Andrew Menard, Sight Unseen: How Frémont’s First Expedition Changed the American Landscape.

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How did the idea of America as ‘the nation of futurity’ relate to the need of territorial expansion across the continent in the mid-19th century? How did the notion of Manifest Destiny (first formulated by the journalist John O’Sullivan) come to be firmly connected with the progress across space besides that across time? How did Americans solve the dilemma between the moral imperative (of Puritanical origin) to civilize the continent and the theoretical need (expressed by Thomas Jefferson, among others) for setting definite limits to the Republic? John Charles Frémont’s report of his 1842 expedition from the prairies of eastern Kansas to the Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains in western Wyoming constituted a fundamental document that helped provide part of the answer to those engaging questions. Andrew Menard’s Sight Unseen addresses the factual events that made up the report, as well as the larger cultural and historical coordinates within which it placed itself. Its aim is to show how Frémont’s piece was extremely influential in changing the general image of the American West in the mid-1840s, and in shaping what Menard calls “an aesthetic craving” for expansion which would accompany the flow of settlers throughout the western territories in the following decades.
Part One highlights how Fremont’s report challenged the predominant vision of the region lying between the Mississippi river and the Rocky Mountains, aptly called the “Great Desert.” As emerged from previous surveys by explorers like Zebulon Pike and Stephen H. Long, this region had been seen as constituting a natural limit for expansion, a judgment further reinforced by the descriptions and accounts of writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving and George Catlin in the genres of, respectively, fiction, travelogue and ethnography. What Frémont’s report did was, instead, to provide a “radical version of the picturesque” (15), i.e. a view showing a contrasted, multi-dimensional space which undermined the supposed monotony and uniformity of previous images. As his descriptions of the prairies of Kansas and Nebraska demonstrate, he oscillated between the language of scenery and that of science, finding in the realm of topographic geology a “splendid model for a nation seeking to identify its destiny and progress with the continent” (76). Moreover, in a period which saw the early planning of a national park system, Frémont’s report contributed to build an aesthetical sensitivity for the originality of the American landscape, by juxtaposing and therefore connecting in the same unifying perspective its eastern and western versions.

In Part Two, Menard assesses the relevance of Frémont’s report to the political debate of the period, particularly in relation to the contentious issue of progress across time and space within the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. Here the question of national boundaries becomes paramount: at the time of Frémont’s expedition, the Rocky Mountains were perceived as an absolute limit for the nation’s territorial expansion, even though official voices argued for a more aggressive policy on the western boundaries, as was the case with a champion of westward expansionism like Thomas H. Benton. Through the account of his trip to the “loftiest peak” of the Rockies, Frémont showed that the optimistic and providential image of the country descended directly from the lay of the land, and was thus in accordance with the laws of nature sanctioned by divine will. What had been previously seen as an absolute boundary was in fact a gateway to a new beginning which wove together progress, discovery and a “more perfect knowledge,” resting at the same time on an “ethos of perfectibility” (146) on which both Democrats and Whigs converged. Instead of a geographical limit, the summit of
the Rocky Mountains suggested to Frémont a kind of crossroads, connecting the nation with its own parts and with the entire globe: Frémont’s “geographical gaze” drew a map which rather than a picture functioned as an argument for the nation’s greatness and as its most powerful signifier.

The last section of Part Two evaluates the report’s most immediate effect on the notion of Manifest Destiny as elaborated in O’Sullivan’s two editorials appearing in the Democratic Review, showing how only in the second (following the publication of the report) did the journalist explicitly connect the “untrodden space” of America’s future with the untrodden space of the continent. Menard then moves to assess how the report helped shape the debate over the transcontinental railroad, a large-scale enterprise which marked a shift, in the nation’s self-image, from an outside-in to an inside-out perspective similar to that effected by Frémont. The plan for this great transcontinental highway seemed to provide the earliest verification of the report’s providential design and a confirmation of the idealistic progressivism it envisioned for the nation’s future. All of a sudden, the North American continent ceased to be the remotest outpost of the civilized world, obsessed with the need to trace a limit between culture and nature, civility and barbarism; with Frémont’s report, it became clear that America’s historical destiny resided in its geographical shape, and in this light the United States had come to “complete the circuit between Europe and Asia” (207).

In the final afterword, the author addresses the tricky issue of the report’s authorship, since Frémont’s sole paternity has been questioned by the fact that his wife, Jessie Frémont, collaborated to the writing and editing of the manuscript. The reader is nonetheless liable to be persuaded by Menard’s argument, that the report being “essentially a topographic adventure, an encounter with the landscape” (218), Frémont had to be necessarily the sole designer of its descriptive exactitude and imaginative force.

As a book about the American western landscape and the way it was ideologically elaborated in Frémont’s report, Sight Unseen could not possibly refrain from making constant reference to the American pictorial tradition of the 19th century. In this respect, Menard shows how the report distanced itself from the idea of the sublime and the picturesque as expressed by the Hudson River School,
providing an alternative, much more contrasted vision of the American West which decisively shaped the work of later artists such as Thomas Moran and Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze. Taking into account the specific roots of America’s cultural and literary history, the author also elicits illuminating comparisons, for instance when he suggests that the report somehow situated itself with the tradition of the jeremiad: in some of its most rhetorically powerful passages, it was capable to instill a sense of anxiety that could be fulfilled only through the country’s self-appointment of a providential mission toward the future.

Dissecting what turns out to be one of the foundational documents supporting the ideology of Manifest Destiny as well as the rhetoric of America’s peculiar relationship with its continental landscape, Sight Unseen is an extremely absorbing and well-researched reading that joins the vast scholarly output dedicated to the physical exploration of the American West and its ideological elaboration during the 19th century. It is even more so because of its awareness of what has to be necessarily left out—to name a major example, the Indian presence that Frémont entirely blotted out of the picture, as Frederick Jackson Turner would do in his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” But this is of course another story, which deserves to be addressed separately with as much attention and scholarly accuracy as Menard has achieved in this study.

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