

## Edward Abbey and Exclusionary Conservation on the Borderlands

For many environmentalists, Ed Abbey holds a special place in our hearts. It is through *Desert Solitaire* that my appreciation for the beauty and vastness of the Sonoran Desert first found an adequate voice that could express the complex vibrancy of such a desolate place. Novels like *The Brave Cowboy* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* read like fantasies that every nature worshipper such as myself wishes he could live out to express disenchantment with modernity and its many downsides. Yet, this place that Abbey occupies in our imagination and in our canon is just as contested a space as the desert Southwest that the author fought to preserve.

Lifting Abbey up as a paradigm of nature writing and environmental activism runs counter to many of the goals of ecocriticism. The rhetoric employed by Abbey and other like-minded thinkers has led to a conservation ethic that excludes those deemed unworthy of experiencing wilderness. This exclusionary conservation has led to problematic and environmentally dangerous policies throughout the borderlands region. The ideology championed by Abbey has paradoxically painted the desert Southwest as a region of unparalleled natural beauty in need of preservation and as an access point for illegal immigrants that threaten the hegemonic structure of American society.

Abbey's polemical writing has appealed to just as many readers as it has alienated. In the introduction to *Coyote in a Maze*, editor Peter Quigley notes that academics hold a reverence for Abbey and his name can be heard whispered in the halls of academic conferences (1). In the same collection, Tom Lynch critiques Abbey's exploration of the Four Corners region by arguing that the adventures in *Desert Solitaire* reenact the conquering of the region by European explorers. Abbey giddily describes an experience rafting through Glen Canyon before it was dammed. The author and his companion rush through what he terms "terra incognita". However,

as he climbs out of the canyon, the sight of petroglyphs disappoints him as it means “the Indians had been here” (326). His negation of the Native American culture that has occupied the desert for nearly 12,000 years is a point of contention for many critics of both Abbey and the wilderness narratives he typifies. Abbey’s rhetoric of negation is not just troubling for those he forgets, but also for those he actively seeks to keep out.

Abbey’s pleas to protect the desert and the strong prose that gives his call to action form and shape are his only redeeming graces for many scholars. But what are the costs of celebrating such a figure? The author’s journals and notes are filled with racist and anti-immigrant vitriol that casts his glorification of desert life in a different shade. Many admirers of Abbey gloss over these problems by euphemistically calling the author difficult, opinionated, and cranky. Indeed, the cantankerous hermit in the wilderness was very much a part of Abbey’s identity as an author and an activist. It allowed him to enter a mode of writing that conceived the desert as a harsh and indifferent landscape that, though it contained diverse forms of life, could kill just as easily as it could nurture.

Throughout *Desert Solitaire* Abbey criticizes the scores of tourists rolling through the desert in their motor homes. Written in the 1950s as highway culture began to take root in American society, ecotourists flocked to national parks to soak in the landscape. In doing so, the parks became overused and overpopulated in the summer months Abbey spent working in Arches National Monument. The author’s placement of himself outside of a dominant culture that can consume and destroy nature in the same act is meant to give him leverage as a voice that can speak out against the mainstream. Yet Abbey’s occupation at the edge of wilderness and society also puts him in that liminal zone of interaction that polices the boundaries between

cultures. It is here that we might understand how Abbey positions himself as the pseudo protector of both wilderness and culture.

In his infamous essay, “Immigration and Liberal Taboos,” Abbey argues that allowing immigrants into the United States will be a drain on our economic and natural resources. He accuses liberals of ignoring the problems of population growth in favor of standing up for human rights, a cause he considers politicized and “cheap.” By allowing immigrants to implant themselves, Abbey fears that American culture will be taken over by “millions of hungry, ignorant, unskilled, and culturally-morally-genetically impoverished people” (43). Though it was first written twenty-five years ago, the rhetoric Abbey uses has become commonplace in an ongoing debate. He fears pregnant women coming to El Paso and San Diego to deliver their babies; he fears their “alien mode of life” will undermine American democracy, and he fears that upon arrival they will multiply endlessly until the country is taken in much the same way Anglo settlers took land from Native Americans (43). Abbey’s rhetorical moves include identifying “true” Americans as descendants of White Anglo Saxon Protestants and, specifically, Latino immigrants as a force of subversive invaders.

In an article deconstructing immigration rhetoric based on environmental concerns, Sarah Jaquette Ray outlines a few of the many problems that come along with envisioning undocumented immigrants in this way. Ray argues that what she calls the “poetics of trash” equates human migrants to litter or invasive animal species ruining the pristine desert landscape (713). The tracks and trash left behind by the travelers is held up as evidence of their environmental harm. Considering them as invasive species also paints the issue as a scientific concern for the ecosystem and deemphasizes the fact that their “not belonging” in this space is contingent on social, historical, and political contexts, rather than environmental. In fact, many

of the nonhuman species we consider invasive often are introduced into an ecosystem by our own designs and machinations. In this light, immigrants are dehumanized and seen as harmful animals that must be hunted out.

Ray also points out that overuse is a problem of conservation in every national park, not merely those along the border. However, while national parks like Yellowstone are being loved to death, Ray notes that border parks are being trampled and stomped on (717). Much of the anxiety about immigrants is their tendency to move through a space, leaving waste behind. They cut trees for fire and leave the ashes for disgusted eco-tourists to discover. Their secrecy also causes anxieties about their contaminating the wilderness with their dirtiness, and configures them as an insidious virus sneaking into America to contaminate our culture as well.

This anxiety over passersby may be one of Abbey's biggest contradictions. Much of Abbey's contempt for tourists in *Desert Solitaire* hinges on their weekend warrior attitudes. They come and camp for a long weekend and then leave without ever truly seeking the experience of living in that place and discovering the many secrets the desert can hold. Yet Abbey lives in the shack allotted to him by the National Park Service and burns fuel to cook and warm his hermitage. Abbey's dwelling there is a place of privilege and a condition of his employment. He came to the wilderness to seek a new start and to earn a living making him not unlike the immigrants he would disparage in his later essays.

In fact, the migrants moving through the wilderness participate in the rugged ecotourism Abbey would seem to prefer as they trek through the desert in the heat of the day (it can reach 134° in the shade near the borderlands) to avoid the animals that venture out at night. While the destructive tourists pass through for recreation, the desperate immigrants crossing through these spaces seek much more than exercise and fresh air. Both may traverse vast distances by foot, but

a trip through the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend National Park would be a different experience if you had no resources beyond a jug of water and a guide who can be more dangerous than the terrain. Venomous snakes and dehydration won't kill you for profit.

Abbey's strict adherence to localism draws tight boundaries around who may enter the spaces he hopes to protect from outsiders. Much of the rhetoric utilized in both his "Immigration" essay and *Desert Solitaire* for conserving national parks operates as a discourse of exclusion. While limiting degradation and exploitation of wilderness spaces is integral to designs to preserve them, Abbey's propositions for maintaining national parks include keeping as many people out as possible. Only those strong enough to power themselves into the park, those who Abbey refers to as "sons of pioneers," should be allowed in (67). The images of conquering obstacles in order to earn a place in the wilderness not only strongly objectifies the natural world but also establishes a hierarchy privileging the descendants of the "WASP ancestors" mentioned in his later essay warning readers that we should not be as foolish as the Indians who failed to stop white settlers from rooting them out of the West (43).

The scare tactics used by Abbey have been taken up by many extremist groups seeking to police the border on their own. Organizations like the so-called minutemen consider it their duty to detain immigrants attempting to cross the border. The "us versus them" mentality seen in Abbey's works informs what political science scholar Roxanne Doty calls "statecraft from below" (528). Statecraft from below, as theorized by Doty, is a boots on the ground type of state building that the minutemen along the border are convinced is necessary. While official statecraft is what allows us to believe in secure and set borders existing both in the abstract conceptions of *them* and *us*, *our* way of life versus *theirs*, and in the concrete structures of a border patrol station, "statecraft from below" is the reinforcement of these concepts through radical rhetoric or

action that reifies these divisions in the public consciousness. Nature writers who take it upon themselves to defend the wilderness from the ravages of migration, such as Abbey, perpetuate this extremism and in many cases add to it. The power of statecraft from below lies in its ability to reproduce imagery through media representation.

This exclusionary rhetoric actually enacts a sort of policy driven violence against wild spaces in the borderlands. By drawing attention to the abstract borders between nations, the natural geographic borders then become dirty spaces fraught with illegal activity. Artificial cultural boundaries become the sites of political theater with very real consequences for the environment. The Rio Grande exists in the public consciousness as a polluted waterway and a source of contention between nations. In “Immigration and Liberal Taboos,” Abbey proposes recalling the military from foreign bases to occupy the Southwest. Both the former and current governors of Texas maintain a National Guard presence in the Rio Grande Valley as a show of commitment to policing.

The transmission of Abbey’s inflammatory essay has almost become a taboo of its own. Originally written for and rejected by the *New York Times*, the piece found its way into publication in a collection of the author’s essays entitled *One Life at a Time, Please*. Now, it is spread digitally as a singular piece by conservative websites that wish to present themselves as Abbey did: brave enough to speak hard truths that others ignore out of cowardice. The status of Abbey as a canonized figure in environmental writing serves these arguments well. It lends them a sense of legitimacy and allows them to make the case for harsh crackdowns on immigration to save our national parks. Many fall victim to what Lawrence Buell calls the “America-as-nature reduction,” relying on the American commonplace that the landscapes of the U.S. (and particularly the West) are exceptional and in need of protection. Nationalizing our landscapes

makes it even more problematic when illegal immigration is routed through these revered spaces and imagines these travelers as an invading force aiming to ruin visual symbols of America's greatness.

Historically, many national parks have already played a role in the politics of exclusion. In order to hold the parks up as symbols of America's pristine character and rugged individualism, many existing cultures were segregated or completely erased. Tribes like the Havasu in the Grand Canyon and the Cheyenne in Yellowstone were relocated, often by force. In our own time and as an extension of this fear mongering, a bill is making its way through the U.S. House of Representatives that would enable massive developmental work within national parks along the Southwest border. Known as the Secure Our Borders First Act of 2015, HR399 will fund large-scale projects from California to south Texas. Just within Big Bend National Park, the bill would add tower-based surveillance, aerial surveillance equipment including blimps and drones, and a mysterious allowance for something called "advanced unattended surveillance sensors". Besides these Orwellian additions to park security, three forward operating bases as well as 192 miles of new road will be constructed for Border Patrol access. Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, authored the bill and states that it will "transfer assets from theatre of war and redeploy them to the Southwest border." The language of the bill and its author imply a militarization of our national parks. Not since the age of Manifest Destiny will our frontier spaces have been so well protected from otherized threats looming on the other side of the wilderness, hoping to infiltrate our culture.

This impending overdevelopment would prove environmentally harmful for many reasons. Parks such as Big Bend that pride themselves on their remote locations would now be awash with guard towers and surveillance equipment. Ecotourists seeking a wilderness

experience would instead be watched over by advanced surveillance sensors. The permanent bases, increased vehicle patrol, and miles of new roads would churn pollution into the atmosphere that the region is not used to and has been relatively free from. Already one of the least visited parks, Big Bend would likely see a drop off in visitors looking for views without blimps and drones, and the miles of new roads would only be left to patrols and black bears.

Exclusionary conservation, as it was espoused by Abbey and as it continues to be by those who would appropriate his voice, might keep the wilderness untouched by those of us without citizenship but will only lend power to projects like HR399. We understand the material, physical space of our world as fundamentally diverse. Be it through the biodiversity of the flora and fauna inhabiting that space or the cultural interactions that take place on it, using exclusionary tactics to preserve environments is inherently contradictory. As we move forward with the conversation of conservation, the most important question we must ask ourselves is not if we should protect wildness but rather who we are protecting it for. Environmental issues transcend place bound politics in a very material way. Exploitation and degradation are global problems and the project of conservation must not be exclusionary.

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