

International transdisciplinary symposium organized by HCTI (EA 4249) November 21-23, 2019 at the Université Bretagne Sud in Lorient, South Brittany, France.

“THE DESERT AND THE USA”

The Université Bretagne Sud and the Université Bretagne Occidentale joint research group HCTI (“Héritages et Constructions dans le Texte et l’Image,” EA 4249) in collaboration with the Université Bordeaux-Montaigne and its research group CLIMAS (“Cultures et Littératures du Monde Anglophone,” EA 4196) are pleased to host a three-day *international and transdisciplinary* symposium on “The Desert and the USA” to be held on November 21-23, 2019 at the Université Bretagne Sud in Lorient, France. We seek papers investigating the link between the USA and its deserts but also with deserts outside American borders.

400-word abstracts as well as brief bio-bibliographies should be sent to the organizing board by **February 10th, 2019**

20-minute papers will be followed by a ten-minute discussion period. Papers may be delivered in either English or French.

Organizing board:

- Karim Daanoune: karim.daanoune@univ-ubs.fr
- François Gavillon: francois.gavillon@univ-brest.fr
- Lionel Larré: lionel.larre@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr

Confirmed Keynote: Catrin Gersdorf, University of Würzburg, Germany.

Scientific committee:

- Karim Daanoune (HCTI, Université Bretagne Sud, Lorient, France)
- François Gavillon (HCTI, Université Bretagne Occidentale, Brest/Quimper, France)
- Wendy Harding (CAS, Université Jean Jaurès, Toulouse, France)
- Lionel Larré (CLIMAS, Université Bordeaux-Montaigne, France)
- Sylvie Mathé (LERMA, Université Aix-Marseille, France)
- Monica Michlin (EMMA, Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier, France)
- Kieran Murphy (University of Colorado, Boulder, USA)
- Julien Nègre (IHRIM, ÉNS de Lyon, France)
- Jose Liste Noya (University of Corogña, Spain)
- Lance Olsen (The University of Utah, USA)
- Pauline Pilote (HCTI, Université Bretagne Sud, Lorient, France)

Calendar:

- **February 10th, 2019: proposals**
- April 1st, 2019: notifications
- July 1st – November 20th, 2019: conference registration (fee: 100€; 50€ for graduate students)

Call for Papers

I was crossing the desert. Smooth. Wind rippling at the window. There was no road, only the alkaline plain.

There was no reason for me to be steering; I let go of the wheel.

There was no reason to sit where I was;

I moved to the opposite seat. I stared at the empty driver's seat.

I could see the sheen where I'd sat for years. We continued to move across the desert.

Barry Holstun Lopez, *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven*, 1976

Let's just say the desert is an impulse.

Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 1997

The desert is a fascinating locus that encompasses contradictory notions and extremes that seem, at first sight, incompatible. It is a place that one would readily call a non-place which may equally be indicative of an end or of a beginning. The desert may feature remains, traces of ruins, of a destruction, or even, of an annihilation that has just occurred. That is the reason why it may adequately depict “an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 18) and it befits the apocalyptic event. Conversely, and owing to the same signs granting it its annihilating value, it stands as a form of nothingness out of which something is to be born, a virgin space from which beginning and being born are, in equal measure, just as implicit as dying and disappearing.

The desert also denotes that unformed background enabling all beings and all things to obtain a form of salience and a more singularized existence, highlighted, so to speak, by the surrounding void. In that sense, it can be argued that the desert operates the way a photographic developer does as it increases both being and the relationship to the other as if to single out what matters. It accommodates a form of life that cannot be seen, an ecosystem which is implicit. In that respect, the desert summons our attention and forces us to adjust our eyes to the level of the grain of sand. It explains why other modes of reading are required, as for instance, those of the Native Americans who, inhabiting in the full sense of the word the “Great Desert” that 19th century Euro-American explorers thought they had discovered, refuted *de facto* the latter's perception of the American West as an empty, unfriendly and uninhabited place where the Natives had, supposedly, left no traces on the environment. It is interesting to note that for the newcomers reaching those great spaces, “desert” and “wilderness” have in common the fact that they are devoid of any human beings, a convenient definition to dehumanize peoples, appropriate their lands and colonize their homes/habitats. Roderick Nash reminds us that another link exists between the desert and the wilderness: in the 14th century, John Wycliffe “used wilderness to designate the uninhabited, arid land of the Near East in which so much of the action of the Testaments occurred [...] Through this Biblical usage the concept of a treeless wasteland became so closely associated with wilderness that Samuel Johnson defined it in 1755 in his *Dictionary of the English Language* as ‘a desert; a tract of solitude and savageness.’ Johnson's definition remained standard for many years in America as well as in England” (Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* 2-3). But, this “Great American Desert” was in fact inhabited and marked, that is to say replete with signs and meanings, including sacred ones.

What is usually called “desert” is no common place. Whether located in plains, mountains, barren lands, thick forests or desert islands, deserts are idiosyncratically other. To what processes of (re)semiotization may those different places be subjected when they are approached by artists, or by geographers, botanists, zoologists, sociologists or ethnologists? Do human beings living in such places fare differently from plants and animals that would probably perish in less extreme environments or milieus? Besides, since the first slave and

maroon rebellions, US history has shown how space and resistance intricately interconnect, how politics and geography often merge. Are historians, in the wake of Thoreau, led to consider those unpopulated areas as sanctuaries, places of resistance, repositories of freedom and wildness? The desert suggests a “topographical manifestation of difference” (Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* 14) that starkly contrasts with a view of America as a land of plenty or as the Garden of Eden. Attempting to address the desert requires that one be ready to abandon the restricting aesthetic dictatorship of greenness (“get over the color green” Wallace Stegner). Envisaging the desert through an ecocritical lens will enable us to assess it in contradistinction to other ecosystems (ocean, mountain, prairie...) and other places that have become sanctuaries (national parks...) and to no longer consider it as a place defined by lack or deprivation, but as a place governed by satiety and balance, a place where “[t]here is no shortage of water [...] but exactly the right amount, a perfect ratio of water to rock, water to sand” (Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* 126).

These “arid United States” (Teague, *The Southwest* ix) also bring to mind the motif of an original *tabula rasa* whence all forms of experiments may be attempted, all civilization imagined. As the place of “desemiotization” (Bouvet, *Pages de sable* 15-16) *par excellence*, the desert calls for the advent of a new world, a new subjectivity, or a new spirituality. Yet, those transformations may sometimes function as utopias or simulacra, for the desert is often perceived as the place where mirages and hallucinations occur. It is indeed “a land of illusions” (Van Dyke, *The Desert* 2), a locus where sensorial and psychical fabrication facilitate the projection and transference of desires. It is almost in those terms that the yearly event known as “Burning Man” may be interpreted: created in 1986 and taking place in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, “Burning Man” is a sort of pagan summer festival during which a transitory city and its ephemeral community are built only to then vanish without leaving a trace as if everything about it was but a mirage. The desert is also the ideal place to pursue the American dream of the space conquest. A case in point is the Mars Desert Research Station located in Utah which aims at reproducing the extreme living conditions encountered on Mars. The desert thus features both the ruins of our world and the experimental means of anticipating a post-Earth world.

The desert is not only concerned with space, it also evokes time. As it has always been connected to the impossibility of life or the idea of survival, it is intimately linked to death insofar as the horizon of destitution it suggests tends to endow it with a sense of utter and irremediable annihilation. As it presents itself as a place deprived of life, as a “blank spot on the map” (Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge* 244), it welcomes all sorts of deadly projections and turns into an ideal terrain for simulations of death and destruction. The Nevada Desert was for a long time used to test the nuclear bomb and is now going to be the site of the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository. It is also a battlefield where the American army simulates war scenarios. Fort Irwin National Training Center (FINTC), California, for instance, accommodates fake Arab villages and replicates the type of topography GIs and Marines will encounter in the Middle-East.

This conference also provides an opportunity to turn our attention to some of the artistic renditions of the Gulf Wars. In DeLillo’s novel *Point Omega*, which takes place “somewhere south of nowhere in the Sonoran Desert” (*Point Omega* 20), the US Mojave Desert is superimposed on the Iraqi desert, the latter being a sort of traumatic and spectral residual trace that the protagonist attempts to repress. Also relevant are the works of the new generation of artists who experienced the war as journalists like Evan Wright or David Abrams, or like former soldiers Phil Klay or Kevin Powers for whom the desert “stretched out on all sides like an ocean of twice burned ash” (Powers, *The Yellow Birds* 183). The graphic novel (Uriarte’s *The White Donkey*), television series (*Generation Kill*, *The Long Road Home...*) but

also the numerous movies dealing with the Iraq wars enable us to study the desert not only as a theatre of operations but also as a place interrogating the concepts of national territories and boundaries.

Proposals from the Early Modern period to the 21st century may address, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Desert and *wilderness*
- Desert, war, armament
- Desert and the West
- Desert and city (Las Vegas, ghost towns...)
- Desert and *no-go zone, no man's land, wasteland*, outlaw
- Desert, retreat, banishment, exile
- Desert as refuge, resistance, liberty, radical reform (*wildness*, Thoreau)
- Desert and the frontier
- Desert and the Bible, sacredness, asceticism
- Desert, orient and orientalism
- Desert and biodiversity
- Desert and ecocriticism (Mary Hunter Austin, Barry Lopez, Charles Bowden...)
- Desert and desertification
- Desert and visual arts: photography (Ansel Adams, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, Robert Adams...); performance; land art; art installation (Wafaa Bilal, Danae Stratou, Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Michael Heizer, James Turrell, Walter de Maria, Leonard Knight...); painting (Georgia O'Keeffe, Frederic Sackrider Remington...)
- Desert and literature: Native American Literature, Southwestern Literature, Arab American Literature, Chicano-a literature...
- Desert in films and series: road movies, western, sci-fi, utopias, dystopias, war...

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