witch" or "healer" (34) to the trans-Atlantic traffic in botanical specimens and medicinal knowledge initiated by Spanish conquerors. "The Spaniards took hundreds of herbs and medicines out of the soil of Aztlán and brought them back to Spain," Manuel explains to his grandson. "Now," he concludes, "she's brought them back where they belong" (34). Thus, Véa raises the issue of cultural contact to yet another, one might say ecological level. The novel suggests that Josephina's botanical knowledge, although hinged on the history and logic of conquest and colonialism, gave her "a power that was somehow tied into the real powers that gripped this land," (2008) the emphasis equally placed on "this" (referring to North America) and "land" (as opposed to stories and ideologies). "Josephina," an omniscient narrator further explains, "kept trying to name the nameless, and somehow Catholic wasn't exactly it, though she desperately wanted it to be" (ibid.). This passage of Véa's novel echoes Austin's dictum that the land, not the law sets the limit – so much so that inherited systems of cultural and spiritual self-identification (Catholicism) need to be reconceptualized from an environmental perspective.

For Hetherington, who draws on the work of Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman, the desire or practice "to name the nameless" is a reaction to experiences of ambivalence in times of social, economic, and cultural upheaval. Together with systems of identification and

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modern United States without coming to terms with its western past" (Cronon, Miles, Gitlin 1992: 6). For these historians, "species shifting," i.e. the ecological transformation of entire regions, is an intricate part of the history of European colonization. Frontier history, far from being a unique American phenomenon, is seen as "part of the worldwide expansion of European economies and nation-states" (9) across the globe.

classification, naming not only constitutes the epistemological and institutional foundation of modernity, it also produces the modern subject and its Other(s). Against this background, Josephina's urge to understand and exercise control over her life in the interstitial, "unthinkable" zones of her American existence through familiar and authoritative religious categories marks her as a modern subject, a characterization also underscored by her predilection for jazz music and the cinema. Far from being merely a resistance to modern processes of secularization, Josephina's insistence on Catholicism as the name for her specific power/knowledge further emphasizes her status as a modern subject. For stripped of its ethical and theological implications, Catholicism is an ideology based on textual rather than experiential or environmental authority; and it is structurally akin to the discourses of modern scientific and economic rationalism in its efforts to control and regulate nature.

In her study on the ecological crisis of reason, Val Plumwood argues that modern economic rationalism regularly assumes but denies or backgrounds the collaborative agency of nature for the long-term spiritual and physical sustenance of (human) life (see Plumwood 2002). A similar logic is operative in Josephina's resistance to accepting anything other than the authoritative text of Catholicism as the foundation of her power. Yet at the same time – and, oddly enough, in spite of herself – she also represents an approach to life that is less defined by technological or rhetorical power over the environment[45] than

[45] In *The Poetics of Imperialism* (1997), Eric Cheyfitz observes that in the Renaissance "the eloquent word" was conceived of "*as* a powerful technology" (24). Against the common assumption of the exclusive power of mechanical technology as an instrument of colonization and conquest, Cheyfitz argues that absent of the rhetorical 'technology' of the eloquent word, mechanical technology is relatively powerless. Shifting his focus from Renaissance England and Shakespearean drama to American Romantics and their quarrel with the progress of industrialism he writes: "Before the Civil War, despite the flowering of the machine (the steamboat, the railroad, the cotton gin, the telegraph, and the improved printing press), the principal form of technology was still eloquence, whereas after the war, marking the decline in the idea of a classical education as normative, technology became the principal form of eloquence" (32). This suggests that although competitors in the social and political struggle for power over nature and geographical space, technology and eloquence are closely related cultural tools for exerting power. The historical scope of Cheyfitz' argument implies that this struggle between technology and

by insights into and an intimate knowledge of the natural world and its effects on human existence. As a *curandera* knowledgeable about the plants and herbs of her desert environment, she accepts and takes on some of the land's life-sustaining and healing properties. At the same time, she denies others and disparages their spiritual and religious qualities. This conflict comes to the narrative surface in descriptions of her relationship with her husband, Manuel, the antagonist in her attempts to raise their grandson as a 'decent' Spanish (or at least Mexican) Catholic.

Described as an "Indian with a thin Christian veneer" (150), Manuel periodically disappears into the desert for spiritual renewal, and enjoys eating cactus and other local foods disdained by his Spanish wife. In terms of gender, race, and religion he is Josephina's inverted, counter-image. Despite his involvement in the modern world – he is a retired railroad and construction worker – and compared with Josephina's conflicted and complicated modern relationship to the land, Manuel is a rather archaic character. For him, modern life, although alienated from the sea and the land, cannot eradicate the rhythms and cadences of nature. A man on his way to work, enjoying the sways of a bus as it is riding "up and down the streets" (36), "would know that his ancestors were sailors, *marineros*, and that the sea is calling to him" (37), if only he had not lost the power to understand the origin of his pleasure. And the men gathered around the TV at night to watch a football game or an action movie would be able to recognize their resemblance to a hunting party at a camp fire. Yet while simulating archaic rhythms and patterns, they have "forsaken" (37) the sea and the land for a life on asphalt, "on cement and carpets" and for jobs in which they "make marks on paper for a living" (37).

Manuel's anthropological interpretation of modern existence, presented to his grandson in the form of an allegorical story, is organized around the double metaphor of "a dim command in the blood" and "a compass in the blood" (37). The body, this metaphor implies, not only remembers but craves being in touch with the land, a craving which, however, is hardly ever noticed, much less acknowledged. Véa introduces this unacknowledged paradox of modern existence early on in the narrative. During one of her rare visits to her parent's home in

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eloquence, between the power of the machine and the power of rhetoric is at the heart of modern culture.

the desert – a place she loathes as much for its lack of modern comforts as she scorns her mother's Catholicism for its twisted and guilt-ridden relationship to the (sexual) body – Lola, Beto's mother, "cursed the dirt floor" of the adobe house because it "made walking in high heels impossible. Balancing in the doorway, she removed one shoe then the other. A strange sigh escaped with her breath as each foot touched the earth" (21). As an expression of sorrow, weariness, and/or relief, the sigh is a gesture which, in this case, contradicts the rhetorical rejection of her parent's home as old-fashioned, backward, and, by implication, un-American. If Lola expressed her rebellion against the confinement of her mother's religious order through her body (by becoming a teenage mother and running away from home), now her body (inadvertently) subverts her embrace of modern America, which she sees represented in Stockton, "a real town" with "real" houses featuring "sliding aluminum windows with real glass" and "a real toilet where I won't have to kick the side to scare the spiders" (22).

If it was through her body that Lola expressed her rebellion against Josephina's influence, represented by her teen-age pregnancy and escape into the space of urban America, the novel offers an alternative for the next generation. Fearing Manuel's influence on their grandson, Josephina submits the boy to several baptisms, a measure that does not, however, keep him from listening as intently to his grandfather's allegories concerning the perils of modern life or his stories about "the Yaqui wars" as he does to his grandmother's memories of "the interior of the now-demolished Downtown Lumiere Theater" (13) in Denver, Colorado where she once accompanied silent movies on the piano, or to her meditations on the nature of good and evil. In the novel, the ideological antagonism between Josephina and Manuel is organized in spatial terms. To accentuate Beto's position between two warring, perhaps even contradictory cultural and religious traditions, Véa places his adolescent character

> between the shafts of dusty light that were his grandfather's preference and the flicker of the red votive candles that was his grandmother's. Unaware and unresisting, Beto became part of the flux that radiated between the two magnetic poles that were his *abuelitos*. (40)

Unlike Josephina who balks at the ambivalences of life in a space-between, Manuel believes in and teaches his grandson a metaphysics of cracks and gaps, a philosophy of cultural hiatus, one might say, in

which new forms of social and cultural life come into being. For as a Yaqui Indian, Manuel is as much an exile in the desert of Southern Arizona as the retired gringos and irrigation farmers.

The Yaquis' (or Yoemem as they call themselves) original home territory is the Rio Yaqui, a river that flows into the Gulf of California from its source in the foothills of the Sierra Madre and through a 6,000-square-mile area, which according to Trudy Griffin-Pierce, "included some of the most fertile regions of Mexico" (2000: 209). Known as the "river people" (Véa 1993: 9), the Yaqui were an agricultural society, practicing both non-irrigation and irrigation agriculture at the time of initial cultural contacts with Europeans in the 16th century. At first they welcomed the Spaniards, whose arrival had been foretold by the Yaquis' mythical Talking Tree. Ready to share their land with the Europeans, their hospitality marked the advent of a history filled with conquest and resistance. For more than three centuries, the Yaquis were able to defend their homelands against all historical and political odds. As Griffin-Pierce observed, "genocide, military occupation, and colonization had not ended Yaqui resistance," but "a policy of deportation of Yaquis to other parts of Mexico outside Sonora" finally did. "The Yaquis," she concludes, "sought political asylum in the United States, which they officially received in 1906" (2000: 214-15). What the Yaquis brought to their American desert exile was a synthetic world view combining Christian and traditional Yaqui elements, one that allowed them to observe their religious ceremonies according to the seasonal rather than the calendrical pattern of the Christian year, and to associate the Virgin "with trees, flowers, and the earth" (223) rather than chastity and moral purity.[46]

Against the background of this cultural history of a land-based spirituality, Manuel's approach to the desert as storied land and as a source of metaphysical metaphors that explain life, contrasts both with traditional Christian beliefs about the desert as a space of temptation or penance, and with the economic values of a society that sees the desert as nothing but a wasteland waiting to be covered with lawns and

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46 Griffin-Pierce notes: "In Yaqui towns, the winter-spring season […] is a time of solemnity, sadness, and restrictive taboos […]. […] In marked contrast, the summer-autumn season is a time of relaxed pleasure and festive abundance as everyone enjoys the blessings conferred by the Virgin, who symbolizes Mother Earth and the bounty of nature" (223).

irrigated fields, and to be translated into the cultural and social grammar of the garden.[47] Locked with his wife in a "war for the child's soul" (Véa 1993: 261), Manuel takes his grandson into the desert on a peyote-induced visionary journey into the family's past. This journey initiates Beto into adulthood, a process sealed by his return from the desert as Alberto. The grandfather prepares the boy for his visionary experience with a lecture on *peyoteros* as "people of the gaps," a space they share with Rosa Parks, who "got up from her seat all alone and became a black magnet in the gaps," and with "every shaman, every conjure man who buries the world-wonder root, every artist, every scientist or schoolteacher that goes to the edge of the usual and acceptable world and risks looking over, risks the sight of real principle, sees right into the gaps" (221).[48] The gaps, Manuel teaches his grandson, are the spaces of alternative knowledge, counter-hegemonic political practice, and an ecological ethics based on organic rather than mechanistic symbols and metaphors. "Stay in the gaps, *mijo*," Manuel advises his grandson. "Love for the land is here. Resistance is here. The company's better in here. […] The water tastes best here, near its source. It's the water in the mainstream that is tasteless" (221). As the location in which such wisdom is imparted and as the site of religious communion, the desert is both an educative and a sacred space, adopted by the Yaqui Indian as part of the cultural body and integrated into his people's cultural history.[49] Thus, from Manuel's perspective the

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47 Kevin Hetherington points out the popularity among sociologists of the garden as "a horticultural metaphor to understand the process of state formation in the modern era." He cites Zygmunt Bauman as one of the more influential thinkers who described the "modern state as a gardening state, one which seeks to bring pattern, regularity and order to society" (Hetherington 1997: 59). As Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and more recently John Warfield Simpson and David Jacobson have noted, the remodeling of America's "wild nature" as a garden was not only a rhetorical device but, quite literally, the foundational model of the young nation's social organization.

48 Véa's characterization of one of the most emblematic events in the U.S. Civil Rights struggle is somewhat puzzling since the point was that Rosa Parks *refused* to get up from her seat on the bus when a white passenger demanded she do so.

49 In *The Tainted Desert* (1998), Valerie L. Kuletz describes how "a tradition of recognition of intersubjective relations with the earth symbolically constructs the earth as part of the cultural body" (229).

desert's transformation into a garden/city by dominant Anglo-America amounts to a religious and cultural sacrilege.

The magnetic polarity between modern and archaic relations to the land (and, by implication, to nature), represented in Véa's novel by Josephina and Manuel's different spiritualities, is consolidated on another narrative level in the duality between the city and the desert, with Buckeye Road as the community in the gaps of modernity. In contrast to America's master narrative which is based on the dualistic opposition between city (as the representative space of social order and control, of domesticity and modernity) and wilderness, the polarity between city and desert in *La Maravilla* is that of two cultures differing in their philosophical, epistemological, and practical approaches to nature. In Véa's novel, city and desert do not so much represent the contrast between modern civilization and wild nature but two competing constructions of America. On the one hand, there is Phoenix, the city whose mythological name is associated with the triumph over destruction and catastrophe, a tradition that casts the desert as a field of rubble and ashes. On the other hand, there is Buckeye Road, a social and economic laboratory whose heterotopic character results from its location in the gaps between desert (defined not as wasteland but as an other ecological and topographical terrain) and city, and equally informed by both spaces.

While Josephina and Manuel occupy the narrative center of Beto/Alberto's memoirs they are not at the center of Buckeye's communal life. At the "social and cultural center" (104) of Véa's imaginative heterotopia are the girls, five transvestites who, aside from the local minister, are the only people in Buckeye with formal educations. "Their presence created a minor renaissance in Buckeye" (ibid.), not a capitalized Renaissance of Art and Science, but a renaissance of camp, as it were, celebrating fashion, Italian opera and Mozart, and gastronomy as some of the major force that drive culture. The following passage is a fine illustration of how the desert is constructed as an experimental space in which new social and cultural trends flower. It also demonstrates one of the many ways in which Buckeye, "a dusty desert lot," informs metropolitan America:

> These girls could serve twenty people with one sliced-up piece of meat. They called them medallions. They had been sauteed in clarified butter and whole black peppercorns. They would put the medallion on

> a plate, then finger two stalks of steamed asparagus around a slice of tomato until some semblance of symmetry was accomplished. A dollop of curried mayonnaise would be centered on the tomato.
>
> No one knew it at the time, but this dusty desert lot with a small bus at one corner was the Kitty Hawk of the West Coast gay restaurant industry. Angelique, her hand on a thesaurus, wondered if a string of adjectives in front of every noun on the menu wouldn't make the entrées sound more seductive.
>
> 'East Indies veal medallions *au poivre* with French Camp asparagus spears.'
>
> She sat there pondering, on the fringe of destiny, as Beto ran up to the bus to invite them to a soiree, the social event of the entire Buckeye season. Of course they would come! (104-105)

For the girls, food becomes an important medium of communication as well as an expression of their specific relationship with the desert. Their *nouvelle-cuisine* style of cooking functions as an allegory for the cultural possibilities offered by a land commonly associated with scarcity, thereby reinscribing the desert-as-garden paradigm with new meanings. As an example for an "alternative hedonism" (Soper 1996: 28), Buckeye's gastronomic heterotopia represents a new cultural style of dealing with diminishing resources. The girls' culinary aesthetics may contrast with the "sumptuous, ample embraces" (Véa 1993: 104) of Mexican meals. But for young Beto they become an important part of his informal education, and exemplify the desert's creative mystery. By invoking Kitty Hawk (a location highly symbolic of the success story of modern technology) as analogy for Buckeye Road, Véa's novel grants the same cultural importance to the gender bending inhabitants of the dusty desert lot as to the airborne pioneers of aviation. Moreover, this analogy marks the significance of the desert as an idiomatic cornerstone of *La Maravilla*'s heterotopic architecture and of Buckeye Road as a metaphor for the transitional space leading to an Other America. In presenting Buckeye as the location not of a perfect society but as a space "for the *perfection* of society and the individual within it" (Hetherington 1997: 12), i.e., as a social laboratory rather than a product of social history, Véa underscores the character of his novel as an imaginative heterotopia and as an allegory of border existence. *La Maravilla* is a novel which, through the trope of the desert, insists on the ecological dimension of borderland discourses, not only within the realistic confines of environmental degra-

dation and social subjugation, but, equally important, within the magical boundaries of a new, heterotopic vision of America.

Epilogue

You have to get over the color green;
you have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns;
you have to get used to an inhuman scale;
you have to understand geological time.

Wallace Stegner

The confrontation of a society, whose ecological sensibilities, economic expectations, and cultural fantasies are deeply informed by the green, arboreal landscapes of Europe, with the topographical reality of North America's arid landscapes was the subject of this study. My project's primary critical interest was to delineate how (poetics) and to what effect (politics) the topography of these landscapes – appearing in the cultural imaginary under the sign of desert – is translated into textual topology, and subsequently, how the desert's topological character has affected constructions and reconstructions of America. With the "rise of a desert aesthetic" (Teague 1997) at around the turn of the 20th century, writers and artists engaged in the project of "getting over the color green," a discursive *tour de force* that entailed revisions of the ecological foundation upon which America was built. That is, for many authors, entering the desert – both literally and imaginatively – involved reconsidering and reexamining the discursive bedrock of America, and this discursive bedrock rests on negotiations of the nature/culture nexus. If there is one smallest common denominator among the various discursive uses of the desert, it would be that there is no smallest common denominator of how and to what effect 'desert' is used in defining the meaning of America; it is employed both as an *affirmative* and a *subversive rhetorical instrument*. That is, it both affirms and subverts the idea of America as a historically and culturally blank slate essentially different from the so-called Old World; and it is employed both to boost and to bust America's discursive (re-) production as a culture and society created by white, male, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Nevertheless, the four eco-spatial paradigms that structure the underlying narrative order to this study – garden, Orient, wilder-

ness, and heterotopia – provide the necessary anchor (both in the maritime and the media sense of the word) to facilitate discussions of the various meanings and interpretations of America as constituted through references to the desert and its specific topographical and ecological character.

As I am writing this epilogue, the United States continues the process of inscribing its political and economic mark on the desert landscapes of Iraq, a topography whose artistic and literary representations once provided blueprints for coming to terms with the domestic landscape known as the Great American Desert. The military operations in the cultural landscapes once known to Americans as the Orient are part of the so-called war on terror, declared by President George W. Bush after terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Other, perhaps less destructive but equally significant responses followed. One such response was architect Daniel Libeskind's design for a new structure to be erected on New York City's Ground Zero. Libeskind envisioned a 1776-foot high rise, towering over the iconic site of the tragedy of 9/11 and topped by the "Gardens of the World," an architectural symbol "reasserting the pre-eminence of freedom and beauty, restoring the spiritual peak to the city, creating an icon that speaks of our vitality in the face of danger and our optimism in the aftermath of tragedy" (Libeskind 2002). The "fresh, green breast of the new world" finally transformed into the design of a phallic, green spire of the world's most powerful nation, still busy conquering yet other real and imagined deserts. The eco-spatial rhetoric underlying or resisting territorial conquest, and the eloquent symbolism of topographical and ecological metaphors – that was the subject of this book.

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