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Main content

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To soar beyond the human cannot be described in words.--Dante Alighieri, Paradiso

To have a body is, finally, to permit oneself to be described.--Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain

The first nuclear test at Trinity Site on July 16, 1945, signaled the beginning of the Atomic Age and the end of the modernist figuration of the New Mexico desert as sacred space. Witnesses of this atomic detonation described the experience as a sudden encounter with spiritual forces, whether creative or destructive. J. Robert Oppenheimer famously imagined the silence that followed as an episode in the Bhagavad-Gita: "Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him he takes on his multi-armed form and says, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.'" Oppenheimer speculated that all of the witnesses "thought that, one way or another" (Rhodes 676). This mute interval transfigured a mere explosion into a new deathly myth. The blast of atomic light illuminated all bodies equally as "angels," Willem de Kooning thought (60); in the post-atomic darkness, however, both human bodies and the desert landscape registered contamination. Again and again, subsequent above-ground nuclear tests, totaling more than 100 between 1951 and 1963, compressed the cycle of life in the Nevada desert in an instant, even if witnesses could not see the destruction within the clouds. Responsibility for confronting the corporeal and environmental effects passed to the next generation.

This essay explores how representations of the Southwestern desert that were produced just before the Trinity Test and in the last decade of the 20th century reveal the mythic and environmental threats of the Atomic Age and begin to transfigure the contaminated desert into new icons. (1) I begin by examining how Georgia O'Keeffe made the New Mexico landscape into sacred space through her aesthetic organization of nature and through her rituals of visiting, naming, and painting distinctive sites. I focus on O'Keeffe's studies of the "Black Place," arguing that her process of painting this landscape created a precedent for post-atomic writers who pursue the toxic desert's environmental, spiritual, and philosophical knowledge through a similar combination of environmental immersion and ritual contact. Then I consider two memoirs at the center of an emerging field of anti-nuclear literature, Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991) and Ellen Meloy's *The Last Cheater's Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest* (1999). As these texts alternately narrate the experience of the body and represent the gap between the desert's appearance and its hidden contamination, they transform the desert's iconography in ways that merge conceptions of the sacred and the profane. Akira Lippit proposes that the nuclear detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki irrevocably "exposed the fragility of the human surface" (4); afterwards, the constitution of the human body could no longer be taken for granted, and "new phenomenologies of the inside: psychoanalysis, X-rays, and cinema" aimed to expose interiority (5). In the post-Atomic Age, the permeability of both body...

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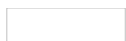
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