The Aestheticsization of the Politics of Landscape Preservation

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This article examines the aestheticization of the politics of exclusion in a suburban American community. The research for this study focuses on the relationships among landscapes, social identity, exclusion, and the aesthetic attitudes of residents of Bedford, New York. By being thoroughly aestheticized, class relations are mystified and reduced to questions of lifestyle, consumption patterns, taste, and visual pleasure. Landscapes become possessions that play an active role in the performance of elite social identities. As such, social distinction is achieved and maintained by preserving and enhancing the beauty of places such as Bedford. This aestheticizing of place is managed through highly restrictive zoning policies for residential land and by “protecting” hundreds of acres of undeveloped land as nature preserves. This article explores the role of romantic ideology, localism, antiurbanism, antimodernism, and a class-based aesthetic in the construction of “wild” nature in these preserves. We argue that, in places such as Bedford, the celebration of localism, environmental beauty, and preservation mask the interrelatedness of issues of aesthetics and class identity on the one hand and residential land shortages in the New York metropolitan region on the other. The seemingly innocent pleasure in the aesthetic appreciation of landscapes and the desire to protect nature can act as a subtle but highly effective mechanism of social exclusion and the reaffirmation of elite class identities. Key Words: aesthetic environmentalism, aestheticization of politics, Bedford, New York, elite landscapes, nature preserves, social exclusion, social identity, suburbia.

As the visible material surface of places, landscapes can evoke powerful images and sentiments. They help to constitute community values, playing a central role in the performance of place-based social identities and distinction (Lowenthal 1991; Cosgrove 1993; Daniels 1993; Graham 1994; Rose 1995; Matless 1998). Members of certain communities can mobilize enough economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) to create landscapes that have the power to incorporate and assimilate some identities while excluding or erasing others. Landscapes serve as scarce positional goods (Hirsch 1976) charged with an aura (Benjamin 1969) of the particularity of place. In capitalist societies such as America where identity is linked to possessions, the aesthetic plays an important role in depoliticizing class relations (Harvey 1989). Class relations as constituted by power, authority, and production practices are aestheticized. By this we mean that they are obscured, becoming incorporated into categories of lifestyle, taste, and patterns of consumption and appreciation of the visual, the sensual, and the unique. Class and power relations are reduced to aesthetic and lifestyle choices. Landscapes become possessions for those with the wealth and power to control them. Not merely a backdrop for social action, landscapes play an active role in the performance of elite social identities and the framing of social life and values within a community.

Although certain geographers and sociologists have long understood that landscape taste is an important positional good (Firey 1945; Lowenthal and Prince 1965; Duncan 1973, 1999; Pratt 1981; Hugill 1987, 1989; Wyckoff 1990; Lowenthal 1991; Ley 1993, 1995; Higley 1995), we would argue it is more important as a form of cultural capital than many academics have recognized. Because landscape taste is an issue that preoccupies the affluent more than any others in society, it has usually been seen as inconsequential and thus rarely investigated by academics. We would argue, however, that its consequences are more far-reaching than may at first appear.

We believe that wealthy bedroom communities serving global cities are particularly good examples of a phenomenon found in many places in the contemporary world: an aesthetic retreat from the perceived impersonality of modern mass society and from the psychologically unsettling processes of globalization by which social relations are increasingly disembedded and reconnected into complex and heterogeneous networks of abstract social and economic relations (Giddens 1991; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). As David Harvey (1989, 292) says, “the revival of basic institutions (such as the family and the community), and the search for historical roots are all signs of a search for more secure moorings and longer lasting values in a shifting world.” This reaction is evident in increasingly militant localism (Probyn 1990),
regionalism, and ethnonationalism, or what Harvey (1989, 305) calls “the reactionary politics of an aestheticized spatiality.” It is manifested in the celebration of place and is more widespread and insidious than is often acknowledged. It can be argued as well that there is an aesthetic of community that celebrates “sign-values” of close neighborly relations that obscure a lack of more fully developed communal relations. There is also an aesthetic of antimodernity, providing an illusion of disconnection from global networks and re-embeddedness in place.

In this article, we look at the role that landscapes of the town of Bedford, a suburb lying forty miles to the north of New York City, play in the quest for social distinction (Figure 1). The town is one site or focal point of suburban aesthetic practices in which the residents achieve social status by preserving and enhancing the beauty of their town. They accomplish this through highly restrictive zoning and environmental protection policies and by preserving as much undeveloped land as possible through the creation of nature preserves. We focus our attention here on the preserves, arguing that romantic ideology, localism, antiurbanism, antimodernism, and a class-based aesthetic all lend a political dimension to the construction of wild nature in these preserves. We argue that the celebration of the natural environment and the claimed uniqueness of a local landscape divert attention away from the interrelatedness of issues of aesthetics and identity on the one hand and social justice on the other.

The desire to protect nature and the seemingly innocent pleasure in the aesthetic appreciation of natural landscapes has a complex cultural and political history in Bedford, which we can only briefly touch on here. What we will attempt to show, however, is that landscape as an aesthetic production acts as a subtle but highly effective

Figure 1. The Bedford region.
mechanism of exclusion. The numbers and types of people who can live and work in Bedford is restricted through various social, economic, political, and legal practices, backed up by appeals to an unquestioned desire to preserve a valuable and unique "sense of place." This might not have any significant social consequences if Bedford were, in fact unique. However, many of New York City's suburbs are characterized by similar, if slightly less extreme, exclusionary and aesthetic practices. These practices are subsidies to the rich that have the effect of reducing available land for the potential development of affordable housing.

We draw on a broader study for which we conducted over two hundred in-depth structured and semistructured interviews of a socioeconomic cross section of residents of Bedford and surrounding towns (Duncan and Duncan forthcoming). Our sample included both long-term and recently arrived residents. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and over six hours. We also questioned town officials, members of various town organizations, and real estate agents. Our questions focused on issues such as what people valued about Bedford, what changes in the town they had noticed, why they moved to the town, what they thought about land development issues and nature preservation, and what impacts they thought Bedford's zoning had on the surrounding area. We also analyzed many written texts: town histories, planning texts, real estate advertisements, and newspaper articles, as well as the landscape itself, a text (among other things) whose meaning, we argue, is "read" inattentively and uncritically by residents because it is thought to be politically neutral rather than ideological.

Our aim is to examine the workings of hegemony and the role that aesthetic discourse plays in supporting such elite interests. We believe that the swing in the field of geography towards an emphasis on individual human agency, autonomy, and intentionality, rather than structures, structuring and stabilizing practices, and unintended externalities, while at one time a necessary corrective to structural determinism, is currently directing attention away from a critical, grounded analysis of the workings of successful hegemony and structured inequalities. While there is a great deal of interest among geographers in uncovering resistance movements and revealing the fragility of hegemony wherever any contested territory is found, we assume that the degree of hegemony and success of resistance against it are very much open empirical questions. In places such as Bedford, the resistance is fractured and minimal, and subtle practices of domination and conserving of the status quo are so obscure that the participants do not recognize them as such. We take the perhaps unpopular view that, as critical geographers and outsiders in the sense of having no personal stake in preserving the local status quo, we may be in the position to analyze interconnections and structural conditions (including historical discourses) that residents often fail to recognize.

We wish to avoid the same type of compartmentalization of issues that allows casual, everyday mobilizations of power to go unrecognized by all concerned: those who benefit, those who suffer the consequences, and those who observe from an academic perspective. We aim to repoliticize the naturalized categories of the subjects of our study, rather than taking them for granted ourselves. We wish to avoid separating aesthetic from social justice issues and the danger of alienated complicity that could come with sharing in the aesthetic attitude towards beautiful landscapes such as the rolling green hills of Bedford or California's San Joachim Valley, as described by Mitchell (1996). The beauty of such landscapes can obscure the exclusion as well as the exploitation that produces them (Daniels 1989). In this sense, the aesthetic attitude can be opposed to a critical attitude. As an aside, we might add that while we define the aesthetic as uncritical or unpoliticized, this is not to say that all art forms (including landscapes and various artistic performances) are necessarily so; some are quite deliberately critical or destabilizing sites of resistance.

Whether it is or is not in the interest of members of a particular class to take a critical view of hegemonic ideologies, few people question these broad frameworks within which they make their day-to-day decisions. Alternatives to many of the existing local political structures, such as those that affect housing opportunities, are rarely considered because of the spatial dispersion of populations of people who together might potentially raise challenges. The formal political practices that have created and now maintain the landscapes of Bedford are both discursively and spatially circumscribed (and the town is hardly unique in this). For example, those without property in an American town are unable to obtain standing in a court of law to challenge exclusionary practices. This structuring out of potential resistance to exclusion occurs because of the relative autonomy of towns and the power of residents, especially in an overwhelmingly residential town such as Bedford. As Ed Soja (1989, 6) puts it, "we must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide the consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology."

We aim to discover a balanced view of how hegemonic ideas are reproduced. While recognizing a high
degree of self-consciousness, intentionality, and strategizing, we oppose any simplistic manipulation thesis, seeking instead to place primary emphasis on unarticulated class reproduction practices. As Terry Eagleton (1990, 4) puts it, “I do not intend to suggest that the eighteenth century bourgeoisie assembled around a table over their claret to dream up the concept of the aesthetic as a solution to their political dilemmas.” Our perspective harks back to the early work of Paul Willis (1977, 2), who states, “Class identity is not truly reproduced until it has properly passed through the individual and the group, until it has been re-created in the context of what appears to be personal and collective volition.” Although interested in both, we are far more concerned with what people sincerely believe than in what they cynically profess. Likewise, we pay more attention to everyday ideological practices and taken-for-granted ideas that support successful relations and conditions of domination than to strategizing or coercion through legislation. Although the former are important to a full understanding of exclusionary practices, perhaps the more difficult work to be done is to learn more about the way attachment to place, heritage, nature, and place-based identities are developed and practiced in places such as Bedford where such sentiments are expressed in particularly accentuated forms. We point to a type of alienation (cultural repression) or unwillingness to acknowledge the unintended consequences of such attachments and celebrations of localities.

We are interested in how landscapes are integral to social and political processes and how they embody past and present social relations (Duncan 1990; Mitchell 1996). We adopt a hermeneutic approach to understanding how landscapes are central to the performance of social identities, investigating how they are read both consciously and practically (inarticulately) by the people who produce and live immersed within them. Of particular interest are the social and political consequences that flow from these various readings (Duncan 1990; Duncan and Duncan 1997). One of the most theoretically interesting aspects of this particular case study is the success of the hegemony that is achieved through the fragmentation and the spatial structuring of potential resistance. The overall structure of landscapes is relatively fixed and largely beyond the ability of all but the most wealthy to physically modify. In certain types of communities, however, residents have gained control over their landscapes. Having a territorial, material basis, these landscapes are privatized through various mechanisms of appropriation and exclusion, private (including institutional) ownership, and local legislation. Power relations and exclusion are aestheticized through the design of landscapes and thereby tend not to enter the terrain of explicit contestation. Rather than being recognized as antidemocratic, exclusion acquires an aura of scarcity and thus becomes a form of cultural capital. The negatively charged words “exclusion” and “exclusionary” are replaced by the positively charged term “exclusive.” An exclusive neighborhood thus is a positional good, one that is highly sought after.

We assume that landscapes are integral to the performance of social identities. Collective memories, narratives of community, invented traditions, and shared ecological awareness are repeated, performed, and occasionally contested; more often, they are stabilized or fixed in artefactual forms. As Harvey (1996, 8) says, “we are in daily practice surrounded by things, institutions, discourses, and even states of mind of such relative permanence and power that it would be foolish not to acknowledge those evident qualities.” One of the more common means of ensuring that landscapes are transformed into cultural capital (positional goods) and communicate social identities is through exclusion. Various social, economic, political, and legal practices have been devised to create or stabilize the association between landscapes and particular desired social identities. These exclusionary practices are usually not seen as such. Instead, they are defined as preservation. As we will illustrate below, social exclusion in itself is often not the goal; preserving the “look of the landscape” is the primary intention. It is not certain types of people that are to be excluded; rather, it is any increase in the number of houses that is to be avoided.

The higher one goes up the scale of wealth in a community, the more control the owners of property expect to have over their residential spaces. In the poorest neighborhoods, people may have little control over even the interiors of their houses or apartments. Moving up the scale of wealth, people begin to have control over their interiors and, if they own property, their front and back yards. With more money to spend, the rich can display more personal choice in producing an aesthetically pleasing house and property. The richest in towns such as Bedford, having both the greatest resources and the greatest feeling of entitlement, attempt to control long-distance views and often go to great lengths to ensure that nothing they see from their own property and nothing they pass by when they drive around their town is unattractive. The pleasure they take in their property as well as its value depends greatly upon controlling the aesthetic and spatial practices of the whole community. Residents of Bedford and towns like it believe that ownership of land gives them the right and responsibility to produce a town’s landscape as a coherent whole, a visual production, or a unique “work,” to use Lefebvre’s (1991)
term. A “unique sense of place” provides the positive goal that serves to obscure practices of exclusion and homogenization, even “spatial purification” (Sibley 1995, 72–89).

Our view of identities is similar to our view of place; although we see them as fluid, performed, fragmented, multiple, and contested (Butler 1990), we find that people continually attempt to stabilize and establish secure identities and, more often than not, anchor them in place. As Pratt (1998, 27) argues in relation to the stability of place, “denial of boundaries would seem a luxury affordable only to those not trapped by them” or, we would add, not threatened by their absence or excluded by them. She goes on to say that “the same is probably true for the romanticization of them.” In other words, stabilized identities and bounded places—whether positive or negative, protecting or trapping, enabling or constraining—are, not always but often, the empirical reality that should challenge our contemporary theoretical predilections toward celebrating instability and permeability. We agree with Harvey (1996, 8) when he says:

But while I accept the general argument that process, flux, and flow should be given a certain ontological priority in understanding the world, I also want to insist that this is precisely the reason why we should pay so much more careful attention to “permanences” that surround us and which we also construct to help solidify and give meaning to our lives. If, as Pratt (1998, 44) argues, places are seen as borderless, blurred, and chaotic rather than the “hierarchized grids of difference” that they so often are, we as geographers will be unable to understand the “multiple processes of boundary construction” necessary to disrupt them. We see Bedford as lying somewhere towards the more stable and uncontested end of a continuum of boundary construction projects and reterritorializations of identity found within the United States today. Thus, we focus primarily on subtle and—by definition—unrecognized, naturalizing, and aestheticizing attitudes that reinforce social and spatial boundaries.

Aestheticization of Social Relations

What does it mean to view something aesthetically? Although a variety of different, loosely related aesthetic discourses have developed since the Enlightenment, they have become conflated in practice (Eagleton 1990). The most common contemporary view assumes an engaged or immersed quality of the aesthetic as a realm of immediate, unarticulated response to the materiality of art or nature or whatever objects toward which one adopts an aesthetic attitude. Being relatively unarticulated except in the most naturalized, unselfconscious terms, the aesthetic is separated from the realm of the cognitive. The aesthetic disposition in this sense is related to ideology in that it refers to the unarticulated, unmediated, and naturalized pleasure one takes in the concrete materiality of things in themselves. Although aesthetic pleasure is often based on learned taste or “refined” appreciation, part of the learning process is to internalize the taste so that it appears a self-evident inclination, a “habit of the heart.” As such, the aesthetic refers to a sensuous bodily pleasure and immediacy of response that is thought to be shared with others,1 self-evident, yet subjective rather than objective, eliciting a spontaneous agreement. As Eagleton (1990, 28) puts it:

[T]he aesthetic is from the very beginning a contradictory, double-edged concept. On the one hand, it figures as a genuinely emancipatory force—as a community of subjects now linked by sensuous impulse and fellow-feeling rather than by heteronomous law, each safeguarded in its unique particularity while bound at the same time into social harmony . . . . On the other hand, the aesthetic signifies what Max Horkheimer has called a kind of “internalized repression,” inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony.

The aesthetic attitude is closely linked to European Romanticism in that both tend to lead towards the valorization of lived particularity over abstracted generalization (Pepper 1986; Lash and Urry 1994, 49), valorization of the locality over centralized governance, and one’s embeddedness in place over the recognition of the global interconnectedness of social relations,3 Massey’s (1993) “progressive sense of place.” To take an aesthetic as opposed to a critical attitude towards a landscape is to be alienated from it, in the sense of rendering it naturalized, autonomous, and self-evident, as well as sensually pleasurable. Harvey (1996), following Raymond Williams (Williams [1960] 1988, 1990) believes that it may not be possible to have a nonaestheticized reconciling of place-based particularisms with more spatially extensive processes not directly accessible to direct local experience. In this, his view is more measured and pessimistic than Massey’s (1991). While Harvey (1996, 32–33) speaks hopefully about “potentially progressive” and “tangible” “solidarities organized in affective and knowable communities” that consist in “a reaching out across space,” he nevertheless fears reactionary as well as “militant particularisms.” Because we see particularisms as based to a large extent in uncritical, naturalized aesthetic responses to place, we are perhaps even more pessimistic than Har-
vey and certainly more so than Massey (1991, 1993) about the possibility of nonaestheticized or open and inclusive attachments to place that will lead to politically progressive results. We tend rather to see aestheticism and romanticism as leading towards the inward looking "pursuit of personal, national and racial idiosyncrasies" (Pepper 1986, 71).

To say that the aesthetic is seen as spontaneous and naturalized does not contradict the fact that there is also a belief in the "refinement" of taste and that this refinement is itself a form of cultural capital. As Bourdieu (1984, 36) discovered in his comprehensive study of bourgeois aesthetics in France, taste is learned mainly within the context of the family, most effectively over generations through practical experience in a class or cultural habitus, and yet it appears paradoxically to be an arena of great freedom and individual expression. Bourdieu (1984, 56) states that "each taste feels itself to be natural—and so it almost is, being a habitus which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious." Fine social distinctions are based on a demonstrated appreciation of the aesthetic. While this appreciation can be learned deliberately over a relatively short period of time, it is often said that the least self-conscious and elegantly demonstrated aesthetic sensibilities are inculcated over a lifetime. Thus, as we found out in Bedford, for example, most people often have little knowledge of the history and textual basis of their landscape taste; they do not need to know because they have learned it in a nondeliberate, experiential sort of way. Their aesthetic taste is performed and practiced as a general appreciative approach to living life that closes the gap between art and life: making of one's life and landscape a work of art with the aura of the unique (see Campbell 1987, 183, 199).

Taste has come to be seen as the property of individuals, with each entitled to their own. This produces a sense of community based on the idea of autonomous individuals sharing taste. From this point of view, the aesthetic has the same qualities as hegemony. It is believed that the question about what is attractive cannot be logically argued or subjected to rigorous analysis, but inspires unselfconscious consent from individuals. These judgments are seen as coming from a realm of the aesthetic separated from ethics, ideology, or politics, further securing the hegemonic effect (Eagleton 1990). Through the sensuous, passionate, apparently autonomous subjective experience of individuals who appear to obey no laws except those internally imposed, hegemony is achieved because agreement appears spontaneous. Furthermore, unlike the realms of politics or ethics and un-like the realms of cognition and of reason, the aesthetic commands the most secure hegemony because it appears to relate to nothing but itself.

Kant's definition of aesthetic judgement as lawfulness without a law (Eagleton 1990) in some important respects parallels Gramsci's (1991) concept of hegemony that sees consensus and collusion across classes achieved without coercion. Hegemony is based on a type of alienated thought by which the interests of the dominant classes in society are naturalized and universalized to the point of being seen as coincident with the interests of all classes. Although theories of hegemony are usually not as crude or unnuanced as that of false consciousness, they do retain some of the same general thrust. However, the fragility, fragmentation, and occasional superficiality of hegemony must be acknowledged; the extent to which dominant ideas go unquestioned should never be assumed but seen as very much open empirical questions.

As Eagleton (1990, 20; emphasis in the original) puts it:

the ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order . . . will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections. And this is equivalent to saying that power in such an order has become aestheticized. It is at one with the body's spontaneous impulses, entwined with sensibility and the affections, lived out in unreflective custom. Power is now inscribed in the minutiae of subjective experience . . . to dissolve the law to custom, to sheer unthinking habit, is to identify it with the human subject's own pleasurable well-being, so that to transgress that law would signify a deep self-violation.

As Bourdieu (1984) says, certain practices become "enchanted" or, as we would say, aestheticized—that is, naturalized, taken-for-granted, and invisible, certainly not theoretically beyond question, but practically so. Normally, to take an aesthetic attitude toward something is to react to it sensually, not analytically—not looking beneath its surface to study or criticize the underlying social relations and other conditions of its production or reproduction. An exception to this is when such analysis or critique itself is undertaken for the pure pleasure of doing so, as an end in itself. Then one can speak of an aesthetic of critique (not unfamiliar to many academics, whether they wish to acknowledge it or not).

Of course it is also possible to take an aesthetic attitude as well as a practical stance toward something. Often the aesthetic response is secondary but sequestered in one way or another, temporally or spatially. Whatever is aesthetic—say, a picturesque landscape—is seen as having value in its own right, and thus the necessary interdependence of its very existence with other processes (economic, political, or social) is often mystified. To the extent that the aesthetic is a sensibility that is seen as
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separated from the cognitive or the moral, to the extent that it is unable to be clearly articulated, one wonders: what politics will follow? Can one talk about the political implications of taking pleasure in landscapes (Rose 1993)? It should not be hard to see that any kind of politics can be mystified (to good or ill effect) by being aestheticized and romanticized: shop floor politics, race politics, or queer politics, for example. It should be even easier to see how Western politics surrounding the environment, and ethnonationalist politics, for another example—both based as they are in a long history of Romanticism, aesthetic appreciation and contemplation of the picturesque, the beautiful and the sublime in nature, and a deep, sensual attachment to land—can be aestheticized and romanticized, virtually by definition. Nevertheless, the textual basis of such a history is often unclear to those immersed in political struggles; and questions about aesthetic appreciation are generally seen as personal, spontaneous, and nonideological.

Aesthetic values are sometimes seen by local decision makers as positive values to be weighed against other issues, but often even this interdependence is underappreciated. Even when it is recognized that trade-offs may have to be made between aesthetic and other goals, such as social justice, safety, economic gain, or convenience, it is rarely recognized that aesthetics itself can be ideological, that there may be a class and ethnic basis to a particular aesthetic that unwittingly helps to secure the hegemony of certain groups. In other words, what we are arguing here is that there is often an aestheticization of the politics of the aesthetic precisely because the aesthetic is seen as potentially undermined by politics but nonideological in itself.

Bedford as a Place

After a brief description of Bedford and its history, we will turn to a discussion of how the politics of producing a residential landscape as a work of living art is related to exclusionary processes. Bedford is an affluent town of nineteen thousand people in northern Westchester County, New York (Figure 2). Prized by its residents and those of nearby towns for the beauty of its pastoral and
wooded landscapes; Bedford is the site of a highly aestheticized quest for social identity and a propertied way of life that draws upon the discourses of good taste, heritage, tradition, distinction, and environmental conservation. As a vigorously protected exclusionary space, we argue, it is as an example of what Lefebvre (1991) calls a visual abstraction produced by bureaucratization (in this case, zoning law and environmental legislation) and commodification (in this case, strong views of entitlement stemming from land purchase and stewardship).

Bedford is noted for its gently rolling hills, open meadowland, and well-preserved historical villagescapes (Figures 3 and 4). Tall maples and oaks overhang dirt roads lined with dry stone walls (Figure 5). Large stone or white clapboard mansions are often hidden from the road by tall trees. Members of the town’s planning and zoning boards, the town’s newspaper, and a recently organized coalition of seventeen political organizations share an overriding concern with the preservation of these historical, pastoral, and wooded landscapes. While some of these organizations, especially the planning and zoning boards, must by law weigh aesthetic concerns against such issues as health, safety and welfare issues, most of the rest are centrally focused on the aesthetic in a classic romantic choice of visual pleasures above utilitarian values (see Campbell 1987, 195).
Although increasingly reverting to woodland, much of Bedford’s landscape is still open pastureland separated by woods, rivers, marsh, lakes, and hilly upland. Bedford has three small hamlets and a very small amount of light industry, but most of the town is residential. Large lots are the norm in Bedford; some estates have over fifty acres, a few over a hundred. While there is at present a small amount of subdivision, these newly subdivided properties rarely fall below ten acres in size. There is also a growing trend in the valuation of real estate that places a premium on unsubdivided land. For the first time in Bedford—and Bedford is highly unusual in this—some large land holdings are now more valuable when left intact than when subdivided. A number of people have recently amalgamated large estates out of several smaller ones (Carroll 1995; interviews with real estate agents). Also, smaller properties are being added to a few acres at a time when land becomes available. The nature preserves, a local land trust, and the town itself have all been given land for protection as green space and views.

**Bedford’s History**

Bedford is celebrated by its residents as having been legally purchased from the Mohicans in 1680 by twenty English settlers from Stamford, Connecticut. However, property and ecological relations among the Native Americans were neither fully understood nor respected by the settlers. Each Native American village held its territory for the use of all its members. Individuals had the right to farm a field that they had cleared, but once it was allowed to revert to forest they no longer retained a right to the site. Transfers of land were seen as temporary and for particular uses. There is evidence from the seventeenth century that Native Americans in the region misunderstood the “sale” of their land to the English, believing that they could continue to use it alongside the English (Cronon 1983, 66–67). Although there was some degree of sharing with Mohican hunters, Indian use became more and more restricted with increasing English migration into the area. Today, this misunderstanding is seen as an unfortunate historical event, but not a viable contemporary political issue. As is the case with the majority of Americans (excluding, most notably, Native Americans), residents of Bedford see the history of the landscape as ethically neutral and apolitical in its implications.

Around ninety descendants of the original settlers still live in Bedford today and are celebrated as an important part of the town’s heritage. In the English tradition, the settlers laid out a village with streets, house lots, and a village common, around which the present-day village stands. At first, each received twelve acres in meadow and field lots, which were later supplemented with more acreage. By 1723, the settlers had purchased what is present-day Bedford from the Mohicans and established its present-day boundaries, approximately a six-mile square. It would appear that, although the Native Americans now understood English law concerning the alienation of land, they nevertheless sold it, because the remaining land in the area had become too densely settled and was decreasing in value for them (Cronon 1995, 103–7). The Bedford area in the seventeenth century was part of a much larger ecological region that—far
from being the dense, impenetrable forest found in the European imagination of the forest primeval—was, in William Cronon’s (1983, 25) words, “remarkably open, almost park-like at times.” This is in part because the Native Americans living around Bedford had been practicing a seasonal mix of farming, hunting, and gathering. The native population of this region was primarily composed of farmers. Extensive sections of forest were burned every spring and autumn to clear new fields for grain crops and to open up the forests for hunting. Most contemporary Americans see the natural history of the North American continent in rather different terms, as great virgin land in which Indians lived in harmony with the land, having little or no impact upon it (Cronon 1983, 12). This wilderness, having first been heroically tamed by the English settlers, is seen as threatened by contemporary overdevelopment. This narrative is based on a romanticism that values the simple life, the idea of noble savagery, and the elevation of “lost” nature to spiritual heights (Nash 1982; Oelschlaeger 1991; Terrie 1994). Nevertheless, the romantic story is useful to the present-day antidevelopment concerns of Bedford residents. By saving many undeveloped “islands and corridors” of wild nature and assigning these the status of environmental purity and fragility, present-day environmentalists hope to participate in the recovery of a lost Eden.6

Despite Bedford’s rocky soil, the railway transformed it into a relatively prosperous English farming community, providing the New York City market with beef and milk. By the mid-nineteenth century, the town had begun to participate in the first wave of suburbanization. The railroad also opened up access to New York City for more distant but more fertile agricultural regions, and by the latter third of the nineteenth century commercial and subsistence farming was on the wane. Bedford became a rural refuge for wealthy New Yorkers who sought, not only an open pastoral landscape, but wilder picturesque scenes as well. As active farming ceased in many parts of Bedford, the trees began to grow back on cleared land. Over time, in part because of the cost of maintaining a pastoral landscape without the availability of cheap agricultural labor, the landscape appeared more and more wild. The forests that grew up came to symbolize to its residents one of America’s most precious gifts. As nineteenth-century Americans began to develop a conservation ethic and an aesthetic appreciation of nature as a scarce positional good, the landscape began increasingly to be associated with their quest for a patrician Anglophile identity. New types of residents appeared in Bedford, ones whose relations to the national and international capitalist economy were principally through industrialism, law, and finance, rather than farming; aesthetic rather than instrumental relations with nature became more prominent.

By the late nineteenth century, Bedford had become a romantic suburb, attracting some of New York City’s elite to weekend and summer gentleman’s farms and others to take up permanent residence. Bedford was not too far from Manhattan for commuters to establish homes, but not so close that it attracted a lot of early development. In the 1920s, however, as pressure to develop land increased, far-sighted individuals instituted highly restrictive zoning codes to protect it from what they saw as potential overdevelopment. Although some had suggested twenty-five acre minimum lot sizes, it was decided that a four-acre minimum was more reasonable (or at least more legally defensible).

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, some of the big estates began to decline and were subdivided. The second wave of settlement began slowly after World War II, with some smaller houses being added to the landscape. By the 1960s, Bedford had a seedy look of elegant decay that was valued as such by many of the residents who wanted an understated and casual lifestyle. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, while Wall Street boomed, a new group of very wealthy urbanites came to buy or build estates. Along with the financiers, lawyers, and advertising executives came celebrities disillusioned with the glitzy, fast-paced life in New York and Los Angeles. All of these groups saw Bedford as the means of a quiet retreat to a more wholesome country lifestyle. Today it is an affluent bedroom community, its landscape dominated by large wooded estates, the open pastureland of its many horse farms, and preserved forests.

Zoning in Bedford

At present, Bedford’s landscape is maintained by some of the most exclusionary zoning practices found anywhere in the United States. The town’s highly restrictive zoning is increasingly compounded in its exclusionary consequences by ever more stringent environmental regulations that sometimes make the subdivision of large properties into four or more acre lots prohibitively expensive. Approximately 80 percent of the town’s land is zoned for single-family houses on a minimum of four acres, approximately 95 percent for houses on one or more acres, and less than 1 percent for two-family dwellings or apartments. The process of obtaining permission to build new housing takes up to twelve years, and few developers can afford to hold on to land for that long. Furthermore, since the Reagan era most of the federal programs that had provided incentives to developers to
build affordable housing have been dismantled. The town's zoning thus effectively shifts the burden of providing shelter for Westchester County's poorest residents onto other communities that are less affluent and not as effectively organized against development.

The close relation between exclusionary zoning's influencing the cost and availability of housing and environmental issues was publicized in the 1970s and 1980s through several lawsuits in the New York metropolitan area. The judges involved dictated that all towns must provide their “fair share” of affordable housing (Rose and Rothman 1977; Platt 1991). There is a tendency to compartmentalize these issues so that interdependencies and externalities between these seemingly separate political issues are overlooked. The recognition of these structures and their uneven geographical and class consequences is mystified by the celebration of hegemonic American values concerning the natural environment, the protection of wetlands and other fragile and threatened ecologies, landscape aesthetics, and a localism that places a very high value on the political autonomy of communities.

Our interviews show that almost everyone believes that the actions of one town have few consequences for surrounding towns. Furthermore, belief in the sanctity of local self-determination is so widely adhered to—by virtually every respondent, undifferentiated across class, age, and gender categories—that it frustrates the possibility of resisting Bedford's exclusivity. Those few organizations that have tried to struggle against the dominant patterns of residential segregation—those who have sought social justice in housing—have run up against the hegemonic aesthetic discourses of history and nature that blind people to the social consequences of the town's policies. When we asked questions about exclusion, residents proclaimed that the goals of the town's zoning have to do with aesthetics, not segregation. As we were told by one informant,

In Bedford there isn’t the same socializing over the back fence or even children playing with neighbors that you have in suburban housing developments. We could care less if our neighbors are black or white, rich or poor, as long as we don’t see anything ugly built anywhere near us. A small cottage lived in by a poor black family is much preferable to a grand, brand new mansion in the middle of a field or forest we knew and loved as children. So we intend to give some of our land to the Land Trust, rather than ever let it be sold.

Another told us: “Status in Bedford comes from having good taste and not having a tacky-looking place. It doesn’t matter who you are as long as you don’t build a house to spoil my view. We want to keep out development. Bedford’s special; we want to keep it that way—not suburbanize it.” And another said, “If we don’t like our neighbors we won’t see them or invite them to our parties. Segregation isn’t what zoning is about—it’s about preserving green space, especially wetlands and woodland.”

Aesthetic values concerning the natural environment and its conservation are considered unquestionably good by virtually all and are seen to be separate from issues of political structure, affordable housing, and exclusionary zoning. In Bedford Village, the uneven spatial arrangements of populations and resources tend to be obscured by the residents' and town government's dominant focus on issues of the environment. Attention is thus directed away from the town's responsibility, as determined by regional planning agencies and judges, to provide its fair share of affordable housing for the metropolitan area.

Creating Bedford as a Rural Retreat

The aesthetic value of having islands of wilderness is unquestioned by most of the residents of Bedford. According to an aesthetic view of nature, Bedford's many acres of forests and many large wooded house lots indicate that it has more “nature” than if the town were composed principally of houses surrounded by manicured lawns. This understanding of nature as wilderness is premised upon the separation of (civilized) humans and culture from the rest of nature; the more a landscape appears to be untouched by culture, the closer it approaches nature. This discourse lends support to the exclusionary structures and practices that maintain Bedford's scenic landscapes.

Although Bedford has a long history as a retreat from urbanism and even from middle class suburbanism, renewed efforts to secure an inviolate space that provides stability and social identity are becoming evident. A place such as Bedford is highly interconnected with global networks of power and privilege. In fact, some of the best-known actors in these global networks live in Bedford. People such as George Soros and presidents of major New York banks, multinational companies, law and stock brokerage firms, and a major world airline, as well as large manufacturers such as Ralph Lauren, live there. The city and the global networks that have economically sustained Bedford's elite are viewed as simultaneously alluring and repulsive. Since the late nineteenth century, Bedford's elite has been cosmopolitan and urbane in its public and business life, but deeply antiurban in many aspects of its private life. Easily accessible by train, Bedford has been produced as highly controlled space, a privatized domain in which an “authentic,” rural republican American identity could be nurtured. Its landscapes are
treated as highly controlled aesthetic productions, so that as far as the eye can see, even if one drives or rides on horseback for many miles, one views "nothing industrial, ugly, or distasteful."

Residents of Bedford maintain the illusion of disconnection through spatial separation of the home realm from the work realm in New York City, and through an aestheticized attitude that conflates fantasies of the English country gentleman, owner of all he surveys, with the sentimental pastoralism of the Jeffersonian American small farmer and individualistic agrarianism. This can be seen in the language of residents as found in interviews, newspaper articles, town and society histories, and real estate advertisements. Terms such as "aristocrat," "great estate," and "commanding distant views" sit comfortably alongside such terms as "the simple country life," "rustic" or "rural" charm, "farmer's club" (an exclusive, elite institution), "studied seediness," and "old colonial simplicity." Self-assured and often self-righteous in their attempts to maintain open green space, the residents possess illusions of innocence that are sustained through spatial separation. Residents spatially and visually isolate themselves from uncomfortable questions of race and poverty and keep out of sight any reminders of the social consequences of what has been referred to as "painless privilege" (Pile 1994, 265).

In order to maintain such illusions, Bedford residents participate in what Pile (1994, 273) notes is a "struggle for coherence...that can only be secured by exclusion." Bedford can be seen as an island of nostalgic retreat from the perceived negative impacts of increasing globalization and encroaching ethnic hybridity into a bastion of rural republican Anglo-America. Many of those with capital and elite social identities to establish or conserve are attempting to devise new spatial strategies to defend and legitimize their identities. These reactionary responses to contemporary complexity require us as geographers to reconceptualize such popularly celebrated concepts as place, locality, localism, and landscape in order to understand how they are being reified as conservative forces in the face of increasingly complex globalizing geometries of power (Harvey 1989; Massey 1993).

Wild Nature in Bedford

Before moving into a discussion of Bedford's nature preserves, we will take a bit of a detour to clarify our position on a strangely persistent issue concerning the idea of socially constructed nature. As evidenced by continuing debates in the geographic literature (for helpful summaries, see Demeritt 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Harrison and Burgess 1994; Livingstone 1995; Walton 1995; Gandy 1996; Willems-Braun 1997; Proctor 1998), all too often, any position which focuses attention on ideas, discourses, texts, myths and imaginings is misunderstood (sometimes disingenuously) as idealist or relativist. For example, saying that wilderness is a human creation is not an ontological statement; it certainly does not mean that the nonhumanized landscape to which the word refers (the reality out there, so to speak) does not exist independently of human knowledge of it. Wilderness is a humanly imposed category with a particular geography and history. It is like the concept of race, which refers to real people who are categorized as belonging to one race or another based usually on skin color. The categorizing really happens, the concept has real, very material effects on peoples’ lives, but it is a humanly created category, one that happens to have a violent history and no sound scientific basis. We agree with Cronon (1995, 69) when he says that “[wilderness] is a profoundly human creation and because, as he says, it refers to the natural, it is “particularly beguiling.” He (1995, 69–70) goes on, “Let me hasten to add that the nonhuman world we encounter in wilderness is far from being merely our own invention.” What interest us in this article are the ideas of wilderness and the role these play in the politics of exclusion. We see these ideas as very real, in the sense that they have material effects and are manifested in material landscapes.

Appreciation of Nature as Cultural Capital

As Schmitt (1990, xvii) points out, “wild nature has changed almost as much as an image in American rhetoric as it has in its physical features.” The “hideous and desolate” wilderness loathed by the early English settlers (Thomas 1983, 194) is now considered America's most precious gift and source of inspiration and pleasure. When nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans proclaimed themselves products of the American wilderness, they revealed themselves to be very much products of English Romanticism, of course, but no less American for that fact. Contemporary models of nature in Bedford can be seen as a reformulation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantic views (Marx 1964; Nash 1982) rearticulated with the introduction of late-twentieth-century environmentalism. Although these two traditions have sometimes conflicting histories (Pepper 1986), the romantic, with its emphasis on the aesthetic, appears to be the dominant view in Bedford and has been successfully conflated and camouflaged (not always conspiratorially) with modern scientific rhetoric thought to have more legal legitimacy. This romantic or aesthetic model
of nature supports present-day quests in Bedford for elite social status through reference to earlier aristocratic models of distinction. There are two principal strands of the romantic model that have been used to construct nature in Bedford. One is the pastoral, tamed nature; the other—our focus for the remainder of this article—is a view of wild nature or wilderness known since the sixteenth century as the picturesque or the sublime.

While the most anglophile of Bedford's residents bemoan the rapid loss of the pastoral aesthetic, most residents (especially relative newcomers) do not particularly notice this decline. They instead look to a more uniquely American symbol: the wilderness as a landscape ideal. This view of the wilderness frontier as productive of a uniquely American culture has a long history going back at least to the War of Independence (Schmitt 1990, xvii). Before the mid-twentieth century, there was only a relatively small, urbanized elite that had an aestheti-cized romantic appreciation for nature in its wildest state (Nash 1982; Stilgoe 1988, 22–23; Bunce 1994). Williams (1989, 15) writes of the nineteenth century elite that "increasingly, primitivism and romanticism became a slightly decadent cult, the hallmark of the well-educated gentleman." And Cronon (1995, 42) notes:

Wilderness came to embody the frontier myth . . . The irony, of course, was that in the process wilderness came to reflect the very civilization its devotees sought to escape. Ever since the 19th century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folks. Country people generally know far too much about working the land to regard unworked land as their ideal. . . . Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of nature leaves no place in which human beings can actually make their living from the land.

Today, however, wilderness is widely considered the quintessential embodiment of nature, and the visual consumption of nature is seen as culturally enriching. Taste that constructs wilderness as appropriate for aesthetic appropriation can be considered cultural capital, and such taste is being cultivated by increasing numbers of people.

Early in the twentieth century, elite members of the community decided that they had a duty to help introduce the children of the community, especially those from immigrant families and city backgrounds, to an appreciation of nature and the old rural republican way of life. Forests were seen as a fragile inheritance that Americans had a patriotic duty to protect from the devastating effects of modern civilization. This nature movement was a part of the production of a class-based and anti-modern aesthetic with nationalistic and sometimes even nativist overtones. In 1913, a group of local nature lovers organized the Bedford Audubon Society. Their job was to study and educate the citizenry about nature and its stewardship. In 1950, the society raised a small amount of money, which they turned over to the Bedford Garden Club in order to set up markers on a nature trail in a nearby county park (Northern Westchester Times 19 October 1950). In supporting nature in such ways, the members of these groups helped to establish or secure their place among Bedford's elite (Bedford Garden Club n.d.; interviews with members and other residents).

These early stewards' sense of purpose still prevails at the nature centers associated with the preserves to provide programs for school children. The preserves also actively involve children in their various conservation projects. Many of the parents we interviewed were enthusiastic about such nature education. Many spoke of the importance of raising children in the country and of taking them into the woods to learn from nature. As one man described the preserves, "they are one of the biggest draws of Bedford for me. Even with Lyme disease, it's so important for kids to be exposed to nature. It teaches them values they can't learn in the city." Another woman told us that her mother had encouraged her to spend time in the preserve's forests contemplating the personal essay she would write for her application to college and suggested that she focus it around the fact that long hours spent in the woods as a child had given her strength of character. Another told us she had given up a good job in the city because she refused to raise a "city boy" who did not know the "ways of the woods and wildlife." Her implication was that a rural, wooded setting was a more psychologically healthy location for a child.

By the middle of the twentieth century, there was concern among some landowners that the estate system that had produced this picturesque landscape was under threat from the subdivision of land. Despite a strict zoning code that severely restricted growth and the fact that there had probably not been more trees in Bedford for several centuries, there was a fear that the rural, wooded nature of Bedford might be lost. It was decided that one way to combat this was to remove land from the market by creating nature preserves. In 1953, five wealthy people founded the Mianus River Gorge Wildlife Refuge and Botanical Preserve. The preserve became a pioneer land acquisition project of the Nature Conservancy, a national nonprofit conservation organization. In 1964, only eleven years after its founding, the preserve became the first registered Natural Historical Landmark in the United States. At present, the preserve is composed of 616 acres of forest, wetlands, and abandoned agricultural...
fields. It might at first seem surprising that this small and relatively undistinguished gorge in the outer suburbs of New York City should have been registered before any of the much larger and nationally known sites elsewhere in the country. However, its designation undoubtedly had much more to do with the elite status and landscape tastes of its proponents than with the natural wonders or ecological significance of the site itself.

Invisible to the viewers’ gaze and contrary to popular perceptions, property relations are constitutive of wilderness. Bedford’s environmental history, as it is told locally, is the story of a pastoral, agricultural landscape valiantly carved out of a hostile wilderness by white settlers. Now, in a seemingly unconscious reversal, a few small tracts of wilderness are being saved from encroaching human occupation. As we have said, Bedford’s agricultural landscape long preceded the English settlers; the mythical history, however, is more romantic and heroic. The nature preserves are not pristine wilderness, but land carved out of an older agricultural landscape, plus some land that had always been marginal to agriculture, such as wetlands and steep ravines (Figure 6). In this respect, it is humans and not God or nature that have created the “primordial wilderness” in Bedford. This wilderness is the product not only of human labor but also of institutionalized systems of property relations—first of native Americans, then of Anglo-American farmers, and more recently of wealthy urbanites who impose strict limitations on the sale of land through highly restrictive zoning regulations and covenants. It is safe to say that if the land was not controlled by wealthy people, none of it would have been turned over to nature preserves, for none but

the rich can afford to give away land or are able to sufficiently benefit from the tax advantages of doing so.

Wilderness in Bedford is produced out of a class-based aesthetic that values both the pastoral and the picturesque. Like the pastoral landscape, this wilderness is the product of wealth generated in an urban industrial and financial realm that retreats from the modern urban landscapes closely associated with production and labor. Such alienated sentiments are enabled by the spatial separation of the private home realm, which is seen as a refuge from the urban centers that support it. Spatial arrangements such as these are not new. Keith Thomas (1983, 286) writes of the educated tastes of late eighteenth-century English aesthetes who saw industrial production as “ugly and distasteful.” “However,” Thomas (1983, 287) says,

such men seldom allowed their aesthetic sensibilities to get in the way of the productive process. In the ensuing century and a half these private sensibilities would have to be gratified by the creation of special reservations, landscape gardens, greenbelts, and animal sanctuaries: artificial oases or peepshows into an idealized world whose very existence underlined their essential opposition to the fundamental values of ordinary society.

Over the years, the Mianus River Gorge Preserve has received numerous small gifts of land. Much of the donated land in the gorge is very steep or marshy and has historically been of very little economic value. We say this in no way to denigrate the gift of land, simply to point out that “wilderness” results from the low economic value of much of the land. This land has been fur-

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Figure 6. Old stone walls in the "wilderness."
ther depressed by recent local legislation forbidding the building of houses or roads on wetlands or steep slopes. This legislation is more stringent than state environmental legislation and is rigorously enforced, decreasing the amount of land that can potentially be built upon. Due to the very high value placed on aesthetics (pleasure above utility) and the desire for green space and views, undeveloped land held in a preserve adjacent to a property is worth as much to that property as it would if it were adjoined to the property. If one can get a tax break from not owning but have all the visual advantages of owning, then it makes sense to give away land. In a sense, then, recent local land law produces “wilderness.”

Another way that property relations are encoded in this new “wilderness” in Bedford is through naming. There are numerous plaques at the Mianus Gorge Preserve celebrating those who gave land or other forms of support to the preserve. The five founders’ names appear on a bronze plaque set in a stone at the entrance to the area. Other plaques tell visitors that they are walking in the Terry Lawrence Memorial Forest or the James and Alice de Pester Todd Woodlands, viewing the Sanford Cascade, crossing the Edith Faile Foot Bridge, or sitting on the Lucy D. S. Adams Memorial Bench (Figure 7). Here, nature becomes converted into prestigious “cultural capital,” whereby people can celebrate themselves or members of their family by having their name displayed on the valued object. Given the symbolic importance of “wilderness” to elites, this permanent linking of a person’s name to treasured “islands of nature” resonates with spiritual and moral power. Just as there are plaques on the historic courthouse in the village informing people that history is provided for them through the beneficence of named citizens, here certain members of the local elite provide the town with “nature” in exchange for recognition by all that go to the preserve. Clearly there is something more than wilderness being preserved here. We can see that nature is cultural capital that can augment the moral power of the elite.

At the entrance to the Mianus Gorge Preserve is a sign reading “You are guests in a private reserve, not a public park. Our only purpose is preservation of biotic diversity, not public recreation.” There are a number of issues raised here. The first is that, as the sign points out, this is not a public place. It is private land on which people are allowed to walk if they obey the rules of the landowners. “Private” here refers to yet another kind of property relation: that of communal property held in trust. The second issue is that this is not a “park,” with all of that word’s connotations of middle-class recreation. This is an aesthetic way of seeing in that it is careful to treat “wilderness” with great respect, reverence, and learned appreciation. The Mianus Gorge Preserve lists twelve activities that are prohibited in the preserve, including everything other than walking along the precut trails. The value of places such as this preserve is predicated on the separation of humans from the environment. Nature in this managed world is an exhibit to be visually consumed. The preserves are like exhibits in a museum, a huge outdoor diorama that one can walk through, but interact with only visually. This is a place where one can look or quietly contemplate, where a class-based aesthetic is encoded into the environment, the same aesthetic that is wielded as a political weapon securing and maintaining the town’s exclusivity.

Property relations are encoded in the nature preserves...
through the conception of nature as capital. Nature, we are told in these and similar words, “is our most precious inheritance, we must save it for future generations,” and “We have been entrusted with this land to pass on to our children and grandchildren.” The conception of nature is pervaded by the language of capitalism, of economic rationality, and of the passing of wealth from one generation to the next. Signs at the entrance to the gorge assure people that here “[n]ature is being preserved intact,” and they urge visitors to “help save these 27 species of songbird for your grandchildren.” The idea of nature here is not markedly different from the idea of capital that is passed down to the next generation. The language of economics is used to describe wild nature that has been removed from the market. The romanticism of nature, however, is a product of the bourgeois mind that ultimately converts all things, including nature and spirituality, into capital and back out again. This rhetorical linking of cultural and economic capital obscured by romanticism is a powerful idea in the politics of conservation.

Aesthetic Environmentalism

What the nature preserves claim to do is to preserve a particular ecosystem as it was at one specific point in time. The wilderness in Bedford is a type of ecosystem that looks to the untrained eye as if it has been little influenced by human activity. The value of this wilderness is underpinned by the long-held Western distinction between the human and the nonhuman. Another popular ecological perspective that attempts to overcome the anthropocentric nature-culture dualism contradicts this view of pristine nature. However, such a contradiction is not particularly noticed by or troublesome to those whose aesthetic environmentalism tends to outweigh their ecological concerns. Wilderness in Bedford is a human creation, in that it is an invented category based on a dualism that is scientifically indefensible, and although it is physical matter, which existed prior to any cultural work upon it, it is now thoroughly inscribed and transformed through cultivation and stewardship. One could similarly say that it is thoroughly cultivated, in the sense that it is both the wilderness of “cultivated” people who have developed the aesthetic sensibility to appreciate pristine nature and, to a very large extent, humanly produced and maintained like a garden.

This contradictory double meaning can be seen in the preserve’s literature. The Mianus River Gorge Trail Guide (n.d., unpagd) claims to preserve untouched nature while calling for volunteers to work on the land to maintain it in its present “untouched” state. The guide states the following as the preserve’s policy: “The Mianus Gorge area is being maintained as a ‘wilderness island’ on which nature, including all plants and animals, may live so far as possible free from any interference by man directly or indirectly while the tract develops along wholly natural lines, regardless of what these may prove to be.” One would think from this statement that the preserve is an “island” removed from human control. However, a report from the preserve’s Stewardship Committee in its News Bulletin (Mianus River Gorge Preserve 1993) directly contradicts the preserve’s stated policy and reveals an actual policy of heavy control of nature to make it correspond to our culturally specific aestheticized views of wilderness. The report (Mianus River Gorge Preserve 1993, 2) begins:

The first and foremost duty of the Preserve’s Stewardship Committee is to see that the natural and unique state of the Gorge is maintained and protected. Because so many natural elements have been removed from our landscape in the past 300 years, we now must manage many of our ecosystems in order to improve or even to maintain the Preserve’s biodiversity. How do we replicate the effect of the fast-moving fires that for 8,000 years were set by Native Americans in these woods? How can we re-establish meadows, those critical habitats for insects and birds? . . . What can we do about the uncontrolled growth of the white-tailed deer herds that are destroying the forest’s understory?

The difference between allowing an environment to change without interference and managing it so that it will remain in equilibrium goes unmentioned. The first sentence of the report refers to “the natural and unique state of the Gorge.” The problem, it explains in the second sentence, is that “so many natural elements have been removed from our landscapes in the past 300 years.” Here, in a rhetorical move, the arrival of the Europeans marks the beginning of culture’s threat to nature. Consider the identification of the first of the “natural elements” removed from the landscape, “the effect of the fast moving fires . . . set by Native Americans in these woods.” Such practices can only be considered “natural” if Native Americans are considered noble savages, belonging to nature rather than culture, as they have been since the eighteenth century in European romantic thought. Intended as a critique of Western civilization, this myth of the noble savage is nevertheless based in a tacit hierarchy of races, with some closer to nature than others, such as those of European descent at the apex of civilization (see Willems-Braun 1997). In singling out the burning of the forests, the committee recognizes the role that the Native Americans played in maintaining a certain type of forest. In calling it natural, however, they fail to see it as a product of the Native American economy, assuming instead that it is “God’s economy.”
This raises the interesting issue of the purpose of the preserves. This is claimed to be the “preservation of biotic diversity” through the creation of a wilderness island. However, the publications of the preserve do not provide evidence to support these claims. The rest of the town of Bedford is very heavily wooded and full of wetlands that are protected by town law. Perhaps these areas also support a degree of biodiversity. However, the area is too small (just over 600 acres) to constitute an island for many species. Some animals could not maintain a viable breeding population if they were restricted to the area. The preserve, therefore, is not a wilderness island in any scientific sense of the term. It is marked as an island not by the quality of the nature there as much as by the institutionalization of it. It is marked as an island because it is a different sort of private property, given over to a cultural ideal of the separation of nature and culture, born of nineteenth-century romanticism and twentieth-century aestheticized notions that depend upon an artistic illusion—if not the actuality—of the separation of the natural from the cultural. Proctor and Pincetl (1996) argue that, while nature and culture are conceptualized “wild” gardens at a larger scale, subject to a similar mindset and technologies.

Despite romantic claims of undisturbed wilderness vis-à-vis the preserve, one can see the application of bureaucratic rationality and classification in the application of scientific knowledge and rational management techniques. Twenty-seven types of songbirds found in the gorge are listed at the entrance to the trail. A list of the trees, shrubs, and wildflowers found in the area are provided in the trail guide. Identifying signs are placed on selected trees in the Westmoreland Sanctuary. The committee calls for volunteers to implement the recommendations in the Management Survey: “We hope many of you will be joining us in clearing sections of second growth woods, monitoring birds and plants, recreating vanished habitats, collecting water samples and photographing the ever-changing landscapes of our 615 acres throughout the seasons” (Mianus River Gorge Preserve 1994, 3). Applying technologies of control and surveillance, the committee urges here that nature be monitored and photographed (see Evernden 1992; Wright 1992). How different, then, is this wilderness from a garden? Picturesque gardens became extremely popular during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in England and America, and they continue as a tradition among the American elite to this day. Symbolically, the garden in the nineteenth century was seen, not as radically different from the forest, but as a pale version of it (Bermingham 1986, 182–83). In the Arcadian myth, as in the Garden of Eden, idealized nature is seen as a garden. The “wild” garden aesthetic has been supplemented in America today by an interest in ecology. The increasingly popular “new American garden” uses “native plants” to create an “ecosystem in miniature in one’s own back yard” (Druse 1994, 27). This movement is spreading in Bedford. Those newly arrived in Bedford learn through friends and garden clubs to reject the suburban aesthetic of a manicured lawn with ornamental trees.

There are close connections between gardening associations and those people who sponsor and run the nature preserves. For example, Mrs. A. W. Butler and Miss H. Frick, who were the major donors for two of the nature preserves, were members of the extremely exclusive Bedford Garden Club, which in 1913 was one of the founder clubs of the Garden Club of America. Mrs. A. J. Lockwood, who recently donated nearly thirty acres to the Mianus River Gorge Preserve, was described in the article announcing her gift as “a nationally known horticulturist and member of the Garden Club of America” (Patent Trader 1992, 12). Anne French, administrator of the Mianus River Gorge Preserve, was presented a medal “for notable service to the cause of conservation education” by the Garden Club of America. Finally, the Butler Memorial Sanctuary is administered by two of Bedford’s garden clubs and the Bedford Audubon Society. This is not to suggest that there is anything misguided about belonging to a gardening club and also sponsoring a preserve, or having a garden club manage a preserve. Instead, it is to suggest that the preserves could be conceptually considered “wild” gardens at a larger scale, subject to a similar mindset and technologies.

It would be difficult to give ecological rather than romantic reasons why nature in Bedford today should look
as it did three hundred years ago. Again, the naturalization of a particular landscape aesthetic tends to obscure the ideological basis of its support. The idea that such a small-scale wilderness island supports a significant degree of biodiversity appears from the point of view of scientifically based environmentalism to be a dubious claim. From the point of view of aesthetic environmentalism, however, the scale of the wilderness island makes a lot of sense. A prominent local biologist in the area, Michael Klemens, has made a plea—which is unlikely to be heeded—that planners in Bedford and other towns in the area restructure controls on development to be more compatible with environmental and social needs of the area. He suggests that it is very costly in both environmental and social terms to impose low-density zoning uniformly across the region. Development, he maintains, should be concentrated so that the preservation of much larger-scale and ecologically healthy areas of significant biodiversity can be planned at a regional scale (Anderson 1997). If this suggestion were to be taken seriously—which it has not been—it would threaten the localized pattern of decision making that supports aesthetic environmentalism.

In effect, wilderness in Bedford is privatized. It is intended for the visual enjoyment and edification of the residents. Although outsiders are not excluded from them, the preserves are difficult to find, as there are no signs directing visitors to them. As a consequence, it is primarily Anglo-American, well-to-do families and a manageable number of outsiders and school classes that visit the preserves. It is the landowners in town who benefit most from the advantages of having forests and open meadows within sight or easy walking or driving distance. In other words, a localism operates beneath the scientific rhetoric of the preserve’s management.

The nature preserves are products of a discourse that arose as a reaction against rationality: transcendentalism. Religion and science have been blended with regard to nature, so that, for example, it can be argued that species should be preserved not only on scientific grounds, but also on the grounds of “God’s Great Chain of Being” (Lovejoy 1974; Pepper 1984). Nineteenth-century transcendentalists such as Emerson saw forests as God’s first temples, as “plantations of God” (Schmitt 1990, 141). For them, a walk in the woods was a religious rite, and we can see a degree of continuity in contemporary attitudes (Thomas 1983, 216, 269). The Nature Museum in the Westmoreland Sanctuary is housed in a reconstructed Presbyterian church built in 1783 and moved to the preserve by a neighbor and benefactor in 1973. Here, religion, nature, and history come together to form a powerful statement about the morality of the place. A sign on a tree in the preserve puts forward a classic statement of transcendentalism:

The kiss of the sun for pardon.
The Song of the birds for mirth.
One is nearer God’s heart in a forest
Than anywhere else on earth.9

One finds a strong element of transcendentalism in the Mianus Gorge Preserve as well. At the entrance to the preserve there is a sign with a number of aphorisms about nature. Among them are psalms and quotations from Thoreau, Muir, and Burroughs. The centerpiece of the Preserve is the “Hemlock Cathedral,” a stand of very tall trees, the oldest of which is reputed to be over 325 years old. At the center of this “cathedral” is a sign reading “Monte Gloria,” in honor of one of the original founders. This echoes Charles Eliot, who in 1896 referred to the wilderness as the “cathedrals of the modern world” (Eliot 1902, 655; quoted in Thomas 1983, 269). The name Monte Gloria, the “glorious mount,” likewise has a religious ring to it, transforming a gift of property into a quasi-religious act. The discourse of aestheticized romanticism has become materialized (Schein 1997) in the physical landscape. One can see this aesthetic transforming nature in a desire to keep open woodland, and in the paths that have been cut through the woods to allow the walker to see the most picturesque scenes. It can also be seen in the construction of a viewing spot in the preserve, where a bench is positioned for contemplating a stream through a frame of foliage (Figure 7). We are reminded of Alexander Wilson’s (1982) words: “[N]ature appreciation is an offshoot of art appreciation from nineteenth-century England.” The importance of the aesthetic in wilderness preservation is pointed to in the sign at the entrance to the Westmoreland Sanctuary. It reads, “Nature sanctuary dedicated to the protection of all forms of nature within its boundaries, for the appreciation and inspiration of those who love natural beauty.” The founder of one of Bedford’s nature preserves added in an interview that “[a]n appreciation of nature is more than aesthetic, it is essential to any real understanding of ourselves.” Her romantic understanding of nature was echoed in many of our interviews.

We asked residents of Bedford what they thought generally of the nature preserves. Interestingly, only a few—those most closely involved with the preserves or conservation organizations—mentioned ecology or biodiversity. The most common response was that the preserves are valuable because they cannot be developed. One man told us that “nature preserves are very important because they concentrate land. They mean no houses. They keep the place rural-looking.” A real estate broker said,
“The nature preserves are great. Permanently preserved open space is a major asset to the town. My customers don’t want to move here to see houses on small lots. They want nature, beautiful open land.” These respondents are typical of those we interviewed in seeing the preserves as aesthetically valuable in themselves and as instrumental in maintaining the picturesque aesthetic of the whole town by restricting and containing development.

Others saw the preserves not as places to visit but as visual barriers between properties. Although some preferred the pastoral landscapes of the town’s many horse farms, they saw the preserved forests as second best and far superior to any built landscape. Some respondents argued that Bedford needs more preserves. One woman said, “[Nature preserves] are important because they keep the land open. The more land we have in preserves the fewer houses we will have.” Another said, “They are good. It would be nice if more people gave land to the town so it would never be built on.” A developer stated, “They [the boards of the preserves] are trying to get everyone to give them land. Certainly anyone who wants to subdivide a sizeable piece of land has to give land to the town to protect nature. But let’s face it; what people of this town really want to do is to protect views.” Another real estate broker had a similar view: “The nature preserves are a racket. They [the town’s residents] just want them for aesthetic reasons.”

Still others approached the preserves less instrumentally, as things of beauty in and of themselves. One woman loved them for their trees. “The preserves are great. There are beautiful stands of conifers in them.” A horse rider told us, “The nature preserves are my favorite place. We can ride through some of them. They are magical.” A man who commutes to New York sees the preserves in transcendental terms. He says that “you get a sense of privacy and inner peace in the woods that you don’t get anywhere else. Nature is the most important thing to me. It’s worth two hours on the train. We need zoning and environmental protection to preserve this. Development pressure must be resisted.”

Wilderness in the nature preserves, however, is beginning to acquire some of its earlier frightening qualities. Lyme disease, which can have some serious long-term health effects if not treated quickly, has become very prevalent in the area. A few people told us that they have acquired a new perspective on forests and fields. One said, “I’ve gone a number of times to the preserves. They are very beautiful. But I worry about getting Lyme disease.” Another said, “We used to do a lot of hiking. We don’t go to the nature preserves any more because I have had Lyme disease. I really have no interest in going into the woods anymore.” Rather than being a threat to humans, nature has until recently been seen as something wholly good, itself threatened by humans. The spread of Lyme disease in the area has brought an old sense of fear back into people’s interaction with nature. However, this fear seems to be causing people to aestheticize nature even further as something to be consumed visually at a distance, as undeveloped land.

Residents also saw the purpose of local land law as the protection of the aesthetic. One interviewee stated that “wetlands laws are important to preserve the look of the land, to keep it open, to stop so much building.” Another complained, “A lot of subdivision regulations are supposed to be about the environment but they are really about aesthetics. You see other situations where there are environmental problems and the town doesn’t care. It all depends who calls up and screams. If neighbors don’t call up and scream the town doesn’t care what happens.” A developer said, “There are some serious issues like poisoning water. Dry cleaning fluid in the water—which needs to be regulated. Most of the rest of the regulations are just a way of stopping development.”

One woman to whom we talked worked for an organization called the Westchester Land Trust, whose office is in Bedford and many of whose members are from Bedford. Its activities are reported on a regular basis, often on the front page of the town newspaper, a paper whose board members and editors are either closely connected to or on the town’s Conservation and Planning Boards. The trust accepts gifts of land that the Nature Conservancy will not accept because they are not considered ecologically important enough to spend resources on. This woman explained that local values are different, and that sometimes it is principally the “look of the land” that needs to be maintained. Over and over again we were impressed by how much more aesthetic than scientific environmental values in Bedford are, and how very much this affects the scale at which ecology is claimed to operate. Well-educated, articulate, and community-minded residents have an unusual degree of power locally; housing developers have very little chance of success against them. The limits of the residents’ power to control the environment are largely fixed by the town boundaries, which were set long before the rise of environmental concern or scientific understanding of the scale at which concepts such as biodiversity make sense. The trust, however, does cover a wider area and tries to coordinate efforts between towns to preserve as much open space, especially adjoining parcels of land, as possible.
Illusion of Disconnection

The director of the Mianus River Gorge Preserve had the following to say in an interview in a local newspaper under the title “Couple Donates 30 Acres to Mianus Gorge Preserve:” “To go out there and walk the road in the moonlight and to think 400 years ago the moonlight shone down on that rock, and it looks just the same today. There are not too many other places 42 miles from New York City where you can look at the moonlight on a whole landscape and it looks just the same [then]” (Patent Trader 1992, 12). The first sentence here demonstrates the romantic desire to return to a state of nature, before people were civilized, that has been so strong in American and European cultures since the Enlightenment. Precontact North America is a principal site of this fantasy. The second sentence is virtually identical in its structure to the way in which history in Bedford is portrayed. Local people often make the point that “there are not too many other places 42 miles from New York City where you can look at” a picture-perfect colonial New England village. Both historic buildings and historic nature are conceived of within the framework of possessive individualism as a scarce positional good that the town’s residents claim to have more of than in other towns. It is this that gives them their value. The key to the director’s last sentence lies in the words “42 miles from New York City.” This situates the whole statement and captures perfectly the idea that what is being discussed here is nature as seen by an elite that is both highly urbanized and antiurban. It is its proximity to New York City that gives this piece of nature its particular value—pristine nature easily accessible to, but visually separated from, New York City, with its high culture, sophistication, and intense global interconnections; having cultural and economic links to the city are considered essential, as life relatively more isolated from these connections would be unbearable culturally as well as financially for many of Bedford’s residents.

Conclusion

The aesthetic attitude toward wilderness, with its complex and ambiguous history in rational and antirational schools of thought, has become a hegemonic ideology. It is an ideology that tends to mystify because it is based in a poorly articulated, immediate, sensuous, and naturalized pleasure in wilderness. It is taken for granted that it is spontaneously shared with others. It is seen as democratically arrived at and as having roots deep in the American psyche. The aesthetic and ecological value of providing green spaces within the metropolitan area of New York City is seen as uncontroversial, although dispensable by some who may be more interested in land development for housing than in the preservation of the wilderness. Thus the wilderness aesthetic may become the object of a politics of exclusion or antidevelopment, but it is assumed that the aesthetic itself is innocent.

As we have argued, landscapes play a central role in the performance of place-based social identities. Residents of Bedford perform elite social identities, in large part by mobilizing cultural capital in the form of landscapes thought to communicate their taste and lifestyles. Whole landscapes stretching as far as the eye can see have come under such tight control that they can be maintained to reflect the taste and the aesthetic sensibilities of the people who live there. Taste- and lifestyle-based identities and an aesthetic attitude towards place play important roles in depoliticizing class as constituted by power, authority, and production relations. This is particularly effective when such relations are obscured by being spatially separated. When visible economic activity is largely confined to a few quaint shops, when working farms are converted into gentlemen’s horse farms, and when land is artificially maintained in a “wild” state through preserves, exclusionary zoning, building and tax legislation, then residents can isolate themselves visually from unattractive reminders of the economic basis of their privilege.

What we have found in Bedford is an attempted reembeddedness in place, the celebration of the aesthetic (but not the reality) of intimate, premodern community relations, and the illusion of disconnection from a wider world of global interconnections. As William Cronon (1995, 81) suggests, this retreat can entail a celebration of the natural in the form of wilderness. He writes:

[T]o the extent that we live in an urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness, to just that extent we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead. We inhabit civilization while holding some part of ourselves—what we imagine to be the most precious part—aloof from its entanglements.

Wilderness in Bedford can thus be seen as the alienated product of urban industrial- and financial-market-generated wealth that banishes from view the modern economic landscape sustaining it. Importantly, this includes a very uneven and inequitable geography of housing and related resources such as education, the quality of which is closely tied to the relative wealth of towns through the American pattern of funding by local taxation. We say alienated because the connections between
aesthetics and negative geographical externalities remain obscure to those who sincerely believe that their efforts to make a lovely place will contribute to a wider society through environmental conservation, and that these efforts have little or no negative consequences for that wider society.

Notes

1. See Featherstone (1991) on the function of sign values in the aestheticization of contemporary everyday life. On aestheticization of history and community as illusion, see Jameson (1984), Harvey (1989), Boyer (1992), Featherstone (1992), Sorkin (1992), and Zukin (1992); but see Jacobs (1998) for a cautionary note and critique of any automatic assumption of the depoliticizing effects of aestheticization. Most court cases against exclusionary zoning in the U.S. have been brought to court by developers hoping to build multifamily and other more affordable types of housing. Developers buy property in a town and then challenge its zoning laws. Most federal programs offering incentives to these developers to build affordable housing were dismantled during the 1980s, and thus there have been relatively few such court cases since then.


4. While it is possible to assume an aesthetic attitude towards the awe-inspiring enormity of such interconnectedness in reality, this would probably be very rare.

5. Perhaps this is because we have chosen to study mainly elite communities. It is possible that standpoint theory (Hartsock 1987; Harding 1991) would show that place-based experiences of the more oppressed members of society prove a more “objective” basis for a critical and progressive view of social and political structures. On the other hand, interviews in Bedford and adjoining towns have convinced us that, in this case at least, members of all classes share aestheticized views and alienation from the structures of inequality (Duncan and Duncan 1997, forthcoming). For a discussion of both the reactionary and progressive aesthetic attachments to place, see Jacobs (1998).

6. On environmentalists’ recovery narratives, see Merchant (1995).

7. As an aside, it can be noted that intraclassestion questions of race, religion, ethnicity, gender roles, and styles of consumption, especially conspicuous consumption through landscape design, are not as easily erased from sight, lead to insecurity, and—despite material wealth—can sometimes lead to (psychically) painful privilege.

8. We base this on an examination of all of the histories of Bedford available in the town’s libraries and historical collections, as well as pamphlets in the town’s historical museum and in the nature preserves, local historical pageants, plaques in the historical district, and many articles that appear regularly in the local newspapers.

9. It is interesting to note that the preserve has substituted the word “forest” for the word “garden,” which appeared in the original version of this poem (Gurney 1979, 237), reminding us once again that there is a close connection between gardens and nature preserves.

References


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