

## CONQUERED LANDSCAPE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

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**Abstract:**

The paper traces the history of “conquered landscape” back to the original European colonists and the Puritans. We discuss the contribution of Thomas Jefferson as an architect of Western expansion through the purchase of the Louisiana territory and the mapping of future policy regarding the settling of Western territory. We cover the major moments in the settling of the West and their historic significance. We discuss Frederick Jackson Turner’s concept of the West as “a succession of frontiers” versus revisionist historian Patricia Nelson Limerick’s concept of *conquest* and *conquered territory*. The second part of the paper deals with the Native American view of the land, with reference to Paula Gunn Allen’s ideas and Leslie Marmon Silko’s novels *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*. Silko juxtaposes two different kinds of space, Native American versus federal space. The Native American and Anglo-American views of nature are contrasted and explained, with the discussion of aspects of native removal, reterritorialization and misrepresentation.

**Keywords:** *Western expansion, environment despoliation, reinscribed borders, reterritorialization*

Early in American history, before the creation of the United States, nature was an ambiguous reality. The Virginia cavaliers rejoiced in the promise of a New World of abundance, a sort of Garden of Eden where people could live “without toil and labor”. On the other hand, the Puritans feared the sinister natural world whose evil eye glared at them from the shores of New England, a “wilderness” inhabited by demons, wild beasts and Indians. The Puritan colonies survived, while the Roanoke Island colonists (1587-1590) mysteriously disappeared.

The Roanoke “story” and the New England “story” demonstrate that the natural landscape of America simultaneously contained the possibility of both danger and profit, and set a pattern for the future colonizing experience in the

American environment – a landscape to be conquered and then profited from through Yankee ingenuity, industrial advancement and hard work.

The colonists liked to regard American landscape as a *tabula rasa* on which man could write, as if for the first time, the story he wanted to live. It was full of promise, the *vacuum domicilium* the Puritans had imagined, waiting to be peopled. The apparent emptiness made the land desirable not only as a space to be filled, but also as a stage on which to perform and as a territory to master. Land was to be conquered, controlled, subdivided, water-righted and exploited. This European attitude that can be traced from the domination motif of the Old Testament to colonial writers such as John Winthrop, Mary Rowlandson and Cotton Mather.

The westward migration gradually pushed the offspring of the founders further from the principles outlined in the Mayflower Compact. Western expansion grew as the population multiplied. The need for land began to move from spiritual to secular goals of nation-building in the new world. Deforestation occurred early on as the colonists pushed the colonized boundaries further and further away from the sea coast.

Thomas Jefferson took delight in the growing numbers of the population of Virginia, noting: “In Europe the object is to make the most of their land, labor being abundant. Here it is to make the most of our labor, land being abundant.” Thus began the independent, landowning tradition that underpins American identity – the tradition of the yeoman agriculturist (today a gardener in a suburban backyard) ready to advance and conquer a limitless continent of natural resources.

Westward movement started on the premise that there was an abundance of free land into which the settlers came, winning the wilderness. If the land was “free”, it was also “vacant” and “virgin” to the white settlers, with strong connotations of the promised land, imbued with the mystical sense of manifest destiny. In the mind of the settlers, the new land was linked with biblical stories of a New Canaan, suggesting the fecundity and promise of a new world of unexplored riches.

Thomas Jefferson acquired an interest in western exploration early in life. His father was a surveyor, map maker, and land speculator on the Virginia frontier. Jefferson had a life-long commitment to supporting western exploration and asserting American claims to western lands. Jefferson was clearly the intellectual father of the American advance to the Pacific. In his quality as President of the United States, Jefferson acquired the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 and sent the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1803–1806) on a mapping and scientific exploration on the Missouri River up to the Pacific.

In 1787, Congress asked Jefferson to come up with a political way of dealing with the West. What was going to be the political and government status of the West? Would the West remain a colonial region of lesser political

significance, on a lower level than the East Coast, or would western regions eventually become states with an equal status with eastern states? Jefferson replied that eventually, three up to five western states with equal power with eastern states will be constituted: Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin.

Should the new land be opened in a wild, uncontrolled manner, to everybody who wants to come, or should the government control the whole process by meting out lots of land for which it will collect a tax? Jefferson chose the second alternative. Jefferson worked out a plan in which territories were created at first – a governor and at least one judge were appointed per territory. 3000 free white adult males were required for a territory to have its own legislature and a non-voting delegate in Congress. 60,000 people (of all types) were required so that the territory could apply to be a state (a request that would probably be granted). Jefferson's plan of development was reinforced by *The Northwest Ordinance* of 1787. Jefferson's plan became a model for the future development of the West.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 forbade black slavery in the area of the Northwest. Although a large slave-owner himself, Jefferson was an Enlightenment figure. He believed that slavery was morally wrong. He used the opportunity to prevent slavery from spreading west. But the issue of slavery in the American West was never solved permanently until the Civil War – in fact it was one of the causes of the Civil War. Political compromises temporarily dealt with the matter of slavery (the 1820 Missouri compromise, the 1850 Compromise and the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act).

In seeking to establish, what he called “an empire for liberty”, Jefferson also influenced the country's policies toward Native Americans. Despite a life-long interest in Native American culture, President Jefferson advocated policies that would dislocate Native Americans and their way of life. In 1784, Jefferson opposed the extension of slavery into the northwest territory, but he later supported its westward extension because he feared that any restriction of slavery could lead to a civil war and an end to the nation.

The Westward push was imperialistic. As John L. O'Sullivan showed, it was the duty of white settlers to move West and occupy and possess the lands there, following the Manifest Destiny ordained by God, “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence”. The journalist William Gilpin wrote in 1846 that “the untransacted destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent, to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean, ... to teach old nations a new civilization – to confirm the destiny of the human race” (Smith 37).

The West was interpreted as “natural wealth” to be consumed and used. The Homestead Act of 1862 parceled the land into 160-acre lots to be sold for the nominal amount of \$10, and meanwhile the railroad companies were being awarded huge land grants to enable the continued expansion of the railroad

across the Plains. Native American lands were being divided, buffalo ranges bisected and the once-uncharted wilderness was being surveyed by large corporate interests: railroads, mining and timber companies, driven by profit and loss.

Western land was opened to the settlers through land rushes and the Dawes Act. The Dawes Act of 1887 (or *General Allotment Act*) was a subterfuge which opened Indian land for the land rushes. A lot of Indian land that used to belong to the reservation was now transferred from Indian into white hands. The General Allotment Act broke up and allotted tribally held lands to individual Indians in small parcels, opening up the surplus to whites. Land which had been commonly owned by the tribal reservation was now subdivided into lots. Each Indian head of a family was given 160 acres of land. The problem was that the Indians did not know how to run farms and according to their religion, they could not “own” land. Land did not belong to people. It was people who belonged to the land. Some of the Indians who accepted the 160 acres rented or sold it to the whites for next to nothing, because they did not understand what the land was worth in money. Many eager speculators induced Indians inexperienced in commercial dealings to sell their newly acquired property.

The federal allotment policy continued with the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889. The Oklahoma Land Rush was another imperialistic design which opened Indian land to white settlement. With settlers lining up for a race to the best property ex-Indian property and with “sooners” already illegally having staked their claims, it can be viewed as symbolic of the white hunger for land at the expense of Indian people. Then on March 2, 1889 Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Bill, proclaiming that unassigned lands were part of the public domain. This was followed by the Curtis Act of 1898 and various inheritance laws. Finally, the Indian land base shrunk from about 150 million acres to 60 million acres.

Additional Indian displacement occurred during the 20th century, through the building of dams and other public works by the Army Corps of Engineers and private contractors, under the concept of eminent domain, as well as various methods of extortion – such as the invalidation of wills, the appropriation of land in exchange for social services, the declaration of landowners as incompetent, and the manipulation and intimidation of Indians, forcing sales. Even today, some Indian lands and resources are still threatened.

The most prominent voice on the importance of abundant western land and the frontier is Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner formulated the American psyche in terms of its identification with a vast natural world. For him, the frontier was “the meeting point between savagery and civilization”. The outer limit of agricultural settlement (as in the vision of Thomas Jefferson) was the boundary of civilization. The emphasis on agricultural settlement places the frontier thesis within the stream of agrarian theory flowing from Thomas

Jefferson to the men who elaborated the ideal society of yeomen farmers in the West. Turner's concept of *the frontier* (1893) encompassed notions of conquest, progress and individual achievement. Turner's rhetoric resonates as the key definition of what it is to be an American even today. Turner believed that the advancement of American settlement westwards and the conquest of landscape explained American development.

For Turner and for Americans even today, westward expansion and the conquest of western land is inextricably embedded in the national myth. Turner's frontier, the "meeting point between savagery and civilization", defined the American relationship with a natural world discovered and exploited in the name of progress. The West provided the "free" land on which equality and democracy could flourish. The presence of an ever-expanding frontier was to account for uniquely American qualities: "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development." The border of the frontier is not fixed, it is advancing constantly westwards. The result of the westering process is "a succession of frontiers" from the Appalachians to the Pacific, as new land was conquered and controlled.

In her book *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987), the revisionist historian Patricia Nelson Limerick encourages the use of the word *conquest* rather than *frontier*, to describe the process that shaped the West. *Legacy of Conquest* contains discussions about federally-held lands and grazing rights; the scarcity of water and over-grazing of Western lands; environmental conflicts; timber and mining conflicts; religious freedom issues; Western dependency on federal support; and boom-bust economies. Her synthesis of these issues of Western American history suggests the continuity of past issues that still appear in the present day, and remain a part of the West's "legacy of conquest".

Limerick takes issue with the commonly accepted notion that the year 1890 marked the closing of the American frontier. "Frontiers involve mules, horses and oxen, but not jeeps; pickaxes and pans but not air drills and draglines; provisions in sacks and tins but not in freeze-dried packets; horse-drawn plows but not mechanized combines with air conditioned drivers' cabins; amateurs but not engineers; bows and arrows but certainly not nuclear tests in Nevada. Are Geiger counters and airplanes less frontier-like than picks and shovels?" (Limerick 24).

The American West is a preeminent case study in conquest and its consequences. Patricia Nelson Limerick shows that the conquest of western land basically involved the drawing of lines on a map, and the definition and allocation of ownership – personal, tribal, corporate, state and federal. It involved the setting of new borders – the writer shows how Western history is a story structured by the drawing of lines and the making of borders. From imperial struggles for territory to the parceling out of town site claims, western

American history was an effort first to draw lines dividing the West into manageable units of property and then to persuade people to treat those lines with respect, shows Patricia Nelson Limerick.

For nearly a century before, Patricia Nelson Limerick argues, federal ownership of the land was a temporary expedient on the way to private property in the West. Territories were transitional, even if the transition came in all lengths – no time at all in California, four years in Nevada, and sixty-three in Arizona and New Mexico. Before statehood, even though they had elected representatives, residents in territories were under the authority of federally appointed governors and judges.

Patricia Nelson Limerick also addresses the issue of environment despoliation. The diversion of rivers, the mindless use of technology to change the natural ecology of the West, whether by water diversion or destruction of wildlife and their habitats, boded ill for the West. It would result in eventual exhaustion of scarce waters, the silting and salting of the soil, the destruction of valuable species of animals, and such a serious disruption of ecological balance that it might take centuries to repair, if ever. Areas of the West – especially the Colorado Plateau in the Four Corners area, and the Black Hills in South Dakota – proved to be rich in uranium ore, and the late 1940s saw a rush and boom in domestic uranium production. Throughout the 1950s, nuclear tests went on over Nevada, and winds carried the fallout around the planet. After 1963, the test went underground, but they still had occasional leaks and accidents.

In New Mexico the Rio Puerco is polluted with radioactive uranium tailings which have a half-life of thousands of years. New Mexico is already a center for nuclear activity, and there are dozens more nuclear installations planned for this state. Nevada today houses America's nuclear testing grounds. Utah is the testing ground for nerve gas. A nerve gas test accidentally killed a large herd of sheep which were grazing in an unfortunate proximity at the time. Utah also houses biological warfare equipment and will be the new center for the world's largest power plants – one of which, at three thousand megawatts, will be the largest in the world. Power plants have already begun to spoil the air of American national parks. Eyes sting at Arches National Park. There is smog in the desert. And dozens more power plants are proposed for the Four Corners area. To the north, in Montana, strip mining and coal-fired plants are competing with cows for resources of the High Plains. Industry contemplates cutting up large portions of the states of Wyoming, Colorado and Utah to mine coal and build gasification plants. The landscape of the Intermountain West has been classified as a "sacrifice area" and is being destroyed "to provide most good for the most people". However the fact that a region is arid hardly implies that it is barren and therefore should be exploited. Rather, it may mean that its landscape should be better protected.

The capitalist ideology of ownership found a perfect manifestation in western landscape. It was a cultural imperative to see the land as something to divide, distribute and register. Anglo-Americans came to the land as possessive individuals pursuing private dreams, trying to fence in their portion of the whole and thought about the land in fragmenting terms.

In contrast, for Native Americans who already inhabited Western landscape when the Euro-American settlers came, the land was sacred, bound up in an intricate web of meaning with all living things. For the Native Americans, the land could not become property since "We are the land, and the land is mother to us all" shows the writer Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop*. The Native Americans have adopted an attitude of environmental protection and treated the land with respect. For the Native American, the land is alive and man interacts with the environment, which reciprocates. For the Euro-American, the land is outside himself, separate, objectified, and ultimately dead.

Native Americans view themselves as an integral part of the landscape, deeply connected with each and every component of nature. Cooperation, non-aggression, interrelatedness among all things are at the core of the communal code of life of Native Americans. From times immemorial, the ecological farming and hunting practices of many groups of Native Americans supported their millions of people for thousands of years without endangering the land or the land's animal and vegetable species. In the middle Rio Grande, perhaps the oldest continuous area of human habitation in America, the Indians worked their corn and other food plants so as to preserve their environment. They prevented flooding; they kept grass in the arid climate; they did not deplete wood supplies, whereas white innovations in the same area produced flooding, erosion and other natural disasters which seriously damaged the ecological balance of the land.

Awareness of the interrelatedness of man and nature permeates Native American literature. Writers such as Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich and James Welch would serve as examples of nature writing. However in the following pages we choose to focus our research on the way in which the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko approaches the theme of conquered landscape in her most representative novel, *Ceremony* (1977).

In the context of nature writing, Silko's novel has been cited as one of the finest pieces of literature that places the Native American landscape at the core of human experience. The protagonist of *Ceremony* attempts to rediscover his responsibility towards the natural environment, by reconnecting with his heritage. Tayo's healing ceremony involves various aspects, among which the central one implies reassessment of the land. The only effective cure for the hero's war trauma is to readjust his relation to the land. Gradually, he comes to realize that his identity is bound up with Laguna's identity, these people's stories, myths, legends; their sacred places help him to overcome his identity crisis and rediscover himself.

The novel *Ceremony* juxtaposes two different types of space: the federal space of the United States and the Native American space. The Native American space has been buried under the Euro-American one. Everything that once defined the Indian landscape has been reshaped according to the dominant culture's code of life. Silko represents Euro-American space as written or superimposed over Indian lands. The process of land dispossession can be described by the term *reterritorialization*. This term also refers to the process of reinscription of the land by the white colonizers.

Silko describes the way in which western landscape has been separated by borders and zones imposed by the dominant culture. For example, even though they used to own the whole territory, the Indians are now pushed to the outskirts of a town called Gallup. The slum is separated by train tracks from the area where the white community lives. The train tracks are a sort of border. Betonie, a medicine man, lives in a hogan on a hill above shantytown, and is often bewildered by the response people have to his choice of residence: "It strikes me funny, the medicine man said, shaking his head, people wondering why I live so close to the filthy town. But see, this Hogan was here first. Built long before the white people ever came. It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man."

The city of Gallup has been superimposed or rewritten on the land that used to belong to the Indians. And it is ironical that, once this reinscription process has been completed, the Indians have been allotted a site at the outskirts of the territory, beside the garbage dump. The irony of Gallup's treatment of the Indians is that they are literally stored in the Reservation and shown off only during the Gallup Ceremonial. It is an annual event that mostly involves the city of Gallup where merchants make "a lot of money off tourists" by selling Indian artifacts. The seasonally marketable Indians are treated like vermin off-season. They are burned, sprayed and pushed out of sight. Silko describes this in graphic detail: "The men in dark green coveralls came with steel canisters on their backs, and sprayed the places where the shelters had been." The tragedy, of course, is that the displaced shantytown Indians have nowhere to go. Burning down the shantytown is a manifestation of white rejection, as well as an attempt to erase "different" living beings and their territorial claim.

The Laguna Reservation is another example of this type of Euro-American violation. It is a territory situated outside the national grid system, in a separate kind of space. The interesting thing about reservation territories is that when the attempted per capita allotment failed after the Civil War was abandoned, reservations were left in a state of partial and residual allotment. This land may be owned by whites or held tribally or in allotments by the Indians. This creates a great deal of dispute over land tenure in reservations. Although reservations are traditionally understood as Indian territory, their status is often ambiguous. The actual ownership of reservation land is often tenuous

and complicated. Significantly, the Indians of shantytown in *Ceremony* cannot find a place to live within the accepted zones. In the town of Gallup, they are designated as waste and disruption. There is no zone for the homeless.

Dispossession of home is a primary feature of all Native American experience, in the sense that all Indians, whatever their tribal differences, have lost their lands to the dominant society. The land that once meant “home” no longer belongs to them. The Indians experience what could be called a *crisis of habitare*. The deeds and papers, shows medicine man Betonie, do not mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain. However belonging to one’s land does not imply documents of ownership. It implies respect and consideration for the land that feeds and shapes your identity as a human being.

Reinscribed borders are viewed as artificial constructs. A relevant example of this kind of artificial borders is the enclosing of the sacred mountain (renamed Mount Taylor) by a barbed wire fence which marks the territory of a forest company. The fence blocks off the Indians from what they consider to be their point of origin (their legends say that they originated from that mountain). The fence is supposed to keep Indians and Mexicans out. Silko shows the relationship between western civilization’s hostility towards the environment (wolves, mountain lions) and the dominant attitude of the Anglo-American culture towards the Native Americans and other minorities. The economic ideology of private property (fences) and racial division are exposed. The irony that the fence enables the whites to steal Tayo’s cattle in addition to protecting their own cattle emphasize the way in which legal and political delimitations enable the stealing of native lands.

When home no longer exists, the human self is fragmented and incomplete. In his journey to find a cure for his inner fragmentation, Tayo breaks open the boundaries of abstract territoriality. He makes a hole in the barbed wire fence and gains access to the mountain. He crosses the borders of reservation (Laguna), national forest (Mount Taylor) and municipality (Gallup). His trajectory is necessarily a violation of legal denominators which strips governmental designations and reinscribes the patterns and perceptions of an older territorial map belonging to the old people. Fragmented territories are thus pieced together as the text appropriates symbolic landscape in an effort to recreate former unity and meaning. Though Native Americans cannot take back America as it existed before the conquest, they can appropriate the space of the novel, in an effort to symbolically reconstruct and reinhabit their home.

Silko’s Laguna community was seriously affected by the decision in the early 1950s to begin open pit mining of the huge uranium deposits north of Laguna. 1977, the year that Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* was published, was the year the Laguna Pueblo tribe received a warning that Rio Paguante, the main river that runs through the reservation, was contaminated with radium. It later became public knowledge that not only were all of the Laguna’s wells

highly irradiated, but that the tribal council building, community center and reservation road system had been constructed with radioactive mining waste as well.

The uranium mine in *Ceremony* is an example of the devastation and destruction wrought on the land by industrialism. Silko calls into question western civilization's economic and legal interpretations of the land. America's claim to western land is revealed as a hypocritical mark for colonial conquest, just as raping the environment through mining is revealed to be a part of a larger industrial-military complex.

*Almanac of the Dead* (1991) is a sprawling, nontraditional novel with six distinct narrative lines. The novel covers five hundred years of history and incorporates multiple themes, motifs, ideas, ideologies and discourses into a vast panorama of revisionist history, told from the viewpoint of the world's marginalized groups, from the indigenous peoples to the handicapped. The novel's numerous characters are often separated by both time and space, and at first many have little to do with one another. A majority of the characters are involved in criminal or revolutionary organizations – the extended cast includes arms dealers, drug kingpins, an elite assassin, communist revolutionaries, corrupt politicians, pedophiles and perverts, and a black market organ dealer.

These unsavory, un-American characters that people the book, the bitter portrayal of American society, and the complexity of the novel's multiple settings, which may appear disorganized and haphazard, explain why *Almanac of the Dead* has never enjoyed the success of the novel *Ceremony* (1977), which is reader friendly and struggles to build a bridge of understanding between the Anglo-American and Native American cultures. *Ceremony*'s message of healing and reconciliation between races and people made it both an immediate and a long-term success. Unlike *Ceremony*, *Almanac of the Dead* is driven by anger and a yearning for revenge and comes close to advocating violent revolution. If we consider all these elements, it is easy to understand why *Almanac of the Dead* has gathered negative or mixed reviews.

A few more words about the book are necessary. The almanac of the title was compiled long ago by Mayans who were watching their culture slowly disappear through Spanish colonization. The almanacs were trying to preserve for the future the Native American cultural inheritance. As the Indians are being driven from their land by "the invaders", they entrust the manual to four children who sew its pages into their clothing as they escape to the North. The children grow hungry on the voyage and the youngest girl eats one of the pages. It sustains her. The children then meet an old hunchbacked woman who has been left behind by her people. She is cooking a stew of roots and berries. The children are nearly dead from hunger, but the crippled woman gives them some stew and it sustains them. The youngest girl puts a page from the ancient almanac in the stew and the children and the old woman are able to live on it for

days and days, a symbolic action signifying the importance of tradition for the future generations.

Driving many of the individual storylines of the novel is a general theme of total reclamation of Native American lands. The writer shows that the criminal characters in the book are forced to inhabit the underworld because a respectable, successful life is practically denied to Native Americans by white culture, in American society. These criminals frequently travel across the border with Mexico, totally disregarding the U.S. border. For them this border is an abusive, imperialistic construct, arbitrarily built in the middle of lands which had been theirs from times immemorial. Like Tayo's breaking across the barbed wire fence to gain access to the Indian sacred mountain (in *Ceremony*), the criminal characters in *Almanac of the Dead* vacillate between the U.S. and Mexico in a symbolic act of territorial repossession.

In conclusion, Silko's novels *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* revisit the American mythos of the conquest of the American land from a Native American point of view, exposing the violence done to conquered land and conquered people. From the Puritans to Jefferson's Agrarian dream, to Turner's successive frontiers and Patricia Nelson Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest*, this research paper covers the major currents of ideas referring to conquered landscape in the American West. Finally, we see how the literary approach of Native American novelist Leslie Marmon Silko from the perspective of revisionist history deals with the Indian attempt to reclaim and symbolically repossess sacrosanct areas and territories in the context of centuries of native removal and misrepresentation, presenting another side of history and dealing with the ecological and human repercussions of dispossession.

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