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God, Satan, and Freshmen in the Southern Californian Desert

In 2012, I launched “God, Satan, and the Desert,” a freshman seminar which provides students with a first-hand desert encounter and introduces them to diverse historical and cultural perspectives on desert environments, exploring the impact of existing environmental perceptions and the tensions between newly emergent or non-dominant views with prevailing ones. This is an ongoing academic project in the humanities which advances the value of experiential learning to enhance the academic classroom experience and the value of humanities content to enrich the outdoor experience. While extra-classroom activity is standard practice in the sciences and social sciences, it is generally less well-established in disciplines within the humanities. And so, this seminar provides a means for students to 1] experience the desert, 2] improve their understanding of desert environments, and 3] recognize the changing historical and cultural perspectives that have shaped our perceptions of desert regions.¹ I have since offered twenty-two such seminars, teaching more than 400 students, before the project was interrupted by COVID-19-related restrictions in 2020. This article offers a synopsis of the seminar’s academic content, program design, and student response.



Image 1. Font's Point, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2019. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

For its wilderness classroom, the seminar uses Southern California's Colorado Desert, the most western portion of the Sonoran Desert, at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, which contains more than 600,000 acres of diverse desert terrain and is bordered by vast spaces of wilderness that is federally managed.² The state park is located about two hours east of our coastal campus in La Jolla. I teach the course as a freshman seminar which offers a low-stakes (Pass / No Pass) opportunity for students to explore topics and expand their disciplinary exposure and affords faculty a means to draw students to areas of interest. The seminar is taught in a ten-week quarter with the required weekend desert experience occurring two-thirds into the term. This article provides an overview of course content, program design, and student response.

Over the years, I have experimented with different content. My early approach emphasized cross-cultural comparison, drawing from Islamic, African, and indigenous traditions of Australia and the American Southwest. Over time, however, I pivoted toward an examination of perspectives within one tradition, that of the West. This change was influenced by the academic constraints of the freshman seminar, by our geographical setting in the American West, and by my desire to explore changing perspectives on the specific region of the seminar's encounter. As I focused the course on this one region, it shifted the comparative inquiry from cross-cultural to one that became increasingly intra-cultural.

Pre-Modern Context: The Exodus Narrative

The course begins by exploring students' own perceptions of the desert, reviewing the wide variety of desert environments across the continents, and defining the dearth of precipitation that designates a region as desert. With that established, the historical content starts with a most-formative influence on the *western* perspective: The Bible. Using selections from *Exodus*, students read account of Moses liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and leading them into the rugged wilderness of the Sinai. *Exodus* portrayed this desert sojourn as formidable, unrelenting trial which bred a persistent temptation to scorn Moses' leadership, reject the divine summons, and return to the abundance of Egypt—accepting slavery as the price for that abundance. The desert was barren and unproductive, resonating with danger and death, a “great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions” but its test was needed “to humble you [the Israelites] and to test you, and in the end to do you good” (*Deuteronomy* 8:15–16).³ Unlike the Nile's fertility behind or the “Promised Land” ahead, desert was terrain impervious to cultivation and hence, antithetical to civilization. For the Israelites, survival in the desert was dependent upon fidelity to and utter reliance on the divine because there was no other means for survival. With food and water unavailable, the ability to preserve life in the desert was evidence of the efficacy of divine power. It was through this desert trial that Moses received the Law (the Covenant) and the Israelites, by persevering, forged their identity as a people.⁴



Image 2. Desert geology, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2019. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

Pre-Modern Context: *The New Testament*

Turning to the *New Testament*, the seminar focuses on Jesus' temptation in the desert (*Matthew* 4:1–11), a narrative used to parallel the *Exodus* trial in the desert. In this Gospel passage, set after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River and before his public ministry, a "spirit" took Jesus into the desert for a period of testing, with forty *days* standing in for the forty *years* of the Israelite wilderness encounter. The *New Testament* adds an element not found in the Hebrew scriptures: an evil being called Satan or the Devil. The *Torah* presented the desert as barren, inhospitable, and cursed—but made no connection between this environment and an evil being. The character of Satan as an evil being opposed to the divine developed later in the Second Temple period. This is clearly in place by the time of the Christian scriptures, which mentions Satan, the Devil, or Beelzeboul seventy-nine times with additional references by other names such as "tempter," "evil one," and "god of this World," among others.⁵

After Jesus had fasted for forty days, the passage presents Satan tempting him in a weakened condition, aiming to dissuade Jesus from his forthcoming mission. The Devil entices Jesus with quintessential human temptations: pleasure, pride, and possessions, but Jesus resists. After having successfully endured this desert trial, Jesus began his public ministry. Thus, this *New Testament* narrative, as in the case of the Hebrew scriptures, portrayed the desert as a place of deprivation in which one faced the persistent temptation to give up by leaving the desert *before* fulfilling the journey's goal. This makes desert an ideal venue for spiritual testing and formation. Students already familiar with these passages generally had failed to appreciate the geographical significance in these stories. That is, they had considered desert as background setting, if it all. The seminar moves this setting

to the foreground, arguing that a proper assessment of the role of desert in these texts is central to grasping the intended meaning.

Pre-Modern Context: Desert Tradition of Late Antiquity

The seminar continues to explore this perspective through the *Life of Antony* by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (296–373), one of the most prominent voices in the later Roman Empire. The *Life of Antony* was an extraordinarily influential text in the history of Christianity, yet it remains largely unknown to contemporary students. The *Life* provides a biographical account of an Egyptian named Antony (ca. 251–356), who, the *Life* asserts, became the first monk and “desert father” in the Christian tradition.⁶

Upon the death of his parents, the young Antony, now head of household, became responsible for the care of his sister and family estate, but his thoughts lingered on how to live an ideal Christian life. He found resolution after a chance hearing of *Matthew* 19:21: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” He sold his estate, entrusted his sister to a community of women, and embarked on his quest. Before stepping into the wilderness beyond the community, he turned first to ascetics on the outskirts of town.⁷ The *Life* narrates how his renunciation and religious intention drew the ire of Satan, who “attempted to lead him away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship, love of money and of glory, the manifold pleasure of food, the relaxations of life, and, finally, the rigor or virtue, and how



Image 3. Trekking along before descending into a canyon, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2020. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

great the labor is that earns it, suggesting also the bodily weakness and the length of time involved.”⁸ His renunciation took an even more dramatic step when he entered a tomb, metaphorically dying to the world, while enduring the torments of demonic forces, which tested the ascetic’s mettle.⁹ Triumphant, Antony stepped out of the tomb (Christ-like) and then advanced *into the desert*, ignoring the Devil’s attempts to lure him away with further temptations.

Antony’s desert journey took him to an abandoned Roman fortress where he took up residence as its solitary sentry. Over time, word of the ascetic’s spiritual authority began to draw believers into the desert for counsel and guidance. This was an entirely new phenomenon in the world of late antiquity, sparking a sort of spiritual eco-tourism that would increase for centuries. Frustrated by this turn of events caused by this desert missionary, the Devil escalated his assaults by “. . . fabricating phantasms . . . imitating women, beasts, reptiles, and huge bodies and thousands of soldiers . . .” and each image “appears to be as tall as a roof and vast in width, so that those they were unable to lead astray with thoughts they might deviously snatch away by means of the phantasms.”¹⁰ After two decades of such combat, Antony left the fortress and progressed still deeper into the desert, pushing further into, as it is portrayed, hostile territory. For the rest of his life, Antony shifted between two desert locations, the outer mountain, closer to inhabited regions and the inner mountain in a more remote, less accessible site.

The *Life* narrates how Antony’s fame inspired so many believers that the desert became a city, transforming the ‘cursed’ region into an abode of piety, which prompted Satan to lament: “I no longer have a place—no weapon, no city. There are Christians everywhere, and even the desert has filled with monks. Let them watch after themselves and stop



Image 4. A desert spring and palm grove, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2018. Source: Author’s photograph used with permission.



Image 5. Badlands, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2019. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

censuring me for no reason!"¹¹ Transforming desert into a city was a preposterous idea in late antiquity, as scholar William Harmless explained:

We in the twenty-first century may not easily appreciate the novelty of this, for we are used to bustling desert cities such as Phoenix or Las Vegas. But these are recent creations, impossible to sustain without contemporary technology. Certainly, no one in the fourth century thought of the desert as a place to build a city. It has no water and therefore no life. To make a city in the desert was an absurdity. As Peter Brown has noted, 'the monks had settled on the social equivalent of an Antarctic continent, reckoned from time immemorial to be a blank space on the map of Mediterranean society . . .'¹²

Thus, Antony began a spiritual reclamation project, advancing *into wilderness* to force evil into retreat. His presence in that barren landscape became a means to manifest and promote his holiness. Christian monasticism emerged in the desert as a struggle to withdraw from society and ascend the heights of human possibility and as a means of extending the power of "good" over a "cursed" landscape." In this perspective, the foreboding nature of desert made it a spiritual proving ground, a geographical stage for testing one's physical and spiritual fortitude.

Modern Context: American West

The aforementioned selected content in the seminar seeks to present a baseline for understanding this foundational perspective in the western tradition. After establishing this pre-modern foundation, the seminar moves to the modern era. The content shifts to an

American context, exploring how American perceptions both exemplified this pre-modern judgement and came to develop a competing *appreciation* of desert environments. The seminar reviews how deserts—Great Basin, Mojave, Sonoran, Chihuahuan—became part of the American landscape after the Mexican-American War (1846–48). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo transferred territory that is today California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, and Utah into the United States. Until then, Americans had limited contact with North American deserts which were beyond the nation’s borders. Among those few were mountain men who traversed the West in search of fur, but as demand for this commodity diminished, some adjusted to the decline by serving as guides for American geographical expeditions.¹³ Such was the case of Kit Carson for the “Pathfinder” John C. Frémont in the 1840s, the era of “Manifest Destiny.”¹⁴ It was Frémont, in fact, who penned the first American account of the Yucca now known as the Joshua Tree: “Associated with the idea of barren sands, their stiff and ungraceful form makes them to the traveler the most repulsive tree in the vegetable kingdom.”¹⁵

The discovery of gold in California and the Gold Rush that followed generated a global migration which rapidly moved hundreds of thousands into California.¹⁶ For those making the westward journey across North America, there was little possibility of avoiding the desert, which was regarded with hostility, a barrier hindering American progress and delaying entry into a “Promised Land” of mineral and agricultural bounty. This demographic tidal wave cavalierly brushed aside the rights of peoples who actually lived in and around the desert.¹⁷



Image 6. Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2013. Source: Author’s photograph used with permission.

To examine this, I provide a brief overview of the historical process and generally focus on contrasting depictions through a selection of contemporary-era novels: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (1985), Louis L'Amour, *The Lonesome Gods* (1983), and Hernan Diaz, *In the Distance* (2017), but I do not assign these texts in the course due to the constraints of the freshman seminar. These novels show different perspectives on desert encounter and diversity, intersecting with Americans of all sorts: Mormons, Mexicans, Native Americans, immigrants and migrants. I now include Tea Obreht, *Inland* (2019) for discussion of the aborted development of the US Camel Corps in the decade before the Civil War, contrasting that with the British experience of using Camels in Australia's desert regions at the same time. The former project failed and faded into near oblivion, while the latter has made Australia home to the world's largest feral camel population.¹⁸

Modern Context: Death Valley

For the seminar's reading, I use a migrant primary source, a selection from William Lewis Manly's memoir, *Death Valley in 1849*. Born in Vermont in 1820, Manly moved west as a child and was making a living by hunting on the Wisconsin frontier, when news of California's gold lured him away.¹⁹ From Salt Lake City, his wagon train, led by a Mormon guide, set out on the Old Spanish Trail toward Los Angeles.²⁰ *En route*, rumor of an alternate, shorter route tempted a number of families to break from the trail and guide. Unbeknownst to them, this itinerary moved through one of North America's most formidable regions: Death Valley. The harrowing experience is chronicled in his autobiographical account, published more than four decades later in 1894. In this, Manly summed up the experience:

... [we] made an error in taking a cut-off route, and striking across a trackless country because it seemed to promise a shorter distance, and where thirteen of our party lie



Image 7. Yucca, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2018. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

unburied on the sands of the terribly dry valley. Those who lived were saved by the little puddles of rain water that had fallen from the small rain clouds that had been forced over the great Sierra Nevada Mountain in one of the wettest winters ever known. In an ordinary year we should have all died of thirst, so that we were lucky in our misfortune.²¹

The wagon train was forced to a halt by the grueling conditions and scarcity of water, Manly and a colleague, John Rogers, trekked out of the desert to obtain supplies and returned to liberate the stranded. It is important to note that the possibility of salvation was directly related to the region's Mexican inhabitants from whom the pair received life-saving supplies. To Manly, the desert was an abhorrent place and he wondered why providence even brought it into existence.

Modern Context: Mark Twain

By 1861 the routes to California were well established when Mark Twain headed west. Avoiding the trauma of the Civil War, he sought a "pleasure excursion" to the recently opened silver mines of Nevada.²² This western foray lasted to 1867 and took Twain from Missouri to Nevada, California, and Hawaii, before his return.²³ These adventures are recounted in his *Roughing It* (1872), in which Twain described his first encounter with a North American desert:

Imagine a vast, waveless ocean stricken dead and turned to ashes; imagine this solemn waste tufted with ash-dusted safe-brushes; imagine the lifeless silence and solitude that belong to such a place; imagine a coach, creeping like a bug through the midst of this shoreless level, and sending up tumbled volumes of dust as if it were a bug that went by steam. . . . The sun beats down with dead, blistering, relentless malignity; the perspiration is welling from every pore in man and beast . . . there is not the faintest breath of air stirring; there is not a merciful shred of cloud in all the brilliant firmament; there is not a living creature visible in any direction . . . it was so hot! And so close! And our water canteens went dry in the middle of the day and we got so thirsty! . . . the alkali dust cut through our lips, it persecuted our eyes, it ate through the delicate membranes and made our noses bleed and kept them bleeding . . . and left the desert trip nothing but a harsh reality—a thirsty, sweltering, longing, hateful reality!²⁴

The desert was, without question, a dreaded place of death:

From one extremity of this desert to the other, the road was white with bones of oxen and horses. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that we could have walked the forty miles and set our feet on a bone at every step! The desert was one prodigious graveyard. And the long-chains, wagon tyres[sic], and rotting wrecks of vehicles were almost as thick as bones . . . Do not these relics suggest something of an idea of the fearful suffering and privation the early emigrants to California endured?²⁵



Image 8. Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2016. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

It was desert, specifically, and not wilderness, in general, that caused Twain such discomfort. By contrast, Twain gushed with delight over his time in the wilderness around California's Lake Tahoe.²⁶

William Manly had entered the desert desperately searching for a way through, while Twain followed a well-established, if uncomfortable, route. Both, however, shared a common vision which loathed the desert as unforgiving obstacle, a "thirsty, sweltering, longing, hateful reality." The desert was, at best, to be endured in order to reach a "Promised Land" beyond.

An alternative American perspective began to emerge only after the establishment of the transcontinental railroad and other railroad lines in the later nineteenth century. This reduced the adversarial aspect of desert as obstacle. This process was accelerated by the emergence and spread of the automobile. One so inclined could easily make a day's "pleasure excursion" from, for example, Pasadena to Palm Springs in the Mojave Desert and then return to "civilization." Such technological changes provided the background for a new cultural perception.

Modern Context: Emergence of New Perspectives

In 1892, Charles Fletcher Lummis published *A Tramp Across the Continent*, an account of his 3,500 mile, 143-day walk from Cincinnati to Los Angeles in 1884–85, where he went to become city editor for the *Los Angeles Daily Times*. In contrast to Twain, Lummis expressed appreciation for Native American and Mexican cultures that he encountered. Explaining his rationale for making the journey on foot, he wrote: "Are there not railroad and Pullmans

enough, that you must walk? . . . But railroads and Pullmans were invented to help us hurry through life and miss most of the pleasure of it."²⁷ His walk was 'book-worthy' precisely because no one would make such a journey on foot with more 'rational' transportation options available. For Lummis, the walk was a self-promotion ticket to notoriety, and he claimed to have made "The longest and happiest 'tramp' ever made for pure pleasure."²⁸ Lummis' final stretch passed through the Mojave Desert, which, in its challenges, "far outweighed all that had gone before."²⁹ While struggling with the desert environment, Lummis signaled an important expansion of the American perspective, one which *appreciated* the cultures of the Southwest, working to preserve (an often *idealized* version of) Spanish and Mexican heritage in Southern California as well as advocating in defense of indigenous traditions in the wider region. In efforts for promotion and preservation, Lummis founded both the Southwest Society (1903) and the Southwest Museum of the American Indian (1907) in Los Angeles.

John Charles Van Dyke marked another watershed by focusing his attention on the desert landscape itself.³⁰ Van Dyke was a professor of art history at Rutgers College (now University) who temporarily turned his critical inquiry from paintings to the desert landscape, which he interpreted as he would a work of art, publishing *The Desert. Further Studies in Natural Appearances* in 1901. For Van Dyke, desert landscapes were easily accessible by pleasure trip and properly viewed, were veritable masterpieces, works of beauty and worthy of appreciation—not for anything that they could produce or do:

. . . but simply because they are beautiful in themselves and good to look upon whether they be life or death. In sublimity—the superlative degree of beauty—what land can equal the deserts with its wide plains, its grim mountains, and its expanding canopy of sky! You shall never see elsewhere as here the dome, the pinnacle, the minaret fretted with golden fire at sunrise and sunset; you shall never see elsewhere as here the sunset valleys swimming in a pink and lilac haze, the great mesas and plateaus fading into



Image 9. Mile high at Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2018. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.



Image 10. The power of wind and water, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2019. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

blue distance, the gorges and canyons banked full of purple shadow. Never again shall you see such light and air and color . . . And wherever you go, by land or by sea, you shall not forget that which you saw not but rather felt—the desolation and the silence of the desert.³¹

This new evaluation emerged decades *after* the celebration of natural landscapes depicted by Hudson River School painters like Thomas Cole (1801–48) and Frederick Church (1826–1900) or in the writings of advocates like Henry David Thoreau (1817–62) and John Muir (1838–1914), all of whom admired natural environments *other than deserts*. The technological and cultural changes in the late nineteenth century created the opening for the emergence of a new appreciation of desert.

Modern Context: Emerging Desert Voices and Visions

While Loomis and Van Dyke offered new accommodating perspectives, they were both observers from the outside, whose long-term influence was overtaken by a voice that emerged from the desert itself, Mary Hunter Austin (1868–1934), who benefited from Loomis' support.³² Her *Land of Little Rain* (1903) presented a much more intimate portrait of the desert to a non-desert American audience. This collection of essays touches on the multi-layered desert ecosystem: its topography, flora and fauna, lore, and people (all manicured for her literary needs). The desert found a popularizing voice in Mary Hunter Austin and, by 1929, it had a painter, Georgia O'Keeffe, who used the arid setting of the Southwest for inspiration, depicting desert as art.³³ This emerging re-assessment of the value of desert was reflected by the contemporaneous designation of Death Valley as a National Monument in 1933 and Joshua Tree in 1936.

While its admirers viewed the desert landscape as inherently valuable, other interests set the true worth of desert in its natural resources. The desert was useful only in as much as there were extractable minerals, precious metals, and other natural resources. This was, it should be recalled, the ostensible reason for Twain's western journey. The prospector and miner sought to locate, exploit, and leave, not to savor and preserve. To extract commodities of value, they would alter the landscape however much was needed to do so. Already concerned about this, Van Dyke noted this looming environmental threat:

Yet here is more beauty destined to destruction. It might be thought that this forsaken pot-hole in the ground would never come under the dominion of man, that its very worthlessness would be its safeguard against civilization, that none would want it, and everyone from necessity would let alone. But not even the spot deserted by reptiles shall escape the industry or the avarice (as you please) of man.³⁴

This tension between preservation and exploitation continues to resonate today.

In the course of the nineteenth century, declining gold production in northern California drove prospectors to search elsewhere, including in the arid regions of the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts.³⁵ This movement led to the further marginalization and oppression of indigenous peoples in regions that had been previously less exposed to the American



Image 11. Encountering wind caves, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2016. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

presence.³⁶ American racism and condemnation fell heavily on desert peoples. Consider Mark Twain’s depiction of the Goshute Indians:

We came across the wretchedest type of mankind . . . [They] have no villages, and no gatherings together into strictly defined tribal communities—a people whose only shelter is a rag cast on a bush to keep off a portion of the snow, and yet who inhabit one of the most rocky, wintry, repulsive wastes that our country or any other can exhibit.³⁷

In similar fashion, while John Muir championed California’s wilderness, this did not include a celebration of indigenous peoples, though he did note their lighter environmental impact.³⁸ In the state’s desert regions, the Chemehuevi, among other peoples, were driven from their traditional lands by prospectors and ranchers. This was the context in 1909 for an American posse’s pursuit across the Mojave of a Chemehuevi man known as Willie Boy. Harry Lawton cast the story in *Willie Boy: A Desert Manhunt*, which was subsequently made into a film in 1969, called *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*. The prevailing account, however, did not incorporate Native American voices which Sandos and Burgess remedied, furnishing the context for an alternate perspective in their book, *The Hunt for Willie Boy: Indian-Hating and Popular Culture*.³⁹

Modern Context: Desert as Promised Land

Beyond the human and environmental impact of mining, an even more extensive American effort was undertaken to recreate the desert by “conquering” it, transforming the arid landscape into the “Promised Land” through irrigation and agricultural development.⁴⁰ In his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* (1878), Civil War veteran, geographer, and geologist John Wesley Powell counselled against an overly optimistic portrait



Image 12. Salton Sea in the distance, 2019. Source: Author’s photograph used with permission.

of the West's potential, but his message of caution was drowned by corporate interests for whom awaiting profit was paired with an evangelical message of desert potential.⁴¹ Blissful proclamations, such as William Gilpin's (1813–94) "rain follows the plow," asserted the "scientific fact" that increased settlement and agricultural development would bring forth the environmental transformation of desert. This confident message fell on receptive ears as the nation embraced an optimistic vision of the transformative possibilities of irrigation for "reclaiming" the desert.⁴²

One such champion was William Ellsworth Smythe (1861–1922). His *The Conquest of Arid America* (1900) celebrated the extraordinary potential of the American West, which, he argued, was the most valuable American region, if only its true potential would be unlocked through irrigation.⁴³ This latent value, along with the business interests that fueled the message, was the subject of Harold Bell Wright's novel, *Winning of Barbara Worth* (1911).⁴⁴ This best-selling book spun a melodramatic tale of love set in the context of the massive desert reclamation and economic development in Southern California's Imperial Valley.⁴⁵ This unregulated effort resulted in an irrigation breach that sent the Colorado River flowing unchecked into the valley, filling up a depression then known as the Salton Sink into what is now the Salton Sea, the largest inland body of water in California. (Note: It is referred to as Salton Sea, rather than Salton Lake, because it lies below sea level). The Imperial Valley continues to be an extremely productive agricultural region, with more than two billion dollars of output annually, now with a secure irrigation infrastructure to the Colorado River, the lifeline that is the Nile of the arid American West.⁴⁶ Yet, the Salton Sea has remained. Fed largely by agricultural runoff, this desert oasis attracted hundreds of species of birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway. The Sea was stocked with fish and became a thriving resort destination, hosting water sports of all kinds. Yet, its halcyon days would not last.



Image 13. Salton Sea, 2018. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

The sea's salinity level increased and the agricultural runoff contained nitrates and pesticides, including DDT, from the era preceding federal regulations and before the existence of the Environmental Protection Agency, founded in 1970. Since that time, agricultural runoff dwindled as irrigation systems became more efficient. And so, the Salton Sea has been shrinking for decades and its salinity level is greater than that of the Pacific Ocean, making it uninhabitable for all species of fish, except for desert pupfish and non-native tilapia. Its days as a tourist destination ended decades ago and the shrinking Sea exudes a pervasive, putrid odor. As it continues to evaporate, there is fear that the pesticides locked under it will be released into a potentially toxic cloud, endangering the wider region. Yet, moving freshwater from the Colorado River into the Salton Sea would waste the precious—and very limited—water resources on which Southern California, Nevada, and Arizona depend. No solution has yet been found. In our on-site program, students gaze upon the massive Salton Sea which looks ever so majestic in the midst of the desert.

The tension between the urge to exploit and transform desert for “productive” purposes, on the one hand, and *appreciation* of the desert environment as desert mobilized activists to press federal and state governments for protected status of some desert areas. This led to California's Death Valley being designated a National Monument in 1933 and Joshua Tree in 1936 (both became National Parks in 1994).⁴⁷ The call for a substantial desert



Image 14. On the shore of the Salton Sea, 2018. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.



Image 15. Borrego, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2018. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

park across Southern California prompted the creation of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in 1941 (the site of this seminar's desert experience) and then the Salton Sea State Recreation Area and Ocotillo Wells Recreational Vehicle Area as well as federally-managed portions, including the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area and Santa Rosa Wilderness. Such designations were needed to preserve desert wilderness *because it was threatened*.

At the same time, the United States federal government restricted immense areas of desert from public access, reserving them for another sort of proving ground, not spiritual, but military. World War II and the Cold War created an urgent need for vast spaces to train soldiers and to test military technology, for which the desert environment was deemed ideal. The Great Basin, Mojave, and Sonoran Deserts became home to China Lake Naval Weapons Center, Fort Irwin National Training Center, the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twenty Nine Palms, Nellis Air Force Range and Nuclear Testing Site, the Carrizo Impact Area and US Naval Gunnery Range, Chocolate Mountain Naval Aerial Gunnery Range, El Centro Naval Auxiliary Air Station, Yuma Proving Ground, and Luke Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range, among other. The desert became the location for testing the mettle of a new sort of "chosen people."

New American Desert Tradition: Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams

The seminar's cultural content concludes with two authors: Edward Abbey (1927–89) and Terry Tempest Williams (b. 1955). For Abbey, we use selections from his *Desert Solitaire* (1968), which articulated a magnetic and spiritual connection between human and desert.⁴⁸ Abbey inverted the traditional view, deeming civilization as "cursed" and desert "blessed," though he rejected any notion of a divinity that set these values. Wilderness, in fact, was

essential to preserve human freedom and desert allowed humanity the chance to shed the artificial and superficial elements accepted as normal in our modern existence. As for the Israelites and Antony, the desert tested and purged and offered transformative possibility, all echoed in Abbey's rationale for his desert sojourn:

I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us . . . To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock.⁴⁹

The desert provided a refuge and offered the possibility of enlightenment: "The desert says nothing. Completely passive, active upon but never acting, the desert lies there like the bare skeleton of Being, spare, sparse, austere, utterly worthless, inviting not love but contemplation."⁵⁰ Abbey, like desert fathers before him, used the desert environment as a geographical setting for contemplation.

Preservation of wilderness was essential, yet how this was being accomplished created a problem.⁵¹ While ostensibly preserving wilderness, Abbey argued that the National Park Service erred in making desert wilderness too accessible, taming it through paved roads, parking lots, manicured trails and campgrounds, and conveniences of all kinds. This easy access had, in effect, destroyed the very wilderness which it sought to preserve. The "desert has become a city," to borrow from the *Life of Antony*, but for Abbey this carried the exact opposite value judgement. This was not a celebration of the expansion of good against evil, but *vice versa*, of hordes of tourists reproducing in the desert, the congestion and consumerism of the city.



Image 16. Desert Iguana, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2018. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

The seminar's academic content concludes with the powerful prose of Terry Tempest Williams, using selections from *Red. Passion and Patience in the Desert* (2001) and *An Unspoken Hunger* (1994). She provides a vision of desert encounter that is in dialogue with a diversity of peoples and identities. Closing the cultural content with her essays is useful as they specifically draw on movements, traditions, and authors previously discussed in the seminar. Students revisit, through her interpretive vision: Mary Hunter Austin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Edward Abbey; the impact of testing weapons of mass destruction on desert environments and inhabitants; religious devotion and desert experience (adding, in this case, Mormonism and the Southwest); and indigenous perspectives, particularly Navajo, on desert environments.

Preparation for the Desert Experience

After completing the exploration of cultural content in the American tradition, instruction shifts to desert ecology, introducing the flora and fauna of the Colorado Desert, the location of the seminar's experiential component at Anza Borrego Desert State Park.⁵² This shift is accompanied by the need to prepare the class for the desert encounter, ensuring that students are ready for the physical encounter ahead. The seminar's students are from diverse backgrounds and experiences, one third of whom are international, and half of whom have never had wilderness or camping experience. Thus, preparation is critical. Thanks to a partnership with our campus' Outback Adventures, outdoor specialists in the Recreation Department, the seminar provides transportation, food (having gathered necessary data on allergy and dietary restrictions), and equipment, including sleeping bags and tents. We also provide extensive guidance on appropriate clothing and footwear. Desert temperatures vary greatly over the course of the year with the fall term's trip in November, the winter trip in February, and the spring trip in May, and varies significantly between day and night. This preparation is integrated into class meetings as we approach the weekend trip. Reflecting on this preparation, one student noted: "One does not simply walk into the desert. It's not a decision to be made out of the blue, like starting a new series on Netflix or adding the extra spicy hot sauce that comes with its own consequences." Another noted: "This was the first time in my life I had to worry about the amount of water I had, something I would never think about it in the "civilized" world. The different types of cacti, especially cholla, and the unpredictability of the ground in front of me always kept me alert and on my toes."

The desert experience calls for a heightened awareness beyond what students are accustomed to in their daily routines on campus, with virtually every step requiring greater vigilance due to the ubiquity of potential harm, as one student later reflected: "... when you are in the desert, you should pay attention to the present but not your iPhone, since once you stumble over a stone, it's likely for you to hit a cactus." This heightened awareness, being fully present in the moment, suggests a link with the desert as setting for contemplation, a



Image 17. Our desert lodging, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2017. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

theme evident from Antony to Abbey and Williams. Even Mark Twain acknowledged the contemplative quality of desert, but for him it was the contemplation of death rather than ultimate reality: “. . . [through the desert] we moved in the midst of solitude, silence and desolation. Every twenty steps we passed the skeleton of some dead beast of burden, with its dust-coated skin stretched tightly over its empty ribs. Frequently a solemn raven sat upon the skull or the hips and contemplated the passing coach with meditative serenity.”⁵³

The experiential component occurs over a weekend to avoid conflict with other classes. We depart campus early morning on Saturday and return Sunday evening. This allows for two days of activity and the experience of one night in the desert. The program exposes students to a variety of desert topography at different elevations (ranging from near sea level to 5000 feet), including slot canyons, wind caves, desert oases, and badlands. The night is spent in a desert valley with no facilities or water (other than what we bring), abiding by Leave No Trace principles for our primitive camping experience.⁵⁴

This is another impactful experience for many students. Explained one student, “Sleeping under the stars in a place with minimal light pollution has been on my bucket list for years, and I found the actual event to be nothing short of extraordinary. After quelling my initial, overblown anxieties about being alone in this endeavor as everyone else retreated to the tents (see: rattlesnake slithering into my sleeping bag, coyotes taking advantage of my isolation and attacking, freezing to death at the mercy of the wind and cold), I realize there was a sort of freedom in this act, as well. I was in the palm of Mother Nature, with



Image 18. Reflection time for students, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2016. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

only my sleeping bag preserving my sense of civilization, and this allowed me to enjoy her magnificent graces." Another noted: ". . . I then looked up to the sky and stars; bothered by the bugs, I turned my light off, and I was stunned by the stars and their amazing brightness. As an urban child who grew up in Beijing, a city famous for its pollution nowadays, I can barely see stars . . . So, the sky full of stars really dazzled me and I felt I could not speak. At that moment, the idea that the book *Desert Solitaire* demonstrated came into my mind: the pursuit of purity and nature in the desert, the amazing silence and serenity."

For students accustomed to perpetual digital access, the program offered a temporary reprieve and a new experiment of being "off the grid," as one participating articulated:

I did not have any internet signal in the desert . . . , but with the hikes and all the things we did in the first day, I didn't feel bored at all. Usually when I have wi-fi, I would check my phone every ten or twenty minutes. But when I did not have internet, I even found myself not thinking about my phones anymore. Maybe it is because the hikes were so tiring or maybe because the absence of internet let me lose the interest to look at my phone . . .

Pedagogy in the Desert

There is discussion and on-site teaching throughout the program and two one-hour reflection times, one each day. I provide a few guiding questions to help students, who, with

journals in hand, find a solitary spot (within a safe distance that I can monitor) and experience the stillness. I was somewhat surprised early on to realize that students routinely identified these reflection times as a favorite aspect of the entire program, affording them time to draw together thoughts and experiences in a somewhat contemplative experience. There was time for introspection and for a reconsideration of the perspectives: One student reflected, “. . . I stand on the side of Terry Tempest Williams following my time in the desert . . . I can see the beauty and life that Williams writes about and the element of spirituality that she found in the desert. The Biblical use of the desert environment as a place synonymous with Satan is not one that I can relate with anymore. My previous dislike of the desert allowed me to sympathize with the Judeo-Christian interpretation, but I am firmly on the side of Coyote Clan now.”

At the conclusion of each seminar, students submit a final writing assignment, reflecting on course content through the lens of their experience in the desert. These assignments offer, to some extent, a qualitative form of assessment, and other basic assessment methods are employed. For undergraduate courses, UC San Diego relies on a confidential evaluation system called Course and Professor Evaluation (CAPE) which students submit at the end of term. As of writing this article, there have been twenty-two wilderness seminars and twenty of these have received the highest (100%) student course approval rating. For some students, the seminar has a powerful impact: One student responded, “. . . this short weekend was probably the most defining event of my first-year experience,” and another suggested, “My desert experience was probably one of the most enlightening experiences of my life.”



Image 19. Marching on, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2016. Source: Author's photograph used with permission.

Conclusion

“God, Satan, and the Desert” advances the value of experiential learning to enhance the academic classroom experience in the humanities and of humanities content for enriching the wilderness encounter. The desert component offers a potent pedagogical setting and learning experience, as one student succinctly expressed: “Desert is a place where all five of my senses were on edge and emphasized . . . the desert seminar has changed the way I look at wilderness.” Another student reflection reveals students see the benefit of merging the academic and the experiential:

In this sense, the course without the desert trip would seem very much like being taught how to ride a horse without actually having a real horse. While in the wilderness, I experienced and lived the texts . . . I walked in the foot trails of settlers and Native Americans. I experienced the heat of the day and cool of the night. I slept under the stars and watched the sun peer its head from around the corners of the mountains. My highlights and challengers were one and the same because in order to experience joy and beauty I had to struggle. I had to climb to the top of Marshall South’s home to look out over the valley . . . and I had to wander the desert to see its beauty.

Moreover, student responses reveal that the journey provides a level of meaning that transcends the classroom:

“. . . As much as I want to be a member of Coyote Clan [reference to a Terry Tempest Williams essay], I think I am lacking in the deep-set roots that are required to be such . . . I often think back on how I felt that weekend: free, unbound, and intoxicated with the promise of potential. I would not have changed anything about the trip . . .”



Image 20. Wildlife, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, 2017. Source: Author’s photograph used with permission.

Being in a position to connect students with their “promise of potential” keeps me motivated to continue this project as soon as the public health situation is safe to do so.

The seminar lends itself to endless possibilities with so many alluring texts for possible inclusion, from desert reflections, like Joseph Wood Krutch’s *The Desert Year* (1951), Craig Childs’ *The Secret Knowledge of Water* (2000), and Ellen Meloy’s *Anthropology of Turquoise* (2002), to works of fiction, including Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold, Fame, Citrus* (2015), Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2015), and on and on.⁵⁵ Still, there is another pedagogical dimension that is overdue, calling for a return to where the seminar started, with cross-cultural inquiry that emphasizes the global dimension of the topic. In our present era of climate change and the challenges of freshwater, voices from diverse desert cultures, set in a world history context, can provide valuable insight for reflection. This requires developing a cohesive pedagogical approach that can fit within the constraints of the freshman seminar and in the specific region of the Colorado Desert. And so, “God, Satan, and the Desert” is a pedagogical experiment in progress, if temporarily halted, for which I welcome ideas and inquiries from all those invested or interested in such projects.

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NOTES

¹ On experiential education, see Jay W. Roberts, *Experiential Education in the College Context: What it is, how it Works, and Why it Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Scott D. Wurdinger and Julie A. Carlson, *Teaching for Experiential Learning: Five Approaches that Work* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); Bruce Martin, Christine Cashel, Mark Wagstaff, Mary Breunig, *Outdoor Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2006).

² On Anza Borrego, see Lowell Lindsay and Diana Lindsay, *The Anza-Borrego Desert Region* 5th ed. (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 2006); Lawrence Hogue, *All the Wild and Lonely Places: Journeys in a Desert Landscape* (Washington: Island Press, 2000); Choral Pepper, *Desert Lore of Southern California* 2nd ed. (San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 1999); Richard Pourade, *Anza Conquers the Desert: The Anza Expeditions From Mexico to California and the Founding of San Francisco 1774–1776* (San Diego: Copley Books, 1971); Anza Borrego Desert Foundation, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://theabf.org>, accessed April 1, 2021.

³ The New Revised Standard Version is used for all Bible passages in the text. Accessible at <https://www.bible.com/versions/2016-nrsv-new-revised-standard-version>.

⁴ William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 579.

⁵ On Satan, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Satan: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 57–104. See also Derwas Chitty: *The Desert A City* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1999; originally, 1966).

⁷ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the letter of Marcellinus*, Tr. Robert C. Gregg (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), 31–32.

⁸ *Life of Antony*, 33–34.

⁹ *Life of Antony*, 37–38.

¹⁰ *Life of Antony*, 48.

¹¹ *Life of Antony*, 43 and 62.

¹² Harmless, 65, quoting Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 287–89.

¹³ Barton Barbour, *Jedidiah Smith: No Ordinary Mountain Man* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 25–44; Kevin Starr, *California: A History* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2007), 65–70. See also, Hampton Sides, *Blood and Thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006); David Roberts, *A Newer World: Kit Carson, John C. Frémont, and the Claiming of the American West* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

¹⁵ Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 224.

¹⁶ Kevin Starr, *California: A History* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2007), 73–90.

¹⁷ See Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); A.L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ For an insightful desert encounter and discussion of camels in the Australian outback, see Robyn Davidson, *Tracks: One Woman’s Journey Across 1700 Miles of Australian Outback*. (New York: Vintage, 1980). On the California context, see note 17; also, Kent G. Lightfoot and Otis Parrish, *California Indians and their Environment: An Introduction* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); Andrew Rolle and Arthur C. Verge, *California: A History* 8th ed. (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

¹⁹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 45–59.

²⁰ On the Mormon impact, see Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (New York: Bison Books, 1992; original work published 1964).

²¹ William L. Manly, *Death Valley in ’49: The Autobiography of a Pioneer* (Santa Barbara: The Narrative Press, 2001; original work published 1894). On Manly, see Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 19–34.

²² Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: New American Library, 1980; original work published 1872), 29–30.

²³ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 61–75.

²⁴ Mark Twain. *Roughing It* (New York: New American Library, 1980; original work published 1872), 115–16.

[25](#) Twain, 121.

[26](#) Twain, 133–36.

[27](#) Charles Fletcher Lummis, *A Tramp Across the Continent* (Forgotten Books, 2012; original work published 1892), 1. See also, Mark Thompson, *American Character: The Curious Life of Charles Fletcher Lummis and the Rediscovery of the Southwest* (New York: Arcade, 2001); Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 48–60. For an insightful reflection on walking, see Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

[28](#) Lummis, 270.

[29](#) Lummis, 259.

[30](#) Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 95–111.

[31](#) Charles Van Dyke, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 232; see also, Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 75–87.

[32](#) Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003; original work published 1903); see also Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 61–74.

[33](#) See Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, *Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Norton, 2005); Roxana Robinson, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

[34](#) Charles Van Dyke, *The Desert. Further Studies in Natural Appearances* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 57.

[35](#) Allan Schoenherr, *A Natural History of California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 423–425.

[36](#) Kevin Starr, *California: A History* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2007), 87, 99–100.

[37](#) Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: New American Library, 1980; original work published 1872), 118.

[38](#) John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004; original work published 1869), 30–31. On Muir, see Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[39](#) Clifford Trafzer, Luke Madrigal, and Antony Madrigal, *Chemehuevi People of the Coachella Valley* (Coachella, CA: Chemehuevi Press, 1997), 86–92; James Kaiser, *Joshua Tree: The Complete Guide* 4th ed. (China: Destination Press, 2010), 89–105; James A. Sandos and Larry E. Burgess, *The Hunt for Willie Boy: Indian-Hating and Popular Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).

[40](#) Kevin Starr, *California: A History* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2007), 167–71; cf., William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 608–12.

[41](#) Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Opening of the West* (New York: Penguin, 1992; original work published 1954), 202–242, 294–350. See also, Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 102–115; Donald Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*, 2nd ed. (1879), accessed April 1, 2021, <http://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/70039240>.

[42](#) Peter Wild, ed. *The New Desert Reader* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), 78–91. See, Donald J. Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848–1902* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992)

⁴³ William Ellsworth Smythe, *The Conquest of Arid America* (New York: MacMillan, 1899); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 77–90; Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 102–115.

⁴⁴ Harold Bell Wright, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 2010; original work published 1911).

⁴⁵ Phillip H. Round, *The Impossible Land. Story and Place in California's Imperial Valley* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008). On Water, see David Carle, *Introduction to Water in California*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). The Salton Sea is located at the lowest part of a wider region in the Colorado Desert known as the Salton Trough. The Colorado River has previously changed course naturally and this region was once the site of what is referred to today as Lake Cahuilla, which disappeared over the course of the sixteenth century. See Clarence A. Hall and Lauri L. Holbrook, *Introduction to the Geology of Southern California and Its Native Plants* (University of California Press, 2007). For an insightful reflection on water in American deserts, see Craig Childs, *The Secret Knowledge of Water* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2000).

⁴⁶ See the classic work, Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking, 1986); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁴⁷ Frank Wheat, *California Desert Miracle: The Fight for Desert Parks and Wilderness* (San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 1999).

⁴⁸ Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1968); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 149–64; Peter Wild, *The Opal Desert* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 146–162.

⁴⁹ Abbey, 6.

⁵⁰ Abbey, 240

⁵¹ Abbey, 39–59.

⁵² Bruce M. Pavlik, *The California Deserts. An Ecological Rediscovery* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008); John Sowell, *Desert Ecology: An Introduction to Life in the Arid Southwest* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2001); Mark Johnson, *The Ultimate Desert Handbook: A Manual for Desert Hikers, Campers, and Travelers* (New York: Ragged Mountain Press/McGraw Hill, 2003); Gerald A. Rosenthal, *Sonoran Desert Life*, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale: Academic Press, 2007); Stephen Ingram, *Cacti, Agaves, and Yuccas of California and Nevada* (Los Olivos: Cachuna Press, 2008); Clarence A. Hall, *Introduction to the Geology of Southern California and its Native Plants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁵³ Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: New American Library, 1980; original work published 1872), 126.

⁵⁴ “Leave No Trace” principles are discussed as part of the desert preparation. On this, see “Leave No Trace: The Seven Principles,” accessed April 1, 2021, at <https://lnt.org/why/7-principles/>.

⁵⁵ In addition to the texts listed, see *The Desert Reader: A Literary Companion*, ed. Gregory McNamee (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Aidan Tynan, *Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Wasteland Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Ben Ehrenreich, *Desert Notebooks: A Road Map for the End of Time* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2020).