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Journey to the Center of the World: Memory and the Sacred in the Colorado Desert

> *Place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocational envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against an unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, or undefined freedom…a yearning for a place is a decision to enter history with an identifiable people in an identifiable pilgrimage.*[1]

Preamble on the Desert

Desert terrain comprises approximately one third of the earth's land mass, appearing on every continent across the globe. Despite this geographic prevalence, in a typical World History course, desert regions are commonly reduced to playing a recurring role as barrier or just blank space. In discussions of the Silk Road, for example, students may hear of the Gobi and Taklamakan Deserts (along with the Bactrian Camel) on one side of Eurasia, and the Syrian and Arabian Deserts on the other (along with Dromedary Camel), but their pedagogical significance, if any, tends toward descriptions of perseverance and endurance.[2] The Arabian Desert provides an exception, since, in this case, a desert-oriented people unleashed a cultural and political tidal wave, which no World History course could ignore. Although tracing the significance of trade and empire in the World History class inevitably brings desert into view, nevertheless, engagement with that particular geographic dimension of the conversation is often marginalized.

Such marginalization can be offset when we take up the theme of environmental adaptation, a fascinating avenue of inquiry in World History that requires

interdisciplinarity, as we consider how diverse communities and cultures lived in desert environments, from the Tuareg of the Sahara to the Tohono O'odham of the Sonoran and the Pintupi of the Gibson. For such indigenous peoples, the desert is not barrier or blank space, it is home. By including in our assigned readings the voices and traditions of desert peoples themselves, we encounter their own sense of centrality in their socio-environmental and cosmological understanding, from creation narratives to ritual practices through which the spiritual and physical, the divine and human intersect in the desert. This sense of place clashes with the perception of visitors, imperial agents, settlers, and perhaps with those in the World History course itself.

In this essay, I focus on a single location, the Colorado Desert of Southern California. My goal is a simple one: to consider the region with this notion of *place* and *centrality* in mind, using an interdisciplinary lens. Yet, the focus on this one place opens a plethora of connections beyond. By diving deeply, we find this desert replete with themes of universal significance, where past and present, local and global, sacred and profane, all intersect. While a forthcoming study expands this conversation into an even more expansive and comparative inter-regional dialogue, before that, however, we must first understand the place itself. [3]

At Mecca and Felicity

In late 2022, I went on a desert pilgrimage of inquiry. I recall driving southbound and passing Mecca in mid-morning, the sea visible in the distance. After some time, I crossed massive sand dunes, which are, for many, the quintessential image of desert, even though most desert terrain does not look like that. Eventually, I reached my destination: a 21-foot-high granite pyramid. This pyramid is not in Egypt, nor Sudan. Considering that this article is in a volume on the American West, one might at first imagine Las Vegas in the Mojave Desert, expecting what follows to address capitalism and labor, migration and human rights, consumerism, cultural appropriation, environmental disruption, or still other avenues of approach. But I am not in the Mojave, and those are not my *primary* topics, though all of these do make their appearances. I arrived at this place to experience what the site asserts itself to be. I entered the pyramid and stood over a bronze marker declaring that this was "The Official Center of the World."

This "Official Center of the World" is in the Colorado Desert in the town of Felicity in Imperial County, the most southeastern portion of California. The spot is just north of the US-Mexican border, slightly west of the Colorado River. It is a geographical "blip" ignored by the thousands of vehicles speeding by on Interstate 8, which links the desert with San Diego to the west and the greater Phoenix to the east. Felicity is equally ignored in courses on US and World History. Yet, there I was, standing over a bronze marker inside a pyramid making a claim of centrality. As confirmation of my achievement, I received a certificate recording the event; it was documented.

My trip to Felicity was part of an experiential reflection on *place* and the meanings attributed to it, including traditions of "the sacred," which memorialize the desert as a *locus* of the holy.[4] Holiness, then, is connected to notions of value, significance, and centrality. As I drove, I pondered a series of questions: Why is a place deemed significant? What are the values at play and whose are they? Who must remember and how is this memory perpetuated?

In examining the American desert, I draw on the work of insightful scholars, writers, and cultural guides.[5] This region has attracted much attention, though their collective work pales in comparison to that produced by writers of mountains, green spaces, and the waterways of the American landscape. As scholar Traci Brynne Voyles has noted: "Environmental histories of the western deserts, taking up scanty space on library shelves as compared to the grading watch of their water counterparts, focus on the ways in which non-indigenous people in the West have encountered deserts." In response to the "problem" of deserts, she continues, "settlers avoid them, cross them, die in them, fear them, irrigate them, urbanize them, and sometimes inadvertently create them…" With their central view being that "arid lands symbolize waste — wasted lands, wasted space, wasted lives." [6]

Colorado Desert – Introduction

The Colorado Desert is the westernmost portion of the larger Sonoran Desert, spanning portions of Southern California and Arizona, and Northern Mexico, in Sonora and the Baja peninsula. For this article, I refer to the California portion of the Sonoran Desert, the desert west of the Colorado River, which separates California from Arizona. The Colorado Desert lacks the large and iconic Saguaro cacti, which add to the distinct look of the Sonoran Desert of Arizona and Mexico. Likewise, California's celebrated Joshua Trees are also absent. These are found in the Mojave Desert directly to the north. In fact, the desert's northern boundary is Joshua Tree National Park, where the Colorado yields to higher elevation of the Mojave; a change one can see while travelling through the landscape at Joshua Tree.

Without Saguaro or Joshua Trees, the Colorado Desert is dominated by the modest and ubiquitous Creosote bush. Creosote has a wider range than any other plant in California. It is the "champion" of the desert, with a higher tolerance for drought than any other plant.[7] Augmenting the Creosote are other shrubs, such as Burro, Brittlebush, and Sage, and a variety of succulents, including Yucca, Desert Agave, and the stunning Ocotillo, each armed and armored to protect itself against desert threats. The region's cacti include Cholla, Barrel, Beavertail, Hedgehog, and Prickly Pear, all lying close to the ground.[8] These shrubs and cacti (though not the succulents) would reach only to the "knee" of a typical Saguaro or Joshua Tree. These sprawl across the desert landscape, except where sand dunes or badlands prevent even their hardy presence. Sprinkled here and there, where groundwater can sustain them, are trees: Smoke, Ironwood, Palo

Verde, Mesquite, and where there is a spring, California Fan Palms.[9] The latter are native to the region in contrast to the thin, non-native palms that have become synonymous with California's coastal cities. All of these trees make a critical contribution to the desert ecosystem and to the cultures that have called this region home. The abundance of flora offered food sources for peoples who understood the environment and its potential for sustaining life.[10]

The Colorado Desert is the least heralded of the American West.[11] Visitor centers are replete with postcards showcasing Saguaro and Joshua Trees, not so with Creosote and Prickly Pear. Moreover, the Colorado Desert has no Death Valley, no national parks. And there is no Las Vegas, no Phoenix; there is no metropolis at all. Case in point: In journalist Ben Ehrenreich's *Desert Notebooks. A Road Map for the End of Time* (2020), he grapples existentially with the state of the world, from Climate Change and contemporary politics to indigenous history and culture, while in the Mojave of Joshua Tree and Las Vegas; he never makes it to the Colorado Desert.[12]

This region is sparsely populated. Imperial County has roughly 180,000 residents compared to its geographically smaller neighbor, San Diego County, which has more than three million. Imperial County is also under-resourced, with employment, education rates, and per-capita income among the lowest in the state. The region is depressed too, that is, it is at lower elevation than surrounding areas. The Colorado Desert is low desert in contrast to the high desert of the Mojave and Great Basin. El Centro, Imperial County's seat and largest city, with fewer than 50,000 people, has an elevation lower than 40 feet *below* sea level. The lowest point in the region is a vast area known as the Salton Trough, which bottoms out around 270 feet below sea level. This depression in the desert, a Cahuilla myth explained, was formed when the creators Mukat and Témayawet pulled the land upward to make a bowl in the desert into which water could flow.[13] At the start of the twentieth century this bowl filled up with water from the Colorado River and exists now as the Salton Sea (discussed below), a distinct feature of, as well as problem for, the region.

Colorado Desert – and River

This water in the desert reflects the region's long-standing relationship with the Colorado River. The relationship is tumultuous, affected by seasonal changes in the river's flow as water rushes down its 1400-mile course, from the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of California, carrying varying volumes of water and silt. The river is also affected by the region's seismic activity. The Colorado Desert experiences the tensions of plate tectonics, caught between the Pacific and North American Plates, with the San Andreas, San Jacinto, and Imperial Faults all within its spatial reality. The desert's topography bears witness in its mountains, fault scarps, mud pots, steam vents, pumice and obsidian domes, *etc.*; it is a geologist's playground.[14] Seismic activity is another reason for the periodic changes in the course of the Colorado River, which has, over the

millennia, unleashed its waters upon the desert, flowing downhill and filling the Salton Trough.

Prior to the twentieth century, the most recent manifestation of this natural union between river and desert formed what is referred to today as Lake Cahuilla, an inland body of water more than 100 miles in length and 30 miles wide; this was six times the size of the existing Salton Sea. Yet, by the late eighteenth century, when Spanish commander Juan Bautista de Anza passed through the Colorado Desert, the region was entirely dry, with no trace of surface water. In the following century, geologist W.P. Blake, working for the Pacific Railroad Survey Expedition, recognized a distinct "bathtub ring" on the side of the Santa Rosa Mountains, two hundred feet off the desert floor, which had been left by the evaporated sea. This was the first Western recognition that the region once had water. This was not, however, the first recognition. The Cahuilla, the area's indigenous residents, had never forgotten its existence. When Blake inquired, a Cahuilla elder drew upon sacred tradition to provide an account of its appearance and dissipation. It had never left Cahuilla awareness. The Cahuilla also pointed to the fertility of the soil, sharing that Coyote descended from the nearby mountains to plant Mesquite beans where the water had once been.[15] While it existed, Lake Cahuilla provided a food source – fish and clams, which explains why one finds rows of stone fish traps (each 10 – 15 feet across) and fossilized marine life in the middle of the Colorado Desert. The lake also became a natural stopping point for billions of birds annually migrating along the Pacific Flyway, which, in turn, provided additional food sources for the Cahuilla in the north and Kumeyaay people in the south. Today, the much smaller Salton Sea continues to provide a stopover, though there are fewer birds now, and the water's toxicity often poisons them.[16]

Colorado Desert - Sacred Mountains and State Park

The "water-stained" Santa Rosa Mountains along with the Chocolate Mountains to the east are within the boundary of the desert, which comes to a halt at other mountain ranges: the Laguna Mountains in the west, named after the water found there; the Orocopia and Chuckwalla in the northeast, named after distinctive aspects of their flora and fauna, respectively; and the San Jacinto and San Bernardino Mountains in the northwest.[17] Focusing on these last ranges: *San Jacinto* (Hyacinth), *San Bernardino*, as well as the earlier mentioned *Santa Rosa,* these testify to the projection of a new sacred tradition onto the region's existing ones. Saint Hyacinth was a thirteenth-century Dominican monk from Poland; Saint Bernardino, a fifteenth-century Italian Franciscan; and Saint Rose of Lima, a seventeenth-century nun from Peru. The region's peaks have loomed over the desert for ages, but on maps and road signs and under hikers' feet, they have become tangible embodiments of *these* sacred names, integrating the landscape into another world view and value system, and marginalizing a previously prevailing (and still extant) cultural understanding.

In a most extreme example of *new* values, desert areas in this sparsely inhabited region serve as sites for military testing. Much land in the Colorado Desert remains closed to the public, as in the sprawling Chocolate Mountain Gunnery Range (virtually all of the Chocolate Mountains) and in the US Navy Gunnery Range west of El Centro. In a similar way, there is the Carrizo Impact Area, which is within the borders of Anza Borrego Desert State Park. These areas forbid public access, including the section within Anza Borrego, due to unexploded ordnances from the era of World War II and the Korean War.

Anza Borrego Desert State Park encompasses 650,000 acres of the western Colorado Desert, and is the largest state park west of the Mississippi River.[18] Its name reflects the area's human and natural history. The first part, "Anza," points to the eighteenth-century Spanish commander and explorer Juan Bautista de Anza who traversed the region, and the second, "Borrego," to the endangered Big Horn Sheep for which the park provides sanctuary.[19] The park itself is an expression of values, through which California seeks "to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation."[20] Park visitors experience a wide range of activities in this vast domain— hiking, camping, horseback riding, encountering the flora and fauna, as well utilizing off-road vehicles, which has created a problem for the preservation of endangered flora, fauna, and cultural sites, which the State Park Service's mission calls it to protect.

Beyond the park there is a vast amount of land under federal management, mostly by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which provides as much additional protected space as is under the watch of the State Park Service. Established in 1946, the BLM expresses its mission as: "To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations."[21] The BLM manages the Santa Rosa, Orocopia, and Chuckwalla Mountains Wilderness areas in the northern Colorado Desert; the Jacumba Wilderness in the south; Indian Peak, Pichaco Peak Wilderness, and Palo Verde Mountains in the east; the Coyote Mountains, Fishcreek, and North Algodones Dunes Wilderness in the center; and Carrizo Gorge and Sawtooth Mountains Wilderness in the west. This list is not exhaustive. Finally, there are areas designated for Offroad Recreational Vehicle (ORV) use throughout the desert, as at the 85,000-acre Ocotillo Wells Recreation Vehicle Area operated by the California State Parks Service and at the 26,000 acre the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreational Area under the care of the BLM. Unfortunately, recreational vehicle use outside of such designated areas has adversely impacted efforts to preserve the natural and cultural resources of the region (discussed below).

Colorado Desert - Agriculture, Extraction, and Waste

There are two major agricultural zones in the Colorado Desert: the Coachella valley in the north and the Imperial Valley in the south, with the Salton Sea between them. Both are made possible by massive irrigation systems that link the desert to the Colorado River through a series of canals, starting with the 80-mile All American, operated by the Imperial Irrigation District. This canal feeds the Coachella, East Highline, Westside Main, and other canals that serve the needs of these valleys. This irrigated water makes the desert bloom. In this light, for the newcomers, the desert became valuable by what it could be made to produce. This aligns with a larger pattern in the Western tradition, which has viewed desert as wasteland in contrast to the productive land of "civilization." This view positioned the former as cursed and the latter as blessed. Desert was of value only through irrigation or extraction for what it could provide "civilization." This cultural view was significantly challenged in the past century, but it has not been entirely displaced.[22]

Desert extraction remains active. The Colorado Desert is an extremely valuable site for mining. Its mines provide, among other minerals, manganese, tungsten, copper, silver, and gold (the region has one of the largest gold mines in the nation). It is also witness to the current scramble for the twenty-first century's "new gold:" lithium.[23] The Colorado Desert furnishes the largest lithium mining site in North America. Another commodity for extraction is energy, which the desert offers in the form of solar power and wind turbine farms.

Apart from this concrete, commoditized, quantifiable value of resources in the desert, there is a lingering view of the desert as "wasteland." As such, it has served as an expedient place for the discarded. The region is home to garbage sites for the waste of coastal cities, which is dumped into vast desert cavities. Finally, there is a disconcerting parallel, but on a human level, where the desert serves as home to those who have been cast off in a different sense. There are no fewer than seven prisons and other centers of detention in the Colorado Desert.

Colorado Desert - Indigenous Peoples

Before any of this, however, before cities and irrigation projects, off-road vehicles and parks, prisons and mines, there were people living in the desert. The Colorado Desert has a dynamic indigenous past and present, for whom this place is central, without any urge to change, reclaim, or transform it from what it is. For the Quechan, Cocopah, Kumeyaay, Luiseño, Cupueño, and the Cahuilla, this region was home, at least in part.[24] And these indigenous communities were not isolated. There were paths and trade networks that made contact possible across the desert. Cahuilla historian Katherine Siva Saubel noted that "Everywhere their trails crisscrossed the terrain they traveled on, where the Indians would meet each other." And in these encounters, "people sang their

shared histories and relationships with local ecosystems in the form of Bird Songs. Sung over a period of four days with a driving, syncopating rhythm at invited listens to dance along with the singers' voices..."[25] These tracks were turned into wagon roads and eventually railroad lines (Blake was on a survey expedition), which was part of the collective dislocation brought about by the settler-colonial transformation of the region.

Colorado Desert - Official Center of the World

Having completed this brief desert overview above, let's return to Felicity. The town's only residents are its founders: Jacques-Andre Istel and his wife, Felicia, after whom the town is named. Istel was born in France, emigrated to the United States, graduated from Princeton, and served as a U.S. Marine aviator during the Korean War. Upon discharge, he combined a lucrative career in the finance industry with a passion for parachuting, which he helped to popularize as a recreational activity in the United States. In 1985, he wrote a children's book entitled *Coe, the Good Dragon at the Center of the World*, and announced that he had located that center in the Colorado Desert, where he and his wife established Felicity. They petitioned the Imperial County Board of Supervisors to grant recognition of the "The Official Center of the World," which was duly recognized on May 21, 1985.[26]

In addition to the pyramid, the town offers the Museum of History in Granite, whose mission is to leave a permanent record of "the collective memory of humanity" so that "distant descendants, perhaps far from planet Earth, may view our history with understanding and, hopefully, with affection." The history is etched on granite panels that radiate outward from the pyramid, forming (in its own self-description) a "compass rose" on the desert ground. There is no shelter covering any of this, so an aerial view gives the appearance of a star, almost as if a signal from the desert floor to the heavens.

On the granite panels, Istel has presented an account of the history of Arizona, California, the United States, and the World. The goal of the project is: "In trust that this summary of human achievement and failure will encourage study of the past, through to the future, and resolve for virtue. In hope that the human race will endure far longer than this stone." It is a unique narrative that runs from the beginning of time to the near present. The student of World History will have much to discuss about selection, presentation, and interpretation, but the museum is an unapologetic, existential project. The museum also showcases sections on parachuting, French aviation, French Foreign Legion, and French imperialism (written in French and English), and a Korean War memorial.

Another unique feature of the site is the Felicity Stone, the Colorado Desert's version of Egypt's Rosetta Stone. This granite monument has the practical purpose of delivering, as it declares, "literacy for millennia." The first panel reads: "On behalf of the people of the world, this monument is designed as a key for visitors of the far distant future to understand our writings." Surrounding panels offer translations in Ancient

Greek, Egyptian Hieroglyphics, Latin, Sanskrit, and Classical Chinese, with two panels yet to be completed; Aramaic and mathematical symbols are proposed as possibilities. For the site's *coup de grâce*, Istel trucked in 150,000 tons of dirt in order to create a highpoint on the otherwise level area. On this "Hill of Prayer," he built a chapel in the desert, which one enters after a pilgrimage of 49 steps. If centrality was not enough, Felicity now had an explicitly sacred dimension. Highlighting this is a 15-foot bronze sculpture of the arm of God, modeled on the image of the divine from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. In Felicity, the divine arm points through the pyramid to the chapel.

Violence in the Desert

The month before Istel received official confirmation of centrality, *Blood Meridian, or Evening Redness in the West* appeared on the literary scene.[27] American author Cormac McCarthy's novel presented a fictionalized account of the exploits of the Glanton Gang, a marauding, sociopathic ensemble led by John Joel Glanton.[28] The latter already had a history of violence prior to his service in the US-Mexico War (1846 - 1848), in which he continued his disregard for human life. After the war, having fled back to Mexico to escape arrest for another violent crime, Glanton was recruited as a mercenary in the service of the Mexican state. The unit's salary was tied to the number of Apache who were killed, scalps serving as evidence. The mercenaries found confronting Apache warriors more difficult than killing other indigenous people with whom the authorities had no conflict, or turning against Mexican inhabitants whom the authorities had sought to protect. The authorities were forced to drive out the very mercenaries they had hired. The band continued its rampage in the neighboring state of Sonora, until forced on again. This brought the group to the Colorado River, at the site of today's Yuma, Arizona, a few miles east of Felicity. By this time, American migrants were an increasing presence, challenging indigenous Quechan control.

The area between where Arizona's Gila River meets the Colorado on its eastern bank, and, on the other side, where a prominent peak rises 900 feet into the sky, furnishes the ideal place for a river crossing. Settlers called this mountain "Pilot Knob" because it served as a marker to navigate on the river. This utilitarian nomenclature was not that of the Quechan people for whom the mountain, *'Avíi Kwalál*, was sacred, as it was for the Kumeyaay to the west. One Quechan tribal member recently referred to the mountain as "our very heart, our very soul."[29] This sacrality was ignored by the American settlers for whom the region was but a critical link between East and West, a hinge of imperial ambition, which moved one into the desert, with "Eden" awaiting beyond. Spanish commander Juan Bautista de Anza was at least closer to this tradition of sacrality when he named the hill after St. Paul.

Juan Bautista de Anza Expeditions and Spanish Empire

The Americans were following in the footsteps of a preceding imperial project. In 1774, Juan Bautista de Anza (1736 - 1788), with the aid of an indigenous guide, reached this river crossing in an effort to establish a land route between Spanish territory in the south and Alta California.[30] The geographic observations of Jesuit Eusebio Kino had made it evident to Spanish authorities that Alta California was, in fact, not an island, as many had believed. It was directly connected to Baja California, though there was as of yet no land route; it was accessible only by sea. A Franciscan missionary, Father Francisco Garcés, alerted the Spanish authorities to the possibility of a land route through this point, hence Anza's expedition. Anza led the settlers and soldiers westward across the Sonoran desert to the Colorado River and the Quechan community located around today's Yuma, Arizona, whence the expedition departed on May 15, 1774. Anza understood clearly that the future of Spanish settlement in California depended on the willingness of the Quechans to let them pass.

Anza's successful exploratory activity was followed by a settler project in 1775, moving 240 people and approximately 1000 herd animals across Arizona, through the Colorado Desert, and on to present day Riverside, Los Angeles, and then up the coast to San Francisco, which they reached in March 1776. Leaving the Colorado River, the expedition followed the contours of the land, veering south (into today's Mexico) to avoid the region's massive sand dunes, turning north beyond present day Mexicali, where they entered the Yuha Basin, a very challenging stretch, until moving north to the water source of San Felipe Creek. They entered Borrego Valley in late December 1775, then moving further north into Coyote Canyon, which offered the beneficent water source of Coyote Creek.[31] In Coyote Canyon, on Christmas Day, the first child of European descent was born in California. That day, Fr. Font baptized the child and celebrated three Masses. The Catholic liturgy represented a new sacred presence. The State Park Service has memorialized one part of this event – the birth – erecting a historical monument in Coyote Canyon. Yet, this was *hardly* the first child born here.

Coyote Canyon was Cahuilla land, and the canyon's residents observed the expedition making its way through before ascending the mountains and leaving the desert. The Christian service took place in the canyon where Cahuilla sacred rituals had been enacted for ages. Now, the entire Anza journey has been memorialized on a national level. In 1990, the 1,210-mile route from Nogales, Arizona to San Francisco was designated the Juan Bautista de Anza U.S. National Historic Trail, which has memorial placards along the route detailing what transpired at various locations.[32]

As Anza had recognized, use of this land route through the desert was contingent on access to the Colorado River crossing. In summer 1781, the Quechans closed this access. Quechan warriors extinguished the Spanish settlement and Franciscan

missionary presence.[33] This resistance ensured Quechan control of their ancestral land, and weakened Spain's ability to strengthen the imperial hold on California.

Blood Meridian, Lonesome Gods, and American Empire

This was the situation, when, in November, 1846 (during the US Mexican War), United States General Stephen Watts Kearny and his Army of the West crossed the Colorado River at this spot and entered the Colorado Desert. In January 1847, Kearny's army was reinforced by Lt. Col. Philip St. George Cooke and the Mormon Battalion, a force composed of 500 Mormon recruits.[34] After having traversed the West, they crossed the Colorado Desert with supply wagons, which Kearny's force lacked. To get these wagons through the desert, the Mormon Battalion exerted much effort in carving out a wagon road. The route that they followed and improved became known as the Southern Emigrant Trail, which was later used by some 60,000 people following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and discovery of gold in California.[35] Those making the route were aided by Captain Randolph B. Marcy's *The Prairie Traveler. A Handbook for Overland Expeditions* (1859), a nineteenth-century guidebook helping travelers through the desert.[36]

To facilitate this movement, Lt. Cave Johnson Couts of the First Dragoons set up a rope ferry across the Colorado River.[37] By January 1850, that operation gave way to a ferry business run by Able B. Lincoln, a veteran of the US-Mexican War. He ventured to California with visions of gold, but found his fortune by setting up an improved ferry that transferred migrants across the river. This operated on Quechan land and the Quechans also provided support for the cross-river journey.

This was the situation when Glanton's gang arrived. In McCarthy's account, Able B. Lincoln was another victim of Glanton's violence. Having seized control of Lincoln's ferry operation, Glanton then sought to eliminate the rival ferry operated by the Quechans. His band killed their ferry operator and threatened massacre, if the Quechans did not cease all operations. To protect their ferry and their lives, the Quechans retaliated. They killed Glanton, Lincoln, and several ferry workers. This reprisal is memorialized in Felicity's Museum of History in Granite. In Cormac McCarthy's telling, the remnants of the gang had only one option — flight into the Colorado Desert.

My reading of McCarthy's novel was preoccupied with the image of another band of foreign mercenaries hired to address political grievances, another mercenary group facing indigenous resistance to their passage, and who, in turn, left a trail of tears and violence. Yet, in that case, we have a first-hand celebratory perspective of the mercenaries, which lionized their valor and deprecated the vanquished. I refer here to Xenophon's *Anabasis*, which recounts events of 401-399BCE when a Greek mercenary army was hired by a Persian governor to oust his brother from the throne and seize power.[38] In the effort, the governor was killed in battle and the Greek army was forced to

fight its way out from the center of the Persian Empire. In a sense, McCarthy's tale is an image of how the violence of the Greek army might have looked bearing down upon indigenous communities. Much has been made about McCarthy's reworking of the *traditional* Western genre, and echoes of his influence are felt in more recent novels, including Hernan Diaz's *Into the Distance* (2017) and Téa Obreht's *Inland* (2019), in each of which the desert plays a prominent role, though not the Colorado Desert. For Xenophon, the violence of the invaders was celebrated as an expression of heroic struggle. The indigenous peoples are background, except when useful in the narrative to depict triumph and sound judgment. Drawing the historical eye back even further, one finds in the Hebrew Scriptures, a passage undoubtedly known to McCarthy: *1 Samuel* chapter 27. There, the warrior David, having fled from King Saul of Israel, was in the service of the Philistine monarch, Achish of Gath. In this role, David raided non-Israelite communities, massacring the men, women, children, and all the animals of indigenous peoples. As with Xenophon's situation, we have no first-hand accounts of how the afflicted perceived the violence bearing down upon them. We have only the account of the victors.

In the desert, the remnants of the gang struggle against the harsh reality of heat and the torment of thirst, hunger, and fear. Present is the sense of evil, of Satan lurking in the desert, a motif deeply imbedded in Western notions of the desert. For *Blood Meridian*, the Satanic figure of this most brutal band is embodied in the character of the Judge, who haunts the American West, about whom one reviewer recently commented: "[he] lustily eulogizes their adventures in a voice that combines Faulkner and Schopenhauer with Twain's Duke and Dauphin. He participates in their depredations, and commits many of his own. He is respected, pretentious, and infinitely worse than they are: they follow instinct and the blood curdling mood swings of young men at war, but he endlessly theorizes about why all their depredations are necessary, before finally turning on them too."[39] This link between the desert and evil contrasts with indigenous traditions of the region, which lack such a connection.

The remaining members of the gang made their way to Carrizo Creek and then to San Felipe, where they received assistance from a Kumeyaay community. From there, they departed for the settlement of Warner's Ranch, where the desert yields to tree-lined mountain terrain, and then onward to San Diego. In the book's remaining pages, every member of the gang will be dead, except for Judge Holden, who still haunts the West.

A contrast to McCarthy's novel is Louis L'Amour's *The Lonesome Gods. An Epic Novel of the California Desert* (1983) which is set at the same time as McCarthy's tale, but in the northern reaches of the Colorado Desert.[40] This work conveys the traditional nationalism of the Western genre, though offers no explicitly antagonistic view of indigenous people. The text, nevertheless, juxtaposes a racialized hierarchy, pitting hard-working, financially-savvy Americans against indolent, financially-ignorant *Californios*; a view that justified American aggression in the US-Mexican War, and

fueled the desire to more "productively" exploit the land. L'Amour weaves in local lore, from Pegleg Smith to Cahuilla traditions about Tahquitz Peak, and adds a hearty dose of adventure to make the book a "page-turner" with a happy ending, which ties up all loose ends.[41] This is the opposite of *Blood Meridian* in virtually every respect.

American Power and Control in the Desert

While the Quechans had retaliated against Glanton in a defensive effort, through which they reasserted their ancestral rights, their action was interpreted as aggression by American authorities. This began a three-year conflict known as the Yuma War and led to the establishment of a permanent military presence: Fort Yuma (so named only in 1874). In spring 1851, the US command reduced the military contingent due to the cost of provisioning the fortress by moving goods across the desert. By fall, the weakened presence faced another Quechan effort to assert their traditional rights and drive the Americans out as they had done to the Spanish in 1781. In November 1851, they assaulted the ferry, destroying its boats, and attacked the fort, which the Americans abandoned. At that same time, there was a coordinated assault on Warner's Ranch by a joint Cahuilla and Cupueño force led by Antonio Garra. The US military moved five infantry and one artillery company into Coyote Canyon, where they defeated Cahuilla warriors and burned settlements. The Cahuilla surrendered. Four indigenous leaders (Juan Bautista, Francisco Mecate, Quill, and Luis) were executed in Coyote Canyon on Christmas Day, 1851, where, seven decades earlier that "first" child was born. Garra was arrested in Coachella Valley by another Cahuilla leader, Juan Antonio, who turned him over to the Americans. He was executed in San Diego on January 10, 1852.[42]

The following month, the Yuma military post was fortified with 250 soldiers. By year's end, the problem of supplying the remote fort was eliminated when a private company, with federal contract in hand, began shipping supplies from the coast, around the Baja peninsula, up the Gulf of California, and upriver from Colorado River delta. The steamboat's presence strengthened American control. This subversion of "desert as obstacle" was augmented by the establishment of railroad lines that cut through the desert in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The next phase of connection was a road for automobiles. An eight-foot plank road was built over the sand dunes in 1915, and then Route 80 was established in 1926, which connected Yuma to El Centro and San Diego. Finally, Interstate 8 was opened in 1975, which now moves more than 21,000 vehicles across the desert every day, with traffic expected to double by 2025.[43] New transportation methods and networks transformed the human relationship with, and impact on, the desert.

While such infrastructure projects were under way, Coyote Canyon was abandoned by the Cahuilla. It had been home to five lineages of the Mountain Cahuilla *Wiwaiistam* ("Coyote People") clan. The violence inflicted upon the Cahuilla, combined with the effects of disease and legislation restricting indigenous rights, brought to an

end Coyote Canyon as a Cahuilla (inhabited) place.[44] The 20-mile long, 30,000 acres of Coyote Canyon was then opened to settlers for ranching and agriculture, until it was eventually absorbed as the northernmost portion of Anza Borrego Desert State Park. In the twenty-first century, the Park has sought to increase understanding of the indigenous history of the region, working with tribal and community partners, like the Anza Borrego Foundation and the Native American Lands Conservancy, to protect the archaeological record and preserve Coyote Canyon. Each summer, the park closes Coyote Canyon for four months to protect the endangered bighorn habitat. Nevertheless, the region's ecological, archaeological, and historical importance is adversely threatened by vehicular and other recreational activities. At the southern entrance of Coyote Canyon, there is an explanatory sign identifying Coyote Canyon and its place in Cahuilla history and culture. Vehicles mostly soar past on their way to off-roading or camping in the canyon.

Salvation Mountain and the 'Last Free Place in America'

Shortly before McCarthy published *Blood Meridian,* and while Istel was imagining his "Town Dedicated to Remembrance," Leonard Knight, another veteran of the Korean War, began building a holy mountain in the Colorado Desert. After decades of personal wanderings through jobs and locations, a profound religious experience focused his energy and left him with a mission to share a message of God's love. Like Istel, he was drawn to the sky, but instead of descending in a parachute, Knight wanted to soar upward in a hot air balloon. For this, he looked to the Colorado Desert as the ideal place to launch. This brought him to a community known as Slab City, dubbed by locals as "the last free place in America."[45]

Slab City derives its name from concrete slabs imbedded in the desert sand, remnants of when the area served as a military base. By 1961, the base was no more and the US Department of Defense relinquished its need for the site. Nothing remained except the slabs on which once rose buildings. The federal government no longer needed the land and relinquished it to the State of California, which was equally indifferent; and no private developer saw any value in this remote spot in the "middle of nowhere." This void of ownership and interest was a catalyst that attracted people seeking a place to live — in their RVs — a place thoroughly off the grid. The location has no infrastructure for water or power delivery, trash or waste removal, or mail delivery, and no sanctioned political or law enforcement system. Along the way, a community formed, including those who wanted, for a variety of reasons, to distance themselves from "civilization." Slab City swells to several thousand residents in winter months, and shrinks to a few hundred in summer, when temperatures soar well over 100F. On the edge of Slab City, there is a concrete monument which has written upon it, in spray paint: "Abandon all Hate Yee (*sic*) who enter," and above this, "The last free place in America." Freedom, this sacred notion in American culture, has been kept alive in the Colorado Desert,

reminiscent of Aesop's fable of Truth surviving only in the desert because Deceit had taken over the world beyond.[46]

Leonard Knight's balloon failed, but he found a home in the desert and transformed his evangelical enterprise in a new way. Knight began his *magnum opus*, Salvation Mountain. Using desert detritus (found or donated), plaster, and paint, he created a vibrantly colored mountain rising from the desert floor. It is a vivid sensory encounter, covered with pious messages scrawled in large and small font, including "God is love" and an assortment of others. Knight believed that he had been called to the desert for this evangelical purpose. In the Colorado Desert, he created a holy site.

Salvation Mountain soon began to attract pilgrims who drove the unpaved road off of Highway 111 to reach this new sacred place and to encounter the man who shunned interviews, but often gave tours. One such visitor reflected: "I have no doubt that what he did as the equivalent to sitting beneath the Bodhi tree or in Muhammad's cave, because I can tell you from my time with him that he was awake. And perfectly with no doubt as to his purpose on this earth."[47] This desert space was sacralized through the ritual activities conducted and the meaning that was attributed to it. Like desert fathers in the Christian tradition, Knight found in the desert the "environment of revelation."[48]

Salvation Mountain has left a mark on American popular culture. Most recently, it appeared in the fifth season (2019) of the Amazon series *Bosch* (2014 – 2021). A decade earlier, it was seen in the Sean Penn directed film, *Into the Wild* (2007), where the viewer visits Salvation Mountain on screen and meets Leonard Knight, played by himself. In a dialogue with the movie's protagonist, Knight declares "this is a love story that is staggering to everybody in the whole world," that is manifested through this holy mountain of the Colorado Desert. The film is based on Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), which tells the story of Chris McCandless, who ventured on a personal quest for meaning, influenced by the essays of Thoreau and the fiction of Jack London, and disengaging from conventual obligations and responsibilities. He meandered through the nation, ending up at Salvation Mountain in the Colorado Desert, before heading north, ultimately to Alaska, where he met his untimely death at 24.[49]

Sacred Encounters

While Knight was building Salvation Mountain, another spiritual searcher, the Brazilian novelist Paolo Coelho, also journeyed to the Colorado Desert. Whereas Knight operated east of the Salton Sea, Coelho arrived west of it, at Borrego Springs. Borrego Valley is where Kumeyaay land begins to yield to Cahuilla territory in the north. It is also where Anza passed in 1775 before journeying into Coyote Canyon. After the forced imposition of the reservation system on indigenous peoples, homesteaders and their cattle moved into the region around 1880. Farmers arrived after groundwater sources (the "springs" in Borrego Springs) were uncovered in the early twentieth century.[50] This coincided with

California's "City Beautiful" movement in which the city of San Diego bought mountain and desert land to be used for recreational purposes.[51] Whereas desert terrain had been of little interest a generation earlier, aesthetic appreciation had changed by that time, a transformation facilitated by automobile and train travel that made a trip to the desert a pleasure jaunt rather than traumatic experience. This still required the creation of a new aesthetic appreciation, since Western culture had no traditional metric whereby the desert could be seen as beautiful. The American Transcendentalists and Hudson River School of painters did not look to deserts for inspiration. To provide this new standard, John Charles Van Dyke (1856 – 1932), a professor of art history at Rutgers, recuperating in Southern California, used the Colorado Desert as his museum of study. He shifted his critical inquiry from painting to the desert landscape, which he interpreted as he would a work of art, publishing *The Desert. Further Studies in Natural Appearances* in 1901. For Van Dyke, deserts properly viewed were masterpieces, truly worthy of appreciation – not for anything that they could produce or do:

> *...but simply because they are beautiful in themselves and good to look upon whether they be life or death. In sublimity—the superlative degree of beauty—what land can equal the deserts with its wide plains, its grim mountains, and its expanding canopy of sky! You shall never see elsewhere as here the dome, the pinnacle, the minaret fretted with golden fire at sunrise and sunset; you shall never see elsewhere as here the sunset valleys swimming in a pink and lilac haze, the great mesas and plateaus fading into blue distance, the gorges and canyons banked full of purple shadow. Never again shall you see such light and air and color...And wherever you go, by land or by sea, you shall not forget that which you saw not but rather felt—the desolation and the silence of the desert.*[52]

This ode to the desert presented a new perspective in the Western tradition, and with this appreciation came an awareness that this natural would was threatened by forces that wanted to sacrifice its majesty for what it perceived as a greater value. Against this, Van Dyke pleaded: "The deserts are not worthless wastes...They should never be reclaimed. They are the breathing-spaces of the west an should be preserved forever."[53] Van Dyke was in the Colorado Desert precisely as investment and development were beginning that would set in motion the inundation that produced the Salton Sea.

Such notions of beauty and value were the seeds that made possible Anza Borrego Desert State Park, which was founded in 1933 (in the same period Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Monuments – later National Parks -- were created). The current State Park is a combination of the original northern section (around Borrego Springs) and the southern region which was added in 1957, bolstered by additional purchases and

donations that have expanded the park to its present size. The town of Borrego Springs was founded between these two markers in 1946 and is entirely engulfed by the enormous natural reserve. Early developers had visions of growing Borrego Springs into San Diego's Palm Springs, but that level of development and investment never manifested. Palm Springs has a population of 45,000, neighboring Cathedral City of 52,000, Palm Desert nearly the same; Borrego Springs only 1,800.

One of the many distinct features of Borrego Springs is the public art exhibitions of Ricardo Breceda, collectively known as Sky Art.[54] There are 28 works in all scattered across the town, mostly on its northern and southern edges. These massive works of metal sculpture manifest the natural and human past of the city, revealing what once walked this region – giant tortoises and sloths, sabretooth cats, mammoths, camelids, horses, and before any of these – dinosaurs: Allosaurus, Utahraptor, and from other regions – Tyrannosaurs Rex, Velociraptor, etc. Breceda also memorialized the human history of the region, including Anza on horseback, a gold miner and his mule, grape harvesters, and a Franciscan missionary carrying a cross. The artist even added a dose of the fantastic with a gigantic serpent sculpture that weaves up and down across a road, its massive head, mouth agape, on one side of the road, and its rattlesnake-like rattle at the other end, 350 feet away.

These were not yet present when Coelho visited Borrego Springs in 1988, a trip that inspired his 1992 novel, *The Valkyries. An Encounter with Angels.* In the tale, Paolo and his wife, Chris, travelled to the desert community to begin a 40-day spiritual pilgrimage. They traverse the Colorado and Sonoran region and travel north into the Mojave, to Death Valley, all of which the novel depicts as one indistinguishable desert. Paolo and Chris encounter the Valkyries, a mysterious band of women on motorcycles, led by a guru named Valhalla. Her spiritual journey had led her to abandon a conventual middle class life for a hedonistic path, which gave way to spiritual liberation. Like Knight, Valhalla felt the call to share a message of good news and freedom. Where Knight established a *place* in the desert, Valhalla gathered nomadic disciples and roamed the desert. The novel and its pilgrimage conclude in Borrego Springs, where Paolo and Chris hike in Glorietta Canyon. There, Paolo finally encounters his angel — first in the form of a butterfly and then in an arm writing on the desert ground. To commemorate the encounter, Coelho places an image of the Virgin Mary as a memorial of his spiritual meeting. "In this place, the energy of the soul of the world was felt," one of the characters states, "and it will be felt here forever. It is a place of power."[55] Despite the intensity of meaning here, there is an error of geography. Coelho's novel fails to distinguish between the Colorado Desert and the Mojave to the north. It is a common error for this most overlooked desert region. The same error was made by Sue Grafton in her *"G" is for Gumshoe,* published two years earlier in 1990.[56] In this novel, one of Grafton's "Alphabet" mysteries, the story's plot takes the action to Slab City of the "Mojave" Desert.

A short distance from Coelho's "soul of the world" in Glorietta Canyon, on a ridge overlooking the town, is a large cross. This was planted in the Easter season of 1949 by members of what was then called the Anza Mission, and which became St. Richard Catholic Church.[57] It was a symbolic assertion of a religious presence and power. It was a spiritual claim made in and on the desert. Below the ridge, one finds a street known as Church Lane, where, next to one another, there is a Catholic Church, a United Methodist Church, an Episcopal Church, and a Lutheran Church; further about town there is a Christian Center, Baptist Church, and a Church of the Latter-Day Saints. The *religious* presence of the Kumeyaay and the Cahuilla people, and their predecessors, who once inhabited the region, are found only in archaeological remains, not through any extant architectural or monumental form. Their birdsongs are no longer heard. Meanwhile, the city's resort facilities host all varieties of retreats for guests drawn to Borrego Springs for a Buddhist, Yoga, Mindfulness, or other form of spiritual awakening in the comfort of a desert spa.

Becoming Ghost Mountain

Just a few months before the cross was planted on that ridge in Borrego Springs, the poet, author, and desert aficionado Marshal South died. The news was shared with the desert-minded public in the December 1948 issue of *Desert Magazine*. Marshal South (1889 - 1948) was the pen name of Roy Richards, who emigrated from Australia to the United States (San Diego County) in the early twentieth century.[58] He channeled his fascination with the American West through writing, publishing eight novels in the Western genre and more than 40 short stories and essays. From 1930 to 1947, he staked a homestead on a mountain in Blair Valley, south of Borrego Springs, which was then not yet part of Anza Borrego Desert State Park, since this did not even exist in 1930. There, down a long and dusty dirt road, on a plateau accessible only by foot, after walking a 900-foot incline, Marshal South created a home with his wife, Tanya She had emigrated from Ukraine to New York City. After the death of her father, she set out for San Diego. Though from an Orthodox Jewish family, she became a member of a Rosicrucian Fellowship. Inspired by Transcendentalist ideas, American westerns, and Tanya's Rosicrucian religious beliefs, the two embraced the desert as the place most fitting for living in their ideal fashion. As a biographer of Marshall South explained: "They did not want to be slaves to making money, and they wanted to pursue more creative and spiritual endeavors. They wanted peace and solitude, and they wanted to experience a total sense of realm — mentally and physically."[59]

Yet, this was an impractical site for lodging, except that its isolation made Marshal's preference for nudity all the easier; Tanya was less inclined. The site has no water source and required all goods to be hauled up by hand or burro — water, food, bed frames, mattresses, wood and glass for building material, and so forth. The remnants of the homestead still exist and the site is now popular destination for hikers who, after

having ascended the trail's switchbacks, are astounded to see what is left of the home high above the desert floor. Today, visitors call the site "Ghost Mountain," sensing the presence of those who once lived there. Marshal South, on the other hand, called it "Yaquitepec." This designation combined the word Yaqui, referring to the indigenous people of Sonora, Mexico, and the Nahuatl word "tepec," meaning hill. In that sense, Yaquitepec was rooted in a world that never existed, though Marshal and Tanya's own lived reality required intense sacrifice and dedication to maintain it. Staying alive on a remote, waterless desert plateau, where the Kumeyaay would not have established a settlement, was no easy feat.

The indigenous presence in Blair Valley is evident. A short trek away from the ascent to Ghost Mountain, one finds Mortrero Trail and then, a bit further still, Pictograph Trail. Both readily reveal to the passerby the presence of the Kumeyaay and their ancestors in the archaeological record. One finds many mortreros carved into the rocks, where indigenous people ground seeds and plants, and pictographs on desert boulders. These are not found on the waterless plateau above. The greatest challenge that Marshall and Tanya faced, however, was caring for their three young children, whom they raised and educated on site.

Their desert experiment was temporarily disrupted when the US Military dislocated them during World War II, moving them out of harm's way due to military drills and testing in the desert, but they returned afterwards. Their desert experiment survived the war, but came to a permanent end when Tanya determined that raising the children on a desolate desert plateau was not in their best interest. She returned to the coast with the children. A contested, acrimonious divorce process followed. In February 1948, a final judgement was rendered in her favor. With his desert dream shattered, Marshall died before the year's end. Tanya, on the other hand, lived five more decades, passing away in 1997. She had no interest in ever revisiting the desert experience. In 1958, with the area part of Anza Borrego State Park, Tanya sold the homestead to the Park Service for $950, allowing it to transition into its present state as a popular hiking spot.[60]

Marshal South's goal had been to adopt a "primitive and natural lifestyle," living in the primal harmony that the desert afforded. He chronicled his family's experiences and way of life through more than one hundred articles and poems published in *Desert Magazine*, a source of income and attention. In these, he offered a window on desert living to those bound by the "conventions of civilization," showing how to live freely and in the harmony with the natural world. Combining Western notions of masculinity, American ideas of freedom, and selectively adopting aspects from various indigenous cultures, Marshal South constructed an *image* of himself in the desert and projected this in his letters and photographs to the world outside. His wife lived with and confronted the reality behind this image, as one can read in their divorce proceedings. Marshal South did not resemble Leonard Knight, who drew people to him and his mountain.

South expressed more judgement against, rather than love for, those in the conventional world. His was not Salvation Mountain. Ghost Mountain became a pilgrimage site only after it was abandoned, where people contemplate life on the mountain, while walking around the remnants of what it once sought to be.

Contemplation in the Desert

This theme of withdrawal and reflection in the Colorado Desert is evident in Don DeLillo's novel, *Point Omega* (2010).[61] With geographic precision, DeLillo situated his story in Anza Borrego, which Coelho never mentioned, even though his tale is immersed in it. DeLillo described the site as "somewhere south of nowhere." It is the place of retreat for the protagonist, Richard Elster, a retired professor who was instrumental in designing the US Government's efforts to garner public support for war. Elster furnished the spirit of the public relations campaign. In the aftermath of war, and feeling the existential consequences of his actions, Elster retired to the desert. In this retreat, he is visited by a film maker seeking to make a documentary about him. His time in the desert overlapped with a visit by Elster's daughter, who was fleeing an abusive relationship in New York. She then vanished. The book becomes a meditation on retreat, contemplation, silence, and the anguish of not knowing.

From Borrego Springs, I journeyed north. My route did not follow Anza's through Coyote Canyon, since there is no passable road. I drove east on county road S-22, passing the enormous Truckhaven Rocks which seismic activity has shifted so that they are tilted at a 45degree angle to the ground. Along the way, one sees overlooks of badlands and canyons, and the gateway to the two highest peaks in the Santa Rosa Mountains, Villager (over 5700 feet) and Rabbit (over 6600). The journey to the latter is via the former, making for one of the most challenging outdoor experiences in the region. At the Salton Sea, I turned north on CA Route 86 and then to 386, where I reached the community of Mecca in the Coachella Valley.

Mecca: A Matter of Dates

Why is there a Mecca in the Colorado Desert? The region's link to the Middle East began shortly before 1900, when the US Department of Agriculture sent "Agriculture Explorers" throughout the world to identify and obtain agricultural produce that could thrive in the United States and support American prosperity. These "Indiana Joneses" of the agricultural world, as one California historian dubbed them, introduced mangoes, avocados, and varieties of oranges to American culture.[62] Here, I will focus only on one import: dates. After Agriculture Explorer Walter Tennyson Swingle recognized potential for date growing in the Colorado Desert, tens of thousands of date palms from North Africa to Iraq reached the Coachella Valley. In this way, California's date industry was born, and it grew spectacularly. At present, 90% of the dates grown in the United States,

some 50,000 tons, come from this desert valley. Prior to the modern irrigation network, the Coachella Valley drew its water from underground artesian wells. Now, it utilizes diminishing groundwater with canal-provided Colorado River water for its agricultural production.

The date has become well-established on the American culinary scene, but this took much effort to promote. One part of the early marketing strategy was employing an eclectic mix of imagery from the Middle East and Arab culture. For example, the town of Walters rebranded itself as Mecca in 1904 to portray the area as an attractive destination for investors, farmers, and potential residents. The town boasted a hotel called the Caravansary. Local guides dressed in Arabian costumes welcomed guests and offered camel rides to proposed development areas. Shops sold dates along California Highway 111 between Mecca and Palm Springs in similar fashion: The Pyramid Date Shop, designed as the name suggests, and Sniff's Exotic Date Garden, which sold dates out of a large tent in the style used by Bedouins. The connection is still evident in the local high school, Coachella Valley HS, whose moniker had once been "the Arabs," and has since been revised to "the mighty Arab." The Middle Eastern theme was echoed in popular culture, with Hollywood movies like *The Queen of Sheba*, *Cleopatra*, and the 1921 silent movie, *The Sheik*, starring Rudolph Valentino. The discovery of Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 further added enthusiasm to the promotional effort and inter-continental connections.

While these efforts achieved great agricultural heights, they did not lead to greater development. Today, Mecca has a declining population, just over 8000. Yet, its presence in the Coachella Valley made it an ideal starting point for Susan Straight's novel, *Mecca* (2020), which follows intersecting links in peoples and cultures that make up Southern California, despite their lack of awareness or even outright denial of such interconnection.[63] Through the characters of the novel and their separate, then interweaving, stories, Straight depicts, through the landscape and human diversity, critical issues facing the region and nation, including the status of undocumented workers, the process of desert cultivation, the legacy of indigenous peoples and of the Anza expedition, the impact of racism and racial hierarchy, and the way these all interact in the world that is Southern California; this Mecca that had drawn people from all places, who are inspired by dreams of a better tomorrow. They enter this *place* which lures, but only sometimes delivers, on its promise of hope.[64]

Reclaiming the Desert

Beginning my journey back to San Diego, I stopped in the city of Brawley, south of the Salton Sea. The city was named after the primary landowner, J.H. Braley, and founded in 1902 by the Imperial Land Company, whose purpose was to develop and transform the desert into something "useful." It aimed for maximum profit and renamed the region "Imperial Valley" for its promotional effort. To make this successful, the desert

needed water. Their work coincided with the advocacy of a great champion of desert irrigation: William Ellsworth Smythe (1861-1922). His *The Conquest of Arid America* (1900) celebrated the extraordinary potential of the American West and Southern California, which, he argued, would be the most valuable and prosperous American region, if only the untapped potential could be unlocked through irrigation.[65]

For this purpose, the California Development Company was established. The company built the Imperial Canal, moving Colorado River water to the valley to make the desert bloom and agriculture possible. At present, Imperial Valley grows in excess of two billion dollars' worth of agricultural products, including most of the nation's winter vegetables. Unfortunately, silt built up in the canal, which was rectified by cutting a temporary opening in the river to be used in the interim. The process was poorly managed. In 1905, the tumultuous river shattered the canal controls and flooded the valley. The river flowed downhill into the Salton Sink for the next two years, before it could be contained. The Salton Sink had become the Salton Sea.

These events and the socio-cultural and economic forces that set them in motion were transformed into fiction in Harold Bell Wright's, *Winning of Barbara Worth* (1911).[66] This best-selling novel wove a melodramatic love story in the context of the desert reclamation and economic development in Imperial Valley. The novel also expressed a racialized view of the project, positioning the Anglo-settlers as heroes, those who mobilized the labor of non-white peoples, and challenged the corruption of nefarious "Eastern" banking interests against the best interests of the local good. It reflected and reinforced the view of a racial hierarchy that itself undermined the development of community by imposing an inequitable and unjust structure upon the geography and demography of the region.

Imperial Valley newspapers championed the drama of supremacy over the natural world. The desert had to be subdued in order to make it productive: "The desert is conquered now, that terrible monster that in times gone by sucked the breath of life from many prospectors who perished on the sands of thirst, that tyrant killed by slow torture the many who ventured to walk across the burning waste."[67] The (Anglo) conquerors, the engineers, the visionaries became heroes who transformed the desert, as one local poet lionized:

> *"I am an empire reclaimed, for I have transformed*
> *the barren wastes into blooming gardens —*
> *arid lands have I fructified with living waters*
> *and made them to blossom in superabundance.*
> *I spell service to humanity, opportunity to the multitudes,*
> *abundance to the diligent.*
> *I have strong men and true, conquerors of the desert*
> *and captains worthy of any industry.*

I am Imperial Valley."[68]

These conquerors –purveyors of "living waters" -- reclaimed and transformed the desert and this included the creation of the Salton Sea. This desert oasis attracted hundreds of species of birds migrating on the Pacific Flyway, as mentioned above. The sea was stocked with fish and became a thriving resort destination for Southern California and beyond, hosting water sports of all kinds. Yet, its halcyon days did not last.

The Salton Sea was fed primarily by agricultural runoff, which increased its salinity. This runoff also contained nitrates and pesticides, including DDT, from the era preceding federal regulations, and before the Environmental Protection Agency was founded in 1970. Since that time, the agricultural runoff has decreased as irrigation systems became more efficient. And so, the Salton Sea has been shrinking for decades, while its salinity level is now greater than that of the Pacific Ocean, making it uninhabitable for all species of fish, except for desert pupfish and non-native tilapia. Its days as a tourist resort ended decades ago and the shrinking sea exudes a pervasive, putrid odor. As it continues to evaporate, there is much concern that the pesticides presently locked down under its waters will be released into a potentially toxic cloud, endangering the wider region. Yet, moving freshwater from the Colorado River into the Salton Sea would waste the precious and diminishing water resource on which Southern California, Nevada, and Arizona depend. No solution has been found.

This very brief overview of the Salton Sea presents a counterpoint to the triumphalism found in Wright's novel. For a much more extensive inquiry, an ideal source for an explanation of these developments and their impact on the human and non-human environment is Traci Brynne Voyles' *The Settler Sea. California's Salton Sea and the Consequences of Colonialism* (2021). In this, the contrast with Wright's view is as startling as *Blood Meridian* is to *Lonesome Gods*. This is an exceptional work of scholarship, adding to previuus excellent studies, including Benny J. Andrés Jr.'s *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley. Nature, Agribusiness, and Workers on the California Borderland, 1900 -1940* (2015), which explores the corporate and institutional entities at work in the Imperial Valley and their impact on both sides of the border; and Philip H. Round's *The Impossible Land. Story and Place in California's Imperial Valley* (2008), which attends to the human diversity of the region, and the perseverance and creativity of the peoples there, as well as the inequity and injustices endured.[69]

Museum, Memorials, and the Sacred

With my research pilgrimage winding down, I travelled on Interstate 8, San Diego bound, and stopped at the community of Ocotillo, population 200, about 25 miles west of El Centro. This southwestern area of the Colorado desert, a region called the Yuha

Desert, is designated as an "area of critical environmental concern" by the Bureau of Land Management, which manages it. The Yuha region extends from Interstate 8 to the border. In this stretch of desert, visitors often search for marine fossils, which testify to the region's submarine past.[70] Others visit the small Crucifixion Thorn Preserve, which is two miles north of the border, just east of the Jacumba Wilderness Area. Here, one finds *Castela Emoryi*, a shrub that reaches about three feet from the ground. Its twisted spikes give the appearance of the crown of thorns forced upon the head of Jesus in the Passion narrative of the Gospels, hence, its common name, the Crucifixion Thorn.[71] The shrub is found in Arizona, but rare in California, which is the rationale for the preserve. I was here because a few months before, while having lunch with a Mexican-American priest from El Centro, he told me to visit this place. It seemed a fitting stop near the end of my pilgrimage.

Juan Bautista de Anza's journey through the Yuha Desert region has been memorialized by the National Historical Trail system and as well as by the Historical Landmarks established by the California State Parks' Office of Historic Preservation, which designate and declare events deemed of historical significance. These are strewn across the Colorado Desert, from Fort Yuma and Camp Pilot Knob, to the Anza Overlook above Yuha Wash and at Yuha Well (called Santa Rosa Well by Anza), where the expedition found water.[72] These present a narrative of what has been officially declared to be important for a particular place and its memory for posterity. Just west of this location is the 2000-acre Piedras Grandes Cultural Preserve, located in the southernmost section of Anza Borrego Desert State Park. The area is a valley surrounded by hills strewn with massive boulders ("piedras grandes") and contains the greatest concentration of archaeological sites in this part of the park, including rock shelters, water basins, and rock art from Kumeyaay ancestors. Among the pictographs is the "Horse and Rider," which possibly records Anza's movement through the region, a depiction akin to those now planted as historical memorials.

The Yuha area also contains another site that champion's the region's centrality: The Imperial Valley Desert Museum.[73] This museum is dedicated to preserving, celebrating, and promoting the history, cultures, archeological record, and natural environment of this region. It is a community focused and engaged museum, with a commitment to preserving and promoting indigenous history. In its previous incarnation, it was the Imperial Valley College Museum in El Centro. After an earthquake damaged its original building in 1979, the collection was moved to Ocotillo. The present facility opened in 2012.

Archaeologist Morlin Childers (d. 1987), one of the museum's founders, conducted extensive archaeological excavations in the region. Fifty years ago, Childers discovered a burial site with an intact adult skeleton. He believed that his discovery had shattered the "late" arrival theory of Homo Sapiens into the Americas, that their arrival was less than 20,000 years before the present, though the burial evidence was later

dated to only 4,000 years.[74] Nonetheless, this timeframe still reflects the deep human history of the region, which "tested human ingenuity to the limit, yet people flourished in these harsh environments for some 13,000 years."[75]

One remnant of this deep history is etched into the desert floor. There are geoglyphs in the Yuha Desert, large works of art carved into the earth (more are found near the Colorado River).[76] The meaning of these signs and figures is no longer extant. The rituals have been lost, but it is apparent that this place had a significant meaning, something momentous happened here, though our understanding is now lacking. In the distance, the prominent feature of Mount Signal (Cerro Centinela) on the Mexican side of the border immediately stands out to the eye. Is this site orienting us in that direction? We don't know. Sadly, the survival of these geoglyphs was endangered in recent memory when motorcyclists rode over them, making their own circles and significantly damaging these memorials of the past, which were restored by the faculty and students of the Imperial Valley College Museum. A fence now offers some protection.

The region's role as a *place* of cultural importance was challenged by the Bureau of Land Management's view that there was a greater value for the land, when it approved the Ocotillo Express Wind Energy project.[77] The 12,400-acre development installed 112 turbines (each 450 feet tall) that produce energy sold to San Diego Gas & Electric, San Diego County's primary power distributor. Kumeyaay and Quechan leaders opposed the project on the grounds that it desecrated the sacred. As one tribal member expressed, "Does economics trump justice in this country? I believe it does and that profoundly saddens me…I cannot understand, we cannot understand, how federal and state institutions who have trusted fiduciary responsibility to Native Americans, allowed the utter destruction of arguably the richest cultural resource in our country in Ocotillo Valley." Tribal leaders stressed that this land had been used by tribes for 10,000 years and its archaeological value and cultural heritage justify protection and the removal of the turbines. They pointed to the protection of the desert's geoglyphs, noting that allowing these to be surrounded by turbines was like "destroying the outside walls of the tomb of Jesus but avoiding the dirt from within." Nonetheless, the Ocotillo Express Wind Energy project continues in operation.[78]

From the parking lot of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum, I watched solar turbines whirling in the distance, and, closer still, the cars speeding by on Interstate 8. They all passed this blossom in the desert, this beacon of understanding, which is clearly visible and yet, largely ignored. I suppose that is much like the desert itself.

Conclusion

> *They were discussing whether or not the Seven Old Ones were gone, now that the White People had come with their new religion.*

The friend said that one time, when he was hunting on Anacapa or Santa Rosa,
he couldn't remember which island it was,
he and his companion came upon a deep hole.
The peered into it
and saw the Seven Viejos at the bottom
sitting in a circle
with their shoulders hunched and their heads bent down.
Despite all the changes, all the destruction, the Ancestors were still here.[79]

In *Sacred Sites. The Secret History of Southern California* (2010), poet Susan Suntree offers, in epic form, a sweeping account of creation, of how the world of Southern California came to be. Her work is divided into two books: "Western Science," which looks to contemporary scientific explanations of creation, and "Myths and Songs," which draws on the work of ethnographers and indigenous traditions. About this work, Gary Snyder commented, "Learning how a place comes into being acquaints us with forces of life that are large and intimately interconnected. For the indigenous people, the creation and transformation of the world is an account of the First People. In this way of looking at it, the land is alive and working out its own story."[80] He sees in the poem a way of "maintaining balance" between the human and non-human world, though admits that "people resist letting the world in. We tend to think of the natural, the sacred, the wild as happening outside our neighborhoods and far away." For California writers like Snyder and Suntree, as with many discussed above, the sacred is all around.

As I circumnavigated the Salton Sea and visited some of the diverse places in the Colorado Desert, a remark in Thoreau's *Walden* came to mind: "I have traveled a good deal in Concord." For more than a decade, I have ventured here with university students, high school students, middle school students, men's groups, friends, family, and assorted other visitors on dozens of trips. Most return intrigued by what they have encountered at this "Center of the World."

The Colorado Desert is a dynamic place, ever changing through seismic and cosmic forces that twist and upturn, and anthropic power that extracts and exploits and bombs. For well over a century now, there have been efforts to make this desert something other than what it is, as well as to make of oneself something new and other than what one was. But for all this change, the desert challenges us to remember. From "bathtub rings" and marine fossils to sign posts and geoglyphs, there are manifestations of the preservation of memory woven into the desert ground. And so, I close with one last novel: Neil Gaimon's *American Gods* (2001). While that book lacks desert, it does ask us to consider the presence of the sacred – gods past and present – who have mixed and mingled here. Even after their worshippers have faded from the scene, their rituals have gone silent, and they appear altogether forgotten, they live on. We may ignore

them, but they have not left. As Suntree expressed: "Despite all the changes, all the destruction, the Ancestors were still here," much like the desert.

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Notes

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 5; quoted in Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred. Place Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 7.

[2] On the Silk Road in World History, an excellent place to start: Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

[3] Currently, there is no such *Deserts in World History* text. For an intriguing place to begin an inquiry, see William Atkins, *The Immeasurable World. A Desert Journey* (New York: Penguin, 2018). This text was just released at the time of the present essay's completion, too late for integration into the article, but it approaches the topic in a kindred manner: Natalie Koch. *Arid Empire: The Entangled Fates of Arizona and Arabia*. (New York: Verso, 2023).

[4] On the Sacred: J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*. 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 3–50. View and theories: Daniel Pals, *Ten Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Highlighting just one of Pals' summaries: Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* Tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957). On the sacred and land, places to begin: Belden Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred. Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). For an integration of space and sacrality, see Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes. Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[5] Recommended places to begin: Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert passages. Encounters with American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985); Craig Childs, *The Secret Knowledge of Water* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2000); Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking, 1986); Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert. Explorations of Fantasy & Reality in the American Southwest* (Austin: U of Texas Press, 1999); Lawrence Hogue, *All the Wild and Lonely Places. Journeys in a Desert Landscape* (Washington: Island Press, 2000); Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian. John Wesley Powell and the Opening of the West* (New York: Penguin, 1992; original work published 1954); Phillip H. Round, *The Impossible Land. Story and Place in California's Imperial Valley* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), among many others. For a comparative, global perspective (including the Sonoran): William Atkins, *The Immeasurable World. A Desert Journey* (New York: Anchor Books, 2018).

[6] Traci Brynne Voyles, *The Settler Sea. California's Salton Sea and the Consequences of Colonialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), p. 9.

[7] Allan Schoenherr, *A Natural History of California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 435-38.

[8] Stephen Ingram, *Cacti, Agaves, and Yuccas of California and Nevada* (Los Olivos: Cachuma Press, 2008).

[9] Gerald A. Rosenthal, *Sonoran Desert Life* 2nd Ed. (Scottsdale: Academic Press, 2010).

[10] Lowell John Bean and Katherine Siva Saubel, *Temalpakh. Cahuilla Indian Knowledge and Usage of Plants* (Morongo Indian Reservation: Malki Museum Press, 1972).

[11] On California Deserts: Bruce M. Pavlik, *The California Deserts. An Ecological Rediscovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[12] Ben Ehrenreich, *Desert Notebooks. A Road Map for the End of Time* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2020).

[13] Traci Brynne Voyles, *The Settler Sea. California's Salton Sea and the Consequences of Colonialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 22.

[14] Allan Schoenherr, *A Natural History of California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 422. See also, Clarence A. Hall, *Introduction to the Geology of Southern California and its Native Plants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[15] Brian Fagan, *Before California. An Archaeologist Looks at Our Earliest Inhabitants* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

[16] See Traci Brynne Voyles, *The Settler Sea. California's Salton Sea and the Consequences of Colonialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021).

[17] In the northeast the desert stretches further north toward Needles, and includes Turtle and Whipple Mountains as the Colorado transitions to the Mojave, see Schoenherr*, A Natural History of California*, p. 413.

[18] Mike Wells and Marie Simovich*, A Natural History of the Anza-Borrego Region. Then and Now* (San Diego: Sunbelt, 2020). See also, Lowell Lindsay and Diana Lindsay, *The Anza-Borrego Desert Region* 5th ed. (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 2006).

[19] On the Bighorn: Mark C. Jorgensen. *Desert Bighorn Sheep. Wilderness Icon*. San Diego: Sunbelt, 2015.

[20] Rupert Sheldrake, *Science and Spiritual Practices* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2017).

[21] Bureau of Land Management: https://www.blm.gov/about/our-mission >.

[22] See my "God, Satan, and Freshmen in the Southern California Desert" *World History Connected* 18/2 (June/July 2021).

[23] On Lithium mining, see:
https://www.desertsun.com/story/opinion/contributors/valley-voice/2022/05/28/salton-sea-lithium-mining-could-hurt-native-lands-column/9914509002/

[24] Looking slightly more broadly in the region: Halchidhoma, Mojave, Serrano, and Chemehuevi. Useful overviews to begin the inquiry: On the national level: Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United State* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as the Grass Grows. The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, From Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019). On the state level: Damon B. Akins and William J. Bauer, Jr., *We are the Land. A History of Native California (*Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021); Kent G. Lightfoot and Otis Parrish, *California Indians and their Environment. An Introduction* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2009); Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide. The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); A.L Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). On the local level: George Harwood Phillips, *Chiefs and Challengers. Indian Resistance and Cooperation in Southern California, 1769-1906* 2nd Ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014); Richard Carrico, *Strangers in a Stolen Land. Indians of San Diego County from Prehistory to the New Deal* (San Diego: Sunbelt, 2008); Clifford Trafzer, Luke Madrigal, and Antony Madrigal. *Chemehuevi People of the Coachella Valley* (Coachella, CA: Chemehuevi Press, 1997).

[25] Traci Brynne Voyles, *The Settler Sea. California's Salton Sea and the Consequences of Colonialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 27-28.

[26] For information on Istel and Felicity, see < https://www.historyingranite.org >.

[27] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Vintage International, 1985).

[28] For historical context, see John Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian* (Austin: Texas State University, 2008).

[29] Contemporary statement on Pilot Knob as sacred, see < https://ictnews.org/archive/elders-ask-creator-to-forgive-tribe-for-controversial-casino >.

[30] Vladimir Guerrero, *The Anza Trail and the Settling of California* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2006).

[31] Among the authors whom I have not discussed in the article is Mexican novelist José Salvador Ruiz, whose *noir* fiction is set in the desert city of Mexicali.

[32] On Juan Bautista de Anza Trail: https://www.nps.gov/juba/learn/historyculture/index.htm

[33] Mark Santiago, *Massacre at the Yuma Crossing. Spanish Relations with the Quechans, 1779 – 1782* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1998).

[34] Norma Rickets, *Mormon Battalion: United States Army of the West, 1846-1848* (Logan: Utah State University, 1996).

[35] Phil Brigandi, "The Southern Emigrant Trail." *Overland Journal* (Fall 2010), 1-18.

[36] Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveller. A Hand-Book for Overland Expeditions*. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1859.

[37] Douglas D. Martin, *Yuma Crossing* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954).

[38] Xenophon, *The Expedition of Cyrus* Tr. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See, for example, *Anabasis* Book IV.vii, 13-14.

[39] Phil Christman, "Ghost Guilts." *Commonweal*. 150/3 (March 2023), 42.

[40] Louis L'Amour, *The Lonesome Gods. An Epic Novel of the California Desert* (New York: Bantam, 1983).

[41] Choral Pepper, *Desert Lore of Southern California* 2nd ed. (San Diego: Sunbelt, 1999).

[42] For an overview of the situation in the region, see George Harwood Phillips, *Chiefs and Challengers: Indian Resistance and Cooperation in Southern California, 1769-1906,* 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), particularly chapters 5-8, pp. 98-179.

[43] See, CalTrans < https://dot.ca.gov/caltrans-near-me/district-11/current-projects/i8-imp-interchange >.

[44] For an overview of the situation in the region, see George Harwood Phillips, *Chiefs and Challengers. Indian Resistance and Cooperation in Southern California, 1769-1906* 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

[45] On Slab City, see Charlie Hailey, *Slab City. Dispatches from the Last Free Place* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018); Jack Wiley, *RVing Slab City, California. Off-the-Grid Free and Unrestricted Boondocking in Your RV* (CreateSpace, 2016).

[46] *Fables of Aesop*. Tr. S.A. Handford (New York: Penguin, 1954), 164 (Fable 160).

[47] Sara M. Patterson, *Middle of Nowhere. Religion, Art, and Pop Culture at Salvation Mountain* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico Press, 2016), 36-37.

[48] Patterson, *Middle of Nowhere,* 38. On Christian tradition, see William Harmless. *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[49] Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996).

[50] Phil Brigandi, "A Place Called Borego [*sic*]" *The Journal of San Diego History* 43/1 (Winter 1997) < https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1997/january/borrego/ >.

[51] Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure. Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[52] Charles Van Dyke, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 231-32; see also, Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 75–87. Other Colorado Desert boosters included George Wharton James (1858 – 1923), see his *The Wonders of the Colorado Desert* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906). Charles Fletcher Lummis (1859 – 1928), *A Tramp Across the Continent* (Forgotten Books, 2012; original work published 1892). On Lummis: Mark Thompson, *American Character: The Curious Life of Charles Fletcher Lummis and the Rediscovery of the Southwest* (New York: Arcade, 2001) and Edwin R. Bingham, *Charles F. Lummis. Editor of the Southwest* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1955).

[53] Charles Van Dyke, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 59.

[54] Diana Lindsay, *Ricardo Breceda. Accidental Artist* (San Diego: Sunbelt, 2012).

[55] Paolo Coelho, *The Valkyries. An Encounter with Angels* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 236. Originally published in Portuguese in 1992.

[56] Sue Grafton, *G is For Gumshoe*. New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1990.

[57] See St. Richard Parish History at < https://www.strichardborrego.com/parish-history >.

[58] Diana Lindsay, *Marshal South and the Ghost Mountain Chronicles: An Experiment in Primitive Living* (San Diego: Sunbelt, 2005).

[59] *Ibid.*, 20.

[60] Lowell and Diana Lindsay. *The Anza-Borrego Desert Region*. 5th Ed. (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 2006), 220-224. For a personal and historical reflection, see Lawrence Hogue, *All the Wild and Lonely Places: Journeys in a Desert Landscape* (Covelo: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2000), 155-164.

[61] Don DeLillo, *Point Omega. A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 2010).

[62] For a brief introduction on the date in the region, see "Forbidding Fruit: How America got Turned on to the Date,"
< https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/06/10/320346869/forbidding-fruit-how-america-got-turned-on-to-the-date >, and "How the Date Palm Came to the US."
< https://sekkamag.com/2018/05/01/how-the-date-palm-came-to-the-u-s/ >. See also, Hilda Simon, *The Date Palm: Bread of the Desert* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1974).

[63] Susan Straight, *Mecca* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2022).

[64] I do not address the important issue of cross-border migration in this essay, but do in the forthcoming one. On this, see Jason de Leon, *The Land of Open Graves. Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

[65] For this article, I am not discussing the Reclamation Act (1902), the Bureau of Reclamation, or the Hoover Dam. For a look at the global impact: Christopher Sneddon, *Concrete Revolution: Large Dams, Cold War Geopolitics, and the US Bureau of Reclamation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). A classic work of scholarship on the topic: Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); another classic: Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking, 1986). See also, Donald J. Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

[66] Harold Bell Wright, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2010; originally published 1911).

[67] Benny J. Andrés, Jr., *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley. Nature, Agribusiness, and Workers on the California Borderland, 1900 -1940* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2015), 67, quoting *Brawley News*, May 14, 1926.

[68] *Ibid.*, 66-67, quoting *Brawley News,* May 10 1921.

[69] Of interest also: William T. Vollmann, *Imperial* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

[70] On changes in the Gulf of California and Colorado Delta: Mike Wells and Marie Simovich, *A Natural History of the Anza-Borrego Region. Then and Now* (San Diego: Sunbelt, 2020), 60 – 66.

[71] Passion Narratives in the *New Testament*: *Matthew* 26 – 27, *Mark* 14 – 15, *Luke* 22-23, *John* 18 – 19.

[72] On California Historical Landmarks, see < https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=21747 >.

[73] On the museum, see < https://www.ivdesertmuseum.org >.

[74] Mike Wells and Marie Simovich, *A Natural History of the Anza-Borrego Region. Then and Now* (San Diego: Sunbelt, 2020), 184.

[75] Brian Fagan, *Before California. An Archaeologist Looks at Our Earliest Inhabitants* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 295. See also, Mike Wells and Marie Simovich, *A Natural History of the Anza-Borrego Region. Then and Now* (San Diego: Sunbelt, 2020), 180 – 194.

[76] Alex Patterson, *A Field Guide to Rock Art Symbols of the Southwest* (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1992).

[77] About the project, see < https://www.nadb.org/our-projects/infrastructure-projects/ocotillo-express-wind-energy-project >.

[78] "Native American Heritage Commission Declares Ocotillo Wind a Sacred Site, Asks Attorney General to Weigh Legal Action." *East County Magazine* (April 2013). <https://www.eastcountymagazine.org/native-american-heritage-commission-declares-ocotillo-wind-sacred-site-asks-attorney-general-weigh-l >.

[79] Susan Suntree, *Sacred Sites. The Secret History of Southern California* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 260-62.

[80] *Ibid*., p. ix.