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Hidden Cities in the American Wilderness : The Cultural Work of a Romantic Trope

Gesa Mackenthun

- 1 Thinking critically of the politics of visibility in representations of the American West, one almost inevitably is reminded of Jean Baudrillard's well-known description of his car ride through the American desert. Here is what Baudrillard writes in his essay *America* (1988) :

The grandeur of deserts derives from their being, in their aridity, the negative of the earth's surface and of *our civilized humours*. They are places where humours and fluids become rarefied, where the air is so pure that the influence of the stars descends direct from the constellations. And, *with the extermination of the desert Indians*, an even earlier stage than that of anthropology became visible : a mineralogy, a geology, a sidereality, an inhuman facticity, an aridity that drives out the artificial scruples of culture, a silence that exists nowhere else.

The silence of the desert is a *visual* thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it. There can be no silence up in the mountains, since their very contours roar. And for there to be silence, time itself has to attain a sort of horizontality ; there has to be no echo of time in the future but simply a sliding of geological strata one upon the other giving out nothing more than a *fossil murmur*.

Desert : luminous, *fossilized network of an inhuman intelligence*, of a radical indifference – the indifference not merely of the sky, but of the geological undulations where the metaphysical passions of space and time alone crystallize. Here the terms of desire are turned upside down each day, and night annihilates them. But wait for the dawn to rise, with the awakening of the *fossil sounds*, the animal silence. (6 ; emphasis added)

- 2 The passage is an aesthetic rhapsody inspired by a ride through the American desert : having erased any other human presence, nothing intervenes between the philosopher and his “inhuman” object. He finds himself vis-à-vis a silence that is not silent, and the desert is a “visual thing” only to the extent that it is a “product” of Baudrillard's own “gaze,” which finds “nothing to reflect it.” With all life and all history having been

aestheticized away from this place, what's left is the simulacrist listening to the "fossil murmur" of geological strata. Silence and invisibility are qualities of the desert that Baudrillard appreciates. His evocation of the geological dimension of time is accompanied by an ambiguous "nuclear" presence in the American desert of the late 80s (7, *passim*). The closest description of this presence is found in phrases about abstract "dumping grounds, wastelands [...] forming around nuclear power stations" (113). Nuclear radiation, of course, is indeed invisible.¹ In Baudrillard's text its invisibility enables the intimate tête-à-tête between the philosopher and the "silent" land. In fashioning the land in terms of eternal geological existence (the desert as a "luminous, fossilized network of an inhuman intelligence") the text pre-empts the land of any organic life and of any historicity. The text demonstrates the imperial eye's desire for silent contemplation of a wasteland where the "metaphysical passions of space and time alone crystallize."

- 3 A quite different relation to the desert is provided by a representative of what Baudrillard calls the "exterminated" "desert Indians." In her essay "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination" Leslie Marmon Silko gives *her* reading of the desert :

The bare vastness of the Hopi landscape emphasizes the *visual* impact of every plant, every rock, every arroyo. *Nothing is overlooked or taken for granted.* Each ant, each lizard, each lark is imbued with great value simply because the creature is there, simply because the creature is alive in a *place where any life at all is precious.* Stand on the mesa edge at Walpai and look west over the bare distances toward the pale blue outlines of the San Francisco peaks where the ka'tsina spirits reside. So little lies between you and the sky. So little lies between you and the earth. One look and you know that simply to survive is a great triumph, that every possible resource is needed, every possible ally – even the most humble insect or reptile. You realize you will be speaking with all of them if you intend to last out the year. Thus it is that the Hopi elders are grateful to the landscape for aiding them in their quest as spiritual people. (42 ; emphasis added)

- 4 Silko's message is quite different from Baudrillard's. Where his text erases—renders invisible—any living organic presence and leaves the bare geological formations for the visitor's aesthetic enjoyment, Silko emphasizes the need to contemplate nature for even the smallest sign of life. Contrary to the visiting philosopher, who passes through the landscape on his way to the next gas station, motel, metropolis, and airport, the Pueblo Indians depend for their survival on their complete knowledge of all life in the desert. Where for Baudrillard "civilized humours" become "rarefied," for Silko the very rarity of life becomes "precious." Where he sees (and wants to see) nothing, she sees little, but that little makes a big difference. Each text promotes a "politics of visibility" of the American landscape, but their politics could hardly be more different.
- 5 In the following remarks I will look at a few examples of how the imperial eye/"I" tends to spirit away the presence of indigenous inhabitants in order to be in sole contemplation of the land and its 'prehistorical' rocks. The tendency in Euroamerican colonial discourse to dehumanize the landscape (by unwittingly reiterating the colonial trope of *vacuum domicilium*) can be extended to a certain reluctance to discover pre-Columbian native habitations, or remains thereof, which would aggravate the colonial narrative of indigenous primitivism. Yet the imperial desire to expand into vacant lands was concurrent with a romantic scientific fascination with the 'prehistory' of the continent, to be deduced from the existence of the architectural remains of vast settlements along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, in Louisiana, and of course in Mesoamerica. This essay will explore the ambivalent representation of space in

American cultural discourse with reference to the indigenous presence, as space that is mediated as at once 'empty' and 'lived'. It will look at a few examples of the trope of the mysterious ruined city awaiting discovery in the middle of the American wilderness. Mythical discourse expresses a desire to possess these cities, coupled with an equally strong antipathy toward finding them already inhabited by defensive natives. Finally I will consider the cultural work this imperial trope may be seen to conduct within the discourse on the American West.

- 6 Before the American West entered the scene of the national imagination, the major discursive items we associate with it had already been tested in the colonial discourse on Latin America. It is here that the trope I'm interested in—of the mysterious native city hidden away in the jungle—begins. Ever after the stupendous discoveries of indigenous metropolises like Tenochtitlan and Cuzco in the 1520s and 1530s, European explorers were dreaming of finding more of their kind. The earliest example is probably the myth of the city of Manoa, the habitat of El Dorado. Without doubt the most imaginative account of El Dorado stems from Juan Martin de Albuja, whose report Sir Walter Raleigh summarizes in his *Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Beautifull Empire of Guiana* (1596). Johannes Martines, as Raleigh calls him, claims to have been captured by Caribs in the 1570s. He claims to have visited the golden city of Manoa (according to him the native name of El Dorado). According to Raleigh's paraphrase of a Spanish summary of the relation of Martines, Martines was carried by natives into the "great city of Manoa, the seat and residence of Inga the emperour." He lived there seven months, lodging with the emperor in his palace (Raleigh 60). The myth of hidden cities in the Amazon stayed alive way into the twentieth century—see David Grann's bestselling book on the British explorer Percy Fawcett who, in 1925, disappeared in the Amazon while searching for a lost civilization there (*The Lost City of Z*, 2005). And as there is hardly ever smoke without a fire, several sites of large settlements that are thought to have continued into the period of the European late Middle Ages have been discovered in the Amazon basin within the past fifteen years—extended ancient garden cities in the impenetrable forest of the Amazon. As Neil Safier writes :

In the central Amazon, Amazonian Dark Earth (ADE) sites, shell mounds, and ceramic complexes provide consistent material support for the theory of long-term landscape management by Amazonian hunter-gatherers in the Pleistocene and Holocene periods. [...] Ceramic occupations in these areas coincide with the construction of funerary mounds and ditches, all of which support the broader conclusion that these locations were heavily occupied, continuously settled, and exhibited significant anthropogenic transformations of the local environment (Safier in Beer/Mackenthun, forthcoming page number).

- 7 In the United States, settlers and travelers have come across the ruins of former large metropolitan sites since the late 18th century. Acting on Thomas Jefferson's fascination with the mounds and barrows found throughout the land, Henry Brackenridge undertook early scientific explorations of Cahokia and other architectural complexes in the second decade of the 19th century. In a letter to Jefferson published in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* in 1813, he reflects on his contemporaries' lack of excitement about the discoveries, which put them in no position to "speak with certainty as to the antiquity of America – of the races of men who have flourished and disappeared – of the thousand revolutions, which, like other parts of the globe, it has undergone." And he reproaches the "philosophers of Europe" for their "narrowness and selfishness of mind" which makes them "depreciate" everything relating to America's history (quoted after Kennedy 185). In other words,

Brackenridge, against the general tendency among his contemporaries, emphasizes the historicity of America before its European discovery : the fact that it was a country that had been shaped by a human presence for many centuries.

- 8 After 1820, the former Spanish colonies finally opened to foreign visitors. One of the earliest was the American adventurer-cum-diplomat John Lloyd Stephens, who traveled in Central America in the late 1830s and early 1840s. In his travelogue *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (1841) Stephens makes explicit claims of possession to the ruins he finds in Mesoamerican countries (he offers to buy the ruined city of Copán in Honduras for fifty dollars). His plan was to

remove the monuments of a by-gone-people from the desolate region in which they were buried, set them up in the 'great commercial emporium', and found an institution to be the nucleus of a great national museum of American antiquities !
(I : 115)

- 9 Bruce Harvey refers to Stephens as a “post-heroic archaeologist” because he uneasily presents himself as a modern scientist and antiquities salesman while also defining himself against his heroic precursors Hernán Cortés and Pedro Alvarado, who sacked and spoiled Indian towns without much regard for international legal standards. This romantic strand culminates in Stephens’ story of a mysterious hidden city in the middle of the jungle of Petén (Yucatan). Through various documents and conversations with local experts, Stephens collects evidence of the existence of this unconquered indigenous city. If the evidence is correct, he writes,

a place is left where Indians and an Indian city exist as Cortez and Alvarado found them ; there are living men who can solve the mystery that hangs over the ruined cities of America ; perhaps who can go to Copan and read the inscriptions on its monuments. [...] We had a craving desire to reach the mysterious city. (II : 196-97)

- 10 But in spite of their craving, Stephens and his British companion Frederick Catherwood decided to leave the living city undiscovered, and Stephens gives several reasons for this. Most of the reasons he names are related to the problem of numbers and time. Although he had at first considered the bare sight of the city worth ten years of a man’s life, he now argues that

[n]o man, even if willing to peril his life, could undertake the enterprise with any hope of success, without hovering for *one or two years* on the borders of the country, studying the language and characters of the adjoining Indians, and making acquaintance with some of the natives. *Five hundred men* could probably march directly to the city, and the invasion would be more justifiable than any ever made by the Spaniards ; but the government is too much occupied with its own wars [...] *Two young men* of good constitution, and who could afford to spare *five years*, might succeed. [...] As for ourselves, to attempt it alone, ignorant of the language, and with *mozos* [guides] who were a constant annoyance to us, was out of the question. The most we thought of was a climb to the top of the sierra, thence to look down upon the mysterious city ; but we had difficulties enough in the road before us ; it would add *ten days* to a journey already almost appalling in prospective ; for days the sierra might be covered with clouds [...] (II : 197 emphasis added)

- 11 What causes Stephens trouble is the notion that the city might be inhabited by living Indians with whom it would take too much time and logistical effort to enter into peaceful negotiations, and that an imitation of the Cortesian action—who, according to historical myth, took Tenochtitlan with five hundred men—might not be morally feasible in 1840. Not being able to think of a less tedious way to orchestrate a peaceful

and practicable encounter, he and Catherwood preferred to leave the city unexplored, and even unviewed.

- 12 A climb of the cordillera may have rewarded him with a glimpse of the ruins of Tikal—the most likely referent of the story which, owing to Stephens' hesitation, was, after a ghostly journey through German and British texts, rediscovered as late as 1956 by Philadelphia archaeologists.
- 13 Ephraim George Squier's romantic novel *Waikna* (1855) echoes Stephens' story. It is a lurid fantasy about the last survivors of the ancient Itza nation, who survived the Spanish conquest in a remote city, and who are now ready to ally themselves with American adventurers in order to kick out "the Spaniards," i.e. the Spanish Creoles in Central America. These fantasies stem from a period after the Mexican-American War and during William Walker's takeover of Nicaragua—a time when the US considered expanding its empire south as well as west in order to gain control of the isthmus crossing.
- 14 But Americans were also fascinated with the remains of former indigenous habitations found along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers and in the American Southwest. American archaeology developed in the context of these discoveries. Theories about the ancient inhabitants, the Anasazi, who left sophisticated buildings, complex irrigation systems, and admirable pottery, sparked the imagination of both scientists (like Bandelier) and writers. In her novel *The Professor's House* (1925), Willa Cather correlates the story of the midlife crisis-ridden professor Godfrey St. Peter, who spends most of his life writing the magisterial history of the Spanish conquistadors, with the narrative of the country boy Tom Outland, who discovers the remains of an ancient hidden cliff city while herding cattle in New Mexico. In a double analepsis and buried in the temporal layers of the plot,² we learn that Outland and his companion Roddy Blake find the cliff city deserted but otherwise undisturbed, and they conclude that it must have been hidden from human knowledge for at least 350 years. They are fascinated with the skillfulness of the architecture :

It was beautifully proportioned, that tower, swelling out to a larger girth a little above the base, then growing slender again. There was something symmetrical and powerful about the swell of the masonry. The tower was the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something. It was red in colour, even on that grey day. In sunlight it was the colour of winter oak-leaves. A fringe of cedars grew along the edge of the cavern, like a garden. They were the only living things. Such silence and stillness and repose – immortal repose. That village sat looking down into the canyon with the calmness of eternity. The falling snow-flakes, sprinkling the piñons, gave it a special kind of solemnity. I can't describe it. It was more like sculpture than anything else. *I knew at once that I had come upon the city of some extinct civilization, hidden away in this inaccessible mesa for centuries, preserved in the dry air and almost perpetual sunlight like a fly in amber, guarded by the cliffs and the river and the desert.* (180 ; emphasis added)

- 15 Cather's fossil fly recalls Baudrillard's evocation of "fossil murmur." Silence, invisibility and inaccessibility are again the ingredients of the description. Tom Outland's story functions as a critique of the modern capitalistic notion of possession in the sense of private property. While his later invention, the engine to be used for aviation, is a useful and financially profitable contribution to the modernization of American society, the material value of the pieces of pottery he discovers in the cliff city is much less certain. The government and museum people in Washington are not interested in yet another Anasazi ruin and yet another set of pots to store in the vaults of the

Smithsonian, and Tom's companion Roddy Blake thinks he does a good job in selling everything, including a female mummy,³ to a German collector for \$ 4,000. The reader is struck by Tom's furiousness when he learns about this sale, because before, his attitude toward his discovery had been that of the typical conqueror : he speaks of "our city" on whose top he has "our cabin" built, reached by "our road" (189-90). Further on, however, he asserts that his claim to possession had been a purely idealistic one, suggesting that rather than desiring material possession of the place he *is possessed* by it in an almost ecstatic way : "I never thought of selling [the artifacts], because they weren't mine to sell – nor yours ! They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from" (219). And he continues,

"There never was any question of money with me, where this mesa and its people were concerned. They were something that had been preserved through the ages by a miracle, and handed on to you and me, two poor cow-punchers, rough and ignorant, but I thought we were men enough to keep a trust." (220-21)

- 16 Blake retorts, "You might have given me some of this Fourth of July talk a little earlier in the game" (221). Outland's argument in fact mixes Fourth of July talk (public inheritance) with the "miracle" argument : that it is his and Blake's poverty and motherlessness, their lack of a family inheritance, which may have qualified them to discover, and "possess," the cliff city. After Blake has left in anger, Tom is finally in harmony with himself and the world. He lives in the ruins for one summer, in solitary contemplation of the beauty of the place :

[...] that was the first night I was really on the mesa at all – the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. ... Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. *It was possession.* The excitement of my first discovery was a very pale feeling compared to this one. For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives ; but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed. (226-27 ; emphasis added)

- 17 Although he talks and acts like a treasure hunter before and after this experience, Tom now defines his "possession" of the place in purely affective and philosophical terms (not to say religious and spiritual ones), as no longer guided by materialistic motives. Rather than expressing a sense of possession in order to exploit the place, he now seems to *be possessed* by the place. But the etymological ambivalence may merely hide the imperial logic whereby the rapture inspired by the splendor of a place functions as a legitimation for taking physical possession of it. This reading is confirmed by the books Outland reads : a Spanish grammar—a book of that genre whose first edition Antonio de Nebrija had in 1492 handed over to the Spanish kings with the words "siempre la lengua ha sido compañera del imperio"—language has always been the companion of empire [my translation]—and Virgil's *Aeneid*, the classic epic poem about the founder of imperial Rome, not the *Eclogues*, nor the *Georgics*—Virgil's beautiful evocations of pastoral country life which Cather had used earlier, in *My Ántonia* (1918). Outland's reading in the ruins is entangled with the history of empire.⁴
- 18 The novel's discourse on inheritance and possession excludes the possibility of asking the members of surrounding tribes about the fate of the ancients. Although we learn that the missionary Father Duchene masters several Indian "dialects" from the area (196) he never attempts to extract any information from their speakers. Outland learns

Spanish, not Hopi or Pueblo. In fact, the ability to communicate with the Natives might have complicated the situation of intellectual inheritance. The silence and invisibility of any native contenders for that inheritance is necessary for the philosophical dialogue between the white man and the land to unfold ; it is the precondition for the imperial “I”’s philosophical contemplation, which the novel presents within its dialogical structure, without necessarily endorsing it.

- 19 Narratives about mysterious hidden ancient cities in America tend to efface an indigenous presence. The imperial eye can *look* but not *see* (to quote Pip from *Moby-Dick*) : it looks at the desert and does not see the ants, lizards, crickets, and indeed the desert’s *human* inhabitants whom it has to construct as “exterminated” (Baudrillard). A companion of this silencing of any native property rights is the demonization of Native Americans, as happens in modern archaeology thrillers, for example Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child’s *Thunderhead* (1999). Horror is the aesthetic expression of colonialism’s denial of its own transformative violence, by projecting its own destructive agency on to the “alien” witches and monsters of the colonized cultures. Many horror fictions since the 19th century (from Rider Haggard and Bram Stoker to H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King) are articulations of the colonial fear of revenge, coupled with attempts to reassert the imperial culture’s technological superiority. Quite a few of them employ the trope of the hidden indigenous city, or ruins thereof, which has survived the ages and whose inhabitants are preparing to take over world rulership.⁵ The trope of the hidden city is thus part of the semantic code Patrick Brantlinger has described as the “imperial gothic”—a literary articulation of the anxieties that attended the ruthless practice and optimistic scientific discourse of high imperialism.⁶ The late imperial response to this in the American popular imagination is the parodic adventure stories of Indiana Jones.

- 20 In *Thunderhead* the protagonist, daughter of an archaeologist who mysteriously disappeared in the Utah desert 16 years earlier, sets out with a team of archaeologists to find the fabled golden city of Quivira (mentioned in early modern Spanish chronicles). The action is triggered by a letter she receives from her elusive father (posted 16 years after it was written) and a spooky encounter with two nasty and murderous creatures who want to take the letter away from her. As it turns out, her father had really discovered a gigantic and richly furnished ancient ruin in an inaccessible canyon but had been murdered by two “skinwalkers” protecting the place. As the archaeologists start investigating the ruined city, discovering evidence of terrible rites and human sacrifice, the skinwalkers begin killing first their horses and then the team itself by poisoning them with “corpse powder.” With the help of an old Indian from a nearby tribe, the protagonist in the end manages to kill the two gruesome figures in the middle of a terrible storm and a flash flood. Like the other narratives, *Thunderhead* employs the inaccessibility trope, here rendered in Conradian style :

[...] the group toiled up through a warren of fractured canyons, moving deeper into a surreal world that seemed more a landscape of dream than anything of the earth. The mute stone halls spoke of *eons of fury* : uplift and erosion, floods, earthquakes, and the endless scouring of the wind. At every turn, Nora realized *her dead reckoning grew more difficult* and prone to error. Each fall of the horses’ hooves took them *farther from civilization*, from the comfortable and the known, *deeper into an alien landscape of mystery*. Cliff dwellings became more numerous, tucked *slyly* into the canyon walls, *remote and inaccessible*. Nora had the irrational feeling, as she stopped

for the tenth time to pore over the map, that *they were intruding onto forbidden ground*. (166 ; emphasis added)

- 21 One may wonder how such remoteness is possible in the modern US. In fact Preston/Child place their ancient city in an area that is pretty much a blank on modern maps, west of Glen Canyon and the river Escalante in Utah, somewhere between the suggestively named real sites “Devil’s Garden Campground” and “Carcass Canyon Wilderness Area.” They furthermore claim that the canyon is so narrow that it is inaccessible even to helicopters, and the GPS first loses connection to any satellite and is then smashed by the villains so that the explorers are forced to use “dead reckoning.” Suspense is heightened by the gradually revealed character of the ancient settlement. The Anasazi settlement, it turns out, had been conquered by evil Aztecs who performed unthinkable horrors there, including human sacrifices and cannibalistic infanticide. Though it contains priceless artifacts, the fabled city of Quivira is a classical “bad place” which continues to be inhabited by native witches.
- 22 The “skinwalkers” are human beings capable of articulation but who are doped with datura to the point of possessing superhuman powers. They get about two lines in a 500 page novel (“The letter, or we rip your head off,” 7). Being constructed as the representatives of absolute evil, they are denied any other speech. At least we get the explanation that they were normal human beings – tribal members severely affected by their social disfranchisement who turned to “evil” powers as a result (525). The ‘good Indian’ Beiyoodzin performs the only remarkable instance of ‘talking back’ when he says,

“I have seen witches in Anglo society, too. They wear suits instead of wolfskins. And they carry briefcases instead of corpse powder. As a boy, they came and took me to boarding school. There I was beaten for speaking my own language. Later, I saw them come among our people with mining contracts and oil leases.” (526)

We should thus credit the authors for their attempt to give a sociological explanation, and certainly some members of the exploration team are a bunch of greedy jerks who are deservedly all killed; yet there is this inexplicable “evil” knowledge which continues to lurk within the Indian community, some of whose members act as guardians of the ancient cannibalistic “culture.” In this regard, the novel is clearly consistent with the demonization of Native Americans since early modern colonial discourse.

CODA

- 23 The cartographical blank into which Preston/Child’s expedition travels to encounter America’s deadly primeval powers is reminiscent of another cartographical blank nearby, a remote, invisible and inaccessible place in the desert, a place that Rebecca Solnit writes about in her book *Savage Dreams* (1994) :

The [Nevada] Test Site was a blank on many maps, a forgotten landscape, off limits to the public and swallowed up in a state which itself seemed sometimes to be overlooked by the rest of the country. [...] here the earth is naked, and geological processes are clearly visible. It is geological time and geological scale that dominate this landscape, dwarfing all the biological processes within the uplift of ranges, the accretion of basins. The very rocks on the ground have lain in place so long around the Test Site that their tops and bottoms are different colors, and any disturbance leaves a lasting scar. Every act out here has to be measured against this scale of change and scope. It is this apparent geology, this bare rock, that makes newcomers

read the desert as a dead or barren landscape, though *if you spend more time in it, you may come to see the earth itself lives*, slowly and grandly, in the metamorphoses of geology. (7-8 ; emphasis added)

- 24 And in the metamorphoses of nuclear testing, or “rehearsing,” as Solnit’s book explains. Unlike Baudrillard, who drives through the area musing on “fossil murmurs” and enjoys the desert’s “aesthetics of disappearance” (8), Solnit gets out of the car and interviews the people living in the Test Site area – including representatives of the Western Shoshone Indians like Mary and Carrie Dann, Raymond Yowell and many others who show her the forbidden zone, including radioactive waste dumps. Much of this ‘rehearsing’ (subterranean bomb testing since 1951 to 1993) happened on land claimed by the Western Shoshone Indians on the grounds of their ancient presence there as well as 19th century treaties. Unlike all the other writers mentioned here, Solnit “had been walking on a strong foundation of [native] stories” (211) told by the local people—stories giving evidence of their intimacy with and love for the land in which they live.⁸
- 25 Adventurous stories of hidden indigenous cities are deeply inscribed in the colonial imagination which they variously explore, confirm, and contest. They easily slid from the early modern colonial imagination of Sir Walter Raleigh into romantic scientific discourse about the ‘prehistory’ of America, where they acted as sites of both imperial desire and cultural anxiety. Not least, Native American cities stood in the way of the Puritan ideology of the ideal ‘city upon a hill’. And they were transferred to the genre fiction of our own time where they keep nourishing the cliché of indigenous savagery, performing the cultural logic of ongoing struggles over territorial access and control. Under their thick aesthetic veil lurk stories of colonial aggression and violence, enacted on the lands and bodies of Native Americans until today. “What is hidden in our history,” writes the playwright John Howard Lawson in the face of McCarthyism, “is the essence of it—the conflict between moral pretensions and the brutal exercise of power” (XIII).

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NOTES

1. See also "I knew all about this nuclear form, this future catastrophe when I was still in Paris, of course. But to understand it, you have to take to the road, to that travelling which achieves what Virilio calls the aesthetics of disappearance" (5). Apparently he did not understand "all" because the "catastrophe" is in the past and present in Nevada, not the future.
2. Outland's story is a double analepsis because it is told after we have already learned that St. Peter's daughter and son-in-law owe their wealth to Outland's later invention of an aviation engine, and that Outland subsequently died in the battlefields of Flanders.
3. The mummy escapes the sale. It is dropped downhill, together with a mule. Both are crushed in the process.
4. Outland's path from his self-education among ancestral ruins to becoming an inventor is never narrated ; technological modernization is presented as the logical continuation of the poor (and 'pure') boy's mysterious initiation into American nature and ancestral culture.
5. This is the case in Rider Haggard's novel *She*, with the immortal Ayesha preparing in her hidden African underground metropolis to inherit world rulership from Queen Victoria, and in H.P. Lovecraft's short novel *The Mountains of Madness*, where the horrible Old Ones are awaiting the time of their return in Antarctic solitude. On the deployment of the trope of the hidden city in English fiction on Africa, see Murray.
6. Brantlinger stresses the presence of fantasies of the occult in British imperial gothic discourse, based on the thesis that imperialism worked as an "ersatz religion" in the 19th century (228-29).

This is less the case with American imperial gothic. Yet both versions can be seen to “express anxieties about the ease with which civilization can revert to barbarism or savagery and thus about the weakening of [...] imperial hegemony” (229).

7. Then again not so remote : there is an Indian village nearby. They may have entered the area of the hidden city from another direction instead of through the difficult canyon.

8. A similar but more academic contribution is *The Tainted Desert* by Valerie Kuletz. Kuletz approaches the controversy about the nuclear uses of Nevada with the methods of sociology and critical cultural theory (Foucault, LeFebvre, Soja, et al.). Her perspective is thus congenial with that of the present essay.

ABSTRACTS

This essay reflects how the imperial eye/“I” of colonial discourse about America tends to efface the presence of indigenous inhabitants in order to be in sole contemplation of the land in its ‘pristine’ state. It argues that since the earliest documents of the European encounter with America, ‘dehumanizing’ representations of the American landscape unwittingly reiterate the colonial trope of *vacuum domicilium*, the empty land. The trope of the ‘virgin land’, however, sits uneasily with descriptions of, and the search for, pre-Columbian native habitations, or remains thereof. The imperial desire to expand into vacant lands, the essay argues, was concurrent with a romantic scientific fascination with the ‘prehistory’ of the continent to be deduced from the existence of the architectural remains of vast settlements along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, in Louisiana, and in Mesoamerica. This essay discusses a few examples of this ambivalent representation of the land by first looking into the trope of the mysterious ruined city awaiting discovery in the middle of the American wilderness and finally by considering the cultural work of this imperial trope in two selected modern fictional texts on the American West.

Cet article montre comment le Moi-Regard impérial (I/eye) du discours colonial sur l’Amérique a tendance à occulter la présence des habitants indigènes de façon à contempler en solitaire le spectacle de la nature vierge. Il explique comment depuis les premiers documents qui relatent la rencontre des Européens avec l’Amérique, des représentations ‘déshumanisantes’ du paysage américain involontairement reproduisent le trope colonial du *vacuum domicilium*, de la terre vide. Cependant, le trope de la ‘terre vierge’ s’accorde difficilement avec les descriptions et la recherche des indigènes pré-colombiens ainsi qu’avec l’étude des vestiges qu’ils nous laissent. Le désir impérial d’appropriation des terres vierges s’accompagnait d’une fascination scientifique et romantique pour la ‘préhistoire’ du continent qui devait résulter de l’étude des vestiges architecturaux des grandes colonies de peuplement le long de l’Ohio et du Mississippi en Louisiane et dans l’Amérique centrale. Cet article analyse quelques exemples de cette représentation de la terre en décrivant, dans un premier temps, le trope de la mystérieuse cité en ruines attendant d’être découverte au milieu de la jungle américaine, puis en étudiant le travail culturel du trope impérial dans deux textes de fiction sur l’Ouest américain.

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Mots-clés: terre vide, vacuum domicilium, terre vierge, désert, architecture pré-colombienne, cité cachée, discours colonial, Eldorado, possession territoriale, empire, gothique impérial, Quivira, skinwalkers

Keywords: vacant land, vacuum domicilium, virgin land, desert, pre-columbian architecture, hidden city, colonial discourse, El Dorado, possession (territorial), empire, imperial gothic, Quivira, skinwalkers

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