

7-25-2012

# Farmer, Miner, Ranger, Writer: Interpreting Class and Work in the Writing of Wendell Berry and Edward Abbey

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FARMER, MINER, RANGER, WRITER: INTERPRETING CLASS AND WORK IN  
THE WRITING OF WENDELL BERRY AND EDWARD ABBEY

by

Tyler Nickl

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

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2012

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## ABSTRACT

Farmer, Miner, Ranger, Writer: Interpreting Class and Work in the Writing of Wendell

Berry and Edward Abbey

by

Tyler Nickl, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2012

Major Professor: Dr. Melody Graulich

Department: English

The writings of Wendell Berry and Edward Abbey are often read for their environmental ethics only. This approach blinds readers to the social significance of their texts. In order to recover some of that social significance, I read both writers' most popular works with an attention to how labor, occupation, and class are represented. The great array of material this approach uncovers demonstrates that nature cannot be considered apart from class and economy. Using four works by Wendell Berry—*Hannah Coulter* (2004), *Remembering* (1988), *The Unsettling of America* (1977), and *Nathan Coulter* (1960)—I demonstrate how Berry's mixed-class background allows him to celebrate manual labor by putting it at the center of his philosophy and obscuring the material problems faced by professional farmers. Using two works by Edward Abbey—*The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), *Desert Solitaire* (1968)—I show how class-identity inflects Abbey's ironic poetics and approach to nature. (81 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Farmer, Miner, Ranger, Writer: Interpreting Class and Work in the Writing of Wendell Berry and Edward Abbey

Tyler Nickl

This study compares some of the essays and novels of two well known, environmental writers: Wendell Berry and Edward Abbey. Usually, these writers are discussed for their environmental politics and representations of nature, but this study examines the ways in which each of these writers discusses class and manual labor. This aspect of Abbey's and Berry's works has not yet received the attention it deserves. With this focus in mind, I make the following conclusions: 1) An author's view of society (as expressed by their opinions of class and socioeconomic status) necessarily affects their view of nature. 2) Berry's occupational experiences as farmer and writer complicate each other, resulting in what some scholars call mixed-class consciousness—a condition in which one's worldview reflects multiple class and occupational experiences that can never be completely reconciled. 3) Edward Abbey uses irony to deflect attention away from his class experience, hoping to escape society. 4) Work and occupation play a large role in shaping how we perceive the world, and we should therefore value working-class opinions and values more than we do.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Melody Graulich for her interest in my developing career and her critical insight. Her wealth of experience and knowledge renders her attention a precious gift. I am grateful to have worked with her, and I hope to honor her confidence in me as I begin doctoral study. I thank Dr. Evelyn Funda for introducing me to literature and topics that have resonated with me deeply and have thereby changed the course of my life and career. Responding carefully to my writing, she has helped me to keep my style and my research interests anchored on solid ground instead of airy abstraction. I thank Dr. Lawrence Culver for serving on my committee and am grateful for his suggestions and insights during this project.

Though I have made many friends in the course of my study, none has helped me more than Ian Weaver. The debating, reading, brainstorming, and commiserating we did together will be cherished memories of my time in Logan. I thank my parents for their examples of hard work and the love of learning.

Most important, I thank my wife. Jessica, you have been indispensable to this project. Your material sacrifice has allowed me the luxury of a graduate education. You have been a sounding board, a critic, a coach, a cheerleader, and a friend. Your intelligence, curiosity, openness, and kindness inspire me.

Tyler Nickl

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

It has become conventional wisdom to see Edward Abbey and Wendell Berry as Thoreau's literary heirs. Ann Ronald, for example, points out that Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968) follows patterns established in Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and grounds a broader comparison of Abbey to Thoreau in their mutually held beliefs in "the joys of solitude, in the need for wilderness, in the enormity of big government, and in the efficacy of studied dissent" (66, 129). Jason Peters likewise invokes Thoreau as he introduces his edited collection on Berry's career, noting that we hear echoes of Thoreau in Berry's asceticism, spirituality, naturalism, and pacifism (1–4). In their dedicated search for a "correct" relation of humanity to itself and the nonhuman world, the two modern authors certainly take cues from their nineteenth-century forbearer and have earned whatever praise such comparisons intend.

However, many critics have overlooked another way in which the authors are similar: all three pay special attention in their writing to manual labor. Berry's writing frequently describes farm work in great detail, and Abbey's best-loved fiction draws out of blue-collar jobs subversive possibilities. Thoreau, for his part, cannot wait even a full sentence before emphasizing manual labor in *Walden*: "I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, *in a house which I built myself*, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and *earned my living by the labor of my hands only*" (1, my



emphasis). Michael Newberry demonstrates that Thoreau's anxiety about manual labor corresponded to ideological changes brought about by the mid-nineteenth-century professionalization of the workforce in the eastern United States. Thoreau's inclusion of labor in his writing, Newberry argues, is but one example of a broader unease felt by members of the rising middle-class, a group that "defined itself through its separation from the manual" yet also needed to "re-unite in rhetorical terms middle-class occupations with traditional valorizations of manual work" (683). When Thoreau writes about his physical work, he does so as a middle-class man and professional writer, someone whose career puts him at a necessary remove from the yeoman values and life he performs at Walden Pond. Thoreau's bean-farming and wood-chopping thus locate him squarely among the other middle-class men of his age whom he imagined to be so different from himself and say much about the society he sought in part to escape.

This Thoreau—the one whose work and life responds to its own historical moment—is not often the one to whom Abbey and Berry are usually compared. Rather, the Thoreau we recognize in them is an ahistorical character, abstracted from the particulars of his own socioeconomic experience. This sort of comparison is not altogether a bad thing. Reading the two modern authors for their similarities to the Thoreau that we have inherited as a mythic persona could have legitimized them early on in their careers and, as shown above, has called attention to the commonalities among the three that enable us to realize US nature-writing as a valuable (even canonical) genre. Insofar as the recognition of this genre opens doors for new writers to call us back to nature, we are well served by Thoreau's celebrity. But Abbey and Berry are no longer new writers, nor are they merely "nature writers." To read their work only as extensions

of that genre takes the writing out of the authors' sociopolitical contexts, blinding us to some of its social and cultural significance. Rather than see Berry and Abbey through the lens of an ahistorical personality, we ought to re-anchor their writing to their own biographies and the historical moments and communities in which they lived them, specifically the US milieu of environmentalism from 1960 to the present. I argue that, as it did for Newberry with Thoreau, putting each writer's professional and economic life in dialogue with their representations of work, labor, and class can do exactly that. Taking such an approach helps us better appreciate the way in which authors and thinkers such as these enlist nature to the causes and opinions that represent their own interests. In other words, there is no "natural" or neutral depiction of nature. Our cultural baggage is inextricably entwined in our representations. In this thesis, I will illustrate how class-consciousness, as part of that cultural baggage, inflects both modern authors' view of the natural. Moments in the authors' texts that deal with work and occupation elucidate these inflections. This study will analyze a few of the most popular texts from each writer's career, considering what these works may have to say about class in the United States during the late twentieth century.

Whereas Newberry found Thoreau to be relatively unconscious of his class-status, I find that Abbey and Berry are slightly more aware of class. Wendell Berry places work at the center of human culture and experience, making it *the* vehicle by which we come to know nature. Given the epistemological function work serves in his philosophy, Berry identifies farming as the occupation most suited to human health and happiness as it cooperates with and stewards the nonhuman world. He thus emphasizes in his writing farming's potential to create human cultures that foster balance and unity. This stance

helps Berry to critique modern American society's fetish for progress, social mobility, and success. But Berry's representation of farming is able to bear the burden of his social philosophy only because he does not rely on farming for his living. His occupation as a scholar and writer necessarily obstructs his view of the material and political problems that can catalyze class conflict among farmers. Taken altogether, I see Berry's writing as a manifestation of his mixed-class consciousness—a condition Renny Christopher describes as created by the interplay in the psyche of one's experiences across traditional class-lines ("Louis Owens's Representations of Working-Class Consciousness"). For Berry, the dignity and importance he imputes to physical work evince his working-class sympathies and earn him a place among writers of the working-class genre; his idealized picture of farm-town unity reflects the distance he enjoys as a professional writer. Thus, Berry's version of nature has much to do with his commitment to a traditional life of family, locality, and craftsmanship.

Edward Abbey's writing crafts a persona that is brash, irreverent, funny, and, most important, independent. However, maintaining that persona requires Abbey to ironize in his non-fiction his employment as a ranger at Arches National Park. Irony suits his purposes well; by evading final, absolute meanings, he is able to complicate perpetually his readers' attempts to pin him with a class identity that would threaten his writerly ethos. In his fiction, he rends blue collar labor from the assumptions we usually make about the subordinate status of labor to capital. That his readers find that move appealing suggests the frustrations they feel with abstract, unphysical, middle-class occupations and the democratic society based around such work. Despite the ambiguity Abbey's ironies introduce in any reading of social status in his writing, his thoughts on

work do occasionally reveal the vestiges of his own class-experience. Considering that class experience suggests how and why Abbey chose to represent the ideal, natural landscape (especially in southern Utah) primarily as an escape from society and economy.

Both writers' invocations of class and work can partly be explained by understanding their peculiar place in the history of the environmental movement. Berry and Abbey began their careers under one patrician ideology of nature and are concluding those careers under another set of ideas espoused by a younger generation of the elite. Despite the differences between these two generations and their respective views on earth and environment, both represent the moneyed class. For Berry and Abbey then, including manual work and blue-collar experience in their writing signifies their difference from either of these camps and asserts their individuality.

Berry and Abbey both studied under Wallace Stegner at Stanford; Abbey in 1957, and Berry in 1958, respectively. In his "Wilderness Letter" written just two years after meeting Abbey and Berry, Stegner argues for the preservation of wilderness by reading it as a spiritual text for the soul's instruction. These undefiled, natural places collectively constitute an "intangible and spiritual resource," and Stegner believed that they alone could save the nation's ailing character (443). "Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wildernesses be destroyed" (443). In its promise of "spiritual renewal, the recognition of identity, the birth of awe," the challenge of preserving wild places presented itself in Stegner's mind as a symbolic battle for the heart of America (446). This wilderness-as-spiritual-resource argument complimented the attitudes of the wealthy, US elite. After all, they had the money and leisure time to see the

national parks, and the insulation they enjoyed from the vagaries of working for a living allowed their minds the space to roam to and from wild places they felt deserving of preservation. Writing about the early days of the conservation movement, Robert Gottlieb points out the class bias conservationists exhibited in their disdain for the rural poor who lived at the margins of their treasured parks and wildernesses (30). Such attitudes existed because the movement was largely a boys club for wealthy sportsmen. Despite Stegner's own impoverished, rural childhood, his stance became the party line in an era of conservation that journalist Kirkpatrick Sale has called the "concern of the affluent and elderly of the boardroom" (14).<sup>1</sup>

But Stegner's view sat at the apex of a turn that signaled a change of direction for the environmental movement. Shortly after the "Wilderness Letter," Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* (1962) to derision and acclaim. Whereas Stegner worried about spirit going out of the nation, Carson took a more physical approach that worried about toxins going into the bodies of unaware citizens. Her book created new audiences for environmental writing and also argued that those new readers had a role to play in the policy decisions affecting their environs. Prior to *Silent Spring*, pesticides were viewed mainly as a technical issue for scientific experts, a view that tended to privilege the corporate interests who could bankroll large research labs (Switzer 15). Carson's assertion that human biology and environment were inseparable concerns warranted democratic accountability and transparency of those professional practices among chemists and agribusinesses that had, until then, operated mostly outside the purview of

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<sup>1</sup> Stegner's place in the mainstream conservation movement and his connection to the cultural and political elite are dealt with more fully by Jackson J. Benson. For example, he served as an assistant to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall and spent two years on the Sierra Club's board of directors. See Benson.

the electorate. As her book circulated, it transformed pesticides from a technical issue for scientific experts into a public issue for citizens, replacing the traditional concern for *wilderness* with an awareness of *environment*.

The publication of *Silent Spring* polarized the wealthy and upper-middle-class constituencies of traditional conservation groups. The publication of a favorable review of the book in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* elicited many angry letters from devoted club members (Gottlieb 85). These more conservative conservationists bristled at Carson's rebuke of American industry. For them, wilderness deserved protection as a symbol of American exceptionality, and the power and prestige of American industry partly constituted that exceptionality, especially in the world economy of the postwar years. Carson seemed to identify something fundamentally wrong with the technological faith that was underwriting the American way of life. Carson's critique threatened the justification for conservation that began with an interpretation of US landscapes as symbols of national greatness.

Though Carson's adversarial stance toward industry repelled some of her audience, it actually attracted one new constituency of environmentalists to her ideas. The students who came of age in the 1960s witnessed great social unrest, and some of them gradually began to believe that all sorts of oppression and abuse had the same systemic causes. Those who shared this belief, who acted and organized around it, came to be known as the New Left. Characterized by its predisposition for direct action and its incoherent multiplicity of ideologies (ranging from anarchism to socialism), the New Left nevertheless aided liberal discourse in the United States as it sought to popularize its humanism by drawing publicity to its causes. The New Left's commitment to radical

humanism and belief in systemic corruption shaped its emerging environmental agenda in the 1960s. Along with Carson, other authors who addressed environment in their social critiques, like Paul Goodman, Murray Bookchin, and Herbert Marcuse, enjoyed popularity on campuses where the New Left had a strong presence (Gottlieb 87–93). Keith Woodhouse demonstrates that the New Left never made environmental issues and ideas a primary concern, and some factions within the student movement saw environmentalism as a distraction from the more urgent business of redressing social inequity. Those who did craft an environmental agenda for the New Left did so under the auspices of their “overall critique of modern, American society” (73). New Leftists borrowed examples of nonhuman, communal thriving to give philosophical warrant to their anarchism (62); they returned “back to the land” and made their search for harmony with the earth an act of political expression against consumerism (69). Though the conventional wisdom marries environmentalism to the 1960s New Left, the reality depicts a more tenuous relationship.

During the 1970s, some of those student leaders of the New Left went on to major executive positions in national conservation organizations, further institutionalizing environmentalism and conservation as they guided their organizations through the new maze of environmental legislation that became the basis for environmental advocacy (Gottlieb 114). By the end of that decade, the movement would be characterized by professionalization and hierarchy, with each organization employing its own scientific and legal staff and working in conjunction with the government’s regulatory agencies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete treatment of conservation’s growth during this period, see Gottlieb, “Professionalization and Institutionalization: the Mainstream Groups,” in *Forcing the Spring*, 1993.

The influential place within the newly professionalized environmental movement of former New Leftist leaders highlights a continuity between the conservationism of Stegner's generation and the environmentalism that followed in the wake of Rachel Carson and the New Left: both schools of thought were driven by participation from the upper class. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a prominent group within the New Left, had strong presences on the nation's elite campuses, campuses that just a generation or two before housed the sorts of Rooseveltian sportsmen who spearheaded the country's first efforts to protect wilderness.

As pupils of the old guard addressing adherents of the new, Abbey and Berry occupied a liminal space between two camps of environmental consciousness, neither of which resonated much with either author's class background or work experience. Though both authors could likely appreciate the heroism and inspiration early conservationists saw in American landscapes, as the sons of hardscrabble farmers, they found no place for themselves within those landscapes and among the sportsmen. Nor could they embrace the New Left, a group whose willingness to "drop-out" of cultural norms must have signified a gross disregard for privilege to these authors. Abbey's and Berry's equivocations, flirtations, and partial engagements with social-class and work in their writing thus represent their attempts to navigate the divide between the old and new generation of elites who controlled environmental action and to assert their identities apart from either movement.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Abbey for his part would find many fans among the New Left who later denounced him because of his views on Mexican immigration into the United States. His most vocal and prominent critic was Murray Bookchin, an author who wrote some of the very first social critiques to focus on environmental degradation. In *Hayduke Lives!* (1989), Abbey separates himself from the movement by mocking their participation at Earth First!'s Grand Canyon Rendezvous, including a jab at Bookchin through his character



The consistent lack of representation within the conservation and environmental movements of working-class people is not just a problem for these two writers. Rather, it marks a gaping divide between environmental thought and working people. Richard White criticizes environmentalism for its kneejerk negativity to human use and control of the environment. The movement, he argues, scorns the work of modern industry while romanticizing archaic forms of work in nature, reducing the complexity and difficulty of both to fit its preconceptions and pieties. He identifies a mythology of an unspoiled natural world that existed before Euroamericans intervened by which the movement usually condemns the use of nature and the application of technology. Such thinking, he says, alienates working-class people and deprives environmentalists of a full understanding of the natural world by turning nature into a mere playground to be visited rather than lived in and dealt with (“Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?”). In the works of Wendell Berry and Edward Abbey, I see some attempts to deal thoughtfully with the criticisms White later raises, and these deserve exploration so that they might serve as a lesson for ecocritics and nature writers of coming generations.

But these gestures towards the importance of work-in-nature by Berry and Abbey are necessarily incomplete. As each writer developed his career, his growing reputation in the community of US letters must have begun to overshadow his working-class background. This thesis draws heavily from scholarship in working-class studies, a field whose fundamental tenet is that the knowledge we gain on the job and in the workplace formulates unique worldviews and epistemologies that can and should inform one another. How then does a writer reconcile those views and epistemologies from two very

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Bernie Mushkin, the “wide assed, narrow-minded, and slope-shouldered” ideologue who delivers a rant there (201).

different careers? How did their social mobility affect their view of the natural places they advocate for in their work? My focus on the class-identities of these two writers is on some level an effort to put their various occupational experiences in dialogue and to identify how those experiences burden their representations of nature. I want for Berry-the-Writer to confront Berry-the-Farmer, to appreciate the erasures that one role necessarily creates in the other. Likewise, I want for Abbey's iconoclastic public image to admit that he is on some level embarrassed by Abbey-the-Ranger, a mostly dutiful public servant who enjoyed his steady government paycheck and the solitude it provided. These identities—farmer, miner, ranger, writer—deserve to converse together, and I aim here to facilitate that conversation.

CHAPTER 2  
MIXED-CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE AESTHETIC OF WORK IN  
WENDELL BERRY

As Wendell Berry recalled his years in Stanford's Creative Writing program, he praised Wallace Stegner's strengths as a teacher and writer in terms that emphasize the hard work of writing: "His performance was like a really good foreman. . . . He gave you good technical criticism and good technical criticism comes from somewhere . . . [Stegner showed] how an able workman made use of a form" (qtd in Benson 262). Berry's description implies an argument about how we should conceive of writing. Using words like "foreman" and "workman," Berry suggests that writing is affectively similar to manual labor. Both require technical skill and knowledge of the materials with which you work. On the grounds of these similarities, Berry recasts students as apprentices and realizes writing seminars as "workshops" in the fullest sense of the word. Writing, it appears, is done as often by artisans as by artists.

Certainly anyone who has ever really applied themselves to writing can relate to Berry's imaginative depiction of Stegner's seminars, but the language he uses seems out of place when we reconsider what an education like his signified about his social status. Studying at an elite institution, Berry completed graduate work as the student of nationally-renowned writer and historian. If, as Renny Christopher argues, the university "stands guard at a metaphorical border" between the working and middle classes, how are we to situate Berry's words in relation to that border? ("Cultural Borders" 45). The question highlights how peculiar Berry's word choice is when he lauds Stegner's

teaching. Berry appears to inhabit two worlds at once, looking both backward and forward across a class-line.

I open with this comment by Berry because the stance toward issues of class and work it represents is so typical of his writing. Berry's writing exhibits mixed-class consciousness. Renny Christopher describes mixed-class consciousness as the unique interplay in the psyche of one's discordant experiences in the social status system. One might have grown up working-class, only to realize great financial success later, or the reverse might be the case. Regardless, the experience of transgressing class-lines in one's life and dealing with the subsequent adjustments of material and cultural capital at one's disposal entail a discordant but dynamic of understanding of class, work, and occupation ("Louis Owens's Representations"). Berry grew up in the farming class, but his professional career has afforded more power and status than his origins would have provided; he is, in other words, a person of mixed-class consciousness. He often empathizes with the working-class but manifests blind spots to some of that community's material interests and problems. The necessity and reality of physical work is the organizing principle from which Berry's fiction and philosophy are derived—a fact that allows us to locate Berry within the genre of working-class literature. Despite the conventions and concerns he shares with the blue-collar writers, Berry nevertheless fails to appreciate some class-based problems in the way of life he celebrates. These blind spots allow Berry to construct an aesthetic of work and put it to productive use via his social thought.

It is helpful to begin by looking at the significance of work in Berry's philosophy. In *Nathan Coulter* (1960), Berry gives the first-person account of his title character's

childhood using language that does not clearly indicate how much time has passed between the events and reminiscences. The lack of chronological specificity gives the text an aura of myth and universality, a feature that allows us to generalize from one of the story's crucial moments. Early in Nathan's teenage years, he and his Uncle Burley are out camping when they notice a line of smoke rising from the direction of Nathan's father's property. They run home to find the barn consumed by fire. "The red light flickered and waved on their faces, and shone on the roofs of the automobiles behind them. Their faces looked calm and strange turned up into the light of the fire, like the faces of people around a lion's cage, separate from it, only seeing" (65). Here Berry uses the fire to symbolize nature by identifying lightning, rather than arson or accident, as the cause of the blaze. His characters' separation from the fire—and by extension, nature—is emphasized by their futile opposition to it. From puny buckets, they throw water at the fire as if to "bruise it" (66). Resignation is forced upon them: "We hadn't accepted the fire; we'd been able to fight that as long as it burned. But now, in the daylight, in our tiredness, as if we'd fought all night in a dream, we accepted the ashes" (67).

A Biblical allusion in this passage suggests how Berry would have us read the barn's destruction as an allegory of his philosophy. The God of Genesis reminds Adam that "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return," and the well-known funeral dirge alludes to this with its references to ashes and dust (Genesis 3:19). When the Coulter men sift the barn's ashes and dust in the morning light, they handle a tangible reminder of the destiny described by Genesis, a common destiny that is shared by all human and nonhuman life. Though the Coulters are in some senses "separate" from the fire and nature, they nevertheless are completely subject to and dependent upon it as it has the

power to shape the circumstances of their lives. In this way, the ashes remind us all of how indistinct our separation from nature really is. For Berry, the Coulters' journey to wisdom requires a full realization of this indistinct relation to nature and a humble acceptance of it as the human condition.

But in Berry's writing, humble acceptance means work, not apathy or fatalism. Only as the Coulters confront and labor against the fire do they realize the extent of its power and the limits of their own. As it confers this realization, the story's fire effectively "baptizes" the men, alluding to another Biblical trope.<sup>4</sup> Berry confirms our reading of the fire as baptism by having the event catalyze positive changes in several characters' lives. After the fire, Uncle Burley drinks less and works more, Grandpa Dave begins to accept his failing health, and Nathan and Tom become more responsible for the management of the farm. Though the fire is a tragedy, it is also a doorway to greater understanding of humanity's dependence upon nature, but that understanding that is only gained through labor. This understanding lays the proper foundation for humanity's collaboration with nonhuman life, a fact that leads Berry to describe it as "the most comely and graceful knowledge that we have" (*Unsettling of America* 94). Taken altogether, these passages describe Berry's philosophy: a humanity striving for enlightenment by realizing itself both within and against nature as it encounters it through work.

As *the* vehicle by which we come to know ourselves in nature, work has great significance for Berry, and its function in his philosophy narrows the scope of his attention mostly to physical work. Most of Berry's characters are farmers who still do a lot of manual labor. We see this physicality in the references to heat and sweat. In *Nathan*

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<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 3:11, describing how the Messiah will "baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire."

*Coulter*, characters occasionally remark that they are “feeling the heat,” and the men measure the pace of the tobacco harvest by the heat of the day (15, 89). During harvest, Nathan remarks that the men talked and joked “against the dread of heat and sweat and tiredness” that follows work. Though the work and sweat are dreaded at times, they are ultimately essential to the Coulter family’s epistemology and identity. Nathan’s father reminds him that “when the sweat runs it quits hurting,” and Nathan accepts that as he says “I quit watching [Daddy] and let myself into the work” (91). The phrasing here implies a voluntary submission to work that helps to enrich individual identity. The self that Nathan “lets” or “allows” into arduous collaboration with the soil will emerge changed from the encounter. All of this bodily experience in a particular, natural place results in a new sense of identity. Berry makes this point as Nathan remembers floating down the river adjacent their farm. “[The trees] leaned toward me—willow and maple and sycamore. I watched them, letting myself float in the slow current. I thought if I floated to the mouth of the river I’d always be at the center of a ring of trees and a ring of hills and a ring where the sky touched. I said, ‘I’m Nathan Coulter.’ It seemed strange” (13). In this passage, Nathan feels the closeness of nonhuman life in the leaning trees, and his references to “rings” suggest that he feels centered and secure—a condition that allows for the formation and proclamation of his identity. But Nathan could not be aware of these conditions without fully immersing himself in them, as signified by his floating in the river. Farming provides such full immersion in the particulars of a place. As it educates the body about its nature and the nature of its surroundings, farming emerges from Berry’s writing as the occupation most able to orient the self in a living, nonhuman environment.

As Berry argues for the value of knowledge gained by working physically, he harmonizes with working-class studies critics who have argued that physical work has its own epistemology—one that has been undervalued by bourgeois society. Janet Zandy reminds us that “if you use your body in a physical way year after year, the body speaks back” and has “a way of knowing and understanding the world that comes out of physical work” (3). Zandy’s nod to working-class knowledge differs from a simple respect for people with practical know-how. Rather, Zandy values working-class knowledge in many domains and sees how it could credibly contribute to any discourse. She would level the playing field for it by asserting its equal position among its epistemological rivals.

Berry’s writing demonstrates the epistemological value of farm work, corroborating Zandy’s argument. In *Remembering* (1988), Andy Catlett attends an agricultural conference held at a land-grant state university. A nameless pundit takes the lectern and talks about soil erosion, water shortages, and pollution, but then glibly says that these are “the price of progress”: “This is economics we’re talking about . . . adapt or die. Get big or get out. Sure not everybody is going to make it. But then, not everybody is *supposed* to make it” (129). The speaker’s comments represent a jab at Earl Butz, US Secretary of Agriculture 1971–1976, whom Berry loudly and persistently criticized. Andy’s attention wanders during the conference back to his small-town farm community of Port William, Kentucky. Contrasting his firsthand knowledge of farming to the conference’s proceedings, he concludes that the academics and agribusiness experts are “condemned to talk forever of what they could not feel or see, old farm boys and old farm girls in the spell of an occult science, speaking the absence of the living and the dead a language forever unintelligible to anyone but themselves” (137). Andy’s conclusion does



not represent a lack of understanding on his part; the story mentions elsewhere that he is a journalist and activist and has attended these conferences before. He is perfectly capable of understanding the speakers' jargon and reasoning, as the text suggests by including the shorthand notes he takes. Rather, Andy's judgment of the conference proceeds from the premise that the systems of thought the conference attendees together build are easily contradicted by real experience with the land. He emphasizes this as he addresses the conference attendees during his talk: "We've been sitting here this morning, hearing about the American food system ... the free market, quantimetric models, pre-inputs, inputs, and outputs, about the matrix of coefficients of endogenous variables, about epistemology and parameters—while actual fields and farms and actual human lives are being damaged" (138). Andy's working-class empiricism requires theory to match lived experience.

Berry's point here takes aim at a major philosophical issue: Cartesian mind/body dualism. The arguments presented at the fictional conference take this dualism as their founding axiom. Andy's rebuttal to them suggests that the physicality of traditional farming helps farmers eschew dualism. After all, the specialists err because they take as their subject something "they could not feel or see" (137). Zandy finds that much of working-class literature resists "that split [of mind and body] ... to claim processes of cultural formation that are grounded in actual events, lived experiences, community, history, and reciprocal relationships" (124). By prescribing traditional farm labor as a remedy for faulty philosophy, Berry's writing exhibits an epistemological stance that elevates the folk wisdom of working-class people and allies himself with working-class writers.

If the mind/body split is illusory, so also is any conception of human individuality that is not relational and communal. Berry's fiction remains consistent with his criticism of dualism by constructing individuality as an emergent property of group belonging. His recurring use of "membership" as a trope captures this nuanced view, and work plays an important role here too. *Remembering* begins with Andy Catlett waking hopeless and alone in a dark, San Francisco hotel room. We gradually learn that he has recently suffered a farm accident in which an automated picker severed his hand. The accident has left him disoriented and unproductive, both feelings that have estranged him from his community, if only in his imagination. The narrator recalls Andy's shame at needing help during the most recent harvest: "They came to help him—Nathan and Danny and Jack, and Martin and Arthur Rowanberry. Or, rather, they came and harvested his hay, he helping them, and doing it poorly enough in his own opinion, with embarrassment, half resenting their charitable presumption, embarrassing them by his self-apology" (151). In Berry's fiction, all people are necessarily interdependent, but his fictional farm-town, Port William, requires his characters to be more aware of that fact than is usually the case. Working relationships constitute the community, where "work is freely given in exchange for kind" (*Hannah Coulter* 93). In a consumerist society, relationships neither positively nor negatively affect one's material well-being. The only standard of value is that assigned by an impersonal market, a fact that led Georg Simmel to remark that identities lose distinction in a consumerist society, since "all things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money" (178). By contrast, in a barter society, such as the one Berry describes in Port Royal, relationships matter. Accordingly, Andy's diminished capacity for work threatens his place in the town, at least as he

understands it, and he is ashamed to take his friends' help without a clear understanding of how he can reciprocate. This shame drives him away. As his own body is dismembered by the farm machine, he dismembers the community by removing himself from it. Calling to mind an old metonym for "worker," we can say that Port William and Andy have both lost a "hand."

Berry makes use of "member" and its multiple meanings to describe the dialectical relation between individuality and community. In *Hannah Coulter* (2004), Berry speaks through Burley Coulter, a one-time trickster who in his old age has become a town sage, saying that "we are members one of another," and "the difference, beloved, ain't in who is and who's not, but in who knows it and who don't. Oh, my friends, there ain't no nonmembers, living nor dead yet to come" (97). Burley's identification of knowledge as the key to one's sense of belonging suggests the way back to Port William for Andy in *Remembering*. Though his work will be different than it once was, he can recall the knowledge he has gained by living and working with the soil and people of Port William, and thus re-member it, restoring that knowledge in his memory and restoring to the community the "hand" it had lost. As he does so, the people of Port William, living and dead, "come to him again ... not in memory, but near to memory, in the place itself and in his flesh, ready always to be remembered" (216).

This demonstrates what I mean when I say that Berry recognizes individuality as an emergent property of community. As Andy realizes that he has power to return to Port William's membership, he recognizes the dialectical process that has created his sense of self. "Those choices have formed in time and place the pattern of a membership that chose him, yet left him free until he should choose it, which he did once, and now has

done again” (169). He is the result of “a long choosing” for which he is necessarily but not sufficiently responsible (169).

Berry’s attention to community evinces his working-class sensibility. Notice how well the reciprocal connection between individual and community he depicts in *Port William* matches philosopher Raymond Williams’ characterization of working-class conceptions of society:

[The bourgeois culture treats] society as a neutral area within which each individual is free to pursue his own development and his own advantage as a natural right. ... [This] individualistic idea can be sharply contrasted with the idea that we properly associate with the working class: an idea which ... regards society neither as neutral nor as protective, but as the positive means for all kinds of development, including individual development. (325–26)

Berry’s fiction instantiates Williams’s comment. The individuals, families, and landscapes in *Port William*’s care progress toward joy because of the community, and they certainly count as the “kinds of development” Williams mentions. Like the working-class people Williams describes, Berry’s characters know themselves in relation to the traditions, places, and people that nurture them.

Like Williams, Christopher and Whitson suggest that community is a key element of working-class writing. “Because working-class people live in harsh conditions and know themselves to be individually powerless, working-class culture, as a result, does not celebrate individuality. It instead recognizes the interdependence of units of people: family, community, friends, and union” (76). As demonstrated, Berry recognizes the

interdependence that Christopher and Whitson posit as a criterion for working-class literature. However, he would take issue with the assumption that “harsh conditions” lead to personal powerlessness. Though his stories are full of hardship and suffering, they are also full of joy, ease, and meaning for the individual as well as the group. He devotes much space and time in his work to developing a carefully articulated philosophy of community and individuality that avoids extreme constructions of either concept. Economic differences between farming and occupations more typically labeled “blue collar” may help explain why Berry’s stance on individual power and community parts company with Christopher and Whitson’s. More on that later. It suffices for now to say that Berry’s writing is in most respects a good example of the community-centered ethic that Christopher and Whitson place at the center of working-class literature.

The importance of community to individual development in Berry’s thinking gives Port William a distinct gravity in his fiction. Even when the characters are not in Port William, they feel its pull and are in its orbit. One of the characters who wanders farthest from the place and its values is Hannah Coulter’s grandson Virge. After a troubled childhood that witnessed his parents’ divorce and his own battle with drug addiction, Virge returns to Hannah’s place in Port William and starts working as a farm-hand for a neighbor. Reflecting on the change that has come over Virge, Hannah muses, “When you have gone too far, as I think he did, the only mending is to come home” (*Hannah Coulter* 184). Even Virge, who loses all contact with the family for a time, eventually feels Port William calling him back.

For Berry’s characters, coming home is a challenge, despite Port William’s grounding influence. Berry often pits Port William’s gravity against the lure of success in

the modern American workforce, letting his characters feel the full exertion of each. But as they navigate the gulf between those opposing forces, their strong attachment to place helps many of his characters to see that the promise of “success” is illusory, at least as it has been defined as strictly economic.

More so than any of his other novels, *Hannah Coulter* offers the best critique of success through the lens of place and community. Its title character is a widow twice over—her first husband killed in Europe during WWII, her second husband returned from the war and lost to cancer after a long and meaningful life. Berry’s treatment of the war in his fiction is significant to his critique of success, so it is worth pausing here to examine it more closely. Popular opinion usually lionizes US involvement in WWII and uses the war to begin its narrative justifying US moral and economic dominance in the second half of the twentieth century. For many, this was “the good war” fought by the “greatest generation.”<sup>5</sup> However, as Hannah recalls the past, the war represents not prosperity’s foundation but the start of an irrevocable change.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the war disrupts production and activity in Port William. The town’s residents, visited by sorrow and loss, exert themselves against the gloom of war to keep working. After Tom Coulter and Virgil Feltner die, Tom’s father and uncle grieve but continue farming. As Hannah remembers, “great suffering had come to them and they were carrying it in them. The light seemed to fall on us a shade darker. But they had their work to do, we had ours, and we went on” (47). We can hear in Hannah’s memory the extra effort that living and working required during the war,

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<sup>5</sup> I refer here to journalist Tom Brokaw’s bestselling book, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), a popular history in which Brokaw suggests that modern Americans owe their prosperity to the men and women whose character was forged by the experiences of the Great Depression and WWII.

reminding us that whatever increase in GDP was realized during the 1940s came at terrible costs. Many people remember the war as an economic boon to the nation, a blessing that provided moral cover for large-scale, Keynesian intervention by the government into the economy at the same time that it opened markets abroad for US goods, services, and capital; they say it put America back to work in a way that New Deal programs never fully could. In contrast, *Hannah Coulter*'s strong sense of place helps its readers understand the damage of WWII to workers and work.

Hannah's judgment of the war is true not only of the US heartland but also of the foreign theatres of war. After her second husband, Nathan, dies, she goes to the library looking for books about the battle of Okinawa, hoping to understand better her his wartime experience. The chapter concludes with her final thoughts on the battle, having earlier shown all the horrifying documentary evidence. "The Battle of Okinawa was not a battle only of two armies making war against each other. It was a battle of both armies making war against a place and its people. Before that spring, Okinawa had been a place of ancient country villages and farming landscapes of little fields, perfectly cultivated" (172). In his reference to "perfectly cultivated" fields, Berry reminds us that, when we consider particular places and people, ignoring notions of economy in aggregate, the war was anything but productive, and he complicates the "successful" conclusion of the war.

The link between identity and place convicts the post-war era of similar productive disruption as *Hannah Coulter* develops, critiquing success and social mobility. Like the children of so many farmers, Hannah's kids all attend land-grant universities and, to the Coulters' disappointment, choose to pursue careers that remove

them from Port William. Hannah confesses her naïveté as she reflects on how her children have become strangers to her:

But I am sorry for my gullibility, my lack of foreknowledge, my foolish surprise at how it turned out. ... It just never occurred to us that we would lose them that way. The way of education leads away from home. That is what we learned from our children's education. The big idea of education, from first to last, is the idea of a better place. Not a better place where you are, because you want it to be better and have been to school and learned to make it better, but a better place somewhere else. In order to move up, you have got to move on. I didn't see this at first. (112)

Her children have all become successful by the usual standards. One son, Matthew, is a high-powered executive in a technology firm; the other, Caleb, is an academic agronomist with publications to his name and a reputation in his field. And yet they are missing much that life has to offer because of their lives' breakneck pace. Matthew's work, for example, strains his marriage and almost keeps him from making it back to Port William for Nathan's funeral. Berry's writing about Hannah's children brings us back to the etymology of success, reminding us that it sometimes denotes nothing more than sequence, one thing following another. The lives of Hannah's children are filled with such "success" to the point of precluding all stasis and thoughtfulness. Berry shows that the value of success-as-movement is limited by one's destination. Having found your place in the world, why would you ever leave just for the sake of leaving? Hannah sees this point clearly, saying, "Members of Port William aren't trying to 'get someplace.' They think they are someplace" (67). As the novel allows individuals' success to hurt the



generational succession of Port William's membership, it warns that communities ultimately bear the consequences of individuals' wanton disregard for home.

Berry's place-based philosophy underwrites the critique of social mobility that appears in his fiction and, doing so, obliquely addresses problems of class. But this subtlety is not the case in his non-fiction. *The Unsettling of America* (1977) confronts class head on as it tries to make sense of success's cultural construction. There Berry argues that an "unsettlement at once of population and values" has occurred because US democracy, through the promise of opportunity, has popularized "superficial upper-class values" (159). These new attitudes have stigmatized craftsmanship and fetishized mobility, such that the nation irrationally chases social prestige. The result is a middle-class who have no meaningful connection to their land, traditions, or communities. Those among them who do succeed become a "vagrant aristocracy" with power over others but no meaningful connections to one another (159).

Berry's argument that modern financial success relies on uncalculated cultural and geographical transience for its continued appeal links him further to working-class literature. Christopher and Whitson point out that working-class literature sometimes critiques upward mobility by showing that "mobility carries a price that is often too high to pay" (77). In their survey of working-class literature, they see that characters who succeed in climbing the social ladder find themselves caught between worlds, alienated from their culture of origin and kept at a distance by those in the middle and upper-class circles to which they have newly arrived. As demonstrated above, Berry attends mostly to the absence created by the upwardly mobile in their hometowns, focusing on dislocations of collective identity rather than those of personal identity. Still, I find that Berry's

symptomatic reading of success resists the Horatio Alger mythology as effectively as the stories that Christopher and Whitson offer as a model for the genre, stories in which aspiring working-class people manage to move up but are made unwelcome by their social betters. If anything, Berry adds philosophical muscle to the argument against boundless social mobility by demonstrating the far reaching consequences of mobility upon communities, landscapes, and nations. Many working-class authors calculate the cost of mobility to individuals; Berry balances the ledger by reminding us that we the pay the price together.

Bill Meikelberger, one of the minor characters that Andy Catlett meets, demonstrates how Berry blends personal and communal consequences in his critique of social mobility and economic success. In *Remembering*, Andy Catlett struggles to reimagine his place in Port William after a tragic farm accident takes his hand. His new disability threatens his place in a community where neighbors still exchange work for each other and cultivate the land using traditional ways that are manual-labor intensive. Andy perceives that one of his options is to modernize his notion of farming. The choice tempts Andy, since, as a “modern” farmer needs only equipment and knowledge, becoming so would render his disability a moot point; he could abstract himself from the physicality of farming.

But as I demonstrated above, Berry sees any attempt to divide the spiritual/mental from the material/physical as ultimately wrongheaded, and he quickly complicates the choice for Andy. Recalling his time as a farm journalist, Andy describes being sent by his editor to visit the farm of Bill Meikelberger, a man “featured in the magazine as that year’s Premier Farmer,” someone who was “out in front of almost everybody” (180). The

text describes how Meikelberger transcended his humble origins by following the prescriptions of agriculture and finance specialists. He now “owned a herd of machines” and “had an office like a bank president’s” (180). At first, Andy is impressed by the technical order of the farm and the luxuries in Meikelberger’s house. The text clearly represents him as an upwardly mobile farmer, one who turned a small family operation into an empire of corn and revenue. However, as Andy continues his visit, he realizes that Meikelberger is neither as happy nor as successful as he first thought. Meikelberger pops a pill for his ulcer during the interview and attributes his ailing health to worries about creditors and hired help, but he says these are the cost of doing business: “You can’t let your damned stomach get in the way. If you’re going to get ahead, you’ve got to pay the price. You’re going to need a few pills occasionally, like for your stomach, and sometimes to go to sleep. You’re going to need a drugstore just like you’re going to need a bank” (182). Realizing that such talk is self-destructive, Andy thinks “There was nothing, simply nothing at all, that Meikelberger allowed to stand in his way: not a neighbor nor a tree or even his own body” (182). That Berry complicates Meikelberger’s success connects him to the “unhappy mobility” stories Christopher and Whitson discuss. But we should note that Berry takes a wider view of social mobility’s discontents than other working-class writers. Like the characters who interest Christopher and Whitson, Meikelberger does experience class conflict, especially when we consider how indebtedness to financiers constrains his choices. But his indebtedness only manifests as the symptom of a greater disease: his blindness to natural human limits that ought to mark stasis. The real problem, Berry argues, with orienting a society around social

mobility is that we neglect the things—like homes and good soil—that have value only when they stay in place.

Clearly, Berry is aware of class differences and the power of ideology to influence people to reproduce social relations that reflect the agendas of the powerful. But he is no Marxist. He focuses on class differences within families, not between them. In his fiction, farm families are alienated from their upwardly mobile children who in turn are alienated from the type of life most suited to human joy. Berry's focus on class only as it touches heteronormative, nuclear families should remind us of the traditionalism and conservatism that lay the foundation for his thought. That such conservatism sounds radical chords in modern ears attests to how peculiar our political discourse has become. Bill Kauffman writes that if Berry is "usually assigned to the left pen of our hopelessly inadequate and painfully constrictive political corral, that is because by the 1960s conservatives had largely renounced peace and stewardship," advocating neoliberal capitalism and a "promiscuously interventionist foreign policy" (27).

Berry has dealt with the perversion of conservatism by addressing himself to the New Left—a movement he thought was animated by a conservative spirit (Kauffman 27). Berry's relationship to the New Left was necessarily fraught with contradiction. On the one hand, the New Left constituted his most attentive audience, a fact demonstrated by the Sierra Club's decision to publish his *Unsettling of America* in 1977 (the Club, by that time, had altered its traditional postwar image and was then more explicitly aligned with New Left values and ideals). On the other hand, Berry's work and life experiences led him to distrust environmental specialists and social engineers of the sort the New Left had helped develop. Berry may have chosen to play down his differences with the New

Left by seeing them as “conservative” in spirit, but I believe he included manual labor and work in writing partly to leave a subtle clue to his readers that he was not cut from the same cloth as his Sierra Club patrons. Despite all this, his thinking does anticipate some of the best insights that would come from the academics whom the New Left movement inspired. Compare Berry’s label for those who enjoy modern success—the “vagrant aristocracy”—to New Left sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s recent thesis that the elite now strive for unfettered mobility: “Travelling light, rather than holding tightly to things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity—that is, for their heavy weight, substantiality and unyielding power of resistance—is now the asset of power” (12). Take for another example Anthony Giddens’s argument linking the “transformation of intimacy” to the “abstract systems” that modernity imposes on lived experience and notice how it resonates with Berry’s concern for disruption of family relationships because of transience (112–116). The commonality by which Berry’s ideas seem remarkably at home in this discourse of postmodern social thought is a recognition of how the human experience of time and space has radically changed in the influence of global capitalism—a change geographer David Harvey has called “space-time compression” (in *Condition of Postmodernity*). That Berry anticipates this profound reconceptualization is more than a curious coincidence. Rather, it provides further evidence for the working-class studies scholars who assert the equality of working-class epistemologies with other systems of thought. Twenty years before Giddens, Harvey, or Bauman, Berry arrived at similar conclusions about humanity, place, and space by thinking critically about what it meant to farm in modern America, and he conveyed

those conclusions in direct and elegant prose—a compliment that his theory-minded counterparts are far less likely to have earned.

One of the most obvious links between Berry and working-class literature is the suspicion aroused by machines and technology. In *Nathan Coulter*, the title character remembers visiting Jig, an eccentric old man who lived outside of town, and he describes Jig's cabin:

He'd found an old Singer sewing machine, and thrown the sewing part of it away, and fastened the iron frame with the wheel and treadle to the floor. Then he'd wired a lot of spools to the walls and run strings between them, zigzagging and crisscrossing from one end of the shanty to the other. This contraption of strings and pulleys was hooked to the wheel and treadle. It worked just like a charm, but Jig never had been able to decide what it was for. . . . The whole inside of his house was a machine that couldn't do anything but run. When he was drinking Jig would sit and treadle the machine and sing and shout and pray for the Lord to purify him. One night he came home drunk he got tangled up in it and nearly choked to death before Gander Loyd came along and found him the next morning. (11)

The contraption in Jig's cabin would be a harmless if overly complicated amusement were it not for Jig's belief in its importance. Believing the machine to have salvific power, he wastes his effort operating the treadle. The anecdote allegorizes Berry's warning about technology: the unlimited progress technology promises is illusory, and we endanger ourselves the moment it becomes a fixation.

Jig's religious zealotry suggests that Berry sees society's pursuit of technology as cultish. In *The Unsettling of America*, he makes this comparison explicit. He begins by contrasting experience and experiment. Experience expresses itself in hundreds of forms, constituting what we call culture. Its variety of expression tends to its health and wholeness (168). Experiment, on the other hand, reduces expression through its reliance on narrowly defined premises. Because of its single-mindedness, "the experimental intelligence tends toward radical oversimplification, reducing the number of possibilities." Ignoring alternative ways of knowing, the technologist "behaves strangely like the intelligence of imperialists and religious fanatics, [saying], 'This is the only true way'" (169).

Technology's myopia easily leads to the abuse of people, animals, and landscapes. As the narrator of *Remembering* reflects on Andy Catlett's farm accident, he comments that the picking machine, made of "oblivious metal ... lubricated with his blood," could not tell "the difference between a cornstalk and man's arm" (131). In this passage, we hear echoes of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939): "Behind the harrows, the long seeders—twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion" (36). Steinbeck and Berry both see the potential for physical violence implied by machinery, but each adds an additional cultural violence that machines invite. Steinbeck shows that farm machines perpetuate emotional violence. As instruments of unfeeling capitalists who themselves are "machines and masters all at the same time," the tractors and seeders he describes feel nothing—not passion, not anger, not joy—and do not require their owners or operators to feel anything either (32): "But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does

not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself” (116). Berry agrees with Steinbeck, and adds more about machines’ incapacity for intuition and knowledge. The picker takes Andy’s hand because it does not *know* to do anything else. Its design for a perfectly singular function precludes any other outcome when a hand accidentally breaches the bladed area. Similarly, those people who behave like machines, performing only one narrowly defined task for their occupation, lose access to other types of knowledge—a condition that could “dismember” their souls.

Like the picker that severs Andy’s hand, machines often fail to see the variety and difference that exist among their objects. This is as true of the macrocosmic systems that manifest such reductive and mechanistic thinking as it is of microcosmic tragedies like Andy’s ordeal. The picker is just one extension of a technological mindset that began coalescing during the Enlightenment and industrial revolution. For Berry, the full expression of that mindset leaves its mark on the entire modern experience and the many disruptions and dislocations that it entails. As Andy wanders the streets of San Francisco and ponders how to make his emotional journey back home, he cannot escape the city’s noise, and even in the rare moments of silence he hears a “low mechanical hum” (154). Machines—as material things or ideological systems—pervade the world.

Berry’s warning about technology’s capacity to reduce and damage has philosophical warrant. Continental philosophers (including Weber, Habermas, Jonas, and others) writing during the twentieth century often criticized technology and were suspicious of its benefits. Martin Heidegger is the philosopher most closely allied with Berry’s view of technology. In the *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1977), he argues that technological thinking characterizes modern society in a



way that reduces reality's subjective qualities and thinks of things in terms of stockpile, instrument, and use, labeling the vast ideational inventory created by such thinking the "standing reserve." Heidegger starts with a distinction between what something *is* and what we might consider the *essence of a thing to be*. For example, we might say that a tree *is* wood and leaves and roots and bark. What though is the essence of a tree?

Heidegger answers that we do not arrive at the essence of a thing until we discover how it maintains what it is through time. Thus, a tree's essence might more properly lead us to ideas about biological processes that enable such a thing as a tree to be. In this way, Heidegger challenges the standard definition of technology as a human activity that serves an end. Instead, he finds that technology is an outgrowth of a compulsive desire to make all things useful, a desire that merely deploys causality and reason in its course. In this way, technology is a bringing-forth, a revealing or *poiésis*. Going one step further, he finds that the compulsion to catalog objects' usefulness presupposes the ability to order and inventory them. This "standing reserve" can then become subject to human calculation and manipulation. Of course, the uses to which we put objects are not inherent to their nature. Nor are the uses to which we put ourselves. Thus, technology obscures our true relationship to the world and ourselves, concealing whatever authentic identity we could hope to have.

I highlight the similarities between Berry's and Heidegger's views to confirm the assertion of working-class studies scholars that socially significant knowledge can develop out of one's work experience. If by such a comparison I hope to raise Berry's profile, I am equally pleased to lower Heidegger's. Comparing Berry's philosophy of technology to Heidegger's demystifies the type of thinking that philosophers are trying to

do, and showing that a farmer-scholar arrived at the same conclusions as a notoriously erudite thinker can help us not to privilege such canonical figures. The comparison should also encourage publishers and journalists to seek out working-class perspectives. That Berry, by meditating on his Kentucky farm experience, can engage Heidegger in a clear and meaningful way suggests that we be open to others whose experiences may enlighten us though they do not originate in the usual epistemologies. What might other working-class thinkers have to contribute to the best of our western, liberal discourse? In his focus on the long-run processes whereby machines and technologies develop, Berry exhibits the sort of complexity and depth we admire in the world's "great minds" but that we do not yet typically recognize in the thoughts of farmers or miners.

I have argued that much of Berry's oeuvre fits within the category of working-class literature, but that is the broad view. When we focus and compare the places and people he writes about to their real-world counterparts, incongruities between Port William and the real world crop up that threaten his credentials as a class/work-conscious writer. The world he constructs in Port William is no stranger to sorrow or conflict. The second world war and following dislocation of rural people endanger and discourage the farm community's people. But these almost never threaten the fraternal bonds between neighbors that constitute the community. Port William seems to locate its troubles outside of itself, enjoying uninterrupted unanimity as it deals with problems that are mostly exogenous. Like an island, it is unmoved as waves of the larger world break upon its shores. Unfortunately, trying to find such a place as Port William proves an impossible task as we search the map. Real farm communities, it turns out, divide like most do over familiar political and economic questions.

As recently as 1980, rural sociologists focused on the structural similarities among farmers. Most, they noticed, owned their land and capital and managed wage workers in their employ. Assuming a basic economic determinism, they classed most farmers as petty bourgeoisie (Green 560). These economic categories—capital, wages, bourgeoisie—belie a more complex reality. Gary Green examined tobacco farming communities of the very sort Berry writes about, and he found that indebtedness, tenancy, and agribusiness do in fact erode farm operators' control of production; on this point, Green and Berry agree. However, unlike Berry's Port William, the towns included in Green's study responded to these problems not with resolved solidarity but with political debate, internal contradiction, and "inconsistency in belief systems" (561–62). According to Green, this inconsistency and argument was particularly manifest in farmers' opinions of how best to handle the ailing tobacco allotment initiative—a New Deal program that subsidized and regulated tobacco production. The allotment program has created a tangled web of social relations that connects farmers as they lease, transfer, borrow, and sell their allotments to one another in response to legislative changes to the administration of the program itself and fluctuations in the market prices of production inputs. For example, in 1964, the USDA substituted poundage quotas for the old acreage quotas, effectively decreasing the value of allotments, and farmers scrambled to adjust. The 1970s witnessed the adoption of the mechanical tobacco harvester, reducing the need for labor by 85% but only on those farms large enough to pay for it, encouraging large landholders to buy up and lease their neighbors' allotments, driving up allotment prices in the process. These political and economic arrangements complicate our attempt to read social class in tobacco-farming communities, but their complete absence in the fiction of

an author who himself has farmed tobacco raises questions about that author's credibility on class issues in farm communities. We may not be able to definitively class any given farmer, but such studies as Green's suggest that class and political conflict are more salient to places like Port William than Berry would have us believe.

Just as Berry in his fiction neglects the political complexity of the tobacco program, he is also silent on the problems posed to rural social life by the 1980s farm crisis. In her case study of a rural Minnesotan town, Kathryn Dudley finds that farm families' financial difficulties distanced them from one another socially. Most people in urban and suburban areas are economically related only by a convoluted financial genealogy. Farmers, on the other hand, often produce the exact same commodity to be purchased by the exact same processor, and so farmers must directly compete with their neighbors much more than most Americans. Dudley interviewed one farmer who put it this way: "If you want to survive, there's two ways of praying: you can say, 'God let it rain,' or you can say, 'God, *don't* let it rain over there'" (109). The necessity of competition brings economic baggage into every social encounter, a fact amplified by the farm crisis. Dudley finds that farm families self-consciously perform the broadly held values of the community—thrift, work, independence—because any departure from those may invite the community's moral judgment or may give a neighbor economic advantage. A family on the brink of foreclosure, therefore, must attend the church socials as usual, never letting on that eviction threatens their lives; to do so would subject the family to moral scrutiny or an attempted buyout at fire-sale prices; Dudley's book abounds with such examples (105–123). In a farm town, gossip, secrecy, and judgment are economic and moral imperatives.

Considering the work of Green, Dudley, and others, we find that Berry's attention to class and work is selective. His writing offers trenchant critiques of systemic problems, and he uses these problems to plot his fiction, but he denies those problems' implications for individuals within the community. This fact sheds light on one of the ongoing arguments about Berry's fiction: whether or not he is utopian and/or nostalgic. Many critics ignore Berry's writing as idyllic and unreal. I find their dismissal glib; as demonstrated above, Berry clearly has a lot to say about suffering and sorrow in his fiction. Political philosopher Kimberly Smith makes a more careful judgment: "Berry's fiction is not mere nostalgia; it is an attempt to persuade us of the *practicality* of his program for reform" (115, Smith's emphasis). Smith goes on to argue that Berry's fiction is a form of argument, one that tries to establish the value of a course of action in comparison to alternatives. Because this approach only asserts *relative* value, it is particularly useful in our postmodern, anti-foundationalist discourse. Berry, she writes, creates in his fiction not a utopia that will never be, nor a golden age that never was, but another account of how humans might live, offering it as a rebuttal to an assumed self-interested and hyper-rational human nature that we uncritically espouse under the influence of industrial society (126–7). Berry does not ask us to accept his view of human nature as ultimately definitive. Rather, he aims merely to offer an alternative and "educate our moral imaginations" by describing a place that could be "not a utopia, but more sustainable, more fulfilling, and more fully human" than the world in which we currently live (116).

Even when writing about the distant past, Berry misses opportunities to include the conflicts that arise from the differences of social status conferred by types of labor.

Frank Higbie has argued that a reexamination of itinerant farm workers' experiences during the progressive era complicates our notion of social class in rural places. Popular opinion has tended to see the seasonal worker of the early twentieth century as a hobo, a homeless man without connection or attachment. Using census data, Higbie finds that in fact nearly 80% of the itinerant workforce owned farms of their own, and they traveled to supplement the meager incomes their own harvests yielded (62). This information troubles in two ways the communal idyll Berry depicts. First, Kentucky tobacco growers generally plant in mid-May and harvest by the end of September. This growing season leaves them completely available to travel west for jobs on the winter wheat harvest of the Midwest, but none of Berry's characters ever do so. Second, it shows that rural life has been less stable, less socially fecund, than Berry writes it to be. His character Hannah Coulter remembers the days after WWII, and says that "when the tractors came, the people began to go" (*Hannah Coulter* 92). According to Higbie, that dislocation of rural people began at least a generation before then.

Given the valid points in Smith's defense of Berry's project, what does the absence of class-conflict *within* Port William tell us about the agrarian writer? Considering the sorrow and trouble that Berry sometimes deals to his characters, his writing cannot be utopian. Nevertheless, he seems unable or unwilling to face the class-derived problems that would affect a place like Port William. The seeming contradiction here leads to me to what I hope is a more qualified critique: Berry's writing exhibits mixed-class consciousness. Perhaps, like his character Caleb Coulter, the work he studies and describes has become a doctrine more than a practice, and he makes his living in intellectual proximity to the tactile life he describes. Perhaps he is like Andy Catlett, who

has lost his hand—the part of his body that allows him to labor and thereby commune with the earth—and he now has only one hand in farming. Berry is both the son of farmers and a nationally recognized man of letters. The two roles influence his approach to both, both informing his experience and opinions.

If Berry has flattened out the class distinctions among the people whom he strives to represent, he may have been unable to help it. Berry is by habit and culture a farmer; by profession, he is a writer. Surveying environmental literature, Richard White noted that Berry was one of only a few writers who thoughtfully examined the role of work and labor in determining humanity's relation to nature. White follows this compliment with criticism: "Berry quite purposefully and pointedly makes his own labor archaic and unusual; he relies on animal power and urges other to do the same. It is advice best taken by literary farmers. It is only Wendell Berry's writing, after all, that enables him to farm with horses" (179). White's point here hearkens back to one of the foundational premises undergirding the arguments of working-class studies scholars: occupational experience produces forms of knowledge and consciousness particularly suited to it. That Berry farms with horses, that his writing addresses class-consciousness at the national level but neglects or omits it in its celebration of the local imagination—these may signify only that his career as a writer necessarily distances him from some of the material and economic problems of professional farmers and farm workers, the very sort of problems that catalyze class anxieties in the farm communities studied by rural sociology. And considering the socioeconomic experiences of those who typically constituted the environmental movement, we can understand Berry's desire to emphasize his background in farming over his career in writing.

Given this concession, the reader might well wonder what benefit we glean from emphasizing the aspects of Berry's work that evince working-class consciousness, or what we gain by categorizing him in the genre of working-class literature. I have shown how, with some qualification, Berry's work aligns with that of working-class writers, but does numbering Berry among working-class authors do anything more than note broad similarities? Is it a productive move for literary critics? I believe so, but the reason will not be clear until we have a better sense of how a genre is constructed and what purpose the category of genre ought to serve. In his essay "The Law of Genre," Derrida uses a paradox to destabilize our thinking about genre. He points out that the traits and labels by which we identify some text as generic must exist *a priori* to the text itself; otherwise we could not recognize them as generic. The sign that marks the text's belonging to the genre must then occupy a liminal and contradictory position; it is both within and without the text—a "participation without belonging" (59). I want to apply Derrida's insight to how we read Wendell Berry's writing in relation to his own and others' identities. When Berry takes up themes and topics that we identify as typical of working-class literature, he (and we) only *participates* in that genre. Nobody's identity stake is threatened by such participation because neither Berry, nor scholars (like myself) who would relocate him within working-class literature, argue that he *belongs* there. What we gain from cross-listing Berry in multiple genres is more participation and more dialogue about the way work connects us to the earth.

Literary genres are constructions, ideas meant to label a broadly similar group of experiences, conventions, or beliefs that address particular communities and are conveyed by writing. Since any definition of a genre is based on argument by



generalization, we can anticipate exceptions to the rule. The people who usually command the attention of working-class studies scholars labor for wages paid by the owners of capital. These are the factory workers, machinists, and housekeepers whom Raymond Carver honors in his fiction as “people who don’t succeed” because of immeasurable odds but try nevertheless (Gentry et al. 42). Though Berry’s farmers occupy a different economic position, they face similar long odds. Placing Berry within working-class literature acknowledges their mutual striving and can remind scholars who study blue-collar workers that *all* labor is rooted in place.

## CHAPTER 3

## HUMOR, LABOR, AND THE EVASION OF CLASS IN EDWARD ABBEY

Historian Paul Fussell wrote the following about those who, in his judgment, had successfully escaped the psychic oppression of the American class system: “[They] parody middle class effects, and parodied items [from the underclass] may make an appearance, like ironically ugly lawn furniture. . . . The guiding principle will be parody display” (182). These people, who “are independent-minded” and “free of anxious regard for popular shibboleths,” form by their will alone an “un-moneyed aristocracy” (180). Reading more of Fussell’s depiction of the liberated American man, it is easy to envision Edward Abbey: “[They] tend to dress for themselves alone, which means they dress comfortably”; “they are not the slaves of timeclocks”; “their houses, which are never positioned in ‘developments’ tend to be sited oddly—on the sides of mountains”; they “shun turnpikes and freeways, those tedious, characterless conduits for the middle class, preferring instead slowpoke back roads because of their ‘charm’” (180–182). Fussell’s words easily call to mind the familiar images of Abbey—frayed hat, red bandana beneath his graying beard, always slightly disheveled, always ready with a critical word for freeways and turnpikes. If one were building a shrine to or choosing to meditate upon the sort of liberation Fussell describes, Abbey’s image might well serve as a fitting icon to such rumination. Certainly the continued celebrity he enjoys even posthumously suggests that many admire him in this way. However, rather than invoke Abbey’s persona as an exemplar to those who aspire to independence and the transcendence of class, I want to ask whether Abbey himself was so free.

Just a few years before Fussell prescribed irony as the antidote to class anxiety, Edward Abbey wrote *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1978), a work steeped in irony as its chief rhetorical strategy. Like Fussell's comments, that book also has much to say about class as it traces the intersections of people from different occupations, interests, and backgrounds through the wild places Abbey came to love. His fiction invites our critical analysis of the relationship between irony and class, but few scholars have yet paid much attention to the connection between these two aspects of his work. Ann Ronald, for example, correctly points out that Abbey's use of irony "adopts a convention only to destroy it" and represents an "inversion of the reader's preconceptions and expectations," but she never says what such a literary strategy might imply about Abbey's beliefs toward social conventions, preconceptions, and expectations, nor how he would locate himself in relation to those (213). Others are similarly silent.

Obviously, locating with fixity the social-class of a dead writer is impossible, and that is not my intention. Rather than giving the definitive word on Abbey's class identity, I hope merely to demonstrate that the interplay of Abbey's themes and rhetorical strategies suggests the presence of class-consciousness. The literary criticism of his work, including Ronald's, has focused on Abbey's defiance and use of literary conventions; this thesis will extend the notion of "convention" to include the prescriptions for labor and consumption that late-capitalist economies also codify as conventional. As Abbey satirizes conventions of economy and labor, it becomes difficult to fix his meaning or his own social identity. Like Fussell, Abbey hoped to escape class-identity through irony and parody. From that realization, Abbey's satires of miners, rangers, housewives, and

executives emerge as a sign of his own complicated relationship to economies of labor and shows how his humor works to establish an un-classed writerly ethos.

An understanding of irony's political appeal helps to explain its relevance to representations of class identity—a helpful move before dealing with Abbey's treatment of class in particular. Much more so than other rhetorical tropes, modes, and figures, irony is social. Lynda Hutcheon writes that irony never exists independently of particular speakers and audiences, that a text—even when its signifiers are fixed by its medium—is never manifestly ironic. Instead, irony must “happen” (16). “Because irony ... happens in something called ‘discourse,’ its semantic and syntactic dimensions cannot be considered separately from the social, historical, and cultural aspects of its contexts of deployment and attribution” (17). Like any social act, ironic speech and interpretation occur between people who constitute a discourse community. Oftentimes, the dynamics of that discourse community can be described by appealing to familiar social categories like race, gender, and class. This triumvirate of intermeshed labels has become repeated so often that we sometimes forget their salience. Insofar as irony requires perhaps more understanding of social context than other uses of language, these categories maintain their usefulness to its study.

If scholars benefit from a social approach to criticizing irony, it is only because those social constraints frame the ironic moves that rhetors intuitively make. Analyzing the gendered, classed, and raced relations within and among discourse communities frequently identifies unequal distributions of power. These inequalities necessarily burden the speech act with political (in the broadest sense of the term) significance. Irony's inherent traits lend themselves to navigating situations fraught with such material

risk. As it relies on shared, communal knowledge to function, irony can be invoked like an inside joke, offering one meaning to outsiders but possibly broadcasting another more subversive or critical message to insiders. Its indirect approach makes it hard to pin down a writer's intended meaning, deflecting attacks on the writer's position and reducing the writer's personal risk. Similarly, resistant readers can use irony to subvert authorized messages, willfully misreading to assert agency or communal identity that might be threatened from outside. For these reasons, Ross Chambers says that irony offers a "possible model for oppositionality whenever one is implicated in a system that one finds oppressive" (qtd in Hutcheon 16).

But irony's edge cuts both ways. The same plurality of meaning that allows it to helpfully disrupt authority or reconstitute a besieged community can also diffuse its force through the multiple channels of meaning it creates. The message can slip, backpedal, or go unnoticed altogether. In some respects, irony never strikes a definitive blow, since the evasion of definition is necessarily its *modus operandi*. Arguing from the premise that irony has been mostly ineffectual when used politically, Fredric Jameson reads the widespread adoptions of irony in literature and discourse as "symptoms and distorted expressions of the penetration even of middle-class experience by this strange new global relativity of the colonial network" (412). In other words, irony can anesthetize, dulling the pain of economic or political oppression by substituting ambiguous expression for the type of real resistance that effects material change.

I offer these conflicting opinions only to highlight the ambiguity that irony entails. Whether we lean more toward Chamber's celebration of irony or Jameson's cynical dismissal, we have to acknowledge its potential to miss its mark. This raises an

interesting point when we think of Abbey. Why would he choose so often to write ironically when dealing with the issues of social-class, work, and occupation? For these topics, irony's slippage might actually be an unmitigated benefit if one's purpose is only to confuse. Writing about his own and others' class identities, Abbey, I believe, does not care if he sends the "right" message; leaving us unable to make any final judgment is his goal in those moments. If you want only to obfuscate any reading of your class identity, irony is well suited to the job. However, the freedom from class judgment is fleeting at best, since the Others whom a writer might imagine are always looking for new clues to re-fix the location of his class identity. For that reason, Abbey is a fugitive from class-consciousness, always on the run, busy leaving ironic, ambiguous clues of his whereabouts within the class system.

This strategy shows up in Abbey's earliest non-fiction work, *Desert Solitaire*, (1968). Throughout the book, Abbey seems careless and unconcerned with making a good impression on his superiors. He would have us believe that his paychecks were a joke played on the national government. "Yes, it's a good job. ... What better sinecure could a man with small needs, infinite desires, and philosophic pretensions ask for?" (41–42). In this passage, the limitlessness of his desires diminishes the already modest demands of employment under the National Park Service. Elsewhere he emphasizes his autonomy in his work. "I am required to work not at headquarters but at this one-man station some twenty miles back in the interior, on my own. The way I wanted it, naturally, or I'd never have asked for the job" (2). As we follow Abbey back to that station through the rest of the text, he continues to emphasize his spatial autonomy and the interiority of his own experience:

I like my job. The pay is generous; I might even say munificent. \$1.95 per hour, earned or not, backed solidly by the world's most powerful Air Force, biggest national debt, and grossest national product. The fringe benefits are priceless: clean air to breathe ... stillness, solitude and space; an unobstructed view every day and every night of sun, sky, stars, clouds, mountains, moon, cliffrock and canyons; a sense of time enough to let thought and feeling range from here to the end of the world and back; the discovery of something intimate—though impossible to name—in the remote. ... The work is simple and requires almost no mental effort, a good thing in more ways than one. What little thinking I do is my own and I do it on government time. (39–40).

Here Abbey uses humor and catalog to make an argument about what features of his desert memoir most deserve our attention. His puns and humorous barbs directed toward the bureaucracy that employs him treat his job as a dramatic irony, a piece of information known to his audience but kept hidden from his employer. These ironic moments also deflect our attention away from his labor, and by extension, away from any charges that he might be complicit in some way by participating in that bureaucracy. Once his levity has established the unimportance of his actual job, a catalog of “fringe benefits” overwhelms our attention, showing that a communion with nature is what should motivate our reading. Abbey suggests that those who do read in this way will be rewarded with an enriched interior experience characterized by a breadth of “thought and feeling.”

That Abbey should apologize for his employment by focusing on his mental and spiritual freedom suggests that he has evaded the question of how his work affects his bodily experience. In contrast to his spirit which travels “to the end of the world and back,” his body must check via radio contact each morning, must make regular patrols as designated by his superiors, must also work to facilitate the correct flow of others’ bodies (those of the visiting tourists) in and out of the natural spaces he stewards. Abbey’s work as a ranger did afford him a lot of liberty relative to others’ jobs, but as he ignores any discipline his job requires of his physical body, he seems anxious and evasive. Michel Foucault has written that all control must ultimately be registered in the body. What constraints upon Abbey’s life are hidden by his humor and appeal to the life of his mind? However minimal those constraints may be, Abbey works to obscure them. He jokes and provokes, donning his “Cactus Ed” mask and peeking out at us from behind his ranger’s uniform. Even though Abbey deflects attention from his physical work, his experience as a wage-earning ranger must necessarily inform Abbey’s view, including even those deflections. Janet Zandy has argued that occupational experience shapes our perception of reality simply because of the amount of time and energy we necessarily invest in it. If Zandy is correct, then Abbey cannot help but to be a ranger and a writer, even when minimizing the one role at the expense of the other.

Given Abbey’s biography, his career as a ranger is hard to ignore or to dismiss with parody. According James Cahalan, Abbey was actually not so free and at ease while working at Arches in 1956. “Abbey began his first stint at Arches not simply immersed in nature, in blissful and uninterrupted solitude as *Desert Solitaire* later stressed, but also frenetically trying to juggle work and family, which were clearly in conflict with each



other” (65). Rita Deanin had just recently given birth to Abbey’s first child, and his marriage to her was suffering from his lack of steady employment. His first novel, *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), was published just months before, and his writing career had yet to take off. These facts suggest that Abbey may have been a more anxious and dutiful employee than *Desert Solitaire* admits.

We see that anxiety in an anecdote from Abbey’s time at Arches that Cahalan uncovered but that Abbey himself left unremarked. Before returning for his second season at Arches, Abbey grew a beard. His chief ranger grumbled that his appearance was unbecoming of a ranger. Though the park service had no formal rules against facial hair, Abbey still shaved it off. That Abbey made some concession to his employer is not so exceptional; most people have worn the embarrassing hairnets, name-tags, or uniforms that a job required. Rather, it is the stark contrast between his self-representation as an employee and his lived experience that deserves explanation. *Desert Solitaire* does not show much of Abbey’s real need to keep his job, nor to do well enough to be invited back for another season. Could the book not have been as effective if he had adopted a more modest writerly ethos when it came to representing his labor? Many people surely could have related to a narrator who felt torn between the job he personally needed and the wild places that the world will always collectively need. Abbey’s failure to deal thoughtfully and carefully with his own employment manifests his class anxiety. In reality, Abbey’s employer required him to shave his beard; symbolically, I wonder if he felt the need to cover the naked face of his labor with a self-effacing tangle of words. Abbey went on to work as a ranger off and on throughout his life. Of the 25 years between 1956 and 1980,

Abbey spent at least parts of 19 of them on the park service payroll (Cahalan 344). In some ways, he was as much a ranger as he was a writer.

Abbey's rhetorical strategy makes sense. Our popular archetype for the artist or writer is the solitary and rebellious genius; the image of a dutiful park ranger hardly fits the bill. Reconciling these two identities—ranger and author—requires Abbey to write about his labor ironically. In the quotation above, he says his paychecks come “earned or not” (39). That disjunctive phrase functions ironically as it avoids any final judgment about whether he is working for a living at Arches, or whether he is a rebel who has infiltrated the ranks of public service employees for his own purposes. Clearly, he needed to carve out some representational space for the dissident elements of his identity without being so overt that he offended his superiors, jeopardizing his future livelihood. Writing ironically about his work allowed him to achieve both of these goals.

Avoiding his own labor, Abbey gladly depicts the tourists who visit his area as workers.

They work hard, these people. They roll up incredible mileages on their odometers ... endure patiently the most prolonged discomforts: the tedious traffic jams, the awful food of park cafeterias and roadside eateries, the nocturnal search for a place to sleep or camp, the dreary routine of One-Stop Service, the endless lines of creeping traffic, the smell of exhaust fumes, the ever-proliferating Rules & Regulations, the fees and bills and the service charges, the boiling radiator and the flat tire and the vapor lock, the surly retorts of room clerks and traffic cops ....(51)

Taken out of context, this passage could easily describe the plight of long-haul truckers. Again, Abbey uses a catalog technique, but whereas it earlier directed attention away from physicality, it here directs our focus back to it. Absent from this passage is any hint that the tourists are enjoying some of that “solitude and space” that being in Arches offers him. As Abbey skirts away from the physicality of his own work while emphasizing the physical condition of a tourist, he transfers the “worker” identity from himself to the tourists he serves. The appellation he gives them—“Industrial Tourists”—even situates their activity in direct reference to economy and production. The label reduces the tourists to cogs in a machine that was built to consume the spectacular landscapes of southern Utah.

Of course, Abbey’s feelings towards cars in the National Parks are not original. In 1912, Lord James Bryce, then Britain’s ambassador to the United States, warned that driving through a natural park precludes “that kind of enjoyment which a painter, or any devotee of nature, seeks” because the “swift automobile pace” means the driver’s “focus is always changing” (qtd in Louter 24). Abbey echoes the mistrust of modernity and romantic aesthetics exhibited here by Bryce. However, he adds a new element by referencing class and labor explicitly. So doing, he leaves his reader with the impression that he wants isolation from his classed and categorized society at least as much as he wants communion with Arches’ unspoiled wonders.

If industrial tourism poses such a great threat to Arches and Moab, how can Abbey—himself an employee of the tourism industry—exculpate his complicity? One moment in *Desert Solitaire* when Abbey does play the role of a worker concerns itself with exactly this question. One evening, a government survey crew arrives at Abbey’s

trailer to restock its supplies. As they visit, the government crew discusses their assignment to plot and map a new roadway that will be built through the park. Abbey suggests that the new road will be expensive and may be unnecessary. The crew's foreman responds that the road will increase visitation to the park by a factor of twenty or thirty, and then he waits for Abbey's reply to what he thinks is incontrovertible proof of his position. Abbey recalls that "he stared at me intently, waiting to see what possible answer I could have to that. 'Have some more water,' I said. I had an answer all right but I was saving it for later" (44). Abbey never directly challenges the foreman's judgment, which I take as a sign that he needed to be cooperative and congenial to keep his job.

However, once his readers replace the survey crew as his primary audience, he takes a different tack:

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 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. Then I went home to the trailer, taking a shortcut over the bluffs. (58–59)

Here Abbey parodies the values of a dutiful employee—teamwork and initiative—that elsewhere in the text he overtly mocks. Since he recognizes that his subversive mischief cannot stop the march of development into Arches, he must intend some other outcome from writing about it. Reading his actions symbolically, we uncover their true effects. Stakes help to delineate, to mark and divide not only space but also attention and interest.

“Do you have a stake in this matter?” we might ask in a situation that has nothing to do with physical space. Though Abbey cannot successfully disrupt the road builders who encroach upon Arches National Monument, he can make his identity illegible to those whom he depends on for his material living—the park service and his readers. So doing, he introduces situational irony into his employment with the park service and conceals the signs by which we could convict him either of selling-out to work as a ranger or of treason against industrial tourism. Irony, true to its form, proves an apt tool in complicating our attempt to read Abbey’s class identity. Un-staking the psychic terrain of his own identity, he disorients his readers’ judgment, leaving them unable to locate him in the system of social status.

In one instance, Abbey disrupts a social myth by re-classing a job that occupies a privileged place in the American popular imagination. Writing about cowboys, he deflates the pretensions of those who play “make-believe” by attiring themselves in the usual western fare of “big white hats, tight pants, flowered shirts, and high-heeled fruity boots” (110). Abbey happens to know a couple of real cowboys and finds that they work for a living like anyone else. During his offseason at Arches, he works for a time with a Moab rancher named Roy Scobie and his hired hand, Viviano Jacquez. Contrary to the lionizing conventions his 1960s readers might expect of cowboys in cinema or literature, Abbey offers an unromantic view by focusing on ranch-work as wage-labor. He compliments Viviano not as the embodiment of Turnerian or Rooseveltian manly virtues but as a capable employee. “He’s a good cowboy, I suppose; at least he knows the basic skills of the trade: can shoe a horse, rope and brand and castrate a calf, fix a flat tire, stretch barbed wire, dynamite a beaver dam or lay out an irrigation ditch” (85). Abbey’s

equivocation here suggests that maybe there is nothing so special about Viviano in relation to other cattle-workers. Unlike the western cowboy hero who has the fastest gun, who rides the longest and the hardest, Viviano is just another hand on the payroll. “But, in his favor, he is inexpensive; he is economical; he works full-time seven days a week for room and board and a hundred dollars a month. Employers like that; but it would be false to say that Viviano is exploited. How can you exploit a man who enjoys his work? He’ll work for nothing, almost, if necessary, requiring only a token wage or salary in recognition of his professional status” (85). Abbey is quick to demystify our perception of the cowboy, but he backs away from uniting the cowboy’s occupational grievances with blue-collar wariness about exploitation. Acknowledging exploitation would lead readers to make judgments about class-identities and class-interests, and Abbey is always working to unsettle those. Viviano, however, might be more inclined than Abbey to unionize and strike. He “complains loud and bitterly about his pay, the long hours, the lousy food, the skunks under the bunkhouse” (86).

Whatever our judgment of Viviano’s situation may be, it is a moot point, since capitalist development has changed the nature of ranching. Even writing in the mid-1960s, Abbey sees that the days are numbered for men like Roy and his outfit. “The cattlegrowing industry like almost everything else has been mechanized and automated. . . . [Ranching] is simply a component of the lab to market food-processing apparatus: you take a steer, drop a hormone tablet in his ear and step back quickly” (109–110).

Resituating the cowboy in relation to labor and capital, Abbey anticipates the arguments made by New Western historians. Abbey would likely have agreed with Patricia Limerick’s argument that “the processes of western development do run

continuously from past to present, from mining, cattle raising, and farming on to hydroelectric power and even into space” (*Legacy of Conquest* 32). In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey writes that he longs to get away from the cacophony that western development has always made. “I find that contemplating the natural world,” he says, “my pleasure is greater if there are not too many others contemplating it with me, at the same time” (200). It is ironic then that the celebrity of such a loner should have called forth masses of people to the places he traveled. Limerick herself notices the irony, writing that Abbey “was equally important for denouncing tourism and for recruiting more tourists” (“Seeing and Being Seen” 48). Like Natty Bumppo, he scouted the way for those who would follow him to destroy the place he loved.

Abbey is thus equally complicit in the development of the West as a writer and a ranger. I point this out to show how vestiges of Abbey’s class anxiety crop up as he deals with both of those identities. Abbey’s writerly identity—and by implication, the identity of the places he loved—stand for the independence and freedom that tourists have found appealing, and the many businesses that compete for tourists’ attention have capitalized on Abbey’s image. That so many should be inspired to visit the Southwest because of the persona he crafted is not necessarily a bad thing, though Abbey probably saw it as such. After all, the expansion of the tourism industry correlates with the rise in stability and size of the American middle-class. According to historian Richard Sellars, the Park Service administrators whom Abbey damns sincerely believed that the development of parks’ infrastructures and roads would best fulfill the Service’s dual mission of opening the parks to the expanding middle-class and preserving wild places for future generations (181). Since Abbey’s prescriptions for the parks would curtail the type of travel most

tourists were able to do, his view represents an elitist stance toward visitors of the sort these administrators encouraged. Hence, it is hard not to read class and social status into his polemic against tourism. True, the policies he recommends to curb tourism have ecological warrant (those ecosystems can be very fragile, after all) and taken altogether they do not preclude visitation by tourists. But they do at some level manifest Abbey's undemocratic unwillingness to share his beloved Southwest. His stance on tourism thus raises the questions of how he viewed the social class of tourists and what emotions his encounters with them evoked. Having grown up on a poor Appalachian farm, did some part of Abbey envy the relative leisure the visitors enjoyed in their motorized homes and air-conditioned cars? Was he ever disappointed that the post-war, rising economic tide had not also lifted his own family's struggling little boat as it seemed to have done for the campers to whom he attended? In general, he covers the tracks he made through the American class system, leaving these questions unanswered. But sometimes hints peek through the prose. As he thought about the few conveniences he enjoyed in his park-service-provided mobile home, he mused about the labor saved and expended by having a refrigerator:

Raised in the backwoods of the Allegheny Mountains, I remember clearly how we used to chop blocks of ice out of Crooked Creek, haul them with team and wagon about a mile up the hill to the farmhouse and store them away in sawdust for use in the summer. Every time I drop a couple of ice cubes into a glass I think with favor of all the iron and coal miners, bargemen, railroaders, steelworkers, technicians, designers, factory assemblers, wholesalers, truckdrivers and retailers who have combined



their labors (often quite taxing) to provide me with this simple pleasant convenience, without which the highball or the *Cuba libre* would be poor things indeed. (*Desert Solitaire* 96)

Remembering the difficult labor that he did even as a boy, Abbey empathizes with the many blue-collar workers he lists and feels grateful for their cooperative effort. The object of his reverence here is just a couple of ice-cubes in a mixed drink, a modest comfort indeed. If he could muster this sort of thanks for an ounce of ice, Abbey must have seen even middle-class vacations as wasteful and exorbitant.<sup>6</sup> Appreciating how consumption signified for Abbey the effort of working-class people reveals traces of his early class-experience even in the writerly persona he crafted as an adult.

This respect for working-class people also shows up in his fiction, but never unambiguously. Abbey began working on *Monkey Wrench Gang* in the early 1970s, finally revising it in 1974 and publishing in 1975. Several friends and acquaintances inspired Abbey's creation of his monkeywrenching characters, a fact that leads me to see some of the book as an inside joke—names, he joked, were changed to “protect the guilty,” and the main characters (George Hayduke, Bonnie Abzug, Doc Sarvis, and Seldom Seen Smith) have real life counterparts (qtd in Cahalan 160).<sup>7</sup> Abbey and his

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<sup>6</sup> Abbey's self-righteous zeal on this point is likely misplaced. Generally speaking, the post-war families whom Abbey observed on vacation had prospered more than his own family had, but this statement obscures the economic constraints that led many post-war families to vacation at national parks instead of resorts. Having examined parks' materials and consumers' magazines from the 1950s, Susan Rugh finds that camping in national parks was advertised as a low-cost and wholesome family trip, “the perfect solution to vacationing on a tight budget for the family of a young veteran” (118). She also finds that the labor-saving amenities in parks that Abbey derides were necessary to convince young, middle-class housewives that their vacation would not be more work than the normal upkeep of their homes (124). Considering the worries of young families about escaping their difficult workloads without blowing their budgets, Abbey's contempt for middle-class travelers seems especially harsh and unsympathetic, and the socioeconomic gap between them and him appears much smaller.

<sup>7</sup> According to Cahalan, some of the industrial vandalism the book describes was actually perpetrated by Abbey and friends just months before *The Monkey Wrench Gang* was published. Abbey was never caught,

fellow saboteurs saw development as an unmitigated threat to the West, but they appreciated the difficult situation of laborers who depended on industrial jobs for their living. For that reason, *Monkey Wrench Gang* always distinguishes between labor and management as it excoriates the public face of western industry. After narrowly escaping arrest by County Search and Rescue team (led by the avaricious and arrogant Mormon bishop, Dudley Love), Hayduke and Smith drive east into Colorado. Hayduke curses the oilfields they spy out of the car window, but Smith tempers the criticism. “There’s men out there a-workin’. Out there in the cold at four in the morning slaving away to provide us with oil and gas for this here truck so we can help sabotage the world planetary maggot-machine. Show a little gratitude” (150–151). Abbey’s sense of irony again plays up multiple meanings: does it unite the saboteurs and the blue-collarers in spirit, focusing on the indirect, blue-collar complicity in their revolt, or does it render the oil-workers foolish people who thoughtlessly slave away for an evil empire? Abbey leaves the answering of that question to his reader’s discretion.

Though he may not let workers entirely off the hook, he celebrates the virility of blue-collar work and respects the practical know-how it bestows. Abbey exhibits a desire to have his mixed-class audience share that respect for blue-collar work. Some scenes educate the reader about the technical skill blue-collar work requires. George and Seldom come across an unoccupied bulldozer near Hite Marina, Lake Powell, early in the novel. Hoping to satisfy his appetite for mayhem, Hayduke craves the chance to drive the dozer off the adjacent cliff and into the lake. Smith agrees to help, but operating the dozer turns out to take a good deal more skill and attention than Hayduke had planned. For five full

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and we can imagine the authorities’ frustration at not being able to get an arrest warrant for a confession made in a work of fiction. Abbey’s ironies strike again!

pages, Seldom delays the satisfaction for which we and Hayduke wait in order to give us a lesson on the proper use of a bulldozer. We wait with Hayduke in the driver's seat, while Seldom describes, in proper sequence, the "array of levers and pedals" (123). Only after knowing more than a bit about flywheel clutch levers, speed selectors, throttle governors, brakes, compression releases, choke valves, and starting motors do Abbey and Seldom allow us the machine's exciting lurch toward the watery abyss (123–127). "Yep, it's a little complicated," Seldom reminds those who would dismiss the work of equipment operators (124).

Abbey wants us to know a little something about the technical complexity of industrial machinery and blue-collar work so that we can appreciate the difficulties the gang encounters as they orchestrate their attacks. Given his vitriol for motorized tourists, I think Abbey worried that his middle and upper-class readers might assume that driving a car and operating heavy machinery were somehow equivalent. Again, he pauses to educate the reader about heavy equipment so that we will not mistakenly assume any parity between the two activities:

You don't lift the hood of a Caterpillar tractor. There is no hood. You walk forward over the steel cleats of the track and hunker down for a look at the power plant. What you see, if your name is Wilbur S. Schnitz this bright morning at Comb Wash, Utah, is a fuel line leading into empty air, a cluster of ignition leads snipped clean in two, cylinder injection heads hammered off, linkage rods cut, air and oil filters gone, hoses severed and dripping fluid. What you do not see is the sand in the crankcase, the syrup in the fuel tank. (100)

The message of this passage is clear: tractors and dozers are not cars, and Wilbur is no mere driver. As Abbey details the damage Hayduke has done to Wilbur's machine, those in his audience who have never had to pull the oil-dipstick from the engine blocks of their own cars must feel that they are out of their depth, a realization that Abbey hopes will confer respect for the monkeywrenchers. To a more limited degree, Abbey extends that respect to men like Wilbur. He is clearly no idiot, since he can take inventory of the damage done to a complex machine, but Abbey's chosen name for him renders him ridiculous and old-fashioned. Wilbur S. Schnitz is the name of someone who might have authored an overland, pioneer journal, or helped to invent improvements to timepieces during the eighteenth century. Though we can appreciate his technical skill, we sense his presence in the story as an anachronism, and Abbey allows us a chuckle at his expense.

Part of the fun in reading descriptions of industrial vandalism comes from the reappropriation of the virility and know-how that people like Wilbur possess by people deemed more politically worthy by us and Abbey. Taken out of context, there are plenty of moments in the text that could describe merely the mundane goings on of a jobsite like Wilbur's. Preparing the gang's raid at Comb Wash, Hayduke shouts orders like a foreman: "Hard hat! Everybody got his hard hat? [...] You—put that thing on your head [...] Somebody show her how to adjust the headband [...] Okay, gloves, hats, wire cutters, signals" (82–83). What makes these moments interesting is the reader's affective exploration of real revolt through manual work. We get to reimagine traditional values of work-ethic, craftsmanship, and a job well-done as the marks of rebellion and independence rather than economic subservience. Jack Burns, the anarchical Lone Ranger and eco-terrorist who rescues Hayduke at the novel's end, watches George

destroy an Allis-Chalmers HD-41 tractor and compliments him like a boss might: “‘I can see you do a good job. Thorough. I like that.’ The man spat on the ground. ‘Not like some of the half-assed dudes I seen up on the Powder River’” (241). The power in Jack Burn’s compliment here is in its simplicity. So many occupations today abstract people from the physical realities of their bodies and surroundings at the same time that so much about our modern political system defers the promise of personal political efficacy through democratic participation. The novel overcomes and simplifies these frustrations through its reification of individuality and democracy in manual labor. Incarnating the cultural ideals of liberal democracy, George Washington Hayduke’s behavior cuts through the abstractions to give us a standard by which to measure personal freedom and political efficacy that is manifestly physical. Readers envy Hayduke for Jack Burns’ compliment, for a measure of personal freedom and worth that can be quantified by the amount of sand in a tractor’s crankcase or the volume of oil one has loosed from a hulking machine. None of Abbey’s characters is a moral exemplar, but for any of his readers who have the luxury of missing manual work, who worry about industry coopting democracy, who worry about the inadequacy of popular governance to curb ecological crisis, they are admirable nevertheless.

These liberal, democratic values held in common between us and the monkeywrenchers license our enjoyment of their subversive performance of blue-collar labor by separating the virtues we admire in working-class people from the negative stereotypes we construct about them. The gang-members’ caricatured backgrounds and personalities construct the group as a class-less society and introduce an element of unreality and irony that excuses us from having to extend the affinity we feel for the

monkeywrenchers' manual labor back to real people. After all, celebrating the strength, virtue, and know-how of real-life, working-class people might unsettle the assumptions we have about the righteousness of our opinions in relation to theirs. In the history of the environmental movement, labor has found itself on both sides of the coin; perhaps that mixed history has engendered among the environmentally-minded a visceral antipathy to all things labor. Richard White argues that this knee-jerk repulsion for modern work relies on an unexamined mythology about a natural past. Environmentalism, he argues, should stop pining the loss of those "old definitions and ideas" about nature and begin focusing on the "people, animals, and landscapes that have vanished" (183). Such a focus would validate more of the interests and concerns workers have in regards to environmental policy.<sup>8</sup>

All of these slips and elisions of class identity in *Monkey Wrench Gang* allow Abbey to unify his own socioeconomic background with his adult politics and opinions. In the early 1950s, Abbey's father traded hardscrabble farming in western Pennsylvania for a lease deal with a stripmining corporation (Cahalan 43). Did Abbey regret not being able to stop the deal? Did he regret not yet being interested in stopping the deal? Perhaps George Hayduke's vigilante justice represents Abbey's attempt to right a wrong twenty years after the fact and to apologize for the collusion of his family with nature's despoilers. Around the same time as the stripmine deal, Abbey worked in New Mexico on an oil crew, describing the job as a "combination of high excitement and dreary monotony" (Cahalan 43). *Monkey Wrench Gang* lets him reminisce about that time, while

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<sup>8</sup> I should qualify this statement by saying that alliances between organized labor and conservationists have a mixed track record at best (see Switzer 32–35). I see the effort to include workers in the environmental policy debate as a way to temper the elitism and radicalism that sometimes characterize the discourse; it might help activists to reach a broader audience, but it would not guarantee greater success.

his self-deprecating tone deflects through irony whatever judgment we might have about the politically unsavory implications of such nostalgia. Abbey perpetually goes back to the scene of the crime—moments of working-class experience long past—and imaginatively lets George Washington Hayduke and “Cactus Ed” set the records straight.

But, as always, Abbey’s irony equivocates, obscuring the trail of class identity as it meanders through the text. He self-consciously challenges the redemptive promise of subversive, manual labor in his treatment of gender. As a reader, I most often found myself identifying most often with Bonnie Abbzug’s character. She is rational, educated, and funny—fully sexual and fully human. More often than the others, she is also willing to think about the ethical and legal contradictions inherent in the story’s development. Despite these perfectly relatable and admirable qualities, the other monkeywrenchers exclude her. If, as I did, you identify with Bonnie, the novel sets you up for disappointment. Before destroying a suspension bridge across a canyon, the crew divides up the work, assigning Bonnie the job of painting signs to warn innocent motorists of the hazard they are making ahead: “‘Why do I always get the dull and uninteresting jobs?’” whines Bonnie. . . . ‘Because you’re a woman’” (313). Does Abbey lead us down a blind alley here, promising us a part in democratic revolt only to ironically relegate us to the unmanly (and unoriginal) work of writing? Or, viewing his writing as “warning signs” to civilization, does he feminize writing to comment on the ineffectiveness of his own career? The personalities of the group’s three men certainly direct us to identify with Bonnie; who, after all, would find a polygamist, a pervert philosopher, or a sociopath more relatable than Bonnie? Having sold you on the appeal of eco-vandalism as political and personal expression, you might ask along with Bonnie, “When’s my turn to wreck

something?” only to find the opportunities denied you (90). Whatever Abbey’s purpose, his treatment of Bonnie must ultimately complicate whatever class anxieties we or he resolve using his redemption of manual work.

This is probably as Abbey would have liked it. Having read a critical review of one of his books, he dismissed its writer as someone with “no skill or understanding whatsoever of humor, irony, paradox, subtlety, or other literary arts” (qtd in Ryan 10). Reviewers, he felt, often misread his work, trying like the government survey crews who were once the object of his mischief to stake down his position, to question him directly about who he was as a man and a writer. Maybe Abbey believed he could offer no candid answer to that question—he was too diffuse and contradictory to ever do so. Late in his career, Abbey found himself accused on xenophobia for saying that the southern US border ought to be closed to immigration. Wendell Berry, his lifelong friend from a distance, came to his defense. In the course of his argument, Berry observed that Abbey’s real topic was not so much politics, race, class, or nature, but himself. “As an autobiographer, his work is self-defense; as a conservationist, it is to conserve himself as a human being” (“A Few Words” 14). If Berry is correct, Abbey’s inclusion of class in his writing suggests that he saw its significance to his identity and felt the tension it exerted as he crafted a public persona that needed to address a mixed-class audience. Michael Ryan points out that Abbey “experiments with his image and ethos, alternately deflating and elevating his personal credibility” (13). Did he conceive of such a strategy’s class implications? Neither he nor I have fully probed the dark waters in his writing that obscure class identity, but the turbulence his work manifests close to the surface suggests the presence of something significant far below.



## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

In the years since Wendell Berry and Edward Abbey wrote the texts I discuss in this volume, the exigency of environmental crisis and the “uneven development” of global capitalism across international boundaries has pushed scholars to generate explanations that account for both phenomena.<sup>9</sup> Many have recently traced human and nonhuman suffering back to a shared genealogy in what social theorist Stuart Sim has called “modernity’s cult of progress” (14). These ideas have had more traction in the United States since the release of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), and the public may mistake their heightened visibility for completely new approaches to the environmental and macroeconomic management. One thing that this class-centered reading of Abbey and Berry does is to remind us that the connection between economy and environment has been a latent force, even in the texts written by these comparatively traditional conservationists. Further research could likely identify a nascent eco-justice consciousness in texts that we might consider far afield of the usual suspects in nature and place writing.

If Berry’s and Abbey’s views on economy and society necessarily influence their conceptions of nature, then perhaps their social philosophies also account for the stylistic differences between these two literary friends. Reading Berry, one is struck by the earnestness of his prose and worldview. He writes well-placed sentences and situates them in paragraphs, chapters, and stories that—like his characters and settings—are well

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<sup>9</sup> Uneven development is a term currently in vogue with cultural geographers. For extended discussion of its meaning, see Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

grounded and aware of their place in the cosmic scheme of things. This written style correlates with Berry's pastoralism. For Berry, there is nothing automatic about humans flourishing in nature; it takes cultivated effort and a clear-headed knowledge of humanity's limits. It takes craftsmen who will work cooperatively with nature, exhibiting the humility and skill that Berry incorporates in his written voice. By contrast, Abbey's prose is full of loose ends, fragments, and barbs that snag the reader's attention, reminding her to slow down and enjoy the view despite whatever chaos people have created around it. I demonstrated above that Abbey exhibits a class anxiety that suggests his desire to escape from it all. It is altogether fitting that, espousing such a view of society, Abbey would choose to represent social and political life as incoherent and ridiculous; the only sublime moments in such a world come only when his characters escape it long enough to see their true animal and mortal nature reflected in the Spartan landscapes of the desert. Postmodernism has generally been suspicious of any claim to know a rhetor's mind through their manipulation of a capricious sign system. However, the comparison of these two authors—with their similar beliefs but opposite styles—suggests that language may reveal something about character and thought.

In chapter 2, I argue that Wendell Berry exhibits a mixed-class consciousness, and I use the criteria that working-class studies scholars have identified as conventional in blue-collar literature to re-categorize Berry as a working-class author. Insofar as that move is successful, it can redefine how we conceive of class. Farmers often own their capital and work as managers—both features that sometimes exclude them from the category of working-class. However, Berry's work demonstrates many attitudes and beliefs that correlate with traits attributed to blue-collar writers. These similarities suggest

that class-identity exists more often as a malleable and context-specific ideational response to lived, material experience than as a direct outcome of one's relation to the deployment and development of capital. This paradigm shift could help us appreciate the influence of class in a broader range of human experience, making it visible in any cultural production that assumes shared beliefs about the meaning of material experiences like occupation, consumption, and status.

An important part of my argument about Ed Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a recognition of the way aesthetics and politics intermesh. The excitement for vandalism Abbey generates in his readers indelibly connects to the political and class taboos he breaks by repurposing blue-collar labor. It is my hope that this represents a more careful and subtle view than traditional Marxist analysis often offers. Michael Denning writes that such reductive scholarship has a "tendency to see all of culture as first and foremost a weapon, a tool for constructing subject of one sort or another"; the truth, Denning suggests, is that cultural production "always goes beyond the ideological function emphasized in the political definitions of culture" (Denning 435). But how then can we deal fairly with a text? Is there an approach that neither aestheticizes away a writer's political complicity nor misreads writing as propaganda or ideology? Denning argues that a definition of culture as labor yields just such nuanced readings. This thesis has been my first long-form experiment with Denning's ideas, and the results I have seen encourage me to continue adopting and adapting his theory.

The most basic assertion this study makes is implied in its methods: that there is no nature apart from culture, at least not as far as humans are concerned. Deep ecologists

have sought to counter our anthropocentric excesses by re-centering in our thought and discourse nature's independent subjecthood, but that venture poses philosophical problems. Christopher Manes finds that anthropocentrism once assuaged humanity's cosmological insecurity before an awesome and inconsiderate nature; now that technology has shifted the balance of power, he suggests that the idea may have outgrown its usefulness (25). It behooves us, he argues, to "learn a new language" by which to address nature and then listen for nature's reply (25). Manes's thought is typical of those who espouse this deep ecology, a philosophical turn that seeks to radically challenge human exceptionalism and privilege. Though his suggestion ought to be an important component of each individual's personal philosophy, it leaves much to be desired as social praxis. Nature's "speech" is dependent upon the hearer and must always have an agent and interpreter. To use another example, even if we agree with Christopher D. Stone's groundbreaking argument that the natural world ought to have independent legal standing, we have no way of knowing how the natural world would exercise its legal preferences, or which species would represent other non-humans. No matter how righteous its intentions to correctly value the non-human, deep ecology pits people against each other in competition for the authority to speak in behalf of nature.

It was on that point that I saw the value in examining work, labor, and class in Abbey's and Berry's writings. If people are in competition to speak for nature, then it is reasonable to assume those competitions would reflect the power relations—material and cultural—to which those people are subject. In this light, Abbey's and Berry's self-representations as workers reveal themselves as rhetorical choices that reflect the socioeconomic and political contexts of the authors and their readers. We know that

“some live more downstream than others,” but examining Abbey’s and Berry’s writings for their attention to work can give us a better idea of who those “others” are and how Berry and Abbey see themselves in relation to them (Tarter 213).

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