



# Migration and U.S. Ghost Towns

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# Louisiana Purchase, 1803

The beginning of the colonization of the West





# Lecture Topics

1. **Why Ghost Towns?**
2. **Moveable Urban Networks: Migrating Ghost Towns?**
3. **Migratory Narratives of Migrants: Anecdotes and Tall Tales**
4. **“The Figure of the Migrant” and the U.S. National Identity**



# The Origin of the Term

**1915** “ghost city ... *Saturday Evening Post* author Charles Van Loan used that term to describe Bodie.”

(a famous mining town in eastern California, once the second largest city in the state, right after San Francisco)

**1922** the term “ghost town” prevailed, together with a nostalgic, idealized representation of these communities as the highest values of civilization: “paragons of Western virtue,” the places where the “miner’s law” was the “best law.”

Didia DeLyser, “Good, by God, We’re Going to Bodie!”: Ghost Towns and the American West,” in Gary J. Hausladen (ed.), *Western Places, American Myths: How We Think about the West* (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2003) 278, 280.





# Rhyolite, NV

## Comparing Ruined Buildings with Their Original Appearance



# Ghost Town Objects: Museum at Bodie





# Steins, NM: Settlers Left Everything Behind



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# **The Failure of Colonization or Mere Exploitative Nature of the Settlement**

**Mono Mills, eastern California**



**the site of Dogtown, CA (tailings)**





# Mark Twain: *Roughing It* (1872)

In no other land, in modern times, have towns so absolutely died and disappeared. [...] the strangest population, the finest population, the most gallant host that ever trooped down the startled solitudes of an unpeopled land [...] have been scattered to the ends of the earth, or prematurely aged or decrepit, or shot or stabbed in street affrays [...] the noblest holocaust that ever wafted the sacrificial incense heavenward.

# **“Global Transfer of Prosperity”:**

**East Rand Mine, South Africa**

**Randsburg, CA**





# Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces” (1969)

Heterotopias (Other Places), Heterochronias (Temporal Discontinuities)

- Ruins are “different spaces” connected with temporal discontinuities, where historical and cultural time is being closely connected with a “quasi-eternity” of decay and disappearance.
- Subversive function of heterotopias and heterochronias: “places that do exist [...], but] which are something like **counter-sites** [...] in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are **simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.**”

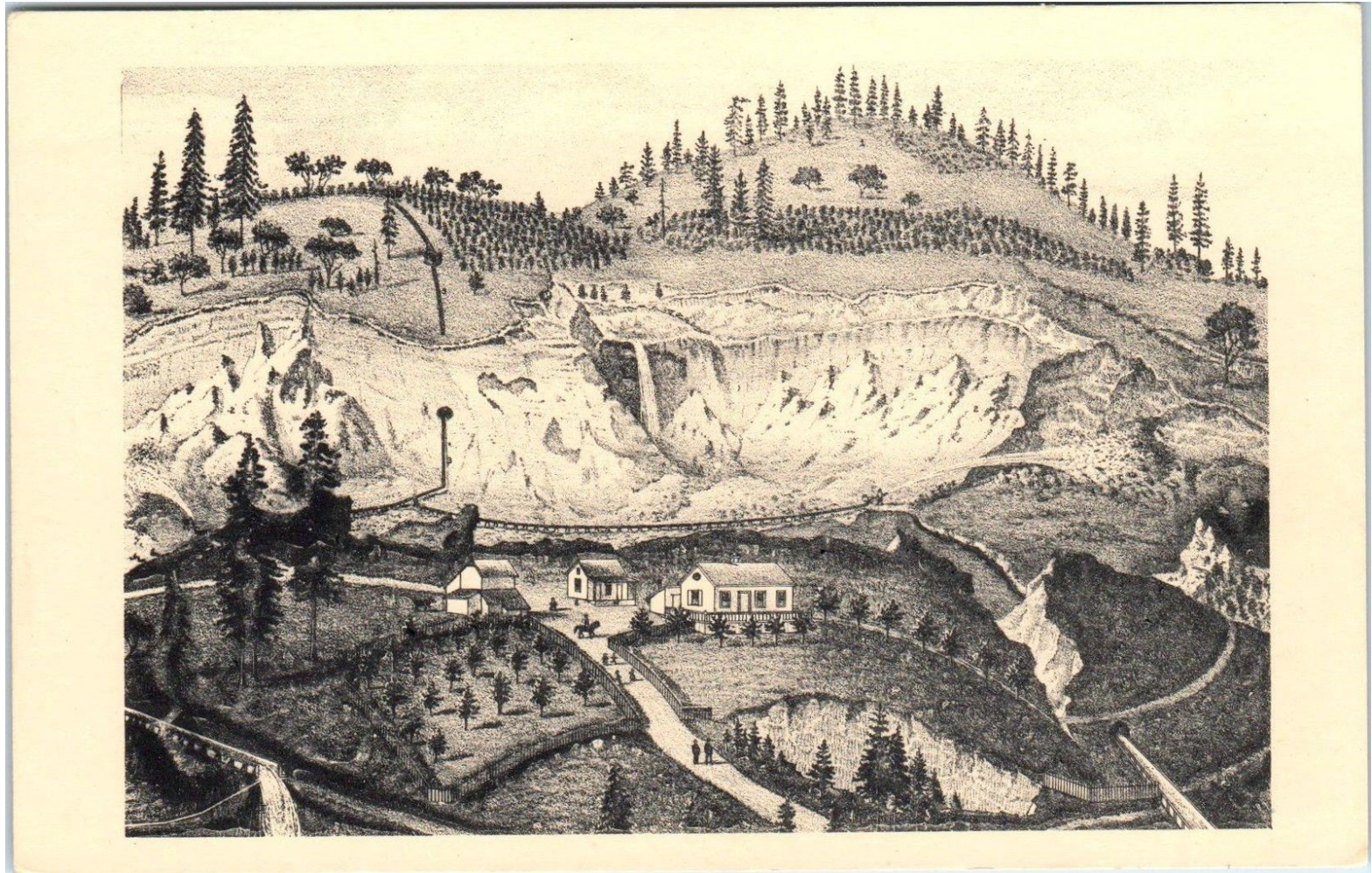


Cemetery, Bodie, CA



# You Bet, CA

## Hydraulic Mining of Gold





# W.S.Body's / President Garfield's Monument Bodie, CA

- the **desire to find a foundation of local history** is challenged by actions and discourses displacing the glorious origin and making it eventually disappear.
- the **heterotopic and heterochronic nature of the ghost town** is emphasized and
- the **subversive discourse linking the founder's missing body with an assassination of the U.S. President** baffles all attempts to integrate local history into historical master narratives.
- Nonetheless, the **local history is finally integrated, but on the most subversive level:** the local scandal of Body's missing body is substituted by the central scandal of U.S. political life.



# Arrested Deterioration: Bodie, CA





# Monuments/Trash: “Circulation”

- Different from the notorious phrase “circulation of social energy” (Stephen Greenblatt).
- Demonstrates the **“founding paradox of the economy”** the **constitution of individual subjectivity in response to the impossibility of “pure gift”**:  
striving “to subdue this hubris or impossibility through the calculation and the exchange of power which is announced in the promise of the gift.”  
(Jacques Derrida, *Given Time 1. Counterfeit Money*, 1991)
- **The circulation of monuments and trash:**  
**a multifunctional structural device** organizing the discourse of ghost towns in several enunciative modalities:
  - individual subjectivity,
  - local history,
  - economic and social changes, including migrations
  - “the end of history,” including eschatology and revelation.

# The Website of the Los Alamos Historical Museum

<http://www.atomictourist.com/alamos.htm> (accessed 20 October 2011)

A lame effort to recycle the 'atomic' past of Los Alamos as a harmless supplement of local Native American findings and other tourist attractions

Documenting the history of the Pajarito Plateau, with special emphasis on the Manhattan [sic!] Project, this small museum displays Anasazi ax heads, needles, potsherds, and arrowheads, as well as various items from the days Los Alamos was the 'Secret City'.

## What You'll See

Included are memos to and from Oppenheimer, photos of atomic testing and post-bomb Nagasaki, and copies of leaflets the United States dropped, warning the Japanese about the bomb. In addition, a small but well-stocked bookstore carries a variety of literature about Los Alamos and the Southwest, including maps of self-guided walking tours of town



## **Eugene P. Moehring,** ***Urbanism and Empire in the Far West (2004)***

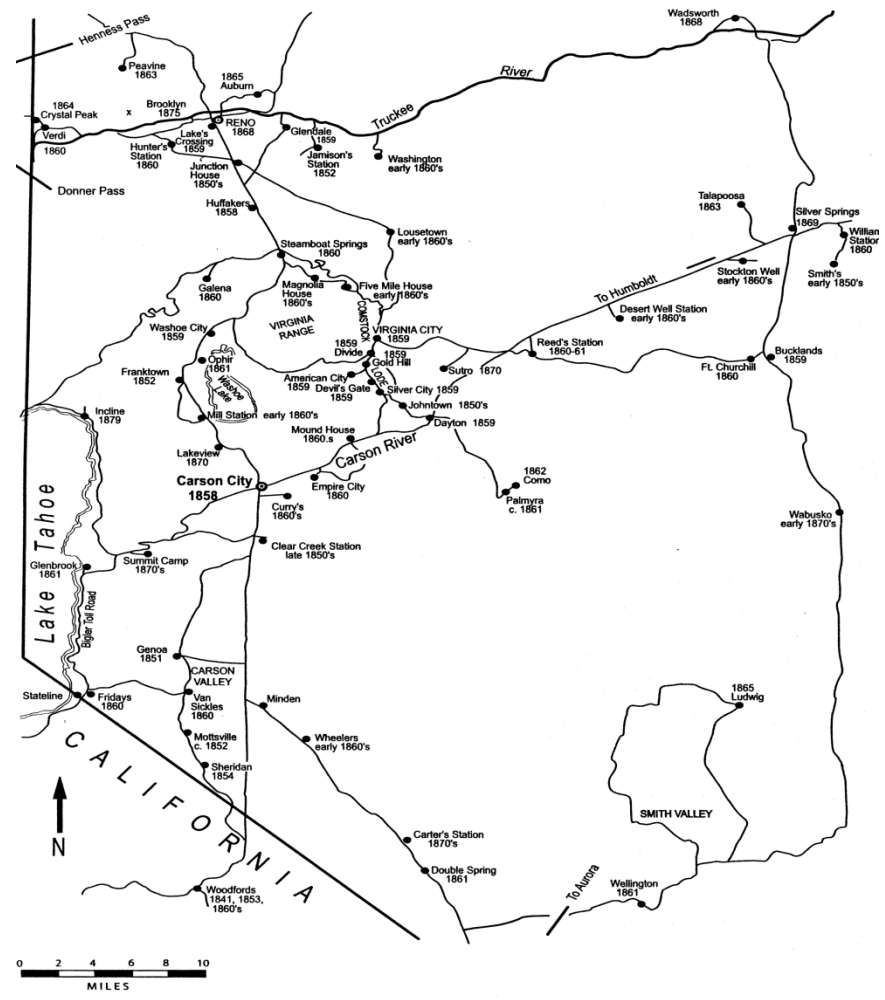
From the major nuclei (San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland-Seattle, Salt Lake, Denver) and secondary nuclei (Boise, Tucson, and so on) [...], the Americans erected a network of towns across sections of every future western state. This was an especially dynamic movement because the Americans created multiple nuclei in many different places *simultaneously*. By connecting these communities and their nascent hinterlands into networks through a system of country trails, turnpikes, stage routes and railroads, the Americans rapidly penetrated and conquered the sprawling West by dividing it into discrete compartments of space that were often easily controllable. All of these towns and places functioned as connected entities. [...] American settlers built the West's urban networks by punching a maze of corridors through the region's countless valleys, desserts, canyons and mountains. [...] These networks expanded until they pressured the land, its animals, plant life, and native peoples. [...] by 1890 the West was "so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement" [...] that the Americans had successfully conquered and colonized the western space simply by fragmenting it.

# Serial Pattern of Settlement

## Two types of town settlements

- transport and business nodes (or “nuclei” in Moehring’s terminology) and
- a series of smaller towns springing up along transport routes (railroad towns, trailhead towns, supply towns, post-office towns).

This pattern characterized by the **decentralization and increasing mobility and migration of urban as well as social and economic structures** was, to a certain extent, typical even of the early eighteenth-century frontier settlement.



MAP 4.1 The Comstock



**Lancaster, CA,  
partially undeveloped grid city  
105th Street W at Avenue I**



# Nodal Transport Network

## Chicago Canals: 20th Century Rebuilding

In the nineteenth century, the construction of the Chicago transport system, based on waterways, was closely connected with the sewage disposal network, canals conducting wastewater from the city core. While the older phase of this process had been marked by the building and use of the 97 mile long Illinois-Michigan (I&M) Canal, which was finished in 1848 and partially gave way to the Adlai E. Stevenson Expressway (Interstate 55) in 1957, later stages were affected by the construction of two new canals, the Cal-Sag Channel and the Sanitary and Ship Canal and partial draining of Lake Calumet. This led not only to the **reversal of the flow of the Chicago River** but to a **massive redrawing of the urban grid** and **relocation of heavy industries** and the ship and railway traffic to the area known as South Chicago.





# Anecdote on Hank Monk and Horace Greeley

“Keep your seat, Horace, and I’ll get you there on time”



# Ragtown, NV





# Tall Tale: Harry Wonham

- “the tall tale [...contains] more than one potential meaning – it does express **a will to lie and a contradictory will to tell the truth *at the same time*.**”
- It also consists in a “**rhetorical pattern of interpretive challenge and response**” dramatizing “the interaction of voices without pretending to solve them into a single, unified voice.”
- It creates a **new interpretive community of narrators and listeners**, scattered in the immensity of the Big Empty and communicating both orally and through the printed word, at tall tale contests and festivals as well as reading and writing the tales, and circulating them by means of the printed medium and even internet.

Harry Wonham, *Mark Twain and the Art of the Tall Tale* (New York: OUP, 1993)

# Tall Tale: Carolyn Brown

- tall tale can **mediate between three types of folk narratives**: (a) **“true” accounts, mostly of a personal character**, expected and believed to be based on facts, (b) **“fictional narratives”** such as the “Märchen, fable, joke, trickster tale, ghost story, and so on,” and, finally, (c) **“truth narratives,”** that is, **myths and sacred histories which cannot be verified and are matters of religious belief**.
- This creates a **unique spatio-temporal field where the opposites, such as history and myth, truth and fiction, appearance and reality, present, past and future or narrators and their audiences, can meet**.
- This field does not establish any harmonic continuum: its power consists of the **dramatization of the relationship between truth and lies, and consequently, between narrators and their audiences**. A very important function in this respect is **the relation of the community to strangers and migrants**: yarns pretend to educate “greenhorns” or “tenderfoots,” at whom they are mostly aimed, in the complexities of life and the art of discrimination.
- The **main technique: exaggeration** leads to the **overstraining and collapse of the metaphor, transforming it into an illogical catachresis** (or a failed or far-fetched metaphor): a leading politician is reduced to a grotesque shouting head.

Carolyn S. Brown, *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989).



# Frederick Jackson Turner – Frontier Thesis (1893)

- Representing the U.S. identity as **a collective experience of the Frontier and its westward movement** that “molded the distinctive character of Americans, shaping traits such as individualism, hard work, and self-reliance.”
- The Frontier “**was the major determinant of the democratic character of their political institutions.**”
- Turner completely **dismisses** the very controversial aspects of Frontier life, such as **lawlessness, violence and even genocide.**
- He emphasizes “**the dominating American character**” namely “**perennial rebirth**” and “**fluidity of American life**” as well as “**its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society.**”
- He imagines this experience as a homogeneous, abstract process, **a dynamic version of a melting-pot theory.**

# Gold Rush Migration

- the inhabitants of the South Atlantic **Sandwich Islands**,
- **Latin Americans** (Mexico, Chile),
- **Chinese** (who named California “Jin Shan” 金山 or “Gum Shan” - “Gold Mountain(s)”),
- **Hawaiians, Filipinos,**
- **Turks,**
- **Australians, New Zealanders,**
- **Europeans:** the French, Bretons, Basques, Scandinavians, Irish, Italians, Germans and Russians.
- **African Americans, Native Americans**

Only more than a half of the approximately 300,000 Gold Rush migrants spoke English.





## Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border* (New York: OUP, 2016)

- The Frontier is **never explained in its specificity** .
- Using the ‘**hydrodynamic**’ model of “disjoined” and “conjoined” flows, Nail models the Frontier as an interface between two liquids or gasses in the process of mixing: Frontier is “**zone or belt of disjoined flows around the conjoined ones**” (41).
- Quotes Turner’s ominous phrase about the “**conflict between savagery and civilization**” (41) although he tries to rectify it by saying that **savagery does not come from the outside, “but from within ‘civilization’ itself** as the social division multiplies, self-destructs and turns against itself” (41).
- Nail’s analysis of the Frontier and its dynamics is **frustratingly abstract**. It reveals that he **tacitly accepts Turner’s Frontier Thesis**.

# Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford 2015)

- The migrant is not an individual with shifting identities (as in post-colonial, diasporic, cosmopolitan or transcultural studies), but a “**mobile social position**” or “spectrum” that individuals move into and out of under certain social conditions of mobility.
- The migrant is seen as “a **political concept that defines the conditions and agencies**” by which individuals or their groups are expelled and kept on the move.
- **The figure of the migrant includes a wide range of very different functions.**
  - those who have **chosen to travel** – diplomats, politicians, businessmen, tourists, explorers, employees.
  - **forced to travel** - economic migrants, victims of war conflicts or climate changes.
- **Even the profitable or free ways of migration partake in certain forms of social expulsion and potential risks.** As Zygmunt Bauman shows, “tourism and vagrancy are two faces of the same coin,” **both tourist and vagabond are “bound to move” by the same social conditions, but their movement results in different forms of expulsion** from the social order.

**“A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of migration.”**

“we are all becoming migrants”, which, among others,  
**“poses a serious challenge to democracy and political representation.”**



# Rhyolite, NV, Albert Szukałski, *The Last Supper*



# Rhyolite, NV, Albert Szukałski, *The Ghost Rider*





# Rhyolite, NV, Albert Szukałski, *Desert Flower*





# Robert Coover: *Ghost Town* (1998)

“the buildings shifted about like wagers upon a faro table...the saloon replacing the church [...] the claims office and the jailhouse changing places [...] until the entire town layout has been reset [...]” (114)

“as he watched, the stars began to slide about, to realign themselves upon the black canvas of the sky as though to spell out some message for him. A warning maybe. But it was just all a sluggish scramble, like the shuffling of dominoes, nothing he could make any sense of [...] anything the universe might have to say would remain forever incomprehensible to him. So well, may be he could read what they had to say after all” (83)

“a nymph of the prairie practising her murderous skills upon him. The days that followed blurred into ceaseless present and, as he felt his life essence draining out of him, he lost all sense of time” (109)

# Betsy Thornton: *Ghost Towns* (2002)

Courtland, near Tombstone, AZ

**But none of us  
seemed to live  
anymore where he  
had grown up; we  
moved to other  
people's places,  
made souvenirs of  
their history. We all  
lived in ghost  
towns.**

