

Modern Monsters / Death and Life of Fiction

SPIRAL LANDS

CHAPTER 2



Andrea Geyer

In the cycle of works called *Spiral Lands*, Andrea Geyer investigates the role of photography in the colonization and continuous appropriation of the North American continent, using the Navajo Nation and the surrounding Pueblos of the American Southwest (now Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado) as an example. Addressing the Western concept of “landscape,” Geyer points to the fact that visualization is and has always been a sophisticated ideological device, revealing as much of what stands behind the camera as what stands in front. Chapter 2 of *Spiral Lands* consists of a slide projection with a voiceover lecture in which a lecturing “scholar” or “researcher” critically asks herself what drives the desire for this land and what enables the feeling of a right of passage.



We are all to be held accountable.

I would have liked to begin this paper with a quotation of... [Jimmie Durham] because of his wisdom, and because it would have immediately set the tone of being in the right ‘camp’. I leave the quotation out because one of our most serious troubles in the United States today, whether we are Indian, white, black or whatever, is a tendency to attempt to escape our reality. We do this by substituting slogans and pronouncements for the more difficult revolutionary praxis of working, looking, thinking/working, looking/thinking. The white left in particular has a tendency to take the words and concepts of

revolutionary leaders from around the world, instead of participating in the hammering out of a *true* understanding of what is going on here, and how to use it.¹

My name is Sonya Atalay, Vine Deloria Jr., Romaine Moreton, N. Scott Momaday, James Clifford, Aby Warburg, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Arturo Escobar, Maria Elena Garcia, Hannah Arendt, Leslie A White, Larry Littlebird, Gillian Rose, Chief Seattle, Fredric Jameson, Barbara Bender, Leslie Marmon Silko, Roland Barthes, Clifford Geertz, Wilma Mankiller, Hayden White, Paul Chaat Smith, Willa Cather, Michel Foucault, Nancy Shoemaker and Walter Benjamin, just to name a few. I speak to you as a scientist, anthropologist, ethnographer, archeologist, geographer, historian, journalist, adventurer, as an artist, researcher, traveler of *known and unknown territories*, as a man and as a woman, but *foremost* I speak to you from the place of knowledge.

I also speak to you from a place of concern. Things have been dire in this country. They have been for years. The issues at stake are about justice, about responsibility that no-one really wants to take. Wars have been waged under false premises, authority is kept in the hand of an imperial power. People are disenfranchised. Public funds have been embezzled and revenues from natural resources wander into the pockets of private corporations instead of their rightful destinations and lands are left behind polluted.

I am not speaking about Iraq, I am speaking about Native American Nations, Tribal Communities and Pueblos within the United States of America.

It is necessary that, with great urgency, we all speak well and listen well. We, you and I, must remember everything. We must especially remember the things we never knew.² No one can look at the sun, that is why we look at pictures. I am to show you images, most of which I photographed myself, from a journey taken in the past, and here in the present. There are 80 slides with Native American subjects

1 Jimmie Durham, "American Indian Culture in *A Certain Lack of Coherence* (London: Kala Press, 1993), 1.

2 Jimmie Durham, "A Certain Lack of Coherence in *A Certain Lack of Coherence* (London: Kala Press, 1993), 147.

(plus “Uncle Sam”).³

The following information was obtained between June 2004 and February 2008 from a group of people I met on the Navajo Nation, the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation, at Hopi, at Zuñi, at Acoma, at St. Idelfonso, at Chaco, on some unpaved roads, under some cottonwood trees. Furthermore, reaching back as far as 1620, I consulted scholars of all kinds, the ones that speak, the ones that remain silent. Some of whom we imagine easily as intellectuals and others we don't. I consulted with the people of reasons, as they were called, always thinking, moving their feet to their restless minds, a habit perceived by many as very unpleasing. I met those people in person or in books, in the library or on the internet, or sitting at my desk as myself. Furthermore information was obtained during my work out in the field. In the deserts, the mountain ranges, the open skies—the words I encountered quietly spoken about this land, and out loud right into my face, into my mind. I want to share the colors of what I saw and of the unseen, of the traces along the horizons of my mind and the untraceable, the delineations of the documents and the dust I found on the library stacks. I want to talk about the light in this auditorium, the light from your eyes glancing at me. I am here to talk about an experience that we all share even though it is singular to my being. I am here to talk about land. I am here to talk about history, I am here to talk about knowledge. Mine and not mine, yours, ours and others.

...

Every summer when school is out, a veritable stream of immigrants heads southwest into Indian Country. Indeed the Oregon Trail was never that populated as are Route 66 and Highway 18 in the summer time. From every rock and cranny in the East they emerge, as if responding to some primeval fertility rite, and flock to the reservation. They are the artist, the ethnographers, the anthropologists,

3 Aby Warburg, *Images from the Pueblo Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1.

the most prominent members of the scholarly community embarque, all brands of this species, on their summer adventure, that infests the land of the free, the homes of the brave...⁴

What can possibly happen and *what* actually did happen?
 What can be *known* and what can be *imagined*?
 What can the *historian* legitimately assert as a truth and
 what might the *poet* entertain as thought?⁵



Out in the field we are followed by a large black bird. Neither crow nor raven but a body the size of a hawk. Its long beak looks strong and intimidating. After a while of circling it decides to settle on a tree near by, tree branches leafless in this season. I stop to look. It turns its head. I take my camera and take a picture. I move slowly, nearly motionless a little closer. The bird lifts its wing to engage in pruning its feathers. I raise my camera again, click, its head turns. I am close now so close that I can see the sunlight reflect in its black eyes. His gaze stays on me now. I move closer yet again, for yet another picture. The

4 Vine Deloria, Jr., "Anthropologists and Other Friends" in *Custer Died For Your Sins. An Indian Manifesto*. (London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1971), 78.

5 Aristotle, *Poetics*.

bird lifts but settles shifting its body. I expect it to take off any minute but it remains. I am only a few feet away when I realize the breath of this creature. He settles his wings and I feel their power moving the air. I hesitate confused by his persistence. I sit down—resting my camera on my thighs and my gaze on the view that we both share. After moments pass, I get up and walk away. When I turn my head I see him lift off with ease into the sky.

...

On the screen photographs repeating and with them repeating their gaze. *We* see how they saw, skimming surface; surveying land. *We* are *invoked*—an active viewer equated with culture and it—a passive land equated with nature. The photograph's static viewpoint is a scientific procedure to help, not a particular aspect of the way things are.⁶ Self-consciously, seriously partial.⁷ One could say this gaze and the photograph as its witness is controlling us and nature.⁸ One could say the photograph as its witness enacts within this discipline a sophisticated, systematic erasure.⁹

...

If this is your land, where is your story?¹⁰ In this place, I am no doubt not the only one who speaks in order to have no face.¹¹ I “chart new territories,’ I ‘break new ground’, I open up new horizons’, I have ‘viewpoints’, ‘overviews’, ‘landmarks,’ ‘vantage points’ and ‘ways of looking.’ I ‘chart’ and I ‘explore’, come up against intellectual barriers’, and operate on ‘frontiers’.¹²

6 Roman Jakobson, *On Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 91.

7 James Clifford. “Introduction: Partial Truths” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 7.

8 Barbara Bender, “Subverting the Western Gaze: Mapping Alternative Worlds” in *Archeology and Anthropology of Landscapes*, by Peter J. Ucko, Robert Layton (New York: Routledge, 1999).

9 Gillian Rose, “Looking at Landscape: The Uneasy Pleasures of Power in *Feminism & Geography* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1993), 87.

10 Romaine Moreton, Thesis in *The Right to Dream* (Sydney: University of Western Sydney, 2006).

11 Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1972), introduction.

12 Anne Salmond, “Theoretical Landscapes: On Cross Cultural Conceptions of Knowledge” in *Semantic Anthropology*, ed. D. Parkin (London: Academic Press, 1992), 65-87.

...

Pick out the tall gaunt white man wearing Bermuda shorts, a World War II Army Force Flying jacket, an Australian bush hat and tennis shoes. He is what we call an Anthropologist, an ethnographer who will inevitably have a thin sexy wife with stringy hair, an IQ of 191 and a vocabulary in which even the prepositions have eleven syllables.¹³

...

In the maelstrom of signification it can be hard to be the one who remains silent.

...

The winter light is cold. And much more angled than anticipated. These temperatures make the cameras unpredictable and slow. The manual works, the automatic stutters. I keep film and batteries in the inside pockets of my coat for warmth. More than once, sites relevant for us to document are invisible due to the sunlight falling directly into my lens. One site I visit 3 times to take a picture. Once the shadow of the cliffs veils it in indistinguishable light, then later, the sun traveling through its midday is right in front of me, taking hold of the entire frame with its glare. When I return a third time in the afternoon, the shadows have grown to unexpected length and the sky is turning into its daily drama of red, blue and purple. I give up, resigning myself and my apparatus to the forces of the sun. No photograph taken.

...

13 Vine Deloria, Jr., "Anthropologists and Other Friends" in *Custer Died For Your Sins. An Indian Manifesto* (London: Collier-Macmillian Limited, 1971), 79.

In *this country, on this land*, this task of controlling the representation of the past through history is linked to the large self-determination movement of the European-American mind and its substance is the determination of cultural survival. One could say that history is and becomes an ordering principle that enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world.¹⁴



Dawn and dusk brings unsettling transitions of light. Related yet different, the colors of the sky evolve around the presence of the sun, which seems to travel the distance between the horizon line and its daytime elevation above in remarkable speed, moving colors in its journey. Orange, purple, green, yellow, blue. Space folds and unfolds along these shifts of light, my eyes tumbling, shifting in similar motion. Each day at this time, I seem to halt my work for the interval, motionless body, still, holding on to the sphere of the inevitable transition. Like listening to the words of a favored lecture, my desire takes a breath in to hold each word, each moment indefinitely.

14 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of Human Sciences*. (New York: Vintage Books edition, April 1994), XVII.

The contemplation of the sky is the grace and curse of humanity.¹⁵ None of us lives apart from the land entirely; such an isolation is unimaginable. If we are to realize and maintain our humanity, we must come to a moral comprehension of earth and air as it is perceived in the long turn of seasons and of years.¹⁶ The histories we write from this place need to be patient with the interruptions of the everyday this land lives. When these histories are told, they only end to begin again. We will soon recognize that in this historiography the narrative closure is always already postponed. It is achievements of our ancestors that make us accountable for how we move in the world today.¹⁷ Time thrusts us forward from behind, blows us out from the narrow funnel of the present into the future.¹⁸ I have talked to you about land. I have talked to you about history, I have talked to you about knowledge. Mine and not mine, yours, ours and others. It all starts again, right here, with me speaking and you listening. You will forget and you will remember. Do not ask who I am, and do not ask me to remain the same either: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order and at least spare us their morality when we write, when we think, and when we speak.¹⁹

15 Aby Warburg, *Images from the Pueblo Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1.

16 N. Scott Momaday, voiceover for *Remembered Earth: New Mexico's High Desert*. PBS production, 2006.

17 Paul Chaat Smith, wall text at the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC.

18 Susan Sontag, *Introduction* in Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street and Other Writings" (London: Verso, 1985), 13.

19 Michel Foucault. *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1972), introduction.