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Beyond the Dust: Colonial Legacy in the Desert

14 February 2024



Lossless #3, Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin, 2008

In February 2021, Europe woke up under red skies and sand-covered streets. The Sirocco winds¹ had carried dust from the Sahara Desert, covering large areas from Spain up to Scandinavia. Even the snow of the Alps was stained by the dust and looked like sand dunes. Videos of skiers coming down these “stained” orange slopes went viral.² The phenomenon also triggered health concerns: the dust carried abnormal levels of radiation, left over from French nuclear weapons tests in the 1960s. The French NGO ACRO (Association for Control of Radioactivity in the West) analyzed the dust and determined that the levels of radiation were low and did not represent a danger for human health—the Europeans were safe.³

Many EU newspapers mentioned the irony of the fact that the

radiation was coming back as a boomerang to France, but most of them did not go as far as to talk about the reality of the Tuareg inhabitants of the affected areas where the dust originated, communities that were never warned of the nuclear tests that France conducted in the Sahara under its colonial regime. These inhabitants unjustly carry the consequences of these experiments in their bodies. To this day, the environmental causes of illness in the region have not been recognized.⁴

The wind uncovered the erased connection between colonial powers and the desert. During the last century, several powerful nations have considered colonized deserts to be “empty” lands, thus using them as sites of resource extractivism, scientific experimentation, or mass burial.⁵ We find traces of this history

not only in the land, but in the word *desert* itself. The term derives from the Latin *desertum* (something that is abandoned or forsaken). In English, before the 20th century, desert was often used to designate unpopulated areas, regardless of the aridity of the land (the Spaniards would use the word *despoblado*: depopulated).⁶ The origin of the word reveals its exogenous and colonial implications: “desert” points to an absence rather than a presence—absence of humans, flora and life.⁷

This program presents five works that problematize the term *desert* by offering diverse representations of arid landscapes. In these pieces, the desert is never empty, but rather full of history, culture, and life. The selection also addresses the colonial processes that have impacted—and continue to affect—these regions.



Lossless #3, Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin, 2008

Controlling the narrative

In *Lossless #3* (2008) by Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin, scenes from John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) are digitally altered and presented to us highly pixelated and compressed. The original dialogue and soundtrack have been transformed into abstract, fragmented sounds. The desert is the background, and every movement across the frame leaves a trace in it, a smudge of color that blurs the land. As Braxton Soderman expresses, "Baron and Goodwin attack the film's temporal structuring to render a kinetic 'painted desert' of the West. The dust kicked up by the movement in the film is pure pixel, unanchored from the photographic realism that used to constrain it."⁸

While *Lossless #3*'s main interest is experimentation with digital materiality. It is no coincidence that Baron and Goodwin manipulate *The Searchers* in particular. Considered to be one of the greatest Westerns of all time and one of John Ford's

masterpieces, the film was shot in the dying days of the classic Western, a genre that faltered when Native Americans ceased being typecast as savages.⁹ Much of the debate and fascination surrounding this film deals with the complexities of how Ford both embraces some traditional problematic aspects of the genre (such as the racist and one-dimensional treatment of Native Americans) while problematizing other aspects of it (the character of John Wayne is not associated with the typical traditional values of the heroic icon of the American Westerns). As Roger Ebert noted, in the "flawed vision of *The Searchers* we can see Ford, Wayne and the Western itself awkwardly learning that a man who hates Indians can no longer be an uncomplicated hero."¹⁰ Some other critics have noted that the relevance of the film is due, in part, to the fact that Ford, who had long contributed to the life of the film genre, "here began to kill it,"¹¹ an idea that interestingly parallels Baron and Goodwin's poetic destruction of the original film.

While assembling *Lossless #3*, Baron and Goodwin selected exterior scenes that take place in the desert of the US Southwest, the background of many other Western films and, notably, an area where settler colonialism has caused the dispossession, extermination, and expulsion of Indigenous communities. American settlers have historically controlled the narrative of these events. In the 1800s, advocates of US expansion spread popular American myths that presented the West as a *virgin land*, stories that willfully disregarded the Indigenous communities that lived in those areas.¹² Although the Western genre presents variations of these myths, its inherently white triumphalist perspective can be seen as a continuation of these narrative processes.¹³ Despite its ambiguities, *The Searchers* contributes to a white, colonial retelling of the settling of the West and the making of America: transforming colonization into "thrilling" stories set in arid lands.

In *Lossless #3*, the distortion of the original film underlines the epic grandeur of the choreography that Ford filmed. As the film progresses, the climax arrives and, even through the blur that covers it all, we can distinguish the violence represented on screen. A fight unfolds, we hear gunshots, and see Native Americans who try to escape, to hide; each action reverberates on screen, leaving traces that tarnish the desert. The artists confront us with a series of corrupted, damaged images, a broken landscape that reminds us of the real devastation that took place in the US Southwest.

Moving through deserts

In Dana Levy's *Desert Station* (2011), the artist introduces us to a desert landscape with few elements. We see a car, a camel, some men far away laying on the ground. They seem to be killing time. Sound is the only element that vaguely locates us in a time and place: the radio of the car is on, a voice narrates the last news of the Arab Spring.¹⁴ Levy doesn't give us much more information, but rather confronts us with a feeling of dislocation that only grows as the film progresses. By the end of the piece, a group of Polish pilgrims enter the landscape, taking pictures with the Bedouin's camel before leaving.

The men who appear in the beginning of the film are Bedouin, traditionally pastoral nomadic Arab tribes of the Middle Eastern deserts. In an email exchange, Levy pointed out the complexity of Bedouin identity and how, in this piece, we do not have enough information to assume their regional identity or status. For instance, although their



Desert Station, Dana Levy, 2011

car has a Palestinian license plate, their motorcycle has an Israeli one. Nevertheless, something that is shared among the Bedouin of the Middle East is the loss of their traditional lifestyle; this is due to several and complex factors in which some of these communities have been deeply affected by land confiscation processes that have disrupted their traditional semi-nomadic way of life.¹⁵

In only four minutes, the ambiguity of Bedouin place and

identity becomes apparent. Notwithstanding the unique characteristics of various desert contexts, the Bedouin's loss of their traditional lifestyle evokes a struggle that is common in other arid landscapes over the world—nomadism tends to be hindered by a complex web of forces, causing the gradual or immediate disappearance of cultures.

Shaping the territory

Camel with Window Memory (1983) by Peer Bode is a live performance recording made over a weekend in the early '80s. Bode pulled out his postcard collection to experiment with a new digital video buffer he had built. A postcard of a camel, held in hand, fluctuates between live or frozen on screen. The video belongs to the broader slate of pioneering digital-video-artworks that Bode developed in that decade. Bode recalls choosing this postcard because of its resonance with the American experience of gas rationing and oil politics during those times. Bode also "remember[s]



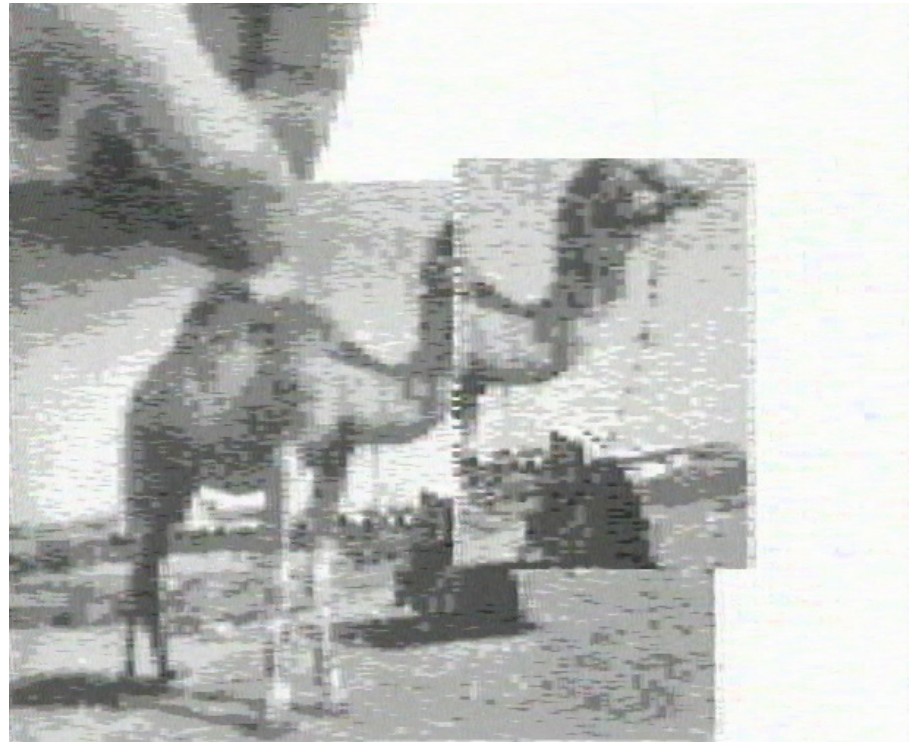
Desert Station, Dana Levy, 2011

reflecting that the camel was historically the traveling water storage unit of the desert, an organic system for storing water, energy and memory."¹⁶

Thinking of the camel as a memory holder feels appropriate, as these animals have been central to the history of many deserts. Like a ship on an ocean, a camel is key to crossing the vast distances of the desert, an inhospitable landscape for those who are not used to it. Just as the ship, the camel has played an important role in colonial processes: interlinking different arid lands.

As Natalie Koch unpacks in her book *Arid Empire: the entangled fates of Arizona and Arabia*, camels played a relevant role in the quest to colonize the deserts of the American Southwest in the 1800s. In 1855, US Secretary of War Jefferson Davis pushed for the approval of a mission, the US Camel Corps Experiment, which would bring camels and cameleers from the Ottoman Empire to North America, where these animals were not previously found. Davis understood that camels were crucial to unlocking the American West, or, as Koch punctuates, "to *making* it the American west."¹⁷

The goal was to test the camels as beasts of burden aiding in North America's westward expansion by transporting munitions and military stores, among other items. The camels could help in making the desert permanently habitable for North Americans and in defining borders that had only recently been formed.¹⁸ Although the animals proved to adapt well to the region and were useful for transportation, the Civil War



Camel with Window Memory, Peer Bode, 1983

halted the mission. The animals were sold at auction, many of them ending up in circuses or zoos.¹⁹ A similar story took place in Australia during the 19th century, when camels were imported from British India and Afghanistan for transport and sustenance during the colonization of the Red Centre. The camels were later released into the wild where they still roam.

Even if these projects were unsuccessful, they serve as a powerful reminder of how far the colonial enterprise will go in its effort to expand, displacing specific knowledge engrained in arid lands and their inhabitants, and repurposing this knowledge to colonise other arid regions.

What the land means

In Neue Sogobia is Not for Sale

(1993), Jesse Drew portrays the conflict between the US Bureau of Land Management and the Western Shoshone land activists May and Carrie Dann. The dispute can be traced back to 1873, when the Dann sisters began to fight over a land treaty that enshrined their rights to the territory where they lived (ancestral lands in central Nevada). Shot in 1992, the video mainly focuses on documenting two encounters between the Bureau agents and the Dannels, although it successfully illustrates broader unequal power dynamics and abuses that Indigenous communities suffer in the United States.

In relation to the land itself, the Dann sisters do not live in a desert, but the aridness of the landscape is a crucial factor in the Bureau's interest in the territory. The Nevada Bureau claimed that they knew how

to make best use of the land and that, acting in the best environmental interests, they needed to take it from the Dann sisters, whom they accused of overgrazing the area. This is an outrageously hypocritical accusation, as the Danns had been living in the region in a manner reminiscent of their ancestors, respecting the earth and rejecting electricity and hot water, whereas the Bureau allowed and encouraged nuclear waste disposal, military weapons testing, and open-pit gold mining with cyanide leach ponds on the very same land.

This conflict follows a pattern in which US institutions have repeatedly justified displacement of Indigenous people by framing their communities as backward in contrast to the state as civilized.²⁰ It is also, essentially, a collision between two opposite conceptions of what the land means, and how one must relate to it.



Newe Sogobia is Not for Sale, Jesse Drew, 1993

Thanks to videotape, Jesse Drew could document these tense exchanges and abuses of power. We witness how the Bureau takes away some of the animals that the sisters owned, part of a series of punitive measures that the U.S. government performed

over decades. In one of the most jarring moments of the piece, we can see how one agent forcefully apprehends Carrie Dann, grabbing and hurting her arm; decades of violence are contained in this moment. Throughout the video, the pain of the sisters is present in every shot, just as clear as their determination to keep fighting to protect their way of living and their land.

Relics of the future

In *After América* (2021), by the Mexican film collective Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, we follow a rover in a 3D generated Martian landscape. The rover moves through this arid world and extracts soil from it. The action is matched by an acousmatic voice, cold and didactic, almost robotic. The voice evokes a guided museum tour as it narrates the history of colonization of the Americas by Europeans.



Carrie Dann in *Newe Sogobia is Not for Sale*, Jesse Drew, 1993



After América, Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, 2021

Starting with the sixteenth century, the voice guides us through the evolution of the European spirit of conquest and its consequences. Throughout the piece, there is a focus on how Europeans pictured the Americas before colonizing the continent and how, even after they explored and studied the continent, they created their own image informed by a western point of view.

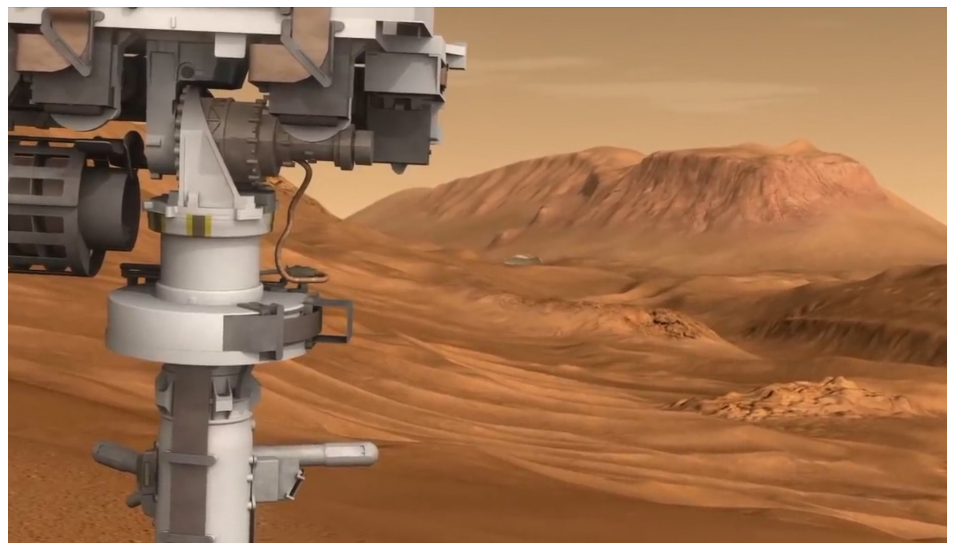
While we hear a reflection on how cartography shaped a particular colonial understanding of the American continent, it is easy to map these attitudes onto the Martian desert landscape we see on screen. It is almost as if the voice were not narrating events and dynamics of the past, but rather anticipating a near future. Unfortunately, this uncanny temporal leap feels plausible as there are many similarities between the colonial tradition that the voice-over analyses and the general discourse surrounding human expansion to other celestial bodies.

We are "only" watching a simulation, but the rover is performing an exercise of extraction in a land no one should own or pollute. Nowadays, similar missions are taking place on the Red Planet. These missions follow planetary protection guidelines,²¹ created in order to avoid mistakes that humans have committed when colonizing Earth's territories in the past (such as the European colonization of Hawaii in the eighteenth century, which introduced bacteria and

viruses that devastated the Indigenous population). Despite these regulations, outer space experiments continue to pose real concerns around introducing germs that could destroy unknown forms of life, especially if humans reach other planets' surfaces.²²

In the projects that imagine humanity's expansion to outer space, the desert always plays a central role. In the past decades, arid lands have often been used as sites of space experimentation and research due to the desert's visual and geological similarities with other satellites and planets (like the Moon, or Mars). Because of these similarities, space facilities have been built in various deserts, such as the Algerian Sahara or the US Southwest, to perform analog missions²³ that promote the colonization of other planets.²⁴

Although some of these projects notably failed, like *Biosphere 2*, others remain active. One example is the Mars Research Desert Station in the desert of Utah, the largest and longest-running Mars research



After América, Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, 2021

facility on Earth. This center is operated by the Mars Society, an organization that advocates for the colonization of Mars. The society periodically invites groups of scientists to conduct simulations and experiments in the facilities.²⁵ These projects do not shy away from theatrics as scientists wear costumes resembling astronaut suits built for Mars exploration. These mediated spectacles have consequences, fostering a public image of Mars as a place to be colonized. As Natalie Koch analyzes: "Projects like the Mars Desert Research Station

normalize a colonial perspective of Mars, while also normalizing the colonial logic that prompted the settlement of the American Southwest in the first place. That is, if Utah is to represent Mars, Mars is also imagined to be Utah: the scampering white scientists are also playing the colonizer."²⁶

In combining a contemporary 3D simulation with historical narrative, *After América* deftly reveals that colonial powers and their strategies have not disappeared, but have rather transformed and shape-shifted, incorporating new tactics to

become invisible. In this process, and as we see throughout this program, the desert is often deemed as an empty space, framed as a place of colonial opportunity in the name of science, the environment, or military agendas. It is crucial to recognize these dynamics, and point at them, in order to be able to dismantle them. Just as the Sirocco winds showed us that the stories of the desert cannot be erased, the works in this program reveal how these stories are inscribed in the land.

ENDNOTES

1 Wind that comes from the Sahara.

2 Howes, Nathan. "Sahara dust in Europe has traces of 1960s-era nuclear radiation." *The Weather Network*, March 7, 2021. <https://www.theweather-network.com/en/news/weather/forecasts/sahara-dust-in-europe-has-traces-of-1960s-era-nuclear-radiation-lyon-france>.

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4 Tellit Hawad, Maïa. "Sahara Mining: the Wounded Breath of Tuareg Lands." In *The Funambulist 44: The Desert*, edited by Leópolo Lambert, 26-33. Paris: The Funambulist, 2022.

5 Leópolo Lambert, "The Desert: Introduction," in *The Funambulist 44: The Desert*, Nov-Dec, 2022, 22.

6 Stevens, Scott Manning. "Imagining the desert." In *Near East to Far West: Fictions of French and American Colonialism*, ed. Jennifer R. Henneman. Denver, 96-104. CO: Denver Art Museum, 2023.

7 Lambert, Leópolo. "The Desert: Introduction." In *The Funambulist 44: The Desert*, edited by Leópolo Lambert, 22-25. Paris: The Funambulist, 2022.

8 Soderman, Braxton. "Lossless #3." Video Data Bank website. Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://www.vdb.org/titles/lossless-3>.

9 Ebert, Roger. "The Searchers Review." Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-searchers-1956>.

10 Ibid.

11 Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter Lehman, *The Searchers : Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004, 12-13.

12 Koch, Natalie. *Arid empire: the entangled fates of Arizona and Arabia*. New York: Verso, 2022. Page 11.

13 Eckstein, Arthur M., and Peter. Lehman. *The Searchers : Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004, 2.

14 A series of pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa between 2010 and 2011, with the aim of challenging some of the region's authoritarian regimes.

15 Minority Rights Group International. "Bedouin." Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/bedouin/>.

16 Bode, Peer. "Camel with Window Memory." Video Data Bank website. Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://www.vdb.org/titles/camel-window-memory>.

17 Koch, Natalie. *Arid empire: the entangled fates of Arizona and Arabia*. New York: Verso, 2022, 5.

18 Ibid, 1-21.

19 The Army Historical Foundation. "The U.S. Army's Camel Corps Experiment." Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://armyhistory.org/the-u-s-armys-camel-corps-experiment/>.

20 Natalie Koch, *Arid Empire: the entangled fates of Arizona and Arabia*. New York: Verso, 2022, 40-50.

21 Pushing this discussion is important, as the major space agencies (such as NASA, ESA, ...) follow the planetary protection guidelines, but these are not part of the international law: so the private space sector do not need to follow them.

22 Clark, Stuart. "Is there life on Mars? Not if we destroy it with poor space hygiene." *The Guardian*, January 30, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/jan/30/mars-life-perseverance-rover-nasa-planetary-protection>.

23 Analog missions are field tests undertaken on Earth, in locations that have physical similarities to space environments.

24 Leópolo Lambert, "The Desert: Introduction," *The Funambulist 44: The Desert*, Nov-Dec, 2022, 22.

25 Mars Desert Research Station. "Our Mission." Accessed December 14, 2023. <http://mdrs.marssociety.org/about/>.

26 Natalie Koch, *Arid Empire: the entangled fates of Arizona and Arabia*. New York: Verso, 2022, 141.



Lossless #3, Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin, 2008