



THE RAILROAD AND THE ART OF PLACE AN ANTHOLOGY



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Most of the paintings in Michael Flanagan's illustrated novel *Stations* are railroad landscapes, but many do not include locomotives or rolling stock. According to one *Stations* character, it can be "more poetic . . . to leave out the train." For Flanagan, *Stations* was about loss, obsession, and the evocative power of railroad tracks. For him, the attraction was not so much the trains themselves, but the places where they had been, or could potentially be. Flanagan said, "I've been interested or obsessed with trains and railroads ever since I was a child. Not so much with the hardware of railroads, but with the notion of railroads as routes. I like trains, but it's the tracks that come first."

from an article by Matt Kierstead,
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Michael Flanagan's *Stations* Matt Kierstead

THE PHRASE "OUTLAW LANDSCAPE" might be an appropriate alternate title for this book. Artist Michael Flanagan used it, in his own italics, to characterize the railroad environment in a passage from his landmark 1994 illustrated novella, *Stations: An Imagined Journey*:

Graceful truss bridges, a network of rusty rails, faded lettering on the walls of old brick factories, signal towers, stone culverts, coal piles... the trackside milieu is a secret universe, preserved outside of time. Railroad space creates its own kind of *outlaw landscape* composed of fringe neighborhoods, flourishing along the unheeded routes where nature, never quite extinguished, comes creeping back into town.

Stations is an unusual combination of railroad landscape paintings and fictional narrative and is perhaps unique in combining painting, writing, photography, and even aspects of scale modeling. Flanagan's *Stations* paintings are based on his and others' photographs, altered and rendered in a *trompe l'oeil* style reminiscent of Dutch Renaissance landscape painting. The paintings are flanked by text from academic journals, architectural surveys, and historical markers, all Flanagan's own fictional context for his "imagined journey." Harvard University landscape studies professor John Stilgoe, author of the seminal railroad landscape study *Metropolitan Corridor*, said: "No summary can adequately address the layers of character and narrative that embed Flanagan's text and paintings."

Stations is intimately autobiographical, and Flanagan wove his own fascinations and images, and quotes and stories from family and friends, into his romantic exploration of the railroad landscape. The *Stations* scenes include bridges, crossings, telephone poles, tunnels, and abundant water towers, but they are also saturated with so many characteristic little details of the railroad right-of-way that they radiate a heightened sense of authenticity that makes one think that one has seen—and felt—these places before.

Stations was Flanagan's way of addressing and externalizing his feelings of loss for the railroads of his childhood, their operating environment, and all the vernacular details of the world they ran in, through his paintings of the "outlaw landscape" and the words of his fictional railroad photographer characters. One of them said about looking down a railroad track: "It beckoned like a gateway to some other landscape... but we are always 'here,' never 'there.'... what we have, what we inhabit, is a geography of longing." And another said, "Some of us express longing through art." Many artists, including several photographers in the book you are currently holding in your hands, embrace a similar set of emotional sensibilities as related to the railroad landscape.

Flanagan's *Outlaw Landscape* Essay

In the late 2000s, Michael Flanagan and his landscape painter friend Matthew Daub began to plan a group show of railroad landscape paintings and photographs, which they never mounted, called "The Outlaw Landscape." Flanagan and Daub collaborated on an essay to accompany the show. In that essay, which appears on the following pages, Flanagan defines and characterizes the outlaw landscape and places it into art historical and creative context. The editors of *The Railroad and The Art of Place: An Anthology*, who feel a kinship to Flanagan's aesthetic, obtained permission to include this previously unpublished essay. They believe it reflects what many "outlaw" photographers featured within the pages of this book—imagemakers who love the allure of railroads and tracks but don't necessarily have to see a train going by—are drawn to, so they deemed it important to weave into this book's overall fabric, and to include it as a tribute to Flanagan.

Michael Flanagan, four snapshots used as source material for *Stations*: Strasburg Junction, Virginia; Chatham, New York; Holyoke, Massachusetts; Cumberland, Maryland.

3.5 x 5 inch Kodacolor prints, 1978, private collection



The Outlaw Landscape Michael Flanagan

Jeff Brouws
Follansbee, West Virginia, 1998

AMERICA ABOUNDS IN MODEST, EVERYDAY PLACES that seem to exist outside or beyond conventional forms of geographic description. The planners who designed and built the environment we now live in and take for granted also left a lot of gaps. It is here in these leftover places that “outlaw landscapes” rise and flourish—thriving on anonymity, if not neglect, and shaped by situations that “just seemed to happen.” Here you’ll find eccentric forms of construction and even odder varieties of disrepair, in places where nature—only half-heartedly subdued—creeps back in to reclaim its old domain.

Such lawless zones, unmapped and unnamed, may be as unbounded as the sprawl of steel mills along the shores of Lake Michigan at Gary, Indiana, or as tiny as the alleyway that borders your neighbor’s backyard. They can be found almost everywhere, hiding in plain sight. Perhaps it is their very ordinariness or obscurity of purpose that makes them appealing to artists, or to anyone who’s just plain curious to seek out the hidden beauty in places that others ignore.

Not surprisingly, outlaw landscapes are often spawned by railroads and by highways. Railroads in particular comprise a unique linear environment, slicing through cities, towns, fields, farmlands, and wilderness alike, in patterns quite different and more hidden than that of ordinary roads.

The uneasy relationship between railroad corridors and the surrounding genteel landscape goes back 150 years. Writers like Thoreau worried about the invasion by the iron horse of New England’s peaceful valleys, while in neighboring New York State, the painter Thomas Cole was profoundly

distressed by the construction of a rail line through his beloved Catskills (though in later works he reluctantly began including trains as portents of progress to come). Eventually, artists like Asher B. Durand, George Inness, and Jasper Francis Cropsey began including these maligned features of modernity in their pastoral vistas. In Inness’s painting *The Lackawanna Valley* (c. 1856), the railroad and its unique architecture—in this case a locomotive roundhouse in the city of Scranton—were treated not as an intrusive element in an otherwise bucolic vista, but as the very subject of that vista. Near the end of the Civil War, Cropsey painted *The Starrucca Viaduct*—a distant view of the monumental Roman-style stone bridge in Pennsylvania (still in use) that carried the tracks of the New York and Erie Railroad. Finally, by the early 20th century, once-radical images like these became standard fare for painters like George Bellows, Charles Sheeler and Reginald Marsh, whose works both depicted and celebrated the marginal landscapes that were the inevitable byproduct of new construction, industrial activity and urban growth in America.

The basic structure of railroads has changed remarkably little since 1845, when Thoreau’s *Walden* was first published. The heavier trains of today still roll along parallel steel rails laid over a fretwork of wood crossties embedded in gravel. As railroads fell into decline after the heady years of World War II, some secondary lines became rust-belt anachronisms, slipping into disuse as obscure weed-grown byways where trains ran seldom, if at all—creating a bonus for photographers, industrial archaeologists, and other students or fans of the outlaw landscape. Even on the most active rail lines, the older wooden ties, bleached and splintered with age, evoke their origin as squared-off tree trunks, while plants constantly threaten to poke up through the stone ballast, and wayward shrubs like sumac and ailanthus proliferate along the right-of-way, their palm-like fronds lending an almost tropical aura to trackside embankments.



Outlaw landscapes are by nature impromptu, lawless places, where the grass doesn't get mowed. Without committees or groundskeepers to maintain a standard of appearance, their features are largely unregulated and untended—a true paradise for enthusiasts of vacant lots, shanty towns, deserted swimming pools, empty billboards, junkyards, slag heaps, railroad tracks, back alleys and industrial sites, and every fringe-scape or quirky little patch of land that exists in and along the margins of the conventional built world. If our official environment can be identified by well-maintained streets, sidewalks, parks, interstate highways, shopping malls, cemeteries, lawns, golf courses, playing fields, and farmlands, etc., the outlaw landscape might be a way of describing everything that's left over. Such areas are often tinged with a faint sense of menace—mundane places without rules, places where it's easy to imagine anything could happen, where there may be more going on than meets the eye, where perhaps some clandestine activity has already occurred or is about to occur.

Modern superhighways and strip malls have created vast sterile zones for specified use, but even beneath the concrete bridges and behind the megastores, unplanned mini-environments can be found—in broken fields of asphalt where dandelions force their way up through the cracks, or in the murky water of roadside ditches where tadpoles and catfish swim, and cardinal flowers and loosestrife thrive against all odds among the litter of aluminum cans and plastic bottles. True, wherever controls are relaxed, pollution often shows up, like an opportunistic disease. Yet even toxic phenomena can be pleasing to the eye. (What jaded Manhattanite could

not be impressed by the iridescent sunsets over New Jersey's Meadowlands, as seen through layers of cadmium-tinted ozone?) We are not advocating a world of dead fish, lead poisoning, and asbestosis. But neither can we deny that these anarchic patches of disturbed earth are at least worth looking at, if only because most of us have been conditioned, by habit or reflex, not to see them.

These scenes are usually shunned as not picture-worthy. The subjects may be as familiar as the tangled cables and poles that carry the phone lines above your street, as ordinary as a fenced-in parking lot, or as surreal as a grove of white-leaved trees at the edge of a limestone quarry. In any case, the artists' intention is not to make judgments about the environment. It is simply to say, "Look at that!"

The decision to paint or take a photograph of something that already exists is essentially a process of framing, of zeroing in, calling the viewer's attention to one particular scene and not another. Photography of course is subject to manipulation, especially in its digital form, but its essential function, and ultimately its magic, remains in the camera's ability to optically freeze an instant of light in time—not so much to create as to record what is there. Likewise, painters can also represent places as they are—without embellishment. Some however do employ fictive techniques as a way to mimic the deadpan reality of documentation, but they share the common starting point of direct observation.

In the course of history, as industrious people began shaping the land to suit their needs, we can only guess when and where outlaw landscapes came into being. And at what point did such places begin to attract the attention of artists? When were these scenes first treated as subject matter? The obvious answer lies in the record left by the artists and painters themselves. Until recently, much of this evidence has been passed over, due to a tendency among scholars to focus on form at the expense of pictorial

content. But according to contemporary art historians like Professor James H. Rubin, who argues that subject matter and form "are inseparable," the pendulum may be swinging back.

In 19th century France, the pursuit of leisure, including an established patronage for romanticized photographs and paintings of "unspoiled" nature, was just one feature of a robust bourgeois culture that was simultaneously becoming enmeshed with the ways and means of commerce—the tangible world of canals, highways, railroads, scrap yards, and manufacturing zones that made that very culture possible. The artistic aspect of this burgeoning new territory is what Professor Rubin calls Impressionism's "other landscape."

Industrial smokestacks appear surprisingly often in early images by painters including Cezanne, Guillaumin, Pissarro, Signac, and others; Van Gogh filled his notebooks with drawings of the railroads and factories around the banlieues of Paris, as Monet became absorbed in painting un-scenic train stations and simple rural haystacks.

Once Impressionism took hold, new generations of artists began paying more attention to vernacular places. In 20th-century America, Edward Hopper recorded (or sometimes invented) outlaw landscapes, as charged settings for his psychological portraits of loneliness and angst.

Perhaps no American eye has probed so deeply or roamed so widely through this territory as the Midwestern-born photographer Walker Evans. Evans aimed his camera at the kind of places previous photographers had largely passed over. Evans's precursor was Alfred Stieglitz, whose groundbreaking photograph of a Pennsylvania Railroad yard entitled *The Hand of Man* was published in 1902 in *Camera Work* magazine, Stieglitz's avant-garde journal of the arts. At the time, critics like Sadakichi Hartmann took pains to praise Stieglitz for his "straightforward depiction of the pictorial beauties of life and nature." Following Stieglitz, it can be argued that Evans's broader vision led to the de-mystification of landscape itself. In more



Alfred Stieglitz, *The Hand of Man*, 1902, J. Paul Getty Museum

recent times photographers of offbeat places, like Steven Shore, William Eggleston, and Joel Sternfield, owe Evans an enormous debt. These later pioneers have in their own way laid the groundwork for contemporary painters of similar imagery.

Artists who find inspiration in the ungoverned world of nowhere places have both documented and interpreted fragments of an "outlaw landscape"—an anonymous sprawling mosaic that surrounds us everywhere and can easily be seen if we but take the time to look.

Matt Kierstead text photography by John Fasulo

AMERICAN RADIO BROADCASTER MIKE MALLOY once called Afghanistan a place “where empires go to die.” Orange County in southeastern New York could well be considered a “railroad Afghanistan.” Routes of the rail empires of the Erie, Lehigh & Hudson River, Lehigh & New England, New York Central, New York, New Haven & Hartford, and New York, Ontario & Western all ran through Orange County. Those railroads relied heavily on revenue from freight interchanged at junctions and yards in and around the villages of Campbell Hall and Maybrook for decades until, one by one, with the decline of regional freight rail traffic after World War II, those railroads died. For those who know where to look, the ghosts of those empires still inhabit the fields and woods around this former Northeast U.S. railroad nexus just sixty miles northwest of New York City.

The Maybrook–Campbell Hall area evolved as a significant freight-rail interchange location after the Civil War and grew to regional importance with the opening in 1889 of the nearby Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge, across the Hudson River, which gave area railroads an all-rail New England gateway. The bridge and its connecting line to Maybrook soon fell under control of the New Haven, which completed building its massive Maybrook Switching Terminal, or simply “Maybrook Yard,” in 1912. The busy freight line east from the yard, over the Hudson and into southern Connecticut, ultimately became known by its now-legendary name, “The Maybrook Line.” Today, in the village of Maybrook, cast-iron roadside history markers crystallize the village’s historic role as a “huge rail center.” The three-mile-long Maybrook Yard incorporated seventy-two miles of track. It was six yards in one, with eastbound and westbound receiving, classification, and departure yards. Support facilities included a roundhouse, locomotive and freight car repair shops, and towers to supply locomotives with coal, sand, and water. At its World War II traffic peak, Maybrook Yard was a critical rail facility employing 1,500 workers. On one day in May 1943, the yard handled

Maybrook,

a record fifty-four trains totaling 3,491 cars. Maybrook Yard was a beating railroad heart, taking in cars from five major veins and pumping them back out into southern New England via the Maybrook artery.

The railroads feeding Maybrook Yard withered with the post–World War II transition to air and highway transportation and regional deindustrialization. First to die was the New York, Ontario & Western, in 1957, followed by the Lehigh & New England in 1961. After Penn Central formed in 1968, it rerouted its New England freight traffic away from Maybrook, drastically reducing volume through the yard and starving the Lehigh & Hudson River and the Erie Lackawanna, which was down to one New England–bound train by 1971. In May 1974, the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge caught fire, permanently severing the Maybrook gateway to southern New England and bewildering the Village of Maybrook and its freight yard. The Erie Lackawanna continued to drop a few cars for local customers at Maybrook Yard for delivery by Penn Central, which went about demolishing yard buildings and tearing up track.

It was at this time, between the Poughkeepsie Bridge fire and the coming of Conrail in 1976, that John Fasulo ventured into the Maybrook Yard with his camera. Fasulo had grown up along the New York Central Railroad’s “Water Level Route” on the east side of the Hudson River. His grandfather, who had worked as a machinist at the Central’s Harmon Shops at Croton-on-Hudson, gave him his first camera. Educated in history and art, Fasulo enjoyed a twenty-five-year career as a journalist, news photographer, and television news cameraman. He often photographed historical sites and landscapes around his mid–Hudson River Valley home, focusing on transportation subjects, especially railroads. On May 8, 1974, Fasulo was in the right place at the right time and captured a series of “decisive moment” photographs of the fateful fire that ended rail traffic across the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge.

New York

His shots of firefighters struggling to fight the smoky, creosote-soaked tie fire, wrestling with heavy hoses on the bridge deck, are iconic images capturing the dramatic loss of this critical regional freight railroad connection.

John Fasulo recognized the impact of the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge fire to the then already rapidly declining Maybrook Line, and he visited the moribund Maybrook Yard several times to photograph its lingering remains. The emptiness in Fasulo's Maybrook images contrasts with much of his railroad photography, which often portrays more active, human aspects of railroading. His image of a battered speeder car, once used to return brakemen back to the hump after they rode freight cars down into the classification yard bowl tracks, evokes a strong contrast between human presence and abandonment. Fasulo's compositional use of empty foregrounds emphasizes Penn Central's stripping of the yard, for instance in the wide-open space between the carshop building and refrigerator freight icing platform devoid of its rows of parallel tracks, the empty turntable bridge at the roundhouse, or the disembodied freight car coupler drawbar lying on the concrete apron at the vacant locomotive servicing facility.

John Fasulo's suite of Maybrook Yard photos captures a powerful type of "outlaw" railroad landscape. Instead of photographing in the periphery of an active line, Fasulo explored the core of a once-great railroad facility at a last-gasp moment of imminent abandonment. Details like an electrical transmission pole intentionally felled across a locomotive inspection pit document visceral acts of track embargo. The only faint sign of life in these images is a distant pair of Erie Lackawanna road switchers waiting to serve the last local customers west of the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge. For Fasulo, perhaps these photographs were truly outlaw images, made while trespassing, striking that balance between looking through the camera for the best composition and looking over his shoulder waiting to be ejected from the property, a creative tension element familiar to the railroad landscape photographer.

John Fasulo memorialized some of the more enduring physical symbols of a fallen railroad empire in his mid-1970s photographs of the last standing structures at the New Haven's Maybrook Yard. If Orange County is a place where railroad empires went to die, then Maybrook Yard is certainly a "graveyard of empires."









