Landscape Of Desire

Gordon, Greg

Published by Utah State University Press

Gordon, Greg.
Landscape Of Desire.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/10431.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/10431
MANCOS SHALE

Formed by silt slowly settling on the floor of an immense inland sea that covered most of the interior West from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean and east to the Great Lakes, these deep waters, low in available oxygen, prevented organic matter from oxidizing and thus created the black and grey of shale and siltstone.

*Perhaps no portion of the earth’s surface is more irredeemably sterile, more hopelessly lost to human habitation.*
—Captain John Macomb, Corps of Topographical Engineers, trying to find the junction of the Green and Grand River in 1859.

Just north of Moab, Utah, the River Road meets Highway 191. A line of RVs and pickup trucks towing chrome-studded Jeeps funnelling into Moab creates a long wait before we can turn left onto the highway. Entering Moab I feel a constriction around my heart. Another multi-story chain motel has appeared during my absence, bringing the total to thirty-three in this town of seven thousand souls.

With the discovery of uranium fifty years ago, Moab was transformed from a sleepy Mormon outpost to “The Richest Town in the U.S.A.” with twenty millionaires for every 250 citizens. By the 1960s, the uranium boom went bust and Moab, like Aspen, Taos, and Telluride spiraled into the post mining-town depression. Like these towns, Moab clawed its way out of economic doldrums by soliciting the tourist dollar. In the 1980s mountain bikers discovered Moab. (Or was it the other way around?) Suddenly it seemed like the old uranium days had returned. Only this time, people were buying bike tires instead of jeep tires, shifters instead of shovels, and odometers instead of Geiger counters.

Driving into Moab, you are barraged with billboards enticing you on raft trips or jeep tours. You can rent a mountain bike for the world famous Slickrock Trail or go rock climbing. And of course there’s recreational shopping. You can buy T-shirts portraying lizards you will never see, books about places that don’t exist, and just about anything from earrings to lawn ornaments adorned with Kokopelli, a mythological figure sacred to the Puebloan...
peoples. Everyone seems like they are on vacation. A teenage girl break
dances in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn while her dad fiddles with the
mountain bikes on the roof of their SUV. A young couple sits on the curb
drinking the milk from a coconut. A playground for the hip and idle, Moab
seems like a town designed by Outside magazine, shamelessly advocating the
outdoors as a playground and portraying nature as a commodity.

Moab’s annual Jeep Safari transforms “mountain bike Mecca” overnight.
The squadrons of spandex and lyrca thighs pumping up and down Main
Street from smoothie shop to brew pub are replaced by Jeeps. Traffic slows
to a virtual stop as Jeeps are unloaded and paraded up and down Main
Street. Many bumper stickers proclaim, “It’s a Jeep thing. You wouldn’t
understand.” There are Jeeps jacked up on monster tires, Jeeps painted blue
camouflage (or a black and white camo that reminds me of a Holstein), and
even a ‘58 Chevy station wagon on a Jeep chassis.

The Jeep invasion swells the valley to more than twenty thousand, and
not a parking spot, campsite, nor hotel room remains vacant. The locals grow
cranky. The parking lot of City Market overflows with hundreds of Jeepsters
outfitting their expeditions for the day with all the essentials: chicken, burg-
ers, chips, pop, beer, and charcoal. The four-wheel-drive trucks, Humvees,
Jeeps, and SUVs queue up at each gas station and into the streets. Parked
diagonally at the corner for all to see is a Mercedes family personal urban
assault vehicle, sort of a cross between a Humvee and a camper. These big
hunks of machine share three things in common: 1. They serve no utilitarian
purpose and exist solely for recreation; 2. They are all spotless, no mud or dirt
anywhere; and 3. As Michelle, my assistant, points out, they are driven only
by white males although a woman is often perched in the passenger seat.

Needing refuge, I seek my favorite funky diner at the far end of town. A
place where service is excellent, just slow, where you can talk to the cook
trough a portal to the kitchen, where the waitress casually fills you in on the
town gossip, where the breakfast is huge, the coffee strong, and the smooth-
ies divine, and where they play whatever music they want. Grateful Dead and
Indigo Girls seem to be favorites. Posters of Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, and
James Dean adorn the walls, and the bathrooms are out back. Confusion
flows over me as I pull into the parking lot. The Star Diner is gone, replaced
by Burger King.

Bereaved, I refuse to eat anywhere else. Surly, deprived of breakfast and
caffeine, I pull into the youth hostel to meet eight university students from
around the country who have enrolled in a field studies program through the
Sierra Institute, an extension of the University of California at Santa Cruz.
The program consists of three courses: Natural History of the Colorado
Plateau, the Art of Nature Writing, and Wilderness Education. As program
leader I’m responsible not only for lectures and instruction, but also for logistics, safety, and general well being, which often encompasses roles as guidance counselor, friend, wilderness guide, confidant, and grumpy old man. Michelle greets the students enthusiastically while I stomp around impatiently, waiting to load the truck so we can escape Moab as quickly as possible.

Instead of heading into the nearby scenic redrock country, we drive north-west toward Green River. To the north of Green River rise the Book Cliffs, a foreboding rampart towering three thousand feet above the desert plain. In erosional retreat, these cliffs form the northern perimeter of the canyon country stretching from Price, Utah, east to Grand Junction, Colorado.

Upstream, the Green River cuts a deep gorge, creating Desolation and Gray canyons, while the canyons of Labyrinth and Cataract form an impassable barrier downstream. Thus, settlers, fur trappers, gold miners, and explorers were funneled into this valley, fording the Green River at Gunnison Crossing. The San Rafael Reef, a shark tooth ridge of upended sandstone, forced the route sharply to the north. Not an actual marine reef, the San Rafael Reef was christened by the early pioneers because this fifty-six mile, two thousand foot high pleat proved a significant impediment to east-west travel. By the 1830s, mule trains were bringing coffee, cloth, livestock, and beaver pelts from Santa Fe to California along this trade route that became known as the Old Spanish Trail.

Crossing such remote and inhospitable terrain, the Old Spanish Trail was also used by rustlers and slave traders. Although Mexico had outlawed slavery in 1812, an illegal slave trade flourished as Indians from the Southwest were sold in California. Fetching up to $200 each, young girls were the most desired for their value as domestic servants in the booming gold rush cities. In the opposite direction, cattle and horse rustlers stole horses in California and brought them to New Mexico. Ute chief Wakara (Walker) played both games; a preeminent rustler, he also traded women and children captured in raids from other tribes to the slave runners for axes, guns, blankets, and metal pots.

The newly arrived Mormon settlers found slavery reprehensible and interfered with Wakara’s participation in the slave trade, prompting the outbreak of Walker’s War in 1853. However, by this time the slave trade was already fading. In 1870 a mail route was established along the trail and then abandoned thirteen years later when rail service between Colorado and California was established.

Instead of following the logical route of the Old Spanish Trail, the engineers must have found the prospect of blasting a highway straight through the San Rafael Reef too appealing to pass up. Begun in 1970, it took twenty
years to complete this stretch of interstate which opened up much of the formerly inaccessible San Rafael Swell, a vast uninhabited country of nine hundred square miles. Interstate 70 now slices through the Reef revealing successive layers of geologic history. Deposited horizontally, the formations have been tilted on end, so that one drives through the entire Jurassic period in a few minutes.

Gunnison Crossing eventually became the town of Green River, and the old way station can now claim distinction as the world’s largest truck stop. Rather than a single entity, here is an entire town dedicated to refueling gas tanks, eating banana cream pie, fixing flat tires, towing SUVs stuck in the desert, and spending one night between here and somewhere else. Green River has two exits, one to get off the interstate, the other to get back on. To the east, only one gas station lies between here and Colorado, ninety miles away. A small sign on the west side of town reads, “Next Services 110 miles.”

About halfway through this 110 miles of “nothingness,” we turn off Interstate 70 at an unnamed “Ranch Exit.” A dirt road off a dirt road leads to Muddy Creek, the only reliable source of water in the southern half of the vast and seldom visited San Rafael Swell. It looks more like an irrigation ditch loaded with cow manure than a creek.

Composed of grey Mancos Shale, the Coal Cliffs loom above us. A cold wind whips the cumulus clouds across the sky like a time release film. Through the low clouds we can see snow in the highlands of the Fishlake Plateau. As we step out of the van after the long ride, everyone replaces their shorts with long underwear and pants and quickly throws fleece over their T-shirts. We park near a derelict trailer, once a cowboy camp of sorts. It sags to one side, the windows blown out. Bits of refuse, old fencing, lumber, and a car chassis lay scattered about. It’s one of those rounded post-war style trailers that conjures up visions of Appalachia.

Banjo, my faithful golden retriever, doesn’t seem bothered by the unsenic scenery. She bounces around in circles and rolls in a cowpie.

Yet I know what the students must be thinking, so casting aside the stoic wilderness guide persona, I take their side.

“Good God, Abbey!” I invoke the patron saint Ed, and quote the first line of his gospel, Desert Solitaire (one of our textbooks), “This is the most beautiful place on Earth.”

“Are you out of your friggin’ mind, Abbey? You expect us to spend the next three weeks out here? Where’s those red rocks, that famous slickrock you make such a big deal about, and where’s those sandstone arches and waterfall grottos? There’s nothin’ here fer Crissakes! This is the most godforsaken, uninspiring, and not to mention UGLY place I’ve ever seen!” The students smile quizzically as I rant.
“You call this good-for-nothing shithole a wilderness? GOOD GOD there’s not even a cactus to hide behind out here. Nothin’ but cows and cow-shit!” I kick a nearby patty.

“The desert’s fried your pickled brain, Ed. A guy would have to be crazy, certifiable NUTS to hike out across that for twenty-one days!” I wave toward the south, a desolate plain bound by low, grey hills.

By now everyone is laughing enough that I can pull out the maps and show them we are indeed headed clear through the San Rafael Swell, from I-70 to the tiny town of Hanksville. A person could easily hike through this county in less than half the time, but our purpose isn’t to pass through an area as quickly as possible, but rather to come to know a place, to linger and saunter as Thoreau would have us do. “For every walk is a sort of crusade,” he wrote, “We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of adventure, never to return, prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms.”

“It’s a big chunk of country, nearly all roadless. I’ve never been here before, should be interesting,” I say, closing the map case.

At least it would be an adventure and an educational experience, which is precisely the point. By combining academic studies with experiencing a place on a physical level, students develop a personal awareness of the environment. Concepts such as evolution, ecosystem processes, geology, and the human’s role in nature cease to be abstractions. For many students, this program has completely changed the course of their academic careers and subsequent lives.

We quickly set up camp as snow and darkness begin to fall.

“Find a spot, set up your tents, and try to stay warm,” I say.

Michelle moves from tent to tent helping the students figure out how to set up their tents (many have never camped before, much less in the snow) while I fire up the cook stove for hot water. Most crawl into their tents as soon as possible. One of the older students, Jonathan, and I stand around the stove sipping cups of soup and glancing at the sky.

“Still snowing,” I say.

“Yep,” replies Jonathan who apparently isn’t much for lengthy conversation.

“Hellava way to start a program,” I say.

“Yep,” replies Jonathan.

“Sure hope it clears up tomorrow.”

“Yep,” says Jonathan. We finish our soup and head to bed.

It does indeed clear the next day, turning the grey dirt into gumbo that sticks to the bottom of our boots like wet concrete. We dry and warm ourselves in the sun while Michelle explains the basics behind minimum impact
camping and safety procedures. By the time everyone figures out how to pack
their packs, it’s well after lunch. Packed long before anyone else, I notice
Jonathan sitting against his pack, already halfway through Desert Solitaire. It
turns out that two years ago he hiked the entire Pacific Crest Trail.

We shoulder our heavy packs and navigate through futile attempts at
alfalfa fields. We aim toward the interstate, sighting our course along the
creek by the low greasewood growing on the banks, the only green, albeit
dusty and pale, in a grey landscape. Overgrazing has created a severe cutbank
along the torpid creek, and we claw at shadscale and tamarisk, hoisting ours-
elves up and down the banks. We trudge slowly in a perpendicular line,
unwavering as a missile, so as to intercept the highway. I wonder if anyone
notices a line of backpackers threading their way through a maze of barbed
wire, old tires, and car parts to the highway, passing beneath it and heading
south into a landscape as desolate as the moon?

We could have parked on the other side of the highway and begun our
hike farther downstream, but I wanted us to walk under the interstate, hav-
ing spent so much of our lives traveling over it. This ribbon of asphalt super-
imposed over the landscape defines our movement and which places are
important and which are not. It gets us from here to there with little concern
as to what lies between. We build our highways with near total disregard of
the land and its inhabitants.

I also wanted to experience how animals move through the landscape.
Driving along Interstate 70 from Grand Junction, Colorado, to Moab, I was
overwhelmed by the hundreds of ground squirrel carcasses littering the
pavement. Are we simply oblivious to the lives of animals in our rush across
the desert?

The Humane Society estimates more than one million animals are killed
every day on U.S. highways. This includes not only large and small mamm-
als such as deer, bear, raccoons, hares, and rodents, but also reptiles,
 amphibians, birds, and untold invertebrates. Over half a million deer alone
are killed every year by traffic. Roadkill is the leading cause of mortality for
 most large mammals and several endangered species, such as desert tortoise,
Houston toad, brown pelican, ocelot, northern long-eared bat (whose only
 known breeding location is bisected by the Transcanada), American croco-
dile, and key deer (of which 80% of all known deaths are attributed to traf-
fic). Highways act as wildlife mortality sinks. For example snakes are
attracted to the road to sunbathe and get run over; then ravens and jays
come to feed off carcasses and in turn are killed. From salamanders to griz-
zlies, highways prove lethal barriers to wildlife movement, preventing
 amphitans from reaching their breeding grounds and bears from finding
mates. Many animals avoid highways altogether. Elk spurn areas up to half a mile from a road. Small mammals find many roads too wide to cross. A study of a four-lane highway in the Mojave Desert discovered that rodents hardly ever crossed the road. This is of a special portent to the Colorado Plateau which is home to more than thirty species of rodents.

Interstate 70 severs the San Rafael bighorn sheep population in half. As traffic flow increases in speed and volume, the highway becomes less permeable resulting in decreased gene flow between isolated populations. Furthermore, a decreased ability to recolonize results in a drop in overall ecological resilience. If populations remain isolated long enough they become susceptible to disease and inbreeding. Extinction results. Thus highways are a double jeopardy for wildlife, for not only do they fragment the available habitat into smaller islands, they simultaneously kill off the remaining populations.

Muddy Creek passes unhindered beneath the interstate. If an animal knew about this passage, it could safely pass from one side to the other. Riparian corridors serve as valuable wildlife habitat; indeed 80% of deer kill zones are associated with major drainages. If properly designed, this could serve as a wildlife underpass, an idea now being incorporated into highways from Florida (which has installed underpasses for crocodiles and panthers) to Canada. The Texas highway department is considering a plan that installs tunnels under the highway for the endangered Houston toad. Near Park City, Utah, fenced right-of-ways funnel deer to painted cross walks that have reduced mortality 40%. However, these mitigation measures are expensive and the results are mixed. In Florida, deer and racoons frequently use the underpasses but black bears do not. In Canada, elk, deer, and coyotes use the overpasses, but grizzlies and wolves won’t.

Roads greatly impact carnivores that occur naturally in low densities. Habitat loss and fragmentation, direct mortality, displacement and avoidance, and human developments associated with roads all contribute to their declining numbers.

As we hike, I think about Simon Ortiz’s poem, “For our brothers: Blue Jay, Gold Finch, Flicker, Squirrel, who perished lately in this most unnecessary war, saw them lying off the side of a state road in southwest Colorado”:

They all loved life.
And suddenly,
it just stopped for them. Abruptly,
the sudden sound of a speeding machine,
and that was it.
I don’t have to ask who killed you. I know, and I am angry and sorry and wonder what I shall do.

This, for now, is as much as I can do, knowing your names, telling about you. Squirrel. Flicker. Gold Finch. Blue Jay. Our brothers.

This particular highway also defines a boundary in my own mind. Although much of the Colorado Plateau lies north of I-70, for me, the vast area between I-70 and the Arizona line embodies Utah’s redrock wilderness. I-70 represents civilization, and I had always looked to the south: Canyonlands, Zion, the Escalante as the real wilderness. By starting north of the interstate and walking beneath it, I wanted to defy the validity of that line. I also hoped that this would somehow frame the students’ concept of wilderness on an experiential level.

Does anything significant change when we pass under the interstate? We are hardly in the land of Oz, but nothing civilized lies between us and Hanksville, eighty-five river miles downstream, no pavement, no houses, nothing but a couple of dirt roads, a muddy creek to follow, and over half a million acres of wilderness. At Hanksville, Muddy Creek joins the Fremont River and creates the Dirty Devil River. After a short resupply, we will follow the Dirty Devil its entire length, another eighty-five river miles to where it converges with the Colorado River beneath the surface of Lake Powell.

Interstate 70 to Lake Powell. Icons of the modernization of the West? The Interstate serves as a transportation corridor, emblematic of speed, efficiency, and globalization, carrying lettuce from California to the Midwest, orange juice from Florida to San Francisco, cocaine from L.A. to Denver. Created by a massive dam across the Colorado River, 180-mile long Lake Powell flooded what was once the very heart of the Colorado Plateau—Glen Canyon.

But what lies between I-70 and Lake Powell? Twenty years before the damming of the river, Harold Ickes, FDR’s Secretary of Interior, proposed the world’s largest preserve, a four and a half million acre national monument that would reach from Lee’s Ferry in Arizona, west to Kanab, Utah, north to Green River and east to Moab. Only one dirt road crossed this region, the most remote in the contiguous U.S. However, FDR’s Federal Reserve Chairman, Marriner Eccles, was from Utah and was vehemently opposed to the monument. Then the bombing of Pearl Harbor shifted attention elsewhere.
Even earlier, Bob Marshall, co-founder of the Wilderness Society, identified two million acres of roadless land in the San Rafael alone in 1935. While I-70 now sliced it in half, I wondered how much remained. Although industrialization has shredded and fragmented one of our last remaining wildernesses, could we still thread together a patchwork traveling by foot across this remote region? Is it still possible to set off into the unknown for weeks, simply following a creek? Would we find the soul of the Colorado Plateau here, damaged but still intact? Would we find our own souls?

The Wilderness Act defines wilderness as an “untrammeled” area. Most people misinterpret this as “untrampled.” Untrammeled refers to a trammel line, which is what fishermen use to surround a school of fish with nets. Thus, untrammeled would pertain to an area whose boundaries are flexible and porous, not surrounded by civilization. I wondered to what degree Interstate 70 and Lake Powell act as ecological trammel lines for the San Rafael/Dirty Devil region. Could they also act as psychological trammels, reining in our own wildness?

Unlike the slickrock country around Moab, so breathtaking with its vivid colors, strange rocks, and cliff dwellings, this is a grey-streaked country, always too cold and windy or too searingly hot. Instead of picturesque junipers and waterfalls, this is a land of salt bush flats and little to no water. What water exists is foul, laced with heavy metals, salt, and giardia (as we later discovered). The intriguing Anasazi and their kivas and haunting rock art are replaced by barren bentonite hills inhabited by ghosts of a different kind, the specters of greed.

We pass an abandoned mine and a road bed scarred into the desert crust. This is a place where you damn the land and hope to get rich quick and get the hell out, an area so desolate that it has never seen a permanent settlement. Scour the earth for uranium (or magnesium as in the case of this mine), or coal, or oil and gas, or fill it with cows, scrape every available resource off, and then fill in the gaps with toxic waste. This unlovely land has been consigned to satisfy the motorized recreation needs of off-road vehicles. We take everything it has to offer and leave feeling not quite satiated. It is the landscape of desire.

“I wonder what this place would look like without cows,” says Stacy as we leave the interstate behind.

“Hard to tell,” I answer. The cows have so thoroughly transformed the vegetation that it is impossible to tell what plant life this strange world might support. Cottonwoods too large to be trampled, tamarisk, rabbitbrush, greasewood, tumbleweed, and cactus are the only survivors.
We stop to examine a rabbitbrush heavily pruned by bovine shears. This indicates the severity of the overgrazing since cattle prefer nearly anything to rabbitbrush, which consequently flourishes in disturbed areas.

“What are these cottonball things?” asks Stacy indicating the white fuzzy growths along the thin stems of the rabbitbrush.

“Let’s take a look. Anybody have a pocketknife?”

David quickly produces a knife and we slice open the grape-sized nodule. Inside a small cavity squirms a tiny worm.

“This is a gall,” I say holding up the nodule. “And this is the larva of a fruit fly. The flies lay their eggs just under the surface of the stem and they act as an irritant to the plant, which responds by creating this gall to encase the egg. Fortunately, for the fruit fly, the gall provides a secure place from predators and a steady food supply.”

“Does it hurt the plant?” asks Stacy.

“I’m sure it doesn’t help; it is parasitic. For some reason rabbitbrush and sagebrush seem to have a lot of galls on them.”

We find several cows along the creek and a cow skeleton in the greasewood thickets. The students become quite excited over the discovery. Scott ties the skull to his pack. I wonder if he will carry it the entire way. As we thread through the thickets land-mined with cow pies, Allison asks me, “When do we get to the wilderness?”