

Sally Mann's American vision of the land

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Between 1997 and 2005 the American photographer Sally Mann portrayed the landscape of the American South, specifically the landscapes of Georgia, Virginia, Louisiana and Mississippi. The photographs depict the common flora of the American South, such as magnolia and kudzu trees, the Tallahatchie River, the crumbling remains of plantation estates and the sites of Civil War battles. Mann presented these photographs in three gallery exhibitions in New York and Los Angeles (*Mother Land*, *Deep South* and *Last Measure*), and in a book published in 2005 titled *Deep South*. The photographs brought financial success and received mostly favourable reviews in leading art magazines such as *Artforum*, and in the popular press, for example in the *New York Times*. However, a close analysis of these laudatory reviews reveals that they relied on disparaging gender and Southern stereotypes, and categorized the works as local and personal rather than as national images of the land, a 'subjective regionalism' in the words of photographer Stephen Longmire.¹ This is in contrast to works by white male photographers, which are perceived as representing 'The American' landscape.

Southern locality

Most critics tied the meaning of the photographs to the fact that Mann was born, raised and continues to live in the South, reading the photographs as an autobiographical metaphor. This discourse linked the photographs to an approach that glorified the South; they were labelled nostalgic, allegedly embodying a visualization of lamentation and loss that traces its roots back to the South's defeat in the Civil War.² A striking example can be found in a favourable review by Katherine Dieckmann, who claimed in 1997: 'It's often said that the South is hyperbolized by those seeking a site of nostalgia and excess, a place where the sweet, humid air forever carries an aroma of loss... But... it's often Southerners who promote their own clichés, and every cliché contains a smidge of truth'.³

¹ Stephen Longmire, 'Black West: Reviewing American Landscape Photography', *Afterimage*, 25:2, September/October 1997, 24.

² A few examples: Grace Glueck, 'Art in Review: Sally Mann', *New York Times*, 15 October 1999, E37; Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2011, 80; Eleanor Heartney, 'The Forensic Eye', *Art in America*, January 2005, 50; Suzanne Schuweiler, 'Sally Mann's South', *Southeastern College Art Conference Review*, 16:3, December 2013, 325-35; Alfred Corn, 'Photography Degree Zero', *Art in America*, January 1998, 88-91.

³ Katherine Dieckmann, 'Landscape and the Suspension of Time', *Village Voice*, 21 October 1997, 48-50, 53.

The nostalgic and local reading rested on the works' subject matter, on Mann's use of the photographic technique of wet collodion, which was used by Civil War photographers, and on the photographs' seemingly-Pictorialist aesthetics from the end of the nineteenth century. It was also compatible with Mann's contextualization of the works, which emphasized the region's distinctiveness from the 'American' experience. In the catalogue text of the *Motherland* exhibition she wrote: 'Our history of defeat and loss sets us apart from other Americans and because of it, we embrace the Proustian concept that the only true paradise is a lost paradise'.⁴ Nonetheless, these interpretations also relied on the tradition of American landscape photography and on stereotypical discursive patterns that reveal intra-geographical hierarchies related to the history of the American nation.

In the history of photography, the geographical space of the Southern landscape was structured dualistically: as either a kind of pastoral 'Arcadia', or a violent and backward region mired in its past. The Civil War photographs were the first to depict the Southern land. Since the majority of the fighting took place in Southern states,⁵ the landscape imagery was defined as one of violence and loss, as Maura Lyons has recently shown.⁶ Moreover, during the war, this visual imagery created by photographers, such as Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner and Timothy H. O'Sullivan, who were avid supporters of the North, encouraged Northern viewers to see the Southern landscape as an enemy, an active agent in the war, and morally infected due to the sin of slavery. The construction of the Southern land in relation to the destruction caused by the war continued in the canon of American landscape photography long after the war was over. For instance, art historian Beaumont Newhall contextualized these photographs as the first American documentary photography in his classic textbook *The History of Photography* (1937).⁷ At the same time, photographs and illustrations, used in advertisements at the end of the nineteenth century, aimed to promote the tourism industry in the South by creating an exotic, utopian and pre-industrial image of the region and arousing nostalgic sentiments.⁸

The Great Depression reinforced the association of the Southern landscape with violence and backwardness.⁹ The work of FSA photographers, such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, distributed in magazines, art exhibitions and photography books during the 1930s, portrayed the generalized poverty of the post-Civil War South and its hard and 'cruel' soil. Thus, augmenting the South's

⁴ Sally Mann, *Motherland: Recent Landscapes of Georgia and Virginia*, New York: Edwynn Houk Gallery, 1997, 5.

⁵ Lisa M. Brady, *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.

⁶ Maura Lyons, 'Wounded Landscapes: Picturing Relationships between Humans and Nature in Northern Imagery from the American Civil War', *Panorama 1, Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art*, 2015.

⁷ Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: from 1839 to the Present*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1937, 42-3.

⁸ Karen L. Cox. *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011, 132-36.

⁹ Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

impoverished image. The area, found itself stereotypically represented as 'the nation's number one economic problem', to quote President Franklin Roosevelt.¹⁰ Clarence Laughlin's work from the 1940s, published in the book *Ghosts Along the Mississippi* (1948), further heightened the sense of nostalgia already present in the cultural construction of the region. By depicting obsolete ways of life in his native New Orleans and the decaying ruins of nineteenth-century plantation around Louisiana in a romantic-surrealist style, Laughlin's photographs evoke a sense of mystery and melancholy. As one contemporary scholar described them: 'a typically Southern preoccupation with the past, tinged with Romanticist elegy'.¹¹ During the first half of the twentieth century, other forms of US visual culture, such as films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), radio shows, advertisements and cartoons served a similar purpose and often reflected a nostalgia for the old South's pre-war past.¹² The geography of production - most publishing houses, television and film studios and advertising firms, as well as major galleries and museums, are headquartered in New York or Los Angeles - has long been responsible for how non-Southerners perceive the region.¹³ Cultural images such as the hillbilly helped to construct Southerners as religious, violent, degenerate, sentimental and deeply connected to family and land.¹⁴ The distribution of such images in the American media reinforced the stereotypical perception of the Southern geographical space by the North-Eastern cultural elite, to which the mainstream American art world has always belonged. A prime example can be found in Alfred Corn's positive review of Mann's work, published in *Art in America* in 1998: 'In a region where the Book of Revelation is taken literally, this image suggests an apocalypse (ie, unveiling) that looks backward to the Civil War or forward to the millenarian expectations of certain religious sects in the South.'¹⁵ Portraying the region as backward, religious and dangerous (in the past and present alike), Corn's review simply confirmed these stereotypes.

The policy of racial segregation and the circulation of lynching photographs of African-Americans contributed as well to this system of visual values. A prominent example are the photographs of Charles Moore, which depict hostile, white Southerners attacking a crowd of demonstrators in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, during a 1963 civil rights protest. As Martin Berger demonstrated, these images played an important role in the nationalist discourse that constructed the 'racist and violent' South as opposed to the ostensibly enlightened North. Their wide circulation in the white media focused the viewers' attention on acts of violence and away from historically-rooted inequities in public accommodation, voting rights, housing policies and labour practices. They presented racism as a

¹⁰ Steve Davis, 'The South as "The Nation's No.1 Economic Problem": The NEC Report of 1938', *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 62:2, July 1978, 119.

¹¹ Lewis Kachur, 'Clarence John Laughlin, Regionalist Surrealist', *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, 2:2, 2008, 216.

¹² Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, 83.

¹³ Karen L. Cox, 'The South and Mass Culture', *The Journal of Southern History*, 75:3, August 2009, 681.

¹⁴ Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

¹⁵ Corn, 'Photography Degree Zero', 90.

problem of white Southern thugs, thus, allowing white Northerners to imagine their own politics as progressive.¹⁶ This is not to say that the racial history of the South is simply an invention, rather, that how the South is remembered is partially dependent on how it functions as visual constructs within the national imagery.

The analysis of historian Thomas J. Sugrue supports Berger's arguments. Sugrue claims that mainstream historians, journalists and political commentators ignore 'the long and intense history of racial violence and conflict in northern towns and cities'.¹⁷ He pointed out that while racial inequality took different forms in the North and South, 'in both regions, private behaviour, market practices and public policies created and reinforced racial separation and inequality'. Informal Jim Crow policies excluded black Northerners from restaurants, hotels, swimming pools and more, and confined them to declining neighbourhoods.¹⁸ Even today, the most persistent feature of life in the North has been racial segregation in housing and education,¹⁹ and police brutality and excessive use of force are also common in Northern cities.

The well-publicized history of racial atrocities in the South, and colourful debates about the Confederate flag in Southern cities in the 2000s, made it easier to imagine the South as the racial face of America. An appraisal review by Vicki Goldberg, published in 1997, exemplifies the influence of these debates on the reception of Mann's landscapes. Citing Mann's exhibition catalogue that portrays Southerners as in love with the past and death, she states: 'Well yes, when the Confederate flag still flies over the Capitol in South Carolina'.²⁰

This stereotypical portrayal of the South continued in contemporary exhibitions and defined the region in the American art world as a homogenous space, despite the diversity of the region's climate, environment, demographics, economy and culture. As Warren Zanes noted in reviewing the exhibition *Picturing the South: 1860 to the Present* at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta (1996): 'despite the efforts of the curator, Ellen Dugan, to present a counter-history, what we see is same old regional stereotypes: racial strife, religious fanaticism and an obsession with its own history and the signifier of its past glory'.²¹

These discursive patterns that construct the South's dualistic structure (pastoral 'Arcadia' or a violent and backward region) are in clear contrast to the general perception of US Western scenery, which was (and still is) constituted as representative of the American nation in major exhibitions, such as *the Photographer and the American Landscape* (1963), *American Landscape* (1981), at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and the *West as America* (1991), at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Despite their nationalistic titles, the two former exhibitions

¹⁶ Martin Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 46-8.

¹⁷ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, New York: Random House, 2008, xiv.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, xv.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 538-40.

²⁰ Vicki Goldberg, 'Landscapes That Are Steeped in Time', *New York Times*, 17 October 1997, E35.

²¹ Warren Zanes, 'Primitive Myths: Photography and the American South', *Afterimage*, 25:4, January 1998, 10.

included only images of the West. Furthermore, despite the controversies the exhibition *the West as America* aroused, by revising the standard narratives of manifest destiny, heroic exploration and inevitable progress, it continued to reaffirm the elevation of the Western landscape and promoted its importance in the national imagery of the land, as representing the American nation.

This analysis sheds light on the positioning of the local and nostalgic interpretation within American visual culture. While nostalgia *per se* is not necessarily a derogatory word, a nostalgic conception of the Southern landscape has been positioned in opposition to a critical view of the region, applied by the dominant North-American artistic discourse. Within this cultural dynamic, the labelling of Mann's landscapes as nostalgic places them in a space imputed with undervalued meanings in the American intra-geographic hierarchy, cementing the perception of her work as merely particular. The South, as the 'Other' in the US's intra-geographical hierarchy, is unable to stand for the whole, to use Angela Miller's concept of 'synecdochic nationalism'.²² Warren Zanes similarly claimed that 'photographs of the South are rarely allowed to speak of anything so much as from where they came [and] as the issue of place is insistently imposed on photographs of the South, they are seen, in a reciprocal action, to embody regionalism itself'.²³

It is interesting to note that scholarly acknowledgment of the violence of the US government's policies toward Native Americans²⁴ did not impair the ability of Western scenery to represent a positive national identity in the contemporary American art world. Curators of recent exhibitions neglect noting that images of the West, produced by nineteenth-century survey photographers such as O'Sullivan or William Henry Jackson, and their laudatory circulation, were used as the first step in the possession of indigenous lands. This, by presenting the land as free of human occupation and open for resource extraction. Exhibitions such as *Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan* (2010) at the Smithsonian, or *In Focus: Picturing Landscape* (2012) at The J. Paul Getty Museum, celebrated the aesthetic and technical developments of these photographers, using the euphemism 'western expansion'²⁵ to describe the imperial conquest of the West. For instance, in the accompanying catalogue Karen Hellman and Brett Abbott described Jackson's

²² Miller uses this concept to clarify the cultural process in which the part (North-eastern scenery) became representative of the whole (the American nation). Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.

²³ Zanes, 'Primitive Myths', 10.

²⁴ See, for example, Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995; Lindsay Glauner, 'The Need for Accountability and Reparations: 1830-1976 the United States Government's Role in the Promotion, Implementation, and Execution of the Crime of Genocide against Native Americans', *DePaul Law Review*, 51:3, 2001, 911-63.

²⁵ 'Exhibitions: Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan', press releases from the Smithsonian American Art Museum website: <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2010/osullivan/>

images as accentuating 'both the grandeur of the American landscape and the glorious potential of the country's industrial future'.²⁶

Gendered interpretation

The local-nostalgic interpretation of Mann's landscapes was tied thematically to motherhood. The vast majority of critics read the photographs as a natural extension of Mann's work on the subject of the family, uniting both under one thesis: a mother's lament over parting with her children.²⁷ Many critics interpreted her thematic shift from family to landscape as a response to the fact that her children had entered adolescence and therefore could no longer be photographed in the nude.²⁸ This ignored the fact that Mann had published a series of landscape photographs in two earlier books: *Second Sight* (1983) and *Lewis Law Portfolio* (1977). It was Mann who first encouraged this narrative. In her correspondence with *Aperture* editor Melissa Harris in 1995, she traced a conservative narrative of motherhood, claiming: 'As women, or women-artists, let go of their children, maybe it is a natural segue to move artistically into the larger world. When you have young children your whole life revolves around the house and the kids. Then as they get older, you look out, they look out [...]'.²⁹

The ongoing controversy that arose in the wake of the circulation of photographs from *Immediate Family* about the morality of publicly exhibiting minors' nudity also contributed to this interpretation. Although only 13 of the 65 large-format photographs included in the book portray nude children, they had elicited accusations of child pornography and obscenity throughout the late 1990s. In August 1997, for instance, several protestors, led by Randall Terry, a conservative radio show host and anti-abortion activist, tore up copies of art books, among them *Immediate Family*, containing photographs of nude children in a Denver Barnes & Noble. Terry's successful campaign resulted in spreading this tactic across the nation, with book-tearings in New York, Dallas, Kansas City and Lincoln.³⁰

It is tempting to understand the gendered-maternal reading of Mann's landscapes as resulting primarily from the works' content, the reception of *Immediate Family* photographs or from standard art historical procedures that focus on the artists' work in relation to their biography. Yet, this interpretation draws on the common stereotype of the earth as mother and on deep-seated gender biases in art criticism which tend to interpret the work done by women artists in accordance

²⁶ Karen Hellman and Brett Abbott, *Landscape and Photographs*, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2012, 10.

²⁷ A few examples: David Lee Strauss, 'Sally Mann', *Artforum International*, 1 February 1998, 86; Carol Mavor, 'Mother Land Missed: Longing for Sally Mann's Landscapes', *Independent Weekly*, 2 January 2002, 16; Carol Mavor, 'Mother Land Missed: The Becoming Landscapes of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden, and Sally Mann', in Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb, eds, *Singular Women, Writing the Artist*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003, 69-81.

²⁸ Goldberg, 'Landscapes That Are Steeped in Time', E35.

²⁹ Sally Mann, 'Correspondence with Melissa Harris', *Aperture*, 138, Winter 1995, 23-4.

³⁰ Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, 277-78.

with their roles as mothers, lovers and wives, or as an expression of their femininity.³¹ In line with these biases, the work of the influential American photographer Dorothea Lange was described as expressing 'maternal concern for things of this world' and a 'woman's sense of care and tenderness'.³² Imogen Cunningham's works were, and still are, read through an essentializing perspective wherein 'women (by extension women photographers) are viewed as essentially closer to nature'.³³ Similarly, in an article from 2001, Bruce Watson suggested that Mann's landscapes expressed a visual harmony of feminine sexuality and reflected the land as mother, even suggesting that some of them described the shape of the vagina.³⁴ Suzanne Schuweiler reinforced this interpretation in 2013, claiming that the ostensibly vaginal shape of the Tallahatchie River bank in Mann's photograph represents 'the mythical birth and healing role of Mother Earth'.³⁵ David Lee Strauss, although refraining from feminizing the land, ended his 1998 appraisal review by stating that 'Mann's children must be proud of her'. It is hard to imagine that a work by a male photographer would have been read through his role as a father in such a belittling manner.

As photographer Deborah Bright has shown, these gender biases replicate the canon of American landscape photography as a masculine stronghold from which women's works are omitted.³⁶ Exhibitions of both contemporary and historical landscapes in notable museums in the US are still almost exclusively presenting the work of white male photographers. For example, the forty photographers selected for the *American Landscapes* exhibition at MoMa in 1981 only included two women, Laura Gilpin and Dorothea Lange, both of whom were dead. Moreover, the six contemporary photographers who were selected to accompany O'Sullivan's work in the *Framing the West* exhibition at the Smithsonian (2010) were all men. A more recent example can be seen in the exhibition *Photography and America's National Parks* at the George Eastman House in 2016. The exhibition included the work of only five women out of a total of more than fifty photographers, thus, highlighting the imbalance of gender representation in the history of landscape photography. When asked, the exhibition's curator, Jamie Allen, claimed that the under-representation of women in the exhibition was due to the fact that 'the majority of photographers working in the American West, where many of the National Parks are, were [...] white males'.³⁷ Yet, considering the exhibition included neither the photographs of Mesa Verde National Park by Laura

³¹ Judith Fryer Davidov, *Women's Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, 310-18, 347.

³² John Benson, 'The Dorothea Lange Retrospective, The Museum of Modern Art, New York', *Aperture*, 12:4, 1965, 45.

³³ Wells, *Land Matters*, 138.

³⁴ Bruce S. Watson, 'Motherland: Sally Mann's Proustian Song of the Earth', *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, LXXI, 2001, 163.

³⁵ Schuweiler, 'Sally Mann's South', 331.

³⁶ Deborah Bright, 'Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry unto the Cultural Meaning of Landscape Photography', in Richard Bolton, ed, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989, 128-29, 138.

³⁷ 'Landforms: A Conversation with Millee Tibbs, Jamie Allen, & Sharon Harper', *Nat. Brut* 8, March 2017.

Gilpin, nor Dorothea Lange's representation of Zion National Park, her answer suggests that even in the present time the art world is still largely unconscious of its conservative politics of representation.

While ostensibly extolling Mann's work, in practice this discourse restricted her place in the American landscape photography canon, by situating the photographs within the anachronistic and limited interpretative framework of 'the feminine other' - a category associated with the marginal, emotional and personal, and one that conveniently corresponds to Southern stereotypes. A clear example of this intertwined interpretation can be seen in an article by art historian Carol Mavor from 2002. According to Mavor, who appraised Mann's landscapes, 'The trees [in the photographs] speak maternity... they narrate the feminized cycle of death/drying/dying out and the sprouting of new growth/regrowth/growing up...the landscapes of Mother Land are unabashedly nostalgic...' and express Southern clichés.³⁸ This review endorsed the traditional association between women and nature and the 'mother earth' stereotype without critically examining how this problematic association contradicts the conception of the artist in the modernist ethos. As opposed to the modernist ethos, in which the artist's figure is constructed as an active, conscious and rational creator, shaping culture in his own way, the woman=nature equation and the 'mother earth' stereotype banish the female artist from the cultural domain and locate her as a passive, instinctual, uncontrollable and devalued subject. An extremely positive review by Grace Glueck, published in the *New York Times* in 1999, exemplifies the limitations of the gendered interpretation. According to Glueck, in some of the photographs it seems as if Mann has 'let Nature click the shutter at random, losing the human perspective',³⁹ thus denying her agency.

One can decipher the association between Southern locality, nostalgia and femininity in accordance with Doreen Massey's argument, whereby geographical concepts are embedded and contextualized in a gendered system of meaning. While the universal, theoretical and conceptual are coded masculine, in current western thinking, the term 'local' traditionally holds a symbolic association with the particular/feminine. The relation between place and a culturally-constructed version of 'woman' operates within the association between place and home, and imbues place with inevitable characteristics of nostalgia, which belittle the local/place/feminine side of the dichotomy.⁴⁰ Indeed, over the last decade we have been observing a new trend in the art historical discourse towards regionalism, as exemplified in the upcoming CAA panels *Regionalism in the Global Era* and *Rethinking Regionalism: the Midwest in American art history* on February 2018. However, in the history of American landscape photography regionalism was viewed as naïvely provincial for much of the twentieth century, especially in relation to the South. By contrast, major curators like John Szarkowski, Director of Photography at MoMA, addressed the work of male photographers of the West according to national, theoretical and aesthetic perspectives, and attributed to them

³⁸ Mavor, 'Mother Land Missed', 16.

³⁹ Glueck, 'Art in Review: Sally Mann', E37.

⁴⁰ Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 9.

characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity, such as objectivity, rationality and heroic exploration.⁴¹

The few negative reviews of Mann's photographs highlight the intersection between patriarchal biases and the intra-geographic hierarchy that underpin the discourse of American landscape photography. For example, in his 1998 review in the *New Yorker*, Hilton Als, the well-known and respected critic and curator, wrote condescendingly: 'Not only does she [Mann] have to prove herself a good Southern girl by feeling for her people, she also has to present herself as a serious artist... Mann is, ultimately, an unreconstructed Southerner'.⁴² Condemning Mann's 'loyalty' to the South, while using patronising sexist language by calling her 'a good... girl', this review constructs Mann as an undeveloped artist, who tries to create 'serious' art, but whose sentimental conception of her homeland and place of residence prevents her from having the necessary critical distance. A more explicit critique that reveals who Als referred to as 'her people' can be seen in Claire Raymond's analysis: 'Mann's death-haunted landscape of images is never fully cashed out for its relationship to the privilege of the photographer's status as wealthy and white'.⁴³ For critics like Als and Raymond Mann's identity as a white middle-class woman from the South serves as a major obstacle to the ability to 'critique the region's history of slavery and Jim Crow'.⁴⁴ Her subtle images portraying the beauty of the land were not perceived as applying a critical position towards the region 'necessitated' by the values of the Northern artistic discourse.

When considering the reception of an earlier photographer-resident of the region, William Eggleston, it is worth noticing that his identity as a white man, as well as the recognizable signs of critique in his photographs of Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama, contributed to his elevated position in the field.⁴⁵ Introducing old trucks, rotting plantations and Confederate flags, in photographs like *Untitled (Sumner, Mississippi, Cassidy Bayou in Background)* and *Untitled - Confederate flag*, the photographer presented a familiar content of Southern poverty, violence and racial hierarchy. In the words of historian Grace Elizabeth Hale, 'Eggleston's South is a place where the horrors of history suggest no solution, no forward motion in anything as orderly as progress'.⁴⁶ It is no wonder, then, that Eggleston's work was received so favourably by the American art world.

What critics such as Als and Raymond are missing is that it is not a realistic depiction of a place Mann seeks, but rather an exploration of the cultural

⁴¹ John Szarkowski, *The Photographer and the American Landscape*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1963; *American Landscapes*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981.

⁴² Hilton Als, 'The Unvanquished: Sally Mann's Portrait of the South', *New Yorker*, 27 September 1999, 98.

⁴³ Claire Raymond, *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics*, London and New York: Routledge, 2017, 144.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 156.

⁴⁵ Starting from his 1976 MoMa exhibition, Eggleston's work has gained much recognition. In the last decade, he has had major exhibitions at galleries and museums around the world including the Cartier Foundation in Paris in 2001, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 2009, the Tate Modern in London in 2012, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2013.

⁴⁶ Grace Elizabeth Hale, 'Eggleston's South: Always in Color', *Southern Space*, June 27, 2013.

representation of the Southern land, and how it functions as a visual construct within the history of photography. I demonstrate this claim by comparing Mann's work with that of canonical American landscape photographers as Ansel Adams, the New Topographics and Alexander Gardner. The basis for these comparisons is twofold. First, I argue that the canon of American landscape photography is the subject matter of Mann's landscapes. These photographers, who shaped the subject matter, objectives and aesthetics of the genre, have traditionally been considered part of the canon. Mann's work responds to theirs, both directly and indirectly. Second, I used these comparisons as a key strategy of feminist art history. By employing standard art historical procedures in the form of emphasizing connections and lineages between Mann and these 'Old Masters', my intention is to award her work a more theoretical-historical frame of analysis.

A comparison with Ansel Adams



Figure 1 Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and the Snake River*, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, 1942. Gelatin silver print, printed 1980, 39 x 48.4 cm. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum. © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.

A comparison between the reception of Mann's landscapes and those of Ansel Adams brings into focus the stereotypical character of the mostly favourable interpretation of Mann's work. Adams examined the wild landscapes of the nature reserves of the American North and West through an elevated and enchanted gaze. A prominent example is his famous work *The Tetons and the Snake River*, which portrays the Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming (figure 1). The photography books he wrote, the 'scientific' methods he developed and the founding of Group

f/64 earned him a highly respected status in the field of art and photography.⁴⁷ Starting from the 1940s until at least the 1980s, Adams' quest for the intensification and spiritual experience of beauty that would instil in the viewer the emotional sensation of nature's sublime magnificence was perceived as an attempt to decipher the qualities of 'the American' landscape at large, and of the uniqueness of the American spirit embodied in it. Key curators, art critics and photographers framed Adams' work in a national context. For example, Adams' mentor, Alfred Stieglitz (the well-known photographer, editor and central figure in American culture), exhibited his work in his New York gallery under the title *An American Landscape* in 1936. Szarkowski, reinforced this interpretation in exhibitions such as *American Landscape* in 1981, while consolidating Adams' place at the heart of the canon of artistic photography and modernist art movements.⁴⁸ This was strengthened further when Adams received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Jimmy Carter, in 1981.⁴⁹

In contrast to Mann, his landscapes were not perceived as a particular, nostalgic longing or in relation to his biography. Mann's and Adams' landscapes were constituted through a gender rhetoric in which the epithet 'feminine' was attached to art that presents the subject's personal experience, and in which the 'feminine' image was seen as a fickle representation that had failed to distance itself from its object; whereas 'masculine' art was deemed intellectual, universal and rational.⁵⁰ Under these archaic gender assumptions, Mann's demonstration of technical proficiency was construed as pretentious,⁵¹ while Adams was constantly exalted for his control of the medium. In the words of Szarkowski: 'He has done this so persuasively that it has seemed to most younger photographers of ambition that that book has been closed'.⁵² As I will explain below, despite major changes that took place in the field of landscape photography in the late 1970s, Adams' legacy as an influential contributor to public awareness of nature and its vital role in human life and culture did not diminish.⁵³ While the contemporary photography discourse mainly focused on environmental issues in Adam's work, it continues to

⁴⁷ Jonathan Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape: A Biography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

⁴⁸ See, for example, John Szarkowski, *Ansel Adams: Classic Images*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1986, 6.

⁴⁹ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, National Archives and Records Service, Office of the Federal Register, 1058.

⁵⁰ It is quite astonishing to witness the extent to which the gendered rhetoric of the contemporary American art discourse follows the gender assumptions shaped in nineteenth-century French art criticism, as analyzed by Anne Higonnet. Anne Higonnet, 'Imaging Gender', in Michael R. Orwicz, ed, *Art Criticism and its Institutions in Nineteenth-Century France*, New York: Manchester University Press, 1994, 146-61.

⁵¹ Als, 'The Unvanquished: Sally Mann's Portrait of the South', 98.

⁵² Szarkowski, *American Landscapes*, 13.

⁵³ Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape*, 359. Adams' elevated position in the field is indicated by the high frequency of retrospective exhibitions featuring his work at leading museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in April 1974, the Philadelphia Museum of Art in November 1979, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in September 1979 and July 2003, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in July 2014.



Figure 2 Sally Mann, *Virginia, Untitled (Niall's River)*, 1994, Gelatin silvert print, 30 x 40 inches.
© Sally Mann. Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York and Gagosian, New York.

contextualize them in a national context, though more implicitly. This, by emphasizing the important role his work played in the founding of the National Park system, and his political struggles to preserve American natural environment.⁵⁴

Comparing Adams' *Tetons and the Snake River* to Mann's *Virginia, Untitled (Niall's River)* (figure 2), it is clear that her model of landscape representation is different from his, even though both depict a river. Adams' image, a panoramic view of the American West, allows the viewer to perceive the course of the riverbed - a snaking route towards the eventual end point. Mann's image, a near-looking mode of vision of the South, depicts just a small part of the winding river. Yet, despite these clear differences, the gendered-local-nostalgic interpretation assigned to Mann's work is not unavoidable. Indeed, Mann's *Virginia, Untitled (Niall's River)* portrays a very personal landscape from a close point of view. The Maury River in Virginia flows through the Mann family's country place, where her children swam and played - as she herself did throughout her childhood. Nonetheless, Mann's landscapes should not be bound in a dualism in which the local and the personal stand in opposition to the national and the political. Rather than simplistically reducing the personal aspects in Mann's work to a biographical interpretation, we

⁵⁴ See, for example, Robert Turnage, 'Ansel Adams: The Role of the Artist in the Environmental Movement', *The Living Wilderness*, 43, 1980, 4-31; James Frost, 'Modernism and a New Picturesque: The Environmental Rhetoric of Ansel Adams', in Nancy Coppola and Bill Karis, ed, *Technical Communication, Deliberative Rhetoric, and Environmental Discourse: Connections and Directions*, Stamford, Conn.: Ablex Publishing, 2000, 113-38; Katherine Ware, *Earth Now: American Photographers and the Environment*, Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2011.

might gain a less stereotypical perspective when considering the radical feminist critique that contextualizes the personal as political.

Mann's proposed photographic model is characterized by blurred focus and subject to the vagaries of the chemical materials. Her use of the technique of wet collodion requires the photographic material to be coated, sensitized, exposed and developed immediately, thus necessitating a portable darkroom for use in the field. The combination of unstable chemicals and an unpredictable environment created 'accidents' in the negative, such as light leaks and dust stains, which Mann encouraged and even generated deliberately. These random mistakes resulting from the fickle nature of the wet collodion process highlight the accidental nature of the photographic act itself, and enabled Mann to infuse the landscape with the perceived arbitrariness of the natural world. This model stands in clear contrast to the sense of reliability obtained by Adams' scientific methods of 'straight photography', in which the clarity of the lens was emphasized, and the final print gave no appearance of being manipulated by the photographer.

By employing this technique at her secluded home location, and creating blurred and fragmentary images, Mann's image points out that the notion of home and place (national and personal alike) is inevitably unfixed, unstable and partial. The blurred focus in Mann's *Virginia, Untitled (Niall's River)* suggests the effect of a shaky camera, which brings a sense of dynamic movement and instability to the landscape. The dark shadows of the trees framing the image and limiting the visible range evoke the feeling of a cramped space and suffocating entrapment, hinting at something threatening and troubling. Following Massey's argument, if home can provide a sense of safety and stability and is therefore a crucial device in the formation and maintenance of identity,⁵⁵ then the lack of such feelings results in the loss of a sense of security. Feminism has long identified the home as both a social sphere and a physical space, which is of great significance to the construction of gender socialization and to the perpetuation of gender inequality. Challenging the experience of home as a source of stability and reliability contests the stereotypical connection between space and gender, as well as the dominant perception of the experience of safety and belonging in the domestic space.

While Adams' image valued the wilderness without human traces, emphasizing the separation of nature and culture as part of his goal to promote environmental conservation, Mann's technique and aesthetics call this legacy into question. As Adams' former student, Mann was familiar with the Zone system of photography he developed for determining the optimum exposure and contrast of the final print, which resulted in exceptional tonal range and clarity. Yet, she chose to experiment with the American Pictorialist style (soft-focus lenses, low in tonality

⁵⁵ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 167-68.

and surface manipulation techniques)⁵⁶ which explicitly sought to enhance the role of imagination in photography.⁵⁷



Figure 3 Sally Mann, *Battlefields, Fredericksburg, Cedar Trees*, 2002, Gelatin silver print, 38 x 48 inches / 96.5 x 121.9 cm.
© Sally Mann. Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York and Gagosian, New York.

For example, a comparison of Edward Steichen's work, *The Pool - Evening* with Mann's *Battlefields, Fredericksburg, Cedar Trees* (figure 3), indicates how both photographers used landscape photography not so much as a medium tied to the real, but as a means to evoke emotions and stimulate the spectator's imagination. As Sadakichi Hartmann states in his positive appraisal of Edward Steichen's Pictorialism: "The only fault that I find in his landscapes... is that they are not finished pictures... It is left to the imagination of the spectator to carry them out to their full mental realization."⁵⁸ Mann did not simply return to the romantic tradition of Pictorialism, she used its formal characteristics and intensified their effect. The apparent smudge marks of emulsion and the optical blurring that Mann created portray the landscape as a living entity, resulting in a troubling, distorted image that blurs the boundaries between real and imaginary. In *Virginia, Untitled (Niall's River)*, the limited visible range of the winding river stimulates the imagination, asking the onlooker to gaze beyond the image towards other possible landscapes.

⁵⁶ American pictorial photography, mainly the Photo-Secession group, was exceptionally consistent in look and style. The pictorial image was most likely to be carefully composed, unconventionally framed, softly focused and low in tonality in order to emphasize atmospheric qualities of beauty, mystery and uncertainty.

⁵⁷ On the role of imagination in American Pictorialism, see Colleen Denney, 'The Role of Subject and Symbol in American Pictorialism', *History of Photography*, 13:2, April-June 1989, 109-128.

⁵⁸ Sadakichi Hartmann, 'Edward Steichen' (1903), in Harry W. Lawton and George Knox, eds, *Valiant Knights of Daguerre: Selected Critical Essays on Photography and Profiles of Photographic Pioneers*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, 204-5.

The overt homage to Adams' documentary tradition, framed here within a Pictorialist aesthetics, allowed Mann to highlight Adams' Pictorialist roots,⁵⁹ locate the history of landscape photography at the centre of her exploration, and assign to this history a constitutive function. She offers an examination of the process whereby the world has been translated into a photograph, an image, a representation. The landscape becomes a set of structuring possibilities, a frame for composing and articulating experience, rather than a particular piece of land.

New Topographics

Mann was not the first photographer to challenge Adams' legacy. In 1975, a formative group exhibition titled *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* was held at George Eastman House, featuring photographs by American photographers such as Robert Adams, Stephen Shore and Lewis Baltz, as well as works by the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. The small-scale photographs (no print was larger than 13x13 or 11x14 inches) shown in the exhibition depicted the common topography and banal architecture of the American West, such as trailer parks, rows of standard houses, industrial warehouses and highways.

The exhibition and the accompanying catalogue signified a radical shift to the tradition of the American landscape. William Jenkins, the curator of the exhibition, defined the project as a new form of documentary, one based on pure description of observation over judgement, and characterized by an ostensibly objective style.⁶⁰ The photographers' proclaimed goal was to reflect the world without an active, self-referential overlay of personal engagement.⁶¹ They aspired to elevate the banal, generic and industrial to the level of high art. As the photographers' statements and Jenkins' description reveal, the images were contextualized as a stylistic development from Adams' idyllic style, as well as a change in the subject matter of landscape photography. As Deborah Bright argued, the timing of the original exhibition, close to the founding of Earth Day and the burgeoning environmental movement, gave it an almost self-evident context and set of political meanings: critiquing the erosion of the landscape by industrial and urban development.⁶²

The photographic discourse adopted the clinical, mundane and seemingly anti-aesthetic style of the New Topographics photographers as a new and authoritative model of political landscape photography. The photographers' work was lauded by major curators of photography, such as Szarkowski, and their aesthetics have impacted generations of photographers to this day. The re-creation of the exhibition at George Eastman House and Los Angeles County Museum of Art

⁵⁹ For Adams' relation with the American Pictorialist movement see: Michel Oren, 'On the Impurity of Group f/64 Photography', *History of Photography*, 15:2, Summer 1991, 125.

⁶⁰ William Jenkins, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975.

⁶¹ Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, eds, introduction to *Reframing the New Topographics*, Chicago: Center for American Places, 2010, xix.

⁶² Bright, 'Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men', 125-43.

(LACMA) thirty-four years later, in 2009, sustained its centrality in the canon of American landscape photography. Contemporary photography scholars continue to reaffirm the works' socio-political interpretation and maintain their documentary and conceptual style as the canonical model for a highly-valued political landscape photography.⁶³

A deciding factor in the canonization of the New Topographics was their proclaimed reliance on the work of the 1960s conceptual photographers who employed a documentary style to photograph the landscape, such as Ed Ruscha and the Bechers.⁶⁴ These photographers, who depicted generic and industrial subjects, in an aesthetic typically perceived as amateurish and mundane, were championed in photography discourse for different reasons. In the 1970s-1990s, scholars who founded the important periodical *October*, articulated the objectives of the photographic medium, and their thinking had a huge influence on the history and theory of photography. Despite their very different theoretical and methodological trajectories, theorists such as Douglas Crimp,⁶⁵ Benjamin Buchloh,⁶⁶ and Rosalind Krauss⁶⁷ shared a common ground. They railed against the canonization and aestheticization of photography as fine art by museums' curators, such as Szarkowski and Newhall, and denied the idea of a privileged and separate aesthetic realm, defining photography instead as an essentially anti-aesthetic medium.⁶⁸ They saw the aestheticization of photography as betraying the political contexts of photography, ignoring its socio-historical context, and disarming the medium of its radical potential.

On this ideological basis, the *October* writers appraised cultural forms that had political aims or were rooted in a vernacular genre, such as Ruscha's and the Bechers' conceptual works. For the *October* writers, the anti-aesthetic tendencies expressed in these photographers' work enabled the deconstruction of the artist's subjectivity, modernist autonomy, and of the work of art as a singular object.⁶⁹ While the New Topographics differed from the *October* writers in their goals and aspirations, their style and subject matter coincided with the model of critical photography, which was to be fiercely articulated by the *October* group in the years to come. The influential positions these groups held in the field of American

⁶³ Alison Nordstrom, 'After New: Thinking about New Topographics from 1975 to the Present', in Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, eds, *New Topographics*, Gottingen: Steidl, 2009, 73.

⁶⁴ Jenkins, *New Topographics*, 5.

⁶⁵ Douglas Crimp, 'The Old Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject', in Richard Bolton, ed, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989, 6-7; 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism', *October*, 15, Winter 1980, 91-101.

⁶⁶ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, 55, Winter 1990, 105-43.

⁶⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View', in Richard Bolton, ed, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989, 287-302.

⁶⁸ Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface', in Hal Foster, ed, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983, ix-xvi.

⁶⁹ Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, introduction to *Photography after Conceptual Art*, Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 1-2.

photography helped to reinforce this photographic practice as a model for criticality in landscape photography.

Despite the radical shift this exhibition expressed, it did not challenge the patriarchal assumptions and the intra-geographical hierarchy embedded in the canon. Almost all the participants in the exhibition were men. Hilla Becher was the only woman whose work was included in the show. Their Western landscapes were coded masculine (by being characterized in terms of progress, objectivity and emotional detachment), and the connections and lineages between the New Topographics and early Western practitioners such as O'Sullivan were emphasized.⁷⁰ As a result, this exhibition unintentionally strengthened the androcentric character of the American landscape photography canon, and the mythology of the West as representative of American national identity.

In the light of this analysis, it is easy to see why Mann's landscapes were perceived as sentimental, traditional and conservative. Compared with the work of conceptual photographers from the 1960s, Mann's landscapes must have looked too specific, and too indebted to the medium's sublime elements. Their deviation from the established critical aesthetics, and reliance on the Pictorialist style which explicitly sought to situate photography as fine art, seemingly located them in an uncritical cultural space - preserving the 'authentic aura' of the medium. In addition, her photographic model broke substantially from that of the New Topographics. Unlike these photographers, her works neither overtly depicted man's destructive effect on nature nor dealt with the banal and the generic in the American suburbs; nor were her landscapes concerned with the contemporary. Mann's work also differs in terms of the qualities of flatness, geographic pattern and the extreme form of detachment that the New Topographics exalted. Photographs such as *Virginia*, *Untitled (Niall's River)* or *Untitled (Deep South #7)*, seemed to the critics to be too close to the enchanted attitude of traditional landscape photographers, such as Ansel Adams. The lack of man-made environments in Mann's works further reinforces the sense of a continuous representation of the landscape, and situates her photographs in a context far-removed from the anti-aesthetic model and the political meanings ascribed to the New Topographics photographers. Mann was also an outsider to the very small yet central community, to which the photographers of the New Topographics belonged, namely the web of mostly personal connections, which was connected to Eastman House.⁷¹

Returning again to the comparison with the legacy of Ansel Adams, it is interesting to find that the New Topographics' exhibition had a distinctly different impact on Adams than on Mann. Even though the exhibition was initially a critical reaction against Adams' style, it did not impair his status as one of the founding fathers of American landscape photography.⁷² Indeed, as is often the case, the rebellion against the forefather paradoxically resulted in a renewed validation of his importance in the cultural field, since it used his work as a crucial reference point.

⁷⁰ Toby Jurovics, 'Same as it Ever Was: Re-reading New Topographics', in Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, eds, *Reframing the New Topographics*, Chicago: Center for American Places, 2010, 1-12.

⁷¹ Nordstrom, 'After New: Thinking about New Topographics,' 70.

⁷² Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape*, 359.

Ironically, critique of the New Topographics reinforced Adams' elevated position in the field and the iconic status of his images.

The historical and cultural construction of landscape

Despite these clearly identifiable reasons for the photographic discourse's disregard of Mann's work, I would like to offer an alternative interpretation. I argue that her landscapes relate to the ideological move that William John Thomas Mitchell has called the construction of the Imperial Landscape. The landscape, according to Mitchell, is an ideological cultural representation that is both the product of cultural forces and a prominent agent in the production of culture. Mitchell is not indifferent to the longing we all have for a primeval landscape unspoiled by culture, but he emphasizes this longing as an integral part in establishing a sense of national identity.⁷³ Following Mitchell's theoretical claim, Mann uses emotion as a means for questioning landscape photography as an open field of ideological neutrality and revealing its historical construction.



Figure 4 Sally Mann, *Untitled #8, Antietam*, 2002, Gelatin silver print, 38 x 48 inches / 96.5 x 121.9 cm.
© Sally Mann. Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York and Gagosian, New York.

A prominent example is her photograph *Untitled #8, Antietam* from 2002 (figure 4), where she explicitly evokes the photographic tradition of the nineteenth-century photographers who documented the Civil War. She revisits the Civil War battlefields, photographed by photographers such as Gardner, Brady and O'Sullivan, and re-photographs their famous works. Gardner's 1862 photograph

⁷³ William John Thomas Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994.



Figure 5 Alexander Gardner, *Antietam, Md. Bodies of Confederate dead gathered for burial*, 1862. Wet collodion negative. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. Public Domain.

Antietam, Md. Bodies of Confederate dead gathered for burial depicts the day of the bloody battle of Antietam (figure 5). The photograph shows a row of Confederate soldiers' dead bodies lying on the grass in an upside-down L shape, with several solitary trees in the background. During the Civil War, burying the dead was a priority. Because of the magnitude of Antietam, the bodies of thousands of dead Confederate soldiers lay on the field awaiting burial. This left a daunting task for Union soldiers on burial detail. The order of burial depended on who had control of the field: those on the losing side were buried after fallen comrades, especially after great, high-casualty battles such as Antietam. Bodies from the opposing side were often placed in mass graves in an effort to save time. Gardner's photograph depicts this brutal reality.⁷⁴ Drawn to the diagonal composition - the outcome of the battle - the eye vainly seeks to isolate the individual from the pile of corpses.

In contrast to Gardner's photograph, in Mann's *Untitled #8, Antietam*, all human representation - dead or alive - is absent. In fact, almost nothing happens in the photograph. Three-quarters of the image is comprised of black earth, and the remainder shows a pallid sky. Almost minimalist in nature, the photograph is made of two horizontal bands: one thin and light grey, the other wide and dark grey, with only a fine line of black vegetation separating them. The division of the landscape into two uneven sections results in the elimination of linear perspective and spatial depth. The horizontal composition and restricted palette call to mind the abstract paintings of artists such as Mark Rothko. The balanced composition and lack of movement draw the viewer's attention to the only action that does take place,

⁷⁴ Kristilyn Baldwin, 'The Visual Documentation of Antietam: Peaceful Settings, Morbid Curiosity, and a Profitable Business', *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*, 1:3, 2010, 6-7.

namely, the chemical flaws in the negative frame and at its centre, which look like barrages of gunfire. Mann's choice to utilize the wet collodion process creates an image that elicits emotional reactions and builds on the expectations created by Gardner's iconic photograph.

Historically, the emotional reactions that Gardner's Antietam photographs evoked stem from their reliance on the camera's potential for documenting the visible details of historically momentous events.⁷⁵ These photographs were shown at Brady's gallery in New York City within a month of the battle, in an exhibition titled *The Dead of Antietam*. After visiting the exhibition, a reviewer for the *New York Times* wrote on 20 October 1862: 'Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it'.⁷⁶ Antietam was the first battlefield visible to the American population. The distribution and publication of Gardner's Antietam photographs, in Marianne Fulton's words: 'make visible the unseen, the unknown, and the forgotten'.⁷⁷ Using the same technology and technique as Gardner, Mann inverts this function, making the visible invisible, the known unknown. She translates the visible scenery into a blurred image, and turns Gardner's familiar and realistic depiction of the dead of Antietam into an abstract photograph in which no subject can be seen; it can only be identified, or known, by reference to information beyond the photograph. Mann's image hints at the violence which occurred on the land by creating an atmosphere of danger and threat. It is left to the viewer's imagination to complete the historical narrative.

This draws our attention to the imaginary dimension in Gardner's work and to its limitations in shaping the historical memory. First, as has been well documented, some Civil War photographs taken by Gardner were manipulated and re-created long after the actual event.⁷⁸ Second, Gardner's photographs are not genuine depictions of life and death on the battlefield. Civil War photographers could not depict the events of the war, due to the technical limitations of the heavy camera and tripod, long exposure times, cumbersome and fragile glass plates, and the need to have darkroom chemicals and developing apparatus immediately on hand to develop the glass negatives soon after exposure. These limitations resulted in pictures that are static and depict scenes of posed, unmoving figures.⁷⁹ Mann responds to these historical limitations by creating a static composition, arbitrary and deliberate technical faults in the negative. The fact that this technique involves random mistakes that remain outside of her control highlights the inability of the medium to document the action itself, rather than merely allude to it. Just as the accident or chance occurrence seem to erupt from the negative and shape the

⁷⁵ Michael Griffin, 'The Great War Photographs: Constructing Myths of History and Photojournalism', in Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt, eds, *Picturing the Past: Media, History and Photography*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999, 133-34.

⁷⁶ Anonymous, 'Brady's Photographs; Pictures of the Dead at Antietam', *New York Times*, 20 October 1862, 5.

⁷⁷ Marianne Fulton, *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1988, 107.

⁷⁸ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, Toronto: Hill and Wang, 1989, 83.

⁷⁹ Griffin, 'The Great War Photographs', 135.

photograph, so it seems as if the earth will give rise to an unpredictable violence that cannot be comprehended, only pointed to and remembered.

The overt homage to Gardner's documentary tradition brings into focus the symbolic meaning of the Southern land in the canon of American landscape photography. By emphasizing the act of photographing and encoding, Mann requires us to look at the visual codes of representation, which constitute the South as a symbol of the violent nature of American history. Instead of the documentary style, which likens the photographer to a transparent viewer, her technique highlights the photographic act itself. This emphasis on the photographic act parallels the construction of history and space, implicating the landscape discourse as a system in which culture enlists the medium for representational tasks. Thus, Mann enables us to see photography as emphasizing the imaginary dimension in the construction of space, and the political construction that underpins the photographic act itself.

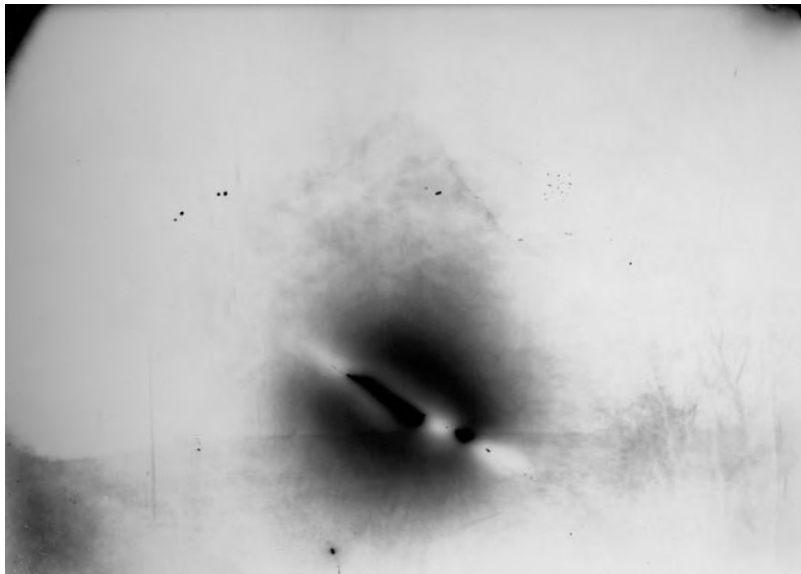


Figure 6 Sally Mann, *Untitled (Georgia, Black Spot)*, 1996, Gelatin silver print, 40x 50 inches.
© Sally Mann. Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York and Gagosian, New York.

Mann challenges the violent myth of the Southern land and the naturalization of the cultural and historical construction 'landscape' far beyond the tradition of the Civil War photographers. The photograph *Untitled (Georgia, Black Spot)*, 1997, powerfully demonstrates this (figure 6). Mann's landscape photographs differ in style, technique and aesthetics from those of Adams and those of the New Topographics. Yet the simple fact that her photographs belong to the tradition of American landscape nonetheless enables viewers to approach the works with a set of expectations: continuous representation of the landscape; a seductive comfort grounded in familiarity; recognition of the land, and the experience of clarity and national identification. But Mann's *Untitled (Georgia, Black Spot)* interferes with this set of expectations, refusing to submit to it. The thin contours that depict a hill and some sparse vegetation are barely visible through the faults in the centre of the

negative and under the bright diffuse light resulting from the long exposure, which undermines the viewer's ability to identify the place. This technique infuses the landscape with a sense of foreignness, which in turn affords the necessary distance from the identification aroused by the powerful role that landscape plays in the imaginative construction of national identity.⁸⁰ In this respect, Mann's work goes further than the New Topographics in demonstrating that there is no landscape *per se*, nor ever was. Using documentary style, these photographers preserved the clarity of the image and its link to the place depicted, for both aesthetic purposes and socio-political and environmental critique. By contrast, *Untitled (Georgia, Black Spot)* questions the realistic visualization and challenges the viewers' illusion of 'being there', common in the tradition of landscape photography. The photograph's visual qualities of blurriness and destruction of vision result in a de-familiarization of space, and refuse any direct correlation between a particular place and its photographic representation. Thus, the image highlights the medium's inability to produce an unmediated perception of nature. Undermining the viewer's comforting familiarity with the cultural representations of American history and land, Mann brings into focus the role of photography in the construction of national narratives of the landscape.

While the damaged negative could be interpreted as indicating Mann's exploration of the South's violent history, it can also be seen as evoking a wider anxiousness about the land. For, as Massey demonstrated, the last twenty years have been characterized by local communities being increasingly broken up, due to the quickening process of globalization, as well as environmental crises, resulting in insecurity and feelings of vulnerability.⁸¹ By stripping away the security of a symbolic national identity, *Untitled (Georgia, Black Spot)* explores the role of imagination in coping with vulnerability,⁸² both arousing and repressing this emotion. The optical blurring that Mann creates holds the potential to transfer the viewer into an imaginative space where one can flee from the hazards and insecurity of reality. Yet, the fact that this image portrays a damaged, unstable and indistinct space, gives the photograph a vague sense of unease, resulting in a refusal to dwell in the seductive power of the imagined space. This interpretation turns the image into a representation of a wider geographical vulnerability, stemming from today's era of destabilization and rapid political-economic-environmental changes.

The most striking example is the photograph *Untitled #34, Emmett Till Riverbank*, 1998 (figure 7), in which Mann returns to the place where the body of Emmett Till was thrown into the Tallahatchie River.

⁸⁰ For more on the relations between human imagination, specific geographical locales and national identity see Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 6-7.

⁸¹ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 150-151.

⁸² For more on the connection between imagination and human vulnerability in relation to the political functions of emerging technologies see Mark Coeckelbergh, *Human Being @ Risk: Enhancement, Technology, and the Evaluation of Vulnerability Transformations*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2013.



Figure 7 Sally Mann, *Untitled #34, Emmett Till Riverbank*, 1998, Gelatin silver print, 40 x 50 inches / 101.6 x 127 cm.
© Sally Mann. Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York and Gagosian, New York.

Till was a black youth from Chicago who was murdered in 1955 during a family visit to Mississippi. His body was thrown into the river tied to a cotton gin fan to make it sink, but it floated up and was discovered. His mother insisted on holding a public funeral and leaving the coffin open, so that the cruelty of her son's murder would be clear for all to see. The picture of Till's disfigured body was published in the newspapers and became a formative event for the Civil Rights Movement in the South (figure 8).



Figure 8 Unknown photographer, *Emmett Till's mutilated corpse*, 'Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth.' *Jet Magazine*, 8:19, 15 September 1955, 8-9.

As opposed to the famous photograph of his body, in Mann's photograph, Till is not seen: the foreground shows a muddy piece of land with sparse vegetation; the remainder shows the river, its surface reflecting the trees. Four small triangles at the corners of the photograph (resulting from technical faults in the negative) create a 'frame' for the image. The act of zooming in on a discrete portion of the overall landscape may be interpreted as an attempt to decipher it, as if such close attention could reveal the 'essence' of a place. But this attempt is doomed to failure. The photograph includes no hint of the violence that took place on that spot, nor affords us any understanding of this horrible murder. Instead of the action, violence and urgency elicited by the picture of Till's body, the blurred screen and the yellow colour-scale in Mann's photograph convey a sense of uninterrupted languidness that seems to be caused by the warm, humid Mississippi air.

Mann is not the first artist to address Till's murder. The legacy of Till has been the subject of multiple storytellers in cinema, popular music and visual art. Recently, Dana Schutz's expressionist painting *Open Casket* (2016) provoked an extensive critical debate in the American art world and social media. The painting, based on the canonical photograph of Till, portrays his disfigured body lying in a funeral casket. On display at the Whitney Biennial, 2017, it stirred much condemnation from critics who claimed Schutz, who is white, was taking advantage of a defining moment in African American history, transmuting black suffering into profit. African American artist Parker Bright stood in front of the painting with *Black Death Spectacle* written on his T-shirt, and a letter penned by a young British artist, Hannah Black called for the work to be removed and destroyed.⁸³

When considering Mann's photograph in comparison to Schutz's painting, it is clear that the whiteness of both artists plays an outsized role in how the works have been received. Still Mann did not attract as much criticism as Schutz. Many of the questions raised by the controversy over Schutz's painting revolve around who has the right to represent racial violence against blacks. These questions were further intensified by the critique of the (white) media's exploitation of wounded black bodies. As Elizabeth Alexander summed up 'Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries'.⁸⁴ Debates over who has the right to represent the socially marginalized were common within the photography discourse of the 1980s and 1990s. See for example, Martha Rosler's ethical critique of representation against the liberal-humanistic tradition of documentary photography,⁸⁵ and the art criticism of Sebastiao Salgado's photographic portrayal of global poverty.⁸⁶ Several contemporary photography scholars have addressed these ethical questions by emphasizing the ever-changing

⁸³ Edward Helmore, 'The Painting that has Reopened Wounds of American Racism', *Guardian*, 2 April 2017; Coco Fusco, 'Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till', *Hyperallergic*, 27 March 2017.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Alexander, 'Can You Be Black and Look at This: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)', *Public Culture*, 7:1, Fall 1994, 78.

⁸⁵ Martha Rosler, 'In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)', *3 Works: Critical Essays on Photography and Photographs*, Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981, 61-93.

⁸⁶ Michael Kimmelman, *Photography Review*, 'Can Suffering be Too Beautiful?', *New York Times*, 13 July 2001, 27.

nature of the photographic meaning. For instance, Dora Apel shows how images of public lynchings of African-Americans were used as central vehicle for both constructing and challenging racial hierarchies; how these images represented white power over the black body and were sold as souvenir postcards, but also how they were appropriated by anti-lynching forces and artists and played a critical role in arousing national anti-lynching sentiment.⁸⁷

Mann's strategy of representation deals with this moral dilemma by focusing on the land, rather than on Till's body. It is the only image Mann singled out in the exhibition's catalogue *Deep South*. She describes the strong emotions aroused in her when she visited the spot, and her inability to reconcile the ordinariness of the land with the knowledge of the tragedy that occurred on it.⁸⁸ In other words, the distinction between seeing and knowing. Despite the photograph's beauty and dreamy atmosphere, its reliance on the viewer's familiarity with the famous photograph of Till conjures his figure up from the dead, inspiring us to imagine him and hinting at the violent catastrophe that is seemingly waiting to erupt from the land. Relying on the previous photographic representation of Till, Mann highlights photography's ineradicable role of interpretation in the construction of knowledge and memory. In this sense, Mann's *Untitled #34, Emmett Till Riverbank* functions as a metaphor for remembrance. Characterized by blurriness that obstructs our vision and a close point of view that limits the visible range, the photograph portrays remembrance as a capricious, blurry, hazy and fragmentary process that elicits strong spatial connotations and vivid imagery of emotional experiences. Mann's photograph, like the national memory of the murder, demands recurrent decoding of meanings and context. The American landscape, the photograph shows us, is never a neutral space. It is always historically constructed, politically used and emotionally complex.

Mann directly addressed questions of memory and knowledge in relation to the racial history of the South in her autobiography. Focusing on the ordinary and trivial details of everyday life, she explored her relationship with Virginia Carter, also known as Gee-Gee, who was her black nanny. She critically examines her own family's involvement in the racial discrimination and injustice that prevailed in the segregated Jim Crow South. Looking back on moments such as family vacations, when Gee-Gee had to wait in the boiling-hot car until the family finished their meal, Mann writes: 'It's that obliviousness, the unexamined assumption, that so pains me now: Nothing about it seemed strange, nothing seemed wrong [...] How could I not have thought it strange [...]?'⁸⁹ At the same time, she refuses to diminish the loving relationship she had with Virginia: 'I loved Gee-Gee the way other people love their parents, and no matter how many historical demons stalked that relationship, I know that Gee-Gee loved me back'.⁹⁰ By trying to reconcile two forms of knowledge

⁸⁷ Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

⁸⁸ Sally Mann, *Deep South*, New York and Boston: Bullfinch Press, 2005, 52.

⁸⁹ Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015. Reprinted in Sally Mann, 'White Child, Black Nanny', *Saturday Evening Post*, November-December 2015, 48.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 44.

that are not compatible with each other - her personal memories of love and intimacy and the racial injustice inherent in them - the text creates a landscape of conflictual and complex experience, both moral and emotional. More than just an attempt to redeem herself from white guilt, this text, like the photograph *Untitled #34, Emmett Till Riverbank*, deals with the ways national history is mediated by and intertwines with emotions, memories and personal experiences of everyday life. It is constructed from sets of unanswered questions. When did Gee-Gee eat, and what? Where and how did she get her groceries? How did she pay for housing, food, travel and the tuition to educate six children? What were her hopes and dreams, struggles and difficulties? Mann's attempt to form a clear and full picture of Gee-Gee's life fails. There is so much she did not ask, did not pay attention to, does not remember. Now it is too late. She has to accept both this lack of knowledge and the partiality of memory itself.

In conclusion, by deconstructing previous interpretations of Mann's landscapes, this article proposes two insights: first, it exposes the ways in which patriarchal assumptions and an intra-geographical hierarchy of symbolic meanings between the US regions continue to shape contemporary art criticism and art history in the US. Second, it sheds new light on Mann's landscapes, situating her work more firmly within the discourse of American landscape photography. I propose that her landscapes offer a critical photographic model characterized by a set of dualisms - personal and national, yearning and rejection, veneration and critique. Her use of beauty and of a misty, lyrical sensation in the photographs should be seen as a means to explore the emotional role of landscape photography in the construction of national identity.

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