Once Achieved, What is it Worth?

James Paul Louks

The University of Montana

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ONCE ACHIEVED, WHAT IS IT WORTH?

By

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

*Once Achieved, What is it Worth?* examines the contemporary social, political and physical landscape of the American West. My research for the past three years has been exploring the myths and misconceptions associated with this region and how these illusions inform, misinform, distort and taint the cultural norms of the region. My intention is to create a more factual representation of the American West relative to my own experience. The American West is a region that has been marauded for its resources, historically to the present day. There is little difference between the fracking boom that North Dakota is currently experiencing than the gold rushes of the late 1800s in South Dakota or the copper boom that made Butte, Montana, “the richest hill on earth.” The boom and bust culture of this region is part and parcel to what it means to be a Wyomingite, a South Dakotan or a Montanan...all of which are monikers that we Westerners adopt, wear and identify with.

At its most basic, the American West is a cash cow for the two coasts and the inhabitants of the region will continue to be subject to benefits and detriments of boom and bust culture. My goal is to remove the romantic façade of the West in favor of a more austere interpretation built upon greed, brutality and guilt.

The body of this thesis delves into a variety of aspects of my practice, touching on personal experience, the myth of the American West, mapping, art and critical theory, socio-economics and aesthetics, forming the body of a thesis.

This paper may be seen as a more direct examination of my thesis exhibition. The writings should be considered in relationship to my studio practice, however, I also think of the writings as self-contained thoughts on specific subjects. The writings serve as reflections of my process and the various currents that run within it and largely represent my intellectual approach to art practice and making, and as such slightly break from the traditional format of the thesis paper. I hope for this effort to be a more insightful approach as it is a more specific representation, where ideas and concepts are paramount, continually expanding and informing one another, resulting in the visual articulation of these ideas.
Once Achieved, What is it Worth?

“They said they’d give me everything, well, here’s the part that made me laugh, they didn’t give me anything and then they took half of that…”
Isaac Brock

The cow was dead. It had probably been that way for a while. There were crows pecking around the carcass and the smell of rotting flesh in 90-degree weather along the side of a rural service road was inescapable. It’s a stench that one does not forget easily, the kind of thing that worms its way into your brain. It is the same way that the approaching stench of a refinery stays with you or the noxious fumes of gasoline on the pavement stays with you. It is a curious phenomenon how these smells call to mind the surroundings I find so familiar and ultimately ubiquitous to the region I have lived all my life. Strangely, these odorous memories of the banal and grotesque are somewhat comforting. This is my home and it doesn’t bother me. It’s what I’ve always known. In many ways I am happy, even proud, to state that I am from the rural American West. And yet I also have an uneasy and conflicted relationship with it.

In Annie Proulx’s short story, “55 Miles to the Gas Pump,” she writes, “When you live a long way out you make your own fun.” I have never lived “a long way out,” but I can still sympathize with and relate to this sentence and its description of the pop culture banality of rural life. I was born in Casper, Wyoming, an industrial hotbed of nearly 70,000 people in the center of the state. I grew up in the college town of Spearfish, South Dakota, which attempts to be a beacon of culture in the “Wild West,” in spite of its diminutive size and relative isolation.

My parents were and continue to be the most middle of middle class. I never lived a stereotypically “Western” existence. I never rode a horse to get someplace. I never needed to mend a fence. I never tended to livestock. I consistently lived within 10 minutes of a doctor, dentist, Wal-Mart and

McDonald’s all of my life. None of the hackneyed tropes of the West apply to my upbringing. Which, strangely, is perhaps why I feel a certain resonance to Proulx’s sentence.

The frontier of my youth is not the frontier of the homesteader or the one canonized in Hollywood lore rather, it is the gentrified frontier of the “new American West.” This experience is a consequence of Manifest Destiny, a stunted experience of the perceived culture. My experience is one rooted not in courageous individualism but in clever capitalism. It is a surreal experience at odds with itself. Despite all of the trimmings and trappings of the 21st century, there is still a palpable feeling of isolation and disconnection from the broader, dominant culture. Because of this, I, and so many others, cultivated a strange existence within this endless cycle of trickle down popular culture.

This realization that I was inexplicably a stranger to this place led me to pursue the body of work I am currently investigating. In my first year of graduate school, while researching theory and writing pertaining to colonization, I came across the writings of the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran. In his text, History and Utopias, he put forward the question, “Glory – once achieved, what is it worth?” With this single sentence, the bewilderment of my upbringing and my role within the rural landscape synthesized and I had a direction in which to take my art practice.

“Glory” is defined as something that brings praise or fame to someone or something. Effectively, glory could be thought of as the “American Dream,” or the realization of capitalist ambitions. It is everything that we sought in regards to Westward Expansion, including the allocation of newly available resources. The American Dream represented philosophies and principles of a delusional paradigm. My personal experience with glory is not an experience based on taming a rugged land to carve out a homestead rather, it is an experience based

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on quaint and effortless subdivisions positioned into the hillside to give homeowners the perspective of “conquering nature,” complete with a pool, SUV, golden retriever and an inexorable amount of debt. Despite the rather “dead end” circumstances of the situation, there seems to be a unanimous praise for this standard of living. The convenience to which we are accustomed to or that we aspire to must be replicated or at the very least emulated. This is true even if we are parading the notion that we’re “roughing it” in the Wild West. Again, it is a direct reflection of Manifest Destiny and our futile pursuit of the American Dream.

This is problematic. It belies the fundamental conditions, constraints and certainties specific to the rural American West. It ignores the palpable realities of life in a region that is seemingly at the whim of the hyper-capitalist culture of resource harvesting. The truth, in many ways the only truth “out here,” is that Westerners are experiencing an existence of borrowed time. Towns, communities, counties and the systems needed to sustain them are ephemeral entities, bound to the economic impulses of corporate entities. At the end of the day, you have to ask yourself, “What is the point of all of this supposed progress?”

For example, what good is it if I have a grand home in “God’s country” when three hours away the average life expectancy is half of mine? What good is it if I can save a few bucks by shopping at the Wal-Mart Super Center when so many others have to drive at least two hours to even see a traffic light, let alone a citadel of consumerism? Is this what resulted from the providence of Manifest Destiny? Is this what God wanted? If this “land of plenty” is truly our Eden, perhaps we should reconsider our deity.

But, strange as it sounds, I actually understand being swept up in this blind naivety. After all, I was and still am a product of it. We all want to attain some amount of glory, whether it’s a big house or a good job or the unbridled freedom of affluence, which allows for independence, perhaps the most American of aspirations. But when you truly think about the situation that someone in the rural, “neo-gentrified” West faces, you realize that they really
have no horse in this race for praise and glory. They don’t work for the folks in charge. They’re just living on borrowed time, occupying the land, cutting out a meager existence. Should the folks in charge decide to cut their losses and leave this “Western Experiment” high and dry, they’ll leave a skeleton in the form of the oddly romanticized ghost town to remind all of those folks inhabiting the abandonment of what might have been.

That nature on the service road was not a unique spectacle, quite the opposite actually. Encountering death, destruction and loss has a certain ubiquity when you live “a long way out.” The sight of a dead cow on the side of the road has the same quality that the sight of an abandoned home or a shuttered business has. The song, “Novocain Stain,” by the band Modest Mouse, adequately sums up the cyclical persistence of settlement and desertion, as well as the subsequent guilt associated with this cycle, that is a constant feature of the landscape of the American West:

…Remember through sounds, remember through smells, remember through colors, remember through towns…with fear and fascination of what was here and what’s replacing it…Interchange causes a mall and crowded chain restaurants, more housing developments go up and get named after the things they replace…So welcome to Minnow Brook and welcome to Shady Space…And it all seems a little abrupt, but we’re enjoying the change of pace!  

The promise of happiness and the desire to “make a life” in the “uncharted wilderness” is what keeps this cycle churning. After all, the pursuit of this glory is the most American of virtues, but, at the end of the day we have to ask ourselves, “Once achieved, what is it worth?”

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5 Modest Mouse. “Novocain Stain.” This is a Long Drive for Someone with Nothing to Think About. Up. CD. Recorded in 1996.
The Gospel According to John Ford

“Out here, a man settles his own problems.”
John Wayne, in the role of Tom Doniphon

In the opening scene of Fort Apache, considered to be a classic John Ford film, Henry Fonda, portraying a career army officer, is seen riding his horse through a quintessentially western American landscape. The place is Monument Valley, a wild and sparsely settled region on the Arizona-Utah border and long a favorite shooting location for Hollywood filmmakers, especially those who established Western films as a defining genre, a eulogy to the early days of an “untamed frontier.” Hollywood has long exploited the stark beauty of Monument Valley. The Searchers, How The West Was Won, The Legend of the Lone Ranger, and many other Westerns were filmed there among the orange-red sandstone buttes that form one of the most remarkable topographies on earth. The iconic landscape provided an ideal backdrop for the development and cultivation of the myth of the American heroic figure, and in many ways, the myth of America itself.

It is the physical landscape of the American West that perhaps most defines what it stereotypically means to be American. Obviously, the arid characteristics of this region are without equal and it is therefore a unique, rugged and idyllic representation of a collective consciousness. It reflects an individualist ideal of strength, perseverance and free will. Partially because of this awe-inspiring beauty it also functions as a convenient distraction from the realities of the historical and contemporary American West. This mythic representation of the landscape is as present in the iconic Westerns of the early 20th century as it is in the paintings of Albert Bierstadt or the photographs of

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Ansel Adams that somewhat unintentionally built upon and continued the belief system associated with Manifest Destiny.

John L. O’Sullivan is credited with coining the phrase “Manifest Destiny,” in 1845, when he wrote,

…It is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government.⁸

Essentially, O’Sullivan’s declaration claimed that the virtue of America’s people and their institutions were superior and that we were called directly by God to spread these institutions from “sea to shining sea,” thus remaking this new frontier in the image of America. In John Gast’s painting American Progress, Columbia, a personification of the United States, leads civilization westward with American settlers, stringing telegraph wire as she sweeps west. This allegorical representation of modernization evokes a sense of pride and strangely feels like a call to arms for expansion. Directly linked to the principles of American Exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny led to an unprecedented history of violence

Figure 1., John Gast, American Progress, oil on canvas, 1872

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and brutality that was conveniently romanticized or entirely forgotten when examining the paintings of the Hudson River School or the films of John Ford. In *Fractured Times* Eric Hobsbawm writes,

> The original image of the Wild West contains two elements: the confrontation of nature and civilization and a freedom with social constraint...Civilization is what threatens nature; and their move from bondage or constraint into independence, which constitutes the essence of America as a radical European ideal in the 18th and early 19th centuries, is actually what brings civilization into the Wild West and so destroys it...The plough that broke the plains is the end of the buffalo and the Indian.\(^9\)

Sadly, the realities and atrocities of the historical and contemporary American West remain glossed over. The brightly colored canvases that regularly populate the galleries in downtown Missoula seem to assume that places like Montana are still somehow untouched by the hands of industrialization and continue to be uncharted paradises where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play. This romantic delusion is not so far removed from Gast's *American Progress*.

There is a clear reason for this omission of truth in the “Pop Western” presentation of the historical and contemporary West. How can a country be virtuous or ordained by a deity when it has clearly achieved this progress through chicanery and cruelty? The “Great American Myth” isn’t as believable when we are playing the role of the villain. So, in crafting this epic, we have made a few alterations, such as omitting the brutal genocide of a native population. In this alternate fallacy, we triumph over our adversaries and reap the benefits of our newfound resources, expunging any culpability from the record all by the grace of God.

In addition to rewriting history in our favor, the principles of Manifest Destiny have helped define masculinity and the role of the quintessential American hero: the cowboy. The invented cowboy was a relative romantic creation. In terms of social content he represented the ideal of individualist

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freedom pushed into a sort of inescapable jail by the closing of the frontier.\textsuperscript{10} He was a strong, silent man of action who did what was right, no matter what. He was a gunslinger, certainly, but he never cut anyone down who didn’t have it coming. He drank whiskey but never got drunk. He never harmed a woman or a child. Rather, the cowboy archetype embodied by the likes of John Wayne or Gary Cooper was a noble, charismatic personification of Manifest Destiny. He became America. And in many ways, he still is America.

Perhaps it is because I have lived in the American West for all of my life and have experienced the veracity of the region firsthand that I have developed a disdain for the tropes of the Western. In my experience, The American West is a place that we broke and never bothered to fix. It is a land of abandonment. It is a land of boomtowns that have long since busted. It is a land of physical and cultural deserts built upon inequality. In my estimation there is nothing philosophically or politically majestic or mythic about the American West. It is not Bierstadt or Adams and it is most certainly not an Eden we were given by a deity. In reality it is a violent, harsh and sorrowful place, equal parts absurdity and tragedy.

There is a long lineage of this more factual telling of the history related to the American West and I feel that my work is a visual interpretation that has its roots in much of this academic research. Historians like Richard White and Patricia Limerick have written extensively on the subject. Relatively recently, there has been a more mainstream willingness to remove the façade of the American West in favor of a more historically accurate narrative in the written and visual arts. Writers like Cormac McCarthy, Anne Proulx, Kent Meyers and Sherman Alexie create stories with themes of isolation, economic dearth and abject violence are set against the backdrop of the rural American West. Films like Jim Jarmusch’s \textit{Dead Man} and Andrew Dominik’s \textit{The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford}, which presented the legendary fugitive for what he was: a violent, manipulative and morally corrupt Confederate

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., pp. 322-327.
sympathizer, have forgone the tropes of the Pop Western in favor of brutal realism. HBO’s series *Deadwood* boldly depicted life in the newly settled Dakota Territory as a vile and corrupt outpost on the edge of the then unknown. These depictions of the American West are ones that read true to my experience and read true to the history of the region I choose to address within my work.

For the past three years I have been attempting to portray the American West, my home, in an unflinchingly realistic light reminiscent of writer McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and filmmaker Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*. In the past I have utilized found text, iconography and symbols related to the archetypes of the region to form a visual critique of the myths and misconceptions we as a society have cultivated and now understand as fact. In my thesis exhibition, I attempted to present all of the aforementioned ephemera. Because so much of the misunderstanding related to the West can be attributed to visual culture, I collected various found footage of iconic Western film and “Marlboro Man” commercials and combined it with recent footage of driving on rural roads in South Dakota. The nearly “third world” roads in and around the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation with lifted pop imagery to create a video piece titled *When the Horse Whips the Man that He Rode*. By contrasting the myth with the reality of the contemporary social conditions I allowed viewers to interpret the circumstances of the situation within the film medium that has perpetuated the fallacy that so much of our cultural identity is based upon.
In the opening scene of Paul Thomas Anderson’s brilliant and brutally beautiful film *There Will Be Blood*, the main character Daniel Plainview, (expertly played by Daniel Day-Lewis), mines a potentially precious ore vein from a pit mine hole. In the process of dynamiting the lode, he falls from a broken rung of the tunnel ladder, breaking his left leg on the bottom of the shaft. He grabs an ore sample, putting it inside his shirt, and climbs out of the mine. He drags himself for miles, bleeding and covered in residue from the explosion, to the nearest assay office to record his claim.\textsuperscript{11}

Like so many of John Ford’s films the cinematography is stunning and we as viewers are left in awe of the panoramic surroundings. Also, similar to the Hollywood lore, the romanticism and individualist sentiment are palpable but the good-natured folly is notably absent. There is no dialogue, the soundtrack is stark and severe and we are presented with imagery illustrating how the West was and is sought after: natural resources. This scene, more so than any other,

commemorates our country's history and the legacy of American Exceptionalism. Daniel Plainview is not the Ringo Kid because he is something more uncomfortably candid. He is the loathsome and avaricious personification of Manifest Destiny.
Nowhere Does Not Mean Nothing

“And 'white' appears. Absolute white. White beyond all whiteness. White of the coming of white. White without compromise, through exclusion, through total eradication of non-white. Insane, enraged white, screaming with whiteness. Fanatical, furious, riddling the victim. Horrible electric white, implacable, murderous. White in bursts of white. God of "white." No, not a god, a howler monkey. (Let's hope my cells don't blow apart.) End of white.”

Henri Michaux 12

My decision to primarily create work in a reductive manner is a decision prompted by my desire to extract elements of myth, nostalgia and romanticism associated with the Western mythos to inform my work. The goal is to present the American West for what it is, a cold, barren land of cyclical settlement and abandonment built upon greed and violence, all of which play upon the notions and traditions of the sublime and the Pop Western. By reducing the work to the most austere use of color, text, and materials associated with construction I am creating a visceral experience for the viewer. This experience is intended to be raw and stands in stark contrast to the typical representations of the American West. However, this process does present an elephant in the room.

My relationship with Minimalism is complicated. Historically, the significance of the movement and the dialogue and the art it has influenced cannot be understated. Hal Foster’s essay, “The Crux of Minimalism,” identified the movement of Minimalism as the historical shift towards Postmodernism. In his writing, Foster states that Minimalism establishes the framework for another kind of Postmodernism: a critical Postmodernism of resistance. Minimal work challenges medium specificity, introduces factory production into art practice and reinvents the Dadaist tradition of the readymade. Foster asserts that because of this critical resistance, Minimalism denies the Modernist tradition of the centered

While much of my work begins with simple, organized design choices referential to the formal elements of a Carl Andre sculpture or an Anne Appleby painting, I am not rooted within the confines of these classifications.

Artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Janine Antoni have utilized, converted and subverted classical forms commonly associated with Minimalism in their practices. Gonzalez-Torres’, Untitled (21 Days of Bloodwork-Steady Decline,) a sequence of identical drawings on graph paper mimics the large grid drawings of Sol LeWitt. However, rather than documenting the process of drawing, the installation traces the decline of Gonzalez-Torres’ immune system during his battle with AIDS.14 Janine Antoni’s Gnaw used the classic minimal cube as a platform for feminist critique. Antoni’s piece thematized contemporary obsessions such as dieting, beauty and thinness, as well as the masochistic longing for love that often propels such obsessions.15 Although Minimalism has

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15 Ibid., p 43.
been firmly established within the lexicon of late 20th century art, it has taken on a new significance and experienced a reinterpretation. The curator Lynn Zelevansky wrote, “Minimalism has a place in the second half of the century akin to the one that Cubism had in the first half. A high percentage of artists have worked with aspects of it, deliberately violating it and creatively misunderstanding it.”

Figure 4, Janine Antoni, Gnaw (detail), 600 lbs. of chocolate, gnawed by the artist. 600 lbs. of lard, gnawed by the artist. Display case with 45 heart-shaped packages for chocolate made from chewed chocolate removed from the chocolate cube and 400 lipsticks made with pigment, beeswax and chewed lard removed from the lard cube, 1992.

The Iranian artist, Barbad Golshiri, utilizes the techniques and aesthetics associated with Minimalism as a means to confront oppression. His sculptures and installations, which deal with the socio-political atrocities that make up everyday life in Iran, dismiss the notions and conventions that are tied to authoritative representation. The result is a body of work that utilizes simple formal elements such as text and shape to question the authority of his country without making a frontal attack on it. By forgoing the traditional romantic

representation of death and martyrdom, Golshiri has created a more honest and timely account of the violence and depravity that is endemic of his culture. In the case of his sculpture, *Untitled Tomb*, Golshiri defies the traditional representation of tombstones, presenting his understated forms with a script that reads, “Here Minn Kaf Aleph does not rest. He is dead.”\(^\text{17}\) This sparse candidness suits his artistic intent and produces a conceptual brutality befitting of his subject matter and it is an approach that I have adapted in my own practice.

Figure 5, Barbad Golshiri, *Untitled Tomb*, iron and soot, 2012

The notion that Minimalism, or at least the aesthetic of Minimalism, can be employed as a technique to critique and confront oppression is a fascinating one and it is one that makes a great deal of sense within the confines of a globalized 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century society. The theory of Narcotizing Dysfunction backs up Golshiri’s statement and provides support to my decision to work in a similar manner. First posited in 1948 by Paul F. Lazarsfield and Robert K. Merton in their article “Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action,” the theory of

Narcotizing Dysfunction claims that as news about an issue inundates people, they become apathetic to it, substituting action on that issue for knowing about it. Because the individual is assailed with information of issues and problems and because they are therefore knowledgeable about or discuss these issues, they believe they are helping in the solution. The theory proposed that society has confused knowing about an issue with doing something about it. However, being informed and concerned is not a replacement for action. What is most interesting about this theory is that it was proposed in the aftermath of World War II. Given the advancements in communication via new technology and globalization, one must assume that our capacity to act on or even sympathize with a violent, criminal or unexpected situation has lessened even more, increasing the apathetic consciousness of our collective society.

Upon coming to the University of Montana I made the decision to invest my entire research and art practice into issues pertaining to the contemporary and historical American West. In doing so, I abandoned the brightly colored aesthetic I had been employing as a means to satirically define the culture of this region in favor of a more subdued, reserved aesthetic I felt was more fitting with the gravitas of the social conditions of the rural West. By removing the authoritative icons and imagery familiar to the West I was able to allow myself more room to create and re-contextualize the romanticisms associated with this region within a subdued, truthful and austere manner of making.

In my earlier work, I exploited found text to extrapolate the myths and misconceptions I was critiquing. The pieces, bang and Landscape, being prime example of this approach. The text had historical roots, or roots in the myths associated with the region, but by presenting it as a sole entity, stripped from its known context, it began to take on new narratives and meaning, functioning as intellectual conduits into new understandings and interpretations of the region. I

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attribute this to the writings of Henry Flynt, who in his essay “Concept Art,” proposed that, “language is material.”\textsuperscript{19} While I am of the opinion that canonical definitions such as conceptual art are somewhat old fashioned or at the very least problematic to 21\textsuperscript{st} century practice, I agree with Flynt’s assertion that a concept may be thought of as the intension of a name, which creates a dialogue between concepts and language.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 6, Landscape** (detail), acrylic, graphite, ink and paper on panel, 2012

In my thesis work, I expanded upon this concept by utilizing building materials to make my work and a more limited palette. While the use of text was successful and perhaps provided viewers with an intellectual inroad to the work, I felt it necessary to experiment with how far I could remove direct markers from the work and still capture some form of understanding of the conditions and realities specific to the region I’m describing.

In the article “Anti-Form,” which appeared in *Artforum* in 1968, Robert Morris argued that, “The Minimal object jettisoned relational arrangement, making the work’s construction explicit. In revealing materials as materials, however, Minimal art did not go far enough.”²⁰ In my practice, I am not interested in process or construction. I am interested in the materials as content. My choice to utilize industrial paint, slabs of drywall, roofing tar, reclaimed wood and other objects commonly associated with construction because of the preconceived meaning and context drive a narrative forward.

The work, *Shame*, was constructed from two sections of found wood. By placing these two forms together, forming a diptych and contextualizing them as art, a visual dialogue is created based in the ideas of defeat and abandonment. Like the other wood constructions in my thesis exhibition, this piece functions as an artificial artifact. It is composed of material that was no longer deemed useful or functional and was therefore devoid of any value. This process of desertion is similar to the way the American West has been settled and constructed. Towns and the necessary features of convenience are constructed when things are going well and then these creations are left to deteriorate when things go poorly. This piece is a representation of the boom and bust cycle, with a clear emphasis on the bust.

The restrictive palette of my thesis work has been a useful tool for conceptual development within the narrative I am presenting. In David Batchelor’s *Chromophobia*, he outlines the social and psychological underpinnings of white or “pure white” in Western culture. White brings with it associations of annihilation and death tucked conveniently behind the shroud of purity. But the virtuous whiteness of the West also conceals other less mystical terrors. These terrors are more local and altogether more palpable; they are terrors, mainly, of the flesh. The underlying terror that can be anchored to white or whiteness has been a major component of my practice because it replicates whitewashing and the removing of historical accuracies that the dominant culture finds undesirable but it can also be seen as a tool to advance notions and reinterpretations of the traditional landscape painting, myth and the sublime. Perhaps the most notable usage of whiteness inspiring terror would be Herman Melville’s great white whale. The whale is, conceivably, a monstrous corruption of

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the great Western ideal of the classical body. This body, at least in its remodeled neo-classical version, was of course a pure, polished, unembellished, untouched, and untouchable white.\textsuperscript{22}

In the piece, \emph{You're Alone}, I presented five four foot by four foot panels of collaged imagery, joint compound and latex paint. The work was a reference to the isolation of the rural landscape and a critique of the constraints of organization, boundaries and ultimately land use. The organizational presentation of the basic grid pattern references how the land is divided and used and how this usage affects the inhabitant. The surface of the work was built up of topographic maps of the region and then overlaid with joint compound and latex paint to mimic the features of topographical map. This process calls to mind Robert Ryman’s paintings from the 60s or the “White Paintings” of Robert Rauschenberg, where Rauschenberg meticulously painted and covered up a surface repeatedly until nearly nothing of resonance existed but the art object. While similar, I feel that my work advances this process by covering a surface with materials familiar to the region, evoking the action of whitewashing or erasure but maintaining a desire to replicate that “lost knowledge” through this material in an attempt to elicit intellectual reverberation through loss.

Figure 8, \emph{You’re Alone} (detail), latex, maps, joint compound and graphite on panel, 2014

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
Ultimately, the reductive aesthetic leaves viewers with a sense of unease, much like the concept of Melville’s white whale. The whale, and the threat it presents, is omnipresent. Just like the threat and fear of isolation I am depicting is omnipresent. Martin Heidegger wrote in *Being and Time*,

> But ‘nowhere’ does not mean nothing; rather, region in general lies therein, and disclosedness of the world in general for essentially spatial being-in. Therefore, what is threatening cannot come closer from a definite direction within nearness, it is already ‘there’ — and yet nowhere. It is so near that it is oppressive and takes one’s breath — and yet it is nowhere.\(^{23}\)

Viewers are fully aware of the isolation they are faced with by encountering the barren landscape of the American West I am referencing but are handicapped to make sense of any action that could alleviate the situation. They are aware of the void that the progression of capitalism has left on the landscape. Despite the absence of recognizable markers, thoughts of annihilation, death, terror and awe are present in the work, even though what you are interpreting is what is not there.

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What Was Here and What’s Replacing It

“All knowledge of cultural reality is knowledge from a particular point of view.”

Max Weber

Social location is the foundation of all studies related to society. One’s social location determines the social environment and cultural norms, values and mores. It determines the organizational structure of the society or institution, often factoring the various social roles and amount of social and economic capital. It also determines the stereotypes, misconceptions and fabrications that surround all social groups, systems and institutions. If we are to understand Postmodernism, social location is itself a social construction, and therefore does not exist without a preconceived context. Given that, it must also be stated that the social construction of social location is established by the dominant group, and as a result, reflects the values and social norms of this dominant group, often relying on speculation and amendment while ignoring other factors.

George Herbert Mead and his set of principles that have come to define the sociological theory of Symbolic Interactionism concisely outline how we as a society create these constructions. Mead asserts that people learn the meanings and symbols that allow them to exercise their distinctively human capacity for thought. These meanings and symbols allow people to carry on distinctively human actions and interactions. This explains how social groups develop cultural norms, mores and taboos within a specific, socially constructed location. Secondly, Mead states that people are able to modify or alter the meanings and symbols they use in action or interaction on the basis of their interpretation of the situation, allowing them to assess the advantages and disadvantages of each particular interpretation. This would explain how a dominant group asserts their values and norms upon others, declaring their set of values and norms to be

superior through the use of symbols and meaning. The ability to subvert individuals and values to fit into a dominant group’s system allows for the creation or illusion of “order,” which is something we as a species have come to expect and rely upon.

One of the most prominent and extensive manners in which a dominant group constructs order is through mapping. Throughout human history, maps, charts, graphs, grids, etc., have been used as tools of organization, bastions of information about the known world and they have been largely thought of as infallible, factual entities. But this of course ignores our understanding of human history, a history that has been and continues to be written by “the victors,” or dominant groups.

The very act of creating a map purports to be an objective, value-free endeavor that is created by an expert. However, it is often the case that this expert will supersede the experiences and knowledge of marginalized communities in order to push forward the agenda of those in power. It could also be argued that when it comes to national and sub-national boundaries or issues of private land ownership, it is the dominant group that creates the categories of organization used to map out and distribute the land, allowing for assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of every possible allocation as Mead proposed. So, if we are to understand that maps are often quite subjective and slanted towards the values and norms of a dominant group, what exactly is the value of mapping?

I found myself asking this question when researching a series of drawings in 2013. I was looking at three maps from the 1930s depicting land claims that had been made and allocated for farming in South Dakota. All three maps depicted the same area of land and all three maps depicted different boundaries and dimensions of the claims. It seemed peculiar to me that these maps, all of


them official government documents associated with different counties could be so varied in their knowledge or assessment regarding the distribution of land. When I looked at a series of maps from the early 21st century a similar situation emerged. Again, there were various discrepancies in the allotment of the land. My fascination with the seemingly arbitrary nature of mapping led me to create the piece, Survey. This work, constructed from randomly cut, “county-like” sections of particle board, building materials, fabric and organic matter was presented in the loose form of a map, with gaping holes of missing information. The intention of the work was to present the viewer with the illusion of some sort of order when in reality there was no formal organization or guiding principle inherent in the piece.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 9, Survey**, latex, enamel, plaster, joint compound, roofing tar, steel wool, fabric, screws and nails on particle board, 2014

The conceptualization of the arbitrary nature of mapping has featured prominently in historical and contemporary artistic dialogues. The grid paintings of Agnes Martin have figured heavily into my artistic and aesthetic influence. Her incorporation of titles that reference nature, subdued palette and her subtle
interpretation of the sublime have weighed heavily on my artistic output during the past three years.\textsuperscript{27} I believe that this notion or concept has directly influenced or featured prominently in my earlier work, such as \textit{Landscape} (figure 6), which utilized the grid pattern to reference the barren landscape of the rural American West. In order to cultivate a social, political and economic conversation around the artifice that these tools have created I expand on the concepts of counter-mapping.

Counter-mapping, which has its roots in Dada and Surrealism, attempts to question and re-contextualize known boundaries in a critique of the principles under which they were constructed.\textsuperscript{26} The map, when reduced to its most basic form, is nothing but a series of lines, color, form and text. It is the socially constructed and preconceived context that we have design elements that allows us to purposefully organize. But when you subvert these principles, disorganizing the traditional elements of an existing map or simply utilize traditional elements to create an arbitrary or artificial map, there can be a newfound understanding. Most interesting of all, these artificial maps are often accepted as factual entities, due to the influence that mapping, organization and order has on our contemporary society.\textsuperscript{29}

In my piece, \textit{The Beginning of It Starts at the End (Bakken I)}, I placed 400 map pins in the wall corresponding to drill sites and proposed drill sites within a 50 square mile radius. I employed a variation on this theme in the piece \textit{Building a Desert (Bakken II)} where I used the same 50 square mile radius and presented 50 one and a half inch blocks covered in roofing tar.

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\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 214-224
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Obviously, in these two pieces, my source material was coming from a tangible map and I employed traditional tenets associated with mapping (map pins and the grid block structure) to construct the work, but by removing text, symbols and other signifiers outside of the title of the pieces, I believe that these two pieces fit comfortably into the dialogue that the work *Survey* was fostering. In summation, these three works present viewers with the illusion of order, even though one of them is complete artifice. While all three of these works owe a debt to cartography, I feel that by presenting them in an unfamiliar manner I am offering a critique to the sanctity of maps and how this illusion is both arbitrary and fictional.
The Party’s Over

“There is great danger in short memories . . . Let today’s Westerner stop occasionally by the remnants of the failed homesteaders’ town, with its blankly staring windows, its collapsed granary, occupied only by field mice and prairie dogs, and its bank—the doors agape, the vault empty. It is important to remember.”

K. Ross Toole

There is something very American about the boom and bust cycle. From the gold rush in the Black Hills of South Dakota to the copper boom in Butte to the natural gas boom in North Dakota today, Americans have been pouring into the West, pillaging and plundering the land for its resources. In the pursuit of life, liberty, happiness and that most important of American virtues; people seek affluence. However, in between “strike it rich” chest beating and “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” pandering, there are two inherent problems. One, not everyone is going to strike it rich. In fact, 9 out of 10 who head out west in pursuit of a better life will end up broke, busted, beaten or dead. That is just as true today in North Dakota as it was in the 19th century. Two, eventually the bust part of the phenomenon rears its head and takes all of the trappings associated with the boom, forsaking the remaining populace to an existence of idly occupying a ghost town.

Yet the boom and bust cycle persists. It is, after all, the American way. It is part and parcel to our economic system, both historically and contemporarily. Also, it calls to mind the basic principles of every Horatio Alger story ever told. An individual starts with nothing and through hard work, dedication and faith eventually achieves his American Dream. The boom and bust cycle also factors into the ideals of Manifest Destiny, American Exceptionalism and even the principles of capitalism.

To be sure, the current boom in North Dakota has brought great things to the region, a region that was undoubtedly suffering from economic decline and

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the effects of rural flight. This boom has given the state a one billion dollar surplus. This boom raised almost one billion dollars for schools. This boom has boosted median incomes in multiple counties. Yes, this boom has been nothing short of an economic godsend for western North Dakota.

But, as there always is with these cycles, there are certain correlations to this boom that wouldn’t be fit for an Algeresque narrative.

This boom has put a major financial strain on the basic infrastructures of the small towns surrounding the Bakken. Essentials such as roads, sewage systems, water supplies and basic maintenance have all suffered tremendous decline in the past decade, leading to nearly $500 million dollars in repairs. Many towns and counties have doubled in population, creating a housing crisis where the average rent in Watford City, North Dakota, is just around $1,400 for a one-bedroom apartment. In the past ten years, there has been an astonishing peak in violent crime, drug trafficking and prostitution in rural areas unaccustomed and mostly unequipped to deal with such offenses.\(^{31}\)

When presented with both sides of this coin, the question then becomes one of whether the pros outweigh the cons?

In an interview with the photographer Sarah Christensen, Carole Freed, a fourth generation rancher living outside of Williston, North Dakota, (the heart of Bakken boom country,) said, “We all wanted this development. We just didn’t know what we were in for. Even half of what we got would be too much.”\(^{32}\) Christensen, a North Dakota native, has been specifically concerned with depicting the development and resulting devastation of the Bakken boom for the past two years. Her photographs candidly highlight the three basic problems with this specific economic cycle. They ask the question of how we can tell when the \textit{bust} has begun? They also examine the individuals who have lived in the


\(^{32}\) Archer, Larissa. “When the Landscape is Quiet Again: North Dakota’s Oil Boom.” \textit{Review for Art Practical}: San Francisco Camerawork, March 19, 2014.
affected region do when said bust does begin? And finally, these photographs challenge us to take a moral/cultural/economic/political position.

There are significant pros involved with all booms. And it is often those most detrimentally impacted by the bust that are clamoring for this economic providence at the onset of the boom. This telling detail is most often ignored, and most interesting to me as an artist and a Westerner, is how the individual components within this cycle are both interrelated and parasitically dependent upon one another. A quickly arriving boom can provide a community with nearly as much pain and friction as a rapidly arriving bust. Residents who watch their community change as the economy climbs or steeply descends can experience emotions that closely resemble the process of grieving observed in those afflicted with serious illness.33

![Image](image-url)

Figure 11, Sarah Christensen, *Bedroom Window, Cartwright, ND*, C-print, 2013

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In 1957, Marcel Duchamp wrote in his short essay, “The Creative Act,” that, “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”

Duchamp’s assertion, that the viewer was an equal, if not more important, participant in the creative act is remarkably profound and prophetic. It directly influenced the practices of Fluxus and later Relational Aesthetics that operate almost solely within this principle. In my own practice, I believe this statement to be paramount to the process of art making and have made a conscientious effort to adhere to this premise, whether the work that I am making is a painting, a sculpture, an installation or a re-contextualized object. The viewer, or “spectator” to use Duchamp’s phrasing, is indeed an essential component to the art experience and no matter the medium or manner of presentation it is the artist’s responsibility to engage the viewer in a visual dialogue, intellectually, if not physically.

In the past, I have made several attempts to conceptually and palpably connect the viewer with my work in an atypical manner. As an undergraduate, I completed a series of traditional landscape paintings that I unceremoniously hung six inches from the gallery floor. In January of 2013, during a solo exhibition at the UC Gallery entitled Everybody’s Fine, I presented a collection of collages, paintings and seemingly random objects that I then asked the viewers of the exhibition to add to, remove or rearrange to their liking, allowing the viewer to take on and perform the simultaneous roles of artist, curator and critic within an exhibition of my own work. The former was an attempt to critique the tradition of painting and the latter acted as a critique of both the traditions of the gallery as well as the sanctity of the artist’s hand. And with the exhibition The Party’s Over

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at FrontierSpace, I attempted to distill the driving ideas of those two previous exhibitions in an installation-based work that activated the viewer into a participatory role while maintaining an overarching concept. 

*The Party’s Over* could be seen as a prequel to my MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Gallery of Visual Arts; the former being a visual *boom* to the latter’s visual *bust*. Both exhibitions explored the 21st century incarnation of Manifest Destiny, in particular the natural gas boom in North Dakota. And when thinking of the cycle of boom and bust culture, a cycle that has been a constant presence in the American West for the past two centuries, it called to mind two very different extremes; these extremes being the initial grandeur and providential opulence of the boom followed cruelly by the abject desolation of the bust. For this exhibition, I worked in an additive manner in order to engage directly and aggressively. 

In a sense, *the party’s over*, followed many of the principles laid out in Sol LeWitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art.” From the initial inkling of this concept through the actual construction of the piece to the interactions and experiences that the work solicited in the viewers, this exhibition was firmly rooted in the writings of LeWitt, which, while certainly aged in the arena of theory, still have particular resonance and importance in 21st century art practice.

*If the artist changes his mind midway through the execution of the piece he compromises the result and repeats past results.* In constructing this work, I made multiple changes throughout the installation. Some of them were minor, such as adding more beer cans or cigarettes, which I personally consumed. And some of them were more involved, such as altering the audio tracks to feel more beleaguered or adjusting the lighting to make the space feel more dank. I never saw these alterations to my original idea as forever altering the concept, rather I saw them as a visual and intellectual negotiation with myself, propelling the work forward in keeping with that original idea.

*When words such as painting and sculpture are used, they connote a whole tradition and imply a consequent acceptance of this tradition, thus placing limitations on the artist who would be reluctant to make art that goes beyond the*
limitations. As stated earlier, I felt it necessary to move beyond my accustomed manners of making for this exhibition in order to more accurately portray the visceral reality of the condition I was speaking of. While it would have been more comfortable, and possibly successful, to portray the cycle of boom and bust in the traditional forms of painting or sculpture, it would have lacked the emotional brutality I was seeking. The goal for this exhibition was to envelop the viewer in hostile or uncomfortable surroundings, forcing them to come to analyze and engage in a dialogue. Ultimately, this piece was about creating active interpretations and reactions, something that stagnant or passive mediums of painting and sculpture cannot elicit.

*Perception of ideas leads to new ideas.* Going off of that previous paragraph, I also was wary of being too heavy handed with the imagery on the walls, in the video or in the audio track. It would have been quite easy to slip into sloganeering artwork with this piece, decrying the evils of fracking and capitalism. But that was not what I am interested in. I am interested in presenting a question, often ambiguously, in order to facilitate a dialogue. Art is about communicating ideas and the artist is an instigator for this process.

*Perception is subjective.* But it must be noted that not all of what we create will be interpreted how we originally intended it to be. My intent for this exhibition being that there would be enough ephemera in the form of text, maps, video cues and iconography for viewers to connect the dots from my statement to my execution of this piece.

I installed certain markers of the home, such as used furniture, domestic lighting, the television set and various knick-knacks, to create a conceptual and physical normalcy for the viewer. The goal of this being to draw visual parallels between the excesses and deterioration of the boom and bust cycle and the corresponding excesses and deteriorations of a house party; or more simply put, the boom bringing the promise of some great experience (the party) and the bust leaving a mess for the owner to clean up (the morning after). Other materials

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used in this installation followed these principles as well. Party supplies such as streamers, balloons, confetti and pennants were mixed in with empty bottles, cans, cigarette butts and boxes, all of these working as metaphors to visually articulate the overindulgence, waste and ruin that a boom brings to a community. While it may not have created intellectual resonance with every viewer, it at least produced an experiential moment to reflect on excess and the despondency that often follows such instances on both the micro and macro levels.

Figure 12, the party’s over. (installation shot), 2014

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When asked about how the fracking boom has affected his town of Williston, North Dakota, Mayor Ward Koeser said, “It’s a boom town...that’s for sure. But we’ve come to accept it and adapt to it.” 36 This frankness could be

coming from a man who has seen the cycle come and pass through his community and region before or it could be the naivety of an individual blinded by the pros of the boom, refusing to acknowledge the cons of the impending bust. Whatever it is, Koeser’s words are unfortunately the status quo when it comes to the economic patterns of the rural American West.

As a country we will never rid ourselves from the cycle of boom and bust. Jerry Z. Muller writes that, “Inequality and insecurity are perennial features of capitalism.”37 Because of how we have structured our economic system we will inevitably continue our cyclical process of building up communities around areas of needed resources and abandoning these communities when we have gotten what we came for.

Richard White writes,

More than a century of brushing off the last bust and waiting for the next boom has left scars on both the land and people. In a region whose people have always defined themselves, for better or worse, in terms of the future rather than the past, such a guarding of the flame has an aura of defeat.38

This current cycle in North Dakota is just another example of the Horatio Alger story gone horribly astray. There is most certainly someone gaining a piece of the American Dream for themselves in the Bakken formation, the only difference being that this entity is not “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” but rather “sliding into their loafers for another stroll through prosperity in other people’s misery.” People will find jobs, the economy will grow, people will pour into to town, new businesses will open, schools will be built, subdivisions will pop up and the illusion of the pursuit of happiness will come to fruition. Then people will lose jobs,

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37 Muller, Jerry Z. “Capitalism and Inequality: What the Right and Left Got Wrong.” Foreign Affairs, March/April 2013.

the economy will stagnate, people will leave town, businesses will close, schools will lose enrollment, subdivisions will sit empty and the pursuit of happiness will present itself for the illusion it actually was and White’s “aura of defeat” will reappear.
The Color When You’re Done Dying

“…There’s seven people dead out on a South Dakota farm...somewhere in the distance there’s seven new people born…”

Bob Dylan 39

One of my favorite scenes in film takes place in Fargo, when Steve Buscemi’s character attempts to hide a briefcase full of money along the snow-covered side of the road. He looks to his left and sees nothing but fence posts and snow and when he looks to his right the image is mirrored. He has no way to orient himself against the winter backdrop and, in vain, places a windshield scraper in the snow as a makeshift marker to return to, even though this marker will inevitably become futile as a point of reference. That money is lost, the caper has been foiled and ultimately the landscape has defeated him, like so many others before. 40

This delirium-inducing condition specific to the harsh landscape of the rural American West is one that I know well. Even within the confines of the gentrified West it is an aspect of life that goes without saying. Winters are harsh, turning the landscape into a wind swept, blizzard-ridden fortress of isolated uncertainty. Summers are even worse, with the droughts, searing heat and visual yellowing of the landscape. Spring and Autumn are fleeting entities in the West, relatively non-existent moments of respite between the long slogs of insecurity that make up the realities of this environment. In The Worst Hard Time, Timothy Egan elaborates on these conditions,

...It scares them because the land is too much, too empty, claustrophobic in its immensity...It still scares people driving cars named Expedition and Outlander. It scares them because of the forced intimacy with a place that gives nothing back to a stranger, a

place where the land and its weather – probably the most violent and extreme on earth – demands only one thing: humility.\(^{41}\)

To summarize with an aphorism befitting of the region, the American West was and remains “no country for old men.” It is this condition that I have sought to emulate in my art practice. A condition of barren and disillusioned astonishment of what might have been and what will never come to be. Through my own personal experience I have tried to visually articulate the realities and circumstances specific to the region.

Agnes Martin, whose work I’ve mentioned, has had an indelible influence on my practice, described her work as being, “Not about what is visually seen but what is known forever in the mind.”\(^ {42}\) My work functions in this manner, becoming a representation of the void that is the American West, both in landscape and culture, and the terror that this intense isolation brings about. It is this void that is known forever in my mind. It is a void that demands humility.

I’ve been asked by multiple people over the past three years to explain and justify my approach of representing the American West. Often, these questions revolve around my cynical or even nihilistic presentation of the region. I would object to these assertions and would counter that simply by questioning my abject depictions those who are asking the questions are still caught up in the romantic grandeur of cinema and tourist season. I am not a pessimist when it comes to my views of the American West. I am a realist. I am not denying that the region has a rugged beauty that cannot be matched. What I am denying is the allegory that has been built in an effort to ignore how the West was actually won.

Josh Ritter wrote, “The West is a story we made up to erase.”\(^ {43}\) This is most certainly true. When one thinks of the West, it is easy to get caught up in

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the rollicking fables, majestic landscapes and the rose-colored delusions rooted in economics but glossed over with fabrications such as “freedom” and the “American Way.” We created this narrative because it gave us an identity that we could parade on the world stage to reinforce the idea that America is truly unique. We can start from nothing and end up with everything, all while maintaining a noble and heroic demeanor and lifestyle, even though the reality is that everything in the West is ephemeral, reliant on the consistency of the economy or the patterns of the seasons to exist. The American West and everything related to and supporting it is replaceable.

In my work, I am rejecting this story in favor of a representation of my own experience. My American West is driving for hours and not seeing a single town. My American West is the seething roast of summer when the grass turns brown and animal carcasses pepper the interstate. My American West is the physical and psychological absence of winter, confining the populace to strange, regimented shifts of coming and going only when it is absolutely necessary. My American West is a prairie populated by oil derricks and coal pits. My American West is a wash of yellow, brown, black and white. My American West smells of burnt coffee, cigarettes, beer, whiskey, sweat, diesel and manure. My American West is a land of abandonment where people, places and things are almost always forgotten as soon as they are replaced. My American West is violent and brutal.

   My American West is what it is.
2. *When the Horse Whips the Man That He Rode* (video still), video projection (color, 6 minute, 59 second loop), 2014
4. Janine Antoni, *Gnaw* (detail), 600 lbs. of chocolate, gnawed by the artist. 600 lbs. of lard, gnawed by the artist. Display case with 45 heart-shaped packages for chocolate made from chewed chocolate removed from the chocolate cube and 400 lipsticks made with pigment, beeswax and chewed lard removed from the lard cube, 1992.
6. *Landscape* (detail), acrylic, graphite, ink and paper on panel, 2012
8. *You’re Alone*, latex, maps, joint compound and graphite on panel, 2014
10. *The Beginning of it Starts at the End* (detail), map pins, 2014
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