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Imaging Nature: Watkins, Yosemite, and the Birth of Environmentalism

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□–*This essay examines the significance of landscape photography in the birth of environmentalism. In particular, this essay considers how Carleton Watkins' 1860s photographs of Yosemite Valley created both a way of viewing the American landscape and a representational vocabulary for environmentalist claims to public preservation. In understanding these images as rhetorical, this essay offers a sustained exploration of the political and cultural effects of visual rhetoric. This exploration constitutes critical intervention in a number of discourses. Most obviously, this work is contributing to a growing literature in several disciplines that treats images as integral to politics. Additionally, this work is also adopting the cultural studies position of considering politics in its most encompassing sense and accounting for its multiple manifestations. Most importantly, in unearthing an episode in the history of the construction of pristine wilderness as the sublime object of environmentalism, this essay interrupts the mainstream environmental discourse that pays homage to the wilderness icon without paying heed to the political and cultural costs of such devotion.*

CARLETON Watkins clicked, Abraham Lincoln signed, Yosemite was "saved" and environmentalism born. It was not that simple, but almost. The initial proposal to preserve Yosemite Valley originated (perhaps surprisingly) with a captain of industry, Isreal Ward Raymond, the California agent of the Central American Steamship Transit Company. Raymond forwarded a draft of the Yosemite bill and Watkins' 1861 photographs of Yosemite to California Senator John Conness in a February 20, 1864, letter that advised Congress to "prevent occupation and especially to preserve the trees in the valley from destruction" (as cited in Huths, 1948, pp. 47–48). Conness routed Raymond's proposal to the General Land Office and then introduced the bill to Congress in March of 1864. The legislation passed and was signed into law by Abraham Lincoln on June 30, 1864, thereby deeding Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Big Tree Grove to the state of California "for public use, resort and recreation" (as cited in Cahn & Ketchum, 1981, p. 125). In the few months between Raymond's draft-

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ing and Lincoln's signing, the pristine image of Yosemite Valley quickly became iconic of an American vision of nature itself–"the one adequate symbol for all that California promised," wrote Kevin Starr (as cited in Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 135). The legislative protection of this national "natural" landscape placed preservation policy as the cornerstone of American environmental politics.

The fundamental role of landscape photography in the creation of Yosemite as the world's first wilderness area created "for the benefit of the people, for their resort and recreation, to hold them inalienable for all time" points to the crucial role of images in politics and confirms that image politics did not start with the advent of television (as cited in Schama, 1995, p. 191). Focusing on a period during the infancy of photography, this essay traces the ur-history of image politics as linked to the birth of environmentalism. Disciplines avowedly concerned with political discourse, such as political science and, to some degree, rhetoric and movement studies, have tended to give insufficient attention to the historically integral role of images in politics. This essay engages the political dimensions of images, a line of analysis explored most directly in art history. Specifically, with respect to landscape photography and art, art historians have explored the role of pictures in the rhetorics of nationalism, expansionism, racial and religious supremacism, capitalism, and scientific exploration (Truettner, 1995; Novak, 1995; Kinsey, 1992; Hales, 1988). This essay contributes to this scholarship in three ways.

First, in addition to reading Watkins' pictures as high art, this study considers them as political rhetoric and popular culture. In taking this position, this work is cognizant that Watkins' landscape photographs are enmeshed in a turbulent stream of multiple and conflictual discourses that shape what these images mean in particular contexts. This essay is contesting, however, that these images are in any simple way determined or limited by verbal frames. More significantly, it is contended that these pictures are not merely evidence in a conventional political argument. They are not simply representing reality or making an argument about reality. Instead, this article makes the stronger claim that the pictures are constituting the context within which a politics takes place–they are creating a reality.

Second, the role of pictures in the origins of environmentalism is illuminated. Chroniclers of the history of environmentalism in America invariably trace its roots to Thoreau and Muir (Nash, 1967; Oelschlaeger, 1991). Although not wanting to downplay the significance of their writings, this study of Watkins' pictures suggests that landscape photography and paintings are founding texts in the construction of a wilderness vision that has shaped the contours and trajectory of environmental politics. Finally, this essay unearths an episode in the construction of pristine wilderness as the sublime object of nascent environmentalism. The analysis counters mainstream environmental discourse that pays homage to the wilderness icon without paying heed to the political and cultural costs of such devotion.

In what follows, the relevant literatures regarding visual criticism are surveyed and specify this approach to reading images. After situating Watkins in context, this essay then offers close readings of three of his Yosemite

photographs. It closes with an extended consideration of the cultural reception and multiple effects of Watkins' visual rhetoric.

Visual Criticism: Habits of Seeing

A cursory review of scholarly literature both in and outside communication studies reveals that the "visual" is not a new phenomenon for the study of rhetoric. Indeed, one might look to the 1970 Wingspread Conference as the starting point of the visual turn in rhetorical studies. "Perhaps it is enough for now," Wayne Booth argued thirty years ago, "to note that the rhetoric of the image, reinforcing or producing basic attitudes towards life that are frequently not consciously faced by the rhetor, constitutes an enormous part of our daily diet of rhetoric" (1971, p. 101). The relationship between rhetoric and images, as critics such as Charles Altman (1980) have revealed, extends back to Carolingian times. Attending to Booth's call, critics such as Thomas Benson, Carole Blair, Sonja Foss, Bruce Gronbeck, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have addressed questions elemental to visual rhetoric in their respective work on film, public monuments, the visual arts, and politics (Benson, 1980, 1986; Blair, 1999; Foss, 1994; Gronbeck, 1995; Jamieson, 1988). In cultural studies, work by scholars such as Paula Treichler and Douglas Crimp reveal how instrumental representational vocabularies have been to AIDS activism (Treichler, 1988; Crimp, 1988/1990). Although contemporary criticism reflects an agility with a variety of different visual sites, including film, political/activist imagery and public monuments, systematic rhetorical accounts of images remain at the disciplinary periphery of communication studies.

A number of disciplines do offer formalized rules and practices for reading images. Indeed, rhetorical accounts of images often rely on the grammar of art and film criticism to reveal the process and effect of visual meaning-making (Harrington, 1973). Filmic techniques such as mobile framing and reframing, which use a pan, tilt, or tracking shot to create the illusion of movement, have been used to explain how the imaging of archival photographs in Ken Burn's civil war documentary constitutes a visual rhetoric that dramatizes the contingent nature of history (Lancioni, 1996). The study of images in semiotics, most notably by Roland Barthes, demonstrated that photographic discourse could be systematically examined by isolating and tracing the signification of codes (1964). Although Susan Sontag laments that the "language in which photographs are generally evaluated is extremely meager," she too emphasizes composition, light, an innovativeness with regard to formal schemes, and the quality of presence (1973). In addition to isolating particular compositional elements governing visual images, a recurrent theme evident across disciplinary fields is a concern with how images offer a way of seeing. It is this trajectory of analysis that serves as the point of departure for our examination of Watkins' Yosemite photographs.

Alternately conceptualized as photographic seeing or regimes of visibility, the position that all images embody a way of seeing often functions as a first principle for the study of images (Berger, 1972). In *On Photography,* Sontag introduces the notion of photographic seeing to stress how photographs function not only as evidence

but also as evaluation. That is, photographic seeing not only records events and experiences, but also establishes a habit of viewing that transforms the very experience or event into a way of seeing. For Sontag, the visual criticism of photographs seeks to determine "what dependencies they [photographic images] create, what antagonisms they pacify–that is, what institutions they buttress, whose needs they really serve" (1973, p. 178). Despite beginning with patterns of convention and codes formed through the composition of formal qualities such as light, balance, and framing, an analysis of photographic seeing stresses how the "horizon of the taken-for-granted" is formed visually (Hall, 1988, p. 44). Echoing Sontag's discussion, Victor Burgin characterizes photography as a signifying system that acts as a "a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar with in order to *make sense.*" From this perspective, images produce "the ideological subject in the same movement in which they 'communicate' their ostensible 'contents' " (1982, p. 153). Therefore, the question that motivates our examination of Watkins' Yosemite survey photographs is not "what do we see?" but "what do the images want?" (Mitchell, 1996, pp. 540–544). Most specifically, what vision of nature do the photographs authorize, warrant, and legitimate?

In answering this question, a cue is taken from John Hartley's analysis in *The Politics of Pictures.* Hartley suggests that there is no real public, but rather that the public is the product of publicity, of pictures. The public's fictional status, however, should not be "taken as a disqualification from but as a demonstration of the social power (even truth) of fictions" (Hartley, 1992, p. 84). Pictures then are important not because they represent reality, but create it: "They are the place where collective social action, individual identity and symbolic imagination meet–the nexus between culture and politics" (Hartley, p. 3). By offering this perspective of Watkins' images, it is understood that his photos are not to be representing nature, but creating it. Watkins' pictures do not represent the reality of Yosemite. Instead, in conjunction with the discourses of tourism, nationalism, romanticism, expansionism, and religion, they construct Yosemite. Yes, Half Dome exists, but its meaning as icon of pristine wilderness is the result of the work and confluence of multiple discourses, especially a photographic discourse of which Watkins' images are paradigmatic. Watkins' photographs established both an iconic vocabulary for environmentalist claims to public preservation and a way of viewing landscape that endures in contemporary renderings of the American West.

Sublime Photographs: Capturing/Creating Nature

As a focus for artists and industrial engineers throughout much of the nineteenth century, the national landscape served as a key site of artistic, industrial, and commercial energy. Following westward expansion and often working for the U.S. Geological Survey and Army Corp of Engineers, photographers such as Watkins, Charles Weed, William Henry Jackson, Eadweard Muybridge, and Timothy O'Sullivan documented sites like Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Big Tree Grove, Yellowstone, the Colorado Rockies, and the Grand Canyon. Survey photography increasingly realized

commercial profits as prints and stereographs by photographers like Watkins were widely distributed. Works like Josiah Whitney's 1861 *Yosemite Book,* which included 24 of Carleton Watkins' photographs, not only popularized the site within the American rhetorical imagination, but also played a role in Yosemite's preservation. According to Robert Cahn, "the publication of photographs in the survey reports, and their availability to the media were factors in building public support for preserving the areas" (Cahn & Ketchum, p. 129). The invitation by landscape photographs to "see firsthand," the inducement to trust the image, belies how the very images used to depict nature are themselves an expression of state power. The geological survey photos of the 1860s and 70s are telling examples. In his analysis of the relationship between photographic records and the growth of the state, cultural critic John Tagg aptly deconstructs the false promise of photography's self evidence:

> Like the state, the camera is never neutral. The representations it produces are highly coded, and the power it wields is never its own. As a means of record, it arrives on the scene vested with a particular authority to arrest, picture and transform daily life; a power to see and record. . . . This is not the power of the camera but the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of images it constructs to stand as evidence or register a truth. (1999, p. 246)

Even if Tagg too completely dismisses the power of technology qua technology, his point remains significant. It is particularly true for state-sponsored survey images because in this complex social and political process survey photography made "real" unknown and unseen regions of the United States, thus sanctioning and sanctifying an *interested* version of "reality."

Perhaps the preeminent survey photographer, Watkins was in many ways a product of his times, a nodal point for multiple discourses–romantic and artistic, to be sure, but also commercial, industrial, and technological. This is reflected in the breadth of his subjects, from the wilderness landscapes of Yosemite to the industrial mining at Mariposa. It is also manifested in the effects of his images, which constitute the nascent beginnings of environmentalism and foment the extractive frenzy of industrialism. Watkins established dual legacies as both founder of landscape photography and chronicler of industrial progress, celebrator of sublime nature and creator of the technological sublime.[1]

Watkins' early photos of Yosemite highlight, more than anything else, the sublime. Although this may have been an artistic imperative (and Watkins' naming of his studio the Yo Semite Art Gallery speaks of his artistic aspirations for photography), it was also a commercial exigence as Watkins left the financial security and comforts of portrait work for the uncertainties and hardships of landscape photography. As Stanford Demars explains in *The Tourist In Yosemite,* for the leisure class that made Yosemite a tourist stop, the appeal of Yosemite consisted in its potential cultural capital as a sublime spot that could trump the picturesque places of Europe (1991, pp. 12–13). Watkins gave these seekers of the sublime what they were looking for.

The sublime is a longstanding concept in Western thought with roots in Ancient Greece (Longinus, trans. 1984). We are more interested in it as a rhetorical force than a philosophical idea. So, instead of documenting the idea

and fixating on Immanuel Kant's theory of the sublime, the essay works from Edmund Burke's formulation and traces how the term is developed and used in public discourse, especially artistic and touristic.

For Burke, the sublime is an intense passion rooted in horror, fear, or terror in the face of objects that suggest vastness, infinity, power, massiveness, mystery, and death (Burke, 1757; Nicolson, 1973; Gould, 1995). In addition, objects linked to privation are a source of the sublime: "All *general* privations are great because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude,* and *Silence*" (as cited in Nicolson, p. 337; also see Lyotard, 1991, pp. 98–101). The most sublime object is God, though many objects of nature are often seen as traces of God. Sublime nature as a manifestation of God is evident in the words of Starr King, minister and publicizer of the California landscape: "God's purpose in creating such glories was not to receive our poor appreciation, it is to express the fullness of his thought, the overflow of his art, the depth of his goodness" (as cited in Palmquist, 1983, p. 15).[2] Although there is a sense in Burke (that is even more developed in Kant) that the sublime is unrepresentable, 19th Century landscape painters and, later, photographers, spent much effort representing the sublime. Eventually, under their influence

> "sublime" was used increasingly to refer to the "wild" in nature, and rather than focus on some work of man that gave meaning to the scene, romanticists tended to perceive a sublime landscape as a nondirect expression of God Himself. Again, the matter of scale was important, as well as the greater element of mystery, of supernatural manifestation that engendered a more reverential perception of the natural scene. Well recognized features of a wild, romantic landscape included references to amplitude or greatness of extent, vast and boundless prospects, great power and force exerted. (Demars, 1991, pp. 12–13)

The current interest is not only in how public discourse puts in play the sublime, but also how the discourse of the sublime directs and constrains how nature is perceived, pictured, and discussed.

Burke writes of Astonishment as the "passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature,* when those causes operate most powerfully" (Burke, 1757, p. 130). Watkins' Yosemite Valley #1 (Figure 1) is astonishing. We have a god's eye view of the valley stretching out before us in all its vastness. Cliffs jut out from the valley floor, intimidating in their sheer verticality. The stubble of trees atop the cliffs and the "toy trees" on the valley floor highlight the massiveness of the rocks. The cliffs also dwarf the trees and us in terms of time, for their craggy faces tell of geological ages. Those cliffs, silent and immutable, have always been and always will be. They bear witness to eternity and deign not note humanity's ephemeral moment. The sedimented composition of the valley's chasm suggests an edenic space-time continuum that transcends even geological time. The human scale, both in terms of time and size, has no place here and, indeed, the view is devoid of human marks. In approaching the vastness of infinity and the timelessness of eternity, Yosemite Valley appears before us inhuman, a power that mocks human claims to significance.

The transcendence of the view, however, is accompanied by the terror of vertigo, for we seem to be perched on a precipice. One step further and we would tumble into the chasm separating us from the neighboring rock formation. The astonishment tinged with

FIGURE 1

horror and fear that is the sublime is provoked, then, by the confrontation with both the immortal valley and our own mortality, perched precariously on the edge of this vastness (Burke, 1757, p. 130).

The vision of sublime nature is tempered to a certain extent because it is a picture, the product of a technological process. The sublime experience has been captured by technology, reproducing a vicarious domesticated sublime. The vastness of the valley and massiveness of the cliffs has been captured by a mammoth-plate camera, reproducing and reducing the view on 16″ × 21″ prints. We are not really tottering on a precipice, a gust of wind cannot blow us into the abyss. Watkins' photography transforms the spectacular sublime into the domestic spectacle, the private possession of tourists, East Coast urban dwellers, armchair adventurers. The comments of a contemporary admirer illustrate this transformation of the spectacular sublime into the domestic spectacle and point to the public significance of the dissemination of Watkins' photographs. The Reverend H. J. Morton writes in the 1866 *Philadelphia Photographer:*

> [His] photographic views, which open before us the wonderful valley whose features far surpass the fancies of the most imaginative poet and eager romancer . . . without crossing the continent by the overland route in dread of scalping Indians and waterless plains; without braving the dangers of the sea by the Chagres and Panama [sea] route; nay, without even the trouble

of the brief land trip from San Francisco, we are able to step, as it were, from our study into the wonders of the wondrous valley, and gaze at our leisure on its amazing features. (Morton, 1886, p. 337)

The process of producing the domesticated sublime, however, also produces a technological sublime. Watkins' stereoscopic pictures "portray the valley as seen with superhuman eyes: They take in vast areas with every wrinkle and crevice on the rock faces in the distance as sharp as the foliage in the foreground" (Solnit, 1994, p. 235). The camera gives us a god's eye view, presenting an image more real than real, rendering with equal clarity the near and far, giving us a better view of the Valley than being there. Moreover, the photograph freezes Yosemite Valley, turning a moment into the eternal. This technological capturing of the view cloaks Yosemite in an immense and unfathomable stillness, provoking the twin terrors of silence and solitude. The viewer is confronted by the mute and immutable. Still, it is a capturing. The Valley is at the mercy of the viewer, and the viewer can contemplate the image at their leisure, put it away, return to it later, compare it to other collected images, and, indeed, own it, so that sublime nature is now commodified nature, a private possession, nature as cultural capital.

In other Yosemite photographs, Watkins creates the future icons of pristine American wilderness in a similar sublime style, with the notable difference that many of the images depict the union of the sublime and the beautiful (or picturesque). While the sublime is infinite, vast, massive, solid, rugged, vertical, and obscure mystery, the beautiful is comparatively small, smooth, delicate, clear, and pleasingly variable in shape (Burke, 1757, pp. 191–207). In practice, the beautiful has often meant pastoral and picturesque serves as a mediating term to describe landscapes that are rougher and less cultivated but on a human scale, not the grand scale of the sublime. Watkins' pictures often presents bifurcated landscapes, with beautiful foregrounds that both point to and are overshadowed by sublime backgrounds. In an 1865–1866 photo of Half Dome (Figure 2), a placid river, with only the faintest suggestion of ripples, occupies the immediate foreground before meandering into an open forest.[3] The rest of the foreground space is filled by the bushes and trees bordering the river. Trees fill in the left and right borders to the top of the frame, but the center upper half of the image is reserved for the background. In this spot looms Half Dome. The massive granite formation towers over the human scale trees and bushes. Complete with dead trees, the intricate foreground tangles of bushes, trees, and water suggests the fecundity and ephemerality of life. In stark contrast, Half Dome and the neighboring cliff are largely devoid of vegetation. Their rugged granite faces suggest ages, eternity.

Two compositional elements sharpen the sublimity of Watkins' Half Dome. First, the foregrounded scene draws viewers to the summit. The water's stillness, breached only by a fallen trunk and wavelets of reflected light, position the monolith as the image's vanishing point. Second, contrastive lighting further dramatizes the scene's stillness. While the foreground is shot in a familiar black and white, the background is a distinctly brighter shade giving Half Dome a decidedly celestial hue. In the union of the sublime and the beautiful is born the tourist gaze. The beautiful foreground gives the tourist a pleasing

FIGURE 2

place from which to view the spectacular spectacle of the sublime. Positioned at the water's edge, viewers experience the scene at ground level. Apprehending the scene from this plane envelops viewers within nature rather than positioning them at the precipice. By constructing a pleasurable place from which to view the sublime, Watkins anticipates and constructs a sublime experience in which comfort displaces risk as the spectator replaces the participant. The distanced position of the spectator obviates the emotional experience of the sublime. The sublime experience depends on the feeling of terror or fear in the face of the sublime object. As Burke differentiates, the sublime and the beautiful, "are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure" (1757, p. 206). In a sense, Watkins' images blaze a trail for the tourist at the expense of the adventurer and hollow out the sublime, leaving only spectacle. Indeed, by the late 1860s, "spectacular viewing already threatened to become a leading recreation at the site," so that the famous geologist Clarence King, with whom Watkins worked with in a survey party, remarked, "I always go by this famous point of view now [Inspirational Point], feeling somehow that I don't belong to that army of literary travelers who have planted themselves and burst into rhetoric" (as cited in Trachtenberg, 1989, pp. 139–140).

The photo of El Capitan (1861) (Figure 3) also suggests the sublime, only more so. A closer shot heightens the sheer verticality of El Capitan. The

foreground of river, trees, and bushes is foreshortened, and El Capitan looms omniously, the background threatening to swallow up the foreground. The immense size of the El Capitan monolith nearly overpowers Watkins' attempt to capture it, even within a mammoth plate panorama. Unable to contain it within his view, Watkins must position us at a distance. Peering at El Capitan from the corner of the photographic frame prompts viewers to crane necks even while taking in the scale of the photographic representation. This distancing effect created by foreshortened perspective underscores the almost immeasurable interval between nature and human existence. Dwarfed by the size of El Capitan, we are also dwarfed by its vast perpetuity.

This notion of an undefined, even perpetual, past, works in tandem with religious appropriations of the site to render the landscape in sacred terms. "El Capitan," according to one travel account, "was the title given by the old

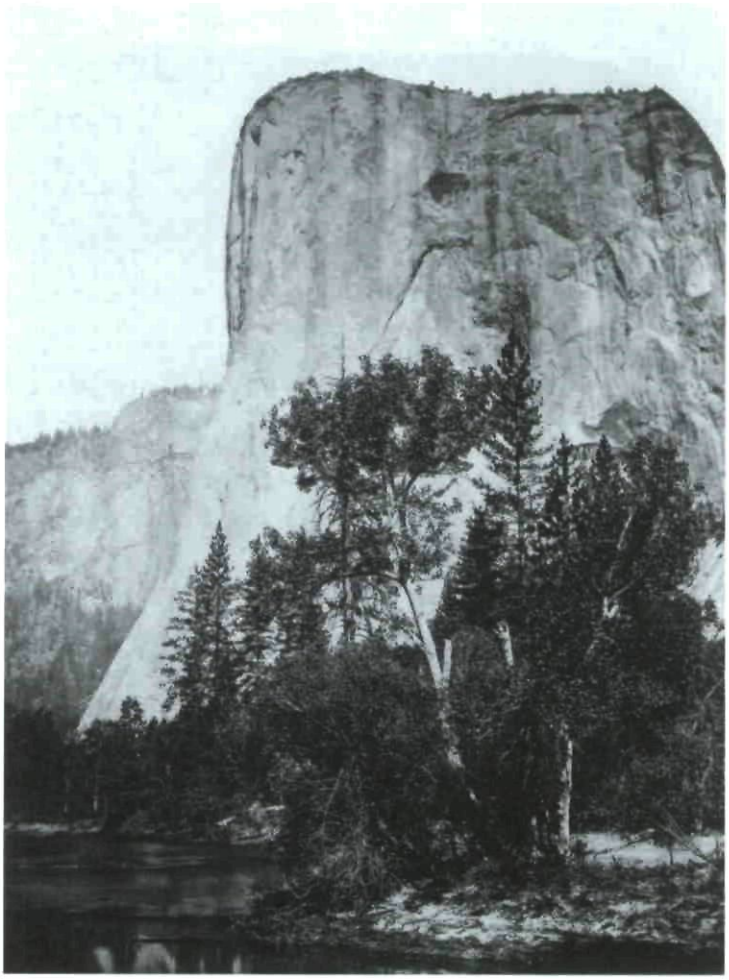

Figure 3

padres to God. What was done, therefore, sometime in the undefined past, was the splendidly daring thing of naming this stupendous cliff with the very name of the Almighty! How true the poetry of it! How fitting the suggestion!" (Jump, 1916, pp. 63–64). Cut away from the rest of the valley, the barren rock of El Capitan stands in dramatic relief to the trees and vegetation that surround the rock's base and the other cliff framed in the image. Its monumentality may, as the Reverend Morton warns, suggest that "Thus far shalt you go and no farther" (Burke, 1757, p. 377). As a visual admonishment of preservation, the image of El Capitan induces a reverence of nature's massiveness as a sign of sublime sacredness.

What is it about Carlton Watkins' photographs that make them such compelling statements for preservation? Watkins' formal composition of the Yosemite landscape dramatized preservationist arguments in his time as well as our own. His ability to orchestrate the "experience of nature" sedimented the nation's commitment to public preservation. By mediating nature as he effaced his own construction of it, Watkins captured the structure of feeling embodied in preservation ideals. His images rely on perspectival framing to immerse viewers within nature. The expansive scenes he crafted almost overpower the photographic frame. Facing such an overwhelming scenic panorama induces a profound reverence for nature. Moreover, by effacing his orchestration of the image, Watkins rendered "living natural scenes" onto an edenic referential frame. Finally, Watkins fashions Yosemite's topography so as to inscribe nature within a perpetual geological past that dwarfs the present. These formal qualities work aesthetically and ideologically as Watkins' images not only resonate with, but also comment on, larger cultural narratives regarding national identity, scientific and industrial progress, and even race and class privilege.

Cultural Reception: Preserving and Portraying Nature

Watkins' photographs of Yosemite Valley provided an important backdrop to the 1864 Act designating Yosemite Valley the nation's first federally protected wilderness area. The lore surrounding Yosemite suggests that California Senator John Conness passed Watkins' photographs around the halls of Congress (Palmquist, 1983, pp. 19–20; Fels, 1983, p. 34; Sanborn, 1981, p. 99). The photographer's role in preserving Yosemite, however, extended well beyond the Congressional floor. Thousands of people on the East Coast saw Watkins' photos, either in art galleries or as reprints in their homes. His images garnered such popular support for preservation that it led Edward Wilson, editor of the *Philadelphia Photographer,* to comment, "It has been said that 'the pen is mightier than the sword,' but who shall not say that in *this* instance, at least, *the camera is mightier than the pen?*" (as cited in Palmquist, 1983, p. 20). In particular, Watkins' influence on Frederick Law Olmsted, the First Commissioner for the Yosemite Commission, placed his photographs as a common referent for public debate regarding the preservation of Yosemite. In an 1865 letter to Watkins and two other artists, Olmsted solicited two queries concerning how the valley could be modeled into more pleasurable scenery:

1st Are there any conditions affecting the scenery of the Yo Semite unfavorably which it would be in the power of the State to remove, or the further and increased effect of which might be prevented? 2nd What can be done by the State to enhance the enjoyment now afforded by the scenery of the Yo Semite? (1865/1985, p. 433)

Although no official record exists documenting Watkins' response to Olmsted's August 1865 letter, the photographer's influence surfaces throughout Olmsted's treatise on preservation–his 1865 Yosemite Commission Report on Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove. Early in the report Olmsted points to the role that images played in making the American public aware of the need to protect and preserve Yosemite:

It was during one of the darkest hours, before Sherman had begun the march upon Atlanta or Grant his terrible movement through the Wilderness, when the paintings of Bierstadt and the photographs of Watkins, both productions of the War time, had given to the people on the Atlantic some idea of the sublimity of the Yo Semite, and of the stateliness of the neighboring Sequoia grove, that consideration was first given to the danger that such scenes might become private property and through the false taste, the caprice or the requirement of some industrial speculation of their holders; their value to posterity be injured. To secure them against this danger Congress passed an act providing that the premises should be segregated from the general domain of the public lands, and devoted forever to popular resort and reaction, under the administration of a Board of Commissioners, to serve without pecuniary compensation, to be appointed by the Executive of the State of California. (1865/1985, p. 489)

Widely recognized as providing the philosophical grounding for the preservation and protection of state and national parks, Olmsted's 1865 report established a public vocabulary for debates over scenic preservation. Watkins' views of Yosemite function within this public narrative as more than a visual referent to Olmsted's philosophical defense of the nation's commitment to environmental preservation. Indeed, the pristine views rendered in Watkins' photographs provide a visual lexicon for the meaning of preservation in nineteenth century America.

Although Olmsted remarks on the monetary advantage of preserving Yosemite for tourists, the body of the commission report outlined the association between scenic contemplation and civic cultivation. "The power of scenery to affect men is," according to Olmsted, "in a large way, proportionate to the degree of their civilization and to the degree in which their taste has been cultivated" (1865/1985, p. 503). He situates the argument for scenic preservation in relation to the English pastoral tradition yet critiques the English for withholding the curative properties of such scenery from those who need it most:

The enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes in the country and the means of recreation connected with them is thus a monopoly, in a very peculiar manner, of a very few, very rich people. The great mass of society, including those to whom it would be of the greatest benefit, is excluded from it. (1865/1985, p. 505)

Olmsted not only extends the curative properties of wilderness areas like Yosemite to all, but also constructs the establishment of public grounds as the political duty of a sovereign state. It is important to note that Olmsted's democratic impulse is accompanied by the impulse of the social reformer to improve the masses, as evident in his

references to "degree of civilization" and "taste." Through the latter impulse nature becomes "a tool of prescriptive improvement aimed down the social scale at class and racial others" (Davis, 1997, p. 32).

Even as Olmsted used the power of Watkins' images to represent Yosemite, he also attempted to complicate the iconic relationship between Watkins' view of Yosemite Valley and the experience of being immersed within the scenery. For Olmsted,

> No photographs or series of photographs, no paintings ever prepare a visitor so that he is not taken by surprise, for could the scenes be faithfully represented the visitor is affected not only by that upon which his eye is at any moment fixed, but by all that with which on every side it is associated, and of which it is seen only as an inherent part. (1865/1985, p. 500)

Olmsted's ambivalence over the images is suggested by his certainty that "There was no single element or view that constituted the glory of Yosemite" (1865/1985, p. 465). Yet, Olmsted's criticisms of the shortcomings of photographs actually reinforces Watkins' theme of the sublimity of Yosemite. As sublime, Yosemite is in part beyond representation, even by Watkins' stunning photos.

Implications and Consequences of Watkins' Visual Rhetoric

If rhetoric is defined as the mobilization of signs for the articulation of identities, ideologies, consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures, it is clear that Watkins' images operate on many registers, including the short-term, long-term, political, cultural, commercial, and scientific. Watkins' 1860s photographs had numerous intentional and unintentional effects. As among the first of the landscape photographers, Watkins sought to establish landscape photography as an art, secure his own preeminence, achieve commercial success, arouse national and international interest in Yosemite, and provide scientifically accurate information for geological survey teams. As the premier pioneer of the art of landscape photography, Watkins succeeded. Watkins' pictures eclipsed the work of his only earlier competitor, Charles Weed, and set the standard for his successors, from Eadweard Muybridge to Ansel Adams. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes remarked favorably on Watkins' work. Holmes described Watkins' photos as "a perfection of art which compares with the finest European work" (1863, p. 8). His photographs were displayed in the prestigious New York City Goupil's Art Gallery, won prizes in competitions in the United States and Europe, including the 1867 Paris Exposition, and were held in generally high regard by his photographer and artist peers. Indeed, the landscape painter Albert Bierstadt considered him the "Prince of Photographers" and used his photos when painting (Palmquist, 1983). It has been suggested that Bierstadt's visit to Watkins exhibition at Goupil's Gallery inspired him to make his first trip to Yosemite. Bierstadt's subsequent Yosemite paintings further popularized the park.

Commercially, Watkins' prints and albums sold fairly well, and he was able to open his own Yo Semite Art Gallery. Although Watkins' artistic and commercial success helped spark interest in Yosemite and spur tourism, it did not translate into personal financial se-

curity. The combination of Watkins' lack of business acumen, the 1870s recession, and copyright problems conspired to put Watkins in a perpetually precarious financial position throughout his career.

In scientific circles, Watkins was considered a photographer without peer. His photos were used by the Harvard botanist Asa Gray and Watkins' presence was prized by geological survey teams (Palmquist, 1983). As the eminent geologist and surveyor King remarked in 1863 to a colleague, "How kind it was of the Indians to shoot the other Watkins [no relation to Carleton] and let the immortal one go free . . . providence will take care of him I am sure till he has 'taken' Mt. Shasta and the Mono Lake region" (as cited in Palmquist, 1983, p. 25). The surveyors' gratitude was such that they named a prominent peak in Yosemite overlooking Mirror Lake "Mt. Watkins."

The most important unintentional short-term effect of Watkins' photographs was political. As previously noted, Watkins' images of Yosemite influenced the Congress to create the world's first wilderness park. As cultural historian Solnit succinctly summarizes the effects of Watkins' photographs, "And so a man who had never seen the place [Senator John Conness] induced more who had never been near the state [Congressional members and Lincoln] to preserve it for a public which had hardly reached it" (p. 243). Watkins' photos also had long-term unintentional political and cultural effects. Although Watkins' had no known environmental or political intentions, arguably his most important legacy is how his imagistic construction of nature has influenced environmentalism. Watkins' pictures mark the beginning of environmental preservationism and ecotourism, for in his work Watkins both perpetuates and constructs an image of nature that sets the parameters for what is nature and what counts as environmental politics even today.

As discussed earlier, Watkins' photos cultivate and propagate an image of a sublime nature, but, to be precise, a spectacularly sublime nature reduced to a domestic spectacle, a nature both sublime and a source of sustenance for the civilized tourist. The consequences of such a nature are multiple and especially significant along the axes of race and class.[4]

Watkins imaged a Yosemite devoid of human markings, a pristine wilderness where one could glimpse the sublime face of God. In picturing a nature apart from culture, Watkins was obeying the dictates of the nature/culture dichotomy central to Western civilization, wherein a nature out there ontologically divided from culture serves as a source of resources, artistic inspiration, spiritual awe, emotional succor, and so on. Viewing nature as pristine wilderness apart from humanity becomes cultural convention and environmental policy, evident in pictures of other natural areas, from the Grand Canyon to Yellowstone, and inscribed in the Wilderness Act of 1964: "A wilderness in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (Frome, 1974, p. 29).

Yosemite as pristine paradise was read in terms of nationalism and divine favour. Nationalist skirmishes over the virtue of the American landscape led English cultural critic John Ruskin to

counter American claims to the pastoral in his 1856 letter to Charles Eliot Norton. Ruskin contests, "I have just been seeing a number of landscapes by an American painter of some repute; and the ugliness of them is wonderful" (Ruskin, 1904, p. 29). As more and more Europeans encountered images and actual fragments of the American West, however, arguments like those advanced by Ruskin waned. Ruskin himself eventually recanted and became an admirer of the landscape painter Thomas "Yellowstone" Moran:

> Nor are there any descriptions of the Valley of Diamonds, or the Lake of the Black Islands, in the "Arabian Nights," anything like so wonderful as the scenes of California and the Rocky Mountains which you may . . . see represented with most sincere and passionate enthusiasm by the American landscape painter, Mr. Thomas Moran. (as cited in Kinsey, 1992, p. 14)

"The opening of the Far West," Demars argues, "with its astonishing array of natural wonders, provided Americans, at last with claims to scenic superiority that were difficult to dispute. Everything 'western' seemed to exist on a monumental scale" (1991, p. 21). For example, almost nothing in the European imagination could exceed the magnitude of the Yosemite Valley Giant Sequoias. The awe engendered by their immense size and life span led visitors to discount the authenticity of a tree bark from the Calaveras Grove (315 feet in height and 61 feet in circumference) exhibited at the 1854 Crystal Palace exhibition: "Owing to the immensity of the circumference, nobody would believe that the bark had come from one tree, and finally, being branded a humbug, the exhibit had to be ended" (Huth, 1948, p. 63). In 1864 Senator Conness used this incident to put before the Senate a patriotic argument for the preservation of Yosemite:

> From the Calaveras grove some sections of a fallen tree were cut during and pending the great World's Fair that was held in London some years since. The English who saw it declared it to be a Yankee invention, made from beginning to end; that it was an utter untruth that such trees grew in the country; that it could not be . . . we were not able to convince them that it was a specimen of American growth. . . . They would not believe us. (as cited in Runte, 1990, p. 20)

By 1867, however, the Paris International Exhibition recognized Watkins' images of the "grand mountains and gigantic vegetation of America" (Vogel, 1867, p. 77). These included Watkins' portraits of the Grizzly Giant, the oldest living Sequoia (having sprouted circa 1500 BC). Olmsted had suggested in his *Preliminary Report upon the Yosemite and Big Tree Grove* that the Grizzly Giant may be the "noblest tree in the world" (1865/1985, p. 491). Images documenting the monumental scale of Yosemite's mountains and trees dramatized the nation's magnitude by constituting America as a sacred space:

> These vast trees, bearing upon their charred rind the marks of scorching fires which might have been coeval with the siege of Jerusalem, were felt to unite our frail beings with the past, and to present to the imagination the procession of the ages, as a chain of which we were among the latest links. (Pfeiffer, 1995, p. 83)

The Giant Sequoia served as an iconic representation of the divine providence of the American West. They created a sense of being at the center of the world–thus designating the nation as an axis mundi. Horace Greeley noted that the Big Trees "were of very

substantial size when David danced before the Ark, when Solomon laid the foundations of the Temple, when Theseus ruled in Athens, when Aeneas fled from the burning wreck of vanquished Troy, when Sesostris led his victorious Egyptians into the heart of Asia" (as cited in Runte, 1990, p. 15). At a time when the ongoing Civil War was read as a sign of God's disfavor, Americans, through Watkins' pictorial evidence, embraced Yosemite as a manifestation of God's continuing favor. Yosemite, then, served not merely as an environmental park but as a redemptive site. Representing Yosemite as Edenic, however, constitutes a form of imagistic genocide. Yosemite was not pristine, but cleansed.

Just ten years prior to Watkins' discovery of Yosemite, the Mariposa Battalion had entered the valley with the intent of relocating or exterminating the Ahwahneechee. The ability of whites to rhapsodize about Yosemite as paradise, the original Garden of Eden, depended on the forced removal and forgetting of the indigenous inhabitants of the area for the past 3,500 years, people whose practices of habitation, including planned burnings of the meadows, had created the pristine wilderness whites were celebrating. As Solnit notes, "The West wasn't empty, it was emptied–literally by expeditions like the Mariposa Battalion, and figuratively by the sublime images of a virgin paradise created by so many painters, poets, and photographers" (1992, p. 56). In not taking photos of Native Americans and their traces, Watkins' contributed to the larger cultural project of effacing Native Americans both literally and figuratively in service to the national myth of pristine nature a myth made material in the "pristine paradise" of Yosemite.

Workers, also, were effaced from the images of Yosemite. Although Watkins took photos of industrial activity at other sites, due to numerous reasons signs of shepherds, miners, and loggers are absent in his images of Yosemite. Artistically, workers and the scars of industrialism do not figure in representations of Romantic, sublime wilderness. Additionally, the elite urban tourists of the industrial East that constitute a large part of Watkins' audience are turning to Yosemite in search of the restorative properties of wilderness, not in search of signs of the omnipresence of industrialism. In fact, the development of artistic and cultural practices for the appreciation of an anestheticized nature mark the upper classes as distinct from the working class and function to naturalize hierarchical social relations (see Williams, 1980, pp. 67–85; Davis, 1997, pp. 31–32). The camera is a stunningly effective means to naturalize reality, to create a world without history and a people without memory. As critics Barthes, Sontag, and John Berger note, photography transforms the world into a series of unrelated, free-standing traces of reality, events without contexts, moments outside of history and memory (1981; 1973; 1980).

This essay is pointing to some of the racial and class consequences of the concept of sublime nature not in order to cast moral recriminations at Watkins and his time, but to highlight the practical effects that this particular construction of nature, materialized in Watkins' iconic images, had on American culture and environmental politics. In placing Watkins' timeless Yosemite in a complex and charged context, the

attempt is to imagine a critical practice that enacts Berger's alternative photography: "The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory" (1980, p. 62). In placing Watkins' photographs in a larger social and political landscape, the attempt is to *remember* the origins of Yosemite and the roots of environmentalism in a way that enables the emergence of alternative environmental practices. To remember is to hope and to act: "Memory implies a certain act of redemption. What is remembered has been saved from nothingness. What is forgotten has been abandoned" (Berger, 1980, p. 58).

The construction of pristine wilderness as nature, largely the product of an urban, upper-class, white, industrialized cultural formation, marginalized other cultures' visions of nature and human-nature relations, most obviously those of Native Americans. The rhetoric of nature as pristine and separate from human culture set in motion the trajectory of environmental politics for its first one hundred years. As evident in their pictures, writings, and actions, environmental groups have been consumed with preserving "pristine" places. This narrow focus has had the major effect of reproducing the nature-culture dichotomy and circumscribing environmentalism in two complementary ways. In taking as their charge the preservation of wilderness, environmental groups relieved themselves of the responsibility of protecting non-pristine areas and of critiquing the practices of industrialism that degraded the general environment. In exchange for pockets of wilderness, environmental groups ignored industrialism's progressive plundering of the planet. Similarly, if the places people live are by definition not nature, environmental groups need not concern themselves with inhabited environments. So, for example, while the Sierra Club was sparing no efforts in saving the desolate Dinosaur National Monument, the nation's major waterways were dying (Hudson, Potomac, Mississippi) and, in some cases, even catching fire (Boston's Charles River and Cleveland's Cuyahoga River). The conceptual blinder of nature as pristine wilderness prevented these groups from focusing on pollution as a major environmental issue.

Of course, since the 1960s Rachel Carson and others have alerted environmentalists and everyone else to the dangers of pollution, deep ecologists have challenged the separation of nature and culture, and environmental justice groups have made a clean environment a social justice and human rights issue. Environmental justice groups have also pointed out how understanding nature as pristine wilderness had race and class dimensions since it led to an environmental movement composed of those who have the time and the money to travel to and play in these pristine places and thus are concerned about wilderness while ignoring degraded prosaic places and those who must live there.

In response to these criticisms mainstream environmental groups have expanded their range of issues beyond just wilderness issues, have started to think of humans as embedded in nature, and have forged links across racial and class lines through alliances

with environmental justice, civil rights, and labor groups. With these moves, environmental groups are finally constructing a vision of nature that transcends the sublime wilderness created in no small part by the visual rhetoric of Carleton Watkins and his successors. □

Notes

[1]For a thorough and compelling account of the rise of the technological sublime in the United States, see David Nye's *American Technological Sublime* (1994).

[2]We do not correct or add to the sexist language used by some of those quoted in this work for the reason that such sexist language is not merely a matter of terminology, but is often of theoretical or historical significance. For example, when theorists write on "man" as a universal category, often their analyses are only of men and pay little attention to the experience of women, though they proceed to universalize their findings.

[3] We use this photo instead of an essentially identical 1861 photo because of better production quality. Thematically, the photos are identical.

[4]Although not explored in this essay, it is important to note that there are also gender consequences, for the sublime and beautiful are gendered concepts.

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