

has me in its crosshairs, and I'm terrified. I'm too afraid to open the door of my car, or even zoom my camera onto the faces watching me. Directly in front of me are three signs; signs that rip through the desert silence like a stealth fighter screaming across an empty sky.

The signs stake out invisible borders cutting through this dirt road. One phrase marks the limit of public space: "No Trespassing." Another marks a limit of visibility: "Photography Prohibited." And the third announces that the rawest expression of sovereignty governs the no-mans-land only a few feet away.

USE OF DEADLY FORCE AUTHORIZED

This is a place where the "normal" rules of society don't apply. It's a place where armed and camouflaged men in unmarked trucks have the right to kill you to prevent you from entering. These men are not soldiers, they wear no insignias, and are presumably not subject to the same rules of engagement as their enlisted counterparts.³⁷ All of the justifications for secrecy, all of the line-items obscured in "black budgets" and all of the conspiracy theories and alien stories aside, in this moment, Groom Lake seems to come down to a simple and brutal fact: "If you try to come in here, or if you even try to take a picture of what's in here, we're going to kill you." Anyone who has ventured towards the border has felt the same thing. Jim Goodall, stealth-watcher and aviation author, says "the thing that bothers me about Area 51 [is] that a camouflage dude in a white Jeep Cherokee can come up to you, shoot you in cold blood, drag your butt a quarter of a mile inside the perimeter of the base, and throw it out where the buzzards can get to you, and there isn't a government agency or law-enforcement agency in this country that has the authority to go in there and get your body. Even if they could, there's no one who can be held accountable, because the place doesn't officially exist. You might as well be on Mars."³⁸

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You may as well be on Mars, indeed; you may as well be somewhere that is totally *alien*; you may as well be *nowhere*. Groom Lake is famous for the fact that it does not properly exist, that it is quite literally *nowhere*. And the history of this nowhere is older than the U-2, or even the Manhattan Project. The nowhere of the "black world," of this silent and foreboding place, is as old as the United States itself. In the nineteenth century, it was the nowhere at the margins of empire, the "black world" of American expansion, of indigenous "savages," and of wholesale and indiscriminate death. It was a swath of uncharted land, a blank space on the map, a space in the crosshairs of manifest destiny, a space that stunk of death.

With the exception of an 1820s campaign to trap all the beaver in the area, the native peoples of the present-day Nellis Complex, the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute, were left alone by whites until the mid-nineteenth century.³⁹ As emigrants, miners, and prospectors arrived to the area, violence between the Native Americans

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and whites became common. It was in this context that the Treaty of Ruby Valley was signed in 1863. Declaring "peace and friendship" between the U.S. and the Western Shoshone, the treaty granted the United States certain rights of passage and mining claims throughout the land, but maintained Shoshone sovereignty over the land.⁴⁰ The Western Shoshone, for their part, were to ensure that "hostilities and all depredations upon the emigrant trains, the mail and telegraph lines, and upon the citizens of the United States within their country, shall cease."⁴¹ In return, the whites promised to compensate the Western Shoshone for the "inconvenience resulting to the Indians in consequence of the driving away and destruction of game along the routes travelled [sic] by white men, and by the formation of agricultural and mining settlements."⁴² But from the beginning the treaty did not extend the same guarantee of safety to the Western Shoshone that the whites themselves demanded. Raymond Yowell, the Western Shoshone Council Chief, describes the signing of the Treaty of Ruby Valley itself the following way:

They had [the Indians] lined up along that ridge, and the troops were standing there ready with their rifles... They fed the Indians first, before signing the treaty. Before they did that they had the Indians turn over a supposedly bad Shoshone to them, who'd maybe killed some white people or something like that. And so they hung him in front of them first, that morning when they were going to sign the treaty. And then, after he was dead, they cut him down and took him away, and they [the Shoshone] didn't know what they did with him. His relatives wanted the body, but they wouldn't give it to them. Later on, they fed [the Shoshone] a meat that they couldn't recognize. Pretty soon, they figured out that they had cooked the Shoshone that they had hung and fed it to them. That's what they figured.⁴³

The violence of "peace and friendship" at Ruby Valley was consonant with the times. Miners were poisoning the land with mercury and cyanide,⁴⁴ whites were cutting down trees for fuel, and their cattle were devouring plants that native peoples relied on for food. Local game was frightened off the land.⁴⁵ Invading settlers attacked Western Shoshone women, raped mothers in front of their children,⁴⁶ and slaughtered native peoples indiscriminately.⁴⁷ In the 1860s and 1870s, Nevada's main newspaper, aptly titled *Territorial Enterprise*, advocated for "exterminating the whole race."⁴⁸ Expansion, a U.S. variation of nineteenth century imperialism, had created its own "black world." It was a legal nowhere, a dark place where certain people could be killed without consequence. An alien place. A place in the desert where the words and deeds of settlers and newspapers would be echoed in the deranged exhortation of a certain Mr. Kurtz in the African heart of darkness: "exterminate all the brutes."⁴⁹

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In the late 1920s, the Navy chose Hawthorne as the site for a massive ammunition-depot, and modern weapons arrived to the area known to the Western Shoshone as *Newe Sogobia*. To claim the land, President Calvin Coolidge invoked the Pickett Act of 1912, which authorized the president to *temporarily* withdraw public land for waterpower, irrigation, and "other public purposes."⁵⁰ With the outbreak of World War Two, the Department of War created many of Nevada's contemporary military landscapes. On October 29, 1940, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8578 to establish the Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range (that would become the Nellis Range Complex). To do this, he reached into an obscure corner of the law books to invoke