

Inventing Yosemite Valley: National Parks and the Language of Preservation

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One of the intriguing facts about the giant sequoia has nothing to do with either its size or antiquity, but rather with its name. The species set a record for the number and variety of scientific denominations attributed to it by botanists around the world and it took no fewer than thirteen different designations before *Sequoiadendron giganteum* was generally accepted. In particular, this debate occasioned a bitter confrontation between British and American botanists. When it became clear that the existence of the tree was not another tall tale from the West, the English adopted in 1853 the term *Wellingtonia gigantea* to honor the memory of the Duke of Wellington. It would be a mild understatement to say that the Americans did not approve of the choice of an Old World statesman to name a New World wonder and they promptly retorted with *Washingtonia gigantea*. The current name was finally agreed on when it became apparent that the tree was a cousin of the Coast Redwood *Sequoia sempervirens*.¹

The sheer fact that such a heated debate could have happened over such a seemingly insignificant and rather technical matter shows that the real focus was not so much on the trees themselves as on what they stood for, and on the cultural role that they were to play in the post-Civil War United States. However, even more telling perhaps is the name by which the trees were most commonly designated by the public while the debate was raging in the higher spheres of scientific societies worldwide: sequoias were for everybody the “Big Trees” or “Mammoth Trees.” These names convey images of grandeur, of sheer size, and reveal the perception of the sequoia as above all a *monument* of nature. This is probably the best key to understanding both the debate over the proper classification of the tree and, beyond this, the deeper meaning of the preservation movement.

The “monumental” is indeed intimately linked with the history of preservation. Had it lacked its monumental landscapes, America would probably have been deprived of its national parks. The West offered an abundance

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of such landscapes and that is precisely the image of America that the first National Parks preserved and celebrated. The sheer cliffs and waterfalls of Yosemite Valley are the very emblem of the kind of monumentality that characterized the West and that lay behind the national park movement in the United States.² The fact that Yosemite was—as we shall see—noted mostly for its monumental qualities points to the fact that the early preservation of natural lands was less the product of an emergent ecological awareness than of philosophical, cultural, political and aesthetic concerns. The concept of monument is indeed a good deal more complex than it may seem at first sight. If a monument is generally noted for its proportions—a typical list of synonyms includes such words as “colossal,” “mammoth,” “massive” or “titanic”—it is also endowed with a meaning and is meant to serve a purpose. As “a memorial stone or a building erected in remembrance of a person or event,” a monument primarily celebrates something or someone from the past.³ This dictionary definition adds something to the mere sense of size: the sense of time. A monument is thus a two-fold concept that has to do both with size and memory.

This, however, does not easily apply to parks. A park is not a mere “stone” or a “building” and it is not easy to see how it could have been “erected.” Moreover, if a park is indeed a memorial, what is it supposed to celebrate? Evidently, parks had to be *made* monuments, or, to coin a word, nature had to be “monumentalized.” Monumentalization, therefore, should be understood as the process through which the most superlative landscapes of the West were institutionalized as monuments in the very innovative framework of federally created parks. Western landscapes were thus promoted to the status of enduring emblems for America, all the more enduring since parks were from the start “inalienable for all time.”⁴ The question behind this, of course, has to do with the true meaning of preservation. Was protection of wild nature, of landscapes, and of wildlife really a concern for the initiators of the first parks? I will argue that the birth of the park idea had at least as much to do with inventing, creating totally new spaces for future generations to inherit, as with preserving something in its original condition, or as it supposedly used to be.

In order to understand how the national park idea could be born in the middle of 19th century America, a few preconceptions need to be shed. The first of these is that national parks were created in order that pristine nature could be protected against the growing assaults of industrialized civilization. A closer look at precisely what lands were set aside qualifies this assumption. In the case of Yosemite, the land designated in the 1864 grant of the park to the State of California was just the Yosemite Valley proper and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees, located some thirty miles south and composed of a large stand of giant sequoias (about six hundred mature specimens). The

high country surrounding the valley was not included and was left open to use or settlement. The Act thus bound together in a single administrative entity the two main monumental features of the Sierra, and excluded the more ordinary landscapes around them. It should not come as a surprise under these circumstances that from then on, the name “Yosemite” became attached to the idea of grandeur and of superlative nature since the park was specifically designed to encompass all the most striking features yet discovered, and leave out the rest.⁵

When Yosemite Park was established, the notion of “the environment,” as we conceive it now, was not yet clearly formulated. True, G. P. Marsh published his seminal *Man and Nature* the same year that the park was ceded to California, and true, the German biologist Ernst Haeckel coined the word “ecology” in 1866.⁶ Still, it is virtually impossible clearly to pinpoint ecological or environmental concerns in the debates that led to the establishment of Yosemite Park. Ecological thinking and the national park idea were growing at the same time, but they were running parallel to each other, and did not really meet until later, well into the first half of the 20th century. Nothing, in the act that established Yosemite Park, referred to a need to protect nature or even distantly pointed to a budding awareness of ecological issues.

The very idea of protection against a threat is itself irrelevant. The proponents of the project had no real intention of protecting endangered nature against utilitarian concerns, but rather emphasized the fact that the lands could not be easily exploited and could not be put to any better use than scenery. Alfred Runte brilliantly encapsulates the irony behind the creation of the national parks in his provocative question: “It’s useless, so why not a park?”⁷ This was, from the beginning, one of the major arguments of park proponents. The objectives of the park were never clearly defined, but preservation of pristine nature was never the main concern of the lawmakers.

In the case of early national parks, what preservationists and intellectuals really dealt with was not so much a physical given as a discourse about this given: Yosemite Valley, the sequoias, the great waterfalls, existed in the minds of preservationists and tourists before they could even actually see them.⁸ This was due largely to the fact that these sites were at first difficult to get to and that the only possible contact that most people could have with them was through the pictures of famous painters like Albert Bierstadt, or through the abundant and extremely popular travel literature of the time. Indeed the “discovery” of Yosemite valley and its almost immediate fame generated a large corpus of texts which are not all so well-known today and which basically could be classified in four broad categories:

1. Texts which lay a clear emphasis on tourism, like James Mason Hutching’s *Scenes of Wonder and Curiosity in California* (1860);⁹

2. Texts intended for the educated public and written by the scientific community, like Josiah D. Whitney's *Yosemite Book*;¹⁰
3. Texts about a personal experience. Most of John Muir's books fall in this category;
4. Official reports submitted by the park authorities.¹¹

These categories, however, are permeable: Whitney's book and Muir's *The Yosemite* also address the question of tourism (as do the official reports, for practical reasons), and Clarence King's *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, which has a clear scientific slant, is also to some extent a personal account. Illustrations were often a highlight of these publications and must be considered as belonging inherently to the general discourse about nature, preservation and monumentalism since they were used to support the descriptions made in the text.

Abundant examples of how nature was "monumentalized" can be found, helping the reader gain a sense of how the public's perception of the West's natural wonders was informed. Clearly my point is not to claim that the various authors who wrote about the West had a clear agenda in mind and that they consciously "monumentalized" the wilderness in order to provide for its preservation. I merely want to show that despite the great variety of works and authors, these texts share a rhetoric which is surprisingly coherent and stable over the second half of the 19th century and that this literature and its rhetorical strategies, recurring motifs and main metaphors provide a key to understanding the various cultural implications of the preservation movement.

The monumentalist discourse that developed in the second half of the 19th century pervaded the bulk of travel literature and nature writings of the time and this, in itself, poses a major methodological difficulty: it would be extremely difficult—and highly impractical—to analyze here the entire extent of such an abundant and varied literature; yet it is also very hard to make a choice of texts that accurately reflect the diversity of the corpus. Such basic criteria as the author, his intended public, the scope of his work, and the year when it was written reveal the extreme diversity of this literature. Since, however, it is impossible not to make a selection, choices must be made. Here I will focus on a few texts of well-differentiated kinds that illustrate the full scope of the literature of the time. I have selected this sample because it covers the four categories mentioned above and these texts show the enduring coherence of the language of preservation and the recurrence of the same rhetoric.

My analysis privileges texts dealing with Yosemite Valley and California's Sierra Nevada. I left aside the huge quantity of material dealing with the West in general because the main features of the language of preservation were in large part developed and fixed in Yosemite. The foundation of the

Yosemite park in 1864, as the first piece of land ever to be set aside as a recreational ground on account of its exceptional landscape, indeed set the standard for preservation in the United States, and the creation of later parks like Yellowstone largely drew on what had been done for Yosemite. Relying on a close analysis of many passages from these texts, I will argue that Yosemite Valley was “invented,” made into a mental construct just as a monument can be erected, and that there was from the outset a shift in its perception from a natural given to a “told,” and from physical data to a discourse on space.

Two texts in this sample stand out, on account both of their length and of their enduring popularity: Clarence King’s *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872) and John Muir’s *The Mountains of California* (1894) are both classics and were widely published. Nonetheless, they are very different: King was a member of the Geological Survey of California and his point of view is neatly marked by his works as a geologist.¹² Muir, in contrast, had a far less scientific and more poetic look on the Sierra even though he could also show a very acute grasp of geology. The third text is Frederick Law Olmsted’s August 1865 report as head of the newly appointed Yosemite Commission, in charge of managing the park. In it, Olmsted defines what the policy of the commission should be, relying on a very minute description of the features of the park and on an assessment of their general aesthetics. It is an invaluable account of Olmsted’s ideas for Yosemite, and of his conception of preservation.¹³

The next three texts in this sample constitute a relatively homogeneous group since they are three accounts written by early tourist parties, namely “California for Waterfalls!” (1855) by James Mason Hutchings, “A Trip to the Yosemite Falls” (1856) by Warren Baer and “The Yosemite Valley” (1855), whose author is anonymous. These relatively unknown texts, which were published in local newspapers, provide a precious indication of how the first tourists reacted to the valley *before* it had been made famous.¹⁴

Finally, the last two texts open up the scope of this sample: *What I Saw in California*, written by Edwin Bryant, the future *alcalde* (mayor) of San Francisco, takes us beyond the limits of Yosemite—his descriptions include a large part of the Sierra Nevada—and into earlier times—his book was published in 1848—and Thérèse Yelverton’s novel, *Zanita: A Tale of the Yosemite* (1872) gives us a chance to have a look at how the monumentalist rhetoric was echoed in contemporary fiction.¹⁵

These texts are extremely varied: some authors like King, Muir and Yelverton wrote for an educated public and their considerations were not driven by the hope to profit from tourism. The three accounts of early tourist parties are far more sensationalist in tone and, as far as Hutchings was concerned, clearly aimed at promoting tourism in the valley. Olmsted’s case is yet another one since his public was the Commission he was heading, and Bryant’s

text belongs to the more general category of travel literature. But this very diversity, as well as the length of the period under scrutiny (roughly a half-century, from 1848 to 1894) is what enables us to apprehend the remarkable consistency of the preservationist discourse over time and in spite of the obvious dissimilarities between authors.

A recurring feature in most texts—the only exceptions are Yelverton and, to a lesser extent, King—is the importance that authors tend to give to numbers. It seems as though no author at the time could do without a detailed—or as detailed as possible—account of the size of California’s natural landmarks. It appears that they felt it necessary to substantiate their superlative descriptions with indisputable figures. Bryant backs his appreciation of Californian trees with an estimate of their height: “Many of the firs and cedars are two hundred feet in height, with a diameter at the trunk of six or eight feet, beautifully tapering to a point.”¹⁶ This is particularly true of Yosemite Valley. Hutchings devoted almost his whole article to these measurements:

[El Capitan] measures from the valley to its summit about two thousand eight hundred feet...Our attention was first attracted by a magnificent waterfall, *about seven hundred feet in height*...and before us was an indescribable sight a waterfall *two thousand two hundred feet in height* the highest in the world...there is another fall of not less than fifteen hundred feet...so that this valley is about ten miles in length, and from a half to one mile in width.¹⁷

The use of italics suggests that Hutchings’ primary goal was indeed to impress the reader with a list of the extreme proportions of the valley’s main features. Interestingly, they were not named (with the exception of El Capitan) and were defined only by their size. Another author supplies even the mean temperatures to be expected in the valley (“seventy-six degrees of Fahrenheit”¹⁸) and the estimated volume of Bridalveil Fall (“three cubic feet per second”¹⁹). Although these precise figures were aimed at conveying a sense of objectivity—thus turning the author into an authority on the subject—they were more often than not gross exaggerations. Baer, for example, set the height of Bridalveil at precisely 928 feet above the valley floor—the very precision of the figure suggesting accuracy—which is in fact 200 feet higher than its actual size.²⁰ Likewise, the anonymous tourist who wrote “The Yosemite Valley” estimated the width of the valley at two miles, when it barely reaches one mile in its broadest section.²¹ It was obviously impossible, or extremely difficult, for tourist parties of the time to properly measure the features they would describe, but their insistence on seemingly accurate figures is telling of their attempt to describe Yosemite as monumental in the spatial sense of the term: above all, Yosemite Valley had to be an imposing site.

When size could not be exactly assessed, or when it was not of such

impressive proportions, authors often made use of the superlative: in the passage quoted above, Hutchings did not hesitate to proclaim Yosemite Falls “the highest in the world.” John Muir often indulged in this, as for example in the opening sentence of his chapter on forests (Chapter 8): “The coniferous forests of the Sierra are the grandest and most beautiful in the world, and grow in a delightful climate on the most interesting and accessible of mountain-ranges.”²² This sentence, however extreme in its rhetoric, is not at all exceptional. Everything, from rocks to waterfalls, and from chasms to peaks, was subject to being praised in such a way that the rest of the world seemed no more than a mere foil for the magnificent Sierra.

The size and age of trees in general, and of sequoias in particular, were also part of the general scaling and surveying of the park. Clarence King frequently engaged in an assessment of both, insisting that they “were quite accurately determined.” But when size was the keyword for the most sensationalist authors, King particularly insisted on their age: “the two firs...were about three hundred years old; the pine, still hale and vigorous, not less than five hundred, and for the “King of the mountains” we cannot assign a probable age of less than two thousand years.”²³ Here, King underscored the fact that the extreme size of the sequoia was matched only by its extreme life span, as though their massive verticality gave them a depth that was protracted and extended into the realm of time. This, in turn, endowed it with a historical significance, as Muir pointed out:

The wood-rings in the section which I laid bare were so involved and contorted in some places that I was not able to determine its age exactly, but I counted over 4,000 rings, which showed that this tree was in its prime, swaying in the Sierra winds, when Christ walked the earth. No other tree in the world, as far as I know, has looked down on so many centuries as the Sequoia, or opens such impressive and suggestive views into history.²⁴

Thus the sequoia was used to link up the two facets of monumentalism: it had both the physical size and the chronological depth that define a monument. It was a tangible feature also rooted in time. The authors, like King or Muir, who wanted to reach a more educated public, privileged this rhetoric. While they evidently rejected the grandiloquent language that pervaded the prose of people like Hutchings, they still wanted to convey a sense of the impressive grandeur of the valley. They gave up the most blatant clichés of the monumentalist discourse and relied more heavily on aesthetics, particularly architecture. Their kind of monuments, merging time and space, could compete with the other, more usual kinds of monuments, as for example, Europe’s cathedrals and ruins. But this new kind of natural monument, being also

alive, could even be said to surpass the other, older varieties:

No imperishableness of mountain-peak or of fragment of human work, broken pillar or sand-worn image half lifted over pathetic desert, none of these link the past and to-day with anything like the power of these *monuments* of living antiquity, trees that began to grow before the Christian era, and, full of hale vitality and green old age, still bid fair to grow broad and high for centuries to come.²⁵

The sequoia was therefore a witness of the past and a promise of the future. It was an emblem of eternity and could inscribe America in time, thus enabling Americans to compete with Europeans precisely where they seemed to have the upper hand.

This, however, was not restricted to the sequoias. If a natural monument was best exemplified in these trees and probably originated with them, it was extended to the park as a whole. Geological features were also used in much the same way: for Baer, “change, the handmaid of Time, was most impressively on the face of the stupendous precipices, and by the crumbling ruins scattered near their base.” King depicted glaciers as agents of time that inscribed a narrative in the landscape: “to-day, [the glaciers] burnished pathways are legibly traced with the history of the past.”²⁶

From then on, all kinds of comparisons could be made. King declared that the Cathedral Rocks were “quite suggestive of the Florence Duomo,” while Thérèse Yelverton conjured up images of other famous European landmarks: “The vast Hum-moo was like a colossal Milan cathedral, with its thousand and one minarets, and pinnacles;” later on, she noted: “we soon caught the drift of the conversation, for there is some acoustic property in the Valley that conveys sound far and clear as the famous Whispering Gallery of St. Paul’s, London.”²⁷ The Merced River, as it flows through the valley, was also evocative of Europe for Olmsted, who was reminded of the English landscape: “The stream is such a one as Shakespeare delighted in, and brings pleasing reminiscences to the traveller of the Avon or the Upper Thames.”²⁸ This intrusion of Shakespeare in Yosemite Valley, however incongruous it may seem, is emblematic of the general endeavor to endow the American landscape with a cultural quality. It was also linked to the feeling that Americans “betrayed” their country when they traveled abroad, precisely because they could find scenery as beautiful, if not more so, in their own country. This is what Baer expressed when he inserted a diatribe against Europhiles in the middle of his description of the valley:

We travel to foreign climes to obtain a sight of what travelers have written of some renowned falls, mountains or rivers or landscapes

amid the Alps of Switzerland or the valleys of Italy. We eagerly seek after books wherein some novice traveler has magnified the sight-seeings of Europe, many of which possess no wonderful attributes of greatness, save in the mind of the traveler, that will compare with the scenery, separately or in whole, of the Yosemite valley.²⁹

The idea that the newly created park could match the architectural treasures of Europe and that it was, indeed, as valid a monument as Renaissance castles or gothic chapels, was reinforced by the frequent use of the word “monument” and of the adjective “monumental.” As we read, King once called the sequoias “monuments of living antiquity.” Muir moved along the same lines when he used the word “monument” ten times in *The Mountains of California*. He applied it to two different features of the park: the ubiquitous glacier-carved domes and the trees. In the case of the domes, he used the word “monument” to signify that they were the marks left in the landscape by the old glaciers that “left monuments so noble and enduring,” and he also called the domes “glacier monuments.”³⁰ This use of the word blends time with the sense of size attached to the huge domes. As for the trees, the word was used both as meaning “something from the past” and “something big,” but in different occurrences. For example, Muir wrote that should all sequoias fall, there would surely be left some “monuments of their existence,” here using the word as a synonym for “trace,” but he also makes an interesting use of the adjective “monumental” in the phrase, “the old monumental trees.”³¹ In this instance, “monumental” was used as a synonym for “colossal,” but the adjective “old” attached to it seems to be here in order to maintain the temporal dimension.

The use of these words was motivated by at least three factors. The Yosemite Valley is monumental, as we have seen, because of the size of its main features, but also because of their aspect and because of their position relative to each other, as though it was the result of a carefully designed arrangement, like the Valley of the Kings in Upper Egypt. What was striking to travelers about El Capitan was not so much its height as its sheer verticality. Hutchings, who dedicated his whole account to measurements of all kinds, called it a “perpendicular mountain of granite” even before he mentioned its height.³² This perfect shape, which was definitely more evocative of an artificial construct than of a natural formation, prompted architectural metaphors: the cliffs became “walls,” and the peaks, “towers.”³³

The same shift, from geology to architecture, also affected the vegetation. Tree trunks were often “columns,” King wrote about the “grand, pillar-like stateliness” of the sequoia while Muir further blurred the line between geology and botany with such phrases as “tree-pillars about as rigid as granite domes” or when he compared the bark furrows to “the fluting of an ar-

chitectural column.”³⁴ The accumulation of such metaphors contributed to turning the sequoias into real pieces of architecture: “when you step back far enough to see the massive *columns* from the swelling instep to the lofty summit dissolving in a *dome* of verdure, you rejoice in the unrivaled display of combined grandeur and beauty.”³⁵ A gradual shift from nature to architecture was thus achieved, as if nature was progressively “de-naturalized” under the gaze of these preservationists and tourists. This perhaps culminated when Muir eloquently described the mountain summits as “peaks of rare architecture.”³⁶

What was clearly massive or impressive in the park was expressed in terms of architecture, and many terms were a good deal more specific than just “wall,” “tower,” “pillar” or “column.” Olmsted coined the adjective “castleated” to describe the valley landscape, an idea that is also to be found in Muir.³⁷ The Yosemite skyline seen from the High Sierra was for Muir, “some gigantic castle with turret and battlement,” while King wrote of “the obelisk form of Mount Clark.”³⁸ The words used were most often associated with gothic architecture: for Muir, trees were “colossal spires,” and granite walls were like “gables.”³⁹ He even compared the mountains to “some Gothic cathedral more abundantly spired than Milan’s.”⁴⁰ Bryant’s evocation of the gothic in nature is a feat in itself:

The timber surrounding the circular space which we occupy is very tall. The bright blaze of our fire defined indistinctly the columnar shapes of the pines, and their overarching branches. Fancy soon pictured our residence for the night a spacious gothic temple, whose walls had mouldered away, leaving the pillars and the skeleton roof, through which the bright stars were twinkling, standing, in defiance of the assaults of time and the fury of elements. The temperature of the evening is delightful, and the sky serene and cloudless.⁴¹

The odd contrast between the solemn evocation of the gothic temple under tormented stars and the pleasant comfort of camp plainly exposes the artificiality of such conventional descriptions, which were largely clichés of the literature about the West. The “gothic” landscape was a recurring motif at the time, as so many place names attest to this day: if the Minarets, the Butresses, Tower Peak, Castle Peak and Watkins Pinnacles all bring to mind artificial formations, the Cathedral “series,” with Cathedral Peak, Lakes, Pass, Fork, Range, Creek, Spires (named by Hutchings), and Rocks, seemed literally to take the Sierra to a 14th-century Europe of cathedrals vying for fame.⁴²

The gothic vocabulary was here mostly formal and cultural in the broadest sense of the word. Whatever spiritual charge a Catholic cathedral could have had in 19th-century California was diluted by the repeated use of

what had clearly become a cliché. Olmsted, however, picked up the architectural topos, and by moving it away from the gothic stock brought it to a level where it could be endowed with a new meaning. He offered in the first paragraph of his *Report* the most accomplished realization of what monumentalism could mean when taken in its fullest sense. Comparing the foundation of the Yosemite Park with the most emblematic achievements of the United States during the Civil War, his text is fraught with terms of architecture which were this time taken literally:

The great *dome* of the Capitol was constructed during the war...; Crawford's great statue of liberty was poised upon its *summit* in the year that President Lincoln proclaimed the emancipation of the slaves. Leutze's fresco of the peopling of the *Pacific States*...; the noble front of the Treasury building with its long *colonnade* of *massive monoliths*; the *great park* of New York, and many other works of which the nation may be proud, were brought to completion during the same period.⁴³

The effect produced by this passage can only be properly understood if one realizes that Olmsted's text was first a speech delivered in Yosemite Valley, before the members of the Yosemite Park Commission, and only later published as a report. The valley landscape, in which his audience was immersed, gave Olmsted's words a double meaning: the "dome," "summit," and "massive monoliths" of the federal capital were bound to evoke the granite formations of the valley while the "colonnade" called forth images of the famous Big Trees. The allusion to Central Park, where he was the principal landscape architect, further blurs the line between a natural space and a contrived nature. Although it would seem quite appropriate to mention one park in order to celebrate another, the parallel that Olmsted draws here between his two realizations seems to put Yosemite on the same level of artificiality as Central Park, which was, indeed, entirely planned and designed.

The subject of Olmsted's speech was indeed Yosemite, taken as a construct. This rhetorical connection between Washington, D.C. and Yosemite had clear political implications: Olmsted read his speech only months after Lincoln's assassination and the defeat of the South. This remarkable text helps us understand how Yosemite was inscribed in the policy of Reconstruction: it was to be a sanctuary, the place of a new beginning for America, where the natural monuments of California echoed the stone monuments of Washington. If the bases of the Union had been shaken by the war, nothing could wobble these monoliths and colonnades on which the nation was to be rebuilt.

But the artificiality of Yosemite was not justified merely by political concerns. Most authors identified Yosemite as a park, regardless of the official status it took in 1864. The foundation of the park seemed to come as a

confirmation of what was already evident: Yosemite was not *made* a park, it had always been one. When Muir wrote about the “park-like ground” of the valley, this idea was already fairly commonplace, but his way of gradually shifting from a *valley*—a strictly geographical concept—to a *park* suggesting an artificial process was very subtle.⁴⁴ He first wrote about “cañons [that] widen into spacious valleys or parks, diversified like artificial landscape gardens” and then blended the two notions into just one, the “park valleys of the Yosemite kind.”⁴⁵ King evidently shared this conception, when he described the view from the summits: “Directly beneath, outspread like a delicately tinted chart, lay the lovely park of the Yosemite,” or “lower...lies the floor, that smooth river-cut park, with exquisite perfection of finish.”⁴⁶

Yosemite valley indeed differs from other canyons in the fact that, although it is very deep, it is also wide and its floor almost perfectly even and level. The contrast of grassy meadows and sheer cliffs makes it look like a walled-in pasture. This is how it was often described, notably by Baer: “before us...spread the verdant Valley of the Yosemite, encased in lofty and picturesque walls of granite.”⁴⁷ Later on, the pasture was described as a natural orchard that looked like a land of abundance. This kind of description could lead to confusion between a natural and an artificial landscape. This is clearly the case further down in Baer’s article: “The cherries were yet green, but the berries we obtained in great abundance, and we found them to possess a delicious flavor. The fruit-trees and the berry-bushes were vigorously flowering on the south bank of the river.”⁴⁸ The walls seemed to be like curtains staging the beauty of the valley, and the adjective “scenic” came to mean both “beautiful” and “theatrical.” The successive points of view dotting the slopes of the cliffs were part of this aesthetic, with the valley seeming to be some kind of scenography built on exceptional points of view that were gradually revealed to stunned travelers. The names given to spots where visitors could obtain the best views attest to the importance that was given to the visual dimension in the Yosemite experience. The most explicit ones were “Discovery View,” “Prospect Point,” “Valley View” (once named “Enchantment Point”), “Contemplation Rock” (also known as “Photographer’s Rock”), and of course the two “Inspiration Points” (Old and New). Some, which sadly are no longer in usage, suggested either surprise, as the “O! My! Point,” or some awe-struck meditation, as the “Stand Point of Silence.” Hutchings underscored twice the importance of these “revelations” of the valley to its visitors. First, he wrote that “descending towards the Yo-Semity valley, [they] came upon a high point, clear of trees, from whence [they] had [their] first view of this singular and romantic valley.” Then, once they had reached the floor of the valley, they “crossed the river, and still advancing up the valley, turned a point, and before [them] was an incredible sight.”⁴⁹ Baer mentioned in starker terms the brutal, almost violent way in which the valley was first re-

vealed: “We came suddenly, abruptly in view of the valley.”⁵⁰

Clearly, the visual dimension dominated a traveler’s appreciation of the valley: it was broken down into a series of points of view from which this particular “stage” could be seen and enjoyed. But this scenic object was also picturesque: all these points of view were so many opportunities to look at the valley as though it were a painting, or at least to appreciate it according to the picturesque aesthetic, as shown in this lengthy description of El Capitan by King, which deserves to be quoted in full:

Looking back at El Capitan, its sharp vertical front was projected against far blue foot-hills, the creamy whiteness of sunlit granite cut upon aerial distance, clouds and cold blue sky shutting down over white crest and jetty pine-plumes, which gather helmet-like upon its upper dome. Perspective effects are marvelously brought out by the stern, powerful reality of such rock bodies as Capitan. Across their terrible blade-like precipice-edges you look on and down over vistas of cañon and green hill-swells, the dark color of pine and fir broken by bare spots of harmonious red or brown, and with distance into purple, then blue, which reaches on farther into the brown, monotonous plains.⁵¹

Clearly, the “scenic” valley was also picturesque and all the points of view provided the opportunity to look at the valley as one would admire a painting. King here seems to be describing not the valley, but some picture of it. His insistence on the different shades and hues of colors (especially the “harmonious red or brown”) and his allusion to “perspective effects” imposed on the landscape clearly inscribe the valley in the picturesque aesthetics.

Colors, but also shapes, contributed to building this aesthetics. The domes, in particular, that were so emblematic of the valley landscape, were a recurring motif. Another description by King laid such emphasis on the variety of geometric shapes that the natural outline of the Yosemite mountains was again perceived as artificial: “[The domes] are of every variety of conoidal form, having horizontal sections accurately elliptical, ovoid, or circular, and profiles varying from such semicircles as the cap behind Sentinel to the graceful infinite curves of the North Dome.”⁵² The key word here is “accurately”: the landscape seems to be the product of an intentional rendering, which is very close to Olmsted’s idea of an “effective” scenery.⁵³ Bryant’s descriptions of the Sierra were much along the same lines: “The mountains are covered with a thick growth of tall and symmetrical timber.... Nothing could be more agreeable to us than the sight and the shade of these stately giants of the forest, piercing the sky with their tall and arrow-straight forms.”⁵⁴ Here, symmetry is very akin to the “accurate” shapes described by King. For Bryant,

the hand of the artist was almost perceptible, and often mentioned:

Leaving the valley, we crossed a high undulating country, timbered with pines, firs, and cedars, whose symmetrical proportions and rich foliage, with the bright green moss clothing their branches, would baffle the skill and coloring of the most artistical painter, to represent them faithfully on canvass.⁵⁵

Olmsted, when he compared the points of view to “cabinet pictures [that] open at every turn, which, composed of materials mainly new to the artist, constantly recall the most valued sketches of Calame in the Alps and Apennines,” took the idea of a pre-arranged pictorial and scenic aesthetics to its ultimate degree.⁵⁶ Indeed, his idea of “effective” scenery supposes an aesthetic ideal, a sort of perfect model that the scenery could match with a varying degree of success. One of the tasks of the true admirer of Yosemite was, therefore, to define this aesthetic ideal in order to be able to assess the “performance” of the valley. Olmsted tackled this question quite straightforwardly:

There are falls of water elsewhere finer, there are more stupendous rocks, more beetling cliffs, there are deeper and more awful chasms, there may be as beautiful streams, as lovely meadows, there are larger trees. It is in no scene or scenes the charm consists, but in the miles of scenery where cliffs of awful height and rocks of vast magnitude and of varied and exquisite coloring, are banked and fringed and draped and shadowed by the tender foliage of noble and lovely trees and bushes, reflected from the most placid pools, and associated with the most tranquil meadows, the most playful streams, and every variety of soft and peaceful pastoral beauty. This union of the deepest sublimity with the deepest beauty of nature, not in one feature or another, not in one part or one scene or another, not any landscape that can be framed by itself, but all around and wherever the visitor goes, constitutes the Yosemite the greatest glory of nature.⁵⁷

This single passage alone encapsulates all the elements at work in the aesthetics of the valley: the “scene” or “scenery” and the “landscape that can be framed” refer to the theatrical, while the colors and reflections hint at the picturesque. However, Olmsted goes beyond this when he mentions two opposing aesthetic traditions that, he claims, are perfectly combined in Yosemite: the sublime and the beautiful. To him, the stark opposition between the sheer cliffs and the rolling meadows of Yosemite Valley created a unique blend of an awe-inspiring “sublimity” well above the human sphere, and of a softer,

gentler kind of beauty, traditionally exemplified by landscapes dotted with signs of human activity.

This contrast was not lost on the other authors. When Baer wrote of “the *gentle roar* of the river,” he was in a way anticipating Olmsted’s analysis of an aesthetic based on two opposing principles.⁵⁸ But most authors insisted on the violence inherent in a landscape that they described as above all pertaining to the sublime. In Hutchings’ article, the word “grandeur” is repeated three times on the same page, each time with a different adjective: “terrific,” “awful” and even “sublime.”⁵⁹ This kind of adjective, typical of the sublime aesthetic, is constantly found in all texts, along with such words as “dreadful,” “terrible” or “stupendous.”⁶⁰

Thus the predominant impression was that of a dramatic aesthetic, particularly fitting in this theatrical valley where the notion that a natural drama had been acted out was often implied by fairly violent descriptions of the landscape. This ever-present violence even provided a favored explanation for the origin of the valley: the peculiar appearance of Yosemite could only have been the result of titanic convulsions of the earth. Olmsted alluded to this primordial violence when he wrote that “the main feature of the Yo Semite is best indicated in one word as a chasm.”⁶¹ King’s formulation was even more precise: for him, Yosemite was a “granite plateau suddenly rent asunder.”⁶² Baer had used almost the same words, and certainly the same geological theory, sixteen years earlier: “it appears evident...that the mountain has been torn asunder by contracting influences, while the globe was in a state of refrigeration.”⁶³ This theory, that came to be known as “catastrophist theory,” was to a large extent a translation in—more or less accurate—scientific language of the prevailing sublime aesthetic, so that even the scientific interpretation of the site was conditioned by it.⁶⁴

So what was preserved in Yosemite was not so much a natural site as a cultural discourse on a nature that was supposedly still wild and virgin in the mountains of California. But the mythic wilderness could not merely be words and rhetorical strategies, it was made *visible*. Preservation went beyond a coded discourse on natural monuments: it gradually came up with new practices. The aesthetic foundations of the monumentalist discourse were implemented, translated in actions in the original framework of the new park. However, the task of early park managers was a great deal more complicated than that of a painter: while the artist dissociates his tools (brushes and pigments) from his subject (the landscape), the landscape architect deals with only one thing. As Richard Grusin notes, “trees and plants, in representing trees and plants, are both real and imagined, both are and are not trees and plants.”⁶⁵ What preservationists preserved was a fiction, but this fiction had to be created. They had to cultivate the wilderness before they could preserve it.

Although preservationists claimed to preserve “wild,” “virgin” nature, both notions—wildness and virginity—have nothing to do with the natural environment. Nature, in itself, is neither wild nor virgin, it is *absolutely*. Only in the relationship with humans and their beliefs does it take its epithets. The Yosemite Valley was by no means “virgin” when the first Euro-Americans entered it: its virginity was merely the product of their perceptions. David Lowenthal notes that “compared with Europe, America seemed a land scarcely lived in; American landscapes conveyed little sense of historical depth.” the American *tabula rasa* was born of the comparison with the known world, the one which was perceived as “normal.” To its original inhabitants, however, America was entirely different:

“We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as “wild.” Only to the white man was nature a “wilderness” and only to him was the land “infested” with “wild” animals and “savage” people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it “wild” for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the “Wild West” began.⁶⁷

The idea that the American continent was pure and intact at the time of its “discovery” has obviously more to do with ideology than historical fact. Archeological research demonstrates that Native Americans had considerably modified their natural environments. For William Denevan, pre-contact America was clearly a lived-in land, fraught with signs of human activity:

By 1492 Indian activity throughout the Americas had modified forest extent and composition, created and expanded grasslands, and rearranged microrelief via countless artificial earthworks. Agricultural fields were common, as were houses and towns and roads and trails. All of these had local impacts on soil, microclimate, hydrology, and wildlife.⁶⁸

Yosemite Valley also bore the traces of this human activity. When white men first saw it in 1851, the valley floor was described as being fairly open and free of underbrush (see Figure 1). Lafayette Bunnell, who as a member of the Mariposa Battalion was one of the first white men to enter the valley, insisted on its “park-like” condition in a letter to the Yosemite Commission published in the Commissioners’ report for 1890:



Figure 1. Carleton Watkins, *The Lower Valley from Union Point* (1867), mammoth plate. The Yosemite National Park Museum. This picture shows how the valley floor was open and free of underbrush.

There was a great variety of evergreen and deciduous trees, planted by Nature’s landscape gardeners, and, as the undergrowth was kept down by annual fires while the ground was yet moist, to facilitate the search for game, the valley at the time of discovery presented the appearance of a well-kept park.⁶⁹

The arrival of white men led to the complete obliteration of indigenous people, “Nature’s landscape gardeners,” and of their culture from the site. The traditional practice of allowing fires to clean the valley floor of its undergrowth was discontinued and the open valley left by the Ahwahneechee was gradually colonized by a dense forest that invaded the entire valley floor (see Figure 2). The motives of park managers for fire suppression were not made explicit in their official reports, but the safety of the increasingly numerous tourists and that of the newly erected structures to accommodate them was clearly a matter of concern. Reports of the Commission consistently show that the accommodation of tourists was indeed the first priority of the managers. In their *Report for 1870*, Commissioners asked for an appropriation of \$5,000 for the next two years, half of which was to be spent on trails and bridges for tourists. Here is how they justified their request:

[The Commissioners] believe that if all restrictions on travel in



Figure 2. Yosemite Valley as it looks today: forest largely covers the valley floor (photograph by the author).

and about the valley can be removed, and the vexatious annoyance of tolls at every point can be spared the traveller, the number of visitors will be greatly increased and their comfort immensely promoted. The pristine beauty of the valley should be preserved, and no unsuitable establishment of any kind be allowed a place within its walls.⁷⁰

This calls for two remarks: firstly, it is clear that the Commissioners considered their first duty to be facilitating access to the valley and movement within it. This was consistent with the objectives of the park, as defined in the Act creating it as a place “held for public use, resort and recreation.”³⁷ Secondly, in their own words what should be preserved was not so much the valley as its “pristine beauty.” The “gardening” of the Indians was thus as unwelcome in the newly founded park as the Indians themselves, and their practice of cleaning it with fires was considered unacceptable. Moreover the changing face of the valley vegetation fit the aesthetic sensibilities of the time: a forest in its wilderness condition should be dense, uninviting and imposing. Although it is not directly possible to claim that the managers of the park allowed the trees and the underbrush to grow back in order to give the valley a wilder aspect, it is safe to assume, based on this observation, that its changing appearance did not bother them or the visitors.

In the case of the waterfalls, the aesthetic implications of preservation are more explicit. The main problem posed by the falls was that they

tended quite naturally to dry up between August and the fall rainy season, thus depriving the valley of one of its most renowned sights. Photographers had “fixed” the problem by taking pictures of tourists in front of dry falls, and then painting the water on the prints to simulate the impressive cataracts they had come to see. This way tourists could leave the valley with a picture fitting their image of the wilderness. The natural setting of the valley was artificially made to conform to pre-existing aesthetic conceptions and the valley became quite literally a backdrop, a predetermined décor.⁷²

The Yosemite Commission also addressed the issue of the falls. Unlike the famous sequoias or the granite domes, the falls could literally disappear; cease to exist, when the river upstream carried less water. The famous Horace Greeley himself had complained about this and written that “the *fall* of the Yosemite, so called, is a humbug.”⁷³ A few plans were designed to deal with the problem: for instance, a canal was supposed to be built upstream of the Yosemite Falls to carry water from the Tuolumne River to supplement that of the Yosemite Creek.⁷⁴ This canal was never actually dug, but according to John Muir, a dam was built on the Nevada Fall:

Nevada Fall is about six hundred and fifty feet high, and in general interest usually ranks next to the Yosemite Fall among the five main falls in the valley. A short distance above the head of the fall on the north side, the river gives off a small part of its waters, which forms a cascade in the narrow boulder-filled channel and finally meets the main stream again a few yards below the fall.⁷⁵

Sometime last year, the Commissioners came to regard these cascades as a waste of raw material, a damaging leak that ought to be stopped by a dam compelling all the water to tumble and sing together. Accordingly, the enterprising landlord of the upper hotel was allowed a few hundred dollars to ‘fix the falls,’ as he says, and by building a rock dam he has well-nigh succeeded in abolishing the Liberty Cap Cascades, though no corresponding advantage is visible in the main fall.⁷⁵

The project to “fix the falls,” however limited in its scope, is quite representative of the occasional attempts of the park authorities to ensure that nature did not stray from the aesthetic canons that motivated the foundation of the park. The frequent attempts to “save” Mirror Lake from becoming a meadow follow the same logic. The Commission wrote in its report for 1890 that it considered work on Mirror Lake a priority:

Too much importance cannot be attached to the restoration of Mirror Lake, one of the most interesting natural objects on the

floor of the valley. This lake is in a basin in Tenaya Creek, and the torrential character of the stream in the season of rain or melting snows had so shoaled the basin, and the shoaling had been so promotive of the growth of aquatic plants and shrubs as to efface the mirror and lose an effect which had charmed all visitors and been the talk of the traveling world.⁷⁶

Even if these kinds of works and projects were limited and the action of the Commission cannot be summed up as “fixing” nature, at least some of the practices implemented reveal the extent to which the managers tried to make Yosemite Valley conform to a preservationist discourse and its aesthetic principles. In doing so, they were not so much preserving nature as a given, but rather creating a fiction.

Behind these aesthetic principles, of course, were also an ideology and the idea that the American continent was pure and that its nature was flawless. This idea, which William Denevan calls the “pristine view,” is relatively recent:

The pristine view is to a large extent an invention of nineteenth-century romanticist and primitivist writers such as W. H. Hudson, Cooper, Thoreau, Longfellow, and Parkman, and painters such as Catlin and Church. The wilderness image has since become part of the American heritage, associated “with a heroic pioneer past in need of preservation.”⁷⁷

Preserving a natural park literally amounts to creating a virgin space. The clear boundaries of the park represent on the map the opposition between domesticated, “civilized” space and a space that has been declared to be wild. In this sense, the park reproduces and perpetuates the American saga of the conquest of a new continent and guarantees that at least some portion of primitive America will always be accessible. The park is, in Simon Schama’s words, “a Manifest Destiny that had been primordially planted.”⁷⁸ Thus the park freezes forever the Turnerian frontier and preserves both an image of pristine wilderness and the tension between conquering civilization and slowly disappearing savagery: inside the park, a sample of primitive America can be celebrated, while outside lies the impetus and the genius of the conquering nation which is honored. Together, these two spaces form a symbol—a monument—to enduring America. Therefore what is truly at the heart of the park-creating process is the tension between present, past and future, between invention and preservation, apparent fixation and hidden process. The park, as a theatrical space, is therefore also where a miniature frontier drama can be staged and this narration of space becomes its *modus operandi*.

Clearly, preservation predated Frederick J. Turner’s formulation of

his frontier theory. And yet, as Patricia Nelson Limerick points out, it is not easy to determine and choose an objective date for the closing of the frontier. Turner's choice to use Census Bureau data must not prevent us from exploring other possibilities. Limerick proposes other criteria to determine the closing of the frontier:

My own preferred entry in the "closing" competition is the popularization of tourism and the quaintness of the folk. When Indian war dances became tourist spectacles, when the formerly scorned customs of the Chinese drew tourists to Chinatown, when former out-groups found that characteristics that had once earned them disapproval could now earn them a living, when fearful, life-threatening deserts became charming patterns of color and light, the war was over and the frontier could be considered closed, even museumized. My nomination has a problem too—it does not come with clear divisions in time. Let the car break down in the desert, or let the Indians file a lawsuit to reassert an old land claim, and the quaint appeal of nature and native can vanish. The frontier is suddenly reopened.⁷⁹

Patricia Limerick's interpretation of the closing of the frontier sheds some light on the significance of preservation in the California of the mid-



Figure 3. [Anonymous] for Currier & Ives, *The Pioneer Cabin of the Yo-semite* [18--]. Print on paper: lithograph, hand colored, 25.3 x 33.7 cm. Reproduced by permission of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



Figure 4. Francis F. Palmer for Currier & Ives, Yosemite Valley, California: "The Bridal Veil" Fall. 1866. Print on paper: lithograph, hand colored, 49 x 66.8 cm. Reproduced by permission of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

1860s: at that time, California Indians had ceased to be a real threat, William Cody would become Buffalo Bill a few years later in 1872 and if we apply Limerick's definition, the frontier was already essentially closed. Popular representations of Yosemite Valley reflect the integration of the valley in the imagery of a mythical American West (see Figures 3 and 4). Nothing could be more removed from the reality of the valley than this lonely pioneer sitting in front of his log cabin at the foot of the imposing cliffs of the valley. Likewise, the Indians represented in Figure 4 have nothing in common with the Ahwahneechee.⁸⁰ Yet, these two lithographs make sense if one tries to understand Frances Palmer's rather naive message: Yosemite was the West. The Yosemite Park offered the first scenic space (in the sense of both beautiful and theatrical), the first staging of the West. What preservation really set aside was what America was beginning to miss: not only pristine wilderness, but also the possibility of a staged, well-regulated confrontation with it. National parks were arguably the first places where the Wild West was museumized.

Thus the park as a monument served to create and materialize a myth—that of the virgin, uninhabited wilderness as a symbol of primitive America—in claiming to preserve what in fact was being invented; the fiction of wild *a priori* nature was made visible and real through the process of enclosing defined monumental scenery. Creating Yosemite Park was therefore as much about political myth making as about celebrating sublime scenery. Aesthetic considerations went hand in hand with ethical and political ones. Nature was used as a very convenient and efficient way of building what Roland

Barthes called a “nature myth.” When it is based on nature, myth, in Neil Evernden’s words, “will be taken not as a human creation but as an independent entity existing outside the realm of culture. It will be perceived, in other words, as nature, as a ‘factual system’ when it is actually a ‘semiological system’.”⁸¹ Fictionalizing nature, or in other words hiding it behind the “semiological system” conceived by the monumentalist discourse, enabled the preservationists of the time to address and surmount the growing nostalgia of a vanishing past of pioneers and wilderness, and to perpetuate that past.⁸² Through this process they were able to transform “the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature.” And this image, Evernden goes on, “has a remarkable feature: it is upside down.”⁸³ What is usually perceived as a given, that is to say nature, was in fact told, and what is usually told, that is to say history, was offered as a given. Thus the preservation process enabled them to achieve a radical inversion by which Yosemite became a pseudo nature that was established as historical. This inversion, in turn, affected the preservation process itself: nature preserved became a “preservative nature,” what Neil Evernden calls “the ideal preservative for our cherished ideals.”⁸⁴

Notes

1. On the history of this debate, see Alfred Runte, *National Parks, the American Experience* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1997): 26-27, and Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1995): 186.
2. Clearly, much of the West was “monumentalized” during the 19th century. This was not peculiar to parks, but, precisely, they were created as enduring emblems of America’s most monumental landscapes. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this clarification.
3. Merriam-Webster Online Thesaurus and Dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com> (accessed 9 November 2006). The Latin verb *monere*, which produced *monumentum*, means, “to make someone remember something.” A monument is therefore primarily something that evokes the past, the memory of someone or something.
4. These were the words used in the act creating the Yosemite Park, “An Act Authorizing a Grant to the State of California of the ‘Yo-Semite Valley,’ and of the Land Embracing the ‘Mariposa Big Tree Grove’” *U.S. Statutes at Large* 13:184 (1864): 325.
5. For accounts of the creation of Yosemite National Park in 1864, see Hans Huth, “Yosemite: The Story of an Idea” *Sierra Club Bulletin* 33 (March 1948): 47-78 and Alfred Runte, *Yosemite, The Embattled Wilderness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
6. George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature* (1864, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1965); about Haeckel’s work, see Frank Benjamin Golley, *A History of the Ecosystem Concept in Ecology: More than the Sum of the Parts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
7. Alfred Runte, “Yellowstone: It’s Useless, So Why Not a Park?” *National Parks and Conservation Magazine: The Environmental Journal* 46 (March 1972): 5. Although this article focuses on Yellowstone National Park, much of his reasoning can be applied to Yosemite.
8. By “early national parks,” I mean both the 1864 Yosemite park (although it was not granted National Park status until 1890) and Yellowstone National Park (1872). Both parks, regardless of their official denominations, partake of the same cultural and political impe-

- tus. On the idea that Yosemite, not Yellowstone, launched the National Park movement, see Alfred Runte, particularly his introduction to the special issue of *California History*, 69, (Summer 1990): 86-91. He points out that “the fact remains that the Yosemite Grant originated as a piece of federal legislation, and was awarded to California only so long as the state observed the expressed conditions contained in the Act” (86).
9. James Mason Hutchings, *Scenes of Wonder and Curiosity in California* (San Francisco: Hutchings & Rosenfield, 1860).
 10. Josiah Dwight Whitney, [Geological Survey of California], *The Yosemite Book: a Description of the Yosemite Valley and the Adjacent Region of the Sierra Nevada, and of the Big Trees of California* (New York: Geological Survey of California, 1868).
 11. The Yosemite Commission, which was in charge of managing the early park, had to publish a *Biennial Report* of its activities.
 12. Clarence King, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872, Yosemite National Park: Yosemite Association, 1997) and John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (1894, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).
 13. Frederick Law Olmsted, *Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report*, (1865, Yosemite National Park: Yosemite Association, 1995).
 14. James M. Hutchings, “California For Waterfalls!” *Mariposa Gazette* (August 9, 1855); Warren Baer, “A Trip To The Yosemite Falls,” *The Mariposa Democrat* (August 5, 1856) and [Anonymous] “The Yo Semity Valley,” *Mariposa Gazette* (October 11, 1855). These texts are reproduced in Peter Browning, *Yosemite Place Names* (Lafayette, CA: Great West Books, 1988) 213-230. The page numbers used here refer to this edition.
 15. Edwin Bryant, *What I saw in California, being the Journal of a Tour, by the Emigrant Route and South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, Across the Continent of North America, the Great Desert Basin, and Through California, in the Years 1846, 1847* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1848); Thérèse Yelverton (Viscountess Avonmore), *Zanita: A Tale of the Yosemite* (1872, Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1991).
 16. Bryant, 225.
 17. Hutchings, 214-215.
 18. Baer, 229.
 19. *Ibid.*, 222.
 20. *Ibid.*, 222.
 21. Anonymous, 216.
 22. Muir, 110.
 23. King, 38-39.
 24. Muir, 138.
 25. King, 39.
 26. Baer, 222; King, 142.
 27. King, 128; Yelverton, 63-64.
 28. Olmsted, 4.
 29. Baer, 220.
 30. Muir, 13.
 31. *Ibid.*, 142.
 32. Hutchings, 214.
 33. *Ibid.*, 214.
 34. King, 38; Muir, 139-140.
 35. Muir, 139, italics added.
 36. *Ibid.*, 43.
 37. Olmsted, 6.
 38. Muir, 54; King, 132.
 39. Muir, 4 (this comparison is also found in King, 128); Muir, 162.

40. Muir, 54.
41. Bryant, 234.
42. On the importance of the gothic at this time, especially in representations of nature, see for instance Schama, 269.
43. Olmsted, 1, italics added.
44. Muir, 124.
45. *Ibid.*, 4.
46. King, 128-129. The use of the word "park" to describe natural places was not exceptional in the West: the Rocky Mountains count several such "parks" in Colorado. For a discussion of the development and use of the term "park," see for instance William Howard Adams, *Nature Perfected: Gardens Through History* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991).
47. Baer, 221.
48. *Ibid.*, 228-229. This description echoes the traditional image of California as America's cornucopia.
49. Hutchings, 213-214.
50. Baer, 220.
51. King, 131.
52. *Ibid.*, 128.
53. Olmsted, 8.
54. Bryant, 225.
55. *Ibid.*, 232. King wrote a similar passage, twenty-four years after Bryant: "The whole region is one solid granite mass, with here and there shallow soil layers, and a thin variable forest which grows in picturesque mode, defining the leading lines of erosion as an artist deepens here and there a line to hint at some structural peculiarity" (128).
56. Olmsted, 7
57. *ibid.*, 8-9.
58. Baer, 222, italics added.
59. Hutchings, 214.
60. For a discussion of this analysis of the sublime aesthetic, see for instance Sarah Burns, *Painting the Dark Side, Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): 1-43.
61. Olmsted, 3.
62. King, 125.
63. Baer, 229.
64. On the catastrophist theory, see for instance William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire, The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West*, (Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 1993): 357-370; Michael L. Smith, *Pacific Visions: California Scientists and the Environment, 1850-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987):100-103; and, Bart O'Brien, "Earthquakes and Snowflowers," *The Pacific Historian* 29, 2-3 (1985): 31-41. For a full discussion of the symbolic significance of the catastrophist theory, see David Wyatt, *The Fall into Eden: Landscape and Imagination in California* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 34 and following.
65. Richard Grusin, "Reproducing Yosemite: Olmsted, Environmentalism and the Nature of Aesthetic Agency," *Cultural Studies* 12:3 (July 1998): 339.
66. David Lowenthal, "The Place of the Past in the American Landscape," in David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden, eds., *Geographies of the Mind: Essays in Historical Geosophy in Honor of John Kirtland Wright* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 90.
67. Chief Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933): xix. Quoted by Carolyn Merchant, *Major Problems in American Environmental History* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co, 1993): 395.
68. William M. Denevan, "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492" *An-*

- nals of the Association of American Geographers 82:3 (1992): 370.
69. Letter of Lafayette Bunnell, published in *Biennial Report of the Commissioners to Manage the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove, for the Years 1889-1890* (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1890): 10. On the history of the Mariposa Battalion, see Lafayette Houghton Bunnell, *Discovery of the Yosemite and the Indian War of 1851 Which Led to that Event* (1880, Golden, CO: Outbooks, 1980).
 70. *Message of Gov. H. H. Haight Transmitting the Report of the Yosemite Commissioners and Memorial of J. C. Lamon* (Sacramento: D. W. Gelwicks, State Printer, 1870): 6.
 71. *Yosemite Park Act*.
 72. See Ted Orland, *Man and Yosemite: A Photographer's View of the Early Years* (Santa Cruz, CA: The Image Continuum Press, no date): 71.
 73. Horace Greeley, *An Overland Journey from New York to San Francisco in the Summer of 1859* (1860, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999): 306.
 74. Jen Huntley-Smith, "Making a Scene: Nature and Progress in Yosemite Valley." Paper presented at the International Conference Nature and Progress: Interactions, Exclusions, Mutations, Research Center on the American West, Université Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, France, November 8th and 9th 2002.
 75. John Muir, in Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (ed.), *John of the Mountains; The Unpublished Journals of John Muir* (1938, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979): 283. Linnie M. Wolfe adds in a footnote, "it has been impossible to fix the date of the cascade-damming episode, since the Park Commission Reports make no mention of it. Authorities upon Yosemite Park history, however, incline to the belief that it occurred in the early eighties."
 76. *Biennial Report for the Years 1889-1890*, 5-6. Only recently have the park authorities decided to let Mirror Lake become a meadow, just as prehistoric Yosemite Lake became the floor of the present Yosemite Valley.
 77. Denevan, 369. Denevan quotes Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982): 17.
 78. Schama, 180.
 79. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987): 25.
 80. On Ahwahneechee culture, see for instance Elizabeth Godfrey, *Yosemite Indians* (Yosemite National Park: Yosemite Association, 1977). More general references on the culture of the Sierra Nevada Miwok include Sylvia M. Broadbent, *The Southern Sierra Miwok Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964) and C. Hart Merriam, ed., *The Dawn of the World: Myths and Tales of the Miwok Indians of California* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).
 81. Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992): 23. Evernden here draws much of his thinking from Roland Barthes, and in particular from *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1973).
 82. See Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witnesses to a Vanishing America: the Nineteenth Century Response* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), in particular Chapter 2, "The Vanishing Wilderness," 23-64.
 83. Evernden, 108.
 84. *Ibid.*, 25