

Dumping Grounds: Donald Trump, Edward Abbey and the Immigrant as Pollution

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Announcing his bid for the US presidency, Donald Trump caused outrage by claiming that undocumented migration from Mexico to the US showed that America had ‘become a dumping ground for everyone else’s problems’. Trump began his typically bombastic speech by declaring that the Mexican government was ‘sending people that have lots of problems ... they’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.’¹ However, Trump’s framing of undocumented migrants turning America in a ‘dumping ground’, whilst shocking, can be clearly situated within a persistent strain of rhetoric in mainstream American culture and media that uses imagery of pollution and toxic waste to depict Mexican immigration. In this essay, I want to show how such rhetoric and imagery survives in popular American culture and literature as part of a sublimated discourse that adopts and adapts the terminology, imagery and conventions of genres such as travel or nature writing in order to convey a message which implicitly frames the immigrant (and particularly the Hispanic immigrant into America) as a form of pollution. As a case study of this process, I will analyse some previously under-researched articles by American nature and travel writer, Edward Abbey.

Abbey (1927-1989) was a prolific novelist and essayist, whose articles appeared in a wide range of periodicals. Perhaps best known for his classic 1975 novel of eco-sabotage, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Abbey was a larger-than-life figure who railed against both multinational companies despoiling the wilderness and what he saw as an intrusive and often venal government. In recent years there has been a marked resurgence of interest in Abbey and his writing, as indicated by books such as Sean Prentiss’s *Finding Abbey: The Search for Edward Abbey and his Hidden Desert Grave* (2015), David Gessner’s *All the Wild That Remains: Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner and the American West* (2015) and a number of articles in outlets such as *Salon*, *Earth Island Journal*, *Orion Magazine* and *Counterpunch*. Indeed, it is safe to say that interest in Abbey’s legacy as a writer has never been higher.

This resurgence of interest in Abbey has posed the problem of how to defuse and de-toxify his well-known outbursts on immigrants and people of colour. Typically, this has been achieved by referring his reactionary outbursts to his love for the environment, a manoeuvre which involves some frankly unedifying ideological contortions in arguing that, firstly, Abbey’s xenophobia was an anomaly which did not affect his writing as a whole, and that, secondly and consequently, we should effectively overlook his xenophobia and celebrate his importance as an environmental icon for the progressive movement in America. For instance, Louis Proyect, writing in the alternative left newsletter *Counterpunch* (2015) takes on the task of trying to reconcile Abbey’s more problematic positions with a ‘Marxist vision of progress’. Typically, he

¹ ‘Full Text: Donald Trump Announces Presidential Bid’, *Washington Post* 16 June 2015.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>

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cites Abbey's infamous 1988 essay, 'Immigration and Liberal Taboos' which is, he admits, 'deplorable' with its heavily racialised and derogatory depiction of Mexican immigrants as prolifically fertile invaders who secure their claim to America by giving birth there. Astonishingly, though, Proyect seeks to apologise for such demonisation and excuse it by downplaying its importance in comparison with Abbey's status in the environmental movement, saying that, 'I would not hold this [i.e. his blatant racism and xenophobia] against Abbey. History will judge him as a prophet of life in balance with nature and not as an anti-immigrant zealot' (2015).² That someone who prides himself on being progressive feels able to wave away such appalling bigotry as merely a 'foible' (Proyect's term) by making vague references to Abbey's being 'in balance with nature' shows how effectively nature and travel writing can sometimes function as sublimated discourses that convey anti-immigrant rhetoric within a putatively acceptable discourse.

The argument of all such apologetics, though, is fatally flawed in its core assumption that Abbey's nature and travel writing can be separated from his xenophobia and racism. Indeed, these articles powerfully reinforced a xenophobic and racist image of the immigrant as pollution by employing long-established quasi-biological and quasi-ecological metaphors of purity and pollution in order to map cultural and ethnic prejudices on to an idealised landscape. Such discourse, I will argue, was disturbingly effective because, by projecting cultural ideals onto a romanticised landscape, it worked to turn a political and legal issue into an existential threat that brooks no compromise. In other words, it 'totalised' the immigration issue. By framing the immigrant as a form of pollution, an invasive species that posed a threat to a putatively 'pure' American landscape, Abbey's articles preserved and transmitted the oldest and crudest images of the immigrant as a quasi-biological threat to the environment and the nation.

In 'Contaminated Communities: The Metaphor of "Immigrant as Pollutant" in Media Representations of Immigration' (2008), J. David Cisneros surveys the literature on representations of immigrants in America and notes that the adoption of quasi-ecological and biological metaphors is a commonplace discourse in media depictions of the subject. Citing earlier studies on the rhetoric surrounding California's Proposition 187 that sought to limit undocumented immigrants' access to benefits, Cisneros comments on the rhetoric of pollution and infection that structured discussion of immigrants in terms of 'clusters' and 'contamination':

The 'civic' rhetoric emanating from government and mainstream media sources reinforced dominant assumptions about the danger of 'illegal' immigration by focusing on nativist, racist, and xenophobic justifications for immigration restriction. The discourse of the Proposition 187 campaign accomplished this characterization through metaphors of 'pollution,' 'infection,' and 'infestation.' These clusters created images of biological invasion or contamination that structured discourse about immigration and fuelled the Proposition 187 movement.³

² Louis Proyect, 'The Life, Loves, Wars and Foibles of Edward Abbey', *Counterpunch* 15 May 2015.

³ J. David Cisneros, 'Contaminated Communities: The Metaphor of "Immigrant as Pollutant" in Media Representations of Immigration', *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11.4. (2008) 571-2.

He also cites the work of Dorothy Nelkin and Mark Michaels which ‘identified in the public discourse about immigration a pervasive use of biological and eugenics metaphors that were used to portray immigrants as dangers to the ‘purity’ of American society and culture’ (572). Cisneros himself compares images of immigrants and immigration with media coverage of the toxic waste disaster at Love Canal. He notes that the visual framing of this type of threat of contamination through toxic waste seeping into water sources or through images of heaps of damaged toxic waste drums was echoed in a striking manner by ‘representations of immigrants on major cable news networks like Fox News and CNN [that] often portrayed undocumented immigrants through similar visual techniques, creating an impression that immigrants were collecting like piles of potentially dangerous waste or were approaching the viewer as mobile pollutants’ (579). The de-individualisation and dehumanisation of undocumented immigrants either by framing them as ‘clusters’ of ‘biological invasion or contamination’ or by framing them as ‘piles of potentially dangerous waste’ stoked atavistic fears of an amorphous foreign mass infiltrating and threatening the health of the native population.

Such discourse employs a technique of adopting quasi-biological or ecological metaphors in order to frame the discussion over immigration in terms of native versus non-native in such a way as to imply that the non-native poses an existential threat not only to the security but the culture, health and environment of the country. Leo Ralph Chavez has remarked on the way Mexican immigrants are framed as a biological threat because they are seen as ‘out of place’ and therefore effectively ‘pollution, threatening the purity of those in place – that is [of those] in their “proper” category’.⁴ In addition, the adoption of quasi-ecological rhetoric in discussing immigration enables a duality of discourse; the author can write about immigration using quasi-ecological or environmental discourse, but conversely can also write about environmental issues in a way that reinforces nativist assumptions and ideals. Jonah H. Peretti has shown that the framing of debates about which species are native and which are not, and are therefore considered invasive or toxic, reinforces the problematic assumption that nature is properly both static and pure and that anything not native is a form of pollution which should be removed.⁵ Ecology and landscape can therefore become metaphors which advance a nativist agenda by using a putatively environmental discourse of purity and pollution as a vehicle to reinforce anti-immigrant themes of native versus foreign, of that which belongs and is in harmony, and that which does not belong and therefore poses a supposed threat.

This conflation of pollution in an ecological sense with the far more established sense of pollution as the ‘Other’, the foreign and therefore out-of-place, is exemplified in Abbey’s article first published in 1984 under the title ‘The Rio Grande: All Vigor Spent’ in a *National Geographic* collection entitled *Great Rivers of the World*, and republished in 1988 under the title ‘Round River Rendezvous: The Rio Grande’ in the collection, *One Life at a Time, Please*. Superficially, the essay is an account of a visit to the polluted waters of the mouth of the Rio

⁴ Leo Ralph Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and Nation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008) 42.

⁵ H. Jonah Peretti, ‘Nativism and Nature: Rethinking Biological Invasion’, *Environmental Values*. 7.2. (1998) 183-192.

Grande on the Mexican-American border near Brownsville, Texas, and is interspersed with reminiscences of a recent hiking trip to the source of the Rio Grande high in the Rocky Mountains, Colorado.

But whilst Abbey's decision to write about the Rio Grande might be seen as entirely circumstantial, the selection should not be passed over too quickly, as at that time the river was the site of numerous American media reports on what was seen to be an ever-rising number of undocumented immigrants crossing the Rio Grande into America, often referred to by the derogatory slur of 'wetbacks'. *US News and World Report* issue of 7 March 1983 led with 'Invasion from Mexico: It Just Keeps Growing' with the cover showing a Mexican woman being carried across the Rio Grande on a man's shoulders. *Newsweek's* 25 June 1984 issue led with 'Closing the Door? The Angry Debate about Immigration: Crossing the Rio Grande' and similarly showed a Mexican woman being carried across water by a man.⁶

Alongside and reinforcing such hyperbolic stories depicting an invasion across the Rio Grande was a growing concern about the perceived disparity between declining fertility rates for white Americans and increasing Hispanic fertility, supplemented by immigration. Indeed, so prominent was the attention given to the issue that the 1980s were dubbed the 'Decade of the Hispanic' and mainstream media predicted European Americans could be a minority population in America as soon as the twenty-first century.⁷ Such reporting was tellingly often accompanied by imagery of pollution, justified by Malthusian theories of population growth as a driver of both pollution and environmental degradation.⁸ A particularly lurid cover of *Time* magazine for 6 August 1984, for instance, had the headline 'Mexico City: The Population Curse' and depicted a tightly packed crowd of Mexican people in the foreground.⁹ In the background, smokestacks belch out pollution that colours the entire cover a sooty golden brown, unobtrusively suggesting a link between Mexicans' ethnicity and pollution. The article is explicit in linking Mexican population growth with pollution, citing the number of tons of garbage produced every day in Mexico City alongside statistics on the number of children born.

Abbey at this time was particularly exercised by the issue of immigration and the threat, as he saw it, that this posed to the health, environment and culture of America. Echoing popular tropes of Mexican immigration as pollution, Abbey warned that allowing continued Latino immigration

⁶ Leo Ralph Chavez, 'A Glass Half Empty: Latina Reproduction and Public Discourse' in *Women and Migration in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: A Reader* edited by Denise A. Segura and Patricia Zavella (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007) 76.

⁷ Neil Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014) 179.

⁸ Named after the eighteenth-century English cleric and scholar, Thomas Malthus, Malthusianism is the theory that because population can increase exponentially, but increases in food production only arithmetically, population growth will outstrip the food available to sustain it, leading to catastrophe if not forestalled. It has something of a chequered history, because whilst overpopulation is a real and pressing concern, it has frequently been used to justify colonialism, oppression and racism (Allan Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*).

⁹ Otto Friedrich, 'Mexico City: The Population Curse', *Time Magazine* 6 August 1984, 24-35.

would simply lead to America becoming another Mexico, overpopulated and polluted. In 1983 he wrote to the editors of the *Arizona Daily Star* that,

Since the editors of the *Daily Star* are so devoted to promoting mass immigration from Mexico, it seems to me you might well change the name of your paper to the *Daily Estrellita*. Better yet, set up your editorial offices in South Nogales, where you can enjoy today the poverty, misery, squalor and gross injustice which will be the fate of America tomorrow, if we allow the Latino invasion of our country to continue.¹⁰

In another letter of that year to the *Arizona Republic* newspaper, Abbey apologised for having referred to Mexican towns as ‘garbage dumps’ but defended his anti-immigrant stance and warned that population growth in Southwest towns such as Tucson and Phoenix meant that they too were in danger of becoming dumping grounds.¹¹ His polemic ‘Immigration and Liberal Taboos’ was also written in 1983 and subsequently sent to, and rejected by, the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Mother Jones*, *Harper’s*, *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek* and *Playboy*.¹² 1984 saw Abbey writing to notoriously outspoken Democrat Richard Lamn, Governor of Colorado, urging him to ‘stick your neck out even further’ by raising ‘such issues as mass immigration from Latin America and differential birth rates in the USA’.¹³

Abbey’s decision to write about the Rio Grande, then, a river that was also an international border and the centre of much media attention, must be considered in a variety of contexts, from chronological to career, from geographical to cultural and sociological. River mouths are always liminal areas, between estuarine wetland and littoral ecosystem. But the mouth of the Rio Grande is also a liminal area politically, legally and geographically, marking the border between America and Mexico, rich nation and developing nation. In such a location and at such a time, seemingly neutral topics such as nature, ecology and pollution become freighted with significance.

Standing at the mouth of the Rio Grande Abbey opens by asking ‘why not begin at the end?’ and wastes no time in signalling his theme of pollution and mixing:

[I] watch the Rio Grande merge its thick, sluggish, algae-green water with the bright blue of the Gulf of Mexico ... one of the great American rivers finally completes its journey to the sea ... the water seems not to move at all ... diverted, processed, recycled, all vigor spent.¹⁴

¹⁰ Edward Abbey, *Postcards from Ed* edited by David Petersen (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2006) 151.

¹¹ Abbey, *Postcards* 133

¹² Edward Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey* edited by David Petersen (Massachusetts: Little, Brown, and Company, 1994) 325.

¹³ Edward Abbey, *Postcards from Ed* edited by David Petersen (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2006) 153. Like Abbey, Lamn was much admired for his stance on environmental issues but castigated for his views on immigration. He was a ceaseless writer and published numerous works linking immigration with population growth, cultural fragmentation and environmental degradation. See, for example, his *Immigration Time Bomb: The Fragmenting of America* (1985).

¹⁴ Edward Abbey, ‘Round River Rendezvous: The Rio Grande’, *One Life at a Time, Please* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988) 150. Further references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

In this disrupted and degraded ecosystem, the nitrogen run-off from industrial farms upstream together with the sewage effluent and other pollutants provide a rich source of food for organisms that can thrive on such detritus, an alternative food chain that upsets and eventually displaces the normal food chain of a healthy ecosystem. Thus, Abbey notes that ‘the river is not as dead as it looks’ observing the presence of fishermen and their families, crowded around the river mouth (149). ‘Why are the fishermen clustered here at the mouth of the river?’ Abbey asks rhetorically: ‘because the effluents from upstream, the sewage and fertilizers and garbage from towns and farms, attract the hierarchies of small organisms, including shrimp, that attract in turn the large game fish that attract human predators’ (151).

Abbey’s mention of the fishermen appears to be in the context of the problems of pollution, their presence serving as an indication of an ecosystem which is thriving not because the river is healthy but because it is polluted. However, Abbey immediately adds another observation which overlays the ecological and environmental insights with a further layer of identification and meaning: ‘All but myself appear to be Mexicans, or Mexican-Americans. Here on the international boundary, in this neutral zone, one’s actual citizenship makes little difference’, Abbey remarks, before pointedly adding that ‘the uniformed police of the U.S. border patrol are nowhere in sight’ (150).

With this observation Abbey blurs the distinction between political and ecological. By remarking on the nationality of the fishermen and questioning their right to be there, he reframes his observations from a purely ecological analysis of the damage done to the river by industrial pollution to a quasi-socio-political critique that revisits the older definition of pollution as that which is foreign and out of place. The visual metaphors and tropes noted by Cisneros and others are present: the fishermen and their families are presented in the mass and discussed in quasi-biological language. They are ‘human predators’ that have ‘clustered’ around the polluted mouth to feed. Furthermore, by situating them within the food chain of a degraded ecosystem Abbey frames their presence within the context of population dynamics, the study of how a species’ population is affected by the over or under supply of food. This removes the element of rational human volition in explaining the presence of the Latino fishermen and their families and reframes it in crudely reductive biological and ecological terms.

A series of identifications is therefore set up which marks out not just the political or legal differences between the Latinos as supposed immigrants and Abbey as a white male American citizen, but also a putative set of qualitative differences which rely on invoking nativist ideals linking purity with homogeneity, and pollution with heterogeneity. The immigrant is depicted as being baser in their motivations and desires, and is discussed in quasi-biological or ecological language, obviating the recognition of each of them as a rational individual agent reacting to historical, cultural and personal circumstances. By contrast, the white American citizen is individualised and his motivations described in terms of aspirations and ideals instead of wants and desires. This contrast is not explicit or categorical but implicit, relying on a cumulative series of identifications, on differing contextualisations of immigrant and native, and on the specific use of language and metaphor to depict and describe immigrant or native.

Abbey achieves this differentiation in 'Round River Rendezvous' by switching between narrating his visit to the polluted estuary of the Rio Grande at sea level (identified as a site of Latino immigration) and reminiscing about a recent hiking trip with his wife to the origins of the river high in the San Juan mountains of Colorado. Immediately following his encounter with the Latino fishermen Abbey, for example, Abbey thinks back to a recent hiking expedition to 'find the origins of the Rio Grande, the source, *La Source*'.¹⁵ The mundane terminology of ecology is obviously not sufficient here for Abbey, as it was in describing the 'neutral zone' of the Mexican border. Indeed, it is perfectly clear that he sees his expedition to the source as an ascent to a literally and metaphorically higher place invested with meaning and significance. He elevates the expedition to a semi-mythological quest for purity in which 'I envisioned a mythological maiden in a flowing, diaphanous gown, pouring crystal clear Rocky Mountain spring-water from a jug on her shoulder. What we really found was something much finer' (152). Abbey's florid prose here is telling: as Catrin Gersdorf has pointed out, Abbey typically figures the America landscape as an 'Anglo-Saxon male space' of struggle and hardship, the battle for survival.¹⁶ But here he figures the landscape in a distinctly feminine way, with the 'mythological maiden' both virgin and mother, highly unusual for him. The source is thus identified as a site of proper fertility, that is to say, of fertility that is pure and in balance with nature.

This contrast between the undesirable heterogeneity of the border zone of the river's end and the idealised and romanticised homogeneity of the source is subsequently revisited with even starker contrast, confirming and reinforcing the distinction. In the border town of Brownsville, Texas, Abbey describes the scene inside a shop selling used clothes:

A dozen weary little Mexican women, all pregnant, sit among mountains of old clothing, each woman patiently sorting through these trash piles in search of children's garments ... The air in the place is stifling, swarming with flies, and dense with the unmistakable, unforgettable smell of poverty. The manager of this pen, a swarthy, greasy-haired, crossbred, snake-eyed *bandito*, the only male in view, waits in the corner for the women to finish their sorting and hand over their faded paper pesos. Hordes of children play outside on the slime and broken glass of the street. (152-3)

Once again, the visual description here fulfils the nativist anti-immigrant tropes of the 'immigrant' as pollutant, invader and infestation. Just as the Latino fishermen were portrayed as part of a degraded, polluted ecosystem, so the Mexican women are depicted clustering around the cast-offs of consumer society, sifting through the 'trash piles' of children's clothes. Once again, the underlying fear is of uncontrollable fertility, attracted by, and burgeoning on, the waste and effluent of consumer society. The pervasive use of biological metaphors to describe

¹⁵ *La Source* may refer to a number of different paintings by various artists, but which all share the same theme of a young, white woman pouring water from a jug (in some variations she is bathing under a waterfall). The painting symbolises the union of fertility and purity in balance with nature.

¹⁶ Catrin Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2009) 194.

immigrants, noted by Nelkin and Michaels (1998),¹⁷ and the tendency for this to slip into coded eugenic language is evident in Abbey's increasingly unpleasant description of the shop as a 'pen' of pregnant Mexican women watched over by the 'swarthy, greasy-haired, crossbred, snake-eyed *bandito*'.

Abbey makes the used clothes shop a Dantean scene and a clear warning to his American readers of what lies in store 'if we allow the Latino invasion of our country to continue'.¹⁸ The trope of the immigrant as a biological threat because they are non-native and therefore 'out of place' (to use Chavez's phrase) is palpable in his depiction: this is not nature's fertility but a grotesque and swollen parody of it.

To accentuate this difference between natural fertility and uncontrolled invasion and multiplication Abbey again returns to the beginnings of the river, to the mythologised and romanticised purity of the source:

Watching this intolerable, unacceptable scene, which nevertheless we tolerate and accept, I think again of Stony Pass in the San Juans, the clear, cold mountain air, the peaks covered with fresh snow, and the bright virgin waters of the Rio Grande trickling from their multitude of secret beginnings under the rocks and the tundra and the alpine flowers. The elk were on the move, through the pines and aspen; in the evenings we'd hear the bull elk bugle forth his challenge to the world. That is another world, a sort of paradise compared to this, a world that these women and most of their children will never see. (153)

By invoking the image of the patriarch elk 'bugling forth his challenge to the world' Abbey emphasises the difference between native fertility, supposedly in harmony with the environment, and the putatively unnatural, prolific fertility of the biological invader. The 'crossbred' Mexican shopkeeper with his 'pen' of pregnant women and the native bull elk calling for females and warding off intruders imply a qualitative difference between that which is 'out of place' and that which is in its 'proper' category.

Abbey's use of the native elk here in a romanticised setting draws on long-established tropes that spring from the early confluence of conservationism and eugenics. As Allen E. Garland has noted, the elk was a frequent symbol in early conservationist literature that symbolised the nobility of pristine nature and undiluted bloodlines and was one of the

common metaphors comparing conservation of the human germ plasm with the nobility of nature in its pristine form [and] a typological mode of thinking that saw species in nature and human groups in society as represented by essentialist or uniform types (the largest elk or the pure Nordic) as some sort of abstract entity, viewed as existing romanticized past that is being eroded away by the modern world.¹⁹

¹⁷ Dorothy Nelkin and Mark Michaels, 'Biological Categories and Border Controls: The Revival of Eugenics in Anti-Immigration Rhetoric', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 18.5/6 (1998) 35-63.

¹⁸ Abbey, *Postcards* 132.

¹⁹ Allen E. Garland, "'Culling the Herd": Eugenics and the Conservation Movement in the United States, 1900-1940', *Journal of the History of Biology* 46.1 (2013) 35.

Inhabiting mountainous areas and the high ranges, the elk symbolised the putatively ‘higher’ animal, hardy and noble, perfectly ‘in balance with nature’ (to make ironic use here of Proyeck’s description of Abbey). In this romanticised re-imagination of nature and ecology, Abbey’s elk signifies the figuratively ‘higher’ creature, removed from but still threatened by the unnatural and prolific. The call to protect the environment in pristine form thereby becomes covalent with an unstated but implicit call to preserve and strengthen racial and ethnic boundaries.

Hence, in his reference to the used clothes shop as a ‘pen’ and the depiction of the Mexican women as passive breeders, Abbey distinguishes the women by figuring them as cattle, an allusion that signifies particular distaste for Abbey, who loathed cattle, blaming them for destroying native vegetation and polluting water sources. In an earlier travel article (‘On the River Again’) Abbey recorded travelling down the Rio Grande where the country is denuded of native wildlife and instead

overrun with half-starved Mexican cattle. They infest the thickets on both shores of the river and graze, browse and trample the desert for miles into Big Bend National Park. Eating up our heritage . . . the Mexican cattle, like the Mexican people, suffer from lack of the same thing: a good five-centevo contraceptive.²⁰

Here the distinction between Mexican cattle and Mexican people is all but erased. Both are treated as problematic populations in need of penning and controlling. Abbey and his boating companions even half-jestingly discuss lethal ecological measures for preventing these ‘illegal cows’ from crossing the border (‘plant the river with alligators, crocodiles, piranhas and hammerhead sharks’) but he concludes in another telling phrase that ‘we all well know that nothing will be done’.²¹ The fiction that he is engaging in ecological critique here is openly mocked by Abbey himself. The unpleasant fact of the matter is that the immigrant, the ‘illegal cow’ of the essay, has been reduced to a biological threat, an ecological menace ‘eating up our heritage’.

In analysing Abbey’s depictions of immigrants, it is crucial to recognise that whilst Abbey may have been xenophobic, it is Malthusianism that provided a spurious link to ecology, allowing him to pursue an anti-immigrant agenda in articles that were supposedly writing about the environment and travel. Nowhere is this made more distastefully explicit than in his article ‘Sierra Madre’ (1979), in which Abbey records his visit to the Sierra Madre mountains in Mexico. Ostensibly, the subject of the article is hiking in the Sierra Madre, but Abbey spends most of the article titillating and terrifying his reader with descriptions of the waste, pollution, degradation and of course population of Mexico. Flying over Chihuahua in a small privately-chartered plane, Abbey gives a God’s-eye description of the scene below. The air, the reader is told, is ‘full of windblown dust and smoke from forest fires’, the cattle ‘dying by the thousands from thirst and starvation’.²² Landing, Abbey describes with regret the effect of development on

²⁰ Edward Abbey, ‘On the River Again’ [1979] *Abbey’s Road* (New York: Plume, 1991) 103.

²¹ Abbey, ‘On the River’ 103.

²² Edward Abbey, ‘Sierra Madre’ [1979], *Abbey’s Road* (New York: Plume, 1991) 81.

the local wildlife and the local Tarahumara people, and always with an eye for the squalor and the sheer number of people everywhere.

Towards the end of the article Abbey makes the point, the real point which all of his previous description has been building towards: uncontrolled population growth is driving environmental degradation and the subsequent ecological collapse is causing and will continue to cause a relentless, nightmarish attack on American borders by half-starved Mexican cattle and people: the two seem to be largely interchangeable for Abbey. Citing the type of statistic beloved by Malthusians (the increase expressed as multiplication and percentage, the reference to seemingly objective and undeniable science – ‘demographers tell us’), Abbey reminds the reader that Mexico is a ‘nation of babies, kids and horny adolescents. Youthful vigor!’ and so unlikely to see a slowing in the rate of increase for some time.²³ Abbey rejects the suggestion that what is needed in Mexico is more investment and further development. Adopting the typically Malthusian argument that industrialisation without population control will always be ineffective and counterproductive, Abbey asks rhetorically, ‘dare one mention – would it be impolite and impolitic? – the name of the real and true spectre haunting this glamorous land, a dilemma that no amount of *turismo* and *industrialismo* is going to solve? May one?’. Answering his own question, he ventriloquises the imagined Mexican reply:

No. One may not. We are guests here, and the reply, if one were reckless enough to provoke it, can easily be anticipated: *No, gringo, mind your own fucking beez-nee-z and geev me peso or I cut your fucking gringo throat.*

There is another India aborning on our southern borders: Juarez, Nogales, Tijuana ... will be the cactus Calcuttas of the year 1999. No wonder a million desperate wetbacks, a million hungry aliens attempt each year to infiltrate our southern defense lines. Living bodies hang on the coils of concertina wire, hands clutching at the barbs.²⁴

The reference to India points unequivocally to the source of this terrified and terrifying image of zombie-like hordes blindly impaling themselves on coils of barbed wire. It is the Malthusianism of Paul Ehrlich, William Vogt, Garret Hardin and others who warned of a population explosion in non-white, non-western nations. With their scientific credentials (Vogt and Hardin were zoologists, Ehrlich is a biologist) and use of authoritative-sounding statistics showing the implacability of population growth and the certainty of disaster, they transfixed the public’s attention and galvanised a movement to address the seeming threat of uncontrolled population growth in developing nations.

Yet, whilst such figures undoubtedly provided the immediate impetus behind the near-panic with which Abbey and others perceived Mexico and Mexican immigration, Abbey’s identification of the immigrant with toxic waste and his dehumanising analogy of them with ‘half-starved cattle’ in need of contraceptives has much older roots in American culture. Mathew

²³ It is worth noting the use of ‘vigor’ here, given Abbey’s later use of it as the original title for his *National Geographic* article, ‘Rio Grande: All Vigor Spent’. The term had been popular in America since President Kennedy had used it as a way to emphasise his comparative youthfulness compared to rivals.

²⁴ Abbey, ‘Sierra Madre 96. Emphasis in original.

Connelly records the animus against Chinese immigrant labour in nineteenth-century America leading one scholar to claim in *The North American Review* that ‘constant over-population’ had adapted the Chinese to ‘live in swarms’ and live, half-starved, off the most unpalatable of food sources, driving ‘the vulture from his prey, or devour[ing] the unclean bird itself’.²⁵ Through such imagery, the immigrant (mostly the non-white immigrant) was dehumanised and identified as out-of-place: as pollution, in other words. With their backgrounds in biology and ecology, later Malthusians such as Vogt, Hardin and Ehrlich, whatever their intentions, tended to reinforce the already established link between immigrants and pollution, as a population that had overexploited and devastated its own lands and was now seeking sustenance in the ‘New World’ of America. Thus, when Abbey describes in his article ‘Big Bend’, ‘rack-ribbed, hungry, Mexican Scrub cattle ... waiting their chance to sneak across the river into the far better forage on the US side of the border’ and warns his readers that ‘having denuded their own range, they now lust after ours’ he is not only drawing on a long-established theme of overpopulation and invasion, but also on more recent ecological tropes of population dynamics and carrying capacity.²⁶

Clearly, then, the contention of Abbey’s apologists that his nature and travel writing can be separated from his xenophobia and racism is untenable. They embody and convey in sublimated form his own prejudices and preconceptions projected on to a landscape that is heavily idealised and politicised. For Abbey, the immigrant posed a ‘total’ threat to American democracy that necessitated the employment of all means of persuasion to fight back against what he saw as the pollution and dilution of white America. As he put it in ‘A Writer’s Credo’, the writer had a duty to tell unpopular and unpalatable ‘truths’ even if doing so meant breaching taboos on what was considered acceptable discourse:

Consider the interesting question of immigration, race and culture: if we who still form the majority in America really care to preserve our democratic traditions, derived in the most part from our European heritage and ancestry, then we must be willing to reevaluate the possible effect of differential breeding rates and mass immigration from Latin American, African and Asiatic countries upon those traditions.²⁷

Democracy and the American way of life, Abbey believed, relied on a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon population and was threatened by what he clearly saw as ‘lesser’ peoples migrating to America who did not share this ‘European heritage and ancestry’. His loathing of the Mexican immigrant in the mass, as in the fishermen at the polluted river mouth or the pregnant Mexican women in the used clothes store, is the horror of the privileged white American confronted with squalor and poverty and viewing it as a monstrosity that results not from inequality and exploitation but from the reckless reproduction of a class or people that have

²⁵ Mathew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 302.

²⁶ Edward Abbey, ‘Big Bend’, *One Life at a Time, Please* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988) 137.

²⁷ Edward Abbey, ‘A Writer’s Credo’, *One Life at a Time, Please* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988) 164.

obviously outgrown their own territory and now seek new sustenance. Abbey's description of Mexican towns as 'garbage dumps' and his warning that American towns risked being turned into garbage dumps as well if Mexican immigration was allowed to continue epitomises this perception of the immigrant as 'pollution, threatening the purity of those in place – that is [of those] in their "proper" category'.²⁸ When Abbey addresses the issue of immigration directly, it is clear that his animus is culturally and ethnically based. Malthusianism, though, provides the ideological basis for his animus in his nature and travel writing, where this cultural and ethnic prejudice is translated into metaphors where the balance of an overtly romanticised 'pure' nature is threatened by the influx of a biological 'other' which is not native and which therefore poses an existential threat.

Trump's complaint, then, that the US has become a 'dumping ground' for Mexico's 'criminals' and 'rapists' must be seen, therefore, not as an anomaly but as the continuation of a long-standing fear of the immigrant as pollution, threatening the purity of a romanticised America. It could be argued that the anomaly in Trump's case is not the substance of what he said but his refusal to encode it (or perhaps his inability). Joan C. Williams (2016), writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, analyses Trump's willingness to transgress accepted norms in the bluntest (and crassest) way as part of his appeal with white, working-class voters who might not share his xenophobia, but applaud his ability to infuriate the polite, professional 'elites' and (as they see it) their double-talking and double-standards, claiming to represent their best interests, but instead primarily concerned with engineering an election-winning coalition of voters. Indeed, it is noticeable that, as observed by Williams, as class has declined as a way of analysing and discussing demographics and politics in America, so ethnicity, gender and other markers of identity have increased. As Thomas B. Edsall observed in 2011, 'preparations by Democratic operatives for the 2012 election make it clear for the first time that the party will explicitly abandon the white working class' in favour of trying to build a coalition of affluent voters and ethnic minorities.²⁹ In other words, economic and class issues were to be sidelined and cultural-identity issues foregrounded.

Whilst this might seem to be unproblematic in and of itself, such a move away from class-based politics potentially opens the door for populism and nativism of the kind that we have increasingly witnessed in politics in America (and indeed elsewhere). Discussions about immigration and border control can become 'totalised' as rational and nuanced discussion is ever more freighted and constrained, and becomes increasingly sublimated. In such a climate, the quasi-biological metaphors and tropes about immigrants that have been largely latent in society, but still circulating in seemingly respectable publications and discourses, can become resurgent. Trump's invocation of the threat of the almost-congenitally criminal Mexican pouring across the border has valence because, as I have argued in this essay, it draws on long-established themes that survive in sublimated form outside of overt xenophobic discourse. Trying to 'shut down' (as the popular expression has it) such bigoted discourse is not only difficult, but, given a particular

²⁸ Chavez, 42

²⁹ Thomas B. Edsall, 'The Future of the Obama Coalition', *The New York Times* 27 November 2011.

set of economic and political circumstances, can easily backfire, as the Presidential election of 2016 has shown.

The necessity, then, is to recognise that reshaping the discourse requires a readiness to do the harder work of identifying and confronting the sublimated forms of racism and xenophobia that circulate in seemingly acceptable discourse. This can be deeply uncomfortable. If we recognise and condemn the racism and xenophobia that underpins much of Abbey's writing, does that mean that we thereby undermine all of his writing on behalf of the environment? Can we value the beauty of Abbey's depictions of nature and wildlife, and yet criticise and confront the racism of the writer? Calling out the overt xenophobia of Trump and others like him is easy, and requires no such distinctions be made: he is a perfect target for ire. Calling out subtle but powerful xenophobic or racist tropes in nature or travel writing can seem almost disingenuous: should we really be tackling such coded discourses when there is blatant racism to confront? Yet, as I have argued here, it is precisely in this apparently acceptable discourse that seemingly outdated and discredited tropes of the immigrant or the 'other' survive.

Whilst it is tempting, and even reassuring in a sense, to assign such backward views to a largely illiterate section of the public and thereby effectively write them off, the uncomfortable truth is that such bigoted language relies on a far wider and putatively acceptable discourse to retain its power to scare and motivate people. *Contra* the pleas of Proyect and other apologists, the urgency of environment crisis is not, and cannot be allowed to serve as, a justification for allowing racist tropes of the 'other' to be propagated.

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