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## Of the Dirt

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Early Winter  
Clare Doveton

## OF THE DIRT

“Who knew there could be such vastness,  
and that fossils could be as big as the wagons their oxen pulled,  
fossils that still today jut up.”

Mary Pinard, “Ghost Heart”

“What was here is inseparable from what is here.”

Lucy Lippard, “The Lure of the Local”

In the summer of 2006 and again in winter of 2007, I retraced the Santa Fe Trail by vehicle, making photographs along the historic trade route. The journey, which had taken on average two months to complete by wagon in the mid-1800s, can now be accomplished in two days’ time with little effort.

Named for a bend in the Arkansas River, my hometown of Great Bend, Kansas, is along the trail. While visiting my mother in 2006, I stopped at the Barton County Historical Society to try to understand the trail’s relationship to the place I was raised. As I began looking through the archives, a volunteer informed me I could see remnants of the Santa Fe Trail approximately 25 miles east of where we stood. I made handwritten notes of her directions and drove there immediately. I found a sign indicating “Ralph’s Ruts,” parked along the gravel road and walked out into the adjacent field with my camera and tripod.

I stood staring at the landscape, but the trail was invisible to me. I wandered, uncertain of what I was looking for, disappointed. As I was about to retreat, the sun dropped below the clouds on the overcast December day. The raking golden light illuminated subtle swales of earth, briefly making visible the distinction of high ground from low, the sandy soil sunken from passing wagons, oxen and mules. I quickly made a single image

before the radiance vanished and the trail was once again camouflaged by the tall, tan grass of winter, the topography of this history made visible only briefly.

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**THIS BECAME THE VISUALIZATION OF MANIFEST DESTINY: THE BELIEF THAT MAN (WHITE, ANGLO-CHRISTIAN MAN) HAD THE GOD-GIVEN RIGHT AND DUTY TO EXPAND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE. THIS CONQUEST CAME AT AN EXPENSE OUR COUNTRY HAS NOT YET FULLY RECKONED WITH.**

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In the months that followed, I continued the pursuit, driving the length of the trail from Franklin, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. I photographed the contemporary landscape I imagined to be shaped by the trail and portraits of people along the way — a farmer selling fruit beside a road, a group of men gathered at an abandoned railroad station a block from my paternal grandfather's home in Lyons, a young but weary sunburned hitchhiker. Later, when looking through all the photographs I made, only one — the ruts from that field — continued to resonate with me.

Why, I thought, hadn't we learned about this proximity to history in high school, been driven here as a field trip? Standing

in the recesses of the past had made a profound impression on me. When I grew up, Great Bend felt like the middle of nowhere. It seemed unconnected to things I was becoming interested in. I dreamed of running away. Perhaps these subtle undulations would have grounded me then and begun to reveal connections to place and history that I would only later, from a distance, feel compelled by.

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In the 1872 painting "American Progress" by John Gast, an angelic figure with long, blond hair appears to float across the American interior landscape, draped in a flowing white gown, telegraph wire in one hand and schoolbook in the other, with the "Star of Empire" visible on her forehead. The sun rises at her back, illuminating the landscape ahead. To the right of her, Gast depicts the Mississippi River, to the left, snow-peaked mountains, and below her what appears to be the Great Plains. She could be dragging her big toe across Kansas! Below her, farmers plow a field, oxen pull a wagon, three trains travel on tracks not yet fully laid: All point West. Indigenous Americans and buffalo also head West but are in retreat before the advancing Euro-American settlers.

This became the visualization of Manifest Destiny: the belief that man (white, Anglo-Christian man) had the God-given right and duty to expand the

American empire. This conquest came at an expense our country has not yet fully reckoned with.

What has been the totality of 150 years of "progress"? I wanted to make an artwork that considered "American Progress" using the visual language of the Hollywood Western. In 2008, I found a location in the Flint Hills that offered an uninterrupted, 360-degree view of the land. I set up camp and positioned three video cameras on tripods to form a panoramic view.

Before the sun rose the following morning, I began recording myself running West. The cameras were far enough away so that it was not a portrait of an individual, but an "everyman." In the darkness and without contextual features on the treeless landscape, the video slowly revealed the figure — who, though exerting great effort, never seemed to move forward. I ran in place as the sun rose and the day passed, taking breaks occasionally to drink water from one-gallon plastic jugs I had brought to location. Sweat drenched the white, pearl-snapped western shirt I wore. A straw Stetson hat shielded my eyes.

As the sun crossed the sky and fell in front of me, I continued to pound my boots into the ground, remaining stationary. By sundown, the tall, green grass was pulverized underneath me, the earth below my boots sunken like the ruts of the Santa Fe Trail.

Later, the three-channel video made over the course of that day would be edited down to one hour. The piece, which I titled "Frontier," was indebted to late 20th century performance art — where the medium consists of time, space and the body. Artists such as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and Ana Mendieta used their bodies, often to physical extremes, in response to the land, identity and their environment. In addition, I considered Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows of the turn of the century, where he re-enacted the spectacle of the West being "won" over and over again. I answered the call, "Go West, young man!" though progress was elusive.

The performance was intended as a critique of Manifest Destiny and its results. More than a decade later, this failure is only louder in my consciousness. Much of rural Kansas has steadily depopulated over the past century. We face the environmental consequences of unbridled capitalism. We are an increasingly unequal society where the American Dream, that each generation will rise above the previous, has faded. In the aftermath of the 2020 election, our very democracy has come under threat.

Though I have not lived in Kansas since graduating high school in 1995, it is here I annually return to try to understand our country, and where I come to better know myself. On that hot July day near Chase

Lake Falls, I made an ephemeral mark on the prairie earth, but it left an indelible impression on me.

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As an educator, I'm grateful to divide summers between Kansas and my partner's family summer home in coastal Maine. Euro-Americans settled the surrounding community of York Harbor in 1624. It and neighboring communities are much older than those where I grew up and have a more celebrated, institutionalized relationship to American history.

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**THE COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE  
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For more than two centuries after York Harbor was established, the Indigenous American Plains tribes of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kanza, Kiowa, Osage, Pawnee and Wichita would rule present-day Kansas. The colonial architecture of New England is a constant reminder of antiquity, yet somehow in Kansas I feel a more intimate proximity to history. I feel it brushing against the tallgrass in the Flint Hills; I recently found

multiple arrowheads near Spring Creek with little effort. The ruts from covered-wagon wheels are still visible on the landscape.

Two summers ago, Lily and I were invited for an afternoon cocktail at a neighbor's house in Maine. Like Lily's family's place, the residence of our hosts has been passed down through generations. I was humbled by the dramatic view of the water from the sitting room and the lived-in elegance of the historic home. Nautical-themed artwork and oil-painted portraits hung on the walls. A telescope stood by the window; a piano waited to be played in the center of the room. As we stood near the large plate glass windows looking out to York Harbor, drinks in hand, our gentleman host eloquently told stories of his kin and their tradition of sailing and seamanship before announcing, "You could say we're people of the sea." He then turned toward me and asked, "And what of your people?"

I stood uncomfortably for a moment, acutely aware of the class distinction that has always kept me from feeling completely at ease in York Harbor. I thought back to my family's land in Russell County. The 320 acres, once territory of the nomadic Plains tribes, were homesteaded by my maternal kin and have been farmed for five generations. For as long as our host's family held this view of the sea, my family toiled on a half section of land in the

desolate center of Kansas. Unable to pay taxes, my family forfeited acreage in the 1920s. The farm would likely have been lost if oil hadn't been discovered on the property. The crude from three wells they drilled carried them through the Great Depression.

The newly discovered oil saved the farm, but it came at a cost. In 1936, my grandfather Ralph and his brother Ernest were working on a well when a gas pocket caught fire and exploded. The local newspaper reported, "Flames fired up 300 feet in the air ... Ernest Harbaugh was burned about his face, shoulders, hips, legs, and arms." He was taken to a hospital over 100 miles away and died days later. He was 25 years old.

Oil has been a steady income since, but dollars only trickle in. And it may not be enough to save the farm for the next generation. My cousin Eric, who manages the property today with his wife, Lisa, has had to take contract work in Illinois to try to keep his family of eight afloat and save the farm.

I made my last photograph of him in 2020, when the oil market crashed and prices momentarily plunged into negative territory. He had just diverted oil from

the well into storage to wait for prices to rise and was returning to the house, shirtless, as I drove up. He was covered in thick, black liquid crude. A pipe had burst, and oil had streaked across his body, leaving his arms, neck and face darkened by the slick substance. Only his torso was still white, shielded by a T-shirt he had since removed. His blue jeans had been turned deep black. Oil outlined each of his fingernails and splattered across his glasses.

This image was fresh in my mind a summer later when our host asked his question, "And what of your people?" I thought back to my mother's rambling vegetable garden, back further to my grandmother's stories of the Dust Bowl, further still to the sod hut first constructed by my kin on the land, then answered, "My people are of the dirt."

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Earth-stained coveralls, grazing cattle, crops rotated season to season, apple trees, compost heaps, sink holes, dirt beneath fingernails ... marked by the land, memories of the past define my present, as if I were running in place, never leaving Kansas.

Jeremiah Ariaz received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Kansas City Art Institute and a Master of Fine Arts from the State University of New York at Buffalo. His artworks have been exhibited internationally. Ariaz is a professor of art at Louisiana State University. [Jeremiahariaz.com](http://Jeremiahariaz.com)