

The camera on the dashboard wobbles as we crest a hill on a road carved out of pale limestone and the unrelenting blue sky is suddenly hijacked by gradients of umber hued rock formations. Mesas, flat topped hills, fill the horizon and stare down at our small car passing by. It is cliché to describe the desert as empty, but there aren't any other vehicles on the Interstate. Out of shot, every phone is fully charged, and in the trunk six large bottles of *Ozarka 100% Natural Spring Water* intermittently pool amongst our luggage. Stopping here could be fatal, the sun will shrivel our bodies and in the evening curious rattlesnakes might slither to find us. The American West is about survival and grit and heroism; it functions as a mythology to remind the European settler to be sufficiently arrogant about their brave triumph over mortality. The footage is old and the quality of the video is granular, but something catches my eye in the recording of this forbidding, vast landscape. A rocking motion is captured in the distance and the soothing gesture is clone-stamped across the flatlands foregrounding the mesas. Moving like a hummingbird drinking nectar, the motion appears animalistic. It is in fact the mechanical work of a determined pumpjack pulling petroleum up into the present day from its origins in layers of decayed organic matter, which laid to rest millions of years ago. The wildness of the landscape becomes a capitalist trinity; extracted, contained in barrels and sold. It is here where a cycle of contradictions begin: the decomposed layers under the floor of the desert bring life as we know it when extracted as fossil fuels, and when released into the atmosphere these fossil fuels threaten the extinction of the earth. It is almost biblical in its telling. The arid lands of the American West are no stranger to the rhetoric of interloping religions; from the spiritual practices of Native Americans entwined with the environment and European colonialists seeking virginal territory in infinite, silent landscapes.

The Californian writer Rebecca Solnit spent her formative years living a somewhat nomadic existence in the desert of the American West, as an activist protesting nuclear testing in the Great Basin of Nevada (of which the Mojave overlaps). In her book *Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (1999) Solnit starts to view the landscape as the type of place that “brings together histories which seem unrelated - and when they come together it becomes possible to see new connections in our personal and public histories and stories, collisions even. A spiderweb of stories spreads out from any place, but it takes time to follow the strands”. Part of the reason the desert makes space for tales are the illusory properties of the land. Within Solnit's text the ancient landscape appears to exist beyond articulation. The arid air warps distance perception, the rock and the dust ripple and shimmer throughout the day to generate new landscapes dependent on sun or moon. It is an illusory place where layers collide into intersections, causing our minds to question the input from our senses. Solnit's description of the desert as a hallucination is much like the atmosphere of the Cairngorms, a Scottish mountain range, which formed the backdrop of my childhood. Describing the Cairngorms in *The Living Mountain* (1977) Nan Shepherd recalls a plane flying through the thin mountain air: “I stood one day on the Lurcher's Crag and heard the engine of a plane, and looked naturally upwards; but in a moment I realised the sound was below me. A plane was

edging its way steadily through the great gash that separates the two halves of the plateau, the Lairig Ghu. From where I stood, high above it, its wing-tips seemed to reach rock to rock. I knew that this was an illusion and that the wings had ample room". Both Solnit and Shepherd realise the space for storytelling amongst landscapes that have the potential for hallucinations. Shepherd speaks of entering the mountain to fully know its being. This way of experiencing nature allows us to read landscapes formed through millennia as shifting entities to enter *into* without conquering or extracting from; so the land stretches out before us as bodily sensations parsed by our minds.

Returning to watch the desert through a screen I pause and fast forward the video, frustrated at the slow progress of our journey. Finally the endless scrolling of mesas, joshua trees and creosote bushes come to a halt. Next, the camera is pointed at the earth. I stop it here and dramatically zoom in to the sand, just as the laptop screen goes blank. The screen ripples with a sublime slick of metallic colour, revealing the materiality of the Liquid Crystal Display. A component in the hardware has failed and I wonder if the silicon dioxide coating behind the glass has eroded to make the crystals float in front of my eyes like the aurora. It is a rare occurrence for the raw materials of such technologies to make an entrance. When the screen is repaired I discover that silicon dioxide used in this way is sand dredged from deserts and seas and rivers, packaged and sold for industrial use. Looking back along the recording of the highway it is not uncommon to see weather beaten structures in the desert mulching back down into the earth. More often than not there are the remnants of industrial machinery in these holdings, a reminder that this place has not just been mined for oil. These abandoned structures can also be illusions; sometimes they are discarded movie sets, re-creating a mythology of the West created by white settlers to justify their presence. Sometimes they are movie sets re-imagining the type of decaying pile you find in this landscape. These deceitful structures pull me back to Shepherd's uncanny encounter with the plane on the plateau. Like these structures and my failing screen, the plane lingers in her memory (of that place) as an inexplicable phenomenon, when technology and humanity and culture shifted her perception of a landscape she thought she understood.

These mirages in the desert are based upon a historical narrative. European settlers came to these lands not seeking the majesty displayed in early landscape photography, but to plunder the riches underneath the image. A driver for the American technological 'progress' of the nineteenth century was the promise of mines composed of tin, copper and gold in the West. These raw materials accelerated the accumulation of riches as they accelerated technological progress. Despite the structures of this era turning into fossils, this capitalistic definition of progress has not halted. At face value it looks as though these mines have run dry, but the trinity of extraction, repackaging and selling raw material has not. There is gold and copper lurking beneath the keyboard I use to type this text. Cobalt has a role in sustaining the battery warming my lap. The territories of where they were extracted are concealed from the consumer, but I know they have been lifted out of the earth's lithosphere. Our virtual world exists because of the alchemy of the raw materials taken from the land we mythologise, yet the primacy of these raw materials are at a remove from the narrative of technology. Alongside the labour used

to extract these materials, the blue-grey sheen of silicon is obscured from *Silicon Valley* and is instead broken down and dematerialised into aspirational concepts and products, which relay other worlds inside our daily reality.

Just like viewing a recording of the desert on a screen without elements mined from the earth is impossible, it is also difficult to view the landscape of the American West without acknowledging the effect of industrialisation in the nineteenth century. In this era, the rapid expansion of American railroads to transport goods from coast to coast sped up the greed for natural materials. This shift coincided with the availability of photography. In her book about the photographer Eadweard Muybridge published in 2003, Rebecca Solnit describes in detail the insatiable hunger for stripping the American landscape of natural materials to equip burgeoning industry. She makes an observation of the culture then that resonates so completely with western culture today, it is as if humanity has buried itself in purgatory for over a century: “what was vanishing as an ecology was reappearing as imagery. Landscape showed up in the stereoscope cards in parlors, in the floral patterns on dresses and saddles and silverware, in the scenery engraved on pocket watches”. We have replaced objects with liking placeless sunsets on Instagram, the sound of waves crashing on a beach is delivered to our ears by an app designed to help us sleep and we choose generic mountains to background our computer desktops. This is where the spiderweb of this text reaches out to collide with another intersection. These patterns of consumption suggest a future similar to some of the ideas presented in *Gulf Futurism* by Sophia Al-Maria and Fatima Al Qadiri. Both view the artificial lifestyles of the oil rich Gulf States - moving from one air conditioned pocket to another - as prophecies for a future spent indoors. An impending domestic life will be spent sheltering from environmental catastrophe and an embargo on toxic fossil fuels.<sup>1</sup> With the natural world degenerating into a pixelated state around us, it is not outlandish to predict that in future generations we will enter into the mountains, the rolling hills or the desert through a simulation created for our digital world. If this is the case, then the sole morbid question we need to decide is how we want these simulations to appear; as hyper-real reproductive representations or as speculative explorations into how the memory of landscape makes us feel and think; taking the approach outlined in *The Living Mountain* (1977) by Nan Shepherd.

Scientifically it is without doubt that our natural world is diminishing because of human intervention. Yet, we are determined to mine silicon dioxide for the manufacture of LCD screens, copper and gold for printed circuit boards, gallium and indium for Silicon Valley’s semiconductors and, cobalt for lithium-ion batteries to be assembled into an ecology, like the Mojave or the Cairngorms, to bring the digital world to life. And because of these new ecologies we can be immersed in an illusion of the Mojave. Our autobiographies are inscribed in these virtual ecologies too, with codes and signals and switches. The hostile climate of the desert undermines the chances of human survival, yet it is a landscape of death that is both finite and generative. Arid regions contain: copper, gold, zinc, gypsum, salts, borates, beryllium, mica, lithium, clays, pumice, scoria, sodium carbonate, sulfate, borate, nitrate, lithium, bromine, iodine,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/15040/1/the-desert-of-the-unreal>

calcium and strontium compounds<sup>2</sup> ready for extraction as much as they are ready for profit. Despite this, upon these minerals in the Mojave, spaced far apart for survival, are enduring joshua trees and creosote bushes. Under the shade of these stoic shrubs live communities of insects, lizards and animals. I go back to the video of driving through this landscape, carelessly warping the imagery with pauses, fast forwards and rewinds. One spot in the footage causes me to halt, where I can almost see the outline of a desert tortoise, a creature content to only experience the area of a square mile for its 80 years on earth, facing with its back to us as it continues on its parochial journey.

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Written to accompany *Under the Creosote*, (2017), a new abstract digital video work and series of short studies, by LA based artist Andrew Benson.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/deserts/minerals/>