Luminol Theory

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2. Colorado Gothic

The Church is laid out so that the parishioners are facing west. In the center of the pulpit is a twenty-foot wide, forty-foot high window that faces the Rocky Mountains. During services, the window is sometimes fully covered with a curtain, When the curtain is opened, congregants are exposed to an unobstructed view of the Rocky Mountains, in front of which is superimposed a simple outline of a cross.
— Robert W. Larkin, “Comprehending Columbine”

The state of Colorado is exquisitely beautiful: set in the Rocky Mountains, it is a popular holiday destination for wealthy skiers who are drawn to its clean air and fresh snow. Yet in this setting of such natural beauty, there have been an unusually high number of globally famous crimes. In the last twenty-five years there have been several major crimes in the state — most notoriously the Columbine massacre, the most widely discussed mass shooting of all time. Ted Bundy, one of the most prolific and culturally relevant serial killers on record, perpetrated several crimes in Colorado. Further back, the state was founded on the originary genocide of indigenous people in the Sand Creek massacre of 1864. The state’s violent history has drawn many writers of fiction and nonfiction to base their violent crime stories in the state, including the most famous horror writer of all, Stephen King. The state itself, built on originary genocide, is a palimpsestic crime scene that, once illuminated, reveals occulted fictional and true crimes.

The overlaying of contemporary crimes onto national violence is the subject of much of American Gothic and, though there have been a huge amount of globally notorious crimes in many (perhaps all) states, Colorado has its own spooky imaginary and local peculiarities. It is this “Colorado Gothic” that marks out the state as distinct from, for example, “Texas Gothic,” “Appalachian Gothic,” or, perhaps most widely represented in literature, film and media, “California Gothic.” It is the idyllic nature of Colorado that makes it the perfect example of the locus terribilis, the violent idyll.
Colorado is home to several “fervor churches” which originated in the 1990s. Dave Cullen in his book on the Columbine massacre describes the statewide religious hysteria that characterized Colorado: “Since pioneer days and the Second Great Awakening, Colorado had been a hotbed on the itinerant ministry circuit”; “by the 1990s, Colorado Springs was christened the Evangelical Vatican. The city of Denver seemed immune to the fervor, but its western suburbs were roiling.”22 The epigraph to this chapter describes the way in which the natural beauty of Colorado is incorporated into the drama and ritual of evangelical church services, where “forty-foot high”23 windows open out on to the Rocky Mountains, as though they were designed as a backdrop for services. This particularity suggests that the location for worship is carefully chosen by church architects in order to suggest a causal link between God and nature, and between the supernatural power of religion and the Colorado landscape. In the Stanley Kubrick version of The Shining, discussed in more detail below, when the Torrance family are headed towards the Overlook Hotel, high in the Rocky Mountains, Wendy Torrance asks her husband Jack “wasn’t it around here that the Donner Party got stranded?”24 to which he replies that it was ‘Farther West, in the Sierras.”25 This is an important discussion as The Shining is a story about a family who travel west for a better life, only to end in horrific tragedy and as they travel they remember the Donner Party who embodied the “common mid-nineteenth-century American dream — a better life to be found by going west” a dream that ends in brutal hypothermia and cannibalism. This dream, like any American Dream, is predicated on stolen land and the drive to colonise. The Shining as imagined by Stanley Kubrick does not shy away from that aspect of American Gothic, but rather brings the audience into close and uncomfortable proximity with the racist origins of

23 Ibid., 17–18.
24 Stanley Kubrick (dir.), The Shining, 1980.
25 Ibid.
the United States. By invoking the Donner Party in the early stages of the film, and by transplanting them from the Californian Gothic to the Colorado Gothic, Kubrick shows how even stories that do not rightly belong in the geographical bounds of the state leave their traces on the frozen imaginary of the Rockies. The horrific science of the Donner Party’s deaths also has a grisly echo with Jack Torrance’s eventual hypothermic fate as his wife and child escape with their lives. According to Donald K. Grayson in his anthropological study of the Donner Party deaths: “under cold stress, inactive males also suffer greater core temperature reduction than inactive females” and “adult women, and to some extent, subadult females should fare better under conditions marked by famine and/or extreme cold than their male counterparts.” This is certainly true for Wendy, who leaves Jack frozen and howling as she escapes with their toddler son, Danny. As she leaves Jack to the fate that befell so many of the Donner men, Kubrick brings the narrative full circle, by firmly planting that corrupt American Dream in the snows of Colorado.

Writing in 1907, the year that the Overlook was purported to be built, Louie Croft Boyd wrote of conditions in Colorado as it became home to a tubercular “vast army of sufferers which other sections of the country are pouring into Colorado” and which only intensified the “crowded conditions and unsanitary dwelling-places.” Though patients were “admitted to the County Hospital” they were “not desired” and, in fact, the “majority of the patients live in tents.” In order to attempt to police and regulate the refugees who arrived in the state to take advantage of clean, fresh air, laws were passed stating that “expectoration in public places is prohibited by law.” This attempt to police bodies, to construct a cordon sanitaire between the diseased and the healthy also created a hierarchy between residents and refugees.

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27 Louie Croft Boyd, “The Tuberculosis Situation in Denver, Colorado,” 265.
28 Ibid., 266.
Colorado Gothic, then, occupies this uneasy space between purity and contamination, the clear, mountain atmosphere presenting a frozen stasis, whilst trapping and preserving the “roiling” bacterial chaos below. This this peculiar *locus terribilis* has been the setting for some of the most globally-notorious crimes of recent history.

Three years following the unsolved murder of JonBenét Ramsey, Colorado was in news headlines the world over for one of the most shocking mass murders and school shootings of all time: Columbine. In April 1999 Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School, where they were enrolled as students, shot and murdered twelve students and a teacher, and injured twenty-one others. After terrorizing staff and students for several hours, they committed suicide. In addition to the shootings, they planted almost one hundred homemade explosives throughout the school grounds. The massacre was the deadliest school shooting to date, and its consequences included major national and international debates about firearm control and teenage mental health. These debates had a lasting impact on the school system, policing, and gun control in the US. Klebold and Harris explicitly cited Timothy McVeigh, the 1995 Oklahoma City bomber, as an inspiration. In turn, Columbine has been linked to over thirty subsequent mass murder cases. Dave Cullen, a reporter who attended the scene at Columbine, writes in his account of the case:

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30 The date of the Columbine shooting was April 20, 1999, one day after the April 19 anniversary of the Oklahoma City attack.
It’s a safe bet that Eric and Dylan watched the carnage of Waco and Oklahoma City on television, with the rest of the country. Those atrocities were particularly prominent in this region. McVeigh was tried in federal court in downtown Denver and sentenced to death while the boys attended Columbine in the suburbs. The scenes of devastation were played over and over. In his journal, Eric would brag about topping McVeigh. Oklahoma City was a one-note performance: McVeigh set his timer and walked away; he didn’t even see his spectacle unfold. Eric dreamed much bigger than that.32

Though this is a highly speculative account, it does illuminate two relevant points. First, Cullen, a native of Colorado, describes mass atrocities, even those perpetrated beyond the borders of the state, as “prominent in this region,” an assertion supported by the fact that McVeigh, perpetrator of the largest act of domestic terrorism in US history, had his lengthy and painful trial in the state of Colorado. Second, Cullen notes the references in Harris’s journal both to McVeigh and to Harris’s desire to “top” him and watch the “spectacle unfold.” Both of these points indicate that the context was relevant to the crime (the spectacle of the trial as it unfolded in Colorado) and also that the killers, or at least Harris, was interested in perpetrating the crime specifically within Colorado. He wanted to stay and watch (the visual image of the “spectacle”) what their crime did to the people they murdered and injured as well as to the environment of Columbine and, by extension, Colorado. This incident reverberated through Colorado and through the world, where, after Columbine, mass murders are more prevalent than ever.

Mass killings are not the only major crimes of national and international interest that have occurred in the state. Bundy, one of the most notorious serial killers in the world, came to Colorado in January 1975. By April he had murdered three young women: Caryn Campbell, Julie Cunningham, and Denise Oli- verson. Though he perpetrated his crimes throughout the us,

32 Cullen, Columbine, 10–11.
the crimes in Colorado have taken on a grimy valence—particularly the murder of Cunningham, in Vail, Colorado. She was brutally murdered by Bundy after, he testified, he tricked her into carrying his ski boots for him by feigning injury. This particular ruse has been popularized in several cultural representations of Bundy and is part of serial-killer folklore. In this case the Colorado landscape participated in the crime, with the snow-covered Vail Mountain offering an alibi both for the heavy ski boots and the injury. When excavated with luminol theory, the murder of Cunningham reveals the mythic narrative that haunts and occupies Bundy’s other crimes. It shines through the snow scene to reveal not only the individual crimes of abduction, murder, rape, and necrophilia, but also the systemic patriarchal crimes perpetrated against women both in reality and in cultural representation.

By limning the crime scene of Colorado, luminol theory reveals histories occulted below the state’s most famous crimes. The careful analyst can take the fragmented, seemingly inchoate crimes and illuminate them in order to curate the state of Colorado and reveal it as not only a crime scene but the crime scene, a microcosm of and genesis for other US crime scenes. Columbine is the ur-school shooting, JonBenét’s killing the most famous US child murder of all time, and Bundy’s crimes are amongst the most vividly resonant in the national true-crime imaginary. Yet these major crimes are only a part of the story to be limned. Below the news headlines and saturated images are weirder, ghostly traces of the state of Colorado as a constellation point for horror of all kinds. The crimes I discuss here were influenced by, and have influenced, a whole range of mystic, religious, and otherworldly practices.

34 Perhaps the most famous of these cultural representations is that of Buffalo Bill in Thomas Harris’s 1988 novel and Jonathan Demme’s 1991 film The Silence of the Lambs. Forced Entry (dir. Lizzy Borden, 2002), a Gonzo porn film based loosely on the serial killer Richard Ramirez, has a scene that features a ruse similar to the one used on Cunningham.
Robert Mighall reminds us that the genocidal origins of the United States are always “what lies beneath” the contemporary American horror story:

“Gloomy wrong,” guilt and nemesis are the master-plots of American Gothic. It is a big paranoid country, guiltily aware that it has taken the land away from people, and taken other people away from their lands: hence the symbolic importance of land, and what lies beneath it, in fictions from [Nathaniel] Hawthorne to Stephen King. The Indian burial grounds that lie beneath the haunted edifices in The Shining (1980), and The Amityville Horror (1979) and Poltergeist (1982) entail indelible stains of guilty horror that erupt to damn the new masters of this nation.35

The twin specters of colonization and slavery are never far from the surface in the American narrative, and particularly in the American crime narrative. At Sand Creek, Colorado, Colonel John Chivington was successful in his genocidal attack at least in part because of his promise to the indigenous community that they would be safe under his protection:

Pre-dawn came with a fright on November 29, 1864, as mainly Colorado militia, seven-hundred soldiers in all, attacked an undefended Indian camp on Sand Creek. […] Those slaughtered were babies, old men, women, and children. The majority of the able-bodied men were on a hunting trip. Black Kettle and his people had been told they would be safe on this reservation.36

The massacre was murder on a massive scale and it was military in character, but it was also a personal betrayal characterised

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by pathological annihilatory violence, based on Chivington’s personal ignorance and fear of indigenous people. This disgust allowed Chivington to justify and perpetrate violence in the eugenic drive for purity. Yet this purity can only ever be illusory, predicated as it is on genocidal atrocities committed on marginalised bodies. In the Colorado Gothic ur-text, *The Shining*, Kubrick’s radical reimagining of King’s novel shifts it away from being a generic horror story, and into cold, banal, proximity with real historical violence, violence such as that perpetrated by Chivington.