

# Literary Environmentalism in the Desert Southwest

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## Introduction

### A Cast of Characters

In 1956 and 1957, a young philosopher and writer spent two summers working as a park ranger in Arches National Park. The pay was poor and the work mundane, but the scenery couldn't be beat – a fact that shone through when the writer, a man by the name of Edward Abbey, wrote *Desert Solitaire* in 1968. The book, a collection of essays based on the journals he kept during the time he worked for the National Park Service, detailed Abbey's life in the desert and shared stories about Abbey's relationship to wildlife, his dealings with tourists, and his interactions with the desert itself.

In a foreword to the reprint of the first edition, Abbey calls *Desert Solitaire* “unreadable – pretentious, hasty, amateurish, embarrassing.”<sup>1</sup> The sentiment, characteristic of Abbey's gruff cynicism, was not shared among *Desert Solitaire's* readership; the book was widely read and critically acclaimed, hailed by many as the next *Walden*. Its depiction of the rare, alien landscape of the desert southwest and Abbey's own strange style captivated readers and shot Abbey to fame within environmentalist and nature writing circles. Abbey became the voice of the desert, glorifying its barren landscape and condemning those who would develop it beyond recognition.<sup>2</sup>

In his next bestselling book, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), Abbey took a more fictional approach to environmentalism. The novel depicts a group of

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1968) xii.

<sup>2</sup> Doug Peacock, “*Desert Solitaire* Revisited,” web, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New

<sup>2</sup> Doug Peacock, “*Desert Solitaire* Revisited,” web, 2010.

environmental activists who turn to illegal actions to protest development along the Colorado River, specifically Glen Canyon Dam. This too was a reflection of Abbey's personal views – this time his politics rather than his experiences; Abbey was an avowed anarchist.

Towards the end of Abbey's career, another writer took up the subject of Southern Utah and the desert landscape within. Terry Tempest Williams, a conservationist and naturalist at the Utah Museum of Natural History, had grown up near Salt Lake City and wrote several collections of essays dealing with the natural history of the place. She was also very politically active in defense of the Utah wilderness. Through her writing and her politics, Williams quickly became one of the most prominent nature activists in the Southwest region.

Two years after Abbey's death, she wrote *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991). The book, Williams' most defining work to date, dealt with the environmental state of the Great Salt Lake region and the floods of the early 1980s, especially focusing on the impacts of the flooding on a nearby migratory bird refuge. The book was Williams' version of *Desert Solitaire*, a personal memoir inextricably connected with the story of place, as throughout the book Williams drew parallels between the environmental impact of the floods, her mother's slow death from breast cancer, and the results both events had on her family and loved ones.<sup>3</sup>

*Refuge* concludes with a well-known and much-anthologized essay, "The Clan of the One-Breasted Women," which claims that the cancer that killed her mother and affected nine members of her extended family was due to overexposure to radiation

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

following the government's nuclear testing in the Utah desert. Williams describes the community of people afflicted by the nuclear testing and tells of a dream she had about this group: a gathering in the desert of women reclaiming the wilderness that poisoned them, a passive resistance and subsequent arrest.<sup>4</sup> However, the call to action contained in "The Class of the One-Breasted Women" was not to be her most significant moment of political action: that would come later, in 1995, as the U.S. Congress considered how much land to set aside for political protection as a designated federal wilderness area. Williams testified before Congress and rallied a group of wilderness writers to contribute essays to a book stating the importance of Utah wild lands. The book, simply titled *Testimony*, was acclaimed as a political action: Bill Clinton, president at the time of the Utah Wilderness Act, reportedly said of *Testimony* that "this little book made a difference."<sup>5</sup>

Both Abbey and Williams were writers and activists, and their writing and activism has attracted much critical analysis. Abbey, who was active twenty years before Williams, has attracted more published scholarship than Williams, but Williams has been the subject of a few books and book chapters, as well as countless magazine and journal articles. For both writers, the tensions between their written lives and their lived ones are the focus of analysis, as both writers had a complicated way of walking the line between truth and fiction.

In the book *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement*, Daniel J. Philippon describes how Edward Abbey creates an

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 281-290.

<sup>5</sup> David Thomas Sumner, "Testimony, Refuge, and the Sense of Place," in *A Voice In The Wilderness: Conversations with Terry Tempest Williams*, ed. Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 100-114.

‘ecotopia,’ or an idealized future that in this case centers around a healthy respect for the wilderness. Abbey’s version of utopia, according to Philippon, is “a distinctively sixties future of peace, love, and ‘absolute presence.’”<sup>6</sup> By presenting not reality but perfection, he is able to lull readers into a love of the land before delivering his condemnation of the real-life forces he sees as threatening this ideal. Abbey’s writing contains many hallmarks of utopia – continuous present tense, a dreamy and unfamiliar landscape – that allow his work to be particularly effective.<sup>7</sup> However, in prioritizing this aim in his writing, he deprioritizes the truthfulness of his own characterization and the coherence of the narrative, resulting in contradictions and inconsistencies that confuse attentive readers.

Other scholars disagree on the point of these contradictions in Abbey’s work; David Pozza, author of *Bedrock and Paradox: The Literary Landscapes of Edward Abbey*, argues that they are to “provoke [readers] into thinking for themselves and making their own judgments about human nature which at times contradicts itself.”<sup>8</sup> In an analysis of Abbey’s work as it relates to genre, he concludes Abbey does not lie about which of his stories are fiction and which are nonfiction, but instead has what Michel Foucault would call a ‘strong author function’ – he, the author, is closely associated with the narrator of *Desert Solitaire*, but they cannot be one and the same. The paradox that results when Abbey casts himself in this light allows him to “gain a broader perspective on existence where inconsistencies and incongruities naturally abound,” and this way of

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel J. Philippon, *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped The Environmental Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 233.

<sup>7</sup> Philippon, *Conserving Words*, 237-247.

<sup>8</sup> David Pozza, *Bedrock and Paradox: The Literary Landscape of Edward Abbey* (New York: P. Lang, 2006), 3-5.

thinking serves to challenge readers as well.<sup>9</sup> Abbey wanted to challenge readers. He wanted to disturb them into action, and his writing was the perfect weapon with which to do so.

Terry Tempest Williams' fiction has also attracted critical analysis, most of which has since been gathered into the essay collection *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams: New Critical Essays* (2003). The largest section of this focuses on Williams' rhetorical style; like Abbey, her memoirs are not entirely linear or factual. Robert Miltner suggests in the essay "In Cahoots With Poetry" that "Williams' stories are creative nonfictions, a reportage of actual events embellished through creative 'slants' or 'takes.'"<sup>10</sup> In crafting prose poems instead of essays, Miltner argues, Williams more effectively symbolizes her emotional and elemental relationship with the desert landscape.<sup>11</sup>

In the essay "When Burke Meets Williams: A Study of Landscape, Story, Identity, and Politics," Lisa Eastmond examines Williams' decision to use creative nonfiction stories as a method of activism. Abbey used his writing style to draw attention to the environmental issues surrounding the desert southwest; Eastmond argues that Williams does the same in using story to 'pierce the heart.'<sup>12</sup> Williams defends her use of

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<sup>9</sup> Pozza, *Bedrock and Paradox*, 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Miltner, "In Cahoots With Poetry: Williams as Prose Poet in *An Unspoken Hunger* and *Desert Quartet*" in *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams*, ed. Katherine Chandler and Melissa Goldthwaite (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), 96.

<sup>11</sup> Miltner, "In Cahoots With Poetry," 97-99

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Eastmond, "When Burke Meets Williams: A Study of Landscape, Story, Identity, and Politics" in *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams*, ed. Katherine Chandler and Melissa Goldthwaite (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), 109.



story as the best way to get a reader engaged in a text and, by extension, a deeper issue, saying that “story offers a wash of images and emotion that returns us to our highest and deepest selves, where we remember what it means to be human, living in place with our neighbors.”<sup>13</sup> Writing becomes her method of activism by drawing public sympathy to the environmental movement.

Abbey wrote to disturb and Williams wrote to draw sympathy, but there is no denying a very similar writing style between the two. Both used their writing as activism to draw attention to environmental causes, and both were hugely popular writers. In addition, both allowed their own personal views – on gender, on religion, and on politics – to influence their writing and their relationships with the desert. However, nobody has ever compared the two, apart from sometimes mentioning them as champions of the same cause. I believe this is because, despite their similarities, their biographies essentially paint them as polar opposites. It is difficult to imagine Abbey and Williams as part of the same cause when their views on gender, religion, and politics vary so widely.

Abbey embodied the desert version of a mountain man, rough and gruff and crusty, and he called no place more specific than the desert home. He blew from place to place like a tumbleweed, and so he worked mostly outside of community. This is evidenced by the title of his most famous work, *Desert Solitaire* (in which, as we might expect from Philippon’s and Pozza’s analysis of Abbey’s work, he exaggerates the fact of his solitude; in fact, Abbey’s wife and child joined him for a season at Arches).<sup>14</sup> The way he eschewed community can perhaps be seen best in the circumstances of his death. In 1989, having been sick for a long time with pancreatic disease, he went to the desert to

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<sup>13</sup> Eastmond, “When Burke Meets Williams,” 111

<sup>14</sup> Pozza, *Bedrock and Paradox*, 21-24.

die alone. That failing him – he wasn't that sick, not yet – he returned home and instructed his friends to bury him in the desert, without gravestone or marker or death certificate. He wanted it to be just him and the desert. (This eventually happened just as he asked; Abbey is currently buried somewhere in the Arizona Southwest under a stone that simply says 'No Comment.')<sup>15</sup> In life as in death, he welcomed and craved the solitude that the desert held.

Abbey's communities hardly influenced his writing at all – or, more specifically, his lack of community made an enormous impact on his writing. He took masculinity to a lonely extreme, as evidenced by the title of *Desert Solitaire*. He was not at all religious, claiming to ascribe to pantheism when pushed on the issue, and he preferred to seek truth to a higher power. “If there is such a thing as divinity...then it must exist in everything, and not simply be localized in one supernatural figure beyond time or space. Either everything is divine, or nothing is,” he said to Jack Loeffler, author of Abbey's entry in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*.<sup>16</sup> He disavowed politics and the hallmarks of American citizenship, instead writing scathing critiques of the government and inspiring anarchist groups to overthrow wilderness developers. Even *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, which is about a group of environmentalists working together and seems to support community, sends a message advocating solitude: at one point, main character George Hayduke grouses that “one man alone can be pretty dumb sometimes, but for real bona fide stupidity, there ain't nothin' can beat teamwork.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jason Daley, “Forever Wild.” *Outside Magazine*, October 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Loeffler, “Abbey, Edward (1927-1989).” *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Tyler (London & New York: Continuum, 2005), 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1975).

Williams, on the other hand, worked *within* community. One reading of *Refuge* is enough to demonstrate this; in the book, she is inseparable from her family, her friends, and her husband as she battles both her mother's cancer and the change brought by the rising of the Great Salt Lake. In the former battle, she leans on her communities for support and love. In the latter, she depends on them for experience. Every time Williams visits the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, she does so with a relative or a friend.

Her reliance on community echoes throughout the events of her life as well. This is best exemplified in a May 1991 gathering that Williams spearheaded and hosted, funded by the Cummings Foundation and held at a ranch in Wyoming. It was called "The Dinner Party" and it brought together fifty of the most influential naturalists and nature writers in America. Barry Lopez, Doug Peacock, Wendell Berry, and countless others met for three days "to pick up a little of each other's lightning," as Williams wrote in her journal. Apart from the gathering of environmentalists and the exchanging of ideas, the event represented the utmost value that Williams placed in community. This is where she gained her strength. "My wish is that we take this, this strength of community that we felt in Wilson, and extend it – reminding our readers that we will rise up from our apathy and dance," she wrote.<sup>18</sup>

And indeed, her communities were strong, and they connected her back to nature as well as to other people. As a woman, she considered herself connected spiritually to all other women through the earth. As a Mormon, she had a religious fellowship with other church members, as well as a moral imperative to protect God's creation. As an

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<sup>18</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University, New Haven CT (Hereafter referred to as *Terry Tempest Williams Archives*), Box 51.

American citizen, she donated to nonprofit environmental groups supporting everything from Logan Canyon to the Vermont Wilderness to The Wolf Fund.<sup>19</sup> She made yearly donations and often spoke at their events. The relationship between her connection to nature and her connection to community is almost indistinguishable.

And yet Abbey and Williams, these two vastly different characters, found common ground. Not in any category of analysis discussed above: we have already seen that the two essentially inhabit separate ends of nearly any spectrum of identity. I believe it was because of the wilderness. For both, the love of the desert was the primary influence on their lives. It impacted their other identities, rather than the opposite, and gave them a way to connect – with their communities, with their readers, and with each other.

Abbey and Williams were friends; they corresponded from 1979 until Abbey's death. Abbey invited Williams to spend time with him in the desert, which she finally did in 1987. They spent a day “climbing in and out of alcoves, simply walking across desert meadows of prickly pears, globe mallows, and cowpies... [walking] in silence, in gentle conversation and in spirited debate.” Two years later, Williams spoke at Abbey's impromptu memorial service, and ten years after that she would write him an emotional letter on the anniversary of his death.<sup>20</sup> For all their differences, the two had remarkably similar approaches to wilderness, remarkably similar feelings toward the place they both loved.

I believe that their shared passion for and priority of the desert southwest allowed them to bridge the superficial gaps between them. Abbey and Williams shared a place –

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<sup>19</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 103.

<sup>20</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 137.

the wilderness of Utah, what Williams called “his heartland, my homeland”<sup>21</sup> – and also shared a mutual respect and love for the land as it was. This similarity was enough to unite them personally, and also enough to cause both writers to resonate with wide audiences; their views on wilderness seem to transcend many divisive categories, as I will show in my analysis of three categories of identity. Additionally, the way that both writers put the land first in regards to other issues of identity allowed them perspective on other aspects of their lives. Love of the land allowed these two extremists to be moderate, and gave them a louder voice to more effectively speak on its behalf.

I would like to look at three categories of identity in this thesis: gender, religion, and politics. I would like to examine how Abbey and Williams related to each of these broad ideas, and how each category influenced their relationship with the wilderness. I argue that their passion for the desert southwest influenced these identities more than these identities influenced their relationships with the land, in that their love of the land caused Abbey to compromise certain aspects of his identity while Williams questioned certain aspects of hers.

The priority that they shared – advocating for the desert southwest - made them both effective and influential voices speaking out on behalf of the desert southwest. In this way, they were able to come together as friends. Their writings became more relatable and their actions became more supportable, and they were able to harness the power of their respective communities to protect and preserve the desert.

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<sup>21</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 137.

## Chapter 1

### The Gendered Approach to the Desert Southwest

In May of 1991, Terry Tempest Williams held a gathering for the community of American nature writers at Crescent Ranch in Wilson, Wyoming. The guest list included some of the most influential environmental activists of the time – David Quammen, Stephen Trimble, Barry Lopez, James Merrill, Doug Peacock – most of whom were male. This was no accident. At the time, nature writing was a masculine field. (Annie Dillard, also a guest at the 1991 dinner party, once wrote about the difficulty of breaking into nature writing as a woman in her journal: “It’s impossible to imagine another situation where you can’t write a book ‘cause you weren’t born with a penis. Except maybe *Life With My Penis.*”)<sup>22</sup>

The bias against women in nature writing also reared its head in Wilson in 1991. This from the journal that Williams kept during the event:

It was supposed to be fun, a gathering of writers in the American West, to inform, inspire, and infuse our ideas and each other. Today it turned into a nightmare. Men. Egos...One addresses a letter to ‘crazy women,’ another proceeds to tell me the importance of acknowledging the feminine, that I may be the exception...I quietly remind him that I am a woman, that the feminine is at the core of my work.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed the feminine is at the core of Williams’ work. Her defining work *Refuge* focuses primarily on breast cancer and, by extension, the relationship between women’s bodies and the earth. Crimes against one were crimes against the other, she argued while

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in: Diana Saverin, “Thoreau of the Suburbs,” *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 51.

speaking at a 1985 UN forum held in Nairobi: “Women are carrying the crisis in their backs,” she said of deforestation and desertification in Africa.<sup>24</sup> But the converse is also true, where the energy of one feeds the energy of the other. “We hold the moon in our bellies,” she wrote in a speech draft for the Women and Nature conference at Brigham Young University in April of 1988, pointing out that the waxing and waning cycles of the moon echo the menstrual cycles of women.<sup>25</sup> This philosophy, which is known as ecofeminism and will be explored later in this chapter, is emphasized throughout her writing, her activism, and her relationships with the environmental community.

Abbey, too, had a relationship with nature that was uniquely defined by his gender. Abbey was manly in almost every sense of the word. His defining physical characteristic was an enormous bushy beard, his drinks of choice were cheap beer and straight whiskey, and he had five wives and many more lovers in his sixty-two years.<sup>26</sup> He enthusiastically participated in the exploitation of women through pornography and objectification. (“What’s wrong with a little sexism in a working man’s magazine?” he asked in a 1974 letter to the editors of the *Mountain Gazette*. “I guess maybe I’m queer but I like to look at pictures of naked girls, especially beautiful naked girls although I got nothing against ugly naked girls, they are interesting too.”)<sup>27</sup> And yet biographer James M. Calahan is quick to point out that “his good platonic friends included women such as singer and activist Katie Lee and fellow writers Terry Tempest Williams and Ann Zinger,

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<sup>24</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 78

<sup>25</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 103

<sup>26</sup> James M. Calahan, *Edward Abbey: A Life* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Edward Abbey Archives: Special Collections Library, University of Arizona. Tucson, Arizona (Hereafter referred to as “Edward Abbey Archives”), Box 3.

who testified to his kind, even genteel qualities.”<sup>28</sup> In his journals he struggled with the feminist movement, saying that it denied human nature and calling it anti-sex – and Abbey was *very* much for sex – but fundamentally he was for equal rights and division of labor.<sup>29</sup> As with all other areas of his life, Abbey’s experience with gender was fraught with paradox, and like Williams, these paradoxes extended to his gendered relationship with the wilderness.

The way people interact with the wilderness has been influenced by gender for centuries. In the book *Nature’s Altars*, Rutgers professor Susan Schrepfer examined the interplay between masculinity, femininity, and approaches to wilderness. Historically, she says, men and women have gravitated towards different landscapes: “elements of power were thought masculine; waters, feminine.” This means that mountains and peaks – things to be climbed and conquered – have traditionally been considered masculine wilderness. They offer a transcendent experience, which Schrepfer refers to as a masculine sublime, involving a struggle against a worthy foe that results in “transformation, reaffirmation, recognition, victory, apotheosis, or defeat.” Schrepfer calls the narrative of mountain-climbing a “recipe for manhood.” Meanwhile, lakes and waterfalls and rivers were considered a feminine wilderness. “A rich biological symbolism associated water with fertility and nurturance,” Schrepfer notes, adding that bodies of water are often seen as the lovers of more masculine features.<sup>30</sup> Rather than conquering, women went into nature to domesticize it and make a home.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Calahan, *Edward Abbey: A Life* xii.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Abbey Archives, Box 8.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 34-40.

<sup>31</sup> Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars*, 74-75.



Of course there are exceptions to this, and Schrepfer spends a good deal of time highlighting these: John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, for example, challenge the idea of masculine conquest with their extended stays in the woods and refusal to assert dominance over the wilderness.<sup>32</sup> Women throughout history have been captivated by mountaintops, leading expeditions and conquering peaks.<sup>33</sup> Virginia Scharff, in the introduction to the essay collection *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, addresses this flexibility by explaining:

Gender is relational and permeable, not a solid object to be carried from place to place. It is more like a grammar, employed in all conversations, not always perfectly executed and indeed often misunderstood but providing at least the potential for order in a world full of wild possibility, unacknowledged context, and inexplicable consequence... We don't argue that men's actions are always different from women's, or that men and women always act according to gendered scripts, or that all interactions with nature have equal transformative power.<sup>34</sup>

Understanding that Schrepfer hardly means to be definitive in her description of gender roles, we can still apply her 'grammar of gender' to other landscapes.

This includes the desert, which confounds the paradigms of masculinity and femininity still further. Deserts are so vast as to make men powerless, and so inhospitable as to leave women unable to make a home. "The balance of power was not ambiguous; in a contest between person and desert, one would not bet on the person," wrote Patricia Nelson Limerick in *Desert Passages*.<sup>35</sup> In the desert, the grammar of masculinity and femininity is completely upended, leaving room for even the ultramasculine Abbey and

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<sup>32</sup> Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 16 and 22-23.

<sup>33</sup> Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 116-121.

<sup>34</sup> Virginia Scharff, introduction to *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. by Virginia Scharff (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), XV.

<sup>35</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters With The American Deserts* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1989), 10.

the ultrafeminine Williams to navigate gender and place on their own terms. While gender still certainly influenced their relationships with the wilderness and their wilderness writing, for both Abbey and Williams love of place was the more powerful force, allowing them to employ different grammars of gender to express a common sentiment and join more fully with the community of desert lovers.

### **Edward Abbey and the Confounded Masculine**

A casual read of *Desert Solitaire* seems to support the uncomplicated men-as-conquerers gender grammar that Schrepfer at first lays out for us. Abbey presents himself as a lone ranger, a heavy drinker, an outdoorsman – but a closer examination reveals complications in Abbey’s gendered approach to wilderness. “When I put on the lens of a gender critic, I see masculinity – or the playful scrutiny and mockery of masculinity – almost everywhere in their work (yes, especially in Abbey’s work)” writes Scott Slovic in the collection *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*.<sup>36</sup> He acknowledges Schrepfer’s explanation of men as conquerers (he calls it ‘the male-lust-for-El-Dorado perspective’ as a nod to feminist scholar Annette Kolodny) but claims that Abbey – like Thoreau, like Muir – is among the men who challenge rather than confirm this perspective. Abbey’s work, though informed by masculinity, moves beyond.

“Abbey...liked to give the impression to readers that he was some kind of cowboy or ranger, ‘Cactus Ed’ who wrote on the fly,” writes biographer James Calahan, and in *Desert Solitaire* we can clearly see entire chapters constructed to fit that

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<sup>36</sup> Scott Slovic, “Taking Care: Towards an Ecomasculinist Literary Criticism?” In *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*, ed. by Mark Allister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 67.

narrative.<sup>37</sup> In “The Moon-Eyed Horse,” Abbey tries to capture an escaped and untamable gelding.<sup>38</sup> In “Cliffrose and Bayonets,” he kills a rabbit with a rock so that he can understand predatory feelings.<sup>39</sup> He rounds up cattle with old ranchers in “Cowboys and Indians.”<sup>40</sup> His actions seem to affirm the masculine ideals of capturing and conquering that Schrepfer describes, but in his musings on the desert and what it means to him, as well as in his life philosophies, he also opposes that very thing.

Early on in *Desert Solitaire*, before any of the above stories take place, Abbey seems more content to stay on his own tiny piece of land than anything else. “I’d sooner exchange ideas with the birds on earth than learn to carry on intergalactic communications with some obscure race of humanoids on a satellite planet from the world of Betelgeuse,” he writes.<sup>41</sup> This contradicts Schrepfer’s explanation of the masculine sublime as a lust for the big, the unconquerable, and the powerful, and instead plays to her counterexamples of men preferring a more local and personal relationship with nature. While Abbey does feel the urge to conquer (“I want to know it all, possess it all, embrace the entire scene intimately, deeply, totally, as a man desires a beautiful woman”) he also dismisses this lust as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘insane.’<sup>42</sup> He knows that he is not capable of dominating the wilderness.

In fact, his entire political philosophy seems to be grounded upon the idea that wilderness is not conquerable – not by him, not by anyone. In Abbey’s view, the only way to experience wilderness fully is to join with it, as we see in his treatise against road-

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<sup>37</sup> Calahan, *Edward Abbey: A Life*, xii.

<sup>38</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 137-150.

<sup>39</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 22-38.

<sup>40</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 82-94.

<sup>41</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 5.

building in the national parks. To Abbey, attempting to bring the wilderness under man's domain is foolish and futile: "A man on foot, on horseback or on a bicycle will see more, feel more, enjoy more in one mile than the motorized tourists can in a hundred miles..."<sup>43</sup> And again, his thoughts at the end of his summer stay in Arches seem to echo the idea of a low-impact, humble approach to the wilderness, characteristic of how Thoreau and Muir approached the outdoors, but opposite of the masculine conquering ideal. In fact, he prizes the defiance of the earth.

Let men in their madness blast every city on earth into black rubble and envelope the entire planet in a cloud of lethal gas – the canyons and hills, the springs and rocks will still be here, the sunlight will filter through, water will form and warmth shall be upon the land and after sufficient time, no matter how long, somewhere, living things will emerge and join and stand once again, this time perhaps to take a different and better course.<sup>44</sup>

The idea of taming wilderness by making it friendly for habitation is 'madness' to Abbey – and it is significant that he does specify men when discussing this lust to possess, perhaps as a rhetorical trick but also as a nod to the masculine desire to claim. Notably, the ways that Abbey does attempt to claim and tame the desert are the ways that Schrepfer describes as feminine: categorizing plants. "Botany provided the foundation for the aesthetics and spirituality of the feminine sublime," she writes of Victorian-era mountaineering women.<sup>45</sup> A hundred years later, we find bearded and grizzled Abbey making a meticulous inventory of the Arches wildlife – in fact, in the chapter "Tukuhnikivats, The Island In The Desert" he does so on a climb up a desert mountain. This is a direct parallel to Schrepfer's botanist women, combined with an example of a

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<sup>43</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 267-268.

<sup>45</sup> Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 84.

man conquering heights to find the sublime.<sup>46</sup> As scholars have pointed out before, paradox is at the center of Abbey's identity, and we can clearly see Slovic's point that Abbey confounds the masculine nature narrative more than he confirms it as he combines the masculine with the feminine.

In order to examine this paradox more closely, we will look at Abbey's most famous creation: George Hayduke of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. He is manly in all the same ways Abbey is – a heavy drinker, a womanizer, a lone ranger figure – and like Abbey, his relationship with wilderness vacillates between conquering and liberating. In one memorable scene Hayduke drives down a desert highway drinking a six-pack and throws the cans out the window, as if the earth were no better than his garbage can.<sup>47</sup> In another scene he directly compares this littering action to the 'litter' of dams and railroads and billboards and construction against the wilderness. In the latter instance, according to Hayduke, the action is reprehensible and the wilderness must be liberated, where in the former, the act of littering *is* liberation.<sup>48</sup> How does Hayduke's masculinity allow for both of these actions? I believe the answer will hold true for Abbey as well.

For Hayduke, it is simple: love of the desert supersedes a gendered approach to the wilderness. At the end of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, when Smith and Doc and Bonnie and Hayduke are headed into the inescapable Maze of desert canyons for refuge from the law, Hayduke thinks first of the place and second of his relationship to it. "Let them try something, the fuckers, I'll never let them forget," he thinks as he dashes away to live in the desert – not to tame the desert, or to domesticize it, but simply to become

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<sup>46</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 221-231.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1975), 31-32.

<sup>48</sup> Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, 67-68.

one with it. “I’ll never let them do it here. This is my country.”<sup>49</sup> In this we see elements of both the masculine and the feminine attitude towards wilderness, and we can see how Hayduke might be employing both grammars to successfully approach the desert. He claims it but also makes it home, and seems to do it all for the sake of the desert rather than for his own gain. At the end of the book, we see that this approach that navigated the line between masculine and feminine got Hayduke through the desert when nobody else could make it. In putting love of the wilderness first and allowing gender identity to play second fiddle, Abbey argues, we are more fully able to join with the wilderness and those who would protect it.

### **Terry Tempest Williams and the Interrogated Feminine**

Just as a casual read of *Desert Solitaire* seems to confirm Abbey’s unflinching masculinity, reading *Refuge* for the first time paints Williams as unrelentingly feminine. Her focus on female relationships – with her mother, with her grandmother – as well as her focus on the female body place her squarely in that category, and her relationship with the desert too seems at first to confirm Schrepfer’s claim that women look to nature for fertility and nurturance.

In a short two-page chapter entitled “Yellow-Headed Blackbirds,” Williams describes a trip out to Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge during her mother’s battle with cancer. The implication is that there is comfort and peace to be found in this nature. Her mother’s health is stable, and so she retreats to the desert to gather strength. And it is a uniquely feminine strength:

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<sup>49</sup> Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, 308.

There are dunes beyond Fish Springs. Secrets hidden from interstate travelers. They are the armatures of animals. Wind swirls around the sand and ribs appear. There is musculature in dunes.  
And they are female. Sensuous curves – the small of a woman’s back.  
Breasts. Buttocks. Hips and pelvis. They are the natural shapes of Earth.  
Let me lie naked and disappear. . . .  
Things happen quickly in the desert.<sup>50</sup>

Williams’ gender identity is almost inseparable from the desert in *Refuge*; all of her conversations about what it means to be female take place with other women, and most of these take place in journeys to and from the desert. However, a closer reading allows us to see that Williams is not always at ease with her gender and the implications it has for her relationship with wilderness.

She saw the ability to bear children as one of the most important duties a woman could possess. “[Our mother’s] womb is the first landscape we inhabit,” she wrote. “It is here we learn to respond – to move, to listen, to be nourished and grow. In her body we grow to be human. . . .”<sup>51</sup> And yet Williams struggles with the decision to have children. We see her at odds here, perhaps not with her gender, but with its implications for her personal life.

“I don’t ever remember being so happy, Terry,” [Mother] said. “Having a child completed something for me. I can’t explain it. It’s something you feel as a woman connected to other women.”  
I asked her if she thought my life was selfish without children.  
“Yes,” she said. “But I’m not saying that’s bad. By being selfish a woman ultimately has more to give away in the long run, because she has a self to give away.”  
“Do you think that I should have a child?” I asked.  
“I can’t answer that for you,” she said. “All I can tell you is that it was the right choice for me.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 108-109.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 51.

The decision to have or not have children may be the first hint we see in *Refuge* of Williams questioning the necessity of fulfilling every expectation of her own gender, but it is certainly not the only instance. As her mother's cancer grows, we see a growing dissatisfaction with her gender as it relates to the wilderness – specifically, the way oppression of women and oppression of nature are connected. In the chapter “Burrowing Owls,” Williams takes a friend out to the desert to discuss gendered intimacy with the land. “We spoke of rage,” she writes. “Of women and landscape. How our bodies and the body of the earth have been mined.”<sup>53</sup> Later on, she refines this thought process in *Refuge*'s epilogue “The Clan of One-Breasted Women,” in which Williams describes the skewed effect that nuclear testing and the male military-industrial complex has on the bodies of women. “The time had come to protest with the heart, that to deny one's genealogy with the earth was to commit treason against one's soul,” she writes, making the connection between crimes against the earth and crimes against women.<sup>54</sup> She then tells of a group of women who venture into the desert and reclaim it for their own, removing the nuclear test sites and reclaiming the land as a place to thrive, showing anger at a system that puts the toll of environmental destruction upon the female body.

The linking of female oppression and natural oppression is known as ecofeminism, the “interrelationship of social domination and the domination of the rest of nature.” Policies that oppress the environment also have consequences primarily for disadvantaged people, and in most of the world, the most disadvantaged people are women. “To the issues of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism that concern feminists, ecofeminists add naturism – the oppression of the rest of nature,” explains

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<sup>53</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 288.



Carol J. Adams in her introduction to the book *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*.<sup>55</sup> This equates women with nature; and indeed, in the next essay, we see how women have historically been considered more closely in harmony with nature. Creation stories from various cultures form the universe out of the female body. These cultures recognize and talk about how seasonal cycles and moon cycles are echoed by women's reproductive cycles.<sup>56</sup>

Williams is certainly an ecofeminist. We have already seen in "The Clan of One Breasted Women" that she links the environmental impact of nuclear testing with impact on women's bodies. This again comes up in a 1995 interview for *Land and People* magazine: "There is no delineation between health issues, social issues, environmental issues [for women]," she says, describing the frequency with which women carry the burden for environmental issues. And then, quoting a woman she had met at an environmental justice rally: "I think it is because women allow themselves to suffer...there is nothing we won't commit to, if we believe it is just."<sup>57</sup>

In this interview we see that not only does Williams link the oppression of the earth to the oppression of women, but she gives women the responsibility of claiming the earth back. That is something that Williams did in her daily work as a naturalist, but with greater impact and wider audience in her work as a writer. In that work we see perhaps her greatest struggle with gender. As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, as a woman nature writer, Williams was severely outnumbered and closely scrutinized.

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<sup>55</sup> Carol J. Adams, "Introduction" in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. by Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 1.

<sup>56</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature" in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. by Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 16-22.

<sup>57</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 83.

“Women who venture into this clubby male territory have all too often been turned into objects of unusual curiosity, she said in an interview with Carl Klaus.<sup>58</sup> Nowhere was this made more clear than at the dinner party Williams hosted for a gathering of nature writers and activists in May 1991.

We have already seen how Williams’ work as it related to her gender was called into question by her peers. But her reaction to the comments and the questions was just as important. Afterwards, in her journal, she fumed: “I’ve had it with men. I am a woman and it is as frightening to them as if I were a bear...I must get stronger and stronger. Keep my vision before me, not my ego, and trust my love for the landscape I know.”<sup>59</sup>

Here we see Williams echoing Abbey, in placing love for the wilderness above gender norms. This was not a vow to ignore her gender, but rather a vow to keep the wilderness at the forefront of her writing. Gender was an influence – in Williams’ matriarchal family and in her breast-cancer-ridden lineage, how could it not be? She was very much a part of the ecofeminist community as well as the nature writing community at large. But she vowed here to find the strength of her writing in nature, so that it would speak to everyone.

### **Wilderness Influencing Gender**

In both their writing and their personal lives, we see how Abbey and Williams played into gender norms. Abbey consistently emanated bravado and machismo.

Williams presented a nurturing spirit and emphasized personal connections. However, in their attitudes towards wilderness, they shifted and questioned traditional approaches,

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<sup>58</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 83.

<sup>59</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 51.

using a more nuanced grammar of gender. Abbey became gentler. Williams became defiant. At no point does either writer *forsake* his or her gender, but they shift their attitudes enough to allow a healthy respect for and oneness with the desert landscape. I believe that their relationships with the wilderness were the primary cause, providing a perspective and an identity that would allow them to engage critically with their gender identities.

In their writing, this is apparent. Both Abbey and Williams are noticeably impacted by their genders as they interact with the landscape, but even more than this, their genders are impacted. Abbey's gender identity becomes paradoxical and contradictory, and Williams questions some of aspects of her gender that have been cast as necessities. As they consider the desert and their places in it, they cannot help but consider the ramifications this has on other parts of their identities. Love of place allowed them to more fully connect with the desert, but more than this, it allows them to examine and connect with their gender communities. Ultimately, this helps these two opposite characters to connect to one another.

## Chapter 2

### The Religious Consideration of the Desert Southwest

Edward Abbey did not believe in God.

Raised in Home, Pennsylvania, by two working class parents, he was exposed to church but “stomped out of Sunday school...after the teacher replied to his questions by insisting that the parting of the Red Sea had really happened.”<sup>60</sup> As he aged his disillusionment with organized religion grew; his college journals reveal dissatisfaction with authority that is most often interpreted as political anarchy, but could certainly apply to religious authorities as well. For example, as editor of the his college newspaper, he published an article called “The Implications of Anarchy” with the epigraph “men will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.” (The quote, originally by Denis Diderot, was attributed to Louisa May Alcott.) Abbey was removed from editorship of the paper shortly after its publication for the piece’s hostility.<sup>61</sup> For the rest of his life he would continue to refer to God only in the most mocking terms.

Terry Tempest Williams could not have been more opposite to Abbey’s staunch atheism. She was Mormon born and Mormon raised, and spent her life connected to church communities. *Refuge* is scattered with references to the Mormon faith: prayers, visits to church, and Mormon culture permeate the story of her mother’s battle with

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<sup>60</sup> Calahan, *Edward Abbey: A Life*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Abbey Archives, Box 4.

cancer. Throughout the rest of her life and up to the present day, she continues to participate in the Mormon faith.

Much like gender, religion influenced both Abbey's and Williams' interactions with and writings about the wilderness. How could it not? For centuries human beings have entered wilderness and found God.

William Cronon discusses the historical associations between wilderness and nature in his landmark essay "The Trouble With Wilderness." The wilderness, he writes, hearkening back to the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is a place where we might meet Satan – but also a place where we might encounter God. By the eighteenth century, the idea of a physical meeting with God was replaced with the idea of encountering the sublime. "Although God might, of course, choose to show Himself anywhere, He would most often be found in those vast, powerful landscapes where one could not help feeling insignificant and being reminded of one's own mortality," writes Cronon, listing mountains and waterfalls as among the most historically awe-inspiring landscapes.<sup>62</sup>

He goes on to refer to one of Williams' and Abbey's predecessors in the field of nature writing: Henry David Thoreau, who in 1846 ascended Maine's Mount Ktaadn, where he had a religious experience. "There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man," wrote Thoreau.<sup>63</sup> And Susan Schrepfer elaborates in *Nature's Altars* about this intuitive sense of the holy in nature, known as transcendentalism:

Sublimity came to reflect 'the vastness, the power, the terror of Deity.' It was the terrestrial vision of God, what one analyst has called 'the

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<sup>62</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness" in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. by William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69-90.

<sup>63</sup> Henry David Thoreau. "Ktaadn." *The Essays of Henry David Thoreau*. (New York: North Point Press, 2002.)

aesthetics of the Infinite.’ The idea of sublimity addressed those mysteries – such as the inevitability of death, the existence of God, and the possibility of divine salvation – that could not be grasped by reason but rather required intuition.<sup>64</sup>

Cronon lays out for us the historical connection between wilderness experiences and spiritual yearning; Thoreau and Schrepfer show us an example in nature writing. But neither Abbey or Williams, both of whom had very strong feelings about religion, based their work or their activism simply on a rush of spiritual feeling. What is the connection between religious thought and their moral imperatives to protect the wilderness?

“It is clear that thinking seriously about the environment raises deep questions about the basis of moral judgment and action, and about the meaning of human existence,” writes Richard J. Wood, dean emeritus of the Divinity School at Yale University.<sup>65</sup> His assertion that careful contemplation of environmental matters will lead inevitably to careful contemplation of religious ones is followed by a reverse claim by Margaret A. Falley, also a professor in Yale’s Divinity School: “All major religions become major in part because they have something to say about the large questions human persons encounter...religion, in fact, has a lot to do with meaning.”<sup>66</sup> Falley says that considering God tends to lead to a consideration of social issues like the environment, rather than the other way around, but I believe that the two assertions are not mutually exclusive. No matter if the starting point is God or wilderness, one will eventually lead to the other. The two concepts inform each other deeply.

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<sup>64</sup> Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars*, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Richard J. Wood, “Introduction to Part 1: Ethics and the Good in Nature and Humanity,” in *The Good in Nature and Humanity*, ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Timothy J. Farnham (Washington DC: Island Press, 2002), 15.

<sup>66</sup> Margaret A. Falley, “Religious Meanings for Nature and Humanity,” in *The Good in Nature and Humanity*, ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Timothy J. Farnham (Washington DC: Island Press, 2002), 103-104.

Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams, despite their wildly different religious backgrounds, are both influenced by the connections between spirituality, religion, and wilderness. Certainly they both experienced the feeling of the sublime in the desert, and certainly they both felt a moral calling to protect that landscape. However, their religions meant that they ascribed these feelings to different things and acted them out in different ways. At first glance, Abbey seems to shun religious community and Williams to embrace it, and their attempts to speak on behalf of the wilderness reflect this. However, Abbey found a religious community in nature, and Williams took issue with the Church of Latter-Day Saints in part because of the environment. Again, I would like to argue that while religion was an influence in their approach to their writing and activism, for both Abbey and Williams, love of the land came first.

### **Pantheism, Atheism, and Earthiesm: Abbey's Religious Relationship to Nature**

Throughout Abbey's journals and interviews, the theme of confused contention with organized religion is ever-present. At times he is disgusted and mocking, referring to God as *Gawd* and signing letters with "in Christ?" rather than a more conventional farewell. He was adamant about his agnosticism. In a 1959 journal he wrote "Does Gawd exist? I neither know nor care."<sup>67</sup> In a 1968 interview, when asked if there was a God, he shot back: "Is there an angry unicorn on the dark side of the moon?"<sup>68</sup> He scrawled Zen parables in the margins of his notebooks next to Bible verse, demonstrating a competent knowledge of several religions and a level of respect for none of them. And yet he seems convinced of the idea of a spirit, perhaps a soul, which unites humanity. ("I pray to the

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<sup>67</sup> Edward Abbey Archives, Box 4.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Abbey Archives, Box 5.

God within me,” he wrote in a 1952 journal.) This spirit transcends organized religion; it is a far more personal being. And it was in nature that Abbey most sensed this spirit, most longed for it, much as Thoreau had done on the top of Ktahdin. “When I see a mountain like that, I know there must be a God. When I see a mountain like that, I know we don’t need a God,” he wrote in the same journal, indicating a sort of atheist religious experience in the same vein of Thoreau’s Ktahdin encounter.

We see in *Desert Solitaire* the connection between the wilderness and the holy. “I am not an atheist but an earthiest,” he wrote, explicitly substituting the earth for a god.<sup>69</sup>

At one point he compared visiting a canyon to a church-going experience:

Is this at last the *locus Dei*? There are enough cathedrals and temples and altars here for a Hindu pantheon of divinities. Each time I look up one of the secretive little side canons I half expect to see not only the cottonwood tree rising over its tiny spring – the leafy god, the desert’s liquid eye – but also a rainbow-colored corona of blazing light, pure spirit, pure being, pure disembodied intelligence, *about to speak my name*.<sup>70</sup>

In his spiritual connection to place, then, we see the beginnings of a moral imperative to protect the wilderness. If Abbey’s god is to be found in the wilderness, then to protect the wilderness is to worship. He calls it “an expression of loyalty to the earth,” to protect the paradise that we have before us.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, the relationship between humanity and wilderness was part of the holiness that Abbey found in nature. At times he identified as a pantheist, or one who believes that everything is God and God is in everything. To a pantheist, holiness comes from harmony, and Abbey especially emphasized this in regards to wilderness. In an interview with his friend Jack Loeffler, he expanded on this view: “Is it not possible that rocks, hills

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<sup>69</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 184.

<sup>70</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 176.

<sup>71</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 167.



and mountains, and the great physical body of the Earth itself may enjoy a sentience, a form of consciousness which we humans cannot perceive only because of the vastly different time scales involved?" he asked.<sup>72</sup> In this we see another possible religious reason for Abbey's activism: his goal is to preserve the spirit that unites all things.

This is the defining characteristic of Abbey's interactions with the wilderness. Balance. Living in a way that sustains the human part of the world while respecting the natural part of the world. This is his highest ideal (one that not even he can live up to, but nonetheless it is the thing that governs his writing and his interactions with the wilderness), and, despite his general disdain for organized religions or elevating beings to divine status, we can call it his religion. In his love of the land, he finds God, and this leads him to write and act on behalf of the wilderness.

### **Locating God In Wilderness: Williams and the Mormon Church**

In *Refuge*, Terry Tempest Williams presents her faith as a constant in her life, a spiritual yearning that anchors and guides her physical being. "I was raised to believe in a spirit world, that life exists before the earth and will continue to exist afterward, that each human being, bird, and bulrush, along with all other life forms had a spirit life before it came to dwell physically on the earth," she writes in the opening chapter, going on to connect herself to generations of Mormons before herself.<sup>73</sup> That belief in the permanence of life and the permanence of religion bolsters her as her mother dies of cancer, the Salt Lake overflows, and the Migratory Bird Refuge is destroyed by floodwater. Through it all, Williams continues to pray – for comfort, for strength, for

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<sup>72</sup> Loeffler, "Abbey, Edward (1927-1989)," 1-2.

<sup>73</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 14.

healing – and it is easy to believe that all of her environmental concerns in *Refuge* spring from a faith-based worldview.

But there were times when she questioned the hierarchy of the church, its message to women, and its claim as the one true pathway to God. In “The Clan of the One-Breasted Women,” she reflects on how the deceit she has been living with all her life with regards to nuclear testing also spreads, cancerlike, to her faith life; she is no longer content to obediently believe the teachings of the church.<sup>74</sup> “As a Mormon woman of the fifth generation of Latter-day Saints, I must question everything, even if it means losing my faith, even if it means becoming a member of a border tribe among my own people,” she says upon learning that her family resided in the fallout zone of the Nevada Test Site.<sup>75</sup> This willingness to question her faith in the name of justice indicates a willingness to prioritize her land and her people over her faith. Earlier in *Refuge*, too, she expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of femininity within the being of God. “If we as Mormons believe in God the Father and in his son, Jesus Christ, it is only logical that a Mother-in-Heaven balances the sacred triangle. I believe the Holy Ghost is female,” she wrote.<sup>76</sup> Obedience, oneness, the very nature of God. These are the things that Williams doubted about the church.

Outside of her writing, she also took issue with some of the church’s teachings. In the Williams archives at Yale University is a letter from her family priest, scolding Williams for her decision to not have children. “A female bird has no options as to

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Austin, “A Life Engaged: A Critical Introduction” in *A Voice In The Wilderness: Conversations with Terry Tempest Williams*, ed. Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 286.

<sup>76</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 241.

whether she will lay eggs or not. She must, God insists, because if she does not, a precious combination of genes will be lost forever,” the letter says. The priest goes on to draw clear parallels between the birds and Williams’ own doubts about childbearing and motherhood, making clear the unspoken reminder that good Mormon women are supposed to bear children. And then, on the back of the letter, in Williams’ handwriting, a scribbled note: “We know very little about our Heavenly Mother – and we want to keep it that way.”<sup>77</sup> In that short note she made clear her dissatisfaction with the church’s demand for unquestioning obedience, its intrusion into her private life, and its demands on the female body.

In a 2002 interview with Jana Bouck Remy, Williams discusses the inconsistencies of her faith. “It would be a lie to pretend [my husband] and I are devout, practicing Mormons; we are not,” she says. “But there are many aspects of our religion that we cherish and hold on to. Must it always be all or nothing?”<sup>78</sup> Perhaps the aspect of Mormonism that she holds on to most tightly is the meaning it lends to the wilderness.

“Because God created the earth for eternal purposes, Latter-day Saints view its natural resources and life forms as a sacred stewardship to be used in ways that will ensure their availability for all succeeding generations,” says the Brigham Young University *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.<sup>79</sup> Stewardship and protecting the earth is certainly a key tenet of Williams’ environmental activism, but she also receives a spiritual value from the desert that is apart from the imperative to protect it. “If the desert

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<sup>77</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, box 7a.

<sup>78</sup> Jane Bouck Remy, “An Interview with Terry Tempest Williams” in *A Voice In The Wilderness: Conversations with Terry Tempest Williams*, ed. Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 156.

<sup>79</sup> “Earth.” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Brigham Young University, 1992.

is holy,” she wrote, “it is because it is a forgotten place that allows us to remember the sacred. Perhaps that is why every pilgrimage to the desert is a pilgrimage to the self. There is no place to hide, and so we are found.” And in that revelation Williams finds peace, strength, and the sacred: “Wilderness courts our souls. When I sat in church throughout my growing years, I listened to teachings about Christ in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights...I imagined Joseph Smith kneeling in a grove of trees...I believed their sojourns into nature were sacred. Are ours any less?”<sup>80</sup> Calling on Christian and Mormon stories and traditions, she describes the wilderness as a place of real spiritual value, and worthy of defense for these reasons. While she does not go as far as saying God *is* nature, as Abbey does, she undoubtedly locates God *in* nature.

Interestingly, this idea of the sacred being outdoors is not in fact echoed in Mormon geography. “Sublime nature was not like Mormon space either, for the most inspiring scenes lay outside of settled society, beyond the margins of everyday life,” wrote Richard Lyman Bushman for the Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History lecture series in 1997.<sup>81</sup> He went on to say that the Mormon tradition is to construct the sublime in their temples, places where God would be “present in greater intensity,” and to place those religiously significant places in the middle of the city. This is demonstrated in Salt Lake City’s current geography – Temple Square sits firmly in the middle of Salt Lake City, as Williams herself describes in *Refuge* – as well as in early Mormon cities.<sup>82</sup>

Bushman discusses Nauvoo, a city that Joseph Smith (founder of the Mormon church)

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<sup>80</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 148-149,

<sup>81</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, “Making Space for the Mormons,” Harrington Lecture Series no. 2, Oct. 22, 1996 (Logan: Special Collections and Archives, Merrill Library, Utah State University), 16-17.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 5.

started as he led his followers across the country. The city's center was the temple but, unlike Salt Lake City, it made no concession to capitalism: it did not place business ventures centrally and died out within a few years.<sup>83</sup> In both the failed Nauvoo and the current Salt Lake City, we see a Mormon preoccupation with building a refuge for its people, a city where they can be a faith community together and find God together. For the church, spiritual power and sanctuary lies within the city, not outside of it.

Williams' preoccupation with the uninhabitable desert as a holy space seems to run contrary to Mormon beliefs that the city is the center of life and the center of faith. Her response to this can be found in a 2000 interview with Michael Toms of the New Dimension Radio Show: "If ever there has been a religion that has been born out of the Earth it should be Mormonism. It is founded literally on golden plates culled out of Hill Commorah. And here is a religion born out of questions, born out of personal revelation" – all of which allows for a more personal engagement with faith and with wilderness than the structure of the Mormon church might seem to allow.<sup>84</sup> And in Williams' personal view, we cannot fully engage with the sublime centered in our everyday lives until we have a connection to the first thing that God created for us – the earth. "I honestly believe our lack of intimacy with the land has initiated a lack of intimacy with each other," she wrote in a letter to Hilary Clinton during her battle with Congress over the Utah Wilderness Act.<sup>85</sup> In this way, protection of the wilderness became a religious imperative

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<sup>83</sup> Bushman, "Making Space for the Mormons," 20-26.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Toms, "The Transformative Power of Art: An Interview with Terry Tempest Williams" in *A Voice In The Wilderness: Conversations with Terry Tempest Williams*, ed. Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 121.

<sup>85</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 102.

for Williams – not only did it honor and enable God’s plan for the world, but it held real value in itself. In this view, she strayed again from conventional Mormon doctrine.

And yet one cannot say that her environmental work was separate from her Mormon belief, as Williams’ writing and activism is infused with religious imagery. Her argument before Congress during the Utah Wilderness Act, arguably her greatest moment of environmental activism, begins with her faith: “My family roots run deep holding me in place five; six generations of Mormon stock run through my veins,” she said.<sup>86</sup> She went on to describe the terms of land protection as a religious mandate, calling a 5-million acre parcel a tithe. Giving some of what God has given back to God. Her testimony read in part:

Brigham Young, the colonizing prophet of the Mormons, brought with him not only a religion and a life but a land ethic: “Here are the stupendous works of the God of Nature, though all do not appreciate his wisdom as manifested in his works...I could sit here for a month and reflect on the mercies of God.”  
Time. Reflection. Mercy. I do not find these qualities revered by our forefathers in the Utah Public Lands Act of 1995. There is little gratitude extended on behalf of these sacred lands.<sup>87</sup>

Williams’ Mormon faith guided her interactions with the wilderness in that she felt the moral imperative to protect it as part of God’s creation. Her relationship to the land was less orthodox in that she felt she received spiritual renewal and strength primarily from the land, rather than from the Mormon community; however, there was an abundance of religious thought and language backing up her opinions on this subject. Her interactions with wilderness may not have been strictly Mormon, but they were inextricably informed by Mormonism.

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<sup>86</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 103.

<sup>87</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 103.

## **Wilderness Influencing Religion**

Both Abbey and Williams contended with religion in their personal lives, and made it a central part of the public personas that they presented in their writing and their activism. Abbey emphasized his lack of belief in organized religion, and made it a central point of interviews both implicitly – through anti-authority statements – and explicitly – outright denouncing God. Williams, on the other hand, wove her Mormon faith throughout her published works and her interviews. She presented it as a part of herself – she was born into the faith and it surrounds her, through family, friends, and even physical geography.

However, when it comes to the wilderness, both are a little more flexible than one would expect from their stated views. Wilderness is the only place that allows Abbey to diverge from his anti-religious belief, instead claiming that God is present and in every part of nature, be it humanity, animals, or the landscape itself. Williams also diverges from church teachings when she sees wilderness, rather than the Mormon community, as her primary place of spiritual rest and renewal.

Both Abbey and Williams find spiritual value in the wilderness of the desert southwest, a value that does not fit with the confines of their religious beliefs. As Cronon suggested, they both encounter God through nature, although neither of their religions allow for this – Abbey is not supposed to sense God, Williams is supposed to find God in the church alone. Though their respective religions inform and influence their relationship with the desert wilderness, in the end their land ethics come before their religious ones. This adds to the paradox of Abbey's character as someone who professes one thing and acts according to another standard, as well as the confusion Williams feels

in her relationship to authority – be it the patriarchy, the church, or, as we will see in the next chapter, the government. In the end, their beliefs about the value of wilderness win out over the value of strictly following the laws of their religions.



### Chapter 3

#### The Political Fight for the Desert Southwest

From time to time, Edward Abbey strayed from his fiction-writing to dabble in poetry. Here, for example, is a poem he wrote in a college journal.

The Gods that once were pleased to stay  
Somewhere in outer space  
Have now, alas, come down to earth  
And run the god-damned place  
Just look around, they're everywhere  
They mean to freeze or fry us –  
STALIN, TRUMAN, MACARTHUR, LUCE  
CHURCHILL, TAFT, POPE PIUS  
They're getting bigger all the time  
No more a harmless myth  
EISENHOWER, ACHESON,  
VISHINSKY, SHERMAN, SMITH  
And all their spies are hard at work,  
From Moscow to Vancouver  
M. BERIA, MCCARRAN  
JOE MACARTHY, G-MAN HOOVER  
In such a mess as this what are  
The honest men to do?  
Load up their guns, I'd say, and shoot  
THE WHOLE FUCKING CREW<sup>88</sup>

To put it politely, the poem reveals Abbey's disdain for politicians and the political climate of the 1950s and 1960s. To put it accurately, the poem gives us a sense of his anarchic tendencies. "I am opposed to all forms of government, including good government. Especially good government," he said in an interview with *Ecolibrium Magazine*.<sup>89</sup> This opposition was easy to detect in his college years – the article he wrote

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<sup>88</sup> Edward Abbey Archives, box 4.

<sup>89</sup> Edward Abbey Archives, box 1.

that removed him from the editorship of his paper was called “Some Implications of Anarchy,” and he wrote his master’s thesis on the same subject. The FBI opened a file on him while he was still an undergraduate at the University of Indiana Pennsylvania after he posted a flyer on a campus bulletin board, urging citizens to burn their draft cards. The FBI file followed Abbey’s exploits at the University of New Mexico, where he continued to stage rallies and wrote inflammatory articles.<sup>90</sup>

When we look into his adult life, we can detect much of this anarchic flavor in his published work as well. *Desert Solitaire* has abundant tirades against government agencies and their destruction of wilderness, but for real political opinion, we need only look at Abbey’s most famous work of pure fiction, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. This book was a political treatise in its own right – it featured a group of ecoanarchists destroying government-funded projects like construction sites and dams – but it also bridged the gap between fiction and reality when it inspired its readers to anarchic environmental actions of their own. This was no accident; the dedication to the book states “this book, though fictional in form, is based strictly on historical fact. Everything in it is real and actually happened. And it all began just one year from today.”<sup>91</sup> It is an unmistakable call to action, Abbey urging his readers to make the fictional factual. Taking this to heart, the group Earth First! was actually founded on the principles laid out in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

True to form, however, Abbey’s relationship with the U.S. government as it related to wilderness was not so simple as it first appears. Though he actively spoke out

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<sup>90</sup> “Edward Abbey.” Freedom of Information Act Library, Federal Bureau of Investigation Vault.

<sup>91</sup> Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, 4.

against the government's overregulation of the wilderness, he did not engage in the type of action that Earth First! – and indeed, his own books – encouraged. At times he expressed approval for certain government agencies. He used the very roads and bridges that he claimed to find so abhorrent. Abbey, a man of paradox, was characteristically paradoxical when it came to the intermingling of politics and wilderness.

Terry Tempest Williams had a very different relationship with the political system. As we have seen in previous chapters, she mostly accepted the authority of the various communities she participated in, although not as it came into conflict with her love for the wilderness. The same was true in the political sphere for Williams. She worked within the political system for most of her life, but when it became clear that the political system was insufficient, she acted outside of it. This can be seen in two moments of political action for Williams – her battle with the United States Congress for federal protection of Utah wilderness, and in her protest at the Nevada Test Site, described in “The Clan of One-Breasted Women.” As with Abbey, her interpretation of the relationship between wilderness and law was complicated.

Policy undoubtedly shapes the way we see the wilderness. In fact, wilderness itself has become a political designation, in addition to a concept; an area must fulfill certain characteristics in order to be so named.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 includes a definition of political wilderness: “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” The Wilderness Act also identifies the qualities that an area must possess in order to qualify as such, which include no visible human impact, secluded, consisting of at least 5,000 contiguous acres, and containing features of some

ecological interest or importance. These areas are set aside “to assure that an increasing population...does not occupy all areas within the United States and its possessions,” and are intended to be used and enjoyed by the American public, protected from overuse and development.<sup>92</sup> Currently, 106 million acres of land in the United States are federally designated wilderness areas, managed by four different groups: the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In addition, some areas that are not designated wilderness are still protected through their status as national parks, monuments, rivers, seashores, and forests.<sup>93</sup> At first glance there is little problem with setting aside ecologically significant areas for protection. Surely such protection is an environmentalist’s goal. However, assigning the task of protection to governmental bodies ends up creating as many problems as it solves.

William Cronon articulated many of these problems in “The Trouble With Wilderness.” Protecting wilderness means maintaining wilderness, maintaining wilderness means regulating wilderness, and regulating wilderness means interfering with wilderness – and interfering with wilderness is exactly what these agencies and these laws are trying to avoid. In addition, designating an area as wilderness ignores any history of habitation – which in this case ignores the native people who may have called a space home for hundreds of years, living there and hunting there and using the land,

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<sup>92</sup> Public Law 88-577, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress (1964).

<sup>93</sup> “Land and Policy,” wilderness.net. Accessed March 16, 2015.

before white people arrived and declared the space to be untouched, uninhabited, and pristine.<sup>94</sup>

Abbey and Williams both recognized the problematic nature of designated wilderness, and both came into contact with with the governmental bodies that regulate it. Abbey actually worked for the National Park Service, and Williams testified before Congress on environmental matters, as well as attending citizen rallies and giving speeches supporting wilderness designation. However, Abbey also advocated direct action against the government in his books and in his support for environmental groups like Earth First!. Williams expressed appreciation towards this policy of monkey-wrenching, and additionally broke the law in the name of environmental justice. Despite their different attitudes towards government, both Abbey and Williams were willing to compromise for the sake of protection and justice for the wilderness that they loved. Both used writing and more explicit activities to interact with a variety of political communities and, in very different ways, achieve their political goals for the wilderness.

### **Wilderness First!: Abbey's Spin On A Political Wilderness Approach**

Abbey worked as a park ranger at Arches for two summers. "I would have returned the third year too and each year thereafter but unfortunately for me the Arches, a primitive place when I first went there, was developed and improved so well that I had to leave," he wrote in the author's introduction to *Desert Solitaire*.<sup>95</sup> It was neither the first nor the last time he'd spoken against the development of the place: later on in *Desert*

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<sup>94</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness," New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1995.

<sup>95</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, xiii.

*Solitaire* he would argue passionately against industrial tourism and the ever-swelling influx of visitors that the National Park Service welcomed and encouraged to the park.

Wilderness, to Abbey, was not meant for the human observer. Abbey himself observed and wrote and lived in the desert, but he acknowledged that the desert was indifferent to his existence. Whether he lived or died, whether he observed it or not, the desert would go on.<sup>96</sup> Even his writing avoided making the desert into too accessible or understandable a place; in *Bedrock and Paradox*, David Pozza explains that Abbey was “keenly aware of the impossibility of accurately recreating the desert through a discourse that is subjectively representational.”<sup>97</sup>

The threat of development – of making the wilderness too people-friendly and therefore unbalancing it, ridding it of all its value – looms throughout *Desert Solitaire*. Abbey warned time and time again that expanding into the wilderness and turning it into something user-friendly will hurt mankind and upset the balance of wilderness. This would be a danger not only for wildlife, but for humanity. Wilderness, Abbey said, is “not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread.”<sup>98</sup>

To an outsider, federal protection through legislation seems like the most effective way to halt the tide of development. However, Abbey was an anarchist, and he was skeptical of the government’s definition of wilderness. “Can wilderness be defined in the words of government officialdom as simply ‘a minimum of not less than 5000 contiguous acres of roadless area?’” he wrote regarding the Wilderness Act of 1964. “This much

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<sup>96</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 267.

<sup>97</sup> Pozza, *Bedrock and Paradox*, 7.

<sup>98</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 169.

may be essential in attempting a definition but it is not sufficient; something more is involved.”<sup>99</sup> He was also skeptical of the government’s ability to actually enforce the law. “[Destructive development] will soon happen to the majority of our national parks and national forests, despite the illusory protection of the Wilderness Preservation Act,” he wrote in the Industrial Tourism chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, “unless a great many citizens rear up on their hind legs and make vigorous political gestures demanding implementation of the Act.” In other words, the mere existence of the Wilderness Act is not enough without the full and enthusiastic compliance of citizens, as well as the dedication of the government in enforcing it.

To Abbey, The Wilderness Act as it was did nothing to prevent monuments from becoming what Abbey called ‘money-mints.’ In fact, it allowed citizens to capitalize on wilderness.

Industrial tourism is a big business. It means money. It includes the motel and restaurant owners, the gasoline retailers, the oil corporations, the road-building contractors, the heavy equipment manufacturers, the state and federal engineering agencies and the sovereign, all-powerful automotive industry. These various interests are well organized, command more wealth than most modern nations, and are represented in Congress with a strength far greater than is justified in any constitutional or democratic sense. . . .<sup>100</sup>

Establishing some areas as wilderness would only build up a transit industry surrounding wilderness, Abbey argued – one that will pollute some wilderness and raze the rest, and will benefit the businesses and corporations that do not actually have wilderness in their best interests. The government’s plan to protect wilderness was ineffective according to Abbey, as in the end it would still lead to development of areas that are not meant to be

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<sup>99</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 166.

<sup>100</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 49.

easy for humans to experience. Abbey was a huge proponent of instead letting people explore national parks and wilderness areas with horses and bikes and feet and without motors – an entire *Desert Solitaire* chapter on industrial tourism explores this idea and ends with these two conclusions: no more cars and no new roads.<sup>101</sup>

In reading *Desert Solitaire*, however, one cannot help but notice how Abbey's own experience there was enabled by development, the very thing he railed against. He drove trucks through the park and to town, and lived in a house specifically constructed for him. Here we can sense a bit of compromise, also present in the third conclusion to his treatise on industrial tourism: "put the park rangers to work." Some people, Abbey conceded, need to be able to get around quickly and be knowledgeable about the area and enable the experience for other people.<sup>102</sup> But rangers are special; if the general public's demands for roads and vehicles were all met, the balance will quickly fall apart.

There is admittedly a bit of hypocrisy here. Abbey's conclusion seems conveniently drawn to facilitate his own wilderness experience to continue unchanged, while the more conventional tourist must accept limitations to his or her mobility in the name of authenticity. Pozza elaborates on this in *Bedrock and Paradox*, naming similar concessions: Abbey hates development, but loves "the iron and coal miners, bargemen, railroaders, steelworkers, technicians, designers, factory assemblers, wholesalers, truckdivers, and retailers who have combined their labors to provide me with the simple but pleasant convenience [of a refrigerator]."<sup>103</sup> He hates needless death but kills a rabbit

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<sup>101</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 52-55.

<sup>102</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 56.

<sup>103</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 96.



just to see what the experience feels like.<sup>104</sup> Given such inconsistencies, what are we to make of Abbey's relentless backing of the no-roads movement?

Pozza is quick to point out that there are several similar factual inconsistencies in *Desert Solitaire*. Abbey compressed two seasons into one. He transplanted certain trips that took place decades later to the summer of 1957. He invented characters, or exaggerated them or left them out entirely. *Desert Solitaire*, for all that it reads like a nonfiction memoir, is actually partially fiction – and for this reason, the Edward Abbey between the pages does not always behave according to the real Edward Abbey's ideals. He is a construction, meant to make an impression and convey a point, as we saw in the introduction.<sup>105</sup> And make a point he did: the anti-roads movement “accelerated sharply” around the time of *Desert Solitaire*'s 1968 publication, due in part to “a resurgence of green politics” that was centered in urban areas but extended to the wilderness.<sup>106</sup> Abbey's idealistic though inconsistent memoir sparked a lot of attention for the movement.

The same hypocrisy is notably present in Abbey's most famous work of total fiction, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. In our introduction to the crusty and anarchic environmentalist protagonist George Hayduke, we hear his opinion on driving cars into the desert wilderness.

‘They’re driving their tin cars into the holy land. They can’t do that; it ain’t legal. There’s a law against it. A higher law.’

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<sup>104</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 33-34.

<sup>105</sup> Pozza, *Bedrock and Paradox*, 25-30.

<sup>106</sup> Derek Wall, *Earth First! and the Anti-Roads Movement* (London: Routledge, 1999), 25.

‘Well, you’re doing it too,’ he reminded himself. ‘Yeah, but I’m on important business. Besides, I’m an elitist. Anyway, the road’s here now, might as well use it.’<sup>107</sup>

Present too are Abbey’s general anti-development sentiments. Hayduke and his band of ragtag environmental warriors spend most of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* running around the southwest wrecking bulldozers and blowing up bridges. Essentially, they ruin the machinery before the machinery can ruin the wilderness. In this book more than ever Abbey demonstrates his political views: not only does he wish to stop development, but he advocates radical action towards that end. “The plot is a vehicle for a thinly disguised, no-holds-barred, sabotage handbook,” writes Derek Wall in his book *Earth First! and the Anti-Roads Movement*, describing how *The Monkey Wrench Gang* spawned similarly minded environmental groups. “Abbey based his account on real activists who sabotaged environmentally damaging projects, turning their campaign into fiction, which was then recycled back into reality.”<sup>108</sup> In this way, Abbey’s written politics had consequences far beyond the pages of the novel – his envisioned anarchists assumed flesh and blood.

Abbey’s idealistic politics did in fact transfer to the real world, but his own role in these politics was not what a reader might expect from such an outspoken anarchist. His fiction was certainly an important part of the founding of Earth First! – they called their sabotage monkeywrenching – and he did participate in some of their events. He wrote a defense of their tactic of ‘tree spiking’ (hammering nails into trees to ruin chainsaw blades) in a Foreward to Earth First!’s *Ecodefense* manual, and attended protests that could have come straight from his novel’s pages. For example, in 1981 the group held a rally at Glen Canyon Dam, the main destructive focus of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

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<sup>107</sup> Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, 32.

<sup>108</sup> Wall, *Earth First! and the Anti-Roads Movement*, 3-4.

Abbey, present for the demonstration, “watched as the outrageous goal of his novel was symbolically completed: while other demonstrators distracted police, a 100-metre polythene ‘crack’ was unrolled from the parapet, creating for a few seconds the illusion of dam destruction.”<sup>109</sup> However, Abbey never assumed a leadership position in the organization that was so intent on acting out his written goals of environmental protection. In an article in the *High Country News*, writer Bruce Hamilton hypothesizes that this is because “Abbey is not a conservation group leader like Muir. In fact, he’s an anarchist. He is a writer, leading from behind.” Abbey himself is quoted later in the same article: “I’ve always been reluctant to join any organization. But if we are going to defend the American West against industrial exploitation, we will have to cooperate with one another in some kind of political, social, and legal action.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, Abbey’s inclination to avoid organizations and political affiliation is sometimes superseded by the need to protect the wilderness itself – and for that, he recognizes that sometimes working within the political system is necessary. He did not assume leadership in Earth First!, but one day while hiking with his friend Terry Tempest Williams he expressed interest in running for the governor of Arizona.<sup>111</sup> He also expressed approval for some governmental measures as progress: the Clean Air Act, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Strip-Mine Control Act all received Abbey’s approval.<sup>112</sup>

The man who was strictly anti-government and anti-organization compromised his views when he feels that they would be counterproductive in his ultimate goal of

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<sup>109</sup> Wall, *Earth First! and the Anti-Roads Movement*, 44.

<sup>110</sup> Edward Abbey Archives, box 1.

<sup>111</sup> Justine Toms, “Wild Heart: The Politics of Place,” in *A Voice In The Wilderness: Conversations with Terry Tempest Williams*, ed. Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 30.

<sup>112</sup> Edward Abbey Archives, box 1.

protecting wilderness. Though Abbey cast himself as a single man against the inexorable tide of development, he in fact did not take every opportunity to monkeywrench. He critiqued the political system, but in the end he understood its power and the need to work within it. Paradoxically, this anarchist was able to find value in the idea of a community of citizens coming together to protect of the wilderness.

### **When Testimony Fails: Terry Tempest Williams and the Utah Wilderness Bill**

Terry Tempest Williams admired Abbey's method of monkey-wrenching. In fact, she once mused in a letter to him, "How to throw a monkey wrench?" However, she saw acts of protest more as lead-ins to dialogue and mutual agreement, rather than ends in themselves.<sup>113</sup>

Terry Tempest Williams' first nature writing was produced during her time as a student of environmental education at the University of Utah, and later during her position as the Naturalist-In-Residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps because of this background, she was determined to protect the wilderness via education. Though we have seen in previous chapters that she is generally respectful of authority, we have also seen that she is willing to question authority in the name of the wilderness. The same is true in regards to political authority; when writing and education fail, action takes over. In the epilogue to *Refuge*, she condemns the United States government for nuclear testing in the desert Southwest – an area chosen because of its sparse population, although it wasn't sparse enough to completely avoid casualties of

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<sup>113</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 137.

<sup>114</sup> Chandler, Katherine and Melissa Goldthwaite, *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams: New Critical Essays*, ix-xxi.

nuclear testing. “When the Atomic Energy Commission described the country north of the Nevada Test Site as ‘virtually uninhabited desert terrain,’ my family and the birds at Great Salt Lake were some of the ‘virtual uninhabitants,’ she explains bitterly.<sup>115</sup>

At the end of “The Clan of the One-Breasted Women,” Williams described going to a nuclear test site with *downwinders*, or the other Utahns who had been impacted by the government’s nuclear testing program:

I crossed the line at the Nevada Test Site and was arrested with nine other Utahns for trespassing on military lands. They are still conducting nuclear tests in the desert. Ours was an act of civil disobedience. But as I walked toward the town of Mercury, it was more than a gesture of peace. It was a gesture on behalf of the Clan of One-Breasted Women. As one officer cinched the handcuffs around my wrists, another frisked my body. She found a pen and a pad of paper tucked inside my left boot. ‘And these?’ she asked sternly. ‘Weapons,’ I replied. Our eyes met. I smiled. She pulled the leg of my trousers back over my boot. ‘Step forward, please,’ she said as she took my arm.<sup>116</sup>

Even in this tale of civil disobedience and subsequent arrest, we can see exactly how Williams prefers to engage with the powers that be. The inclusion of her pen and paper is no coincidence; Williams is arguing that these are the most effective methods of resisting authority. Dialogue, rather than destruction. Writing as activism. She demonstrated this inclination during her most significant time of political engagement: her work surrounding the Utah Wilderness Act of 1984.

The Utah Wilderness Act of 1984 was a bill that was set to designate 1.8 million acres of Utah land as federally-protected wilderness. While significant, 1.8 million acres was actually far less than what many citizens were calling for; Terry Tempest Williams

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<sup>115</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 287.

<sup>116</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, 289-290.

led a group that called for 5 million acres of wilderness. The difference in the numbers was due to outside interests; in reducing the number to 1.8 million, the government allowed access to lands that held potential value for oil drilling companies.<sup>117</sup>

Significantly, Williams is arguing for greater government intervention – a tactic that seems antithetical to someone who professes admiration for Abbey and his monkey-wrenching methods. Cronon, too, might question the fact of politically designated wilderness remaining wilderness at all. The differences between the various wilderness designations are important here; while national parks are specifically designed for a visitor experience, which Abbey scorned, wilderness status means protection from pollution and in fact prohibits motorized vehicles.<sup>118</sup> Not all national parks are wilderness areas, and not all wilderness areas are national parks. We saw that Abbey professed admiration for the Environmental Protection Agency, and we can assume that this action – setting aside land without further plans to develop it – would not meet with the same opposition that the National Park Service received.

Williams’ political action during the period of the Utah Wilderness Act was significantly more in line with the law than Abbey’s; in fact, she condemned anything that might lead to violence. In a Salt Lake Tribune article from May 30, 1995, she wrote:

One citizen [at a rally] stood up and offered a ‘no wilderness’ proposal, encouraging his neighbors to stand up and fight as patriots for what was rightfully theirs. Afterwards, I overheard him say “you know how we solved the Civil War, don’t you?”

Armed beliefs.

This is extreme. This is radical. I do not believe this is the majority voice in the state of Utah.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Sumner, “*Testimony, Refuge, and the Sense of Place,*”), 100-114.

<sup>118</sup> “National Parks, National Forests, and U.S. Wildernesses.” *Nature*, PBS. April 18, 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 103.

Despite her disapproval of violence, she certainly did not condemn the battle against the government for wilderness. In a letter to Hillary Rodham Clinton, she referred to her fight for 5 million protected acres of Utah wilderness as ‘guerilla action.’<sup>120</sup> However, this action did not take the form of illegal protest. Instead, Williams worked within the political system and used traditional methods of communicating with political officials. These methods were mostly group efforts – letter campaigns, rallies, essay collections. In a 1995 article in the *Deseret News*, Williams recommends five steps to opposing government action. These included: 1.) writing letters to the editor, 2.) writing letters to politicians, 3.) attending public meetings, 4.) adopting and speaking for a wilderness area, and 5.) telling five friends to do the same. “Act with a desperate rage,” she advised, and yet these actions are not inherently desperate.<sup>121</sup> They are rational. They aim to begin dialogue, to work within society, rather than against it.

Williams was no Abbey, no lone voice in and for the wilderness. Instead, she harnessed, represented, and mobilized the voices of the people. Williams’ efforts during the Utah Wilderness Act debates were many, but the two most public were her testimony before Congress and the publication of her Utah wilderness writers’ anthology. Both are strong examples of Williams’ reliance on community when engaging with the political system.

Williams testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Forest and Public Lands Management on July 13, 1995, asserting that the will of the people was not being done when the government offered to protect a mere 1.7 million acres of wilderness. “It is not

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<sup>120</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 102.

<sup>121</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, Box 83.

a wilderness bill that the majority of Utahns recognize, want, or desire,” she said. “It is not a wilderness bill that honors or respects our history as a people.” The emphasis on Utahns as a single entity is no coincidence; Williams derived power and authority from speaking as one representative of many – be it the people who wanted more federal land protection or the wilderness itself. “We do not exist in isolation,” she said towards the end of her congressional testimony. “Our sense of community and compassionate intelligence must be extended to all life forms, plants, animals, rocks, rivers, and human beings.”<sup>122</sup>

In addition to invoking the spirit of thousands of citizens in her speech, she provided physical proxies for the community for which she spoke to Congress by bringing letters in opposition to Senate Bill 884. “These letters represent men and women, Republicans and Democrats alike, registered voters and voices too young to vote, but not too young to register their opinions,” she said.<sup>123</sup> Again, Williams emphasized the communal aspect of her plea in order to gain power, working with the system and working with people to add legitimacy to her political action.

The Senate paid little heed to Williams. So she threw her own version of a monkey-wrench: she got attention. She turned to the nature writing community and solicited essays from them regarding the value of Utah wilderness. The result was *Testimony: Writers of the West Speak On Behalf of Utah Wilderness*. Every member of Congress got a copy.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Terry Tempest Williams. Statement to the Senate, Subcommittee on Forest and Public Lands Management. July 15, 1995

<sup>123</sup> Terry Tempest Williams. Statement to the Senate, Subcommittee on Forest and Public Lands Management. July 15, 1995

<sup>124</sup> Sumner, “*Testimony, Refuge, and the Sense of Place,*”), 100-114



When asking for essay submissions, Williams specified the need for “the most impassioned, most reasoned essay you have ever crafted in the name of wilderness...write to unsettle, to move, to convince. The task of restoring awareness of our symbiotic relationship with nature may be the most pressing spiritual and political need of our time.”<sup>125</sup> The result of this request was a book widely acclaimed for its literary value, its political effectiveness, and its representation of Utah’s citizens. The public nature of the book meant more sympathy for the conservationists’ cause and an eventual victory for the fight for more protected land in Utah. Though not all 5 million acres were protected, Congress expanded the protection of their original bill to over 2 million acres. According to *Terrain* magazine, when President Bill Clinton dedicated the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument years later, he held up a copy of *Testimony* and said “this made a difference.”<sup>126</sup>

Williams mostly worked within the political system to effect change, but she was not afraid to break the law as a way to start dialogue. Her emphasis on community and cooperation rather than singlehanded destruction actually led to a more favorable conclusion than did Abbey’s methods of destructive monkeywrenching.

### **Wilderness Influencing Politics**

At first glance Abbey and Williams seem to employ very different methods of achieving political change. Abbey stands outside of the government structure and critiques it, at times even calling for its destruction. Williams works within it, testifying

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<sup>125</sup> Terry Tempest Williams Archives, box 102.

<sup>126</sup> Simmons B. Buntin, “We Leave Our Doors Wide Open: Interview with Terry Tempest Williams.” *Terrain Magazine*, Issue 17. October 22, 2005.

before Congress and writing alternate bills to put before the Senate. However, once again, we see contradiction within Abbey's stance when he does not actually *act* upon the political policies he lays forth in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. And once again, we see Williams chafing against the authority she has been taught to accept when she protests government action on government land. Their relationships to political action are contradictory at times, and they are certainly different from one another.

There is, however, a similarity between the two that should not be overlooked. Both were deeply immersed in politics but used writing as their primary form of activism, utilizing the power of the written word to gain public sympathy for their causes. This is a very democratic method of activism, and it indicates a level of moderation. Though both Abbey and Williams had strong political views, they recognized the power of reaching out to people to help protect the land.

In the end, their goals for the land surpassed their political goals, and their writings were used as tools to inspire political action amongst a great number of people. This was startlingly effective, as we can see in the creation of Earth First! and Williams' political victory in the battle for more Utah Wilderness. Their lived experiences, however, demonstrated a more moderate, practical ethic. In the land they found sufficient reason to compromise or exaggerate their political views, in order to be more effective agents of protection.

## Conclusion

### A Land-First Ethic

In his book *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold writes about his idea of a *land ethic*: a way of considering the earth as a community that humans too are a part of, and every part of the earth important and worth protecting for that reason. The value of wilderness and wild things does not lie in its value to humans, but in its identity as part of that community. “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for),” Leopold writes. “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”<sup>127</sup> This is something that Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams both understood intimately: a connection with every community through the shared community of the land.

I believe that both Abbey and Williams put their land ethics first in their writing. Through a relationship to the land and the environmental community, they were able to transcend barriers of gender, religion, and politics, in order to effectively speak on behalf of the desert and reach as many people as possible. In addition, the perspective of a land-first ethic gave both writers a perspective on their other identities. We have seen how Abbey incorporated seemingly contradictory viewpoints into his identity to better

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<sup>127</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 203-204.

facilitate a healthy and respectful relationship with the desert southwest. We have also seen that Williams questioned and resisted authority in her quest to attain the same.

Considering the two writers together allows us to better see how effective a land-first ethic was in drawing attention to the cause of environmentalism in the desert southwest and instilling a passion for the landscape. Abbey and Williams both gained a wide audience determined to become warriors for the desert southwest. Doug Peacock wrote on Abbey's work: "Forty years ago, my best friend from Michigan pored over the book, passed it on to me, then took up residence defending the high desert. A woman in Oregon read it, packed up and moved to southeaster Utah where she took a job as a national park ranger, busting archeological thieves for looting Indian burial grounds. She's still out there."<sup>128</sup> Williams' work was no less impactful. Tom Lynch wrote in *Desert Exposure* that "she is one of the most graceful yet forceful voices for the preservation of wilderness areas."<sup>129</sup> However, I think the most significant part of their land-first ethic is not that it allowed them to reach out to their communities on behalf of the desert. The land-first ethic allowed them to reach out to each other.

We know that Abbey and Williams were friends. They corresponded, they spent time together in the desert. We have seen them pop up as minor characters in each others' stories. We also know that this was an unlikely friendship, as they were complete opposites on many social and cultural spectrums. But as advocates of a land ethic, they recognized each other as members of the same community and were able to connect through this. This gave them the ability to create a personal relationship with each other,

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<sup>128</sup> Doug Peacock, "Desert Solitaire Revisited," web, 2010.

<sup>129</sup> Tom Lynch, "Talking to Terry Tempest Williams about Writing, the Environment, and Being A Mormon" in *A Voice In The Wilderness: Conversations with Terry Tempest Williams*, ed. Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 93.

as well as with the land, and this is why I think studying them next to each other is a worthwhile task. While examining them individually we can see how their relationships with the land influenced their other identities, but when we put them together we see just how powerful the land-first ethic was. We can see the implications this might have today, as humans continue to debate their role in the natural world.

A love of the desert connected Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams to their communities and each other. This shared land ethic gave them both balanced and respectful views of the wilderness, which they shared primarily through their writing. Using words as activism, they inspired readers to see themselves also as a part of the community of all living things, and instilled in others a passion for their place. This literary environmentalism transcended the boundaries of gender, religion, and politics, and allowed both Abbey and Williams to become the complicated, beautiful voices of a complicated, beautiful place: the desert southwest.

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