

WHERE THE PAVEMENT ENDS

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ABSTRACT. Black Rock is one of the nation's newest national conservation areas. This significant desert-and-mountain region 107 miles north of Reno, Nevada, is the focus of increased global attention, in part due to the annual Burning Man festival, which has become a cause célèbre of the dot-com set and many others. This photographic essay offers a visual sampling of the lyrical sensibility of this unique environment. Geography, I argue, can be an overtly photographic textual form. *Keywords:* Black Rock, desert, lyricism, mountains, Nevada, photography, water.

Where the pavement ends, the West begins. Silk-screened on T-shirts sold at Bruno's Country Club in Gerlach, Nevada (essentially a diner, bar, and double-wide assortment of small motel rooms), this mythical phrase embodies the spirit of the Black Rock country. At hand is the American outback: distant, rugged, dusty, and silent but for the howl of the wind or the distant scream of a freight train rolling along the southern edge of the vast playa. Surrounded by the Jackson Mountains, the Black Rock Range, the Granite Range, and the Calico Range, the Black Rock outcropping and prostrate playa at its feet serve as the visual locus of an enormous desert. This is a place unlike others, excluded from the nineteenth-century celebration of the sublime and interpreted historically by eastern explorers and settlers as barren, hostile, forbidding, and repulsive. The sense of physical and emotional space is overwhelming, so it is no surprise that this place attracts the survivalist, the Burning Man exhibitionist, and the recreationist. . . . It is here that people escape the concrete canyons and grids of time-managed lives. I wonder, now and then, whether these visitors from other worlds are aware of the human ancestry, both spiritually and historically, contained within the canyons, springs, playas, and groves. Even though some people consider this an empty or blank place, I know that the Black Rock Desert is a magical place.

When Ansel Adams exposed his famous "Moonrise over Hernandez" photograph (1941), he was driving south along the highway and spotted, out of the corner of his eye, the brilliant reflection of the fading sun off the white grave markers in small Hernandez, New Mexico. He tells this story of measuring in his mind's eye—while under time duress—the candlepower of the reflected sun off the moon in order to expose the negative properly. In "Moonrise over Black Rock" the process was different: I was camping on the playa, waiting for the light. I had viewed the Black Rock hundreds—thousands—of times, every glance as if obligated to the mythical spirit of the desert. I waited for the moon, knowing that the celestial collaboration would embody the essence of this place. Reach into the earth; feel the grit and glitter of the light as it reflects off the minute minerals contained within. Feel the

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hot water; let its subterranean history soothe the soul. It is simply sublime in a quiet way to float in the Soldier Meadows hot spring and close your eyes, listening to the bubbling of the water against the surface tension of the pool. Feel the hot, muddy muck between your toes and lose the horizon, discovering that the sky is your only geography. Another pool, hidden in an earthen depression miles away, is a dangerous jewel but a welcome visual accent to the vacant sky and alkali ground.

Sit and contemplate, alone, in a grove. Leave the place for another, leave your words for another, as has been done in cabins and on canyon walls throughout the Black Rock. Clean the detritus of human ignorance as an offering to the land. Discover the wind, faster and faster, farther and farther, until you have nothing to stop your advance except your own whim. Turn a broad circle because you somehow must. There is color in this landscape, but it, too, must be discovered, even if it is the red silt-caked railroad ties contrasted against the muted, pale-green sage. Discover the forest of millennia past, a redwood turned into rock as if some western fairy tale took place here. How ironic that this history must be enclosed. Find the overwhelming sensuality of the geyser, if you can. For this is a place of magic; certainly it is no *tabula rasa*. Within this vastness, it can be written: Where the pavement ends, the West begins.

FIG. 1 (p. 547)—Moonrise over Black Rock, 1990.

FIG. 2 (p. 548)—Children floating at Soldier Meadows Hot Springs, Black Rock Desert, 1998.

FIG. 3 (p. 549)—Red silt-caked railroad-tie house near Rattlesnake Canyon, Jackson Mountains, Black Rock Desert, 2002.

FIG. 4 (p. 550)—One of the Double Hot Springs, Black Rock Desert, 2002.

FIG. 5 (p. 551)—“World’s Fastest Sailing Yacht,” Experimental Aircraft Association project, Black Rock Desert, 2002.

FIG. 6 (p. 552)—Petrified forest, Black Rock Desert, 2002.

FIG. 7 (p. 553)—Green chair near Blue Lakes, Pine Forest Range, Black Rock Desert, 2002.

FIG. 8 (p. 554)—Fly geyser, Black Rock Desert, 2002.