

Sight Lines Thesis Projects 2004
Graduate Studies in Visual Criticism, CCA

crossing cultures:

the construction
of national heritage
areas

Sarah Lidgus



FACING PAGE: COURTESY OF THE YUMA CROSSING HERITAGE AREA, 2001. THIS PAGE: PHOTO BY AUTORK, 2003

Crossing Cultures: The Construction of National Heritage Areas

Figure 1 Cautionary sign.



"The production of space is not an incidental by-product of social life but a moment intrinsic to its conduct and constitution, and for geography to make a difference—politically and intellectually—it must be attentive to difference."

—Caren Kaplan¹

Figure 2 Yuma landscape at dusk.



PHOTO BY AUSTIN, 2003

Yuma proper is flat and pure desert, surrounded by walls of rock; etch-a-sketch plateaus baked orange and red, distant, jagged mountains superimposed onto an endless cinematic blue-screen. Heat steals moisture from your lips in a matter of moments and fossilizes road kill in days. Temperatures bloat to 108 degrees in mid-October. Mostly everything is dusty and beige and encrusted with a thin layer of sand.

Trees appear as overgrown shrubs whose small, rough leaves create an almost pointless shade. On clear nights the moon rises big and gold and hangs on the horizon, lighting desert roads miles away from Yuma's city lights. During the day, Apache helicopters and fighter jets from the nearby military proving ground punch through the heat with their blasting engines, buzzing strip malls and neighborhoods and streets; no one looks up.

For thousands of years, the Colorado River flowed unimpeded through this landscape, wearing away earth and carving out canyons with an unyielding force. The result became twelve hundred miles of river, beginning as a trickle from a slope of a then-unclaimed mountain and ending up at a body of water known today as the Gulf of California. Two opposing granite outcroppings on the banks of the extreme lower Colorado, located in present-day Yuma, were the most viable and steady points of crossing along the seemingly endless miles of relentless rapids. Members of the Quechan tribe were the first known inhabitants of the region, living and farming along the banks, crossing the river at the narrows with only strong and determined swimming. This was the first crossing at Yuma. When Spanish explorers, searching for the fabled wealth of the Seven Cities of Cibola, reached the narrows in 1540, they were amazed at the Quechans' abilities to traverse the treacherous river without aid.² The Quechans helped the Spanish by building rafts and ferrying the men across the Colorado.

Over the next four hundred years, the natural outcroppings that formed the narrows would become a site of crossing for many, though its history would become largely buried when technological advances would facilitate the building of hundreds of public bridges across the Colorado River. Even within Yuma, traversing the river would become increasingly streamlined, first

with the construction of a ferry, then a railroad bridge, then a single-lane automobile bridge, leading up to the present and multilaned Fourth Street bridge that zips motorists over the river and onto the main drag of Yuma. Today, travelers need not even acknowledge the river below. And while the crossings were multiplying, dams were being conceived and constructed at various points along the river, first one, then two, than many; today there are eight major dams harvesting the power generated by the river. The Colorado at Yuma, once a great and raging river, appears today as a weak tributary. But the traffic over the Fourth Street bridge flows with fuel-injected ease into the city, a steady, unimpeded stream.

The city itself is located in the extreme southwestern corner of Arizona, along the California border, just north of Mexico. For the most part, Yuma has been a site of transition, a crossing—one country to another, one state to another, one culture to another—a border town that exists because of and in spite of its many borders. For explorers, fur trappers, traders, and travelers, Yuma has been a place that exists in order to get to other places, a rest stop rather than a destination, a crossing. For the nearly 110,000 residents, however, Yuma is home.



PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2003

Figure 3 Entrance to the Crossing.

The National Heritage Area program, founded

in 1986 under the direction of the National Park Service, is a network of twenty-four locations throughout the United States, like Yuma, whose histories have largely gone unread in the context of the nation's master narrative. The stories of these sites, created through a decisive process involving federal, state, and local involvement, are meant to be exemplary vignettes that, when read as a whole, compose a significant history of the nation that has been largely forgotten or never included. The coalition of National Heritage Areas aims to use tourism as a vehicle for recognition and economic revitalization.

Tourism. Since it was first used at a 1917 meeting of the League of Nations, the term *tourism* has become so multivalent, so specialized, franchised, and theorized that the understanding of the term itself has disappeared into a palimpsest of meaning. Therefore, in order to begin a discussion on the market of heritage tourism, the lens must first be pulled back to determine a specific definition for the generalized term. Stripping the word of its loaded, accumulated meaning, one can determine the essential element, the fundamental base of "tourism," and gain a better understanding of its role as an agent of culture.

The word *tour* comes from the Middle English for "turn"—to cause to move around an axis or center, to rotate or revolve—and the Latin *turnos*, a machine in which work is rotated about a horizontal axis and shaped by a fixed tool. The suffix "-ism" defines an action; process or practice; and a doctrine, theory, or set of principles. Therefore the root meaning of tourism is about moving around a certain point within a space. This inevitably results in a shifted perspective, different, at least, from the position at the beginning of movement. *Tourism*, then, can be defined as an event: the theorizing of a shift in perspective around a fixed point. For the purpose of this essay, a *turnos* can be understood as the machine or agent of tourism, and more specifically, the *turnos* in question here is the National Heritage Areas.

The question of how one changes perspective in the act of tourism is where the agency of the tourist—the ability of an individual to determine how he or she would like to operate within a space—comes into play. Many theorists have discounted the tourist's agency, concluding that everything at a tourist site is so carefully scripted and controlled that the tourist has no choice but to be herded along from gift shop to gift shop. It is of course true that many tourist sites are highly mediated, as the discussion of the National Heritage Area Program will point out. Both the physical layout of the space and ways in which the informational layout is manipulated and framed define the space from the perspective of the *tourists*.

8 This new breed of National Park wants to incorporate and celebrate the impact of humans on the natural landscape, telling the stories of how people used the land and how that use spawned a subculture that uniquely embodies the societal ideals of the United States. There are a set of standards and qualifications that each area must meet under a formalized process. Officially, the qualifications of Heritage Area status, as defined by the Coalition of Heritage Areas, are region[s] where natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, naturally distinctive landscape[s] arising from patterns of human activity, shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of

the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in the areas. Continued use of the National Heritage Areas by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscapes enhances their significance.³ This relatively vague criteria opens up many, if not all regions to the possibility of becoming a Heritage Area. Essentially, it is a matter of figuring out how a place fits into the frame of national identity, then outlining how it could be potentially packaged and marketed as such to tourists.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, contemporary theorist Michel de Certeau writes that spaces are defined by the borders created through their stories. "Narrative activity... fragmented and disseminated," he writes, "is continually concerned with marking out borders."⁴ These stories can also be read as Benedict Anderson's famous notion that the bordered nation is in itself a constructed "imagined community," the idea of which is disseminated through the media, and that "the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life."⁵ The imagined communities that make up the Heritage Area program are part of what contemporary nationalist scholar Tim Edensor calls a "national bounded space." He writes,

...borders are also imagined to enclose a particular and separate culture, a notion which is articulated by hegemonic



Figure 4 Photo display in the office of the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area's president.

ways of differentiating and classifying cultural differences. It is not that different cultures cannot exist within any nation, but that they are subordinate to the nation, and conceived as part of national cultural variety.⁶

Borders are redefined by the spatial stories imagined by the National Heritage Program that are deemed worthy "representative[s] of the national experience."⁷ To become part of the newly revised version of U.S. history the program is selling, these unique spaces must amount to stories of national assimilation.

The borders created by the spatial story of the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area are not readily apparent to the tourist. But researching the unrepresented histories of particular sites within the Heritage Area itself shows that the

borders constructed for the gaze of the tourist negate the complexities of the site, creating a story of a space that is only partially true. Struggles between the Quechan Tribe on the California side of the river and the city of Yuma on the Arizona side are glossed over in the name of heritage. The Latino (mostly Mexican) population now constituting 52 percent of Yuma is barely mentioned within the Heritage Area;⁸ almost nothing text-based is written in Spanish for those who do not speak the official language. The massive depletion of the Colorado is viewed only in terms of progress. Yet the federal funding continues to stream in annually, supporting an area that claims to tell the story of the nation's heritage. Within this microcosmic edit called the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, the macrocosmic edit of the history of the United States lives on.

PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2003

The Colorado below Fourth Street seems like a trickle of a river compared to the meandering path several hundred miles north, whose violent rapids still rage against rock, wearing it away, slicing it to create new grand canyons. Yuma, though, is almost the end of the twelve-hundred-mile-long line, at this point a worn-out stream whose wildness has been tamed, dammed, and rerouted, harvested for its energy. A riverbed of sharp, broken beige slabs lies mostly exposed. Water flows slowly through the extreme middle of its craggy ground, a stream compared to its former self, stretching nearly a mile across when flooded and whose will dictated the lay of this desert land. Before humans tried to tame the Colorado, the crossing at Yuma was the only way east and the only way west, and the waters raged on.

National Heritage Areas are not the typical roped-off style of park

where nature is presented as something seemingly untapped by human interaction. Nor are they “living history” museums that feature actors reenacting the community’s stories, or museum-like spaces that are off-limits to further use, existing solely as references of their former states. Rather, these new parks attempt to incorporate preservation, restoration, and new growth into comprehensive revitalization projects fueled by the revenue from tourism.

The process of becoming a National Heritage Area is meant to start at the local level and then link up with others on a national scale. Many areas had (and have) previously established groups that were interested in historical and environmental restoration for different reasons. Ideally, the creation of a Heritage Area facilitates and unites these groups by forming a partnership between federal, state, and local government and the private sector, including primarily for-profit business but also nonprofits, civic and environmental clubs, and city redevelopment teams. The exact amount of money distributed to a Heritage Area is determined by the money raised in the private sector, which is then matched by the federal government in a total not to exceed a million dollars annually. This strategy is employed in the hope that the area will be able

to be self-sufficient when the ten-year period of federal funding ends. It took several years before the program gained recognition on statewide level in Arizona, and only recently has it become (relatively) national, with the incorporation of two Heritage Areas in the western states since 2000.

For tourists, National Historic Areas are billed as celebrations of the local imprint upon the landscape and the imprint of the landscape upon the locals. In the staging of information within these sites, the goal of a Heritage Area is to showcase how the local people have harvested and inhabited the cultural landscape, ultimately plugging that area back into the collective network of the National Heritage Program. This network aims to revive the defunct relics of economically depressed rural or industrial-based areas that were once economically thriving regions. National Historic Areas in the east and northeast, for example, celebrate those areas’ prime years and contributions to the nation via local industry: steel in Pennsylvania, coal in West Virginia, cars in southeastern Michigan. National Heritage Areas use heyday histories as capital in the hope of restarting local economies.

But what is at stake when a living community is repackaged as a historical product, framed as a static, fixed point with the goal of generating tourism? The Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area is an example of how heritage tourism can simplify

local histories into neatly packaged anecdotes of Americana, effectively erasing the undesirable parts of local histories in favor of promoting a site as an exemplary reflection and reinforcement of national idyllic norms. The *tourmos* of National Heritage Areas, therefore, spins the tourist into a realm of propaganda, negating the local—its supposed primary benefactor—in favor of an overriding national agenda that may overlook civil conflicts in the hope that they will be forgotten with time. Or, as tourism theorist Dean MacCannell wrote, “Even when modern society gets its historical facts and relationships right (if this is technically feasible), the appearance of the past through the vehicle of the tourist attraction may be loaded in favor of the present, which is not shown as an extension of the past but as a replacement for it.”⁹

The southernmost route in the United States,

known originally as the Ocean-to-Ocean Highway, is today called Interstate 8. It's a fairly unpopulated road, both in terms of travelers and roadside inhabitants. Signs reading "Next Gas for 47 Miles" and "Caution: Do Not Drink—Water for Radiators" almost outnumber those for motels and restaurants. Sometimes the two lanes climb through rocky reddish-brown

mountains, slicing through at seventy miles per hour what was once an impassable fortress. Mostly, though, it meanders across the sandy desert, at times dipping so close to Mexico that the border sidles up within yards of the highway's southern bank. At these points, the only landmarks amidst the endless monochromatic landscape are the orange and white blockades that stand for the end of the United States and the beginning of something else.

Figure 5 Billboard: A history of historic interest.



PHOTO BY LEE RUSSELL, 1942, COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

In the middle of this desert, Interstate 8 exits onto the Fourth Street bridge, which then becomes Fourth Street itself once you cross the river and enter Arizona. It is the central axis of the city and runs a straight six miles through the center, five lanes pushing people from stoplight to stoplight, letting them off at Chester's Chuckwagon for supper or The Grapevine for karaoke. The stores and restaurants and pool halls lining Fourth Street are mostly single-storied, their rooftops humming along in monotonous succession from First Avenue all the way to Thirty-Sixth. Along the banks of Fourth Street, local businesses are being slowly rooted out by newer-looking chain stores that link together and surround themselves with huge parking lot moats. Old standbys like Brownie's diner saddle right up to Fourth Street and dare you to find your own parking. Heat rises from the pavement, and your feet momentarily stick to the street. At major intersections, the left-turn lane, having melted and hardened hundreds of times, is carved and worn in an elliptical arch, like ski tracks snowed over with black tar.

The first left immediately after the Fourth Street bridge and before the strip mall strip is the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area. Founded in October 2000, it was the first Heritage Area west of the Mississippi. It encompasses a twenty-two-square mile stretch of land that recedes back about a half-mile from the eastern

bank of the Colorado River, into the aging adobes downtown and the edges of ranch-style neighborhoods. The space expands upon and radiates out from the centrally located Yuma Crossing State Park, located between the axis of the Fourth Street Bridge on the south and the Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge on the north. The Heritage Area incorporates several national landmarks, including the Yuma Territorial Prison (also a state park), already one of the most visited tourist spots in Arizona. These areas are part of the primary downtown revitalization focus, also known as the Riverfront Revitalization Zone. This section features late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture that is being restored in hopes of creating a downtown that features shopping, restaurants, and hotels.

The vision of Yuma Crossing, according to the Management Plan compiled by Deardorff Design Resources, Inc., is "not the product of a consultant but the evolution of a community's dream."¹⁰ The Heritage Area is "based on decades of community planning to reconnect the river and maintain its heritage."¹¹ Goals include "assist[ing] partners to develop a diversity of interpretative opportunities, venues, and heritage sites while distinguishing between different audiences and establishing different levels of the heritage experience" and "attract[ing] visitors, investment and economic opportunity to Yuma to improve the quality of life for its residents."¹²

Figure 6 National landmark plaque.



PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2003

Ultimately, the goal is to improve the visual image of an area in the name of heritage in order to improve the local economic landscape. But to make an area attractive to visitors and appealing to business, the heritage story as marketing tool must reflect the desirability of an area. This can potentially result in what Tom Finkelpearl has called a “sanitized history,” a cleaned-up version of the past that erases the negative or messy parts but presents the story as a whole.¹³

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The Management Plan states that “while tourism is an integral part of the Plan, the audience, first and foremost, includes the 110,000 people who live here year-round.”¹⁴ That audience now lives and works partially within an area just recently framed for tourism, a community cleaned up so that they can be their own audience, first and foremost. They traverse the crossings every day.

Deemed the “centerpiece of redevelopment” by the Heritage Area’s president, Charlie Flynn, the Ocean-to-Ocean bridge is the sort of unofficial mascot of the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area. Its image is repeated on the covers of all brochures and distributed pamphlets related to the Heritage

Area, the black, latticed metalwork is set against the colorful sky of a desert sunrise (or sunset?), the four-foot orangey neon letters that glow “OCEAN TO OCEAN HIGHWAY” and below it “YUMA,” illuminate the silhouetted truss. On the brochure, as the river approaches the foreground of the image closest to the viewer, it looks a deep black, except for the section in the distance that reflects the brilliance of the sky. The same striking shot is the centerpiece of the yumaheritage.com Website, pre-framing the fixed visual focal point of the tour for the potential tourist.

In person, the one-lane bridge looks like a rounded-off cage of crisscrossed steel. Officially, this is known as an overhead truss bridge. Traffic is regulated by a sensor traffic light that switches the flow back and forth, so when cars approach the bridge, they will most likely have to stop and wait for oncoming traffic. Although the bridge is small compared to its Fourth Street neighbor upstream, the Ocean-to-Ocean provides the most direct access between the Quechan Indian Reservation, including their casino, and downtown Yuma. The result is a nearly constant stream of traffic. While waiting on the Arizona side, motorists can see the marshy,

mostly unmanaged wetlands below the highway that create the eastern bank of the Colorado. Behind the suspended traffic on the California side, the tower from the Spanish mission competes for skyline dominance with a giant, barrel-like water reservoir. The floor of the Ocean-to-Ocean is a runway of metal grating; driving across it yields ten seconds of whirring as the tires grip a less-familiar terrain.

That is a picture of the newly restored Ocean-to-Ocean bridge, opened to the public in 2002 after being closed in 1988 for structural safety concerns. The original bridge was the third

of the four constructed crossings at Yuma, and was destroyed twice by river flooding before it was open for traffic on April 9th, 1915. It was named the Ocean-to-Ocean bridge because it was the final link needed to complete the transcontinental Ocean-to-Ocean Highway that connected San Francisco and New York. The bridge was built for \$76,000, with a portion of funding from the City of Yuma and some from the county, but the majority of the money came from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a branch of the federal government responsible for managing tribes and their reservations. In a letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives dated



Figure 7 Ocean-to-Ocean bridge across the Colorado, date not listed.

PHOTO COURTESY OF YUMA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

December 3, 1912, Daniel Adams, First Assistant Secretary of the Interior justified the allotment due because "...the Indians would benefit from trading purposes at Yuma...." The more obvious reason, however, was the promised increase in automobile traffic traveling through Yuma. As the only major town between San Diego and Tucson, Yuma would benefit enormously from road-weary travelers needing a place to stay or something to eat.

The Ocean-to-Ocean bridge was added to the national historic register in 1979, but years of nonmaintenance and neglect due to a lagging city economy forced the closure of the bridge in 1988. By this point, the highway had been moved several hundred yards upstream and was benefiting from the installation of the five-laned Fourth Street bridge. That bridge was equipped to handle the now hundreds of thousands of motorists traveling through Yuma annually.

In 1990, a community celebration was held for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the opening of the Ocean-to-Ocean bridge. Visitors could take guided tours of the bridge and learn about its history. In the tour guides' guide to the tour, an excerpt suggested that the guide say to tourists when near the bridge, "76 years ago and earlier the water was much deeper and wider and very swift. This area here is called the narrows. Back then, its width was about one-fourth of the width of the river during normal flows. Water in the narrows was dangerous."¹⁵ The guide book anticipated that an often-asked question would be "Where's all the water?" to which the guide could respond that "much of the water is used for irrigation and dammed for recreational purposes. Also, the All-American canal takes quite a bit."

Endnotes

Figure 8
Marketing image of Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge
as seen in the Yuma Crossing National
Heritage Area's Website and brochures.

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- 1 Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 155.
- 2 Douglas D. Martin, *Yuma Crossing*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 17.
- 3 "Heritage Areas, National Park Service, Frequently Asked Questions," *National Heritage Areas*, National Park Service, February 21, 2004, <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/FAQ/INDEX.HTM>.
- 4 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 125.
- 5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983).
- 6 Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 37.
- 7 "Heritage Areas, National Park Service, Frequently Asked Questions," February 21, 2004.
- 8 *Supporting Reference Materials for the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area Management Plan*. Statistical source created by Deardorff Design Resource, Inc. and The Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area Corporation, 2002.
- 9 Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 89.
- 10 *Supporting Reference Materials for the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area Management Plan*.
- 11 *Supporting Reference Materials for the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area Management Plan*.
- 12 *Supporting Reference Materials for the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area Management Plan*.
- 13 Tom Finkelppearl, "Abstraction and Attraction," in *Uncommon Sense*, (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997).
- 14 *Supporting Reference Materials for the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area Management Plan*.
- 15 From "The Ocean to Ocean Bridge Tour," courtesy of the Yuma Public Archive, Yuma, Arizona. nd.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE YUMA CROSSING HERITAGE AREA, 2011

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crossing cultures: the construction of national heritage areas

About the Thesis Project

As one of the first critical looks at the National Heritage Area Program, this project explores what is at stake when a living community is repackaged as a historical product, framed as a static, fixed point with the goal of generating tourism. Using the Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge from the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area as an example, the following excerpt begins to demonstrate how heritage tourism can simplify local histories into neatly packaged anecdotes of Americana. In this act of selling unique local culture, the erasure of the “undesirable” or unmarketable parts of local histories negates the individuality of these sites in favor of an overriding nationalist agenda.



About the Author

Sarah Lidgus is a writer who completed her undergraduate studies at DePaul University in English and creative writing. She explores the often overlooked and revealing complexities of popular culture through her work, hoping to offer engaging critical responses to the practice of everyday life. Sarah’s writing has been

published in a range of art and culture magazines including *salon.com*, *Art Nexus*, and *Contemporary*, as well as in local publications such as *Kitchen Sink*, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, the *Examiner*, and the *SF Call*, where she was the weekly arts writer. She hopes to be the first writer to be published in *Harper’s Magazine* and *Teen People* simultaneously.