Vagaries of value at California State Parks: towards a geographical axiology

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Abstract
This article explores the vagaries of locating value in California’s state park system in general and Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park in particular. The practice of listing and delisting for purposes of preservation relies on accepting the premise that some places are inherently superior and more worthy of public esteem than others, and that such distinctions are detectable, indeed, measurable in gradations. In this article, I aim to undermine our confidence in these kind of valuations and the designations they proliferate through scrutiny of two occasions where value is ranked geographically. I compare Frederick Law Olmsted Jr’s 1928 statewide survey of California that identified land for acquisition as parks, with a 2011 deficit-reduction measure earmarking 70 specific state parks for closure. These two lists demonstrate how value is immanent to social relations. The article contributes to examinations of value within Human Geography by developing a relational axiology that attends to the materials, forces and practices that hold together when value becomes subject to a project of fixing. I challenge the exclusively positive conception of value in on-going policy work and outline how valuation as a technology works to produce the public in whose name it is performed. What kinds of justifications emerge when fine-grained negotiations about revenue streams come up against long-held principals about the importance of nature and cultural history? Geographical value, in the same way as any other kind of value, is not found but is made by the very act of its enunciation. Accepting this requires us to think more carefully about how and why value’s identification leads invariably to its uneven distribution.

Keywords
California State Parks, geographical value, listing and delisting, Malakoff Diggins, preservation

Introduction
When theories of values do not afford intellectual assistance in framing ideas and beliefs about values that are adequate to direct action, the gap must be filled by other means. If intelligent method is lacking,
prejudice, the pressure of immediate circumstance, self-interest and class interest, traditional customs, institutions of accidental historic origin are not lacking, and they tend to take the place of intelligence.\textsuperscript{1}

\(\Sigma = 0\)

This article explores the vagaries of locating value as a philosophical and logistical endeavour in California’s state park system. In March 2011, the California State Legislature adopted Governor Gerry Brown’s proposed budget that reduced contributions to the state park system from the General Fund by US$11 million in that fiscal year (2011–2012) and another US$11 million the next. The Department of Parks and Recreation responded by saying it would be forced to permanently close 70 parks, a quarter of the 278-unit park system, by July 2012, in order to absorb the cuts.\textsuperscript{2} It was an exercise in ranking the value of space that perversely mirrored a 1928 survey of California authored by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr who selected 125 sites, out of the more than 300 nominated, to be worthy of acquisition as state parks.

As governments demand ever more assurance that expenditure is correctly targeted and fully justified, the auditing of value geographically becomes more frequent and increasingly elaborate.\textsuperscript{3} The article seeks to remove some of the mystique that surrounds assessment of non-economic kinds of value and challenge the veneer of academic objectivity that gives such systems their authority.

I interrogate the value concept by developing a relational axiology. Axiology, with \textit{axios} coming from the Greek meaning worthy, is the philosophical study of value or goodness. It has been used to denote a field of scientific investigation within mathematically orientated European philosophy in the early 20th century, but the label has since fallen out of favour at least in terms of contemporary scholarly debate.\textsuperscript{4} A relational axiology rejects notions of essential preordained value that inheres, for instance, in nature or works of art, or emerges as a universal outcome of the labour process. A relation axiology, as I want to present it here, asserts that any identification of value involves its removal from something else. Value, as Doel reminds us, ‘is always elsewhere: value is relative, manifold and set in motion’.\textsuperscript{5} We cannot only assert that one thing is good, we are unavoidably also saying that one thing is better than another. Value relies on creating equivalence. It operates in a zero-sum game. Baudrillard’s essay \textit{The Destiny of Value} explains,

Because we no longer know what is true or false, what is good or evil, what has value or does not, we are forced to store everything, record everything, conserve everything, and from this an irrevocable devaluation ensues. All that lives by value will perish by equivalence.\textsuperscript{6}

Throughout the article, I illustrate how dominant conventions of calculation, assessment and appraisal work to disguise this equivalence.

The philosophical analysis of value has occupied an esteemed array of thinkers from philosophers Plato and Kant through to Adam Smith, and David Ricardo in classical economics; 19th century thinkers, from Nietzsche, Dewey, Marx and Polanyi, and more recent scholars working within social anthropology, critical literary, aesthetic and poststructuralist theory.\textsuperscript{7}

Human Geography has been thoroughly engaged in this discussion. Jonathan Smith’s essay on value and place in the United States goes as far as to assert that the entire discipline is largely about values. He adopts a relational position arguing that the value of a particular place is never absolute:

No place is naturally valuable because its land is productive, its harbour deep, or its hills fled with gold; it becomes valuable only once it falls to the hands of a people who know how to make use of such things as fertile soil, a generous anchorage, or a precious metal. The value of any particular place depends on the culture of those who control it. The value of a valued place is always, in short, relational.\textsuperscript{8}
Other place-related value research in the discipline that adheres to relational reasoning includes Gold and Burgess’ *Valued Environments* which maps the phenomenological and affective bonds between places, individuals and groups in the United Kingdom; Cresswell’s account of archival practices that assign objects contrasting and competing value at Maxwell Street Market in Chicago, Illinois; and Miller’s critique of bottom line thinking in the UK government audit *best-value*.

By far the most sustained and systematic examination of value within Human Geography has been carried out by political economists, political ecologists, urban theorists and economic geographers who have variously abbreviated their respective research projects as being fundamentally about value, how it is assigned, transferred, controlled and what value actually does in societies that hold to a dominantly capitalist mode of production. As well as a topic for study value is also an important means of theoretical positioning often used to crystallise disagreement about the proper status afforded to the economic as a totalising analytic. Roger Lee, for example, rejects the society/economy dualism that treats value as if autonomous and distinct from social relations with his account of an ‘ordinary economy’ where value is historically and geographically variable and ‘emerges from the practice and performance of economic geographies’. Most relevant to the relational axiology I develop here, however, is research on the spatial politics of calculation and especially that which examines value’s role in making nature more legible to the logics of private capital.

In associated work around heritage and preservation, cultural geographers have explored the way value becomes ‘located’ through formal planning routines and private property law, how value is claimed as part local community empowerment strategies and how value is attached to places even when it is unwanted or deemed difficult or unpleasant.

This work has not yet extended its enquiry into those technologies of valuation, ranking, grading and profiling that profess to translate non- and more-than-economic qualities into economic metrics. California state parks as both public bureaucracy subject to fiscal contraction and a network of grounded material spaces provide a rare example of how the espoused apolitical logics of value and their associated modes of ordering perform and embody themselves. State parks illustrate the vagaries of value at a time when our faith scientific audit, performance management and the probity of ranking for the effective distribution of funds are at an all-time high. As public park systems across the United States and elsewhere undergo privatisation, it is productive to compare Olmsted Jr’s original designations of value in the statewide survey of California in 1928 with value’s articulation in the very different political–economic context of today.

The measurement, ranking and assigning of value to places through designation or listing (whether accompanied by ‘natural’, ‘cultural’ or ‘historical’ signifiers, or variously accredited at different scalar levels – local, regional, national, global) depend for their validity on two orthodoxies that warrant our suspicion. The first is ontological – that is, a belief in the existence of value per se as an intrinsic, objective, essential property. The second is methodological – a belief in the possibility of valuational measurement as a practice that can detect, scrutinise and neutrally, and without prejudice, put value in relation. But value is always political and works to ensure the continuity of existing social privilege. Affirming that a particular suite of places is more valuable than another, for instance, reinforces the superiority of those who hold such places in high esteem. Preservation lists are, to that extent, an illustration *par excellence* of what Bourdieu identifies as the misrecognition of economic capital as symbolic capital where the elite maintain a virtual monopoly of judgement on matters of artistic and architectural taste and cultural and historical significance. To quote Bourdieu directly, ‘Thus the more the official transmission of capital is prevented or hindered, the more the effects of the clandestine circulation of capital in the form of cultural capital become determinant in the reproduction of the social structure’.
The article seeks to expose how value functions in this way so that it might be more easily contested. It is therefore primarily a critique of power rather than an attempt to offer solutions or alternatives. Key to my argument is the assertion that value is not something that pre-exists in the world awaiting detection, but rather is something produced by the practices that identify and measure it. Value is made and not found. It is immanent to social relations and political economies. In one sense, this is unsurprising, but there are a host of institutions that depend for their legitimacy on the premise that value exists outside of our attempts to detect it.

The material in this article has been developed from fieldwork at Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park and my own very minor involvement in the campaign against its closure that picked up speed as the financial threats emerged during my visit in the summer of 2011. My broader comparative study of the environmental silences at iconic industrial heritage sites in Wales, South Africa and the United States incorporated Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park as one of the few examples where an active and critical engagement with despoliation helped temper the ‘conquest of nature’ narrative that so often frames selection, designation, interpretation and management of industrial-related landscapes and cultural resources.

Malakoff Diggins State Park is a 3000-acre area of land 26 miles from Nevada City California that was acquired by the park service in 1964 because of its association with the infamous practice of hydraulic gold mining in operation at a moment of rapid industrialisation in the post-gold rush far western United States. My research draws on interviews with volunteers, park aids and rangers; ethnographic and archival research conducted at the park, at the Doris Foley Library for Historical Research and the Searls Historical Library, both in Nevada City and at the California State Resources Archives and California State Archives in Sacramento.

The article proceeds in the subsequent section ‘Valuational imperatives’ by establishing a context for listing in California parklands, and in the preservation sector more broadly before considering listing as a valuational technology rooted in modern logics of purity and order. I move then to examine the methodologies employed in generating the 1928 acquisition list and the 2011 closure list, respectively. With each example, I show how value’s articulation works to define and redefine the character of the public upon whose behalf it is conducted. Finally, the conclusion provides some broader reflections on geographical value and its ramifications for the preservation sector and beyond.

**Valuational imperatives**

In an early statement from the ‘Report of the Director of the survey to the California State Park Commission’, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr declared a conception of value as intrinsic, unquestionable and self-evident:

> The magnitude and importance, socially and economically, in California, of the values arising directly and indirectly from the enjoyment of scenery and from related pleasures of nonurban outdoor life, considered in the aggregate and without regard to the means by which they are made available, are incalculably great, and in this summary are taken for granted.

In the spring of 2011, state park administrators were asked to unravel this fundament. They were given 3 weeks to draw up a list of parks to be closed (Figure 1). According to deputy director of the parks department Bill Herms,

> There was a great deal of argument – arm wrestling, [but] there was no rubric by which all of the different criteria were put into a formula. We had to rely to a very large extent on the experience of our professional staff.
Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park found itself on the closure list as well as the adjoining South Yuba River State Park in Nevada County California. Responding to fierce public outcry, the State Assembly’s Accountability and Administrative Review Committee called a hearing to obtain the full criteria used by the parks department in identifying which to close. Democratic assembly member for Sacramento and chair of the hearing Roger Dickinson said ‘We’re the “show your math” committee’ and Jared Huffman, democratic assembly member for San Rafael, commented afterwards that

The process is beginning to seem downright arbitrary and capricious in the absence of any data . . . It was not satisfying to learn the park closures process consisted of 12 unnamed people in a room throwing darts at a wall.24

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**Figure 1.** California Department of Parks and Recreation attachment to press release 13 May 2011.
Parks’ spokesman Roy Sterns complained that such characterisation was unfair noting,

We had 12 long-employed highly trained park superintendents who knew the parks personally and individually. We thought about developing a scorecard, but there are so many complexities . . . that we gravitated toward experience, judgment and narrative analysis. This is not a golf game.\(^{25}\)

It is not the first time sporting metaphors have appeared in public policy discourse, but their use here hints at the rarely acknowledged zero-sum nature of valuation as an administrative technology. Just as in the aforementioned golf, darts and arm wrestling where one succeeds at the expense of another, so it is in the distribution of core funding.

But legislators steered the debate away from that implication and associated discussion of the value of parks per se (their general worth to society) to one concerning procedural misdemeanour in the ranking of one park’s value against another. It is, in other words, a denial of equivalence. It is also an assertion that valuation is good, is inevitable and is something carried out by the state scrupulously. In his book *Organising Modernity*, Law writes that all modes of ordering tell of the performance of hierarchy as a necessary part of organisational life:

[They assert] that hierarchy and it’s distributions of agency, like the poor, are always with us; and they ignore most of the hidden iceberg of effort and work concealed behind and within the ordering patterns that makes their performance possible.\(^ {26}\)

So what happens when we make choices about which places are most valuable or significant? And whose belief systems and preferences are gauged in this assessment? The official grading or listing of one place over another is a peculiar form of spatial beauty contest. Perhaps the most famous, UNESCO’s World Heritage Site list, began in 1972 and has grown incrementally to include 980 properties in categories labelled ‘cultural’, ‘natural’ and ‘mixed’. For those judged to fall short of possessing what the World Heritage Committee judge to be ‘Outstanding Universal Value’, other lists can be utilised: ‘tentative lists’ of sites deemed suitable for inscription by member states, and ‘nominated lists’, those from the tentative lists that have been formally submitted. Other official inventories of esteem abound at the national level. The ‘Statutory list of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest’ in the United Kingdom, for instance, and the *Monument Historique* programme in France. The United States has among others the ‘National Register of Historic Places’ and the ‘National Historic Landmarks Program’. Lists also proliferate at the state, regional and local level, many employing their own idiosyncratic criteria and scoring methods.

The lure of the list derives from its provision of order and the reassuring sense of control we experience when all is as it should be. In the field of preservation, valuation most generally operates in one direction: to include, extend and expand. Harrison argues that this incremental mission creep has led to a crisis of accumulation where saturation leads ultimately to oblivion.\(^ {27}\) Indeed, this concern was expressed in a 1985 review of the US National Historic Landmarks Program by Mackintosh who asserted, ‘The true value of an honour is revealed not by its most qualified recipient but by its least. If landmark status is to signify all it should to the American people, its coin must not be debased’.\(^ {28}\)

The enterprise of geographical valuation as a practice that is both necessary and fair is an accepted convention. But methodologies that claim to ‘locate’ value so objectively are something of a chimera with many decisions coming down to quite nebulous assessments of intangibles such as ‘feeling’, ‘experience’ or the ‘association’ between different buildings within an area, and these are subject to unconscious bias.\(^ {29}\) Indeed, the identification of value is much more likely to be prompted by on-the-ground economic or electoral imperatives.\(^ {30}\) National Parks historian John Sprinkle, in his book on crafting the criteria used to assess nominations to the US National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks, refers to awkward compromises, contradictions, ad hoc
elissions, cover ups and savings into pressure that became necessary to ensure the criteria maintained a ‘veneer of academic objectivity’. He refers collectively to these as ‘Criteria P’ (P as in power).

The place-based vagaries around value in the preservation sector are mirrored more broadly with attempts to calculate the value of the outdoors, the arts and education. But the virtues of value’s more extensive recognition in such fields serve to distract us from diminishing funds. Performance indicators, cost–benefit analysis equations and the scientific economics approach to public policy proliferated by the US Federal Office of Management and Budget brought in originally by the Reagan administration are tools designed to advance a neoliberal framework ensuring capital accumulation, the reduction of the public realm and the free functioning of markets. It is a political project that has its foundations exposed by Clarke with his description of value as ‘a conceptual virus spread by modernity’. Our current faith in value as a panacea has its roots in Enlightenment principles of perfectibility, where, more often than not, value is conflated with purity. ‘Purification’ is the term Latour employs to describe the ‘modern’ project of categorically separating humans and nature, and purity is implicit in Aristotle’s theory of ‘natural law’ which holds that something is right if it fulfils its true purpose. Echoing this maxim, the axiologist Robert Hartman in his work *Structure of Value* posits his base principal of value with the phrase: a thing is good insofar as it exemplifies its concept. In other words, a thing is good if it possesses all the properties its name suggests that it should, if it fulfils its own definition, if it is pure. The contemporary application of this logic is perhaps most apparent in our treatment of mineral deposits that are graded according to the richness of the ore. We are familiar with its use in expressing the quality of racehorses (thoroughbred), or of Scotch Whisky (single malt). The logic of purity works also in a preservation sector often driven by the phantom of authenticity. Historic sites must meet requirements of ‘integrity’ if they are to communicate their story without too much distraction from the contemporary world, and ‘natural’ sites are much more likely to be protected if they display elements that are characteristically pristine, unsullied and seemingly ‘unproduced’.

The historian Richard White discusses the problem of our fixation with purity in relation to the environment specifically:

What many of us have done, myself included, is to find the root of many of the horrors of our time in a categorical mistake, confusing one thing with another, and in the transgressing of forbidden boundaries. We have logically deduced that the solution is purity: keeping categories separate, the boundaries intact.

And Law highlights the danger of this when he writes,

It seems to me that we have spawned a monster: the hope or the expectation that everything might be pure; the expectation that if everything were pure then it would be better than it actually is; and we have concealed the reality that what is better for some is almost certainly worse for others; that what is better, simpler, purer, for a few, rests precariously and uncertainly upon the work and, very often, the pain and misery of others.

Identifying value at California state parks belies a conceit that value as purity can be objectively detected and used to shape the distribution of funds. But ranking state parks also enunciates – and materially locates – the categories of ‘state’, ‘park’ and ‘public’ those designations presume to stand for. As Hinchliffe observes in his work on urban field ecology and conservation in the United Kingdom, ‘representation implies a whole suite of practices which include . . . the making public of a thing and at the same time the making of a public which can attest that thing’. It is crucial to recognise that the lists I now move on to examine work to actively produce a public with a coherent set of beliefs, aspirations and expectations.

I begin with the 1928 survey that became the blueprint for planning diverse park systems across the United States before moving in the section ‘Contesting closure’ to discuss the recent closure list, its contestation and the contours of public that were revoked.
The State Park survey

The California State Park system exerts an enormous pull on the state’s collective self-image. Today, state park holdings cover one and a half million acres of deserts, forests, mountains, coastline, beeches and lakes, as well as a vast array of historic properties, museums, monuments and sites of cultural and historical significance. The state park system currently employs nearly 4,000 individuals, receives upwards of 70 million visitors a year, runs on a total estimated annual budget of US$779 million (figures for 2013) and generates US$4 billion of direct and indirect income every year.46 Its status and scope reflect a long history.

California’s claim to the title of national preservation pioneer derives from President Abraham Lincoln’s 1864 Yosemite Land Grant and the establishment of the United States’ first park, although this was ignominiously handed back to the federal government in 1905. Landrum, in his review of the state park movement in the United States, argues that the most important lesson learned from this return ‘was that a park, as a public enterprise, should not be expected to sustain itself financially – especially in a remote wilderness setting’.47

The environmentalist mission that started with Yosemite and continued with campaigns to save coast redwood trees was ideologically eclectic but invariably elite. Groups from the upper echelons of society such as the American Redwoods League (founded in 1918) saw preservation as a private responsibility. They were anti-tax, against government regulation and supported the capitalist exploitation of timber – an approach that chimed with National Forest conservationist Gifford Pinchot’s belief that resources be managed scientifically and sustainably where use by many (for economic gain) should outweigh the aesthetic concerns of a few.48 This ran counter to the position of the Sierra Club headed by John Muir who asserted nature’s transcendental value and campaigned to protect it absolutely from the market. Conservation of natural resources extended to preservation of cultural resources, and in 1909, a coalition of groups named The California Historical Landmarks League deeded objects and structures to the state for protection against rapid economic development.

These divergent motivations came together to ‘establish San Francisco as one of the hearths of conservation and nature appreciation in the United States’49 leading to a national parks movement and, belatedly, a unified system of state parks. In 1923, a committee to set up state parks led by real-estate magnate and Sierra Club director Duncan McDuffie was backed by other conservation groups and the California Automobile Association but faced opposition from the lumber industry, California’s Taxpayer Alliance and then Governor Fred Richardson.50 The committee reorganised as the California State Parks Council in 1927 and drafted charter legislation as well as a match-fund US$12 million bond issue to pay for a statewide survey and the acquisition of recommended lands. Newton Drury, previously of the Redwoods League, and the first California State parks director, justified state investment with an appeal to value that framed his own vision of the public:

> The benefit to Californians will be many times the cost. State Parks will pay not only in increased revenue . . . but, what is more important will pay rich dividends in the health and happiness of our people by assuring for them and for their successors, enjoyment of the scenic beauty and outdoor recreation which Californians have always looked upon as their heritage.51

When the funding came through, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr, then Harvard professor of landscape architecture, was paid US$15,000 to determine ‘what lands are suitable and desirable for the ultimate development of a comprehensive, well balanced state park system’.52

Olmsted divided the state into 12 districts, detailed a rationale for selection and produced an itemised list of lands for purchase. The process buried a contradiction where value was taken on the one hand to be intrinsic, self-evident and common sense, while on the other hand, Olmsted’s discernment of quality was quite explicitly informed by economic, practical and legal limitations.
When his office received more than 330 nominations for consideration, for example, Olmsted dismissed many immediately because of a suspicion that owners or agents were seeking to unload poor land onto the state ‘with little appreciation of the qualities which might make the land desirable for state park purposes’. His objections to 98 projects put up for inclusion give some insight into the way the vagaries of value were mobilised.

Places were rejected (Figure 2) if they were

- Definitely lacking in qualities suitable for a state park; definitely more of local than statewide value; too small or isolated or both to justify acquirement and administration by the State in the absence of more notably outstanding qualities; too costly in proportion to their value for State Park purpose; and distinctly less valuable as a State park than other projects which would serve similar purposes.

Olmsted’s four selection criteria stated first that parks were ‘Sufficiently notable and distinctive to attract visitors from all parts of the state not just the local area’; second, that they be characterised by resources not well provided through private ownership; third, that they be just sufficient in number to meet requirements which cannot be met by other state provision such as local or national parks or scenic highways; and finally fourth, that they be geographically distributed to secure a ‘wide and representative variety of the landscape types for the state as a whole’. State parks were therefore shaped by a relational rubric where a fixed budget led to selection and dismissal on the basis of expedient criteria with the zero-sum nature of the practice disguised behind superlative landscape descriptions of ‘marvel’ and ‘magnitude’ and an overarching assertion that value was ‘incalculable’.

Importantly, the list also produced the public it proclaimed to serve. Olmsted characterised the state’s inhabitants as an enlightened ‘great mass of well intentioned people’ who were distinguished from others ‘of a former age or different country’ by their ability to recognise the value of the outdoors over and above base economic values of commerce and development. His positive reinforcement on this attribute came hand in hand with a caution:

The enormous development in California of the use of these scenic and recreational values of the outdoors has resulted in part from the economic prosperity of the people, leaving them time and means for such enjoyment, and in part from the lavish abundance of naturally favourable conditions of landscape and climate. But there are signs on every hand that because of this very abundance (and of the increasing rate at which the favourable conditions are being put to use) careless, hasty, short-sightedly selfish methods of exploiting the natural assets of scenic value are rapidly killing the geese that lay the golden eggs.

While the economic shaped the contours of Olmsted’s ranking, references to ‘pleasant scenery for the sake of enjoyment’ and complaints about ‘ill sited subdivisions and resort development’ illustrate a logic of non-human purity informed by the aesthetic preferences of a cultural elite. In his celebration of California deserts, for example, Olmsted writes,

The very conditions which make a desert what it is leave every man-made scar upon its surface so completely unsoftened and unbarred by natural processes as to produce a rapidly cumulative deterioration of its precious wilderness.

This scorn is echoed in his comment on the essential values of the Yosemite Valley [which] have, in my opinion, been impaired to a very appreciable degree . . . by the insidious tendency toward the successive introduction within the Valley of activities and conveniences of kinds, [which are] basically inconsistent with maintaining the values peculiar to the Valley – a direction of which the logical ultimate outcome would be a definitely urban pleasure resort.
The survey and subsequent reports for California State Parks carried out by Olmsted between 1945 and 1950 provided guidelines for the consolidation of the park system and its expansion through the 1960s and 1970s. The grand vision became difficult to maintain, however, when monies allocated to California state parks from the General Fund began to decline in 1978 with passage of Proposition 13 – a mandate that reduced state property taxes and required a two-thirds majority in both legislative houses before any increase could be permitted. For Citrin, Proposition 13 transformed the operation of the California State Government shifting power from local government to the state, from the legislature to the governor and from a representative democracy to a plebiscitary system run through periodic referenda. State parks were asked to make up the significant shortfall in this new era with concessions, fees, private donations and by reducing operating costs.

Many park employees saw this prolonged phase of commercialisation as a threat to the Californian people as a whole whose rights, reasons, virtues and ideals were inscribed into the very ground of the parks. Speaking in March 2012, in response to the latest threat of closures, democratic senator Noreen Evans maintained her stance against financial reform telling the Huffington Post,

> Once you privatise a park, you change the essential mission of the park – it becomes about making a profit. My own philosophy is that a state park should be owned and operated by the public. Any time you turn even a portion of a state park away from public control, you always have the problem that the park’s interest becomes inconsistent with serving the public.

For many though, closure exposed deep dysfunctional and outdated management systems within the Department of Parks and Recreation that led to inefficiencies, scandals, misbehaviour and bad bookkeeping.

In Olmsted’s survey and the list it generated, the public was distanced from commerce. Scenic and recreational values that ‘make life worth living [were] distinguished from things which are valued only because they can be exchanged for something one really wants’.

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Figure 2. Sample of proposals rejected on basis of the objections noted above.
The 2011 closure list by contrast asserted a different relationship between the parks and the populace who, cast within a neoliberal doctrine, related to the outdoors through the purchase of services (parking, restrooms, accommodation choices and all the rest) provided by the market. This new normal is clear from the sentiments expressed by oversight agency the Little Hoover Commission, who, in their 122-page report on the future of state parks, called for the department’s transition into an ‘enterprise-based’ organisation with shared management, greater transparency and a ‘more business-minded’ and ‘entrepreneurial revenue enhancement strategy’.66

At the core of this transition was a new axiology with The Commission recommending a complete reassessment of park resources with those deemed not to express ‘true’ statewide significance having to be realigned. Just as in the 1928 survey value espoused as intrinsic, true and universal is actually shaped by prevailing political–economic demands. The exercise of value on this occasion, however, extends the infiltration of private capital into the public realm rather than guards against it.

This section has sought to illustrate how the state park system took shape through a relational axiology that disguised value’s contingency behind a rhetoric of universal appeals to inherent, unquestionable quality. It moved to outline how that framework is to be reformed by an equally relational axiology again making claims to accurately detect ‘true’ value. I turn now to protests surrounding the 2011 closure list to demonstrate the flaws in valuation as a strategy of management and explain how its authority unraveled.

**Contesting closure**

The criteria used by the Department of Parks and Recreation to select parks for closure was specified by the legislature in statute.67 It was released to the press on 13 May 2011 and is reproduced here.

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**California State Parks**

**Park Closure Methodology: Factors Considered**

Statewide Significance: The statewide significance of the parks based on the department’s established lists of *Outstanding and Representative Parks* as well as the *California State History Plan* and the *California State Parks Survey of 1928* (authored by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.).

Visitation: In order to protect public access.

Fiscal Strength: Estimated net savings from closure for each unit.

Ability to Physically Close: Some units are easily closed to public access while others cannot be physically closed.

Existing Partnerships: Units with substantial concession operations and/or non-profit support.

Infrastructure: Some units suffer from unstable infrastructure (primarily water and wastewater treatment facilities). Recent or proposed Capital Outlay investments were also considered.

Land Use Restrictions: Known deed restrictions and grant requirements. Parks will continue to work with the National Park Service to protect access to our Land and Water Conservation Fund parks.

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These criteria are part of the suite of apparently neutral technologies of calculation that function to legitimate wealth and power. They are what Braun has referred to as a fine weave of micro-practices that produce a territory for the law of value to operate upon. Enmeshed in that fine weave are non-human contributions that can mostly be turned to an advantage. At Malakoff Diggins, the large acreage, remote location and dirt-road access result in relatively low visitor numbers. This is matched negatively against the high costs of electricity and water provision required to defend resources against decay and forest fire. Frequency and extent of fire in this area are exacerbated by scotch broom, a shrub brought over from Europe in the 1850s and prized as an ornamental but which now provides a bridge between ground grasses and the tree canopy. Such non-human contributions illustrate nature’s indifference to the esteem we bestow upon it. Given the mix of contributions to value’s immanence in this particular instance, it was no surprise to rangers that Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park would end up on the closure list.

For those with no direct involvement in the park, the list affords a sense of probity and transparency by evidencing the application of objective expertise. This is what Hartman’s science of axiology promised for the fields of business, economics, psychology and philosophy. But value is ultimately enigmatic. While some of the Department’s considerations in closing a park are quantifiable to a degree, the first, ‘relative state-wide significance’ is a matter of political arithmetic calculated against what the electorate will allow.

Technical criteria for the neutral measurement of value profess rigour, but they are much less useful in practice when the necessary equivalence of value, its disavowal, becomes unavoidable. At this point those in authority protect themselves from criticism by appealing to scientific principles of pure valuation, they task others to impossibly deploy. A state audit in 2013, for instance, criticised park managers asserting, ‘the department did not hew closely to the criteria it developed for the task’, ‘lacked detailed written analysis for closure’ ‘and may not be able to justify its decisions to the public as reasonable’. A report by the assembly committee on appropriations concurred describing the closure process as ‘opaque, insensitive to public and private costs associated with closure of particular park units, and inflexible in its consideration of cost saving alternatives to park closure’.

The operational flavour of the closure methodology shows value reduced to that familiar economic conflation ‘value for money’. And yet faith in non-economic, intrinsic kinds of value was maintained by local residents for whom an appreciation of the park’s transcendent value helped galvanise resistance against remote bureaucrats and their reductive accounting techniques. It is a reflection of the dominance of prevailing economic logics, however, that challenge operated most directly through a critique of the department’s business case for closure. In the midst of the crisis, a member of Malakoff Diggins Park Association wrote in frustration that

No one seems to know anything for sure about the status of Malakoff. Several people have tried to get some numbers from State Dept. of Parks & Rec. Either they cannot or will not tell us how much it costs to run the Park. (It seems to me that if they cannot produce those numbers with a press of one computer key, then they cannot say that closing the park will save any money – but I get caught up in conspiracy theories . . . they are trying to hide the numbers from the public, or they are totally incompetent at bookkeeping. Either explanation says that the decision of which parks to close, or to close any parks, is smoke and mirrors. Someone has a political solution for an economic problem.

Instead of closure being understood as a crisis response to funding decisions at the Governor’s office, many regarded it as a cynical measure to focus minds and secure additional support from the General Fund. Indeed, California Republicans accused the park service of putting the life of
their dysfunctional bureaucracy ahead of the needs of hard working families. It seemed at one point that everyone was against closure, which made its presumed inevitability frustrating:

I started to dig down and find out that the state – and I’m not trying to be mean – the state is completely fraudulent with cost savings they originally posted for these parks, the parks, these numbers which are public information, were 30–60% inflated. We’re not going to save the money, not only are we going to lose money to local economies which I’ve talked about and hundreds and millions of dollars, but the initial savings are not what they seem and that’s just unfortunate.73

While advocate groups, including the South Yuba River Citizens League, the Olmsted Fund, The Malakoff Diggins Park Association and the South Yuba River Park Association, provided numbers to demonstrate that parks more than paid for themselves through the creation of primary jobs and input to local economies, the energy driving the campaign was generated by communal ideals and a rejection of market driven logics for park operation:

There’s this greater purpose than profit, that’s the whole point that they were set up in the first place. And parks were never meant to raise money, it was never intended that the parks would turn a profit, it’s not until very recently that somebody decided that they should.74

Walker and Fortmann’s political ecology of Nevada County highlights a schism between longer term residents who value the landscape primarily for its natural resources (mining and logging) and those they label exurban migrants, arriving since the 1960s, who tend to appreciate the landscape for its aesthetic qualities.75 My concern in this article is less about adjudicating between competing measurements of value and more about the privileged status of valuation itself as a means of getting things done.

The campaign against closure at Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park became most effective when drawing attention to value’s equivalence. The closure list in that sense is an emblem of the removal of value that can be countered by focusing squarely on consequences.

The rangers at Malakoff Diggins were aware of this:

It’s not effective to take people on a nice walk in the woods if you don’t tell them in nine months ‘you can’t come here because this park will be closed’ or if you don’t tell them that ‘you can walk here, but in one mile you have to stop because it’s going to be clear cut for logging’ which is going to be happening right over there in another year or so. So, I think people need to understand that even once you’ve protected something it’s not protected forever and it’s not safe from budgets cuts. It’s not safe from greed; it’s not safe from private interest.76

Invocation of loss became one of the most powerful ways of challenging the exclusively positive valence by which valuation is proffered as a mechanism of policy:

If it closes next summer and all the buildings are locked up and there are no restrooms open and there’s no one picking up the garbage, how long do you think it will stay a place that you’d take your kids? What do you think the lack of sanitation there would do to the water quality and the health of the river? Now we have one third of the parks staff that we had in 2009. Imagine what would happen if those buildings were left unprotected, imagine the risk from vandalism, dumping, graffiti, fire.77

This fear is not hyperbole. Damage totalling US$100,000 was discovered at the remote Providence Mountains State Recreation Area in the Mojave Desert in February 2012, and a US$2 million theft at the California State Mining and Minerals Museum in Mariposa the
following September. Both facilities were struggling with budget-driven reduction in services and security.

**Conclusion**

On 28 June 2012, just before the busy 4th of July holiday weekend, and 2 days before the planned closure deadline, California officials announced that 65 of the 70 state parks marked on the list for shuttering would remain open. The Governor announced new funds at the last minute as well as a number of new operating agreements with external partners. Ruth Coleman, then director of the parks department said, ‘We have re-energized the people who love parks, and they are stepping up and contributing to parks in all sorts of ways’.

One of these contributions will be the direct provision of revenue since the rescue package brought with it fee machines that accept credit cards, and improvements to other charge-able facilities such as restaurants and accommodation. Those parks listed for closure, while often the least suited to income generation, are now at the frontline of an entrepreneurial strategy demanding self-sufficiency and sustainable private revenue.

Olmsted cautioned against this:

> There are some cases where the only practicable course is for the state to take title to the land, to repair and protect the object, give it a suitable setting, and permanently safeguard it, all of which involves a considerable annual expense without much possibility of securing any corresponding revenue in any dignified and legitimate way.

Aligning value with price appears reasonable in such a constrained financial climate. Indeed, the technology of valuation and its extension into the non-economic realm is regularly pitched as progressive and inclusive. But as I have tried to show, value invariably works as a tool to persuade the public of the veracity of judgements that are not necessarily in the public’s interest. As Sullivan so effectively argues in a related context,

> It is very unclear how making nature even more legible as capital will counter rather than intensify the massive vested interests pulling the world towards greater inequality and environmental volatility. Indeed it seems strange if not delusional to expect that affirmation of the current economic paradigm will solve these related crises.

The Little Hoover Commission’s call, for instance, for ‘new objective criteria to be developed through a public process for determining which sites truly hold state-wide significance’ allows, in theory, for the possibility for state park expansion, but of course the expectation is exactly the opposite. Appeals for more accuracy in value’s measurement distract us from appreciating it as relational where every declaration of value requires its diminishment elsewhere. Understanding value as relational requires us to be far more suspicious about claims for its detection through ever more sophisticated mathematical models and map out instead how value furthers the interests of those overseeing it.

In this article, I have outlined a relational axiology that challenges the mystique and authoritative status afforded to value as something that exists outside our attempts to measure it. I have detailed, in two comparative scenarios, exactly how value is immanent to the social relations and political economies operating at the time of its articulation, and how that articulation works to establish a certain kind of public which emerges in the first listing exercise as a group of people whose enjoyment of the outdoors transcends commercial and economic imperatives, and is...
redrafted in the second listing exercise as a population of independent entrepreneurs tired of mismanagement and government waste. I have done this while also trying to acknowledge how other non-human forces collaborate to intervene in our human practices of valuation.84

Much of the emerging social research on value is confined to debates over which particular methodology to employ and how to implement it.85 This article casts doubt on the premise underpinning that endeavour. It argues for much more critical approach to valuation that explores and exposes how value, while professing to work on behalf of us all, gets deployed as instrument of control, encapsulation and containment. Hartman’s axiology, derived as it was from logical mathematical norms, promised a mechanism for ‘detecting value free from the influence of political bias and the power-laden contingencies of context’; the axiology I’ve outlined here has sought to explain how that promise is a sinister fantasy.

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