

she's filled with secrets:
the mythology of landscape in the American Western

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my dad for taking me west for the first time eight years ago

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In 1955, the Museum of Modern Art's photography curator Edward Steichen put together an exhibition called "The Family of Man." Featuring photographs by both trained artists and talented amateurs from all over the world, it aimed to showcase the ability of photography to profile the universal elements of the human experience – from birth to death, from love to war. It also featured several images that situated universalized humanity in a profound relationship with landscape. A huge print of Ansel Adams' "Mount Williamson, Clearing Storm," which he took ten years earlier in 1945, opened the show in grand style. Typical of Adams' photographs from the forties, "Mount Williamson" (figure 1) is the black and white equivalent of Rocky Mountain School paintings by artists like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, in which American landscape is rendered bathed in divine light, a spiritual bath of life streaming through sublime, unsullied wilderness. It reads like a moment of creation, a miraculous image of a primordial, pre-human space. The (unpublicized) truth isn't quite so sublime – Adams made this image from the grounds of the internment camp at Manzanar, California, in which thousands of Japanese Americans were imprisoned during World War II on suspicion of sedition simply for being Japanese. In reality, Manzanar is a space of profound human incursion – upon landscape as well as on the civil rights of other human beings – but Adams' photograph easily (and typically, for his time) glosses over this unsavory history, in favor of focusing on a convenient, often-false quasi-historical narrative rooted in a pervasive American mythology that asserts the profound exceptionalism of wilderness in the minds of a freedom-loving white populace.

In 1963, when he was twenty-six, the young photographer Robert Adams purchased his first print, a copy of the other famous Adams' 1941 image "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico" (figure 2). Robert had begun making images of his adopted home state of Colorado, following to some extent along the dramatic, pictorialist, almost painterly compositional lines Ansel had been working with since 1921. He was interested in beauty and sublimity too, and how they manifested in the dramatic form and light of American landscape. However, unlike so many Western artists (Ansel included), Robert was interested mostly in reality. He was making beautiful images of tract homes and mine tailings and trailer parks bathed in Bierstadtian light with an attention to form and detail that echoed that of his pictorialist forebears, profiling his findings in his first book *The New West*. In doing so, he garnered the notice of William Jenkins, the curator of the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York, who selected Robert among seven other photographers to contribute to a show called "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape." Far from glossing over its complexities, these photographers aimed to closely study America's difficult history of and relationship with land ownership and settlement. In doing so, they entered into dialogue with and began working to dismantle perhaps the most central, pervasive, and deeply complicated tenet of American cultural mythology – our relationship with landscape, namely the landscape of the West.

The West is, to a huge extent, America. It is the America neatly encompassed by the word's poetic definition "a place which one longs to reach; an ultimate or idealized

destination or aim; a newly identified object of personal ambition of desire;”¹ it is also the very essence of the nation. The myth of the Western frontier, of our manifest destiny to take control of new, unsettled, wild space waiting only for the taming hand of the right divinely ordained hero to open up limitless tracts of inconceivable bounty, is the myth of America, the land of plenty, the land of endless opportunity for all, regardless of anything, as long as you are willing to work for it. Said mythology is easily sexualized: when John Donne wrote his bawdy “Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed” in the 1580s or 1590s, he neatly set up an allegory for much American landscape mythology in his speaker’s sexual striving for his titular mistress:

O my America! my new-found-land
 My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,
 My mine of precious stones, my empery,
 How blest am I in this discovering thee!
 To enter in these bonds is to be free;
 Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.²

Like Donne’s poem, classic Western landscape mythology is about the assertion of a particularly American breed of masculine control over a fertile, feminized landscape. It’s an abstracted *Taming of the Shrew*, in which she puts up an honorable fight beforehand, but the climactic consummation is by no means analogous to rape: in the end, the feminine welcomes and embraces the taming power of the masculine, and, together, both reap mutual benefits, the most profound among which is freedom.

¹ OED Online. “America.” Last modified March 2008.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/248477?redirectedFrom=america&>

² Wikisource. “Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed,” by John Donne. Last modified January 2013.

http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Elegy_XIX:_To_His_Mistress_Going_to_Bed.

Landscape, in the classic myth, does not necessarily lose its sense of virginal promise after contact with the heroic settler figure: after all, he owes to her the existence of his unique American character. In 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair, a moment when America sought to stand as both a cultural and economic world power, the scholar Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a speech concerning the role of the frontier in American history. He theorized the existence of a wild frontier space as central to the existence of a unique "American intellect" –

[...] that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things [...]; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism [...] and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom – these are traits of the frontier.³

This mythic hero is tough and practical, physically strong, restless and passionate, in touch with and understanding of landscape, but above all he is free, and he owes his freedom to the continued existence of virginal space in which he can continue to create himself, without the strictures of any law besides that of morality. In Donne's words, this is the one man who can man the kingdom of the ultimate mistress. Engagement with the Western (and thus American) space is necessary to gain Western (and thus American) heroic traits, and it was the gaining of these traits through experience with the frontier that gave Americans the strength of character necessary to throw off the yoke of the most powerful nation in the world, and in turn become the most powerful nation in the world. We owe our very existence to our landscape, in both a physical and metaphysical sense.

³ Taylor, *The Turner Thesis*, 27

Thus, our most profound, inescapable, culturally profuse mythic heroes are those in touch with, couched within, perhaps even born from American landscapes; namely, they are the heroes of Westerns. Those nation-builders who appear on our coinage notwithstanding, the first American heroes we learn about in grade school are frontiersmen: Johnny Appleseed, Paul Bunyan, Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, men who pushed the boundaries of that inspiring boundary line further and further West. These men understand the secrets and thus reap the benefits of the mythic hardy-but-yielding landscape – they are hunters, trappers, miners, ranchers, cattlemen, farmers, members of wagon trains. They are the morality-ruled gunslingers who do what’s not necessarily lawful but definitively right. Their antagonists: Indians who won’t accept that their time is over and their stewardship has ended, conniving Eastern merchants in it just for profit, hired killers who stray from the rule of moral law. And the setting for this battle of wills (every Western film does, after all, open and close with an establishing landscape shot): the beautiful, sublime, open, wild space West of civilization, an inconceivable, dramatic geography of colored rock reaching to the endless sky in strange buttes and spires, sculpted by a divine hand that still seems evident.

Obviously, this mythology is problematic, and Robert Adams and the New Topographics photographers were far from the first or the only to put it under the microscope. In recent decades, many writers, artists, and filmmakers have engaged with the Western myth in order to revise, subvert, and challenge it, creating a revisionist consciousness that parallels the rise in New Western Historical scholarship and other movements that aim to bring to light the actual history of the West, rather than continue to teach and propagate the legacy of mythic work like “Mount Williamson, Clearing

Storm.” In this paper, I aim to explore how artists who challenge classic Western mythology contribute to a neomyth, or a revised, updated, “modernized” system of mythology, surrounding landscape. Landscape can function to revisionist artists as an especially profound strategy – if landscape mythology, the founding element of American mythology, is effectively subverted, the complete legacy of American mythology (and thus, American culture) is destabilized. Such neomythic treatment of landscape in Westerns can serve to reveal a haunting set of problematics and anxieties behind not only our mythology, but our culture itself.

As continuity exists among the landscapes of the classic myth, it exists among neomythic landscapes – in revisionary work, a common thread that characterizes Western space is its tendency to be disappointing. Whether it’s boring or horrifying, it is utterly not what the classic myth promised it would be. It is not the American dream manifest, not a space of limitless opportunity and untapped resources available to all; it’s a place whose sublime Bierstadtian beauty reads as more terrifying than inspiring. It is a human-scarred, man-altered landscape that unshyly exhibits evidence of colonial history, including legacies of settlement and resettlement, changing ownerships, natural resource extraction, relentless suburbanization, and the profoundly damaging social and environmental effects of each. It brazenly shows off a history characterized by unregulated farming, mining, hunting, and building carried out by those who embraced the classic myth’s preaching of limitless opportunity and unspoilability. Rather than being fertile and welcoming to a strong-enough frontier hero, it’s unyielding and infertile, even destructive, rife with man-made agricultural disasters, like the dustbowl and other draughts, and seemingly random natural disasters like forest fires, earthquakes, and

volcanic action. It is a landscape that bears numerous marks of failed human settlements abandoned and almost completely reclaimed back into the land from which they came. It's a concealing space that effortlessly hides a disconcerting, controversial, conspiratorial history of horrifying secrets – nuclear testing and accidents, internment camps, chemical and nuclear waste storage, perhaps even evidence of extraterrestrial contact. If classic mythic Western landscape functions as proof for America as earthly Eden, neomythic landscape is more easily comparable to an earthly hell.

Most importantly, though, neomythic landscape is powerful in its own right. It is not solely or necessarily a victim of white, masculine, capitalist ambition. It is not the tabula rasa on which to sketch an outline for true American-ness, nor is it the yielding feminine force waiting to be conquered; in fact, it seems to have been waiting to conquer humanity, and its most effective tool is its pervasive power of consumption. Neomythic Western landscape has the power to erase, consume, and even control humanity at its will. The controlling quality of the Western landscape is acknowledged even in classic mythic work, which implies the existence of frontier space is responsible for the creation of a uniquely American character, and neomythic work simply takes this form of mythology several steps further, refuting the classic notion that this frontier-bred national character is at all positive or good. If we are modeled after and ultimately controlled by the whims of our landscape it is in our mirrored tastes for violence, destruction, and erasure: three actions readily taken against both landscape and indigenous people by colonizing white Americans during Western settlement, conveniently ignored by the classic Western myth, and now enacted upon white Americans by the neomythic landscape.

Throughout all this neomythic revision, Western landscape is still often feminized. In some work, landscape mirrors the female body; elsewhere, many feminist artists have focused on the female experience of and encounter with the West. The looming potential horror of a landscape that remains feminine but exercises the power to consume is closely connected to one of Sigmund Freud's central theories of the uncanny – that the most uncanny, or familiar-but-warped, possible scenario is that of being buried alive, metaphorically returned to the womb.⁴ Imprisonment or attempted control by a feminine force is often figured as a motivator for Western adventure in classic mythic works⁵ that uniformly end with masculine order being restored; in neomythic content, consumption of the masculine by the feminine is often figured as inevitable and unavoidable.

Perhaps this ultimate reversal of the classic mythos functions as a revenge narrative in which the feminized and subjugated is revealed as powerful, capable of conquering its oppressor. Perhaps it relates to the new understandings of Western space afforded to scholars of all ages by the New Western Historical movement, which aims to reveal the truth behind a pervasively taught mythic history – no longer can or should we think about the West without thinking about what really happened, about the atrocities we really committed in the name of our national mythology and character and, overall, our power as a nation to eclipse that of others. Perhaps we are looking for a reason why so many years of American history erased the reality of Western colonialism in favor of teaching mythology as fact; perhaps we are wishing it were still erased.

⁴ Freud, *The Uncanny*, 150.

⁵ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 33.

In this thesis, I will explore three different mythologized Wests, the Southwest, California, and the Pacific Northwest. I aim to consider what neomythic cultural material – films, TV shows, novels, works of art – set within each space can tell readers and viewers about American anxieties relating to landscape. Through contrasting the tropes of the landscape neomyth with those of the classic mythos, and relating the neomyth to glossed-over, concealed colonial histories, we can extract from our mythology the nature of our greatest fear – complete extinction.

GOD, DEATH, BEAUTY, MADNESS: THE SOUTHWESTERN NEOMYTH

Reading through the table of contents of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is like reading a list of descriptors of the American Southwest: "Novelty," "Beauty," "Power," "Vastness," "Infinity," "Light," "Gradual Variation," "Beauty in Color" – even "Ugliness," and especially "Terror." Burke is frank about the sublime's horrifying aspects:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror [...] The mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.⁶

Following his definition, nothing comes to mind as more potently sublime than the landscapes of the Southwest. The unreal, massive red sandstone moonscapes of Southern Utah, Nevada, and Northern Arizona, carved over inconceivable amounts of time by nothing more than wind and water into otherworldly formations; inhospitable high deserts, with scrub stretching infinitely into clear, endless blue sky; massive canyons whose narrow, sheer walls dwarf human explorers – these are landscapes that stop analytical thought in its tracks. Gazing upon Zion Canyon, Bryce Canyon, the Grand Canyon, the strange formations of Arches National Park in Utah, Valley of Fire State Park in Nevada, or Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park in Utah and Arizona, one can only think about the vastness, the redness, the beauty, the strangeness. The writer Mary Hunter Austin chose four words to describe the Southwestern space that inspired much of

⁶ Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 53.

her work and neatly summed up the reactions of many Americans: “God, death, beauty, madness.”⁷ Her minimalist response evokes the seeming lack of reason Burke theorizes is instilled by the sublime.

One doesn't necessarily have to visit to get the effect – one need only look at a selection of Timothy O'Sullivan's survey photographs (figure 5) from the 1870s or a few of Edward S. Curtis's photographs from the early 1900s to understand exactly what Burke was working to convey when he published the *Enquiry* just over a century earlier. Photography has long been an important way in which Americans – corporations, government members, and civilians alike – have discovered and explored from afar the landscapes of the West; unlike landscape painting, which allows for artistic license, photographs present themselves to most viewers as pure documents, capturing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about that which is imaged. Needless to say, photographers like O'Sullivan and Curtis weren't necessarily presenting pure documents: their photographs were often edited, staged, posed, cropped, misleadingly titled, or misleadingly captioned in the service of Southwestern mythology that calls for massive sublimity, utter timelessness, and wild vacancy – or soon-to-be-vacancy, in the case of Curtis's early work (figure 6), which uniformly shows Native Americans peacefully leaving their lands. In images and accompanying text, Curtis characterized his subjects as “a vanishing race” throughout much of his twenty-volume, life-consuming series *The North American Indian*.

Little is known about O'Sullivan's life or the personal motivation behind his project (aside from being contracted by the United States Geological Survey⁸), but Curtis

⁷ Athearn, *The Mythic West*, 228.

left plenty of writing behind, much of it in the volumes of *The North American Indian*. He aimed to present the culture of the eighty different tribes he catalogued as it had been pre-white contact, a reality that was quickly fading. He understood, unlike many white Americans, that indigenous culture and achievements were incredibly valuable, and deserved to be documented,⁹ but he also knew he could successfully sell mythology to a voyeuristic Eastern audience, who wanted to read about and see primitive peoples refusing to modernize and quickly fading into the past, leaving plenty of sublime landscape open for the taking. Even more contemporary photographers who work within the classic mythos, like Ansel Adams, extend Curtis's theories about how Native Americans should be presented to encompass also the presentation of Southwestern landscape. As, in the classic myth, wilderness is not damaged or changed upon contact with the American settler, the Southwest could continue to function as mythically sublime wilderness, and is presented as such in classic mythic photography.

Many political ecologists have speculated about the damaging effects of labeling or presenting space as pure wilderness in the modern day – not only does it erase the accomplishments, even the very existence, of indigenous peoples, it erases colonial history.¹⁰ The Southwest in particular is rife with an unsavory colonial history that includes conflict, genocide, and relegation to reservations of Native Americans, such subjugation easily glossed over in classic Western material, like the photographs mentioned above. Only toward the end of his career – in the nineteenth of his twenty

⁸ Jurovics, *Framing the West*, 14-5.

⁹ *The North American Indian* also includes recordings of songs, videotaping of dances and ritual scenes, and biographical information; in many cases Curtis's work is the only record of these events that anthropologists – and the ancestors of those he photographed – have today.

¹⁰ Davis, "Scales of Eden," 215.

volumes – did Curtis present Oklahoman Native Americans living on reservations, and only then because he couldn't find enough of what he considered to be “traditional” culture.¹¹

Filmic representations of the Southwest also propagated wilderness mythology to erase indigenous narratives: in *Stagecoach* (1939), John Ford's first film shot in Monument Valley (now, interestingly, Navajo tribal land), Geronimo's band of Apaches function as the horrifying antagonists to a group of travelers, including archetypal Western actor John Wayne in his breakout role. As soon as the travelers leave the Easternized civilization of town (two of them, a drunk and a prostitute, spurred onward by the Ladies' Temperance League, in a typical symbol for the feminization and demasculinization of “civilized” Western space) and enter the “wilderness” space beyond the fence, they're followed by a mindless herd of Apaches, their reasoning never explained but neatly surmised: they're enemies just because they're Indians who won't surrender their wilderness, as though they exist only to fight white people. They function in the narrative of *Stagecoach* solely as elements by whose challenging John Wayne and the other male characters can prove their masculinity. In a way, they are rendered as simply another part of the Southwestern wilderness that must be tamed by colonizing white Americans. Thus, Native Americans may not be rendered physically invisible in this film and other Westerns that render Native people as antagonists, but their actual experience with American Western colonialism is totally erased.

The neomythic Southwest is deeply connected to themes of erasure and concealment, of indigenous histories and colonial processes alike. Neomythic works set

¹¹ Lyman, *The Vanishing Race*, 125.

within this space remind us of white colonialism's legacy of erasure, and the secrets we have attempted to conceal within a landscape that seems like an ideal cache. Pitchblende ore, from which uranium can be extracted, was discovered in Colorado in 1871 and in Southeastern Utah in 1898;¹² since then, the Southwestern landscape has existed as a finding, proving, testing, and finally hiding ground for nuclear experimentation – a frontier of its own, with all the promise and potential horror of its Western mirror. In 1943, the Los Alamos National Laboratory was opened in New Mexico as the think tank for the Manhattan Project that developed nuclear weapons; the Trinity test took place about 150 miles to the south in the New Mexican desert in 1945. The advent of nuclear weapons technology utterly rocked humanity's understanding of itself and the surrounding world; after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945, American newspapers reported that “the great question of all civilization and history has come,” that one could sense “the foundations of one's own universe trembling,” that “the final crisis in human history had come,” that the earth was “no longer solid; out of the forces that hold it together human genius has summoned forces that tear it apart,” that “a bottomless wound in the living conscience of the race” had been created.¹³ This dialogue is rooted in a pervasive anxiety about Americans having sanctioned, overseen, and ultimately created our own destruction, and it began in the space of the Southwest.

Later in the 1940s and 1950s, significant amounts of uranium-bearing ores, including pitchblende, were discovered in the Four Corners area, and excavated with help from the numerous Native American groups living on reservations there. Many worked in the mines, which were poorly maintained and unsafe – mining of radioactive material

¹² Johnston et al, *Half Lives and Half Truths*, 97-8.

¹³ Franklin, *War Stars*, 155.

was carried out without contamination regulations, no medical program was provided to workers, and the miners were not told that the materials they were excavating could be dangerous.¹⁴ It was onto Navajo land in Church Rock, New Mexico that 100 million gallons of water containing 1,100 tons of radioactive material leaked from a drainage pond in the summer of 1979; the spill wasn't acknowledged until three months later, and the residents of Church Rock were told the material wasn't especially dangerous.¹⁵ Later, land was taken from the Shoshone and Paiute, in violation of treaties that guaranteed it to them, for the construction of the Nevada Test Site, where over 900 nuclear weapons were tested, aboveground and underground from 1951 until 1993.¹⁶

As the scholar John Beck posits in *Dirty Wars*, his study of Western landscape and waste, the complete but rapid annihilation of nuclear war is only one potential horror instigated by the advent of nuclear technology. There is also the slow, cancerous destruction engendered by radiation, and the Southwestern landscape is deeply connected to this potential apocalypse, too.¹⁷ Post-9/11, the potential for the storage of nuclear and chemical wastes at Yucca Mountain in Nevada was much discussed. Though this project has been discontinued, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico (adjacent, of course, to the Mescalero Apache reservation), opened in 1999, is licensed to dispose of radioactive waste for 10,000 years: once the facility is full and sealed, the impermeable, deforming layer of salt rock surrounding the waste will completely block it off from the

¹⁴ Johnston et al, *Half Lives and Half Truths*, 99-100.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Romancing the Atom*, 62-3.

¹⁶ Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 185.

¹⁷ Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 178-9.

environment within 75 years.¹⁸ These projects reveal a mythic conception of Southwestern landscape – that it has such space and wilderness value that it can erase the very thing Americans have so much anxiety about erasing, or at least keep it so hidden from view that no one has to think about it and its potential for destruction.

In short, the Southwestern landscape has allowed Americans to secretly create and test a weapon of complete obliteration. It has provided us with cheap, disposable labor (and silence) in a set of people we've long considered erasable, and it seems to have the potential to provide us with a place to permanently hide, maybe even erase, all the evidence. Southwestern neomythic work probes America's nuclear anxieties, calling all these legacies into question, especially those relating to the idea of a landscape that can function as a burial or concealment space for nuclear culture. If this landscape can erase that which might so easily erase humanity as a whole, what does that mean about our place within it?

Many Southwestern artists use the horror of nuclear concealment to elaborate upon the neomythic theme of a landscape capable of human erasure. The writer Cormac McCarthy has set many of his novels within the space of the Southwest, often playing to, exploring, and exaggerating classic mythic tropes into a neomythic consciousness. While his 1985 novel *Blood Meridian* doesn't explicitly reference nuclear culture – set in 1849, it would be anachronistic if it did – the consuming, hellish horror of the landscape and skewed Western heroism of the characters McCarthy establishes seem imbued with post-nuclear sensibilities. In the novel, McCarthy takes a purportedly historical event and blows it up into a neomythic Western misadventure that's more deeply disturbing than it

¹⁸ Wikipedia. "Waste Isolation Pilot Plant." Last modified January 12, 2013. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waste_Isolation_Pilot_Plant.

is remotely inspiring. Everything about *Blood Meridian* is hyperbolic, mythic and multiplied, starting with its landscape, in which its “heroes” (I use the term loosely) must in turn be hyperbolically mythic. One character, Judge Holden, serves as a concurrent personification of human violence and an allegory for landscape, implying that within the Southwestern space the two are immutably linked in their tendencies for destruction and consumption.

McCarthy’s protagonists, including the Judge, are a gang of outlaws under the command of a purportedly historical figure, John Joel Glanton, recruited by the authorities of a series of Southwestern towns in Texas and Mexico to kill Indians, receiving a bounty on each scalp and even more for specific heads. They ride West (of course) in search of their quarry, across the horrifying space of the Southwestern desert, which McCarthy presents here as an exponentially hyperbolic take on the wilderness of classic mythology. The scholar David Holmberg calls *Blood Meridian’s* setting a “hyperimagined West,” and a “quasi-unimaginable land of the post-apocalypse.” He decides “these landscapes must be in the West – because McCarthy’s novel never goes anywhere else – yet these are descriptions not of a real landscape but instead some kind of primitive, hyperbolic hell.”¹⁹ Holmberg believes *Blood Meridian* is only a Western because it has to be, because we’re given place names like San Antonio and San Diego and the implication of a border with Mexico, and McCarthy places much of the action in the space that must be between; he leaves out the fact that these wilderness elements (volcanoes, desert plains, ancient ruins, caves full of bats, mountain ranges, et cetera) are real geologic features that exist in the Southwest, though they are thoroughly dramatized

¹⁹ Holmberg, “In a Time...,” 150.

by McCarthy's language. It is McCarthy's style that makes this West "more than the West,"²⁰ that exaggerates the sublime, eternal primalness and otherworldliness of the Southwestern space captured by O'Sullivan and Curtis into a kind of hellscape. McCarthy refers to the landscape as unreliable, inhospitable, and impossible, with language that mirrors those tropes:

"[The Glanton Gang] rode all day upon a pale gastine sparsely grown with saltbush and panicgrass. In the evening they entrained upon a hollow ground that rang so roundly under the horses' hooves that they stepped and sidled and rolled their eyes like circus animals and that night as they lay in that ground each heard, all heard, the dull boom of rock falling somewhere far below them in the awful darkness inside the world.

On the day that followed they crossed a lake of gypsum so fine the ponies left no track upon it [...] In the night some of the horses began to scream and daybreak found several so crazed with snowblindness they required to be shot."²¹

Through McCarthy's language, in this landscape even the sparse shrubbery evokes fear and pain – "panicgrass" is one thing, "saltbush" evokes the feeling of salt rubbed in wounds or nonpotable salt water. Hypnotic, seemingly endless sentences summon a landscape that proves that hell exists within a hollow world, a landscape that will erase each trace of you as though you were never there, a landscape that will drive your horses to madness just by existing. It is the end and the beginning of the world, atavistic and apocalyptic; its pure white gypsum lake evokes heaven, its hollowness, implying the existence of a mysterious, hidden subterranean space, evokes hell. It's far from the blank slate of classic wilderness, upon which men could write their chosen manifest destiny – it's completely unyielding, undeniably threatening; it has already

²⁰ Holmberg, "In A Time...", 150.

²¹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 117.

written itself, human existence is a blot it can erase as easily as the gypsum absorbs the ponies' tracks.

This landscape's effect on humanity is not one of inspiration or hero creation as it is in classic mythology; rather, it's a distinct menacing force to the people within it, physically and mentally. McCarthy speaks of the desert's random acts of violence: dust devils, "mindless coils," that scoop up travelers and drop them, grievously wounded, leaving them to "cry out and in his anguish [...] rage, but rage at what?"²² The novel is packed with references to characters who have lost their wits because "the country carried them off."²³ Some of the feminization of the classic myth is present in this language, here reversed: the country has carried the sanity of its heroes off, like a bride over the threshold. This is a landscape that cannot be subdued, in fact, it will itself subdue those who try.

That's not to say that McCarthy's heroes don't make an attempt at mythic status. In fact, they make an outrageously hyperbolic attempt at mythic status, as if putting Turner's Frontier Thesis ideas that landscape creates American character through trial by fire. What kind of national character could be created through confrontation with this horrifying, hyperbolically wild, consuming space? *Blood Meridian's* heroes try to match the landscape in their hyperbolic mythicness: McCarthy borrows several landscape-inspired tropes on prominent display in the heroes of classic Westerns and amplifies them into a grotesque but recognizable, logical end in his characters.

Throughout the novel – from the last of its three epigraphs – McCarthy plays up his characters' connection to a kind of atavistic, primitive history. In many classic period

²² McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 117.

²³ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 318.

Westerns, heroes display a romanticized connection to a “noble savage” motif – think the fringed buckskin outfits worn by countless cowboy heroes, referencing mythic Native American dress. Though the noble savage concept plays into countless works of fiction from Europe and the Americas and is far older a concept than American Western expansion, it can be easily synthesized with Turner’s Frontier Thesis theories that wild space evokes positive traits in those who live in harmony with it. Encapsulating the notion that primitive humans were innately good and moral, the noble savage theory has easily been applied to Native Americans in Western mythology (think Longfellow’s “The Song of Hiawatha” or Curtis’s more romantic images), thus, the appropriation of mythic Native American traits by Western heroes is deeply connected to this concept. *Blood Meridian* refutes the notion of the noble savage (its Apache war party is “a legion of horrors”²⁴) and deconstructs the romanticization of primitiveness in Western heroes. One of the novel’s epigraphs comes from the Yuma, Arizona *Daily Sun*, from June 1982, and relates to the discovery of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull in Ethiopia that showed evidence of having been scalped. This, not the romantic noble savage mythology, is the primitive history McCarthy’s characters are connected to. Later, we are introduced to the Glanton gang in one customarily terrifying, hallucinatory sentence, by way of the kid, our nameless protagonist who’s soon to become the newest recruit:

“[...] they saw one day a pack of viciouslooking humans mounted on unshod Indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description [...] and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and

²⁴ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 54.

blackened human ears and the horses rawlooking and wild in the eye and their teeth bared like feral dogs [...] the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh.”²⁵

When the gang rides through another town much later in the novel McCarthy evokes this passage, this time adding “Save for their guns and buckles and a few pieces of metal in the harness of the animals there was nothing about these arrivals to suggest even the discovery of the wheel.”²⁶ The gang’s connection to primitive history is far from noble or moral – it’s horrifyingly grotesque and cannibalistic (McCarthy’s constant reiteration of the word *human* in the passage quoted above thoroughly drives this point home). Even if the gang isn’t literally eating human flesh, they might as well be, with their consumption of fragmented body parts as adornment and their monstrous synthesis of animal parts with human ones.

McCarthy also references and builds on the sense of nostalgia for a lawless recent past that pervades classic period Westerns. In the 1953 film *Shane*, a typical conflict between new and old breeds of mythic Western heroism presents itself. The film’s young character, Joey, is presented with two paths toward Western heroism: the way of his father, the stubborn, self-made rancher, or the way of mysterious stranger Shane, the gunslinger of the “old West.” By the end of the film, it’s clear that the West is changing, and its new hero is Joey’s father; Shane’s type can no longer exist in this space. He must ride further West, toward death, as the scholar Jane Tompkins theorizes, toward apotheosis as a mythic hero.²⁷ *Blood Meridian* presents a similar but amplified case of

²⁵ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 82-3.

²⁶ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 242.

²⁷ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 23.

nostalgia for the violent, gunslinging Western past and its mythic heroes in Judge Holden's last few lines: "As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be?"²⁸ The judge means himself – violent, lawless, and ironically injudicious as he is, he is mythically (and perhaps even physically) eternal the way heroes like Shane, "true dancers," perhaps, in their submitting to "the sanctity of blood," are. In these last lines, McCarthy recognizes – and grotesquifies – the eternal nature of human violence as a Western heroic trope: it is the gunslinging heroes, like Shane, like Clint Eastwood's *Man with No Name* in Sergio Leone's *Dollars Trilogy*, about whom we make mythic Western films and write mythic Western novels. The judge, himself an eternal force prone to rattling off lines like "If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay,"²⁹ functions as ultimate, horrifying proof for the profound permanence of human violence as a tenet of American Western mythology, classic or revised.

The Western hero's connection to landscape is the aspect of the mythos that McCarthy most thoroughly exaggerates. In the gang's "communal soul," he writes, "wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live and where there is nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds,"³⁰ creating a mirrored relationship similar to that of classic mythic Westerns between the gang and the landscape they wander, which is strikingly similar to the unreckonable

²⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 344-5.

²⁹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 319.

³⁰ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 158.

wasteland inside their souls. The mirror here is not between a tough-but-yielding feminine landscape and its requisitely tough, taming, masculine force; it's between two post-apocalyptic wastelands. The heroes come to resemble the landscape in their mutually murderous, consuming, terrifying senselessness; at one point after they massacre a camp of sleeping Native Americans they "[assume] once more the color of the land through which they [pass]" as the dust rises to stick in the blood that covers their clothes.³¹

Most of *Blood Meridian*'s characters blend with the land through their mutual taste for violence, but none so much as the judge, the "true dancer" for whom "war is god,"³² a literally larger-than-life perversion of the Western heroic mythos – over seven feet tall by McCarthy's description, he could be a latter-day Paul Bunyan were it not for his taste for murdering children. He's hugely fat, hairless, often naked or in disgusting improvised clothing, and toward the end of the novel takes to walking a disabled, mentally handicapped "idiot" around on a leash. If the landscape creates mirrors, the judge is reflected in a mirror so clear it's hard to tell which is the reflection of the other. "The judge is [...] the landscape, or the landscape is a multiplied version of the judge," the critic Liana Andreasen has said.³³ The judge recognizes that landscape is more powerful than humanity ("The smallest crumb can devour us [...] Only nature can enslave man"³⁴) and seeks to understand everything about it until it no longer poses a threat to him ("Only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to

³¹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 167.

³² McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 345, 261.

³³ Andreasen, "Spatial Metaphysics," 23.

³⁴ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth”³⁵); it is through this memorization and absorption of nature, as he records everything he can in a notebook in his quest for suzerainship, that the judge becomes an avatar for the landscape.

The judge and the landscape mirror each other in countless ways beyond just their shared sublime size. In the priest-turned-scalphunter Tobin’s chapter-long monologue about the gang’s encounter with the judge in a moment of desperation, the judge seems to be born out of the desert in which they find him: “We come upon the judge on his rock there in the wilderness by his single self. Aye and there was no rock, just the one. [...] And there he set. No horse. [...] Like he’d been expectin us. [...] He didn’t even have a canteen. It was like... you couldn’t tell where he’d come from.”³⁶ Later, the kid and Tobin are hiding from the judge, who is out to kill them, and the kid reminds Tobin “He ain’t nothin. You told me so yourself. Men are made of the dust of the earth.”³⁷ The judge is certainly made from the dust of this particular consuming, post-apocalyptic earth, and that’s what makes him so horrifying. When the judge responds to that “You ain’t nothin” with “You speak truer than you know,”³⁸ perhaps he’s referring to the kid’s double negative: “You ain’t nothin” translates to “You are everything.”

Considering the judge as an avatar of the landscape allows the reader to more fully understand the landscape’s threatening, consuming power over humanity. Acts of consumption characterize so much of the judge’s evil – at the end of the novel he smothers the kid to death, destroying by swallowing up, dominating in the most final

³⁵ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

³⁶ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 131-2.

³⁷ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 309.

³⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 345.

way, erasing completely, a failed attempt at mythic Western heroism.³⁹ He serially murders and rapes children, and others go missing whenever he is around; this combined with his persistent infantile appearance lends him a not only cannibalistic but vampiric air, as though he consumes these children in order to remain youthful himself. The novel is full of references to infanticide and patricide – in fairness, not all of these murders are committed by the judge, but almost all of them are couched within some form of natural space: the tree full of dead babies, the children consumed by the judge, the travelling father buried in a shallow wooded grave. Perhaps this comments on the Western landscape’s ability to consume and destroy all layers of human history, the coming generations erased before they have a chance to create history, the older generations erased before they can pass on their history.

It is this aspect of the judge and the landscape that is the most horrifying – eternalness in the face of humanity’s mortality, eternalness that can outlast and erase all aspects of human existence. The most terrifying thing about the judge (and thus, the landscape) is summed up neatly by McCarthy’s final line: “He says that he will never die.”⁴⁰ Classic Western heroes will die – “Death is everywhere in this genre,” Tompkins is quick to remind us⁴¹ – or they’ll ride into the sunset, further West, toward more danger and an uncertain future. Their myth might live on, but not themselves. In one of its most

³⁹ The judge’s relationship with the kid is endlessly interesting and merits a whole other chapter. We know about the judge’s taste for raping and murdering children, which seems to play a part, and when the judge tells the kid “I’d have loved you like a son” (319) it’s one of the novel’s most horrifying moments. The judge seems to regard the kid as his protégé, but the kid has too much mercy, refusing to execute or abandon his wounded comrades, so for the judge, he’s not violent enough to be canonized as a “true dancer,” an ultramythic hero – thus the smothering murder. Andreasen meditates on this in the essay of hers I’ve cited.

⁴⁰ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 349.

⁴¹ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 24.

compelling scenes, *Blood Meridian* shows us a culture of which only the myth remains, the Anasazi, when the gang camp out beneath a ruined cliff dwelling. The judge, of course, has a commentary:

“They quit these parts ages since and of them there is no memory. They are rumors and ghosts in this land and they are much revered. [...] Here are the dead fathers. Their spirit is entombed in the stone. It lies upon the land with the same weight and the same ubiquity. For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe [...] Do you not think that this will be again? Aye, and again. With other people, with other sons.”⁴²

Here are the remnants of a people still revered in the mythology of both whites and Native Americans – they are dead, their attempt at eternalness, at altering the structure of the universe, has been reabsorbed by nature (McCarthy makes note of broken pottery and burned wooden shards and deer tracks in the sand), someday these stone structures too will fall back into the primal mud. And this will be again, and again, and again, with all human attempts at permanence; the landscape will prevail over all aspects of mythic humanity. Later the gang comes across more evidence of ancient indigenous peoples, wall paintings, which have to do with “men and animals and the chase and there were curious birds and arcane maps and there were constructions of such singular vision as to justify every fear of man and the things that are in him.”⁴³ In short, they are paintings relating to this particular culture’s mythology. After observing and copying some into his ledger, the judge erases one. He as the landscape’s avatar is the arbiter (“the

⁴² McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 152-3.

⁴³ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 180.

judge”) of which human accomplishments to destroy, and he does it at his own seemingly random, focusless will, with no regard for mythic heroism as defined by anyone.

The kid experiences the judge’s judgment for himself in the literally hallucinatory passage late in the novel in which McCarthy describes his post-surgery fever-dream. The judge appears to the kid in his delirium, out of a limitless, atavistic void that suggests his primalness and eternity. The kid “could read whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the courts of men and he saw his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps.”⁴⁴ The judge has heard the kid’s case and has decided he isn’t mythic enough to be eternal, thus the kid is “already accomplished” – note the language of conquest – and doomed to be remembered only esoterically, if at all. It is significant that the judge’s very name is evocative of final judgment – he decides who lives and who dies, who is elevated to mythic status and who is not, the human accomplishments that are allowed to remain on the earth and those that are erased. And in the face of all this cosmic judgment in imponderable, unworldly courts beyond the understanding of humanity, he “will never die.” Thus is the basis of the terror inspired by the judge, and the basis of the sublimity inspired by the landscape: he/it will always be present to decide; humanity, mythic or not, is utterly at his/its mercy.

As a neomythic text, *Blood Meridian* engages with and revises a fair amount of classic Western myths, but it is not a perfect, universally revisionist text by any means: it leaves many other myths – namely, the treatment of women and non-whites – standing

⁴⁴ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 322.

almost intact. There are no named female characters in the novel, and all the women that are mentioned in passing are totally passive; sometimes, they seem literally two-dimensional, functioning as little more than paper shooting targets.⁴⁵ Plenty of revisionist, feminist culture makers (like the filmmakers Kelly Reichart and Molly Greenwald) have subverted the myth of the agency-lacking Western woman in their work: the critique is possible, and effective, but McCarthy doesn't entertain it here, nor in his other novels. He also does nothing to counteract the racist, colonialist classic mythology about Native Americans, figuring his Apache warriors – the Glanton gang's quarry and antagonists – as horrifying, grotesque horsemen of the apocalypse, even more crazed, bloodthirsty, and cannibalistic than the gang themselves, in one of the novel's most gruesome passages.⁴⁶ We are horrified by the actions of the Glanton gang because they massacre innocent, unprepared, peaceful bands of Native Americans at some points in the novel – McCarthy's shedding light on events like this, which really did happen during the settlement of the West (and are often glossed over and conveniently erased by classic period Westerns and non-revisionist history), is a start at deconstructing some Western mythologies about Native Americans and their land-based conflicts with whites, but by no means is it a thoroughly revisionist standpoint.

McCarthy does make some small attempts at deconstruction of mythology relating to women and non-whites. His use of the Spanish language throughout this novel and his other novels, namely the Border Trilogy, acknowledges the presence of Spanish-speaking peoples in the Southwest in the 1850s, deconstructing the classic mythic presentation of a West completely populated by two races, whites and Native Americans.

⁴⁵ Mayne, "As Far as the Eye Could See," 6-7.

⁴⁶ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 54-7.

It's also a start at deconstructing the Southwest as a space of total wilderness before the advent of white Easterners, acknowledging the history of Spanish colonialism. McCarthy also makes an interesting tie between women and Native Americans: the troupe of whores who dance with the judge in *Blood Meridian*'s final pages and the Apache war party "legion of horrors"⁴⁷ who slaughter the American cavalry the kid accompanies in the beginning of the novel are both clothed in what McCarthy terms "trophies" – clothing or adornment associated with "civilized" white culture. The Apache warriors are clad in "coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil [...] and one in the armor of a Spanish conquistador;"⁴⁸ the dancing whores wear "hats or pantaloons or blue twill cavalry jackets"⁴⁹ as evidence of their own conquests. Here, McCarthy presents members of groups subjugated by classic Western mythology as seizing, appropriating, and integrating evidence of their conquest of mythic white American masculinity. McCarthy presents this integration of clothing as grotesque, but I read it as evidence of agency – subjugated groups presenting evidence of their destruction, consumption, and thus outlasting of mythic white masculinity.

Its failings aside, *Blood Meridian*'s key neomythic revisions relate to the classic Western's mythic conception of heroism, land, and the relationship between the two. In the novel, the landscape is not passive, waiting for the right hero to settle and tame it; rather, it can settle and tame those who attempt to subdue it. Every human attempt at permanence in this landscape is doomed to fail; nature absorbs cliff dwellings and those

⁴⁷ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 54.

⁴⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 55.

⁴⁹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 348.

who built them, mythic though they may be, as easily at it does footprints. Toward the beginning of the novel McCarthy sums up the reasoning behind the kid's (and so many others') drive West: "Not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay."⁵⁰ By the end of the novel, we know the answer to this question – man's heart is indeed another kind of clay, the landscape ("the stuff of creation") can, will, and has shaped humanity to its will. The Western heroes this landscape creates should be ultra-mythic (in their mirrored hyperbole) but instead of being superheroic they are utterly grotesque, disturbing, and frightening, wearing necklaces of human ears, murdering children, committing acts of monstrous violence as seemingly random as earthquakes or flash floods.

Through the gang's actions, especially those of the judge, human violence in *Blood Meridian* is connected integrally to the Southwestern landscape. That and the post-apocalyptic quality evoked by McCarthy's language and style create an interesting connection to nuclear consciousness. Within the Southwestern landscape, we have discovered the materials necessary for, created, tested, and hidden the ultimate form of human violence and destruction, all through our quest for our own breed of suzerainship, power over other nations. Nuclear culture in the Southwest has created a pervasive strand of gothic horror, a genre characterized by the looming danger of the hidden and the secret, through narratives of concealment and exposure.⁵¹ *Blood Meridian* fits well as part of a Southwestern nuclear-informed neomythic canon, in McCarthy's crafting of a terrifying, consuming landscape tied to human violence and ambition, but the work of

⁵⁰ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 5.

⁵¹ Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 180.

many contemporary photographers more obliquely references the gothic epistemology engendered by nuclear culture. Often, nuclear photographers will play to the tropes of classic mythic landscape art, the way *Blood Meridian* references the classic heroic mythos, in order to thoroughly couch nuclear culture within Western mythology, as a new lens through which we must consider this space. These photographers demand of the viewer, if this landscape can consume our most destructive weapon, as the WIPP's surrounding salt flats seem to eat up casks of radioactive waste, what can it – and this adherent culture – do to us?

The Diné artist William R. Wilson's photomontage series "Auto Immune Response" (figure 7) is a prime example of how neomythologizers of all backgrounds play to the tropes of classic landscape mythology in order to assert a more complicated history of "radioactive colonialism."⁵² Wilson doesn't shy from depicting similar jaw-dropping vistas to photographers like O'Sullivan and Curtis – the works in this series include images of the Grand Canyon, massive deserts, deep slate gorges, endless flooded basins, and breathtaking cloudscapes. However, true to the sense of landscape-induced horror that also characterizes *Blood Meridian*, these spaces also include Wilson's own gas-mask-wearing image, upending classic mythic representations of a limitlessly bountiful space destined to endlessly support American life. This post-apocalyptic landscape is beautiful, because sublimity like that of the Southwest will never lose its power, but is also irrevocably poisonous, no doubt as a result of human actions, presumably nuclear or chemical ones like those stored and experimented upon within the Southwestern landscape, so often on tribal land. Humans have created a world that can no

⁵² Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 185

longer support human life, and nature doesn't seem to care – in the manner of *Blood Meridian*'s footprint-erasing gypsum lake, it has reclaimed almost entirely all signs of human existence. Only Wilson himself, having reconciled modern technology (his gas mask, his Apple computer) with tradition (his home within the series resembles traditional Navajo structures), can exist within this space.

Richard Misrach meditates on similar themes in his “Desert Cantos” series, in which he profiles American Southwestern desert spaces in photographs whose composition and content, like that of Wilson’s work, often recalls the work of classic mythic artists. Four of the eighteen Cantos, all shot just after the Chernobyl accident in Russia in 1986, directly reference land use by the American military for nuclear testing.⁵³ In these four short sections, “The War,” “The Pit,” “The Secret,” and “The Test Site,” Misrach profiles post-nuclear landscapes that often appear like something out of the text of *Blood Meridian*. In “The War,” a profile of the Bravo 20 testing (and later, unacknowledged, illegal toxic waste-disposal) range in Nevada, endless desert wasteland appears spotted with the rusting, sun-bleached wreckage of military convoys, the skeletons of dead fish, and bomb craters filled with blood-red, toxic liquid (figure 8), all backdropped by distant, hazy mountain ranges and unending skies. In “The Pit” (figure 9), Misrach images one of many county-designated disposal areas for the corpses of dead animals, initially opened as dumps where farmers could leave the bodies of their livestock killed by radiation during the days of aboveground nuclear testing – that radiation killed these animals was, of course, denied by the Atomic Energy

⁵³ Misrach, *Violent Legacies*, 86.

Commission.⁵⁴ “The Secret” focuses on the now-abandoned testing range in western Utah where the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki underwent final preparation in 1945. In the text accompanying “The Test Site,” Misrach details the human effect of nuclear testing and storage in the West.

Much of the work in these four Cantos uses the visual language of the gothic alongside mythic landscape photography modes to communicate a sense of nuclear horror – visible in the buried, undetonated bombs and fragmented convoys in “The War” and “The Secret” and the partially uncovered, decomposing, skinless, ripped-apart animal bodies in “The Pit.” It’s present also in “Atomic Bomb Loading Pit #2” in “The Secret” (figure 10) – we can’t see the bottom; we don’t know what could be still in there – and in “New Home Construction, Rocky Flats, Colorado” in “The Test Site,” which shows the excavation of a foundation for a house (eerily reminiscent of Robert Adams’ earlier photographs of Colorado tract housing) on Coloradan land Misrach’s accompanying text asserts is adjacent to “the most environmentally hazardous site in the nuclear-weapons industry.”⁵⁵ Wherever he can, whether through text or images, Misrach attempts to bring to light some of the lasting damage of the nuclear dialogue of secrecy, making visible (in another gothic move) the classified information and lies of early atomic regulators, such as the cause of death of the animals in “The Pit” and the safety of the weapons plant at Rocky Flats. These works thoroughly couch the consumed, consuming legacy of nuclear technology within a Southwestern landscape laden with requisite potential horror. We get the sense that whatever is keeping this space from concealing human corpses the way it conceals animal ones is no action of our own.

⁵⁴ Tucker, *The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach*, 98.

⁵⁵ Tucker, *The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach*, 124.

Misrach's focus on the secrets and lies of governmental nuclear agencies serves as a precursor to the work of Trevor Paglen, a contemporary photographer whose work focuses, among other subjects, on government-owned land in the Southwest. The Southwestern states possess the highest percentage of government-owned land in the country – Nevada and Utah come in numbers one and two, with 88% and 67% federally controlled, respectively. This includes Bureau of Land Management land, US Forest Service land, National Parkland, and the holdings of other governmental organizations, but it also, commonly in the Southwest, includes military ranges closed off to civilians that include completely classified areas. This mysterious land ownership trend combined with the mistrust of government imbedded in American mythology – and summed up by the classic Western myth of lawless but still moral freedom that *Blood Meridian* warps – creates a hotbed for conspiracy surrounding government-owned Southwestern space. One need only watch one episode of *The X-Files* to hear about the conspiracy theories couched within the Southwestern desert and its government hideaways, most of them having to do with alien contact and/or weapons development.

Paglen's work in a fascinating series called "Limit Telephotography" engages with this legacy, using technology borrowed from space photography – a telephoto lens with incredible zoom capability; itself the brainchild of another branch of frontier mythology – to image highly classified military installations from tens of miles away. In these images, dust and convection waves rising from the floor of the desert blur the images into almost-abstract, mirage-like visions.⁵⁶ Still, Paglen engages with a legacy of

⁵⁶ Wender, "Trevor Paglen's State Secrets." *New Yorker*, October 16, 2012. Accessed February 2, 2013.

landscape photography – in “Detachment 3, Air Force Flight Test Center” (the Air Force installation commonly known as Area 51) (figure 11), he images the space in question as a blur of lights picturesquely nestled within a dark valley, almost like an abstracted, postmodern version of Ansel Adams’ “Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico.” Elsewhere, he engages with the dramatic light, form, and color of classic Western landscape art, namely in “Untitled (Reaper Drone)” (figure 12), taken at sunrise outside Creech Air Force Base in Nevada. Against a gorgeous, brilliantly colorful sky, the tiny image of a drone is visible. Paglen’s work carries the nuclear legacy into a new age of weapons technology, still using the landscape of Southwest as a key part of this language.

Alongside that of his predecessors in both photography and literature, Paglen’s work insists that a neomythic consciousness relating to Southwestern space must engage with the legacy of nuclear and military culture. Work that denies this complicated, troubling history builds on unproductive classic mythology, erasing the narratives of colonialism, subjugation, secrecy, and concealment that neomythic artists and writers, those I’ve profiled among them, figure as central to a modern understanding of Southwestern space. Perhaps we have always seen the looming horror of the Southwestern landscape as it manifests in classic mythic works that evoke awesome power and sublimity, “God, death, beauty, madness,” but now this sublimity is irrevocably charged with the gothic horror of concealed history – the Southwest is a space that still evokes death and madness, and whose beauty and seeming divinity are deeply connected to a kind of impartial, consuming brutality. We must understand this space not as limitless wilderness unchallenged even by the testing of nuclear weapons or

the storing of radioactive waste, but as a landscape that may bear the scars of these human activities but has nonetheless survived them – a feat we as humans would scarcely be able to pull off – as a landscape that is poised to enact against us what we’ve enacted against it, and worse.

In the classic myth, in the culturally pervasive gunslinging Western films shot in Monument Valley, in the massive prints of Ansel Adams photographs with which we wallpaper doctors offices and any other place we need to be calmed and reminded of openness, in the box full of dog-eared, yellow-paged Western adventure novels your grandfather left you, we erased the reality of the American experience with the Southwest – we erased years of colonial conquest and subjugation, of environmentally damaging human settlement, of secretive, classified, concealed military history, of white Americans doing everything in their power to un-wilderness a wilderness and still present it as a wilderness – and then we tried to get the Southwestern landscape to do more erasing for us, to conceal the evidence of our greatest weapon and our greatest fear. In neomythic works from *Blood Meridian* to Richard Misrach’s *Desert Cantos*, the landscape refuses, and it threatens us with what we might deserve, with what we might have engendered ourselves: our own extinction. Thus is the neomythic sublimity of the Southwest more death than it is God or beauty or madness.

CHRIST'S ENTRY INTO LOS ANGELES – THE CALIFORNIAN NEOMYTH

California is a different story, because California provides an endpoint. As the native Californian essayist Joan Didion has observed, here is where we run out of continent;⁵⁷ it exists as our last chance to prove, apotheosize, and make manifest American mythology relating to people, space, and opportunity. California, a space of Eden-like beauty and climate, promises ultimate fulfillment of the American myth; it promises that it is here, and perhaps only here, that we can build a uniquely American utopia. The architectural writer William McClung is clear on this terminology; he distinguishes between arcadia, a space of found natural beauty, and utopia, which must be constructed, “asserting the dominance of the built over the unbuilt.”⁵⁸ Out of mythology and onto the blank spaces of the Californian landscape we conjured cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco that we intended as the American utopias of our dreams, spaces that exemplified the classic American mythic promise of freedom and opportunity for all.

To do this, we conquered, tamed, and incontrovertibly shaped landscape. The building of L.A. necessitated the diversion of rivers and the construction of countless dams and aqueducts.⁵⁹ In an essay called “The Golden Land,” Didion delineates the steps that were taken to create the “entirely artificial environment” of the agricultural utopia where she grew up, the Sacramento Valley: “980 miles of levee, 438 miles of canal [...], 50 miles of collecting canals and seepage ditches [...] three drainage pumping plants, five low-water check dams, thirty-one bridges, ninety-one gauging stations, and eight

⁵⁷ May, *Golden State, Golden Youth*, 186.

⁵⁸ McClung, *Landscapes of Desire*, 5.

⁵⁹ McClung, *Landscapes of Desire*, 15.

automatic shortwave-radio water-stage transmitters.”⁶⁰ It’s an exhausting list of attempts by the federal government to control and tame landscape in the interest of financial gain. The reasons why we’d go through such strain in the interest of cultivating Californian space, bending it to our will, are evident in the very title of McClung’s book about Los Angelean landscape mythology, *Landscapes of Desire*: it evokes terminology like that of the “desire path,” one created through foot traffic rather than planned, constructed, and built as part of development. The Californian utopia, agricultural or urban, exists because we wanted it to be; we wanted it to be so badly that we worked at it until it was.

California must reckon with two established mythologies: the classic Western mythos it should theoretically exemplify, being the furthest West, the most absolute frontier, the landscape of desire we created out of sheer belief in mythology and sheer will to manifest it, and the set of Hollywood-related myths that followed the establishment of the Los Angeles film industry. In Hollywood, anyone can be a star; it is a matter only of luck, beauty, or both. Everyone can have their moment of fame. Everyone can encounter, in one way or another, the excitement of the film world, whether through on-screen stardom, behind-the-scenes employment, or simply being a spectator at film premieres and shoots. Add this opportunistic possibility to that promised by the classic Western myth, and it seems impossible *not* to make it in California, a space continually rendered as climactically Western.

Mythic California, as documented by photographers like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, was as much wilderness as it was agricultural paradise. Didion recalls reciting in school the answer to the question “In what way does the Holy Land resemble

⁶⁰ Didion, “The Golden Land,” 3.

the Sacramento Valley?": "In the type and diversity of its agricultural products"⁶¹ – and it's true that California is one of the country's most biodiverse states.⁶² Ansel Adams' photographs of Yosemite are positively unreal – beams of divine light through clouds, impossible geologic forms, shimmering bands of waterfalls, dense trees carpeting the valley floor. Weston documented the beauty of Californian forms, both natural and human: desert dunes, wood fences, flora and fauna. Both seem to focus on the essence of Didion's memory – the blessed nature of Californian space. Settled or not, it is still wilderness: beautiful, sublime, divinely mandated to the American people.

Classic Californian mythology does not just involve the beauty of the space, but the nature of the people within. As emphasized by Turner's Frontier Thesis, a chief tenet of American mythology is the belief that American character is influenced by landscape; thus, human mythology is deeply connected to spatial mythology. In the 1950s, magazines like *Time* and *Life* focused on an idealized vision of Californian youth, profiling young men and women who were "longer of leg, deeper of chest, better muscled than other American youngsters," "tanned, healthy, exuberant, active," "happy-go-lucky, big, bronzed, and beautiful;" on collegiate women with "more than only good looks in their favor," who still had "values and views" like those of previous generations. They tried to explain why this was, and fell back on a Turner-esque conclusion, deciding that the Californian space itself created these all-American youth, thanks to "a packed suburban life," "healthy eating, year-round [...] sports," and "prolonged exposure to the sun." One writer concluded that the space of California provided "too much life to be lived to sit around crying doom for long," which explained why its youth were "more

⁶¹ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 174.

⁶² Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 19.

free, and more carefree” than other teens.⁶³ In short, California’s physical environment and all the excitement and recreative possibilities it offered led its young people to reject the angst and introversion of other American teenagers and embrace their freedom to be sexy, smart, and fit. Idealizations like this implied that Californian space, through its integration of nurturing suburbia and thrilling wilderness, offered freedom even from teenage depression and ennui and nursed a culture of positivism, athleticism, and all-around attractiveness that characterized the ideal American youth.

Thus, faced with our seemingly divine mandate to manifest the American dream on California’s Pacific Coast, Americans created a utopia that bred ideal young people who would grow to be ideal Americans in a land of exceptional opportunity and divine space that both nurtured and molded them. Obviously, this myth presents – and creates – problems. The real California is not utopia – nowhere is. No space can fabricate a uniformly perfect, all-American people (how, even, do we define “all-American?”), no industry can create opportunity for all, and thematics of disappointment surround the characterization of any American space as divinely engineered or blessed. As the California historian Kevin Starr has said, “California was charged with human hope. It was linked imaginatively with the most compelling of American myths, the pursuit of happiness. When that intensity of expectation was thwarted or only partially fulfilled [...] it could backfire into restlessness and bitterness.”⁶⁴ The real California is a betrayal of its utopian mythology – thus, it’s become the ultimate American mythic disappointment, a breeding ground for the restlessness and bitterness Starr speaks of.

⁶³ May, *Golden State, Golden Youth*, 24-5.

⁶⁴ Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 231.

Neomythic artists who depict California often negotiate with this spirit of disappointment. Many California writers center their works around a feeling of betrayal by landscape and its attendant mythology. Visual artists like the New Topographics photographers (like Joe Deal, figure 13) and Ed Ruscha (figure 14) chose to represent the mundane, the commonplace, the ordinary, the ugly, instead of the grand, sublime, and beautiful. Most pervasive in California neomythology is a sense of grotesquery – classic mythic themes and forms are not just questioned or subverted; rather, they're distorted, twisted, perverted, and made hideous. In Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, the sexy, flirty, athletic, fun-loving teens of 1950s mythology become conniving, drug-addled, violence-hungry, apathetic clones. Joan Didion's "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" profiles a woman accused of calculatedly killing her husband after her betrayal by the classic California myth of happiness, excitement, and opportunity. Nathanael West's 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*, a founding work of Californian neomythology, presents Hollywood as a theater of the grotesquely absurd – the opportunity-seeking would-be star, the self-made middle-class laborer, the artistic Easterner, even the cowboy hero of classic Western films, all of them warped and skewed into horrifying but disturbingly recognizable versions of themselves. Didion explicitly roots the cause of her subject's growing discontent and eventual murderous rage in an insidious, inhospitable, disappointing space, but it's easy to see a betrayal by the mythic promises of Californian landscape behind the death, violence, and apocalyptic horror that characterizes so many works of modern California fiction. These narratives contribute to a canon of neomythic Western works defined by the fear and inevitability of consumption and control by

landscape, typified in Ellis's *Less Than Zero* protagonist Clay, who's always getting the shakes from a billboard that reads "Disappear Here."

The California-via-New York writer Nathanael West's last novel, *The Day of the Locust*, is a perfect introduction to the California neomyth. Published in 1939, it's hardly the first text to theorize a Los Angelean apocalypse or skewer the film industry,⁶⁵ but West's thorough distortion of classic Californian myths and pervasive taste for the grotesque uphold the novel as a reference point for many contemporary neomythic artists. Most importantly, West warps the tropes of accessible opportunity and constant excitement central to the classic California myth. Those who come to California seeking their fortunes are first controlled, then consumed; they become "the people who come to California to die,"⁶⁶ utterly possessed and grotesquely distorted by a drive for the violent voyeurism they can't get enough of.

The novel opens with recent Yale graduate and aspiring artist Tod Hackett's arrival in L.A., where he hopes to become a set and costume designer. The California utopia he discovers is one of shuffled, bastardized histories, surreal artifice, and ostentatious wealth, in which film sets are indistinguishable from reality, neighborhoods combine the perceived architectural styles of Spain, Ireland, Mexico, New England, and other cultures (sometimes within the same house), and wealthy producers decide the best thing to spice up their home pool might be a life-size rubber reproduction of a dead

⁶⁵ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 304. Mike Davis has made an exhaustive list of every piece of cultural material that has ever meditated on the destruction of L.A. *The Day of the Locust* is just one of the many works he cites in a section he refers to as "cult-catastrophe" based apocalypse narratives.

⁶⁶ West, *The Day of the Locust*, 7.

horse.⁶⁷ Soon after coming to L.A., Tod develops a crush on a would-be starlet and possible prostitute named Faye Greener, about whom he soon entertains disturbing rape fantasies, and who quickly gets involved in a parasitic relationship with her and Tod's hapless mutual friend, Midwestern transplant Homer Simpson (who's in love with Faye; she's in it for the money). The story winds up at a garage cockfight put on by a bunch of animated, grotesque stereotypes (the cowboy, the dwarf, the big-shot producer) at which Faye, who has spurned both Homer and Tod, has sex with Miguel, a cliché Mexican. Finally, the novel culminates with a horrifying, apocalyptic movie premiere mob scene in which Homer is literally consumed by the violence-hungry crowd, Faye disappears, and Tod is severely wounded and driven insane, visualizing the painting he's been working on, "The Burning of Los Angeles" (figure 15), as reality.

In short, West's Los Angeles is hardly the space of utopian myth-apotheosis. He skewers the classic system of mythology mostly through his characters, but we see each of them swayed by the power of Californian space. As they ransack Los Angeles for the film-world opportunity they were promised, they're warped by their disappointment into violence-hungry zombies who have come to California to die, to destroy and be destroyed. We see some evidence of this in the character of Faye, West's "whore" figure,⁶⁸ who many critics see as a grotesque representation of the promise and opportunity of L.A.⁶⁹ At first, she presents the irresistible opportunity of her sexuality to men like Tod and Homer, flirting with them, going on dates, even moving in with Homer, but she refuses sex with either of them. Tod, who thinks she might be a prostitute,

⁶⁷ West, *The Day of the Locust*, 5, 23, 40-1, 120-7.

⁶⁸ West was not famously kind to women. Many of his female characters are especially hideous, which is disappointing.

⁶⁹ Curren, "Noir or Gothic," 14.

attempts to buy some time with her, but this doesn't work out either. Whether it's through Tod's drunkenly trying to rape or "rent" her or Homer's attempt at tender seduction, Faye turns them both down, saying "she could only love a handsome man and would only let a wealthy man love her."⁷⁰ This mirrors the feminization of landscape in so much Western fiction that recapitulates a "Taming of the Shrew" trope – Western landscape can be tamed by the right, tough-enough, masculine, American hand – and theorizes a new, neomythic metaphor. The Los Angelean space, represented in Faye, is unattainable, shrewd, and conniving, always presenting and then retracting opportunity for ownership or consummation. Neither luck, hard work, nor any mythic American qualities can tame it; rather, a classed, economic system is at play. Whether one tries to take it by force or seduce it lovingly, only it can choose when to give in.

It's a major betrayal to Homer when Faye has sex with Miguel after the cockfight (which Miguel's bird wins). Tod finds Homer on his couch, having a panic attack in the fetal position,⁷¹ evoking Freud's theories of the uncanny that root the greatest horror in being returned to the womb, and the ability of landscape to bring about this uncanny fate in much neomythic Western fiction. Homer is driven by this betrayal to leave L.A. and return to the Midwest, moving like a "badly made automaton"⁷² to the bus stop. While Tod is trying to hail a cab to take Homer to a hospital, Homer brutally murders a child who has been pestering him throughout the novel, and is executed, equally brutally, by the ensuing movie-premiere mob.

⁷⁰ West, *Day of the Locust*, 17.

⁷¹ West, *Day of the Locust*, 185.

⁷² West, *Day of the Locust*, 197.

In this moment, we see Faye, the personification of Los Angelean space, choosing to offer that space and opportunity to a non-white man, rather than Homer or Tod (rather even than Earle, another attempted romancer who dresses and acts like a stereotypical cowboy), the hardworking, white immigrants to the West who “deserve” the opportunities of classic mythology. It’s significant that Miguel has also won the cockfight, in itself an obvious symbol for sexual conflict and supremacy. We don’t know that he’s handsome or wealthy, or why Faye chooses to sleep with him, which gives us a sense of the randomness that characterizes both her and the landscape she represents; in the end, no one can predict the movements, the choices, the whims of Los Angeles, just as Tod and Homer can’t predict those of Faye. Faye’s betrayal – Los Angeles’ betrayal – of the entitlements classic Western mythology promises to white men infantilizes and demasculinizes Homer; ultimately, it drives him to do that which destroys him. He moves like the rest of the restless zombie masses fueled by their disappointment, he indiscriminately kills a child at the slightest provocation – in the end, we see that he, like the rest, has come to California only to die. Visible also in Homer’s death as he tries to leave is another trope common in neomythic California fiction, famously summed up by the Eagles’ song “Hotel California:” “You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.” Once you come to California, namely Los Angeles, there is no escape – there might not even be anywhere else in the world for you to go.

The final mob scene is charged with another grotesque skewing of Western mythology – the zombification of the hordes who have come to California to die resembles a mob mentality like that of fascism. The fascist threat was a profound concern of many Americans in 1939, when the growing power of Hitler and Mussolini’s regimes

in Germany and Italy threatened the outbreak of World War; it happened in September of that year, when Germany invaded Poland. In *Day of the Locust*, hardly has the Californian utopia bred the ultimate Americans; rather, the seeming factory for perfect all-American youth has instead churned out a senseless, violent mob who, if the right leader presented himself, would follow him without question through the destruction of America as we know it. As a wounded Tod witnesses the violence of the rioting mob, he begins to consider it the fulfillment of the prophesy foretold in the unfinished painting, “The Burning of Los Angeles,” he’s obsessively worked on in the wake of his betrayal by Faye. In it, “a super Dr. Know-All Pierce-All had made the necessary promise and [the mob] were marching behind his banner in a great united front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored, they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames.”⁷³

What’s the cure for the boredom and disappointment engendered by the failings of the California myth? West answers: violence, systematized violence led, sanctioned, and executed by a visionary leader who sweeps the disgruntled masses into a fascist army under his wing, leading them on a purifying mission resonant of the eugenic programs carried out in many fascist nations. Horrifying though it is, is this image not a logical, if grotesque and hyperbolic, imagining of California mythology, the way *Blood Meridian* is a disgusting but logical endpoint of the Southwestern mythos? The classic myth may not speak to racial purity, but it does emphasize and uphold the rule of white, American men, rejecting and erasing non-whites, foreigners, women, and other minorities. Our mythic leaders may not be fascist Dr. Know-All Pierce-Alls, but have we not assigned visionary

⁷³ West, *Day of the Locust*, 206. The fascist undertones of this moment are especially apparent in John Schlesinger’s excellent 1975 film version of the novel.

qualities, impossible intelligence, and larger-than-life stature to our mythic, heroic strongmen? The Western myth may not have promised violence, but it did promise opportunity, and it did promise excitement, and in classic Western films excitement and opportunity often must manifest through violence – conflict with Indians, shootouts between “good” and “evil” gunslingers, et cetera. Is this promise, one of the central tenets of Western mythology, all that different from Dr. Know-All Pierce-All’s “necessary promise,” with its undertones of exciting violence, mob-driven conquering, and manifest destiny?

Maybe California is the end of America in more than one way, West posits. American fascism would be an apocalypse; it would be a change beyond imagining. As illustrated in the flames of mob scene, an American fascist state would be a cauterization by fire; it would necessitate complete destruction and erasure of everything we have defined as “American.” It would be such an apocalypse that it’s easily relatable to another apocalypse, that evoked by the novel’s very title, the biblical end of the world, the epic battle between good and evil that ends with the return of Christ. The art historian Jeffrey Meyers has analyzed the myriad of art historical references West makes in the novel, chiefly to James Ensor, a Belgian expressionist whose work leant almost exclusively toward (often borderline nauseating) grotesquery. Tod’s “The Burning of Los Angeles” is likely meant to be a reference to Ensor’s massive, 8-by-14 foot painting “Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889”⁷⁴ (figure 16), which, interestingly, is in the collection of Los Angeles’ Getty Museum.⁷⁵ Ensor made the painting in 1888; its very

⁷⁴ Meyers, “The Paintings,” 52.

⁷⁵ The museum acquired the painting in 1987, making it unlikely that West saw it in person. Still, the correlation is worth considering.

title evokes a sense of apocalyptic inevitability. Unique among art that presents religious scenes of any sort, Christ is not the focus of Ensor's painting; rather, the swarming crowd, following a grotesquely fat bishop in advance of Christ on horseback, gets much of the attention. The mob is comprised of hideous, frightening caricatures – soldiers, skeletons, witches, clowns, all with faces that look like masks – seemingly funneled toward the viewer by colorful banners, crowded so tightly they threaten to burst out of the painting and into real space, just as Tod hallucinates.

In *The Day of the Locust*, as in “Christ's Entry into Brussels,” apocalypse is imminent, inevitable, and perhaps even desired. Apocalypse would be the ultimate excitement, the ultimate cure for the boredom engendered by the disappointment of California. At Faye's father's funeral, Tod recognizes the song played by the electric organ, Bach's “Come Redeemer, Our Saviour.” At first, when the music is soft and calm, no one seems to be paying attention. Finally, the music becomes exciting – Tod notes the power of the deep bass tones overpowering the softer treble sounds. Then the funeralgoers start to engage – Tod hears one “grunt with pleasure.”⁷⁶ The scene goes on:

“Now come, O our Saviour,” the music begged. Gone was its difference and no longer was it polite. Its struggle with the bass had changed it. Even a hint of a threat crept in and a little impatience. Of doubt, however, [Tod] could not detect the slightest trace. If there was a hint of a threat, he thought, just a hint, and a tiny bit of impatience, could Bach be blamed? After all, when he wrote this music, the world had already been waiting for its lover more than seventeen hundred years.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ West, *Day of the Locust*, 118.

⁷⁷ West, *Day of the Locust*, 118.

In this moment, the funeralgoers are engaging with music that intensely begs for apocalypse, for the return of Christ. The seemingly threatening, impatient current that underlies the music is what makes them interested and gives them reason for this feeling of identification. West notes the music's seeming lack of doubt – Bach and the funeralgoers are sure that the return of Christ is imminent, they are simply hoping for it to happen sooner rather than later.

The language of desire in this moment is compelling as well. Many neomythic California texts present apocalypse as a form of consummation, a distinctly sexual breed of completion and finalization. Whether it's in the sexual "grunt of pleasure" from one of the funeralgoers as the song picks up speed or in the language West uses to describe Christ here (as the world's lover, "shy and gentle,"⁷⁸ almost feminized), there seems to be a climactic sexual dimension to the California apocalypse, as though it were the moment when seduction becomes physical reality, the ultimate accomplishment of courtship. There's another element of the skewed mythos here; classic Westerns are rife with metaphorical references to consummation with land as the ultimate achievement. We can also return to the language of the "landscape of desire" – Californian mythology presents us with a place we have willed into reality; could we not then theoretically will apocalypse into reality, as the funeralgoers seem to be attempting here?

In short, neomythic California texts like *The Day of the Locust* present a destructive and erasing apocalypse as the logical, necessary end of the story – of California, of the West, of America. It must occur in California – "the people who go to California to die" move there to watch it; those who were born (created?) there are the

⁷⁸ West, *Day of the Locust*, 117.

ones who will make it happen. The utopia we willed into existence in California turns out to be a kind of apocalypse breeding ground; the perfect Americans this space should have created come out of the factory very different from what we intended. In California we were betrayed by our mythic conception of landscape, so we betrayed our own dreams. West published *The Day of the Locust* in 1939; to this day media and culture are loaded with images of classic mythic California, the ultimate America, the ultimate dreamland, with its promises of idealized, eternal youth, opportunity and excitement, and singular utopian space. Writers are still reckoning with the growing rift between real California, its real people and its real problems, and the classic mythic California still pervasive in culture, often through the use of neomythic tropes, namely a sense of consumption and control by landscape. Joan Didion and Bret Easton Ellis are California-born writers who often incorporate elements of the classic myth to meditate on the physical space of their home state, its effects on the people within it, and what these connections mean about American dreams and mythologies. They, like West, often come to a very neomythic conclusion – if Californian space has created a Californian character, it's one utterly obsessed by and inexorably driven toward self-destruction.

Bret Easton Ellis's major critique of California mythology lies in its perception of youth. In his first novel *Less Than Zero*, published in 1985 while he was still a college student, Ellis subverts and distorts the mythic image of the blonde, bronzed, beautiful, and generally all-American California youth. The novel follows Clay, a native Los Angelean who returns home for winter break after his first semester at a New England college and is swept back up into the social scene that his friends who stayed in L.A. have maintained in his absence. It's a dark, horrifying world of drug addiction, deprived

sex, meaningless decadence, and utter apathy, populated by the generally unparented teenage children of the very wealthy. Within this world, Clay goes to parties, has a series of insincere sexual encounters, does a lot of cocaine, suffers from severe anxiety, and finally tracks down Julian, the childhood best friend who owes him money, to find that he's now a heroin-addicted prostitute, hopelessly in debt and utterly trapped. After this harrowing experience, he's all too happy to return to school in New England.

Ellis's neomythic California teens are neither the golden and perfect youth of classic mythology, nor are they the revolutionary "hippie" youth of San Francisco and Berkeley in later mythology, as profiled by Didion in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" – his young people may be beautiful but they are fake, apathetic, doomed clones dedicated only to drugs, sex, and meaninglessness. This sense of a culture of clones is apparent in the similar appearance of every character – in one scene, Clay and his ex-girlfriend Blair go with some friends to a party in Malibu to find "mostly young boys in the house and they seem to be in every room and they all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blonde hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them."⁷⁹ Throughout the novel, every character is described as being tan, blonde, and attractive, and we only hear specific descriptive elements beyond this when something is wrong or out of place. Clay is constantly told that he looks too pale, having just come from New England; Julian is described only as "thin" and "completely fucked up."⁸⁰

The characters of *Less Than Zero* have a kind of cloned mindset as well, one of united apathy, ennui, and a general feeling of meaninglessness. One character, Ronnette,

⁷⁹ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 152.

⁸⁰ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 17.

has an apocalyptic dream, where she “saw the whole world melt. I was standing on La Cienega [Boulevard] and from there I could see the whole world and it was melting and it was just so strong and realistic like. And so I thought, Well, if this dream comes true, how can I stop it, you know?”⁸¹ Her sense of ennui even in the face of apocalypse seems drawn straight from the *Day of the Locust* school. The same zeitgeist of apathy is visible in the end of the novel, just before Clay leaves to return to New England. He has lunch with Blair, who asks him if he ever loved her. When he answers no, she asks him what he cares about, to which he responds, “Nothing. Nothing makes me happy, I like nothing [...] I don’t want to care. If I care about things, it’ll just be worse, it’ll just be another thing to worry about. It’s less painful if I don’t care.” Blair concludes “You’re a beautiful boy, Clay, but that’s about it,” before she leaves.⁸² Hearing Clay admitting to his own existential ennui and being called out on his hollowness is jarring: he’s our first-person protagonist, who Ellis has set up throughout the novel as being (along with Blair) one of the precious few characters who actually does care about his friends.

It’s easy to root these physical and mental character traits in Turner’s Frontier Thesis, as well as within classic mythology surrounding Californian youth. Classic Californian mythology follows along with the Turnerian concept that landscape creates American identity, asserting that the very nature of Californian space creates attractive physical characteristics (some, like tan-ness, very possible; others, like height and beauty, less so) and attractive mental ones, like athleticism, intelligence, good values, and exuberance. Ellis doesn’t deny that Californian space produces character traits; he, like McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*, simply denies that this character is positive. The young

⁸¹ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 103.

⁸² Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 204-5.

people created by the Californian space are beautiful clones like those of classic mythology, but their metaphysical traits, like Faye's in *Day of the Locust*, tend toward the brutal, uncaring, and conniving, especially when it comes to the problems of their friends.

Ellis continues dissecting California youth mythology through his examination of California's mythic promise of opportunity and excitement. He treads familiar paths laid by West as well as Didion – West profiles “the people who come to California to die” seeking a cure for boredom through apocalypse; Didion writes about finding “evidence of atomization, proof that things fall apart” while researching a piece, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district,⁸³ Ellis has Clay follow Julian to watch him turn tricks because “I want to see if things like this can actually happen [...] I want to see the worst.”⁸⁴ Linking these writers is the connection of neomythic California existence with an obsession with witnessing violence, especially self-destruction. Though plenty of neomythic characters relish committing violent acts, it's a kind of voyeuristic, divorced perspective that most of them actively seek. It's as though filmic violence, like that of classic Westerns, were not enough – now, only the real thing will do.

In two separate scenes in *Less Than Zero*, partygoers watch as their friends shoot heroin, one of the more damaging and harmful illegal drugs, which creates in users a sense of escape and euphoria. At one party, Muriel, who has recently been released from an anorexia treatment hospital, shoots up in an almost ritualistic setting, surrounded by her friends. One character, Kim, tells her not to do it, “but [Kim's] lips are trembling and she looks excited and I can make out the beginnings of a smile.”⁸⁵ Blair is the only one

⁸³ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, xiii.

⁸⁴ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 172.

⁸⁵ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 86.

who walks out, refusing to watch; the rest, including Clay, stay, as Muriel shoots up and begins to cry. Later, Clay watches as Julian's pimp injects him with heroin, as Julian begs him to stop.⁸⁶ At the party in Malibu where Clay and Blair see all the Californian clones, their host, Trent, leads them into a room where he's screening a snuff film, in which a man rapes and brutally murders a young girl and boy. Blair and Clay leave in the middle of the film, still able to hear the horrifying soundtrack, and are outside when the other viewers finish the film and come out, clearly aroused, and start arguing about whether it was real or not.⁸⁷ It's a nearly direct quotation from *The Day of the Locust*, wherein a group of wealthy partygoers watch a (admittedly less horrifying) pornographic film, and a "mock riot" erupts when the projector breaks and the watchers are cheated out of viewing a particularly climactic moment.⁸⁸

Later, Clay and Trent's cocaine dealer Rip takes them back to his house to show them a twelve-year-old girl he and his friends have kidnapped and gang-raped. Like Julian's pimp, they inject her with heroin to keep her complacent. When Clay is horrified by the situation and asks Rip why, he says "If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it."⁸⁹ Clay leaves the apartment, but Trent stays, already starting to get undressed. Like the feeling of consummation connected to apocalypse in *Day of the Locust*, witnessing horrific moments of violence and self-destruction has a sexual, climactic dimension here, in which brutality literally becomes a turn-on. In a world seemingly bereft of excitement, only grotesque, often sexual violence will satisfy. In Rip's statement, this obsession with

⁸⁶ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 183.

⁸⁷ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 154.

⁸⁸ West, *The Day of the Locust*, 31.

⁸⁹ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 189.

consummated violence takes a distinctly Western tone – it’s easy to imagine such a quote, carrying a measure of distorted American values, coming from the mouth of John Wayne. After all, the lure of the West, California included, is freedom – when does that freedom become dangerous?

Didion comes to a similar, if somewhat less disturbing, conclusion about the search for the promised excitement of California in many of her short essays about the state. One, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” tells her story of the spring of 1967, when she travelled to San Francisco because “nothing else seemed so relevant,” because “San Francisco was where the social hemorrhaging was showing up.”⁹⁰ Taking her title from William Butler Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” Didion’s work is decidedly pre-apocalyptic, as if her experience in San Francisco presented her with incontrovertible evidence of the oncoming end of the world. Like Ellis, she finds this evidence in the strange, grotesque, and depraved actions of the friends she makes – countless drugs, weird religious organizations, negligent parenting, bad relationships, clueless racism, children as young as five dropping acid. The way Clay searches for the worst and finds it, Didion seeks proof of a social apocalypse and finds it – “we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job,”⁹¹ she decides upon getting to know the Haight-Ashbury’s shiftless, acid-addled wanderers; through our search for something, for anything different and special and exciting in California we killed the fragile dreams we had created inside ourselves, and now we as a nation are bleeding to death.

Perhaps most thoroughly subverted by Ellis’s and Didion’s work, though, is our mythic conception of Californian space as an American utopia, dreamed into fully-

⁹⁰ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 85.

⁹¹ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 85.

actualized life by sheer force of will. Neomythic California texts present us with a landscape that is not fully tamed – like the characters bred by it in *Day of the Locust* and *Less Than Zero*, it's conniving, violent, and unfeeling, charged with inevitable betrayal. Ellis and Didion use two methods to distort and render grotesque our understanding of mythic Californian utopia – both cast California as though it were not only the most perfect space, but perhaps the only space that truly exists; and both cast as inevitable, complete, and destructive the betrayal and consumption of Californians by the space in which they live. Both methods probe American anxieties that perhaps we have hastened our own end by trying to build our utopia.

In *Less Than Zero*, Ellis presents Los Angeles as the only space that really exists. All the characters' absentee parents are somewhere not in L.A. – Daniel says his parents have “gone to Barbados for the month and then they're going to oh... shit... I don't know... Versailles? I don't know. They don't care.”⁹² Someone else's parents are either in Aspen or Paris, as though those were places one could confuse for one another. This thematic sense of an undifferentiated exterior world seems to prove that all places outside L.A. are the same, united under the same banner of not being L.A., and not worth setting apart, or even considering. In this moment Daniel tells Clay he's not returning to college in New England: “It doesn't seem like I've ever been there [...] It seems like I've been here forever.”⁹³ It's as though, for Daniel, nowhere else exists. Readopting the Californian lifestyle after returning from school has utterly erased his understanding or even belief in the existence of any place that's not California.

⁹² Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 160.

⁹³ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 160.

Clay's greatest fear is this happening to him, getting lost in the physical and metaphysical maze presented by his home city. Perpetually haunted by the billboard that reads "Disappear Here" (after he first sees it, he believes he's being watched),⁹⁴ he dreams about being consumed by the space of L.A. – "I'll suddenly trip into mud and fall flat on the ground and because the earth's so wet, I start to sink, and the mud fills my mouth and I start to swallow it and then it goes up through my nose and finally into my eyes and I don't wake up until I'm completely underground."⁹⁵ Frightened of something like this really happening when mudslide season begins, Clay stays up all night, doing cocaine, to make sure his house doesn't collapse. Later he weeps in his dismissive psychiatrist's office, overcome with anxiety because "I drive sometimes and get lost."⁹⁶ Like Homer in *Day of the Locust*, consumed when he tries to leave, Clay fears he'll become like the rest of his friends who have no comprehension of any space outside, who have been totally molded to the whim of California, who have been taken over and possessed by the notion of this space as the only space. Didion speaks to a similar anxiety when she writes, "It is very easy to sit at the bar in, say, La Scala in Beverly Hills, or Ernie's in San Francisco, and to share in the pervasive delusion that California is only five hours from New York by air. The truth is that La Scala and Ernie's are only five hours from New York by air. California is somewhere else."⁹⁷ For both writers, it is as though California exists in a different world, on a different plane, inaccessible from anywhere else, as though its existence invalidated that of all other spaces.

⁹⁴ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 39.

⁹⁵ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 114.

⁹⁶ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 112.

⁹⁷ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 171.

Didion and Ellis, among other neomythic Californian artists and writers, also follow in West's footsteps in their characterization of California space, rendering it as an agent of inevitable, looming destruction and consumption of its citizens and their accomplishments. Both are adamant: Californian landscape is not utopian, not welcoming, submitting, tamable; in fact, it can easily erase all the evidence of human existence within it. For Didion and Ellis, this sense of landscape-inspired horror is often rooted in real natural phenomena that pose an existential threat to humanity. In *Less Than Zero*, Clay is sometimes dragged on "field trips" by his friends to see evidence of the landscape's destruction of human evidence – Daniel forces him and Blair to take the long way around to Malibu, so that he can see what houses were destroyed by the rainstorms and landslides.⁹⁸ Elsewhere, Rip pulls over on Mulholland Drive while he and Clay are driving to Palm Springs to show him where at least "twenty or thirty" cars are wrecked at the base of the hill around a treacherous turn, because people "misunderstood the road."⁹⁹ These scenes are evidence for the desired witnessing of violence that runs through *Less Than Zero*, and also speak to a neomythic landscape consciousness: the novel's characters most enjoy witnessing self-destruction; here, it's the self-destruction of their complete culture that excites them.

Less Than Zero and many of Didion's essays make reference to the hot, dry Santa Ana winds that sweep down from the mountains to ravage L.A. yearly, usually in the early winter. The characters of *Less Than Zero* frequently comment on the strangeness and the violence of the wind, and it manifests as one of the reasons for Clay's anxiety: in one of his aimless drives he stops in a café, feeling that something terrible is about to

⁹⁸ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 151.

⁹⁹ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 194-5.

happen, and hears the winds “blowing so hard that the windows are shaking and the sounds of them trembling, about to break, fill the coffee shop.”¹⁰⁰ Didion takes a more scientific approach to discussing the Santa Ana, concluding, “To live with the Santa Ana is to accept [...] a deeply mechanistic view of human behavior.”¹⁰¹ Everything about the wind is ominous – it creates a glossy sea, unreal and impossible heat, a strange color to the sky – and, to many California writers, this ominous quality instills those who witness it with a short temper, pervasive unhappiness, depression, and anxiety. Didion and Ellis both list horrific crimes – including murder-suicides, infanticides, and devastating car accidents¹⁰² – that occur during the Santa Ana, speaking to a trope that seems pervasive in Californian neomythology: that those who committed these acts were driven to do it by a sentient Californian force outside themselves. To the depraved sex, drug use, and hunger to witness and create violence that are attributed to California landscape, we can add murder, even the murder of one’s own children. It’s an explicit reference to the persistent neomythic undercurrent of control by landscape, of landscape perhaps bending us to self-destruction.

The Santa Ana’s heat and dryness often leads to another natural disaster deeply linked to Californian neomythology – destruction by fire. *The Day of the Locust* ends with the surreal “Burning of Los Angeles” becoming reality; Didion writes that “the city burning is Los Angeles’ deepest image of itself.”¹⁰³ Fires in Southern California are dangerous, common, and destructive, often causing incalculable losses in dollars, homes, and lives, and they tend to make apparent economic disparities. In *Ecology of Fear*, the

¹⁰⁰ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 61.

¹⁰¹ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 217.

¹⁰² Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 220; Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 77.

¹⁰³ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 220.

social geographer Mike Davis writes about how inner-city fires, often caused by corruption among landlords and fire officials, take incredible tolls on immigrant populations and people of color and are often swept under the rug; meanwhile, fires that destroy wealthy areas, like Malibu, are given more attention, research, and preventative energy.¹⁰⁴ These fires breed classed and raced tensions – after one fire was proven to have been started by a homeless person trying to keep warm, white, wealthy Southern Californians, spurred on by the media, blamed mountain wildfires on an “incendiary Other,” generally a person of the most-hated identity du jour, from itinerant farmworkers during the Depression, to “Axis saboteurs” during WWII, to “sexual deviants” during the 1960s. Of course, most of these wildfires started naturally – and meanwhile, inner-city fires that killed and destroyed the homes of people of color, while they almost definitely had human causes, were invariably naturalized.¹⁰⁵ Fires that start or move randomly seem to be evidence of the supernatural, consuming power of landscape – Davis speaks to this when he writes about fires “feigning thrusts” at certain areas, then moving towards other, more wealthy ones, as though they had minds of their own to destroy these places.¹⁰⁶ It’s no wonder Californians work to deny the natural beginnings of fires that plague wealthy, white areas: these are the people the Californian utopia was created for. Mythic, subdued, tamed landscape would never enact violence against those who had tamed it – it might turn its back on those (often non-white) usurping others, hence the attempt at naturalizing inner-city fires – and the tendency of these fires to destroy wealthy areas seems to

¹⁰⁴ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 95-147.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 132-3.

¹⁰⁶ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 129.

function as horrifying proof that maybe all Californian settlement and utopianizing work has been for naught.

This fear of Californian failure evidenced by fire took a different form in the Watts riots of August 1965, in which fires were started throughout the mostly-black neighborhood following instances of police brutality, residential segregation, and discrimination. Los Angeles' understanding of itself was shaken by the experience – almost 1,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed, mostly through fire (figures 17 and 18).¹⁰⁷ Didion writes “For days one could drive the Harbor Freeway and see the city on fire, just as we had always known it would be in the end.”¹⁰⁸ The Watts riots were horrifying for white Californians because they were a stark wake-up call that perhaps we had not achieved an American utopia; perhaps we had not even come close. If we had done anything we had created a fake, hollow gloss of a utopia on top of a less forthcoming real space; we had created even this failure of a mythic zone for white people alone; now we were challenged both from outside and from below.

Fire is a cauterization, a kind of cleansing, complete, finite destruction. It's reminiscent of the burning or sealing of a wound so that the disease won't spread. The looming sense that landscape must utterly destroy and cauterize the complete human footprint on Southern California, that it seems so dedicated and so hungry to create this breed of apocalypse, speaks to an overwhelming anxiety from within and without California that perhaps we have utterly failed. We failed at creating a “landscape of desire” willed into existence out of mythology; in trying this we put ourselves in harm's way, denying what Davis calls “environmental common sense” that perhaps humans just

¹⁰⁷ Wikipedia, “Watts Riots.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watts_Riots

¹⁰⁸ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 220.

aren't meant to live in some places.¹⁰⁹ We put ourselves in the way of fires and earthquakes and floods and storms, and perhaps we even aggravated these natural systems through our less-than-healthy treatment of our surrounding environment, hearkening as we did to the classic Western mythic conception that we, white Americans, could never truly un-wilderness American space. There's a sense that by attempting to create mythic California we made something angry – some believe it to be those we left out of classic mythology, visible perhaps in the Watts riots and the 1992 race riots and evidenced by the belief in the “incendiary Other”; others believe it to be God, “mad at us for making all those dirty movies”¹¹⁰; in the end, it seems undeniable that it is, in fact, landscape that we have betrayed, and we have driven it to in turn betray us.

“Millions of Angelenos have become genuinely terrified of their environment,” Davis writes,¹¹¹ and it seems as though they have good reason. The mythology out of which we tried to summon Los Angeles is revealed in neomythic work as so easily warped into the grotesque and horrifying – West's treatment of opportunity, Ellis's treatment of youth and excitement, Didion's treatment of would-be utopian space – that perhaps it has always been horrifying and we simply have not seen it. Necessarily, perhaps, the space we would create hurriedly in the face of a very physical spatial endpoint out of such a grotesque mythological system would be the beginning of an apocalypse outside of our control or comprehension until the day we see Christ on horseback riding through the streets of Los Angeles behind a paparazzo mob obsessively stalking whatever hot young star. As Didion says, when she speaks about getting into

¹⁰⁹ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 6.

¹¹¹ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 8.

“bad trouble” when we warp a system of morality into one of grotesque entitlement, “I suspect we are already there.”¹¹²

¹¹² Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 163.

NOT WHAT THEY SEEM: THE PACIFIC NORTHWESTERN NEOMYTH

California is one American coastal endpoint, but in how many classic Western mythic works is Oregon Territory the desired destination? How many adventuresome heroes and heroines of novels geared at children, teens, and adults alike followed a series of mythic, dangerous trails through the tough-but-beautiful landscape of the plains and the Rocky Mountains, keeping an eye to the far horizon and beyond it the dream space of the Pacific Northwest? These narratives are more about the getting there, in itself a pervasive Western trope, than the destination, which has its own complementary mythology, but the prevalence of Oregon Trail stories in all levels of American culture, from novels for middle schoolers to classic Western films to high art, shows Americans something about our conception of the Pacific Northwest as a kind of idealized final frontier. Like California, the Pacific Northwest provides a coast, a predetermined geological endpoint before which we must realize the Western dream, and it provides a shapeable landscape instilled with motivating mythology to promote emigration. Where California's settlement-motivating myth was utopian and neobiblical, the Pacific Northwest's was characterized by a sense of limitlessness. Like the Southwest, the Pacific Northwest is rich with extractable natural resources, including precious minerals and timber, the resource that would come, within just a few years of initial settlement, to define the economy of the region to this day.

By the time Americans began to explore and settle today's Washington and Oregon, the Pacific Northwest was the site of the largest and oldest swaths of "old growth," or ancient and undisturbed, forest in America. The coniferous forests of the

Pacific Northwest, nurtured by the region's unique geology and a resultant rainy but temperate climate that's ideal for the growth of conifers,¹¹³ contain some of the tallest and most ancient trees in the world. Douglas firs, the most valuable trees in the timber market and those on which the Pacific Northwestern economy was founded, grow ideally in these forests.¹¹⁴ Aside from the trees, the Pacific Northwest's old growth forests provide habitats for countless endangered species of plants and animals.

The massive size of these trees initially presented a problem to many settlers wanting to clear land for farming, and they soon found that cutting and selling of these huge trees rather than trying to nurture crops among the cold shade they produced was a much more lucrative option. As logging technology improved with time and ingenuity and the market for houses boomed with the onset of the California gold rush, logging became an unregulated, fiercely competitive field by the early 1900s. Some loggers' motto was "cut and get out" – with a seemingly unending abundance of lucrative trees, no governmental regulation, and other companies to compete with, it seemed the most sensible way to work.¹¹⁵ Logging mills popped up throughout the Pacific Northwest, many along rivers or coasts to smooth transportation to market pre-railroad. When the railroad did come with the help of federal land grants, it sold unused lands to timber companies, helping them to cheaply purchase vast tracts.¹¹⁶ In 1891, conservationist pressure motivated the federal government to set federal forestland aside to be preserved, but most of the conserved tracts were those that would have been unprofitable for

¹¹³ Norse, *Ancient Forests*, 24.

¹¹⁴ Norse, *Ancient Forests*, 22.

¹¹⁵ Norse, *Ancient Forests*, 28-9.

¹¹⁶ Norse, *Ancient Forests*, 30.

logging. Regardless, by the 1980s, the Forest Service was opening these lands for selective logging under the pressure of the timber industry.¹¹⁷

The classic mythology surrounding the Pacific Northwest's old growth forests spoke to an age-old sense of dichotomy between nature and civilization. When the Eastern journalist Charles Nordhoff explored Washington's Olympic Peninsula on assignment for *Harper's Magazine*, he wrote that the old growth forests there, now part of Olympic National Park, had a "dreary continuity of shade... It had, I confess, a gloomy, depressing influence. The fresh, lovely green of the evergreen foliage, the wonderful arrowy straightness of the trees, their picturesque attitude where they cover the headlands and reach down to the very water's edge, all did not make up for their weight upon my sensibilities."¹¹⁸ Logging and other forms of forest resource extraction hence took on a manifest destiny-appropriate sense of bringing light to the darkness, saving the forests from themselves, perhaps even making their beauty more accessible to visitors. In later years, logging became a source of pride for Pacific Northwestern states, as tourist postcards advertised massive logs and idyllic logging camp scenes. Even as they were rapidly cut down, the potential of these forests seemed limitless. In *Anatomy of a Conflict*, Terre Satterfield's ethnographic study of loggers and environmentalists at odds, she writes about one "cutter," Doug, telling her "as far back as the 1950s there was talk of Oregon running out of wood," as he points out the new trees growing in replanted clear-cut areas and imagines a "continuous forest"¹¹⁹ that will never be exhausted.

¹¹⁷ Norse, *Ancient Forests*, 30-2.

¹¹⁸ Dietrich, *The Final Forest*, 20.

¹¹⁹ Satterfield, *Anatomy of a Conflict*, 47.

Cities on Washington's Puget Sound like Seattle and Tacoma boomed in the 1870s and 1880s as they became processing and shipping meccas for this seemingly inexhaustible supply of lumber. Like Los Angeles, Seattle seemed like a city dreamed into life out of mythology – Asahel Curtis's photographs (his brother, Edward Curtis, was a somewhat better known photographer) of the large-scale leveling of hills to create the city's Denny Hill neighborhood in 1910 (figure 19) serve as evidence for the city's rapid growth in wealth, space, and population. Those who saw these images could easily infer that Pacific Northwestern settlement was expanding and urbanizing to create space just for them, in which they too could shape landscape and glean some of its endless wealth. Of course, images like these erase complicated racial legacies, including that of the riots and mobs that attempted to violently drive Asian immigrants from Seattle and Tacoma in the late 1890s, suggesting this logging paradise wasn't made for everyone after all.

With the rise of the environmentalist movement in the mid-20th century, classic Pacific Northwestern mythology surrounding the endless quantity of natural resources began to be questioned. Environmental activists, charged with a sense of emotion and spirituality regarding the landscape, challenged the clear-cutting of old growth forests, citing the lasting effects the destruction of these forests would have on the Pacific Northwestern ecosystem, and ultimately on its human settlers. Many spoke about the strange, bone-deep sense of nameless wrongness they felt when looking at clear-cut swaths of land that had once been thriving ecosystems.¹²⁰ Some environmentalists, whether intentionally or unintentionally, demonized logging communities in the media, painting portraits of unfeeling, wealth-obsessed, foresight-lacking duped pawns of a

¹²⁰ Norse, *Ancient Forests*, xiv.

larger industry, often creating a classed, regionalized (ie. rural-based loggers versus urban-based environmentalists) breed of conflict that threatened complete stalemate as to productive dialogue or change.¹²¹

Meanwhile, charged by the environmentalist debate and the resulting changes in logging regulations, artists began to image the Pacific Northwest in neomythic terms. Images of clear-cutting no longer manifested as a source of regional pride; rather, photographers like Chris Jordan, in his series “Intolerable Beauty,” and Eirik Johnson, in his series “Sawdust Mountain,” profiled logging, its results, and its side-effects as eerie, uncanny, and hypnotically excessive, evidence not of human achievement but of a profound human misstep, a mistake we’ve gone too far with to take back, a wound bleeding too profusely to bandage. Jordan’s images of massive piles of sawdust and dizzying, seemingly infinite spreads of stacked lumber (figure 20), and Johnson’s photographs of the meadows remaining of clear-cut forests, abandoned boom-era homes, trucks, and trailers, and massive “burn piles” of logging leftovers (figures 21 and 22) leave viewers with a sense of the neomythic Pacific Northwestern landscape – ordered, abstracted, and damaged, instilled with a haunting feeling of responsibility and a sense of that nameless wrongness, but still, somehow, possessive of an impossible presence, a strange power. This power is manifest in Jordan’s photograph of Mount Rainier seemingly hovering over a container yard in Tacoma (figure 23), a ghostly, looming presence that looks almost like a thundercloud. If Mount Rainier, a symbol of Pacific Northwestern beauty, wilderness, and conservation, were to erupt powerfully, it would likely destroy Tacoma, and parts of Seattle as well. Its presence may be a sign of

¹²¹ Satterfield’s study is ideal for further reading into this debate.

unspoiled beauty, but this beauty is charged with the haunting potential for widespread destruction.¹²²

David Lynch and Mark Frost's short-lived TV series *Twin Peaks*, which aired for two seasons from April 1990 to June 1991, is perhaps the ultimate work of the Pacific Northwestern neomyth. Exploring the mysterious, supernatural circumstances surrounding the death of a high school homecoming queen and filmed largely in North Bend, a rural town east of Seattle at the base of the Cascade Mountains, *Twin Peaks* digs deep into the classic mythology surrounding the Western, the Pacific Northwest, and the American dream as a whole, subverting these systems and drawing a set of uncanny, Gothic conclusions that force viewers to reconsider and ultimately reject our assumptions and mythologies regarding landscape. Landscape in *Twin Peaks* is settled and damaged but powerful, perhaps to the point of evil; it is vengeful, it is consuming, it contains unimaginable horror. And throughout this, it possesses one of the most pervasive tropes in American landscape mythology – it is feminine. The evil Lynch and Frost root in the virgin wilderness of Mother Earth in *Twin Peaks* is the most lasting of the show's disturbing qualities; it suggests that we have truly failed. At our last frontier, with our last forests, with our last attempt, we have failed, and now we have a truly threatening breed of vengeance to contend with in turn.

Twin Peaks is probably best described as a darkly comic Western detective melodrama. It meditates centrally on a theme that underlies many of Lynch's films – the

¹²² Mount Rainier is one of sixteen volcanoes in the world on the "Decade Volcano" list, a list compiled by geologists and volcanologists to designate those volcanoes whose eruption would cause the greatest likelihood of extreme loss of life and property. It was last active throughout the 19th century, with small eruptions in 1820 and 1854.

dark currents and hidden secrets brewing beneath the surface of American small-town life. Beginning with the murder of town sweetheart Laura Palmer and the subsequent arrival of eccentric FBI special agent Dale Cooper (frequent Lynch leading man Kyle MacLachlan) in the small, sleepy Pacific Northwestern town (likely meant to be in northeast Washington) that gives the show its name, *Twin Peaks* explored themes both, in the words of Cooper, “wonderful and strange”¹²³ over its two-season, 29-episode run. *Twin Peaks* follows Cooper, the local Twin Peaks law enforcement, and plenty of Laura’s curious friends and acquaintances as they meet and interact with a host of characters, young and old, male and female, good and evil, human and non-human, in order to bring Laura’s killer to justice. In the end, it’s not just as simple as arresting one man – Laura’s murder reveals secrets and evils, some of them supernatural, that rock Twin Peaks’ understanding of itself. When the mystery of who killed Laura was solved partly into the second season due to popular demand, audience interest waned, and wasn’t bolstered by the writers’ grasping at soap opera-esque straws (questionable paternity, doomed love affairs, personal revenge narratives, et cetera) to keep viewers interested. The show was cancelled, but ended with a shocking, mythology-destroying cliffhanger of a finale that cemented its induction into the cult TV hall of fame.

One of the neomythic strategies Lynch and Frost use to critique and subvert classic mythology in *Twin Peaks* is their selective appropriation of many classic Western tropes, especially those regarding character and space. *Twin Peaks* is rife with characters who perfectly fit the stringent tenets of Western heroism, sometimes to the point of caricature. Agent Cooper, the Eastern FBI man who quickly falls in love with the idyllic

¹²³ *Twin Peaks* 2.18.

landscape, sticks to his gut and intuition in his search for the truth, trusts in supernatural “signs,” and follows a strict moral code, fits a classic mythic archetype. He’s a great shot with a gun (when given six bullets and a paper target, he puts “two in the eye-holes and one in each nostril”¹²⁴), but uses his powers for good – we hardly see him use a weapon. He’s chaste, turning down sex with the very beautiful but very young seductress Audrey Horne. And he’s surrounded by archetypal sidekicks – there’s Harry S. Truman, the town sheriff who takes his name from the onetime president, follows similar “the buck stops here” ideals, gifts Cooper a few expertly tied flies when he thinks Cooper’s leaving town, and implicitly trusts and follows Cooper’s advice (figure 25); there’s Deputy Hawk, a Native American character who neatly fits the classic tropes: he’s a talented tracker, brimming with knowledge of the natural and supernatural; there’s Deputy Andy Brennan, the classic bumbling but loveable fool. Elsewhere, Audrey finally finds love after her rejection by Cooper with Jack Wheeler, her father’s young business partner who’s a devastatingly handsome modern cowboy in the business of saving rainforests, with a private jet instead of a horse. Even the bad guys seem borrowed from a classic Western – the crew of gamblers, drug runners, and prostitutes¹²⁵ working out of the casino (more like modernized Old West saloon) One Eyed Jack’s (figure 26), presided over by the conniving drug baron Jean Renault and the sultry but heroin-addicted madam Black Rose, function as antagonists until Renault kills Blackie in a squabble over drug money and then is himself killed in a very Western shootout. Western villainy is visible even in the supernatural arena – MIKE and BOB, the parasitic spirits who take over human

¹²⁴ *Twin Peaks* 1.4.

¹²⁵ These characters are over-the-top French-Canadian, making another very classic Western point – “others” (ie. non-Americans) are often those responsible for breeches of moral code.

bodies and force them to commit evil, operate under a distorted moral code when they kill together – “the golden circle of appetite and satisfaction”¹²⁶ – the way many Western villains function outside a mythic structure of morality.

Twin Peaks' treatment of women is also very Western. The show sets up a dichotomy between the “good woman” and the “bad woman” in the tradition of Western films like *Stagecoach* (in which the “good woman” is the pregnant, bourgeois wife of an Eastern military major and the “bad woman” is a Western prostitute who gets kicked out of town) – “good women” in *Twin Peaks* are faithful and chaste; when they break from these codes, they become “bad women” and are punished. When Donna Hayward, Laura's best friend, tries to seduce an agoraphobic named Harold Graves partially in order to uncover his secrets about Laura, she must watch as he uncovers her intentions and mutilates himself. When Audrey tries to win Agent Cooper's favor by helping him with his investigation and going undercover as a prostitute at One Eyed Jack's, she's almost raped by her own father. Audrey's virginity is the focus of much attention in the show – after Cooper denies it and she maintains it throughout her employment at One Eyed Jack's, she finally chooses to offer it to Jack Wheeler, the modernized cowboy character, who accepts her proposal. The day after, she's presumably killed by a bomb. Then there's Laura Palmer, who is almost too good on the surface (as the coordinator of Meals on Wheels, an English teacher to the Hong Kong immigrant Josie, and a tutor to Audrey's mentally ill brother Johnny, not to mention homecoming queen), but is quickly revealed to have been a cocaine-addicted sometime prostitute. Despite the stories that arise after her death, she's canonized in the town's memory in a way that recalls the

¹²⁶ *Twin Peaks* 2.9.

treatment of medieval saints – her belongings coveted as relics, ownership of her body contested, her writings and vocal recordings revered and protected by those who loved her.¹²⁷ The sense of purity, innocence, and idealization that surrounds women in Westerns is at play in *Twin Peaks* – those who are perceived to be pure or innocent are idealized; their deconstruction into real women and the subsequently revealed impurities are close to unthinkable, so these stories are often erased or denied. This theme is visible in Josie too – she came to America fleeing a tough history of human trafficking in Hong Kong, which she committed murder to escape. However, it's not this fact that sends her secret lover, Sheriff Truman, into a drunken rage after her death: it's her history of prostitution arrests.

In a classically Western way, *Twin Peaks* often applies Western feminine ideals to landscape. It's visible from the show's very title, evoking the Pacific Northwest's geography (namely, the appearance of North Bend's Mount Si) as well as a woman's breasts.¹²⁸ The landscape of Twin Peaks (the town and the show) is fertile, rich, and available to the highest bidder – one of the show's central conflicts revolves around the ownership of a tract of land called Ghostwood. Josie's (supposedly) deceased husband Andrew Packard and his family, including the conniving Catherine and the clueless Pete, own and operate a sawmill, whose operation opens every episode in the credit sequence (figure 27). Viewers watch for the first ninety seconds of every episode as machines sharpen saws and those saws slice timber into usable flats of lumber, as though logging had become a completely naturalized process that needed no human labor to smooth it along. Appropriately, the mill shots are intercut with natural scenes, including images of

¹²⁷ Lavery, *Full of Secrets*, 95.

¹²⁸ Twin Peaks is also a Dallas-based chain of Hooters-like restaurants.

the breathtaking Snoqualmie Falls. While we see some evidence of logging in the credit sequence and in the log-bearing trucks that continually pass through town (figure 28), we never see how it has manifested in the landscape of Twin Peaks – we never see clear-cut forests; in fact, we never even see a stump. This harkens to the concept that American landscape is not unwildernessable, that the Pacific Northwest will never run out of old growth forest as long as we need it, that this space is still a virgin one, even after we've conquered it. Twin Peaks is a total innocent, “a long way from the world”¹²⁹ – tellingly, the woman who's crowned its human avatar (“Miss Twin Peaks”) in the series' penultimate episode is the recent ex-nun Annie Blackburn, who wins over the judges with her beauty, modesty, and an impassioned speech on forest conservation. On the surface, innocence, purity, and the sense of innate mythic morality associated with the feminine landscape seem to rub off on the townspeople, following along with the Frontier Thesis – but Lynch and Frost dig deeper into a neomythic consciousness to expose the seedier seams inherent in classic mythology.

Lynch and Frost's chief neomythic revision to classic Pacific Northwestern mythology is familiar – not alone among Western neomythic artists, they attribute unharnessable, controlling, consuming power to landscape. In the second season, Cooper and the Twin Peaks police department begin to uncover threads between Laura Palmer's death, some local legends originating from Deputy Hawk's tribe, the Air Force Major Briggs' highly classified research into mysterious radio signals from within the woods surrounding Twin Peaks, and Cooper's ex-partner and nemesis Windham Earle's bizarre, cryptic conniving (ie. most of the show's myriad plotlines). All seem to be related to the

¹²⁹ *Twin Peaks* 1.3.

existence of a White Lodge and a Black Lodge, mirrored supernatural zones from which emanate all the good and beauty in the world, and all the evil and darkness in the world, respectively. Both Lodges can be entered only at a specific place and time, at a moment of certain planetary conjunction, at a pit of oil inside a circle of new growth sycamore trees in the region of Ghostwood Forest called Glastonbury Grove (figure 29).¹³⁰ Inside the circle at the right time, the gateway to the Lodges will appear (figure 30). In this way, power – whether it be for good or for evil – is thoroughly couched within landscape, and must be negotiated with and visualized through the lens of landscape.

The power manifest in the Lodges (and thus, in landscape) is horrifyingly influencing, controlling, and consuming. Laura Palmer’s killer (and repeated rapist and abuser) turns out to be her father, Leland, under the control of the evil Black Lodge spirit BOB, who had possessed him since his childhood (figure 31). Leland’s realization of his crimes and subsequent confession of his experience with BOB presents a compelling neomythic revision –

I was just a boy... I saw him in my dreams... He said he wanted to play... He opened me and I invited him and he came inside me [...] When he was inside I didn't know and when he was gone I couldn't remember. He made me do things, terrible things... he said they wanted lives, others that they could use like they used me.¹³¹

If we read BOB as a landscape element (as a piece of the *supernatural* Black Lodge), we can read this moment as a complete subversion of classic landscape mythology. The classic myth presents upper-middle-class white male characters like

¹³⁰ That the entrance to the Black Lodge is a new growth, perhaps man-altered, natural space is significant.

¹³¹ *Twin Peaks* 2.9. Ellipses are textual; Leland confesses just before the moment of his death.

Leland as the tamers, winners, and settlers of Pacific Northwestern space; here, he is utterly at the mercy of landscape. Its control and taming of him, its bending of him to its will, takes a violent sexual dimension, a logical and exaggerated reversal of the way the classic myth renders white male conquering of feminized Western space. The last line is worth considering; it suggests that landscape is compelling Leland to bring it other lives to control. He works as a lawyer for Benjamin Horne, Audrey's father, who is trying to secure foreign investment for a development complex on the Ghostwood land – might these be some of those other lives? This scene utterly subverts the concept that American landscape exists for human use; it suggests that Americans exist for use by their landscape, and that this control, rather than create Turner's unique national character, compels them to commit acts of murder and other forms of destruction of their fellow human beings.

No one can escape the consuming, controlling power of the Black Lodge, not even the series' most classic mythic Western hero, special agent Dale Cooper. In the series' final episode, he enters the Black Lodge in an attempt to save Annie Blackburn, the human manifestation of Twin Peaks' mythic innocence, who's been kidnapped and taken there by Windham Earle in his attempt to harness the power of the Lodge. In looking for her inside the Lodge, Cooper confronts his "shadow self," his evil doppelganger (figure 32), who incapacitates him and leaves the Lodge in his stead. In the last moments of the series, Cooper looks himself in the mirror and we see BOB's reflection as he laughs maniacally (figure 33). The "good" Cooper, the mythic hero, has been consumed by the Lodge. Similarly, BOB's acts of violent murder are charged with a sense of consumption – acting through Leland, he kills Maddie Ferguson, Laura's cousin,

after squeezing her in a bizarre embrace that he later attempts on Donna, Laura's best friend. In his death-embrace of Maddie, he licks and bites her face as though trying to eat her alive.¹³²

Nature's power may manifest in the existence of the Lodges, but it's visible elsewhere throughout *Twin Peaks*. Even in the indoor scenes, neither the show's characters nor viewers can escape natural elements – “the interior settings and décor remind viewers of the show's exterior setting and the town's outdoor industry.”¹³³ Every interior space has a kitschy logging-camp aesthetic, with wood beams and panels, log furniture, and approximated totem poles (figures 34 and 35). One house, Shelley and Leo Johnson's, is unfinished, as though it were inviting the elements inside. Cramped, claustrophobic, tight interiors, exacerbated in the Lynch-directed episodes by his taste for seemingly collapsing spaces, remind the viewer of Nordhoff's assessment of the Pacific Northwest's old growth forest: gloomy, depressing, and ultimately disorienting. The critic Blake Allmendinger concludes that “the domestication of wilderness enables evil to relocate indoors.”¹³⁴ In *Twin Peaks*, wilderness can be appropriated and domesticated, but it can never lose its sense of power and presence.

These disorienting “natural” interiors serve as a mirror of the show's establishing shots, which don't in fact serve to establish anything: a select palette of about ten short establishing clips move the show from place to place and storyline to storyline, but they don't illustrate the setting of the previous or coming action, they simply serve as interstitial pieces. It leaves the viewer with no idea where they are, where they're going

¹³² These murderous, consuming embraces are reminiscent of the Judge's murder of the kid in *Blood Meridian*.

¹³³ Allmendinger, *Ten Most Wanted*, 176-7.

¹³⁴ Allmendinger, *Ten Most Wanted*, 177.

next, and how they got from place to place, reminiscent of Leland's confession – "when he was inside, I didn't know." Landscape has a power to disorient and confuse, and ultimately create fear – and it's this fear, Cooper realizes, that is the key that opens the Black Lodge. Landscape creates fear and feeds off fear, but, as Hawk says, "If you confront the Black Lodge with imperfect courage, it will utterly annihilate your soul."¹³⁵ In the series' penultimate scene in the Black Lodge, Earle, thinking he's gained control of the space, offers Cooper a trade – his soul for Annie's. BOB appears and takes Earle in a chokehold, saying in the warped, reversed language unique to the Lodge, "He's wrong, he can't ask for your soul. I will take his,"¹³⁶ before killing him. Earle can't harness the power of landscape; he can't use it to take Cooper's soul and exact his revenge. Only landscape can decide who lives and who dies, and it decides so seemingly impartially, using its own incomprehensible, distorted moral code ("he is *wrong*"). There's no way to win, no way to truly conquer, tame, and subdue landscape, for even the most mythic Western hero. At every step, indoors and outdoors, *Twin Peaks*' characters are reminded of this fact.

Throughout all this impartial, consuming, controlling evil, landscape remains feminine; in fact, its feminization can be a key part of its power. The intact mythic conception of Twin Peaks as an unspoiled, innocent virgin, an unsullied wilderness space, is at play, but a neomythic sense of the feminine landscape is also visible. Perhaps this speaks to a nascent legacy of ecofeminism, in which male domination of nature is linked to male domination of women.¹³⁷ Indeed, the history of forest extraction in the

¹³⁵ *Twin Peaks* 2.11.

¹³⁶ *Twin Peaks* 2.22.

¹³⁷ Satterfield, *Anatomy of a Conflict*, 144.

Pacific Northwest and elsewhere is often related in feminized, sexualized terms: the stripping, denuding, baring of landscape. In *Twin Peaks* as in this dialogue, women's bodies are often explicitly connected to a man-altered landscape. The bodies of BOB's victims, Laura and Maddie, are found within natural spaces – Laura's body is first seen “floating like a piece of driftwood downstream;”¹³⁸ Maddie's is found floating among cut logs. Both are famously “wrapped in plastic” (figure 36), packaged like consumer products – Pete Martell's infamous series-opening line, “She's dead, wrapped in plastic,”¹³⁹ might just as easily apply to one of the Pacific Northwest's great Douglas firs, packaged by the sawmill owned by his wife's family that features prominently in the opening credits. Elsewhere, women's connection (stereotypically considered closer than that of men¹⁴⁰) with nature gives them a sense of vision or understanding that male characters lack. The Log Lady, a woman who carries around and speaks to a “pet log,” understands the Black Lodge through her telepathic connection with the log, who often “sees” things. None of the other characters who try (most of them men) can speak to the log, but they quickly learn not to dismiss the Log Lady as crazy – her (the log's) advice and wisdom is often profoundly important.

Women in *Twin Peaks* often serve as mirrors to the landscape. Annie Blackburn, in her purity and innocence, serves as one mirror; Laura Palmer, whose purity and innocence are only skin-deep, serves as another, somewhat more accurate one. After Laura's murder, Cooper's (and the rest of the town's) relentless investigation into her death reveals secrets about her life that shatter the popular conception of her as an ideal

¹³⁸ Allmendinger, *Ten Most Wanted*, 176.

¹³⁹ *Twin Peaks* 1.1.

¹⁴⁰ Satterfield, *Anatomy of a Conflict*, 145.

American teenager – namely, her involvement in drugs, prostitution, and supernatural evil. Laura, like the landscape, can execute powers of control and consumption: she easily talks one of her boyfriends, quarterback Bobby Briggs, into selling drugs so that she can have them for free;¹⁴¹ other characters repeatedly reference her always getting whatever she wanted. Even after her death, this power is present: when Donna and Maddie put on Laura’s sunglasses, they take on Laura-like attributes of coldness, cruelty, and chilly sexuality.¹⁴² As the superficial sense of Laura’s ideal young femininity is deconstructed through the reveal of her secrets, the sense of innocence, virginity, and availability surrounding the landscape is deconstructed as well. In the last episode, when Cooper enters the Black Lodge, the pure manifestation of wilderness as evil, he meets a thoroughly deconstructed Laura with white frosted eyes, who screams and moves like an animal, illuminated by a fragmenting strobe light (figure 37). Here, the revelation of the horror perhaps innate in these mythologized, idealized feminine entities, the landscape and Laura, is simultaneous.

In the face of these neomythic Western women and landscapes, male characters in *Twin Peaks* very often suffer a crisis of masculinity. BOB as Leland kills Laura because she won’t give in and allow herself to be possessed; Leland and other male characters, including Cooper, do give in to BOB’s possessive power. Laura is in control of her own death – she decides to allow herself to be killed to escape the pain of knowledge that her father is her abuser, while this ability isn’t afforded to *Twin Peaks*’ male characters. The sense of fear that opens and exudes from the Black Lodge incapacitates, consumes, and destroys male heroes, like Cooper, targeting the classic Western heroic attribute of

¹⁴¹ *Twin Peaks* 1.6.

¹⁴² *Twin Peaks* 2.1.

courage. Male-female relationships in *Twin Peaks* are often characterized by unstable men in crisis complimented by the long-suffering women who put up with their violence, madness, and absurdity. This dynamic is at play in Leland Palmer and his wife Sarah, who at one point shouts “What is going on in this house!”¹⁴³ in a way any number of her fellow Twin Peaks housewives might. Elsewhere, Shelley Johnson is repeatedly abused and beaten by her criminal trucker husband, Leo, and Mrs. Horne sits with her head in her hands at the dinner table as her wealthy landowner husband, Ben, absurdly reunites over sandwiches with his equally absurd brother, Jerry.¹⁴⁴ This sense of masculinity in crisis or even near failure complements and asserts *Twin Peaks*’ sense of powerful, feminized space.

A sense of feminized landscape power is most visible, though, in the Black Lodge itself. It is a space as profoundly feminine as it is evil. It’s constantly associated with red curtains, which make up the Black Lodge’s interior and are often visible in the “real world” at moments of Black Lodge-ian evil (behind gloating BOB-as-Leland, in the casino One Eyed Jack’s), and simultaneously recall female genitals. The nested black-and-white Vs of the tile floor pattern might also recall a vaginal motif, but the critic Nancy Buffington makes an argument for the floor pattern as “a contortion of linear, patriarchal structure.”¹⁴⁵ This notion of disrupted patriarchy is visible also in the Lodge’s distortion of the structure of language – within the space, language sounds vaguely familiar, but is warped almost beyond recognition, necessitating the use of subtitles (figure 38). It’s a disorienting space in which no defined structures of understanding hold

¹⁴³ *Twin Peaks* 1.2.

¹⁴⁴ *Twin Peaks* 1.3.

¹⁴⁵ Sanders, *Functions of the Fantastic*, 102.

up: sounds aren't necessarily matched to impulses, people are not necessarily who they seem, corridors don't necessarily lead where one might think. The Black Lodge's consuming, maze-like, feminine, patriarchy-warping power allows it to function as a kind of womb, a concentrated, controlling, molding female space.

The sense of horror created in *Twin Peaks*, visible in the reading of the Black Lodge as a womb, can be related to Sigmund Freud's 1919 meditations on the uncanny, which he theorized to be a form of the terrifying and frightening characterized by a sense of something that was once familiar, disappeared, and has now returned. The uncanny can manifest in something that was hidden and secret and is suddenly revealed, or a sense of somewhat altered *déjà-vu* – a place you've been before, subtly changed. It can take the form of childhood or "primitive" fears that become realized, such as something that seems to prove the existence of supernatural, animistic forces that modern, adult, "rational" minds have proven to be fantasy. Whatever the case, the uncanny is characterized by repression – repression of childhood fears, repression of memories, repression of secrets – that suddenly bursts forth. Freud meditates on consumption by landscape as, perhaps, the ultimate uncanny:

Some would award the crown of the uncanny to being buried alive, only apparently dead. However, psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying fantasy is merely a variant of another, which was originally not at all frightening, but relied on a certain lasciviousness; this was the fantasy of living in the womb. [...] Neurotic men state that to them there is something uncanny about the female genitals. But what they find uncanny ('unhomely') is actually the entrance to man's old 'home,' the place where everyone once lived.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Freud, "The Uncanny," 150-1

Being buried alive, being returned to the horrifying womb of the feminized earth, presents, possibly, the ultimate form of terror. In the context of *Twin Peaks*, it suggests that all Americans' most stringent attempts at Western mythology have failed utterly – even our most mythic heroes are doomed to inevitable, impartial consumption by this space we thought was innocent, open, and available. The womb of the Black Lodge, of the landscape, consumes heroes and rebirths them as villains, and *Twin Peaks* demands that we look at the Turnerian trope of the shaping of American masculinity by landscape through this lens. Through their drive, their lust, to take whatever steps necessary to understand, conquer, subdue, and tame landscape, our mythic heroes are made villains, but much as we still consider landscape virginal wilderness despite evidence to the contrary, we still consider them heroes.

Through these tropes and others, *Twin Peaks* insists on a neomythic reading of itself, and, by extension, other Westerns, as a work of the Gothic. The Gothic is often characterized by a Freudian sense of the uncanny; Gothic plots revolve around narratives of concealment and exposure. *Twin Peaks* consciously, inescapably presents the Pacific Northwest as a “brooding, Gothic frontier”¹⁴⁷ in which everyone and everything has hidden, grotesque secrets, and Laura Palmer's death serves as a catalyst for their reveal. The sense of secrecy that permeates *Twin Peaks* is deeply reminiscent of Gothic tropes – hidden secrets often surround problematic, strange sexualities, as in the show's plethora of paternity debates, extramarital affairs, and incest or incest-like narratives. Similar to the Southwestern Gothic, sometimes concealment in *Twin Peaks* is literally subterranean:

¹⁴⁷ Allmendinger, *Ten Most Wanted*, 179.

Cooper and the Twin Peaks police department find a secret map to the Black Lodge inside a cave by pulling a lever that causes a false wall to fall.¹⁴⁸

Chiefly, though, the sense of the Gothic and uncanny in *Twin Peaks* is bred by Lynch's pervasive use of disorienting doubles and mirrors. There's Laura's look-alike cousin Maddie, whose shockingly similar appearance (both characters were played by the same actress, Sheryl Lee) causes dangerous misunderstandings; Annie, Cooper's new love interest, strikingly resembles his deceased former love, Caroline; even the show itself has a twin, the diagetic soap opera *Invitation to Love*, whose over-the-top plots often parallel those of *Twin Peaks*. Names are problematically doubled as well – MIKE and BOB are evil spirits from the Black Lodge, whereas Mike and Bobby are high school football players. The Black Lodge itself is a double, the “shadow self,”¹⁴⁹ as Hawk says, or the evil mirror of the “good” White Lodge, and it creates similarly evil doppelganger versions of those who pass through it, including the white-eyed, possessed, animal versions of Cooper and Laura in the show's penultimate scene. Freud writes about the doppelganger in *The Uncanny*, rooting the sense of fear inspired by the double in the notion that the self might not in fact be fixed, that it may be “duplicated, divided and interchanged.” The double, to Freud, perhaps contains all the unrealized possibilities of one's life, all the opposite choices, which challenges the existence of free will.¹⁵⁰ *Twin Peaks* is full of evidence of body fallibility, in which the same body doesn't necessarily denote the same person. In the instances of the BOB-possessed Leland, the One Armed Man, Gerard, possessed by MIKE, and even with Laura and Maddie, this uncanny sense

¹⁴⁸ *Twin Peaks* 2.18.

¹⁴⁹ *Twin Peaks* 2.11.

¹⁵⁰ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 142-3.

that there is perhaps more than one self within the same body or that two bodies might exist with the same self extends into “real” Western space. Within the Black Lodge, things are even more interchangeable – two friendly spirits within the Lodge’s waiting room say to Cooper “One and the same,” though one is a giant and one a dwarf. The dwarf says “When you see me again, it won’t be me,” before Cooper enters the Black Lodge, where he finds a demonic version who shouts, “Doppelganger!”¹⁵¹ Finally, Cooper thinks he’s found Annie inside the Black Lodge, but she turns into a bloodied version of Caroline, before she becomes the animal, white-eyed Laura, then Windham Earle, Cooper’s nemesis.

The Black Lodge suggests that perhaps the selfhood of this very world isn’t fixed. The second season’s pervasive symbology of the two mountains of Twin Peaks (more doubles) with zones existing above and below (the White and Black Lodges, respectively) recalls Tobin’s line in *Blood Meridian*: “Someplace in the scheme of things this world must touch the other.”¹⁵² As in *Blood Meridian*, *Twin Peaks* theorizes that Western landscape conceals within it both heaven and hell, a fragmented multiplicity of worlds, and either can be exposed at any given place and time. Through the multiplying of worlds and people within the concentrated landscape space of the Black Lodge, *Twin Peaks* insists on Western space as cosmically, impartially, uncannily powerful – within it, even the structure of our most basic conception of humanity (let alone the Western and its celebration of masculine individualism), the notion of the existence of a single, unique, decision-making self, is challenged, fragmented, and subverted. In this space, selves are revealed to be another, or to be more than one, and one self can be replaced or controlled

¹⁵¹ *Twin Peaks* 2.22.

¹⁵² McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 137.

by another, but through all this the landscape remains, man-altered and still capable of incomprehensible power.

The sense of the uncanny in *Twin Peaks* is related to a sense of masculine, patriarchal fallibility in the face of a feminized space so commanding, controlling, and consuming that it threatens the very existence of humanity in a looming, ambivalent way. Will Mount Rainier or other volcanoes in Washington, Oregon, and northern California's Cascade Range erupt in the coming years? We have no way of knowing, and when (not if, but when) the time comes, it's only the whim of nature that will decide if adjacent cities will still exist. One thing is for certain – nature will return from even the most profound cataclysm. Scientists estimate that it will take Pacific Northwestern forests 1,200 years to return to a state of old growth after being clear-cut or burned,¹⁵³ and Frank Gohlke's photographs of Mount Saint Helens following its 1980 eruption show nature beginning to reassert itself within less than ten years.¹⁵⁴ Could humans completely recover to the point at which we are now from utter decimation in 1,200 years? Could we recover at all?

If *Twin Peaks* demands that we view it as both a Western and a Gothic, what does that mean for the Western genre as a whole? Gothic tropes and narratives of concealment and exposure gel so easily with the similar tropes and narratives of the neomythic Western, but could we look at classic Western mythology through the same lens? Western neomythology is characterized by the exposure of white, male atrocities committed against people of color, women, and a feminized landscape, while classic mythology is characterized by the concealment of these same atrocities within that

¹⁵³ Norse, *Ancient Forests*, 34.

¹⁵⁴ Rohrbach, *Accommodating Nature*, 89-90.

landscape. The classic myth teaches Americans that the landscape of the West is still wilderness and will always be, that it bears no history, that it is still a blank slate; neomythology ruptures this mode of thinking by turning the weapon of concealment against those who had used it, and revealing Gothic legacies of hidden secrets. Neomythology engages with and references classic mythic tropes by skewing and perverting them into horrifying but recognizable, hyperbolic ends; we must then consider how easily these classic tropes are warped into the grotesque, how fine the lines are between desired Western heroic traits and the horrific, repulsive actions of neomythic hero-villains who have been consumed and rebirthed different and disgusting by the Black Lodge. Fine lines of tenuous, difficult-to-define ideals like morality and justice exist between the heroic gunslinger and the not-so-heroic one, fine lines exist between the good woman and the bad woman, the virgin and the whore, the wilderness and the settled space. The finest line of all, perhaps, is between landscape's influence on American character and identity and landscape's control of those who exist within it. Suggesting we as Americans were created and bred by our space is very close to insinuating that our actions have never truly been motivated by free will. Neomythology reveals these lines as having always been as unstable and uncertain as they appear in contemporary work, and then it dissolves them completely.

When engaging with classic Westerns today, we need to take into account the neomythic notions that these dichotomies aren't really all that dichotomous, that these seemingly mirrored entities aren't necessarily fixed that way, that what appear to be opposites could in fact be "one and the same." We need to use our knowledge of neomythology to read classic Westerns as simply the opposite side of the Gothic coin: the

side on which real history, in all its inconvenient truths and dark secrets, is concealed and buried, but is still present, waiting, looming like Mount Rainier, to erupt. The sublime geographies, individualist masculinity, and assertion of pure American-ness propagated by classic Westerns are charged with the ghost presence of what is being deliberately left out, erased, denied, concealed, because these hidden secrets and histories will inevitably explode – it's only a matter of time. When they do, who knows what will happen to those who have concealed them?

Concealed Western secrets are dangerous; from buried nuclear and chemical wastes, to racial conflict, to the jadedness and hatred engendered by broken promises, to the gnawing suspicion that perhaps our limitless hunger for more has hastened our own destruction as a nation. The fear these secrets create isn't only the uncanny, Gothic sensation surrounding the reveal of the repressed – it is fear of the seemingly inevitable dissolution of our mythic conception of ourselves as good, moral, right, blessed; it's fear for our own lives, fear for the lives of our posterity. Indeed, it is the children of would-be Western heroes who seem to suffer most at the hands of the landscape in neomythic work – the children murdered by the Judge, the dissolute, doomed children of wealthy Californians, Laura Palmer's rape and murder by her own father. These fears haunt classic Westerns as they do neomythic ones.

Twin Peaks is so disconcerting because it is undeniably a Western, but one thoroughly, assertively instilled with these neomythic fears. It suggests that we Americans lack any semblance of free will; we exist at the whim of incomprehensible, unharnessable, supernatural power present in our landscape. At any moment it could possess us to do things as horrible as murder our own children. When we enter into its

multiplicity of worlds, it could take us to heaven or drop us into hell. It can consume the heroes we think we are, shape us into something else entirely, and spit out grotesque villains who take the same form. In short, *Twin Peaks* is a Western that's also an anti-Western; it's an assertively mythic American work that does everything it can to subvert what mythic Americana means to us. It leaves viewers with an understanding of the mythos we were raised on so deconstructed, so unfixed, that it makes engaging with classic mythology feel like looking in a mirror and seeing someone else, a wrongness perhaps even more intense, permanent, and horrifying than standing in a clear-cut meadow where days ago stood a grove of Douglas Firs.

Edward Steichen's Family of Man exhibit toured the world for eight years, showing in 37 countries. Even today, it's on permanent display in the Clervaux Castle museum in Steichen's native Luxembourg. The Ansel Adams photograph, "Mount Williamson, Clearing Storm," taken from the grounds of the Japanese internment camp at Manzanar still opens the show, unannotated. Though problematic, it's an appropriate representation of the history of American Western art and literature, a genre that (in this photograph's case, literally) turns its back on the less-than-pretty reality in order to present untouched, sublime wilderness, void of human presence, seemingly touched only by a spiritual, generative hand.

Likewise, it's appropriate that Steichen chose an American photographer's imaging of the West to hold such a commanding place in the show, given the profundity of Western landscape to American culture. Classic Westerns, from Ansel's photographs to John Wayne's movies to Louis L'Amour's novels, are undeniably the most uniquely American cultural mode. Westerns serve as evidence that Americans can detach from European forms in realms beyond the political and economic, that we can develop independent culture based on unique regional experiences impossible elsewhere in the world. Westerns, which at their core strive to prove American exceptionalism both of landscape and those who inhabit it, are a powerful, pure form of uniquely American self-assertion. They image a landscape like none other known to man, wild and unsettled in a way for which Europe has no mirror. They image sublime, sacred geographies in which human presence is dwarfed, if extant at all. They image a hardy but not heartless people within this landscape struggling – but succeeding – to hew out a place for themselves both physical and metaphysical, to build a sodbrick house analogous to a nation, to

govern themselves by the moral codes of “right” and “wrong,” to strive for the proto-democratic institutions of town meetings and group conversations but not to succumb to time-saving, money-making, depersonalized bourgeois trappings like corporatization. Motivated and shaped by the tough but tamable landscape that surrounds them, its these Americans who function as our mythic nation builders. We built this mythology, because our nationhood was tenuous, to prove that we had what it took. Like our mythic heroes, we were tough and hardy enough to shape this landscape; we were strong enough to govern it; we were moral enough to do the right thing. As evidenced by George W. Bush’s cowboy-inspired campaign trail wear, we still resort to it as the definer and bastion of all things American. Our founding mythology, our self-justifying mythology, is Western; America is the West as the West is America.

Needless to say, this mythology is fragile, and it is something about which we have become very sensitive. Classic Western mythology cannot be said to apply to everyone – that it was realizable by anyone but white, able men of fairly good means is doubtful – yet we continue to present it as universally accessible, and we erase the stories of those (women, people of color, working-class people, the list is endless) who could not, or were not allowed to, access the West in fully mythic terms. By the twentieth century the West was settled, cities were springing up along the coasts and growing rapidly, and the tract housing nestled under those sublime mountains could easily have been cut and pasted from Connecticut or Florida or any number of Eastern states, but artists imaged wilderness, pure wilderness, untouched wilderness, bestowed with the benedictive hand of divine light, waiting to be tamed. Even in the more contemporary era, attempts to call out the flagrant falsehoods and unproductive tendencies of classic

Westerns are often met with defensiveness, coldness, and allegations of political agenda. The 1991 Smithsonian American Art Museum exhibition *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier* stirred controversy, and even led to concerns about the future of the museum's government funding, for presenting classic Western art with labels informed by the New Western Historical movement, characterized by scholarly questioning and undermining of classic mythology in favor of focusing on the reality of Western racial conflict, white (and male) supremacy, violence, and unregulated settlement and industry. Spurred by backlash, the museum was forced to edit and redact some of the labels.

That controversy surrounded such a public overhaul of Western mythology is unsurprising. When you critique Western mythology, you don't just critique Western mythology – you critique American mythology, and you critique the foundation of American culture. You critique the notion of American exceptionalism, and, perhaps most profoundly, you critique the idea that we built a nation “right.” When you probe and question any mythos you invariably reveal believers' anxieties: some comments in the show's visitor's book accused the Smithsonian of taking a “smug, superior, and self-righteous” tone to propagate “politically correct” “propaganda” and “sickening [...] dishonesty” that stripped “Western Americans of their achievements and sense of self-worth.” One visitor wrote, “I'm happy with the myth.” Another signed simply, “My heroes have always been cowboys.”¹⁵⁵ Visible here are pervasive anxieties about the denial of entitlements and privileges afforded to white male Americans, and concern about the growing attention to a culture of “political correctness” that challenges white,

¹⁵⁵ Gulliford, “Visitors Respond,” 78-80.

masculine supremacy. These are anxieties thoroughly soothed by the system of classic Western mythology that romanticizes white male individuality and provides, even celebrates these entitlements: to land, to women, to the oppression and silence of people of color. To upend that mythology upends that feeling of safety; it opens white male supremacy up to challenges and critiques, and that will not be stood for by the predominately white male American power structure.

The use of neomythic landscapes in many contemporary Westerns also serves to challenge the feeling of safety in entitlement propagated by the classic myths. So many mistakes and atrocities committed in white settlement of the West are rooted in a pervasive culture of entitlement to landscape – after all, what has the American dream ever really promised but space? We drove indigenous nations from their land because we thought we were entitled to it. We sapped resources from landscape without regulation or concern because we thought we were entitled to it. We built settlements in unwise, dangerous places because we thought we were entitled to it. And throughout this we continued to culturally represent this settled, man-altered space as wilderness because we thought it was, because we thought it would provide for us infinitely.

Western landscape neomythology is horrifying because it challenges this central American entitlement, that we can take whatever we want from our space and we can perform whatever we want to within it and it will stay wilderness; it will still provide us with that blank slate on which to write America as we want to write America. Landscape is anything but safe in neomythology; at its kindest, it'll refuse to support you; at its worst, it'll destroy you. It's written itself with the material we gave it, and it's written itself to be beautiful and horrifying, to conceal only when it wants to, to pay no heed to

the things we ask of it or to the weight we put on it. We see in neomythology that America is already written, that we have no blank slate anymore; we do not like the hideous colonial legacy we see written there, and we cannot make our landscape erase it. Our entitlement to write only white, male, mythic, “pretty” history and to conceal the rest within a pervasively culturally wilderness space whose unsettledness erases the factuality of colonialism is gone, and it won’t come back. Western neomythology is necessary because, as the comments in the guest book at the *West is America* show explicitly illustrate, plenty of Americans still feel themselves entitled to selective erasure of history.

The classic Western mythos propagates and defends white, male entitlements at the same time that it speaks to freedom and self-creation and a black-and-white system of morality; it images wilderness while it urges the growth of industry; it impartially romanticizes and demonizes indigenous peoples; it feminizes spiritual landscape while it degrades women themselves. The classic Western mythos is deeply flawed and almost ambivalent in its multitude of seemingly contradictory themes, and neomythology shows us that it is very, very fragile. We easily distort classic Western mythology to motivate, defend, and excuse our colonialist actions; we twist mythology bred to emphasize nationhood into manifest destiny, Indian removal, “cut and get out.” Is it any wonder, then, that neomythic artists put pressure on American culture by subverting and deforming other tenets of Western mythology? In the neomythos the sublime becomes the horrifying; nature’s creative, shaping influence becomes its consumption and control. Classic Western mythology showed us our greatest desire in the form of independent, unique nationhood, characterized by individualism and self-assertion; neomythology

shows us our greatest fear in the form of the looming suspicion that we have created our own extinction. We have set up the dominoes and perhaps we have started them falling.

Landscape neomythology shows us how little free will we really have, how thoroughly we live at a larger whim. Our destruction seems necessarily couched within the space we once used to conceal other forms of destruction we ourselves committed – Mount Rainier could erupt; the Yellowstone Caldera could explode; California could slide into the sea with the slippage of the San Andreas fault, or burn to the ground with all-consuming, seemingly sourceless wildfires out of Malibu; the weapons we invented, realized, and sourced in the Southwestern desert could be used against us; the consuming geography in which we've hidden our dangerous waste could fail and consume us instead. We could all follow our nemesis into the Black Lodge and emerge as our evil doubles, or maybe we already have. Neomythology shows that what frightens us the most is how impermanent we are, how unreliable is our selfhood as individuals and as a nation in the face of the profound, undeniable, unerasable selfhood of the space we tried and failed to make fit our classic mythology. Most horrifying and inescapable is the insistent notion that when we are gone and all the evidence of us has been reduced to the equivalent of the ruined Anasazi cliff dwellings of *Blood Meridian*, our landscape, never *our* landscape, will still be there: "he says that he will never die."

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APPENDIX



figure 1: Ansel Adams, "Mount Williamson, Clearing Storm," 1945



figure 2: Ansel Adams, "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico," 1941



figure 3: Robert Adams, "Fort Collins, Colorado," 1976

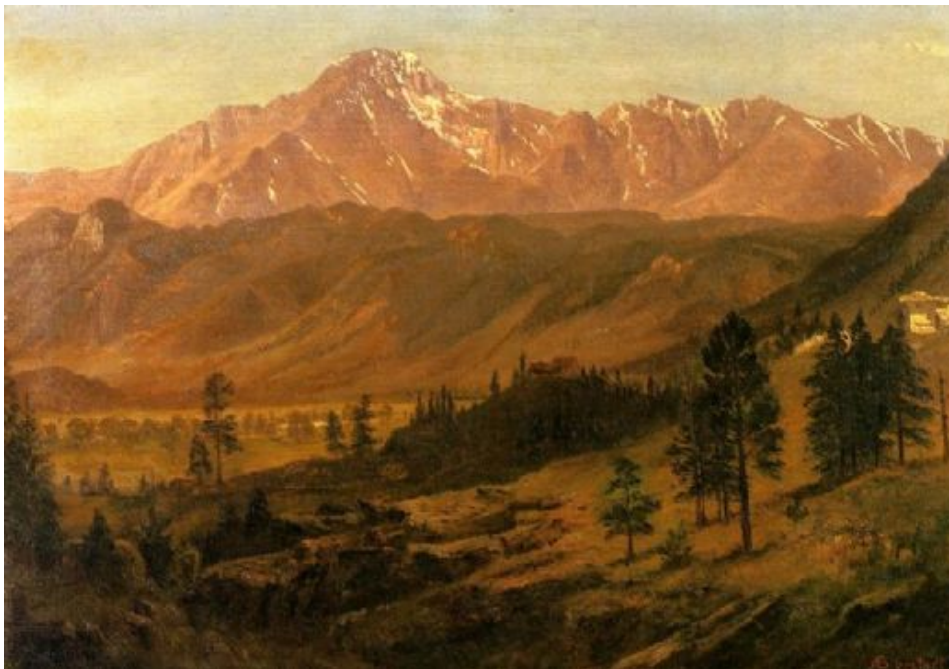


figure 4: Albert Bierstadt, "Pike's Peak," date unknown (19th century)



figure 5: Timothy O'Sullivan "Panoramic View of Tents and a Camp Identified as Camp Beauty," Canyon De Chelly, New Mexico, 1873



figure 6: Edward S. Curtis "The Vanishing Race - Navajo," ca. 1904



figure 7: Will Wilson, "Auto Immune Response #5," 2005



figure 8: Richard Misrach, from "The War," 1986



figure 9: Richard Misrach, from "The Pit," 1986



figure 10: Richard Misrach, "Atomic Bomb Loading Pit," from "the Secret," 1986



figure 11: Trevor Paglen, "Detachment 3, Air Force Test Center"



figure 12: Trevor Paglen "Untitled (Reaper Drone)"



figure 13: Joe Deal, "Sunset Beach," 1978

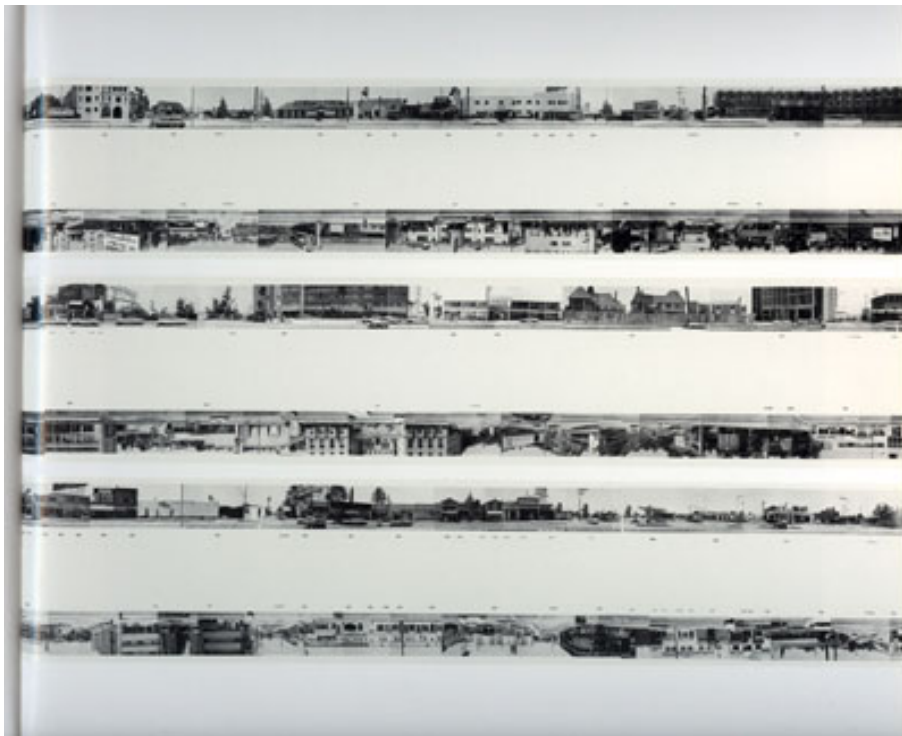


figure 14: Ed Ruscha, from "Every Building on the Sunset Strip," 1966



figure 15: Homer Simpson (Donald Sutherland) in front of Tod's "The Burning of Los Angeles," from John Schlesinger's *The Day of the Locust*, 1975



figure 16: James Ensor, "Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889," 1888



figure 17: Watts, Los Angeles, 1965



figure 18: Watts, Los Angeles, 1965



figure 19: Asahel Curtis "The Leveling of the Hills to Make Seattle," 1910



figure 20: Chris Jordan, "Pole Yard, Tacoma," 2004



figure 21: Eirik Johnson, "Arlington, Washington," 2006



figure 22: Eirik Johnson, "Freshly Felled Trees, Nemah, WA," 2007



figure 23: Chris Jordan "Container Yard and Mt. Rainier, Tacoma," 2004



figure 24: Part of *Twin Peaks*' credit sequence. North Bend, WA's Mount Si is visible in the background.



figure 25: Sherriff Harry S. Truman and Special Agent Dale Cooper (Michael Ontkian and Kyle McLachlan)



figure 26: The Canadian casino One Eyed Jack's



figure 27: The Packard Mill in the credit sequence



figure 28: Logging trucks pass the Double R Diner with Mount Si in the background.



figure 29: Glastonbury Grove – the gateway to the Black Lodge



figure 30: Red curtains, the entrance to the Lodges, appear – Cooper enters



figure 31: The evil Black Lodge entity BOB advances towards Maddie Ferguson.



figure 32: BOB and Cooper's white-eyed doppelganger in the Black Lodge



figure 33: The series' final image – BOB possesses Cooper



figure 34: Agent Cooper in very Pacific Northwestern gear in the Great Northern

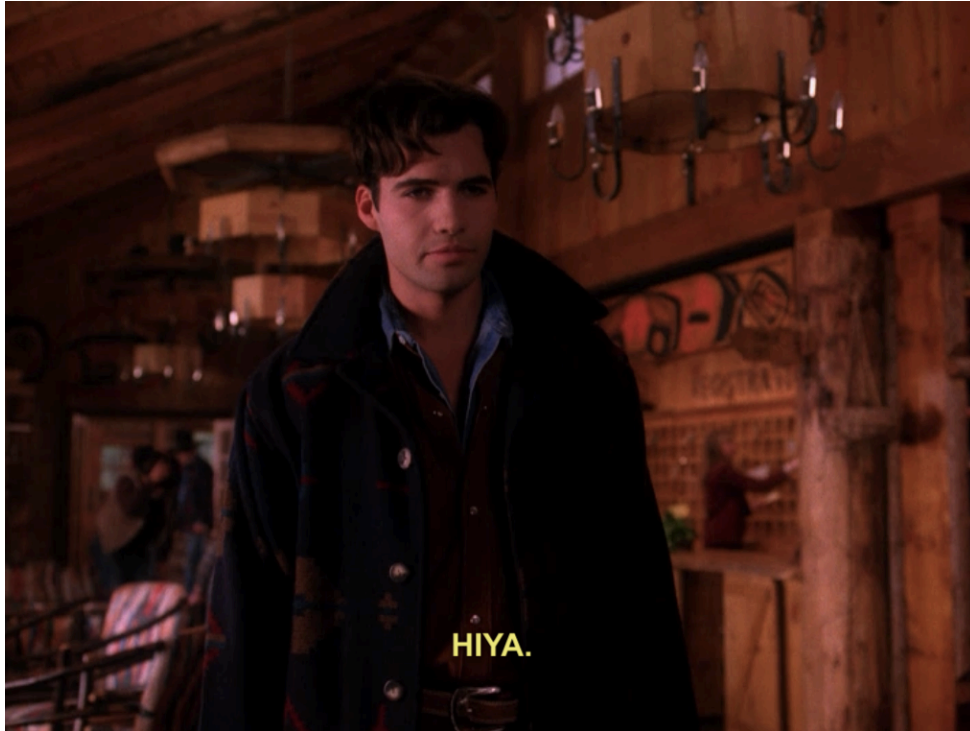


figure 35: Jack Wheeler (Billy Zane) in the Great Northern



figure 36: The iconic image of Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), "wrapped in plastic"



figure 37: A deconstructed Laura in the Black Lodge in the final episode



figure 38: The Man From Another Place welcomes Cooper to the “waiting room” between the Black and White Lodges. Note the floor pattern and red curtains. Subtitles are diageitic in this moment – the Man is speaking in a warped form of English.