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Beyond the Fringe

Carl Abbott

Portland State University, d3ca@pdx.edu

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Beyond the Fringe

Carl Abbott

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BEYOND THE FRINGE

Carl Abbott

Lincoln Bramwell. *Wilderburbs: Communities on Nature's Edge*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014. xxiv + 309 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, notes, and index. \$34.95.

Andrew Needham. *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014. ix + 321 pp. Figures, notes, index. \$35.00.

If you've driven around the Western states, you've seen them, perhaps without paying much attention. Here, along the mountain highway is a sign pointing up a bumpy side road to "lots for sale, 15 acres" and then, a bit further on, a much more elegant entrance gate to a golf course and condo community screened from passing traffic by thick woods. Lift your eyes from the road for a quick glance at the encompassing landscape and you're startled to see an army of Martian tripod invaders from *The War of the Worlds*—no, wait, it's a procession of 120-foot pylons cutting across the landscape to carry 500-kilovolt electric lines from hydro dams and power plants to metropolitan customers.

These commonplace sights in the U.S. landscape are manifestations of the long arm of the metropolis. Large cities are imperial entities that stake out claims to the resources of surrounding territories. A classic theme of urban history is the rivalry among nineteenth-century cities to dominate the trade of developing hinterlands—pulling the products of farm, forest, and mine to urban factories and shipping facilities, and sending manufactured products the other way—with lucrative cuts for city bankers, merchants, and manufacturers. Boosters and city builders imagined regional geographies and then built the railroads, warehouses, wharves, and shipping lines that turned imagination into networks of trade and investment. The choice of locations for Federal Reserve banks in 1914 codified the results of a century of interurban competition by recognizing the special importance for the American West of San Francisco, Dallas, Kansas City, and Minneapolis–St. Paul.

A city also has a distinctive metabolism that depends on interaction with its surrounding region. It takes in building materials, food, manufactured goods, water, energy, and air, all to construct its physical "body," power its

systems, and sustain its living inhabitants. An urban metabolism also emits waste products in the form of air and water pollutants, sewage, and truckload after truckload of trash for distant landfills. The urban search by New York, Boston, Seattle, and other cities to tap more and more distant sources of water is a thriving subfield of urban/environmental history, and the efforts of San Francisco and Los Angeles have become embedded in anti-urban morality stories about the Hetch-Hetchy Valley and Owens Valley. Andrew Needham in *Power Lines* aims to elevate the urban search for electric energy to the same level of attention.

Cities and their regions also exchange people. Cities draw in ambitious young people from far and near, particularly from hinterland farms and towns (in Willa Cather's *O, Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson stays home but Carl Lindstrom heads for Chicago). In turn, cities "trade" for these newcomers by sending out certain categories of people. The prisons that dot the rural landscape of most twenty-first-century states are filled with the poor, marginalized, and criminal from its cities. On a happier note, hinterland amenity zones become what I have elsewhere called "weekendlands" where lakes, rivers, mountains, and coasts support growing tourist economies. The "young old" in their early retirement years move from cul-de-sac neighborhoods to seasonal or permanent homes in the same weekendlands to fish, hike, and contemplate nature. It is within this framework of demographic transfers that Lincoln Bramwell places *Wilderburbs: Communities on Nature's Edge*.

Bramwell defines wilderburbs—his own coinage—as "traditional-sized subdivisions located far beyond the city's edge, built to achieve a new ideal about what it means to live with nature" (p. xvii). The book focuses on three communities: Burland Ranchettes located forty-plus miles southwest of Denver, Paa-Ko located twenty-five miles east of Albuquerque on the far slope of the Sandia Mountains, and the Snyderville Basin thirty miles east of Salt Lake City in the vicinity of Park City. The first chapter details the real estate development process, highlighting the difficulty of developing and marketing land in relatively isolated locations and the consequently slow development of the case-study communities. Bramwell also notes an important shift in the 1980s from an earlier generation of buyers who were seeking summer retreats to a later generation with an increasing desire for year-round living, leading to an associated demand for winterized houses and better public services.

The three ensuing chapters explore the problems that arise when suburban expectations meet the natural constraints of water supply, wildfire, and wildlife. They include good background sections on western water law, the basic differences between urban and wildland firefighting, and changes in wildlife management concepts. Bramwell's underlying theme is the mismatch between culturally formed expectations about wildland living and the physical realities of real places: "The most compelling link between wilderburbs and

the metro areas is the mindset many homeowners bring with them from the city. Rural developments are physically disconnected from the metro area, but residents are still connected culturally to suburban norms" (p. xix). The retirees and commuters of wilderburbia are thus engaged in the same process of inscribing suburban values on nonmetropolitan landscapes that William Philpott described for closely related infrastructure and real estate development in *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country* (2013).

Each type of interface—between subdivisions and water, trees, and animals—brings problems. In the Rocky Mountain West, where the sample communities are located, the fractured geology makes access to groundwater problematic—neighbors can drill wells with very different results. In addition, developers are usually undercapitalized, with the result that water supply solutions have repeatedly lagged behind needs, while the doctrine of prior appropriation has made much nearby stream flow unavailable. And, of course, many residents expect to maintain green lawns and lush plantings. Because wilderburbers like to live among the trees, they are also vulnerable to wildfire. The people of the agricultural West are protected from fire by cleared fields and pastures and know to keep brush and trees back from buildings, but transplanted urbanites do not. Two of the major wildfire-fighting tragedies of recent years (Storm King in Colorado and Yarnell Hill in Arizona) were directly linked to efforts to save houses built in highly vulnerable locations. And then there is wildlife. Deer are cute until they munch up ornamental plantings. So are bears, until they become habituated to humans as food suppliers and learn how to break into houses.

The author fully recognizes that "wilderburb" is a hard concept to pin down. A high-end wilderburb can look a lot like a destination resort, but it is intended for individual homeowners who live there either during recreation seasons or year-round. At the same time, it is not simply a district peppered with randomly located, individually built mountain homes on twenty-acre ranchettes. It overlaps with places that geographer William Wyckoff, in *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide* (2014), called "amenity exurbs" and the landscape of the "urban-wildland ecotone." The latter is the zone where expanding metropolitan areas intermingle with forests and wildlife in ways indistinguishable from freestanding wilderburbs, a point that Mike Davis also made in *The Ecology of Fear* (1998).

The book raises abundant questions for further research. Bramwell assumes the existence of pools of metropolitan homebuyers to provide the market for wilderburb housing. Because his interest is the interaction of these new communities with their natural environment, however, we do not learn much about wilderburb residents as a group. Left to other investigators are important sociological questions. What proportion of residents come from the nearest metropolitan area and how many from further afield? How many housing

units are occupied year-round, seasonally by one family, or by a procession of short-term users by way of, for instance, VRBO and Airbnb? How many wilderburh households depend on retirement income, on telecommuting, on physical commuting to the big city, and on work in the community and its rural surroundings? How often do residents travel to the big cities, and for what purposes? Behind these sorts of questions is a basic spatial issue: should we better understand these places as far-flung extensions of their closest metropolis, or as manifestations of a general and diffuse metropolitan culture?

Andrew Needham also writes to challenge the spatial limitations of metropolitan history, which he sees as being limited to city-suburb relations while neglecting the larger regional context and connections implicated in metropolitan growth. Zeroing in on the boom city of Phoenix, he traces the construction of a regional energy system that enlisted rural northern Arizona in service to urbanizing southern Arizona. The "power lines" of the title are both the physical high-voltage lines that connect generating sources to Phoenix and the invisible lines of political influence that radiate from the metropolis. Urban and environmental historians will think immediately of William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991). Where Cronon emphasized the impacts of new technologies and structural changes in the Midwestern economy, however, Needham focuses on actions and debates among individual (and often memorable) decision makers in Phoenix, in Washington, D.C., and on the Navajo reservation.

Needham begins with "Fragments," a background chapter on the 1920s and 1930s that describes the Colorado River Compact, Boulder Dam, and the disastrous reduction of Navajo herds by federal officials during the 1930s. These are stories previously told, but Needham summarizes them clearly and frames them in terms of the flow and embodiment of energy. For example, he considers forms as different as fast-moving water that turns turbines, pumped water that irrigates fields, and herds of sheep. The next two chapters, grouped as "Demand," detail the rise of Phoenix, the energetic work of its boosters, the development of a nexus of banking and real estate interests, and the dependence of its growth agenda on electric power. Needham's cogent explication of the intricacies of energy regulation and the expansion programs of electric utilities makes a potentially opaque topic interesting. The next two chapters, grouped as "Supply," examine the options and choices for increasing the amount of electricity delivered to Phoenix. Included are the economic development needs that led the Navajo Nation to accept coal-mining and power generation by Phoenix utilities and the establishment of an interconnected power grid that integrates electricity from Boulder and Glen Canyon Dams with privately generated power. Two chapters on "Protest" revisit the environmental activism that blocked further Colorado River dams and detail the limited success

of Navajo radicals who resisted the further exploitation of Navajo resources for the benefit of Phoenix and Los Angeles.

Needham frames the debates in terms of responses to changing energy technologies (particularly the increasing capacity of long-distance transmission); the competing regional interests of Arizona, the upper Colorado River states, and the 800-pound gorilla of California; and the long conflict between advocates of public power and private utilities. His story has roles for key actors known largely within Arizona, along with figures of national influence such as David Brower, Stewart Udall, and Henry Jackson. He weaves the several strands into a rich and detailed story that follows a classic dramatic structure. The first chapter is, in effect, a prologue setting up the coming conflict between Phoenix and Navajoland: "Two peoples, both alike in dignity but not in political clout, in fair Arizona, where we lay our scene," to paraphrase Shakespeare. There follow the gathering of opposing forces as Phoenix boosters and Navajo leaders pursue their economic development strategies; rising action and tentative resolution with the Four Corners Power Plant and regional electric inertia; and then a second climax as a new force enters the action in the form of the Sierra Club, the *deus ex machina* that "saves" the Colorado River. Beware when the gods intervene in human affairs, however, for the resolution came at the expense of further exploitation of Navajo coal that disproportionately benefitted outsiders rather than Indians. In Needham's words, "the Sierra Club found a solution in the spatial reorganization of the Colorado Plateau into what we might think of as sacred and industrial spaces. . . . the Grand Canyon became protected sacred space. The Navajo Reservation, slightly to the east, became increasingly industrial" (p. 211).

Needham places the rise of Phoenix within the mid-twentieth-century enthusiasm for electricity as the basis for building modern and humane cities to supplant the coal-fouled cities of the previous century, citing Lewis Mumford's hopes for an enlightened neotechnic age. By attracting "clean" aerospace and electronics industries, Phoenicians worked toward combining new suburbs with the "industrial garden" as conceptualized by historian Robert Self. Indeed, the development of Phoenix strikingly realized the progressive planning vision of the documentary film "The City," made for the New York World's Fair of 1939 with the participation of Mumford. After depicting the smoky squalor of Pittsburgh and the frenzied anthill of New York, the film cuts to Boulder Dam, to electricity surging through new power lines and an airliner that delivers viewers to a new, gleaming white suburban factory within walking distance of a beautiful new suburban community. Phoenix may not have been what Lewis Mumford envisioned from his bucolic home along the lordly Hudson River, but it was where his ideas led.

The Arizona story has parallels in other regions that Needham leaves for others to pursue. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, Portland, Seattle,

and Spokane battled over control of power from Columbia River dams in the 1930s, before moving to an interconnected regional system managed by the Bonneville Power Administration. Lewis Mumford himself made a key contribution to the policy debate on a visit to Portland in 1938. The dams not only inspired Woody Guthrie ("Pastures of Plenty," "Roll On, Columbia"), but also allowed the large cities to displace costs of growth onto fishing communities by damaging salmon reproduction and onto Indians by drowning traditional upstream fishing sites. Led by Seattle, the region then undertook a nuclear power generating program that managed to open one of five planned nuclear plants 180 miles east of the metropolis at the already contaminated site of Hanford, Washington, just a bit less than the distance from Phoenix to the Navajo Generating Station in Page, Arizona.¹

Bramwell's analysis sticks close to the ground, both the literal ground on which his wilderburbs arise and the closely observed experiences of individual residents whose sometimes poignant, sometimes baffling, and sometimes infuriating comments pepper the discussion. In comparison, Needham is more explicitly theoretical, referencing both ideas about energy as an encompassing system and critical analysis of flows of capital and its fixation in place. That is, when financial capital is turned into real property, the result is spatial inertia in which the weight of physically embedded capital limits future options—we couldn't replan San Francisco after its earthquake and fire, nor are we willing to abandon precariously situated New Orleans. Fixed capital, in other words, is one of the most powerful determinants of path dependency. Another quick way to compare the two books is to note that *Wilderburbs* is an entry in the series "Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books" (as are Wyckoff's *How To Read the American West* and Philpott's *Vacationland*). *Power Lines* appears in "Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America." Natural systems are independent forces in Bramwell's environmental history, shaping and limiting human plans. In Needham's narrative, powerful individuals make decisions that harness and distort natural systems.

Bramwell and Needham share a concern—perhaps even outrage—about the exercise of power without accountability. Land developers have the power to start mountain subdivisions but can leave problems such as inadequate water supplies or dangerous housing locations to others to fix. Residents have power to force firefighting decisions whose worst consequences may fall on others (a point that Bramwell, with several years of experience fighting wildfires, makes very clear). The Bureau of Indian Affairs appears more accountable to abstract theories of assimilation or self-sufficiency than to the people it regulates. Phoenix has had economic power to utilize regional resources, but not the willingness to acknowledge or mitigate the consequences; even the smoke plumes from the northern Arizona power plants blow away from the metropolis.

This last point suggests another similarity between the two books. The Mountain West, like every other part of the modern world, is embedded in the regulatory state. It may look like the great wide open, but it is institutionally full, layered with regulations enforced by public bureaucracies. The history of the West over the last century is inextricably bound up with the extension and articulation of state power through resource management agencies, infrastructure investment, the defense establishment, immigration control, trade policy, education policy, and welfare programs. The intricacies of federal utility regulation and federal water and energy policy are central to Needham's story, while the details of state and local land use and water policies are equally important for Bramwell.

The authors are absolutely correct that metropolitan history should not stop with the suburban fringe. We might think in terms of geographer D. W. Meinig's now classic description of culture regions as consisting of an intense core, a surrounding domain of substantial influence, and a larger sphere of attenuating influence.² If the Denver metropolis is the core, its domain encompasses the other Colorado Piedmont cities and the Front Range recreation zone of communities as modest as Burwell Ranchettes and as elaborate as Estes Park. Its sphere reaches to the western edge of the state where traditional cities and towns like Craig and Grand Junction are interspaced with resort and retirement communities from Steamboat Springs to Telluride. The domain of Phoenix embraces Maricopa and Pinal counties (the official metropolitan area), Sedona, and Salt River dams; its sphere includes both the Colorado River dams and the Indian Country of Arizona reservations. Thinking in terms of regions—cultural, economic, metropolitan—reminds us how much regional relationships and patterns are in constant flux as energy, water, investment, credit, goods, people, and political influence flow in continually changing patterns.

Needham takes his detailed analysis into the 1970s, but Phoenix has not stopped growing. With a current metropolitan population greater than 4 million (it added 74,000 people from 2014 to 2015 alone), its air conditioners will keep humming with Navajo coal. Given the demographic bump of retiring baby boomers, wilderburbs won't go away either, creating more wildfire crises and painful encounters with wildlife. Both books give us insightful history that illuminates the present dilemmas and challenges of the American West, and they remind us that the boardinghouse reach of major cities makes nearly all recent regional history a part also of metropolitan history.

Carl Abbott is Emeritus Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University. Recent books include *How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America* (2008) and *Imagined Frontiers: Contemporary America and Beyond* (2015). His forthcoming book is *Imagining Urban Futures: Science Fiction Cities and What We Might Learn from Them*.

1. Charles McKinley, *Uncle Sam in the Pacific Northwest: Federal Management of Natural Resources in the Pacific Northwest* (1952); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (1995); Katrine Barber, *Death of Celilo Falls* (2005); Daniel Pope, *Nuclear Implosions: The Rise and Fall of the Washington Public Power Supply System* (2008).

2. D. W. Meinig's magisterial summation is *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History* (4 vols: 1988–2004).