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The Wildēor Downtown

Exploring Wilderness Remnants In Urban America

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UNIVERSITAT POLITÈCNICA DE CATALUNYA



This dissertation, while written in English and relying predominantly on bibliographical sources also written in English, was carried out by a native Italian speaker within the PhD program of a university whose official languages are Catalan and Spanish. Translating what we had already read, heard or thought from one of these languages into another has been one of the most challenging aspects of the entire work. We have tried to convey a sense of this effort by including Italian and Spanish in specific sections of the text and by dedicating the prologue of the study to the main question of linguistics that concerns the subject matter: the untranslatability of the world *wilderness*. The English text is recognizable by the black font.

Esta tesis ha sido realizada por un investigador italiano en una institución cuyas lenguas oficiales son el catalán y el castellano, y en ella se han empleado mayoritariamente fuentes bibliográficas en inglés. Reformular en inglés, italiano o español lo que ya había sido leído, escrito o pensado en otra lengua ha sido uno de los aspectos más difíciles y al mismo tiempo más interesantes de toda la investigación. Hemos tratado de ofrecer parte de dicho esfuerzo de dos formas: en primer lugar, incluyendo las tres lenguas en algunas secciones específicas del texto; y en segundo lugar, dedicando el prólogo del trabajo a la principal cuestión de lingüística que concierne al objeto de investigación: la intraducibilidad de la palabra *wilderness*. El texto español se reconoce por los caracteres en verde oscuro.

Questa tesi è stata eseguita da un ricercatore italiano presso un'istituzione le cui lingue ufficiali sono lo spagnolo e il catalano e in essa s'impiegano prevalentemente fonti bibliografiche in inglese. Riformulare in inglese, italiano o spagnolo ciò che era stato già letto, scritto o pensato in un'altra lingua è stato uno degli aspetti più difficili ma anche più appassionanti di tutta la ricerca. Abbiamo cercato di restituire parte di questo sforzo in due modi: includendo le tre lingue in alcune specifiche sezioni del testo e dedicando il prologo del lavoro alla principale questione di linguistica che concerne il tema di ricerca: l'intraducibilità della parola *wilderness*. Il testo in italiano si riconosce dai caratteri amaranto.

ABSTRACT

Proximity between urban realm and wilderness has been a salient feature of Northern American territorial patterns since European settlement. Even today such proximity, although drastically reduced, in some cases endures. Nonetheless, the topological relation between areas of extensive development and wild land is changing: if the history of urban America has been a history of *cities in the wilderness*, today vast urbanized regions frequently encompass wild enclaves, areas we look upon as *wildernesses in the city*. These wilderness remnants may be protected areas engulfed by urban growth, or areas that have not been developed due to their orographic or hydrographic features, or areas that have been developed and subsequently abandoned. Varying in form and physiographic features, they range from large natural systems to minute green interstices widespread in the urban fabric. Often linked with each other or with larger wildernesses beyond the confines of the urbanized area, they form what in this study we define as *the urban wilderness system*. Urban ecology has already delved into the study of these places, describing their relevance in maintaining environmental balance in metropolitan regions. Scientific literature has called for their conservation and brought them to centre stage of the debate on future urban development. Such studies are institutionalizing wilderness as an integral part of urban systems. Contextually, communities are demonstrating a growing interest in urban wilds as places for recreation. The use of these areas as alternatives to traditional urban open space has been promoted in response to the need to re-establish a rapport between city dwellers and 'nature'. In fact, in these areas it is possible to experience exploration and play, contemplation and reflection, in ways that are otherwise unfeasible in a metropolis. Such practices are institutionalizing urban wilderness as a new and distinctive kind of public space. However, the significance of urban wilds goes beyond their ecological and recreational value. We believe each remnant of wilderness in Northern American cities is a *semantic reservoir*, a place where the meanings that Northern American culture has attributed to nature manifest within an otherwise all-encompassing urbanity, islands of intense placeness emerging from the endless stretch of sprawling development. As the expansion of Northern American urban areas relentlessly continues, and cities further transcend the dimensional scale that had characterized them throughout history, urban wilderness remnants acquire immense relevance. In the synthesis of their ecological, functional, and semantic value, they become primary elements of the dispersed, polynucleated, territorial urban systems of tomorrow, capable of structuring the form and fostering the sense of place of the city in which they find themselves. This dissertation intends to develop this thesis by undertaking a study of the semantic substratum of the idea of wilderness in Northern America, and an exploration of the places within major Northern American cities that most vividly evoke such substratum.

The work is composed of two parts. The first chapter of the first part examines the history of the idea of wilderness, the transformations of its connotations, and its significance in Northern American culture. The second chapter deals with the ambiguous meaning of the word *natural* and with the consequences of such ambiguity, and the dilemmas associated with the oxymoronic proposition of managing the wild as well as the conflicts related to wilderness preservation. The third chapter offers a tentative definition of urban wilderness and undertakes a description of its recurrent characteristics, developing a classification of wilderness remnants in the city. The second part employs the taxonomy created in the third chapter of the first part to examine fifteen case studies. Ordered in five chapters according to their dominant original landscape - (1) woodlands, (2) grasslands, (3) shrublands, (4) wetlands, and (5) deserts, each case is an emblematic *locus ferus* in the heart of an American metropolis.

RESUMEN

El término *wilderness*, en su uso común en lengua inglesa, se refiere a la condición de una parte del territorio en la que no se encuentra signo antrópico alguno. Por extensión semántica, la palabra se aplica también a cualquier área o conjunto de áreas que poseen esta condición. La palabra tiene además un denso sustrato de connotaciones que expresan el significado cultural que la wilderness ha asumido y asume. Este significado se revela especialmente profundo y complejo en Norteamérica, donde toda wilderness es un *frontier remnant*, un residuo del ambiente natural que ha sido el escenario y al mismo tiempo el gran protagonista de la historia del continente. La relación de proximidad entre ciudad y wilderness es desde siempre uno de los aspectos más significativos y fascinantes de los procesos de asentamiento norteamericano. La progresiva transformación del territorio a fines productivos ha reducido solo parcialmente el contacto entre ambas: no muy lejos de algunos de los más extensos núcleos de población aún se conservan amplias extensiones de naturaleza incontaminada. Sin embargo, en muchos casos su recíproca relación topológica se encuentra invertida. Si la historia urbana americana es una historia de *ciudad en la wilderness*, hoy son los sistemas metropolitanos territoriales los que incluyen en su propia trama enclaves naturales, verdaderas y propias *wilderness en la ciudad*. Se trata de fragmentos cuya resiliencia en contextos urbanizados depende de circunstancias diversas: áreas cuyas características orográficas e hidrográficas hacen demasiado difícil o cara la explotación de las mismas; áreas potencialmente aprovechables pero inaccesibles; áreas sujetas a vínculos paisajísticos; áreas abandonadas de las que la naturaleza se vuelve a apoderar hasta borrar cualquier testimonio de su uso precedente. Diversas en cuanto a la forma y a las características físico-geográficas, se extienden - sin solución de continuidad en el factor de escala - desde las grandes emergencias geográficas hasta las más pequeñas inmergencias intersticiales que se insinúan capilarmente en el tejido de la ciudad, formando lo que en este estudio llamaremos *el sistema de la wilderness urbana*. Durante los cuatro decenios que nos separan de su nacimiento como disciplina, la ecología urbana ha dedicado estudios extensos a los sistemas de la wilderness urbana, explicando cómo estos ofrecen refugios necesarios para la biodiversidad e ilustrando detalladamente el importante papel que desempeñan en la conservación de los equilibrios ambientales de las regiones metropolitanas. Con autoridad y vehemencia, esa ha reivindicado la preservación de estos sistemas situándolos por primera vez en el centro del debate en torno a la ciudad contemporánea. En los mismos años ha surgido también un progresivo interés hacia la wilderness urbana como lugar de recreo. El uso de estas áreas como alternativa a los tradicionales espacios verdes públicos se está promoviendo en respuesta a la necesidad de restablecer el contacto entre ciudadano y naturaleza. En ellas se hacen posibles ciertas actividades de exploración y de ocio que difícilmente se podrían llevar a cabo dentro de los límites de la metrópolis, así como momentos de recogimiento para la reflexión y la contemplación en soledad. Las políticas implementadas en esta dirección institucionalizan la wilderness como un nuevo y peculiar tipo de espacio público. Pero el valor de la wilderness urbana trasciende todo esto y va más allá. El presente estudio ve en cada fragmento de wilderness que queda en las grandes ciudades de EEUU y Canadá un *recipiente semántico* que recoge los muchos significados que palabra ha adquirido a lo largo de la historia del subcontinente. Un lugar en el que estos significados pueden ser redescubiertos y comprendidos, que resiste como un baluarte en la ilimitadas manchas urbanas. En él se encuentran custodiados los valores colectivos que la cultura norteamericana ha atribuido a la naturaleza, es por tanto un lugar de concentración de sentido que se eleva a la categoría de auténtico y propio monumento. En estos primeros años del siglo XXI, que han visto la ciudad trascender la escala dimensional que le ha sido propia a lo largo de toda la historia para volverse progresivamente ciudad-territorio, extensión metropolitana continua, el sistema de la wilderness urbana puede asumir un rol muy relevante. En la síntesis de sus valores ecológicos, funcionales y simbólicos, se puede configurarse como un componente fundamental de los sistemas urbanos territoriales: cada una de sus partes puede convertirse un elemento primario de la estructura de la ciudad, capaz de dar forma y significado a su contexto. Nos hemos propuesto de corroborar esta tesis a través de una investigación que, apoyándose en aquellas que estudian la ecología o los usos a fines recreativos de la wilderness urbana, describa los aspectos morfológicos y los valores simbólicos de estos peculiares hechos urbanos en el contexto geográfico en el que asumen mayor relevancia geográfica y mayor profundidad semántica.

El trabajo se compone de dos partes. En el primer capítulo de la primera parte se examina la historia de la idea de wilderness, la transformación de sus connotaciones, su valor específico en el contexto de la cultura norteamericana. En el segundo capítulo se afronta el significado ambiguo de la palabra *natural* y las consecuencias de dicha ambigüedad, las dificultades asociadas al propósito de restaurar 'lo natural' y a la problemática relativa a la conservación de 'lo salvaje.' En el tercer capítulo se ofrece una definición de wilderness urbana y se describen las sus características recurrentes, y se presenta una clasificación de los fragmentos de wilderness en la ciudad en función de sus caracteres morfológicos, ecológico, del paisaje primario del que son expresión y las narraciones que evocan. En la segunda parte del trabajo se emplea la taxonomía expuesta en el último capítulo de la primera parte para examinar quince casos de estudio. Ordenados en función de los paisajes primarios de los que son expresión, (1) bosques, (2) praderas, (3) matorrales, (4) humedales y (5) desiertos, cada cual es un emblemático *locus ferus* atrapado en las redes de una gran metrópolis norteamericana.

S O M M A R I O

Il termine *wilderness*, nell'uso comune della lingua inglese, definisce la condizione di una porzione del territorio ove non è riscontrabile alcun segno antropico. Per estensione semantica, la parola si riferisce anche a ogni area che conserva tale condizione o all'insieme di tali aree. La parola possiede inoltre un denso substrato di connotazioni che esprimono il significato culturale che la wilderness ha assunto e assume. Tale significato si fa specialmente profondo e complesso in Nord America, ove ogni wilderness è un *frontier remnant*, ovvero un resto dell'ambiente naturale che è stato lo scenario e al tempo stesso il grande protagonista della storia del continente. La relazione di prossimità tra città e wilderness è da sempre uno degli aspetti più significativi e affascinanti dei processi insediativi nordamericani. La progressiva trasformazione del territorio a fini produttivi ha ridotto solo parzialmente tale contatto: non distante da alcuni dei più vasti centri abitati si conservano ancora ampi brani di natura incontaminata. In molti casi si è però invertita la loro reciproca relazione topologica. Se la storia urbana americana è una storia di *città nella wilderness*, oggi sono i sistemi metropolitani complessi a scala territoriale che includono nella propria trama enclavi naturali, vere e proprie *wilderness nella città*. Si tratta di frammenti la cui resilienza nei contesti urbanizzati è dipesa da circostanze diverse: aree le cui caratteristiche orografiche o idrografiche hanno reso troppo difficile o troppo caro lo sfruttamento, aree potenzialmente sfruttabili ma inaccessibili, aree soggette a vincoli paesistici, aree dismesse di cui la natura si è riappropriata sino a cancellare ogni testimonianza del loro precedente uso. Vari per forma e per tratti fisico-geografici, spaziano - senza soluzione di continuità nel fattore di scala - dalla grande emergenza geografica sino alla più minuta immergenza interstiziale che s'insinua capillarmente nell'abitato, formando ciò che in questo studio definiremo come il *sistema della wilderness urbana*. Nei quattro decenni che ci separano dalla sua nascita come disciplina, l'ecologia urbana ha dedicato approfonditi studi a questi sistemi, spiegando come essi offrano necessari rifugi per la biodiversità e illustrando con minuzia di particolari il loro importante ruolo nella conservazione degli equilibri ambientali delle regioni metropolitane. Con autorevolezza e veemenza ne ha rivendicato la conservazione portandoli per la prima volta al centro del dibattito sulla città contemporanea. Anche ma non solo in seguito a ciò, è sorto un progressivo interesse nella wilderness urbana come luogo di *recreation*. L'uso di queste aree come alternativa ai tradizionali spazi di verde pubblico si sta promuovendo in risposta alla necessità di ristabilire un contatto tra cittadino e natura. In esse sono possibili attività di esplorazione e di gioco che raramente si sono potute svolgere dentro i confini della metropoli, così come momenti di raccoglimento per la riflessione e la contemplazione in solitudine. Tali politiche istituzionalizzano la wilderness come un nuovo e peculiare tipo di spazio pubblico urbano. Ma il valore della wilderness urbana americana va ancora oltre. Il presente studio vede in ciascun frammento di wilderness dentro la città un serbatoio semantico che raccoglie i molti significati che la parola wilderness possiede; un luogo ove tali significati possono essere riscoperti e compresi, che resiste come un baluardo nelle sterminate distese della macchia urbana. In esso si custodiscono i valori collettivi che la cultura nordamericana ha attribuito alla natura; luogo di concentrazione di senso, assurge al ruolo di vero e proprio monumento. In questi primi anni del secolo, che hanno visto la città travalicare definitivamente la scala dimensionale che gli è appartenuta durante l'intero corso della storia e diventare progressivamente città-territorio, distesa metropolitana continua, il sistema della wilderness urbana può assumere un ruolo estremamente rilevante. Nella sintesi dei suoi valori ecologici, funzionali e simbolici, essa si configura come una componente fondamentale dei sistemi urbani territoriali, ciascuna sua parte come un elemento primario della struttura formale della nuova città capace d'informare e significare il suo contesto. Ci si è proposti di corroborare questa tesi attraverso una ricerca che, affiancandosi a quelle di chi ne sta studiando l'ecologia o l'uso a fini ricreativi, descriva i caratteri morfologici e i valori simbolici di questi peculiari fatti urbani nel contesto geografico ove esso assumono maggior rilievo geografico e maggior profondità semantica. Si vuole, in questo modo, contribuire a rivendicare il loro ruolo e aggiungere una dimensione finora inedita all'apologia del selvaggio nella città.

Il lavoro si compone di due parti. Il primo capitolo della prima parte esamina la storia dell'idea di wilderness, la trasformazione delle sue connotazioni, e il suo specifico valore nel contesto della cultura nordamericana. Il secondo capitolo affronta l'ambiguo significato della parola *natural* e le conseguenze di detta ambiguità, i dilemmi associati alla ossimorica proposizione di restauro della 'naturalità' e alle problematiche relative alla conservazione del 'selvaggio.' Il terzo capitolo offre una definizione di wilderness urbana e descrive le sue caratteristiche ricorrenti, e redige una classificazione dei frammenti di wilderness nella città in funzione del loro *paesaggio primario*, dei loro caratteri morfologici, del loro funzionamento ecologico, e delle narrazioni a cui rimandano. La seconda parte del lavoro impiega la tassonomia stilata nell'ultimo capitolo della prima parte per esaminare quindici casi studio. Ordinati in funzione dei paesaggi primari di cui sono espressione (1) foreste, (2) macchie, (3) praterie, (4) paludi, e (5) deserti, ciascuno è un emblematico *locus ferus* intrappolato nelle maglie di una grande metropoli nordamericana.



«We lived between the Via Aemilia and the Far West»

«Vivíamos entre la Via Emilia y el Far West»

«Vivevamo tra la Via Emilia e il West»

*A fig for your Italian scenery!
This is the country where Nature reigns in her virgin beauty.*

- Michigander on his return from a journey to Tuscany, 1835

Speaking of his childhood, spent in the Bolognese countryside at the time when moving cinemas rambled from town to town projecting the American West on the walls of the old *piazza*, a well-known writer from my home town once said: “We lived between the Via Aemilia and the Far West.” Although I was born forty years later, when Western movies could more comfortably be watched from one’s living room, I can use the same words to describe the imaginary geography of prairies and deserts that my friends and I overlaid over the real geography of our homeland. In the following years, my exploration of those remote places continued through an indulgence in American literature, music and cinema, never diminishing, not even when - after my first trip to the United States - I was finally able to replace those fictional images with real ones. Yet, the evocative power of the American landscape remains mysterious to me still today. The visions it offers of itself and the constellation of its place names generate an extraordinary fascination whose origins I ponder. I do not think this fascination can stem solely from the power of the narratives that celebrate the American landscape in literature, music, and cinema; nor from the persistent promotion of these narratives as packaged with other commercial products in the process of Americanization of the twentieth century. On the contrary, I believe that the power of the narratives that describe men and women immersed in the American landscape depends on a distinctive character of the landscape itself. Tackling a study on the symbolic value of American wilderness and studying the relationship it establishes today with its antonymic term - the city - is the path I have chosen to try to decipher this ineffable character. To fully grasp it, if ever possible, will be the only way to cut the ties that until then will continue to bind me to this subject of research.

*¡Vuestro paisaje italiano no vale un pimiento!
Esta es la tierra donde reina la Naturaleza en su belleza original.*

-Natural de Michigan a su regreso de un viaje a Toscana, 1835

«Vivíamos entre la Via Emilia y el Far West», dijo un conocido escritor de mi ciudad hablando de su infancia, transcurrida en la campiña boloñesa en los años en los que los cinematógrafos ambulantes se detenían de pueblo en pueblo, proyectando fotogramas de oeste americano sobre las paredes de viejas casonas. Aunque yo hubiera nacido cuarenta años después en un ambiente menos campestre, en el que los western se veían cómodamente desde el salón de casa, podría usar las mismas palabras para describir la geografía soñada de praderas y desiertos que infinitas veces he superpuesto a las imágenes reales de mi tierra. En los años siguientes, la exploración de aquellos lugares remotos continuó en mi interés por la literatura, la música y el cine estadounidense sin disminuir jamás, ni siquiera cuando, tras mi primer viaje transoceánico, pude sustituir las imágenes cinematográficas por las reales, impresas en mi retina. Todavía hoy, el poder evocativo del paisaje americano es para mí un misterio. ¿De dónde deriva la fascinación de las visiones que ofrece de sí mismo y de la constelación toponímica de sus lugares? ¿Qué es lo que lo convierte en algo tan atractivo y que invita a formar parte de él? No creo que se pueda encontrar la respuesta exclusivamente en la calidad de las narraciones que lo han celebrado a través de la literatura, la música y el cine, ni quizá tampoco en la insistencia con la cual estas narraciones se difundieron, en la progresiva «americanización» del siglo XX, junto a cualquier otro producto comercial. Creo que ocurre más bien lo contrario: la potencia de los discursos narrativos que describen al hombre inmerso en el paisaje norteamericano depende del carácter específico de tal paisaje. Iniciar un estudio sobre los valores simbólicos de la *wilderness* americana y estudiar las relaciones que esta instaure en la contemporaneidad con su antónimo - la ciudad - es el modo que he elegido para intentar descifrar ese inefable carácter. Aunque quizás nunca será del todo posible, comprenderlo a fondo, sí será la manera de cortar el vínculo que hasta entonces me ata indisolublemente a este tema de investigación.

*I vostri panorami italiani non valgono un fico secco!
Questa è la terra ove la Natura regna nella sua vergine bellezza.*

- Abitante del Michigan di ritorno da un viaggio in Toscana, 1835

“Vivevamo tra la Via Emilia e il Far West” disse un noto letterato della mia città parlando della sua infanzia, trascorsa nelle campagne bolognesi negli anni in cui cinematografi ambulanti si fermavano di paese in paese, proiettando sui muri delle piazze fotogrammi del grande ovest americano. Benché io sia nato quaranta anni dopo, in un ambiente meno campestre ove i *western* si guardavano comodamente dal soggiorno di casa, potrei usare le stesse parole per descrivere la geografia sognata di praterie e deserti che infinite volte ho sovrapposto a quella reale della mia terra. Negli anni successivi, l’esplorazione di quei luoghi remoti è continuata nel mio interesse per la letteratura, la musica, ed il cinema statunitense senza mai scemare, neanche quando - dopo il mio primo viaggio oltre oceano - ho finalmente potuto sostituire le immagini cinematografiche con immagini vere, impresse sulla retina. Ancora oggi, il potere evocativo del paesaggio americano rimane per me un mistero. Da dove deriva il fascino delle visioni che offre di sé e quello della costellazione toponomastica dei suoi luoghi? Cosa rende una prospettiva così invitante farne parte? Non credo che si possa cercare la risposta esclusivamente nella bontà delle narrazioni che lo hanno celebrato nella letteratura, nella musica e nel cinema, ne tanto meno nell’insistenza con cui queste narrazioni si sono diffuse insieme a qualsiasi altro prodotto commerciale nella progressiva ‘americanizzazione’ del secolo XX. Ritengo piuttosto il contrario: la potenza dei discorsi narrativi che descrivono l’uomo immerso nel paesaggio nordamericano dipende da un carattere specifico di tale paesaggio. Intraprendere uno studio sui valori simbolici della *wilderness* americana e studiare le relazioni che essa instaura nella contemporaneità con il suo termine antonimico - la città - è il modo che ho scelto per provare a decifrare questo ineffabile carattere. Comprenderlo a fondo, se mai sarà possibile, sarà il modo per recidere il vincolo che sino ad allora mi lega indissolubilmente a questo tema di ricerca.

The Wildēor Downtown



Woman by a Giant Cedar in Stanley Park, Vancouver, 1900 ca.

Mujer junto a una Tuya Gigante en el Stanley Park de Vancouver, 1900 ca.

Donna presso una Tuya Gigante a Stanley Park, Vancouver, 1900 ca.

Agostino Ghigo DiTommaso

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Exploring Wilderness Remnants In Urban America

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A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.

- *Wilderness Act, 1964*

No tract of land is too small for the wilderness idea. It can, and perhaps should, flavor the recreational scheme for any woodlot or backyard.

- *Aldo Leopold, 1942*

Appreciation of wilderness must be understood as recent, revolutionary, and incomplete.

- *Roderick Nash, 1981*

Una wilderness, en contraposición a los territorios que están dominados por el hombre y sus obras, se define como un área en la que la tierra y la comunidad de los seres vivos no sufren ninguna constricción humana, un lugar en que el hombre no es nada más que un visitante que está de paso.

- *Wilderness Act, 1964*

No hay fracción del territorio, por pequeña que sea, donde no quepa la idea de wilderness. Esta podría, y quizás debería, enriquecer nuestro modo de vivir el ocio en cualquier parque o jardín.

- *Aldo Leopold, 1942*

Conviene entender que la valoración de la wilderness es un fenómeno reciente, revolucionario e incompleto.

- *Roderick Nash, 1981*

Una *wilderness*, in contrapposizione con quei luoghi ove l'uomo e le sue opere dominano il paesaggio, è dunque definita come un'area ove la terra e l'insieme delle specie che la popolano non subiscono nessuna costrizione umana, ove l'uomo stesso è un ospite di passaggio.

- *Wilderness Act, 1964*

Non c'è pezzo di terra che sia troppo piccolo per contenere in sé l'idea di wilderness. Essa può, e forse dovrebbe, arricchire il nostro modo di vivere il tempo libero in ogni parco o giardino.

- *Aldo Leopold, 1942*

L'apprezzamento della wilderness va inteso come un fenomeno recente, rivoluzionario e ancora incompleto.

- *Roderick Nash, 1981*

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PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of the ideas that underlie the content of this study took shape during the course of a monographic seminar on the writings of Lewis Mumford that Carlos Martí Arís organized and directed at EtsaB in the spring of 2007. Navigating through Mumford's immense literary production, I became interested in some of his earliest and less known publications - *Sticks and Stones*, *The Golden Day*, and the *Brown Decades*. The three books form a trilogy I refer to as Mumford's Early American Studies. There the young author takes on a journey of great insight in search for the roots of European-American culture. It is in these readings that I encountered for the first time something that was as unheard of to me as familiar to any Northern American: *the idea of wilderness*. With his captivating prose, Mumford offers a series of intriguing considerations on the fundamental role that the relationship between European colonists and the American wilderness has had in the shaping of European-American culture. Further readings helped me recognize this relationship as the very source of some of the most meaningful narratives associated with the Northern American landscape, narratives that were extraordinarily fascinating to me. At the time, I was also very inspired by Martí's reflections on the morphological transformation of post-modern cities and on the potential of 'public places in nature' to become foci of contemporary urban regions. I soon became interested in crossing these two branches of research and exploring the role of 'wilderness remnants' in today's Northern American urbanized areas. Encouraged to join the doctoral program in the spring of 2009, from the beginning I had clear in mind that this should be the topic of my dissertation. I also had clear in mind that to do so I lacked two things: a much broader background on the history and philosophy of the idea of wilderness and a deeper knowledge of the Northern American landscape. I therefore decided to travel overseas and to conduct research in an academic institution in the United States. The University of California, Berkeley was my first choice. Professor Louise Mazingo backed my intentions and sponsored my stay as a visiting scholar within the Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning for the academic year 2010-2011. The two semester sojourn of study was preceded by a cross-country field trip in the United States and Canada in which, accompanied by photographer Adrià Goula and writer Luigi Cojazzi, I visited Boston, Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland, exploring some of the potential case studies for the research. During the trip, Adrià took a series of photographs, whose subjects and aesthetics influenced my way of looking at the landscape, and a selection of which have been included in this work. While at Berkeley, I attended Paul Groth's course on American Cultural Landscapes, Louise Mazingo's course on the History of American Designed Landscape, Carolyn Merchant's course on Environmental Philosophy and Ethics, Joe McBride's courses on Ecology and Urban Forestry, and Michael Southworth's course on Landscape Theory, and participated in all activities programmed for LAEP PhD students. Throughout the year, the research acquired a solid foundation, expanded its scope, and found its specific approach. When back in Barcelona, I pulled all ideas and materials together and wrote the full manuscript I hereby present.

There are several people that made an incredible contribution to the realization of this work. My first acknowledgments go to Carlos Martí and Louise Mazingo. I thank Carlos for the esteem and the interest he demonstrated as well as for the generosity of his time and attention, providing both inspiration and guidance throughout the journey. I thank Louise for her trust as well as for her continuous mentorship during and after my stay in California. I also deeply thank Xavier Monteys for his support of my candidacy and my research. Several other professors have inspired or influenced the work: Antonio Armesto Aires and Miquel Corominas of EtsaB; Paul Groth, Carolyn Merchant, Joe McBride, Michael Southworth of the University of California, Berkeley. I also had the privilege of endless conversations on the subject matter with some very bright minds of my generation: Giovanni Cattabriga, one of the four people behind the Wu Ming collective of writers; Emanuel Giannotti, urban planner and scholar from IUAV; David de la Peña, architect, Fulbright fellow, and PhD candidate at UC Berkeley; Pedro Pinto, researcher and PhD candidate at UC Berkeley; Benjamin Golder, researcher, Fulbright fellow and Master's student at MIT; and Luigi Cojazzi, writer and activist. My gratitude goes indeed also to Adrià Goula for enthusiastically participating in this project and contributing his photographic work. I would also like to thank Nicola Lombardi for his help in the realization of the dissertation prospectus, Guido Sender for his assistance with the Spanish text; Zoe Siegel for her help with the captions; Luz Soro for her support with the administrative documentation; and Mimma Vignaroli for offering the perfect place for a writing retreat during which the work was fully completed; and last, but not least, to Lorenzo Sabbatani for his tremendous help with the graphic work on the satellite imagery. Finally, I owe my gratitude to my family for their extraordinary support and to Blanca Rocío Cendejas for helping me practically in every aspect of this work - from the review of the English text, to the moral support needed for its completion, to insightful critiques on the content, and - more importantly - for fully understanding what I was doing and why.

PREFACIO & AGRADECIMIENTOS

Algunas de las ideas fundamentales de este estudio tomaron forma durante un seminario monográfico sobre la obra de Lewis Mumford que Carlos Martí Arís organizó y dirigió en la primavera de 2007. Mientras exploraba la inmensa producción literaria de Mumford, tres de sus escritos de juventud me llamaron la atención de un modo particular: *Sticks and Stones*, *The Golden Day* y *The Brown Decades*. Los tres libros, olvidados por la crítica tras la publicación en décadas sucesivas de sus obras consideradas clásicas, conforman una auténtica trilogía que en el ámbito de mi trabajo de seminario reuní bajo el título de «los estudios americanos del joven Mumford», y representan un viaje de gran erudición y profundidad en busca de las raíces de la cultura norteamericana. Fue en estos libros que me leí por primera vez *la idea de wilderness*. Con su estilo cautivador, Mumford ofrece una serie de consideraciones sobre el papel que la relación entre hombre y wilderness ha desempeñado en la formación de la identidad de su pueblo. Lecturas sucesivas me llevaron a pensar que es precisamente en esta relación se encuentra el origen de algunas de las narraciones más poderosas que el paisaje americano ha generado y genera. En ese mismo periodo, comencé a interesarme también por las reflexiones que Carlos Martí estaba desarrollando sobre las transformaciones morfológicas de la ciudad posmoderna, y sobre la vocación que los «lugares públicos en la naturaleza» parecen tener de convertirse en nuevos fulcros de las regiones urbanas. En consecuencia, comencé a pensar que podía ser interesante cruzar estos dos temas y explorar el papel de los «fragmentos de wilderness» en las áreas urbanizadas norteamericanas contemporáneas. Animado a formar parte del programa de doctorado de la EtsaB en la primavera del 2009, desde el principio tuve claro que aquel debía ser el tema de mi tesis. Sin embargo, tenía claro también que para llevar a cabo lo que me proponía necesitaba dos cosas: un conocimiento más profundo de la historia y de la filosofía de la wilderness, y un conocimiento más profundo de los paisajes norteamericanos. Comencé así a buscar la oportunidad de viajar y estudiar en una institución académica estadounidense para adquirir esos conocimientos. La Universidad de Berkeley fue mi primera elección. Louise Mozingo apoyó mis intenciones y me acogió como visiting scholar en el Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning durante el año académico 2010-2011. A la estancia de investigación de dos semestres precedió un viaje de estudios en el que, acompañado por el fotógrafo Adrià Goula y Luigi Cojazzi, recorrí el subcontinente de costa a costa, visitando Boston, Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, Vancouver, Seattle, y Portland, pudiendo así explorar algunos de los potenciales casos de estudio de la investigación. Durante el viaje, Adrià realizó varias series de fotografías cuyo tema y estética influyeron fuertemente en mi manera de mirar el paisaje, y una selección de su trabajo ha sido incluida en la versión final de la tesis. En Berkeley pude aprovechar ampliamente los recursos bibliográficos disponibles en las bibliotecas y en los archivos universitarios, y asistí a cursos, seminarios, simposios y conferencias. Pude seguir el curso de «Paisajes culturales de Norteamérica» de Paul Groth, el curso de «Historia del paisaje norteamericano» de Louise Mozingo, el curso de «Filosofía y ética del ambiente» de Carolyn Merchant, y los cursos de «Análisis ecológico» y de «Gestión de sistemas forestales urbanos» de Joe McBride. Asimismo, participé en diversas actividades didácticas organizadas por los estudiantes de doctorado del departamento. En el transcurso del año, la investigación adquirió las bases sólidas que le eran necesarias, amplió sus objetivos, y encontró su corte específico. Una vez en Barcelona, reuní las ideas y el material que había recopilado, y redacté el manuscrito que ahora presento.

Son muchas las personas que contribuyeron de forma insustituible a la realización de este trabajo. Mi reconocimiento se dirige en primer lugar a Carlos Martí y a Louise Mozingo. Agradezco a Carlos su estima e interés en la investigación demostrado en estos años, la generosidad con la que me ha dedicado su tiempo y atención, y el haberme dado inspiración y consejo a lo largo de todo el trabajo. Agradezco a Louise su fe y apoyo, y el haber sido para mí una mentora, no solo durante mi experiencia en California, sino también en adelante. Agradezco además a Xavier Monteys su apoyo incondicional al desarrollo de la tesis. Hay muchos otros profesores que me dieron inspiración durante la investigación, y querría mencionarlos a todos: Antonio Armesto Aira y Miguel Corominas Ayala de la EtsaB; Paul Groth, Carolyn Merchant, Joe McBride, y Michael Southworth de la Universidad de Berkeley. Asimismo, tuve el privilegio de mantener largas conversaciones sobre el tema de mi investigación con algunas de las personas de mi generación a quienes tengo más estima: Giovanni Cattabriga, uno de los cuatro escritores que se esconde tras el pseudónimo de Wu Ming; Emanuel Gianotti, urbanista e investigador en el IUAV; David de la Peña, arquitecto, Fulbright fellow y doctorando en Berkeley; Pedro Pinto, investigador y doctorando en Berkeley; Benjamin Golder, investigador, Fulbright fellow, y estudiante de master en el MIT; Luigi Cojazzi, escritor y activista. Obviamente, mi gratitud también va a Adrià Goula por haber participado con entusiasmo en el proyecto ofreciendo su trabajo fotográfico. Lorenzo Sabbatani merece un agradecimiento especial por la ayuda prestada a la edición gráfica de las imágenes de satélite. Querría dar las gracias también a Nicola Lombardi por su estima, su estímulo y por su ayuda en la realización de la propuesta de tesis; Güido Sender por la atención dedicada al texto en español; Zoe Siegel por su ayuda con las imágenes; Luz Soro por su precioso apoyo en cuestiones administrativas; y Mimma Vignaroli por haberme ofrecido un lugar ideal para retirarme a escribir durante la última etapa del trabajo. Para acabar, agradezco a mi familia su extraordinario apoyo, y a Blanca Rocío Cendejas la revisión del texto en inglés, las críticas constructivas al trabajo, y muchas otras cosas imposibles de consignar en este breve escrito.

PREFAZIONE & RINGRAZIAMENTI

Alcune delle idee alla base di questo studio hanno preso forma durante un seminario monografico sull'opera di Lewis Mumford che Carlos Martí Arís ha organizzato e diretto nella primavera del 2007. Esplorando l'immensa produzione letteraria di Mumford tre scritti giovanili hanno in particolare modo attratto la mia attenzione - *Stick and Stones*, *The Golden Day*, and *the Brown Decades*. I tre libri, dimenticati dalla critica dopo la pubblicazione dei classici dei decenni successivi, formano una vera e propria trilogia che nell'ambito del mio lavoro di seminario ho ribattezzato 'gli studi americani del giovane Mumford,' e rappresentano un viaggio di grande erudizione e profondità alla ricerca della radici della cultura nordamericana. È in questi libri che mi sono imbattuto per la prima volta nella *idea di wilderness*. Con la sua accattivante prosa, Mumford offre una serie di interessanti considerazioni sul ruolo che la relazione tra uomo wilderness ha avuto nella formazione della identità del suo popolo. Successive letture mi hanno spinto a pensare che proprio in questa relazione vanno cercate le fonti di alcune delle più potenti narrazioni che il paesaggio americano è in grado di evocare. In quello stesso periodo, iniziai a interessarmi anche alle riflessioni che lo Carlos Martí stava portando avanti sulle trasformazioni morfologiche della città postmoderna e sulla vocazione dei 'luoghi pubblici nella natura' a diventare nuovi fulcri delle regioni urbane. Iniziai dunque a pensare che sarebbe stato interessante incrociare questi due temi ed esplorare il ruolo dei 'frammenti di wilderness' nelle aree urbanizzate nordamericane contemporanee. Incoraggiato a prendere parte al programma di dottorato dell'EtsaB nella primavera del 2009, fin dall'inizio avevo chiaro in mente che quello sarebbe dovuto diventare il tema della mia tesi. Avevo però anche chiaro che per poter portare a compimento tale proposito mi mancavano due cose: una più approfondita conoscenza della storia e della filosofia dell'idea di wilderness e una più approfondita conoscenza dei paesaggi nordamericani. Iniziai dunque a cercare l'opportunità di viaggiare oltreoceano e di studiare in una istituzione accademica statunitense per poter acquisire tali conoscenze. L'università di Berkeley è stata la mia prima scelta. Louise Mozingo ha appoggiato le mie intenzioni e mi ha accolto come visiting scholar al Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning per l'anno accademico 2010-2011. Il soggiorno di ricerca di due semestri è stato preceduto da un viaggio di studi in cui, accompagnato dal fotografo Adrià Goula e Luigi Cojazzi, ho attraversato il sub-continente da costa a costa, visitando Boston, Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, Vancouver, Seattle, e Portland, potendo così esplorare alcuni potenziali casi studio della ricerca. Durante il viaggio Adrià ha scattato diverse serie di foto, il cui soggetto e la cui estetica ha fortemente influenzato la mia maniera di guardare al paesaggio, ed una selezione del suo lavoro è stata inclusa nella versione finale della tesi. A Berkeley ho potuto ampiamente avvantaggiarmi delle biblioteche e degli archivi universitari, e ho seguito corsi, seminari, simposi, e conferenze. Ho potuto frequentare il corso di 'Paesaggi culturali del Nord America' di Paul Groth, il corso di 'Storia del paesaggio nordamericano' di Louise Mozingo, il corso di 'Filosofia ed etica dell'ambiente' di Carolyn Merchant, ed i corsi di 'Analisi ecologica' di 'Gestione dei sistemi forestali urbani' di Joe McBride e ho partecipato a svariate attività didattiche organizzate per gli studenti di dottorato del dipartimento. Nel corso dell'anno la ricerca ha acquisito le solide basi di cui aveva bisogno, ha ampliato le sue finalità, e trovato il suo taglio specifico. Tornato a Barcellona ho rimesso insieme le idee e il materiale raccolto, e ho redatto il manoscritto definitivo che qui presento.

Ci sono diverse persone che hanno dato un contributo insostituibile alla realizzazione di questo lavoro. La mia riconoscenza va prima di tutto a Carlos Martí e Louise Mozingo. Ringrazio Carlos per la stima nei miei confronti e l'interesse nella ricerca che ha dimostrato in questi anni, per la generosità con cui mi ha dedicato il suo tempo e la sua attenzione, e per avermi fornito ispirazione e guida per tutta la durata del lavoro. Ringrazio Louise per la fiducia e l'appoggio, e per essere stata per me un mentore non solo durante la mia esperienza in California ma anche in seguito. Ringrazio inoltre Xavier Monteys per il suo supporto incondizionato al mio percorso di tesi. Vi sono molti altri professori che hanno fornito ispirazione per la ricerca tramite le loro lezioni o tramite incontri individuali, vorrei menzionarli tutti: Antonio Armesto Aira e Miquel Corominas dell'EtsaB; Paul Groth, Carolyn Merchant, Joe McBride, Michael Southworth dell'università di Berkeley. Ho inoltre avuto il privilegio di lunghe conversazioni sul tema di ricerca con alcune delle persone della mia generazione che maggiormente stimo: Giovanni Cattabriga, una dei quattro scrittori che si cela dietro lo pseudonimo di Wu Ming; Emanuel Giannotti, urbanista e ricercatore allo IUAV; David de la Peña, architetto, Fulbright fellow e dottorando a Berkeley; Pedro Pinto, ricercatore e dottorando a Berkeley; Benjamin Golder, ricercatore, Fulbright fellow, e studente di master al MIT; Luigi Cojazzi, scrittore e attivista. La mia gratitudine va ovviamente anche a Adrià Goula per aver entusiasticamente partecipato al progetto offrendo i suoi lavori fotografici. Un ringraziamento speciale va inoltre a Lorenzo Sabbatani, per l'aiuto che mi ha dato con l'editing grafico delle immagini satellitari. Vorrei anche ringraziare Nicola Lombardi per la stima, gli stimoli, e per l'aiuto nella realizzazione della proposta di tesi; Guido Sender per essersi preso cura del testo spagnolo con grande attenzione; Zoe Siegel per il suo aiuto con le didascalie delle immagini; Luz Soro per il suo prezioso supporto nelle questioni amministrative; e Mimma Vignaroli per avermi offerto un luogo ideale per un ritiro di scrittura durante il quale ho completato il lavoro. Infine ringrazio la mia famiglia per il suo straordinario supporto e Blanca Rocío Cendejas per la revisione del testo in inglese, le critiche costruttive al lavoro, e per così tante altre ragioni che sarebbe impossibile elencarle in queste brevi scritte.





PROLOGUE
NOTES FROM A WILDERNESSLESS COUNTRY

*Even William Blake could dream of liberty on the banks of the Ohio,
if not on the banks of the Thames.*

Lewis Mumford, 1926

There is no word for wilderness in Romance languages. Not even a noun phrase can fully convey the meaning of the English term. In the prologue of his classic book “Wilderness and the American Mind” environmental historian Roderick Nash presents an array of translations taken from various bilingual dictionaries: “Thus in Spanish, wilderness is *immensidad* or *falta de cultura* (lack of cultivation); in French the equivalents are *lieu désert* (deserted place) and *solitude inculte*; Italian uses the vivid *scene di disordine e desolazione*.”¹ All demonstrate that even linguists fail in the attempt to find a convincing translation. In fact, no Neo-Latin language has a word to define a tract of land with no anthropogenic trace. The terms that derive from the Celtic word *land* and that migrated to southwestern Europe through Provençal might be the only exceptions: *lande* in French, *landa* in Italian and Spanish. Their meanings approximate that of *moor*.² Unfortunately, their use is very unusual in any nonliterary context. *Ferus*, Latin word for wild and root of adjectives such as *feroce* in Italian and *feroz* in Spanish, did not generate a single noun that can be used to describe a condition of the land. When attempting to translate *wilderness* using a single term it is therefore necessary either to choose among one of its several attributes (solitude, vastness, etc.) or to refer to a specific wild landscape: the forest, the bush, the prairie, the swamp, or the desert. When using a circumlocution, translators often combine adjectives derived from *silvaticus* (Fr. *sauvage*, It. *selvaggio*, Sp. *salvaje*) and substantives derived either from *territorium* (Fr. *territoire*, It. and Sp. *territorio*) or *natūra* (Fr. *nature*, It. *natura*, Sp. *naturaleza*). Yet the end expressions are equally unsatisfactory. While it is true that the words derived from *silvaticus* have gradually lost their specific association to the *silva*, the forest, and acquired a general meaning of *uncultivated*, expressions such as *territoire sauvage* or *nature sauvage* in French, *territorio salvaje* or *naturaleza salvaje* in Spanish, and *territorio selvaggio* or *natura selvaggia* in Italian sound almost as awkward as *savage land* or *savage nature* do in English. Furthermore, all words derived from *natūra* carry an ambiguity that makes these expression even more vague.³

¹Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 2. This entire research is greatly indebted to Nash’s work. Forty-five years since its first publication, it remains the most relevant study on the idea of wilderness in European-American culture. To write these initial pages, we extensively referred to the book’s prologue. Other direct references to Nash will appear throughout the text, especially in the section dedicated to the history of the word wilderness.

²Ottorino Pianigiani, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010). Pianigiani quotes Dante’s XIV canto of the “Inferno”: A ben manifestar le cose nove / dico che arrivammo ad una landa / che dal suo letto ogni pianta rimuove. (Clearly to manifest these novel things / I say that we arrived upon a plain / Which from its bed rejecteth every plant).

³Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992). On the ambiguity of the meaning of the word nature see the chapter “The False Dilemma Natural / Not-Natural and the notion of Anthropogenic Change.”

This lexical gap is no coincidence. Southwestern Europe has been since time immemorial a wildernessless country. Land of maximum concentration of anthropogenic trace, it has more than any other lost its ties to the wild. The idea of wilderness itself - as omnipresent as it is in Northern America - is completely absent in Romance culture.⁴

The *Pianura Padana*, point of departure of this study, is the most significant epitome of this wildernessless condition. Known in English as the Padan Plain or the Po Valley, the Pianura is a large valley formed by the Po River, Italy's longest waterway. The river flows west to east, descending down from the western alpine piedmont and debouches into the Adriatic Sea some four hundred miles away from its source. Occupying a surface area of 46,000 square kilometres, the valley lies between the southern slopes of the Alps and the northern slopes of the Emilian and Romagnol Apennines. To the northeast, the adjacent valleys of Veneto and Friuli merge with the *Pianura* forming a vast unbroken flat terrain and, although they do not belong to the Po basin, are often considered part of it. The plain constitutes the surface of the Apennine foredeep, a vast formation made of a series of canyons infilled with outwash gravel. A system of tributaries runs down from the Alps and the Apennines following the trajectory of maximum slope, toward the river and toward the coast.⁵

Originally covered by deciduous forests, deep marshlands and large coastal lagoons,⁶ by the time Rome conquered it in 196 BCE, the Padan Plain⁷ had already been partially cleared and drained for agricultural purposes by the Etruscans. The Romans took over their role, further dotting the region with settlements, clearing and draining more and more land, and proceeded to employ a series of sophisticated hydrological interventions. They founded most of their colonies at the foothills of the Alps and Apennines: to the north along the route that connected *Mediolanum* and *Aquileia*, to the south along the trajectory of an incredibly ambitious infrastructure - the *Via Aemilia*. Completed under and named after *Marcus Aemilius Lepidus*, the Via Aemilia was built between 189 and 187 BCE. The road runs in a straight line for 176 Roman miles (161 miles) along the southern edge of the Pianura, within sight of the northern foothills of the Apennines. It crosses numerous tributaries of the Po, most notably the *Trebbia*, along whose shores Hannibal achieved his victories against the Romans during his invasion of Italy, and the *Rubicone*, the river Julius Caesar crossed in 49 BCE in a deciding moment of Roman history famously recounted by Caesar himself in the *De Bello*

⁴Nash, *Op. Cit.*, 2. The author states this clearly, but touches on the matter only briefly before delving into the core subject of his study - the idea of wilderness in American culture.

⁵Carlo Cattaneo, *Notizie naturali e civili su la Lombardia* (Milano: Bernardoni Giovanni, 1844). Cattaneo describes the geography of valley through a cross-section of it from the Alps to the Apennines, detailing its hydrologic system made of the pre-alpine lakes, rivers and the *risorgive* (larks springs), distinguishing between the 'dry plain' with its small towns, small agricultural lots, each of which with its own phreatic well, from the 'wet plain' mainly occupied by latifundia.

⁶Fulco Pratesi, *Storia della Natura d'Italia* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2001).

⁷During the republican period, the Padan Valley was referred to as Gallia Cisalpina because it was then inhabited by Celtic tribes from Gaul who had colonized the area in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. In turn, Italia corresponded to the area inhabited by Italic tribes, the border between Italia and Gallia Cisalpina being an approximate line between Pisae (Pisa) and Ariminum (Rimini).

Gallico. The road began in *Ariminum* and, passing through *Forum Livi*, *Faventia*, *Bolonia*, *Mutina*, *Regium Lepidi*, and *Parma*, reached *Placentia*.⁸ Equally relevant in the history of the Padan landscape is the Roman *centuriatio*⁹, a method of land survey, measurement and subdivision that combined and further developed land surveying instruments and methods from ancient Egypt, Greece and Etruria. By this method, the subdivision (*limitatio*) of the land (*ager*) was laid out on an orthogonal grid traced with a tool known as *groma*. A distance of 10 or 20 *actus* (roughly 20 or 40 yards) separated the *limites* (parallel lines). Each square was considered to hold the proper amount of agricultural land to sustain one hundred men. During the late Republic and the Imperial Era the centuriatio of 20x20 *actus* was the most common. The *limites* were known as the *decumanus* and *cardus*: the *decumani* ran east to west, the *cardi* north to south. The first *limites* that were traced determined the orientation of the centuriation and were named *decumanus maximus* and *cardus maximus*.

Centuries of Roman domination forever determined the main features of the plain's configuration. Remains of the road system and centuriation are still clearly distinguishable in the landscape today. They persist in the form of roads, canals, ditches, agricultural plot boundaries and property lines. But Roman influence on today's territory goes far beyond. After 2200 years, the Via Aemilia and the Alpine Piedmont route are still the two most relevant axes of development and urbanization, the backbones of any regional planning operation.¹⁰ The Republic's colonies founded during and after the construction of the Via Aemilia, *Bolonia* (Bologna) in 189 BCE and *Mutina* (Modena), *Regium* (Reggio Emilia) and *Parma* in 183 BCE, are still the most important urban centres in the southern half of the region. Successive civilizations throughout the Middle Ages and the Modern Era transformed the Padan Plain's landscape as if working on a palimpsest,¹¹ in some cases ignoring, in others voluntarily erasing, but more often accentuating Roman traces, tracings and layouts. Century by century, other axes and subdivisions were added when necessary, further fragmenting and transforming the land through an infilling of the web of infrastructure. Between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, former colonies along the Via Aemilia and the Piedmont corridor would flourish as *comuni*, hubs of commerce strategically situated between the mountains and the plain. These townships generated both centripetal development in urban centres and dispersed development within the countryside.

⁸Giovanni Brizzi, "La Via Aemilia: Linea di confine e segno d'identità?" in *Via Emilia e Dintorni: Percorsi Archeologici lungo la Antica Consolare Romana* (Rimini, 2009), 29-47.

⁹*Centuratio*, *centuriationis*, from *centuriare*: to divide in centuria, one hundred parts. Each Part was a *heredium*, a unit of area corresponding to 5047 square meters.

¹⁰For further readings on the significance of the Via Aemilia axis and a comparative look between the development of the Via Aemilia and the Dutch Randstad see: Francesco Pasquale, Francesca Poli, Aurora Toma, "Il Cerchio e la linea – Randstad e Via Emilia: un confronto parallelo tra due sistemi metropolitani policentrici" in *Paesaggio Urbano*, n.3/2008. Maggioli Editori, Bologna.

¹¹*Paesaggio come Palimpsesto* (Landscape as Palimpsest) is the name of a interdisciplinary research unit at Istituto Universitario di Venezia directed by Renato Bocchi. For further readings, see: Sara Marini and Cristina Barbiani, *Il Paesaggio come Palimpsesto* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011).

The process continued slowly but incessantly up until the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth century. With extensive industrialization came massive urban concentration in Turin, Milan and Genoa. The construction of the railway improved the synergy among the three centres, by then known as the vertices of the *triangolo industriale* (the industrial triangle). The first two cities became the main hubs of Italian manufacturing, the third its major commercial harbour, attracting large numbers of workers from the countryside. Their populations doubled in less than fifty years. A new metamorphosis ensued following the second world war, ignited by the *miracolo economico*, the post-war economic boom of the 1950s. Unprecedented economic growth, combined with random localization of activities, made possible by regional planning deregulation and loose zoning, generated a distinct process of industrialization and suburbanization of the rural land. The territory of the Pianura Padana began to support a new economy that progressively complemented the typical heavy industry of the *triangolo industriale* and partially substituted the agricultural activity of the valley with a light and diffused swarm of small manufactories and enterprises producing high-quality goods and services. By the turn of the century, the process had brought immense wealth and growth to the region: the single provinces of Padova, Venice and Treviso, making up fifteen percent of the Pianura's land area, counted with roughly five hundred thousand companies. As of today the Padan Plain is one of the richest and most productive areas globally, the foremost component of the world's seventh largest economy.

In the current configuration the new, dispersed, small-grained industrial tissue is sown amidst remaining agricultural lands, urban settlements, suburban developments, commercial facilities, and the network of roads and rails that make up the regional infrastructure. Not dense enough to be called a city as we know it, but too dense to be called by any other name, most of the Pianura Padana is a large array of poles of concentration of various sizes gravitating in an infinite mass of low-density, highly differentiated development. It is a constellation of ancient urban centres around which rise the mid-century *periferie* ('the outskirts') and more recent urban expansions, suburban developments, working farms and their agricultural land, industrial buildings ranging in scale from the large plant to the small manufacturer, warehouses, high-tech service hubs, churches, convents and monasteries, remains of feudal strongholds and patrician villas, shopping malls, and office parks. As of today many are tempted to look at the Po Plain as a sole, immense, polynucleated urban landscape¹² that houses approximately twenty million people, almost one third of the Italian population, within urban, rural, and suburban settlements. This twenty million inhabitant quasi-city develops along two higher density corridors that follow the trajectory of the two axes of Roman infrastructure traced two thousand years ago: one runs today from Turin to Venice and Udine, passing through Milan¹³ and the other runs west to southeast from Turin to Rimini passing through Bologna. The low plains in between the two axes maintain a more rural character. Along the axes, population density averages approximately 350 people per square kilometre, in the low plains

¹²We adopted this term from: Michael Beatty, "Polynucleated Urban Landscapes" in *Urban Landscape* (Urban Studies April 2001 vol. 38 no. 4 635-655). The expression polynucleated city was coined by Lewis Mumford.

¹³A secondary vertical axis connects Milan to Genoa.

approximately 175 people per square kilometre. Some scholars have started to refer to this colossal conurbation as the *Città Diffusa*, the diffused city. This expression was used for the first time by Francesco Indovina and by a group of researchers he led at the department of City and Regional Planning at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV), and originally defined the low-density urban realm of the Veneto region, but increasingly it can now be used to describe the entire region.

Scholars continue to debate over the nature of this post-modern landscape. In *La Megalopoli Padana*,¹⁴ Italian geographer Eugenio Turri describes the Città Diffusa as a “an indifferent city, a non-place, a non-geography” that is “growing wildly like a field sown without care” and that “has overrun the Pianura Padana with its development, grossly wasting the space, wasting the green, wasting the silence’, like “a flood that has buried the once visible landscape beneath its waters, leaving only a few ruins exposed, intact.” To him, “the megalopoli padana is incredibly voracious... it consumes history, it sows destruction, it erases memory.” The Pianura Padana, once “one of the most beautiful and hospitable regions of Europe... is today a wasted land.”¹⁵ In his compelling comparative look at the Los Angeles metropolitan region and the città diffusa of Veneto, late American geographer Denis Cosgrove presents a radically different point of view. After studying what had been the Venetian Palladian landscape for a long stretch of his career, in the last years of his life Cosgrove became fascinated by the transformations the territory was then undertaking.¹⁶ His observations focus on the “vibrancy of its space economy” and on the incredible diversity of the landscape: “multiple, formerly independent, urban centres and 580 *comuni* that have coalesced economically into a polynucleated mosaic of increasingly interdependent residential, industrial, commercial, agricultural, recreational land use zones... Thus in the lands between Vicenza and Padua, or Treviso and Pordenone that were purely agrarian until the 1980s, corn grows in a field adjacent to a smoked-glass superconductor factory, a gold jewellery workshop and a furniture hypermarket. The 16th century villa and its garden or the 18th century *barchesse* stands next to the modern residence built on artificial rise above the drainage ditches of a former rice field.” Having offered this rich description, he also proceeds to caution against the risk of simplistic interpretation: “While the forces of contemporary change inevitably generate tensions, to suggest that their only outcome is 'loss of place', 'unworldment', or 'inauthenticity' represents a failure of imagination and empathy with the richly varied ways that people live in and continuously manipulate their worlds, in favor of an intellectually fashionable Heideggerian angst.”¹⁷

¹⁴Emilio Turri, *La megalopoli padana* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2000).

¹⁵“La città diffusa... finisce con l’essere la città indifferente, il non-luogo, l’a-geografia”, “cresciuta come un campo seminato senza cura, selvaggiamente”, “una macchia che sembra simile a un fenomeno canceroso, un’escrescenza, una muffa”, “ha riempito la pianura di edificazioni, con sprechi enormi di spazio, di verde, di silenzi”, “un’alluvione che ha sepolto il paesaggio ereditato, lasciando scoperti, cioè intatti solo... pochi relitti”, “la megalopoli è una divoratrice di spazio e di storia formidabile, semina distruzioni, cancella memorie”, “edificata su una delle terre più belle ed ospitali d’Europa... è oggi una terra guastata dall’intensa antropizzazione.” For further readings, see also: Aldo Bonomi & Alberto Abruzzese, ed., *La Città Infinita* (Turin: Bruno Mondadori, 2004), and Ermanno Cavazzoni, et al, *Esplorazioni Sulla Via Emilia: Scritture sul Paesaggio* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1986).

¹⁶Denis E. Cosgrove, “Los Angeles and the Italian Città Diffusa: Landscapes of Cultural Space Economy,” *Landscapes of a New Cultural Economy of Space* 5, no. (2006): 69-91.

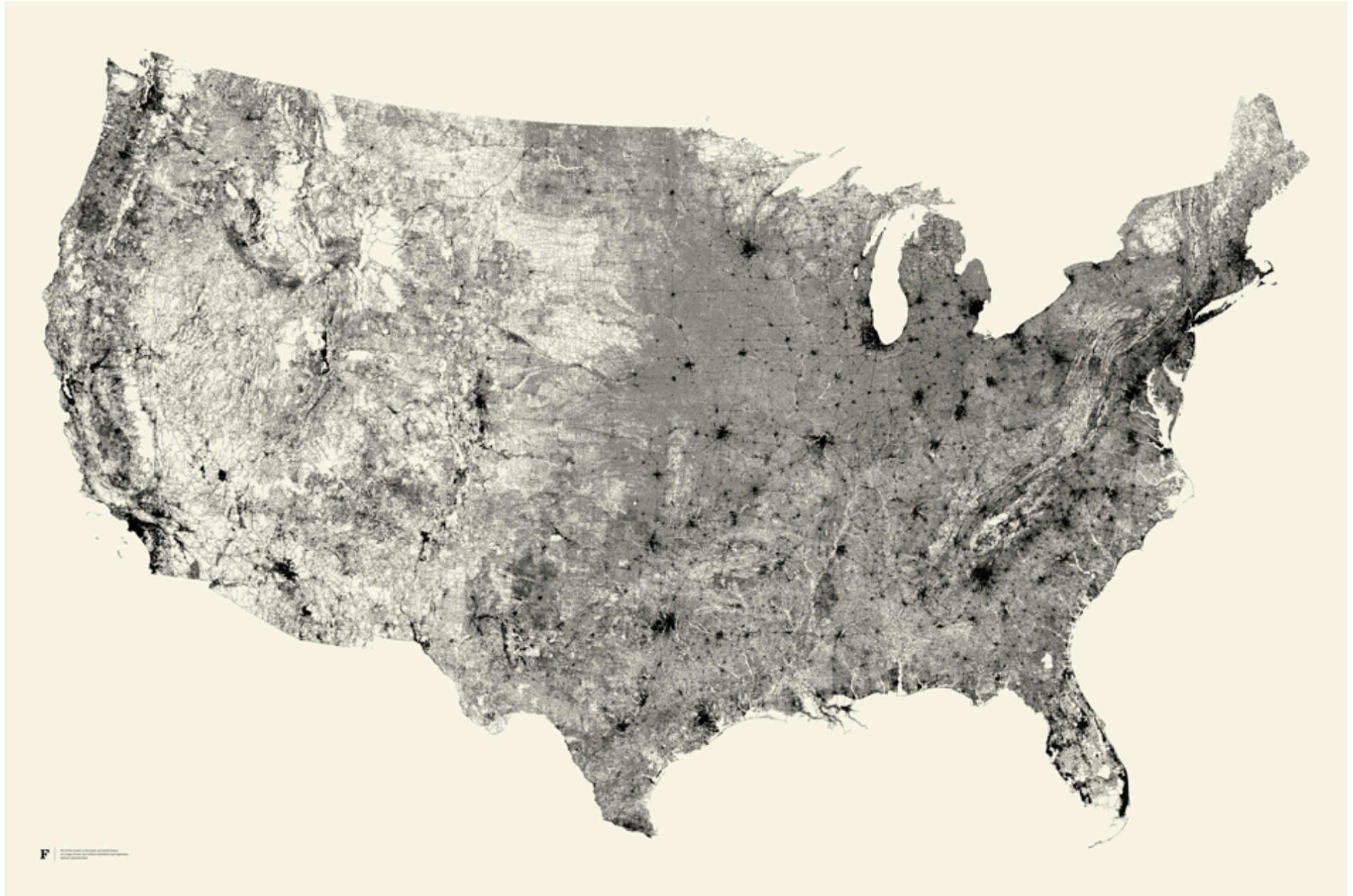
¹⁷Cosgrove: Op. Cit.

These two positions reflect a common polarization within the debate on postmodern landscapes. However, the scope of this present discussion is not tackling the vexata quaestio of the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ nature of the Città Diffusa. We are instead interested in pointing out that neither Turri nor Cosgrove specifically mention what is to us its most defining character: its endemic lack of wildness. The density of settlement and intensity of land use throughout the three millennia of the valley’s human history have resulted in the exhaustive obliteration of any fragment of wilderness. The twentieth century marked the definitive loss of the original landscape: the last forests were reduced to a few small scattered patches, the last marshes and lagoons were reclaimed through the *bonifica* (the drainage operations) systematically carried out during the Fascist Regime or transformed into dykes and pools for activities such as fish farming or salt harvesting. Yet, it is not only the physical lack of wild land that makes the Pianura Padana a wildernessless country, rather it is the fact that all of its symbolic references for what is wild have for long been lost as well. The land has been surveyed, subdivided, cleared, drained, and cultivated too many times to convey any sense of the unknown; its mysteriousness having been stripped too long ago. In such a territory any activity of exploration has become impossible, even getting lost is a hopeless endeavour. Cultural traces are omnipresent, and the flat terrain makes even more patent the redundancy of the anthropization: after every familiar landscape made of tree farms, forage crops, canals and ditches, there is yet another, equally familiar. Not even the proximity of the Alps can make up for the absence of the wild. Although it is true, as Cosgrove poignantly noted, that just as one can get a glimpse of the San Gabriel Mountains from downtown L.A., one can see the Alps from the plains of the Città Diffusa,¹⁸ the high valleys and slopes of the Alps are only able to recall a sense of pastoral beauty, their rocky summits and passes having been conquered too many times since Hannibal crossed them with hundreds of horses and war pachyderms two thousand years ago to be compared to the still wild San Gabriels.¹⁹ Moreover, while the Californian mountain range is the gate to the American wilderness of the Southwest, the Alps are a mere hiatus in the continuously urbanized corridor of the ‘European Backbone.’

In this age on the verge of exhaustive urbanization, this country that has no wildness, inhabited by a people that have no word for wilderness, is a vivid image of what an increasing number of our populated regions are becoming. This is why, for all scholars interested in postmodern landscapes, this wildernessless country is a place to see and explore. For this writer it is instead a far too familiar homeland, a place to leave in search of other regions where the urban and the wild have not overridden each other and instead coexist side by side, strengthening each other’s character and meaning; other countries where the word wilderness not only *exists*, but where it can still be used to describe places that are only steps away from some of the most bustling manifestations of urbanity.

¹⁸Cosgrove, Op. Cit.

¹⁹Paolo Rumiz, *Annibale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2008).



INTRODUCTION

URBAN TERRITORIES & WILDERNESS

*Sometimes I wonder if the world's so small
That we won't ever get away from the sprawl.*

Arcade Fire, 2010

More people than ever before are living in cities. In just the last three decades, the number of urban dwellers worldwide has increased by almost two billion units. The only cities with more than one million inhabitants in the year 1900, London, Paris, Berlin, and New York, are now just four among the 468 cities that have reached such population figures,²⁰ while almost fifty urban areas already exceed a population of five million people. Recent demographic surveys report that for the first time in history the number of people living in an urban environment equals that of those living in a non-urban environment and that - most notably - this ratio will rampantly increase from 1:1 to 2:1 in the next twenty years.²¹ While predictions confirm the consistency of these trends in every continent, growth is not at all uniform. For instance, while Shenzhen, the most prolific Special Economic Zone of the Guangdong Province of China, has seen a 3000 percent increase in its population in the last thirty years, in the very same period of time, Detroit has lost more than half of its inhabitants.²² Despite unprecedented global urban growth, the phenomenon of shrinking cities persists, not only in Europe and North America, but also in developing countries normally associated with absolute growth like India. India's most populous city, Mumbai, is seeing a loss of city dwellers from its centre in favour of the vast slums that surround it.²³

On a global scale, urban expansion is following two different patterns. Within emerging economies, growth is still often characterized by the centripetal force of the metropolis and a consequent urban concentration. In Europe and in Northern America, the central preoccupation of scholars and planners is the ungovernable process of rural and suburban dispersion.²⁴ Looking at a few figures can again help better illustrate these phenomena. Phoenix's population is half of the population of Hong Kong but its surface area is five times bigger; on average, the square footage occupied by one household in Phoenix, houses

²⁰Thomas Brinkhoff, "Major Agglomeration of the World," *City Population*, last modified April, 1, 2013, accessed April, 28, 2013, <http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html>.

²¹*Global Cities Institute*, accessed April, 28, 2013, <http://globalcities.aecom.com>.

²²*Ibid.*

²³UNFPA, *State of World Population*, UNFPA 2011.

²⁴*Ibid.*

ten in the Chinese Giant. Similar figures hold true when assessing the difference between low-density urban regions such as the Veneto Plains, the Flandres, the Ruhr, the Randstad, Los Angeles and Riverside, Dallas and Fort Worth, Miami, and dense metropolises such as Manila, Delhi, Tehran, Cairo, Lagos, and Kinshasa.²⁵

The dramatic consequences of overpopulation are well known and have been widely documented, yet the phenomenon of urban dispersion is garnering increasing attention. Firstly because while overpopulation in the cities of emerging economies can be seen as a perpetuation of a process undergone in Europe and the United States since the Industrial Revolution, low-density urbanities instead have virtually no precedent in history. Secondly because in the foreseeable future dispersion will likely concern emerging economies as well, and it will be aggravated by the fact that the number of urban-dwellers involved will be exponentially higher. There are already several signs pointing toward an inversion of the urban growth pattern in developing countries including the recent data on the average density of South East Asian metropolises such as Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur that approximate those of North American cities.²⁶ And thirdly - and most importantly - because urban dispersion calls into question our very conception of what a city is or can be.

Looking at the process of dispersion European cities have been undertaking in the last decades, scholars such as Indovina, Font and Portas, speak of ‘the explosion of the city.’²⁷ Their studies tackle the territorial expansion cities such as Naples, Milan, Paris, Marseille, Barcelona, and Madrid experienced after the second world war, continuing the scholarship initiated by Indovina himself in the late nineteen eighties. Together with other researchers of the IUAV group within the Department of Urban Studies including Secchi, Indovina coined the phrase *Città Diffusa*,²⁸ ‘diffused city’ to define the quasi-urban reality the plains of Veneto where transforming into and in so doing opened a fruitful season of research on urban ‘rarefaction’ in Europe. An equally relevant debate has addressed the out-of-control sprawlification of Northern America, also producing a substantial outpouring of scholarly work. Most recently publications such as *Suburban Nation* by Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck²⁹ and *Sprawl: A Compact History* by Bruegmann have had strong resonance.³⁰ Each brings a plethora of pro and anti sprawl considerations to the table. Both studies emerge from a strong list of predecessors. K.T. Jackson³¹ examined the retreat from American

²⁵ “Demographia,” *Demographia World Urban Area*, 9th Annual Edition, March 2013, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua.pdf>.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Antonio Font Arellano, et al., *L'esplosione della città: Barcelona, Bologna, Donostia-Bayonne, Genova, Lisbona, Madrid, Marsiglia, Milano, Montpellier, Napoli, Porto, Valencia, Veneto Centrale* (Bologna: Compositori, 2005).

²⁸Francesco Indovina, *La Città diffusa* (Venezia: DAEST, 1990).

²⁹Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2010).

³⁰Robert Bruegman, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

³¹Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

downtowns and the rise of the bourgeois suburban life at the beginning of the nineteenth century and its slow metamorphosis into the limitless suburbia of present day. Joel Garreau expatiated on the postmodern condition of the edge-cities.³² Kunstler described the condition of the sprawl as the “geography of nowhere;”³³ and decades earlier Jane Jacobs had vehemently lamented the loss of the quality of urban life experienced when Americans began moving out of their cities’ dense downtowns.³⁴ The European and the Northern American debates have on some occasions converged and more than one author has proposed a comparative look at the phenomenon of low-density urban development in Europe and in North America such as the one by Denis Cosgrove on Los Angeles and the *Città Diffusa* of Veneto, mentioned in the previous section, or *Sprawl-Town* by Richard Ingersoll.³⁵

All of these analyses address the deterioration of the centre-centric model and the rise of other forms of urbanities.³⁶ European and Northern American cities are no longer exclusively mono-centric centripetal entities. They overflow traditional confines, flooding the former *extra-urbe*, and cluster with adjacent centres with which they connect creating vast conurbations. In some cases they become polycentric systems forming across several foci and along lineal infrastructures; in others they mutate into centre-less “vast territories of extensive development with urban functions”³⁷ deconstructing previous territorial hierarchies.

Possibly the most relevant aspect of this mutation is the new relationship urbanities are establishing with the territory as a whole. The ‘explosion of the city’ is, in fact, radically changing the morphological characteristics that had defined cities throughout history. While cities, regardless of the blurriness of their boundaries, had always been enclosed entities surrounded by cultivated landscape and wild land, they are now beginning to merge into continuous urban territories that enclose the rural and the wild land within their very fabric. This radical change in the topological relation between the city and the country is a copernican revolution that is turning the territory literally inside out.³⁸ Taking what Gottmann defined as the *Northeastern Megalopolis* in his celebrated study³⁹ as a matter of example can help us better understand this topological inversion. The megalopolis of the Northeast is comprised of individual cities - Boston, Providence, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington D.C. - that are now merging into a sole urban territory, containing a system of rural and wild

³²Joel Garreau, *Edge Cities Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

³³James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1994).

³⁴Jane Jacob, *The Death and the Life of the Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

³⁵Richard Ingersoll, *Sprawlown: Looking for the City on Its Edges* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).

³⁶Roberto Mastromarini, *Dalla Città Diffusa Ai Territori Della Dispersione. Trasformazioni Urbane E Legami Sociali in Una Lettura Teorica Di Sintesi*, paper (Alessandria, Italy: Presented at AIS Conference, March 2010).

³⁷Ibid., 9, “territorio ampio, a sviluppo estensivo [...] e a funzionalità urbana”.

³⁸Carlos Martí, *La Cimbra y el Arco* (Madrid: Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2004), 83.

³⁹Jean Gottmann, *Megalopolis: The urbanized northeastern seaboard of the United States* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1961).

enclaves within the triangulation of its web.⁴⁰ At the present state many other American cities are similarly progressively merging into a few urban megaregions. The American Regional Planning Association has identified ten emerging clusters in addition to Gottmann's case study: the Piedmont Atlantic, including Atlanta, Charlotte, Raleigh, Nashville, Memphis, Birmingham, Knoxville, Chattanooga and more; the Florida Coast that spreads across the whole peninsula with the exception of the Everglades system; the Great Lakes, including Chicago, Toronto, Detroit, Minneapolis, Saint Louis, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Ottawa, Louisville, Rochester and Madison; the Gulf Coast from Pensacola to Matamores; the Texas Triangle, whose vertices are Houston, Dallas, and Austin; the Front Range that includes Denver and Boulder; the Arizona Sun Corridor, that runs from Phoenix to Nogales; Cascadia, that includes, Vancouver, Seattle, Olympia, Spokane, Portland and Eugene; Northern California, that includes the whole San Francisco Bay Area and stretches northeastward to Sacramento; and Southern California, where the Los Angeles metropolitan region, Orange County and San Diego are welding together. Similar entities have been identified in Europe including the Padan Plain in Italy, the Trans Apennine Corridor in England, and the Blue Banana, which connects the Italian plain with the English corridor across the Alps and the English Channel.

In the foreseeable future, as this process continues to unfold, the fragments of non-city included within vast urban territories will play an essential role. Urban and peri-urban agriculture are already proving to offer great potential. Urban farming is steadily growing in popularity in several urban regions of Northern America and Europe, contributing significantly in building community and neighbourhood life. Shrinking cities in particular, with their drastic loss of population and their newfound acres of vacant land, are emerging as centres for initiatives regarding agriculture and are becoming laboratories of experimentation of new practices for the postindustrial city.⁴¹ However, agricultural lands are not the only fragments of non-city within the urban territory that can help mitigate the endemic problems related to its vastness. Another 'welcome intruder' may have even more potential than urban farmland: urban wilderness. While within this study we will offer a more thorough definition of urban wilderness, for now using this expression we refer to all fragments of urban areas that have escaped the process of intensive anthropogenic change, offering a peak into spontaneous natural processes. Their resilience despite the pressures of urbanization depends on different factors, we are dealing with: protected areas, areas that have not been developed because of their orographic and hydrographic features, areas that could have been developed but remain inaccessible, areas that have been developed but subsequently abandoned letting vegetation and wildlife progressively erase the evidence of their previous use. Varying in form and in physiographic feature, they range from large natural systems to minute green interstices nestled within the urban fabric. Often linked with each other or with larger wildernesses beyond the confines of the urbanized area, they form what in this study we will define as *the urban wilderness system*.

⁴⁰Stefano Boeri, *USE Uncertain State of Europe: Multiplicity USE - A Trip Through a Changing Europe* (Milano: Skira, 2003).

⁴¹Kimberly Hodgson, Marcia Caton Campbell, Martin Bailkey, *Urban Agriculture: Growing Healthy, Sustainable Places* (Chicago: APA, 2010).

Urban ecology is delving deeply into the study of these urban wilds, illustrating the role they play in offering necessary refuges for biodiversity and in maintaining environmental balance within metropolitan regions. Authoritative scientific literature has called for their conservation and brought their cause for the first time to centre stage of the debate on contemporary cities. Such studies are progressively institutionalizing urban wilderness as a new and necessary element within urban systems. At the same time, communities are demonstrating a growing interest in urban wilds as places for recreation. The use of these areas as alternatives to traditional urban open space is fostered in response to the need to re-establish a rapport between city dwellers and nature. In fact, there it is possible to carry out activities of exploration and play - as well as contemplation and solitary reflection - that are otherwise impossible within cities.

However, we believe that the significance of urban wilderness remnants goes beyond their ecological and recreational value. This study aims to investigate the role they often have in structuring the overall morphology of vast urban territories and in providing their surroundings with a distinct sense of place. For such a study, we think that no geographic context is more appropriate than Northern America. Despite the cases of population loss in the urban centres of the rust belt and other de-industrializing areas, the urban areas of the United States continue to grow extensively, especially in the Atlantic Piedmont, the South Central West, and the Southwest Mountain regions. The U.S. continues to be the most highly urbanized country in the world and it will remain so in the foreseeable future. Today, eighty percent of its population lives in a urban area, by 2050 estimates show this figure will increase to ninety-five percent, when the country, if the predictions are confirmed by facts, will virtually become a solely urban nation. Yet, this solely urban nation is also the one that generated a unique narrative around the idea of wilderness. It is the one that declared the physiographic features of its landscape to be national monuments, and that has sought in the wild and beautiful fragments of its territory an image of the cultural values with which it identifies as a nation and people.

This dissertation will therefore focus on an exploration of Northern American urban wilderness remnants: we will first investigate the semantic substratum of the idea of wilderness in Northern America and then explore some of the places within major Northern American cities that most vividly evoke this substratum. The work is composed of two parts. The first chapter of the first part examines the history of the idea of wilderness, the transformations of its connotations, and its significance in Northern American culture. The second chapter deals with the ambiguous meaning of the word *natural* and with the consequences of such ambiguity, the dilemmas associated with the oxymoronic proposition of managing the wild and the conflicts related to wilderness preservation. The third chapter finally offers a tentative definition of urban wilderness and describes the common and unifying characteristics of urban wildernesses, proposing a taxonomy of wilderness remnants in the city. The second part employs this taxonomy to examine fifteen case studies. Ordered into five chapters according to their dominant original landscape - (1) woodlands, (2) grasslands, (3) shrublands, (4) wetlands, and (5) deserts - each case is an emblematic *locus ferus* in the heart of an American metropolis.

PART I

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF URBAN WILDERNESS



CHAPTER 1

THE EXTRAORDINARY SEMANTIC JOURNEY OF THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS

*They looked toward the wilderness,
and, behold, the glory of the LORD
appeared in the cloud.*

Exodus 16:10

1.1 The Semantic Journey of the Word Wilderness

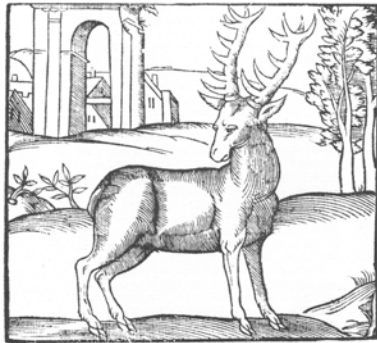
contrast to the stark absence of correspondent words in Romance tongues, the term *wilderness* has exceptional significance in the English language. From the Tudor Age, in which the word was adopted for the first time, to present day, its meaning has relentlessly evolved through a series of linguistic migrations, acquiring connotations¹ that today form a uniquely rich semantic substratum. The first pages of Nash's book are undoubtedly a good point of departure for retracing the story of the word. The following paragraphs expand upon Nash's argumentation in the direction we considered most relevant for the development of our study.

¹In this text we use the words *denotation*, *connotation*, and *acceptation* according to their common meaning in linguistics. The denotation is therefore "the direct specific meaning as distinct from an implied or associated idea"; the connotation is "the suggesting of a meaning by a word apart from the thing it explicitly names or describes"; acceptance is "the generally accepted meaning of a word or understanding of a concept." Merriam-Webster OnLine, s.v. "denotation," "connotation," and "acceptation," accessed February 21, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>.

On the previous page: Fig.1, Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite Valley*, 1944.

Top: Fig.2, The Wild-deor, Xylography from: Sir Thomas Cockaine, *A Short Treatise of Hunting: Compyled for the delight of Noble men and Gentlemen*, London: Thomas Woodcocke, 1591.

Below: Fig.3, The entry of the word *wilderness* in the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology.



Wild-deor, es; n. [wild *wild*, *deor* a beast; hence perhaps with *nesse*, or *-nes*, our Eng. word **WILDERNESS**] *A wild beast; fera, bellua, Lev. 26, 6: Ex. 22, 13: 23, 11: Lev. 26, 22: 79, 14: Dt. 38, 2: Bd. S. p. 554, 24: Gen. 31.*

Wilderness derives from the Anglo-Saxon term *wildeoren*, which is a contraction of the compound *wild-dēor-ness*,² in use since the beginning of the thirteenth century. *Wild*, *wilde* in Old English, stems from the Proto-Germanic *willhijaz* through the Old High German (*wildi*) and Old Norse (*villr*). In its original form it meant ‘willed’, wilful or self-willed.³ The Old English *Dēor* stems from the Proto-Germanic *deuzam* through the Old High German (*tior*) and Old Norse (*dyr*). It meant wild animal, beast, its meaning narrowing throughout centuries to become the modern English *deer*. *Wild* and *dēor* combined together in the contracted form *wilddēor* make their first appearance in the lines of the “Beowulf” contained in the “Nowell Codex,” in reference to fantastic wild creatures inhabiting mountains, forests, and moors.⁴ With the addition of the suffix *-ness* (often also appearing as *-nes* or *-nesse*) the term defined the condition - or the place - of the *wild-dēor*. We might say: how the wild beast is, or where the wild beasts are, or, as beautifully paraphrased by Maurice Sendak in the title of his 1963 classic children’s book: “Where the Wild Things Are.”⁵

The first recorded usage of the word *wilderness* goes back to the “Brut,”⁶ the Middle English poem compiled by English clergyman Lawamon between 1190 and 1205. Written at a time in which French and Latin were the dominant literary languages, the poem is largely based on

²Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “wilderness”.

³Nash, Op. Cit., 1. The Proto-Indio-European root seems to be *ghwelt* (cf. Welsh *gwyllt* “untamed”), the same of the Latin word *ferus*.

⁴Nash, Op. Cit., 2.

⁵Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988).

⁶The poem is sometimes also referred to as “The Chronicle of Britain.”

Wace's Anglo-Norman⁷ poem "Roman de Brut." Its sixteen thousand verses narrate the history of Britain, making it the first historiography written in English after the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Named after Britain's mythical founder, Brutus of Troy, the poem is the first English text to tell the tales of Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. Unlike in "Roman de Brut," in Layamon's poem, the verses dedicated to the life and exploits of King Arthur occupy a conspicuous part of the opus. In the "Arthurian" section of the Brut, the word wilderness appears at the very beginning of the narration:

At Totnes Constantin the fair and all his host came ashore; thither came the bold man - well was he brave! - and with him two thousand knights such as no king possessed. Forth they gan march into London, and sent after knights over all the kingdom, and every brave man, that speedily he should come anon.

The Britons heard that, where they dwelt in the pits; in earth and in stocks they hid them like badgers, in wood and in wilderness, in heath and in fen, so that well nigh no man might find any Briton, except they were in castle, or in burgh inclosed fast.⁸

As Nash argues, a precise meaning of wilderness as a forested landscape is defensible since the etymological roots of the word are limited to



Fig4: The *Wilder Mann*, the wild man of the woods, German Heraldry Xylography, 1487.

⁷Anglo-Norman, was a variant of the *Langue d'oïl* spoken in England between the 11th and the 14th centuries.

⁸William R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg, *Layamon's Arthur: The Arthurian Section of the Brut* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005).



Nordic languages.⁹ In the High Middle Ages, forests still covered most of the continent's open country, especially that occupied by the Germanic people.¹⁰ The theory according to which *wild* shares etymological roots with *weald*,¹¹ the Old English word for forest that today survives in the modern German *wald*, would further support this assumption. Other evidence can be found in the *Brut* itself, in the recurring literary topos such as "he came into a wood, into a wilderness", "the woods and the wilderness", "out of the woods and out of the wilderness", "to a wilderness, to a mickle wood", "over wealds and over wilderness", where *woods* and *wilderness* seem to be used as synonyms mutually reinforcing each other.¹² The denotation of the word *wilderness* at the time is therefore clear - the term referred solely to the wild woods.

Undoubtedly more nuanced yet equally traceable are the word's connotations. Firstly, *wilderness* described an intrinsically inhospitable place. Its common attributes included vastness, darkness, inclement climate, and the presence of ferocious animals. The word alluded to the hostile character of the landscape, to its threats and dangers, functioning as an antonym for *settlement* or even for *home*. Wilderness was also thought to have a corrupting power: it was 'bewildering'- able to awake or enhance the wild side of 'human nature', to bring men and women back to the original feral condition that preceded civilization.¹³ Secondly,

⁹Nash, *Op. Cit.*, 2.

¹⁰Roland Bechmann, *Le monde de la forêt* (Lausanne: Payot, 2011).

¹¹Sometimes spelled 'woeld.'

¹²Barron and Weinberg, *Op. Cit.*

¹³Nash, *Op. Cit.*, 3.

wilderness referred to places to run away to and through, to hide in, places where men and women could be forced into exile or where one would choose to self-exile. Thirdly, *wilderness* was not just the place where the wild things were, it was also the place where the mythical, the mystical, and the magical lived. Forests swarmed with imaginary beings,¹⁴ not just in Anglo-Saxon mythology, but in every folklore across Central and Northern Europe. Spirits, elves, boggarts, trolls, and wild-men were in most cases associated with the wild open country. Some of them were demoniac or simply evil and were feared, others were considered good creatures and were adored, even if with the typical sense of fear that characterized the cult in pre-scientific times. Wilderness was therefore also a place of cult. In Anglo-Saxon England and in Scandinavia, the population commonly worshipped outdoors, among trees, stones, cairns and wells.¹⁵ In their historical accounts of Germanic populations, both Pliny and Lucan describe their surprise in discovering that druids did not meet in temples but outdoors; in Tacitus' *Germania*, we read:

The Germans, however, do not consider consistent with the grandeur of celestial beings to confine the gods within walls, or to liken them to the form of any human countenance. They consecrate woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to the abstraction which they see only in spiritual worship.¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., 11.

¹⁵Ibid., 44.

¹⁶Tacitus, *Germania* IX.





Fig.7: John Wycliffe, 1320-1384, English Theologian.

In the following page, Fig.8: Frontespiece of the first edition of the King James Bible, 1611.

On the previous page, Fig.5 & Fig.6: Bernard Picart, "The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Various Nations," 1725. The engraving represents the religious ceremonies in the woods of the Saami, ugro-finnic people of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the Baltic.

Sacred groves known as *nemeta* had great relevance in most Celtic cults. Still today, toponyms that refer to *nemeton* can be found as far west as Galicia and as far east as Anatolia. Descriptions of *nemeta* are present in Lucan's *Pharsalia*:

No bird nested in the nemeton, nor did any animal lurk nearby; the leaves constantly shivered though no breeze stirred. Altars stood in its midst, and the images of the gods. Every tree was stained with sacrificial blood. The very earth groaned, dead yews revived; unconsumed trees were surrounded with flame, and huge serpents twined round the oaks. The people feared to approach the grove, and even the priest would not walk there at midday or midnight lest he should then meet its divine guardian.¹⁷

In the first centuries of its usage, therefore, the word *wilderness* referred to the wild forest and to all of its connotations - a hostile place, to go to only if forced into exile or if willing to meet with the deity. Then, in the late fourteenth century, came the first sharp semantic turn: John Wycliffe,¹⁸ scholastic philosopher, dissident theologian, and author of the first complete translation of the Bible into English, chooses the word

¹⁷Lucan, *Pharsalia* III.

¹⁸Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "John Wycliffe," accessed February 13, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/650168/John-Wycliffe>. His name is also spelled Wycliff, Wyclif, Wicliffe, or Wiclif (born c. 1330, Yorkshire, England—died December 31, 1384, Lutterworth, Leicestershire). He is considered one of the precursors of the Protestant Reformation. In 1378 he began an attack against the practices of the Church requesting it renounce worldly possessions. The Lollards, a heretical group, propagated his controversial views.

*wilderness*¹⁹ to translate terms such as *desertum* (*desert*) and *solitudo* (*solitude*) that appeared in the *in volgare* version he used as primary source for his work. Uninhabitable and uncultivable semi-desertic land dominated the Near East in biblical times. This landscape was found just outside the city of Jerusalem, spreading across Palestine on both sides of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, toward both the Sinai and Arabic Peninsula. “In order to distinguish it from the ‘good’ land which supported crops and herd, the ancient Hebrews used a number of terms”²⁰ which had been translated into Latin and Vulgate mainly as *desertum* and *solitudo*. They all referred to the landscape in which so many crucial events of the Bible took place. Wycliff not only chooses the word *wilderness* to refer to the uncultivated open country, he combines it with other words creating memorable place names such as the notorious “Wilderness of Sin.” The word appears dozens of times throughout his text. Catholic authorities tried to destroy all of Wycliffe’s Bible copies, but the fact that today about 150 partial or complete manuscripts still exist, demonstrates how widely diffused the manuscript was at the time. When translating the Testaments directly from Greek and Hebrew to produce his version published in 1526, William Tyndale will borrow conspicuously from Wycliffe’s own work, reaffirming the choice of the word. Subsequently, the famous King James Bible - that in turn borrowed conspicuously from Tyndale’s work - will canonize the usage for good. In the Bible’s mid-twentieth century “Revised Standard Version,” *wilderness* appears 245 times in the Old Testament and 35 in the New Testament. From then on, the meaning of the word becomes much broader, continuing to

¹⁹The word is spelled ‘wildirnesse’ in his text.

²⁰Nash, *Op. Cit.*, 13.

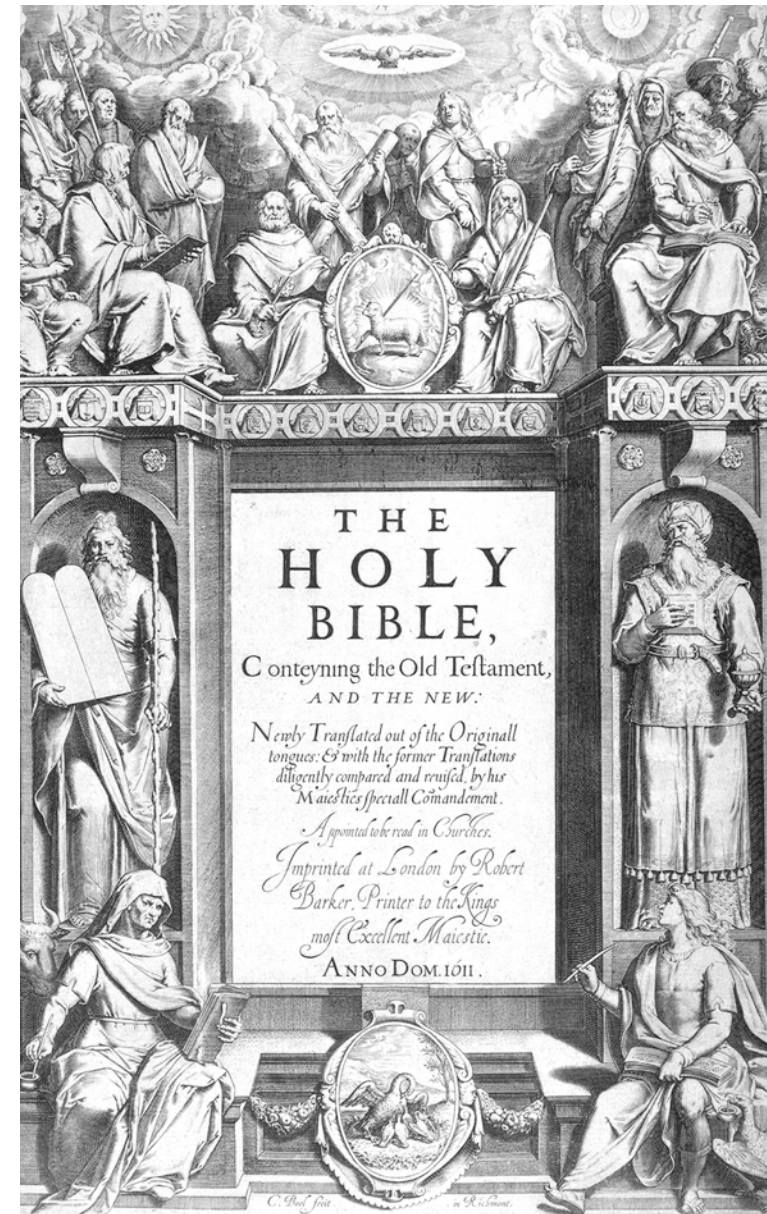




Fig8: Sunday School Union, *Handbook of Bible Geography*, “Egypt and the Wilderness,” Map N. 2, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1877.

On the following page, Fig9: Sunday School Union, *Handbook of Bible Geography*, “Canaan,” Map N. 3, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1877.

refer to the forested landscape but - curiously - also to its counter biome: the desert.

Forsooth Moses said, This is the word which the Lord commanded, Fill thou an omer thereof, and be it kept into generations to coming afterward, that they know the bread with which I fed you in wilderness, when ye were led out of the land of Egypt.²¹

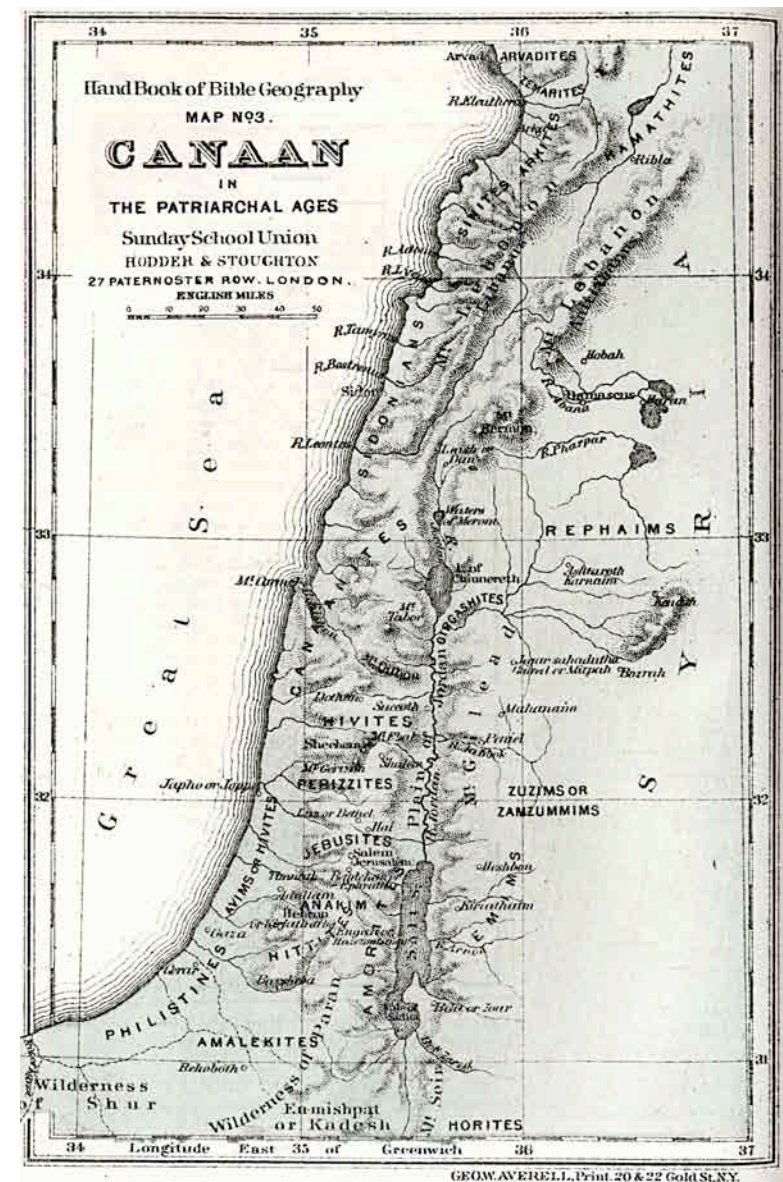
Wycliffe’s choice strikes us both for its originality and appropriateness. His great intuition is recognizing that, in spite of their antonymic denotations, *wildirnesse* and *desertum* shared the same semantic substratum. In other words, he grasps that the desert in the minds of the people of the Neolithic Middle East represented what the forest did in the minds of the people of his culture and his time, and that parallels between those two apparently opposite landscapes could - and should - be drawn to vividly convey the narratives of the Bible and their meanings.

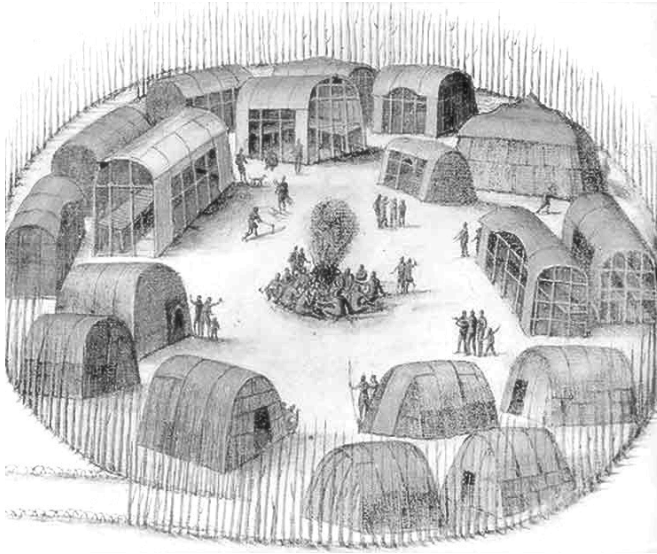
The desert of the Near East of biblical times was first of all a place of physical and psychological discomfort. Its high temperatures, aridity and vastness made it forbidding. It was a place of exile, the Book of Exodus being the archetypal expression of this specific narrative. The word exodus originates in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures, where it was used to designate the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and their safe passage through the Sea

²¹Ex. 16:32. Terence P. Noble, ed., *Wycliffe's Old Testament and Wycliffe's New Testament* (<http://ibiblio.org/tnoble/>).

of Reeds, that was traditionally mislocated as the Red Sea. The Hebrew title of the work is *Shemot*. The book tells the story of the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery and the subsequent escape from Egypt under the leadership of Moses in Egypt and the forty years of migration through the desert before reaching the promised land of Palestine. The hardship experienced in the wilderness acquires an unprecedented value during the exodus. It offers the chance to expiate past guilts, allows for a true contact with God and serves as the route to the promised land. Living the wilderness condition becomes an inevitable price to be paid for redemption and happiness. In Jewish tradition the desert was also the place of the mystical, the mythical and - if not the magical - the miraculous. Jewish mythology includes a series of supernatural monsters and demons inhabiting the desert, among which the female winged monster *Lilith*, the goat-man *Se'irim*, from which the Greek satyr seems to derive, and *Azazel*, arch-devil of the wild.²² And while the faithful adored Yahveh primarily in temples, some of the most crucial manifestations of God narrated in the Torah take place in the open deserted wilderness. Despite these sporadic theophanies, in a territory dominated by the scarcity of water, where water was a benediction, the deserted wilderness was considered a cursed land, a hell on earth. Nash mentions two of Isaiah's passages. The first describes God's punishment against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah: "I will lay waste the mountains and hills, and dry up the pools. ... I will also command the clouds that they

²²In this regard, it is important to stress that the extraordinary creatures that populate the Judeo-Christian wilderness are supernatural while the extraordinary creatures that populate the Germanic wilderness are considered natural elements. This is very relevant in the forthcoming development of this study.



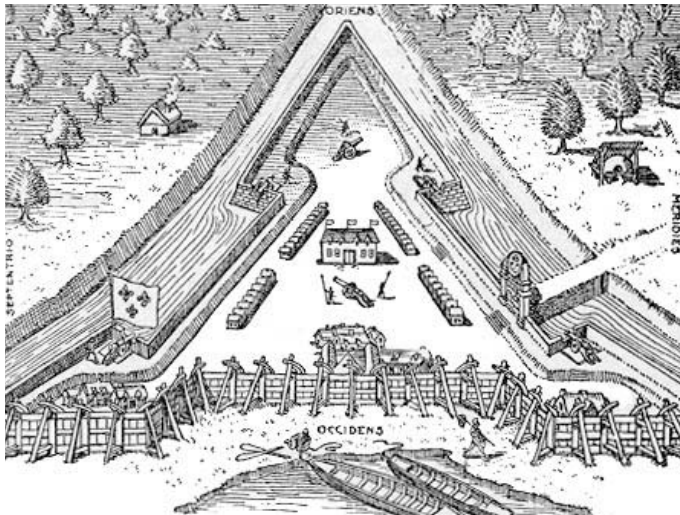


rain no rain upon it.²³ The second describes God's promises of redemption, "the wilderness and the dry land should be glad... for waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert." The Scriptures are also responsible for creating a narrative of opposition between wilderness and the Garden of Eden, or between wilderness and paradise. As Nash puts it, "The story of the Garden and its loss embedded into Western thought the idea that wilderness and paradise were both physical and spiritual opposites."

At the dawn of the Modern Age the semantic sub-stratum of *wilderness* thus consisted of the superposition of the cultural meaning of the wild forest in Germanic tradition and the cultural meaning of the desert in Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet the journey of the word wilderness and the meanings attached to it had just commenced.

1.2 Wilderness To Be Subdued

The spread of Anglo-Saxon culture beyond the Atlantic marks another turning point in the evolution of the idea of wilderness. From 1607, year of the founding of *Jamestowne*,²⁴ to 1890, year of the fall of the last



²³Isaiah 42:15

²⁴Jamestowne (Jamestown), established by the Virginia Company of London as "James Fort" on May 14, 1607, is considered the first English settlement in North America despite the existence of several earlier short-lived settlements, including the "lost colony" of Roanoke. Jamestown served as capital of the English colony for 83 years.

frontier;²⁵ wilderness will be both the main setting and the main character of European American history.²⁶ The incessant confrontation with wild nature will provide European Americans with the basis for the formation of a new cultural identity and wilderness an unprecedented significance.

In the beginning, the story is one of violent struggle. The first years of the Virginia Colony are plagued by disease and starvation as are those of the Plymouth Plantation. Wilderness will explicitly or implicitly take the blame.^{27,28} In their chronicles, both John Smith and William Bradford recount in detail the fight against the threats of wild nature undertaken by their fellow colonists, marking the commencement of a “tradition of repugnance”²⁹ toward wilderness. The description of the many woes



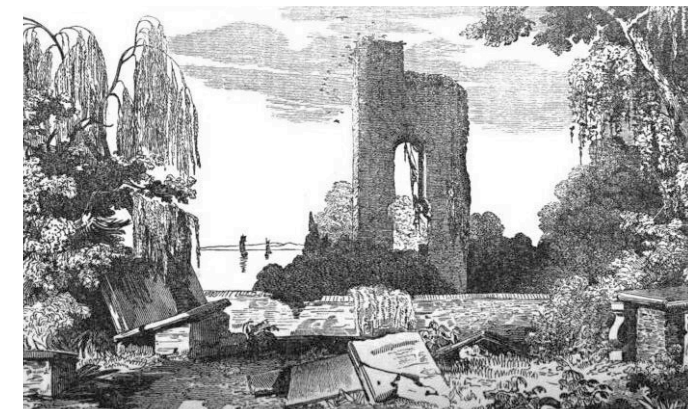
²⁵As the American superintendent of Census describes in his report: “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census report.”

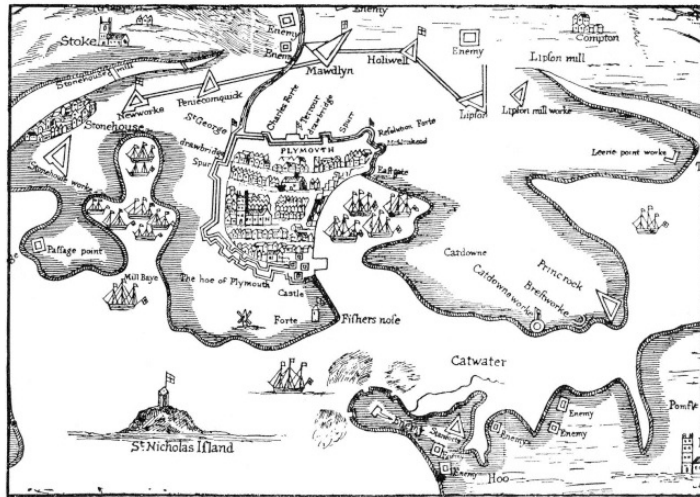
²⁶Cft. my words with Nash’s in this extract from the preface of the third edition of his book, “wilderness was the basic ingredient of American civilization. From the raw materials of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give that civilization identity and meaning.”

²⁷In his “A True Relation of Virginia” John Smith recounts the tragic fight for survival in the new environment; In his “Of Plymouth Plantation”, William Bradford⁵ describes what he sees as a “hideous and desolate wilderness.”

²⁸In this regard it would be interesting to investigate the very attitude of John Smith toward wilderness as subsequent Romantic literature tends to depict a figure with a benevolent sensibility toward untamed nature, further fueled by his legendary relationship with Pocahontas.

²⁹Nash, Op. Cit., 24.





Top, Fig.10: An engraving from *A True Mapp and Description of the Towne of Plymouth and the Fortifications thereof at the last siege, A. 1643*, 17th century, after 1643.

On the previous pages, Fig.10: An illustration of “The Lost Colony of Roanoke,” Established in 1585 (Present-day Dare County, North Carolina).

Fig.11: Jamesfort in Jamestown, Virginia.

Fig.12, 19th century Xilography, The building of Jamestown Virginia.

Fig.13: Robert Sears, Engraving of the ruins of Jamestown showing the tower of the old Jamestown Church built in 1639, 1854.

suffered in establishing the first settlements will soon become a relevant part of the nation’s foundational myth³⁰ and the hatred spurred by these struggles will be renewed each time the frontier is pushed westward, as settlers further penetrated the backcountry.

The Puritans held several cultural constructs that contributed to their sense of animosity towards wilderness. Most of these assumptions stemmed from their interpretation of the Bible.^{31,32} The account of the temptation of Christ, where the Devil entices Jesus during his forty days of prayer in the wilderness of Judaea, was read as a warning against the corrupting power of the environment. The wilderness beyond the palisades of their towns was believed to be able to reawaken the instincts and passions they intended to restrain in their communities, it could open the pandora’s box of their own souls. Working the land and reclaiming it from the wilderness condition, therefore, meant pushing back temptation and pursuing moral virtue. Genesis 1:28 explicitly exhorted them to act upon wild nature: “replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”³³ The Book of Exodus provided a potent narrative with which to identify. The story of the Puritans paralleled that of the ‘People of God’ struggling in the

³⁰The memory of the first fatal attempts to settle on the shores of the new continent are lost in the annals of British history,⁴

³¹Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day: A Study on American Experience and Culture* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1926), 20.

³²They did not commonly refer to God’s revelations in the wilderness present in the Old Testament, such as the episode of the burning bush that spoke to Moses during the Exodus.

³³Genesis 1:28.

wilderness while in search of the promised land. While the illusion of a heaven on earth awaiting them across the ocean had already vanished, another had arisen: the promised land could be reached after continued wandering in the wilderness of the new continent or it could be carved out of its wild country. America somehow incarnated both the Wilderness of Sin and New Canaan.

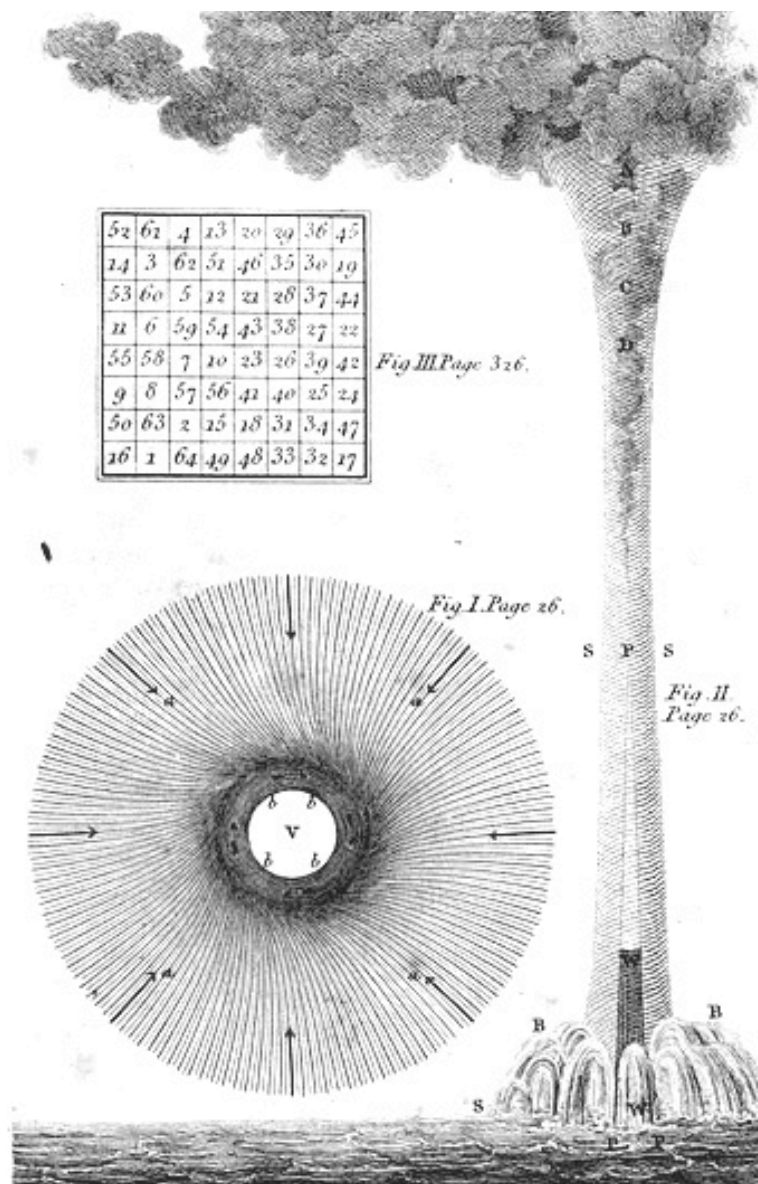
For joint-stock company members instead, the will to push back temptation was undoubtedly a lesser drive, nevertheless their belligerence toward wilderness was no less strong. In full expression of their proto-capitalistic culture deeply rooted in Calvinism, they saw in the wilderness either an impediment to the exploitation of the land and its resources or a resource itself to exploit. For them, fighting the wilderness was not about defeating its corrupting power, it was rather the method they had chosen to achieve their materialistic objectives.

For the frontiersmen, dedicated to more individualistic deeds such as scouting and fur trade, the fight against wilderness was a question of survival, yet their hostility was to some degree less strong. For they did not look at wild nature as mere threat, it was also the source of their sustenance. Moreover, as their path in life stemmed from a desire for relentless wandering in some cases and from some form of anti-social tendencies in others, wilderness - at least in this regard - provided them with what they were looking for.³⁴

³⁴This should not mistakenly lead one to accept the narrative that instills the character of the pioneer with a romantic sensibility that he could not have had for very obvious historical reasons.

Fig.14: Pen Skeich, "Barnstable County, Massachusetts," 1890, Historical Map of Cape Cod.





As the nation's early history unfolded, undoubtedly the deterministic paradigm brought about by the Scientific Revolution induced an unconscious process of reification of nature that resulted in an even stronger will to dominate the wilderness. By the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Enlightenment had already allowed for the sedimentation of the ideas of modern science and mathematics, and the desire to analyze, gauge, and master the whole environment had largely risen in the settlers' collective consciousness thanks to the divulgations of people such as Benjamin Franklin.³⁵ The advent of democracy itself played a role in further strengthening the will to reclaim all wilderness.³⁶ The desire to offer opportunities for everyone to experience 'the good life' had an immediate implication: the need to log, clear, and till more and more land. Thomas Jefferson's own unflagging support of territorial expansion well demonstrates how this egalitarian spirit contributed to the increasing rate of obliteration of the great American wilderness. Jefferson's land survey system itself, a virtually perfect immaterial infrastructure, offered the adequate framework for taking exhaustive measurements across the American landscape, and thus a definitive means for controlling it.

Soon after independence, the newborn nation will begin to build heavy infrastructure, creating a system of arteries that allowed settlement,

³⁵Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature, Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper, 1983).

³⁶Max Oelschlaeger strongly stresses this point, while Nash seems not to consider it.

deforestation, canalization and land drainage to be further expedited.³⁷ The rate of change of the landscape will steadily increase and then abruptly accelerate after the Civil War. By then capitalism, the myth of progress, and the idea of 'manifest destiny' had become the three pillars of a collective creed that, relying on the new power of industrialization, was exploiting environmental resources to a degree without precedent in human history.

1.3 Wilderness To Be Contemplated

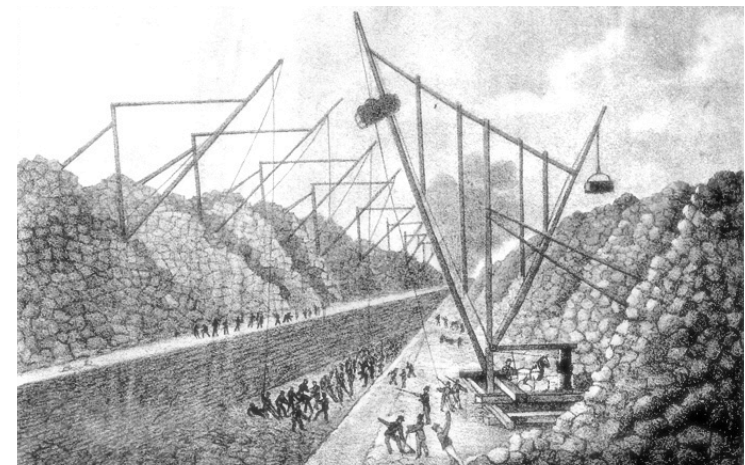
The quantity of this phenomenon will irretrievably change its quality. It is the final step of an escalation begun in ancient times that will lead to the collapse of a relationship between nature and culture that had lasted thousands of years.³⁸ Max Oelschlaeger describes it as the end of a colossal cultural era with beginnings in the Neolithic Revolution: "the separation of humankind from nature's embrace began long ago with the Neolithic turn... the Pre-Socratics intensified the separation by making nature an object of intellectual study; the paragons of Athens reanimated the natural world, conceiving of nature as organic and self-moving, yet they divorced the essence of our humanity (*psyche*) from nature. Judeo-Christianity both desacralized nature - since only God was divine - and raised humans above it, thinking the world God's gift to his most favored creation: *man*. The scientific and industrial revolutions were the ultimate realization of the alchemist's dream: through science the

³⁷The construction of the Erie Canal, that connected the Hudson River to the Ohio frontier and to the immense midwestern region, is often cited as one of the events that marked the beginning of this new era.

³⁸For the last time the Abrahamic conception of land use will not raise moral disquietude.

On the previous page, Fig.15: Representation of waterspout accompanying "Water-spouts and Whirlwinds" by Benjamin Franklin. This paper was republished in "The complete works in philosophy, politics, and morals, of the late Dr. Benjamin Franklin", 1806. Volume II, p. 26.

Bottom, Fig.16: The excavation of the Original Erie Canal, West of Lockport, 1825. From a print in Colden's Memoir.



LA BOTANIQUE
DE
J. J. ROUSSEAU,
ORNÉE DE SOIXANTE-CINQ PLANCHES,
IMPRIMÉES EN COULEURS
D'APRÈS LES PEINTURES DE P. J. REDOUTÉ.



biological and physical world was conceptualized as a machine that could be understood simply as so many atoms in motion... capitalism and democracy coalesced with the machine technology to effect the conversion of nature into a standing reserve possessing market value only. Modernism thus completes the intellectual divorce of humankind and nature.”³⁹

Nevertheless a change of sensibility was impending. Unexpectedly, the science and the philosophy that brought the paradigm of opposition between nature and culture to its climax also laid the foundations for a new paradigm.⁴⁰ There are several possible dates we could choose to mark the beginning of this process, several events we could indicate to mark the inception of this new collective thinking on nature. There is one we particularly like to mention: the publication of *Julie, or the New Héloïse*. We are back in Europe, at the height of the Enlightenment. In 1761, Rousseau completes the manuscript of this epistolary novel that was originally entitled *Lettres de deux amans habitans d’une petite ville au pied des Alpes* (Letters from two lovers living in a small town at the foot of the Alps). In it, a captivating plot is interwoven with extensive descriptions of the wilderness of the Alps. The setting is not at all secondary. The natural features of the places in which the story unfolds have the same relevance as the story’s characters. The feelings of both joy and desperation that romantic love generates in the hearts of the two lovers are entangled with the visions of the mountainous landscape surrounding the little town in which they live. This time, though, the

³⁹ Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 95-96.

⁴⁰ Oeshlager, Op. Cit., 96; Nash and Merchant, Op. Cit.

wild land is not place of doom; not even loathsome or dreadful. In the narrative, the power of nature mirrors the lovers' impetus, the unspoiled landscape mirrors human innocence.

The novel will have an unprecedented success in the history of publication, becoming "the biggest best-seller of the century."⁴¹ It generated a real 'rousoumania.' As published copies ran out quickly, publishers would rent the book by the day or by the hour. By the year 1800 the book already counted with seventy editions. Interesting are not just its sales figures, but also the reaction it produced in European literary circles. Readers recounted how it produced in them 'torments' and 'ecstasies', and that they often had to interrupt their reading to abandon themselves to tears. Others declared that the book "nearly drove them mad from excess of feeling."⁴² The success converts Rousseau possibly into the first celebrity author⁴³ but most importantly demonstrates that society, at least a part of it, was ready - not only for a new way to conceive of feelings - but also to reconsider wilderness. Two longly discarded ideas of nature definitively resuscitate and converge in Rousseau's philosophy - it is a true Copernican turn: wild nature is not satanic, but the very place in which we should seek God; wild nature is not corrupted, it is the very place in which we can find purity and authenticity. The first of these two beliefs - we argued - had long existed

⁴¹Robert Darnton. *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Viking, 1984), 242.

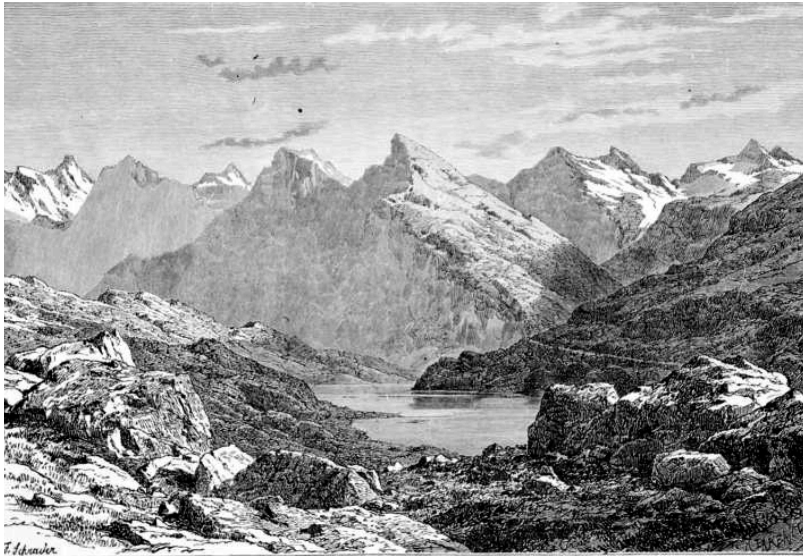
⁴²Ibid., 243.

⁴³Ibid., 247.



*Rousseau contemplating the wild!
— Beauties of Switzerland —*





On the previous page, Fig.17: Book Cover of “La Botanique” de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, illustrated by Pierre-Joseph Redouté. Fig.19: Engraving, “Rousseau contemplating the wild beauty of Switzerland.” Fig.20: Engraving, Nicolas-Andrew Monslau, “Le Premier Baiser de l'Amour”, Illustration from *The New Heloise*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 18th century, before 1837.

Top, Fig.21: The Swiss Alps, Engraving, late 19th century.

in the pre-Christian era, both in pagan and in Judaic⁴⁴ traditions: wilderness as a place of the manifestation of God. In this pantheistic vision Rousseau is accompanied by the most relevant thinkers of his time, most notably by the Irish essayist Edmund Burke and by Kant. Three years before the publication of *Julie*, Burke had published his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, three years after Kant will complete *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*. Describing the sublime, both authors celebrate the greatness wild landscapes possess that is beyond the possibility of calculation, measurement, or imitation. Such immensity could be used to prove the existence of an equally immense entity capable of forging such scenery. Looking at nature's grandeur was therefore equitable to looking at the greatness of God. The second revolutionary idea definitively emerging in Rousseau's writings is an idea of wild nature's purity and authenticity. Rousseau proposes returning to wild nature to escape the corruptive force of society and institutions, epitomizing the myth of the noble savage. To find historical precedents for this idea we might have to go all the way back to Eastern monasticism of the early Christian age. As Lewis Mumford puts it:

Nature was not a fresh element in the tissue of European culture: it was a complete substitute for the existing institutions, conventions, habits, and histories.

His prescription was simple: return to Nature: shun society: enjoy solitude. Rousseau's Nature was not Newton's Nature a system of

⁴⁴In the first case Nature itself was considered sacred, in the second nature was the place in which to seek the sacred.

matter and motion, ordered by Providence, and established in the human mind by nice mathematical calculations. By Nature Rousseau meant the mountains, like those which shoulder across the background of his birthplace; he meant the mantle of vegetation, where one might botanize, and see "eternity in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower."⁴⁵

Mumford's essay also illuminates the resonance between new European ideas of nature and the American landscape. Indeed, "the rêve exotique de l'Amérique"⁴⁶ was incredibly inspiring for the new intellectual entourage that grew around Rousseau and his peers. American wilderness would acquire new meanings thanks to the philosophy and literature of Rousseau. In an impulse of chauvinism, Mumford asserts that it is the very existence of American wilderness that gives full meaning to Rousseau's conception of nature:

What made the authority of Rousseau's doctrine so immense, what made it play such a presiding part in European life, echoing through the minds of Goethe, Herder, Kant, Wordsworth, and even, quite innocently, Blake, was the fact that there awaited the European in America a Nature that was primitive and undefiled.

In America, Rousseau's dream could come true and with it, so too that of an entire generation of thinkers and poets that would follow him:

⁴⁵Mumford, Op. Cit., 22.

⁴⁶Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le Rêve Exotique dans la Littérature Française au XVII et au XVIII Siècle* (Paris: Hachette et cie, 1913).

Top, Fig.22: Alexander Findlay. View in the Penninae Alps. Engraving, 1835

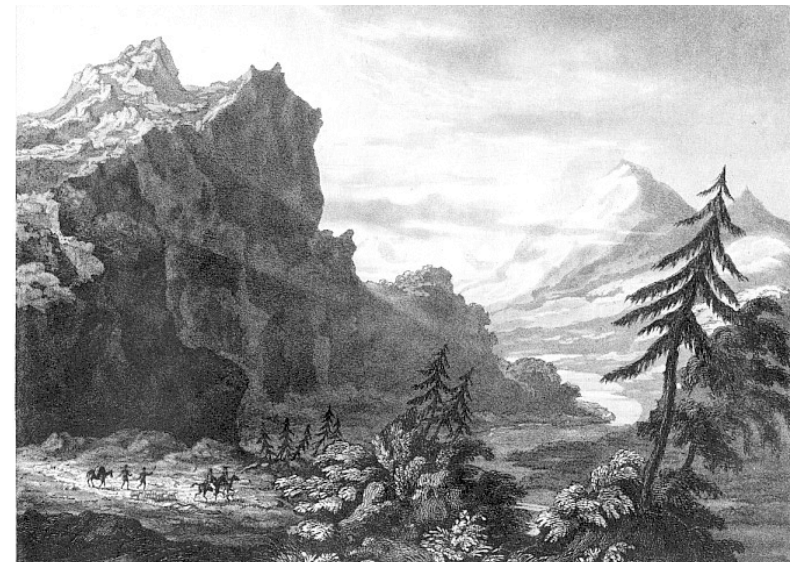




Fig.23: Frederic Edwin Church, "Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford in 1636," Oil on Canvas, 1846.

Even William Blake could dream of liberty on the banks of the Ohio, if not on the banks of the Thames. In America, if society was futile, one had only to walk half a day to escape it; in Europe, if one walked half a day one would be in the midst of another society. In Europe one had to plan a retreat: in America one simply encountered it. If Nature was, as Wordsworth said, a world of ready wealth, blessing our minds and hearts with wisdom and health and cheerfulness, what place could be richer than America? Once Romanticism turned its eyes across the ocean, it became a movement indeed.⁴⁷

Nash also stresses the fascination of the Old World's new intelligencia with the New World's wilderness that, "with its abundance of pathless forests and 'savages' intrigued the Romantic imagination."⁴⁸ Travellers for the first time disregarded the routes of the Grand Tour and sailed to America. François-René de Chateaubriand will be one of the first.⁴⁹ When travelling across the upstate New York wilderness in 1791, he will describe how the roadless and town-less country produce 'delight' in his soul. Alexis de Tocqueville astonished Americans when he revealed his desire to explore the wilds of Michigan during his trip to the United

⁴⁷Ibid. 23

⁴⁸Nash, Op. Cit.

⁴⁹Ibid.

States in 1831.⁵⁰ Europeans were the pioneers in the appreciation of the American wild.

The first Americans to follow this European fashion were members of the gentry, most often residing in cities. Not only because they had access to European literature, but also because their actual distance from the wilderness condition and its associated fatigues allowed them to idealize it. “Writers, artists, scientists, vacationers, gentlemen - people, in short, who did not face wilderness from the pioneer’s perspective”⁵¹ first experienced, and then through words and writings, spread a vision of the wild country that soon brought Americans to look proudly upon their very own landscape. In 1836, painter Thomas Cole delineated these collective feelings writing an “Essay on the American Scenery” in which he claimed that American wilderness counterbalanced the testimonies of cultural history that gave value to the European landscape:

The most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness.

It is the most distinctive, because in civilized Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified--the extensive forests that once overshadowed a great part of it have been



Fig.24: Thomas Cole, “Home in the Woods,” Oil on Canvas, 1847.

⁵⁰To expand on this, see literary critics on *Atala*, the novella by François-René de Chateaubriand, first published in 1801. The work, inspired by his travels in North America, had an immense impact on early Romanticism, and went through five editions in its first year. It was adapted frequently for stage, and translated into many languages.

⁵¹Nash, Op. Cit.



felled--rugged mountains have been smoothed, and impetuous rivers turned from their courses to accommodate the tastes and necessities of a dense population--the once tangled wood is now a grassy lawn; the turbulent brook a navigable stream--craggs that could not be removed have been crowned with towers, and the rudest valleys tamed by the plough.

And to this cultivated state our western world is fast approaching; but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away: for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God the creator--they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.⁵²

By then Rousseau's auspices had echoed long enough through the Romantic minds of Europeans and Northern Americans and were about to find a new realization. The foundations for a new paradigm were firmly laid. Henry David Thoreau will build it, literally, in 1845, with timber from a few young white pines, a saw, a hammer, and a handful of rusted nails. At the end of March of that year, he will begin the construction of a small wooden cabin on the forested shore of Walden Pond, a few miles away from his native Concord, Massachusetts, and will commence a period of isolation from civilization that will last

⁵²Thomas Cole, "Essay on the American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine*, no.1 (1836).

two years, two months and two days. The experiment is the realization of a philosophical proposition: to reduce to minimum the need for a transformed environment in order to increase to maximum both the deepness and the elevation of the existential experience. Thoreau limits the space in which the individual can squirrel away the necessities within a rectangle of three by four meters, leaving all the rest to wildness. He is convinced that the light-hearted renunciation of what does not fit inside the cabin will enable him to liberate his self from the oppression of universal materialism; through the total immersion in the wonderful and meaningful wildness that awaits outside the cabin he can infinitely expand his self and allow for its transcendence. For the first time, the wilderness condition is not imposed by historical circumstances, as it was for the frontiersman, it is a deliberate practice with the aim of a fuller, truer life.

Thoreau, not only fully embraces Rousseau's philosophy of nature, he also resolves its major problematic node. For both philosophers wild nature is a place of manifestation of God and a place of pure authenticity. Nevertheless Rousseau oscillates between two extremes: he is torn between his bourgeois life and the idealized 'state of nature' of the *bonne savage*. The first allows him to rejoice in the contemplation of wild nature only for brief moments and then forces him to return to the sophisticated societal world he belongs to. The second is too distant and - in many ways - unreachable. Thoreau reconciles this apparently irreconcilable opposition. His life is neither that of the bourgeois nor that of the 'bonne savage', it is a novel synthesis of the two. He completely refuses the ease of life amidst society without renouncing culture; he fully lives the wilderness condition without embracing 'savageness.' His desire is to truly experience the wild, not to *be* wild.



On the previous page, Fig.25: Fredric Edwin Church, "Twilight in the Wilderness," Oil on Canvas, 1860. Fig.26: Fredric Edwin Church, "Mount Katahdin I," Oil on Canvas. Fig.27: Thomas Cole "Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)," Oil on Canvas, 1825.

Top: Fig.28: Fredric Edwin Church, "Niagara Falls," Oil on Canvas, 1857.

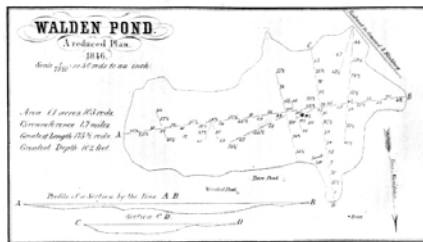
WALDEN;
OR,
LIFE IN THE WOODS.

By HENRY D. THOREAU,
AUTHOR OF "A WEEK UP THE MOUNTAINS AND THROUGH THE WOODS"



It does not require to write an article to describe, but to bring us fully to the character of the scene, standing on the bank of the pond, and looking up the hill to the cabin.

BOSTON:
TICKNOR AND FIELDS.
N. BROAD ST.



The human landscape he builds and inhabits by the shore of the pond is incredibly simple, but not mimetic or naturalistic like the primitive hut conceived by the Abbé Laugier⁵³ and influenced by Rousseau's ideas. On the contrary, Thoreau's cabin possesses the essential characters of the human landscape the philosopher secluded himself from, it is a minimal reproduction of it. The wildness that surrounds the tiny settlement gives to each and every cultural object composing it a value that is much greater than that which they would have if surrounded by a sea of other superfluous cultural objects. The cabin - with its pitched roof, its chimney, its only door and its only window - is a minute archetype of domesticity, it is pure homeness. The objects inside the cabin - the bed, the desk, the chair, the notebook and the pen - become priceless, beautiful and dear. Likewise, the smallness and the simplicity of Thoreau's shelter brings the infiniteness and the beautiful complexity of the wild to the fore, letting it express its eternal truth.

With his experiment Thoreau does not denigrate civilization *tout court*, he only criticizes its tendency to invade everything all the time, to incessantly sophisticate any aspect of life, to override any alternative to itself. By reducing his own possessions to the essential, Thoreau rediscovers the true value of both civilization and wild nature. He brings the first back to the dimension it should have and allows the other to be. The microcosmos he creates by building the cabin represents in itself a new paradigm for humans' place in nature - it is an *imago mundi* of a world made of a few meaningful cultural objects and an infinite non-

⁵³Marc-Antoine Laugier extensively discusses his idea of the primitive hut (*primitif cabane*) first described by Vitruvius in the *De Architectura* and chooses it as the frontispiece for the second edition of his *Essay on Architecture* in 1755.

human nature in which to mirror the soul and to search for the absolute. With the demeanour, the tone and the timing of a prophet, Thoreau hurls a subtle *j'accuse* to modern society and begins a countercurrent swim in the flow of Western thought. In the second chapter of *Walden, Or Life in the Woods*, the book that recounts his life experiment at the pond, Thoreau clearly expresses this intention in his own words:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

1.4 Wilderness To Be Protected

It will not be long before Americans realize that wilderness is not as invulnerable as it had seemed, and that it was instead quite fragile. A telling example was the fate of one of the most grandiose sceneries on earth: Niagara Falls. By the mid-eighteenth century, tourism was already the main industry of the Niagara region yet at the time the landscape was no different than that seen by the first white explorers. One hundred years later, however, hundreds of erected buildings obstructed the vista

On the previous page, Fig 29: Book Cover of the first edition of “Walden or Life in the Woods” by Henry David Thoreau, 1854. Fig.30: A Survey of Walden Pond made by Thoreau. Fig 31: Gleason, “Map of Concord, Massachusetts,” 1906.

Below: Fig.32 The tumulus marking the situation of Thoreau’s Cabin at Walden Pond, 1908. Fig.33 The reconstruction of Thoreau’s Cabin by Walden Pond.

Fig.34: In the following page: The view of the shore of Walden Pond from Thoreau’s Cabin.





of the falls from both sides of the river and the huge demand for passage across the Niagara River had led first to the construction of a foot bridge and later to the construction of a suspension bridge. The pressure of civilization had - in only a few decades - spoiled one of the most sublime spectacles nature had ever created. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Americans began to develop a sense of resentment toward the radical transformation of some of the continent's most iconic sceneries. The protests against the vanishment of wild country began within the same social strata that had firstly voiced appreciation for it.⁵⁴ French-American ornithologist and painter John James Audubon, who had a great reputation in both the scientific community and genteel American society thanks to his *Birds of America*⁵⁵, was one to express his preoccupation over the rate with which the forests of the East were falling to the axe in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1827, James Fenimore Cooper expressed the same feeling of regret for the transformation of the grasslands of the Great Plains, another distinctive Northern American landscape, in his novel *The Prairie*.⁵⁶ As early as 1836 Thomas Cole blamed the "meagre utilitarianism" of America as the destructive drive that was obliterating the beauty of the landscape. Five years later, to more vividly describe the situation, Cole gave the woods their own voice writing a poem entitled "The Lament of

⁵⁴Nash, Op. Cit, 96.

⁵⁵*Birds of America* was published between 1827 and 1838 in Edinburgh and London. The work consists of 425 hand coloured life-size plates. All prints are available for viewing online at www.umich.edu/audubonroom.

⁵⁶*The Prairie* was published in 1827 and is the third novel written by James Fenimore Cooper featuring the fictitious frontier hero Natty Bumppo.

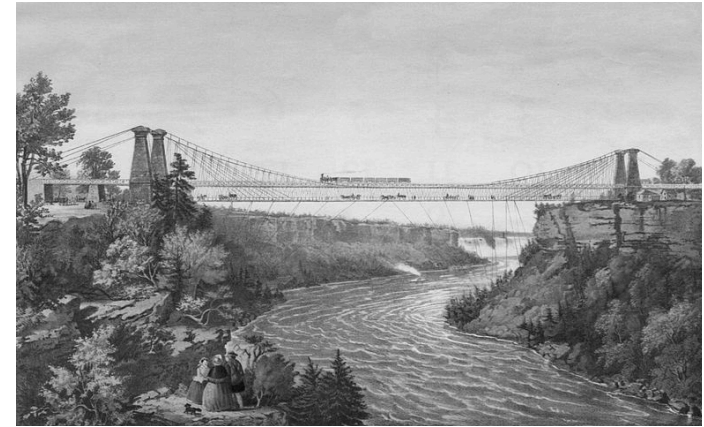
the Forest.” Through the words of the artist, the American landscape itself accused Americans of its own destruction:⁵⁷

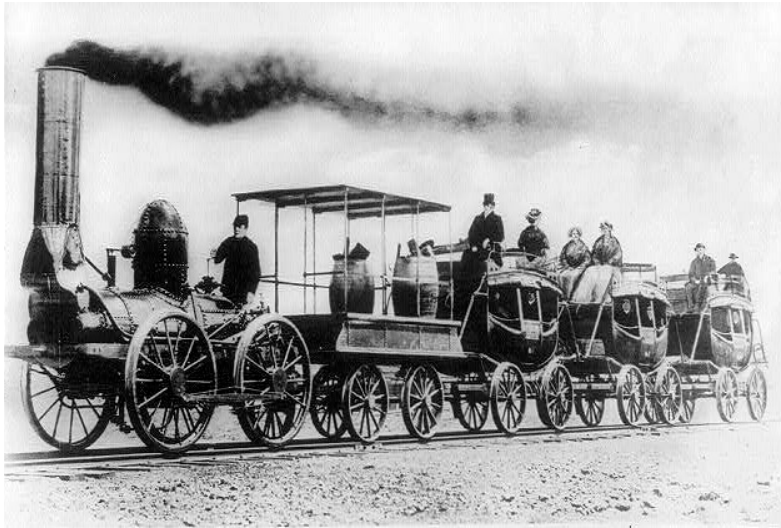
Our arms were clasped around the hills, our locks
Shaded the streams that loved us, our green tops
Were resting places for the weary clouds.
Then all was harmony and peace; but MAN
Arose -- he who now vaunts antiquity --
He the destroyer -- and in the sacred shades
Of the far East began destruction's work.
Echo, whose voice had answered to the call
Of thunder or of winds, or to the cry
Or song of birds -- uttered responses sharp
And dissonant; the axe unresting smote
Our reverend ranks, and crashing branches lashed
The ground, the mighty trunks, the pride of years,
Rolled on the groaning earth with all their umbrage.
Stronger than wintry blasts, and gathering strength,
Swept that tornado, stayless, till the Earth,
Our ancient mother, blasted lay and bare
Beneath the burning sun.⁵⁸

In the same years, in his descriptions of the Rocky Mountains, Washington Irving seems to have grasped the inevitable topological inversion between the wilderness and the anthropized territory the

⁵⁷Nash, Op. Cit, 97.

⁵⁸Thomas Cole, “The Lament of the Forest,” *Knickerbocker*, no.17 (June 1841): 16-19.





On the previous page, Fig.35: A lithograph depicting the first railroad suspension bridge across Niagara Falls. Fig.36: Italian tightrope walker Maria Spelterini crossing Niagara River Gorge in 1876.

Top: Fig. 37: Dewitt Clinton, one of the earliest steam locomotives to be used in the United States.

continent was soon to face. The future American landscape will be one of islands of wilderness in a sea of civilization:

An immense belt of rocky mountains and volcanic plains, several hundred miles in width, must ever remain an irreclaimable wilderness, intervening between the abodes of civilization, and affording a last refuge to the Indian. Here roving tribes of hunters, living in tents or lodges, and following the migrations of the game, may lead a life of savage independence, where there is nothing to tempt the cupidity of the white man.⁵⁹

The resentment toward the rapid vanishment of the American wilderness quickly evolved into a will to protect it. Many writers offered incipient propositions for conservation by the mid-twentieth century. As early as 1841, George Catlin, known for his studies and paintings of Native Americans, dreamt of a magnificent park where the Indians, the buffalo and the wilderness could remain untouched by civilization.⁶⁰ In 1851 Horace Greeley had already envisioned preserves to cherish portions of American primitive forest⁶¹ and by 1858 Thoreau himself had clearly stated that human self-containment with regards to wildness needed to translate into preservation:

⁵⁹This description is contained in *The Adventure of Captain Bonneville*, a Washington Irving book based on the Journals of the explorer James Bonneville, the explorer of the American West that is believed to be the first white man to see the Yosemite Valley. The book was published for the first time in 1832.

⁶⁰Nash, Op. Cit., 105.

⁶¹Ibid.

The kings of England formerly had their forests to hold the king's game, for sport or food, sometimes destroying villages to create and extend them; and I think that they were impelled by a true instinct. Why should not we, who have renounced the king's authority, have our national preserves, where no villages need be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be 'civilized off the face of the earth,' our own forests, not to hold the king's game merely, but to hold and preserve the king himself also, the lord of creation, and not in idle sport of food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation? or shall we, like the villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domain?⁶²

Integral part of the immense contribution made by Frederick Law Olmsted to landscape studies, his role in the early conservation debate should not be underestimated. In his California sojourn of 1863 as manager of the Rancho Las Mariposas mining estate of the Sierra Nevada, he visited the Yosemite Valley for the first time and soon after obtained the appointment as one of the first commissioners entrusted to its care.⁶³ During his appointment, Olmsted redacted a report "Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove" for the Californian authorities in which he advocated against converting the valley to private property.⁶⁴ The report includes considerations on the positive effect of contact with wild land

⁶²Henry David Thoreau, *Katahdin and Chesuncook* (New York: Nabu, 1858).

⁶³Nash, Op. Cit, 106.

⁶⁴Frederick Law Olmsted, *Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report*, 1965. This brief publication, read by Olmsted to his fellow commissioners in the Yosemite Valley in the summer of 1965 is considered a seminal text of the conservation movement.

Fig.38: Highways in the United States, 1825.

Fig.39: Canals in the United States in 1825.



for human well being and it tackled the problematic nodes regarding the need to accommodate recreational use without compromising wilderness itself that today are still unsolved in wildland management. It also underscores the moral responsibility of government to preserve the regions of extraordinary beauty for the benefit of all, the government's political duty to set aside "great public grounds for the enjoyment of the people" and their "pursuit of happiness." The reference to the Declaration of Independence is not by coincidence, but rather purposefully used to make the case that public access to collectively preserved wild land is an inalienable expression of individual liberties.⁶⁵ Olmsted read the report to his fellow commissioners while in the valley in the summer of 1865 but the hostility or indifference of the assembly led him to discard it before its submission to the California government authorities, yet this piece of writing will become the seminal statement of conservation.

Fig.40: Sanford R Gifford, "Hunter Mountain, Twilight," 1866. One of the first paintings depicting the destruction of the virgin forests.



The discovery of Yellowstone's incredible landscape led to the first significant realization of these propositions. Up until the sixties of the nineteenth century virtually no white man had yet scouted the Yellowstone plateau, but as soon as the frontiersman of the Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana territories began to wander into the area, the reputation of its unique and peculiar landscape spread rapidly. Nathaniel P. Langford, Minnesota explorer and businessman, and Cornelius Hedges, lawyer and writer from Massachusetts, two among the members of the expedition that in 1870 rafted the Yellowstone River

⁶⁵Ibid.

in order to give a precise report of its geographical features,⁶⁶ were the first to advocate for the preservation of the area as a national park.⁶⁷ Soon after Ferdinand V. Hayden guided another larger expedition under direct government sponsorship known as the Hayden Geological Survey of 1871. His report included large format photographs by William Henry Jackson as well as paintings by Thomas Moran that will give support to the lobbying efforts of Langford and Hedges. On the first of March of 1872, President Grant will sign the Act of Dedication that created Yellowstone National Park.

After this first big victory of the early conservation movement, the battlefield of conservation centred around upper New York and, again, the Yosemite Valley. For many decades, New York and Boston elites had found in the Adirondack Mountains their recreational grounds. One of the first and most relevant groups around which a movement for the exploration and preservation of these mountains' wilderness coalesced was the Appalachian Mountain Club founded in 1876 by MIT Professor Edward Charles Pickering.⁶⁸ Thanks in large part to this club's efforts and influence, in 1885 the State of New York created the Adirondack



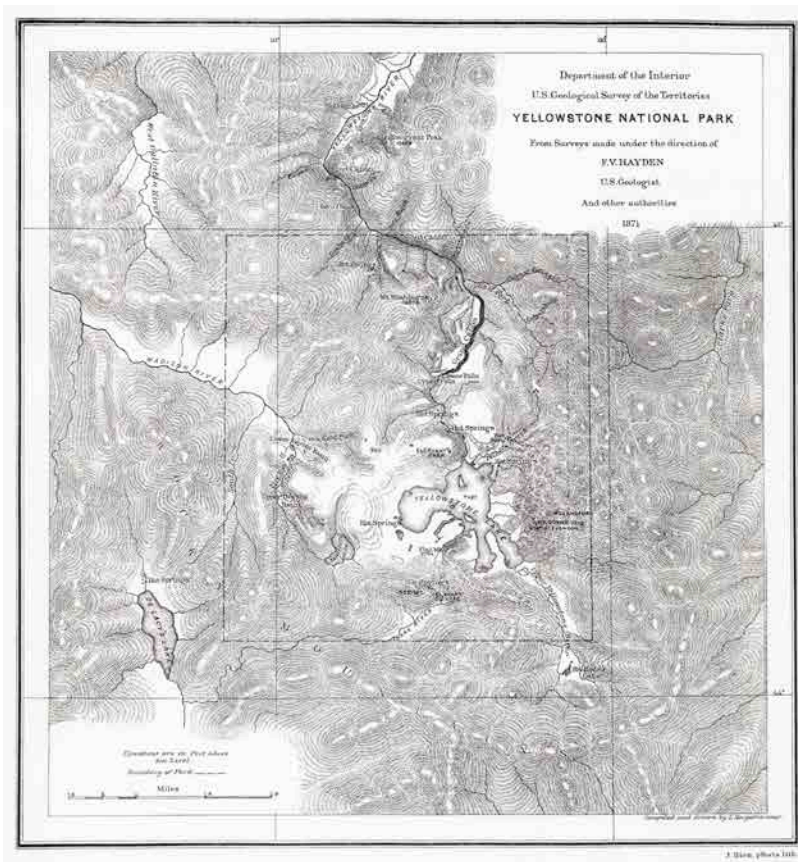
⁶⁶Their journey is thoroughly described in *The Discovery of Yellowstone Park: Journal of the Washburn Expedition to the Yellowstone and Firehole Rivers in the year 1870*.

⁶⁷Nash, *Op. Cit.*, 115.

⁶⁸On the timeline of the AMC, see: *Appalachian Mountain Club*, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://www.outdoors.org/about/history.cfm>.

On the previous page, Fig.42: Albert Bierstadt, "Looking Down the Yosemite Valley, California," 1865. Fig.43: Albert Bierstadt, "Looking Up the Yosemite Valley, California," 1865. Fig.44: Albert Bierstadt, "Sunset in the Yosemite Valley," 1868.

Below: Fig.45: Department of Interior, U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories, "Yellowstone National Park," From Surveys made under the direction of F.V. Hayden, U.S. Geologist, 1871.



Forest Preserve.⁶⁹ The Yosemite Valley did not have such a large and influential lobby of vacationers to rely on, but could count with the most vehement wilderness preservation advocate of all time: John Muir. Scottish born erudite self-taught geologist and botanist, mountain Rambler, and gifted nature writer, his figure will be indissolubly associated with the valley that was his home for forty-five years. It is difficult to think of wilderness preservation as we know it today without recognizing the paramount role Muir had in publicizing the idea of wilderness and in broadening the audience of the wilderness debate. While an exhaustive look at Muir's life and incredibly prolific writings transcends our purpose to synthesize the evolution of the idea of wilderness, we would like to underscore two facets of his role within the wilderness debate. In the first place, Muir has been the person that more than anyone else was able to translate the values of Romantic culture into a cause for the conservation of the land that embodied such values. This ability to lead the transition that brought the intellectual underpinnings of the Romantic movement to the political agenda of a modern democratic system is epitomized by two storied encounters. In 1871, when the young John Muir meets a septuagenarian Ralph Waldo Emerson in the Yosemite Valley and is described by the New England philosopher as the "new Thoreau" he is symbolically vested with the role of divulging the transcendentalists' vision of nature; when more than thirty years later, a now nearly septuagenarian Muir meets a young Theodore Roosevelt and camps with him in the Mariposa Grove, he

⁶⁹For more on the early stages of the conservation movement and on the debate between Gifford Pinchot, head of the National Forest Service, and John Muir on the final objectives of preservation and the Hetch Hetchy controversy see: Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970).

symbolically bestows the president with the task of definitively making preservation a matter of national prominence from then on. In second place, John Muir is the emblem of an approach to conservation that is completely detached from utilitarian objectives as opposed to the vision that defends conservation as a practice aimed to achieve a sustainable use of environmental resources as championed by his contemporary opponent Gifford Pinchot, first Chief of the National Forest Service. The main battlefield where these two points of view came to head is the notorious controversy over the construction of the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir designed following the 1906 earthquake of San Francisco to serve the water needs of the Bay Area. John Muir's positions will incite the twentieth century non-anthropocentric visions of nature and the consequent environmentalist movement that arises alongside the growth of the awareness of the ecological crisis.

While in the first decades of the twentieth century the conservation movement, adhering to the classic Romantic creed, focused almost exclusively on the preservation of alpine sceneries or of what people of that time defined as natural curiosities - geysers, volcanic landscapes, waterfalls, et cetera, by the turn of the century the idea of wilderness had already become more inclusive. The rate of deforestation and the concerns that it raised soon made the forest another focus of attention for conservationists. Furthermore, as the last frontier fell and a nostalgic and romanticized narrative of its history unfolded, other vanishing American landscapes acquired historical and cultural value in the eyes of Americans, making them worthy of the same attention the valley of Yosemite and the geysers of Yellowstone had already garnered: the desert, the prairie, and in time even the wetlands would become centre stage for the battles of conservation. For these landscapes, as had happened for the alpine peaks and valleys, the collective backing for



Fig.46: Tourists in front of Old Faithful Geyser, Yellowstone National Park, early twentieth century.



Fig47: A portrait of the young John Muir.

conservation focused initially around the most spectacular sceneries, and then progressively expanded to include less spectacular but no less important areas. This is certainly the case for the American Southwest. Initial preservation began with the Grand Canyon, which received federally sanctioned protection per direct action of President Theodore Roosevelt following his first visit there in 1903, together with the Devil's Tower of Wyoming and the Petrified Forest of Arizona. After the canyon was preserved for two years as a Game Preserve, Roosevelt granted it further protection making it a National Monument in January 11, 1908. In decades following, protection grew to include larger and larger sectors of the region. As specimen extinction was already a concern as early as the late nineteenth century, habitat conservation also proved to be an early driver for preservation of tracts of land that are not in line with the canons of Romantic beauty. A new-born ecology will demonstrate that even the least scenic landscapes can contain a genetic patrimony of flora and fauna worthy of preservation. The near-extinction of the bison and the disappearance of the passenger pigeon spurred the growth of wildlife conservation advocacy in the early 1900s. By the end of Roosevelt's presidency, and in part thanks to his direct political action and influential writings, all wilderness is recognized among many of the progressive circles of American society as a condition to be protected.

While Roosevelt significantly helped set the stage for the universal recognition of wilderness as a condition to be protected, his understanding of the purpose of conservation was related solely to what we would today call sustainability. The following quote captures the essence of this perspective:

The nation behaves well if it treats the national resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value.⁷⁰

However, the new generation of conservationists was prepared to work off of this growing momentum and move the debate on the purpose of conservation toward a less utilitarian and anthropocentric approach in favour of ideas that directly echoed Thoreau's and Muir's conception of human self-containment, shaping a new ethic that addressed the environment as an entity possessing entirely its own rights. The central figure of this new movement is indeed Aldo Leopold while the most influential writing is certainly his *Land Ethic*, written as the finale to his *A Sand County Almanac*. His opposition and response to the utilitarian approach to conservation is definitive:

Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us.⁷¹

The definition of the land ethic that he gives in this writing opened the door to the development of what will become a new paradigm for the relationship between man and environment in Western thought that we are still struggling to internalize and divulge today.

⁷⁰Theodore Roosevelt's speech before the Colorado Live Stock Association, Denver, Colorado, August 29, 1910.

⁷¹Aldo Leopold, *The Sandy County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).



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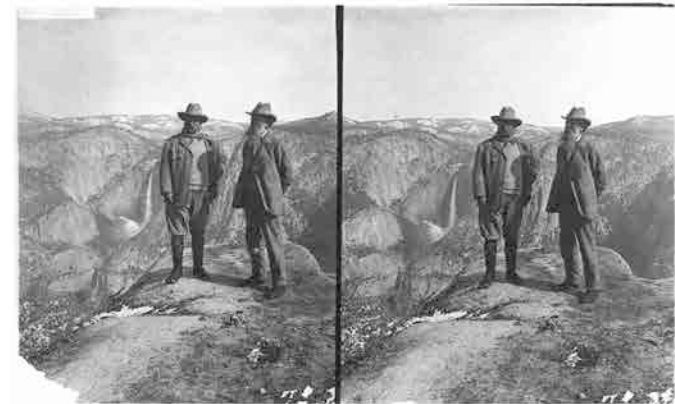


Fig.47: John Muir with John Burroughs. Burroughs accompanied Muir on expeditions to Alaska, the Grand Canyon and Yosemite. Fig.48: John Muir accompanying President Theodore Roosevelt on his visit to the Yosemite Valley in 1903. Their three day camping trip in the valley is a legendary episode in the history of the Conservation Movement.



Fig.49: Theodore Roosevelt on Jacobs Ladder on the Bright Angel Trail, Grand Canyon National Park.

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.

Without yet referring directly to non-Western philosophies that embrace non-dualistic paradigms in their vision of nature as thinkers that will follow do, Leopold inspires a holistic understanding of the role of humans within the universal biotic community that successfully fits within the philosophical framework of Western culture by making it a matter of deontological ethics. Other prominent conservationists will gather around him and his ideas and with him will found the Wilderness Society in 1935. Among these are Benton MacKaye and Robert Marshall. The first is the father of the Appalachian Trail, whose project is among the first to address the need to counterbalance the development of vast conurbation with an equally vast wilderness preservation system fully integrated within the region. The second is the person who will make a crucial contribution to the formation of the society through his financial support and intellectual work. The efforts of this generation of conservationists were finally realized and the idea of wilderness preservation reached a moment of full maturity when in 1964 President Lyndon Johnson signed the text of the Wilderness Act⁷² written by Howard Zahniser into law. This momentous achievement, however, opened the door to new dilemmas not least of which the question: was the idea of managing wilderness not a contradiction in terms?

⁷²Wilderness Act of 1964, Pub.L. 88-577.

As the last three sections have delineated, the idea of wilderness throughout history acquires three contrasting connotations: (1) wilderness as a condition to be subdued; (2) wilderness as a condition to be contemplated; (3) wilderness as a condition to be protected. As we succinctly recounted, the first is spurred by ancient conceptions of the wild and by the early colonists' experience confronting the hostile environment of the continent. The second develops alongside the flourishing Romantic culture and the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. The third reached its present climax with the post-WWII collective disquietude and growing awareness of the ecological crisis. However, stressing the chronological development of these three connotations excessively might lead us to a naively historicist point of view. Tracing the history of the idea of wilderness as we have was necessary in order to give a general interpretation of the collective changes in sensibility regarding the wild environment. In so doing we could not but omit some relevant countercultural drives, discordant voices, pioneers of new ideas that came before their time as well as nostalgics that refused to abandon old ways of thinking. For example, reexamining the tradition of the Christian eremitic life, we can easily find relevant antecedents to the favourable attitude toward wilderness long before the advent of Romantic culture. Rooted in the desert theology of the Old Testament, the life of the Christian hermits was spent in isolation to escape the corruptive influence of society. Since the early age of Christianity, in the East, Anchorites sought purity and authenticity by secluding themselves in the wild and renouncing any commodity of civilization. This tradition follows throughout all of the Middle Ages and the Modern Era. The three connotations of the idea of wilderness so far described, instead of rising and fading to give way to the next, were longly incubated before their era and longly persisted

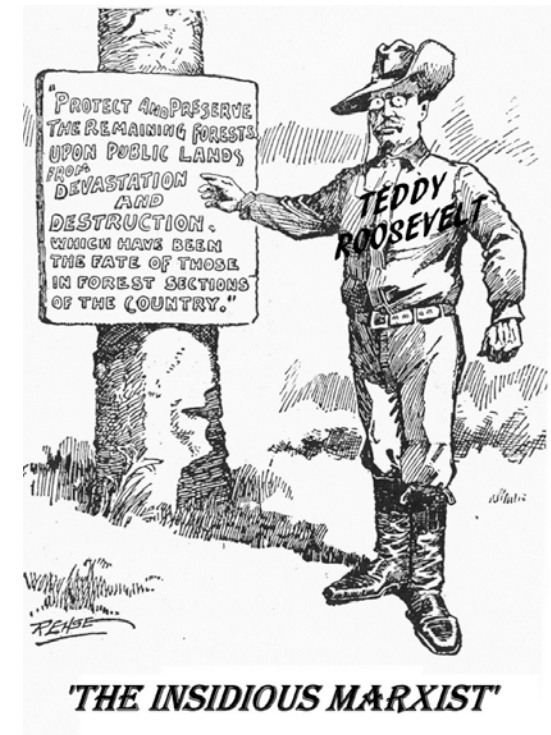
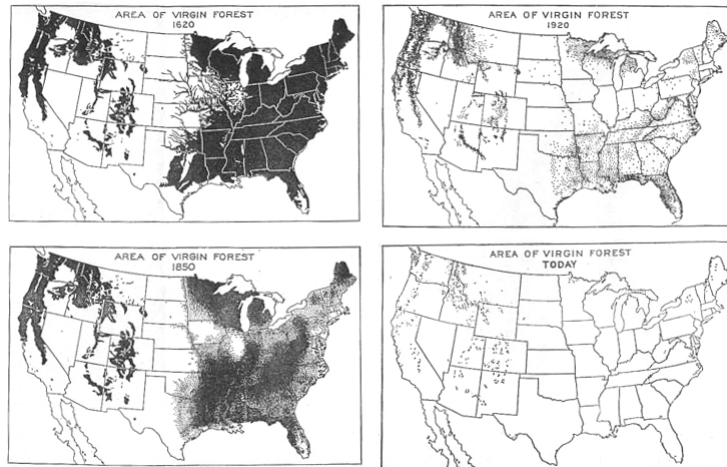


Fig.50: Cartoon profiling Roosevelt as a Marxist for his policies on public land conservation.



after a new one developed. This is the very reason why the wilderness idea harbours such intrinsic complexity; different and often contradictory connotations coexist in the incredibly rich semantic substratum of the word.

1.5 The Significance of Wilderness in American History

Scholarly awareness of the role that prolonged contact with wilderness had in the shaping of American culture develops soon after the end of territorial expansion. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner presents his first essay on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, the fundamental chapter of a series of publications produced on the subject matter over the thirty year course of his career. Turner explains the core of his Frontier Thesis in the first pages of the text:

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development... American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with this simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating

American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.⁷³

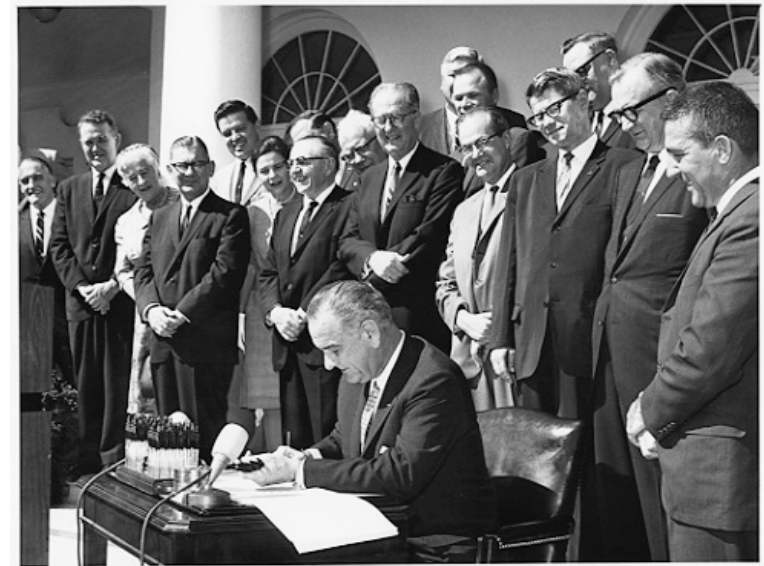
Turner's subject is the frontier, but by writing about it, he is indeed writing about wilderness as well.⁷⁴ Turner's frontier, in his words "the meeting point between savagery and civilization", is the very place where the confrontation between man and the wild environment occurs. Turner's essay fully recognizes and celebrates the uniqueness of the American wilderness experience.

The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people - to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. . . .

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, mode of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad and put him in the birch canoe. It strips of the garment of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of Cherokee and Iroquois...

⁷³Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921). The book opens with the original text of the paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago on July 12, 1893, representing the first version of what will be later be referred to as "The Frontier Thesis" or "Turner Thesis".

⁷⁴See Nash, *Op. Cit.*, 146.



On the previous page (Left): Fig.51: Map of the Virgin Forest of the United States: 1620, 1850, 1920 and 1992. Fig.52: Philip Hyde “Hetch Hetchy Field of Stumps,” 1955.

On the previous page (Right): Fig.52: Aldo Leopold in the field, 1946. Fig.53: Lyndon Johnson signing the Wilderness act of 1964 which created the legal definition of wilderness in the United States and protected 9.1 million acres of federal land.

Below: Fig.54: P.F. Rothermal, “Landing of the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock, 1620,” 1869.



The relevance of Turner's historiography cannot be underestimated, although it is just one voice among many that, during and after the westward penetration, will ignite the celebration of the American Wilderness experience. Mumford's early writings serve as another example. In 1926, five years after the publication of Turner's definitive work on the frontier, a young Lewis Mumford will offer his interpretation of the role wilderness had in "The Origins of the American Mind" in the opening chapters of "The Golden Day"⁷⁵, an essay on the history of literature and philosophy of the United States. While Turner concentrates on the role that the wilderness had in the shaping of a national character, Mumford focuses rather on the question of the American identity. According to Mumford, the first stage of the creation of an autonomous and genuine American identity springs from a break with the past, the hiatus in the continuity of the historical process that the voyage across the Atlantic produced, that is the separation from 'an old culture in ruins, and a new culture *in vacuo*' as he phrases it. The second stage will be the filling in of this vacuum by transposing some specific aspects of European culture to the new geographic context. Attitudes and perceptions inherited from the most progressive ideas that were developing in Europe and the combination of these ideas with the geographical context of the new continent would fuel the formation of a true American identity. As he states:

Now we begin to see a little more clearly the state of mind out of which the great migrations to the New World became possible. The physical causes have been dwelt on often enough; it is important to recognize that a cultural necessity was at work

⁷⁵Lewis Mumford, Op. Cit.

at the same time. The old culture of the Middle Ages had broken down; the old heritage lingered on only in the "backward" and "unprogressive" countries like Italy and Spain, which drifted outside the main currents of the European mind. ... Intelligent people were forced to choose between the fossilized shell of an old and complete culture, and the new culture, which in origin was thin, partial abstract, and deliberately indifferent to man's proper interests.

Choosing the second, our Europeans already had one foot in America. Let them suffer persecution, let the times get hard, let them fall out with their governments, let them dream of worldly success and they will come swarming over the ocean. The groups that had most completely shaken off the old symbolisms were those that were most ready for the American adventure: they turned themselves easily to the mastery of the external environment.

...

If the Nineteenth Century found us more raw and rude, it was not because we had settled in a new territory; it was rather because our minds were not buoyed up by all those memorials of a great past that floated over the surface of Europe. The American was thus a stripped European ; and the colonization of America can, with justice, be called the dispersion of Europe a movement carried on by people incapable of sharing or continuing its past. It was to America that the outcast Europeans turned, without a Moses to guide them, to wander in the wilderness ; and here they have remained in exile, not without an occasional glimpse, perhaps, of the promised land.

Fig.55: John Gast, "Spirit of the Frontier," 1872.



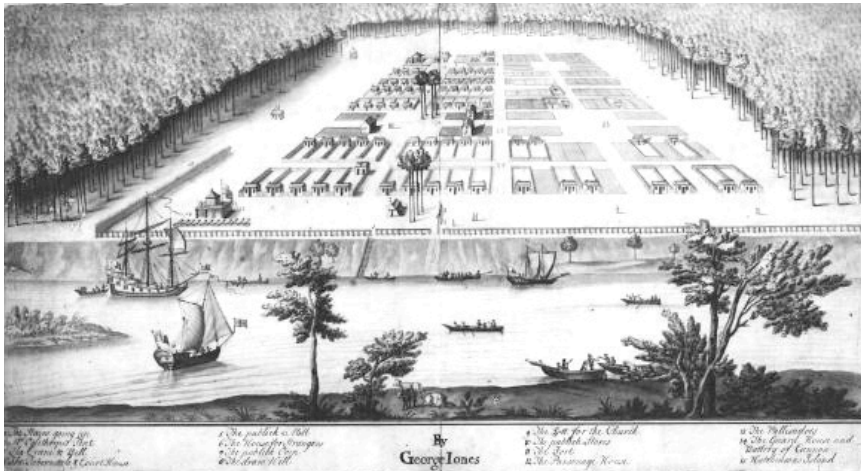


Fig. 56: The Hargrett Library Rare Map Collection, “His Majesty’s Colony in Georgia,” 1733. This image depicts the founding of Savannah.

Outcast Europeans, soon-to-be ‘the Americans,’ immerse themselves in a wild and immense country, whose scale and forces surpass those of any land known until then, and tackle one of the greatest collective adventures in human history. The experience is sufficiently extraordinary to initiate a process of mythopoesis. In that myth is to be found the very source of the narrative that provides the people who generated it with an identity of their own. The natural environment, and more specifically American wilderness, is therefore the setting and the protagonist of the foundational myth of American culture. In it the evidence and the symbols of its collective narration have to be found. Nature fills the void generated by the hiatus in the historical process that the departure from the old continent had caused.

As the American people find themselves in this adventure, so too does the American Landscape acquire distinctive semantic characters, and with it all of the possible symbolic attributes associated with any of its forms. It is a system of meanings that the European landscape had lost long before: the American wilderness becomes the Promise Land or the desert to cross in order to reach it; the Garden of Eden or the very place of moral corruption; untamed and unspoiled nature, sublime manifestation of an immanent God to contemplate. These characters did not extinguish with the fall of the last frontier in 1890, they endure even today in any fragment of territory where it is possible to get lost or to seek, to explore and to ramble, and they will endure as long as the territory does not become exhausted, consumed by the trace of man, as happened in most of the old continent. It will endure as long as there will be wilderness.



CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS WILD?

*When we try to pick out anything by itself,
we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.*

John Muir

2.1 The False Dilemma Natural/Not Natural & the Notion of Anthropogenic Change

Today's wilderness debate is plagued with dilemmas, contradictions and paradoxes. The proposition for wilderness preservation, as formulated for the first time in 1925 by American conservationist Aldo Leopold⁷⁶ and eventually realized in 1964 with the creation of the Wilderness Act,⁷⁷ has been in a process of constant reassessment since the day the act was signed into law.⁷⁸ Since the late sixties, scholars have been pointing to the unstable ground on which the ideas of the act stand. The problem *in nuce* is that the crucial questions that should make that ground firm have either no largely shared answers or no answers at all. Among these questions, possibly the most crucial is that which troubles anyone who approaches the field of environmental conservation: what is *natural?* and what is *not natural?*

⁷⁶Aldo Leopold. "Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

⁷⁷Aldo and Aldo Starker Leopold were soon after joined in the battle by other conservationists such as Bob Marshall and the other members of the Wilderness Society he cofounded: Benton MacKaye, Sigur Olson, and Howard Zahniser, who authored the text of the Act.

⁷⁸Roderick Nash begins his study right after the signing of the Wilderness Act.



On the previous page, Fig.1: Ansel Adam, "The Tetons and the Snake River," 1942.

Above, Fig.2: Frederick Edwin Church, "The Natural Bridge, Virginia," 1852.

If asked prior to any specific investigation on the subject matter, most of us would answer that *natural* is that which does not fall under any human constraint, that is beyond the reach of any human influence. But as soon as we delve into the question a little more - and more importantly - as we try to apply this abstract concept to the material world that surrounds us, we soon realize that labelling something as *natural* is more difficult than had seemed at first glance. Bringing the 'Idea of Wilderness' from the hyperuranian down to earth without losing part of its essential purity is even more difficult, actually it is practically impossible.⁷⁹ As Anne Whiston Spirn explains in a brief article on the different conceptions of naturalness in the practice of landscape architecture⁸⁰, this difficulty depends in part on the semantic complexity

⁷⁹See: William Cronon "The trouble with wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton & Company, 1996).

⁸⁰Anne Whiston Spirn, "The Authority of Nature: Conflict and Confusion in Landscape Architecture," in *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1997), 249-61.

of the word *nature* itself.⁸¹ Raymond Williams calls *nature* “perhaps the most complex word in the language.”⁸² A. O. Lovejoy identifies sixty-six different acceptations of *nature* and *natural* in the literature and philosophy dating from the ancient world to the Enlightenment.⁸³ C. S. Lewis acknowledges such complexity including the entry *nature* in his *Studies in Words*.⁸⁴ This complexity undoubtedly does not help, but - of course - the problem is not just a matter of semantics. The history of the idea of nature seems to be no less intricate than the etymological root of the word. In order to conduct preliminary research for the writing of a book on the history of the idea of nature from the Enlightenment to the

⁸¹Spirn's references are A. O. Lovejoy, “Some Meanings of ‘Nature,’” in *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas*, A. O. Lovejoy et al. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1935), 447-56; R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945); A. O. Lovejoy, “Nature as Aesthetic Norm,” in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1948), 69-77; Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought From Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967); C.S. Lewis, *Nature*, in *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); Raymond Williams, *Ideas of Nature*, in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980) 67-85; Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Rev.ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 219. To these references we might add: Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980.

⁸²Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Rev.ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 219.

⁸³A. O. Lovejoy, “Some Meanings of ‘Nature,’” in *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas*, ed. A. O. Lovejoy (Baltimore: Octagon Press, 1935), 447-56.

⁸⁴For further readings on C. S. Lewis' study on the word nature see also: Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Fig.3: Robert N. Dennis collection of stereoscopic views, “Stereoscopic views of Natural Bridge, Virginia,” 1906.





Fig.4: The Ship wreck of Aristippus as related by Vitruvius in the Preface to book VI of his *De Architectura*. This illustration is chosen by Clarence Glacken for the frontispiece of his “Traces on the Rhodian Shores” in 1967.

1960’s, the late American geographer Clarence Glacken remained caught up in a twenty year long study. This meant-to-be-preliminary work eventually became *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*,⁸⁵ a colossal contribution to the cultural geography of the twentieth century. Glacken never published the work he had initially planned to write, despite the fact that he had collected more research material than that used for the writing of *Traces*. The question “what is nature?” is also at the very core of disciplines such as environmental philosophy and environmental ethics. Even within these fields the most authoritative scholars have raised the white flag asserting that the question has no answer - or at least no *one* answer.⁸⁶ Indeed, conceptions of nature have changed over time in each culture and change radically from culture to culture, and we have no way or right to say that any of these conceptions is better or more true than any other. In the 1990’s, the debate focused on demonstrating (or confuting) that nature is a mere cultural construct.⁸⁷ Within a few years, two books on the subject were published: *The Social*

⁸⁵Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought Since Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967). To read more about Glacken’s difficult relationship with his own scholarship read the ad memoriam eulogy written by his former colleagues in 1990: <http://texts.cdlib.org>

⁸⁶We refer to the position of social constructivists on the subject.

⁸⁷Neil Evernden. *The Social Construction of Nature*. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992). See also: Steven Kellert, “Concepts of Nature East and West” in *Reinventing Nature: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* ed. Michael Soulé and Gary Lease (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1995) - in particular, chapter seven “Concept of Nature, East and West”: 103-121.

*Creation of Nature*⁸⁸ (1992) and *The Social Construction of Nature*⁸⁹ (1996), by Neil Evernden and Klaus Elder, respectively, while the publication of the controversial *Uncommon Ground*, published a few years after, marked the climax of this prevailing constructivism.⁹⁰ In the introduction of *Uncommon Ground*, speaking on behalf of all of its contributors, environmental historian William Cronon asserts that: “The work of literary scholars, anthropologists, cultural historians, and critical theorists over the past several decades has yielded abundant evidence that “nature” is not nearly so natural as it seems. Instead, it is a profoundly human construction. This is not to say that a nonhuman world is somehow unreal or a mere figment of our imaginations - far from it. But the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated. What we mean when we use the word “nature” says as much about ourselves as about the things we label with that word.”⁹¹

In this open sea of relativism however, contemporary epistemology seems to signal some kind of beacon: there are actually a few things we can say about what nature really is. Let us go back for a moment to the lay person hypothesis, the one that says that natural is that which is beyond the reach of human influence and see where we can go from

⁸⁸Neil Evernden. *The Social Construction of Nature*. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992). Among the main sources Evernden uses to build up his argument: “The Social Construction of Reality” by Thomas Luckmann (1967)

⁸⁹Klaus Elder, 1996

⁹⁰We refer to epistemological constructivism as used for the first time by Jean Piaget in the in “Logique et Connaissance scientifique” in from the *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*.

⁹¹Cronon, Op. Cit. 1995, 25.

Fig.5: Salvador Dali, “Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man,” 1943.

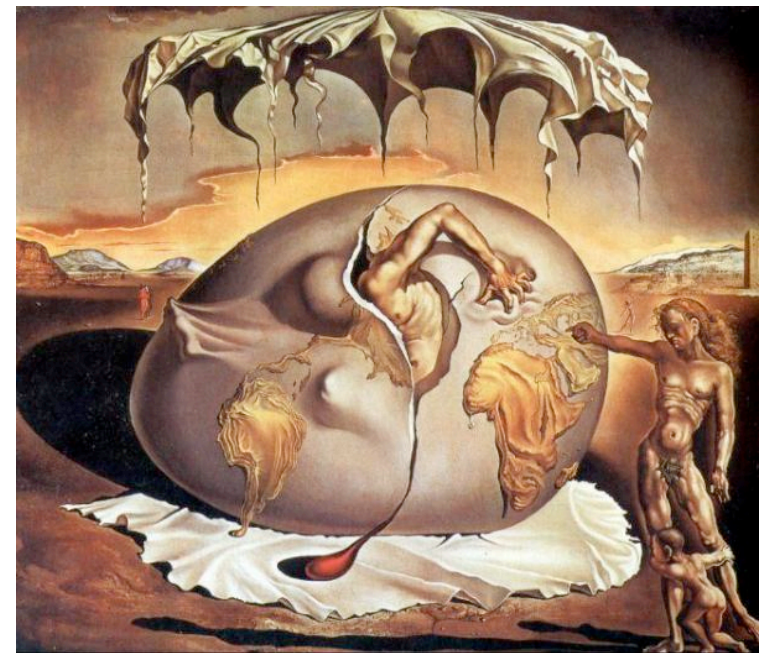




Fig.6: Dosso Dossi, “Jupiter, Mercury and Virtue,” 1524.

there. Apparently, not very far: in fact, the awareness of the existence of a human factor in the current global climate change would lead us to the paradoxical conclusion that nothing really natural is now left on the planet. In fact, no tract of land is truly beyond the reach of human influence as any tract of land shares with the rest of the planet the human-modified atmosphere as an integral part of its ecology. This is precisely the conclusion Bill McKibben reached in his famous book from 1989, when he proclaimed the *End of Nature*.⁹² Despite the paramount importance that the material McKibben thoroughly presented in his study had - and still has - on the global consciousness about global warming, we believe that the statement that served as the title to his book is somehow misleading. Scientifically speaking, humans have always had an influence on global climate, just like anything else on this planet. Even if infinitesimal up until the Industrial Revolution, a human contribution to the global climate has existed since prehistoric times. Its sudden augmented reality should not make us think that it is something new. The words of John Muir that open this chapter make this very clear: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”⁹³ Everything is interconnected: we have always been attached to the ecosystem of Yosemite Valley even before the Mayflower landed at Plymouth Rock. Edward Lawrence’s theory on the “sensitive dependence on the initial condition” of non-linear systems, also known as the butterfly effect, can be seen as a more recent and thorough version of this same intuition. The smallest variation in any physical system may contribute to the transformation of any other

⁹²Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 1989).

⁹³John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

physical system. The ultimate consequence of the 'lay person hypothesis' on what natural is therefore proves to be even more shocking than McKibben's claim. As nothing beyond the reach of human influence has ever existed, nature ceased to be when humans appeared on the face of the earth. And as humans did not appear on the face of the earth from one day to the next - despite creationists' efforts to make us believe the contrary - we find ourselves again entangled in another solution-less puzzle. It therefore becomes clear that we have started from fallacious premises.⁹⁴

In fact, from an epistemological stand point, the 'lay person hypothesis' is rooted in an outmoded paradigm⁹⁵ that looks at nature and culture through a simplistic dualistic lense. An outpouring of recent literature stresses this very issue, comparing the Western worldview of nature with that of other cultures.⁹⁶ Deeply embedded in the Judeo-Christian thought that produced it, our paradigm is based on the opposition

⁹⁴Robert C. Hilborn, "Sea gulls, butterflies, and grasshoppers: A brief history of the butterfly effect in nonlinear dynamics," *American Journal of Physics* 72, no. 4 (2004): 425-427. In chaos theory, the "sensitive dependence on initial conditions" in a nonlinear systems define how a change at one place can result in large differences to a later state. The name of the effect is derived from the theoretical example of a hurricane's formation being contingent on whether or not, several weeks before, a distant butterfly had flapped its wings.

⁹⁵Mark W. Brunson, "Managing Naturalness as a Continuum: Setting the Limits of Acceptable Change" in *Restoring Nature*, ed. Paul H. Gobster and R. Bruce Hull (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2000).

⁹⁶Steven Kellert, "Concepts of Nature East and West" in *Reinventing Nature: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* ed. Michael Soulé and Gary Lease (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1995); Brunson, Op Cit.; Gary. A. Fine, "Naturework and the Taming of the Wild: The problem of "overpick" in the culture of mushroomers" in *Social Problems* 44, no. 1 (1997):68-88; Gary Snyder, *The Rediscovery of Turtle Island* (San Francisco: New Directions, 1974).

Fig7: an Brueghel the Younger, "Creation of Adam in the Paradise," 17th century.





Fig.8: Wenzel Peter, "Adam and Even in the Garden of Even," 18th Century.

between humans and nature. The Torah and the Bible describe man and woman as entities of creation that are clearly distinct from the earth, plants and animals. They were generated through a different creative impulse (that in fact takes place on a different day in the genesis narrative) and - unlike the rest of creation - they are created in the image and likeness of God. Mediaevalist Lynn White Jr. explains it in this way: "What did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment? Christianity inherited from Judaism ... a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes." On this note White further comments: "Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploits nature for his proper ends;" as a consequence "man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature." In a sort of regret of his own religion he comes to the conclusion that: "especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."⁹⁷ American theologian David Loy contrasts this dualistic paradigm with the non-dualistic visions of the Eastern world in which the human realm is an integral part of nature, it is infinitely interconnected and inextricably sown with it. In the West, the

⁹⁷Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967), 1203-1207.

seed of nonduality “however often sown, has never found fertile soil, because it has been too antithetical to those other vigorous sprouts that have grown into modern science and technology.” On the contrary in the Eastern tradition “the seeds of seer-seen nonduality not only sprouted but matured into a variety (some might say a jungle) of impressive philosophical specimens... By no means do all these systems assert the nonduality of subject and object, but it is significant that three which do - Buddhism, Vedanta and Taoism - have probably been the most influential.”⁹⁸ Mark Brunson defines the non-dualistic paradigms as ‘the organic view.’ In this view “the line between nature and culture is blurred if it exists at all.”⁹⁹ Unlike White and Loy, historian of science Carolyn Merchant claims that the Western world has not always exclusively embraced the dualistic paradigm. In her 1980 book *The Death of Nature* she thoroughly describes the struggle between dualistic and non dualistic visions within Western culture.¹⁰⁰ Neil Evernden will do the same in his study on the idea of nature published twelve years later, largely referencing Merchant. Both authors see the lapse of time between the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment as the age in which man began to dissect and objectify nature, the apotheosis of the dualistic paradigm. Nonetheless, both point out that before being wiped out by the mechanistic view of the Scientific Revolution, fifteenth century Humanism had attempted to lay a foundation for an organicistic view of nature. As Merchant puts it: “The female earth that



Fig.9: Thomas Cole, “Expulsion from the Garden of Eden,” 1828.

⁹⁸David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁹⁹Brunson, Op. Cit. 233.

¹⁰⁰Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).



Fig.10: William Blake, "Newton,"1795.

was central to organic cosmology was undermined by the Scientific Revolution and the rise of a market-oriented culture." Before then, "in 1500, the daily interaction with nature was still structured for most Europeans, as it was for other peoples, by close-knit, cooperative, organic communities. Thus it is not surprising that for sixteenth century Europeans the root metaphor binding together the self, society, and the cosmos was that of an organism. As a projection of the way people experienced daily life, organismic theory emphasized interdependence among the parts of the human body, subordination of the individual to the communal purpose in family, community, and the state, and vital life permeating the cosmos to the lowliest stone. The idea of nature as a living organism had philosophical antecedents in ancient systems of thought, variation of which formed the prevailing ideological framework of the sixteenth century."¹⁰¹ The dualistic paradigm was challenged not only before the Scientific Revolution, but also subsequently. Several authors stress that a certain reassessment of dualism has been undertaken, counterintuitively, as a direct consequence to the development of technoscience itself. Evolutionary biology, genetics and ecology, arising simultaneously in the early decades of the second half of the nineteenth century considerably weakened the basis of the man/nature opposition. In *Gray World, Green Heart* Robert Thayer sheds light on the transformative action ecology has had in this regard: "Although the early ecologists considered themselves heirs to the objective scientific tradition - he says - they themselves unselfconsciously laid the basis for the eventual infusion of value. By articulating their scientific theories of the *connectedness* of nature, they were reawakening and giving credence to the long-buried values of organic vitalism, universal holism still residing

¹⁰¹Ibid.

in the mythology of the primal peoples, in Eastern philosophies, and in Western mysticism. Philosophers, humanistic scholars, and the general public saw this potential even before the scientists themselves. As a holistic, integrative science, ecology proved much too strong a threat to the dominance of reductionist technological determinism, and much too potent a paradigm for explaining and ordering human life within the context of other living and nonliving entities.”¹⁰²

The rediscovery of the holistic paradigm is also the rediscovery of Spinoza, whose discordant voice, in the middle of the seventeenth century, called for a monistic ontology. Max Oelschlaeger describes Spinoza’s vision of the natural world: “Spinozism is a kind of neutral monism predicated on the presupposition of the *Unity of Nature*. . . . He separated neither divine substance nor the cognizing mind from nature. Both were interpretation of the one substance, or reality. This reality could be regarded either as nature by the scientist or as God by the religionist, but either path viewed philosophically led to an *infinita idea dei* (infinite idea of god). The universe was for Spinoza one connected system as expressed in the doctrine *Dei sive natura*, God or Nature.”¹⁰³

A great number of scholars that discuss such views, including Merchant, Cronon and the other contributors of *Uncommon Ground*, White, Loy, Thayer and Brunson, as well as the founder of Deep Ecology Arne Næss whole-heartedly embrace the holistic paradigm. They strongly believe

¹⁰²Robert L. Thayer, Jr. *Grey World, Green Heart: Technology, Nature and the Sustainable Landscape* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1994).

¹⁰³Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

Fig.11: An illustration from Descartes’s “meditations métaphysiques” on the mind-body dualism.

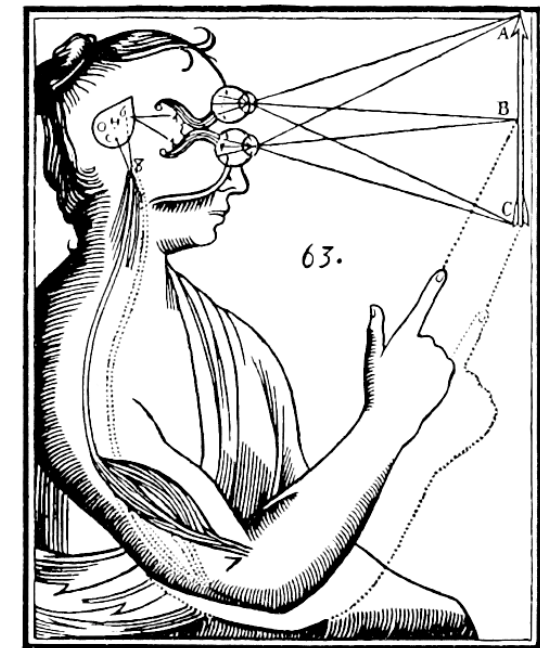




Fig.12: The Cover of Baruch Spinoza's Magnum Opus: Ethics, 1677.

dualism has been the cause of the confusion we make about what natural is and - most importantly - that it is at the very "root of our ecological crisis."¹⁰⁴ In his *Invitation to Environmental Philosophy* Anthony Weston synthesises the position of this cohort: "the environmental crisis is in part a crisis of concepts as well. . . . We are many things: men or women, Americans or other nationalities, as well as mammals, animals, life forms, earth beings. Could we not as well say that we must invariably think as earth beings, since we are earth beings too? . . . In fact we can escape the crisis. We can return to the community of life, we can re-situate ourselves, in thought and experience, within and not against the more-than-human world."¹⁰⁵

Following this train of thought, we can easily come to the conclusion that if humans are part of nature so are all human artefacts as they are nothing more than the result of a transformation of environmental resources carried out by human hands. This is the premise that frames Anne Spirn's ground-breaking 1984 book *The Granite Garden*. Spirn sees the city itself as a manifestation of nature. Are cities not simply the result of the processing of natural resources by natural beings? In her words: "the city is part of nature," and urban process "is not 'unnatural' but, rather, a transformation of 'wild' nature by humankind."¹⁰⁶ By inserting a passage from *Tristes Tropiques* in the book's epigraph, Spirn shows us that Lévi-Strauss had shared this intuition decades earlier: "a

¹⁰⁴Lynn, Op. Cit.

¹⁰⁵Anthony Weston, *An Invitation to Environmental Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁶Anne Spirn, *The Granite Garden* (New York: Basics Books, 1984).

city is a congestion of animals whose biological history is enclosed within its boundaries.”¹⁰⁷

Viewed through the lense of the non-dualistic paradigm, the question “What is natural?” proves to be a false dilemma. The answer becomes obvious: everything is natural. We look at nature as the noumenal all-inclusive *ding an sich*, the world we are a part of and of which we can acquire a phenomenological knowledge of through our senses.¹⁰⁸ From this point of view, unless we deny the existence of a material world that exists autonomously from the projections of the human mind, we cannot deny that beyond the sphere of our phenomenological knowledge, an objective reality of nature exists in the dimension of the noumenon.

Yet, embracing this vision does not leave us without further doubts regarding our relationship with the environment. Brunson observes the problematic nodes that emerge when we adopt holism: “if nature and culture are inseparable” and “any place is a natural place,” we paradoxically lack the means by which to distinguish between places such as downtown Los Angeles and the Mojave Desert. So, while we can say with no hesitation that everything is natural, we still need categories and terms to describe in what ways a forest and a city differ. This is where the idea of the *wild* comes into play. Unlike the binomial *natural/not natural*, the binomial *wild/not wild* is not made of two dichotomous categories. While it is nonsensical to say that something is quite natural or very natural, the expression *wild* is able to describe phenomena in relative terms. From this point of view we can say that the city and the

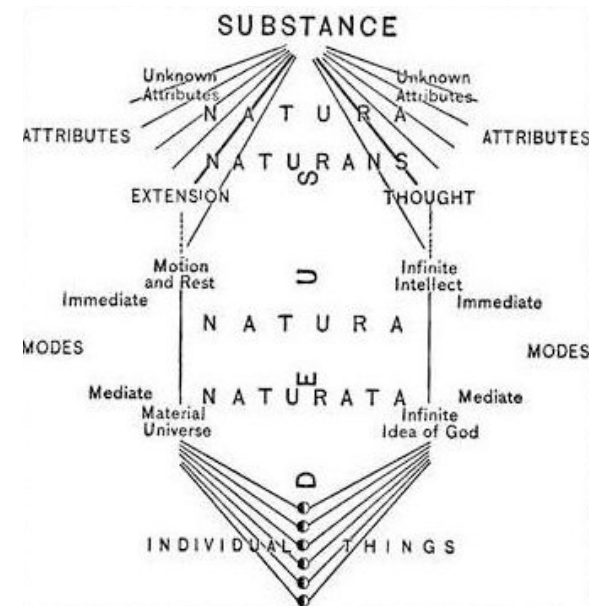


Fig 13: A diagram of Spinoza's Vision of Nature.

¹⁰⁷Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristi Tropici* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2011).

¹⁰⁸Domenico Abbagnano: *Storia della Filosofia* (Torino: UTET, 2006).



Fig.14: Valley of Fire, Mojave Desert, 2013.

primeval forest, both natural manifestations, represent the two ends of a continuous spectrum that describes how wild things are. Borrowing Cronon's use of the term *otherness* in this respect,¹⁰⁹ wild is that which embodies a great degree of otherness with respect to things that have been manipulated by humans. To describe the degree of otherness of a place, Brunson provides an even more convincing expression: rate of anthropogenic change. Introducing the notion of anthropogenic change in this study can help us delineate a series of distinctions which are fundamental to its further development.

Unlike nature, the objective all-inclusive thing-in-itself that exists beyond the sphere of our phenomenological knowledge, the condition of the wild - in other words the otherness of what surrounds us - has to be recognized as a cultural construction. In fact, *otherness* does not exist without a subject to identify it, a subject that will necessarily use the culturally constructed ideas of his/her own subjectivity to interpret the other as *other*. If our position, therefore, differs from that of the epistemological constructivists when regarding nature, it aligns with theirs when it comes to wilderness. In other words, while skeptical about some of the constructivist positions of the authors of *Uncommon Ground* regarding nature, we agree with Cronon when he says: "The more one knows of its peculiar history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems. Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular

¹⁰⁹William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness" in William Cronon ed.: *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (Madison: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

moments in human history.”¹¹⁰ From this fundamental premise, in the following section, we will try to describe which forms this cultural construction takes within the Western and the westernized world.

2.2 Selfwilledness, Wildness, & Wilderness.

The first observation that comes to mind as we explore the *wild/non-wild spectrum* and delve into the notion of the *rate of anthropogenic change* is that pure wilderness is just an abstraction. To some extent we had already argued this in the previous section. We reasoned on the fact that no place is beyond the reach of human influence as every place is part of a globally interconnected human-modified environment. As a matter of example - we said - every corner of the earth shares with the rest of the planet an atmosphere that is highly human-modified, as human-driven climate change confirms. Another way to look at this same question is to consider the boundaries of the tract of land we intend to define as wilderness. The area immediately outside those boundaries has indeed a direct ecological connection with the area inside the boundaries. Apart from the already mentioned atmospheric composition, the micro-climate, the soil, the vegetation and wildlife patterns, and many other characteristics of the anthropized areas adjacent to the presumed pure wilderness will necessarily compromise such pureness.

This is not the only reason why we can argue that pure wilderness does not exist. There is also a more subtle but no less relevant one: when undertaking the simple act of labelling a tract of land ‘a wilderness’ we



Fig.15: Los Angeles Metropolitan Region, 2013

¹¹⁰Ibid.



are inevitably undertaking a process of objectification¹¹¹ that contradicts the very definition of pure wilderness. When we delimitate a wilderness area, distinguishing it from the non-wilderness that surrounds it, we are taking a step further in this process. Regardless of the integrity of its presumed pristine condition, from the moment in which we take it into consideration it has already entered the ‘human realm,’ becoming a cultural object. It is not relevant whether such reification derives from a will to exploit its resources or a will to protect it, in both cases its pure *otherness* is obviously lost.¹¹² This is maybe why the metaphor of the “earth as a garden,”¹¹³ used by authors such as Gille Clement or Michael Pollan are so convincing when it comes to describing our environment. If even the wildest places - regardless of our intentions - are indirectly under the influence of human activity,

¹¹¹Martha Nussbaum investigates the issue of objectification as an action to possess and exploit an entity in “Objectification” published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24, pp.279-83. She claims that something is objectified if any of the following factors are present: instrumentality – if the thing is treated as a tool for one's own purposes; denial of autonomy – if the thing is treated as if lacking agency or self-determination; inertness – if the thing is treated as if lacking agency; ownership – if the thing is treated as if owned by another; fungibility – if the thing is treated as if interchangeable; violability – if the thing is treated as if it is permissible to damage or destroy it; denial of subjectivity – if the thing is treated as if there is no need to show concern for the 'object's' feelings and experiences.

¹¹²Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992). The epilogue of the book focuses on this issue.

¹¹³Michael Pollan “The Idea of a Garden” in *Second Nature* (New York: Grove Press, 1991).

then we should look at them as elements of a planetary garden¹¹⁴ that is under our ineludible responsibility.¹¹⁵

The fact that pure wilderness is not more than an abstraction does not diminish the value of wild places; and our ineludible responsibility toward the planetary garden does not imply that we cannot make the decision to keep as much of it as we can wild. The big challenge then is: how do we keep a place wild? When can we arguably say “this is a wild place”? For instance, most of us would be tempted to describe the remote first-growth sequoia groves of the Sierra Nevada as a very wild place that thanks to preservation has never been reached by logging, road construction or any other kind of direct human activity and that, together with the rest of the communities of vegetation and wildlife that are part of their ecosystem, remain literally untouched by humans. Nonetheless we know that, as a result of the pollution generated by the Southern California urban region, on some days of the year the air of the groves is the most contaminated of the entire continent.¹¹⁶ Similar phenomena occur in the Appalachian Mountains as a result of the polluting activity of the vast Northeastern urban region.¹¹⁷ Just how wild then are the forests in Kings Canyon and in the Smokies? Other

¹¹⁴Gilles Clément, *Manifesto del Terzo Paesaggio* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 1995). In the original French version of the text the author uses the expression “Jardin Planétaire.”

¹¹⁵Pollan, Op. Cit.,

¹¹⁶Tracie Conn, “Sequoia National Park: California Smog Threatens Ancient Trees,” *The Huffington Post*, May 12, 2012, last accessed August 4, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/28/sequoia-national-park-california-smog_n_1550870.html.

¹¹⁷“Air Quality,” *National Park Service*, last modified July 27, 2013, accessed August 03, 2013, <http://www.nps.gov/grsm/naturescience/air-quality.htm>.

On the previous page: Fig.16: Lee Rentz, “Contrails over El Capitan in Yosemite.”

Below: Fig.17: Tourists in the Yosemite Vally: the paradox of the crowded wilderness.



questions also arise. Is a thriving ecosystem populated by communities of old-growth native vegetation and highly-diverse wildlife that develops on a patch of land defended from invasive species and polluters through high-tech research, continuous interventions and elaborate management protocols *wild*? Is a thriving ecosystem populated by communities of exotic vegetation and invasive wildlife that spontaneously develops on an artificial landfill created by the dumping of construction debris *non-wild*?

The confusion and the conflicts that emerge when, either individually or in the public debate, we try to answer these questions depend on the fact that we often start from different ideas of what *wild* is. In fact - as we argued in the previous section - the notion of the wild is a cultural construction and, far from being objective, can acquire more than one meaning. We said that any definition of *wild* generically refers to ‘that which embodies a great degree of otherness,’ but people are far from agreeing on what it is that confers this sense of otherness. Nonetheless we believe that the characteristics that make us recognize a place as *wild* almost always fall into the same three categories. In other words, the features of what we perceive as a *wild* place are almost always related to the same three conceptions of what *wild* is. Describing these three categories may help us realize that the conflicts derive from the fact that we often start from different premises and the confusion from the fact that we often jump from one notion of *wild* to another without being aware of doing so. We will try to describe each category in the followings paragraphs.

1. SELFWILLEDNESS. Some of the characteristics that makes us recognize a place as wild are related to the lack of human cultivation, to the absence of human action taking place there. Non-anthropized areas

Fig.18: Detroit’s “Urban Meadows” near Michigan Central Station, a case of *urban self-willedness*.



always present such characteristics, but anthropized areas might also in some cases. It does not matter to what degree an area had been previously anthropized, transformed, or constructed, if man has stopped taking care of it due to a lack of means or negligence, it will strike us with its otherness. Often it is precisely the contrast between the former human care and its present neglected condition that enhances its wild character. The semi-abandoned neighborhoods scattered across Detroit and so many cities of the Rust Belt are perfect examples of this. Their pervasive sense of a life interrupted and nature's indifference towards their demise generates an unsettling placeness. It is not just about the absence of human activity, it is mainly about the vitality of the non-human life that autonomously thrives. Gilles Clement explains this perhaps better than any other.¹¹⁸ His descriptions of the *friche* and the *délaissé* as outposts of biological diversity that develop in places disregarded by humans are a celebration of their value within the planetary garden. The slow development of spontaneous ecologies, the plant succession and the progressive colonization of wildlife unraveling despite the absence of any kind of management or preservation is proof to our eyes of a non-human nature's self-will. This is precisely the semantic origin of the word *wild* that derives from *willed*, or *self-willed*, in reference to what would not obey man's will. In following with this etymological root we will refer to the condition of a tract of land that presents these characteristics as *self-willedness*.

2. WILDNESS. Other characteristics that in some cases make us claim that a place is wild are less visible but no less valuable to us. They are related to science's answer to the question of otherness. In fact, when it

¹¹⁸Clement, Op. Cit.

Fig.19: Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York, a restored *wildness* in the city.



Fig.20: Stanley Park, Vancouver. Several patches of the forest are managed as *urban wilderness*.



comes to defining non-human nature we tend to trust science considerably, taking its assumptions wholeheartedly into account. These characteristics are what ecology describes as the integrity of a non-anthropized ecosystem.¹¹⁹ In other words, we see places in which healthy and diverse non-anthropized ecosystems thrive as wild, delegating to science the authority to decide the cases in which this occurs. It does not matter how much human knowledge and technology is required to preserve such ecological integrity. This definition of wild, unlike the previous, accepts human intervention for the sake of the creation of perfect otherness. Any tract of preserved land whose management has accomplished the objective of guaranteeing the integrity of the ecosystem is a good place to look for this kind of wild. We often also see as wild the places where the integrity of the non-human ecosystem has not been reached but where an ecological restoration has been initiated. Any habitat restoration area falls within this category. In following with the common acceptance of the word, we will refer to the condition of a tract of land that presents such characteristics as *wildness*.

3. WILDERNESSE. The third characteristic that induces us to recognize a place as wild is not related to the lack of human activity on the land, nor to the integrity of its ecosystems. It deals rather with its ability to evoke some of the great narratives that in the present and in the past have been associated with the idea of the wild. This is the very definition of wilderness this study proposes. For us a *wilderness* is any place that is able to recall the extraordinary semantic substratum the word has acquired throughout history. Wilderness is the condition of any place that through its landscape vividly recounts the story of the relationship

¹¹⁹SER, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://www.ser.org/>

between humans and non-human nature: the self-inflicted separation of the former from the latter, the struggle between the two, and their final imperfect reconciliation. Examples of tracts of land that fall within this category are found everywhere within the American landscape and not only in areas that are remote and far from urban centres.

It is clear that in some cases selfwilledness, wildness, and wilderness can be found in just one place at the same time. This is true for most of the land protected by the National Park Service in the United States. In national parks human intervention is kept at a minimum level while still allowing for recreational use and ecological management; ecological management defends the health and diversity of the ecosystems and, indeed, the landscape itself recalls the many narratives of early Northern American history. As aforementioned, this is precisely what generates most of the confusion and conflicts within the wilderness debate. We are unsure about 'how wild' a place is because we are unsure about which of these three 'kinds of wild' we should refer to when speaking about it. Similarly, conflicts around wildland management strategies often derive from the fact that different parties are interested in defending only one of these three notions of wild: either a place's selfwilledness, wildness or wilderness.

While selfwilledness, wildness, and wilderness often coexist, defending the attributes of one without damaging those of the others is very problematic. Both wildness and wilderness require careful management yet every action of management by definition reduces the selfwilledness of a place. On the contrary, the decision to not intervene on a tract of land in favor of its selfwilledness can easily jeopardize the integrity of its non-anthropized ecosystems - as happens for tracts of land threatened

Fig.21: Yosemite National ParkING LOT.



Fig21: San Francisco's Suto Forest is a place on great *self-willedness* but virtually no *wildness*.



by exotic invasive species - or the evocative 'sense of wilderness' it recalls - as happens for tracts of land threatened by frequent large natural disturbances such as storms or fires. Furthermore, making all of this more complicated, is the fact that the management strategies wildness and wilderness require often sharply contrast. A good illustrative example is the controversy regarding the many Eucalyptus forests that are spread out throughout several different parts of the European and North American landscape. While these lush groves of monumental trees often strongly evoke the idea of wilderness, defenders of wildness often struggle in advocacy for their clearance in order to allow for the reestablishment of native plant communities through complex and drawn out ecological restoration processes. The intricate relationship among these three different 'kinds of wild' often obliges us to choose one of the three to protect. This difficult decision represents a new dilemma: which of these three notions of the wild is the most worthwhile to protect? This question overlays other, more profound ones: Which of the three is the true wild? Which is most relevant for human culture? Which is the most beneficial for the health of our planet?

Affirming that selfwilledness is the true wild might initially be tempting. Selfwilledness is the only kind of wild that does not have to be cultivated. Yet, dampening any possible enthusiasm in this regard, Michael Pollan explains the downsides of advocating for selfwilledness. Recounting the acrimonious debate that ensued after a tornado destroyed a small patch of old-growth forest that had been a landmark in his hometown in Connecticut, he illustrates how a community's choice to not intervene in order to leave ecological regeneration up to nature's hands alone led to destructive and paradoxically very 'human'

results.¹²⁰ The decision to support selfwilledness after a natural disturbance such as a storm or a fire can turn a meaningful landmark wilderness into a meaningless patch of invasive exotic garden vines.

In having to choose between wildness and wilderness, one might lean toward the first, thinking that it has science on its side while the other seems to be too dependent on human values. Nevertheless, Mark Brunson poignantly explains that wildness is no less subject to cultural relativism than wilderness.¹²¹ In fact, despite science's authority and presumed objectivity, the definition of wildness is not objective at all. Science, and especially a young science like ecology, changes its point of view over time more often than one might think. An good example is the transferring of specimens from one classification to another and the consequences that such fluctuation generates in biodiversity management. "Western culture - he writes - typically sees scientific inquiry as yielding truth that somehow rises above the interpretive variability associated with the social sciences, ... however, the natural sciences are subject to evolutions of meaning as any other cultural constructs." Brunson addresses the taxonomic debate regarding the great tailed grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*), a common black bird found in central North America. This bird has undergone oscillatory classifications, from being considered an autonomous species to being classified as a subspecies of a morphologically similar bird (*Quiscalus mayor*) only to be "promoted back to its own species" thirty years later. In recent natural history it has switched genus twice and family once. "As all of these changes were taking place, the genetic make-up of the great



Fig.22: Cathedral Pines, Connecticut have become an emblem of the dilemmas wilderness restoration must address: what to do after a natural disaster? What to pursue? The *self-willedness*, the *wildness* or the *wilderness* of the place?

¹²⁰Pollan, Op. Cit., 200

¹²¹Brunson, Op Cit.



Fig.23: The great tailed grackle (*Quiscalus Mexicanus*): Ecologists constantly make assumptions on the integrity of ecosystems based on changing taxonomic definitions that are far from being objective and, as a result of this, wildness becomes subject to cultural relativism.

tailed grackle stayed the same. What changed was how scientists organized their construction of the natural world.” These changes greatly affect the management of natural areas. “If a natural area has a slightly varied population of a common species, that species might not be a high priority for the manager. But if a geneticist somewhere discovers that the local variant is more variant than what we thought - that it's actually a separate (and quite rare) species - priorities suddenly change.” Ecologists constantly make assumptions on the integrity of ecosystems based on changing taxonomic definitions that are far from being objective and, as a result of this, wildness becomes subject to cultural relativism.

Unlike self-willedness and wildness, wilderness presents itself frankly for what it is: nothing more than cultural construction. And if, as we have claimed, wilderness is that which is able to recall the idea of the wild, then self-willedness and wildness are wilderness too, as we have also argued that they are nothing more than human ideas of the wild themselves. Within this framework, self-willedness and wildness might then also be looked upon as sub-categories of wilderness.



CHAPTER THREE

A DEFINITION OF URBAN WILDERNESS

*Which sites in the city require rehabilitation?
Those fortuitous and ecologically diverse landscapes
representing urban natural forces at work
or the formalized landscapes created by man?*

Michael Hough

3.1 Toward a Definition Of Urban Wilderness & Wilderness Remnants in the City

The expression *Urban Wilderness* is becoming fashionable these days. It appears in newspapers and magazines, websites and blogs.¹²² Nonetheless, in spite of the abundant use of this neologism, there is no consensus on its meaning. Being an evocative oxymoron, scholars, activists, and journalists have often used it as a slogan, yet with reference to different - sometimes contrasting - acceptations. Looking at the history of the use of the term in publications might help provide some clarification.

In 1972, Sam Warner uses it as title for his book on American urban history. In 1977, Jim Stratton includes the expression in the title of his retrospective on the renovation of industrial buildings for residential use in major U.S. cities. Warner addresses the ungovernable growth of urban environments and the intricateness of their cultural landscapes. Stratton draws an analogy between the post-industrial city and the

¹²²On August 3, 2013, the entry “Urban Wilderness” on google.com gave 157,000 results. Apart from the ones that refer to the publications we cite in this article, numerous organizations have chosen the term for their proper name.



frontier. In his eye the first loft-dwellers were ‘Pioneering the Urban Wilderness.’ Both authors choose the expression to address the unruly force of urban processes. Its use in this manner demonstrates the persistence of a specific narrative that began to spread during the Gilded Age, the narrative according to which the American urban realm was becoming a hostile environment, and the great outdoors, now fully domesticated, the only refuge from it.

In the following years, however, as a newborn urban ecology begins to focus on the crucial role that natural process has in a city’s life¹²³ and public opinion becomes more familiar with the concept of urban nature, the expression acquires a new meaning. In 1988, it appears again on a book cover, but this time it is not describing the complexity of urbanity, but rather the remnants of wildness within the city. In “Urban Wilderness: Nature in New York City,” Joel Greenberg’s photographs and Jean Gardner’s text recount the “natural wonders and peaceful landscapes” of New York: “a salt marsh in the Bronx, rich in molluscs, swaying with tall grasses... a sweep of sand dunes and stunted trees punctuated by growths of blueberry bushes” in Staten Island... or in Queens... a forest canopy of oaks, maples and saffras, where 17th century colonists once stood, marvelling at a spot very full of timber.”¹²⁴ From this moment on, the expression will increasingly refer to any thriving spontaneous ecology within the confines of an urban area. This is in fact the use of the term we see spreading relentlessly today.

¹²³In this regard, “City and Natural Process” by Michael Hough, published in 1984, plays a very important role.

¹²⁴Jean Gardner and Joel Greenberg, *Urban Wilderness: Nature in New York City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988).

We have thus far explored the semantic substratum of the word wilderness, the history of the wilderness idea in Western culture, the significance of wilderness in American history, the misconceptions and paradoxes related to the false dichotomy *natural/non-natural*, and we have given our definition of what wild is. We are finally ready to focus our attention on Northern American urban wildland. To start, we will give a tentative definition of urban wilderness and outline a taxonomy of wilderness remnants in the city.

The definition of urban wilderness we will give is intentionally a very broad one. We believe that only in this way can we fully discuss its multiple meanings, values and potentials. In so doing we know that in the long run some of the various acceptations we will consider might prove weak or inaccurate. Yet, carrying out this first inclusive analysis is necessary in order to consider all of its relevant embodiments. We define a wilderness remnant as any tract of land that, regardless of its size and the intensity of anthropogenic interventions it has been exposed to, is able to recall one or more of the different manifestations that the idea of wilderness has assumed throughout history. We define as urban wilderness the condition of any wilderness remnant found in an urban context.

In the following pages we will delineate a tentative taxonomy of these remnants¹²⁵, offering categories by which to classify them according to

¹²⁵The use of the word remnant is inspired by the article “The Changing Cultural Geography of the Frontier: Michael C. Hall, “National Parks and Wilderness Areas as Frontier Remnants” in *Tourism in Frontier America*, eds. , Shaul Kracover & Gradus Yehuda (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002), 283-296.



the primary features of their landscape; their form within the urban territory; their physiographic and ecological features; their environmental history, jurisdiction and management, and - most importantly - the specific connotation of the word wilderness they recall and the narratives they evoke.

3.2 A Taxonomy of Wilderness Remnants in the City

THE FIVE PRIMARY LANDSCAPES

All wilderness remnants in the city share a common trait: they always feature the visible characteristics of an unanthropized landscape. Like a tear in the fabric of the urbanized territory, they offer visions of the land the way it was before human settlement or - more often - the way it would be if humans were to interrupt their transformative action. These visible characteristics greatly vary from case to case depending on the biome of the region, as well as on the area's environmental history and present state of management. As a result of this, wilderness remnants in the city range from lush forests to barren grounds. Yet, we can always recognize them as fragments of one of the five primeval landscapes that characterized the inhabitable regions of the planet prior to human transformation: *the woodland, the shrubland, the grassland, the wetland, and the desert.*¹²⁶

¹²⁶Cfr. this definition of primary landscape, mainly based on the visible perception of land cover and the definition of Land Cover given in: Lex Comber et al. (2005). "What Is Land Cover?," *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* (32): 199–209 - and also - Pete Fisher et al. (2005). "Land use and Land cover: Contradiction or Complement," in Peter Fisher & David Unwin, *Re-Presenting GIS* (Chichester: Wiley, 2005). pp. 85–98.

The ability to evoke one of these primary landscapes is for us one of the most relevant properties of a wilderness remnant. This is why we have decided to group our case studies accordingly: we will dedicate a chapter in the second part of the dissertation to each of these five dominant landscapes.

With the term *woodland* we refer to any tract of land that is dominated by trees. This definition is more inclusive than the one commonly found in scientific literature, which usually describes woodlands as areas of low density forests that receive considerable sunlight and limited shade. In order to maintain consistency in the specific taxonomy this study attempts to outline, we will consider medium and high density forests as woodlands as well.¹²⁷ The definitions used in this study for the other primary landscapes adhere more closely to the standard definitions found in most manuals.¹²⁸ With the term *shrubland* we refer to any tract of land that is dominated by woody scrubs, regardless of the sparse presence of herbaceous plants and trees. With the term *grassland* we refer to any area dominated by grasses and other herbaceous plants regardless of the sparse presence of shrubs and trees. With the term *wetlands* we refer to a tract of land that is dominated by shallow waters and water saturated soil, regardless of the sparse presence of firm land, or characterized by recurrent and abundant inundations.¹²⁹ The vegetation of these areas can vary from trees, to shrubs, to herbaceous plants, yet the dominant character of the landscape is stagnant or semi-stagnant

¹²⁷Barry Lopez and Debra Gwartney, *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2006), 393.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 318.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 389.





waters. A definition of *desert* based on climatic and ecological features is elusive, yet the idea of the desert is very precise in the human mind. Just like we did for *wilderness*, we will refer to *desert* as any tract of land that recalls this idea: bleak expanses of arid land, bare ground and barren rocky soil, sand dune fields, dry habitats characterized by severe climatic conditions that accommodate a reduced flora - mainly herbs, shrubs and succulent plants - and fauna.

We will refer to these categories without regard to whether we are dealing with ecological communities that have reached the climax of their ecological succession, or with ecological communities that are undergoing intermediary stages of such succession. Likewise, we will refer to these categories without regard to whether they may have reached their current state through a spontaneous ecological succession or through highly invasive human intervention.

GEOGRAPHIC SITUATION OF WILDERNESS REMNANTS

While it does not happen strictly, wilderness remnants that feature specific primary landscapes are to be found in cities within ecological regions that are primarily characterized by such landscapes. We carefully took into account the ecological regions and the ecotones the wilderness remnants we studied found themselves in and the variation between the landscape one would assume to find in such locations based on the ecological region they belong to and their actual landscape. Equally relevant with respect to the ecological regions of the subcontinent are of course their regional context and the urban megaregions to which they belong. For each wilderness remnant we took into account the ecological

region it belongs to through level III classification. While we will give a detailed listing of each remnant's full classification in the following part of the study we will here firstly list the different level I ecoregions our case studies belong to: Marine West Coast Forest, Eastern Temperate Forest, Great Plains, American Deserts, Mediterranean California, Tropical Wet Forest.¹³⁰ In terms of regional geography, we considered twelve regions, nine of which include metropolises we considered for our study: Northwest Pacific, the Great Lakes, New England, Mid-Atlantic, Atlantic-Piedmont, Florida, South Central West, Southwest Mountain, Southwest Pacific. All of the urban megaregions defined by the Regional Planning Association of America are featured in this study with at least one wilderness remnant belonging to a city included in the clusters that constitute the megaregions themselves: Cascadia, Great Lakes, Northeast, Atlantic-Piedmont, Florida, Texas Triangle, Front Range, Chihuahuan Desert, Arizona Sun Corridor, Northern California, and Southern California.¹³¹ As for the specific metropolises we considered we based our selection criteria solely on population, selecting the twenty-five most populous urban areas of Northern America. While substantially influenced by the classification of the Statistical Metropolitan Areas and the Combined Statistical Metropolitan Areas made by the United States Office of Management and Budget, we followed our own criteria when it came to interpreting clustering urban

¹³⁰*Ecological Regions of North America*, accessed August 4, 2013, http://www.ccc.org/Storage/42/3484_eco-eng_EN.pdf.

¹³¹"Megaregions," *America 2050* last modified June 10, 2013, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://www.america2050.org/megaregions.html>.

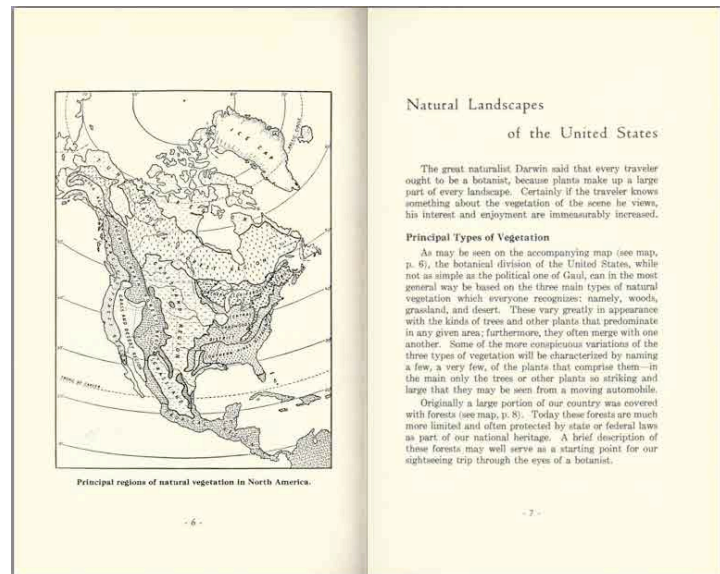
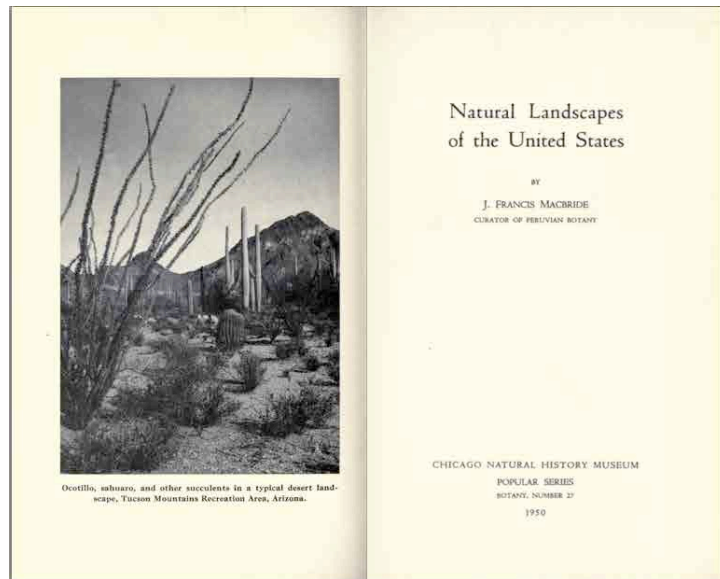
On the previous pages: Fig.1: Stanley Park and Downtown Vancouver on a foggy day. Fig.2: The outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona.

Fig. 3: Joel Sternfeld, Friends of the High Line, The proposed area for the Highline's third section, 2000. Fig.4: Joel Sternfeld, Friends of the High Line, The Highline, 11th avenue and 30th street looking east, 2000. Fig.5: Joel Sternfeld, Friends of the High Line. Looking South at 27th Street, 2000.

Fig.6-10: The Five primary landscapes of the anthropized temperate regions: the woodlands, the shrublands, the grasslands, the wetlands and the deserts.

Below, Fig.11: Major Northern American urban regions and their respective biomes.





centres as either two entities or as a sole urbanity.¹³² As a matter of example, while we considered the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area in the most extensive definition possible including the hundreds of municipalities that stretch from Malibu to Orange County, we considered Washington D.C. and Baltimore as two different and independent metropolises. The criteria we used to make such distinctions is again related to wild land. We considered the borders of a metropolis to be those marked off by a continuous frontier of undeveloped territory as that which is still recognizable between Washington D.C. and its neighboring city, and that instead does not exist between the two extremes of the immense urban territory that clusters around Los Angeles. For each of these twenty-five metropolises we tried to look for a significant wilderness remnant in accordance to the definition given within this same study, often finding more than one and more rarely finding not a single one that was convincing enough as was the case in Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth, and Atlanta. We then decided to choose the fifteen most significant cases being careful not to choose two within the same metropolis and more importantly choosing three cases for each of the five primary landscapes here defined.

MORPHOLOGY OF WILDERNESS REMNANTS

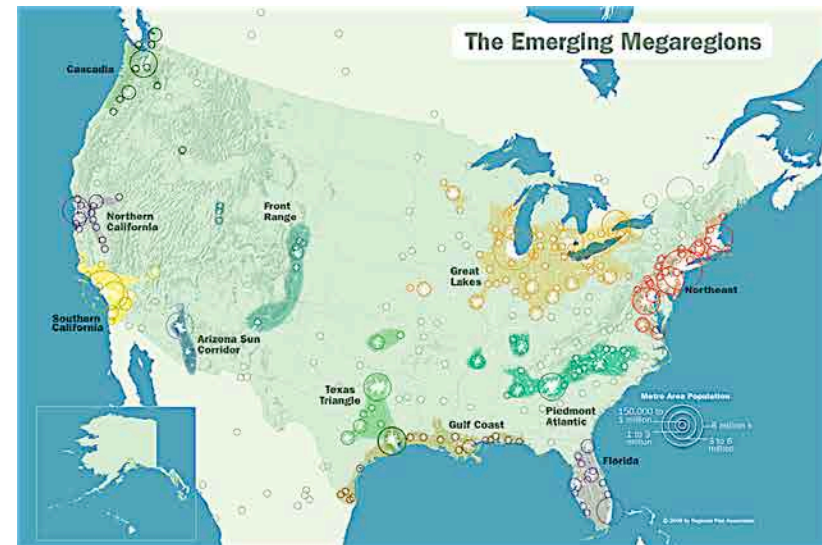
In our study we never considered scale a decisive factor for evaluating whether a tract of land could or could not be considered a wilderness remnant. In fact, we believe that even the smallest patch of land may in some cases be able to recall the idea of wilderness despite its urban

¹³²“The United States Census Bureau,” *Population Estimates* last modified June 27, 2013, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://www.census.gov/popest/data/index.html>.

context. Aldo Leopold's words explain this better than any other: "No tract of land is too small for the wilderness idea. It can, and perhaps should, flavor the recreational scheme for any woodlot or backyard."¹³³ The case studies we have selected range from large natural systems to small green interstices in the urban fabric. The list includes areas as vast as the grand El Paso & Ciudad Juarez Franklin Mountains and as minute as the Sutro Forest of San Francisco. Despite the actual continuity of this spectrum, for the purposes of taxonomy, we have grouped wilderness remnants into three categories according to their dimensional scale: (1) regional wilderness remnant, (2) urban wilderness remnant (3) neighborhood wilderness remnant.

Assessing the form of wilderness remnants with respect to the form of the city in which they find themselves enclosed has been from the beginning a very interesting aspect of this study. We have found it very useful to further group remnants according to the topological relations they establish with the overall urban system they are part of. Every remnant unequivocally falls within only one of these five categories: (1) wilderness enclaves, (2) wilderness wedges, (3) wilderness corridors, (4) wilderness backdrops, and (5) wilderness vest pockets.

1. *Wilderness Enclaves*. With this expression we refer to a large wilderness remnants surrounded by urban, suburban, industrial or infrastuctural development that have no direct connection with larger wild or semi-wild land. Tracts of land that maintain one or more territorial connections to other wildernesses through a thin corridor such as a river or a stream and its riparian zone also fall within this category. Urban



On the previous pages, Fig.12: J, Francis MacBride, "Natural Landscapes of the United States," 1950, Frontispiece. Fig.13: J, Francis MacBride, "Natural Landscapes of the United States," 1950, First pages of the first chapter.

Above, Fig.14: The Emerging Megaregions of the United States, as defined by the Regional Planning Association of America.

¹³³Aldo Leopold, Op. Cit.



wilderness enclaves could be described as islands emerging in the sea of urban land. Urban wilderness enclaves' *frontier lines* describe a closed perimeter that ranges from irregular jagged lines to closed polygonal contours depending on the nature of the boundary.

2. *Wilderness Wedges*. With this expression we refer to wilderness remnants largely surrounded by urban, suburban, industrial, or infrastuctural development that maintain one broad direct connection with a larger wild land system that is external to the urban region. Tracts of land that maintain other territorial connections to other wildernesses through a thin corridor such as a river or a stream and its riparian zone also fall within this category. Urban wilderness wedges could be described as peninsulas emerging from the sea of urban land. Urban wilderness wedges' *frontier lines* describe a pronouncedly convex open perimeter that ranges from irregular jagged open lines to open polygonal contours depending on the nature of the boundary.

3. *Wilderness Corridors*. With this expression we refer to wilderness remnants that stretch across an area of urban, suburban, industrial or infrastuctural development connecting two larger wild land systems that may be internal or external to the urban region. Urban wilderness corridors could be described as isthmi emerging in the sea of urban land. In urban wilderness corridors two *frontier lines* run roughly parallel, describing a straight or curved trajectory. They range from irregular jagged lines to open polygonal contours depending on the nature of the boundary.

4. *Wilderness Backdrops*. With this expression we refer to wilderness remnants that develop parallel to an area of urban, suburban, industrial

or infrastructural development. Tracts of land that maintain other territorial connections to other wildernesses through a thin corridor such as a river or a stream and its riparian zone also fall within this category. Urban wilderness backdrops could be described as shores in the sea of urban land. In urban wilderness backdrops a *frontier line* separates the urban and the wild, describing a straight or curved trajectory. It may range from an irregular jagged line to a polygonal contour depending on the nature of the boundary.

5. *Wilderness Vest Pockets*. With this expression we will refer to an array of small wilderness remnants that spread out across an area of urban, suburban, industrial or infrastructural development. Urban wilderness vest pockets could be described as archipelagos emerging from the sea of urban land. Urban wilderness vest pockets' *frontier lines* describe a series of closed perimeters that range from irregular jagged closed lines to polygonal closed contours depending on the nature of the boundary.

Most Northern American cities present several prominent wilderness remnants within their fabric. Often, enclaves, wedges and backdrops are connected with each other and with larger wildernesses outside the confines of the urban region through corridors forming what in this study we define as the *urban wilderness system*.

We would like to take a short detour and make some observations on the words used to describe the topological characteristics of land masses and bodies of waters. It is interesting to notice how the classifications we have just outlined to describe wilderness remnants (enclaves, wedges, corridors, backdrops, and vest pockets) refer to the same topological categories that are generally used to describe the form of land masses



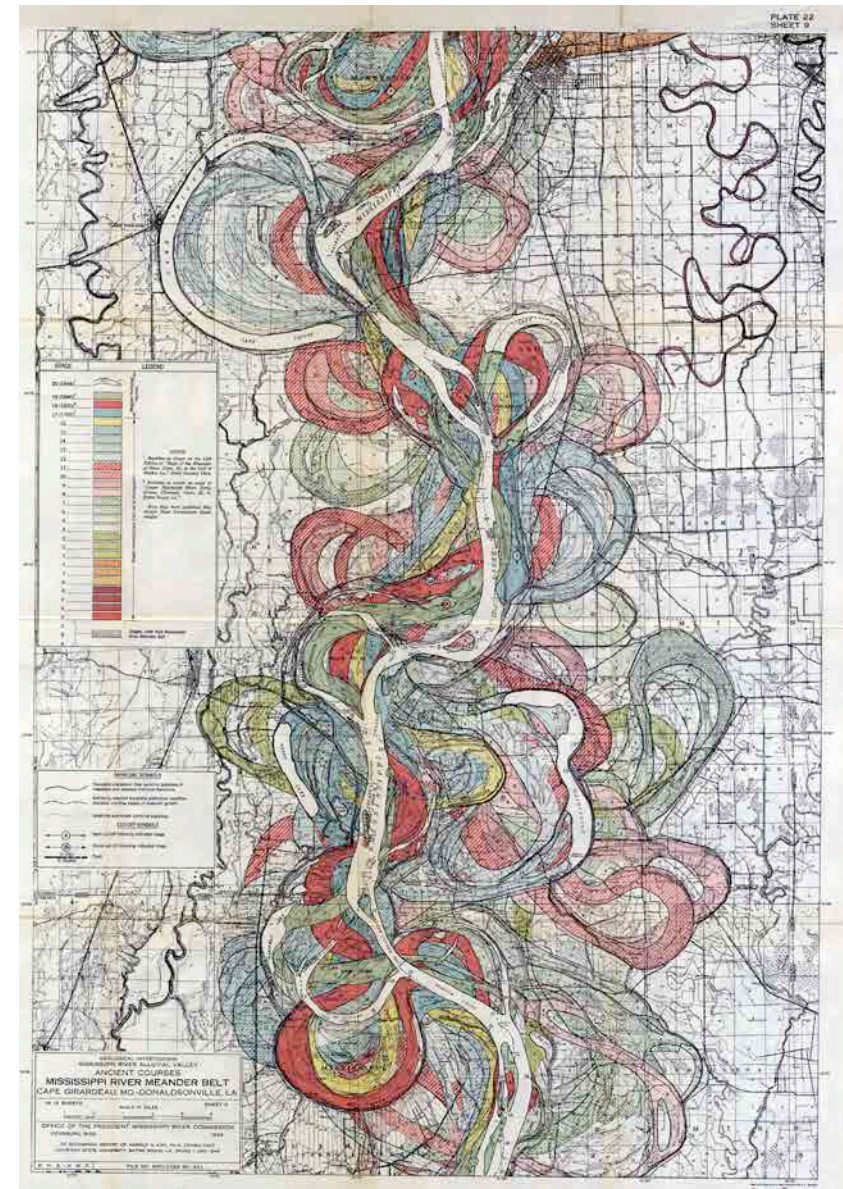


On the previous pages and on this page, Fig.15-19: in order of appearance: Theodore Roosevelt Island in Washington D.C. - *wilderness enclave*; The Tualatin Mountains, Portland, Oregon - *wilderness wedge*; The Mississippi River shores, the Twin Cities, Minnesota - *wilderness corridor*; Red Rock Canyon, Las Vegas, Nevada - *wilderness backdrop*; Urban Meadows, Detroit, Michigan - *wilderness vest pocket*.

and bodies of water. For example, we could argue that *wilderness enclave*, *island*, and *lake* refer to the same topological category, meaning respectively: a tract of wild land completely surrounded by urbanized land, a tract of land completely surrounded by water; a body of water completely surrounded by land. Each of these words has then a series of synonyms that describe variations of this topological category offering further information on its specific characteristics such as *islet* or *atoll* for *island*, *pond* or *pool* for *lake*. Likewise *wedge*, *peninsula*, *inlet* refer to the same topological category, meaning respectively: a tract of land completely bordered by urbanized territory but connected to a larger wild land system beyond the limits of that urban territory; a tract of land bordered by water on three sides but connected to mainland; a body of water bordered by land on three sides but connected to a larger body of water. Again, each of these three words has a series of synonyms that describe the same topological category but offer further specifications on its characteristics such as *promontory* or *spit* in the case of *peninsulas*, or *cove* and *gulf* in the case of *inlet*. *Corridor*, *isthmus*, *strait* refer to the same topological category, meaning respectively: a strip of land bordered along two sides by urbanized territory but connecting two larger wild land systems beyond the limits of that urban territory; a tract of land bordered by water on two sides that links larger land masses such as two islands; a narrow passage of water bordered by land on two sides but connected to two larger bodies of water. The word *isthmus* does not have common synonyms unlike *strait* that has several such as *channel* or *sound*. In last instance, *backdrop*, *shore*, *littoral* refer to the same topological category, meaning respectively: a tract of land that has a long strait interface with urbanized territory; a tract of land that has a long strait interface with water; a body of water that has a long strait interface with land. These words also have several synonyms that describe the same

topological category offering further information on their characteristics. The word shore has synonyms such as *coast* or *bank*, while *littoral* has *intertidal zone*.

When examining wilderness remnants, assessing their boundaries is almost as important as assessing their form. We will refer to the boundary of a wilderness remnant as a *frontier line*, continuing to reference the narrative of the opposition between wilderness and settlement in American history. We find it useful to describe their *frontier line* with regard to both its sharpness and permeability. Regarding sharpness, boundaries can vary from crisp contours to blurred intermediate zones. In terms of permeability they can range from impenetrable barriers to perfectly osmotic thresholds. In the case of Portland's Tualatin Mountains for example, the boundary of the wilderness remnant is very blurred along the west side, as the preserved forest merges with a series of privately owned groves. On the contrary, on the east side, the municipal road clearly defines a straight line boundary. In the case of the Tijuana River estuary, the border between the United States and Mexico is an almost impenetrable barrier to the free flow of plant material, wildlife and most of the urban dwellers of the south side of the San Diego/Tijuana binational conurbation.¹³⁴ The length of the *frontier line* of the remnant with respect to the surface area of the wild land it is enclosing should also be taken into account. Considering equivalent surface areas, the longer the boundary the more urban land maintains a high proximity to the wild land. Analyzing the remnants' shape and its contour line, terminology borrowed from



¹³⁴Richard T. T. Forman and Michel Gordon, *Landscape Ecology* (New York: Island Press, 1996).

On the previous pages, Fig.20: Plate 22-09 from Harold Fisk's "Geological Investigation of the Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River," 1944.

On the following page, Fig.21: Suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona. Fig.22: A suburb of Las Vegas.



botany, and more specifically from leaf morphology, proved to be very helpful. Adjectives such as acuminate, lobed, orbicular, ovate, and rhomboid have served to describe the outline and shape of a wilderness enclave or wedge. In the case in which the boundary was generated by a prominent land form, like a river shore or a steep hillside, it maintains the irregularity that is typical of physiographic features, when it aligns with a road, a property line, or any other human generated trace on the landscape, it usually develops along a straight line.

The last characteristic we have found important to consider when looking at the morphology of urban remnants is its prominence with respect to its urban context. We use the word *emergence* and *immersion* to distinguish the remnants that act as physical foci around which the urban context is structured from those that persist as interstices between two autonomously structured urban areas, respectively. As for the other characteristics considered, emergence and immersion of a wilderness remnant also vary over a continuous spectrum. Even if landform - which we will consider next - is often a relevant factor in determining the degree of emergence of a wild remnant, the morphological structure of the urbanized territory plays an equally relevant role.

PHYSIOGRAPHY OF WILDERNESS REMNANTS

It is also interesting to notice the recurrence of the prominent landform that physically defines wilderness remnants and the relationship they establish with bodies of water. To facilitate a categorization according to these characteristics we have classified our case studies as inlands, headlands, islands, and coasts and have specified the kind of body of water such landforms are defined by: ocean nearshores, inlets, channels,

and lagoons; lakes, rivers, and estuaries. We have taken into account the other physiographic features of the wilderness remnants we have studied, giving to them more or less attention according to the role that those specific features play - from our point of view - in shaping the identity of that place as a wilderness. For all case studies we have looked at them in the following systematic order, omitting a description only when considered irrelevant for the understanding of the place: orography, geology, hydrology, climate, vegetation, and wildlife. In this comprehensive description of the place we have also taken into account human artifacts considering them to be no less a part of the physiographic makeup of the place than its physical geography.

KINDS OF WILD IN THE CITY

While looking at wilderness remnants we have also taken into account the considerations made in the previous chapter regarding the different conceptions of what wild is and the consequent management strategies that are applied for their preservation. We introduced three terms to define these three conceptions: selfwilledness, the condition of what is beyond the reach of direct human action; wildness, the condition of those ecosystems with a high degree of diversity and integrity; and wilderness, the condition that is able to recall the narratives the word wilderness itself implies. While we stated that selfwilledness and wildness, despite what one might initially believe, are no less subjective than wilderness and that they may actually be considered subcategories of the third, we nonetheless found it relevant to analyze the degree to which wilderness remnants present characteristics of each of these three 'kinds of wild.' The Suto Forest of San Francisco is maintained by the University of California in a state of nearly absent management that has



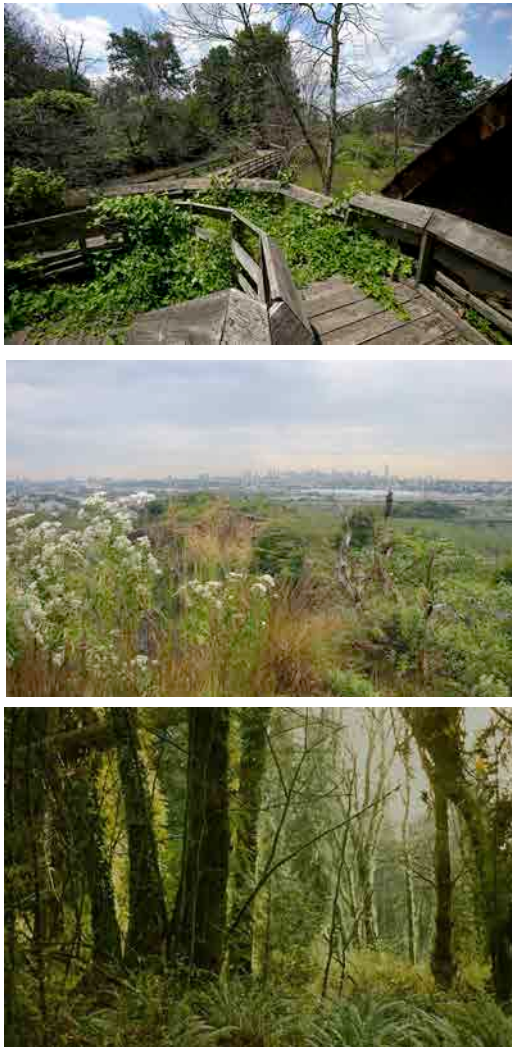


Fig. 24-26: Abandoned Zoo in Detroit, a *self-willedness*. Patches of restored *wildness* in the Hackensack River estuary, a few miles east of Manhattan. Forest Park in Portland, Oregon, a *wilderness*.

resulted in what is today a dense wood of exotic trees and an understory of invasive species. The Leslie Street Spit of Toronto is managed by the non-governmental organizations that have been entrusted with its care in order to make the ecosystem of this unique wildlife habitat as diverse as possible despite its proximity to the Canadian metropolis' downtown. Stanley Park of Vancouver is managed by the municipal authorities with the purpose of freezing its nineteenth century image in time by using methods that go as far as reinforcing the trunks of dead trees with steel belts to prevent their 'natural' decay. The given definitions of selfwilledness, wildness, and wilderness, respectively, are incredibly useful to better understand what these places represent in each of their urban contexts.

SEMANTICS OF WILDERNESS REMNANTS

What we care about the most in this study are the narratives each remnant is able to evoke. At the beginning of this chapter we defined urban wilderness remnants as those tracts of urban land that are able to recall one of the many manifestations of the idea of wilderness. In the first chapter we have systematically - even if not exhaustively - described these manifestations. We argued that three contrasting acceptations constitute the semantic substratum of the word wilderness: wilderness as place of discomfort, to be feared; wilderness as place of the beautiful, to be contemplated; wilderness as place of authenticity, to be protected. Wilderness remnants always recall at least one, and often more than one, of these meanings. Places such as the estuary of the Tijuana River that divides the San Diego metropolitan region from the northern *colonias* of the Mexican city, which is too often a backdrop to modern day exodus, are giving new meaning to the word wilderness as a place of discomfort,

while the Tualatin Mountains in Portland are fragments of the iconic forested wildernesses of the Northwest that had enchanted nineteenth century explorers with their beauty, and parts of the Hackensack Meadowlands of New York are almost miraculously authentic remains of the ecosystems that once thrived where today Manhattan rises. The best way we found to explore the semantics of wilderness remnants was to retrace their human history in order to try to understand and convey the meanings these places once had before the cities in which they are today immersed engulfed them. We have done this again dedicating more or less attention to the part of those histories that we believe has contributed the most to the shaping of their identities.



Fig 27: David McNew, A section of the U.S./Mexico border fence expansion that crosses once pristine desert sands between Yuma, Arizona and Calexico, California, Getty Image. Getty Images, 2009.