# Introduction: American Deserts, Real and Imagined

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> The desert is a significant medium of American self-creation and identification.
> Catrin Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, 2009

> I was crossing the desert. Smooth. Wind rippling at the window. There was no road, only the alkaline plain. There was no reason for me to be steering; I let go of the wheel. There was no reason to sit where I was; I moved to the opposite seat. I stared at the empty driver's seat. I could see the sheen where I'd sat for years. We continued to move across the desert.
> Barry Holstun Lopez, *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven*, 1976

> Let's just say the desert is an impulse.
> Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 1997

This issue of *Leaves* on "The Desert and the USA" is the result of an international and interdisciplinary symposium coordinated by François Gavillon, Lionel Larré and Karim Daanoune, that took place at Université Bretagne Sud in Lorient, in November 2019. It was organized by the Université Bretagne Sud and Université Bretagne Occidentale joint research group HCTI ("Héritages et Constructions dans le Texte et l'Image," EA 4249) in close collaboration with Université Bordeaux-Montaigne and its research group CLIMAS ("Cultures et Littératures du Monde Anglophone," EA 4196). Its aim is to enrich the already existing prolific scientific literature dedicated to the deserts of the United States. It endeavors, therefore, to further investigate "the rhetorical participation of the desert, a territory of geographical and symbolic significance, in the construction of America" (Gersdorf 22).

What is usually called "desert" is no common place. Whether they be located in plains, mountains, barren lands, lush forests or desert islands, deserts are idiosyncratically other,[1] and as such, they defy a comprehensive definition:

> Effective definitions of deserts vary according to the background of those doing the defining and the purpose of their enquiry. An artist's approach to deserts may be different from the stance taken by a scientist although, broadly, the two usually overlap geographically. It may, or may not, be surprising to learn that no universally accepted definition of the term "desert" exists. (Middleton 2)

In other words, the lack of consensus opens deserts to processes of semantic appropriation, (re)semiotization and conceptualization that confirm that "it is not at all obvious where the distinction between the real and rhetorically constructed desert lies" (Tynan 2). That is the reason why this issue wishes not only to assess the treatment of empirical American deserts in

[1] One may add that this otherness brings with it a pernicious corollary as the desert becomes the ideal locus of the Other, and one may add with John Beck, of "'othered' populations" (Beck 15).

literature and visual arts but also to ponder over what seems to be an essential feature of deserts, which is to express a geographic *idea* particularly fertile to initiate metaphorization and foster conceptualization.

The desert is a fascinating locus that encompasses contradictory notions and extremes that seem, at first sight, incompatible and that suit a country like the United States of America, its excesses, its paradoxes. It is a place that one would readily call a non-place or a void which may equally be indicative of an end or of a beginning. It may feature remains, traces of ruins, of a destruction, or even of an annihilation that has just occurred. That is the reason why it may adequately depict "an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance" (Baudrillard 5) and it befits the apocalyptic event. Conversely, and owing to the same signs granting it its annihilating value, it stands as a form of nothingness out of which something is to be born, a virgin space from which beginning and being born are, in equal measure, just as implicit as dying and disappearing. Those paradoxical attributes are to be found, for instance, in the catastrophic events that Aliette Ventéjoux explores in her analysis of two novels by contemporary writers, Don DeLillo and Paul Auster, in her article "From One Desert to the Other: Reconstructing Identity after the Catastrophe." Reading the deserted places of America in the wake of haunting epochal catastrophes, respectively 9/11 in *Falling Man* and the subprime mortgage crisis in *Sunset Park*, she contends that the correlated notions of void and emptiness as dominant characteristic of the desert adequately portray an "America [that] has become a wasteland." As the protagonists attempt to deal with their trauma by leaving behind the deserted places associated with their losses, they end up carrying those real and symbolic deserts with them, together with the roaming ghosts of the disappeared that populate their real and affective deserts and the melancholic atemporality characterizing their shattered selves.

The desert accommodates a form of life that cannot be seen, an ecosystem which is implicit. In that respect, it summons our attention and forces us to adjust our eyes to the level of the grain of sand. It explains why other modes of reading are required, as for instance, those of the Native Americans who, inhabiting in the full sense of the word the "Great Desert" that nineteenth-century Euro-American explorers thought they had "discovered," refuted *de facto* the latter's perception of the American West as an unfriendly and uninhabited place where the Natives had, supposedly, left no traces on the environment. It is interesting to note that for the newcomers reaching those great spaces, "desert" and "wilderness" have in common the fact that they are devoid of any human beings, a convenient definition to dehumanize peoples, appropriate their lands and colonize their homes/habitats. Roderick Nash reminds us that another link exists between the desert and the wilderness: in the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe "used wilderness to designate the uninhabited, arid land of the Near East in which so much of the action of the Testaments occurred . . . Through this Biblical usage the concept of a

treeless wasteland became so closely associated with wilderness that Samuel Johnson defined it in 1755 in his *Dictionary of the English Language* as "a desert; a tract of solitude and savageness." Johnson's definition remained standard for many years in America as well as in England" (Nash 2-3). But, this "Great American Desert" was in fact inhabited and marked, and therefore, replete with signs and meanings, including sacred ones. Wendy Harding has cogently deconstructed what she calls "the myth of emptiness": "There is no place outside human culture and no culture distinct from place. Places are always storied—humanly imprinted—just as stories are placed—given substance through their geography" (Harding xv). In his article "*Born from Loss*: Desertification and Regeneration of Native America in Sherman Alexie's autobiography *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* (2007)," Fabrice Le Corguillé tackles some of the issues at the heart of the conception of the USA as a conveniently uninhabited territory. His use of the terminology pertaining to the desert is dynamic—the land was "emptied" not "empty," "depopulated" not "unpopulated," "widowed" (Jennings) not "virgin"—as he endeavors to illustrate the processes of "forced desertification" perpetrated by early white settlers against Native Americans. He notably shows that on multiple occasions Alexie does not hesitate to speak of "genocide" in his autobiography to describe the sense of loss and dispossession suffered by his people. Le Corguillé further scrutinizes this desertification as it applies to Alexie's own community, the Spokane people who were "damaged by the dam" that has drained the river of its water and its sustaining symbol of life, the salmon, and consequently severed his tribe from their ancestral culture. Yet, despite colonialism, Le Corguillé argues that Native Americans have always been committed to "regenerating" those "vampirized Natives" and resiliently "rehydrating" what has been dried out and, therefore, "revers[ing] colonialism" as Alexie himself puts it.

The idea of emptiness is thus a conscious *emptying* maneuver rather than an intrinsic feature of the desert. In that sense, the desert is expounded as a blank screen or page where the fantasy of an origin may be projected, where a local or national narrative may be inscribed—often written *over*, hence erasing—unseen or denied preexisting life. These arid United States therefore recall the motif of an original *tabula rasa* or, a virgin wax tablet on which all forms of experiments may be attempted or imprinted, all destinies imagined. As the place of "desemiotization" (Bouvet 15-16) *par excellence*, the desert calls for the advent of a new world, a new subjectivity, or a new spirituality and, of course, along with it, a new mythology. Nowhere is this more plainly spelt out than in deserts that are grasped within the cultural framework of the frontier and its violent history.

In "Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*: The Desert (of the) Real and the Writing of the 'Hallucinatory Void'," José Liste Noya analyzes the desert of the novel as a textual desert, that is to say, as a place which is *always already* invested with and distorted by culture, even when

it is posited as void. Intent on communicating the inner workings of the necessarily constructed "hallucinatory void" that the desert stands for, Liste Noya sheds light on the virtuosity of "McCarthy's textual self-consciousness" and his somewhat parodic use of allegory. Indeed, the desert seems to be predicated upon a meaningless void to be filled, hence countered, by an inhuman violence that in its own way, accentuates the void, turning the novel into "a textually self-reflexive voiding of the void." The novel also works to suggest a *desert absolute,* that is to say, a place whereby meaning would be illusorily granted in an autonomous manner, without any human referential interference.

Nawelle Lechevalier-Bekadar's study of Brian Evenson's short-story "Prairie" in her article "'Prairie' de Brian Evenson: un espace du *de-sertum,*" probes the infinity and the indeterminacy of the violent space referred to as the "prairie" and which is endowed with all the features of the desert. In fact, the prairie, which Lechevalier-Bekadar conceives of as a Deleuzian "smooth space" bereft of any *sertum,* that is to say, any "link" whatsoever, harbors an openness that partakes in endlessly blurring the generic categories it evokes and subsumes. The story fuses indistinctively post-apocalyptic, zombie and neo-exploration narratives but also draws formal elements from westerns and frontier narratives to offer, all at once, a story saturated with familiar signs which paradoxically never cohere into an intelligible and properly legible whole. Just as Liste Noya draws attention to McCarthy's use of intertextuality as the void of the desert is replenished with more texts, themselves dealing with that void, Lechevalier-Bekadar exposes the significant mythologizing narratives employed by Evenson to elaborate further on the topic of the quest of a so-called "new" world. She also unveils how Evenson's way of doing away with any form of guiding linkages that would, for instance, help characters and readers draw the line between the living and the dead communities, contaminates the very language used in the story. Indeed, a certain type of phraseology expressed both at the level of wording and syntax further exhibits the unstoppable circulation between antinomic states whose very conception *as* states has been disrupted by the prairie and the desert it stands for.

The porosity between place and language is also at stake in Pauline Boisgerault's article "The Corrupt (Re)generation of the Californian Desert in *The Octopus* by Frank Norris," which focuses on the first volume of Norris' unfinished "Epic of the Wheat" trilogy and identifies the affiliations that may be drawn between an untamable desert land that precludes ontological grounding and the necessarily counterfeit ontologizing gesture that wheat cultivation epitomizes. Dwelling on the horizontal barrenness and fundamental inappropriability of the Californian desert, she examines how the characters fail "to claim original ownership" for the desert defies the possibility of possession. Wheat consequently grows out of a fallacious terrain and is endowed with a pseudo-origin grounded on *corruption*, a term that Boisgerault both

understands as the *modus operandi* of capitalistic expansionism—that neither spares the railroad construction nor the industrialized cultivation of wheat it is pitted against—at the heart of Norris' naturalistic project and as the departure from a naturalistic stance that the fiction of an origin entails. Wheat thus performs a paradoxical regenerating function thanks to a language, which, as it is liberated from the grip of determinism and its horizon of knowledgeability and certainty, is more apposite to address "the self and the complexity of nature."

Those transformations that sometimes make the desert a stage where utopias may be performed, or simulacra may be displayed are perhaps best exemplified when the desert is assessed as the scene where mirages occur. The desert may in fact be read as "a land of illusions" (Van Dyke 2), a space where physical phenomena but also sensorial and psychical fabrication facilitate the projection and transference of desires[2] or encourage a propensity for abstract theorizing. In her article entitled "Art et désert aux États-Unis : entre mirage et réalité," Antonia Rigaud reflects on the place of American deserts in the art history of the United States by showing how the desert questions the very possibility of its visibility as it constantly oscillates between what is being seen and what is being imagined, between reality and experience on the one the hand, and myth and mirage on the other. Drawing her analysis from a wide range of works of art, she reveals how artists, and before them explorers, have persistently missed an opportunity to encounter the desert as a "proper locus" ("un lieu propre") with its own geographic, social, and political integrity, and have instead only met a mere landscape defined by emptiness. Due to the intrinsic capacity of the desert to jeopardize its experiential apprehension and thus problematize its visual and visible materiality, the desert has fueled its own abstractedness and thus dissolved into mental projections that have kept at bay its physical reality.

Caroline Lavoie's article entitled "Reading the Changing Deserts of the American West: Perception and Reality," also appertains to issues of perception in more phenomenological terms. By stressing the variegated quality of deserts and by offering a broad array of potential lenses through which they may be grasped, she puts forward her own; that of a landscape architect and artist, etching and drawing on-site. Documenting her perspective on deserts with maps, drawings, and photographs, Lavoie wishes to communicate in her artistic renderings of deserts a locational awareness encompassing a personal imaginative perception enmeshed with collective memories. In addition to that, and thanks to the concept of "sensory perception" that she applies to her approach and that entails a departure from "intellectual perception,"

[2] It is almost in those terms that the yearly event known as "Burning Man" may be interpreted. Created in 1986 and taking place in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, "Burning Man" is a sort of pagan carnivalesque summer festival during which a transitory city and its ephemeral community are only built to then vanish without leaving a trace, as if everything about it was but a mirage.

she seeks to render in her drawings the perceptual conditions that were concurrent with their effectuations so as to enact the necessarily "changing reality of the desert."

The desert also denotes that unformed background enabling all beings and all things to obtain a form of salience and a more singularized existence, highlighted, so to speak, by the surrounding void. It is related, in that sense, to the idea of solitude as it provides a prerequisite space for the self to commence its quest and come to terms with the world and itself. As John Beck suggests: "The American desert, like its biblical counterparts, could be a test, a site for overcoming the temptations and excesses of civilized life" (Beck 22). In his article "Le désert et le mythe de l'âme en voyage dans la période contemporaine de Terence Malick" which is devoted to *Knight of Cups* and *The Tree of Life*, Guilain Chaussard exposes Malick's "symbolic and spiritual" take on the desert, a setting imbued with soteriological values as it is characterized by an exilic condition of "perdition and ruin" that paradoxically embodies the unavoidable site whereby the Promised Land may be attained, and the dispersed fragmentary self may be restored to a state of wholeness. The quest for meaning at the heart of Malick's films finds its expression in the image of the soul that reconciles the inner and the outer realms, immanence and transcendence, life and death. Imbued with biblical references that make it simultaneously western and oriental and, therefore, reflect Malick's Syrian Christian background, the desert in the films combines the intertexts of both the puritan ethics of Bunyan and Iranian Islamic theosophy.

In his article "Fragments, dédoublements, multiplicité : désertification littéraire à l'œuvre dans *Into the Wild* de Jon Krakauer," Martin Berny delves into the enigmatic figure of Chris McCandless (a.k.a. Alex Supertramp) as he is portrayed *and* imagined by Jon Krakauer within the boundaries of a double desert—the Mojave Desert where McCandless is metaphorically reborn after relinquishing his former "civilized" self and the Alaskan wilderness in which he will die. But the shifting identity of McCandless is itself doubled by the presence of Krakauer. In fact, Krakauer insinuates himself into the fragmented life of McCandless to fill in the blanks with his own experience. Berny posits that the desert constitutes the ideal metaphor to analyze *Into the Wild* insofar as it enables the creation of a space where the real is suspended and deserted, so to speak, in order to make room, within the biographical narrative, for elements pertaining to the fictional realm where the cultural expectations of a retreat into the wilderness and the promises of self-invention that goes hand in hand with it are exploited.

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