



Audrey Goodman*

ASSEMBLING CALIFORNIA PHOTOBOOKS

Defined by its coherent design, its focus around a particular subject or theme, and its emphasis on the juxtaposition of elements, “The photobook is a creature of the twentieth century, and it grew with the century to address the needs of new times” (Fernández 2011, 29). Whereas photographs displayed in galleries or art books foreground purely visual knowledge, photobooks both arrange images in a deliberate sequence and stage a dynamic interaction; the combination of image and text amplifies both elements, blurs the boundary separating art from document, and creates a new, flexible, dialectical form that partakes of and transforms both media. Unlike images on display, “Books beg to be cherished in silence, isolation, intimacy, their imaginative universe coming alive only when this world is frozen, disregarded, betrayed,” as Ilan Stavans writes (Stavans 2001, 165). If photographers seek what Dorothea Lange called “a visual life,” dedicated to paying attention to how the world looks (quoted in Spirn 2008, 4), creators of photobooks seek to tell stories about how places feel from the situated perspectives of people who live and dream in them; they construct for their readers a virtual experience of imagined immersion and travel. As the physical form in which places, cultures, environments, and stories combine in the reader’s mind and activate imaginary senses of place that become collective through shared acts of reading and visualization, photobooks also provide a critical means of interrogating the construction of local identities and regional boundaries.

In California, photobooks emerged most visibly in the 1930s. The camera had come into its own as a documentary tool and as a means of social, economic, and historical reflection, and the photobooks created during the Depression era provided a vehicle for communicating social conditions and advocating for social change. While the photographs themselves “carried the most emotional punch” in the pioneering books of this era, such as *You Have Seen Their Faces* by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White (1937) and *The Land of the Free* by Archibald MacLeish (1938), William Stott argues that “the emotion was guided by the text” as the captions and narrative elements of these books “told who was suffering where, and why, and what could be done to help” (Stott 1973, 215). In response to the Depression, writers, photographers, and social scientists in California, as elsewhere in the US, sought to make local struggles for work and human dignity visible to national audiences; through giving voice to displaced workers, farmers, families, and communities, photobooks animated documentary images and connected isolated regions within and beyond the state. According to Sally Stein, “California’s impact on photography was never so great as in the 1930s. The effect was also reciprocal, for photography in this period played a prominent role in shaping the state’s public image and programs” (Stein 2000, 171). While many California photography projects and photobooks in this decade focused on social concerns, with the most notable example being *An American Exodus* (1939) by Lange and Paul Taylor, others advocated for wilderness preservation. Edward Weston and Charis Wilson’s *California and the West* (1940), Adams’s *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail* (1938), and, slightly later, Adams’s version of Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* (1950), each developed out of sustained encounters with the state’s diverse landscapes and created new stories of wilderness exploration.¹

However, if we look only at the most widely circulated photobooks and published images and texts, we miss seeing how women photographers and writers initiated an ongoing process of critiquing the colonial assumptions that underlie popular conceptions of California as an exceptional western region. As Krista Comer explains, such critical regional work articulates place in deeply local ways and resists “a logic of mobility that historically, in Western empire and Western American and Australian frontier theses, presents optimistic

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¹ For detailed accounts of California photography through mid-century, see Castleberry 1996 and Goodman 2010, Chapter 1.



horizons, new chances, hope, openings, progress, national exception, freedom” – all “dimensions of settler mobilities” (Comer 2016, 6). Throughout the twentieth century, California was commonly imagined as “offer[ing] people an environment in which they could start a new life on their own terms, a place where they could pursue their lives unhampered by the restrictive, tradition-based society of the eastern and Midwestern United States” (Fort 2000, 31). Women writers and photographers in California resisted these regional ideologies of mobility, focusing instead on articulating personal or communal visions and on revealing the social and environmental costs of the California dream, although they encountered various challenges when they tried to publish this work. Several major projects designed by women were published belatedly or not at all, such as Anne Brigman’s *Song of a Pagan* (whose publication was delayed from 1939 to 1949 because of the war), Dorothea Lange’s “Death of a Valley” (commissioned as a photo-essay by *Life* in 1957 and rejected before appearing in *Aperture* in 1960), and Alma Lavenson’s “Mother Lode” project, envisioned as a sequence of images of California mining country that Lavenson began in the 1930s and hoped to publish in the late 1970s. Other projects, such as *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California* by Joan Myers and William deBuys (1999), an exploration of the Colorado River watershed in southern California, were realized through long-term relationships between photographers and writers.

In his natural history *Assembling California*, John McPhee writes that any effort to assemble a coherent vision of the state requires exposing geological fault lines, imagining vastly different scales of time, and putting geological, social, and cultural maps in motion. In this essay, I explore how the photobooks created by Brigman, Lavenson, Lange, and Myers cultivate equally complex, if less coherent, visions of California. I argue that these books both promote the reader’s tactile and affective engagement with local landscapes at various scales and reveal critical, if incompletely documented, connections between the region’s native and settler histories. Rather than using the emotion generated by the images to advance an agenda for social change or a heroic notion of wilderness, these texts or projects encourage intimate and critical contemplation of local histories, environments, and communities. Through their intertwined visual and verbal narratives, as well as their strategic omissions, they provide current readers with the opportunity to tell new stories about California’s past, present, and future.

1. Embodying and Voicing Early 20th-Century California: Anne Brigman’s *Songs of a Pagan*

Anne Brigman emerged in the New York photography world as an artist nurtured by the “wonderful natural beauties of California,” as proclaimed in a comment included with the reproduction of her photographs in *Camera Work* in 1909. With work that was judged by Alfred Stieglitz to be “expressive and thoroughly individual,” she seemed to convey to male viewers “that same elemental brooding that distinguishes the speech and gestures of those old Viking heroes” and a “large and simple way of seeing” (Laurvik 1909, 47).² Through this endorsement and the fine reproduction of her images in Stieglitz’s influential publication, Brigman found an early appreciative audience for such works as *The Dying Cedar* (1909), a highly stylized self-portrait in which Brigman’s pose mimics the twisted curves of the cedar’s trunk and branches and the chiaroscuro lighting dramatizes the passionate merger of body and tree. Claiming to do her best work in the mountains, Brigman preferred to hike and work at high elevations and to confront extreme weather: wind, hail, snow. Such intimate contact with the mountains led her first to visualize her body’s relation to the environment and then to pose for herself.³

In the decades that followed, Brigman continued to test ways that photography could work as a tool for more radical ways of embodied seeing and for imagining relations between human and more than human forms. Her writing reveals her own strong awareness of her method and her conviction that the body and camera together could function as instruments for situated seeing. In an essay published in 1936, she recalled the moment when she claimed photography as a tool for visualization:

One day during the gathering of the thunder storm when the air was hot and still and a strange yellow light was over everything, something happened almost too deep for me to be able to relate. New dimensions revealed themselves in the visualization of the human form as a part of tree and

² See Ehrens 1995, 29-32, for a full account of this relationship, which continued until 1944.

³ For digital versions of some of Brigman’s self-portraits, consult the Alfred Stieglitz / Georgia O’Keeffe archive at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



rock rhythms and I turned full force to the medium at hand [photography] and the beloved thing gave to me a power and abandon that I could not have had otherwise. (Quoted in Ehrens 1995, 23)

At the same time, she drew upon literary sources of inspiration, consulting copies of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy* "during long camping and photographic expeditions in the Sierra," and these volumes affirmed "her belief in the wilderness as sacred" (Ehrens 1995, 25). The photographs she made in this period attest to her deepening knowledge of the climate, rocks, and trees of the Sierra range.

In 1929, Brigman moved from "her beloved mountains" in northern California to the southern part of the state, settling in Long Beach near her ailing mother. She began to photograph abstract patterns of the sand and ocean, reactivating sensory memories of her childhood in Hawai'i, as well as subjects common in the work of other California photographers of the 1930s, such as "oil derricks, close-up images of cacti and other vegetation, expansive views of beaches and sky, and sand erosion" (33). Soon she began to write poetry and explore other visual modes of expression, such as etchings, linoleum prints, and charcoal drawings (34). Her critical perspective on embodied vision and her intimate contact with California's varied terrain together inform her photo-textual approach to the two books she designed in the 1930s, *Songs of a Pagan* and *Wild Flute Songs*.

When she turned to the photobook as a vehicle for promoting and expressing her affinity with the region's isolated and extreme elements in the late 1930s, Brigman announced her own changing position in relation to the California landscape, as she focused on private and uninhabited land and created her own imaginary spaces for self-expression. In the Foreword to *Songs of a Pagan*, she explains her intention to integrate embodied memory and critical reflection by pairing poems and photographs. Claiming that her "most vivid" memories "are of mountain peaks and blue sea, trees and clouds, flowers and fruits and birds," she describes her lasting impressions of Hawai'ian land and seascapes; then her later experience camping in the "glorious grimness" of the northern Sierra, discovering the power of her camera to reveal the rhythms of the junipers and tamarack pines, to trigger "flashes of visualization," and to expand into "new dimensions of body and thought;" and, finally, her newfound dedication to the sea and sky. She concludes by meditating on the timeless nature of her craft; after all, she claims, "We work with LIGHT" (Brigman 1949). The photographs in the book activate the air sensed by her body through the manipulation of tone and shadow. With her pairings of earlier photographs and more recent poems and her design of the book, Brigman also reveals a dynamic handmade aesthetics drawn from the models of scrapbooks and family albums, one that resists the "shift in the conceptualization of photography as a process of *making* to one of *taking*" initiated with Kodak's commercialization of the dry-plate process in the late nineteenth century (Riches 2014, 131). The poems measure the gap between the time the photographs were created, the time of writing, and the book's assembly, thus extending and revising the artist's reciprocal relation to the places that shaped her and that she in turn defined through photographic visualization. In *Songs of a Pagan*, the culmination of a creative life dedicated to the process of coming to know her native environment, Brigman reclaims and voices the California landscape on her own terms.

2. Visualizing California Across Generations: Lavenson's Mother Lode

While in her photobooks Anne Brigman narrated the emergence of her creative voice through reimagining contact with the island of Hawai'i, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and the coast of southern California at various stages of her life, other women photographers explored how specific places sustained communities across generations. As they created visual narratives of pioneer experience, Alma Lavenson and Dorothea Lange sought to keep the Anglo-European settlers who immigrated to California in the mid-nineteenth century and struggled to sustain their families, towns, and communities in view. Rarely concerned with the indigenous people that white settlers had displaced or killed, these photographers focused on the groups and places they identified with or sought to protect. Whether constructing stories of local pride and persistence in the face of modernization and development or assembling narratives of crisis, Lavenson and Lange created image sequences to narrate how the state's recent social upheaval played out on a local level.



Lavenson, a self-taught photographer based in Oakland who had achieved modest success in the camera competitions she entered in the 1920s and greater visibility through group shows in places ranging from Los Angeles to Chicago, Paris, and Turin by the early 1930s, began photographing California gold mining towns in 1933. Her subjects had included cityscapes, industrial sites, everyday tools and objects, and flowers, and her approach revealed a decisive, sharp perspective and impressive technical control, mastery often credited to her mentor Edward Weston. When she set out to document the settlements created during the Gold Rush era in the Sierra Nevada foothill region known as the Mother Lode, she embarked on a long-term investigation into ways that her family history could be visualized. As she traveled between various towns founded after the arrival of land baron John Sutter and miner José Amador, she surveyed the types of buildings that held each community together – hotels, stores, churches, graveyards, farmhouses, breweries – as well as some of the tools and objects left behind. Thus she reimagined the everyday lives and rituals of California’s original settlers as she observed and documented continuities between past and present. According to Ehrens, “As she photographed churches, shops, signs, and walls, she felt the spirit of the place and of the past – of the California of her ancestors, of those who had mined for gold. She found deep personal meaning in her new subject and approached it with the dedication of an anthropologist” (Ehrens 1990, 7). Because at least some mines remained active until 1942, a few towns still had commercial centers and active communities, making access to this spirit a matter of imagining connections across generations.

Although not documented in Lavenson’s work, the Mother Lode region had been occupied for centuries prior to the arrival of the settlers. As Benjamin Madley explains,

Miwok and Nisenan Indian people were the primary inhabitants of what became the Central Mines. Traditional Miwok territory covers a vast region, stretching roughly from what is now Walnut Creek, in the eastern San Francisco Bay Area, to the high peaks of the Sierra Nevadas and from just north of the Cosumnes River south to modern-day Mariposa. To the north Nisenan territory covered the majority of the Central Mines and spread north from what is now Sacramento to the jagged Sutter Buttes and east to the Sierra Crest. Although they spoke different languages, Miwok and Nisenan people had much in common: they both wove beautiful baskets, lived in politically autonomous villages, practiced tattooing, gathered and hunted to create similar cuisines, and often built substantial structures. (2016, 68)

Theirs was a fully developed culture that extended over a wide territory, and before the prospectors arrived “California Indians had outnumbered non-Indians by perhaps ten to one,” a ratio that limited anti-Indian violence (2016, 100). Both groups initially allowed prospectors into the area, and some became miners themselves. However, the sudden influx of so many immigrants into the region (80,000 in a matter of a few years) proved to be fatal for Miwok and Nisenan people. In addition to the devastating effects of malaria and smallpox, which arrived in the 1840s, and the mass killings of the Sierra Nevada Miwoks by Mexican forces under the command of José Amador, settlers “motivated by racial hatred, fear, and greed” (2016, 90) conducted campaigns of annihilation. What Madley terms “local genocide” and “exterminatory killing” originated in the Central Mines and then spread north, resulting in a dramatic demographic shift: “by the end of 1849, there were fewer than two California Indians for every non-Indian,” Madley claims (2016, 100). “The process was, as historian Philip J. Deloria has written of other ‘Indian Wars,’ one of ‘defensive conquest,’ that is, conquest that whites described – somewhat disingenuously – as a reaction to Indian aggression, theft, or threat” (quoted in Madley 2016, 96). Herbert Luthin confirms this assessment in the conclusion to his collection of Native California stories and songs: “If the devastation of the missions swept through the Southern and South-Central California cultures like a fire, the Gold Rush hit the Northern cultures like an atom bomb,” he writes. “Some of the most shameful passages in United States history took place in California during the decades immediately following the Gold Rush of 1849” (Luthin 2002, 556). By 1900, less than ten percent of the indigenous population at the time of first European contact in the sixteenth century survived, and more than a hundred tribal groups had vanished (Fagan 2003, 361).

None of this “shameful” history is visible in Lavenson’s photographs of Sutter Creek, a town named after a Swiss emigrant who built his vast estate in the Sacramento River Valley through the labor of unfree Indians (Madley 2016, 52) that survived the boom and bust of the Gold Rush and remained relatively prosperous into the mid-twentieth century. The images Lavenson made of this town instead confirm her commitment to reveal



to current-day viewers the public meeting places, private structures, and memorial sites that sustain families and communities across generations.



Fig. 1: Alma Lavenson, Monteverde [Monteverde's] Store, Sutter Creek, 1957. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

A prominent building in town was the Monteverde General Store, established in 1896 by an immigrant from Genoa who had arrived in the town in 1861 and worked first in the mines and then as a stone mason, helping to build many of the homes in the area. At his death, his daughter took over, with the help of her mother, who stayed on as bookkeeper. When Lavenson photographed the store in 1957, it appeared to be in good condition and open for business.⁴ (Fig. 1)

Other photographs Lavenson made in Sutter Creek reveal a town whose prosperity seemed to increase between 1939 and 1957: in the interval, the Main Street was paved and the buildings repainted. She also focused closely on the local cemetery, where generations of one Irish immigrant family, the Mahoneys, had buried their kin. With markers indicating a child who died at the age of one year and two months in 1865 and father or grandfather who died at age sixty in 1885, this portrait of a graveyard chronicles one family's persistence in the face of loss and hardship. (Fig. 2)

⁴ Although closed in 1971, Monteverde's Store has since been reopened as a museum and tourist attraction. See www.suttercreek.org for details and for a tourist's introduction to the town.



Fig. 2: Alma Lavenson, Cemetery, Sutter Creek, 1938. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Although selected Mother Lode photographs were displayed as part of Lavenson's second solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1948, the book she envisioned was never published. In the late 1970s, a decade that brought renewed interest in her work, she began to consult with Richard Dillon, an editor at Northland Press, about putting together a book with 60 photos, detailed captions, and a text of between 20,000 and 25,000 words (Alma Lavenson Archive). In preparing the book, the editor suggested, she should retrace her steps from the first decades of the project and measure her impressions from that time against the contemporary scene. Unfortunately, this editor left for University of Washington Press and delivered that press's rejection of the book in 1981, citing "bad timing" and lack of finances. What remains of this project is a digital archive managed by the University of California's Bancroft Library, part of the Online Archive of California. Lavenson arranged her negatives alphabetically by town, and the archive of 373 photographs preserves this organizational structure.⁵ From our current perspective, this archive remains full of critical potential precisely because it does not delineate the region's spatial or temporal boundaries; if those visual and "social processes that freeze the scales" of space amount to "an exertion of colonial control over space" (Neil Smith, quoted in Goeman 2017, 101), the digitized collection of Mother Lode photographs keeps these scales open for decolonial recalibration. And because we can't know what kind of narrative Lavenson would have constructed, each image remains available for new textual frames.

3. Speaking from the Berryessa Valley: Dorothea Lange and Pirkle Jones's "Death of a Valley"

Some of the many outstanding questions regarding Lavenson's potential photobook – such as how she might have told the stories of each community and incorporated their voices – are answered definitively by Dorothea Lange and Pirkle Jones in "Death of a Valley," a photo essay that documents and dramatizes the destruction of Monticello, a community located in the Berryessa Valley at the intersection of Napa, Yolo, and Solano counties. Seemingly old California in microcosm, the valley was transformed through a federal plan to

⁵ Lavenson's digitized archive can be accessed through the Online Archive of California: <http://www.oac.cdlib.org>.



reallocate water resources; recognizing that the “development, distribution and control of water” was the “new” California’s “biggest problem,” the US Bureau of Reclamation built the Monticello Dam and created a reservoir where farm buildings and houses had stood. The textual introduction expresses anger at this federally imposed plan, setting the emotional tone for the essay to come: an unnamed construction worker complains that one can no longer “stand still in one of these here fields without you get moved down, raked up, or painted,” laments the loss of part of a “California legend,” and critiques the “changing values” of the new California dedicated to “progress” (Lange and Jones 1960, 127).

The photo essay proper then begins with a portrait of a farm woman extending her hand to the viewer, inviting the reader into a community described as “a place of settled homes and deep loam soil” that “held generations in its palm” only “eleven miles long / two and one half miles wide.” It introduces views of the valley as it was and portraits of other people who had worked there (a storekeeper, a cowboy, a grape harvester). Although the first landscape photograph depicts a vast field with mountains rising in the distance, Lange and Jones move in quickly to create a sense of immersion. We approach an idyllic farmhouse lushly planted with trees and flowering bushes. We wander through a cemetery dotted with wildflowers. We meet Albert A. McKenzie, the storekeeper who continued the work of his father. We witness the last roundup of cattle and the last grape harvest accomplished by the labor of “the brown hands of the Mexicans” (1960, 140). Then, just as Lange and Jones begin to document the dismantling and destruction of the town, they pause the narrative to introduce an image and moment of stillness. Accompanying a photograph of a fertile field with clouds gathering overhead is the caption “Visible changes came slowly and quietly. There was packing, selling, moving. Families disappeared, melting away, emptying the valley” (1960, 144). The text describes the atmospheric sounds: “ripping wood for salvage amid the buzz of insects.” (Fig. 3)

The next photograph, of a luminous, isolated barn, shows the clouds darkening, as if anticipating the storm of destruction to come. On the page that follows, Lange quotes anonymous voices – “We’re going to have to scatter out” (1960, 146) – and prints this collective utterance in a seemingly hand-typed line. Then, from this point on, the pace of destruction accelerates. Lange and Jones’s narrative dramatizes the violence that accompanies “progress,” showing how preparation to build the Monticello Dam left people homeless, animals terrified, the earth “raw and mutilated” (1960, 160). The following images indeed show what is left of the valley when the people scatter and the land is plowed in preparation for the dam’s construction: discarded family photographs, disinterred graves, felled oak trees, downed power lines, and bulldozed earth. “The winter rains finally came,” but “The valley is empty” (1960, 162). (Fig. 4)

In the photo essay’s final image, the newly built, illuminated dam contains the force of the water and, in its wake, the final pages of written narrative express disbelief at the people’s enforced compliance with enforced “progress:” “This valley and this land was good to us, but the water over it will be good for the majority of the people. We have to think that way...” (1960, 165). While the image of the dam seals the fate of this community and the people of the valley have the last word, the ellipsis opens a way for reconsideration, inviting readers to continue the conversation about how water resources could be managed better for the collective good, in and beyond the Berryessa Valley.



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THERE WERE SOUNDS OF RIPPING
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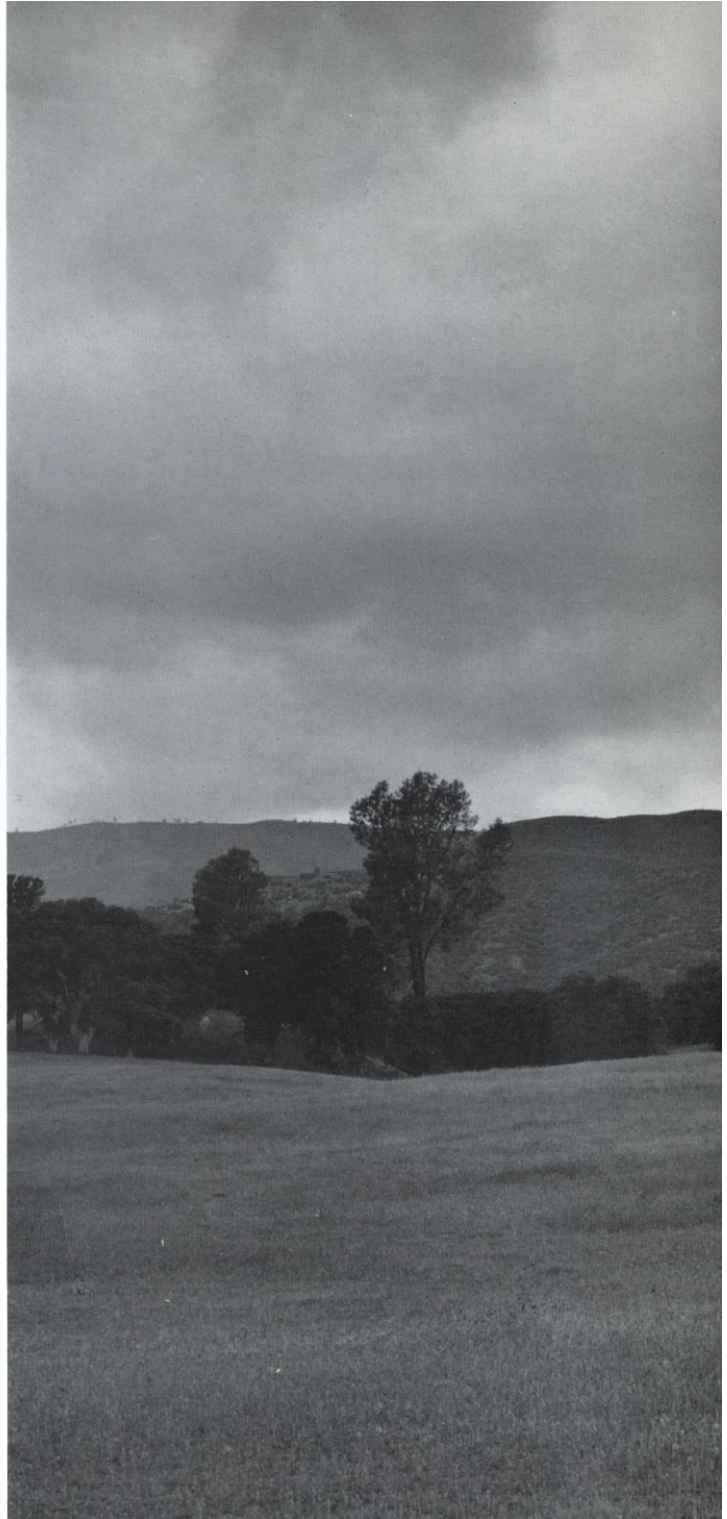


Fig. 3: Dorothea Lange and Pirkle Jones, "Death of a Valley." *Aperture* 8.3 (1960): 144



THE WINTER RAINS FINALLY CAME. THE VALLEY IS EMPTY.
THE WATER CAME SEEPING IN FROM THE STREAMS.
A SMALL LAKE FORMED ON THE LOWER END BEHIND THE DAM.
THE WATER KEPT RISING.
IT FLOWED OVER THE LAND LIKE A RIVER AND COVERED
THE HIGHWAY WHICH RAN THE LENGTH OF THE LITTLE VALLEY.
IT COVERED THE OLD TOWNSITE. ALL LANDMARKS DISAPPEARED.
NO DUST NOW, NO SMOKE, NO HUM OF INSECTS,
NO SMELL OF TARWEED, ONLY STILLNESS
AND THE WATER RISING AND RISING.

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Fig. 4: Dorothea Lange and Pirkle Jones, "Death of a Valley." *Aperture* 8.3 (1960): 162



4. Visualizing Deep Time in “Low-Down” California

The more recently published *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California* (1999) narrates intersections of natural, indigenous, and settler histories in the desert basin west of California’s fertile Imperial Valley, bringing together photographer Joan Myers’s extensive experience exploring southwestern landscapes and historian William deBuys’ environmental and social knowledge of the region to visualize deep time from many embodied perspectives. DeBuys characterizes the photobook as an “archaeology of place” and organizes his narrative around two major themes: first, the idea that the Colorado River basin is an environment where generations of native people and settlers experienced or imposed their dreams; and, second, the concept of the “low” as a place where “consequences collect” (deBuys 1999, 8). Following the model of environmentally conscious photobooks made by contemporary photographers Richard Misrach, Peter Goin, and Robert Dawson, the book amplifies the frames through which viewers approach an imperiled landscape.⁶ This striated inquiry, at once temporally vertical and geographically and culturally expansive, invites the reader to follow multiple routes and side trips through a region that spans southern California and Baja California, as well as parts of Arizona and Sonora. *Salt Dreams* thus provides a form for imagining histories of contact and settlement beyond the boundaries of the state as well as for visualizing a future for this contaminated but potentially resilient natural and social landscape.

“Every dream is a story about the future,” deBuys claims, “a vision of how things *should* be” (deBuys 1999, 255). Throughout the book he explores the unevenly recorded complexity of first contact, emphasizing the challenges of creating a historical narrative without having any written texts aside from glyphs inscribed in rock. Beginning with the Quechan belief that “all the knowledge and power, skills and understanding a person might possess were acquired through an extraordinary process of prenatal dreaming,” he offers an alternative way of approaching the knowledge of place “not as a process of acquisition, let alone of study, but of recovery – a return to an earlier, more complete state” (1999, 29). By contrast, the process of realizing settler dreams, which in California was ratcheted “to a higher, more compulsively happy [...] and sybaritic level,” (deBuys 1999, 44) demanded material acquisition, at the cost of the region’s indigenous inhabitants and its environment. The book renders this process in intricate detail, through maps and improbable, disastrous engineering plans that lay bare the sharp and destructive conflicts between private development companies and government water projects. Through all of the written accounts of pioneers, engineers, and settlers, deBuys keeps returning to and historicizing encounters with the land itself, asking at each point in time what it felt like to inhabit this place. He urges his readers to read the landscape in order to imagine its natural and human histories of use, transformation, and destruction. Which species died out? Which cultures survive? Which marks have we left on the land? From which scales (physical and temporal) can we see this place best? How will we sustain its ecosystem in the future? Even if the dreams of our time turn out to be “ill conceived,” it is still essential to articulate them; “we cannot live without them,” deBuys proclaims (deBuys 1999, 256).

Meanwhile, Myers’s photographs capture the dreamlike quality of this stretch of the Colorado River and the surrounding desert, trouble the dreams that originally brought US settlers to the Salton Sea, and similarly urge viewers to imagine its future. Smaller reproductions and individual pages inserted between chapters prepare for the two portfolios that stand alone, the first opening with an expansive view of the sand rippling as if it were the sea that it once was, and the second offering an introduction to the region’s living communities. As Myers takes us closer in and brings us towards the present moment, we see the extent of the aridity, the destruction wrought by floods, and the effects of contamination. She also focuses on the geoglyphs, including a magnificent horse intaglio, a figure that must have served as a sacred site and means for the Quechan people to connect with the spirit of a newly encountered creature. The photographs shift our focus to the surface of this environment: the remains of settlements and the few still-active routes. When we turn to the final image in this section, taken “Near the headquarters of the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge,” it is not at all clear if there is any refuge from the consequences of this region’s devastation.

⁶ For an excellent overview of some of these recent projects, see Wells 2011, 148-155.



Fig. 5: Don and Barbara Streets, Salton Sea, California. © Joan Myers 1999

In Portfolio II, Myers looks for the intersection of natural and human patterns in the landscape and renders visual contrasts and textures so precisely that viewers can almost feel the qualities of the materials themselves, from the dry, cracked dirt and pebbly gravel to the smooth burn of pressed painted metal and the sharp fray of a metal fence. She views the region from all directions; while often working at ground level, presenting a pedestrian's view of failed ambition, she also mixes scales and perspectives. One page reveals more than a dozen farm workers in the Imperial Valley working their rows from a distance; the facing page offers a full-body portrait of one worker, temporarily in repose, his boots and shovel caked with mud. Aerial views, inserted strategically at the center of the portfolio, lay bare the area's major construction plans and its few remaining structures: the roofless and windowless Navy test base and a solitary, abandoned vacation home accessible from a grid of roads designed to serve a hundred. Myers alternates sequences that take viewers through the contemporary vernacular landscape with sequences that invite us to reflect on ways that ruins and beauty, destruction and renewal, contamination and resilience, are thoroughly entangled. While the second portfolio emphasizes the environmental costs of human development by presenting unsustainable landscapes and choosing to come in closer to look at desiccated tilapia carcasses and dead pelicans, a few of many species still under threat in this environment, it also conveys the everyday pleasures of fishing and looking out from the shore that could connect generations of indigenous and settler communities. Taken together, the stories generated through the intertwined images, captions, stories, and histories in *Salt Dreams* simultaneously ask their readers and viewers to re-inhabit a newly rich past and to confront those questions most challenging to all inhabitants of California and the western US: what happens when official "refuges" fail to protect species at risk? Can we heal toxic bodies – human, more-than-human, and social – through new technologies and trans-cultural alliances?



Fig. 6: Tilapia. © Joan Myers 1999



Fig. 7: Salton Sea Fence. © Joan Myers 1999



Along with the unfinished projects and completed photobooks women artists created earlier in the century, deBuys and Myers's *Salt Dreams* challenges the notion that California photography either promoted or explicitly critiqued the spatial and individual freedoms the region's settlers had sought. Instead, by specifying the shifting locations of the observer and by intertwining the region's documentary and landscape traditions, they explore the complex and often sticky relations between human and natural bodies, re-situating their narrative visions of California within what feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo terms a trans-corporeal "contact zone" (Alaimo 2008, 238). Some of these projects locate generational continuity in imaginary, private spaces, while others reveal the instability of western lands and the environmental costs of settlement in California's diverse but fragile ecosystems. When re-read together, these 20th-century California photobooks have the critical potential to "unsettle" readers' ways of seeing, revise local histories, and initiate critical regional engagements in the 21st century.

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