

resources. The Paiute, who were the first inhabitants of the valley, once lived spaced apart in smaller family units. The Cahuilla in southern California did too. They divided when the group reached around 200 or so. The idea of living as a larger tribe was forced by settler governments that wanted to keep them in one area instead of being able to roam the countryside. I hope that the Paiute, or the Numa, as they call their people, and future Aridtopians will be able to live by their own fates, and not have to surrender to dense living conditions.

Centuries ago, water flowed into imperial, ancient Rome from the countryside via beautifully engineered, arched aqueducts. Los Angeles is imperious too, treating the Owens Valley as a resource-colony. The concrete aqueduct is a prison for the water. The snowpack—the blood of the mountains—is being drained slowly.

I am sweating profusely in the near one hundred degree July heat in the Mojave Desert. A lizard scrambles along the concrete embankment. I will not allow my water to drain from me into the aqueduct.

Jawbone Canyon, northeast of Mojave, California, U.S. Route 14

I drive north from Pearblossom, past the town of Mojave and the Tehachapi Pass Wind Farm—hundreds of single and double blade turbines spinning in the wind--and pull off at Jawbone Canyon, named for hills that resemble mandibles. In the 1800s, several gold mines dotted the landscape. Now, it's the site for one

of the largest sections of the LA Aqueduct's metal siphons.

A stark, white line crosses the desert surface. It is one segment of a miles long, nearly seven-foot circumference, metal pipe, or siphon, transporting water from the Owens Valley River to Los Angeles. The siphon's extreme straightness suggests a contemporary rendition of the ancient Nazca Lines in Peru, which often took the shapes of regional animals; some seemingly visible from an aerial viewpoint only. Zigzags of this same pipe are atop hills in the distance; perhaps suggesting a slithering rattlesnake over the landscape, at least as seen from the sky, or the satellite image on my phone. The reflection of the sun off the chalk-like paint covering the pipe is blinding. I walk across the powdered desert sand to touch its side. No sensation of rushing water—of the Sierra Nevada's blood—beneath the metal, as I had expected.

Several fire rings are near the siphon. They are made from nearby, stray stones, and placed in a circle. They are left by what I call "desert-reckers" (those who use the desert for recreation, such as off-roading vehicles, commiserate with the federal policy for parks that states "Land of many uses." An Aridtopian might define it as "wreck-reation"). I imagine them as demarcating one of many resting places for future, Aridtopian pilgrimages along the aqueduct's route.

The Mojave Desert is a land of many uses: people retreat into it for the landscape's solitude, quietness, and stillness, seeking spiritual replenishment. The U.S. military has installed several bases such as Edwards Air Force Base, just south of Jawbone Canyon, or China Lake, north of here in the Indian Wells Valley, just

before entering the Owens Valley. There is plenty of land for secrecy and distance from a civilian population for their protection. Experimental rockets and planes do blow up and they crash hard.

How could these siphons be repurposed? The first idea that comes to mind is that they could provide a pathway from Aridtopia into Owens Valley that would provide even more protection from the elements than the open-air cement aqueduct sections that I saw earlier in Pearblossom.

With the siphons, ventilation slits could be cut into their metal sides so that air circulates continuously. This will allow pilgrims and travellers to traverse the desert in coolness. Doorways would be cut into the sides so that people can enter and exit at will, perhaps to sit around one of the fire rings. Flat platforms could be erected atop the curved surface so that people could climb out and up on to them for camping at night from snakes, coyotes, and scorpions.

However, this seems like only practical suggestions. I feel that there's an opportunity to use the aqueduct for enacting a sacred journey, seeking spiritual truth. Maybe it could be a journey that the youth will take as they transition into "deserthood?" It would be like walking in a dream as they walk in the pitch darkness of the siphon with their eyes wide open; severing their tie with the outside world. It would be a waking "dreamdesert" ritual.

**Keeler, California, located on the east side of Owens Lake, U.S.
Route 395**

I leave my Aridtopian fantasies behind at Jawbone, finally merging onto the 395, heading further north into the Owens Valley. I drive past the Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake on my right, or east side, in Indian Wells Valley. It's the Navy's largest base and the source for a variety of rockets and missiles with desert animal inspired names, such as Sidewinder and Shrike. The first is a venomous pit-viper and the second is a bird known for its feeding habit of impaling lizards and insects on the thorns of plants or barbed-wire fences, given them the nickname, "butcher bird." Whether Nazca Lines, lengthy metal pipes carrying water, or missiles, desert animals are a source of representing otherworldly power.

Finally, I reach the southern tip of the desiccated Owens Lake. I turn right off the 395 onto the 190, which curves around the lake's east side, reaching an intersection, where if I continue on 190, I'd enter into Death Valley, but if I turn left on 136, then I'll continue skirting the perimeter of the lake, until I reconnect with the 395 at its northern end.

My MiniCooperMarsRover curves around the depleted, dusty, briny Owens Lake. Large expanses of salt flats are towards its center. When there is some rain, the water mixes with the salt and other minerals, making a small brine pond sometimes. Brine-fly larvae from its edges once sustained the Paiute. But, there is no more water. No more reflections of the sky on a shimmering,

undulating, liquid surface.

The lake's main contribution for decades has been alkali dust storms, since the aqueduct began tapping the Owens River above it. As much as four million tons of dust blows off the lakebed, spreading throughout the United States as one the country's largest polluters.

I pass the DWP's Dust Mitigation headquarters. They dump gravel, encourage some vegetation growth, and spray water, to tap down the dust. The process has been successful to a degree, but has cost over a billion dollars, and has been executed only because of a court order.

I drive further north, and then stop at Keeler, midway on the east side, off the 136. Stepping out of my MiniCooperMarsRover, I walk among dilapidated, petrified, sucked dry homes. The upkeep of some places suggests habitation, but it is still a ghost town, but one of hopes and dreams turned into dust. It was built when the Cerro Gordo silver mine was active from 1866 to 1957; 9000 feet up into the hills from here. The ore was once brought down for smelting in Keeler, and then mule trains would take tons of silver to Los Angeles.

I come upon a post and lintel entrance to nothing. The lintel is a surfboard that is a sign, which reads, "Keeler Beach. Swim, Surf, Fish. Camps For Rent." There is no more shoreline since there is no more water.

Keeler and Olancho, on the west side, off the 395, could become sites where pilgrims rest. Perhaps there are areas of the lake that could be sectioned off with walls, so that water can be

pumped in, mix with the salt, and create a density of eight times more salt than the ocean, like that of the Judean Desert's Dead Sea. Then, pilgrims could float buoyant on it, their bodies touching nothing hard, loosing sense of their own body, confronting their primal self as the interior and exterior boundaries with the body dissolve into the briny water.

Or, perhaps Aridtopians can specialize in huge salt sculptures. The old smelting kilns for the silver ore could be use to prepare a salt solution: bring a vat of water to a rolling boil, keep adding salt until no more salt will dissolve, add food coloring. Then, bring the vat out onto the salt plains of the lake, build a skeletal wood structure over it, dip rope into the vat, then pull it out so that one end of it dangles in the vat and tie the other end is tied to a spot on the skeletal structure, and then leave it undisturbed. When the salt water begins to cool, the salt molecules will crystallize back into a solid, creating long salt, multicolored, stalagmites along the rope, eventually becoming a crystalline superstructure in the desert. Temporary sanctuaries can be built in this manner. Maybe even a whole city for pilgrims on the dry Owens Lake.

Clues to the past can be excavated in the form of fulgurites, while these Aridtopian structures are being built for the eventual future.

I read once that in the early 1990s, Dr. Scott Stine, a paleoclimatologist at California State University at Hayward, examined centuries-old tree stumps at Mono Lake, now exposed after water levels dropped as the Los Angeles Aqueduct drained water from the Owens Valley. He was able to demonstrate with this

evidence that long drought periods are the norm in the California region. The relative wet period, which is coming to an end, and in which we now live, is the anomaly.

He gathered additional evidence from fulgurites at Owens Lake, which are glassy structures in which sand has been fused from lightning strikes, and became accessible after the disappearance of the lake because of the aqueduct. He found fulgurites from both past decades and centuries past, whose trapped electrons allowed for dating further back than expected. This suggested that the lake had been dry many times earlier during which a lightning strike would have had the opportunity to hit a dry lakebed, thus, creating the fulgurites. In other words, there were many, long-lasting droughts in the past. Pilgrims could treat the fulgurites as talismans.

Bishop, California, U.S. Route 395

After Keeler, I skirt the remaining east perimeter of Owens Lake, intersecting with the 395 again. Then, I drive straight through the small towns of Lone Pine, Independence, and Big Pine, arriving in Bishop. It is located above the aqueduct's intake gates, where water begins to flow from the Owens River into it, bypassing the Owens Lake. The river can be found in its unchanneled state in this area.

I pull into Bishop, the biggest town along the 395. Along the main street, are coffee shops and outfitters for hiking, skiing, and camping around Mammoth Lakes, which is located just a little