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Nativity, Domesticity, and Exile in Edward Abbey’s “One True Home”

TOM LYNCH

Nature is not a place to visit—it is home. . . .
—Gary Snyder, “The Etiquette of Freedom”

BLOOMSBURY: You aren’t worried about what academic people might do to your work?
ABBEEY: No. I don’t think about it. Let them do their work. I’ll do mine.
—in Resist Much, Obey Little: Some Notes on Edward Abbey

Albuquerque, April 12, 1956: Today I became a father. Eight pounds twelve ounces and his name, it is called—Joshua Nathaneal Abbey.
—Abbey, Confessions of a Barbarian

On April first, 1956, only a few days prior to recording in his journal the birth of his son, Edward Abbey began the first of three seasons as a ranger in Arches National Monument. He immortalized this sojourn in the influential classic of nature writing Desert Solitaire, a work whose very title suggests that his experience of the desert was one essentially aloof from familial or other ties. As Abbey reveled in his desert solitude, his wife, Rita, and new son, Joshua, were summering in Hoboken. During subsequent years his wife and son visited periodically with him, but never for extended periods, and their presence at Arches is never portrayed in the book. What is intriguing about this chronology is not so much that Abbey would leave wife and newborn for the desert. Perhaps as a struggling writer he
simply needed the work. Evading motives in the “Author’s Introduction” to Desert Solitaire, he demurs that “Why I went there no longer matters” (Abbey 1971, ix); and the impulse for such a move was no doubt complex. But what strikes me as suggestive is that in this semi-autobiographical account of his time at Arches, Edward Abbey would make only passing and derisive mention of his wife, and none at all of the new son he so proudly announces in the privacy of his journal.

Such observations are not merely biographical trivia, for the absence of family from Desert Solitaire is, I think, essential to Abbey’s conception of the value of his experience of “a season in the wilderness,” as the book is subtitled. His job, he informs us, requires him to live and work at a “one-man station some twenty miles back in the interior, on my own. The way I wanted it” (1971, 2). His stance here seems well sanctioned by the tradition of literary natural history composition of which he is an heir (Thoreau’s removal to Walden Pond, though often misconstrued as more antisocial than it was, serves as a paradigm), and in turn Abbey’s solitary experience has influenced the way others conceptualize their relationship to the land.

Paradoxically, the opening of Desert Solitaire invokes the concept of “home.” “This is the most beautiful place on earth,” Abbey exults. “There are many such places. Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary” (1971, 1). And he shortly proclaims the Arches region to be “Abbey’s country” (1971, 4), so he accepts a considerable responsibility for distinguishing his in-placed vision from that of the tourists he tends to revile. “Home” is a significant term in eco-critical discourse. It implies a particularly intimate, enduring, and protective relationship with an area of the natural world. According to the school of deep ecology known as bioregionalism, the healing of the human relationship with nature will best be served if people learn to become true inhabitants of—at home in—their local environment rather than merely tourists or sojourners passing through it. Gary Snyder explains that the bioregional vision “prepares us to begin to be at home in this landscape. There are tens of millions of people in North America who were physically born here but who are not actually living here intellectually, imaginatively, or morally” (1990, 40).

In determining the degree to which a writer teaches us to be at home in a particular environment, a useful—though by no means foolproof—method would be to contrast his or her work with the work
of writers who have inhabited the region for an extended period of time. In the American Southwest about which Edward Abbey writes, no one has lived longer than the Native Americans, whose tenure extends back at least 12,000 years according to archaeologists, and to the primordial time of Emergence according to native traditions.

It is not necessary, of course, that the vision of a newcomer to the Southwest, such as Abbey, conform in all ways to the vision of the region's native people, but still one may gain useful insights into his perspective by contrasting it with theirs. Gary Paul Nabhan has suggested the phrase "cultural parallax" to refer to "the difference in views between those who are actively participating in the dynamics of the habitats within their home range and those who view those habitats as 'landscapes' from the outside" (1995, 91). By bringing within the same scope of vision these different cultural perspectives on a natural region, we may gain a more multidimensional view. Hence a comparison of Edward Abbey's vision of the Southwest with the perspective of some Native American writers from the region, such as Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna), Simon Ortiz (Acoma), and Luci Tapahonso (Navajo), will reveal to us aspects of Abbey's work that we might otherwise take for granted—especially if we share his cultural angle of vision—and might help us determine both the degree to which Abbey's perspective represents a new angle of observation of the western terrain and the degree to which he does or does not suggest a model for newcomers to become inhabitants of the desert Southwest. Our understanding of Abbey, and of the terrain he presents, can be enriched and challenged by contrasting him with Silko, Ortiz, and Tapahonso; unlike Abbey, they portray the natural world of the Colorado Plateau as a place imbued with the presence of family and ancestors, and their experience of those places is valuable precisely because of, rather than in spite of, that familial presence.

Culturally and personally, Abbey is a newcomer to the desert. He arrived first as a teenager in 1944, fell in love with the allure of the landscape, and returned after his war service, toting a suitcase stuffed with cultural predispositions that he was loath to jettison. In this light, Abbey's use of the term "home" is, I think, quite problematic, for though Abbey refers to the Arches country as his home, he continually exoticizes the desert Southwest, projecting it as a space antithetical to human comfort—especially by the standards of his Allegheny Mountain upbringing. Indeed, in his text to accompany Eliot Porter's photographs in *Appalachian Wilderness: The Great*
Smoky Mountains, published five years after Desert Solitaire, Abbey begins with "Going back to the Big Smokies always reminds me of coming home," and he goes on to describe his family's farm in rural Pennsylvania, consisting of a pleasant landscape where, "from the top of the hill you can look down into a long emerald valley where a slow stream meanders back and forth," and where one may take an "easy, pleasant sort of walk" down into that natal valley (1973, 9-10). His portrayal of the Southwest is quite different. For example, in his essay "The Great American Desert" he emphasizes the harshness and danger of what he calls "God's forsaken country": "You will find the flora here as venomous, hooked, barbed, thorny, prickly, needled, saw-toothed, hairy, stickered, mean, bitter, sharp, wiry and fierce as the animals" (1977b, 14). Scott Slovic has commented on this feature of Desert Solitaire, a book, he says, that "contains many examples of the harshness and unfamiliarity of the desert landscape. Even features of the desert which most of us would consider predictable and commonplace, such as the general lack of water, and the occasional, sudden, deadly, and nourishing return of water in the form of deluges and flash floods are presented hyperbolically, sometimes nightmarishly, so that they become defamiliarized, alien" (1992, 93-94).

It is precisely this exotic, alien sense of the desert Abbey loves—and one's home, by definition, can never be exotic. Abbey's landscape is treacherous and hence alluring to the adventurous and macho spirit. Slovic proposes that

unlike Wendell Berry who suggests that through careful "watchfulness" it is possible to "belong" to a particular piece of land, and unlike [Barry] Lopez who asserts that a receptive, "tolerant" approach even to a wholly exotic landscape makes "intimacy" possible, Abbey seems to discredit the very idea of anyone ever feeling calm and comfortable in the desert. . . . He realizes that prolonged habitation in such country is for spadefoot toads and coyotes, not for human beings. (Slovic 1992, 99)

Abbey values the desert for its ability to filter out the family matrix and liberate him as an individual. The more efficiently a natural place serves as such a filter, the more highly he values it, leading, perhaps, to his claim that "in the American Southwest only the wilderness is worth saving" (1977b, 17). To Abbey, the desert wilderness, the "one true home," is a defamiliarized landscape devoid of familial ties.
Nativity, Domesticity, and Exile

A particularly well known example of this occurs in Desert Solitaire when Abbey, along with friend Ralph Newcomb, embarks on a raft trip down the Colorado River through Glen Canyon shortly before the completion of Glen Canyon Dam. This trip was begun on June 25, 1959, less than a month after the birth of his second son, Aaron Paul Abbey (1994, 148), an event that, although never explicitly mentioned in the text, perhaps accounts for some of the images in the following passage. Disembarking from Hite’s Ferry landing, Abbey celebrates his freedom: “Cutting the bloody cord, that’s what we feel, the delirious exhilaration of independence, a rebirth backward in time and into primeval liberty, into freedom in the most simple, literal, primitive meaning of the word... My God! I’m thinking, what incredible shit we put up with most of our lives—the domestic routine (same old wife every night), the stupid and useless and degrading jobs...” (1971, 177). Abbey portrays this journey into the natural world as an escape from domestic responsibility, a severing of the bloody cord binding him to home and wife.¹

While I wish to make the case that such a relationship to the environment contrasts markedly to the sort of relationship espoused by Silko, Ortiz, and Tapahonso, I am wary of drawing too sharp a contrast between Abbey and these Native American authors; as Arnold Krupat (1992) warns, the Manichean approach to simplistic interethnic comparisons suffers from the terminal flaws of overgeneralization and essentialism. Abbey’s perspective, though different, is not the polar opposite of that of his Native American neighbors. In particular, he, Silko, and Ortiz all express outrage at the destruction of the natural environment. In her apocalyptic novel Almanac of the Dead, Silko, no doubt influenced by Abbey’s similar fantasy, even envisions the annihilation of Glen Canyon Dam at the hands of ecosaboteurs. Ortiz consistently rages against the desecrations perpetrated by the uranium industry, most notably in his “Fight Back, For the Sake of the Land, For the Sake of the People.” And certainly uranium mining and the development of the atomic bomb function as the epitome of evil in Silko’s Ceremony. Like many Navajo families, Luci Tapahonso’s was involved in and suffered health effects from uranium mining, though protest against the industry is not a prominent feature of her work. Curiously, Abbey’s protests against the atomic industry and nuclear bomb testing are relatively slight, especially notable given that, as pointed out by SueEllen Campbell in this
volume, fallout from the Nevada test site was settling on Arches Na-
tional Monument throughout Abbey’s stay there in the mid-1950s. But in terms of speaking against ecological outrages, Silko, Ortiz, and Abbey share a similar voice.2

Nevertheless—with these caveats noted—key distinctions do exist between the way Abbey and his Native American neighbors perceive their relationships to their common terrain. Throughout their work, Silko, Ortiz, and Tapahonso portray the natural world as a domestic place, a home full of family and friends. As generalized by Gregory Cajete, from Santa Clara Pueblo, “American Indians symbolically rec-
ognized their relationship to plants, animals, stones, trees, mountains, rivers, lakes, streams, and a host of other living entities. Through seeking, making, sharing, and celebrating these natural relationships, they came to perceive themselves as living in a sea of relationships” (1994, 74). This philosophical position linking humans to nature is underscored by the fact that among the Laguna, for example, “kin-
ship terms are extended to express not only social relationships be-
tween people but also ritual relationships between individuals and
and groups and various aspects of nature” (Eggan 1950, 262). Such ex-
tension of kinship to the natural world extends the domestic sphere outward from hearth to cosmos, or rather, perhaps, incorporates hu-
mans as heirs of a cosmic lineage. Silko elaborates on this: “Human
identity is linked with all the elements of Creation through the clan: you might belong to the Sun Clan or the Lizard Clan or the Corn Clan”; and she defines “clan” in a way to suggest that such a rela-
tionship is rooted in a family’s origin: “Clan—A Social unit composed of families sharing common ancestors who trace their lineage back to the Emergence where their ancestors allied themselves with certain plants or animals or elements” (1987, 84–85). In other words, for
Silko, humans connect to nature through, rather than severed from, the umbilicus of family.

This attitude of relationship pervades the work of Southwest na-
tive writers. For example, in his poem “We Have Been Told Many Things but We Know This to Be True,” Simon Ortiz invokes the idea of family to express his connection to the land: “The land. The
People. / They are in relation to each other. / We are in a family with
each other” (1992, 324). This familial bond is not just an abstract, idealistic claim but informs much of Ortiz’s work. Most of Ortiz’s poems about his interaction with nature in the Four Corners area in-
clude the presence of his children, such as the following excerpt from
“Four Poems for a Child Son,” subtitled, “It Was the Third Day, July 12, 1971”:

Hitchhiking on the way to Colorado,
I heard your voice, “Look, Dad . . .”
A hawk
sweeping its wings
clear
through the whole sky
the blue
the slow wind
fresh with the smell of summer alfalfa
at the foot of the Jemez Mountains.

(Ortiz 1992, 46)

In this poem it is his son, Raho, who directs Ortiz’s attention to the natural world.

Similarly, when recounting the birth of his daughter, Rainy Dawn, in “To Insure Survival,” he relates her both to the Earth and to his ancestors’ emergence from it:

You come forth
the color of a stone cliff
at dawn,
changing colors,
blue to red
to all the colors of the earth.

(Ortiz 1994, 48)

Experiencing the nativity of his daughter, Simon Ortiz reestablishes his own physical and mythological bond to his natal terrain. For Abbey, the birth of his children is unrelated to how he chooses to portray his connection to nature, but Ortiz illustrates how the birth of his daughter vitally renews his own sense of connection to the land.

Like Ortiz, Silko and Tapahonso portray the Southwest as a habitat imbued with their families’ presence. In Storyteller, Silko explains how

On Sundays Grandpa Hank liked to go driving.
Usually we went to Los Lunas
because Grandma Lillie had relatives there. We took the old winding road that follows the San José river until it meets the Rio Puerco. Not far from the junction of the rivers is a high prominent mesa of dark volcanic rock. On one of these Sunday drives long ago Grandpa told us two of his grand-uncles had died there killed by the Apaches who stole their sheep. I remember looking very hard out the window of the car at the great dark mesa and the rolling plains below it. (Silko 1981, 246)

This concept of the terrain as a place suffused with family stories is shared by Tapahonso. In a context similar to Silko's, she recalls a family trip to Arizona. As the car passed the base of a mesa near Shiprock, her cousin interrupted the children's play with the remark, "'See those rocks at the bottom?" The children, Tapahonso continues, recognizing this reference to terrain as the opening of a story, "stopped playing and moved around her to listen." Her cousin then relates a tale about the death of an infant girl many years before. The infant's family, traveling through the area, buried her at the base of the mesa beneath those rocks. Tapahonso concludes her tale with the observation that "this land that may seem arid and forlorn to the newcomer is full of stories which hold the spirits of the people, those who live here today and those who lived centuries and other worlds ago. The nondescript rocks are not that at all, but rather a lasting and loving tribute to the death of a baby and the continuing memory of her family" (1993, 5–6).

While Tapahonso identifies with the land through the historical tales, Abbey, a relative newcomer, prefers unstoried landscapes. The culmination of Desert Solitaire is Abbey's descent with Bob Waterman into the Maze, a remote Utah canyonscape he refers to as "terra incognita." This designation suggests a direct connection to early European explorers and their discovery of allegedly unexplored and unnamed terrain. At the adventure's outset Abbey remarks, hoping to be the original intruders into that terrain, that he and Waterman will be "the first so far as we know," to enter the Maze, "since," he must caution, "the Indians left seven centuries before—if they were here at all" (1971, 289).

He soon discovers to his disappointment, however, that those
pesky Indians had indeed preceded him: “We decide it best to climb out of The Maze before dark and save further exploration for tomorrow. We go back to the pool and the base of the ridge. On the way Waterman points out to me the petroglyph of a snake which I had missed. The Indians had been here. But nobody else, so far as we can tell” (1971, 293). The “but nobody else” here is telling; nobody else, it seems, who really counts. This dismissal of the Indian occupation is underscored when, upon departing, Waterman writes triumphantly in a BLM logbook, “First descent into The Maze.” Reading the entry, Abbey reminds himself that they “cannot be absolutely certain of this” (1971, 295), but the petroglyph they have just seen should have made them certain. Waterman’s inscription in the BLM log serves to obscure in historical consciousness the Indian inscription of the snake petroglyph.

For Abbey the Southwest may be a place with a history, but it is a history of a different people, and a history thus unnecessary to be taken wholly into account. In order to valorize their own experience as discoverers of virginal territory, Abbey and Waterman must, like their exploring forefathers, minimize the significance of the Indian presence. For, in such a worldview, it is much more thrilling to pursue new territory than to habitually reenter the same old habitat. Familiarity, or familiality, does indeed breed contempt. Rather than becoming cognizant of the stories expressed by his terra incognita—stories encrypted in the snake petroglyph—Abbey, complicit with Waterman, seeks to mute the voices in the land around him.

Silko responds quite differently to the petroglyphs she encounters. For example, after visiting Slim Man Canyon on the Navajo Reservation, she writes the following poem:

Slim Man Canyon

early summer Navajo Nation, 1972 for John

700 years ago

people were living here
water was running gently
and the sun was warm
on pumpkin flowers.

It was 700 years ago
deep in this canyon
with sandstone rising high above
The rock the silence tall sky and flowing water
sunshine through cottonwood leaves
the willow smell in the wind

700 years.

The rhythm
the horses feet moving strong through
white deep sand.

Where I come from is like this
the warmth, the fragrance, the silence.
Blue sky and rainclouds in the distance
we ride together

text

past cliffs with stories and songs
painted on rock.

700 years ago.
(Silko 1979, 208)

Even away from Laguna, Silko hears the petroglyphs speak to her, creating a domestic serenity where people live among pumpkin gardens and compose stories and songs upon the rocks. Rather than annoy her with their reminder that she is not the first to enter this canyon, the petroglyphs comfort her with that message; they place her as a native rather than as a visitor to canyon country.

In explaining his preference for the desert over other environments, Abbey proposes that, unlike other landscapes, “the desert says nothing. Completely passive, acted upon but never acting, the desert lies there like the bare skeleton of Being, spare, sparse, austere, utterly worthless, inviting not love but contemplation.” And, he continues, “there is something about the desert that the human sensibility cannot assimilate or has not so far been able to assimilate. Perhaps that is why it has scarcely been approached in poetry or fiction, music or painting. . . . Even after years of intimate contact and search this quality of strangeness in the desert remains undiminished” (1971, 270, 272). Tapahonso’s poem “The Motion of Songs Rising,” however, suggests a different understanding of the desert.

The October night is warm and clear.
We are standing on a small hill and in all directions,
around us, the flat land listens to the songs rising.
In Tapahonso’s Southwest, the land gives forth corn for the health of the people, and the people breathe forth the dawn air; the people and their land seamlessly assimilate.

For Abbey, wilderness is the most desirable of natural environments, but not so much because it constitutes a more or less intact ecosystem where nature’s other creatures can live autonomous lives, but because it is a place where the bloody cord that binds him to so-
ciety is most easily broken. Though Abbey provides various justifications for the preservation of wilderness, the one he most passionately advocates is that wilderness is necessary for individualistic freedom. This linking of ecologically healthy wilderness and personal freedom contradicts the conclusions of environmental historian Donald Worster, who finds that groups that have managed to successfully live in a place for extended periods of time and to minimize their destruction of the biota around them have had one dominant characteristic:

They have made rules, and many of them, rules based on intimate local experience, to govern their behavior. They have not tried to "live free" of nature or of the group; nor have they resented restraints on individual initiative or left it to each individual to decide completely how to behave. On the contrary, they have accepted many kinds of limits on themselves and enforced them on one another. . . . having these rules and enforcing them vigorously seems to be a requirement for long-term ecological survival. (1995, 80–81)

Abbey, however, sees things differently. His opposition to the construction of Glen Canyon Dam and the formation of Lake Powell is primarily based on the fact that the free-flowing canyon river represents liberation, whereas the placid, impounded lake constitutes an environment under social control. He mocks the rules for Lake Powell: "PLAY SAFE, read the official signboards; SKI ONLY IN CLOCKWISE DIRECTION; LET'S ALL HAVE FUN TOGETHER! With regulations enforced by water cops in government uniforms" (1971, 174). For Abbey the great evil of Glen Canyon Dam is not so much that it has submerged a canyon as that it has constrained his freedom.

Prior to the dam's completion, however, cut loose on the Colorado River with his friend Newcomb to drift calmly through Glen Canyon, Abbey celebrates his yet remaining freedom. It is a freedom "to commit murder and get away with it scot-free," he declares, uncharitably eyeing his innocent friend (1971, 177). Newcomb is in no real danger, we presume, but the fact that Abbey's mind so quickly turns from celebrating his wilderness freedom to pondering a violation of his last remaining social bond is telling. In an essay titled "Freedom and Wilderness, Wilderness and Freedom" he argues for wilderness by proclaiming that "even the maddest murderer of the sweetest wife should get a chance for a run to the sanctuary of the
hills” (1977a, 229). This ideal of wilderness as a sanctuary for the desperado, for the murderer of domestic sweetness, is a recurring theme in his defense of wilderness because Abbey’s wilderness ideology is firmly rooted in the mythology of the frontier—of an individualistic anarchy and contempt for what are perceived to be artificial rules and a disdain for the presumed civilizing influence of women. As Ann Ronald has pointed out, Abbey’s persona in Desert Solitaire is a direct descendant of Shane and Lassiter. Like them, “Ed bears no apparent responsibilities other than the ones in the continuous present of Desert Solitaire. He frets more about wildlife and tourists than he does about wife and family” (1982, 68). Likewise Jack Burns’s re-incarnation as “the Lone Ranger” in The Monkey Wrench Gang reinforces the connection of his protagonists and his autobiographical persona to the traditional Western heroes who roam a mythic landscape dispensing extrajudicial justice against the wicked.

Such a vision is, in large degree, an adolescent fantasy. This is not surprising given the way Abbey first encountered the desert Southwest. In a story he has retold many times, Abbey first saw the desert standing on the California side of the Colorado River in Needles as a seventeen-year-old hitchhiking for a ride: “Across the river waited a land that filled me with strange excitement: crags and pinnacles of naked rock, the dark cores of ancient volcanoes, a vast and silent emptiness smoldering with heat, color, and indecipherable significance, above which floated a small number of pure, hard-edged clouds. For the first time I felt I was getting close to the West of my deepest imaginings—the place where the tangible and the mythical become the same” (1977c, 5). Several days later, from the open door of a boxcar, he watched the bright northern New Mexico landscape slide by, with its “queer foreign shapes of mesa and butte,” and responded to it as a space “full of a powerful, mysterious promise” (10–11). Abbey’s later attraction to wilderness can be seen as a nostalgia not just for a landscape in more pristine condition, but for the irresponsible and irrepressible life of a seventeen-year-old hitchhiker.

This suggestion that Abbey maintained essentially adolescent ideas about the desert may seem harsh, but it is unwittingly reinforced by the claim of Dave Petersen, editor of Confessions of a Barbarian, selections from Abbey’s journals:

When you read twenty-eight years of journals of a writer, you would expect... the gradual progression or development of a
**weltanschauung**, a worldview, plus a writing style. With Edward Abbey, it was full blown from the first page of the first journal. He was writing as eloquently then, he was thinking the things, saying the things then, that he was saying in the last journal entry before he died. . . . His worldview and in a large part his artistic talent were completely developed by the time he was age twenty-five. (Petersen 1993)

Unlike Abbey’s sense of wilderness as concomitant with freedom, Silko’s connection to the land, reinforcing Worster’s observations, is full of rules governing reciprocal obligation and mature responsibility. This sort of relationship is as exquisitely developed in *Ceremony* as in any other work of American literature. In *Ceremony*, Tayo’s healing comes about through his acceptance of intertwined familial, communal, natural, and supernatural responsibilities. During his discussion with the medicine man, Betonie, Tayo, resisting the prescribed cure,

wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things the white doctors had yelled at him—that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like “we” and “us.” But he had known the answer all along . . . medicine didn’t work that way, because the world didn’t work that way. His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything. (Silko 1977, 125–126)

Tayo’s cure includes, for example, fulfilling his promise to his Uncle Josiah to care for the lost cattle. And it is fulfillment of this responsibility, rather than escape from it, that leads him on his quests into the natural world.

Tayo’s activities in nurturing the Earth with the myth-woman Ts’ech Montaño, whom he encounters while pursuing and later tending Josiah’s cattle, provide evidence that his cure is well underway. For example, while with her he gathers pollen for ritual uses: “He found flowers that had no bees, and gathered yellow pollen gently with a small blue feather from Josiah’s pouch; he imitated the gentleness of the bees as they brushed their sticky-haired feet and bellies softly against the flowers” (1977, 220). Shortly thereafter he encounters a snake: “He knelt over the arching tracks the snake left in the sand and filled the delicate imprints with yellow pollen. As far as he
could see in all directions, the world was alive. He could feel the motion pushing out of the damp earth into the sunshine—the yellow spotted snake the first to emerge, carrying this message on his back to the people” (1977, 221). The snake brings to him a message of spring, and he reciprocates by honoring the snake with sacred pollen. Tayo gains healing by accepting ritualized adult responsibility in his engagement with nature.

While with Ts’eh, Tayo learns about his natural environment and his proper respectful attitude toward all of its beings: “He went with her to learn about the roots and plants she had gathered. When she found a place she got comfortable, spreading her blue shawl on the ground after she had cleared the area of pebbles and little sticks and made sure no ants were disturbed” (1977, 224). Silko’s attention to Ts’eh’s care for not disturbing the ants contrasts with Abbey’s attitude in a similar context in *Desert Solitaire*. Like Tayo, Abbey is engaged in learning the plants that grow in his vicinity. Returning to his trailer from this botanical excursion around Arches, Abbey relates how “On the way I pass a large anthill, the domed city of the harvester ants. Omnivorous red devils with a vicious bite, they have denuded the ground surrounding their hill, destroying everything green and living within a radius of ten feet. I cannot resist the impulse to shove my walking stick into the bowels of their hive and rowel things up. Don’t actually care for ants. Neurotic little pismires” (1971, 30).

Abbey sees the ants as vicious devils not so much because of their bite, or because they eat the surrounding vegetation, but because they are social insects, residents of a “domed city.” Anthills, he has complained, remind him “of New Jersey. Of California. Of Phoenix and Tucson” (1984, 46). Silko’s vision of harmonic engagement with nature, however, would never sanction such gratuitous destruction of other beings. In her description in *Ceremony* of a witch, presumably Emo, trouncing melons in a field, Silko emphasizes his evil by citing that, “He looked back, down the long row. Tiny black ants were scurrying over shattered melons; . . . He trampled the ants with his boots” (1977, 62).

For Abbey, the lure of the desert Southwest lies in its condition of absence; in its emptiness is its appeal. Scanning juniper and pinyon and prickly-pear covered mesas stretching to the horizon across the Colorado Plateau, Abbey revels in the fact that “there was nothing out there. Nothing at all. Nothing but the desert. Nothing but the silent world” (1977b, 22). Silko, Ortiz, or Tapahonso, however,
someone more at home in this terrain, would have seen an entirely different view: the plenitude of the pinyon nuts, a sacred hill or spring told about in old stories, the slope where a relative shot a particularly fat antelope. In short, a person at home would have seen not an empty landscape but a web of complex and historical intimacy, the sort of place that Silko recollects venturing forth into as a young girl: “I was never afraid. . . . I carried with me the feeling I’d acquired from listening to the old stories, that the land all around me was teeming with creatures that were related to human beings and to me. The stories had also left me with a feeling of familiarity and warmth for the mesas and hills and boulders where the incidents or actions in the stories had taken place” (in Turner 1989, 330–31). For Silko, stories evoke and are evoked by the terrain; tales and land are mutually arising and enriching, comforting in the familiarity their synergism generates. Such a perspective is apparent in Ceremony, as when Tayo is at Dripping Springs watching dragonflies and suddenly recognizes that “there were stories about the dragonflies too. He turned. Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them” (1977, 95). An empty space becomes a domestic place through the intercession of stories. It is precisely in the storied-ness of this world that its hominess consists.

Abbey’s emphasis on individualistic freedom pursued in an empty desert space might even be considered part of the witchery Tayo confronts in Ceremony. Tayo’s cure comes from fulfilling his domestic responsibilities, attuning himself to the stories in the landscape, and establishing a nurturing relationship with the natural world. In spite of his frequent invocations of “home,” however, Abbey persists in seeing nature in general, and wilderness in particular, as a place of exile, and the degree to which he does so suggests the degree to which he remains out of tune with the resonances of his terrain. Abbey’s philosophy leads him to decry the destruction of his wilderness and the freedom it represents even as he unwittingly abets that destruction by espousing an anarchic individualism that makes him deaf to the stories and songs imbedded in the landscape and to the ecologically responsible communalism such stories celebrate.

Abbey’s vision of the Southwest, in spite of an environmentalist inflection, remains firmly configured by the old paradigm of his ethnic Anglo-American experience: The West is, or at least should be, a place of escape—a place where a man can ride away, alone, into the
sunrise. But as Gregory Cajete suggests, “Indian people believed they had responsibilities to the land and all living things. These responsibilities were similar to those they had to each other” (1994, 83).


Notes
1. This antidomestic attitude can also be fruitfully considered in light of what Barbara Ehrenreich has called “a male revolt . . . against the breadwinner ethic,” which developed in the early 1950s (1983, 13). This revolt can most clearly be seen in the Beat movement, to which Abbey was attracted, but never a part: “In the Beat,” according to Ehrenreich, “two strands of male protest—one directed against the white-collar work world and the other against the suburbanized family life that work was supposed to support—come together into the first all-out critique of American consumer culture” (52). In January 1958, while living in Half Moon Bay, California, Abbey praised Ginsberg’s Howl—the anthem of the Beat movement—as “the best poem written in America by an American since—well, since Pearl Harbor. (So far as I know.) Yes, a beautifully shaggy little book. Wild and shaggy, and also highly accurate: ‘Moloch whose heart is a cannibal dynamo,’ etc. Very touching. My wife hates it, of course” (1994, 146).

2. And it is useful to remind ourselves that all Homo sapiens, regardless of our cultural differences, share many characteristics—though usually taken for granted—in our relationships with nature. Our common biology constrains the range of cultural variables. For example, we all see the world from a similar height through binocular vision and within the same narrow span of the electromagnetic spectrum. Likewise, biology dictates nutritional needs and what foods we are capable of eating; culture then prescribes acceptable diets within that range of possibilities. Contrasting our species’ relationship with nature with the relationship enacted by other species suggests that what we might see as major differences between cultures are relatively minor compared with our interspecies differences.

Works Cited


