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Laying the Groundwork: Desert Spaces and the Sacralization of U.S. Settler Colonialism

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Religious Studies

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Anna-Elena Maheu

Lewiston, Maine | Traditional territory of the Wabanaki Confederacy

May 5, 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Sand, loam, flaking earth, shimmering heat. Sloping dunes. Cracked scales of salt and short, bristled, scattered growing things. Silver sagebrush, fragrant brittle brush. Lobed, waxy leaves taut with water reserves. Holes, tunnels, and arches nurtured into shape by eons of trickling water, shifting sediment. A rhythmic stillness like a lung expanding and contracting. Towering mesas, and homes. Sharp corners rising up out of the heat, adobe, cob, limestone. Wavering gas stations. Dusty currents of stars. Sky—boundless sky. Sonoran. Chihuahua. Black Rock. Sinai. Mojave. Gobi. Death Valley. Negev. Thar. Sahara.

The desert is elusive. Etymologically sourced from its verb form “to desert,” meaning to forsake, to abandon, a desert implies an emptiness in all senses of the word – uncultivated, uninhabited, unexplored.¹ By naming a body of land “desert,” any content of that land is overwritten by an entire network of symbolism that informs interactions with it. The desert makes for a useful metaphor or analogy. The desert represents nullity, a profound sense of “lack,” something defined by what it is not, rather than what it is. Deserts are cursed; they are also sacred. The emptiness of the space signals purity—and death. Deserts are dangerous; they are liberating. The desert is sublime. The desert is at once exquisite wilderness and barren wasteland.

As semiotically fraught as it is, the desert is also an undeniable topographical and sensorial reality. This reality is difficult to dispute, particularly when standing among the dusty red textures of the deserts in what is now called the southwestern United States. The light, dry air creates a sensation of buoyancy in the feet and the heart. As inundated with discursive,

¹ Farouk El-Baz, "Origin and Evolution of the Desert," *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 13, no. 4 (1988): 331-347.

metaphorical, and historical deserts as we are, deserts can still be touched, smelled, tasted. Desert botanist and writer Gary Paul Nabhan writes,

We can liken a desert landscape to a prism, through which each observer from a different culture, discipline, or political ideology sees it in a different light. And yet, just as the prism is a palpable multidimensional entity, a concrete material with an existence independent of any intellectual attempts we may make to circumscribe it, so too do arid landscapes exist in a realm independent of our thoughts.²

Deserts are spaces that are intimately and personally known as much as they are culturally and discursively constructed.

However, in *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Wasteland Aesthetics*, Aidan Tynan points out that “it is not at all obvious where the distinction between the real and the rhetorically constructed desert lies,” noting that even ecologists have struggled to delineate what exactly is and is not “scientifically” a desert. Tynan goes on to say that deserts “challenge life’s ability to *make* a place for itself. They thus tend to put our conceptions of place and belonging into question.”³ Other scholars of the desert have noted this exigent quality of the space, particularly in the context of the United States. The central question, Patricia Limerick writes, that baffled nineteenth century Euro-Americans as they began to colonize the desert of the southwest was, “What was the purpose of the desert?”⁴

Catrin Gersdorf’s *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* investigates the implications of the desert in the discursive production of “America.” Responding to a turn in American Studies to recognizing the fluidity of the

² Gary Paul Nabhan, “The Nature of Desert Nature: A Deep History of Everything that Sticks, Stinks, Stings, Sings, Swings, Springs, or Clings in Arid Landscapes,” *The Nature of Desert Nature*, ed. Gary Paul Nabhan (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020), 10.

³ Aidan Tynan, *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 2.

⁴ Patricia Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1985), 82.

conceptual and geographical borders of the nation, Gersdorf presents the desert as a “significant medium of American self-creation and identification.”⁵ This process of creation and identity formation occurs along the blurred boundaries between the narrative and imagined desert, and the “real” desert. In Gersdorf’s words: “The transformation of nature into civilization, land into landscape, landscape into text, and text into a social and political tool for producing and reproducing a nation’s cultural identity is a process foundational for our understanding of America.”⁶ The desert, as a topography that posed a serious challenge to U.S. territorial expansion and identity, can and should be studied as a model for how U.S. spatial narratives served to interpret, construct, and reconstruct a national sense of place and belonging.

The construction of belonging is a key narrative technology of settler colonialism. In this thesis, I contend that looking to the desert provides significant insight into the function of settler-colonial statecraft within the U.S. To engage with the U.S. as a settler-colonial state is to acknowledge the formation of “America” as a historic and ongoing campaign of violence. Johan Galtung’s violence triangle delineates violence into three interlocking and mutually reinforcing categories—direct, structural, and cultural. Cultural violence takes the form of narratives, ideologies, religions, spiritual systems, sciences, and symbols that justify or legitimize structural and direct violence.⁷ These abstractions may not be violent on their own but, inasmuch as they are deployed in service to violence, they constitute a form of “cultural violence.” Settler colonialism relies on the relationships of reciprocal reinforcement among all three violences. Religious ideologies and narratives, more specifically Christian ones, were and continue to be pervasive in the project of U.S. national identity formation. As a form of cultural violence in the

⁵ Catrin Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (Kenilworth: Rodopi, 2009), 22.

⁶ Gersdorf, *Poetics and Politics*, 13.

⁷ Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 294.

U.S. context, biblical narratives and the supremacy of Christianity itself were both harnessed to justify initial colonization and continued expansion.

As Steven Newcomb, Anders Stephanson, and George Williams have noted, Christianity and Christian models of chosenness were instrumental in the formation and justification of early Euro-American identity.⁸ The biblical “Promised Land” narrative, as it served to validate and authorize settlement and statecraft, has been explored by countless others and, while it is fundamental to the Christian desert narrative that I describe, the desert itself (as an uninhabitable, transitional space) is the focus of this project. The desert on its own is not promised land; rather, it is a space of testing, of identity formation, of vulnerability. It is a proving ground that determines, bears witness to, and reinforces chosenness. The desert precedes the promised land.

The desert is significant to biblical religion in the sense that both Judaism and Christianity emerged from arid topographies. In the sacred texts of Christianity, the desert is an important narrative setting and metaphor, and it continued to play a formative role in the ancient cultural contexts of early Christian believers. The first Christian monks were called the “Desert Fathers,” ascetic practitioners who lived in the desert so as to encounter God, test their faith, and extricate themselves from the impurities and impermanence of material society. They reenacted a desert experience that is narrated in the Old Testament⁹ and recapitulated in the New Testament. Unlike more contemporary connotations of “wilderness,” within the U.S. cultural context—which evoke images of thickly forested spaces filled with lush, green, and wet vegetation—the

⁸ Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, 1st ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing Inc., 2008); George H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962).

⁹ I will refer to the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh) as the Old Testament throughout this thesis because I am interpreting this text in its Christian context; that is, as a text which served as a guide for the New Testament/for the Jesus movement, rather than Judaism’s sacred text.

wilderness of the Bible is interchangeable in meaning with “desert.” The characters of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament emerged from the arid topographies of Egypt and Palestine, and the narrative function of wilderness in these texts defines it as deserted and uninhabitable land. The Greek Old Testament generally uses *eremos*, referring to deserted and empty places, uncultivated land, and loneliness and neglect, for the Hebrew Bible’s *midbar*. English translations will oscillate between the words “desert” and “wilderness” for this same term. The Euro-American “wilderness” — a “pristine” and “untouched” landscape filled with consumable resources (timber, water, fertile soil) that have yet to be consumed — is the antithesis of a desert wasteland, and yet they are both wildernesses. The desert, however, is perhaps better described as an alternative form of wilderness, and its unique narrative and semiotic functions in U.S. cultural consciousness make it ripe for analysis. How do settler colonizers lay claim to “wasteland?”

This project asks the question, then, of how sacralized narratives of ancient Christian deserts give shape to a settler-colonial desert narrative in the U.S. At the heart of this thesis is the proposition that mechanisms of sacralizing and naturalizing are essential to making settler colonialism invisible and that unearthing the religious foundations for contemporary national narratives sheds light on these disguising mechanisms in ways that can help to *denaturalize* them.

I argue that U.S. settler encounters with deserts are informed by an early, Northeast African Christian narrative that configures deserts as spaces where vulnerability paradoxically creates power. In this ancient and foundational Christian context, deserts are spaces that necessitate divine intervention, as they render those within them vulnerable to the endangering conditions of the landscape. This narrative of divine intervention is interwoven with one of

divine testing and casts the desert as a space for collective identity trans/formation.¹⁰ The desert becomes the literal ground on which the power associated with the biblical paradigm of chosenness is claimed. In the U.S. context, these dynamics function to authorize, sacralize, and naturalize settler claims to these landscapes and the violent settler-colonial projects carried out in them. I provide case studies in U.S. history that exemplify the recurrence of this Christian desert enactment and reveal how these processes of sacralizing and naturalizing are vital to upholding the settler-colonial state.

What is clear from the work of Gersdorf, Tynan, and Limerick is that the desert space is both constructed and experienced; desert topographies are experienced and narrativized and then experienced again. The desert is not merely a space of imagination but is one where materiality and imagined materiality are indistinguishable. In order to account for this hybridity and navigate this multi-layered space, I apply the analytical categories of critical spatial theory—in particular Edward Soja’s First-, Second-, and Thirdspace. Following this introduction, the first chapter provides the theoretical underpinnings for my argument, expanding first upon settler-colonial theory and concepts of naturalizing, collective identity, and cultural violence. I then define in depth the analytical tools provided by critical spatial theory.

In the second chapter, I present a Christian narrative of the desert as it is articulated in biblical texts and Desert Father literature, contending that the Desert Fathers are representative of early Christian reception and enactments of the biblical desert and exemplify this narrative taking form in the early Christian movement. I locate, first, the dynamics of vulnerability/divine

¹⁰ I make the orthographic choice of “trans/formation” to conceptualize identity formation as a process of transformation and vice-versa. The formation of collective identity is not static; rather, it is an ongoing process of formation in which the evolution—the transformation—of collective identity is an essential character of that identity. As I demonstrate in this project, the desert is a space for identity and narrative formation *and* transformation, and these processes are entirely fused.

intervention along with divine testing and collective identity trans/formation in the biblical texts. I then apply the categories of First, Second, and Thirdspace to demonstrate how the Desert Fathers present a desert space that is a product of both biblical desert narratives and the perceived material landscape.

The third chapter presents my first, and broadest, case study—the shifting narrative of the "Great American Desert" in early settler encounters with the U.S. deserts. The desert first served as a natural boundary for U.S. expansion, but eventually evolved to become a symbol of U.S. territorial control and destiny. I illuminate the perpetuation of the early Christian desert narrative as its themes reappear in this spatial narrative shift and argue that the "Great American Desert" is, too, a site wherein the landscape's effect of rendering trespassers vulnerable imbues an evolving national identity with power and sacralized authority through divine intervention and testing.

The following case study examines the narrative construction of the desert by the early Mormon pioneers¹¹ as they migrated from the midwestern frontier to settle in and colonize the Great Basin. I focus in particular on the retroactive narrative shift of the space of the migration and the space of the Salt Lake Valley upon arrival. To reinforce a collective Mormon pioneer identity and sanctify (and expand) their settler-colonial project, early Mormon leaders in the Great Basin recast the spaces of their immediate past as the desert, again configuring the desert as a space in which vulnerability engenders power and collective identity is shaped and defined by the recognizable motifs of divine testing and protection.

¹¹ I use the fraught term "pioneer" because it is the term used in Mormon histories and celebrations of this piece of their history, and a key part of my argument with this case study is the sacralizing effect of early Mormon narrativization of their own history.

In the fifth chapter, I shift to the mid-to-late twentieth century for the third and final case study—nuclear weapons development in the deserts of New Mexico and Nevada. As the least explicitly religious desert narrative recapitulation, the discursive construction of the desert as the ideal site for nuclear experimentation (“the nuclear desert”) perpetuates the narrative theme of a paradoxical causal relationship between the uninhabitability of the space and the space as a source of power, as well as the theme of collective (national) identity trans/formation. I contend that the literal testing of a weapon of a supernatural level of destruction is a variation on the divine testing motif that is represented as a necessary political response to the nation’s vulnerability to foreign powers. Through nuclear testing and waste storage, the figurative desert “wasteland” is violently realized as the landscape is permanently ecologically and chemically damaged.

I conclude by revisiting the potential for Edward Soja’s “Thirdspace” to illuminate the hybridity and heterogeneity of alternative desert spaces that complicate, subvert, or diverge from the dominant Christian/settler-colonial desert, and I highlight a few voices from these spaces. In this chapter, I center Indigenous peoples of North American deserts—the survivors and resisters of the violence of settler-colonial desert projects. My goal in this final section is to recall that the dominant, biblically infused settler colonial desert is just one spatial construction, despite settler colonialism’s objective to naturalize itself, homogenize spatiality, and mask Indigenous or alternative narratives and ontologies. Although it does bear the scars of settler-colonial and cultural violence, the desert in these “counter-spaces,” is neither empty nor dead, but profoundly alive with its multi-valence and multi-dimensionality.

This thesis is by no means comprehensive—if anything, it is a preliminary sketch of what could be a much larger project. The breadth of topics considered here make any real depth of

exploration impossible. Instead, I have sought merely to provide an introductory outline of the recurrence of an ancient Christian desert narrative in U.S. settler-colonial constructions of the desert by way of contributing to the larger conversation about the biblically infused settler-colonial project that is the United States.

While I have sought to limit the potential for this study to perpetuate the very power dynamics it works to illuminate and criticize, my positionality as a white Euro-American must be acknowledged as I contribute my voice and perspective to the growing body of critiques of settler colonialism. Heeding Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's call to halt harmful and evasive appropriations of the term "decolonizing," I want to avoid any implication that this project decolonizes in any capacity.¹² Instead, this project puts into practice at a scholarly level my personal and ongoing journey to shine a critical light on the infusion and naturalization of settler colonialism in my own worldview, identity, relationship to, and occupation of land. I am not a colonized subject, but I was raised and educated in a culture that depends on the invisibility of the pervasive animating forces of settler colonialism. I am not from the desert or even the western United States, nor am I a member of the LDS Church, but I do have an identity, a birthplace, and particular freedoms that implicate me in all settler claims to space, time, and sovereignty. Making visible what is invisible to myself and others—that is, seeing the mechanizations of settler colonialism, the structural and direct violence that it enacts, and the cultural violence (the foundational religious narratives) that sustains it—is, I believe, a prerequisite for any tangible moves toward decolonizing.

¹² Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012):1-40.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMING & KEY TERMS

Throughout this study I apply a critical spatial theory framework to my analysis in order to demonstrate the spatial functionality of the desert as a site for collective identity formation. The desert narratives elucidated in this thesis—biblical/ancient and modern—portray a landscape with innate spatial qualities that act upon subjects within them, catalyzing a process of collective identity formation that reenacts inherited sacred cultural desert spatialities. The resulting narrative of powerlessness and vulnerability serves, paradoxically, to ultimately empower subjects by sanctifying and naturalizing their trans/formed collective identity. What follows is a break-down of the relevant terms and theoretical frameworks I employ in my thesis.

Settler Colonialism, “Naturalizing” Violence, and Collective Identity

I employ the terminology of settler-colonial theory because of a key distinction that this body of theory makes between “colonialism” and “settler colonialism”: the latter relies on a process by which it renders itself invisible.¹³ As Lorenzo Veracini observes: “settler colonialism... extinguishes itself. Settler colonialism justifies its operation on the basis of the expectation of its future demise.”¹⁴ Patrick Wolfe has summarized the same process: “Settler colonialism destroys to replace.”¹⁵ By denying the existence of and eradicating individuals, cultures, and narratives that interfere with a settler colonialist project, settled lands (Indigenous

¹³ Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing Settler Colonial Studies,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1-12; Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.

¹⁴ Veracini, “Introducing,” 3.

¹⁵ Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 388.

homelands) are transformed into settler homelands. The desert, as a space literally masked by its own name, is both emblematic of and a site for this phenomenon.

A brief interrogation of the term “natural” is necessary here, as this thesis relies on the contention that “naturalization” is a technology of settler colonialism. The Oxford dictionary features a great variety of definitions for “naturalization.” First and foremost, it refers to the process by which a foreigner becomes a citizen of a new country; it can be used to describe a plant or animal that can establish a life in an environment to which it is not native; to naturalize a word is to alter a foreign word to conform it to the sound and spelling of a different language; or, more generally, naturalization refers to the process by which something is regarded as or made to appear “natural”—naturally occurring, a product of innate conditions, inevitable, normalized, “right.”¹⁶ The concept of “nature,” itself, has an entire network of meanings, from those referring to the nonhuman world (the “natural” world), to those describing the innate qualities of something (human “nature”), to those implying an obvious truth (“naturally”).¹⁷ These connotations can, in part, be credited to the Aristotelian concept of nature (*phusis*), which theorizes nature as an organizing principle of the living world: “every being is defined by its nature, conceived as a principle, as a cause, and also as a substance.”¹⁸ To naturalize something, then, is to imply that it conforms to a sort of overarching “right” order, as opposed to being defined by human creation or human systems. The boundary between God and nature, between the natural and the supernatural, is indistinct—“the supernatural” suggests that divine power and

¹⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, “natural,” OED Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, March 2021).

¹⁷ For a full treatment of the linguistic history of the term “nature,” see Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For another influential work of scholarship that has interrogated the politically charged discourse of “nature” see Bruno, Latour. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Descola, *Beyond Nature*, 35.

deities of any kind are beyond “the natural.” At the same time, in the Christian context, nature is the composite of God’s creation (which includes human beings). In this capacity, nature is sacred. Humans, however, are possibly supernatural in their own right. Humans are included in Christian eschatology; just as God is *beyond* nature, so too are humans, as not only are humans told in Genesis to exercise dominion over nature, they also are to persist long after the current created world has passed away.¹⁹ The above definitions of naturalization are all at work in my application of the term for the purposes of this thesis. “Naturalizing” carries connotations of the biological/scientific category of “nature” and the nature of a divinely created world—both suggesting a sense of rightness or goodness. To naturalize is to regard something foreign, transplanted, or created by humans as inevitable or coming to be by divine design. To naturalize, ultimately, is to sanctify. Naturalizing and sanctifying are key technologies of settler colonialism, which imposes a nation-building story over Indigenous land in order to justify occupation, colonization, and genocide. Christian narratives that were used to sanctify claims to land and sovereignty, such as the European colonial concept of the doctrine of discovery (which I will address in greater depth in chapter 2), are later employed in the U.S. to naturalize settler colonialism. The naturalization of U.S. national identity is at the heart of the U.S. settler-colonial project—settler colonialism erases Indigenous existence and configures settled land as the territorial destiny of the U.S. nation-state, by divine design or “natural” law.

Illuminating where and how that national identity is forged is, therefore, an essential prerequisite to the reversal of effacing mechanisms of settler colonialism—making visible what is invisible. It is for this reason that I seek to demonstrate the narrative function of the desert as a site for this collective identity trans/formation, a narrative that has its origin in an ancient

¹⁹ Descola, *Beyond Nature*, 36.

Christian desert imaginary. Regina Schwartz offers a theory of collective identity formation as a violent process through her reading of the Bible, “a book whose chief preoccupation is imagining and forging collective identity.”²⁰ Of particular relevance to this thesis is Schwartz’ discussion of collective identity and nationalism. Schwartz argues that the “Western myth of collective identity” is encoded in biblical stories that structure the seemingly “secular” processes of statecraft and national identity formation: “The concentration of power in an omnipotent sovereign is far too useful to divest at the birth of modern nationalism, and so allegiance to a sovereign deity in order to forge a singular identity became, in secular terms, allegiance to a sovereign nation to forge a national identity.”²¹ This process masks Western nationalism’s religious origins, but these “sacred categories of thought” linger in how nations defend their identity, existence, and sovereignty. This masking, or naturalizing, is not unlike settler colonialism’s self-effacing teleology. As noted, a central argument of this thesis is that the desert creates the conditions for vulnerability in the face of naturally harsh conditions and divine power, which paradoxically serves to transform collective/national identity and authorize the territorial sovereign power of this identity. Collective identity, which is formed and transformed by subjection to an omnipotent, supernatural power, becomes a source of power to be wielded by the collective. Schwartz’ description of the transition from sovereign God to sovereign nation illustrates this pattern:

A text that had once posited collective identity as the fiat of God (‘I will be your God if you will be my people’) came to posit collective identity as the fiat of the nation authorized by God (‘one nation, under God’). Nationalism has stubbornly held fast to this legitimation by transcendence. Nations are the will of God. National borders are the will of God. National expansions and colonization are the will of God. National military confrontations are the will of God. Every nation is the one nation under God.²²

²⁰ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8.

²¹ Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 16.

²² Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 11.

The relationship between vulnerability and power is unique in this context—the centralization of power within a singular deity is the focal point around which collective identity is formed. The vulnerability and infantilization of God’s people are a foil for God’s power, and yet these very people are empowered by their collective identity and authorized to hold sovereignty over land and other people as a result of the supremacy of their deity. Schwartz is careful to note that biblical texts have been used to justify both the oppression of peoples and the liberation of peoples, “often the same people, often the same verse.”²³ The Bible is not solely responsible for current modes of collective identity formation, nor the violence they can perpetuate. Rather, biblical texts codify a model of collective identity that is ingrained in western national identities (and violent power) of today. In Schwartz’s words, “All this is to warn that, if we do not think about the Bible, it will think (for) us.”²⁴

As Galtung has shown, such cultural narratives and their structural and institutional manifestations participate in violence. Galtung’s “violence triangle” identifies direct, structural, and cultural violence as interlocking processes that reinforce and catalyze one another in systems of domination.²⁵ Direct violence refers to the recognizable acts of violence that inflict immediate harm at the individual and collective levels, whether it be denial of necessities for survival or acts of physical violence, while structural violence refers to embedded systems and institutions that oppress (and therefore are violent toward) particular groups based on an axis of difference. Cultural violence refers to the cultural materials and resources from which individual and collective actors draw justification for direct and structural violence. Cultural violence maintains and authorizes systems of structural violence and normalizes acts of direct violence. In Galtung’s

²³ Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 17.

²⁴ Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 8.

²⁵ Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291-305.

words, cultural violence refers to “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.”²⁶ Recognizing the violent aspects of the “symbolic sphere of our existence,” Galtung expands the concept of violence to include any narratives that are wielded for violent purposes.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am particularly concerned with cultural violence as the legitimizer of both direct and structural violence. As Galtung notes, “Direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; cultural violence is an invariant, a ‘permanence,’ remaining essentially the same for long periods, given the slow transformations of basic culture.”²⁷ Cultural violence has longevity; it is difficult to extricate oneself from one’s symbolic sphere of existence when we rely so heavily on networks of symbolism and narratives to inform our interactions with each other and with our surroundings. Formative Christian narratives from thousands of years ago continue to authenticate some current experiences and deny others. In his discussion of religion as an essential source for culturally violent narratives, Galtung exemplifies the sort of analysis that illuminates the connective threads between ancient, faith-based narratives and contemporary ideologies and knowledges. Like Schwartz, Galtung raises the particular example of the trope of “chosenness” in biblical religions—the notion of a God who serves and is to be served by a particular people and no other people—calling this “a vicious type of cultural violence,”²⁸ which has taken on various guises of self-versus-Other but remains consistent in its violent impact. As I trace the thread of collective identity formation across ancient, canonized desert narratives and the deserts of the U.S., it is important to identify

²⁶ Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” 294.

²⁷ Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” 294.

²⁸ Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” 297.

these narratives as having culturally violent effects in that they authorize the structural and direct violence of settler colonialism.

Critical Spatial Theory

Settler colonialism is reliant on the physical presence of land, on “specific land and belonging, on relationships to home and belonging.”²⁹ One cannot discuss land without discussing violence against Indigenous people; one cannot discuss violence against Indigenous people without discussing land. Dominant settler-colonial spatial narratives and practice—settler-colonial geographies or settler-colonial spatiality—pave over Indigenous geographies as a means of consolidating power and ensuring territorial sovereignty.³⁰ Western settler-colonial narratives of land are shaped by a biblical preoccupation with land. Schwartz describes claiming land as a means of “owning identity”: “Ancient Israel projects its identity onto a deity who in turn sanctions Israel to take the land... [C]ollective identity and land, whether possessed or desired, are deeply implicated with one another.”³¹ For the purpose of my discussion of land, I am using the theoretical language of space and spatiality in order to refer to the *production* of space that overlays (and becomes) land in settler-colonial structures. With regard to this process, Ania Loomba writes, “The process of ‘forming a community’ in the new land necessarily meant un-forming or re-forming the communities that existed there already.”³² My use of a critical spatial approach is meant to elucidate this process while demonstrating that, within the particular space of the “desert” of ancient Christian and U.S. settler desert narratives, the land is configured as a force that acts upon those within it to produce a particular experience of vulnerability,

²⁹ Natchee Blu Barnd, *Native Space* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2017), 10.

³⁰ Barnd, *Native Space*, 7-14.

³¹ Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 47.

³² Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London, UK: Routledge, 1998), 2.

testing, divine encounter, and collective identity trans/formation. This “naturalization” of the narrative desert upholds and maintains continued settler-colonial projects and attitudes toward the deserts of the United States.

The critical spatial triad of geographer Edward Soja provides the analytical framework by which I navigate through formative sacred narratives and their legacy in the settler-colonial projects in the North American deserts. Soja’s categories of Firstspace (perceived space), Secondspace (conceived space), and Thirdspace (lived space), provide sharp lenses through which to elucidate the settler-colonial process by which these spaces of the desert collapse into one another to mask cultural violence.

Soja’s foray into spatial theory begins with his examination and explication of Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*. He presents Lefebvre’s book as the formative and outstanding text for the incorporation of space into late twentieth century postmodern thought. Not only are Soja’s theories built upon Lefebvre’s spatial triad, but other scholars who have employed this theoretical framework have relied on Soja’s clearer explanation of Lefebvre’s meandering and purposefully inconclusive analysis. For this reason, I, too, am primarily relying on Soja’s work to form the theoretical basis of my discussion. The foundation set by Lefebvre’s spatial categories, however, is crucial to Soja’s theory, and I use Lefebvre’s language (translated from French by Soja) in conjunction with Soja’s.

Soja’s tripartite framework of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace is an expansion of Lefebvre’s three kinds of space: perceived space, conceived space and lived space. The triadic structure is integral to the theory, which seeks to disrupt the binary of conceptualized versus actual (physical, geographical) space. Soja’s objective with the third category is to escape dualistic formulae for thinking about space, to “third” the spatial imagination, and create

“another model of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism, but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning.”³³ The essential third category is meant to both incorporate and shatter pre-existing ontologies of space. This is easier to understand once we have established working definitions for Lefebvre’s three kinds of space.

The first of these is perceived space, called “spatial practice,” which is geophysical and material space. Perceived space is described as immediately discernible and “open, within limits, to accurate measurement and description.”³⁴ Soja terms this “Firstspace.” Conceived space, or “representations of space,” is ideologically crafted space – this space is the “storehouse of epistemological power” as it is bound up with “relations of production and, especially, [the] order design that they impose.”³⁵ These are the representations of space (and the representors of space) in hegemonic and dogmatic discourses; the spatial order imposed by the powerful is “constituted via control over knowledge, signs, and codes: over the means of deciphering spatial practice and hence over the production of spatial knowledge.”³⁶ This is Soja’s “Secondspace.” Lived space – “spaces of representation” – is the departure from the physical-ideological dualism set up by the first two spaces. Lived space combines the material and representational or imagined — imagination “seeks to change and appropriate” this space, overlaying physical (perceived) space and “making symbolic use of its objects.”³⁷ Putting emphasis on its disruption of the binary of physical versus conceptual space, Soja calls this “Thirdspace.”

³³ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* (New York, NY: Wiley, 1996), 11.

³⁴ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 66.

³⁵ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 67.

³⁶ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 67.

³⁷ Lefebvre, quoted in Soja, *Thirdspace*, 68.

Soja expands upon this spatial triad, framing his three categories as spatial knowledges: “Firstspace epistemologies and ways of thinking have dominated the accumulation of spatial knowledge for centuries,” Soja writes. Firstspace epistemologies are preoccupied with

Empirically measurable configurations: in the absolute and relative locations of things and activities, sites and situations; in patterns of distribution, designs, and the differentiation of a multitude of materialized phenomena across spaces and places; in the concrete and mappable geographies of our lifeworld.³⁸

Firstspatial knowledge privileges and assumes objectivity and regards human spatial interactions as “an outcome or product” of the material form and order of things.³⁹

Secondspace is interpretive space: while conceived space in Lefebvre’s delineation revolves around a locus of power and is bound by epistemological hierarchy, Soja presents a more expansive concept of Secondspace as the “primary space of utopian thought and vision, of the semiotician or decoder, and of the purely creative imagination of some artists and poets.”⁴⁰ Secondspace still, however, seems to encompass, in Soja’s formulation, spaces of domination – shaped, controlled, and surveyed by the discursively powerful. Secondspace epistemologies assume and idealize these representations of space as “real” geography, and the primary forces responsible for the ordering of space.

Thirdspace encompasses both material and imagined spaces. It is the *operative* space of both representations of space and spatial practice. Soja makes it very clear that, although Thirdspace encompasses Firstspace and Secondspace, it more importantly explodes the latter two categories by exiting the binary of objective versus subjective. Soja’s discussion of Thirdspace prioritizes a praxis of this space as subaltern – a space where the marginal and marginalized can resist hegemonic overlays. The combination of the material and the imagined make Thirdspace

³⁸ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 75.

³⁹ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 76.

⁴⁰ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 67.

the terrain for “counterspaces, spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral, or marginalized positioning.”⁴¹ This is part of Soja’s “thirthing-as-Othering” theory that presents any theoretical or practical thirthing (such as the articulation of this third space) as immediately disruptive to totalizing binaries.

Although Soja’s explication of Thirdspace characterizes it as an Othered space, always existing on the periphery, and therefore *a space for subaltern resistance*, I aim to hold in tension with this conception a secondary understanding of an *oppressive* “Thirdspace” – one that naturalizes Secondspace narratives through settler-colonial processes. This expanded understanding provides the means to illustrate the power of Thirdspatial experiences both to enforce dominant narratives and to generate subversive counter-narratives. As Claudia Camp points out, “oppressors also have lived spaces,” which both exist as a result of and perpetuate “the production of power that makes critique and resistance necessary.”⁴² By collapsing Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace categories into a singular narrative of the U.S. deserts, American settler colonialism registers as deeply authentic because it draws upon the Secondspace cultural resources of biblical origin stories and seems to be reactive to Firstspatial “realities” of the desert. This naturalized Thirdspace is a space of production of power authorizing a history of direct and structural violence against the peoples and lands in and around these deserts.

Admittedly, I am working within the confines of narrative—I do not have access to anyone or any group’s experience—much less to the material topographies they inhabited; I can only analyze the narrative translation of those places and experiences. By their status as

⁴¹ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 68.

⁴² Claudia Camp, “Storied Space or Ben Sira Tells a Temple,” *Imagining Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social, and Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan*, 64-80 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 68.

canonical, authored and passed down by historical winners in their tradition, biblical texts (and ancient Christian literature that is canonical in its own right) would appear to fall entirely into the category of Secondspace. The settler narratives of the desert that I draw upon similarly appear to exist within Secondspace, as they form the hegemonic discourse which structures dominant spatialities and renders Indigenous geographies invisible. But appearances can be deceiving, according to biblical scholar Jon Berquist, who cautions that: “Writing is a practice that creates social-spatial connections. This is essential to remember given that those who write often combine Firstspace and Secondspace in an attempt to repress (alternate) Thirdspaces.”⁴³ Camp also problematizes the assumption that canonical literature is only Secondspatial in order to argue that a lived space (Thirdspace) might be discerned within the literary world of these texts, suggesting that attempts to box any dominant narrative entirely into one spatial category are inadvisable as the boundaries between First, Second, and Thirdspace blur within any text. Camp suggests that “words also create space; certainly, they create Secondspace, as well as providing an essential part of the texture of Thirdspace.”⁴⁴ Laura Feldt, one of the few scholars who have applied spatial theory to some of the specific biblical texts that I discuss in the following chapter, summarizes this Thirdspatial function of narrative: “Narrative literature may supply models (which may come to function as Secondspatial paradigms) for thinking Thirdspatially and be a site of Thirdspace experience, but may also incorporate Thirdspatial aspects.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Jon L. Berquist, “Critical Spatiality and the Construction of the Ancient World,” *Imagining Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social, and Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan*, 14-29 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 27-28.

⁴⁴ Camp, “Storied Space,” 69.

⁴⁵ Laura Feldt, “Wilderness and Hebrew Bible Religion – Fertility, Apostasy and Religious Transformation in the Pentateuch,” *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*, ed. Laura Feldt, et al., 55-94 (Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., 2012).

Berquist, Camp, and Feldt offer useful models for distinguishing different spatial aspects within a narrative, models that guided me in delineating my own definitions of First-, Second-, and Thirdspace for this project. Feldt's analysis of the religious instrumentality of wilderness in narratives from the Pentateuch/Torah was particularly helpful in this pursuit.⁴⁶ Feldt uses Soja's three categories to break down different desert spatialities within these narratives, approaching narrative descriptions of concrete, climate-related or geophysical land features as Firstspace, social spatial models that appear in the text—such as spatial binaries of city-desert, cultivated land-desert, danger-sanctuary—and the utterances/actions of God (and the narrator) as the authoritative Secondspace, and the utterances/actions of the Israelite people as Thirdspace. As my analysis of desert narratives covers vastly different eras and locales, my approach to defining these spatial categories draws on and departs from both Feldt and Soja in the following manner: (1) I define Firstspace as descriptions and understandings of space that presume inherent material qualities about the space—this ranges from attempted geophysical descriptions to widely accepted beliefs about the beings, spiritual and otherwise, that inhabit the desert. (2) I define Secondspace as the cultural and social narratives that influence articulations of the desert, as well as receptions of these articulations by a given narrative audience. There is a temporal dimension to Secondspace, as these narratives shape and are shaped by an idea of desert that can span generations and continents. (3) I define Thirdspace as the narrative totality of these two spatial elements, which determines a configuration of the desert and its effect on the “lived experience” of those within it. Thirdspace encompasses how Firstspatial and Secondspatial elements are incorporated to enact a complete desert narrative that has lasting effects on the ontologies of those within the space, as well as the material space itself.

⁴⁶ The first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

Soja is an urban geographer. Whereas he presents his spatial triad as a general analytical tool for the field of cultural geography, he, himself, has only applied it to the urban space of Los Angeles. Many of the theoretical applications of his work have been in urban case studies and there is very little scholarship to be found that applies these spatial categories to more contemporary non-urban environments—the unbuilt landscape, as opposed to the built.⁴⁷ It is therefore fascinating to note that one of the few scholars who has used Soja’s spatial theory to approach contemporary unbuilt spaces chose as his subject the landscape of the American West. Campbell identifies in the writing of John Brinckerhoff Jackson a Thirdspatial experience of the West (largely comprised of desert spaces) which explodes geographical binaries of “myth and reality, true and false, utopia and dystopia, rural and urban,” and, in its place, envisions the landscape as a transitional space, a “blurred, contested zone: both region and more than region, as imagined dreamspace as well as real, material space.”⁴⁸ Feldt and Campbell both use First, Second, and Thirdspatial categories to present an image of deserts (biblical and American West, respectively) as oscillating spaces of transformation and hybridity. With their shared use of spatial theory and complementary insights into desert landscapes, these two scholars have opened a space for my own project, namely, of offering a preliminary sketch of the dynamics of an ancient Christian desert narrative and their replication in the violent conquest of the American desert “frontier.”

⁴⁷ I will point out, however, that the binary of built vs. unbuilt geographies is a binary that Soja would find problematic.

⁴⁸ Neil Campbell, “Critical Regionism, Thirdspace, and John Brinckerhoff Jackson’s Western Cultural Landscapes,” *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*, 59-81 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 62.

2. THE EARLY CHRISTIAN DESERT

In this chapter, I look at both biblical and early patristic texts to elucidate an early Christian desert narrative. By looking to early patristic literature, I am analyzing texts that are representative of early Christian reception and enactment of biblical desert narratives. At the turn of the fourth century C.E., leading up to and following the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the first Christian monks—the Desert Fathers—journeyed out into the deserts of eastern Egypt and Palestine to pursue a life of asceticism, prayer, and solitude. In forming the basis for Christian monasticism as it developed over later centuries, the Desert Fathers forged a closer bond with the divine by modeling a lifestyle that left survival entirely to the whim of their environment and their God. They embodied a relationship with the landscape that was sanctified, unique to the desert, and shaped by their readings of desert narratives from both the New and Old Testaments. The desert motif in the biblical tradition is embedded in the narrative development of the ascetic/desert monastic experience. Claudia Rapp argues that the early Christian desert ascetics had an intention that was specifically tied to their geographical surroundings—to reenact the experience of Moses, Israel, and Jesus in the desert. The desert in biblical texts was a centralized locale for encounters with the divine. In Rapp’s words: “from the late third century, the desert again became a locus of intense spiritual experience. This time, it was the hermits and monks of Egypt who sought a new encounter with God.”⁴⁹ This spiritual desert experience stands out against other religious traditions that preceded it: generally, other benevolent Gods of Antiquity preferred to appear to humans in lush, shaded, watery landscapes.⁵⁰ By contrast, the

⁴⁹ Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 106.

⁵⁰ Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 106.

ancient Christian God's proclivity for encountering his people in the desert suggests that this space has a particular narrative function.

The lives of the Desert Fathers inspired a body of desert spirituality literature, which is generally assumed to be modeled off of Athanasius' hagiography of St. Antony, the literary prototype for desert ascetics.⁵¹ This body of literature spans the fourth and fifth centuries and a variety of literary genres, including hagiographies like *The Life of Antony*, St. Jerome's *The Life of Paul the Hermit*, a compilation of parable-like "sayings" from ascetic elders called the *Apophthegmata Patrum (Sayings of the Desert Fathers)*, and histories that conform more to the genre of travel-literature, such as the *Lausiac History* by Palladius and the anonymous *History of the Monks in Egypt*, which both document the authors' visits to hermits and monastic communities in the desert.⁵² While I do not pretend to offer a comprehensive reading of depictions of the desert in this vast body of literature, I do present a preliminary analysis of the appropriation of biblical desert narratives in the desert imaginary of this early Christian desert tradition. I do this using select passages and scenes from Athanasius' hagiographical portrait of Antony, as well as writings about desert spirituality from significant church fathers and an imagery-rich Syriac commentary describing the experiences of ascetics, hermits, and desert dwellers. I analyze the significance of the desert space in this early Christian tradition, highlighting two major themes in the desert narratives of biblical texts:⁵³ (1) a state of

⁵¹ Some scholars of patristic literature have sought to disprove this literary timeline, defending the existence of a desert ascetic literature that predated Athanasius' text. William Harmless delves into this debate in his chapter "Monastic Origins" in William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Cary: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2004), 417-423.

⁵² Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 33-36; Derwas Chitty, *The Desert, a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1966).

⁵³ The biblical translation used throughout this thesis is the New Revised Standard Version with two exceptions: I substitute "desert" for "wilderness" when it is necessary and relevant to my

vulnerability as a result of the harsh environment, in which survival depends upon divine intervention and (2) a process of collective identity trans/formation that revolves around divine testing and an intimate relationship with God. I then use categories of First, Second, and Thirdspace to demonstrate how the Desert Fathers articulated a narrative of the desert as a space that is both “real and imagined,”⁵⁴ a product of both biblical desert narratives and a perception of a tangible geographically bound landscape. This desert narrative incorporates and responds to both material and theological/narrative spatial elements in which vulnerability engenders power and collective identity is trans/formed.

The Biblical Desert

Shemaryahu Talmon suggests that the desert in the Old Testament rarely refers to a place but instead serves temporally as “a designation of the clearly circumscribed period which followed upon the Exodus and preceded the Conquest of Canaan.”⁵⁵ This period of wandering was characterized by struggle and hope for eventual settlement in a promised land. The desert narrative begins in Exodus 15:22 and follows the Israelites through a nomadic forty-year period in the desert in which they experience struggle, hunger, and thirst, bear witness to miracles, and receive, through Moses, the ten commandments and their covenant with God. In other words, it is in the desert that the Israelites are transformed into a people —“God’s people.” Thomas B. Dozeman distinguishes between two oppositional conceptions of the desert that characterize the

discussion and I refer to the “wilderness wanderings” period that the Israelites spend in the desert as the desert wanderings.

⁵⁴ This is language borrowed from Soja, but Peter Alexander Mena uses this phrase to describe the spatial dynamics of the desert experience in Christian hagiographies. So far as I can tell, Mena is the only scholar to have applied the theoretical framework of Thirdspace to desert patristic literature.

⁵⁵ Shemaryahu Talmon, “The Desert Motif,” *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Alexander Altmann, 31-64 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 46.

Hebrew biblical wilderness tradition: the nomadic ideal and salvation history. The nomadic ideal draws upon a nomadic cultural history of the Israelites, conceiving of the Israelite God as a God of the desert and idealizing the desert setting of the period after the Exodus from Egypt. The salvation history prioritizes, instead, the notion of promised land as the culmination of the story of the Israelites and their God. In this latter form, settled, fertile land is the ideal, as opposed to the uninhabitable space of the desert.⁵⁶ Talmon, for his part, has shown that the desert in this tradition is not an ideal or a final destination, but rather a liminal, didactic space.⁵⁷ Indeed, for narrative purposes, the biblical desert is only a liminal space – one journeys *into* the desert or is led *out* of the desert. Callbacks to this space by the prophets of the Old Testament support Talmon’s claim. References to this desert motif appear in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Hosea.

The central characters operating in the desert of the New Testament are John the Baptist and Jesus. The synoptic gospels assert an important connection between John the Baptist and the desert.⁵⁸ The authors of Mark and Matthew situate John’s ministry entirely in the desert, while according to the author of Luke, John received his call from God in the desert before preaching throughout the “region around the Jordan.”⁵⁹ While Matthew suggests the desert in question is the Judean Desert, some scholars have shown that this was likely not the case⁶⁰—nevertheless, the historical locale of John’s ministry is not necessarily essential to the narrative function of the

⁵⁶ Thomas B. Dozeman, “Hosea and the Wilderness Wandering Tradition,” *Rethinking the Foundations: Historiography in the Ancient World and in the Bible*. Essays in Honour of John Van Seters, ed. Steven L. McKenzie, et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., 2000), 57.

⁵⁷ Talmon, “The Desert Motif.”

⁵⁸ Mark 1:2-8; Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-18.

⁵⁹ Luke 3:3.

⁶⁰ C. C. McCown, “The Scene of John’s Ministry and Its Relation to the Purpose and Outcome of His Mission,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, no. 2 (1940): 113-31; Joshua Schwartz, “John the Baptist, The Wilderness, and the Samaritan Mission,” in *Studies in Historical Geography and Biblical Historiography: Presented to Zechariah Kallai*, ed. Moshe Weinfeld (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

desert; the synoptic gospels make use of the desert setting for the story of John the Baptist, harnessing desert motifs associated with the “Old Covenant” to tell of a “New Covenant.” All four canonical gospels cite a particular passage from the LXX⁶¹ version of Isaiah 40:3 interpreted as a prophecy of the divine selection of John the Baptist to precede the coming of Christ: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the desert: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.””⁶² After Jesus goes to John to be baptized, he spends forty days in the desert, during which he is repeatedly tempted by Satan, but remains ever loyal to God. While Mark makes no mention of fasting, Matthew and Luke both indicate that Jesus embodied the desert experience by depriving himself of food for the full forty days.⁶³

Rapp interprets the desert fathers as the finale of the “three-act-drama” of the evolving desert narrative in early Christian imagination, with the first two acts being the Old Testament and the New Testament.⁶⁴ Each “act” is modeled after the previous one(s), and testifies to the longevity and significance of this space in the development of early Christian identity. In these three bodies of text, I identify two interwoven themes throughout that define the narrative space of the desert as it is established and reinterpreted in the Bible and replicated in the desert patristic literature: vulnerability and infantilization, which necessitates divine intervention, and collective identity trans/formation.

Vulnerability and Divine Intervention

⁶¹ The Septuagint (the Greek New Testament).

⁶² Mark 1:2-3.

⁶³ Matthew 4:2; Lk. 4:2.

⁶⁴ Claudia Rapp, “Desert, City, and Countryside in the Early Christian Imagination,” *Church History & Religious Culture* 86, no. 1-4 (2006): 94.

The setting of the desert creates a condition of vulnerability for those who journey into it. An important narrative element of the desert wanderings of the Israelites is their doubt about the God who has delivered them out of Egypt only to lead them into the desert. “They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the desert? ...For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert.’⁶⁵ The desert is presented as an environment without humanly accessible water or food and the helplessness of the Israelites is demonstrated by their persistent complaints. The narrative of the early years of this wandering period include instances of the Israelites complaining of hunger or thirst followed by divine alimentary marvels,⁶⁶ such as the appearance of manna (a bread-like substance), quails, and bitter water turning sweet. The Israelites are often informed in advance of these miracles by Moses, along with particular instructions from God: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.’”⁶⁷ Moses gives the Israelites particular instructions relating to the collection of manna which they promptly disobey, effectively failing this divine test. Manna is a supernatural desert food that appears in response to the Israelites’ vulnerability and need. Feldt argues that “manna is oppositional to ordinary bread and it represents a systematic inversion of the normal.”⁶⁸ Human agricultural, bread-making, or harvesting capacities are useless with regard to the collection and

⁶⁵ Exodus 14:11-12.

⁶⁶ “Alimentary marvels” is a term I am borrowing from Laura Feldt. For her thorough discussion of spatiality, wilderness, and fertility miracles in the Pentateuch, see Laura Feldt, “Wilderness and Hebrew Bible Religion — Fertility, Apostasy, and Religious Transformation in the Pentateuch,” *Religion and Society: Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*, ed. Laura Feldt, et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., 2012).

⁶⁷ Exodus 16:4.

⁶⁸ Feldt, “Wilderness and Hebrew Bible,” 68.

consumption of manna; God offers no materials for self-sufficiency—manna can only be eaten instantaneously and cannot be stored. After the desert period is ended, the Israelites never eat manna again.⁶⁹ This substance therefore exclusively serves as an attestation of God’s care for his people in the desert, his power to respond to their needs, and their total reliance on him. This infantilization of the Israelites casts the desert as a space in which the relationship between people and God is one of vulnerability, need, and (parental) intervention.

The Old Testament prophets refer back to the desert wanderings as a period of youthfulness/infantilization and vulnerability that was formative in Israel’s relationship to God. In Jeremiah, God addresses Israel: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride,⁷⁰ how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.”⁷¹ This formulation of youthfulness/infantilization and covenantal bliss is expanded in the metaphors of Hosea 2. The motif of the desert comes into play in Hosea’s expression of God’s frustrations with Israel’s “apostasy.” Israel is likened to an adulterous woman who will be stripped bare—“I will strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born, and make her like a desert, and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst.”⁷² The desert of this metaphor is both a geographical one and a state of existence marked by extremity. The material qualities of the desert are being invoked to describe an imposed state of vulnerability, infancy, and need—to be made like a

⁶⁹ Exodus 16:35; Joshua 5:11.

⁷⁰ Both Hosea and Jeremiah refer to the desert as the space of *bridal* innocence, when Israel was newly wedded to God. For a more extended discussion of the marital metaphor in Hosea see Alice A. Keefe, “The Female Body, The Body Politic, and the Land: A Sociopolitical Reading of Hosea 1-2,” *Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Carole R. Fontaine, 40-58 (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 1995) and Naomi Graetz, “God is to Israel as Husband is to Wife: The Metaphoric Battering of Hosea’s Wife,” *Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Carole R. Fontaine, 40-58 (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1995).

⁷¹ Jeremiah 2:2.

⁷² Hosea 2:2-3.

desert is to be made naked and thirsty like a newborn. After Israel-as-wife is effectively stripped bare and made like a desert, the love/covenant between people and God can be restored in the space where it began—she will be lured into the desert and behave “as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.”⁷³ This verse draws on a concept of the desert as the landscape of youthfulness and vulnerability, which is later reinforced by the shift to a father-son metaphor in a subsequent chapter of Hosea:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...it was I who taught Ephraim⁷⁴ to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.⁷⁵

In Israel’s infancy, they were brought into the desert and there they were fed, held, and taught to walk. While conceiving of God as a parental figure is not unique to the desert context, or even Jewish and Christian traditions, the call back to the desert wandering in this passage configures the desert as a space that reverts those who enter to an infant-like vulnerability.

John the Baptist’s desert ministry, the baptism of Jesus, and the temptations of Jesus, all of which occur one after the other in the New Testament Gospels, are modeled on the desert motif of the Old Testament and therefore reinforce the narrative of the desert as a space for vulnerability and divine intervention. The reference to “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,” from Isaiah 40:3 that appears in all gospels indicates that John the Baptist was sent for this divine purpose—his ministry in the desert embodies this voice. John’s role as the baptist that comes before Jesus (and eventually baptizes Jesus) implies that he is coming to stand in for

⁷³ Hosea 2:14. This marital trope is obviously problematic in its romanticization of an abusive power dynamic and its potential to authorize violence as an allowable in the context of unconditional love; the implications of the gender and sex-based violence in this text are explored in depth in Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1995).

⁷⁴ Ephraim is another name for the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

⁷⁵ Hosea 11:1-4.

the intervening force that is required in the desert. People go into the desert, to John's domain, to be baptized, thereby returning to a state of infancy. In the Gospel of John, Jesus explains that to be baptized is *to be born a second time*: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.’”⁷⁶ John the Baptist warns the crowd that has come to him that he is not a divine figure; his ministry is temporary and serves to prepare people for the coming of Jesus Christ: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”⁷⁷

Within New Testament scholarship, the term “new exodus” has been popularized to describe an interpretation of John the Baptist's desert ministry and the temptations of Jesus as a repetition of the Exodus narrative. Inspired by the reference to Isaiah 40:3, the “new exodus” takes the form of Jesus Christ, and is realized in John's baptism of Jesus, with the temptations of Jesus representing the desert wanderings period, and the Sermon on the Mount mirroring the delivery of the old covenant to Moses on Mount Sinai/Horeb.⁷⁸ Just as God appears in the desert to Moses, the desert baptism of Jesus prompts an appearance as well: “And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”⁷⁹ What follows, in the narrative, reenacts the desert wanderings of the Israelites insofar as there is a divine leading into the desert and a desert experience characterized by deprivation

⁷⁶ John 3:4-5.

⁷⁷ Luke 3:16.

⁷⁸ For a full review of the evolution of the term “new exodus” in biblical scholarship, see Daniel Smith Lynwood, “The Uses of ‘New Exodus’ in New Testament Scholarship: Preparing a Way through the Wilderness,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 2 (2016): 207-243.

⁷⁹ Mark 1:10-11.

and testing: “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil,”⁸⁰ where he fasted for forty days and forty nights (the same number of years the Israelites spent in the desert). To each of Satan’s attempts to lead Jesus into temptation, Jesus responds with quotes from passages in Deuteronomy about the tribulations of the Israelites in the desert. The devil first targets Jesus’ hunger and in response, Jesus quotes Deut. 8:3: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”⁸¹ The devil then asks Jesus to prove that he is the Son of God by risking death, to which Jesus quotes a verse cautioning the Israelites against further disobedience: “Again, it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”⁸² Finally, the devil promises Jesus all the world’s kingdoms if he will worship him; again, Jesus quotes God’s message to the Israelites: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”⁸³ Jesus’ successful weaponization of the word of God imbues it with a divine, prevailing strength. Afterward, he is afforded the protection and attention of the angels.⁸⁴ Jesus’ forty days in the desert mirrors the Israelite experience in the desert and prefigures the later desert father experience where vulnerability to physical suffering and mental torment/testing is mitigated by invoking the word of God and becoming imbued with divine power.

Collective Identity Trans/Formation

The desert is not simply a space where people encounter God, but one in which the condition of vulnerability and relationship with the divine create experiences that come to define

⁸⁰ Matthew 4:1.

⁸¹ Matthew 4:4.

⁸² Matthew 4:7.

⁸³ Matthew 4:10.

⁸⁴ Mark 1:13; Matthew 4:11.

those who pass through it and trans/form collective identity. This is most evident in the Old Testament narrative of the Israelites in the desert—in this space, they established their covenant with God, received divine instruction on how to live, and embodied the necessary landlessness that must precede the eventual promised land in the fulfillment of the covenant. George H. Williams suggests two symbolic meanings of the desert experience which define the space by its formative qualities:

In the interpretation of the historical experience of the children of Israel escaped from bondage to Egypt through a desert there is a double meaning suggested: (a) the wilderness as a place of redemptive, covenantal bliss, and (b) the wilderness as the place of testing and tutelage.⁸⁵

Both aspects are evident in the Exodus narrative, where God liberates the Israelites from their life in Egypt, establishes a covenant, tests their obedience and loyalty, and delivers divine instruction. My position builds on that of Williams by asserting that these two narrative functions come together to configure the desert as a space for collective identity formation. If the Israelites developed their identity as God's people in the desert, Hosea's threat of a return to the desert as a result of apostasy configures it as a space for identity *crisis* and identity *re*-formation; an experience that instructs and reunites. After Israel is stripped bare and made like a desert, union with God can be restored: "Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the desert, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards... And I will say to Lo-ammi, 'You are my people.'"⁸⁶ Hosea's deployment of the threat of no longer being God's people to accentuate this identity crisis reinforces the desert narrative of collective identity trans/formation.

⁸⁵ George H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 15.

⁸⁶ Hosea 2:14-15. "Lo-ammi" refers to the name that God instructs Hosea to name one of his children to enact the adultery metaphor of the test and translates to "not my people."

Ezekiel makes a similar reference to the desert as the original formative space for Israelite collective identity in his prophetic condemnation of Israel's past idolatry and apostasy:

I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out; and I will bring you into the desert of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your ancestors in the desert of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, says the Lord God. I will make you pass under the staff, and will bring you within the bond of the covenant.⁸⁷

The desert in this passage holds a unifying power—God will draw the Israelites from where they are scattered into the common landscape of the desert, where he will reenact the original desert covenant and bring them again within its bond. The desert is a space of divine bonding experience, the outcome of which is a unified people in a divine relationship with a singular God. Regina Schwartz contends that this outcome is at the heart of the biblical theme of collective identity formation: the prophets' "preoccupations with divine (and sexual) fidelity are part of that ideology of identity as someone or some people who are set apart... This people is to be the exclusive possession of the deity, and none other, and they are to have exclusive desire for this deity, and none other."⁸⁸

The desert settings of the New Testament likewise make use of both the dimensions of covenant and divine testing. John the Baptist alerts people of the coming of Jesus (the founder of a new covenant) and prepares "the way" in the desert by facilitating rituals of baptism, a redemptive washing away of the past with water. The motif of water in this redemptive deliverance trope is not insignificant—the deliverance of the Israelites necessitates a passing through water (the parting of the Red Sea) and baptism is also a ritual in which one passes through water. This motif is in stark contrast with the scarcity of water in the desert. God

⁸⁷ Ezekiel 34:37.

⁸⁸ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 18.

expresses both his power and his love/protection of the Israelites in the desert by miraculously turning bitter water sweet, and threatens to deprive Israel of water when she strays in Hosea. Water becomes representative of divine intervention and redemption, as well as a transformation into something new (this will be especially relevant in the following chapter in the settler irrigation narratives of the Great American Desert). On the subject of Jesus' baptism in the desert, Williams writes: "The fact that he had been baptized by John in the wilderness obliged the Evangelists to come to terms with the whole cycle of wilderness theology, notable in their reworking of the Temptation scene."⁸⁹ Williams is among twentieth-century scholars who have posited the existence of an expectation within ancient Jewish communities of a new exodus, which the authors of the synoptic gospels applied to the baptism and temptation of Jesus—"baptism by the water rite of John the Baptist would become the means whereby exodus from this world would be sacramentally effected...Christian reflection [will] find in Jesus' temptation in the wilderness of Jordan a redemptive recapitulation of that of the elect people in the wilderness of Sinai."⁹⁰ Just as the redemptive covenant with the Israelites can only be fulfilled after the forty years they spend in the desert being tested, after his baptism, Jesus only begins his ministry after the forty days he spends in the desert weaponizing God's words to the Israelites to succeed at his own divine testing. While both John the Baptist and Jesus are individuals, they both serve as stand-ins for divine and collective actors—John alerts the crowds that he is standing in for a divine redemptive force in anticipation of that force, and Jesus in Christian eschatology is a salvific container for the collective, and in many ways, the human embodiment of a new covenant. Just as in the Exodus narrative, the desert of the synoptic gospels is the space

⁸⁹ Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise*, 23.

⁹⁰ Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise*, 23.

where the Jesus movement (that becomes Christianity) begins to take shape in the form of John's baptismal ministry and Jesus' divine testing.

The First, Second, and Thirdspace of the Desert Fathers

I will now use Soja's theoretical framework to unpack the relationship between the material space of the desert and the desert as a biblical space in order to elucidate the narrative configuration of the desert as a trans/formative force that acts on its inhabitants by rendering them at once vulnerable and empowered. Although the spatial turn in the field of religious studies is still relatively new, I am not the first to assess the critical spatial dynamics of the desert of early Christian ascetics. Peter Alexander Mena provides an interpretative guide for the desert space in hagiographies like *The Life of Antony* that frames the landscape as a Thirdspatial borderland,⁹¹ in which the desert space is "invested with cultural power" and constructs both the identity of the Christian ascetic and the desert landscape itself.⁹² The linking of "holy persons with sacred spaces" is essential to the ongoing sacralization of the desert space that characterizes desert patristic literature.

As I am working within the boundaries of narrative, it is notable that scholars of this desert spirituality literature have posited that the "desert" within these texts is more of a literary construct than a geo-physical place.⁹³ The prevalence of the desert in early Christian literature

⁹¹ Peter Alexander Mena, "Borderlands/"La Frontera" of the Late Ancient Egyptian Desert: Space, Identity, and the Ascetic Imagination," PhD diss., Drew University, 2014, 45. Mena relies primarily on Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of "mestiza" identity as a borderland identity to analyze the desert patristic literature but makes reference to Soja's critical space and the resonances between the two theoretical frameworks.

⁹² Mena, "Borderlands," 12.

⁹³ James E. Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, (1993): 281; Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 283.

likely exaggerates the number of monks who really lived in solitude or inhabited the desert—the bulk of the monastic community at the time lived in communal living spaces in urban or village settings.⁹⁴ The ubiquity of the literary desert construct is perhaps a testament to its power as a metaphor for a spiritual position or practice—but what kind? Why the desert and what does it confer upon the idealized ascetics who make the desert their home? Despite the assertion that the desert of these early Christian narratives is predominantly a literary production, Mena, along with Harmless and Goehring, hold both the space and the subject within the space as equal participants in the construction of the “myth of the desert.” “Holy persons and sacred spaces are intimately linked in the Christian literary imagination: the desert produces the saint while at the same time the saint produces the desert, and both are products of the author’s pen. Seen in this way, neither the subject nor the space is privileged.”⁹⁵ James Goehring articulates the canonizing and sanctifying effect of the production of this space:

Grounded in the ecological reality of the Egyptian desert and the experiences of actual individuals, the myth of the desert emerged in the writings of the Christian authors...They fashioned, whether consciously or unconsciously, a spiritual landscape that transcended the everyday realities of desert life...the myth of the desert served to naturalize the religious and social constructions of the church.⁹⁶

By placing an emphasis on a geographical/ecological frontier, the idealized experience of the ascetic is attached to a tangible landscape and therefore naturalized. The Thirdspace in the desert narrative in this body of literature harnesses the perceived “ecological reality” of an existing space in order to enact and therefore naturalize an early Christian narrative of collective identity formation.

⁹⁴ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 283; Goehring, “The Encroaching Desert,” 281.

⁹⁵ Mena, “Borderlands,” 5.

⁹⁶ James Goehring, “The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33, no. 3 (2003): 438.

As a reminder, for the purposes of the present study, I approach the narrative Firstspace as physical, geographical, and material elements of desert landscapes as they were expressed at the time and articulated in the patristic materials—this includes environmental mythologies and imagined realities, such as a general consensus surrounding demons or other deities inhabiting the desert. I define Secondspace as the received narrative traditions surrounding the desert as a narrative space—namely, the biblical desert narratives I discussed in the above sections. Finally, I define the Thirdspace of the desert fathers as the desert imaginary presented in patristic desert spirituality writing as it is shaped by and responds to Firstspatial and Secondspatial elements of the desert.

Firstspace

The desert setting in both the Old Testament and the patristic materials is generally understood to be the desert in the east of Egypt, between the Nile River and the Red Sea as a specific geographical setting. Rapp highlights a particular pre-Christian Egyptian view of the desert that would have influenced Christian monastics practicing in the area. The fertility of the Nile Valley in contrast with the aridity of the desert (“black land” versus “red land”) created religious associations that delineated between the two spaces as the domains of particular Gods—the Nile Valley was associated with the God Osiris (fertility, agriculture), while the desert was understood to be the domain of Seth (God of trickery, chaos, disorder). After the popularization of Christianity, other Gods were understood by converts to have retreated to the desert where they pestered passersby in demonic forms.⁹⁷ In Athanasius’⁹⁸ *The Life of St. Antony*,

⁹⁷ Rapp, “Ascetic Authority,” 110.

⁹⁸ St. Athanasius was a highly influential figure in early Christianity, particularly ancient Egyptian Christianity, and served as the bishop of Alexandria for several decades during the mid-fourth century. His hagiography of Antony is considered the first widely read work of desert

Antony's progressive journey into the desert could be described as a spiritual turf war with the desert demons—the majority of this hagiography documents Antony's continued success with the Satanic demons of the desert who seek to drive him out, a plot device that comes to be important to the reenactment of the biblical desert motifs of divine testing and intervention. Both Rapp and Feldt also discuss the “spatial oppositions between city-land, land-desert, the sown-unsown,”⁹⁹ etc. as significant spatial features overlaying the geography of the desert. Whereas Feldt, who engages with critical spatial theory in a discussion of biblical texts, delineates these conceptual binaries as Secondspatial, Rapp's analysis of the desert/unsown vs. city/sown spatial opposition lends itself to interpreting these spatial imaginaries as Firstspatial—indeed, they are substantively different and structure the material environment in a very literal way:

The opposite of the city, both in a topographical and a demographical sense, was the desert. The desert is a wide-open space with no clear delineation of its boundaries. The city, by contrast, is a well-defined area, often surrounded and protected by a wall. The desert is marked by scarcity of supplies, the city is a place of abundance, of commerce, entertainments [...] the desert is a place of loneliness, while the city is characterized by the presence of crowds.¹⁰⁰

Much of the writing dealing with desert monasticism, particularly instances when elders are advising potential ascetics or church fathers are praising the piousness of ascetics, mentions the city as the epicenter of excess, crowding, sin, etc. The Firstspatial boundaries that delineate between and qualify city space and desert space would have been widely and viscerally understood, and certainly gave shape to the desert imaginary of the early desert fathers.

The narrated desert space in desert patristic literature presents the environment as one that is isolated, uninhabitable, and populated with demons, framing the space as one that renders

literature. For a fuller description of the life and significance of Athanasius, see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 33-36.

⁹⁹ Feldt, “Wilderness and Hebrew Bible Religion,” 60.

¹⁰⁰ Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 111-112.

subjects within it physically and spiritually vulnerable. The physical vulnerability of the desert ascetic is articulated in a Syriac homily historically (but inaccurately) attributed to Ephrem the Syrian, which vividly describes a desert space where desolation and isolation sacralize the body and life of the ascetic.¹⁰¹ Ascetics' physical suffering contributes to their vulnerability: "They stretch out on the bare earth, rather than on beds and rest their heads on rocks, rather than on soft cushions."¹⁰² The desert space is defined by what it lacks; by its status as the antithesis of the city. The desert is a space where survival—cultivation and settlement—is humanly impossible, and therefore predicated on God's will or choice to provide sustenance to the ascetic. This is demonstrated in several of the *Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* which feature elder ascetics who had been divinely afforded a single date palm and a shelter to keep them alive. In one saying, the anonymous speaker is out in the desert and buries an elder desert father who had been thus provided for: "When I buried [the corpse], the date palm promptly withered and the shack collapsed. I wept a great deal, beseeching God that he might concede me the date palm and allow me to spend the rest of my days in that place; but, since this did not happen, I told myself that it was not the will of God."¹⁰³ The majority of the sayings of the Desert Fathers attribute any and all food to God's will. Rapp explains that if desert ascetics were to infer anything from the desert narratives of the Bible, it was that this site of desolation is where encounters with God were most likely to happen:

[Christian monks] cherished the image of a desolate landscape devoid of distractions, not even allowing the possibility of engaging in agricultural labor, where the individual was

¹⁰¹ Joseph P. Amar, "On Hermits and Desert Dwellers" in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. V.L. Wimbush, 72-80 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

¹⁰² Amar, "On Hermits," 275.

¹⁰³ No. 132.3, *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A Select Edition and Complete English Translation*, ed. John Wortley (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 81.

stripped naked of all worldly paraphernalia. This is the place where God called his people to go so that he could encounter them.¹⁰⁴

The Firstspatial qualities of the ancient Northeast African desert—both the broader social normative conceptions of the city vs. desert space and the described environment in the patristic literature—are incorporated into the complete spatial narrative of the Desert Fathers that recapitulates the desert themes of the Bible.

Secondspace

The patristic desert literature builds on the biblical desert as a guide and legacy that sanctifies the experience of the ascetic. The Desert Fathers inherited this biblical narrative as a Secondspatial dimension to their desert, reenacting the narratives of suffering, divine testing, and divine intervention of the Old and New Testaments. Texts from prominent figures in the early monastic community assert that the desert is the ideal locale to realize a Christian identity through emulating the characters of biblical texts. St. Jerome, author of *The Life of Paul the Hermit*, also ties the lineage of Christian monasticism back to biblical desert narratives in his Epistle CXXV: “To me, a town is a prison and a solitude, paradise. Why do we long for the bustle of cities, we whose very name¹⁰⁵ speaks of loneliness? To fit him for the leadership of the Jewish people, Moses was trained for forty years in the wilderness, and it was not till after these that the shepherd of sheep became the shepherd of men.”¹⁰⁶ By drawing on the literary resource of Moses in the desert, Jerome affirms the notion that the desert is a setting in which one finds

¹⁰⁴ Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 109.

¹⁰⁵ Jerome is referring to the Latin word for monk, *monachus*, meaning single, solitary, alone.

¹⁰⁶ St. Jerome, “Letter CXXV To Rusticus,” *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. W.H. Freemantle, M.A. (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1982), 441.

and forms one's divine self and purpose. As the number of ascetics journeying into the desert grew, the desert space was narrative reinforced as a transformative space for collective identity. Basil the Great, another influential figure in early monastic literature, wrote of the "citizens of the desert," and compared the desert space of their homes to the biblical desert:

I am living...in the wilderness wherein the Lord dwelt... Here is the wilderness where the people, purified, received the law, and then going into the land of promise beheld God...Here is the wilderness where the blessed John ate locusts and preached repentance to men. Here is the Mount of Olives, which Christ ascended and there he prayed, teaching us how to pray. Here is Christ, the lover of the wilderness; for He says, "Where there are two or three gathered in my name, *there* am I in the midst of them."¹⁰⁷ Here is the narrow and strait way that leads to life. Here are teachers and prophets, "wandering in deserts, in mountains, and in dens, and in caves of the earth" (Heb. 11:38). Here are apostles and evangelists and the life of monks, citizens of the desert.¹⁰⁸

Basil outlines an entire lineage of desert narratives that culminates in the collective inhabitation of the desert by monks, and the establishment of a collective identity of "citizens of the desert." The notion of being a "citizen of the desert" is prevalent throughout desert patristic literature and contributes to the configuration of the desert space as a site for collective identity trans/formation, a point I will expand upon in the following section.

Thirdspace

The desert Thirdspace of these early monastics appears in the literature as a narrative that appropriates, is shaped by, and responds to both material and theological spatial elements, constructing a space that defines and is defined by ascetic identity. As Mena observes, "Christian ascetics depended on their own socialized memory of biblical typologies that identified the desert as a sacred space imbued with a particular spirituality. The first desert ascetics then established their own social memory by identifying themselves with the desert space and their

¹⁰⁷ Basil is quoting Matthew 18:20.

¹⁰⁸ Basil of Caesarea (St. Basil the Great), as quoted in Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise*, 39.

daily life and practices in the desert.”¹⁰⁹ By enacting the biblical desert experience of vulnerability and reunion with the divine in a desert space of their own construction, the desert fathers engaged with and attached a cultural “social” memory of biblical narratives to a particular landscape. Through this narrative process, the desert ascetic tradition produced a biblically infused desert Thirdspace that was a paradoxical one of both powerlessness and empowerment, which hinged on Firstspatial boundaries and constructs.

The spatial binary of city vs. desert, for example, is subverted in the patristic narrative through the trope of building a city in the desert or establishing citizenship (society) in the desert. There are several instances in the Syriac homily where the desert hermit builds or finds a citted world: “The desert, frightful in its desolation, became a city of deliverance for them;”¹¹⁰ “Desolation fled from the desert, for the sons of the kingdom dwell there; it became like a great city.”¹¹¹ In one conversation between Antony and the devil, the devil mourns the invasion of his desert home, now that “even the desert is already full of monks.”¹¹² Other passages from the text reinforce the desert-as-city image: “[Antony] induced many to take up the monastic life. And so now monasteries also sprang up in the mountains and the desert was populated with monks who left their own people and registered themselves for citizenship in Heaven.”¹¹³ By invoking the binary of city/society vs. desert through the trope of building a desert city or holding citizenship in the desert, Desert Father narratives emphasize the collective power of and divine protection

¹⁰⁹ Mena, “Borderlands,” 43.

¹¹⁰ Amar, “On Hermits,” 157-8.

¹¹¹ Amar, “On Hermits,” 161-3.

¹¹² Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, ed. T.C. Lawler (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1950), 55.

¹¹³ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 33. The translation that Rapp is working with explicitly uses the word city: “[T]here were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for citizenship in heaven...” Rapp, “Desert, City, and Countryside,” 99.

afforded to desert ascetics in their capacity to exist—even to thrive in community with one another—in an uninhabitable space.

The Desert Fathers are able to exist—and claim power—in this space because of a total reliance on God for protection, much like the Israelites. As previously shown, the experience of the ascetic in the desolate landscape of the desert was conceived of as a revelation of God’s will—either God would dispense upon the ascetic the gift of some food, water, or fertile soil, or let death take him to be reunited with God in the Kingdom of Heaven. The isolated and helpless ascetic in the desert, vulnerable to physical suffering, starvation, and other ailments, invites this protective divine power:

Since they entrust their spirits and bodies alike to God,
they are not saddened by physical hardship.
If a hermit becomes sick, he has no companion to look after him.
But because he entrusted himself to God, the power of heaven looks after him.
Since there is no one to prepare food for him, or to bring it to him when he is sick,
He is comforted by the Holy Spirit, regains strength, and recovers.¹¹⁴

This in turn creates an intimate relationship of dependence between the ascetic and God; this dependence, however, is not a source of weakness but power for the ascetic. The homily suggests that the desert, in its emptiness and desolation, is itself a transformative source of power for the ascetic. The construction of a desert city is not literal, but symbolic of this paradoxical empowerment. The homily, for example, continuously makes reference to the impermanence of the physical body and the actual ultimate end goal—“the everlasting dwellings”¹¹⁵—of “citizenship in Heaven.” In this text, the desert imaginary responds to the uncultivated and unbuilt material landscape by configuring the body of the ascetic as, itself, the site for the city. The emptiness of the desert means that one must look inward (to the body) to access the

¹¹⁴ Amar, “On Hermits,” 261-262.

¹¹⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 95. This quotes Luke 16:9.

resources previously available in the material world — as the ascetic becomes poor in material wealth, physical comfort, and health, he becomes spiritually rich. The bodies of the desert dwellers are sites of worship in themselves: “Their bodies are temples of the Spirit, their minds are churches; their prayer is pure incense, and their tears are fragrant smoke.”¹¹⁶ The bodies of the ascetics become the churches and altars that they no longer have access to in the emptiness of the desert: “*instead* of a church building, they become temples of the Holy Spirit. *Instead* of altars, [they have] their minds.”¹¹⁷ The desolation and emptiness of the landscape, which contributes (both materially and theologically) to a condition of vulnerability is the same feature that renders the ascetics powerful. It imbues them with the power to build such places of worship anywhere they please: “Wherever one of them goes, he plants his cross and it becomes [his] church and wherever the day ends, there is the temple of his rest.”¹¹⁸ This narrative desert Thirdspace creates a striking image of subversion of the desert-city binary, (creating a contrast to the dominant cultural understanding of the desert as a fearful and unlivable space) and endows the Desert Fathers with power through their experience of vulnerability, divine intervention, and transformation.

The willful suffering of the desert ascetic, as it was for the Israelites and for Jesus, is also an enactment of the divine testing motif of the biblical desert, which supports the representation of the desert as a site for collective identity trans/formation. The emphasis on renunciation in ascetic practice promised a reward for putting one’s trust and survival entirely in God’s hands, a test the Israelites failed several times and one Jesus passed. This testing was not just the test of

¹¹⁶ Amar, “On Hermits,” 97-98. This image is receptive of the Pauline tradition of infusing of body and temple: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

¹¹⁷ Amar, “On Hermits,” 291-93 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁸ Amar, “On Hermits,” 229-31.

asceticism and harsh desert conditions—Antony’s skirmishes with demons were another form of testing, another narrative that framed the desert as a proving ground for and testament to Antony’s faith, his identity as the idealized ascetic practitioner, and ultimately his empowerment. In one speech he delivers to other monks, he describes a moment of honesty from Satan, who comes to him to ask:

Why do the monks and all other Christians find fault with me for no reason at all?...Their troubles originate with themselves; for I have become weak. Have they not read: ‘The swords of the enemy have failed to the end and their cities Thou hast destroyed?’ I now have no place, no weapon, no city. Everywhere there are Christians...¹¹⁹

To which Antony replies: "Though you are always the liar and never speak the truth, yet this time you have spoken the truth, however you disliked to do so. You see, Christ by His coming has made you powerless and cast you down and stripped you."¹²⁰ Although the devil is communicating that Christians, particularly monks, have displaced and weakened him—Antony serving to epitomize this practice in his desert dwellings—Antony points to the coming of Christ as the real catalyst for the weakening of Satan. In this passage, Antony’s experience is both representative of a collective ascetic phenomenon and of a medium through which the divine power of Christianity can be demonstrated. By identifying with Christ, Antony attests to the formation of a collective monastic identity that represents the power of Christian desert spirituality. This is evidenced in other instances of divine testing (demons either physically attacking Antony or presenting him with material comforts in the form of food or gold), as Antony maintains that whatever he did to defend against evil was actually God working through him.¹²¹ Peter Alexander Mena offers an interpretation of the desert space in *The Life of Antony* as

¹¹⁹ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 54.

¹²⁰ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 54-55.

¹²¹ See Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 54: “It was not I who stopped them and crippled their efforts, but it was the Lord, He who says: I saw Satan like lightning falling from Heaven.”

a site for the creation of a new identity, paying particular attention to Antony's ongoing battle with demons. Mena argues that Antony's progressive journey deeper and deeper into the desert documents a series of perpetual withdrawals into the desert, the most essential characteristic of ascetic practice. Antony starts his practice in bordering villages before migrating to more isolated parts of the desert: "It is this continuous making and breaking of home and family that reveals an identity-making narrative."¹²² Antony's escalating run-ins with demons throughout this desert journey testify to the success of this identity-making process of "making and breaking of home:"

If Antony is searching for a new homeland to replace the one from which he has turned away, he is finding the Egyptian desert to be the perfect space precisely because of the challenges to stake any claim there. The novelty of desert asceticism therefore Athanasius presents not as being about inhabiting *the previously uninhabited, but rather the previously uninhabitable*. That is, the desert ascetic inhabits the space belonging to the demonic.¹²³

By inhabiting the space of the demonic (the desert) Antony stakes a claim over the space that is derived from his identity as the emerging embodiment of the ascetic ideal. Athanasius confirms the formation of an idealized ascetic identity after a twenty-year time jump in the narrative of *The Life* to a scene in which traveling ascetics go to visit Antony in the further (outer) desert and are shocked by Antony's appearance: "When they saw him, they were astonished to see that his body had kept its former appearance... a man guided by reason and stable in his character. Through him the Lord cured many of those present who were afflicted with bodily ills, and freed others from impure spirits."¹²⁴ In this twenty-year period of total solitude and ascetic practice, Antony has been transformed into the new Christian ideal of the ascetic.¹²⁵ During his time in his desert fortress, Antony's surroundings have "allowed him to metamorphize" into "a new Antony,

¹²² Mena, "Borderlands," 45.

¹²³ Mena, "Borderlands," 71 (my emphasis).

¹²⁴ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 32.

¹²⁵ Mena, "Borderlands," 58.

the desert ascetic. This desert ascetic is the new philosopher, the new Christ... born in the Egyptian desert. He begins to perform miracles; heal the sick, cast out demons, sermonize, and teach. His life in the outer desert has, again, transformed him.”¹²⁶ Mena’s reference to the “new Christ” and birth in the desert indicates that Athanasius’ work is receptive of the New Testament model of the desert as a site for rebirth—in other words, identity reformation—and calls back to the function of the desert as a space for biblical reenactment. As Antony’s life is the prototype for the identity of the desert ascetic, inspiring the popularization of desert ascetic practice, this identity becomes a collective one.

I have presented a brief analysis of the desert motif in foundational biblical texts to situate the literature surrounding the Desert Fathers in its position as an ancient, early Christian reception and enactment of a biblical desert narrative. By tracing the lineage of this desert narrative from the Old Testament through the New Testament and patristic writings, I discussed elements that signal a common narrative of vulnerability, divine intervention, and collective identity trans/formation. I demonstrated the layered Firstspatial and Secondspatial elements of the desert locale of the Desert Fathers in order, ultimately, to demonstrate how this body of literature merged material and theological space to construct a Thirdspatial narrative of the desert that reinforced the paradoxical trope of empowerment-through-vulnerability and imagined the space as vital to the formation of a collective (ascetic) identity. In the chapters that follow, I will explore ways in which this ancient Christian desert theology became foundational for settler-colonial projects in the deserts of the U.S. by showing how these desert narratives have been harnessed to authorize (1) claims over land and power in the early desert “frontier,” (2) the Mormon migration to and invasion of the southwestern desert of what is now called Utah, and

¹²⁶ Mena, “Borderlands,” 58.

(3) the testing of nuclear weapons of mass destruction in the deserts of what is now called New Mexico and Nevada.

3. “THE GREAT AMERICAN DESERT”

The emergence and evolution of a national and cultural awareness of an “American desert” determined the course of continued westward colonization and the expansion of the borders of the U.S. in the nineteenth century. Influential accounts of a “Great American Desert” from Zebulon Pike, Stephen Long, and John C. Frémont bestowed this title on the semi-arid grassy plains just west of the Mississippi. Although this label is ecologically inaccurate,¹²⁷ and a product of ignorance born of limited experience, scholars have been careful to point out that the term “desert” has not always had a consistent, purely ecological meaning in U.S. environmental history.¹²⁸ In fact, desert narratives of the mid-nineteenth century employed the term “desert” in a similar fashion to its use in the Bible—to designate borderlands or arid wilderness that seemed to hold no possibility for cultivation or settlement.

The idea of the Great American Desert as the geographically limiting boundary of the young nation was not long-lived. As the ideology of Manifest Destiny was popularized in political discourse, settler-colonizers continued to push West across the continent, reframing each new boundary-land as desert, and each new desert as “American.” How did a space at first defined by its uninhabitability become such a quintessentially “American” landscape? As cartographers —“pioneering” agents of settler colonialism — explored the lands beyond the first

¹²⁷ Lawrence Culver, “The Desert and The Garden: Climate as Attractor and Obstacle in the Settlement of the Western United States,” *Global Environment* 9 (2012): 130-159; Andrew Menard, *Sight Unseen: How Frémont's First Expedition Changed the American Landscape* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2018); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts*, 1st ed (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1985); Jimmy L Bryan, “Our Eyes Ached with the very Vastness”: Reimagining the Great American Desert as the Great American Prairie,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2019): 243-263.

¹²⁸ Erik Lee Altenbernd, “Great American Desert: Arid Lands, Federal Exploration, and the Construction of a Continental United States,” PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2016; Menard, *Sight Unseen*; Limerick, *Desert Encounters*; Bryan, “Our Eyes Ached.”

“desert,” the desert was transformed from an effective environmental border into an incorporated territory that defined the expansiveness and idealized pioneering character of an American continentalist national identity. In this chapter, I illuminate the perpetuation of early Christian desert narratives as their themes and tropes appear in the spatial elements of a nascent U. S. story of land and national identity. As Regina Schwartz, among others, has observed, a collective identity that revolves around the centralization of power in a sovereign, monotheistic God is easily transplanted and transposed into one that has as its nucleus the centralization of power in a sovereign, unified nation-state.¹²⁹ The formation of a U.S. national identity through settler colonialism is just such a process that naturalizes, secularizes, and masks what are, at base, religious narratives of identity and authority, enabling cultural violence. As Secondspatial ancient Near Eastern Christian narratives are applied to the Firstspatial features of North American spaces, the process serves to sanctify and naturalize settler-colonial statecraft. In the desert context, this takes the form of a Thirdspatial narrative of the Great American Desert which incorporates Firstspatial narratives of an ecologically unlivable landscape and Secondspatial narratives of vulnerability and divine intervention coupled with divine testing and authoritative destiny. Consequently, the desert, narratively configured by early Euro-American settlers, is a site wherein the landscape’s ability to render trespassers vulnerable to powerful and devastating natural (and supernatural) forces imbues an evolving national identity with a magisterial and geographically intensified power.

Firstspace

Pinpointing the Firstspace of the Great American Desert is particularly challenging, as its

¹²⁹ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11. See also: Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1994).

geographical boundaries are as fluid as its popular definitions. Recall that Firstspatial epistemology assumes that human spatiality—how humans organize across a terrain—is an outcome or product of the material form of the space.¹³⁰ A study of encounters with the desert using Firstspatial epistemology, then, would seek to answer the question of how geography shaped U.S. settler interactions with the Great American Desert and the eventual incorporation of that desert into state control. In this vein, while the material and geographic “reality” of the Great American Desert is not fixed (it is, as Henry Nash Smith calls it, a “myth”¹³¹), I identify an articulation of desert Firstspace in desert narratives in which settlers represent the land as having innate observable qualities. As pre-Manifest-Destiny-era speculators Zebulon Pike, in 1806, and Stephen Long, in 1820, journeyed westward across the continent in search of river headwaters, they characterized the rolling grasslands just west of the Mississippi as a wasteland, uninhabitable for humans and of no agricultural value. In an account of his expedition, Pike observed:

These vast plains of the western hemisphere may become in time as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa... Our citizens being so prone to rambling and extending themselves on the frontier will, through necessity, be constrained to limit their extent on the west to the borders of the Missouri and Mississippi, while they leave the prairies incapable of cultivation to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country.¹³²

Twelve years later, Long would name the region the “Great American Desert” and affirm Pike’s observation, calling the area a “sterile dreary waste” and “the boundary which *nature* seems to

¹³⁰ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 76.

¹³¹ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: American West as Symbol and Myth*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950.

¹³² Zebulon M. Pike, “Appendix to Part II,” *An Account of Expeditions to the Sources of the Mississippi, and through the Western Parts of Louisiana* (Philadelphia: C. & A. Conrad, 1810), 8.

have *fixed* as the western limit of our population.”¹³³ Despite Long’s impression of a “fixed” desert borderland, the boundaries of the Great American Desert shifted as settler-colonizer expeditions pushed further westward and encountered the more arid “desert” landscapes of the southwest. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between what might be called the Great American Desert *East* and the Great American Desert *West*, a distinction that Erik Lee Altenbernd makes in his tracing of the evolution of desert in American political consciousness.¹³⁴ The territory of the first Great American Desert, in Andrew Menard’s words,

remained a formidable barrier in the minds of most Americans. At least partially explored by three expeditions, the region was such a distinctly “known unknown part of America” that it had become best known as a vast wasteland or desert.¹³⁵

Thanks to the accounts of Pike, Long, and later John C. Frémont, this space had at least an imaginable texture and a broadly conceived location, but the Great American Desert symbolically stood in for land that was simply unknown or deemed unknowable. In the case of Pike and Long, the term “desert” was reserved for land that seemed antithetical to U.S. settler spatial and aesthetic ideals of agriculture and lush forested wilderness.¹³⁶ This notion of desert as a stand-in for the opposing pole to U.S. settled life is reminiscent of the desert vs. city binary that structured the Firstspatial narrative landscape of the Desert Fathers. In their accounts, Pike and Long could not avoid moralizing language that painted a picture of total desolation and “bad land.”¹³⁷ As more settlers traveled further toward the Pacific Coast—encountering the Great

¹³³ Stephen H. Long, “General Description,” in *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the St. Peter’s River*, ed. William Keating (Philadelphia: H. C. Carey & I. Lea, 1824), 242–43 (my emphasis).

¹³⁴ Altenbernd, “Great American Desert.”

¹³⁵ Menard, *Sight Unseen*, 6.

¹³⁶ Smith, *Virgin Land*.

¹³⁷ For an exploration of U.S. land classifications and notions of “good” vs. “bad” land, see John R. Stilgoe, “Fair Fields and Blasted Rock: American Land Classification Systems and Landscape Aesthetics,” *American Studies* 22, no. 1 (1981): 21–33.

American Desert *West*—the U.S. public was inundated with accounts of a desolate land of hunger and thirst. Thomas J. Farnum, for example, who journeyed to the northwest reaches of the continent in 1839, described the Great American Desert as a “burnt and arid desert, whose solemn silence is seldom broken by the tread of any other animal than the wolf or the starved and thirsty horse which bears the traveler across its wastes.”¹³⁸ These descriptions filled American imaginations in the east with a vague impression of a borderland, a land not to be lightly entered or crossed through, and one that could render individuals (or nations) who pass through it vulnerable to demise.

The earliest chronicled state-backed journeys into what I am referring to as the Great American Desert *West*—regions we call deserts today—were those of Frémont in 1842 and 1843, to chart the best route to Oregon and explore parts of the land that would later be called Utah, California, and Washington. Although Menard makes clear that Frémont’s first expedition completely shifted the cultural understanding of the “American desert” away from its status as a barrier to expansion, Frémont’s descriptions of the desert were not entirely optimistic. At various points in his report, he employs a series of undeniably negative epithets to describe his surroundings, such as “desolate and inhospitable regions,” or “very forbidding [in] appearance, presenting to the eye nothing but sage and barren ridges.”¹³⁹ Frémont describes the experience of an amplified sense isolation in the magnitude of the desert: “A stillness the most profound and a terrible solitude forced themselves constantly on the mind as the great features of the place.”¹⁴⁰ It is worth noting, however, that Frémont’s report is layered—as Menard points out, he was not in the business of turning easterners off from this landscape in the fashion of Pike and Long.

¹³⁸ Thomas J. Farnham, quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, 176.

¹³⁹ John C. Frémont, *Frémont's First Impressions: The Original Report of His Exploring Expeditions of 1842-1844*, ed. Anne F. Hyde (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2012), 184; 281.

¹⁴⁰ Frémont, *Frémont's First Impressions*, 86.

Instead, Frémont’s version of the Great American Desert presented “such an overwhelming image of desolation and emptiness that it seems to demand some sort of human presence. A powerful metaphor for the abyss cried out for an offsetting metaphor of agency and desire.”¹⁴¹ Menard argues that Frémont’s complex, “three-dimensional” rendering of the landscape in his report is what catalyzed a shift in the conception of the U.S. desert in Euro-American consciousness. Rather than likening the desert to an attractive eastern aesthetic that would have been familiar to his readers, Frémont proffers an image of the desert that combined travelogue and scientific writing styles in conveying the dynamism of the landscape, challenging the contemporary notion of desert uniformity. “Mirroring the vagaries and contradictions of the trail, the descriptions in *the Report*,” according to Menard, “are relentlessly ambiguous and open-ended, and the eye is never allowed to settle or choose.”¹⁴² Frémont’s real contribution to the changing significance of desert space in U.S. history was the revelation that, by crossing the desert, “the Continental Divide would [...] unite, not obstruct a continental nation,”¹⁴³—thus making possible the incorporation of the desert into settler-colonial futurity.

Frémont’s excitement at the prospect of mapping the western part of the continent is palpable in his journals. In anticipation of his first expedition, he wrote, “It would be to travel over a part of the world which still remained the New — the opening up of unknown lands; the making unknown countries known; and the study without books — the learning at first hand from nature herself.”¹⁴⁴ Cartography, such as that carried out by Frémont, is a technology of settler colonialism and state building, as cartographers function as agents of the state with the sole purpose of surveying, outlining, and rewriting land and space with the end goal of land

¹⁴¹ Menard, *Sight Unseen*, 62.

¹⁴² Menard, *Sight Unseen*, 34.

¹⁴³ Menard, *Sign Unseen*, 97.

¹⁴⁴ Frémont, quoted in Menard, *Sight Unseen*, xxvi.

control and domination. By mapping space, settler-colonizers can establish and control dogmatic spatial productions, imposing settler consolidations of space onto Indigenous geographies.¹⁴⁵ While mapping is arguably a Secondspatial process—it is one of the more self-evident mechanisms by which space is conceptualized and conceptualizations of space are disseminated—the information within initial settler desert expedition narratives that were used to map desert spaces were understood to be empirical, factual observation; undeniable spatial truths used to infer a broader topography. Although such spatial truths may not exist empirically, I categorize them as part of the narrative Firstspace for this reason. Stephen Long’s attempts at mapping the western region delineated a 400-square-mile area as the “Great Desert.” His map was reproduced in atlases up until the 1850s. In Frémont’s report, the process of topographical surveying went hand-in-hand with the territorial expansion of national identity: “We mounted the barometer in the snow of the summit, and, fixing a ramrod in a crevice, unfurled the national flag to wave in the breeze where never flag waved before.” In this moment, Frémont’s act of mapping represents both an immediate, present-moment territorial claim over land and an open invitation to future U.S. settlers to populate and traverse the desert. This desert landscape had become a space to be mapped—and therefore to be colonized and inhabited.

Secondspace

Secondspatial elements of early Euro-American settler desert narratives derive from extended cultural narratives about land, God, and identity. The early Christian desert narratives that I outlined in the previous chapter—including the biblically infused Thirdspace of the desert fathers—become Secondspatial elements that give shape to the fluid concept of desert for nineteenth-century settler colonizers. The process by which the desert went from being a “known

¹⁴⁵ Natchee Blu Barnd, *Native Space* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2017).

unknown” borderland to an incorporated “American” landscape and symbol of U.S. continentalism was influenced by the same naturalized spatial narratives of vulnerability, divine testing and intervention, and collective identity trans/formation that structure the early Christian imagination of desert landscapes.

The enactment of Christian narratives is part of the very DNA of the United States of America. Settler-colonizer claims over land in the Americas have as their original source of authority Christian imperialism. The Doctrine of Discovery is a fifteenth century European legal concept that came out of a series of papal bulls, most notably the “Romanus Pontifex” decree of Pope Nicholas V authorizing the kidnapping and enslavement of people from the African continent and Pope Alexander VI’s “Inter Caetera,” which allowed Christian Europeans to lay claim over any non-Christian land, water, and bodies they “discovered” in order to promote and expand Christendom.¹⁴⁶ These theological documents authorized and enabled the oppression, enslavement, genocide, and dispossession of millions of Indigenous peoples, including those living on the land that has come to be known by colonizers as the United States and Canada. This Christian “doctrine” was codified into U.S. federal law through the 1823 Supreme Court decision *Johnson v. M’Intosh* in response to an alleged dispute between two white settlers over ownership of a plot of land that had been sold to one of their families by Piankeshaw people a few decades earlier. Chief Justice John Marshall called upon historical precedent to justify the court’s unanimous decision, citing a doctrinal “principle” developed to establish the context in which European powers could claim land:

This principle was that discovery gave title to the government by whose subjects or by whose author it was made...The history of America from its discovery to the present day

¹⁴⁶ Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Pub, 2008). For an insightful discussion of the suffix *-dom* in Christendom (and kingdom, freedom, etc.) as referring to the power of domination—land or people that have been dominated or subdued—see pages 59-60.

proves, we think, the universal recognition of these principles... The right of discovery given by this commission is confined to countries “then unknown to all Christian people”... Indian inhabitants are to be considered merely as occupants, to be protected, indeed, while in peace, in the possession of their lands, but to be deemed incapable of transferring the absolute title to others... The absolute ultimate title has been considered as acquired by discovery, subject only to the Indian title of occupancy, which title the discoverers possessed the exclusive right of acquiring.¹⁴⁷

In determining the “rightful owner” of the piece of land in question, Marshall’s decision deprived Indigenous people of the right to own or sell land, using the origin story of the U.S. to establish that, upon Christian European discovery, Indigenous inhabitants were immediately relieved of their sovereignty and rights to land and restricted to the right of “occupancy” alone. This decision incorporated the Doctrine of Discovery into the state’s precedent-based legal system to be referred back to again and again.¹⁴⁸

This is an example of settler colonialism’s structural violence as it is made possible through the naturalization (in the form of legal codification) of a culturally violent Christian narrative of territorial right that is hidden from view by the secularizing of national history and identity. In Peter Alter’s succinct phrasing: “In nationalism, the religious is secularized, and the national sanctified.”¹⁴⁹ In keeping with this insight, Steven T. Newcomb prefers to call the Doctrine of Discovery the Doctrine of *Christian* Discovery, arguing that there are undeniable strands of biblical narratives evident in the *Johnson v. M’Intosh* decision. Newcomb calls these

¹⁴⁷ *Johnson v. M’Intosh*, 21 U.S. 543

(1823): <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/21/543/case.html>

¹⁴⁸ As recently as 2005, in *Sherill v. The Oneida Nation*, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg cited the Doctrine of Discovery in reference to another decision concerning the Oneida Nation from 1985. Ginsberg delivered the opinion on this case and referenced the Doctrine of Discovery in the following footnote: “Under the ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’ fee title [ownership] to the lands occupied by Indians when the colonists arrived became vested in the sovereign—first the discovering European nation and later the original States and the United States.” *City of Sherill, NY v. The Oneida Nation of New York*, 544 U.S. 197 (2004):

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/544/197/#F1>.

¹⁴⁹ Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, 13.

strands “the Conqueror model,” or “the Chosen People-Promised Land model”—cognitive models that formed the basis for (and continue to uphold) the metaphorical perception of Native land as land promised to a (white European Christian) chosen people.¹⁵⁰ Newcomb’s models are indicative of a distinctly Anglo-American shift from the original mandate of the Doctrine of Discovery, one that initiates the justified long-term settler-colonial project of the United States and is eventually fully articulated through the eighteenth century ideology of Manifest Destiny. Anders Stephanson describes this shift, crediting New England Puritan culture with this settler-colonizer logic:

The Christian colonizers of the Americas—including the Spanish and the Portuguese—understood theirs as sacred enterprises; but only the New England Puritans conceived of the territory itself as sacred, or sacred to be... This, then, was New Canaan, a land promised, to be reconquered and reworked for the glory of God by His select forces, the saving remnant in the wilderness.¹⁵¹

This metaphorical configuration is a crucial technology of settler colonialism as it seeks to transform Native lands into settler homelands. The creation of national identity ultimately hinges on this reframing of land and space—interpreting the land of the North American continent as a promised land, or “New Canaan,” lays the groundwork for a recapitulation of the biblical desert narrative to account for the deserts of the West, or any lands on the continent deemed less than favorable.

As the settler-colonial project of the U.S. looked to expand its borders westward, the concept of Manifest Destiny became a crucial Secondspatial element that shaped the image of the desert in nineteenth-century settler-colonizer narratives, particularly as it became again a space for divine intervention and testing, and collective trans/formation. The term “Manifest

¹⁵⁰ Newcomb, *The Doctrine of Discovery*.

¹⁵¹ Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 6.

Destiny” was coined in 1845 by James O’Sullivan, though it was never attributed to him until 1922.¹⁵² O’Sullivan’s original usage implies no intention to name a political ideology, nor an awareness that this would come to describe an entire era. The essence of the term, which described a “providentially or historically sanctioned right to continental expansionism,”¹⁵³ was not unique to O’Sullivan; the assumption of this right was prevalent in the rhetoric of other prominent expansionists. William Gilpin, one of many affluent settler-colonizer land prospectors, spoke of westward colonization in terms of a divine destiny to be fulfilled:

The *untransacted* destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent—to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean... Divine task! Immortal mission! Let us tread fast and joyful the open trail before us! Let every American heart open wide for patriotism to glow undimmed, and confide with religious faith in the sublime and prodigious destiny of his well-loved country.¹⁵⁴

Gilpin appears so certain of this “untransacted destiny” due to its retrospective logic—his emphasis on the word “*untransacted*” implies a narrative of promised land that has been *preordained* and will be transacted (enacted, fulfilled) in the future. Although O’Sullivan was not alone in his expansionist rhetoric at the time, his first use of the full phrase “Manifest Destiny” attests to the “matrix” (to borrow language from Stephanson) of the term as an idea that melds together a Christianized origin story, the formation of future nationalist identity, and practical economic gain. In response to European interventions in the annexation of Texas, O’Sullivan accused England and France of “thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent

¹⁵² Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*.

¹⁵³ Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, xxi.

¹⁵⁴ William Gilpin, *Mission of the North American People, Geographical, Social, and Political*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott & Co., 1874), 130 (my emphasis).

allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”¹⁵⁵

Stephenson defines Manifest Destiny more broadly as “more than an expression: it was a whole matrix, a manner of interpreting the time and space of ‘America.’”¹⁵⁶ What Manifest Destiny prophesied was distinctly settler colonial: it discursively transformed territorial expansion into a structurally integral piece of national identity. Manifest Destiny harnessed biblical narratives of divine chosenness and promised land (which are, as Schwartz has shown, essential biblical mechanisms for creating a collective identity), and the desert borderlands of the “Great American Desert” became, like the desert of the Bible and the Desert Fathers, a proving/testing ground for this “untransacted” destiny.

The narrative of the desert as an uninhabitable wasteland is shaped by another important Secondspatial layer to early settler-colonizer encounters—the U.S. agricultural ideal, or what Smith calls the myth of the U.S. as “the garden of the world.”¹⁵⁷ This narrative configures farming as essential to the character of the U.S. and the frontier farmer as the ideal of the settler, creating a hierarchy of land valorization based on a singular type of agrarian utility.¹⁵⁸ Settler-colonizer desert narratives of wasteland shaped and were shaped by the narrative of agricultural American identity which cast European settlers as agricultural savants and Indigenous peoples as hunter-gatherers wasting the potential of their own land. Menard writes, “[I]t was precisely because Indians were assumed to be hunters and gathers, not farmers, that the US government felt justified in removing them to a region west of the Mississippi that was ‘on the outside of us,

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in John Wilsey, “‘Our Country is Destined to be the Great Nation of Futurity’: John L. O’Sullivan’s Manifest Destiny and Christian Nationalism, 1837–1846,” *Religions* 8, no. 68 (2017): 3.

¹⁵⁶ Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 5.

¹⁵⁷ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 123-132.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 123-132. See also, Stilgoe, “Fair Fields.”

and in a place which will forever remain on the outside.”¹⁵⁹ The broad conception of the desert in the early Christian context of the third century assumed that only demons, evil spirits, and exiled wanderers would find home in a space so desolate and barren—early U.S. settler accounts of the desert racialize this narrative by casting it as the environment of the “uncivilized,” and therefore a fitting home for the Native people of the continent. The writer Washington Irving once envisioned that on the desert plains “may spring up new and mongrel races, like formations in geology, the amalgamation of the ‘debris’ and ‘abrasions’ of former races, civilized and savage; the remains of broken and almost extinguished tribes.”¹⁶⁰ After the end of the Civil War, there was a push to settle in the West that required a redefinition of the desert as a new agricultural frontier (while still retaining the culturally violent and settler-colonial narratives that dehumanized the peoples Indigenous to these deserts). “On the level of the imagination,” Smith writes, “it was therefore necessary that the settler’s battle with drought and dust and wind and grasshoppers should be supported by the westward extension of the myth of the garden.”¹⁶¹ This narrative transvaluation of desert lands—from non-arable to simply arid—is an integral part of the narrative Thirdspace of the Great American Desert.

Thirdspace

The evolution of the Great American Desert was a Thirdspatial exercise in collective national identity trans/formation and the naturalization of settler colonialism. The process by which the desert in Euro-American consciousness transformed from a distant borderland marking the Western end of the contiguous U.S. settler-colonial nation-state to a distinctly “American” symbol of U.S. continentalism involved an amalgamation of Firstspatial and

¹⁵⁹ Menard, *Sight Unseen*, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Washington Irving, quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, 178.

¹⁶¹ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 175.

Secondspatial narratives that replicated the Thirdspatial desert of early Christian imagination. The barrenness and harsh conditions of the landscape were reinterpreted to frame the space as one that necessitated intervention and tested those who crossed through it. The outcome was a divinely ordained national expansion, authorizing U.S. territorial sovereignty from the coast of the Atlantic to that of the Pacific and naturalizing and sanctifying settler colonialism through an implicit recapitulation of an ancient Christian narrative.

Early settler desert narratives frame the desert as a force that renders those who cross through it vulnerable. Both Pike and Long wrote of the physically taxing experience of living in the desert. Frémont, too, put into words the oppressive solitude of traveling through the desert. Patricia Limerick, in a careful analysis of the language in Frémont's expedition reports, points out the transformation of Frémont's phrasing from the early days to his later experiences in the desert: "Ordinarily, Frémont recorded his decisions with the confident phrasing: 'I determined.' The desert reversed the balance of power in his sentences. 'We were forced by desert plains,' he said, 'far to the south.' He no longer 'determined' the direction; the 'traveling' was 'forced upon us by the structure of the country.'¹⁶² The characterization of the desert as a site for the struggle for survival is illustrated by the direction of power in Frémont's phrasing. While his expedition—and all settler colonizer expeditions of the kind—was intended to survey, and therefore dominate, the land, the intensity of the desert landscape, itself, turned the tables and wielded a power over Frémont, subjecting him and his companions to their experience rather than allowing itself to be surveyed. Throughout Frémont's report, the desert "deceives," "tempts," and "destroys" his hopes.¹⁶³ In Limerick's words, "Nature in the deserts gave Frémont

¹⁶² Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1985), 30.

¹⁶³ Frémont, *First Impressions*; Limerick, *Desert Encounters*.

a brief course in submission.”¹⁶⁴ As much as the arid environment of the Great American Desert West posed threat to the physical survival of those who traveled or thought to settle in it, descriptions of even the semi-arid plains of the Great American Desert East reveal a mental and spiritual exhaustion brought about by the experience of journeying through such an unrelievedly horizontal and uniform landscape. Menard quotes settler-colonizer artist George Catlin in a passage that is reminiscent of the isolating, ascetic experience of the Desert Fathers:

For two or three of the first days, the scenery was monotonous, and became exceedingly painful from the fact, that we were (to use a phrase of the country) “out of sight of land,” i.e., out of sight of anything rising above the horizon, which was a perfect straight line around us, like that of the blue and boundless ocean. The pedestrian over such a discouraging sea of green, without a landmark before or behind him; without a beacon to lead him on, or define his progress, feels weak and overcome when night falls; and he stretches his exhausted limbs, apparently on the same spot where he has slept the night before, with the same prospect before and behind him.¹⁶⁵

This passage emphasizes the physical and mental experience of the desert traveler rather than the aesthetic attributes of the landscape itself. To this end, Catlin speaks almost entirely in metaphor, painting a vivid picture of a traveler standing in the “ocean” of the desert with nothing to ground him. The uniformity of his travel is weakening and almost imprisoning—he is trapped in his nightly exhaustion with the knowledge that the desert remains “before and behind him.”

This narrative of the desert as a space that oppresses—makes vulnerable—sets up a striking contrast for the subsequent Manifest Destiny era of encouraging expansion through and in the deserts that works to prove this destiny. As Frémont crosses through the South Pass in what came to be called Wyoming, he reaches the rhetorical peak of his *Report*—the point at which he “finally begins to associate the geographical predestination of the nation with the space between the ‘two great oceans which border our league of States.’ Having exceeded the Great

¹⁶⁴ Limerick, *Desert Encounters*, 30.

¹⁶⁵ Menard, *Sight Unseen*, 13.

Desert as a barrier to western expansion, Frémont uses his trip to South Pass and the summit to suggest that the Continental Divide would also unite, not obstruct, a continental nation.”¹⁶⁶

Frémont’s *Report* would later shape the plan for a railroad to the Pacific, enabling expedited travel and development across this now unifying desert “Continental Divide.” The desert-as-barrier model allows for a compounding of the logic of Manifest Destiny—if the barrier can be “exceeded,” is that not a demonstration of the divinely preordained destiny of the nation?

According to the settler-colonizer narratives of the subsequent era which reframed the desert as a space where agriculture was possible and necessary, it was precisely such a demonstration. This can be seen in the religious rhetoric of Manifest-Destiny-era land speculators who encouraged agriculture in the desert. Charles Dana Wilber, the western land speculator who coined the phrase “rain follows the plow,” speaks of farming in the desert as a testament to American agricultural excellence on a divine level:

In this miracle of progress, the plow was the avant courier—the unerring prophet—the procuring cause. Not by any magic or enchantment, not by incantations or offerings, but, instead, in the sweat of his face, toiling with his hands, man can persuade the heavens to yield their treasures of dew and rain upon the land he has chosen for his dwelling place. It is indeed a grand consent, or, rather, concert of forces—the human energy or toil, the vital seeds, and the polished raindrop that never fails to fall in answer to the imploring power or prayer of labor.¹⁶⁷

Wilber uses the language of the American agricultural ideal, focusing on the labor and toil of the farmer—however, this “miracle of progress” is undeniably framed in religious terms. Farming is an “imploring prayer of labor,” which can “persuade the heavens” to bestow life-giving rain. All of this is “a grand consent” or “concert of forces” in which man and the heavens work in tandem to transform the barren desert into fertile farmland. Smith points out Wilber’s feeble attempt to secularize the process: “When Wilber says this is not an incantation, he means, of course, that it

¹⁶⁶ Menard, *Sight Unseen*, 97.

¹⁶⁷ Charles Dana Wilber, quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, 182.

is.”¹⁶⁸ Gilpin, another desert appreciator and Manifest Destiny enthusiast, saw exploring the desert as a quest to understand the will of God: “The calm wise man sets himself to study aright and understand clearly the deep designs of Providence—to scan the great volume of nature—to fathom, if possible, the will of the Creator.”¹⁶⁹ Both Gilpin and Wilbur are participating in a Thirdspatial narrative process of sacralizing the Firstspatial, material, desert space by applying Secondspatial models of divine intervention/power.

In the postbellum era, realizing the desire to expand westward provoked a turn to irrigation as the solution to farming in the arid soil of the desert—the agriculturalist who was able to reroute waterways and realize the innate potential of this land would become the ideal Manifest Destiny desert hero. John Wesley Powell, who played a key role in pushing the irrigation movement, articulated this transvaluation of the space: “Arid lands are not lands of famine, and the sunny sky is not a firmament of devastation. Conquered rivers are better servants than wild clouds...The light of a cloudless sky is more invigorating to plants than the gloom of storm.”¹⁷⁰ The task of irrigation became one of the tests that the desert provided for settlers to prove their Manifest Destiny, framing the “conquest” of water in the desert as both divine test and an enactment of God’s will (intervention).

The project of desert irrigation recapitulates the divine testing trope of the ancient Christian desert space. Another prominent proponent of irrigation, William Ellsworth Smyth, similarly wrote about desert irrigation as a project endorsed by Providence—a vocabulary that masks/naturalizes God in itself. By transforming the Great American Desert, the nation would be reunited with God and thus be able to control nature’s waters by siphoning them from rivers:

¹⁶⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 182.

¹⁶⁹ Gilpin, *Mission*, 130.

¹⁷⁰ John Wesley Powell, *Seeing Things Whole: The Essential John Wesley Powell*, ed. William DeBuys (Washington, DC: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2001), 256-7.

“When Uncle Sam puts his hand to the task we know that the stream will obey his command.”¹⁷¹ This is a direct reference to Moses parting the Red Sea for the Israelites and striking a rock in the desert to produce sweet water—both scenes in the Old Testament in which the divine intervened through Moses. By irrigating the desert and putting their hands “to the task,” settler-colonizers responded to the conditions of the landscape and “conform[ed] their methods to the laws of the universe”¹⁷²—irrigating the desert would not only be responding to the innate aridity of the landscape, it would be a settler embodiment of divine authoritative intervention. This also recapitulates the project of the Desert Fathers, which represented the desert as a testing ground, and who, by their ability to sustain life there—be it through literal survival or fending off demons—demonstrated their alliance with the divine. The figure of Uncle Sam-as-Moses or as God is also a striking example of Schwartz’s and Alter’s insights about the transposability of ancient and foundational religious tropes into secularized nationalist projects that thereby render their biblical authorizations invisible.

Limerick has demonstrated that Smyth viewed the desert as the site for an intimate, biblical reunion with God, not unlike the early Christian desert fathers of the fourth century. This reunion is attained through the experience of the desert as a didactic, liminal space. Through divine testing:

God created the desert, along with the rest of the earth, but the desert He left unfinished, barren, arid, and uninhabitable. This was not an oversight or a failure on God's part. When His other creation, Man, was ready for maturity, the desert would be his test and his opportunity. His assignment would be to finish what God only began. In this enterprise, Man would become a partner in creation, empowered to create fertile land from that most unpromising of raw materials: desert... The crucial element in the test of the desert was that it would give men a second chance at unity. Undertaking the collective irrigation projects necessary in the deserts... Man, collectively, was an entity in whom Smyth had full faith.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Smyth, *Constructing Democracy*, xxvi.

¹⁷² Smyth, quoted in Limerick, *Desert Encounters*, 83.

¹⁷³ Limerick, *Desert Encounters*, 82-83.

Limerick's analysis reveals that, through Smyth's narration, the desert is a purposeful wasteland, and the struggle and vulnerability that characterizes the desert experience is an intentional divine test. The desert is an environment created by God for the nation to transcend and thereby define itself. The aridity of the landscape would require a sort of collective project—forming a collective identity—as well as the nation coming to stand in for a godlike power to summon and control nature (Uncle Sam-as-Moses waving his hand over the obedient stream). The irrigation movement sought to literally settle and inhabit the desert itself, which was not ever a goal or ideal in biblical texts, and yet a related biblical sensibility may have been in play inasmuch as the settler objective was to bring the land, itself, *out* of its harsh desert condition and *into* one of promise and fertility. The “desert” as an idea remained the transitional space which imposed a condition of vulnerability and tested the abilities of settler colonizers to fulfill their divine destiny and inhabit their collective identity. Like the Desert Fathers, inhabiting (in the U.S. context, crossing, mastering, dominating) the uninhabitable was a mechanism of a collective-identity formation that derived power from its breaking away from the old and encountering anew the divine.

By exploring Firstspace and Secondspace in narratives associated with the Great American Desert, I have shown how the initial fluidity of the settler-colonial concept of the “American desert” involved a Thirdspatial narrative process that presented the desert itself as an active, oppressive force and enacted an early Christian desert narrative which framed the desert experience as one of collective identity formation. The settler-colonial Euro-American desert symbolically over-wrote the lands in the middle-West of the continent by harnessing foundational Christian spatial narratives of the desert. The desert space was first constructed as a space defined by its desolation and uninhabitability. These Firstspatial qualities were then

invoked to support or “prove” the manifest destiny of the nation and to recapitulate a Secondspatial Christian desert motif of a space that necessitates interventionist power and serves as a divine testing/proving ground and site for collective identity trans/formation. The desert thus functioned as a mediating space between the U.S. and the fulfillment of its divine destiny of land acquisition, one which empowered subjects by rendering them vulnerable. In the biblical story, this divine destiny was part of a covenantal relationship with God; for the desert fathers, the formation of a collective ancient Christian identity through a reenactment of the biblical desert; and for early U.S. desert settlers, the realization of a settler-colonial national identity centered around divinely preordained unlimited (or at least continentally bound) territorial domination. Through invocations of sacred cultural narratives and narrativization of Firstspatial natural deserts, this settler colonial claim to domination was naturalized and sacralized.

4. THE MORMON PIONEER DESERT

According to Joseph Smith, the angel Moroni instructed him to unearth golden plates in 1823 inscribed with an ancient history that places Israelites in North America. In 1830, Smith published the English translation (and the only version that would be made publicly available) of these plates: The Book of Mormon. Smith subsequently established a new religion with “broad geographical consequences.”¹⁷⁴ This was the Church of Christ, later renamed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and members of this church were called “Mormons.” Soon, they numbered in the thousands. They were forced to participate in a repetitive process of frontier settlement and resettlement as public and state persecution pushed the community to move first to Jackson, Missouri, then to Nauvoo, Illinois, and finally across the plains (the Great American Desert East) to the arid and “unknown” land of the Great Basin, which now is understood using settler placenames to span the western part of Utah, the majority of Nevada, and a portion of southern Oregon. The Mormon pioneers immediately selected the more-watered area between the Great Salt Lake and the Wasatch mountains as the site for their first settlements and the construction of a central temple. The arrival of more and more Mormon settler colonizers contributed to expansion southward throughout the Great Basin. The compounded process of migration and settlement became memorialized as a recapitulation of the exilic biblical desert journey, fulfilling a prophecy that was both ancient and new. Though the LDS Church has a global following and there are (and were) Mormon communities beyond the deserts of the Great Basin, the narrative of the desert in this pioneer period of Mormon history has been ritualized and made integral to Mormon collective identity.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Francaviglia, *Go East, Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 88.

In this chapter, I again define Firstspace as descriptions of innate environmental qualities which, in the case of pious Mormon narration, are inextricable from divinely determined qualities. For the purposes of this case study, this definition encompasses descriptive changes in the Firstspatial desert as they can be observed in early Mormon narratives (see below). Despite comprehensive logistical and agricultural planning on the part of Brigham Young and other leaders in the decision to go west and the optimistic initial Mormon accounts of the landscape of the migration and of the Great Basin, upon settlement these spaces were discursively and retroactively transformed by the settlers into “deserts” in all senses of the word: desolate, infertile, uninhabitable, and unknown landscapes populated and transformed through Mormon enactment of divine will.

I define the Secondspace of the Mormon-imagined desert as the theological and ideological narratives that are embedded in their notion of desert. This Secondspace includes both Mormon scriptural and American political narratives of desert and human relationship to desert — narratives that draw explicitly on the biblical desert narratives and implicitly on the desert reenactments of ancient Christian desert monastics.

In my discussion of the Mormon desert Thirdspace, I illustrate the influence and harnessing of Secondspace in effecting the narrative shift of Firstspace: Mormon settlers assert the existence of innate desert conditions that then both necessitate and prove Mormon enactment of a sacred desert experience. This desert Thirdspace (which encompasses both the landscapes they passed through during their migration and the initial state of the Salt Lake Valley) of the Mormon settler colonizers is, therefore, both a site for and an event of a reenactment of a sacralized desert story. The Mormon model of laying claim to the past in order to sacralize the present is thus played out in this desert space, in which (1) vulnerability in the presence of

supernatural and natural forces becomes evidence for authoritative power and (2) Mormon collective identity is trans/formed and sanctified by this authoritative power. The desert, thus, sacralizes the settler-colonial project of their claim to land.

The notion of wilderness (and therefore desert) is so embedded in Mormon theology that there is no need to distinguish the journey in the desert and the settlement/creation of Zion in the desert as two different enactments rather than a multidimensional sacralized desert narrative. Furthermore, the conditions of settlement prompted a reimagining of the migratory journey in order to weave it into a sacralized Mormon history and collective identity; the narrative desert of the migration and the narrative desert of the Great Basin settlement are thus enmeshed—in fundamental ways, they are the same desert.

Firstspace

Despite the fact that vulnerability was already a central element of the narrative of Mormon frontier experience (due, in large measure, to their status as a violently and systematically persecuted group) the original landscapes of the pioneer migration and the Great Basin settlements were, for the most part, not described as deserts. Conditions of vulnerability and struggle imposed by the desert itself were absent from the first pioneer narratives. The area of the Great Basin was introduced to the U.S. public by John C. Frémont through his expedition report. Brigham Young, “the American Moses,”¹⁷⁵ and other Mormon leaders, studied Frémont’s

¹⁷⁵ “American Moses” is the title of well-known Mormon scholar Leonard J. Arrington’s comprehensive historical account of Brigham Young’s life and role in the LDS Church. The comparison of Young to Moses is not Arrington’s creation; as I discuss in this chapter, Young served as the leader and guide of the Mormon migration westward, which enacted the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and positioned Young as a prophet-shepherd Moses figure. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985.)

reports and the accompanying maps in anticipation of the westward migration.¹⁷⁶ After Joseph Smith was killed by an armed mob in Illinois, his protégé, Young, assumed Smith's role as president and began making plans to journey westward in search of a place where the community could develop and practice their religion as they chose, without persecution or judgment from the U.S. government. Claiming to be inspired by prophetic encouragement from Joseph Smith to travel to the Rocky Mountains, Young selected the Great Basin as the site for the Mormon's promised land. Frémont's descriptions of the Great Basin were enticing enough to convince LDS Church leaders to lead several "companies" on journeys there starting in 1847.¹⁷⁷ In one of his expedition reports, Frémont describes the area around the Salt Lake as follows:

All the mountain sides here are covered with a valuable nutritious grass, called bunch grass, from the form in which it grows, which has a second growth in the fall. The beasts of the Indians were fat upon it; our own found it a good subsistence, and its quantity will sustain any amount of cattle, and make this a truly bucolic region.¹⁷⁸

After violent skirmishes with local militias in Illinois, Young and his pioneer company were forced to accelerate their plans and begin to migrate. They continued their research en route, speaking with white colonial trappers and traders with experience in the West. These meetings confirmed Frémont's favorable descriptions of the Salt Lake Valley and, in particular, suggested that the southeastern part of the valley would be the most agriculturally fertile.¹⁷⁹

The experience of the migration or journey was in no way easy. In the words of one 1847 pioneer, as many Mormons came from "refined" homes in the East, "the strenuous nature of

¹⁷⁶ Francaviglia, *Go East*, 87; Richard H. Jackson, "Mormon Perception and Settlement," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 68, no. 3 (1978): 317-34; D. W. Meinig, "The Mormon Culture Region: Strategies and Patterns in the Geography of the American West, 1847-1964," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55, no. 2 (1965): 191-220.

¹⁷⁷ Jeff Davis Smedley, "The 1848 Mormon Westward Migration," PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2017.

¹⁷⁸ John C. Frémont, *The Exploring Party to the Rocky Mountains and to Oregon and North California* (Washington: Henry Polkinhorn, 1845), 258.

¹⁷⁹ Jackson, "Mormon Perception," 323.

frontier struggles was consequently new to them.”¹⁸⁰ There are, however, very few instances of language in the Mormon pioneer memoirs implying that they viewed the plains they crossed through as deserts. Richard H. Jackson’s survey of pioneer diaries found that out of 135 diaries written between the years 1847 and 1866, only seven include the term “desert” at all, with most of those uses in reference to a specific day’s travel or certain parts of western Wyoming.¹⁸¹ The term does appear periodically in accounts of pioneer frustrations with their exilic status rather than as a descriptor of land itself. Hence, the journey comes to be described as a “wearisome route over the deserts.”¹⁸² One pioneer, in 1848, writes: “We have suffered and endured such a continuation of persecution and cruel treatment from those who boast of civilization that we now choose to make our home in the Desert among Savages rather than try to live in the garden of the world surrounded by Christian neighbors.”¹⁸³ These accounts suggest that the articulations of the initial hardships of the journey were prompted by frustrations with forced displacement, rather than from the character of the land itself.

Initial settler reactions to the landscape upon arrival at the Great Basin confirmed pioneer expectations of a bucolic, fertile land. Wilford Woodroff, who later became the LDS Church president, arrived at the Salt Lake Valley with the first pioneer company and described “the land of Promise, held in reserve by the hand of God as a resting place for the Saints” as “the most fertile valley spread out before us.” The area surrounding the lake was “clothed with a heavy garment of vegetation...[with] creeks of pure water running through the beautiful valley.”¹⁸⁴

Other pioneers were impressed with the “very rich land,” the “black” soil, “fertile, friable loam,”

¹⁸⁰ John R. Young, *Memoirs of John R. Young, Utah Pioneer 1847* (Salt Lake City: The Desert News, 1920), 50.

¹⁸¹ Jackson, “Mormon Perception,” 331.

¹⁸² Louisa Pratt, quoted in Smedley, “The 1848 Mormon Westward Migration,” 111.

¹⁸³ John Pulsipher, quoted in Smedley, “The 1848 Mormon Westward Migration,” 96.

¹⁸⁴ Wilford Woodroff, quoted in Jackson, “Mormon Perception,” 323.

and “deep grass”/“thick grass.”¹⁸⁵ The land was thought to be well-suited for irrigation and therefore well-suited for cultivation and habitation.¹⁸⁶

After the initial waves of migration and the development of substantial settler communities in the less arid areas surrounding the Salt Lake, Mormon leaders began encouraging settlers to go to the dryer valleys in the south, which were described, categorically, as “desert.” This encouragement was met with resistance from the settlers; LDS Church leader George A. Smith recalls that even to a request for volunteers from Brigham Young himself to move southward to grow cotton, “the great mass of brethren did not feel [inclined] to do so.”¹⁸⁷ Political agendas of the leaders to expand into an autonomous and self-sufficient state clashed with the pastoral ideals and desires of the “average Mormon settler,” who sought only “a home where agricultural conditions were optimal.”¹⁸⁸ In the decades after the first waves of migration, attempts to convince pioneers that the lands in the South were indeed fertile and habitable were unsuccessful. LDS leaders had to reframe spatial conceptions entirely in order to convince pioneers to settle in these lands. This discursive shift ushered in a new desert theme to environmental descriptions of the plains of the migration and the landscape of the Salt Lake Valley itself. Despite evidence that the first Mormon settlers initially found the Salt Lake Valley to be a bucolic landscape with fertile soil and enough water—and evidence of Brigham Young’s careful research on the agricultural realities (and selection) of this destination—descriptions of the initial, “untouched” state of the valley shifted to invoke an image of a desert wasteland. In a

¹⁸⁵ This language is quoted in Thomas G. Alexander, “Irrigating the Mormon Heartland: The Operation of the Irrigation Companies in Wasatch Oasis Communities, 1847-1880,” *Agricultural History* 76, no. 2 (2002): 172, and Jackson, “Mormon Perception,” 324.

¹⁸⁶ Alexander, “Irrigating the Mormon Heartland.”

¹⁸⁷ “The Importance of the Mission to the Cotton Country: Remarks by Elder George A. Smith” in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols (Liverpool, England, 1854-1886), vol. 10 (1861): 121.

¹⁸⁸ Jackson, “Mormon Perception,” 329.

speech just three years after the first settlement, commemorating its anniversary, the apostle William Richards claimed that the first pioneers, upon arrival, beheld “no cheering prospect before them but the earth, covered with black crickets, Indians, naked and loathsome, and for their music the dark doleful howl of the prairie wolf.”¹⁸⁹ George A. Smith described the original climate of the Great Basin as “cold, sterile,” and characterized by “drought, crickets, and grasshoppers.” Nonetheless, he declared, “We came to this land because it was so desert, desolate, and God-forsaken that no mortal upon earth would ever covet it...the Spirit of the Lord was hovering over the Great Basin.”¹⁹⁰ John R. Young’s description of the valley paints a recognizable picture of the extremities of the desert:

Salt Lake Valley, as it lay in eighteen forty-seven, was a desert desolate. Its parched wastes were given as a playground for the hot winds that in whirlpools sent clouds of alkali dust swirling through the air, poisoning with its white breath the scant vegetation existing there. And in the summer, from the grey, sunburned bench lands, looking westward, the glimmering lake, and the glistening sands of the great American desert, met the traveler’s view.¹⁹¹

Young suggests elsewhere in his memoir that Brigham Young and the other pioneer leaders had intentionally sought such an unlivable—“poisonous,” even—landscape. Although they had knowledge of the abundance of resources of Oregon “inviting the homeseeker,” the Mormons were wary of wealth/prosperity and its propensity to “excite jealousy, and invite turmoil and trouble...On the other hand, the interior of California was marked on our maps as an uninhabitable desert, and Brigham said: ‘If there is a place on this earth that our enemies do not want, that’s the place I’m hunting for.’”¹⁹² This retroactive transformation of the narrative Firstspace of the desert required (and ultimately reinforced) Secondspatial theological and

¹⁸⁹ William Richards, quoted in Jackson, “Mormon Perception,” 331.

¹⁹⁰ “Synopsis of Remarks by Elder George A. Smith” in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, England, 1854-1886), vol. 11 (1861), 177.

¹⁹¹ John R. Young, *Memoirs*, 318.

¹⁹² John R. Young, *Memoirs*, 50.

ideological constructions of the desert drawn from Mormon scripture and U.S. cultural narratives of expansion. In a move emblematic of the enmeshed categories of the religious, the political, and the spatial, these early Mormon settlers recast the original environments of the westward migration and the Great Basin as deserts.

Secondspace

The national narratives of land and desert that I expanded upon in the last chapter deeply influenced the narrativization of the early Mormon “desert.” The Mormon worldview invoked a distinctly Euro-American settler-colonial logic and was borne out of a Christian-dominated culture. At the same time, stigmatization and persecution put Mormons at odds with U.S. dominant cultural politics and the state itself. In addition to rejecting the religious claims and revelations of Joseph Smith, Evangelical Protestants abhorred the practice of polygamy and resented Mormons’ persistent proselytism.¹⁹³ When the Mormons fled Missouri after a series of violent clashes with local mobs and militias, the governor at the time, Lilburn Boggs, declared that Mormons “must be exterminated or driven from the state if necessary for the public peace.”¹⁹⁴ Although there is a prevailing perception among later observers that the central reason for the controversy surrounding Mormonism and for the persecution of Mormons was the practice of polygamous marriage, David T. Smith has shown that this is only one piece of the puzzle. Rhetorical constructions (both in popular media and at high levels of government) of Mormons as socially deviant, quasi-ethnically different, and fundamentally anti-democracy set Mormons apart from a dominant American ethos and society, enabling state-sanctioned

¹⁹³ David T. Smith, *Religious Persecution and Political Order in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 44.

¹⁹⁴ Smith, *Religious Persecution*, 44.

persecution to bypass a legal/ethical precedent of religious freedom.¹⁹⁵ The Mormon migration responded accordingly as its goal was to create distance between Mormons and the state and to find some degree of autonomy on the Western frontier. Despite this rhetoric of difference and political and territorial goal of separation, however, Mormon collective identity operated at a U.S. settler Americanist intersection of ideology and theology. In its reinterpretation of God's covenant, Mormonism embraced an ideological interpretation of U.S. American exceptionalism and imperialism—not unlike the quasi-secular religious-political logic of Manifest Destiny. Mormon settlement of the Great Basin embodied and executed a settler-colonial existence that defined the early character of the North American West. Despite popular U.S. opinion that Mormonism was reprehensible, even William Ellsworth Smyth (who stoked fears of the “occult power of [the Mormon] creed,”¹⁹⁶) could not deny it:

[N]o candid mind can study the problem which confronts the American people—the problem of opening the door to the masses of our citizenship upon the unused natural resources of the nation—without realizing that Brigham Young and the State he founded furnish stronger and clearer light for the future of domestic colonization than any other experience that can possibly be discovered.¹⁹⁷

Even in acknowledgement of the Mormon western settlements as an autonomous “State,” Smyth clearly interprets the land as a U.S. frontier of sorts and Young as a savvy frontiersman. Despite seeking to politically separate from the U.S. national project, Mormon settlement of land implicitly promised the eventual incorporation of that land into U.S. state territory. Mormon preoccupation with sacralizing “American” land and replication of U.S. settler colonialism demonstrates that, despite seeking to differentiate themselves, early Mormon settlers were participating in a project of U.S. American national identity trans/formation. Peter M. Chidester

¹⁹⁵ Smith, *Religious Persecution*, 44.

¹⁹⁶ William Ellsworth Smyth, *The Conquest of Arid America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1900), 75.

¹⁹⁷ Smyth, *The Conquest of Arid America*, 75-76.

summarizes the significance of this entanglement in early Mormonism: “The collective identity of the early Latter-day Saints was, to a great extent, forged by the relationship that Mormon theology established between its adherents and America, both as a land and as a nation.”¹⁹⁸

Claims to and narrative construction of land are essential to Mormonism’s theology and sacred text, which rewrites and combines biblical and North American history in order to locate the origins of Christianity on U.S. soil. The Book of Mormon suggests that the original people of the North American continent were Hebrews who had traveled from the near East around 600 B.C.E.; this group was then divided into the righteous Nephites, who went out into the wilderness with the gold plates and God’s protection, and the Lamanites who had a deep hatred for the Nephites and were therefore cursed with dark skin to distinguish them: “Wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.”¹⁹⁹ Although there was a period of union and prosperity after the coming of Jesus Christ, eventually the Lamanites stray into hatred once more, kill all Nephites, and live for the better part of two millennia as a lost people, severed from God until the arrival of Christian European settlers who encounter them as Natives. The broad strokes of this story serve to write the continent and its Indigenous peoples into Christianity’s origin story—effectively imposing an authoritative and colonizing narrative on both—through this newfound sacred text, which, in becoming canonical for Mormons, comes to canonize the land itself. The racialization of the Lamanites simultaneously instantiates national ideologies of white supremacy and participates in a settler-colonial discursive strategy of transforming Indigenous lands into Christian homelands. Just as Manifest Destiny justified, in

¹⁹⁸ Peter M. Chidester, “A Land Choice Above all Others: The Importance of the American Wilderness to the Rise of the Mormon Church, 1820-1850,” PhD diss., (University of Connecticut, 2012).

¹⁹⁹ 2 Nephi 5:21, Book of Mormon.

quasi-religious terms, U.S. territorial expansion and dominion over Indigenous people and lands, this new religious movement laid claim to “American” space and time (the land itself and the past of its peoples) as a means of setting the stage for their far more explicit recapitulation of a biblical (and now Mormon) desert narrative. Mormons were able to frame their journey of vulnerability and persecution in terms of the Israelite experience as they found themselves *literally exiled* on what their scripture identified as Israelite land. In the words of historical geographer Richard Francaviglia, “The Mormons’ Israel is associated with the wilderness— that is, a place like that remote location where Moses and other prophets were both inspired and tempted. It is this connection that made the desert frontier the perfect place for Mormons— and the Mormons the perfect people for the desert frontier.”²⁰⁰ The aridity of the landscape in and around their settlement in the Great Basin only further enhanced the Mormon connection to the Israelites. As John Davis observes, “The singular landscape features surrounding them— such as the Great Salt Lake, with its evocation of the Dead Sea, or the ever-present desert, which inspired such town names as Moab, Utah— only reinforced the connection and aided in the creation of their own ‘sacred’ space.”²⁰¹

Mormon scripture draws heavily on the biblical motif of desert wilderness as a transitional, unknown space that must be crossed through rather than settled. Shawna Norton makes a helpful distinction between “wilderness” and “land” in the Book of Mormon. Land, she argues, “acts as a static place... of safety and growth,” whereas wilderness operates as “a liminal space through which people *move*.”²⁰² In 1 Nephi, God commands Lehi and his family to leave

²⁰⁰ Francaviglia, *Go East*, 97.

²⁰¹ John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996), 21.

²⁰² Shawna Norton, “Land as Regenerative Space in The Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (January 2018): 189.

Jerusalem to escape destruction: “[Lehi] took nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions, and tents, and departed into the wilderness.”²⁰³ This departure into the wilderness signals the start of a narrative of exile or “movement and escape.”²⁰⁴ Wilderness is as much a space for movement and transformation in Mormon traditions as it is in the Old Testament. In both instances it is charged with the potent energy of dangerous uncertainty and glowing possibility: “[T]here is as much potential for failure as there is for opportunity.”²⁰⁵ The biblical desert narrative is recapitulated and reenacted by the characters in the sacred Mormon text. The Nephites bear witness to divine alimentary marvels as they suffer through the rigors of the wilderness: “And we did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness...And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, that while we did live upon raw meat in the wilderness, our women did give plenty of suck for their children, and were strong, yea, even like unto the men.”²⁰⁶ Nephi, like Moses, relates God’s will to his followers and rebukes them when they begin to doubt God’s instructions—he reminds them of the story of Exodus, of the suffering and doubt of the Israelites in the desert, and how God both ensured their survival with gifts of manna and sweet water and molded them as one does children, “straiten[ing] them in the wilderness with his rod.”²⁰⁷ The wilderness/desert is the site for a process of divine testing that assesses and/or confirms the righteousness of a chosen people and their deservingness of the promised land. The Book of Mormon reinforces the wilderness as the mediating space between exile and entry into a promised land; in a clear reference to Isaiah 40:3, God says to the Nephites, “I will also be your light in the wilderness; and I will prepare the way before you, if it so be that

²⁰³ 1 Nephi 2:4.

²⁰⁴ Norton, “Land as Regenerative Space,” 189.

²⁰⁵ Norton, “Land as Regenerative Space,” 189.

²⁰⁶ 1 Nephi 17:1-2.

²⁰⁷ 1 Nephi 17:41.

ye shall keep my commandments; wherefore, inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led.”²⁰⁸

With the fulfillment of God’s promise of land comes an intimate knowledge of God’s power:

“Nephi and his family travel to the Promised Land not only to gain an inheritance but also so that they might come to know the Lord and realize their utter dependence on him.”²⁰⁹ This is precisely the narrative function of desert in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the literature of the desert fathers. Vulnerability, empowerment *through* awareness of absolute divine power, and the formation of a collective identity bound up with God are all enmeshed in a singular transformative desert experience. In canonizing their “ancestors” reenactment of the biblical desert narrative, the earliest Mormons thereby sacralized future recapitulations of this narrative, such as the migration to the Great Basin. In the Book of Mormon, Nephi is Moses, and the Nephites are the Israelites; on the western frontier, where pioneer leaders referred to their companies as the “camps of Israel,” Brigham Young is a new Nephi *and* Moses (and perhaps John the Baptist and Jesus as well), and the Mormons are the Nephites *and* the Israelites. Jan Shipps deftly articulates this lineage-process as follows:

Because [pioneer] history recapitulated more ancient pasts, it opened out to reveal Mormonism’s reappropriation of Christianity’s appropriation of Hebrew history and, especially in the case of the Saints who went to the Great Basin, its own direct appropriation of Israel’s story...[this process] not only allowed the Saints to take hold of their own past, it also gave them a tenacious hold on the reality of the biblical story... Accounts of Mormon history that reflect the experience of the Saints themselves consolidate and reshape the vision of Old and New Testaments in much the same way that accounts of the experience of the early Christian community consolidated and reshaped Israel’s story.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ 1 Nephi 17:13.

²⁰⁹ Chidester, 89.

²¹⁰ Jan Shipps, *Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 64-65.

Shippo presents a framework through which to read Mormon sacralization of its own history as receptive of an ancient tradition of recapitulating and reenacting an Old Testament desert narrative—a tradition in which the Desert Fathers literature participates, as well. In the U.S. desert space, the Mormon recapitulation of this desert narrative gives shape, meaning, and momentum to their settler-colonial project.

The most distinctive parallel between the ancient Christian desert monastic tradition and the Mormon desert traditions regards the formation of a collective identity through a process of collective separation and differentiation from a larger and less righteous society. Although Young and other Mormon leaders in the early 1840s clearly anticipated that the valley of the Great Salt Lake would be suitable for agriculture and settlement, Young also suggested that the selection of this location was in part due to the isolation and autonomy it promised to provide the Mormon pioneers. In a letter to U.S. president James K. Polk dated August 9, 1847, Young wrote:

The cause of our exile we need not repeat; suffice it to say that a combination of fortuitous, illegal, and unconstitutional circumstances have placed us in our present situation, on a journey which we design shall end in a location west of the Rocky Mountains, and within the basin of the Great Salt Lake, or Bear River Valley, as soon as circumstances shall permit, believing that to be a place where a good living will require hard labor, and consequently will be coveted by no other people, while it is surrounded by so un-populous but fertile country.²¹¹

Despite the fact that it was outside persecution that forced the first journeys of 1847, Young asserts that separation and isolation from others was an original desire and intention on the part of Mormons. The political goal of autonomy, the religious goal of freedom, and the construction of Zion as a desert habitation were fused in the progressive Mormon migration from the

²¹¹ Brigham Young, *Brigham Young Letter to James K. Polk*, from the L. Tom Perry Special Collections of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, *The Kane Family Papers*, <https://cdm15999.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15999coll22/id/96>.

Northeast to Missouri to Illinois and finally to the Great Basin area. This pattern is not dissimilar to Antony's steady retreat further and further into the Egyptian desert—first to the edge of the desert, then into the immediate desert, and ultimately into the most isolated depths of the desert. Although Christian desert monasticism is not often invoked in studies of Mormon theology or practice, at least one scholar has explicitly explored the similarities between ancient Egyptian monastic practice and the LDS Church. Clayton Christenson likens the settlement of the Great Basin community to the development of robust cenobitic²¹² monastic communities in the Egyptian desert. Even a solitary hermit like Antony, who was not a cenobite, drew a circle of like-minded ascetics to his dwellings, ultimately populating the deep desert with monks and creating a “spiritual city.” Similarly, “the ‘Great Basin Kingdom’ was the deep desert of the Mormons, and the deep desert was descended upon” and was subsequently transformed from a small, devout Mormon settlement to a “thriving city.”²¹³ Mormon settler preoccupations with the construction of Zion/the Holy Land in the Great Basin desert resonate strongly with the ancient monastic identity-forming creation of the spiritual city in the desert and withdrawal into the desert (and away from defiling civilizational entanglements) as a path to registering for “citizenship in heaven.” The Mormon desert settlements clearly served as a site for collective identity trans/formation, extending the trans/formative effects of the desert journey into the desert settlements themselves: “The Mormon worldview firmly holds that the Lord brought the Latter-day Saints into the wilderness *to forge them into a people*, just as he had done with ancient Israel. Working together to build the utopian theocracy of Zion gave the disparate Mormon

²¹² A monastic practice centered around communal living, as opposed to eremitic monasticism (living as a “hermit,” in solitude).

²¹³ Clayton Christenson, “Coptic Monastic Traditions and Mormon Monastic Practices Discovering Parallels and Differences between Coptic Monastic Traditions and Mormon Monastic Practices,” PhD diss., The Claremont Graduate University, 2015, 11.

converts a common purpose and shared experiences that established communal bonds between them.”²¹⁴ The Mormon goal of collective participation in the creation of a divinely authorized and territorially stable community out of nothing harnessed ancient notions of the desert as a critical space for collective identity trans/formation.²¹⁵

Thirdspace

The perceptible shift in Firstspatial descriptions of the environments of Mormon pioneer history once large settlements were underway is indicative of the construction of a Mormon desert Thirdspace. This Thirdspatial desert imposed biblically infused Secondspatial desert narratives onto the landscape of the past and present, reenacting ancient desert narratives and catalyzing the subsequent ritualization of the Mormon desert experience. Much as the Book of Mormon rewrote ancient history to serve contemporary theological and national purposes, LDS Church leaders in the Great Basin settlements engaged in a narrative retrofit of their recent past in order to serve a vision of an autonomous and sacred Mormon territorial identity. Jackson, in his piece on “Mormon Perception and Settlement,” presents four distinct themes that inform this “unconscious,” discursive shift: an emphasis on Church leaders’ lack of foreknowledge of the environmental realities of Salt Lake Valley, the difficulty of the migration across the plains, the initial desert environment of the valley itself, and, like the Manifest Destiny expansionists of the

²¹⁴ Chidester, “A Land Choice,” v.

²¹⁵ Other cultural similarities include the abstinence teaching of the “Word of Wisdom,” one of the many revelations of Joseph Smith that was encoded into Mormon law in the Doctrine and Covenants, which restricts consumption of alcohol and tobacco (Doctrine and Covenants 89, Book of Mormon)—not unlike the desert fathers who took to the desert to escape the material excess of the cited life which clouded one’s ability to commune with God. Christenson describes other parallels, including fasting rituals, practices surrounding clothing, and the importance of missions (a trek/separation to commune with God in a sort of religious desert) in past and present Mormon culture.

previous chapter, the symbolic power of desert irrigation and cultivation.²¹⁶ These four themes also exemplify the manner in which the narrative construction of an innately desert-like Firstspace reinforces the Mormon reenactment of past sacred desert experiences. That is, the environment of the *desert* landscape *necessitated* this reenactment by rendering Mormons vulnerable and in need of divine intervention, and the imputation of desert qualities onto the migratory landscape and the initial conditions of the Salt Lake Valley served to prove that this reenactment had, in certain terms, already occurred in past generations.

The language of desert begins to appear in sermons from LDS Church leaders to describe, in retrospect, the hardships that the Mormon pioneers underwent, transforming the plains of the migration into barriers impassable without divine aid and the Salt Lake valley uninhabitable without the backing of Providence. George A. Smith, one of the twelve apostles of the mid-nineteenth century, included the following history in his 1861 sermon: “Our toilsome journey across the Plains, the difficulties we had to encounter in making a settlement, were such as are unparalleled in the history of mankind, rendered so by the necessity of conveying our provisions over a desert for upwards of a thousand miles.”²¹⁷ This passage testifies to the dual forces that imposed a condition of vulnerability on the Mormons—the forced displacement of public persecution and the dangerous, desert environment they had to pass through. The Mormon political experience of forced migration is fused with the spatial construction of the migratory desert; the texture of the space becomes indistinguishable from the hardship of forced displacement. A poem from 1847 pioneer Robert Young’s memoir published in 1920 reinforces a narrative of the physical hardship wrought by the environment, as the speaker entreats the

²¹⁶ Jackson, “Mormon Perception,” 330.

²¹⁷ “Prosperity of Zion: Discourse delivered by Elder George A. Smith” in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, England, 1854-1886), vol. 9 (1861): 66.

reader to search “in vain, in every land, to find the equals of that band of noble men and women true who left their homes, their lov’d Nauvoo, facing hunger and wintry blasts.” He then implores, “Marked ye, the path the fathers trod? How close they crept to Israel’s God? Like Moses at the burning bush, took off their shoes midst thorns and brush, and tramped across cactus plains, that we our freedom might obtain.”²¹⁸ The proximity of the pioneers to God frames the desert landscape as a space for divine encounter, likening it to Moses’ first supernatural experience with the burning bush at Horeb. The relationship between desert hardship and divine closeness is a dynamic I illuminated in previous chapters—in the desert of the Bible, the narrative of the desert fathers, and in the writings of western agriculture enthusiasts like William Ellsworth Smyth and Charles Dana Wilber. The reconstruction of the imagined desert invokes the wilderness/desert motif of the Mormon scripture as a place of danger, complete uncertainty and, therefore, also potential. In the same sermon cited above, George Smith implies that the danger of the landscape can and should be read as proof of divine guidance and authority. Throughout the pioneer journey and initial settlement, “the protecting hand of the Almighty has been visible over us all day long: every step has been guided in wisdom.” Smith blurs the boundary between God’s power and ability to perform miracles and the Mormons power to do the same. In doing so, he suggests that the uninhabitability of the desert endowed the LDS Church with a power on the level of the divine—their vulnerability engendering their power:

To take a people from amongst the nations of the earth and locate them in the midst of these mountains was one of the greatest achievements over natural obstacles ever accomplished upon earth. To organize a State in the midst of a vast desert—one that could sustain itself and bear up against the powers that endeavored to destroy it, was a feat unequalled by anything recorded in the annals of history... Take the Saints that were assembled at Nauvoo, that had been driven from their possessions, hurried away from their homes, and robbed of all they possessed, driven away with a design on the part of their enemies that they should perish in the wilderness,—to take this remnant that was left and bring them with the rest to his land, that was pronounced uninhabitable,—to

²¹⁸ Young, *Memoirs*, 321.

make it produce the rich provisions of the earth, and to organize a powerful State in the midst of this desert country, shows the power and wisdom of the Almighty, manifested through the man that leads, guides, and instructs the people.²¹⁹

By retrospectively describing the pioneer landscape as a desert, the successful organization of a “powerful State in the midst of this desert country” serves as proof of divine intervention and protection. In his retelling of a Mormon desert history, Smith implies that both the desolate landscape of the journey and the desert country of the Great Basin make up the broader desert stage for this pioneer drama—one that reenacts the desert experiences of the Israelites and the Nephites.

Descriptions of the initial environment of the Salt Lake Valley as an infertile desert retroactively frames the success of Mormon settlement as evidence that a divine test had been passed as well as an empowering testament of their divinely given authority to colonize this land. The popularized history of the first Mormon migration culminates in their arrival at the Salt Lake Valley where Brigham Young suddenly and without warning declared, “This is the place.”²²⁰ The customary narrative suggests that the exact location of the new holy land was unknown to all until this declaration, reinforcing the uncertain and unknown connotations of the desert, which formed “a horizon, beyond which no white man knew.”²²¹ This depiction of the Salt Lake valley as a desert imbues the eventual agricultural and developmental success in the area with providential authority and sets the stage for a narrative of divine testing. “To attempt to settle a whole people, situated as we were, in the midst of a howling desert a thousand miles from

²¹⁹ Smith, “Prosperity of Zion,” 73.

²²⁰ See, for example: Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 39-41; Francaviglia, *Go East*, 95; James L. Westcoat Jr., “Watering the Deserts,” in *The Making of the American Landscape*, ed. Michael Conzen (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 220.

²²¹ John R. Young, *Memoirs*, 318.

supplies”²²² required both divine intervention and the Mormons’ ability to be tested. This was not only a test of agricultural prowess, but of faith. How would the Mormons transform this space from a barren wasteland to an agriculturally prosperous holy land? “To those who have faith,” John R. Young wrote, “all things are possible. Only by this God-given power, so little known and comprehended, were our people enabled to cross the trackless plains, subdue the wilderness, and make the ‘desert blossom as the rose.’”²²³ Despite settling in the arid desert of the Salt Lake Valley, the Mormon pioneers were soon able to pull an abundance of grains from the soil. On this subject, George Smith declared, “Who has done this? God and the Saints have done it! The Saints have had faith and walked over the land.”²²⁴ In 1870, LDS Church leader Orson Pratt similarly reflected on Mormon prosperity: “Everyone knows that fruitful as it is now, when we came here it was called a desert,” citing both the cartographic title of “Great American Desert” that had previously been attached to this western portion of the continent, as well as his observation that the waters of the Great Salt Lake had risen “some ten or twelve feet above the surface as it existed in 1847, when I first saw it.”²²⁵ Pratt saw this change in water level as synonymous with a prediction in Isaiah, when “waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.”²²⁶ The narrative shift to emphasizing the Salt Lake Valley as a desert paints the Mormons’ agricultural success as confirmation of their authoritative status as not only a chosen people but a people chosen to reenact and fulfill ancient desert experiences and prophecies: “These chosen people had thus transformed the desert wilderness into their promised land... the fact that this occurred about three millennia *after* Isaiah likewise confirmed not only

²²² “Synopsis of Remarks by Elder George A. Smith” in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, England, 1854-1886), vol. 11 (1861), 176.

²²³ John R. Young, *Memoirs*, 51.

²²⁴ George A. Smith, “Synopsis of Remarks,” 177.

²²⁵ Orson Pratt, quoted in Francaviglia, *Go East*, 95.

²²⁶ Isaiah 35:6.

the Latter-day Saints' geographic mission but also their actions in a preordained time—the actual latter days themselves.”²²⁷

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, the Thirdspatial construction of the Mormon desert replicates the now familiar vulnerability-empowerment dynamic occurring through a process of narrativization that reconfigures the landscape of the pioneers as a desert on par with ancient and prophetic desert spaces. The desert functions, therefore, in Mormon history, as a geographically distinct site of biblical reenactment, as well as the defining element of an era/event of this reenactment that concludes with the settler transformation of the desert into fertile land. This narrative, once complete, becomes encoded into Mormon history as a people-defining experience and is consequently sacralized. The now-sacralized pioneer history could then become integral to the development of a collective Mormon quasi-nationalist identity. Heeding the divine call of reenactment in the “land of inheritance,”²²⁸ the “Latter Day Saints would transform the land into Zion, an agrarian utopia, and this work would transform the Latter Day Saints into the Kingdom of God.”²²⁹ The Mormon historian Ron Barney attests to the transformative nature of the migration and settlement in the western part of the continent, as it “provided the catalyst that transformed the Latter--day Saints from disparate groups and individuals into something they were not” and “shaped their spiritual and cultural identity.”²³⁰ By interpreting their desert history through a narrative framework of an ancient sacred past, Mormon pioneers participated in a recapitulation that ultimately would be narrativized and recapitulated again, imbuing the settler-colonial project of Mormon settlement in the Great Basin with an

²²⁷ Francaviglia, *Go East*, 95.

²²⁸ “Land of inheritance” is a terminology for promised land that appears in the Book of Mormon.

²²⁹ Chidester, “A Land Choice,” 113.

²³⁰ Ron Barney, ed., *The Mormon Vanguard Brigade of 1847: Norton Jacob's Record* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005), 5.

almost scriptural authority. An annual July 24th celebration developed, in which Mormons reenacted the “fulfillment event of the LDS Exodus, reentering the Salt Lake Valley with appropriate ceremony, thus symbolically reentering not only the Great Basin but also the Promised Land.”²³¹ The significance of this history continues into the twenty-first century with traditions that revisit and keep alive this recapitulation, such as Mormon youth conferences organized around a reenactment of the desert trek of the pioneers that take place at culturally significant locations on the Mormon Trail.²³² By recapitulating this desert history, the settler-colonial project of the Mormon pioneers is sacralized, as they not only harnessed sacred narratives of land and collective transformation, but lived their lives in “sacred space and sacred time.”²³³

²³¹ Shipps, *Mormonism*, 64.

²³² See Megan Sanborn Jones, “(Re)living the Pioneer Past: Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Re-enactments,” *Theatre Topics* 16, no. 2 (2006): 113-130.

²³³ Shipps, *Mormonism*, 126.

5. THE NUCLEAR DESERT

In the mid-twentieth century, the southwestern deserts were fundamentally, and perhaps irrevocably, altered. They were nuclearized. The nuclear desert is a composite geography of militarized research centers, nuclear test sites, and nuclear waste storage sites that took shape during WWII and the Cold War arms race. It is a space of national reckoning, trans/formation, and immense destructive and creative power—a space of cultural, direct, and structural violence. In 1945, U.S. military-backed nuclear scientists detonated the world's first nuclear bomb at the Trinity site in the Jornada del Muerto desert, in New Mexico. Three weeks later, the U.S. dropped an untested uranium bomb on Hiroshima and three days later, the same plutonium bomb as was tested at the Trinity site was dropped on Nagasaki. One hundred and seventy thousand people died instantly; thousands more died slowly from radiation sickness and burn wounds.²³⁴ While the U.S. national narrative credits this violent introduction of a weapon of mass destruction with the ending of the Second World War, it was also initiated almost half a century of federal nuclear testing that would cause irreparable environmental, social, and cultural damages within the United States. After the first test at Trinity, the U.S. detonated several nuclear bombs in occupied offshore lands before, due to pressure from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) (now the Department of Energy [DOE]), the federal government moved its proving ground back to the deserts of the Southwest and created the Nevada Testing Site in 1950. Over the next several decades, over a thousand nuclear explosions were detonated at the Test Site, culminating in an eventual establishment of the deep-geologic repository for high-level

²³⁴ These specific numbers are quoted in Terre Ryan, *This Ecstatic Nation: The American Landscape and the Aesthetics of Patriotism* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 29.

nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain in Nevada.²³⁵ In her attempts to map what she terms the “nuclear landscape,” Valerie Kuletz asserts that, “though the nuclear landscape can be said to exist throughout the United States, nowhere has it emerged as extensively as in the Southwest interdesert region.”²³⁶

Scholarship on U.S. nuclear history and its southwestern backdrop gained momentum in the 1990s, when the U.S. halted all nuclear testing in anticipation of the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. In 1992, several historical papers on the topic were presented at a symposium called “The Atomic West, 1942-1992: Federal Power and Regional Development.” Two years later, Rebecca Solnit published her sweeping cultural critique/memoir *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West*, drawing parallels between the violent creation of one of the country’s “national treasures” Yosemite National Park and the equally violent creation of one of its wastelands or “national sacrifice areas,” at the Nevada Test Site (NTS).²³⁷ *The Atomic West* was later assembled as an anthology by Bruce Hevly and John M. Findlay in 1998, the same year that Kuletz published her investigation into the consequences of national nuclear policy on the human geographies of the southwest, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West*. This literature jumps across disciplines, weaving a tale of environmental transformation, national identity, federal abuses of power, structural and direct violence, political secrecy, and spatial imaginings and reimaginings of land and power; all of which is set against the backdrop of the desert regions of the U.S. continent.

²³⁵ Valerie Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

²³⁶ Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert*, 10.

²³⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1998), 246.

In this chapter, I present an approach to this history that centers the desert space and therefore elucidates how the desert has been narrativized to serve the greater U.S. political purpose of nuclear weapons development. The desert of the “Atomic West” replicates the dynamics of early Christian narratives of the desert—as an uninhabitable space of desolation, emptiness, and chaos in which “the divine” (in this case, its scientific and national surrogates) makes itself known and authorizes an otherwise endangered and vulnerable collective with supreme power. The nuclear desert was unfolded over a historical period of several decades. The Manhattan Project (under J. Robert Oppenheimer’s leadership) was a project of the Second World War; the broader national project of nuclear weapons development, however, rested on narratives of antagonistic national and international dynamics that were continuous throughout WWI and the Cold War that followed. For the purposes of this case study, which investigates the narrative creation of the nuclear desert and its recapitulations of foundational, sacralizing desert motifs, I will be moving non-linearly throughout these wartime eras because I see them to be continuous in this way.

To help account for and nuance the distinctions between this case study and the previous two, I make use of Kuletz’s adaptation of Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s theoretical concept of deterritoriality, defined in her words as “the loss of commitment by modern nation-states to particular lands or regions.”²³⁸ In the context of this case study, national deterritorializing and reterritorializing work together to lay claim to desert spaces by excluding them, by classifying particular lands as beyond protective control. In the mid-twentieth century of U.S. history, the nation had fulfilled its supposed continental destiny. Unlike the desert narratives of the nineteenth century, encounters with land no longer had to answer the question

²³⁸ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 7.

of whether or not (and how) the land would or should be incorporated into U.S. territorial control. While U.S. settler colonialism was and is an ongoing process of internal conquest and colonization, the ethos of the mid-to-late-twentieth century could be described as a “post-conquest” mentality—enter deterritoriality as a mechanism of settler colonialism. By casting particular landscapes as ecologically and agriculturally useless and uninhabitable, and deterritorializing them, the AEC/DOE made space for a paradoxical revitalization of the land as a “zone of sacrifice,” space sacrificed for the greater good of the nation.

In the post-conquest context of this third case study, the desert remains a site for vulnerability engendering settler-colonial power/authority through the narrative and literal—and Thirdspatial—creation of a nuclear desert space that integrates a post-war/Cold War national security narrative of vulnerability, a conception of the bomb as a sort of divine encounter, and a deterritorializing implementation of the desert-as-wasteland discourse. The naturalizing and sacralizing processes that I have illuminated in the previous chapters continue to shape the settler-colonial desert space in this third and final case study through narrative comparisons between nuclear power and divine power and/or the forces of nature. Regina Schwartz’s insight on the consecrated, holy nation— “sovereign power legitimated by transcendence”—is particularly relevant to this case study, in which the transcendent power of the sovereign nation is implicitly woven into narratives of antagonistic foreign relations, scientific advancement, and land.²³⁹ The nuclear desert becomes a proving ground on which the nation can test its ability to harness nature for the benefit of its standing on the global stage, contributing to the trans/formation of its collective identity.

²³⁹ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 12.

In this chapter, I define Firstspace as the topographical and climatological descriptions of the desert regions of the Southwest in federal documents and by the atomic scientists at Los Alamos. I focus on the selection of the locations of the Los Alamos research hub, the Trinity Test Site, and the Nevada Test Site. My discussion of Firstspace comes with the caveat that the topographic “reality” of this landscape has been overwritten to serve the interests of the U.S. government; in other words, the desert geographies I describe are settler-colonial and depart radically from Indigenous geographies of the same spaces. The goal of this section is to present a national Firstspatial narrative of an empty landscape with innate desert qualities that made these areas ideal locales for the development of nuclear weapons.

I define the Secondspatial elements as cultural narratives surrounding the desert and nuclear weapons that contributed to the spatial production of the nuclear desert; in this case, I emphasize the recapitulation of the Euro-American “wasteland” discourse and the specific religious resonances of atomic research—the supernatural and apocalyptic power of a weapon of mass destruction and the religiosity in the historicized figure of Oppenheimer.

The final section, on the atomic desert Thirdspace, demonstrates how First and Secondspatial narratives of the desert are interwoven to construct a nuclear desert landscape that implicitly replicates the ancient Christian desert narrative in service to national and settler-colonial claims to power. The decision to bomb the desert lands of the southwestern U.S. in order to test weapons of mass destruction that might prove necessary as the Soviet Union raced to do the same, relies on a narrative of the desert as an ideal proving ground for the power of the sanctified nation-state. In this section, I explain the Thirdspatial narrative of the nuclear desert as a violent process of deterritoriality, a technology of settler colonialism. “Deterritoriality,” Kuletz writes, “is a term used to explain the construction of national and international sacrifice

zones,”²⁴⁰ such as the delineation of particular desert spaces for testing and storage of toxic nuclear weapons. I illustrate how, through the wasteland discourse, the naturalizing narrative of the desert as the ideal sacrifice zone for nuclear weapons testing, the political context of the WWII and Cold War national security fears, and a variation on the divine testing motif, the nuclear desert becomes a deterritorialized space that continues to serve as a site for national identity trans/formation and maintains settler-colonial domination. The narrative construction of this desert Thirdspace is what ultimately enabled the federal government to transform the space into the wasteland it had been made out to be. By testing radioactive weapons of mass destruction and subsequently storing the near-indestructible nuclear waste in this landscape, the imagined “wasteland” of the desert is rendered a literal wasteland.

This discussion provides a final example of the replication of a desert narrative that I have traced from its ancient Christian origins to the U.S. context. In the nuclear desert, the space of the desert has been transformed from one in which a collective could encounter God, be rendered vulnerable, be tested, and prove a level of divine authorization, to a space where a nation could get as close as possible to a supernatural degree of destructive power, test that power, and prove at the domestic and international levels a national identity that was simultaneously (and paradoxically) defined by vulnerability to a perceived antagonistic “Other” and power in the form of a supernatural weapon and scientific progress. By contributing to ongoing collective identity trans/formation of the U.S. nation-state, the desert continues to be a site for the sacralization of settler colonialism.

²⁴⁰ Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert*, 7.

Firstspace

The narrative Firstspace of the nuclear desert proving ground comprises topographical, ecological, and climatological qualities that erase local Indigenous history and frame the desert as simultaneously uncondusive to human habitation/survival and definitively ideal for secret military research and nuclear weapons development. The first desert site for nuclear research in the southwest was the “science city” or “atomic city” of Los Alamos, which developed around the Los Alamos laboratory built in 1943 on a mesa northwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico and west of the Rio Grande. As historian Carl Abbott writes, “Los Alamos met the seemingly contradictory requirements of a defensible landscape, isolation from concentrated populations, a location at least 200 miles from the Pacific Coast and international borders, and reasonable convenience to rail transportation and a commercial airport.”²⁴¹ Hence, the selection of this site was in part due to its “remote” desert location but also, in part, it was a product of Oppenheimer’s affinity for New Mexico. “My two great loves are physics and New Mexico,” Oppenheimer once penned in a letter to a friend. “It’s a pity they can’t be combined.” The Los Alamos laboratory perhaps proved him wrong:

[H]ere, at last, he would bring together his two great loves. High on a mesa top, surrounded by pines and stunning views of the Jemez Mountains, the Rio Grande Valley, and the Sangre de Cristo range, he and his colleagues would combine physics and physical setting in the service of making a weapon that might defend liberal democracy against the fascist threat.²⁴²

While the location of the research hub of Los Alamos in New Mexico was valued for both its isolation and its beauty, the decision for the site of the first detonation of the atom bomb—the

²⁴¹ Carl Abbott, “Building Atomic Cities: Richland, Los Alamos, and the American Planning Language,” *The Atomic West*, eds. Bruce Hevly and John M. Findlay, 90-115 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 90.

²⁴² Mark Fiege, “The Atomic Scientists, the Sense of Wonder, and the Bomb,” *Environmental History* 12, no. 3 (2007): 596.

Trinity Test—was based on the notion that much of New Mexico was a desert wasteland, characterized by barrenness, a scarcity of resources, and death. The Department of Energy’s official history of the Manhattan Project from 2000 describes the location of the Trinity Test Site in Alamogordo as a “barren site [...] known as the Jornada del Muerto, or the Journey of Death, 210 miles south of Los Alamos.”²⁴³ This space, with its connotations of death, seemed to be the perfect site for the inaugural test of a supremely deadly weapon.

Topographical research and later descriptions regarding the area that would eventually be selected as the Nevada Test Site describe a similarly barren, uninhabited desert environment. After a haphazard handling of the Trinity Test and the shock of witnessing the first nuclear explosion, there was a brief period where the U.S. used offshore “wastelands” like the Bikini Atoll to continue testing.²⁴⁴ However, due to issues with transport and climate (and the “communist insurgency in Korea”) according to a pamphlet from the DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration, “the need for a continental test site had become urgent.”²⁴⁵ The Armed Forces Special Weapons Project selected Naval Captain Howard B. Hutchinson to conduct the classified study “Project Nutmeg” to search for a continental test site.²⁴⁶ Hutchinson’s 1949 report made no specific site recommendations but listed the “arid southwest” as the “most

²⁴³ Terrence R. Fehner and F. G. Gosling, “Origins of the Nevada Test Site,” (DOE/MA-0518; Washington: History Division, Department of Energy, December 2000), 48.

²⁴⁴ Jeffrey Sasha Davis has examined the “discursive-material formation” (Davis’ framework for the real-and-imagined socio-spatial processes that construct place) of Bikini Atoll as a “deserted island,” providing an example for how a variation on the desert narrative has shaped the representations of places used for off-shore nuclear testing/nuclear colonialism. Jeffrey Sasha Davis, “Representing Place: “Deserted Isles” and the Reproduction of Bikini Atoll,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 607-25.

²⁴⁵ “Project Nutmeg,” (DOE/MA-0518; Nevada: Nevada Field Office of Public Affairs, National Nuclear Security Administration, Department of Energy, August 2013).

²⁴⁶ For an account of the fraught politics surrounding the reception and initial rejection of the findings of the Project Nutmeg report, see Frederick Anthony Schoemehl, “Nuclear Reactions: National Security Policy, Culture, and Environment in the Nevada Test Site Region, 1950–1958,” PhD diss. (University of California, Irvine, 2004), 40-50.

favorable” site for continental nuclear testing.²⁴⁷ During this process and throughout the early years of Nevada testing, the AEC conducted more topographical and climatological research on the area before selecting the location of the NTS, despite later indications that the Nutmeg study and other site-planning research endeavors had been rushed and inaccurate.²⁴⁸ A DOE-published history of the Test Site includes a description of the pre-nuclear environment as a “remote desert” where “water—or lack thereof—is the dominating climatic characteristic.” In the same section, the narrative makes no effort to hide that these climatological and topological descriptions are to assure the reader: “The Nevada Test Site nonetheless is where it is for good reason. Few areas of the continental United States are more ruggedly severe and as inhospitable to humans.”²⁴⁹ The DOE’s Firstspatial description cites nature as the defining force of settlement—if this landscape were more hospitable, more people would call it home. This history glosses over Indigenous geographies by suggesting that pre-colonial Indigenous presence on these lands took the form of “widely scattered,” minimally populated, and non-agricultural societies. The Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute are called “free roaming” peoples, forced to practice “a subsistence strategy designed to cope with a severe and unforgiving environment [...] By the early twentieth century, most of the free-roaming Native Americans had moved to surrounding towns or relocated to reservations.”²⁵⁰ This brief but telling passage demonstrates how the populations indigenous to the region—those that did call it home—were portrayed in

²⁴⁷ Terrence R. Fehner & F. G. Gosling, “Atmospheric Nuclear Weapons Testing 1951-1963” (DOE/MA-0003; Washington: History Division, Department of Energy, September 2000), 164.

²⁴⁸ Fehner and Gosling, “Origins of the Nevada Test Site,” 40; Schoemehl, “Nuclear Reactions,” 22. Schoemehl’s study demonstrates that selection site planning documents “make clear that no one had command of basic information, such as the exact size and location of neighboring population, land uses, or sentiments of local people. Men who would leave nothing to chance as they addressed the intricacies of atomic weapons played a vast guessing game when the subject was selection of the Nevada site. Expedience dominated the process.”

²⁴⁹ Fehner and Gosling, “Origins of the Nevada Test Site,” 6.

²⁵⁰ Fehner and Gosling, “Origins of the Nevada Test Site,” 7.

culturally violent narratives as subhuman; barely living by embodying a sort of nomadic, “free-roaming” straggler lifestyle that was antithetical to U.S. settler ideals. This would have been, it seems, the only way to live on this land, proving its worthlessness. This narrative serves as justification for the deterritorialization of the land, making it ideal for the destructive testing project at hand.

The topography of the NTS was and continues to be described as uninhabitable land. Meanwhile, during AEC site selection discussions and subsequent public-facing narratives, the topography and meteorology of the area was frequently described as well-suited for nuclear testing. In response to concerns about fallout, the AEC emphasized that the wind currents of the season would effectively “cleanse” the atmosphere of radioactive toxins.²⁵¹ As these concerns remained, the AEC pointed to natural sources of radiation as evidence that the amount of radiation generated by testing was insignificant and AEC-backed researchers promoted the idea that natural processes would effectively de-contaminate the surrounding environment.²⁵² Frederick Anthony Schoemehl has explored this rhetorical trend: —in the selection process of the Nevada Test Site, “[n]ature seemed to offer so much: aridity had kept the land devoid of population; topography afforded protection from inquiring eyes; and meteorological conditions guaranteed atomic testing at will.”²⁵³ In 1953, erratic weather (increased rainfall in some places, droughts elsewhere, tornados in Canada) prompted thousands of letters to the AEC raising concerns that the nuclear tests were to blame. In response the AEC launched a public relations counter-offensive centered around “a constant reiteration,” according to AEC director of information services Morse Salisbury, “that the test organization uses weather, does not create

²⁵¹ Schoemehl, “Nuclear Reactions,” 248.

²⁵² Schoemehl, “Nuclear Reactions,” 248.

²⁵³ Schoemehl, “Nuclear Reactions,” 251.

it.”²⁵⁴ This message, according to another AEC public relations official, had to come from “all possible opinion-controlling agencies, such as the U.S. Weather Bureau, Air Force bases, and the news media.”²⁵⁵ Despite evidence to the contrary, political, military, and scientific leaders of the nuclear project maintained that nature and nuclear power were harmonious at the Nevada Test Site, a rhetorical strategy that asserted particular Firstspatial qualities to help *naturalize* the transformation of the desert into a nuclear desert.

Secondspace

The desert-as-wasteland discourse attached to the nuclear desert inherits a legacy of desert/wasteland narratives that populated the cultural image of the “American West” and relied on more overarching Euro-American narratives about land and utility. In the previous chapters, I introduced biblical and early U.S. desert narratives that contribute to the instrumentalization of the “wasteland” discourse to justify the violent appropriation of the arid regions of the Southwest for nuclear weapons testing. Kuletz and other scholars have pointed out the “wasteland discourse” and its contributions to the deterritorializing of these landscapes.²⁵⁶ Laura Pitkanen and Matthew Farish define the wasteland discourse as “negative associates designed to turn swaths of the Great Basin and Range into a landscape empty of value and even people, *in advance* of land withdrawal, militarization, and contamination.”²⁵⁷ By what Kuletz calls “inverted logic,” the desert landscape was “viewed by the state as desirable because of its

²⁵⁴ Morse Salisbury, quoted in Schoemehl, “Nuclear Reactions,” 275.

²⁵⁵ Richard Elliot, quoted in Schoemehl, “Nuclear Reactions,” 275.

²⁵⁶ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*; Pitkanen & Farish, “Nuclear Landscapes;” Danielle Endres, “From Wasteland to Waste Site: The Role of Discourse in Nuclear Power’s Environmental Injustices,” *Local Environment* 14, no. 10 (2009): 917-937.

²⁵⁷ Pitkanen and Farish, “Nuclear Landscapes,” 870.

undesirability.”²⁵⁸ This discourse relied on a historical settler narrative of deserts that understood certain portions of the Western continental U.S. to be entirely barren—Danielle Endres cites Frémont and other early desert “explorers” as some of the original narrators of this wasteland discourse.²⁵⁹ The dominant Euroamerican perspective of more contemporary naturalist and environmental discourses support this narrative through the disguising of objective scientific categorization, supporting “preexisting settler discourse about desert lands as barren wastelands by organizing bioregions within hierarchies of value according to productive capacity. In this scheme, deserts are placed at the bottom of the ladder.”²⁶⁰ This quasi-utilitarian and culturally violent valorization extended to the people within the landscapes—photojournalist Carole Gallagher notes that the AEC in a “top secret memo,” described the people living downwind of the test site as “a low-use segment of the population.”²⁶¹ Gallagher also notes that the AEC referred to these areas as a “desert wasteland,” and a 1950s magazine article from *Armed Forces Talk* written for soldiers joining atomic development projects at the Test Site described the landscape as “a damn good place to dump used razor blades.”²⁶² There was and is an obvious strategic purpose of the discourse of desert as “wasteland” in the designation of these lands as expendable, as zones of sacrifice. For example, despite the AEC and the DOE’s portrayal of the space as an empty, valueless landscape, the deserts of the southwestern U.S. were rich in energy resources. Though initial supplies of uranium ore for the Manhattan Project were extracted from the then-colony of Belgian Congo and Indigenous territories in northern Canada, the U.S. eventually began to mine uranium reserves in the Southwest—with Native reservations (lands

²⁵⁸ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 16.

²⁵⁹ Endres, “From Wasteland to Waste Site,” 926.

²⁶⁰ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 16.

²⁶¹ Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), xxiii.

²⁶² Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, xxiv.

already deterritorialized and deemed value-less by the U.S. government) accounting for two thirds of all domestic uranium reserves.²⁶³ In Kuletz' words, "The ironic and continuing designation of this resource-rich terrain as wasteland in fact represents a very important means of justifying the relentless plunder of the region through highly environmentally destructive extractive technologies."²⁶⁴ The DOE histories choose to portray the destructive nuclear project, instead, as constructive and almost regenerative. In conjunction with the opening of the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, the DOE published a narrative history of atmospheric nuclear weapons testing featuring a 1952 quote from Nevada Governor Charles Russell: "It's exciting to think that the sub-marginal land of the proving ground is furthering science and helping national defense... We had long ago written off that terrain as wasteland, and today it's blooming with atoms."²⁶⁵ The authors of the DOE histories of the test site appear to cite this as evidence for the gratitude of local leaders for the role weapons testing had played in "the city's prosperity and population growth."²⁶⁶ Russell's biblical reference to Isaiah 35:1²⁶⁷ should not go unaddressed—despite the well-understood destructive qualities of nuclear weapons and the selection of a desert wasteland in which to test them, the wasteland narrative that devalued deserts paradoxically revalorized the nuclear desert as "blooming" spaces of epic creation, scientific (and national) progress, and encounters with the supernatural.

The unprecedented level of destructive power of nuclear fission was at times conceived of as a superhuman force rather than a product of human creation—a divine encounter of sorts.

²⁶³ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 13; Laura Pitkanen and Matthew Farish, "Nuclear Landscapes," *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 6 (2018), 870.

²⁶⁴ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 13.

²⁶⁵ Fehner and Gosling, "Atmospheric Nuclear Testing," 164.

²⁶⁶ Fehner and Gosling, "Atmospheric Nuclear Testing," 164.

²⁶⁷ "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom" (Isaiah 35:1 NRSV).

Post-Enlightenment distinctions between science and religion fall away in a survey of the accounts of nuclear physicists and other witnesses to the first detonations of the atomic bomb. In addition to Oppenheimer's famous recollection of a line from the Hindu *Baghavat Gita* ("I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."²⁶⁸) upon witnessing the "Trinity" bomb, the conflation of nuclear power and divine power was common among the testimonies of the Los Alamos scientists and in later literature surrounding the cultural legacy of the bomb. David Tietge writes that during the era of atomic research, "science in many ways functioned as a surrogate for religion."²⁶⁹ Mark Fiege's analysis of the writings of the scientists at Los Alamos demonstrates that physics, and more specifically nuclear physics, was interpreted by physicists as a medium for encountering God. The writings of nuclear physicist Isidor Rabi, in Fiege's words, suggested that by "probing atoms, he glimpsed the divine." Physics allowed Rabi to perceive, "the mystery of it: how very different it is from what you can see, and how profound nature is."²⁷⁰ Fiege recounts that "when a graduate student brought a scientific finding to him, [Rabi] would ask: 'Does it bring you near to God?'"²⁷¹ Victor Weisskopf, another physicist at Los Alamos, looked back on his role in the atomic discoveries with "exaltation:" "We touched the nerve of the universe."²⁷² The name of the Trinity site itself encapsulated the cosmic and religious vision for

²⁶⁸ Oppenheimer's well-known interest in and affinity for Eastern religions, in light of his love of science and nature, should be understood through the lens supplied by Ramachandra Guha in her seminal critique of "Radical American Environmentalism" and Edward Said's critical concept of "Orientalism." Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics*, 11, no.1 (Spring 1989), 71-83; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

²⁶⁹ David Tietge, *Flash Effect: Science and the Rhetorical Origins of Cold War America* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 147.

²⁷⁰ Isidor Rabi, quoted in Fiege, "The Atomic Scientists," 594.

²⁷¹ Fiege, "The Atomic Scientists," 594.

²⁷² Victor Weisskopf, quoted in Fiege, "The Atomic Scientists," 594.

this experiment—Trinity calls to mind the Father, Son, Holy Spirit triad of Christian theology. In 1962, Oppenheimer said,

Why I chose the name is not clear, but I know what thoughts were in my mind... From [a John Donne poem] quotation: “As West and East / In all flat Maps—and I am one—are one, / So death doth touch the Resurrection.” That still does not make a Trinity, but in another, better known devotional poem Donne opens, “Batter my heart, three person’d God.”²⁷³

Thus, the site of the first detonation of an atom bomb became Trinity, after the pluralistic, destructive, and resurrectional power of the Christian God.

The first detonation at Trinity was a “convergence” of science and religion and prompted an “immediate understanding that human beings had captured a godlike power that required equally godlike accountability.”²⁷⁴ On July 16, 1945, scientists and other onlookers were struck by the transcendent and apocalyptic beauty of the bomb. Researchers George Kistiakowsky and Emilio Segre thought they were catching a glimpse of how the world would end.²⁷⁵ Fiege cites a particular quote from Victor Weisskopf: “Weisskopf recalled that ‘an aureole of bluish light’ around the fireball reminded him of a medieval painting of Jesus ascending to heaven in a bright yellow sphere surrounded by a blue halo: ‘The explosion of an atomic bomb and the resurrection of Christ—what a paradoxical and disturbing association!’”²⁷⁶ This rhetoric of exaltation, transcendence, resurrection, ascension, and apocalypse inherits a Christian paradigm for conceiving of the supernatural. The atomic scientists encounter God in unknown (but certainly deadly) phenomena; in the “vibrating, shimmering, energy-packed particles too small to see or feel yet nonetheless reflecting the face of God.”²⁷⁷ This narrative of proximity to the divine

²⁷³ J. Robert Oppenheimer, *Robert Oppenheimer, Letters and Recollections*, eds. Alice Kimball Smith and Charles Weiner (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995), 290.

²⁷⁴ Tietge, *Flash Effect*, 147.

²⁷⁵ Fiege, “The Atomic Scientists,” 601.

²⁷⁶ Fiege, “The Atomic Scientists,” 602.

²⁷⁷ Fiege, “The Atomic Scientists,” 603.

through creating or bearing witness to the bomb continues to shape its legacy in contemporary cultural narratives. One of the more well-known biographies of Oppenheimer, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's *American Prometheus*, evidently implies through its title that Oppenheimer can and should be conceived as a beneficial, salvific—even Christlike—mediator between humans and the divine, one who has gifted the fire of the gods to humanity. Terre Ryan has unpacked the infusion of religious symbols and mythologies with the atom bomb in her personal reflection on Oppenheimer's choice of name for the Trinity site:

For humankind, the birth of the Bomb—the destroyer—was perhaps as significant as the birth of Jesus Christ—to believers, the savior. The name of Oppenheimer's bomb strikes me like a blow to the gut. *Trinity*. To someone raised as a Catholic kid, reluctantly or not, Trinity signifies a three-faced patriarch of Father, son, and spirit—a force of impalpable love conjoined with formidable anger, and of authority unquestionable except by those who would court eternal damnation. *Trinity*. Had technology replaced God in this nation that has, since the pilgrims first staggered ashore, liked to portray itself as a Christian country? Perhaps the atom—neutrons, protons, electrons weighty as spirits—had become our new Trinity.²⁷⁸

While there is a clear struggle in Ryan's writing to come to terms with the comparison between a “force of impalpable love” and the destructive power of the bomb, the possibilities of connecting this bomb, and the invisible “spirit” of its particles, and the divine patriarch's “formidable anger” and “unquestionable authority” are undeniable. But what of the desert? In addition to serving as the ideal empty “wasteland” for the deterritorializing project of nuclear weapons development, the nuclear desert implicitly reenacted the familiar (and ancient) desert narrative of divine encounter and trans/formation. Nuclear testing in the desert offered a variation on the divine testing motif through the literal testing of a weapon of mass destruction and the replication of the narrative of the desert as a “proving ground.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Terre Ryan, *This Ecstatic Nation*, 28-29.

²⁷⁹ “An expression,” Ryan notes, “that raises the question of why we must prove ourselves, or anything, against the environment” (Ryan, *This Ecstatic Nation*, 33).

Several biographies of Oppenheimer imply that the desert environment was not only one for which the physicist had an aesthetic affinity, but one that also reflected significant aspects of his religiously infused. Oppenheimer as powerful creator and In his survey of this body of biographical literature, Lindsey Michael Banco points out an ambivalence in the literary reconstructions of Oppenheimer’s identity, which encourage both a reading of Oppenheimer as a scientist on a “hyperrational quest for knowledge,” and an “American version of the Romantic artist tapping intuitively or emotionally into unearthly and sublimely incomprehensible knowledge.”²⁸⁰ Banco argues that this ambivalence maps onto the “duality of the desert.”²⁸¹ In Banco’s characterizations, one perceives the ancient, paradoxical, biblical model of the desert: “The wasteland of the desert contains the potential for strange creation or provision despite its apparent emptiness... The desert’s forbidding qualities, its potential, its transformative powers, and its haunting aesthetics make it a multivalent space whose meaning is never stable.”²⁸² Bird and Shirwin’s *American Prometheus* likewise includes descriptions of the landscape in and around Los Alamos that characterize it, in a typical example of wasteland discourse, as a “wilderness” that was “stark,” “desolate,” and “spartan,” while at the same time emphasizing Oppenheimer’s romantic emotional experience of the landscape as a strange and new mythical landscape.²⁸³ The desert as both empty/austere and sublime reinforce the portrayal of Oppenheimer as an aesthetically-inclined romantic and a technological genius—a creator in all senses. In the desert, Oppenheimer’s creative—godlike—power can be fully realized. Again, the Prometheus myth is alluded to, as the sublime, “mystical” desert spaces create “a medium for

²⁸⁰ Lindsey Michael Banco, “The Biographies of J. Robert Oppenheimer: Desert Saint or Destroyer of Worlds?” *Biography* 35, no. 3 (2012), 494.

²⁸¹ Banco, “The Biographies,” 495.

²⁸² Banco, “The Biographies,” 495.

²⁸³ Banco, “The Biographies,” 491.

divine inspiration and knowledge that...comes from on high... Here, genius stems from the heavenly (yet ultimately dangerous) touch invoked in the myth of Prometheus.”²⁸⁴ The narrative of the desert as both desolate and divine (or perhaps desolate *and therefore* divine) is resonant of the ancient Christian desert, which, through its austerity, becomes a *proving ground* for God’s relationship to and authorization of a collective. The conflation of scientific discovery with encountering the divine bears similarities to the Euro-American narrative that links U.S. progress with a fulfillment of divine destiny, and the nuclear desert inherited the Euro-American mythologies of the desert frontier. Banco contends that Oppenheimer is consistently portrayed as a pioneering frontiersman, an image that is supported by descriptions of the Los Alamos landscape that emphasize its empty, deserted qualities:

Such a linguistic voiding of the landscape, a process that also elides the native presence in the American Southwest and masks ecological complexities, helps present Oppenheimer as a shaper extraordinaire, as a resourceful scientist who transformed a ‘desolate,’ ‘empty’ mesa into an intricate weapons laboratory and the primary tool for winning the Second World War. Wiping the landscape clean before Oppenheimer’s arrival highlights the American conceptions of innocence and purity that subtend narratives of the hard working, efficient creator generating power and wealth from (ostensibly) nothing...²⁸⁵

These intersections of national power and religion, frontiersmanship and divine destiny—intersections that give shape to and take shape in the North American deserts, as evidenced in previous case studies—shed light on the recurrence of ancient Christian desert tropes in the formation of the secularized, militarized nuclear desert.

Thirdspace

²⁸⁴ Banco, “The Biographies of J. Robert Oppenheimer,” 499.

²⁸⁵ Banco, “The Biographies of J. Robert Oppenheimer,” 498.

In this section, I use the category of Thirdspace to illustrate the integration of First and Second-spatial narrative spaces in the construction of desert space that authorizes its appropriation for nuclear weapons testing. Via settler-colonial mechanisms of naturalization, sacralization, and, in this case, deterritorialization, this imagined desert is imposed onto southwestern geographies and used to authorize the militarized “zone of occupation” of the nuclear desert. The nuclear desert, like the desert of the early Mormon pioneers and the “Great American Desert,” is a space where a narrative of vulnerability is structurally integral to claims to power and authority. The paradoxical dynamic of this space is in large part a result of a process of deterritorialization that cast the deserts of the southwest as simultaneously completely worthless and absolutely necessary—highly militarized and socially neglected—creating a “zone of sacrifice,” by sacrificing this land for a national good. The deterritorialization of the desert regions of the Southwest—the state mechanisms by which, as undesirable or expendable regions, the deserts could become a national, militarized “proving ground” (and dumping ground)—suggests that the power and authority to deterritorialize is predicated on authoritative claims to territory. This notion of a desert wasteland as it appears in the territorial narratives of the U.S. makes the deterritorializing of the desert southwest possible during the nuclear era; this deterritoriality paradoxically reinforces utility and importance of these landscapes in the evolving narrative of national security. John Beck, a scholar of the militarized southwest, observes this inclusion-by-exclusion dynamic:

This designation of desert as wasteland makes the arid West an abject place that, by World War II, can serve as the necessary differentiating sacrifice that maintains the national order. In withdrawing land, the nation identifies a site that is, as Julia Kristeva writes, “something rejected from which one does not part.” That which has been withdrawn continues to be the necessary structural other that gives shape to what is being protected through the act of exclusion.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ John Beck, *Dirty Wars: Landscape, Power, and Waste in Western American Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 23. Beck is drawing on Julia Kristeva’s abject

In the nuclear era of the U.S., the chaos and desolation of the desert, which is typically seen as a boundary to territorial control or an obstacle to be crossed (a test), becomes the key to a process of deterritoriality that, paradoxically, maintains territorial—settler colonial—dominion and reinforces national identity. The desert wasteland becomes, in Beck’s words, “the necessary structural other,” made necessary by a political narrative of vulnerability.

The construction of this deterritorialized desert Thirdspace reveals thematic continuations of ancient Christian and early settler desert narratives in the nuclear desert space whereby a collective, national identity is reinforced and empowered through a perceived vulnerability to an uncontrollable threat. That vulnerability, in turn, necessitates or invites a “supernatural” response: in this case, the development of weapons of supernatural magnitude. Schwartz has argued that a violent “construction of the Other” is necessary to imagine collective identity. “[O]utsiders—so needed for the very self-definition of those inside the group—are also regarded as a threat to them... Identity forged against the Other inspires perpetual policing of its fragile borders.”²⁸⁷ In the mid-twentieth century, repeated narratives of endangerment predicated on the idea of a foreign, uncontrollable antagonist were strategically used by the U.S. to build and maintain a national identity throughout WWII and the Cold War, beginning with the Third Reich and Japan. The United States’ decision to enter WWII initiated a political urgency to develop and test the first atomic bomb at Trinity while the continuation of nuclear weapons testing at the Nevada Test Site was both reactive to and instigative of the ensuing Cold War arms race. As early as 1945, scientists involved in the Manhattan Project saw that the increased momentum

theory (the affective reaction to the dissolution in meaning of the boundary between subject and object) as explored in Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

²⁸⁷ Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 5.

behind the project would likely lead to an eventual nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union.²⁸⁸ As national security was introduced into post-war conversations, an “expansionist reading of Soviet motives” served a narrative of the exigency of national security expansion reinforcement.²⁸⁹ The idea of Soviet weapons development made the U.S. vulnerable and therefore obligated to engage in similar expanded weapons development. James Carroll writes that during the Second World War, “the nation had come to depend on a negatively perceived Other,” a moralized narrative of national identity in which “good and evil were in ontological conflict.”²⁹⁰ Carroll observes this trend in the development of foreign policy during the Cold War: “[T]he impulse to demonize, arising from considerations that may be largely imagined, leads to a shift in the real that itself becomes threatening. The perception of danger and the danger itself have a way of becoming the same thing. Shadows take on weight.”²⁹¹ The continued development of and experimentation with nuclear weapons was given absolute priority in response to these “shadows.” A narrative of U.S. vulnerability was required to make U.S. expansion of power on a global scale seem necessary, and this expansion of power required a deterritorialized region for a testing ground. “It is with Pearl Harbor,” John Beck argues, “that the ‘wasteland’ conception of the desert West is firmly rearticulated as a function of national security. The Japanese attack revealed America’s vulnerability to external threat and soon became symbolic of American innocence in a dangerous world.”²⁹² Trinity, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the following years of nuclear testing at the NTS altered U.S. national identity both internally and externally. Instigated by a national security narrative of vulnerability, nuclear

²⁸⁸ James Carroll, *House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 59.

²⁸⁹ Carroll, *House of War*, 126.

²⁹⁰ Carroll, *House of War*, 126.

²⁹¹ Carroll, *House of War*, 127.

²⁹² Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 24.

testing—and the supernatural force it seemed to harness—began to authorize a trans/formed national identity that gave new meaning to the age-old notion that the U.S. was allied with God: “[T]he bomb could be seen as changing everything. It was a phenomenon that would in short order transform... [the United States’] way of presenting itself to and being viewed by the world, and even its understanding of itself.”²⁹³ With the exception of the violent offshore arenas of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Enewetak and Bikini Atolls, the southwestern deserts served as the geographic and imagined space for the proverbial testing and development of this transformed identity.

The selection of the Nevada Test Site, justified by the wasteland discourse, was a deterritorializing process that retroactively constructed these arid spaces as having *always* been useless. The official DOE history summarizes thousands of years of history with the following sentence: “The site and the immediate surrounding area have always been sparsely populated. Only once prior to 1950, and then very briefly, did more than a few hundred people call the site home. In most periods of habitation, far fewer have lived there.”²⁹⁴ This culturally violent erasure of historical and current inhabitants demonstrates that this form of historical revision is integral to both territorializing and deterritorializing settler claims to land and dominance; in other terms, deterritorializing is a distinct form of settler colonialism. The NTS planners, according to Schoemehl, saw “waste lands—territory not complicated by history.”²⁹⁵

The deterritorializing construction of this history of uninhabitability is then juxtaposed with a narrative of the utility of the land for U.S. empowerment—in an almost miraculous reversal (recall the nineteenth century “miracle” of inhabiting the uninhabitable desert), the

²⁹³ Carroll, *House of War*, 71.

²⁹⁴ Fehner & Gosling, “Atmospheric Nuclear Testing,” 10.

²⁹⁵ Schoemehl, “Reactions,” 251.

desert space that has been useless from time immemorial is now made useful. This miraculous reversal is aided by what Schoemehl has observed is a rhetorical trend of certainty that “wed” nature and nation in the AEC’s public-facing justifications for the Nevada Test Site.²⁹⁶ Through the AEC’s consistent assurances that the climate of the NTS was ideal for nuclear testing, and would even participate in the neutralizing of radioactive fallout (weather was “used” and not “created,” in AEC’s Morse Salisbury’s words), they engaged in a rhetorical process of naturalization that framed nuclear weapons testing at the NTS as almost part of a “natural” order. Although the AEC’s official language is definitively secular (if such a thing is possible) compared to the religious inflections of the Los Alamos scientists themselves, invocations of nature as a supportive force in U.S. history have always operated in the gray area between the natural and the supernatural (the divine). “It was almost providential,” Patricia Limerick observes. “The way in which aridity had reserved certain regions from settlement, and therefore left them suitable for bombing.”²⁹⁷ This naturalization process models a settler-colonial trend in U.S. history of reframing Firstspatial environmental qualities as testaments to divine or natural authorization (the deeply unsettling concept of “virgin land,” for example, invites a consummation in the form of settlement),²⁹⁸ as we have seen in the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny-era expansionists and the early Mormon settlers of the Great Basin.

The nuclear desert, like the deserts of ancient Christian Northeast Africa, is a space of contradiction. Vulnerability begets power; a wasteland becomes a highly essential proving ground. The means by which this empowerment is realized is, as we have seen, the testing of a

²⁹⁶ Schoemehl, “Nuclear Reactions,” 249.

²⁹⁷ Patricia Limerick, *Desert Encounters*, 175.

²⁹⁸ For deeper analysis of the feminized metaphor of land of the “New World” as virgin, see Annette Kulodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

weapon so potent it unleashes power of a nearly divine magnitude. This, too, carries a contradiction. In the Cold War context, nuclear weapons research was used to proliferate weapons that were, explicitly, “*not to be used.*”²⁹⁹ In theory, this power was as generative as it was destructive insofar as it promised to ensure the immortality (and deterrence) associated with absolute power. In Carroll’s words, nuclear power is

Infinite power. Power that, by bringing the ultimate form of death under human control, bestows, as if by magic, redemption from death... [Oppenheimer’s reference to the *Baghavat Gita*] can equally point to the paradoxical exhilaration of undiluted vitality springing from utter destructiveness. Final death, in the mystery of the atomic economy, opens into abundant life. Science inherently pursues immortality, and the control of nuclear energy bestows it.³⁰⁰

As the Nevada Test Site becomes the locus of the U.S.’s development of this infinite power, a nuclear desert narrative space emerges as a site for these contradictions, which enact paradoxical empowerment mechanisms and authorizations akin to those conjured by the early Christian desert monastics and the settler colonizers of the early U.S. west.

By constructing the desert as wasteland and naturalizing/sacralizing the desert as a necessary site for nuclear weapons development, the U.S. government was authorized to engage in a deterritorializing violent campaign that laid the land waste. As Endres has shown, the wasteland discourse has allowed the U.S. government and the DOE to fundamentally alter the land—land which, contrary to the narrative of what Beck calls a “federally constructed emptiness” that facilitates “federally constructed emptiness,”³⁰¹ is, in fact, home to several thousands of people and, for Indigenous communities, holds ancestral significance. As I have shown, U.S. national claims to and deterritorializing of the desert are technologies of settler colonialism that deny Indigenous geographies and sovereignty and specifically target Indigenous

²⁹⁹ Carroll, *House of War*, 71.

³⁰⁰ Carroll, *House of War*, 72.

³⁰¹ Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 30.

people via direct and structural violence. Uranium mining on reservation lands in the Black Hills and Four Corners regions has caused cancer, birth defects, and other health problems for mine employees and local communities.³⁰² The Nevada Test Site is, under the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley, on Western Shoshone land— rendering the Shoshone “the most bombed nation on earth.”³⁰³ The DOE has proposed storage sites of high-level radioactive waste on Skull Valley Goshute Reservation land and at Yucca Mountain, an area sacred to the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute.³⁰⁴ In 2002, the Indigenous Environmental Network wrote the following in an anti-nuclear public statement:

For more than 50 years, the legacy of the nuclear chain, from exploration to the dumping of radioactive waste has been proven, through documentation, to be genocide and ethnocide and a deadly enemy of Indigenous peoples... United States federal law and nuclear policy has not protected Indigenous peoples, and in fact has been created to allow the nuclear industry to continue operations at the expense of our land, territory, health and traditional ways of life.³⁰⁵

The authorization of this violence against people and land—chemical, poisonous, and toxic— stems from the spatial conceptions of the desert. This authorization is ongoing—the desert

³⁰² Endres, “Wasteland to Waste Site,” 922.

³⁰³ The Anti-nuclear organization Healing Ourselves and Mother Earth refer to the Western Shoshone as “the most bombed nation on Earth, with over 1,000 nuclear bombs detonated on their land by the U.S. and Great Britain since 1987.” “The Western Shoshone and the Treaty of Ruby Valley,” Healing Ourselves and Mother Earth, 2012, <http://www.h-o-m-e.org/nuclear-colonialism/western-shoshone.html>. This epithet was also used in a 2020 op-ed by Ian Zabarte, Principle Man for the Western Bands of the Shoshone Nation, in *Aljazeera*. Ian Zabarte, “A Message from the Most Bombed Nation on Earth,” *Aljazeera*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/8/29/a-message-from-the-most-bombed-nation-on-earth>.

³⁰⁴ Endres, “Wasteland to Waste Site;” Kuletz, “Tainted Desert;” Danielle Endres, “The Rhetoric of Nuclear Colonialism,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2009): 39-60.

³⁰⁵ Indigenous Environmental Network, “Indigenous anti-nuclear statement: Yucca Mountain and Private Fuel storage as Skull Valley,” Indigenous Environmental Network, April 14, 2002, accessed May 1, <https://www.ienearth.org/indigenous-anti-nuclear-statement-yucca-mountain-and-private-fuel-storage-at-skull-valley/#:~:text=The%20Indigenous%20Environmental%20Network%2C%20which,allow%20the%20transportation%2C%20storage%20or>.

southwest of the United States continued to be militarized and used as a testing ground for war. In her book *Refuge*, desert environmental writer Terry Tempest Williams articulates this causal relationship: “[A] blank spot on the map translates into empty space, space devoid of people, a wasteland perfect for nerve gas, weteye bombs, and toxic waste.”³⁰⁶ The nuclear desert is a distinct example of the direct violence of a culturally violent spatiality. In her discussion of the nuclear desert, Catrin Gersdorf argues for a relationship of reciprocal power between narrative and material space: “The distinction between and ecological hierarchization of wasteland and useful land materializes in the creation of actual wastelands whose existence then seems to confirm and legitimize the original misperception.”³⁰⁷ As nuclear colonialist projects continue well into the twenty-first century—efforts to store the waste of nuclear desert at Yucca Mountain are ongoing as the waste in question sits in temporary concrete storage facilities—disrupting these self-confirming narratives of barrenness, wasteland, deserts of death becomes crucial to resisting the cultural violence of settler colonial desert spatiality.

³⁰⁶ Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Press, 1991), 241.

³⁰⁷ Catrin Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America*, (Kenilworth: Rodopi, 2009), 289.

CONCLUSION: HYBRIDITY, COUNTERSPACES, & THE MULTIVOCAL DESERT

Ancient Christian desert narratives have been appropriated and reenacted in U.S. settler-colonial processes of territorialization (and deterritorialization) and nation-building/statecraft. These narratives, appropriated as such, are therefore fundamentally violent—recalling Galtung’s concept of cultural violence, these desert spaces have served to justify and enable direct and structural violence. Native scholars like Ned Blackhawke, Vine Deloria Jr., Roxane Dunbar Ortiz, and more have provided historical and cultural analyses of U.S. settlement that paint vivid pictures of the brutal physical, sexual, psychological, and generational violence (through genocide, through torture, through displacement, through dispossession) that European (and then United States) settlers inflicted upon Indigenous peoples and nations.³⁰⁸ The creation and expansion of the United States across the “desert” lands of the North American West was predicated on this violence, as well as on a series of established and then subsequently broken treaties with Native nations in a progressive federal policy of termination.³⁰⁹ The creation of settler space, through narratives like that of the “Great American Desert,” mythologizes both land and the people within that land. Wasteland or desert discourses work to support this technology of settler colonialism by implying that certain lands are devoid of ecological, economic, and cultural value. In a true reenactment of the ancient Christian desert narratives of the first monks, the living beings Indigenous to the deserts are demonized: mythologized as

³⁰⁸ See Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); Ned Blackhawke, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Roxane Dunbar Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2014).

³⁰⁹ See David E. Wilkins and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, “A History of Federal Indian Policy,” *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*, 121-134 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011); Vine Deloria Jr., “The Disastrous Policy of Termination,” *Custer Died For Your Sins* 54-77 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969).

savage, wandering peoples who barely survive, and who are only able to do so because they are content with the primitiveness of their existence. The Mormon settlements in Goshute, Western Shoshone, and Southern Paiute lands were guided by scripture that offered an alternative imagination of Indigenous identity that saw Indigenous people as distant, if cursed, relatives; the Mormon settler project of building Zion, however, still necessitated violent dispossession and exploitation of these peoples. The early Mormons' appropriation of the ancient Christian desert narrative shaped their pioneer histories and authorized their claim over the lands they sought to transform into Zion. The desert narrative was also appropriated to serve the nuclear and national security interests of the U.S. state, justifying again the dispossession of Indigenous communities—in particular the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute—of their life-giving resources. Indigenous resistance movements to this “nuclear colonialism” have been documented elsewhere.³¹⁰ More than one thousand nuclear bombs have been detonated on unceded Western Shoshone land (“the most bombed nation on Earth”) without permission. The Southern Paiute also have ancestral ties to the land of the Nevada Test Site, and other Shoshone and Paiute lands were violated through the disposal of nuclear waste at the sacred Yucca Mountain.

These case studies represent settler-colonial recapitulations of an ancient biblically infused desert narrative that authorize and naturalize settler existence, land seizure, and other forms of violence in the U.S. This desert narrative empowers and trans/forms collective identity, enabling the violence of settler colonialism to take place, even sacralizing it. As seen in the case study about the “nuclear desert,” the desert narrative can structure attitudes toward the landscape that enable and sacralize violence, violence that can poison lands and bodies. (Recall, for

³¹⁰ See Valerie Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*; Danielle Endres, “The Rhetoric of Nuclear Colonialism,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2009): 39-60; Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1994).

example, the Nevada Governor Charles Russell’s eerie enthusiasm about the transformation of the Nevada Test Site from a wasteland to one “blooming with atoms.”) By focusing on culturally violent settler-colonial spatialities, I do not mean to disregard the past and present acts of resistance that have responded to settler-colonial desert projects. From violent resistance at the frontier, to crop destruction in Mormon settlements, to activist sit-ins and prayer ceremonies at the Nevada Test Site, Indigenous people and their accomplices³¹¹ have resisted and continue to resist settler colonialism and its violent desert spaces. This thesis, however, is focused on the goal of denaturalizing settler-colonial narrative desert Thirdspaces.

Edward Soja’s theorized “Thirdspace” prioritizes it as a space for the development of subaltern theory and praxis. “Thirthing-as-Othering,” is resistive and disruptive: by stepping out of the binary of real versus imagined, Thirdspace disrupts any totalizing spaces and provides a framework for resistance to hegemonic overlays.³¹² Soja draws upon subaltern and marginal theorists like bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa, Edward Said and Homi Babha to expand the “openness of Thirdspace” as a space of radical differentiation.³¹³ A number of scholars who have applied these spatial theories, however, including those who have applied them as powerful lenses onto ancient Christian sources,³¹⁴ have explored ways in which

³¹¹ I borrow the term “accomplice” from the group Indigenous Action with the intention of disrupting the normative use of the term “ally,” which is predicated on the marginalization/disempowerment of others and does not suggest personal stake and investment in the liberation of the group with which one is allied. “Accomplices not Allies: Abolishing the Ally-Industrial Complex,” *Indigenous Action*, May 14, 2014. <https://www.indigenouaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/comment-page-1/>.

³¹² Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1996), 68.

³¹³ See Chapter 4: “Increasing the Openness of Thirdspace,” in Soja, *Thirdspace*, 106-144.

³¹⁴ Claudia Camp, “Storied Space or Ben Sira Tells a Temple,” *Imagining Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social, and Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan*, 64-80 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Jon L. Berquist, “Critical Spatiality and the Construction of the Ancient World,” *Imagining Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social, and*

dominators or oppressors can, too, have complexly textured spaces that respond to a perceived material reality and rework and *perpetuate* hegemonic narratives.³¹⁵ This thesis has built upon these insights by exploring the recapitulation of an ancient Christian spatial narrative in U.S. settler-colonial spatial productions, focusing on the desert as a central Thirdspace for settler-colonial identity formation, authorization, and empowerment. My aim has been to illuminate instances in which material (Firstspace) and ideological/theological (Secondspace) qualities were narratively integrated to reproduce, naturalize, and sacralize a biblically infused settler-colonial desert space.

I began by explaining the biblical motif of the desert and demonstrating an early desert Thirdspace that received and enacted the biblical narratives. I highlighted two distinctive themes in the Christian biblical desert space as it is narrated in the Old Testament and the New Testament: —the desert space as a site for vulnerability, which paradoxically empowers through divine testing and intervention, and the desert space as a site for collective identity trans/formation. I then observed how this biblical desert space was subsequently reconstructed by the early Christian monastics—the desert fathers—in the narrative space of ascetic literature, reinforcing a distinct Christian desert spatiality. The ancient Christian desert space becomes instrumental to early U.S. settler encounters with lands that the latter saw to be deserts, particularly with regard to how the desert space could reinforce collective identity and naturalize

Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan, 14-29 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Laura Feldt, “Wilderness and Hebrew Bible Religion – fertility, apostasy and religious transformation in the Pentateuch” in *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*, ed. Laura Feldt, et al., 55-94 (De Gruyter, Inc., 2012).

³¹⁵ Recall, for instance, Claudia Camp’s insight that the “lived spaces” of oppressors complicate the theoretical framing of Thirdspace as exclusively a space of *resistance* to the production of power: “Critique and resistance are not the sum of experience in what all these theorists agree in calling 'lived' space. Living involves a lot of things, including the production of power that makes critique and resistance necessary” (Camp, *Storied Space*, 68).

settler-colonial claims to land. With the “discovery” of the fluidly defined “Great American Desert,” U.S. settler colonizers began to incorporate the desert into the ideologies and territorial agendas of the nation-state. The desert was first painted as an insurmountable barrier to expansion—this narrative then shifted to accommodate Manifest Destiny-era fantasies of a continental United States. Harnessing the foundational Christian desert motifs of vulnerability/power and divine testing/intervention, settler colonizer desert narratives constructed a desert Thirdspace that interpreted the Firstspatial desert materiality through the frameworks of inherited, Secondspatial narratives to configure the deserts of the North American southwest as sites that would confirm the nation’s manifest destiny and participate in its collective identity trans/formation. Through my second case study, I explored the retroactive narrative construction of the desert context of the Mormon “pioneers,” which framed the success of the Mormon migration and settlement in the Salt Lake Valley as evidence for the divine authorization and sacralization of their settler-colonial project. By reframing a desert Firstspace characterized by infertility, barrenness, and death, and overlaying these qualities with the Mormon scriptural recapitulation of the biblical desert, late nineteenth century LDS leaders crafted a Thirdspatial narrative that not only sacralized the land as their Zion but sacralized their colonial history itself. Finally, I jumped to the mid-20th century nuclearized desert, where the Christian desert spatial tropes continued to authorize, if more subtly and implicitly, a Thirdspatial desert narrative that cast the deserts of New Mexico and Nevada as wastelands in order incorporate them into a militarized nuclear desert for the purpose of testing a weapon of supernatural destructive power. In public information campaigns from the AEC and later state-sponsored histories of nuclear testing, the desert became a sacrificial space that responded to the national security narrative of vulnerability and served as a proving ground for an expanded, trans/forming national identity.

Pointing to the existence of oppressive Thirdspaces illuminates dominant manipulations of Firstspace and Secondspace that naturalize existing productions and assertions of power. Settler colonialism, as a structure that overwrites geography, history, and reality to protect, at all costs, settler claims to land and power, relies on the ongoing construction and reconstruction of oppressive Thirdspaces. I maintain that conceiving of dominant Thirdspaces sheds light on the ongoing spatial production and practice that gives shape to and is shaped by our histories of, relationships with, and affinities for different spaces. Indeed, the “extraordinary simultaneities” of Thirdspace enable it to be applied to the spatial productions of both the subjugated and the dominator, as well as to hybridizations in between. As Camp has noted, in response to Soja’s implication that Secondspace produces power and Thirdspace resists it, “power is multifaceted and diffuse. Resistance is also a form of power and demands its own ideology, all the more so if it is to be used effectively.”³¹⁶

Nonetheless, I would be remiss if I did not conclude with a return to Soja’s important insight about the subaltern, alternative, and hybrid potential of Thirdspace. Soja’s “Thirthing-as Othering” is a framework that makes space for hybridity and “borderland spaces” that, particularly within postcolonial critical theory, do not necessarily fall into neat categories of dominator and dominated, but are, instead, doubly marginalized for their hybridity. Soja credits the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, among other feminist and postcolonial spatial thinkers, as a precursor to his development of Thirdspace. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* explores the relationality between hybrid space and hybrid identity via the concept of a real-and-imagined borderland. Anzaldúa centers her “*mestiza*” (Chicana, Mexican, European,

³¹⁶ Camp, “Storied Space,” 68.

Indigenous, and lesbian) identity as a marginalized one formed in the borderlands of the Texas/Mexican desert. This borderland is one where

the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them...A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los *atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.”³¹⁷

Through Anzaldúa’s “borderland,” one can imagine hybrid spaces and hybrid narratives as a form of resistance. “As a *mestiza*, I have no country, my homeland casts me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover ... I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.”³¹⁸ This borderland space offers insight into how resistance, counter-narratives, and multi-faceted identity operate in a contemporary settler-colonial context—the subaltern is hybridized because they are colonized. Strong, ancestral legacies that survive campaigns of cultural genocide are continuously reconstructed, responding and resisting dominant, colonizing ideologies and paradigms. Resistance to settler-colonial spatial narratives is resistance to the homogenizing mechanism of these narratives. Counter-narratives (and counter-spaces) to dominant narratives and spaces include hybridized and alternative spaces—hybridity resists the homogenous, “kneading, uniting, and joining.”

³¹⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

³¹⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 80-81.

Acknowledgement of a syncretistic Indigenous Thirdspace is especially germane to a discussion of Christian foundations for culturally violent spatial narratives. A singular North American Indigenous theology or land ethic does not exist and the generalizing category of “Indigenous, itself, hinges on the presence of the non-Indigenous. Native scholars of religion and the U.S. have certainly sought to parse out paradigmatic differences between a European settler belief system and the religious systems of Indigenous traditions. One of the more renowned scholars of religion and U.S. colonialism, Vine Deloria Jr., a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, has argued that the Euro-American religious worldview is preoccupied with time (rather than space) as linear, predestined, and unraveling in a sequence that eventuates in “the peoples of Western Europe [becoming] the guardians of the world.”³¹⁹ Deloria notes that:

In the western tradition, revelation has generally been interpreted as the communication to human beings of a divine plan, the release of new information and insights when the deity has perceived that mankind has reached the fullness of time and can now understand additional knowledge about the ultimate nature of our world. Thus, what has been the manifestation of deity in a particular local situation is mistaken for a truth applicable to all times and places.³²⁰

Deloria’s explanation is useful in illuminating how settler-colonial appropriations of the biblical desert narrative might overpower Indigenous desert geographies with their assumption of “a truth applicable to all times and places.” Deloria adds that, by contrast, cultures Indigenous to the North American continent prioritize space and spatial experience as an organizing principle: “Thousands of years of occupancy on their lands taught tribal peoples the sacred for which they were responsible and gradually the structure of ceremonial reality became clear.”³²¹ Settler colonial recreations of the ancient Christian desert interpret the desert as a plane on which to

³¹⁹ Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 2nd ed (Golden, CO: North American Press, 1992), 64.

³²⁰ Deloria, *God Is Red*, 65.

³²¹ Deloria, *God is Red*, 65-66.

enact a predestined Euro-American “ceremonial reality,” whereas those for whom the deserts are their ancestral lands may see the desert as space that structures and informs their “ceremonial reality” in perpetuity.

It is important, however, to separate Deloria’s argument about religious ontologies from the reality that being Indigenous does not preclude one from being Christian. As Comanche scholar Paul Chaat Smith points out, another violent legacy of settler colonialism is the romanticization of a manufactured, ecologically minded Indigenous caricature that invokes a stereotype of the spiritual, ecological Native that is static, fixed in the past: “White inventions of Indians [are] preferable to the real thing. There will always be a market for both nostalgia and fantasy. [...] The myth-making machinery that in earlier days made us out to be primitive and simple now says we are spiritually advanced and environmentally perfect. Anything, it seems, but fully human.”³²² This settler-colonial construction of Indigeneity excludes syncretistic belief systems that weave together Christian theology and Native religion, silencing voices from what could be described as a marginalized, hybrid Thirdspace. This silence supports “the colonizer’s idea that the only real Indians are full-blooded, from a reservation, speak their language, and practice the religion of their ancestors.”³²³ Chaat Smith presents particular examples of romanticized Indigenous figures in U.S. culture whose syncretistic lives are overlaid with reductive histories: “Quanah Parker, the legendary leader of the Comanches, became a successful businessman after the war. He was part owner of a railroad, and endorsed farming and Jesus. At the same time, he was a leader in the Native American Church and advocated the use of peyote.”³²⁴ Like Quanah Parker, there are a great many Indigenous people and communities who

³²² Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 23.

³²³ Chaat Smith, *Everything*, 26.

³²⁴ Chaat Smith, *Everything*, 21.

have embraced the God of the colonizers and have found ways to make that God their own.

George Tinker (Osage/Cherokee) and Paul Schultz (Ojibwe) write about “God’s gracious act of creation” as the Native Christian theological “starting point:”

The institutional churches to which our congregations belong will have to learn to make allowances for the different ways that we as Native People pray and relate to God as Creator. Some of us might even argue that the appropriate Old Testament for Native American people is not the Hebrew Old Testament with that people’s stories and history, but the stories that each of our tribes tell and our histories. Thus, our starting point for coming to faith in Jesus Christ is not a history imposed on us, but our own history first of all and our own understanding of the world, our own celebration of God’s gracious act in creation.³²⁵

Tinker and Schultz grapple with a syncretistic Native Christian worldview which does not, in their eyes, depart from Indigenous religious systems. “For most Native Peoples [converting] did not mean leaving one religion to embrace a new religion. At first it meant living with both sets of stories.”³²⁶ In their discussion of Native Christian identity, Tinker and Schultz grapple with the difficulties of resisting colonizing forces that were entangled with Christianity’s introduction, namely, “that part of the missionary faith that asks us to embrace not just Jesus, but a new culture and a new set of values— to change our way of living life.”³²⁷ Dakota Mormon scholar Elise Boxer has also navigated her own integrated Indigenous and Mormon identities, particularly with regard to the Mormon construction of the “Lamanite” and the sacralization of settler colonialism in Mormon “pioneer” history.³²⁸

³²⁵ George Tinker and Paul Schultz, “Rivers of Life: Native Spirituality for Native Churches,” *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (Taylor & Francis Group, 1996), 60.

³²⁶ Tinker and Schultz, “Rivers of Life,” 60.

³²⁷ Tinker and Schultz, “Rivers of Life,” 61.

³²⁸ Elise Boxer, “‘This is the Place!’: Disrupting Mormon Settler Colonialism,” *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, ed. Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2018).

I hope, with the above discussion, to clarify that narrative spaces that counter, resist, hybridize, etc. the settler-colonial desert space I elucidate in this thesis are not cut-and-dry antitheses to an exclusively biblical desert, Christian desert, Mormon desert, or European desert. Insights from Chaat Smith and Anzaldúa show that to even begin to understand colonized spatial constructions and ideologies in post-colonial or settler-colonial contexts, rigid borders between these spaces must be dissolved to make room for *borderlands*. The desert also, as this thesis has shown, is one of the more symbolically and literally expansive spaces and has often been a signifier for a borderland. Anzaldúa developed her theoretical borderlands near the desert border of the U.S. southwest. In his ode to “everything that sticks, stinks, stings, sings, swings, springs, or clings in arid landscapes,” desert botanist and writer Gary Paul Nabhan describes the desert as “a landscape filled with unanswered questions and improbable paradoxes...a chimera, a sandcastle of many rooms, towers, and balconies standing high and dry above the desert floor.”³²⁹ Having said all this, I conclude this project by showcasing a few voices from this othered desert space—narrative Thirdspaces of the desert that demonstrate complexity, hybridization, or a distinct alive-ness. Spaces that, therefore, disrupt homogenizing settler-colonial desert spatial narratives. The desert space that disrupts is a space of plurality, of multivocality. Indigenous and Chicana spatial imaginaries and traditions are centered here, joined by a handful of non-Indigenous voices. In these Thirdspaces, living deserts, integrated and embodied deserts, and erotic deserts make themselves known.

The ancient Christian desert narrative navigates the cosmic meaning of survival in the desert as it relates to collective identity. Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko articulates

³²⁹ Gary Paul Nabhan, “The Nature of Desert Nature: A Deep History of Everything that Sticks, Stinks, Stings, Sings, Swings, Springs, or Clings in Arid Landscapes” *The Nature of Desert Nature*, ed. Gary Paul Nabhan (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2020), 5, 9.

an Ancestral Puebloan approach to desert spaces that does the same. Silko describes the austerity of life in the desert as culturally defining for the Pueblos. Thriving in a landscape that seems severe is how Silko interprets Puebloan origin stories, or stories of “Emergence.” Rather than a historical sequence of events in which the Ancestral Pueblo people emerged from the underground, Silko interprets Emergence stories as allegories for the development of Pueblo culture as one utterly reliant on and connected to its environment:

Life on the high, arid plateau became viable when the human beings were able to imagine themselves as sisters and brothers to the badger, antelope, clay, yucca, and sun. Not until they could find a viable relationship to the terrain—the physical landscape they found themselves in—could they *emerge* [...] Pueblo people became a culture, a distinct group whose population and survival remained stable despite the vicissitudes of the climate and terrain.³³⁰

In her Puebloan desert, Silko presents an alternative to the meaning of desert survival in settler-colonial recapitulations of ancient Christian desert narrative. While surviving the desert (whether by crossing through it, transforming it, or making it useful) is a narrative indicator of divine intervention and divinely-ordained authority—appropriated as a sort of mastery over the desert through the logic of Manifest Destiny—survival in the Pueblo desert is contingent upon finding and maintaining reciprocal relations with all life forms within the landscape. Silko references a similar narrative in Hopi culture: “Hopi Pueblo elders said that the austere, and to some eyes, barren plains and hills surrounding their mesa-top villages (in northeast Arizona) actually help nurture the Hopi *way*.” Silko goes on to describe the Hopi way as one that “cherishes the intangible: the riches realized from interaction and interrelationships with all beings above all

³³⁰ Leslie Marmon Silko, “Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories,” *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 38.

else.”³³¹ The expansiveness and aridity of this non-forested landscape contributes to the valorization of relationships with its elements:

The bare but beautiful vastness of the Hopi landscape emphasizes the visual impact of every plant, every rock, every arroyo. Nothing is overlooked or taken for granted. Each ant, each lizard, each lark is imbued with great value simply because the creature is there, simply because the creature is alive in a place where any life at all is precious.³³²

This outward valorization differs from the dominant settler desert narrative which imagines any other life in barren landscapes to be indicative of an unorganized, degenerate, and even demonic form of existence—even as Israelite/Christian/“American”/Mormon survival signified their supremacy. In a Hopi and Puebloan context, according to Silko, human survival is predicated on the survival of other lifeforms; the desert is a space of life, rather than death.

The settler-colonial desert spaces featured in this thesis presume a deadness in the desert, but alternative spatial imaginings imply that an intimate knowledge of the material landscape reveals it as one that is succulent with life and, perhaps more controversially, water. Nabhan has poetically championed the existence of life in the desert.

“Nothing grows here?” I asked myself that day in the dunes. (I sometimes ask that same question when hearing newcomers react to the Sonoran Desert, too.) Sure, soy or hybrid corn might not last here on their own for long, but prickly pear cacti and whiptail lizards don’t count? Grapevines sprawling over sandy hummocks do not matter? Neither do long-jawed orb weavers, Karner blue butterflies, sundial lupines, or carnivorous sundews?”³³³

Valerie Kuletz, through researching the environmental injustices visited upon Indigenous people and lands through nuclear weapons testing and waste storage, has spent extensive time interviewing members from the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute nations to understand various oral depictions of the desert in their traditions. In contrast to the nuclear desert discourse

³³¹ Marmon Silko, “Interior and Exterior Landscapes,” 40.

³³² Marmon Silko, “Interior and Exterior Landscapes,” 40.

³³³ Nabhan, “The Nature of Desert,” 3.

of barren wasteland, people she has interviewed have shared with her a narrative depiction of “the land’s life-sustaining and healing properties [...that] reveal a landscape teeming with springs, food sources, and medicines; a land alive with animal life, spirits, and power.”³³⁴ The orated Shoshone and Paiute geographies, for example, predominantly consist of stories and storytelling that encode locations of, and relationships between, waterways. A space characterized (by settlers) by its lack of water emerges in these oral traditions as “a landscape not of isolated water sources but one connected *by* water—an integrated, if often invisible, nexus that permeates the land...like capillaries.”³³⁵ Ignoring the presence of water is crucial to the settler wasteland discourse. For example, Yucca Mountain sits on the third largest aquifer in the United States; Indigenous regional narratives revolve around this knowledge of water, but the DOE “downplays” this information. Shoshone and Paiute descriptions of the area inevitably lead to water—this is one way that Indigenous geography, Kuletz reports, “helps us to perceive a living environment,” as opposed to a dead one.³³⁶

The Timbisha Shoshone, a Shoshone tribe whose homelands encompass parts of Nevada and California and include the so-called Death Valley of Death Valley National Park, have sought, intentionally and publicly, to disrupt the wasteland narrative attached to their ancestral land. “Death Valley” is not alone in its status as a settler placename that invokes connotations of death. Kuletz describes these names as “veils of meaning made heavy with Euroamerican cultural signs of death (Death Valley, Funeral Mountains, Devil’s Golf Course, Hell’s Hole, Coffin Canyon, Dante’s Inferno).”³³⁷ In a now-discontinued pamphlet titled “The Timbisha

³³⁴ Valerie Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 210.

³³⁵ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 224.

³³⁶ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 220.

³³⁷ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 212.

Shoshone and Their Living Valley,” the Timbisha invoke their creation story to push back against these presumptions of deadness:

The *Tumpisattsi* live in their valley where their ancestors have lived since the time of Creation. Some archeologists have written that our ancestors came here less than one thousand years ago from the Great Basin, but we learned differently. It was told by the old ones that Coyote brought the people to this place in his basket. When he fell asleep, the people crawled out of the basket and went away in all four directions [...] Our history is not what has been written in books. Our history is in the Creator’s belongings: the rocks and the mountains, the springs and in all living things. The old ones taught us that Coyote did not leave the people until he finished his job and traveled through *Tupippuh Nummu* (“our homeland”), naming all the places for the people to use for places to stay and obtain all they needed. At the places that the Coyote named for them, the *Nummu* found a good living in their homeland.³³⁸

This pamphlet was created in response to the National Park Service attempts to ignore or force out the Timbisha nation from their living valley. In this text, the Timbisha reclaim the space of the desert by resisting and overwriting a Euro-American pioneer placename. The Timbisha pamphlet goes on: “Before outsiders changed our valley, it was described in the names of the places that were important for our survival here. Many are the names of springs. If the Manly Party, who traveled across our valley in 1849, had known our stories and trails, they would have found water, and *Tumpisa* (“red rock”) might not be known as a Valley of Death.”³³⁹ The Timbisha’s living desert is a narrated landscape that encodes the space’s life-giving attributes—this information is encoded in both “stories and trails,” in both the oral history of this nation and the landscape itself.

The paradigm of life as coded into the landscape (to be deciphered over generations) appears in Comcáac author Alberto Mellado Moreno’s “Heeno,” an essay written in the perspective of the heeno (a Comcáac word translated by Moreno into English as “desert”) of the

³³⁸ Timbisha Shoshone Tribe, “The Timbisha Shoshone and Their Living Valley,” quoted in Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 212.

³³⁹ Timbisha Shoshone Tribe, “The Timbisha Shoshone and Their Living Valley,” quoted in Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 213.

Comcáac community, a desert that others have called the Sonoran: “I am distinct among all my relations, for I have grown a skin of sand and stone, of plants with spines and thorns, of leaflets small but fragrant, of miniscule pools of water that sparkle like gems in the sun.”³⁴⁰ Moreno not only breathes life into the desert by personifying, he emphasizes the sustaining relationship between the desert and the Comcáac: “In fact, I have always felt full of life; I have always felt as if I have had all I need, for the Comcáac had taught the names and use of every plant and animal that lives on my skin.” Like the desert space described in Kuletz’s work with the Shoshone and Paiute, Moreno’s living desert holds water like capillaries, or succulent plants—beneath the skin:

Searching my body for crevices and cavities, they also discovered plenty of water, even though it had been hidden from others. With their stunning capacity to come to know me in every way, they handed over to their children this precious knowledge. They would arrive in a place and soon encounter water where no one else had recorded it, for they knew that I would keep it just below my skin in places where no one else had looked.³⁴¹

The living landscape comes through with its water sources; water, or lack thereof, is often the defining feature that determines whether a space is a desert or not, whether the land is desirable or not. Water is life, and Moreno’s desert contains plenty, hidden in its body and in the intimate relationship it shares with the people. The relationship between people and desert in Moreno’s story is mutually didactic—the desert shows its resources to the Comcáac and the Comcáac help the land to “realize what an incalculable quantity and diversity of life has gathered around us.”³⁴² Moreno also emphasizes a physical and symbolic integration with the land: “With the passage of time,” the heeno says, “they turned me into part of their community, and they became part of me.

³⁴⁰ Alberto Mellado Moreno, “Heeno,” *The Nature of Desert Nature*, ed. Gary Paul Nabhan (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2020), 59.

³⁴¹ Moreno, “Heeno,” 59.

³⁴² Alberto Mellado Moreno, “Heeno,” *The Nature of Desert Nature*, ed. Gary Paul Nabhan (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2020), 59.

From the most ancient times, whenever the Comcáac lost their lives, they were put to rest beneath my skin.”³⁴³

Similarly visceral descriptions of an integration of body and desert appear in Chicana poetry. Chicana literary critic Tey Diana Rebolledo points to verses from the work of Pat Mora, Rebecca Gonzalez, and Denise Chávez to demonstrate a Chicana poetic desert that pulses with powerful feminine and erotic energies, envisioning the landscape as an embodied space, as alternately a symbol and source of a sensuous, feminine, and sacred power. Pat Mora writes, “The desert is no lady” and “her unveiled lust fascinates the sun.”³⁴⁴ In “Desert Women,” Mora suggests that desert women derive their strength from integrating with the desert plants: Desert women know / about survival. Fierce heat / and cold have burned our skin. / Like cactus, we’ve learned / to pull in tender leaves, / to shoot spines / from soft areoles, to hide / pain and loss by silence / [...] But when we flower, we sun. / Like cactus, we’ve learned to gulp and hoard.”³⁴⁵ This visceral integration with the land is also a feature of one of Rebecca Gonzalez’ poems, in which she herself embodies the desert and lures “man away from the sky and toward an intuitive integration with the earth.”³⁴⁶

I would be the land
And words would be no good.
My softness would be
The loose dirt under your feet.
You would stand over me silently
and I would hold your shadow.

You would work me
And I would yield season after season

³⁴³ Moreno, “Heeno,” 59.

³⁴⁴ Pat Mora, quoted in Tey Diana Rebolledo, “Tradition and Mythology: Signatures of Landscape in Chicana Literature,” *The Desert is No Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women’s Writing and Art*, eds. Vera Norwood and Janice Monk (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 117.

³⁴⁵ Mora, quoted in Rebolledo, “Tradition and Mythology,” 118.

³⁴⁶ Rebolledo, “Tradition and Mythology,” 117.

...
 Until you would lose yourself in me,
 Feeding hunger,
 Face down in the ground,
 Your back to the untouched sky.³⁴⁷

The landscape is eroticized through descriptions of both a sensual and subsistence-oriented relationship with the land; contrary to the desert as a transitional space or a wasteland that tests, the desert is a space in which to lose oneself, in which to feed hunger. By giving voice to the desert and undermining a human centrality, Gonzalez imagines the space as something that is alive, itself, and can be related to and bonded with. Denise Chávez vivifies the desert in the following verse: “Artery of land / the water flecks quench / certain / desert thirsts / Your pore-red valleys / wander sun-paths / along the vision line / of that New Mexico heat.”³⁴⁸ Chávez’ desert is a war, living body with arteries and pores. The heat and thirst of the desert experience is not imposed on a body but rather are elements of the desert body itself.

The desert-body integration takes on a narrative form in Pat Mora’s “Curandera,” inspired by the folkloric (and real) figure of the curandera, a healer, alchemist, and wise-woman. In “Curandera” the curandera is a person of the desert, embodying and living with the landscape’s extremes of richness and austerity: “The curandera / and house have aged together to the rhythm / of the desert./ [...] She moves down her porch steps, rubs / cool morning sand into her hands, into her arms. / Like a large black bird, she feeds on / the desert, gathering herbs for her basket.” Mora’s curandera serves both the people and the desert; townspeople come to her and “[s]he listens to their stories, and she listens / to the desert, always, to the desert.” The desert is no threat; only a source of information, which the curandera translates. As she lives in and mediates for the desert, the desert begins to absorb her—or she absorbs the desert: “The wind /

³⁴⁷ Rebolledo, “Tradition and Mythology,” 117.

³⁴⁸ Denise Chávez, quoted in Rebolledo, “Tradition and Mythology,” 118.

strokes the strands of long, gray, hair, / the smell of drying plants drifts / into her blood, the sun seeps / into her bones.”³⁴⁹ Mora’s “Curandera” creates a strong link between a figure which represents healing and knowledge, and the desert, infusing the desert space itself with the gifts of a curandera.

Terry Tempest Williams embodies an equally erotic union with the deserts of the Great Basin in *Desert Quartet*. Camping in desert caves, Williams explores the space like a lover, seeking signs of life through tender touch: “The palms of my hands search for a pulse in the rocks.”³⁵⁰ Williams describes an experience of intimacy with the geology of a space she calls sacred:

The silence that lives in these sacred hallways presses against me. I relax. I surrender. I close my eyes. The arousal of my breath rises in me like music, like love, as the possessive muscles between my legs tighten and release. I come to the rock in a moment of stillness, giving and receiving, where there is no partition between my body and the body of Earth.³⁵¹

Through an intimate union, the boundaries between body and land disintegrate; the desert is a space of physical reciprocity, giving and receiving. The erotic power of this space, as well as the desert spaces of Chávez, Mora, and Gonzalez, recalls Audre Lorde’s expansive and pivotal articulation of the erotic: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings.”³⁵² A particularly striking element of Williams’ desert narrative is the connection she draws between geologic tension and erosion and something she describes as “passion”—perhaps akin to Lorde’s “chaos of our strongest feelings”:

The parallel and intersecting maze I have been traveling through is tortured rock pulled apart by internal tensions and stresses that form fractures in Earth. These fractures become susceptible to erosion, creating deep slots between fins of sandstone. Through the

³⁴⁹ Mora, quoted in Rebolledo, “Traditions and Mythology,” 120.

³⁵⁰ Terry Tempest Williams, *Desert Quartet* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1995), 8.

³⁵¹ Williams, *Desert Quartet*, 10.

³⁵² Audre Lord, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.

weathering of our spirit, the erosion of our souls, we are vulnerable. Isn't that what passion is—bodies broken open through change? We are acted upon. We invite and accept the life of another to take root inside. The succession of the canyons is like our own.³⁵³

The desert of the *Desert Quartet* is, as it was in the Bible, a space of vulnerability: “No compass can orient me here, only a pledge to love and walk the terrifying distances before me.”³⁵⁴ This vulnerability, however, gives rise to a tenderness, an openness, a body, “broken open through change.” Perhaps the life that Williams is inviting to take root in her is the living desert, a space with history carved into its skin through sedimentary lines, fractures, canyons, and arches. In a variation on the narrative of the desert as a space for identity trans/formation, Williams identifies in the land an ongoing trans/formation that is distinctly human—or rather, we, as humans, endure constant erosive change that is akin to the shifting sands and stones of the desert.

Natalie Diaz (Mojave) explores her embodied relationship with the desert, her “home-home,” in her 2021 poem “Duned.” In “Duned,” the desert is a space that embodies, gives voice to, and offers refuge from a borderland/post-colonial experience. Among the bones and bodies of the desert, “pressed beneath this tectonic pie,”³⁵⁵ Diaz attempts to find the words for the space that bear witness to her feelings of dislocation/disjointedness as she navigates a colonized, borderland identity: “I am known in this place—: of Creation & cascabel. Mojave Greens are my relatives. I holograph in the ambient heat, green quicked with copper. *Don't play with snakes* they say *Don't play with your own power.*”³⁵⁶ With “Creation & cascabel,” Diaz presents a desert space where life is simultaneously sprouting and ancient; a space where she feels “known”

³⁵³ Williams, *Desert Quartet*, 11.

³⁵⁴ Williams, *Desert Quartet*, 10.

³⁵⁵ Natalie Diaz, “Excerpts from ‘Duned,’” Poetry Foundation, March 23, 2021, <https://poets.org/poem/excerpts-duned>.

³⁵⁶ Diaz, “Duned.”

in the context of her relations, known to the snakes, to the plants, to the Creator, if not to herself. She feels the desert in her skin and blood, unsure if the space is making her or if she is making the space: “She recognizes me not as human but as her own imagination. I am granite reorganized, a formation—: yet forming.”³⁵⁷ Diaz provides a supplementary commentary on the published excerpt:

Out here I wonder the chasms between experiencing my desert in this fleshed, personed body and writing in the English language body which ‘means’ to deny my desert and me a life beyond scarcity, beyond thorn or what needs to be plucked out. My abundant and living desert, often called wasted land or badland, the way we, my brothers, sisters, and cousins, have often been referred to as. This is where I learned my life and what I love, and what I am still learning how to love and love better.³⁵⁸

Settler colonizer narratives of wasteland have hampered Diaz’ ability to articulate her “abundant and living desert” in the language of the colonizer and have committed violence against both her desert and her people. In “Duned,” investigating the scattered dry bones of a ram with “desert grapevines threading the bone sockets,” Diaz sees herself in the remains: “I am dislocated. Some knowledge is not mine, some is but I haven’t arrived there yet.”³⁵⁹ At the same time, she has, from a reader’s perspective, successfully conjured a space that is personal, painful, vivid, visceral, and vibrating with creative power. In the final line, she writes: *Touch me* I say, because it’s a story we become.”³⁶⁰

By amplifying voices emerging from the desert (even the small fraction featured here) that imagine and reimagine the space in ways that resist, diverge from, or hybridize dominant settler desert spaces, I seek to avoid rendering them invisible in the way that settler colonialism does. I choose to end with this discussion of predominantly Indigenous alternative desert

³⁵⁷ Diaz, “Duned.”

³⁵⁸ Diaz, “Duned.”

³⁵⁹ Diaz, “Duned.”

³⁶⁰ Diaz, “Duned.”

spatialities that feel, respond to, and mirror the powerful, diverse, erotic life forces that emanate from this multi-layered, multi-valent space. The desert is neither sacred sanctuary nor barren wasteland; it is, to use Diaz' language of the incomplete, a "formation—: yet forming." Nabhan asks, "So what if the desert is not empty, but full? Or what if it is simultaneously empty and full in a way that you have to tilt your head back and forth to see? What if you have to silence yourself not only to hear what the desert speaks, but to stay in conversation with this chimerical changeling?"³⁶¹ In his classic essay "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," Robert Allen Warrior urges proponents of Christian liberation theologies to consider the violent conquest of the Canaanites. "They are the last remaining ignored voice in the text, except perhaps for the land itself."³⁶² How can we begin to hear what the desert speaks? In the poetic deserts of Natalie Diaz and Terry Tempest Williams, there are bats who seem to hear something ancient and infinite. "Bats delight in the darkness with their ears wide open. What do they hear that I am missing?" Williams asks.³⁶³ The bats of "Duned" hang like ripened fruit in the desert's storied fields and caves of igneous rock: "The bats remember when we loved ourselves & called so tenderly into twilight that our words brought us the throbbing world..."³⁶⁴ Perhaps the land offers its voice freely, tenderly, over and over again, and some have learned how to respond. We might take our cue from the bats. "Gifted in the location of echoes, they listen twice to all that is spoken in the desert."³⁶⁵

³⁶¹ Nabhan, "The Nature of Desert," 3.

³⁶² Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (Taylor & Francis Group, 1996), 98.

³⁶³ Williams, *Desert Quartet*, 43.

³⁶⁴ Diaz, "Duned."

³⁶⁵ Williams, *Desert Quartet*, 43.

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