



## Landscapes of the New *Ecological* West: Writing and Seeing Beyond the Wilderness Plot

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### *Paget/Hoy Speaker Series*

*Landscapes of the New Ecological West: Writing and Seeing Beyond the Wilderness Plot*  
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### Abstract

*The discursive and aesthetic yoking together of two imperial ideals, “the West” and “the Wilderness,” has framed, plotted and empowered a landscape of expansion and development over the course of North American history—until recently with the advent of the new ecological west. This presentation introduces readers to contemporary landscape writers, historians and photographers who are de-framing and re-visioning the dominant view of the West through ecological art and critique.*

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<sup>2</sup> **About the Paget/Hoy Speaker Series:** Housed in the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Calgary, the Paget/Hoy Speaker Series was established in 1992 byCarolynn Hoy and the late J. Robert Paget to enhance the intellectual experience of the local community and the U of C by bringing distinguished speakers to Calgary. Over the years, the series has brought to the city Sid Marty, Rosemary Sullivan, Carol Shields, Jane Urquhart, J. Hillis Miller, Brad Fraser and the Parliamentary Poet Laureate of Canada, John Steffler.

of new territory in a *westward* direction. From their respective seaboard and settlements in the east, Canadian and American imperialists looked west to a landscape of unlimited prospects in natural resources. "Wilderness" commodities (fur, gold, lumber, land and black gold) were deemed free for the taking by whatever federal agent, company scout or individual prospector could lay first claim and extract raw wealth in a provable, profitable manner. Early views of western geography highlighted the wilderness landscapes of fur traders, buffalo hunters, explorers, cartographers, land surveyors, prospectors, free-range ranchers and other invasive frontier species. In time, these views acquired a far western horizon as settler migrations set out across the wilderness to the promised grazing and growing lands of California's Central Valley and British Columbia's Okanagan. The *Great Plains*, the *Great American Desert* and the *Great Divide* landmark these intrepid westward marches in *grand* narratives of crossing. Those westward-hoers who stayed behind in the wilderness to trap, hunt, prospect and trade with the natives instead of proceeding to greener pastures were themselves deemed wild. Indeed, the figurative "wild West" evokes a landscape of carnival and escape for refugees from the civilized herd.

More recently, since late last century, westerners have been talking about "the West" in terms of "Old West" and "New West," as if the western landscape had bifurcated into distinctive geocultural strata. According to western vernacular, the Old "Wild" West wanes with the settling of the Overlanders into productive and governable populations, the signing of treaties with Native North Americans, the resolute fencing of the open range and the decelerated boom-and-bust of conventional, natural resource-extraction industries (mining and logging); whereas the New West waxes with the global and hyperdevelopment of oil and gas, the spread-and-sprawl of urbanization afforded by intensified damming and irrigation, and the accelerated growth of service-oriented recreation and tourism. The Old West, it is said, reclaims the wilderness with utilitarian earthworks as grand as the Grand Canyon, whereas the New West conserves, restores and reifies select wilderness landscapes as environmental amenities, even as it intensifies the industrialization of wilderness elsewhere. That is, if the Old West conquers and subdues the wilderness to exploitative exhaustion, the New West rediscovers in wilderness surplus aesthetic value for viable prospecting. For the New West there is still gold to be mined in "them thar hills" without necessarily destroying the hills to resource it, "gold" being a vision of the wilderness as *sublime*, and the prospecting of sublimity being more artful than industrial.

If this is a fair reiteration of "Old West" and "New West" parlance, I am not persuaded by its rhetoric of opposition. When I attempt to clarify the terms, the distinction begins to blur. What I discern popular discourse to be saying is that the New West is not so much *new* as *duplicitous* in its approach to the landscape that the Old West framed as wilderness. On the one hand, the New West conserves those wilderness landscapes, usually alpine landscapes, that it reappraises as sublime and inherently uplifting. On the other hand, the New West intensifies the exploitation and degradation of remaining wilderness, notably deserts and wetlands, that it downgrades to wastelands and redeems through industrialization. In other words, the visionary New West wields a double-edged "wilderness plot": one edge self-righteously carves National Parks out of mountain landscapes, whilst the other shamelessly desertifies desert and wetland "wastelands" with a technological militancy that includes atomic bombing. California's Yosemite National Park and Nevada's Nuclear Test Sites exhibit the paradoxical landscapes of this double-edged wilderness plot, though we need not look so far afield: witness Banff and Jasper National Parks versus the Athabasca Oil Sands.

The New West continues and intensifies the Old West's imperial-industrial conquest of western wilderness, though the sublime aesthetics with which it frames select wildernesses distract us from seeing the displacement of indigenous cultures from within the frame, as well as the devastation of wildernesses without. Not everyone, however, is distracted. A number of New West landscape writers and photographers have, in recent decades, complicated our view of the west by putting into place a more complex, ecological, frame of view. A primary aim of my presentation is to review the intervention of these writers and photographers, who instead of fixating on grand and pristine, soul-saving wilderness, frame into view unsettling landscapes of diverse, disjunctive, overlapping and co-evolving wilderness cultures, habitats and territories. Another aim is to preview my own future project of de-framing and re-visioning western Canadian landscapes with an eye to foreseeing sustainable compositions of indigenous and industrial wilderness.

### **New West Landscape Photographers**

Since the mid-1970s, New West landscape photographers have been altering our habit of looking west for grand wilderness views. Then again, landscape photographers played a big hand in cultivating this habit in the first place. It was they who most effectively transformed the Old West's frontier vista of wild badlands into peak visionary prospects. Adapting the sublime aesthetic of European landscape painters and projecting this aesthetic onto Yosemite and other "spectacular" landscapes, they invented and promoted a mass media vision of the West as wilderness sanctuary (Fig.1).



**Fig.1 Albert Bierstadt, "Sunset in the Yosemite Valley," 1896**

[http://www.hagginmuseum.org/collections/bierstadt\\_sunset\\_in\\_the\\_yosemite\\_valley.shtml](http://www.hagginmuseum.org/collections/bierstadt_sunset_in_the_yosemite_valley.shtml)

John Muir's ecstatic wilderness writings helped inspire, and California's burgeoning tourist industry helped employ, their production of a sublime wilderness West. Setting the visual frame were photographers Carleton Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge and Ansel Adams—especially the latter, whose landscape photos of the 1940's-1960's still frame our view of western wilderness today (Fig.2). Canadian landscape photographers exhibit the imprint of the Yosemite photographers. Like Watkins and Muybridge before them, Walter D. Wilcox and Byron Harmon feature mountain glory in classical still-frames of the Canadian Rockies. Ansel Adams's contemporaries, Don Harmon and Harry Rowed adapt Adams's sublime style with color embellishment to photograph Banff and Jasper National Parks, while Tom Willock creates Adams-esque large-format black-and-white photographs of Waterton National Park (Fig.3).



**Fig.2 Ansel Adams, "Thunderstorm, Yosemite Valley," 1945**

<http://thephotexchange.wordpress.com/2010/09/14/ansel-adams-vintage-and-modern-prints-reception-at-duncan-miller/>



**"Moon and Half Dome," 1960**

[http://www.springfieldmuseums.org/news/view/105-ansel\\_adams\\_exhibition](http://www.springfieldmuseums.org/news/view/105-ansel_adams_exhibition)



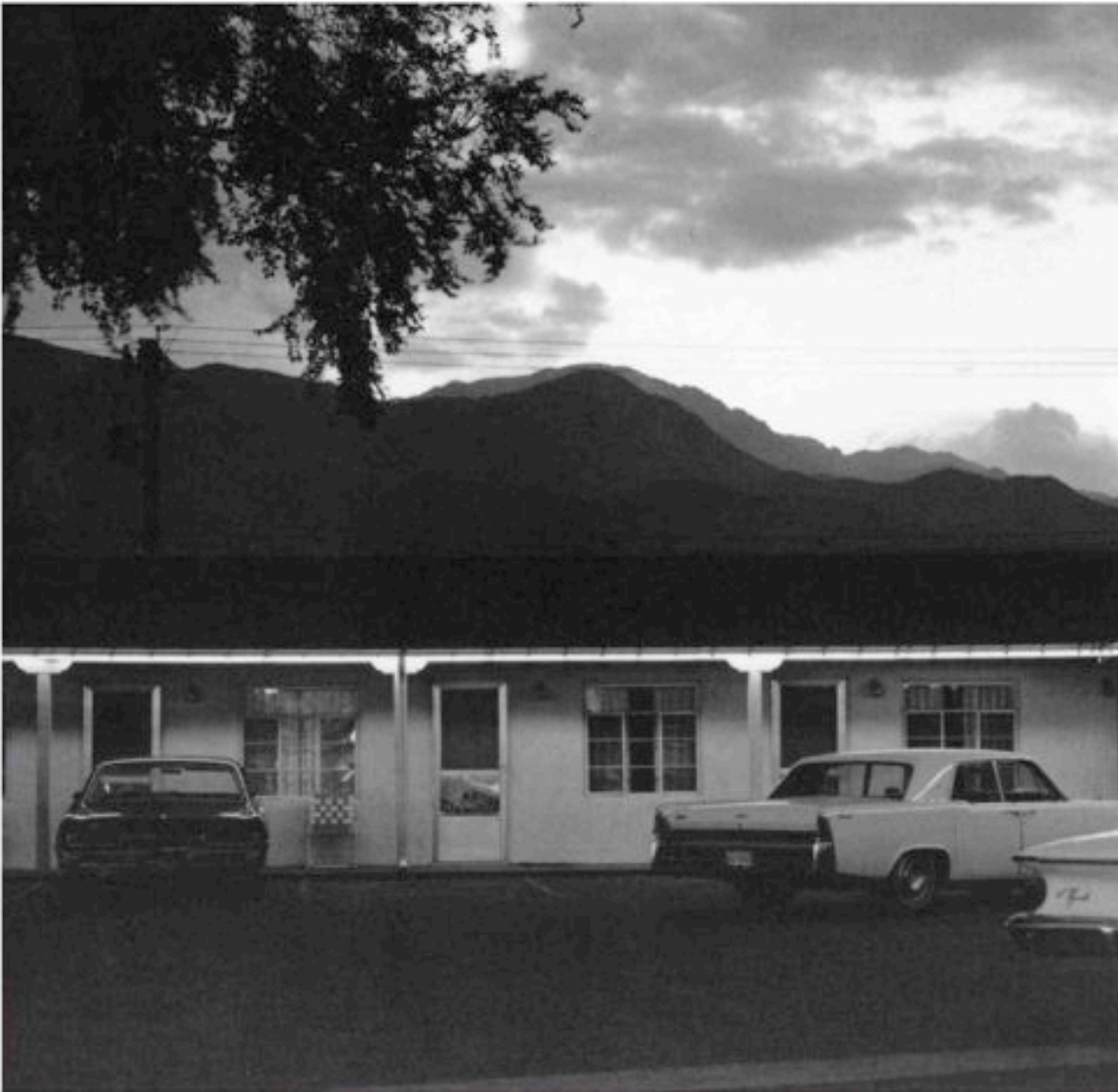
**Fig.3 Tom Willock, "Upper Waterton Valley, Study #2," 2001**

<http://www.willockandsaxgallery.com/willock2.htm>

It was another Adams—Robert Adams—who broke the frame of Ansel Adam’s alpine sublime to bring into view a uniquely western anthropogenic style of inhabiting mountain landscapes. Adams helped mount the 1975 ground-breaking exhibition *New Topographics: Landscapes of a Man-Altered Landscape* that his 1974 publication *New West: Landscapes along the Colorado Front Range* helped to inspire. In place of Ansel Adams’s uninhabited Sierras and Tetons, Robert Adams’s *New West* foregrounds tract housing (Fig.4), roadside motels (Fig.5) and fast-food drive-ins (Fig.6) against the Colorado Rockies. The younger Adams adapts the elder Adams’s technique to highlight suburban construction with a luminescence previously reserved for mountain peaks and valleys. We could say that Adams’s *New West* extends a transcendental aura to the human landscaping of front-range wilderness.



**Fig.4 Robert Adams, “Newly Completed Tract Housing, Colorado Springs,” 1968**  
[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A66&page\\_number=8&template\\_id=1&sort\\_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A66&page_number=8&template_id=1&sort_order=1)



**Fig.5 Robert Adams, "Motel," 1969**  
<http://whitney.org/Collection/RobertAdams>



**Fig.6 Robert Adams, "Drive-In, Colorado Springs," 1968**

*Adams, Robert. The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range. 1974; rpt. New York: Aperture, 2008.*

In the 1990s, Richard Misrach is arguably the photographer who is next to break the New West wilderness frame of view. Instead of glowing mountains, Misrach features the irradiated desert, and he brings a landscape into view that has been not merely man-altered but devastated by atomic testing, mining and fallout (Figs.7, 8). He re-deploys Ansel Adams's sublime strategy in combination with techniques of Gulf War photography. The result: a radiant illumination of the desert's anthropogenic desertification. Edward Burtynsky similarly de-frames and re-visions our view of western Canadian wilderness. Combining Ansel Adams's monumental depth of scope and still-life precision with Robert Adams's foregrounding of built wilderness, along with Misrach's desertified sublime, Burtynsky illuminates the unfathomable expanse of development and devastation of such "manufactured landscapes" as the Alberta oil sands (Fig.9). Burtynsky's *Oil* photographs frame an industrial excavation of the wilderness on a scale never seen before, with a horizon of remnant boreal parkland and wetland in thin retreat from a barren

plain of industrial plants, tailings ponds, chemical rivers and tar-black diggings. In sum, revisions of Ansel Adam's sublime frame of view made by Robert Adams, Richard Misrach and Edward Burtynsky expose the New West's duplicitous glorification and degradation of wilderness, and together they reveal the complex physical-cultural ecology of landscape reclamation.



**Fig.7 Richard Misrach, "Crater and Destroyed Convoy, Bravo 20 Bombing Range," 1986**

[http://www.artinfo.com/media/image/74912/005\\_Misrach\\_BombCraterConvo.jpg](http://www.artinfo.com/media/image/74912/005_Misrach_BombCraterConvo.jpg)





**Fig.8 Richard Misrach, “Dead Animals, #1,” 1987**

[http://www.artinfo.com/media/image/77786/007\\_Misrach\\_DeadAnimals1.jpg](http://www.artinfo.com/media/image/77786/007_Misrach_DeadAnimals1.jpg)



**Fig.9 Edward Burtynsky, “Alberta Oil Sands, #6,”**

<http://thevelvetrocket.com/2009/10/18/photos-of-the-day-industrial-carnage/>

## New West Landscape Writers

In recent years writers have joined photographers to de-frame and re-vision the prevailing image of western landscapes as double-sided (sublime and abject) wilderness. I am thinking of writers of landscape fiction and non-fiction, writers who mix narrative fiction or non-fiction with some combination of cultural and natural history, critical theory and landscape ethnoecology, and who collaborate with photographers to unearth past legacies of conquest and to imagine ways of seeing an *ecological* west. Two writers who come prominently to mind are Rebecca Solnit and Annie Proulx.

Solnit is a freelance journalist and acclaimed creative nonfiction writer who hails from San Francisco. She has authored several books that interrogate and change our view of western landscapes: notably, *Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, 2000; *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*, 2003; *Rivers of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, 2004; with Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, *Yosemite in Time: Ice Ages, Tree Clocks, Ghost Rivers*, 2005; and *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*, 2008—all of which focus on the deployment of landscape art and media technology in the cultural-political production of the American West. Annie Proulx is a freelance journalist and acclaimed fiction writer. Born and schooled in the northeast, she moved to the southwest in 1994 and has since made Wyoming landscapes the subject of her writing. She is most known for her best-selling novel *The Shipping News*, 1994 and her *Wyoming Stories*, 2000-2009, and above all for “Brokeback Mountain,” the short-story that Ang Lee made into a movie and filmed along Alberta’s Front Range. I will briefly review Proulx’s fictional New and Old West landscapes. But what interests me most are her creative non-fiction writings on Wyoming’s Red Desert that she has recently assembled and edited along with various documentary texts by scientists, historians and photos by Martin Stupich. With this latest work, she initiates an ecological reclamation of Wyoming’s forgotten and maligned badlands, and a departure from her fictional satirizing of the place.

Solnit and Proulx advance the latest moves in rewriting the American New West. One could say that the move to revise became critical when Wallace Stegner recanted his view of the West as the “geography of hope”—a view that he first proclaimed in his “Wilderness Letter” of 1960 and that prompted the Wilderness Act of 1964. In *The American West as Living Space*, 1988, Stegner abandons his vision of the West as the last, truly open space for cultivating rugged self-reliance after tracing the savage footprint left by imperialist industrialism on fragile ecosystems, and he castigates westerners for pursuing a boom-and-bust mentality to the exhaustion of both human and natural resources. In place of the New West’s promethean irrigation of urban sprawl, he advocates a humble resettling of the arid landscape in small towns with natural aquifers. Stegner’s *volte face* might well have been provoked by his former student, Edward Abbey. Abbey writes provocative landscape fiction and nonfiction that aims to subvert encroaching urbanism by re-plotting the wilderness ideal in an invigorated wild west style and by locating the “geography of hope” in the canyon lands of the southwest. In *Desert Solitaire*, 1968, he damns the damming of the Colorado River and he revels in ecstatic revelations of the soon-to-be flooded Glen Canyon, while ranting episodically against industrial tourism in favor of the solitary walker’s low-impact contemplations. In praise of unreclaimable wilderness, Abbey exhorts readers to explore the desert at their mortal peril and with sublime appreciation for its extreme indifference to human survival.

Another major New West revisionist is Puebloan author Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko, like Abbey, plots a peripatetic narrative of rediscovery through the arid southwest. Unlike Abbey, she maps territories that were inhabited and cultivated well before the frontier put up fences and reclaimed the “unoccupied” and “unproven” wilderness. Instead of plotting a wilderness ideal, her novel *Ceremony*, 1977, plots what linguist and landscape ethnoecologist Keith Basso would call a narrative of “re-placement”—that is, a narrative which recovers the sacred landmarks, place-names and storied landscapes of Native Americans. Ultimately, she plots a prospective entanglement of New West ranching practices and traditional land management with a view to sustainable living in the arid southwest. To my mind Silko, Stegner and Abbey, set important writerly precedents for Solnit’s and Proulx’s de-framing and re-visioning of the western landscape.

Solnit critiques New West landscaping most explicitly in her double-header essay on “Unsettling the West: Contemporary American Landscape Photography” and “Look the Other Way: New Western Landscapes.” The essay discloses the role played by landscape photography in mediating popular visions of the west. By shifting focus to pristine wilderness from unsightly frontier battlegrounds and mining excavations, “American landscape photography,” Solnit observes, “went from the prehistoric to the ahistoric.” Such erasure, she explains, was mandated by the new art of sublimating wilderness—a more lucrative and creative enterprise than commercial or documentary photography. Critical of this artful erasure of history, contemporary landscape photographers, she observes, compel us to “look the *other* way” by foregrounding Native, minority, and marginal landscapes, including the self-changing landscapes of the earth itself. Solnit features Cynthia Rettig’s “Family Outing Series” of violent recreational activities which westerners casually and routinely enjoy in wilderness landscapes; Rising Buffalo Jackson’s series of in-your-face close-ups of signs demarcating Reservation boundaries against wilderness backdrops; and Robert Dawson’s postcard vistas of California’s toxic waste sites, water systems, flood cycles and agricultural lands.

*Savage Dreams* chronicles Solnit’s critical peripatetics across the nuclear landscape of Nevada. Instead of going solo in search of sublime desert wilderness as Abbey dares us to do, she joins peace activists, Native and non-Native ranchers and downwinders, as well as photographer Richard Misrach on forbidden forays into off-limit military zones and cross-country drives through irradiated territories. En route she reveals a landscape exposed to decades of atomic-bombing, and she mobilizes awareness of State-perpetrated devastation of desert habitats. Solnit notes that the West has been over-represented since Bill Hitchcock’s “Wild West Show” in contrast to the under-represented desert that is but a “void” in the American imagination. She sees the “wild West” and desert “nothingness” converge in the Department of Energy’s photo-display of mushroom clouds rising above the literally voided earth. Misrach, she explains, further exposes the New wild West desert in his photos of super-charged racing cars set to break land-speed records across the playa, and of military debris scattered about nuclear test-sites. To Solnit, these photos illuminate what she calls “Scapelands”—landscapes for enacting fantasies of high-velocity *escape* from all things earth-bound, or for targeting as the scapegoats of cultural abjection.

In *Savage Dreams* Part Two Solnit walks us through the landscape wars that paved the way for the creation of Yosemite National Park. She shows how landscape photographers complement the effort of the U.S. Army to remove Yosemite Indians from their lands by similarly removing images of Indians from

photographic landscapes. If Albert Bierdstadt and Eadweard Muybridge figure Indians in their visual representations of Yosemite's Old "wild" West, Adams "disappears" them from his pristine and unpeopled New West. Kent Monkman has them reappear in paintings that parody this sublime tradition by peopling Yosemite's landscape with Breughel-esque cowboys and Indians, and other Euro-American wilderness fantasies (Fig.10). But parody is not Solnit's strategy. Instead, she chronicles her encounters with traditional methods of Ahwahneechee land-management and her gradual rediscovery of the highly-cultivated garden that Yosemite's "wilderness" once was.



**Fig.10 Kent Monkman, "The Triumph of Mischief," 2006**

<http://simonekeiran.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/the-triumph-of-mischief.jpg>

Solnit has also worked with photographers Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe in their effort to de-frame and re-vision the Yosemite landscape. If, as she argues, Adams freeze-frames the landscape's dynamic ecosystem into a timeless wilderness ideal—an ideal that inspired Park administrators to build viewing platforms from which tourists could frame their own Adams-esque vistas—she and her photographer-collaborators break out of that frame into new, temporal dimensions. In *Yosemite In Time*, she chronicles their explorations in "re-photography" and "fourth-dimensional" time. By photographing the same landscape that Watkins, Muybridge and Ansel Adams photographed decades earlier and across the decades and by placing these photographs side-by-side, Klett and Wolfe discover how re-photography can reveal a *changing* landscape. Moreover, by inserting historic photographs between the frames of a contemporary panorama, they discover a fourth dimension of landscape evolution. In one exemplary study, they take Adam's 1960's black-and-white photo of one part of Yosemite Valley and Watkin's 1860's black and white photo of another part of the Valley, and they superimpose each photo in their corresponding place on a recently-shot color panorama of the Valley so as, Solnit explains, to bring into high-contrast view a landscape moving between the future and the past across a virtual time-lapse continuum (Fig.11).



**Fig.11 Mark Klett and Byron Wolf, "View from the handrail gate at Glacier Point Overlook, connecting views from Ansel Adams to Carleton Watkins," 2003**

<http://byronwolfe.typepad.com/klettwolfe/yosemite/>

Like Solnit, Annie Proulx re-vision the western landscape. Her three-volumes of *Wyoming Stories* figure the sagebrush desert as prime staging ground for historic and contemporary wild west antics. Landscape is the central character of Proulx's fictional West and it is unforgiving, to boot. With the exception of Brokeback Mountain's gay cowboys, whose suffering she treats humanely, Proulx's characters are grotesque disfigurements of frontier living. Despite the dogged, painstaking and heartbreaking efforts of human characters to wreak a livelihood from the land or merely find romantic rural reprieve, the landscape always dwarfs and defeats them. Tortured by relentless wind and drought, swept under by high snows and flash floods, wracked by cycles of industrial boom-and-bust, taunted by surreal desires for unbridled escape, and lost to unsustainable aspirations of rugged individualism, Proulx's westerners signify a devolving ability to adapt to the real, ecological, lay of the land. Her New West Wyoming persists in propagating the follies of the Old West, thus driving the human species towards extinction. As she sees it, the least populated state of the United States breeds a wild wilderness-loving culture at the expense of sense and survival.

Proulx's stories hardly offer good fodder for State advertising (though if you google Brokeback Mountain you'll find a "Panama Real Estate" site that uses Proulx's short-story title to list 270 roadless, rolling acres of prime horse country). Instead, they sound an alarm to anyone who buys into Wyoming's peculiar brand of the wilderness plot. But if her fiction brutally demystifies New West illusions and delusions about the Wyoming landscape, her recent non-fiction reclaims the landscape for ecological realism. As her "Introduction" to *Red Desert* explains, she and her fellow contributors showcase a landscape never-before documented. Like Abbey, she invites readers to visit the Red Desert and see it for themselves, using the book as a guide. Unlike Abbey, she gives practicable advice on how to go equipped with a 4x4, spare tires, reliable maps, lots of water, and a copy of *War and Peace* for when you get stuck and must wait for days until somebody comes with a winch.

Using *Annales School* historiography, Proulx narrates a compendium of artifactual details about desert forts, ranches, river valleys, horse brands, outlaws, railroads, and trails—trails mapped by desert Natives, retraced by settler migrations, and built over by railroads and highways. Her several chapters on Red Desert cultural history and many others written by scientists on natural history (including regional geology, hydrology, biology, paleontology, entomology and botany) compose a complex frame of view through which readers might see this place anew. Stupich's photos add a visual dimension to the composition by documenting industrial and commercial land-use as integral components of Red Desert wilderness (Fig.12). They do not "illustrate" the collective knowledge of the other contributors but add another exploratory dimension. They are his "stand-alone record of the desert over a period of years," Proulx explains, while the text "grew up around what we *didn't* know."



**Fig.12 Martin Stupich, "Railway tracks overgrown with rabbitbrush and sage, Carbon County, Wyoming," n.d.**

[http://222shelbystreet.com/artists/martin\\_stupich/index.html](http://222shelbystreet.com/artists/martin_stupich/index.html)

Solnit and Proulx intervene in the New West's plot to frame the wilderness in visions of the sublime by exposing its blind spots and deploying their respective forms of regional realism (or surrealism, in the case of Proulx's *Wyoming Stories*) to alter the view. Instead of pristinely unpeopled and abjectly deserted wilderness, they re-present the west as an unsettled and unsettling landscape of native and non-native, human and non-human, natural and industrial history and ecology.

Canadian writers also revision New West landscapes with investigatory realism. In Alberta, NeWest Press and *Alberta Views* galvanize a writing scene dedicated to re-viewing New West follies. Notable au-

thors like Rudy Wiebe, Myrna Kostash, Aritha Van Herk and Pamela Banting track and chronicle Native, minority and maverick landscapes from obscurity into bold view. Arguably, Sid Marty goes furthest in giving character to Alberta's western landscapes. His autobiographical adventure stories outfit Rocky Mountain vistas with a folkloric cowboy vernacular. Drawing on his experience as a National Park warden and on escapades of fourth-generation homesteading, Marty narrates an insider's history of western wilderness culture. He views the New West disparagingly from the perspective of the Old West in the persona of a modern old-fashioned mountain man. He rants against development, tourism and incompetent Park administration, and he appeals to Front Range ranching and landscape stewardship. He does not plot a wilderness ideal that prohibits all land-use but he does plot a conspiracy of developers against seasoned land-owners. For a *new* take on New West and Old West views of Canadian wilderness, we might do well to consider, in addition to the literati, the historians, especially Ian MacLaren and Robert Sanford.

### **New Western Historians and the Ecological Turn**

MacLaren and Sanford present two versions of the ecological turn in historicizing the West. Both take on the wilderness plot, if with opposing prescriptions. To shed light on the revisionist impulse of these approaches, I review them in context of the New Western History movement. American writers, photographers and historians precede their Canadian counterparts in plotting an ecological reconsideration of the wild and wilderness west. Visibly altered and damaged by imperialist industrial hydrology, the fragile landscapes of the arid southwest have been the focus of an ecologically-based revisionist history since the mid-1980s. Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* arguably spearheaded this turn in 1985, shortly before Stegner revoked his "geography of hope" in his essay "Living Dry."

Worster investigates how the western U.S. was landscaped for irrigation by a monopoly of dam builders and water barons, and how the Old free-range cattle-ranching West was mapped onto the grid of a modern, rapidly urbanizing, hydraulic society. He pursues these themes further in *Under Western Skies*, 1992, where he urges readers to look "beyond the agrarian myth" that inspired westerners to fence, dam and irrigate—in short, to "pastoral-ize"—the irredeemably arid landscape, and he criticizes "cowboy ecology" no less than "hydraulic society" for plotting unsustainable enterprises of land reclamation. Also in 1992, William Cronon et al published *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*. This collection overturns Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis with a nonlinear history of Native, Métis and Mestizo territorialization in complex conjunction with Euro-American industrialization. It is Cronon who first identifies "the wilderness plot" in his next cutting-edge anthology *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, 1996. His lead essay "The Trouble With Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" critiques the New West's fetish idealization of grand wilderness at the expense of less spectacular landscapes left for unchecked exploitation. He proposes instead that Americans cultivate appreciation for an everyday wildness, even in urban settings, where grass grows with unruly force through the concrete. In doing so, they discover everywhere a common wilderness for living, exploring and connecting with, instead of dreaming about a precious and remote elsewhere for rarefied recreation.

Patricia Nelson Limerick's *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West*, 2001, disorients and reorients western American history by approaching the west by looking east, and as cultivated soil rather than transcendental wild. One notable essay revisits the west from the perspective of Japanese Americans who, during World War II, were forcibly relocated from California's coast to Sierra Nevada's eastern slopes. She unearths Ansel Adams's little-known photographs of "Manzanar" that show prisoners turning the soil of their desert internment camp into sustainable gardens with techniques used to cultivate their original homeland (Fig.13). Limerick has recently gathered a team of New West revisionists from law, linguistics, public policy, landscape architecture, ecology, evolutionary biology, English, music, geoscience, civil engineering, journalism and history to collectively imagine "healing landscapes, histories, and cultures." Their book *Remedies for a New West*, 2009, reflects the complex ecology of the western landscape and it presents a correspondingly complex interdisciplinary strategy for composing sustainable landscapes that goes well beyond wilderness protection.



**Fig.13 Ansel Adams, "Farm workers at Manzanar War Relocation Center with Mount Williamson in the background," 1943**

<http://yosemiteblog.com/2010/07/06/ansel-adams-at-manzanar/>

New Western historians also look to the past *before* a New West wilderness ideal was implanted on the landscape in the form of National Parks. Their research shows that pristine wilderness did not naturally predate human habitation but was artificially imposed on Native American habitat by the New West plot to sublimate the wilderness. In *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 2000, Mark Spence documents how the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the establishment of the first National Parks led to a systematic relocation of indigenous peoples from their traditional territories, including the Shoshone and Western Crow from Yellowstone, the Blackfoot from Glacier, and the Sierra Miwok, Central Valley Yokut and Mono Lake Pai-



ute from Yosemite. In *Tending the Wild*, 2006, Kat Anderson reverses the plot to dispossess the wilderness by recovering Native Californian land-management practices for sustainable wilderness cultivation.

For MacLaren and Sanford the western landscapes most in need of ecological revision are those circumscribed by the National Mountain Parks. But MacLaren researches historic cultures of wilderness with a view to intensified and diversified landscape use, whereas Sanford retrieves development-free prehistoric landscapes as ideal images of future wilderness conservation. Highly skeptical of the National Park mandate to preserve wilderness from people, and fiercely critical of Parks' removal of Native peoples and interference in complex ecological systems, MacLaren documents and investigates past practices of "culturing wilderness" as alternative, if forgotten, views of the Rocky Mountain landscape. His "Introduction" to *Culturing Wilderness*, 2007, explains how the collection recovers two centuries of little-known and hard-to-track evidence of human occupation in the area overlain by Jasper National Park. An outgrowth of the "Culture, Ecology and Restoration Project" that he and others began in 1999, the collection re-maps the landscape with trails and tracks left behind by explorers, fur traders, homesteaders and mountaineers. It also recovers stories of how Métis homesteader/hunter-gatherers made a sustainable wilderness living for themselves and their communities. Such remapping and restorying of the landscape reveal ways of appreciating the wilderness that live and cultivate rather than merely preserve it, and that are, paradoxically, less intrusive and more adaptive than National Parks' conservation and management.

Eric Higgs' contribution to *Culturing Wilderness* uses re-photography to document the greening of Jasper Park landscape as a consequence of the Park's policy and practice of extinguishing forest fires to ensure landscape conformity to an idea of wilderness as lushly forested. Higgs illustrates that restoration begins by abandoning this ideal and learning instead how to enhance self-changing ecological processes native to the landscape. In contrast to MacLaren's recovery of historic initiatives to create sustainable wilderness cultures, Robert Sanford's new book *Ecology and Wonder*, 2010, showcases *prehistoric* and *posthistoric* wilderness landscapes. Instead of culturing wilderness Sanford would protect wilderness more conscientiously than we have. MacLaren remaps the trails and tracks of prior habitation, whereas Sanford retraces Park boundaries that comprise the Canadian Rocky Mountain World Heritage Site. His map of the "Magnificent Seven" (Jasper National Park, Mount Robson Provincial Park, Humber Provincial Park, Banff National Park, Yoho National Park, Kootenay National Park, Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park) is a Canadian counterpart to the conglomerate of Park protectorates along the American Rocky Mountain Corridor. Both maps project a New West where the "future is wild."

Like other New Western Historians, Sanford foregrounds landscape and ecology in his revision of the West. But instead of submitting "the wilderness ideal" to further critique, he plots its recuperation. His content headings spell out a tripartite teleology. "*The West We Had: Foundations of Place*" precedes "*The West We Have: Making the Mountains Our Home*," which precedes "*The West We Want: Creating a Culture Worthy of Place*" in a transcendental synthesis of monumental nature and mountain-inspired culture. Under the rubric of "*The West We Had*," Sanford recounts the natural and Native history of the area to establish an idea of pre-Contact wilderness as "foundational" to future preservation schemes. For *The West We Want*, he prescribes a "Pleistocene re-wilding of the West" that foresees the reintroduction of bison to mountain grasslands, as well as *prescribed* burns to approximate natural burn cycles.

Sanford's teleology is inspiring. But it is a version of New West vision that divides industrial and inhabitable from natural and inaccessible wilderness, and that distracts ecological attention (and climate-change apprehension) to the saving spectacle of Great Divide watersheds. Sanford advocates putting into place a landscape ethic whereby westerners feel bound to restore mountain wilderness as it was before modernity disturbed its prehistoric integrity. The driver of this Janus-faced plot is "wonder," which Sanford evokes with sublime landscape photography and eye-witness testaments to the pristine glory of glacial headwaters. Not shy to use words like salvation and posterity, Sanford raises the wilderness ideal to a new onto-theo-ecological level. The preservation of Rocky Mountain wilderness is, accordingly, western culture's greatest triumph and humankind's singular hope for meeting such mortal challenges as global warming and diminishing fresh water sources. If we are to take this triumph to heart, we must recognize the "sublimities" of the place we have territorialized to protect. To this end, Sanford showcases *The West We Have* in a pantheon of writing, painting, photography and mountaineering that makes the sublime wilderness a place to inhabit ethically and aesthetically.

The moral of *Ecology and Wonder* is this: we can all reach the promised land and reclaim the Great Divide mountains as home to our most cherished aspirations by stepping off the path of development to reside in low-impact wonder. If we do not already live in a mountain town, and even if we do, our prospective place in the wilderness is and should be elsewhere, as Sanford's previous book *The Weekender Effect: Hyperdevelopment in Mountain Towns*, 2009, warns. Yet, if this place exists outside the transcendental imagination, it cannot accommodate traditional land-use practices or new enterprises in sustainable living. An ecology of wonder does not permit a reintroduction of human species into its revered landscape. If Sanford highlights images of Rocky Mountain First Peoples, it is not to recover aboriginal ecological knowledge for sustainable future mountain living but to idealize "The West We Had" as paradise lost.

## **Becoming Landscapes of the New *Ecological West*: A Preview**

Having reviewed the ecological turn in New West landscape writing, photography and history, I will end this presentation with a *preview* of two landscape compositions that I am currently in the process of developing. In these becoming landscapes, I incorporate many of the de-framing and re-visioning strategies I have just reviewed. One landscape focuses on an area in the Front Range east of Canmore, while the other focuses on the boreal foothills near Moberly Lake in northeastern BC. I call the former "Yamnuska" and the latter, "Landsong."

### **"Yamnuska"**

To see beyond the wilderness plot, I look just outside National Park boundaries to Alberta's Front Range where indigenous, industrial, recreational, agricultural and wilderness landscapes visibly abut, overlap, collide and co-evolve. Alberta's Front Range hosts a calamity of wilderness ecologies that escape National Park framing and administering. With the exception of the Morely Reserve, which falls under Federal jurisdiction, the eastern slopes comprise Provincial Crown Land that the Alberta government leases to various industrial and agricultural ventures, and/or that it reserves as Provincial Park land for recreational use and conservation. The Province, however, leases land to industry and/or preserves it for wil-

derness with little sense of how landscape-use may be orchestrated to the benefit of all stake-holders and cohabitants. "Yamnuska" is an interesting case-in-point.

As a literary critic and composer of a new *ecological* west, I combine peripatetic narrative and landscape photography to create minor and emerging landscapes. In contrast to the statistical grids made by industrial ecologists that homogenize difference into economic units of resource management, I project landscapes of amplified and evolving heterogeneity. That is, instead of dividing wilderness from industry, avoiding overlaps of native and non-native territories, or superimposing human on nonhuman habitats, I frame the complex and dynamic entanglement of different territories and habitats into view with an eye to perceiving how their differences might be mutually sustaining. Furthermore, I restore to vision the buried layers of cultural archeology that shape the "Yamnuska" landscape by showing how the area's present designation within the "Bow Valley Wildland Provincial Park" is underlain by aboriginal place-names and mappings of trails, waterways, hunting grounds and sacred sites.

"Yamnuska" might best be thought of as a guided walk through a landscape that is most highly land-marked by Yamnuska Mountain. A sublime framing of the landscape would highlight the mountain's sun-catching flat-face (Fig.14). Conversely, my "walk" traverses a multiplicity of different, conjunctive and disjunctive, wilderness landscapes wherein the mountain always appears but not always in the centre and foreground (Fig. 15). My Yamnuska presents a constellation of biological and geological landscapes, including alpine, subalpine and boreal ecologies that feature calcareous spring fen complexes and glacial landforms such as drumlins, eskers, kettles and kames. Close-up views reveal delicate and diminutive plant species like the yellow lady's slipper, while telescopic views reveal rare bird species like white pelicans and trumpeter swans. Face-on views of the Mountain bring into focus the landmark thrust fault that gives rise to its vertical landscape. My Yamnuska also constellates industrial, indigenous and urban wilderness. A panoramic view from Pigeon Mountain to the southwest reveals the conglomerate of La Farge, Bay Mag and Graymont limestone and magnesium quarries and refineries, as well as the CPR railroad, Trans-Canada Highway and Old Coach Road transportation networks that scarify and criss-cross Bow Valley Wildland and Kananaskis Provincial Park topography. An eye-level close-up of the walls of Grotto Canyon sights Hopi pictographs dating back 700 to 900 years, while eye-to-the-ground tracking discovers 12,000 year-old Clovis sites on the banks of Hector Lake. A view from Brewster Kananaskis Ranch foregrounds a pastoral landscape with Yamnuska Mountain as scenic backdrop; whereas views that foreground Canmore's Landfill, Seebe Dam, and LaFarge quarries reconfigure Yamnuska's alpine wilderness as an industrial landscape. And a reverse view *from* Yamnuska mountain looks over a complex panorama of the Stoney Nakoda landscape, including "Nakoda Lodge" on Hector Lake, the "Stoney Casino" off Hwy. 1, Reserve homesteads on Morely Flat and logged clear-cuts on the slopes of the Kananaskis Range.



**Fig.14 A sublime view of Yamnuska Mountain**  
<http://www.wallpaper-z.com/images/wallpapers>



**Fig.15 Yamnuska's mosaic landscape of mixed ecologies, with Mount Yamnuska decentred (author's photo)**

In my frame of view, Yamnuska Mountain becomes a composite geocultural landscape in itself. The sharp vertical rise of its southeastern face overlooks the western edge of the Morely Reserve: the mountain frames the Stoney-Nakoda landscape into view. To the Stoney-Nakoda the mountain is a spiritual landmark. A photograph of its iconic face figures on the cover of *These Our Sacred Mountains*, Chief John Snow's history of the Stoney people. Sioux-speaking elders named it "Îyâmnathka" ("flat-faced mountain") before changing it to "Mount John Laurie" in tribute to their English-speaking friend and advocate. Mountain climbers know the mountain simply as "Yam," a punchy abbreviation of the English corruption of the Stoney place-name. Place-names make places and "Yam" is no exception. Cultivating their own sacral values, climbers reclaim the mountain with "trad routes" and "rad lines," all of which have names and stories—names and stories that reflect an evolving geophilosophy. My Yamnuska will, therefore, feature such different views of the mountain as those seen from Morely Flat, where the mountain appears most luminous and ascendant; from the Nakoda burial ground to the east above the McDougall mission, where the actual mountain cannot be seen but where headstones engrave its sacred spectre (Fig.16); from the "Eyrâhi Nakoda Campground, where the mountain orients the riverside camper with a cardinal sense of direction otherwise obscured by forests and foothills; and from a climber's perspective of immersion in Yam's force-field of spatiality and gravity (Fig.17).



Fig.16 Stoney-Nakoda Yamnuska (author's photo)



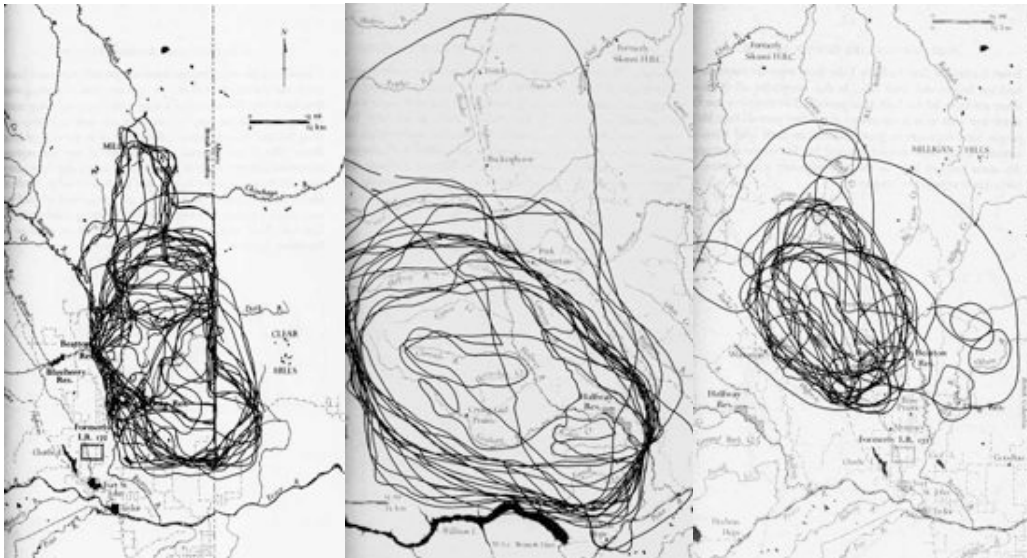
**Fig.17 Climber's Yamnuska (author's photo)**

To these primarily spatial perspectives, I plan to add a temporal dimension by incorporating re-photography into my composition. I will also document the visual component with a peripatetic narrative that will guide the reader forward and backward through the landscape with cues to seeing the cultural strata of natural history and, vice versa, the natural strata of cultural history. By writing landscape ethnography in creative nonfiction, I can jump-cut conventional chronology and interweave New West, Old West, and indigenous stories of place, together with my own walk-about chronicles of rediscovery. The result: a mosaic landscape that gives view to imagining how its composite parts might make a mutually beneficial fit.

### **"Landsong"**

My "Landsong" project derives its name from "Landsong Heritage Consulting Ltd.," a small heritage resource company based out of Moberly Lake in northeast BC. Founded in 1998 by archaeologist Beth

Hrychuk, the company has conducted hundreds of projects for government and industry. Why northeast BC? Because, as writer and film maker Hugh Brody observed decades ago, “in northeast BC the old North became the new West” due to an untimely clash of traditional and postmodern economies that, to me, remains untimely and warrants revisiting. In *Maps and Dreams*, Brody points to the region’s economic shift from colonial mercantilism to oil and gas drilling and pipelining, and to how expeditiously industry superimposed its infrastructure with little knowledge of the habitat and territories it was sectoring. To make visible this other, prior landscape, he traces the seasonal routes, trails and trap-lines first made and still very much used by semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, and he invents a complex rhizome-mapping to demarcate the interweaving and overlapping of traditional territorial pathways belonging to different neighboring tribes (Fig.18). If the New West scans surface topography and sees but empty wilderness for mapping onto its grid, Brody’s nomadic cartography sees otherwise. How does this overlap of landscapes look thirty years later? More to the point, how can I re-map and re-chronicle this overlap to bring a sustainable landscape into prospective view? In “Landsong Heritage Consulting Ltd,” I find a ready-made start to this project.



**Fig.18 Hugh Brody, Territorial Maps of the “Doig River Reserve: Hunting”; “Blueberry River Reserve: Hunting”; “Halfway Reserve: Hunting,” in *Maps and Dreams* (pp. 161, 163, 169)**

The company has distinguished itself as an agent of negotiating pipeline re-routing to accommodate aboriginal land-use practices. Taking its name, in part, from Dunne-za shamans whose song-lines once guided hunters through the bush, Landsong observes these ancient song-lines as metaphorical guidelines for its revisionist cartography. In surveying the landscape with traditional ecological knowledge, Landsong does more than just locate archeological sites: it charts a continuity between paleo, historical and contemporary aboriginal land-use, and it assesses the potential impact of industry on traditional cultural ecology overall. Landsong conducts landscape negotiations not only between industry and aboriginals but also between neighboring Saulteaux, Cree, Dunne-za First Nations and Métis. It raises industrial focus from unary archeo- or eco-sites to what Hrychuk calls the “landscape level” of overlapping

and changing territories, resources and interests (Fig.19). After mapping and assessing this overlap, it recommends how industry might alter its blueprints for traditional landscape-use to continue. It releases detailed ecological documentation to Band Councils, in addition to the archeological assessments requisitioned by industry. Moreover, it has a meticulous archive of project reports, complete with maps and photos of affected landscapes and adaptive changes.



**Fig.19 Landsong's landscape level land-use negotiations (author's photo)**

In other words, Landsong endorses a landscape ethic that values First Nations's ecological sense of and territorial claims to the land. It requires through contract or negotiation that clients consult with local Elders and recognize the validity and significance of traditional ecological knowledge. Ultimately, it gives precedence to habitat over profit. Landsong's story is ready for composing into a powerful re-vision of landscape mapping and resourcing. I propose to assemble its archive of reports into a primary text, identify precedent-setting projects, and select significant details with which to map, photo-illustrate and narrate its success in negotiating the creation of sustainable landscapes (Fig.20). I will walk the land that Landsong remaps and enter my own landscape peripatetics into the composition.





**Fig.20 Landsong's aerial view of industrial and indigenous ecologies near Moberly Lake, BC (author's photo)**

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As these previews of "Landsong" and "Yamnuska" show, it is possible to de-frame and re-vision the landscape of the New West. In place of the New West's plotting and parceling of the wilderness into sublime National Parks and aesthetically irredeemable wastelands, these alternative landscapes compose a virtual mosaic of multiple and different wilderness ecologies that can help us to see what makes and what undermines a sustainable and mutually beneficial mix.

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