

# Inside *Hyperway*

Jan Tumlir

In the following pages, I will attempt to relate the backstory of Christopher Richmond's new filmic work, *Hyperway*. To put it perhaps more grandiosely, but also more cautiously, this will amount to an origin myth, and only one possible myth among others. My account is speculative, subjective, and certainly not the last word on the matter, as I am still largely in the dark as to what exactly it might be.

I have not yet seen the completed film, only some teasing excerpts that Christopher has periodically sent my way. These have been increasingly impressive, but also increasingly difficult to reconcile with the scenario that was briefly described to me at the start of the project. Why should this be of concern? The obvious answer is that one is expected to know the work that one is writing about. But more sensitive in this case is the fact that I am involved in this work not only in my normal capacity as a writer, but as a productive participant. *Hyperway* was to be my acting debut; moreover, I was promised a leading role in the film. In the course of its rather arduous production – which I observed in its earliest stages of planning, and then, during the shoot, both from a position in front of the camera and behind it – I felt that I was witnessing the entirety of what would wind up onscreen. Not so. New characters, new situations, new narrative strands keep getting added. The last bit of footage that was shared with me barely resembled any part of the film I had in mind.

I was there, present at the filming, and now am also present in the film. These are the



*top, Hyperway*  
2018  
Page from notebook

*bottom, Production still*

objective facts as they are stored inside my own memory and externally on digital files. This is the part of the record that can be consulted, but what remains unavailable to me is the place that I hold in Christopher's thoughts. Just what does he want me to do, to be, in his film? What, I might ask him, as an actor to a director, is my *motivation*? But this question comes much too late in the day to make any difference. My performance has been committed, some small share of my existence excised and imported into another technical dimension, taking root there as image and, moreover, as data. For the time being, it would seem that I am merely an accumulation of intelligent particles, endlessly mutable, wafting about in a limbo of post-production. Whatever motivation is registered here can only come from without.

I am no longer so sure of the role I was invited to play in *Hyperway*.

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When Christopher first approached me with his proposal, the film he described concerned two astronauts. I would play one and Augusto Aguilera, my co-star, would play the other. About half of the running time was to be devoted to our journey through space, and our rapport inside the spaceship. The other half would be taken up with our adventures upon landing on a distant planet. In the first part, as he outlined it, we establish our characters, whereas in the second, these undergo transformation. This general scenario would seem to closely conform to the conventions of the science fiction space travel film. But then, with a knowing wink, Christopher added a twist: our journey was to take place onboard no elaborate interstellar vehicle, but rather his modest Honda Civic. And the ostensibly faraway planet of our destination would be revealed as actually the closest – that is, earth. No doubt, there are budgetary reasons for these decisions, but necessity, as we know, is also the mother of invention. To make the most of the means at one's disposal, it is sometimes advisable to highlight their limitations, which gives invention a stake in the concrete conditions of its emergence.

Here is the character study and plot synopsis I was given on Day One: "Jan is Augusto's foil. He is a contrarian. He loves the cadence of his own voice and revels in disagreement. With his winning smile, he is eager to conquer the alien landscape. But he is also honest, which means that he does not think of hiding his cynical feelings. Both the mishandling of life on earth and Augusto's humanist views amuse him. In displaying his indifference, he



*Hyperway*  
2018  
Production stills



*Hyperway*  
2018  
Video still

implicitly challenges Augusto's accepted moral standards. And yet he is neither moral nor immoral. Instead, he is amoral, and he does not make the distinction between good and bad. He believes the universe is, like him, entirely indifferent to human life. He thinks that a person's life has no grand meaning. He believes that people's actions, their comings, and goings, have no significant effect on the world. These views, however, shift when he spots a coyote in the distance on the alien world. Suddenly and without explanation, he sees majesty in this creature, one that he cannot so quickly dismiss. And when Augusto later dies, he begins to question even further his indifferent views of the universe and all of its comings and goings. A silence falls on him here for the first time."

Upon first reading this brief text, I was struck by a number of things: (1) Christopher wants me to be in the film because I have "views"; (2) He believes that I am "amoral" and "cynical," but that underneath it all I might also be a romantic, someone capable of feeling the "majesty" of life; (3) Perhaps for this reason, he finds me charming, with my "winning smile"; (4) Nevertheless, in the end, he wants to confine me to "silence." *Hyperway*, as I conceived of it at this preliminary stage, was to be all about me. At the same time, it could not be ignored that, on Christopher's side, this film might also be an exercise in wish fulfillment. Maybe he gave me this speaking role only to shut me up.

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I was given no written lines in *Hyperway*, but asked rather to improvise. Basically, my dialogue comes down to a series of lectures that I deliver to my co-pilot, Augusto, while we are in transit. These mainly revolve around science fiction cinema and post-studio art – two topics, ostensibly derived from my research of life on earth, which have captured my attention to the exclusion of all others. For instance, I go on at great length about the "unspeakable compromise of the work of art" as articulated in Daniel Buren's essay "The Function of the Studio." I also have some points to make about the relation of *Star Trek* to *Star Wars*. My interlocutor, who neither knows or cares about such things, is left to express his exasperation.

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While preparing these monologues, I thought back to what I still believe to be the genesis of *Hyperway*. All of the thoughts expressed by my character can be traced to the summer



top, *Hyperway*  
2018  
Video still

bottom, Production still

Buren  
Goethe  
Sound

Star Wars

Star Trek

Reagan

Sentinel

Human

**Hyperway**

2018

Post-production note

of 2013, when I was invited to teach a graduate seminar in Los Angeles on the topic of post-studio art. This class was constructed around a weeklong tour of the monuments of the American Southwest and included site visits to earthworks, casinos, national parks, architectural foundations and communes. Christopher, then pursuing his MFA degree, was enrolled in the class. It was in this quasi-academic context that we first met – a fact worth retaining in regard to the subsequent development of his film on the whole. It may be an exaggeration to claim that *Hyperway* is a product of a school trip, but that is the gist of the argument that follows. Please bear with me; a certain amount of local detail is required to make this point.

The first stop on our itinerary was Michael Heizer's earthwork *Double Negative*, that massive linear cut through the high desert cliffs of the Mormon Mesa, just outside Overton, Nevada. Inside the bus that carried us to this site, we speculated on the impression land art might make on visiting aliens. Was it maybe produced for their benefit, something to be observed from high above? The approach to *Double Negative* is all-important and has to be factored into the experience of this work. Like many or most visitors, we got lost for a time with no phone signal, navigating a darkening terrain as if we were on the moon.

Somewhere along the line of this trip, we did in fact listen to Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* while driving through the desert. In addition, it should be mentioned that a great deal of mind-altering substances were consumed by many of the students throughout this time, both on and off the bus. The second stop on our itinerary was Las Vegas, and it was during the night that we spent there that I realized that this class trip was also a kind of Spring Break blowout. The faces of the students I met up with on the Strip were as "lit up" as the signage all around them, maybe more so.

Some form of psychedelia is present in nearly every frame I have seen of *Hyperway*, which also is largely set in a desert landscape. The parched raw sienna and burnt ochre tones that normally come with this terrain serve, in the film, as a kind of under-painting for a play of phosphorescent colors that instead take us deep underwater, or else back to the "artificial paradise" that is Sin City. A burst of chromatic lushness from out of the void – did we speak about the closing sequence of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* while en route? Yes, we most certainly did. And we also spoke of the opening sequence, the one subtitled "The Dawn of Man."



top, *Hyperway*  
2018  
Video still

bottom, Michael Heizer  
*Double Negative*  
1969  
Photograph taken in 2013





Passing through the deserts of California, Nevada and Utah, and then back through those of Colorado and Arizona to California, we experienced a sensory deprivation that filled our tour bus with all sorts of talk. Empty expanses compel recollection and the sharing of information drawn from earliest childhood, and they are no less conducive to imaginary projection, to conversations that freely take leave of any existing referential reality. The flattest landscapes invite a “heap of language,” to quote Robert Smithson, or perhaps it would be better to describe this language as burrowing downward in search of its archaic roots. Throughout our travels, the discussion thread of science fiction was never relinquished – with good reason. These primordial and barren locales tend to be particularly hospitable to the most hyperbolic visions of science and technology, dotted as they are with nuclear test-sites and presumed UFO landing strips. Lingering geological evidence of the world’s ancient past would seem to invite futuristic thinking; it is almost a reflex. And no less reflexively do we sprinkle our science fiction with the seeds of prehistory.

Interestingly, this temporally vacillating mindset was instantly paused upon reaching our more idyllic destinations, such as the national parks of Mount Zion in Utah or Mesa Verde in Arizona. Amidst the natural plenitude and splendor of these sites, one feels that one has *arrived* and that nothing more needs to be done – as we are told was the case of Adam and Eve in Eden. Perhaps the most definitive trait of science fiction is that it must move; it must take us somewhere else. At its root, it is related to the accounts of great explorers, fundamentally travel literature. Only once we were back on the road did any such insights become once more available for discussion. Our excavation of the genre would only resume in the middle of nowhere. I want to say that it is at such points that the tour bus became the incubation chamber of *Hyperway* – a film that, in my estimation, however limited, is not only of science fiction, but also *about* it.

Science fiction, as narrative of departure and discovery, is a subset of the larger genre rubric of adventure, where it cannot help but rub shoulders with such neighbors as war films and westerns. Theoretical observations on the mutability of genre were amply corroborated by the inherent instability of the facts on the ground. Along our journey, we passed through a succession of wind-swept towns with traffic lights swaying on their poles, tumbleweeds rolling by, a watery blur rising up from the asphalt. All of it was instantly registered as filmic cliché of endangered life on the frontier – any frontier, because in film they are essentially all the same. One or two pump gasoline stations and general



Petroglyph Point Trail, Mesa Verde, Colorado  
Photograph taken in 2013



*Hyperway*  
2018  
Video stills

stores, those most rudimentary signs of civilization, drew us off the main road. And the further we ventured into the increasingly depopulated distance, the more the existential necessities narrowed down to the bare essentials: fuel and water, tobacco and beef jerky. Frontier outposts equal space stations, zones of momentary reprieve for those who are traveling far. I remember my colleague, Dwayne Moser, then the assistant director of the MFA program and our official driver, extolling the virtues of five-hour energy drinks from behind the wheel. If lift-off toward *Hyperway* began along forlorn country roads, then this was our Tang.

Science fiction is an escape vehicle, a means of “getting away from it all,” but also a means of rebuilding civilization, as if from scratch. In the encounter with other worlds, alien and/or futuristic, we are invited to imagine how our own world would work if, from the outset, it had been designed differently. Here the genre may indulge a messianic tone, whether cautionary or proselytizing.

Nearing the end of our journey, we visited two architectural proposals for a better life, both on the outskirts of Scottsdale, Arizona: Paolo Soleri’s Arcosanti and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin West. The latter project was begun in 1937 and is today often seen as a model for the postwar development of suburban sprawl. The former, begun in 1970, checks this vision of middle-class privatization by arguing instead for shared density, an intimate sort of urbaneness informed by the hippie communes. Much more could of course be said about their differences, but the main point to make here is that they are equally products of the sort of blue sky thinking on which science fiction is founded. Both Taliesin West and Arcosanti were conceived in relative isolation, largely unencumbered by the material, historical, social and political exigencies of the worlds left behind, while still answering directly to these in the negative. Doesn’t every utopia relate to a dystopia somewhat like a casting to its mold? Certainly this could be said of Slab City, the last stop on our trip, a community openly built on a foundation of failure.

Well before we arrived at this place, I had suggested that science fiction had perhaps run its course. What the genre had devolved into, as clearly evidenced by the films and television shows on offer at this time, was basically a zombie apocalypse. Especially when it is set in the future, such entropic fare is utterly incommensurate with science fiction, which is anti-entropic on principle. When it becomes impossible to imagine a future any different from our immediate present, or one where the only observable difference is



Frank Lloyd Wright  
**Taliesin West**  
1937  
Photograph taken in 2013





previous, **Hyperway**  
2018  
Production still

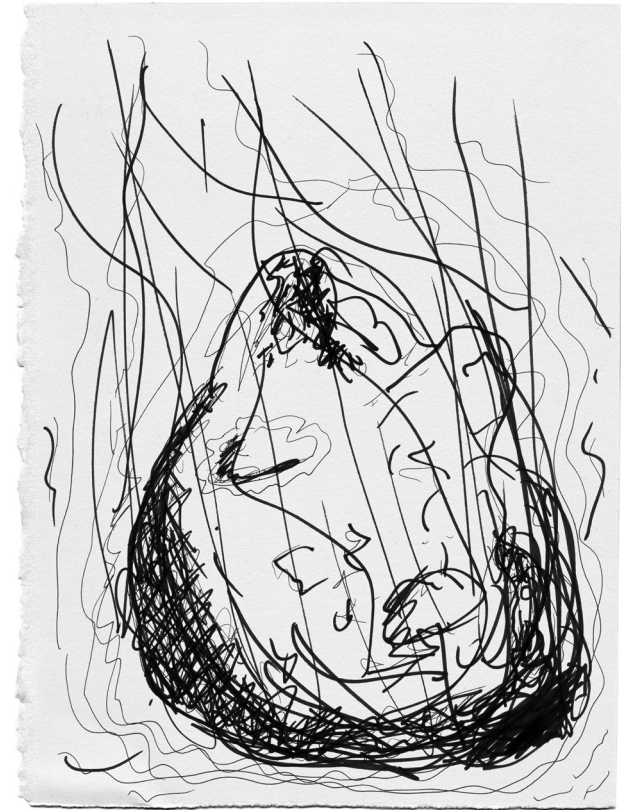
increasing sameness, a gradual grinding down of all things and beings to some shared grey element, science fiction is over. I sensed that this line of argument resonated strongly with Christopher, but only because he disagreed with it fundamentally.

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What Christopher would go on to produce with *Hyperway* might be described as a counter-argument, an affirmation that science fiction is still possible, and perhaps even that science fiction is today inevitable. But this thesis in no way negates its antithesis; rather, it comes at the problem from the opposite end. If the genre seems to have retreated from the realm of creative possibility, it is only because its various fantasies have so fully permeated even the most mundane details of everyday life. So, in objection to the “no future” argument, one could say, “the future is now.” Moreover, under the aegis of “total recall” in which we presently exist, it should be added that “the past is now” as well.

The 1990 film *Total Recall* is based on a 1966 short story by Philip K. Dick titled “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale.” The familiar science fiction theme of time-travel is here resumed within an order of “allatonce-ness,” to employ the wording of Marshall McLuhan – an instantaneous convergence of time frames. The dismantling of historical thought, and right along with it the imagination of the future, is also the specialty of Brian W. Aldiss, whose 1967 novel *An Age* is built on the premise that time in fact flows backward. To an extent, the author also conceived and produced it in reverse. Incidentally, Robert Smithson read a book by Aldiss on the bus that carried him on his own “tour of the monuments” from Port Authority in New York City to the suburban hinterlands of New Jersey. As recounted in his travelogue-essay from 1967, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” the drive-by landscape appears to be comprised of “ruins in reverse.” Earthworks, the category name for the art with which Smithson would become associated shortly thereafter, is lifted directly from the title of the book he brought along for the ride.

It is here that a flirtation with entropy begins. Yet the short stories and novels of authors like Dick and Aldiss remain science fiction inasmuch as they are still narratives of prediction. Even Smithson, in projecting his own lifeline toward geological time, a timeframe in which human life as we know it is registered as a mere blip, was engaged in prediction. The particular tone of futurist thought in the sixties and seventies might be characterized as alarmist, and that is to put it mildly. Consistently, it is argued that an experience of time



*Hyperway*

2018

Page from notebook





as no longer moving, but rather exponentially thickening, is unendurable to humans, who will inevitably fall prey to overheated states of paranoid schizophrenia and then succumb to listless torpor, heat death. This was the future predicted for the world I was born into, where I spent my childhood, and that shaped me as a subject to prepare for the worst.

This is not the world Christopher was born into. His is the world that had been predicted – the world in which no further prediction is possible, at least not by human intelligence. Today, time’s arrow plummets toward a temporal abyss. Every second undergoes endless subdivision, yielding an order of *surreal* and *hyper-real* numbers. These are products of infinitesimal and infinite calculations that only computers are capable of, yet they shape our experience. The sum total of human history, collecting as a big-data backlog, is statistically factored into all possible future outcomes. Probabilities are considered, risks assessed, a course of action determined – algorithmically. In this time that we occupy even as it exceeds us at every step, contracting and expanding at once, we, human actants, are increasingly reduced to the condition of *accidents*.

Some will say that this perspective is unduly dire. For someone like Christopher, with the better part of his days still ahead of him, it might well be unwelcome. To dismiss it wholesale, however, would be to cross the line between science fiction and sheer fantasy – a point of no return. Rather, *Hyperway* is perhaps an attempt to renegotiate this dilemma with some measure of optimism. Might the accident disclose a saving grace?

\* \* \*

I appear in *Hyperway* as an astronaut, a human being wearing a space suit that indicates that my environment, even though it is plainly earth, is non-native to me. My costume suggests that I come from elsewhere, that I am an alien to this particular planet we all know so well. This conceit, however, receives very little structural support; the moment it is floated, it is allowed to blow away. A safer course of interpretation might locate this costume as a sign of alienation. The astronaut is one who observes from a distance, who remains un-integrated with his physical surroundings, who is “in his head.” For what it’s worth, I prepared for my role by imagining myself as both an astronaut and a psychonaut, in the grand tradition of David Bowie’s Major Tom.

I recall how, with great pride, Christopher first showed me the heavy helmet that I would



opposite, top, *Hyperway*  
2018  
Pre-production sketch

opposite, bottom, Production still

top, Production still



*top, Hyperway*  
2018  
Video still

*bottom, Hyperway*  
2018  
Production still

then have to wear, day after day, while shooting under the punishing summer sun of the desert. This headpiece was sourced online at no small cost. It came with the tubing that an astronaut would attach to an oxygen-supply backpack upon leaving their spaceship and venturing out into the field of some distant planet. In our case, the air duct was connected to a canister that had been improvised from an old firefighting rig. The rest of the outfit basically came down to disposable items from the cleaning supply store: a lightweight synthetic fiber jumpsuit, latex rubber gloves and elastic strap booties. The helmet, however, felt real. If it did not in fact issue straight from NASA or its Russian counterpart Roscosmos, some prop shop had put in the requisite effort to make it seem like it did. More than anything else, this weathered but sturdy artifact guided my performance, as well as that of my co-star, Augusto. There are two astronauts in *Hyperway*, as mentioned, but only one helmet, which we traded between us. The weight of this thing on the shoulders, the sense of claustrophobic entrapment felt inside it, the stoic effort of maintaining composure, an even expression, despite the discomfort – all of this would register on camera as realism, non-superfluous acting.

The best use a director can make of his actors in a project of this sort is simply to let them speak for themselves. I would deliver my own thoughts in *Hyperway*, only now in a space suit; I would play myself in a disguise. And Augusto, for his part, could act out his lines with impunity precisely because he is a trained actor. To speak in the voice of others is what this person does on cue, and in this sense he too would be playing himself even while playing someone else. The point that every film, in addition to telling a story in pictures, is also a document of its own making, is perhaps being advanced here. To approach film in this way – at once more literally and more symbolically, as paradoxical as this might seem – is to hold fiction at arm's length, but without dismissing it. It is our vacillation between moments of immersion in a world of illusion and then critical appraisal of its real material “substrate” that makes for filmic pleasure.

Alienation is simply what happens when one passes into the realm of representations. The space suit is a blatant sign of this process in that it presents the body at an insulated distance from anything that can be felt, while also intimating a psychological warp in the reflections that appear on the helmet's curved visor. In our astronaut get-ups, Augusto and I become human projections of technical optics – roving “probes” into a landscape that the camera cannot occupy and at the same time reproduce. The order of things in which we might still want to imagine technology as an extension of man is here pointedly



**Hyperway**  
2018  
Production still



*top, Hyperway*  
2018  
Pre-production sketch

*bottom, Production still*

reversed. That we, the performers, remain ourselves even as we are subordinated to the filmic equipment lends pathos to the proceedings.

Such a struggle can be discerned at the basis of all cinema, of course, but it is made explicit within science fiction, where such matters of subtext often feed back into the storyline. As mentioned, *Hyperway* closely conforms to this genre even as it steps back to say something about it. All of the constituent tropes of science fiction are present and accounted for: escape vehicles, hostile landscapes, courageous explorers, encounters with “others.” Yet, in the end, it might well be that all of this fantastical bric-a-brac merely provides us with a kind of pretext for addressing the real – but the real from an adjusted, somewhat inhuman angle. Isn’t science fiction fundamentally an attempt to envision and enact what happens to everyday life inside a machine?

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Again, I have not seen the finished film, and so I am only guessing. Perhaps in the end this is exactly the role I was invited to play in *Hyperway*: that of an astronaut whose onscreen exploration of another world allegorically feeds back into the other world that is this film. My character’s monologues, no less than this written account, are attempts to tether the experience of the unknown to some determinate knowledge – or, to put it more prosaically, to what I know. The element of prediction is in full effect here, because what I say in the film is preconceived with a view to what the film will ultimately be. And the element of the accident is summoned right alongside it, at every step of prediction.

It is not the first time I have been placed into this compromised position by Christopher. Shortly after our graduate seminar, he began work on a project titled *The Milky Way*, which is essentially a road film in the vein of *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) or *Daytrippers* (1997), but with the added element of a Golem-like creature who is brought onboard by the human travelers to silently witness their interactions and adventures. Although *The Milky Way* does not qualify as bona-fide science fiction, its mixture of the banal and the fantastic anticipates some of the key themes of *Hyperway*, as I understand it. In fact, shortly before *The Milky Way* was completed, Christopher invited me into his studio to film an improvised analysis of these themes – all without having seen a single frame of the finished product. I was directed to pretend.



*Hyperway*  
2018  
Video stills



*Hyperway*  
2018  
Video stills

The resulting footage, which was to be attached to the end of *The Milky Way* as a kind of talking head coda to his film, wound up somewhere outside it. Titled *Summary*, it constitutes a stand-alone work within Christopher's *oeuvre*. As a summary divorced from the work to be summarized, it evinces feelings of acute vulnerability. I struggle before the camera to find the words and thoughts appropriate to an object that is nowhere in sight, neither to myself nor to the audience. Nevertheless the talking continues pretty much non-stop; this, at least, I am able to do. Somewhere along the way – while evidently channeling Smithsonian channeling Aldiss – I hit on the idea that *The Milky Way* might be science fiction in reverse.

On my end, the backtracking continuity between *Hyperway*, *Summary* and *The Milky Way* cannot be overlooked. Essentially, my passage between these three films is akin to that of a footnote that gets detached from its source text and then transplanted into another, only to become integrated with the text body. The speculative summary I deliver of *The Milky Way* is projected into *Hyperway* right along with my person, once an outlying observer, now factored into the film's plot as a central character. What I couldn't see and didn't know of the first film – which could only be imagined as an obscure object in the far distance – enfolds me in the last. I cannot tell *Hyperway* apart from my thoughts about it. My predictions and accidents converge all around.

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A final biographical note: When I was a little kid, I was obsessed with films, especially those I was too young to see. I would stand outside movie theatres and pore over the promotional posters and photographic stills on display there. If any of these details caught my attention, I then set about to find supplementary information. From my older brothers, I often requested plot summaries of these films in place of bedtime stories. If the films were based on novels, novellas or short stories, I tried to read them. I also read newspaper and magazine reviews, these often analyzing films I would have to wait many more years to experience firsthand. At an early age, I became closely acquainted with the language that Christopher has coaxed from me. These are the words that announce what is coming: a coming attraction. Even if I don't know exactly what my role is in *Hyperway*, I may have been born to play it.



**Summary**

2014

16mm color film, sound transferred to HD

17 minutes, 41 seconds

Film still

opposite, **Hyperway**  
2018  
Video stills



Image Credits

p. 33 (bottom): photo by Colin Trenbeath

p. 32 (top), 35 (bottom), 36, 42-43, 45, 46, 47, 48 (bottom), 50: photo/drawing/note by Christopher Richmond

p. 33 (top): photo by Garrett Hill

p. 34, 35 (top), 37 (top), 40, 48 (top), 51, 52, 53, 55: courtesy of Christopher Richmond and Moskowitz Bayse

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p. 37 (bottom), 39, 41: photo by Chris Engman

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