Half Wilderness

by

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Introduction
Where do you go except back where you came from? I can’t tell you how many people have lost track of where they were going—how many people are not too sure of where they are from. But I can tell you that it’s a farm or a little town—and that little towns are...big places to be from. The smaller they are the bigger they are to be from—but they never get big enough to hold all the men that left them—the roads lead back, but the travel is still the other way.

- Wright Morris, *The Inhabitants*

It’s strange, now, to think that I saw my first Robert Adams print only two years ago. In many ways I feel as if I’ve been looking at his photographs for much longer than that; the places, even the ones I’ve never been to, feel familiar. I was enrolled in a photography class. When the professor saw the pictures I made over spring break, she said they reminded her of Robert Adams. It was something about the light. They were fairly simple, most of them taken on a single street in my hometown, Denver. I looked up Adams’ work, and I’ve been thinking about it ever since.

Adams is a landscape photographer. Many of the images for which he is most famous were taken in and around Colorado, where I grew up. The pictures are not always easy to look at. One of the reasons I have returned to his work over and over again is the unsparing honesty in his portrayal of the contemporary American West. This is familiar geography to me, but it is also a suburbanized, polluted evolution of its natural state. And yet, the photographs are captivating. Adams has recognized this polarity. He once said: “I thought I was taking pictures of things I hated. But there was something about these pictures. They were unexpectedly, disconcertingly glorious.”

1 MacMillan, Kyle. "Photographer Robert Adams Uncovers Lasting Allure in a Paved and Subdivided
In this thesis I examine the way Robert Adams’ photography challenges the traditional vision of the landscape in the American West. In its inception in the late 1800s, Western landscape photography drew heavily on its artistic predecessors: the paintings of Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, and others. Influenced by the legacy of British sentimentalist painters such as J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, these paintings presented dramatic interpretations of the region. The first photographers of the area, such as William Henry Jackson, did not stray far from the romanticized representation of the West offered by Moran, Bierstadt, and others. As a result, the photographs depicted the territory as virgin nature that was occasionally terrifying. It was sublime yet accessible to future pioneers, unknown yet full of potential. It was the symbol of Manifest Destiny; it was “God’s country” (Snyder 1981: 37).

The first men to photograph the West participated in several surveys of the territory in the late 1800s. Scholars like Rosalind Krauss have since questioned whether these images are the first examples of expressive, artistic landscape photography or simply the work of “camera operators” following instructions from their expedition leaders. Were the photographers producing marketable representations of the West, or making innovative use of relatively new technology, as Martha Sandweiss proposes in Print The Legend?

The scholar and curator Toby Jurovics argues that this debate is beside the point. The first landscape pictures (if that is what they are) may not have the same meaning today as they did when they were first published, but that does not mean they are not relevant to the development of the photographic medium (Jurovics 2010: 38). Jurovics points to the photographs of Timothy H. O’Sullivan, the “camera
operator” for the Clarence King and George M. Wheeler surveys between 1867-1872 as evidence of individual expression within a field that other scholars have classified as purely scientific. O’Sullivan’s pictures do not look like those of his contemporaries (Jackson, Bell, et al.).

These survey expeditions, which I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter, were sent out in the years following the Civil War. The United States government wanted more detailed maps of the American interior, especially beyond the 40th parallel. From roughly 1862 to 1879 the surveys collected geographical, topographical, mineral, geological, and ethnographical information on the region, utilizing the relatively new technology of photography in their reports. While O’Sullivan’s “views,” as they were called, certainly reflect the interests of his survey leaders, Clarence King and George M. Wheeler, they are more than simple visual documentation of the territory. They are often haunting, poignant images.

Robert Adams, too, has noted the distinctiveness of O’Sullivan’s work and has written about O’Sullivan’s pictures, citing him as an important predecessor: “I admire many photographers, but none more than O’Sullivan and Lange” (Jenkins, *New Topographies*: n.p.). Both Adams and O’Sullivan share an interest in emptiness and the stark portrayal of terrain. In O’Sullivan’s case it provides a counterpoint to the grandiose representations of Bierstadt, Moran, Jackson and others. As Joel Snyder writes, O’Sullivan changed what was worth portraying in the landscape (Snyder 1981: 9). As for Robert Adams, his spare, almost banal images can be understood as a partial rejection of the landscape photography of the twentieth century.
Although Robert Adams never identified Carleton Watkins as an important influence in the same way he has cited photographers such as O’Sullivan and Dorothea Lange, I have included a brief section on Watkins’ work in California in the late 1800s. Both Adams and Watkins explore the intersection between development and awesome natural beauty in the landscape.

Ansel Adams (no relation) was one of the foremost twentieth-century American landscape photographers; his pictures are arguably the embodiment of the artistic style that Robert Adams and others have sought to challenge. Ansel Adams’ aesthetically brilliant prints, especially of the High Sierra and Yosemite, have entered the national canon. He was also an early advocate for the importance of the historical and aesthetic value of the Western survey prints, including those by Timothy O’Sullivan. I offer a brief outline of Ansel Adams’ career, with special attention devoted to his technical and editorial skills in order to highlight the contrast between his photographs and those of Robert Adams.

In 1975 Robert Adams was featured in a show at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* was a seminal exhibition of ten photographers, all of whom presented pictures of a profoundly un-romanticized interpretation of the American space. Although *New Topographics* was unpopular in 1975, its significance is undisputed today.

The scholar John Rohrbach has written that curator William Jenkins “downplayed [the] sociopolitical underpinnings” of *New Topographics* when he claimed that the featured artists were essentially “‘postula[ting] what it means to
make a documentary photo” (Jenkins, *New Topographics*: n.p.). The exhibition was so influential (and probably so unpopular) because the “photographers recognized that broad economic shifts were changing the face of the land, and they were interested in drawing visual attention to the bland, repetitive…results” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: xvii). The pictures were sparse and often bleak, while simultaneously acknowledging what Nicholas Nixon called the “cloudy continuum” (Jenkins, *New Topographies*: n.p.) between objective fact and the photographer’s point of view.

As I have said, I first became interested in Robert Adams because the spaces he photographed seemed so intimately recognizable to me. After the initial jolt of identification, though, I was uneasy. His pictures explain my hometown better than I can: the sprawl, the trash, the natural gas wells, the brilliant light. Along with his innate understanding of the landscape, however, comes a strong critique. Once, I told a friend that I liked Adams’ work because he captured where I lived. My friend responded, he would probably rather you didn’t live there. Sometimes I wonder if he’s right.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that my interest in my family history began around the same time I saw my first Robert Adams photograph. In the introduction to his book *denver* (1977) Adams says that he deliberately avoided the Rockies while photographing the city and surrounding area. “I was determined, moreover, to stay clear of the mountains. I distrusted the late Victorian passion for mountaintop vistas,” he writes (Adams, *denver*: n.p.). Instead, he wanted to see the landscape as the first pioneers must have seen it when they arrived. The experience Adams is attempting to
replicate in some (but not all) of his pictures is the experience my great-grandparents may have had when they arrived in Atwood, Colorado in 1895.

Over the summer of 2012 I used funds from an Olin Fellowship to revisit many of the places Adams photographed in Colorado. I added a few other towns that I thought would help me understand my family’s geography: Atwood (the town my great-great-grandparents first lived in when they arrived in Colorado), Cotopaxi, Walsenburg, Sterling. I went as far East as Limon and as far South as San Luis. I brought my camera, not a 35 mm or medium format, like the ones Adams used, but a digital Canon T1i; I wasn’t sure what I would find but I wanted to make sure that if something was there, I would be able to capture it.

As I began to reflect on the places I visited and the pictures I took, I found Rick Dingus’ work as part of the Rephotography Project to be useful in processing my observations. Dingus was a member of the Rephotographic Survey Project from 1978 to 1979. While acknowledging that conditions were obviously very different from the original situations, the Project sought to retrace the routes of the nineteenth century survey expeditions (for example, the King or Wheeler surveys of which Timothy O’Sullivan was a part). Dingus, along with Mark Klett, and others, duplicated the camera positions, light, and shadow of the nineteenth century prints.

I did not envision a project as ambitious or as all-encompassing, but as I traveled to many of the towns Adams visited in the 1960s and ‘70s, I felt a little bit like Dingus when he wrote: “I was most interested in using repeat photography to investigate not just how the camera could help us record the world changing through time, but to examine how both the photographer and the medium of photography
distort the world by rendering it as an image.\textsuperscript{2} In Colorado Springs, I parked in front of a house Adams photographed in 1969 while it was under construction. The road had been paved, trees grew taller than the roof, and windows and walls now covered the exposed beams. Outside Keota, a town in the northeastern corner of the state, the only thing that had changed was the people; the town, populated when Adams was there, had since been abandoned. How did the pictures I made at these two sites reflect on Adams’ images; how did they relate to my own personal interpretation of the space?

This thesis is the result of a circular search: Timothy O’Sullivan, Ansel Adams, Carleton Watkins, Robert Adams, \textit{New Topographics}, and the Rephotography Project. In tandem, my family’s arrival in Colorado just a few decades after O’Sullivan passed through. Each photographer, each investigation into the strange and beautiful American West, is linked to the other, although I’ve realized that the images seem to raise more questions than answers. The view, in the end, is the most important thing, Adams reminds us. It’s what you see, not what you understand (Wolf 1983: 10).

Chapter One: Predecessors
I. Timothy O’Sullivan

Biographical information on Timothy O’Sullivan is hard to find; scholars aren’t even sure if he was born in the United States or Ireland. What is known is that he got his start working with Mathew Brady first in New York, then in his Washington, D.C. studio under the guidance of Alexander Gardner. This position later led to O’Sullivan’s doing photographic fieldwork during the Civil War. O’Sullivan left on his first photographic survey expedition with Clarence King in 1867. Over the course of almost three years they would travel to California, Nevada, Idaho, and Utah.

Martha Sandweiss has pointed to the fact that the potential of the Western frontier developed simultaneously with the potential of the new technology of photography. The wet-plate negative replaced the slower daguerreotype, allowing for somewhat more mobility on the part of the photographer. A few years after the end of the Civil War, the United States government wanted an account of the land beyond the 40th parallel. As a result, Clarence King, a geologist, was appointed to lead the expedition that set out in 1867. O’Sullivan’s original role may have been as a documentarian. There was new terrain to be catalogued, claims of mineral wealth (in the form of coal, silver, and gold) to be investigated, and potential railroad routes to be scouted. O’Sullivan used the technological advances of photography to capture the region, although the truly artistic qualities of his “views” (as photographs were called at the time) continue to inspire debate among scholars and historians: did he intend to present such a distinctive interpretation of the West, or was he simply following instructions?
In addition to the 40th parallel survey under Clarence King, several other surveys were undertaken in the years between 1867 and 1879. Ferdinand Vandeveer Hayden led a twelve-year expedition of the territories as head of the U.S. Geographical and Geological Survey. John Wesley Powell led an expedition along the Colorado River from 1869-1872. George M. Wheeler led another survey, which spanned the years 1871-1879. The surveys employed various “camera operators” including O’Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, Carleton Watkins, A.J. Russell, William Bell, and Alexander Gardner. O’Sullivan worked with King again from 1872 to 1874.

Sandweiss asserts that the expeditions were also conceived as a means to help the nation recover from a devastating war. She cites Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, *The Young American*: “[America] has no past; all has an onward and prospective look” (Sandweiss 2004: 125). The momentum of frontier exploration allowed the country that had “struggled to survive civil war and resolve the painful dilemma of its slaveholding past” to set aside grim recent events and focus entirely on the promises of the future (125). O’Sullivan’s pictures offer a different interpretation of such optimism. They are the product of a photographer scarred by recent war. They also reflect the responses of a man deeply impressed by the immense, empty landscape around him.

O’Sullivan used a converted ambulance to cart his camera and darkroom equipment across the West. Maybe this was for convenience, but Robert Adams, writing about O’Sullivan’s photos in the introduction to an anthology of images called *The American Space* (1983), saw it as something more. O’Sullivan developed
his talents in the middle of the Civil War, documenting the aftermath of some of the bloodiest battles, from Antietam to Gettysburg. Adams wrote that the ambulance was evidence of a man trying to recover from what he’d seen. Other authors have also pointed to the effect the Civil War had on O’Sullivan’s pictures of the American West. They are not the confident, magnificent visions of the frontier found in Albert Bierstadt’s paintings, nor in the work of O’Sullivan’s contemporaries such as William Henry Jackson. Instead, the images give the viewer the sensation of being “engulfed” in “unforgiving” nature (Snyder 1981: 37).

[Fig. 1] Brown’s Park, Colorado. 1872

The 1867 King survey traveled from California’s Sierra Nevada range to Cheyenne, Wyoming, loosely following the line of the transcontinental railroad. (Today the same trajectory is roughly traced by I-80). In *Framing the West: The
Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O’Sullivan, Toby Jurovics makes it clear that this was not entirely unexplored territory. John C. Fremont, Benjamin Bonneville, even Mark Twain, among others, had already traveled along the 40th Parallel. Clarence King’s proposal, then, was not one of historical exploration, but of scientific and economic investigation.

Jurovics argues with critics who claim that O’Sullivan’s photos are products of the fear or desperation supposedly experienced by so many who found themselves in the West. O’Sullivan’s “principal audience would be geologists, fellow members of western surveys, and others who understood and were comfortable in the landscapes…” (Jurovics 2010: 40). Jurovics writes that although O’Sullivan’s images may convey solitude and isolation, they also demonstrate familiarity with the landscape. “The figures in these photographs are visibly at ease…their poses evoke the common experience any viewer – past or present – would have at the same site” (41). He stresses that the King survey images are often understood in a different context today than they were when they were first published in the 1870s.

O’Sullivan did not write about his photos; only a few of his letters are extant. This lack of information makes him a mysterious figure, especially when one considers the immense impact he has had on landscape photography; his influence is evident in the work of Robert Adams and several of his contemporaries. Despite the

3 Clarence King was a believer in “catastrophism,” a theory that Jurovics calls “notably reactionary.” Catastrophists believed that geological change occurred in “sudden, life-altering upheavals of tremendous energy…” (Jurovics 2010: 17). Jurovics points to the publication of Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species in 1859 as voice of the more accepted scientific theory of the time: uniformitarianism. O’Sullivan’s photographs from the King survey can also be understood as images that deliberately underscore King’s wish to portray the West as a land formed by “unpredictable outburst[s] of violent, destructive geological forces, spelled by extended periods of relative calm” (18).
absence of any record of O’Sullivan’s thoughts while he took photos on the King expedition, it is clear that he shied from the romantic or sentimental, and instead composed shots that became “quiet, still, sometimes desperate pictures” (Snyder 1981: 37).

[Fig.2] Black Canyon, Arizona. 1871

In addition to his work on the King expedition, which ended in 1869, O’Sullivan was also employed by the United States Navy Department in Panama, then by Lieutenant George M. Wheeler upon his return to the United States. The Wheeler expedition to the American Southwest took O’Sullivan to Nevada, California, and the Grand Canyon.

Jurovics has highlighted the difference between the O’Sullivan pictures produced with King and with Wheeler, attributing it to the disparate characters of the two expeditions. Wheeler, a military man, saw the other Western surveys of the time
(the Powell and Hayden surveys, which were funded by the Department of the Interior and involved civilians) as encroaching on an endeavor that was once a solely an Army enterprise (Jurovics 2010: 28).

A study of O’Sullivan’s images of the American West reveals that he made specific editorial decisions in the composition of his photos. At times he cropped out other expedition members, signs of their camp, or footprints or tracks. He took pictures of the same subject at different angles, achieving a different atmosphere with each change. He used a wide-angled lens, often tilted, to show the landscape in a different way than it appeared to the naked eye. Most importantly, he photographed a specific kind of space. Robert Adams elaborates: “O’Sullivan was interested in emptiness, in apparently negative landscapes, in the barest, least hospitable ground…his best pictures are of vacancies…in them he compulsively sought to find shape, to adjust his perception until everything in the plate registered every seemingly inconsequential element in balance” (Jurovics 2010: 26). It is this evocation of a certain atmosphere, this willingness to make “difficult” pictures that sets his photographs apart from those of his contemporaries.

During the seven years O’Sullivan spent photographing the West, he developed a distinct view of the region that challenges most of the other representations of the area at that time. In accordance with the United States’ overall commitment to Manifest Destiny, painters and photographers portrayed the new

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4 Wheeler’s audience was not King’s scientific community but rather Congress and the military. His interests were not geological, but (among others) topographical, mineral, and ethnographic. Jurovics suggests that the Wheeler survey pictures are less interesting, but for all of the images that portray the region as safe, contained, and full of opportunity, there are also pictures that emphasize the difficulty of travel and the dramatic scenery.
territory as God-given, virginal space. Robert Adams calls these pictures fiction, the imaginary, idealized versions of nature (Wolf 1983: 6). He asserts that the best landscape pictures struggle with the space, its vastness, its dark skies. This is what O’Sullivan’s photos do, and perhaps why it is so easy to trace the line from his experience in the Civil War to his images of deep canyons and endless desert.

Robert Adams writes that Timothy O’Sullivan was known as a likeable man. He was a great, often profane storyteller. This stands in contrast to his mysterious images. Did O’Sullivan intend the “views” he produced to inspire or to unsettle? Much has been written about O’Sullivan, but he left almost no writing behind; instead, the viewer is left to ruminate on the space in his pictures. O’Sullivan died young, of tuberculosis, in New York. He was forty-two.
II. Carleton Watkins

If a certain sense of interior struggle with the vast, empty landscape is present in the photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan, the opposite can be found in the pictures of Carleton Watkins. Although Robert Adams has never explicitly identified Watkins as an important influence on his own work, Watkins’ interest in both the development of the West and the region’s great natural beauty mark him as an important predecessor to Adams and others involved in *New Topographics*.

Watkins is perhaps best known for his pictures of Yosemite. Using a custom-built large format camera – he had a cabinetmaker construct it for him – Watkins was able to make “mammoth prints” (approximately 18 x 22 inches) of Yosemite. His efforts helped lead to the preservation of the space when President Lincoln signed a law of inviolation in 1864 (Nickel 1999: 10). Maria Morris Hambourg groups Watkins’ Yosemite photographs into three distinct categories (11). The first, most “poetic” images correspond to his first visits to Yosemite in 1861. The second, more “factual” pictures were printed during his time with several Western Survey expeditions (he, too, photographed for Clarence King). The last group, which Hambourg identifies as his most “baroque” were likely produced after Watkins was forced to revisit many sites in Yosemite and remake some of his most famous work. After the Panic of 1873 he lost control of his San Francisco gallery and all of the prints in it. His creditor took control of the pictures, placing Watkins in the “unusual position of competing against his own work” (Naef 2008: 9). Perhaps this accounts for the more dramatic, “baroque” style. Hambourg also hypothesizes that Yosemite was already overcrowded with tourists at that time, forcing Watkins to try to make
new and innovative prints of views he had captured many times before.

[Fig. 3] Cape Horn, Columbia River, Oregon. 1867

Although the Yosemite photographs are Watkins’ most famous images, they comprise a relatively small portion of his body of work. He came to California in 1851 after the Gold Rush. Many of his photographs document the explosion of development in the region, from the lumber towns, to the mines, to the expansion of the city of San Francisco. Many of his photographs were commissioned by the new elites, people who had moved out to the area after 1849 and recently made their wealth. Unlike many other photographers of the time, Watkins included people in his

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5 These were exhibited at the Groupil Gallery in New York City in 1862.
pictures: the workers, tourists, and businessmen who populated the new state. The prints reflect his positive, pro-development outlook on the industrialization of California and the West.\(^6\) For an East Coast audience, most of whom had never seen the West, the photographs conveyed the immensity of the space, as well as its possibilities. Nickel writes that Watkins made many of his photographs with a specific, newly bourgeois class of citizen in mind; perhaps he figured that they would inspire more people to come to California. His attitude about development is markedly different from that of both Ansel Adams and Robert Adams.

The railroad, especially the California Pacific, was very significant to Watkins. Whereas Robert Adams views the changing face of the landscape with regret or dismay, Watkins highlights, even promotes, the industrialization of the West. The railroad elevated the traveler, flattened the perspective, and allowed for passive visual consumption of the scenery. Nickel suggests that it influenced Watkins’ pictures, many of which are taken from the “commanding view” and survey the land as if from the window of a train (31). The railroad tracks appear in many pictures, as a sign of forward momentum, Manifest Destiny, and the economic potential of the land.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) As Douglas R. Nickel writes: “Watkins’s subject as a whole was never really ‘nature’ so much as it was ‘natural resources and their development’” (Nickel 1999: 20).

\(^7\) Obviously aware of Rosalind Krauss’ criticism of the label “landscape photographer” in the nineteenth century, Nickel qualifies his discussion of Watkins’ work. He was a commercial photographer who mass-produced his images and ensured that they all had a uniform, finished appearance. However, he also exhibited his prints in galleries, and was the first to make use of mammoth prints to convey his “views”. He also used stereoscopes and panoramic pictures, both of which allowed him to express his typical close attention to detail. “Watkins’ detail often verges on the hallucinatory….the picture unfolds with time and across the viewer’s space. It is fully comprehended only through effort...” Nickel writes (25). Watkins’ career, like that of Timothy O’Sullivan, cannot easily be identified as that of either an artist or a camera technician.
Watkins’ legacy, with its twin interests in the natural beauty of Yosemite and the development of the rest of California at the turn of the century provides an interesting anticipation of the work of Robert Adams. Just as *New Topographics* would explore the further industrialization of the West in the 1970s, Watkins’ pictures, taken roughly a century before, document some of the earliest alterations to the landscape. He did not seek out the empty expanses of the West, as Timothy O’Sullivan did. Most important, however, is that Watkins did not appear to view development in the same critical light as do Robert Adams and his contemporaries. Carleton Watkins’ West was one where the natural and the man-made coexisted side-by-side.

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8 After the 1906 earthquake that hit San Francisco, much of Watkins’ work was lost or destroyed. He died just ten years later, blind, at the Napa State Hospital. In 1940, Ansel Adams featured Watkins in his exhibition at the Golden Gate Exposition, alongside William Henry Jackson and O’Sullivan.
III. Ansel Adams

It is difficult to write about Robert Adams’ photography without referring to Timothy O’Sullivan. Adams once wrote: “I would not have photographed the West as extensively as I did had it not been for O’Sullivan” (Jurovics 2010: 11). It is equally challenging to write about Robert Adams without first examining Ansel Adams.

In the fifty-five years after O’Sullivan’s death in 1882, his pictures had largely disappeared from public awareness (Jurovics 2010: 36). Then, in 1937, Ansel Adams brought a copy of the Wheeler survey photos to Beaumont Newhall, the curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Two of O’Sullivan’s prints were included in MoMA’s exhibition on the first century of photography that same year. In 1940, Adams again included O’Sullivan’s work (alongside that of William Henry Jackson and Carleton Watkins) in a show at the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco. He called these pictures part of a specific “American aesthetic, emphasizing clear, straightforward description of the physical world” (Sandweiss 2004: 121).

Ansel Adams himself made significant contributions to this “American aesthetic.” John Szarkowski writes that Adams “revised our sense of what we mean when we say landscape,” but he also points out the noticeable inconsistencies in the photographer’s life. Adams was an artistic photographer forced to take up commercial work in order to support himself. He was an early proponent of ink print reproductions of his photos, yet managed to be simultaneously instrumental in reestablishing interest in the collectability of chemical prints (Szarkowski 2001: 28).
Robert Adams has called him an “inspiring” environmental advocate but was put off by the other Adams’ interest in nuclear power.

Colin Westerbeck, the former director of the California Museum of Photography, notes that one of Adams’ most iconic images, *Mount Williamson, Sierra Nevada, from Manzanar, California*, (made in 1944) was taken from inside the Japanese internment camp located at Manzanar. At the time, Adams was involved in several projects that he perceived as contributing to the war effort. That same year, he published a book entitled *Born Free and Equal*, which was comprised of photographs taken within the internment camp at Manzanar. However, Szarkowski, Robert Adams, and Jason Weems, among others, have all pointed out that while Ansel Adams did not shy away from social and political critique in his photographs, he was often slightly out of synch with the growing documentary trend exemplified by Dorothea Lange, Lewis Hine, and others. The majority of the pictures Ansel Adams made during World War II were scenes of the Sierras, far removed from the wartime reality of the rest of the country.

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Regardless of the contradictions in his career, Ansel Adams remains an eminent figure in North American landscape photography. His pictures of the West, especially Yosemite and the High Sierra of California, have become iconic images.  

Ansel Adams has been praised and disparaged for his willingness to present an idealized version of the American space. He did not try to hide the fact that he used his expert editing skills to erase unwanted details from his prints. His image Winter Sunrise, made in 1944 near the town of Lone Pine, exemplifies his desire to present scenes of “extraordinary beauty and perfection…” (Adams 1983: 164). After

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10 Szarkowski notes that for many years Adams planned to be a concert pianist before deciding to devote himself to photography. He writes: “[Ansel Adams] gave up piano not for photography but for Yosemite…” and credits his technical expertise to his training as a musician (13).
about two weeks of waiting for exactly the right kind of light to hit the mountains, Adams made an exposure he felt was adequate. He faced another problem when printing the negative, something unlike the light or the uncooperative horse in the foreground: “The enterprising youth of the Lone Pine High School had climbed the rocky slopes…and whitewashed a huge white L P for the world to see. It is a hideous and insulting scar on one of the great vistas of our land…”(164).

[Fig. 6] Winter Sunrise: Sierra Nevada from Lone Pine. 1944. After spot-toning.
He goes on to explain how he “ruthlessly removed what I could of the L P from the negative…and have always spotted out any remaining trace in the print” (165). Adams admits that he has been criticized for this practice; he acknowledges that he is not enough of a “purist” to leave the letters in the final presentation. Writing about this photograph, Errol Morris asserts that Winter Sunrise is: “one of the greatest [pictures] in the history of American photography.” He adds: “It has been faked, altered, tampered with. But is it not a spectacular image?” (Morris, The New York Times, 2008, n.p.).

Robert Adams’ work can be understood as a partial rejection of Ansel Adams’ vision of the American West. Whereas Ansel Adams wants his landscapes to look
unspoiled, Robert Adams instead presents a very different view of a natural world that people have altered. Ansel Adams’ landscapes rarely include any sign of human activity; Robert Adams’ prints are full of the effects humans have wrought on the space. One thinks back to Timothy O’Sullivan and the way Robert Adams was drawn to his photographs. “[H]e seemed more honest about disagreeable fact…less selective in favor of the picturesque” (Jurovics 2010: 26). It is hard to image the same thing being said about Ansel Adams.

Westerbeck relates the story of a young man who in 1979 wrote a letter to Ansel Adams, thanking the photographer and adding that his pictures often saved the correspondent from “my own despair.” At the end, he apologized, saying that he was an “upstart, albeit obscure, running around with the same name, doing landscapes” (Westerbeck 2011: 34). The writer was, of course, Robert Adams. The letter is interesting, because it was sent several years after the New Topographics show at George Eastman House. By that time, Robert Adams had published several books and exhibited in galleries. He was not so obscure as he claimed, although he certainly had not achieved the fame of Ansel Adams. Westerbeck contends that Ansel Adams may never have looked at the younger Adams’ work because it represented to him, “a current trend he didn’t appreciate” (34). In his response to Robert’s letter, Ansel wrote: “I find it very difficult to comprehend much of the…artistic expression of our era” (34). The exchange between the two artists is remarkable: Robert Adams, who represented much of what Ansel was struggling to understand, was writing to express his admiration for a body of work that he so often challenged in his own pictures.
Ansel Adams struggled to achieve recognition for his photography during his lifetime; even after his death in 1984, reactions to his work have oscillated between celebration and criticism. The conservation movement has claimed his photographs as powerful evidence in the fight for preservation, but his pictures have been rejected as fictionalized. Robert Adams clearly respected Ansel Adams (he had two of his prints hanging in his home) yet his praise was measured: “[Ansel Adams’] pictures of uninhabited nature are important because they reveal the absolute purity of wilderness, a purity we need to know…[but they are] partial visions, and they make us uneasy” (Adams 1994:104).

11 John Szarkowski contends that the debate over Ansel Adams’ legacy is irrelevant. “As Adams’ audience we are grateful to him for enlarging our emotional knowledge of the natural world…an artist is also a member of art’s audience, and as such shares our interests; but finally he is interested in something else. He is interested in demonstrating, to himself, by the authority of his work, that his world is not an illusion…but rather a real world…so if we ask the question, what did Ansel Adams do for us? one useful answer would be: nothing; he did it all for himself” (Szarkowski 2001: 41).
Chapter Two:
Robert Adams and New Topographies
I. Robert Adams and New Topographies

Robert Adams was born in New Jersey in 1937, and then moved to Colorado with his family in 1952. As a child, Adams suffered from bronchial problems; part of the reason for the move was the family’s hope that life in Wheatridge, a suburb of Denver, would be beneficial for his health. Adams spent time in the Rocky Mountains rafting, hiking, and, occasionally, hunting, something he no longer does. He thought briefly about becoming a Methodist minister, then attended the University of Redlands and the University of Southern California, where he earned a PhD in English.

Adams married his wife Kerstin in 1960. Two years later they moved back to Colorado, where he began teaching English at Colorado College, in Colorado Springs. The changes in the landscape surprised him. The suburbs were larger, the pollution more noticeable, the cars more numerous. But the bright, high-altitude light so characteristic of the region remained. Adams was fascinated by it. He began his career as a photographer in 1963, and in many ways has spent most of his career documenting what scholar Finis Dunaway has called: “divinity permeating the land in the form of light” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 24). The landscape might be littered with ugly, monotonous man-made structures, but, as Adams writes: “Nothing permanently diminishes the affirmation of the sun” (Adams 1974: xii).

White Churches of the Plains, Adams’ first book, was published in 1970. The monograph is a collection of straightforward architectural studies of the simple buildings. As mentioned previously, Adams was raised Methodist and considered becoming a minister before entering college; it’s not hard to see a connection to these early influences in White Churches (and, in fact, many of his other books). His next project, The Architecture and Art of Early Hispanic Colorado (1974) is an extensive textual and visual history of the San Luis valley region of the southern part of the state. Many of the interests and concerns Adams would address throughout the rest of his career (human interaction with the landscape, religion, the effects of development and pollution to the space) are present in the book.

[Fig. 8] North of Keota, Colorado. 1969
Architecture and Art is divided into four sections. The first, Exploration and Settlement moves through the Spanish-American domination of the region, the Europeans’ struggles with the indigenous peoples, the establishment of Spanish-American villages, and the life of the settlers. It ends with the post-Civil War arrival of Anglo-American pioneers and the introduction of the railroad, both of which Adams views as negative changes that destroyed farmland and came “directly at the expense of earlier Spanish-speaking settlers” (Adams 1974: 28). The following section, Architecture and Art, involves a detailed discussion of different types of adobe buildings constructed by the Spanish-Americans. Adams has an appreciation for adobe that goes beyond its simple functionality. He writes:

“Adobe buildings demonstrate…the pioneers' voluntary reliance on the geography…the shapes of early, flat-roofed structures repeat those of the surrounding mesas, and the colors of the walls were permitted naturally to correspond to each region's soil; adobes near Gulnare are, for example, a light orange, at Chama they are tan, and at Conejos brown…Unlike modern homes in the West, which are apt to imitate the architecture of the East, and thus to imply a rebellious nostalgia, adobes are meant to be where they are, in the semiarid Southwest” (33).

Adams laments the disappearance of local cultural history beneath a modern, technological way of life, although he is aware that it is easy to sentimentalize the past. At the same time, however, he pointedly contrasts the settlements with the “moral embarrassments” of the boom towns near the mines (3). The third section, comprised of photographs and captions, provides a visual record of what is left of the
Spanish-American settlements: graves, religious iconography, barns, houses, and churches.

In the fourth and final section, *The Future*, Adams states: “There is no saving this landscape” (223). He criticizes the Catholic Church for appearing “ashamed of its part in the region's history” and exhorts it to “assume responsibility for its own historically important buildings” (224). Adams once again lays partial blame on settlers’ fixation with material wealth, which led to the expansion of the mining industry that so transformed the landscape in Colorado. At the end, he concludes: “But what was the wealth of people living by undisturbed mountains and prairies? If we can begin accurately to assess it, we may hope, in grace, to save ourselves” (225).

The use of the word “grace” is central to many of Adams’ texts—*Architecture and Art*, with its lengthy discussion of religion, religious artifacts, and practices, is no exception. For Adams, it is an expansive word. In this case, perhaps, grace is indicative of Adams’ thoughts on development, memory, and geography. One is reminded, again, of Adams’ earlier plans to become a minister. Grace refers to aesthetics and the way the light falls, but it is also the search for something in the landscape that is redemptive.

Although *The New West* was published in the same year as *Architecture and Art*, 1974, it is remarkably different in tone and purpose. *The New West* evinces the same attention to humans and their connection to where they live but does not display the same quiet reverence. It speaks to the scope of Adams’ talent that he was able to produce two such different works almost simultaneously.
In Joan Murray’s review of *The New West*, she called it “a very sad book” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach: 2010, 41). *The New West* directly confronted multiple myths surrounding the American West. These idealizations were created in the era of Manifest Destiny and persisted in the post-World War II national imagination. Instead of endless spaces and endless opportunity, Adams showed images that made the West appear dangerously finite and damaged. The distinguished historian of photography Beaumont Newhall called the book “a record of uncontrolled blight” (41). Newhall, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and, later at George Eastman House, was a great friend of, and advocate for, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and others. Perhaps it is not a surprise that he, and many others in the art world, did not like *The New West*. While Newhall’s comment is honest, it does not account for the beauty Adams also presented in his photos. Newhall’s assessment is typical of an attitude many viewers probably had during the early years of Adams’ career, because they were seeing only the uncomfortable effects of their interaction with the landscape. Perhaps they did not understand that in showing these images Adams was hoping to prevent more of the country from declining into what he found in the Colorado suburbs.
Adams has often been called an environmental photographer, but as with Ansel Adams before him, this description raises questions about the relationship between art photography and photography with a sociopolitical agenda. An example to consider is Ansel Adams’ work as a member and guide for the Sierra Club, and the images that he provided for the organization’s influential 1960 book This is the American Earth.

John Szarkowski asserts that This is the American Earth was instrumental in making Ansel Adams a household name. Although the book featured twenty other photographers, along with some historical photographs, Adams supplied most of the
Ansel Adams was often criticized for photographing nature while the nation was undergoing great social unrest. As John Szarkowski wrote of Ansel Adams:
“During his best years Adams was photographing (from a political point of view) the wrong subjects” (Szarkowski 2001: 38). Although Robert Adams also focuses on the landscape, he cannot be faulted for photographing a world devoid of humans (and therefore devoid of commentary); evidence of their activity is everywhere in his images. Ansel Adams was criticized for being an idealist; Robert Adams found little to idealize.

[Fig. 10] Burning Oil Sludge North of Denver, Colorado. 1973

A year after the publication of The New West, Robert Adams was one of ten photographers selected by the curator William Jenkins for an exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. It was called New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape, and it has come to be acknowledged as an event that significantly changed landscape photography (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: xiv).
Those who were included did not consider themselves to belong to a particular group or specific art movement. The themes evident in their work, however, are remarkably similar. All the photographers were interested in exploring human interaction with the landscape; whether positively or negatively, was left for the viewer to decide. In his introduction, Jenkins emphasized the influence of the Conceptual artist Ed Ruscha, whose projects such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* featured a characteristic repetition, uniformity, and “machine-made look” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 73). Jenkins called the dominant style of *New Topographics* the “current manifestations of a picture making attitude that began…with Ruscha” (Jenkins, *New Topographics*, n.p.). Many of the *New Topographics* artists explored repetitive structures, such as Bernd and Hilla Bechers’ coal breakers in Pennsylvania or John Schott’s Route 66 motels.

*New Topographics* was in fact radically different from most previous presentations of landscape photography. Ansel Adams, Minor White, and Eliot Porter, among others, had helped to establish a paradigm of landscape photography that presented the natural world as an entity almost entirely separate from humans. However, as Frank Gohlke, one of the featured photographers, explained, some of the New Topographers worried about the influence of these artistic giants:

“Landscape work was being done by a lot of people that were influenced by Adams, Weston…White, and Caponigro that just seemed really dead to me—all the conviction had gone out of it. They weren’t responding to the world anymore: they were responding to an ideal of photographic excellence…” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 6).
What *New Topographics* presented, Gohlke adds, was the gap between “the world you would like to see and the world you have to look at” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 12). A brief summary of the images in the exhibition reveals both the breadth of the artists’ interests as well as the similarity of their concerns: Robert Adams’ suburban developments in Colorado, Lewis Baltz’s industrial parks of southern California, the Bechers’ coal breakers in rural Pennsylvania, Joe Deal’s aerial views of housing construction in Albuquerque, Gohlke’s Midwestern water towers and parking lots, Nicholas Nixon’s downtown Cambridge and Boston, Schott’s Route 66 motels, Stephen Shore’s color photographs of small towns, and Henry Wessel Jr.’s anonymous houses.

At the time it was presented in 1975, the show received decidedly mixed reviews. Frank Gohlke recalled:

“What I remember most clearly from the original show was that almost nobody liked it. I think it wouldn't be too strong to say that it was a vigorously hated show. Some people found it unutterably boring. Some people couldn't believe we were serious, taking pictures of this stuff. And actually, that attitude is still very alive and well.”

The general response to *New Topographics* also applies specifically to Adams’ work. By evoking “uneasy recognition” through visual testaments to the changing landscape, Adams’ prints can be hard to look at. They insist that there is a disjunction between our ideal of nature and the way we actually treat it (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 12). At the same time, his pictures often suggest that something

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unexpected can be found in “the whole geography, natural and man-made… all land, no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolutely persistent beauty” (Adams, *The New West*: n.p.). Adams has an eye for form. His compositions draw the eye of the viewers to things they may not have seen otherwise: the silhouette of a woman framed by the picture window of her house, the geometry of an outdoor movie theater with the Rockies in the background, or the way the light transforms a grocery store parking lot.

[Fig. 11] Colorado Springs, Colorado. 1968

In his introduction to *New Topographics* William Jenkins directly avoided any social or political commentary on the images he had selected, asserting instead that
the “problem at the center of the exhibition is one of style” (Jenkins, *New Topographics: n.p.*). At the same time, however, he acknowledged “the artificiality of his…construct” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: xviii). Jenkins’ insistence on the purely documentary quality of the images initially led many viewers and critics to assume that all the artists accepted Jenkins’ assertion that the photographs were made with purely objective intentions.

In the foreword, Jenkins includes a quotation from photographer Lewis Baltz that reveals the extent to which he ascribed to the notion of purely “topographical” representation in his images. The paradox of documentary photography, Baltz believes, is that it “must persuade us” while still appearing objective and “without author or art,” which is impossible, as every photograph is carefully composed and “selective” (Jenkins, *New Topographics: n.p.*). From this quotation, as well as others from Nicholas Nixon and Robert Adams, it becomes clear that although Jenkins avoided the sociopolitical issues inherent in *New Topographics*, it was something that the artists considered very carefully in their work, both for the exhibition and elsewhere.

Baltz’s insight poses a crucial question for the legacy of *New Topographies* (and even, to some extent, for Robert Adams’ work). Are the photographs dispassionate records of industrialization and suburbanization, or do they represent a deeply emotional response to what they depict? The answer, in many cases, appears to be the latter. Frank Gohlke’s contribution to the show included pictures of grain elevators in the Midwest, and he said of them: “I was frustrated by the discrepancy between the ordinariness of the facts surrounding the grain elevators and the intensity
of my emotional responses to the objects themselves” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 5). Many of the other New Topographics photographers presented images of seemingly “ordinary” structures like warehouses, housing developments and motels, yet the images range from the elegiac, to the quietly optimistic, to the more disapproving or even openly hostile.

While The New Topographies was on view at George Eastman House, Adams was working on what would become his next book: From the Missouri West (1980). Inspired in part by the knowledge that his own ancestors had settled near the Missouri River, Adams produced a series of images that, as professor and critic Mark Rawlinson has pointed out, owe much to the work of Timothy O’Sullivan (10). Adams often cites O’Sullivan as a major influence; his respect for his predecessor’s distaste for the traditional majestic image is evident in his own pictures, where most “pictorial elements…are largely secondary to tract and mobile homes, gas stations, and other forms of human detritus” (125). Whereas other landscape photographers of the time (principally the aforementioned Ansel Adams) produced stunning prints of “unspoiled” nature, Robert Adams was more interested in landscapes that showed the effects of human activity.
[Fig. 12] Northeast from Flagstaff Mountain, Boulder County, Colorado. 1975

In addition, like the photographs O’Sullivan made after the Civil War, Robert Adams’ work in Colorado bears witness to a nation in a period of great transformation. In O’Sullivan’s time, the West became a space where a country recently devastated by the bloodiest conflict in its history could manifest its dreams for reconciliation and progress. At the same time it was immense and still relatively unknown, a mythologized area in the American imagination. Roughly one hundred years later, when Adams began photographing, the United States was involved in Vietnam, the Cold War, the civil rights movement, Watergate, and “an increasingly overt environmental crisis” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: xv). In the 1970s, the West was again an abstract space onto which America could project its anxieties and hopes. Neither O’Sullivan nor Adams presents pictures that are synonymous with stereotypical representations of the American West. As author Page Stegner puts it:
“What American West? We are attempting to describe in a single brushstroke a colossal canvas that is incredibly difficult to define…” (Jurivocs 2010: 2). These are not redemptive images. At the same time, though they may refute the significance assigned to the West by the rest of the country, they are not unemotional.

The postwar Colorado suburbs were – and in many ways still are – an explosion of tract houses across the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. As in O’Sullivan’s time, people moved to the state to buy land, to build or buy a home, or to find work in the new industries that sprang up in the region: oil, tourism, manufacturing. The population increased, as did development and pollution. If O’Sullivan’s images depict the potential of the “untouched” West, Adams’ pictures provide evidence of what comes after. In 1983 Adams wrote: “the West has historically been filled in a series of sudden invasions…our present experience is in certain respects no different. [The Civil War] was a period as well, like ours, of extraordinary brutality…What sets our recent experience apart, though, is first of all the scale of what has happened” (Wolf 1983: 1). Adams makes the man-made features of the landscape central to many of his pictures: the natural gas wells, the feedlots, the expansion of the suburbs, the smog. It is as though he is trying to catalogue every new development and its potential effect on the space.

But what are the long-term effects of a career spent “exploring the progressive deterioration of the American West by unfettered human activity”? (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 137.) The New West, along with denver (1977), and What We Bought (1995) form what photographer and writer Tod Papageorge has called a “trilogy, one produced in the white heat of Adams’s first extended study of the depredations of
urban sprawl…” (Papageorge 2008: 1). Although Adams’ work is not explicitly political, it is not difficult to discern his concerns.

In *Our Lives and Our Children* (1984) Adams’ message becomes much more explicit. The pictures were taken in the populated areas around the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant, and were shot mostly from waist-level – about the height of a child – with a 35 mm camera around Adams’ neck. (He operated the shutter through a cable release in his sleeve.) The subjects are primarily women and children in places like shopping malls, parking lots, and sidewalks. The weapons plant itself is never seen. Adams wants to do more than call attention to a potential environmental catastrophe; he also wants his audience to think about the humans that stand to be affected in the event of any kind of nuclear disaster. Prior to this book, most of the spaces Adams captured with his camera were inhabited but unpopulated. *Our Lives and Our Children* makes the clear decision to give faces to the community that stands to be directly affected by the plant.

It is impossible to distill a career as prolific and distinguished as Adams’ into a few generalizations. Adams has published over thirty books, including extensive writings. Some of his monographs, such as *Prairie* (1978), *Summer Nights* (1985), and *Los Angeles Spring* (1986), are lyrical, nostalgic, and infused with a deep melancholy that tempers the more explicit anger of some of his other work. For this essay, however, I will focus on the photography he did in Colorado; this is where his life intersects with my family’s lives and mine.

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13 In the introduction to *Our Lives and Our Children* Adams says: “When we can find in ourselves the will to keep asking questions of politicians [about the risk of nuclear armaments], it is, I think, after we have noticed the individuals with whom we live. How mysteriously absolute each is” (Adams, *Our Lives and Our Children*: n.p.).
In 2000, speaking about his work in Colorado, Adams explained that he made photographs not only because he enjoyed it, but also because he wanted to affect change. And yet, seven years earlier, in 1993, he had reflected:

“Art should finally be encouraging…and since lies are finally discouraging, that means art should be truthful. Truthful and affirmative, presumably even about what has happened to most of the landscape. I wonder if I’m up to that anymore.”14

Adams has said that he sought to show both the good and the bad in the landscape, and he has acknowledged that such ambivalence may make the pictures appear contradictory. What does it mean to place a picture of something as beautiful as the clouds over the eastern plains next to a panoramic view of the urban sprawl visible from Flagstaff Mountain? The decision to portray the land honestly and unsparingly leads to images of the dull uniformity of the Denver suburbs that become strangely beautiful when they are captured in the bright, clear light of Colorado in the afternoon. Adams’ prints are full of the “uneasy recognition” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: xiii) that John Rohrbach associates with many of the New Topographers and their work. Not every picture is enjoyable to look at; others are breathtaking. But it also leads one to wonder, as Finis Dunaway asks: “does Adams fail to capture peoples’ appreciation for where they live?” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 34). The answer is not obvious, nor should it be, but the question is worth asking.

In 1986 Adams wrote an essay that was later republished as “Landscape Photography in the Twentieth Century” in Why People Photograph (1994). Originally

entitled “In the American West is Hope Possible?,” the essay addresses Adams’ disappointment with the development of the West. He catalogues the various changes he has noted since he was a boy growing up in Colorado: crowded hiking trails in the mountains, the shrinking wildlife population, noise pollution, chemical pollution, all of which have contributed to his sense of general loss.

“We feel worst about losing the specifics of home. The issue is not just that land developers have unbalanced the ecology and made much of the geography ugly. What strikes so painfully is that, at least in the perspective of our brief lives, they have destroyed the places where we became, and would like to continue to become, ourselves” (Adams 1986: 2).

In his writing, as in his photography, Adams is honest. He offers solutions to what he perceives as the hopelessness of life in the contemporary West: gardens, art, a reduction in noise, a “more respectful architecture” (9). The essay reflects the feelings of a man who has witnessed the transformation of a place he has called home into something he has trouble recognizing. Adams writes: “To have grown up in Colorado and to be middle-aged now is to be old. And sometimes angry” (159). In an attempt to catalogue the West’s problems, he can, at times, present a fatalistic argument. All that can be hoped for are small changes; the landscape in Colorado or Oregon or California will never again resemble what it looked like in Timothy O’Sullivan’s time.

Adams’ later work has taken him even further west, to coastal California and Oregon, and to some of the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. His newer photographs manifest many of the concerns that appear in his earlier pictures, the
mixture of bitterness and melancholy expressed in “In the American West is Hope Possible?” For example, *Turning Back* (2005) comprises another series of photographs centered on retracing another earlier journey. The monograph mirrors the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804-1806), but in reverse. Adams began on the West Coast and moved into the Oregon interior in a shortened version of the original trek. His images of old-growth forests and clear-cut trees make a commanding statement about the man-made changes the region has undergone since Lewis and Clark passed through in the early 1800s.

[Fig. 13] *Clatsop County, Oregon. 1999-2003*
Although Adams’ work seems to have become more polemical as his career has evolved, some of his most recent publications convey a softer, more elegiac tone. In *Gone?* (2010) Adams published a monograph of images taken in Colorado in the 1980s. The photographs were culled from visits he made to “marginal but beautiful landscapes” he had “taken for granted” when he was growing up (Adams, *Gone?*: n.p.). The pictures portray fences, roads, and other signs of human development, but they are not the searing, overtly critical presentations of the suburbs in *What We Bought*, or *denver*. With *Skogen* (2012), his most recent book to date, Adams has returned to the forests of Oregon, where he now resides. There is little sign of human activity in these images. It is as though Adams has finally tired of exploring and exposing the man-made landscapes of the West. The fact that he is still photographing, however, suggests that there are still landscapes that have captured his imagination. “Making art—being able to say what one sees that is whole—is an enormous relief, as if one had been held dumb by an impediment of speech, and then abruptly cured, enabling one to say, and thus understand better, what it is that is most important” he writes (Adams 1986: 176).
II. Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal

*New Topographics* featured nine photographers along with Robert Adams. It is useful to examine the work of some of the other artists in the exhibition, because it helps to contextualize the climate in which Adams was photographing, and to illuminate some of the ideas the exhibition sought to address. Two artists featured in the show, Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal, photographed the development of the landscape in California (Baltz and Deal) and in New Mexico (Deal) around the same time Robert Adams was documenting the sprawl of suburban Colorado. Their pictures, like Adams’, are responses to the mythologized West and the frontier, and share what Colin Westerbeck, the former director of the California Museum of Photography, identifies as a pervasive ambivalence about the industrialization of the state.¹⁵

In *The Meaning of Landscape in Late Twentieth Century California and Vice Versa*, University of California, Riverside professor Jason Weems addresses the transformation of landscape photography in California, a shift similar to what occurred in Colorado around the same time.¹⁶ Like Colorado, California was the site of massive in-migration, military technology development, and expansion during World War II and the postwar years. Just as Robert Adams responded to the new suburbs and factories in Colorado Springs and Denver, Baltz and Deal each produced a series of photographs about Los Angeles that confront the city’s rapid changes.

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¹⁶ Weems writes that pictures began to depict California’s changing landscape, from the “predominantly natural [and] sometimes developed,” scenes of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, to “space that invokes notions of unmade and mundane…nature” like those of Baltz, Deal, and others (Westerbeck 2011: 76).
When curator William Jenkins and Baltz were discussing plans for a show at George Eastman House about the photography of architecture, both thought of Deal. He was employed at George Eastman as a museum guard, as part of his service as a Conscientious Objector during the Vietnam War. Deal was the one who told Jenkins that his show, which would later become New Topographics, was not about the photography of architecture, but of landscape. “[T]he tract housing, strip malls, and industrial buildings…were the landscape now” (Westerbeck: 2011, 41). Deal had reached this conclusion while studying photography at the University of New Mexico, during a leave from his job as a guard. He recalled this realization in an interview:

“The reason I wanted to photograph suburbia was because I grew up in the suburbs and I wanted to photograph what I knew. But I didn’t want to make fun of it…I stood up on a hillside and looked down on Albuquerque, and it just startled me that here, spread before me, was what I’d been looking for in photographing suburbia: that it wasn’t just one house, and my interest wasn’t in architecture—that I had been gong in the wrong direction with it, trying to photograph the buildings. I wanted to photograph the landscape, and the buildings became part of the landscape…I had no intention of turning my back on California landscape photography traditions…I was just making work, and that’s what it turned out to be” (Westerbeck: 2011, 33).

While working on his MA at the Claremont Graduate School, Baltz began what would become his series Tract Houses. Although Tract Houses shares subject matter with many of Robert Adams’ pictures, Baltz’s photographs are what
Westerbeck identifies as “spin-offs of Minimalism” (41). They are even sparser than Adams’ photographs: the white bricks of a chimney against the darker background of the house’s wall, the rectangular lines and diagonals of the windows and doors. As Westerbeck points out, the absence of a horizon line flattens many of the pictures and heightens the sense of claustrophobia in the photographs (41).

Adams lived in California for a while as well. In *Los Angeles Spring* (1986), he captures the windy highways and overpasses, the cleared space waiting to be paved over for new developments. Although the overall tone of the book is perhaps slightly less forceful, some of the images are as critical as any photograph in *The New West*, published ten years earlier.  

An exploration of several pictures made by Baltz and Deal illuminates the shared concerns and stylistic differences between the three photographers.

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17 In the introduction to *Los Angeles Spring*, Adams writes: “Southern California was, by the reports of those who lived there at the turn of the century, beautiful…all that is clear is the perfection of what we were given, the unworthiness of our response, and the certainty, in view of our current deprivation, that we are judged” (*Adams, Los Angeles Spring*: n.p.).
In this picture, made in 1971, Lewis Baltz characteristically eliminated any horizon and distilled the façade of a house to its most basic forms. There is something off-kilter in the photograph; the windows seem to be crooked. The picture is anonymous, unspecific. It could be California; it could be Colorado, or somewhere else entirely. The space looks barely habitable, and certainly not inviting. This image is entitled *Tract House #17*. Westerbeck has pointed out that Baltz’s decision to work serially, as in *Tract Houses*, was another way in which artists of his generation distanced themselves from their predecessors by declining to make singular, dramatic photographs.
[Fig. 15] Backyard, Diamond Bar, California. 1980

In this photograph, Joe Deal, too, has eliminated the horizon at the top of the frame, cutting off the roof of the house and centering the viewer’s attention on the unevenly sodded grass. The houses are made of the same materials and have the same small backyards. Although Deal claimed that he did not want to make fun of the suburbs, it is impossible not to note the hint of humor in this photograph, the tinge of exasperation with homeowners who are insistent on a lawn in an environment where grass is not typically found. Deal shares with Baltz an interest in the abstract patterns he can find in these new developments.

Westerbeck writes that though Baltz and Deal (and the other artists of New Topographics) did not explicitly intend to “turn their backs” on the photographic tradition of the region, they did so, and thereby helped to create an artistic movement that continues today. The similarities in their photographs: the absence of a horizon, the flattening, occasional claustrophobia, and what Baltz called an “unromantic and unfiltered way of looking through the lens” were quite different from the pictures produced by Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and others of the previous generation of photographers (Westerbeck: 2011, 41). Nature in its most idealized form was no longer at the center of the photograph.

Instead, Jason Weems writes, the pictures made by Baltz, Deal, and others at this time reflected a “more uncertain engagement with a landscape whose definition remained equally unfixed” (77). The space was increasingly transformed. The pictures reflect the unwillingness of the artists to portray what remained of the scenic
beauty of the region. Rather, they are images of “the development of an understanding, necessarily incomplete” (77).

Like Adams, Baltz and Deal made photographs that are often, but not always, critical presentations of the landscape. Studying the works of Robert Adams’ contemporaries makes it easy to see that he was not the only one concerned with the industrialization of the West. Collectively, their art responds to the man-made alterations with seriousness, anger, and occasional humor. The photographs capture the new forms and shapes of the developed space, drawing them into the landscape, not separating them from it. The work rejects unspoiled nature as its focus. It responds instead to the photographs of the early twentieth century by demonstrating that too much has changed to simply portray the land as empty of human influences.

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In an analysis that could easily apply to Robert Adams’ Colorado as well, Weems writes about the clash between the architecture and the landscape: “Its signature forms, from tract housing and superhighways to desert ruins and irrigated fields, evade simple explanation. The standard suburban development, after all, is simultaneously an architect’s nightmare and a family’s dream” (77).
III. New Topographics Today

The 1975 *New Topographics* exhibition continues to influence photography today. What follows are just a few examples of its enormous impact on art and academics. In 2009 the exhibition was recreated at George Eastman House, with later shows at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and several other museums. Two-thirds of the original photographs were included, along with works by other artists influenced by the *New Topographics* legacy. One new addition was a video projection by the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), which presented aerial views of the “petrochemical corridor” outside Houston, Texas, and the oil derricks and crop fields of Kern County, California. In “*New Topographies*”: *Locating Epistemological Concerns in the American Landscape*, professor Wendy Cheng writes:

“The CLUI piece enacts a "scaling-up" of the concerns of the New Topographics photographers: the scale is industrial, and the video cameras, presumably mounted in airplanes, move at a mechanically regulated pace over the landscape. Here the original show's claims of neutrality and objectivity are pushed to an extreme, to a point where there is a palpable sense of human absence…” (Cheng 2011: 159).

Although the original photographers would never have predicted the longevity the show has enjoyed, and did not even consider themselves a unified group, the impact of *New Topographies* now extends beyond photography and into the academy. Cheng sees traces of the exhibition’s concern with different interpretations of the landscape in fields such as ethnic studies, American studies, and geography.
“[A] critical analysis of space, after all, is essential to the questions of empire…The question of landscape, however, is a more particular one…A close viewing of the New Topographies forces one to contemplate the centrality of particular landscapes, especially western landscapes, in the myth and imaginative currency of American nationhood” (Cheng 2011: 153).

Cheng offers Edward Burtynsky as an example of a photographer who has gained acclaim for his large-format of “man-altered” landscapes such as mines, dams, and quarries around the world. Although he was not featured in the new shows, Burtynsky’s pictures, as well as the academic discourse that has evolved around the meanings of space and place demonstrate the broad reach of *New Topographics*.

Another exhibition that opened in conjunction with the LACMA restaging of *New Topographies* was titled *Locating Landscape: New Strategies, New Technologies*. The show at the Sam Lee Gallery in Los Angeles featured new work by Lewis Baltz and Frank Gohlke – two of the original New Topographers – as well as by other photographers who engaged with the legacy in a more explicitly sociopolitical manner. Andrew Freeman’s series, *Manzanar* Architecture Double, was a study of the former Japanese internment camp at Manzanar, California, (the same camp in which Ansel Adams made his famous *Mount Williamson* photograph and his monograph *Born Free and Equal*) and the ways in which the barracks have been repurposed. Another photographer, Paho Mann, presented a series of color images of Circle K convenience stores in Arizona that had been vacated and then rehabbed into different businesses.
The new photographs and projections “lift the veil of opacity” from the original *New Topographics* by engaging with the racial legacy at Manzanar and the “creative reappropriation of corporate homogeneity by locally based entrepreneurship” of the Circle K stores (160). Cheng asserts that the “neutrality” of many of the images presented in the 1975 show was part of the reason why *New Topographies* has endured, but stresses that the work presented in the 2009 interpretation resonates with the viewer precisely because it is unconcerned with its own objectivity.
Chapter Three: Rephotography
I. Family History

In 1895 a group of Jews, most of them Russian immigrants, arrived in a small town in eastern Colorado called Atwood. It wasn’t much of a town. Louis Rossman, who was a child when he lived there, remembers “arriving…where there was nothing but prairie and waiting stacks of lumber.” Nathan Schwartz remembers just a railroad station. The first house was built of sod (Uchill 1957: 180).

The immigrants hoped to use funds they had acquired from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) to start an agricultural community in Atwood. My great-great-grandfather, Louis Fine, and his wife, Ida, were among the first group. They had come from Kishenev (near what is now Ukraine) to Philadelphia, then traveled by boat to Galveston, Texas, then to Colorado.

Atwood was not the first Jewish “colony” in Colorado. In 1882 the first such community was founded in Cotopaxi, in the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado. Unfortunately, however, due to a disastrous combination of poor soil, flash floods, a harsh winter, the settlers’ lack of farming knowledge, and a food shortage, the Cotopaxi experiment was short-lived. The soil in Atwood, by contrast, was much more fertile. The land was flat, not rocky. The nearby Platte River provided a water source. The immigrants could grow wheat, alfalfa, watermelon, cantaloupe, and muskmelon. But the nationwide Panic of 1893 meant that alfalfa sold for just two dollars a ton. A dozen eggs cost ten cents. The fruit wouldn’t sell. All they could do with the watermelons, Uchill writes, “was eat them” (180).

The agricultural community in Atwood lasted four years. Aside from the economic upheaval from the 1893 panic there were other reasons for Atwood’s
failure. Some of the men, who were sweatshop workers or small businessmen back East, had to be taught how to hitch horses to plows. The more observant Jews insisted on kosher meat, which meant shipping chickens from Atwood to the butcher in Denver, then back before they could be eaten. Kosher beef was imported by rail or wagon. There was a “non-observant and rowdy element” in Atwood, which is probably related to the fact that there were too many bachelors and too many “roughnecks.”

When the alfalfa wouldn’t sell, they burned the rest of the crop. Some, like my family, began to leave for Denver. “Louis Fine emerged as the colony’s leader,” historian Phil Goodstein writes, and continues: “The lack of farming experience, isolation, a poor foundation, and internal tensions soon led many to flee Atwood...by 1899 the entire experiment had become a page in history...” (Goodstein 1992: 28). Atwood is now a census-designated place in Logan County. In the 2010 United States Census it had a population of 133 people.19

In the introduction to his book From the Missouri West (1980), Robert Adams writes:

“Exploration of the West began in the nineteenth century at the Missouri River. On its banks pioneers understood themselves to be at the edge of a sublime landscape, one that they believed would be redemptive. My own ancestors, as it happens, settled along the river, and my grandfather made enthusiastic trips onto the Dakota prairies to make panoramic photographs. For these reasons, and because I had lost my way in the suburbs, I decided to

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try to rediscover some of the land forms that had impressed our forebears.

Was there remaining in the geography a strength that might help sustain us as
it had them?” (Adams, *From the Missouri West*: n.p.)

I hadn’t read that passage before I drove out to Atwood with my dad last
summer. I don’t know if my great-great-grandparents were looking for any kind of
redemption, and I hadn’t lost my way in the suburbs, but I felt the same urge to find
something. It was the summer before my senior year of college. Unlike Adams, I
wasn’t following the Missouri, but I could follow the Platte River to Atwood.

I’m not sure which came first: my interest in my family history or my
introduction to Adams’ photography. Sometimes, when I look at his work, I think I
see people I recognize. It’s not just that Adams has succeeded in making pictures that
seem intimately familiar to me; it’s also that he has recorded his ambivalent feelings
towards his subjects. As I drove through the eastern plains I began to appreciate the
contradictory nature of Adams’ photographs. How else could I explain the
melancholy I felt in this monotonous, endless landscape?

Why go back to the place where my family struggled to live for two years
before moving to Denver? Is there value in observing the way humans alter the
landscape? Adams suggests that there is, that we need to see the whole picture. In
1974 he wrote: “… we do not live in parks…we need to improve things at home,
and…to do it we have to see the facts without blinking” (Adams *The New West*: n.p.).

I’d never really been to the plains before. Being able to see in all four
directions without encountering the Rockies in the West was a disorienting
experience. My dad wondered out loud what Louis and Ida must have thought when they first arrived in Atwood. It was very quiet.

Adams, in addition to his skills with a camera, is also a gifted writer. As I read through his essays I found that he was able to articulate my thoughts about my home and the West far better than I ever will. In a way, the issues he raises in his photography (which often provoke questions about my heritage and about my family’s role in the Western landscape) are often explained, if not answered, in his writing. In an essay originally entitled “In the American West is Hope Possible,” later republished in *Why People Photograph* (1994), he wrote:

> “I think of the grave of a man I knew on the plains. He was the editor of a small-town newspaper until, during the thirties, the town withered, leaving eventually just his shop and two houses in the middle of the prairie...In 1978 he died... his gravestone reads ‘Clyde L. Stanley-Keota, my home for 63 years’...He must have thought about the words for a long time to conclude so unequivocally what mattered most, remembering I suppose the blizzards he’d watched through the front windows, the smell of sage after summer rains, the conversations he’d had with generations of neighbors...The place—that was who he was, by his love for it” (Adams, 1994: 168).

In the summer of 2012 I received an Olin Fellowship to do research for a project that would later become a part of this thesis. I drove all over Colorado, revisiting both towns that Adams had photographed years earlier as well as places that were relevant to my family history. In his work Adams has asked: “What does our geography compel us to believe?” (Adams, *What Can We Believe Where?* n.p.).
What does it mean to feel a sense of belonging? Did it even make sense to explore my geography through someone else’s art? At times, looking through one of Adams’ books, or reading one of his essays, I found a distance I couldn’t match, a bitterness I couldn’t find.

I was born into what Adams has identified as a new western American tradition, one that involves loneliness and alienation. He hasn’t lived in Colorado for most of my life. But he was here when my dad was living in south Denver, when my cousins moved to Boulder, and so when I see his pictures of the arcing sky over Keota I think: he must have passed by Atwood. As I have noted, his pictures are sometimes a frustrating contradiction. They are the “evidence against hope” (Adams, *The New West*: n.p), and the light that is so particular to that region of the United States. They are the “fragments of open sky…that…make radiant even what frightens us” (Foster-Rice, Rohrbach 2010: 23).

What I found once I left Denver were quiet places: houses with flaking paint, towns with dirt roads, cottonwood trees, empty rodeo arenas, rusted swing sets, grain elevators, water towers, and post offices. Adams often writes about the silence on the plains, but until I was standing on the side of the road in Bennet, Colorado, I had no idea how absolute it was.

Time seems to move differently on the eastern plains, but they are not changeless. Comparing Adams’ photos to my own travels, I noticed more natural gas wells, more trucks, larger fields cleared for wheat or cattle. Arriba, just off Interstate 70, had grown; Keota, on the other hand, was now unincorporated and declared a ghost town.
Looking at the photography and writing of Rick Dingus, a member of the Rephotographic Survey Project, provided a helpful example when I began to process my summer research. In 1978, Dingus worked with Mark Klett, Ellen Manchester, and JoAnn Verburg as they rephotographed sites visited by the survey expeditions of the nineteenth century. Dingus was especially interested in the work of Timothy O’Sullivan. During the summer he spent retracing the expeditions Dingus attempted to replicate, as closely as possible, “the exact camera positions but also the same light and shadows in the old photographs” (Dingus 1982: 32). He found that this precise approach provided him with an intimate connection to the scene. “Far from being an homage to the photographers, the act became a gesture of participation with each site…I fantasized others rephotographing the sites as an ongoing ritual…” (32).
Even as he tried to duplicate the exact conditions of the nineteenth century surveys, Dingus acknowledged that imitation was not the goal of the project. He writes:

“The idea of participating with a site was reinforced by coming to see how each place might variously be represented by the photographer. Each series of photographs I took reminded me of a phenomenological exercise in perception—as if I were moving from vantage point to vantage point asking perceptual and conceptual questions about the place and receiving an appropriate response each time in the form of the resulting image…My experience was both an exchange and interchange, an engaging and a blending, an agreement and an affirmation” (Dingus 1982: 33).

In Utah, while attempting to rephotograph Pulpit Rock, a spot visited by O’Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, and A.J. Russell, Dingus found himself unable to locate the formation. He was told that the rock had been removed during the widening of the highway. At another site, Big Cottonwood Canyon, he found telephone poles and a picnic ground.

When I decided to attempt my own miniature (and far less precise) rephotography project, I found that I did not always experience the “agreement and…affirmation” that Dingus felt while revisiting the survey sites. In Adams’ photographs, the dialogue between the beautiful and the ugly can make it challenging to discern exactly how he feels about the landscape. This is intentional; even a cursory glance through any of Adams’ books reveals the work of a photographer who shows both the damage and the possibility of recovery. While rephotographing, I
wanted my pictures to reflect Adams’ influence, but did not want them to veer into the territory of imitation. I realized that much of what concerned Adams about the development of the landscape in Colorado had only continued. I also realized that because I had grown up in and around those places, I saw them differently, as landmarks from my childhood. My project, in Dingus’ words, is an “exercise in perception.” I began to see how everything could fit in the frame, the “exchange and interchange” between the shuttered windows, the exhaust from the trucks, the empty parking lots, and the light, which even thirty or forty years later, seemed the same.
II. Places

Colorado Springs

There are several pictures that I return to again and again. One, taken in Colorado Springs in 1969, shows the frame of a tract house under construction [Fig. 9]. The house is isolated in the center of the photo, although there are other buildings visible in the distance. Much of the foreground is taken up by unpaved road. The Rockies appear in the back, almost as an afterthought, though they extend the space within the frame, making the house seem even more alone. A street sign informs the viewer that they are looking at Darwin Place. There are no clouds in the sky, and almost no shadows.

I came back to the house on Darwin Place not so much because of the photograph (although its emptiness always stays with me) but because of the way it captures the city just before it exploded into the semi-suburban sprawl I know it as today. In 2011 I heard Robert Adams interviewed on Colorado Public Radio. He mentioned that people often go back to the house to see what it looks like now that over forty years have passed since the photograph was taken.\(^\text{20}\)

I went back, too. The Springs have stretched out in all directions from the house on Darwin Place. It’s no longer possible to see so far into the distance; there are cottonwoods taller than the roof. The road is paved and the house has siding, windows, a door, a small lawn out front. It feels dated next to the other, bigger houses on all of the surrounding streets.

The development that Adams was so intent on capturing has continued. In the introduction to *What We Bought* (1995) Adams wrote about the population boom that occurred in Colorado in the 1970s, when oil, tourism, and the military (Colorado Springs alone is home to the United States Air Force Academy and several Army forts) brought people from all over the country into the state. “In a few years, however, the area’s ruin would be a testament to the bargain we had to strike,” he writes (Adams *What We Bought*: n.p.). It’s hard for me to imagine, now, what he would think of the Springs today.

**Pawnee National Grassland**

On the drive home from Atwood, where we hadn’t found a single sign of the old community, my dad and I decided to take a different highway back to Denver. Highway 14 goes straight West from Sterling into the Pawnee National Grassland, cutting across Weld County heading towards the mountains. In the 1980s, when Robert Adams was working on a series of photographs of the Grassland for *Perfect Times, Perfect Places* (1988), he observed the way the land was simultaneously used for preservation and profit:

“The Pawnee National Grassland, where these pictures were taken, is a reserve established during the 1930s in northeastern Colorado to rehabilitate a part of the dust bowl. Though recovery has been incomplete, and though in the summer the land is rented to the cattle industry, in April and May it is spacious. It has a long history and future” (Adams 1988: n.p.).

Parts of the Grassland looks much the same as Adams’ photos, but since
oilmen and others have begun to exploit the Niobrara Shale Formation, which runs belowground from here to parts of Kansas and Nebraska, every small farmhouse on the side of the road had its own natural gas well. They look like bowing dinosaurs.

About halfway between Sterling and Fort Collins there is a ghost town called Keota. It was abandoned in 2011 when the population fell to just a few residents. James Michener lived in the town while writing his novel *Centennial*, and later, when that book was made into a television series, scenes were filmed nearby. I was told that some of the set, mostly houses made out of cardboard, remained standing, but I couldn’t find them. It’s very easy to see far into the horizon in places like Keota because there is nothing but grass and sky. Instead, I found a watertower, a trailer, and some fallen fences.

![Image of a landscape with a watertower and a trailer](image)

*[Fig. 17] Highway 14, Colorado. 2012*


Denver

Sometimes, Denver looks like it could be anywhere. Without the Rockies in the background, the city has almost no skyline. It’s a city that cannot decide if it’s a suburb. Downtown is a collection of old brick and brownstone buildings left over from the pioneer days and newer, more modern glass-and-concrete office buildings. There are addicts on the pedestrian mall and on the street that runs past my high school, but there are also cops on horseback. My neighborhood is full of tall trees; the neighborhood where my father grew up is full of tract houses like the ones Robert Adams photographed in the seventies. Sometimes my dad recognizes the places in Adams’ pictures: Skaggs department store, the view from Lookout Mountain. Without the mountains Denver is a flat and far-reaching prairie city. Adams and others have mourned the end of the West’s defining characteristic: space, but to face East from the edge of Denver is to stare out and see nothing but plains for miles.

On the eastern plains it’s easier to understand Adams’ appreciation for the space, and his frustration with its transformation. If there is a film of smog over the city, as there is sometimes on very cold days in the winter, Denver looks tired. The light is flat and hazy. Adams writes: “…the importance of pure light is a fact for any photographer to experience; with it pictures of space are easy, without it they are a struggle; though the difference between a clean sky and a smoggy one is not felt only by photographers” (Wolf 1983: 3). Those days of really bad smog are rare, though. But when I try to see Denver as Adams sees it, sometimes the pollution is all there is.
In the picture of Colfax Avenue from 1970 I see an early evening street lit more by neon than by the sunset. The headlights of the car seem like a pair of curious eyes. It’s a street Jack Kerouac wrote about, the longest road in America, one I’ve driven up and down more times than I know. Colfax goes past my high school, past the football stadium, up into the foothills. If the picture contains a critique, as I assume it does, given Adams’ documented dislike of cars (and car dealerships), it’s lost on me.

What about a parking lot? These vacant urban spaces seem to be one of Adams’ favorite places on which to project various interpretations of space. There is a
form in the leaning streetlight and the stripes of the trailer, even in the windows of the building. There are parking lots like this one all over Denver. The stores are usually closed, and the few cars seem to have no owners.

[Fig. 19] Colfax Avenue, Colorado. 2012

San Luis

I drove down to San Luis partially because I’d seen Robert Adams’ photographs of the region and partially because I’d driven through the valley several years before and had always wanted to go back.

San Luis is the oldest town in Colorado. 1851. It’s older than the state. It was founded when Hispanic settlers moved north out of Taos and Mora in New Mexico. You can hear it in the names: Cuchara River, Culebra River, Purgatory River, Sangre de Cristo Mountains. There are churches in San Luis, in Viejo San Acacio, in Conejos, some of the oldest churches in the region. There are few people on the street
in San Luis. There is a dog missing patches of his fur. There are Mormons in the restaurant right before the turn for the highway. I can tell by their suits and the pamphlets on their table.

On a hill next to the main street the town has donated money for bronze statues of the Stations of the Cross. They lead to an adobe church. It starts to rain right before I get to the tenth Station. Inside, the church smells like incense. After it stops, the air smells like sage.

These places are quiet. In the mid-1970s, when Robert Adams was working on his first books, *White Churches of the Plains* (1970) and *The Architecture and Art of Early Hispanic Colorado* (1974), he wrote: “the only sounds are as they must have been earlier” (Adams 1974: n.p.). The river past Cotopaxi, the thunderheads rolling in over San Luis, the railroad, a few cars. Paint flakes, some doors are locked, even in the middle of the day.

For a brief period of time, Adams thought about becoming a minister; he went to college and became a professor instead. His first book, *White Churches of the Plains*, was a photographic exploration of those eponymous structures. In many ways Adams has never ceased to explore religion, faith, and grace in his photography. He has written about “pilgrimage routes in America.” Some exist already, and lead to “clapboard churches on the high plains” (Adams 1986: 9) and others exist in his imagination, as a circle from the Missouri River to the Rockies, retracing the route of early pioneers, but doubling back to the Missouri instead of staying in the West.

I thought about this while I stood in the church in San Luis, waiting for the rain to let up. It was too still and silent, suffused with incense. In San Luis the only
sound was the sound of the rain coming down in sheets outside. I looked back at the church as I left.

![San Luis, Colorado. 2012](image)

**Cottonwoods**

Bennet is a small wheat town that is bisected by I-70. I parked between the Facing East realty office and a highway sign pointing north towards Prospect Valley. Bennet’s main feature was the grain elevator. All along the streets, especially the ones that bordered on prairie, there were cottonwoods.

Trees make frequent appearances in Adams’ work (he has a book entitled *Cottonwoods* and his most recent publication is *Skogen*, which means “forest” in Swedish). I recognized the cottonwoods in Bennet; they grow along Cherry Creek, several miles from my house. In the summer their fluffy catkins coat the ground around their trunks. Once I began my own rephotography, and started to look for the
cottonwoods, I noticed them everywhere, not just on the riverbanks. What I didn’t know is that these trees are often removed for development. Adams writes: “Agribusiness now wages wars on cottonwoods because the trees compete for water, and suburban developers replace them with conveniently small but ecologically disruptive species like Russian olive” (Adams *Cottonwoods*: n.p.).

When my dad and I visited the Pawnee National Grassland he found Russian olives there. He recognized them from the neighborhood he grew up in.
Rocky Flats

Highway 93 is one of my favorite drives. The road, just two lanes, runs north-south between Golden and Boulder. It’s where Denver ends and the foothills begin. It’s the narrow little divider between prairie and mountains. Route 93 also happens to run right past the Rocky Flats Plant, which was a nuclear weapons production facility until 1992. Today it’s called the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge.

The plant was built in the 1950s to manufacture plutonium triggers for hydrogen bombs. After investigations by the Environmental Protection Agency and others in the 1970s, it was found that hazardous chemicals from the plant had made their way into the air and water supply. Plutonium was drifting East over Denver, and there was tritium in Walnut Creek and the reservoir. Rocky Flats was the site of huge protests, various environmental studies, and, ultimately, an investigation by the FBI.

In 1984 Robert Adams published Our Lives and Our Children, his own personal statement on the presence of the plant. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Rocky Flats never appears in the photographs. Instead, the book is full of images of people. Most of the pictures are not particularly exciting; the impact comes from the viewer’s knowledge that the subjects are the ones who live downwind.

The land around the plant is now under remediation, although a recent report from the Department of the Interior suggests that little is being done to ensure that the area is eligible for certification as a refuge by the Environmental Protection Agency. The landscape has returned to some version of what it must have looked like before: grasses and other plants. There’s not much to see of the factory now. There are some old buildings, but the driveway is blocked by a padlocked fence. It’s not a victory.
The factory continues to be an invisible presence in the lives of people in the area. Plutonium has a half-life of 24,000 years and contamination can still be transmitted through the wind or the water supply.

I didn’t know anything about Rocky Flats the first time I drove on 93. What I noticed was a woman riding a horse on the shoulder of the road, and the dive bar, the Rocky Flats Lounge, directly across the highway from the plant. I found out later that the Lounge used to be the plant’s payroll office.

Pollution

Over the summer, while I was doing research for my Olin, Colorado was experiencing a series of wildfires. The High Park Wildfire, which began in June near Fort Collins, was called the most destructive in the state’s history until the Waldo Canyon fire occurred just a few weeks later that month. People were evacuated and homes were destroyed, but an article published in the Denver Post in September claimed that 2.2 million homes would be built by the year 2030 in “fire-prone areas of the western Rocky Mountains”. According to investigators, there is evidence that the Waldo Canyon fire was the result of arson.

On certain days when I was photographing, there was a haze everywhere. In August, I watched the sunrise from the top of Mount Elbert, the tallest peak in the Rockies. The smoke from the wildfires that were still burning turned the sun bright red.

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One of the first Robert Adams pictures I saw was titled *Burning Oil Sludge North of Denver, Colorado* [Fig. 10]. It was taken in the winter of 1973. Against the backdrop of the front range of the Rockies, a giant plume of black smoke rises out of the ground and swells across the image, dwarfing everything around it, even the mountains. Adams has framed the smoke between a leafless tree and a small oil derrick. Its blackness is offset by the snowy foreground and the overcast sky. This, too, is a scene I find beautiful, perhaps against my better instincts.

More and more people in places like Weld, Logan, or Larimer County have allowed oil derricks or natural gas wells to be constructed on their property. Companies were hydrofracturing the land in the eastern part of Colorado long before it became an issue of national importance.

About forty years ago one of my grandfather’s cousins, Leonard, got a call from the Logan County Clerk and Recorder’s office. They wanted to know if anyone still had a title to the land near the Julesburg Basin, by Atwood, where my great-great-grandparents had lived. Someone, or some company, believed that there was oil in the Basin. Leonard explained that no one in the family owned any land in that area anymore. He never heard if they actually found any oil, but my guess is that they did. When I told my dad that story he shook his head in disbelief.

For a brief period of time over the summer, I couldn’t stop looking at pictures of the wildfires. I couldn’t explain why. On Highway 14 I took a picture of a natural

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22 Hydrofracturing, or “fracking” as it is more commonly known, refers to the extractive process in which a pressurized fluid breaks up layers of rock to release the petroleum or natural gas stored within them. This provides access to previously isolated resources, but opponents to the technique have pointed to the various environmental impacts. These include groundwater and air contamination, increased seismicity, and other health concerns.
gas well. There was no black plume of smoke around it, and something about the horizon made it seem very small and insignificant. We continue to alter the landscape, and some of the costs have already become apparent. On the drive back to Denver though, the proliferation of wells and derricks didn’t make me angry the way it did later. It was something about the way the machinery seemed to be bowing to the ground.

![Image: Keota, Colorado. 2012](image)

**Jasmine Street**

On Jasmine Street, where my dad grew up in the seventies, the high voltage power lines run straight through the backyards. Jasmine Street is in south Denver. There are houses where the windows are always closed, where the lawn is brittle. There are houses like the house my dad grew up in, ranch-style, a garden out front,
skylights. There are tract houses with gray-white, off-white, or cream-colored siding. My mom, who grew up in Hyde Park, Chicago, calls south Denver “hick country.”

In south Denver they used to let sheep graze on the corner of Holly Street. People burned their trash in backyard incinerators. I asked my dad about the power lines. Some people who used to live here think that’s why everyone’s so messed up, he responds, and he’s joking, sort of. I think of some of my earliest memories of visiting my grandparents in the hospital. And other things, things that cannot be catalogued like cancer, things where maybe the best explanation is the way the power lines used to hum at night in the backyard.

Sometimes my dad seems faintly puzzled at the things he remembers about his old neighborhood. At the end of Jasmine Street there is a tile factory. Next to it is the drainage ditch where the chemical waste from production was emptied. My dad used to look for used gun targets in the trash where they tested the tile. In the light at seven thirty in the evening, during the summer, when we drive through the old neighborhood, that field can look very beautiful. Even though my grandparents have since moved, I still drive down Jasmine just to see my grandma’s garden blooming outside. Now the house has a darker coat of paint.

Although south Denver now extends much farther past Jasmine Street, my dad told me that forty years ago it felt much more like the edge of the city. I’m not sure if Robert Adams ever photographed in or around my dad’s old neighborhood, but his pictures of the suburbs that were under construction around the same time look like they could be anywhere and everywhere, just like some of the streets in south Denver.
Stapleton

Until 1995 my family lived about a mile from the Stapleton airport. My mom claims that we lived so close that we could see peoples’ faces in the plane windows as they descended. I’m not sure that’s true, but we could definitely hear the planes overhead before they touched down.

The airport, now renamed Denver International, moved much farther East, into a carved-out section of Adams County, in 1996. A new neighborhood has been installed on the land that was once the Stapleton airport. The suburbs are now just a mile from my house.

These are not suburbs dotted with tract houses and schools that look like prisons, although this community is certainly sprawling. Stapleton is a neighborhood where all the two-storey houses are either fake adobe or brick. They have small backyards, even smaller lawns, white trim, and two- (or three-) car garages. Developers bought up entire blocks and built the same house ten times in a row. Inside, every one has the same soft, nubby carpet, granite countertops, and high ceilings. It’s like every other suburb in the country, except that this one is personally more important to me because it’s almost in my backyard.

I’m pretty sure Robert Adams has never seen Stapleton as it appears now. The only thing that is left of the old airport is the control tower, now surrounded by houses in various stages of construction. I decided to photograph the neighborhood because I thought it would be important to show what the latest version of the Colorado suburb looks like. There is not a tract house in sight.
Stapleton has a coyote problem. What used to be open prairie (and tarmac and terminal and main concourse) has become parkways and streets. The coyotes occasionally eat cats and small dogs. They usually hunt in packs. Some residents in Stapleton, and other neighborhoods where coyotes have been spotted, try to shoot them. It’s the same story with sheep ranchers and wolves. I saw coyotes in Stapleton once. They were about half a block away, running through the tall grass growing in the dry creek bed by the bike path. They were smaller and thinner than I’d imagined.
Conclusion
“America was not settled only by those following a dream of profit. Just as often, our forebears’ motive was to escape some nightmare of hunger or stultification or violence, and they would always love, with a sudden intensity against which they could never fully guard themselves, the geography where they were raised—the flowers, trees, birds, clouds, and lay of the land. Ours has never been, really, just a country of easygoing transients. There has always been a counter tradition of learning to make the best of exile, of building from recollections of what was prized and torn away” (Adams 1994: 178).

I’ll never know exactly what prompted my great-great-grandparents to leave Russia and come to the United States. Still, I’m sure it had to do with anti-Semitism, pogroms, and the idea that something better was possible across the ocean. As an American Studies major, I have been taught that “settler” is a fraught term. I know that the West is a mythologized space, and I have been instructed to study history (including my own) with a critical lens. Maybe this acute exploration of place is another reason why I have such an appreciation for Robert Adams’ photography. His work is a study of the contradictions of human geography. Is it reasonable to feel an attachment to this landscape, these spaces I know from childhood and memory?

Is it even the same landscape? When I decided to revisit the places where many of Adams’ pictures were taken I never really expected anything to be completely unchanged. The towns and prairies could not have remained the same after thirty or forty years. I knew that Denver, too, had changed, because I saw what it used to look like in my grandparents’ old photographs.
When I began to look at my home through a camera lens, I looked for different things. Adams’ work has made me more aware of empty spaces (like plains and cul-de-sacs), trees, highways, and the light. I was amazed by the quiet on the eastern plains, and even in certain parts of Denver. His pictures made me wonder why people decide to live in certain environments, whether in the shadow of a nuclear arms plant or an isolated agricultural community. I realized that sometimes people have no choice.

At first, I was drawn to the familiar spaces in Adams’ photographs. It wasn’t until I began to revisit certain pictures and reread his essays that I became aware of the intricate dialogue within his work. I felt that my reaction to the seemingly mundane landscapes I recognized from my childhood was often at odds with the despair Adams felt. It was hard for me to view certain spaces with a critical eye because my memories got in the way. The view of the foothills from Lookout Mountain, a stretch of Interstate 25, a movie theater in Otis, Colorado that looked like so many other small theaters I’d seen while driving around the West on family road trips. At other times, I envied his understated eloquence, the way he managed to distill all of my frustrations about the West in a single photograph. His pictures are a constant conversation between increasing hopelessness, outright indictment, and occasional thankfulness for the beauty that remains in the landscape.

My research brought me to other photographers as well, most importantly Timothy H. O’Sullivan, one of Adams’ esteemed predecessors. There has been a long debate as to whether O’Sullivan’s work for the Western Surveys of the 1860s and 1870s was motivated by art or by science. Regardless, his images are strikingly
distinct from those of his contemporaries. Many of the photographs of the West produced for the surveys featured land that seemed livable, ready for an influx of profit-seekers or pioneers. By contrast, O’Sullivan’s West was a vast, occasionally alien region. Most of his pictures are unpopulated; the men who occasionally appear in them are dwarfed by the immensity of the space around them. It is easy to see how Adams was influenced by O’Sullivan. Both photographers share a distaste for the picturesque or the majestic. They are both interested in the architecture of the landscape, its emptiness.

Carleton Watkins was another “camera operator” on the survey expeditions. Although he is arguably most famous for his pictures of Yosemite, his other images of California in the late 1800s and the turn of the century document a region in the midst of rapid expansion. I found similarities between Watkins and Adams: an awareness of the development of industry, new construction, and immense population growth. Their photographs are separated both geographically and temporally. Perhaps the most significant difference between the two artists is that Watkins does not critique the industrialization of California with the vehemence Adams would convey in his pictures of suburbanized Colorado almost one hundred years later.

No discussion of landscape photography in the American West can ever really be complete without Ansel Adams. His pictures dominate the field. They have become the images many people think of first when they think of the High Sierra, or New Mexico. John Szarkowski’s biography of Ansel Adams, published one hundred years after the photographer’s birth, provided me with a rich exploration of the artist’s life and work. Szarkowski offered a useful analysis of the various reactions to Ansel
Adams’ photographs. He has been lionized and criticized in equal measure. Many have admired his technical skill and dramatic landscapes. Others find his pictures too idealistic, too celebratory of a fictionalized version of America. He is a giant in the field, but I found aspects of his legacy problematic.

Ansel Adams had no qualms about editing his photographs to remove any trace of human interaction with the space. Many of his most famous pictures portray solely pristine nature, whereas Robert Adams’ photographs, though they may depict unpopulated landscapes, bear obvious signs of the men and women who live there. Robert Adams owns several Ansel Adams prints; he has written essays about him and clearly admires his work. However, I found that Robert Adams often challenges the glorified representation of the West that Ansel Adams presents in his photographs. Much as Timothy O’Sullivan composed images that were much quieter and more intense than those of his contemporaries, Robert Adams subverts the dominant discourse of twentieth century landscape photography and instead offers pictures that are stark in their honesty.

Robert Adams was not the only photographer to question the prevailing aesthetics of landscape photography. Other photographers associated with the New Topographics exhibition at George Eastman House in 1975 were also making pictures of other sites around the country (but primarily in the West). They, too, explored the nebulous territory between documentary and objective photography as they captured new developments, industrial parks, and other “man-altered landscapes.” New Topographics underscored some of the more disagreeable realities of the contemporary West. The show was unpopular when it was first staged, mostly
due to the uncomfortable directness with which it approached its subject. Studying *New Topographics* helped me to place Adams’ work within a larger cultural context. I saw how he related to and differed from his contemporaries.

Occasionally I asked myself if it made any sense to connect my curiosity about my family history with Robert Adams’ photography. His pictures and essays have provided a framework for me to explain what I mean when I write about things that don’t have an easy definition. Atwood, where my family first lived at the turn of the century, is really just a cluster of houses in the middle of nowhere; Denver is a city that looks as if it could be anywhere. Adams’ photographs helped me articulate what was so important to me about those geographies. He has spent most of his life exploring the same issues. In *Why People Photograph*, he writes:

“[W]e live in several landscapes at once, among them the landscape of hope…though we must usually focus on what is characteristic of the immediate and troubled present, it is rash to say that other geographies are unimportant or even finally separate” (Adams 1994: 182).

Even when I disagreed with his representation of the space it helped me to see it a different way. It wasn’t useful to imitate him. Instead, I thought about how my research put me in dialogue with his photographs. I couldn’t reconcile everything that captivated or bothered me about the way we revere and abuse the landscape.

When I think about the quotation I put at the beginning of this section, I wonder if my great-great grandparents missed the home they left. Did they love the eastern plains and the mountains the same way I do now. I think about it.
[Fig. 23] My great-great-uncle, Simon Fishman, and my great-grandfather, Isidore Fine, somewhere on the eastern plains. Date unknown.
Works Cited


**Images Cited**

*Arriba, Colorado.* Personal photograph by author. 2012.


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**Bennet, Colorado.** Personal photograph by author. 2012.


**Colfax Avenue, Colorado.** Personal photograph by author. 2012.


**Highway 14.** Personal photograph by author. 2012.

**Isidore and Simon.** Personal photograph, property of author. Date unknown.

**Keota, Colorado.** Personal photograph by author. 2012.


