Parallel tracks| The new Western history & revisionist photography

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PARALLEL TRACKS
The New Western History & Revisionist Photography

by
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B.S. The University of California at Santa Cruz, 1990
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New Western photographers (as I dub them) and New Western historians have been re-envisioning the American West and its history in critical, often negative ways in seeming tandem. They have followed parallel tracks for similar reasons. Both took their cues from the general critique of American society that occurred during the 1960s. And they have been reacting to the same popular perceptions about the West - that it has been thought of as both a special place and a state of mind, representing promise, opportunity, and natural splendor matched by the heroics of nineteenth century Euro-American pioneers. The New Western History and the New Western Photography, using essentially identical perspectives from which to criticize the respective traditional views of the West in their fields, demonstrate that a more critical view of Western history was not an “internal” development in either field, but instead represented larger cultural currents in American society. Thus, the New Western History is neither so unique nor revolutionary as it appears.

In my discussion of the New Western History I give special attention to the works of three important historians: Patricia Limerick, Donald Worster, and Richard White. I focus on eight photographers - Richard Avedon, Robert Frank, Richard Misrach, Len Jenshel, Robert Adams, Mark Klett, David Levinthal, and Lewis Baltz - to represent revisionist photography.

I place both revisionist history and photography into a wide context of how American views of the West have changed through time. I divide western history into three periods, periods that clarify the shift from a triumphalist West to a critical West, and the corresponding tracks of the New Western Photography and the New Western History: the celebratory West, the West in question, and the critical West. The first period, the celebratory West, dates from the late nineteenth century on into the 1940s, though in a general cultural sense, it began in the mid-nineteenth century, and in derivative forms has lasted through the twentieth century. In the mid-twentieth century photographers and historians entered a second phase, the West in question, in which they began questioning the West of celebration. The third stage, the critical West, began in the 1970s for the New Western Photographers and in the 1980s for the New Western Historians.
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Introduction

In 1989 "New Western" historian Patricia Limerick, en route to a conference on Western landscape photography, supposed that the photographs being discussed would be of the land as sublime nature, untouched in any obvious way by people. She planned to deliver a speech informing the photographers that they were perpetuating a nostalgic, unrealistic image of the West by not acknowledging that people are and have been living in the West, and that both their relationships with the land and with each other often have been not romantic, but grim. To her chagrin, Limerick discovered that photographers had already been working with these ideas for some time, and that a reevaluation of the West was not confined to historians.¹

New Western photographers (as I dub them) and New Western historians have been re-envisioning the American West and its history in critical, often negative ways in seeming tandem. They have followed parallel tracks for similar reasons. Both took their cues from the general critique of American society that occurred during the 1960s. And they have been reacting to the same popular perceptions about the West - that it has been thought of as both a special place and a state of mind, representing promise, opportunity, and natural splendor matched by the heroics of nineteenth century Euro-American pioneers. The New Western History and the New Western Photography, using essentially identical perspectives from which to

¹ Mark Klett, Patricia Nelson Limerick, & Thomas W. Southall. Revealing Territory - Photographs of the Southwest by Mark Klett. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), pg 10
criticize the respective traditional views of the West in their fields, demonstrate that a more critical view of Western history was not an "internal" development in either field, but instead represented larger cultural currents in American society. Thus, the New Western History is neither so unique nor revolutionary as it appears.

The origins of the New Western Photography go back to the Farm Security Administration photographers in the 1930s, who showed the West not as a place of escape or economic possibility as artists had often depicted it, but as a region ravaged by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Another forerunner of the New Western History was the photography books the environmental organization the Sierra Club began publishing in the 1950s. Although the pictures illustrating these books were stylistically the same as earlier and contemporary photographs of pristine landscapes, their purpose was new: to buttress arguments for saving exceptional but threatened western lands by informing Americans what they had to lose, and inspiring Americans to political action to preserve these places.

Although photographers have been working in a roughly parallel vein to New West Historians, well before historians substantially revised their views of the Western past photographers were routinely making critical, pessimistic images of the West and its inhabitants. In the mid 1950s Robert Frank presented a gloomy view of the West; its inhabitants alienated and its classic themes of opportunity, independence, and space an illusion. Richard Avedon's portraits of Westerners in *In the American West, 1979 - 1984,* followed Frank's portraiture in spirit - his subjects seem estranged.2

This new imagery of the West and its landscape took off in the 1960s

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and 1970s with the work of Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Richard Misrach. They rejected the romantic tradition of depicting nature as gorgeous and untouched by people. These photographers recognized the presence of people in the landscape, and depicted that presence as primarily malevolent. Their least grim images explored how the Western landscape appeared outside urban areas. Viewers of their photographs have been reminded that despite the comparatively small human populations in much of the West, there were, and are, few places one does not encounter signs of people, even if only bits of trash or plane contrails in the sky. All three photographers shot landscapes that appeared to be under siege by people. Baltz, in *San Quentin Point*, (1986), and Adams, in *To Make It Home: Photographs of the American West*, (1989), portrayed bushes and trees attempting to survive amidst trash and industrial debris. As well, both photographers documented new housing developments, which appear sterile and ugly, their architectural aesthetics sacrificed to utility. In his photographs of deserts, what he calls his “Desert Cantos,” Misrach portrayed once beautiful lands ravaged by illegal military use, pollution, and seemingly unending development.³

One could see the work of Baltz, Misrach, and Robert Adams as realism in opposition to the photography in the tradition of Eadweard Muybridge and Ansel Adams, romanticism. Certainly these New Western Photographers’ pictures are in contrast to traditional landscape photography. They almost always include some sign of people, and/or focus not on grand, sublime

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scenery but on the commonplace, such as the shrubbery beside a road. However, both traditionalists and realists have shared a fundamental assumption that nature is virtuous and threatened by Euro-American industrial civilization. Ansel Adams shot the preserved "wilderness" of national parks, while the New photographers show the despoliation of unprotected land.

The images of a second group of New Western photographers - Mark Klett, David Levinthal, and Len Jenshel - are less bitter in their criticism of the optimism of the mythic West and its legacy than those of Misrach, Baltz, and Adams. Their pictures reflect positive as well as negative aspects of modern culture's impact on the West. Klett, Levinthal, and Jenshel bring both a sense of history and a sense of humor to their work, and they do not seem to hold to the dichotomy between industrial Western Civilization and nature. Klett's and Jenshel's work shows that there is an organic wholeness in the relationship between twentieth century Westerners and nature, while also criticizing that relationship.

Like the New Western Photographers, the New Western Historians have emphasized the negative about the West. Historians have questioned the popular notion of the West as a place of opportunity, of freedom, and of progress, and this reevaluation has manifested itself as a backlash against the lingering influence of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner presented his influential essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in which he suggested that the experience of the frontier was the primary force shaping American culture. The gist of

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Turner's hypothesis was positive, a celebration of American cultural origins, and remained a pervasive explanation of the meaning of Western history among academics and lay people alike until the mid-1980s.5

To be sure, historians did challenge Turner's frontier thesis before the 1980s. Almost immediately after Turner's death in 1932 scholars disputed his frontier thesis.6 Charles Beard thought Turner placed too much emphasis on the frontier's influence on American culture, and Beard believed that both north eastern industrial capitalism and southern slavery were stronger forces shaping American society.7 George Wilson Pierson and Benjamin F. Wright asserted that Turner put too much importance on the frontier's democratizing effects and downplayed the European democratic traditions that pioneers brought with them to the frontier.8 For Wallace Stegner in Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West (1954), Congressional rejection of Powell's plan for western settlement in 1879 meant that American expansion would be chaotic, greed-ridden, and wasteful. In an essay in 1955 Earl Pomeroy argued that pioneers, rather than being the creators of a new American culture, were essentially imitators, establishing new communities based on eastern American traditions. More recently, in Regeneration Through Violence, (1974), Richard Slotkin - although agreeing with Turner about the power of

environmental determinism- found that the attendant mythology that grew up around the American push westward (a dichotomy between white "civilization" and Native American "savagery") were mythic constructs that have had a profound and lasting influence on American culture.9

Despite these challenges to Turner’s frontier thesis, the thesis really was not put aside academically until the 1980s. And although there has been an element of self-promotion about the controversy the New Western historians have aroused, these historians have revitalized the field. In the 1980s they pointed out the inadequacies of the dominant ideas regarding the history of the West, noting that Turner’s essay left out completely, or dealt simplistically with, many peoples who lived in the West and were a significant part of its history: women of all races and ethnicities, Native Americans, Hispanics, Mormons, and Afro-Americans. For the New Western Historians, Turner’s Thesis is "boosterism," a simplistic, favorable version of the Euro-American conquest of the West told from the viewpoint of the victors.

In her 1987 book, The Legacy of Conquest, Patricia Nelson Limerick proposed a new paradigm with which to view Western history. Limerick stated that historians too often have distorted the history of the West by looking at it from the perspective of white Americans expanding across the continent. She emphasized place over the process of the moving frontier, and considered Western history to be a contest between diverse ethnic groups for cultural and material dominance. Environmental historian Donald

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pg 6
Worster argued in *Dust Bowl - The Southern Plains During the 1930s*, that the disastrous Dust Bowl was caused not primarily by nature but by the American capitalist drive for maximum efficiency and control over the natural environment, which disregarded the fragility and boundaries of the plains ecosystem and pushed it into ecological collapse. In *Rivers of Empire*, (1985), Worster found that this same impulse for total control over nature led to large water reclamation projects in the West, particularly the huge dams built during the 1930s through the 1950s. In turn, these reclamation projects eroded democracy by concentrating inordinate power in the hands of politicians, hydraulic technicians, and large landowners. The changing scholarly attitudes toward the West are evoked powerfully by contrasting Richard White's revisionist textbook, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own - A New History of the American West*, (1991), and Ray Allen Billington's older, conservative text, *Westward Expansion A History of the American Frontier* (1960).

The revision of both the historical West and West of imagery started with the social agitation of the 1960s. Environmentalists fought with new vigor, and minority rights advocates demanded a reappraisal of their roles in history and a greater political and economic say in the present and future. The face of academia was changing too - at the middle of the twentieth century American western historians were a small number of white men, but by the 1970s and 1980s historians of the West had increased in number and

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become relatively heterogeneous.

Along with the reevaluation of Western history, artistic images about the West have been subjected to new analysis, similar to the ideas of the New Western History. Barbara Novak, in *Nature and Culture - American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875*, discussed how American painters in the nineteenth century celebrated the grandiosity and sublimity of the American landscape, portraying it as a national treasure, making the United States both distinct from Europe and closer to God. It is this cultural strand, of Romanticism, coming from Europe and inspiring Bierstadt and Moran in making their portrayals of sweeping western landscapes during the 1860s through the 1890s, that Ansel Adams and others would pursue, and to which the New Western Photographers have been reacting.12

In *Virgin Land - The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith examined the changing images of the West reflected in literature during the nineteenth century, and found that although the imagery was often inaccurate, it never-the-less influenced people's actions and political policies.13 For example, in the early nineteenth century, Americans hoped the West would provide easy access to markets in Asia. Thus, one of Lewis and Clark's goals was to find the fabled north west passage across or through the continent, perhaps an easy pass over the Rockies and a large navigable river all the way to the Pacific (they did not find it).


Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts - Transforming Visions of the American West and The West as America were exhibits with accompanying books, with groups of images paired with essays by historians. The historians asserted that viewers have often taken western art as truthful, accurate representations of the west, whereas really the art was often imaginative, romantic, inaccurate, and encouraged and glorified the American push West. In a similar study of western art, The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions - The Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis, Christopher Lyman discussed how Curtis' "documentary" photographs of Indians at the turn of the nineteenth century represented a Native American past that never existed. The images were subjectively created to an extreme, such as having Native Americans from different tribes wearing the same costumes.

Reactions to the reevaluation of the West have often been explosive, with vigorous debate both within and outside academia. The comments book at the exhibit West As America became a debating ground as people responded to each other's entries, and many comments were angry criticisms of the new interpretations. Debate among New Western historians and conservative historians has been lively too. Typical charges against the New Western History were made by Gerald D. Nash in Creating the West - Historical Interpretations 1890 - 1990. He called the New Western Historians non-objective "with a vengeance," and criticized them for endangering the "fabric of national identity" by teaching "exclusively about the alleged depravity of the Western experience."

Despite the controversy, however, the new interpretations of the West

have found considerable institutional acceptance. The images by the New Western Photographers are collected by galleries and museums nationally and internationally. *Discovered Lands Invented Pasts* was sponsored by Yale University, and *The West as America* was put on by the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. And the New Western History is entrenched academically. The New Western History was the only Western history I was taught as an undergraduate at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the late 1980s.

Despite the obvious confluence in history and photography of the West in the past thirty years, there are no works whose central topic is the relationship between the New Western History and New Western Photography, and those projects that do touch on it do so peripherally. For example, Richard W. Etulain, in his acclaimed book *Re-imagining the Modern American West - A Century of Fiction, History, and Art*, (1996), did not even mention the New Western Photographers.

In the main essay in *Crossing the Frontier - Photographs of the Developing West, 1849 to the Present*, Sandra S. Phillips discussed the photographs and Western history from a revisionist perspective, as opposed to examining trends in photography and historical studies, and she did not mention any New Western Historians. She considered some of the same photographers I discuss, including Robert Adams, Misrach, and Baltz, and ended her essay with an idea that has been a starting point of my project, suggesting that, “...perhaps this recently achieved ‘realistic’ objectivity reveals the very same conflicts that informed the work of their predecessors: a resignation to the exploitation of wilderness as an inalienable right, and the
attendant mythology of a frontier of individual promise."\(^{16}\) This is a somewhat different spin on my point that the "optimistic" photographers and the "pessimistic" photographers share the fundamental view that post-industrial Western Civilization is, in its essence, in opposition and malevolent to nature.

Although Phillips did not endorse this perspective, the organizers of the accompanying exhibit seem to hold this view, as the photographs they chose reflect it. The images were organized in historical progression. They begin by showing the West as a pristine landscape with railroads and towns beginning to intrude, and continue with the land's resources being pillaged, its topographical features highly modified to make way for cities. Finally, the land is submerged in post-industrial filth and debris by the late twentieth century. For the most part, the selection of photographs emphasizes the discrepancy between natural beauty and American changes to the land, ignoring modern architecture that complements the landscape.\(^ {17}\) At the same time, the exhibit organizers seemed to see the West as "undeveloped" before whites arrived, as if Native American groups, according to their various lifeways, had not modified it already.

In *The West of the Imagination*, W.H. Goetzmann and W.N. Goetzmann evaluated Western art from the early nineteenth century to the early 1980s from a slightly revisionist perspective. They did not mention the New Western Photographers, and scarcely mention twentieth century photography, although their treatment of nineteenth century photography is


\(^{17}\) This sort of photography exists though. The work of photographer Michael Kenna is an example.
excellent and lengthy.\textsuperscript{18}

The two books \textit{The Myth of the West} and \textit{Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts} reinterpret Western American art. \textit{Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts} does not include photography as its subject matter, but \textit{Myth of the West} has a section on photography. This section includes some images by the New Western Photographers, although the accompanying essay, by Mark Klett, is about nineteenth century photography.\textsuperscript{19}

The essays that usually accompany the revisionist Photographer's monographs do not discuss the connection between the New West Photography and the New Western History. In the retrospective on Lewis Baltz, \textit{Rule Without Exception}, twelve commentaries manage almost totally to ignore placing the photos in historical perspective. An exception among the monographs is \textit{Revealing Territory - Photographs of the Southwest by Mark Klett}, with the essay, "Second Views and Second Thoughts" by Patricia Limerick. She found his photographs reflect many of her own views about the West, and some of the comments she made about them are observations I make as well, although I include not only Klett but the full range of the New Western Photographers. Limerick noted that Klett is not nostalgic and finds our supposed control over the land has limits, and that his images reflect an ambiguity about the changes we have made in the western landscape - part skeptical and bitter, part appreciative.\textsuperscript{20}

In examining the relationship between the New Western History and the New Western Photography, I place both in historical context. The image

\textsuperscript{18} Goetzmann& Goetzmann. \textit{The West of the Imagination}.
\textsuperscript{20} Klett, Limerick, and Southall. \textit{Revealing Territory - Photographs of the Southwest by Mark Klett}.
of the West in American culture has changed through time. This includes an image of the West as a desert, unfit for the habitation of whites, as reported by the explorers Stephen Long and Zebulon Pike in the early nineteenth century. This view both overlapped with, and gave way to the image of the West as a garden, a haven for small farmers. Yet another image grew up in the 1860s when Americans discovered the extraordinary western landscape, and it became a source of cultural pride. This image was both reflected and added to by the painters Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, and later by photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

It is worth examining the way Richard Etulain organized his book Re-imagining the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art (1996), as the work is accomplished, recent, and, like this study, traces western intellectual and artistic trends from the late nineteenth through the late twentieth century. Etulain divided the last century of imagery and writing into three phases; frontier, regional, and postregional. The West as frontier flourished particularly during the first years of the twentieth century, with frontier novelists, historians, and painters "often emphasizing a closing frontier...." Beginning about the 1920s, the regionalists "focused on life in the West rather than to the West." The novelists, historians, and artists of the postregional West, dating from the 1970s, "stressed...the momentous influences of race and ethnicity, gender, and a new environmentalism."22

Etulain's phases could accommodate the evolution of western photography and history. For example, William Henry Jackson's photographs might fit into the frontier stage, Ansel Adams' images of the

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21Smith. Virgin Land - The American West as Symbol and Myth. pg 174-175.
Sierra mountains are explorations of specific western locales, falling into the second stage, West as region, and Robert Adam’s pictures of a polluted West fit into the third stage, West as postregion. However, Etulain’s organization would serve my thesis poorly. His schema clouds one of my main points: that both photographers and historians went from considering the West positively to considering it critically. His periodization obscures the trajectory of my thesis. Where Etulain stressed the separateness of the frontier and regional Wests, I emphasize the positive way photographers and historians portrayed the West during this time, the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. For example, while William Henry Jackson may be considered a frontier photographer and Ansel Adams a regional photographer, the images of both presented the West positively. Another difficulty of applying Etulain’s periodization to my project is that in his third section, West as postregion, which corresponds timewise - the 1970s on - to the main focus of my thesis, the New Western History and the New Western Photography, Etulain is far more broadly focused than I. Etulain’s term, postregion, is imprecise enough to cover the differing, multiple directions that painters, writers, and historians pursued during this period. In the area of painting alone Etulain discusses Abstract Expressionism, Figurative painters, Pop art, Photo Realism, wall murals, and Georgia O’Keeffe. My concerns are more specific than Etulain’s. The term postregion is too vague to describe the heart of my argument, that the New Western Historians and New Western Photographers follow similar paths.

My strategy, similarly, is to divide western history into three periods, but periods that clarify the shift from a triumphalist West to a critical West, and the corresponding tracks of the New Western Photography and the New Western History.
Western History: the celebratory West, the West in question, and the critical West. The first period, the celebratory West, dates from the late nineteenth century on into the 1940s, though in a general cultural sense, it began in the mid-nineteenth century, and in derivative forms has lasted through the twentieth century. In the mid-twentieth century photographers and historians entered a second phase, the West in question, in which they began questioning the West of celebration. The third stage, the critical West, began in the 1970s for the New Western Photographers and in the 1980s for the New Western Historians.
CHAPTER 1

Shadows of the Past:
Changing Views of the West & the Origins of the New Western History

The New Western History and New Western Photography can be better understood if we examine how the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century left a legacy of ideas and imagery that New Western Historians and New Western Photographers have drawn from, wrestled with, built on, and sometimes rejected. The New Western History did not arise out of a void, but had historiographic precedents. Frederick Jackson Turner’s optimistic and influential 1893 thesis, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” was challenged even before his death in 1932. Historians Charles Beard and Benjamin F. Wright thought Turner overemphasized the influence of the frontier on American culture, particularly its democratizing effects. In 1942 Yale professor G.W. Pierson asserted that Turner exaggerated the degree that the physical environment shaped westering immigrants. Criticism of the frontier hypothesis intensified during the 1950s. Earl Pomeroy argued that settlers, rather than being creators of a new American culture, were imitators, establishing new communities based on eastern American traditions. Henry Nash Smith, Wallace Stegner, and later, Richard Slotkin, instead of celebrating the American westward movement, contended that American expansionary impulses were misdirected, unrealistic, and often destructive.
These predecessors of the New Western Historians challenged a positive vision of the West that was not confined to academia, but was a view held by American society in general. The exploration of the West by painters and photographers during the mid-nineteenth century coincided with the ideas of the European Romantics entering the United States, that touted the spiritual benefits of nature. As Euro-Americans discovered the West's scenic magnificence, they began to appreciate it esthetically and spiritually, and regard the West as a symbol of national pride. At the same time, artists responded to the powerful American impulse of viewing the West as an area ripe for economic exploitation and American settlement. Nineteenth century western visual imagery reflected these contradictory, but optimistic impulses Americans felt toward the West. Painters, such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, and photographers, among them Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson, pictured the West both as natural wonderland and a land inviting development.

Considering the cultural and economic value the West came to have for Americans, it is ironic that in the first half of the nineteenth century Americans thought the West was a parched wasteland. Overland travelers reported that the West was desolate, with only pockets of usable land. Explorers Zebulon Pike and Stephen H. Long presented two of the more influential reports. In 1806 Pike was sent by General Wilkinson to reconnoiter the Red River, the boundary between the recently purchased Louisiana Territory and Spanish territory, and secretly to map Spanish New Mexican territory.\(^1\) Pike characterizes the areas in which he traveled - Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas - as dry;

These vast plains of the western hemisphere may become in time as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa; for I saw in my route, in various places, tracts of many leagues where the wind had thrown up the sand in all the fanciful form of the oceans's rolling wave, and on which not a speck of vegetable matter existed.²

In 1820 the War Department sent Long and his party to explore the Plains west of the Mississippi river, the Rocky mountains, and sections of the Arkansas and Red rivers, part of the boundary dividing American and Spanish territory. Long's expedition, which included scientists, painters, as well as soldiers, became lost returning from the Rockies and followed the Canadian River instead of the Red River.³ Nevertheless, the expedition did gather information, and, while noting the Rocky Mountain water-sheds, it characterized the West as dry and not suitable for the backbone of American society, the farmer. Long put it this way:

In regard to this extensive section of country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence.⁴

In 1823 Long wrote "Great American Desert" over the southern plains on the map he prepared after his expedition, a term cartographers copied for years after. Deemed mostly worthless by Americans, the West became a place where eastern Indian tribes, then residing on land whites wanted, would be relocated. After the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, nearly 100,000 Indians from over thirty tribes were relocated west of the Mississippi River.

into "Indian territory," now part of Oklahoma.\(^5\)

It should not be surprising that Americans considered the West a desert. The majority of Americans were of northwestern European heritage and accustomed to lush climates. Average rainfall in the east was between 28 and 80 inches per year, compared to eight or below to 28 inches on the plains west of the hundredth meridian, and eight or under to 16 inches in the Great Basin. However, the Rocky Mountains were a haven of higher precipitation, receiving 16 to 80 inches per year.\(^6\) A minimum of twenty inches of moisture per year is required for agriculture without irrigation. From the 1830s to the 1850s many Americans trekking west crossed or sailed around the interior West to settle in the green areas near the Pacific coast, such as the Willamette Valley in Oregon, with its familiar heavy rainfall.\(^7\)

By the mid-nineteenth century the image of the West as a wasteland began to change, and the West began to be seen as having more potential uses than Americans previously had thought. One of these potentials was for agriculture. Americans considered agriculture the economic and moral backbone of society, particularly in the first half of the century. They hoped that the West would provide for the extension of American democracy through land for independent small farmers who would enjoy dual, mutually reinforcing freedoms: economic freedom by owning and operating their own farms, and political freedom through American democratic institutions.\(^8\) The dream of an agricultural West seemed feasible by the 1860s

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\(^7\) White, *Its Your Misfortune and None of My Own A New History of the American West,* pg 183.

as Americans came to believe that the aridity of the West was not as extensive nor as permanent as they had formerly thought. Long's expedition had coincided with a drought, whereas the 1860s were a particularly wet period. Also encouraging the viability of a farming West was the growing belief in the idea that "rain follows the plow," that cultivating the land would increase rainfall. The idea was promoted and given scientific credibility by Ferdinand V. Hayden, head of the U.S. Geological Survey in the early 1870s. While not proving the maxim "rain follows the plow," the wet years did confirm the optimism behind the sentiment. Art depicting the West during this period reflected these elevated hopes. The picture *The Rocky Mountains Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, (1868), by Fanny F. Palmer, showing train tracks extending out of a small town westward across the prairie, exhibits the confidence Americans felt in their ability to spread across the landscape. The straight, purposeful tracks, the train moving westward, the industrious figures in the foreground cutting timber on a hillside, and the smart little log buildings in town evince such a powerful expansionary momentum that the open, treeless plains, which might have appeared a barrier, instead seem to be inviting development in their emptiness. Despite the drought on the plains from 1887 - 1893 and the tremendous economic problems faced by small farmers in the late nineteenth century, the vision of an agricultural West did not die. Between 1900 and 1920 more settlers established claims under the Enlarged Homestead Act than in the entire late nineteenth century.

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11 Smith, *Virgin Land The American West as Symbol and Myth*, pg 181 - 182.
Not only was the West thought of as an actual or potential agricultural utopia, but a number of other factors converged in the mid-nineteenth century that made the West appear especially valuable. Since the time of ancient Greece and Rome, western European cultures have thought there was a paradise waiting to be discovered, usually located somewhere west. The wondrous landscape of the American West became this western utopia by the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{14} By the 1830s the Western landscape had become a source of national pride, setting Americans off favorably from the older cultures of Europe, and bringing the United States closer to God.\textsuperscript{15} Some Americans thought the East already was tainted by excessive European influences. The West could provide a place for the continuing development of a distinctly American culture.

American appreciation of the North American landscape increased as Romanticism came from Europe in the late eighteenth century. As Marjorie Nicolson illustrates so well in her book \textit{Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Aesthetics of the Infinite}, Western Civilization, after 1,700 years of finding extreme landscapes primarily negative places where evil lurked, began to see them as positive. As rapid scientific developments led to the recognition of the immensity of the universe, Europeans began to associate divinity with the vast, extreme places on earth, such as mountains. As “awe” and “exaltation” in God was transferred to “great objects of...the geocosm,” “mountains, oceans, and deserts,” aesthetics shifted as well; ideals of “regularity, symmetry, restraint, and proportion” were “replaced by ideals of

diversity and irregularity." The American West contains - and contained - varied and extreme land forms in abundance. The hypnotically repetitive north-south mountain ranges of the Great Basin are complemented by the barren surreality of mineral-rich Salt Lake. In contrast to these are the aspen and conifer forests and craggy peaks of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, with more than fifty peaks above 14,000 feet. The highest and lowest points of the contiguous forty-eight states, Mt. Whitney and Death Valley, lie only eighty miles apart in California. Despite the aridity of much of the West, the wettest area in the United States is the rainforests of the Olympic Peninsula in northwestern Washington.

Since the United States had a young culture, without the long artistic, intellectual, and architectural traditions and achievements of Europe, Americans took pride in the country's tremendous natural variety and splendor, which apparently meant that the nation was particularly close to God. In the early to mid-nineteenth century this strand of Romanticism inspired the Hudson River painters, a few of whom took trips West, including Sanford Gifford, Worthington Whittredge, and John Kensett. However, the painters Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran and the photographers Eadweard Muybridge, William Henry Jackson, and Timothy O'Sullivan, among others, devoted themselves to describing the West visually, making their portrayals of the sweeping western landscapes during the 1860s through the 1890s. As well, appreciation of western scenery led to setting aside some of the most picturesque areas, which would be called national parks and national monuments, to be protected and used for the

enjoyment of their natural beauty. Yellowstone was the first national park to be founded anywhere in the world, in 1872. Yosemite was protected as a state park of California in 1864 and established as a national park in 1890. Glacier received national park status in 1910, and Zion and the Grand Canyon in 1919.18

This contemplative approach to the landscape was at odds with mid-nineteenth century notions of progress. “Progress” generally meant settling the land and exploiting it as quickly and as much as possible, often to its limits, and sometimes beyond. Resource extraction - fur trapping, farming, mining, grazing cows and sheep, and logging - was the primary economic activity in the West during the nineteenth century. Hundreds of mining towns sprang up, many in existence for only a few years, long enough to remove the greatest amount of valuable metal from the earth as possible, and then deserted. Beavers and bison, whose fur and hides were particularly sought after, were nearly wiped out. On the Great Plains, cattle were allowed to overgraze their ranges, although ranchers had no contingency plan, and in the harsh winters of 1885 - 1886 on the southern plains and 1886 - 1887 on the northern plains, 30 percent or more of the herds died.19 During the die-off on the northern plains, Montana artist Charlie Russell was working as a ranch hand, and when the owner of one of the ranch herds asked how his cattle were faring, Russell replied by sending a sketch of an emaciated cow in the snow with coyotes waiting for it to collapse.20 Federal policies encouraged the

18 Alfred Runte, National Parks The American Experience, Second Edition, Revised. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), pg 46 - 47, 77, 112 - 113. Runte argues that national parks were created only in places that held little or no promise for lucrative resource extraction.
19 James A. Young and B. Abbott Sparks, Cattle in the Cold Desert. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1985), pg 121-140.
20 Peter H. Hassrick, Charles M. Russell. (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1989), pg 25-26. Russell’s sketch was photographed and passed around the community.
rapid privatization, settlement, and exploitation of the public domain. Huge land grants, amounting to seven to ten percent of the nation, were given railroads with the partially realized expectation that they would sell the lands off cheaply.21 The Homestead Act was only one of many bills passed by Congress aimed at facilitating the distribution of public lands to private ownership. Although this version of progress and the romantic view of nature were contradictory impulses in terms of their views of the land, they shared a patriotic pride in the West.

Nineteenth century American schoolbooks presented the West and American westward expansion to young people in glowing terms. L. M. Hauptman “analyzed over a thousand” fifth grade through college textbooks, and found that throughout the nineteenth century, the West was considered synonymous with the frontier, and that,

Although there were occasional unflattering remarks and fears expressed about the West and the westerner, the frontier was generally presented to Americans as Xanadu, a mind-expanding experience as well as a semi-magical place symbolizing opportunity, civilization over savagery, predestination, material progress and freedom, and Arcadia.22

That is, the West represented economic opportunity, and was the object of “Manifest Destiny,” the supposed God GIVEN right of Americans to expand across the continent, bringing “civilized ways” and Christianity to Native Americans. The characterization of the West as boundless opportunity, even as utopia, was not simply nostalgic glorification after the fact (which there has been in abundance, too). Rather, the textbooks mythologized western expansion as it was occurring.

Hauptman repeatedly emphasized that “despite claims to the contrary, schoolbooks scrutinized the meaning of the frontier experience for more than a hundred years before Frederick Jackson Turner enunciated his famous thesis,” and that Turner was repeating the gist of what textbooks said already, such as that the West was a place of economic opportunity. However, in his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner stated explicitly what the schoolbooks, according to Hauptman, only hinted at: that the western frontier experience was creative of a distinctly American culture.

The supposed closing of the frontier, according to the 1890 census, provoked Turner into considering what impact the frontier had on American society. He argued in his influential paper that the frontier experience was the primary force shaping American culture. The importance of the West was the process of the moving frontier, which Turner called “...the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” Turner described the frontier as a series of overlapping stages, such as “the farmer’s frontier” and “the rancher’s frontier.” Succeeding waves of immigrants repeated the process of regressing into primitive conditions, and building new communities from the ground up. As settlers adapted to western lands they became, culturally, Americans:

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist....the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence along American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history.

23 Ibid., pg 270.
25 Ibid., pg 3 - 4.
The continuous cycles of settlement fostered a peculiarly American set of character traits: “practicality,” “inventiveness,” “strength,” “inquisitiveness,” and most importantly, “individualism.” For Turner, the primitive living conditions of the frontier weakened class rigidities, and promoted individualism by necessitating people to be more self-reliant since there were fewer social support structures than in the East. Individualism and the loose, egalitarian social structure reinforced democracy. And even though the institutions of democracy existed, it took the frontier experience to invigorate them. Although the frontier had apparently disappeared by the 1890s, Turner believed that the values associated with the frontier were ingrained so firmly in American society that they would remain.

Certainly, Turner found the cultural traits coming out of the westward experience not wholly positive. Americans were immoderately individualistic to the point of selfishness, lacked “civic virtue” leading to corrupt politics, and were wasteful owing to the seemingly inexhaustible resources of the land and an excessive impulse to “subdue the wilderness.” However, on balance, Turner’s hypothesis was positive, a celebration of American cultural origins. Turner’s thesis remained a pervasive explanation of the meaning of Western history among academics and lay people alike until the 1980s.

Although Turner’s ideas have been criticized with a vengeance in the 1980s and 1990s, they already had been challenged much earlier. In 1921 historian Charles Beard reviewed a recently published anthology of Turner’s

26 Ibid., pg 21.
27 Ibid., pg 17.
28 Ibid., pg 2.
29 Ibid., pg 3-4.
essays:

In the literature of American history there is perhaps no essay or article more often cited and quoted than Professor Turner’s Significance of the Frontier...Finding the Great West neglected by historians from the eastern coast, Professor Turner chose this almost virgin field for his life’s work and with laudable enthusiasm he laid on his emphasis in hammer strokes. The influence of his labors was immense....

While acknowledging the tremendous impact of Turner’s frontier thesis, Beard also criticized it. He was unsure whether the frontier promoted or created national character traits, and whether European immigrants adopted American values any more readily on the western borderlands than in any other part of the country:

It is certainly questionable whether even up to that time [1893] the frontier or the whole agricultural West had exercised a more profound influence on American development than either the industrialism of the East or the semi-feudal plantation system of the South.

In addition, Beard found that while the frontier experience may have encouraged democracy to some degree, American democratic ideas had already come to the United States from England.

In 1930 Benjamin F. Wright, Jr., followed this line of criticism, charging that Turner exaggerated the impact of the frontier on the development of American democracy. Although Wright acknowledged that the frontier environment was receptive and even conducive to both democracy and individualism, he stated that frontier settlements only retained heightened egalitarianism for the short periods that they were in their frontier stages. After they developed infrastructures and became less isolated, they were no more democratic than towns and cities in the East or South. Rather, the

sources of American democracy did not come from settlers adapting to the western environment, but came from Europe, Britain in particular, and later the eastern United States:

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of this frontier interpretation of our national development is its tendency to isolate the growth of American democracy from the general course of Western civilization. The proper point of departure for the discussion of the rise of democracy in the United States is not the American West but the European background...33

In an 1942 article professor G.W. Pierson criticized the Frontier hypothesis on the grounds that Turner over-emphasized environmental determinism, and was “almost fatalistic.”34

...I cannot but feel that too small a role is allowed to man’s own character ambitions...and to the traditions and momentum of the society which came to use this free land. Thus the continent masters, destroys, commands, and creates - while man is surprisingly passive. Where many of us are inclined to regard the physical environment as permissive, or limiting in its influence, Turner in his essays tends to make it mandatory.35

If the physical environment was as powerful an influence as Turner claimed, contended Pierson, then how was it, for example, that Americans imposed the illogical and cumbersome grid system that did not take into account variations in land use and of climate and topography, to demarcate western land?36 Pierson pointed to groups of pioneers such as the “Pennsylvania Germans” who hung on to their traditions despite the supposed influence of the frontier, and suggested that cities were as effective as frontier areas at

35 Ibid., 250.
36 Ibid., 232.
assimilating immigrants. As well, Pierson found that Turner was inconsistent and did not back up his thesis with enough solid evidence. For example, Turner never explained how the characteristics derived from the frontier experience, such as egalitarianism and practicality, remained when the brief frontier period ended. Whether or not one believes Turner's tenets, their credibility was questionable because he failed to back them up with "concrete examples."

During the 1950s, historians took the criticism of Turner to a new, more intense level, launching critiques that presaged the New Western History. In his 1955 article "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," Earl Pomeroy found Turner's frontier doctrine seriously flawed. Pomeroy disagreed with Turner on two interrelated points: that the frontier did not spawn "radical" democracy, and that environmental determinism was a small influence on settlers compared to pioneer cultural conservatism:

If we refuse to let another generation, in effect, force its interpretations on us by excluding such data as do not fit them, we may see that conservatism, inheritance, and continuity bulked at least as large in the history of the West as radicalism and environment. The Westerner has been fundamentally imitator rather than innovator, and not merely in the obvious though important sense that his culture was Western European rather than aboriginal. He was often the most ardent of conformists....

Pomeroy considered the West to be a "colony" of the East, politically, socially, and economically. "Even in the early stages," the West was exploited by eastern capitalists. Politically, Westerners "brought their

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37 Ibid., 250.
38 Ibid., 245.
39 Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment." The Mississippi Valley Historical Review Vol. XLI No.4, (March 1955): 582 - 583.
40 Ibid., 582.
41 Ibid., 588.
For example, although western states had opportunities to adopt modified state constitutions, for the most part they chose to model theirs after conservative eastern constitutions. And settlers aped the East as they built new communities in the West. Pomeroy pointed to architectural styles copied from the East that were ill-adapted to western conditions, with "steep roofs to shed snow that never fell." Also, Pomeroy briefly suggested other faults with Turner's hypothesis that historians would pursue more deeply in the future. He asserted that not only Turner, but many western historians, treated western history as frontier history instead of regional history, and ended their courses on the West at the end of the nineteenth century since the frontier closed in 1890, although the history of the West continued on through the twentieth century. In addition, he thought that the powerful impact of Turner's thesis "opened the university doors to romanticists," and had degraded historical scholarship. And finally, Pomeroy suspected that the supposed violence and lawlessness of the frontier had been overstated.

Like Pomeroy, novelist/historian Wallace Stegner eschewed the commemorative version of western history in his 1954 biography of J. W. Powell, Beyond the Hundredth Meridian - John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West. Whereas Turner celebrated the individualistic private enterprise of western expansion, Stegner condemned it as confused,
corrupt, ecologically damaging, and resource wasteful. Stegner praised Powell for his scientific pragmatism and his "revolutionary" challenge to "initiative, individualism, and competitiveness," devising a system that was meant to benefit the majority of settlers, and standing up to a few large economic interests and their "hatchetmen" in Congress who disproportionately profited from largely unregulated expansion. Instead of glorifying the competitive, individualist frontier, he asserted, we should admire the overlooked historical figures such as Powell, who was not tied up in selfish, blindly optimistic views of the West, but rationally appraised the problems of topography and climate facing settlers, and advocated sensible solutions.

Although in the popular imagination the West was characterized as a garden, or at least soon would produce abundance, as 'rain follows the plow,' Powell saw that large sections of the West were in fact not lush, but arid. They received less than twenty inches of rain a year and Powell came to believe that they could not be settled successfully using methods practiced in the arable East and Midwest. Powell saw that the model of the family homestead east of the hundredth meridian would not work in most parts of the West. The 160 acre homestead specified in the 1862 Homestead Act was inadequate in arid regions, unless they were irrigated, and then it was too much for one family to farm. Powell believed that without new strategies, western settlement would result in thousands of ruined and suffering settlers.

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45 However, in Turner's later essays he supported resource conservation and the progressive impulse to regulate laisse-faire capitalism. For example, see pages 293 - 294 in The Frontier in American History. On the other hand, these sentiments always seem to be sandwiched between exhortations for continued growth and more efficient exploitation of the land.

46 Stegner, Beyond the Hundredth Meridian - John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West, pg 229, viii.
In his 1879 report to Congress, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States, with a More Detailed Account of the Lands of Utah*, Powell proposed an alternative to the chaotic, illogical grab going on under the existing homestead laws. He called for homesteads of only eighty acres for irrigated farms, and 2,560 acres for pasture farms. Each homestead parcel would have irrigable land that would be inseparable from the parcel. And instead of parceling out land using the orderly but nonsensical rectangular grid system, Powell advocated dividing the land into irregularly shaped parcels based on topography, giving the parcels more efficient and fair access to water. In addition, he suggested the formation of farming cooperatives, with farmers sharing a common range. Powell probably got this last idea from a group of Americans already putting it into practice, the Mormons. As well, Powell was inspired by Hispanics in New Mexico who had been practicing communal lifeways for generations. Congress discussed Powell’s proposals for nine days in February 1879, and finally rejected them.47

Powell got another chance to promote his ideas when he was made head of the United States Geological Survey in 1881, upon Clarence King’s resignation. A series of disasters, among them the drought in the West of the late 1880s and early nineties, which reduced many homesteaders to misery, and the harsh winter of 1886, which killed thousands of cattle, ruining many ranching enterprises, gave Powell’s ideas some credibility. Powell estimated that only twenty percent of all Western lands could be made irrigable, and this would be possible only with the coordinated leadership and massive effort the Federal Government alone could provide. In 1889 he proposed closing the public domain to settlement, and mapping, organizing, and finally

settling irrigable lands under Federal supervision. In 1890 Congress rejected this plan. Powell left the U.S. Geological Survey in 1894. Stegner found that Powell’s proposals failed to be accepted because they had little support both from the public and the politicians. The mythic vision of the West to which people clung, the West as soon-to-be-verdant-with-individual-enterprise, triumphed over factual evidence to the contrary. I would add that in attempting to both stem and delay the tide of westward movement, Powell was attempting to arrest a process that had been going on for generations and had achieved a formidable cultural momentum.

*Virgin Land - The American West in Symbol and Myth,* (1950), by Henry Nash Smith, like *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian,* is another book that challenged triumphalist versions of western history long before the advent of the New Western History in the 1980s. Smith, like Stegner, demonstrated that westward expansion was often driven by irrational expectations and unrealistic goals and set a precedent for the New Western History by examining how Americans took myths of the West at face value. He was concerned with communal “myths,” and defined myth as a relatively simple idea, an “intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image.” He asserted that myths are necessary to motivate people, for people “cannot engage in purposive group behavior without images which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence on the infinitely numerous and infinitely varied data of experience.” Smith demonstrated how these myths, or perceptions, regardless of their accuracy, drove history. They reflected people’s “aspirations and beliefs,” motivated

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49 *Smith, Virgin Land The American West as Symbol and Myth,* pg IX.
50 *Ibid.*, pg IX.
their political decisions, pushed legislation, and determined social relations.\textsuperscript{51}

For example, in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, the hope of finding a northwest passage through North America giving the east coast easy access to the Pacific ocean and trade with Asia stimulated western exploration and expansion, even though no viable route was discovered.\textsuperscript{52} Another myth was the notion of Manifest Destiny, the right, sanctified by God, of Americans to expand across North America. The thoroughly unoriginal idea that God was on one country's side, in this case the United States, gave Americans, from their point of view, ethical legitimation in conquering the West. Smith goes so far as to say that the drive westward had become almost a "moral imperative" by the 1870s.\textsuperscript{53} Another myth was the cult of nature or 'primitivism,' a belief that "nature is a source of strength, truth, and virtue."\textsuperscript{54} This figured in the literature of Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and a multitude of popular scout and mountain man stories, such as those about Daniel Boone and James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking. It had some impact on the passage of the Homestead Bill, in the belief that farming as a way of life brought people into close contact with the earth thereby increasing their fortitude and morality.\textsuperscript{55}

A fourth symbol was that of the West as a national safety valve, a place where discontented and poor people of the East could get cheap farmland and start a new life, thereby making for more self-supporting citizens and less social and economic discontent. This idea gave impetus to enacting legislation encouraging western settlement, such as the 1862 Homestead Act.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., pg 250.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., pg viii, 22.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., pg 185.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., pg 71.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., pg 77 - 78, 152 - 153, & 172.
whereby an individual or family could file a claim on 160 acres of land and purchase it for a small price if they developed it and lived on it for five years.56 The consequences of available western land were argued various ways. Some people claimed it would hobble large Eastern companies by siphoning off excess workers and thereby increasing labor costs. Others argued the opposite, that it would erode the power of the eastern labor movement, since unhappy employees would simply move west instead of fighting for better working conditions. All these arguments were based on the assumption that eastern workers would really remove west in significant numbers. Smith says that the West probably never was a safety valve as eastern working people never moved west in large numbers. They did not have the money for transportation, farm tools, and funds to maintain themselves until their farms began to generate income.57

For Smith the most important myth about the West during the nineteenth century was what he referred to as the "agrarian" or "garden utopia." Americans hoped that they could build a model society in the West, consisting of thousands of family owned subsistence farms. Land ownership would provide economic independence, and the American democratic system would provide political independence. The "myth of the garden" was infused with patriotism too, as Americans sought to create a better, more healthy society than those of Europe.58 Thomas Jefferson had been the original, articulate advocate of this agrarian ideal, and thought that western lands might provide space for American farmers to occupy gradually, avoiding the over-industrialization, class strife, and urban squalor of Europe.

57 Smith, Virgin Land The American West as Symbol and Myth, pg 201 - 210.
58 Ibid., pg 128.
The romantic cult of nature played a role in the garden too, since intimacy with the land through cultivating the soil ennobled the “yeoman farmer.”

The myth of the garden had several profound influences on the course of United States history during the nineteenth century. It led to a realignment of regions in the thirty years leading up to the Civil War. The South and West had closer ties than the North and West, with many of the pioneers and explorers of the West coming from the South. As well, the western regions near the Mississippi basin were tied to the South economically by trade and transportation of goods along the river, to and from New Orleans. However, the agrarian ideal, with its emphasis on democracy and tilling the earth with one's own hands, was incompatible with the slave-based plantation system of the South. The erosion of South/West ties accelerated in the 1850s as the newly formed Republican party adopted the garden myth as one of its ‘planks,’ and the Northwest went with the Union in the election of 1860. The South stolidly opposed the passage of the Homestead Bill, which did not become law until 1862, after the South seceded from the Union. The Homestead Act embodied the myth of the garden and the Act’s passage attests to the power of that myth. The myth also helped push hundreds of thousands of people to attempt to establish farms in the West.

Smith found that the myth of the garden ultimately foundered on the realities of cultivating western land and on industrialism. For Smith, myths remain powerful only so long as they can be validated in some way:

They cannot motivate and direct action unless they are drastic simplifications, yet if the impulse toward clarity of form is not controlled by some process of verification, symbols and myths can become dangerous by inciting behavior grossly inappropriate to the
Such was the case with the garden myth. Although it was a fairly accurate vision of American society at the turn of the eighteenth century when the majority of Americans were farmers, it became increasingly less so as the nineteenth century progressed and Americans entered the West. Americans failed to grasp the profound changes wrought by industrialism. Instead of controlling their own economic and political fate, farmers found themselves increasingly dependent on price and demand of outside, world markets, railroad transportation costs, and bank loans. As well, farming families that had settled on the plains beyond the hundredth meridian during the wet years of the 1860s found themselves facing a more normal, arid climate afterwards, and even new dry-farming techniques were only a partially successful solution. With the agricultural depression of the 1920s, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and the subsequent exodus, Smith suggested that the plains had been "seriously overpopulated." The goal of building a western agrarian utopia lost credibility as it was incompatible with industrialism and western aridity.

In his concluding chapter Smith placed Turner's thesis in the context of the agrarian myth. He stated that the frontier thesis was informed by the myth of the garden, and that Turner's analysis of the West and the frontier was compromised by that myth's influence. Smith claimed that the garden ideal was the basis for the frontier hypothesis, that both looked to the West for the extension of democracy, for abundant land, and for cultural distance from Europe. So far, so good. However, Smith found that most importantly,

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61 Ibid., pg ix - x.
62 Ibid., pg 156 - 159, 193.
63 Ibid., pg 174.

pg 37
both paradigms defined themselves in terms of the opposition of nature and civilization, considering civilization as a society of small, family owned farms, not an urban industrial culture. Smith said that the frontier thesis ran into a dead end when dealing with the end of the frontier - what would happen to American democracy without pioneers building communities from the bottom up in the wilderness and revitalizing American freedom? According to Smith, Turner faced this problem because he was caught in the agrarian ideal, orienting him toward the interior West, and nature's "unqualifiably benign," influences, which blinded him to European and Eastern influences.64

This was a misreading of the frontier thesis, and it did not explain the genuine inconsistency to which Smith pointed. Smith had it backwards. The agrarian myth probably appealed to Turner because it located the center of American culture in the western United States, away from European influences. And, as I have already pointed out, Turner did not find the influence of nature all positive. For example, the seemingly inexhaustible resources of the West made Americans frivolous.65 The frontier encouraged a lack of sophistication regarding financial and governmental concerns that resulted in administrative corruption and incompetence.66 Too much individualism made for greed. The conspicuous quandary in Turner's hypothesis which Smith pointed out was caused by Turner's patriotic insistence in finding an internal basis for American culture.

*Regeneration Through Violence The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860,* (1973), is another work that presaged the New Western

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64 Ibid., pg 251, 256 - 257, 260.
66 Ibid., pg 32.
History in exploring the damage wrought by the frontier. Slotkin affirmed the centrality of the American frontier experience as a source of national identity and myth, by which Americans rationalized westward expansion and the Indian wars. However, by the time Slotkin wrote, where Turner said the frontier produced mostly positive values, Slotkin found that its impact was profoundly negative. Euro-Americans responded to the frontier by developing the myth of the “savage war,” whereby the impulse toward violence and destruction became a force vitalizing American society.67

Slotkin described myth as a discourse, a story, or a set of symbols that represent a people’s values and illustrates their place in the universe, in a way that is valid to them:

A mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors.68

Myth is invoked as a means of deriving usable values from history.... Its primary appeal is to ritualized emotions, established beliefs, habitual associations, memory, nostalgia. Its representations are symbolic and metaphoric, depending for their force on an intuitive recognition and acceptance of the symbol by the audience.69

The cultural construct of the “savage war” came out of the original thirteen colonies during the seventeenth century, particularly the New England Puritan colonies. In founding a new homeland in the “New World,” the colonists viewed the land as a hostile wilderness and its native inhabitants as culturally, morally, and by the eighteenth century, racially inferior. The colonials often thought of the Indians not only as barbarian heathens, but as the forces of darkness that would have to be subdued to

68 Ibid., pg 6.
make way for civilization.\textsuperscript{70} Since the British colonists considered Native Americans to be minions of the devil, they saw no permanent, middle path of compromise and accommodation with the Indians, only conflict with two possible outcomes: total victory or total defeat. The heroes of the frontier savage war were men who learned to fight like Indians, to harness the power of nature and of the Indians, and use it to destroy them. These white, bi-cultural men were sanctioned to act outside the laws and norms of society, to kill, because of the overriding necessity of defending civilization. The frontier hero made way for white farms, roads, and towns by conquering the wilderness and exterminating the Indians.\textsuperscript{71} Slotkin could have modified his assessment of the "savage war" by noting that it was not a "white" phenomena, but was specific to the English, Scots, and Welsh colonists. Spanish, and particularly French relations with Native Americans were characterized by far greater cohabitation and cooperation than those of the British.

For the mythic frontier hero, the "savage war" was not only a conflict for material possession of land and resources, but an internal, spiritual struggle between good and evil. For the mythic protagonist, 'knowing the Indian" meant knowing evil not only outside of oneself but internally and psychologically as well. The hero had to confront his own dark passions and master them. The battle between good and evil might also translate as a conflict between reason and unconscious, often irrational desires.\textsuperscript{72}

Slotkin asserted that as all the colonies fought Indians, the myth of the savage war was a force unifying British colonials and later Euro-Americans.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, pg 21 - 23, 178 - 179.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.}, pg 55 - 56, 550 - 563.
Scouts, mountain men, and cowboys have come closest to personifying this mythic hero in the popular imagination. Daniel Boone, scout and "savage warrior" extraordinaire, was the first American national hero of mythic proportions. Davy Crockett defined "national aspiration in terms of so many bears destroyed, so much land preempted, so many trees hacked down, so many Indians and Mexicans dead in the dust." The righteousness of the savage war was such that "regeneration through violence" "represented the redemption of the American spirit."

For Euro-Americans, the myth of savage war justified killing Native Americans and taking their land. The myth placed blame of total war on the Indians as "savages," whereas in truth colonists were projecting their faults and fears about their own impulses onto Native Americans. What Euro-Americans, the Puritans particularly, sought to repress in themselves, such as sexuality, passion, thoughts of violence, they saw, or thought they saw, in Indians, and in attempting to build a pure society they found a rationalization for waging all-out war.

The paradigm of the savage war long outlasted the circumstances from which it grew. The myth began developing when the colonies were precariously situated along the edge of the eastern seaboard during the early seventeenth century. However, as early as 1630 the colonies were so firmly established in terms of population and infrastructure that their existence was not seriously threatened by Indians, Slotkin claimed. Although their collective existence was not threatened, Americans continually invoked the

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73 Ibid., pg 269, 313.
74 Ibid., pg 5.
75 Ibid., pg 12.
76 Ibid., pg 55 - 56.
77 Slotkin, The Fatal Environment The Myth of the Frontier In the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890. pg 60.
myth of the savage war as they fought the Indians throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the two books that complete his trilogy on the Myth of the Frontier, *The Fatal Environment The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890*, and *Gunfighter Nation The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Slotkin showed how Americans used the myth to rationalize overseas imperialism, smash organized labor, and even used the language of the Myth to encourage prosecution of the war in Vietnam.78

Slotkin was careful to make a distinction between the rhetoric of the savage war myth and historic reality. Events conformed to the myth unevenly. Despite the carnage of the Indian wars and of Native American dislocation, and the belief of many nineteenth century Americans that Indians would cease to exist, they were not wiped out. Although there were "episodes of anti-Indian genocide," and the United States "sponsored colossal violence in Africa" in connection with the slave trade, Slotkin found that "there are no equivalents in American history of the programs of ethnic genocide carried out by the Turks against the Armenians or the Germans against the Jews; nor of the political genocide practiced by Stalin and Mao against opposition or dissident movements."79

Slotkin showed that Turner's description of the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" was the subjective point of view of one group of people, white Eastern Americans, and not a universally held view. That is, Turner was reiterating in explicit terms what some Euro-Americans felt about the frontier at the time of his writing, the late

nineteenth century, and before. Slotkin concluded that the Euro-American characterization of themselves as civilized and Indians as savage was a distortion. Few whites understood that many Indian groups lived in a "precarious balance" with the natural environment. This conception is different from the commonly held white view that Indians were part of nature, which is pejoratively condescending in its implication that they could not rise above a 'natural state.' The difference, Slotkin said, between Native American and white relationships with the land was that Indians had "a sense of belonging to the world they exploited," whereas "whites had no such connection with the earth they possessed," and "destroyed the balanced world in an attempt to make it in the image of something else."80

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During the nineteenth century American attitudes about the West went from one extreme to the other. Based on reports by explorers and travelers, Americans thought the West was a desert unfit for a nation oriented toward small farmers, such as the United States. By the 1850s, the image of the West began to move in the opposite direction, from a barrier to settlement, to a place of economic opportunity, a probable agricultural paradise, and an extraordinary, sublime landscape. By the beginning of the Twentieth century, then, Americans, including artists and historians, had come to see the West positively.

The first, celebratory phase in the field of western history, as established by Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s, gave way to a transitional period in the middle twentieth century. The New Western History did not appear from nowhere, a phenomena independent of historiographical trends, but

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evolved from gradually shifting ideas regarding western history. Long before the 1980s, historians criticized the frontier interpretation of the West in ways that New Western Historians would pursue and expand on. These critics found the frontier interpretation overly optimistic and nationalistic, and asserted that it exaggerated the influence of the frontier on democratic traditions and institutions, and put too much weight on the West as frontier at the expense of understanding the West as a region. Although these “transitional critics” succeeded in laying a foundation for further criticism of the frontier thesis and deepened the study of the West, they did not propose a new framework for explaining western history and its relevance in American history that was wholly satisfying. None of their alternative views, such as the portrayal of the West as an economic and cultural colony of the East, had the explanatory sweep of Turner’s frontier thesis.

At the end of the nineteenth century, artists, including photographers, like historians celebrated the West and its past in their work. As it became clear that Americans were populating and developing the West remarkably quickly, and as it seemed that American westward expansion was nearing its end, imagery by such painters as Frederick Remington and Charlie Russell that memorialized what many Americans thought was an adventurous epic became popular. As well, the Romantic artistic strand of finding the sublime in nature continued, and even gained strength, as Americans transformed the West. In the twentieth century, photographers, among them Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Anne Brigman, expanded on the photographic landscape tradition established by Eadweard Muybridge and Carleton Watkins exalting the western wilderness. For both early twentieth century photographers and traditional western historians western wild lands were a
source of benevolent revitalization for Americans.
CHAPTER 2

The Transcendent West:
The Photography of Ansel Adams, Anne Brigman, and Edward Weston

Without exaggeration I say, it was one of the impressive moments of my life. No mighty mountain, snow capped, touching the heavens ever stirred me as did these amazing rocks. Stark-naked they rose from the desert, barren except for wisps of dry brush: belched from the earth’s bowels by some mighty explosion, they massed together in violent confusion, in magnificent contiguity. Pyramids, cubes, rectangles, cylinders, spheres, - verticals, obliques, curves, - simple elemental forms, complex convolutions, opposed zigzags, at once chaotic and ordered, an astounding sight!

So Edward Weston wrote in his diary on May 23, 1928, after encountering the strange, fantastic stone formations of the Mohave desert in southern California. Weston’s reaction to the scenery, of almost stunned astonishment, typifies the way photographers responded to the western landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. During this period photographers continued to envision the West in the Romantic tradition, as a sublime, magnificent wilderness. Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Anne Brigman were three remarkable exponents of this tradition, each portraying the West as a sacred landscape, and extending the vision in her or his own unique manner. The images of these photographers, and traditional western history, mirror each other in their optimistic renderings of the West. The idea of continual rebirth with the western landscape as the source of renewal

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ties together Adams’, Weston’s, and Brigman’s imagery and traditional western history. The three photographers depicted the West as pristine wilderness, the same wilderness that Turnerians said energized American society and institutions, providing a “perennial rebirth” through repeated cycles of regression and “new development” as the frontier moved westward, encountering fresh wild lands.2

Pictorialist photographer Anne Brigman, in the 1900s and teens, envisioned the West as a wondrous landscape where Americans, particularly women, could achieve personal liberation through communing with nature. Frontier historians too saw open land - “free land” as Turner put it - as producing individual freedom. Adams’ images of nature, seemingly untouched by people, showed the creation of a new world, echoing the Turnerian emphasis on repeated contact with pristine nature. Weston is the only one of the three who dealt with the confluence of civilization and wilderness in a substantial way. Despite his anti-industrialist verbal and written rhetoric, he did not depict this confluence with negativity or bitterness, as photographers of the latter twentieth century would, but rather showed the impermanence of civilization’s artifacts opposed to the timelessness of nature and wilderness. His depictions were sometimes harsh, sometimes beautiful, but always inclusive. Weston’s imagery too, in its exploration of death and rebirth, reflects the traditional western history’s emphasis on a continual return to the primeval, and subsequent renewal.

Residing in Oakland, California, photographer Anne Brigman rapidly rose to prominence in photographic circles during the late 1900s and teens. She took up photography in 1901 at age thirty-two, and by 1906 was not only

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exhibiting her work in California, but was a member of Alfred Stieglitz’s select artist organization, the Photo-Secession.3 Her photographs appeared in *Camera Work*, Stieglitz’ exquisitely produced magazine, in 1909, 1912, and 1913, and were included in Photo-Secession exhibits in the United States and in Europe.4

Brigman’s vision dovetailed with pictorialism, an international movement among photographers beginning in the late 1880s and lasting into the 1930s. The movement was a response to the popular conviction that photography was too mechanistic to be truly creative. Pictorialists wanted their photographs taken seriously as art, and self-consciously sought to include the hand of the artist more obviously into the making of photographs. They rejected sharp, detailed prints as too automated, and used soft focus lenses and arduous printing processes to create an indistinct look in their photographs that resembled impressionist painting.5 Pictorialism’s fuzziness suited Brigman’s concern with mystery, mood, and allegory, since too much detail threatened to individualize people and locations. She continued working in a pictorialist vein even when art photographers, including many of her fellow California photographers, abandoned it for a photographic style that emphasized clarity of detail.

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4 Five of Brigman’s pictures appeared in *Camera Work* 25, (1909), five appeared in *Camera Work* 38, (1912), and one appeared in *Camera Work* 44, (1913).

5 Pictorialist photographers often manipulated their prints so extensively through a number of laborious printing processes, such as bromoil and gum-bichromate, that each photograph was one-of-a-kind, irreproducible. Tonality and chiaroscuro took precedence over detail. Pictorialists emphasized the middle range of grays in their prints, favoring matte surface printing papers that reflect less light than glossy surface papers, and therefore had a smaller, more gray, subtle, contrast range. As well, pictorialists often chose subject matter that had more to do with ideas, emotions, and allegory than specific times and places, to show that photography was capable of more than mechanical documentation of the external world.
For Brigman, the western landscape invited fantastic, magical visions. She called herself a "pagan photographer," and took ancient European myths and northwestern European legends of dragons, elves, and fairies, and placed them into the American Western landscape, particularly the Pacific Coast, the Desert Southwest, and the high Sierra. She shot the twisting juniper trees of the Sierra, metamorphosizing them into *Amazons, Harp of the Winds*, and *The Dragon and the Pearl*. Despite her self-description as a pagan photographer, she did include sympathetic references to Christianity in her work, such as *Madonna*. It seems that for Brigman, Christianity was simply another source of imagery and myths to draw from and mix into her enchanted world.

Another source for Brigman was long-used romantic iconography, but she gave it an original spin. She used motifs such as lightning-blasted trees, craggy cliffs, and vast spaces, that had been in continuous use by Romantic poets and painters for a hundred years. Her favorite location, the Sierra mountain range, had been portrayed as a sublime landscape by artists such as painter Albert Bierstadt and photographer William Henry Jackson in the 1860s. Brigman added the nude to that landscape, almost always a female nude, usually her friends or herself. Brigman's women go beyond just contemplating the environment; they are part of nature. *Dawn* shows a woman lying across a rocky outcrop gazing at her reflection in a pool of water, the outline of her legs and torso complementing the horizontal lines of distant hills behind her. In *The Dying Cedar*, twisting tree branches and a woman's arms and body fuse together in harmony. A woman in a fluttering

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translucent shawl appears about to fly away on a gentle wind in *The Breeze*. Probably Brigman's best known picture, *The Soul of the Blasted Pine*, shows a woman dramatically reaching for the heavens from a gnarled trunk, her face turned passionately skyward.8

Brigman depicted the western landscape as a source of freedom, particularly for women. Brigman's women, by stripping themselves of their clothing, the trappings of civilization, and melding with nature, achieve a release, a liberation from the constraints of society. Brigman photographed her landscape/nudes during the 1900s and teens, a time when both young women and psychology, particularly Freud's ideas, began challenging the "cult of domesticity," and the women's movement was splintered but still vigorously pushing for nation-wide woman suffrage. Nineteenth century Americans held contradictory notions regarding gender and the western landscape. They sometimes considered nature to be a feminine entity that had to be subdued by men to make way for civilization.9 Simultaneously, American society considered white women pioneers the agents of civilization, homemaking, and the upholders of morality - which Women's Studies has dubbed "domesticity." Brigman's photographs at once blended and transcended these assumptions about women and nature; Brigman's women, although part of nature, appear powerful and independent.

Despite the references to legend in her work, Brigman's reverence for nature and its rejuvenating potential was quite real to her. She wrote enthusiastically, "My friends...enter into the spirit of my work....Many of them have told me that in the very act of posing they have experienced an

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9 Annette Kolodny?
exaltation of mind and soul.” Brigman seems to be describing an epiphany, when the individuals in these photographs, the expressions on their faces ecstatic, bond with something greater than themselves, the vastness of the cosmos. Eighteenth and nineteenth century romantics exalted the power of nature, such as the pleasing terror of a mountain storm. Brigman, however, did not portray the human connection with nature’s immensity as the exhilaration and adrenaline rush of experiencing danger, but rather, as grace that comes from uniting with infinite nature. *The Strength of Loneliness* shows a woman atop a cliff contemplating the ocean. The title and subject suggest timeless themes such as self-reliance, and the personal realization of solitude in the face of the enormity of the universe. The edge of a Grand Canyon cliff on which a woman stands considering the abyss before her in *Sanctuary* is anything but an enclosed, protected space, but her calm posture expresses tranquility.11

By the 1920s pictorialism was declining, losing adherents in the face of “straight photography,” particularly on the East Coast. Straight photographers believed photography could stand on its own terms and need not mimic painting to be a fine art, so the negative could be printed “straight” onto glossy printing paper without using oils and pigments. Straight photographers, by sharply focusing their lenses and refusing to obscure detail in an amorphous haze, made more factual representations of the West than pictorialists. Brigman was so attached to pictorialism that even during the 1930s when she shot subjects that straight photographers favored - close up nature studies and factories - she retained an emphasis on tone and form over detail in her prints. With pictorialism’s demise Brigman was largely

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10 “Fear Retards Women, Avers Mrs. Brigman,” *San Francisco Call*, 8 June, 1913.
forgotten, long before *Songs of a Pagan*, a collection of her photographs and poetry she had been amassing for over forty years, was published in 1949. Recently, however, there has been a renewed popular interest in pictorialism and Brigman's work.

Many of the most influential of the straight photographers in the West were originally pictorialists, including Edward Weston. Although art photographers on the East Coast and in Europe were practicing straight photography by the early 1920s, it was not until the late 1920s that western art photographers began to reject pictorialism. Edward Weston was making straight photographs by the early 1920s, and he eventually destroyed his pictorial negatives, to the detriment of art historians who seek to understand the development of his vision, and to the public, for he made some gorgeous pictorial prints.

In 1932 as the movement against pictorialism gathered momentum, a group of seven California photographers, including Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Imogen Cunningham, formed Group F. 64 to promote straight photography in the West. Although Group F. 64 remained in existence only until 1935, it was a catalyst, firmly launching straight art photography in the West.

Both the way Edward Weston lived and his approach to photography recall nineteenth century Romanticism. He resided in Mexico from 1924 to 1926, spending time with leftist avant-garde artists such as Diego Rivera and romancing the beautiful communist and photographer, Tina Modotti. Back in the United States he moved from one relationship to another, sometimes wondering in his diary why women were so attracted to him. In 1938, at age 52
52, he entered into marriage for a second time, with Charis Wilson, a woman thirty years younger than he. Unlike his friend and occasional travelling companion, Ansel Adams, Weston was not fascinated with the intricacies of photographic chemistry or the mathematical equations regarding film, light, and exposure, paying attention to them only enough to get the results he wanted. He achieved the subtle, lovely tones in his prints through experience and intuition rather than such things as the measurements of the statistical density of the silver in a negative.

Not only the way Weston lived and photographed but his attitude toward the landscape reflected the Romantic conviction that the human spirit can achieve fulfillment and wholeness through living in harmony with the natural world, and that industrialization posed a threat to our connection with the natural environment:

I do not wish to impose my personality upon nature, but...to become identified with nature, to know things in their very essence, so that what I record is not an interpretation - my idea of what nature should be - but a revelation, a piercing of the smokescreen cast over life by irrelevant, humanly limited exigencies....
In a civilization severed from its roots in the soil - cluttered with nonessentials, blinded by abortive desires, the camera can be a way of self-development, a means to rediscover and identify oneself with all manifestation of basic form - with nature, the source.\textsuperscript{12}

Ansel Adams recalled in his autobiography that Weston occasionally expressed similar sentiments to him:

Edward distrusted science and technology. I would ask him, 'Edward, how can you depreciate science in general and technology in particular; you use lenses (they certainly do not grow on trees) and photographic film and paper: products of scientific research and high technology. You have electric lights and power, running water and a telephone. Please explain.' The question would never be answered, but responded to by, 'Don't you see how much death and destruction through war

\textsuperscript{12}Edward Weston & Nancy Newhall, editor. \textit{The Daybooks of Edward Weston II - California.} pgs 241 & 246.
and pollution science has brought us?"\textsuperscript{13}

Weston’s best images of the West reflect a wide range of emotions, from celebration, to mystery, to despair. He consciously avoided “postcard views,” seeking to create deeper, more meaningful pictures. When he shot Yosemite, he ignored the dramatic scenic wonders like Half Dome and El Capitan, instead concentrating on smaller views.

Far and away the most successful landscape work he did was along the California coast, especially at Point Lobos, a peninsula three miles from Carmel. There he focused his camera on details of sand, rock, seaweed, and trees, his compositions imparting a sense of rhythm and tension. The twisting branches of a weathered cypress tree intimately encircle a stone in \textit{Cypress and Stonecrop, 1930}. In another picture, \textit{China Cove, 1940}, Weston shot a large, floating piece of kelp which resembles a giant, glowing, magic octopus, come to the surface to cast a benevolent spell over the ocean.\textsuperscript{14}

While Weston is justly famous for his work at Point Lobos, his inland photographs are overrated. He made dozens of trips around the West during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly when he received Guggenheim Fellowships in 1937 and 1938, travelling through New Mexico, Arizona, California, Washington, and Oregon. He stated in his application that he wanted “to continue an epic series of photographs of the West, begun about 1929.”\textsuperscript{15} He shot thousands of negatives of the landscape from many points of view, often focusing so close to subjects as to almost, but not quite, make them abstract.

Weston attempted to eschew the picturesque for more substantial images, but


\textsuperscript{15}Karen E. Quinn and Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., \textit{Weston's Westons - California and the West.} (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1994), pg 11.
largely failed to create compelling alternatives. A typical case is *Dunes*, *Oceano*, 1934. The chiaroscuro of the sand dunes is interesting, with contrasting dark shadows and glowing highlights caused by the low angle of the sun in the sky. But there is no focus, bits of light intrude on the corners, leaving the eye to wander uncertainly about the picture searching in vain for purpose or harmony. Weston was bold in intention, but his results were mediocre.

Weston’s landscapes that include the detritus of human habitation transcend the mediocrity of his inland nature studies. Weston shot a series of deserted mining towns across the Southwest that reflect ambivalence about whether or not modernity and industrialism are progress. On the one hand, these photographs seem a condemnation of human greed and advancing technology. People extracted what valuable minerals they could, moved on, and left piles of machinery and garbage littering the land behind them. On the other hand, the old buildings are crumbling and the equipment is rusting, suggesting the power of the natural environment to integrate human waste. Decomposition was one of his favorite subjects. In *Wrecked Car* a twisted automobile resembles the fallen, weathered tree beside it. In *Old Shoes* a pair of boots are on their way to becoming dust. In *Eroded Plank From Barley Sifter* the sifter is so worn that one cannot tell it was once a human-made implement. The ruins, whether clothing, buildings, or machinery, are not pretty or nostalgic, but melancholy.

Just as gloomy as his ghost town photographs are his series of dead animals—birds, rabbits, and even a dead person Weston found and

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photographed soon after the man died of thirst and exposure in the desert.\textsuperscript{19} These photographs do not seem to characterize the land as something that destroys life, but rather, as a potent force.

Weston's journal, letters, and comments to his friends indicate that he looked at the Western landscape as nourishing the spirit, and at industrialism as stifling the human soul. However, his photographs do not reflect this written and verbal bitterness about the modern world. He found beauty in industrial forms, approaching them photographically the same way he approached organic forms. He discovered the same expressive elements in both - elegance of line and curve, and sense of texture, apparent in such pictures as \textit{Egg Slicer, 1930}, \textit{Armco Steel, Ohio, 1922}, and \textit{Washbowl, 1925}. \textit{Washbowl} is particularly compelling, the space between the straight edges of the photograph and the bowl creating a visual tension.\textsuperscript{20}

We should respect Weston's inquiring heart and mind. The depth, passion, and complexity of his intent is fabulous. His photographs seem to be suggesting that the natural environment is powerful and whole regardless of whether humanity exists or not. Humans are not irrelevant, but we are part of a larger whole. The play between decomposition and growth that characterized the relationship between civilization and primal nature in Weston's photographs echoes the importance that frontier western history placed on American civilization's reinvigoration through ongoing contact with the wilderness.

While Weston avoided conventional scenic views, his young contemporary, Ansel Adams, made such strikingly picturesque images that


\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, pgs 167, 58, 108.
he would become by the 1970s not only a prominent landscape photographer
of the West but the best known photographer in the United States. In his
hundreds of pictures revealing the grandeur of Yosemite Valley, Adams is an
heir of Eadweard Muybridge and Carleton Watkins, who competed to be the
foremost Yosemite image-maker during the late 1860s and 1870s. Like
Watkins and Muybridge, Adams emphasized the awesome scale of the
Valley, the monoliths reaching skyward and the waterfalls plummeting from
cliffs hundreds of feet high. Also like them, Adams followed in the style of
the Hudson River school painters and the Rocky Mountain school painters in
representing the landscape as magnificent and sublime, with few if any traces
of civilization. *Clearing Winter Storm - Yosemite Valley, 1940*, with its
swirling clouds, and *Mt Williamson*, with rays of sunlight shining through
the clouds on the boulder strewn slopes of the Sierra, recall the sense of
primeval creation that Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran captured in their
huge “operatic” paintings of the 1860s. Like these painters, Adams
attempted to include as much detail as possible in his pictures, and he used
fine-grained negatives and an 8 x 10 inch view camera to get maximum
information in his negatives. Adams wrote delightedly about the detail in
one of his most popular images, *Aspens - Northern New Mexico, 1958*, that in
large 40 x 60 inch prints the “image reveals worm holes in the bright
leaves.”

Adams’ work is more factual than that of the nineteenth century Rocky
Mountain school painters and landscape photographers, which gives it
tremendous power. Moran and Bierstadt often incorporated mountains,

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21 Ansel Adams. *Ansel Adams - Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs*. (Boston: Little,
22 Ibid., pg 57.
waterfalls, and rivers from different locations into single pictures. Bierstadt’s paintings in particular exaggerated the height of mountains.\textsuperscript{23} They are so falsely contrived that Adams’ pictures not only are more accurate but feel more authentic in their portrayal of the majesty and mystery of wilderness. Besides the obvious fact that he used black-and-white film and humans see in color, Adams did manipulate his photographs a bit. He sometimes changed the contrast of a scene, “burned and dodged” during printing, and used lens filters to darken skies.\textsuperscript{24} However, in his hands the use of filters usually made the photographs more true to how people see. Even modern film is more sensitive than the human eye to blue light, so skies appear overexposed compared with the ground. The use of filters compensates for this technical deficiency. Muybridge and Watkins were handicapped for they did not have effective filters, and their photographs usually have blank, gray skies instead of the cloudy or dark blue skies that were often there when they shot their pictures. Undoubtedly they would have been thrilled with the technology available to Adams.\textsuperscript{25}

Adams was not disturbed by industrial modernism to the extent Weston was. Adams saw both positive and negative aspects of modernity, and even could enjoy its excesses; he drove a Cadillac that honked in seventy-two different ways.\textsuperscript{26} His choice of work reflected his attitudes. Without reservations, in 1941 he accepted two jobs, one working for the Federal

\textsuperscript{24}“Burning and dodging” refers to adding or holding back light during printing. Adding light will make a part of the print darker, and holding back light will lighten part of the print.
\textsuperscript{25}Although Muybridge invented a filter that darkened the top half of a picture, it only worked well in compositions that had a fairly even horizon line, since, for example, a tree or mountain extending from the bottom of the frame to the top would become unnaturally dark in its middle.
Government to produce a visual record of the National Parks, and the other, doing a commercial assignment for the U.S. Potash Company in New Mexico, shooting their underground operations. He recognized the inevitable expansion of society, of population, roads, and cities, but also thought Americans spiritually needed areas less trampled upon by humans. The National Forests and National Park system seemed to Adams the best way of balancing an ever-expanding American civilization with the wilderness:

We all know the tragedy of the dustbowls, the cruel unforgivable erosions of the soil, the depletion of fish and game, and the shrinking of the noble forests. And we know that such catastrophes shrivel the spirit of the people.

The wilderness is pushed back; man is everywhere. Solitude, so vital to the individual man, is almost nowhere. Certain values are realized; others destroyed.

Possessions, both material and spiritual, are appreciated most when we find ourselves in peril of losing them. The National Forests were established just in time to prevent unimaginable disaster.27

Although Adams had been photographing the landscape in a consistent style since the 1930s, he did not become famous until the modern environmental movement gathered momentum in the 1960s. Perhaps not surprisingly, at this same time Americans were rediscovering Albert Bierstadt's work. Adams has retained the position of best known photographer in the United States for the past thirty years. He portrayed the landscape as Americans wished to see it, not as an untamed wilderness that was as threatening as it was wondrous, but a wilderness that had been largely purged of many of its supposedly dangerous elements such as wolves and grizzly bears. Much like the confinement of Indians to reservations by the

1890s, Americans corralled the wilderness into clearly defined, seemingly controlled areas, the National Parks. By the 1960s not only did our domination over nature seem secure, but there was a growing awareness that natural resources and open spaces, which a century and a half earlier had seemed nearly infinite, were limited. This realization prompted Americans not only to appreciate the natural environment, but cherish it. And indeed, with cities continuing to grow, Americans have realized the scarcity of large beautiful areas unsettled by people, and the national parks are visited more than ever before.

Another reason Adams' photographs have achieved such popularity is, simply, that they make people feel good. They remind Americans that the "wilderness" is still out there and that we are doing a good job preserving it for future generations. His photographs do not reflect the pressure of large numbers of tourists on the parks, or the pollution from outside areas that increasingly infringes on the parks. We can look at his images and congratulate ourselves on having conserved magnificent natural spaces, which we can visit when we need to connect with nature and experience a spiritual renewal.

This discussion is not meant to demean Adams' achievements. He was a brilliant darkroom technician, possessing exquisite control over the black & white photographic process and a keen eye for detail, and his prints have a subtle and brilliant tonal range. Technical expertise in itself cannot save a badly composed negative, but when combined with Adams' rigorous and sensitive vision, the results are deeply stirring. Hundreds of professional

\[28\text{I am not suggesting that Native Americans are a part of nature and whites are not, but pointing out that both Indians and the land were often seen by Euro-Americans as obstacles to the settlement of the continent, which had to be overcome.}\]
and amateur photographers continue to follow Adams stylistically, making pictures of nature, often with few obvious signs of human influence, and using the darkroom methods Adams laid out in his three instruction books, *The Camera, The Negative, and The Print.* Yet few of their prints come close to the consistent transcendence of Adams' best work.

Although Adams' photographs remain popular with the general public, many "serious" artists and art critics have considered them passe since at least the 1980s. His images have been soaked up by our collective consciousness, and they now seem cliched and have lost their "edge." Part of the reason Adams' work has fallen from favor is the reevaluation of the West and its history. Initially, a renewed concern for our land in the 1960s resulted in increasing appreciation for wilderness images. However, by the 1980s the West and its history began to be looked at more critically, and his work seemed not to be performing an important function of art - to provide - or provoke - fresh ways of seeing ourselves and society. An understanding of our impact on the natural environment has grown since the 1960s, yet his images do not force us to examine our treatment of the environment. They now are often perceived as being too pleasant to provoke concern for the environment. Instead, they seem to breed complacency, appearing as decoration on calendars and note cards. Adams, however, was anything but complacent. He was an environmental activist, serving on the Board of Directors of the Sierra Club for thirty-seven years, from 1934 to 1971.

The work of the three photographers is similar in being equally removed from day-to-day social and economic problems. Their photos dealt

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29 Among them are John Sexton and William Gilpin. Many color photographers too have worked in this tradition too, including Eliot Porter and William Neill.

30 For example, see: Editors, "Beyond Wilderness," *Aperture Beyond Wilderness* 120, (Late Summer 1990): pg 1.
with public welfare indirectly. Although Brigman's photos spoke to the rejuvinational qualities of communing with nature as a cure for spiritual malaise, they did not address more immediate concerns such as unemployment or inadequate housing. Running naked across the slopes of the Sierra does seem an exhilarating, even a profound experience, but the one to two month camping trips Brigman took to the Sierra were made possible largely by economic privilege, and were hardly practical for most people.

Perceptions of art often change cyclically, and Adams' and Weston's photographs received similar criticism in the 1930s as Adams' work has gotten in the 1980s and 1990s - i.e., of being out of touch with environmental and social problems. Committing themselves to the portrayal of beauty as the Great Depression rocked the nation, Adams and Weston were criticized for not addressing pressing social concerns. However, they both decided that their responsibility as artists ultimately lay in following their creative inclinations, and their contributions to society would be greatest if they followed their heart-felt passions.

Brigman, Adams, and Weston did not portray the West as a place where modern American industrial society and wilderness clash. For Adams and Brigman, civilization and wilderness each existed in their own, discreet zones. The few images they did make depicting civilization were not critical of it. The three photographers may even have been influenced by what art historians have called the "technological sublime." Art historians have used the term to describe how Americans thought about trains in the

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31 Therese Thau Heyman, Seeing Straight The F. 64 Revolution in Photography, pg 30.
nineteenth century: the power of these machines that seemingly defied space and conquered the length of the continent elicited the same feelings of awe that one would experience when contemplating the monuments of the natural sublime, such as mountains. We can expand this definition of the technological sublime to include, along with trains, other human-created architecture of the industrial age, such as skyscrapers, (that defied gravity), dams and factories. Weston and Adams photographed factories, but they did not portray them as sources of environmental degradation or any other kind of degradation. Rather, the photographs reveal a fascination with formal concerns, with shape, texture, line, and tone.34

For Brigman, while civilization and wilderness appear as two quite separate, unconnected worlds, they were bridgeable. People could enter the wilderness on nature’s terms - that is, her photographs have no sign of modernity in them. Her protagonists remove themselves from the city and join with nature at its most extreme - mountains, deserts, and ocean. Adams too envisioned nature in the West in its own separate sphere of cyclical seasons, divorced from human historical time. Although we know he made his wilderness photographs in the twentieth century, they may as well have been shot as the world just emerged from the seventh day of the Book of Genesis.

Weston is the only one of the trio photographers who moved beyond the wilderness/civilization dichotomy and merged nature and modern American society. In portraying this intersection, Weston foreshadowed the work of the New Western photographers, who also concerned themselves


pg 63
with the confluence of wilderness and society. But Weston, despite his written and verbal denouncements of modern industrial culture, did not portray this intersection as violent, bitter, or ugly as later photographs of the West would. To be sure, the shots of the not-always-picturesque remains of human settlement and his many images of death can make for hard viewing. However, they exude a complex wholeness, and are ultimately optimistic in their elaboration of natural processes, and in the peace that comes with recognition and acceptance of cycles of life and death.

For both these photographers and for frontier historians the western wilderness was a source of renewal: for photographers, a spiritual renewal, and for historians, a renewal and re-enforcement of democratic ideals and of individualism. The photographers' and frontier historians' concentration on new beginnings contributed to their shared optimistic outlook. However, by the mid-twentieth century, photographers, like historians, began to question these hopeful outlooks of the West. Their optimistic views gradually eroded as the Great Depression ravaged the nation and open lands began to seem increasingly threatened by American expansion and pollution.
Revisionist western history grew in strength in the 1980s, and came to be known as the New Western History with a fresh group of outspoken historians, among them Patricia Limerick, Richard White, and Donald Worster. The changing historical perspective was due in part to the social climate growing out of the 1950s and 1960s. Americans questioned their patriotism in the surrounding the Vietnam War. The women's, environmental, and minority rights movements gained momentum, and white, male-focused history increasingly came under fire. Western art-history came in for reconsideration too, with the publication of notable texts *The West as America - Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, (1991), *The West of the Imagination*, (1986), and *Discovered Lands and Invented Pasts - Transforming Visions of the American West* (1992). The reexamination provoked a controversial storm that extended beyond academia, with both scholars and lay people partaking in the debate over the western past, and its implications for the western present and future. At the forefront of the debate were issues, among others, of personal and group identity within a multi-cultural nation; of where and with whom power resided in society; and of responsible land use.

Although historians had questioned and had even modified the frontier version of western history before the 1980s, (as I have shown), it took
this new generation of historians to repudiate it and put forward a forceful new model. They rejected western history as a celebratory process of a moving frontier with white men at its center, and the 1890 division of a pre-and-post frontier West as the focal point of western history. Instead, New Western Historians have grounded western history in place, and have looked at it not only from the standpoints of whites, but from the perspectives of the various ethnic groups that have been a part of the region's history. Donald Worster, in *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979), and *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985), saw the West as an arid location where Americans have tried to achieve absolute mastery over the land, exploiting it for maximum profit, which has caused massive ecological degradation and has not enhanced but has curtailed freedom. Richard White in *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (1983), explored how the subsistence economic systems of these three groups collapsed. In *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987), Patricia Limerick pulled together a myriad of new concerns, about environment, gender, ethnicity, and place, and explored how they related to one-another.

If one book could be said to have launched the New Western History, that book was *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* by Patricia Nelson Limerick. Limerick pointed out the limitations of the Turner Thesis, which she considered an academic version of the "most popular origin myth" of white Americans, the moving frontier of the nineteenth century West.\(^1\) The thesis was ethnocentric, simplistic,

exaggerated the opportunity, self-reliance, and freedom of the West, and inaccurately broke Western history into two incongruous parts, before and after the supposed closing of the frontier in 1890. Limerick not only demonstrated the inadequacies of the Turner Thesis, but put forward an alternate framework through which to view Western history. Instead of looking at the West as a process, a moving frontier, Limerick advocated viewing the West as a place, an area contested by numerous, diverse groups of people, each vying for cultural dominance, resources, and political power. As well she emphasized both the complexity and continuity of Western history into the present.

Limerick acknowledged that the themes of *Legacy of Conquest* - the shortcomings of “the myth of the West,” the complexity of Western history, the West as place instead of process - were not new. But synthesizing these seemingly disparate strands of Western history, including race relations, ecology, and economics, into a comprehensive and forceful model was original. Limerick further argued that the ideas needed to be pushed because “the message has not gotten through,” as Americans still see the nineteenth century West as wrapped in a mist of nostalgia, isolated from the twentieth century West, which has kept “us from seeing where we are and how we got here.”

Limerick saw the reputation of the West as a font of democracy, and the idea of the pioneers as being self-reliant, as over-emphasized. Although immigrants to the West were willing to work hard, they thought they deserved to be rewarded, and felt victimized when they were not successful. Often Westerners felt cheated by the natural environment. Prospectors felt

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like injured innocents when gold strikes yielded less metal than expected. Knowing many of the risks, farmers believed themselves to be innocent victims when dust storms and locusts destroyed their crops. They acted as if they were unaware that nature is capricious. The reason emigrants felt victimized was human nature; “By assigning responsibility elsewhere, one eliminated the need to consider one’s own participation in courting misfortune.” More surprising is that the pioneers have a reputation of taking responsibility for their actions.5

Like nature, the Federal Government was another scapegoat Westerners commonly blamed for their misfortunes. Limerick considered federal subsidies among the five main resources available for exploitation: “furs, farmland, timber, minerals, and federal money.” Federal money went to newspapers, public buildings, and transportation, particularly in huge land grants to railroads. It was also principally a federal responsibility to protect settlers from hostile Indians. Although Westerners accepted federal subsidies, they often resented federal interference.7

Like individual responsibility and self-reliance, freedom and democracy were often empty sentiments in the West. Euro-Americans usually discriminated against, or simply excluded, non-whites. Fearing competition from Chinese immigrants who would work for low wages, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 and made “permanent” in 1902. Although the Chinese showed little incentive to join unions, they were not invited to participate either. Less well known than discrimination against the Chinese is the Oregon state constitution provision in 1857 that excluded not

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4 Ibid., pg 47.
5 Ibid., pg 36, 39, 41 & 42.
6 Ibid., pg 82.
7 Ibid., pg 81-84.
only slaves but all blacks from the state. Both Californians and Oregonians were upset with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which gave black Americans the vote, and the Oregon legislature went so far as to reject the amendment symbolically.8

One of The Legacy of Conquest's themes is simply the complexity of Western history. Limerick notes that Euro-Americans could dislike deviant groups of their own race nearly as much as they disliked non-whites, as evidenced by their treatment of the Mormons. The Mormons faced persecution both before and after they announced that they practiced polygamy in 1852. The Church of Latter Day Saints was the dominant political voice within the Mormon community, and Mormons practiced a cooperative economy. Seeking to build a community away from the persecution they faced in the East and Midwest, the Mormons migrated to Utah territory in the late 1840s. Only in 1896, after renouncing cooperative economic practices and polygamy, and years after it had the required population, was Utah admitted as a state.9

In another example of the complexity of Western history, in this case the complicated nature of racial and ethnic relations, Limerick told of a massacre at Camp Grant, Arizona. In 1871 a group of Hispanics, white-Americans, and Papago Indians attacked a camp of Apache Indians, killing over one hundred, mostly women and children. This episode deviates from the image of the West in the “popular imagination” in which racial conflict is simply between whites and Indians.10 And it shows that reversing the biased terms, so as to make whites “barbarians” and Indians “saintly,” does little to

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8 Ibid., pg 268-269 & 277-279.
9 Ibid., pg 280-288.
10 Ibid., pg 259.
explain the confluence of race, ethnicity, and conflict in the West, since it still deals in stereotypes, as if whites and Indians were two monolithic groups.\textsuperscript{11}

Limerick suggested that viewing the West as place allows one to get away from one group's perspective and to see it as a meeting ground of different cultures. The killing of the Apaches at Camp Grant was an occurrence that is better understood in the context of history of place, instead of history as the process of American westward expansion. The conflict between the Apaches and Papagos long antedated that between the Apaches and white-Americans. Limerick considered Western history to be a contest between diverse ethnic groups for cultural and material dominance. Looking at Western history from the diverse points of view of different cultural groups gives a fuller, more accurate picture. For example, the Southwest of the 1870s was the fringe of Euro-American North America, but it was the center of the Apache and Papago world.\textsuperscript{12}

Viewing the West as a place instead of a frontier process also allows one to recognize the continuities in Western history. Limerick believed that assigning 1890 as the date that marked the closing of the frontier was too arbitrary, considering the numerous persisting trends thereafter. One of those trends has been the boom-and-bust economic cycles of the West. This occurred dramatically across the nineteenth-century mining West, where placer and load mines were 'played out' in as short as two or three years, creating dozens of ghost towns. Similarly, mineral extraction could provide boom-and-busts in the twentieth century, as it did in the shale oil rush on Colorado's Western slope in the early 1980s. With oil prices high and federal subsidies available for developing alternative energy sources, Exxon invested

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., pg 215.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pg 27 & 292.
millions of dollars building the Colony Shale Plant near Rifle, Colorado, in 1981, building hopes in the community for long-term prosperity. These hopes came crashing down when Exxon closed the Colony Shale Plant in 1982 following a drop in oil prices. Limerick thought that Turner’s designation of 1890 as the major turning point in western history had created a false division, since it ignored important historical patterns, such as the repeated economic boom-and-busts, that continued from the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries.

For Limerick, recognizing the continuities and complexities of Western history necessarily involved removing, or at least dispelling, the romance and optimism that still are associated with the nineteenth-century West. She qualified the notion that the West offered possibilities and progress; what seemed sophisticated solutions to obstacles usually created new problems. The use of pesticides to dramatically increase crop yield proved a health hazard for people and ecosystems. Farmers in the nineteenth-century who thought the arrival of the railroad meant wealth and security found that they were dependent on, and subject to, fluctuating rail rates. One person’s success almost invariably came at another’s expense. Clear-cutting forests has lowered expenses for logging companies and the Forest Service, but it has meant fewer tourist dollars for the communities near the clear-cuts, and has angered hikers and those people who want healthy forest ecosystems. The heart of American westward expansion was not an epic story of the creation of democracy and freedom, but a mundane search for property and wealth: acquiring property, speculating on land values, attempting to make or reach mineral discoveries earlier than others and getting out before the almost

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13 Ibid., pg 142-147.
14 Ibid., pg 52.
inevitable bust. The alleged optimism of the West was more an attempt to escape from problems instead of dealing with them, which merely "postponed" them to later dates:

Whether in Indian removal or Mormon migration, the theory was the same: the West is remote and vast; its isolation and distance will release us from conflict; this is where we can get away from each other. But the workings of history carried an opposite lesson. The West was not where we escaped each other, but where we all met.

Limerick’s view of Western history as the meeting ground of different cultural groups is directed not only at lay readers and students, but at Western historians too, of course. While acknowledging that a people have a right to tell their own history from their perspective, she asserted that there also should be historians who are more responsible and sensitive, and incorporate other points of view:

Indian people can and should write their own histories according to their traditions, just as pioneers and their descendents have every right to publish books enshrining their own version of the past. For the sake of national and regional self-understanding, however, there should be a group of people reading all these books and paying attention to all these points of view. In that process, Western historians will not reach a neutral, omniscient objectivity. On the contrary, the clashes and conflicts of Western history will always leave the serious individual emotionally and intellectually unsettled.

Limerick could have taken the implications of calling on historians to redouble their responsibility further. She did not discuss specific challenges that a historian might face when dealing with primary historical research. Suppose a historian is interviewing members of a plains Indian tribe who insist that their tribe never partook in commercial bison hunting, but

15 Ibid., pg 152-154, 129, 76-77 & 100.
16 Ibid., pg 291.
17 Ibid., pg 221.
18 A primary source is the subject of inquiry not yet processed by a researcher, whereas a secondary source refers to source material that already has been organized and interpreted by a historian or other researcher.
abundant nineteenth-century sources give evidence to the contrary. How does the historian proceed with integrity? Does the historian break the trust of her or his sources and remain loyal to the truth? Does the historian leave these sort of sensitive projects to historians who are members of the tribe itself and who therefore can be less concerned about the element of trust? *Legacy of Conquest* challenges historians and lay readers alike to recognize the full complexity of Western history, and persuasively argues for the West to be seen as a meeting ground of various cultures and peoples.

For environmental historian Donald Worster, Western history has been steeped in irony. He asserted that the American notion that the West has been a place of possibility and freedom where Americans could be spiritually reinvigorated through contact with the primordial landscape has been misplaced, and that this idea was far from the reality of what Americans have made the West. For Worster, the West is where Americans have come face to face with the limits of nature, in the form of aridity. Americans moved westward trying to impose their capitalist “economic ethos,” the boundless push for profit and economic growth, on the land.19 And in trying to overcome its aridity and make the region a part of mass-consumer society, Americans have caused environmental disasters by throwing the ecology of the West out of balance. As well, attempting to establish total control over nature has curtailed democracy, not enhanced it. In *Dust Bowl The Southern Plains In the 1930s* Worster found that the Dust Bowl was caused primarily by people, not nature, because farmers did not respect the fragile ecology of the southern Plains. In *Rivers of Empire - Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* Worster stated that the immense water reclamation systems

Americans constructed in the West to conquer its aridity has not extended democracy and freedom in the region, but has constricted them.

Worster opened *Rivers of Empire* by proclaiming that lingering perceptions of the West as a place of freedom and opportunity should be put aside;

The West is still supposed, in popular thinking, to be a land of untrammeled freedom, and in some of its corners it may be just that. However, that is not all it is, is not even the more important part of what it is. The American West is also more consistently, and more decisively, a land of authority and restraint, of class and exploitation, and ultimately of imperial power. The time has come to brush away the obscuring mythologies and the old lost ideals and to concentrate on that achieved reality.\(^{20}\)

Americans turned the West into a "land of authority" by building a huge water reclamation system, turning the West by the second half of the twentieth century into a "hydraulic society:" "a social order based on the intensive large scale manipulation of water and its products in an arid setting."\(^{21}\) Americans embarked on the irrigation projects with a vision of turning the West into a haven of Jeffersonian democracy, a land of small family farms. However, instead of making for freedom, building a hydraulic society led to the opposite; at the top, power was held by a small elite made up of water technicians, bureaucrats, and large land owners, and at the bottom, by many low-paid agricultural wage laborers.\(^{22}\)

The water reclamation system did not promote democracy because it could not be divorced from the hierarchical social structure needed to build, maintain, and most importantly, use it. Only the Federal Government was

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\(^{21}\)Ibid., pg 7.

\(^{22}\)Ibid., pg 174, 51.
willing to take the financial risk and had the enormous resources needed to construct the water projects, which by 1977 included 322 storage reservoirs, 345 diversion dams, 174 pumping plants, 14,490 miles of canals, 930 miles of pipelines, and 15,530 miles of drains.23 The expense of the irrigation infrastructure meant that only efficient, large factory-farms with cash crops worked by an "underclass" of cheap labor were feasible. Small, crop-diversified, semi-self-sufficient family farms were not financially practicable. In the 1930s, a number of critics of the water reclamation system, such as Carey McWilliams, suggested that if it could just be structured around a socialist plan it might be more egalitarian. Worster said that this would be impossible, since the only way to design the system was around technical and managerial expertise, and it required enormous capital investments and lots of unskilled labor, which inevitably made for a highly stratified social hierarchy.24

By the early 1980s the hydraulic society had reached its nadir and stopped expanding, as its moral legitimacy was called into question and its costs increased, and the Federal Government stopped funding new reclamation projects.25 All pretense for promoting small family farms was dropped with the passage of the Reclamation Reform Act of 1982, which allowed for unrestricted leasing above 960 acres, "opening the way to unlimited aggrandizing" for the biggest growers, who made up about two percent of the total number of growers.26 As well, support for the hydraulic society waned as more and more systemic problems became apparent, such as the dams proving less durable than originally hoped, and salinity increasing.

23 Ibid., pg 130-132, 277.
26 Ibid., pg. 302.
and lowering water quality.\(^{27}\)

The root of the problem, Worster found, was that most Americans were loath to accept the aridity of the West, and insisted on trying to turn it into a humid environment through increasingly sophisticated technology. He argued that when a society attempts to establish absolute control over nature it generally makes for sharply stratified, undemocratic social and political systems;

Immense centralized institutions, with complicated hierarchies, they tend to impose their outlook and their demands on nature, as they do on the individual and the small human community, and they do so with great destructiveness. They are too insulated from the results of their actions to learn, to adjust, to harmonize. That is another way of saying that a social condition of diffused power is more likely to be ecologically sensitive and preserving. In contrast to the big organization, whether it be a state or a corporation, the small community simply cannot afford massive intervention in the environment.\(^{28}\)

Worster is persuasive in his argument that the imperative to seek total domination over nature has led Westerners to rely on a water reclamation system that has been both socially unjust and eventually will be physically untenable. And while he demonstrated that aridity has had a tremendous impact on society and institutions in the West, greater than most Westerners are aware, Worster is less convincing in his description of the over-arching power that the western water-technicians, managers, and large land-owners have wield. One gathers from reading *Rivers of Empire* that the "technocracy" has exercised power far beyond water control and agriculture, over most important political and economic matters in the West. He

\(^{27}\)Ibid., pg 310-326.

\(^{28}\)Ibid., pg 332 Arid lands are more saline than wet areas, where centuries of rainfall have washed salt out of the upper soil layers into the ocean. When arid areas are irrigated the water brings salts to the top, which interferes with crop growth, and the land gradually gets less productive unless the salts are removed.
discusses the social hierarchy of the reclamation “empire” as if all Westerners outside the technocracy have been low-paid agricultural laborers with little economic or political clout. Actually, agricultural workers have made up a small minority in the West. This is not to minimize the tremendous unfairness in the way western agribusiness has treated farm workers, or that Americans tolerate the existence of such an underclass, whose labor benefits society disproportionately to what they are paid. However, in the West hydrology has not had the kind of cultural sway in terms of the region’s power structure and identity that, for example, slavery had in the South in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In his earlier book, Dust Bowl The Southern Plains in the 1930s (1979), Worster argued more convincingly than in Rivers of Empire that the American impulse toward absolute control of the land has devastated both society and the natural environment. He contended that the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression were caused by the same thing: the American capitalistic economic ethos, a non-stop drive for growth, production, efficiency, and profit. In the case of agriculture it meant the complete utilization of the land.29 And once again one of Worster’s themes was that a culture’s insensitivity toward the land will likely make for a society in which power is distributed inequitably. The Dust Bowl occurred when capitalism encountered a delicate, “volatile” ecosystem, and threw it out of balance. The Dust Bowl “challenged society’s capacity to think,” to learn from the disaster and change its attitudes toward the land. President Roosevelt’s New Deal failed to implement solutions to the causes of the Dust Bowl.30 Worster warned us that if we do not change our relationship with nature we are

29 Worster, Dust Bowl The Southern Plains in the 1930s. pg 46.
30 Ibid., pg 6, 25, 7-8.
bound to have more ecological collapses. He urged Americans not to place too much confidence in the idea of "endless progress," and more specifically, in the belief that technology can solve all our problems with nature.\(^{31}\)

Expansion of mechanized farming on the southern plains created conditions for the Dust Bowl in short order, from 1910 to 1930, since machines could plow large areas of land quickly.\(^{32}\) By 1935, with tractors, disc plows, and combines, farmers plowed up 33 million acres of sod, the topsoil held in place by the plains' grasses. Since the potential profit on wheat was high, the majority of crops planted on the southern plains were wheat. However, "normal" rainfall on the plains was "at or below the rainfall margin for most farming."\(^{33}\) And since wheat absorbed far less rain water than plains' grasses, when droughts and powerful winds hit the plains in the 1930s, as they do periodically, there was not enough vegetation to prevent the soil from being blown away.\(^{34}\) Dozens of wind storms pulled millions of tons of soil into the air, and redeposited it not only across the plains, but as far east as Washington D.C. Although the Dust Bowl shifted location depending on where the winds were blowing, the worst hit areas were the Oklahoma Panhandle, western Kansas, southeastern Colorado, and the Texas panhandle. During the worst years of soil erosion, 1935 and 1937, there was an exodus from the Dust Bowl, with 34% of the population leaving.\(^{35}\)

Worster asserted that although powerful winds created the dust storms, the Dust Bowl was caused mainly by American farmers who did not respect the limits of the terrain and weather of the Great Plains. The plow-up

\(^{31}\) Ibid., pg 26-27.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., pg 87, 93.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., pg 70.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., pg 12, 13, 71.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., pg 49.
of the plains was a manifestation of American capitalism, which encouraged
people to subjugate the land and use it for “self-advancement.”

In terms of agriculture, this attitude of unrestricted acquisitiveness in practice meant that
the land was exploited to its utmost for maximum monetary and agricultural
yield. Adding industrial technology and mass production to this economic
credo meant that people could pursue economic growth and alter the terrain
all the more effectively with large single crop farms and machinery.

Industrial farming also made control of the land and nature seem all the
more possible to American farmers, as it seemed that they could shape the
land to their will. And by considering the land as capital, that is,
commodifying it, farmers distanced themselves from it and nature’s
processes. By not “understanding the dependency” of “all living things” on
the land and the climate, American farmers drastically disrupted the
ecological balance of the plains and suffered the repercussions.

Worster contrasted Euro-American economic culture that alienated
land from people with Native American cultures that accepted their
dependency on nature and lived within the limits of their surroundings.
Various Indian groups had made forays onto the plains or established
settlements there during wet periods, moving off when the environment
stopped supporting them. Worster insisted that even the Indian groups that
developed new lifeways around the horse and moved onto the plains in the
eighteenth century, such as the Sioux and Comanches, did not disturb the
equilibrium of the plains ecosystems. Where Native peoples had “merged
into the natural economy” for thousands of years, it took white Americans

36 Ibid., pg 6-7.
37 Ibid., pg 93, 97, 164.
38 Ibid., pg 66.
39 Ibid., pg 77.

pg 79
only a few decades to push the plains to ecological collapse.\textsuperscript{40} Despite the stark contrast Worster drew between Plains Indians and Euro-Americans in their treatment of the plains, the issue is ultimately a matter of speculation, as the Plains Indians did not practice their horse-oriented culture on the plains long enough uninterrupted for history to discover whether they may have eventually over-taxed the environment. Even on the Canadian Plains where Indian groups decimated the bison herds and failed to show restraint as buffalo numbers declined, the Indians never got an opportunity to establish an ecological balance without constant disruptions from the outside in the forms of disease and increasing population pressures.\textsuperscript{41}

Farmers and federal groups assigned to deal with the Dust Bowl responded to it variously and unsuccessfully. Farmers, for the most part, evaded accepting responsibility for the dust storms, and regarded themselves victims of a natural disaster.\textsuperscript{42} Two of the New Deal groups, the land-use planners and the ecologists, understood that agricultural practices unsuited to the plains played a determining role in causing the Dust Bowl, and that the American attitude toward agriculture, of absolute and unremitting exploitation, was also to blame. However, they did not state their ideas forcefully or comprehensively, nor did they formulate a practical plan to put them into effect.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{Dust Bowl} is a critique not only of commercial agriculture but of American consumer culture, “a culture dominated from coast to coast by the techniques of mass production, mass-media advertising, and mass

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, pg 76, 66-78.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid.}, pg 42-43.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.}, pg 207.
consumption." Worster condemned mass society for devastating not only ecosystems but human communities as well. Practicing single-crop commercial agriculture in marginal lands was a manifestation of industrial mass production; the impulse toward greater efficiency, greater output, and larger profits. Instead of adapting to the peculiar qualities of a place, Americans sought to impose mass culture wherever they went stated Worster. For example, similar architecture made towns across the nation monotonous, almost indistinguishable from one another, regardless of the region in which they were located. Worster implied that mass society made for standardized people, and that speaking of consumer "culture" as if it was something meaningful is absurd; for Americans, consuming factory-made goods became a substitute for "creating culture."

Above all, Dust Bowl was, and is a warning to Americans, that more ecological calamities will inevitably occur if we do not substantially change our relationship with the environment. Worster found that American faith in technology to solve all our problems with the land is misplaced. Part of that faith has been blind optimism, which has perpetuated ignorance. Americans in general and farmers in particular during and after the Dust Bowl believed so strongly in the "inevitability of progress" and their ability to control nature that they did not reappraise their attitudes toward the land and learn from their mistakes. Since the late 1950s plains farmers have tapped underground aquifers for water. Yet these will run dry within a two or three generations.

44 Ibid., pg 168.
46 Ibid., pg 177.
47 Ibid., pg 25.
48 Ibid., pg 26-27.
In order to prevent further ecological disasters Worster suggested that we "moderate our demands on this limited planet: learn to discipline our numbers and our wants before nature does it for us." One way to do this would be to develop a "sense of place." This would mean bringing ones' expectations into line with the ecological possibilities of an area so that one could live in a sustainable relationship with the land;

When both the identity of self and of community become indistinguishable from that of the land and its fabric of life, adaptation follows almost instinctively, like a pronghorn moving through sagebrush. Houses and fields, tools and traditions, grow out of the earth with all the fitness of grass; they belong in their place as surely as any part of nature does. This is genuine adaptation, and it implies much more than shallow managerial skill. It comes from having a sense of place, which is at once a perception of what makes a piece of land function as it does and a feeling of belonging to and sharing in its uniqueness.

As Worster conceived it, part of adapting to a place would involve becoming more self-contained, differentiating between "needs and wants," and moderating one's desire for consumer goods from the outside. As well, Worster calls for restraint, of moving away from the drive for growth and profit, and changing one's standard of contentment so that one would be satisfied with less. Worster's views were revolutionary, dissenting from both the older notions of historians and public sentiment. Most obviously, Worster's West was not a frontier process, but an area characterized by aridity. His assertion that American efforts to exert ever more control over nature through increasingly sophisticated technology has not been progress, but has led to ecological disaster and promises to make for further environmental

49 Ibid., pg 239.  
50 Ibid., pg 164.  
51 Ibid., pg 87, 164-174.
catastrophes, ran counter to the prevailing notions in the United States that conquest of nature is desirable and possible. In contrast to the Turnerian emphasis on American democracy becoming more fully realized through the westering experience, Worster held that democracy instead has been undermined in the West, through western dependency on an extensive hydraulic apparatus. Worster assailed another foundation of the traditional western story, optimism, with his admonition that too much optimism can lead to recklessness. For example, excessive optimism has blinded Americans to the folly of pursuing market-driven domination over nature, which was a major cause of the Dust Bowl.

In *Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* Richard White explored how and why the subsistence systems of these three Indian groups broke down and they could no longer "feed and clothe themselves with some security," becoming dependent on federal aid and the market economy. All three groups were hunting-gathering-horticulturists, and the aim of their diversified means of production was security. In broad outline, these peoples with their diversified economies faced similar challenges: disease, warfare with their Indian neighbors and invading whites, decimation of natural resources, the capitalist market economy, and finally, demoralization from the combined weight of these burdens. White concluded that if these pressures had come separately the Indians could have withstood them. But occurring together, the pressures reinforced each other, pushed the Indians into downward spirals, and made their subsistence systems untenable.

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Once again, in *Roots of Dependency* we find the familiar focus of revisionist history on place. To comprehend the Indian economies and how they succumbed under stress, White described the physical environments in which each Indian group lived, and how each group had adapted to them. White, however, argued against the prevailing materialist interpretations of dependency, and moved beyond a shallow discussion about whether Indians were wise stewards of the environment living in perfect harmony with the natural world, or were pawns of environmental forces beyond their control. White instead took an interdisciplinary approach, emphasizing that Native American subsistence strategies and the process of dependency should be understood as a complex interaction between culture, environment, politics, and economy. A brief examination of the Choctaw subsistence economy provides an example of this complexity. Deer were an important part of the Choctaw diet, yet the forests could only support a limited number of deer for which both the Choctaws and their neighbors the Chickasaws competed. The Choctaws did not solely rely on the uncertain deer population, however, and purposefully and effectively manipulated the landscape, clearing land and cultivating crops that provided them with an additional food source. And they waged constant, low-level wars with the Chickasaws, which created a "no-man's land" in the forested borderlands between the two peoples, which prevented over-hunting the deer. White says that although the Choctaws and Chickasaws did not consciously use warfare to preserve deer numbers, it never-the-less provided this benefit.

In a project as large as writing the history of the American West, there is nearly an infinite amount of information to place within a framework that

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54 Ibid., pg 151, ix.
gives it meaning. Examining college textbooks on Western history is a fruitful way of exploring the differing approaches of traditional Western history and New Western History, since in textbooks historians must distill the whole history of the West into its most relevant points. In 1960 Ray Allen Billington wrote Westward Expansion - A History of the American Frontier, in the Turnerian tradition. By contrast, "Its Your Misfortune and None of My Own" A New History of the American West, (1991), by Richard White, is a revisionist work. A major difference in their overall outlook is that Billington celebrated American westward expansion, whereas White counted its costs.

Their differing treatment of diverse aspects of the same subject, western mining, reflects their contrasting perspectives of Western history. Billington considered mining in the West about adventure, individualism, and democracy, whereas White discussed mining in terms of working conditions and economic power. And where for Billington economic opportunity and individual initiative drove American expansion westward, White placed the federal government at the center of the westward movement, and qualified opportunity in the West.55

A good place to begin evaluating the books is with their titles, which indicate White’s and Billington’s dissimilar views. For Billington, the frontier was synonymous with the West, and he began his text with the British colonies on the East Coast in the early seventeenth-century. White never used the word “frontier” in his book, and seldom mentioned terms such as “pioneer,” associated with romance, heroics, and tough

individualism. Avoiding language that is loaded with old, powerful connotations has the effect, to some small degree, of opening up Western history to new and different interpretations. White’s quote “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own” from the old cowboy song, “Whoopee Ti Yi Yo, Git Along, Little Dogies” suggests that the story of the West has been one of selfishness and greed.

For Billington, the settlement of the West was accomplished through individual enterprise. He described the push West as Turner did, as an overlapping series of waves of emigrants - traders, miners, cattlemen, and farmers. For Billington, the extension of farming westward was the most important aspect of American expansion because he viewed the farmer as the backbone of American civilization. Miners moved on when precious metals gave out, and cattlemen were not appropriate representatives of civilization because “they reverted to the primitive themselves before the stronger force of nature.” The “true hero of the tale,” who did the real work of civilization, of conquering the land and building permanent communities, “was the hard working farmer, who, ax in hand, marched ever westward until the boundaries of his nation touched the Pacific.” The prairie fires, the crop-eating locusts, the lack of wood, and the semi-aridity of the Great Plains seem to have enhanced the standing of farmers in Billington’s eyes, for it made their tasks all the more challenging and extraordinary.

White found the nineteenth-century West’s reputation as a catalyst for individualism and self-reliance curious and undeserved. Rather, White

57 Ibid., pg 5.
58 Ibid., pg 11.
59 Ibid., pg 708-711.
60 White. Its Your Misfortune and None of my Own A New History of the American West. pg 57-59
said, the prominent role that the federal government played in the West, not individualism, has helped make the West a distinct region within the United States;

The American West, more than any other section of the United States, is a creation not so much of individual or local efforts, but of federal efforts. More than any other region, the West has been historically a dependency of the federal government....

Except during the Civil War, most nineteenth-century Americans had little direct experience with federal influence over their daily lives. Westerners were the great exception.61

The government sponsored explorations to gather information about the West throughout the nineteenth century, from Lewis and Clark’s expedition in 1804-1806 to the surveys of the second half of the century led by Ferdinand V. Hayden, John Wesley Powell, Clarence King, and George Wheeler.62 The military was a constant presence in the West, responsible for protecting emigrants and augmenting what would become the American West by conquering northern Mexico in the 1846 - 1848 Mexican-American war.63 Throughout the nineteenth-century the government distributed public land into private hands, and then in the 1880s and 1890s decided to retain and manage large tracts of public land, creating a substantial, permanent federal role in the West that existed in no other part of the nation. As well, before they became states, territories were virtual colonies of the federal government, which supervised the passage of laws and the election of high officials.64

The dependency of the West on the federal government continued in

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61 Ibid., pg 57.
62 Ibid., pg 119-135.
63 This conquered territory would become California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and part of Texas, and Colorado.
64 Ibid., pg 155, 157.
the twentieth-century. This was particularly true during the Great Depression, when the New Deal gave the West more aid than any other part of the nation, and during the Second World War, when the government invested substantial amounts of money and resources to expand the military, and industries that supported the military, in the West.65

White perhaps over-emphasized Federal involvement in emigrants’ lives in the West, possibly in an effort to counter the exaggerated self-reliance of westerners in traditional Western history. Did western settlements provide the equivalent support and security that eastern communities provided? One suspects not - particularly in the hundreds of mining towns that sprang up with new strikes, with ethnically diverse, predominantly male, constantly shifting populations gathered into remote spots. With immigrants not only from the United States but the world pouring into the West and destabilizing existing Indian and Hispanic communities, it is probable that, compared to other places, an atmosphere of insecurity pervaded the West. If this were the case, to what extent did federal leadership replace older community supports in people’s everyday lives? White’s emphasis on the federal government leading the way west implies a sense of order. However, in reality that order probably did not compensate for the comparatively weak support systems in the West.

As well, Billington and White disagreed about how much economic opportunity there was in the West. Billington believed that the nineteenth-century West held “limitless opportunity.”66 However, opportunity existed in a sort of duality, the flip side being great hardship. Those pioneers who could not handle the harsh conditions of the West returned east, but those

65 Ibid., pg 472-503.
66 Billington. Westward Expansion A History of the American Frontier. pg 754. pg 88
with stamina, who could tough out the West, were rewarded. For Billington there was rarely any middle-ground. The story of pioneers overcoming great odds to prosper was repeated over and over again as each succeeding wave of emigrants opened a new frontier, giving this frontier version of Western history a heroic aura.

Although White found that there was much economic opportunity for brief periods, such as during the first couple years of the California Gold Rush, opportunity in the West was more limited than has been commonly thought;

Historians have found that opportunity in both the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century West was not as great as popularly believed. Current studies for portions of the West indicate that wealth was no more evenly distributed in the West than in the East.

The uneven distribution of wealth, however, does not rule out the possibility that most people gained a more modest success. Current studies seem to show, however, that most nineteenth-century westerners advanced only slightly or not at all during their working lives.

It appears that although in some industries such as mining an elite of owners and managers may have, to a disproportionate degree, risen from the ranks of immigrants and workers, in most places and in most occupations, rags to riches stories were as rare in the West as in the East.

Since emigrants found less economic opportunity in the West than they expected, White asked the question, why did the working class not unite to further their common economic interests? This did not happen, or occurred only in limited ways, because racial and ethnic solidarity usually

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67 Ibid., pg 708.
68 White. Its Your Misfortune and None of my Own A New History of the American West. pg 285
69 Ibid., pg 286-287.
70 Ibid., pg 287.
71 Ibid., pg 288.
trumped class solidarity; workers identified more with their race than with their economic class.\textsuperscript{72} As well, despite limited economic mobility, workers believed that if they worked hard they would move up the economic ladder, and consequently they did not see themselves as part of a working class.\textsuperscript{73}

That is, since most laborers "shared the widespread American belief that a person's class status was temporary, not permanent," the formation of a "a self-conscious working class became an impossibility." Billington, on the other hand, saw no reason to ask why there was no mass, widespread worker's movement, since he believed there was enough freedom and opportunity in the West to preclude such a phenomena.

Billington and White also had dissimilar views of mining in the West. For Billington, "miner" meant the placer miner, an independent entrepreneur, not the hardrock miner, a wage laborer. Placer mining refers to recovering gold that has eroded out of rock, usually into stream beds, where miners could pan for it. Placering was the most egalitarian phase of mining, as the miner could be an autonomous operator, needing little capital outlay and equipment to work. Billington described the formation of miner's courts after a mineral rush. With the creation of a new mining camp, miners created order by organizing themselves into a crude court to regulate mining claims and dispense justice until formal institutions of law were established. Billington admired how Americans practiced grass-roots democracy in the chaotic conditions of isolated mining camps;

The simple democracy of the mining camps was typical of the frontier; from the days of the Mayflower Compact...westerners had set up their own governments whenever they found themselves beyond the pale

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., pg 284.

\textsuperscript{73} Historians refer to the belief that, with perseverance and hard work it was possible to advance economically, as the "free labor ideology."
Billington hardly discussed hardrock mining, remarking that removing precious metals from rock required substantial amounts of capital and machinery. He ignored what this entailed: the development of mining along almost class lines, with a small number of managers and owners controlling the mines, thousands of miners paid high wages, for awhile, but working under horrendous conditions, union formation, and considerable labor strife. Hardrock mining was done “by trained engineers or unromantic wage earners,” and apparently did not meet Billington’s criteria of important Western history.75

By contrast, White, while mentioning placer mining, devoted more space to discussing where power lay within the hardrock mining industry. He related the rivalry between “bonanza kings” Marcus Daly and William A. Clark for political influence in Montana, to illustrate the tremendous wealth and power wielded by large mine owners.76 White also described the formidable dangers of working in the mines, and hardrock miners’ struggles for power and security through union organizing and striking. Among the organized miners’ goals were preventing wage cuts from the levels miners were initially paid to lure them to remote western mines, and improved safety.77

Western Expansion is an example of the nationalistic outlook that New Western Historians have condemned in Turnerian works, and the book does suffer from it. There is a tension throughout the text between

74 Billington. Westward Expansion A History of the American Frontier. pg 691.
75 Ibid., pg 632.
76 White. Its Your Misfortune and None of my Own A New History of the American West. pg 265-266, 365-367.
77 Ibid., pg 290-292, 280-281.
celebrating the genesis of the American People, and critical history. Billington stated that the great majority of miners, moving from one strike to another, never acquired much wealth, despite their efforts, yet he held too that the West offered "unlimited opportunity" to those people willing to work for it - and the reader is left to resolve the contradiction.\textsuperscript{78} The farmer was not just an historical actor, but a "hero" who fulfilled manifest destiny.\textsuperscript{79} Billington reduced the landscape, and groups opposing pioneers in the West, to obstacles - "The French Barrier," "The Indian Barrier," " The Spanish Barrier" - that Americans had to overcome, to finally assume their rightful place in the world.\textsuperscript{80} Billington's description of the American move west has an aura of inevitability about it, as if it were fore-ordained by God.

White was far more critical of the American conquest of the West than Billington, and he distinguished between development and progress. Although Billington made several powerful statements about the negative impacts of American expansion, these were asides that briefly interrupt his triumphal narrative. White made a far greater effort to assess the damage of expansion;

Most westerners saw the rapid development of the West as their greatest triumph. They calculated their achievement in the terms that development itself mandated: tons of ore, miles of rail, bushels of wheat, heads of cattle. They converted all of these things into dollars, and there is no doubt that their achievement was great. They physically transformed the West and poured its resources out to a waiting world. But in calculating the cost of this effort they dismissed things that cannot be reduced to dollar values. No one subtracted crippled and dead miners or mill men from the gross national product. No one thought of the diminished opportunities for Indians, Hispanics, or Chinese as a cost worth assessing. Few thought that the mountain valleys ruined by hydraulic wastes or buffalo rotting on the plains represented a cost that offset the gold the mines produced or

\textsuperscript{78} Billington. \textit{Westward Expansion A History of the American Frontier.} pg754, 617.  
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., pg 11.  
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., pg 405, 421, 670, ix-x.
the cattle the ranches raised.81

Despite the shared outlook of New Historians on many issues, they have not presented a united front. For instance, historians Donald Worster, Richard White, and William deBuys would, I think, agree with the generalization that white Americans have drastically altered the natural environment in the West. However, when considering the differing impacts that all ethnic and racial groups have had on the western landscape, the consensus breaks down. For Donald Worster, there seems to be a clear division between those people who have sought to dominate nature in the West - whites - and people who have accepted the limits of nature - everyone else. For William deBuys, as reflected in *Enchantment and Exploitation*, his regional history of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, this division is not at all so decisive, but rather differs in degree and in time and place among various cultural groups. For example, he asserted that the Hispano subsistence economy had pushed its environmental resource base beyond its capacity through overgrazing by the late nineteenth century.82 For Richard White too, the difference between the way whites and non-whites treated the land was not dichotomous. He noted that although Indians modified the landscape less than whites, they still did so in significant ways. The Pawnees brought in and cultivated new plant species such as corn, beans, and squash at their settlements on the central plains. They managed native plant species too, eradicating them from some areas and promoting them in others, such as wild plum trees, which they planted around their villages.83

81 White. *It's Your Misfortune and None of my Own A New History of the American West*. pg 296.


Recent historical analysis of western art has followed a path similar to that of the New Western History. Historians and art historians pointed out that Americans have taken nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century western art as faithful representations of western history. Historians suggested that the way to find the truth in this imagery is not to take it at its face value, but to investigate what the pictures say about the concerns of the society that produced them. They concluded that western imagery was in many ways a visual equivalent to Turner's version of western history; a celebration of American westward expansion, tinged with regrets but finally triumphant. I will discuss several works that deal with these issues.

_Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts - Transforming Visions of the American West_, (1992), is an exhibit catalog with groups of images paired with essays by historians including pieces by Bill Cronon and Susan P. Schoelwer. _The West As America - Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920_, (1991), another exhibit catalog, contains essays by Nancy K. Anderson and Alex Nemerov. _The West of the Imagination_, (1980), while not fitting wholly into either revisionist or traditionalist camps, is a comprehensive survey of western art by the father and son team William H. and William N. Goetzmann. In _The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions - The Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis_, Christopher Lyman argued convincingly that Curtis' popular photographs of Indians are not documents, but are images of dramatic recreations of an imagined Indian past. Barbara Novak, in _Nature and Culture - American Landscape and Painting 1820-1920_, (1980), explored how American artists portrayed the relationship between landscape, spirituality, industrialization, and nationalism.

Novak discussed a dilemma artists faced in the nineteenth-century
depicting American westward expansion: how to reconcile the competing values of the West, as a place for material exploitation and settlement, and as a spiritual resource. The western landscape, as wilderness, little changed from the time God had created it, or so many Americans thought, was a national symbol and a place for spiritual contemplation. At the same time, and more pragmatically, it was a resource for development, and it seemed that one aspect could be elevated only to the detriment of the other aspect. Cutting down the forests, building roads, laying tracks, and melting mountains with hydraulic mining threatened our national identity and our special connection with God. Optimistically, artists sought to solve, or at least come to terms with the problem by striking a precarious balance between wilderness and civilization in their images. Painters portrayed clearing the land and homesteading as creating a "garden." Wilderness was not destroyed, but simply reordered and "cultivated." Artists melded trains into the landscape by making them small and blending their smoke with the clouds. Occasionally they did include tree stumps and locomotives prominently in their images, indicating a sense of loss as well as gain. However, Novak reminded the reader that perspectives of the same imagery differ through time, so that these images that may appear as destruction to twenty-first century viewers more likely signified progress to nineteenth century audiences. She concluded that, although in diaries and letters many painters were sensitive to the environmental and scenic degradation wrought by development, they rarely let these sentiments dominate their artwork; The cultural impulse toward expansion and development of the West was too

85 Ibid., pg 59-60,157-158.
86 Ibid., pg 157-158.
Echoing Novak, Nancy K. Anderson, in her essay "The Kiss of Enterprise - The Western Landscape as Symbol and Resource," also found that nineteenth century artists rarely explored this nature/culture dilemma in their art, more often pursuing strategies to avoid the conflict. Some painters dealt with the predicament by denying its existence altogether. Thomas Moran, in his many paintings of rock formations along the Green River, done over a forty year period, from the 1870s to the 1900s, simply did not include the town that grew up below the cliffs. Another strategy was to harmonize the two perspectives: "most western landscapes carried a conciliatory message implying that the natural and technological sublime were compatible."

Collis P. Huntington, vice president of the Central Pacific Railroad, commissioned Albert Bierstadt in 1871 to paint a picture of the most difficult stretch over which the railroad builders had laid track, Donner Pass across the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. The painting, Donner Lake From the Summit, finished in 1873, depicted Donner Lake shimmering in the morning sun, with snow-shed covered railroad tracks crossing the granite heights along the right side of the picture. The painting addressed the splendor of nature, and the successful human struggle to master the mountains with modern engineering, leaving the integrity of both intact. Anderson concluded that the painting, by merging nature and technology,

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87 Ibid., pg 157-200.
89 Ibid., pg 241.
endorsed" the railroad.90

Alex Nemerov, in “Doing the Old America - The Image of the American West, 1880-1920” alleged that turn-of-the-century artists who painted the “Old West” pictured a West that they saw through the “mediating” lens of the metropolitan East.91 Paintings by artists such as Frederick Remington and Charles Schreyvogel reflected the concerns of the “urban, industrial” East.92 Many Americans felt that the United States was being overwhelmed by the vast inflow of south-eastern European and Asian immigrants. Nemerov interpreted pictures such as Schreyvogels' *Defending the Stockade*, depicting troops desperately attempting to close stockade gates against attacking Indians, and Remington’s *Fight for the Water Hole*, (1903), of cowboys defending a water hole against encircling Plains Indians, as unconscious manifestations of the fear of being overrun by foreigners.93

William B. Truettner, editor and contributor to the *West As America*, found the images even more caustic than Nemerov did; the paintings advocated a "martial system for maintaining class and racial lines in industrial America" Truettner argued.94

The Goetzmanns, in *The West of the Imagination*, pointed out how turn-of-the-century paintings of Indian/white conflict in the West "sanitized" the violence.95 Death was messy, not the neat poses Remington's slain soldiers collapsed into. They contrasted these paintings with two

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90 Ibid., pg 259-264.
92 Ibid., pg 287.
93 Ibid., pg 285-306.
photographs, one of a dead trooper, and another of a dead Indian. The trooper, naked and covered with arrows, has deep gashes on his torso and legs, and his head disfigured by blows. The second photograph depicts the Sioux Yellow Bird, shot and frozen in the snow, in a grotesque half-sitting position the day after the “battle” of Wounded Knee in 1891.96 Susan Prendergast Schoelwer investigated how paintings misrepresented gender and racial roles in the nineteenth century West, in “The Absent Other: Women in the Land and Art of Mountain Men.” Schoelwer stated that western art has been dominated by representations of men and of male themes, and that this is a distortion of reality, for women “participated in all stages of western development.”97 For example, women in the fur trade were rarely pictured, and when they were, Americans paid them little attention. In George Caleb Bingham’s Fur Traders Descending the Missouri, the Indian wife is conspicuously absent, although her son leans on the fruits of her labor, a parcel of tanned buffalo hides.98 Counter to their popular reputation, mountain men were not “lone adventurers,” carrying on their trade in the absence of women, Schoelwer asserted.99 In actuality, Mountain men often married Native American women, in part to cement business relationships between themselves and tribes.100 However, white Americans tended to disapprove and ignore the existence of women in the fur trade because it upset nineteenth-century gender and racial proprieties. From the perspective of whites at that time, Indian women were disturbing partly because they

96 Ibid., pg 206-208.
98 Ibid., pg 160, 162.
99 Ibid., pg 160.
100 Ibid., pg 155.
threatened to draw white men out of civilization and into their savage world. As well, white-Americans feared that miscegenation polluted racial purity, and was "so threatening that it required forceful repression through the imaginative construction of potent and persistent counter-symbols such as the lone mountain man and the womanless frontier."\(^{101}\)

Like Schoelwer, Bill Cronon, in "Telling Tales on Canvas: Landscapes of Frontier Change," asserted that the cultural lens through which nineteenth-century painters saw the West led them to misrepresent it in their pictures. Painters, such as George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, and Alfred Jacob Miller observed how quickly the West's topography and native peoples were changing as outsiders moved in, and determined to portray in paint what was disappearing. They insisted on depicting Native Americans the moment before they were touched by whites, although in actuality most Indian groups that the painters portrayed had been interacting with whites for years. Their approach located Indians in a static cultural "timelessness" that removed them from history, as if they had lived unchanged for centuries until whites arrived. The historical accuracy of the paintings was marred as well by other white cultural biases. Since the mounted warrior fit easily into Euro-American painterly traditions, painters extensively depicted Plains Indians buffalo hunting from horseback while ignoring other aspects of Native American lifeways.\(^{102}\) Still, Cronon did not dismiss all nineteenth century paintings as having nothing to tell us about the West beyond the sensibilities

\(^{101}\) *Ibid.*, pg 165, 156-165.

\(^{102}\) Bill Cronon, "Telling Tales on Canvas: Landscapes of Frontier Change," in *Discovered Lands and Invented Pasts- Transforming visions of the American West.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, (1992), pg 60, 61, 144-145, 147. In another example of the shallowness of white portrayals of Indians, Cronon states that many of Alfred Jacob Miller's sketches of Indian women show them lounging or frolicking joyously in an immaculate Edenic landscape, that in their superficiality resemble "classic tourist art, akin to the beckoning natives in tropical paradises that remain a staple of travel agencies the world over," (pg147)
of the artists and society’s expectations - one simply has to navigate through the distortions.\textsuperscript{103} The tepees erected around the trading post in Alfred Jacob Miller’s \textit{Fort Laramie} indicated that Indian groups in the remote West were “being drawn into a metropolitan orbit” and that “corporate institutions were beginning to exert profound influences over western landscapes.”\textsuperscript{104}

In \textit{The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions - The Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis} Christopher Lyman stated that Curtis’ photographs are not factual documents portraying the final unblemished years of Native American cultures on the verge of extinction, but were highly subjective, staged fabrications. Through darkroom manipulation and the creative use of costumes, ‘stage direction,’ and graphic composition, Curtis made photographs that reflected his stereotyped views of Indians, not images of American Indians as they really were when he saw them. Curtis carried props around with him, such as jewelry and clothing, and in some pictures different people appear wearing the same apparel. In other pictures, Indians from different tribes are seen wearing the same shirt. Curtis’ photographs are scientifically inaccurate not only in terms of their subject matter, but as well because he used darkroom manipulation to remove objects that appeared on the negatives that did not conform to his view of ‘Indianness.’ Curtis took out signs of Euro-American influences such as suspenders, umbrellas, and clocks.\textsuperscript{105}

Lyman placed Curtis’ project in the context of popularly held American attitudes toward Indians in the late nineteenth century. As the tribes had

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\item \textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid.}, pg 44-60.
\item \textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid.}, pg 62-63.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Christopher M. Lyman. \textit{The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions - The Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis.} (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), pg 62-150.
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been conquered and posed no threat to white settlement, many Euro-Americans held nostalgic views of Indians of being noble, primitive savages. Prevalent ideas of the time, of social-Darwinism and Manifest Destiny, of the inevitable domination of the continent by whites, sometimes made the defeat of Native Americans seem sad, even tragic, but certainly not surprising. The photograph *The Vanishing Race - Navaho* sums up these attitudes perfectly. The picture shows a line of Indian horsemen move away from the camera toward a black void, the harsh light and shadow of sundown dramatically emphasizing the feeling of coming darkness.106

What precipitated the revisions of the historical West and the West of imagery? Both reevaluations began with the social upheavals of the 1960s in the United States. The late 1950s and 1960s saw the birth of the modern environmental, Women's, African American, Hispanic, and Native American movements. These groups sought revision and inclusion of their roles in American History, as well as more recognition, participation, and political and economic power in the United States. As well, the number and diversity of historians specializing in American history had increased dramatically since Turner's day, from a few hundred, mostly white men, to thousands of men and women, many of them people of "color," by the 1960s.107

However, the origins of the New Western History go back before the 1960s. The anthropologist Franz Boas advocated the idea of cultural relativism in the 1920s. Recognizing the relativity of culture means that applying the behavioral standards of one culture to a society with a different

world view and customs will end in misunderstanding. Cultural relativity has informed New Western History as a conceptual tool helpful towards understanding the various ways that groups in the West have responded to one another. Richard White described an instance of cross-cultural confusion in *Roots of Dependency*, when in the mid-1930s the federal government drastically reduced Navajo herds of sheep, goats, and horses, mistakenly believing that the herds were causing massive erosion. Federal officials had difficulty understanding why the Navajos resisted herd reductions so resolutely, particularly in light of the overgrazed ranges, and what seemed to government representatives an excessive number of goats and partially domesticated horses that were worth little on the market. Attempting to reorient the Navajos toward a capitalist market economy of efficiency and bottom-line cash return, government officials failed to grasp the complexity and priorities of the Navajo subsistence economy. The Navajos sought security from their herds, not cash profit, and their mix of goats, horses, and sheep, reflected this goal. The goats provided milk and emergency meat during times of drought or hard winters, as the Navajos thought goats were hardier than sheep. The horses were also an emergency food supply, since horses could travel longer distances to watering spots during droughts. From the Navajo point of view these mixed herds made sense, for they provided security; to government representatives the herds appeared irrational, for they did not translate into substantial market assets.\(^{108}\)


As well, the New Western History has been part of a larger trend in historicism, of moving beyond history centered around the powerful men of the past, the emperors, kings, and presidents, to a more egalitarian, widely
conceived social history that has its roots at least as far back as the nineteenth century. Despite his condescension toward the "masses," Karl Marx emphasized the importance of common people in history. What were their lives like, their aspirations, needs, and fears? American Western history, in its various guises, has always been exceptional in its concern with ordinary people. Even, or particularly in its conservative popular version, of white, male pioneers from the East enduring hardship to civilize the West, the protagonists of western history were average people - trappers, miners, cowboys, and small farmers.

Responses to The West As America exhibit, put on at the National Museum of Western Art, March 15-July 28, 1991, demonstrated how powerful and sharply divided sentiments were about the nineteenth century West. Contention stemmed from the revisionist texts accompanying the paintings, which, according to the primary curator, William H. Truettner, redefined the art as "ideological narratives encouraging expansionism."109 The exhibit became an event, the controversy taking on a life of its own: the curators rewrote and "tuned down" the text panels because they were too inflammatory, and to conform to criticism by anthropologists; two United States Senators who saw the show "questioned the intent of the exhibit and textual notes and even threatened an investigation of Smithsonian policies in the Senate's Appropriations Committee;" and viewers filled four comment books with passionate responses to the show.110

The comments capture a range of public opinion and set out some of

the terms of the controversy over Western history and demonstrate that the differences of opinion were not limited to academicians. The supportive comments, which were in the majority, welcomed the hard critique of the interpretations;

4/2/91
Thank you for your revisionist view of American history. On the eve of the anniversary of Columbus’s “Discovery of America” and on the close of our “housekeeping” of Middle East oil, your exhibition is particularly timely. The decoding of sexism was good [and] more about the Chinese railroad workers would have been good. The assault on Catlin seemed excessive, although [it was] valuable in introducing a new interpretation, unromantic and non-racist.

5/91
My family settled in South Dakota in the nineteenth century. Much as I admire what they accomplished as individuals, I have to admit their views of the land and native Americans are echoed in this exhibit. The interpretation rings true to me.

5/91
As a native American, I appreciate the comments supplied. I can see that many people are ashamed and reject the real political and economic incentives that resulted in westward expansion.

4/12/91
I am appalled at the lack of sophistication and the parochialism of the comments of many. My God! Manifest Destiny is alive and well!

4/8/91
As an historian, I am moved by the clear-headed interpretation by museum curators. It’s about time that we face our history honestly and without romanticizing the past.

Some of the critiques were visceral, outright condemnations. Both supporters and detractors accused each other of “dishonesty,” which suggests how polarized opinions were about the West;

4/12/91
Wonderful art but a sickening example of the dishonesty of contemporary art historical interpretations.
A number of the commentors clearly would rather the West remain a symbol of dreams and myth. These comments attest to the larger-than-life reputation the nineteenth century West has had for many people;

4/3/91
I didn’t need to be told that Catlin’s pictures were propaganda-phooey! I’m happy with the myth.

4/2/91
I always thought painting was supposed to be about hopes, dreams; the imagination. Instead, you seem to say it’s political statement at every brushstroke. Every painter is, according to you, an evil, cunning, [and] greedy “Anglo-American.” Shame on you for choosing to make such a statement...about your “political correctness” instead of really looking at the art for what it says about the appeal of the West to our collective imagination.

4/21/91
Politics and other ideologies aside, some of the paintings are about light, beauty, and color almost beyond belief. Wasn’t the West also the Never-Never Land of Dreams?

Some of the exhibit detractors thought that the curators had traded a romantic perspective for an alternative, but just as narrow vision:

3/9
[The] heavy handedness of the interpretation often obscures ambiguities in the art. Overall, railroading one polemical line over all the art at hand is a serious flaw in the exhibit, and not unlike what the commentators themselves are accusing others of.111

The New Western History has been controversial among historians of the West too. Gerald D. Nash, in his survey Creating the West - Historical

111 Ibid., pg 78-80. I chose and edited a few selections that characterize many of the comments. pg 105
Interpretations, 1890-1990 (1991), did not even see or acknowledge the new paradigm of the West as a meeting ground of various cultural groups. Although all historians are inevitably influenced by the social concerns of their time, the New Western Historians have gone further, throwing out everything that did not fit with their presentist interests, Nash declared. He stated that the revisionists have been too interested in the negative elements of western history, and neglected to pass on positive, unifying aspects of the past, and have presided over the fragmentation of the field:

Many of them viewed the history of the West as a shameful chapter in the American experience, finding little to praise but much to condemn. The laments covered a wide range of alleged injustices and oppressions ingrained in the Western movement. The emphasis was on what was wrong, not much on what might have been right.\textsuperscript{112}

Many in this generation openly abandoned any effort to retain a measure of historical objectivity. They became relativists with a vengeance, although they did not always regard themselves as such. In their view, the main role of historians was to be social critics whose task it was to espouse social causes....That the historian perhaps also had a responsibility to transmit the experiences of one generation to the next was a function which seemed less important on their scale of priorities than social commentaries. If historians are also keepers of a nation’s soul, the custodians of its sense of identity, one-sided indictments can serve the function of destroying the very fabric of national identity.\textsuperscript{113}

Western writer Larry McMurtry criticized not the negativity of the New Western History, but its supposed newness, in his thoughtful essay “Westward Ho Hum - What the New Historians Have Done to the Old West.” He held that revisionists gained notoriety for the revolution in Western history, which in actuality has had less to do with their originality than with “changing attitudes.” The terrible “moral and physical costs of


\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., pg 276. Nash puts forth this point of view repeatedly, pages 51,70-71,99,158,198.
winning the West” were discussed long before the late 1980s, but Americans were not ready to hear it.  

McMurtry noted a number of historians who foreshadowed the revisionists, such as Angie Debo, who dealt with Indian removal from the Southeast to the West, “movingly but unsentimentally,” in *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (1934).

McMurtry made another telling point, that in their determined efforts to de-mythologize and de-romanticize western history, revisionists lost sight of the role imagination played in westerners’ experiences, (for whites in particular he might have added). Nineteenth century Westerners had a sense of wonderment at the West that nourished and inspired them in the face of hardship. He cited his own father, a cowboy, and “every cattleman” he ever met, for whom being a cowboy was not simply a job, but a calling. Meanwhile, the revisionists reduced cowboying to “the range cattle industry:”

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\text{Failure Studies...in their effort to have the truth finally told, often fail themselves because they so rarely do justice to the quality of imagination that constitutes part of the truth. They may be accurate about the experience, but they simplify or ignore the emotions and imaginings that impelled the Western settlers despite their experience.}
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The Triumphantists write about a West where people had callings and were sustained by them. The Revisionists see a West where people had only jobs, and crappy, environmentally destructive jobs at that.

McMurtry’s comments point to how revisionists have considered the role of mythology and dreams in western history in an almost exclusively pejorative sense, as a way of promoting and justifying conquest, and an impediment to a clear understanding of the past, instead of how it enriched people’s lives.

It would be surprising if traditional historians did not react defensively

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115 Ibid., pg 35.

116 Ibid., pg 37-38.
to the New Western History, since revisionists claimed to practice a more accurate and moral approach to western history. A smug self-righteousness occasionally creeps into the reappraisal, as if western history, lost in a fog of nationalistic biases for years, was finally rescued by this younger generation of historians who discovered the truth and responsible scholarship; "For this region that was once so lost in dreams and idealization, we have been creating a new history, clear-eyed, demythologized, and critical," proclaimed Donald Worster.\(^{117}\) Perhaps there has been an element of self-promotion about the controversy that the New Western historians aroused. After reading a few dozen revisionist essays, particularly in compilations such as _Trails Toward A New Western History_, it sometimes seems that the New Western History has consisted of provocative statements and repeated calls, mantra like, for new studies, instead of substantial, in depth projects.

Of course, the potentials and implications of a particular outlook or school of thought may take years to realize. Walter Prescott Webb's _The Great Plains_, (1931), one of the best Turnerian works, appeared a full 38 years after Turner gave his paper _The Significance of the Frontier in American History_ in 1893. New directions are often built slowly, piece by piece, with seemingly small investigations that require much work. For example, revisionists have sought to qualify nineteenth century Western violence, which, according to film, television, and novels, was (tediously) routine and widespread. Two excellent studies, _Gunfighters, Highwaymen, and Vigilantes_ by Roger D. Mcgrath, and _The Cattle Towns_ by Robert R. Dykstra suggested that violence was not nearly as prevalent in the nineteenth century West as popular

\(^{117}\) Donald Worster, “Beyond the Agrarian Myth,” in Patricia Limerick, Clyde Milner, and Charles Rankin, edits. _Trails Toward a New Western History_. (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), pg 7. This compilation, based on a 1989 symposium of the same name, comes closest to a manifesto of the New Western History.
mythology would have it, and that there are few antecedents to modern violence in the "Old West." These works only covered a few towns, and there is room for far more research on the topic.118

Although the debate about western history has taken place both among historians and the general populace, one could build a case, as Patricia Limerick has, that western historians have clung to conservative interpretations of western history more than other Americans. Limerick argued that the New Western Historians were belatedly catching up with the changing views of Americans, westerners in particular. In this sense, New Western Historians were reacting to shifting societal concerns as much as inciting them. She related a story of how, after giving a talk on the West, a member of the audience responded, saying, "I enjoyed your speech, but since I'm not a western historian, everything you said was obvious to me."119 Sensing the disconnect between academic versions of western history and a lay person's sense of the West, revisionists attempted to make the past useful by shifting the focus of western history, from, for example, the division between the pre-and post frontier, to western history's continuity. What Gerald Nash referred to as "presentism with a vengeance" was a revisionist attempt to make Western history relevant to Americans in the late twentieth century.

The rift between lay Americans and conservative western historians in their conceptions of western history found dramatic expression in a forum held in December, 1998, at the Oakland Museum, marking the 150th

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119 Limerick, "The Unleashing of the Western Public Intellectual," in Trails Toward a New Western History. pg 72.
anniversary of the California Gold Rush. While not glorifying the gold rush, the three historians in the first part of the forum, Kevin Starr, J.S. Holliday, and Ron Limbough, did not spend a majority of their time describing its adverse aspects. When the forum opened to audience participation, the audience redirected the discussion toward the destructive consequences of the gold rush, and the historians found themselves on the defensive, particularly about why they had not spent more time describing the impact of the gold rush on Native Californian Indian groups. The most heated part of the debate revolved around whether the near disappearance of California Indians through disease, disruption of resource bases, illegal slavery, state sponsored but not systematic warfare and murder, and dislocation from their lands, constituted genocide. The debate reached a climax when a member of the audience declared that “We can only remind the historians here that to continue to fail to discuss this is to continue the genocide today” and called for monetary compensation and an apology for “state-sponsored massacres,” and a clean up of the mercury left from mining on reservation lands.¹²⁰

In the second half of the forum, with speakers Frank La Pena, Gray Brechin, and Patricia Limerick, both the speakers and the audience focused almost exclusively on race relations and the assault on California Indian lands and lives. The forum discarded the notion that the gold rush represented progress. There was little controversy, but rather a passionate exploration of the topic.

Whether one judges the New Western History as negative is a matter of perspective, of course. From Limerick’s point of view, revisionists were not negative or bleak, but added a long overdue “moral complexity” to

western history that it lacked;

If you said that the American South was a place of moral complexity or if you said that the urban Northeast was a place where progress came mixed with costs and injuries, it is hard to imagine anyone crying in response, 'How glum, how disillusioning!' But if you say those same things about the American West, then everyone with a heavy emotional investment in the mythic West of innocence and fresh starts will immediately break into protest....

When someone looks at the picture we present and says, 'how deeply depressing and gloomy,' there is no particular point in correcting them. It is, indeed, a great deal more interesting to explore this misprision, to respond, 'How fascinating that you would see this version of western history as so negative. Shall we talk about why you feel that way?' If, in other words, the New Western History must for a time carry the label 'disillusioning,' then this is surely a tribute to how much illusion had accumulated in the region's historical accounts.\textsuperscript{121}

Although a good point, it was also somewhat disingenuous, for \textit{Legacy of Conquest} not only balanced the romance and progress that characterized Old Western History, but to a large extent, discredited them too. Other revisionists, such as Richard White, acknowledged and embraced the harshness of the New Western History; Old Western Historians wrote "comedies," "in the sense that they provided a happy resolution," while New Western Historians "lean toward tragedy." For White, traditional history has been compelling in its narrative of challenges confronted and overcome, whereas the New Western History is not particularly satisfying, except in "the satisfaction we gain" from "the knowledge of our limits."\textsuperscript{122}

Gail M. Nomura, in "Significant Lives: Asia and Asian Americans in the U.S. West" in the fine collection of essays, \textit{A New Significance Re-envisioning the History of the American West}, (1996), saw the West not only as a meeting ground of various ethnicities, but as a place where a new

\textsuperscript{121} Limerick, "The Unleashing of the Western Public Intellectual," pg 74-75.
\textsuperscript{122} Richard White, "Trashing the Trails," in \textit{Trails Toward a New Western History}. pg 31-33.
cultural “core” of the United States has been formed. She proposed a multi-cultural western history which would be “inclusive,” without “margins” and a “center.”123 While acknowledging there once was a Euro-American cultural core in the distant past of the puritan colonies, she asserted that there has ceased to be a single nucleus of American identity, that it is instead a multitude of influences.124 And Asian Americans have played a vital role in the formation of this new core. However, they were not a monolithic ethnicity, and she emphasized the diversity of the Asian groups that have come to the American West; all they had in common was the discrimination that they experienced at the hands of white Americans. She summarized political, cultural, religious, and economic impacts Asians have had on the United States and on Western Civilization. Among the Asian influences has been a widening of freedoms, brought about by the demands of Asian Americans that American standards of freedom and democracy be broadened to include non-whites. Why has Asian American history been so long ignored, she asked? Many white Americans have insisted on the foreignness of Asians as a way of defining themselves, building their identity in opposition to the purported differences with Asians, said Nomura, which “served to unify the increasingly heterogeneous white population of the U.S. West.”125

However, after eloquently calling for the recognition of a new core, Nomura failed to support the call with her description of Asian American history. Nomura’s statement that “it is necessary to fully acknowledge the

124 Ibid., pg 138.
125 Ibid., pg 141.
critical role of Asian Americans in the transformation, for good or bad, of the U.S. West" was an empty sentiment in the context of her essay. She was reluctant to admit Asian immigrants engaged in behavior that was morally questionable; “In the context of the U.S. West, when I am asked to discuss the "contributions" of Asian Americans I feel I am actually being asked, "how much did your group contribute to the Anglo capitalist system of oppression to native peoples and destruction of the environment?" Regardless of one's view of Asian American pasts, the end result of Nomura’s investigation is to oversimplify Asian American Western history and ignore its tangled ethical dimensions. For instance, although Chinese miners were relegated to sites that were deemed poor or had already been worked over by white miners, this does not change the reality that Chinese miners enjoyed the benefits of conquest, making a living off formerly Native American lands. She did not acknowledge the advantages immigrants found. Asians would not have come to the United States if they did not hope to find benefits that would outweigh the opportunities at their homes. And, in many cases, they did - otherwise tens of thousands of Asians, decade after decade, would not have immigrated.

Nomura’s model of multi-cultural history superficially resembled Limerick’s vision of the West, as a meeting ground of diverse ethnicities with many world views. But beneath the surface Nomura’s conception was narrow, and lacked the complicated mosaic of history that Limerick advocated. “Significant Lives” described a strictly heroic story - a struggle for rights and recognition. Nomura ignored the motley array of motivations and experiences that make up Asian American history, and human history in

126 Ibid., pg 148.
general. At issue is not historical objectivity versus presentist political goals, but rather accuracy and reality, and acknowledging and exploring the breadth of Asian American, (or, indeed, any groups’ experiences.) This is not to minimize the prejudice - sometimes deadly - that Asians faced, or their determined struggle for greater rights. But her vision of Asian-American experiences is so narrowly conceived it strips them of the diversity that she powerfully elaborated at the beginning of her essay. How did Asian responses to discrimination vary according to each groups’ differing cultural mores? The new core that Nomura described does not take account of the complexities, moral and otherwise, of Asian experiences in the West. Nomura's attenuated and glorified vision of Asian American history in the West is boosterism of a similar sort to Turner's frontier history.

Despite its shortcomings, “Significant Lives” leads to vital questions regarding the politics of identity in the American West and the United States as a whole. Can we consider the West and the United States part of Western Civilization with its cultural roots primarily in the European past, or has a substantially different basis of national culture evolved in the United States? Nomura pointed out, and has been encouraged by the changing demographics of the West, of its increasing diversity as it moves rapidly toward having a majority-minority white population.127 Indeed, with the massive immigration into Europe and the United States and Canada in the nineteenth and particularly twentieth centuries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and its cultural influences, does a Western Civilization even exist anymore?

While many of the revisionist historians discuss population growth in

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terms of culture, few of them talk about its immense detrimental impact on the environment (Donald Worster is an exception). New Western historians probably ignore the issue because the majority of demographic growth in the West comes from non-white immigrants, and drawing attention to it would likely draw charges of xenophobia. As well, for many historians, the problems caused by an increasing human population seem to be an acceptable price for greater human diversity in the West.

Revisionists have also examined western history from the standpoint of gender. Susan Lee Johnson has sought to pull apart the white, male centered West by analyzing western history from the perspective of gender. She noted in "A Memory Sweet to Soldiers": The Significance of Gender, that gender studies have been usually pursued by women, about women, and have not so much dismantled traditional western history as put women’s histories up next to men’s histories. Johnson, like Limerick, applied other academic disciplines to the field of western history. She turned to women’s studies’ perceptions of gender to reveal how “racialized notions of gender have created meaning and reinforced power relations in the Wests of academia and popular culture.”\textsuperscript{128} She distinguished between gender and sex, asserting that gender has been socially constructed, not biologically determined. Gender has been historically used to create different gender roles characterized by “inequality and injustice.”\textsuperscript{129} Historians have applied gender analysis disproportionately to women, held Johnson, which reinforced masculinity as a normative standard;

\textsuperscript{128}Susan Lee Johnson, "A Memory Sweet to Soldiers": The Significance of Gender," in A New Significance - Re-envisioning the history of the American West, pg 258-259.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., pg 258.
categories of human experience - the unmarked category serving as the normative, the more inclusive, the less 'interested' and particular. As historians, then, we must both illuminate female and non-Anglo-American lives and mark the category of white, male experience - show it to be as historically and culturally contingent, as deeply linked to conceptions of gender and race, and as limited in its ability to explain the past as that of any other group of westerners. Only then can we begin to deflate the overblown rhetoric of white masculinity that has long been associated with the 'American West.'

Finally, Johnson asserted that historians need to explore the connection between gender, race, and class, as well as sexuality and environment, although she "remains ambivalent about the latter, especially until environmental history begins to take race, class, and gender more (and 'nature' less) seriously." Both Nomura's and Johnson's arguments for reconceptualizing Western history recognize the old axiom that whoever controls the past controls the future; rewriting history is a tool that can, and in the case of Western history, should be used to help change power relations in the present and future. For Johnson, "studying gender in the West holds promise for the project of denaturalizing gender and dislodging it from its comfortable moorings in other relations of domination - from small-town racism to worldwide imperialism." And when Nomura asked "who controls the writing of history?" the implication was that white men have written it, and have kept the multi-ethnic West on the periphery of western history. Historian David G. Gutierrez, in discussing Mexican American history in the West, maintained that "Even a cursory knowledge of the region’s ethnic history reveals that Mexican Americans have long considered

\[130 \text{Ibid., pg 258.} \]
\[131 \text{Ibid., pg 275-276.} \]
\[132 \text{Ibid., pg 258.} \]
\[133 \text{Ibid., pg 154.} \]
the struggle to represent their own history and to be represented accurately in
the West's history generally as crucial components of their ongoing campaign
to achieve their full rights as American citizens and as human beings."134 He
stated that the work of "activist scholars" who believe "the production of any
historical knowledge is an inherently political act" "is intended to threaten
social structures that serve to maintain the subordination of certain
groups."135

This discussion on the role of history brings up the question, what are
the responsibilities of the historian? Gerald Nash proposed that one of the
historian's tasks is to be a keeper of national identity. By contrast, Donald
Worster thought that historians should not show obeisance to "the powers
that be;"

The history of this region, if it wants to be vital and listened to, cannot
be kept isolated from public controversy, struggles over power, the
search for new moral standards, or the ongoing human debate over
fundamental principles and values. Rather than claiming to be some
detached laboratory technician, the historian ought to be unabashedly
and self-confidently an intellectual whose express purpose and primary
justification for being are that he or she lives to question all received
opinions, to take alternative ideas seriously, to think as rationally as
possible about them, and to work constantly to demythologize the past.
When historians fail to see themselves as critical intellectuals, as I
believe historians of the West have done, they become ideological in
the most dangerous sense: They become prisoners of ideology rather
than masters of it.136

The integrity of history is compromised when the historian insists on forcing
history to conform to his or her ideology. One of the virtues of Legacy of
Conquest is that Limerick refused to wrap-up western history into neat little

134 David G. Gutierrez, "Significant to Whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the
American West," in A New Significance - Re-envisioning the history of the American West, pg 71.
135 Ibid., pg 82-83.
136 Donald Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," in Trails Toward a New Western History,
pg 23.
packages, and insisted on its complexity. The book prepares one’s mind for the unexpected and the unwanted; when delving into the past, one may not find what one had hoped.

The New Western History has decisively broken with the old frontier narrative of western history. Revisionist historians have successfully reoriented western historiography toward new priorities of gender, environment, race, place, and ethnicity. These issues that form the basis of new ways of thinking about western history have seen widespread academic acceptance. Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, western historiography has gone from Turnerian exuberance, through a period of questioning during the mid-twentieth century, to the revisionist, harsh, critical assessment of western history in the 1980s and 1990s. Western photography has followed this broad trend too, moving from celebration in the early twentieth century to a period of growing doubt in mid-century, to one of grim, negative imagery in the late twentieth century.
CHAPTER 4

Dirge to Paradise:
The New Western Photography

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between Edward Weston’s elation at beholding the Mohave desert in 1928 (as quoted at the beginning of chapter 2), and Robert Adams’ assessment of the West in 1983:

The West has ended, it would seem, as the nation’s vacant lot, a place we valued at first for the wildflowers, and because the kids could play there, but where eventually we stole over and dumped the hedge clippings, and then the crankcase oil and dog manure, until finally now it has become such an eyesore that we hope someone will just buy it and build and get the thing over with. We are tired, I think, of staring at our corruption.

The stark difference between Weston’s and Adams’ views illustrates how photographers’ attitudes had changed toward the West during the twentieth century, from exaltation to concern, disgust, and sadness. As, and even before historians substantially revised their views of the western past, photographers were making critical, pessimistic images of the West and its inhabitants. Like the New Western Historians, these photographers portrayed the West as a place to find American failures. Where in Brigman’s pictures whimsy and magic run wild, and Ansel Adams’ photographs describe a timeless Eden, these New West Photographers have kept their images rooted to time and place, to the West of the late twentieth century, and they reflect the changing topography of the West. Their pictures describe the relationship between the land and people as oppositional, and portray the

wondrous landscape as under assault by Americans who appear alienated from each other and from the earth. In Richard Avedon's portraits from the late 1970s and early 1980s, westerners appear estranged. Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Richard Misrach show the western landscape not as a place of possibility, but as abused by people. These photographers seem to share the vision of the western landscape and nature as sacred.

As with western historiography, however, changes in western photography occurred gradually. Prior to the advent of the New Western Photography, photography entered a period of questioning the celebratory pictures of the West. The Farm Security Administration (FSA), a federal agency headed by Roy Stryker, hired photographers to record the ravages of the Great Depression and rally Americans around citizens that the economic collapse hurt most. The photographers, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and Arthur Rothstein among them, portrayed the West not as an escape from elsewhere in the nation or world, but as one of the areas that the Depression hit hardest. In their work, the West no longer appeared a place of opportunity, but one of defeat, of displaced farmers, of fields riven by erosion, and of abandoned, boarded-up homes. A western phenomenon - the Dust Bowl, the subsequent exodus, and the trek of the "Okies" along highway 59 to California where they received a frosty reception - has come more than anything else to symbolize the hard times of the 1930s. Dorothea Lange's picture "Migrant Mother," of a worried young mother surrounded by her three children at a California squatter camp in 1936, has become the iconographic image of the Depression and is one of the finest documentary portraits ever made.²

² Dorothea Lange, Photographs of a Lifetime. (Oakland: Aperture, 1982), pg 77.
Another aspect of this phase of doubt was the growing worry among Americans that the wild lands of the West were under increasing threat in the mid-twentieth century. The Sierra Club adopted a strategy of publishing coffee table books illustrated with exquisitely reproduced photographs of remarkable western landscapes in hopes of convincing Americans that these places were worth preserving. Two of the most poignant of these books were *Glen Canyon on the Colorado* (1963) by photographer Eliot Porter and *This is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers* (1955), edited by Wallace Stegner. The proposed damming of the Colorado River at two places in the border region of north eastern Utah and Colorado and flooding Dinosaur National Monument in 1950 energized a protest movement to save the monument. *This is Dinosaur*, a compilation of work by photographers and writers, presented the varied, exceptional aspects of the monument - the huge store of fossil dinosaur bones, a large number of Native American petroglyphs and pictographs, and the striking river gorges - that would vanish with the proposed dams.3 Although the fight waged to stop the building of the dams was successful, the victory soon turned bittersweet, as people belatedly realized that the compromise sight chosen for a new dam on the Colorado, Glen Canyon, was also magnificent.4 The Sierra Club published *The Place No One Knew* in 1963 as Glen Canyon disappeared beneath the waters of the newly built reservoir. Although in color, in terms of style and subject matter Eliot Porter’s pictures followed the tradition of landscape photography showing nature without people. The book contained no photographs of the dam under construction, but rather showed what was lost

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- exquisite rock forms revealed by light plunging down the canyon walls, and shimmering pools of water reflecting glowing red cliffs. What had changed was the context of the photographs. The collection of images stood as an elegy to Glen Canyon, and a warning that great natural wonders of the West were vulnerable and unless people became aware and active, might be ruined before Americans knew what was at stake.\textsuperscript{5}

The FSA images and photography in the service of wilderness preservation set a precedent for, and gave way to the New Western Photography in the 1970s. In terms of more immediate causes, the New Western Photography probably occurred in part for some of the same reasons that the New Western History arose: the cultural milieu of the 1960s, when many of these photographers and historians “came of age,” encouraged new ways of looking at the world, including the West. The questioning atmosphere was receptive to reappraisals, which may have “liberated” the vision of many photographers in their portrayals of the West. That is, the open atmosphere may have encouraged and given them room to respond to the West in new ways. In addition, photographers were out observing the world around them, and reacted by picturing the changes they saw - more development, people, and pollution.\textsuperscript{6} After all, part of what photographers do is constantly hone their visual awareness. It may be that photographers were “reevaluating” the West a little earlier than historians because they were out looking, while historians were inside, absorbed with books.

It was a foreigner who first caused a stir by presenting a dismal view of the United States at the height of her power, in the late 1950s, a time of

\textsuperscript{5} Eliot Porter, \textit{The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado.} (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1963)

\textsuperscript{6} This is particularly true for photographers who work outside.

\textit{pg 122}
general optimism and patriotism. Robert Frank, a Swiss immigrant to the United States, received a Guggenheim grant in 1955 to spend the year crossing and photographing the country. The resulting book, *The Americans*, published in the United States in 1959, initially caused an outburst of indignation both from photography critics and lay audiences. Although the book covers many parts of the nation, much of it was shot west of the Mississippi, and deals with themes associated with the West: violence, gambling, cowboys, mining, space, freedom, movement, and opportunity. However, Frank presented a disturbing viewpoint of these issues and symbols. His images suggest that the promise of the West did not pan out as Americans had thought it would. Frank’s Westerners are not the sturdy, upright citizens Turner thought the West had created and would continue to create, but rather, people disaffected from themselves and from society.

*The Americans* suggests that indeed there is material abundance in the West, but not inner fulfillment. *View from hotel window - Butte, Montana*, reveals mining operations taking apart the hillside in the background and dreary looking homes and streets in the foreground. Ironically, Frank made this gloomy image when Butte’s copper mines were producing well. *Casino - Elko, Nevada* shows a woman gathering her chips at a craps table. In *Bar - Gallup, New Mexico*, a Navaho rancher stands with hands in pockets looking disconsolately into space. A waitress looks out from behind a diner counter, her glum expression in contrast to a jolly, smiling Santa Claus picture hanging on the wall above her in *Ranch market - Hollywood.*

Frank included one of the quintessential symbols of the West, the cowboy, twice in *The Americans*. In both pictures he decontextualized the
cowboy, removing him from the West altogether. Instead of shooting a rodeo in a genuine cowtown, Frank photographed a rodeo in Detroit. And instead of focusing on what was happening in the arena, he turned the camera on the bored looking audience in *Rodeo - Detroit*. In the other picture, *Rodeo, New York City*, a cowboy leans against a garbage can on a city street. The juxtaposition makes for an absurd image, the cowboy eating car fumes instead of living out on the open range. He is portrayed as being useful for entertaining Easterners and Midwesterners, not for herding cattle.9

Another romantic icon that Frank presented as less than positive is the Hollywood movie star. Frank suggests Hollywood is a world of empty appearances, and that Americans are enamored of surfaces, not substance. In *Movie premiere - Hollywood*, a blonde actress stands in the center of a group of admirers.10 Frank focused his camera on the fans, and the actress, in the foreground, is blurry. By obscuring her face Frank underscores the idea that her distinct features do not matter. Personal substance is irrelevant, since what makes her worthy of attention is that she is a gorgeous, blonde star. Frank does not tell us the actress' name. One woman, biting her fingernails, watches the actress nervously, while another two look on admiringly. Frank brilliantly used selective focus for social commentary. Whether or not he purposely used selective focus with this picture in mind, or made it by accident, he recognized the force of the image and included it in the book.

Frank suggests the hollowness of Hollywood, of glamour, and of sunny California as a place for living out your dreams, in *Covered Car - Long Beach, California*.11 Two palm trees stand on either side of a car with a

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9 Ibid., pg 19, 139.
10 Ibid., pg 141.
11 Ibid., pg 77.
protective cover draped over it. The street, the tree, the car, and the building
behind it are clean and look as if they have been manicured. The sun shines
directly onto the scene and makes it glow. The display looks too manipulated
to be genuine though - one suspects that when the cover is lifted, the car,
perhaps representing the California dream, inevitably will be a
disappointment.

Not all of Frank's portrayals of the West are negative. In *U.S. 285 -
New Mexico*, the highway stretches smaller and smaller into the infinite
distance, evoking movement and space.\(^{12}\) If one has ever driven the vast
distances of the West, the open road is a fairly obvious motif, and many
people have photographed it. Yet Frank made a distinctive, compelling
version. He took the picture standing almost in the middle of the street and
placed the road a little off-center, making for a dynamic composition. The
sun gently sets, or rises, over flat grasslands, a single car in the distance
moving toward the viewer. The road can be considered a symbol of travel, of
progress, of possibilities. However, countering this interpretation is the
sameness of the landscape; though you pass across it, you do not seem to get
anywhere.

While *U.S. 285 - New Mexico* may have only a touch of melancholy,
Frank's other road pictures are harsh. In *Crosses on scene of highway
accident - U.S. 91, Idaho*, the sun slices through the clouds and shines on
crosses marking the spot where three people were killed. The road is the
scene of death again in *Car accident - U.S. 66, between Winslow and Flagstaff,
Arizona*, with four people standing on the side of the road shivering as the
snow comes down, contemplating a corpse under a sheet.\(^{13}\) Ironically, U.S. 66

\(^{12}\) Ibid., pg 81.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., pg 107, 79.
was the hopeful route taken by farmers fleeing the Dust Bowl and seeking work in California during the Depression.

With Jehovah’s Witness - Los Angeles, and St. Francis, gas station, and City Hall - Los Angeles Frank gives the alienation pervading The Americans a religious dimension. In St. Francis the statue holds aloft a cross toward the setting sun above a used car lot. St. Francis “preaches” in vain, with a religious fervor to which society no longer seems to be listening. In Jehovah’s Witness, an elderly man standing on the street holds a pamphlet entitled “Awake!” Can we take him at face value considering the way Frank photographed him? He stands against a stark wall looking into the camera with a demented expression. Although the title identifies him as a Jehovah’s Witness, from the picture alone we can deduce easily only that he is an active member of one of the many religious sects in the West.

The ambiguity of Frank’s imagery underscores the complexity of religion in the West. The story of religion in the West in the twentieth century is one of increasing diversity. By 1990 the West, with California in the lead, had the largest array of religions of any region or state in the nation. Perhaps not surprisingly, this extraordinary growth of smaller and/or ‘peripheral’ religions has coincided with a broad secularizing trend. Religious affiliation has steadily dropped in the West among mainstream Christian denominations, Asian-Americans, and Jews. Frank’s enigmatic photograph, Jehovah’s Witness, ‘speaks’ about these issues on many levels. The fellow in the photograph seems to have taken it upon himself to awaken people from a wayward slumber. The fact that religions in the West have openly

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14 Ibid., pg 65, 105.  
proliferated shows that freedom and religious toleration exist. But does this freedom manifest itself in a negative way or a positive way? Is it a sign of healthy open-mindedness, or of spiritual drifting, of unfulfillment and a desperate search for meaning? Is he, the Jehovah’s Witness, not only indicative of, but part of a problem, of a confused and directionless populace? Does he simply offer another religious choice within an already crowded market?

Frank’s dismal vision of religion in the West appears especially gloomy when contrasted with one of the nineteenth century’s most popular photographs of religion and the West, *The Mount of the Holy Cross* (1873), by William Henry Jackson.¹⁶ This photograph, of a mountain whose crevices filled with snow during winter formed the outline of a cross, became Jackson’s most celebrated image for it combined American visions of the West: the grandeur of nature, Christianity, and manifest destiny. The “miracle” of the cross seemed to confirm God’s approval of American westward expansion.¹⁷ For Americans in the 1870s, the picture implied adventure, romance, mystery, a trip into the remote Colorado mountains to find the divine. The snow cross was one among many fantastic tales about the West reaching the East, and Jackson’s photograph was a document verifying its truth.¹⁸ Where Jackson’s photograph presents unity of faith and

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¹⁸ In the first half of the nineteenth century fabulous stories circulated about the West, of herds of buffalo so large they stretched to the horizon, of huge blond bears with humps on their backs, and of hot water that shot out of the ground high into the air. W.H. Jackson documented these last natural phenomena, the geysers of Yellowstone, in 1871.
purpose, and optimism, Frank’s images, *Jehovah’s Witness* and *St. Francis*, offer spiritual uncertainty and fractured aspiration.

Like *The Americans, In the American West, 1979-1984*, a book of portraits by Richard Avedon, depicts Westerners as alienated people.\(^{19}\) Avedon’s subjects are from the small town West. Most of them are working class, such as truckers, miners, ranchers, secretaries, and oil field workers, or are poverty stricken or marginalized, including prisoners, inmates of a mental institution, drifters, and even a fall-out victim. Avedon’s West is inhabited by people who recall grotesques, “not all horrible,” the American small towners Sherwood Anderson describes in his book *Winesburg, Ohio*.\(^{20}\)

As Frank did before him, Avedon subverts the positive meanings of Western icons. His symbols of the West are not romantic. Richard Wheatcroft, rancher looks morose. Alfred Lester, dryland farmer, an unshaven frail old man with one arm, his skin wrinkled into mountains and valleys, appears defeated and broken by a lifetime of working the land. Harrison Tsosie, cowboy, has an lackadaisical expression and looks like a clown.\(^{21}\) The celebrated restless movement in search for improvement in the West is absent from *In the American West*. The only movement one finds in the book is represented by drifters and truckers.

Though he is by no means all-inclusive, Avedon did capture a wide spectrum of people in terms of ethnicity and age groups, including Hispanics, Whites, Native Americans, women, men, and children. What makes his pictures distinctive is their strangeness. Immediately apparent is that his

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subjects do not look happy - not one of them is smiling. In the American West is almost a panorama of types. The viewer can identify the subjects by their clothing, or the titles of the photographs, stating their occupations if they are employed. However, as the subjects' names are included with the photographs, they transcend mere types, and are individuals. Avedon often photographed his subjects in the middle of their workdays, wearing their work clothes. He chose to make pictures of people with jobs that outsiders rarely witness, and whose on-the-job appearance is striking. Oil field workers appear covered in oil, hair matted with grime. Miners are covered in dust. Slaughterhouse workers are drenched in blood. And when a person's clothing is not peculiar, Avedon frequently selected people with unusual physical characteristics. Sandra Bennett, twelve year old is submerged beneath an ocean of freckles. Billy Mudd, trucker resembles a coiled snake.22

While Frank carried a small, lightweight 35 mm Leica camera, Avedon used an 8 x 10 inch view camera and had two assistants. Avedon closely focused on his subjects, and they are usually shown from the waist up. Sometimes in group shots some of his subjects are cropped in unconventional ways for a portrait, such as straight down the middle, or with half their heads or arms lopped off. This seems to characterize their lives - cut apart, with pieces missing. Describing his method, he said that,

I photograph my subject against a sheet of white paper about nine feet wide by seven feet long, that is secured to a wall, a building, sometimes the side of a trailer. I work in the shade because sunshine creates shadows, highlights, accents on a surface that seem to tell you where to look. I want the source of light to be invisible so as to neutralize its role in the appearance of things.23

22 Ibid., Sandra Bennett, twelve year old - Rocky Ford, Colorado, 8/23/80, pg 27, Billy Mudd, trucker - Alto, Texas, 5/7/81, pg 76.
23 Ibid., Forward
Placing people in the same surroundings, against the white backdrop, gives a sense of democracy to them. Regardless of their station in society, each person - a scientist, a prisoner, and a sales clerk - receives the same treatment. They are all equally exposed. Avedon’s camera is mercilessly graphic and undercuts his subject’s dignity. The way Avedon took these pictures is a representational assault on his subjects. The blank background and the even light centers the viewers’ attention completely on the people in the photographs. Their nose hair, the dirt under their finger-nails, the lines of their skin are all there for our inspection. And the photographs are reproduced in the book a large 11 x 14 inches, so the details are all the more visible. This stark, ultra-reality gives the pictures power. How often do we get to look at this many people this closely for as long as we want?

Avedon’s method of making pictures, of combining great detail of people dressed in their everyday clothes, with a blank background, highlights the fact that his subjects are not in their normal surroundings, and makes them seem dislocated. Even people whose expressions are dignified are compromised by the starkness of the background and clarity of the negatives.

Their facial expressions as well make them look estranged. Avedon inspires enough trust in his ‘sitters’ so that they reveal their feelings. However, the emotions he inspires, or looks for, are any but happiness. Avedon’s subjects are morose, vacant, bored, serious, thoughtful, confident, tormented, and defiant, but never joyful. The only photographs in the collection that are not of people are three close up studies of skinned sheep and steer heads, with eyeballs still intact.24 These seem to represent what Avedon is attempting to do in all his portraits - peel back his subject’s psychic

24 Ibid., pg 125, 128, 129, 133.
and physical layers to reveal their frayed/unhappy inner lives. As portrayed by Avedon, the West hardens, twists, and destroys people at worst, and leaves them stoically resilient at best.

Richard Avedon's and Robert Frank's negative portrayals of Westerners are complemented by Robert Adams' dismal views of the Western landscape. Adams eschewed awesome, uplifting representations of nature, for what he believed were more accurate depictions of the western landscape. He recognized the presence of people in the natural environment, and pictures their presence as primarily harmful. In both his photographs and writing, from the 1960s through the 1980s, Adams portrayed the West as a place where Americans have been out of balance, esthetically and spiritually.

There is a disconnect between Adam's stated goals and his pictures. In his 1981 book, *Beauty in Photography*, Adams asserted that "The job of the photographer, in my view, is not to catalog individual fact but to try to be coherent about intuition and hope."25 He made a similarly positive statement in an 1994 interview; "I do believe that artists are obliged, like everyone else, to try to find their way to an affirmation."26 His photographs, however, reflect little affection for life, and seldomly match his rhetoric of hope.

Instead of dodging and ducking around signs of people to get shots of "unsullied nature," Adams accepts them and incorporates them into his landscape pictures. Much of Adams' work simply acknowledges how the western landscape really looks when one travels out of the city. Despite the existence of large areas in the West that are not only comparatively sparsely

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populated, but are losing population, particularly the plains, Adams reminds one that there are few areas where one does not find a sign of humans. Even in isolated places one usually sees a road, a fence, or power lines in the distance, or hears or sees a plane overhead, or finds trash on the ground. In the late 1970s Adams made a set of pictures in which human intrusion is present, but minor, and does not threaten to overwhelm the landscape. In *Missouri River, Clay County, South Dakota* 1977 Adams uses a subtle, effective strategy to make the viewer aware of the human ubiquity in the landscape. When looking at the picture, for a moment one supposes this to be an image of a pristine riverscape before noticing the beer can in the bottom left corner. Then one looks more closely, for other signs of human presence. Are the rocks on the edges of the river actually old pieces of concrete? Are there bits of trash along the bank?

In the late 1960s Adams began a series of pictures of housing developments in the plains of central Colorado beneath the Front Range. These photographs show the gradual transformation of grassland into blocks of ugly, though affordable, tract housing. In *Buffalo calf for sale, Pinon, Colorado*, 1968, a bison, symbol of an earlier West of open land and freedom, is corralled behind a fence. Adams' pictures often include expanses of plains and hills, and suggest there could be, or once was, freedom and openness. Like the boxing in of the buffalo, the construction of new towns obliterate natural space, eliminating that area as a source of spiritual nourishment. Adams portrayed "development" as an exchange of a place of regeneration for one of spiritual emptiness. In *Colorado Springs, Colorado*,

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28 Ibid., pg 39.
1968, through the window of a spanking new tract home a woman stands in profile, silhouetted against the light.\footnote{Ibid., pg 35.} She seems to have become as bleak and characterless as the house she lives in.

One of Adams' most disheartening groups of photographs is of southern California urban areas where municipal governments made miserable attempts to beautify their locales by planting trees. The trees are gangly and wasted, looking like they were overwhelmed by smog, neglect, and even physical attack. Many of the photographs are compositionally chaotic, with a lack of focus, perhaps reflecting the imbalance of a modern society that cannot successfully integrate trees into metropolitan areas. In *Broken Trees Next to Box Springs Mountains. East of Riverside, CA, 1982*, a scraggly tree with drooping branches holds out against the human onslaught.\footnote{Ibid., pg 137.} The New Western Photographers have almost conventionalized the forlorn, beleaguered tree as a symbol of nature under assault by people.

Adams did not confine his original sense of composition and subject matter to making pictures of blighted urban beautification projects. What is striking about much of his work is its plainness. Where Ansel Adams' photographs are often overwhelming in their grandiosity, Robert Adams' landscapes are studies of the ordinary. They are so accessible that they are, paradoxically, almost inaccessible, perhaps because we are accustomed to passing through these common surroundings without noticing details. So when one sees a photograph of common subject matter shot in a straightforward way, one may easily glance over it without looking closely. *The Garden of the Gods, El Paso County, Colorado, 1977* shows a runt of a
tree standing in front of an uninteresting rock face, with a metal handrail and
a path in the foreground.\textsuperscript{31} The scene looks as if it is just beyond a parking
lot, so familiar we are hardly conscious we are seeing it.

One of Adams’ only series of photographs that can be described as life
affirming make up the book \textit{Summer Nights}, published in 1985. In this
collection of images that Adams shot at night, the boundaries between the
natural and the human world are broken down and they become one. In a
lovely picture, \textit{Berthoud, Colorado, 1976}, leafy tree branches cast shadows on
the side of a house.\textsuperscript{32} Does the light casting the shadows come from a street
light or from the moon? In \textit{Manitou Springs, Colorado, 1980}, street lights
reflect off puddles of water, the edges of the puddles becoming glowing
rings.\textsuperscript{33} Despite the fact that with \textit{Summer Nights} Adams seems to be
indulging in uncharacteristic optimism, the work is not without ambiguities.
The moon hangs above a tree on the side of a parking lot in \textit{Fort Collins,
Colorado}.\textsuperscript{34} Does the concrete with parking space lines complement the
moon and tree, or is it indicative of the compromises inherent in the way we
have chosen to live at a distance from nature?

Adams’ productivity and intensity as a photographer have been
matched by his prolific, thoughtful writing about photography. Although he
did not comment on any of his photographs specifically, his essays reveal his
feelings about the West and help us understand some of his motivations in
making his pictures. For Adams, the West was ruined by the mid-1970s, by
overpopulation, over-development, and by ugly architecture, all pushed by

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., pg 91.
\textsuperscript{32} Adams, \textit{Summer Nights}. pg 23.
\textsuperscript{33} Adams, \textit{To Make it Home Photographs of the American West}. pg 118.
\textsuperscript{34} Adams, \textit{Summer Nights}. pg 16.
the American economic system with its insatiable drive for profit. Adams has found this loss tragic. For him, the vast open spaces were a source of uplifting, spiritual vitality, and hope. And the national park system has failed to compensate for the overcrowding of the West, because the parks themselves have become overcrowded, and are too small, a few crumbs left over from the whole loaf, Adams believed;

What we need now and for the future is a system of parks that would allow us to encounter not what have always been geographic oddities - caves, geysers, petrified trees, waterfalls - but what were large-scale typicalities - shores, forests, mountains, canyons, and prairies. To a small degree, we have set aside such places..., but not in nearly enough size to convey to visitors the central fact of the undisturbed American landscape -its proportion to us, its grandness.

Adams believes it would be dishonest to ignore the peopled West and make pictures of landscapes that look devoid of human impact, because these wild areas have become rare. He holds that one of photography's great strengths is its ability to record the real world. And to make important, meaningful statements, photography should be employed not toward creating abstract images, but in portraying recognizable images of the real, physical world. He does not dislike or find unworthy photographs of "untainted" nature of the sort made by Ansel Adams. But these depictions of "perfection," "the absolute purity of wilderness," can leave him in "a crippling disgust." They remind him of the loveliness of the large natural areas that once existed in the West;

Our discouragement in the presence of beauty results, surely, from the way we have damaged the country, from what appears to be our

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36 Ibid., pg 158, 162 - 163.
37 Ibid., pg 162 - 163.
38 Adams, Beauty in Photography Essays in Defense of Traditional Values, pg 30, 84.
39 Ibid., pg 104.
40 Ibid., pg 14 - 15.
inability now to stop, and from the fact that few of us can any longer hope to own a piece of undisturbed land. Which is to say that what bothers us about primordial beauty is that it is no longer characteristic... Unspoiled places sadden us because they are in an important sense, no longer true.\textsuperscript{41}

For Adams, the remaining wilderness seems to be an afterglow of the grandeur the West once was. Photographing these ever-shrinking wild places is like chasing uncertain shadows of the past.

An essay Adams wrote on nineteenth century landscape photography in the West helps explain why his images of the West are pessimistic. He found that the images by photographers such as William Henry Jackson, Eadweard Muybridge, and Timothy O'Sullivan valuable for showing how Americans have altered space, polluted it, and erected fences and dams. We are reminded that we are reducing space by covering the land with cities. Above all, the photographs humble the viewer by showing that humans are not needed, as the landscape is "perfect" without us.\textsuperscript{42} Although people can play an important role within nature, nature is a coherent whole. The only way we can deeply understand natural space is to approach it on its own terms, not ours - which means spending a long time quietly exploring it on foot. The pictures are reminders of the natural space we have lost, and continue to lose.\textsuperscript{43}

Adams asked the question, how could Americans have reached the point where we need to look at these photographs to be reminded of our poisoned, apathetic relationship with the land? The answer, as Adams saw it, is that Americans have been blinded by a colossal egoism. The pictures can

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., pg 14.  
\textsuperscript{42}Adams, \textit{Why People Photograph}, pg 144.  
\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., pg 136.
teach us about our self-centeredness. The fact that some of the nineteenth-century photographic depictions of the West, especially O'Sullivan's desert images, have been considered "malevolent" for not picturing a West that invited settlement, only reflects our misguided cultural bias that the land was made just for us to inhabit. In our quest for private gain and personal freedom, we have developed the West and fenced it off, and have proceeded without recognizing limits. Adams implied that a human reconciliation with the natural environment meant not only showing respect to nature, but redeeming ourselves as well. By striking a balance with nature we can balance our own lives.

The photographs would fail if the viewer simply mourned the shrinking wilderness. Adams saw these nineteenth century photographs as symbols of hope, and as reminders that we must act now before more space becomes irredeemable. He did not just advocate preserving land that is relatively "unsullied" by people, but also vacating and reclaiming parts of the West. Adams did not suggest which areas should be emptied, nor how to convince people to move off these areas. The essay is strong on inspiration and short on practical ideas.

The essay is a conceptual framework for how one should view old photographs of Western space. Adams believes that the viewer is morally obligated to see these photographs a single way. If people are not alternatively pained and inspired to action by these works, they are wasting their time. It is "pointless nostalgia" when people simply "love the views" and look at the photos as pretty pictures.

44 Ibid., pg 153.
46 Ibid., pg 139.
Is this a responsible way of analysing these photos? Adams was too strident in his single-mindedness. I believe the photographs would cease to function as art if we only permit ourselves to consider them in one way. Adams robs them of their power by insisting on only one way of understanding them. He puts forth a thoughtful, worthwhile interpretation of the photos, but it should not be the only interpretation.

Our expectations of positive change in the West should be small, Adams wrote, since we can only make limited, small improvements over the next couple hundred years (if the United States lasts that long, he added for good measure.) He advocated "a more conservative pattern of land use, a more prudent consumption of water, a lessening of animal abuse, a more respectful architecture." Americans have valued profit making over the spiritual worth of open spaces, which has resulted in the overpopulation and over-development of the West. And because materialism is the principal value of American politics and economics, it is unlikely people will ever move off western lands in significant numbers and recreate open spaces, Adams reasoned.

As if in response to his inability to find comfort in the diminishing open spaces of the West, Adams seems to have turned inward photographically, seeking solace in his family and the immediate space around him. In the book Perfect Times, Perfect Places, (1988), Adams lovingly portrayed his wife Kerstin, their scotch terrier Sally, and the plains near their home by the Colorado Front Range. The book contains some of his only pictures that show the landscape without any obvious indications of human intrusion. They are intimate and undramatic. In Pawnee National

\[47 \text{Ibid., pg 173.}\]
\[48 \text{Ibid., pg 162 - 163.}\]
Grassland, Colorado, 1984, a prairie vastness glistens in the sun. A tree branch appears at the top of the picture, and the viewer is ‘rooted’ to the ground by its shadow. A stand of cottonwood trees casts gentle shadows onto the plains in Weld County, Colorado, 1984. Adams also focuses on solitary trees, individualizing them, and interspersed with the pictures of his family, they seem to be Adams’ inanimate friends.49

Adams found landscape photographs with people in them useful not only because they can help us reconcile ourselves to our “mistakes,” but because they can humble us by showing how small humans are compared to the enormity of the land.50 Adams consoles himself that although people are “in the way” of wilderness, we are minor beings next to the totality of the universe, and this “wisdom” can comfort us. This seems to imply that we are so small we can take comfort in the limited damage we can do.51 At the end of his book Beauty in Photography, Adams wrote that we need to come to terms with cities and somehow find hope in them, since, he reluctantly admitted, humanity and our works ultimately are part of nature. He quoted the British Romantic poet Coleridge, who found beauty in “the unity of the manifold, the coalescence of the diverse.”52 This sense of wholeness rarely comes through in Adams’ photography, however. His images suggest that westerners have turned their backs on this inclusiveness with nature, having traded it for a melancholy materialism. This is similar to Donald Worster’s argument that Americans have attempted to set themselves apart and above nature to an unrealistic extent.

Lewis Baltz’s three books, The New Industrial Parks of Irvine,

50 Robert Adams, Beauty in Photography, pg 107 - 108.
51 Ibid., pg 104.
52 Ibid., pg 105 - 108.
California, (1974), Park City, (1980), and San Quentin Point, (1986), are portfolios of black and white photographs that, like much of Robert Adams' work, describe the transformation of western topography. The photographs show open, natural areas that are being, or have been, covered by litter and functional but characterless, housing and industrial developments. New Industrial Parks is a visual exploration of somber factory buildings, Park City shows the residential growth of that Utah tourist town, and San Quentin Point is a photographic study of a trash inundated section of open land in the Bay Area, California. Again similarly to Robert Adams' photographs, Baltz's images are about commonplace things: housing construction, litter, and workplace exteriors. Although Baltz focused on subjects that are commonplace and accessible, people generally do not examine them since they are unpleasant. And the way Baltz shot them increases their unpleasantness, and gives them an air of cool detachment.

The photographs have a detached mood partly because Baltz used lenses that approximate angles of view that appear normal to our eyes, and shot below overcast skies that made for even, revealing light. Without deep shadows, the pictures have a clinical clarity, are hard, cold, and have an air of objectivity. Baltz heightened the illusion of objectivity by giving the pictures titles with an element of documentary precision. In New Industrial Parks, every picture title includes the name of the company, city and street location of each building, and which side of the structure Baltz depicted. Although the

54 Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams, along with eight other photographers, took part in an influential photography exhibit entitled New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, in 1975 at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. Although the exhibit explored an alternative to landscape as wilderness, it was not about the West in particular, but about the United States as a whole.
pictures are fairly accurate representations of what was in front of the camera at the moment Baltz released the shutter, this does not make them neutral statements, of course. They are highly biased. The ways Baltz made them seem objective, the open light, normal visual perspectives, and the long, precise titles, are themselves the artifice of the work.

In *The New Industrial Parks*, Baltz portrayed the parks as if they exist in the margins of society, on a plain apart from everyday life. The pictures have this atmosphere partly because the buildings are on the physical peripheries of urban living space, popping up near cities across the West. They often have been built in the open areas between towns, as in the area between Oakland and Monterey, California, where fields and orchards that once separated towns have been replaced by gray monoliths. In *East Wall-Western Carpet Mills* a grassy expanse, vital in the wind and sun, extends across the foreground, in contrast to the dull, lifeless building in the distance.\(^5\)

In addition, the pictures convey a sense of disconnection through their formal elegance. There is a wonderful tension between the plains, angles, and lines in the images. *South Corner-Precision Winding Company* is an assortment of rectangles - a doorway, two walls, a garage door, a ladder, and the picture frame itself - that rhythmically play off each other.\(^6\) Most of the compositions are filled by building exteriors and include little sky and ground, and appear so ordered, tidy, and deliberate, that they look like architects’ illustrations or models.

Another reason that the industrial parks seem disassociated from

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55 Baltz, *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California*. plate # 17 - East Wall, Western Carpet Mills, 1231 Warner, Tustin
56 Ibid., plate # 11 - South Corner, Precision Winding Company, 3182B Airport Loop Drive, Costa Mesa
everyday life is that Baltz did not include any people working in the structures and they seem deserted, yet they are obviously maintained. They are clean and have no chipping paint, so we know they must be used. But Baltz never shows workers going about their tasks, or trucks coming and going. The buildings resemble stage sets kept prepared for actors who never arrive. Without people to provide animation in the images, the structures seem sterile.

Baltz emphasizes the starkness of the buildings by often using tight camera shots and even light. Few of the pictures have deep shadows that would have provided mystery and drama. Rather, Baltz focused in close, presenting the buildings in open, revealing light, leaving little to the viewers' imagination, and making it all the more obvious how bleak the structures really are. If he had included dramatic clouds in the compositions, with the sun low on the horizon and the lighting angled, the buildings may have looked less forbiddingly cold. As well, the lengthy, specific titles contribute to the stark look of the buildings, since the claim that the extensive titles make on the distinctive identity of each site is belied by the visual evidence. The locations appear nearly indistinguishable, and after looking through all 58 pictures, the discrepancy between each unique title and each similar looking photograph gives the portfolio an absurdist bent.

However, the sterility of the buildings was not all due to Baltz's efforts. He magnified what was already repetitive, ugly, architecture. These work spaces look as if they have been made as functional as possible, with little concern for beauty or character. Some of the images, such as South Wall-Semicoa show shrubs and small trees planted next to the buildings in a futile
attempt to make them appear inviting. But these organic elements look out of place, are overwhelmed by their concrete environment, and only serve to accentuate the coldness of the structures.

Baltz’s images of industrial plants depict two aspects of the West many Americans have valued highly, space and nature, as vanishing. Americans have considered space one of the defining characteristics of the West, and have given it all sorts of positive connotations: space to grow, space as possibility and freedom. Baltz portrays a West where space has been collapsed into a maze of asphalt slabs and where nature seems an alien element.

Park City is similar to New Industrial Parks in that both portfolios show workplaces devoid of human activity. In Park City Baltz photographed houses in various stages of construction, with excavations for cellars and foundations, partially built walls, and building materials laying scattered about. And again, the divergence between the activity of construction we know has occurred, and will occur again, and the seemingly perpetual stillness the viewer witnesses in one image after another, creates a disconnected, almost surreal, atmosphere. The housing developments appear to exist in a crack in time, which makes them strange and ominous.

Park City’s detached mood, however, does not obscure the process of transforming the landscape that the portfolio depicts. The economic boom and explosion in housing construction we witness in Park City mirrors the growth of the West in general, and specifically, the repeated story of a number of old western mining towns during the 1960s and 1970s, such as Alta, in Utah, Ketchum, in Idaho, and Crested Butte and Breckenridge, in Colorado, that have gone from near ghost town status to upscale, expensive ski areas.

57 Ibid., plate # 36 - North Wall, Semicoa, 333 McCormick, Costa Mesa pg 143
Despite the new economic booms, some of these towns, such as Telluride, Colorado, have managed to retain their historic appearance better than others, such as Park City.

Affluence does not necessarily produce fine architecture. The new houses Baltz pictured in *Park City* are unpleasant and characterless. Many of the photographs describe the grim new topography people are creating, in contrast to the stunning, surrounding landscape. In *Between West Sidewender Drive and State Highway 248, looking southwest*, pathetic mounds of earth bulldozed together when construction crews prepared the lots for construction, mimic the Wasatch Range, which looms above them, as if these human works are hopeless compared with nature's majesty. Baltz seems to be mocking what Americans have made of the opportunities the West presented them. *Park City, interior, 34*, a painted white wall with electrical outlets half installed, is a concise statement of Baltz's take on modern American endeavors in the West. The blank, incomplete wall implies possibility - perhaps the possibilities of the West when Euro-Americans arrived there. However, judging by the dreary-looking finished homes in other of Baltz's photographs in the portfolio, the apparent possibilities of that uncompleted wall are false expectations: the finished product will be as esthetically and spiritually vacant as the wall now looks.

As with *New Industrial Parks* and *Park City*, *San Quentin Point* describes another "margin" in society, though of a different sort than in Baltz's previous two books. While in *New Industrial Parks* he focused on places of production of goods, and in *Park City* he dealt with home construction, it seems appropriate that Baltz finished his trilogy by portraying

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58 Baltz, *Park City*, plate # 7, plate # 95.
the discarded debris of a post-industrial consumer society. *San Quentin Point* is a study of garbage left in an open bushy area not far from Baltz’s home in Marin County, California. Although the site is located in a major western metropolis, the Bay Area, these open, littered areas border most urban areas and highways nationwide. Baltz presented an intimate view of refuse strewn landscape, sharply focusing on small areas. Chunks of cement, plastic containers, bottles, cardboard, rugs, a spray can, magazines, paint containers, clothing, asphalt siding, aluminum siding, plastic sheets, nails, wire, chemicals of various consistencies, insulation, and metal shards lay amid, and nearly cover, wild grass and drooping bushes.

These photographs momentarily remind one of Edward Weston’s close-up studies of discarded items decomposing, and rusting abandoned equipment at old mining towns. But the connection is superficial. Weston treated organic remains and industrially produced remains in the same way pictorially. In his pictures the deteriorating objects sit in a peaceful repose of death, slowly drawn back into the earth in a process that reflects the interconnectedness of all things. By contrast, in Baltz’s photographs, thrown away manufactured goods seem in opposition to nature, and overwhelm the land. The pictures describe a post-industrial hell, with nature lost in the trashed terrain.

In *Plate # 39* a partially melted gelatinous heap of rubber looks like a brain oozing from someone’s head. Like Robert Adams’ portraits of assaulted trees, a branchless tree stands alone, dying or barely surviving in *Plate # 43*. Some of the objects he photographed, such as a pile of nails held together by some sort of hardened glue, divorced from their surroundings, would be attractive forms sculpted by the weather, like pieces of driftwood hung from
the ceiling. However, Baltz photographed them in the context in which they were created, in a toxically polluted landscape. He never brings the camera in so close that they become abstract designs on the one dimensional plane of the photograph. Although fascinating to look at, Baltz never lets the viewer forget these are part of an ugly, dangerous environment.

San Quentin Point may be what the whole planet will look like in a few hundred years. In the twentieth century a large part of the world population became consumers of manufactured goods. By the end of the twenty first century, the rest of the world may be engulfed in consumerism too. Or, an alternate interpretation is that the broken up household goods and building materials, scraggly bushes, and pools of foul looking water in some of the photographs remind one of war zones, of bombed out towns. Ironically, the site is near what are considered some of the most beautiful places in the Bay Area. To the south is the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco and to the west is Muir Woods National Monument.

In conclusion, once again, I emphasize that the detached atmosphere of Baltz' portfolios does not mean that he was emotionally detached or unbiased toward his photographic subjects. The pictures may appear straightforward because Baltz made a series of subjective decisions, of choosing what to photograph, and how to do it, in terms of quality of light, perspective, and captions.

Baltz's trilogy condemns the topographical transformation of the West, the covering of the landscape with garbage and functional but dismal looking homes and workplaces. Baltz's images are a logical consequence of the survey grid system, with its disregard for diverse land forms and regularity of its

59 Baltz, San Quentin Point, Plate # 39, Plate # 43, Plate # 55. pg 146
measurements, that was used to divide land in the late eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries as Americans moved west. He envisioned the West as
over-rationalized; westerners have disrespected and sacrificed natural beauty
for materialism and utility. Baltz's pictures suggest that if we look with
intense scrutiny at the western landscape and not ignore the parts that are
unpleasant, the horror of how Americans are altering it is revealed.

While Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams focused on commonplace
subjects, Richard Misrach depicted extraordinary landscapes that people have
seldom observed. In his ongoing photographic exploration of American
deserts he began in 1979 and calls "Desert Cantos," Misrach has avoided
National Parks and their crowds, such as Death Valley and the Grand Canyon,
preferring flatter, less dramatic areas. In a 1992 interview Misrach described
the Desert Cantos;

I began the 'Desert Cantos' project around 1979. For over a decade, I
have been searching the deserts of the American West for images that
suggest the collision between 'civilization' and nature.60

Misrach's photographs do show, sometimes with subtlety, sometimes with
straightforward, brutal force, that the United States has indeed collided with
nature. Misrach portrayed the desert West as a marvelous landscape
suffering from irresponsible exploitation, unwise irrigation projects,
dangerous, secret military operations, and as a dump for nuclear waste. His
images not only show that Americans have used their power to alter the
environment unwisely, but are also humbling, pointing to how small
humans are compared to the enormity of the land. And Misrach depicts
westerners themselves as weary and resigned.

Misrach devoted two cantos to environmental portraits, The

Inhabitants and The Visitors. Misrach’s view of westerners was sympathetic, though hardly uplifting. The portraits reveal a stoicism also evident in Avedon’s westerners, but without the bitterness. Misrach’s westerners are complacent and seem resigned to their lives, and a sadness permeates the portfolio. In Woman Watering Roses, Tucson, Arizona, 1982, an old woman in her bathrobe waters her roses while her poodle, with the same curly gray hair as the woman’s, looks on. Her house is not impressive, nor is her garden verdant, though her roses are gorgeous and obviously carefully tended. With her pensive expression, one imagines she is reflecting back over her life. In Boy Scouts and Fremont’s Pyramid, Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation, Nevada, 1991, one would expect the boys, who look about eleven years old, to be splashing around in the water, but instead they are standing oddly still, looking uneasy, waste deep in the lake. In Marines, Cabezon, California, 1980, we see four marines, those steely-jawed men of action, gazing at the camera, appearing anything but strong and fierce. One has a lackadaisical expression. Another, with hunched shoulders, stomach hanging over his belt, and a tired face, looks like he has eaten too many hamburgers. A marine in the middle gingerly holds a puppy to his chest with both hands, and has a big sweet smile. A woman reclines on a rubber raft in a swimming pool in Sunbather, Palm Springs, California, 1985.

The optimistic vitality that supposedly infused nineteenth century pioneers is not evident in these portraits. The passivity of Misrach’s westerners suggests that Frederick Jackson Turner was wrong to assume that the tough, hopeful drive of westering emigrants would survive once they

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61 By “environmental portraits” I mean a portrait made outside a studio. Avedon’s portraits are a sort of compromise, for he used a portable studio.


pg 148
settled frontier areas. A somber older man stands amidst pictures of John Wayne in *Hollywood Stunt Men’s Hall of Fame Museum, Cabezon, California, 1984.* The photograph points to the seeming drabness of the contemporary West when compared to the imagined heroism of the nineteenth-century West. John Wayne personified “true grit” to many Americans, a set of qualities - decisiveness, integrity, resiliency, and independence - they thought nineteenth-century cowboys possessed.

At the same time, however, the picture throws doubt on the validity of the terms of the comparison, on past heroics versus current dullness. After all, John Wayne and Hollywood stunt men were reenacting what twentieth-century writers and directors imagined the Old West to be. Have movies adhered more to the genuine spirit of the past or to a different set of needs and ideas from the present? In more general terms, the photograph points to the question that historians of the West debate; how mythologized has the nineteenth century West become?

In the canto *The Event I* Misrach extended his vision of human passivity in the West. The *Event I* is a “photo essay” on the landing of the space shuttle at the Edwards Air Force Base in California in 1983. Misrach manages to make the American push to the space frontier into almost a non-event. There is no excitement or drama in Misrach’s version of the landing. People stand, wait, and somberly watch a gray speck come out of the sky towards earth. Misrach subverts the potential impression of the shuttle landing as a triumph of modern technology by framing the spacecraft and the audience watching on the ground as small in relation to the space around them. The size of the desert and the sky is more impressive than the

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63 Ibid., pg 150.
64 Ibid., pg 74 - 79, & 110 - 115.
sensational of the shuttle moving toward earth.

_The Event I_, and Misrach's desert Cantos in general, often seem not so much about what people are doing in the desert, but how small people are compared to the enormity of the desert. By calling the Canto an event Misrach initially draws the viewer's attention to people's activities. Then the discrepancy between the Canto's title and the inactivity of the pictures becomes apparent. Once the viewer begins focusing more on the desert and less on the people, the landscape becomes grand and powerful, while by comparison people seem small. We become aware that events are happening in many of the pictures, but they have to do with the weather, sunrise and sunset, and cosmic forces, not the figures in the photographs. One gets a sense of movement from the quality of light, since Misrach usually shoots in the morning or evening when the sun is low on the horizon and envelopes the land in soft, glowing warm, light.\(^{65}\) We are aware that the light and shadows are in a state of flux. And as the viewer takes in the totality of the Cantos, not just one or two, the project assumes epical dimensions. Huge spaces, flood, and fire, (as portrayed in the canto _Desert Fires_,) while not cataclysmic, suggest the inevitability of change, off-setting the stillness of the pictures and giving them tension. Although people are in the pictures and part of the western terrain, they are part of something larger. Misrach's work challenges us to look beyond ourselves, to the forces of nature.

The stillness of people and things that are associated with speed and movement in Misrach's cantos deflates human pretensions to dominating the natural environment. Misrach pictures progressive modes of transport used to cross and conquer the vast spaces of the American West, but negates

\(^{65}\) Color photographers commonly call this time of morning or evening the "magic hour," and this quality of light "magic light."
their power by depicting them statically. We see a train in *The Santa Fe, 1982*, a car in *Chrysler Newport, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah, 1992*, and a plane, (untitled), all lying motionless in the desert. Misrach suggests Americans have taken their obsession with movement and speed to preposterous extremes in *Worlds Fastest Mobile Home, (96 mph), Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah, 1993*. Misrach considers the pictures metaphors for American foolishness in constantly attempting to overcome natural barriers.

Accompanying the canto *The Salt Flats* Misrach wrote,

> A century and a half later, the same salt desert that impeded the Donner party serves as the site for the Annual World Land Speed Records. Traversing a ten-mile, smooth stretch of salt flat at speeds from 100 to over 600 miles per hour, the racers, often unaware of the plight of their forebears, once again attempt to defy the limitations imposed by nature.  

These pictures and Misrach’s comments warn us, implicitly, of the potential disaster that may await modern Americans who do not respect the limits of nature. They recall Robert Adams’ admonition that if people want to understand nature they need to slow down in experiencing the land, and instead of only driving, they should spend some time walking the West, far from the city, looking and listening to everything around them. Historian Donald Worster advocates a related idea, saying that to form a healthy relationship with the land, westerners need to have a commitment to its long term well being, to understand its weather patterns, soil, etc. And they must be willing to adapt culture around the patterns of nature, instead of trying to overcome it and change it into something it is not.

Although most of the Desert Cantos deal with how the American

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67 Ibid., pg 152.
68 Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph*. pg 136 - 138. pg 151
impact has damaged the land, Misrach's pictures of the Salton Sea, a human-made lake in southern California, suggest a more complicated relationship with the environment. *The Flood* describes the inundation of vacation communities around the Salton Sea, caused by engineering inadequate to the task of efficiently harnessing water from the Colorado river for irrigation projects. The tops of cars, trucks, buildings, gas station pumps, and TV antennas poke up through the water.69 The Flood points to the risks of American efforts to drastically alter the environment. Yet Misrach's photographs of the Salton Sea in the canto *Desert Seas* are some of his loveliest. In *Salton Sea, Red, California, 1985*, and *Salton Sea, Brown, California, 1985*, the luminous light and colors that often are a backdrop to people or human artifacts in Misrach's work assume center stage.70 These pictures are unusually uplifting for Misrach, who generally portrays American stewardship of the land as a failure. The contrasting sets of photographs of the Salton Sea acknowledge the complexity of American impacts on the environment, that the way we modify the environment can be damaging and beautiful at the same time.

All three landscape photographers, Misrach, Baltz and Robert Adams, have sought alternatives to the classic, grand western landscapes such as images of Yellowstone and Yosemite. However, while Baltz and Adams explored the commonplace, Misrach focused on the remote. In contrast to Baltz and Adams, who concentrated on subjects familiar yet seldom closely observed by Americans, or the subject of art, Misrach's use of color, light, and location were unfamiliar. Misrach avoided the remarkable orange twisting rock formations of Utah in places such as Arches National Park, that are well-

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known and the subjects of hundreds of books, calendars, and photographs. Instead, he shot less dramatic, more flat and expansive deserts that are not major tourist attractions.

Misrach has found extraordinary beauty in these “plain” deserts that most Americans historically considered wastelands, better used for development into housing, ranch land, and farmland, if enough water could be brought in, than for aesthetic appreciation. Through his use of light, color, and space Misrach placed American deserts on the level of sublime grandiosity generally associated with mountains. Misrach seems to charm the light. Although he often captured the warm illumination of the early morning or late afternoon, he rarely pointed the camera at the sun, and avoided bright red and orange saturated sunset skies. Misrach prefers subtle but exquisite colors and effects of light, and uses print film for its ability to capture a wider range of light than slide film, which produces a more contrasty image with less detail in the shadows and highlights.

Americans were not ready to appreciate the desert esthetically until the twentieth century. They regarded deserts with abhorrence, as barriers to

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71 Tucker, Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach. pg 166 Western Utah, 1994, a flat stretch of desert with mountains looming in the distance, is one of Misrach’s most delicate pictures. There are no deep blacks, but all luminous, high key hues. Pink clouds hover in a light blue sky, above orange mountains with gray-purple shadows and pale green bushes. Misrach’s desert aesthetic has precedents both in photography and in painting. The luminosity of Misrach’s colors are reminiscent of Mark Rothco’s abstract color studies and J.M.W. Turner’s landscapes.

The New Mexican art colonies established in Taos and Santa Fe that estheticized the desert beginning about the turn of the nineteenth century preceded both O’Keeffe’s desert paintings and Misrach’s Desert Cantos. The artistic community that gathered around Ernest Blumenschein, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Mary Austin from the 1900s to the American entrance into World War II in 1941, embraced not only the desert but the vibrant New Mexican cultural mix of Hispanic-Americans, Native Americans, and whites. The vortex of the Taos and Santa Fe art colonies drew in not only painters, writers, and intellectuals, but photographers too. Paul Strand and Ansel Adams both visited Taos, and Adams and Mary Austin collaborated on a book together, Taos Pueblo, in 1929.


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settlement and movement. The Great Basin, where Misrach shot many of his Desert Cantos, was a formidable obstacle facing overland emigrants before the cross-continental railroad was completed in 1869. Deserts have become more attractive to Americans as technological advances, such as good roads, cars, and air-conditioning, have made arid areas seem less threatening. The way nineteenth century photographers were received by the public illustrates this changing cultural bias. Where as in the second half of the twentieth century Timothy O'Sullivan's photographs of the desert have been widely admired, in the nineteenth century he did not receive public acclaim comparable to that which greeted Eadweard Muybridge, William Henry Jackson, and Carleton Watkins, all of whom photographed mountains.

Misrach's Desert Cantos depict Americans as posing a far greater threat to the land, and to themselves, than the threat that the land poses to people. In Bravo 20 Misrach documented the illegal use by the U.S. Navy of public lands near Fallon, Nevada, as a bombing range. The Test Site is a visual record of nuclear waste sites and areas subjected to radioactive leaks or fallout. The Pit is an exploration of a disposal site for dead livestock north of Fallon, Nevada, where Misrach suspected radioactive waste was poisoning farm animals. The canto The Playboys, is a series of photographs of pages from bullet-riddled copies of Playboy magazine.

While exploring the northwest corner of the Nuclear Test Site, Nevada, in 1988, Misrach found two copies of Playboy magazine that had been used for rifle target practice. Realizing that the shot-up pages could be considered metaphors for contemporary social issues, Misrach photographed

75 Misrach. Violent Legacies - Three Cantos. pg 38-82.
portions of the magazines:

For me, this Canto is really important because it ties in with militarism and environmental degradation. The *Playboys* is not about *Playboy* magazine at all; it’s just a mirror for our culture, for violence against women and violence based on gender, race and class.\(^76\)

I realized that the women on the covers of both magazines were the intended targets, but that in the bullet’s passage through the remaining pages, other symbols of our culture were randomly violated, too. The violence that was directed specifically at the women symbolically penetrated every layer of our society.\(^77\)

By photographing pieces of the shot-up magazine pages and then enlarging them, Misrach re-contextualized the ‘found’ objects. An image of cowboys rounding up horses, torn by bullets, could be a metaphor for the end of the “Wild West,” or a symbolic ripping apart of the cowboy myth of romance and heroism in the nineteenth century West. The title of the piece, *Playboys #97 (Marlboro Country)* gives it another twist; we find that the image originally was created for surely one of the longest running and successful advertisement campaigns of all time, of cowboys smoking Marlboro cigarettes.\(^78\) *Playboys #97* points to how images portraying the mythic adventure and romance of the West have been commercialized and used to sell products that have no intrinsic connection to the West.

*The Playboys* addresses how images are taken out of context, reproduced, and tweaked so their meanings are changed. In art-historical parlance this has been referred to as “appropriation.” *Playboys #92 (Madonna)* depicts rock star Madonna in her Marilyn Monroe phase of appearance, her face riven by cracks and slashes from bullets. With this


\(^{78}\) Ibid., pg 81.
image Misrach has rephotographed an already altered (by bullets)
reproduction of a photograph of a 1980’s pop singer imitating the look of a
1950’s movie star. Artistic recontextualizing is not new, of course. The
photographer Walker Evans took black and white photographs of parts of
ripped, weathered billboards in the 1930s. Marcel Duchamp created his
famous recontextualization The Fountain (1918) when he turned a urinal on
its side, signed it, and pronounced it a work of art. One of the best known
forms of recontextualizing is not “high art;” rap music artists often build new
songs around samples of old songs, or include snippets of other songs in a
new song. The Playboys is part of this twentieth century tradition of
“appropriation,” and is Misrach’s recontextual spin on the American West
and American culture at the end of the twentieth century.

These cantos fall between journalistic, documentary, and fine art
photography, and are exposes on what Misrach believes are pressing social
issues; the use of the desert West as a dumping ground for nuclear waste, the
extensive presence of the United States military in the West, and that
establishment’s covert projects and abuse of the landscape in the West;

American identity is based so much on the idea of the Ulysses myth of
the white male who runs around taking on all sorts of obstacles, and
conquering them, too, but destroying them in the process. Possibly the
first model in this country is the cowboy, the white male on a horse
with a six-gun on his hip....

Now, the old cowboy myth doesn’t really function anymore; the
Frankenstein myth might be more appropriate. Government agencies
and individuals are taking large tracts of land and experimenting on
them with really dangerous materials. These agencies fool around
with the powers of the universe - biological, chemical, electronic and
nuclear - and their actions affect the immediate and global
environments. Militarized America is a big, invisible giant which
nobody seems to be aware of, partially because it’s hidden in

79 Ibid., pg 76.
America's rural outback.\textsuperscript{81}

The presence of the Military in the West that so disturbed Misrach is a legacy of World War II and the Cold War. The Federal Government established and promoted the creation of defense industries, military bases, and research facilities during the early 1940s. An expansion of the military in the West made sense not only because of the proximity of the Pacific war, but because western topography and climate suited the armed forces. With plenty of clear days of flying weather, a relatively sparse population, and lots of space for maneuvers, the West has been an ideal place for military bases and training.\textsuperscript{82} With the Cold War following soon after the end of World War II, and with a physical, educational, research, and economic infrastructure largely in place, the size of the military in the West remained large.\textsuperscript{83}

In 1986 Misrach became involved in the struggle of several communities around Fallon, in central Nevada, which sought to limit military activity in the area. With the build-up of the armed-forces in the 1980s, adverse pressure on communities from nearby military bases increased. Livestock died from unknown causes, sonic booms caused by jets breaking the sound barrier increased in number, aircraft maneuvering at nearly tree level over homes occurred more often, and ground water supplies were contaminated by military toxic spills. Protesters rallied around Bravo 20, a 64-square-mile area of public land northeast of Fallon, that the U.S. Navy had been illegally bombing since 1952. Incensed locals, environmental groups, and members of the Northern Paiute (for whom the sight holds religious

\textsuperscript{81} Misrach, "A Conversation with Richard Misrach," pg 18.
significance), occupied the area after having staked a claim under the Mining Law of 1872, which allows one to make a claim on public land if one believes the ground contains valuable minerals. Misrach bought a share of the claim, and for a year and six months he photographed the devastated tract of desert. In 1990 this project was published in a book entitled *Bravo 20*. With the passage of the 1986 Military Lands Withdrawal Act, the Navy had 15 years before it had to leave Bravo 20. Misrach’s pictures of Bravo 20 are of the center of military activity, Lone Rock, and reveal a landscape torn by bomb craters and replete with real and ‘dummy’ shells, shrapnel, rusting debris blown apart during target practice, including a school bus, cars, trucks, and armored personnel carriers.84 *Crater and Destroyed Convoy* shows half-buried shards of metal and vehicles scattered across the desert, and a shell hole filled with red, noxious liquid.85

*Bravo 20* ends with Misrach’s proposal to turn the site into a National Park, the nation’s “first environmental memorial,” in 2001, when the Navy’s right to use the land expires. Misrach had an architectural firm submit a proposal for the park, including projected costs and sketches of a camping area, boardwalk across the shell-holes, visitors center, museum, and site plaques.

Like *Bravo 20*, *The Test Site* reveals how areas of the West have been dangerously polluted. The written commentary with *The Test Site* goes beyond aiding or complementing the photographs, and is indispensable to what Misrach wants the photographs to communicate. If there were no text accompanying *The Test Site*, the meaning of the images would be obscured.

84 Misrach and Misrach, *Bravo 20 - The Bombing of the American West*. pg xiii - xv, 1 - 48; I have related R. Misrach’s and M.W. Misrach’s version of these events. Other parties, such as the U.S. Navy, would undoubtedly describe the events differently.
85 Ibid., pg 75.
Snow Canyon State Park, Utah 1987 depends on Misrach’s statement that the area was subject to the fallout of early atomic testing. By 1979 all the stars of the movie The Conqueror that was filmed there in 1954 had died of cancer, including John Wayne, and a third of the cast had cancer. Yet the government has claimed that the fallout did not and does not pose a danger. With photographs of Rocky Flats, Colorado, Misrach includes a letter to “prospective residents” warning them of the “varying levels of plutonium contamination” from the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant.\textsuperscript{86} The letter turns the photograph New Home Construction, Rocky Flats, Colorado, 1987 from just a house being built in a pretty field to an exercise in folly.\textsuperscript{87} Likewise, Misrach’s text gives meaning to Nineteen-Foot, Diamond-Studded Chain Saw, Yucca Mountain, Nevada, 1994;

In 1987 Congress selected Yucca Mountain, Nevada, as the sole site under consideration for the world’s first high-level radioactive waste dump. Located on the western rim of the Nuclear Test Site, some eighty-five miles northwest of Las Vegas, Yucca Mountain is far from being a safe repository. Not only is the area riddled with earthquake faults, but years of nuclear explosions at the nearby Test Site have weakened and ruptured the surrounding surface structure.\textsuperscript{88}

The Pit is a series of photographs made between 1987 and 1989 of huge holes in the desert of Churchill County, Nevada, where the county encouraged locals to dump their dead animals. Whereas Bravo 20 is bittersweet in its combination of desert beauty and destruction, The Pit is a vision of pure horror. Rotting horses, cows, and sheep lay piled upon one another in contortions, their eyes dripping out across their heads, and their

\textsuperscript{86} Tucker, Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach. pg 122 - 127.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., pg 127.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., pg 122; As of December 1998 the plan to use Yucca Mountain as a depository for 80,000 thousand tons of used reactor fuel is still not final, as groundwater flows through fissures in the rock more quickly than geologists had thought earlier. The project has cost $2.2 billion so far, and if completed, is estimated to cost $18 billion, H. Josef Hegert, “Report favorable of Nevada nuclear waste site,” Missoulian, 19 December, 1998, A9.
skin slowly peeling from their bones. Misrach's large-format, 8 x 10 inch color negatives render the scenes in gruesome detail. *Dead Animals # 396a* (Maggots, short exposure) is almost too grisly to look at - a horse, eye still intact, lying atop a pile of unrecognizable carcasses, covered in thousands of maggots. In *Dead Animals # 128*, bloody skinned heads, legs, and innards lay in a pile. *Dead Animals # 327* shows a horse completely buried in the earth except its front leg and head, its mouth open as if screaming in its moment of death.89

Although depository pits are used across the West, Misrach found that in the vicinity of the three pits he was photographing, not only was livestock dying in exceptionally large numbers, but a study conducted by the military found that toxic wastes, such as jet fuel and napalm, were leaking into the water table. Misrach's photographs led to an investigation of the pits in Churchill county by the Bureau of Reclamation. Several years later, however, in 1993, Misrach seemed to believe there was a Federal cover-up; "For the last five years, every time these issues come up and people in the government actually pursue them, they get moved out and the issue is dropped and they don’t talk to me anymore."90

Misrach’s *Desert Cantos* give the old phrase used to describe development of the land for human use, "improving the land," new irony. Misrach's *Desert Cantos* mirrors Donald Worster’s contention that American faith in society’s greater efforts to dominate the environment through ever more sophisticated technology is misplaced, for it can only lead to disaster. With *The Pit, Bravo 20, The Test Site*, and *The Flood* Misrach pictured our failing stewardship of the land. In the context of all the desert cantos, the

estrangement of Misrach's westerners seems a result of alienating themselves from the land. They look as out of place as the water hungry roses and swimming pools are in the desert.

Although in work such as The Pit, Misrach's photographs are shocking in their graphic brutality, they are not condemning modernization as a whole, the way Robert Adam's and Lewis Baltz' pictures often do. Projects such as Bravo 20 and The Pit have a specificity about them that make our problematic relationship with the land seem, perhaps, eventually soluble. Adam's images seem to indict our notions of progress, of advancing technology, of the settlement and exploitation of the land, and of cities. Misrach, Adams, and Baltz have made images that raise the viewer's consciousness about problems. But much of their work has a hopelessness about it, as if at a core level American culture is rotten.

The New Western Photography and the New Western History have paralleled each other in focusing on how Americans have failed in the West on an array of fronts, from treatment of the environment to social relations. Both groups were concerned that Americans have been so busy pushing the limits of nature that they are losing touch, or have lost touch, with nature. For Donald Worster, the American approach to the land has eroded democracy and caused environmental crises. Misrach's, Adams', and Baltz' photographs depict the society we have built in the West as separate from nature and an imposition on nature.

This first group of New Western Photographers has overdrawn the separation between modernism and nature, and it gives their work a narrowness in this regard. They rarely have made images of how Americans have altered the topography in ways that are beautiful but not disastrous.

pg 161
Perhaps their disgust with how Americans have changed and continue to change the environment in such devastating, ugly ways has made them unwilling to accept industrialism or post-industrialism as part of, or even complementary to nature. Their pictures of the West are marked by violence perpetrated against others, other species, and the environment: Avedon’s skinned sheep, Adam’s images of clear-cuts, Baltz’s photographs of plants poking through the rubbish at San Quentin Point, and Misrach’s portfolios The Pit, Bravo 20, and The Playboys.

Both revisionist historians and revisionist photographers have shared a distrust of optimism about the West. From their perspectives, western optimism has often been unwarranted and has too readily led to arrogance and foolishness. Where was the optimism in decimation of many animal species, such as the buffalo, or, as Richard White eloquently related in Roots of Dependency, in Indian groups facing disease, conquest, and losing their means of livelihood when their resource bases were destroyed? The “Negative West” photographers have portrayed a West at odds with the hope of Ansel Adams’ pristine landscapes. In their work, the promise of the West has been turned around; opportunity has become opportunism and redemption has become descent. Frank’s Westerners are disoriented, empty shells. Avedon’s Westerners are bereft both materially and spiritually. Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Richard Misrach’s work suggests more than mismanagement of the environment. Do our souls resemble the wasted, foul land of their photographs?

A second group of New Western Photographers would not take such

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91 Robert Adams, From the Missouri West. (New York: Aperture, 1980), pg 52, Clear-cut and burned, east of Arch Cape, Oregon; pg 56; Clear-cut along the Nehalem River, Tillamook County, Oregon.
an anti—modernist stance but rather a more balanced view, investigating not only the destruction Americans have wrought in the West but also the benefits and even the delights of late twentieth century society.
CHAPTER 5

The American West Processed & Canned:
The New Western History pt. II

The work of three photographers, David Levinthal, Mark Klett, and Len Jenshel, like that of Misrach, R. Adams, and Baltz, offers alternatives to the traditional western imagery of triumphalist narratives and magnificent wilderness, yet is less pessimistic, and more playful and irreverent. Klett has a keen eye for material culture and his photographs speak to the interaction between environment and people through time in the West, and address contemporary issues such as land use and recreation. Levinthal’s photographs of miniature dioramas of stereotyped Old West episodes cast doubt on the traditional version of western history by suggesting its narrowness, absurdity, and fabrication. Jenshel explored changes in western topography with both humor and bitterness, and used his visual wit to criticize the cliched pristine wilderness of popular western imagery.

Jenshel undermined the mythical view of the West by dealing with the reputed romanticism of the nineteenth century West with skepticism, and by revealing the modern West as mundane, a place of laundromats, motels, and parking lots. Westerners did not create a “society to match the scenery;” rather, his photographs contrast a humble, ordinary, slightly silly American civilization with a staggeringly beautiful landscape. In Near Zion National Park, Springdale, Utah, 1988, a road and neon hotel sign sit below the fiery
cliffs of the park, glowing red at sunset.¹ He framed the enormous buttes in Monument Valley with a car and a parking lot in *The Mittens, Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park, Arizona, 1985.*²

Like Robert Adams, Jenshel undercut the traditional photographic view of the West as pure nature by acknowledging the ubiquity of people in the region. In his photograph of Monument Valley, *The Mittens,* he could have stepped forward ten feet to avoid the parking lot. Similarly, in *Great Basin National Park, Nevada, 1987,* Jenshel could easily have repositioned his camera to exclude the road and stop sign that appear in the foreground, and gotten a classic western sunset.³ When Jenshel did photograph wilderness, he found ways to avoid grand landscape views. *Grand Prismatic Spring, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, 1990,* would be a conventional tableau were it not for the large cloud in the center of the picture obscuring our view.⁴

Jenshel portrayed the intrusion of modernity in the West less shockingly and more obliquely than Misrach or Baltz. A mural of buffalo browsing on the plains painted on a wall next to a filthy parking lot in *Lander, Wyoming 1991* makes the lot more pleasant for a moment, until one thinks about the scene.⁵ The contrast between past and present is forceful; the mural is a sad reminder of the changing topography, of the littered concrete covering this spot where buffalo once grazed.

Jenshel visually explored the gulf between nature and modern culture. *Best Western Mammoth Hot Springs, Gardiner, Montana, 1990,* is a metaphor

²Ibid., pg 53.
³ Ibid., pg 21.
⁴Ibid., pg 43.
⁵Ibid., pg 50.
for our distant relationship with nature.\(^6\) The inorganic right angles of the hotel interior, the mounted elk head on the wall, and the small window through which the land appears far away, imply separation and control. Our civilization has been able to remove nature to a safe distance - yet the sterility of the hotel suggests that, in our effort to manipulate the world around us, we have lost something, a spiritual interconnectedness between nature and culture. Donald Worster made the same point in *Rivers of Empire* and *Dust Bowl*.

Jenshel's photographs show how Americans have drawn nature into our consumer culture. He used the car as his central motif, examining the automobile's integral role in how we experience the western landscape. His images reveal the way we package natural landmarks so we can visit them conveniently by car; the escarpments and scenic overlooks, and the web of good roads and rest stops giving tourists access to distant national parks.

When asked why he often included this human "paraphernalia" in his landscape photographs, he replied,

> Because that's what's there....I'm interested in how these places are being used. They were once natural and now they're more like museums or Disneyland.

Most people go to the national parks, drive their car to the vista point, get out and take a picture, or sometimes they snap from inside the car. That's what my photograph with the open car door is largely about. "The Mittens" in Monument Valley is an instant symbol of the myth of the Great American West. John Ford's westerns were filmed in front of these classic buttes. What I tried to convey was something of the perverse relationship between the grandeur and the machine. Cars and buildings are what we sometimes feel most at home with in wide open spaces, rather than the splendor or uniqueness of the landscape.\(^7\)

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The long tunnel blasted through stone Jenshel portrayed in *Zion National Park, 1988,* illustrates how, in the process of enabling people to experience nature, we radically alter it. The infrastructure we have built to visit the outdoors in our cars points to the irony that we are turning these nature preserves into the developed, polluted, crowded places we seek to escape. In the process of enabling people to make pilgrimages to these natural shrines, some of the essential qualities that draw us to these places have been destroyed: solitude, the sounds of birds and wind blowing through the trees uninterrupted by city noise, the slower rhythms of nature instead of the rush of cars and people in urban areas, and black nights with bright stars unimpaired by the glow of city lights.

Do these images of the paved over landscape and a tunnel blown through solid rock, and Jenshel's comments that we have turned nature into an amusement park, betray a belief that not only is modernism inherently in opposition to nature, but also that Americans have succeeded in dominating and packaging nature? Perhaps. However, he also has made photographs that contradict these ideas. Jenshel's pictures of cars in the landscape, along with alienation from nature, impart the romance of the automobile too. One gets the sense, looking at *Joshua Tree National Monument, California, 1990,* of a Joshua tree lit an attractive luminous red by the taillight of Jenshel's car, that the relationship between nature and technology is not necessarily antithetical, and that Jenshel enjoys exploring the West in his car. His picture *Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, Hawaii, 1991,* of a highway engulfed by lava, is a forceful representation of the ultimate strength of natural

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8 *ibid.,* pg 18.
9 *ibid.,* pg 15.
phenomenon.10 This image is mirrored by Donald Worster’s admonition that we should not underestimate the power of nature, for just as we think we have gotten a firm hold of an environment, it may turn around and bite us, as with the Dust Bowl on the Great Plains in the 1930s.

Unlike Misrach, who photographed out-of-the-way, seldom pictured locations in the West, Jenshel often photographed Western icons, but shot them in an original way:

The challenge of the ‘cliche’ is something that fascinated me the very first time I picked up color film. Transcending the cliche becomes the prime issue. Is there a way to make an intelligent photograph of a sunset after all the horrible things that calendar art and advertising photographs have done with that genre?11

Jenshel often moved beyond the typical views of the western landscape as sunsets and grand vistas by incorporating them into his images, and then including other, less conventional elements in the frame - a process like Marcel Duchamp painting LHOOQ (1919), in which he painted a facsimile of the Mona Lisa and then added on a mustache.12 In Dante’s View, Death Valley National Monument, California, 1990, Jenshel included the front of his car in the photograph, its headlights shining on the desert floor beneath a classic, glowing orange sunset.13 In Goulding’s Lodge, Monument Valley, Utah, 1987, wagon wheels rest against a rickety old wooden fence, with the towering buttes in the distance, silhouetted by sunlight fading into the night sky.14 Bright orange pylons sit in the foreground, mimicking the shape of the buttes. The scene without the pylons would resemble a nostalgic meditation on a heroic past, of pioneers traversing a majestic land. The pylons - a

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10 Ibid., pg 57.
11 Ibid., pg 11.
13 Jenshel, Travels in the American West, pg 27.
14 Ibid., pg 31.

pg 168
warning that construction is going on - add skepticism and suggest that the heroic narrative was self-consciously fabricated. The photograph throws into doubt the veracity of the epical West. Maybe it was all created by storytellers and script writers. We wait for John Wayne to stride onto the set, the pylons to be removed, and filming to begin. Whether a natural icon, as in Dante's View, or the heroic pioneer narrative, as with Goulding's Lodge, Monument Valley, by adding to the cliches, Jenshel both acknowledged their power and at the same time thumbed his nose at them.

Jenshel used witty compositions to criticize what moderns have done to the western landscape. Ashton, Idaho, 1991, depicts a playful juxtaposition, the front of an off-white car in the near foreground melding with snow piled up against a wall, which has a mural of trees painted on it. Jenshel arranged the elements so the car hood appears to be a snowy plateau beneath the woods. On closer inspection, the photograph shows how Americans have replaced nature with buildings, paved streets, and cars, and then attempted to make up for it with a pathetic reproduction of what they destroyed.

Jenshel brought many of his themes together in Route 127 near Death Valley National Monument, California, 1990, a photograph of a view out the front windshield of a car. Reflected in the window are a half-eaten banana, yogurt, a piece of bread, and a bag of strawberries, all sitting across the dashboard. The picture speaks both to the distance from nature that driving "allows," and the car's convenience. Once, traversing the West was about walking it or riding on a horse or in a wagon. Now, one moves quickly in the comfort of an air-conditioned automobile, picking up refrigerated food at mini-marts along the way. The image is also his version, almost a spoof, of

\[15\] Ibid., pg 49.
\[16\] Ibid., pg 22.
the western open road, full of Jenshel's usual, understated humor. Instead of
the moody romance of a road disappearing into the hazy distance under vast
western skies, Jenshel shifted the emphasis from the exterior landscape -
which we see out the window, slightly out of focus - to his lunch, and the
snug interior of the car.

Like Jenshel, David Levinthal has played with conventionalized
imagery of the West in an original way. He photographed toy model figures
of 'cowboys and Indians,' building dioramas and 're-enacting' mythic
episodes from the Old West; a mounted Indian shooting a running buffalo
with a bow and arrow, gunfighters squaring off on a street, a cowboy lassoing
a Texas Longhorn, among others (all his photographs are untitled.)17
Levinthal's photographs are part of a long tradition in many media - painting,
drawing, film, and television - of depicting these iconographic images that
almost have come to define popular perceptions of the nineteenth century
West. In taking on the quintessential symbol and hero of the mythic West,
the cowboy, Levinthal dealt with a subject that has been portrayed with
increasing cynicism in the last thirty years. Since the 1960s westerns have
often featured amoral protagonists in movies such as The Wild Bunch (1969)

Levinthal's work derives much of its power from its combination of
romance and skepticism. His work is both nostalgic, and mocks nostalgia.
Levinthal used warm, orange and red lighting, and huge 20” x 24” negatives
that make for saturated, romantic color. He also used a large lens aperture, to
make for shallow depth of field in his images, with only a thin slice of the
scene in focus, revealing little detail, which makes it harder to tell that the

pg 46, 30, 45.
figures were not real people. In one photograph, a cowboy and his horse stand contemplating a distant sunset in a classic evocation of the cowboy as mediator between nature and civilization.\textsuperscript{18} Within the late nineteenth century Euro-American world view in which civilizing, in part, meant mastering nature, and living within nature's bounds meant succumbing to nature, the cowboy was exceptional in being able to be a part of both the "natural order" and "civilization." In another picture, Indians attack a covered wagon.\textsuperscript{19} The scenes are instantly recognizable and familiar. But something is curiously wrong. Because the figures are toys, the project radiates irreverence, which undercuts the epical quality of the pictures.

Unlike the work of other New Western Photographers, Levinthal's pictures are fabrications, not documents. But the pictures are surprisingly affecting, and seem like documents, and this tension throws doubt on the romance of the Old West. Levinthal distilled the stereotyped narratives to their essence, which gives them an immediacy. He captured the height of the action perfectly in a photograph of a cowboy roping a stallion.\textsuperscript{20} In a photograph of two gunfighters squaring off on a dusty street, he portrayed a pivotal moment before both men drew their pistols.\textsuperscript{21} Of course, there were no critical moments, and no action; Levinthal built static sets and photographed them. This act of construction is a metaphor for the whole epic West. The photographs, through their fabrication, draw our attention to the contrived quality of these western episodes.

Not only the scenes' fabrication, but the way that Levinthal put them together sets them apart from more conventional representations of the Old

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pg 21.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., pg 37.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., pg 15.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., pg 22.
West. The photographs afford us a distance from this well-worn imagery that a Remington painting or a John Ford western does not. Creating the scenarios with toys emphasizes the gulf between the mythic and the real West. The photographs both conform to the spirit of traditional works, and as miniature dioramas, suggest just how caricatured and limited these episodes are in a way that more realistic, serious representations do not. Most of the photographs have to do with action and danger, cowboys fighting with each other or with Indians. A square shouldered cowboy stands just inside a saloon, the ubiquitous swinging saloon doors just behind him, one hand on his hip, another hand ready to use his gun, and he exudes decisiveness, toughness, and vigor in the face of possible death. However, the authoritative fellow is only two inches tall, and the ridiculousness of the miniature figure assuming a larger-than-life heroic pose throws these scenarios and values into question.

The photographs also address the issue of gender, and portray the stereotyped gender roles of the mythic West at their most elemental, so we see just how shallow they are. Levinthal showed the extreme masculinity of the mythical West - he made almost no photographs depicting women. In Levinthal's photographs, the women are not only few, but passive. One woman stands on a train platform waving goodbye to someone leaving on the train. Another woman, a sunbonneted "prairie madonna" with babe in arms, contemplates the plains. By comparison, the men are active, riding horses, driving stage coaches, and fighting. Levinthal's West is a proving ground for conservative masculine characteristics; physical trials, strength, bravery, and stoicism. Levinthal showed that these mythologized gender

\[\text{22 Ibid., pg 25.}\]
\[\text{23 Ibid., pg 53, 51.}\]
roles, particularly of women, but of men as well, were limited.

Where Levinthal commented on the West of traditional imagery by pushing conventional representations “over the top,” by inflating the conventional aspects of already stereotyped imagery, Mark Klett approached it from another direction, grounding his photographs in fact and documentation. Klett explored western history, both of human-human and human-environmental relationships, as an alternative to representations of the West as pristine, idyllic landscapes. Klett made a thoughtful decision not to portray the western landscape as open and unpeopled because, simply, it was not, and he felt he could not portray it as such with integrity. While photographing the Grand Canyon near Toroweap Klett mulled over the challenge of how to depict the modern West;

This is no longer open territory from which one can count on the freedoms of solitude, or a setting in which one can wrestle control over destiny. Toroweap remains a landscape of impressive scale and beauty, which has not physically vanished with the 19th century, but is has been effectively changed by an increasing number of uses to the point where its status as wilderness has become problematic....

I wanted to make my own picture of the scene, but what might ordinarily be a simple act was suddenly loaded with responsibility: If I show a pristine landscape, do I overlook the growing human presence and invite viewing the canyon as an awaiting frontier? If I show signs of human influence do I accept or criticize them? If I feel disdain for what I see, should I advocate political activism or confirm the importance of what’s left and show that our relationship to the land need not be adversarial?...it didn’t feel possible, or wise, for me to avoid commenting on this landscape as an occupied territory: a place that the culture consciously manages to meet the growing demand for resources, urban expansion, defense, recreation, and more. I felt that re-exploring this place with a camera called for a different approach, one which also reexamines our relationship to wilderness, including the substantial role we play in defining it.24

Klett came to terms with these issues in this instance by including his own shadow in the photograph *View of the Grand Canyon in homage to William Bell, east of Toroweap*, 7/3/88. Another picture, *Boatman’s sandal point, San Juan River*, 9/27/90, a close up photograph of an indentation made by a plastic sandal sole in the moist earth, gently announces that moderns are here.

Other photographs portray a drastically altered landscape, and are critical of these alterations. However, instead of shocking the viewer, as Misrach did with his grisly photographs of mouldering farm animals, Klett implied danger through understatement and suggestion. In *Nuclear generating station, Palo Verde: 50 miles from Phoenix*, 1/4/86, Klett depicted the facility as an ominous protuberance on the horizon emitting smoke hundreds of feet into the air. Engineering oasis, *Central Arizona Project canal awaiting water*, 10/21/84, and *Holding Lake Mead: Hoover Dam*, 7/5/85, describe edifices to water control that could illustrate Worster’s *Rivers of Empire*. In the image of the dam, a cup of water, its lip pushed inward, rests on a wall in the foreground. The picture suggests American arrogance in our efforts to control the environment; the dam may crumple just as the cup has. The photograph is a warning not of what may come to pass, but of more of what has already occurred, as several dams in the West have collapsed, including southern California’s St Francis Dam in 1928, and Idaho’s

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25 Mark Klett, *Revealing Territory - Photographs of the Southwest by Mark Klett* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), plate 84. Photographer William Bell, while a member of the Geological and Geographical Survey of the 100th Meridian under George Wheeler, made a picture of the Grand Canyon in 1873 from the same vantage point that Klett made his photograph.

26 Ibid., plate 99.

27 Ibid., plate 43.

28 Ibid., plates 35-37.
Klett reversed the old frontier narrative; instead of pioneers trying to survive a harsh natural environment, non-human species are in peril from contact with people. Klett depicted the way people assault the landscape in a myriad of creative ways. His photograph *Bullet-riddled saguaro, near Fountain Hills, Arizona, 11/21/82,* of a cactus remaining standing despite a hail of bullets, is analogous to Robert Adams’ and Lewis Baltz’ photographs of tattered plants stubbornly resisting human onslaughts. In *Car passing snake, eastern Mojave Desert, 5/29/83,* the protagonist again is non-human, a snake, in danger from human encroachment. The viewer knows that there is a strong possibility that the snake, basking in the sun on a warm roadway, will be crushed to death by a car 30

Klett’s photographs are an alternative to the pristine images that appear disembodied from human influence. Klett has often made photographs that suggest narratives, pieces of the history of human interaction with western lands;

> What I wish my pictures could do is lessen the distance one often feels when looking at landscape photographs. It’s easy to have a sense of being removed in time, of being disconnected from place, or of seeing only monuments framed like photographic trophies. The longer I work, the more important it is to me to make photographs that tell my story as a participant, and not just an observer of the land. 31

Indeed, Klett’s treatment of western topography dissuades viewer detachment. His photographs reflect the continuing story of our long term and varied involvement with western lands. Klett’s photographs portray human interaction with the land through time, going back long before

29 Worster, *Rivers of Empire,* pg 309.
30 Klett, *Revealing Territory - Photographs of the Southwest by Mark Klett.* plates 4, 18.
31 *Ibid.,* pg 164.
Europeans arrived in North America, and echo Richard Whites' explorations in *Roots of Dependency* of how different Indian groups exploited the land. Rock used for shaping ancient tools, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, 5/26/86 shows permanent striations in the stone made over years by the Anasazi around 850 A.D. to 1150 A.D. His photographs record a series of artifacts recalling human habitation in the West - Reconstructed dance plaza, Wupatki ruins, Arizona, 7/3/83, and Potsherds left on a flat rock, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, 9/6/82. A car pockmarked by bullet holes in Ventilated sedan, east of Parker, Arizona, 1/5/86 recalls more recent history. For Klett, it seems, the land is not only witness to human history, but a sinew holding the human past together. Klett's pictures represent the land as a physical record of human history in the West.32

Klett's images not only depict how Americans have physically interacted with the western landscape, but remind the viewer that the act of envisioning the landscape can be a form of involvement. Klett makes us aware that the hand of the artist is involved in the process of image making, by using a pen to write the picture titles directly onto the front of his photographs. Klett repeats this point with Under the dark cloth, Monument Valley, 5/27/89, a photograph of the back of Klett's camera, a Monument Valley butte in the viewing screen, his hand holding the edge of the camera.33

As well, Klett's photographs impart a sense of history through their titles, and by Klett's inclusion of contemporary subject matter. Recording the dates that he took each picture on the front of every photograph locates them on specific historic dates and removes them from myth. Along with the titles, Klett deliberately included objects in his images that place them on a

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32 *Ibid.*., plates 48, 21, 13, 44.
Contrasting Ansel Adams’ and Klett’s versions of the same subject, the deserted Anasazi buildings, White House ruins, shows Klett’s concern for having the content of his pictures reflect when and where he made his photographs. In Adams’ picture, *White House Ruin* (1942), the structures are at once old, but also enveloped in a timeless romantic aura of slow decomposition, with nothing in the photograph to indicate when he made it.34 Adam’s image resembles the earlier photograph, *Ancient Ruins in the Canyon de Chelle, N.M.*, that Timothy O’Sullivan took from a nearby spot in 1873.35 Comparing the two pictures it appears that little had changed during the intervening sixty-nine years between the dates the photographs were made. By contrast, in Klett’s image *Sears hat at White House ruins, Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, 6/4/87*, by including a cowboy hat atop a barb wire fence in front of the ruins, Klett placed the shot in modern times.36

Klett’s photographic exploration of western history is decidedly not triumphalistic. *Palm at the site of Japanese internment camp, Poston, Arizona, 11/10/85* is a counterpoint to the West of freedom, a reminder of the shameful episode when American citizens of Japanese ancestry were forced from their homes and interned in detention camps in the interior West during World War II. A partially decomposed cow carcass and a lone cowboy boot lie in the shrubbery in *Cow with boot and bottle, south of Parker, Arizona, 1/15/87*, a wry take on the romantic ‘cowboy on the range.’ *Sign near Cameron, Navajo Reservation, 8/1/90*, proclaiming “Nice Indians behind you,” piques our sense of time; hostile Indians posing a threat to

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36 Klett, *Revealing Territory - Photographs of the Southwest by Mark Klett*. plate 71.
unwary motorists in the 1980s? The sign appears an anachronism, put up in response to the apprehension of overland migrants in the 1840s who feared Indian warriors waited behind every rock and shrub to ambush them. The reassurance the sign offers parodies those fears - in reality, during the 1840s Indians more often traded with overlanders than attacked them.  

Although Klett did not romanticize the Euro-American tenure in the West, whether in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, neither did he ascribe to a contemporary primitivism, as if paradise fell the moment Europeans set foot in the West. Many of his images invite multiple, varied interpretations, and tend to ask questions rather than make dogmatic statements. Does Playing desert golf, Moab, Utah, 5/21/89, a picture of a golf course in a desert valley, point to the indulgence and waste of using copious amounts of water for golf in the desert, or to progress, of a sophisticated infrastructure capable of maintaining a verdant lawn in an arid setting? Is View from the truck: driving below Comb Ridge, 6/19/89 a picture of the desert framed by a truck window, a condemnation of our reliance on the automobile and our distance from nature, or is it about the convenience, comfort, and enjoyment of driving the West in an air conditioned vehicle?

The complicated picture Klett's images draw of the West comes through powerfully in his exploration of recreation in the West. Dirt-bike loop, west of Henryville, Utah, 4/18/91 suggests the mountain biker's paradise Utah has become, particularly around Moab. Six pages from the visitor's logbook at Toroweap; remote point on the Grand Canyon, 8/18/86 document the outrage and disappointment of hikers at the increasing number of visitors, new conveniences such as paved roads, and frequent

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37 Ibid., plates 42, 63, 96.
38 Ibid., plates 86, 90.
sightseeing plane flights. These new developments that the hikers complain about imply new economic developments. Outdoor recreation, including skiing, fishing, hiking, and rafting are partially supplanting declining old western industries, such as mining, logging, and cattle raising. As greater numbers of outdoors people vacation in the West, outdoor recreation’s impact on the land may not be much more benign than the old extractive industries.39

Klett’s images are a counter-take to Anne Brigman’s images in which humans and nature interact beautifully and reciprocally, but seem to belong in a fantastic, magic realm. His complex depiction of the continuing inter-relationship between people and the western environment through history encourages viewers to recognize that we all impact the land, and therefore, we all share responsibility for the way we treat the land.

Both this second group of New Western Photographers and the New Western Historians have sought to reveal the narrowness and false romance of traditional views of the West. Levinthal’s photographs of “Wild West” dioramas capture a sense of how popular notions of the West have been contrived and shallow, particularly in terms of gender roles. Klett more than any of the other photographers portrayed the West as a place of long and varied human habitation, not the pristine landscape many traditional photographers and historians imagined it. In his images we find evidence of human interaction with the land over centuries, from Indian civilizations to the modern United States, and his photographs mirror Richard White’s discussion of Indian impacts on the land. Both Klett’s and Jenshel’s photographs of seemingly endless developments - houses, roads, dams, and

39 Ibid., plates 100, 58-60.
tunnels, complement Donald Worster's contention that American efforts to subdue and transform the landscape have been continuing and damaging to the environment and to ourselves. In *Legacy of Conquest* Patricia Limerick hammered away at these same issues, of the continuities of western history through the supposed end of the frontier in 1890, and its multi-ethnic and gendered and environmental dimensions.
Conclusion

Western photography and historiography have moved along much the same arcs, from a period commemorating the West in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, to a phase of questioning this positive outlook in the mid-twentieth century. In the later twentieth century they entered a third, revisionist period of rejecting the celebratory views and envisioning the West in newly critical terms.

The New Western History and the New Western Photography have followed similar paths in exploring the grim aspects of the West and its history, and have done so for much the same reasons. They have responded to the same societal attitudes toward the West, that Americans have considered it a wondrous landscape, a source of spiritual nourishment, economic opportunity, freedom, and nineteenth century adventure. Both photographers and historians have been part of the same cultural milieu that has demanded examining the past and present from the perspective of race, ethnicity, gender, and environment. They responded to - and advocated - these new priorities, reevaluating the West in severe terms, if not with outright pessimism, than with harsh judgments of the past and often with intense worry about the present and future. The New Western History and the New Western Photography, with nearly the same viewpoints from which to criticize the particular traditional outlooks of the West in their fields, show that a critical view of western history was not an "inside" development in either field, but instead represented larger cultural trends in American society. The New Western History, then, is neither so exceptional nor as
revolutionary as it appears.

The thrusts of the revisionist history and the revisionist photography mirror each other in a variety of ways. Both have investigated the price of American tenure in the West, emphasizing its violence, grossly unequal power relations between ethnic groups, and ecological degradation. They have refused to play to the notion of a heroic western past. For revisionist photographers part of de-mythologizing the West has involved turning their cameras onto westerners' everyday surroundings: housing developments, pollution, roads, and people. Instead of prolonging the fiction of an eternal, pristine landscape, they have portrayed a West that more nearly approximated their experiences of it in the late twentieth century. They have located the West in history instead of in timeless myth.

While photographers of the West have focused on new subject matter, some of the ideas and values associated with their imagery have remained the same. The old Romantic conviction that contact with nature is virtuous and spiritually restorative underpins their photographs. They have remained in awe of the western landscape, but the admiration at American ingenuity and determination to subdue the land so apparent in nineteenth century photographs of the West has turned into a mistrust of the benefits of modernism.

An area recently colonized by comparatively large numbers of humans, and with the majority of public land in the nation, the West is a symbol and a barometer of how well we can balance our existence with the rest of nature. According to revisionist photographers and historians, Americans have a dismal record so far. Revisionist explorations of Americans' adverse treatment of the western environment asks the question implicitly - and

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sometimes explicitly - what will Americans' place in nature be in the West of the future? Will Americans recklessly continue to use western lands as we have in the past, with more of the results the revisionist photographs exhibit - clear-cut hillsides, once open geography covered in office buildings and poisoned by nuclear waste - or will we adopt more responsible outlooks and practices?

The work of revisionist photographers and historians clashes with the American tenets that nearly unlimited personal liberty and endless economic growth are possible and desirable. Their work suggests that we will have to sacrifice some freedoms and economic benefits - by doing such things as controlling our numbers and balancing economic growth with sustainable land use - to prevent overtaxing our resources and preserve some space.

With the notable exception of Mark Klett's work, a self-centeredness underlies both the negative West and positive West photographs. Both points of view seem not to take into account that the West was inhabited for at least 11,000 years before Euro-Americans arrived. The pristine landscapes of Ansel Adams look as if God just created Western land, and it is waiting there fresh for Euro-Americans to do with what they want. Part of what makes these photographs optimistic is that they resemble a blank page waiting for us to 'write' on it what we want, as if they had not been 'written on' before. And looking at Misrach's and Robert Adams' work, one gets the feeling that native-Americans had a negligible impact on the natural environment, as if it took whites to transform it in any significant way. Indians certainly manipulated the flora and fauna of the land for their benefit. One example is the use of buffalo jumps, particularly used in the northern plains. Indians could not control how many bison were driven off
the edges of cliffs, and on some occasions many more bison were killed than could be used.

Are the revisionist photographs of the West any more truthful than Ansel Adams' landscapes? No, they are not - they are simply other truths. How constructive are they? As alternative interpretations, they present a more full view of the West. And if they heighten our awareness and provoke us to find responsible ways of treating the land and to lead more spiritually fulfilling lives, then certainly they will have been valuable. Yet the ‘negative West’ images of the first group of revisionist photographers are so pessimistic, they might as easily elicit self-absorbing despair from viewers as rousing us to salutary action.

Does the gender and race of the revisionist photographers play a role in explaining the New Western Photography? Is it chance that these photographers have been white men? Perhaps they feel guilt and responsibility for the messes in the West, realizing that the racist, sexist, environmentally abusive society built in the West was spear-headed by white males. The reevaluation of the West in photography is probably also part of men coming to grips with changing conceptions of masculinity. The West has had powerful symbolic meaning as an old style, tough, virile proving ground. And having recently grasped the downside of the region and its history and mythology, men may be particularly disillusioned since they have had more invested and at stake in the symbolic West than women.

Another consideration that may explain the grim pictures of revisionist photographers is that some of them - Frank, Avedon, and Jenshel - come from outside the West. If they had formed preconceptions of the West based on its romantic, rugged, wild reputation, this could have led them to
disappointment when confronted with the actual West, and their extraordinarily high expectations were not met. Conversely, witnessing the long term changes in the West can have the same effect. Robert Adams observed the ongoing transformation of Colorado through the years. Whereas the crowding and the loss of clean air and space were apparent to him because he saw it over the long haul, he reasoned that to the thousands of new residents the area looked fine since they had not seen it earlier.¹

Does the New Western Photography depicting western topography turned into ordered suburbs, dams, tunnels, and straight roads cutting through the irregular landscape go further than recognizing the human capacity to drastically alter the land, and also propose that humans have vanquished nature? Have the photographers bought into the false notion that modern humans, for better or worse, have been able to take control of nature? No. Rather, their images warn Americans against such an egotistical and ultimately futile stance.

Still, the revisionist photographers, particularly the first group of Avedon, Misrach, Adams, and Baltz, exaggerated the opposition between the natural western environment and modern American culture, probably because their disgust with what Americans have done in the West has been so great, and their concern for the future so pronounced. Their work seems to ask, how can we celebrate modernism when it so obviously has been out of control and needs to be reigned in? Revisionist photographers shattered the equilibrium that nineteenth century artists depicted between American society and the natural environment in the West. In the revisionist West, traditional notions of progress no longer suffice. The so-called advancements

of expanding human settlement and economic growth have been destroying what has made the West special, the tremendous landscape and open space.

The criticism that Larry McMurtry leveled at the New Western Historians, that they “simplify or ignore the emotions and imaginings that impelled the western settlers despite their experience,” can also apply to the pictures of this first group of revisionist photographers. They did not portray the West as a catalyst to imaginative human endeavors in the region. Instead, their images show that Americans have imposed themselves on the landscape in a host of disrespectful ways. Rather than being inspired to meaningful culture, westerners have at best covered the land in houses and shopping malls, and at worst have lethally polluted it. Revisionists in both fields have been reluctant - indeed, have recoiled from - considering imagination and wonder to have played a positive role in the West because fantasy has diverted Americans from rational analysis of the region.

However, the second groups of New Western Photographers, Klett, Jenshel, and Levinthal, while pointing out how fantasy has so often blinded us to the unpleasantries of the West, also consider that imagination has produced a valuable richness and has a continuing place in western art. Levinthal’s miniature dioramas reveal the power of the cowboy wild West without endorsing the myth itself, retaining a critical distance from it. Jenshel’s pictures show that Americans failed to connect with the western landscape, pushing away or destroying what was before them, such as the buffalo, to make way for an architecture that has been alien to the organic forms of the land. But Jenshel’s photographs of his car lights illuminating plants in eerie glowing relief against evening darkness are magical. They not

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2 McMurtry, “Westward Ho Hum - What the New Historians Have Done to the Old West,” pg 37.
only suggest that modern technology is not necessarily inimical to nature, but also carry forward the artistic tradition of finding enchantment in the West. A strand of magic runs through Klett’s images too. For example, *Witness to sunrise, Muley Point, Utah, 5/24/88*, of a person’s shadow on a stone outcrop at a vista where one can gaze across the high Utah desert, could be a moment from a western creation myth of the “birth” of the first human. The featureless figure is a symbol of redemption, of the possibility of reinventing ourselves in new and better ways. These photographers have moved in a direction that future artistic and historic explorations of the West could pursue constructively: they do not shun the harsh aspects of the West, yet they integrate playfulness, optimism, humor, whimsy, and positive aspects of the old myths of the region with their criticism.

The New Western Photography remains vital and relevant in the early twenty first century, with many of the issues it addresses more compelling than ever before. The human populations of most western states continue to boom. Concern and discussion about urban sprawl is intensifying on local, state, and national levels. How we treat the environment is getting increasing public recognition as an important issue, and politicians at least have to give it lip service. The work of revisionist photographers impart a powerful sense of the responsibility that Americans have for the West. Their images challenge us to make the region more livable for all species including humans.

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3 Klett, *Revealing Territory - Photographs of the Southwest by Mark Klett*. plate 79.

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