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IRVINE

Other Frontiers:
Administrative Media and Intimate Domains of American Settler Futurity

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

Anirban Gupta-Nigam

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Lucas Hilderbrand, Co-chair
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2018

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It might sound odd to call a document such as this, ostensibly produced in the thickets of hermetic isolation, “collaborative”. However, the word does ring true to my mind. Of course, as is usually the case with these things, all errors, misfires, and exaggerations are mine. But many of the themes, ideas, and years of exasperating labor codified in these pages are, without doubt, the product of diverse relations—of the most intense as well as tangential kinds. Believing somewhat fastidiously in Fred Moten’s claim that debt socializes and has, as a result, a direct connection to the fugitive practice he calls “study”, I cannot but proceed without acknowledging (some) debts—with full knowledge that they can never be repaid; only elaborated upon in the years to come.

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Finally (thanks Ben), Father John Misty, for summarizing this dissertation: "Maybe love is an economy based on resource scarcity".

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"Forms of Binding: On Data and Not 'Fitting In'" *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies*, special issue on *Small Data*. Spring 2016.

"Black Infrastructure: Media and the Trap of Visibility" *Media Fields Journal*. Issue 11: *Surveillance Zones*. March 2016.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Other Frontiers: Administrative Media and Intimate Domains of American Settler Futurity

By

Anirban Gupta-Nigam

Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Professor Lucas Hilderbrand, Co-chair
Associate Professor Bliss Cua Lim, Co-chair

This dissertation argues that the rhetorical and material production of frontiers has remained crucial to the sustenance of American modes of futurity (ideas like progress, growth, prosperity) since the mid-twentieth century. It tracks, on the one hand, how what I call "administrative media"—literary and audiovisual objects produced by governments and corporations—have, at specific historical junctures, foreclosed environmental anxieties by propagating new frontiers of expansion. On the other hand, it examines how such foreclosures have shaped the lives of normative citizens and racialized others of the settler state.

The first chapter reinterprets the postwar era, usually conceived of as a time of abundance, under the sign of resource scarcity. Reading an influential report by the President's Materials Policy Commission, it shows how acknowledgments of futures constituted by scarcity became occasions for envisioning frontiers of extractive growth at home and abroad. In parallel, the chapter examines how plastic flowers in the home helped normative suburban subjects stabilize scarcity-induced-anxieties by promising permanence and security from the vagaries of nature. The second chapter engages the last decade of the twentieth century when, after the Cold War, pronouncements

of the end of history produced a sense of temporal unsettlement. At this time, the rhetoric of technological frontierism leveraged a nostalgic and eternal image of nature to authorize electronic futures. The chapter discerns this dynamic in a 1995 book by Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, and examines how frontier nostalgia filtered into intimate domains by analyzing an iconic Microsoft desktop nature wallpaper, *Bliss*. The third chapter transitions into the early-twenty-first century to examine how, in the context of global ecological crises, the American state and corporations now invoke renewable energy as the "next frontier" of economic growth. Reading these claims against photojournalistic images of everyday toxicity in Los Angeles, the chapter argues that those living in the debris of energy economies, cultivate inattention as a survival strategy. Where the first two chapters zero in on the ways in which normative subjects are enrolled into foreclosures of environmental crises, the third elucidates how racial others live on in the knowledge that such foreclosures are always illusory.

INTRODUCTION

Abstraction, Intimacy, and the Politics of Futurity

I. Re/definitions

"Redefining Natural Resources", proclaims the slogan on a page called "Why Asteroids?" featured on the website of the company, Planetary Resources [figure 1]. Visitors are told that "there are over 16,000 near-Earth asteroids that share a similar orbit to Earth. Asteroids contain the resources that make it possible to fuel and sustain life in space, creating a new paradigm of travel and human presence in space". An American company, Planetary Resources, finds one of its most significant benefactors in the state of Luxembourg—a small European country that is at present leveraging its historically significant status as an economic tax haven to position itself as a leader in exploring outer space to search for new resources with the eventual aim of extending human "civilization" beyond earth.[1]

None of this is especially novel news today. Stories of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and businessmen hoping to conquer space, inhabit new territories, and even overcome death are, in a sense, fairly commonplace in popular media. What interests me about the specific page in question is that phrase—"Redefining Natural Resources". It interests me because, as I will attempt to show in the course of this dissertation, "redefinition" is a strategy, a defense mechanism, that snaps into place when (a) culture cannot handle questions of finitude, scarcity, or depletion. Redefining what one means by the words "natural resource" is often an easier task than having to actually face the fallout of such resources becoming exhausted. It is a trick, I will suggest, (settler) colonial regimes have deployed to reinvent other frontiers whenever they have been faced by the limits of "present"

[1] Abrahamian, "How a Tax Haven Is Leading the Race to Privatise Space".

ones. In other words, despite all the academic conversation currently taking place about the power of things, material agency, and the force nonhumans exert in shaping the world;[2] and despite all the conversation currently taking place about materiality as method for overcoming linguistic contortions,[3] "redefinition" reminds us that the making and remaking of social worlds is, at bottom, a problem of language. "Redefinition" cautions us against becoming so enamored by asteroids as resources that we forget the process through which they are actively *constructed* this way: a linguistic process, wordplay, discursivity.

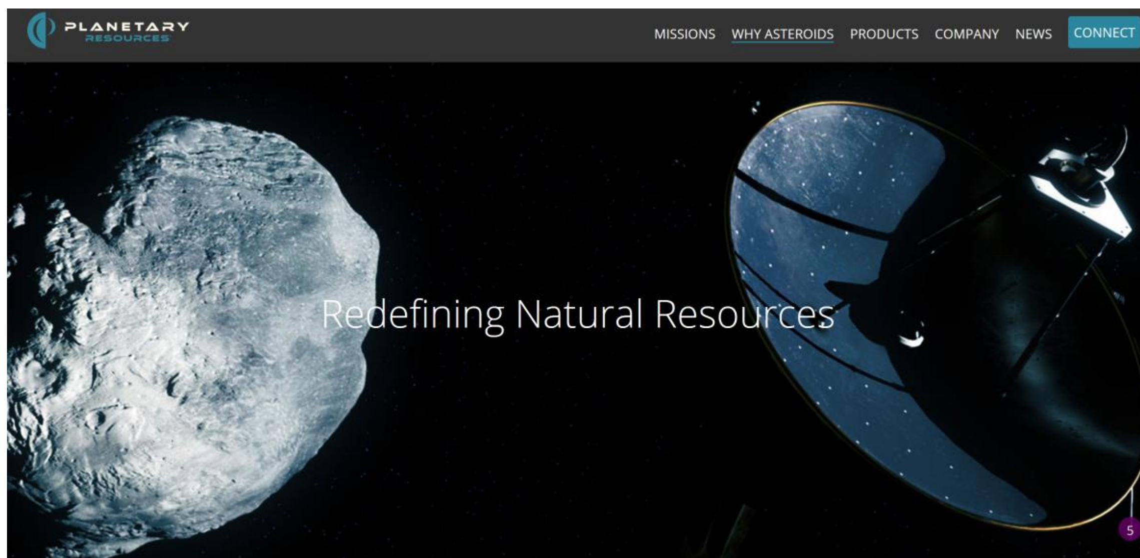

Figure 1 "Why Asteroids?" planetaryresources.com

The pages to come hold on to this capacity language has for constructing and destroying lifeworlds and examine, in that light, the material and rhetorical production of "other frontiers" in the United States since the end of the Second World War. I will have more to say about frontier imaginaries below. For now, it is sufficient to note that "other" frontiers take hold after the "real" one (the West) ceases to be a space—territorial or fantastical—that can be extended into. The exhaustion

[2] For an early, sociological treatment, see: Latour, *Reassembling the Social*. More recent framings of various approaches can be found in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*; Olsen, *In Defense of Things*. A different, idiosyncratic, and conciliatory take is apparent in Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.
[3] See, for example: Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *The Speculative Turn*; Morton, *Hyperobjects*.

of the West and the continued demands placed by a rapaciously growing civilizational project, I will argue, coupled from the mid-twentieth-century onwards to produce a crisis of futurity. If the American administration acknowledged its burden on planetary resources, it would have to revise its way of life, the flagship product it was selling during the Cold War. Unable to do that, it had to rhetorically produce other frontiers of expansion—acts of redefinition—that would facilitate the continuation of its core fantasy, an exceptional way of life, through material expansion. In the three chapters that constitute the body of this work, I track such redefinitions in the domain of planetary resources, technology, and energy.

But despite this framing, honestly, the two questions animating my inquiry don't overtly seek to contribute (on the face of it), to either ecocriticism or the environmental humanities. As a rhetorical maneuver, acts of redefinition tend to alter not just the nature of the social sphere, but also the conduct of individual and intimate life. Which is to say: when a new frontier is produced, when a new horizon of extractive expansion is opened, and when space to act for the future is wedged open in this way, it *must* have an effect on the people who endure within the system that is reorienting itself along these coordinates. How could it not? How could "Americans"—both the normative subjects of the settler colonial state and its racialized others—*not* be affected by or react to the effects of creating other frontiers? This intersection—between reasons of state and domains of intimacy—is of tantamount importance to me.

As a result, the two questions *really* animating my inquiry are as follows: first, how do abstractions (represented in the dissertation by the media of administration) impinge on intimate domains? And second, how do these domains adjust to (the violence of) abstraction? A relevant subset of these questions would be: what are the rhetorical means by which administrative media continue to propagate a sense of the future even when the future recedes as a horizon of action?

And what are the psychic strategies by which subjects of empire—both normative and racially marginalized ones—stabilize a sense of coherent life that allows them to go on living, persisting, or even (in some cases) flourishing within the system?[4] In an effort to clear some ground before providing some form of answer to these questions, I will spend most of the rest of this introduction, following the next section, laying out the contours of the key words and phrases I use frequently—administrative media and intimate domains; frontierism and extractive visuality; and (settler) colonialism as global form—in an effort to explain what they mean.

II. A note on method—abstraction, scale and psyche

By tracking the interface between abstraction and intimacy I am, in effect, trying to grapple with a problem of scale. Questions of scale are often conceptualized in terms of the relation between human agents and the wider worlds they are immersed in. Susan Stewart's study of miniatures[5] is one example of such work, as is a suggestive essay by Jonathan Auerbach and Lisa Gitelman. In the latter, the authors—drawing partially on Stewart—offer a study of the microfilm as a miniature object and a technology of miniaturization that allows for useful reflection on the politics of the Cold War era: "Whether in paeans to its archive-handy reduction ratios or in plots discovered and imagined, this technology of miniaturization offered a material way of measuring and visualizing the tensions between active human agents and larger impersonal structures of state that organized,

[4] I use the word "system" loosely to refer to a broad assemblage of technical, political, economic, and cultural forces (among others) that seek to order, designate the boundaries of, and map social space. Social theorists often prefer the word "totality" to system in such contexts, while anthropologists and sociologists tend to make more rigorous and considered distinctions between "totalities" and "systems"—the latter indexing specific kinds of totalities. Without getting mired into this debate, I use both words somewhat interchangeably although, as will be clear soon, my recourse to "system" emerges partly from a skepticism I have towards the all-encompassing and disabling politics of "totality" as a concept. Briefly, then, when I say "system", I am drawing on the following kinds of texts: Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity*; Moeller, *Luhmann Explained*; Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*; Seltzer, "Form Games: Staging Life in the Systems Epoch". See also: Olson, *Into the Extreme*; Siskin, *System*.

[5] Stewart, *On Longing*.

jeopardized, and domesticated them".[6] Here, Auerbach and Gitelman are pointing not only to the importance of thinking about the intersections between human agents and abstract systems. They are, more importantly, framing the miniature and miniaturization as technologies through which intersections of this kind can be understood usefully.

Abstraction—a term I use in at least two, sometimes overlapping, senses—poses a scalar challenge on several counts. On the one hand, I use "abstraction" to refer to abstract systems, i.e. entities like governments, nongovernmental agencies, and corporations that can be large-scale and transnational, but the effects of which are widespread in the social sphere. These are organizations that, their embodied presence on the ground notwithstanding,[7] also operate at levels of abstraction removed from everyday life. They scale up from the local to the global, often exceeding a person's capacity to grapple fully with their contours. The effects of such scaling up raises a whole set of questions that occupy me throughout the dissertation, and especially in chapter three: how does one visualize an abstract system like capitalism? If settler colonialism is a systemic form, then how does it render itself present in everyday life and in what ways does it evade registers of experience? What are the methods by which abstract systems visualize or map the social field? This latter question informs what I describe in the introduction as "settler colonial visuality"—a process that names how an abstract system relates to its environmental surround in primarily extractive ways.

On the other hand, throughout these pages, by "abstraction" I also refer to the myths and ideals abstract systems generate—the fantasies they produce, through which intimate domains become attached to them. "The American way of life" is one overarching abstraction undergirding much of what I dissect here. "Economic growth" and "frontierism" are others. Each of these terms names both material conditions and states of fantasy. Or, put differently: while the American way

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[6] Auerbach and Gitelman, "Microfilm, Containment, and the Cold War", 763.
[7] Sharma and Gupta, *The Anthropology of the State*.

of life, economic growth, and frontierism all designate very particular modes by which social and cultural life is organized, each of these terms also exist in domains of abstraction, pointing to ideals that organize understandings of these specific, material conditions. Hence, even under conditions of inequality or scarcity, the fable of economic growth can sustain reigning commonsense among those in charge of making policy. Fantasies abstract systems generate—the promise of a good life, of abundant futures—capture the imaginations of citizens and subjects. This is part of the scalar work they do; it is how ideals become materialized in intimate domains. It is my contention that administrative media play a crucial part in generating such fantasies and in effecting social attachments to them. At the same time, I also suggest that they ways in which people attach vary vastly, stemming from the positions the people in question occupy within a fragmented and violent world. Thus, normative subjects of the American settler order—foregrounded in chapters one and two—are often enrolled into accepting the fantasies administrative media distribute. However, the racially abandoned—who I consider in chapter three—live in the knowledge that they will likely be the sacrificial victims of some fantasies that are too good to be true.

In recent years, environmental crises have forced the question of scale to the forefront with renewed urgency. Anna Tsing's work, especially her recent research on the matsutake mushroom, exemplifies one strategy for complicated thinking around the politics of scale. She extends some of the implications of the insights I just mentioned by pointing out that making something scalable is often a problematic endeavor. Scalability "is the ability of a project to change scales smoothly without any change in project frames".[8] In this sense, scalability is a cherished ideal of modernist politics—expansion and progress narratives both feed on the capacity of government undertakings, businesses, research projects, and the like to scale up. Among other things, scaling up "banishes

[8] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 38.

meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things".[9] However, just because scaling up is associated with modernist hubris, we ought not to assume that nonscalability is automatically a better strategy. Something that does not scale can also cause harm. For nonscalability to be made politically viable, work and attention has to be put into thinking about what kinds of nonscalability one is interested in fostering.[10]

Tsing offers the "arts of noticing" as one potential alternative to projects that are beholden to either scaling up or not scaling at all.[11] The arts of noticing sit uneasily on the edges of the scalar and the nonscalar. By such arts Tsing is referring to sensitive modes of attending to the world and its many expressions. Her research objects—mushrooms that blossom in devastated landscapes—are one example of lifeforms that elude the eye fixed on grand narratives of progress and ruination. Such an eye misses precisely what happens, what occurs and unfolds *in* the ruins. One way of cultivating the arts of noticing is learning to "listen and tell a rush of stories", stories whose "scales do not nest easily", and which draw attention to "uneven geographies and tempos".[12] In a modernist paradigm, these interruptions of geographies and tempos demand "the possibility of infinite expansion without changing the research framework. Arts of noticing are considered archaic because they are unable to 'scale up' in this way. The ability to make one's research framework apply to greater scales without changing the research questions has become a hallmark of modern knowledge. To have any hope of thinking with mushrooms, we must get out of this expectation".[13]

[9] Tsing, 38.
[10] Tsing, 38–42.
[11] Tsing, 37.
[12] Tsing, 37.
[13] Tsing, 37–38.

Taken together, Auerbach and Gitelman, alongside Tsing, provide some basic materials for the kind of scalar work this dissertation attempts. With Tsing, I too am interested in "getting out of this expectation"; and with her, I too am concerned with finding new ways—stories and arts of noticing—of narrativizing the interface between abstract systems and domains of intimacy. As will be clear from the following sections of this introduction, the chapters contained herein toggle between the macro and the micro, the systemic and the psychic, the abstract and the intimate. What I am calling administrative media hews to the side of the macro, the systemic, and the abstract. Such media perform and enact reasons of state, corporate practices, and bureaucratic rationalities. They are not quite propaganda machines, but they do help us understand the logics of projects that scale up: bureaucratic reports on how to address resource scarcity; technocratic documents on the future of technology; corporate media on the horizons of economic growth leveraging renewable resources and technology alike. On the other hand, I attempt, in these pages, to figure intimate domains by turning to objects and visual media that do not scale quite so easily but in which the world appears miniaturized: plastic flowers as portals for considering the fallout of living with scarcity; nature wallpapers as idyllic escapes from the contingencies of temporal unsettlement; photojournalistic representations of everyday life in toxic geographies as indicative of peoples' capacity to hold onto life in what Tsing calls "blasted landscapes".

These latter entities, hewing to the side of the micro, the psychic, and the intimate, become, in my narrative, sites where systemic abstractions are made apparent within the intimate realm. I take Tsing's provocations seriously because it seems to me that getting out of the modernist frame also requires the adoption of experimental narrative methods for getting at "old" problems. In other words, while I am concerned with statecraft, corporate machinations, and bureaucratic logics, I think, like Tsing, that understanding their effects within intimate domains is contingent upon an

ability to think outside conventional parameters of evidentiary research. Many of the objects and media I engage at the level of intimacy (plastic flowers and nature wallpapers most explicitly), do not leave traces in archives to back up beyond a shadow of doubt the claims I make about their therapeutic, psychic effects. I cannot prove beyond reasonable doubt that plastic flowers foreclosed anxieties surrounding resource crisis for domestic suburbanites. Nor can I point to any kind of incontrovertible evidence articulating the therapeutic effect of having nature wallpapers adorn one's desktop. But that I cannot do so does not mean that extrapolating those effects from these objects and media is meaningless. This is partly the challenge abstractions and the fantasies they generate pose.

This is also, broadly speaking, a problem with the psychic in general. My investment in the question of scale is related to my attempt at trying to figure how abstraction impacts intimacy and how intimacy adjusts in the face of abstraction. Much of this process, occurring at the level of the psyche, necessitates precisely the kinds of arts of noticing Tsing wants to develop. In conversation with her work, my attempt to read for the psychic effects of administrative rationalities draws on anthropologist Joseph Masco's meticulous analysis of the American security state in its transition from the nuclear-complex of the Cold War to the counterterror-complex of the post-9/11 world. In his work, even as he remains attentive to the practices and logics of how successive governments have used geopolitics to erect ever more sophisticated security apparatuses that seep into everyday life, Masco is equally keen to discern the psychic fallout of this kind of seepage. These latter effects are harder to get at, harder to point to and capture than the mechanics of administration. However, one could argue that it is precisely for this reason that they are important to think through. Thus, when Masco writes about the state "allocating conceptual, material, and affective resources to ward

off imagined but potentially catastrophic terrorist futures”,[14] and of how allocations of this variety cause “citizens to *feel* increasingly insecure with the diversion of funds and psychic energies from everyday welfare to anticipatory defense”,[15] he is, to some extent, making a speculative case based on his interpretations of historical contexts. That “a new affective politics” is “key to the formation of the counterterror state”,[16] grounded in “an affective atmosphere of everyday anxiety”[17] cannot be demonstrated beyond equivocation. This however, makes the task all the more urgent.

While I borrow from Tsing a methodological orientation (the arts of noticing), I take from Masco an attentiveness to how structures and systems (abstractions) have affective, psychic effects as well as political ones. In this context, the psychic should not be understood as cleaved off from the realms of economics, politics, society, and culture. Rather, as Masco’s repeated invocation of the “psychosocial” effects of the security state demonstrates, the psychic is always grounded in the social. Masco is one among many to advance such claims about how abstractions make, unmake, and remake the psyche.[18] In all such cases, the psychic is taken seriously as important for coming to terms with the intimate experience of living amidst what Masco calls “the fallout” of systemic violence. For me, in the pages that follow, objects and media which scale uneasily become vectors for better understanding the links between administrative rationalities and intimate domains.

[14] Masco, *The Theater of Operations*, 13.
[15] Masco, 14. Emphasis in original.
[16] Masco, 17.
[17] Masco, 18.
[18] Massumi, *Ontopower*; Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*.

III. Administrative media and intimate domains

Gray power

Early in *Evil Media*, a book organized around thinking in stratagems, Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey circle repeatedly back to what they call "gray media"—"most recognizable from the world of work and administration, affecting the habits of governments, business, and culture, yet rarely recognized or explored as media in their own right".[19] If "media are rather more pervasive than is commonly perceived", then gray media consists of things like "databases, group-work software, project-planning methods, media forms, and technologies"[20] that evade the eye or categorization as media in the most commonsensical use of the term. Covering a wide swathe, from "accounts, manuals, instruction books, policy guidelines, strategy documents" gray media, Fuller and Goffey argue, are "historically as significant a resource and topic for analysis as the literary or scientific text and, although demure, are also equipped with a certain aesthetic".[21] Seen this way, it is easy to see how gray media recede into the background, and call for "a kind of suspicious attentiveness": "a certain recessiveness is often a crucial aspect of their efficacy, and that recessiveness is what makes them of practical interest here".[22] Most emphatically, perhaps, the grayness of mediation "points toward the sociotechnical conditions of contemporary democracy and the bleeding in of bureaucratic technologies into the operations of power".[23]

Fuller and Goffey's account frames what I have, in this dissertation, called "administrative media". As I will explain presently, they are not by far the only theorists to attend—suspiciously or otherwise—to grayness and its political effects. In recent years, much work in literary, cultural,

[19] Fuller and Goffey, *Evil Media*, 1.
[20] Fuller and Goffey, 1.
[21] Fuller and Goffey, 7.
[22] Fuller and Goffey, 12.
[23] Fuller and Goffey, 12.

and media studies has attempted to provide descriptive accounts of bureaucracy, administration, statecraft and their attendant media: archives, paperwork, files, software and the like. However, unlike some work in this tradition, Fuller and Goffey turn to grayness not purely for its material affordances, nor for its representational purchase. They are not interested so much in analyzing the "materiality" of gray media, or how it is represented in cultural productions. Rather, and this point is crucial to my effort as well, they want to figure grayness as an element that performs control functions through the generation of suspicion, ambiguity, and dissimulation within systems of governance: "In a period when it is difficult to trace patterns of conflict and the emergence of antagonisms back to a single binary opposition with any degree of plausibility, the zones of gray media call for new forms of investigation and a nuanced approach to the kinds of tension and patterns of interference that arise".[24]

In this spirit, the following chapters engage varieties of gray media involved in the work of "administration"—from bureaucratic reports and corporate informational videos to stock photographs and artistic mapping projects. The first chapter takes as its central object, a report published in 1952 by the President's Materials Policy Commission, titled *Resources for Freedom*, using it as evidence of the postwar government's state of panic about resource scarcity. Through a reading of the rhetoric of frontierism in this report, I attempt to rewrite the period from the 1950s to the early-1970s under the sign of scarcity as opposed to abundance. Chapter two turns to the genre of stock photography, offering a reading of one image—called *Bliss*—that is globally known for being an iconic wallpaper on Windows computers. Alongside a book written by Bill Gates in the mid-1990s, the chapter reads the image in the context of late-twentieth-century fantasies of the end of history and projections of technological frontiers. Finally, chapter three looks at a report by

[24] Fuller and Goffey, 32.

the Natural Resources Defense Council, two videos produced by the Southern California Gas Company, and a mapping initiative by the Center for Land Use Interpretation, to put some pressure on contemporary discourse surrounding clean energy as the "next frontier" of American prosperity.

Additionally, in each chapter, I take scholarly interventions—theorizations of anxiousness in postwar domesticity; invocations of a "virtual frontier" in discussions of the internet; and calls for "proper attention" to the materiality of resources—as units of administrative media. Part of the inspiration here also comes from Fuller and Goffey, who piercingly demonstrate how literary New Criticism and, in particular, William Empson's landmark book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, was deeply influential in the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency's postwar counterintelligence program.[25] They chip away at the fantasy that scholarship merely reflects on gray media, showing how it also helps constitute these forms. Additionally, I am also inspired on this count, by the sense that administration as such is not something that happens "out there" in distant and (sometimes hidden) enclaves from where statecraft and corporate-craft are practiced. It is also what "we" do; it is the work of the university, the work of art, as well as of academic disciplinarity, which enforce and police the boundaries of what is legible, what passes for scholarship, and what comes up short as an analytic for social processes.[26]

My spin on administrative media, then, as I have implicitly indicated, departs from a wide range of recent studies which examine the histories and politico-aesthetic effects of paperwork, filing systems, archives, strategies of reading, and other bureaucratic or classificatory practices.[27]

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[25] Fuller and Goffey, 29–31.
[26] For three distinct—but also sometimes overlapping—stylistic and rhetoric interventions on this count, see: Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*; Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*; Wiegman, *Object Lessons*.
[27] Some notable and representative works within the field of media studies (broadly considered) include: Edwards, *A Vast Machine*; Vismann, *Files*; Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*; Krajewski, *Paper Machines*; Day, *Indexing It All*; Halpern, *Beautiful Data*. From a literary studies and art historical perspective, consider: Marx, *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890-2011*; Emre, *Paraliterary*; Kindley, *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture*; Spieker, *The Big Archive*; Dutta, *The Bureaucracy of Beauty*. Anthropological and other social science contributions

While I am more indebted to some strains of such scholarship (for instance, Cornelia Vismann's work on files), there are others I resist or strain away from (for instance, Matthew Hull's work on bureaucratic paperwork). For the most part, my approach to administrative media is substantially influenced by a tradition of German media theory that begins with Friedrich Kittler, especially his famous pronouncement in the first line of the preface to *Gramophone Film Typewriter*: "Media determine our situation, which—in spite of or because of it—deserves a description".[28]

I find in this statement a remarkable diagnosis of interiority, of how the terms of mediation deserve description because there is no easily identifiable outside to the condition of medial interiority. In this book, as elsewhere,[29] Kittler modeled ways of reading the interface between media, psychic interiority, and subjectivity: from his analysis of manuals for mothers ("around 1800 a new type of book began to appear, one that delegated to mothers first the physical and mental education of their children, then their alphabetization"),[30] to his relentless identification of the psychoanalytic implications of modern media systems. His thought endures in Bernhard Siegert's work on "cultural techniques"[31] and (a palpable presence through the following chapters), Avital Ronell's idiosyncratically driven analyses of the cultural neuroses caused by mediation.[32]

Ronell brings us into direct confrontation with the administrative and medial substrates of intimacy and settler colonialism, particularly in an American context. Even though she scarcely writes explicitly about the settler order, it is hard not to read in her dissection of perennial American obsessions and psychic anxieties, the specter of this order. Consider, for instance, these fragments

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of significance include: Hull, *Government of Paper*; Gupta, *Red Tape*; Lampland and Star, *Standards and Their Stories*.

[28] Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, xxxix.

[29] For example: Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems*; Kittler, *Optical Media*; Kittler, *The Truth of the Technological World*.

[30] Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, 27.

[31] Siegert, *Cultural Techniques*.

[32] Among her relevant works are: Ronell, *The Telephone Book*; Ronell, *Crack Wars*; Ronell, *The Test Drive*.

from *The Test Drive*, her incisive critique of democracy's need to leverage the hyper-gray media of testing—standardized, medical, and psychological alike: "It seems as though everything—nature, body, investment, belief—has to be tested, including your love";[33] "The test has everything to do not only with the way the policing of political sites and bodies take place but also with the experienceability and constitution of reality in general …";[34] "Testing means, among other things, that your pee belongs to the state or to any institution or apparatus that thrives on the new civic readability".[35]

This is how administrative media press up against (or penetrate, a word I choose advisedly), intimate domains: through procedures, systems, and technologies of accountability. The media of administration seeks to order and render sensible the world through what we might, in a broad, Foucauldian sense, call "governance".[36] One could, then, conceive of such media as a subset of gray mediation. Administrative media administer: they control, manage, and order the world. Gray media are not always administrative in this outward sense. Many kinds of gray media—such as background applications on computational devices—function at the interstices of coercion and consent, with users normally signing agreements (albeit ones they do not read). Administrative media, in my use, are not coercive per se, but they are associated with large-scale systemic entities in a more discernable way—with states, bureaucracies, and corporate bodies. It this is association that allows them to seep pervasively into the social world. Ronell's reading presents the test as an ultimate kind of gray media: not something that recedes from view by hiding, but something that becomes invisible through sheer proliferation. When everything—nuclear power and children's

[33] Ronell, *The Test Drive*, 5.
[34] Ronell, 19.
[35] Ronell, 19.
[36] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*; Burchell, Gordon, and Miller, *The Foucault Effect*. I am also drawing substantially on work by the philosopher of science, Ian Hacking, especially his comments on historical method. See: Hacking, *Historical Ontology*.

intelligence alike—is subject to mechanisms of testing, then the medial apparatus in question is hiding in plain sight. For the most part, the media I look at function in a similar way. They effect forms of deception and dissimulation by leveraging ambiguity rather than undertaking a coercive role in any straightforward sense.

The reports, photographs, and videos I examine throughout eschew coerciveness as such. If anything, they tend to beckon or—in an Althusserian vein—interpellate individuals into the system, into narratives of progress and prosperity. In each case, the structural violence of the settler colonial order underwrites the administrative media under consideration; and exploring the logic of that underwriting is part of the challenge I set myself. How do narratives of scarcity call on the normative, suburban postwar subject to assume a certain stance in relation to the future? How do stock photographs normalize histories of violence and repression through replication? And how do visions of renewable energy frontiers reenact persistent, low-threshold violence on the same bodies that the settler order has always sacrificed for the sake of an abstract notion of the national good?

But the work of administrative media does not exhaust the horizon of the present work. How intimate life adjusts to conditions created by administrative media is the other half of the story I am interested in telling.[37] Which is to say: I am interested not merely in the way abstractions like administrative media interpellate subjects. I also want to know how those being interpellated trace different paths of escape and capture in response to the demands made by medial abstractions.

[37] A word on "interesting"—a term that, I am aware, is often taken to be too subjective and vague to justify the rigors of scholarly analysis. My use of it throughout—in a manner that might be taken as a defense for using words of this kind—leans on an incisive comment by Deleuze and Guattari: "Philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine success or failure. Now this cannot be known before being constructed. We will not say of many books of philosophy that they are false, for that is to say nothing, but rather that they lack any importance or interest, precisely because they do not create any concept or contribute and image of thought or beget a persona worth the effort" (Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 82–83).

Here, Germanic media theory, in conjunction with Fuller and Goffey, has much to teach us about the virtues of "suspicious attentiveness"—to be attentive both to less intuitive forms of media and to their less intuitive effects; to cultivate suspicion as a mode of attention even while remaining aware of the ways in which some things (some media and their effects) are better left unattended. It is also at this point that the psychic enters the frame of my narrative.

Domains of intimacy

Speaking of settler colonialism from an Australian context, theorist Deborah Bird Rose once wrote that there, "people got in the way just by staying at home".[38] As an articulation of the relationship between domesticity, settler conquest, and territoriality, Rose's statement captures the scalar nature of intimacy as it surfaces throughout this dissertation. That settler colonialism encroached on land by dispossessing those who were already inhabitants of the terrains being claimed, points, of course, to the violence etched into the heart of that enterprise. However, the implication of Rose's statement, as I take it, is subtler. It also points to the manner in which "home", conceptualized in multiple numbers of ways—the nation, locality, domesticity—was centrally implicated in the establishment of the settler order.

In these pages, my conceptualization of intimate domains takes statements like this as a starting point to think more rigorously about the intimate as a space that scales from the psychic to the national, if not the global. When I use that phrase, therefore, I am less indexing concepts like love, desire, or forms of sexual life than I am a certain arrangement of living that has to bear the effects of large-scale socio-historical transformation and find ways to adjust to its impact. In certain cases, my use of intimacy reaches for other abstractions, like the "normative subject" of

[38] Rose, *Hidden Histories*, 46.

settler society, to get a better sense of how she stabilized a sense of self in the midst of global turmoil. In other instances, I use intimacy as a lens to think through survival strategies developed by racialized minorities who are left abandoned in zones of slow, toxic death.

On one level, then, I take seriously Ann Stoler's claim that "domains of the intimate" are places where "two related but often discreetly understood sources of colonial control" work themselves out "through the requisition of *bodies*—those of both colonials and the colonized" and the generation of "new 'structures of feeling'—new habits of heart and mind that enable those categories of subject formation".[39] Such a requisition of bodies, I contend (and I think Stoler would agree) occurs not merely through the recruitment of colonized subjects into normative regimes of desire. Bodies are also requisitioned, recruited, on affective and psychic levels—they are beckoned into the settler order with the promise of abundant futures and social stability. Hence, the need for a "commitment to think the intimate through and *beyond* the domestic and through and beyond the management of sex".[40]

More forcefully using the category of love and carnality in settler colonial contexts, Elizabeth Povinelli sees "the intimate couple" as a "key transfer point between, on the one hand, liberal imaginaries of contractual economics, politics, and sociality, and, on the other, liberal forms of power in the contemporary world. Love, as an intimate event, secures the self-evident good of social institutions, social distributions of life and death, and social responsibilities for these institutions and distributions".[41]

Lisa Lowe's recent work on the "intimacies of four continents" draws certain implications of theories like Stoler's and Povinelli's into relief on a more explicitly global level. Where Stoler

[39] Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen", 2. Emphasis in original.
[40] Stoler, 4. Emphasis in original.
[41] Povinelli, *The Empire of Love*, 17.

works with the category of empire and Povinelli's newer work uses the term "late liberalism"[42] to name political forms that have reshaped society since nineteenth-century colonialism and, more recently, the postwar era, Lowe focuses on "the economy of affirmation and forgetting that structures and formalizes the archives of liberalism, and liberal ways of understanding".[43] By this she means the mechanisms through which liberalism propagates itself as a purveyor of freedom and suppresses, elides, or censors legacies of slavery, dispossession, migration, and resistance occurring in other geographies as unfolding in places populated by those held sharply at a "distance from 'the human.'"[44] For Lowe, whose book attends to entangled histories of settler conquest, slavery, indentured labor, and the generalized traffic in people, race becomes a mark of colonial difference—the analytic through which the universalization of some forms of life occurs while others are relegated outside that history.[45] Deploying the term as a "heuristic", Lowe develops as "'political economy' of intimacies" that reveals "a particular calculus governing the production, distribution, and possession of intimacy".[46]

Together, Stoler, Povinelli, and Lowe speak simultaneously to (settler) coloniality as global form—a theme I will come back to below—and to the processes by which intimate life becomes imbricated in systems of abstraction and universalization. Together, they also tether the affective to the global and to what Lowe calls "residual" forces—those relations, histories, and intimacies that counter liberal forms of life and are, therefore, expunged from history. My account is deeply influenced by these works but differs from them in one specific way: save the last chapter of this dissertation, I am, for the most part, not offering an analysis of marginality or resistant populations.

[42] Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*; Povinelli, *Geontologies*.
[43] Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 2–3.
[44] Lowe, 3.
[45] Lowe, 7.
[46] Lowe, 18.

The bulk of this document delves into the psychic and affective archives of what I am referring to as the "normative subjects" of American empire: the white, usually heterosexual, couple who were the central fiction of the postwar world.

Rather than take a critic's hammer to their world and show how it was built on an elaborate, delusional fantasy of progress founded on imperial violence, I do genuinely want to know *how* this world took hold in the minds of those who inhabited it—and still continue to. I want to know what it takes to maintain a sense of optimism, of futurity, of goodness in the face of all evidence to the contrary. If one is skeptical—as I am—of explaining such states of mind in terms of theories like false consciousness, then one must accept boldly the difficult challenge of actually taking such expressions of optimistic futurity seriously.

Lauren Berlant might classify what I am doing as an investigation into "cruel optimism": "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing … These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially".[47] This part of her definition is well-known. The most elusive thing Berlant points to is the underlying structure of optimistic attachment—that it is repetitive and produces subjects who strain for the normative. Thus, "one of optimism's ordinary pleasures is to induce conventionality …"[48] And: "Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves sustaining an inclination to return to the scene of the fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way".[49] I wouldn't necessarily refuse the charge that what I am in search

[47] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.
[48] Berlant, 1.
[49] Berlant, 2. Emphasis in original.

of in the pages that follow are the affective structures of cruel optimism, structures that express themselves through well-worn genres and through *generic* expectations of the good. The postwar world in North America was particularly adept at raising generic expectations: the abstract fiction of an abundant life, to take one powerful example.

With Anahid Nersessian[50] and Rei Terada,[51] one might also supplement the notion of cruel optimism by referencing the capacity of life to minimally adjust as a response to systemic violence. Although such attentiveness to small-scale acts of survival and ethically restrained flourishing are sometimes taken to task for precisely "adjusting" to worldly catastrophes,[52] I find that a "political and aesthetic paradigm that fetishizes neither apocalyptic ruin nor its redemption"[53] has much to offer. None of this is to suggest that I take an uncritical approach to the psychic life of normative subjectivity. Neither cruel optimism nor adjustment—contra Mark Seltzer's claims (cf. footnote 52)—involve any kind of simple accommodation with coercive regimes of normativity. What they offer is a political vocabulary for understanding the desires, fantasies, and dreamworlds that sustain the reproduction (pun intended) of normative subjects.

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[50] Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited*.
[51] Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*.
[52] Here is Mark Seltzer's critique: "The affective turn today reproduces exactly this preference for affects that incorporate their self-reflection (or consist in it). I have in mind here the provocative work, for instance, of Brian Massumi, Rei Terada, and especially Sianne Ngai. I have in mind too work building on in part the earlier social-psychological work of Silvan Tomkins and Erving Goffman (on the latter, especially Heather Love's work on stigma). Second-order affect theory trades in derivatives of feeling in the same way that hedge funds trade in derivatives of financial products … The current affective turn in academic criticism is on some fronts a return to sensibility criticism, at times groundbreaking, at times arguably amounting to a methodologically concealed conservatism. (Hence the perpetual redemonstration of the end of "the Cartesian subject", its deconstruction playing on an endless loop). It is, unarguably, a retrofitting to the world systems of second-order observation. Such a retrofitting is embedded in the very notion of the turn—the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the affective turn—as a way of marking historical epochs. This is an extraordinary vehicle of periodization: what amounts not merely to the modalization of history but to its self-observation" (Seltzer, *The Official World*, 233–34). There is much to be said about the rhetorical moves by which Seltzer effaces internal distinctions between the various interlocutors named here and simplifies their points of overlap as well as divergence. But this is perhaps not the venue for accounting for such (mis)representations.
[53] Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited*, 2.

Each chapter, therefore, pairs one or more genres of administrative media with one or more scenes of domestic turmoil[54]—or its disavowal—to better elaborate this collision between intimacy and abstraction. Chapter one juxtaposes the media referenced above to the proliferation of plastic flowers as common household decorations in the postwar world and suggests that the marketing rhetoric surrounding them implicitly helped stabilize anxieties of ecological disasters and resource scarcity. Chapter two connects placid, timeless computational stock photographs of landscapes to the mythology of national parks and teases out an enduring ideal of wilderness and agrarian idylls, which provides therapy for the normative subject in a period of temporal incertitude. Chapter three is the only one where normative subjects are decentered as I examine photographic representations of toxic life in low-income, working-class neighborhoods of Los Angeles to make a sympathetic case for the politics of inattention—psychically backgrounding evidence of systems that are slowly killing you in order to go on living in their debris. Here, in the last instance, attachment is not cruel because for those who adjust in these scenes, the fantasy of a good life was never an abstraction on offer. They were always—and continue to be—the sacrificial lambs who justify the promise of prosperity in the settler order.

IV. Frontierism and extractive visuality

I position extractive visuality as a specific feature of settler colonialism, propagated largely by the fantasy of a permanently available frontier. This frontier is operative, in different ways, both at the level of administrative media and intimate life. Before detailing some of its features and explaining how it fits into the story I am telling, I want, however, to differentiate what we might call "settler

[54] Although I occasionally use the word "crisis", I mostly stay away from it. Unconvinced by certain strands of Marxist theorization which tend to periodize the contemporary in terms of perpetual crisis, I wonder what it means to designate crisis as a near-permanent state of affairs. For an instructive—if ultimately unsatisfactory—critique of such thinking, see: Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*.

colonial visuality" from other forms of imperial visuality that scholars have analyzed. In short: my claim is that unlike other forms of colonial visuality, which tended to either discipline or render spectacular subject populations and landscapes, settler colonial visuality posits an ontologically extractive relation to the world and its inhabitants. The frontier imaginary allows this visual regime to project such extractive desire outward—away from the self toward an-other.

Consider, for instance, a statement that captures a sentiment common to studies of imperial visuality: "The twin assertion of this volume is therefore that no history of imperialism is complete without heeding the constitutive capacity of visuality, and correspondingly, no history of modern visuality can ignore the constitutive fact of empire".[55] These words come from Sumathi Ramaswamy's introduction to a comprehensive collection she co-edited with Martin Jay, titled *Empires of Vision: A Reader*. Although Ramaswamy is correct to point out that a lot of mainstream art history and visual studies remain unaware of empire and postcolonial critique, links between vision and empire have, in the past three decades, been at the forefront of many significant interventions in cultural studies and cultural theory more generally.[56] The experience of the United States might not quite fit into this body of work since its model of imperial domination followed a different logic than, say British India. However, numerous studies have, over the years, made emphatic connections between visuality and American imperial formation from at least the nineteenth-century onwards.

Scholars like Amy Kaplan have pioneered interdisciplinary interventions within American studies in an effort to link the domestic to the international, as well as the popular to the imperial.[57]

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[55] Jay and Ramaswamy, *Empires of Vision*, 11.
[56] Mcclintock, *Imperial Leather*; Gruzinski, *Images at War*; Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*; Landau and Kaspin, *Images and Empires*.
[57] Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*; Kaplan and Pease, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*.

David Brody's work on orientalism in the Philippines draws on this tradition but extends its insights into visibly foreign territory.[58] Many of political theorist Michael Rogin's most insightful essays centered, repeatedly, on questions of visuality and American global power[59]—leading one commentator to argue that "Rogin was not someone who simply enjoyed the moving image. Rather, he understood visuality as central to the project of forging the rationalizations, desires, and identifications of a mass white public".[60] Within both film and cultural studies, a wide range of scholarship has offered similar commentary on Hollywood and imperial formation, not merely in terms of how it expresses "soft power",[61] but also through detailed analysis of genres like the Western as inherently articulating forms of colonial domination.[62]

More recently, Sönke Kunkel has argued for the centrality of mass media and image cultures in the dissemination of American power after the 1960s,[63] while Liam Kennedy has demonstrated the role photojournalists played in the working out of US foreign policy.[64] After the attacks on 9/11 and the subsequent "War on Terror", a plethora of academic studies—most prominently those by Nicholas Mirzoeff[65] and the Retort Collective[66]—situated visuality and spectacular politics at the heart of the national security state. In the past five years, after the revelations of mass surveillance by Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, even more studies have rapidly proliferated on themes like redaction,[67] the visual politics of security states,[68] surveillance

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[58] Brody, *Visualizing American Empire*.
[59] Rogin, *Ronald Reagan The Movie*; Rogin, *Independence Day*.
[60] Klausen, "Michael Rogin on American Empire".
[61] Nye, *Soft Power*.
[62] Campbell, *Post-Westerns*; Carter, *Myth of the Western*.
[63] Kunkel, *Empire of Pictures*.
[64] Kennedy, *Afterimages*.
[65] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*; Mirzoeff, "War Is Culture"; Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon*.
[66] Retort, *Afflicted Powers*.
[67] Nath, "Beyond the Public Eye".
[68] Masco, *The Theater of Operations*.

photography,[69] and the overarching relationship between perception, visuality, and regimes of imperial violence.[70]

What, then, remains to be said? My propositions about frontierism and settler colonial visuality are not meant as a corrective or challenge to this existing body of work. I find them instructive and useful for identifying some of the structural features of both American empire and imperial form in general. The minor addition—or modification—I hope to make to this literature is centered precisely on the term "extraction". With a few exceptions, many of the studies mentioned above tend to see the power dynamics of imperial visuality in terms of Foucauldian articulations of discipline or through the lens of spectacle. If the colonial production of a bodily archive in the manner identified by Allan Sekula in an influential essay[71] captures the disciplinary aspect of such work, then studies of Saartjie Baartman (derogatorily called the Hottentot Venus) gesture to the function of spectacle in colonial rule.[72] Considerably extending the scope of such analysis, Anne Anlin Cheng has, in a recent, excellent essay, commented extensively on the fetishistic racialization of Asian femininity through ornament.[73]

Taking all of this into account, I foreground "extraction" as a third possible prism through which settler colonial visuality might be considered. We must remember, of course, that—as I will argue in the following section—this does not make extractive vision *singularly* settler colonial. It is a form that travels. However, looking at the historical record, it appears likely that the settler order was perhaps, to some extent, unique in ontologically relating to the world as an extractive resource. Defined structurally by what Patrick Wolfe has called "the elimination of the native", it

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[69] Gustafsson, "Foresight, Hindsight and State Secrecy in the American West"; Andersen and Möller, "Engaging the Limits of Visibility".
[70] Feldman, *Archives of the Insensible*.
[71] Sekula, "The Body and the Archive".
[72] See Chapter 4, "The Spectacle of 'the Other' in Hall, *Representation*.
[73] Cheng, "Ornamentalism".

seems quite clear that settler colonialism, at least in the North American case, was never primarily interested in processes like the "civilizing mission" that determined much of the work colonialism did in places like India. As Wolfe polemically writes: "The positive outcomes of the logic of elimination can include officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations".[74]

Settler colonial visuality turns, therefore, on conceptualizing animate and inanimate life as resources open to the perennial extraction of economic (and other kinds of) value. This, then, is a specific kind of visuality, the stakes of which lie less in discipling subject populations or fetishizing them as spectacular (though that also undoubtedly happens). From a different angle, Jennifer Wenzel distinguishes usefully between the logic of improvement and that of extraction, asking whether "extractivism might have its own aesthetic".[75] If improvement functions through the "agricultural or organic promise of development, addition, bringing forth", then what of extraction, which "seems by contrast, a logic of emptying out or subtraction?"[76] Then: "How does a mining company see? What tricks of the eye enable its work? The extracting eye, I want to suggest, peers through space rather than time: to keep one's eye on the prize in this context means to home in on what's valuable, to espy the buried ore precious enough to make it worth the digging up".[77] Using the mining term "overburden", Wenzel suggests that the extractive aesthetic turns on seeing everything that isn't a valuable resource as excessive or unnecessary. This logic of subtraction, of valuation, and of disposability is what I am referring to as settler colonial visuality.

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[74] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native", 388.
[75] Wenzel, "Afterword".
[76] Wenzel.
[77] Wenzel.

Doubtless, such a visual logic is not *only* a component of settler colonial regimes. It does travel wherever the extractive enterprise goes. Extraction might have been a part of colonialism per se in the past and is a part of corporate practice more generally today. However, I do think that this form of visuality is *intrinsically* a part of the settler order. In this sense, I am not doing much more than identifying extraction as a structural feature of the settler colonial visual regime—one which ensures that power's primary relation to the world and its nonhuman and nonhuman inhabitants is guided by the logic of overburden. And this regime, I am suggesting, requires an idea of the frontier to draw continuing sustenance from.

As is well-known by now, Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis about the frontier in American history situated Westward expansion as a process of spiritual and material renewal for settler populations.[78] Delivered as a lecture at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, Turner's thesis has animated much discourse, discord, and debate since that time. In his incisive historicization of the frontier-impulse in American culture, Alan Trachtenberg shows how the themes which fascinated Turner were, in essence, carryovers from a Jeffersonian tradition where the West was seen as a space of pastoral, agrarian idyll awaiting cultivation and settlement. The building of the railways and the discovery of gold in California in the mid-nineteenth-century abruptly interrupted this more primitive notion of national wealth generation with by installing a new engine of history at the heart of the West.[79] Four years before Turner's talk, in a book titled *The Winning of the West*, Theodore Roosevelt drew on these themes and attached them to a "half-mystical imperative of 'race history,' a culminating moment in the drive of the 'English-speaking peoples' for dominance in the world".[80]

[78] Turner, *History, Frontier, and Section*; White and Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture*.
[79] Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 11–12.
[80] Trachtenberg, 13.

Trachtenberg argues that Turner's thesis actually extended many of the undertones of this latter telling of the history of Westward expansion, giving it a slightly different, civilizational spin. Earlier, reviewing Roosevelt's book, he had suggested that "American history needs a connected and unified account of the progress of civilization across the continent".[81] A claim Trachtenberg interprets as calling for a "coherent, integrated story" of the nation's birth and development. This telling of Western expansion would emphasize "connectedness, wholeness, unity: these narrative virtues, with their implied telos of closure, of a justifying meaning at the end of the tale, Turner would now embody in the language of historical interpretation".[82]

Surveying his impact, William Cronon too, returns repeatedly to narrative as fundamental to Turner's enduring relevance across different fields of historical inquiry. Thus: Turner's thesis "becomes *a story*",[83] which, even when its historical veracity is questioned, leads historians to turn to him for "our *rhetorical* structure".[84] The frontier thesis provides a "generous scaffolding" on which "almost all American history could be erected as a case study in the progress of human civilization".[85] It raises, in Cronon's view, the most basic questions that inform the creation of American abstractions: "And here we may as well return to one of Turner's most important questions as well: what *is* the relationship between abundance and American notions of liberal democracy?"[86] How, in other words, are contesting notions of "the good life" generated at the heart of American national mythmaking?[87]

[81] Quoted in Trachtenberg, 13.
[82] Trachtenberg, 13.
[83] Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier", 165. Emphasis in original.
[84] Cronon, 170. Emphasis in original.
[85] Cronon, 165.
[86] Cronon, 175.
[87] Cronon, 175.

For Turner, the frontier was characterized by valor, sturdiness, and a capacity to endure; elements Trachtenberg identifies as “these heroic masculine traits”.[88] He further notes the irony—a *critical* irony—of Turner offering his thesis in Chicago, a midwestern city that was, like the other east coast and midwestern places Turner had known, hurtling towards untrammeled urbanism. It is curious that the frontier—a historical figuration that was disappearing even as Turner theorized it—should inform the work of a person such as this. Though he doesn’t explicitly say it exactly in this way, Trachtenberg seems to suggest that the frontier myth was, for Turner, a psychic strategy by which futurity and nostalgia could be bridged in a new synthesis. Trachtenberg writes that he solved the problem of clinging to the frontier metaphor even after its historical passing by raising the frontier beyond geography to a feature of national character: “the traits of selfhood”, “a national character, a type of person fit for the struggles and strategies of an urban future”.[89] Finally, then, he “arrived at his conception of the American character as an emblem of national coherence”.[90]

The visual vocabulary informing this idealized concept of the west,[91] when combined with Turner’s investment in the frontier metaphor, his nostalgic projection of into the future, and his deployment of rhetoric and narrative form, speaks powerfully to the intersections of abstractions with intimate domains. As a psychic mechanism for coping with the future, Turner’s thesis appears less important as historical analytic than as evidence of a particular form of life’s struggle to adjust to large-scale social transformation. The elevation of the frontier myth beyond territoriality into a terrain of national character captures this fundamental move where an abstraction comes to define the horizon of normative, subjective being. The proper subject of empire. By framing this drama in terms of the extractive aesthetic of settler colonial visuality, I am gesturing, therefore, to the

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[88] Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 13.
[89] Trachtenberg, 15–16.
[90] Trachtenberg, 16.
[91] Trachtenberg, 17–21.

cultural, narrative, and rhetorical tropes that sustain such notions of national character well beyond Turner's time and into ours.

With the official closure of the frontier in 1890, then, the affective and infrastructural investments channeled into the myth of an endless Western horizon were relocated elsewhere. They didn't disappear. Hence, in the third volume of Richard Slotkin's magisterial cultural history of the American frontier commences with a 1960 speech by President John F. Kennedy where he invoked "The New Frontier", a phrase deliberately calibrated hark back to the renewal Turner referenced.[92] Amongst the many genres of popular culture preoccupied by the frontier trope—pamphlets, historical romances, dime novels, theatrical melodramas, Wild West shows, film, and eventually, television[93]—Slotkin is particularly interested in Westerns and how they "offered a language and a set of conceptual structures" for representing social hierarchies and moral codes.[94] This vast visual archive shows the frontier was never simply a geographical space. Entangled with desires for material and psychic regeneration, it conjured an entire cultural repertoire of settler sovereignty. The West as the overcoming of limits.

In the historiography of the region, ocular fantasies surface constantly. For instance, in his pioneering study of the region, Gerald Nash announces: "by 1945 the war had wrought a startling transformation. Westerners now had visions of unlimited growth and expansion, a newly diversified economy was booming, a vast influx of population was changing the very fabric of Western society … The West emerged from the war as a path-breaking self-sufficient region with unbounded optimism for its future".[95] Nash's throwaway reference to "visions" indexes links

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[92] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 1–5.
[93] Slotkin, 8.
[94] Slotkin, 350.
[95] Nash, *The American West Transformed*, 216.

between ocularism, futurity, and spatial expansiveness that others have diagnosed systematically.[96] But the progressive telos Nash celebrates was premised on ecological devastation, Native extermination, and the transformation of the West into a testing ground for toxic modernity.[97] Along these lines, offering a critique of Nash's exuberance and Turner's nostalgia, Donald Worster points out that the American West was not terra nullius, but a place of conflict where the arsenal of the American military-industrial took hold—at both political and environmental costs. He describes the geography as one where "Americans ran smack into the broader world".[98]

But of course, Turner's nostalgia—as I have argued—didn't foreclose this possibility. In fact, he explicitly relied on running "smack into the broader world" as the authorizing fiction of his vision of the frontier. What Trachtenberg, Cronon, and Slotkin ably show is that the frontier thesis was never just about history. It was always-already an effort to psychically accommodate to new ways of being—to furnish a mythology, a narrative, and rhetorical structure for understanding the interface with the "broader world". My contention is that the grammar of extraction subtends this myth, narrative, and rhetoric. Ultimately, extraction is the fiction that holds together settler ways of seeing, providing some sense of coherence to settler life, allowing this way of life—and its attendant ocular regime—to expand globally. Seen this way, it is also important to keep in mind that in my approach (and to some extent in Turner's), the frontier is as much a "real" geographical entity as it is a trope—a component of the settler imaginary. In fact, the territoriality of the frontier informed the mythical trope as much as the trope infected conceptualizations of the territory. As a result, while two chapters of the dissertation are, to an extent, focused on the "American West", I

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[96] Rollins and O'Connor, *Hollywood's West*; Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*; Rodney, *Looking Beyond Borderlines*.
[97] Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*; Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*; LaDuke, *The Militarization of Indian Country*; Voyles, *Wastelanding*.
[98] Worster, *Under Western Skies*, 13.

am making the case for frontierism as a trope that extends much beyond this geographical terrain. As a global formation, settler colonialism reinvents frontiers in a whole host of places, from the Americas to Australia. In each case, the frontier subsists as trope and space.[99]

V. (Settler) colonialism as global form

As should be clear by now, I am explicitly *not* making a case for the North American settler order as an exception to other colonial or imperial regimes. I *am* teasing out its specificity, the particular sorts of fantasies it feeds on and fictions it creates; its particular redefinitions of the social terrain. Such a search for specificity is driven, in large part, by my conviction that the story of American settler colonialism is fully imbricated with stories of other colonialisms. The traffic in colonialism, to coin a phrase, is of interest to me: what forms of subjectification, domination, adjustment, and resistance travel across which borders—and what happens in transit? If entwinements of intimacy and abstraction fascinate me, it is because of the temporal politics that come appended to such acts of entwinement.

In a sense then, the dissertation is about time—about (settler) colonial futurity as a method for formatting times to come. Through invocations of progress, nostalgia, and persistence in zones of abandonment, I investigate lineaments of colonial temporality as a framework for understanding and producing the future. The adjustments intimacy makes to render itself coherent in an unstable world are crucial here because adjustment is a procedure for stabilizing the present in the hope of promised futures. And as it produces these promised futures, (settler) colonialism circulates around the globe. This is one decisive way in which the American project is no different than many cases of "classic" European colonization: it participates in the same universal history. Or, to be more

[99] For more on the psychic dynamics of the frontier see: Povinelli, "Horizons and Frontiers, Late Liberal Territoriality, and Toxic Habitats".

precise, it propagates the idea that universal history is the province of some (who make it there at the expense of others). The primary theorists I leaned on above—Stoler, Povinelli, and Lowe—are all in agreement on this point and show how (settler) colonialism becomes what I am calling "global form", i.e. a recognizable structure of social ordering, which, despite differences, also distributes similarity—similar forms of suffering, control, and systematicity.

Povinelli offers some materials for making the case for global form in this manner with her claim that "the intimate couple" as a "key transfer point within liberalism … is already conditioned by liberalism's emergence and dispersion in empire".[100] Intimacy, here, becomes a lens for looking at how "the reach of settler colonialism stretches way beyond the site of colonial settler itself".[101] It is for this reason, she argues, that "the referent of *liberal settler colonies* is much wider than the nation-states literally founded on the basis of colonial settlement, encompassing what I sometimes describe as the *liberal diaspora*—an origin-less, origin-obscuring process of transformation in circulation that retroactively constitutes its beginning and center".[102] Note the temporality involved in this description of liberalism as a formation that captures territories and exterminates peoples around the world but that, through a taxonomic differentiating in tactics (for example, colonialism vs. settler colonialism), effaces its coherence as global form.

More pointedly, Ann Stoler asks "why the imperial frame seems 'forced' to some and the rubrics of postcolonial scholarship 'contrived' in U.S. contexts?"[103] Does the applicability of an imperial frame appear misdirected because even as Americans practiced imperialism they didn't take on the word "empire" the way European powers did? Or does the nature of American empire empirically differ? Is it possible, Stoler queries, that often marking difference like this is exactly

[100] Povinelli, *The Empire of Love*, 17.
[101] Povinelli, 17.
[102] Povinelli, 18.
[103] Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen", 10.

what American empire does best: “And is the ‘uniqueness’ of U.S. empire built not on a difference from European modes but on a willful compartmentalization of its entangles parts?”[104] Or: “have the refusals been located more squarely in U.S. historiography, where students asking what bearing Native American history might have had on the annexation of the Philippines might be redirected within domestic borders and chided for spreading themselves too thin?”[105] Stoler’s comparativist politics leads her to put pressure on such easy distinctions that attempt to separate logics of rule across geographies, histories, and social contexts—as if by refusing to see “thin” connections one can simply overcome the universalizing impulse of liberal colonial form.

Calling for the capacity to “read *across* the separate repositories” that compartmentalize “links between settler colonialism in North America and the West Indies and the African slave trade; or attention to the conjunction of the abolition of slavery and the importing of Chinese and South Asian indentured labor; or a correlation of the East Indies and China trades and the rise of bourgeois Europe”,[106] Lisa Lowe makes a convincing case for analyzing the “nuances and interdependencies” determining varied contexts of colonial domination. *The Intimacies of Four Continents* examines the “differentially situated histories of indigeneity, slavery, industry, trade, and immigration” to show how they “give rise to linked, but not identical, genealogies of liberalism”.[107] Lowe’s focus on twinned histories of colonialism and capitalism is useful not only for further explicating the logics by which liberal domination circulate globally through the rhetoric of universalism. Her work also links this history—as does Povinelli’s more recent scholarship referenced in later chapters—to regimes of contemporary value extraction through capital in a postcolonial era.

[104] Stoler, 10.
[105] Stoler, 10.
[106] Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 4.
[107] Lowe, 11.

By citing these scholars (who, it must be noted, are often in conversation with each other), I am trying to make a case for American settler colonialism as one component of a liberal regime of governance, which has historically taken on a global form. Implicit in the citations above but fleshed out elsewhere in these works—and the chapters to follow—is a set of problems concerning the temporality liberalism and colonialism. Assuming the mantle of universal history, relegating otherness to a domain outside that history, liberal colonialism articulates a futurism premised on linear progress—where the past gives way to abundant futures. However, as Turner's thesis about the persistence of imagined frontiers after the closure of the territorial one shows, progress narratives often prop themselves up by going back to the past, exploiting nostalgia as a technology of future-making.

In this scheme, past and present orders are justified from the position of a future to come where the liberal order and its modes of governance shall be exonerated from all forms of historical complicity. Povinelli provides a convincing description of this dynamic in her work on "economies of abandonment"—a text to which I shall return in due course. Thinking the social in terms of a division of access to "tense"—where liberalism holds the future and its others are forever emerging from the past—helps flesh out some implications of the futurity I am after.[108] Ultimately, then, when (settler) colonial futurity emerges as global form, it stabilizes a sense of mission by fixing on that future as a space of promise. Each of the following chapters, in its own way, circles and elucidates the contours and implications of such a search for stability.

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[108] Povinelli makes many, scattered references to "tense" in her work, but one relevant point worth noting in this context flows from her critique of Benedict Anderson's work on nations as "imagined communities": "The problem with Anderson's account of the imagined political community of nationalism is not that it locates the origin of the nation-state at the wrong moment or in the wrong place. Rather, the problem is that Anderson doesn't account for a division that emerged internal to the otherwise homogeneous space-time of nationalism. When we look at these differential narrative structures we find that although all people may belong to nationalism, not all people occupy the same tense of nationalism" (Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 37).

VI. The chapters

With these thematic concerns foregrounded, the roadmap for what happens next is this: this effort is organized in three chapters, beginning with the immediate postwar era and moving towards the contemporary. In each chapter, one or more forms of administrative media are set in juxtaposition to intimate life with the aim of showing how these media materially and rhetorically produced new frontiers of extractive growth and how that rhetoric percolated into the everyday.

Chapter one, "Plastic Permanence (Resource Frontiers and Economies of Scarcity)", attempts a rewriting of postwar domesticity under the sign of resource scarcity and depletion. The period in question is, roughly, 1945-1973—the year when the embargo put in effect by the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) ushered the United States into a confrontation with energy crisis. The 1970s also mark the inauguration of what is commonly called the "environmental decade". The twenty-odd years leading up to this point, however, are just as commonly narrativized through the lens of consumer capitalism, commodification, and the process of suburbanization. The chapter looks to administrative archives—particularly the first volume of a five-volume 1952 report, *Resources for Freedom*, released by the President's Materials Policy Commission—where, contrary to much cultural history, the postwar period is understood to be besieged by the specter of resource scarcity and crisis. In conversation with some historians who are revisiting the epoch through fresh eyes, the first part of the chapter offers a reading of the report to show how, in the face resource scarcity, it called for new frontiers of extractive growth at home and abroad.

I then examine a concurrent proliferation in plastic flowers across American social life during the same period. Looking at works of pop art, television programs, commercials, and newspaper stories on fake floral arrangements, I argue that plastic flowers—marketed as objects

that offered protection against the seasons and the passage of historical time—helped normative, domestic subjects stabilize a sense of self in the midst of a world gripped by the fear of resource depletion. The chapter also references plastic flowers in British and Canadian contexts to make a case for the global form such acts of frontierism and stabilization took.

The following two chapters descend, in a more focused manner, to the American West as a theater for the dynamics that concern me. Chapter two, "Technostalgia (Electronic Frontiers and Temporal Unsettlement)", leaps to the end of the twentieth-century, specifically the period after the end of the Cold War and examines the emergence of technological futurism after the end of history. Here I am interested, on the one hand, in how, during the early-to-late-1990s, the internet was marketed and conceptualized as an informational frontier by forces across the political spectrum. Surveying this literature, I find that invocations of the frontier and the "Wild West" online oddly preserve a sense of idealism around agrarian idylls and wilderness. The case is made through a detailed reading of a 1995 book, co-written by Microsoft founder Bill Gates, where he takes exception to thinking of the internet as infrastructure and proposes instead, a number of alternatives—all of which hark back to an idealized settler colonial past. Looking at this evidence, I suggest that techno-optimistic futures are, to a large extent, propped up by a sense of nostalgia that derives from discourses surrounding the end of history—promising white subjects an exit from the precarity of an indeterminate present.

The chapter then engages one iconic image—*Bliss*, a stock photograph from the Napa-Sonoma county line, which is also one of the most famous desktop wallpapers to have ever adorned personal computers. Offering a reading of the image in relation to the history of farm labor and Californian agriculture, and comparing *Bliss* to photographs taken by Ansel Adams in Manzanar, the chapter shows how the nostalgic politics of futurity articulated by entrepreneurs also filtered

into an intimate domain and provided comfort through the illusion that unspoiled, eternal "nature" still exists for the taking.

Finally, chapter three, "Ordering Attention (Renewable Frontiers and Cartographic Fantasies)", tackles more head-on, the implications of Anthropocene-discourse and ecological crises in the contemporary. In it, I contrast modes by which two different sorts of administrative media, corporate and academic, order the world through the politics of attention. An extended analysis of videos produced by the Southern California Gas Company justifying the importance of storing natural gas underground is ensconced within an analysis of a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council that frames clean energy as the key to unlocking the "next frontier" of American prosperity. I argue that corporate media—both the videos and the report—urge viewers to look away from questions of infrastructural failure, systemic toxicity, and the costs of progress by directing attention elsewhere—to everything energy affords in maintaining life as it is. By contrast, academic fields like the energy humanities, call for "proper attention" to be paid to the materiality of energy in the hopes of unravelling a "new" politics of the Anthropocene. In these texts I read the endurance of an old paradigm of suspicious reading derived from Fredric Jameson's mining of the textual unconscious and his method of cognitive mapping.

If corporate media makes viewers look away, then this kind of work sees attention as the a priori ground for politics—one must attend properly to the effects of totalizing systems, even when those effects evade description. Taking issue with the high-affect paranoia of the latter move, and the complicities involved in the former, I turn to the Center for Land Use Interpretation's mapping of oil and gas infrastructure in Los Angeles and photojournalistic representations of toxicity in the city's neighborhoods, to make the case for an alternative, deadpan aesthetic of totality where the

psyche cultivates inattention—the capacity or need to look away from the debris of what is killing you—as a survival strategy in the face of large-scale, violent, abstractions.

VII. Conclusion (on futurity)

As my hints about chapter three above might indicate, one of the feelings underwriting this work is my sense that the forces of settler colonial futurity tighten their grip—and the fantasies attached to them accelerate—precisely at the moment when the future has ceased to be a horizon for action in any simple sense. Saying this is not the same as declaring the end of history. The difficulty of imagining futures that might occupy what Povinelli calls an "otherwise"—a different grammar and arrangement of relations—has been diagnosed by several theorists with a keen eye for what is going on all around.[109] Nostalgia, as these same theorists note, emerges once the future disappears as a technology for working out ways of inhabiting what happens after what is to-come is no longer on the horizon. This, I think, is an affliction that affects everyone. Which is to say: the inability to confidently project into future-time is not a malaise that catches those who are already being laid to waste by abstract systems. It also corrodes those systems themselves.

What I diagnose as vicissitudes of settler colonial futurity are, in this sense, themselves a deeply panicked reaction to that vanishing temporal horizon. Much of the violence, distribution of harm, and toxic fallout accompanying the production of other frontiers over the past five-odd decades is a byproduct of empire's not knowing how to deal with finitude. This is in large part, my contention in chapter one. What the first two chapters show in varied ways is the manner by which the absence of the future as a horizon of meaningful action turns the (settler) colonial order

[109] Berardi, *After the Future*; Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*; Scott, *Omens of Adversity*. One should note that these works differ in their analyses. Scott's book, especially, is very different than Berardi or Fisher's. One should also note that Berardi's useful provocations in the text cited here have, in more recent work, relied on alarmingly orientalist readings of contemporary media cultures in the non-West—specifically South Korea.

into a machine for producing material, rhetorical, imagined, and other futures. There is a fantasy of expansion and permanence subtending the precarity infecting contemporary forms of life, even in the global north.

By contrast, some of the projects and subjects I study in chapter three—the Center for Land Use Interpretation's low-affect, deadpan mapping of totality and the techniques poor, working-class, racialized others are forced to cultivate in order to not constantly attend to death-dealing infrastructures—some of these projects and subjects adjust and accommodate to the loss of futures. Intimacy's capacity for adjustment serves, here, not to shore up the fiction of coming prosperity. Rather, it indexes life amidst scarcity, life which makes peace with the present, looking ahead, at most, in an attenuated manner. In the end, this other form of looking, this other way of living, this modest, minimal kind of flourishing departs radically from the extractivism of settler colonial visuality.

This other form cultivates—it maintains and holds in place, refusing to extract from human and nonhuman others, substance of economic or noneconomic value. Disillusioned both with the machinations of systemic abstractions and the relentless search of academic critique for the most devastating takedown of what exists, this other ethic strains towards what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called "reparative" practice. "In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression", she asks, why has it become "naïve, pious, or compliant" to "theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance?"[110] The reparative antidote Sedgwick offers emanates from love, (which doesn't require giving up criticality). Reparative relation allows a person to render themselves vulnerable to the "resources" a loved object can "offer to an inchoate self".[111]

[110] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You", 124–25.
[111] Sedgwick, 149.

Where suspicion always interrogates surface appearance, repair cultivates the precarity of surfaces. Not the opposite of paranoia, repair is an otherwise in the most literal sense—a varied contour for relating to something.

Departing from extractive settler visuality can, I hope, offer this minimal consolation—the feeble promise of another view of things.

CHAPTER ONE

Plastic Permanence (Resource Frontiers and Economies of Scarcity)

I. Introduction

In 1964, the British science fiction writer JG Ballard published a strange, nostalgic little story called "The Garden of Time". For those familiar with Ballard's brand of future-writing, the story is odd because of both its brevity and potentially sentimental harkening back to aristocratic life—a system Ballard, himself a staunch suburbanite, spent an entire career demolishing. Of course, "The Garden of Time" doesn't approach aristocracy without a sense of critique. In fact, its elegiac tone is, in fact, essential to the form of critique it undertakes.

The narrative is straightforward: Count Axel and his wife lived in a villa, from the terrace of which you could look out onto an artificial lake and a garden. From there, one could "see over the wall to the plain beyond, a continuous expanse of open ground that rolled in great swells to the horizon … The plain surrounded the house on all sides, its drab emptiness emphasizing the seclusion and mellowed magnificence of the villa".[1] Regularly, on the horizon in the distance, the Count and his wife saw a barbarian throng, an indiscernible mass, approaching them. Whenever they saw this mass, they walked into the garden and picked a "time flower"—a crystal flower—which they broke, and the smashing of which made the horde disappear. For a time. Both were aware that these nonorganic flowers were not infinite. They knew that with each destroyed flower, there was one less left to fight off the oncoming crowd. Nonetheless, one evening, during their walk in the garden, the Countess said to her husband: "What a wonderful display, Axel. There are so many flowers still"—leading him to consider how "her use of *still* had revealed her own

[1] Ballard, "The Garden of Time", 141.

unconscious anticipation of the end".[2] With only a dozen crystal flowers left in the garden, this statement foreshadows, in the story, the couple's fate, projecting forward to a time when the vast empty outside populated by barbarians will swallow whole their aristocratic idyll.

I start with Ballard's story because the function of the crystal flowers in it mimics, to an uncanny extent, the function of plastic flowers in what this chapter attempts to do. In Ballard's story, the flowers take on a talismanic quality—holding off the inevitability of a future everyone knows is coming. Unable to adjust to the implications of this future, those implicated in the maintenance of the status quo hold on to some fiction of stability; some artifact that will assure them that the "drab" "empty" plains will not engulf the present order of things. "There are so many flowers *still*"—in this tableau, such statements take on dual meaning. On the one hand they index a straightforward inability confront limits and finitude, to accommodate to the challenges material scarcity poses to an existing order of things. On the other hand, they index a psychic mechanism, a psychological story subjects concoct to convince themselves that things will go on as usual even though the *still* reveals an "unconscious anticipation of the end".

That Ballard is British and this story unfolds in an unnamed place ought not to deter us. For the substance of this chapter, even though much of it takes place in the United States, gestures to what I referred to in the introduction as settler colonialism as global form. Which is to say: the particular, idiosyncratic rewriting of the postwar American order that I offer in the following pages is not, by any means, restricted to the United States alone. Discussions of British and Canadian examples both amplify this point and suggest—if only implicitly—that telling nationally bound stories of resource scarcity is of little use, especially in the context of twentieth century postwar geopolitics. With this in mind, what I hope to do in this chapter is: first, make a historical case that

[2] Ballard, 145.

the postwar United States—accelerated patterns of consumer capitalism notwithstanding—was a society overrun, at least at the levels of bureaucratic and policy concerns, by fears of scarcity. This "other" tale of postwar America is not told very often, at least in the annals of cultural history and theory, where one tends to make a more intuitive journey from the end of the Second World War to the fantasies attending the democratization of consumerism and suburbanization.

Signposting work within what we might broadly call the field of political economy, I will offer a different reading of the texture of the historical moment spanning, roughly, from 1945 to 1973. Here, I will attempt to figure out how the rhetoric of economic growth turned on postwar visions of frontierism even though this rhetoric was materially underpinned by specters of resource scarcity. I take 1945 as a starting point because that is when the war ended; though, as will be clear from my discussion in the following section, "1945" represents a contortion within longer histories of scarcity and governance. Similarly, I take 1973 as a cutting off point because, on the one hand, by that time society had entered the third year of what is often called "the environmental decade". More importantly, the decision by Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in that year to institute an embargo on oil exports to the United States made questions of scarcity apparent in popular consciousness on a register that had been unavailable prior.[3]

With this arc in mind, in section II, I will focus primarily on a five-volume 1952 report produced by the President's Materials Policy Commission, titled *Resources for Freedom*. Through a detailed reading of volume one of that report, in conjunction with other historical evidence from the era, I will try to make the case that concerns about scarcity underwrote American prosperity after the Second World War. Moreover, I will show that faced by such concerns, rather than revise the meanings of cherished abstractions like "the American way of life", administrative media

[3] On the significance of 1973, see: Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*.

foreclosed specters of scarcity-induced-crises and produced other frontiers of extractive expansion. They acted, in other words, like Count Axel and the Countess, crushing crystal flowers when barbarians appeared at the gate.

The second endeavor I undertake in this chapter turns on a more speculative, more tenuous, question: if society was overrun by concerns about scarcity and resource depletion, how could signs of such concern *not* become manifest within the intimate domain? How could the home remain immune to such concerns? In invoking plastic flowers as a method for answering some of these questions, I am making a different kind of historical claim than I do in section II. Between sections III to V, I contextualize plastic flowers within trends in postwar suburbanization and styles of interior decoration. Through scholarly work on the fondness for "outdoor living", especially in the Western United States, I suggest that we might consider plastic flowers to be a peculiar and counterintuitive object that shored up some of the fantasies such trends encoded within the home.

Here, work on suburban anxiety is important to me because, virtually all of the literature at hand—scholarship on medicalization, nuclear war, sexuality, and interior decoration—makes references to terms like "anxiety", "fantasy", "psyche", and "therapy" without always considering how the material substrates of that moment (i.e. natural resources) might be linked to the psychic states of normative subjects living in suburban setups. I read numerous fragments of popular and media culture between the late-1950s and early-1970s—a pop artwork, a television advertisement, a part of a television show, and news reports—where plastic flowers surface in a number of elliptical, elusive ways. My claim, broadly, is that if we consider these objects to be materially indexing the postwar petroleum-based resource economy, then we might also consider how their presence within homes—specifically, rhetoric surrounding their promise of protection from seasonality as well as organic time—actually shored up the abstraction of "good life" that

administration propagandized. If administrative media was crushing crystal flowers to stave off the horde, the timeless promise of plastic flowers allowed normative, suburban, domestic subjects to say *still*—and to look away from an "unconscious anticipation of the end".

Where the first part of the chapter historicizes resource crisis in relation the 1950s, plastic flowers take me into the 1960s and 1970s. The problems present in my reading of administrative media did not disappear during this latter period. Rather, worries surrounding resource depletion further intensified as both the nascent environmental movement and panicked population politics began to take hold, symptomatized most effectively by Paul Ehrlich's 1967 book, *The Population Bomb*. As Thomas Robertson usefully points out, between new interpretations of Darwinism, the civil rights movement, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and global food shortages in far-off places like India "a growing sense of crisis" gripped America, "stemming from varied yet simultaneous crises that all seemed beyond the problem-solving capacity of the system".[4] Moreover, by the late 1960s, "the vast changes that had so transformed American life in the previous two and a half decades—economic growth, suburbanization, civil rights, the women's movement, the Cold War, Vietnam, student protest—came to a boil".[5] In other words, while the first part of this chapter tries to historically ground resource scarcity as a narrative arc for understanding postwar society, the second extends these insights in a period when concerns about scarcity had far from disappeared.

I am aware that my claims about the function of plastic flowers within the home are not historically airtight. Being products of the oil economy, they materially indexed petroculture. But within my narrative they also function as metaphorical objects, as crystal flowers do in "The Garden of Time". Methodologically, then, these sections of the chapter use the historical archive as a jumping off point to offer a speculative reading of the time in question. I am inspired, in this

[4] Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*, 138.
[5] Robertson, 138.

endeavor, by recent work in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities where the speculative as a mode of thought and methodological practice, has been eloquently defended.[6] Speculation, in this sense, does not designate a departure from reality or a fictional account. Rather, it designates a mode of attention—what Anna Tsing calls "arts of noticing"[7]—where the texture of the everyday is opened out to counterintuitive interpretations that are not necessarily grounded in the evidentiary paradigm. Nothing that I say about plastic flowers is extrapolated from thin air. The lessons I draw are also, however, not always spelled out on the surfaces of the objects that concern me.

Part of my contention is that this *must* be so; had they been plainly apparent, one wouldn't need to notice them. All of which is to say: while I am aware that plastic flowers are not tethered to historical and material reality in the same way as my analysis of the report, *Resources for Freedom*, I also think that without attending to these objects in a partially speculative mode, one ends up looking only at how crystal flowers were destroyed to maintain a sense of order. One ignores, completely, the Countess' *still*—that unconscious anticipation of the end which speaks to how intimacy organizes itself in the midst of scarcity. Before diving into the history, therefore, let me provide a brief example of the kind of speculative work plastic flowers do in this chapter.

In the pages of the August 23, 1964 edition of *The New York Times*, Sherwood Kohn announced that: "The age of the realistic, imperishable, inexpensive, pollen-free, flexible, easily obtainable, socially acceptable, detergent washable, artificial plant is here".[8] Kohn opined that where merely five years prior, few florists would have "touched a polythene pansy with a trowel",

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[6] For a defense of the speculative method, see: Uncertain Commons, *Speculate This!*. On the relationship between "science fact" and "speculative feminism", see: Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. And consider the following from an eminent geographer of the Anthropocene: "Promisingly, diverse fields of inquiry are now converging on what might be termed a 'speculative geophysics': which I take to include not only a renewed philosophical, cultural, and social theoretic interest in the possibilities of earth processes 'in themselves', but also the past and present willingness of natural scientists to think beyond the empirical into the realms of what has been, or might yet be". Clark, "Rock, Life, Fire", 260.

[7] See my discussion of this concept in the introduction.

[8] Kohn, "The Flowering of Fake Flowers".

in 1964 even William Fuss—progeny of famous European florist Kasper Fuss—was making "a comfortable living by renting plastic landscapes to Americans (he thinks of himself as a botanist in plastic)". In fact, Fuss created a roof filled with artificial plants atop his East 53rd Street shop. Of course, not everyone welcomed the arrival of plastic flowers, as Kohn pointed out by referencing a "motivation researcher" from Chicago who "theorized that people buy artificial flowers because they're afraid of death"—an opinion which chimes with anthropologist Margaret Mead's claim that people indulge fake flora because they "are unwilling to be at the mercy of a fading flower".[9]

Kohn's article effectively captures the dual sense of enthusiasm and skepticism that accompanied the postwar proliferation of plastic flowers in the American public sphere: from office spaces and restaurants to hotel lobbies and suburban houses.[10] Cultural historian Jeffrey

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[9] Quoted in Kohn.

[10] Apart from innumerable newspaper articles containing decorative tips (some of which I discuss towards the end of this chapter), plastic flowers surfaced in a suspiciously in/visible way in the culture of the 1960s and 1970s. The common practice of appending plastic flowers to swim caps faded quickly as a fashionable thing to do; but the objects kept being referenced in a range of films, books, and artwork—not to mention consumption culture in general. For instance, Peter Cook's character in the well-known 1967 film *Bedazzled*, says to God: "All right, you great git, you've asked for it. I'll cover the world in Tastee-Freez and Wimpy Burgers. I'll fill it with concrete runways, motorways, aircraft, television, automobiles, advertising, plastic flowers, frozen food and supersonic bangs. I'll make it so noisy and disgusting that even you'll be ashamed of yourself!" In 1968, the artist Christo's "Wrapped Roses" featured plastic roses wrapped in plastic. A 1971 episode of the popular television show, Doctor Who, titled "Terror of the Autons", features poisonous plastic daffodils as an evil presence the Doctor must counter. In Phillip K Dick's 1977 book, *A Scanner Darkly*, a character speaks of being able to buy little plastic spring flowers from supermarkets. Consider, finally, the poetry of British poet Adrian Henri (discussed in a little detail in footnote 112), where plastic flowers turn up constantly.

In all of these cases, there is a tendency—as the Peter Cook quote nicely illustrates—to equate plastic flowers both with commercial culture and kitschy taste. They often symbolize a world gone wrong. What is interesting about the string of commodities referenced in *Bedazzled* is precisely the number of those goods that are now implicated in environmental crises or are signs of unsustainable lifestyles. My point, in this chapter, is to take such equations seriously but to suggest that rather than fitting into a matrix of commodification, plastic flowers give us some clues about telling the story of the mid-twentieth-century a little differently: as a story about resources. In many ways, my effort is allied to new studies of suburbia discussed below, where petroleum is brought front-and-center in analysis of suburban formation. I am calling, in some manner, for a similar shift in optic—to take note of objects that were present all around, in society and culture, but rarely commented upon because they continue to be thought of as examples of commodification or kitsch. However, by thinking of them as indexing natural resources, we begin to tell their story differently; as well as the story of the society they proliferated in.

Finally, it is also worth noting that there is a (settler) colonial story to be told about plastic flowers in terms of their manufacture and circulation in the 1960s because the biggest global supplier of these flowers to the United States was Hong Kong. The story of the plastic flower industry in that country is connected to—and indicative of—

Meikle notes that even though plastic flowers were becoming increasingly common in the fifties—because, according to one promoter, they "'require no care except for an occasional wiping, will last virtually forever, and are highly fire-resistant'"[11]—they were still painstaking to produce. However, the development of injection-molded polythene meant that "by the early 1960s the annual synthetic crop amounted to $120 million, about a sixth of what people paid for cut flowers".[12] Meikle points out that the postwar spread of plastic, in both its decorative and utilitarian forms, was accompanied by a certain sense of ambivalence.

Expanding on an insight present in Kohn's article (as well as in numerous other journalistic writings of the time), Meikle argues that by midcentury, plastic's most utopian phase had passed. Peoples' attachment to plastic was, now, mediated by anxieties about inauthenticity, the specter of a surface without deeper meaning.[13] We find such sentiment not only in the quotes from Margaret Mead and the Chicago researcher cited above, but also in a plethora of other counter-arguments about the spread of plastic flowers, which often chided consumers who bought these items for devaluing "experience" and reducing real feelings to kitschy superficiality. Consider, for instance, the words of Thomas H Everett, the assistant horticultural director and senior curator of education at the New York Botanical Gardens in 1964, who asked Sherwood Kohn: "Would you give your best girl a bouquet of plastic roses?"

As speculative objects, plastic flowers embody, in my reading, what Marita Sturken calls "miniature worlds". For Sturken, "the effect of the miniature is to offer a sense of containment and

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many of the contortions of global political economy that this chapter tries to gather under the headings of anxiety and scarcity.

[11] Meikle, *American Plastic*, 255.

[12] Meikle, 255.

[13] The writer Norman Mailer was perhaps one of the most prominent and polemical critics of plastic in this vein, often comparing the material to the devil's work. A small sample of these views—which crept into his work throughout his career—can be found in books like *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968). For a good interpretation of Mailer's antipathy toward plastic, see the epilogue (titled "Why Norman Mailer Hates Plastic") of Wells, *Fighting Words*.

control over an event".[14] This "sense of containment", much like the Countess's *still* is not a force that can always be demonstrated inconvertibly. The gamble of the speculative mode is that the reader will, to some extent, have to take a leap of interpretive faith. But to give up on making that case because it cannot be proved with a degree of unwavering certitude, would be to give up on thinking through latent traces within a historical moment that, by definition—because they are psychic—will seldom leave clear evidentiary marks. The best I can do, therefore, is to refer the work plastic flowers do to a host of other genres that might carry more evidentiary weight. The miniature is one. Another, which I deploy towards the end of the chapter, is the still life. My point, as the Kohn article should make clear, is not that plastic flowers were universally reviled or loved in the postwar United States. Only that their spread was met with a certain ambivalence. Their offer of permanence and their kitschy artificiality both drew on the effects of plasticity. That these effects surfaced in the form of ambivalence is not insignificant, for ambivalence is primarily is a psychic category—a word that leads us to think more rigorously about the *still*.

I should clarify here that in discussing how the rhetoric of marketing and consumption surrounding plastic flowers helped foreclose anxieties induced by resource scarcity, I am not, by any means, suggesting that countervailing interpretations of this historical moment are invalid. As my engagement with the literature on postwar domesticity, cultures of containment, and anxiety in section III will, I hope, show, there is much value in this work. With many other interpreters of the period in question, I agree that there were many causes for American anxiety after the war—most far more obviously discernable on the surface of social life: the Cold War, perceived threats of Communist revolution, teeming, starved "Third World" populations, nuclear annihilation. There

[14] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 2.

was no shortage of things that could potentially induce anxiousness in suburban subjects. Why, then, foreground scarcity?

For two primary reasons: first, as the discussion in the next section will demonstrate, concerns about depleting natural resources were not extraneous to these other kinds of anxieties. The American state's worry about natural resources running out, one might claim, in fact subtended all or most other anxieties. What war, poverty, communism and other such specters would likely attack was precisely a way of life premised on material abundance. Scarcity posed a challenge to the conditions of that abundance. Second, I focus on scarcity because unlike some of the other historical phenomena that induced anxiousness in subjects at the time, scarcity still very much with us. Postwar fears about resource depletion point, in many ways, to very contemporary fears about fossil fuels and environmental catastrophes—in response to which, as I will argue in chapter three, clean energy is furnished as another frontier. I use plastic flowers, therefore, to draw attention to an underexamined cause of postwar anxiety—scarcity—and show how the discourse of permanent summers and protection from nature eerily mirrored, if only in discourse, the protective mechanisms dreamt up by government reports like *Resources for Freedom*.

II. Under the sign of scarcity

"The question, 'Has the United States of America the means to sustain its civilization?' would never have occurred to the men who brought this nation into greatness as the twentieth century dawned".[15] Volume one of a five-volume 1952 report, *Resources for Freedom*, titled *Foundations for Growth and Security*, began with these ominous words, going on a mere paragraph later to baldly state: "After successive years of thinking about unemployment, reemployment, full

[15] Commission, "Resources for Freedom", 1.

employment, about factory production, inflation and deflation, and hundreds of other matters in the structure of economic life, the United States must now give new and deep considerations to the fundamental upon which all employment, all daily activity, eventually rests: the contents of the earth and its physical environment".[16] "The plain fact", the authors write soon after, "seems to be that we have skimmed the cream of our resources as we now understand them …"[17]

How are we to account for remarkable statements like these, coming as they do, a decade before Rachel Carson and two decades before environmentalism? Along with scholars like Adam Rome,[18] historian Thomas Robertson has pointed to a genealogy of American environmentalism that might explain this temporal discrepancy. Robertson shows how, in the aftermath of the Second World War, two distinct (but eventually interrelated) strands of ecological thought evolved in the United States. One turned to the realm of conservation by emphasizing the ontological violence caused by human civilization. People like Fairfield Osborn, director of the New York Zoological Society, for instance, wrote a book called *Our Plundered Planet* (1948) where he spoke of "'man's warfare against nature.'"[19] Similarly, David Brower, a WWII veteran who was instrumental in popularizing the Sierra Club, argued in 1968 that "'man can undo himself with no force other than his own brutality.'"[20] For such critics, American civilization, imprinted with violence and—like humanity as such—was complicit in the spread of ecological devastation around the world. The second strand that Robertson identifies is less commented upon in the annals of postwar environmental history. He demonstrates, in this context, how shortage of material resources during the War turned the American state into a serious environmental planning organization.[21] In the

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[16] Commission, 1.
[17] Commission, 6.
[18] Rome, "Give Earth a Chance".
[19] Quoted in Robertson, "'This Is the American Earth,'" 565; See also: Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*.
[20] Quoted in Robertson, "'This Is the American Earth,'" 566.
[21] Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*, 567–68.

1950s, *Resources for Freedom* was being used as a textbook in military academies and, in the same year that that text was published, the Ford Foundation established an organization called Resources for the Future which "produced a host of path-breaking studies … The prewar period had no equivalent to this kind of organization".[22] In Richard Lane's view, Resources for the Future, "the most important think tank you've never heard of",[23] helped create the conditions for economic growth by separating that question from concerns about resource scarcity.[24]

By writing the story of the postwar United States economy under the sign of consumerism and capitalist commodification, one runs the risk of missing this other trajectory of anxieties and concerns that defined that historical epoch in fundamental ways. Robert Collins' work on the ideology of growth in the postwar United States shows how narratives of abundance were, to a great extent, economistic constructs. These constructs often went hand-in-hand with a notion of America as leading the world into a new epoch of prosperity—something that I will suggest below, is symptomatic of frontier-thinking in the face of scarcity. Collins discusses "the emergence among growth liberalism's own advocates and within its own constituency of a profound ambivalence about the relationship between quantity and quality in American life".[25] One such advocate, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, who, for instance, wrote of a "spreading anxiety and frustration in our society" and of how the "crust is breaking up".[26] In his view, the Democratic Party could only counter these tendencies by shedding its old attachment to scarcity economics from the era of the Great Depression, making peace with the fact that America was now living through an age of abundance.

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[22] Robertson, 570.
[23] Rauch, quoted in Lane, "Resources for the Future, Resources for Growth: The Making of the 1975 Growth Ban", 29.
[24] Lane, 29–30.
[25] Collins, *More*, 62.
[26] Quoted in Collins, 63.

Extending Timothy Mitchell's critical insights on how categories like "economy" and "environment" were produced and assembled in the postwar world,[27] Lane attacks the problem from a different angle. He argues—in line with Robertson—that after 1945, simultaneous concerns about rapid economic growth and dwindling natural resources brought "Malthus heaving back from the dead".[28] As confrontations, hot and cold, began with the Soviet Union, this Malthusian concern with scarcity—a need to think population growth and resource depletion in tandem—became paramount. Indeed, it is no surprise that it was precisely at this time that maverick architect and thinker Buckminster Fuller produced a series of energy maps of the world, mapping existing and potential natural resources, as well as their unequal and geopolitically determined patterns of use around the globe.[29] Together with some landmark sociological polemics in the vein of Michael Harrington's influential 1962 study, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*,[30] such work helps us reposition postwar history under the sign of scarcity. And it is under that sign that we must consider the questions with which *Resources for Freedom* commenced its inquiry.

President's Materials Policy Commission (PMPC) was established by President Truman in 1951, after the onset of the Korean War. The report *Resources for Freedom* (henceforth *Resources*) was produced by this commission, led by William S Paley, then Chair of the board of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) News.[31] In the words of policy historian Megan Black, it was among "a host of advisory committees created under the authority of the Defense Production Act of 1950, a Korean War initiative, tasked with assessing the long-range outlook for materials deemed necessary to national security and economic growth".[32] Called by one analyst "the most original

[27] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, especially chapter five, "Fuel Economy".
[28] Lane, "Resources for the Future, Resources for Growth: The Making of the 1975 Growth Ban", 32.
[29] Rawes, "Insecure Predictions".
[30] Harrington, *The Other America*.
[31] Lane, "Resources for the Future, Resources for Growth: The Making of the 1975 Growth Ban", 32.
[32] Black, "Interior's Exterior", 88.

and significant contribution to the study of resources and public policy since the 1933 report of the Mississippi Valley Committee and the early reports of the National Resources Committee",[33] the PMPC decisively changed the terms in which scarcity and growth were to be thought.

I will examine one dimension of this below through the report's theory of a "total resource base" as a workaround for limits. Lane provides a different interpretation that amounts, in some sense, to the same thing. He argues that the commission broke from previous efforts because, in assessing the future of natural resources, it didn't try to provide an inventory of the actual volume of resources at the country's disposal. Rather, it focused on economics—the costs and end products derived from particular resources. Thus, "resource depletion was not, therefore, considered as a physical absolute, but was instead expressed through rising costs. This crucial shift from absolute scarcity to relative (price) scarcity allowed the commissioners to abstain from the then common concern with resources running out and shift to a new conception of mineral reserves".[34] In so doing, the Paley commission disentangled the question of scarcity from "physical and material constraints", turning it into a question of economic growth.[35] That an ideology of growth or energy security spurred much of the work done by the PMPC is an assertion other studies also support.[36]

Much of the address of the report was directed towards American interests but framed globally. Black argues that during this time, the search for new materials was vexed because while domestic shortage turned the eyes of Americans in the direction of foreign lands (especially to the Global South), "global anti-imperialist sentiment" tended to "render foreign minerals off-limits".[37] Black makes a convincing case for how the American establishment responded to this situation by

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[33] Maas, quoted in Lane, "Resources for the Future, Resources for Growth: The Making of the 1975 Growth Ban", 34.
[34] Lane, 33.
[35] Lane, 33.
[36] Tidwell and Smith, "Morals, Materials, and Technoscience".
[37] Black, "Interior's Exterior", 83.

adopting a rhetoric where resources would automatically be framed as "resources for all": "the view that resources were global and thus the property of all … Resource globalism offered a seemingly natural, apolitical, and borderless vision of an earth contoured by resources".[38] In order to explicate in more detail how a particular futuristic vision of limitless growth was developed from the ashes of scarcity by the PMPC, it is worth keeping in mind both Black's claim about resource globalism and Lane's argument about price. Together they point to a global reach of economic ideology in the postwar epoch. My reading of the first volume of the report complements their analysis from another angle.

If the initial questions and statements I quoted above give the impression that the PMPC had recognized the implications of rapaciously extracting "the contents of the earth and its physical environment", then that impression is misplaced. *Resources* follows a classic rhetorical strategy in building its bureaucratic vision of materiality—by first outlining all the points of crisis and then supplying a narrative of recovery which reinstates optimism at the center of the historical moment. Therefore, while the report recognizes that conventional energy resources might be running low, and while it concedes that a consumerist American way of life might be contributing to the shortage, it also reposes faith in a capacity to maintain—rather than revise the conditions of—that lifestyle. Black notes how the cover page of the fifth volume of the report represents this journey by showing "a globe filled not with distinct continents, let alone the makers of national boundaries, but rather oil derricks, atomic energy facilities, hydro-electric dams, lumber operations, refineries, and mines".[39] In her reading the image literalizes the idea of resource globalism by visualizing a planet overrun by resources and from which national political boundaries have been erased. Given the dire note of pessimism on which the report begins, it is worth looking into the maneuvers by

[38] Black, 85.
[39] Black, 90.

which the PMPC ends up in a more optimistic, future-oriented place. The opening sentences I cited above, are not the only ones that fuel an initial sense of bleakness framing the report.[40]

The first chapter is prefaced by the page-length reproduction of two graphs which inform readers that the US is the "free world's biggest materials consumer" and is "using up reserves faster than other countries" [figure 2]. Unsurprisingly, petroleum consumption rates lead the pack. The ominous graphics continue throughout the report, but the initial ones are the most damning. The prefatory graphs are followed by one which announces that the US is outgrowing its "resource base". An assessment of production surplus between 1900 and (projected) 1975, shows a shift from +15% in 1900 to a possible -20% production deficit in 1975. The second chapter keeps the hits coming with an opening paragraph where some truly staggering statistics are thrown at the public:

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[40] *Resources* is symptomatic of a larger, more structural crisis centered on the twin and interlinked threats the American administrative apparatus perceived in the period between the 1950s and 1970s, from resource scarcity and global population explosion. Robertson's work (cited above) charts much of the historical terrain related to these twinned senses of crises. However, one fallout of such which I don't have space to discuss fully here, relates to emergent consciousness of planetary limits. Although the groundbreaking report *Limits to Growth* was published by the Clube of Rome as late as 1972, it had been two decades in the making. Apart from the rumblings I am indexing in the 1950s, we might consider two landmark texts published in the following decade: Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*; Boulding, "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth". Ehrlich's prophecies are better known, but Boulding's were tremendously influential in forwarding the idea that human society could no longer function as it had done in the age of "the cowboy"—an age when the world was there to be conquered and an endless expanse of unclaimed territory could be claimed. The "spaceman economy", on the other hand, was vastly circumscribed. It was a closed system and there was no "away"—all the vices of human civilization would come back to haunt it.

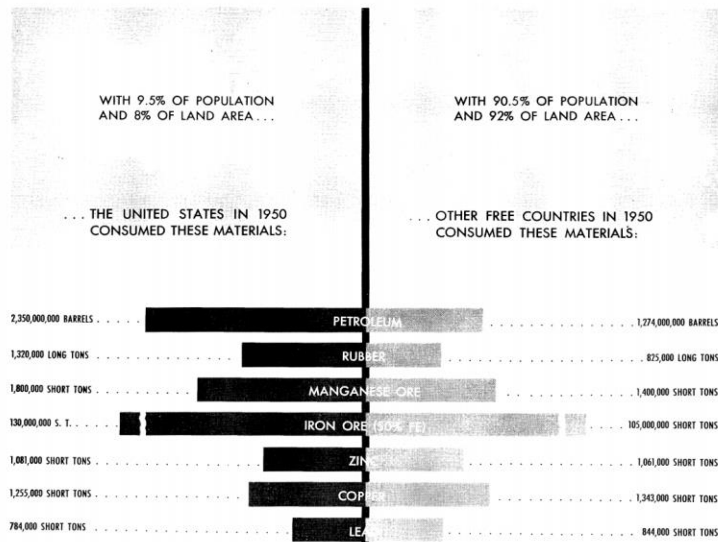
Melinda Cooper has written about this moment by gesturing to the manner in which *Limits to Growth* signaled "a wholesale crisis in the realm of reproduction" where "the continuing reproduction of earth's biosphere and hence the future of life on earth" was presumed to be at stake (Cooper, *Life As Surplus*, 16). Similarly, Sabine Höhler points out that works like Ehrlich's and Boulding's created concerns about the earth's total "carrying capacity" (Höhler, "Spaceship Earth"). At the same time, as both Cooper and Höhler argue, one would be erroneous in thinking that a consciousness of limits led to the rethinking of foundational myths around consumption and capitalism. Instead, those devoted to the ideological principles of The American Century attacked the Club of Rome for using faulty scientific methods and suggested that innovative enterprise would find a way out of the crisis. Historian Derek Hoff also shows in great detail how, after initial moments of panic, President Richard Nixon's administration decided that the fear-mongering about population growth would be solved through suburbanization since the main problem wasn't overall numbers but the crowding of urban space—i.e. urban racial minorities (see: Hoff, "Kick That Population Commission in the Ass"). My discussion of the PMPC follows largely in these tracks.

> The United States' appetite for materials is Gargantuan—and so far, insatiable. At mid-century, over $2^1/_2$ billion tons of material are being used up each year to keep the country going and support its high standard of living. With a population of 151 million, each person uses up, on average, some 18 tons a year. He uses about 14,000 pounds of fuel for heat and energy—warming houses and offices, running automobiles and Diesel trains, firing factory boilers, and hundreds of other tasks. He uses 10,000 pounds of building materials—lumber, stone, sand and gravel, etc.—plus 800 pounds of metals winnowed from 5,000 pounds of ores. He eats nearly 1,600 pounds of food; this together with cotton and other fibers for clothing, pulpwood for paper and other miscellaneous products mounts up to 5,700 pounds of agricultural materials. In addition, he uses 800 pounds of nonmetallics, such as lime, fertilizer, and chemical raw materials.[41]

These sobering figures are followed, on the same page, by a graphic illustrating the quantities in question emanating from a human body; making the abstractions figurally palpable [figure 3]. A range of enormous numbers pulsate, radiate, out of an outline drawing of the human form: 450,000 tons of agricultural materials; 51,000 pounds of construction materials; 60,000,000 tons of miscellaneous non-metallics; 1,100,000,000 tons of fuels, and the like. The numbers represented in the graphic are nice, rounded figures, packed with zeroes—a fact that is perhaps not insignificant to the visual strategy at play. Zeroes increase the weight of the numbers by rounding them off and through repetition. They lead a reader's eye to engage the repetition, to count the zeroes even while sometimes losing track of what all them might add up to. These massive numbers are abstractions, most likely representing approximations of real figures of resource consumption. They impale the

[41] Commission, "Resources for Freedom", 4.

figural outline of a human body that is, in turn, rendered non-abstract—a body which seems to both receive and emanate resources in unimaginably large quantities. Within the logic of the image, there is a slight sleight of hand at work: the figure represents what one citizen consumes on average while the numbers represent the total energy consumption on a national level. That the human figure is in outline, that he (it is clearly he) is unmarked, is also important. Such a representational strategy foregrounds the sort of typical liberal subject the state would image to be the recipient of its address: a normative subject, an everyman.



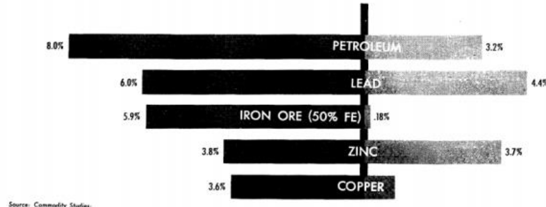


Figure 2 From *Resources for Freedom*. PMPC. 1952.

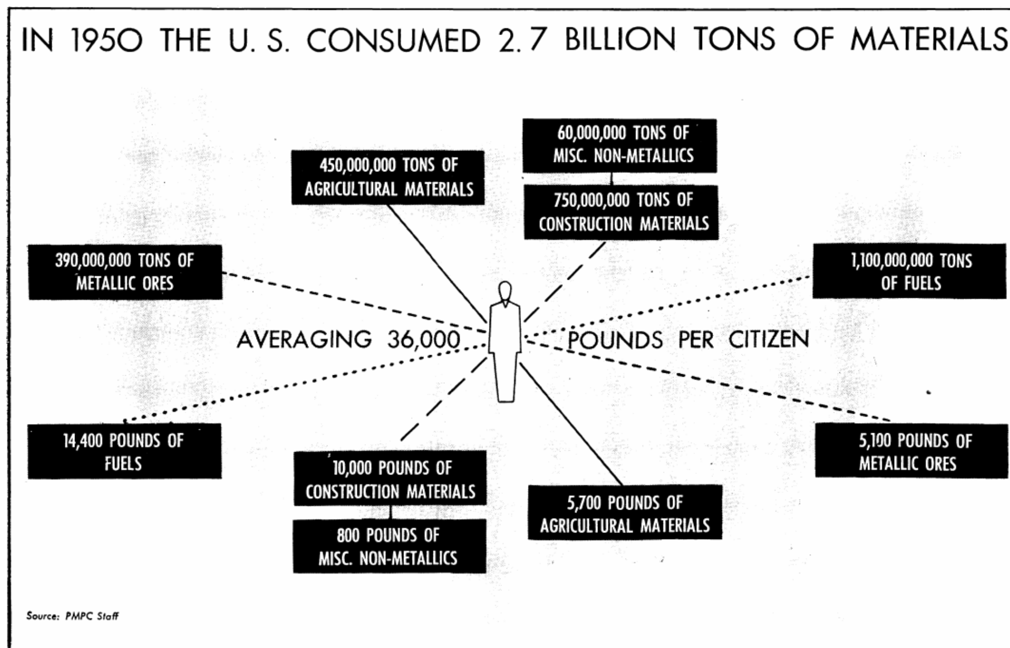


Figure 3 *From p4 of* Resources for Freedom. *PMPC. 1952.*

"A ton of ore removed from the earth is a ton gone forever; each barrel of oil used up means one less remaining", readers are informed.[42] Then, the tone and tenor of *Resources* begins to shift ever so slightly, especially with Chapter 3, titled "The Opportunities". Having laid out in some detail, a visual and textual landscape of overconsumption, the report transitions to better prospects. In 1952, the PMPC claims, the United States was only using a fraction of its "total resource base". And what is a total resource base? Well, according to the authors: "broadly conceived, [it] includes all components of the earth's crust within our borders, together with the atmosphere, water, climate, and the energy forces of nature, but the useable sector of that base is limited by the combination of physical, technological, and economic conditions prevailing at any one time".[43] The argument on this count is remarkable, making inroads towards the sort of economistic rationale for growth that I earlier suggested underpins the report's entire edifice. Thus, the authors

[42] Commission, 5.
[43] Commission, 8.

write that total resource base is not actually static but changes as "conditions change". Or: "Past depletion notwithstanding, this Nation today has a far broader and stronger useable resource base than ever before, mainly because over the years we have discovered resources and uses unsuspected by our ancestors".[44]

For "our ancestors", obsessed by bayberries, sperm whales, and buffalo, the existence of petroleum, iron ore, and phosphates, was "irrelevant". These were not resources that mattered to them. Similarly, "it is equally irrelevant to us today that the candles, the whale, and the buffalo have all but vanished from the scene; but it is of high importance that the resources of the West have been opened up, that the invention of the internal combustion engine has made petroleum a valuable resource, that technology has taught us how to make aluminum from bauxite, and plastics from such abundant resources as coal, water, and air".[45] Leave aside, for now, the deeply disturbing implications of such statements for understandings of ecological balance and the kinds of historical forces that lead to the elimination of animals like the buffalo from the American landscape. More relevant to my purpose, we see here a clearly teleological, progressivist framing of the resource problem: to those in the past, knowledge of future resources was irrelevant; to those in the present, the disappearance of things considered resources in the past is irrelevant.

Now that the West has been opened up and a frontier inaugurated, we can power through to other frontiers—to plastic, for instance, the production of which, in this framework, appears to be premised on the availability of "abundant" resources like "coal, water, and air". We ought to note in this framing, not just the way plastics are championed as a miracle resource for the future. We must also note how "coal, water, and air" are presented as almost ontologically "abundant resources". What does this equivalence signify? To think of water and air as simply abundant, is,

[44] Commission, 8.
[45] Commission, 8.

of course, to misunderstand the environmental system as a totality of intricate interrelations. It is to not recognize, for instance, the manner in which, by polluting or extracting from the earth more and newer materials, water underground and air in the surround are rendered toxic. The phrase "abundant resource" only has any meaning here insofar as it eschews comprehension of how each resource—each source of energy—affects and is affected by others. Moreover, to place in this equation coal, alongside water and air, is nothing if not indicative of the extractive unconscious at work. One assumes that the report puts these three things into relation by conceptualizing them, in the most minimal sense, as resources for living and growth. However, to do so is to undermine the fundamental difference between coal and other substances named—coal being a precursor to the petrochemical economy, which, like its successor, altered the constitution of water and air in ways that are still with us today. My claim is that such equivalences are made possible through the figuration of the future as a space and time for extractive frontierism. The telos allows the report's authors to efface a range of complications that would render their formulations fragile.

This is also the reason why the importance of the PMPC's definition "total resource base" cannot be overstated. Of course, one immediately discerns the wholistic framework of the definition—everything from the soil to the air is up for grabs. Anything that constitutes the environment is a potential resource. But there is a second insight in this definition which is perhaps even more critical to attend to: the "useable" parts of the total resource base are dependent on various capacities—from the machinic to the financial—that a society has at its disposal at any given moment. This means, obviously, that as those dependencies change, so do the boundaries of what can be considered a resource. The PMPC, then, is decisively *not* making an ethical case for limiting consumption or pulling back from over-extraction after realizing the burdens the earth has historically been subject to. Quite the opposite. They are claiming that extractive economies can

flourish with the same intensity as before—perhaps even greater intensity—because technological and economic innovations will open points of access to *new* resources which constitute the total base, but which have, till now, been out of reach. Hence, the Commission can say that: "Past depletion notwithstanding, this Nation today has a far broader and stronger resource base than ever before …"[46]

Astonishingly, as a result, from the third chapter onward resource scarcity becomes the grounds for justifying the development of a more accelerated regime of speculation, research, and extraction. Consider the following exhortations and observations: "the fact nevertheless remains that in many respects major materials research is yet to begin"[47]; "attention should be focused as much on expanding the output and use of the abundant materials as upon enlarging the supply of scarce materials"[48]; "As the best and most accessible resources are used up, it becomes necessary to work harder and harder to produce more supplies from less accessible and lower quality resources"[49]; "From now on, the search for these [undiscovered] minerals must be directed toward deposits hidden in the earth"[50]; Congress should "direct the United States Geological Survey to accelerate the topographic and geologic mapping of the United States and Alaska".[51] By the end of the first volume, the PMPC authors write plainly that one thing seems certain: that prophets of gloom and doom who overemphasize the catastrophic failure of American civilization as a result of resource scarcity, overlook

> the extraordinary ingenuity of mankind in extricating himself from situations before they become wholly and finally intolerable. This Commission began its report with an

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[46] Commission, 8.
[47] Commission, 10.
[48] Commission, 10.
[49] Commission, 13.
[50] Commission, 27.
[51] Commission, 29.

> expression of faith—faith in growth, in enterprise, in the future of freedom. It ends with a reaffirmation: the materials problem may never be solved but it can be compensated. We will accomplish this, however, only if we recognize that as physical resources decline, the resources of ingenuity must rise up to serve mankind in their stead … We are no longer vagrants on a continent, but established householders.[52]

The invocation of the domestic—"we are no longer vagrants on a continent, but established householders"—is not out of place here. The vagrant owns nothing; the vagrant is without the capacity for making claims to any space or territory; the vagrant forever feels like s/he has no right to fully inhabit the places s/he is in. The householder, on the other hand, is a man of property. He establishes ownership, takes charge, and finds something to call his own. By conceiving of human relationships to the earth this way, the report once again, not only leans on a frontier-trope where the home encroaches into novel, "unclaimed" territories. It also articulates a directly proprietorial relation to the earth. The earth as property. Resources as property. "We" must not be shy when it comes to thinking of both as existing for our needs. Who is this "we" the report imagines in the place of the householder here? Who, after all, has the right—indeed the confidence—to imagine himself as a householder in midcentury America? Who can confidently stake claims on the world and what it offers without hesitation, without fear that such claims are not theirs to make? In these sentences, the administrative authorizes its controlling impulse by leveraging the domestic.

By going into the first volume of *Resources* in this kind of depth, I want to gesture to the creation of an administrative, bureaucratic (visual) vocabulary surrounding resource depletion, which, having acknowledged the finitude of the earth, managed nonetheless to conjure—extract—an infinite horizon from it. Temporality was, as I suggested above, integral to this vision; the

[52] Commission, 169.

possibility that resources are never fully exhausted because, ultimately, the *definition* of a resource rests of the technical capacities a society has to produce any substance as a resource. There is, obviously, a therapeutic element to this tale, a mournful element that is unable to fully come to terms with the loss of a world there for the taking. However, in the absence of an ethical response to such knowledge that might also require rethinking American expansionism during this period, the only recourse the PMPC had was to a logic of compensation. And that is precisely what the total resource base theory offers: compensation for a world, a way of life, on the brink of disintegration. By projecting depletion into the future, the PMPC not only staves off having to reassess American postwar capitalism. It also proposes a technoscientific solution for an environmental problem of limits. Moreover, this solution turns on an invocation of frontierism both in fact and in rhetoric. In fact, resource globalism and the desire to extract more offer one kind of frontier for futurity. In rhetoric, redefinition furnishes another horizon of expansion—the thing that sustains frontierism. From here, the next piece of the puzzle I am intrigued by has to do with how concerns surrounding scarcity percolated into domestic space. How, in other words, was it possible for the home to remain immune to scarcity?

III. An anxious age

Domesticity contains

In attempting to unpack the reverberations of bureaucratic and administrative logics beyond the scope of government alone, I want to consider therefore, how the foreclosure of anxiety about resource scarcity through the production of other extractive frontiers filtered into the domestic sphere. As a result, I want to suggest that narratives about consumerist excess notwithstanding, the domestic sphere was impacted by these macro level churnings. Postwar domesticity, an icon of the

American way of life, was at the center of the political sphere, not its periphery. It symbolized individualism, achievement, and freedom—some of the most cherished myths undergirding anticommunist ideology during this time. By surveying three kinds of work on the domestic order, therefore, I hope to be able to tease out a certain sense of anxiety structuring it. I will then offer an account of how such anxiety might have been foreclosed, to some extent, through the incorporation of plastic flowers in the home.

One of the more prominent arguments about the American, suburban home centers on the idea of containment and is best articulated in Elaine Tyler May's significant book titled *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. May makes a solid case for a domestic ideology that saw itself as a "buffer" against political turmoil and sexual confusion but ended up reproducing many of the same things it hoped to critique or guard against: consumerism, conformity, materialism.[53] She argues that the postwar American home developed as a "fortified" arena guided by the overarching principle of containment: "the key to security".[54] Alan Nadel offers a similar view in his book on postwar containment culture, suggesting that the word designates "a privileged American narrative during the Cold War. Although technically referring to U.S. foreign policy from 1948 to at least the mid-1960s, it also describes American life in numerous venues and under sundry rubrics during that period …"[55] May and Nadel put forth a view that is by now quite common, where domestic space is seen to "contain" anxiety by simultaneously providing psycho-social protection against the looming threat of nuclear annihilation and shielding the social body communist invasion.

[53] May, *Homeward Bound*, 13.
[54] May, 15–16.
[55] Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 3.

The normative, nuclear family emerges, in this scheme, as a vanguard securing the American way of life by offering utopian capitalist consumption as a distraction from nuclear war and an alternative to communism. May extends this argument through a comment on postwar television sit-coms which, in her view, "eased the transition from a depression-bred psychology of scarcity to an acceptance of spending … Commodities would solve the problem of the discontented housewife, foster pride in the provider whose job offered few intrinsic rewards, and allow children to 'fit in' with their peers".[56] These links between containment, security, and the threat of nuclear or Soviet threat structure numerous other influential studies of postwar domesticity.

A second strand of scholarship confronts the domestic in terms of its material culture. Much of this work is still emerging, and traverses a range from Pap Ndiaye's excavations of chemical materiality in DuPont commodities like nylon,[57] and Allison Clarke's work on the socialities that accrued around plastic Tupperware in the postwar home,[58] to Stephanie LeMenager's cultural history of attachments to petroculture in the latter half of the twentieth-century.[59] For the moment I want to consider in some detail, one recent intervention in this tradition which also lays the groundwork for my own attempt at rewriting the domestic via scarcity and depletion: Matthew Huber's reading of the historical context of suburbia in *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*. In a chapter on what he calls "fractionated lives", Huber outlines the development of a postwar "entrepreneurial" self in conjunction with the spread of petroleum products through the social fabric. Referencing the emergence of "Sunbelt cities such are Charlotte, Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, and eventually Phoenix, and Las Vegas", Huber argues that these "landscapes of

[56] May, *Homeward Bound*, 163–64.
[57] Ndiaye, *Nylon and Bombs*.
[58] Clarke, *Tupperware*.
[59] LeMenager, *Living Oil*.

suburban social reproduction also tended to reinforce the entrepreneurial logics of Sunbelt capitalism".[60] A very particular vision of "life" took hold at this time in these spaces:

> The central argument of this chapter is that refineries provided an ecological basis, and consequently the supplementary materiality, for reproducing the imaginary of an individuated condition, or "life", that is improvable solely by one's own effort and entrepreneurial capacities. Refineries, and their petroleum products, saturate the landscape of suburban social reproduction—from gasoline-fired automobility to vinyl-sided homes and petroleum-based food commodities. Just as refineries produced their own set of discrete fractionated products distilled and cracked from crude oil, petroleum products provided the material basis for the appearance of *fractionated lives*, each tidily contained and controlled within the private spaces of the car, the home, and the body. As such, refineries actively constitute the ability of millions of individuals to ask the core question posed in chapter 1: "What will I make of my life?"[61]

Drawing on Foucault, Huber argues that the answer to the question posed at the end of the extract had as much to do with emergent geographies of capitalist consumption as individual mantras of success and self-motivated productivity. In his reading, the petroleum economy underpinned the rise of entrepreneurial subjects who saw themselves as forms of human capital—who viewed "*life as capital*".[62] Huber makes a good case for how, in the postwar context, oil companies created a narrative where the multiplication of petroleum-based products within social life would determine the meanings of terms such as "freedom", domesticity", and "lifestyle" in America: "petroleum products became key to the construction of a 'free' society in opposition to communism".[63] Some

[60] Huber, *Lifeblood*, 63.
[61] Huber, 64.
[62] Huber, 73. Emphasis in original.
[63] Huber, 72.

of the narrative Huber reconstructs here is, by now, well-known. We know how the dispersal of the oil economy, the proliferation of petroleum products, and (of course) the dominance of plastic created urban sprawl, suburban life, and freeway-based metropolises like Los Angeles. But Huber adds two crucial elements to this familiar narrative: the entrepreneurial analytic, and a gesture toward the affective intensity of entrepreneurial life.

He illustrates the manner in which the privatized utopia sold to Americans after the War through magazine ads and television shows was premised on constantly reminding the public of oil's centrality to entrepreneurial American life. The car and the single-family home were the two most omnipotent symbols of the connection between privacy, petroleum, and enterprise. If gas—the fundamental ingredient for running cars—occupied one end of the spectrum (mobility), then plastic occupied the other (domesticity). This utopian vision of life as capital was, he mentions, forever underwritten by a sense of creeping "anxiety that 'the American way of life' actually entailed too much work to maintain the appearance of cleanliness and family prosperity that the suburbs were supposed to guarantee".[64] It is this sense of anxiety that I am interested in picking away at. My feeling is that the biopolitical framework of entrepreneurship Huber subscribes to doesn't fully account for the play of interiority in the production of anxious subject. Although Huber fleshes out the contours of the biopolitical mechanism at work and makes repeated reference to structures of feeling of postwar petroleum-based society, his reliance on Foucault leads, I think, to an evacuation of the psychic economy of resource scarcity.[65]

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[64] Huber, 82.

[65] Foucault's antipathy towards interiority is written all over his works—from the early books on madness and the clinic to his later research on biopolitics. It surfaces most prominently in his critique of psychoanalysis, much of which is perhaps valid when it comes to the practice of power. But the critique often goes hand-in-hand with a dismissal of interiority per se. Thus, his provocative accounts of the rise of disciplinary regimes, the formation of biopolitical modes of governance, or indeed the emergence of an entrepreneurial subject never scratches below the interface between administration and body. The epidermis, or the physical more generally, seems to be as far as Foucault is willing to go on interiority. Even his last work on the ancient Greeks tends, on occasion, to reduce

On this count, it might be worth considering briefly work on anxiety, psychological stress, and medicalization that complements the containment narrative. Benjamin Mangrum encapsulates the basic thrust of this body of scholarship through his claim that "the 1950s mark the apex of the so-called age of anxiety", an era "defined by public fear not only surrounding the emerging nuclear threats of the immediate postwar years, but also the popularization of psychological discourse in America".[66] Numerous works on the history of psychoanalysis, family therapy, and countercultural psychoanalysis buffer this observation.[67] Additionally, Jonathan Metzl's historical excavations reveal intersections between therapeutic practices, antianxiety medication, and conceptualizations of gender.[68] Andrea Tone's detailed history of anxiety sums up some of the basic findings of such interventions by suggesting that "middle-class Americans' responses to tranquilizers in the 1950s determined how successive generations interpreted anxiety as a disorder. In the 1950s and 1960s the everyday meanings of anxiety were defined less by committees of psychiatrists, diagnostic manuals, and corporate agendas than by Americans' exuberant response to antianxiety drugs".[69]

Tone's book also usefully connects the personal to the political through this frame. She reminds readers of a figure we have already encountered in these pages in an anxious vein—Arthur Schlesinger who, in 1948, wrote: "Western man in the middle of the 20th century is tense, uncertain, adrift … We look upon our epoch as a time of troubles, an age of anxiety".[70] To which Tone adds: "Although we cannot say definitively that the post-World War II period was a more anxious era than any other, the fact that people in this era perceived (and were encouraged to

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something like the "cultivation of the self" to a matter of training the body. For some of these dynamics as they surface in Foucault's work, see Whitebook, "Against Interiority: Foucault's Struggle with Psychoanalysis".

[66] Mangrum, "The Age of Anxiety", 771.

[67] For example: Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America*; Herzog, *Cold War Freud*; Weinstein, *The Pathological Family*.

[68] Metzl, *Prozac on the Couch*.

[69] Tone, *The Age of Anxiety*, xvii.

[70] Tone, xii.

believe) that it was helped solidify a rationale and rhetoric that justified tranquilizers' use".[71] In assessing the sheer numbers of people who started taking antianxiety medication and tranquilizers in the postwar epoch, Tone wonders how these medications caught on in such a popular way. Her suggestion is that part of the reason for their popularity lies in how "anxiety was viewed less as a serious psychiatric disorder than as a badge of achievement … Anxiety was the predictable yet commendable offshoot of Americans' insatiable hunger to get ahead, their relentless determination to become new and improved".[72]

Link this with the generalized popularization of Freudian thought and psychotherapy in the postwar context, and we begin to get a sense of the kind of work anxiousness did in relation to the social body. In his reading of Patricia Highsmith's novels, Mangrum argues that in this period, "the ego and its vicissitudes—rather than socioeconomic or structural conditions—became the normative template for understanding society and the self".[73] Commenting on how much Freudian psychoanalysis came into vogue, he cites a character, Frank Wheeler, from Richard Yates' novel *Revolutionary Road*, who claims: "This country's probably the psychiatric, psychoanalytic capital of the world. Old Freud could never've dreamed up a more devoted bunch of disciples than the population of the United States—isn't that right?"[74] Working through instances of Freudianism in popular culture, including television and fiction, Mangrum draws on contemporary commentators to make a convincing case for a "turn inward", especially among American fiction writers.[75] He suggests that the psyche became a preferred mode for explaining states of socio-political turmoil, unanchoring their causes from systemic and structural issues: "… the circulation of psychological

[71] Tone, xiv.
[72] Tone, xvii.
[73] Mangrum, "The Age of Anxiety", 770.
[74] Cited in Mangrum, 772.
[75] Mangrum, 783.

templates for everyday life began to reframe how Americans understood the conditions of possibility for their everyday lives. With the rise of a new science of subjectivity and the popularization of psychotherapy, the idea of structural political intervention became subordinate to the terms of an internal existential drama".[76]

There is much that is of value in such historical contextualizations of the home as a sphere of containment and anxiousness. These accounts help us locate the psychic as a concern not outside the world in question but central to its staging. Supplementing interpretations like Mangrum's, I would add that even though the psyche might provide an alternative to discussions of systems and structures, it does nonetheless itself possess a structure. I mean by this something akin to what Joseph Masco, in his anthropology of the American security state calls "national security affect", which designates "a new kind of infrastructure—a 'structure of feeling' to use Raymond Williams' felicitous phrase—that is historically produced, shared, and officially constituted as a necessary background of everyday life".[77] What I want to highlight here is precisely the structural dimension of affect, of the psyche.

In other words, if the psychic provides another way of talking about the social and the political—one which avoids questions of structural discrimination—then it is still important to ask *what* way of talking the psyche is furnishing. Yet another way of putting this is: if the affective or the psychic provides a cover story for something, then we might want to ask what it is potentially covering up. Putting some of these thoughts together with the implicit insights of Huber's text, we get a sense of the kind of stabilization against anxiousness that interests me. Where Huber interrogates the overall logic of petrocapitalism and how it infiltrated domestic life, Tone's inward look at the postwar psyche stresses medicalization, while Mangrum reads the ways in which the

[76] Mangrum, 794.
[77] Masco, *The Theater of Operations*, 18.

turn to Freudianism causes one to look away from socio-economic determinants. I am in search of something that operates in between these logics without eschewing their validity—indeed, by drawing on insights in all three. More precisely: I want to see if it might be possible to make a case, even a tentative one, for plastic flowers as shoring up a sense of security and stability during an anxious age. Consider, then, the following.

Flowering anxieties

In 1971, an episode of the public television show, *The Great American Dream Machine* travelled to Sun City, a retirement community inaugurated in 1960 in the Arizona desert [figures 4-6]. Populated largely by elderly white couples, draped in single-family homes, swimming pools, and artificial turf, Sun City, it appears, strives to represent the essence of luxurious living after decades of entrepreneurial self-making. There is much to say about the community on a sociological level (and a lot has been said,[78]) but I want to focus here on one vignette within the episode where the filmmakers approach a retired couple in the drawing room of their house. The scene centers on a physically rigid, bespectacled man wearing a plain-white tucked in shirt and formal trousers, and his effusive wife, adorned in bright yellow, a skirt with floral patterns, and white glasses. The topic of discussion is the room they are in: decorated, most prominently by a large white sofa, bright blue curtains on window from where the strong Arizona sunlight comes streaming in, and a mirror atop what looks like a writing desk in the background of the frame. The couple tell us—it is mostly the woman who speaks—that they have decorated the room in "French style". As she walks over to the right of the frame, the camera pans and reveals to viewers a previously unseen area of the room with a one-seater patterned sofa and a large wall-mounted shelf on which, the wife says she

[78] See, for instance: Gober, "The Retirement Community as a Geographical Phenomenon"; Laws, "Embodiment and Emplacement"; Trolander, *From Sun Cities to The Villages*.

has positioned her “music boxes, that I love”. Gesturing to the wall facing the shelf she announces that it is vacant because they haven’t yet decided what should go on it. What does the husband think? He wants something “French”—presumably to go with the décor of rest of the room. She, on the other hand, says “let’s just get a nice, big outdoor picture”. Then, walking over to a plant we have seen from the moment the camera let us into the house, she announces (gently brushing its foliage): “We brought the outdoors indoors with our artificial hibiscus plant, here. We like it because it adds pink to this room”.

The scene fascinates me for a number of reasons, not least of which is the husband’s distinct sense of discomfort with the camera and how to situate himself before it, even as his wife glides into the frame with complete confidence and ease. More importantly, the (as yet) unfulfilled desire for a “nice, big outdoor picture” and the transposition of the “outdoors indoors” in the form of the artificial hibiscus plant speaks to a certain insulated appreciation of the natural world. The pinkish hue of the hibiscus apart, I am struck by how the couple—the wife especially—imagine this space, with their bodies bound on one side by a picture of the outdoors and on the other by a simulation of natural foliage. It is in fact precisely this sense “boundedness” that intrigues me about plastic flowers in general. Their permanent presence, devoid of the affective labor of maintenance (more on this later), shores up suburban lifestyle by introducing nature within a domestic setting only once its temporal contingencies have been expunged.

In the middle of an artificially created community where the limitations of desert ecology are sacrificed at the altar of an abstract notion of the infinitude of American life, mundane objects like the hibiscus plant achieve renewed significance. They index the miniature’s promise of control over contingency, gesturing especially to the possibility that as long as the outdoors endures indoors, it will endure outdoors too. Which is to say: at a time of resource depletion and concerns

about the finitude of the fundamentals on which the ethic of limitless entrepreneurial consumption is based, the stodgy, persistent, pinkish hue of fake hibiscus plants contain the promise of an unchanging world "out there"—beyond the couple's house, beyond Sun City, and potentially beyond the borders of America itself. The cheery colorful plant and the prospective wall-hanging offer stability for the psychic apparatus in a time of strife. In the process, these sets of associations help situate the interior outside the exterior—by bringing the outdoors indoors, they transport the indoors to a space unaffected by the turmoil of the outdoors. To make this point clearer, let's move out one level further (from the house to Sun City itself) and look at three quick scenes which immediately follow the one just discussed.

Figure 4 Screenshot from *The Great American Dream Machine*. WNET. 1971.

Cut to a close-up of a white woman, looking at an angle slightly away from the camera. She says: "The thing that would make me happy, first of all, would be the casual leisure and not the humdrum of cities, possibly the litter … And this is one way to keep America beautiful. This is America beautiful". As she speaks, the camera zooms out from a close-up to a shot where her surrounds are suddenly revealed—something like a tennis court or a garden, covered, quite clearly with

AstroTurf. Then a cut to another space—old people exercising next to a swimming pool. As the camera surveys their smiling faces and swinging arms, keeping up with rhythm of the routine, a Sun City resident offers voice-over commentary: “Conditions in America today are frightening. I don’t care whether a man or a woman is black, white, yellow, pink, red, brown or polka dot. Poverty is no excuse and we simply have to do something drastically different from the do-gooding that has been going on all over this nation. We found what we consider a haven in Sun City”. When the man finishes talking, we find ourselves facing a woman, legs outstretched, on a beach chair by the pool: “Somehow or other, out here in Sun City, we feel very safe, protected, and yet we’ve only got about three or four sheriffs. But it’s a true utopia, I think, as much as one can find anywhere in the world”.

Figure 5 Screenshot from *The Great American Dream Machine*. WNET. 1971.

Figure 6 Screenshot from *The Great American Dream Machine*. WNET. 1971.

It should be clear by now that artifice is everywhere in Sun City—from individual houses with fake flora to communal spaces covered in plastic grass. The disavowal of local ecologies on which much of the postwar system was premised is replicated fully in Sun City. Equally centrally, the community is itself a miniature world—a model. As a planned community, it delivers to residents a sense of eternal security, the sense of utopia. Law and order, distance from centers of urban disturbance, from garbage, violence—the "frightening" conditions in "America today". It goes without saying that our masculine narrator can confidently say he doesn't care about the color of peoples' skins because in Sun City he is isolated from racial others. A conservative form of tolerance can take hold as a byproduct of spatial segregation. Everything Sun City affords—safety, security, utopia—is based on its hermetic isolation from a wider culture of disarray. In this respect, what is truly revealing about the series of vignettes I've laid out is the deep sense of anxiety that structures old, white experiences of utopian retirement. Just as the pink plastic hibiscus plays a part in inscribing the home as a domain outside the exterior world of turmoil, the synthetic

pleasures of Sun City, too, situate it outside this external world—“outside the outside” we might say.

In both the statements of the couple from the first vignette and the individuals that follows, the “outdoors” has a spectral quality, a presence that though constantly invoked, is always suffused with violence, terror, and disorder. Only by bringing the outdoors indoors—by miniaturizing the contingencies of the social body—can one discover utopia. Understood in this manner, utopia is not simply a different space but also a different time—or a timeless time—it is a time without nature, without matter, without geology. It is a time where the outside world is constantly reproduced within the inside—through petrochemical products—but the finitude of that world is constantly held at bay as new narratives of limitless expansion compensate the subject’s anxious fear of loss. The subject on view here is, then, only the surface effect of an anxious interior that it turns away from or overlooks in order to better occupy a place at a height—an overlook[79]—from where the American way of life appears utopian, unrestricted by the demands of the resource economy. To look upon artificial grass or plastic flowers as products of oil would be to resolve the aporia that allows the subject to stabilize himself. Resolution, here, would spell the end of infinity.

I would argue that we see a similar mechanism at work (if on a different register) in artist Tom Wesselmann’s 1963 painting, *Still Life #30* [figure 7]. Art historians like Cécile Whiting[80] and Nan Freeman[81] have provided convincing readings of this painting, as well as Wesselmann’s larger oeuvre, where collage aesthetics, female bodies, and everyday objects of consumption in postwar America proliferated in different—often innovative—ways. Whiting and Freeman both

[79] In saying this, I am playing with the word “overlook” as one which designates simultaneously a place at a height from where things appear from a bird’s-eye-view (as it were), and an act—overlooking—that refers to an inability to notice something. I am suggesting that the postwar subject occupied an overlook from where the future appeared abundant by overlooking scarcity.
[80] Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*.
[81] Freeman, “Tom Wesselmann: Still-Life Painting and American Culture, circa 1962”.

help situate Wesselmann as the (sometimes subversive) male pop artist who played constantly with the edges of highbrow and middlebrow art, femininity and the male gaze, and, of course, consumption and its critique. Whiting, for instance, persuasively argues that Wesselmann appropriated the aesthetics of women's magazines, presents "the fantasy of completely up-to-date appliances harmoniously and sensibly arranged in a pristine space",[82] and combines the two oranges on the window sill with the skyscraper as a visual joke about phallic power.[83] The copy of a Picasso framed above the pink fridge next to replicas of 7UP bottles also, obviously, speaks to the transgression of cultural boundaries where the everyday domestic setting becomes a site for viewing high art and high art migrates into the realm of popular culture. This is all well and good. But I am intrigued two specific things about this painting and the commentaries on it: one, that the image, it appears, is perennially read in relation to postwar consumerism; and two, the critics do not have anything to say about the bright red pot with bright red plastic flowers in it placed on the window sill next to the oranges.[84]

My hunch is that these two phenomena are interconnected: *because* Wesselmann, and indeed pop art more generally, is narrated as a symbolic manifestation of the postwar consumer economy, all of his (and its) artefacts are considered through the language of what Jean Baudrillard called "consumer society".[85] From this point of view, it is important to understand the way pop artists like Wesselmann represent or comment on brands; how they borrow or overturn conventions of interior decoration in the popular press; and the ways in which the commodities in their art stand

[82] Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 57.
[83] Whiting, 78.
[84] The red plastic flowers in this painting are identified as plastic by the artist, and a glance at the page dedicated to the work on the website of the Museum of Modern Art in New York substantiates this fact: https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/tom-wesselmann-still-life-30-april-1963
[85] Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*.

in for cultural values.[86] In a Baudrillardian sense, the consumer society functions through the manipulation of signs and the resignification of commodities within different regimes of valuation.

Figure 7 Tom Wesselman, *Still Life #30*. MOMA. 1963.

The problem is that in such interpretations, fake nature or plastic flora falls by the wayside because it doesn't quite arise to the status of a commodity. As more generic objects, they don't evoke the same sort of mystique or charm or image of luxury as branded things or high value objects inside the home. But plastic flowers are containers of the postwar resource economy—its very basis, in fact, in petroculture. If, as I have argued, the postwar moment was, from its very inception beset by concerns about material finitude and depletion, then it stands to reason that consumer society took hold in *this* context as well as one of abundance. Seen this way, the plastic flowers in Wesselmann's painting are not commented upon because they are not commodities in the sense in which pop art understood the term—marked, branded goods. Rather, they manifest the resource economy within a domestic setting; an economy no one was particularly interested in discussing because to do would be to question the foundational myths of postwar progress.

[86] Freeman, "Tom Wesselmann: Still-Life Painting and American Culture, circa 1962", 111.

The plastic flowers in *Still Life #30* might, I am suggesting, serve the same function that the artificial hibiscus plant serves in the vignette from *The Great American Dream Machine*. If we understand this object as a miniature world that doesn't live up to the status of a commodity within the iconography of pop art, then we must ask what it's doing there in the first place. It is perhaps the only presence within the fame that is too mundane and generic to incite comment. Everything else—from the branded Rice Krispies to the bright blue pattern on the wall above the stove—can be explained in terms of a design aesthetic or conventions of decoration dominant at the time. The flowers seem to hold commentary at bay because there is nothing, apparently, temporal about them. They are not "of the present"—they cannot be scaled up to speak of capitalist economy after the war; nor of the desire for "good things" in suburban houses. Plastic flowers are neither hi-tech enough (like the fridge) nor iconic enough (like the Picasso). Even *within* the frame of a still life, the pot remains overlooked.

The flowers are right in front of those who look at the painting but pass over them in silence. In them, the depletion of postwar culture becomes apparent—as if the bright red is actually obscuring or compensating for a deeper anxiety about the possible loss of futurity. Commenting on the luster and shine fruits often have in Wesselmann's paintings, Nan Freeman suggests a connection between his playful images and contemporaneous "crate labels and supermarket produce-department decorations, idealizing depictions intended to suggest that the fruit being sold is eternally permanent".[87] While the organic world is open to such play in the lexicon of pop art, nonorganic floral objects, it would appear, require temporal foreclosure; they require a certain fixity in time that plucks them from the flux of environmental flows and situates them on a window sill where they slip into invisibility in plain sight.

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[87] Freeman, 106.

The situation is even more amusing because the plastic flowers sit immediately next to what Whiting identifies as the jokey phallic assemblage. Turning her formulation around slightly, I would suggest that in my reading, the window and its opening into the outside world—one where a skyscraper towers over the landscape—serves the quintessential function of an overlook. It gives visual form to the space from where the domestic attempted to disentangle itself. The skyscraper literalizes this notion of an overlook—a space from where everything appears with clarity—while also demonstrating how such an overlook becomes apparent when the plastic flower (and resource depletion) is overlooked. In this image, the home becomes unstuck from the world outside but maintains, nonetheless, a view of it. So, on the one hand we see how domesticity is implicated in relation to the larger world. But we also discern on the other, how it protects or shields itself from this implication by occupying a space exterior to the external world. A space "outside the outside" as-it-were. The commodified world of everyday consumer objects and the corporate world of ever-extending towers reaching skyward are subtended by the very thing that sits in plain view but evades the eye. To look at the pot of red plastic flora, to look at the overlooked would be to acknowledge the very finitude, depletion, and limits which the postwar order of domesticity must turn away from; what it must disavow, to reproduce a horizon of plenitude.

In all of these ways, the plastic flowers in *Dream Machine* and *Still Life #30* reproduce at a domestic, intimate level, the sorts of foreclosure that administrative media effected in the sphere of governmental rhetoric and action. Where in Sun City, residents articulate a form of utopian life by sealing themselves off from conditions of racialized life, the visual logic of *Still Life #30* makes the home a privileged point of access from where the outside is both rendered visible and distant. Both of these observations also point us to consider the ways in which suburbanization in the West (and the settler-home more generally) was integral to the postwar American project. Matthew

Huber's case for how, in Sunbelt cities (Charlotte, Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Phoenix), "landscapes of suburban social reproduction also tended to reinforce the entrepreneurial logics of Sunbelt capitalism"[88] is worth recalling on this count. Scholars have also shown how intimately entrepreneurism in cities like Phoenix was entwined with racialized urban planning, patterns of white flight, and the distribution of environmental pollution to low-income nonwhite geographies.[89] We might note, in this context, what Lorenzo Veracini calls "morphological" similarities between Westward expansion and suburban settlement, where sprawl "re-enacts settlement in more ways than mimicking housing styles (i.e. 'colonials' and 'ranches.')"[90]

The postwar suburban home was a site for the social reproduction of settler subjects who exemplified the future-oriented frontiers of modern luxury living. Where Veracini tracks the replication of settler displacement in patterns of automobility and urban segregation—often through the establishment of suburban dwellings in previously "untamed" lands[91] —there are more embedded and troubling links between postwar housing and imperial form. Kwajalein Island, for instance, lies "on the southeastern edge of Micronesia" and was "within the Trust Treaty of the Pacific Islands, a United Nations-sanctioned designation that positioned the island to become a key site for buttressing the postwar security state".[92] Lauren Hirshberg discusses how "knowledge workers" associated with the American nuclear and military industries migrated from the (suburban) mainland to Kwajalein, transforming the territory into a "domestic space" through military "segregation policies" that positioned "American families as at home and the Marshallese as foreigners".[93] Hirshberg's point—one which I want to remain attentive to here—is that the slow

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[88] Huber, *Lifeblood*, 63.
[89] See: Bolin et al., "Environmental Equity in a Sunbelt City"; Bolin et al., "Double Exposure in the Sunbelt"; Cunningham, *American Politics in the Postwar Sunbelt*; Goldfield, "Writing the Sunbelt".
[90] Veracini, "Suburbia, Settler Colonialism and the World Turned Inside Out", 341.
[91] Clarsen and Veracini, "Settler Colonial Automobilities".
[92] Hirshberg, "Domestic Containment in the Marshall Islands", 177.
[93] Hirshberg, 181–82.

orientation of Kwajalein into an American colony during the Cold War was largely effected through policies of segregation, control, and containment premised on ideals of domesticity.

Morphologies of settler expansionism thus map quite neatly on to segregationist histories of planning and inhabitation in this region. Further, the vignettes of Sun City in *Dream Machine*, along with Huber's identification of optimistic entrepreneurial sensibilities, demonstrate how, beyond morphology, spaces like these were quite literally sustained by fantasies of utopian separation from exhaustion, scarcity, and generalized violence. If in the home, plastic flora was corralled to build a protective wall against exteriority, then (as I will argue in more detail below), their status as miniatures impervious to time made them what David Theo Goldberg—in a discussion of gated communities and abandoned wastelands in the Californian deserts—calls a "prophylactic borderline": objects creating segregated geographies where (settler) liberal fantasies of utopian toleration flourished in the manufactured absence of racial others.[94]

All of which is to say: the home was deeply implicated in remaking the external world in the image of settler society. I will further elaborate this point in the following section with reference to work on "manifest domesticity". The domestic sphere had to be made safe from the fluctuations affecting the wider world *because* it was fully imbricated in that world. To sustain the fantasy that settler life could become a permanent and global model of normative life per se, the home had to be insulated from history, materiality, and any sense of infection by temporal finitude. Plastic flowers played a small but crucial part in this process.

[94] Goldberg, *The Threat of Race*, 76–77.

IV. Plastic flowers, accumulation, domesticity

Designing nature, designing order

We might locate plastic flowers within the home by signposting some broad markers of how the home itself was designed and organized during the period in question. Analyzing the boundaries between inside and outside in the postwar home, Margaret Maile Petty points out that windows and curtains presented an obstacle to the modern architectural drive to "bring the outdoors and the indoors into direct communication".[95] Architectural critic Bernard Rudofsky's 1955 book, *Behind the Picture Window*, was an important text that took aim at one of the defining features of domestic life at the time. He criticized both the desire to blend outdoor and indoor spaces (which, as I shall show below was characteristic of suburbs in the West), and the site picture windows opened out to—gardens. For Rudofsky, suburban gardens were "melancholic" and a waste of time.[96] Petty argues that although the picture window was intended to bridge indoor and outdoor spaces, it had the opposite effect, and "often caused a severing of any real engagement between indoor and outdoor life. In putting the garden on display, framed for view from the inside, this space of potential outdoor living became a spectacle for visual consumption rather than ambulatory enjoyment".[97]

The picture window and the display garden are symptomatic of longer histories of design in suburbia where the ideology of "outdoor living", as Elizabeth Carney has shown, was connected to the ideology of socio-economic growth. As she writes in an important intervention, trends begun in the 1930s had ensured that by the 1950s "western suburbia epitomized the middle-upper-class good life. Indeed, so many people found the 'right mode of life' in the modern West that massive

[95] Petty, "Curtains and the Soft Architecture of the American Postwar Domestic Environment", 38.
[96] Petty, 40.
[97] Petty, 42.

growth became central to the region's increasingly suburban culture".[98] Nonetheless, the specters of dispossession, racism, and environmental damage stalked this growth narrative, and meant that proponents of the good life in the West had to constantly shake off the presence of this other form of life. Carney's essay is worth attending to in some detail because she supplies another historical anchor for many of the tensions I discussed above through Huber, Tone, Mangrum, and work on anxious containment. Through archival research on numerous lifestyle magazines—most visibly, *Golden West*, *House and Garden*, and *Arizona Homes*—she shows how outdoor living was became the "great hope for two, sometimes contradictory, pursuits: encouraging growth and defining a comprehensible, commodifiable sense of place for the region".[99]

Ideologues of outdoor living foregrounded the West as a place that tied together real and imagined cities, homes and hinterlands, and ideals of domesticity, leisure, and nature. Built spaces, highways, agricultural valleys, orchards, and the wilderness were all summoned in the service of selling a space where the marvels of modern economic life could coexist with the affordances of a rustic, nostalgic past. This ideology endured well into the late-1950s, promising inhabitants that "the undeveloped nature that suburbanites encountered in the mountains (usually on public lands near urban centers) not only constituted something 'out there', but also represented a part of homemaking: *home* was both indoors and out-of-doors".[100] The rhetoric of psychological, mental development and renewal followed close at heels in the propagation of such visions of a home in-and-out-in the world. Aesthetically, arguments were put forward for gardens—including ones with decorative rock sculptures—are miniaturized replicas or copies of natural space. Tensions between

[98] Carney, "Suburbanizing Nature and Naturalizing Suburbanites", 477.
[99] Carney, 478.
[100] Carney, 480.

native and nonnative plants was one clear flashpoint in debates about the organization of domestic outdoor space.[101]

After the end of the war, as suburbia really blossomed both economically and territorially, decks and patios extended the concept of outdoor living by created spaces where homeowners could dwell on a daily basis: "modern gardens were meant to be lived in".[102] The term "hardscape" captures some of the elements at plat in this period. California garden designers, for instance, "emphasized the *hardscape* (structural elements such as paving, decks, benches, and walls) and low-maintenance shrubs and trees".[103] This new kind of garden was "not a garden for traditional gardening enthusiasts. *House Beautiful* advised its readers to avoid troublesome plants and instead to pick plants that would 'stay put' and 'preserve the status quo longer,' using language that reflected the values of midcentury containment culture … the ubiquitous lawn, automatic sprinkler systems and preventive garden chemicals took much of the labor and thought out of garden care".[104] In these gardens, nature was "minimized" and "held in stasis as much as possible. Nature had become the backdrop for the central stage of backyard leisure".[105] Additionally, magazines like *Sunset* encouraged its readers to travel the Southwest and create "miniature landscapes out of pieces of wood collected on beaches, in deserts, or in mountains".[106]

Crucially, this entire physical, architectural apparatus—from miniaturized copies of nature to the hardscape where one could just step into the outdoors while still being inside—served a thickly psychic function for suburbanites. Thus, when Marshall Sprague, one of the founders of *Golden West*, considered the view of Colorado's mountains from his home in Denver he felt a

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[101] Carney, 480–83.
[102] Carney, 487.
[103] Carney, 487.
[104] Carney, 488.
[105] Carney, 488.
[106] Carney, 495.

sense of "permanence": "As was true in other Sunbelt cities that grew dramatically, things certainly did not stay put in Denver over the next decades; but what Sprague described was a feeling that Denver's mountain range served as a psychological anchor compared to other landscapes with less obvious markers of rustic nature …"[107] Significantly, outdoor living led "new westerners" to "invest in the security of nature", opening up "nature as an antidote".[108] The hardscapes, along with artificially planted trees, and the like "contributed to the fantasy landscapes of outdoor living. In a sense, Western backyards became private 'magic lands,' places that, like Disneyland and their other public counterparts, offered therapeutic space for westerners to manage massive cities and dizzying growth".[109] These associations helped "ease anxiety over the loss of the family farm to modernity" and helped "maintain the health of the family".[110]

Note these words and phrases: "psychological anchor", security of nature", "nature as an antidote", "fantasy of outdoor living", "a therapeutic space", "manage", and, of course, "anxiety". These terms crop up in Carney's work—and elsewhere in the texts I have discussed above—but they are not commented upon in any detail. The direction I am taking my analysis in might, by now, be somewhat obvious: without saying that plastic flowers represent a kind of hardscape, I *am* suggesting that the work they do inside the home is *akin* to the kind of psychic comfort that these other spaces and architectural innovations sought to provide for normative domestic subjects. I am also extending my analysis of these objects into the realm of resource scarcity and not merely the idea of economic growth—though, as my discussion of the PMPC report showed, the two are quite deeply entwined. Scarcity and growth are part of the same narrative of postwar culture. When I refer to the work plastic flowers do in the context of resource scarcity, I am, therefore, trying quite

[107] Carney, 497.
[108] Carney, 497.
[109] Carney, 497.
[110] Carney, 498.

explicitly to connect administrative concerns around resource depletion to postwar domestic psychic anxieties of various kinds. If scholars like Huber, Tone, and Mangrum are right, and if the postwar order is also one where the fortunes of Freudianism are on the rise, and if this is also an order that turns to the outdoors as a space of therapeutic comfort, then the obvious question we have to ask is: what makes anyone *need* these therapies? Tone's argument that anxiousness was a component of success might explain one part of the story, but surely it doesn't saturate the entire spectrum of possibilities.

Fine, let us submit, empirically, to the fact that inhabitants of suburbs in the West required nature to find some sense of permanence and ease anxiety. But what is this anxiety that needed easing? Why was any kind of psychic balance even on the table for people whose material, outer lives were nothing short of opulent in the context of a booming commodity economy? Plastic flowers point, I suspect, to an underlying structure of melancholy, a precarious sense of loss and impermanence— the impermanence of a way of life, of a civilization (remember the opening question of *Resources*)—that required foreclosing. American domesticity could not claim the world or remake it in its own image if it did not stabilize the interior life of its subjects. They were, like the Countess in Ballard's story, forever surveying the terrain around them and saying *still*.

Plastic flowers and imperial domesticity

To flesh some of these dynamics out in more detail, let me turn now to another minor visual object [figures 8-10].[111] An advertisement for plastic flowers, 1959, in black and white: the opening shot is a mid-to-high-angle framing of flowers—roses—against a (presumably) blue and clear sky. The composition bequeaths the frame a certain sense of romantic naturalism, as one might find in

[111] Tube Outpost, *P&G Ivory Snow: Free Plastic Flowers*.

paintings of nature, for instance. The male narrator's voiceover breaks through: "Now you can keep summertime beauty in your home all year round—with beautiful, lifelike, artificial roses, as a dramatic mass of color, a delicate arrangement, or a single accent". As he speaks, the camera cuts from the opening frame to a housewife carefully arranging a large fake bouquet in a white flower pot. After showing viewers images of what a "delicate arrangement" and "single accent" might look like, the camera focuses on a close-up of lush roses, methodically zooming in as the narrator speaks over the movement—"Now get these lovely, washable roses free"—and the word FREE appears at the very center of the frame atop the roses. But our masculine voice is not done yet: "—Now get these lovely, washable roses free when you by these favorite Proctor and Gamble household helpers". Cut to packs of detergent: Cheer, Joy, and Ivory Snow. The advertisement then goes on to instruct its audience about the kinds of plastic roses (one-bud, two-bud, three-bud) that come appended to different sizes of the products and ends by exhorting women to start building "a bouquet today" while supplies last.

A question clearly arises in the context of the narrative I have been laying out in this chapter: what are we to make of this celebration of domestic routine, the bounty of artificial nature, and suburban life in a context where national discourse, as I have demonstrated, was centered on concerns surrounding resource depletion? My first suggestion is that the writing of domesticity as articulated in the previous sections is, to some extent, inadequate for fully grasping the significance of such an ad. Containment culture is perhaps too fixated on the threat of nuclear catastrophe to adequately address a more gradual fear of depletion which accompanied realizations about the potential exhaustion of planetary limits. Accounts oriented toward anxiety and medicalization, similarly, though attentive to the fractured happiness of domesticity, seem strangely disinterested in the internal lives of the subjects being medicalized into stability. And while studies of material

culture do bring to the surface the histories of oil, petroleum, and plastic that underwrite the fantasy of domestic life in this period, that fantasy itself goes unremarked upon in the service of a Foucauldian model where interiority has little (if any) role to play.

I think ads like this one by Proctor and Gamble, on the other hand, help reconstitute domesticity by implicitly—subconsciously—relocating concerns about resource depletion into narratives of normative plenitude. In other words, we would do well to stay away from words like "consumerism" and "commodification" when talking about this audiovisual snippet. The commodity story simply rehearses once more a tale of American postwar capitalism unfolding against the shadows of potential eventful disasters such as nuclear war and communism. The nondramatic temporality of depletion—something which would come to fruition in the distant future—gets excised from this account. In the P&G ad, all of these issues come to the fore through the displacement of labor—specifically maintenance-work.

Figure 8 Screenshot from Proctor & Gamble advertisement. 1959.

Figure 9 Screenshot from Proctor & Gamble advertisement. 1959.

Figure 10 Screenshot from Proctor & Gamble advertisement. 1959.

To begin with, the juxtaposition of (what viewers are told are) red roses against a clear, blue sky. The motif replicates closely the red and blue color scheme in Wesselmann's *Still Life #30*. The opening shot needs to be thought of in relation to a couple of elements: the narrator's claim that

plastic flowers give one permanent access to summertime, and the manner in which the placement of the flowers within packets of detergent visually mimics the act of planting something into the soil. Together, the sequence—the opening shot, the unchanging season, and the "planting" of plastic flowers—conveys a sense of timelessness where the domestic is simultaneously sutured to "nature" and extricated from its contingencies.

The opening shot also deceives the viewer—especially since the ad is shot in black and white—into thinking that the roses on display, in relief against a splendid sky, are real, idealized objects encapsulating the beauty of the natural world. Until the plasticity of the flowers is verbally announced, it isn't entirely clear that what is on screen is indeed plastic. The invocation of organic materiality thus frames one's reception of the images that follow. The narrator's repeated invocation of color throughout the minute-long ad reinforces such links between the bounties of nature and commonsensical understandings of what might be considered beautiful inside the home. Recognition of the plasticity of the flora doesn't subtract from their desirability. In fact, the claim that plastic flowers create a permanent summer (with all its attendant connotations of brightness, sunshine, and optimism) makes the viewer affectively invest even more in the object: "Now you can keep summertime beauty in your home all year round".

Repetitions of the nature motif are critical to the move I am trying to identify here because together these repetitions bequeath plastic roses natural beauty without burdening them with the fickle temporality that is ontological to organic matter. Accepting plastic roses within the home, placing them on tables or next to music boxes and bookshelves, represents a turn away from the temporality of organic matter; an orientation towards the promise of permanence ensconced in midcentury imaginations of plastic. [112] Significantly, the incorporation of plastic flora as decorative

[112] Plastic flowers (specifically daffodils), surface repeatedly in the late British poet Adrian Henri's work—often touching on similar themes. To take just one example, in the poem "I Want to Paint", Henri writes of "The first

background elevates the home "beyond" nature: artifice isolates the domestic sphere from the eternal turbulence of the natural world. To invest—financially as well as emotionally—in these miniature worlds is to express a (perhaps subconscious) desire for control over the great outdoors, where population explosion and resource scarcity structured a sense of foreboding about the sustenance of American civilization. For the home to maintain a sense of coherence at this time, its inhabitants had to incorporate elements of the very resource economy that would eventually threaten them, and then turn away from the finite temporal horizon of that economy.

Repetition—or, more tantalizingly, reproducibility (with all its gendered connotations)—opens out to accumulation, which surfaces as a theme throughout the advertisement. By goading (female) consumers to collect all the flowers and build magnificent fake bouquets before stocks run out, P&G establishes a link between accumulating plastic roses and accumulation structuring the postwar heteronormative, suburban economy. Both visually and rhetorically, the drive to accumulate plastic flowers—to collect them all—evokes the construction of the normative female subject in the image of a techno-subject one of whose primary goals in life is social reproduction. That the accumulative element of plastic flora is intimately connected to the trappings of this reproductive economy—in a word, domesticity—is, therefore, not very surprising.

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plastic daffodil of spring pushing its way/ through the OMO packets in the Supermarket" (Henri, *Adrian Henri*, 110). When asked about his fascination with these objects, Henri told an interviewer about a trip to a Supermarket with a counter stocked with artificial flowers: "… and I said, 'Can I have some daffodils please?' and she said, 'You can't—they're out of season.' And I just thought: that's the most incredible thing. And that's a paradox if ever there was one: the idea that you could actually only buy them when they were in season …" (Henri and Bateman, "Adrian Henri: Singer of Meat and Flowers", 89–90). Commenting on Henri's penchant for plastic daffodils, the critic Peter Barry claims: "Likewise, the cultural artefacts that would be despised as inauthentic by High Modernists schooled by Adorno … are here salvaged and embraced. They are recommended not so much for study as for contemplation … The plastic flower, for instance, is to be genuinely admired: in another of Henri's poems the first sign of spring is the appearance of plastic daffodils in Woolworths. The flower is not despised as inauthentic, nor—heaven forbid—regarded as a symptomatic simulacrum of the postmodern identity", (Barry, "'The Hard Lyric': Re-Registering Liverpool Poetry", 26–27).

In Paul Preciado's words: "Postwar white men and women are biotechnological beings belonging to the sexo-political regime whose goal is the production, reproduction, and colonial expansion of heterosexual human life on the planet".[113] Or: the heterosexual machinery of postwar normativity sustained itself by eliminating time from domestic space, because making the home appear immune to worldly instability naturalized the settler domestic order as eternal and timeless. By expelling time, on the one hand, the home protected itself from threats posed by global resource scarcity. But atemporality was also a method for colonizing time: if the American nuclear family could serve as the norm for what *all* families should look like, then any expansionist project to more intensely exploit global resources could be justified as an effort to protect that familial ideal. From this we can extrapolate that the settler heterosexual order was propelled by an endless drive to constantly remake the world in its own image.

These mechanisms replicate the logics of what Amy Kaplan calls "manifest domesticity", where the double meaning appended to domesticity—the home and the not-foreign—"not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual borders of the home".[114] Her essay addresses antebellum America to discern the modalities by which an imagination of "the nation as a home" helped the country achieve coherence during a period of imperial expansion defined by violent confrontations with Mexicans, Indians, and Europeans.[115] She identifies a "paradox" within "imperial domesticity" in which women's retreat from the public (male) arena of business or commerce allowed feminine subjectivity to make the home its own playground within the national-imperial project: "The outward reach of domesticity … enables the interior functioning of the home".[116] Underwritten by

[113] Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 119.
[114] Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity", 581.
[115] Kaplan, 583.
[116] Kaplan, 586.

frontier imaginaries of Manifest Destiny, rhetorics of domesticity simultaneously allowed the United States to think of the world as its "'home' and project the home as 'coextensive with the entire world'".[117]

Kaplan's antebellum history speaks eloquently to the reordering of the postwar world when a new phase of American imperial ascendancy was on the rise. In the face of resource crisis, intensified exploitation of resources made it imperative for the administrative apparatus to devise new rhetorical devices justifying American intervention beyond its borders and in the interests of a world community. Further, as replicating patterns of imperial domesticity in Kwajalein Island suggest, the domestic sphere was essential to the American ideological project after 1945. But if the home was going to be thrown so centrally into the turbulent world, if the home was going to become *the* visual icon of abundant life, then how could it not be affected by the crises engulfing the world it was being plunged into? How could resource scarcity be held at bay, especially when it was precisely those resources thought to be scarce that powered the postwar home? In plastic flowers, we find a stabilizing mechanism for sustaining a fantasy of the home as external to the world-in-crisis. The effacement of organic time, excision of material decay, and the promise of permanent summers functioned as the flipside of catastrophic images of nuclear winter. Where the latter filled domestic space with dread, the former elevated the home beyond the wider world even as it became increasingly entangled with it.

But how does the labor of maintenance fit into this framework? The simple answer is that plastic flowers enter the home based on a guarantee of permanence (i.e. their uncontamination by the vagaries of the natural world), and nonlabor (i.e. their lack of dependence on upkeep). These two phenomena are, I would claim, interconnected. Which is to say: despite the shield of protection

[117] Kaplan, 588.

they afford against nature, plastic flowers would never have entered the home if they needed constant the attention of their owners. That they can be overlooked without being regularly tended to, is integral to their promise. In the P&G ad, the effacement of labor is a constant thematic concern. In all the talk of bright redness, washable flowers, and bouquet building, viewers are meant to forget the fact that you only accumulate a bunch of roses by buying packs of detergent.

The commodification angle is less interesting here than the specific commodities being sold. The product marketed by Proctor and Gamble aids the repetitive performance of female domestic labor—doing the dishes, washing clothes, keeping the home clean. But the ad asks viewers not to focus on the dreariness of those tasks (nor indeed on the fact that plastic roses need a wash from time-to-time). Instead, both the visuals and the narrator's words direct viewers' eyes towards the abundance of plastic roses: collect them all, accumulate more, make large bouquets, so that you might arrange fake flowers in ever more imaginative ways.

The imprinting of the word FREE on screen isn't entirely incidental either, on two counts: first, it is plainly obvious that the roses are free because the consumer is paying for the detergent and getting a potentially pointless substitute for nature tacked on to it for no charge. But more importantly, FREE roses are, here, being used to sell another normative ideal—which underpins the entire accumulative, reproductive edifice of heterosexual family life: free domestic labor. In much the same way that fake plastic flowers are sold as idealized versions of nature evacuated of the temporal flux of the natural world, women's labor—given free of charge within the domestic setup—is naturalized by the rhetoric of bouquet building. Even though the commodities being sold in the ad are things one needs to maintain households on a day-to-day basis, we might be forgiven for thinking that the star of the show is the red plastic rose. That which is merely a FREE accessory to the "real thing" on sale becomes, in effect, the thing itself.

The effacement of (women's) labor in the P&G advertisement reflects the other side of the entrepreneurial suburban subject which Matthew Huber conceptualizes around the oil economy. If self-making informs one element of petrocultural fantasy, then the stabilization of the interior self through the expulsion of organic time and manual labor informs another portion of that same fantasy. Hence my suspicion that on this count the biopolitical account needs to be supplemented by a narrative more attentive to internal fluxes of the governmentalized subject. By expelling all the markers of time—work, nature, organic matter—from the narrative around plastic flora, they strive to secure the home as that insulated space outside the outside where resource crisis becomes a blip in the mirror as summertime flourishes all year around.

Having argued thus far for the emergence of bureaucratic vision and its prominent role in the inscription of domesticity outside the space of external turmoil, it remains for me rehearse the final step of the argument: that together bureaucratic vision and domestic isolation articulated a distinction between materiality (or the temporality of matter) and history. The endless drive for growth illustrates plainly how crucial it was for governments, policymakers, and bureaucrats to never fully acknowledge the finitude of the earth's contents. Faced with the reality that resources might run out they simply created a definitional space for generating more resources in the future—as the PMPC report shows. But how could rational, thinking people have failed to realize that the earth *is* finite—in a deep, material sense; that it has contents that *will* be exhausted at some point in the future? The answer to this question cannot be gleaned from the pages of political economy. The refusal to recognize what appears as a shockingly basic fact to many has to be understood within the matrix of psychic stabilization: in a period of ascendant imperialism, at a time when American presence on the world stage was about to be cemented in a way it never had been before, how could something as banal as "material" limit the horizon of expectations? A split had to be

created between the temporal orders of matter and history for America to take its rightful place as the author of the American Century.

V. Still, life

I am designating as "still life", a genre of photography found within the pages of newspapers, journals and magazines in the postwar period where plastic flowers are represented with an overt decorative aesthetic in mind. These images and their discursive positioning in popular publications offers a useful lens for getting a sense of the matter/history split. On some occasions, the images are accompanied by numerous tips on how and where plastic flowers can be placed within the home; whereas on others, the photographs simply illustrate a story or report about plastic flora—as in the case of the article by Sherwood Kohn with which I began this chapter. While I am partly interested in the photographic conventions on display in some of the images under consideration, my reference to still life gestures primarily to the flowers themselves and not the photographs. In this sense, although I draw on art historical and literary work on the genre of still life, the objects I am going to discuss are not representational but actual objects, i.e. the flowers themselves.

The visual conventions in play don't vary greatly: photographs frame bouquets or shrubs of plastic flora in medium close-up or close-up, arranged delicately in vases, most often evacuated of their surrounding domestic contexts. Each image depicts a different arrangement; and sometimes—as in the case of an article printed in the January 24, 1965 edition of *The New York Times*—the captions identify the particular kind of flower being reproduced in plastic: "six-foot plastic rhododendron bush"; "daisies add a frothy accent to the strong shapes created by cattails, driftwood, and modern leaves".[118] Captions also naturalize the objects by repeatedly using organic,

[118] Carr, "Arranging Artificial Flowers".

earthy language which renders plastic flowers simultaneously timeless and fragile: “bouquet—it is realistic, imperishable, pollen-free, flexible, detergent-washable and socially acceptable”.[119]

Some of these themes come together nicely in the February 1964 issue of the Canadian women’s magazine, *Chatelaine*, in an article written by the magazine’s gardening editor, Lois Wilson, titled “Fabulous Fakes” [figures 11-13].[120] The article—which was printed alongside a series of photographs by Murray Dutchak—had a simple aim, summed up in its header: “The only way you can tell today’s plastic flowers from real ones is by their lack of scent. Here’s how to choose them for eye-filling arrangements”.[121] Two of Dutchak’s large photographs are particularly good representative samples of what I mean by still life. In one, at the top of Wilson’s article, readers find a bouquet of plastic flora—at least one of which appears to be a sunflower—arranged in an elegant pot which is resting on a window sill. Although we cannot see outside the window, the presence of glass gives the frame a sense of openness toward the exterior. In the foreground we find an open, overturned book and an ashtray with a pipe inside it. In the other photograph, readers once again find an elegant floral arrangement in a stylish long-stemmed pot; this time standing in relief against wallpaper with floral decoration printed on it. Two busts of horses—much like a large rook on a pricey chessboard—flank the right side of the flowers, while on the left we see unopened envelopes with an envelope opener placed carefully atop. Other photographs in the piece rehearse a similar aesthetic logic.

Wilson’s text amplifies what is on view in the two photographs that appear at end of the article. Although plastic flowers might lack the “fragile beauty and fragrance of the real thing”, Wilson tells readers that they “are appealing and useful in places where fresh flowers simply would

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[119] Carr.
[120] Wilson, “Fabulous Fakes”.
[121] Wilson.

not last”. Unlike organic flowers, plastic ones can withstand heat as well as cold drafts of wind—they “can fill all these tricky spots, and if they are cleverly used, do it with distinction and originality”. For a “sunny window-sill in a room warm with wood tones”, Wilson recommends “two or three big yellow dahlias and some branches of green hydrangea leaves with little yellow-green in the veining”. Alongside tips for specific arrangements Wilson offers her readers consumer advice, telling them to always have a sense of where they might wish to place the flowers they buy and to work with the colors within that space. So, to place flowers on the dinner table, think of the colors of the dishes, the tablecloth and the like: “think of your dishes and pick up the dominant color in them”.

Telling readers to “buy with restraint” she warns them against getting lost in the plethora of colors one might find in a shop. It’s always better to purchase fewer colors that go well together than many varieties which clash visually. Having then detailed how one can make the perfect arrangement using “a good hefty pair of wire cutters, blocks of Styrofoam, Plasticine or any similar sticky compound, a cupful or so of discarded nuts and bolts or some old fishing sinkers, some black or greenish wire and a few interesting containers”, Wilson tells readers to be mindful of time. Artificial flowers don’t last endlessly in the sun, and to keep the same ones out all the time would bore guests. Therefore, “use them for two or three weeks, then run your shower or kitchen spray over them to wash them clean, let them dry, pop a plastic bag over their heads and put them away for a while”.

Both the visual and textual rhetorics on display in “Fabulous Fakes” produce a fantastical image of what we might quite unambiguously call bourgeois interiority (infused with a dollop of high kitsch). In Dutchak’s photographs as in Wilson’s text, plastic flowers are constantly located within an economy of plenitude, excess, abundance, and exteriority.

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Figure 11 From "Fabulous Fakes", *Chatelaine*. 1964.

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Figure 12 From "Fabulous Fakes", *Chatelaine*. 1964.

FOR A HANGING BOUQUET

Simple white wire birdcage with ice-cream container liner, painted turquoise, holds summer bouquet of lilacs, anemones, zinnias, fuchsias, baby mums, grape ivy. Pink and white ribbon adds a party air.

FOR A CENTREPIECE

A simple arrangement featuring three white snapdragons and a half dozen red and purple-blue anemones in white salad bowl. This one was planned to pick up the colors of the everyday dishes used.

CONTINUED

◁ AUTHOR LOIS WILSON

created all the flower arrangements featured in this article. Here she is seen preparing the hallway bouquet shown right.

Continued in your hall, choose for a bouquet there a variety of green-leaved foliages.

To any one-color combination you can always safely add white. But don't, until you become more experienced, add any other color. Plastic flowers, for all their fantastically accurate form and increasingly lifelike color, still lack the velvety bloom and shading that make fresh flowers of different hues and tones go well together no matter how adventurously you mix them.

So think of your house, look at all that your shops have to offer, and then to start with, settle for one or two varieties in the same color range.

For your next bouquets, look at made-up arrangements in florist and gift shops, in demonstration settings in well-decorated furniture stores. Analyze the color combinations of those that appeal to you, always remembering where you will place what you buy. If you want to make something for a table centre, think of your dishes and pick up the dominant color in them. If you want to hang a party arrangement high in a window where it will be a gay festive accent above your guests' heads, think of colors that will look well with your curtains and walls.

Then buy with restraint. More flowers of the same kind in related colors, will make more pleasing arrangements than a greater variety in many unrelated colors. Don't, for goodness' sake, get lost in admiration of the plastic flower-maker's art and buy one of this and one of that just because they're all so clever. That way lies a hodge-podge of confusion.

In shopping, you may find a great difference in the price of what looks to be the same flower. You may even find two snapdragons, one selling for forty-nine cents, the other for $1.98. The more expensive one may perhaps be a little bigger but, at first glance, no better than the cheaper one in any other way. Look more closely.

In the more expensive variety, the half-opened flowers and buds near the top will have a variation of form and color the cheaper variety will not have. Foliage will be more realistic and there will perhaps be little auxiliary leaflets where the main leaves meet the stem, which real snapdragons often have. In the better grades of *Continued on page 52*

Flowers and foliage on these pages from Perma-Fleur Designs; fruit for mirror swag, Reed's.

FOR A DRAFTY HALL

No place for real flowers, but made beautiful with artificial hydrangea and laurel, yellowish aucuba, silver-grey eucalyptus, and white Mexican tear drop.

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Figure 13 From "Fabulous Fakes", *Chatelaine*. 1964.

Where the windows give us a glimpse of expanse, the pipe, horse busts, envelopes, and overturned book all refer to an aesthetic of comfort and luxury. The floral wallpaper ushers in a sense of calmness; and together, all of these elements suffuse the visual frame with optimistic futurity. Wilson's text performs a similar task by giving readers a sense of how plasticity can "class up" domestic interiors—raise the generic suburban house beyond the obvious to a space where you would want to entertain guests. In this article, as in many of the others where such photographs of plastic flora were printed, the home becomes a display window of sorts, it becomes the thing you not only live in but also want to "show off" to friends and family.

Nor is *Chatelaine* an anomalous example in this context. The writer of the aforementioned *New York Times* article, Rachel Carr, mentions the "unbelievable lifelike texture and look" of artificial flora, which, though devoid of "the fragrance and freshness of growing plants" are "in their permanence and variety", a "boon to the housewife".[122] She assures readers that artificial flowers can be arranged in numerous ways for decorative purposes, and, unlike real nature "require no matter" since "once arranged, they can be left indefinitely". Discussing their pliability, "plastic resilience", and ability to take on new shapes when exposed to heat in the form of boiling water, Carr repeatedly reminds readers of how closely plastic flowers approximate nature—but do one better by outlasting it and defying its material limitations. The illustrations accompanying her story repeat both motifs: permanence and nature-likeness [figure 14]. Another article from the same paper, dated March 21, 1960, reinforces these themes even more forcefully, reminding readers that plastic flowers "do not die". The rhetoric of protection from natural decay is perhaps most forcefully display in the very opening lines of the piece, titled "Flowers to Bloom this Spring and All Year":

[122] Carr, "Arranging Artificial Flowers".

> Never will they wilt from steam heat or lack of water. It takes only an occasional swish in the lukewarm sudsy water to keep them continuously fresh. A years' supply of these flowers can be kept in the closet and brought out at will. One might crave yellow daffodils in the middle of December, bright red poinsettias in July, or colorful orange marigolds in March. Since fake flowers need no water, they can be placed in virtually any container.[123]

The gesture toward nonorganic everlastingness is reinforced by a large photograph where different plastic flowers are arranged in delicate arrangements within an elaborate frame. Coupled with the white background—which gives the frame an immaterial, almost ethereal quality—the bountiful display visible in the image conveys a sense of abundance and (non)natural profusion. Plastic flora emanate from various containers. Each—even though devoid of color—seems vibrant and full of life. The caption narrates the specific dimensions and types of flowers on display, while the sub-heading under says, "Fake Blossoms Survive the Passing Seasons" [figure 15].

The cruel irony—what speaks, in fact, to the crisis of depletion subtending this fantasy of domesticity—is that the domestic settings in question across these publications are anything but bourgeois. They are condemned historically to be nothing more than "middle class"—an aspiring segment of the postwar population that strains constantly to become abundant in a way it never quite manages to be. One could call this "kitsch"—this effort to semiotically mimic 18th or 19th century bourgeois lifestyles (but draped in plastic) by invoking chess, literature, smoking pipes, and fancy floral arrangements. But I refrain from using that word because, despite its apparent mimicry and artificiality, there is something deeply genuine about the spectacle on display which I don't want to displace into a discussion of kitsch. There is, here, in the call to replace correctly

[123] Mercanton, "Flowers to Bloom This Spring and All Year".

colored plastic flowers at the right time, a genuine belief in abundance, in a certain stature that one's life can and must aspire to.

On a related note, abundance—bourgeois abundance to be precise—is of course essential to the genre of still life. Often the abundance on display in classical still life is understood to be vacuous and without content. This was very much the position of French cultural theorist Roland Barthes who, in a short essay called "The World as Object", suggested that "never has nothingness been so confident … To pain lovingly these meaningless surfaces …"[124] For Barthes, the still life captures "man and his empire of things", rendering objects to their mere utility functions; "all this is man's space … his *chronos*".[125] Art historian Norman Bryson picks up the theme of utility in his study of still life with the argument that the "culture of the table" is not resistant to history even if it has conventionally been relegated to the background or overlooked.[126] But while Barthes thinks of still life as being quintessentially about "man's" empire of things, Bryson suggests that the genre, which evacuates human form, is committed (if implicitly) to a some form of anti-anthropocentrism. Unlike history painting (which is sutured to narrative conventions), in still life "human presence is not only expelled physically" but it "also expels the values which humans impose on the world".[127] Triviality and anti-anthropocentrism, for Bryson, also bequeath still life paintings with a sense of non-eventfulness. In other words, theirs is a history without events.

While Bryson's spin on Barthes' reading of the genre is useful, his claim about still life as essentially uneventful is, obviously, harder to sustain. Especially given his own emphasis on the centrality of abundance—which is everywhere—in these works. Surveying a range of Dutch still life paintings, Bryson claims that notions of waste and luxury changed with the transition from

[124] Barthes, "The World as Object", 3.
[125] Barthes, 3–5.
[126] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 13.
[127] Bryson, 60.

preindustrial life to the time of early-modern capitalism. Oversupply, affluence, and the mass production of goods created a new set of demands and "for the mounting tide of capital, the Netherlands could only provide one major outlet: domestic space".[128] We might then better understand the relationship between domesticity and still life not through the language of event and nonevent, but by infusing into the equation a question of scale.

Bonnie Costello does precisely this in her reading of literary modernism's engagement with still life. She argues that the strategies and conventions of the genre "provide a particularly productive focus for exploring the way distant affairs of the world might reach into the life of the individual".[129] Costello makes a compelling case for thinking about still life as historical product, even if it is drained of the heroic anthropocentrism of history painting or epic narrative. She scales usefully between interior affects and external turmoil, arguing that "as still life takes this chaos [of the world] into its enclosed, personal space, it also confirms our agency in the ordering of our lives".[130] Importantly, taking issue with readings like Bryson's and Susan Stewart's, Costello calls on us to recognize the ways in which still life doesn't recede from eventfulness or historicity but, in fact, responds to "historical and geographical realities".[131]

Brushing very close to the analytic frame I have adopted throughout this chapter (and the dissertation as a whole), Costello writes that still life "bespeaks the value of containment and framing which forestalls dissipation of radiance, small orders to satisfy for a time in a world that can sometimes seem overwhelming".[132] In making this claim—and throughout the book—Costello weaves the home and the outside world together in a precarious narrative where the still life teeters

[128] Bryson, 103.
[129] Costello, *Planets on Tables*, 6.
[130] Costello, 7.
[131] Costello, 11.
[132] Costello, 11.

on the edge of a threshold where scales collapse and interior psychic states clash—or come close to the verge of clashing—against large-scale historical turbulences:

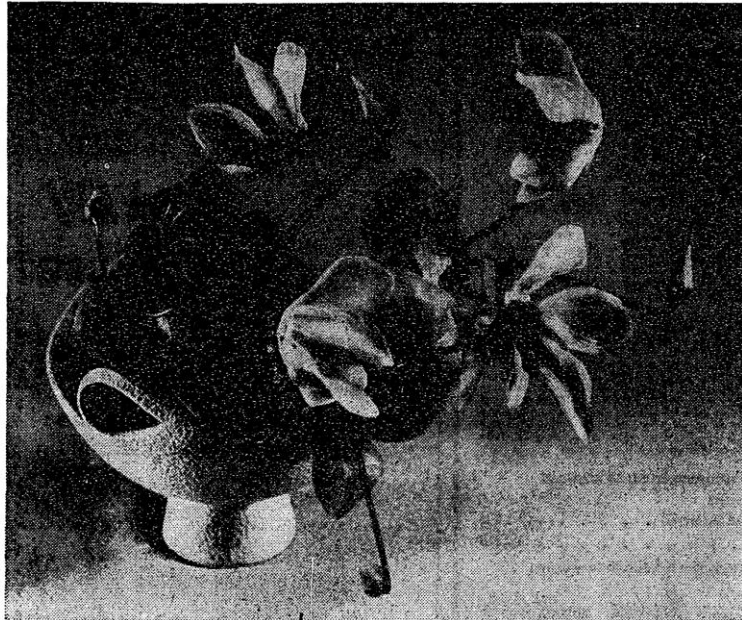
> The still life/landscape trope answers our need for intimacy and connection with an object within our immediate range and scale, and at the same time our desire to escape, to move out into deep space. The trope reminds us as well that our cultural organization of the material world is a continuum, an arrangement set against flux—something taken from or put into the landscape, something that has a human touch, even if only the touch of symbolism.[133]

I am drawn, of course, to scalar drama surrounding intimacy and the desire for connection. It is precisely in this vein that throughout the preceding pages I've argued that we must understand plastic flowers as objects which allow the normative, suburban, heterosexual postwar subject to achieve a sense of internal stability. Two minor differences are, however, worth noting in this context. First, unlike still life paintings (or poems invoking the genre), plastic-flowers-as-still-life are not explicit aesthetic objects. Yes, they are decorated, arranged, placed in carefully considered spaces within the home.

But their ontological function—contra any work of art—is to become overlooked. Even when they are there to be "shown off", they are meant to blend into a larger aesthetic background; not to steal the show. They are, almost by definition, backgrounded objects. When placed on the dinner table or next to the mantelpiece in the hallway, plastic flowers are not meant to evoke conversation the in same way that a lavish Dutch still life is. They are meant to be—at best—noted, commented on, and passed over. Relatedly, second, plastic flowers are not inscribed within a history of abundance or "man's" imperial chronos. On this point, I am in agreement with

[133] Costello, 176.

Costello. Fake flora become stabilizing objects that foreclose anxieties about depletion. They do not quite represent abundance.



LIFELIKE—Artificial cyclamen and foliage give the appearance of natural growth.

Figure 14 From "Arranging Artificial Flowers", *New York Times*. 1965.

Figure 15 From "Arranging Artificial Flowers", *New York Times*. 1965.

What, then, of the images I discussed and referred to at the top of this section? How do they fit into the narrative I have been building around stability in the face of depletion? I think that as in the cases of Sun City, *Still Life #30*, and the P&G advertisement, representations of serene plastic bouquets in domestic settings elevate interiority to a space that I referred to in passing above, as "outside the outside". This is my version of the containment operation spoken of in the quote above. In this instance, the fantasy of bourgeois luxury perhaps has less to do with a class aspiration than an aspiration toward the elimination of time from domesticity. The heterosexual machinery of normative reproduction sustains itself by eliminating time from the grounds of its operation because, by making the home appear immune to the instability of the world-at-large, it naturalizes the domestic order as eternal and timeless. The elimination of time might be ahistorical, but it is also done with an eye toward the colonization of time—if the American settler nuclear family becomes the ideal of what *all* families should be then it extricates itself from the flux of peculiar and specific problems like resource crisis; problems that will eventually be solved—in order to protect the family. It isn't inappropriate, in this context, to note that one of the most prominent objects featured in still life artwork and poetry is the flower.

Bryson points out that in Dutch still life, engagements with emergent styles of material plenitude often took the form of flower paintings. Many of these works—like Ambrosius Bosschaerts' *Bouquet in a Niche* (1618)—represent abundance in the form of vases overfilled with flowers. But, Bryson notes, "the abundance is, surprisingly, not that of nature".[134] Calling these flower paintings "non-pastoral" or "anti-pastoral",[135] he argues that Dutch still life didn't represent flowers that were wild or in season. Rather, they depicted a hodgepodge selection of flora that would occur throughout the year in one vase—an improbable timescale. In these works, Bryson

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[134] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 104.
[135] Bryson, 104.

reads a “refusal of natural time and of seasonality”, something that “breaks the bond between man and cycles of nature”.[136] Indeed, in his view, these paintings, even though they depict flowers, are less about flowers than the artist’s technical prowess which has the ability to “outstrip the natural world”.[137]

We find in such readings, certain historical antecedents to the plastic flower: the desire to overcome nature, to efface seasonal temporality, and to raise technique above wilderness. The main difference, as I have been stressing repeatedly, lies in the transition from abundance to depletion. Plastic flowers do, occasionally, foreground technique. But their role in facilitating a turn away from the temporality of the organic, material world has more to do with the sense of crisis around resources and population. By eliminating time from domesticity and by inscribing the home outside the outside, the postwar American order fixed its gaze on an expansive future—an overlook—uninfected by the temporality of matter. There can be little doubt that plastic’s supposed mutability—its ability to change shape but remain resilient—played no small part in elevating it to an ethereal realm beyond time. Postwar plastic utopianism, whether curtailed as in Meikle’s reading or boosterish as in others,[138] was significant in locating materiality outside temporality. This sense of unearthly timelessness became fairly ingrained within the governmental and cultural imaginary of plastic. So much so that *Resources for Freedom* positioned plastic as a viable substitute in an age of dwindling resources.

As Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis note, by some weird miracle, plastic became unstuck from its implication in the petrocultural complex. Thus, even when oil was deemed to be scarce and potentially finite, plastic retained a sense of infinite reproducibility.[139] What Boetzkes

[136] Bryson, 105.
[137] Bryson, 105.
[138] See: Phillips, “Plastics”.
[139] Boetzkes and Pendakis, “Visions of Eternity”.

and Pendakis identify as a split between the ontologies of oil and plastic could, however, also be seen as a mode of incorporation followed by disavowal. Within such a framework plastic and oil have never been separate. Rather, the production of plastic infinity was premised on its incorporation within the domestic sphere as a byproduct of oil. This is how a dynamic of incorporation and disavowal took hold in relation to plastic flowers: one where petrocultural finitude first formed the background to domestic activity and then—by giving the appearance of existing beyond natural or organic time—allowed the normative subject to overlook its presence within the home. As decorative objects, plastic flowers aestheticized the finite, rendering it limitless. What was auxiliary to massive petrocultural churning at the material level, assumed the form of faux bourgeois luxury. That which was extracted from the bowels of the earth transmogrified into colorful bouquets immune to the transitions of time.

What I wish to emphasize again and again however, is that these series of procedures, these consistent displacements, are not best understood within the grid of postwar capitalist futurity. It is imperative that we rewrite the domestic because continuously thinking of the home as an engine of mid-twentieth century capitalism reproduces a condition where mundane miniature worlds like those of plastic flowers (which do not fit the narrative of commodification) remain unremarked upon and unthought—even as they contain the keys to an entirely different understanding of the cultural economy of ascendant empire. I take the normative subjects discussed in this chapter to be entirely genuine in their love for fake floral decorations. I take their admiration for bright red washable roses and their dedication to patterns of organization at face value. They are not, in my view, dupes of a vast ideological machine.

At the same time, because I take their apparent desire for these weird objects seriously, I find I must ask why they do so. It is this question that has led me to suggest repeatedly that as an

overlooked, background presence plastic flora serve a therapeutic function, they offer a kind of stability (on both the material and psychological level) that the world out there could not in the period in question. Resilient, lasting, regenerative, cheap, durable—plastic flowers were everything nature *could* be but wasn't. Unstained by biological decay or manual labor, plastic flowers offered men and women in postwar America assurance that the world they were—quite literally—banking on[140] would always be there.

VI. Conclusion (on finitude)

If, in this chapter, I have tried to argue the case through historical, administrative media as well as weird, seemingly unimportant cultural objects, then this is because I think the latter offer a particular lens into the psychic consequences of living amidst scarcity. As miniature worlds that seek to contain and control external contingency, and as still life, plastic flowers are both indexical

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[140] Robert Collins has demonstrated how economic thought from the New Deal era to the 1990s was plagued by concerns about growth and scarcity. His work—which is partly aimed at correcting what he takes to be a lack of focus on the economy in studies of American culture—helpfully gestures to a longer history of financialization that, in some ways, backs up some of my observations about depletion as the permanent specter structuring fables of abundance. See: Collins, *More*. Some of the critical impulses of this chapter are also fundamentally indebted to Timothy Mitchell's recent work on "carbon democracy" and intersections between futurity and government. Mitchell makes a powerful argument for how "the economy" as a "thing" was assembled in the postwar context on the back of a geopolitical transition from coal to oil. This new conception of the economy was determined, in large part, by a basic disagreement between economists in the United States on how their discipline should interact with "the material world": "One side wanted economics to start from natural resources and flows of energy, the other to organize the discipline around the study of prices and flows of money. The battle was won by the second group, who created out of the measurement of money and prices a new object: the economy" (Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 131). It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to suggest that this shift from resource to price also indexes a concurrent optical shift from scarcity or depletion to abundance. In a recent essay Mitchell has fleshed out these dynamics further by focusing more explicitly on futurity as a technology of governance—especially in relation to schemes like insurance policy (Mitchell, "Economentality").

My spin on Mitchell is to infuse his materialist and sometimes Foucauldian reading of history with a dose of affective interiority. Which is another way of saying that, in a certain sense, plastic flowers are offer a lens for thinking through the psychosocial effects of "the future" becoming appended to mechanisms of price flow. Where Mitchell expertly lays out the technologies by which modern democracies were assembled and economized, I attend to the ways in which normative subjects within these democracies became affectively invested in the endurance of those technologies.

and metaphorical in the account I have provided. In the preceding pages I have tried to show that postwar American society was deeply structured by concerns surrounding the scarcity of natural resources. I have also argued that psychic life in this epoch, often referred to as "an age of anxiety", bore marks of fears about precarious civilizational futures. By mimicking a robust, permanent, and nonorganic version of nature, plastic flowers helped stabilize the internal worlds of those who, in this period, were considered the normative subjects of the American project. At the same time, I have also suggested that it would be counterproductive to think of the specific American case I have dramatized here as occurring in isolation from wider geopolitics. As my discussion of Ballard and the women's magazine *Chatelaine* show in different ways, settler colonialism as global form travels—along with its administrative machinery and attendant anxieties.

Between the end of the Second World War and the early-1970s, after the PMPC devised the idea of a total resource base to authorize a new extractive frontier that would propagate the American way of life, consciousness of planetary limits slowly began to catch on as commonsense among thinkers, policymakers, and government functionaries. Awareness of the planet's finite "carrying capacity", economist Kenneth Boulding's delineation of a restrictive "spaceman economy" where nothing ever goes away, Paul Ehrlich's explosive 1968 book *The Population Bomb*, and the paradigm-changing 1972 *Limits to Growth* report by the Club of Rome, all combined to clear some ground for discussions of a future plagued by depletion and natural resource scarcity (cf. footnote 40). Why, then, does it feel like nothing has changed? How does the United States still cling to the future as a horizon of optimistic expansion, powered by fracking, nuclear, and renewable energy? I will try to provide some answers to these questions by examining a period towards the end of the twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries in the chapters that

follow. There is, however, a deeper, conceptual problem that might be worth highlighting as I close my observations in this chapter.

Avital Ronell has helpfully suggested that the words "finitude" and "limits" have very different valences, attending to which could be instructive for understanding how "the more things change the more they stay the same" (as the saying goes). My interchangeable use of these two terms, finitude and limits, has blurred the distinctions Ronell makes and which I now want to disentangle. Extending an insight from philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, Ronell claims that the word "finite" already contains within it an orientation to infinity. It would be foolish "to imagine that *finitude* designates an absolute limit, if only because the concept of limit often reverts to the simplicity of linearization. An absolute limit—if it were possible to imagine such a thing—would be a boundary without an outside, without a foreign, neighboring land, an edge without an outer dimension".[141]

The proposition is enticing because it indexes how limits discourse can, paradoxically, feed narratives of limitlessness. Ronell opens some space for thinking about the ways in which awareness of limited resources, spaceman economies, and material exhaustion can spur dreams of fracking, Arctic drilling, and Mars colonization, without interrogating how societies must engage with scarcity. History punctures the idea that visualizing the planet as a whole makes us conscious of its fragility. Seeing limits and boundaries can also reveal the earth as a node in the cosmic interior, where every space is open for extraction. Limits discourse can, following Ronell, sustain ideas of a total interior where everything "we" can reach is "ours" for the taking. Not only do such fantasies rearticulate problematic distinctions between earth and outer space,[142] they also authorize the kinds of proto-imperial projects *Resources* envisioned in the early-1950s. As Ronell observes

[141] Ronell, *Finitude's Score*, 4–5.
[142] Olson and Messeri, "Beyond the Anthropocene".

elsewhere, such fantasies are underwritten by an addictive impulse where prostheses—oil, nuclear energy, and renewables—foreclose productive aspects of anxiety by proving the "hit" addicted subjects or economies need. Anxiousness is crucial for acting for the future.[143] Anxiety can force a subject to examine the conditions of its existence and work through them without taking recourse to the therapeutics of, in this case, extractive growth. Confronted by limits, Americans today—like the world at large—search for ways of maintaining the fictions of growth and prosperity that spurred the dreamworlds of postwar society and economy.

By contrast, for Ronell, finitude "is not about the end in terms of fulfillment or teleological accomplishment but about a suspension, a hiatus in meaning, reopened each time in the here and now, disappearing as it opens, exposing itself to something so unexpected and possibly *new* that it persistently eludes its own grasp".[144] In this view, finitude assumes an aporetic quality, hinting at moments of fatigue, futility, suspension, and non-closure which also contain the potential for something unexpected. Finitude requires openness to anxiety. Acting in and for the future is predicated on rupturing addictive cycles. Coming to terms with finitude might radically destabilize the present, wedging open the space for another construction of the future. By contrast, the frontier imaginary and its cultural artifacts, as I have argued, excelled at sacrificing the present to the promise of abundant futures-to-come. Futures, which, inevitably, never arrive; but in the service of which the present is rendered ever more precarious.

[143] Ronell, *Crack Wars*, 43–45.
[144] Ronell, *Finitude's Score*, 5.

CHAPTER TWO

Technostalgia (Electronic Frontiers and Temporal Unsettlement)

I. Introduction

Manzanar was a concentration camp in California's Owens Valley, located at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, where 110,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated from 1942 to 1945, during the Second World War. The name, "Manzanar" translates as "apple orchard" in Spanish—a fact worth keeping in mind since this chapter revolves around invocations of nature as a therapeutic defense against legacies of historical violence. The famous American photographer, perhaps the *most* famous American photographer, Ansel Adams, went to Manzanar and produced a body of work.[1] To set up the major concerns of this chapter, I want to consider briefly what Adams did during his time in the camp by consulting a few pages of Jonathan Spaulding's book, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape: A Biography*.

In the early 1940s, Adams—in search of new and meaningful projects—was commissioned by the government's Interior Department to produce photographic murals that would be placed in the agency's offices. Adams was excited because, as Spaulding writes: "The importance of nature in his own life had convinced him of its importance for society as a whole".[2] 1941, his biographer states, would mark a turning point in Adams' life. It was during this period that, travelling around the Southwest, he shot one of his most well-known photographs, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New*

[1] For a general account and overview, see: Hayashi, "Transfigured Patterns"; Phu, "The Spaces of Human Confinement". Phu, especially, offers a powerful critique of Adams' practice in Manzanar, comparing his vision to that of Dorothea Lange and Toyo Miyatake. Where Lange went for a hardened, almost urban aesthetic, according to Phu, Miyatake's photographs are an interesting counterpoint to Adams' because they survey the land in similar ways but with radically different outcomes. Both produced a corpus of pastoral works, but Miyatake's images strained to show how the land was an "imposition" on imprisoned bodies. Adams, by contrast, looked to Manzanar as an opportunity to extend the landscape genre—to sing praises of the outdoors and produce a spiritual image of pastoral space. Phu's insight is entirely relevant to the critique I offer of the photographs Adams took at the camp.

[2] Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape*, 182.

Mexico. Also around this time, Adams began to think of his work as having a potentially political impact. As America prepared to enter the Second World War, "a reinvigorated spirit of American mission, expanded now to an international scale"[3] started to determine the horizon of his desires as a photographer. His contributions to *Road to Victory*, a 1942 exhibition curated by Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, formed one experiment in this endeavor but left Adams unhappy for the exhibition's theatrical quality; something he believed sacrificed the integrity of photography as an artform. Itching for a project that would be socially relevant, Adams was offered, by his friend and Sierra Club member Ralph Merritt, a chance to document the lives of citizens interned in Manzanar.

Adams' work at the camp is significant to me because he was politically on this count, largely sympathetic towards those imprisoned: "He tried to stress that the prisoners at Manzanar were loyal American citizens … and that they were engaged in productive work at the camp—creating small businesses and farms, gaining confidence and a sense of self-sufficiency that, he felt, would enable them to successfully integrate with the general society after the war".[4] Two other photographers were there while Adams was present—Toyo Miyatake, who was incarcerated in the camp, and Dorothea Lange, another great social realist photographer of twentieth-century America. Miyatake's approach—including his interest in taking pictures of group activities and social life at the camp—were shaped by his implication within the imprisoned population. He was not taking pictures of the "other" so much as producing a language of selfhood and community. Lange for her part, "did not share Adams's view about the inspirational qualities of the site of the social benefits of life in the camps".[5] The views Adams held are, obviously, open to challenge for

[3] Spaulding, 189.
[4] Spaulding, 203.
[5] Spaulding, 205.

their investments in abstract ideals of nationhood, productivity, and work. What interests me more than a political critique of these liberal views is how they surface in the photographic works he produced during his time at Manzanar. Two images are especially worth considering in this regard, both landscape images [figures 16-17]: *Mount Williamson, the Sierra Nevada, from Manzanar, California* (1944), and *Winter Sunrise, the Sierra Nevada, from Lone Pine, California* (1944).

Figure 16 Ansel Adams, *Mount Williamson, the Sierra Nevada, from Manzanar, California*. Harvard Art Museum. 1944.

Figure 17 Ansel Adams, *Winter Sunrise, the Sierra Nevada, from Lone Pine, California.* Scripps College. 1944.

Both photographs are evacuated of human presence. In the former—what looks like a low-angle shot—the viewer is confront by rocks and boulders in the foreground and lead into splendid views of the mountains in the background, with clouds and radiant, almost Biblical, light breaking through the sky. The low-angle adds to the sublimity and majesty of the scene, giving the frame a kind of ethereal, spiritual quality. The path paved by rocks seems to even replicate the structure of a journey toward the light—toward enlightenment and fulfillment. The latter, one of Adams' best-known works and one he considered emblematic of "the role that wilderness played in American culture",[6] contains a strong play of light and dark, illumination and shadows, against the mountains looming behind. Writing of the "romantic and modernist styles" present in this image, Spaulding calls it a "unified and powerful statement".[7] Adams, he says, believed that "nature's 'enduring

[6] Spaulding, 207.
[7] Spaulding, 207.

beauty had strengthen[ed] the spirit of the people of Manzanar. He felt it could do the same for the entire nation".[8]

Consider this sentiment. On the one hand, it moves us from the sphere of nature to that of (an incarcerated) people to the level of the nation as a whole—signaling to registers of affective transferences between nature, history, and violence that I will spend much of this chapter dissecting. Here, nature stands in for spirituality, community, and renewal even as the material history of place is evacuated and erased. On the other hand, even as we consider this chain of transitions, it seems useful to hold on to Adams' description of nature's beauty as "enduring"—a not entirely innocent word. Part of his temptation to mythologize survival in Manzanar as an act of heroic stoicism by citizens who had been wronged is his allied temptation to elevate their suffering into a realm of enlightened nobility. We see this in many of the other images Adams took during his time at the camp: images where people are working on fields, playing sports, walking to school, and painting (among other things). An entire repertoire of what I will refer to in this chapter as "stockness"—generic, everyday activities that reinforce a sense of normality, of things going on as usual—is visible in these images. Stockness serves, visually, to normalize the camp.

To compare life in this manner with nature's capacity to "endure" is perhaps a little vulgar, perhaps a little innocent of the violence inherent in the equation being proposed. The problem with Adams' liberal objection to Manzanar—that here essentially good, hard-working American citizens were unjustly held prisoner—is that it underplays the architecture of coercion and imperial paranoia undergirding the operation. It produces Manzanar as error, exception, and deviation instead of norm; a part of the political apparatus of an imperial state. And then, this vision enlists nature in the service of an argument about the spirit of the people. Nature, smooths things over.

[8] Spaulding, 207.

Nature's enduring beauty mirrors the capacity of well-meaning people to go on enduring the things they are subject to. Nature becomes a vector for extending the nobility of the incarcerated to the population—the nation—as a whole. I draw attention to these sets of movements as a way of developing the argument that spaces subject to intensified forms of extractivism, value generation, and death are often the very same spaces that produce idyllic views of nature—agrarian ideals and wildernesses where American civilization seeks to forge itself anew.

This chapter is not *about* Ansel Adams. It is concerned with another iconic image that, in my reading, captured a certain spirit of a time—the end of the twentieth century, a time when one witnessed another twist in the progress report of the fabled American way of life. Connections, visual as well as psychic and historical, between this other image and Ansel Adams' time at Manzanar—suspended for now—will become clearer in the concluding pages of the chapter.

II. *Bliss* at the end of history

In 2014, news reports about an image called *Bliss*—Microsoft's default background on its XP operating system—began to proliferate [figure 18].[9] The company, it was revealed, was planning to replace the iconic photograph of rolling green hills against resplendent blue clouds in the background, with a different image during its next system upgrade. Suddenly, people were explicitly interested in the photograph they had spent so much time with, either in conscious contemplation or as background presence. In the news, *Bliss* was habitually referred to as the "most viewed photograph in the entire world".[10]

[9] Hachman, "The Story of the Windows XP 'Bliss' Desktop Theme—and What It Looks like Today"; Luckerson, "Meet the Guy Who Took the Most Famous Desktop Photo of All Time"; Newman, "The Most Famous Desktop Wallpaper Ever Is a Real, Unaltered Photo".
[10] Sweeney, "Say Goodbye to 'Bliss.'"

Figure 18 Charles O'Rear, *Bliss*. Corbis. 1996.

The circumstances in which the image had been captured were narrated repeatedly once the media got hold of the photographer, Charles O'Rear, who claimed he couldn't "get away from it. It's everywhere". Adding: "Even in a place like North Korea … there's the Microsoft picture".[11] For such a well-known photograph, the date of its origin lies mired in confusion. Depending on which reports one reads, *Bliss* is dated to 1996, 1998, and 2002. On balance, however, it seems safe to assume that O'Rear shot the scene in the mid-to-late-1990s (1996, according to some precise accounts), on the Napa-Sonoma county line when he was driving through Highway 121 after visiting Daphne, his wife—who he was, at the time, "courting".[12]

Having shot it, O'Rear deposited the image in a stock photo archive, Corbis, owned by Microsoft founder Bill Gates. At some point, the company called and informed him that they "were looking for a photo that would illustrate the philosophy of their 2002 operating system",[13] and had chosen *Bliss*. Having earned a "low six figures" from Microsoft for the image, O'Rear found it

[11] Sweeney.
[12] Sweeney.
[13] Sweeney.

impossible to deliver because no company would consent to transport it. Eventually, Microsoft bought him a ticket to fly out to the company's headquarters and deliver *Bliss* in person. When *The Napa Valley Register* published this story, they asked the photographer a question many others hadn't: what is it about vineyards that fascinates a man who has clicked pictures of thousands of things and scenes around the world? "They're beautiful, and I love the outdoors", he responds in the story. Then: "They have strong design patterns. They're the most organized crop in America. I come from a rural area so I'm familiar with agricultural and rural settings".[14]

Bliss and the media narrative around it illustrate aptly some of the claims advanced in the present chapter. To begin with, several points of intersection are worth noting just from the paragraphs above: that *Bliss* was produced, according to O'Rear, as a result of his fortuitous courtship ritual (it is what sent him on that road on the day in question); that the beauty of the image, its appeal, draws from its composition and emptiness (produced by regimes of deep control and organization in agriculture); that the image was kept in a stock photography archive and derives its distributional power from it (buffered, in no small part, by Bill Gates); and finally, that the photograph was taken in the mid-to-late-1990s (a moment when America discovered yet another frontier in the form of the internet). My wager is that none of these things are necessarily coincidental. Or, to the extent that they are, they are still underwritten by a historical logic that requires disentangling. In the process of undertaking such disentangling I will, circle back towards the end, to Ansel Adams and to his peculiar intersections with the history fleshed out below.

It is worth remembering, in this context, that the 1990s were a peculiar time in American—and indeed global—history. A time that sometimes appears to be evacuated of historicity and suspended between other events of world-historical significance: the Cold War on the one hand,

[14] Sweeney.

and the War on Terror on the other.[15] However, I want to suggest that this odd sense of the suspension of temporality at the end of the putative "American century" is precisely what characterizes the historical temperature of the decade in question. Following famous declarations about the end of history, the postmodern moment, and eternal triumphalism surrounding visions of liberal democratic futures in times to come, one could suddenly, in this time, begin to imagine an "exit" from history—one that rendered the temporal coordinates of past, present, and future precarious.

Where critics like Fredric Jameson diagnosed a "nostalgia for the present", historians and social scientists became increasingly preoccupied with questions of trauma and memory. Commenting on how these tendencies accelerated from the 1980s and finally came to a boil in the post-Cold War period, Geoff Eley suggests that "representations of the past, personal and collective, private and public, commercial and uplifting become both therapy and distraction, a source of familiarity and predictability, even as the actual ground of the present ceases to be reliable. Such nostalgia spells the desire for holding on to the familiar, for fixing and retaining the lineaments of worlds disconcertingly in motion, of landmarks that are disappearing and securities that are unsettled".[16] The connections Eley makes between therapy, distraction, and nostalgia in a temporally unsettled moment are of direct relevance to my concerns here.

It is worth considering also, historian and theorist David Scott's work on the aftermath of the Grenada revolution in 1983 to get a better sense of what this temporal conjuncture looked like.

[15] We might note, tangentially, a series of near-contemporaneous academic reflections on this moment, delving into which in detail is beyond the scope of the present chapter. I am thinking, primarily, of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's influential book, *Empire*, published in 2000, as a node around which many discussions of post-historicity, sovereignty, reconfigurations of capitalism, and other such questions unfolded. For a representative sample of these debates—oscillating in the broad realm of matters that do concern me in the pages that follow—see: Hardt and Negri, *Empire*; Dean and Passavant, *Empire's New Clothes*; Bull, "You Can't Build a New Society with a Stanley Knife"; Steinmetz, "The State of Emergency and the Revival of American Imperialism".

[16] Eley, "The Past Under Erasure?", 556.

Focusing on that event, Scott argues that the failure of postcolonial and socialist revolutions on the one hand, and the putative victory of liberal democracy on the other, created a sense of "the present as ruined time".[17] Also gesturing to the preoccupation with memory and trauma, he suggests that "curiously, it is precisely when the future has *ceased* to be a source of longing and anticipation that the past has become such a densely animated object of enchantment".[18] While at one point of time, the past was considered something to be "overcome" and superseded, "*now*, by contrast, the past has loosed itself from the future and acquired a certain quasi-autonomy; far from being dependent upon any other time, it seems now to exist for its own sake, as a radiant source of wisdom and truth".[19] Of course this does not mean that an individual or society's relation to the past is uncomplicated. If nostalgia and memorialization occupy one end of the spectrum in how societies engage the past, then trauma situates itself at the other. As a result, the past is also a "wound that will not heal. What the past produces now are inward, psychic harms and injuries to an individual sense of self and a collective sense of identity".[20]

With such insights in mind—the rendering precarious of temporal experience and its psychic effects—in my account, the technological and the nostalgic come together to facilitate one kind of narrative about the suspension of time, or the precarity of a present that has come unstuck from past and future. In the following pages I will argue technological frontierism turned backward to a nostalgic, idealized past—to a time "prior"—to authorize technological futures. I will suggest also, that eternal, timeless images of nature played a crucial part in the workings of technostalgia. With these broad, interconnected claims in mind, I will situate *Bliss* in the context of the 1990s as a historical moment when coordinates of temporality and historical progress became unsettled.

[17] Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 12.
[18] Scott, 13.
[19] Scott, 13. Emphasis in original.
[20] Scott, 13.

The chapter will locate *Bliss* both within history and geography, offering the possibility it had—has—timeless and apparently universal appeal because, on the one hand, it is implicated in the nostalgic politics of techno-futurity, and on the other, it is territorially bound to landscapes defined by capitalist intensification. By reading *Bliss* as an artefact of settler nostalgia and agribusiness, I also show how at the very moment when political theorists proclaimed the end of history and the limitless expansion of liberal democracy, longstanding ideals of agrarian idyll and wilderness became the unconscious ground on which these visions of prosperous futures were erected. In other words, the subject that claimed to have transcended history was, in fact, still very much confined by it.

The rhetoric of "technological frontiers" accompanying many discussions surrounding the internet at the time was, in this sense, an attempt to look backward to a period of settler expansion in the hopes that it might offer some clues about the future in this moment of unsettlement.[21] The production of electronic frontiers was both therapeutic and fantastical: they allowed the normative subjects of the late-twentieth-century American project to occupy an orientation toward the future while eliding any acknowledgement that the very fact of futurity is premised on the continuation of temporality and historicity. Stock images like *Bliss*, my discussion will show, facilitated this therapeutic flight from the trauma caused by having to inhabit unsettled temporalities.

But where did this idea of time's unsettlement emerge from? That one had reached a certain "end of history" was, as is well-known today, forcefully articulated by Francis Fukuyama, first in an article[22] and then a book.[23] Positing that the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet

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[21] Needless to say, I am not suggesting that history *actually* ended; only that one of the major fallouts of the temporal ruptures occurring in this moment was the sense that one's individual and social relation to past, present, and future was undergoing dramatic transformation—as my discussion of Eley and Scott indicates.
[22] Fukuyama, "The End of History?"
[23] Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

Union had removed all obstacles from the path of liberal democracy as the true horizon of the human experiment, Fukuyama championed a coming future where at least some kinds of conflict would cease to define social experience. He imagined the economic fallout of the end of history in terms of a "technologically driven capitalism" which would be "free of internal contradictions".[24] Based on such comments, Annie McClanahan points out that Fukuyama was not only responding to the collapse of a rival superpower but also to economic deindustrialization, in what was a "contradictory interplay between the idea of an end of history and the fantasy of a new post-material economy driven by the 'cumulative and endless acquisition of knowledge'".[25]

In line with this sentiment and seeing the 1990s as a moment suspended between two states of conflict, Samuel Cohen sharply announces that it looks like "an interwar decade".[26] He also demonstrates—again in keeping with McClanahan's insistence on the end of history and deindustrialization as signs of a *historical* turn in the trajectory of capitalism—how the 1990s was preoccupied with the past. As Fukuyama, Ronald Reagan, George HW Bush, and others lauded America's capacity to overcome its enemies, their rhetoric was subtended by an appeal to the past, to a nostalgic history "emphasizing American victory from the Indian wars on …"[27] As culture "throughout the 1990s exhibited a fascination with history", the decade "took on a markedly retrospective quality".[28] This quality was also—as some commentators point out—immediately disavowed in the euphoria of having overcome or transcended history altogether.

From another angle, critics like Fredric Jameson took stock of postmodernism in historical terms. Or, put another way, they took postmodernism to task for failing to adequately acknowledge

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[24] Quoted in McClanahan, "Investing in the Future", 79.
[25] McClanahan, 80.
[26] Cohen, *After the End of History*, 4.
[27] Cohen, 7.
[28] Cohen, 10.

its historicity.[29] With multiculturalism becoming a mantra of inclusive liberalism, it appeared that protracted phases of ideological contestation were perhaps over. While Marxists like Jameson had one kind of response to that development, more conservative scholars offered other interpretations. In *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Walter Benn Michaels, for instance, said that the process of globalization had "made it easier to detach both the phenomenon itself and especially the opposition to it … from any political ideas and attach them instead to an array of more or less attractively contesting or resisting bodies—ones that a surprisingly wide array of writers will urge us to 'put on the line'".[30] Michaels' snarky take on the turn of events in the post-Cold War world offers a caricature of the post-Marxist left and internal critics of American policy. This leads him to characterize Leslie Marmon Silko's work—especially her "enthusiastically multiculturalist *Almanac of the Dead*"[31]—as being "committed to a more or less straightforward ethnonationalism".[32] A misreading (at best) of this magnitude is unsurprising given how conscious Michaels is of another formative text framing popular understandings of the 1990s: the political scientist Samuel Huntington's 1993 essay on the clash of civilizations.[33]

What Huntington's text, Michaels' gross misrepresentation of Silko and the left, and his comments on historian Arthur Schlesinger's 1991 book, *The Disuniting of America*, reveal is how deeply the "posthistorical" was infused by epochal anxiousness. Michaels sees Schlesinger as the establishment's answer to Silko, writing that "the ideological victory of the West had made possible 'confrontations' that were themselves no longer ideological and that were just as likely to take place in the first and second worlds as in the third".[34] *The Disuniting of America* expressed

[29] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.
[30] Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 20.
[31] Michaels, 21.
[32] Michaels, 24.
[33] Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?"
[34] Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 21.

concerns about what, "without capitalism (since everybody was a capitalist now), would hold the United States together".[35] If Silko defends a form of insurrectionist identitarian "ethnonationalism" that has become unmoored from Cold War Marxism, then Schlesinger worries precisely about the rise of such identitarian movements under the cover of multiculturalism. Where Silko upholds an order after history—an order where ideological struggle is no longer relevant—Schlesinger is anxious about the nature of order after ideology. He fears that in the absence of opposing anchors of the kind the Soviet Union and the United States supplied for many decades, the Western world would devolve into an image of the corrupt, uncontrollable Third World ungoverned by ideology.

All of which is to say: first, that the 1990s was a decade, which, even in trying to surpass historicity, was mired in it; and second, it was a decade rife with the anxiety only victors can feel. Contrary to the impulse one might have to relegate American ascendancy in a post-Soviet world to the archives of euphoria and triumphalism, proliferating worries about a new post-ideological order and governance through multicultural toleration show how the end of the Cold War did not in fact spell stability, security, and visions of a friction free future where capitalism would flourish. Caught between the end of a long, protracted geopolitical conflict and the oncoming never-ending global conflicts in a post-September 11 world, the optimism of these years was built on repression, forgetting, and erasure. If techno-futurity and the communications revolution promised what on the surface looked like a pleasant version of things to come, then, as I will show here, it is important to remember how deeply its utopian rhetoric was anchored in the past. Indeed "the past"—the very figuration the end of history ought to have dispensed with—haunted the present. And it is here, in my view, that nostalgia emerged as a lever to mediate the settler subject's fantasies of futurity sans historicity.[36] Images of wilderness, agrarian idyll, and frontierism furnished the sorts of stabilizing

[35] Michaels, 21.
[36] On the modernity of nostalgia, see: Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

mechanisms this subject needed to sustain her orientation to the future. *Bliss* is but one fragment of that archive.

Now, to go about substantiating these arguments, the schema this chapter follows looks a bit like this: I outline, in the next section, the persistence of wilderness ideals and myths of agrarian idylls as a cornerstone of the American psyche. Through a discussion of how such ideals and myths take hold precisely when—in the case of agrarian lands as well as national parks—"civilization" permeates the social fabric as a whole, I argue that the fantasy of untouched, natural space sustains projects oriented to the future. The section then details the manner in which nostalgic wilderness rhetoric provided a framework for the particular shape of technological futurity in the 1990s, where writers constantly invoked ideas of "community", "frontiers", and "the Wild West" to make a case for the internet. That such forward-looking technological talk relied on nostalgic tropes of settler expansion is not incidental but central to the politics of techno-optimism after the end of history. This literature encapsulates the genre of administrative media I am concerned with in this chapter.

Section IV applies these insights to an in-depth reading of one specific expression of corporate administration: a 1996 text by Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, called *The Road Ahead*. Paying attention to the metaphors he uses, I argue that Gates' version of a hi-tech future occurs through the forgetting—or repression—of infrastructure and through the figuration of people like himself as spiritual equivalents of nineteenth-century pioneers traversing the American West. In section V, I descend to the region of *Bliss* itself. The first part of this section interprets the image in relation to wilderness ideals and histories of agrarian labor and ecology in California, showing how timelessness is made manifest in landscapes that are anything but exterior to or outside anthropogenic intervention. The second part of this section tackles stockness as a genre, going over the dimensions of the visual content industry and its effort to distribute "sameness" across

the globe through generic photographs. I discuss the visual logics of stockness alongside images by Ansel Adams, whose photographic corpus exists in the same image bank where Charles O'Rear's *Bliss* is hosted. Finally, section VI complicates what we might make of stockness by suggesting that the generic might also offer possibilities of thinking and looking otherwise—of attending to what the eye overlooks.

III. Wilderness and technology in an American frame

Wilderness, agrarian idyll, and the national psyche

As many commentators have pointed out, the wilderness ideal has had a long and productive life in the American imaginary. It is useful, in beginning, to understand how this ideal was reconfigured towards the of the twentieth century, to take stock of the larger histories within which that period is contained.[37] In an essay published in 1977, political theorist Michel Rogin offered that some clues about the mobilization of the wilderness trope (or nature more generally) can be found in the literary tradition, where "major actions take place not in society but in nature, and racial division and emotional intensity replace social interdependence".[38] In these texts—spanning the works of authors as disparate as Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Norman Mailer—"the

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[37] I would be remiss to launch into this history of the wilderness and agrarian idyll in the American imaginary without mentioning an obvious text that frames much of the debate on this terrain, but which I don't directly make mention of in the text above: Leo Marx's 1964 publication, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Marx's legacy is substantial and hard to overstate, both in the field of cultural theory and ecocriticism. If one of his central contentions in the book was that the "pastoral ideal" in America was impacted and transformed by its encounter with massive forces of industrialization, then that insight endures in many of the texts I discuss below. Steeped in a certain kind of socialism, Marx—inspired also by Raymond Williams' take on the politics of pastoralism—rejected a backward-looking nostalgic ideal of the pastoral in favor of something more industrial. In a later reflection (published in 2008), on "the idea of nature in America", Marx revisited some of these questions in light of critiques proclaiming the "end" or "death" of nature launched by activists like Bill McKibben and feminist theorists like Carolyn Merchant. For a sense of the vicissitudes of this history, see: Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*; Marx, "The Idea of Nature in America"; Robinson, "The Ruined Garden at Half a Century"; Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*; Williams, "Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral".

[38] Rogin, "Nature as Politics and Nature as Romance in America", 6.

asocial innocent, searching for a lost pastoral idyll, encounters despair, nightmare, and wilderness apocalypse. Here America's special destiny is fulfilled in nature".[39] The literary imagination, Rogin suggests, didn't turn to the founding fathers as the spiritual fountainheads of American civilization, but to "the Indian fighters, pioneers, and settlers continuously creating 'the rebirth of American society' from virgin land".[40]

The deeper drama Rogin attempts to uncover in the essay has to do with investments in the sentimental rendering of rural life—even by "professionalized agrarian leaders"[41]—in a historical moment when agribusiness was steadily replacing pastoral idylls with new forms of stratification in the countryside. This, ultimately, is the question framing his inquiry: "How does the land figure, then, in the development of a distinctive set of American political images?"[42] Searching for an answer, as he delves into the archives of political theory and philosophy via the writings of Marx (Karl not Leo) and Benjamin Franklin, Rogin naturally invokes both the image of the frontier and of the West as propelling such idealizations of expansive rural, natural life as places "outside" civilization. Where the pastoral draws on sentimentalized images of natural harmony, the frontier-West turns more to images of savage wilderness. However, both "heal the split between physical, productive bourgeois and ideal citizen … Both ideals liberate the white male in agrarian space from social conflict in historical time. Both picture regression to a simple, presocial state".[43]

Ultimately, pastoralism is useful for activating nostalgic politics—yearnings for a bygone time when things might not only have seemed to be simpler, but when the individual's capacity for regeneration in an unexplored frontier allowed him (always him) to maintain optimism for the

[39] Rogin, 6.
[40] Rogin, 8.
[41] Rogin, 9.
[42] Rogin, 11.
[43] Rogin, 16–17.

future. It is not at all insignificant that these dramas unfolded against the backdrop of capitalist intensification, the marketization of rural life, and the extension of new sorts of social hierarchies into spaces produced as beyond the reach of markets. In fact, Rogin's juxtaposition of these developments shows how the longing for freedom in nature functioned as a therapeutic release from the trauma of inhabiting a historical time defined by progress. For white subjects, pastoral and wilderness ideals furnished utopian future-spaces that could be activated through a politics of nostalgia; spaces where the violence of extermination, colonization, and capitalist consolidation were easily relegated to the background of consciousness.

I look in such detail at a potentially "outdated" text from the 1970s because I think Rogin articulates the material and psychic stakes of nostalgia particularly well. The specter floating in the margins of his own text was the figure of Ronald Regan, then charting his path up the political ladder. This essay, which would later be collected in Rogin's perceptive volume on Reagan,[44] is, therefore, important not only as a diagnosis of white nostalgia but also a precursor to the shape such nostalgia would take in the final decade of the previous century when an older phase period of capitalist expansion gave way to new fantasies of frontier expansion authored under the sign of the information superhighway. His essay also shows how the pastoral and the wild—though not the same—are often co-constitutive of frontier imaginaries. Finally, Rogin's insights are uncannily prescient from the perspective of environmental politics, anticipating a landmark deconstruction of the wilderness in 1996 by William Cronon and a more recent work in that tradition by Jedediah Purdy in 2015.

Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature"[45] is a field-defining publication. In the essay, he takes apart the American idealization of the wilderness

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[44] Rogin, *Ronald Reagan The Movie*.
[45] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness".

as a place uncontaminated by civilization. Instead, Cronon meticulously shows that the wilderness is a thoroughly anthropogenic construct. By suppressing human complicity in its production, he argues "we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires".[46] Historically, the wilderness—at least in an American context—has been configured either under the heading of the sublime or that of the frontier. For Cronon, this means that modern environmentalism is birthed as the progeny of romanticism on the one hand, and "post-frontier ideology" on the other.[47] The sublime is of less immediate importance to the canvas I am painting on here, so for the moment I will sketch Cronon's thesis about frontiers, which, I hope it will be evident, echo Rogin's claims.

Of course, as with any commentary on frontier ideology in the United States, Cronon invokes Turner and the claim that Westward expansion once offered settlers a fantasy of "national renewal". This, as well as Turner's attendant claim that the frontier age was passing, are well-known. Cronon's move in the essay is to juxtapose ascendant nostalgia surrounding the frontier to preservationist impulses. Thus: "It is no accident that the movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas began to gain real momentum at precisely the time that laments about the passing frontier reached their peak. To protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin".[48] In addition to nostalgia, in Cronon's reading, the frontier-myth was also grounded in class politics. Wilderness preservation became the mantra of men hailing from elite backgrounds who—having never labored on land in their lives—held fast to an idealized notion of unworked, pristine territory. "Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists", Cronon writes, adding: "Country people generally know far too much about

[46] Cronon, 7.
[47] Cronon, 10.
[48] Cronon, 13.

working the land to regard *un*worked land as their ideal".[49] The series of historical formations—elite versus poor—and erasures—the creation of public lands through Native removals and extermination—that Cronon points to are worth keeping in mind as I slow commence my journey toward *Bliss*.

Some of Cronon's remarks are usefully updated in Jedediah Purdy's more recent work, where he locates the politics of wilderness as one component of the different ways in which America has articulated its relationship to nature over time. In *After Nature: Politics for the Anthropocene*, he outlines four visions of nature that have historically underpinned such articulations: providential, romantic, utilitarian, and ecological. In the providential vision, human labor recuperates value from nature, whereas in the romantic view, natural formations are spiritual presences complementing the human endeavor—a thought that maps onto the sublime in Cronon's sense. The utilitarian perspective conceives of natural domain as a resource that requires proper management, while in the ecological view nature is a vast network of interconnected systems. Although one account has been dominant over another at different points of time, Purdy usefully points out that these four visions also coexist,[50] especially today.

A detailed summary of each position is less relevant here than Purdy's comments on the romantic view (tinged with elements of the providential)—the contortions of which lay out quite well some contradictions that I will claim persist into the late-twentieth-century. Writing about public wild lands as producing a "cultural practice of aesthetics and spirituality", he gestures to wilderness advocates who, from the 1920s onward, "made wildness a virtue, insisting that the solitude of wild places edifyingly revealed a human being's smallness and dependence on the vast

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[49] Cronon, 15.
[50] Purdy, *After Nature*, 8.

and ancient natural world".[51] These efforts came to fruition in 1964 when the Wilderness Act was passed; an Act that today protects over 107 million acres of public land from development. The romanticism of wilderness ideology was, Purdy argues, supported by the providential notion that the entirety of the American continent was for the taking through the labor of white settlers. As a result, "even as it shut out the first peoples of the continent, the providential view also screened out ecological nuance, such as the dry land, swamps, and inconvenient species that did not fit easily into the agenda of development".[52]

What I want to tease out from all these accounts—Rogin's, Cronon's, and Purdy's—is the deep entwinement of aesthetics with the politics of both futurity and nostalgia. For the problem of the wilderness, as each argument makes at least implicitly clear, is also one of historical erasure. The search for individual and natural renewal in the world "out there", the projection of wild areas as spaces uncontaminated by modernity, and the repression of memories of foundational violence upon which protectionist impulses towards public lands are propped up—these tropes are integral to an American identity rooted in frontierism and expansion. Hence, Purdy's claim that the four ideologies he outlines often coexist must be taken seriously. Hence, Rogin's attention to the idyllic as a response to agrarian capitalism is worth remembering. And hence, Cronon's emphasis on the wilderness as a space of (psychic) fantasy and collective stabilization is useful to hold on to. And nowhere are these lines of confluence—between entrepreneurial capitalism, technological frontierism, psychic stability, and the endurance of the nature-wilderness-ideal—illustrated better than in the collective mythology of national parks. So, turning to those as a specific site where the nature-ideal helps further ground my intervention.

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[51] Purdy, 25.
[52] Purdy, 27.

Margaret Grebowicz's brief intervention in *The National Park to Come* helps us get a better handle on the psychic and aesthetic dimensions of the appeal of wilderness on a register allied to but also different from that of Cronon and others. Writing that national parks establish a "continuity between domesticity and wilderness"[53] she discusses how common photographic practice in these spaces strains to "exclude the other cars, and indeed any signs of other people".[54] Pictures taken in national parks seldom represent either the roads that bring people to the spaces or "maintenance buildings, toilets, water fountains, trails, handrails, and anything else that recalls the infrastructure which makes our visit leisurely and, in some places, possible at all …"[55] Grebowicz's main claim, one which is of immense relevance to me, is that national parks are theaters for the enactment of the "emotions surrounding collectivity".[56] Further, identifying parks as extensions of commercial space, she points out that in the early-twentieth-century, Freud had suggested that American nature reserves exemplified "what happens in the formation of fantasy, a realm split off from reality and governed entirely by the pleasure principle".[57] Although, in commonsensical understanding, we might often think of conservationists and developers are taking up cudgels against each other in an effort to carve out a space where the other cannot encroach, the two are locked in a dance where each needs the other to maintain itself.

It would be erroneous to reduce Grebowicz's claim here to Cronon's—that wilderness is a construct or convenient fiction. She makes a stronger intervention that cuts to the heart of the matter I've been circling around in preceding pages: "Nature not only becomes a useful locus for the democratic ideal; it allows us to imagine that democracy is not a form of modern politics, but

[53] Grebowicz, *The National Park to Come*, 6.
[54] Grebowicz, 9.
[55] Grebowicz, 9.
[56] Grebowicz, 15.
[57] Grebowicz, 20.

some original human state".[58] There is, in this framing of the problem, a fantasy of origin wrapped up in the wilderness-idyll nature ideal, where discovery—of self, collectivity, nation—occurs in a space "out there"—a space simultaneously prior to self, collectivity, nation, *and* constitutive of it. Thus parks "become spaces in which natural human experience is solitary and atomistic, and in which politics disappears because it simply 'is' the transparent truth of what the people—*at once collective and absent*—want. … this collective 'we' are natural, not political".[59] Lauren Berlant's writing on "national fantasy" as a mode of regulating personal as well as collective psychic states also speaks powerfully to this point.[60] If the wilderness is a "collective hallucination",[61] then the words of a park ranger and crime writer featured in a film Grebowicz discusses, captures the basics of this mechanism quite poetically: "I think we require national parks for our psychic stability and sanity. We need national parks because we psychologically need to have a place to go when we can't be 'here' anymore".[62]

Attentive to the settler colonial history of national parks, Grebowicz offers a strong critique of how this collective mythology of nature, democracy, and national origins occurs after erasing the violence inherent to the foundation of wildernesses.[63] I would add, in keeping with the spirit of her text, that the two phenomena—the enjoyment of nature and the erasure of settler violence—are ontologically intertwined. I mean this in Jodi Byrd's sense of the Indian being the paradigmatic, structuring condition for the unfolding of settle nationhood.[64] But I also mean this in the sense that

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[58] Grebowicz, 41.
[59] Grebowicz, 25.
[60] Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*.
[61] Grebowicz, *The National Park to Come*, 30.
[62] Grebowicz, 31.
[63] Grebowicz, 11–14.
[64] Byrd writes: "As I use the term here, transit as a concept suggests the multiple subjectivities and subjugations put into motion and made to move through notions of injury, grievance, and grievability as the United States deploys a paradigmatic Indianness to facilitate its imperial desires. This paradigm of Indianness that functions as the transit of U.S. empire arises from how the United States was constituted from the start, not just in the scientific racisms and territorial mappings inaugurated through Enlightenment voyages for knowledge, but in the very constitutionality that produced the nation". Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, xxi.

the fantasy of "our" being a natural collectivity percolates from the scale of the nation to intimate realms of inhabitation and experience. The claim above—that we "psychologically need to have a place to go when we can't be 'here' anymore"—is not very different from the claims made by the retired residents of Sun City I discussed in the previous chapter. There, people hoped to escape the "dirt" and "lawlessness" of mid-sixties America by retreating into an oasis of artificiality where fantasies of toleration could take hold in the absence of racial others. Here, the park serves a similar function, providing an escape from "here" and a retreat into "nature"—as if the very thing one is escaping didn't in fact create the conditions for that escape. The perversity of this fantasy is exactly that: the notion that one can escape the heaviness of "here" by going "there" and regaining stability. Psychic stability in wildernesses can occur only when the foundational history of that wilderness has been cleared, repressed, and wiped from the archives of national memory. The claim here is, I think, much stronger than a mere gesture towards the historicization of wilderness as "man"-made. It is a claim that the very notion of national fantasy requires both the occurrence and repression of settler violence—against lands and peoples.[65]

Wild nostalgia on technological frontiers

In his detailed assessment of the place and politics of "wilderness" in American environmentalism, James Morton Turner writes about "something odd" occurring in the 1990s, when "the Wilderness Society and Sierra Club staffers found themselves increasingly out of the loop".[66] These stalwart organizations' grips on advocacy for public land was threatened, in part, by the rise of new forms

[65] Consider here, Byrd's sharp critique of Lauren Berlant's reading of the structure of what she calls "cruel optimism" in Geoff Ryman's novel, *Was*. She points out that Berlant is oblivious of the manner in which, in the novel, the figure of the Indian becomes the source of affective attachment through which national fantasy sustains itself. She argues that Berlant's analysis of the central character, Dorothy's, optimistic attachment, while attentive to the dynamics of national coherence, overlooks entirely the attachment the character has to the Indian as a figuration of something like a protective wall for the normative subject. See: Byrd, 34–37.
[66] Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 323.

of communication (fax and email) that allowed local activists and advocates to connect with each other without the mediation of larger structures. Realizing that "new technology had leveled the organizational playing field", these groups "scrambled to maintain their leadership"[67] in the field. The new strategies evolved by the Wilderness Society and Sierra Club are of less immediate importance, except to note their main feature: a scaling up of the dedication to protect something called "the wildness" in the service of the public. Where prior to this period, many conservationist efforts had been more flexible, the 1990s inaugurated a new phase of zealous protectionism. At the same time, the 1990s also laid the groundwork for new discord over the very meaning of the term "wilderness".

A 1989 polemic by Indian environmental historian Ramachandra Guha saw him take aim the ways in which Western—particularly American—environmentalism had been evolving since the 1970s. Guha's essay was largely a critique of deep ecology, of which wilderness preservation was a part. In essence, he pointed out that the drive to save, conserve, or restore wilderness areas ended up valuing nonhuman life (especially the lives of rich, white people) over the lives of those who lived in areas supposedly despoiling the wild.[68] Cronon's critique of wilderness discussed above also found its way into the public sphere a few years later. And he was clearly not alone. Geographer William Denevan said that idealizations of pristine nature played into "the myth of 1492".[69] Scientists began to dispute the very idea of the wilderness, and philosophers like Baird Callicott suggested that the human/nature divide was an artificial one. Some critics argued that the wilderness ideal was "ethnocentric" since what was now considered wild land had once been home to Native Americans as well as rural communities. Others argued—perhaps in keeping with some

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[67] Turner, 324.
[68] Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation".
[69] Quoted in Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 326.

of Guha's concerns—that a focus on wilderness tended to ignore the very real, pressing problems faced by racial and ethnic minorities.[70] While Turner's careful and detailed history of this moment leads him to provide a rich account of how the wilderness-concept wound its way through the political, economic, and cultural system in the coming years, I am, at this point, going to take leave off that history to consider a development Turner hints at as "something odd" without much elaboration: the internet and the rise of novel technological media.

Against this backdrop, this section engages the ways in which, in the 1990s, rhetoric about the internet drew on settler colonial tropes of expansion, and further, how these tropes hewed close to certain imaginaries of nature located in wilderness discourse. Both strands come together—fortuitously for my purposes—in a 1995 book by Microsoft founder Bill Gates, on which I spend some time below. But lest one think Gates was an anomaly, it is well worth remembering the larger discursive universe he was a part of. Consider, then, a slightly more recent publication (from 2010), by Michael Fertik and David Thompson, revealingly titled *Wild West 2.0: How to Protect and Restore Your Online Reputation on the Untamed Social Frontier*. With chapter headings like "Welcome to the New Digital Frontier" and "The Internet is the New Wild West", the book wears its claims on its sleeve. The first pages bear out the metaphor in even more obvious and tantalizing detail:

> The Internet today resembles the Old West of American history. Like the Old West, the Internet is rich with opportunity and hope, but it is also still a rough-and-tumble place with many hidden dangers. There is a chance for individuals to express themselves or strike it rich, but the unprepared also face immense dangers. And, just like in the Old West, law enforcement is weak, and traditional society has not yet

[70] Turner, 327–29.

> adapted to the strange new technology, social norms, and culture of the Internet. In short, the Internet is a new digital frontier that echoes the Wild West of American history. Call it "Wild West 2.0". … Just like in the original Wild West, countless people have struck it rich on the new digital frontier.[71]

We find in this quote the basic materials for the future-oriented deployment of settler frontierism on the information highway. Fertik and Thompson's comparison of online space to the Wild West occurs along two axes: lawlessness and economic possibility. New technology is understood to be a penetrative force breaking ground in a space as yet unconquered by a set of rules. In this narrative, lawlessness becomes an opportunity for entrepreneurial profit-making. What goes unremarked in this passage—but is signaled to, if only unconsciously—is the figure of the threatening "other", the Indian, the Native, the presence inhabiting this space law has yet to capture.

Stephanie Ricker Schulte draws out these themes in some detail in her work on the early popular culture around the internet in America. She discusses how the internet was described as "a new democratic frontier" and an "information superhighway" by American policymakers who hoped to "colonize" virtual space beating competitors.[72] "Just as the U.S. government facilitated and pushed settlement of the western frontier and the lunar landing, so it pushed exploration and ultimately economic control of what it imagined as new frontier of global space and marketplace", she writes.[73] Making explicit connections between the "internet and nationalist American frontier narratives", helped render American imperial ambition visible anew.[74] Nor was statist discourse the only kind to turn to settler colonial metaphors. Hackers, in those early years tended to fancy

[71] Fertik and Thompson, *Wild West 2.0*, 54.
[72] Schulte, *Cached*, 17.
[73] Schulte, 84.
[74] Schulte, 87.

themselves as "console cowboys" and harked back to libertarian individualism.[75] Additionally, while euphoric critics like Howard Rheingold published books with problematically suggestive titles like *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, activist-theorists like John Perry Barlow setup organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and proclaimed that information wanted to be free. The electronic frontier, Barlow opined, was not that different from the "nineteenth-century West. It is unmapped, culturally and legally ambiguous, verbally terse. … Hard to get around in and up for grabs".[76] Helpfully summing up the implications of these kinds of theories, Schulte argues that "by tapping frontier rhetoric and American national mythology, those early 1990s voices perpetuating the representation of the internet as a virtual frontier not only helped to construct its importance to American identity, and vice versa, but also helped (temporarily) to inoculate it against the critique that it produced a stratified social structure".[77]

The nostalgic appeal of internet futurism—on full display in these works—is worth picking away at a little bit. And in this effort, Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* offers the ideal object lesson. In an early critique of that work, Kevin Robins pointed out that Rheingold's utopian commitments were accompanied by "a clear concern with the social order".[78] Rheingold begins, Robins reminds readers, "from what he sees as the damaged or decayed state of modern democratic and community life".[79] He envisions cyberspace as an opportunity for returning—note the irony—to a pre-technological commons, to "'aspects of the community that were lost when the malt shop became the mall'".[80] That a self-proclaimed ideologue of mass communication futures would rely

[75] Schulte, 42.
[76] Schulte, 101.
[77] Schulte, 101.
[78] Robins, "Cyberspace and the World We Live In", 147.
[79] Robins, 147.
[80] Robins, 148.

heavily on ideas of “community”, “family”, and “social order” is only ironic, however, if we take Rheingold to be an exception. He is not. Thus, when Robins writes that “for all his futuristic pretentions, Rheingold’s imagination is fundamentally conservative and nostalgic”,[81] he is on to something. In some sense, techno-futuristic appeals always occur via nostalgic invocations of eras past. The short history of the wilderness and agrarian idyll tropes I provided above help explain why this might be the case—why the appeal to community, family, and frontier underwrites any attempt to look forward, especially in the late-twentieth century. But Rheingold’s case is, at the same time, much more specific.

Fred Turner reminds us that Rheingold was steeped in the primitivist counterculture of the late-1970s and 1980s centered on the charismatic figure of Steward Brand and his very influential *Whole Earth Catalog*. In 1985, the *Catalog* spawned a teleconferencing system called the Whole Earth ’Lectronic Link (WELL), which sought to recreate, in electronic space, the idealism of back-to-the-land movements that had spurred Brand’s earlier social experiments.[82] Rheingold became associated with WELL in the 1980s and soon started proselytizing for disembodied, immaterial virtual space as the terrain where the lost hopes of (countercultural) community could be captured once again: “Rheingold’s vision of a collaborative virtual community not only echoed the goals of commune builders from the late 1960s, but also represented a transformation in the countercultural critique of technocracy. Like the early 1960s critics of the Cold War military industrial complex, Rheingold critiqued the loss of cooperative spirit and implied that technology itself had brought about that loss”.[83] These links between older, almost preindustrial forms of life and virtual space were literalized even more in the biography and work of John Perry Barlow who,

[81] Robins, 148.
[82] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 141.
[83] Turner, 160.

at one point, worked in agriculture, before—unwillingly—recognizing what he claimed was the historical inevitability of knowledge work superseding farm labor.[84] But "like the rural landscape of the 1960s, Barlow's cyberspace would stand beyond government control",[85] and, in the process, reenact a form of wild frontierism in virtual space.

There are perhaps two things worth nothing from this short, generalized overview of the tendency to equate the internet with the Wild West, a new frontier, and communal life. First, that as in the tradition of frontierism per se, rhetoric about the electronic frontier also centered on some form of renewing the national body. This renewal, the discourse suggests, would be effected through democratic, communal possibility in a recently discovered, virtual, open space. In other words, libertarian ideology, mythologies of individualism, the specter of lawlessness, and images of untamed space were all used in the service of a persistent American democratic ideal enacted in nature—that untrammeled space where heroic action against nonhuman and racial others becomes the driving forces of a progress narrative that represses both the violence and racism on which it is founded. This is one of the basic lessons we might draw from my survey of the wilderness-concept from Rogin to Grebowicz. Second, this teleological ideal—where the future lies unproblematically ahead on the horizon—is deeply rooted in a temporal split which allows the settler-subject to look forward while invoking an idealized nostalgic past. In the next section, I will attempt to describe this split temporality in terms of what the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli calls "the future anterior".

For now, it is sufficient to point out that almost all the quotes I have pulled from a disparate range of texts in this section repeatedly produce the "Wild West 2.0" as an ambiguous, still-unregulated, somewhat unknown territory *simultaneously* harking back to a past and awaiting

[84] Turner, 166.
[85] Turner, 162.

being pulled into the future. The providential vision as discussed by Purdy provides one template for understanding such split temporality: hard work will elevate land into value (the assumption being that prior to settler colonialism land was waste even when it was worked upon). But the claim I am making transcends the Lockean claim that European labor was the transformative element that turned wasteland into value.[86] Settler futurity in the mid-to-late-1990s—at a time when it decisively disavowed historicity *and* the anxieties this disavowal caused—drew on these older ideological strands of wilderness and idyll to figure the digital entrepreneur as a new cowboy in the virtual West, inhabiting a nostalgically wild and unregulated space with his gaze fixed firmly on the future. What remains unremarked upon in the quotes I've discussed thus far is the nature of the nature-ideal underpinning digital frontierism. Now, by turning to a 1995 text by Bill Gates—a poster child of such frontierism—I hope to show with more specificity, how technological frontiers were sustained by images of wilderness and idyll.

IV. Settler nostalgia and techno-optimism

The forgetting of infrastructure

Writing with Nathan Myhrvold and Peter Rinearson, in *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates sets out his vision for the future of the internet. "There is never a reliable map for unexplored territory", the authors announce in the foreword to the book.[87] The text—the authorship of which I will, for the sake of convenience, accord to Gates in these pages—can be read, interpreted, and critiqued from a number of angles: from its retelling of the history of computation to its predictions about online worlds in years to come. As a canny entrepreneur plugged in (pardon the pun) to the technological knowhow one required as the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Microsoft, Gates obviously

[86] Gidwani, *Capital, Interrupted*.
[87] Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, *The Road Ahead*, xiii.

had a pulse for the moment. Problems notwithstanding, therefore, many of the things he and his co-authors write about have come to fruition in recent years. But mine is not an exhaustive survey of such claims. Rather, I want to focus on two interrelated elements that might help grapple with the textual unconscious of works like these. The first has to do with Gates' repeated and emphatic distinction between highways and roads—something that opens out to a wider infrastructural issue. The second, relatedly, is the cover image of the book, taken by the well-known photographer Annie Leibovitz. I will note, in passing, that there is a section of *The Road Ahead* on stock images and Gates' company, Corbis, to which I will return in the following section of the chapter.

Throughout the book, Gates expresses a dislike for the term "information superhighway" as a descriptor of the internet. The term, he writes, was popularized by then-Senator Al Gore, "whose father sponsored the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act".[88] On one level the comparison is a very sensible one—connecting a massive, distributed network of computers across the nation can look very much like connecting different parts of that nation through complex, arterial systems of highways. However, "the highway metaphor isn't quite right" because "it suggests landscape, geography, a distance between points, and it implies you have to travel, to move from one place to another", whereas "this new communications technology will eliminate distance".[89] Moreover, the highway imager suggests there is only one route everyone can take. Gates prefers to think of the internet as "a system of country roads" where "everybody can take his own route, at his own speed, in his own direction".[90] He is also skeptical of the highway metaphor because it indexes the presence of federal government regulation. "But the *real problem* with the highway metaphor", he

[88] Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, 7.
[89] Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, 6.
[90] Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, 6.

writes, “is that it emphasizes the infrastructure rather than its applications. … A metaphor I prefer is the market. … The interactive network will be the ultimate market”.[91]

An obvious question one could post to these assertions would be something like: in what precise universe do roads and markets evade either statecraft or infrastructure? I suspect, of course, that Gates’ juxtaposition of highways to these other figurations relies not on roads and markets as physical entities but as components of an American mythology of freedom and entrepreneurialism. In this sense, the idea of roads and markets as vectors for freedom, connection, and autonomous navigation of unexplored territories stays close to the rhetoric of the electronic frontier and Wild West 2.0. Logically, one could ask a similar question about the elimination of distance: roads still refer to travel, to “landscape, geography, a distance between points”. Why, then, make the case for a different metaphor? If highways, roads (and to some extent, markets) serve similar functions—or represent similar kinds of infrastructural possibilities—then why is Gates so invested in figuring the internet as a road? The market as a mediating concept between highways and roads might well be the key to unpacking his investment. It is what roads enable that really seem to enchant Gates—“everybody can take his own route, at his own speed, in his own direction”. A “system of country roads” seems unrestricted, less governed, more open to individual will and a spirit of adventure. It is a space suffused, in other words, by the spirit of the market in its quintessentially neoliberal form: an unregulated space of possibility from which the state has withdrawn, allowing individuals to make the most of what they can. By contrast, the highway system—with its overtones of federal bureaucracy, welfarism, mid-twentieth-century big government, and legislation—connotes a form of control that, in this vision, is antithetical to the very ideal of markets providing services to users. No one can go their own way on a highway. The highway is a “map” for “unexplored territory”.

[91] Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, 6. Emphasis added.

On highways, the pioneer spirit cannot sustain itself, it must always be reined in by external forces outside its control—infrastructure, in short. Which leads to a third question: why is infrastructure the "*real problem*" with the highway metaphor?

To say that the infrastructural tends to obscure the function of applications is only half the story. The other half is the market. The "*real problem*", then, could be that infrastructure stinks of publicness, and of all the nightmarish connotations that "the public" might have for an entrepreneur looking to strike it rich in supposedly previously undiscovered geographies. Infrastructure, Bruce Robbins helpfully reminds us, smells: "the smell of infrastructure is the smell of the public".[92] He points out that while capitalism (as in Gates' case) is often conjured as a wonderworld of material plenitude and commodification, "infrastructure belongs to capitalism as well—it makes possible the production and distribution of these commodities—while it also sustains life functions like the provision of clean water …"[93] Whether infrastructure as a "public thing"[94] lives up to its promise of sustaining life is a different matter (and I am less optimistic than Robbins on this count). For the moment it is sufficient to note that the smell of infrastructure, to the extent that it brings into being an image of publicness anchored by sociality and community, serves a threatening function for entrepreneurial ideologues like Gates.

The market is a "better" metaphor because it allows you to forget that "infrastructure belongs to capitalism as well"; it allows you to project infrastructure outward—to the realm of the state, of regulation, of bureaucracy. The "system of country roads" then steps in to furnish a different ideal where rampant individualism and unregulated movement seizes the path to a bright future. The ability to make that move seems critical for someone writing in the early days of the

[92] Robbins, "The Smell of Infrastructure", 26.
[93] Robbins, 25.
[94] Honig, *Public Things*.

information revolution—a time when the entire rhetorical structure of talk about the virtual Wild West occurred in the service of savvy businessmen who would be the first to capture pieces of this terrain and make it theirs. On multiple levels therefore, what the Gold Rush was to California in the nineteenth century,[95] the internet was to entrepreneurial subjects in the late-twentieth. Curiously however, a few pages on in *The Road Ahead*, these claims surface again, and in a far more jarring—and somewhat contradictory—fashion that demands some attention:

> In keeping with the highway metaphor, the Oregon Trail might even be a good analogy for the Internet. Between 1841 and the early 1860s, more than 30,000 pioneers rode wagon trains out of Independence, Missouri, for a dangerous 2,000-mile journey across a wilderness to the Oregon Territory or the gold fields of California. An estimated 20,000 people succumbed to marauders, cholera, starvation, or exposure. You could easily say that the route they took, the Oregon Trail, was the start of today's interstate highway system. It crossed many boundaries and provided for two-way vehicular traffic. The modern path of Interstate 84 and several other highways follows the pioneers' trail for much of its length. But the comparison between the Oregon Trail and the interstate does break down. Cholera and starvation aren't a problem on Interstate 84. And tailgating and drunk drivers weren't much of a hazard for wagon trains—though drunk cowboys might have been.[96]

Lest we think Gates is backtracking by calling the Oregon Trail a "good analogy" for the internet, we would do well to remember that it only becomes a good analogy when that trail—identified as the origin of the modern interstate system—can be temporally located in a moment prior to all the bad connotations of state control. This is the settler fantasy of split temporality in the frontier that

[95] Nash, "A Veritable Revolution".
[96] Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, *The Road Ahead*, 139.

I have trying to discern throughout the chapter: a bad analogy becomes good when it is mobilized in the service of a nostalgic politics that, in turn, informs visions of what anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli might call the "future perfect" (more on this below). Here we find Gates as pioneer. The point at which the comparison fails is efficiency—unlike the Oregon Trail, the modern interstate isn't plagued either by disease or "marauders" (a coded reference, no doubt, to nonwhiteness in the fledgling American West). What of the trail itself, though? If trailblazing and pioneering exploration is the thrust of what makes this a "good analogy" then the choice is a poor one, one which reflects the logic of the settler unconscious poetically well.

To substantiate this, I want to refer not to historical details connected to the trail, but to an artefact closer to the world of Gates' frontier nostalgia: *The Oregon Trail*, "the most widely distributed computer game of all time".[97] In a careful interpretation of the cultural legacy and textual contents of the game, Katherine Slater points out that from the mid-1980s, for a twenty-year period, "tens of thousands of public elementary schools across the United States purchased educational product bundles for their shared computers",[98] including copies of *The Oregon Trail*. In this game, players take on the identity of a wagon leader guiding groups of settlers through unfamiliar terrain. The game, Slater writes, was often the first encounter American schoolchildren had with histories of settler colonial Westward expansion. Its protagonist ("you") "is presumed to be white and male".[99] I am using the example of this game as an initial foil to Gates' invocation of the trail as a "good analogy" not merely because it is a handy tool for illustrating the settler unconscious. As importantly, a cultural history of *The Oregon Trail* combines settler colonialism, play, and computation—the three realms of experience Gates' book (and the wider corpus of

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[97] Slater, "Who Gets to Die of Dysentery?", 375.
[98] Slater, 375.
[99] Slater, 375.

electronic frontier literature) tends to oscillate around. Slater argues that the game interpellated players into a white supremacist view of the world on both an ideological and a geographical level: “The force overlay of player and character helps to normalize whiteness and masculinity while acting in potential conflict with the heterogenous identities of players”.[100]

In addition to producing the unmarked, transparent, white, masculine subject as the central character, the game also focalizes a narrative of “Native otherness through language and indirect comparison”.[101] For instance, one section asks the player “what” they would like to read about—the options being “Animals of the Plains”, “Animals of the Mountains”, and “Arapaho Indians”. The equation of Native peoples with nonhuman elements of nature aside, this comparative range reveals once again, settler investments in the wilderness-idylls combine as the primary lens for thinking the social world. Referring to how the game is adept at “spatializing models of American exceptionalism”, Slater argues that in the game, movement is physical as well as a “socio-political and ideological” concept.[102] Focused on a linear, progressive movement that will culminate in the settlement of Oregon, the game “fails to recognize the felt experiences of loss, disallowing the process of mourning beyond the practicalities of interring a body”.[103]

I want to underscore how, in Gates’ text as in *The Oregon Trail*, forward-looking linear narratives of settler conquest are anchored in or authorized by nostalgic notions of wilderness and idyllic open space. Both visions seem draw from a similar affective reservoir, ensuring that the settler subject’s infatuation with the progressivist pioneer narrative is premised on what I earlier referred to as a temporal split. Within the purview of such a split, even as this subject stands tall, surveying the lawless land before him awaiting domestication, behind him an entire region of rural,

[100] Slater, 377.
[101] Slater, 382.
[102] Slater, 389.
[103] Slater, 390.

natural plentitude opens out. I am suggesting that in *The Road Ahead*, this kind of split becomes operationalized through the forgetting—or more accurately, the repression—of infrastructure. The book's emphatic claim that the internet be conceptualized as "application" and "market" therefore goes beyond the critique I gestured to above through Robbins and infrastructural publicness. More fundamentally, the repression of informational infrastructure produces a frictionless vision of the world where communities shall be synthesized into a kind of "oneness" by technocratic power. In relation to this point, consider a 2008 Microsoft campaign titled "Windows vs Walls", where we see a man standing in the background with his back to the viewer, holding a power saw and looking out through a hole he has presumably cut in the wall [figure 19]. The shape of this hole replicates the Windows logo and through it our eyes catch an open expanse—green fields and white clouds, not unlike the *Bliss* image I will discuss below. The text accompanying this visual is worth reproducing in detail:

> … The thing that gets us out of bed every day is the prospect of creating pathways above, below, around and through walls. To start a dialogue between hundreds of devices, billions of people and a world of ideas. To lift up the smallest of us. And catapult the most audacious of us. But most importantly, to connect all of us to the four corners of our own digital lives and to each other. To go on doing the little stuff, the big stuff, the crazy stuff, and that ridiculously necessary stuff. On our own or together. This is more than software we're talking about. It's an approach to life. An approach dedicated to engineering the absence of anything that might stand in the way … of life. Today, more than one billion people worldwide have Windows. Which is just another way of saying we have each other.

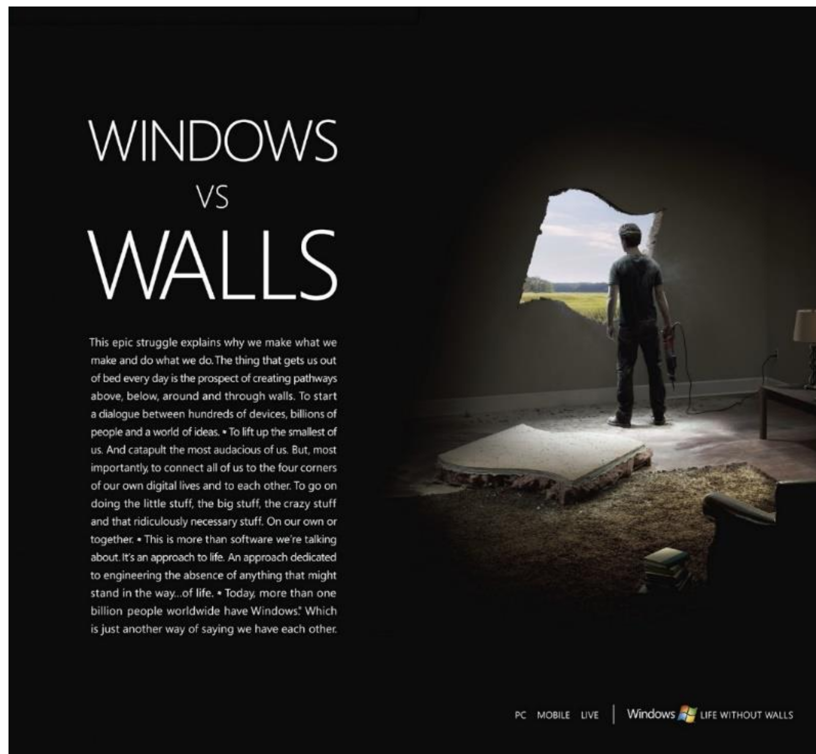

Figure 19 Windows vs. Walls. Microsoft. 2008.

Much of this text is, to not put too fine a point on it, gibberish written in the style of what Keller Easterling calls “managementese”.[104] It isn’t clear at all what is meant by “stuff”—necessary, little, big, or otherwise. Nor is it evident what it is that Microsoft is selling (other than its new Windows Vista upgrade, the release of which was the occasion for this campaign). At the same time, several things about the visuals and text demand interpretation. The juxtaposition of windows and walls, for instance, points simultaneously to walls as obstructionist architectural devices and windows as the means for overcoming this obstruction. It also underplays the fact that windows can’t exist without walls. As entities creating separations, enclosures, divisions, and expulsions, walls have, of course, been subject to rigorous critique by a number of scholars in different disciplinary

[104] Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*.

traditions.[105] It is, however, probably safe to assume that Microsoft's aversion to walls is less rooted in these dynamics than something else. What might that something else be?

The image seems to suggest that unlike walls, windows provide a transparent view of the outside—of open space, of unlimited horizons (thereby rearticulating the nostalgia/futurism bind I have been tracking in these pages). That the protagonist stands heroic, with his back to the reader, wielding a masculine tool in one hand; that his gaze (which we cannot see) seems fixed on some point in the distance; that he stands in the debris of a dark, sparsely decorated apartment and looks out to the source of light, of illumination—these elements together create a sense of futurity, a sense that whatever is to come will be seen "through" Windows. By thus positioning Windows (and literal windows) as a source of light, knowledge, and information, the advertisement actually also cuts against the older cultural trope of windows as transparent frames. Here, the outside is not so much transparent as *produced* by the frame one looks through. The shape of the window indicates that it isn't merely enough to look out. One must look out *this way*.

In her late work on the concept of the window in cultural discourse and production, Anne Friedberg wrote persuasively about how, for Microsoft, windows represented "multitasking environments", not transparent points of access to a world outside. Friedberg argued that "the 'windows' trope is emblematic of the collapse of a single viewpoint; it relies on the model of a window that we don't see through, windows that instead overlap and obscure, and are resizable and moveable".[106] In this new, hypermediated environment, work would still occur seamlessly and without interruption. Users would toggle between windows, switch across applications, and keep busy without recognizing the multiple tasks they were undertaking at the same time. Friedberg was

[105] See, for instance: Oles, *Walls*; Weizman, *Hollow Land*; Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.
[106] Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 229.

entirely correct to identify this as a novel imagination of the window as a structured frame wherein increased productivity and distraction are co-constituted for a digital age.

What Friedberg did not mention—and what I want to draw attention to—is how settler colonial frontierism with its binary investments in nostalgia and futurity is quite essential to the establishment of the windows view of the world. It is here that it might be useful to consider that while Microsoft's windows represent work environments and strain against narratives of transparent interfaces, they do nonetheless provide a control vision for how this new environment ought to be understood. Which is to say: the frame still produces a particular axis of looking and that axis is rooted deeply in settler nostalgia as the authorizing force of techno-optimism. My excavation of fascination with wilderness and agrarian landscapes serves, in some sense, therefore, as a complement to Friedberg's technological story. I want to show that rearticulations of the technological in the historical period under question are, to a large extent, founded upon idyllic memories of a past that never was. While the windows in Microsoft's narrative might not be transparent, we could still—somewhat polemically—say that it is the transparency of the white subject that underpins the edifice of the multitasking environment. This subject, in turn, becomes a vector for suturing the world in the image of whiteness: "Today, more than one billion people worldwide have Windows. Which is just another way of saying we have each other".

The forgetting of infrastructure is critical to this architecture of technological futurity. I do not want to take the easy track and ask who the "we" is that Microsoft summons in the quote here. Nor do I want to press the point of what "having each other" might mean in this context. Clearly, the gesture to "one billion people" is racialized in the spirit of liberal multiculturalism as a politics based on fantasies of inclusion—an idea many have eloquently critiqued.[107] I am interested in these

[107] Gordon and Newfield, *Mapping Multiculturalism*; Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture*.

invocations for a different reason. The image of oneness and global communal coexistence that is referenced here, is, I think, enabled in large part by the effacement of infrastructure and celebration of applications and markets. On this point, discourses of liberal multiculturalism dovetail nicely with the mid-to-late-1990s rhetoric of the internet as a space of immateriality.[108] The immaterial—the idea that information superhighway is ethereal, global, and unrestricted by national boundaries or laws—is a quintessential product of the repression of infrastructure. Gates is important to this story because, like the unnamed protagonist-player of *The Oregon Trail*, his transparent whiteness can afford to forget infrastructure, to relegate maintenance, repair, and world-building to the realm of statecraft. It can lead him, like the unnamed protagonist-player of *The Oregon Trail*, to think in a nostalgic vein about settler colonial patterns of transit and conceive of them as a "good analogy" for late-twentieth-century capitalist form.

The nostalgic politics at play here could be summed up, from one direction, by Elizabeth Povinelli's concept of the "future anterior", where actions taken in the present are judged from the perspective of a future interpreter.[109] For Povinelli, the future anterior sacrifices the present in the service of a time-to-come, leading one to overlook, repress, or suppress conflicts constitutive of the moment one is inhabiting now. The "durative present" disappears from view.[110] *The Road Ahead* eloquently rehearses some of the logic of this argument by twinning the Oregon Trail to the modern interstate after having emphatically distanced itself from the highway as an effective or desirable metaphor for information technology. What enables this move, on the one hand, is the location of the trail in a past that settler colonialism renders open for interpretation in the grammar of a future anterior; i.e. what happened "back then" is—or will be—justified by a person yet-to-

[108] Negroponte, *Being Digital*; Mitchell, *Me++*; Boyer, *Cyber Cities*.
[109] Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 7.
[110] Povinelli, 12.

come, an onlooker who will justify those courses of action (native extermination and colonial settlement) from a future perspective. The future anterior can, in this way, justify colonial conquest as a node in the long history of American civilizational progress—a narrative of progress that still clings on to a sense of premodern naturalism as the ground on which is must continuously unfold.

Jodi Byrd, in her sharp critique of figurations of "the Indian" in Western literature and philosophy, makes a similar point, arguing that: "As a philosophical sign, the Indian is the transit, the field through which presignifying polyvocality is re/introduced into the signifying regime … *And* the Indian is a ghost in the system, an errant or virus that disrupts the virtual flows by stopping them, redirecting them, or revealing them to be what they are and what they have been all along: colonialist".[111] Her point—that even as "the Indian" is summoned by philosophers like Deleuze and Guattari as a source of freedom from structure, s/he can reveal the colonial foundations of such summoning—is immensely relevant to the claim I have been teasing out in this section. Not that Bill Gates and Microsoft enact in a conscious manner, histories of settler violence. Neither does so any more than Deleuze and Guattari (in whose work Byrd finds much to value). Rather, her insight—which I want to hold on to carefully—is that when properly attended to, it becomes evident that even the most liberating rhetorics can be haunted by violence that has been forgotten, erased, or merely overlooked. In addition to the affective dimensions of the future anterior, such mechanisms of writing the future are critical for understanding how texts like *The Road Ahead* reenact colonial fantasies even as they strain for future-oriented images of global oneness. And nowhere are these dynamics clearer than in the picture on the cover of *The Road Ahead*.

[111] Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 19.

Covering up

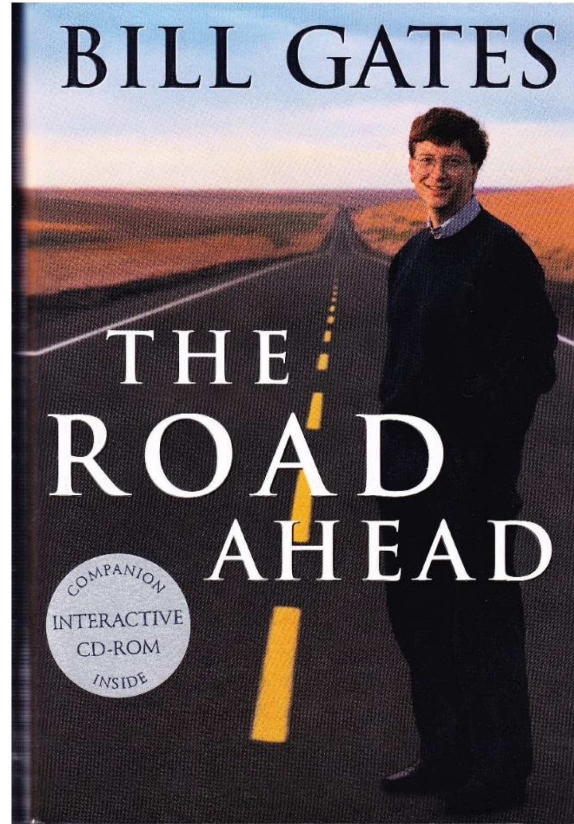

Figure 20 Annie Leibovitz, *The Road Ahead*. Penguin. 1995.

Photographed by Annie Leibovitz, Gates is pictured on the cover, standing with his hands in his pockets, wearing a dark blue sweater and what look like matching trousers [figure 20]. A slight grin on his bespectacled face, he stares out from the frame—not quite at the photographer but at a slight angle, perhaps glancing at the viewer. He stands on one side of a road, with yellow traffic markers occupying the center of the frame. Behind him, an expanse stretches out infinitely, disappearing into the horizon. The landscape on either side of the road is neither green nor luscious or beautiful in a conventional sense of the sublime that I discussed earlier in relation to Cronon's work. At the same time, it would, I think, be a mistake to read this sense of openness in nature as a featureless or boring landscape. The image might evade the sublime but puts its finger quite precisely on the frontier imaginary that also subtends the rhetoric I have been slowly peeling away

at. Gates stands, here, as the adventurer-pioneer-entrepreneur figure. His outward, confident glance—coupled with the half-smile and posture—sketch an idealized image of future-orientation. We cannot see what he is looking at, but from the angle of the camera it seems likely he is not quite meeting our eyes. Rather, one gets the sense he is looking at something behind us—beyond our shoulder—something our eyes have no access to. In his review of *The Road Ahead* for *The New York Review of Books*, James Fallows writes about the photograph in this way:

> The most effective aspect of Bill Gates's new book is its cover. A wonderful photograph, taken by Annie Leibovitz, shows a friendly-looking and casually dressed Gates standing on an isolated highway somewhere in the West. With his crew-neck sweater and penny loafers, with his warm expression and relaxed pose, Gates looks like the brainy young nephew in whom a family reposes its future hopes. Behind him, toward a horizon of pastel blues and pinks, the highway stretches straight, promising much. The image recalls other American fantasies of the next frontier and the open road. The message is, of course, that the competent, unthreatening Gates will guide us toward the information frontier.[112]

All the major elements are here, if not extensively commented upon, by Fallows: the gentle nephew figure, a highway "somewhere in the West", future hopes, and fantasies of the frontier. Gates can see the future unfurl in a way his readers cannot. If Gates reads the leaves for signs of what is to come, we can only discern the shape of things by trying to better understand the expression on his face. That he is off-centered in the frame is perhaps also not unintentional. By decentering his physical presence, Leibovitz gives us a full picture of the road and the horizon; as well as an image of the natural idyll surrounding her subject. This idyllic landscape harkens back to the sense of

[112] Fallows, "Caught in the Web".

nostalgia I have been referring to. We can quite easily discern in the landscape elements of the stock image that would eventually adorn Windows wallpapers well into the twenty-first century. These fields, or this desert-like geography might not be as green or as delectably colored, but it does contain the therapeutics of drab genericness; a kind of genericness that is both calming and beautiful without overwhelming the viewer. It is significant also that the "road ahead" is both in front of and behind Gates—his back is turned away from it. In this background there is an interplay between the fantastic sublime of the wilderness and the calming logic of the agrarian idyll.

Importantly, even as we look out behind him, we don't lose sight of Gates. He commands the frame from its edge; he controls what we see and provides coherence to the image. Like the pioneers who occupy the center of a faux narrative of history filtered through the archives of white supremacy, Gates embodies progress—the Oregon Trail as it morphs into Interstate 84 as it morphs into a "system of country roads" where the pioneer can run amok in search of wealth; where "marauders" are mere disturbances obstructing the way things *must* go. Leibovitz's image functions, then, as a visual materialization of the settler colonial unconscious. At the same time, it also assimilates the components of stock imagery—the power to distribute this unconscious across a virtual sphere as yet untamed and uncontrolled but there for the taking.

The distinction between highways and roads is also worth remarking on in a little more detail as we keep this photograph in focus. Narratives of mobility have long fascinated Americans. What Ronald Primeau calls the "romance of the road" can also be traced back to the frontier myth. Primeau writes that as the frontier was closing, "Americans' roaming spirit was anxiously awaiting the new form of conquest brought about by motorways".[113] A whole trajectory of American literary and philosophical work—from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman to Jack Kerouac—

[113] Primeau, *Romance of the Road*, 23.

celebrated the road in various ways. Citing the work on Phil Patton, Primeau makes the important point that as automobility and the highway system became gradually rigid features of life-on-the-move, the concerns of this sort of literature turns from "migration" to "circulation"—"While once a means from getting from one place to another, roads themselves slowly became *the* place to be: the place for searching, escape, and self-discovery".[114] Although Primeau doesn't quite spell out what he means by "circulation", beyond the obvious circulation of bodies through space, it is tempting to think of circulation as a form of currency, as a way to gain cultural (and other kinds of capital) in the post-frontier world. I say this half facetiously, but such resonances might explain the continued investments people had in figuring the internet either as a superhighway or a system of roads. In both cases, financial rewards lurk close behind the surface of such discourse. Keeping Primeau's observations in mind, the other point to note is the possibility that the fantasy of the road does indeed differ from that of the highway—and not only in infrastructural terms, but also in terms of the freedom the former is assumed to afford the traveler. As in the text, so in the image, Gates' occupation of a road is significant for his repression of infrastructure.

It is tempting also, in this regard, to think of Gates at the supplying the frontal shot for the man captured from the back in the "Windows vs Walls" campaign. Obviously, they aren't the same person. But is that obvious? On some level they are in fact the very same person—the transcendent, transparent subject (un)marked by whiteness, seizing control of the future. Where on the cover of the book, wilderness and idyll is relegated literally to the past (backgrounded), in the campaign shot, our man looks out at the *past to come*—the past his power saw will bring into being. Where on the cover of the book, a pioneer of the electronic age looks beyond our line of sight into the distance, in the campaign shot darkness gives over to light in the "epic struggle" of windows

[114] Primeau, 23.

against walls. Some version of the future anterior—techno-optimism fueled by myths of nature as it never was but has forever been imagined by subjects oriented to narratives of linear progress.

V. Stock therapy

Bliss *as control space*

As I zero in, in this final section, on the image with which I began, I turn my attention to *Bliss* as a specific object or site where the effects of many of the larger historical forces I have tried to capture become palpably apparent. By positioning *Bliss* as an artefact of control space[115] and as a stock image, I hope to show how those two things—control and genericness—go together. In fact, not only do they go together, but in some ways, it is precisely *because* of its controlled and generic nature that *Bliss* achieves the kind of appeal it does. If we went back to the anecdotes with which I started the chapter, then we might find ourselves asking: what exactly *is* the "kind of appeal" this image has? Everyone seems to know it; to recognize it; to be able to mourn its disappearance from the background as an event. But the investments people have in it are, decidedly, muted. Removing *Bliss* during a system upgrade is not an occurrence imbued with world-historical significance. No one seems to fixate on the photograph in this way. I think this might be one reason to attend to it in the first place.

It is precisely the fact that *Bliss* lives in the background, that it hangs around in the peripheries of vision, that it sits on one's desktop and is made visible when the many windows one is working on are minimized—these are the little things that make it significant. There is, I think, a therapeutic value to the image, which emerges from its supposed eternal quality—and this quality in turn is the product of how empty the landscape is. If, throughout these pages, I have tried to

[115] By "control space" I am referring, drawing loosely on Deleuze's "control societies", to spaces that are subject to confinement, control, monitoring and the like.

make a case for nostalgia as the critical factor buttressing the end-of-century tech-utopianism of much post-Cold War American culture, then *Bliss* exemplifies that argument. Its placid, subdued, and yet exuberant indexing of nature "out there" represses geographical and historical realities framing the circumstances of its production. In what follows, then, I want to tease some of these realities out a little more in the hopes of demonstrating what is going on within the image that we sometimes miss by discussing it abstractly as "one of the world's most recognizable photographs".

Consider, first, *Bliss*—the timeless artefact that has spread over and through the planetary epidermis over years—as a product of industrial capitalism and its intensive exploitation of land. *Bliss* as a version of what George Henderson calls "rural realism". In his reading of a crop (pun intended) of novels set in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century California, Henderson argues that the conventions of rural realism represent the spread of capital into hitherto unconquered terrains. The novels he discusses—set in the San Joaquin Valley (1880), Southern California (1890), and the Imperial Valley (1905)—showed "capital *in terms* of its spillage into new rural frontiers" and these frontiers "*in terms* of capital mobilization".[116] Primarily, the rhetorics of these works tended to either discuss how capital redeemed nature by infusing wasteland with value, or how nature redeemed capital through processes of idealization.[117] Within the narrative space of rural realism capitalism could be "seen as chaotic, alienating, elusive, and riddled with crisis, while nature is eternal, holistic, and morally empowering. By this very logic, *the union with nature is the path back to capital*—though now a cleansed and tamed capital, shorn of crises stemming from debt, bankruptcy, and overproduction".[118] Henderson's study, though historically situated, is useful for thinking about an image such as *Bliss* because, in weird ways, its conventions hew close

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[116] Henderson, *California and The Fictions of Capital*, 119.
[117] Henderson, 120. Emphasis in original.
[118] Henderson, 121. Emphasis in original.

to those of rural realism—at least to the extent that what we have here is a redemptive view of nature that hides the fact that its redemptive capacities are produced through intensified capitalist exploitation of territory. To the extent that *Bliss* is an image of nature that serves a function for nostalgic techno-futurity, it does, in some sense, also delineate a "path back to capital" from hinterlands devoid of human presence. Of course, the lack of human presence in the photograph is itself an artefact—a repression of history. To get at the specific contours of this more precisely we might locate *Bliss* within histories of racialized agrarian labor in California.

Henderson takes note of this dimension of rural realism with the pithy observation that "agriculture—capitalist agriculture, in the form of waged bodies—was an opportunity to further (and further *specify*) the idea and practice of race …"[119] Fred Glass' exhaustive work on labor in California extends his insight by, for example, pointing out that as early as 1857, at least one hundred Chinese workers were working in Sonoma on wine pioneer Agoston Haraszthy's fields. By 1869, he writes, "the Chinese had planted most of the area's 3.2 million vines …"[120] Japanese workers began to arrive in the 1890s, and by 1896, over eight thousand were employed on farms.[121] Other historians and geographers gesture to the invasion of "petro-farming" in postwar California, which brought on flighty dreams of mechanizing production and eliminating workers from the agrarian economy of the state.[122] As Curtis Marez explains in his persuasive cultural history of resistance and mediation by agricultural laborers, postwar "agribusiness efforts to design a future free from conflict between capital and labor actually reproduced and extended such conflicts".[123] Instead of getting rid of workers, mechanization, for instance, "enabled the exploitation of low-

[119] Henderson, 91. Emphasis in original.
[120] Glass, *From Mission to Microchip*, 108.
[121] Glass, 111.
[122] Walker, *The Conquest of Bread*.
[123] Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism*, 21.

wage, noncitizen Mexican guest workers or braceros"[124] who were "employed as generic labor"[125] and moved from one kind of work to another in a flexible and unregulated manner.

I want to highlight, from these accounts, two things: first, how forms of exploitation—of terrain and bodies—are systematically erased and suppressed in accounts of Californian nature presented on registers of sublime beauty and timelessness. So, we might say that the agribusiness fantasy of eliminating conflict is reproduced on a formal level in *Bliss*, where the lack of tension in the landscape lends it both a generic and futuristic affect. I will have more to say about these dynamics below. Second, I want to flag Marez's identification of flexible, insecure employment as "generic" labor. For here the quality of work—the forcible shifting across tasks, the deployment of various competencies across a range of different skills demanded by farm labor—itself takes on a stock quality; a genericness that comes unhinged from particular situations and *stands in* for a number of varied tasks. Like a stock image, workers move across any number of roles without imbuing them with any specific significance. I will have more to say about this in the conclusion.

Consider, now, the sheer, effervescent greenery of *Bliss*. It leads many to wonder on online forums whether O'Rear photoshopped the image. The answer, supplied by Abigail Cain in a short article on *Bliss*, is that he didn't. The reason the fields are so green is that through "most of the 1990s" the Napa Valley was fighting off phylloxera—"a microscopic pest" that had devoured close to 50,000 acres of vineyards by the time it was warded off in 1999.[126] The phylloxera, historian Steven Stoll reminds us, is an insect "that can sit on the head of a pin, lives inside the roots of grapevines where it eats away at the water absorbing tissue".[127] The 1990s were not the first time phylloxera invaded this terrain. Stoll writes about similar infestations in the nineteenth and early

[124] Marez, 21.
[125] Marez, 22.
[126] Cain, "The Story Behind the World's Most Famous Desktop Background".
[127] Stoll, "Insects and Institutions", 224.

twentieth centuries. Although that infestation took, according to Cain, about half a billion dollars to contain, “the landscape of Northern California had never looked more idyllic. Endless rows of grapevines had been replaced by a lush carpet of grass, dotted here and there with wildflowers”.[128] *Bliss* appeals largely because of the infestation. The lush greenery thrown into relief against a vibrant blue sky with smatterings of hovering clouds and some flowers in the foreground supplies a strange mix of agrarian idyll and wilderness.

I quoted O’Rear at the start of the chapter as saying that he admired the image and vineyards because “they have strong design patterns. They’re the most organized crop in America. I come from a rural area so I’m familiar with agricultural and rural settings”.[129] His words index an obvious tension that requires some working through. Namely that what looks like an eternal landscape without signs of human presence—a landscape prior to or outside the human—is, in fact, the product of labor, agribusiness, and profiteering. *Bliss* appears idyllic and wild but, like all other spaces assuming such a garb, it is fully anthropogenic—it is completely an artefact of human intervention. It gains its timeless quality by effacing these signs of human activity. At a certain level, then, one’s appreciation of a photograph such as this is not actually very different from the public’s admiration of national parks and protected public lands; the very wilderness constructs Grebowicz’s work so eloquently dissects.

Even though the irony of *Bliss* is its disavowal of the anthropogenic forces involved in the creation of the landscape it comes from, I want—in light of my discussion of Grebowicz—to suggest, further, that to understand the psychic attachments one might form to stock images like *Bliss*, it is, emphatically, not adequate to write the histories of such images as coextensive with the history of natures and environments. Phylloxera might have greened the fields and laid the ground

[128] Cain, “The Story Behind the World’s Most Famous Desktop Background”.
[129] Cain.

for an image of timeless beauty. But the environmental story cannot on this count, exhaust logics of settler nostalgia and futurity. The environmental story sticks close to the terrain, to claims that wilderness areas and agrarian idylls are social constructs. Following the template of that argument, one could make a convincing case that photographs like *Bliss* become points of psychic cathexis when nature "out there" begins to disappear, when ecological and other crises render the world precarious. In such circumstances timeless images of nature can serve a therapeutic function, convincing one that the world will remain—an argument analogous to my claim about plastic flowers in the prior chapter. However, here, such an argument is inadequate.

The lineaments of settler futurity I have been describing in this chapter—the leveraging of a nostalgic past in the service of an expansionist future—draw the domestic and the intimate into the realm of large-scale historical violence. Put differently: while plastic flowers might have foreclosed a sense of impending resource crisis for the settler subject in the immediate postwar years, *Bliss* unfolds on a geographic terrain where life has already—has always-already—been foreclosed to many: to the Indian, the Mexican, the foreigner—generic nameless populations who have been exterminated in the service of national mythology. What the psyche needs to stabilize itself against, therefore, isn't an abstract threat of environmental collapse, but the very real history of the violence that psyche has been complicit in. This is how I interpret Grebowicz's riff on Freud: in the United States, national parks are defined by the pleasure principle because in the absence of that principle, national fantasies would fail to take hold. The pleasure principle forecloses history and clings to sublime or nostalgic tropes of nature *against* civilization. In this sense, the pleasure principle is perhaps also the perfect apparatus for a post-Cold War subject who believes herself to have been elevated beyond linear time into the context of deep temporal unsettlement where present and future appear uncertain. Along these lines, we might argue that without *Bliss*, without

the projected idylls of “Windows vs Walls”, and without the friendly, nephew-like portrayal of Bill Gates, national fantasies of electronic frontierism would reveal themselves for what they often are: coded appeals to a settler past that cannot be reckoned with and surfaces almost without control in the space of national discourse.

Figure 21 Goldin+Senneby, *After Microsoft*. 2007.

In light of its environmental history, then, it is useful to return to O’Rear’s fascination with vineyards precisely because even though they give the impression of idyllic wildernesses, they are in fact massively controlled agrarian landscapes. Julian Myers-Szupinska extends the implications of O’Rear’s view (without referencing the claim) in an essay on Henri Lefebvre and abstract space that touches on *Bliss*. Briefly, for Lefebvre, abstract space indexes a situation where technocratic rationality and capitalist intensification produces spatial homogeneity and leads to its abstraction

from conditions of social life.[130] Suburban America, Myers-Szupinska writes, is a good example of how this sort of abstraction was produced. A replication of generic forms not embedded in the social fabric or ecology of a place.

Even as capitalism makes abstract space an "interconnecting, totalizing force", it also leads to spatial fracturing following the overall social division of labor: "industrialized agriculture, administrative subdivision, technical specialization, and real estate speculation".[131] Myers-Szupinska illustrates this process through a video art project by Swedish artists Goldin+Senneby, titled *After Microsoft* (2007) [figure 21]. After narrating the circumstances of its production, in the video, the artists restaged O'Rear's photograph. They rehearsed the history of the vineyards and phylloxera infestation, pointing out that Microsoft didn't discover the infestation till late in the production process. The photograph, however, "fortuitously matched the brand's predetermined color scheme of blue and green, and 'the reality of real life' (as the video puts it) thereby came to serve as an aesthetic alibi for globalized production".[132] Myers-Szupinska points out that in Goldin+Senneby's version of *Bliss*, the removal of phylloxera has made the picture lose its shine, as wine production has returned to the valley. As the photograph becomes obsolete, he writes, the land enters new circuits of production, exchange, and value generation.[133] Value moves from the register of the image to the terrain itself—and potentially back again.

With an eye on histories of agrarian labor and capitalist interventions in the geography in question, one can spot clearly the strange conjunctions between the various forces—historical, aesthetic, temperamental—that I have been tracking throughout this chapter. Forces that align, sometimes neatly and sometimes not, affective investments in futurity to settler colonial tropes

[130] Myers-Szupinska, "After the Production of Space", 22.
[131] Myers-Szupinska, 23.
[132] Myers-Szupinska, 24.
[133] Myers-Szupinska, 28.

and metaphors, circulating around the natural and technological. If part of the appeal of an image like *Bliss* lies in its capacity to disavow its industrial-agrarian origins in favor of timelessness, then another part of that appeal flows quite decisively from its status as a stock image in the Corbis archive—as an image that can make a timeless appeal precisely because it is generic (and not specific to particular situations).

Bliss *as generic photograph*

Towards the end of *The Road Ahead*, in the course of a chapter where he discusses what his future home—"plugged in"—will look like, Bill Gates pauses briefly to talk about the art that will adorn his domestic space: "I'll be the first home user of one of the most unusual electronic features in my house".[134] He is referring to Corbis, a stock image company owned by Gates that, at that time, contained over a million images in its database—primarily photographs and reproductions of paintings. In the plugged-in home, one would just be able to browse this archive and "call up" any of the images it contains to adorn the walls. In 1996 Corbis acquired exclusive digital rights to the work of Ansel Adams, one of America's best-known photographers of natural landscapes. Corbis was established as a stock image company that would acquire such collections, protect the rights of artists and producers, and eventually feed into a trend of online image browsing (a habit Gates prophetically predicts with a fair degree of accuracy in the book).

As Paul Frosh writes in his book, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography, and the Visual Content Industry*, stock photography is characterized by "overlooked" images to which audiences rarely pay much attention. Stock images form a part of what is called the "visual content industry"—a term, which Frosh argues, "emphasizes the centrality of an industrialized

[134] Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, *The Road Ahead*, 257.

system of image-production to our everyday visual world…"[135] Only a handful of major agencies control the entire global distribution network of images kept in stock and "duplicated, filed, and cross-referenced" before being classified in generic, categories like "family", "nature", "abstract", "people", and "lifestyle" (among others).[136] Frosh dates the rise of the industry to the 1970s in Europe and the United States, especially through the establishment of two agencies: The Image Bank and Comstock.[137] These agencies represented what he calls the "classical period" when the acquisition and circulation of stock images was under strict control of a strong industrial system. Prior to the rise of Image Bank and Comstock, stockness was not identified coherently as a genre.

Beginning in the 1990s, the industry began to undergo another phase of transformation brought about by "rapid and radical fiscal, organizational and technological change, corporate and cultural disorientation, fragmentation, restructuring and consolidation coupled with massive growth and global wealth-generation, partial dislocation from the immediate imperatives of the advertising industry and the construction of alternative (including consumer) markets, and an experimentation with the style, and to a lesser degree the content, of images".[138] Unsurprisingly, the accelerated changes during the 1990s caused one author to liken the moment to the California gold rush.[139]

Nor is it insignificant to note, in this context, that once it did consolidate itself as a genre, the unconscious of stock photography was, for the most part, determined by whiteness—the most common images of ordinary people doing everyday things rarely feature nonwhite subjects. It is tempting (and not farfetched) to suggest, therefore, that the specific sub-domain of nature

[135] Frosh, *The Image Factory*, 3.
[136] Frosh, 4.
[137] 26
[138] Frosh, *The Image Factory*, 36.
[139] Frosh, 45.

photography within stock archives is no different than the rest of this corpus of work. Whiteness is the unsaid framework determining these archives. That Bill Gates "pioneers" a similar kind of unmarked and transcendent whiteness is, of course, only partly a happy coincidence for me. His faith in Corbis as both gatekeeper and museum for the future of global art is, as a result, worrying for the assumptions packed into what constitutes "art" worth digitizing and propagating across the world at large. Indeed, some art historians found Gates' project problematic on these grounds.

For instance, in a chapter of his book, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, Geoffrey Batchen excoriates Gates and Corbis for their understanding of history and aesthetics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a previous version of the essay was published in *Afterimage* under the suggestive title, "Manifest Data: The Image in the Age of Electronic Reproduction". In the piece, Batchen begins by taking aim at Corbis for acquiring electronic rights to the Ansel Adams catalog.[140] His nervousness about Corbis in general and Gates in particular centers on two main issues: first, a potentially totalitarian sketch of the future where Gates controls the means by which people communicate *and* the content of that communication; and second, the implications of such control for publicness and aesthetic practice.[141] "What exactly is Corbis buying and selling? What is a digital image?"[142] Microsoft's assumption, Batchen argues, is that in the future, electronic reproductions will subsume their analog originals, and that the reproduction will be the only thing worth possessing. Part of the problem here is that "Corbis's photogenics runs against the grain of photography as Ansel Adams understood and practiced it".[143] The other, related, problem is that after Corbis acquires an image like Adams' *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, it churns out one version of an electronic copy to be distributed to buyers. However, Batchen informs readers that

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[140] Batchen, *Each Wild Idea*, 147.
[141] Batchen, 148–50.
[142] Batchen, 151.
[143] Batchen, 152.

he has "seen at least half a dozen different versions by Adams based on this particular negative".[144] The deeper anxiety underlying Batchen's harsh critique surfaces near the end of the essay: "an image is no longer distinguishable from a piece of datum".[145]

Now, if it is inadequate to understand *Bliss* in purely ecological or environmental terms, it is equally inadequate to restrict one's interpretation of it to the technical medium of photography and how digital stockness might violate its principles by turning images into data. At this point we might also realize why it is not coincidental that the person caught in the center of this discussion is Ansel Adams, the photographer known for all the things Gates and Batchen ascribe to him—a towering figure in the history of American (nature) photography, an advocate for the protection of natural landscapes, and master of a complex philosophy of photographic aesthetics. These are perhaps the precise qualities that make entrepreneurs like Gates lay claim to Adams' legacy and critics like Batchen take Gates to task for doing so. Without downplaying these aspects to his legacy, let us return, briefly now, to the scene at Manzanar; a short period in Adams' career where environmental art, international politics, and imperial violence collided. Seen in the light of how I have positioned late-twentieth-century American yearnings of agrarian idylls and wilderness, it might now be evident how Ansel Adams as digital image, Ansel Adams as stock photograph in the Corbis repository both haunts the temporally fractured historical moment under consideration, and articulates how the psychic dynamics of settler nostalgia latches on the "nature" as the site of therapy for all the violence it cannot confront.

Looking at the Manzanar photographs in a post-Corbis world, one could indeed be forgiven for mistaking them for stock images. Corbis, Getty, and other members of the global visual content industry have successfully extracted the sublime from such documents to render them banal, non-

[144] Batchen, 152.
[145] Batchen, 157.

singular, and reproducible. This is precisely the anxiety Batchen airs about the transformation of image into datum. However, their rendering-banal doesn't necessarily mean that such artifacts have no power or influence as visual objects. What is interesting above all else about the two photographs by Adams I discussed at the top of this chapter [figures 16-17] is his deployment of the idea of "nature's 'enduring beauty'" as a point for reference for thinking about the "spirit of the people of Manzanar" and "the entire nation" as a whole. That *even* a space like Manzanar can be enlisted for this purpose only illustrates how corrosively and powerfully genericness—stockness—can infiltrate the psyche. My point is not that there is no beauty in the images Adams shot. Nor that to find beauty in sites of violence is somehow inherently abhorrent. Rather, I want to draw attention to the way Adams himself connects "nature's 'enduring beauty'" to the "spirit of the people of Manzanar," and "the entire nation". In so doing, Adams not only moves beyond the realm of an aesthetic appreciation of nature. He—far more importantly—*invokes* that aesthetic in an effort to reintegrate Manzanar within the narrative of an essentially harmless settler liberal order where concentration camps are dismissed or incorporated as anomaly and error.

As my reading of *Bliss*—its enduring appeal being premised on a timelessness authorized by historical erasures—has shown, the stock aesthetic, especially in the form of wilderness and agrarian idyll, facilitates problematic links between nature, peoples, and nation. Stockness allows Adams to look at Manzanar and furnish an account of the inherent capacity of incarcerated populations to endure the conditions of incarceration. Stockness makes it possible for Bill Gates to express hesitation about infrastructure as a good metaphor for the internet while, at the same time, turning precisely to the infrastructure of the settler colonial state in a nostalgic mode when discussing electronic frontiers to come. However, maybe other accounts of (the aesthetics of) genericness are also possible. It is with such a consideration of alternatives that I want to end.

VI. Conclusion (On stockness)

Throughout the preceding pages, I have been circling around the stock as a genre, making explicit some connections between its visual vocabulary and the architecture of settler-technostalgia. But I have also held back from saying too much about stockness itself. At this point, I am, I think, on firmer ground to elaborate these formulations a little further. In so doing, I want to return partly to Curtis Marez's reference to the "generic" labor of Mexican workers on farms, and partly to the reinforcement of the norm as a form of the generic in Ansel Adams' Manzanar photographs. While these two modalities might overlap, they also don't. The generic laborer circulates across a set of tasks without being tied to a specific one—like a stock image that moves from context to context without being sutured any of them indexically. The generic photograph that normalizes, however, is less versatile. It could tie together natures, peoples, and nations, but this tying is almost always in the service of power—capital, state, settler colonialism (call it what you will for the moment). This latter generic, the normalizing impulse, covers things up; it engages in acts of forgetting and erasure. Perhaps these are the reasons why this latter generic, the normalizing impulse, appeals to nostalgists and internet pioneers—the ones who want to "buy" Ansel Adams as a sign of cultural capital and turn him into datum; also the ones who want to propose a frictionless vision of the internet—smooth space; not infrastructure but market and application.

Most analysts of stock images and the visual content industry would be in agreement with these claims. From Paul Frosh to David Machin,[146] most theorists of the stock image industry would agree that stockness reinforces sameness, distributes commonality, and participates in the flattening of global culture. *Bliss* exemplifies this argument. *Bliss*: the image that effaces its own conditions of production; that is visible everywhere from California to Delhi and North Korea; that

[146] Machin, "Building the World's Visual Language".

appears photoshopped but is actually infested by pests; that organizes the symbolic logic of a company eyeing, in the late-twentieth-century, to take over a new frontier for the generation of value. *Bliss* is what Ansel Adams would have shot if he was let loose in California at the turn of the century. The stockness of *Bliss*, which appears like a harmless, timeless image suspended in the ether, contains dimensions of control, elimination, and violence—as I have pointed out above. *Bliss* is stock in the sense that Marez means when, writing about the work of Mexican American activist and litterateur Ernesto Galarza, he says: "Corporations continued to look forward to a time when technological progress would, in Galarza's ominous phrase, 'eliminate people from production,' or at least eliminate farm workers who resisted, made demands, and organized".[147] The elimination of people, of workers and dissidents, is the work of stockness as settler-nostalgia, of the latter generic, the normalizing impulse.

It is also in this space that the therapeutic function of images like *Bliss* takes hold. I have been using that word—therapy—throughout, without fleshing out its contours. However, if the politics of nostalgia in the settler-futuristic vein takes hold by reproducing images of wilderness and agrarian idylls, then we must understand the affective charge these myths have for the settler imaginary. Landscapes, pictures of unspoiled nature, and open environmental horizons serve a therapeutic function by effacing history, by providing a grammar of the future anterior, and by aiding the forgetting of infrastructure in deliriums of smooth space. That scholars keep coming back to terms like "myth" and "fantasy" in their discussions of the wilderness ideal is not incidental. Even when they skirt around its specifics, they gesture to the power idyllic images and wild spaces exert over the settler psyche. It is this power that allows Bill Gates to refuse the highway as a metaphor for the internet. It is this power that leads Ansel Adams to conceive of an

[147] Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism*, 18.

American concentration camp as a space where the enduring beauty of nature can reenergize the nation and its peoples. The work of stockness as a normalizing process is to repress ruptures and alleviate settler consciousness beyond the finitude of historical temporality: no Native elimination, no agribusiness, no exploitation, no environmental damage; only the possibility of a future to-come. But—as this dissertation argues via the varied media and objects it corrals together—settler consciousness cannot remain oblivious to the erasures it is premised upon. The process of living on in the settler system requires continuous accommodation, rationalization, and coming to terms with a history the unmarked subject cannot quite confront. Where plastic flowers offer one form of therapeutic closure to the subject, allowing her to stabilize an unpredictable world, stock images offer another, wedging open some space where—in a moment of dense temporal unsettlement, after the end of history—the "normal" subject can look upon (or overlook) a "normal" view: *This is the American Earth*.[148]

However, I want to suggest, that this normalizing impulse doesn't exhaust the capacities of stockness. Other generics are possible—generics gestured to by labor as a stock signifier or quality or energy that can be attached to different kinds of work. Marez has a more intuitive reading of generic farm labor as resistance to the status quo than me. He excavates the impressive, critical media practices of Californian farm workers in the postwar period, and examines how activists, artists, and trade unions generated counternarratives challenging the technological fantasies of agribusiness. The axis of my interest in this dissertation has been a little to the side of such evident forms of resistance. Hence, while I am in agreement with Marez's analysis, I turn to genericness not as a point resistance so much as a space from where forms of what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call "fugitivity"[149] emerge.

[148] The title of 1961 a book by Ansel Adams, published in collaboration with the Sierra Club.
[149] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.

Speculating on the generic on this register of experience, AbdouMaliq Simone writes that "the generic refers to a condition of insufficiency … The generic is an infrastructure outside the incessant need to divide things, outside the fundamental epistemological maneuvers that cut the world into specific existent conditions and then bring in the analytical tools needed to account for them".[150] Drawing on the work of French philosopher Francois Laruelle, Simone argues that where we normally tend to think of infrastructure in terms of connection, combination, and accretion, we might also consider infrastructure as "subtraction as exclusion or segregation".[151] This reading of the generic—as the capacity to subtract, hide, camouflage—owes, for Simone, a debt to blackness and its study. Refusing both the normalizing and oppositional impulse, genericness of this kind finds gaps within an existing order to exploit or make a home in (without being seen). "Generic blackness", Simone writes, "is not a place where a person resides, that can be known; it is not a project waiting to be realized. Rather, it points to the uninhabitable in all that makes itself known as exemplarily inhabitable. It extracts from what has long been viewed as uninhabitable—the slum, the wasteland—materials that can be used to enact a different sense of 'home'".[152] This other spin on the generic, this other view of stockness falls to the side of normalizing impulses. It doesn't quite resist the status quo, but points to the fact that there is a lot else going on—a lot more "stuff"—that we don't attend when we look at landscapes and events. Without taking up cudgels against the order of the day, and without giving in to a language of exposure or revelation, this other register of stockness unsettles the inhabitable. This means, as Simone points out, both a capacity to render spaces of violence and death as spaces where some form of life can emerge

[150] Simone, "Urbanity and Generic Blackness", 188.
[151] Simone, 188.
[152] Simone, 188–89.

(perhaps even flourish), *and* a capacity to show how, in those spaces where signs of violence are erased, violence persists as a dry hum in the background of the everyday.

In making a case for this other generic, I have, of course, no *actual* image to offer as a counterpoint to *Bliss*. And that is somewhat the point: there is no image or readily available grammar for generic blackness. It exists as a kind of supplement, a small tear in the fabric of consensus that requires, on our part—on the part of the viewer, the reader, the consumer—the cultivation of a different mode of attention. This will be the subject of the next chapter. For now, its perhaps enough to say that, depending on how one views it, *Bliss* simultaneously normalizes and disrupts the normalizing logics of technostalgic settler-futurity. Taken as a window to a past from which the future can be projected (Bill Gates), *Bliss* becomes tethered to the white unconscious of settler subjectivity after the end of history. But positioned as a fragment of a landscape where the scattered remains of colonial and capitalist intensification lie buried on the surface, *Bliss* unsettles what exists, what "is", and what might otherwise be—forcing us to look a little closer at all the things we miss in the march towards promised futures.

CHAPTER THREE

Ordering Attention (Renewable Frontiers and Cartographic Fantasies)

I. Introduction

In this chapter, the arc of relations I have been following—administrative, intimate, political, and historical—find their most contemporary articulation. Although I have, in the preceding pages, stayed away, for the most part, from too explicitly or strongly making references to ecological crises or the Anthropocene—which is to say, although I have thus far been refusing to frame my intervention with reference to these terms—the substance of this chapter makes that refusal a little harder to achieve. As a result, I will take a counterintuitive route that slides along the side of both this "moment" and the debates it has engendered within academia and beyond. The tone and tenor of this chapter also differs slightly from the preceding ones. In looking at the administrative media and intimate life of settler territoriality within the context of what one might tentatively agree to call "the Anthropocene", I am less interested in what this term describes than in what descriptions of it do to the picture of the world we are sketching.

The following pages take corporate productions, artistic practices, and scholarly critique as forms of administrative media. Gathering these seemingly disparate ways of engaging with the world under the heading of "administration", I hope to inquire into the ways in which each offers an account of the contemporary—how each orders the world—through varied media forms. The primary objects informing this inquiry are: a Natural Resources Defense Council report that symptomatically references "clean energy" as the "next frontier" of American prosperity; two videos produced by the Southern California Gas Company making a case for the importance of underground natural gas storage; one mapping project by the Center for Land Use Interpretation

offering what I see as a deadpan cartography of late liberal fossil fuel geography; and a handful of photojournalistic images from Southern California (primarily Los Angeles), indexing the slow violence of living next to oil refineries and other harmful energy infrastructures.

My analysis of these objects is mediated by another set of objects—texts—that provide a frame for understanding emergent scholarly responses to resource scarcity and energy crisis. What, these texts ask, is the most adequate language for studying the effects of the Anthropocene? What kinds of "new" politics are enabled by attending to materiality—of oil, coal, carbon, water, wind, and the like? The spread of Anthropocene discourse in academia—the human and social sciences especially—has spurred a sense of urgency, which has, in turn, given rise to several allied (and rival) attempts to find the best way of attending to contemporary society and politics. I look, in the following pages, at two tendencies: the energy humanities and a movement towards descriptions of "resource aesthetics". In both cases, I am intrigued by the ways in which academic clarion calls for a "new" politics suited to times of crises hew close to a very "old" language of description—primarily Fredric Jameson's mapping of the textual unconscious, and his subsequent propagation of the method of cognitive mapping. The problem (or point) for me is less that calls for newness end up relying on an old Marxist framework. Rather, I want to know what purchase the new has and what assumptions the old hides. Specifically: why do the energy humanities, theories of resource aesthetics, and Jamesonian Marxism all invest so much in the politics of attention? What does attention contribute to the political and what does it foreclose? Why is attending to the right sorts of things assumed to be the starting point for a "proper" politics in the Anthropocene?

In a certain sense, as I will argue in greater detail below, it isn't just scholarship that is obsessed with attentiveness and its affordances. Corporate media productions, too, want us to focus on one thing (clean energy and new frontiers) while looking away from others (perennial toxicity

and faulty storage). Where such media deploy attention in the service of maintaining the status quo, social theory, by uncovering, revealing, or mapping the present, invests in orienting us—audiences, readers, publics—to the "right" sorts of things; things that are ostensibly capable of effecting political change. I think that in their own ways, corporate media and social theory seek to order attention in the service of particular visions of politics—to either shore up an existing order or to (hopefully) produce a new order of things.

Throughout what follows, my use of words like "politics", "the political", and "order" is informed by Cedric Robinson's *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*. As Erica Edwards remarks in her foreword to a new edition of the work, Robinson was interested in how "the political came to mark the limits of thought on what constitutes social cohesion and political organization".[1] Robinson begins by noting that the concept of the political can often be hard to pin down. The conventional objects of concern for political science—governments, bureaucracies, policies—are "not the substance of the political but its phenomenology" expressed through "figures and institutions".[2] In its most precise (but also most complicated) definition therefore, the political is both "an instrument for ordering society and that order itself. It is both a general way of acting on things and the consequences which follows having acted upon things".[3] Robinson helps us see that much of the work "we" do as scholars, practitioners, managers, or bureaucrats, simultaneously provides an account of the world and implements that account.

As a result, theory, corporate, or aesthetic practice doesn't merely map a terrain to figure out how things are aligned. They also provide a certain sense of alignment. Robinson's comments blur distinctions between an analysis of order and the act of ordering. Sometimes, the two occur

[1] Edwards, "Foreword", x.
[2] Robinson, *The Terms of Order*, 7.
[3] Robinson, 7.

in tandem. Holding on to this crucial insight, by using words like "politics" and "order", I am, therefore pointing to the figures and institutions that order the social *and* the nature of that order itself. While remaining cautiously aware that "politics" is not equivalent to "the political", I do play fast and loose with the two terms to get where I want to go: the proposition that the social is ordered not merely by institutional apparatuses that legislate its form (ministers, bureaucrats, administrators), but also by academic disciplines seeking to understand, critique, and overturn that form (here represented by energy humanities and resource aesthetics).

To this extent I turn to the work of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, as well as photojournalistic images of life amidst toxicity, to offset the politics of order; to think with dis/order and inattention as ways of surviving the world—of making the world a little bearable, and of making a home in the uninhabitable. Some of the themes centered on generic stockness that surfaced at the end of the previous chapter thus reappear here. What might it mean to live in the Anthropocene and grapple neither with politics or attention, but to try, minimally, to go on living and sustaining one's lifeworld? I want, modestly, to rescue such desires from accusations of apathy or ignorance. To offer the possibility that the act of sustaining one's precarious lifeworld requires the cultivation of forms of inattentiveness which confound both corporate and state visions of smoothly functioning systems where nothing can go wrong, and scholarly suggestions that smooth systems actually hide their inner workings from the eyes of ordinary folk. To what degree I succeed in substantiating these claims, remains to be seen.

II. Energy futures and the corporate calibration of attention

Renewing the frontier

The frontier narrative underpinning American imaginaries of the future doesn't disappear from the set of concerns animating this chapter. In fact, the ways in which corporations order attention in the face of ecological crises only extend frontier rhetorics surrounding optimistic futurity. With a critique of fossil fuels and the hydrocarbon economy now at the front and center of the agenda for global governance, environmentalism can no longer be brushed aside as a purely regressive or anti-growth ideology (conservative denialism aside). For the most part, increasing consciousness of ecological damage has required that administrative bodies develop novel modes of justifying the endurance of the status quo without radically revising parameters of what ought to constitute life. In this context, I am intrigued by how administrative media shore up the present through appeals to a future built on clean energy and renewable resources. The specific kinds of energy at play are of less importance than the rhetorical invocation of a "next frontier" awaiting occupation through clean energy. This section attempts to tease out the affective and psychic structure of this vision by working through a report and two videos where the reigning order of things is naturalized by frontier tropes. The analysis will also reveal, I think, the mechanisms by which a particular politics of attention plays into the sustenance of futuristic imaginaries of a "next frontier" in which the national imaginary becomes attached to "natural", "renewable", and "clean" resources.

To begin with, consider this image [figure 22], which appears in a September 2017 report published by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), authored by Vignesh Gowrishankar and Amanda Levin, titled *America's Clean Energy Frontier: The Pathway to a Safer Climate Future*. The cover image suggestively deploys a stock photograph of the American continent at night, illustrating the patterns and extent of electrification across the landmass. The bright light

emanating from the background—recalling, in some ways, the use of such light in the Manzanar images of Ansel Adams that I discussed in the previous chapter—bequeaths the image temporality: future-orientation. The backlight projects forward—a time to come when not only will all of America be bathed in light, but the its source shall be "clean". The invocation of frontierism and safety in the title of the report, embossed in bold white near the top of the photograph, complete the picture (so to speak) and make, once again, a connection between expansion and futurity in the tradition I have been tracking throughout.

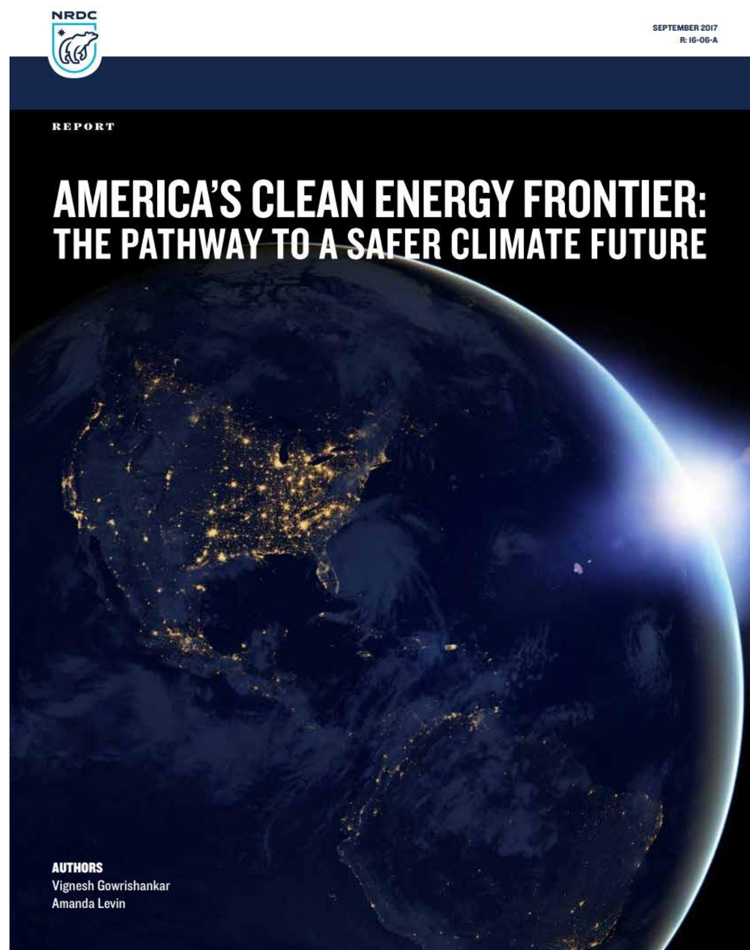


Figure 22 Cover page of *America's Clean Energy Frontier: The Pathway to a Safer Future*. NRDC. 2017.

Now consider the image in context. The report makes an emphatic case for a 70% reduction in American fossil fuel use by 2050 by focusing on some key areas: reduction of overall national

energy demands through energy efficient technology; expansion of renewable energy activity across all scales of use; displacement and reduction of fossil fuels in domestic, transportation, and commercial sectors; decarbonization of the economy; and modernization of the electrical grid.[4] Concerns about climate change heavily preoccupy the report—spurred, in no small part, by the Trump administration's decision to pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Accord. Thus, a sense of panicked urgency is clearly visible in a section titled "Clean Energy: The Next American Frontier", with the authors writing that "standing idle is not an option", "this is an all-hands-on-deck moment", and "the choice is clear".[5]

The report is also rife with visualizations of the future based on the NRDC's projective models. For instance, one image [figure 23], under the heading "Exhibit 7: Time Line and Key Milestones for the Deployment of the Principal Clean Energy Resources Under the NRDC Core Scenario Pathway", undertakes a year-by-year analysis (from 2017-2050) of energy efficiency in the American economy as it transitions from fossil fuels to other sources: "new building shells 70% more efficient than in 2014 [by 2036]"; "70% of electricity from renewables [by 2040]"; "new appliances 50% more efficient than in 2014 [by 2050]".[6] The next exhibit, on "Energy Use from 2015 to 2050" is a colorful graph of projections depicting depleting amounts of conventional fuel in the economy and major energy savings resulting from that trend. Exhibit 9, similarly, charts the steady decline of fossil fuels and natural gas by 2050.

Doubtless the telos of linear historical progress is amply evident on the very surfaces of these images. Moreover, this linear narrative plots quite easily onto models the social and human sciences have long critiqued as underpinning legacies of colonial-civilizational tropes. Both the

[4] Gowrishankar and Levin, "America's Clean Energy Frontier", 5–10.
[5] Gowrishankar and Levin, 11.
[6] Gowrishankar and Levin, 32.

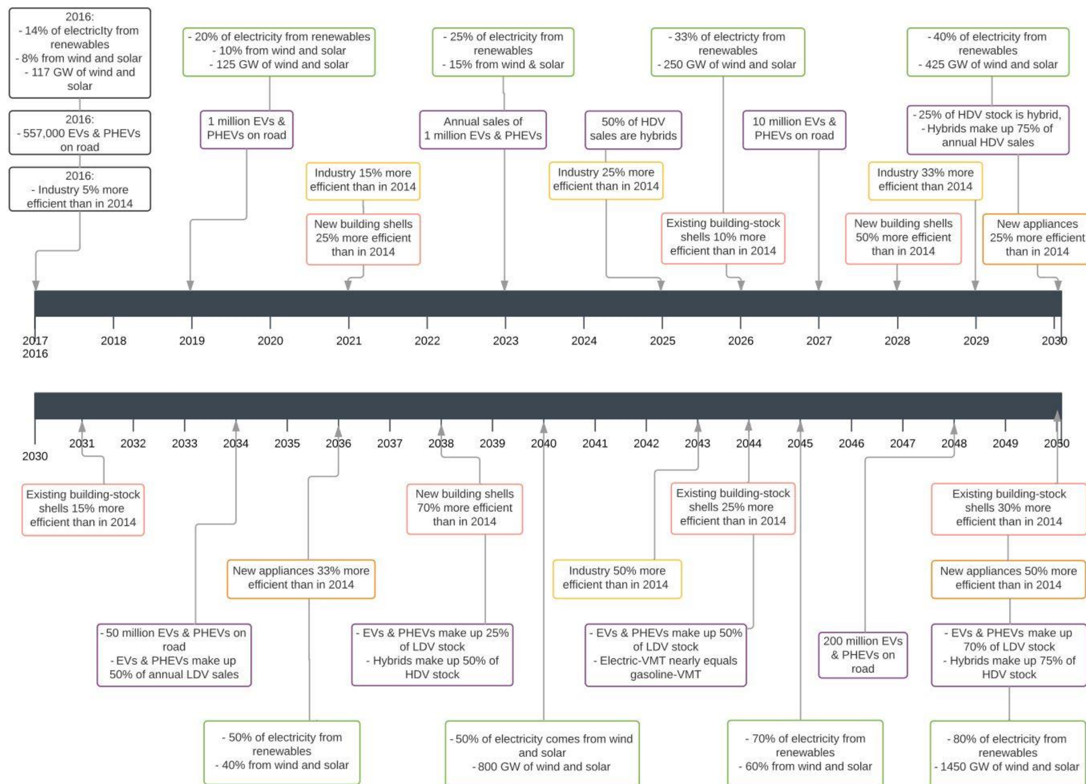
confidence of national transition towards better futures and the repeated rhetorical invocation of "by 2050" as a realistic cutoff date for that transition rely on a startlingly simple view of "the system" and how it can be leveraged towards other ends—even when the government is actively working against such alternatives. However, for the moment, I am less interested in picking apart the assumptions that create this view of the system than I am in trying to understand how the view is produced in the first place. The coherent picture of the national-domestic in the NRDC report is underwritten by the figure of frontierism to which the report's title and accompanying photograph gesture. The "clean energy frontier" and the "next frontier" imagined in these artifacts, though oriented toward a definitive future (2050), draw sustenance from the past—a past when the frontier served to erase the violence of American imperial progress in the West by offering the image of national cohesion—framed, like NRDC report, in terms of exploration and overcoming.

The frontier was always-already about the future and the nation. This is the trope that is reworked by the report at hand. Consider, in this context, Mark Rifkin's positioning of the matter in his book, *Manifesting America: The Imperial Construction of U.S. National Space*:

> The claim that the territory on the frontier was part of a clearly delimited national whole validated government authority over a distant and heterogeneous social landscape, helping to make possible the following: the management and militarized disciplining of unruly settlers demanding title to lands, greater political representation, and more favorable commercial policy; the acquisition of states' "western lands", recoding them as federal "public lands" so as to make them available as payment to veterans and saleable as a way of financing the general government; and the regulation of the terms of land purchase in ways that often enabled extensive speculation and absentee landlordism by eastern elites. … The image of U.S. territorial coherence, therefore,

mediated class, regional, federalist, and diplomatic tensions by treating the supposedly incontestable obviousness of domestic space as a physical manifestation of the ideal of a national union constructed of, by, and for the people.[7]

EXHIBIT 7: TIME LINE AND KEY MILESTONES FOR THE DEPLOYMENT OF THE PRINCIPAL CLEAN ENERGY RESOURCES UNDER THE NRDC CORE SCENARIO PATHWAY



With the right policies we can achieve or even surpass these goals. In the absence of adequate policies, while there may be meaningful progress, it will be uneven in sectors and regions, and will likely fall short in the long-term, while some near-term investments may prove to be distractions or impediments.

Figure 23 From p7 of *America's Clean Energy Frontier: The Pathway to a Safer Future*. NRDC. 2017.

Rifkin is suggesting that the promise of a frontier awaiting exploration, conquest, and exploitation almost became the precondition for establishing a coherent sense of national domesticity. Although the frontier was, in some sense, *beyond* realms of settler territorial claim-making, its incorporation became the ground for authorizing a particular ideal of "Americanness" defined, among other things, by the federal control of public lands, and mythical ideas of national-popular regeneration.

[7] Rifkin, *Manifesting America*, 9.

The spatial analytic present here must also be complemented by Rifkin's temporal analytic as it surfaces in his *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*. In the opening pages of that book, he argues it is insufficient for political criticism to counter tropes that render indigenous peoples' primitive by insisting on their contemporaneousness and their coevalness to modernity. While it is admirable to critique conceptualizations of Native populations as existing in a premodern time, insistence on their modernity also implicates them in the future-orientation of settler society in a way these populations might resist. Which is to say: when the Indian "becomes modern" she is also assumed to become well-adjusted to the very imperial, settler colonial ideological structures that continue to expel, racialize, and marginalize her. In both spatial and temporal dimensions, figurations of the frontier produce the nation as suffused by strict spatiotemporal unity—where "we" Americans come together to recognize the crises facing "us" and propel onward to other frontiers.

Polemically we might say: when organizations like the NRDC repeat the trope of frontiers as horizons awaiting conquest and exploration, they implicitly extend a settler colonial figuration of space that has become deeply ingrained in the American psyche. Ingrained enough, if we take Rifkin seriously, to have been relegated to the background—to that occluded layer of historical experience against which the entire drama of American progress has unfolded, subsuming violence in the service of narratives of national progress and linear growth. In Rifkin's words: "the background indicates what is held constant in order to perceive movement, including the passage of time. It serves less as an inert setting than as the condition of possibility for registering action, change, survival. … Absent a background, nothing can figure in or as the foreground and be available for attention, perception, or acknowledgment".[8] It should be evident how, following this

[8] Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 11.

line of argument, we might also rewrite the history of the frontier—and settler society generally—as one centered on the politics of attention. The frontier produces homogeneous national-domestic territory by effacing its existence as a territory annexed into the heartland—dissolving into the background. Talk of new energy frontiers are not that different from the historical settler colonial rewriting of frontier expansion as national mythology. If the sublimation of death and ecological devastation in the West furnished the rationale for an image of industrial, hardworking American people in the past, then the rhetoric of unbounded (clean) energy and a modernized, efficient grid hides the costs of annexing this "next frontier".

We might also note—only half-facetiously—a structural affinity between the "old" frontier and this new one, which is revealed through the rhetoric of "renewability". For Turner, the Western frontier, as both territorial and imagined space, functioned as a site of renewal—a space where the American project, its national ideals, and its spiritual destiny could be re-energized when in danger of exhaustion. This was one of the major sources of the progressivist optimism about the frontier in Turner's rendering of it. That much we know. What is curious is the manner in which most articulations of energy frontiers—including the one in the NRDC report—unconsciously extend and literalize some of the critical terms and ideas informing the Turner thesis. "Renewability" and "energizing" are, for instance, both rendered painfully literal in this latter framework. Defined by renewable resources, the clean energy frontier, is also, therefore, a sort of permanent frontier—a frontier that can never be exhausted, and that is, by definition, renewable. The futuristic references to "by 2050" and the modernized grid, I am suggesting, then, take hold less through numerical projection than this deep, structural linking of old and new frontier imaginaries. Here we find another version of the nostalgia I diagnosed at the bottom of settler imaginaries of technological futures. While for internet pioneers, nostalgia harkened back to wilderness areas and agrarian

idylls, for the zealous proponents of clean energy, it is the psychic and affective charge of renewability and energy that constitutes visions of the future.

This other frontier takes hold by training the eyes—of bureaucrats, citizens, and politicians alike—to see in specific ways, to attend to specific things: to recognize everything consumerism and capitalism allows without which life as "we" know it would end. Thus, even relatively forward thinking and radical propositions like those of the NRDC cannot help but dangle the carrot that in 2050, the substitution of fossil fuels by clean energy will not fundamentally change anything for the worse. No reckoning is called for as far as questions of scarcity, exhaustion, or the loss of boosterish enthusiasm is concerned. In this sense, the charts, graphs, and images I have referred to, quite cleverly divert the eye away from what Jennifer Wenzel calls "overburden"—there is no waste here. Locating overburden as a technique in the repertoire of resource extraction, Wenzel writes: "In mining parlance, the technical term for the layers of dirt and rock that must be excavated to get down to the valuable minerals below is overburden. … Overburden is topsoil, sand, and clay; sedimentary rock; surface water and groundwater. Everything in the way of paydirt. Overburden, I want to suggest, is an aesthetic judgment as well as an economic one: a way of seeing and a way of imagining what can't be seen".[9]

Hence, "by 2050" the system achieves perfection: excess matter is recycled, carbon is captured, and oil or gas emissions are controlled. To unravel how this frontier imaginary is erected on the basis of ordering the social through a particular politics of attention, I turn now, to two videos produced by the Southern California Gas Company. The videos—which are an argument for the importance of underground natural gas storage in the region—deploy a series of visual and linguistic strategies to channel public attention away from the subsurface to the material

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[9] Wenzel, "Afterword".

affordances of plenitude on the surface. We are told that there is a trade-off for living well—but it isn't something we ought to spend too much time being worried about.

Natural gas and the present as quasi-event

It is likely that before the leak in Aliso Canyon in late 2015, very few among the American public at large had heard of methane—a gas that has only gained large-scale traction in discourse on climate change in the past few years. Writing in *The New Republic* in April 2016, Emma Foehringer Merchant pointed out that methane is currently "having a moment"[10] at the forefront of efforts to tackle climate change. A relatively more recent entrant into the debate on climate change than carbon dioxide, methane is increasingly coming under the public scrutiny because of its centrality in the global transition from fossil fuels to natural gas. As Merchant points out, once in the atmosphere, methane breaks down relatively quickly and poses few direct risks to human beings. Many in the oil and natural gas industry hail the gas for having "virtually no contaminants" and making a "low environmental impact".[11] For these reasons, it is often proffered as a better alternative to crude oil. However, as Sonia Shah argues in her book on the history of oil: "Because methane sucks up so much more heat than carbon dioxide, even if small amounts leak into the air—unburned—they could intensify global warming by twenty-three times more than an equivalent amount of carbon dioxide".[12]

Methane becomes diffused in the atmosphere largely because of leaks that are endemic to pipelines. Shah quotes a 2001study by the International Energy Agency which stated that by 2010 methane would cause the same amount of warming as the burning of 3.8 billion barrels of oil.

[10] Merchant, "Why Methane Is Having a Moment".
[11] Shah, *Crude*, 172.
[12] Shah, 172.

More recently, the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) reported that, in the course of extraction, production, and transmission, California alone loses 75,000 metric tons of methane every year, while companies nationally lose almost $1 million in revenue annually because of leaks. Equally importantly, the EDF also pointed out that when natural gas leaks, far more toxic substances than methane are released into the atmosphere, including xylene, benzene, and hydrogen sulfide.[13] All of these factors lead experts like Matt Watson of the EDF to conclude that the benefits of natural gas are undercut entirely by the amounts of methane spewed into the atmosphere as a result of industrial activity: "The promise of natural gas as a lower carbon alternative to coal depends fundamentally on addressing methane emissions. … Methane emissions undermine the climate advantage that natural gas can have over coal—that's just a basic fact".[14]

Another basic fact is that events like the leak in Aliso Canyon are magnifications of a hidden potential ensconced within all oil and gas infrastructure. Infrastructures leak. Sometime after the Aliso Canyon disaster was discovered, anthropologist Nicholas Kawa testified to the banality of this observation in an "Object Lesson" for readers of *The Atlantic*, pithily titled "Gas Leaks Can't be Tamed".[15] Recalling a high school job he had checking gas lines for a company in the suburbs of Chicago, Kawa wrote that although he documented all the leaks he found, his employers "only immediately fixed those leaks that were within five feet of an enclosure". Eventually he realized that "the bulk of gas leaks identified are left leaking". He went on to add that: "No matter how much work we do to police them, there will be gas leaks for as long as there are gas lines".[16] Scholars working on infrastructures in different disciplines have all made the same point—almost all infrastructure around us is incomplete, partially broken, and in need of constant,

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[13] Burga, "Rollbacks to National Standards Jeopardize California's Efforts to Reduce Methane Emissions".
[14] Quoted in Merchant, "Why Methane Is Having a Moment".
[15] Kawa, "Gas Leaks Can't Be Tamed".
[16] Kawa.

repetitive repair and maintenance. Nor is Kawa the only one to make this assertion. Claims about the perennial incompletion and leakiness of infrastructure are among the most basic insights of infrastructure studies.[17] I will refer to just one example that is also instructive for thinking about methane leaks in Los Angeles.

In an ethnography of the social life of water in Mumbai, Nikhil Anand develops a subtle account of the politics of leakage. He argues that "the dense historical accretions of technology, material, and social life that inform hydraulic infrastructures in Mumbai challenge the audit cultures of neoliberal government".[18] Anand emphasizes that one must not think of leaks as either endemic to "underdeveloped" parts of the world, or as evidence of corrupt bureaucracy. Instead, to get at the heart of leaky politics, one should understand that leaks are intensely difficult to "apprehend, locate, and repair".[19] Anand persuasively demonstrates that all parties involved—officials, consumers, and suppliers—know that infrastructures like water pipelines leak. Even when they try to mitigate losses and measure quantities, these actors remain conscious of the various, complex social lifeworlds that leaks enable. Faced with creaky pipes and broken meters, maintenance workers and repairmen deploy local knowledge to solve technical problems. Leaks that remain unaccounted for, for instance, are often redirected or harnessed to meet requirements of low income households and residents of slums.[20]

Such focus on the ontological leakiness of infrastructures goes some distance in blurring distinctions between catastrophic events and wider geological landscapes of slow diffusion which are less immediately perceptible to eyes or bodies. One major difference between Anand's case

[17] See, for example: Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure"; Larkin, *Signal and Noise*; Graham and Thrift, "Out of Order"; Anand, *Hydraulic City*; Starosielski, *The Undersea Network*.
[18] Anand, "Leaky States", 307.
[19] Anand, 308.
[20] While this account is sympathetic, for a more sustained critique of Anand and infrastructural obsessions with leakiness, see: Gupta-Nigam, "How Systems Cohere".

and mine is the substance itself. Leaking hydraulic infrastructures might require modes of apprehension, but water itself is visible. Gas—particularly invisible, odorless gases—presents greater difficulties for the perceptual apparatus. To sense or feel its presence in the environmental surround one may have to look at other objects, signs, or scenes that index its presence. Discussions of methane for example, might have to look closely at the infrastructures associated with the oil and gas industry. To unravel this dispersed geography as a mundane presence in everyday life, there is perhaps no better place to turn to than Los Angeles.

A city quite literally built on oil, LA exemplifies the constant interplay between phenomenological experience and the side-effects of systemic abstraction, especially in terms of its toxic fallout. All pervasive yet seldom "seen" (I will complicate this logic later), the urban landscape of the city is draped in leaky infrastructures—often concealed, often in your face. Writers grappling with the petroculture of Los Angeles repeatedly invoke the phrase "out of sight, out of mind" to capture the relationship inhabitants of the city have with its oil and gas infrastructure. On the vertical axis of the city, these infrastructures disappear deep beneath the surface of the earth, for both drilling and storing natural gas. In fact, Aliso Canyon was a storage disaster. The site that leaked was one where gas was being held for future use. Subsurface lifeworlds are, we might think, occluded to the eye—except for the oil rigs and derricks which reach skyward and scatter themselves all around the landscape of the city. On this horizontal axis, infrastructure is placed out of sight, out of mind either by camouflage (derricks dressed up as synagogues and office buildings), or concealment through ubiquity.

Aliso Canyon exemplifies the visual logic of oil and natural gas in much of Southern California. In the aftermath of the catastrophic leak in the area in 2015, a long *Newsweek* report began by quoting from a 2008 real estate advice column published in the *Los Angeles Times*, which

discussed the upscale neighborhood surrounding the facility: "Once inhabited primarily by grazing sheep, today this calm outpost of Los Angeles, graced with lush parks, attracts residents seeking sanctuary from the urban hubbub … An abundance of green space, including Palisades Park, which bisects the community, and Porter Ranch, Limekiln Canyon, Aliso Canyon and Moonshine Canyon parks, provides hiking, biking and a rural feel".[21] Alexander Nazaryan, the reporter who wrote the *Newsweek* story, nicely summarized the hollowness of such rhetoric about finding rural idyll in the outskirts of Los Angeles:

> Until very recently, you would have had to do a considerable amount of Internet sleuthing to discover that Porter Ranch, home to 30,000 people, is not exactly the pristine, quasi-rural paradise promised by its developers and boosters. The hills that frame its Instagram-ready backdrop also cradle the Aliso Canyon Storage Facility, a parcel of 3,600 acres in which the Southern California Gas Company has turned 115 defunct oil wells into an underground warehouse that can hold 80 billion cubic feet of natural gas. On October 23, workers discovered that a 7-inch casing in one of those wells had ruptured, and that well has been continuously pouring methane into the atmosphere, at a peak rate of 60,000 kilograms per hour (the rate of loss has been reduced since then). A counter on the website of the Environmental Defense Fund estimates that, as of Thursday morning, the total loss has been more than 79,000 metric tons of methane sent into the air above Los Angeles.[22]

This strategy of foregrounding claims to rural openness only to puncture their basis in fact, was repeated in a number of media reports on the Aliso Canyon disaster, including a documentary by

[21] Wedner, "Wind-Swept but Comfy on L.A.'s Fringe".
[22] Nazaryan, "How Methane Gas Turned California's Porter Ranch into a Ghost Town".

Vice News, called *Crude LA: California's Urban Oil Fields*.[23] After pointing out that government officials and administrators don't pay attention to the health risks posed by the vast network of oil rigs and underground natural gas reservoirs beneath Los Angeles' surface, Daniel Hernandez, the presenter, says: "The hillsides just north of Porter Ranch [the neighborhood primarily affected by the leak] look almost like a park. They actually house the Aliso Canyon storage facility—a huge network of underground wells owned by a utility company called SoCal Gas. … This facility was a major oil field until it was depleted in the 1970s and turned into a storage site". The visuals accompanying Hernandez's narration frame Aliso Canyon through shots of idyllic green fields, underneath which, invisible to the eye, a vast apparatus of the natural gas industry quietly works [figure 24].

In such narratives, the leak emerges as a significant moment when hidden forces are unearthed and let loose in the atmosphere. The matter becomes even more sinister once we realize that the threat to domestic security posed in this instance comes not from a materially tangible toxic substance, but from diffused gaseous presences permeating, quite literally, a netherworld residents are unaware of or just don't pay enough attention to. That rolling green hills, plush homes, and golf courses can sit atop a world of almost primordial churning is unthinkable; the ultimate kind of visual deception. Massive infrastructures hide and work seamlessly (except not) under the feet of unsuspecting people going about their day. The leak might have rendered such occlusion visible and perceptible, but in the thrall to analyze the effects of the leak, a larger question has gone relatively uninterrogated: how did inattention become the norm?

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[23] VICE News, *Crude L.A.*

Figure 24 Screenshot from *Crude L.A.: California's Urban Oil Fields*. VICE News. 2016.

Hernandez is, of course, correct to point out that underground infrastructures are largely not attended to, either by officials or locals who live in surrounding areas. Even failing infrastructures barely cause a flutter until a certain threshold of damage is crossed, as it was in Aliso Canyon. There are, I think, two sources, each quite distinct from the other, driving the logic of inattention to (often toxic) infrastructures. First, the company in charge of maintaining the Aliso Canyon facility works hard to keep the underground out of the public's field of vision. This misdirection of the eye away from the subsurface is essential to the smooth functioning of otherwise problematic sociotechnical systems. Second, inattention is also part and parcel of learning to live amidst the debris of hazardous systems, an act of cognitive backgrounding which structures one's ability to persist in the world. This is truer for working-class people who inhabit neighborhoods in cities like Los Angeles where toxic infrastructure isn't draped in idyllic hillsides but brutally occupies public space. (I will have more to say about this in section V).

After the leak in Aliso Canyon, the Southern California Gas Company (SoCal Gas) uploaded several videos on its YouTube channel which, without explicitly stating it, attempted some "damage control" to reassure the public about the inherent safety of natural gas. I want to focus on two of these videos to sketch a fuller picture of how underground infrastructures blend into the everyday, and the rhetorical strategies by which they are "secured" for the public at large. The first discusses the process by which natural gas is stored underground, while the second speaks more directly to the importance of Aliso Canyon for SoCal Gas and residents of Southern California. I am intrigued not merely by how these videos invoke the underground as a controlled environment, but also by how they speak to a systemic totality which *requires* stored natural gas to keep performing smoothly. SoCal Gas reinforces, on a visual as well as linguistic register, the centrality of subsurface storage to the normal "carrying on" of life on the surface. The ontological leakiness of infrastructure is (unsurprisingly) excised from this narrative and replaced by a flawless aesthetic guiding the mechanical process of extraction, compression, storage, and recirculation. Images of experts and smooth, shining infrastructure, guide the eye away from potential threats below the ground and towards an expansive sky, vibrant urban life, and a consumer utopia powered by the underground. In a strange way, by showing us a particular view of the underground, SoCal Gas actually urges us to look elsewhere—at the things we value. The videos effectively demand that we cognitively background subsurface infrastructure because, as the proverbial saying goes, "there's nothing to see here".

The first video, titled *How Underground Natural Gas Storage Works*, runs to just over two minutes [figure 25].[24] It depicts the process for storing natural gas underground. It also produces temporal frameworks within which such processes can be understood. At the outset, the narrator

[24] Southern California Gas Company (SoCalGas), *How Underground Natural Gas Storage Works*.

informs us that "since the 1940s, underground gas storage has played a big part in reliably and safely meeting the energy needs" of customers. Later, she says: "Natural gas is stored deep underground inside porous sandstone beneath a layer of impermeable caprock, creating a natural storage reservoir. These reservoirs have naturally held gas and oil securely for millions and millions of years". A couple of things are worth taking note of here. First, the juxtaposition of historic and geologic time—"since the 1940s" and "millions and millions of years". Although widely disparate, these timescales are crucial to the rhetorical trope of security undergirding the entire video. "The 1940s" and "millions of years" might represent vastly divergent timescales, but each periodization justifies a different logic of security, aided by the visuals accompanying them. When the narrator discusses the historical arc from the 1940s onward, we see images of a natural gas facility where workers, technicians, and engineers are going about their day as usual. Conversely, when she invokes the geologic temporality of millions of years, the video literally moves underground. As the camera pans down from the well head to underground infrastructure, documentary images of a natural gas facility yield to animations of underground geologic formations—sandstone, and the impermeable caprock referenced above.

In each case, the visual illustrates particular logics of security. Images of experts accompanying the historical timescale serve to humanize an abstract system, asking viewers to repose faith in the capacities of technocratic actors. The suggestion is taken to its logical conclusion in another SoCal Gas video, titled *Aliso Canyon Infrastructure, Technology, and Safety Enhancements* [figure 26].[25] This video, uploaded in October 2016—one year after the leak—rehearses a set of human-supervised technological methods by which the Aliso Canyon facility is rendered visually transparent. For instance, the narrator informs viewers that the facility is

[25] Southern California Gas Company (SoCalGas), *Aliso Canyon Infrastructure, Technology, and Safety Enhancements*.

equipped with “a newly installed fence-line methane detection system with eight pairs of infrared methane monitors: solar powered, with backup battery, as well as optics that compensate for dirt, rain, and fog”. Information of any leaks are fed immediately to the Aliso Canyon operations center, staffed 24/7. Additionally, twice every day, technicians “visually examine” each well in the site using technological prosthesis even as they “look, listen, and smell’ the operational wells to make sure all is okay”.

The “frenzy of the visible”[26] unleashed here as a response to environmental catastrophe is intriguing precisely because it strives actively to combine the human and the technological, hoping to persuade viewers that each component of the system acts as a check on the other—where technology fails, sight, smell, and hearing can potentially compensate. Where human perception isn’t up to the mark, infrared imagery can pick up signals of potential leaks. “The 1940s” in both videos, serves as the rhetorical marker of a period we can faithfully consign to the age of the expert—it isn’t so far back in the past that we doubt its modern promise, and it isn’t so close to our present that we suspect its efficacy. No doubt subconsciously, this periodization also harks back to a moment of utopian possibility about technology and the interface between humans and machines, including the emergent cybernetic movement which sowed the seeds of posthuman culture.

But what about the “millions and millions” of years? Here an entirely different logic of security appears to be at work. That the documentary image gives ground to animation is not incidental. Even as we see an illustration of storage technology boring deep under the surface, the narrator informs us that the space we are intervening in is actually a “natural storage reservoir” where gas has been “naturally held” for millions of years.

[26] Comolli, “Machines of the Visible”.

In other words, if the surface is framed in terms of human-technological collaboration, the subsurface (though penetrated by technology) is nonetheless rendered as an organic, natural storage vault. The animation sequence is critical for delivering this message because it allows us to visualize a clean segregation of geological layers—impermeable caprock and porous sandstone. Animation, in this instance, excises the dirt and messiness of real geological formations in favor of an idealized and playful image of the underground. The camera zooms into the "natural storage reservoir", which is aptly centered in the frame. We see a yellow line—a storage pipe inserted from above ground—that, by no coincidence, occupies the very center of the frame [figure 27].

Figure 25 Screenshot from *How Underground Natural Gas Storage Works*. SoCal Gas. 2016.

Figure 26 Screenshot from *Aliso Canyon Infrastructure, Technology, and Safety Enhancements*. SoCal Gas. 2016.

Centeredness only reinforces the logic of security by visually conferring a certain coherence and stability to the frame. The alignment of the pipe and the natural reservoir not only makes the underground visible, but also connotes an intrinsic organicity to the work of storage. Where the expert capacity of engineers and infrared thermal cameras provides a sense of security on the surface, the subsurface derives legitimacy from the eternal, unchanging (but also beautifully organized) poetry of geologic formation. Unlike the surface, the underground is held firmly at a distance. Geologic temporality is extrinsic to human life. Rendered perceptible and visual through animation, geologic formations authorize technologies of subsurface storage because “nature” has already been doing it for millions and millions of years. Thus, paradoxically, we are urged simultaneously to trust the combined power of humans and apparatuses populating natural gas facilities above ground, *and* repose faith in subsurface storage as a mere extension of the work of nature over millennia.

The rhetorical tropes invoked repeatedly by the visuals and narration in these videos are reminiscent of observations made by cultural historian Rosalind Williams in her landmark book

Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination. Referring to the figurative tropes used to represent the underground in the nineteenth century, in this book Williams argues that subterranean worlds provide a "prophetic view into our environmental future" by providing the "model of an artificial environment from which nature has been effectively banished".[27] In the nineteenth century, two decisive developments framed dominant imaginaries of the underground: rampant mining activity and resource extraction on the one hand, and the rise of geology as an academic discipline on the other. Lewis Mumford, one of the pioneers of technological and urban studies, pointed out that mines, for instance, were sustained by artifice. Miners required both artificial light and artificial ventilation to work effectively below the surface. The underground in such visions, is an inorganic space, a space where manufacture (in the sense of artifice) is laid bare.[28]

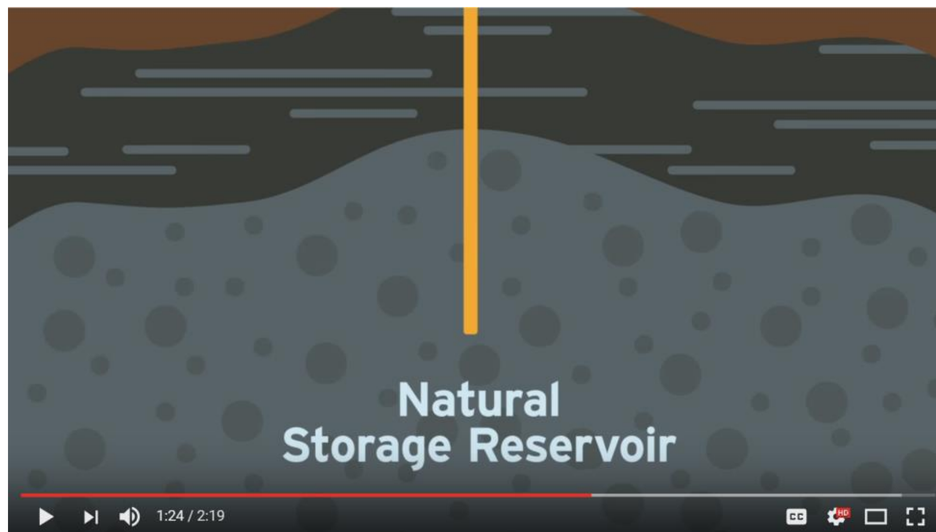

Figure 27 Screenshot from *How Underground Natural Gas Storage Works*. SoCal Gas. 2016.

Williams evocatively describes it in the following way:

[27] Williams, *Notes on the Underground*, 4.
[28] Williams, 4–6.

> The defining characteristic of the subterranean environment is the exclusion of nature—of biological diversity, of seasons, of plants, of the sun and the stars. The subterranean laboratory takes to an extreme the ecological simplification of modern cities, where it sometimes seems that humans, rats, insects, and microbes are the only remaining forms of wildlife. The guiding principle of this literary experiment is, therefore, what the critic Fredric Jameson has termed 'world-reduction': 'a principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality, something like a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification'.[29]

The language here is richly suggestive of an emergent consciousness of the subsurface as a space which can be controlled, manipulated, and turned instrumentally towards human use. *How Underground Natural Gas Storage Works* approximates this logic uncannily. Remember now, the sentence at hand: "These reservoirs have naturally held gas and oil securely for millions and millions of years". Both words—"naturally" and "securely"—are crucial for understanding what is going on in this video. I suggested above that this sentence frames the subterranean as a timeless geological space devoid of environment (but infused with organicity). But there's more. The clean representation of geological layers in the animated sequence provides an image of unchanging nature. However, the yellow pipe boring into the ground tells another, entirely different story—one which is legitimized by the organicity of subterranean worlds. Technological intrusion into the subsurface is not considered disruptive or damaging because the pipe is only extending the work nature does anyway. The almost minimalist simplicity of the space depicted, with a neat

[29] Williams, 20.

differentiation of geological layers and a seamless integration of the storage pipe, authorizes the idea of intervention without blowback. Its eternal persistence with no possibility of sudden change makes subsurface geologic formations "impermeable", resilient. The world on the surface might be unstable, but the reduced (in Jameson's sense) subsurface is a product of human ingenuity. There are no geological events here. Powerfully drawing attention to this interlinked dichotomy between the surface and the underground, geographer Gavin Bridge writes about organic processes of subsurface production, those

> deep-time processes beyond human control that create the hydrocarbon concentrations we know as fossil fuels. Because the conditions under which hydrocarbons form and collect are not found everywhere, the quality of underground space is highly variable: the highest-quality concentrations provide massive ecological subsidies to modern economic and social life. Aboveground and freed from geological fixity, energy is thrown into a tumultuous world of 'social production'; a surface world of mobility and change …[30]

Bridge's analysis of spaces of extraction through a focus on the "hole" as a figure which represents economies of drilling, alerts us to the ways in which geographies become valued based on the resources they afford. Which is to say, not all landmasses and geographical formations are equally important. Holes are only drilled in spaces that promise certain scales of profit. More importantly, Bridge usefully links organic geologic processes and anthropogenic interventions which—as in the case of SoCal Gas—leverage organicity to justify extraction; or, for my purposes here, storage and accumulation. There is a weird way in which an image of pristine, undisturbed nature justifies resource extraction. (The weirdness of this knot was, in large part, what I tried to untangle in the

[30] Bridge, "The Hole World".

previous chapter). Considered from this point of view, the duality of Aliso Canyon—Instagram apartments and hillsides juxtaposed to an invisible world of toxic penetration—is not as surprising as one might initially consider it to be. Moreover, as Bridge demonstrates, the reduced, minimalist simplicity of subsurface spaces structure the historical forces of what he calls “social production”. The constrained organicity of the subsurface goes hand-in-hand with a surface world where energy is liberated from “geological fixity”.

In other words, this reduced, minimalist, unchanging space furnishes the preconditions of modern life. As Williams points out (drawing on Mumford), mining as well as underground excavation, determine the world as we experience it today: from raw materials to railroads, none of the infrastructures of urban life would exist if we didn’t dig deep beneath the surface. SoCal Gas both recognizes and capitalizes on this fact. Natural gas is stored “one to two miles beneath the surface” the narrator tells us before making things clearer: “That’s a depth greater than 20 football fields!” Having proposed this radical geographical separation between our life on the surface and what goes on below, having made us cognizant (if we understand American football) of the distance between the world we love and the infrastructure that powers it, SoCal Gas visually orients our attention away from its image of a flawlessly clean underground. A tracking shot guides the viewer through quintessential images of suburbia, before cutting to a bus, and creature comforts—the thermostat in an apartment, and a cooling fan. Then we scale up. A low-angle tilt shot frames a thermal power plant and electrical lines from below, bestowing upon them a certain grandeur while the narrator informs us about the “partnership” between fossil fuels and renewable energy. Cut to a solar field—panels in the front and picturesque mountains behind [figure 28].

The visual suturing of thermal and solar doesn’t go entirely unnoticed. The permanence of subsurface geology combined with the infallible expertise of human-technical alliances on the

surface, generate an abstract and infinite system. If the subsurface is enclosed, reduced, eternal, then the surface is changing, growing, always accelerating towards a prosperous future. If the subsurface is animated, then the surface is Ansel Adams on steroids: pristine beauty and an unceasing lust for more. Neither the visual connection of thermal and solar, nor the interplay between solar panels and lush mountains against a blue California sky are unthought juxtapositions. The infinitude of "the system"—from the little things we cherish and the warmth or cooling we desire, to nature as a resource which throws solar and thermal power into relief—this infinitude demands that we take a look at the underground and turn away. To fixate on the subsurface would be to betray the promise of what goes on above. In many ways, the sequence enacts in visual form the frontier rhetoric underpinning the NRDC report.

Of course, turning away is easier said than done, especially in urban centers like Los Angeles. Contrary to what SoCal Gas might want, the subsurface is neither contained nor stable. Methane actively creeps to the surface all the time. Not always in the form of an invisible, odorless spill like the one which afflicted Porter Ranch as a fallout of the disaster in Aliso Canyon. Often combined with other elements, methane oozes overground in the form of a thick liquid, black and viscous. The phenomenon is known as a "seep" and over the years Los Angeles has faced the brunt of many seeps, both eventful and banal.

The most violent act of "surfacing" in this manner occurred on March 24, 1985, when a fire blew through a Ross Dress for Less store on Fairfax Avenue. After the blast, public discussion turned (if only briefly) to the inherently dangerous, precarious geography of the area. While methane had been bubbling to the surface in the La Brea Tar Pits for many years (and continues to), other phenomena were less noted. For instance, a *Los Angeles Times* report stated that within a few blocks of the blast radius, lawns of "hundreds of Mediterranean-style single-family houses

… allow[ed] occasional puffs of methane to escape harmlessly into the atmosphere".[31] A few years later, on July 30, 1999, the public was alerted to news of "an invisible danger lurking beneath the Los Angeles Basin, from Newport Beach to Newhall".[32] Janet Wilson warned her readers that: "if your community is built on or near a fault, there's a good chance it's also sitting atop abandoned oil wells—and methane".[33] The very next year, Patt Morrison wrote about "a shifting, subterranean world" under the feet of Angelinos.[34] Two years later, in May 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* once again published a report, this time by sociologist J William Gibson, on the plight of tenants in an apartment complex called Playa Vista, which sits atop a bed of methane.[35]

Figure 28 Screenshot from *How Underground Natural Gas Storage Works*. SoCal Gas. 2016.

These partial fragments testify to the difficulty of containing or controlling the subsurface as SoCal Gas would like. They reveal the underground as a cultural construct that not only infrastructurally supports petrocultural life but also provides an imaginary of spaces that can remain out of sight,

[31] Chazanov, "Explosive Gas Still Imperils Fairfax Area, Experts Say".
[32] Wilson, "Vulnerable to Vapors".
[33] Wilson.
[34] Morrison, "L.A.'s Eternal Flame Symbolizes Life's Calculated Risks".
[35] Gibson, "Just How Much Gas Flows Below?"

out of mind as the work of living continues normally on the surface. In this context, methane seeps represent the intrusion of geology into history. The disavowal of geologic temporality on which SoCal Gas' rhetoric of security rests, is frayed by seeps which corrode and occupy the surface of historical time. Seeps also give lie to the company's disinterest in—or denial of—the geological as a space of events. Methane seeps effectively embody a slower, more gradual concept of "events" than those we are accustomed to in public discourse, which is only interested in catastrophic and spectacular occurrences.

In the words of anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli, methane seeps are "quasi-events" that "neither happen nor not happen", and which "are, or are not, aggregated and thus apprehended, evaluated, and grasped".[36] Premised on their precarious positioning on the thresholds of the visible or the sensible, Povinelli asks: "What techniques, such as statistics, allow nonperceptual quasi-events to be transformed into perceptual events, even catastrophes?"[37] In her book, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Povinelli argues that the quasi-event, which accrues gradually and without the intensity of events, "is only ever *hereish* and *nowish* and thus asks us to focus our attention on forces of condensation, manifestation, and endurance, rather than on the borders of objects".[38] Unlike clearly discernable events which, in Povinelli's view, instantiate temporal separations between the "here and now and there and then",[39] quasi-events quietly gesture toward temporal ongoingness—a minor accumulation of flows that cannot be easily contained, captured, or arrested. Within the regime of late liberalism, for Povinelli, "forms of eventfulness—the big bang, the new, the extraordinary; that which clearly breaks time and space, creating a new Here

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[36] Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 13–14.
[37] Povinelli, 14.
[38] Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 21.
[39] Povinelli, 21.

and Now, There and Then",[40] give way to quasi-events. Quasi-events never create a "new" time and space, but manifest logics that were always latent within liberal governance.

Considered through this lens, it becomes clear that the rhetoric of security espoused by SoCal Gas, (which suggests simultaneously that the surface system is infinite and the subsurface is a safe space) *relies* on a vocabulary of the event. The catastrophic leak, the possibility of large-scale contamination, and potential fracturing of technical infrastructure are integral components of the imaginary of securitization. In environmentalism as in terrorism, the logic of security rests on the specter of its "other"—the disaster, the attack. Security takes hold over the social precisely by promising security *from* "bad things". Geological events and infallible technical infrastructure are, therefore, sutured within the same narrative. This explains why SoCal Gas doesn't ignore or deny the fallout of Aliso Canyon but in fact makes its environmental impact hypervisible—by, for example, creating webpages where live data from the site can be fed back to the concerned communities.[41]

At the same time, the quasi-event reintroduces temporality to geology. It makes apparent the manner in which geological formations *do* in fact have temporal rhythms—only these rhythms are imperceptible and difficult to sense; they accrue over time, often hiding evidence of their own transformation. The point is not an insignificant one. If security and the event are intimately bound together in a narrative where each justifies the existence of the other, then its plainly evident that SoCal Gas does not deny geological events but geological quasi-events. The quasi-event is an inconvenience, a phenomenon which must be disavowed by logics of security that are steadfastly oriented towards the future. Quasi-events—though gradual and insensible, though difficult to quantify or make visible—destabilize the entire ontology of the system and its future-orientation.

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[40] Povinelli, 173.
[41] See, for instance, this website: https://socalgas.esriemcs.com/MethaneMonitoring/

To take quasi-events seriously, to even acknowledge them as a factor in the calculus of the system, is to consider the distribution of harm of a vastly different social scale. Quasi-events don't afflict affluent neighborhoods but attach themselves primarily to low-income, working-class, racially segregated localities. Toxic landscapes, polluted atmospheres, everyday gas emissions released as part of the production process—these are quasi-events. They are part and parcel of the ontological leakiness of infrastructure but never announce themselves as geological events.

I want to suggest, finally, that this rhetoric of security—premised on the denial or expulsion of quasi-events—sutures SoCal Gas and the NRDC, to the more generic promise of a next energy frontier. By hoping that citizens, consumers, and users will focus their attention on the future and on what might be enabled by looking away from sites of harmful non or quasi-events, corporate media hopes to relegate discomfort to the background in the way Rifkin diagnoses. And perhaps this is not a surprising move. What else might one expect from those whose have investments—financial, energetic, psychic—in "safer futures" without the specter of world-reduction? But what are we to make of how scholarship responds to the challenges posed by the same moment? It is to that sphere that I now turn.

III. Attention, cartography, and environmental politics

The Jamesonian unconscious

The energy humanities, Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer write while introducing an eponymous collection, draw "critical attention to the fact that energy is absolutely necessary for modern societies".[42] A few pages on, they claim it constitutes a "political project unlike any we've ever encountered before … There may have been coal and oil capitalism; there *cannot* be solar and

[42] Szeman and Boyer, "Introduction: On the Energy Humanities", 1.

wind capitalism".[43] There is need, readers are informed, for "a sociopolitical revolution that is both necessary and unavoidable".[44] Critical attention to energy will be the bedrock of this project: "Are there ways in which newfound attention to energy might reinvigorate our politics …?"[45]

This set of claims in the openings pages of *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* are not anomalous. They are, in fact, symptomatic of a particular rhetorical strategy common to a whole range of writings grappling with the problem of environmental crises that I want, here, to subject to scrutiny. Taking apart and burrowing into the citational ecologies and propositions made by these emergent formations elucidates the complex ways in which calls for "critical attention" and "reinvigorations of politics" lean on very familiar tropes—most prominently Fredric Jameson's ideas about the political unconscious and cognitive mapping—which tend to order the social even as they claim primarily to provide a cartography of that order.

In a number of his essays, Imre Szeman—like Brent Ryan Bellamy, Michael O'Driscoll, and Mark Simpson, in an introduction to resource aesthetics published in the journal *Postmodern Culture*—invokes Jamesonian-Marxism for critically analyzing political cultures of energy. Citing *The Political Unconscious* in an essay on oil documentaries, Szeman writes: "Fredric Jameson famously describes cultural texts or artifacts as 'symbolic acts' in which 'real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm'".[46] Throughout the essay, he tries to think through gaps between "knowledge and action" on the one hand, and "aesthetics and politics" on the other.[47] The "social ontology of oil" that the films attempt to represent, exceeds the scope of the cinematic. As a result, each film ends up having to develop

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[43] Szeman and Boyer, 7. Emphasis in original.
[44] Szeman and Boyer, 7.
[45] Szeman and Boyer, 7.
[46] Szeman, "Crude Aesthetics", 425.
[47] Szeman, 434.

an “imaginary solution” to “social contradiction” with “the ‘imaginary’ being the phantasmatic liberal public sphere it imagines into existence …”[48] Because oil’s ontology exceeds easy capture, different aesthetic strategies are necessary to create space for political action. While the almost sublime representation of oil places viewers “in awe of scale” in the hope that recognizing scale might suture knowledge to action, “this gap persists”.[49] When one thinks of oil, or of its exhaustion, as a planetary resource, one is faced by a problem that is difficult to “cognitively map”.[50]

These concerns resurface (no pun intended) in an essay on the dilemmas of representing oil, written with Maria Whiteman. Here, photographer Allan Sekula’s practice of “critical realism” is invoked alongside more overt references to Jameson. Quoting his comments about cognitive mapping in the book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*—“a pedagogical and political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of place in the global system”[51]—Szeman and Whiteman enthusiastically propose that “photos *can* contribute to a cognitive mapping of a resource reality about which we too commonly imagine we already know everything there is to know”.[52] Critical realism, contrary to conventional realism, aids cognitive mapping not by merely representing everydayness, but by documenting “what is hidden *in* that phenomenal everydayness and its ready-to-hand socio-political codes and narrative conventions that are all-too easily passed off as reality”.[53] This desire to penetrate surfaces for a deeper code of meaning to reveal the true nature of a system is entirely in keeping with Jameson’s politics as they develop from *The Political Unconscious* to the later theory of cognitive mapping.

[48] Szeman, 435.
[49] Szeman, 436.
[50] Szeman, 438.
[51] Szeman and Whiteman, “Oil Imag(e)inaries”, 48.
[52] Szeman and Whiteman, 48. Emphasis in original.
[53] Szeman and Whiteman, 50. Emphasis in original.

In the earlier work Jameson is very clear that reading "traces" left in texts plays a part in "restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history"[54]—i.e. the history of "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity".[55] "My position", he writes, clarifying the political logic driving such mining of the unconscious, "is that only Marxism offers a philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism … Only Marxism can give us an account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past".[56] This call to read for an underlying structure informing any text, feeds directly into his later claim that although any representation of capital will always remain incomplete, it must nonetheless strive to produce an image of the total system. From the repressed unconscious of a text, cognitive mapping moves to considerations of individual experience in relation to world-historical truth. As Jameson explains in one version of the argument, cognitive mapping intervenes in "a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience …"[57] Capitalism is "admittedly a totalizing or systemic concept: no one has ever seen or met the thing itself; it is either the result of scientific reduction … or the mark of an imaginary and ideological vision".[58] But that doesn't diminish its reality. In other words, experiential unverifiability legitimizes the system's presence even more, and cognitive mapping connects phenomenological experience to abstract totality.

Recently, Alberto Toscano—perhaps the foremost contemporary proponent of Jameson's method—has analyzed fascination with images of ruins and narratives of a posthuman "world without us" by claiming that our collective indulgence of these futures reveals that "geological

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[54] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 4.
[55] Jameson, 3.
[56] Jameson, 3. Emphasis in original.
[57] Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping", 353.
[58] Jameson, 354.

rather than historical time dominates our consciousness".[59] We adjust more adeptly to nonhuman futures than we do to the proliferation of an inhuman present under capitalism. Recall Jameson himself, who once famously quipped: "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism".[60] The argument is stated in stronger terms in *Cartographies of the Absolute*, a book Toscano wrote with Jeff Kinkle, where early on, the authors argue that "an inability to cognitively map the gears and contours of the world system is as debilitating for political action as being mentally unable to map a city would prove for a city dweller".[61] Linking the political imperative of cognitive mapping to the aesthetic, they further suggest that "capitalism as a totality is devoid of an easily grasped command-and-control-centre. That is precisely why it poses an aesthetic problem, in the sense of demanding ways of representing the complex and dynamic relations intervening between the domains of production, consumption and distribution, and their strategic political mediations, ways of making the invisible visible".[62]

This latter quote also appears in Bellamy, O'Driscoll, and Simpson's essay "Toward a Theory of Resource Aesthetics", to address precisely what Szeman identifies as the gap between aesthetics and politics, knowledge and action. Hence: "resource aesthetics will recollect the question of what Fredric Jameson famously termed cognitive mapping—a practice that, as Toscano and Kinkle contend, ventures dialectically to reckon the contours of capitalism with and against the dynamics of the visual".[63] For resource aesthetics, the stakes of cognitive mapping lie in its attentiveness to form—the thing, the authors remind us, modernity hides in its enforcement of a sleek aesthetic surface. So, oil, the material that gives form to much of modernity also recedes

[59] Toscano, "The World Is Already without Us", 119.
[60] Jameson, "Future City".
[61] Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 7.
[62] Toscano and Kinkle, 24–25.
[63] Bellamy, O'Driscoll, and Simpson, "Introduction".

from view, hides in the background, indexing an "aesthetic ideology" that facilitates the system's disappearance from sight.[64] For both the energy humanities and resource aesthetics, attention to energy and materiality can help cognitively map the textual unconscious of the modern surface—wedging open space for something that goes by the name of "politics".

I am struck by how in all these texts, the word "attention" slips into the background even though it supplies the structuring logic of the argument. Nor is Marxism, by any means, the only branch of inquiry that privileges attention. When, a long time ago, political theorist Claude Lefort suggested that democracy creates an "empty space of power",[65] he was referring to a condition where, in the aftermath of sovereignty, different interests—defined, let's say, as "the public"—would compete or engage with each other in what is commonly identified as the public sphere. To become legible as political actors, the public not only has to act in the public sphere but (and more importantly) it has to remain *attentive* to the demands that sphere makes on political life. Thus, in his careful classification of publics and counterpublics, Michael Warner argues that "a public is constituted through mere attention" since "attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated".[66] More than anything else, publics, he writes emphatically "commence with the moment of attention".[67] Attention can draw individuals into a larger community of strangers and sows the seeds for politics—which, in turn, is premised on publicity, or what following Hannah Ardent, we might call "the space of appearance".[68] Liberals, anarchists, and Marxists alike acknowledge, in their own ways, this fundamental link between

[64] Bellamy, O'Driscoll, and Simpson.
[65] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*.
[66] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 419.
[67] Warner, 419.
[68] See, for example: Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

attention, publicness, and the political. Cognitive mapping and the energy humanities are, in this sense, a symptom of tropes far more pervasive within the human and social sciences.

Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in a chapter on care in philosopher Bernard Stiegler's book, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, where he offers extensive comments on attention and its relation to the psychic apparatus. Stiegler argues that what he calls "psychotechnologies"—like radio, television, and digital media—have enabled "the systematized organization of the capture of attention".[69] He defines attention as "the psychic faculty that allows us to concentrate on an object" but also—in its social dimension—makes it possible to "take care of this object".[70] Because attention is both individual and social, for Stiegler, its capture amounts to the destruction of both the psychic and social apparatus. "Psychopower" messes with peoples' ability to think in the long term, a kind of thinking that is critical in our age of environmental crisis. Without attention one cannot think the future.[71] The accelerated and incessant threats posed by psychotechnologies demand, Stiegler claims, a new politics of "investment": "a new way of taking care of the world, a new way of paying attention to it, through the invention of therapeutics …"[72] Further, "taking care of the collective … is the only worthwhile definition of genuine political action …"[73] These statements reveal plainly the suturing of attentional regimes of care to public, collective life in Stiegler's framework. Only by recuperating attention from capitalist technocrats can one redeploy it in the service of what he conceives of as "genuine political action".

These thoughts are echoed in a recent study by literary theorist Yves Citton, called *The Ecology of Attention*. As the title suggests, Citton hopes to rescue attention from the clutches of

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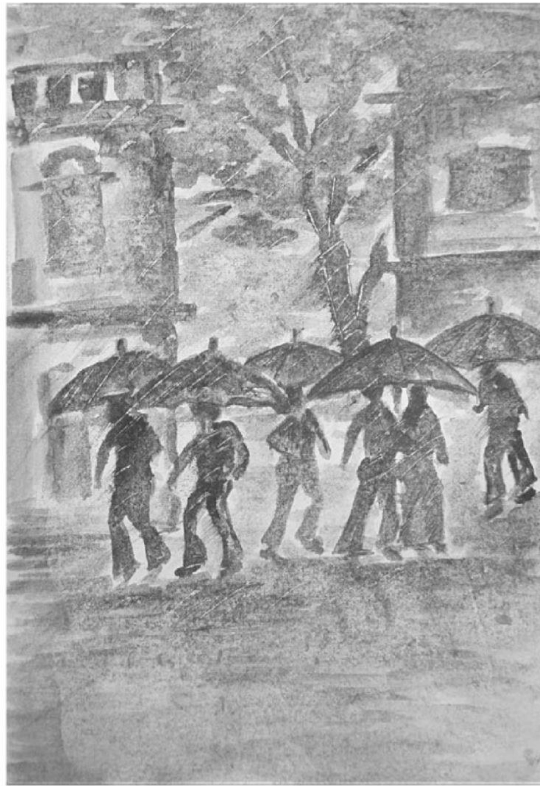
[69] Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living*, 81.
[70] Stiegler, 81.
[71] Stiegler, 83.
[72] Stiegler, 88.
[73] Stiegler, 97.

capitalist value generation by proposing a more communally-oriented, ecological view. Clear echoes of Stiegler abound in Citton's declaration that "a being … must 'attend to' (*beachten*) that which enables it to live, it must be concerned for it in order to take care of it".[74] By the time he reaches his conclusion, Citton begins to explicitly theorize the ecology of attention in terms of the play between figure and ground. Thus: "The work of attentive focusing consists in noticing significant features in what seemed to be an insignificant background".[75] This background—air, water, seeds, climate (Citton's categories)—is a kind of commons that requires protection through attentive practice. Although we seem, in rhetorical terms, to be far away from Jameson's language of cognitive mapping, in the final pages of the book Citton presents a reading of an image which reintroduces all the totalizing logics of Jamesonian cartography.

Referring to a painting titled by Rajashri Mitra *Rain in Calcutta* Citton argues that we must "reground" politics by attending not merely to the figures and objects represented within the frame of an image like this, but by also taking into consideration its "second ground", i.e., the media by which we encounter the work [figure 29]. Which is to say: if we stand before the painting, we must attend to its materiality—the watercolor, the paintbrush etc.; if we encounter it on a computer screen, we must pay attention to the pixel and the and the electric circuit; if we see it in a book, we must think about the ink on the page. But we rarely do. Citton follows this observation with a remarkable admonishment: "It is because of our indifference and negligence towards this second ground that Bengal is at immediate risk of seeing floods and droughts destroy its multi-millennial civilization".[76]

[74] Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, 22.
[75] Citton, 181.
[76] Citton, 198.



18. Rajarshi Mitra, *Rain in Calcutta*

Figure 29 From p196, Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*. 2017.

The sudden shift from canvas to the logic of a systemic totality—when you see *Rain in Calcutta* you *must* think of acid rain, toxic wastelands, and exploited workers in Africa[77]—might appear abrupt. But I think this scale-shift is predicated on the logic of attention serving as the ground of politics proper. This harsh condemnation of the viewer, moving swiftly from Stiegler's ethics of care to Jameson's imperative of political art as bridging the gap between experience and abstraction, uses "attention" as a rhetorical trope to close off the possibility of other experiences. It expunges ambiguity, ambivalence, and aporia. It denies the possibility that one could simply take pleasure—perhaps even melancholic pleasure—in this quaint image of rain in a postcolonial city without automatically attending to historical logics of domination and exploitation. Words

[77] Citton, 198–99.

like "indifference" and "negligence" are weaponized by this dehistoricized and decontextualized reading (Citton provides no dates or information about the painting) because attention is the a priori condition of being a good political subject. The context doesn't necessarily matter. Attention is public, it is social, it is systemic—or at least it allows for all of those things. In Jameson and Warner, as in Stiegler and Citton, then, some notion of attention—articulated or implicit—is used to reinstate a series of binaries between politics and apathy, public and private, experience and abstraction.

To stay with blind spots

The energy humanities and work on resource aesthetics extend the work of these binaries in the guise of a "new" politics adequate to our times. But their quiet clinging on to older tropes, I am suggesting, puts pressure on all of these terms: newness, adequacy, and our times. For what is new about a paradigm imported from the 1980s? And if language from the turn of the last century is enough for thinking about politics today (I am not suggesting it isn't), then why reach for another language? Finally, what does such temporal confusion about the very language by which social theory orders the world say about the incoherence of "our times"? Put differently: cognitive mapping presents itself as a way to interpretively order the world by directing attention to the "right" places, objects, sites, and events from where the logics of a system can be revealed. Putting my cards on the table, I confess that it seems to me that abstract systems are not so omniscient that they elude cartography. Their debris are strewn all around.[78] The evidence of abstract systems

[78] My use of the word "debris" draws heavily from Ann Laura Stoler's recent writings on debris and ruination in conjunction with contemporary iterations of colonialism. Stoler's work is especially useful because of its emphatic call for attending to processes of ruination as both material and psychic. She writes, for instance, about "how empire's ruins contour and carve through the psychic and material space in which people live and what compounded layers of imperial debris do to them. It, too, sounds an alert: to *the uneven temporal sedimentations* in which imperial formations leave their marks" (Stoler, *Duress*, 339–40). The use of a word like sedimentation—with its more than gestural affinity to geological notions of time—is perhaps not entirely incidental here. What particularly

pervades our everyday. The totality surrounds, engulfs, and enters us. One needs no "adequate" representations of the total system because the total system never occludes its presence. Much of the damage being done to the world is on view in plain sight. This makes the task of politics harder because merely showing or seeing the system does nothing.

I am interested, then, in attention as a mode of ordering the political, of giving form to a "proper" grammar of politics, because to do so is to assume that the inattentive subject—the subject who doesn't attend to the "right" things—is somehow prey to ideology. In the final section of this chapter, I will suggest inattention (or wide and vacant attention) as a counterpoint to cognitive mapping; a counterpoint that buffers my claims that to survive in the debris of a system, one looks away—if only from time-to-time. Such occlusion is neither false consciousness nor an inability to "see it all". It is a more modest attempt to do something like hold the world at bay; to carve out a space and/or time where systems and their effects slip out of the field of vision. The easy gap between authentic experience and totalizing abstraction that cognitive mapping turns on—in Szeman, Bellamy et al., Jameson, Toscano and Kinkle, as well as Stiegler, and Citton—tends to

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draws me toward Stoler's conceptualization of imperial debris, however, is her constant reference to the psychic effects of materially inhabiting particular landscapes, geographies, and terrains. Without directly referencing either media theory or the psychic apparatus, Stoler makes an eloquent case for how infrastructures and such apparatuses of interiority co-emerge or are co-implicated each other's formation.

In relation to this latter point, Stoler argues that there is an urgent need to focus on the "*connective tissue* that continues to bind human potential to degraded environments and degraded personhoods to the material refuse of imperial projects—to the spaces redefined, to the soils turned toxic, to the relations severed between people and between people and things. … Rubrics such as 'colonial legacy' offer little help. They fail to capture how people choose—are forced—to reckon with features of those formations in which they remain vividly bound" (Stoler, 346). What such attention to ruin must address, Stoler argues, is the problem of "what people are 'left *with*': what remains that blocks livelihoods and health; the aftershocks of imperial assault; the social afterlives of degraded infrastructures … Such effects reside in the corroded hollows of landscapes, in the gutted infrastructures of segregated cityscapes, and in the micro-ecologies of matter and mind" (Stoler, 348).

Equally significantly, for Stoler, imperial debris are not merely to be found "out there" in some space designated as the "Third World" or the "periphery" by postcolonial theory. "Why does it seem counterintuitive", she asks, to look at people and spaces within the United States—like those discussed by James Agee and Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, for example—as "abandoned by specific state policies and historical acts, as the embodied ruins of a racialized American empire?" (Stoler, 371). Within the framework of my argument (especially in this chapter), such reflections are poignant in allowing us to think of the internalized ruins of empire where permanently "othered" nonnormative subjects of empire have always had to develop affective modes of survival and endurance.

both underplay the register of experience and the overstate the importance of finding the correct kind of politically valid idiom for representing *the* system. The (sometimes implicit) emphasis on phenomenology is puzzling to me for the assumption that somehow merely understanding, experiencing, and feeling a system is enough to challenge it. Affective registers of exhaustion, endurance, and psychic survival in the debris of toxic abstractions unfold not without knowledge of systems, but *despite* such knowledge.

Therefore, even as the energy humanities and resource aesthetics claim to "reinvigorate our politics" by placing "critical attention" on the right kinds of objects and scenes, the persistence of assumed gaps between experience and abstraction, phenomenology and totality, and form and ideology end up restating a vision of politics that looks anything but "reinvigorated". What Citton rehearses more blatantly by evacuating *Rain in Calcutta* of any socio-historical context, pervades these other works more subtly. One might claim that the allocation of attention dictating the logic of such politics reorders the world without recognizing that what it is providing is but *an account* of order. This was Cedric Robinson's chief insight: that which diagnoses a thing also helps order that thing.

Politics in this vein becomes a matter of faith, as Jameson's repeated incantation of "only Marxism", and Szeman and Boyer's claim that "there *cannot* be solar and wind capitalism" prove. What is being reinforced in these statements? What functions do words like "only" and "*cannot*" serve? The insistent tenor of these terms—like the imperative to cognitively map—indexes an anxiety that in the absence of constant theoretical reinforcement, one would read the texture of the world erroneously. In opposition to Jameson and the energy humanities I am suggesting, then, that theories themselves are little more than "language games"[79] that strive to order the messy worlds

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[79] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

they are confronted by. But what separates a theoretical endeavor conscious of itself as an ordering device from one that thinks it is providing some kind of authentic account of things is the former's consciousness of "blind spots". In Niklas Luhmann's account, any description of a scene produces a space that elides description.[80] Since observers are embedded within the worlds they observe, they can never produce an account of the whole. Or, to follow William Rasch's helpful explanation: "As the eye remains outside the field of vision, the observer excludes itself from its own operations; yet, as one of the many observers (distinctions) operating in the world, it is made visible by other distinctions, other observations".[81]

Taken this way, theory might—without searching for an outside to ordering—be conscious of its own inevitable partiality, its perennial incompletion, and its implication in systems of administration and order. Such theory could take leave of the paranoid epistemology structuring efforts to cognitively map a political unconscious. Consider, in relation to paranoia, Toscano and Kinkle's claim that "the novels of Virginia Woolf, for example, are not *about* imperialism, but imperialism inhabits them, namely by shaping their form".[82] This statement indulges precisely in an affective form of paranoia by propagating that a fundamentally legible logic of social totality can be read outward from any fragment of cultural production. If conspiracy theory sutures different pieces of apparently disconnected information into a narrative of systemic control, then cognitive mapping surveys cultural objects to see how they yield an image of totality. The constant anxiety about gaps—between knowledge and action, aesthetics and politics, or "experience and abstraction"[83]—highlights the emotional labor of cognitive mapping: the hope that a proper analysis of totality can restore some form of (authentic) experience. The ceaseless search for a

[80] Luhmann, *Theories of Distinction*.
[81] Rasch, "Introduction: The Self-Positioning Society", 25.
[82] Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 16.
[83] Toscano and Kinkle, 20.

structuring logic that binds conspiracy theory to cognitive mapping thus trades on high affect, what Emily Apter calls a "delirious aesthetics of systematicity" that is "held in place by the premise that 'everything is connected'".[84]

What might it mean, against this notion, to affirm a mode of analysis where the truth of a system requires no revelation? Where what we think we are mining is already overburden?[85] How might we consider the labor of surviving in toxic debris without wanting, always, to attend to the sources of toxicity? What if knowledge, experience, and authenticity inhabit no gap that awaits closure? I am intrigued by these questions less in the hope of articulating an alternative politics, than with an eye to thinking about how it might be possible to subsist in a zone that lies suspended between order and disorder; how one might inhabit blind spots without rushing to resolve their contradictions to reinvigorate something called "politics". I would like to think, against the highly affective surface/depth binaries of cognitive mapping, with the texture of "quasi-events" and the "crisis ordinary"[86]—where subtle amplifications evade the attentiveness of ordering devices attuned to large-scale systemic abstractions. In the next section, therefore, I enlist the services of an organization whose aesthetic practice confounds politics, hews close to bureaucracy, and shies away varieties of committed critical realism.

IV. Mapping totality, deadpan

Like much of the Center for Land Use Interpretation's (CLUI) work, its online exhibition, *Urban Crude: Oil Fields of the Los Angeles Basin*, offers an intelligent catalog of petroculture in the city.

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[84] Apter, "On Oneworldedness", 366.

[85] Apter, "Overburden".

[86] This term is Lauren Berlant's, who, takes issue with trauma theory for fixating on specific events as moments of rupture, and crisis narratives for exceptionalizing particular historical moments as especially traumatic. Rather, she writes, "the extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure". Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10.

Part of the descriptive text framing the exhibition reads: "Los Angeles is the most urban oil field, where the industry operates in cracks, corners, and edges, hidden behind fences, and camouflaged into architecture, pulling oil out from under our feet".[87] Each subsection of the site associated with the exhibition displays oil fields from specific geographical locations: "Westside and Downtown", "Eastern and Inland", "Coast and South Bay", "Harbor and Long Beach", "South Coast", and "Inglewood". The photographs inside are captioned with information about each site, and the pictures themselves switch between aerial shots and more grounded representations of oil rigs and derricks—some camouflaged, some installed in plain sight. CLUI sets up each new site through numerous aerial shots before zooming down to the level of the specific buildings and wells in question. The images thoroughly catalog wells and their geographical surrounds, sometimes diverging into controversies and auxiliary information around this or that structure [figures 30-32].

CLUI's textual and visual language is deadpan, descriptive, without emotion or discernable tonality: "The mall parking lot abuts the oil field"; "Access to the field is controlled by an electric gate" read two captions attached to images of the Montebello oil field in the "Eastern and Inland" section of the exhibition. The manner in which CLUI documents the sites in question makes it both difficult and counterproductive to undertake a rigorous critique of the image. I will, for the most part, steer clear of critique and try to understand the cartographic impulse framing CLUI's work—an approach that, in my view, is different from the ordering impulse of cognitive mapping. Their obsessive taxonomy of the landscape approximates a bureaucratic aesthetic of display where affect is flattened and drained; what I am calling a deadpan aesthetic of totality.

To unpack their aesthetic, it's useful to better grasp CLUI's visual philosophy as well as its historical antecedents in the genre of landscape photography. Matthew Coolidge, the co-founder

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[87] See: http://clui.org/sites/default/files/exhibits/online/index.html

of the Center, lays out his organization's basic approach to cartographic projects quite succinctly in an interview with environmental and cultural theorist Stephanie LeMenager. In this interview, after arguing that the separation between humans and nature (on which much of our cultural appreciation of the latter is premised), is deeply flawed, he discusses how the concept of the aesthetic deeply informs CLUI's practice: "We are visual creatures, and aesthetics are an important part of maintaining our attention and ascribing value to things. … Aesthetics isn't always about beauty—it's about a kind of clarity. Aesthetic components can be preexisting—aesthetics is just a frame of evaluation. What CLUI does as an institution is provide a frame, a point of view, for the existing world".[88] Coolidge then speaks of photography merely as an "utilitarian device, a way of capturing the appearance of a place"—a tool that aids in their overall (but "impossible") mission "to develop this portrait of the country, in its totality".[89] Admitting that the Center tends to "look toward things that are less noticed", he adds: "We're not trying to sell the world any particular ideology. We're not out there trying to convert minds or take over peoples' psychological spaces". Instead, by photographing the banal, everyday stuff we normally simply overlook or find boring, in Coolidge's view, CLUI tries to ask some very basic questions: "What's that in front of me? What's it connected to? How did it get there?"[90]

[88] LeMenager and Coolidge, "A Poetics of Infrastructure".
[89] LeMenager and Coolidge.
[90] LeMenager and Coolidge.

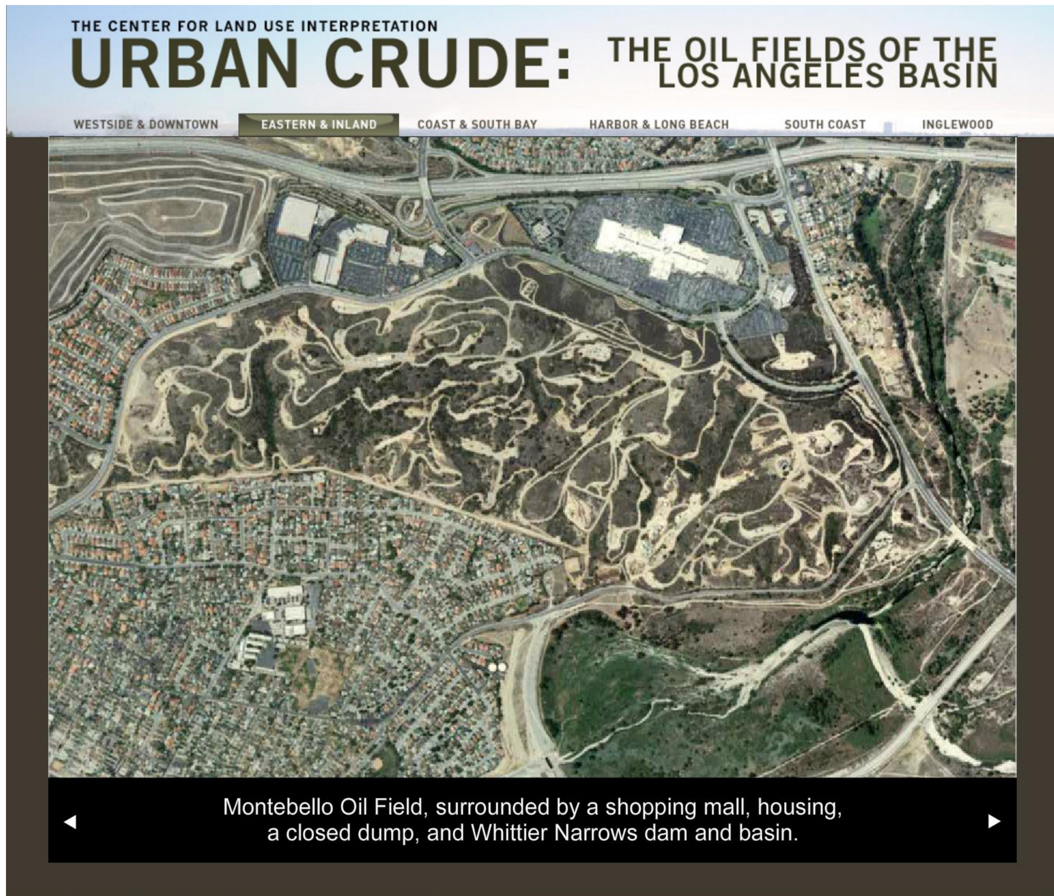

Figure 30 CLUI, *Urban Crude: The Oil Fields of the Los Angeles Basin: "Eastern & Inland"*. 2010.

There is a lot one could say about these suggestive comments and their relation to CLUI's efforts at mapping urban landscapes. I will restrict myself to two areas which draw out the implicit arguments Coolidge makes about cognition and attention that undergird the Center's aesthetic practice. CLUI is often taken to task for its noncommittal politics—its claim that it is simply presenting a certain reality without taking sides on how that reality "ought" to appear. The claim that one is merely intrigued by the idea of documenting space (without offering commentary on it) can, obviously, smack of a problematic shying away from political engagement. In an essay on their work, Michael Ned Holte finds the lack of political commitment precarious yet potentially liberating. Calling their style "the administrative sublime", Holte also points to potential critiques

that might puncture the organization's claims of simply mapping space.[91] A primary example of such critique is furnished by Benjamin Buchloch's searing indictment of Conceptual Art (an artistic tradition within which CLUI's work is often assimilated). Writing in 1990, Buchloch lashed out at Conceptualism for "its self-imposed restrictions, its lack of totalizing vision, its critical devotion to the factual conditions of artistic production and reception without attempting to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions".[92] Nor is CLUI necessarily shy about admitting to many of these faults.

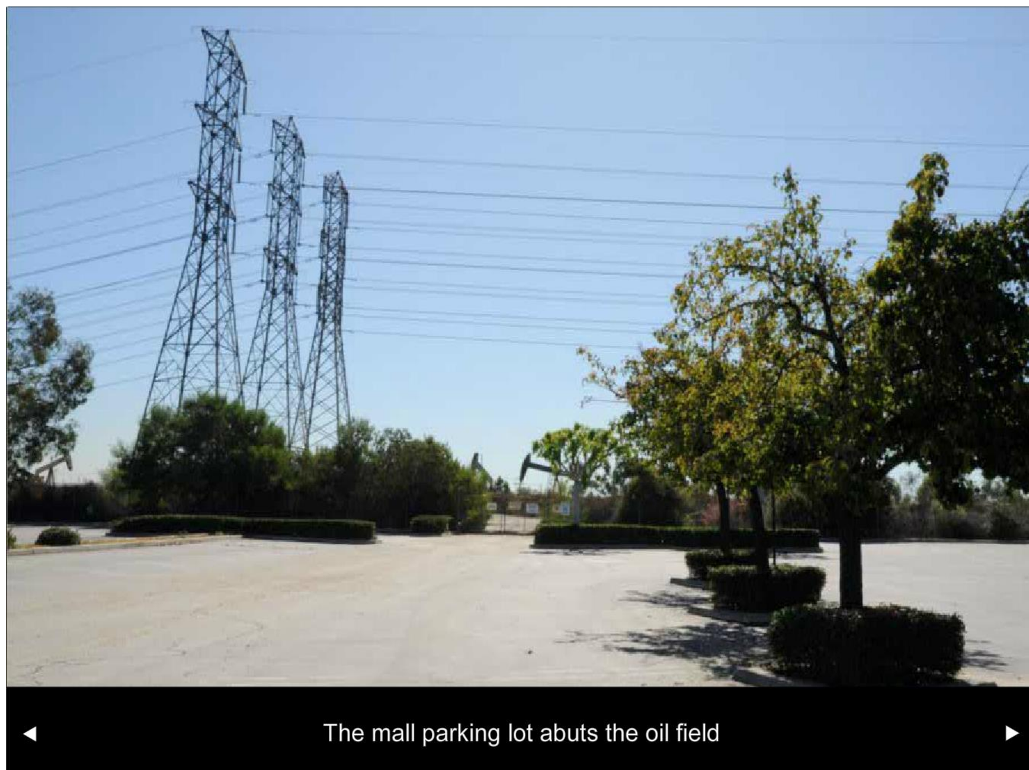

Figure 31 CLUI, *Urban Crude: The Oil Fields of the Los Angeles Basin: "Eastern & Inland".* 2010.

[91] Holte, "The Administrative Sublime or The Center for Land Use Interpretation at the Circumference".
[92] Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969", 141.

Figure 32 CLUI, *Urban Crude: The Oil Fields of the Los Angeles Basin: "Eastern & Inland".* 2010.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the main inspirations for the Center's work is the landmark 1975 exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, displayed at the George Eastman House. Featuring photographers like Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joel Deal, and Bernd and Hilla Becher, the exhibition is famous for transforming American conceptualizations of the landscape and marking a shift from sublime nature photography to the visual representation of corporate parks, urban spaces, and suburban geographies. It also marks the landscape genre's movement from Northern to Southern California—the abode of artificiality, and inauthenticity, of which Los Angeles is an idealized symbol.[93] What Kim Sichel calls "the deadpan geometries"[94] of *New Topographics*, also encoded a vision of the landscape as document, something which was simultaneously, an artifact of human intervention, and could be displayed objectively without overt

[93] Westerbeck, Laxton, and Weems, *Seismic Shift*.
[94] Sichel, "Deadpan Geometries: Mapping, Aerial Photography, and the American Landscape".

judgement.[95] The political unclarity of *New Topographics* is probably what made it a landmark achievement. While hailed at the time for inaugurating a new aesthetic for photographic industrial landscapes as if they were extensions of nature, today the work of Baltz, Deal, and others represents an early, if anachronistic, acknowledgement of environmental landscapes as always-already anthropogenic.

Indeed, their faith in the transparency of space is probably one of the reasons why Allan Sekula took Lewis Baltz to task. Paraphrasing his objections, Toscano and Kinkle write that the evacuation of human beings from the photographic frame caused Baltz's photographs to "be led by their own economic unconscious"[96] to a complicity with the ideological system which gave rise to it. In other words, the simple, elegant abstraction of his works—like the series *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine*—mirrored the abstraction of capitalism in its nascent stage of financialization. This "aesthetic decision to depict homogeneity, modularity, and opacity" without making clear whether, in Baltz's words, generic buildings are manufacturing "pantyhose or megadeath", elided the political task of cognitive cartography in favor of the cheap thrills of abstract form.[97] An attempt to properly cognitively map the postwar system, in Toscano, Kinkle, and Sekula's view, would not only require the representation of labor, but also an acknowledgment of visual abstraction's ontological complicity with systems of capitalist domination. We might also note, in passing, that such is precisely the task Szeman and Whiteman set themselves in their essay discussed in the previous section. There, having set out to visually document oil culture in the petroleum-dependent Canadian city of Edmonton, they are confounded by that infrastructure's invisibility. Referencing Sekula's *Fish Story*, they argue the "problem of rendering the reality of

[95] Cheng, "New Topographics".
[96] Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 229.
[97] Toscano and Kinkle, 232.

oil visible in the form of a photo-essay" is that either oil hides in plain sight or it blends into the fabric of the everyday.[98] The photo-essay they produce must, therefore, "draw attention to … what is left out of such oil images: labour, forms of life, the experience of bodies working and living in proximity to the oil sands".[99]

These objections—from Buchloch's to Szeman and Whiteman's—are similar to the extent that they take Conceptualism, abstraction, and formal invisibility to task for accepting "mere facticity" without a revolutionary or political vision structuring the representation of what exists. It's also easy to see how these critiques could be extended in the direction of CLUI. In making the case for a different reading of *Urban Crude* than what Buchloch or cognitive cartographers might prefer, I begin by taking some exception to the phrase "administrative sublime"—a phrase which, to my mind, names too easily, the landscape confronting us and, at the same time, places our inability to describe it beyond the realm of language. Sublime is too heroic a word for what CLUI does. I prefer to think of their work as a deadpan aesthetic of totality because it seems that neither CLUI nor Baltz *fail* to do something "properly political". They are quite simply, *not interested* in doing it. However, unlike Toscano and Kinkle (as well as Szeman and Whiteman), I do think both *New Topographics* and CLUI are engaged in an explicitly political effort to map the system, to visually capture a totality. What distinguishes deadpan totality from cognitive mapping is not the absence of politics but the recession of affect—and, as a result, a fragmentation of the political.

In a chapter dedicated to deadpan aesthetics in the history of photography, Charlotte Cotton writes that this type of photography places emphasis on "a way of seeing beyond the individual perspective, a way of mapping the extent of the forces, invisible from a single human standpoint, that govern the man-made and natural world. Deadpan photography may be highly specific in its

[98] Szeman and Whiteman, "Oil Imag(e)inaries", 55.
[99] Szeman and Whiteman, 55.

description of its subjects, but its seeming neutrality and totality of vision is of epic proportions".[100] This quote is suggestive of two things that are critical to the deadpan aesthetic of totality: one, the explicit—if neutral—framing of a certain scene which is presented to the viewer. And second, the attempt to capture systemic totality without reaching for an emotional vocabulary.

In relation to the first point, we might consider some of Coolidge's claims about CLUI's practice, a practice that he says is conscious of the aesthetic as a "frame of evaluation", which represents preexisting things with "clarity". Not many art historians or artists would necessarily recognize or subscribe to such a basic notion of aesthetics. At a minimum, even the most limited definitions of the word are usually at pains to draw out etymological links between aesthetics and the senses. None of that here. For CLUI the aesthetic is a frame. The same is true of photography. Coolidge's view of photography as a mere device for capturing something before the lens, and of aesthetic experience as the basic fact of noticing what otherwise bores us, cuts against the idea of the sublime—administrative or otherwise—as constituting the Center's practice. Of course, the photographs and descriptions in *Urban Crude* create a kind of information overload, they glut the senses with too much knowledge, and beyond a point the user/viewer is not quite sure where she is or what she is doing. At the same time, to equate any form of perceptual disorientation to sublimity is problematic. The information piled up in *Urban Crude* does not disorient by overwhelming the senses but, if anything, by leaving them relatively underwhelmed. CLUI presents information without affect. This is the crucial and decisive manner in which the Center's efforts to map a totality differ from the work of cognitive cartography.

As I suggest above, like paranoia and conspiracy theory, the methods of cognitive mapping are marked by a degree of tautology where every object justifies the existence of a totality already

[100] Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 81.

assumed to be in place, and objects and totalities function through weird self-enclosed loops. Each sustains the existence of the other. More to the point: the totality cognitive mapping wishes to uncover is very different from the one CLUI hopes to grapple with because unlike the former, the latter is disinvested from the affective labor attached to capturing or restoring authentic experience. Recall, here, the edifice constructed by Jameson where the phenomenological unverifiability of a system in fact supplies the rationale for its totalizing presence. Comfortable with abstraction, CLUI's deadpan totality approximates, what Lauren Berlant calls "underperformativity, a mode of flat or flattened affect" which, in its recessiveness, "does not promise sentimental participation in a world's worldness, for it cannot rely on the transparency of performance. At the same time, it is not merely ironic, paranoid, or untrusting in relation to surfaces".[101] This is one way of saying: photographic exhibits like *Urban Crude* destabilize the coordinates of what is expected by displaying a certain comfort with the surface that doesn't arise to celebration but doesn't slip into paranoia either. When Coolidge speaks of mapping totalities, he seems less interested in discerning a deep logic of the present than in asking simpler questions: "What's that in front of me? What's it connected to? How did it get there?" This is totality in the image of a machine that can be taken apart, put back together, or understood as a set of moving parts.

The other claim made in the interview—that CLUI is not keen to "take over peoples' psychological spaces"—further shows the Center's rather banal desire to frame the world for its audience without attempting to convince them of anything. We cannot say with much confidence that the deadpan aesthetic of totality even aspires to evoke wonder. In fact, as Coolidge says at the very end of the interview with LeMenager, CLUI wants people to cultivate a childlike curiosity about the world. The temporal vision on display in this work not only mimics the aesthetic of *New*

[101] Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling", 195.

Topographics, but also goes along with the members of that school in articulating the belief—still only implicit in 1975—that the anthropogenic transformation of landscapes is a geological event. In CLUI's scheme of things, historical and geological temporalities appear co-constituted—at least to the extent that any consideration of anthropogenic effects is, de facto, a consideration of geological transformations on the surface of the earth (and below). For this reason, it seems unproductive and inaccurate to condemn CLUI for propagating capitulation to the facticity of the given. Instead of pulling them up for inadequately politicizing the present, we could attempt to understand what this aesthetic of totality is in fact attempting to do.

At this point, returning to the scene of the crisis ordinary or the quasi-event, I find that far from capitulating to the facticity of the given, CLUI's work seems to render perceptible the psychic effects of inhabiting anthropogenic, toxic geographies in Los Angeles. Their meticulous and low, flattened-affect mapping of a totality without any real interest in the shape or logic of that totality provides deep insight into conditions of exhausted life. In such contexts, material infrastructures are always-already sutured to the psychic apparatus. The psyche must maintain itself to endure, survive, in an urban landscape where harm is distributed along economic and racial lines, where toxicity seeps into the fabric of *specific lives*. Therefore, the point is not that CLUI fail to excavate the logic of the system or unravel its energies. Where cognitive mapping deploys the distinction between experience and abstraction to reinstantiate a vision of "politics proper", CLUI holds politics in abeyance—allowing us to glimpse at the logic of maintenance by which interior life attempts to retain some semblance of stability in the context of the spatialized distribution of harm. The affectless, withdrawn, and deadpan aesthetic of totality holds open blind spots between knowledge and politics, experience and abstraction, aesthetics and politics.

V. Order, form, backgrounds

Inhabiting this blind spot requires the operationalization of a distinction between what Adam Phillips, in a recent lecture, called "attention as instrument and attention as medium".[102] I will end, in the conclusion, by fleshing out the stakes of this distinction. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that as Citton's analysis of *Rain in Calcutta* and the paranoiac intensities of cognitive mapping ably demonstrate, reinstating a recognizable vocabulary of politics often requires the dissolution of distinctions between the political and apolitical, or experience and abstraction. In all the cases I have discussed so far—corporate communiques, cognitive mapping, the energy humanities, and resource aesthetics—attention is narrowed either in the service of the status quo or in a critical flourish against it. In wanting to dwell in the blind spot where the impulse to order attention is suspended or rendered, I draw inspiration from cultural critic Maggie Nelson, who evocatively asks: "Perhaps more controversially still, given our inarguable complicity in all kinds of systemic forms of global injustice: is there any space left for *not* watching, *not* focusing, *not* keeping abreast of all the events and atrocities unfolding in the world, as an ethically viable option?"[103]

Exhaustion, affective flatness, and "not-ness" occupy spatiotemporal frequencies of quasi-events. They inhabit an aporia, dwelling in a moment where the terms of politics have not yet been (re)established. In this section, I want to suggest that the struggle over occupying an aporia and resolving it is, in large part, a struggle over form—the tendency to order the social and the political to make it legible for specific kinds of political projects. Quasi-events and the crisis ordinary, on the other hand, strain in a different direction, slightly away from immediate legibility, in the hopes of better articulating what Nelson calls the space of the "not". The analysis of crisis ordinariness or the quasi-event is useful because, as I have hinted at throughout the previous pages, quasi-events

[102] Phillips, "On Vacancies of Attention".
[103] Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*, 44.

name widespread problems that don't rise to the status of an event but nonetheless tinker constantly with what Keller Easterling calls the "spatial software"[104] we are embedded in. In the context of natural gases like methane, such quasi-events persist in the form of "fugitive emissions" which are endemic to the infrastructures of the oil and (natural) gas industry and give lie to fantasies of a clean energy frontier as occurring without cost.

Fugitive emissions are normalized within the manufacturing process, designating both accidental leaks inherent to infrastructural systems and intentional burning of excess gas extracted from below the surface when it cannot be put to economic use. Fugitive methane emissions, intimately related to the functions of the natural gas industry, pose significant health hazards and contribute to climate change. An *Oil and Gas Threat Map* produced by three major activist, policy, and advocacy groups—Earthworks, Clean Air Task Force, and FracTracker Alliance—puts forth the claim that in the United States 12.4 million people live within half a mile of an oil or gas facility. In California, 1.3 million live close to what the map identifies as a 'threat radius,' which covers 1,837 square miles. One entire section of the map's website, dedicated to a campaign called #cutmethane, argues that the oil and gas industry ("the largest methane polluter in the United States") "is recklessly leaking millions of tons of methane pollution and toxic chemicals into the air".[105] The campaign likens normalized, fugitive leaks to "an industrial oil spill happening every day".

It is worth remarking in this context, on the fact that although the Obama administration and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took some steps to curb—or at least pay more attention to—the environmental implications of fugitive leaks, house Republicans under the Trump administration have already voted to repeal controls on everyday methane leaks. After the

[104] Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*.
[105] See: http://oilandgasthreatmap.com/cutmethane/

Obama-era rules were repealed, *The Washington Post* reported the oil and gas industry's positive reaction: "[The Bureau of Land Management's] rule is technically flawed and redundant, and it could impede the technological innovations that have led to increased domestic use of cleaner-burning natural gas".[106] We see in this statement how the fantasy of natural gas as a bridge fuel between the fossil fuel and so-called "green" economy is sustained to feed into narratives of systemic expansion through the rhetoric of innovation. But as devastating as such renewed attacks on regulatory frameworks might be, I think it is still important to keep a wider historical trajectory in mind, both political and environmental, which created the conditions for what is about to unfold. In other words, the rollbacks under Trump might amount to an event; but the accumulation of toxic ecological burden has a much longer trajectory—one which no regulatory authority has ever really wanted to clamp down on. I am arguing, in this context, that form is not extrinsic to the problem at hand. It is precisely methane's unnameability, its persistence without detection in low-income working-class areas that allows toxic quasi-events to persist.

On the question of form, the novelist Ali Smith writes:

> 'God, or some such artist as resourceful, / Began to sort it out. / Land here, sky there, / And the sea there' is how Ovid, metamorphosing into Ted Hughes, saw the start of all things. Before that? 'Everything fluid or vapor, form formless. / Each thing hostile / To every other thing.' Not that fluid or vapor isn't form too; it's the hostility that Hughes highlights: 'at every point / Hot fought cold, moist dry, soft hard, and the weightless / Resisted weight.' Until, that is, God, or some such artist, starts throwing weight around. Form, from the Latin *forma*, meaning shape. Shape, a mold; something that holds or shapes; a species or kind; a pattern or type; a way of being; order, regularity, system.[107]

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[106] Harvey, "House Republicans Just Voted to Repeal Another Environmental Rule".
[107] Smith, *Artful*, 67–68.

Usefully, Smith resists the temptation to equate gaseousness with formlessness. The suggestion that form resembles an imposition of order—or the act of bequeathing some arrangement of elements a certain kind of weight—is good to think with. Pure hostility of matter, in this reading, precedes the emergence of form. But perhaps the deeper implication of Smith's take on Ovid (via Hughes) is that without shape, without "order, regularity, system", the work of perception becomes that much harder. Weightlessness must be contained within figural apparatuses that shape, channel, and make legible what might otherwise escape the eye, the ears, the nose, or even the body as a whole. The point is not that gases are ontologically formless; but that the forms they possess—weightless, odorless, invisible—escape our perceptual coordinates.[108] Remember, not unrelatedly, how Robinson discusses figuration as the strategy by which the instability of politics is ordered. Smith too, indicates that formations of social power ("God, or some such artist") determine what shape the weightless surround will take. Form, shape, or system designates, then, the space of attention: the terms by illegible things are reigned in, drawn into the orbit of politics proper.

Sometimes—often—such formations of social power announce themselves through infrastructure. Infrastructures are formal ordering devices in at least two senses of the word (both of which Smith relies on): they impose shape on matter, acting as machines for figuration. But they also represent, as in the case of CLUI, the banality of bureaucratic life, "forms"—the documents one routinely fills out, which simultaneously cause anxiety and make one's eyes glaze over in boredom. Beyond the mutual hostility of the elements, therefore, is the weighty presence

[108] My omission of the art historical discussion of "formlessness", especially by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois (who deploy the concept as developed by Georges Bataille), is entirely intentional. Although Krauss and Bois propose exceptionally intriguing formulations, I think that the opposition they posit between form and matter (where matter equals formlessness) is both unconvincing and problematic—especially from the point of view of the environmental substances I am discussing. It is not self-evident to me that materiality is formless or that, say, sculptural works which break with established norms of figuration necessarily slip into a domain of formlessness because they use matter in an unruly manner. As Smith indicates in the quote above, the formless is always the form-formless; which is to say, there is no such thing as formlessness per se. See: Bois and Krauss, *Formless*.

of devices that impose "order, regularity, system", and, at the same time, produce the corollary effects of systematicity: boredom, banality, a mild sense of dread. Away from the eventfulness of spectacular occurrences which grab headlines and capture televisual ratings, systematicity also enforces a certain mundaneness, a regular pace of things. And this is precisely the space where inattention flourishes as a method for *not* thinking about, *not* looking at forms—the infrastructures and elements proliferating desolate landscapes, and paperwork, consistently reminding us of another pending deadline, another "form" of accountability.

At an empirical level, Smith's poetic, speculative observations are backed up interestingly by the findings of sociologists of perception like Eviatar Zerubavel who, in a short but useful book tantalizingly titled *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance*, argues that the irrelevant exists in a crucial space between everything we notice and the few things that catch our attention. He claims that "the relations between 'figure' and 'background,' in other words, basically represent the relations between the attended and unattended parts of our phenomenal world".[109] By acknowledging that the unattended or the irrelevant is that part of a perceptual field we notice but don't focus on, Zerubavel leaves open the possibility for something which is backgrounded today to potentially become figured tomorrow and vice versa. The problem with backgrounds, he suggests, is that they are normally considered to be spatially "unbounded".[110] One of the most important things about figures is their spatial coherence—they stand apart from an otherwise undifferentiated surround and call attention to themselves as objects with clear edges and frames. Figural objects or scenes grab attention because, in Jonathan Crary's words, attentional regimes perform the tripartite function of "organization, selection, isolation".[111] For Charles Feré

[109] Zerubavel, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, 7.
[110] Zerubavel, 14–17.
[111] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 24.

and Alfred Binet, for instance, attention represented "a concentration of the whole mind on a single point, resulting in the intensification of the perception of this point and producing all around it *a zone of anesthesia*; attention increases the force of certain sensations while it weakens others".[112] By contrast, the background has a diffused quality, making it difficult to identify or focus on.

Form, shape, or system in Smith, like figure in Zerubavel, designates a zone of attention, a space which emerges from diffused backgrounded surrounds where even the activity of hostile elements can be overlooked, or left unattended. The problem of fugitive methane emissions is quite fascinating when considered from this point of view. Although everyday emissions in sum total annually amount to virtually the same amount as the methane spewed into the atmosphere from Aliso Canyon, the banal routineness of infrastructural leakage or intentional combustion doesn't factor into a calculus of either environmental or health costs. From the vantage point of the oil and gas industry, these emissions are not worth paying attention to because they detract from the innovative promise of natural gas as a bridge fuel—and a source of new speculative capital. From the vantage point of those inhabiting the landscapes identified by the *Oil and Gas Threat Map* however, these emissions—like catastrophic events—do deserve attention. But in order to persist within largely toxic landscapes, the psychic apparatus must develop strategies which allow the maintenance of some stability within interior life. This is the work performed by inattention: not a permanent withdrawal from politics; nor an openly apolitical act; but a stabilizing function generated at the interstices of technological infrastructures and mental life. Following Smith and Zerubavel, I am suggesting that this kind of withdrawal has a kind of "form formlessness" that eludes easy categorization within the frame of politics as an ordering device.

[112] Crary, 39.

The cruddy mundaneness of the crisis ordinary approximates temporalities of everyday life, of "just going on", of working, living, sleeping, and doing it all over again. Where the logic of events orients subjects towards what Povinelli terms a "future perfect", the repetitiveness of endurance obliterates any concrete realization of the long-term. The everyday becomes a site of persistence; not vitality. Attention as a "zone of anesthesia" not only heightens some sensations at the expense of others, but also articulates a desire for relief (if impermanent and fleeting) from a system whose effects thoroughly structure the everyday. Inattention, in this situation, is the cognitive equivalent of mumblecore,[113] recessive action, deadpan photography. It indicates the impossibility of scaling the everyday up, of registering events unfolding all the time, all around.

I want to reinforce therefore, that inattention is not apolitical, apathetic or coerced by ideology. It is an aporia, a blind spot, and a space of relief where the distinctions between those terms are suspended. My plea, as such, is allied to but different from Rob Nixon's critique of the slow violence of environmental degradation. In his important book, Nixon argues that the diffused temporality of ecological violence makes it difficult to visualize or narrate.[114] Unlike spectacular events, pollution, deforestation, toxicity, and events of this genre resist incorporation into regimes of representation. At least until they explode on to the stage as events. Nixon makes a convincing case for developing representational strategies which might meet the challenge of slow violence by effectively unveiling the effects of environmental damage. Even though I fundamentally agree with much of his argument, I am, here, making a case for a different kind of ethic—an attention to inattention itself. That moment when slow violence is rendered palpable is crucial for political

[113] Briefly, "mumblecore" refers to a twenty-first century aesthetic genre—primarily cinematic—where dialogue and speech (often unclear) take precedence over plot, narrative, and event. Dictionary definitions and online forums often connect mumblecore to emergent youth cultures characterized by forms of emotional disconnect, awkwardness or reticence.

[114] Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Though I don't have space to go into it here, I am skeptical of Nixon's reliance of the politics of representation as a panacea to slow violence.

work. But we must also attend to the reasons why slowness remains unattended to in the first place. Attending to inattention requires a certain degree of sympathy with the desire to hold the world at bay, to look elsewhere—at least for a moment or two—as catastrophic, gradual, violence engulfs the environmental surround.

That said, all that remains is for me to substantiate the quasi-event in what I have so far vaguely referred to as low-income, working-class neighborhoods of Los Angeles. These spaces are not abstractions I have been using in the service of a larger argument. They are actual, physical locations in the urban geography of the city. In pointing to one such urban pocket—Wilmington, Los Angeles—I don't want to provide a sociological account of toxicity but think through a visual grammar of inattention. So, consider two images [figures 33-34].

A primarily Latino locality (over 85 percent), Wilmington is widely acknowledged to be one of the most intensely oil-infested and polluted areas in the city. As of 2016, there were 90 active wells in Wilmington. In a report for *City Lab*, Laura Bliss paints a vivid picture of conditions there: "a working-class neighborhood near L.A.'s port, pump-jacks dot the landscape like trees. On small lots sandwiched between homes, schools and churches, they cast shadows on rooftops and nod as gently as branches. Pump-jacks help extract oil from the ground, a process that can pollute the air with diesel particulates, methane, and a host of volatile organic compounds, including carcinogenic benzene".[115] Describing how oil derricks loom over the neighborhood, Bliss draws attention to the toxic side-effects of extraction, which releases "diesel particulates, methane, and a host of volatile organic compounds, including carcinogenic benzene" into the atmosphere. With wells located, on average, only 139 feet away from sensitive spots like schools and homes, people are consistently exposed to the neurological, respiratory, and reproductive side-

[115] Bliss, "L.A.'s Slow-Moving Oil and Gas Disaster".

effects of the oil and gas industry. Residents like Ashley Hernandez have “grown accustomed to the sour odors that seep from sidewalks”.[116] In a long report for *The Nation*—from where the two images I discuss are taken—Michael J Mishak discusses another similar case:

> Alejandro Valdez lives with his wife and two young sons in Wilmington, an industrial enclave near the Port of Los Angeles frequently enveloped in brown haze. Their bungalow borders the Phillips 66 refinery, which gives off odors so strong, especially at night, that ‘I feel like throwing up,’ Valdez said. His older boy, Nathan, is lethargic and regularly gets nosebleeds and headaches. Noise deprives the family of sleep; some days, black smoke from flares fills the sky. Everyone has rashes. Valdez likes the neighborhood, loathes the hulking complex just across the fence. ‘I got a good price for the house,’ he said, ‘but it’s not worth it.’[117]

With this context in mind, I offer the two photographs of Wilmington from Mishak’s report to tenuously sketch a visual grammar of inattention. Even though the refinery is brought into focus by the report and the responses reporters like Bliss and Mishak elicit for their subjects, one wonders how foregrounded such industrial infrastructures are on a day-to-day basis for people living in Wilmington. I would suggest that the everydayness of the Phillips 66 refinery naturalizes and banalizes it—in much the same way that CLUI suggests through its photographic practice. In fact, in the context of the report, the refinery is summoned into brutal facticity by text accompanying Elizabeth Fladung’s images. “Children play”, the caption reads in one. In the other, we are asked to take notice of the refinery “lighting up” in the background. The text spectacularizes infrastructure, beckoning ocular attention toward the top and background of both frames.

[116] Bliss.
[117] Mishak, “Big Oil’s Grip on California”.

Figure 33 Elizabeth Fladung, *The Phillips 66 refinery lights up the Wilmington, Los Angeles skyline*. 2017.

Paradoxically, the center and foreground are less important than the looming backdrop in each of Fladung's images. By off-centering human bodies and calling attention to the refinery, she expertly reverses optical conventions. She recognizes that normative spatial relations can be suspended because a critical apparatus is framing the reception of each photograph. In the two photographs, human presence only indicates toxic harm and demands that the reader/viewer's visual attention be placed on the backgrounds, which themselves are not entirely centered. Visual incoherence replicates systemic and structural incoherence, rendering spatial boundaries uncertain and floating the possibility that sinister background infrastructures might, in fact, be determining the shape of social totality—petroculture penetrates everything. But what would happen if the reader/viewer disobeyed the guiding logic at work here? What would happen if, instead of focusing on the infrastructural backgrounds of each image, she was to look at the foreground?

Figure 34 Elizabeth Fladung, *Children play in the Wilmington neighborhood of Los Angeles, just next to the Phillips 66 refinery*. 2017.

Consider the children playing or the two figures crossing the street. What are they attending to? Where are their eyes directed? What is the relationship between their everyday lives and the Phillips 66 refinery framing their bodies in these pictures? How are we to conceive of playing, walking, even taking an evening stroll, in the backdrop of geological events running the planet—no puns here—into the ground? Is the action of the children "political"? Are the two individuals crossing between blocks attending to the refinery as *we* are being asked to do? Even as the words describing Fladung's photographs require readers and viewers to suture bodies in the foreground to a background infused with violence and toxicity, are not the bodies themselves potentially straining in a different direction? Can we not claim these moments of mobility and movement for something other than a pure narrative of toxicity? Is it possible to resist the temptation to read these four bodies within a narrative of slow violence? What would happen if one looked at the

photographs but, instead of being pulled into the refinery, one remained—perhaps only for a few minutes—with the playful children and the strolling figures?

A zone of anesthesia. To speak of attention in these terms is, on the one hand, to point out the ways in which individual minds can fixate on specific objects, scenes, or sites—as Feré and Binet did in Crary's account. On the other hand, along with Allen Feldman, such a zone might articulate dimensions of what he calls "cultural anesthesia"[118]—the mechanics by which one is inured to the violence inflicted upon others, especially in a highly-mediatized society. At the same time, anesthesia—what the OED describes as "insensitivity to pain, especially as artificially induced by the administration of gases or the injection of drugs"[119]—might be a technology developed by the psychic apparatus embedded in a toxic environmental surround. To be anesthetized is to become unstuck, if impermanently, from backgrounds. It is to find temporary relief from the procedures one is subject to on a day-to-day basis. To fixate on an object or a scene—a quick walk to a neighbor's house for dinner, a moment of play—is to shut out the world, to create a space where other sensitivities can flourish without a systemic, structural background always slipping into view. These are not necessarily events which register on the landscape of political action. They are flattened, exhausted, affective responses to landscape choked by quasi-events.

In her own spin on such fleeting timescales of attachment, Rei Terada writes of "a subterranean practice of phenomenophilia in which the most transient perceptual objects come to be loved because only they seem capable of noncoercive relation".[120] The position I am espousing here is not the same as the phenomenophile's, but it does align with that impulse toward a moment

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[118] Feldman, "On Cultural Anesthesia".
[119] See: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/anaesthesia
[120] Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*, 4.

of freedom where oppressive systemic structures slip out of view. The moments when they do slip away from the field of vision are not political but operationalize blind spots that ought not to be assimilated immediately into terms of order. Throughout this chapter, I've gestured to the fact that inattention follows a different track than corporate media and the conspiratorial affective intensity of work in the human and social sciences. Attending to inattention and the psychic need to maintain stability in a time of quiet turbulence requires the cultivation of an openness towards minor affects and dispositions which don't register themselves as traumatic events; which scratch the surface of the ordinary. Here I fall back on Terada's mapping of a certain sense of dissatisfaction which colors phenomenophilic demands for relief: "We are melancholy and restless during periods of freedom not because we don't know what to do with freedom, but because there is not enough of it yet".[121] To affirm this wavelength of experience—if only to acknowledge the space it opens up for thought—perhaps one has to express a certain skepticism toward ordering devices as Robinson and Ali Smith write of them. And if this is the case then, instead of foreclosing politics altogether, inattention orients us to another way of thinking about and relating to the world—one where our attention doesn't narrow to focus on one thing or site but widens and wanders in a less controlled manner.

VI. Conclusion (on wandering attention)

When Adam Phillips distinguishes between attention as instrument and as medium, he means that as instrument, attention is an ordering device—it is the sort of thing corporate media and social theory manipulate to different ends. Riffing on Freud, Phillips argues that this type of attention is "selective", "a protection racket" guided by what "we can call the will to define".[122] In deliberately

[121] Terada, 202.
[122] Phillips, "On Vacancies of Attention".

focusing on something we discover little more than "our expectations, and assumptions, and presumptions"—the stuff "we already know". Freud is interested, Phillips argues, in the "difference between the kind of attention paid when we know what we want, what we're looking for, and the kind of attention paid when we're finding out what we want, when we don't know beforehand what we want, or what we're looking for, but only that we're in a state of wanting and seeking".[123] The former is attention as instrument; the latter is attention as medium. As medium, attention is "wide"—in the way Marion Milner meant: a type of perception where you look at "something and yet want nothing from it".[124] This ability to unclasp oneself from the demands an object or a scene makes is critical for Phillip's investment in it: "What happens to attention when we take wanting out of the picture? And what happens to the picture?"

"Picture", here, might be another word for totality. Construed this way, to take "wanting out of the picture" is to adopt a mode of inquiry that refuses extraction and mining—both in the literal, corporate sense, and in the metaphorical interpretive one—in search of an unconscious. Not quite because no unconscious exists, but because the unconscious manifests without playing into binaries of surface and depth, attention and distraction, or experience and abstraction. By taking wanting out of the picture, I think we can begin to take stock of what we sometimes miss; we can start looking at the "stuff" going on within the frame without imbuing that frame with our own wishes, anxieties, and fears. None of this is to refuse the deleterious effects of capital on the racialized bodies of the poor. It is, however, to express skepticism about the claim that these effects exhaust the range of relations those bodies are capable of having with their environments. Of Cedric Nunn's image of children playing football in front of a refinery in South Africa, Sharad Chari writes: "The football players in the photograph shout out that even in our age, saturated as

[123] Phillips.
[124] Milner, *A Life of One's Own*, 79.

it is by capital's value form, when, to paraphrase Joan Robinson, the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited at all, life in damaged form can never fully be subsumed by capital".[125] This minimal vitality outside the realm of subsumption flourishes in crevices where order, politics, and authority are suspended.

Suspending the urge to know, giving in to attention as a medium—its wideness as a mode of linking different, overlooked spheres of quotidian experience—holds some promise for working out anew the shape of the picture we are confronted by; its colors, lines, and points of saturation; where the frame ends and where it dissolves into the texture of an outside that is, nonetheless, very much constitutive of the picture. To take wanting out of looking is, modestly, to give up making claims on the world—to allow the wandering eye and undisciplined body to track some signals and ignore others. In its refusal of extraction, this mode of seeing also turns away from the frontier imaginary—from thinking of what is "to come" as a horizon where the present will be renewed again and again. Here, overburden isn't what stands in the way of profit-making or interpretive purity. Here, overburden *is* the thing engaged, the matter in need of sustenance. I am not suggesting that there is politics in attention as medium. Nor that from such inattentional practices a new, oppositional order will arise to thwart what is afoot. Only that the impulse to order, formalize, and mine misses something. And it might be worthwhile cultivating a feel for what happens, or where "life" rests, when "God, or some such artist as resourceful", isn't manically sorting things out.

[125] Chari, "The Blues and the Damned", 155.

POSTSCRIPT

Space Force, 2018

In the preceding pages, I have invoked the frontier as a geographical and fantasy space, as a shifting terrain that captures histories of imagination as much as it does histories of conquest. It would not be erroneous to suggest, in fact, that much of the impetus for territorial conquest stems from how frontiers are conjured in the domain of the imaginary. In this context, we would do well to remember that a frontier is not merely a space of extension and expansion. It also designates a border, it is a technology that separates entities and marks distinctions—between nation states, between self and other, between civilization and wilderness, to name a few relevant examples. Doubtless, part of the allure of conquering new frontiers has precisely to do with this thrill of occupying a territorial space that is not one's own. "Pioneerism" is the romantic name for such a process. "Colonialism" is perhaps the more accurate descriptor. At times, fortuitously for an interpreter like myself, the nostalgic yearning for pioneer life and the paranoid controlling of borders constitutive of the colonial impulse come together on material and psychic levels.

On June 18, 2018, President Donald Trump announced—to much fanfare and criticism—his desire to create a sixth wing of the United States military, a space force that would be (note the racial resonance) "separate but equal" to the air force. "The essence of the American character", he noted, "is to explore new horizons and tame new frontiers. But our destiny, beyond the earth, is not only a matter of national identity, but a matter of national security".[1] Twinning exploratory desires to securitizing imperatives, before this announcement, Trump implored listeners to "just remember, a country without borders is not a country at all. We need borders. We need security.

[1] All quotes are from: Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at a Meeting with the National Space Council and Signing of Space Policy Directive-3".

We need safety. We have to take care of our people". He also connected his vision of a space force to the historical arc I have been tracing throughout: "Our nation of pioneers still yearns to conquer the unknown, because we are Americans and the future belongs totally to us … Once more, we will summon the American spirit to tame the next great American frontier". And then, in response to questions from reporters, the President articulated how the frontier as a space of conquest and as borderland seems crucial to the constitution of his own paranoid unconscious. The space force would be "great, not only in terms of jobs and everything else; it's great for the psyche of our country … So important for our psyche … It's going to be important monetarily and militarily. But so important right up here—the psyche". One imagines Trump pointing at, perhaps knocking, his skull as he directs his audience to where his psyche might reside.

What are we to make of this series of statements? In them, we can discern a neat summary of the major claims that have driven the chapters of this dissertation. First, Trump's words are yet another, almost painfully beautiful, illustration of the settler order's ceaseless search for frontiers to sustain a sense of optimistic futurity. That the press conference is littered with references to how "optimistic" Trump finds the United States to be in the present moment is, therefore, not surprising in the least. Second, the sentiments on display here capture a distilled essence of the frontier as a geographical and fantastical terrain where the "great" American tradition will once again renew itself by extending outward into (another) space. Third, three different occasions for the use of the word "psyche" go a long way in speaking to the ways in which fantasies of the frontier continue to shore up an American sense of self.

With these more obvious points in view, at the end of this dissertation, I want to point to another facet of the frontier—one with which I began the conclusion: the frontier as a technology of separation. My analysis of frontier imaginaries has, of course, made reference to boundaries or

metaphorical lines in the sand. But I have done so implicitly for the most part. Trump's comments explicate the link between the frontier as a space of exploration and as a fence (or is it a wall?) with unexpected eloquence. The fact that in this speech he references borders, immigration, and security at the same time that he looks upward to space as an area to conquer and claim speaks volumes about the ways in which the frontier in the American imaginary has always been linked to the thrill of renewal and the anxiety of encountering the other. If "a country without borders is not a country at all", then what is it? Borders, in this vision, imply security, safety, and identity. A country without borders is just plain, unclaimed territory—the very thing pioneers drag into the frame of "civilization".

The fact that Trump's remarks echo and substantiate some of my central claims ought to give some pause to those who are tempted to conceptualize the present in terms of a decisive break from the past. Intensifications and accelerations notwithstanding, there is a case to be made for how what we are currently witnessing and experiencing unfold is not, in any obvious sense, new.[2] In concluding on this note, I am not trying to offer insightful commentary on what Trump means. My point is only that one must note how the central tropes of frontier-based futurity are a defining feature of Trump's vision for America. And in so noting one must acknowledge the tradition he continues within rather than ruptures. His words, panicked and enthusiastic at the same time, are useful because they help focalize the question of anxiety that has run throughout the body of this text, i.e. my claim that frontierism is, in its different guises, often a byproduct of imperial anxiousness about sustaining its organizing myths in the future. In various ways, each chapter has oscillated around how administrative media tackle this central problem: how can a certain style of American civilization continue in economies of scarcity? How does technological optimism obtain

[2] See: Singh, *Race and America's Long War*, especially chapter five, "The Present Crisis".

in the midst of temporal unsettlement? How might narratives of progress be generated anew when social faith in conventional sources of energy dwindles?

At a time when the resurgence of revanchist, nostalgic nationalism is turning considerable public and critical focus onto the malaise cause by the politics of paranoia and (sometimes hollow) specters of fascism, it is perhaps not irrelevant to keep continuities in mind; to de-exceptionalize how the present is structured. More importantly—and in keeping with the spirit of the introduction to the dissertation—it is precisely a flourishing culture of paranoid violence that requires the cultivation of a reparative ethic, an ethic oriented to the otherwise, to the arts of noticing that depart from the kinds of overburden generated by extractive settler visuality. As frontier imaginaries continue to nourish an extractive aesthetics and politics in the service of destructive futures, by remaining aware of the frontier as a space of extension and separation "we" might—if only for brief moments—seek out another ecology of relations.

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