

The 'Feral' Wilderness: American Studies, Ecoliterature and the Disclosures of American Space

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Abstract: This essay argues for a broader historical and geographical context for reading American environmental literature. Many works of American nature writing, or "ecoliterature," contain important critiques, explicit or implicit, of resource capitalism and the course of American urbanization, but this aspect is often overlooked by scholars. The undervaluing of these texts as environmental critiques is the result of developments in critical theory since the 1950s. The problem began with readings undertaken by myth-symbol scholars, in particular Leo Marx, and was intensified by the rise of new historicist criticism in the 1970s. Ecocriticism's "first wave" operated largely within its own context, and while "second wave" ecocriticism has effectively defended pastoral writing, scholars have generally conceded too much ground to new historicist critiques, and over-emphasized "naturism" at the expense of the social construction of space. "Feral wilderness" is a re-conceptualization of American space, with resonance in the works of Thoreau and Edward Abbey, that grounds naturism in a materialist understanding of American geographic development.

Keywords: Feral wilderness—pastoral—Ecocriticism—myth-symbol school—New historicism—abstract space—neotechnics

The valorization of wilderness in American ecoliterature has had a rather ambiguous history; on the one hand it has come to virtually define the literary canon of nature writing and was seen as a cultural foundation for the rise of progressive environmental politics. On the other hand the veneration of wilderness through representation in art and literature has been subject to a set of refusals: that "wilderness" does not exist except as idealization;

that the idea of wilderness establishes a rigid duality between nature and human life; that the representation of wilderness as “primeval” is based on a myth of “paradise lost” (Oates, 2003); that preservation of wilderness constitutes a “flight from history” and gives rise to the “false hope of an escape from responsibility” (Cronon, 1995: 80); that the very idea that wilderness existed ignores Amerindian history; that the love for wilderness is socially irresponsible—an elitist project, etc. etc.

Wilderness has been principally associated with North America (both the United States and Canada) but also Australia where the preferred term is the “outback.” The actual geographical conditions which underlie the concept of wilderness are very important and relate strongly to my conception of a “feral wilderness,” but before further discussion of this question it is very important to consider how the idea of wilderness is generally understood. The prevailing concept of wilderness derives from the writings of John Muir, the chronicler and defender of the startlingly magnificent wilderness of California—the “old growth” forests with their references to the splendor of Yosemite in the Sierra Nevada Mountains: here the concept of the “virgin forest”—a place of “deep cathedrally canopied woods” (Zencey, 1998: 118) makes sense considering the dimensions of the physical spaces there and the age of the trees—among the oldest living things on the face of the earth. This was “nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization,” a wilderness whose purity exists “by virtue of its independence from human beings,” and, to stretch the point, a concept of pastoral quite different from anything in the Old World because it expresses the “autonomy and autonomous cultural independence of the young republic” (Garrard, 2004: 59, 66, 70-71).

The question is whether this picture comports accurately with the whole of American experience or not. One has to wonder which republic Garrard refers to, for the first one ended in the catastrophe of civil war—the bloodiest, most brutal war in American history, whose divisions are still a force dividing the American polity, while the second republic, founded in the “Gilded Age” amidst a period of unprecedented corruption, cynicism and class warfare, was never legitimate in the eyes of the people until the much delayed reforms of the Progressive Era (1900-1919). Perhaps the conception of an idealized wilderness became politically expedient during the progressive era when Muir wrote, but that doesn’t diminish my point that conflict and not consensus has defined American history—and there’s no particular reason to think that wilderness as an idea should not

have been a contested concept as well. At the same time, wilderness as an actual condition of the land pertains to a particular geographic and historical circumstance: namely the peopling of sparsely settled and (for the most part) pre-agrarian landscapes by European settlers on behalf of expanding European states. The imperialist political implication of the term “settler cultures” is widely acknowledged by ecocritics (e.g. Buell, 1995: chap 1), but what is less often commented on is the character and influence of the “frontier” economy created by the settlers in response to the demands of the world economy. The frontier was an economy based on the exploitation of natural resources with some interesting peculiarities—that have some impact on the perception of the actually existing geographic landscape. Before I delve into that, it is necessary to look briefly at the deep structures of North American geological history because this too impacts perceptions as well as settlement patterns. North America is a composite of two separate continents, east and west, of quite distinct geological character which were separated for long periods of time by a shallow sea (Flannery, 2001: 10-12): interestingly enough, the geological division between the very old and geologically stable land mass to the east and the violent, unstable and dramatic land mass to the west had much to do with the distinct physical sense of wilderness in the West as well as the retarded and limited settlement of the western part of the continent until the 20th century; by the time it was coming under settlement pressures the cultural and political background had shifted.

I don't wish to overplay this regional distinction, but it does provide a useful starting point for my discussion of the actually existing geographic landscape, part of which I've characterized as a “feral wilderness.” The feral wilderness was a typical phenomenon of the east, of lands far more easily and rapidly subdued . . . and just as easily abandoned. A feral wilderness calls to mind the expression “a feral dog”: something domesticated that has gone back to the wild, except that the feral wildernesses were never fully domesticated (settled); they were quickly abandoned lands often used for a single function in the highly specialized global economy that Europeans brought to North America. Feral wildernesses are spaces used and neglected whose value is somehow magnified by having been abandoned and forgotten. The process of creating the lands the Americans would later take to calling “wilderness” goes back to the 17th century fur trade when forests were ‘de-wilded,’ first by being completely stripped of particular species of wildlife (Richards, 2003: 463-516). The economic function of

these remote lands usually unsuitable for agriculture (though farming was sometimes tried there with meager results) later shifted to bark (for tannin) or timber or minerals, but the pattern of exploitation, neglect and abandonment remained the same. Scholars of forestry today describe abandonment of land as a process of “rewilding”: the changes wrought when “a formerly cultivated landscape develops without human control” (Höchtel, et al., 2003: 86). In the feral wilderness of the 19th century, the restoration of ‘wilderness values’ was often rapid. The land was never cultivated to begin with. Nonetheless there is something about the traces of former human presence and the fact that the land had been abandoned that make the feral wilderness a landscape, i.e., gave it a history, albeit a submerged one.

What is quite clear is that feral wilderness contradicts the ideal quality and transcendent meaning attributed to wilderness by ecocritics. Wilderness, regardless of the different ways of describing and explaining its significance, has always been conceived as a separate and distinct space—apart from civilization, a cultural margin. American nature writers were, after all, the inheritors of Pastoral’s division between the city and the country; for them wilderness was something distinct, perhaps, in pastoral terms, a new Arcadia. But how should we interpret this New World wilderness pastoral? Was the margin simply an inverse reflection of an ideal American nation or were there currents of political opposition in the idea of wilderness space? In my view, if the “feral wilderness” could be said to constitute a credible reading of the American wilderness idea this should make a difference in the way we read American pastoral writing. In effect, I am arguing that there was an alternate conception of wilderness, that its roots lie deep in American nature writing and that it can be read in relation to the geo-historical and political development of the United States. By examining two of the key writers on wilderness, Thoreau and Abbey, I am attempting to contest the influence of new historicist themes and complicate our reading of American ecoliterature. In the 1970s, new historicist revisionism criticized pastoral writers and landscape artists for promoting a vision of the West as an idealized vision of environmental utopia that ignored the slaughter of the indigenous inhabitants and the ravaging of the (female identified) land (Kolodny, 1975). To a great extent, as suggested above, ecocritics have accepted the premises of this critique but have found various devices to blunt it. In this article I wish to examine the structure and premises of this debate, particularly in relation to the potential, sometimes realized, of pastoral writing to reveal important environmental

questions, in part by identifying deep structures underlying the way space has been conceived and disposed of in the last 500 years.

American Studies: Pastoral's Strange Promotion (1955-1964)

The larger question here is that of the utopian imagination and its relation to oppositional themes and political change. There are many sides to the question and there are differences in national discourses to be taken account of. What I propose to do is look at this entirely in an American context and I will begin with the work of one of the earliest postwar voices in the development of an academic discourse against pastoral: Leo Marx. Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) falls under the national myth and symbol school, though most designations like this contain their own fault lines. I would put *The Machine in the Garden* in line with the better myth-symbol works, such as R.W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955). These books were not simplistic celebrations of American culture; indeed they entertain fundamental cultural critique, but at the same time they are highly skeptical about cultural and political change. Both Lewis and Marx uncovered themes of irony and tragedy that permitted them to make a case for the aesthetic value of American Literature, and to argue (implicitly) that the terms of American political discourse were naïve. In many respects they shared the sensibilities of the generation that comprised the "Counter-Progressive" school of American historians (Wise 1979): antagonism toward European ideologies and political ideas in general, a relative satisfaction with the institutions of American life, and most importantly, a distrust of American democracy. The American fascination with the machine in the garden made Americans uniquely vulnerable to the siren call of simple pastoral's 'return to nature' motif. According to Marx, awareness of Eurasian history, necessary to complex pastoral, was required to combat the megalomaniacal fantasies of the American people, thus projecting an authoritative voice.

It seems to me that Marx actually misunderstands the importance of the attempt by early American intellectuals to reflect on the terms of the relation between nature and culture. This attempt was awkward and politically flawed, but should not be dismissed out of hand. A second point is the importance of pastoral writing's reflection on the emerging structure of American space, which is a highly significant development. Emerson is the starting point. Leo Marx depicts Emerson's transcendental discourse as

simplistic, philosophically spurious,¹ and inherently contradictory: “what perplexes us here is Emerson’s ability to join enthusiasm for technological progress with a ‘romantic’ love of nature and contempt for cities” (232). In reality, Emerson’s objection is not to the city but to the beginnings of industrial age urbanization, which he witnessed in Britain, a process that produced what Lewis Mumford referred to as “the insensate industrial town” (1938). At the same time, if we believe that we must find a way to shape an advanced technology compatible with natural ecological foundations of life, Emerson might be well understood as having asked the right questions.

Be that as it may, Thoreau is more to Leo Marx’s liking, but for a surprising reason. Marx endeavored to save the value of Thoreau, the writer, by neatly and artificially separating his cultural criticism from his nature-orientation: there was Thoreau, the wise critic of the American technological faith, and then there was the literary Thoreau, the nature enthusiast, who used a pastoral occasion (at Walden Pond) to create a piece of literary art remote from time and place. This division reflects on Marx’s distinction between “simple” and “complex” forms of pastoral. Marx begins with a disclaimer: on the one hand Thoreau is dragged into the pastoral trap laid by Emerson’s transcendentalist discourse, particularly in his essay “Walking” which Marx reads as a paean to the eternal West. On the other hand, and unlike Emerson, Thoreau applied pastoral to a critique of technology while understanding, at times, that pastoral’s division between man and nature denied an essential condition of human existence, namely a “sense of relatedness between man and not-man” (23). Given his reflexivity on pastoral, Thoreau was more likely than Emerson to limit the significance of (pastoral) literature to an aesthetic that in Marx’s eyes has intrinsic value but also lacks profound political implications.

For Leo Marx, the context was shaped by modernity: the difficulty with Emersonian transcendentalism was not only that it called on the worst forms of American sentimental pastoral, but that it provided philosophical support (in the form of a “dualistic theory of mind”) for the development of “romantic pastoralism” (233) that rejects the modern world. This leads the Transcendentalist to a complete misreading of modern history, i.e. the failure to anticipate the social and political consequences of the industrial revolution. The romantic idealism of Emerson’s characterization

1 Marx’s determination to brand Emerson as a philosophical dualist may be contrasted with Sherman Paul’s (1952) understanding that Emerson is best read as a precursor of pragmatism and phenomenology.

of the New World as “our garden” and the availability to the ‘Young Americans’ of “the imaginative, utopian, transcendent, value creating facility [of] Reason” (236) charted the course of a spurious American Exceptionalism, according to Leo Marx, though I wonder if Emerson’s work really differs so much from William Morris’s utopian novel, *News from Nowhere* (1890), which sees British cities dismantled in favor of agrarian villages making possible a new Arcadia. What Emerson and Morris have in common is fairly common 19th-century intellectual judgment, that even touched Karl Marx (in his early manuscripts of 1844): that the industrial revolution was a terrible, terrible mistake.

The question is whether a utopian envisioning might be made applicable to evolving alternate methods of production and corresponding political alternatives, or whether such thinking is simply a dangerous fantasy underlying a false consciousness that entails escapism, or, more seriously, a utopianism that lends itself to the development of ideology. I won’t answer that question directly here, but I will partly address it by contextualizing Leo Marx’s position. It seems to me that a critique of environmental utopianism, Emersonian or otherwise, makes perfect sense from a realist perspective at mid-20th century, where the alternatives of political economy were presented in the macro-economic writings of Marx and Keynes (Heilbroner, 1953). Obviously, the subsequent collapse of Keynesianism and the return to classical economics in the West, plus the failure of the Soviet system and the recent Great Recession of 2008 are indicative of a rather less stable and more problematic picture of the world economy. It’s not clear where we are headed and there’s no particular reason to exclude ecological thinking on the question of future economic design. Admittedly, it would be an error in the worst kind of presentism to critique Leo Marx’s understanding of economic changes on the basis of a discussion of current problems; it is safe to say, then, that historical context does provide an underlying rationale for his position at the time. It says nothing, however, about a much more important historical argument Marx makes, namely the suggestion that Emersonian idealism and the sentimental pastoral lie behind the political failures of the country. In fact, what has the influence of (Emersonian) pastoral in the United States to do with the country’s difficulties in dealing effectively with the rise of a laboring class, or the sprawl of its cities, and the over-exploitation of its resources? The implication that there is some sort of causal relation between ideas and events confuses an epiphenomenon (romantic idealism) with the real structures of economic and political

power. Can the problems of the political in the USA be laid at the mantle of Emerson or wilderness appreciation and preservation? Or, for that matter, if historical materialism had it come into existence, would it have had a better chance of righting these environmental ills, assuming that such problems would be taken seriously? One need only look at the record of actually existing socialism to raise doubts in this regard. One important point to add here is that Ramachandra Guha (2006) has argued that environmentalism in all of its artistic and political manifestations is essentially a response to the industrialization of the world (which he defines as a broad social-historical phenomenon), and that opposition to industrial modernization, while no longer cogent in the first world, is very much alive in India where villagers fight for survival. In the longer run, the foundations of industrial modernization—substituting ever growing inputs of natural resources for labor and of simplifying diverse human ecologies in favor of greater productivity—will probably be re-thought and modified. As we move forward to that day, earlier writers on pastoral may be partially vindicated.

Leo Marx took the opposite position: that the pastoral has nothing to say about the political real. In light of this judgment Thoreau emerges a transitional figure between Emerson and Melville, still wedded to Pastoral, but one who recognizes in *Walden* that while pastoral imagining might function as social critique, it could never become a social ideal: “for Thoreau the realization of the golden age is, finally, a matter of private and, in fact, literary experience” (264). The “complex pastoral” that Marx defends is thus severely limited in scope while the “simple pastoral” with its utopian implications has been nothing more than a case of false consciousness. Well, it is a safe position to take because at best Pastoral in its idealizations refracts the political, which means that it can result in political distortion. There is no reason to take such risks if like Marx your view of nature is merely an “image in the mind” that stands for social and religious values rather than as a physical environment important in its own right (Hartman 2007: 45).

The Anti-Pastoral Ideology and the Rise of Ecocriticism

We tend to be more aware of the overwhelming rejection of myth-symbol’s nationalist orientation and canonical conservatism than of the school’s continued influence. Fundamentally, new historicism shares myth-symbol’s attempt to define historical experience entirely in symbolic terms; it also shares Marx’s skepticism about the majority culture and his orientation to a

saving remnant, though it is there that new historicism works a democratic revolution by favoring the texts of non-white and female authors over the traditional canonical works. Nonetheless, the skepticism toward the “classic” pastoral themes of American writing remains. Like new historicists, ecocritics often sharply distinguish themselves from Leo Marx—and with good reason considering Marx’s sharp delimitation of the physical environment as a subject. Nonetheless the highly exaggerated distinction between Emerson and Thoreau, which marks much ecocritical discourse, seems to have originated in Leo Marx’s work, and the limitations of the political that emerged from American Studies have been important as well. Marx’s influence on the reading of pastoral as the ideology of “pastoralism” has been widespread. The turn against representations of nature in American literature and art bears his stamp. Landscape painting is as complex as pastoral writing and its growth and development paralleled and reflected a growing scientific understanding of the geological forces behind landscape (Bedell, 2001); in cultural studies, however, the dominant interpretation reflects a rather narrow reading of the sublime aesthetic—a sense of aesthetic pleasure that arises by viewing a terrifyingly powerful object from a safe distance, as Edmund Burke put it—has helped to confine the American landscape to a cliché: the representation of the West *is* the highly sentimentalized landscape made popular by Albert Bierstadt, for instance, in his *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak* (1863). Here is a clear representation of apparently untouched or little used land as the “transcendent” wilderness that was embraced to support the ideology of American national expansion—the so-called Manifest Destiny. Here an idealized nature was widely interpreted as lending support to a national destiny as imperial expansion at the expense of Amerindians and at the cost of extreme exploitation of other species. In short, simple pastoralisms became indicative of a hegemonic cultural formation which inextricably links all expressions of the wilderness representation to a regressive social politics.

In some sense ecocriticism has been trapped by having to respond to this entire formulation. First generation ecocriticism attempted to reverse the terms of Marx’s formula by de-emphasizing the cultural critique of industrial society and emphasizing instead the turn to nature. Lawrence Buell tells us that “the ideological valance of pastoral writing cannot be determined without putting the text in a contextual frame” (1989: 19). The framework changed after 1970 and was open to considerable innovation, for a short time. After the first Earth Day, ecological thinking has become a not insig-

nificant influence on academic life as well as in many other arenas. The idea is that our relation to environment is exploitative and self-serving because we have failed to adequately represent the ecological character of our environs (surroundings). The result is that pastoral could be resurrected as “nature writing” aimed at exploring attitudes toward the natural environs. Pastoral’s assumption that nature equals countryside or non-urban landscape was thus preserved, but the analytical mode shifted from pastoral motifs to the mimetic qualities of the nature writing, i.e., the capacity to express what was real in the environment, the ecological dimension, or ‘environmentality’. In the 1970s and 1980s wilderness was at the core of a growing academic interest in the genre of nature writing as suggested by anthologies like *The Wilderness Reader* (1980) and *This Incomparable Lande* (1989) which created a broad sub-canon and broke down the exclusive concern with *belles lettres*, making the environmental contextualization the primary identifier of the literature. Defining an ecoliterature is a further extension of this trend toward a politically-committed literature. Indeed ecocriticism sees itself as its own “political mode of analysis” broadly comparable to Marxism or feminism, and related to similar developments in political science and philosophy (Garrard 3). Its embrace of multiple subjectivities through the study of a multitude of aspects of environmental imagining is both an exercise of democracy and good sense (Buell 2005).

Adequate description of the complexities of nature was understood as the primary *raison d’être* of nature writing and ecoliterature. In theory, this motivation contrasted sharply with pastoral, which, after all, is a literary tradition that “constructs a different kind of world from that of realism” leading Terry Gifford to argue that what emerges through modern literature, is a post-pastoral that intertwines subjectivity with the creative powers of nature (1999: 45,74). The result is the development of eco- and bio-centrism (Arne Naess’s idea of deep ecology) that became the foundation for further development in reading culture in terms of nature. This “first wave” ecocriticism was based on an “organicist model” of culture, i.e., ecology as a model for understanding culture (Bateson 1972) and as means for dismantling culture to nature dichotomies (Buell 2005: 21-22). The practice of “renewing and repossessing” (Paul 1976) was an interesting and significant cultural theme in the 1970s, connected to the growing practice of ecological restoration (Howarth, 1996). Such a conception is essentially normative, however, and lacks the explanatory power necessary to drive political and social theory, with the consequence that the more ambitious agenda of first-

wave environmentalism fell away. Safer ground was found in the mimetic instrumentality of ecology. Interest shifted from the broader implications of ecology as cultural metaphor to the ecological purposes of description in nature writing. Writers like Rick Bass (1996) retained the idealizing qualities of pastoral writing but added a realist ecological perspective to his description of a remote valley in Montana. The question addressed by first-wave ecocriticism (with the “organicist” exception noted above), thus hinged on the adequacy of description, the veracity of its mimetic qualities of natural ecologies. The idealizing qualities of pastoral were compensated for but the larger question of nature-culture interaction was not fundamentally addressed.

Back to Thoreau: Feral Wilderness as Produced Space

What spaces do we focus attention on when reading Thoreau and what do we make of them? My examples come from one of his lesser known works, *The Maine Woods* (1864; 2004). Here Thoreau encountered “wilderness,” that is the feral wilderness of the northern frontier as well as the wildernesses of his imagination. One is struck at the many different formulations of the meanings of wilderness arrived at by Thoreau, a variation made more apparent in a work that consisted of journalistic pieces written and published at various times over a number of years. For instance, the conclusion of “Chesuncook,” Thoreau’s account of his second journey in September 1853, leaves us with a rejection of wilderness set upon the return to the countryside:

It was a relief to get back to our smooth, but still varied landscape [in Concord]. . . . Perhaps our own woods and fields—the best wooded towns . . . with the primitive swamps scattered here and there in their midst, but not prevailing over them, are the perfection of parks and groves, gardens, arbors, paths, vistas, and landscapes. They are the natural consequence of what art and refinement we as a people have—the common which every village possesses, its true paradise in comparison with which all the elaborately and willfully wealth-constructed parks and gardens are paltry imitations. (155-156)

Here nature is valued for contributing to culture; the landscape of the countryside suggests the inter-play of nature and culture in which art learns from but cannot displace life, while the responsibility of human beings is for sustaining that interplay: very much a Georgic pastoral idea. By contrast, there is the famous example of ecocritical analysis by Max Oelschlaeger (1991):

the famous hike up Mt. Ktaadn during Thoreau's first trip. There Thoreau encounters a nonhuman nature, one stripped of the reassuring associations that underlay Pastoral: "this was the Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden . . . Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific . . ." (Thoreau, 70). This central passage provides a model for how the physicality of wilderness is turned into an imaginative space that challenges established ethical assumptions, especially in regard to the dominion of humankind over other life forms. Here, Oelschlaeger argues, is the real meaning of wilderness: the world without Man, even without humankind: "As an Emersonian transcendentalist armed with conventional categories and comfortable conclusions, Thoreau had died on Ktaadn's ridge, and he verged on achieving a primordial, if threatening, relation to the universe" (1991: 147).

I think it's worth pointing out that when we speak of wilderness we are speaking of a space—defined against or certainly outside of conventional social and cultural spaces—whether we call them settings, environments, or landscapes. One strong tendency in ecocriticism, an early response to the critiques of new historicism which associated wilderness with Amerindian removal, among other things, was to minimize the importance of wilderness as space and to substitute the idea of the wildness or the "practice of the wild" (Snyder, 1990). Wildness cuts across the culture/nature divide—an attempt to restore faith in the creative powers of culture. This was a mistake because it has the effect of removing culture from historical time, whereas wilderness as an actually existing space is created in time and has the potential of re-connecting us to history.

In *The Maine Woods* Thoreau goes looking for a picturesque wilderness, though he comments that his audio and visual senses remain mostly unsatisfied, and finds a sublime wilderness instead. The top of Katahdin might be interpreted as sublime, though Thoreau takes it beyond an aesthetic and into the realm of metaphysics: perhaps we humans don't belong here? It seems to me that there are three wildernesses in Maine for Thoreau. There's the occasional picturesque wilderness landscape with its Arcadian associations one finds along the trout stream where Thoreau's party makes camp before mounting their final thrust to the top of Ktaadn (Luccarelli 2007); there's the primordial wilderness glimpsed on the summit with its sublime undertones, described by Oelschlaeger, that has no place for human presence, except as a distant observer; and there is a third wilderness as social constructed space which I've dubbed the "feral wilderness"—what we

might call the lumbers' Maine gone to seed, a wilderness that roots itself into the discarded space of the lumber companies. What makes the work of Thoreau and nature writers suggestive sources for cultural criticism is precisely this capacity to entertain multiple definitions/descriptions of non-human spaces, to entertain a picturesque pastoral while telling us about the real spaces that they find.

Inland Maine is not for the most part picturesque, an observation which Thoreau is quick to make, and it is far removed visually from the idyllic wilderness of the sublimely picturesque Sierra mountains in California. The Maine Woods is a vast endless tract of sandy soil forest land that had been picked over and utilized for logging. What Thoreau encountered time and time again might be referred to as discarded landscapes, where the infrastructure—especially dams, logging roads and camps—remained often in a state of disuse and decay. The woods were recovering after the first assault by the timber industry, which at that time found only the stately white pine worth the effort of cutting and removing. Much of the value of wilderness is found in these abandoned landscapes where the traces of human use remain. One meaning of “wilderness” then is a place discarded by industrial man whose value resides in its *opposition* to the reigning geography of economic value. The creation of marginal spaces given over to a single specialized economic function along the so-called “frontier” of settlement was, at the time, the most significant development in the creation of what Lefebvre (1974; 1991) calls “abstract space”: or that quality of a networked capitalist market to reduce real spaces to simple functions that can be expressed in terms of ultimate monetary value. Following Lefebvre I suggest that the physical, imaginary and social aspects of space when read in relation to one another means that space takes on “a sort of reality of its own” (26), that space is essentially produced but that its production does not entail the loss of its physical reality nor of the imaginative avenues necessary to its understanding. It is this complex interplay of space that underlies the importance of environs—our surroundings. In light of the production of space, a process well underway by the time Thoreau undertook his journeys into Maine, finding value in the wilderness spaces that have been discarded, is an act of imaginative opening and resistance. In this way, one can posit a relation among social space, cultural space and imaginative space.

Abbey, the Southwest and the Geo-History

Thoreau's feral wilderness was picked up—in effect—by the most important nature writer of the 1960s and 1970s, Edward Abbey, whose subject matter—the territory often referred to as “the wastelands,” the abandoned mining territories of the American Southwest—he describes in all its harsh immediacy in *Desert Solitaire* (1968; 1971). In relation to the social world, the wilderness Abbey describes was doubly feral—discarded as in the sense suggested by Thoreau in interior Maine, and ignored—a landscape outside the favored sublime paradigm of mountain majesty or the middle landscape of lush and verdant greenery. Abbey's great achievement in *Desert Solitaire* was to turn these unconventional aesthetics into a marvelous pastoral, an exultation of the wilderness against the corruptions of late industrial American life—and as it so happens against what he imprecisely referred to in his book as the “growth economy.” And in fact there was something to the phrase—it was descriptive of a process whereby the agents of economic and urban development were turning land that had been widely considered as wasteland—overlooked and ignored—into a commodity for urban development. In the 1930s it came to be widely understood that a new urban future for the southwest was possible if its riparian resources could be exploited: the building of the Boulder dam and the associated postwar development of the city of Las Vegas—not to speak of a similar development of water resources that made the growth of Los Angeles possible—became a model for the urban development of the southwest. Abbey associated this with the threat posed by “industrial tourism” and understood that the shift in the aesthetics of space had become essential to the economic development—which he opposed as unnecessary and illogical for the desert.

There is no lack of water here unless you try to establish a city where no city should be. . . . The Developers, of course—the politicians, businessmen, bankers, administrators, engineers—they see . . . a desperate water shortage . . . They propose schemes of conspiring proportions for diverting water by the damful . . . What for?: “In anticipation of future needs, in order to provide for the continued industrial and population growth of the Southwest.” And in such an answer we see that it's only the old numbers game again, the monomania of the small and very simple minds in the grip of an obsession. They cannot see that growth for the sake of growth is a cancerous madness, that Phoenix and Albuquerque will not be better cities to live in when their populations are doubled again and again. They would never understand that an economic system which can only expand or expire must be false to all that is human. (145)

Abbey puts this in normative terms, but the critique of 'growth at any cost' was fundamentally sound for the economy of his time.

Contextualizing Abbey: the Social Historical Production of Space, and the Political Imagination

As second-wave ecocriticism moved toward realism in an attempt to account for the ecological and social aspects of dwellers on the land, it followed in the footsteps of new writers on nature and landscape such as Rebecca Solnit. In her widely touted book, *Savage Dreams* (1994), Solnit is committed to political activism in the interest of the inhabitants of the southwest (Amerindians in particular) for whom she wishes to speak while, at the same time, struggling to deal with her own attraction to the landscape. She tells us that her aesthetic originates in the sublime (44) of which she really doesn't approve, though in her view a fragmentary sublime is far more defensible than Pastoral which she takes as a fully developed ideological structure:

... the idea of an independent nature was crucial to John Muir, was the premise of establishing the national parks and the conservation movement. It has grown up and broadened its horizons into something less concerned with putting picture-frame fences around the exceptional places than with recognizing the interconnection of all things, the world as an interdependent network of systems rather than a compendium of scenes of varying quality. In recent times it has become hard to regard places and species as neatly set apart from culture: ... but if we have to give up this story of virgin wilderness at end, the end Rachel Carson describes as chemical incursions into every corner of the globe, then it may hearten us to give it up at the beginning too. By giving it up we can lay to rest some of the misanthropy of old-fashioned conservationists and recognize that culture does not necessarily destroy nature, and that the ravages of those in a hurry are not the only pattern in the book. (308)

This formulation bears some thought, particularly in light of the critical emphasis of second-wave ecocriticism: the idea that the critical social dimension of environment consists of super-geographic "interconnecting systems" that work against place specificity, making the re-imagining of place impossible—an unrealizable dream or a dangerous utopianism. We should find value instead in existing structures, it is argued. Perhaps this explains why second-wave ecocriticism chooses no longer to distinguish between "natural and built environments" and insists on "taking urban and degraded landscapes just as seriously as 'natural' landscapes" (Buell 2005, 22).

The blending of social justice, ecological concern and a skeptical hermeneutics makes for a sophisticated environmentalism. It certainly has done much to address the contradictions of Pastoral, but it comes at a price: the loss of a critical edge; the capacity to analyze much less challenge the organization of space, just at a time when that structure is changing once again on behalf of the changing structure of global economic power. Second-wave ecocriticism is descriptively sophisticated in understanding the loss of distinct boundaries between the human and the natural, between space and place, between the city and the wilderness—without being imaginative enough to consider why this is happening or what the response to this condition could be or might be. Old forms are crumbling, but why? What new forms might take their place? I shouldn't hold ecocriticism to such a standard, but I've been tempted to do so by its own gesturing toward the sufficiency of its self-corrections and its search for theoretical completeness and self-sufficiency.

Abbey's text doesn't and can't answer such questions, but then I don't think the text implies completeness, a device we get in a second-wave text through the device the postmodern reflexive distancing. Abbey tries to carve out genuine places—a city (Hoboken, N.J.) and a backcountry around Moab, Utah—without making them into clichés. The first principle is that genuine places, though distinct, have an imaginative relation to one another: there is city and there is backcountry in *Desert Solitaire*, and they are distinct but imaginatively linked (Bigell 2007). The second principle is that if these places are not to be shallow idealizations, then they have to emerge out of, but not be reduced to, the real processes by which space is shaped. This is what I think Abbey does, more or less successfully. Ecoliterature can help frame these places by giving testament to encounter. Abbey gives us distinct perspectives on space that reflect on the economic and technological processes by which the space has been shaped and perceived. If he were a photographer, Abbey would be changing lenses (and focal lengths) on his camera without advising us of that fact. There are imaginative readings of the desert—close up and at a distance, each comprising a focal length and a different point of view. The distant view shot with a wide-angle lens is that of the explorer taking his raft down the river: reveling in the openness (an abstraction) of space; and missing the desert as a place: his attraction is to the capacity to read over and into space. Here Abbey is re-living/re-perceiving for his reader American geographic history and its (closing) present. We can't really see the backcountry from this vantage point, but it is how we

got there. Descend down into the canyons, drop out of open space onto the micro scale and open up a new point of view, proto-ecological, where close observation (macro-photography) of each thing creates not only a generalized ethos but a particular understanding of life there in the desert: "life not crowded upon life as in other places but scattered abroad in sparseness and simplicity with a generous gift of space for each herb and bush and tree, each stem of grass . . ." (29); and then there's the standard view shot with 50mm lens that comes closest to replicating the way the human eye sees, with its pretense for an infinite, focused view forward and back (in time). Here is the basis for his self-declared "polemic" against the industrial scale tourism and urbanization. These different frames are also marked by the inconsistencies of American pastoral noted by Leo Marx to begin with: Abbey is the Jeffersonian hostile to industrialization, but he believes in the national park bureaucracy for whom he works.

Nonetheless, amazingly, Abbey's diatribe against industrial urbanization has a good deal of validity in both ecological and economic terms. What he's reacting to turns out to have been the final phase in the mid-20th century paradigm pursued by corporations and the state for the deterritorialization of capital from industrial core countries and its investment in the less developed world, a process that has fundamentally re-shaped the global economy in a period of 30 years. The first step in this process, a kind of trial run, occurred when capital was exported to the peripheral regions in the American south and west. We see that more clearly today because globalization has shown us capital de-territorialized and sent to float freely around the globe. Early in the globalization discourse, deterritorialization was pictured as a kind of one-way ticket to globality—both an economic regime and a state of mind where capital would circulate freely around the world, erasing boundaries and perhaps erasing the State itself. Neil Brenner in his article "Globalization and Reterritorialization" (1999) offers a useful corrective by arguing that deterritorialization of the last third of the 20th century is part of a cycle of alternate geographic modes of fixity and mobility.

It is an old story which has led to the repeated creation of feral landscapes as capital is withdrawn from deprived areas, and re-invested in areas where development on new vast scales, and often enabled by the national state, ensured greater productivity and higher profitability. Of course this was measured in accordance with an economic growth machine requiring ever greater use of natural inputs (resources). In the Southwest this means water, but also electricity, of course. The literary critic Van Wyck Brooks

writing in the 1910s (1934) put his finger on how quickly the geography of value is subject to shifting realities. He noticed an ironic feature of the American cultural landscape—its age. One gets a sense, Brooks tells us, of a very young country that is nonetheless completely worn out—used up and abandoned. In no other country are regions so thoroughly and quickly discarded as the dynamic economy moves on to develop new resources and new technologies. This affects cities as well as rural regions but in our context it's interesting to note that abandoned regions become, in the imagination of an Edward Abbey, a wilderness of deep personal and cultural significance. Abbey wrote in a time of great urban expansion; we are now witness to the contraction of cities, the abandonment of houses and the requisite shifting in the structure of space: new feral wildernesses and new opportunities for reconstruction are being created now.

The on-going cycle of de- and re-territorialization of capital in the “production of space” (Lefebvre 1974; 1991) or the creation of the ‘geography of (economic) value’ (Smith 1992) provides a standpoint from which to re-examine the political and imaginative value of writing on wilderness in the 1960s. Vast investment in the periphery represented the climax of industrial strategies begun under the New Deal in the 1930s. This produced a geography that favored simplification, differentiation and dispersion on a scale and to a degree that made old *laissez-faire* industrial capitalism look quaint. The result was the creation of cities spread out over enormous spaces fueled by the spread of the automobile technological complex into what had been bypassed regions in the United States. In addition to the automobile industry, this process of industrial dispersal was made possible by a new technological complex that de-linked production from existing concentrations of population. It was called “neotechnics” by Lewis Mumford (1934).

Mumford was keenly interested in landscape and (following Ruskin) in the relation between landscape forms and social organization. In his 1934 book, *Technics and Civilization* Mumford argued that any technology should be seen as a part of a system or technological complex in which certain signature machines and sources of energy are fundamental. A technological complex is an expression of social organization and an outgrowth of those social forms. The complex also necessitates the re-shaping of landscape. This is what creates the regime's geography of value. A shift from one technological complex to another requires the development of a new geography of value and hence the carving out of new spaces, places, structures, systems (such as networks) as well as the abandonment or conversion

of existing structures, spaces and systems. Mumford periodized the development of technology from the Middle Ages in three main eras: "Eotechnics"—where the harnessing of wind and water power developed during the Middle Ages were the key technologies; "Paleotechnics" which was based on steam power produced by the burning of coal and became the driving force of the industrial era technologies; "Neotechnics" which was emerging into its own when Mumford wrote *Technics*, a period when electricity was the favored mode of power transmission and hydro-electric dams were one of the era's signature technologies. That era was welcomed by Mumford as a necessary condition to overcome the bleak industrial cities and dirty power sources of the industrial "paleotechnic" era; neotechnics would give rise to a regime of industrial and urban decentralization linked to multiple "clean" power sources. These new sources would make possible the "colonization" of previously inaccessible areas (Mumford 222); he might have mentioned the American Southwest. He called for "regionalism"—a new kind of city region which combines the virtues of the classic and Renaissance city of "many-sided potentialities" (Mumford 256) with landscape preservation that provides space for "organic life." The city gets a wider setting that makes possible to draw on the environmental imagination. The neo-technic landscape was a concept of organic modernism that over-stated the symbiotic relationship between mind and nature, the very principle upon which Bateson had founded his work. Consequently Mumford was overly optimistic about the "neotechnical" transformation, but his judgment was absolutely accurate about the relation between the formation of space and shifts in technological strategies of different economic regimes. This is a process that we continue to undergo that invites interventions of various kinds.

Abbey found his place in life, not on the Jeffersonian farm of his father in Pennsylvania, but in the opportunities created by the expansion of the neo-technical regime. He attended the University of New Mexico and lived in Albuquerque (Bigell 2007). As a pastoral *Desert Solitaire* doesn't acknowledge his position of dependence on the very regime he criticizes, nor does he unravel the utopian modernist ideology that lies beneath the failed dam-and-power (or "neotechnical") regime of the Southwest. But Abbey does reflect, even through his pastoral frame, on the interdependence of places—that is on the need to define places properly, to think of cities and wildernesses (in his dynamic scale). He intuits that neo-technics has created an unsustainable non-city, or what Jane Jacobs calls an "artificial city" (1984).

Abbey's critique of urban growth was totalizing, but read in the context of spatial development of the United States, he was correct about its complete unsustainability. Unsustainability isn't a moral judgment. It means that environmental conditions are being created that makes capital-fixing strategies, necessary to create ecological stability, very difficult. Abbey provided a pastoral that hit hard at the underlying abuse of landscape, justifying Buell's comment that the "toxic discourse" of the contemporary environmental justice movement originates in "pastoral outrage" at environmental destruction (2005: 15). *Desert Solitaire* can be read productively in line with an enduring tension between wilderness and civilization (or biocentrism and anthropocentrism) (Scheese, 2002: 113) or as an example of pastoral or "outback nationalism" (Buell, 2005: 16), but these culturalist readings will still fail to contextualize Abbey's book in terms of the production of space. The contradictions in Abbey are the same contradictions one finds in 19th-century pastoral: Abbey the white male explorer who wishes to hold on to a discovered wilderness for himself and like-minded (male) bushwhackers who in one way or another are freed from sustaining a living on the landscape they explore and whose advocacy seems more appropriate for the land itself than the people who reside there. These contradictions don't detract from the value of Abbey's book; they are part and parcel of the contradictions that give rise to pastoral.

The politics that generated the national State's harnessing of neotechnics did not to emulate Mumford's vision of balanced city-regions. It was a missed opportunity that resulted instead in what Zygmunt Bauman calls "non-places"—supposedly urban, e.g. "ostensibly public," places of private production that nonetheless manage to become "emphatically non-civil sites: they discourage the thought of settling in, making colonization or domestication of the space all but impossible" (2000: 102). Witness the new cities of the Southwest, as in Las Vegas. The mid 20th-century reclamation of "wilderness" as imaginary space tied to a real physical place and to a politics of opposition should be read in the broader context of this production of space. What Abbey found was a "wilderness" of a different kind: a physical space that helped generate a new imaginary (certainly not unique, clearly rooted in the pastoral tradition, but new and related to its time) that managed to comment on and critique the artificial city for its negation of landscape and culture and to find in the wilderness a residual value and a margin upon which to stand.

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