



JENNY PRICE

remaking american
ENVIRONMENTALISM:
ON THE BANKS OF THE L.A. RIVER

This essay was presented originally as the Lynn W. Day Distinguished Lecture in Forest and Conservation History, Forest History Society and Duke University, November 12, 2007.

I CAME OF AGE with the glory days of environmentalism. In the 1960s and '70s, environmentalism's Heroic Age. In what historians like to call the "second wave," when the movement evolved to *become* a self-recognized movement, under one banner, and captured the hearts and imaginations of a mass population of Americans. As a nature girl in a white house in a suburb of St. Louis, I, like many upper-middle-class baby boomers, embraced saving the earth as nothing less than a mission to save our souls. I read Edward Abbey. I was at the forefront of recycling. I fantasized about blowing up the Glen Canyon Dam—as I imagine at least some of you, too, must have. But even if, like my parents, for example, you embraced environmentalism with enthusiasm but with a tad less religious fervor, and you were a thinking liberal citizen who wrote checks to the Sierra Club and Audubon Society not because you wanted to live in the Alaskan wilds in a cabin you built

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yourself off wild caribou you caught yourself, but still you wanted to save the Alaskan wilds for the people who might wish to do so, and for the caribou themselves, and if you also were a person who generally found persuasive the argument that we should breathe clean air and drink clean water ... well, back in those halcyon days, for so many people who leaned at least a little left in their politics, environmentalists were the good guys.¹

But environmentalism has since gotten complicated. As we know, it has since come under serious attack. In the 1980s and 1990s, of course, the Reagan Right and the Wise Use advocates waged a major backlash, which inspired in part what historians call the “third wave,” in which some mainstream environmental groups began to advocate market-based incentives. Since the late 1980s, the environmental movement also has drawn a rash of vehement criticism from within—and this is what I am far more interested in today. It has drawn major fire from good guys not only from within but from without—critiques that some have since labeled the “fourth wave,” and that would dwarf (and greatly amplify) much of the grumbling within the movement about market-based incentives.

Let me review a few of the greatest hits. In 1990, two different groups of civil rights leaders send what will become famous letters to ten of the most prominent environmental organizations—the Sierra Club, Audubon Society, Wilderness Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, and others—that accuse this Group of Ten of racist hiring practices and, more generally, of ignoring the economic needs and environmental hazards faced by “working people in general and people of color in particular.” The letters ride the crest of a wave of grassroots campaigns in the late 1980s against the siting of toxic waste facilities in poor minority communities. This all culminates in 1991 in the formal establishment of the environmental justice movement at the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit.²

That’s one greatest hit. A few years later, environmental historian William Cronon writes, or detonates, his 1994 essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” “The time has come to rethink wilderness”: Cronon begins the essay with this heretical challenge, and charges on to argue that the idea of wilderness as an unsullied refuge from the troubles of modern civilization—the idea that’s been at once the heart and soul of so many environmentalists’ efforts to save the earth—erases the long human history of living in and using these places, and more generally reveres nature in the places we don’t live at the expense of the nature and the people in the places we do. Environmentalists take sides—to put it mildly. Some take up arms—or pens, at least. Cronon’s essay appears in his edited anthology *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, where it is followed closely by Richard White’s like-minded salvo, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?”—which lobs similar objections at environmentalists’ tendency to ignore the essential ways we connect to the environment through work.³

I could review more hits, including Robert Gottlieb’s influential alternative history of environmentalism *Forcing the Spring*. But I’ll skip to the release of Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger’s book in the fall of 2007—*Break*

Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility—which expands on their notorious speech, “The Death of Environmentalism,” in 2004 to environmental grantmakers. Nordhaus and Shellenberger examine the issue of global warming to argue that environmentalism is now failing entirely to slow the production of greenhouse gases, and to clean up the environment in any other substantial way, and that the problem is that environmentalists push for technical policy solutions, and that they treat environment as a separate thing and environmentalism as a special interest. They should push instead, Nordhaus and Shellenberger argue, for an ambitious integrated progressive politics that connects environmental health to such social and economic issues as jobs and health care. These authors call it all post-environmentalism (not the fourth wave, alas), but really, they want to get rid of the separate issue of environmentalism, based on the concept of environment as a separate thing, altogether.⁴

The responses to this salvo can make the not very nice battle over Cronon’s essay still sound like a seemly conversation over tea. Bill McKibben dubs the dynamic duo “the bad boys of American environmentalism,” and the *New York Times* reports on the fight as a civil war. The Grist website reprints the piece—Grist dubs the duo the “reapers”—and publishes a forum (which they call “don’t fear the reapers”) with responses from a dozen environmental leaders: the environmental justice leaders criticize the reapers for still not paying enough attention to racism, and mainstream leaders, led angrily by the Sierra Club’s Carl Pope, claim that environmentalists are alive and well, thank you, and still making excellent progress on saving that separate thing called the environment. It all sounds a bit like the classic Monty Python dead-parrot pet-shop sketch, with the reapers claiming the parrot they bought is “dead, dead, passed on, no more, has ceased to be,” and the defending environmentalists saying, “It’s not dead—It’s just resting,” and the reapers pointing out that the parrot’s feet have in fact been duly nailed to the perch.⁵

Environmentalism, in sum, *has* taken some *very* serious hits. Many of its most familiar and cherished icons have come under a veil of suspicion. Thoreau? Inspiring—but urged us to see nature as the antidote to the places we live. Yosemite? Spectacular, and essential for many reasons—and a site of violent conquest. And a white refuge from the troubles of cities. And culturally constructed to boot. *Silent Spring*? Indispensable to the ensuing 1960s and 1970s legislation—but apocalyptic, the reapers complain, with a millennial, paralyzing vision of nature as the pure true world that humans by definition violate. What would have happened with the civil rights movement, they ask, if Martin Luther King had given an “I have a nightmare” instead of an “I have a dream” speech? Ditto for the Cuyahoga River fire in Cleveland in 1969 and the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska in 1989. The earth from space? We may all live on one planet together, but environmental justice advocates have pointed out also that we are not entirely all in this together.

The critics, of course, hardly all agree with one another. However, I do think their objections hew to some common principles. They all ask us to see the fundamental connections to the environment in our everyday lives. They all ask

Figure 1. The Eco-Frenzy.



<https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/cia-goes-green.html>

Even the CIA is going green.

us to conceive the heart and soul of environmentalism less as a passion to save the environment than as a passion to use and inhabit the environment wisely. And by wisely, they mean sustainably but also equitably. Now, if you had told me when I was 17 that I would say what I am about to say, I would probably have responded, "Yeah, right, and some day I'll live in Los Angeles, too"—But I agree with them.

So where to go from here? What is the state of environmentalism, exactly, after twenty years of fourth-wave critiques? On the one hand, I've painted a picture of a movement in serious crisis. On the other hand, at this very moment, we are smack in the midst of an eco-frenzy without precedent. Environmentalism is in fact going mainstream as never before. It's impossible to open up the *Los Angeles Times* or *New York Times*, or *Vogue* or *Entertainment Weekly*—or to turn on the TV—without finding out that another someone or something has gone green, or organic, or carbon-free, or lower-footprint, or LEED-certified: Wal-Mart, some major oil company, furniture, cosmetics, downtown L.A., Santa Monica, the Oscars, yoga mats, Trader Joe's, the car wash, UCLA, business in America. It's easy enough to be skeptical of at least some expressions of these great new eco-trends—as consumer-centered, for example, as they can often seem to be. When the trumpeted hybrid luxury SUVs get worse mileage than my old Toyota wagon, or some Hollywood icon switches to compact fluorescent light bulbs in all five houses ... well, I'll let you decide. But it's safe to say a few things. There's an enormous amount of genuine interest in paying attention environmentally speaking. All this attention seems encouragingly to be more everyday-centered and not terribly suspicious—perhaps even not suspicious enough—of the places we live. And it offers an enormous opportunity to articulate a set of reformulated environmentalist ideals.

After all, *do we* have any real redefinition yet of what it means to pay attention environmentally speaking? To see how environmentalism is in fact currently being

defined, fortunately we now have an up-to-the-minute encyclopedia we can all turn to. I mean Wikipedia, of course. *Environmentalism*: “Environmentalism is a concern for the preservation, restoration, or improvement of the natural environment, such as the conservation of natural resources, prevention of pollution, and certain land use actions.” If that seems imprecise or unsatisfying, there’s also a definition for *Environmental Movement*—which I guess is not the same thing at all, but is apparently “a diverse scientific, social, and political movement. ... centered around ecology, health, and human rights.” Or you might try the entry for *Environmental Movement in the United States*—which, in contrast to the other two, is a movement “represented by... NGOs.” Let’s check out the entry for *Conservation Movement*, which “[differs] from environmentalism in that it aims to preserve natural resources expressly for their continued sustainable use by humans”—a distinction that might make more sense if the Wikipedia-ites had posted it in the 1920s. And, lest we miss the definition of *Ecology Movement*—a movement driven “by a widespread acknowledgment of an ecological crisis of our planet ... with climate change [now] the biggest concern.”⁶

These definitions tell us ... well, first they might tell us that it’s long past time to write an article entitled “The Trouble with Wikipedia: Or, Moving Forward to the Wrong Reality.” (I like Stephen Colbert’s coinage: “Wikiality—together, we can create a reality that we can all agree on, the reality we just agreed on.”) But I think these definitions, however unsatisfying (not to mention unattributable), actually do suggest a state of confusion—that environmentalism has acquired no real redefinition, and no articulate philosophy, but currently remains a grab-bag of available causes and rhetorics old and new: some apocalypse, a bit of Earth-is-our-mother, some justice and power here, some indigenous people there, a whole lot of energy, a lot of sustainability, some earth happening, a lot of we are all in this together. I think the eco-craze does offer a rather phenomenal opportunity to tap the growing enthusiasm, and to channel it—to redefine an everyday twenty-first-century environmentalism that takes account of the critiques, and that articulates the place of environment in our lives.

A REARTICULATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL IDEALS will require new icons. Good effective icons, I think, really have not emerged. Earth from space? Too much baggage, perhaps. Polar bear? Pretty depressing. And ditto for the plastics atoll in the Pacific Ocean—which risks making people want to stay in bed in the morning rather than jump out of it. The hybrid car?—Expensive, can appear elitist. The compact fluorescent light bulb?—Kind of pedestrian, maybe. The recycle symbol—Aesthetically lacking?

I do have a candidate to put forward for consideration, however. I’d like to nominate an icon for a future environmentalism. An icon that’s new and dramatic. An icon for everyone. An icon that’s entirely, overwhelmingly inspiring—*The Los Angeles River*.

The Los Angeles River. Los Angeles has a *river*? Yes, and you have almost certainly seen it, even if you’ve never set foot in Los Angeles. It’s that large concrete sewer-like thing in all the movies and TV shows. The site of the famous drag-race

Figures 2 and 3. The Los Angeles River.



Photo courtesy of Catherine Holliss.

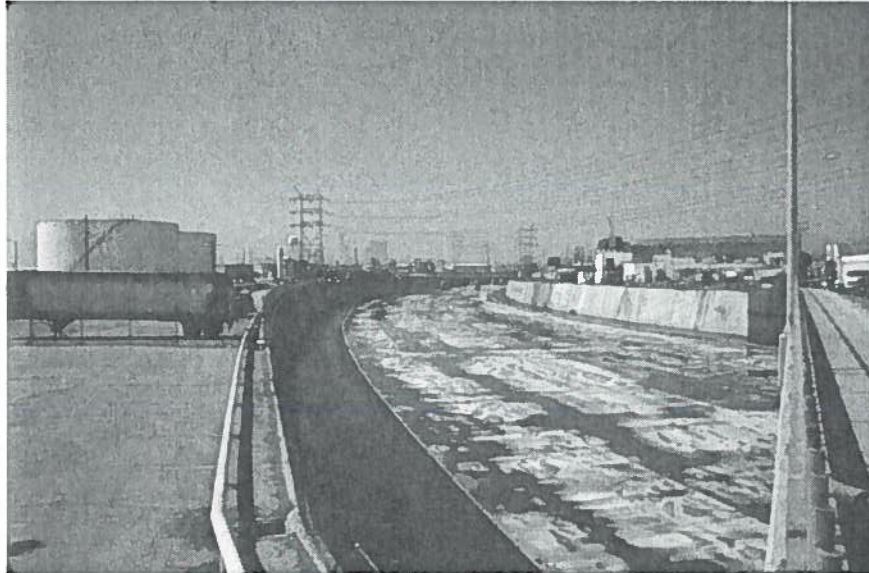


Photo from the author's collection.

Above, hanging out in the L.A. River—the icon with a drive-through option. Below, the untouched L.A. River without humans and cars.

scene in *Grease*, and of the scene in *Terminator 2* where Schwarzenegger flees on a motorcycle from a liquid-metal alien driving a tractor trailer. It is, as David

Letterman allegedly has said, the last two-lane river left in North America. A joke, a laughingstock. So un-river-like that people in L.A. who drive over it every day cannot say exactly where it is. It's the most degraded river in an American city. And it's the most famous forgotten river in the United States.

The Los Angeles River is L.A.'s major river. It runs fifty-one miles through the heart of the city. It drains major portions of all three of L.A.'s major mountain ranges. (It is also highly prone to flooding, which will be important in the discussion below.)

Since 2000, the campaign to bring it back to life has quickly become the most ambitious, well-funded, and widely supported vision to revitalize the quality and equality of life in Los Angeles.⁸ And what's happening on the banks of the L.A. River, I think, responds to the twenty years of critiques of environmentalism, and offers us a powerful articulation for our once and future environmentalism.

IN THE ANNALS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY, environmentalism and the L.A. River have not often shared the same sentence—or the same book. To argue why we should make the L.A. River an icon for the *future* of environmentalism, I think it's useful to begin by reading its meaning into the past. In other words, in the history of environmentalism, we have identified certain people and places and writings and events as especially meaningful—the first national park, the Hetch Hetchy battle, *Sand County Almanac*, *Silent Spring*. These are hardly the only important moments in the history of environmentalism and our encounters with nature—but we've singled them out, and identified them as milestones in the efforts to articulate the environmental ideals that we hold ourselves. So what was happening on the L.A. River—say, in 1890, when John Muir was gambling through the just-designated Yosemite National Park? And how can the history of the Los Angeles River—our once and future icon—speak to the future of environmentalism? Let me briefly recount this history. I'll need to cover a couple of hundred years—so to offer this whirlwind chronicle, I'll pin the history of the L.A. River to five key iconic moments in the history of environmentalism.

Key iconic moment number 1. The popular history of environmentalism usually begins ... Actually, there's no agreed-upon moment of birth, but the writings of Thoreau have often been a standard starting point. *Walden*, in 1854, is of course the most famous piece, but I like the 1863 essay "Walking," in which Thoreau pens many of what will become his most quoted lines: "All good things are wild and free"; "Eastward I go only by force ... but westward I go free"; and the line that in time will become a (or *the*) mantra for environmentalism, "In Wildness is the preservation of the World."⁹ Thoreau articulates beautifully what will become a reigning ideal in post-World-War-II environmentalism—that nature is wild, pure, and free, and is an antidote to cities and modern life.

Across the continent—all the way westward—by 1863, the L.A. River, our once and future icon, has made Los Angeles possible. Without the Los Angeles River, there would be no Los Angeles. In 1781, the original European and Mexican settlers had founded the pueblo on the spot with the most reliable year-round supply of

above-ground water in the L.A. basin, and one of the most beautiful and reliable in southern California. In 1863, the growing American town has long since been an oasis that continues to rely on the river as its sole water source.

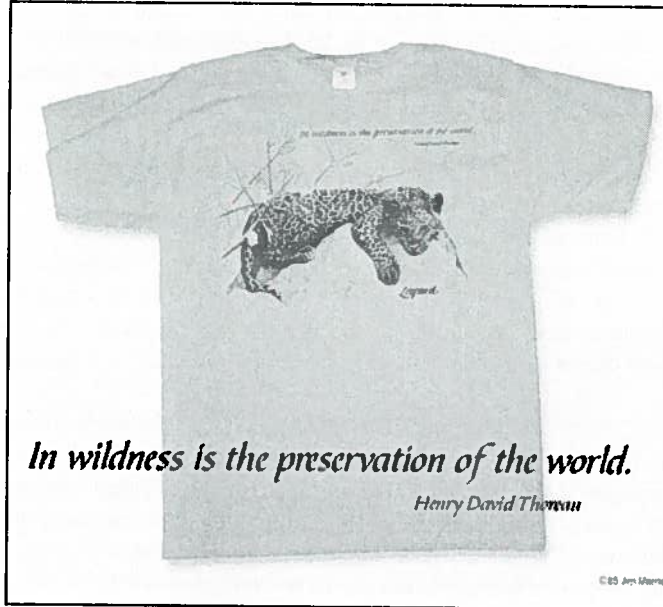
Many American urbanites may be embracing wild nature as an antidote to the growing cities, but in fact, the same

people are also making their cities very literally out of nature—by using resources and inhabiting and changing ecosystems. Here is how the L.A. River in 1863 might speak to a future environmentalism. This river is one of the most basic natural facts of L.A.'s landscape. It's the central artery of the major watershed that L.A. inhabits. If we create cities out of nature, not apart from nature, then however a city uses and inhabits its basic natural facts will shape the city profoundly—and will have huge consequences—and in fact, the L.A. River has always been central to the past, present, and future of Los Angeles.¹⁰

I'll jump to key moment number 2 in the history of environmentalism—the first national parks. Yellowstone is established in 1872—preceded in 1864 by California's preservation of Yosemite, which becomes a verifiable American icon and national park in 1890. All these places of uninhabited nature, of course, had been quite recently inhabited. Yet among all the excellent twentieth-century reasons, from ecological to spiritual, for preserving big chunks of wild, so much of the iconic power of Yellowstone and Yosemite has always been that these are places wild and free, where urban Americans can take refuge from the troubles and overcivilization of cities.

Back on the banks of the L.A. River—the future icon for environmentalism. By 1872, people in Los Angeles have used the river to build an American Eden, a town that's widely described as a paradise. It's the American city of eternal sunshine, healthful sea breezes, fertile soils sprouting with fruit trees and vineyards. Once the railroad arrives in 1876, the town's boosters will lead the charge to market L.A. as a city of nature. "This is a happy land for children and all young animals,"

Figure 4. Wearable Thoreau.



Jim Morris Environmental T-Shirt Co., <http://www.jimmorris.com>.

a tourbook writer gushes in 1884—"They live in the pure air and sunshine." You could say that L.A. is the Yosemite of cities. The marketeers tout L.A. as the un-city city—a paradise of nature where you can escape the pollution, financial disappointments, and racial and ethnic conflicts of, say, Concord, Boston, St. Louis, and the other industrial immigrant cities to the east. And they market L.A. as a white city. The American paradise of nature becomes the American city of white flight.¹¹

However, all is not so edenic—and white—on the banks of our once and future icon in the late 1800s. The nature-dwelling Angelenos have been draining their major river, and irrigating their paradise of nature with a profligacy that astonishes visiting easterners—and in addition have long been treating the river as a sewer and trash dump. By 1890, the year of Yosemite, white Angelenos have begun to flee the severely polluted river, to the first suburbs of nature. They leave the river to the Mexican population, and start what will eventually become a very famous tradition of white flight *within* L.A.¹²

How does the L.A. River in 1890 speak to future environmentalists? Well, defining a place as nature and seeking refuge in nature both have so often meant the expulsion or exclusion of other, and generally less powerful, people. It has so often meant fleeing, rather than dealing with, a city's and one's own unsustainable uses of nature—and leaving the less powerful to suffer the worst consequences. (One of the most obvious cases today is L.A.'s socioeconomic geography of air, in which nonwhite poor Angelenos live in the most industrial areas and breathe the most toxic air.) Generally, treating and managing a city's basic natural fact inequitably and as a trash dump inevitably will produce dramatic consequences for the shape of a city, and for the quality and equality of life.

Icon, or moment, number 3 in the annals of environmentalism: Hetch Hetchy Dam in Yosemite—approved in 1913. The debate over Hetch Hetchy has commonly been defined as the Great Battle of early environmentalism—between Muir's ideal of wilderness preservation (Hetch Hetchy is in *Yosemite*, no less) and Gifford Pinchot's ideal of conserving and managing resources to produce the "greatest good for the greatest number." In the history of environmentalism, Muir has more often been pegged as the hero—who battles the "temple destroyers," whom he famously calls his opponents—but Pinchot and his camp have also emerged as models for an environmentalist approach that is less elitist, and that urges us to ask how to *use* nature.

In 1913, the Los Angeles River is a trashed, depleted, sandy wreck. And the local water source has become insufficient, not because it couldn't supply L.A.'s needs but because L.A. has wasted and polluted it. So at the exact same time that San Francisco is thirsting for Yosemite water, Los Angeles has just completed a project to divert water from the Owens Valley, 250 miles north—not exactly Yosemite, but a beautiful valley, with thriving agriculture, that the Los Angeles Aqueduct will ruin. President Theodore Roosevelt supports the project, just as he supports Hetch Hetchy, as the "greatest good for the greatest number." The aqueduct's boosters, an alliance of city officials and real estate powers, themselves champion the imported water as clean and pure, from a pristine place watered by

the wild eastern Sierras—in obvious contrast to the L.A. River, which is dirty, urban, degraded, and of course Mexican. They proceed to use the Owens Valley water to market the vast suburbs of nature—the whites-only suburbs—that they proceed to develop in the San Fernando Valley, where the aqueduct delivers its water to the city.

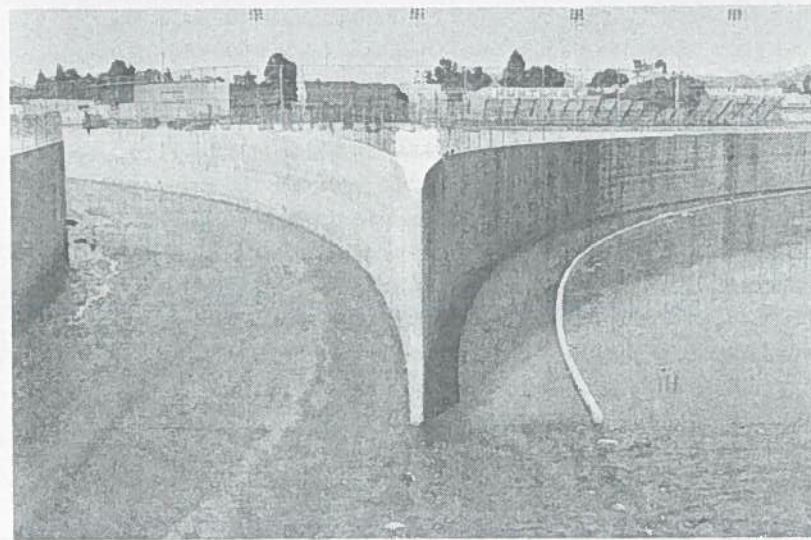
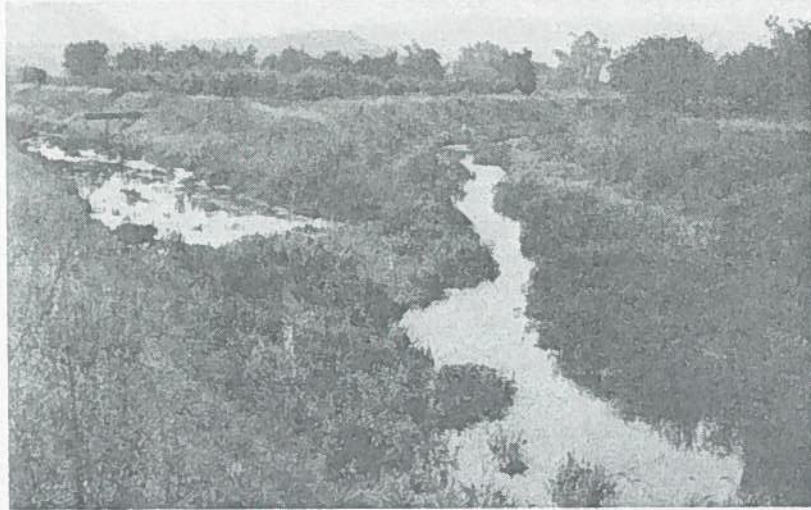
The year 1913 is powerfully transformative in the history of this river and its city, when L.A. downgrades the central artery of its major watershed (mostly the aquifers at this point) to a minor water source. And to this day, the city's most affluent communities, which on average lie closer to the aqueduct, drink cleaner water overall than the poorer communities, which on average lie closer to the river.¹³

How does the meaning of our future icon speak to us at this major crossroads? Well, the “greatest good for the greatest number” can be anti-elitist, and it can also mean that powerless minorities can get, well, how should I put it ... screwed—and again, can end up saddled with the consequences of how the entire city, or simply the greatest number, uses nature unsustainably. Still, the conservationists do speak to us about the use of nature. And yet, we also have to ask how to use resources inside the city—not just, as these conservationists emphasized, how to use the resources out there for the city. As Thoreau said, “In Wildness is the preservation of the World,” and that's of course true—we carve our lives, our worldliness, out of nature—but it's also true that in the world, and in our great modern cities, is the preservation of wildness. To preserve places like Yosemite, you absolutely have to think about how to use nature sustainably—and equitably—in places like Los Angeles.

Okay, iconic moment number 4 in the history of environmentalism: *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold's lovely and beloved plea in 1949 for a land ethic—which repeats Thoreau's “in wildness” line. It begins, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot”—but goes on more to sound like the love child of Muir's preservation and Pinchot's conservation ideals.¹⁴

Since then, we could, but I don't think have conventionally read, the land ethic as a guidebook to gritty urban life. Back in 1949, Angelenos haven't exactly done that with their major river—which they are now in the midst of paving. With the city's explosive suburbanization since 1913, the L.A. River's fierce tendency to flood has, for a few days every fourth or fifth winter, been making increasing amounts of real estate canoeable. After dramatic floods in 1934 and 1938, exacerbated by the extensive paving of once-permeable ground in the rapidly growing city, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decides to solve this problem by burying the river deeply in a three-sided concrete trench. Cementing and burying the river and its tributaries requires 3.5 million barrels of concrete and takes the Corps twenty-five years, into the early 1960s. And the consequences of paving the city's major river? Developers now build vast new car-oriented commuter suburbs of nature across the flood plain to within an inch of this river—all amidst the first acute smog attacks in the city in the 1940s and 1950s, which will turn out to be caused primarily by car exhaust. But burying the river creates more than a few problems—ecological, social, and economic.

Figures 5 and 6. Headwaters of the Los Angeles River.



Top photo: Clement Padick, "Control and Conservation of Natural Runoff Water in the San Fernando Valley, California" (master's thesis, UCLA, 1956). Bottom photo: Blake Gumprecht. Reprinted as one image from Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), 231. Used by permission of author. Both images show where Arroyo Calabasas and Bell Creek meet in the San Fernando Valley: before (mid-1950s) and after channelization. The headwaters currently lie adjacent to the Canoga Park High School football field.

First, the ecological problems. To begin with, the river has been cut off from its basin, so it can no longer replenish the aquifers with water, the soils with nutrients, and the beaches with sand. For decades, the county has trucked sand

to the beaches; John McPhee wrote in 1989 that when one truckload of thirty thousand yards was dumped on Zuma Beach in Malibu, people complained that it was the wrong color.¹⁵ Also, the county does connect the storm sewers from the streets to the river channel, which now gathers pesticides, metals, and hundreds more toxics from all across the lawns and roads of the heavily urbanized watershed and rushes them into the ocean. And not least: While the channel does contain the river's floods, all these storm sewers now rush stormwater from across Los Angeles into the river—which, ironically, drastically increases the volume of rainwater in the river during floods.

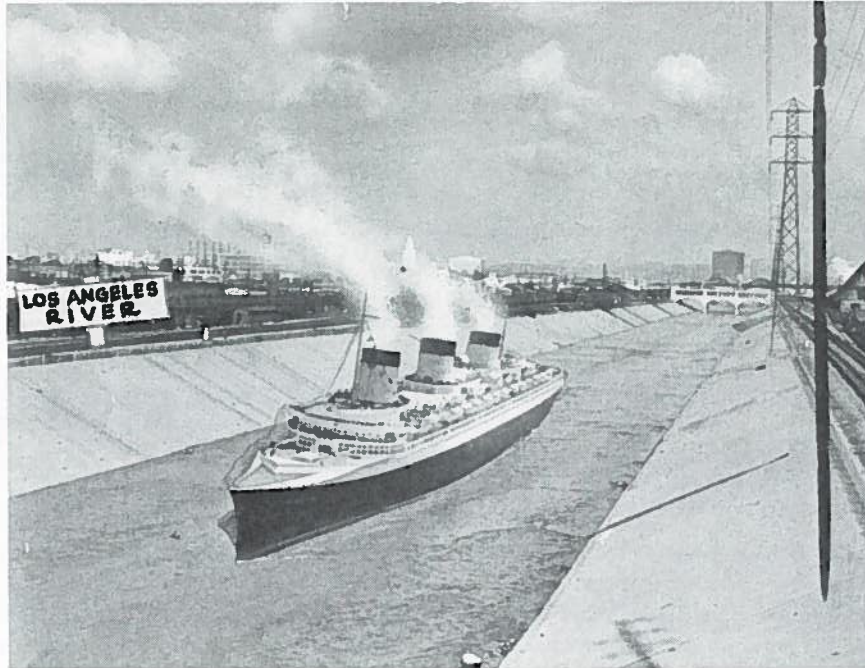
Next, social problems. In 1949, this city of private lawns is the major American city with the least public park space per capita (which has at this point been true for decades). Many poorer neighborhoods, especially—with little private greenery—enjoy almost none of the neighborhood parks that are so essential to health, to urban air and water quality, to recreation, to community. Now, in the 1940s and 1950s, L.A. tears out every iota of greenery from the river and its banks—the most logical site for green space in the entire L.A. basin—and turns its river into a fifty-one-mile concrete scar that runs through what are already or will quickly become some of the city's poorest areas.

And then, economic problems. L.A. now uses the storm sewers and the concrete channel to rush as much rainfall as possible as fast as possible to the sea. So here's how L.A. manages its water—that critical resource, which could in fact mostly supply the city—in a semi-arid climate. It uses the rainfall it gets from the sky, for free, to water the Pacific Ocean, and then spends enormous amounts of money and energy (currently, \$1 billion and 20 percent of its energy expenditures yearly for 200 billion gallons) to import water from distant watersheds all over the West—at great ecological cost to those watersheds.

In sum, how does the L.A. River—our icon-to-be—speak to us in 1949? How L.A. treats this basic natural fact continues to profoundly shape the city. And paving the major artery of the watershed is in fact deeply implicated in L.A.'s increasingly notorious troubles. L.A. is already in 1949—or will soon become—the major American city with the worst air pollution and rivers and ocean pollution, and with the most beach closures. It has the least park space per capita and the most extreme social inequalities. And it has an unconscionable thirst for the West's water. It's no coincidence that the American city that paves its major river—the river that once created a vision of an American Eden—is quickly coming to be called the American Nightmare. L.A., you could say, has become the city that most suffers the consequences of embracing nature as an antidote to cities—and of the American penchant for loving wild nature too much and the nature we use and live in too little.

The sixth and last icon in the history of environmentalism—*Silent Spring* in 1962. Rachel Carson's parable of crisis and impending apocalypse helps launch modern environmentalism, which will bring us such essential milestones as the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the regulatory acts of the 1970s—as well as a great many iconic moments of the earth in crisis, including the twin disasters of the Cuyahoga River fire and the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969.

Figure 7. Los Angeles's River as a Joke.



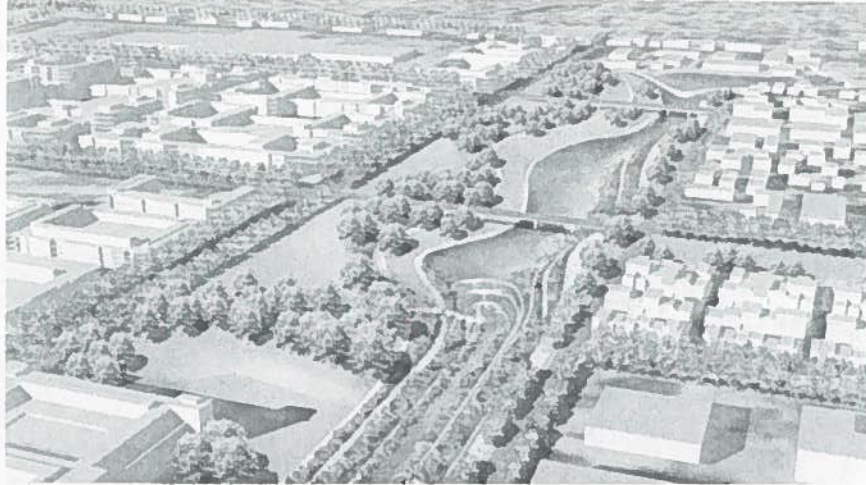
Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library.

This image appeared in a local newspaper on April Fool's Day 1950. After L.A. turned its river into a concrete storm sewer, the river became a joke.

By 1962, L.A. seems to epitomize the crisis that environmentalists are telling us is at hand. The black skies, the fouled ocean, the endless pavement: once the city of nature, where Americans went to escape the troubles of cities, Los Angeles is now often described as the city that has destroyed nature. While strains of apocalypse start to appear in the 1940s in descriptions of Los Angeles, by the 1990s, L.A. will graduate fully from Nightmare to Apocalypse—which will achieve fullest expression in Mike Davis's book *Ecology of Fear*, in which the megalopolis of social and ecological disaster is beset by earthquakes, fires, mudslides, killer bees, bubonic plague, tornadoes, palm-tree-loving rats, rattlesnakes, and cougars that have evolved to eat white suburban children.¹⁶

In fact, I would argue that the long history of imagining L.A.—from the American dream to the nightmare to the apocalypse—has essentially been told as a nature story: nature blesses L.A.; L.A. destroys nature; nature returns heavily armed with revenge on its mind. This story has at every stage told us that nature is not at the foundation of our urban lives—whether nature is an antidote, or has been destroyed, or is about to destroy us. And the idea that we've destroyed nature erases our essential everyday connections—since how can you ask how to inhabit nature better when you think that you've destroyed it entirely?¹⁷ In the 1960s, L.A. becomes the anti-environment city of crisis, the place where the destruction of the earth has come to pass—less a focus of environmentalists' efforts than an

Figure 8. Master Plan Proposal for the River's Headwaters.



Copyright City of Los Angeles 2007 Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan.

object of their scorn (which is why I as a nature girl in the 1960s didn't exactly think that I'd ever live there).

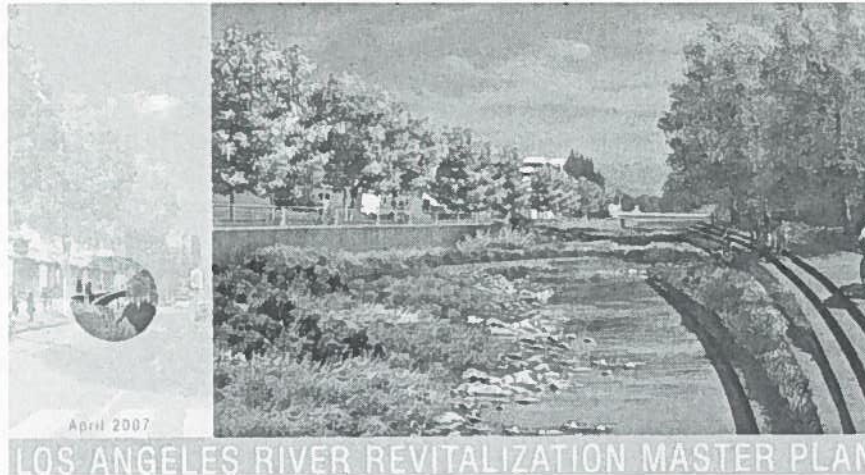
And the L.A. River? *What L.A. river?* The birth of the environmental movement in the early 1960s coincides exactly with the Corps' completion of the paving job, and is exactly the moment when Angelenos begin to forget that the river even exists. People who still do understand what that large concrete thing is say that the channel has destroyed the river—rather than that we have managed the river more than a little unwisely. Los Angeles has a *river*? For me, the meaning in 1962 of this perfect icon for the future is that people no longer *see* the river at all—and that the environmentalist narrative that we're destroying nature is emphatically not helping. The river in fact remains central to basic watershed processes in the L.A. basin, and is deeply implicated in most of Los Angeles's social and environmental troubles. Yet Angelenos have lost their fifty-one-mile river in plain sight—and can't see the essential daily connections from the river to their lives.

Los Angeles has a *river*? Our once and future icon has become the apotheosis of the failure to see and deal with nature in cities, and of the havoc that this failure inevitably creates.

THAT'S A WHIRLWIND HISTORY of the L.A. River to the present—and people continue to say "L.A. has a river?" But meanwhile, beginning in the mid-1980s, we can also tell a parallel history about the revitalization of the lost river. And this project can now articulate ideals for a future environmentalism. After all, what more perfect, symbolically resonant icon could we possibly find for an environmentalism that pays close attention to how equitably and sustainably we use nature in our everyday lives?

The movement to revitalize the L.A. River will hardly invent the wheel—the critiques of environmentalism are emerging at the same time—but I think it's an

Figure 9. Front Cover of the L.A. River Master Plan.



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The Los Angeles River Greenway will maximize water supplies and quality, control flooding, and create a fifty-one-mile series of parks that will serve as a backbone for a network of parks, green streets, greenways, and bikeways in the riparian corridor.

extreme and wonderfully dramatic example of this kind of environmentalism, which is now more and more happening across the country.

This history starts in 1985—while the environmental justice movement is in its early stages, and the river is thriving still mostly as a favorite film location for scenes of murder and apocalypse. That year, Lewis MacAdams, an L.A. artist and writer, takes wire cutters and a few friends down to the L.A. River, and soon after, they publicly announce that they're going to restore it. To the degree that they provoke a response, it's "River? L.A. has a river?" The city commits no interest or money to the idea, and the new group Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) is mostly dismissed as a quixotic bunch of wide-eyed tree-huggers who can make Don Quixote seem like a practical fellow.

FoLAR stages clean-ups and a few symposia, and in 1990—the year before the liquid-metal alien chases down Schwarzenegger, our governor of the future, in *Terminator 2*—Mayor Tom Bradley appoints a task force to explore the possibilities for river revitalization. Bradley is spurred in part by a state assemblyman's proposal in 1989 to use the river as a dry-season truck freeway, which alarms even people who think MacAdams is entirely nuts. In 1995, the year Cronon's "Trouble with Wilderness" essay appears, the state creates a small riverside park, and FoLAR and two other environmental groups, TreePeople and Heal the Bay, sue the L.A. County Department of Public Works (unsuccessfully) to stop a project to raise the walls of the channel. The environmental justice activists in L.A. remain skeptical: these are environmental groups, after all.

By the late 1990s, the state, county, and city are cumulatively investing a few million dollars in revitalization projects, and a dozen new small parks line the river, and a couple of really big parks have been proposed. In 2000, over \$100

million goes toward river revitalization, as the mayoral candidates, regardless of political affiliation, are falling over each other to back the project. It seems as if every conceivable public and private interest—from FoLAR, TreePeople, and Natural Resources Defense Council to neighborhood associations to environmental justice activists and Latino social activists to the mayor's office, the L.A. City Council, and, yes, the L.A. County Department of Public Works—is advocating the revitalization of the L.A. River. You know the tide has turned when Public Works, the former Sun God of the flood-control channel, agrees to post signs saying “Los Angeles River” at the bridge crossings. Already in 1999, the county had substantially reorganized Public Works to create a Watershed Management Division.

Because it turns out that when you move past “let’s restore the L.A. River” to ask how to actually do it, well, to revitalize the L.A. River is to tackle so many of L.A.’s troubles. To restore the river to health, you have to do three things to it: green it, clean it, and take out some concrete (not all, but some). Each one of these promises enormous benefits. To green the river, the revitalization advocates have begun to create a fifty-one-mile greenway that would serve as the logical backbone for a countywide network of greenways and bikeways through some of L.A.’s bleakest, poorest, most heavily nonwhite, and most park-deprived neighborhoods—a vision that has come to appeal enormously to, and has been articulated substantially by, social and environmental justice activists.

To clean the river, you have to similarly clean up a toxic eyesore in these polluted and park-deprived neighborhoods. More broadly, you have to look at where the pollutants come from that run through the storm sewers. You have to consider the enormous quantity and diversity of toxics—from pesticides, paints, fertilizers, car waxes, bits of copper brake pads, and thousands more everyday products—that end up in the air and water and in our bodies. A goal to clean up the river becomes a goal to fully understand and rethink the wholesale toxicity of ordinary everyday life in 2007.

And the concrete? Sure, it might be satisfying to dynamite the concrete, but how do you do it and not compromise flood control? The project to revive the river has gotten the powers that be to completely rethink how we move water through Los Angeles (and Public Works is currently testing these new principles in a sub-watershed of the L.A. River). Basically, instead of using the river to rush water to the ocean, you need to capture water where it falls. You do that, first, by building parks, planting trees, and restoring wetlands. But you also deploy infrastructural methods—such as backyard cisterns, porous pavement, and gutter and street designs that direct water toward lawns and other green spaces rather than onto driveways and into storm sewers. You can use the captured water on-site (from a cistern, say, to water your lawn), or let it sink back into the aquifer—and minerals in the soil will bind up toxics as the water filters down. To control the floodwaters—now seriously reduced—you can divert them into detention basins, which can double as parks and wetlands.

And if you move water in *that* way through L.A.—which is what this long-term, thirty-to-forty-year project aims to do—you get flood control, cleaner water and

cleaner air, and desperately needed neighborhood parks, wetlands, and wildlife habitat, and you maximize local water supplies. So depaving the river could potentially change how water moves through the West—including the wild West.

In sum, by the late 1990s, people were beginning to conclude that to grapple successfully with L.A.'s social and environmental troubles—to address the quality and equality of life in this megalopolis—we are absolutely going to have to bring the city's major river, and the central artery of its watershed, back to life.

By 2000, the coalitions that form around the river include Group of Ten environmentalists, civil rights and environmental justice advocates, engineers, community leaders, politicians from every sector of L.A. And by 2004, when the reapers pronounce the “death of environmentalism”—and I think this will be a hallmark of a successful environmentalism in the future—the agendas of the mainstream environmentalist and environmental justice groups have become harder to tell apart, and the environmentalists have become social activists and the social activists have become environmentalists, and the engineers have become environmentalists and the environmentalists have become engineers.

Not that everyone agrees. Far from it. After a moment of consensus around 2000, when everyone agrees it must be done, exactly *how* inevitably becomes a source of sometimes rancorous disagreements—how to build parks, what riverside development should look like, who should control the development, how much concrete can come out. The revitalized river will be a product of continuous compromise and negotiation. I think another environmental ideal that this project argues for is that how, exactly, we should live in nature has better and worse answers—but that nature itself dictates better but no correct answers. Also, it is the absolute precondition of passion for and commitment to this project that no one is seeking perfection. This is L.A., for God's sake, and I think that there are few more apt places than Los Angeles for understanding that the process of living in nature, however sustainably and equitably you negotiate and compromise to do it, is inherently messy, imperfect, and forever unsolved.

SO, FINALLY: What environmental ideals are playing out on the L.A. River right now? And what should we call this environmentalism? Post-environmentalism, the fourth wave, post-post-environmentalism, post-wave environmentalism?—or Lewis MacAdams says he's an infrastructuralist. I'm not sure I care that much. I'm happy with just plain “environmentalism.” But I don't agree with the reapers that we should jettison the word and category altogether—because I think that applying new definitions to the words people know is more effective than creating a new language. To use the reapers' own metaphor, what if Martin Luther King had avoided the words “freedom” and “rights” rather than articulating them in new ways?

Let's take nominations for what to call it—But this twenty-first-century environmentalism emphasizes as its absolute fundamental principle not that we save or destroy nature but that we inhabit nature for better and worse. It pays a great deal of attention to how we inhabit nature in cities, where most of us live—

and tells us that the quality and equality of life in the places we make our homes depend fundamentally on how sustainably and equitably we use, move, change, manage, *and* preserve nature inside and outside of cities. It puts all this activity at the core and center of our social and economic lives. So being an environmentalist means being one in the course of producing and consuming wealth as much as, or much more than, in the course of giving money away. This environmentalism locates its heart and soul in sustainable and equitable economic and social systems—and in sound and equitable public policies and investment—as much as, or much more than, in individual personal virtue.

An environmentalism inspired by this river's revitalization appreciates, and understands the tremendous ecological significance of, wildness, but it does not embrace wilderness as a way to ignore or escape, rather than to grapple with, the use of nature to sustain our lives.

It does not leave other people facing the worst consequences of how we use nature. It emphasizes that we may all be in this together, but also that we are not all in this together—and makes clear the essential connections between socioeconomic and environmental inequities, and between using nature equitably and using it sustainably.

It emphasizes compromise and negotiation, and process over solutions. It is less apocalyptic than alarmed, less utopian than optimistic, and less religiously dogmatic than pragmatic and full-souled and whole-hearted.

It connects preservation and conservation, and muddles them energetically. It proclaims that in wildness is the preservation of the world. It proclaims with equal enthusiasm that in the world is the preservation of wildness.

A twenty-first-century environmentalism, with the L.A. River as icon, argues for a world in which channeling and intensively managing a flood-prone river can be a wondrously environmentalist thing to do—and where the important questions are not whether you manage nature but how sustainably and fairly you negotiate to do it.

On the banks of the L.A. River, a once and future environmentalism takes joy in wild nature. It takes joy in our everyday connections to nature. It is an environmentalism, all told, in which our joy in wild nature is widely and deeply informed by the great joy of using nature well.

Jenny Price a writer in Los Angeles, and a Research Scholar at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women. She leads tours of the Los Angeles River, and guides people generally through the thickets of L.A. as a Los Angeles Urban Ranger.

NOTES

1. On the history of environmentalism, I have relied primarily on Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1995); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005); and Philip Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003).

2. Letter excerpt reprinted in "The Letter that Shook a Movement," *Sierra*, May/June 1993, 54.
3. William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995). For critiques, see, for example, the essays in the "Opposing Wilderness Deconstruction" issue of *Wild Earth* (Winter 1996/97) by Dave Foreman, Gary Snyder, Donald Waller, George Sessions, Bennett Stark, Sarah Vonhof, and Bill Willers.
4. Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007). Grist posted the text of the original speech, "The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World": <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-reprint/>.
5. Bill McKibben, "Bad Boys, Bad Boys, Whatcha Gonna Do?"—<http://www.grist.org/comments/dispatches/2005/01/25/mckibben/index1.html>; Nicholas D. Kristof, "I have a Nightmare," *New York Times*, March 12, 2005; <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-intro/index.html>.
6. Entries at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page. Authors unknown. Dates unknown. Quotes are from the entries appearing in the first week of November 2007. These definitions may have changed entirely since then.
7. http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/index.jhtml?ml_video=72347.
8. Except where I explicitly refer to the city of Los Angeles, "Los Angeles" in this talk means the greater L.A. area defined roughly by Los Angeles County. On the history and revitalization of the river, see Blake Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Jared Orsi, *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); Jenny Price, "Paradise Reclaimed: A Field Guide to the L.A. River," *L.A. Weekly*, 10 August 2001; and Jenny Price, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.," *Believer* 4, 2 parts (April and May 2006); City of Los Angeles, *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan* (2007), at <http://www.lariverrmp.org/>.
9. Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, ed. Robert Finch and John Elder (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 197, 188, 192.
10. I have made this argument previously in my piece "Thirteen Ways."
11. Newton H. Chittenden, *Health Seekers', Tourists' and Sportsmen's Guide to the Sea-Side, Lake-Side, Foothill, Mountain and Mineral Spring Health and Pleasure Resorts of the Pacific Coast*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Murdock, 1884), 18. On the history of Los Angeles, see, for example, Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990); Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1973). On white flight and L.A., see Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).
12. On the river and white flight, see, especially, Karen Piper, *Left in the Dust: How Race and Politics Created a Human and Environmental Tragedy in L.A.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and on the river and Anglo-Mexican relations, see William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: the Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2004), 91-128.
13. On the connections among the Owens Valley, the L.A. River, pollution, and whiteness, see Piper's excellent *Left in the Dust*. On the geography of drinking water and toxicity, see *ibid.*, 61-62.
14. Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac; and Sketches Here and There* (1949; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1987).

15. John McPhee, "Los Angeles Against the Mountains," in *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 267-68.
16. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).
17. I have presented this argument also at greater length in "Thirteen Ways."