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DESERT SOLECISMS: THE REVITALIZATION OF SELF AND COMMUNITY THROUGH EDWARD ABBEY, THE COLD WAR, AND THE SACRED FIRE CIRCLE

by

Lyra Hilliard

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

American Studies

Approved:		
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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY Logan, Utah

2009

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ABSTRACT

Desert Solecisms: The Revitalization of Individual and Community Through

Edward Abbey, the Cold War, and the Sacred Fire Circle

by

Lyra Hilliard, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2009

Major Professor: Christopher Cokinos

Program: American Studies

This creative thesis is a braided narrative in which I explore the promised lands of

Utah through my travels in the summer of 2008, the Cold War defense industry, and the

early career of writer Edward Abbey. America's domestic and foreign policy shifts in the

first decade of the Cold War contributed to the rise of modern environmentalism and to

the creation of countless new religious movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To

illustrate the cataclysmic upheavals of this era, each chapter of this thesis has been

organized according to anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace's schema of revitalization

movements. In both an historical and personal context, I investigate the tensions between

freedom and preservation, between defense and vulnerability, and, ultimately, between

solitude and community.

(152 pages)

To Bill McKee

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I was repeatedly humbled by the kindness and generosity of several National Park Service employees: Matthew Greuel of Dinosaur NM, the rangers and staff of Arches NP, and particularly to Vicky Webster and her meticulous archival records at Arches. Special thanks to Laurie Collins and Andy Nettle's work for Moab's Confluence, where I also received invaluable insight from Wendell Withrow, Jack Loeffler, and Amy Irvine.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On May 2, 2008 I am driving south on I-15 at 75 miles an hour. I have just entered the highway from Brigham City, leaving UT-89 behind me. I have been sequestered for four long, brutal months in Logan, Utah, a city in which the winter does not end. It snowed two inches yesterday, enough to coat the grass for most of the morning.

My 2001 Jeep Cherokee is packed with two duffel bags, a suitcase, a crate full of books, my Nikon D70 and its multiple lenses, blankets, a pillow, and a variety of clothes and shoes ranging from hiking gear, ritual wear for dancing around an all-night fire, and nicer clothes for parental visits, a funeral, and a wedding. I will transform myself countless times over the next six weeks. I will drive south, to Salt Lake City, then east to Dinosaur National Monument (NM), then south to Moab and its surrounding Red Rock Country. I will continue south through Navajo Nation, over to Page, Arizona, back through Utah, and finally south to Vegas. I will spend five days with friends there, most of them at Mayfire, a festival devoted to the all-night fire circle in a park forty-five minutes north of the city. I will then fly to Massachusetts and return to Rites of Spring, a large, annual pagan gathering in Massachusetts and to what many of us "fire tribe" consider the "original" all-night fire.

I don't know all of this yet, though. I know only where I am going today: Ken Sanders' bookstore in Salt Lake City, the salve to the abysmal selection at the used

bookstore here in Logan. From there I will head over to Uintah County because there is a national park there that I have not yet seen. I only know what I am leaving behind, albeit temporarily. As I slow slightly for the apparently permanent construction zone in the 344 exit range, my head is spinning with questions about myself, Utah, isolation and community, my extended spiritual community—and Edward Abbey.

Born in 1927 to socialist Paul Revere Abbey and Mildred Abbey in the western hills of Pennsylvania, Edward Abbey had first seen the American southwest at seventeen from a railroad boxcar he had hitched a ride on in 1944. Less than four years later, after high school, the army, and a year at the local college in Indiana, Pennsylvania, Abbey transferred to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. There he would prove himself to be enough of a writer to earn a Fulbright in 1951-1952 and write the first of his 22 full-length publications, the latter 21 having never gone out of print. His two most famous works, *Desert Solitaire* (1968) and *The Monkeywrench Gang* (1975) would establish his fame, or infamy, depending on the judge. I first read *Desert Solitaire* two and a half years ago from the lush tropics of Florida and came away from the book with a rather simple view of Abbey: a passionate, obstinate, difficult man whose criticisms of "the rape of the West" seemed, for the most part, over the top.

Then I moved here.

Ken Sanders joins a clan of booksellers who mark Edward Abbey's shelves of books with large, rusty wrenches. When I get to the store, I see that the one in front of me guards several copies of *Down the River, Good News*, and *Hayduke Lives!* Scanning the

¹ James M. Cahalan, Edward Abbey: A Life (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 8–10, 45–6.

five shelves of Abbey titles, I look in vain for a used copy of *Confessions of a Barbarian* or *The Journey Home* or, for that matter, for any of Abbey's books. They're all new. The wrench and the new copies are a tribute not to Abbey the writer, but to Abbey the legend. Abbey is credited with inspiring thousands of Americans to journey West to the desert, the landscape long thought of as wasteland, or Promised Land, or both. To some who viewed the wilderness as the latter, Abbey is the veritable prophet of monkeywrenching, or eco-sabotage: defending the wilderness by damaging the machines that would otherwise destroy the earth. Abbey hardly invented the practice, but *The Monkeywrench Gang* (1975) certainly popularized it. Monkeywrench Gang (1975) certainly popularized it.

I am not one of these latter idealistic—or idol-worshipping, depending on my mood—ecodefenders. Far from it. I am suspicious of fringe groups and the damage that can be levied on the broader movement: in this case, environmentalism. And I'm not sure where I come down on violence against machines, anyway. In theory, I think it's commendable, to an extent. In practice, however, every machine damaged or destroyed is private property—someone *owns* that bulldozer. Someone owns those new SUVs at a car dealership, and someone owns the huge houses in that subdivision outside of Seattle. Burning down houses and destroying new vehicles?⁴ That repulses me.

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² Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 3.

³ Jack Loeffler, *Adventures with Ed: A Portrait of Abbey* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 71–2.

⁴ For a recent example, see Debera Carlton Harrell, Aubrey Cohen, and Paul Shukovsky, "'Street of Dreams' Houses Torched; Eco-terrorists Suspected," *SeattlePI.com*, 4 March 2008, 8 February 2009, available at http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/353498_arson04.html.

But maybe I just write all of the above to avoid writing that, at the end of the day, I am too much of a coward to engage in such activities. I do advocate civil disobedience—it's less violent. Abbey cited Thoreau all the time, but Thoreau's legendary "On Civil Disobedience" (1849) was prompted by his refusal to pay taxes that would help finance the Mexican War. It's not like he sauntered out to the Springfield Armory and destroyed a bevy of weapons.⁵

Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* has been likened to Thoreau's *Walden* because both authors embarked on the timeless purification ritual of isolating themselves in the wilderness through which they embodied the Anglo-American flight out of history and into nature. Abbey invokes Thoreau on the sixth page of *Desert Solitaire* with perhaps one of the book's most famous lines: "I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and Bedrock." It's the 20th century version of Thoreau's marrow-sucking: "I went to the woods to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived . . . to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." Why are American men expected to go West and strike out for fame and fortune? And why must they be alone? Why, furthermore, have I internalized these myths?

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⁵ Thoreau's stint in jail is also attributed to his anti-slavery stance. The tax in question was the poll tax, which, as he states in the essay, he had not paid in six years, supporting the anti-slavery thesis. Without a solid investigation, I am unwilling to jump causes; I readily acknowledge his opposition to both slavery and the Mexican War.

⁶ Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, (1968; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1990), 6.

⁷ Henry David Thoreau, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," *Walden,* in *The Selected Works of Thoreau,* Cambridge Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 304–5.

From John O'Sullivan's 1845 sanctification of "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" to Horace Greeley's 1865 exhortation to "go West, young man," the West has been the proverbial proving ground for anyone with enough mobility and faith. This did not end with the close of the frontier in 1890; if anything, this myth was strengthened by Frederick Jackson Turner's assertion that the American character of "coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness...that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" depended on its interaction with the frontier, real or imagined.

I've always framed my journey from Florida to Utah, undertaken to attend graduate school, in these mythological terms, even though this is the fourth, not first, time I've moved out West. I never last long. This time would be different, I told myself as I expertly played Tetris with the 33 boxes of books in the 5 by 8 U-Haul trailer in Gulfport, Florida. This time I was moving to the real West, not metro Phoenix or Malibu or Vegas. I was going to Utah: The Promised Land.

Up until a year ago, I had little concrete knowledge of Western United States history, coming originally as I do from Massachusetts. To a significant extent, schoolchildren in Massachusetts are only vaguely aware that American history happened

⁸ John O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17 (July 1845): 5–10, accessed August 31, 2008 at David J. Voelker's page:

http://historytools.org/sources/manifestdestiny.pdf.

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, (1893; repr., New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1963), 57.

anywhere west of the Ohio or south of the Potomac. Prior to my move to Utah, I knew that while Thoreau was musing in the woods and Elizabeth Cady Stanton was drafting the Seneca Falls Convention, thousands of pioneers packed up and headed west in search of gold and God, forsaking the rapid cultural changes in the northeast for a virgin land that promised freedom and redemption. Thoreau testified to this at the peak of the westward migration: "So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn."

Largely because of its iconic national parks in the southern part of the state, Utah has come in some measure to represent the American West, even if only visually. Utah, the land of saints and pilgrims, prophets and prospectors, has come to symbolize the land of opportunity, unparalleled beauty, and limitless resources. The American West, and America in general, has promised boundless potential, spiritual and otherwise, and limitless resources for centuries; this seductive idea is why Europeans came here in the first place. One of Abbey's chief contributions to American thought is his fierce opposition to the long-standing American myths of exceptionalism and progress and their offspring: unchecked growth. In this, Abbey writes in the tradition of Rachel Carson and

¹⁰ Thoreau, "Walking," *The Selected Works of Thoreau*, 686. Incidentally, this is the last sentence both of "Walking" and of Abbey's "Down the River with Henry Thoreau," p. 48, in *Down the River*, 1982 (New York: Plume/Dutton Signet-Penguin), 1991.

¹¹ Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1995), 153-4, 191.

Aldo Leopold, to name but two giants that straddled the transition from conservation to environmentalism in the post-WWII era.

Abbey got to the southwest just as the Cold War had begun and the US defense industry claimed its dominance on the American West. Utah's postwar transformation is most acutely realized by the crucible of three overlapping industries: road-building, tourism, and uranium mining, all major industries that were championed in the name of national defense and that Abbey utilizes in *Desert Solitaire* to suggest that "national defense," as commonly understood, is a misnomer. As I leave Ken Sanders' and head east to the Uintas, I want to see if I can create a working understanding of how "national defense" can be touted both by America-as-nation-state and by Abbey as anti-nation-state. Too old to be a rank-and-file member of the countercultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, is Abbey a prophet after all?

If Abbey was a prophet for early environmentalists and later radical environmentalists, Charlie Steen was the crowned prince of the rags-to-riches American success story. Eight years Abbey's senior, Steen came to the Colorado Plateau and Utah just over a year after Abbey relocated to Albuquerque. A geologist by training, Steen was lured to the region in the same manner that thousands of Americans were in the late 1940s and early 1950s: the uranium rush. The successful creation of the atom bomb turned the once-useless byproduct of carnotite mining into gold for the US defense industry, who promptly established sole rights to the radioactive mineral and tempted

prospectors with lucrative subsidies and other incentives.¹² The vast majority of prospectors would fail miserably in their quest to strike it rich on the Colorado Plateau. Charlie Steen, however, would.

I will learn about Steen as I dig through the Colorado Plateau for Abbey's history and legacy while racking up more national parks. Heading east on UT-40 towards

Dinosaur NM, I begin to wonder if my zeal to see all of America's national parks plays into the role of the conqueror, or if I am merely another victim of industrial tourism. I think of my cherished National Park Service passport books, the books that I carefully stamp at every visitor's center and am so protective of that I keep them locked in my safe with my actual U.S. passport, my college diploma, and the credit cards that I try not to use. I like to think that my national park quests have deepened my understanding of America, that I am an avid historian who is perpetually curious about my national history. Yet are the stamps more important than the time I spend at each park?

This collection of essays investigates questions about Utah as the Promised Land, Abbey as man and legend, and my spiritual community. Because of Utah's unique culture and my acute "Gentile" (non-Latter Day Saint, or Mormon) status here, because Abbey consistently engages politics and social organization in his work, and because I have a longstanding obsession with the intersections of religion and politics in American life, my questions about isolation and community are often situated in larger questions about

¹² Michael A. Amundson, *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 50–1.

politics and religion in general. I ask these in the context of the first ten years of the Cold War, the decade that coincides with the beginning of Abbey's adulthood and career and the birth of the modern environmental movement. In the tradition of recent historians who have begun to probe the 1950s to pinpoint the origins of the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, I see that between 1946 and 1956, America became a different country, one preoccupied with foreign threats because of her sudden prosperity and global influence. The rise of the United States as superpower is the rise of the omnipresent nation state, an entity that, in Abbey's opinion, exists not for the benefit and protection of its citizens, but for the benefit of its own power.

America's domestic and foreign policy shifts of the Cold War directly contributed to the rise of environmentalism and to the creation of countless religious and spiritual subcultures in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Fundamentalist Christianity exploded as a major movement at this time; so, too, did alternative, non-Christian spiritual groups.

Among the latter is Neopaganism, the blanket term I will employ in reference to the "invented traditions" of modern, earth-based spirituality. In brief, two main components of Neopaganism are a rejection of patriarchal hierarchy and a reverence for the earth, two concepts that gained wide currency in the late 60s and early 70s. I am interested to see how Abbey's lifelong focus on "a society based on mutual aid and consent" can apply to my own spiritual community which is loosely related to Neopaganism: the "fire tribe" which has really only come into its own over the last fifteen years or so. While it's a

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¹³ Sabina Magliocco, "Ritual is My Chosen Art Form: The Creation of Ritual as Folk Art Among Contemporary Pagans," in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, 6th ed., ed. Arthur C. Lehmann, James Myers, Pamela A. Moro (Boston: McGraw–Hill, 2005), 128.

stretch to combine Abbey's anarchism with my fire tribe, both impulses are a reaction to the limitations of Cold War culture.

Because I focus on the countercultural components of both environmentalism and Neopaganism, I have structured these essays according to anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace's schema of revitalization movements. Wallace defines revitalization movements as "deliberate and organized attempts by some members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture by rapid acceptance of a pattern of multiple innovations." 14 This is what millions of Americans were doing by the late 1960s, with varying degrees of success. Most of the social reform movements focused on just that reform. In other words, most Americans wanted to change the existing social organization, not dismantle it and replace it entirely, as is the objective of revolutions. My application of Wallace's revitalization movements to American society in the late 1960s speaks to the liminal space between reform and revolution. In so doing, I imply that political reform movements are often not quick enough or total enough to satisfy all of its members. At the same time, revolutions are commonly viewed as too extreme and too dogmatic, becoming, to detractors, a "cult," a negative religious connotation. I suggest that revitalization movements provide a third option between reform and revolution, one that dares to admit that it is both political and religious—or, more palatably, spiritual.

¹⁴ Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, 6th ed., ed. Arthur C. Lehmann, James Myers, Pamela A. Moro (Boston: McGraw–Hill, 2005), 361.

As this is a creative thesis, I weave myself in and out of the narrative as I flee northern Utah and chase Abbey, community, and ultimately myself through my travels in the summer of 2008. In chapter 2 I establish Wallace's "Steady State," or "existing culture" to illustrate what would soon be challenged by Abbey and many others in the late 1960s. I focus on the early Cold War years in Utah and the birth of the modern environmental movement at Dinosaur National Monument between 1946 and 1955. In chapter 3 I illustrate Wallace's second phase of a revitalization movement, the "Period of Increased Individual Stress." By this point in the narrative I have arrived in Cisco, Utah and focus on Steen and Abbey between 1952 and 1956. "Increased individual stress" provides me an opportunity to be forthcoming about my experiences in Utah and my dissatisfactions not just with the state, but with myself. It is probably the most personal chapter of the four, not counting the conclusion.

Chapter 4 is entirely devoted to what I consider the crucial turning point of my historical research: the year 1956. As the "Period of Cultural Distortion," 1956 marks Abbey's first year at Arches, the birth of his first child, the publication of his second novel, and a barrage of legislation, from the National Highway Act to the changing of the national motto, that dramatically altered the United States. 1956 was, of course, an election year—a reelection year, to be exact, so this political activity is not surprising. My narrative focuses on my time in Arches, straddled over three visits, as I carefully examine the park and Abbey's well-known polemic on industrial tourism.

Chapter 5 takes a departure from the previous ones in a few ways. While the present-day narrative of the first four chapters happens over the course of just over a

week with my drive from Logan to Moab, "Revitalization" continues my drive from Logan to Moab but also takes me across the country to Massachusetts and New York and back to Utah, travels which bring us all the way to mid-August 2008. Likewise, I quickly bring Abbey, Steen, and the United States to 1968, the year *Desert Solitaire* was published, landing the reader into what I consider the worst year in 20th century American history—the ideal socio-cultural environment for a revitalization movement.

After the "period of revitalization," Wallace writes, comes the period of "cultural transformation." In my conclusion, I ask to what extent the socio-cultural revolutions of the late 1960s and early 1970s transformed the perceived limitations of Cold War culture. In so doing, I probe the limitations of both politics and religion as agents of change and influence. I return to the lure of the American West, particularly in regards to the long-standing myth of American exceptionalism and its relationship to environmentalism. I wonder how influential Abbey has been as a prophet of modern environmentalism and if his work as a writer can be separated from his infamy as a man. I also consider my own transformation as I wrap up my "season in the wilderness" in rural Utah and prepare for my return to the East Coast.

The title of this collection, "Desert Solecisms," is a direct tribute to Abbey, for this was his own title for *Desert Solitaire* until his publishers refused it. I had to look the word up and found it defined as "a mistake, impropriety, or incongruity," or "a breach of good manners." I use "solecisms" in each chapter, applying them to the major characters

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¹⁵ Wallace, 364.

I discuss. In so doing, I engage in one of my favorite pursuits: exposing the limits of dualistic thinking while complicating the possibility of neat, comfortable answers. I am not the philosopher that Abbey was, though I like to think that my pursuit of interesting questions that don't always yield tidy answers is, if not a strength, not a weakness, either.

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 York: McGraw–Hill, 2005.

CHAPTER II

THE STEADY STATE

The Promised Land and What it Means:

Logan to Cisco, 1946–1952

"I should rather begin with how it feels to be out on the road again, dry-camping in the desert, hitting the road after five years of rationing and restrictions, doing what a good third of America is doing this summer of 1946, if the polls and the prophecies mean anything. For many people—and I sympathize with them—one of the least bearable wartime deprivations was the loss of their mobility. We are a wheeled people; it seems to me sometimes that I must have been born with a steering wheel in my hands, and I realize now that to lose the use of a car is practically equivalent to losing the use of my legs." ¹⁶

In June of 1945, a year before writer Wallace Stegner rediscovered America, eighteen-year-old Edward Abbey was drafted into the army. ¹⁷ Because Germany had surrendered just a month earlier, Abbey was convinced that he would be sent to the Pacific to "be part of a massive invasion on the main island of Japan." ¹⁸ He would instead sail for Italy, part of a legion of soldiers sent to rebuild Europe on American terms, for by the time Abbey was through with basic training, President Harry Truman authorized the deployment of two atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, effectively ending World War II. ¹⁹ That the atomic bomb had been successfully tested

¹⁶ Wallace Stegner, "Rediscovery of America: 1946," in *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West* (1969; repr., New York: Penguin, 1997), 45.

¹⁷ James M. Cahalan, *Edward Abbey: A Life* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 33.

¹⁸ Jack Loeffler, *Adventures with Ed: A Portrait of Abbey* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002). 21.

¹⁹ Kenneth J. Hagan and Ian J. Bickerton, *Unintended Consequences: The United States at War* (London: Reakiton Books, 2007), 128–129.

only three weeks prior to its debut as a wartime weapon of mass destruction seems unbelievable, in hindsight. Yet as of July 16, 1945, America and the world suddenly lived in the atomic age, when time and space were hastened, quickened, and altered in ways previously assumed impossible.

The strength of America's economy helped to rebuild Europe through military might, capitalist prowess, and cultural seduction, which in turn drove a seeming cycle of perpetual abundance here at home. ²⁰ Compared to fifteen years of economic depression and war rationing, the years immediately following World War II must have seemed like paradise, even if twinned with the threat of nuclear annihilation. The economic transformation was felt nationwide, yet was particularly acute in Utah. New industries poured into the state in the 1940s and 1950s, transforming Utah's previously agricultural and mining-dependent economy to an economy dependent on the defense industry. ²¹

Utah was a good place to invest in for several reasons, among them its educated workforce which had "established a reputation as being disciplined, loyal, energetic, and productive."²² Considering Utah's motto, "The Beehive State," this is not surprising. Utahns, mostly Mormon, traditionally privilege industry and they often work well in hierarchical institutions, a boon for employers connected to the military. By 1962, "Utah

²⁰ Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic–Perseus, 1997), 205.

²¹ Leonard J. Arrington and George Jensen, *The Defense Industry of Utah*. Department of Economics, Utah State University, Logan, UT, February, 1965, 31. Utah State University Special Collections: 355.26 Ar69. ²² Arrington and Jensen, 27.

was unsurpassed in the degree of civilian employment dependence upon defense related activity," according to one study.²³

In 1965, Leonard J. Arrington could confidently write that "transportation facilities" were one of Utah's strong points that served as an attraction to outside industries.²⁴ Had Arrington written two decades earlier, he may have had to skip this section of his report; Utah's infrastructure had not been improved since well before the war.²⁵ As of 1942, less than three percent of Utah's 75,922 miles of roads were surfaced beyond gravel or stone.²⁶ The lack of good roads in Utah was acutely felt in rural areas, particularly in the southeast corner of the state, in Grand and San Juan Counties.

Combined, these two counties comprise about 11,500 square miles, an area slightly larger than my home state of Massachusetts. Sandwiched between the Green River and the Colorado state line, San Juan County offered exactly eight miles of paved road in 1945.²⁷ Despite the poor roads, the region was already well-known for its scenic splendor. As of 1946, four national monuments had been designated in the region, though locals could only dream of the tourist boom that other national monuments and parks bestowed on surrounding communities. "Few tourists had ventured...into the heart of the

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²³ George Jensen, "The Regional Economic Impact of Defense Spending and the Utah Case," PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, 1968, 68–9. Utah State University Special Collections: 330.9792 J453r. See also James L. Clayton, "The Impact of the Cold War on the Economies of California and Utah, 1946–1965," *The Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Nov., 1967), pp. 449–473.

²⁴ Arrington and Jensen, 27.

²⁵ Governor Maw (1945) quoted in Ezra C. Knowlton, *History of Highway Development in Utah* (no publisher information besides State of Utah, n.d.; best estimate, 1958; available at Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan UT: SciTech HE 356.U8 K55), 431.

²⁶ National Highway Users Conference, *Highway Facts of Utah: A Condensed Summary of State Statistics, with Some Comparable National Totals* (Washington, D.C.: National Highway Users Conference: 1945), 11.

²⁷ State of Utah, "General Highway Map," Utah State Road Commission, 1945, Special Collections, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, UT, Map 3–16.

canyon country. Then again, why would they, when the road map was mostly blank?" asks historian Jared Farmer.²⁸ Within ten years, however, roads were hastily built to improve access not necessarily for tourists, but for a key natural resource suddenly considered vital for national defense.

When Wallace Stegner was researching John Wesley Powell's extraordinary 1869 journey down the Green and Colorado Rivers, he would have taken US 40 from Salt Lake to Vernal, the road that hugs the southern edge of the Uinta mountains in the northeast corner of Utah, for as of 1945, there was only one road from Salt Lake City to Vernal. Sixty-two years later, as I stare at my 2008 Rand McNally Road Atlas, I see that 40 is still essentially the only road between Salt Lake and Vernal. As Stegner chased John Wesley Powell down the canyons of Dinosaur National Monument, he couldn't have realized that this remote, fairly unknown region of Utah would be making national headlines within a few years.

Stegner's *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* (1948) is still considered one of the best biographies of Civil War hero, explorer, geographer, and ethnographer John Wesley Powell. Powell's expeditions would bring him fame; more importantly, his careful studies of the West would convince him that the region could not be settled without

²⁸ Jared Farmer, *Glen Canyon Dammed: Inventing Lake Powell and the Canyon Country* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999), 21.

²⁹ State of Utah, "General Highway Map," Utah State Road Commission, 1945, Special Collections, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, UT, Map 3–16.

¹⁵ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (1986; repr., New York: Penguin, 1993), 45–6.

pasturelands that paid heed to the region's watersheds in a way that the arbitrary state lines did not, even going so far as to recommend that states themselves be redrawn according to major watersheds.³¹ In effect, Powell was "demanding that the West should submit to a rational and scientific revision of its central myth, and indeed that the nation at large should yield one of the principal underpinnings of its faith in progress, in the mission of America, in manifest destiny."³²

Powell's recommendations flew in the face of God and Nation. The scientific advances of the latter third of the 19th century veritably convinced Americans that they could conquer nature; indeed, they were supposed to, according to religious convictions, social Darwinism, or both.³³ The West would simply have to be tamed to accommodate Americans—not the other way around. This would go largely unquestioned until a few years after Stegner published his biography on Powell. Ironically, the very same rivers that forced Powell to rethink natural resource management in the 1870s—the Green and the Colorado—would finally force many Americans to do the same two generations later, all because of a couple of proposed dams.

While Stegner was chasing Powell, Abbey spent 1946 in Naples as a military police officer, keeping the peace in the former Axis country that was now, according to

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³¹ Philip L. Fradkin, *A River No More: The Colorado River and the West* (1968; repr., Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984), 24; Reisner, 47.

³² Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 200.

³³ Reisner, 48.

leaders like Winston Churchill, ominously threatened by the Soviet Union's "iron curtain." He returned to Home, Pennsylvania, in February 1947, just as Great Britain begged the United States for economic aid for Greece and Turkey. Taking advantage of the GI bill, Abbey enrolled in the Indiana State Teacher's College, where he could commute from his neighboring town of Home. He had barely traded in his army uniform for his offbeat undergraduate garb when he posted a letter against the draft, encouraging men to either burn their draft cards or to send their cards "with an explanatory letter to the President. He'll greatly appreciate it, I'm sure." That Abbey's free tuition was possible because of his military service did not seem to matter to him, but his letter did matter to the FBI, which promptly began a file on Abbey and would follow him for the next thirty years. The service of the service of the promptly began a file on Abbey and would follow him for the next thirty years.

Greece and Turkey were a problem. For Truman to ask Congress, and, by extension, the American people, to commit even more money and resources to Europe would not be the easiest sell. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, however, unwaveringly believed that if Greece and Turkey were abandoned by Great Britain and America didn't act, then the Soviet Union would sweep into the two countries and would easily push into Italy.³⁷ Communism was the new Nazism. Acheson told this to a select group of

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³⁴ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 61.

³⁵ Cahalan, 35.

³⁶ James M. Bishop Jr., *Epitaph for a Desert Anarchist: The Life and Legacy of Edward Abbey* (New York: Touchstone–Simon and Schuster, 1994), 75.

³⁷ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (1969; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 219.

Senators, including Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg, who turned to Truman and said, "Mr. President, if you say as much to Congress and the American people you will have our support."³⁸ This is how Acheson remembers it, anyway. Legend has it that what Vandenberg actually told Truman was that he needed "to scare hell out of the American people."³⁹ This is exactly what he did.

Truman's Doctrine essentially stated that the United States had every right to intervene in foreign affairs that threatened, or might threaten, the security of the United States. "Given a choice between freedom and totalitarianism, 'it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities," as historian William F. Chafe writes, quoting Truman. This policy of hegemony, wrapped in altruism and delivered with fear, would set the tone for American foreign policy for the remainder of the twentieth century. Unlike most Americans at the time, Abbey viewed this policy as an excuse for the United States to increase its power and control over its own citizens, becoming, in his own words, a "garrison state."

Though Westerners may have accepted as easily as most Americans their government's demands for increased national defense, the West's resistance to government control was—and is—downright legendary. This is ironic when coupled with the fact that the West has been settled chiefly through massive federal funding to

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³⁸ Acheson, 219.

³⁹ Chafe, 65

⁴⁰ Truman quoted in Chafe, 65.

⁴¹ Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian*, ed. David Petersen. (1994; repr., Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 2003), 7–8.

subsidize its infrastructure. Faith in water reclamation was high in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly when framed in patriotic terms. "In broadening the base of the country's food supply, in strengthening and supporting its industry, in enlarging and building up the Nation's transportation system, reclamation has been a fundamental agency of public welfare," reads a confident 1935 report to the Secretary of the Interior. ⁴² In order for Utah to accommodate its postwar industries, Utah would need to harness more power.

Fortunately for Utah, the Bureau of Reclamation had been eyeing Split Mountain and Echo Park as potential dam sites for the Green River since 1939.⁴³ That the sites were within Dinosaur National Monument, and therefore under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service (NPS), didn't seem to faze them, nor did the NPS put up much resistance for several years.⁴⁴ In 1947, the Bureau of Reclamation, joined by local and state officials, initiated a flurry of publicity for the proposed dam at Echo Park and its role in the larger Colorado River Storage Project, which included another large storage dam proposed for Glen Canyon, just south of the Utah–Arizona border.⁴⁵ In one pamphlet entitled, *The Colorado River: "A Natural Menace Becomes a National Resource*," the Bureau brazenly states:

"Tomorrow the Colorado River will be utilized to the very last drop. Its water will convert thousands of additional acres of sagebrush desert to

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⁴² John W. Haw and F.E. Schmitt, "Report on Federal Reclamation to the Secretary of the Interior" (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, 1935), 3.

⁴³ Jon M. Cosco, *Echo Park: Struggle for Preservation* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Printing, 1995), 9. ⁴⁴ Cosco. 29.

⁴⁵ Mark W. T. Harvey, "Battle for Wilderness: Echo Park Dam and the Birth of the Modern Wilderness Movement," in *A Sense of the American West: An Anthology of Environmental History*, ed. James E. Sherow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 183.

flourishing farms and beautiful homes for servicemen, industrial workers, and native farmers who seek to build permanently in the West. Its terrifying energy will be harnessed completely to do an even bigger job in building bulwarks for peace. Here is a job so great in its possibilities that only a nation of free people have the vision to know that it can be done and it must be done."

If "bulwark for peace" was too abstract, then dam enthusiasts could latch onto another, more tangible—but no less emotionally charged—benefit that was rapidly gaining currency: increased recreational access. The boost in tourism would increase revenue, which Uintah County needed as desperately as did Grand and San Juan counties, 300 miles to the south.⁴⁷

To dam proponents, increased recreational access meant that all Americans, regardless of health, wealth, or taste for the strenuous life, could enjoy "the wilderness." The problem with the National Park Service was that it locked up tens of thousands of acres of land from the vast majority of Americans. It was time to reclaim these areas, to halt the dangerous trend of creating pleasure grounds only to be used by the wealthy elite. To residents of Vernal, seat of Uintah County and closest town to Dinosaur, the dam and its new roads would "open up to the public the glory of Lodore Canyon, the majestic Yampa Gorge, to thousands of American citizens who otherwise will never see them

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⁴⁶ Bureau of Reclamation quoted in Farmer, 134.

⁴⁷ Harvey, 183.

⁴⁸ Play on Teddy Roosevelt, "A Strenuous Life" (1899).

⁴⁹ Joseph L. Sax, *Mountains Without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 83.

because they are not accessible."⁵⁰ Ironically, the fact that the proposed dam site sat within Dinosaur National Monument would become its eventual undoing.

As I drive towards Dinosaur National Monument in May 2008, I have a hard time imagining that many people would mark this area as a prime destination spot for a vacation. Past the Strawberry Reservoir, Highway 40 dips and curves along with the thrust of its base, the Uinta mountains. A steady wind skips along the water, creating waves that roll towards me. In the reservoir, I see what appear to me to be tips of hills or cliffs that were drowned when the dam stopped the river almost a century ago. Like the drumlins that pepper Clew Bay off of Achill Island in my grandmother's Ireland, these unlikely earthen tufts make me wonder what this stretch of landscape looked like forty years ago. Truth be told, I can't imagine putting up much of a fight to save the surrounding area on aesthetic grounds. How do I describe the non-descript? I'm walled on the left by bland green and tan foothills. To the south, my right, the land opens up enough to attempt some grazing. The terrain isn't necessarily ugly; it's just that I can't see any reason to stop. As I continue towards Vernal, passing through exactly four small towns in 100 miles, I notice my own discomfort. Each truck that I pass or group of uniformed men that I spot in a gas station reminds me that I am severely out of place. I am forever out of place, it seems, in this state. The conservative sentiment is palpable.

⁵⁰ Memorandum to The Honorable Oscar L. Chapman, Secretary of the Interior, from The Utah Colorado River Development Committee of Twenty-One Counties, 24 March 1950, in Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, MSS COLL 48, Box 14, Folder 6.

By the end of 1947, the House Committee on Un-American Activities had joined forces with the FBI and began, as Chafe writes, "to 'ferret out' communist sympathizers in the federal government [and] expose communist influence in the American labor movement."51 As winter crept in over Pennsylvania's Allegheny valley, the sunny southwest with its wide open spaces and its iconic protection of the free individual must have looked increasingly vital to Abbey. Abbey transferred to the University of New Mexico in January 1948, the point at which, to him, life would begin "at last." 52 By the end of the year, Henry Wallace, the last Progressive candidate of the 20th century with a real chance at being elected President, was roundly defeated by another encroaching Red Scare. Abbey campaigned for Wallace in Albuquerque, Florida, and Pennsylvania, the last presidential candidate whom he would ardently support. 53 Within sixteen months. America would fall under the maniacal reign of Senator Joe McCarthy. Rabid, almost blind patriotism was on the rise. Individual liberty was at risk, and, with it, individual thought.

Truman had faced a major re-election challenge in 1948 that inspired him to levy vituperative, pro-Communist attacks on Wallace while heavily courting voters in the West. 54 His advisor, Clark Gifford, argued that to win the West, the President must "concentrate[e] upon the West and its problems, including reclamation, floods, and

⁵¹ Chafe, 96.⁵² Abbey, *Confessions*, 125.

⁵³ Cahalan, 36–9.

⁵⁴ Chafe, 99.

agriculture. It is the Number One priority for the 1948 campaign."⁵⁵ In this way, residents of Uintah County could be confident that the dam had presidential support. Yet in 1949, after the Bureau of Reclamation's two-year publicity blitz had worked Vernal and the greater area into a madcap frenzy, the Park Service finally began to resist, primarily through the aid of several powerful private conservation groups.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, over a thousand miles away in Texas, twenty-eight year old Charlie Steen picked up the December, 1949 *Engineering and Mining Journal* and read its headline: "Can Uranium Mining Pay?" The accompanying article promised that it could: men with no background in geology were striking it rich on the Colorado Plateau.

Imagine what "experienced mining men" could find, the magazine wondered. 57

Steen did have experience. He earned his B.A. in geology from the Texas School of Mines and Metallurgy in El Paso, Texas, worked briefly in Bolivia and Peru as a geologist searching for tin and oil, and had worked for Standard Oil in Indiana, both in the field and behind a desk. It was the paperwork that would be his undoing; he hated it, rebelled, and was fired. He relocated to his native Texas with his young family and was making ends meet as a carpenter when he read that article. ⁵⁸ He knew he had to go.

By the spring of 1950, Steen was exploring southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah without so much as a Geiger counter, armed only with canned peaches,

⁵⁵ Elmo R. Richardson, *Dams, Parks, and Politics; Resource Development and Preservation in the Truman-Eisenhower Era* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky), 27.

⁵⁶ Harvey, 181.

⁵⁷ Raye C. Ringholz, *Uranium Frenzy: Boom and Bust on the Colorado Plateau* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 22.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 21–5.

detailed maps, and unbridled optimism.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Abbey was balancing "writing good term papers" at the University of New Mexico with regular explorations of the Colorado Plateau.⁶⁰ "Almost every weekend or whenever there was enough money for gas we took off, all over New Mexico, over into Arizona, up into Colorado, and eventually, inevitably, back toward the Four Corners and beyond—toward whatever lay back of that beyond," Abbey writes in "How it Was" (1971).⁶¹ Steen, driving to the region from Houston, would have driven through New Mexico; he likely would have taken Highway 290 across Texas to Fort Stockton, just south of Pecos, where he would have turned north on 285, up through New Mexico until reaching Route 66 just east of Albuquerque.

Steen would have driven west on 66 to Gallup, where he would have turned north on 666. Highway 666, only recently renamed 491, cuts through the large, relatively unmarked area between Canyon de Chelly and Chaco Canyon National Monuments, both destinations for Abbey and his friends. Once in Shiprock, just before the Colorado state line, one can go right to Aztec National Monument or continue north to Cortez and nearby Mesa Verde National Park. Just north of Cortez, the road veers northwest, leaving a large swath of roadless area—roadless, at least, in 1950. 62 Both Steen and Abbey had to get off the pavement to find their fortune.

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⁵⁹ Ibid., 29–30.

⁶⁰ Edward Abbey, 1983 interview by Jack Loeffler, *Ed Abbey: A Self Portrait*, produced by Loeffler on compact disc, 2008, Track 1.

⁶¹ Abbey, "How it Was," in *Beyond the Wall: Essays from the Outside* (1971; repr. New York: Henry Holt, 1984), 55.

⁶² Texaco 49-State Road Atlas, Rand McNally, 1959.

I like to imagine both of them pulling into Cortez for a meal, Abbey in his "old Chevy" sliding up alongside Steen's "rattletrap jeep" and trailer in the parking lot of a roadside diner. 63 Abbey and perhaps Alan Odendahl would have marched into the diner. proud of their freedom, their part-outback, part-pre-Beatnik appearance, proud of their obvious outsider status. 64 They would have picked a booth by the window so that they'd have more room to spread out their maps. Passing a lone, wiry, bespeckled man eight years his senior at the counter, Abbey wouldn't have given Charlie Steen a second glance, except perhaps to note that the diminutive fellow also looked out of place at this provincial eatery. As for Steen, he wouldn't have turned around even if he had glimpsed the passing pair him the mirror behind the counter—artists, students, pinkies, Steen would have marked them, kids who haven't yet learned that there are more exciting things to do than shock the locals.

The roads that Abbey and Steen navigated were predictably terrible, as Abbey would recount twenty-two years later: "the road was rough, full of ruts and rocks and potholes, and we had to stop a few times, get out the shovel and do a little roadwork."65 Reading this line, I realize how far removed I am from such adventures. I don't have a clear idea of what he means. Filling in potholes? Did he always travel with a shovel for such purposes, as I have learned to travel with an ice-scraper here in Utah? An icescraper and my maps, of course, like Steen, like Abbey. "We were desert mystics, my

⁶³ Abbey, "How it Was," 53; Ringholz, 29.

⁶⁴ Abbey "How it Was," 53–5, play on "proud of my freedom and hobohood" from "Hallelujah on the Bum" (1970), reprinted in The Journey Home: Some Words in Defense of the American West (1977; repr. New York: Penguin-Plume, 1991, 17.

⁶⁵ Abbey, "How it Was," 57.

few friends and I, the kind who read maps as others read their holy books," Abbey remembers in "How it Was." 66

While Abbey and Steen were gallivanting in the Four Corners area, the Echo Park proposal had erupted into a full-blown controversy. In April of 1950, newly appointed Secretary of the Interior Oscar Chapman called a hearing on the issue in Washington, D.C. Before the proposal could be brought to Congress for legislative authorization, the Secretary of the Interior had to approve it. Despite the fact that Chapman was a relative local from neighboring Colorado, he seemed truly undecided on the matter.⁶⁷

The testimonies of everyone from the Mayor of Vernal to retired Army Corps of Engineers General Ulysses S. Grant III drove the hearings for fifteen hours. Aesthetics were pitted against economics, wilderness against recreation, the intangible benefits of nature against the interests of national defense. According to Vernal Mayor B. H. Stringham, Echo Park was "all the more necessary because of its strategic location and its nearness to huge untouched sources of minerals such as uranium [and] oil shale."

As Secretary of the Interior, Oscar Chapman was serving at the pleasure of reclamation proponent Truman; furthermore, according to historian Mark W. T. Harvey, "Chapman was under pressure from the Atomic Energy Commission to help supply electrical power reserves in Utah and the Mountain West, reserves needed to aid in the

⁶⁷ Cosco, 31–5.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁸ Cosco, 41.

⁶⁹ Memorandum to The Honorable Oscar L. Chapman, Secretary of the Interior, from The Utah Colorado River Development Committee of Twenty-One Counties, 24 March 1950, in Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, MSS COLL 48, Box 14, Folder 6.

Park Dam. ⁷¹ Chapman wrote his decision on Tuesday, June 27th, 1950 the same day that Truman met with Congressional leaders to inform them that North Korea had crossed the 38th parallel. ⁷² Within seventy-two hours, the United States was once again at war. ⁷³

A month later, on July 22, 1950, Bernard de Voto published "Shall We Let Them Ruin Our National Parks" in the *Saturday Evening Post*, bringing "the controversy into living rooms across the country." In his chapter, "Battle for Wilderness," Mark W.T. Harvey quotes DeVoto: "Should the dam be constructed, he warned, 'Echo Park and its magnificent rock formations would be submerged. Dinosaur National Monument as a scenic spectacle would cease to exist." While De Voto had desperately tried to get this article published before Chapman made his decision, his article still had an enormous effect; it remained up to Congress to authorize the funds to build the dam. In this way, the battle for Echo Park had only just begun.

I had begun to learn about the controversy over Echo Park because of its relationship to the Glen Canyon Dam and, by default, Abbey. I wanted to see Echo Park firsthand, to provide myself with a legitimate reason, perhaps, to explore a national

⁷⁰ Harvey, 186.

⁷¹ Oscar Chapman, "Decision by Oscar Chapman, Secretary of the Interior, Regarding the Dinosaur National Monument Controversy, 27 June 1950, in Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, MSS COLL 48, Box 14, Folder 6.

⁷² Acheson, 409, Chafe, 243.

⁷³ Acheson, 413.

⁷⁴ Harvey, 186.

⁷⁵ DeVoto quoted in Harvey, 186–7.

⁷⁶ Cosco, 44, 46.

monument that otherwise didn't interest me very much. A place-visit to the veritable birthplace of modern environmentalism was appealing—even if I didn't do very much beyond walking to the edge and looking in. ⁷⁷ I turn off of 40 in Jensen onto a long road into Dinosaur National Monument, passing the obligatory roadside stand promising real dinosaur fossils and cold water. Within a few minutes, I learn that I can't see Echo Park at all, for the road is closed—due to snow. On May third. I stare at the ranger unblinkingly, forcing myself not to roll my eyes at the latest proof that I am out of my element in this desolate state.

My thwarted exploration affords me time to talk to the ranger, a tall, amiable man about my age. Bundled in a wool cap and gloves in the large, outdoor shelter, he appears to me to be a bit more bookish than outdoorsy, like me. Clarifying my intentions, I tell him that I have no interest in dinosaurs, only controversies. We end up talking at length about the resurgence of gas and oil exploration in the Uintah Basin that has been increasing since about 2003 while he helps me plan my route to Moab. There is not a direct route between Vernal and Moab, though there have been hopes for one for decades.⁷⁸ He points to the Bureau of Land Management's map of Utah.

"If you drive down this road (UT-45), all you will see are exploration trucks."

I wouldn't drive down that road, however, for it only goes to a town called

Bonanza; then, as in so many booms, it stops. Later, the ranger would write in an e-mail:

National Park Archives, Moab, Utah, 26 June, 2008. From ARCH 1860, Folder 92.

⁷⁷ Play on Stegner's "Coda" ("The Wilderness Letter") (1960), reprinted in Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West* (1969; repr. New York: Penguin, 1997), 145–53.

⁷⁸ "Book Cliff Road Boosted at Vernal." *Moab Times Independent*, 3 February 1941. Accessed at Arches

"The road from Vernal to Bonanza is one of the most important arteries in the region for the oil and gas folks. That goes to East Tavaputs Plateau and the Book Cliffs region, one of, if not the most productive part[s] of the region. The area just south of Bonanza along the White River is one of the areas that the BLM wants to open for oil shale/tar sands. . . . there is still quite a bit of disagreement over whether or not the technology is available for those items. It is, though, a rather destructive method, not unlike openpit mineral mining where much surface disturbance occurs."

Bonanza seems an unlikely town on the map in my hands. Yet then, its name suggests that it was never meant to be a town in the American sense of the word; rather, this looks like a semi-permanent camp, a centralized meeting place, the still eye in the center of the hurricane of exploration and discovery, of claim-staking and exploitation. The scaffolds of security are precariously built on land that must be in constant vibration, ever-shifting, its topography under perpetual surveillance and reconfiguring. The metaphor is overused, but too apt to ignore: the belly of the land is ripped open and heavy machinery sent in to find every single one of the millions of fertile spots, pockets of potential that promise cash value for a few today while ensuring absolute paucity for generations to come.

Perhaps I am too cynical. Industry is not just about corporate executives; it's about average, working people. In that same e-mail, the ranger pointed out that Chevron, Shell, Halliburton, and their subsidiaries are a boon for the area. When I visited, the

⁷⁹ Matthew Greuel, email correspondence, 17 July 2008.

Quarry Visitor Center was closed, dropping visitation to Dinosaur "by about one-third. . . but the oil boom is such that those affected by fewer tourists—motels, restaurants, etc.—are having that slack picked up and then some by the oil field folks. . . .many are convinced that *this* boom is here to stay. . . *this* time it's permanent. They follow in the footsteps of all the people who said that [about the] last boom, and the one before that, and the one before that."⁸⁰

Something has to fuel the local economy. Is mineral extraction unequivocally immoral? How does one make a judgment about a region and the industries that support it, and how does one declare that for the good of the collective, it is right to halt an industry which would undoubtedly have dire effects on a remote area region hard-pressed for viable alternatives? As I get back in my car and drive away from Dinosaur, I am once again gripped by the thought of a few determined groups of conservationists in the early 1950s. How did they take one project in the grand scheme of the Colorado River Storage Project and organize a fierce campaign to shut it down? And how did they win?

The publicity campaign of the Bureau of Reclamation met its match in the articles published by Bernard de Voto and Wallace Stegner in the early to mid-1950s. Both writers were somewhat native to Utah, were highly esteemed historians, and would increasingly be considered conservationists. ⁸¹ Ultimately, it would be the marketing skills of the Sierra Club's new executive director, David Brower, that would turn the tide on Echo Park. Brower was deeply influenced by Sierra Club founder John Muir and the

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ T. A. Zachary, "Nonexperts and Narrative in Public Debate: A Case Study of Wallace Stegner's Mass Media Use to Promote Environmental Causes" (Master's thesis, Utah State University, 2002), 73–4, 90.

latter's unequivocal opposition to the Hetch Hetchy Dam to be built in Yosemite in 1913. 82 Brower was equally inspired by landscape photographer Ansel Adams and, according to Harvey, "understood the enormous power of still pictures and films in sparking public awareness of places worthy of being preserved."83

Brower would enlist Stegner to write the text for *This is Dinosaur*, a book filled with gorgeous photographs and laudatory writing "to let the people know what's there, [and] whether it is to be a milestone or a headstone—this question is for the people and Congress to decide," as Brower writes in his forward. 84 The publisher, Alfred P. Knopf, agreed to give every member of Congress a complimentary copy upon publication, in April. 1955.85

Not twenty minutes south of Rangely, Colorado, oil rigs appear as do small white signs marking driveways with Chevron USA, Inc. written in small black paint. Cresting one particular hill, I gaze below at a perfectly pastoral, modest town nestled in the valley below, surrounded by bucolic mountaintops in the distance and large oil rigs in the foreground. I am heading south, directly into the northeast corner of the Colorado Plateau, from the memory of a thwarted dam to the reality of a major dam that became larger, in many ways, than its original plans had called for. In between the two lies an area roughly 130,000 square miles that became well-known just as the Echo Park

85 Harvey 190

⁸² Harvey, 188–9.
83 Ibid., 189.
84 David Brower quoted in Harvey, 189.

controversy had gone national.⁸⁶ To many, this sparsely populated, oddly beautiful swath of the country was not interesting because of what could be seen above ground, or even because of the Colorado and Green Rivers that run through it. For thousands of Americans in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Colorado Plateau derived its value from what could be extracted from deep beneath the ground.

While the 21st century War on Terror has helped refuel the gas and oil expeditions in the Uinta Basin, the Cold War boosted the Colorado Plateau in ways unimaginable prior to 1945. It is not hyperbole to repeat that the detonation of the first atomic bomb at Trinity on July 16, 1945 changed the world forever.⁸⁷ The psychological effects of the nuclear age gain specificity in the US Southwest, and not only in Los Alamos, home of nuclear weapons development.⁸⁸ The realizations that atoms could be split, that uranium could be a source of energy, and that a nuclear bomb could be made from uranium transformed what had long been a useless by-product into one of the most coveted materials in the world.⁸⁹

If the Manhattan Project transformed uranium from waste to gold, so to speak, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), established in late 1946, transformed the Colorado Plateau more so than any other single entity. 90 According to historian Michael A. Amundson, the most fundamental factor that can never be overlooked with regards to

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Richard A. Firmage, A History of Grand County (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1996), 1.
 Richard Rhodes, The Making of the Atomic Bomb (New York: Touchstone-Simon and Schuster, 1986), 667.

⁸⁸ Hunner, "Reinventing Los Alamos," in *Atomic Culture: How Americans Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, ed. Scott Zeman and Michael A. Amundson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2004), 35.

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89</sup> Michael A. Amundson, *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 7.

90 Ibid., 20–1.

uranium history is that "the federal government, through the AEC, [was] the sole legal buyer, refiner, and producer of uranium ore for atomic energy use." The fact that thousands of individuals and businesses were now directly dependent on the federal government in countless, interrelated ways was a dramatic change for Utah residents. The roads that were finally graded, improved, and paved in the 1950s were almost entirely funded by the AEC. "By the logic of the cold war, the roadless areas of the Colorado Plateau stood in the way of national security," writes historian Jared Farmer. "At a final cost of nearly \$17 million, the AEC subsidized the construction or improvement of 1,253 miles of roads in the uranium-producing states of the American West. Southern Utah received the lion's share, about six hundred miles. For all of this road work, the Defense Department picked up 95 percent of the tab."

Steen would become partly responsible for this burst of road-building, yet when he first got to the Colorado Plateau in the spring of 1950, the scant roads he encountered were negligible, at best. He spent a year in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah, eventually staking several claims in an area behind Big Indian Wash, about twenty miles south of Moab, Utah. 93 Steen's background in geology convinced him "that uranium deposits existed in anticlinal structures favorable to oil reservoiring. In drilling behind the rim, he violated all proven practices for uranium mining," writes Raye C. Ringholz in her history of the uranium rush. 94

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⁹¹ Admunson, 20.

⁹² Farmer. 26

⁹³ Ringholz, 34–5.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 55.

I don't have a firm grasp on much of this yet as I drive south on Colorado 139. I only have a vague understanding of what uranium is, what it does, and how the Colorado Plateau became the Wild West all over again in the early 1950s. Yet I start to sense the implications of framing the uranium rush and atomic energy in terms of patriotism and defense, terms that would redefine America for the remainder of the 20th century. ⁹⁵
There's something rather paradoxical about destroying the earth to defend the country.

Dam opponents who fought to preserve Echo Park thought that they could convince Americans that the wilderness was an "idea worth saving," and in large measure, they were right. He preservationists were able to take advantage of a shift in attitudes towards the wilderness, a shift that many historians and environmental psychologists attribute to post-industrial prosperity. On closer examination, however, this shift was really a trend, one that had been strengthened in 1949 with Aldo Leopold's posthumous *Sand County Almanac* and that can be traced back to the 1916 creation of the National Park Service itself. In effect, the invention, popularity, and mass production of the automobile had as much to do with shifting attitudes towards wilderness as post-industrial prosperity, as historians such as Paul Sutter point out. Yet until good roads were built that could accommodate those cars, the wilderness, to many, would remain a

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⁹⁵ Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since* 1776 (Boston: Mariner–Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 151, 164–9.

⁹⁶ Stegner, "Coda," 146.

⁹⁷ Samuel P. Hays, "From Conservation to Environment," in *Major Problems in American Environmental History*, ed. Carolyn Merchant (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1993), 508.

⁹⁸ Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 1979 (Lincoln: Bison–University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 118.

⁹⁹ Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 106–7, 252.

resource to be utilized, not an endangered concept to be preserved. As such, I do not disagree with historian Mark Harvey's claim that Echo Park marks the birth of the modern environmental movement, for the nine-year controversy overlapped the national urge—and the ability—to rediscover America with renewed vigor. 100

Brower and Stegner's *This is Dinosaur* (1955) delivered its intended effect. Many members of Congress were sufficiently moved, enough so that they began to analyze the Echo Park dam proposal with a more critical eye. 101 Yet was it really Brower's powerful marketing prowess that made the difference, or was it his assertion that the Bureau of Reclamation had overestimated the dam's capacity and potential? ¹⁰² Brower took a closer look at the plans of the Colorado River Storage Project, studying Glen Canyon, just south of the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers in southeastern Utah. What if the proposed dam at Glen Canyon were raised to 710 feet? 103 Couldn't that render the Echo Park dam obsolete?

If solecism is a "mistake or impropriety," then this was David Brower's most infamous solecism. 104 He is often falsely accused of a trade-off; indignation and myth have obscured the fact that by the time Brower got to the negotiating table, the dam at Glen Canyon was inevitable. Suggesting that it become a high dam is not the same as authorizing its construction. Yet Brower owned his complicity, writing that he was "partly responsible for [the] needless death" of Glen Canyon and its incomparable side

¹⁰⁰ Harvey, 195–6.
101 Reisner, 284.
102 Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 1163.

canyons.¹⁰⁵ The Glen Canyon Dam and its reservoir, Lake Powell, would be the target of fierce opposition from Abbey for all of his life; they are mentioned in *Desert Solitaire* (1968) and play a central role in *The Monkeywrench Gang* (1975). Yet Abbey spoke highly of David Brower many times, commending him as a man of action, which is far more valiant than what Abbey saw himself as: a coward hiding behind a typewriter.¹⁰⁶

Abbey hid behind his typewriter on a Fulbright at Edinburgh during 1951 and 1952, "ostensibly to write on Robbie Burns" but instead writing what would become his first novel. 107 *Jonathan Troy*, published in 1954, was Abbey's first full-length publication, though he always considered it "a terrible novel" and refused to put it back in print. 108 Abbey's year away from the Southwest coincided with Steen's forced exile from the Colorado Plateau due to the heart attack and recovery of his mother, Rose. 109 Both men longed to return to their promised land; Steen and his family would get there first, settling in Cisco, Utah, in early May 1952. 110

"'We arrived looking like *The Grapes of Wrath*," Charlie remembered, 'but we were in fine spirits and full of hope. We rented a tarpaper shack for \$15 a month and stoked the stove with scavenged railroad coal." As the sun burns oranges and pinks in

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¹⁰⁵ David Brower, "Foreword," in Eliot Porter, *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado* (1963; repr., San Francisco: Sierra Club–Ballantine, 1968), 5.

¹⁰⁶ Edward Abbey, 1983 interview by Jack Loeffler, *Ed Abbey: A Self Portrait*, produced by Loeffler on compact disc, 2008, Track 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., Track 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ringholz, 35–6.

Abbey, Confessions, 100–01; Ringholz, 29, 52.

¹¹¹ Ringholz, 52–3.

front of me on Interstate 70, I take exit 214, which simply reads: "Cisco," with no mention of Arches National Park, nearby Moab, or the beauty I am about to dive into.

When Steen got there, Cisco "consisted of a café-beer hall, a general store and Buddy Cowger's service station. Little more. The few trailers and lean-to shanties of the local squatters disappeared into the sagebrush and rolling sandhills." Fifty-six years later, the haphazard collection of ragged, abandoned buildings coming into view still match Steen's description.

I slow my Jeep down to a crawl and stare at the remnants of Cisco, the town that sits "like a dry blister on the lip of Highway 50-6," now Interstate 70, in Ringholz's searing, yet accurate, description. It can't imagine living here. There are no trees for shade, no apparent water, no reason for this town save as a "desolate whistlestop for the Denver and Rio Grand Railroad." As if staged for my arrival, a long train of boxcars, now Union Pacific, waits on the southern edge of the town. Waiting? Would people move back to Cisco if the train were more frequently used? Why would anyone live here?

For the past nine months, I've applied this question not just to unlikely towns like Cisco, but to the entire state of Utah. Part of this is due to the fact that seemingly hundreds of people have asked me why I've come here, forcing me to evaluate not only Utah, but my place in it. Sometimes I tell them that of the four graduate schools I had been accepted to, Utah State was the only one that was nowhere near a man in my life.

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¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ringholz, 52.

This is partly true. Central Pennsylvania and southern California were too close to potentially distracting men, or so I told myself when I accepted USU's offer. At other times I say that I was seeking adventure, that I wanted to see the national parks of the Colorado Plateau, that a concentration in creative non-fiction seemed perfect, even if I had no idea what it was, and that USU was the only program that would allow me to teach straight away. I wanted to teach.

What I didn't anticipate was that my sense of acute isolation, partly external, mostly self-inflicted, would render me as incapacitated as I can sometimes become when I'm infatuated with a new romantic interest. I had moved to northern Utah from a sunny, seaside paradise in Florida—my promised land was behind me, I realized a few short months after living here. This is decidedly not "the place," not Zion. Not by any stretch. "The newcomer to the Plateau country is apt to find the hardships much greater than he anticipated. The climate is arid, roads are few, and the topography may be extremely rugged. Unless he is accustomed to such conditions he will have difficulty accomplishing anything." Writing in 1955, Thomas J. Ballard and Quentin E. Conklin neglected to mention to would-be prospectors that should they choose to stake their claims in Utah, they should also mind that they are entering the Promised Land of others.

Something about the discarded scraps of Cisco appeals to me: forgotten life, memories that warrant preservation, materials that could be reformulated into something new. The muse appears in the most unlikely places; perhaps my so-called incapacitation

¹¹⁴ Thomas J. Ballard and Quentin E. Conklin, *The Uranium Prospectors' Guide* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), 8.

is exactly what fuels my creative obsessions. Maybe I'm used to operating from some level of chaos, and maybe I needed a substitute for the intimate relationships that had, against all my best efforts, intensified, frightening me away to abject isolation. It seems as though my relationships with other people, particularly when they get difficult, inspire me to turn to the page, to work out my unsettled mind through words. If "the human spirit delights in uncertainty," as Belden Lane asserts, I'd say that art depends on it. So, I suspect, would Abbey.

¹¹⁵ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39.

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CHAPTER III

PERIOD OF INCREASED INDIVIDUAL STRESS

Cisco to Moab, 1952–1956

"Federal demand for Uranium...Tremendous expenditures on roads by the Atomic Energy Commission...cooperation of local and state road commissions... cooperation of the Indian Services...have brought this revelation of road progress, that today, opens great new areas of unbelievable beauty to every tourist. The Four Corners Travel-Land of—UTAH-COLORADO-ARIZONA-NEW MEXICO." 116

The railroad tracks hold sixteen boxcars caked with the dust and desolation of the facing town of Cisco, Utah. Dozens of abandoned houses sag, their roofs heaving towards former streets. Forgotten 1955 Ford pick-ups and Chevy Cavaliers from the mid 1990s sunbake next to RVs whose once shiny chrome has speckled into red, pink, and brown rust. Better to match the cliffs in the distance, across Interstate 70. Disused refrigerators, washing machines, scraps of tires, splintered plywood and broken two by fours cluster in piles as though displayed for the passing railroad, as if the Union Pacific box cars have stopped to be weighed down with rot and corrosion. A house sinks towards the end of the town, its porch buckling, its windows blown off, shards of glass lining the doorway like a broken picture frame. Cisco is a town that appears and disappears in a blink of an eye,

¹¹⁶ "Information on the New Roads West through the fabulous Uranium Country of the Colorado River Plateau Areas in Utah-New Mexico-Colorado-Arizona The Four Corners Travel-Land," Map, April, 1955 (n.p.) In author's possession.

unless one is coming to find the memory of a tarpaper shack, of Buddy Cowger's service station, of an unlikely town in an unlikely landscape. Cisco is a desolate wisp of a town, unless one is prospecting for hidden treasure.

"For myself, all my life a prospector, I was prospecting for revelation." Edward Abbey's line here is from "Desert Places," published in *The Journey Home* (1977), which means that he wasn't more than 50 when he first wrote this. As yet, I have not determined when the original essay was first written. "All my life a prospector, I was prospecting for revelation." Does the past tense indicate that his quest is finished, that he has succeeded? I doubt it. Does it suggest that he has given up, that his middle-aged sagacity has shown him that such a quest is fruitless? I don't think so, either.

To take him at face value, what kind of revelation, exactly, was he looking for?

What did he hope would be revealed to him? Utopian freedom in the American West?

Did he mean to find some sort of message, some sign that he was on the right path? A trite image, possibly, but then, I cannot think of many humans who do not look for such signs, and often. This isn't terribly different from uranium prospector Charlie Steen, I suppose, who was also looking for some sign, some sense that his intuition was trustworthy, some revelation that he was on the right path. "Steen's Folly" was a common chortle around Moab—many locals thought he was a downright fool for staking claims in an area the Atomic Energy Commission had deemed worthless. "It In retrospect, "Steen's

¹¹⁷ Edward Abbey, "Desert Places," in *The Journey Home* (New York: Plume-Penguin, 1991), 65.

¹¹⁸ Raye C. Ringholz, *Uranium Frenzy: Boom and Bust on the Colorado Plateau* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 55.

Folly," as his endeavors were often referred, might also be considered "Steen's Solecisms." Hindsight is, of course, 20/20.

It's easy to state that Utah's Promised Land has been the landscape upon which thousands of Americans have staked their claims, prospecting for gold or God. Yet it's true. In her history of the Colorado Plateau's uranium rush, Raye Ringholz writes, "Here was the last American Dream. The gold rush and the western movement rolled into one. The final opportunity for a man to bet on himself and stake his own knowledge, instincts, and sweat against the hidden riches of a formidable land." 119

Steen's quest for uranium at least had a physical goal, a prize that he might one day hold in his hand. To prospect for revelation, however, is to prospect for an ephemeral goal, one easily missed, or one whose discovery might not yield comfortable answers.

Rolling south out of Cisco, I see the snow-capped La Sal mountains rise above tall walls of dark, shadowed rock. To the east, far into the distance, cliffs sharpen in black and a deep, reddened pink. Most of the land through this stretch is painted in light tans and faded sands, the bleached earth stubbled with clumps of gray-green sagebrush.

As the black canyon walls open up around a turn, the road suddenly hugs a tall cliff of gray and pink rocks. Within a mile I cross the Colorado River, pass an old, burned, blackened bridge, and enter a federal recreation area. Now the river is on my right, and the cliffs loom over my Jeep from the left. Walled in, I can't see what is just ahead.

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¹¹⁹ Ringholz, 25.

I have driven here to southeastern Utah as an already disillusioned newcomer. For six months, I have seen Red Rock Country through the eyes of Abbey, Terry Tempest Williams, Wallace Stegner, and countless others; I have steeled myself for slight disappointment. It would be impossible for this place to match the laudatory, otherworldly descriptions I have read.

"Read, then forget. Let the desert speak to you in its own way." A month ago, I met USU alumnus Jared Farmer while he was on campus to promote his new book, *On Zion's Mount*. Though it was the second week of April, a thin coat of snow flecked the campus like confectionary sugar. Farmer and I discussed my aversion to this climate and my defensive resistance to the entire idea of southern Utah. The region had simply been built up too much for me. He smiled at me and took his time signing his other book, *Glen Canyon Dammed*, which, of course, is all about southern Utah. An hour later I returned home and read the above inscription. I sighed with a vague sense of defeat.

The wide brown ribbon of the Colorado River undulates slowly south in serene resignation, even though I am over 160 miles—as the river flows—from its cement vice of the Glen Canyon Dam. Yet my eyes are mainly up, not down; pushing south on 128 against the setting sun, I slow my Jeep as my jaw begins to sag in awe. As I snake down the curves of this scenic byway, the canyon walls appear to grow taller, stretching themselves taut, smooth, protectorates at the ready. Unlike the light browns and tans that dominated the landscape twenty miles north around Cisco, the colors of the canyon are

rich and dark: here are the burnt violets I've read about for months, here are the blood reds that deepen to black in the inner crevices, the cracks in the walls. The sun cannot penetrate this ribbon, only a few hundred yards across, for much longer than an hour or two a day, I suppose. The sand is red, not brown, the land rich, not bleached. A tangled matting of bushes coats the banks of the river. In contrast to the long-abandoned town of Cisco, this area pulses with fertility.

The canyon walls still me even as I am losing light—it is too late to reach for the camera, and I am almost glad for it. I can't frame this place, not yet. I can't quite silence others' voices, particularly Terry Tempest Williams's, as I imagine what these smooth, slick walls must feel like against the skin. Finally, I pull over between the road and the river to stop the car, to be still, to breathe.

"For those who have not experienced the sublime nature of Utah's canyon country...prepare to be broken open like a rock fallen from a once-secure place." ¹²⁰

There is security in fixed locales, or, perhaps more precisely, in places that we characterize simply. After nine months of living in Cache Valley, six hours north at the top of the state, I have framed my environment in harsh negatives: the circle of surrounding mountains there traps me, I am silenced, stultified. I give no room for a complex interpretation of my temporary town; no pink sunset splashes or wintering magpie will complicate my derision for northern Utah. There is comfort in tenacity, a convenience that American philosopher Charles Peirce, long buried in obscurity, spoke to

¹²⁰ Terry Tempest Williams, "Home Work," in *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (New York: Vintage–Random House, 2002), 17.

in 1877. "The instinctive dislike of an undecided state of mind, exaggerated into a vague dread of doubt, makes men cling spasmodically to the views they already take." The implication, of course, is that such beliefs are often under-examined. It's been easier for me to loathe my surroundings in Cache Valley, that I may project my own fears and doubts about myself and my future prospects onto an imagined landscape of hostility and judgment.

So, too, can I slip into the familiar trappings of my own hostility and judgment, twinned in my harsh treatment of myself and the social skills I learned as my father's daughter in Massachusetts. We are a notoriously rude, cold people, a social more that is a point of pride to natives and a source of shock to many outsiders. We're not so much rude, I'd say, as we are cautious. Our heightened suspicion of others has served us well in the past. Yet my father and I take this further—he is uncomfortable to the point of social paralysis; his curt responses clip dialogue before it can begin. I fall into this when I am not careful. I've become a nicer person in general since I left New England thirteen years ago, yet in times of distress, I fall back on what I know: rigid expectations for myself and little patience for others. I construct my walls with livid eyes and a venomous tongue. My jaw has hardened with my heart, the dry air accentuates the wrinkles around my mouth and eyes, the lack of sun has erased the blonde highlights from my hair. My hair is now a plain brown that shimmers with hundreds of gray and white strands. I am visibly aging as I am emotionally crystallizing. Don't promise me sublimity; I am done with seductions

¹²¹ Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays, 2nd ed., ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71.

that fall short, overtures that are withdrawn when I am rendered too difficult to move.

Yet the burnt blood red of these canyon walls did move me—to stop. All over the country, at forty, or sixty, or eighty miles an hour, I'd usually raise my eyebrows in fleeting appreciation of the beauty of a country I'd never seen, and I'd keep driving, too late, too busy, or too scared to dive into wonder. Too scared to stop and feel. Yet here I stopped. Here I began to allow myself to see Abbey differently, to peel away his own defensiveness and irascibility, so that his more vulnerable, idealistic written lines would no longer seem incongruous with his brazen convictions. At a full stop, I could finally begin to humanize the archetype that Abbey has become.

I will soon learn that his father was an outspoken socialist, a position that didn't necessarily win him many friends in the more rural patches of western Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh, on the other hand, in whose factories he had been employed as a teenager, was so well known for its socialist sympathizers and activists that the Bureau of Investigation, predecessor to the FBI, began infiltrating labor meetings as early as 1917. Their target: the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or the Wobblies, of whom Paul Revere Abbey was a member. 124

When I read that "the IWW has been classed as an aberrant movement because. . . the union sanctioned violence and sabotage [and] scorned political action," I will perk up

¹²² Charles H. McCormick, *Seeing Reds: Federal Surveillance of Radicals in the Pittsburgh Mill District, 1917–1921* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 27–28; Loeffler, 11.

¹²³ Ibid 27

¹²⁴ James M. Bishop, Jr., *Epitaph for a Desert Anarchist: The Life and Legacy of Edward Abbey* (New York: Touchstone–Simon and Schuster, 1994), 61.

and make a connection between the "radical" politics of father and son. 125 Those who subscribe to radical politics, by strict definition, do not attempt to reform the dominant system; rather, the system must be replaced entirely. Reform movements ultimately play by the rules of the state; revolutions, on the other hand, play by the rules of the people, the proletariats, the individuals.

Or so men like the Abbeys would probably say. Edward Abbey's two most famous books were published within seven years of each other: Desert Solitaire (1968) and The Monkeywrench Gang (1975). In Desert Solitaire, Abbey accuses the United States of imposing "a dictatorial regime upon the American people." ¹²⁶ In *The* Monkeywrench Gang, his thinly fictionalized protagonists fight back against this regime through what would become known as eco-sabotage, or monkey wrenching. Abbey's own thesis asked whether violence was a necessary, morally justifiable component of anarchy—a question he concluded in the negative. 127 To think that Abbey's father was involved with a revolutionary movement that sanctioned violence and sabotage is simply irresistible. According to Wobbly theorist Justus Ebert, "the IWW is the proletarian forerunner of the new society, the militant protestant against capitalist reaction." ¹²⁸ If the Wobblies were protesting capitalism in the 1910s, what would they have done had they seen the rising technocracy of the 1950s?

¹²⁵ Joseph Robert Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too: Studies of the Wobblies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1969), 68.

¹²⁶ Abbey, Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness, 1968, (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 131.

Abbey, "Anarchism and the Morality of Violence" (Master's thesis, University of New Mexico, 1959), 75. Conlin, 79.

The river is brown. The Colorado, the Grand, the river of countless names, including Rio Mysteriosa and Rio de los Martires—the Spanish names for River of Mystery and River of Martyrs. 129 Mystery, Martyr, and Red—which is what the current name means: red-colored. Mysteries become martyrs, martyrs become red. 130 There is a large part of me that becomes nostalgic for my Catholic upbringing when I trip over the Spanish colonization of the southwest, particularly in Santa Fe. I like the drama, the iconography, the high ritual. At any rate, I do not see a red-colored river; I see a brown, muddy one. Ahead of me, a flank of monuments and spires stand guard—watchtowers of the south. The cliffs to the east are no longer taut and smooth so much as they look almost cracked, crumbling, layers upon layers of pockmarked, chipped gray and black rocks. Across the river, the rocks appear warmer, in burnt oranges and reds with a tinge of purple at the bottom edges. Kneeling down, I place my hands on a smooth, salmoncolored rock, just large enough to sit on. It's cool to the touch, direct sunlight having left its surface hours ago. I look again to the river and know how cold it would be were I to forge through the messy tangle of bushes and branches, about twenty feet wide, to get my hands in. Besides, it wouldn't taste like salt. Salt water is my salve, not freshwater. I continue to stare, feeling my skin chill as shadows lap up the remaining light. Cars pass me but I do not turn; I remain kneeling by the rock, looking up in silence.

Steen would have had to have come through here fifty-four years ago, leaving his

¹²⁹ Sam Lightner, Jr., *Roads Through Time: A Roadside History of the Moab Area* (Jackson, WY: Exotic Rock Publishing, 2008), 75.

wife and kids behind in their tar-paper shack in Cisco as he went off to his Mi Vida claim in the Big Indian Wash, almost seventy miles to the south in San Juan County. While today, I could have driven this distance in a little over an hour, in 1952, the distance was too prohibitive to commute; it would probably have taken closer to a full day. According to historian Raye C. Ringholz, Steen was convinced that if he drilled 200 feet down into the sandstone, he would hit carnotite. 131

He didn't. At 197 feet, his drill pipe broke. He had nothing but a bunch of footlong sandstone core samples that he had intermittently pulled up: brown, gray, then finally black. Steen and his mother broke camp and eventually made it back up to Cisco on July 18, 1952. There, Steen dejectedly wandered into Buddy Cowger's service station. After telling a sympathetic Cowger what had happened, Steen pulled one of the last core samples, a piece of "ugly black rock," and put it on Cowger's Geiger counter. The needle "swung clear off the scale." Steen had hit pitchblende. With a combination of geologic training, strong intuition, and sheer luck, Steen had staked his claims over primary pitchblende, the highest-yielding uranium mineral known. A sample of pitchblende can contain up to seventy percent more uranium than even the best carnotite deposits. Steen had made it, and he had made it big.

Would my quests be easier if my goals were as concrete?

As the remaining light fades into dusk shadows, I look down at my feet. My

¹³¹ Ringholz, 54–7.

¹³² Ibid., 57-8.

¹³³ Ibid., 58

¹³⁴ Thomas Ballard and Quentin E. Conklin, *The Uranium Prospector's Guide* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), 84–5.

canvas, oatmeal-colored sneakers are flecked in red dirt. Scattered around my feet are iron chips for rose petals, small red rocks that flake dust into my palms as I crouch down to pick them up. I think of Tempest Williams's line about "finding red dirt in every pore of your skin," written with what seems to be a knowing smile, a secret handshake or code shared between her and her fellow members of the "coyote clan." Because I am on Bureau of Land Management land, I assume that removing anything is illegal, as we are consistently reminded in the national parks. I clasp two pieces of red rock and return to my Jeep, placing the artifacts in the small built-in tray to the left of my gearshift. Travel trophies, sensory-triggers: rocks infused with a vague sacrality that will intensify when I eventually place them on my altar. "I return with even greater conviction to my strategy of concealment. I turn away from people, turn towards objects. Things I can grasp.

Things I can understand. Obtaining knowledge about things becomes a cheap substitute for intimacy," Amy Irvine writes. 136

My resistance to being "broken open like a rock" is thrown into sharp relief when Irvine, in *Trespass*, calls my bluff with my trophy-taking. Have I sauntered far enough, have I lingered long enough to say that I've really been here, or do I need these rocks to prove it to myself? "Prepare to be broken open like a rock." Again? I've been broken open like a rock, and I've melded myself back together. Yet the dismembering and remembering weakens me every time, and I've taken to patching my fragility with emotional hardness. If I dare to expose myself again, risking vulnerability for the

¹³⁵ Tempest Williams, 106.

¹³⁶ Amy Irvine, *Trespass: Living at the Edge of the Promised Land* (New York: North Point Press–Farrar, Straus, and Girard, 2008), 69.

purported bliss of intimacy, will I shatter quickly, or will I merely fracture and slowly erode? I don't know how many more permanent cracks can run down my face and heart without rendering me unfit for future prospects. There's a tipping point between battle scars that add character and the cracks and faults that finally force a woman to surrender her former image of herself—beautiful—and accept that she is now damaged goods. One can't exactly go backwards. One cannot erase the lines. I can't reverse time.

Abbey spent forty years writing about this canyon country, red rock country—or, by his own estimation, "Abbey's Country." Wary of anthropomorphizing the natural environment, he did his best to describe the rocks, the junipers, the thrust of the river, and the movements of rattlesnakes and vultures without assigning human characteristics or motivations. Such a task is difficult, however, even for the most skilled writers. Peppered throughout his twenty-two books are passages like the following, in which the writer seems to surrender his pen:

"The landscape of the Colorado Plateau lies beyond the reach of reasonable words. Or reasonable representation. . . . There remains something in the soul of the place, the spirit of the whole, that cannot be assimilated by the human imagination." Soul. Spirit. Fightin' words, Abbey. My graduate poetry professor forbade us to use the word "soul" in our work; the word, like love, is overused to the point of meaninglessness. Utah's Canyon Country is adorned with words like "soul," "spirit," "sublime," and

Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 4, 61.

Abbey, "Come on In," in *The Journey Home*, 86.

"mystical," words that have been affixed to the region like *milagros* on a saint. Is this an act of perceptual laziness, or does this concede that abstract language, even in the pen of the best writer, cannot adequately convey the extraordinary? In the words of literary critic Scott Herring, generations of cultural expectations dictate not only what the West should look like, but what it should signify. He suggests that we have "an expectation...that something wild, extraordinary, and mystical is waiting for us, requiring perceptiveness and diligence but waiting. We expect to find it, not within us but out there." 139

I'm not looking for uranium; I'm not looking for gold. I'm looking, perhaps, for a reason to redeem this state from my judgmental eyes, and, perhaps, a reason to redeem myself from my own rigid judgment. If the desert is, among other things, indifferent and impersonal, then can I be witnessed without being judged? Can I trip and stumble without shame? Out here, the scaffolds of history-laden cities cannot guilt-trip me, the endless ocean cannot soothe me, the trees cannot protect me; I cannot hide out here, and yet somehow I believe I will emerge intact. "Desert and mountain places, located on the margins of society, are locations of choice in luring God's people to a deeper understanding of who they are." Oh, but Belden Lane doesn't understand. I've always located myself on the margins of society. That's the only place I feel comfortable.

Above my desk at work hangs one of my proudest possessions: a large map of the United States streaked with a yellow highlighter. The entirety of the eastern seaboard is

¹³⁹ Scott Herring, *Lines on the Land: Writers, Art, and the National Parks* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 5.

¹⁴⁰ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 46.

drenched in yellow; the six thick horizontal lines, as far south as I-10 in Texas and as far north as I-90 in North Dakota, prove that I have seen more of the United States than most. Only the Pacific Northwest remains unexplored—for now. It has taken me ten years to see forty-four states, over 200 national parks, and to crystallize my identity as Stegner's quintessential American slouching towards freedom: "So many Westerners, like other Americans only more so, shy away from commitment. Mobility of every sort—physical, familial, social, corporate, occupational, religious, sexual—confirms and reinforces the illusion of independence." 141

Curiosity, adventure, and, yes, unapologetic independence have fueled these drives, though in hindsight, I wonder how much of this high-velocity travel has distanced me from intimacy, from forging deep relationships with the friends I keep at arm's length, the lovers to whom I feign indifference, the land which I claim to revere yet do not seem to know. The only land I can truly claim relationship with is the land of my childhood, the woods twenty miles north of Boston and the tormented seashore of Cape Ann. If this is so, it is only because I lived there for the first nineteen years of my life. I do not think it's a stretch to surmise that the constraints under which I was bound, or at least witnessed, inspired a life as free from attachments as possible.

Steen and Abbey were hungry for freedom and open spaces, for adventure, for a landscape big enough to hold them, large enough for their dreams. They, too, were

¹⁴¹ Wallace Stegner, "Variations on a Theme," in *The American West as Living Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 76.

imports; Steen from nearby Texas, Abbey from Pennsylvania. Continuing south on 128, I hug the Colorado River while thinking of others who have come to this corner of the country to stake their claims on a landscape of promise and purportedly limitless potential. Terry Tempest Williams, Amy Irvine, Ellen Meloy, Craig Childs, and Jim Stiles are all writers who have found, or strengthened, their voices here. Writing is, perhaps, an appropriate prayer in the canyon country, the desert lands: an act of devotion, an offering of exhibition to an indifferent territory in a medium that may never bear witnesses. Like the cairns that lead travelers through red dirt, fine like sand, over rocks and around junipers and piñons, writers push forward into uncharted territory, marking new ideas for those who would follow them, little eggs along the message line. 142 The hidden crevices of these canyons become the previously unexplored territories of the mind, of the thoughts that are too risky, too frightening to voice—until the landscape dares one to do so.

Abbey may not seem like a man sometimes afraid of his own voice or of other people, yet, by many accounts, he was painfully shy. 143 Stubborn, daring, obstinate, a rebel with countless causes—none of these lifelong traits necessarily preclude social ease. Why had the memory of the desert he had seen from a rolling Santa Fe Railroad boxcar at seventeen in 1944 haunted him for the next four years? What was this "powerful, mysterious promise"? How much of this was cultural, in the way that we have long

¹⁴² Play on Judy Grahn, "Queen of Wands," in *She Rises Like the Sun: Invocations of the Goddess by Contemporary American Women Poets*, ed. Janine Canan (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1989), 38. ¹⁴³ James M. Cahalan, *Edward Abbey: A Life* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 21.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴⁴ Abbey, "Hallelujah on the Bum," in *The Journey Home*, 10.

made the West larger than life? Was he escaping to the desert, for vague freedom? Or was he escaping from something specific?

Snaking southwest, I chase the sun over the tall fingertips of the spires that guard the road, hand after hand, for miles. The landscape opens up for a stretch and the canyons retreat on both sides, giving me both physical and mental space to reconstruct the early years of Cold War history and Abbey's intellectual expansion therein. After passing a big, expensive-looking green ranch, I see the canyon walls close in again and several succeeding BLM campgrounds appear. Long before these campgrounds realized permanency, these riverbanks were clogged with makeshift tents, clusters of sleeping bags, and temporary living quarters for hundreds of miners and prospectors who struck out for greater Moab in the mid-1950s. As soon as word got out of Steen's strike, thousands of hopeful prospectors descended on Grand and San Juan counties, transforming nearby Moab seemingly overnight. By 1956, according to historian Michael A. Amundson's estimations, the population of Moab had increased by five hundred percent. 146

If Abbey saw a "powerful, mysterious presence," what did Steen see? I don't imagine that the two looked on the Colorado Plateau terribly differently. Steen was convinced that his grail was hidden beneath the sandstone, deep within the rock, the bedrock, so to speak. I think that Abbey did, as well, and I think that both of them were

¹⁴⁶ Michael A. Amundson, *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 57.

grounded enough in American mythology and popular culture to firmly believe that they could and would find their grail, their purpose, their future in the desert.

Steen's story is a remarkable one, yet his was hardly an overnight success. He had spent three years in and out of the Colorado Plateau, searching, running out of money, returning to Texas, coming back. Throughout all of this he had a wife and children to support. While Steen was seventy miles south at Big Indian, his wife, M.L., stayed in Cisco, nearly destitute with four young boys to care for. Yet M.L. seemed to remain optimistic. In a letter to a friend, M.L. writes, "Have found no ore, and have darned near perished, but I have absolutely found it an impossibility to worry...I love it here. I have learned to laugh instead of gripe, and by gosh, enjoy living!" 147

Abbey could only dream of such domestic contentment. He and his second wife, Rita, fought chronically and loudly, as their neighbors in Taos and Albuquerque would attest. An artist, Rita was intense, intelligent, and passionate, just like her husband. She hated his long absences, particularly once they became parents. Perhaps the tension between independence and familial responsibility has long been present for husbands and wives, yet the hardened gender roles of the 1950s would intensify this tension in unbearable ways to couples like the Abbeys. Gone was the celebration of the common man who worked with his hands; the American man of the 1950s was an organization man, a man in a gray flannel suit, a man whose ability to get along with others was far

147 Ringholz, 56.

¹⁴⁸ Cahalan, 54–5.

Learning, 2005), 137, 141–4, 147–9, 157.

more important than his personal merit.¹⁵⁰ The post-war American workplace did not make room for men such as Steen or Abbey. They could realize themselves only outside, away from boardrooms and factories, searching for raw resources waiting to be transformed by their ingenuity, mettle, or pen.

In my better moments, I like to think that I have enough ingenuity to stake my ambition over fertile grounds. Such ingenuity is less innate than reactive; my refusal to be bound by those who do not recognize my worth forces me to relocate frequently, both physically and intellectually. Pride comes before the fall; I try to move before the latter. Steen struck millions of dollars; Abbey struck millions of readers. I am still driving, moving quickly, fleeing myself as much as anyone else, and, as yet, I haven't found a compelling reason to stop.

¹⁵⁰ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, 5th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 111–12.

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CHAPTER IV

CULTURAL DISTORTION

Arches, Abbey, and 1956

By 1956, Abbey had earned his B.A. and was a thesis away from his M.A., both from the University of New Mexico. He had been married, divorced, and was married again. In late March, with his second novel, *The Brave Cowboy*, about to be released, his wife nearly at full term with their first child, and his thesis in general disarray, Abbey drove 400 miles northwest to a fairly inaccessible corner of southeast Utah to begin his post as a seasonal ranger at Arches National Monument.

If he had driven west on Route 66 to Gallup, New Mexico, he would have then turned north on 666 though Shiprock and beyond, into Colorado. Just over the Colorado border lies Mesa Verde National Park and the adjacent town of Cortez, where Abbey would have turned northwest on 160, the road that would take him into Utah to Monticello, where it abruptly turns north to La Sal Junction, past Big Indian Wash, Moab, and finally Arches. ¹⁵¹ On my first night in Moab, I meet up with Abbey on the corner of 128 and 160 (now 191) fifty-two years and five weeks after his own initial nighttime entrance to this area.

Abbey may have thought that by fleeing to Arches, he was escaping not only the pressures of family and academia, but also the unstoppable growth of the postwar boom and the suburban communities that were mushrooming all over New Mexico. As Thoreau

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¹⁵¹ Texaco 49-State Road Atlas (Rand McNally, 1959), 22, 30.

wrote almost a century prior: "It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes or sufficient wildness and freedom behind the eastern horizon I believe that the forest which I see in the western horizon stretches uninterruptedly toward the setting sun, and there are no towns or cities in it of enough consequence to disturb me." Abbey may have thought that a deeper push into the West's interior would insulate him from military research, industrial power, and America's perennial quest to dominate Nature.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

As Abbey headed west on US 66, he was driving on a road that was about to be planned for decommission, for Eisenhower would sign the Federal Aid Highway Act three months later, on June 29th. He would have driven past the exploding boomtown of Grants, perhaps scoffing at the prospectors, boosters, and miners who scoured the belly of Haystack Mountain for uranium. He was headed to Charlie Steen's Moab, the town which competed with Grants for the title, "Uranium Capital of the World." If he had looked at a map of Utah in 1956, he would have seen Zion National Park in the southwest and embattled Dinosaur National Monument in the northeast, clearly delineated and adjacent to major highways. Arches wasn't on the map—yet. It would be soon, due only partially to the planned Interstate 70 that would eventually cut across

¹⁵² Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," *The Selected Works of Thoreau*, Cambridge edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 668.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: The White House Years*, 1953–1956 (New York: Signet, 1965), 649.

¹⁵⁴ Michael A. Amundson, *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 78.

¹⁵⁶ Eisenhower would sign the bill prohibiting the construction of dams in national parks in twelve days, on April 11th, 1956—the day before Abbey's first child was born.

the San Rafael Swell twenty-two miles north of Arches in 1970.¹⁵⁷ Other, more local road-building was bringing more natural resources out of the area and more human resources into the area by the mid-1950s, though to read much of *Desert Solitaire*, it's easy to get the impression that when Abbey got here, Moab and Arches were frozen in time, a good two or three decades behind the country. This simply wasn't the case.

After a full day that had started in Vernal, Utah, and taken me to Dinosaur, through western Colorado, to Cisco, and down by the Colorado River through stunning red rocks, I reach the end of 128 at its intersection with 191. Night has now completely fallen, and I am startled by the stream of headlights that illuminates the road in front of me. The dull glow of Moab heralds me from the left, yet I am only two miles south from the entrance to Arches National Park. I am briefly motionless.

Perhaps if I were a more adventurous woman, I would have gone up and into Arches, slipping past the empty guard gate and up into the park. If I were a more passionate pilgrim, I may have driven ten miles north on 191 until I found Willow Road, an "unimproved road" that served as the park's entrance until 1957. This was the road that Abbey had taken on his first night here after stopping in at the park's headquarters, just south of what is now the visitor's center. After driving slowly for eight miles over ruts and a few washes, I may have pulled over on Willow Road within sight of Balanced

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¹⁵⁷ Edward A. Geary, *History of Emery County*, (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1996) excerpt cited available at *Utah History to Go* (State of Utah, 2009) 7 February 2009 http://historytogo.utah.gov/

Utah-chapters/Utah-today/interstate70.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness, 1968 (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 2.

Rock, imagining my car in the same spot that Abbey's tiny trailer used to occupy. Yet I do not make this choice.

I like amenities. I can't afford them, but I like them. I want a bed, a shower, and privacy. I want to mark my approach to Arches with a rested, clean body and a stash of trail mix, dried banana chips, beef jerky, and two gallons of water. I want to make sure that I am prepared to step into what had become a shrine of sorts, for me and, as I would discover, for thousands of young Americans who had read *Desert Solitaire* and had trudged West to see if this "most beautiful place on earth" really had disappeared. ¹⁵⁹

When Abbey worked his first season here, all travelers entered Arches on Willow Springs Road. 160 This eight-mile, barely improved dirt road was infamous for flooding, eroding, and otherwise causing havoc for early visitors; the first two decades of personal correspondence in the Arches archives are dominated by visitors thanking Arches employees for helping them free their cars from washes and impassably wet roads. 161

After a few bumpy miles on Willow Springs Road, visitors would begin to see the top of Balanced Rock towering above the Windows section, the area "enjoyed by the majority of visitors." Many visitors were likely perfectly content to see Balanced Rock and the surrounding arches and rock formations; going any farther, however, would have

¹⁵⁹ Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 1.

¹⁶⁰ Christine Madrid, Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) No. UT-70, "Arches National Park Main Entrance Road," in National Park Service Archives, Arches National Park Museum Collection (ARCH), Moab, UT, Catalog Number 2845, 7–8.

 ^{162 1950} Revision, "Interpretive Section Development Outline," Arches National Monument Master Plan,
 Arches National Monument, National Park Service, in NPS Archives, ARCH 1860, Folder 196, 1.

been a chore, one that likely would have required an overnight stay. Arches administrators were well aware of the burden travelers faced; how could anyone truly appreciate its 33,770 acres in a "short stop"?¹⁶³ Somehow, visitors needed to be convinced to "spend at least a day in the monument and make use of some of the trails as well as the roads," as the 1950 draft of the Arches National Monument Master Plan reads.¹⁶⁴ Yet in order for visitors to be enticed to enter the monument, let alone explore, something had to be done about these so-called roads. Writing in late 1956, Carl Squeal of the *Denver Post* notes that "the area has been an off-the-beat scenic attraction for several years, but difficult access has kept it from gaining wide public recognition."¹⁶⁵

Just north of Moab, across the Colorado River on 191, past the intersection with 128 where I had paused last night, 160 bends widely to the left; on the right, towering walls of sandstone inch closer to the road, a fortress guarding the arches and Abbey's history. To the left sits a large, raised, flattened pile of what looks to be red sand or dirt, not unlike the surrounding soil. Yet I know otherwise. I'm a couple of hundred yards from 16 million tons of uranium tailings, remnants of "uranium-ore processing operations" begun on this site by Charlie Steen in 1956 and continued under Atlas Minerals Corporation through 1984. ¹⁶⁶ Contentedly ignorant about uranium tailing

¹⁶³ Ibid., 1, 3.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 3

¹⁶⁵ Carl Squeal, "Moab's Great Gorges Should Be a U.S. Park, Say Visitors," *Denver Post*, December 12, 1956, in NPS Archives, ARCH 1860, Folder 73, 1.

Amundson, 64; "Moab UMTRA Project Information, (Grand County, UT: 2006) December 28, 2008 http://www.moab-tailings.org.; "Environmental Management Project Baseline Summaries: Moab

toxicity, I roll up my windows and quickly pass the pile, though I recognize that this is either futile, superfluous, or both. 16 million tons of radioactive waste can't be healthy to breathe, but it has lain here for twenty-five years. If 130 acres of uranium tailings greatly increased local risks for, say, cancer, the government would move it, right? Right?

Four rangers stand behind the desk in the Visitor's Center. One woman, a few years younger than I, smiles when I approach. In an almost sheepish manner, I ask, "So...does everyone walk in here and ask you about Abbey?"

"Actually, no. Not at all."

I'm immediately relieved. I've been separated from the chafe; the ranger has just validated my superior rank against the rest of the tourists. As she lays out the map of the park across the counter, I suddenly wonder if she knows where Abbey's trailer may have been.

"No, but he does," she replied, gesturing to another ranger.

"Oh, sure, it was right over here, on the old entrance road, right about where these picnic tables are, and the Port-o-Potty." The ranger points to a map of Arches I had not yet seen, one that clearly marks the different boundary changes over the years. The Arches of 1956 looked to be nearly half of what it is today. In fact, the Arches that Abbey entered as a twenty-nine year old ranger had gone largely unchanged for almost twenty years. While the 1938 boundary changes expanded Arches by 800 percent, the Devil's

Garden and Windows areas were still the only areas that received significant visitation. Yet while no new roads or trails or wayside stands could be detected, plans for developing Arches had long been in the works.

In fact, sixteen years prior to Abbey's appearance, the *Moab Times-Independent* reported that "C. A. Richey, landscape architect of the national park service, stated that plans for development of the Arches have been perfected. . . . He brought with him the master plan for developing the monument. This plan calls for . . . the construction of a road into the Arches which eventually will cost \$750,000." The master plan clearly states that "all roads, trails, and parking areas [would] ultimately receive asphaltic surfaces." Construction on the road started within six months by 200 members of the CCC, who would undertake the absolute hardest work: blasting and grading the first mile of the entrance road into the nearly vertical, 400-foot high cliff face behind what is now the visitor's center. 169

Forcing my Jeep up the "steeply pitched and curved switchbacks" of this improbable road, I join several other cars and more than a few RVs. ¹⁷⁰ The visitor's center and parking lot disappear quickly, and as I dart my eyes quickly to the right, Steen's old mill site comes into view. I've never been a fan of this kind of driving; I don't like feeling this vulnerable. A couple of scenic pullouts bubble on the side of the road,

¹⁶⁷ "Arches Unrivalled in Diversity of Scenic Interest," *Moab Times–Independent*, 30 May 1940, in NPS Archives, ARCH 1860, Folder 91.

¹⁶⁸ Madrid, 8–9.

¹⁶⁹ Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce, "Arches National Monument," *News–Aids–Warnings* August 10, 1940, No. 226, in NPS Archives, ARCH 1860, Folder 91. Special thanks to Annie Corson and the amenable rangers on 5 February 08 who took GPS readings for me. ¹⁷⁰ Madrid. 11.

luring brave travelers to pose for pictures only feet from sure death. Even more ludicrous to me than inching closer to the edge of a forty-story high vertical face of Entrada sandstone is the sight of a man willing his legs to propel his mountain bike forward.

Abbey, when you bade us to get out of our "upholstered mechanized wheelchairs," you didn't really expect us to bike this, did you? Would you have?¹⁷¹

The outbreak of World War II forced the CCC to abandon its work on the Arches entrance road about a mile in, near "the Three Penguins rock formation located above headquarters." The unfinished road would not be touched for fifteen years—until the summer Abbey showed up, to be exact. The NPS was sorely neglected between 1940 and 1956, as is attested by Arches personnel and Conrad Wirth, the man who became the director of the NPS after Newton Drury was ousted in the Echo Park fiasco. ¹⁷³ Wirth's agency faced significant problems which he recounts in his memoir:

"By 1950, with 21 additional parks and twice as many visitors as we had in 1940, the Park Service funds were 25 percent less than in 1940. And things were getting worse. The shooting war was over, but the cold war and grants in aid to nations throughout the world—allies and former enemies alike—left very little funding for the National Park Service. . . . It was quite evident that the cold war was damaging our parks more than the war itself had "174".

Three months prior to Abbey's drive to Utah, a nervous yet outwardly confident Wirth had presented his Mission 66 plan to President Eisenhower. The plan requested

¹⁷⁴ Conrad L. Wirth, *Parks, Politics, and the People* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 234.

¹⁷¹ Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 51.

¹⁷² Madrid, 11.

¹⁷³ Correspondence from John M. Davis, Acting Regional Director, Region Three, National Park Service, to Mr. P. T. Reilly of North Hollywood, California, 29 October 1947, in ARCH 1860 Folder 51.

over a million dollars to be apportioned over a ten-year period to the NPS to repair, improve, and add to the parks' long-neglected facilities. When Wirth ended his presentation, Eisenhower turned to the Secretary of the Interior and asked that the program be started "at once." The date was January 27th, 1956—Abbey's 29th birthday. Within a year, Mission 66 would provide the funding for the "Master Plan" of the Southwestern National Monuments of which Arches was a part. One of the Plan's first tasks was to finish the last nine miles of the ten-mile paved entrance road through Arches National Monument.

About two miles in, after the road has finally leveled off and I am back on safe ground, I pull over, grab my camera, and get out of the car. The view from the road is amazing—and therein, of course, lays a huge part of the preservationist problem. This entrance road curves through the park and offers stunning photo opportunities en route to the extent that one need not leave the main road at all and still get incredible pictures. The average visitor to Arches spends about three hours there in total, just about enough time to hit perhaps five of the park's estimated 1,000 arches. Yet with such a convenient road unfurling past stunning scenery virtually unavailable anywhere else, who would be moved to venture off the pavement?

Unlike the first mile of this road, whose placement is determined by the sandstone and steep vertical slope, roads through wide open spaces are another thing

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 254–5, 262.

¹⁷⁶ "Arches National Park Public Use Counting and Reporting Instructions," NPS Stats: National Park Service Public Use Statistics Office, *National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior,* January 4, 1993, February 4, 2009 www.nature.nps.gov/stats/CountingInstructions/ARCHCI1993.pdf>.

altogether. How do architects, engineers, and administrators design "nature roads"? How do they do so in such a way that the road affords the visitor the best view? "Landscape architect," the profession pioneered by Frederick Law Olmsted, implies that one literally designs a landscape, and in so doing, designs a whole new experience—and expectation. The sightlines, or, in Alexander Wilson's term, "verges—the place the car driver's eye first comes to rest after scanning the pavement"—are carefully decided by a few men for millions of visitors. 177 Prior to 1958, no one entered Arches down by Courthouse Towers; no one came around that wide bend from the west, banked north, and dropped their jaw in awe as those particular spires and fins came into view. By becoming the most accessible, those exact rock formations would become the most photographed and thereby the most seen. The "take-away" for the visitor in her car is the illusion that she is "pushing back the frontiers and discovering this land for" herself, as Wilson writes, yet in a way that conforms to her previous conception of what the landscape is supposed to look like. 178

A few miles farther in, I turn left at Balanced Rock onto an unmarked dirt road and park near some picnic tables across from the Port-o-Potties that mark the site of Abbey's old trailer. Somehow, I think he'd appreciate this. A couple of cars are already parked; I walk past a family and a young, healthy-looking couple at the picnic tables towards some flat rocks that look out over Salt Valley. While I'm not quite alone, the parking lot in front of Balanced Rock, a mere eighth of a mile away, is teeming with cars

¹⁷⁷ Alexander Wilson, The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), 36. Wilson, 38.

and people. The Windows Section behind it is also undoubtedly packed. On the Arches brochure in my hand, the road I turned on is marked with gray dashes, not the solid red of the main road and turnouts. Get off the red line, even by only a few hundred yards, and the people all but disappear. It's 2 pm. My white shawl slips down my back, allowing my pale skin to be bronzed by the high sun. Reaching up to the nape of my neck, I unclip my halter top bikini to decrease any tan lines. Baking in the sun clears my brain of its generally neurotic activity; the sun seems to radiate the unnecessary, the distractions, the anxiety, leaving only what matters.

Sun, wind, water, rock. Earth as heaven.

Desert Solitaire exemplifies the impossible ideals and missions, not only of the NPS, but of the individuals who visit them. I am, undoubtedly, not very different from the majority of tourists I see around me: visiting a national park celebrated for its incredible, fragile beauty, I want to see it alone. I don't want to be reminded as I stop at the most famous arches that I am one of almost a million visitors who will come here this year, or one of over 3,000 that could see Delicate Arch today. 179 I have come for a nature experience, not a social experience. Or social experiment, for that matter. I have come to be one with nature, not one out of many with the same goal. I don't like the fact that I can

¹⁷⁹ Conversations with Sharon Brussell and Ann Corson at Arches Headquarters, February 2 and February 4, 2009, respectively. Arches National Park visitation was 919,697 in 2008, up from the 860, 181 in 2007. On May 5th, my first day in Arches and the date of my Landscape Arch visit, the total park visitation is estimated at 3407. This estimation is based on the 1262 cars counted that day multiplied by 2.7, the formula used by the NPS Public Use Statistics Office (see <www.nature.nps.gov/stats/CountingInstructions/ ARCH11993.pdf>. There is no real way of estimating how many visitors see each arch or walk each trail, which is why I've used "could" in this sentence.

hear passing cars every ten seconds or so while studiously writing in my journal. Then again, with the exception of masochistic mountain bikers, driving into Arches is the only way to get inside.

In the *Desert Solitaire* chapter titled, "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks," Abbey recounts one of his most famous acts of rebellion against his employer in response to a group of survey men who visited him one evening in June, 1956. After a long day of staking the finally-funded entrance road, the men knocked on Abbey's trailer and traded information for water. The civil engineer "patiently explained" that Abbey needed this road, that he'd see up to "thirty times as many tourists as you see now." In June of 1956, few questioned the doctrine of progress and expansion, yet as Abbey saw it, "growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell. Cancer has no purpose but growth; but it does have another result—the death of the host." After the survey crew left,

"The air grew cool...the moon was high enough to cast a good light when I reached the place where the gray jeep had first come into view. I could see the tracks of its wheels quite plainly in the sand and the route was well marked, not only by the tracks but by the survey stakes planted in the ground at regular fifty-foot intervals and by streamers of plastic ribbon tied to the brush and trees.

"Teamwork, that's what made America what it is today. Teamwork and initiative. The survey crew had done their job; I would do mine. For about five miles I followed the course of their survey back toward headquarters, and as I went I pulled up each little wooden stake and threw it away, and

¹⁸⁰ Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 40–1.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.. 44

¹⁸² Abbey, "Arizona: How Big is Enough?" in *One Life at a Time, Please* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 21.

cut all the bright ribbons from the bushes and hid them under a rock. A futile effort, in the long run, but it made me feel good."¹⁸³

It's easy to cheer Abbey on in this section, to celebrate his bold protest. Yet at the same time, with only scant reflection, I know how much I like roads. Not just roads—paved ones. Furthermore, Arches is a very big park, far bigger than its maps suggest. The Visitor's Center is less than ten minutes from Moab, giving me a drastically false sense of the time it takes to get from Moab *inside* the park. When I return this evening to see Landscape Arch at sunset, the best time of day for photographic light, I will miscalculate not the time it takes to hike the mile and a half from its parking area to the arch itself, but the time it takes to get to the parking area from Moab—forty-five minutes. When I hurry along the last few hundred yards, a parade of visitors will begin passing me from the other direction. I'll miss the good light by at least twenty minutes. Yet I got there. How would I ever be able to explore Arches without its paved main road?

In six weeks, I will return to Arches, in late June. By this point, I'm consciously taking my time with Arches in a way that I've never quite done so with any national park. I want to see it slowly, as slowly as curiosity and time constraints will allow me, partly because Abbey's ghost will sneer at me if I do otherwise. Or, worse, he'll merely roll his eyes and focus on other travelers who are enjoying his country with more reverence.

I will strike out for Tower Arch, for while it seems to be a major arch, it may be less crowded than the others: to get there, I'll have to drive a 7.2-mile, unpaved, gravel-

¹⁸³ Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 58–9.

laden road. Its severe ruts and bumps will slow me to less than ten miles an hour for its entirety. Just before this, I had driven past its barely-marked entrance and paused at the pullout for Skyline Arch. The afternoon light was ideal to capture this arch that sat only two-tenths of a mile from the main road. Within fifteen seconds, however, a red Buick with an older couple pulled in right behind me; moments later, a car with three kids coming in the other direction pulled over and stopped, as well. Furious, I started my car again and drove off, not willing to share the briefly bright, golden light with the inane conversations of others.

The slow road to Tower Arch will afford me time to notice countless rabbits with oversized, black-lined ears hopping across my path. Three enormous ravens will startle me as they suddenly shoot up from the tall brush by the road and fly north. A red-tailed hawk will accompany my Jeep for ten full minutes, circling the brush to my left, pausing, falling behind, swooping past me, and then flying next to me over and over again. When I finally reach the parking area, I'll park next to the only other vehicle, a dark blue van with Illinois license plates. The trail to Tower Arch is just under two miles, and though I suspect that the setting sun will leave the arch in shadows by the time I get there, I push forward quickly, following cairns over flat rocks, around juniper-lined bends, and up steep hills made only of fine red sand that buries my ankles and, in places, half of my lower legs. The sand will silently remind me that this is not an area to rush through.

When I pass the family of four from Illinois, the father will exclaim, "Look! A person! You're the only person we've seen this whole trail!" The mother will ensure that I have a flashlight; I will lie and say yes. The arch will present itself to me in dusk

shadows, and I will linger for less than a minute before turning around. After nearly running down the red sand and across the flattened gray rocks, I will finally pause near the trailhead and watch the rest of the light be lapped up by the darkening grays of night. The air, as Abbey attests, cools quickly, but my beating heart and sweat will keep me warm for the twenty minutes I write in my journal. Not bothering with any attempt at poetry or metaphors, I will write that I finally know what it means to be surrounded by silence, to write without the dull sound of distant cars, to truly feel alone, like the only human for miles. I'm hardly alone; lizards dart around me, lifting their heads, studying me, scurrying away. The rocks could be ascribed with human qualities, if I weren't too embarrassed to do so in Abbey's country. I feel perfectly safe, even with my water low, my pack totally unequipped for any real journey away from help. Yet here, on a high rock balcony looking southeast, probably nine miles away from my May perch on the other side of Salt Valley, I will finally surrender to Abbey. This road that took me nearly an hour to navigate, this road to Tower Arch, must remain unpaved. That's an order.

Abbey's "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks" is often credited as being far more revolutionary than it really is, even upon its 1968 publication. Abbey is quite sympathetic to his employer, citing the often competing objectives interpreted in the 1916 mission statement of the NPS: "to provide for the enjoyment" of the parks "by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Two camps emerge here for Abbey: the developers who would provide said enjoyment and the

¹⁸⁴ NPS quoted in Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 48.

preservers who would leave the parks unimpaired. 185 These two sides are essentially the same two who fought for nine years over Echo Park, its fate finally sealed in favor of preservation eleven days after Abbey started his work at Arches, on April 11, 1956. 186 Indeed, the same arguments had been heard for decades by the time Abbey reiterated them in *Desert Solitaire*. Yet Abbey brought the issues to a wider audience than the select few who happily buried themselves in the details of the Echo Park controversy, or even the recent passage of the Wilderness Act (1964). While his indictments of industrial tourism—the big business composed of "various interests [which] are well organized, command more wealth than most modern nations, and are represented in Congress with a strength far greater than is justified in any constitutional or democratic sense"—are legendary, he doesn't exactly burn its proponents at the stake. 187 He'll find plenty of time to do that in later essays; here, in this chapter, he considers the possibility that the interests of the industry, not unlike those of the NPS, are to provide enjoyment for the people. In so doing, he implies that the intent might not be as contemptuous as its result.188

It's the tourists themselves who receive the brunt of Abbey's lampooning, a theme that Abbey pushes throughout the book even though he's fully aware that he's being unfair. Yet even while he implores his tourists to "get out of those motorized wheelchairs [and] get off your foam rubber backsides," decrying their preferences for

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¹⁸⁵ Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 48.

¹⁸⁶ Jon M. Cosco, Echo Park: Struggle for Preservation, (Boulder, CO: Johnson Printing, 1995), 90.

¹⁸⁷ Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 49.

¹⁸⁸ Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 50.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 235.

their "wilderness experience" to be handed to them on a silver platter—with air-conditioning—he knows that they are victims of the powerful agencies at play. 190

Abbey's proposals are not new: no more cars, no more new roads, and force the park rangers to work—outside. Regarding new roads, he echoes former NPS directors Mather and Horace Albright, among countless others. 191 Regarding cars, his proposal has begun to come to fruition in grossly overrun parks such as Yosemite and Zion. Many rangers would probably like nothing more than to guide visitors outside on trails, rather than to hand them maps from behind a desk or from a tiny booth. Furthermore, his elucidation of the NPS missions are downright identical to the internal documents of the NPS—in a stunning irony, sections of the revised Master Plan for Arches sound as though they could have been written by Abbey himself: the 1963 mission of Arches "is to bring the visitor into an intimate contact with the scenic grandeur...and to develop among the visitors, through physical participation, intellectual and esthetic experiences which are afforded in the highest order, in this colorful Colorado Plateau Country." Well, Abbey would never have used that many commas, and he would have spared readers the dry rhetoric, yet the sentiment is the same. The NPS personnel advocate physical participation; implied is the mission to encourage the visitor to get out of her

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¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 233.

¹⁹¹ Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 125.

¹⁹² "MASTER PLAN for Arches National Monument, Volume I: Master Plan Narrative," 1963, in NPS Archives, ARCH 1860, Folder 46, 2.

"upholstered horseless hearse." Indeed, no wonder Abbey had to write *Desert Solitaire*. At least he got people's attention.

Overall, Abbey's Polemic is startling not in its rage, but in its rationality, not in its idealism, but in its pragmatism. His tone is often more subdued than Bernard De Voto's, in places as congenial as Wallace Stegner's, his cries for the wilderness as impassioned, but probably less controversial, than Aldo Leopold's. Yet he is accused of being irrational, dogmatic, infantile. True, he did his part in fanning the flames of detraction, yet I have come to believe that he has been censured for the wrong reasons. By focusing on his crass caricatures of others—and himself—we conveniently ignore what he was imploring all of us to do: to make our own decisions—not have them made for us.

His real point is that industrial tourism has weakened us not only physically, but mentally. As passive, placated consumers, we are told where to go, how long to stay, how long it will take to see this place, exactly where the restrooms are, and, in fact, where the Coke machines are, as well. We have endless maps and brochures and books and how-to guides, ubiquitous to the point that several authors have published "the hidden" or "off the beaten path" guides to Arches, a (necessary) pandering to the lone rangers in all of us who must do it our own way.

Abbey's idealistic version of the lone ranger appeared in 1956 with the publication of *The Brave Cowboy*, his second novel which would be turned into the film *Lonely are the Brave* in 1962. ¹⁹⁵ *The Brave Cowboy*'s protagonist, Jack Burns, threatens

¹⁹³ Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 233.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

¹⁹⁵ James M. Cahalan, *Edward Abbey: A Life* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2001), 83.

civilization by his commitment to "destroying the calculated, computerized, mass-produced law and order of urban society." Plenty of artists and intellectuals decried the rising technocracy of the 1950s; less remembered is the fact that 1956 was also the year in which the national motto of the United States was changed from *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one—to "In God We Trust."

In changing the national motto from unified pluralism that honors the individuals (and states) who make up America to an emphatic declaration of faith in a higher power, the 84th Congress and President Eisenhower sanctified the notion that America is secured not by a well-informed populace comprised of diverse citizens, but by an elite group of politicians, scientists, businessmen, and military professionals who would redefine and transform America on their own terms.

"In the United States the Jeffersonian vision of a decentralized society of independent agrarian freeholders was dead by the end of the nineteenth century while democracy, defined in Lincoln's words as "government *by* the people" has never even been tried." Not tried, or not given a fair trial in the summer of 1956, when the power once vested in the people was redirected to trust in an absolute power.

Abbey fiercely resisted absolute power of any kind, but it wasn't a reactionary resistance. He labored carefully over his theories about authority and government, refining them and disseminating them in most of his writing. While in Edinburgh he wrote a short section in his journal called "Tips for Anarchists," the subject of his

¹⁹⁶ Book jacket of Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy*, 1977, Avon-Hearst edition.

Abbey, "A Writer's Credo," in *One Life at a Time, Please* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 169.

eventual master's thesis. "Government derives its moral authority from those whose end it serves. My moral allegiance to a given State is directly proportional in degree to the extent to which the State senses my needs, and inversely proportional to the extent to which the State violates or disregards my ends, needs, principles." A dryly academic equation. Yet just five days later, after hearing an orchestra play "God Save the King" (which is the same melody for "My Country 'Tis of Thee"), his tone shifts dramatically:

"I was amazed and a little embarrassed as a strange emotion welled up from the heart . . . a wave of homesickness and loneliness, yet more than that—an immense and inordinate and tearful tragic pride in my land, my country, America, *sweet land of liberty*; immense and inordinate with a profound and swelling love of the physical land. . . tragic with a sense of America as a promise yet far from complete, far from realization, and as a dream menaced by ugliness and by mean little enemies masquerading as defenders of that dream and armed now with the most awful POWER as the world has ever known. . .

"I nearly wept under that great burden of loneliness and alienation from my home, and with it the pride and joy and anger and sorrow which, combined, prove me to be a patriot of a most earnest kind, and, I hope, a patriot of a most dangerous kind. Me, a patriot! It's true, my soul, it's true." ¹⁹⁹

Solecisms as "incongruities" could not be better illustrated. Abbey's own solecisms are infinite; his personal and professional relationships are rife with both belligerence and sensitivity, his bold assertions delivered in an erudite, almost quiet voice. ²⁰⁰ His philosophies are riddled with inconsistencies and paradoxes, yet that was likely a point of pride for Abbey. In his eventual thesis—which was not, as he had

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¹⁹⁸ Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian*, ed. David Petersen (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 2003), 8–9. ¹⁹⁹ Ibid 9–10.

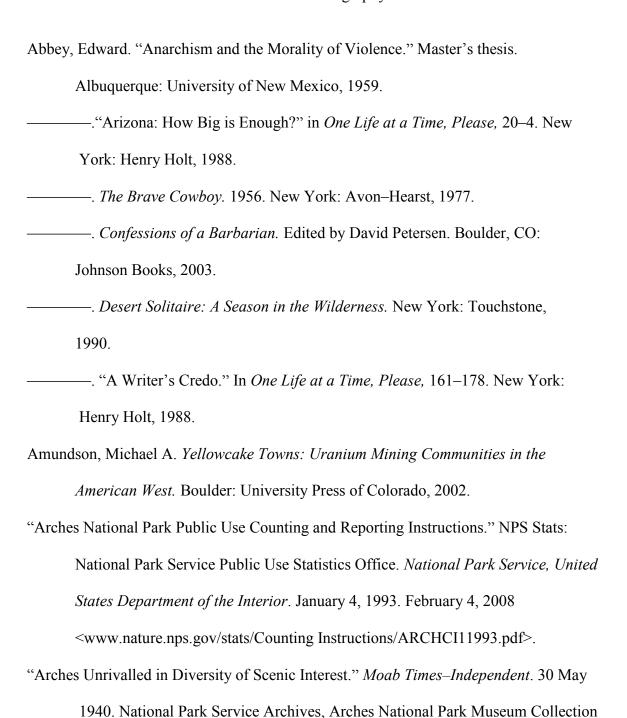
²⁰⁰ My opinion of Abbey's speaking voice is based off of the 1983 interview with Loeffler.

intended, a "general theory of anarchy" but instead a much more manageable project regarding the morality of violence in anarchism—he quotes Pierre Joseph Proudhon's line to Marx, whom the former worried was becoming too militant. 201 "Let us never regard a question as exhausted, and when we have used our last argument, let us begin again, if necessary, with eloquence and irony." 202 Within the decade between 1956 and 1965, millions of Americans began asking many serious questions of and about their country as it became evident that the status quo no longer fit their needs.

Abbey, "Anarchism and the Morality of Violence," Master's thesis (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1959), 13.

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CHAPTER V

REVITALIZATION

An increasingly pagan and hedonistic people (thank God!), we are learning finally that the forests and mountains and desert canyons are holier than our churches. Therefore let us behave accordingly.—Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*²⁰³

With intense, shining eyes, the drummers lean into each other, locking into a long, steady wave of polyrhythmic power. Hands on goatskin match bare feet flying. Breathing deeply and steadily, I drop my hips, lift my ribs, lengthen my legs to leap and spin around the fire. My chest leads my body as though strung to a marionette. With skirts and scarves flying, I draw serpents in the air with my arms and hands, tracing transits and the drummers' final bars. In the eternal instant of silence between the final beat and the celebratory cheer, my body is suspended with one raised foot on the ground, seemingly on the ballerina's pointe while my other leg glides through the air, making a slow arc from my side to my front. My arms float from taut excitement above my head down to my sides in weightless surrender. My silken skirts and scarves ripple down, a cascade of feathers. Sinking to the ground in prayer and exhaustion, my lungs stretch and compress quickly for more air. Sweat slides from my hair down the back of my neck; my wrists and elbows are creased with dirt and ash. Crackling flames and the soft purr of white coals are the only sounds for several moments.

²⁰³ Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 52.

The above scene is not specific to time, or even, necessarily, to place. Rather, it is il illo tempore, Latin for "time out of time," an anthropological term for sacred acts or rites that are, to the participant, infinite. 204 After five days of exploring Utah and its national parks which serve as timeless, symbolic landscapes and specific historical monuments to the modern environmental movement, I drove south into Navajo Nation, northwest to the infamous Glen Canyon, around the bitterly-contested Escalante National Monument, and finally south towards Las Vegas. The closer I got to Vegas, the closer I got to safety, for I was heading to a festival produced by and for members of my spiritual community. More specifically, I was driving to MayFire, a festival dedicated to the sacred fire circle that roughly coincides with the Neopagan holiday of Beltane. MayFire is not a Neopagan festival, but the distinction between a fire festival and a Neopagan festival isn't necessarily sharp, particularly to outsiders. During this drive, I experienced intense moments of American mythology, most vividly as the famed spires and buttes of John Wayne's Monument Valley rose on the horizon for me and for a busload of excited Japanese tourists who captured the iconic landscape from an impromptu huddle in the middle of Highway 163. Interspersed with these sensations was the historian's impulse as I continued to situate Abbey in the rapidly shifting decades of the 1950s and 1960s.

By 1965, Abbey had served as a seasonal ranger for two back-to-back seasons in

²⁰⁴ Alessandro Falassi, *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 4.

Arches in 1956 and 1957, published two novels, worked several seasonal odd jobs for the Department of the Interior, and watched his second wife leave him, taking with her their two sons, Joshua and Aaron. His marriage to Rita was probably the most tumultuous of his five; both of them retained bitter memories and lifelong resentment. Hordes of critics have derided Abbey for excluding his wife and children from *Desert Solitaire*; this derision is most likely due to the relatively widespread black and white photograph of Abbey, Rita, and thirteen-month-old Joshua in the doorway of the tiny Arches trailer on Willow Park Road. 205 None of them are smiling. Joshua's face rumples mid-fit, as though he is about to cry. Rita knits her brow; apparent disdain draws her thin dark lips downward. Abbey's brow furrows with what could be weariness, or near-hopelessness, veiling an inner impulse to bolt. While the photograph is well-known, it is not necessarily representative of Abbey's time at Arches. Joshua was born in Albuquerque twelve days after Abbey began his post in 1956; Rita never stepped foot in Arches in that year. The photograph was taken in 1957, the year that Rita and one-year old Joshua did indeed join Abbey for the season at Arches. 206 Yet as far as I'm concerned, the 1957 season of the family does not trump the 1956—and 1965—season of solitude. Metaphorically, couldn't he have felt alone even with Rita by his side? Besides, it's not like Thoreau chronicled his near-daily walks to downtown Concord while he lived at Walden Pond. One can be completely isolated in the company of others. To me, the "solitaire" in *Desert Solitaire* is not ironic; Abbey was alone.

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²⁰⁵ Available in Loeffler, *Adventures with Ed: A Portrait of Abbey* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), first photo essay.

²⁰⁶ James M. Cahalan, Edward Abbey: A Life (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 69.

Five years ago, I moved from Las Vegas back to the east coast. Tonight I've returned, just for a weekend, just to spin around the fire with old friends. Starlight alone illuminates the change into my ritual garb; the moon is new tonight. Standing beside my Jeep, I pull my long hair up into a high bun and secure it with the elastic from one of my yarn falls. Thirty orange and green strands of yarn fall over my face; I flip them back over the bun, feeling each one into place. Once these strands are set, I secure them with the elastic from the second yarn fall. The second one is for bling, dramatic effect. The yarn, which I've recently taken to wearing on a near-daily basis, is my announcement to the world that I am willing to be seen. The ends of the burnt-orange silk scarf that I wrap in between the bun and my brow are twisted around each other on top of my head, creating a garland effect. The scarf signifies that the priestess is in the house.

Abbey would return to his proving ground in 1965, yet he would endure his third season as a ranger at a very different Arches National Monument, due in no small measure to the success of Mission 66, the ten-year improvement plan of the National Park Service that had begun in 1956. The ten-mile paved entrance road, the new visitor's center, the improved camping facilities, and a considerable amount of publicity would contribute to a massive increase of visitors to the monument comparable to the recent, uranium-induced population explosion of nearby Moab.²⁰⁷ In 1965, nearly 150,000

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²⁰⁷ MASTER PLAN for Arches National Monument, Volume I: Master Plan Narrative, 27 June 1963, in National Park Service Archives, Arches National Park Museum Collection, Moab, UT, ARCH 1860, Folder 46.

people toured Arches, compared to the 30,000 of 1956.²⁰⁸ As the statistics from the final, 1963 version of Arches National Monument Master Plan attest, Abbey's "most beautiful place on earth" was littered with people, waste, cars, and rules.²⁰⁹ He could do little to protest this as a federal employee, one charged with the mission to serve what he viewed as an increasingly lazy and irreverent public. He would instead defend the land and what he saw as a noble, vanishing American way of life with his pen.

By 1965, Charlie Steen had been long gone from Moab. He sold his URECO mill, the nation's second-largest yellowcake producer, in 1961 and left the uranium industry years before it collapsed.²¹⁰ He and other major uranium players had succeeded in securing a large stockpile of uranium for the US defense industry, so much so that the Atomic Energy Commission saw no need to renew the government buying program when its lease ended in 1966.²¹¹ If the uranium rush of the 1950s was akin to the gold rushes of the nineteenth century, one of the few elements that could be relied on was that of insecurity. Industries that explode overnight are likely to die quickly. Steen got out in time.

Ready at last, I lock my Jeep and put the keys in one of my pouches. It's quiet; the ritual has started. There had been steady doumbeks and shakers for most of the duration

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 1.

Michael A. Amundson, *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 64.

Jil Ibid., 71.

of my change, yet it's been quiet for about five minutes.²¹² It must be past eleven, then; I'm late. So be it. I walk down the hill to the circle, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. Here in the Valley of Fire, a state park forty-five minutes northeast from Vegas, noise travels far without trees to dull sound, with tall red rocks to reverberate voices. As I round a bend, I hear Jeff's high baritone clearly. My pulse quickens—I haven't been around a fire with Jeff in nearly five years.

Jeff, the High Priest, the Magician, the Magus. Jeff Magnus McBride, magician of Vegas, world-renowned for his mask work and sleight-of-hand agility, particularly with playing cards. With probing eyes that flash playfulness or quick wrath and a mouth in perpetual, fidgety motion, Jeff commands attention from hundreds of yards away, whether he's on a mainstage, by a fire in a desert, or across a small room. Jeff is always on stage. Always in control, always directing the theoretically uncontrollable from afar, the sacred and profane elements are inseparable in this man.

According to anthropologists like Victor Turner, the Magician is one of the first community members to be singled out for special skills.²¹³ Shaman, priest, edgewalker, shapeshifter, the Magician has the power to walk between the worlds, to act as a conduit between humans and the supernatural, and, even, to control the elements. Man would not be ruled by nature; rather, he would become nature's master.

²13 Victor Turner, "Religious Specialists," in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, 6th ed., ed. Arthur C. Lehmann, James Myers, and Pamela A. Moro (Boston: McGraw–Hill, 2005), 149–53.

Doumbeks are small Middle Eastern hand drums with higher, softer voices than the large African djembes which are ubiquitous at these circles. When as little as two djembes are playing, doumbeks can become inaudible. The significance here is that most elements of Mayfire are tightly controlled, including the music. Specific parts of the ritual are slated for the softer percussion instruments, a backlash against djembe divas dominating the music all night.

My first vision of Jeff was through a nineteen-year-old's eyes, in May 1997. After pestering my friend Kate about her spirituality and why she sometimes referred to herself as a witch and at other times as a priestess, she had finally looked at me and said, "You need to come to Rites of Spring." She was referring to an annual Neopagan gathering in western Massachusetts, the spiritual home of perhaps thousands. I suppose that I now count myself as one of these. The gathering officially opens the Wednesday before Memorial Day with a large, nighttime ritual at one end of the site. From there, hundreds of participants walk the mile through the site to the other end: the fire circle. When I first took that left-hand turn off the main road down a winding path that glowed with the light of a large fire, I had no idea what I was walking into. I had no idea, at the time, what the burning white sage at the entrance gate signified, nor did I fully comprehend what the gatekeeper meant when she said, "Welcome Home." I had no idea why my legs pulsed with the drums, why my heart leapt when I saw the fire, why my eyes widened when I saw Jeff with his black top hat and two gold fans fanning the fire, or why I started dancing for hours. What I do know is that I haven't stopped dancing since.

As a prospector, miner, and refiner of uranium, Steen embodied some of the Magician's archetypal qualities. He transformed the community of Moab by refining pitchblende into yellowcake in his mill directly opposite the new entrance to Arches. Steen was a geologist, not a chemist; he would not then take the uranium and transform it into fuel for nuclear reactors. Yet his role in strengthening the military's nuclear stockpile is indisputable. If atomic energy was one of the key races between the US and the USSR.

Steen played a major role in defending America—in both land and dream.

In the 1960s, however, the atomic age gave way to the space age. When John F. Kennedy declared in 1961 that by the end of the decade, the United States would put a man on the moon, the entire country swooned. Nuclear power was enthralling, but it had the rather unsettling potential of global annihilation. The space race, on the other hand, was exciting, innovative, and had the potential to transcend the earth's horrors. The New Frontier was irresistible to millions of Americans in the thick of the Cold War; if man could leave earth at will, he would raise himself to the level of the gods. 15

As the fire circle comes into view, I hear Hermes invoked. Jeff is reciting something, a short piece that I don't think I know yet seem to recognize. In our postmodern, post-"grand unified truth" world, countercultural spiritual practices are often maddeningly obscure. Many modern Americans seem to prefer a vague spirituality that's personally selected than claiming—or being claimed by—an orthodox religion. In the Neopagan community, it often seems cooler to find the most obscure deities to worship, or the most unfamiliar tradition to reclaim, as though the more eclectic—yet emphatically traditional, according to *someone*, *somewhere*—one's spiritual path seems to be, the more

²¹⁴ Gerard J. Degroot, *Dark Side of the Moon: The Magnificent Madness of the American Lunar Quest* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 142.

²¹⁵ Not everyone bought into the ideology of the space race, as my friends and family members who lived through the 1960s have been quick to point out. Zimmerman's *Genesis*, however, is unapologetically patriotic and mythological; Robert S. Ellwood also invokes the gods in his mention of the Apollo program in *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1944), 180.

legitimacy that path is accorded.²¹⁶ As such, adept community leaders are able to extract some common threads and spin them into just the right words to open and close rituals, words that are broad enough to appeal to most, yet at the same time, specific enough to add credibility.

Jeff and his wife, Spinner, tend to use the Egyptian and Greek pantheons. These are fairly safe bets: two well-known Western civilizations with recognizable deities. Both precede monotheism by several centuries, a subtle (or not) affirmation that our traditions, neo or not, have withstood the test of time. Our traditions—eclectic, piecemealed, too new to even be called traditions, yet too old to be referred to as anything else—are valid, references to Hermes confirm.

An easy god for a Magician to favor, Hermes is "both mediator and trickster: working at the limits, boundaries, and frontiers between worlds, joining what is separated, facilitating communication in all forms . . . lively, rapid, and transient, a skillful and disconcerting mechanic, a great swindler with words, he takes onto himself the mobility of the world." To medieval alchemists, transforming the natural elements was thought to be akin to unlocking the ancient Philosopher's Stone, the proverbial code to the secret of life attributed to Hermes himself. Opening the ritual with Hermes reminds those in the fire circle that we, too, can transform ourselves in ritual with the metaphors of alchemy.

²¹⁶ See Sarah M. Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 40, 57.

Yves Bonnefoy, *Greek and Egyptian Mythologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 189.
 Dennis William Hauck, *The Emerald Tablet: Alchemy for Personal Transformation* (New York: Arkana–Penguin Putnam, 1999), 7–15.

"Invented tradition" is the term coined by historian Eric Hobsbawm to describe the phenomenon of creating new group identities, most often in contrast to the dominant culture. ²¹⁹ "Hobsbawm stresses that traditions are most likely to be invented during periods of rapid social change," anthropologist Sabina Magliocco writes. "This is in fact the case of Neo-Paganism, which emerged in the United States during the late 1960s, a historical juncture during which social and political movements such as ecology and feminism radically altered the American landscape. Interest in nature spirituality, Goddess-worship, and other tenets of contemporary Neo-Paganism grew out of this social transformation." ²²⁰

By 1965, John F. Kennedy had been assassinated and students protested in droves, first against their mega universities, then against segregation, then against Vietnam, then against everyone over 30, then, seemingly, against anyone and anything at all. Lost in the ashes of collective memory is the potency of these student protests and the lasting impact that they had on American life. Embedded in the protests that either inspired or repelled Americans between 1963 and 1967 was the strong belief in personal agency, the notion that an individual's action made a difference. For a few years, this notion seemed tenable. Yet as each movement splintered between the majority reformists and minority

²¹⁹ Sabina Magliocco, "Ritual is My Chosen Art Form: The Creation of Ritual as Folk Art Among Contemporary Pagans," in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural,* 6th ed., ed. Arthur C. Lehmann, James Myers, and Pamela A. Moro (Boston: McGraw–Hill, 2005), 128.

²²⁰ Ibid.

My use of 1967 as a turning point year is supported by Ellwood, 249–50; see William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 311–314, 333 for his emphasis on personal agency.

revolutionists, theories and ideals became mired in contentions over methodologies.

Social justice bled into culture wars, peaceful protests exploded into urban race riots.

America was on fire.

1968 would mark possibly the worst year in 20th century American history. The year that opened with the Tet offensive was punctured in April with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and again in June with the assassination of Robert Kennedy. In August, the riots at the Democratic National Convention seemed to confirm that violence was the only response to civil unrest. By November, many Americans seemed desperate for order; Richard Nixon was elected in large part because he promised to defend the "silent majority" of Americans determined to reclaim their country that had quickly become unrecognizable.²²²

On December 21, 1968, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders shot into the sky, orbited the earth three times, and shot up again, out of the earth's orbit towards the moon. The three astronauts of Apollo 8 became the first men "to break the bonds of the earth." Three days later, on Christmas Eve, millions of people worldwide would see the surface of the moon glide slowly across their television screens while listening to the three astronauts read twelve lines of Genesis. "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth... and God saw that it was good." Everyone back home could now see the earth in stark perspective because of the photographs the astronauts took. The "Earthrise" photograph captures the earth with about a third of it in shadow, like a waning moon a

²²² Ibid., 294.

²²³ Robert Zimmerman, *Genesis: The Story of Apollo 8, The First Manned Flight to Another World* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998).

few days past half. Born in the next decade, I've never known a world without this distant perspective. Yet the photographs of earth from outer space were monumental. To some, being able to see the earth in its totality would fortify a burgeoning environmental movement.

I imagine Abbey may have rolled his eyes at the astronaut's decision to read Genesis that night. Then again, Abbey wasn't in good spirits that Christmas; his third wife, Judy, had left him a few months earlier, taking with her their infant daughter. *Desert Solitaire* is punctuated with references to God, or god, yet Abbey privileges the material world over abstract faith: "God? . . . Who the hell is *he?* There is nothing here, at the moment, but me and the desert. And that's the truth. Why confuse the issue by dragging in a superfluous entity? . . . I am not an atheist but an earthiest. Be true to the earth."²²⁴

If Hermes is both mediator and trickster, working on the margins of communities, disseminating the truth by swindling words, does Abbey not also bear a resemblance to Hermes? Abbey earned his notoriety by writing hard truths in an often crass manner, asking uncomfortable questions and never giving complete answers. He was no prophet, despite his devotees. He was no poster boy for any movement, either, as environmentalists would soon learn. It's easy to read Abbey and determine what he was against; it's less clear to determine exactly what he is for.

In his polemic against industrial tourism, Abbey theorizes that soon enough, the tourists themselves will rise up, refuse to be enslaved by their machines, and will plunge

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²²⁴ Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 184.

into the wilderness with a hitherto unknown vigor. "The fires of revolt may soon be kindled, which means hope for us all."²²⁵ The fires of revolt had been burning for a couple of years by the time that line was published. By the end of 1968, however, the only place hope seems to have appeared was on the moon.

That the space race could be seen as an escape from the ravages of the earth is ironic in that, like atomic energy and Vietnam, the space program was another front in the Cold War financed by the defense industry. The defense industry is particularly interesting not only because its growth and success fit perfectly into the long-standing American myth of progress, but because its own rhetoric invited astute observers like Abbey to turn the myth upside down.

What is being defended by the defense industry? America? The American way of life? The idea of America? These are abstract concepts that, by virtue of the pluralistic, democratic republic in which we live, cannot be adequately defined or agreed upon. If we were to defend every American's "way of life," then we would ultimately be battling ourselves over ideas, over whose way of life is best, or which way of life is most worthy of defense. Does the defense industry defend the actual land of America? Quite the contrary, according to Abbey. In his "Theory of Anarchy," he affirms that America's "grandiose structure is self-destructive: by enshrining the profit motive (power) as our guiding ideal, we encourage the intensive and accelerating consumption of land, air, water—the natural world—on which the structure depends for its continued existence." 226

²²⁵ Ibid 54

Abbey, "A Theory of Anarchy," In *One Life at a Time Please* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 28.

Hence, the environment needed its own defense—against industry. In effect, Abbey determined that the promises of America were being broken by the military-industrial complex and "formulated a code" under which Americans could resist the ravaging of the earth with *Desert Solitaire* and the bulk of his subsequent literary non-fiction.²²⁷

Environmentalism offered a way for some Americans to fundamentally alter the ways that they lived while continuing to protest the superpower of the American nation-state. One of the casualties of the 1960s was the fall of science and technology; because of their affiliation with the defense industry, scientists rapidly descended from miracle workers to evil-doers. The only sure way to prevent total technocracy was to "go back to nature." Some Americans tried to do just this, using *The Whole Earth Catalog* and *CoEvolution Quarterly* as their veritable Bibles to transform their personal properties or create utopian communes. Others would opt for the burgeoning phenomenon of annual festivals that spoke to nostalgia, history, mythology—in short, Arcadia—giving people a chance to recreate their pasts, redefine their identities, and reimagine their futures. If personal agency couldn't transform the country, then at least it could transform individuals. This is one of the major draws to the sacred fire circle: the belief that one will transform oneself throughout the all-night ritual. So, too, might we transform the earth, transcending the nation-state entirely. We tend to "pledge allegiance to the earth,"

Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, 6th ed., ed. Arthur C. Lehmann, James Myers, and Pamela A. Moro (Boston: McGraw–Hill, 2005), 363.

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²²⁸ See, for example, Sarah L. Thomas, "A Call to Action: *Silent Spring*, Public Disclosure, and the Rise of Modern Environmentalism," in *Natural Protest: Essays on the History of American Environmentalism*, ed. Michael Egan and Jeff Crane (New York: Routledge, 2009), 186-7.

²²⁹ Steven Stoll, *U.S. Environmentalism Since 1945: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave–MacMillan, 2007), 104.

Pike, 226, 234; Ellwood, 181–2.

yet, not unlike Abbey, we often direct our attention to America itself.²³¹ "Open space was the fundamental heritage of America; the freedom of the wilderness may well be the central purpose of our national adventure."

According to Anthony F. C. Wallace, the formulation of a code is the initial step in the fourth phase of a revitalization movement. "An individual . . . constructs a new, utopian image of sociocultural organization. This model is a blueprint of an ideal society or 'goal culture.' Contrasted with the goal culture is the existing culture, which is presented as inadequate or evil in certain respects." One of Abbey's most clear descriptions of this appears in his "Theory of Anarchy." He reiterates that the existing culture is self-destructive and predicts that "the military-industrial state will disappear from the earth within a century," leading to "the coming restoration of a higher civilization: scattered human populations modest in number that live by fishing, hunting, food-gathering, small-scale farming and ranching, that gather once a year in the ruins of abandoned cities for great festivals of moral, spiritual, artistic, and intellectual renewal, a people for whom the wilderness is not a playground but their natural native home."

Two weeks after MayFire, I'm across the country in western Massachusetts at Rites of Spring, back home around my home fire. Several nights into the gathering and several hours into the ritual, I stand back and watch. The shadows have begun to skulk

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²³¹ Gary Snyder poem. The actual poem was given at a fire festival in the summer of 2008 and fit perfectly with the tone of the sacred fire circle: its sentiment is both political and transcends political boundaries.
²³² Abbey, Preface to *Beyond the Wall: Essays from the Outside* (New York: Henry Holt, 1984), xv.

²³³ Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," 363.

²³⁴ Abbey, "A Theory of Anarchy," 28.

back through the trees, casting the circle in a dulled, gray light. Faces on the edge, beyond the glow of the fire, become recognizable again as Mz. imani's hang drum stirs some sleepers awake. The hang (pronounced "hong") a rare steel drum that looks like a flying saucer, has an ethereal quality that is not unlike an electric harp. Brighthawk has now joined Mz. imani, sitting down with her own hang, and the two of them play in tandem, their hands patting and kissing the notes to create an otherworldly sound, at once ancient and futuristic, as the fire circle transitions into dawn.

Off to the side, clad in black leather pants and boots, hair pulled back under a tight black scarf, I stand with my arms crossed over the large leather smock-jacket that firetender Dave has loaned me for the night. Brighid, my dear friend and cohort, shifts at my side underneath her recently donned gray cloak. It's always coldest at this hour.

ALisa—tiny, fey-like, yet enormous in her enthusiasm and early-crone wisdom—beams as she glides past us around the fire. To our left, a woman with dark curls and quasi-tribal bellydancing costuming swoops up her arms. She holds two identical fans in her hands, fans to which perhaps eight feet of bright red nylon, the kind used for flags or banners, are attached which flutter behind her as she slowly begins to move through the circle. The fans swirl like wings or like the flames of the fire itself.²³⁵

She glides in and out of the eight other dancers, all who move slowly and lightly, some playfully, some meditatively. The gray light brightens some and the first tinge of pale pink burns on the eastern horizon. For the first time tonight, we can see the rips and tears in the dancers' skirts, the dirt streaking their legs and hands, their matted hair. The

These are actually called "fan veils" and are quickly becoming popular in the bellydance community.

fire is lower now; neither Brighid nor I have added any wood in almost an hour. As the logs settle and spiral into each other, the first morning finches and hermit thrushes begin to wake up and sing. Mz. imani responds softly, "The world needs our medicine, the world needs our medicine..." Up above, the new, bright green maple leaves begin to glow, their edges briefly shimmering with gold, which means that the sun will rise over the horizon in about thirty minutes. I smile and prepare for a new day.

I don't know what Abbey would have made of all of this. I suspect he would have shrugged or laughed at much of it and scoffed at the request that the circle be alcoholfree, yet he also would have been delighted at the sight of squirmy, nubile young women dancing around the fire. Music, women, the outdoors, a big fire. I think he'd have gotten along just fine. Indeed, the scene is not unlike the one he requested of his fifth and final wife, Clarke, to arrange for his funeral celebration. ²³⁶ As for the guidelines that have developed over the last twenty years, Abbey would obviously be our Coyote, lampooning the entire ritual and the intense seriousness with which many of us—myself included—approach its sanctity. Yet I think he would have gotten a kick out of it, even if, like me, he spent a considerable amount of time at the sidelines, observing, trying to make sense out of what is going on in these rituals.

According to historian Jon M. Cosco, Abbey can be seen as a prophet for the modern environmental movement—a loaded label, considering the movement's, and

²³⁶ Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian*, 1994, ed. David Petersen (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 2003), 295.

Abbey's, associations with the state of Utah. The invocation of the prophet begs the question: is environmentalism political or religious? Environmentalism demands no less than a reconfiguration of how we live in relation to each other and to the earth. As a political movement, such a demand can be partially forced, as the barrage of acts legislated between the Wilderness Act (1964) and the Endangered Species Act (1973) attest. Yet to successfully rewrite key American myths—exceptionalism, progress, and taming the frontier, to name a few—the dominant paradigm itself must be reformulated, a task that politics cannot completely accomplish. In this way, environmentalism can invoke the power of religious conversion, a difficult claim for a movement long dominated by liberals, progressives, radicals, and intellectuals, Americans traditionally opposed to dogma of any kind.

Abbey writes that "the moral duty of the free writer is to begin his work at home: to be a critic of his own community, his own country, his own government, his own culture. The more freedom the writer possesses the greater the moral obligation to play the role of the critic." Abbey died before the Cold War did; the freedom mentioned here speaks to both his lifelong emphasis on personal liberty and the ideological conflicts between the US and the USSR that dominated the world for the entirety of his adult life. While writing through the lenses of the Cold War, he also turns around and breaks them, noting that "the Soviet Union and the United States . . . are basically similar in structure or purpose. Both societies are dedicated to nationalism, militarism, industrialism, technology, science, organized sport, and, above all, to the religion of growth—of endless

Abbey, "A Writer's Credo," in *One Life at a Time, Please* (New York, Henry Holt, 1988), 161.

expansion in numbers, wealth, power, time, and space."238

Like his father, Abbey was born with dissent in his blood; I can't imagine Abbey living in any dominant system that would not have been subject to his criticism. As several scholars have attested, no group was safe from Abbey's pen; the trained philosopher was far too inquisitive and demanding to accept any "formulation of a code" unless it was his own. This does not mean he was a rebel for the sake of being rebellious; on the contrary, it means that he spent years thinking and rethinking how to live, both in solitude and with others. More a man of words than a man of active reform, however, Abbey never exactly tells his readers how to enter Eden—or Zion—short of just kicking back and waiting for the existing culture to collapse. Sporadic monkeywrenching aside, Abbey does not design a detailed path to total cultural transformation. His strength is in his ideas, in the core themes—anarchy, liberty, community, freedom, and wilderness that appear in nearly everything he wrote. He never tired of asking questions. He never tired of pointing out what wasn't working in America, not (solely) to be a pain in everyone's ass, but because he was constantly reevaluating how we might live together better. "A more perfect union" is never realized; it is always in process.

Democracy, of course, is absolutely exhausting.

Before the fire circle can contain ecstatic dancing, powerful drumming, or the quiet bliss of the pre-dawn hang drum, the actual space needs to be constructed. Brighid and I arrived at Rites of Spring two days early to be part of the pre-festival building crew

²³⁸ Abbey, "A Writer's Credo," 169.

and spent the entire time in the fire circle, half a mile away from the main camp. The small clearing in the woods, surrounded by the maples, slim birches, and wild blueberry bushes common to New England, has served as the "original" fire for thousands of us. We have been raking leaves, clearing branches, stacking truckbed after truckbed of firewood, steadying the large rocks around the fire pit, layering the inner circle with mountains of peat moss, and marking the perimeter with tall, carved wooden poles, large rocks, and torches.

This year, about three people decided that the musicians' benches would be moved across the circle, from North to roughly Southeast. This is a major change, and many are shocked. The need to move the musicians was real; their old location has gotten smaller every year as the back edge of the clearing has eroded downhill towards the lake. Yet the decision was not made by consensus, and resentment lingers. Late in the afternoon on Tuesday, we've been adjusting to the new placement of the benches, and thereby every other installation, for twenty-four hours.

"I'm wondering about the food altar," Elizabeth offers.

Over the years, we've come to realize that certain logistical elements are important—a water altar, for example, is critical. We must have a constant supply of fresh drinking water that's easily spotted and accessible. To maintain our energy, we must have food, it has to go somewhere, and someone has to find a table to use for it. Maybe Elizabeth was trying to compensate for her hurt feelings; maybe she was reminding the rest of us that her experience and opinions should be sought.

About eight people walked over towards Elizabeth to discuss the food altar.

Looking across the circle at Brighid, I knew that she was annoyed. She hid this well, for Brighid is astonishingly open, welcoming, friendly, kind—all of the gracious social qualities that I sorely lack. Yet we were tired. We'd been working hard, both physically and mentally, to transform the space in a short amount of time in a way that would be acceptable to as many of us as possible. The food altar was moved.

Half an hour later, after many, including Elizabeth, had left for dinner, Brighid uncharacteristically burst out: "Can I just say, I mean, no! The food altar cannot go there! That space needs to be kept clear for the fire tenders. The food altar was *fine* over here. Why can't it be over here?" Without a word, I picked up one end of the table, waited for Brighid to walk over, and we moved it back. "Seriously! Why do we have to have a fucking dialogue about every single detail! Why isn't anyone happy until they've had some long fucking *process* about every single decision?! Jesus GOD!"

When Abbey writes that "democracy is anarchy taken seriously," I believe that he means that the best social organizations are small and egalitarian, based on "mutual aid and consent." Yet does mutual consent mean total consensus? If so, what would Abbey himself do? If Abbey had been present at the scene described above, I can't imagine him doing anything beyond rolling his eyes, grabbing a beer, and walking down the hill to chase a woman. Would Abbey really have had the patience to endure the mental mastication of group decision-making processes and their implications for the placement of a folding table? He would have lampooned the entire scene, and, likely, the whole

²³⁹ Abbey, "A Theory of Anarchy," 26.

group for wasting this kind of time. In fact, it's possible that moments such as this are more ludicrous than the composite picture of the entire community: a bunch of mostly white, well-educated, loosely-defined pagans hijacking deities, consecrating sacred space, and dancing around a fire for eight hours playing primarily West African drums and rhythms while using the metaphors of medieval alchemy and transpersonal psychology to transform ourselves in one night.

I'm not sure what I mean by that last line. Am I poking fun or being mean? I write "hijacking deities" as if to acknowledge common accusations about inauthenticity and cultural appropriation, and, in so doing, my own complicity. While the complexities of this argument are outside the scope of this essay, it is worth noting religious scholar Sarah M. Pike and her placement of cultural appropriation in a broader historical framework:

"The United States is a culture that simultaneously yearns for and denies its ancestors—yearns for them in order to provide some stability in a relentlessly convulsive society, rejects them as one of the preconditions for success in this economy. Neopagans thus reflect the ambivalence toward ancestors characteristic of American society when they long for cultural purity, but constantly shape and change borrowed practices to suit their needs as contemporary Americans."

Newcomers to a new land lack roots; the fire circle as an invented tradition reestablishes a diverse collection of roots for this community. Yet nothing ever happens in this community without negotiations and dialogue which serve two purposes: ensuring that all voices are heard and flatly rejecting hierarchy and overt leadership. These are good goals. Hierarchy for the sake of power and control over others should be

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²⁴⁰ Pike, 150.

questioned. Yet hierarchy for the sake of building a ritual space could be, dare I say, more efficient than pure egalitarianism.

Conflicts such as these can be difficult in that they are always two-fold. We are never just negotiating the placement of a table; we are also negotiating how to negotiate. "Neopagans are a contentious group of individualists who argue about every aspect of festival experience," Pike observes. 241 We are unapologetically individualist, yet we are also searching for, and increasingly committed to, community. 242 Our invented tradition is perpetually in the invention stage, or co-creation stage, to use a common term in this tribe. If the fire tribe as an offshoot of Neopaganism can be viewed as a revitalization movement in its own right, then one of its inherent challenges is that we lack Wallace's identifiable "individual, or group of individuals," who "constructs a new, utopian image of socio-cultural organization." ²⁴³ In the fire tribe, that "group of individuals" means every member of the community. Egalitarianism, the core of Abbey's ideal society, is a social structure found almost exclusively in small bands of people numbering between twenty and thirty. Is egalitarianism the best model for a community of several hundred?

While others may apply the prophet label to Abbey, I doubt he would have appreciated the term. Abbey was a writer. He remains relevant because his criticisms are incisive and perspicacious and because he wrote in the tradition of the American writer as critic of America: Coyote, Hermes, the Fool, the Sage—all guises which mask, or most certainly complicate, the American patriot. Abbey was relentless in his criticisms of

²⁴¹ Pike, 55. ²⁴² Ibid., 222–3.

²⁴³ Wallace, 363.

America and its technocratic institutions which, to him, were rendering the country into the ground. Yet he never put himself in exile. He never claimed to hate America per se, even if he was disgusted with its policies. Abbey was a life-long anarchist, though I've come to believe that anarchism and patriotism are not mutually exclusive. Rather, Abbey longed to revitalize an America in which people reclaimed a sense of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency, qualities which might eventually lessen the need for a large central power. Implied in this reclamation is a strengthened sense of "mutual aid," the shared concern that is the bedrock of a strong community.

"My name is Sarah and I am ready to step into my womanhood." Her last words spoken as a girl are determined, unwavering. Her words bounce off of the bodies of over a hundred adult witnesses whose reverent silence creates a palpable container for this rite. The firelight dances the night shadows off of her white dress, her focused expression, the white orchid that I had given to her earlier in the evening to wear in her hair. A few minutes ago, nine women in red and four maidens in white processed into the sacred fire circle at SpiritFire, another fire festival that occurs later in the summer in upstate New York. Eight women stood at even points around the fire; the four maidens stood in front of them, at the directional quarters. When the others are in place, I step forward to clarify our intentions.

"Behold four maidens standing in their power. With one foot rooted in the familiarity of girlhood and one foot newly planted in the mysteries of womanhood, these four maidens have been walking the liminal space between two modes of being. We

honor them as we recognize the potency of holding multiple archetypes within us at once." The thin, three-foot logs of maple that lean into the center of the fire are still intact and feed the flames half again as high. Slowly, I move around the circle, invoking the ancestors, then the women, and finally, the men:

"In the presence of the men: kings, warriors, magicians, lovers, the fathers, the grandfathers whose blood runs through your veins, you are witnessed, held, and holy."

My eyes meet Owen's across the fire. Representing the men of the community, he steps forward: "daughters of the Divine...you may trust the men here. The men here believe in you, we know you are destined for greatness. The men also want to be there for you—we will watch out for you..." *You may trust the men here*. Later, I will hear that Owen's words sent several adults to tears, men and women alike. The adults needed to hear this affirmation of mutual protection and respect as much as the maidens, if not more so. Most of the adults present had not had such a public rite of passage. *I am ready to step into my womanhood*. Have the rest of us women done so? Do I model fully realized feminine power well?

When I return to Logan, Utah in mid-August for my final four months in the town I love to loathe, I will think about this rite of passage ceremony over and over again. Why was it so meaningful to me? Does my pride in co-creating a successful ritual diminish its potency? Do I take away from the maidens' transitions when I suddenly frame the ritual in terms of my own rite of passage?

"The initiate in these rituals is at once alone and yet never entirely independent.

For biological reasons, we are creatures achingly vulnerable to the emotions, opinions, and physical care of others. . . . We are born and die alone, ultimately unique and separate, yet we are unable to survive without our fellows and the web of symbols and activities that bind us one to another."²⁴⁴ So it is that anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff rebukes the stories I tell about myself, the false freedom I claim when I cast myself as the solitary prospector or the lone ranger. Besides, prospectors and rangers serve an actual purpose; those are real occupations, not just archetypes.

In hindsight, I suppose that I could view my entire journey in the summer of 2008 as some sort of rite of passage, though I immediately broaden that to include my whole sixteen months in Utah. A rite of passage, traditionally understood, involves isolation from community, time for the initiate to be one with herself and Spirit. My isolation from my community in Florida, the many good friends I had cultivated relationships with for four years, was inordinately challenging; by my second semester in that endless winter of 2008, I would never pick up the phone when a friend called, for hearing the sound of my friends' voices invariably induced tears. I've grown accustomed to living apart from my spiritual community, though I never rued this separation so much as I did in Utah.

A true rite of passage also requires that the initiate comes back, comes back to her community and is celebrated as a new and improved, a revitalized, if you will, person.

My flight out West was firmly in the tradition of the American pilgrimage, the solitary journey West to find one's grail, one's fortune, one's purpose. With such high

²⁴⁴ Barbara Myerhoff, "Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox," in *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and* Ritual, ed. Victor Turner (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 111–12.

expectations, who can return East? Who can return to one's community without riches, without evidence of making one's mark in the world, or, at the very least, without clearly recreating one's self into something better?

The mandate of self-actualization isn't a terrible one. Self-sufficiency is not a bad capability. Yet if that is the sole objective of one's journey, then one is left alone. If, on the other hand, one learns new tools in isolation not just to improve one's self, but to improve the community at large, then that might be worthy of merit. Maybe. Before I return East, then, it would behoove me to take stock of what I am bringing with me—and what I am leaving behind.

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

By early February 2008 I'd had enough. As I remember it, the last two weeks of January had averaged a high temperature of eight degrees. That was in the middle of the day. At ten o'clock in the morning as I crossed the campus, the temperature was still below zero. Inhumane, I thought to myself. Downright inhumane. I learned that at a certain point, it gets too cold to snow. Growing up five miles from the Atlantic Ocean, I'd never heard of such a thing. My ocean warms and moves the winter like Cache Valley chills it, contains it, the inversion a tight lid on the bitter, polluted air and the bitter, polluted woman I quickly became.

The depression that returned last winter I had not seen in over ten years, since I had removed myself from the gray New England winters that would annually turn me to stone. During more interactions than I care to count in the winter of 2008, I would watch myself as though outside my own body and wince as a hostile woman spit venom on colleagues and staff alike. Why, I began asking daily, do people come to Utah? Why do people live here?

That question became the starting point for this thesis. In many ways, Utah represents the mythological American West: inhospitable as its climate may be, it is sparsely populated, at least compared to the eastern seaboard. There are treasures in the underexplored desert and canyons for anyone brave enough to live here. Besides, "the strenuous life" that the Western climate demands, as Teddy Roosevelt and Frederick

Jackson Turner remind us, have shaped our exceptional American character. This is the pioneer myth, the frontier myth, the edict of manifest destiny, the mandate to "go West" and strike gold, or uranium, or real estate, or some other monetary symbol of freedom.

As I've prepared for my second degree in American Studies, I've thought about the "westerning impulse," as Wallace Stegner romantically characterizes colonization, domination, resource scarcity. I'd never heard nineteenth-century pioneers honored as reverently as they are here in Utah; to easterners, particularly those of us from New England, the pioneers were either immigrants or poor whites who couldn't afford land anywhere east of the Mississippi. They were desperate itinerants, fools lured by boosters and false promises, the underclass that Easterners hardly missed. Yet these pioneers are the recent ancestors of many Utahans—and persecuted ones, to boot. One need not look too hard to find several of America's most cherished myths coalescing in the culture of Utah: adding to the expansionist myths mentioned above, the Exodus myth is as powerful to Mormons as it has been for Black Americans and John Winthrop's Pilgrims. Pioneers, pilgrims, prophets: these are the people who created the iconic American West.

I think in terms of myths and values, sweeping generalizations that hark back to American Studies scholars such as Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, Perry Miller and the like. This is largely because of how I was trained as an undergraduate in the discipline and also because I like myths. I think that they are useful. One need not buy into the myth entirely to recognize it, to have parts of it resonate in one's bones.

"Expectations for exceptionalism" might sum up my thoughts about Utah and the American West, then and now. The lure of the American West is in promises of

abundance, unbridled opportunity, in freedom, in self-actualization. An old story. Yet this was my fourth time out here, not my first. For me to have truly believed that I would strike success this time around would render me either wildly optimistic or clinically insane, according to the oft-repeated definition of the latter. And, at least in matters of the self, I am anything but optimistic.

I chose to write a creative Plan A American Studies thesis because, as far as I could tell, that was the most challenging option. I would critically engage the myths and values of the American West in the context of post-WWII environmental history in Utah. As Utah State's American Studies program is housed in the English Department, I decided it would be appropriate to integrate American literature into this thesis, a subject area in which I have virtually no background. I made an attempt at this through the works of Edward Abbey, though I ended up examining Abbey as a man and thinker as opposed to deconstructing his texts, a choice I do not regret.

The first twenty years of Abbey's adult life precisely parallel the first twenty years of the Cold War, an irresistible synchronicity that I exploit shamelessly, particularly in chapter 4. I try not to claim causality; rather, I attempt, in Reg Saner's phrase, to utilize "hidden affinities of coincidence." I have long obsessed with the myths that we hold dear and what we do with those myths, namely, the narratives that we construct for ourselves, particularly in times of rapid change. When something major happens to shift the dominant paradigm—say, the creation and use of the atomic bomb—then the stories we tell about ourselves must be revised to accommodate the shift. When the United States

became a superpower, America made some rapid decisions with long-term consequences. On diplomatic and militaristic levels, these decisions and consequences have been analyzed and reanalyzed for years, and no doubt will be for many more. It is the collective image of America and Americans that I have tried to discuss in this thesis, particularly how the image changed between 1946 and 1956. The image changed because the stories changed, and the stories changed "in the interest of national defense."

The interdisciplinarity of American Studies comes naturally to me and is why I chose the field five years ago. I aim for a healthy mix of historicism by incorporating social and cultural historians along with military and diplomatic historians. I am comfortable using concepts from anthropologists and religious studies scholars and also value quantitative research, hard numbers and statistics to solidify my claims. Abbey is a relatively easy writer for me to research in that virtually all of his non-fiction is autobiographical in one way or another; this boon, along with his journals and the insight of one of his best friends and biographer, Jack Loeffler, helped me acquaint myself with the infamous writer and cultural critic. Note that I write "acquaint myself"—I do not claim that I know or even understand Edward Abbey. That said, I soon recognized Abbey as my kind of man: tall, difficult, and aloof. Obstinate. Uncomfortable in most social settings. Idealistic. A lover of women. Refreshingly different and coolly detached, like most Aquarian men I know. And, above all, highly intelligent. Painfully intelligent, even.

I stayed close to Abbey's own words and those of his three primary biographers:

Loeffler, James Bishop, Jr., and the indispensible James M. Cahalan. I did not engage

Ann Ronald or Peter Quigley, Scott Herring or Dan Phillipon, or any other commendable

literary critic who has researched Abbey. I suppose I still feel insecure in this regard; I do not feel as though I have the requisite training to enter into a literacy criticism conversation. I instead relied on the standard method of historians—archival research—and the classic method of American Studies scholars: unlikely primary documents. I pored over Texaco maps from the 1950s and national magazines of the era such as *Life, Collier's, and Coronet*. The inhalation of decades-old dust while searching for a 1955 advertisement of a Chevrolet is medicine for me, as is fingering the same map that Wallace Stegner used in the 1940s as he researched Powell. Unfortunately, that map at the University of Utah is of the Boulder Dam, not the Echo Park dam, but holding it in my hands brought me closer to the post-WWII era, just like reading how-to guides for potential uranium prospectors and articles with scientific experts on the benign effects of nuclear fallout induced disbelief and a strange sympathy.

My intellectual passions are politics and religion. They always have been and likely always will be. Broadly speaking, politics is the institution in which we exercise or control power. We change what we have the power to change. Religion, on the other hand, is the institution in which we surrender our power to something or someone greater than us. We accept what we cannot change with the aid of religion, as the prayer goes.

This is why chapters 4 and 5 are particularly meaningful to me, for in them I try to articulate not only how America changed, but how Americans responded and adapted to these changes. To imply that the countercultural left was composed of the only Americans who challenged America's course is misleading and erroneous. Many Americans challenged the dominant paradigm; I have simply focused on Abbey, an

outspoken critic and defender of the earth, and the Neopagan movement which greatly inspired the Fire Tribe community. Environmentalism may be a political movement, but it has its moments of religiosity, for better or for worse. Likewise, Neopaganism and the Fire Tribe are religious, or, more palatable to many of their members, spiritual, yet as is customary with new religious movements, the increased attention on social interactions and group negotiations speaks to a political awareness and to the proper exercise of personal power.

Research for the fourth chapter was dangerously easy. Even if subjectivity is no longer as much of a liability as it was a decade or two ago, the line between participant and observer is always a treacherous one, especially for young social researchers. I've conducted social research before and fully admit that all of my primary research on the Fire Tribe and the Neopagan community is subjective, anecdotal, and would never stand up to the institutional powers that be—it's undocumented. The conversations and rituals that I include have been corroborated with the other participants, but those phone conversations aren't recorded. It wasn't until the twilight of my research on this project that I stumbled onto Sarah M. Pike's excellent book and, through her bibliography, discovered quite a few sources that would have been useful to this chapter—or, more optimistically, will be useful to me in the future.

It would have been a lot easier if I had compared the controversy over Echo Park to the controversy over Grand Staircase-Escalante, or if I had deconstructed Abbey's most vehement attacks on America and analyzed his anti-immigrant stance with Mark Twain's nativist writings. I could have, as Chris Cokinos pointed out, written this entire

thesis about road-building in the 1950s and its impact on tourism in southern Utah. If anything, I have confirmed that I have a penchant for making things hard on myself.

Expectations for exceptionalism and all.

Up until this point, I have avoided discussing that which I would rather skip: the creative non-fiction ambitions, accomplishments, and shortcomings of this thesis. I don't want to admit that there are elements of this thesis that are personal, sections that appear suspiciously like memoir. I lament the fact that chapter 2 contains the strongest writing in the entire collection. I shudder to think that I can spin silk out of words only when I am being most critical of myself, for that could mean that either the rest of my writing is bland, or that some narcissistic part of me thinks that I am a more interesting subject than anything else, or, most ominously, that my good writing depends on my depression, anxiety, and general neuroses.

If the "triggering story" of this thesis, in Philip Gerard's term, is the revitalization of America in the latter half of the 20^{th} century, then the deeper story is about the search for community through a prolonged period of isolation. This is a common story, the proverbial return to one's tribe after a rite of passage. Even Abbey looked forward to his return to New York: "After twenty-six weeks of sunlight and stars, wind and sky and golden sand, I want to hear once more the crackle of clamshells on the floor of the bar in the Clam Broth House in Hoboken Enough of Land's End, Dead Horse Point,

Tukuhnikivats and other high resolves; I want to see somebody jump out of a window or off a floor. I grow weary of nobody's company but my own."²⁴⁵ So do I, I'm afraid.

I've used Abbey as a decoy at times, to avoid talking about myself; at other times I've used him as a measuring stick against which I can compare myself. I've allowed myself to believe that he struggled with the same tensions that I do, that most of us do: self-preservation versus dissolving into another, or others, solitude versus companionship, delusions of aptitude versus mounting evidence of mediocrity.

A few months ago I jotted down the following: "While we may come West to self-actualize, what we actually come here to do is surrender control." The power of the Canyonlands, of Red Rock Country, is partly in its grandiosity and its naked danger. The cliffs are gorgeous: stumble and die. The wash looks cool and shaded: lie down and rest and die. The red rocks, red dirt, the iron that I hungrily breathe as though inhalation or actual consumption could make me harder and stronger is inspirational: come here, and wear the mantle of Abbey, of Terry Tempest Williams, of Ellen Meloy and Amy Irvine, of Craig Childs. Write short sentences. Sparse. Bare, like Tempest Williams. Toss out phrases that are bold, raw, yet seem to be hiding something: I analyze some of Abbey's phrases as though they were government code. "The shock of the real." The crow flies at midnight. Paradox and bedrock.

²⁴⁵ Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 265.

I came out here to self-actualize and I now leave inexplicably shattered. Was it my reaction to Logan, to Cache Valley, the ease with which I remembered to harden myself into stone in response to what I viewed as an inhospitable climate? Perhaps Tempest Williams is right—perhaps I have been "broken open like a rock fallen from a once-secure place." Yet I remain in pieces. Part of this thesis was meant to deconstruct Abbey; apparently I have deconstructed myself. Better than destroying myself, I suppose.

This thesis has forced me to a relatively familiar crossroads: I took on two disciplines with rigor and determination. I was less of a writer than a critical scholar when I entered USU; sixteen months later, I have closed the gap. I'm a decent writer and a decent young scholar; this is the place where I generally jump ship and prospect for a new ambition, a new vocation, a new adventure.

I am loathe to wax personal here, yet I promise the reader at the tail of chapter 4 that I will. What am I taking back to the East coast? What am I leaving here in Utah? I may well join a host of graduate students who stop with a Master's and do not pursue a PhD. I don't crave that degree, and I believe that one must indeed crave it to bother with it. I have tasted the possibility of writing with the intent to publish, for better or for worse. A dreary prospect—who in their right mind would want to become a writer?

I don't think it's a desire so much as a necessity, a compulsion. I've learned through teaching writing and studying creative non-fiction that I really do write in order to figure out what I think—a critical tool for a mind that generally leaps and vaults like a team of gymnasts practicing before tryouts. Even in my worst moments, I still value my mind, with all of its quirks and misfired synapses.

I have displayed what I consider to be my worst traits and characteristics on a fairly consistent basis here in Utah. I imagine that this is due to the fantasy that I would reach my vague goals alone, that if I accepted help, then my accomplishments would not be mine to own. I admit that my undergraduate mentor's words to me—"You're strongest asset is your writing. That's what you should do. Just write. No one's going to want to work with you"—sting now as strongly as they did two years ago, that I believed her then and believe her even more so now. She knew me in sunny, friend-filled Florida. Imagine what she'd say to me today.

So if solecisms are mistakes, improprieties, incongruities, I confess that my solecism was that I decided that I had to be alone, and that I would ensure solitude and isolation at whatever cost. My solecism was that I could be a lone ranger in an academic community—a solecism that has forced thousands out of academia, I'm sure. I love studying politics. I loathe playing politics. My solecism was that I could enter a foreign community and thrive without establishing deep connections. I was wrong.

In October, I drove down to Moab for the Confluence: A Celebration of Reading and Writing, which focused on Abbey and his influence. While there I spent eight hours with Amy Irvine, author of *Trespass: Living on the Edge of the Promised Land*, a beautiful memoir which is braided with Mormon and Anasazi history and which I just happened to have been reading as I wrote the first draft of this thesis. Irvine was one of the three writers who taught workshops to attendees, and I ended up working with her and a mere seven other writers on the final day of classes. Irvine titled her class "Fire in the Belly: How to Fan the Flames Through Personal Narrative." I appreciate the direct

approach; I can rise to ambitious tasks, especially when framed in terms of my favorite element.

After we had introduced ourselves, Irvine related one of her passages from *Trespass* in which she and her husband discover a coyote recently shot through the neck and strung up on a fence as a warning to its kin. "That's the moment. That's why I write," Irvine said, her face animated, her body leaning into us. "We often distance ourselves from the feelings of horror, heartache, or shock, yet this is exactly the moment that needs to be written, the split second just before we cry out, *How could you?* By writing that moment, I force myself to own my part in the piece, my own complicity in whatever tragedy I'm trying to show. I have to write from that place—my story is strung up on that fence "

My story is strung up on that fence. Irvine stressed intimacy, vulnerability, and complicity throughout the day—at least, that's how I remember it. Apparently, that's what I needed to hear. The idea that I can grow in isolation, without the sustenance of community, is simply false. One does not go on a rite of passage and stay alone in the wilderness for the rest of her life—the point is to come back revitalized, ready to give back to the community who has sustained her.

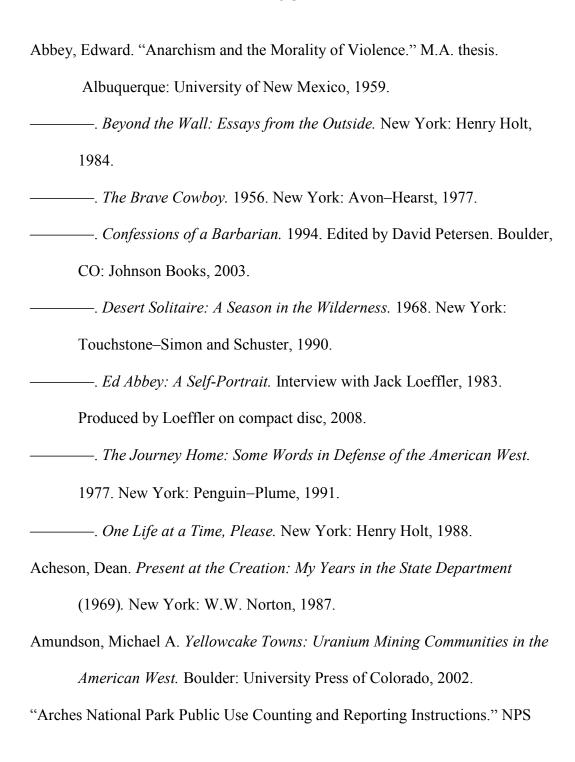
M. Scott Peck writes, "There can be no vulnerability without risk, no community with risk, no peace—and ultimately, no life—without community." I don't know that I'm any stronger now than I was before I came out West, though it's possible that I may be braver. I can't claim that I have moved from the strength of defense to the strength of vulnerability, though I can say that I recognize the difference between the two, and,

moreover, why the latter may ultimately be a more fulfilling option. I know that I have long asked myself exactly what do I have to give back to the communities that sustain me, a question that usually induces a bout of self-loathing. The risk to claim that I have learned something about myself, about the West, about environmental and Cold War histories, and, of course, about writing, is still overwhelming to me, for it would imply that I have a responsibility to do something with my knowledge.

I'm only picking up the pieces of the rock. I'm not sure how to put them back yet.

All I know is that the arrangement that I am used to is no longer appropriate, a knowledge that is partly terrifying, partly liberating, mostly interesting. Interesting enough to entertain in a new essay, from a new vantage point, in a revitalized community back East.

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