Edward Abbey (1927-1989), often called the Thoreau of the West,¹ was an activist, anar-
chist, writer, and philosopher. In his writing, especially Desert Solitaire (1968) and The Monkey
Wrench Gang, (1975), Abbey criticized the destruction of Utah and Arizona’s desert wilderness
by the bureaucratization, urbanization, and industrialization of the American West. Abbey was
notorious for his radical environmentalist and anarchist rhetoric. Most notably, he decried the
construction of the Glen Canyon Dam in northern Arizona and what he called “Industrial Tour-
ism,” or the development of infrastructure and businesses to support large volumes of tourists in
the National Parks. A self-proclaimed *vox clamantis in deserto*² who sought to expose the bar-
renness of modern living, Abbey has been pigeonholed by both critics and admirers as a “nature
writer” (Luke). Moreover, Abbey’s fame has distorted his message; while conservationist
groups cherry-pick his writing for rich descriptions of the Western landscape, eco-terrorist
groups tarnish Abbey’s legacy through their “monkeywrenching”³ activities (Luke).

Abbey was born in 1927 in the rural Appalachian countryside of Pennsylvania to Mildred
and Edward Paul Abbey (Brinkley xvi and “Edward Abbey” FBI Records § 1). According to

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¹ The appellation “Thoreau of the West” was first coined by novelist Larry McMurtry (Brinkley xvi). Abbey
respected Thoreau, remarking “The few such [nature] writers whom I wholly admire are those, like Thoreau, who
went far beyond simple nature writing to become critics of society” (“Preface” Desert Solitaire 1989, xi).
² *Vox clamantis in deserto* is Latin for “A voice crying in the desert.” The term refers to John the Baptist, who lived
in the desert preaching repentance and baptizing the Jews in anticipation of Jesus’s coming. Colloquially, *vox
clamantis in deserto* describes someone who warns society about some danger, but is ignored.
³ Monkeywrenching includes the destruction of property through tree spiking, vandalism, arson, and explosion.
historian Douglas Brinkley, although Abbey eventually migrated West and became its most passionate defender, much of his philosophy stemmed from his upbringing in the East. Abbey’s respect for the mountainous wilderness was fostered by his childhood spent exploring nature—hunting, fishing, and collecting leaves and rocks. In adolescence, Abbey’s anti-governmental and anti-business tendencies were solidified by Appalachian Pennsylvania’s regional politics. Abbey grew up witnessing the exploitation of the region by big lumber companies and mining operations for profit, and watching his socialist father steadfastly support the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical labor union⁴. Frustrated by the shameless destruction of the Appalachian wilderness, and tantalized by the fabled undeveloped American West, Abbey left Pennsylvania at age 17. He became a vagrant, hitching rides, working part time jobs, and getting arrested—all while exploring the best the West offered—Seattle, San Francisco, Arizona, the San Joaquin Valley, Navajo Country, the Sonoran Desert, and Death Valley (Brinkley xvi-xvii). Simply put, he fell in love with the West. Almost 30 years later, Abbey began his most famous book, Desert Solitaire, with a poetic description of Moab, Utah as “the most beautiful place on Earth… the ideal place, the right place, the one true home...” (Desert Solitaire 1971, 1).

But Abbey did not live out his Western coming-of-age adventure for long. He was drafted into the Army near the end of World War II, serving from June 1945 to February 1947 in Italy (Brinkley xviii and “Edward Abbey” FBI Records § 1). Shortly after he returned to the U.S., Abbey enrolled in the University of New Mexico (UNM) on the GI bill and earned a B.A. and M.A. in philosophy (Brinkley xviii). At UNM, Abbey’s unconventional styles and ideas, especially those ideas published in the university magazine The Thunderbird, garnered not only the attention of his peers, but also that of the FBI, which formally investigated Abbey as a potential Communist sympathizer.⁵ Five years earlier, the FBI had monitored Abbey for sedition after he encouraged his male peers at the State Teachers College of Indiana, Pennsylvania to burn or otherwise destroy their draft cards to protest peacetime conscription (“Edward Abbey” FBI Records § 1). FBI records reveal that Abbey was no Communist spy but an outspoken and

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⁴ According to Edward Abbey’s biographer, Jim Cahalan, Paul Abbey was a loyal Marxist and registered socialist, despite living in a very conservative and rural part of Pennsylvania. Although historians do not know if Paul was a card-carrying member of the IWW, Paul’s experience as a factory worker caused him to idolize Eugene Debs. Edward Abbey adopted Paul’s radicalism and individualism, but not Paul’s admiration for socialism (Cahalan 8).

⁵ Characteristic of the McCarthy era, intense fear of Communism caused the FBI to investigate many ordinary Americans who had distant and inconsequential ties to Communism. During the 1950s, anti-communist propaganda and the campaigns of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) also caused greater suspicion of many social activists and academics (“McCarthyism”).
individualistic pacifist. In Abbey’s masters thesis, “Anarchism and the Morality of Violence,” he had denounced the Soviet Union, arguing that the violence perpetrated by organized government — under communism, socialism, or a capitalist democracy— provides a dubious justification for violent protest (“Edward Abbey” FBI Records § 1 and “Anarchism and the Morality of Violence”).

After leaving UNM, Abbey worked odds jobs — school bus driver, janitor, fire lookout, teacher, tour guide, and forest ranger — financing and inspiring his writing (“Edward Abbey” FBI Records § 1 and Brinkley xix). Abbey’s first novel, Jonathan Troy, was published in 1954. Twelve years later, The Brave Cowboy feature followed; it was adapted by screenwriter Dalton Trumbo⁶ into the popular 1962 film Lonely are the Brave starring Kirk Douglas and Walter Matthau. Abbey’s most famous non-fiction work, Desert Solitaire, was published in 1968. In it, he recounted the summers he spent as a forest ranger at Arches National Park. Abbey’s most impactful work, The Monkey Wrench Gang, was published in 1975. It tells the story of a group of saboteurs, led by Vietnam War veteran George Hayduke, who travel the west monkey-wrenching with the eventual goal of destroying Glen Canyon Dam (Brinkley xviii).

Abbey’s radical rhetoric in The Monkey Wrench Gang spoke to many environmentalists frustrated with bureaucratic gridlock and the inability of mainstream environmentalist organizations to effect change within the system (Brinkley xxii). Antagonistic and outlandish, Abbey’s writings are mired in controversy.

Literary critics and admirers have given Abbey many epithets; “Thoreau of the West,” “Cactus Ed,” and “curmudgeon,” to name a few. The tag that predominates is “nature writer.” As scholars Tim Luke and Douglas Brinkley both note, Abbey detested that title, once remarking, “I did not mean to be mistaken for a nature writer” (“Preface” Desert Solitaire 1989). In fact, according to Luke, Abbey did not like to be labelled as an environmentalist, either:

Even though many environmentalists hear environmentalism in his words, Abbey did not shrink from exclaiming “I am not an Environmentalist.” Facing these facts is important, because Abbey’s writings should not be sent away to the taxidermy

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⁶ Dalton Trumbo, the award-winning director, author, and screenwriter, was one of the “Hollywood Ten,” called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947. Blacklisted in Hollywood until the early 1960s, Trumbo moved to Mexico City and continued to write screenplays under pseudonyms (“Dalton Trumbo”).
shop of literary theory, only to return as America’s finest “Western Environmentalist Writer” when so much of his art addresses more than just the American West, the desert environment, and nature writing (9).

Luke contends that Abbey wrote not about the physical desert, but about American society. Abbey understood deserts as “human constructs” and used that view in his writings to examine the desert wilderness as a social space (Luke 24). Through this examination, Abbey uncovers the “technological utopia, a biased ideology, and a quite destructive political economy” prevalent in American society, which shapes the exploitation of and fetishizes the desert space (Luke 11). Luke further contends that Abbey seeks to correct this wrong and expose both nature and society in their truest interdependent forms (Luke 15-16). In Desert Solitaire, Abbey acknowledges his motives when discussing the personification of nature:

> I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it’s possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and the fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us…. Paradox and bedrock. (1971, 7).

Abbey did not write merely about the beauty of the desert. By examining mythic American conceptions of the wild, he diagnosed the problems of American society as a whole. From the desert, he gained a bird’s-eye view. To portray of Abbey as a nature writer is therefore erroneous.

Abbey opposed the attitudes of Southwesterners towards the desert and the “techno-industrial culture” driving American society (Luke 20). These beliefs shaped his politics. Abbey saw the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam as the epitome of American greed. A monstrosity of a pork barrel project, the Glen Canyon Dam’s commissioner, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, later admitted the project was a mistake (Brinkley xix-xx). Abbey often advocated for the Dam to be destroyed. In Chapter 5 of Desert Solitaire, “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks,” he is even more fervent. As a part-time ranger at various National Parks

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7 Abbey writes, “‘All dams are ugly, but the Glen Canyon Dam is sinful ugly” (A Voice 86)
and federally protected wilds throughout the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, Abbey witnessed the development of the Western wilds to accommodate larger numbers of tourists (“Edward Abbey: Freedom”). In his polemic, Abbey argues that what he calls “Industrial Tourism” is ruining the National Parks. He identifies both the root and victim of the systematic destruction of the National Parks: the “motorized tourist.” According to Abbey, such tourists create a demand for paved roads in the National Parks by clinging to comfort of their automobile. Industry and government, working in tandem, are happy to accommodate these tourists, but at a cost to the pristine landscape.

At the time when Abbey was a ranger, managers and engineers in the top ranks of the National Park Service were often crusaders for the improved accessibility of parks. Big business, especially hotels, restaurants, and gas stations, encouraged federal, state, and local government to allocate funds for the development of areas surrounding and within National Parks. With the funds, power, and demand for paved roads, development of National parks became inevitable. During Abbey’s lifetime, tourist influx following initial development increased almost exponentially, prompting further development. Roads begot tourists. Tourists begot roads. Abbey detested this development. Abbey lamented that future generations, who will not be able to experience the pure undeveloped wilderness of the original National Parks, have been robbed of their birthright (*Desert Solitaire* 1971, 48-73).

While the label of nature writer incorrectly describes Abbey, his representation in the environmental movement is also misunderstood. In 2015, Arches National Park in Utah published a tribute to Abbey on their website. On this webpage, the National Park Service shamelessly celebrates Industrial Tourism borrowing Abbey’s own writing. After including a meditative and beautiful passage from Abbey about the desert, the Park Service remarks:

> Between eloquent descriptions of the natural history of the area, Abbey passionately opposed the development of Arches and his beloved canyon country, fearing dire results from the growth of “industrial tourism.” Readers find in *Desert Solitaire* an Arches that no longer exists: a little-known monument at the

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8 Abbey was a ranger at Arches from 1956-1957, Canyonlands in 1965, and the Everglades from 1965-1966 (“Edward Abbey: Freedom”)

9 The word “Industrial” in Industrial Tourism may more explicitly refer to the involvement of business in this cycle of development. However, “Industrial” may also refer to the seeming mass production of infrastructure in National Parks across the country to meet the demands of tourists. Development itself, to Abbey, seems like an industry.
end of a little-used dirt road. The road is paved now and the park is world-famous, yet Abbey's spirit lives on in the people who continue to search for the feeling of personal freedom evoked by this desert landscape (Arches National Park).

In addition to touting the fame and popularity of the park, the National Park Service today uses Abbey's writing to sell Arches as an attractive tourist destination — now car accessible since Abbey left — to all those seeking a “personal freedom” that Abbey describes. The National Park Service shamelessly deploys Abbey’s writing to market what Abbey detested — Industrial Tourism. Abbey is surely turning in his grave!

While the National Park Service blatantly disregards Abbey’s message on its website, a subtler misrepresentation of Abbey’s message pervades the contemporary environmental movement. The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) includes a quotation from Abbey on its homepage, ironically, next to a link for donating to the organization:

These canyonlands are the property of every American from Maine to California, and if necessary, we must make the saving of them a national issue.

Abbey’s arguments are often conditional, a fact that is not shown in this inspirational quote. Indeed, Abbey was a migrant to the West and he lived the idea that the canyonlands are for all Americans. At the same time, Abbey actively discouraged the mass consumption of the canyonlands by the American public. Abbey wrote in *Desert Solitaire* "'Don't go. Stay home and read a good book, this one for example ...The desert is for movies and God-intoxicated mystics, not family recreation.'" (Luke qtd. Abbey 26). Abbey also argued that cars should not be allowed into National Parks and that minimal accommodations, if any, should be made for those who cannot walk or bike. According to Abbey, the unwilling or the weak should not come (*Desert Solitaire* 65-70).

Abbey the idealized figure stands in sharp contrast with the flawed man. Investigation beyond the back covers of his books reveals that Abbey did not uphold the ideals typically associated with environmentalism. He was racist, using vulgar slurs in his
writing. He opposed immigration, especially immigrants from Latin America, arguing that overpopulation would destroy the United States. Abbey was a misogynist, objectifying the female body and mocking feminists in his portrayal of the character Bonnie Abbzug in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Moreover, Abbey was not always environment-friendly. Once, on impulse, he drove a vintage Cadillac through Tucson, blasting music and making a scene (Brinkley xix). His fictional characters were no better. George Hayduke, the protagonist of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, constantly litters, throwing empty beer cans from his car along the side of the road. Most ironically, Abbey lived, not in the desert, but in the suburbs. He only went into the desert when travelling, on assignment, or to work —either writing or working for the tourist industry or National Parks (Luke 22-26). Abbey contradicted the ideals he preached.

Ecoterrorist organizations, portrayed as dangerous and unhinged by the mainstream media, have tarred Abbey’s reputation. Shortly following its publication, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* inspired a grass roots environmental monkeywrenching movement during the ‘70s and ‘80s. As Brinkley notes, Earth First!, the most organized of these groups, followed George Hayduke’s credo “‘Always pull up survey stakes’” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 85) like it was dogma hoping to “keep it like it was” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 82) (xxii). Earth First!’s first public event was a symbolic “cracking” of the Glen Canyon Dam. Rolling out a shaped black tarp over the middle of the dam, Earth First! grabbed the attention of the national media, drawing substantial attention to radical environmentalism (Brinkley xxii). Abbey, who spoke at this event, promoted a by-whatever-means-necessary approach to environmental resistance (Philippon).

Over time, Earth First! became more radical and violent, moving from peaceful civil disobedience to more sinister acts of sabotage like tree spiking and arson. Even though he befriended the movement’s leaders, Abbey maintained his distance from the group, preferring to write rather than lead. Starting in the ‘80s, conservative politicians, quick to demonize environmental groups, used the threat of ecoterrorism to push for an FBI crackdown on radical environmentalist groups, including Earth First! Media coverage of ecoterrorists quickly became sensational, and Abbey became synonymous
with the extremist radical environmentalist (Brinkley xxii-xxiii). But despite criticism from the media, Earth First! has brought about some positive change. In 1999, Earth First! organized a protest in Humboldt County, CA which led to Julia Butterfly Hill’s long tree-sit in Luna, an old growth California redwood. Hill’s three-year stay atop Luna gripped the nation and resulted in the Luna Preservation Agreement in 1999 (Ensign).

Since 9/11, the FBI has continued to condemn radical eco-activists as a serious domestic terrorism threat, even though ecoterrorist operations target machines, not people (Brinkley xxi; FBI statement “The Threat of Ecoterrorism”). Most scholars agree that there has been a Republican, law enforcement, and Park Service overreaction to modern day “monkeywrenching” movements such as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and Animal Liberation Front (ALF) (Luke 19 and If A Tree Falls). Splinter groups formed from Earth First!, the ELF and ALF committed a string of arsons during the late 1990’s that most famously included the Vail Colorado Ski Resort fire (If a Tree Falls). Of all 1200 monkeywrenching crimes these two groups claimed responsibility for, no human was killed or injured (If A Tree Falls). Overreaction to eco-terrorism was documented in the film If A Tree Falls, the story of former ELF member Daniel McGowan. Arrested by the FBI in 2005 during one of the biggest crackdowns on radical eco activism, McGowan was given a special “terrorist enhancement” sentence for his role in a number of ELF arsons. This enhancement led to his detainment in high security prison for most of his seven-year sentence. Although ecoterrorists have embraced Abbey’s message and followed in the footsteps of Abbey’s fictional heroes, their actions have discredited all environmental activists and delegitimized Abbey’s criticism of society.

Despite all this, Abbey was not unsuccessful. His final book, A Voice Crying in the Desert (1989), describes the legacy Abbey envisioned for himself (A Voice xi). In his introduction, Abbey contextualizes his criticism of American society:

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10 The labelling of radical eco-activists as terrorist is still disputed, as great precautions are taken to ensure that all violent activities do not harm human life (If a Tree Falls).

11 A Voice essentially is the catalogue of Abbey’s wisdom developed throughout the whole of his adult life. The epigrams and aphorisms which make up A Voice were taken from Abbey’s personal journals that he had kept since 1948 (A Voice xi).
"Vox clamantis in deserto" is a role that few care to play, but I find pleasure in it. The voice crying from the desert, with its righteous assumption of enlightenment, tends to grate on the nerves of the multitude. But it is mine. I’ve had to learn to live within a constant blizzard of abuse from book reviewers, literary critics, newspaper columnists, letter writers, and fellow authors. But there are some rewards as well: the immense satisfaction, for example, of speaking out in plain blunt language on matters that the majority of American authors are too tired, timid, or temporizing even to allow themselves to think about. To challenge the taboo…and though all respectable and official and institutional voices condemn me, a million others think otherwise and continue to buy my books… (xi-xii).

Abbey felt honored to be the vox, and he recognized his deserto as “the arid wastes of our contemporary techno-industrial greed-and-power culture” (A Voice xiii). Through his writing he was always warning—clamantis.

Abbey died in 1989 at age 62 from internal bleeding after surgery,12 two weeks after the publication of A Voice Crying in the Desert. Perhaps the posthumous testimony about Abbey from his friend Jack Loeffler best summarizes Abbey’s lasting impact (Harden E1). Shortly following Abbey’s death, Loeffler said “‘Ah, Abbey, You know the truth. The same truth I know. Except you maybe know it better than I do.’” (Loeffler qtd. in Harden E1). As attendance at U.S. National Parks today swells to record numbers, the effects of climate change become more present in our day to day lives, and new technologies like the iPhone and computer dominate everyday interactions, Abbey’s message — what society calls “progress” is not always good — is ever more relevant to understanding and coping with the dysfunction of American society in the Information Age.

Readers should embrace the “paradox and bedrock” not only of the canyonlands, but of Abbey’s philosophy (Desert Solitaire 1971, 7). But they should also see Abbey for what he was — a flawed idealist, a wanderer in the desert, a man of oxymorons. The question remains: will we heed his warning? Will we choose to preserve the great wilds and our humanity along with it? Will we fight the status quo of environmental destruction?

12 Mystery still surrounds Abbey’s death. Radical environmental circles have popularized the conspiracy theory that Abbey still lives, and the message “‘Abbey Lives!’” can be found graffitied across the West (Brinkley xxiv).
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