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READING THE WAY HOME:
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ABSTRACT

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By

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Much has been written in recent years about the role of literature, the state of the natural environment, and the human relationships that develop and impact each of these areas. Barry Lopez, in both his fiction and nonfiction writing, explores these relationships in what appears to be a new way. Lopez combines the influences and roles of landscape and literature, arguing that recognition of the interaction between these areas and the human sense of belonging might provide a stabilizing sense of place or understanding of home.

To map this development out, this paper explores the voice with which Lopez endows the natural world, the understanding of literature and reading within which Lopez works, and how the combination of the similar roles that Lopez sees both literature and landscape to possess might provide to his reader's a different sense of the world in which they live.

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Introduction

"Where is your place?" asks the character only identified as "the caretaker" in Barry Lopez's short story "Pearyland" (Field Notes 66). It seems a rather simple question. Within the context of the story, it serves to encompass, more or less, the usual introductory questions: where are you from? where is your home? why are you here? what do you want here? Really, it is a simple question, yet it is one that Lopez seems to argue, in light of much of the current sociological debate, might not be so easily answered by many. Culture has, according to a recent interview with Lopez, lost touch with the natural world, and in doing so, it has "become solipsistic. It produces too much self-referential material and loses a sense of itself in the world because it creates too much of the world in which it lives" (O'Connell 30). Lopez frequently depicts individuals in his writing who have lost their sense of place, and in doing so, he reflects the characterization often attributed to the individual in twentieth-century society.

One simply cannot read twentieth-century philosophical or sociological texts without encountering some element of inquiry into the twentieth-century "crisis" in western

culture. From both the political left and right, from socialists, feminists, Buddhists, the pope, poets, and news anchormen, we hear that we are in a state of uncenteredness, that as a culture we have become shiftless, lost our sense of identity, community, or cultural character. We hear that individuality has been lost to the ever-growing technological and capitalistic "machine" that once was culture. We hear that literature, and God, are dead, and that the American mind has closed. Our consolation in all this is that imminent doom is on the horizon. None of it all will really concern us in a world, if the conflicting and ever-changing assertions of science are to be believed, that will soon be without ozone protection and be in both an ice age and unprecedented global warming at the same time. And, who knows, some of this may well be true.

Invariably fingers are pointed, usually with overt and partisan political motivation. Blame is ascribed, and books are written. Of course, these lamentations do not lack the voices of those in higher education, who in lengthy treatises and with typical aplomb and citing each other, reduce all the arguments to their basest elements and determine that these elements are indeterminate and, thus, void of any true or remarkable insight. Reassuringly, they

tell us that we create our own world, that meaning is meaningless, and that words and literature are just another technology, sociological tools by which our psyche is shaped or misshaped.

The Nietzschean idea that when everything is permitted nihilism is inevitable plays right along with the idea that in destroying meaning we have rendered the idea of morals or right action unfixable. Thus, many of the same thinkers that wrestle with the dilemma of the modern cultural malaise do so without regard to the fact that the post-modern critical lens through which they see that world disallows them any stable standard by which to judge it. And while, indeed, little is without shades of uncertainty, attempting to evaluate and measure the nature of that uncertainty through admittedly or identifiably instable means is simply a lesson in futility, and that seems certain.

The literature that arises from and is positioned within such a culture reflects the impact of the swirling social and intellectual winds. Echoes of Eliot's hollow men, who seek for something to suffice and who measure out their lives with coffee spoons, haunt the literature of the era. Frost's questioning ovenbird asks what might well be considered a theme in today's literature, with its query of

"what to make of a diminished thing" (96). In both his fiction and nonfiction Barry Lopez places himself and his work among the voices in this conversation, both representing and opposing many of the common themes in today's literary criticism. For him, there is determinable right action, words still have meaning, and literature plays a meaningful role; his voice seems to occupy a position somewhere between the modern and the postmodern encampments.

Lopez too recognizes the discenteredness so commonly maligned in the modern individual. One sees in the work of Barry Lopez a profoundly sincere concern for his fellow humans and for the world in which they live. The human relationship with its environment and the corresponding impact of that relationship on both the people and the land seems foremost among his concerns. While he recognizes that one of the writer's chief function is to entertain (Aton 9), Lopez demonstrates in his fiction the same focus that is so much a part of his nonfiction and essay writing: through the recognition of the natural world, its landscape, and the literature into which we immerse ourselves, we might achieve a sense of place in our world, a centering sense of home.

A Sense of Home

Of course any such endeavor, approaching ideas of nature, place, or some sense of stability, requires first a bit of definition and qualification. The idea of place as this paper depicts it does not assume or imagine that there is but one place which each member of a given culture must occupy in order to achieve some sense of comfort; instead, and quite the opposite, the idea of place, as it is depicted within this paper and, seemingly, within Lopez's work is one which might incorporate wherever it is that one might find oneself. Though the sense of place that Lopez seems to be hoping for his reader is never quantified, it would appear that it is not an exclusive term, but rather an inclusive one. In fact, by presenting such diversity within his writing, depicting mystical, spiritual, philosophical, and geographic approaches to place, Lopez seems to urge that place need not necessarily be a physical place.

Vergil's Aeneas, for instance, while forced to flee from his home, is able to re-establish that sense upon arriving in his new home, what would eventually become Rome, for his sense of home relied not upon a specific geographic place, but rather upon his community, his family, and his *penates*, those household gods that

represented not just a religious foundation, but also a physical sense of belonging.

In a similar fashion, the idea of a *quarencia* also might shed light on the nature of Lopez's depiction of the sense of stability that might be achieved through a sense of place. Bulls, having become injured or weary, often retreat to an area of perceived safety; they establish an area within the bullring that is referred to as their *quarencia*; this area, though no different than any other area within the ring, allows a sense of security and strength. The bullfighter, if able to determine the bull's *quarencia*, typical attempts to prohibit the bull from achieving it, as once the bull has, it becomes a much greater force with which to be reckoned. Within this arbitrarily determined place within the ring, the bull often reestablishes a sense of advantage and power.

Place then might be a particular geographic location within which one senses stability or it could well be some entirely imagined or internal phenomena. Milton writes, for instance, "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (Paradise Lost I. 254). Place relies largely upon perspective and acknowledgement of one's surroundings and how those surroundings lend themselves to a sense of place and not

merely the coordinates of some blip upon a Global Positioning System.

Next, attempting to define "nature" as it is used throughout this text requires a bit of exposition. Nailing down the precise nature of "nature" is, of course, a frustrating enterprise, and potentially endless. If we consider that the naming of things or ideas is an attempt, if not to fix something in order that it be mutually intelligible, to at least establish some position which might be recognized as stable enough for long enough to serve the purpose of being understood, it seems apparent that it is quite a dynamic process. Words do not name things; people do, but they use words to express that naming. There is, then, a bit of the subjective here. Words, rather than fixing some idea at some interstice of meaning, evoke, and they evoke through a process that is inherently subjective: both the speaker and listener or writer and reader play a role in the process. What precisely is being evoked then when "nature" is used in this text or in the texts approached through this one can hardly be set in stone. To attempt to do so could well be an endless process. "Nature," as a word, denotes both an idea and an infinite web of possibilities within a system of possibilities.

For the purposes of this paper, nature is that nonhuman landscape and the elements of that landscape by which humans are surrounded throughout their lives. As such, it is a place and a construct. And as Kittredge notes, "constructs and actuality each qualify our sense of the other" (57). Kittredge continues, urging that narratives incite readers to create their own constructs and responses to the experience of reading as it is filtered through their own experiences, concluding, "In this way narrative attempts to avoid coercion, which is of course a political objective" (57). Nature then as a construct and within a narrative cannot be anything but subjective, and thus political. This is inherent, though perhaps worthy of acknowledging, as both reader and writer need recognize their own role in the uncertainty that underlies it. Despite the instability of the particular term, or terms in general, a sense of stasis is not impossible. There can be stability within instability. As anyone who has spent much time at sea or who has seen those who have when they once again return to land can attest, the "stable" earth is anything but that to legs long accustomed to the "instability" of a ship. A sailor who might one moment have darted up a precariously swaying line with little pause, upon debarking to the dock might find it

troublesome to stay on her feet. The sense of stability too seems to be dependent upon one's particular position. Stability in this sense becomes not a system of certainty, but rather simply a frame of reference. In a similar sense, the inherent instability or uncertainty of the ideas of nature, stability, or a sense of place need not compromise an approach to them, provided that both reader and writer acknowledge that any such approach is subject to condition.

Bearing all this in mind, Lopez's writings might be seen to act as a bridge to another world, a world with which we have lost contact—our own. In the midst of a literary culture that often regards literature as just another technology, largely void of mystical or mythical powers, Lopez reaffirms its potential. As McClintock notes, Lopez "practices resurrection" (141). Lopez unites people, politics, the landscape, and morality, seeking a "redemptive wisdom" by which both the human and the non-human worlds might co-exist in a dignified and ennobling manner (McClintock 142). There is a sense of soul that works through Lopez's writing; it is a sense that, at first, seems to unite the soul of humans, literature, and nature, but that, in the end, is seen not to unite them, but rather to reveal that they have always been of the same

soul. It is a soul that cannot be separated without damage to each of its parts.

One way to describe the view of the world found in Lopez's writing is through the idea of ecotones. The ecotone is frequently a sphere of study in the ecological sciences. Its derivation can be seen in its Greek etymology: *eco*, or dwelling place, and *tone*, tension. An ecotone, then, is the overlapping of divergent cultures or locales; it is at the interstices formed of crossing boundaries, and it is characterized by the tension that arises from the clashing borders or interests of the two cultures. Relating this back to the position of the modern individual, the ecotone that separates the human and nonhuman world, for Lopez, need not exist. Lopez's characters tend to break through the barrier that distinguishes the two separate worlds, and in doing so, they relieve themselves of the tension that would otherwise be allowed to distance them from a sense of stability.

One encounters this sense of unity in the relationship between divergent cultures throughout Lopez's writing, where Lopez's extensive travel is reflected in his work that is scattered across the genres. Among his fiction works are Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with his Daughter: Coyote Builds North America (1977), in which

Lopez recounts many of the various coyote stories found within the traditions of the early indigenous tribes of North America; Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven (1976), River Notes: The Dance of Herons (1979), Field Notes: The Grace Note of the Canyon Wren (1994), a trilogy of short fiction in which each collection of stories is united in their exploration of a particular place and the impact of the nonhuman elements there upon people or their perception; Winter Count (1981), another collection of short stories, differing in a focus just as much upon thought and literature as place; Crow and Weasel (1990), unlike Lopez's other fiction, this is a book length mythic tale in which two youths explore their boundaries, grow up, and learn the value of story and place; and finally, Lopez's most recent collection of short stories Light Action in the Caribbean, which maintains similar concerns to the above fiction works, though it is quite diverse in its style and settings—its stories range from action and adventure to lecture to personal epiphany and are set from the far east to Quarain to the Northern Pacific to the mid-west—as usual, however, Lopez retains his focus on landscape and personal relationships, though he does attempt a broader range of settings and action.

The nonfiction work of Lopez weaves personal experience, travel, historical accounts, scientific investigation and information, and, often, myth in an intricate and captivating web. Of Wolves and Men (1978) explores the human creation of wolf. Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape (1986) is, so far, Lopez's most acclaimed book; it won the National Book Award for nonfiction. Both these books probe the Western view of the nonhuman world and evaluate the loss of the relationship that preceding cultures enjoyed with that world. About This Life (1998) is an autobiographical collection of essays reflecting upon Lopez's life as a writer and traveler; it probes into both the places that he travels, as well as into the heart and mind of the traveler.

Finally, Lopez's nonfiction work finds voice in many journals and periodicals. While similar in element to the writing expressed above—specifically in the focus upon the human relationship with the nonhuman, these articles tend to be more personal responses to experiences encountered during travel. A number of his favorite essays have been collected in Crossing Open Ground (1988), and he has also had a lecture published, The Rediscovery of North America (1990), both as an article and as an independent book.

Exploring Lopez's collective work, we find that one of Lopez's central concerns is his fellow human and the plight of the modern person, whom he presents as intricately and inextricably connected to natural world, but who does not necessary recognize or acknowledge that connection. By re-establishing that connection, through personal experience or through literature, by recognizing that an undignified approach to what is not human inevitably compromises the dignity of the human, Lopez's writing creates an understanding of the world that might provide the modern individual some sense of home in that world.

The ability of Lopez's writing to do all this depends first upon the voice or role with which Lopez endows the nonhuman world. Having endowed the nonhuman world with such a role, Lopez's writing then presents a written world in which the human and nonhuman worlds might enter a relationship that elevates both to more dignified positions, one through which the reader, through literature, attains a similarly dignified understanding of his own position and role in the world.

The Voice of Nature

The other day, as a friend and I drove east, the sun rose out of the highway in front of us, spreading one of the most peculiar light and color phenomena that I have ever encountered across the sky. I couldn't come up with a way to describe it, as it was precisely like nothing I had seen before. Other cars had pulled over as well, and with craned necks, we all were looking upward. The sky was no longer merely something above us: it was movement and color that surrounded us. Trying to capture the moment with an apt description, the first word that my companion came up with was "unnatural." What strikes me is how perfectly wrong that word actually was and what it might be saying about the human position in the world when nature, of all things, has become unnatural. These thoughts were reinforced just recently when I watched a television advertisement encouraging people to "get away from the world for awhile." It showed a couple doing just that—in a line of cars as far as the camera could reveal, they were leaving behind a cluttered background of skyscrapers. Apparently, it is this most unnatural and constructed setting that has become the representation of the "world."

In today's jargon, nature has increasingly become marginalized. Our environment has become an "other." The

landscape in which we live is one solely of our own creation, not of an interdependent entity. The natural landscape has ceased to be the place in which we live; rather, it is that which we must separate ourselves from in order to live most comfortably. The greater the separation, the more comfortable we believe ourselves to be. To far too many, in my more cynical moments, I suspect that the natural landscape is merely the brief bit of dirty green that occasionally flits past the tinted windows of their air-conditioned cars as they rush to whatever it is that waits for them on the other end of their cell phone. Or, maybe, for the more cultured, landscape is that which is captured and controlled and nicely framed in the marbled museum, where on Tuesdays the admission is only half price. This, admittedly subjective, response seems shared at times by much within Lopez's presentation of the modern individual.

Of course, there are those who do recognize the value of the natural world. I am not necessarily talking here about those who see nature as a charity case in need of their salvation—an object to be pitied or rescued. They call themselves environmentalists, but they are entirely estranged from the environment around them. The "environment" is thousands of miles away, physically and

spiritually, and theirs is the green party for no other reason than the color of the money that is always being sought. It is these that a character in Jim Harrison's latest collection of stories refers to as "the burgeoning swarm of eco-ninnies" (60). There are others, however, who, in the landscape around them, hear a voice that plays a vital role in politics, society, literature, and in their personal lives. It is a voice that might well be heard, and it is a voice that is central to much of Lopez's writing.

Lopez encourages the reader to recognize this voice of the world around them, to listen to it, and to find comfort in it, and in doing so, to find that they can attain a sense of home within that world. As Glotfelty notes, the setting in which Lopez's fiction takes place, usually one in nature, acts "not just as a stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama" (xxi). Lopez does not cast the natural landscape in a minor role. It is not merely the setting. It influences and is influenced by nearly every action, making it one of the key roles and allowing it to shape elements within the story itself.

This relationship between the land and humankind is a particular concern in Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape. After spending nearly five years

researching in the arctic and exploring its history and the history of the people, animals, and plant life that dwell there, Lopez focuses on the role of the land in the imagination, in language, in politics, and in social interaction in the region. Doing so, he demonstrates that, like other issues that critics and theorists examine in literature and society today and in accordance with some of the ideas of recent postmodern critical thought, the natural world is too, like language, literature, and society, a construct that shapes and is shaped by the people that interact with it.

Lopez argues that the way people understand nature "depends upon what we know, what we imagine, and how we are disposed; each of us puts together the information we have differently, 'according to his cultural predispositions and his personality'" (Campbell 129). In other words, we read the land just as we read texts, and these readings are from politically, socially, and psychologically constructed positions. If, as many post-structuralists argue, we create meaning (individually and collectively) when we read, then it follows that we influence the natural world in a similar way when we interact with it—whether we realize it or not. Lopez reveals the degree to which he sees this type of interactive relationship acting, asserting that "we bring

our own worlds to bear in landscapes in order to clarify them for ourselves. . . . The land urges us to come around to an understanding of ourselves" (Arctic Dreams 247).

Examining Lopez's whole body of work, it becomes evident that he does not see the land merely to "urge" this understanding, but rather he presents the land with the means to attaining it. This can be seen most readily in the three "notes" collections of Lopez's short stories. Each collection of stories is a series of more or less independent tales; the unity of each collection relies upon a consistent focus on place. It is through this focus that the nonhuman world is able to interact with the human world. Returning, for instance, to "Pearyland," we find that what is of utmost importance is not the principle characters, which really are not developed, but rather the relationships that exist between the land and the animals that dwell in it. Animals come to Pearyland to be resurrected, to renew themselves. It is the land that provides them with renewal. In the same collection of stories, an open lot in the middle of an urban area becomes a porthole to time and animal spirits; but more importantly, it becomes "sort of [a] companion" to Jane Weddell, the principle human character in the story (Lopez, Field Notes 47). The relationship that exists between them,

the lot and Jane, is fragile; it is also no different than her human relationships: "She didn't press the acquaintance, any more than she did those of her friends" (47). In return, she achieved special insight and a mystical understanding. In the end, it is not important that the open lot is lost to construction or that Jane has taken a serious setback at work. What is important is that the relationship with the land allows Jane a sense of belonging, a place that is her own.

The relationships that Lopez creates are not one sided; we and the world around us shape each other. "The contours of human subjectivity, as [Lopez] sees it, are molded by the configurations of the landscape with which a person has been deeply associated. Subjectivity is not a mere function of landscape; but it is regulated somewhat by landscape" (Buell 94). We position ourselves and nature then by interacting with it, and we do so in a manner that is regulated by our environment. To be negligent in this recognition is to suffer an increased lack of stability and sense of "home," which results from a loss of sense of place.

McClintock, who includes in his conclusion of Nature's Kindred Spirits a brief discussion of Lopez's work, notes, "Lopez's literary activity is, of course, a spiritual and

moral activity" (143). While this is true, it seems to stop a bit short of acknowledging the understanding of nature and the human relationship with it that appears to precede and undergird Lopez's writing. His writing is indeed spiritual and moral; more importantly though, it is necessarily so, because, for Lopez, nature helps shape human understanding of spirituality and morality, which like language, culture, and history are constructs dependent, at least partially, upon interaction in the natural world.

Noting that our positioning in the world can be founded as a result of such a mutually reciprocating process points to another aspect of the natural world that plays out in the writing of Lopez. Lopez admits that he writes with a dream in mind: that there might develop "a dignity that might include all living things" (Arctic Dreams 405). This dignity is founded upon what has come to be known as the first law of ecology, that all things are connected. This connection unites all in a web of possibilities, much like the criss-crossings of Derridian thinking, which posits a diacritical relationship between a seemingly endless system of oppositions and mediations. Lopez's writing places the land within this web of factors from which develops human understanding. Place, then, plays

a role in the determination of meaning or understanding, as well as language. Lopez further elucidates Derridian conceptualization of the play of language, which creates potential for variations in understanding and meaning, by noting that there are "no permanent landscapes . . . the land is vigorous and alive" (Arctic Dreams 411). Nature, like language, thus influences understanding even while it itself is influenced by other factors and forces, creating an ever-shifting and malleable force with which to interact.

Depicting and permitting a nature with such a role endows it with a voice that frequently goes unheard. Reexamining nature in light of such a voice, brings to mind the work of Foucault, which examines issues of power and society through an evaluation of privileged and unprivileged speakers. As nature in many cultures has not been recognized to have a voice, any role which that voice might play has been disregarded. The results of such behavior is highlighted in Lopez's 1990 book-length essay The Rediscovery of North America, which reveals, laments, and seeks redemption for the historical actions of early European explorers, who initiated an era of plundering from North American landscapes. These men founded a civilization based on extracting resources from the land. In doing so,

they set precedent for a culture that views the landscape in which it lives as existing solely for human wealth creation and recreation. Lopez writes, "What Columbus began, then, what Pizarro and Cortez and Coronado perpetuated, is not isolated in the past. We see a continuance in the present of this brutal, avaricious behavior, a profound abuse of the place during the course of centuries of demand for material wealth" (Rediscovery 8-9).

In Rediscovery, Lopez also approaches the role of capitalism in the current relationship between the human and the nonhuman worlds. Lopez asserts that the history of exploration and development described above established a vector to North American society that set a tone of lauding wealth accumulation above nearly all else and of viewing the land as merely a resource from which that wealth might be extracted; the endeavor to extract this wealth sublimated land in the North American consciousness and was carried out under the supposition that these actions would either be without consequence or that the consequence was not a matter of much importance in comparison to the potential accumulation of wealth (Rediscovery 7-9). Lopez never provides or seeks some alternative system or scheme to capitalism, but he does formulate his arguments within

the scope of the opportunities available within that pre-existing system. He notes that, while it seems too late to reverse the capitalistic impact of the past, it is not too late to change the view of the landscape within which we dwell. Interestingly, he founds his reasoning upon economic terms of benefit, noting, "To acknowledge the interdependence [of humans and land] is simply a good and wise habit of mind" (16-17). Through a recognition of the interdependence, human benefit is gained, even while the "resource" nature is protected or preserved. Few better than economists understand the value of protecting one's resources to increase the potential for future benefit. Lopez, while condemning the acts and the precedent established by the view of the land as a resource to be manipulated for capital gain, attempts his solution from within a tradition that offers little recourse for alternative. Lopez's position here seems somewhat strengthened in that his approach accepts personal benefit or gain in the end, but not as an end.

In doing so, Lopez, on the one hand, seems to compromise his depiction of land as above that of mere means to an end; yet, on the other hand, he seems to provide an approach that might appeal across the spectrum to many political, economic, and environmental thinkers.

And in doing that, he places his reader and the characters in his stories back within a context that might easily be seen in the world around them.

For many, the world in which we find ourselves is not recognized as an intricate factor in the creation of self and beliefs, but rather it is a limiting factor to be overcome or a means to wealth through manipulation. For still others, it is mere real estate--if enough is accrued, retirement might be made more comfortable. What these people appear to bear in common is their characterization of the natural world as an other, and not as a part of themselves and their social, political, and psychological identity. In Arctic Dreams Lopez allows the Inuit people to strike home this point: he relates that, in reference to themselves, they do not distinguish between their own human life and the life that is plant or animal. In contrast, the Inuit word for the non-indigenous people who have come to the arctic translates as "the people who change nature" (39). Lopez attributes this to a separation from the natural world that has become too complete (Arctic Dreams 39).

Robbed of its voice, nature loses the seemed subjectivity that many, such as Lopez, see it to possess. It becomes a mere object, some inanimate other. The writing

of Lopez, who is of course not alone, seeks to return a voice to the environment surrounding his readers. It should be noted too that Lopez does not seek to speak for nature, to provide it with a voice; rather, he presents us with a world in which there is a voice to be heard. The nonhuman world acts and speaks to the characters that take the time to listen and acknowledge it. This often plays out in mystical ways. In the Winter Count story "Buffalo," for example, a mountaintop is used by buffalo to escape into the clouds. It becomes a place of mystical powers, which is occasionally brought up by people researching the loss of western habitat for both Native Americans and for the buffalo. In the end, the land offers a kind of redemption to the buffalo that were forced from their place. Seeking to research the phenomenon, the speaker spends the night near the area only to wake with his legs broken—it seems the land retains both power and judgment (Winter Count 35).

It is pertinent to mention here that Lopez is not attempting to silence other voices, or to privilege the voice of nature. He does not elevate the land and its creatures to a position of greater importance than people or their needs; rather he depicts a world that relies on the mutual respect of all life. What follows is a rather

lengthy excerpt, but it does, I believe, voice precisely what Lopez wishes to establish through much of his writing:

> One of the oldest dreams of mankind is to find a dignity that might include all living things. And one of the greatest of human longings must be to bring such dignity to one's own dreams, for each to find his or her own life exemplary in some way. . . . A way to do this is to pay attention to what occurs in a land not touched by human schemes, where an original order prevails.
>
> The dignity we seek is one beyond that articulated by Enlightenment philosophers. A more radical Enlightenment is necessary, in which a dignity is understood as an innate quality, not as something tendered by someone outside. And that common dignity must include the land and its plants and creatures. Otherwise it is only an invention, and not, as it should be, a perception about the nature of living matter. (Arctic Dreams 405)

The relationship that is sought here is one that is not forced upon any of those within the relationship. It simply celebrates the life that is common to all living things. And it develops in part through what Lopez calls

"conversations with the land," interacting ideas, images, and perceptions (Arctic Dreams 226).

People, for Lopez, need not be subservient to the land (the position seemingly sought by many political activists), but he seems to doubt that people can ever be at home in their world without recognizing its voice. His is, in this sense, a rather Bakhtinian approach, characterized by a dialogical representation of reality. Bakhtin notes a diversity of voices achieve a beneficial "interplay of social voices and a variety of relationships among them" (McDowell 372). The inclusion of yet another voice in the conversation of life or literature does not necessarily detract from the other voices, but rather, it might be a means to advancing the conversation with even greater definition.

To ignore, then, the voice of nature is to increase the likelihood of misconceiving the world. "The land is not inert; and it is precisely because it is alive that it eventually contradicts the imposition of a reality that does not derive from it. . . . Language is not something that man imposes on the language. It evolves in his conversation with the land" (Arctic Dreams 277-78). As land plays a role then that both constructs and is constructed by human thought, a flawed sense of the world results

without recognition of this. There is in Lopez's short stories a frequently repeated juxtaposition, which compares two characters—one in nature and characterized by his sense of home and an awareness of deeper truths and insights, the other outside it and unable to achieve a comfortable position in the world that remains somehow out of his grasp. "The Negro in the Kitchen," for instance, another short story in Field Notes, allows the examination of two financial consultants, both of whom are well-educated, financially secure, and privileged in general. One, the Negro, is living off the land on a year long "walk" across North America, driven by a desire "to see the breadth of the land. To be in it. To hold it and be held by it" (Field Notes 82). He becomes, as a result, rather than an interloper in the America landscape, "a black man who identifies with the American landscape, who fractures the immorality of his heritage in this country so completely that he finally gains a consoling intimacy with the place, the very place that for so long had been unapproachable" (82). The land, once controlled by the whites, had before his walk been off-limits, but through his travels the Negro feels, "exhilaration," "transcendence," and "reconnected" (80). The other man too lives in a natural setting, though in distinct contrast to the traveling black man. He

believes himself to be interacting with nature through his identification (often incorrectly, we find) of the indigenous birds of the region—according to his *Peterson's Field Guide*, he has only nine birds left to find (82). The two men talk. It becomes apparent to the white man that he is lacking in something that the black man has, and yet he never really does grasp the relationship with the land of which the other speaks. Later, we find the white man "annoyed" by this realization, which he never really seems to understand. He "got his binoculars and put on another cup of coffee . . . and got down Arthur Cleveland Bent's *Thrushes, Kinglets, and Their Allies* and began reading" (88). Lopez earlier, in an article entitled "Narrative and Landscape" that was republished in Crossing Open Ground, provides what might be considered a final gloss to this story, claiming, "One learns a landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it," which is made possible, at least in part, though stories (64). The white man never sees or understands these relationships of which the black man becomes a part.

The relationship that people develop with the landscape surrounding them is of utmost importance to Lopez. It is this relationship that provides a sense of

belonging, a sense of home, and it is a relationship that requires the recognition of a nonhuman voice. This voice, in the end, is what Lopez heard in the artic. The arctic has long been seen as an inhospitable, desert wasteland (except by oil drillers and fishing concerns). Lopez traveled to the arctic to find a world with a voice, despite recent actions in the area, still largely unmuddled by those who would not recognize it. And at the end of it all, Lopez describes what he did there as "listening." He relates that "the land is like poetry: it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life" (Arctic Dreams 274).

The voice Lopez hears and recognizes in nature is a voice that offers solace to a people feeling a lost sense of belonging. It is a voice, Lopez reveals, that only waits to be heard. Listening to it increases human understanding of self and world and perhaps, if we listen long enough, Lopez hopes that we might "find a place within the land, to discover a way to dispel [our] sense of estrangement" (Arctic Dreams xxiii). This loss is two-fold, for not only does it deprive people of the "actual" voice of nature, it also renders them incapable of recognizing the echoes of that voice in landscape-centered narratives.

In Crow and Weasel Lopez pushes this idea of voice beyond the mere allegorical, mystical, or metaphysical. The story is a coming-of-age tale of sorts, centered upon a crow and a weasel, two young members of an anthropomorphized tribal culture that seeks to explore the boundaries of its world. The narrative is one of self and world exploration and discovery; it comprises a series of experiences, through which an individual and cultural sense of place is sought and established.

Among the lessons learned by the traveling pair is that of the importance of story and storytelling. While visiting with Badger, an aptly named friendly host whom they encounter along the way, Crow and Weasel receive the following instruction:

> I would ask you to remember only this one thing," said Badger. "The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves. One day you will be good storytellers.

Never forget these obligations. (Lopez, Crow and Weasel 60)

There is here as elaborate a theory of literature as any. Its seemed simplicity is intriguing, yet while seemingly simple, these ideas of literature and its role submit as elaborate a view of literature as many far more complex modes of thought. Moreover, it is a theory of literature expanded upon, yet never significantly changed, throughout both the fiction and nonfiction of Lopez.

Lopez's view of literature is similar to his view of nature, in that both act and interact with people and, in doing so, help them come to an understanding of themselves and their world. Though art, at times, has been cast as a remove from nature, a mere reflection or degeneration; it also, as Lopez demonstrates, might be seen as a means to recognize or acknowledge an existing connection between the human world and the nonhuman. As Buell points out, "the emphasis on disjunction between text and world seems overblown" (84). To understand fully how Lopez demonstrates this through his writing, we first must examine how it is that Lopez views literature and the acts of writing and reading. In the end, Lopez draws all of them together into an interconnecting moral matrix. In this, his effort seems more one that seeks acknowledgement for a pre-existing

condition that has not been lost but that has merely ceased to be recognized than it is an effort to introduce and assert some kind of new conceit or philosophy.

Just as Lopez attributes an identity forming facet to nature, he ascribes one as well to literature. Lopez, in telling the kind of stories that Badger encouraged above, acts in accordance with Ezra Pound's descriptions: "Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers as such have a definite social function" (32). Admittedly, Pound had his own problems with social function, but his ideas here, as in much of his poetry, are worthy of note.

Pound's view of literature and the author seems often not to be shared by the modern reader. Frequently, I have heard literature described by various critics, readers, advertisers, or authors as a vehicle of escape from our daily lives, our worlds. The tropes have become common: the book as ship to another land, the reader as vicarious traveler, etc. Lopez, on the other hand and like Pound, sees literature as a means to refresh or maintain an intricate knowledge of the world in which we live and to renew a sense of the connection that already exists within that world. This juxtaposition of literary views has been dealt with at length in Gutenberg Elegies by Birkerts, who notes, "fiction only retains its cultural vitality so long

as it can bring readers meaningful news about what it means to live in the world of the present. Its other functions—escapism, reassurance, entertainment—are ultimately trivial" (204). Lopez reflects this idea in an interview with Kay Bonetti, in which he claims that the value of literature is in imparting a coherent understanding of the world in which we live; to attain this understanding, he continues, what we need is "words used well" (64,74). To focus the value of literature away from the depiction shared here creates a watered down literature, stripped of its power or potential to empower.

Lopez attributes to literature nearly the same interactive characterization that he does landscape. The role that he sees them playing is a role that he describes in much the same manner. Comparing his description of the human relationship with the nonhuman world to his characterization of the interaction between literature and reader, we see that through both convergences the result is nearly the same—the positioning of the human within the world around him. In Arctic Dreams Lopez asserts, "we bring our own worlds to bear in landscapes in order to clarify them for ourselves. . . . The land urges us to come around to an understanding of ourselves" (247). And in a 1986 interview he notes that what it is that readers and writers

are doing is "trying to understand ourselves here" (Aton 9). Two years later, in the Bonetti interview again, Lopez completes this gloss of literature, relating, "We need to have a coherent understanding of the world in which we are living. If the best of thinking is in places where it is not accessible to most people, then we run the risk of leaving the people who, by virtue of their votes and behavior, will decide where our country is going bereft of good thought and good language" (64).

Literature then provides recourse to the same positioning of the individual that Lopez attributes to nature. He proposes the same value to the voice of literature as he does that of landscape, urging, "writing is not something to fool around with; the course of history is changed by language. Evolution is affected by language. In our culture we throw language around all the time. We use it in the most indiscriminate and disrespectful ways. . . . The language has the power to heal and to elevate and to instill hope in the bleakest of circumstances" (Bonetti 62-63) Interestingly, Bonetti's words apply equally well if one should strike "language" and replace it with "nature."

In both the description of these two worlds and the value attributed to them, we see that Lopez believes that through them individuals might realize the relationship

that they share with their culture and their world. The realization that Lopez encourages is just that—a realization. It is a recognition that by evaluating nature and literature "in the same moral universe we occupy" we "begin to . . . sense how to fit a place" (Lopez, Rediscovery 35). What Lopez appears to seek is an acknowledgment of what exists already; it is an appreciation for one's place. This is not a mere attempt to provide a means to "finding oneself," that common mantra of the numerous group of apparently lost people that wander about the self-help and mysticism sections of the bookstores, walk across America searching for themselves, or sit mindlessly in front of infommercialing spiritual cult leaders; rather, Lopez forwards an acknowledgment of our world and how it comprises relationships among its diverse elements. And once that is understood, he submits that we might attain the sense of belonging for which those seeking themselves are searching. One of the unnamed conversants in "The Rapids," a short story in the River Notes collection, notes that despite losing his wife and seeing seventeen people die in the rapids that he lives near, "It's easiest to live where you have an understanding" (106).

Through capital "S" story, Lopez remythologizes both nature and literature for the modern individual. Lopez's stories reconnect his readers to their own world. It is a world that highlights relationships and landscape. Often in Lopez's stories, the reader never is allowed the names of the characters; time is often measured by events (natural or historic); place names frequently are left out. These elements are merely ancillary to what is most important in Lopez's stories. Lopez stresses the relationships that develop between the characters, landscapes, or ideas. In "The Rapids," for instance, multiple unnamed characters carry on a conversation. It is not clear precisely who they are or how many of them there are, yet in less than four pages Lopez deals with curiosity about the meaning of life, anger, blame, death, wisdom, understanding, history, and the value of a sense of home. Lopez creates in this story, through simple perspective on place, a picture of a relationship with the world that is far more complex than some a more fleshed out piece might have been. The story has been pared down to its core, and at that core is a concern with an individual and his relationship with the world around him. The reader encounters throughout such stories Lopez's sense of myth and story. The stories we choose to tell ourselves shape our worlds and how we

respond to them. Though writing pointedly about Native American stories and culture, William Penn makes a depiction that seems applicable to the possible functioning of most stories in general and might well be applied here, shedding light upon what seems to be a view shared by Lopez; he writes, "stories combine over time, for the listener who hears them again and again, into a kind of epic of his community, her tribe, their family and the relationship among them all. In that relationship they find meaning, they find their value and worth as human beings" (Penn 6). Lopez would likely corroborate this statement, for similarly, reading Lopez is reading the story of human positioning in the world. Narrative, for Lopez, has the power "to nurture and heal, to repair a spirit in disarray" (Crossing Open Ground 69).

Lopez's stories respond to a need that Kittredge describes eloquently at the end of Taking Care: Thoughts on Storytelling and Belief. He writes,

> What we need most urgently is a fresh dream of who we are, which will tell us how we should act, stories about taking care of what we've got, which is to say life and our lives. . . . We need to inhabit stories that will encourage us toward acts of the imagination, which in turn will drive us to the arts of empathy,

> for each other and the world. We need stories that will encourage us to understand that we are part of everything, that the world exists under our skins, and that destroying it is a way of killing ourselves. We need stories that will drive us to care for one another, all the creatures, stories that will drive us to take action. (Kittredge 77)

The stories that Lopez gives us stem from a recognition of this need. They provide the same impact that he seeks from a story—to renew a sense of purpose and personal context (Lopez, Crossing Open Ground 63).

Lopez distinguishes himself from many other nature writers, to include Kittredge, though, in his view of the rightful role of the author. For Lopez, the author's primary role is to entertain the reader, not, he asserts, to make some specific point or further some personal agenda. The point of the story is to be the story itself (Aton 7). Far from the apparent understanding of many nature writers, Lopez operates under the assumption that didacticism has no place in writing stories. Stories, Lopez writes, should be told "for their own sake, not forced to serve merely as the vehicle for an idea" (Crossing Open Ground 63). The author in this regard, Lopez relates in an

interview, "serves the reader" (fulfilling Pound's "social function") (Gonzalez 9).

Speaking for himself, Lopez asserts that he, as an author, is tasked with finding a way to impart a sense of harmony to the individual. Lopez does not stipulate how this must be done or restrict the author's means to do so, but he does provide a gloss to his own perspective. Just as in nature the interconnection of things and events allows a sense of place, story makes available a harmony of the individual and its surrounding world. Lopez describes the ability of literature to do this in, once again, "Landscape and Narrative." First, he establishes two landscapes, the interior and the exterior. The exterior landscape is every element of the land, from the smell of pine to the cricket's song to the mountains and ponds, and the relationships that develop among them. The interior landscape lies within the individual; it is everything that works together to comprise each particular individual—thoughts, morals, memories, political beliefs, etc. Having set these two worlds up, he notes the tension that might easily exist between the two. We return here to the ecotone idea again; Lopez sees literature acting to unite the two landscapes, providing resolution, overcoming the strain of the clashing boundaries that so often separate the two.

Story, for Lopez, causes a working out of relationships, an insight into one's world. Having gained this insight, the individual is that much more at home in that world. This accord between the individual and its world, asserts Lopez, is the purpose of storytelling (Crossing Open Ground 68).

> A story draws on relationships in the exterior landscapes and projects them onto the interior landscape. The purpose of storytelling is to achieve harmony between the two landscapes, to use all the elements of the story—syntax, mood, figures of speech—in a harmonious way to reproduce the harmony of the land in the individual's interior. Inherent in story is the power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call 'the land.' (Crossing Open Ground 68)

In The Environmental Imagination, Buell concludes his segment "Representing the Environment" by noting that Lopez's two-landscape model of thought "is far more productive than a criterion based on the presupposition of the inevitable dominance of constructedness alone (Foucault's theory of discursive formations)" (113). The relationships that Lopez builds upon go beyond Foucault's

ideas of constructedness alone, in order to incorporate "the authority of external nonhuman reality as a criterion of accuracy and value" (Buell 113).

Lopez maps out these relationships in his writing. Landscape, though admittedly filtered through human perception, is allowed to exert its voice. Also enjoying a voice in Lopez's accounts are the sometimes hard to accept explanations, reasonings, or stories of those who live in an area. Often in Of Wolves and Men, Arctic Dreams, and his journal essays, Lopez listens to accounts of those native to the area he is researching. Frequently, these stories provide just as much insight as the more scientific investigation he encounters. They provide, if not an empirical explanation, an understanding. What is understood is an ethos. This understanding is not achieved through a compromise of scientific knowledge or at the expense of factual representation, for as Buell writes, for Lopez "literature functions as science's less systematic but more versatile complement. Both seek to make understandable a puzzling world" (Buell 94). Romand Coles notes that Lopez's writing "emerges at the interstice between identity and nonidentity" (240). The result, argues Coles, is a dialogical ethos that emerges from Lopez's work (247). A

similar dialogical relationship is seen in Lopez's interweaving of scientific inquiry and personal accounts.

The working out of such an ethos, the use of story to magnify the relationships of nature that might permit the reader insight and thus a sense of place plays out throughout Lopez's writing. In Arctic Dreams, for example, Lopez relates a story about the frustration of European explorers who were trying to get some Eskimos to create a map. The Eskimos could not do it without including as well stories of hunting and fishing and theatrical accounts of past events in the area to be mapped. Lopez concludes the anecdote with the following gloss: "There was no way for them to separate the stories, the indigenous philosophy, from the land" (Arctic Dreams 297). This overlap of myth and landscape underlies much of the sense of connect between story and land that Lopez creates and works with.

This is seen in Lopez's fiction as well. In "Winter Count 1973: Geese, They Flew Over in a Storm," a story within the Winter Count collection, a historian researching early North American historical tribal accounts eventually comes to the realization that multiple and possibly contradicting interpretations of historical events do not necessarily mean that one is flawed and the other accurate; rather, he finds, "it is too dangerous for everyone to have

the same story. The same things do not happen to everyone" (62).

The diversity of personal accounts out there is reflected in Lopez's most recent collection of short stories. Light Action in the Caribbean is, with the exception of two stories, a collection of first person narratives. The diversity of the voices that Lopez employs is both impressive and appropriate. Within the scope of the book the reader encounters the first person accounts of a horse thief, a landscaper, a Wenrit scribe, a Mexican prisoner, a cabinet maker, a historian, a cartographer, a lawyer, among still others. Light Action repeatedly returns to a juxtaposition of those who lack and desire a sense of peace, who like the nomadic cabinet maker of "In the Great Bend of the Souris River," do not feel that they "belong to any particular place" to those who either possess or find such a sense of place (Lopez 53).

In "The Mappist," the final story in this most recent collection, Lopez focuses on the shift that has occurred in the societal relationship to its landscape. The mappist, a cartographer working for the sake of those in the future (for his own society, a "lost generation" has deemed him and his work "not practical" (152, 161)) creates unique maps. His maps incorporate historically accurate accounts

of the movement of birds and other animals, the progressions of fence lines, the shifting patterns of human populations and landscape features (Lopez, Light Action 160). Behind his efforts is his conviction that "this information is what we need, you know. This shows history and how people fit the places they occupy" (159).

Lopez work, fiction and nonfiction, like the cartographer in "The Mappist," asks readers to re-approach both language and literature, to redraw the boundaries within which they find themselves, so that in doing so they might come to acknowledge that their position within those boundaries is one which might be considered home.

Remapping Our World

Returning then to the initial dilemma, the individual and societal lack of sense of place, Lopez's writing and thought attributes this, at least in part, to the lack of acknowledgment of our inseparable connection to the landscape around us. We no longer acknowledge an accurate ecological representation of our place and therefore cannot justify a cultural or individual position within the world around us. As Berkirts notes,

> Fifty years ago the human environment was still more or less the natural environment. We had central heating and labor-saving devices and high-speed travel, but these were still only partially modifications of the natural given. It is the natural given that is now gone. Now, for better or worse, we move almost entirely within a regulated and mediated environment. Our primary relation to the world has been altered. (205)

Birkerts makes an important distinction here. It is not so much that we have changed (though we have) or that the environment itself has changed (though it too has), but that the relationship between the two has changed.

Birkerts posits that this lack of acknowledgment is recognized by modern authors as a remove from "reality" and

that, in turn, authors such as DeLillo, Pynchon, Auster, Gaddis, and Faulkner make this "irreality of the present part of the subject itself," through satire, black humor, and surrealistic touches (207). This, indeed, is one way for the author to approach writing within a culture that has lost touch with its world. Lopez, however, takes an opposing tack, while maintaining what seems a meaningful role within society and literature: rather than occupy the void left between readers and their world, he attempts to suture the fissure.

This, finally, is the importance of Lopez's work: after all is accounted for, ideas about language and landscape and literature, Lopez cares deeply for the world in which he lives. He sees and demonstrates through natural history and fiction a means to make evident the connection that exists between author and reader and individual and landscape. It is not for him a connection that has been broken; it is, however, a connection that goes unacknowledged. His work encourages this realization. We are, whether we realize it or not, in this relationship. Not acknowledging it only frustrates efforts to feel at home; acknowledging it permits the sense that throughout history has been an aim of literature—the sense of a place called home.

Lopez's literature is a literature that rests upon his foundation of "ought." It is a literature that is presented as listening to the voices of both human and nonhuman participants, acknowledging the dignity of both. In the end, Lopez seeks to encourage through his literature the same realization that Crow and Weasel discover at the conclusion of their exploration of their boundaries. "Weasel said very softly, 'It is good to be alive. To have friends, to have a family, to have children, to live in a particular place. These relationships are sacred.' 'Yes,' said Crow. 'Yes, this is the way it should be'" (Lopez, Crow and Weasel 79).

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