

Steffen Wöll is a postdoctoral fellow at Leipzig University’s collaborative research center “Processes of Spatialization under the Global Condition.” He has published articles on various intersectional topics, including spatial imaginations, border studies, naturalism, literary postmodernism, as well as film and horror studies. Wöll is the author of *The West and the World* (2020). [steffen.woell@uni-leipzig.de; ORCID: 0000-0003-1582-6078]

Violence, Representation, and Ecocide in the American West

This paper traces spatial imaginations and cultural representations of the American West from their nineteenth-century origins to their postmodern refractions and real-life ecological consequences. It argues that while symbolic expressions of what I call ‘violent westernness’ have become a centerpiece of America’s cultural vocabulary, their discursive origins betray an unexpected discursive complexity. Today, a plethora of representational patterns and literary tropes have congealed into popular imaginations of the American West. Many continue to view the West as an archetypal stage for social deviancy, masculine quests, and Darwinist selection. Importantly, these archetypes build upon the structuring effects of exoticization, othering, and the creation of “separateness from the familiar.”¹ Thoroughly commercialized based on these representational properties, the “West has been oversold and oversimplified as a vast vista of mountain, plain, and desert occupied by heroic, often male, archetypes noted for their violent actions.”² However, over time and through the obsessive repetition of its symbolic language, the spatial format of the unfamiliar West has now become inverted, resulting in its polar opposite: overburdened with semiotic and semantic abundance, places such as Grand Canyon or the Niagara Falls appear overly familiar, evoking emotions and cultural memories even for those who have not physically been there. Consequently, representations of the West increasingly collapse under their own discursive weight as “the image ironically absorbs the space of the real.”³

Historic imaginations of what might be called the unfamiliar West date back to pre-settlement

¹ P. N. Limerick, “Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West,” in: B. Allmendinger and V. J. Matsumoto (eds.), *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 18-19.

² C. A. Milner, “America Only More So,” in: C. A. Milner, A. M. Butler, and D. R. Lewis (eds.), *Major Problems in the History of the American West: Documents and Essays*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989, p. 39.

³ R. G. Smith, *Baudrillard Dictionary*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 96.

Puritan imaginations of a hostile wilderness. As Africa did for medieval Europeans, the boundless West for white settlers on the Atlantic seaboard represented a fantastic space “where wolves are white and bears grizzly — where pheasants are hens of the prairie, and frogs have horns! — where the rivers are yellow, and white men are turned savages in looks. Through the whole of this strange land the dogs are all wolves — women all slaves — men all lords.”⁴ Francis Matthieu, a nineteenth century Canadian smuggler and refugee to the West relates an incident in his journals that depicts the wilderness as a lawless realm where punishment was dished out indiscriminately and without regard for race, class, or gender. For instance, he mentions how “a white man complained that there was an Indian who had stolen his wife from him. The old Dr. tied the Indian to a cannon and whipped him. Only two or three months afterwards a white man took an Indian’s wife, and he did the same thing for the white man, he tied him to the gun and whipped him.”⁵ On the way from Esther Belle Hanna consigned to her diary the violence and retribution that took place among white emigrants themselves: “Saw 3 graves[,] one was [...] of a man who was murdered yesterday, his name was Miller, the name of his murderer is Tate, who killed him in cold blood.” Her entry on the following day starts similarly: “Saw 3 graves[,] one was th[e] grave of Tate the murderer of Miller, he was taken the next day after he committed the awful deed, tried by his company and some others, then hung.”⁶

At the close of the nineteenth century, new technologies allowed travelers to capture the violation of natives and others in the West, perhaps most prominently the aftermath of the massacre at Wounded Knee. As photo historian Vicki Goldberg notes, many Americans “were first introduced to the wilderness by images,” often by the oil paintings of Bierstadt, Church, Cole, and other Hudson River School painters. To enjoy their epic depictions of the West’s *genius loci* and otherworldly spaces of light-flooded grandeur, “[l]ate in the century virtually every home had a viewer for 3-D stereographs of a West that looked like a fable.”⁷ While new technologies allowed for more widespread and detailed imaginations, the bandwidth of western

⁴ G. Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1844 [1841], pp. 105-106.

⁵ F. X. Matthieu, “Refugee, Trapper & Settler,” 1878, P-A 49, Bancroft Library Western Americana Collection, p. 16.

⁶ E. B. Hanna, “Diary of a Journey From Pittsburgh to Oregon City,” 1852, P-A 313, Bancroft Library Western Americana Collection, p. 11.

⁷ V. Goldberg, “Ansel Adams in a New Light,” *The New York Times*, 17 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/arts/design/national-parks-ansel-adams-photography.html>.

iconography simultaneously narrowed as it became part of ideological narratives of the frontier and manifest destiny, which reframed western settlement as a patriotic performance. During its early days, selling points of western tourism however more often included transatlantic assemblages with Europe and other faraway places instead of hymns on the American nation-state: “California was the Mediterranean, a transplanted Italy; Colorado was Switzerland, with replicas of the Alps.”⁸ This does not mean, of course, that these touristic experiences were any less irrational—and sometimes, silly—than purely nationalistic discourses. In Colorado Springs, Limerick reports that upper-class Americans imitated the lifestyle of British aristocrats, including supper rituals and polo games, although the absence of foxes meant that they had to chase after coyotes on horseback.⁹

More recent example of ‘spatial appropriation’ in the West include the case of Kellogg, Idaho. After the collapse of its traditional mining and logging industries in the late 1980s, the town received a multi-million federal grant to help transform its picturesque setting into a ski resort. This confronted the town council with the difficult task of picking a theme for the new resort. Since most of its regional competitors had adopted “western Americana,” “Kellogg settled on ‘Old Bavarian’ as its image of choice. Not everyone was enthusiastic. ‘I have,’ said one resident in a wonderful and memorable line, ‘some real reservations about going Bavarian.’”¹⁰ As inhabitants of Kellogg changed their dirty workwear for pristine dirndls and lederhosen, the unfamiliar or ‘wild’ West removed itself from its own historical references to become an arbitrary set of symbols that takes part in a cultural vocabulary of Saussurean signifiers.¹¹ Kellogg is but one example of how western landscapes, genres, and categories were replicated and simulated to satisfy the demands of consumer culture and mass taste, peaking in places such as Las Vegas and Disney World.

In the visual realm of professional photography, several paradigm changes occurred in a reaction to these developments, which saw prominent practitioners depart from desires to emphasize the intactness of the West. Conversely, they focused on its representation as a social landscape and a twofold dumping ground: Physically, as even in the “‘last wild place,’ the

⁸ Limerick, “Seeing and Being Seen,” pp. 18-19.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

¹¹ S. Wöll, “Inertia and Movement: The Spatialization of the Native Northland in Jack London’s Short Stories,” *GeoHumanities* 3 (2017) 1, p. 69.

remote ranges and lost box canyons, the Pentagon's jets are always overhead."¹² And figuratively, as the West became a graveyard for 'dead' spatial imaginations such as Jefferson's agricultural empire, whose skeletons were swallowed up by the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930s. During the same decade, the "straight photography" of Ansel Adams transported the romanticism of National Parks into modernity "with its sharp focus, vivid contrast and compositions that amounted to studies in form and light"—yet sometimes also by touching up negatives to remove newly constructed roadways or deforested spots that disturbed his compositions.¹³

In the 1970s, the New Topographics movement, Rephotographic Survey Project, and the Atomic Photographers Guild "mounted a frontal attack on the hegemony of Ansel Adams, the dead pope of the 'Sierra Club school' of Nature-as-God photography. [...] Their West, by contrast, is an irrevocably social landscape, transformed by militarism, urbanization, the interstate highway, epidemic vandalism, mass tourism, and the extractive industries' boom-and-bust cycles."¹⁴ Famously, Richard Misrach captured the West's brutalization with images of abandoned trailer parks, swastikas painted on desert highways, and the "Dead Animals" series taken in "The Pit." Misrach's visceral photographs are reminiscent of Picasso's *Guernica* and capture the impacts of Cold War nuclear testing sites on the western landscape in areas he called "national sacrifice zones" that were permanently damaged in the service of their country's militarization. The following description is juxtaposed to Misrach's 40 by 50-inch color prints depicting half-submerged animal corpses conserved by the desert climate:

On March 24, 1953, the Bulloch brothers were trailing 2000 head of sheep across the Sand Springs Valley when they were exposed to extensive fallout from a dirty atomic test. Within a week first ewes began dropping their lambs prematurely — stunted, woolless, legless, potbellied. [...] At final count, 4,390 animals were killed. Initial investigation by government experts indicated that radiation was the cause. [...] The AEC did not provide a public explanation — a dry year and malnutrition were blamed.¹⁵

¹² M. Davis, "Dead West: Ecocide in Marlboro Country," in: B. Allmendinger and V. J. Matsumoto (eds.), *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 347.

¹³ Goldberg, "Ansel Adams in a New Light."

¹⁴ Davis, "Dead West: Ecocide in Marlboro Country," pp. 346-347.

¹⁵ L. Rinder, "Richard Misrach / MATRIX 126," *Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive University of California*, 1989, <https://bampfa.org/program/richard-misrach-matrix-126> (accessed 7 February 2021).

In conclusion, violence in the American West was and is not only a fact of life or result of competing interests. Conversely, it is also the outcome of aesthetic negotiations that aim to compress divergent spatial imaginations into coherent narratives. As with Misrach's photographs, violence can also become a powerful tool of cultural critique. Nineteenth-century accounts sowed the discursive seeds of the unfamiliar West as a multi-layered and diverse space that was flattened according to the ideological demands of nation-building. What remains is an ambiguous and battered cultural geography whose simulations of familiarity and power point to the discursive vectors of a global order and the role of the United States in it. This furthermore leads to provocative questions that ask if "America, too, has entered this era of undecidability: is it still really powerful or merely simulating power?"¹⁶ Debates about the American West are by no means solely occupied with critiquing the nation's whitewashed and romanticized history of westering as internal colonialism. Instead, they can add substance to the understanding of contemporary developments that draw upon the West's symbolic language, for instance fictions of limitless mobility or the digital colonization of physical spaces that portray Silicon Valley tech-companies as epitomes of twenty-first-century westernness.

¹⁶ J. Baudrillard, *America*, Brooklyn: Verso, 1989, p. 115.

Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean, *America*, Brooklyn: Verso, 1989.

Catlin, George, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1844 [1841].

Davis, Mike, "Dead West: Ecocide in Marlboro Country," in: Allmendinger, Blake and Valerie J. Matsumoto (eds.), *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 339-369.

Goldberg, Vicki, "Ansel Adams in a New Light," *The New York Times*, 17 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/arts/design/national-parks-ansel-adams-photography.html>.

Hanna, Esther Belle, "Diary of a Journey From Pittsburgh to Oregon City," 1852, P-A 313, Bancroft Library Western Americana Collection.

Limerick, Patricia Nelson, "Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West," in: Allmendinger, Blake and Valerie J. Matsumoto (eds.), *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 15-31.

Matthieu, François Xavier, "Refugee, Trapper & Settler," 1878, P-A 49, Bancroft Library Western Americana Collection.

Milner, Clyde A., "America Only More So," in: Milner, Clyde A., Anne M. Butler, and David Rich Lewis (eds.), *Major Problems in the History of the American West: Documents and Essays*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989, pp. 33-41.

Rinder, L., "Richard Misrach / Matrix 126," *University of California, Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive*, 1989, <https://bampfa.org/program/richard-misrach-matrix-126> (accessed 7 February 2021).

Smith, Richard G., *Baudrillard Dictionary*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Wöll, Steffen, "Inertia and Movement: The Spatialization of the Native Northland in Jack London's Short Stories," *GeoHumanities* 3 (2017) 1, pp. 65-87, DOI: 10.1080/2373566X.2017.1289821.