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Surprise Valley and Lookout Point:
Zane Grey and the Configuration of Southwestern Landscapes

Explorers on the North American continent have often sought to define their experiences by their interaction with the landscape.¹ It is this interaction, D.H. Lawrence wrote in his exploration of the American “spirit of place,” that allowed European-Americans to begin to formulate a new identity that broke from a world they suddenly defined as “Old.”² At times, however, access to the landscape was complicated by the indigenous peoples who had lived on the continent for tens of thousands of years. While explorers of the eastern regions had acknowledged the presence of indigenous people within the continent, explorers of lands further west instead developed a narrative that increasingly described the places they encountered as empty.³ Lawrence observed that “no place exerts its full potential upon a newcomer until the old inhabitant is dead or absorbed”; in keeping with that belief, new Americans began a complex process of removing, relocating, and rendering invisible these native peoples in order to facilitate that feeling of discovery, newness, and ultimately, a complicated sense of place.⁴

I will not trace the entirety of those often violent processes here, but instead will describe the literary and artistic climate that developed from the time when the deserts of

¹ Bruce Greenfield, *Narrating Discovery: The Romantic Explorer in American Literature, 1790-1855* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1992), 182.

² D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

³ Greenfield, *Narrating Discovery*, 191.

⁴ Lawrence, *Studies*, 40.

the United States Southwest were ceded by Spain in 1848 until the early 20th century. I will then explore the ways in which the Western novels of Zane Grey enact these modes of place-making in literary form. Grey's novels use alternately narratives of emptiness and domesticity to include the deserts of the southwestern United States in the nationally promoted story of frontier settlement that promised untouched land awaiting the productive hand of the American pioneer. The reality of the mistreatment of native peoples by settlers or the United States government during this time of frontier settlement is not meant to be confused with literary treatments of fictional characters and places. I mean instead to trace the path of two interrelated forces. Firstly, that the idea of an empty and virgin America has always been, as Lawrence suggested, "a creation of the Euro-American imagination."⁵ And secondly, that through Grey's use of these imagined landscapes he participated in a process of supplanting the actual history of frontier settlement—and the consequent displacement of native peoples—with fictional stories of discovery and individual transformation.

Grey's Westerns are part of a complex history of the United States' relationship with its deserts. In order to understand the figurative climate that developed during the time prior to which Grey's novels were published (spanning from 1903 to the late 1930s), I will briefly outline some of this history. Patricia Nelson Limerick in *Desert Passages* presents a brief overview of attitudes towards nature, which situates the deserts of Grey's early life within a phase she terms "transitional":

A simple model of sequential phases in American attitudes towards nature had limited reverence for the desert. By this model, pioneers initially feared and hated nature in the form of wilderness; nature had them overpowered and they, sensibly, resented it. Then, in a transitional phase,

⁵ Greenfield, *Narrating Discovery*, 3.

pioneers fought to conquer nature, and the balance of power shifted. In a final phase, pioneers had mastered nature; they were, by that very act, no longer pioneers. The completion of the conquest then made it possible to appreciate nature; in an apparent happy ending, Americans could create national parks and museums for the last stand of a safely defeated enemy.⁶

As settlement moved westward into new U.S. territory throughout the 1840s and 1850s, pioneers came up against a landscape that complicated their understanding of themselves as an agrarian society that had, above all else, the capacity to tame the land. Henry Nash Smith explains in *Virgin Land* that the dominant symbol of 19th century America was the yeoman farmer in the great garden of the nation's interior.⁷ This symbol of the garden generated metaphors of "fecundity, growth, increase and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow."⁸ In the desert, however, these metaphors no longer functioned. The desert's dissimilarity from the arable land of the Great Plains necessitated an entirely new concept of landscape and man's relationship to it. The response to this sudden disjunction between the symbolic farmer and his real life counterpart was a literary attack on the desert. As David Teague observes in *The Southwest in American Literature and Art*, "the desert necessitated a reinvention of language to describe it; likewise there was a reinvention of desert to fit language."⁹

Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, published in 1872, is a piece of travel literature modeled after Twain's experiences exploring the West in the early 1860s. Twain's descriptions of the desert places he encounters exhibit his distaste for the region:

⁶ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 172.

⁷ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 123.

⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 123.

⁹ Donald Teague, *The Southwest in American Literature and Art: The Rise of a Desert Aesthetic* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 20.

The sun beats down with dead, blistering, relentless malignity...truly and seriously the romance all faded far away and disappeared, and left the desert nothing but a harsh reality—a thirsty, sweltering, longing, hateful reality!¹⁰

The desert was also the location of people who Twain described as "the wretchedest type of mankind I have ever seen...the Goshute Indians."¹¹ By presenting the desert landscape in this way—as a place that threatened to malign through its lack of such essentials as shelter and water—Twain suggests that the land is without value. The only thing capable of surviving there, he suggests, are the Goshutes, who he ranks at the absolute bottom of humanity.

Notably, Twain does not attempt to extend the fecundity-through-agriculture rhetoric that prevailed during the preceding decades and drew pioneers to the prairies beyond the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. By avoiding a description of yet another promising (or “romantic”) landscape that awaited agricultural cultivation by settlers Twain instead presents a landscape that invited a full-scale conceptual reinvention. In this way, his descriptions of the desert began to reset the nation’s mentality towards place.

Specifically, Twain planted in the mind of his readership the idea that wilderness could be conquered in new ways; that a place itself could be entirely reimagined. Smith identified the presence of this new idea and summarized it thusly:

The important thing about man is not his past, nor a cultural tradition, but his biological adjustment to his milieu, which is a matter of the present and of the future.¹²

While in eastern, arable regions this “biological adjustment” had meant the ability of frontier settlers to provide shelter, food and safety for their families, in the deserts of the

¹⁰ Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Pocket Books, 2003), 102-3.

¹¹ Twain, *Roughing It*, 132.

¹² Smith, *Virgin Land*, 40.

southwestern United States this adjustment instead meant the more conceptual acts of invention and discovery—activities that looked to the future while disregarding the past.

Twain's writing is only one example in which a new form of conceptual conquest is suggested. Other journalists used their writing to encourage large-scale industrial development in the desert as a way of utilizing the empty and arid space and continuing to promote the policies of Manifest Destiny.¹³ The U.S. government also sponsored exploratory expeditions throughout the southwest in order to assess the region's worth in terms of its naturally occurring resources.¹⁴ In other words, the desert's value was, at the time of the 1870s, being built entirely upon what could be put there or taken from it—actions that indeed prioritized the mental labor of ambitious exploration or inventive industry over the hands-on labor of plowing and home-building.

Further complicating Euro-Americans' relationship with desert landscapes was the difficulty of travel throughout the region. Before the railroad made the places of the southwest somewhat accessible to anyone able to afford a ticket, descriptions of the desert were necessarily mediated by those with the ability or willingness to travel by horse or stagecoach (such as Twain). The way in which many people first “saw” the desert was therefore through the work of artists. Landscape artists encountered a new problem when confronted with the desert: “strange and different as it was, [it] did not lend itself to immediate aesthetic appreciation.”¹⁵ Artists struggled to represent the beauty of an environment that, in contrast to the familiar forests of eastern woodlands and pastoral scenes of the Great Plains, seemed quite bleak and colorless. In response to this

¹³ Teague, *Southwest in Literature*, 98.

¹⁴ Limerick, *Passages*, 16.

¹⁵ Teague, *Southwest in Literature*, 98.

challenge, artists strove to represent a sort of subliminal beauty, which, as Teague explains

Necessarily involves a certain distance from the subject, the sort of conceptual aloofness early desert explorers liked to maintain in the face of unfamiliar landscapes.¹⁶

He also observed among art of the time “a firm conviction that being able to understand the sublime beauty of the desert could put one in touch with Truth” and other abstractions such as “Good, Power, Force and God.”¹⁷ Before many easterners were able to develop firsthand a sense of desert places, they were presented with a rubric for understanding the landscape that, by definition, required they remove themselves from the reality of the environment and instead focus on the landscape’s ability to represent abstract concepts. Whatever appreciation existed, then, was doubly removed from the land; it was much more an appreciation of images of the desert—and all of the abstract concepts it had now been made to embody—rather than the desert landscape itself.

Frederic Remington, who regularly contributed sketches inspired by his travels in the Southwest to *Harper’s Weekly* in the late 1880’s, developed an “oblique approach to the harsh land.”¹⁸ By creating a backdrop of brutally arid lands as a distinct stage, Remington told “a story of strong men facing desolation”—a theme that allowed him to focus on the idealized rugged hero that characterized his work.¹⁹ At the other end of this spectrum was the work of Mary Hallock Foote, whose illustrations often portrayed

¹⁶ Teague, *Southwest in Literature*, 30.

¹⁷ Teague, *Southwest in Literature*, 116.

¹⁸ Teague, *Southwest in Literature*, 63.

¹⁹ Teague, *Southwest in Literature*, 63.

women at ease in desert and Western lands, suggesting a triumph of mind—and perhaps—manners over a difficult landscape.²⁰

What all of these approaches have in common is their tendency to reduce the desert to a collection of movable (or removable) parts and abstractions. This actively prevented an understanding of the desert as a comprehensive part of the United States landscape. By no means do I aim to suggest that “the desert” in its entirety lacks complexity or even lends itself easily to comprehension. But the means by which it was dissected—alternately into areas rich in resources or empty space, picturesque places or the home of the wretched, a site of industry or an unendurable wasteland—show through their contradiction that a certain strategy was at work. Artists, explorers, prospectors and journalists had seized on the opportunity carved out by Twain, which was the suggestion that the desert could be remade and reenvisioned. The combined result was not a comprehensive attitude towards desert landscape, nor a multicultural representation; rather, it was a hodgepodge of individual attitudes, visions and abstractions presented by writers and artists. It did not (as Twain had ensured) look backwards in order to gain understanding from the native people such as the Goshutes who had long inhabited the desert. Instead it worked to start the time-keeping of history at the moment of Euro-American arrival in the desert. This was the creative arena into which Zane Grey’s novels entered: an emptied, ahistorical, individuated space.

Fiction writers, beginning with dime novelists such as Edward Wheeler and his *Deadwood Dick* series published in the 1880s, saw the commercial potential of stories set in the West.²¹ As a distant place that few American citizens had experienced firsthand,

²⁰ Teague, *Southwest in Literature*, 124.

²¹ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 89.

the West provided an exotic backdrop for stories that catered to the recently formed demands—for adventure and discovery of Power and Truth in a sublime landscape—of the dime novel readership. As Smith explains, “the persona created by the dime novelists was so accurate an expression of the demands of the popular imagination” that at times it had the ability “to shape the real...into the fictional character.”²² Two of Grey’s novels, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) and *Heritage of the Desert* (1910), show the interplay of real and fictional spaces of the desert. Through Grey’s manipulation of spaces, he affects the concept of history-making within and outside the Western novel. I will first examine the creation of spaces in *Riders of the Purple Sage* and then the ways in which Grey’s characters depend on observations of the landscape to express themselves in *Heritage of the Desert*.

Riders of the Purple Sage follows the arrival of Lassiter, a known vigilante, to a Mormon community where the female protagonist, Jane Withersteen, is under attack by her elders because of her association with individuals who do not belong to the Mormon church. Jane’s ranch, Cottonwoods, is depicted as a beautiful and well-run site, which she had chosen to run in accordance with her tolerant humanitarian beliefs. However, because these beliefs conflict with the church, her elders had begun a systematic destruction of the space that sustained her lifestyle.

Beginning with this destabilization, Grey enacts the first part of a process he employs to conceptualize space in the West, in which an established place is broken down or threatened. Cottonwoods is suddenly presented as containing “unrest and strife,” and Jane observes, “it had begun to wake and bestir itself and grow hard.”²³ One of her

²² Smith, *Virgin Land*, 102.

²³ Zane Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 3-4.

riders, Bern Venters, is a Gentile, and Tull, Jane's elder, focuses his disapproval of her lifestyle on her friendship with Venters. Tull arrives at Jane's house to scare Venters away: "Venters, will you leave at once and forever?...I'll have you whipped within an inch of your life...I'll turn you out into the sage."²⁴ Venters refuses to leave his home at Cottonwoods and prepares himself to receive the abuse Tull threatens. Lassiter, however, interrupts this scene with his unexpected arrival and saves Venters from this particular assault. It is made clear, though, through this foundational image of Cottonwoods's transition from serenity to discord, that the battle will continue. Grey suggests that Cottonwoods had been a safe place up until this intrusive scene of violence; indeed, Jane admits she thought, "the sleepy pastoral days [would] last always."²⁵ Grey chooses to set the beginning of his novel in this recently unsettled place in order to, as Audrey Goodman states in *Translating Southwestern Landscapes*, "challenge the economic and religious foundations of traditional frontier communities."²⁶

The threat to Venters at Cottonwoods is followed by an assault on Jane's cattle herd. As Jane's best rider, Venters tracks the rustlers and discovers an elaborate system of canyons where the herds have been hidden. By accident, he shoots a young woman known as the Masked Rider and goes searching for an adequate place to oversee the rider's recuperation because the canyon, like Cottonwoods, is not safe. The product of Venters's exploration is a well-hidden place he names Surprise Valley:

Above Venters loomed a beautiful arch of stone bridging the canyon rims, and through the enormous round portal gleamed and glistened a beautiful valley shining under sunset gold reflected by surrounding cliffs... There were the white of aspens, streaks of branch and slender trunk glistening

²⁴ Grey, *Riders*, 6.

²⁵ Grey, *Riders*, 4.

²⁶ Audrey Goodman, *Translating Southwestern Landscapes: The Making of an Anglo Literary Region* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 38.

from the green of leaves, and the darker green of oaks, and through the middle of this forest, from wall to wall, ran a winding line of brilliant green that tracked the course of cottonwoods and willows. “There’s water here—and this is the place for me,” said Venters.²⁷

What Venters discovers is no less than an oasis in the desert: a perfectly protected and verdant space into which he plans to bring the injured rider. With this discovery, Venters exemplifies another strategy that Grey uses to manipulate space, which is the apparent creation of space itself. While the journalists and artists mentioned above had worked towards the reconfiguration of parts of the West during the second half of the nineteenth century, Grey moved beyond this to suggest an endless potential for the spontaneous creation of place and its consequent discovery.

Goodman refers to this device as Grey’s “symbolic production of space,” in which characters generate or otherwise discover precisely the space they seek.²⁸ The path Venters follows to get to the valley is a set of stone stairs, which he recognizes as the work of cliff dwellers. In Leonard Lutwack’s *Role of Place in Literature*, he describes the presence of ruins:

In the literature of quest journeys, timeless places of the past or future intersect with the present world and produce a visionary experience for the hero that may be either regenerative or shattering.²⁹

In the case of Venters, the site of the cliff dwellings is regenerative, and he allows Venters full claim to the space in two ways. He first describes the cliff dwellers as “vanished,” as though their absence from the valley could not be tracked by time or history but was instead a result of some abstract force.³⁰ He also refers to them as “little

²⁷ Grey, *Riders*, 84.

²⁸ Goodman, *Translating*, xviii.

²⁹ Leonard Lutwack, *Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 56-

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³⁰ Grey, *Riders*, 84.

stone men,” which serves to both freeze the people in the distant past, and solidify or stop altogether their movement through space.³¹ In these descriptions, the cliff dwellers are reduced to a benevolent force—rather than a historical community—that exists only in order to lead Venters to this valley in this moment. Venters also claims the space in his act of naming it. “Surprise Valley” describes only Venters’s relationship to the place, thereby entirely overlooking the many generations of prior events that would have occurred in the valley. Even while Venters climbs the stairs, he counts the notches in the stone, “one, two, three, four, on up to sixteen,” as though announcing ownership through his language with each step.³²

Goodman speculates that part of what makes the Western such a lasting and popular genre is “its ability to produce new meanings from previously claimed spaces.”³³ In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, this production occurs primarily in Surprise Valley. The valley is situated in an elaborate system of canyons called “Deception Pass,” both because of the canyon’s intricacy and its use as a hideout for horse thieves. But with Venters’s so-called discovery and naming of Surprise Valley, the canyons become changed by the themes of recuperation and cultivation. After moving the rider, Bess, to the valley, Venters begins a search for an appropriate camp. He describes a portion of the valley as “a glade that surpassed, in beauty and adaptability for a wild home, any place he had ever seen.”³⁴ What had before been a battleground among thieves or a site of cliff

³¹ Grey, *Riders*, 83.

³² Grey, *Riders*, 81.

³³ Goodman, *Translating*, xviii.

³⁴ Grey, *Riders*, 91.

dwellers' "ruins" was now, explicitly, a home.³⁵ Grey also depicts a transformation within Venters:

Venters surmised this much of the change in him—idleness had passed; keen, fierce vigor flooded his mind and body; all that had happened to him at Cottonwoods seemed remote and hard to recall.³⁶

The transformation that occurs once Venters returns to Surprise Valley with Bess signifies another device utilized by Grey to reconfigure Western spaces, and this is to conceive of these newly discovered or co-opted spaces that were first briefly wild as domestic spaces. In other words, conflicted or contested spaces that may have been sites of violence are easily renamed and repurposed as sites for home-making. Venters likewise forgets the conflict of Cottonwoods and, in Surprise Valley, discovers himself to be transformed through his interest in domestic activities and his desire to provide for Bess.

While Bess recuperates, Venters goes about the processes of homesteading: hunting, protecting stores of food and improving shelter. In effect, he cycles through the frontier processes that had been in operation in arable lands. In this way, Grey's novels present a desert landscape wherein knowledge of desert-specific agriculture or lifestyles is unnecessary. The spaces his characters discover seem to become fertile and domestic in accordance with the characters' attitudes or intentions. Grey's deserts, therefore, are presented more as a mental state than any real ecological environment that could be found in the Southwest.

In *Heritage of the Desert* Grey puts a name to this abstract condition, which he refers to throughout the novel as "the spirit of the desert." Grey's novel depicts the

³⁵ Grey, *Riders*, 97.

³⁶ Grey, *Riders*, 94.

recovery of John Hare from pneumonia through the assistance of a prosperous rancher, August Naab. Hare's recovery occurs during his time in the desert and he ultimately falls in love with Naab's adopted daughter, who is of Spanish and Native American descent. Naab and his entourage find Hare while out on an expedition to gather wild mustangs, and one of the first dramatic scenes Hare witnesses is the leading of the mustangs across the river to Naab's homestead, another "oasis":

He could not but revel in the scene, in its vivid action and varying color, in the cries and shrill whoops of the Indians, and the snorts of the frightened mustangs, in Naab's hoarse yells to his sons, and the ever-present menacing roar from around the bend. The wildness of it all, the necessity of peril and calm acceptance of it, stirred within Hare the call, the awakening, the spirit of the desert.³⁷

Here Grey presents a passage in which the scene is instantly reflected back to and internalized in Hare. While what is present—the sights and sounds of the horses, river and Navajo men—is characteristic of the desert region, Grey does not use it to describe the desert as much as he employs it to describe Hare. Moreover, Grey overlays the tangible details of the scene with the abstract qualities of "wildness," "peril," and "calm," which blurs rather than sharpens the actors in the scene. As a result, the scene manages to bring the reader further from that landscape and closer to the fictional Hare, which sets the tone for desert images throughout the rest of the novel.

This landscape's primary role—to restore Hare's health and character through his identification with the spirit of the desert—is established under Naab's guidance. This "desert man" assigns him the task of tending his sheep flock with Mescal, which stations Hare on Lookout Point, the highest point of elevation in Naab's grazing lands. Their ascent is nearly vertical:

³⁷ Zane Grey, *Heritage of the Desert* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1910), 53.

He looked out and down; already the green cluster of cottonwoods lay far below. After that sensations pressed upon him. Round and round, up and up, steadily, surely, the beautiful mustang led the train...The trail changed to a zigzag along a seamed and cracked buttress where ledges leaned outward waiting to fall. Then a steeper incline, where the burros crept upward warily, led to a level ledge.³⁸

In emphatic movements ("round and round, up and up"), Hare observes the height to which he climbs. In the same way that Venters climbs the carved steps of the cliff-dwellers to gain access to the verdant valley where he could oversee Bess's return to health, Hare must ascend a spiraling path to the place where he too can become restored. In Lutwack's examination of verticality in literature, he says, "scaling heights is a test of character" and

Frequent movement between places promise[s] life and action...restriction to a single place is more consonant with tragedy and death...The reader may receive a sensation of motion by the quick succession of different settings or by the order in which the details of a single place are described.³⁹

In this sense, the desert peak serves as a tool that reveals Hare's potential for greatness; in the challenge presented by its ascent is the promise of improvement Hare wishes to see manifested in himself. The sensation that can develop from these moments of vertical ascent provides the reader with the opportunity to experience what Hare gains from the landscape, and to see not just that the desert's attributes are reflected back to Hare, but also extend outwards to the reader as well. In its anthropocentric naming, too, Grey invites the reader to be affected by the scene—to "look out" and then look back to himself. In this way, Grey reiterates the process of reenvisioning the desert landscape as a creative and individuated event, and one that does not necessarily rely on the events of history.

³⁸ Grey, *Heritage*, 66.

³⁹ Lutwack, *Role*, 40, 59.

When Naab returns to Lookout Point after a few weeks, he indeed finds that Hare has found his better health in the desert landscape.

'Black sage and juniper!' exclaimed August. 'In this air if a man doesn't go off quickly with pneumonia, he'll get well. I never had a doubt for you, Jack—and thank god!'⁴⁰

Naab attributes Hare's recovery to the "desert air," and through the act of taking this air into himself, Hare has become well. Hare credits his recovery to a more ambiguous force: "the wilderness of this desert country, and the spirit it sought to instill in him, had wakened a desire to live."⁴¹ Although Hare had spent time in the desert before Naab's party found him and took him in, he had not understood how to relate to the desert landscape; it was only when he harnessed its "spirit" and internalized that sensation that he was able to generate new life—his own—from the desert.

As Hare realizes that the time he has spent on Lookout Point has resulted in his full recovery, he rushes to embrace the parts of the landscape that surround him: "he buried his face in the fragrant juniper; he rolled on the soft brown mat of earth and hugged it close; he cooled his hot cheeks in the primrose clusters."⁴² His next thought is of Mescal, who he thinks of as "a part of the desert-land":

Suddenly his mind was illumined. The lofty plateau with its healing breath of sage and juniper had given back strength to him; the silence and solitude and strife of his surroundings had called to something deep within him...It was Mescal, embodiment of the desert spirit.⁴³

Hare's way of understanding Mescal is the same as his approach to the land itself: he sees in her the same potential for strength and survival that he wishes to gain himself. He comes to understand this desire for her, in a moment of illuminating self-discovery, and

⁴⁰ Grey, *Heritage*, 95.

⁴¹ Grey, *Heritage*, 70.

⁴² Grey, *Heritage*, 89.

⁴³ Grey, *Heritage*, 89.

wishes to possess her—and to his understanding, the desert as well—formally through marriage.

Here again is what differentiates the Euro-American way of understanding the landscapes of the West from understanding those of the frontier plains. Rather than a biological adjustment, Hare exhibits a process of spiritual cultivation and conflation of native people with this spiritual landscape. And while the soil of the prairie is fertile and awaits the plow, the air of the desert is rich and waits to be raided. The suggestion is that one can come to the desert and find there exactly what one seeks; first this was true for Venters as he sought and discovered his oasis, and it is also true for Hare who sought a restoration of his health and spirit, and discovered it in what he thought of as the human embodiment of the desert. Grey's "symbolic production of space," therefore, is not just the repurposing of "already-claimed" southwestern places with frontier homesteads, settlements and towns. It is also the construction of a conceptual space wherein one can embark on these journeys of self-discovery.

In Bruce Greenfield's *Narrating Discovery*, the author observes that the abstracted relationship between the self and the landscapes of the West has in part come from literature such as Grey's that at once emphasizes and complicates the process of discovery. Grey has shown how extant places can be endowed with "new meaning" and how individuals can locate a source of self-improvement through an abstract approach to the landscape. In *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *Heritage of the Desert* this approach creates a tone of nearly ubiquitous discovery. And in these moments of apparent discovery Grey's characters somehow repossess the sites and spirits they find. But this method of relating to landscape—by ownership through a shaky form of discovery—

bypasses any ecological, sociological, or even economical understanding of Southwestern places and also emphasizes individual or even fictional accounts of experiencing natural spaces over descriptions of historical communities or ancestral knowledge. In Grey's landscapes, native characters are often interchangeable, mute, confined to a distant and unreachable past, or otherwise entirely disarmed, and the places that have long been home to their communities therefore become easily reenvisioned and repurposed as a new Edenic homestead or ranchland for sheep.

The result of this is that “the place, stripped of its role in native lives, reveals itself in its essential, timeless being to those sent to behold it. Discovery takes place...”⁴⁴ And instead of a discovery based on a chronological history, it gives a prioritized importance to the process of discovering oneself—an event that also occurs in a similarly timeless realm and requires only a gaze outward and a reflected gaze back to oneself. It is through this process of self-discovery that individuals can relive the geography-based experience of those earliest European explorers:

the original discovery of America [is] something that happens again and again as part of a gradual amelioration process in which each person learns to transcend all that is ‘foreign and accidental’ to the place.⁴⁵

But it is also in this process that Euro-Americans can fail to see so much—for instance, the desert river without the contradictions of “wildness...peril and calm” or the biological details of a desert ecosystem independent of an ambiguous spirit. Hare describes a Navajo man he meets as having “a face like a bronze mask, cast in the one expression of

⁴⁴ Greenfield, *Discovery*, 12.

⁴⁵ Greenfield, *Discovery*, 183.

untamed desert fierceness.”⁴⁶ Why reduce this landscape and this individual to one expression, or look out into a landscape and aim only to see oneself?

Greenfield suggests the impetus for replacing geographic discovery with self-discovery is two-fold. At first it is “a way of mediating the conflict between Euro- and Native American claims” in order to “place Euro-Americans in contact with their continent without requiring them to countenance the killing and displacing of its first peoples.”⁴⁷ And on an even larger scale, it is a way to “liberate Americans from their past and connect them with a new world of possibilities.”⁴⁸ In an attempt to cultivate this sense of place, then, Euro-Americans paradoxically removed a portion of their history—and by extension, themselves—from Southwestern landscapes.

After the nation could understand itself in such liberated, flexible or entirely ahistorical terms, “Euro-Americans were no longer cohabitants of a continent whose people they had conquered; instead, they could see the primordial land itself as explanation and justification for their presence in it.”⁴⁹ The artistic and literary industry that followed Twain perpetuated this erroneous story of continental expansion and settlement, which featured this imagined place, “The West.” The images of the desert topography, the vegetated hills of purple sage, the herds of mustangs and even entire indigenous communities became removed from their historical role in the desert environment and instead became a stock background for a genre that grew to focus on stories of individual recuperation and the domestication of wild places. While a century has passed since Grey’s first Western novel was published, the landscape he presented

⁴⁶ Grey, *Heritage*, 39.

⁴⁷ Greenfield, *Discovery*, 203.

⁴⁸ Greenfield, *Discovery*, 183

⁴⁹ Greenfield, *Discovery*, 2.

has, in many ways, continued to grow more abstract, and indigenous communities must still struggle to iterate their tangible and historical—rather than imagined—home in the deserts of the southwestern United States.

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