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Queer placemaking, settler colonial time, and the desert imaginary in Palm Springs

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The first structure most tourists notice as they drive East into the California desert city of Palm Springs is a cross-stitch of I-beams forming an enormous triangular canopy looming towards the road. Though only 55 years old, this former Tramway Gas Station is listed under the National Register of Historic Places and serves as the city’s visitor center. Inside, three themes emerge. Half of the room is filled with historical pictures of 1950s buildings and Hollywood celebrity entourages, architectural history books, and other midcentury memorabilia. A splash of rainbows sits adjacent to this section, with colorful souvenirs offered with LGBTQ+ tourists in mind; I pick up a free copy of *The Gay Yellow Pages for Palm Springs and Desert Cities* with nearly 200 pages. Finally, in a separate booth across the entryway, a representative of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation is prepared with pamphlets describing outdoor tourism opportunities on tribal land. If tourist development operates through a neoliberal planned placemaking agenda that draws from material and imaginary features of a space (Lew, 2017), what is the relationship between the three aspects of the area’s character on display at the gateway to the city?

In the extensive literature on architecture, non-normative sexuality and gender, and settler-colonialism, researchers tend to address only two of these three at a time. For example, Henry Urbach (1996) has written of the importance of closets as an architectural feature of (rather than a simple offhand metaphor for) homosexuality; Scott Lauria Morgensen (2010) has drawn on Jasbir Puar’s work to describe settler homonationalism, in which queer movements ‘naturalize settlement’; and Janet McGay, Anoma Pieris, and Emily Potter (2011) have argued that architecture helps navigate Australian settler placemaking. This chapter uses the case study of the built urban landscape, queerness, and settler ideology in Palm Springs to explore how time functions in American placemaking. The city is widely celebrated for its high concentration of modern (and especially midcentury modern, hereafter ‘MCM’) homes, stores, and government buildings, many of which sit on federally recognized tribal land. While several excellent monographs have been written about the ongoing colonial project of building Palm Springs (e.g. Przeklasa, 2011; Kray, 2009) and the unique role played by gay men in revitalizing interest in ‘desert modernism’ (LoCascio, 2013), these two stories are rarely told together. I argue that attending to the uses of different temporal registers helps integrate different historiographies of space and real estate in ...
California’s Colorado Desert. The first part of this chapter argues that queer colonial eyes have interpreted desert landscapes as objects of temporal disjuncture and liberatory possibility. The second part introduces two different historiographic approaches to Palm Springs history and contends that they rely on different temporal modes of memorialization. I conclude by arguing that the desert’s temporality affects both narrativizations, providing the background noise to placemaking in the city.

Ruins, settler-colonialism, and the erotics of the desert

In The Necessity for Ruins, landscape theorist J.B. Jackson (1980) describes a shift in American memorialization practices in the mid-twentieth century. Prior to this transformation, history is treated as a sequence of explicitly political events, and the present social order is the continuation or reenactment of a foundational covenant between people and their leaders: a constitution, a treaty, etc. Today (especially in the American West), the covenant model has largely been replaced by an evolutionary one that treats the past as a remote spacetime, one that is unstructured, depoliticized, and most of all, gone. These two temporal modes correspond with two different political-religious attitudes, which produce distinct practices of memorialization. The earlier form honors canonical and sacrosanct figures and produces monumental statues or parades that honor specific features of the covenant (names, dates, etc.). By contrast, the newer evolutionary approach honors an amorphous, romanticized, almost prehistorical golden age through vernacular reenactments that restore as much of the ‘original’ landscape as possible: ‘There is no lesson to learn, no covenant to honor; we are charmed into a state of innocence and become part of the environment. History ceases to exist’ (p. 102). Unlike the earlier ‘Latin’ model of history, the narrative structure of evolutionary memorialization relies on a period of ruination for stability: ‘Ruins provide an incentive for restoration, and for a return to origins’ (ibid.).

Jackson doesn’t theorize the role these landscape temporalities play in narrativizing American settler-colonialism, but his description of evolutionary historical registers is helpful for understanding the role of the landscape in understanding the doxic background noise of settler placemaking; in other words, its common sense. Two closely related notions of common sense have emerged in Native American Studies in recent years. Anti-Indian common sense, as described by Nick Estes (2019), is a modification of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony; unlike Gramscian common sense, it does not rely on the internalization of common sense among the governed/colonized to operate, and ‘originate[s] from the continued assertion of patriarchal White sovereignty over Native lands and lives’ (p. 50). Estes urges readers to disrupt anti-Indian common sense by reframing cities, towns, and urban spaces as colonial settlements and border towns (p. 50). Similarly, Mark Rifkin’s theorization of settler common sense signifies ‘the ways in which the legal and political structures that enable non-native access to Indigenous territories come to be lived as given, as simply the unmarked, generic conditions of possibility for occupancy, association, history, and personhood’ (Rifkin, 2014, p. xvi). This is a common theme in Native American Studies, but what distinguishes Rifkin’s approach is his insistence on wedding queer theories of time (especially in Elizabeth Freeman’s (2010) notions of chrononormativity and temporal drag) to the question of landedness and settler-colonialism. He argues that the nineteenth-century American writers he studies (Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Melville) deployed a queer critique of the ‘nuclear normality’ and state violence of ‘the politics of placemaking,’ but that these ‘queerings take shape’ through an unexamined conceptual architecture that entrenches settler sovereignty: ‘The impression of anachronism that surrounds Indianness, then, helps orient and provide momentum for the feeling of givenness that marks nonnative’s relation to place’ (Rifkin, 2014, p. 31; emphasis in original).
Jackson’s schema is inadvertently helpful for thinking about the different settler colonial narrativizations of the deserts of the American and Mediterranean worlds, and especially how the denigration of landscapes and their indigenous inhabitants that Tracy Voyles (2015) has termed ‘wastelanding’ occurs in the desert. Kuletz (2016) is correct in diagnosing European and US American writings on the desert as ‘wasteland discourse’ that dismisses arid lands as marginal, lifeless, and unproductive (pp. 3–4), but this has not always been the case. Though ancient Europeans often saw deserts as dangerous, they were not considered ruined, abnormal, or defective landscapes (Davis, 2016, p. 35). This was also true of many early Christians, including the third-century ‘Desert Fathers’ who traveled to the Scetis Desert (Wadi El Natrun) to find ascetic (and, some argue, homoerotic) religious experiences (Schroeder, 2009). This began to shift after the rise of Islam; during the Crusades, Christians often blamed ‘destructive Arab invasions’ for desertification (Davis, 2016, p. 42). In the modern period, Diana K. Davis (2016) has shown how the ‘dessicationist’ narrative of the desert as a once-fertile space that has grown lifeless due to misuse has helped articulate and mobilize French colonial intervention in North Africa (pp. 81–116). This North African setting was a site of counterhegemonic (but nonetheless colonial) queer life for some French men. Thus, we see scenes such as André Gide’s moment of queer genesis with an Arab boy on the sand dunes of Tunisia on a journey to meet Oscar Wilde in Algiers (Dollimore, 1987). Historian Robert Aldrich writes of François Augiéras, a French mentee of Gide who traveled through Algeria:

Only in a venue such as North Africa, a romanticized and mythologized North Africa, could a man find true happiness… Augiéras expresses … the sense of being receptive to the beauties of the region, the joys of solitary contemplation, the excitement of market-places, cafes, and brothels, and pleasures of sex. All come together in physical and poetic enjoyment… in the ‘Oriental’ desert.

(Aldrich, 2008, p. 212)

Here the queer colonial gaze involves the visual consumption of both desert landscapes and colonized male bodies. Arab culture is linked to the past, a fossilized space shielded from modernity but made accessible to the colonial citizen, who may pass to and from the dominated periphery and sample its products and subjects at will. This mythologized North Africa is utopian to Augiéras not because it represents the future, but because it represents the past. ‘Old’ World deserts were seen as inherently peopled and full of history; their existence is explained in terms of human activity. For an emerging White queer common sense, arid colonies were exotic spaces where the flesh of the colonized and the desert landscape itself are made available through empire. For an emerging imperial common sense, deserts are ruins, and ruins have a history; perhaps one that demands restoration to an Edenic past, even if that requires genocide.

In the ‘New’ World, settler travelogues have extolled the perceived virtues of Californian deserts since Mary Austin published The Land of Little Rain in 1903, but the use of the desert as a symbol of vacuity, timelessness, and meaninglessness persists. For Jean Baudrillard (1988), to take one prominent example, Southwestern deserts are not only diagnostic of American culture, but are also unlike Old World deserts: ‘Nothing is more alien to American deserts than symbiosis (loose-fitting clothing, slow rhythms, oases) such as you find in native desert cultures. Here, everything human is artificial’ (p. 66). He struggles to recognize extant native desert cultures in America, referring to spaces like Monument Valley as ‘the mausoleum of the Indians’ and suggesting that ‘The extermination of the Indians put an end to the natural cosmological rhythm of these landscapes’ (p. 70). In reality, Monument Valley is managed by very-much-alive Indians of the Navajo Nation. The desert’s supposed lack of history also makes it a non-erotic space: ‘I speak
of the American deserts and of the cities which are not cities. … Everywhere: Los Angeles or Twenty-Nine [sic] Palms, Las Vegas or Borrego Springs. No desire: the desert’ (p. 123).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the de-eroticization of the American desert by heterosexual writers like Baudrillard, arid lands have assumed the role of a space of (largely White) escape and refuge. In fact, the existential flight into the desert is a widespread trope in settler queer media. This is especially true of queer travel narratives, including The Price of Salt, Transamerica, Thelma and Louise, Desert Hearts, The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert, and My Own Private Idaho. The desert is treated as a space of refuge in emptiness, of queer embrace of the death drive, of the timelessness and negation of history that enables self-becoming in a hostile world. Unlike earlier depictions, these portrayals treat the desert as unpeopled and devoid of colonial history. When indigenous people do appear, as in the dreamlike appearance and disappearance of a group of aboriginal people in Priscilla, they are marginal to the narrative, placed in a phantasmagoric relationship to history. More than just a literary or movie trope, this spatial imaginary is integral to American settler queer life: thus we see the ‘utopian queers’ who gather in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert for Burning Man (Hornik, 2019), Foucault’s supposedly-pivotal epiphanies during a 1975 LSD trip in California’s Death Valley (Wade, 2019), or as I argue here, Palm Springs.

Palm Springs

There are two stories about landscape that are commonly employed by Palms Springs placemakers: one describes a struggle for tribal sovereignty through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the other describes a movement to restore and memorialize architecture. In what follows I will consider their respective temporal mechanics before asking how the figure of the desert might help reconcile their tensions.

A story of tribal restoration

In 1862 the thirty-seventh US Congress handed over large swaths of the Western United States to railway barons in the form of financing, right-of-way assurances, and land grants. In many areas this land was allocated in alternating plots, so within a decade the General Land Office’s platting maps of much of the West resembled a checkerboard, with allocated odd-numbered squares braided with unallocated even-numbered squares (Ainsworth, 1965). In the years following the Civil War, the federal government periodically allocated some even-numbered sections to the Iviatim people, more commonly known to settlers as the Cahuilla (probably from the Spanish kauïya, or ‘master’; Pritzker, 2000, p. 118). The Iviatim had lived in the Sec-he (‘boiling water’) region for over 5,000 years, with strong ties to the Agua Caliente Hot Spring and a nearby petroglyph-covered canyon inhabited by a powerful and malevolent being named Tahquitz (Hough, 2004). In 1876, President Grant formally recognized the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians (now one of many recognized Cahuilla tribes; hereafter ‘Agua’), establishing a reservation that included Section 14 of the checkerboard (including the spring) and part of Section 22 (including Tahquitz Canyon; Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, 2020). A larger allocation the following year left Agua with tens of thousands of acres of checkerboarded land, but this didn’t always translate into political sovereignty. In 1891 Congress ostensibly clarified and secured Agua’s title even as it (like the 1886 Dawes Act) expanded federal control over Indian life through suppression of Cahuilla language and religion, formal restrictions on agriculture, and proletarianization of Cahuilla people in the cattle, peat, and asbestos industries (Pritzker, 2000, p. 119).
In the 1920s, the beneficiaries of a burgeoning film industry in Los Angeles nurtured a tourism economy in the young and unincorporated town of Palm Springs, but Agua was hamstrung with federal bureaucracy that managed tribal planning and leasing. The White-controlled Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce had de facto authority over development until the town’s incorporation in 1932 (Przeklasa, 2011, pp. 3–4), but even thereafter, city leaders maintained White supremacy by ensuring a White ‘guardianship’ program over reservation land, a ‘negro removal’ program targeting Agua’s relative willingness to rent to Black tenants, and doggedly opposed proposed federal housing projects that would have served the lower-income Black, Latino, and Native American construction workers who were building modernism in town (Kray, 2009, p. 175). Manuel Shvartzberg Carrió (2019) has shown how the Alexander Construction Company bypassed the ‘problem’ of a nonwhite proletariat in town by collaborating with US Steel to automate the construction process, and has suggested that the unique role of the modernist architect and modernism’s modular possibilities were useful to those who sought to undermine Cahuilla sovereignty. Thanks to tribal leaders and organizations such as Vyola Ortner (Ortner and duPont, 2012) and the Mission Indian Federation (Przeklasa, 2011) Agua’s members secured the ability to issue long-term leases in 1959, and White conservatorship was eliminated in 1968 following a state investigation that charged Palm Springs leaders with conducting a ‘city-engineered holocaust’ (Kray, 2004). Since then, Agua has made major developments on Section 14: they have built a wildly successful casino, and as of writing are building both a minor-league hockey arena (Powers, 2020) and a Cahuilla cultural museum at the site of the original spring. ‘It’s where our creation story is based,’ says tribal chairman Jeff Grubbe. ‘It’s one of the most important pieces of land we have, so for us to have the ability to start over from scratch and build something that reflects us as a people – our history and culture and traditions and how we got here – is very special to us’ (quoted in de Crinis, 2019).

The Tribal Revival narrative of Palm Springs, which is present in public-facing Agua material and a handful of excellent historical monographs, stands out in part because, contra Jackson, it relies on both of the historical modalities described in The Necessity of Ruins. As a ‘Latin’ view of history, it presents the current social order of Palm Springs as the outcome of a highly-politicized nineteenth-century legal compact that must be defended; specific dates, documents, and leaders are named and honored, and the original promises of the compact guide a continuous, if bumpy, progression of history into the present. But as an ‘evolutionary’ view of history, it identifies creation itself as the origin of the social order, one that has fallen into disrepair but can now return as Agua ‘start[s] over from scratch.’ They also may imply different political projects; while the former defends what territorial claims were ultimately secured through settler colonial legal institutions and practices such as checkerboarding and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the latter suggests that those precise institutions and practices are illegitimate impositions of a political-legal system. Meredith Alberta Palmer (2020) has argued that ‘settler sovereign landscapes’ are constructed not only through racialized dispossession of land, but also through maintaining the hegemony of the concept of land as an object that can be owned. Given that the US Supreme Court has restricted the expansion of Indian sovereignty into areas with ‘distinctly non-Indian character’ (Palmer, 2020) the evolutionary modality of the Tribal Revival narrative hints at a more radical break from the politics of federal recognition.

Crucially, both temporal modalities are issued in response to settler ideology and attending to them helps explain how settler common sense is physically manifested in Palm Springs. For instance, the role of landscape in developing settler common sense becomes clearer when compared to anti-Black racism in Palm Springs. It is easy for a pedestrian in Downtown Palm Springs to enter and exit the reservation several times without ever knowing that they have done so. The same cannot be said of the border of the historically Black Crossley Tract, which
was explicitly cordoned off from the neighboring golf course by a row of enormous tamarisk trees from the early 1960s until ongoing protests led to their removal in 2018 (Kennedy, 2018). Though anti-Blackness is a forceful part of Palm Springs placemaking with intimate ties to attacks on indigenous sovereignty, it operates differently on the landscape: anti-Black landscapes were explicit and written through partitioning, while landscapes of anti-Indian common sense were written through erasure and a revanchist denial of the checkerboard.

**A story of architectural restoration**

The second narrativization of Palm Springs begins during the expansion of the desert tourism industry in the 1920s but is more attentive to architecture than to land. In 1924 construction began on the Oasis Hotel, the first of thousands of modern-style buildings to come in subsequent decades (Weznell, 2014). Southern California’s film industry was surprisingly resilient during the depression, and Palm Springs’ connection to Hollywood wealth allowed it to grow through the 1930s as other resort towns sputtered (Leet, 2004, p. 45). Where the modernism narrative acknowledges the checkerboard, it carries a different significance. For example, in a book on Richard Neutra’s Miller House, Stephen Leet writes that ‘The temporary but beneficial consequence of this development pattern was that the land to the east of Miller’s property [the reservation] remained a pristine desert landscape, largely developed until the mid-1950s’ (p. 62). Neutra insisted that the surrounding desert must be consumed in a comfortable and modern setting. This was couched in unambiguously racialized and temporal terms: ‘There is nothing Indian, Spanish, or Mediterranean in the Colorado desert… this new love for nature can not [sic] find its right architectural expression in the imitation of the rusticity of the pioneer or the native’ (quoted in Leet, 2004, p. 131).

Modernism wasn’t the only architectural style in town – Palm Springs followed the wave of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture in the 20s and 30s (Hart, 2017) – but by the mid-century it became best known for its distinctive style of ‘desert’ modernism (Chavkin, 2016). These private houses were often second homes designed for pleasure rather than professionalism. As a result, the landscape of Palm Springs lies on the extreme end of modernism’s spectrum of whimsy, with flamboyant butterfly roofs and ubiquitous swimming pools and wet bars. In the mid-50s, the father-and-son real estate development team George and Robert Alexander worked with younger architects like William Krisel to mass-produce desert modernism through modular design and assembly-line construction; by the end of the decade, Palm Springs was a major destination for the White middle class (Lagdameo, 2020).

Midcentury Palm Springs was a space of bellicose compulsory heterosexuality, but this was not heterosexuality modeled on the nuclear family. During the ‘Rat Pack’ era, celebrities such as Frank Sinatra used their sleek Palm Springs properties as getaway homes with mistresses (Goolsby, 2015), and as the town grew it became a major Spring Break destination. The 1963 film *Palm Springs Weekend* depicts the vain and supposedly comic attempts by the Palm Springs Police to control the wild parties, fights, drag races, and sexual liaisons that erupt amongst the visiting college students at the modernist Riviera Hotel and what appears to be an Alexander home. The narrator in a trailer for the film describes Palm Springs as a natural ecology for migrating heterosexual college students:

In the springtime the swallows fly to Capistrano, bees head for the flowers, and kids here in Southern California head for Palm Springs! It seems to be a kind of primitive, instinctual urge… the boys come for girls, the girls come for boys, and when they come together… man, it’s wild!  

*(Movieclips Classic Trailers, 2014)*
Spring Break grew increasingly raucous until 1986, when a riot broke downtown and a mob of men began sexually assaulting women in the street. In response, then-mayor Sonny Bono banned thong bikinis, poolside drinking after 11pm, and traffic along Palm Canyon Drive during spring break to curb cruising. The spring breakers left town, and for the most part have not returned since (Kelman, 2018).

Their departure accelerated an ongoing decline in Palm Springs tourism. After the tumult of the late 1960s and early 1970s – during which Palm Springs witnessed the escalation of the Vietnam War and the death of nearly the entire Alexander family in a 1965 plane crash – the goofy optimism of Palm Springs’ landscape and alleged lifestyle fell out of style (LoCascio, 2013, pp. 31–32). Many modern buildings were left vacant or remodeled in Spanish Colonial or Neo-Eclectic styles, and the town’s occupants and visitors both became more geriatric in character; for 20 years the city was considered (as one journalist wrote) ‘a character-free, climate-controlled elephants’ graveyard’ (Anderson, 1998). (The Modernism Revival narrative’s strangest theme is its ageism, a remarkable habit in a city with a median age 18 years higher than the state average.) But the elderly was not the only marginalized group that began to cluster in Palm Springs; for reasons that are not entirely clear, the city became a major destination for lesbians and gay men of means in the 1970s and 1980s. The Dinah Shore Golf Tournament evolved into a lesbian gathering, and the Warm Sands neighborhood south of Downtown grew increasingly popular with gay men who began to gentrify the area by the early 1990s (Conrad, 2018). Many of them joined the ranks of the gay ‘keepers of culture’ (Fellows, 2005), becoming committed architectural preservationists and devotees of MCMism through activism and preservation-minded homeownership (LoCascio, 2013).

When I speak to colleagues about Palm Springs, they often suggest that these preservationists are attracted to the archeological remnants of a hyperbolically heteronormative era, either as bids for a form of acceptance denied to them in childhood or as defiant gestures of queer reclamation. As I have previously written (Lenc, 2018), I found very little evidence for either of these suggestions during my visits. On the contrary, colleagues chafed at the idea that their homes were ‘museums’ of the midcentury and denied that nostalgia fueled their attraction to modernism. ‘I love the 40s, 50s, and 60s. But I don’t want to live with them,’ said one respondent who lives in a restored MCM home. Instead, what attracted him was the alleged timelessness of the era’s design. When pressed about what timelessness means, his answer was comparable to that of most others I spoke to:

If you look at antiques now, they look out of style with today’s world… Charles chairs [a midcentury chair model] are like sculpture; nobody would ever find it dated or old… There may be people who have nostalgia, maybe its subconscious and they saw it in a magazine when they were 16 or 18, but let’s be honest: gays are just more design-focused than straight guys.

One preservation activist insisted that ‘This is not a re-enactment! I hadn’t been exposed to modernism as a child, my mother preferred early American furniture.’ Time held paradoxical significances for him: he fell in love with MCM antiques and architecture because it seemed so ‘new,’ but also because they seemed so ‘timeless’; he said that ‘It would be so fun to go back in time when all these buildings were new, when excitement was high’ before saying, ‘I have no connection to that period at all.’ These turbulent temporal flows and alternating avowals/disavowals of the midcentury – which as everyone noted, was a conservative and homophobic period in Palm Springs and elsewhere – were present in the testimonies of every gay or modern homeowner or preservationist I spoke to.
While the Tribal Restoration Narrative is usually marginal to the Modernism Restoration Narrative, the recent demolition of the Spa Resort Hotel (a celebrated MCM landmark on the reservation; Descant, 2014), to build the aforementioned cultural museum, forced these homeowners and activists to face the reality of Section 14. Their responses shared a common disappointment but varied in their temporal descriptions of tribal land and life. Several argued that the tribe’s decision to demolish the hotel was ‘shortsighted’; one respondent said that there was ‘no future’ for MCM homes on tribal land and lamented the temporal ambiguity of the reservation’s newest non-modernist structures:

I don’t think they’re worried about any consistent style that has anything to do with Palm Springs. They’re not interested in the midcentury […] I don’t even know what a Cahuilla motif is. I think they lived in temporary structures. I don’t know if there was a style, a Cahuilla style. There’s no style that I can see. Adobe maybe? A grass roof?

It’s worth mentioning that in addition to the structures, including MCM homes, that Cahuilla people have built since checkerboarding, there is a long tradition of pre-colonial Cahuilla architectural practices that includes dome-shaped shelters constructed with brush, rectangular thatch houses, granaries, sweat houses, and ceremonial lodges (Pritzker, 2000, p. 119).

Others were more diplomatic. One respondent emphasized the ancientness of Agua’s ties to the land, reframing the evolutionary component of the Tribal Restoration Narrative in liberal multi-cultural terms:

Really, this is their land. They have a different vision of what is historic and what should be preserved based on thousands of years of their own culture. I would think that going forward as more of these issues that both sides learn to live together, learn not to mistrust one another. The [Spa Resort] Hotel was on the most sacred spot, it’s the heart of the whole region for them.

Unlike the Tribal Restoration narrative, which uses tightly wound strands of both the ‘Latin’ and ‘evolutionary’ modes of landscape history that Jackson treats as distinct, the Architectural Restoration narrative is more thoroughly evolutionary. While preservationists could in theory erect monuments to Richard Neutra (and the names of a few modernists like the Alexanders are admittedly present in the Hollywood-style ‘Walk of Stars’ downtown), instead they tend to de-emphasize politicized political compacts as key historical structuring moments. Instead, there is an emphasis on a golden era in the past, the ruins of which stimulated a movement to restore this historical landscape in its ‘original’ form. But while Jackson understands this view of history as merely unstructured outside of the structuring device of the ruins, what we see in Palm Springs is a knot of temporal contradictions: timelessness flows into novelty flows into nostalgia even as they negate one another. The knottedness only becomes clearer when we try to consider preexisting theories of queer narrative and time. The exodus of lesbians and gay men from Los Angeles to Palm Springs doesn’t fit the pattern of what Halberstam (2005) identifies as the ‘metronormative’ coming-out narrative in which queer subjects migrate from the country to self-actualize in a liberal metropolis; most of the men I spoke to have been out for years or even decades in large cities (especially San Francisco and Los Angeles) before moving to the desert. Nor do we see Tongson’s (2011) ‘queer suburban imaginaries’ or Muñoz’s (2009) ‘queer futurity,’ which endeavor to explain queer of color responses to and negotiations with White supremacist landscapes. Instead, we see a variety of seemingly contradictory temporal modalities used to articulate the value of MCM architecture and design, sexual community, and settler presence.
Conclusion: desert time in Palm Springs

While the differences between the Architectural and Tribal restoration narratives are easy to spot—Alexander homes as democratizing architecture vs. the Alexanders as racial capitalists, the tragic demolition of the Spa Resort Hotel vs. the triumphant establishment of a tribal museum, settler common sense vs. indigenous sovereignty—it is easy to miss their common dependence on preexisting attitudes towards the desert itself. The desert is an inconsistent signifier in American settler colonial discourse: it simultaneously represents the space of the ancient other and a space of emptiness and timelessness. Settlers seek the desert as an otherwise and elsewhere, embodying erotic lifeways that may or may not be ‘normal’ but do not belong in the urban core or the atomic family home, from Frank Sinatra use of Palm Springs as a site for extramarital affairs to LGBTQ+ people (and gay men in particular) who seek to build ‘a different kind of Eden’ in the Coachella Valley. But in a settler colonial context, these flights to elsewhere also leverage the figure of the empty desert to stage a break with history and the creation of alternative sexual possibility. This figure is present as the settler common sense of midcentury developers enables them to deny an indigenous presence even on a reservation. The temporal logic of modern architecture provided a convenient grammar for this historical erasure, as when Richard Neutra likened the desert setting with its rocks and mountains to the landscape of the moon and conceived of the [Kaufmann] house as a gem-like pavilion in a small, lush oasis in the midst of a grand but relatively barren place’ (Hines, 1994). The turbulent temporal knots found in MCM preservationist discourse were already present in queer desert discourse that deploys timelessness, ancientness, and newness where convenient for settler purposes. Reconciling the Tribal and Architectural Revival narratives in Palm Springs will require more than ‘dialogue’ between settlers and tribal members: if placemakers are to dismantle the settler common sense that holds them apart, they must question assumptions about the history and use of the desert as a marginal, ruinous, and ahistorical wasteland.

References


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Queer placemaking in Palm Springs


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