



A Waste of a Desert: Nevada and the Cold War Chemical Legacy

by Cinzia Scarpino

We are well acquainted with the extreme weather phenomena looming large within the U.S.

Less known is that there was a time, in U.S. history, when meteorology encountered chemistry and 'weather control' took over 'weather forecast'. It was back in the days of Cold War America, and those scientific ambitions did not come out of thin air: analogous experiments in chemistry were carried out in nearly every aspect of life, from gardening to food processing, from mental depression to nuclear weapons.

These experiments did not come without heavy environmental costs either. In many ways, the history of Nevada has been defined by that chemical legacy. With its deserts literally going to waste, the driest state of the Union has borne silent witness to military destruction and environmental displacement.

ACTS OF GOD?

Wildfires, heat waves, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, wild storms are some of the main weather phenomena which have remodelled and laid to waste the U.S. environment in the last few decades. (USCB 2007: 374) As natural cataclysms, they share the ongoing tendency to occur in increasingly violent causal chains (Steinberg 2000: 152).

A look at the American newspapers (not to mention 'CNN' videos) from March 2006 up to now, August 2008, shows an alarming sequence of natural catastrophes



affecting U.S. geography in general: from California to Vermont, from Kansas to Illinois, from Florida to Maine.¹

Besides these natural calamities – and often along with them – in the second half of the twentieth century a state of environmental emergency has been induced by ‘waste’: the industrial and nuclear fallout dumped on (and buried under) the American soil.

Common socio-economic reasons underlie the environmental toll from both natural cataclysms and manmade disasters; California wildfires and Mississippi flooding as well as the Exxon Valdez and the Nevada Test Site² (Smith 2002; Wilson 1992).

In order to chart how these socio-economic and ecological trends have worked together in the twentieth century, an insight into the history of Nevada since the 1950s will prove useful.

On the one hand, Nevada’s Great Basin and Mojave deserts have been used as sites for nuclear experiments, thus turning huge areas of the state into no-trespassing craters; on the other hand, the radioactive fallout of the explosions hit whole segments of the population but was silently disposed of as irrelevant or marginal by national institutions.

However, while considering the ‘catastrophic’ effects of natural phenomena on U.S. geographies, one must not forget that the country is geologically located at the intersections of two dominant currents of air: the first is warm and damp, blowing south-north from the Caribbean and the Mexican Gulf; the second is dry and polar, blowing north-south from the Arctic (Steinberg 2000: 152). When these two streams of air collide, wild storms, floods, and tornados occur. No other place in the world is affected by such extreme meteorology. Since 1989 not only has the number of hurricanes, floods, and wildfires significantly increased, but their furiousness, frequency and impending quality have lashed alerted areas (Florida, California, Louisiana) as well as traditionally safe ones (e.g., the Washington region).

The current situation (e.g., the wildfires wreaking havoc all along the Big Sur, Northern California, in the summer of 2008, and hurricane Gustav threatening Florida, Texas, and Louisiana as I write³) and forecasts for the near future (think of the

¹ For wildfires see Times Staff Writers, December 3, 2006, “Fire burns 4,500 acres, five homes”, *Los Angeles Times*; Times Staff Writers, November 11, 2007, “Southern California’s New Homes Lining Up In Fires’ Path”, *Los Angeles Times*; for storms and floods see Robert McFadden, April 4, 2006, “A Barrage of Storms Batters 8 States, Leaving Death and Debris”, *New York Times*; Alan Feuer, June 29, 2006, “Mid-Atlantic States Reel Under Deluge”, *New York Times*; Felicity Barringer, June 27, 2006, “Savage Storms Wreak Havoc Across the Washington Region”, *New York Times*; Lynn Waddell, February 4, 2007, “Attention Turns to Salvage After Deadly Florida Storms”, *New York Times*; Brenda Goodman, March 2, 2007, “Widespread Storms Cause Deaths in 3 States”, *New York Times*.

² See also Felicity Barringer, June 2, 2007, “\$ 92 Million More is Sought for Exxon Valdez Cleanup”, *New York Times*; William Yardley, April 23, 2007, “Climate Change Adds Twist to Debate Over Dams”, *New York Times*.

³ See: <<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/US/06/27/calif.fires.ap/index.html>> (26.02.2009); <http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_9725016?nclick_check=1> (26.02.2009); and Miguel Bustillo, August



prediction of 2008 hurricanes, with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA, indicating an 85% probability of an above-normal hurricane season) are no better.⁴

Given these weather extremes, the temptation to slip into a providential frame of mind seems quite inevitable. In *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* the environmental historian Ted Steinberg warns us precisely against this risk, quoting Mark Twain's saying that "[T]here are many scapegoats for our blunders, but the most popular one is Providence" (Steinberg 2000: *Exergo*). By analysing California earthquakes, Missouri floods, Florida hurricanes and tornadoes, similar economic tendencies and "risk policies" emerge to explain the all too mundane responsibilities of their environmental and human cost. Providential design may only play a small part in deciding who survives a tornado, a flood, an earthquake. In *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*, Mike Davis has offered a thorough analysis of the ill-conceived hydroelectric policies that have turned California into a match readily ignited by ocean winds. Those profit-driven policies have been consistently dictated by the needs of the wealthy *elites* (Davis, Mike 1992; 1998).

LOOKING AT NEVADA

In the Fifties, without doing away with providential design altogether, America embarked on a series of tragic ecological "blunders": the most popular scapegoat for them was 'Containment'.

Let me offer an explanation, the idea to use the Cold War, Nevada, chemistry, and 'Containment' as interwoven threads of the same discourse stems from the reading of Don DeLillo's epic novel *Underworld* (1997), with its overarching theme of 'waste' (both garbage, industrial/nuclear fallout and 'refusal places' such as landfills, Southwestern deserts, the South Bronx ghetto) functioning as a unifying fictional metaphor. In *Underworld*, a cross-section of American history from the 1950's – the heyday of the Cold War – to the 1990's gets unravelled along with the protagonist's anti-*Bildung*. The protagonist himself, Nick Shay, is a "waste manager" for a Phoenix-based corporation whose job is to look for blank spaces to fill with hazardous waste; namely the Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Nevada's deserts. The title itself, *Underworld*, was allegedly chosen by DeLillo because of the plutonium fallout buried under the Southwestern deserts, inferring a metaphorical association between Pluto – God of the dead and of the Underworld (the Hades) – and Plutonium, Uranium's "heavier manmade relative" (Solnit 1994: 56).

29, 2008, "A Fearful New Orleans Prepares for a Potential Hurricane Gustav", *Los Angeles Times*; Adam Nossiter, August 29, 2008, "3 Years After Katrina, A Storm Approaches", *New York Times*.

⁴ See also: <<http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/outlooks/hurricane.shtml>> (26.02.2009)



A true seismographer of the country's lowest frequencies a decade ago, Don DeLillo's novel evokes an accurate, if also suggestive, picture of the American deserts being converted into hazardous waste dumps, old missile depots, and nuclear weapons production sites. By the 1970s, the victims of the Nevada Test Site – "Workers...in the days of the aboveground shots...And people living downwind" – overlap with those of New Mexico's "Pocket": "World War III", reads a protesters' sign, "Starts Here". (DeLillo1997: 404) From the 1950's to the 1990's, that "Here" on the threshold of a nuclear war was by and large associated with Nevada's "white places on the map" (*Ivi*).

Nevada is mostly made up of sandy deserts and dry pastures in the North (in the Great Basin Desert) with mountains reaching up to 4,000 metres; and the Mojave Desert (Las Vegas area) in the south. Rainfalls are extremely scarce, with Reno's 7.48 inches annual precipitation, (USBC 2007: 381) and the record of driest state in the country (enough interestingly, though, the daily water consumption of Las Vegas is 256 gallons per person).⁵ Population density is as scarce as 9 per sq. km, and the two thirds of it are concentrated in and around Las Vegas. A total area of 286, 351 sq. km., 84.5 % of the land is owned by Federal Government – which sets another country record. (*Ibid.*: 345, 346)

According to the 2007 *U.S. Census Bureau Statistical Abstract*, 2004 Nevada's 'Toxic Chemical Releases' (in millions of pounds) were 268.1 'on-site' (with 152.3 surface water discharges) and 1.2 "off-site/transfers to disposal"; a comparison with the same data in California is quite telling: 38.8 on-site; 7.8 off-site. In 2003, in thousands of tons, the hazardous waste generated was 9.7, shipped 11.9, and received 45.2 (*Ibid.*: 367, 370). Even if in the "annual feast for numbers crunchers" the "statistics can suggest false precision",⁶ this data cannot help evincing the fact that Nevada receives far more hazardous waste than it produces and ships away.

With its huge uninhabited deserts – and the secrecy they guarantee – southern Nevada became the ideal place to experiment with new nuclear weapons during the Cold War. The arid and sparsely populated West and its geographical 'vacant' status meant "spaces big enough to fly warplanes across and test weapons in, and land considered worthless enough it could be poisoned and bombed to hell without much public outcry" (Solnit 1994: 56). Sharing the similar fate of New Mexico (a colony of the U.S. military forces) and Arizona (a natural arsenal for ballistic relics), between 1951 and 1992, in Nevada hundreds of nuclear explosions were staged in its "ground zero" area within the Nellis Airforce Range, the Nevada Test Site.

Two of Nevada's most popular landmarks can be defined as places of 'reconstruction' and 'deconstruction' of its arid environment (MacDonald 2004): the mighty and muscular Hoover Dam, 1931-1935, and the above mentioned Nevada Test Site (NTS).

⁵ 256 gallons = 972 litres. See : <<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2007/oct/22/a-problematic-thirst/>> (26.02.2009).

⁶ Sam Roberts, December 15, 2006, "Who Americans Are and What They Do, In Census Data", *New York Times*.



The Boulder (now Hoover) Dam allowed massive provisions of water (and power) which was largely responsible for the demographic rise of the state and the thriving of Las Vegas' licit and illicit business, with legal gambling since 1931. In his speech at the Dedication of Boulder Dam in 1935, Franklin Delano Roosevelt stressed the advancement brought by the "twentieth century marvel" of hydraulic engineering in contrast with the wildness of the desert:

Ten years ago the place where we gathered was unpeopled, forbidding desert. In the bottom of the gloomy canyon whose precipitous walls rose to a height of more than a thousand feet, flowed a turbulent, dangerous river...The site of Boulder-City was a cactus-covered waste. And the transformation wrought here in these years is a twentieth century marvel. (in Merchant 2005: 468-469)

Some fifteen years later, a 3,500 sq. km missile basis straddling the boundary between the Mojave Desert and the Great Basin was built, where 126 nuclear tests would be conducted above the ground from 1951 to 1963, and 825 underground from 1963 to 1992, when they would be declared illegal⁷ (Nicolett 2002; Shoumatoff 1997; Solnit 1994).

The NTS was built on Shoshone land in 1950 (Wilson 1992: 278), during the Korean War, a later chapter in the long history of Native Americans' land dispossession preceded by the "Uranium Rush" in the aftermath of World War II: "From 1944 to 1986, 3.9 million tons of uranium ore were chiselled and blasted from the mountains and plains. The mines provided uranium for the Manhattan Project, the top-secret effort to develop an atomic bomb, and for the weapons stockpile built up during the arms race with the Soviet Union".⁸

Despite the 1992 moratorium, the NTS area (bigger than Rhode Island, or Yosemite National Park) is still a 'no-trespassing zone' hardly traced on any civil map. Within the larger area of the NTS and close to Yucca Mountain, the so-called 'Area 51' (a.k.a. 'Groom Lake' or 'Dreamland') has been associated with UFOs since the 1950's.⁹

Between 1951 and 1963, "several thousand Americans died" (Shoumatoff 1997: 456) because of their exposure to acid rain and radioactive contaminations of water, soil and air provoked not only by the explosions but also by the abandoned uranium mines scattered across the state (Merchant 2005: 474-477).

Critics are of one mind on recognizing three main categories of NTS victims: civilian workers and military personnel who worked where the explosions took place; and Mormons who lived 'downwind' of the 'tests' – whence the name 'downwinders' – and were described by a top-secret memo of the Atomic Energy Commission as "low-use segment of the population" (Gallagher 1993; Shoumatoff 1997: 457).

⁷ See also: <<http://digital.library.unlv.edu/ntsohp/index.php?view=landscape>> (20.02.2009).

⁸ Judy Pasternak, November 19, 2006, "Blighted Homeland", *Los Angeles Times*. See also, by J. Pasternak, November 20, 2006, "Oases in Navajo Desert Contained 'A Witch's Brew'", November 21, 2006, *Los Angeles Times*; "Navajos' Desert Cleanup No More Than a Mirage", May 4, 2008, *Los Angeles Times*; "Uranium Claims Spring Up along Grand Canyon Rim", *Los Angeles Times*.

⁹ See Stephen Regenold, April 13, 2007, "Lonesome Highway to Another World?", *New York Times*.



A further element to this “clinical case” were the women struck by massive hair loss and dermatological diseases who, turning to healthcare facilities for help, were diagnosed with “neuroses” and “housewife syndrome” and medicated with tranquilizers (*Ivi*).

Mormons and witches: “Waste”, goes Nick Shay’s mantra, “is a religious thing” (DeLillo 1997: 88).

FROM WASTELAND TO DREAMLAND...

If one were to follow Nick Shay’s explanation, the etymology of the word “WASTE” would be traced back “through Old English and Old Norse, back to the Latin, finding such derivatives as empty, void, vanish, devastate” (*Ibid.*: 120).

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the noun <waste> involves the wide semantic field of “refuse” derived from any manufacturing and human production – garbage, rubbish, unwanted by-product, sewage – and that of ‘abuse’ of a place “made barren or forbidding by human agency” (Merriam-Webster 2005: 2580). The word ‘waste’ can be traced back to French (<wast>, <faire wast> = to lay waste, whence Modern French ‘gâter’), Old High German (<waste> (noun), <wasten> = to lay waste), both cognate from Latin <uastus> (adjective) = waste, desolate; akin to Latin <vastus> we find two cognate words: the Anglo Saxon <wēste> and the Old High German <wuosti> for “waste” (Skeat 1995).

The etymology of the word is to be traced back to Latin, where the adjective <vastus, a, um> meant “unoccupied, desolate, waste”;¹⁰ deserts being large, <vastus> was subsequently associated with “wide, vast, ample”.¹¹ No surprise, then, besides <solitudo, solitudinis>, the other Latin word for “desert” is the nomen qualitatis <vastitas, vastitatis>¹² from <vastus> (Karl, Calonghi, Badellino 1950). The fluidity of the Latin etymology (stretching from “unoccupied” to “wide”), which includes the verb <vastare> = to lay waste, and the nomen agentis <vastator, vastatoris, (f., vastatrix, vastatricis)> = those who lay waste, is thus conserved in the Modern English adjective <waste>, defining “a desolate and cheerless region or place”, and, specifically, “a region made barren or forbidding by human agency” (Merriam-Webster 2005: 2580). The history of Nevada – especially of the NTS – seems to come full-circle to the origin of the etymological digression; that is, from a naturally deserted and (almost) uninhabited place to a place laid to waste by human activities.

¹⁰ <Vastus> is used by Lucius Accius (poet and dramatist, 106-43 B.C.); Cicero (106-43 B.C.), and Titus Livius (59-17 B.C.), who both couple it to <desertus> for places, cities (<urbs vasta ac deserta>), or land (<ager vastus ac desertus>); Tacitus who also uses it referring to day (<dies per silentium vastus> = mute, quiet day).

¹¹ See Cesar (100-44 B.C.) and Virgil (70-19 B.C.), who use <vastus> to convey the idea of a ‘boundless sea’.

¹² And <vastitudo, vastitudinis>, <vastities, ei> (Plautus).



The nuclear fallout and the hazardous waste which have plagued Nevada since the Fifties determine an ecological (therefore human) catastrophe: the craters cracked open by underground explosions; the toxic clouds caused by the atmospheric blasts and pouring radioactive rain and dust on the 'downwinders'; the genetic mutations of the cattle; the exponential growth rate of cancer amidst those exposed to radiations (Gallagher 1993).

With the earth stripped geologically naked of vegetation, Nevada's deserts are places where "any disturbance leaves a lasting scar" (Solnit 1994: 7) and where the all too visible blights of radiation-damaged land and houses find their grotesque pendant in the Las Vegas commercial strips of hotels and gambling casinos physically "sitting above a nuclear waste dump" (MacDonald 2004).

The literal and literary contiguity of the words 'waste' and 'dream' is further fleshed out in Las Vegas. A paradise for money-laundering (mainly in the 1940's), and Sin City where nothing is illegal – or everything is allowed – the city in the desert has always bred a human disposition towards easy gain and even easier waste of money and natural resources. Suffice it to think of the nineteenth-century silver mining towns described by Mark Twain in *Roughing It* (1871) and soon to decline into "ghost towns" punctuating a landscape of ruins. At the end of the 1870's, naturalist and early founder of the American environmental movement John Muir described "Nevada's Dead Towns" as:

...one of the very youngest and wildest of the States; nevertheless it is already strewn with ruins that seem as gray and silent and time-worn as if the civilization to which they belonged had perished centuries ago. Yet, strange to say, all these ruins are results of mining efforts made within the last few years. Wander where you may throughout the length and breadth of this mountain-barred wilderness, you everywhere come upon these dead mining towns, with their tall chimney stacks, standing forlorn amid broken walls and furnaces, and machinery half buried in sand, the very names of many of them already forgotten amid the excitements of later discoveries, and now known only through tradition—tradition ten years old.¹³

From silver to uranium, and from uranium to plutonium: nothing *new* in the West, or, all *quiet* on the Western Front. For in the "Silent Fifties", human progress came at the prize of forced quietness.

¹³ John Muir, [1902] 1918, *Steep Trails*, XVI, "Nevada's Dead Towns", Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1918, see also: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/326/326-h/326-h.htm#2H_4_0014> (26.02.2009).



...VIA THE COLD WAR

U.S. nineteenth-century history – from New England’s settlers to West-bound homesteaders – tells of the *Homo Americanus*’s stubborn drive to correct nature in order to tame its wildest elements, thus pursuing both survival and happiness.

By the second half of the twentieth century, however, during the Cold War, this long-abiding ambition gave birth to a series of state and federal policies that marked – as we are now beginning to acknowledge – the nadir of U.S. environmental history.¹⁴ In the Fifties, American domestic politics mirrored the anti-Soviet obsession with “containment”, which found its ultimate expression in the proliferation of nuclear blasts – euphemistically called “tests” (Solnit 1994: 4) – with the first one exploded at the Nevada Test Site in January 1951. On the home front, the will to uproot the “enemy forces” – within and without the national borders – was channelled into the second wave of Red Scare (the fear of espionage by Communists), but also, albeit in a less celebrated way, into the first chemical experiments aimed at containing the mercurial temper of American weather. The so-called “weather control” thus became a major concern for the Federal government, all caught up in keeping dangers and natural calamities out of the country.

The ‘Tranquillized Fifties’¹⁵ were colonized, if not ‘bombed’, by chemical discoveries. The home became both the epicentre and ultimate stage of the new gospel of progress through chemistry spread by ads and commercials: in *Underworld*, the portrayal of suburban life in the Fifties is punctuated by the DuPont’s slogan “Better life through chemistry: Bomb your lawn with Nitrotex” (DeLillo 1997: 528). In 1946, Vincent Schaefer, a man working for General Electric, had rented an airplane and bombed a cloud near New York with six pounds of dry ice, making it snow. Schaefer’s playing Jupiter from the sky didn’t fail to impress the military apparatus which, one year later, asked him to stop a hurricane approaching the Florida coast. Almost 200 pounds of dry ice were dropped from planes right into the storm’s eye and the natural scourge threatening Florida was actually avoided, with its course diverted to Savannah, Georgia, where it caused more than \$ 5 million in damage (Steinberg 2000: 127-128).

At any rate, the first engineered hurricane disaster was not to prevent the military from carrying out large-scale ‘weather experiments’ in the form of ‘cloud seeding’. Disguised as a relief to droughts in the West, “cloud seeding” was part of a project called “Complete Weather Control” approved in 1954 by Howard T. Orville, President Dwight Eisenhower’s weather adviser. The real circumstances under which weather engineering was first legitimised were military: the loading of silver iodide into clouds would initiate rain thus making enemy operations more difficult. Despite

¹⁴ For the environmental legacy of the Fifties see Washington Post Staff Writers, May 12, 2007, “Thousands of Nuclear Arms Workers Claims Denied or Delayed”, *Washington Post*.

¹⁵ Robert Lowell, 1959, “Memories of West Street and Lepke”, in *Life Studies*: [...] These are the tranquilized *Fifties*/ and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?/ [...].



its being born out of “a weather race with the Russians”¹⁶, this technique became pretty popular by the early Fifties when commercial “cloud seeders” “were off tinkering above almost 15 % of the country, mostly to alleviate droughts” (*Ibid.*: 128).

Given the fact that by 1957 there were 73 brands of tranquilizers easily available to Americans by prescription and that the brand name of the first sedative launched in 1955 – Miltown – had entered everyday language (Metzl 2003), a parallel between weather and nervous systems – both sedated on a massive dose of tranquilizers – may easily be drawn.

Moreover, considering how the housewife’s ‘tiredness’ – as Betty Friedan would call it in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) – was commonly treated with barbiturates “tranquillizing” women’s unrest and “destructive” sexual drives, helps us stretch the parallel a little further, to the exact point where gender meets meteorology.

The anti-subversive climate of the Cold War, which had nourished an obsessive control of each and every aspect of the country’s social and cultural life, was also the guiding principle of the U.S. Weather Bureau. Trying to contain the least containable of all weather phenomena, in 1949 the U.S. Weather Bureau started giving Florida hurricanes female names and the first woman-hurricane, Bessie, was born. In a time when female sexuality was neutralized into the reassuring icon of the housebound wife and mother (May 1999), hurricanes came to be metaphorically associated with capricious and unpredictable women (Chafe 1991: 127). And chemistry, so it seemed, could restrain – if not curb – both.

‘Containment’ of the catastrophic action coming either from the URSS and/or from the sky was the real keyword – let alone the ideal keynote – to the decade. Half a century later, the country represented in DeLillo’s *Underworld* still holds “containment” as a political and economic tenet. In the 1990’s, the word “containment” has almost naturally led to “waste management”: the collection and disposal of an overwhelming mass of garbage and hazardous waste. Nick Shay works for the “Waste Containment” – with “Waste Management” as one of the most profitable sectors in U.S. economy. Nick’s task is to contain what has grown beyond containment.

Similar to ‘weather control’ and to the all-American science of weather forecast, ‘waste containment’ relies on the myth of exact calculation. Meteorology and waste management have another trait in common, namely the fact that they are meant to send ‘warning signals’ only to the privileged segments of the population. In the last analysis, the human victims of what Mike Davis has called “ecologies of fear” – geographical regions more exposed to either natural or environmental catastrophes, or both – belong to the American underclass: the poor (mainly blacks and recent immigrants from Mexico)¹⁷, and the homeless (Davis, Mike 1998).

¹⁶ Steve Matthewman, April 1996, “Changeable Weather”,
<<http://nzsm.webcentre.co.nz/article97.htm>> (26.02.2009).

¹⁷ On Latino workers living amid trash, mud, contaminated water in trailer parks on an Indian Reservation in California see David Kelly, March 26, 2007, “The Southland’s Hidden Third-World Slums”, *Los Angeles Times*.



DISPLACEMENT/DISPOSAL

In drawing to a conclusion of our discourse about Nevada and the chemical legacy of the Cold War, the word “displacement” comes to mind. Once again, the Merriam-Webster dictionary enlightens us, its definition of the verb “to displace” including:

1. to remove from the usual or proper place
 2. to expel or force to flee from home or homeland
 3. to move physically out of a position
 4. to take the place of (as in a chemical reaction)
- (Merriam-Webster: 654)

If one assumes water, uranium, Native Americans, and “low-use segments of the population” are the objects of the above-listed actions, and military-industrial corporations their main subjects, ‘displacement’ will be the perfect common denominator to the multi-folded history we have tried to unravel.

Foreign and domestic U.S. policies during the Cold War enacted a repressive social order of ‘consensus’ against which little public dissent was allowed. Fuelled by the constant threat of nuclear destruction, huge spending on defence – passed at the expense of all social programs – was responsible for a series of horrors downsized as inevitable by-products of a socio-economic structure based on warfare: “... a huge ‘national sacrifice zone’ in the desert, and a population of silent casualties of radiation from nuclear and chemical weapons testing including indigenous peoples, soldiers, armament workers, and ‘downwind’ civilians” (Stewart 1999: 293).

Backed by the overblown rhetoric of progress through chemistry, the abuse of new barbiturates to sedate human anxieties was mirrored by the use of chemicals in the attempt to control and ‘guide’ weather phenomena such as snow, rain, and hurricanes. The aim of what Eisenhower would retrospectively call the “industrial-military complex”¹⁸ was to control any kind of suspected subversive activity (Smith, Merritt 1998: 427-28). If the obsession with earthborn and airborne menaces from some communist plot found its utmost institutional expression in McCarthyism, Richard Hofstadter would later show how the paranoid style was a recurrent motif in American political history. In his famous essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964), the historian pointed out the correlation between social conflicts and the resurgence of paranoia: every time class conflicts reach a point of unrest no social reform is able to negotiate, paranoia enters the political and cultural scene. And the ‘enemy’ of the paranoid spokesmen is “a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman – sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving” (Hofstadter 1966: 31).

¹⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 17, 1961, “Farewell Address to the Nation”



The “sensual, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel” delineated enemy seems to explain why, during the 1950’s, the ‘containment’ of women and hurricanes overlapped, if only metaphorically.

The very protagonists of those non-negotiable conflicts turned out to be the silenced victims of an otherwise non-negotiable truce with industrial/military corporations against the national Arch-enemy. At the Nevada Test Site nuclear facilities, workers’ and downwinders’ lives were thus wasted in the name of patriotic participation “in a moment of history”; and women would start dying of ovarian and breast cancer due to radioactive fallout in contaminated areas. (Shoumatoff 1997:457)

Besides nuclear destruction wrought by the NTS – “the most prodigiously reckless program of scientific experimentation in the United States history”¹⁹– and Orville’s godlike pluvial ambition, environmental engineering, far from controlling nature, would be held responsible for some short- and long-term disasters. In the West, the erection of “30,000 dams of significant size” (Reisner 1987: 511) meant to prevent rivers from running free and wasting water, and initiated with the building of the Hoover Dam, provoked everlasting scars in the environment, and made it possible for California coastal regions to be over-built, becoming more exposed to floods, and fires.

The history of Nevada – and of much of the American South-western deserts – in the second-half of the twentieth century can be defined as one of continuous displacement and disposal, with hazardous *and* human waste shoved here and there across anonymous “blank spaces” on the map.

The toxic legacy of abandoned uranium mines and forty years of nuclear explosions – aboveground and underground – can be related to a full-scale military displacement: “The bombs set off in Nevada seemed instead a way of making war by display and displacement [...] For every bomb set off in Nevada was potentially a bomb dropped on Odessa” (Solnit 1994: 6).

And if “the enemy is the projection of the self” (Hofstadter 1966: 31), well then, Americans’ emulation of the enemies led them to lay waste to their own soil and people on behalf of “the urgency of a war without a war” (DeLillo 1997: 405).

Displacement is also at work in the blooming of Las Vegas and Reno’s ephemeral economy (and architecture) based on casinos and marriage/divorce facilities – easy gains and losses on both financial and emotional levels (Scandura 2008). A somewhat latter-day version of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western boom-towns, Las Vegas’ luxuriant vegetation and thriving economy depend on displaced resources.

A more metaphorical mode of displacement is finally represented by the proliferation of contemporary “dreams of love and freedom and miraculous new beginnings” (Stewart 1999: 292) coming from some non-terrestrial space and having their flipside in apocalyptic millennialism.

¹⁹ Keith Schneider, 1983, “Foreword”, in C. Gallagher: 1983.



The inhospitable Nevada's deserts have proven an irresistible landscape of spiritual displacement ever since the Mormons who "...didn't mind the desert – it reminded them of the land of the Old Testament, and they were expecting the end of the world imminently anyway" (Solnit 1994: 52).

If the UFOs and conspiracy theories focused on "area 51"/"Dreamland" seem to have reached their momentum in the 1990's (helped by the *X-Files* craze), the last ten/five years have seen an increasing interest of American collective imagination in "Burning Man", an annual event which takes place in Black Rock City – another "temporary" city... – in Black Rock Desert (in the Great Basin) that ends with the ritual burning of a wooden effigy. A radical experiment in self-expression, "Burning Man" is not easily pinned down when it comes to definition. Its official website addresses any potential participant by reminding them:

"You're here to survive...You're here to create...You're here to experience...You're here to celebrate...You'll leave as you came. When you depart from Burning Man, you leave no trace. Everything you built, you dismantle. *The waste you make and the objects you consume leave with you*".²⁰

Smelling the (contaminated?) dust of the Playa and waiting for a spiritual reawakening while being ecologically sound can be read as the ultimate cultural displacement of America's amnesia of the past.

No wonder, then, the Burning Man 2008 Art Theme is the "American Dream".

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²⁰ Emphasis added.

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