This is to Tell You We’re Out in the Old West

Thesis

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Abstract

Simulated representations of the West found in airports, suburban neighborhoods, museums, and small towns within the landscape of the American West displays a cultural need to hold onto historical western mythologies of grandeur and the workingman. Through the use of imagery and text I will illustrate how stereotypical western constructs help shape current western identity. This is to tell You We’re Out in the Old West works to decode the semiotics that make up the contemporary western landscape. By rereading and interpreting Old West icons a new narrative arises about how western communities work to historicize themselves.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my family.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In *This is to tell You We’re Out in the Old West*, Montana, South Dakota, and Wyoming become the locations where I draw upon current perceptions of western settlement, expansion, and icons that influence and alter the physical and social landscape. Simulated representations of the West found in airports, suburban neighborhoods, museums, and small towns within the landscape of the American West displays a cultural need to hold onto historical western mythologies of grandeur. Through the use of imagery and text I will illustrate how stereotypical western constructs help shape current western identity. *This is to tell You We’re Out in the Old West* works to decode the semiotics that make up the contemporary western landscape. By rereading and interpreting Old West icons a new narrative arises about how western communities work to historicize themselves.

Western expansion has gone hand in hand with photography since the mid 19th century. Photographs of the western frontier have shed light on uncharted territory, wind swept plains, and grand mountains. Photographers pointed their cameras at untamed land, thereby creating a narrative of what America stood for, the sense of a newfound freedom. Eva Respini, associate curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, writes, “The West was a blank slate on which new stories could be written. From the very beginning, photographs of the West were tied to national identity and supported an image of the West that promised independence, faith in progress, and rejection of old-world
values. The West symbolized America as a whole, and photography, representing technological progress, was the perfect medium with which to construct an American identity. This relationship has resulted in a complex association that shapes the perception of the West’s social and physical landscape to this day” (Respini 10-31). What has been framed in the past lies parallel to how current communities present what it means to be a westerner in the 21st Century. The personification of western identity prescribed by photography is still recognized in the present day. Icons and representations of historic western mythologies pepper the West. Cowboys are painted on buildings, neighborhood streets are named after guns, and Manifest Destiny is not yet forgotten but represented in alternative ways.

Chapter 2: The Arrival

In *This is to Tell You We’re Out in the Old West*, viewers are met with a different tourist experience in that the viewers enter the show as if they have entered an airport terminal. A diorama image sequence is taken in the Gillette Campbell County Airport of Wyoming titled, *The Arrival*. Taxidermy animals and tableaus of the West inform the outsider of the original environment they have entered. Three images make up *The Arrival* and each separate image has text physically cut from the paper of the photograph. The text consists of information from pamphlets displayed next to the dioramas in the airports. The text and image together create a tension between the ways of gathering information and forces the viewer to choose whether to read the image or read text.
Tension is created to place emphasis on the fact that neither text nor image is sufficient in describing how western history or current life is portrayed. The text within the triptych runs from one image to the next showing that the information gathered from each source blends together to describe the same western narrative.

The first image in the triptych presents a landscape replica with brush, grass, rocks, and sand. A Native American on horseback is placed in the terrain and is spearing a bison. The Native American, bison, and horse look petrified within the confines of a Plexiglas cube. Looking at the airport diorama the viewer is placed in a time when the West was wild. Pamphlets to the side of the tableau assist in the time warp by working to educate the reader about a past era. The tableau functions as an informational guide and becomes a sandbox filled with signifiers. A horse, Native American, rocks, brush, bison, place notions of the savage Wild West. The text cut from the image functions tangentially to the image. Facts such as: “Trappers and early explorers to this area remarked in their journals that the prairies were black with these large animals that always seemed to be in motion”, “While they may appear slow and lumbering, buffalo can run very quickly in short bursts as they can reach speeds up to 30 mph, easily avoiding most predators as several animals together are much more formidable than a lone bison”. The word choices that make up the text such as explorers, prairies, hunters, paint a picture of coexistence and dependency on wildlife for survival. The text uses history and current information that skews the viewer’s perception of what has happened in the past and what is happening now. Moreover, the images display a Deleuzeian idea of assemblage, author and professor J. Macgregor Wise, “Territories are not fixed for all time, but are always
being made and unmade, reterritorializing and deterritorializing. This constant making and unmaking process is the same with assemblages: they are always coming together and moving apart” (Wise 77-87). The airport that constructed the dioramas created an assemblage, a collection of artifacts, creating an identity for the West. As each tourist enters the space of the dioramas he or she is deterritorializing the dioramas by bringing his or her own ideas of what the West means. By reformatting a previously constructed idea of the West I am creating a new assemblage and upon viewing *The Arrival* viewers will do the same.

The second image in the triptych consists of two pronghorn antelope. In the diorama two antelope are seen drinking water out of a man-made windmill structure. One antelope is preoccupied by this task of drinking while the other stares frightfully at what seems to be the person viewing the constructed prairie in a box. The diorama puts man and nature on the same level and the viewer is placed in an unnatural space of being close to the antelope. The diorama functions using icons like a weathered windmill and rough terrain that make up an assemblage, and the descriptions of the past found in pamphlets that accompany the dioramas do the same. Assemblage is also created with words as J. Macgregor Wise explains, “But there is another dimension to assemblages. In addition to the systems of things, actions and passions that we have been discussing assemblages are also systems of signs, semiotic systems. That is, assemblage elements include discourses, words, meanings and non corporeal relations that link signifiers with effects” (Wise 77-87). Using text within the images I am using both systems to decenter and reinstall assemblages to highlight the construct of the West. The text cut into the second image
reads, “The outer sheath is made up of a stiff, hair-like substance similar to your fingernails”, “Pronghorn fawns have almost no scent. The twins also do not lie next to each other. Approximately 320 feet separate them. Having no scent makes it difficult for predators to find the young pronghorn and in the event that a predator does manage to find one, the other will survive because they are not laying close together”. The image and text function together to accentuate how the assemblage constructed for the viewer falls short on representations of the West.

The last image in The Arrival is from an elk diorama. The elk is placed in a setting that has likeness to its original habitat. It stands tall among mounds of rock, prairie grass, and a couple of tall dead trees that are suppose to function as a forest. The elk’s head is held high with its eyes looking fearful peeking out from above its Plexiglas walls. The placement of the elks gaze outside of its tableau causes the elk to have a sense of awareness of the viewer in its constructed environment. The text cut into the image reads, “Their eyes are made to identify movement, not necessarily the creature itself”, “Antlers are used for defense, battles against rival bulls, and to impress female elk. A large rack means the bull will have a better chance to fight off rival males, thereby securing his harem for mating”. The text and image function much like the tableau and viewer by creating a gap between fact and fiction. The pamphlet educates the viewer of the vision and defense mechanisms of the animal while the tableau highlights those features.
The Arrival reimagines the American West as a savage or untamed place and is placed in context within an airport. As a triptych the photographs illustrate what an airport of a western community portrays to tourists by upholding certain histories to visitors and constructing narratives of how the West once was. The triptych comments on displaying cultural identity at an airport for the community to perpetuate western ideals that imitate the 1860’s ideas of expansion and survival to today’s travelers. Although the tableaus are not actual landscape images they mirror the ideas found within William Henry Jackson’s image, Grand Canyon of the Colorado River. 1883. Curator and author Eva Respini writes, “The importance of the survey images to Americans’ experience of the West is evident in an 1883 photograph by Jackson, made years after he participated in the Hayden survey. In this photograph, sold to tourists, the small figures surveying the
land embody the optimism that defined Manifest Destiny; this posed image is a nostalgic
reenactment of the survey spirit” (Respini 10-31).

Figure 2. William Henry Jackson. *Grand Canyon of the Colorado River*. 1883

Using the airport as a platform to educate travelers through dioramas and
pamphlets mirrors how The Great Surveys educated settlers and tourists on the West. The
tableaus represent what the West embodies. The airport is preserving the image of
settling an unsettled environment, which is what tourism is constructed to do by using
postcards, pamphlets, or other representations of the wild. In *The Arrival*, neither image
nor text as a representational system function in a traditional manner much like Martha
Rosler’s *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*. A double critique of
photography’s history trying to represent its subject but failing to do so and its failure to
understand the experience of the subject to the viewer. Text is placed in list form beside
the images of storefront windows to try to describe the images but one finds that
language is an inadequate descriptive system. *The Arrival*, by physically cutting text from the images the viewer must mentally fill in the blank text to see the entire image, or choose to see the work as a linguistic message and only read the blank space, to discover that neither systems of representation functions properly. This dysfunctional representation mirrors how the West is portrayed using image and text throughout history and how this breakdown has constructed an entire identity of western culture. For example old western photography, Clint Eastwood films, and dude ranches, do not truly describe the West but this is how it is portrayed.

![Figure 3. Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, 1977](image)
In *Cowboy and Pioneer* I am representing a constructed representation of historical iconography found within the Red Lodge, Montana landscape. By appropriating historical icons such as the cowboy and pioneer woman I am highlighting the communities ability to simulate a hyper reality through imagery, much like the portrayal of the West in historical photography. Image and text are used together to depict the signs and language that construct the environment and work to perpetuate western mythologies of the hardworking cowboy or the down on her luck homesteader. Subtle embossed text pushes outward from the photographs of painted murals. The text molds into the paper much like the murals on buildings become a part of the landscape. By using both image and text I am complicating the stereotypical readings of these signs through asking the viewer to spend time reading the embossment instead of only receiving an icon.

In the first image, a cowboy is painted on the side of a building taking up most of the frame and representing the epitome of western masculinity. Theorist, philosopher, and critic Roland Barthes explains the role of the objects within an image, “Special importance must be accorded to what could be called the posing of objects, where the meaning comes from the objects photographed. The interest lies in the fact that the objects are accepted inducers of associations of ideas (book case= intellectual) or, in a more obscure way, are veritable symbols. Such objects constitute excellent elements of signification: on the one hand they are discontinuous and complete in themselves, a
physical qualification for a sign, while on the other they refer to clear, familiar signified” (Barthes 16-31). The cowboy is wearing the standard stereotypical attire with a red paisley bandana tied around his neck, black Stetson hat, and a light striped shirt. His eyes are blue and his skin is weathered by age and hard work. In the background the viewer can see the cowboy’s yellow crop with silos and a barn to finish the painting’s landscape. The mural is painted on the side of a building that faces a city street. A two-hour parking sign disrupts the murals representation of wide-open spaces. Cowboy as a signifier signifies loyalty, hard work, and the West. The sidewalk and street sign contradict and question ideal representations of the West by placing the myth and reality within the same frame.

Figure 4. Brittney Denham. *Cowboy*. 2012
We see antelope, deer, elk, and often other wild game, and cowboys. It’s not all plains, after miles of them; we strike the grandest mountains with lakes, streams, and fishing n every thing. This country has a real kick and we will have lots to talk of, if the old jalopy holds out, and we get back home”. The source text is found from a postcard that is written from the perspective of the tourist writing to an outsider about his or her experiences of the West. Titles on historical images are typically used to inform or narrate to the viewer what is happening within the frame. Historian and author Mick Gidley writes, “All told, these pictures with words provided not so much information per se as an education in, and reinforcement of, the cultural values of the time. It could be argued that many of the stereo-card series should be seen and analyzed as examples of self instruction in Americanism” (Gidley 87-98). By adding the text to the image I am representing a new tension. The tension of how the person truly experiences the West as a simulation, through icons painted on the side of the buildings, as opposed to what the text portrays. The text is integrated into the image producing a seamlessness that references the ability to paint a mural within a landscape to represent an identity.

The second image in the diptych is an appropriated image of a painted mural that illustrates pioneer living. An old pioneer woman is depicted sitting on a chair next to an old settler’s log house. She is wearing all black with a bonnet over her hair. She watches as a man is tilling the land with horses and a wagon. Her hands are politely placed in her lap as she watches a man do the labor-intensive work. Like the cowboy image, the pioneer mural is painted on the side of a building. The tattered sidewalk and paved street
are reminders of the contemporary landscape where the painting exists. Small red fire emergency devices are in the middle of the painting, which break up the historical narrative of harsh pioneer living conditions. By painting these images large on sides of buildings they become an everyday reminder of mythical western living. The text embossing of the image reads, “This is to tell you we’re out in the old west and seeing lots of wide-open spaces miles of prairie with nary a tree, but sweet-smelling with sage. Often we travel the routes of the pioneers, such as the Oregon Trail and see old forts and landmarks of frontier times”. The text from the postcard recalls an adventure where relics of pioneer living and landmarks of frontier times are found. Appropriating imagery and placing it within the Red Lodge, Montana landscape constructs a modified historical experience for inhabitants. Using imagery and text found within the town I am incorporating icons from the West to magnify stereotypical perceptions of the West. When viewing the diptych not only is the West stereotyped as a region, stereotypes within the West arise such as gender roles. The cowboy is in the foreground, dominant, strong, while the pioneer woman is painted small and sits while a man figure works. Representations of gender placed in the social landscape help to perpetuate the myth of stereotypical gendered roles found under the wider umbrella of western stereotypes.
Stereotypical representations using imagery is not a new phenomenon. Since the mid 1800s images taken of people of the West were usually over the top and accentuated stereotypical ideas of what people thought they were. Curator Eva Respini writes, “Even though the classic cowboy began to disappear in real life over one hundred years ago, as an icon he is still instantly recognizable by his swagger and his clothes. The sitter’s clothes, worn like a costume, highlight how the symbolism of dress, regardless of its utility in the working world of ranch hands, can make for a powerful image. In the late 1800s, Charles D. Kirkland became known for photographs of Wyoming cowboys and straightforward descriptions of ranch life. But even his direct and frank pictures show cowboys in their dress clothes, helping to mythologize them as heroic figures” (Respini
Another artists whose work discusses the myth of depicting the West is Richard Prince with the series *Untitled (Cowboy)*. In *untitled (Cowboy), 1989*, Richard Prince deconstructs the myth of the cowboy by rephotographing an advertisement of a cowboy. John McWhinnie writes in *No Country for Old Men: Spiritual America and its Wild History*, “For Prince, “wild history” addresses the idea that history is a fictional construct. In a wild history, one is no longer able to distinguish the public version of events from the private version, what happened from what actually happened. It speaks to our culture’s propensity to print the myth and thereby turns it into fact. In wild history, image is more powerful than evidence. Evidence, in the form of documentation—for instance, “true” photographs—is just another public story built out of an adulterated image bank. Text is ad copy written by clever copywriters out to sell you a dream. Wild history is where personal history meets public myth and becomes inseparably one, the lines between the two so artfully airbrushed that they become indistinguishable” (McWhinnie 32-43). Richard Prince and Charles Kirkland’s depiction of how a cowboy is represented still rings true today. How the West was portrayed over 100 years ago is deeply ingrained into how Americans view the West currently. Kirkland’s *Wyoming Cow-boy* portrays a cowboy as noble, in his best attire. White fringe chaps, shined boots, hat, and gun holster play into the identification of the iconic character. Richard Prince’s rephotographed advertisement deals with the inauthentic and constructed character. Prince shows a cowboy riding a horse in the desert, with a blue-sky background. Both images depict how photography perpetuates the myth of an iconic staple of the West, the cowboy.
Figure 6. Charles D. Kirkland. *Wyoming Cow-boy*. 1877-95

Figure 7. Richard Prince. *Untitled (Cowboy)*. 1989
Chapter 4: Signs of Suburbia

*Signs of Suburbia* is a portion of, *This is to Tell You We’re Out in the Old West* that demonstrates how a community navigates and takes ownership of a space by marking the environment using street signs. By framing road signs used to delineate geographical location I am recontextualizing the meaning of the language found on the signs. Five images are exhibited at the same heights as a street sign and appear to be 1:1 in scale. The images are hung at these heights to signify a relationship between original context and the viewer.

![Figure 8. Brittney Denham. *Signs of Suburbia*. 2012](image_url)

The placement of the signs within the frame leave the signs surrounded by wide-open blue sky, which is a signifier of the expansiveness of the West. The signs and streets are titled using gun names such as Winchester, Sako, Marlin, Glock, and Red Ryder.
Guns as objects are reduced to their name only. This reduction strips the object down to text that pacifies what a gun is used for, taming the object. The taming traces back to a guns historical usage to tame the western landscape. The signs and homes placed on the Wyoming territory create a tamed simulation of the wild West. Pacifying the gun by reducing it to text and placing it within a suburban context mimics the taming of the West through suburbanizing it. American media theorist Laura Marks writes, “Mimesis, from the Greek mimeisthai, “to imitate,” suggests that one represents a thing by acting like it. Mimesis is thus a form of representation based on a particular, material contact at a particular moment” (Marks 129-153). The neighborhood being named after a gun company, and road signs named after types of guns, bring to the forefront myths tied to the West such as it being an unsettled environment. Housing developments strive for order and safety, road signs establish location, and therefore the signs represent a juxtaposition of chaos and control in one space.

Stephen Shore’s image U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon. July 21, 1973 poses similar ideas of representation of landscape as Signs of Suburbia. A large advertisement billboard is placed in the middle of the frame with a mountain scene painted on it. The landscape where the advertisement is placed does not replicate the painting, but looks like a more realistic version of what the painting is trying to represent. Blue skies and clouds surround the billboard, its blues mirroring the skies of the painting. The billboard captures western ideas of the sublime found within nature and creates an ideal representation of a western landscape. In relation to Signs of Suburbia, both works use a system of signs that help place familiar icons within the western landscape. The
street signs are photographs of signs with gun names; turning a violent object into a less represented more tamed description of a weapon. Guns reduced to text signal direction, Shore uses a billboard, and both represent a deconstruction of the West.


Chapter 5: Black Gold

The triptych *Black Gold* represents how the natural resource of coal helps to sustain the economy of Gillette, Wyoming. My family has been coal miners for almost 20 years, and I have also driven haul truck. The gold leafing on the image is added to invoke questioning as to why and how the West was settled, and how the West economically functions. The triptych consists of one large coal truck image surrounded by gold leaf
with two images of coal shelves on either side of the main image. In the two images of the coal shelves gold leafing is applied to visible areas of coal deposits.

The center image depicts a coal truck in the middle of the frame. The environment that the truck normally functions within is covered and replaced by gold leafing. Gold is a signifier of decadence, grandeur, profit, and expansion. By using the gold leaf the truck is monumentalized and becomes more of a formal focal point. The gold that replaces the land becomes a sign of wealth. The two images that accompany the coal truck are the quarry environments. The shelves of the pit are evidence of the machineries ability to physically alter the landscape to remove the natural resource. Gold leafing is placed on top of all pieces of coal within the frame to signify the wealth of resources found in the Wyoming landscape. The greater the coal production the more affluent the town becomes, which in turn allows the town to expand, thereby perpetuating historical ideas of western expansion. Gold is itself a major signifier of religious motifs among many, Thomas Hoving and Carmen Gomez-Moreno write for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Gold has been used for thousands of years to make precious jewels, ornaments, coins, vessels, and many other objects both for religious or secular use. With its almost mythic qualities of beauty and eternity, gold has been, more often than not, the cause of avarice and corruption. Thinking of all the struggle of mankind to find gold, to worship it, to use it for its beauty, to try to create it, brings us to meditate on what has become of gold today. With incredible effort it is extracted from the depths of the earth and much of it is buried again in bank vaults as bullion. We only see paper, never gold coins. We know the gold is there, and tragic will be the day when it is no more” (Hoving, Gomez 75).
By covering the coal with gold I am glorifying the resources that supply the town and nation its energy. Historically, western expansion began in the search for gold, land, and other natural resources. Gold was not found in this specific landscape, but the utilization of coal within the country parallels that of the historical search for gold. Curator Eva Respini writes, “Photography has played a key role in celebrating the taming of the West, influencing attitudes about land use and its impact. The scope of this discovery is astonishing within seven years, about $300 million in gold had been excavated from the ground and its economic and social impact solidified the notion of the West as land of opportunity. Mining towns became cities, and photography flourished in their centers. Timothy O’Sullivan in 1868 took some of the first photographs made in
mine shafts” (Respini 10-31). Like Timothy O’ Sullivan in *Savage Mine, Curtis Shaft, Virginia City*, where men are seen working in an underground mine, I am using photography as a means to show the viewer the economic wealth that the West has. The triptych exhibits how a specific town expands through mining, and lends to a discussion between contemporary and historical working conditions. *Black Gold* glorifies the resources found in the West and the value found within the landscape.

Figure 11. Timothy O’Sullivan. *Savage Mine, Curtis Shaft, Virginia City, Nevada*. 1868

Chapter 6: Collections

Museum collections are displayed to construct a narrative of important cultural information. Museums of the West house historical western mythologies of an untamed past and land. In *Collections*, as seen in every piece that makes up *This is to Tell You We’re Out in the Old West*, I am representing representations of western culture.
Collections consist of three separate pieces, a man’s gun collection, a found rock, and a hair wreath.

The Gun Collection diptych documents one man’s gun collection found in The Rock Pile Museum in Gillette, Wyoming. The two tightly framed images place importance on one man’s gun collection. If the viewer looks closely at each information tag found below every gun they will notice that all guns are of the same make and are in chronological order starting with year 1870. The collection has signifiers that emphasize stereotypes of westerners as being gun owning, violent, savages. Gun Collection like Signs of Suburbia uses an object to further construct the identity of the West. Thereby both pieces construct a new representation of the West by using a historical icon that historically helped tame the landscape.

The next image in the series, Rock, is brought from the landscape to be hung indoors and behind glass for museumgoers to enjoy. The rock framed in the middle of the image is hung with a white tag above that explains how the rock made its way onto the museum walls. It tells the story of the rock being found by a man who lives in the town, his horse stepped on the rock causing it to split in half. He thought it looked like a Native American artifact so he brought it to the museum. The tag justifies to the visitor why it is allowed to hang on the wall asking the viewer to accept its placement among the arrowheads and old bullets. By using text to inform the viewer of the rock’s history it gives the rock validation to be in a museum. Director of Hayward Gallery, Ralph Rugoff writes about a conspiracy of vitrines, “We are essentially amnesiacs, and what we call “memory” is nothing more than an imaginative act scaffold around fragments of lived
experience…It also drollly implies that museums, as repositories of cultural memory built up around “fragments of experience” may be no more reliable than Delani’s short-term recall. They provide a fictive picture of a history that no amount of evidence will ever retrieve or render accountable” (Rugoff 97-100). The rock signifies a community’s ability or need to collect an artifact that is used to represent a past era. The rock may have simply been a rock, but because a man with a horse attached a narrative of a Native American to the object it becomes a piece of history, a memorial of sorts that should be cherished and displayed. The image of a rock also represents my need to instill new meaning to what is considered a historic artifact in relation to our need as a culture to hold on to where our past stems from while we embark on our future. The Museum of Art at Rhode Island School of Design appeared to have felt the same when they asked artist Andy Warhol to curate a show called Raid the Icebox using art from the museums basement storage areas. Art critic David Bourdon wrote, “Andy Warhol consented to go underground in Providence, and to cast his innocent, non-curatorial eye upon objects that had been scorned and forgotten for decades. By resurrecting some cast-offs, “Raid the Icebox” restores some of the cultural fabric of the past, seen now in a fresh perspective through the contemporary eyes of Warhol” (Bourdon 17-24). Bringing a contemporary artist in to curate among what was perceived as forgotten art resurrected what was dubbed unimportant. This draws relation to the man who brought a rock into a museum and added text to bolster its importance. Rock, having text and image combination draws parallels between it and The Arrival, through inadequate modes of representation.
Hair Wreath was recreated as an object after seeing similar work at museums in Montana, Wyoming, and South Dakota. A text panel that described why they were made accompanied each wreath. The text told the story of pioneer women collecting hair to meticulously construct wreaths to memorialize their loved ones. The hair wreath I constructed consists of over 100 flowers made from synthetic and human hair from my family, friends, and myself. The wreath is placed in a traditional shadow box that replicates the display of past wreaths. The shadow box is lined with white paper that is embossed with text that comes from the information found beside the hair wreaths in museums. The embossed text reads, “The term fancy work came to describe both functional and purely aesthetic objects a Victorian woman made or embellished in her free time. From 1850 to 1875, one of the most popular forms of fancywork was the hair wreath. Often, close companions exchanged hair as tokens of friendship. Hair was also sometimes taken after a person’s death as a means of honor and remembrance”. Although
Laura Marks is talking about video and film when talking about embodied knowledge I believe it has relation to the creation of the hair wreath, she explains, “I suggested that memory is encoded in objects through contact, and examined films and videos that attempt to reconstruct those memories by engaging with the object. Cinema itself appeals to contact-to embodied knowledge, and to the sense of touch in particular” (Marks 129-153). Like the painted murals I believe that contemporary western culture uses images, text, and objects to trace themselves to the past. By constructing the hair wreath I am taking part in reproducing an object that represents a piece of the West.

Figure 13. Brittney Denham. *Collections (Hair Wreath)*. 2012

While I chose to remake a human hair wreath Mark Klett rephotographed the work of Timothy O'Sullivan. Author William L. Fox writes, “Klett’s first major recognition as a photographer came when he put together a team in 1977 to undertake the
task of rephotographing the work of the nineteenth century photographers of the Great Surveys of the West. The Rephotographic Survey Project ran through 1979 and made thousands of images. The resulting exhibition and book of 120 rephotographs, Second View, as it’s called, was an astonishing feat of mathematical accuracy, cultural geography, history, and art” (Fox 3-27). By rephotographing the Great Surveys of the West Mark Klett is representing the West in its current state.

Figure 14. Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe. *Panorama from Sentinel Dome connecting three views by Carleton Watkins.* 2003

Chapter 7: Exhibition

The group exhibition, *Next Wave MFA Thesis Exhibition 2012*, curated by Sarah Rodgers, is where *This is To Tell You We’re Out in The Old West* was exhibited. Upon entering the gallery space the viewer is greeted by two iconic symbols of the American West in the diptych *Cowboy and Pioneer*. When viewing *Cowboy and Pioneer* they function as indications of how and what the audience will be observing as the embossed text and image serve as two of the most stereotypical representations of the West.
The wall directly across from *Cowboy and Pioneer* is where one will see *Collections*. The hair wreath is placed in a wood and glass shadowbox lined with white embossed paper, hung five inches higher than the guns and rock images. To the right of the hair wreath the triptych of the gun image, rock, then and gun hangs horizontally across the wall. Together the triptych and hair wreath act as museum-like artifacts that embody the West.

Walking further into the gallery the remainder of *This is to Tell You We’re Out in The Old West* is placed on two adjoined walls. The wall is made of three panels separated by small concrete columns. On the smallest of three walls *The Arrival* hangs as a triptych. The prints are put in wooden frames with one and a half inches of space between the print and the back of the frame. High lighting casts shadows of the cut out text onto the inside of the frame. The triptych works in unison with its title, serving as an arrival into the rest of the work. On the middle wall, *Black Gold* hangs as a triptych with the coal environments hanging on both sides of the haul truck surrounded by gold.

The third wall is home to *Signs of Suburbia*. Seven images hang eight feet high on the wall. The images of road signs hang high to help with the perception of viewing an actual road sign. A bank of windows sits about a foot and a half above the images. The windows work with the images of blue sky surrounding the signs due to the window placement letting in views of open sky.

With *This is to Tell You We’re Out in the Old West* being shown in a public gallery I was able to watch the interaction people had with the work. Growing up in western America and now being removed from the region visiting was like being
transported to a past era. Interacting with people unfamiliar with the West led me to the realization that the fabricated Hollywood portrayal of my home is what was believed. There are reminders of history, but for the most part the horses were replaced by Ford pick-ups, dirt roads became paved, franchises closed the mom and pop stores, modern technology is accessible. In *This is to Tell You We’re Out in the Old West* I was searching for the myth in reality and came up with yet another representation of the West. Trying to debunk the stereotypical perception of the West in turn, using photography, constructed my own western reality.

Figure 15. Brittney Denham. *Next Wave MFA Thesis Exhibition*. 2012
Chapter 8: Conclusion

In the summer of 2011 I underwent a photographic exploration of Gillette Wyoming influenced by photographer Bill Owens series, Suburbia. I grew up in the town and found it peculiar that each time I went back the town remained the same. In this work I used text from conversations I had with towns people to influence what images would be made. In The Old-Fashioned Way, a friend sits on a chair covered in a floral pattern reminiscent of the 1960s and mirrors the work of William Eggleston titled, Jackson, Mississippi. The woman holds a baby downing a similar flower headband. On the ground beside the pair sits a bag of Miracle Grow potting soil, and in the foreground flowers in a planter. The background surrounding the mother and child is a trailer dated by chipped paint. The woman does not look thrilled or upset while gazing into the lens. The words, Old-Fashioned Way, are embossed into the print stemming from a conversation between the woman and myself. When describing her life she said, “I did it the old fashioned way. I got knocked up, put the barrel to his back, and had a shotgun wedding”. She wasn’t the first woman to have this particular life path, and she certainly wouldn’t be the last. I questioned why or how the outdated ideas of the West were so deeply ingrained into my community. The words Old Fashioned Way fed my need to discover how and why the town was constructed to collectively believe we were still a part of the past.
This is to Tell You We’re Out in the Old West uses imagery and text to inform how stereotypical constructs shape the current perception of western identity. Through simulated iconic representation of the West such as cowboys, pioneers, guns, and wildlife
found within a contemporary context like airports, suburban neighborhoods, and buildings one can see how historical influences through the use of photography and other mediums have helped influence and shape an artificial narrative of the West. Using iconic and familiar stereotypes of the West such as the heroic cowboy, native wildlife, and guns helped me examine how America constructed the myth to push people westward, and to perpetuate ideas of expansion. The semiotic exploration found in This is to Tell You We’re Out in the Old West helped in the deconstructing of these icons and stereotypes. For example placing found text such as postcards and pamphlets with imagery taken from the communities helped in the breaking down of western perceptions. Our reliance on icons and myths act as a double-edged sword. Without them specific towns using them as a tourist attraction may not function. At the same time these thriving myths and stereotypes of the West pose as a constructed reality freezing the past within the present.
References


