

# Invasive Species

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We drove for a few hours out of the city, to a site near a small river where a set of grassy mounds dotted the area. Even, rounded small hills, with wooden steps leading to the top. Once up, they each just had a brown balding patch of dirt, the mild elevation hardly giving any view at all. Our parents had let us roam on our own, and, slightly bored, we began racing each other up and down the sides of the inclines.

We tired quickly enough, heading back to the visitors' centre to find our lift home. It was on the way from the Etowah Indian Mounds, driving back to the suburbs of Atlanta, that we were asked what we thought. A shrug of the shoulders. *Why were the stairs there?* It's so you don't walk on the mounds, one of the fathers explained. They were graves. We exchanged a wide-eyed look in the back seat. Or houses, or just walls; it's all that's left of a culture that had been there until around four hundred years ago, now only called Mississippians. *Like the state?* Kind of, before that. Only a few of the mounds have been excavated, so we don't know exactly what's in them. We both stared at our feet for the rest of the drive home; we both knew it was bad luck to walk on graves.

That evening it was one of the father's ideas to treat us to the first *Star Trek* film. *Why aren't they wearing their usual uniforms?* In one scene, two new crew members are meant to be beaming aboard. The control board for the Starship Enterprise's transporter sparks and smokes, a malfunction with the teleportation device while the crew are en route, de-materialised. Kirk rushes to the transporter room, fiddling with knobs: two misshapen bodies partially appear, crying out in anguish, before fading again. They try to send the atomised bodies back to where they came. Fortunately, for my nightmare-prone mind, they don't show the deformed lumps of the unlucky travellers, but a curt transmission that still managed to plant far worse in my head: 'What we got back didn't live long, fortunately.' Fortunately.

I was remembering that day, its transgressions and unease, while walking down a short, steep slope in an Essex forest just outside of London. It's part of a ridge that begins to bend and, following it around, form a rough u-shape, a design that reveals some sort of human intention in shaping the dirt. Trees and shrubs grow on it as anywhere else, and like the Georgia mounds, it might well be a few hundred years or thousands of years ago this shaping took place: the dormancy today is the same. I get an odd sense of a *déjà vu* of sorts, wondering who else might have walked up and down these banks, wondering about how such marks, just pushing a lot of soil around, have remained over time. The trees around here – oak, beech,

hornbeam – are all considered native to the UK; the earthwork was also probably used to hold cattle, an animal that is considered indigenous as well. Though they've been attempting to clear rhododendron, brought here in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from the forest, and have installed fences to keep the fallow deer out, a species that used to be found in Britain until melting glaciers restricted them to closer to the Mediterranean. The Normans re-introduced the animal for hunting; it is now considered 'naturalised'.

And here I am, an American born to Midwesterners of mixed, mostly European descent, on a wet afternoon walk, pondering how we get to understand what a land used to be, how that seeps through to the now, when my phone buzzes. A video broadcast begins: a blurry shot of the ground, moving over a set of large rocks in the sun. I angle my phone to see it more clearly, shielding the surface from reflecting the greys of the forest. The person carrying the camera keeps it focused on their shadow as they move, panting, and then singing. The song, after a few lines, becomes recognisable as 'I Hung My Head', a tune I know as sung by Johnny Cash. My phone becomes a tunnel to a hill in California: the walker goes through the song, stopping occasionally to regain their breath. 'All for no reason,' she pants, pauses, before giving an exasperated 'Bloody hell.' Then continuing to sing her way slowly up the hill, '...just one piece of lead. I hung my head.' Once she reaches the top, surveying the dry landscape around her, I put my phone away and continue on through wet leaves. The song stays in my head as I walk, humming it as I think about all that Cash, the 'Man in Black', embodied to his fans, a vision of the American lone wanderer, the bad good guy, being evoked by a British man in their own walk in a desert in the West. But then I remember that the song was actually written in the '90s by Gordon Sumner, who was himself penning an idealised tribute to the Western films of his youth, long after Sumner, from Northumberland, had renamed himself Sting.

A few days later, I'm sitting on the tube in London, on the District line pulling into Blackfriars station. I don't expect any reception, but my phone buzzes: a video from within a yellow structure, the angles suggest some kind of a geodesic dome, a hilly desert expanse all around it. The sound cuts in and out, the fuzz of the wind, fragments of a man talking; the camera pans shakily to see him, with a ponytail and soul patch explaining...something. I hear the words 'quasar wave transducer' before the train moves on and it cuts out again and freezes, the man gesticulating some unknown theory with his hands.

Kirk, at the start of each *Star Trek* episode, called space 'the final frontier'. The word *frontier* manages to denote limitations, borders, the unknown, while still carrying so much baggage: of expansion, maps and settlements of Europeans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or the more popularised version of white Americans heading towards the Pacific through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the time Kirk was broadcasting his version of the frontier in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, space was the next perceived border – 'Spaceship Earth' was filling up,

and the great wide open of the sky beyond was the next empty place to be colonised. That projection seems to have quieted, or been subsumed, into the 21<sup>st</sup> century frontier, a place where these dreams of unending open plains and songs of freedom might echo into eternity: digital space. And while the former sense of frontier – of a materialised place that is 'wilderness' – might be understood as an urban phenomenon, devised and directed from crowded city spaces outwards, this newer frontier is more pervasive, elusive and permeating. The use of computers is becoming globally standardised, while the internet is somehow pitched as a survival necessity; which is to say, the digital frontier is, hypothetically at least, everywhere to everyone.

The next week, I'm working at my computer at home, looking up recent writing on Carl Jung when a 'ding' sound goes off. My desktop image is an abandoned truck loading bay on the outskirts of Copenhagen, and over that a small window pops up. This broadcast seems to be a lecture of sorts on lichen that live in the Mojave desert; the connection must be slow, as the words keep dropping out, but the most fascinating part is the way the images materialise. Each still image in the sequence appears first as a pixelated blur, a rough stain of blotchy colours, resolving itself after a few seconds into a sharper, legible picture of yellow or brown growths on rocks. The distance these images have travelled is palpable, the routing and wiring enacted, reassembled in front of me. These daily interruptions, arriving to me in the UK, have come to feel like an occupation, an alien intrusion of sorts: short, single take videos from a long-distant elsewhere being beamed onto my phone and computer. I'm sure Shatner and his crew took the day trips from Los Angeles to film episodes of *Star Trek* among the slanted and oddly ordered rocks around Joshua Tree; the first impression the geologic formations give is that of being from another planet. Not to mention the myths of Gram Parsons that might echo around the place, or moreover the scant traces of the Serrano tribe that lived here before the frontiersmen came through. Each video, in itself, is a misplaced documentary, with a sense of the British artists of TRACKINGSHOT exploring this new surrounding. But this isn't straight up topolatry, worshiping the landscape rightfully or not. Perhaps what they cumulatively capture isn't the place itself, this other-worldly-other, but the process of coming to some sort of terms with it, temporarily tracing its weather, its people, its geology. Any walk on the ground involves a back and forth of projection, of amnesia, of understanding that shifts over time: it's that process itself that is being mediated, excerpted and beamed up.

It's at the juncture between the geographic frontier and the ephemeral frontier, between the conception of last century's and this century's ideals of space, where the TRACKINGSHOT project is roughly situated. What we might see, among the pixelated rocks and sand, or hear between the half-words of nu-hippy, old-Western ideals, is a sense of how we might comprehend our current relationship with dirt, landscape, earth, and its reverberating projections into the ether. In the old frontier, altering the landscape – physically changing it – was our way of understanding what

it used to be and seeing what it is now. Excavating, digging, demolishing. In the new frontier, it is a more invisible layering, in sending it away, transmitting it in all directions at once, where we might be able to perceive what results. Of course, even most of the time, the transmission is stunted, cut off, mutated, or missed altogether. The question remains of how we tend and relate to this beamed, fragmented landscape, this half-formed body that emerges.

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