STORMING THE GATES OF PARADISE

LANDSCAPES FOR POLITICS

REBECCA SOLNIT

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1

UNEVEN TERRAIN

*The West*
The West began at the pay phone at the gas station in Lee Vining, the little town next to Mono Lake on the east side of the Sierra Nevada, too remote for cell phones. I was standing around in the harsh golden light at seven thousand feet waiting to make a call when I realized that the man on the line was trying to patch up his marriage, and the task wasn’t going to be quick or easy. “You just aren’t going to let us get back together, are you?” he said in a tone at once supplicating and truculent. I thought that maybe she had her reasons and wondered how far away she was on the other end of the phone line.

At Lee Vining, named after a miner and Indian killer, the rain shadow begins: the Sierra, which are just a hair shorter than the Alps, scrape off the Pacific clouds and keep everything east of them arid. There are few real boundaries in nature, and this is one of the most astounding: from the west, you can hike up a green mountain slope and come to the divide, where you face the beginning of a thousand miles or more of desert, stand in patches of deep snow from the winter before, and look at a terrain where only a few inches of moisture a year arrive. In most of California, all water flows west to the Pacific, including that of the western slope of the Sierra; but on the Sierra’s other side, it goes east, into salty bodies of water like Mono and Pyramid lakes, into sinks and subterranean spaces, into thin air. The Great Basin, so-called because its scanty water doesn’t drain to any sea, is mostly a terrain of north-south-running ranges, sharp-edged raw geology, separated by flat expanses of sagebrush.

In the desert, plants grow farther apart to accommodate the huge root systems
they need to collect enough water to live, and so do communities and ranches. Few but the desert’s original inhabitants found it beautiful before cars. The extremes of heat and cold, the vast scale, and the scarcity of water must have been terrifying to those traversing it by beast or on foot. On a hot day, water is sucked straight out of your skin, and you can feel how fast dying of thirst could be; but this aridity is what makes the air so clear, what opens up those fifty-mile views. What feeds the soul starves the skin. Now, with air conditioning and interstates and the option of going several hundred miles a day with ease, desert austerity is a welcome respite from the overdeveloped world. The aridity and the altitude—the lowlands are mostly more than four thousand feet high—make the light strong, clear, and powerful; and the sky in these wide places seems to start at your ankles.

Because wild creatures too are spread far apart and often operate at night, because the colors and changes of the plant life can be subtle, it often seems as though the real drama is in the sky—not exactly life, but life-giving, the light and the rain. Summer thunderstorms in the arid lands are an operatic drama, particularly in New Mexico, where the plot normally unfolds pretty much the same way every day during the summer monsoon season: clear morning skies are gradually overtaken by cumulus clouds as scattered and innocuous as a flock of grazing sheep, until they gather and turn dark; then the afternoon storm breaks, with lightning, with thunder, with crashing rain that can turn a dusty road into a necklace of puddles reflecting the turbulent sky. New Mexico is besieged now by a horrendous multiyear drought, and, watching the clouds gather every afternoon as if for this dionysian release that never came, I felt for the first time something of that beseeching powerlessness of those who prayed to an angry, unpredictable God and felt how easy it would be to identify that God with the glorious, fickle, implacable desert sky.

Every summer I go to live in the sky, I drive into this vastness whose luminousness, whose emptiness, whose violence seem to give this country its identity, even though few of us live there. It’s hard to convey the scale of the empty quarter. The Nevada Test Site, where the United States and the United Kingdom have detonated more than a thousand nuclear bombs over the past half century, is inside a virtually unpopulated airbase the size of Wales. Nevada is about the size
of Germany and has a population of a million and a half, which wouldn’t sound so stark if it weren’t that more than a million of them live in Las Vegas and most of the rest in the Reno area, leaving the remainder of the state remarkably unpopulated. At one point, the state decided to capitalize on this and named Highway 50, which traverses the center of Nevada, “the loneliest highway in America.”

From Mono Lake, I drove about forty miles on 120, crossing from California to Nevada at some point along the way; then a stretch along the Grand Army of the Republic Highway, Route 6, over to the small town of Basalt; and another hundred or so miles up to 50. At first, the country was high enough that it was green, beautiful, stark, and treeless. Then the altitude climbed a little into piñon pine and juniper country, before dropping down into the drabness of most of the Great Basin, the color of sagebrush and the dirt in between. A grove of trees is a sure sign of a ranch house and irrigation, though there are entire valleys—and a valley means a place five or ten miles wide and several times as long—in which no such ranch is to be seen. Highway 50 traverses a dozen of these valleys and passes; driven in a day, they pass like musical variations, with their subtle differences of color and form. One range looked like mountains, another more like cliffs, with tilted layers of strata clearly visible. One valley was full of dust devils, those knots of swirling wind that pick up debris and move it across the land, funnels that are the visible sign of the wind’s entanglement in itself.

Most of California is west of the West: the vast arid expanses come to an end at the Sierra Nevada, the long wall of mountains on the state’s eastern edge. West of the Sierra, a dramatic change in scale takes place, and the infolding, the lushness, the variety of the terrain seem to invite the social density and complexity of California, with its thirty-something million residents from all over the world. The two coasts often seem to me to be a pair of parentheses enclosing the inarticulate, unspoken, inchoate American outback, this part of the country colored red for Republican in the voting map for the last presidential election, when the coasts were Democratic blue.

The red lands are an outback, a steppe, a Siberia, far removed from the cos-
mopolitanism of the coasts. When I live out here, as I have for a week or so now and again over the past dozen years, it seems hard to believe in cities, let alone in nations, in anything but the sublimity of this emptiness. The Great Basin is wide open topographically but introspective in spirit, turned in on itself; and news from outside seems like mythology, rumor, entertainment, like anything but part of what goes on here, or doesn’t, out here where the sparse population is interspersed with sites for rehearsing America’s wars. A lot of people became preoccupied with Area 51, an off-limits part of the eastern periphery of the Nevada Test Site where aliens were supposed to have landed, or been captured, or had their flying saucers tested, and the logic behind the beliefs seemed to be equal parts creative interpretation of military secrecy and a sense that everything from outside was alien. But the absences resonate as much as the presences.

On another road trip a few years ago, we’d gotten on Interstate 50 farther west and driven through the part of the highway that is also the Bravo 17 Bombing Range, past the electronic warfare installations, past the fake town they practice bombing, to Dixie Valley, a ranching community whose population was forced out by sonic-boom testing in the 1980s. Fallon Naval Air Station—a naval base in this driest of the fifty states—was testing the military uses of sonic booms on livestock, school buses, and homes. Animals stampeded and aborted, windows shattered, people went off the roads, and the navy solved the problem by eliminating the population in this oasis where clear spring water breaks the surface of its own accord.

The few dozen houses had been burned to the ground, and tanks used for aerial target practice were scattered between them. As we looked at the ruins of one ranch house, an extraordinary sound erupted behind us. The best way I can describe it is as the equivalent of a chainsaw running up one’s spine, a noise so powerful it seemed more physical than sound. I turned just in time to see a supersonic jet disappear again, after buzzing us from about two hundred feet. It came from nowhere and went back there almost immediately, as though it had ripped a hole in the sky. The wars fought in the Middle East have been fought here first, in strange ways that could make those wars more real but instead make them more removed.

Once, driving a back road in Nevada, I was stopped for half an hour by a road
construction crew. The woman in the hard hat who’d flagged me down spoke wistfully of San Francisco when I told her where I was from. She’d visited once in high school and spoke as though the seven-hour drive was an impassable distance, and perhaps it was, for her. Her town was called Lovelock, and it had a few casinos but no movie theater or bookstore. When I think of how Americans could fail to measure the carnage caused by hundreds of bombs in one city by that of two hijacked airplane crashes in another, I think of her.

And I think of the wars fought for our cheap gasoline, the wars that make viable not just my summer jaunts but year-round homes sixty or seventy miles from the grocery store (to say nothing of military flights measured not in miles per gallon but gallons per mile). When the freeway clotted up with roadside businesses south of Salt Lake City, this seemed verified by an auto dealer with a flashing signboard: “Our Troops. God Bless Them.” And maybe all the talk about freedom means freedom to drive around forever on cheap petroleum, out here in a terrain just a little less harsh than Afghanistan. Thomas Jefferson was afraid of the red lands, afraid that where the arable soil ended so would his arcadian yeoman ideal and Europeans would revert to nomadism. There’s something roving and ferocious about the white West that suggests he’s right; the United States is really more like the lands it’s been bombing lately than like Europe.

Red for a kind of cowboy ethos that society is optional and every man should fend for himself. This vast space was where people stepped out of society when their domestic lives failed or the law was after them. The ethos, of course, ignores the huge federal subsidies that support cattle raising, logging, and mining, just as Republican tax cutters overlook the fact that the military they wish to expand consumes the lion’s share of tax revenue. Western and action movies concoct endless situations in which belligerence is justified and admirable, in which a paranoid autonomy is necessary; and the current president, like Ronald Reagan before him, portrays himself as a representative of these places and their cosmology, an act of self-invention as bold as that of any renamed outlaw. Reagan went from the Midwest to Hollywood; Bush is a product of East Coast privilege, even if he did go to flat, dry Midlands, Texas, to cultivate his insularity and a failed oil business.
Maybe the seductive whisper of these empty places says that you don’t have to work things out, don’t have to come home, don’t have to be reasonable; you can always move on, start over, step outside the social. To think of a figure in this vast western space of the Great Basin is to see a solitary on an empty stage, and the space seems to be about the most literal definition of freedom: space in which nothing impedes will or act. The Bonneville Salt Flats—a dry lake bed in northern Utah—where some of the world’s land speed records have been set, and Nevada’s Black Rock Desert dry lake bed, where more speed records were set and the bacchanalian Burning Man festival takes place every September, seem to have realized this definition in the most obvious ways: speeding cars, naked, hallucinating, tattooed love freaks partying down. And, of course, the U.S. military training for foreign adventures. (In the first Gulf War, the commanders referred to the unconquered portions of Iraq as “Indian Territory.”)

Easy though all this is to deplore on moral grounds, the place is seductive. There’s a sense for me that all this is home, that every hour, every mile, is coming home, that this isolated condition of driving on an empty highway from one range to another is home, is some kind of true and essential condition of self, because I am myself an American, and something of a westerner. There’s a bumper sticker that says, “I love my country but I fear my government,” and, more than most nations, the United States has imagined itself as geography, as landscape and territory first, and this I too love.

A year ago, I was at a dinner in Amsterdam when the question came up of whether each of us loved his or her country. The German shuddered, the Dutch were equivocal, the Tory said he was “comfortable” with Britain, the expatriate American said no. And I said yes. Driving across the arid lands, the red lands, I wondered what it was I loved. The places, the sagebrush basins, the rivers digging themselves deep canyons through arid lands, the incomparable cloud formations of summer monsoons, the way the underside of clouds turns the same blue as the underside of a great blue heron’s wings when the storm is about to break.

Beyond that, for anything you can say about the United States, you can also say the opposite: we’re rootless except that we’re also the Hopi, who haven’t moved in several centuries; we’re violent except that we’re also the Franciscans
nonviolently resisting nuclear weapons out here; we’re consumers except that this West is studded with visionary environmentalists; and on and on. This country seems singularly dialectical, for its evils tend to generate their opposites. And the landscape of the West seems like the stage on which such dramas are played out, a space without boundaries, in which anything can be realized, a moral ground, out here where your shadow can stretch hundreds of feet just before sunset, where you loom large, and lonely.
The Postmodern Old West, or
The Precession of Cowboys and Indians

[1996]

I. COWBOYS, OR WALKING INTO THE PICTURE

The most breathtaking moment in the *Road Runner* cartoon show came when Wile E. Coyote set a trap for Road Runner. The trap poised on a mesa’s edge was a billboard-like image extending the mesa’s dead-end road into a different landscape, so that the coyote’s prey would crash through the paper image and fall to its death. But the indomitable bird ran straight into the picture and vanished up its road. Representation had become habitable space, and it was no coincidence that the landscape represented was the arid terrain of the Southwest. In much the same way, Ike Clanton escaped the Earp brothers’ assault at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona, by jumping inside the adjacent photography studio; and the events he had just survived made their own entry into the picture—into literature, moving pictures, and TV. This habit of walking into pictures is the defining cultural habit of the American West, a habit that could be called identity-shifting, self-mythologizing, self-reflexive, simulationist, and a host of other words more often associated with the present moment. But if postmodernism had a birthplace, it was in the Old West.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as tourism sociologist Dean McCannell points out, roving herds of theorists—Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson among them—invaded California, which they described as the capital of postmodernism, the place where the future had arrived. Had they spent as much time reading the region’s history as they did staring out car windows and watching
TV, they would have found that theme parks and drive-by shootings, rogue cops and actor politicians, amnesia and identity-laundering were nothing new; they were in fact Western heritage, just as the toxic waste wars and technology booms bore a strong family resemblance to the previous century’s Indian wars and gold rushes. And if this cowboy postmodernism had a mother, it was Jessie Benton Fremont. She played a willing Wile E. Coyote to her husband, John C. Fremont, who disappeared into the picture of the West she made, and a whole nation followed after him. Out of that picture a century later came a cowboy movie star president who transformed the whole nation into his vision of the Wild West: more weapons, more punishment, more mythology, less regulation, less social welfare, less memory (and another publicly adoring wife, Nancy Reagan, parenthetically pulling the hero’s puppet strings). In that version of the West, past and present, identity is infinitely malleable, and history is indistinguishable from fiction.

Jessie Benton Fremont, by all accounts, would have preferred to be a man, and thereby an adventurer. Born in 1824 to a retiring southern belle and the powerful expansionist senator from the old Old West, the Missouri frontier, she was named after her paternal grandfather and grew up to become her father’s confidante and political aide. Thomas Hart Benton himself saw her as his son and raised her much as though she were one. When she first realized how her gender would constrain her, she cut off her hair and refused the role; a few years later, at seventeen, she scandalized her relatives by cross-dressing in a military uniform at a family wedding. Finally, she settled for marrying the handsome nobody John Charles Fremont, and she and her father invented him as the son she should have been (a good proto-westerner, the illegitimate Fremont had already improved upon his father’s name by adding the accent on the first syllable and the final t that made the name speak of mountains).

Thanks to his father-in-law’s influence, Fremont received the command of the government’s 1842 surveying expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Though the journey was of scientific and political significance, it was the literary quality of the report that made it a huge success. By all accounts, that literary flair was Jessie Fremont’s. She got up from her childbed to ghostwrite for her neurasthenic husband, and she continued to write in his voice throughout his subsequent surveys
and for the rest of their lives. The 1843 Report on an Expedition of the Country Lying between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains became a best-seller and a guidebook, and it made the man whose name was on the title page a national hero. Emerson complained about Fremont’s narcissistic self-consciousness for all the descriptions of how he and his party looked, amid the romantic descriptions of scenery and thrilling accounts of adventure, but it may have been Jessie Fremont who saw it all as a picture. This pivotal first-person account of the West, this testament of manhood and authenticity, seems to have been the literary construct of a teenage girl who had stayed in the East.

Fremont’s first expedition, the expedition of 1842, reached its climax with the ascent of what he called Fremont Peak in the Rockies. On Fremont Peak, he saw a bumblebee: “It was a strange place, the icy rock and the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains, for a lover of warm sunshine and flowers, and we pleased ourselves with the idea that he was the first of his species to cross the mountain barrier, a solitary pioneer to foretell the advance of civilization.” The mountain and the bumblebee are both reinvented as portraits of the hero, a billion years of geology undone so that the man precedes the mountains; this utterly new place is only a mirror, and, layers upon layers, the man himself may be a fiction made up by a woman. It is clear the West is being invented, not even discovered, let alone encountered. As a text in which one finds in the landscape symbols and signs of oneself, Fremont’s bumblebee incident has a place in symbolist literature; as documentary, it’s more problematic. For the brave bee who is the author’s double in this fiction of authenticity, literature, not life, is the ultimate destination: Fremont pays it fitting tribute by squishing it between the pages of a large book he happened to have with him.

One could wish that the West he concocted had been worthy of a greater philosopher—but Fremont was carrying out Baudrillard’s agendas: “Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory. . . . Simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary.’” (The other West—the West of Native Americans as inhabitants rather than invaders, of an economy dependent on massive federal handouts rather than rugged individualism, of women and var-
ious others disqualified from cowboyhood, of a colossal military infrastructure in which further expansionism is rehearsed—has seldom appeared since, except in recent revisionist Western histories and photographs.)

It was this report and the military actions that followed that Americanized the Mexican West, opened up the land for mining, cattle grazing, military training, the crime and punishment industries, boasting, and forgetting—the characteristic activities of the American West. Before the Fremonts made the place literature, what lay beyond the Mississippi was little known to Yankees. Nobody was interviewing the Indians, and the trappers who knew it well were largely illiterate outsiders too; one of these illiterates, the Indian slayer Kit Carson, became Fremont’s principal guide and was rewritten, by Jessie Fremont among others, into a national hero. Fremont and Carson have towns, streets, mountains, and rivers named after them. They became both the landscape they explored and the developments that effaced it (and in their wake came John Wayne Airport and Roy Rogers State Park). This opportunity to invent oneself, to enter into the new America as a fiction is what the West offered, and what its rootless amnesiac open spaces and society offer still: the self-made man as an artistic rather than merely economic possibility.

Such frontier heroes as Fremont and Carson were adored for their authenticity, for the physical courage and stamina that made their involvement in the blood-drenched exploration of the West possible, and for their encounters with the grit of real mountains and real prairies. Yet the details of their adventures and their characters were often fabricated. For the inhabitants of the Wild West they founded, there seems to have been no clear border between the world and its highly embroidered representation. Buffalo Bill (William Cody) and Wild Bill Hickok (James Butler Hickok), respectively a scout and buffalo hunter and a gunman and lawman, had been the subjects of laudatory fictions published in the East, and they collaborated with the mythmaking by lying extensively about their own lives afterward—or perhaps they had become true inhabitants of that murky borderland. They began in 1872 to reenact their adventures for audiences, helping to create a pageantlike docudrama that drew equally from circus, theater, and rodeo. This hybrid reached its apotheosis with the Wild West Show that Cody founded in 1882 with the pseudonymous Ned Buntline, who wrote more than a hun-
dred novels about his partner. The circus, formerly a blend of the fabulous and the exotic, became a vehicle for presenting the celebrated characters, skills (shooting, roping, riding), and events of the West as entertainment. The West had already ceased to be a place and become a genre: it had become the Western.

In his autobiography, Cody wrote about fashion and fiction:

At the last minute I decided to take along my buckskin suit. Something told me that some of the people I had met in New York might want to know just how a scout looked in his business clothes. . . . I was still wearing the wonderful overcoat that had been given me by the Grand Duke Alexis, and it was a source of continuous admiration among the officers, who pronounced it the most magnificent garment of its kind in America. . . . In the papers the next morning I found that I had had adventures that up to that time I had never heard of. The next evening I had my first adventure in high society.

Cody was born in 1846, the year the United States began its war with Mexico for what is now the American Southwest, and died during the First World War; he began his career as a buffalo hunter and army scout and ended as a silent-movie producer. He is the crowning achievement of this proto–shape shifting, a prefigurative mix of Andy Warhol and Steven Seagal and Michael Eisner. There is now a Buffalo Bill Museum in Colorado, and, like the Gene Autry Museum in Los Angeles, it presents Western history and theater as though they were one—and in crucial respects they were. To comprehend the Wild West Show, imagine that Colin Powell toured the country in a theatrical production simulating the bombing of Baghdad, and that Saddam Hussein joined him occasionally for a command performance. The stars played themselves, and actors played the smaller parts. Enemies on the battlefield became co-stars of the circus, and Cody harbored an outlaw for a while who played himself—Gabriel Dumont of Canada’s Riel Rebellion. For many of the most prominent characters of the West, crime, law enforcement, and entertainment were not distinct categories: Las Vegas already existed in spirit.

In the 1880s in Montana, some young outlaws were apprehended with saddle-
bags full of dime novels—they must have been copycat criminals, egged on by their reading. In his book *Spaghetti Westerns*, Christopher Frayling recounts, “Emmett Dalton, the last surviving member of the Dalton Gang specializing in great train robberies, actually collaborated on a book in 1937 (subsequently filmed) entitled *When the Daltons Rode*. This book told the story of how Emmett Dalton had died a romantic death at Coffeyville, Kansas, forty-five years previously.”

Wyatt Earp’s sister-in-law Allie, married to Virgil Earp, tells of an occasion when Kate Holliday, the common-law wife of Doc Holliday, accidentally stumbled upon Earp’s other identities, in the presence of Mattie, Wyatt Earp’s wife:

> Kate had been leanin’ against the closet door, her hand on the doorknob. As she flipped around, the door flew open. There was a bang and a clatter. Out of the closet tumbled a big suitcase, spewin’ out on the floor some things that made my eyes pop out. Wigs and beards made of unravelled rope and sewn on black cloth masks, some false mustaches, a church deacon’s frock coat, a checkered suit like drummers wear, a little bamboo cane—lots of things like that! Mattie gave a scairt little cry and fell on her knees in a hurry to gather all those things up.

Earp was a gambler, a criminal, and sometimes a Wells Fargo stagecoach guard; he and Doc Holliday used this Cindy Sherman–like collection of disguises to cover up that they were working both sides of the law.

After he and his brothers shot and were shot by a few rivals at the OK Corral, Wyatt Earp jumped town and dedicated himself to his own myth. He was always seeking someone to write his version of the facts about his two years in Tombstone; toward the end of his life, he served as a film consultant on Western movies. The love of his life was a San Francisco actress, and by the time he died in California in 1929, he had transformed himself from a petty criminal into the paradigmatic law-and-order marshal of American movies and, eventually, TV. Among his coffin bearers was Tom Mix, the most popular Western actor of his day; a few decades later, Henry Fonda would play Earp in a John Ford movie. Wyatt Earp had arrived in the pictures.

This is what Jim Jarmusch was trying to get at in his 1996 Western *Dead
Man, in which Johnny Depp eventually becomes the notorious gunman he is initially mistaken for, as he wanders across a West where wanted posters bearing his likeness have preceded him—and the rock star Iggy Pop cross-dresses, in a calico-and-sunbonnet cameo role. For all the ethos of manliness, gender became as malleable as any other aspect of identity in the West, whose foundational document was Jessie Fremont’s ventriloquism. In the 1870s, Calamity Jane was following George Armstrong Custer’s Seventh Cavalry dressed as a man. Elizabeth Custer was wearing a wig made from her husband’s golden ringlets. Custer himself was writing articles celebrating Wild Bill Hickok as the quintessential plainsman, and Calamity Jane made up a story that she had married Hickok; she claimed him as the father of a daughter eventually demonstrated to have been born four years after his death. Both Hickok and Buffalo Bill did stints with Custer’s Seventh Cavalry at various times, but Hickok was shot in a bar in 1876 shortly after playing the part of himself in a three-act entertainment entitled Scouts of the Prairie, the same year that Custer and his cavalry were wiped out by the Oglala Sioux at Little Bighorn. In Son of the Morning Star, Evan S. Connell tells the tale of a much-married laundress for the Seventh Cavalry who was posthumously discovered, by her fellow female camp followers preparing her for burial, to be a man. (During the California Gold Rush, dances were often held in which some members of the all-male society took the part of, or dressed as, women; and Western newspapers of the era tell of same-sex couples of both genders.) The berdaches—the gay men who took on female roles in Plains Indian society—are another story; Crazy Horse, one of the Oglala leaders who creamed Custer, was said to have had a berdache wife.

Pictorially, the Old West existed in the interval between the development of wet-plate photography and the development of motion pictures and exists still in the timelessness of pictures and movies. Photography came of age with the settlement of the West, which became the first place to become widely known to the rest of the world through photographs. (Carleton Watkins’s large-plate photographs of Yosemite, for example, were winning medals in Paris before more than a few hundred white people had ever seen the place, and Yosemite would become the great
national shrine of nature as a work of art.) The Western photographers already knew what Foucault would preach, that knowledge was power: surveying the landscape was a military exercise, and places were often invaded so that they could be documented and measured. An information age had begun.

But the Western took place in the suspension of history. The Western is a conservative genre, intimating that cowboys and their environment of rough authenticity are how things have always been, or ought to have been, and that change is about to ruin both. Its sentiments echo still in conservative speeches claiming a Platonic steady state for the Heraclitan flux zones of family, culture, and nation. The nostalgia may be not for a past but for an impossible condition: the Western enshrines the self-conscious desire to be unself-consciously masculine, enshrines a condition in which masculinity has achieved the status of nature rather than culture. The only people who had been cowboys long enough to be traditional were the Mexicans and their indigenous ranch hands, and even gringo cowboys’ accoutrements and skills—lassoes, the high-cantled saddles with saddle horns, cowboy boots—were borrowed from Spanish-speaking vaqueros (and even the word vaquero was anglicized, as buckaroo). But when movie cowboys—like the gunslingers of The Magnificent Seven (1960)—ride into Mexico, all they find are campesinos and a few inept bandits.

The great Kansas-bound cattle drives that form the basis for Texas Westerns like John Ford’s Oedipal Red River (1948) took place in the brief years between 1866 and 1886, before the fences and trains reached Texas. The Western depended on the delicate balance between a wild space and a tame audience, between Texas plains and Chicago slaughterhouses, between the authenticity of cowboys and the insincerity of actors. The first narrative feature film is 1903’s The Great Train Robbery, which was almost simultaneous with the events it fictionalized, but afterward technology appears largely as a threat in an ever more sophisticated Western cinema. In Sam Peckinpah’s The Wild Bunch (1960), trains, cars, and automatic weapons are making it hard for traditionalist horse-riding thieves. In Clint Eastwood’s Unforgiven (1992), the same sense that the spirit has gone out of the times prevails. Clint, as the protagonist, has hung up his guns, and everyone else except tired fellow retired gunman Morgan Freeman is despicable: the east-
erner who has come out to write about the bungling Duke of Death, the sadistic sheriff, the nearsighted would-be young gunman who idolizes the bloodshed of the past, the fat guy whose attack on a prostitute who giggled at his tiny dick sets the rest of the events into motion. It is an austere Western because it lacks the lush homoeroticism of almost all the movies in this genre, in which men represent Nature and women are the intrusive force of Culture come, like Huck’s Aunt Sally, to civilize them (“We won’t play culture to your nature” could be the rallying cry of Western feminism).

Late twentieth-century entertainers have reversed the trajectory of the frontier heroes, from acts to representations, from nature to culture. Ted Turner in Montana and Robert Redford in Colorado, Ronald Reagan in Santa Barbara, and costume maker Ralph Lauren in New Mexico celebrate their entertainment successes with the purchase of the ultimate reality, real estate. They become ranchers, and the lifestyle they impersonated becomes the one they take up in life (though rather than exiting the picture, they seem to be moving into an enlarged arena in which to carry out their cultural enactment of the nature and value of manliness and westernness). Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull went from the landscape of the West into the theater of the Western. This reversal always reminds me of children’s tales of toys like the Velveteen Rabbit and the puppet Pinocchio becoming flesh and blood: if they love you enough at the box office, you can become a real cowboy. After Fremont, what could be a more perfect precession of simulacra than the career of Clint Eastwood, who clambered up from playing in TV’s Rawhide to the spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone to American Westerns to becoming a rancher, a landowner on a vast scale, and, for a while, the mayor of Carmel?

II. INDIANS, OR BREAKING OUT OF THE PICTURE

One of the most spectacular moves from the solid ground of the West into the nebulous genre of the Western was made by Sitting Bull, the great Hunkpapa chief who had been instrumental in wiping out Custer and his Seventh Cavalry. He became an actor who played himself. In 1884, Sitting Bull and his entourage exhibited them-
selves as “representations of wild life on the plains” in a New York City wax museum, already relics of the authentic only eight years after the Battle of Little Bighorn. He toured the West and then joined Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show with his entourage (and contractually retained the right to sell photographs of himself).

As a spectacle, Sitting Bull fit into this new West; as a speaker, he did not. In 1883, he had given a public address at an event commemorating the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad, another commercial artery slicing up the West’s open spaces and bleeding off its resources. Abandoning his text, he stood up and told the white audience that he hated all white people, that they were thieves and liars—but his army interpreter decided not to depart from the script and translated Sitting Bull’s speech as a flowery welcome full of faux-Indian clichés. The audience applauded enthusiastically. A speech he gave in Philadelphia, this time about the end of fighting and the importance of education for his people, was “translated” as a lurid account of Little Bighorn. The inherent inadequacies of language so beloved of deconstruction had, in the case of Sitting Bull, become a political gap between signifier and signified that effectively silenced him. In his public speeches, Sitting Bull described a territory neither east nor west, but central: home, a complex, real place. His translators relocated it to the fictional zone of the Western, assimilating him into that authenticity they had to simulate.

Back on the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota during the heyday of the Ghost Dance cult and its bloody repression, Sitting Bull was shot down by the reservation police sent by the U.S. Army to capture him, a side note to the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. In the midst of the gunfight, the white horse Buffalo Bill had given him began to go through his circus tricks. In Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, Dee Brown writes, “It seemed to those who watched that he was performing the Dance of the Ghosts. But as soon as the horse ceased his dancing and wandered away, the wild fighting resumed.” Sitting Bull had exited the picture, but his horse was still performing on cue.

I claimed, in the first half of this essay, that postmodernism—as a cluster of simulacral precessions, self-conscious mythologizings, rootless identity manipulations,
and erasures—was born in the Old West and that California is, rather than where
the future has come to pass, a place where the regional past has borne strange inter-
national fruit. Those western emigrants turned actors, politicians, developers, and
crooks created a mythology of the West so powerful it became a literary and cine-
matic genre that largely eclipses the factual history of the place, an inhabitable
mythology with a large place for cowboys and a small one for Indians. When I think
back to the Westerns of my childhood, it was the wagon train that functioned as the
stable center of the movie, despite its invasive mobility; the Indians were, composi-
tionally, invaders from outside the frame. Jane Tompkins writes in her marvelous
treatise on the Western, West of Everything, that during her marathon of movie
watching, “The Indians I expected did not appear. The ones I saw functioned as
props, bits of local color, textural effects. As people they had no existence.”

Western history is, in some respects, the history of the accretion of these dis-
tortions or fictions, and contemporary Native American political activity is often
an attempt to break out of that history. Imagine Western history as an action
movie—part Cape Fear, part Home Alone—in which a home is invaded by love-
able gunmen who insist that the residents play all the lousy bit parts in an inter-
minable drama or just shove them in the closet and play house themselves: the
Native American land wars are attempts to take back part of the house, but the
cultural wars are attempts to recast the characters or rewrite the drama. The sar-
donic artist Jimmie Durham revises it thus: “Nothing could be more central to
American reality than the relationships between Americans and American
Indians, yet those relationships are of course the most invisible and the most lied
about. The lies are not simply a denial; they constitute a new world, the world in
which American culture is located.”

This new world of the United States was almost literally founded on appro-
priating indigenous identity: in 1773, the Sons of Liberty dressed up as Mohawks
to stage the foundational gesture of revolt against England, the Boston Tea Party.
Since then, playing Indian has been a popular occupation for children and, of late,
for adults; and decorative motifs, from New Mexico license plates to Pendleton
woolens to the ever popular chief’s-head tattoo, draw from indigenous iconogra-
phies. For Native American culture to be infinitely appropriable, it must belong
to everyone—and to no one in particular. This desire to possess has generated both the widespread belief that Native Americans have vanished and the concomitant problems of the visibility of contemporary Native people. The authenticity attributed to nativeness seems to be something everyone can impersonate; as cowboys are to American actors, so are Indians to—apparently everyone, including horde of part-time wannabe Indians in Germany and Central Europe and New Age wannabes all over the United States. The Western’s self-invention finds its final frontier, or final solution, in immigrants reinventing themselves as indigenous people, self-conscious simulators of an aesthetic of unself-conscious authenticity, happy inhabitants of a historical fiction.

Perhaps the conceptual reservation onto which Native Americans have been forced is called Art: like works of art, they are expected to exist either outside of time or in the past tense of classics and masterpieces, to be on exhibit, to be public property, to be seen and not heard, to be about the spiritual rather than the political, and to embody qualities to which everyone can aspire, whether they are the Czech and Slovak “Indians” in John Paskievich’s 1996 documentary film If Only I Were an Indian or sports teams such as the Atlanta Braves, the Washington Redskins, the Kansas City Chiefs, the Chicago Blackhawks (to say nothing of Chevrolet Apaches, Jeep Cherokees, Pontiacs, and Winnebagos). As they have become more vocal—or audible—in recent decades, many native North Americans have worked to move out of or mock this conceptual museum. In the visual arts, Edgar Hachivi Heap of Birds, Jimmie Durham, James Luna, Zig Rising Buffalo Jackson, Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie, and many others have taken on the politics of indigenous identity with humorous outrage.

One such battle against the museum was mounted by Pemina Yellow Bird, a Mandan woman appointed to the board of the North Dakota State Historical Society. After an incident in which two non-Indian men were apprehended with the shellac still drying on the skulls they had robbed from a local burial mound, she asked the state archaeologists where the recovered skulls were going:

And they said, Well, we’ll just put them in the vault with the others. The others? Yeah you want to see? So we went to the Heritage Center and down into
the basement where an armed guard was standing next to a vault. . . . They lead me into this warehouse-like room that was filled from the floor to the ceiling with boxes and boxes of remains of dead Indian people. And I said at that time—you know, I was just shocked, it knocked the wind out of me—Are these all Indian people? And they go, Yup, they’re all Indians. The non-Indians get reburied, but we bring the Indians here for study.

Yellow Bird stood up at four board meetings to explain that the remains must be reburied, but, like Sitting Bull, she became inaudible when she became challenging: her remarks were ignored in the meetings themselves and were absent from the board minutes. It took five years of statewide Intertribal Reinterment Committee effort to achieve her goal.

The Smithsonian alone has the remains of more than eighteen thousand Native Americans in its collection, demonstrating yet again that Native Americans are considered artworks on the same order as their baskets. No matter how recent, indigenous burial sites were regarded as legitimate sites for archaeological digs until Congress passed the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. But the same year that legislation liberated Native American remains from museums, another law put live artists back in: that law mandates that no one may describe himself or herself as a Native American or Indian artist unless that individual is a registered member of a federally recognized tribe or is able to demonstrate a heritage of a quarter or more “Indian blood” (a definition that American Indian Movement activist Ward Churchill calls arithmetical genocide, since within a century no one will meet the genetic criterion, no matter what their cultural experience). No other ethnic group in the United States is thus certified—in somewhat the same way Old Masters paintings are authenticated or discredited. Punishment for unauthenticated artists or the exhibitors of their work can include up to fifteen years in prison or a million dollars in fines. Supposedly drafted to prevent imposters from cashing in on the Santa Fe art market, this law immediately caused several Oklahoma museums to close down and excluded uncooperative artists from many other arenas.

Jimmie Durham, for example, was scheduled to have a show at the nonprofit
gallery American Indian Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, but the gallery faced closure or loss of funding, because its legal mandate is to show Native American artists and the part-Cherokee Durham, a prominent AIM activist in the 1970s, has declined to be certified by the federal government. The show was moved to another venue, and soon after, the artist Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie made this law the subject of an installation at the San Francisco Art Institute, drawing an analogy between registration numbers and concentration camp numbers. Durham writes:

To protect myself and the gallery from Congressional wrath, I hereby swear to the truth of the following statement: I am a full-blood contemporary artist, of the subgroup (or clan) called sculptors. I am not an American Indian, nor have I ever seen or sworn loyalty to India. I am not a “Native American,” nor do I feel that “America” has a right to name me or un-name me. I have previously stated that I should be considered a mixed-blood: that is, I claim to be a male, but only one of my parents was male.

For a lot of tribes, the primary war nowadays is to prove that they exist; as extras from the Golden Age, they are assumed to have faded into the sunset along with the credits. Like Sandra Bullock in The Net (1995), a movie about a woman whose identity is electronically destroyed, or Vanessa Williams in Eraser (1996), the Schwarzenegger flop about the federal witness protection program, they do not officially exist; and without federal recognition of their existence, they cannot obtain the land rights and legal benefits owed to Native Americans. Proving they exist means coming up with a paper trail demonstrating cultural continuity, a peculiar demand to place upon people whose largely oral culture was violently disrupted and dislocated by the same government.

Proving that they exist to the general public can be equally challenging. Innumerable works of art mourn (or celebrate in a giddy whirl of melancholy) their vanishing: cultural monuments from The Last of the Mohicans (1826) to James Earle Fraser’s sculpture The End of the Trail (1915, but still widely reproduced on postcards, belt buckles, and so forth) to Dances with Wolves (1991) wave them a
fond but insistent farewell. Even the Northern California Karuk artist and storyteller Julian Lang embarked on a project about the nearby Mattole people under the impression that the Mattole were extinct—but learned better along the way. Thanks to the museum wall text accompanying an exhibition of Karl Bodmer’s frontier watercolors of the 1830s, I myself believed that Mandans had been utterly wiped out by smallpox, until I met the Mandan artist Zig Jackson.

Ishi, much cherished as “the last Yahi” while more thriving California tribes were largely ignored, was exhibited at San Francisco’s Panama Pacific International Exposition, along with The End of the Trail, and spent the last years of his life as exhibit-in-residence at a University of California museum in San Francisco, among Egyptian and Peruvian mummies and Indian bones. Performance artist James Luna critiqued Ishi’s status when he put himself on display at the San Diego Museum of Man in 1986. Contemporary groups from the Ohlone of the San Francisco Bay Area to the Gabrielano of the Los Angeles Basin have been mourned as vanished tribes; and Edward Curtis’s costumed portraits, in which he dressed up Native people in a multirace pastiche of authenticity, haven’t helped much either, insisting as they do that the only real Indian is a vanishing Indian. Tourists still sometimes get indignant about traditional dances performed by people in Reeboks.

Southern Sierra Miwok activist and Yosemite Park employee Jay Johnson told me the following story a few years ago:

I think it was 1980, Julia and four of us on business for our tribe [seeking federal recognition in Washington] went to the Smithsonian and found the California museum exhibits, then Yosemite... It had a little statement on the side, and it left off with “It’s very sad today. There’s no more Yosemite Indians.” Period. I said, “Let’s go down, talk to the people at the desk about this statement.” So we went down there and this lady, she was at the desk, and I said, “Ma’am, about that diorama about Yosemite,” and she says, “Oh, isn’t that nice?” And I said, “It’s nice, but there’s an error in the statement,” and she says, “Oh, no, there can’t be. Every little word goes through channels and committees and what-not.” And I says, “It’s OK, but,” I says, “it tells me that there are no more Yosemite Indians today.” She says, “Well, that’s true, it’s very sad. But what-
ever’s out there is true.” So I say, “Well, I hate to disturb you, but I’m a Yosemite Indian, and we’re here on business for our tribe.” And she caught her breath and said, “Ohhh . . .”

Kit Carson finds a book that tells of feats he never did. Jay Johnson finds a museum display that tells him he has vanished long ago. In the simulaclral West, cowboys expand, Indians contract.

Some tribes are fighting for federal recognition, others against appropriation in the representational wars. Many practitioners of New Age spirituality have been appropriating indigenous identities as though the world was their shopping mall and religious identity was no more than a costume to be tried on, mixed and matched, traded in and up. White people with bound braids and symbolic trinkets and animal names doing their own version of sweat lodge, drumming, vision quest, and sun dance ceremonies are rampant in the New Age and men’s movements. In 1992, the Lakota Nations, the heirs to the victors of the Battle of Little Bighorn and the victims of Wounded Knee, issued a “Declaration of War against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality.” It read, in part, “The absurd public posturing of this scandalous assortment of pseudo-Indian charlatans, wannabes, commercial profiteers and cultists comprise a momentous obstacle in the struggle of traditional Lakota people for adequate public appraisal of the legitimate political, legal and spiritual needs of the real Lakota people.” Like dressing up as Indians, religious appropriation threatens to homogenize, fictionalize, and commercialize an identity to the point where it can belong to everyone or no one, but not to anybody in particular. Confrontations with New Age people have attracted little outside attention, however. The Native newspaper The Circle reported that in 1993 indigenous activists caught up with Lynn Andrews, “a Beverly Hills housewife-turned-shaman,” at a Los Angeles Whole Life Expo “and tried to convince her to admit that what she was writing about [in best-selling books such as Jaguar Woman] was fantasy, not Indian spirituality. Andrews is reportedly considering the proposal, but has not officially responded as she is negotiating a movie deal.”

Indian gaming may be where many tribes are making themselves visible now. In a recently opened Pueblo casino just north of Santa Fe, Pueblo Indians are hav-
ing their long-delayed revenge on the kin of Coronado, who blundered through the vicinity in the 1540s looking for the fictional Seven Cities of Cíbola. The casino is called Cities of Gold, after the jackpot Coronado never found, and poor Latinos get poorer there every night. It remains to be seen what the long-term results of the transformation of some of the poorest people in the country into some of the richest may be, but one of the early indications is counter-appropriation: back east, the Mashantucket Pequots, who operate the nation’s most profitable casino, have just given the Hartford Ballet half a million dollars to stage an American version of the Nutcracker to be set not in their own Connecticut, but in Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks—as dizzy a tour de force of hybridization as anyone could imagine.

But the biggest wars are still over land, particularly over toxic and radioactive waste disposal on the land still held by Native Americans, wars to unload the excreta of technology upon the involuntary symbols of a pristine continent. (The same exemption from state regulation makes both dumping and gaming possible.) I participated in a Native American land war once. At stake was whether the U.S. government or the Western Shoshone Nation owns much of Nevada; the test case considered whether two Western Shoshone elders, the Dann sisters, had to pay federal grazing fees for running their livestock on the contested land.

The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and, because all the evidence was on the Shoshone side, the government was forced to make up a fictitious date of taking for the land it had forgotten to steal in the last century. In 1979, the courts decided that the land had been “taken” in 1872, though nothing resembling taking had actually happened that year, or any other, to the still largely unfenced and sparsely inhabited land, and no paperwork documents a transfer of land by any means. Transplanted elsewhere, the outrageousness of this historical revisionism resonates more strangely: imagine, if you will, that France claims Napoleon did conquer Russia and thereby asserts sovereignty over it in the present; or recall the occasions when Ronald Reagan cited events from the movies as historical fact. It is as though the courts asserted that Fess Parker and John Wayne beat the Mexicans at the Alamo.

The decision was economic: the federal government could afford to buy
eastern Nevada for $26 million at 1872 prices (without interest), but not at late twentieth-century prices. The fact that it wasn’t for sale didn’t enter the calculations. The Dann sisters didn’t respect the court’s rulings, or its jurisdiction. So in 1992, the government hired cowboys from Utah to steal the sisters’ cows from the contested land. I was one of the supporters at the Dann ranch the day of the first cattle raid, April 10, 1992, and though I missed the actual raid, a stalwart German supporter caught it all on videotape with Carrie Dann’s camcorder (along with camcorders, walkie-talkies, faxes, computers, and radio-telephones played a part in the defense; information was the most powerful weapon in our nonviolent defense project). The raid took place in the morning. Carrie Dann single-handedly prevented the government men and the rent-a-buckaroos from loading her rounded-up cows into their cattle trucks by occupying the loading chute.

In the afternoon, we all watched it on TV with Carrie’s humorous live narration. A few days later, I took the videotape to San Francisco and convinced a member of Paper Tiger TV to cut the footage into a short documentary. Within a couple of weeks, it was being screened in theaters (it opened in San Francisco as the short before Craig Baldwin’s revisionist film O No Coronado!, which ends in the Coronado shopping plaza in Santa Fe), broadcast on public access TV, and distributed to activists. The Danns and their allies had become postmodern Westerners, living simultaneously in art and life, even if their version of history clashed with the cowboys’ master narrative.
“The celebration of the past can easily be made to play politics, and monuments are linchpins of this process,” writes Lucy Lippard, and nowhere is this more true than with monuments involving Native Americans. European Americans have long been fascinated with Native Americans, but not with their history, which often implicates early emigrants and undermines the heroic versions of history preserved in songs, school lessons—and monuments. In recent years, that history has been told more accurately and more audibly, with often turbulent results. In earlier versions, Native Americans either were the adversaries in a Manifest Destiny version of history or were outside history altogether, as timeless and infinitely appropriable totemic figures. Almost all Native American monuments commemorate Indian-European interaction rather than autonomous indigenous history, and only a handful of helpful or nonadversarial Indians—Squanto, Sacajawea—are remembered by name in public monuments. Coming to terms with that history has generated a new era of Indian wars, with iconography and words as the weapons this time around.

Earlier monuments are often merely evasive. On the coast of northernmost California, there is a National Historic Landmark plaque whose text names “Indian/Gunther Island” and asserts: “This site possesses national significance in commemorating the history of the United States of America.” What the plaque fails to mention is the nature of that significance: on this island, formerly known as Tolowot, settlers axed to death all the women, children, old, and infirm of the Indian village while the men were out hunting. Others celebrate the “us” in the
old “us/them” model of Euro-American/Native American history. The central plaza of Santa Fe, New Mexico, features a monument to those who died fighting “savage Indians” (although guerrilla reformists chiseled off the word savage); in front of one of its civic buildings is an obelisk commemorating Kit Carson, although it doesn’t mention whether he’s being commemorated as an expansionist scout or the scourge of the Navajo. Such monuments are predicated on an obsolete idea of who the public is: more and more Americans come from neither side of the historic “us/them,” while if “us” now means the mainstream rather than an ethnicity, most Native Americans are participants in it to varying degrees.

San Francisco generated a lot of conflict when it tried to adjust one monument. The Pioneer Monument in San Francisco’s Civic Center was dedicated on Thanksgiving Day 1894, less than half a century after California became part of the United States. The eight-hundred-ton piece, which serves as a statement about the Americanization of California, is a massive hunk of iconography, with thirty-seven bronze elements on five granite pedestals, including a forty-seven-foot-high central figure, four sculpture groupings on lower surrounding pedestals, commemorative names, bas-reliefs of representative events, medallions, and captions. Women, like Native Americans, have more often appeared as emblems than as individuals in public sculpture, and the Athena-like figure of Eureka standing atop the central structure along with a California grizzly is no exception. Two of the subsidiary sculpture groupings, allegories of commerce and agriculture represented as women, are standard-issue, too; although the artist, Frank Happersberger, was born in California, he learned his academic-classical clichés during years of study in Munich. The other two groupings are more specific and more interesting. One, captioned “In ’49,” shows a trio kneeling with picks and pans. The other grouping is where the trouble began.

Captioned “Early Days,” it is meant to represent the peoples who lived in California before the Yankees. In the rear is a dashing vaquero; in the middle, a figure wearing a monk’s habit and leaning over the figure of a prone Indian, who is in front. While the other two figures have upraised hands—the vaquero is energetically twirling a now-vanished lariat, the priest is chastising with upraised finger—the Indian’s arms are draped resignedly across his body, as if to suggest
that his space is contracting as that of the others is expanding. From left of center, it looks as if the vaquero and the priest are raising up invisible whips to lash the Indian. With his two feathers, braids, lanky body, and Roman nose, this representative Indian looks more like the Last of the Mohicans than like most Native Californians, and he is clearly an older cousin of James Earle Fraser’s *The End of the Trail*, the famous sculpture of the downcast warrior slumped on his drooping horse that was first exhibited at San Francisco’s Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915 and now sits in Visalia, in central California. Happersberger’s grouping represents the Spanish and Mexican eras, during which the Franciscan missions were built to convert—into Christians and laborers—the indigenous inhabitants of the coast. According to the San Francisco Municipal Report of 1893–1894, “The group of figures fronting the City Hall consists of a native over whom bends a Catholic priest, endeavoring to convey to the Indian some religious knowledge. On his face you may see the struggle of dawning intelligence.”

The 1906 earthquake destroyed the City Hall that this first version faced, but the monument survived unmoved until a few years ago. It was slated to be relocated to accommodate the new public library when the San Francisco Arts Commission received a letter from Martina O’Dea, “on behalf of the American Indian Movement Confederation and the Native American and Indigenous people of the San Francisco Bay Area,” early in 1995. “We request,” she wrote, “the removal of a monument which symbolizes the humiliation, degradation, genocide and sorrow inflicted upon this country’s indigenous people by a foreign invader, through religious persecution and ethnic prejudice.” The Arts Commission, which administers such civic sculptures, decided instead to attach a plaque providing a contemporary interpretation of the grouping. An early draft stated, “In 1769, the missionaries first came to California with the intent of converting the state’s 300,000 Native Americans to Christianity. With their efforts over in 1834, the missionaries left behind about 56,000 converts—and 150,000 dead. Half of the original Native American population had perished during this time from the whites’ diseases, armed attacks, and mistreatment.”

Although the draft text was intended to counter the image of oppression conveyed by the statue, it actually reinforced its message by linking indigenous and
Spanish/Mexican history with the “Early Days,” as if the Spanish and the Mexicans had superseded the Indians before fading away themselves. Clearly neither group was imagined as part of the audience Happersberger addressed, the audience that identified with westward migration and a romanticized version of the Gold Rush. In representing the domination of Indians by the Spanish, the sculpture pitted against each other, then and now, two peoples who had both suffered in the Americanization of California—and presumed that neither would be its audience, though in the 1990s both are.

The proposed revision of the text prompted both the local Spanish consul and the Catholic archbishop to write indignant letters to the mayor. Their point was that the most brutal treatment and precipitous population decline of Native Californians came with the Gold Rush, not the mission era (although being less brutal than the Forty-Niners is a dubious distinction). Should the text appear, said Consul General Camilo Alonso-Vega, “many of us, including myself, would feel discriminated against and indelibly unwelcome at the very core of this city founded by Spaniards.” Alonso-Vega missed the point that the statue had for a century made indigenous Americans feel those very things. Archbishop William J. Levada even suggested another interpretation of the grouping: “a Franciscan missionary directs the attention of a native American and a vaquero heavenward.” Most of us who are not archbishops distrust authority more than did the citizens of 1894; an image of one man asserting such intensely bodily authority over another would appear ominous to many viewers even without historical contextualization.

Some suggested that the Pioneer Monument be replaced with other monuments: the premise of these proposed monuments was that the oppression was not sufficiently obvious and that the wrongs done to indigenous Americans should be represented, even more explicitly. One proposal called for a forty-ton stone block crushing an Indian, another for a Promethean figure chained to a rock. O’Dea’s original complaint was that the sculpture grouping commemorated “the crimes committed against indigenous Americans,” though she may have meant that it celebrates or sanitizes those crimes. She didn’t want them forgotten, but rather remembered differently.
The whole ruckus was decried by local newspaper columnists and by State Librarian and historian Kevin Starr as “political correctness.” The latter wrote, “How can San Francisco, or any city for that matter, hope to address its pressing problems, hope to achieve community, when an agency of government—for whatever perverse and distorted reasons—stigmatizes a culture and a religion with horrific charges of genocidal intent?” It is surprising that Starr ignored the many, many historical statements—albeit by Protestants—demonstrating genocidal desires and expectations; there was, for instance, California governor Peter Burnett’s 1851 declaration to the new state legislature “that a war of extermination would continue to be waged until the Indian race should become extinct, and that it was beyond the power or wisdom of men to avert the inevitable destiny,” which, like many similar statements, suggested that the war and the extinction were mysteriously inevitable and even more mysteriously unlinked.

Believing that Indians were vanishing, then and now, seems to have been wishful thinking, a wish for the circumstances under which monuments such as this could survive ideologically intact for a unified “us” untroubled and unenlarged by a “them” who had been safely relegated to the ahistorical realm of the emblematic. As emblems, they would be national ancestor-spirits rather than the ancestors of particular individuals with sometimes inconvenient political demands. It is this conveniently vague fading away, a disappearance for which no one bears responsibility, that is represented in the Pioneer Monument, as well as in such ideologically similar works as The End of the Trail and Edward Curtis’s reconfigured photographs.

The text that was finally put on the bronze plaque in front of “Early Days” reads, in part, “At least 300,000 Native people—and perhaps far more—lived in California at the time of the first settlement in 1769. During contact with colonizers from Europe and the United States, the Native population of California was devastated by disease, malnutrition, and armed attacks. The most dramatic decline of the Native population occurred in the years following the discovery of gold in 1848.” From a text that commented on the grouping, it has become a text that draws attention away from it, toward the Forty-Niners on the opposite side.
of the monument, and that also underscores the congratulatory tone of the whole ensemble. It concludes with the statement that, in 1990, the indigenous American population of the state was 236,078 (though it left out the fact that many of those are not Native Californians). Having weathered the reaction, the Arts Commission has permanently reoriented the meaning of the sculpture—has made it an artifact rather than an expression of public sentiment.

The San Francisco monument pitted two relatively disenfranchised groups against each other, but the conflict is more often between indigenous and dominant-culture values and interpretations, as with the new memorial to the Indians killed at the Battle of Little Bighorn in the summer of 1876. The history of this Montana site reflects changing federal attitudes: established in 1879 as a national cemetery for the soldiers of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry who died and were buried there, it became Custer Battlefield National Monument in 1940, and in 1991 was renamed Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in a law signed by President George H. W. Bush that also called for an additional monument at the site (a granite obelisk bearing the name of General Custer and his fallen troops having been erected long ago). As the official Little Bighorn Battlefield statement put it, “The law also stated that the memorial should provide visitors with a better understanding of the events leading up to the battle and encourage peace among people of all races.” An advisory committee was formed, a public competition was held, and a ruckus ensued.

In 1997, the Times of London reported that “enraged critics say that erecting an Indian monument at Little Bighorn is akin to ‘handing the Vietnam War memorial over to the Vietnamese.’” Another unnamed traditionalist told the western states’ progressive newspaper High Country News, “It’s like erecting a monument to the Mexicans killed at the Alamo.” Philadelphia designers John R. Collins and Alison J. Towers’s winning design for the monument is an earthwork, a circular berm with a northern aperture through which can be seen a grouping of three larger-than-life mounted Indians. It’s an odd mix of contemporary siteworks, à la Maya Lin and Nancy Holt, and old-fashioned heroic representation. It provides both a place to gather and to think and something to look at—something for
everyone but those still fighting the Indians. As in the San Francisco case, governments have become more progressive than some of the governed.

In his 1995 book of photographs, *Sweet Medicine: Sites of Indian Massacres, Battlefields, and Treaties*, Drex Brooks portrays places important to indigenous history and culture across the continental United States. What is most startling is how many are unmarked. The site where King Philip and his Wampanoag warriors were massacred in Bristol County, Rhode Island, in 1675, for example, is only a stream in a thicket of young branches; and many others are likewise unaltered, unmarked landscapes. A massacre site in Mystic, Connecticut, is built up, but uncommemorated: the bland buildings and signs constitute an erasure of the past.

Monuments are reminders that something important happened somewhere and interpretations of its significance. The premise of monuments—that without such markers the history of a place would be lost—may be true for cultures whose memory is preserved in material forms and whose members do not remain long in one place—that is, for cultures such as that of the settlers and contemporary Euro-Americans. Leslie Marmon Silko writes of the web of stories woven around everyday life in her Laguna Pueblo community, stories that “carefully described key landmarks and locations of fresh water. Thus a deer-hunt story might also serve as a map. Lost travelers and lost piñon-nut gatherers have been saved by sighting a rock formation they recognize only because they once heard a hunting story describing this rock formation.” She continues, “Indeed, stories are most frequently recalled as people are passing by a specific geographical feature or the exact location where a story took place. It is impossible to determine which came first, the incident or the geographical feature that begs to be brought alive in a story.”

Anthropologist Keith Basso describes a similar relationship in the culture of the Western Apache, for whom natural places call forth stories, so that the landscape provides a practical and moral guide to the culture. Even allowing for the profound differences between tribes, the many accounts like this suggest a worldview in which oral tradition continually generates a network of stories that map and make intimately familiar a landscape in which, as Silko puts it, “the precise
date of the incident is often less important than the place.” All of which suggests that bronze sculptures and granite obelisks with their inscriptions and emphasis on dates might be alien or redundant to such a tradition. In her essay in Sweet Medicine, however, historian Patricia Nelson Limerick argues that “Americans ought to know what acts of violence bought them their right to own land, build homes, use resources, and travel freely in North America. Americans ought to know what happened on the ground they stand on; they surely have some obligation to know where they are.” Knowledge of such past violence, she says later, might save Americans from nostalgia for “a prettier time in the past.” For Limerick, such monuments would speak most powerfully to the nonindigenous population. By these terms, putting up monuments is as significant a project as revising those that exist.

One European-style monument to insurgent indigenous history has long been in the works: the giant equestrian figure of Crazy Horse being carved into a mountain near Mount Rushmore. The brainchild of Boston-raised Korczak Ziolkowski, who assisted Gutzon Borglum in the carving of Mount Rushmore, the Crazy Horse memorial was begun half a century ago and, according to its web site, will be the biggest sculpture in the world when completed. It could be argued, however, that the European sculptural tradition within which this work fits and the massive blasting of the mountainside it requires celebrate the artist and the technology more than the dead leader, who refused to be photographed.

The continent is already densely populated with monuments—that is, sites of significance—recognized because of oral traditions, which means that those outside the traditions are often unable and or unwilling to see them. A case in point is Devils Tower National Monument, in northeastern Wyoming, where conflicting interpretations, or at least interests, led to a lawsuit. A steep and startling granite butte standing alone in the landscape, with ridges sweeping up to its flat crown, it was designated in 1906 as the first National Monument in the country (a National Monument is a national park named by presidential order rather than by an act of Congress). Devils Tower has been mainly a recreation destination during most of its subsequent history, but long before its absorption into the terrain of scenic tourism, it was a sacred site for several tribes in the region, including the
Lakota and the Kiowa (who call it Bear’s Lodge, because of the story in which seven sisters fled their brother, who had become a bear; they were saved by a giant tree stump that rose from the ground with them on it: the butte we see today is scored by the bear’s claw marks, and the sisters became seven bright stars in the night sky). Lakota leader Charlotte Black Elk recalls, “I grew up going to Devils Tower. As a kid with my family, we would pass ourselves off as tourists, initially. Back then, the park wasn’t a high traffic place.” The butte appeared in Close Encounters of the Third Kind as the site where the aliens landed, which, says Black Elk, caused tourism to increase significantly. So too did the growing popularity of rock climbing. In 1973, 312 climbers visited Devils Tower; now about 6,000 do so every year. Because of the popularity of rock climbing and the growing respect for Native American religious beliefs and rights, monument superintendent Deborah Ligget called for a voluntary moratorium on climbing every June, when Native Americans conduct ceremonies at Devils Tower.

The number of June climbers dropped dramatically when the moratorium was instituted in 1995; but Andy Petefish, who owned a climbing service, sued to have the ban declared illegal. Petefish and the Mountain States Legal Foundation, which represented him, argued that the voluntary ban was a violation of the First Amendment—that protecting Native American religious practices amounted to establishing a religion. Petefish, whose real motives seemed to be economic, asserted, “Climbing on Devils Tower is a religious experience for me. But when the rock gets crowded, I don’t ask for my peace and quiet to be regulated. I just want equal treatment on public land.” Since he wasn’t prevented from climbing or guiding clients on the butte, he seemed to be suing to protest being made to feel that climbing there was inappropriate.

The same attitude has prevailed at many other sacred sites across the West, where protecting indigenous rights or respecting non-Western religious beliefs by limiting access to the land has been attacked as reverse discrimination, by non-Natives who assert that the pleasure of outdoor recreation and scenic views is equally a form of spiritual observance. Some of the friction arises because many contested sites are federal land; another problem is that natural sites are not visibly tied to specific cultural practices, as is the case with, say, churches. An interpreta-
tion dependent upon oral tradition is less distinct than one embodied in architecture and sculpture—it changes how people look rather than what people see.

Similar cultural clashes have arisen at Rainbow Bridge in Utah (sacred to Dine [Navajo] people and already damaged by the flooding of nearby springs and petroglyphs caused by the Glen Canyon Dam); at Cave Rock in South Lake Tahoe (sacred to the Washoe and popular with climbers); and at the Western Shoshone sacred site at Rock Creek in northern Nevada’s Landers County, whose officials wanted to create a recreational reservoir that would put the site underwater (with a lot of activist work, the county measure was recently defeated). As Malcolm Margolin, a historian of Native California, said when discussing a sacred spring in the San Joaquin Valley that was threatened, “I began to realize that for them the religion, the religious experience was rooted in that particular place, in the power and the beauty of that particular place, and if you destroy the place, you destroy the religion.”

Edgar Hachivi Heap of Birds has worked as a public artist for more than a dozen years. All his public works have been temporary or permanent monuments to the erased or invisible indigenous history of the chosen site. The pieces most often consist of short texts placed on objects from the existing vocabulary of public space—billboards, bus signs, enameled metal signs like those used for traffic—which gives them a neutral, official aesthetic. In the late 1980s, he completed *Native Hosts* for a public art project at City Hall Park in New York. This work consisted of twelve signs made by the city’s Traffic Department, each of which said, “New York, today your host is ____” and named one of the tribes that had lived or still lives in the region. A few years later, in Seattle, he paid tribute to the city’s original inhabitants and the homeless Indians on the streets today with an enameled metal sign in Pioneer Square, next to and addressing the existing statue of Chief Seattle. One side of *Day Night*, decorated with crosses and dollar signs, said, “Chief Seattle the streets are our home”; the other, decorated with leafy splotches, said, “Far away brothers and sisters we still remember you.” Both these projects spoke to the presence, then and now, of displaced Native people in urban spaces. So did a third proj-
ect in San Jose, California, which used bus posters to critique the effects of the mission system—and, inevitably, offended the Catholic Church. “Who owns history?” another project asked point-blank, at a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, monument already commemorating “Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the United States.”

Among Heap of Birds’s more controversial projects were billboards commenting on the centennial of the 1889 Oklahoma land rush from which the “Sooner State” took its name; one had the text “Sooners run over Indian Nations, Apartheid?” with the word “Sooners” written backwards. In 1992, Heap of Birds recalled,

All of the state of Oklahoma is Indian Territory. They changed the treaties and took the land away and gave it to the settlers and that’s why they had the land run. So every April they have an incredible reenactment which goes throughout all the school system. All the grade school kids come to school and they have a little red wagon and they dress up like pioneers and they bring their sack lunch and they run across the school yard and put a stake in the ground and take away Indian land. . . . So I made a series of billboards that just try and turn the Sooners away and run them [in] the other direction . . . and just try to remark about this kind of practice of racism really. So we had the billboards up and then I made some t-shirts and then people started wearing them and then the day was coming when the city was going to have its big celebration, and then everyone said well let’s have a protest march, so we made more t-shirts and then people marched from the Native American Center in Oklahoma City to the State Capitol and had a forum on the steps of the Capitol and followed the path of the billboards, so it was a very, very positive kind of way to bring people together and focus people on this other part of the history.

You could call Heap of Birds’s works counter-monuments: they speak to excluded people of erased history; they revise, but they don’t reconcile or conciliate.

The gestures of conciliation and recognition are due elsewhere. Those fighting to deny recognition of the presence of Native Americans then and now and the atrocities suffered are cultural Custers, caught up in a doomed assault on truth, justice, and even awakening government bureaucrats. But the conflicts they stirred up are not yet over.
The Garden of Merging Paths

[1995]

You are in a maze of twisty little passages, all alike.
Screen text from the early computer game Adventure

Place your right (or left) hand on the right (or left)
wall of green, and doggedly keep it there, in and out of
dead ends, and you will finally get to the middle.
Julian Barnes, on hedge mazes

In 1989, I went to a demonstration at United Technologies in San Jose, a company
making fuel components for Trident II missiles, which carried nuclear warheads.
The corporate headquarters was nothing special, just another glass-walled box
with a Pizza Hut–style mansard roof, a parking lot full of late-model cars, and
nobody in sight but security guards. It was in a business subdivision so new that
much of the earth was still exposed, with raw compacted clay and gravel up to the
curving suburban sidewalks; and there was a fruit orchard just behind the offices,
where one of the protestors escaped when chased by a guard. This, the visible
landscape of military technology, was bland, closed-off, a mask. There were other
United Technologies landscapes. Some were even more invisible, or only poten-
tial: the military bases where the Trident missiles were stationed; the targets
they were intended for in this, the late rococo phase of the cold war; and the
workplaces where they were manufactured—we were at design and corporate
headquarters. (Nuclear weapons are traditionally pork-barreled all over the coun-
try, so that almost every state has an economic interest in their perpetuation and
no one is responsible for making weapons.)

Another United Technologies landscape was underground, that of the colos-
sal fuel plume which was (and is) leaking toward the reservoir that holds most of
San Jose’s drinking water. Although Silicon Valley’s industries are often thought of as clean for their lack of industrial-era smokestacks and other such visible emblems of poisons, they are full of such high-tech toxins in the workplace and in storage tanks leaching underground into the water table.

The most visible UT landscape at the time of our protest was an ostentatious show of American painting, mostly landscapes, from the Manoogian Collection in Detroit, underwritten by this corporation which was destroying so many landscapes out of sight. The works in this show at San Francisco’s M. H. de Young ranged from the Hudson River School of the 1830s to American impressionism at the turn of the century, mostly heroic and idyllic landscapes, images of glorious possibility and pleasant interlude. This was what UT chose as its public face.

Finding the landscape of Silicon Valley isn’t as easy as getting lost among the subdivisions and freeway exits and industrial parks. When Langdon Winner wrote a profile of Silicon Valley a few years ago, he reached for the Winchester Mystery House as its emblem. It’s an obvious one in a region whose other landmarks are scarce. The Stanford Linear Accelerator, cosponsored by the Atomic Energy Commission; Paramount’s Great America amusement park, with its Top Gun military flight simulator ride; Moffet Air Field; the off-limits Blue Cube missile control center next to Lockheed (officially called Onizuka Air Force Base after one of the Challenger’s victims); Mission Santa Clara—all contain something of the valley’s character as well, but Mrs. Winchester’s paranoiac maze in San Jose sums it up best.

Sarah Winchester moved west after she became the widow of the man whose repeating rifle was the definitive weapon in western expansion—“the gun that won the West.” Frightened of the souls of the Native Americans killed by the Winchester repeating rifle, she sought spiritual advice and was told that as long as her house was being built, she was safe—and the result is the 160-room chaos of architecture that has been a local tourist attraction since 1922. The house had no overall plan, so that doors and staircases lead nowhere, windows open onto rooms added later, architectural details clash, and floor levels and design scales are incon-
sistent. Workers were kept busy twenty-four hours a day so that construction was always in process. Perhaps the house can be seen as a mad monument to mechanized capitalism. In the words of Capital itself: “If machinery be the most powerful means for increasing the productiveness of labour—i.e., for shortening the working time required in the production of a commodity, it becomes in the hands of capital the most powerful means for lengthening the working-day beyond all bounds set by human nature. It creates on the one hand, new conditions by which capital is enabled to give free scope to this its constant tendency and on the other hand, new motives with which to whet capital’s appetite for the labour of others.”

The invisible counterweight to the elaborate uselessness of this monument to wealth and fear is the ruthless efficiency of the rifle that paid for it: between the two of them—military technology and diversionary folly—the valley might begin to be defined. The rifle’s pursuit of death in open, contestable space; the house’s sequestering from death and the dead in sequestered interior space. The implications of Mrs. Winchester’s acts are interesting: that guns do kill people; that technology does have a moral dimension; and that perhaps she could buy her way out of the implications, fend off the spirit world with unending consumption, build a literal nowhere in which she could become lost to the spirit world.

What other stories can provide a thread through the labyrinths of Silicon Valley? The problem of understanding it seems to be the inadequacy of its stories and images. There’s the arcadian story, of paradise lately become limbo, of the world’s greatest prune orchard paved over to become the world’s greatest technology center; and there’s the utopian one, of the glorious future opened up by technology, the old Crystal Palace—World’s Fair rhetoric, which has become less credible for most people about most technologies. The two stories have some interesting things in common. The arcadian nostalgia of Wendell Berry or Jerry Mander has its counterpart in the feckless utopian enthusiasm of the Wired and Mondo 2000 consumers for a brave new world of cyberspace and techno-wonders. Mander’s In the Absence of the Sacred is among the most recent attempts to assess technological progress, but the book bogs down in a refusal to engage social issues (as well as
in a romanticization of his own early years, in which the Great Depression becomes Edenic). Technology becomes an inevitable march toward consolidation, control, ecocide—a kind of Big Brother Godzilla. By making technology autonomous, rather than literally and historically a tool of power, Mander avoids most questions about the social forces that control the development and use of machines and the social changes that might detour us from the current trajectory. What begins as a radical critique ends as a refusal to engage the powers that be. In this, Mander is not much different from the more widespread enthusiasts for the new technologies, who also imagine technology as autonomous and also leave out any social analysis, except for happy projections of empowerment through information access. Both these arcadian and utopian analyses insist on a straight line, backward or forward toward the good; but in a maze, straight is the quickest route to immobility, and the route may call for lateral moves, shifting perspectives.

The maze becomes an inevitable metaphor for the moral tangles of technologies and social change; for the equivocal gains and losses; for arguments that can only lead deeper in, not outside the problem; for the impossibility of plunging straight forward or backing out altogether—that is, for simply embracing or rejecting the technologies and the visions of futures that accompany them. And the maze’s image is echoed in the circuit boards and silicon chips, in the suburban sprawls of curving residential streets and industrial parks, of centerless towns that melt into each other, in the limited choices of computer games, perhaps in the rhetoric of technological progress that avoids social and teleological questions. Silicon Valley itself is an excellent check on the technophiles’ enthusiasm, since the joyous liberation of the new technologies is so hard to find here, in a place known for its marathon work schedules, gridlock traffic, Superfund sites (twenty-nine, the greatest concentration of hazardous waste sites in the nation), divorce rate, drug consumption, episodes of violence, and lack of corporate philanthropy and organized labor.

Certainly the orderly grid of fruit trees is more appealing than the jumble of mismatched corporations and assembly sheds, and certainly the most familiar story
about California, even about America, is of a paradise that fell sometime not long ago, the story Mander tells. But the paradise of the orchards is partial at best: they are themselves workplaces for immigrant and migrant laborers, whose poor working conditions and exposure to pesticides foreshadowed the sweatshops of microchip manufacture. And the first of these fruit trees came with the Spanish missionaries in 1777, who established Mission Santa Clara as a slave labor camp for the Ohlone and nearby indigenous people. (Santa Clara County is named after the mission and includes San Jose and the southern half of Silicon Valley; the northern half extends up along the San Francisco peninsula into San Mateo County. The term valley is something of a misnomer for this sprawl.)

When the missionaries came on their double mission for salvation and empire, the whole peninsula was a vast expanse of live oaks maintained by the Ohlone. As the explorer Sir George Vancouver wrote after a visit in 1792, “For almost twenty miles it could be compared to a park which had originally been planted with the true old English oak, the underwood . . . had the appearance of having been cleared away and had left the stately lords of the forest in complete possession of the soil, which was covered with luxuriant herbage and beautifully diversified with pleasing eminences and valleys.” The planting of the orchards represents a reduction of a complex ecology into the monocultural grid of modern agriculture, and the transformation of a complex symbiosis with the land into the simpler piecework of agricultural labor for surplus and export. It may be that the orchards even have something in common with the Winchester repeating rifle as symbols of frontiers of conquest and rules of order. But they also represent sustenance and continuity, two things hard to condemn out of hand, and I have been told that the sight of the valley in bloom was exquisite.

By the 1820s, the slave population—which included members of tribes from farther away as well as locals—had begun to escape, raid their former prison, and liberate their comrades. One successful raider, Yoscolo, carried out many such missions until he was caught; his head was nailed to a post near the church as a disincentive to the remaining workers. This is the not very edifying early history of European civilization in Silicon Valley, and the anticolonial raiders here have their successors in contemporary Vietnamese gangs who steal vast quantities of
silicon chips for the gray and black markets. Perhaps the missions, too, are prototypes of Silicon Valley, of information colonization. The neophytes, as the mission captives were called, were required to memorize and recite long lists of saints, prayers, and so forth, which they were unlikely to have understood; salvation was a matter of having the right information.

In between the missions and the corporations, a golden age is hard to find and a fall is hard to postulate. Leland Stanford, one of the Big Four railroad barons whose government-subsidized rail monopoly made him a millionaire many times over, founded Stanford University in 1885 as a memorial to his dead son. The photographer Eadweard Muybridge invented high-speed stop-action photography here in 1877, often considered the crucial precursor of motion pictures, to confirm Stanford’s belief that all a horse’s feet were off the ground simultaneously at some point during a gallop. Around that time, the Bing cherry was bred here by Seth Lewelling, who named it after his Chinese cook—according to legend, in lieu of back wages. (It’s worth remembering that the Silicon Valley region is now also a capital of genetic engineering, with giant Genentech headquartered in South San Francisco and Stanford University again deeply involved.)

Technological innovations continued in the region, including Philo T. Farnsworth’s invention of the iconoscope tube, a crucial TV component, in the 1920s, when the valley had nearly 125,000 acres in orchards; Charles Litton’s San Carlos labs, which did war work, laser research, and more; and the refinement of magnetic tape recording technology for Ampex and ABC soon after World War II. Moffet Air Field opened up in the 1930s and was for sixty years an important aviation research center. Silicon Valley environmentalist Ted Smith calls the place the greatest concentration of military-industrial sites in the country. Later, Stanford University became an ally of the electronics industry in much the way that nearby UC Berkeley took on nuclear weapons research and lab management; Stanford Research Park was built on university land in the early fifties as Stanford Industrial Park. Stanford electronics engineering students William Hewlett and David Packard invented the audio oscillator in 1938 and sold their first ones to Walt Disney for Fantasia. Long before Robert Noyce invented the integrated
circuit—the silicon chip that gave the valley its name—military technology and entertainment technology were already aligned on parallel paths.

In 1958, the Santa Clara planning department published a report that jumbled its metaphors interestingly: “Santa Clara County is fighting a holding action in the cause of agricultural land reserves. We are a wagon train, besieged by the whooping Indians of urbanization, and waiting prayerfully for the US Cavalry.” The cavalry had already arrived, in the form of defense contracts that supported much of the research and development in the technology field, a connection that doesn’t fit with the image of the independent inventor or with the images of the planning department. The fruit orchards of Santa Clara, like the citrus groves of Orange County and the San Fernando Valley, are vestiges of a cleaner environment and lower property values. In a place such as Cupertino, with land prices up to a million dollars an acre, hanging onto farmland is difficult (though some farmers became wealthy enough by selling some of their land to cultivate the rest of it for pleasure). By the 1980s, more than four-fifths of the agricultural land had become industrial or suburban space, and only 8,000 acres of orchard stood, much of it between office buildings and clearly doomed. The peninsula and San Jose were developed with little more foresight than Mrs. Winchester’s house.

In this, Silicon Valley is not unique but typical in contemporary America, a decentralized, diffused region: postindustrial, postcommunal, postrural, and posturban—postplace, but for the undeveloped western slopes and the undevelopable bay. As Langdon Winner writes, “Perhaps the most significant, enduring accomplishment of Silicon Valley is to have transcended itself, and fostered the creation of an ethereal reality, which exercises increasing influence over embodied, spatially bound varieties of social life. Here decisions are made and actions taken in ways that eliminate the need for physical presence in any particular place. Knowing where a person, building, neighborhood, town, or city is located no longer provides a reliable guide to understanding human relationships and institutions.” As much as specific products—for the military, for business, and for entertainment,
whatever that is—Silicon Valley seems to have generated prototypes of a more pervasive American future, one of dislocation. It has no center; rather than being a city radiating bedroom communities, which generates a coherent commute, it consists of myriad clusters of industry and housing, with commuters jamming in all directions at the beginning and end of every workday. As we discovered at protests there, Silicon Valley lacks centers that can function as social or political arenas.

I went to another demonstration at Lockheed Missiles and Space Corporation, the region’s biggest employer and the prime contractor for Trident missiles, where there were no sidewalks, no focal points, no public spaces. In some sense, protest and community had been designed out of the place, and the workspace too had been suburbanized. Interestingly, many of the Silicon Valley corporations are based on “campuses,” attractive, diffused, pseudodemocratic spaces that belie the traditional corporate structure within most of them, a design that originated with the not very parklike Xerox PARC. Diffuseness seems to have become an irreversible condition, in which both the consciousness and the place for consolidating individuals, for community, are virtually impossible. Suburbia represents an early triumph of such diffusion, and the new technologies often seem to further it. Suburbia is a landscape of privatized space, of the division of home from work, with the scenes of production both industrial and agricultural (and now informational) separated from those of consumption, a sequestering that has progressed with the shift from the public space of shopping streets to the private space of shopping malls.

There is the decentralization of anarchist direct democracy, in which power is everywhere; and the decentralization of postmodern control, in which power is transnational, virtual, in a gated community, not available at this time, in a holding company, incomprehensible, incognito—in a word, nowhere. Mrs. Winchester’s house is also a maze whose center was nowhere, and here it is important to distinguish types of mazes as well. The original myth of a maze centers on the one Daedalus built at Crete to hide the monstrous result of Queen Pasiphaë’s union with a bull, the Minotaur. Later mazes, such as those on the floors of many medieval churches, symbolically compress and reconstitute pilgrimage, and the
maze functions not as a tangle in which to lose things but a mandala in which to find them (the artist Paul Windsor recently mocked this tradition with a giant sand painting at the San Francisco Art Commission Gallery, which merged Tibetan and Hopi mandalas with the microchip). These mazes often have only one route to the center. The maze at Crete and that of the Mystery House apparently have no center; as such, they are types of the new landscape of the suburb, the multinational, the subcontracted and subdivided, the faces of nowhere, in which it is impossible to get found.

Here it is important to distinguish the actual tools generated in Silicon Valley and its sister sites from the visions of their implementation. Computers and the information they manipulate are the means to many ends; in one of these, they are an end in themselves. In its most dematerialized state, Silicon Valley is a blueprint for a future: in this future, outside has disappeared, the maze has no exit. The world of information and communication online, much hailed as a technological advance, is also a social retreat accompanying a loss of the public and social space of the cities; a loss of the aesthetic, sensual, and nonhuman space of the country; a privatization of physical space; and a disembodiment of daily life. A central appeal cited for the new technologies is that their users will no longer have to leave home, and paeans accumulate lauding the convenience of being able to access libraries and entertainments via personal computers, which become less tools of engenderment than channels of consumption. This vision of disembodied anchorites connected to the world only by information and entertainment, mediated by the entities that control the flow, seems more nightmarish than idyllic. Postulated as a solution to gridlock, crime on the streets, the chronic sense of time’s scarcity, it seems instead a means to avoid addressing such problems, a form of acquiescence.

There is another maze, another landscape, that has bearing on the tangle of Silicon Valley. The multimedia mazes resemble the maze of Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths,” in which a Chinese assassin finds out the secret of his ancestor’s chaotic novel and missing maze—the two are one.
Ts’ui Pen must have said once: I am withdrawing to write a book. And another time: I am withdrawing to construct a labyrinth. Every one imagined two works; to no one did it occur that the book and the maze were one and the same thing. Almost instantly I understood: “the garden of forking paths” was the chaotic novel; the phrase “the various futures (not to all)” suggested to me the forking in time, not in space. . . . In the work of Ts’ui Pen, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forking.

An extensive but finite number of forks can be represented on an interactive CD or laser disc, but they do not reproduce life, in which the unimaginable is often what comes next. The greatest tragedy of the new technologies may be their elimination of the incalculable—the coincidences and provocations and metaphors that in some literal sense “take us out of ourselves” and put us in relation to other things. To live inside a mechanical world is to live inside plotted possibility, what has already been imagined; and so the technologies that are supposed to open up the future instead narrow it. I am not arguing for existentialist freedom with this difference between inside and outside, only for an unquantifiable number of paths in the latter, a too predictable course in the former.

Much recent attention to the use of interactive media proposes that it makes passive viewing become active engagement. What is interesting about these products is that they map out a number of choices, but the choices are all preselected (and, with the rare exception of work by artists such as Lynn Hershman, the choices have little to do with meaningful decisions). That is, the user cannot do anything, go anywhere the creator has not gone before; as usual with computer programs, one must stay on the path and off the grass (by which analogy hackers do get off the path, a subversive success that keeps them in the park). We could chart the game as a series of forks in the road, in which each choice sets up another array of choices, but the sum total of choices have already been made. Thus, the audience becomes the user, a figure who resembles a rat in a conceptual version of a laboratory maze. The audience-user is not literally passive; he or she is engaged in making choices, but the choices do not necessarily represent freedom, nor this activity thinking. Participating is reduced to consuming. The ur-game, Pac-Man,
made this apparent: the sole purpose of the Pac-Man icon, a disembodied head-mouth, was to devour what was in its path as it proceeded through a visible maze.

Perhaps what is most interesting about this form of interactivity is its resemblance to so many existing corridors of American life, in which a great many choices can be made, but all are ultimately choices to consume rather than to produce. About a decade ago, the 7–11 chain of convenience stores ran a series of television ads whose key phrase was, “Freedom of choice is what America is all about.” The ads echoed a pervasive tendency in the culture to reduce freedom to the freedom to choose from a number of products, to the scope of the consumer’s ability to consume. Perhaps it is not surprising that consumption should become the metaphor for democracy in a country that has long had little but representative democracy: that is, the ballot too is a kind of Garden of Forking Paths and not an open plain on which to roam and encounter. By the time the political process has reached the voting booth, all the real choices have been programmed in, and the voter becomes a consumer. Few genuine choices remain, and the act of voting becomes the act of acquiescence, an endorsement of the maze as an open field. The laboratory maze through which the rat moves is one metaphor for it. Another is supplied by the critic Norman M. Klein in an Art Issues article on virtual reality: “VR is reverse Calvinism—predestination posing as free will. In that sense, VR may be as old as the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a new consumerist form of metaphysical redemption.”

The real landscape of Silicon Valley seems wholly interior, not only in the metaphor of the maze and the terrain of offices and suburbs but also in the much promoted ideal of the user never leaving a well-wired home and in the goal of eliminating the world and reconstituting it as information. Again, what disappears here is the incalculable, this time as the world of the sensory and sensual, with all the surprises and dangers that accompany it. In all the hymns to information, little is said about the nature of that information or the ability to use it; one pictures the empty trucks of metaphor hurtling down that information highway. Thinking
is an aesthetic occupation, a matter of perceiving relationships and resemblances between things on many levels that defeat computerization because they are aesthetic, not rationalistic; the sensual world is necessary to it as grounding and inspiration, and as parallel. Computers can reason, but they will never really imagine, because the incalculable of the body is forever beyond them, though it may be simulated with increasing complexity—toward what end?

Understanding works largely by means of metaphors and analogies—the incalculable relationships between bits of information—and the way those metaphors and analogies are drawn from the nonconstructed world. The most obvious examples are expressions: stubborn as a mule, dumb as two sticks, pigheaded, dog breath, pussy, cock, cuckoo, horse sense, drones, worms, snakes in the grass, aping the gentry, bovine, donkey’s years. There are also shared (but fading) fables: the ant and the grasshopper, the tortoise and the hare, the dog in the manger, and a million coyote stories, which provide animal analogies for human dispositions, moralities, and fates. The microcosmic macrocosmic metaphors are particularly important, and they’re most immediately obvious in geography metaphors: the foot of a mountain, the bowels of the earth, a river’s mouth, the heart of the forest, tree limbs, even the soft shoulders of roads. (For a minor example, in Tristes Tropiques, Claude Lévi-Strauss compares speaking of his research to an unreceptive audience to dropping stones down a well, an analogy few would be likely to make nowadays.) The majority of figures of speech that make the abstract concrete and the abstruse imaginable are drawn from animals and organic spaces. It’s the animal world that makes being human imaginable, and the spatial realm that makes activity and achievement describable—career plateaus, rough spots, marshy areas. And it’s the image of the maze that’s gotten me through all the aspects of Silicon Valley I’ve approached thus far, and the approach to a specific landscape in California that’s made it possible to articulate some effects.

Computers are significant for their lack of metaphor: their processes don’t resemble organic processes, and only the crudest analogies can be drawn. Instead, they provide imaginatively sterile terms that are projected back onto organic life; we can be made to resemble them more easily than they can be made to resemble us. (It’s interesting that another machine-age invention, the superhighway, was
used as the metaphor for information circulation systems and even more interesting that the information highway already has “gridlock.” I wonder if generations of being without contact with such undeveloped spaces and nonhuman beings will eventually diminish English into a kind of blanked-out newspeak, a machine language, which has already appeared as the shorthand on networks, the disembodied platitudes of electoral politics, and the starkly denatured language of inner-city rap with its license-plate number-letter combos, police codes, and so on.

All those metaphors are ways of navigating the way things span both difference and similarity; without metaphor, the world would seem threateningly amorphous, both identical with ourselves and utterly incomprehensible. The anthropological theorist Paul Shepard writes, “Humans intuitively see analogies between the concrete world out there and their own inner world. If they conceive the former as a chaos of anarchic forces or as dead and frozen, then so will they perceive their own bodies and society; so will they think and act on that assumption and vindicate their own ideas by altering the world to fit them.” The loss of a relationship to the nonconstructed world is a loss of these metaphors. It is also loss of the larger territory of the senses, a vast and irreplaceable loss of pleasure and meaning.

Finally, even nowhere has its twin: everywhere. Silicon Valley has become a nowhere in the terms I have tried to lay out—an obliteration of place, an ultimate suburb, a maze in which wars are designed, diversions are generated, the individual disembodied. But the physical landscape of Silicon Valley is now everywhere, not only in the attempts to clone its success but in the spread of its products and its waste throughout the globe, the outside world being ravaged by the retreat to the interior.

If you imagine a computer not as an autonomous object but as a trail of processes and effects and residues, which leave their traces across a global environmental maze, then it is already everywhere. The clean rooms in which poorly paid chip makers were exposed to toxic chemicals are now subcontracted out in the Southwest, Oregon, and the third world, so there’s a little of the valley there. The waste that was leaching through the once fecund earth of Silicon Valley is leach-
ing still, and more of it is leaching around the globe. Some of the chemicals used to
clean the chips have been peculiarly potent ozone-depleters (though most Silicon
Valley firms have switched over to other compounds), so think of the upper atmos-
phere too; and the landfill where the packing and shipping material goes; and the
electrical generating station your computer is plugged into and its energy sources
(coal, hydropower, nuclear, geothermal, natural gas?); think of the networks it
may be hooked into; think of the corporations whose pockets it lined—but don’t
picture pockets, the money is in imageless cyberspace—and the stock markets
where their shares are traded; think of the forests the manuals are printed on;
think of the store that sold it; think of where it’ll be dumped when it’s rendered
obsolete, as all computers have been.

These are the tentacles, the winding corridors, the farthest reaches of Silicon
Valley, and the hardest to imagine. It is the scene of the crime that has vaporized,
and resisting an unlocatable and unimaginable crime is difficult. One of the princi-
pal challenges for environmentalists is making devastation that is subtle and re-
mote seem urgent to people with less vivid imaginations. Another is finding a site
at which to protest (which is why Greenpeace has largely relocated from actual
sites to wherever the media can be found). And the ultimate problem of the land-
scape of Silicon Valley in its most abstruse, penetrating, and symbolic forms is that
it is unimaginable.

Apple Computer, which is headquartered in six buildings, indistinguishable
but for their security levels, on Infinity Loop in Cupertino, is a key landscape for
Silicon Valley, one that apparently displaced real orchards. When I was there, the
Olson orchard across Highway 280 in Sunnyvale was selling Bing and Queen
Anne cherries, and Latino workers were cutting up apricots to dry. But a third of
the orchard was bulldozed this past spring [1994] for housing, and the rest of the
Olson orchard is on its way out. What does it mean, this rainbow-colored apple
with the bite taken out of it, which appears everywhere on Apple computers and
on the many commodities (mugs, key rings, t-shirts) Apple markets, this emblem
that seems to sum up the Santa Clara Valley’s change from agriculture to technol-
ogy? It seems to have been appropriated to connote simplicity and wholesomen-
ness, though apples aren’t rainbow colored in anything but the sloppiest associa-
tion of positive emblems; and the bite also recalls temptation in Eden: the emblem is denatured, reassuring, and threatening all at once. But more than that, it is forgettable, dead in the imagination, part of nowhere—it has been a decade since I last pondered the Apple logo, which has become part of a landscape of disassociation in which the apple image connotes neither sustenance nor metaphor, only a consumer choice, the fruit of the tree of information at the center of the garden of merging paths.