

## ROCKY HISTORY: DEBORAH BRIGHT'S PLYMOUTH ROCK AND NEW ENGLAND STONE WALLS

Holly Markovitz Goldstein, Ph.D. Candidate

When most visitors arrive at Pilgrim Memorial State Park to view Plymouth Rock, they walk down to the water's edge, into the neoclassical pavilion that protects the monument, and peer over a railing at a small rock sitting in a sandy hole. According to the artist, Deborah Bright, the typical reaction is, "Is that it?"<sup>1</sup> A small, cracked, granite boulder resting deep in a sunken pit, Plymouth Rock is indeed a disappointing site, especially in comparison to its inflated status marking America's mythical foundation. As one of the nation's most significant and popular landmarks, the rock wields tremendous power to perpetuate a narrow, elitist interpretation of American history. Deborah Bright's series of nine photographs, *Glacial Erratic*, depicts the undignified rock behind bars, ironically suggesting that this American icon is also held captive by our collective need to authenticate a false national origination myth (Plate 1). Bright's contemporary photographs of significant American frontier landscapes, including those of Plymouth Rock, balance the artist's political convictions with aesthetic rigor and serve to re-image, and therefore re-write, American history.

Photographer and critic, Deborah Bright questions how the encoded and explicit meanings of the American landscape have been shaped by ideology in the past and present. Bright's photographs explore the ways in which our understanding of the American frontier has been molded by underlying patriarchal and nationalistic biases. Using two of Bright's portfolios as case studies, I explore how the artist's repeated photographing of historic American places exposes each site's conflicting meanings and histories for different populations over time.

The *Glacial Erratic* series (2000-2004), named after Plymouth Rock's geologic classification, reveals how the Rock, a site of imagined patriotic memory, is heavily inscribed with histories of violence and oppression. Depicting a small, cracked rock situated behind metal bars, Bright transforms Plymouth Rock from a mythical monument of freedom into a lonely captive. By presenting a sequence of nine photographs of Plymouth Rock in varying shades of light and at different times of the year, Bright suggests that symbolic meanings

## ROCKY HISTORY

can change in addition to appearance. Another body of work, the *Manifest* series (2000-2002), depicts stone walls from northern New England as sites of power and resistance. Stone walls call to mind human control over nature, private property, and white male privilege over Native Americans. Formerly signifiers of the triumph of civilization over wilderness, the walls are now crumbling and covered by the encroaching forest. Bright's photographs bring to light a past that is literally buried by the present. Bright revisits sites from these early American frontiers that have accumulated layers of contradictory political, economic, and social meanings over time in order to reframe traditional historical narratives.

Investing her projects with overt political content, Bright's personal agenda is inextricable from her artwork. Bright believes that art should hold aesthetic merit to create complexity while also delivering a strong political message. During a recent interview, Bright mentioned that all of her work is informed by her personal experiences and deeply-held beliefs. Although her, "sensibility is formed by political feelings," her photographs attempt to be more contemplative than preachy.<sup>2</sup> The *Glacial Erratic* and *Manifest* photographs are problematic, however, because their political message is both intentionally overt and potentially obscure. This paper highlights this problematic tension between the unstable balance of aesthetic appeal and political content that is central to Bright's work.

While Bright strives to create images that convey her political convictions, she also hopes to make compelling, marketable art. Problematically, her photographs potentially privilege formal beauty and conceptual complexity at the cost of their political agenda. As discussed below, the *Glacial Erratic* photographs effectively convey the idea that the Rock is a ridiculous, ignoble monument unworthy of its inflated stature. However, because the images are exhibited as a simple grid unaccompanied by textual interpretation, the Rock's multifarious, complex history is partially obscured by the understated formal presentation. No visual or textual clues inform viewers that the *Glacial Erratic* photographs depict Plymouth Rock; the small stone behind bars could be any anonymous rock. Bright's photographs formally recall Sol LeWitt's grids or Bernd and Hilla Becher's typological studies of water towers; in all these cases, repetitive composition takes precedence over subject matter. Furthermore, although the *Manifest* images successfully depict stone walls as past and present cultural signifiers, the lush, beautiful

## HEMISPHERE

representation of the landscape arguably distracts from a more politicized reading. Bright's photographs navigate the delicate balance between discourse and presentation by combining visual appeal and controversial meaning. Ultimately, Bright's work emerges as both troublingly beautiful and politically provocative.

In addition to her artistic output, Bright's writing—informed by an extensive inquiry into the connections between photography, gender, and power—offers an aggressively critical investigation of traditional landscape photography.<sup>3</sup> By applying feminist and queer theory to an analysis of American landscape photography, Bright seeks to uncover the underlying power struggles and biases that shape our relationship to nature. Most importantly, Bright brings the social awareness of the documentary tradition to the subject matter of landscape. Bright reminds us that all photographs, including her own, bear prejudices, and she seeks to dismantle the biases present in every photograph, regardless of artistic or documentary intent. Bright asserts that her artwork is not neutral or transparent but rather reflects the choices of its maker, the implications of its presenting agency, and the personal experiences of its audience.

Bright's photographs and writing participate in a larger discourse of new historicism; the artist, examining how myths are shaped by a narrow and elitist telling of history, seeks to include underrepresented narratives. In *Glacial Erratic*, Plymouth Rock is not an icon but is personified as a meek prisoner cowering behind bars, subject to unpredictable, harsh weather and water. Viewers are thus prompted to reconsider the ideology framing its status as a monument. Additionally, Bright's richly detailed and lushly printed photographs of rocky ruins in *Manifest* suggest that New England's ubiquitous, forgotten stone walls carry significant histories worth preserving.

### **Personal History: Deborah Bright**

An artist's personal history can provide an integral layer of meaning to his or her artwork, and Deborah Bright's own biography resonates especially profoundly with her politically motivated photography. Born in 1950, Bright grew up in Bethesda, Maryland, in a somewhat conservative and homogenous environment. She cites family vacations during childhood as the most influential formative moments contributing to her contemporary

## ROCKY HISTORY

artistic outlook. Bright's yearly car trips from Maryland to southern Pennsylvania and West Virginia exposed her to poor rural villages, dying factory towns, small farms, and industrial cities. During these trips in the 1950s and 1960s, Bright recalls pressing her nose up against the window while she noticed subtle changes in the landscape from place to place and from year to year. Fascinated by the rich world around her, Bright fantasized about what it would be like to live in a dingy steel town or a rural farm, finding beauty in each different place.

After attending Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, Bright earned her M.F.A. in painting from the University of Chicago in 1975. Before choosing photography as her medium of communication, Bright practiced painting, drawing, and graphic representation. Her "breakthrough moment" as a photographer occurred after seeing Walker Evans's work, which she describes as, "photographs that referenced the real world yet were highly constructed to frame significant detail."<sup>4</sup> Bright currently chairs the Art and Architectural History Department at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she teaches art history and photography, and is the Interim Dean of Fine Arts.

When asked about the formation of her political views and the reasons behind creating art with a political message, Bright responds that she became radicalized in college during the Vietnam War era. Growing up in a middle-class apolitical family, Bright recalls no political discussion during her childhood. While a graduate student, Bright worked as a cartoonist and graphic designer for the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and served as their art director for three years. Working for this leftist, liberal magazine, Bright became entrenched in anti-war issues and sought to convey her anti-militarist radicalization through her artwork. Bright's *Glacial Erratic* and *Manifest* portfolios contribute to her ongoing project to document and examine sites of patriotic memory. Bright holds a longstanding fascination with the way places change or remain the same over time. She views land as a palimpsest of history—layers of history are encoded into places just as trees record their lives through the rings that slowly develop.

### **American History: *Glacial Erratic* and the Myth of the Monument**

The aura of Plymouth Rock supersedes and overshadows the actual object; to most viewers, the Rock itself is neither beautiful nor picturesque nor

## HEMISPHERE

sublime. It is, however, one of the nation's most significant historical sites, and over the past two centuries, conservators have physically and intellectually constructed the Rock as a, "symbol of the courage and faith of the men and women who founded the first New England colony."<sup>5</sup> Since the seventeenth century, the Rock has come to symbolize divergent meanings for diverse populations; it can represent regional pride for New Englanders, oppression and racism for Native Americans, a justification for exclusionist immigration policies, or national patriotism. When gazing down at the Rock from the elevated viewing platform under a temple-like portico, viewers today are struck by the Rock's small size, cracked surface, and humble, sandy location. Yet the Rock is a powerful symbol of the nation's mythical birth precisely because it is a tactile, tangible, physical object. Although it is small in stature, the Rock satisfies the public's desperation to connect history to a specific place. Bright's photographs, discussed below, depict the Rock as both powerful and incapacitated, both iconic and ludicrous.

Mythically canonized as America's first frontier, Plymouth Rock represents a tangible contact zone between conflicting elements.<sup>6</sup> Perched on the shore where waves caress the land, the Rock represents a meeting of monumental forces, including "Old World" and "New World," repression and freedom, cultivation and wildness, and European-American and Native American. Frederick Jackson Turner defined the frontier as, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," and Plymouth Rock represents a forceful, although counterfeit, physical reminder of the original frontier.<sup>7</sup>

The story of the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock is largely a fabrication. William Bradford, leader of the colonists now called the Pilgrims, stated upon his arrival, "On Munday, they sounded ye harbor and found it fitt for shipping, and marched into ye land and found diverse cornfields and little running brooks, a place fit for situation."<sup>8</sup> This account—the only written description of the moment when Bradford's ship reached land on December 11, 1620—contains no mention of a rock. The symbol of a rock marking the site of this landing evolved more than a century later during America's Revolutionary War, when civic leaders sought a new national foundation story to unite a divided population. The Rock became an icon symbolizing America as a freedom-seeking nation, linking the revolutionary struggle to the earlier colonial era.

## ROCKY HISTORY

Throughout the nineteenth century, paintings, prints, sculptures, and Plymouth Rock itself sold a false national foundation story to an eager American audience. Images, such as Enrico Causici's *Landing of the Pilgrims, 1620* (1825), have helped to establish the Rock as an enduring emblem of national pride. Causici's relief sculpture for the Rotunda in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. depicts Plymouth Rock as a ceremonious meeting point, a literal stepping stone between old and new (Plate 2).

A stable triumvirate of man, woman, and child, blessed by divine providence above, assuredly moves from boat to shore, and the Rock represents a sturdy foundation on which to build a new civilization. A subservient Native American offers the newcomers corn and gestures downward toward the Rock, indicating the abundance and security that comes from the land. This initial assembly of Pilgrims and Native Americans is imagined, not historical—the colonists did not encounter Native Americans until several months after their arrival—just as the Rock should be regarded as a symbolic, not literal, reminder of the 1620 landing. Despite the fact that most viewers recognize that the Pilgrims did not actually land on Plymouth Rock in 1620, the Rock remains a powerful physical symbol of the legendary first European settlers in America.

The rock that visitors see today has not always had its present appearance or location. Writer, John McPhee calls today's rock a, "simulacrum of the landmark that [may have been] there in 1620."<sup>9</sup> What we now call "Plymouth Rock" did not occupy its current position when the Pilgrims landed, and over the years, it has been moved from place to place across Plymouth. The first mention of a rock as the site of the Pilgrims' landing dates back to the 1740s. In 1741, amidst plans to build a wharf at Plymouth harbor, ninety-five year old Plymouth resident, Elder Thomas Faunce objected to removing a large boulder on the shore; Faunce proclaimed that this rock had received the footsteps of his forefathers. Faunce's authority derived from his age and ancestry—his father had reached Plymouth in 1623 on the sailing vessel *Ann*, and Faunce had known several *Mayflower* passengers. The proposed wharf was relocated, the rock was preserved, and the legend of "Plymouth Rock" was born.

Plymouth Rock has been moved and accidentally broken many times over the centuries; in 1774, the Rock was split in two, and it broke vertically

## HEMISPHERE

several years later. This second split was repaired with mortar, so that today's Rock bears a surgical scar through its center. During the Revolutionary Era, the misshapen, cracked Rock symbolized the division between the "Old" and "New World" and between freedom and oppression; Plymouth Rock personified the endangered nation and consequently became a powerful symbol of unity and perseverance. In 1834, 1867, and 1880, the Rock was again moved, trimmed, and modified, and throughout the nineteenth century, souvenir-hunters routinely broke chips off of the Rock. The temple-like portico currently covering the Rock was commissioned by the Colonial Dames of America and designed in 1920 by the architects, McKim, Mead, and White. This neoclassical facade reflects Greco-Roman democratic ideals far from the intolerant Puritan ideology of the founding fathers.

As a response to the query, "Is that it?," a carving reading "1620" has been chiseled into the stone to signify the Rock's authenticity.<sup>10</sup> A larger armature of commemorative landmarks at Pilgrim Memorial State Park helps to bolster the Rock's importance and legitimacy; a full-scale model of the sailing vessel *Mayflower* (named the *Mayflower II*) is anchored in Plymouth harbor, and the nearby *Plimoth Plantation* promises to reveal Plymouth as it was in the seventeenth century. This network of reconstructions, populated by employees who dress and speak in the colonial manner, offers visitors a convincing, multi-sensory vision of America's European colonization. Bright's photography reminds viewers that this history is selective, largely imagined, and biased. In her images, she edits out the reconstructions to concentrate on the "falseness" of the "original."

One monument on Cole's Hill overlooking Plymouth Harbor commemorates America's inhabitants before the Pilgrims' arrival (Plate 3). A bronze figure representing Massasoit, the Wampanoag leader who negotiated a treaty with the Pilgrims in 1621, was commissioned for the landing's tercentennial in 1920.<sup>11</sup> Credited with saving the Plymouth Colony from collapse during its first years, Massasoit is considered a protector of the American people, but he is depicted as an exotic, non-threatening "savage." The partial nudity and relaxed *contrapposto* stance link this figure to classical statuary, yet his attributes—the loincloth, peace pipe, moccasins, leather sling, and head feather—signal his Wampanoag identity. In her essay, *Queer Plymouth*, co-authored with gender studies scholar, Erica Rand, Bright compares the bronze Massasoit to a nearby statue of William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth

## ROCKY HISTORY

Colony, both by the sculptor Cyrus Dallin. Bright contrasts a “colonizing, white-supremacist admiration and primitivizing nostalgia” in the depiction of Massasoit with the austere, Puritanical authority of Bradford.<sup>12</sup> Protected by his heavy cloak, sturdy hat, stable stance, and dour expression, Bradford projects authority and dependability. While the inclusion of Massasoit in the Plymouth pantheon secures his place in history, he is not part of the same *American* history as Bradford or Plymouth Rock.

Throughout the past two centuries Plymouth Rock has become an icon promoting various patriotic, nationalistic, and religious causes. Bright’s photographs perhaps provoke viewers to consider the many meanings the Rock has carried over time. There are numerous silent histories and untold stories that form America’s fabric that are not traditionally represented at Plymouth Rock. Bright attempts to reclaim these neglected narratives as an integral part of American history. Although the Rock customarily symbolizes the Anglo inhabitation of North America, the monument itself has also been re-appropriated by Native American protest groups to draw attention to their oppression. On Thanksgiving Day, 1970, for example, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) staged an occupation of Plymouth, painting the Rock red and forcefully seizing the *Mayflower II*. Bright’s artwork can be characterized as an artistic counterpart to the AIM’s more physical acts of dissent; the photographs exclude all references to the fabled “Pilgrim Landing,” and in her images, neither the “1620” carving nor the grandiose neoclassical portico are visible. Therefore, *Glacial Erratic* effectively silences Plymouth Rock and divorces it from its mythological meanings, returning the stone to its original condition as an ordinary, unremarkable rock.

Nine Iris prints, *Sunrise, Sunset, Overcast, Snowfall, Storm Surge, Nor’easter, Lucky Pennies, Spring Rains, and Nightfall* compose Bright’s *Glacial Erratic* series. While Bright prefers the works to be exhibited in a grid containing all nine images, occasionally, the photographs are shown in pairs or as triptychs. Each image depicts an identical viewpoint of Plymouth Rock, which is positioned in the center of the frame, behind the bars that protect it from weather and damage. Bright stood on the shore, feet in the water or on a sandy beach, to capture a particular view of the Rock from a close vantage point not available to most visitors. The matching compositions call attention to the subtle differences in light, atmosphere, and weather



## HEMISPHERE

conditions from print to print. At first glance, *Glacial Erratic* appears to be a rigorously arranged, long-term study of a single location—the vertical bars compositionally organize the individual prints while the gridded formation further emphasizes formal control. Over days, months, and years, the Rock’s appearance ebbs and flows like the tide, signifying the various meanings it has carried for diverse populations throughout history. Depicted as a metaphor for change, the Rock appears golden and glowing, radiating warm energy in one photograph, and cold, grey, and lifeless in the next.

Without knowing that the images depict Plymouth Rock, however, the political content emphasizing the ridiculousness of a national monument confined behind bars is potentially lost on the viewer. No evidence in the photographs identifies the specific location of Plymouth. Furthermore, the minimalist simplicity and painterly beauty of the presentation somewhat distract from the project’s critical intent.

Bright created *Glacial Erratic* in order to investigate the “mysterious aura” of what she calls a “ridiculous” monument; she sought to convey both “visual pleasure” and “irony.”<sup>13</sup> The composition of the lonely, inert, scarred rock kept behind bars reveals the irony that this wounded, unremarkable rock has become an icon of American freedom and independence. Bright’s photographs, however, convey not only the pathetic quality, but also the beauty, of the Rock. Restoring its aura (by depicting it as a beautiful artwork) and yet heightening its absurdity as a monument, the photographs suggest that Plymouth Rock can be an important symbol or a meaningless farce, depending on its audience.

Similar to Andy Warhol’s repeated images of Campbell’s Soup cans or the Becher’s photographic typologies, Bright’s repetition of the Rock makes it both more familiar (solidifying its status as an icon) and more meaningless (it loses its importance as a singular monument). Bright highlights the mechanical reproducibility associated with photography by repeating the same, exact vantage point in her images. This exactitude allows viewers to notice the most subtle changes between images, such as the square light fixtures that were re-installed inside the shelter. While the lighting and atmosphere change from print to print, the Rock itself remains constant, implying that while human history is layered, complex, and changing, geologic time is slow and steady. *Glacial Erratic* enacts the multiplication of an icon,

## ROCKY HISTORY

transforming the Rock into art. Multiplying, confining, and aestheticizing the Rock, Bright's project removes the monument from history and from daily life, and transports it into the gallery. The artist therefore takes control over the Rock, re-telling its story and re-fashioning its meaning.

Although she calls attention to her chosen medium of photography, Bright also engages a painterly aesthetic to foreground the objects' status as art. An early inspiration for Bright's method of rephotographing simple objects in changing light and seasons was Claude Monet's *Haystacks* series from the early 1890s. Bright was inspired by Monet's ability to make the most mundane objects appear beautiful. Producing her images as high-quality Iris prints on textured paper while avoiding a slick photographic surface, Bright wanted her photographs to teeter on the edge of visual painterly language while remaining visibly tied to photography. The images capitalize on both the camera's power of mechanical reproduction and the fine art beauty of a painterly surface.<sup>14</sup>

Bright views Plymouth Rock as a reflector; it reflects the play of light on the water, the shadows of visitors viewing it from above, and it reflects America's conflicting histories over time. The scar joining its two, once separate halves is a poignant reminder of the nation's various struggles, including the fight for independence, the clash between Native and European Americans, the abolition of slavery, and conflicts regarding race, gender, and sexuality. Depicted as an animal at the zoo, Plymouth Rock falls short of representing an accurate, inclusive American history. Similarly, Bright's photographs potentially fall short of conveying their political message; it might be difficult for a museumgoer who has never been to Plymouth to understand how the project critiques the monument.

Although in her writing, she has criticized other photographers for exhibiting beautiful images of contested landscapes without explanatory text, Bright potentially commits the same offense with *Glacial Erratic*. Bright's photographs of a ridiculous, complex, and ironic monument are intentionally beautiful, but does her emphasis on visual pleasure potentially undermine the project's criticality? The *Glacial Erratic* photographs are not accompanied by didactic labeling when exhibited, and the titles refer to seasonal and atmospheric conditions, not to the site's history. Furthermore, the portfolio's simple title, *Glacial Erratic*, is geological, not

## HEMISPHERE

political. Bright omitted text from the installation because she found that in the early twenty-first century, the art world had no patience with text.<sup>15</sup> She relished the creative challenge to create beautiful objects that retained a political viewpoint. Bright carefully considers the way viewers experience her work in a gallery setting, and her gridded installation and geological titles deliberately construct layers of meaning and intrigue. She imagines that viewers will wonder why an artist would photograph the same rock again and again, that they will question the meaning of the ambiguous title and then consult the artist's statement, available in the gallery or on Bright's website, for more information. By refusing to name or identify the monument in her photographs, Bright effectively erases its history.

The simple, stark composition of a cracked rock behind bars, coupled with the power of repetition, focuses attention on the monument's absurdity. By omitting images of Pilgrims, the *Mayflower*, or Native Americans, Bright avoids the nostalgic ideology found in most representations of the Rock. She reduces Plymouth Rock to its most basic geologic state, stripping it of inflated mythological significance. Yet, Bright's process of directly photographing Plymouth Rock from the beach at eye level, can be interpreted as a demonstration of respect for the Rock and its history. Therefore Bright depicts the Rock as both a pathetic captive and a strong survivor, signifying its conflicting meanings throughout history.

Bright navigates the tension between ridiculing and respecting the Rock in order to achieve her goal of making landscape art that is contemplative, not heavy-handed. On one hand, Bright's photographs employ traditional painterly aesthetics; the image production presents a rich surface and the golden light recalls American Luminist painting. On the other hand, the flat, stark, graphic compositions contrast more conventional grand, sweeping romantic vistas. Additionally, the grid-like compositions and exhibition format recall conceptual art and minimalism. Bright's intention to employ, "traditional landscape aesthetics only when and if they are useful to her message, but not so they take over the work," helps the project find a balance between politics and beauty.<sup>16</sup>

### **Changing History: *Manifest*, A Meditation on New England's Stone Walls**

Bright's *Manifest* series similarly grapples with the burden of traditional landscape aesthetics. The twenty-four *Manifest* images—large twenty-by-

## ROCKY HISTORY

twenty-four inch Chromogenic prints each cold-mounted on archival conservation board printed with a title in engraver's script—display exquisite craftsmanship and evoke Victorian fine art photographic conventions. The images depict sections of northern New England stone walls, and titles printed below the photographs designate a land transaction between two men.<sup>17</sup> Selecting antiquated aesthetics, script, and language, Bright evokes nineteenth-century albums and albumen prints. She also invokes an earlier form of contract making, that of witnessing, so that the photographs stand as evidence in addition to fine art objects. Unlike *Glacial Erratic*, text is a crucial component of *Manifest*; here, the language used in the title of the series and images constructs, archives, and ostensibly authenticates human and natural history. Bright created the series to, “renew our vision of New England's stone walls as the living evidence of particular historical, economic, and geological processes rather than as fixed nostalgic artifacts of a vanished golden age.”<sup>18</sup> By literally bringing to light old, crumbling walls previously covered by weeds in dark forests, *Manifest* uncovers the forgotten histories and conflicting meanings these structures have had over time.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when most of the walls were built, “the farmer, the cultivator, became the truly heroic figure” in America and the New England farm helped to maintain the, “mythic correlation of agricultural work and national virtue.”<sup>19</sup> Sturdy, dependable walls symbolized the legal control of land as private property. Deeds that read, “Conveyed to *x* by deed of *y*” established a record of land-ownership and patriarchal authority as old and as robust as the walls themselves. Bright's titles adopt the language of the deeds, reading, for example, *Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804* (Figure 1a). According to Bright, “the very existence of the walls, like the board fences and stockades that preceded them, made manifest the imposition of fundamental capitalist principles of private ownership and entitlement to profit.”<sup>20</sup> Such traditions of land ownership were incomprehensible to the indigenous inhabitants of the region, who practiced cooperative land use and conservation. Like Plymouth Rock, the walls symbolize white Euro-American control of Native Americans and of nature.

As Bright notes, “New England's stone walls tell other stories besides those of property enclosure, economic exploitation, and racism.”<sup>21</sup> Embedded in the piles of stones are the histories of the rocks themselves, from their

## HEMISPHERE

geologic formation, to their selection as building material, to their eventual entropic erosion. The granite cobblestones that compose the walls were deposited in New England during the Ice Age approximately twenty thousand years ago.<sup>22</sup> Blemishes, nicks, and scars indicate the rocks' ancient history and long journey before reaching their current manmade formation. New England farmers built walls not only to demarcate property lines but also to deposit the numerous stones that littered newly cleared farmland. As Bright states, "Rather than Yankee ingenuity, the stone walls are more accurately understood as linear dumps."<sup>23</sup> Structures built out of necessity, the walls mark coveted property and also represent the unwanted, as the rocks themselves were considered a nuisance for farming.

Wall building declined as settlers moved west and industrialism lured workers out of fields and into cities. Since the late 1800s, most walls have been reclaimed by the surrounding forest. Bright notes, "Over a century and a half, they have melded with landscape and become inseparable from it, man-made geological formations as much a part of New England's woodland ecosystem as are its ancient kettle ponds and bogs."<sup>24</sup> Today's walls signify both the rise and the fall of New England's landscape as a site of American prosperity and national pride. More recent histories include the walls' attraction for hikers as picturesque ruins, and their ability to thwart the efforts of industrial logging operations. Repeatedly visiting the snaking stone structures near her cabin in New Hampshire, Bright has had a long relationship with the walls she has come to know like old friends.<sup>25</sup> *Manifest* allows viewers to see layers of time and history within single images. Although the photographs depict the walls' appearance in the twenty-first century, they are presented in an antiquated format. This contrast enables a multileveled reading where the past and the present are displayed simultaneously.

While the walls themselves are ostensibly the primary subject of *Manifest*, the photographs depict the stones as hidden, covered, and controlled by nature. In *Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804*, for example, tentative stones peek out from under strong, lush ferns. A natural wall of ferns has grown up alongside and now covers the manmade line of boulders—the sinuous, curling organic fingers of the plants caress, shield, and engulf the immobile stones. Here, the stone wall appears old and inert in comparison to the fecund greenery.

## ROCKY HISTORY

Bright agrees that her photographs can be considered lush, appealing depictions of nature, yet she sought to undercut their majesty by creating flat, inert compositions similar to her flat, direct views of Plymouth Rock. The artist found it difficult to challenge traditional landscape aesthetics because the walls—simple ruins reclaimed by nature—are ideal romantic subjects. Her solution was to circumvent long perspective views of sturdy walls receding into the distance and instead, to use her lens to render the forms as more flattened than our eyes would see them. Although *Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804* depicts a classically beautiful landscape, many *Manifest* photographs present a more banal view. *Conveyed to Justus Lakin by deed of Luther Page, 1821*, for example, depicts a wall that has become a trash dump (Figure 1b). A squat glass bottle rests squarely on a thick, flat rock, as if it was placed there like a stone to begin a new layer of the wall. The unsightly and unnatural bottle recalls the wall's first function as a trash dump for unwanted rocks.



A.



B.



C.



D.

FIGURE 1. Deborah Bright, (a) *Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804*; (b) *Conveyed to Justus Lakin by deed of Luther Page, 1821*; (c) *Conveyed to John Claflin by deed of Hosea Whipple, 1787*; and (d) *Conveyed to Roswell Perry by deed of Thomas Baldwin, 1806* (2000-2002), Chromogenic photographs, 20x24 in. Copyright Deborah Bright.

## HEMISPHERE

Several *Manifest* photographs allude to a struggle between organic nature and static stone. For example, *Conveyed to John Claflin by deed of Hosea Whipple, 1787* confronts the wall straight on, and tree-trunks, not a wall, recede diagonally into the distance (Figure 1c). Leafless, thorny brambles and dead limbs encroach upon the stones, providing a haphazard disarray to contrast the wall's more regular geometry. In this instance, trees provide a larger obstacle and more daunting barrier than the wall itself. Similarly, in *Conveyed to Roswell Perry by deed of Thomas Baldwin, 1806*, the organic form of a massive tree dominates the composition and overpowers the wall (Figure 1d). Sunlight warms the lithe tree trunk, which appears more alive and important than the wall. In both images, walls are pushed into the margins and confined to the shadows, yet they endure. This tension between woods and walls mirrors the larger conflicts written throughout the stones' history.

The titles adorning the images theoretically anchor each stone wall to two of its owners and to a specific year in its life. Yet the images contrast the titles—the text describes land-ownership and control of nature, whereas the photographs depict the structures long after their functional properties are depleted. Furthermore, the shadowy, cropped, almost abstract compositions present the rocks as anonymous, archetypal objects. *Manifest* presents a tension between specificity and universality.

The stones are ironic, tragic, elegiac, and nostalgic. Just as the *Glacial Erratic* photographs satirize Plymouth Rock by depicting it inside a cage, the *Manifest* images ironically depict rock walls that were intended to control and confine nature as impotent, buried, defeated ruins. There is also a solemn, mournful element to the series. The dark prints illuminated by dappled light project a somber, melancholic mood. By closely examining the photographs, we tread deep into the woods to uncover hidden traces of history. Unearthing remnants of the past lingering in the present, we detect a musty trace of nostalgia for what once was.

Stone walls represent a frontier. When first built, they signified boundaries between known and unknown, chaos and control, and, in Frederick Jackson Turner's words, savagery and civilization. Today, the walls recall a moment in early American history when the woods of New England represented a penetrable, controllable, inhabitable frontier. In the *Manifest* photographs,

## ROCKY HISTORY

the walls also represent a frontier between past and present; they are vestiges of the past that accumulate new meanings in the present.

Just as the chinks and cracks between stones offer a breeding ground for weeds, bugs, and other creatures, simple stone walls hide complex and contradictory histories. Bright's photographs examine the landscape as an arena of social and political action; clearly, landscape history is inextricable from human history. Far from an isolated refuge, the New England landscape is a site of conflict, as demonstrated by Bright's images of stone walls and Plymouth Rock.

### **Contested History: Re-Imaging the American Landscape**

The choices Bright makes while crafting and presenting her photographs of significant American landscapes influence and underscore their political message. For Bright, the landscape is a document or text to be examined and deconstructed rather than an isolated object to be adored and venerated. Exhibited in museums and sold at galleries, Bright's photographs are marketed to a fine art audience, yet the artist defies the modernist, formalist canon of conventional American landscape photography, such as that established by Ansel Adams, for example, by asserting her revisionist perspective. In other words, Bright challenges the tradition of landscape photography while working within it. Bright does not disparage beauty in landscape photography; in fact, she acknowledges that images, such as *Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804* and *Sunrise*, which depicts Plymouth Rock basking in golden sunlight, are classically beautiful. Furthermore, Bright's presentation methods—including *Glacial Erratic's* rich painterly surfaces and *Manifest's* luxurious, antique framing and script—heighten the photographs' visual splendor.

Foregrounding her identity as an activist, Bright espouses a politicized approach to landscape photography, working against the grain of the modernist canon. Bright intentionally defies modernist traditions of American landscape photography, such as those exemplified by the work of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, that treat nature as a separate, pristine arena of natural beauty. Choosing symbols of America's elite white Euro-Christian patriarchy as her subject, Bright works to demystify and deflate dominant master narratives.<sup>26</sup> In her photographs, Plymouth Rock and the stone walls are alternately weak and strong, immobilized and full of life,



## HEMISPHERE

powerless and commanding. Depicting these monuments as problematic icons of a biased American history, Bright removes their mystique. Yet, the stones endure. Although they have been broken, beaten, and imprisoned, Plymouth Rock and the stone walls have lasted for centuries and will continue to do so. The rocks mark moments in history as the landscape changes around them. Accordingly, the myth of the American frontier landscape as Manifest Destiny is formidable, influential, and not easily dislodged. Bright's essential message is that all history is a construction, just as all photographs are constructions. Using photography to visualize and access layers of history, Bright emphasizes that history and photography always harbor personal viewpoints and agendas.

---

HOLLY MARKOVITZ GOLDSTEIN is a Ph.D. candidate in Art History at Boston University, working under the guidance of Professor Kim Sichel. Her areas of specialization include the history of photography, modern and contemporary art, and American landscape history. Goldstein's dissertation is titled, *Re-Imaging the American Frontier: Landscape Photography as Revisionist History* and examines the ways in which contemporary artists use photography to rethink historical meanings and mythologies of the American frontier.

### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Deborah Bright and Erica Rand, "Queer Plymouth," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 260.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Bright, interview with author, 3 October 2008, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>3</sup> See Deborah Bright, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men," *Exposure* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1985); "Victory Gardens: The Public Landscape of Postwar America," *Views* (Spring 1990); and "The Machine in the Garden Revisited," *Art Journal* (Summer 1992). These three essays demonstrate Bright's sustained critical investigation of landscape photography.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Bright, interview with author, 3 October 2008, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>5</sup> Plymouth Rock is managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as part of Pilgrim Memorial State Park. See <http://www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/southeast/plgm.htm> (accessed April 28, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt influentially uses the term "contact zone" to refer to the real and imagined space of colonial encounters. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 38.

<sup>8</sup> William Bradford, quoted in John Seelye, *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock*

## ROCKY HISTORY

(Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1. Prior to their landing at Plymouth, the Pilgrims explored land at Provincetown, MA and along the shore of Cape Cod.

<sup>9</sup> John McPhee, "Travels of the Rock," *The New Yorker* (February 26, 1990): 108.

<sup>10</sup> In 1880, "1620" was carved into the Rock, replacing painted numerals.

<sup>11</sup> The statue was commissioned by the Improved Order of Red Men. In 1920 the mission of the Order was to "preserve some of the customs of the aborigines, and to pay tribute to their many manly virtues, which we, as the dominant race, have been too strongly inclined to overlook or ignore." Alvin G. Weeks, quoted in Bright and Rand, 262.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>13</sup> Deborah Bright, interview with author, 3 October 2008, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>14</sup> A seminal text on photography's mechanical reproducibility is Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968. Rpt. Schocken, 1969. Rpt. 1992), 217-252.

<sup>15</sup> Deborah Bright, interview with author, 3 October 2008, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> According to Bright, although "women's names occasionally appear in these registers [of deeds in Cheshire County, New Hampshire], presumably because they were widows or unmarried survivors of deceased male kin, property customarily passed from male to male. In the early years of the nation, only white male property owners could exercise the right to vote." See Deborah Bright, *The Manifest Project: A Meditation on New England's Stone Walls* (Cambridge, MA: Deborah Bright, 2005), 10. This self-published catalogue was funded through a RISD grant and includes title information for each of the images and an essay by Bright.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Hills, *The American Frontier: Images and Myths* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1973), 9. Bright states that the late 1700s to the 1850s was the "period of most intensive land-clearing and farming" in Cheshire County where she photographed. Bright (2005), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Bright (2005), 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Bright uses Robert Thorson's history of stone walls as her primary resource. See Robert Thorson, *Stone by Stone: The Magnificent History of New England's Stone Walls* (New York: Walter and Company, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Bright (2005), 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Bright first became interested in stone walls during hiking trips near her weekend cabin in southwestern New Hampshire. According to the artist, "It was the walls' surreal visual paradox that struck me; the relentless labor of their human geometry dividing and organizing seemingly undifferentiated plots." *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> I borrow the term "master narrative" from Jean-Francois Lyotard. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) for the definition of postmodernism as a departure from master narratives.