Stepping through the metaphor | Literary animism in Barry Lopez's short fiction

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Stepping Through the Metaphor:

Literary Animism in Barry Lopez's Short Fiction

by

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B.A. University of California, Santa Cruz, 2001

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

English Literature

The University of Montana

May 2003

Approved by:

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Date
Stepping Through the Metaphor: Literary Animism in Barry Lopez’s Short Fiction

Barry Lopez is well known and much celebrated for his works of natural history writing and creative nonfiction, but his short fiction, a larger body of work than his nonfiction, is largely unnoticed by scholars. His five short story collections—Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven (1976), River Notes: The Dance of Herons (1979), Winter Count (1982), Field Notes: Grace Note of the Canyon Wren (1994), and Light Action in the Caribbean (2000)—all provide animistic atmospheres charged with the possibilities of, in ecologist David Abram’s words, “a more-than-human world.” Although Lopez does not refer to his work or worldview as animistic, I believe the term describes the subjectivity, agency, and character he recognizes in the natural world, particularly the transformative influence that animate nature has in contact with perceptive human characters in these stories.

Animism, as I use the term, is the acknowledgment of a world full of lives and perceptions. Our human perceptions, and thereby our minds, depend on the diversity of sensuous interaction with the lives of this world. Throughout my thesis, I develop and apply what I call “animist literary theory” to explore the implications of this animistic recognition of perception to literary narrative in Barry Lopez’s short fiction. I intend this theory to be an articulation and application of what some philosophers have called the re-embodiment of Western thinking through my attention to the sensuous body’s participation in cognition and metaphorical thought.

Through the framework of animist literary theory and personal narrative, my thesis offers close readings of stories from all of Lopez’s short story collections. I map, following the techniques and theoretical models of David Abram, Mikhail Bakhtin, Paul Shepard, and Donna Haraway, the animist dimensions of the stories. I argue that Lopez’s narratives follow a pattern, a repeated process of encountering mysterious otherness in animals, people, and landscapes that works to alter the reader’s epistemology within a world filled with more-than-human perceptions.
To have lost, wantonly,
the ancient forests, the vast grasslands
is our madness, the presence
in our very bodies of our grief.

-Wendell Berry, From Sabbath Poems 1988: II

"If one is patient," he said, "if you are careful, I think there is probably nothing that
cannot be retrieved."

-Barry Lopez, "The Orrery"
# Stepping Through the Metaphor: 
Literary Animism in Barry Lopez’s Short Fiction

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In the woods, you know, you have this tremendous cerebral activity of working with these symbols on paper and your writing instrument, the pencil, actually in your hand. And then, you look to the side and there will be a wolf spider making eye contact with you, and you’re immediately brought into the world you inhabit as a creature, as a human being.

—Barry Lopez

On my literary journey in Lopez’s animate fictional worlds I found aid and instruction from the writings of Paul Shepard, a “human ecologist” who wrote subversively and prolifically on the presence and importance of animals in human epistemology and culture. An ecologist with an interest in human sensuous perception and its roots in animism, David Abram introduced to me the notions of animism and its wild possibilities in story and language. Though there is little sustained criticism focused on Lopez’s fiction, Scott Slovic, John Tallmadge, David Stevenson, William Ruekert, Jeffery Odefey, and Nicholas O’Connell provided many helpful interpretive and critical entrances into Lopez’s large body of work. The best critical writing I found on Lopez’s fiction is Masami Yuki’s doctoral dissertation, Towards a Literary Theory of Acoustic Ecology: Soundscapes in Contemporary Environmental Literature. Yuki’s original and refreshing exploration of aural perception in Lopez’s fiction was helpful to me in drawing out a theory of literary animism.

Readings in Catholic thinkers Thomas Berry and Thomas Merton’s work illuminated an unanticipated interpretation of Lopez’s work for me. Anthropologists Hugh Raffles and Anna Tsing provided me with critical language for exploring Lopez’s self-reflexive critiques of anthropology and science. Keith Basso’s ethnographic and linguistic work with the Western Apache helped to root my understanding of metaphor to
a specific epistemology of a people to a place. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s
tireless critique of disembodiment in Western metaphysics was essential for my entrance
into the various discussions revolving around embodiment.

I am ever so thankful for the patience and thoughtfulness of my committee
members Professors David Moore, John Glendening, and Phil Condon who pushed me
toward sharper prose, clearer thing, and new directions on this expedition of words.

My Dad, Jeff Burdick, discussed this thesis with me over coffee in the High
Sierra, in the car around California’s Central Valley, and over the telephone almost
everyday. He is a constant source of encouragement and inspiration for my writing.

Sage Clegg-Haman not only challenged my interpretations of Lopez’s stories, but
pulled me away from my books and computer each day to touch, see, smell, taste, and
hear the world where Lopez’s stories originate. This thesis is dedicated to her.

I agree with John Elder when he writes, “It seems important to acknowledge that
natural scenes engender and inform meditations on literature as well as the other way
around” (qtd. in Slovic 19). The thinking for this thesis was largely done out-of-doors,
whether in Lopez’s animate story habitats or the pebbly banks of Rattlesnake Creek in
Western Montana where I pen this now. Kingfishers, crows, and flickers have been
constant companions to these ideas and have helped nourish my wilder words. I would be
remiss not to mention the long walks I took in Northern California’s Lost Coast and the
Sierra foothills where I compared my readings on animism to my own experiences
watching a spotted owl at dusk, harbor seals feeding on surf fish in the foamy breaks, and
bats over a summer Sierra lake. I am indebted to the many helpful voices along the way.
Introduction: An Animistic Argument

No longer cohering to a single vision of the world, we are, for better or worse, on our own in defining our relationship to the Others. We can rummage through the old myths, but we must make from the debris of history and nature our own story and our own ecology. Except for an obsolete notion of supremacy and domination, there is no thread between us and them in modern life. And so we must create afresh our idea of who we are in the context of the circle of animals.

--Paul Shepard, The Others

Once I lay without moving for days until, mistaking me for driftwood, birds landed nearby and began speaking in murmurs of Pythagoras and winds that blew in the Himalayas.

--Barry Lopez, “The Shallows”

As I walk the wide, steep beach, I add my deep-waffled Vibram sole prints to wide black bear tracks, dainty raccoon prints, the meandering S canyons of rattlesnake tracks, the thin letter shapes of killdeer feet. Perhaps someone else, a seagull maybe, read my heavy-footed journey among the calligraphies left across the Usal beach in Northern California’s Lost Coast. Perhaps the seagull read the tracks to find food, comfort, or warning; perhaps he read my footprints for story. I don’t know; I do know I return often to what Mary Oliver calls the “country of language”—the beach and books—to look for my place among the tracks of others. I comb the many-tracked, shell-littered beach to perceive in its shifting, squawking, and crashing narratives a story that draws me into a larger world. I walk the beach and admire the grace of brown pelicans floating over the tops of crashing waves.

I am not alone; many human tracks weave through the bear’s and seagull’s paths amid piles of golden kelp. Books, too, make trails into this world of other perceptions.
Ink and paper record the gaze of an osprey over bluegreen water or the satisfaction of turkey vultures perched on a dead gray whale. We beach- and book-combers search for narrative in pages that reflect and mimic the seeming coherence and certainty of lounging harbor seals. Nature writing, like the beach, is a shifting, many voiced landscape where we travel to interpret the tracks of others and add our own, finding comfort and challenge in the fact that others have walked here before: this edge of mystery between land and ocean and our language connect the self and the other.

Our language, nature writers seem to agree, can help us re-imagine our lives, instructed and enlarged by the lives and perceptions of others. The black bear, sand flea, and pigeon guillemot are different enough from and similar enough to us that they can carry in our habitat of language the connecting coherence of metaphor as well as the challenge of incongruity.

Nature writers believe our lives may benefit from imaginative trips through other lives. The animistic travels of language, like the lively narrative expressed by tracks on a beach, enlarge the possibilities of storytelling by including, through acts of imagination and attentiveness, what David Abram calls a “more than human world” in our human perceptions. Nature writing helps us to explore also the more-than-human nature in ourselves; ethnobotanical writer Gary Paul Nabhan speculates on the narrative possibilities of nature writing in our own bodies:

Lynn Margulis has pointed out that there are myriad other lives inside each human “individual.” For every cell of our own genetic background there are a thousand times more cells of other species within and upon each of our
bodies. It would be more fitting to imagine each human corpus as a diverse wildlife habitat than to persist in the illusion of the individual self.

Or better, each of us may be a living corpus of *stories*: bacteria having the final word within our mouths; fungi breeding between our toes; other microbes collaborating to digest the world within our intestines; archetypical images from our evolutionary past roaming among nerve synapses, pitting our groin muscles against our brain tissues. (12)

If our bodies are indeed a “living corpus of stories” that are more-than-human, then the writing and reading of nature is the reading and writing of our own nature, the mysteries in our own bodies. To study natural history and to write about places, animals, and natural processes is to explore our own place among many, outside and within ourselves.

Barry Lopez’s short fiction, and indeed, all of his work, inhabits this many voiced, many eyed world and takes the path both nature writers and fiction writers suggest: following the tracks of others with our language and imaginations. In Lopez’s fiction we must read the tracks of humans and animals as part of the same breathing text.

I walk the beach to get closer to the source of Lopez’s language.

**Stories of the “Other Nations”**

Barry Lopez is well known and much celebrated for his nonfiction works—*Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape; Of Wolves and Men; Crossing Open Ground; The Rediscovery of North America;* and *About This Life*—praised by critics for their strong personal narratives which connect stories of far off places, wild animals, native cultures, and the Western world’s spiritual impoverishment.
to ethical concerns and questions. Lopez, who often describes himself “as a writer who travels,” says his understanding of the writer’s responsibility is to “inquire of a parallel culture, to ponder another order, for how it might illuminate some part of [his] own culture” (17). Lopez includes animals in his idea of parallel cultures, and through his form of natural history explores ways animals illuminate and teach attentive people. The epigram from Henry Beston’s *The Outermost House*, with which Lopez sets the tone for *Wolves and Men*, offers Lopez’s own view that animals are “other nations” that should be respected, not pitied or “patronized”: “They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth.” Thinking, watching, and learning about these “other nations” is Lopez’s constant impetus for writing both fiction and nonfiction. The “other nations” provide Lopez with an animistic breadth of vision, a larger view of the possibilities of life than is provided by the violently anthropocentric moral, political, and religious limitations of our time.

Scholar Scott Slovic writes, “to overcome the absurdity and meaninglessness and destructiveness—of man’s estrangement from the natural world—is precisely the goal of Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams*” (137). Slovic’s statement is also true, perhaps more subversively so, for Lopez’s five collections of short fiction: *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven* (1976), *River Notes: The Dance of Herons* (1979), *Winter Count* (1982), *Field Notes: The Grace Note of the Canyon Wren* (1994), and *Light Action in the Caribbean* (2000). In these stories, characters discover mystery, repose, unexplainable feelings of gratefulness and fear in the proximity of other animals, cultures, and places in
ways that resist the solipsistic inwardness and incoherence that result from our perception of a human-created and inhabited world.

Lopez's fiction is mostly uncharted territory for literary explorers. His small collections of short stories are often shelved in the Nature or Natural History sections of bookstores—a designation, while not entirely inappropriate, that nonetheless keeps Lopez's fiction beyond the reach of the literary critic's radar. I hope, through my close readings of stories from each of his collections, that I may draw critical attention to Lopez's fiction, contribute to a dialogue in the humanities on expressions of animism in literature, and chart out Lopez's unique challenge to Western metaphysics and human-centered ethics.

These stories, like Lopez's subject matter, are difficult to categorize into any conventional taxonomy of fiction. At first read, these fantastical and oblique stories where humans transform into birds, wolverines talk, boulders dream, and distinctions between animate and inanimate blur, may seem easily captured by the descriptor "magic realism," but the net does not fit well. Even as the stories' form and tone echo the magic realism of Borges or Marquez, Lopez's fictive imagination works toward something different from the goals of magic realism. One definition of magic realism suggests that the form is

fiction that does not distinguish between realistic and nonrealistic events,

fiction in which the supernatural, the mythical, or the implausible are assimilated to the cognitive structure of reality without a perceptive break in the narrator's or characters' consciousness. (Dictionary of Twentieth Century Culture 156)
Lopez's stories differ from this definition of magic realism because his characters often are surprised by unlikely and supernatural events, or they have undergone in the process of the story a kind of epistemological surrender that allows them to accept the “implausible” events. Masami Raker Yuki describes Lopez’s fiction employing magic realism in a slightly different sense than the previous definition by using Franz Roh’s initial explanation of the term: “I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (qtd. in Yuki 40). This definition of magic realism is an accurate description of the way Lopez’s stories work; however, the term also carries associations and resonance of surrealism which is a kind of art based on removing things from their contexts, an aesthetic that is precisely what Lopez’s animistic fiction avoids. As magic realism seems too loaded of a term, I will describe the stories as “animistic realism,” which I define as fiction that does not recognize the barriers between human and non-human, animate and inanimate, sentient and non-sentient. Consequently, animistic realism is a philosophy of fiction that works toward a recognition of the natural world in which humans are participants. These stories are indeed about that epistemological surrender that characters undergo in order to accept the animistic nature of reality.

A Definition of Animism

“Animism,” as I will be using the term throughout this thesis, is somewhat different from its historical, orthodox usage. The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition represents the common understanding of animism: “the attribution of a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena.” This definition is problematic on several
fronts as it not only employs Christian religious terminology, but depends on drawing a distinction between animate and inanimate phenomena, whereas an animistic epistemology avoids such dualisms. The *OED*'s conventional definition of animism relies on the premise that this dualism exists. Recent studies of animism and indigenous worldviews by anthropologists demonstrate that many cultures do not make the separation that divides, often along ideological lines, species and phenomena into dualisms. I therefore do not use “animism” in the strictly spiritual sense that all life is imbued with spirits, but rather, as a particular understanding of human perception. However, the spiritual dimension of animism will also show up in the stories, and I will draw out the connections and distinctions between animistic perception and animist metaphysics.

Animism, as I will use the term throughout the essay, is the acknowledgment of a world full of lives and perceptions; an animistic understanding does not separate or classify “inanimate phenomena.” Because an animistic worldview will not draw distinctions between animate/inanimate, sentient/non-sentient, and higher/lower-life forms, different species cannot be separated as deserving or not deserving dignified treatment from humans.

I, like many nature lovers and environmentalists, often focus on the “pretty” side of the animate world, a practice that often privileges nature over culture, perpetuating a binary outlook that divides the animate world. “Nature” is one of the most contested terms in contemporary critical theory, and I hope to employ it inclusively in this thesis in the sense of “nature” that anthropologist Hugh Raffles suggests: “a dialogic, vernacular nature that encompasses multiple knowledges [and includes] the politics and agency of
even the humblest of animals” (9). I do not wish to squelch the possibilities of what I mean by nature by turning away from the mysterious, unexplainable, the frightening; terrifying, violent, and cruel forces inhabit these stories alongside joy and hope. Rapist mallard ducks, cannibal wolves, and abusive otters must also be included within our vision of nature; we must consider what we cannot understand. In this thesis, “nature” embraces the “nature” both outside and inside of all human bodies; I write toward an animist understanding of nature.

**Biophilic Possibilities**

In *Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram, extending Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology, suggests that animism is the habit, requirement, and structure of human perception itself—even among cultures that deny animistic beliefs. Our human perceptions, and thereby our minds, depend, as life depends on the nourishment of earth and water, on the diversity of sensuous interaction with the other lives of this world. We find in our attention to elephant seals, coyotes, or Caspian terns, metaphors for human behavior and emotions, and thereby take those lives into us in thought. As art historian John Berger writes, “the first metaphor was animal”; animals have always fed our imaginations with their mysterious similarities to and shocking differences from us (qtd. in Ingold 47).

According to entomologist E.O Wilson, we are attracted instinctively to other species by a biological necessity called “biophilia.” In biophilic play, we endlessly mimic animals in search of transcendence, for renewed or greater perception; we wear macaw feathers and otter furs for sex appeal or to note differences in class or clan. We teach
children to speak our alphabet with Alligators, Baboons, and Canaries. We encounter animals in our imaginations through the acts of story, dance, art, and science in order to discover, create, and challenge what it is to be human. We act as tourists with our art and rituals, visiting and voyaging into the animate world with its other perceptions.

David Abram writes that “we are human only in contact and conviviality with what is not human” (ix). Humans evolved as animals in community with many other lives, and through that concert learned from these other ways of being in the world. Scientists E.O. Wilson, David Abram, and Paul Shepard believe that in contact with and through observation of such animals as bears, cranes, and crickets, humans learned to dance, make music, and to create metaphor. Abram offers a history of human interdependence with other beings and follows this history with a warning:

Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth—our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their own coherence.

(22)

Abram’s warning suggests the consequences of human conceit to the perceptions of an animistic world: a solipsistic worldview that limits human moral and epistemological possibilities.
The animism of Lopez’s fiction requires the inclusion of animals in our moral universe, and I would add that this is necessary for the animate world’s and our own survival. The quality of human imagination reflects the diversity and depth of our relationships, interactions, and musing with other lives. We place our hope with the wings of golden eagles or pelicans because these birds allow us to fly upon the thermals of imaginative thought—a kind of transubstantiation where human desire finds host throughout the natural world. Rather than relying on the romantic, though ontologically necessary, pathetic fallacy of asking nature to rejoice or mourn, we are asked to pass into nature and discover its answer: we need those birds to find ourselves. This kind of transubstantiation differs from Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy in that it recognizes that the animate world is interactive with human meaning; the animate world is not simply a convenient medium on which meaning is placed.

Our meaning, our emotions, our minds have formed in an evolutionary dialogue with a million other creatures and phenomena that are and were our bodies and ancestors, foes and food, fear and hope. Human meaning, emotions, and tropes can be found in the bodies of animals and throughout the earth because they have been entangled there from the beginning. We are not aliens; we are not new to this earth, and the earth is not new to us, though our philosophies often assume that we are newcomers with bodies and minds that were never as small as mice.

“Renegotiating the Contracts”

Lopez’s short fiction addresses the problem Shepard poses in my epigraph for this Introduction: “we must create afresh who we are in the circle of animals” (269). Lopez,
however, extends his concern beyond animals to the whole world—animal, mineral, and botanical. In reference to prayers made in appreciation of animals by Inuit hunters, Lopez asserts that we must “renegotiate the contracts” we hold with the world; our relationships to the world and animals are damaged by greed and inattention, which has not always been our history. Lopez suggests in his essay “Renegotiating the Contracts,” “We once thought of animals as not only sentient but as congruent with ourselves in a world beyond the world we can see, one structured by myth and moral obligation, and activated by spiritual power”(382). One symbol of the disregarding attitude and violence that typify the modern relationship with the earth and its animals, for Lopez, is Cortés’s act of burning the great macaw and parrot aviaries of Mexico City:

The image of Cortés burning the aviaries is not simply for me an image of a kind of destructive madness that lies at the heart of imperialistic conquest; it is also a symbol of a long-term failure of Western civilization to recognize the intrinsic worth of the American landscape, and its potential value to human societies that have since come to be at odds with the natural world. (“The Passing Wisdom of Birds” 197)

This moment of incursion and his admonishment of its greed and callousness is repeated often in Lopez’s works, whether it is in his recount of the attempts to eradicate North American wolves in Of Wolves and Men or his grief for the destruction of the Oregon fir forests near his home. His continual return to these incursive moments in essay, story, and interview is an attempt to find a path away from hate. Lopez writes later in “Renegotiating the Contracts” that if we were to enter once again into a moral relationship with animals, we might learn to love ourselves:
If we could establish an atmosphere of respect in our relationships, simple awe for the complexities of animal’s lives, I think we would feel revived as a species. And we would know more, deeply more, about what we are fighting for when we raise our voices against tyranny of any sort. (386)

Lopez’s stories work to create this atmosphere in which characters can experience “awe” in attention to something that is the beginning of intimacy and love for a person, an animal, or a place. “Pearyland,” a story in *Field Notes: Grace Note of the Canyon Wren*, is such a story. With “Pearyland” Lopez explores the broken hunting contracts between people and animals. An Inuk caretaker on the arctic tundra tells Bowman, a graduate student in wildlife biology, that the place where they stand near the fjords on the tundra is where animals’ spirits return after respectful hunters kill their bodies; the spirits wait for new bodies there. The Inuk caretaker sings to the spirits for his work; he lets Bowman know that his work is dwindling as fewer animal spirits return to the tundra:

“too many, now, they don’t come here. They are just killed, you know No prayer.” He made a motion with his fist toward the ground as though he were swinging a hammer. “They can’t get back here then. Not that way . Many religions have no animals. Harder for animals now. They’re still trying.” (70-71)

The Inuk caretaker’s explanation for the disappearance for animals echoes Lopez’s belief that humans are giving animals a smaller and smaller role in our ethics, religion, and imagination. Lopez’s animistic stories, by giving animals a larger role in the imaginative role of the stories, help readers to empathize and imagine animals in a world that deserves recognition in our ethics, religion, economics, and politics. In an essay, “The Naturalist,”
Lopez asserts the primacy of the animate world to human moral vision: “a politics with no biology, or a politics without field biology, or a political platform in which human biological requirements form but one plank, is a vision of the gates of Hell” (43).

Lopez’s stories seek to evoke an animistic atmosphere charged with the possibilities of, in David Abram’s words, “a more than human world.” Although Lopez does not refer to his work or worldview as animistic, I believe the term describes the subjectivity, agency, and character he recognizes in the natural world, particularly the transformative influence that animate nature has in contact with perceptive human characters in these stories. Lopez’s frequent statements, such as the following from an interview, reflect an animist (and metaphysic) perception as I am using the term:

[Natural history writing] is distinguished for me, first of all, as a kind of writing by the capitulation of various authors to a vision larger than their own. It seems to me that the people whom I read who are writing the best kind of natural history see something larger than their own universe, and, in that sense, it is an antidote to solipsism. (Lueders 22)

Lopez’s stories are animistic not solely because of any particular ideology delivered in the narrative, but because of Lopez’s attentive acknowledgment of the more-than-human world’s constant interaction and play within human characters’ perceptions and language. My chapters will follow and chart out these transformative human and more-than-human interactions through close readings of a number of Lopez’s stories.
Tracking the Territory Ahead

In my first chapter, “The Disintegrating Borders of Self and Other: Animist Literary Theory,” I chart the possibilities for the literary exploration of animism in fiction, while offering a close reading of Lopez’s short story “The Open Lot.” A discussion of animism in fiction will contribute helpfully, I believe, to the current discussions of “embodiment” in critical theory, philosophy, anthropology, and feminism. Embodiment studies explore the ways Western and, specifically, Cartesian metaphysics have privileged an “objective” reasonable mind while denying the “animal” sensing body on which that mind depends. Chapter One enters this discussion among literary scholars and extends the implications of an animistic worldview for embodiment as it relates to critical discussions of ethical identity and power in literary narrative.

My argument about literary animism moves toward, in my second chapter, “Listening to the Animate Earth: The Epistemology of Surrender,” a study of an epistemological shift required by the acknowledgment of an embodied, animistic nature of perception. Through close-readings of several of Lopez’s short stories, I chart the epistemological shifts that characters undergo upon their discovery of the animate nature of the world. Lopez’s first book, Desert Notes, a collection of stories about individual characters questing, in some way, in the desert, begins with two epigraphs, one from Charles Darwin and one from Thomas Merton. These quotations point toward how an epistemological shift works in the stories as a kind of shedding of preconceived notions and prejudices or as an integration of seemingly disparate epistemologies:

The plains of Patagonia are boundless, for they are scarcely passable, and hence unknown: they bear the stamp of having lasted, as they are now, for
ages, and there seems no limit to their duration through the future time. If, as the ancients supposed, the flat earth was surrounded by an impassable breadth of water, or by deserts heated to an intolerable excess, who would not look to these last boundaries to man’s knowledge with deep but ill-defined sensations? —Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*.

and

With the Desert Fathers you have the characteristic of a clean break with a conventional, accepted social context in order to swim for one’s life into an apparently irrational void. —Thomas Merton.

By setting the tone for the collection with a quotation from a representative scientist/explorer and a religious seeker, Lopez, as David Stevenson suggests, “claims as his literary heritage both the naturalist and spiritual traditions” (152). I will expand Stevenson’s observation to argue that the pairing of these two epigraphs by these two prolific figures shows Lopez’s interest in “renegotiating the contracts” both scientists and Western religion have made with animals and the natural world. Darwin, allied with Merton in the epigraphs, becomes a Desert Father encountering mystery, experiencing “deep but ill-defined sensations.” Darwin, a father of modern science, in the desert must, as Merton suggests, “swim for [his] life into an apparently irrational void.” Darwin’s and Merton’s statements express humility in the presence of the unknown. What Lopez continually asserts in story, essay, and interview is a subjective, embodied, and humble approach to interacting with places, animals, and other cultures that is both necessary for wisdom and understanding and is too often absent in scientific, anthropological, and religious pursuits which impose epistemologies that do not allow room for mystery or
other ways of knowing and believing. Lopez gives the following critique of science in the hope that scientists will acknowledge or allow themselves to discover multiple and diverse ways of knowing:

   The idea that animals can convey meaning, and thereby offer an attentive human being illumination is a commonly held belief the world over. The view is disparaged and disputed only by modern cultures with an allegiance to science as the sole arbiter of truth. The price of this conceit, to my way of thinking, is enormous. ("The Language of Animals" 2)

The "conceit" for Lopez is the arrogant denial of an animistic world upon which our perceptions depend for scientific reasoning. In Chapter Two I chart how animism becomes, in Lopez’s stories, a relationship with the world that offers not simply an alternative to science and modern epistemology, but also the possibility that illumination and meaning are rooted in the land itself.

In Lopez’s personal essays and interviews, he often reflects on the influence of his Jesuit education and Catholic upbringing. In About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory, Lopez’s most intimate and personal collection of essays, he reflects on the beauty, but also the conceits, of this education. His writing in many ways is an attempt to bridge and challenge the limitations of scientific and religious dogma, seeking like Merton’s Desert Fathers a relationship with mystery. An animistic epistemology acknowledges, like religion, the limitations of human awareness and its dependence on other orders. Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest writes,

   Barry Lopez’s works have a profound relationship with Catholic thought. His is one of the best achievements of what you might call Western Christian
thinking . . . He understands profoundly the manner in which humans and the natural world are present in a single community of existence. (O'Connell 3)

Berry points to what I believe is fundamental in discussing the animistic nature of Lopez's fiction when he says that for Lopez "humans and the natural world are present in a single community of existence"—that Lopez's animism works as an extension of his humanist concerns. "Renegotiating the contracts" between humans and the natural world also becomes, in the stories, a way for humans to renegotiate ethical contracts with each other. Berry's inclusion of Lopez within "the best achievements of Western Christian thinking" is helpful for my understanding of how Lopez works within the epistemology of the Western Christian tradition, Lopez does not wish to abandon or snub the value of his own cultural epistemology, but he is interested in challenging the limits of that way of knowing the world.¹

All of Lopez's work moves toward an epistemology that is personal and subjective and not solely cultural, certainly not only "Western Christian." In his story "Winter Count 1973. Geese, They Flew Over in a Storm," a historian wishes to tell his students, "it is too dangerous for everyone to have the same story. The same things do not happen to everyone" (62). This character's statement resonates deeply with Lopez's own epistemological project, which as he has said repeatedly in interviews and essays, is to "find trustworthy patterns" in his own tradition, others' epistemologies, and the natural world to guide his inquiry, behavior, and ethics. Lopez addresses the problem of only seeking these reliable ways of knowing in his own culture or only in other cultures in an interview:

¹ For a thorough discussion of Lopez's engagement with Western Christian thought, see O'Connell, Nicholas. Commonweal. March 2000: 11+. It is interesting to note that while Lopez attended Notre Dame he considered entering the monastic life he saw presented in Thomas Merton's writings.
If you talk to anyone who has spent time living with native cultures in North America, they will, I think, tell you the same thing—that sooner or later you are driven to a point in which you feel a fierce sense of the dignity of your own culture. In my experience with native peoples, the true exchange does not happen until you’ve reached that plateau. They are less and less interested in you the more and more interested you are in being like them—because they know you can never be like them. What they wish is that you would express, with the integrity of your own positions in a discussion or in the way you live, the best of what your culture represents. Then there is something to talk about. (Lueders 15)

In short, what Lopez posits in this interview, indeed, in all of his work, is an epistemology of dialogue where one person or a culture does not impose their way of knowing and their dignity over another.

In the “Epistemology of Surrender,” I examine Lopez’s recent story “Light Action in the Caribbean,” which shows how an immoral relationship with the animate world extends to relationships with other people. This story is a modern-day re-telling of the story of the European incursion of the Americas and demonstrates how a conquering approach to the animate world is repeated in the violent incursion into other cultures. Lopez’s connection of these two histories of domination and injustice draws profound implications for the boundaries of humanist concern: the humanist sense of justice cannot end with the human species.


I discuss how the narrative process and pattern in these representative stories "renegotiate the contracts" between the author and reader, and further, between the reader and the animate earth. The Inuktitut word for storyteller, Isumataq, as Lopez translates it, is "the person who creates the atmosphere in which wisdom reveals itself" and works, I believe, as an appropriate description for Lopez's narrative technique and approach to telling stories. Isumataq sets up a different approach to storytelling: the storyteller simply, humbly evokes an animistic "atmosphere" in which the reader discovers wisdom; the storyteller does not dispense wisdom—the elements evoked in the story are the keys to finding "trustworthy patterns" that one can use to ascertain proper, wise behavior Lopez works toward this Inuktitut ideal through his careful rendering and attention to the possibilities of a more-than-human landscape. The telling of the story, then, becomes a practice of the same kind of surrender and humility that Lopez's characters undergo to find wisdom in places, in contact with animals, and people who live with humility on the land.

In Chapter Four, "Imagining Beyond the Cartesian Divide: Restoring the Reader, Restoring the Earth," I read "Emory Bear Hands' Birds" from Light Action in the Caribbean and follow its literally magical turns of metaphor. In this story, metaphor is made actual by events in the story. The unexpected mysteriously happens in "Emory Bear Hands' Birds": prisoners, who were given hope by stories about animals, become birds and fly away from their prison. The shocking turns of this story are not, as I argued before, simply a kind of magic realism, but rather, to borrow from Catholic metaphysics, a kind of transubstantiation like in the Catholic Mass when Christ's body and blood are
manifested in bread and wine. In Lopez’s stories metaphors for hope, for transcendence, for communion with the animate world are made actual: a man who seeks an understanding of the desert watches as his hands become the desert as they crumble to the floor.

For Lopez’s characters, hope is found literally in “the thing with feathers” as in Dickinson’s familiar line. These transformations of metaphor into transubstantiation are moments when characters find entrance into the animate world and, consequently, into intimacy with other humans. Lopez’s animistic transubstantiation of metaphor works as the re-embodiment of Western language and philosophy for his characters; the stories become a way to step back into our world.
Chapter One:

The Disintegrating Borders of Self and Other in Barry Lopez’s Short Fiction: Animist Literary Theory

Those who were sacred have remained so,
Holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence
of bronze, only the sight that saw it
falter and turned from it.
An old joy returns in holy presence.

--Denise Levertov, “Come into Animal Presence”

... all that saves us here is Descartes’ convenience.

--Barry Lopez, “Renegotiating the Contracts”

... you am before you think you are.

--Jim Dodge

Cayucos, CA / Missoula, MT

When I sit on my surfboard just outside the waves, sea lions, otters, and dolphins
do not perceive me—a shivering, neoprene-clad surfer—as threatening. The big dark
eyes of the harbor seal fix on mine as we float over swells. The otters usually pay little
attention to me, preferring instead their backstroke picnics of mussels. Brown pelicans
seem to ignore my noisy paddling as they dive, with easy grace, for surf fish. The
dolphins share the afternoon I am in—they surf inside the curling waves, only their sleek,
dark dorsal fins perceptible. With all of this wave and look sharing, the participation of
all of us in the afternoon—aristocratic pelicans, chattering sea gulls, surfing dolphins, curious harbor seals, snacking otters, shivering numb-fingered human surfers—in this place, this confluence of animal life, I cannot help but question what I am told about nature and people.

Descartes was not a surfer (and if he had been, the Western world would be the better for it!), but his famous declaration, “I think, therefore I am” sits with me out in the waves as my teeth chatter and I point out circling osprey to other surfers. Descartes’s formal expression of the division and privilege of the human mind over the animal body feels completely wrong. My animal body perceives the reciprocal vision of the harbor seal, hears the squawking sea gulls, finds joy in the lift and speed of the waves, and therefore I am here, writing now, feeling very much embodied with the buzz of caffeine and by the noisy reminders of crows outside my study window, sharing this discussion of an animist theory of perception in literature. From a writing desk festooned with an otter skull, a vireo nest, an ivy plant, and a coffee mug that serves as perch for a housefly, I push Descartes out into the earth and ocean to discover the natural sources of metaphor and narrative, the sources of the human mind. I feel, even now, the stare of the harbor seal.

I Sense, Therefore I Think

I wish to propose a theory of literary animism. I offer this as a supplement to the important work being done by ecocritics who give their attention to the earthy habitats of our literatures, and as an articulation and application of what some philosophers call the re-embodiment of Western thinking. Animist literary theory is an extension of several
critical discussions in the humanities that take issue with Descartes’ proposition of a bodiless intellectual freedom independent of material structure—an irresponsibility and fallacy that Jacques Derrida among others has challenged in his continuous unearthing of Western metaphysics’ forgotten (or denied) dependence on the written word. In a similar fashion, an animist literary theory traces the ways Western metaphysics denies its dependence on the animate world and the sensing, “animal” body.

A theory of literary animism also finds its roots in feminist critiques of the way Descartes’ categorical division between body and mind privileges, historically, the “objective,” usually male, mind. The “animal” sensing body is subjective in nature, and therefore disappears from sight in “objective” narratives of science. Opposing this conceit, science historian Donna Haraway declares: “I would like to insist on the embodied nature of vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere” (188). The supposition of a “conquering gaze from nowhere” is a useful way to describe what animist literary theory disintegrates through its attention to the subjective, interactive, ecological nature of perception as it relates to language and narrative.

Polyglots of Animistic Sensation

A literary theory of animism extends the implications of Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussions of dialogic linguistics and polyglossic narrative to a kind of ecological understanding of dialogics. Michael McDonnell’s exploration of the possibilities of Bakhtinian dialogics in “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight” provides some essential insights into the way Bakhtinian dialogic theory can “be seen as the literary
equivalent of ecology, the science of relationships” (372). Bakhtin’s notion is that
“wherever there is a human voice, there’s evidence of other human beings because we are
each a result of our interactions with each other” (372). McDonnell, in a sense,
anticipates a theory of literary animism when he extends Bakhtin’s notion to wherever
there is a human voice there is evidence of nonhuman voices also. We are all polyglots of
the more-than-human world as we passively and actively take into our bodies the sounds
of creeks, the taste of blackberries, the colors of pheasant feathers, the caramel odor of
Jeffery pine, the caress of dog fur and turn those sensations into expressive, evocative
language.

Lopez’s stories are charged with nonhuman voices that embody the experience
and perception of one character. His introduction to Field Notes, “Within Birds’
Hearing,” follows a man suffering from dehydration and despair whose encounters with
animals give him hope. The animal encounters allow the human voice to continue in this
narrative; the presence of his voice is the consequence of animals’ kindness: “My one
salvation, a gift I can’t reason through, has been the unceasing kindness of animals” (5).
The animals’ kind interactions with the man result in his re-orientation to an unfamiliar
place, relief of his thirst, and renewed hope:

Once when I was truly lost, when the Grey Spider Hills and the Black
Sparrow Hills were entirely confused in a labyrinth of memory, I saw a small
coyote sitting between two creosote bushes just a few yards away. She was
eyeing me quizzically, whistling me up with that look. I followed behind her
without question, into country that eventually made sense to me, or which I
eventually remembered. (5-6)
and further in the story:

Mourning doves were perched on my chest, my head, all down my legs, their wings flared above me like parasols. They held my lips apart with slender toes. One by one, doves settled on my cheeks. They craned their necks at angles to drip water, then flew off. Their gleaming eyes were an infant’s lucid pools. (6)

The coyote, the mourning doves, and later a canyon wren give coherence to this man’s voice. His voice was singular, alone and lost, until he acknowledged that the kindness of the animals literally gave him life. “Within Birds’ Hearing” is a dialogic fable for the story’s recognition that our world’s coherence and our voices are held up within the perceptions and interactions with others; we are not alone.

A theory of literary animism begins with this larger, more inclusive reading of Bakhtin’s dialogic, or many-voiced nature of language. In a sense, Bakhtin’s belief that polyglossic narrative is a kind of “carnival” of interactions could be said in an animist reading to be a “menagerie” of narrative, or more accurately, an ecosystem of narrative.

This interactive, ecological understanding of language and narrative situates the character’s “self” within what Charles Darwin called a “web of relationship.” This dialogic nexus works to disintegrate the borders between the self and other; the subject and object cannot be disentangled. The coyote that re-orders the lost man’s sense of geography in “Within Birds’ Hearing” becomes indistinguishable from the man’s mind: to separate the coyote from the man’s mind would be to unravel his mind’s coherence and his understanding of where he is. Bakhtin’s dialogical understanding of language points to the fact that all voices are dependent on other voices; animism acknowledges
that our perceptions and understanding are dependent on an animate earth, Darwin’s “entangled bank” of relations.

**Descartes was a Disembodied Animal**

To deny the ecological, dialogic nature of language would be to shut off the body’s dialogue with the world “outside” the body. In a nutshell, this denial has been a central, puritanical drive of Western philosophy. Scholars Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior write in their introduction to *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*: “The project of Western philosophy has always been to find what is exclusively human in the human animal: man is the rational, speaking, bipedal, tool-making, history-possessing, incest-prohibited, fire-discovering animal” (2). By distilling and separating humanity from animality, philosophical epistemology has stepped away from the body—evidence of our animal-nature—toward the “reasonable” mind where it assumes refuge and respite from “wild” nature. This act of metaphysical disembodiment causes all kinds of problems, not the least of which are the moral implications of deeply rooted cultural notions built upon Descartes’s “convenience”: the simple categorical distinction between sentient and non-sentient beings. This dualism was drawn formally through statements like, “I think, therefore I am”—a statement that assumes objectivity by denying the embodied, sensing nature of the mind that relies exclusively on a body in an animate world. This dualism damns the physical world—bodies of animals and people—women and non-European people, land, and natural phenomena—that are “objectively” thought not to possess reason, or not at least “the right kind.” This physical world receives the label of being non-sentient and therefore outside the realm of humanist ethical concern.
Philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore critiques Descartes and similar thinkers and highlights the greatest danger and loss of the dualistic, disembodied worldview:

By writing always about ideas, never about themselves, authors transformed themselves into disembodied authorities who had no past, no future, no reason for wondering—authors whose own hopes and fears were so submerged that they could only sway slowly in the margins like ghosts. And then the range of possible subjects narrowed: the easiest things to write clearly about are the simplest, and nothing in real life is simple. (172)

The “disembodied authorities,” through their ghostly abstractions, can shirk responsibility for care of communities, whether the human community or the physical ecosystems in which we live.

More specifically, the Western world’s greatest horrors—human chattel slavery, the extermination of entire tribes of American Indians, Hitler’s “Final Solution”—often “worked” on the presumption that some human beings were perceived to be “closer” to animals than others. Within a Western metaphysic that privileges an “objective” mind over the animal body, millions of bodies that are defined in terms of their “animality” are treated as animals in a society where the world outside of humans is rarely included within discussions of moral behavior. An animistic understanding of morality and perception does not allow this easy sloughing off of relationship, responsibility, and reciprocity for a solipsistic, self-centered “moral view.” Many eyes are watching.

Barry Lopez offers the following short history of human relationship with animals and writes that our distrust and violent disregard for our own animal bodies and other animal bodies leaves us morally injured:
We once thought of animals as not only sentient but as congruent with ourselves in a world beyond the world we can see, one structured by myth and moral obligation, and activated by spiritual power. The departure from the original conception was formalized in Cartesian dualism—the animal was a soulless entity with which people could not have a moral relationship—and in Ruskin’s belief that to find anything but the profane and mechanistic in the natural world was to engage in a pathetic fallacy. Both these ideas seem short-sighted and to have not served us well. ("Renegotiating the Contracts" 382)

Writing Like Bears

An animist literary study, as I envision it, seeks through the study of narrative to recover and recognize the relationship between the human body, mind, and spirit and the animate earth. Like ecological literary study or "ecocriticism," animist literary studies attend to the ways stories are informed, representative, and critical (as Lopez’s stories often are) of human relationships to the land. Animist literary theory hikes deep into the territory of our language and literature to recover and repair, like restoration ecologists, the narratives that connect the human reader to the animate land. It is an investigative, interdisciplinary approach to interpreting stories that begins with the premise that our language itself is animistic in nature. As a larger conception of Bakhtin’s theories suggests, and as David Abram argues, animist perception is still accessible and familiar to modern humans:
As a Zuni elder focuses her eyes upon a cactus and hears the cactus begin to speak, so we focus our eyes upon these printed marks and immediately hear voices. We hear spoken words, witness strange scenes or visions, even experience other lives. As nonhuman animals, plants and even “inanimate” rivers once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so the “inert” letters on the page now speak to us! This is a form of animism that we take for granted, but it is animism nevertheless—as mysterious as a talking stone. (131)

Abram, extending Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, contends that human language is not so much a construction of reason as an ecosystem of perceptions and voices in which the human vocabulary is one voice sounding and communicating among many others.² Our language is evocative of an animate earth and is not solely the clever trick of human reason; our language is not solipsistic and alone, but interactive with and derivative of other lives and phenomena.

Similar to Abram’s history of literacy, poet Gary Snyder speculates on the history of calligraphy as found in the karst limestone caves of southwestern France:

Big predators were abundant in the Paleolithic, but sketches or paintings of them are scarce in all caves but one. It was the bears who first used the caves and entirely covered the walls of some, like Rouffignac, with long scratches. Seeing this may have given the first impetus to humans to their own graffiti.

(“Entering the Fiftieth Millennium” 392)

² Abram sees in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology a “corporeal” language that connects “the self” with the body in a way that resists the abstract and compartmentalized notions of self that he argues are prevalent in academic and popular philosophy from Descartes to the present. For further discussion, see “Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Participatory Nature of Perception” in Spell of the Sensuous, 44-72.
The idea that animals may have helped to inspire and possibly create human arts including literature is central to a literary theory of animism. All literature can be understood as being like a shamanistic practice of embodying other lives or perceptions. It is a kind of serious and playful travel where humans can discover and imagine other ways to live, other possibilities of understanding. Abram’s and Snyder’s speculations point to a correspondence between the animate world and the development of the human mind with its reason, aesthetics, and culture. Philosopher Mark Johnson asserts the verity behind those speculations of cognitive and cultural development: “We conceptualize and reason the ways we do because of the kinds of bodies we have, the kinds of environments we inhabit, and the symbolic systems we inherit which are themselves grounded in our embodiment” (99). Human ontogeny works as a physical dialogue between the body (and here I am including the mind) and animate nature. Our faculty of reason is a result of that dialogue; we should give more credit to the animals, plants, and phenomena that, in concert with our senses, create our minds. Indeed, to disentangle our reason from our bodies and the lives of animals and land would be to break the connective tissue of metaphor. Michael McDowell writes that this metaphoric dialogue is the basis of our perceptions that hold up our reason:

We are beginning to recognize that Ruskin’s “pathetic fallacy,” the crediting of natural objects with human qualities, is not merely a romantic indulgence, but an inevitable component of human perception; it is something to acknowledge and celebrate, not to condemn. (373)

Ruskin’s notion that to see emotion or meaning in a landscape or in an animal is simply self-referential projection (although a mainstay and thrust in critiques of nature writing
and romantic writers) is flawed by the fact that our bodies (minds included) are in
dialogue with the landscape and the landscape is in conversation with us. The world
reflects us because we are a reflection of the world. Although the world does not literally
rain for our losses, as the romantics wished, we, in our communion with nature attach
ourselves to expressions of meaning when apt: we recognize our bodily responses writ
large on the land

The Geography of the Self

My discussion of the interaction and dialogue between the (human) self and the
world is part of a larger, and for nature writers, historical, preoccupation. Henry David
Thoreau, Scott Slovic writes, was obsessed with this notion:

One of the major issues of the text [the Journals], which covers more than
twenty years of Thoreau's life, is whether there is, in Emersonian terms, a
“correspondence” between the inner self and the outer world, between the
mind and nature. This is a question that Thoreau never answers finally—and
thus results the rich tension of identity forging. The Journal, an almost daily
record of observations, shows the author’s efforts to line up his internal
rhythms with those of external nature. There are times when Thoreau takes
pleasure in the apparent identity of his own fluctuating moods and the
“moods” of the passing season. (6)

Thoreau’s question of the correspondence between the self and the world was preceded
and influenced by his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson who asserted in a similar

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3 John Ruskin's notion of the "pathetic fallacy" concerned the crediting of emotional responses to
"inanimate" nature by artists, though the term is often applied to works of art that credit animal or "animate
nature" with human emotional responses.
spirit, “The conclusion is irresistible that what is a truth or idea in the mind is a power out there in nature” (qtd. in Richardson 450). The transcendentalist notion that the human self is reciprocated by “powers out there in nature” and, at the same time, that the human self is a reflection of the outer world, is sympathetic to the animist perception that our minds are menageries or ecosystems of interaction. Indeed, the transcendentalists even anticipated Donna Haraway’s critique of the violence and conceit of disembodied science as a result of their acknowledgment of a dialogue between the inner self and the outer world.\(^4\) Thoreau and Emerson’s biographer Robert R. Richardson writes of their ideas of science that echo Haraway’s contemporary notions of positional subjectivity and self-reflexivity in scientific narrative:

In philosophy transcendentalism taught—teaches—that even in a world of objective knowledge, the subjective consciousness and conscious subject can never be left out of the reckoning. Thoreau could say “the purest science is still biographical,” or, as Emerson might have said, there is finally no science, there are only scientists. (250)

Thoreau and Emerson came to their understanding of subjectivity and the tenuous division between the self and world, in part, through their broad readings and explorations of other epistemologies present in the Bhagavad-Gita, the Buddhist scriptures, and for Thoreau, in the fields and forests around Concord.

\(^4\) It is interesting to note, as Richardson does in his biography of Thoreau, that during the latter part of Thoreau’s life the language of natural history was being replaced with the language of “objective science”: “The older terms “naturalist” and “natural history” were increasingly displaced by the new (1840) word “scientist,” the confident rhetoric of “scientific objectivity” and “the scientific method. During these same decades the study of the natural world became rapidly professionalized and sharply specialized” (363).
Lopez’s work is of a similar trajectory of epistemological surrender to animist perception. Although Thoreau does not state explicitly whether congruence exists between his self and the outer world, Barry Lopez is certain of the geography of the self:

I think of two landscapes—one outside the self, the other within. The external landscape is the one we see—not only the line and color of the land and its shadings at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution . . . The second landscape I think of is an interior one, a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape . . . The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes. (Crossing 64-65)

I believe Lopez’s articulation of the geography of self/world “correspondence” points to a central question of animist literary theory: if the “shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes,” then what happens to the mind if the land and all that lives in the land are treated poorly or if some members of the land are pushed to extinction? Thoreau writes: “To travel and ‘descry new lands’ is to think new thoughts, and have new imaginings. In the spaces of thought are the reaches of land and water over which men go and come. The landscape lies fair within” (qtd. in Richardson 78). If the “landscape lies fair within” then what happens to the human mind when the animate earth is disregarded, and as in “Pearyland,” the contracts with animals are broken? An animist literary theory tracks this question as it shows up in stories; the question is answered by the madness that Lopez’s characters often experience when estranged from the animate earth.

33
An animist reading is not new or radical; instead, an animist literary study is the recovery and rediscovery of our dependence on an animate world, whether the world of sentences, panthers, or butterflies; an animist literary study is the recovery of human perception. As Denise Levertov echoes and insists, “Those who were sacred have remained so.” The sacred for Levertov is the “animal presence,” which she sees as still accessible: “holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence / of bronze, only the sight that saw it / faltered and turned from it” (qtd. in Le Guin 1). The “faltering” was a failure of vision or imagination that pushed away or turned from the animate earth as a source of reason, sanctity, and possibility for the human mind.

**Reading Animistically: A Framework**

A literary theory of animism turns back to acknowledge and explore the implications of the more-than-human world in “human” narrative; I make my turn back toward the earth with an animist reading of Barry Lopez’s story “The Open Lot.” My application of literary animism to “The Open Lot” explores the possibilities of animist literary theory in discussions of embodiment and “otherness” in ecocriticism, post-colonial, and cross-cultural discussions. I seek to give through my close reading of this story an answer to this essential question: how does one read a text animistically? By extension, I will also discuss what is gained from an animist reading.

These are some of the further questions that may be posed by animist literary theory:

1. What kind of role or character does the story’s setting play in the narrative? Is the setting more than scenery, more than backdrop or context?
2. In what ways does the language of the narrative—figurative and descriptive—evoke the more-than-human world? Are animal infinitives and etymologies—to out fox, to be catty, to bear—employed in the narrative’s language? Are animals evoked metaphorically? Are characters’ personalities, behaviors, or appearances compared to animals—hawkish? weasel-like? bitchy? badgering?

3. In what ways does a character participate bodily and imaginatively in the animate world? How are the character’s sensuous relationships with the world carried through their occupation, religious practice, academic discipline, sport, or art?

4. Where is the character in proximity (ideologically and physically) to the human community and to the nonhuman world? Where do the characters live? Does the more-than-human world hold a place in their ideology? their religion? their speech? their daily life?

5. How does the nonhuman world interact with the human character? Does the nonhuman world hold any agency in the narrative? Does the nonhuman world affect the character’s emotions?

6. As contemporary stories often are narratives of alienation from community or relationship, and as animism is a worldview concerned primarily with sustaining and repairing relationships, how do characters in a particular story find (or not find) a way into intimacy with community or relationship (both the human and more-than-human communities)?

These questions provide a framework for applying animist literary theory to Barry Lopez’s fiction so that it may open possibilities for other works of literature and may grow with new questions. I will address these questions indirectly in my reading of “The Open Lot.”

35
Unearthing Attention


A loner, Jane Weddell is the Jane Goodall of ancient marine fossils. Her work is to excise marine fossils from indiscriminate rocks. Her work is somewhat disrupted by a budget cut in the museum, and with her extra time she begins compiling a journal of memories and observation of an open city lot that she is mysteriously drawn toward. As she fills the pages of her journal with notes on this space, the lot transforms gradually and she begins to see wildlife—bear, fox, deer, panthers, chickadees—inhabiting an improbable place. Jane Weddell watches this city lot—fence surrounded, litter-strewn, unnoticed—become a refuge of “restored relationships.” She does not step into this space, not wishing to intrude or trespass into this place that “allures” her and gives her comfort. Near the end of the story, Weddell leaves New York for a vacation in Aruba with her nieces—the first time she is shown to have human relationships outside of work. When she returns from Aruba, the lot is gone—covered over with construction porticos and walls. Weddell is not saddened by the loss of the lot—instead she returns to her rocks to draw out more lives from the past.

The voice of the story’s omniscient narrator is quiet, slow, and deliberately formal as in so many of Lopez’s stories. This quiet, careful prose typifies Lopez’s reverence and care for language, which reflects also the quiet nature of his characters in Field Notes. He
seems to excise Weddell’s character with the exacting strokes she uses to reveal life in rocks:

The shadow across Jane Weddell’s life did not come from living alone, a condition that offered her a peace she esteemed like fresh water; nor from being patronized for her great gift by people who avoided her company. It was thrown by the geometry of a life her professional colleagues implied was finally innocuous. (39)

This “shadow” is more complex than depression or loneliness; Lopez’s characters often embody this ambiguous realm outside of orthodoxy that resists the reduction of emotions to simple labels. John Tallmadge writes that *Field Notes*’ characters are monastic personalities, artists, scientists, or contemplatives whose odd inquiries take them to the borders of Western understanding. The stories turn on “threshold experiences,” where a momentary glimpse of alternative reality offers hope for redemption or atonement. (558)

Jane Weddell embodies all of these personalities—she is at once monastic, artistic, scientific, and contemplative, but her character is ambiguous, as she is not strictly scientific, artistic, or contemplative. Lopez’s characters often blur the distinctions between disciplines, which allows them to work on the outside, in the periphery of their disciplines near the “borders” of any given epistemology. Neither strictly a scientist nor an artist, Jane Weddell navigates this outer territory where distinctions and rigidity of discipline and knowledge disintegrate.
The story begins with Weddell walking from her apartment to the Museum, and already we learn she lives in a landscape that in subtle ways influences her thoughts and actions:

Her path was determined by a pattern of complexity outside her thought, the result not solely of her emotional state but also of her unconscious desire, say, to avoid a wind blowing black grit down Columbus Avenue on the morning when she was wearing a new blouse for the first time. Or she gave in to whim, following a path defined by successive flights of pigeons (38)

The city landscape often thought to be the most “human” of landscapes is animated and enlivened beyond buildings, shops, bustling streets by the influence of wind and the flights of pigeons. The narrator’s and Weddell’s attention to the more-than-human character of the city draws in the dialogic possibilities for “The Open Lot” as Weddell’s actions are not solely her own decision, but are part of a larger interaction of life. Further removing humans from the center focus of the narrative, the human aspects of the city are given a context that is more-than-human and includes a geologic sense of spatial time:

The pattern of her traverses from one day to the next gave her a sense of the vastness in which she lived; she was aware not only of the surface of each street but, simultaneously, of the tunneling below, which carried water mains and tree roots, like the meandering chambers of gophers. And ranging above, she knew without having to look, were tiers upon tiers of human life, the joy and anger and curiosity of creatures like herself. (38)
This “geologic” and emotional cross description of the city unearths a transcendent, “vast” understanding of the human condition. Weddell’s ability to imagine and know the strata of human experience within the larger context of life rises from her intimate knowledge of fossils, a knowledge that requires an expansive (and imaginative) conception of geologic time. Weddell’s inclusive vision of the city that embraces rock, water mains, tree roots, cement, asphalt with human life as just being one layer or “tier” of strata becomes essential to understanding her character and actions. The geological and zoological language throughout the story gives context, like Weddell’s stratified vision of the city, to Weddell’s place in time and space, which as we shall see, becomes thoroughly disrupted by events in the open lot.

Describing the Human Animal

“Water mains and tree roots” are described with a simile from the animal world—“like the meandering chambers of gophers”—that subtly contextualizes human actions and artifice as being a kind of imitation or extension of the gopher’s behavior. This kind of simile works the opposite direction of anthropomorphism: instead of animals being described in terms of human characteristic or actions, the human world is described in terms of an animal’s character or behavior.

Weddell’s walks through the cityscape are described in the biological, bodily language of blood vessels and veins: “her footpaths—she imagined them lying awake at night, like a rete mirabile—a tracery over the concrete” (38). Weddell’s participation in creating the “rete mirabile” [a network of blood vessels] over the city sidewalks involves her in a landscape that is not inert, but is alive in her vision. The rete mirabile of the city
is a nexus through which she navigates and gives attention to a world that embodies a larger sense of time and scope of possibility than a strictly human sense of time and possibility. Her actions are described in geologic terms; she is the slow force of nature in this passage:

> It was her gift to discern in the bits of rock placed before her lines of such subtlety that no one who beheld her excisions could quite believe what she had done. Under the bold, piercing glass of a microscope, working first with the right hand and then, when the muscles in that hand lost their strength, the left, she removed clay and sand and silt, grain by grain, her eyes focused on suggestions indescribably ambivalent. (38-39)

The inverted anthropomorphism seen in Weddell’s geologic scrapings and patience radically, though quietly, re-contextualizes humans in terms of the animistic earth, as opposed to the earth viewed in terms of the human: the animistic earth becomes the vantage point from which to perceive and understand human life. In this re-defined context, the human body becomes a microcosm and reflection of the earth. Transcending anthropomorphism, “zoomorphic,” metaphor, or simply, animism, is itself a decentered, infinitely subjective (as it is the nexus of all perceptions in a particular place) description of life. Weddell’s patience for detailed work, with this animistic view, can be understood in the analogous actions of water on stone or the slow creep of tectonic plates; her careful attention to characteristics of marine organisms connects her to the processes of life:

> “When she finished and set the piece apart, one saw in stone a creature so complete, even to the airiness of its antennae, that it rivaled something living” (39). Indeed, her care and attention reveals a before unseen, but always mysterious, aspect of life: “What was
certain was that from a piece of stone in which a creature might reside—guessing simply from the way light broke on its surface—Jane Weddell would pry an animal wild as a swamp night” (39). Inert objects, like the stones that hold the fossils, are seen in a geologic sense of time and through close attention, to be animate, even “wild.” A story about a character who reveals fossils in rocks would seemingly not work as an example of animistic fiction; however, this would be viewing fossils only within the lens of human time, an assumption that Henry David Thoreau, for one, would like to complicate:

There is nothing inorganic . . . The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum, like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit; not a fossil earth but a living earth. (qtd. in Abbey 61)

Thoreau’s notion that everything is “living poetry” directly states the premise upon which this animistic story rests: there is nothing inanimate in a larger conception of time. Jane Weddell’s city and the marine organisms she reveals in rocks are animate in the sense that they are members of a larger narrative of metamorphosis and interaction that is life within an animate planet.

Weddell participates and interacts with the world as an artist. Although her training is in paleontology, her revelation of marine organisms in rocks is described in terms of her creativity, craftsmanship, and ability to evoke life. Weddell’s “gift,” the story tells us, is unique—“No one, perhaps no one in the world, could make the essential pieces of the first puzzle of Earthly life so apparent”—although her gift is downplayed by
her fellow scientists because she refuses orthodoxy and rigorous explanations of
scientific order and hierarchy (38):

Many tried to give meaning to what she did; but because she would neither
insist upon nor defend any one theoretical basis for her thought she was
ultimately regarded as a technician only. The pattern in her work, what
propelled her to the next thing and then the next, was the joy of revelation.

She saw no greater purpose in life than to reveal and behold. (40)

Jane Weddell’s unorthodox motivation for discovery—revealing and beholding—
removes her from a position of assumed objectivity as a scientist; she avoids theories and
generalizations about the organisms she reveals through her patient work in favor of
beholding specific, individual fossils. She sees possibilities for life in places others do
not. Her work is the tactile, physical revealing of specific lives—it is the discovery of her
ability to interpret life by the whims of her imagination, body, and context:

She listened politely to urgings that she concentrate on figuring out
taxonomic sequences, or that she stick, say, to the Middle Silurian for a
while; but she didn’t follow through. She hoped, instead, someone might
ask what the difference was between two trilobites of the same species
where one had been extricated from its matrix with the music of Bach in her
ears, the other with Haydn. (41)

Weddell’s hope that someone might ask about her interpretations of life is an
acknowledgment of her own subjectivity and also of the mysteries that she cannot
account for. She also shows a bit of wry humor in this statement: Bach’s mathematical,
architectural fugues embody the deliberate, carefully tendency in her character, whereas Haydn's aires embody her romantic side, her tendency toward playfulness.

Weddell resists the "objectivity" assumed by some scientists who believe they can synthesize individual lives into generalizations and trust their own perceptions to be an omniscient, objective understanding of phenomena. Her science is, in Thoreau's terms, a biographical project—a revealing of her own influence in the fossils: "She wanted to say that there were differences; for her, the precision the scientists sought in their genealogies, even with a foundation as exquisite as the one she provided, was a phantom, a seduction" (41). Weddell's belief that precision with hierarchies, generalizations, and genealogies is impossible echoes Lopez's own sentiments about science. In Lopez's first work of natural history writing, Of Wolves and Men, he states of the mysterious, varied nature of wolves: "To be rigorous about wolves—you might as well expect rigor of clouds" (4). Rigidity in science is defeated, Lopez suggests, by our perceptive subjectivity that depends on an animate landscape that often delights our senses and baffles our sense of order and reason. Weddell and Lopez eschew a rigorous, "objective" view in favor of an embodied, specific, and reverent view of life. Jane Weddell is comfortable on the edge of science, beyond the rigidity imposed by scientific inquiry, but the open lot opens her perceptions even more radically than her "revealing and beholding" of fossil animals.

The Lives of the Forgotten

Jane Weddell "occasionally saw phantoms" in an open, feral lot in the middle of the city. In the beginning, her visions of the phantoms are vague and elusive, but they
grow increasingly vivid. Weddell’s ability to detect life inside stone grows with her encounters with the open lot, and her vision reveals a world that, seemingly, does not exist in a city. The lot allures her in mysterious, oblique, and physical ways: “The existence of the lot exerted a pressure upon her, like a wind growing imperceptibly but steadily more forceful” (41).

During her first encounters, the lot is animated by plants: “In spring, the grasses grew waist high and among the tall and running weeds purple aster, small white daisy fleabane, and yellow coltsfoot bloomed” (42). The plants she sees evoke animals—fleas and horses—but also animal movement—“running.” Weddell’s observations of the plants fit our expectations of what could be found in an abandoned building site—nothing extraordinary. Indeed, the first true animal Weddell notices in the lot is vague and mouse-like—“a small creature”—also unremarkable in a city (42). We are told that Weddell “found the lot alluring,” but that it “disturbed [her] sense of grace and proportion to be drawn any more to one place than another” (42). We read that the lot occupied “her waking mind” even as she tried not to succumb to intimacy with the place. The mysterious lot somehow attracted Weddell to pass by more often and to pay attention: “her sense of perception now grew more acute as she drew near, prepared to catch the faintest signal; and her peripheral awareness intensified” (43). Weddell’s perceptions sharpen in contact with the lot as she gathers more of its character in her mind. In the same ways Weddell envisions her footpaths charged with life and can see through a rock to the hidden inhabitant inside, her vision reveals another dimension of the broken-down open lot; she sees possibilities for life that others miss. As her senses attune to the subtlety and character of the lot, it changes. The lot’s transformation from a junk-strewn
patch of city to “earth dark as loam” marks the moment when Jane Weddell recognizes
the power of her attention to reveal invisible facts. There is no rational explanation for the
lot’s transformation provided by the narrator or by Weddell. Indeed, as William Rueckert
suggests in his discussion of River Notes, there is a danger in rationalizing mysteries such
as this:

One must be careful and attentive to hear what [the story] is “saying,” to perceive what it is doing. In a sense, we must learn to save these notes from our highly trained analytic and hermeneutic minds by realizing that—here anyway—things most often just are, and to turn them all into symbols is to trespass on, rather than share in, their being. (149)

Rueckert’s notion that rationalizing the mysteries of Lopez’s fiction is a kind of trespass is especially helpful to understanding Jane Weddell’s interactions with the lot, and indeed, all of his fiction. Weddell is careful when examining the lot: she unobtrusively keeps a journal of her memories and observations of what she perceived: “The more she demanded of her memory, the more it gave. The first notebook of two hundred pages gave way to a second, and she became aware in her notes of a pattern of replacement, of restored relationships” (46). Weddell’s journal keeping allows her to reveal and behold “restored relationships” impossible for others to see, just as her excision of marine organisms revealed life once invisible to others. The city’s covered-over, pushed away inhabitants return in the generosity of Weddell’s attention: “The incremental change was stunningly confirmed for her the morning she saw a black bear standing in the lot” (46). The bear’s presence is not shocking, but “stunning”; she trusts her senses enough to
include the bear within her vision, however impossible the bear’s appearance seems from the lens of unanimistic assumptions.

"The Mathematics" of the Possible

A clue as to why Weddell can see what no one else sees is given while talking to her supervisor at the museum about her reduced working hours, her only exchange with another person in the story. Jane Weddell

folded her hands under her chin in polite, wry indignation.

"Don’t pout, Jane. It doesn’t become you," he said.

"I’m not pouting, Cabe. I’m doing a sort of mathematics. In a few moments it will all seem possible." (45)

Weddell’s “mathematics of possibility” is her ability to re-imagine the world, to see possibilities in rocks, in time, and in the open lot that jettisons a singular, dependable, unmysterious view of life. If the work of Western civilization has been, as Annie Dillard jokes, to “de-spookify” nature, then Weddell is working outside the confines of Western knowing, where the possibilities of time and space are less rigid and where a black bear can wander into an open lot in New York.

The “mathematics of possibility,” to see the lot in another way, is a choice for Weddell, a conscious decision to re-imagine the world: “She thought of it [the lot] as a place she’d been searching for, a choice she was finally making, with which she was immediately at ease”(47). Weddell’s re-imagination of the world gives her, someone outside of orthodoxy and community, a place in the world.
A revealing clue about Weddell’s “mathematics” possibility that allows her to revision the world can be found in her relationship to the geography of New York City. Her museum, the streets she walks from work to home, the open lot, are just blocks away from Central Park, the great wilderness in the city. She does not go to the park to see chickadees or deer, or to the zoo to see bears or panthers, but picks out the forgotten husk of a building, an unloved, lifeless hole in which to re-imagine and “restore” the relationships of life. The lot, like her life, like the marine organisms she reveals, seems outside the reach of relationships, of ecologies, but she senses hope and sees possibility even there. The “open lot” is not just a physical place but, in a play of words, it is the potential to decide another way to see to the world. An open lot is a decision with a lot of possibilities for her “lot,” her fortune in life.

At the moment in the story when Weddell is most intimate and familiar to the lot, and when she most desires to reciprocate the gift the lot provides her (“The lot comforted her, and she puzzled over how she might return the comfort”) she leaves New York to visit Aruba with her nieces (47). We are not told anything about her vacation or her nieces. When Weddell returns from the short vacation, the lot is gone, covered over with a construction project. The animals, the trees, the whole lively scene disappears: “the lot was not there.” Although this “kicked out of the garden of Eden” moment seems tragic, Weddell is not saddened by the disappearance of the open lot; she simply wonders, “why she had not done something, whatever that might have been” (48). John Tallmadge reads the disappearance of the lot this way: “[After the lot is bulldozed], she has gained the strength to return to her work, recognizing that she and the land have both suffered from the ignorance of the powerful” (558).
I disagree with Tallmadge’s interpretation; I believe Weddell and the lot have much more agency than Tallmadge acknowledges: the lot has given her a way back into community and into relationship with others. Weddell’s observations and attention to this place connected her to patterns and mysteries outside her own; her knowledge of the lot’s ecology gave her a pattern on which to rediscover her own community with her nieces. Jane Weddell’s close attention to the open lot provided her an entrance into the animate; it was a place where she decided to change her lot. After the lot disappears we can see that indeed, Weddell’s lot has changed:

She left [the lot]. On the way to the museum she remembered a tray of samples so vaguely fossiliferous even she was not sure anything could be drawn from them. So much of the fauna that existed on Earth between the Ediacaran fauna in the Precambrian and the first hard-shelled creatures of Cambrian seas was too soft bodied to have left its trace. These rocks were of the right age, she knew, to have included some of these small beasts, and as she climbed the stairs to her studio she knew she was going to extract them, find them if they were in there. (49)

Weddell’s attention returns to her rocks, back to her gift, to “coax these ghosts from their tombs”; the mathematics of possibility that changed the open lot, her lot, allows her to re-imagine New York by arraying the fossils “adamantine and gleaming like diamonds below her windows, in shafts of sunlight falling over the city and piercing the thick walls of granite that surrounded her” (49). The granitic, dividing walls of the city are pierced by the re-imagination and interpretation of light. The fossils, encased inside rocks, seem impenetrable by vision, just as a city or one way of knowing the world seems
impenetrable by a bear or another perception of reality, but Weddell’s story suggests that there is life and mystery there that we do not see, *but it is there*.

A theory of literary animism, like Weddell’s notebooks chronicling the open lot, seeks “a pattern of replacement, of restored relationships” between the reader and the earth. The open lot, in both senses of Lopez’s pun, is a place of possibility for Weddell’s imagination; it is a forgotten place that can be re-imagined, a place where Weddell could restore her life within larger relationships; a place where she could discover her place in the world. “The Open Lot” is a story in which we, the readers, can re-imagine our own world—an open *lot* of possibility where we can restore our relationships with what we have ignored intellectually and morally: our bodies and selves *in* the-more-than-human world.
Chapter Two:

Listening to the Voice of the Animate Earth:
The Epistemology of Surrender

In the face of a rational scientific approach to the land, which is more widely sanctioned, esoteric insights and speculations are frequently overshadowed, and what is lost is profound. 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.


Take care you don’t know anything in this world too quickly or easily.

--Mary Oliver, “Moonlight.”

I sit as close as I can to the rushing snowmelt of Rattlesnake Creek, trying to connect with the world that sometimes seems outside of my grasp as I spend this spring with books. Upstream a smaller creek joins the flood, its waters mixing and becoming inseparable, indistinguishable from the Rattlesnake. I watch the creeks join, and as I pay attention, I join this place, this moment. On my knees, I lean the trunk of my body forward over the edge of the creek and hold onto an exposed, arched cottonwood root that sips from the flow, its woody fibers entangled and pulsing with the water. The blood that runs in my hand, the hand that holds the cottonwood root, is also entangled and pulsing with water; I am part of the “rete mirabile” of this place. I share a dialogue of breath with this cottonwood I touch and also with the dew-covered willows, stoneflies, and moss that surround me. We breathe reciprocally, in, out, in, out, and all shudder—hair, leaves, clothing, branches, skin—when a breeze rustles down the creek.

I sit at a confluence of creeks, of sensation, of sound. A chickadee whistle is the only sound louder than the water rolling over rocks; his call joins the creek in my ears—a
"tee dee dee"—giving rhythm to the rambling water. Someone, a pileated woodpecker or a squirrel perhaps, drops small flakes of cottonwood bark around the spot where I sit—they fall as easily on me as they fall on the moist leaf duff and the river stones. I feel the air brushing my body as it shakes the leaves. My ears fill with the sound of water. I smell the wet, loamy ground. My eyes take in the shimmer and swirl of light on water—this is how I know I am not separate, not alien to this place: it runs through my body and I am in its thoughts.

A dipper flies low above the creek and lands on a water-washed stone in front of me. His eyes flash a silver light as he turns upstream. This dipper will never leave the creek, he is a part of it: he feeds from it, lives at its bank, mates here. When the dipper glances at me, it is the creek looking back at me. My communion with Rattlesnake Creek involves a profusion of sensation traveling between the bodies of a dipper, my body, the cottonwood tree, willows, and a body of water among others; this is how I know this creek is mediated through the bodies of others and myself. The more I give attention to this world that flows through me, the more I surrender my alienation from the epistemologies of the swimming dipper, the darting flight of the kingfisher, the river stone.

**The Animistic Nexus**

The human body and mind can experience more than one way of knowing; our sensing bodies know a range of experience not taken into account in a materialist epistemology which draws strict boundaries between the self and other, sentient and non-sentient, human and nonhuman, body and soul, even nature and culture—distinctions we
might not even recognize sensuously. As I argued in “The Disintegrating Borders of Self and Other,” our reason and imagination depend on an alive world that we experience as natural animists, but we often leave our animistic feeling for the world behind when we speak from philosophical, moral, or scientific epistemologies. Our animist perception, crucial to our ontogeny, is shirked for anthropocentric and Western-focused epistemologies that reject the uncertainty and polyglossic wildness of an animistic world for one that is tidy, homogeneous, and does not blur the distinction that some humans make to keep the human separate from the animal. Anthropologist James Clifford, although speaking specifically of human cross-cultural exchange, uses language that helps to break down the binaries that a strictly materialist epistemology works to sustain:

Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other or resistance to the other. A fear of lost identity, a Puritan taboo on mixing beliefs and bodies, hangs over the process. Yet what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? (344)

I would like to expand Clifford’s helpful statement about “cultural contact and change” to include interspecies contact and exchange. As I sat on the bank of the Rattlesnake and held a cottonwood limb in my hand, shared glances with a dipper, and exchanged breath with all of the beings around me, I was less an independent, autonomous subject than a “nexus of relations.” My humanity on the creek was not “a boundary to be maintained” by separating my sensuous experience of the creek from those of the dipper or the cottonwood. My skin, not my analytical ideas trying to untangle me from Rattlesnake Creek, is my frontier of transaction with the cottonwood and the creek—their touch is the
outside world trying to get inside my body. My skin is not a “boundary to be maintained” between the cool spring air and my sensitive demeanor, nor is it a place of “absorption or resistance” to this place, but a nexus of dialogue flowing through me, giving me goose bumps and thoughts.

Barry Lopez’s stories work to inhabit this wild nexus in narrative; he pushes the reader and his characters into a world where one epistemology cannot possess a monopoly on truth. Confronted with a world filled with other ways of being and knowing, characters and the reader must re-imagine, as Jane Weddell does, his or her relationship to a mysterious, animate world that they cannot separate from or elevate themselves beyond. Lopez’s stories concern the process of that realization and re-imagination that allows room for mystery. David Stevenson shows that a careful handling of mysterious subjects is a part of Lopez’s larger project of revising the ethical relationship of humans to the more-than-human world:

Within the context of the human relationships to landscape that pervades Lopez’s body of work two more subtle themes emerge—the sense of mystery that he illuminates without damaging or dissecting, and the description of his methodology as a writer: sometimes firsthand observer, sometimes participant, and always meticulous researcher. In the end this method is not merely a writing strategy but also an ethical framework through which he seeks to redefine the relationship of humankind to the natural world. (150) Lopez’s storytelling, as Stevenson describes it, seeks to avoid imposing on mysteries on the land, on cultures, on animals. In an autobiographical statement about how he came to
expand the narrow confines of his education, Lopez articulates and fleshes out Stevenson’s point:

I was drawn especially to men and women who had not dissociated themselves from the passionate and spiritual realms of life, people for whom mystery was not a challenge to intelligence but a bosom.

The effect of these encounters was not a belief that I was now able to speak for such people—a notion I find dangerous as well as absurd—but an understanding that my voice, steeped in Jung, Dante, Heisenberg, Melville, and Merton, was not the only voice. My truth was not the one truth. My tongue did not compose a pinnacle language. These other voices were as indispensable to our survival as variations in our DNA. (12)

Lopez, in other places, includes nonhuman voices within the body of indispensable voices that are necessary to our survival. His “assumption of ignorance” and his realization that his truth was not dominant leads him to conclude that invasive wildlife research, exhibiting the cultural property of an indigenous people, or even disrupting his own character’s privacy is an affront to the mysteries that sustain our lives.

The positivist assumption that everything about people, animals, and landscape can eventually be known by science is repeatedly challenged in Lopez’s body of writing. In his nonfiction essay, “A Presentation of Whales,” Lopez recounts a beaching of forty-one sperm whales on the coast of Oregon. He introduces the sperm whale first in terms of what humans know about these animals: that their hearts weigh over four-hundred pounds, their skin is “as sensitive as the inside of your wrist,” they possess the largest brains of any “creature that ever lived,” and that they are the largest carnivores on earth”
Lopez then describes the whale in terms of what our scientific inquiries do not know and cannot perhaps ever know:

What makes them awesome is not so much these things, which are discoverable, but the mysteries that shroud them. They live at a remarkable distance from us and we have no Pioneer II to penetrate their world. Virtually all we know of sperm whales we have learned on the slaughter decks of oceangoing whalers and on the ways at shore stations. (Crossing 122)

This statement is paired or contrasted with Lopez’s account of the hoards of scientists who descended in both respectful and invasive ways upon the dying, beached whales. Despite the blood samples, pieces of skin, vials of spermaceti oil that these scientists collected, sperm whales remain mostly unknown to science; without disparaging the scientific pursuit, Lopez suggests that we allow dignity and space for their mystery.

Incursions

Similar to “A Presentation of Whales” many of Lopez’s stories deal with invasions of privacy, trespasses into mystery. One story, “Teal Creek” in Field Notes, follows a young man who is captivated by a mysterious hermit named Teal who lives in the woods. The young man watches Teal stare out into the forest as the hermit stands on his front porch. Teal does not know that the young man is watching him, nor does the young man try to summon him. However, the young man is overcome by a feeling of dread while watching Teal and runs back to his truck in shame. The young man recounts: “It wasn’t Teal that had frightened me. It wasn’t the dark, either. What scared me was the thought
that I might have injured him. I knew right then what it meant to trespass" (18). This
moment of trespass is repeated throughout the story collections. In “The Open Lot,” Jane
Weddell “didn’t press the acquaintance” of the lot by stepping inside its fences or staring at
it too long because she didn’t want to disrupt the slow revelation of animal life (47). In
“The Salmon,” a man painstakingly constructs a salmon in the middle of a river from
stones. When the real salmon swim upstream to spawn and are confronted by the large
salmon sculpture, they turn around in the river and flee downstream, away from their
spawning grounds. The sculptor watches in horror as they retreat, confronted with his
unintended invasion into their world and its consequence: “He brought his hands to his
face and for a while, in the passing mist of the rainstorm, he imagined what they would
say. That it was the presence of the stone fish that had offended them (he tried to grasp the
irreverence of it, how hopelessly presumptuous it must have seemed)” (112). This artist’s
“irreverence” can perhaps be understood as analogous to the Islamic prohibition of artistic
depictions of human or animal life because they try to compete with and reproduce the
Creator’s own mysterious work. The prohibition is an acknowledgment of the impropriety
of copying or dissecting mystery.

The problem with invasions of privacies, whether that of the scientists poking and
prodding still-alive sperm whales, or an anthropologist’s probing curiosity, or voyeurisms
of many kinds, is that these acts do not initiate or participate in a dialogue in which the
other’s dignity and wishes are given equal footing and consideration with the inquirer’s
curiosity and desire. Lopez recognizes the dangers that reductive science, invasive art, and
disembodied philosophy impose on the privacy and understanding of their subjects: a
condescending superiority to other ways of knowing, other epistemologies that fails to
Lopez places himself as a writer in a position of vulnerable subjectivity where he works to let go of the certainty and dogma of his own Western tradition in order to experience the animate world on its own terms or through epistemologies other than his own. He pushes himself toward this epistemological surrender by making his position as a writer overt as someone who wishes to share something he has seen or imagined with the reader, but without pressing upon the reader’s experience of a story as his characters pressed the acquaintances of Teal or the run of salmon. Lopez does not share anything too private about himself with the reader that would disrupt the reader’s personal connection to a story where they may discover something about their own (not Lopez’s) way of knowing. Lopez works toward this by acknowledging the limits of his own epistemology. His book *Of Wolves and Men*, an exploration of how humans and wolves have interacted throughout human history in many cultures, is exemplary of how Lopez assumes that his understanding, or any culture’s knowledge of wolves, cannot totalize—cannot fully explain—these animals. He writes that our own natures are as mysterious as those of the wolves and can allow for epistemological possibilities beyond our often-narrow conception of animals: “The range of the human mind, the scale and depth of the
metaphors the mind is capable of manufacturing as it grapples with the universe, stand in
stunning contrast to the belief that there is only one reality, which is man’s, or worse, that
only one culture among the many on earth possesses the truth” (284).

Lopez’s short stories echo the ethical concern present throughout Of Wolves and
Men to not impose one way of knowing over another. John Tallmadge writes that this
desire works to change the reader’s conception of reality and mystery: “Epistemologically,
the stories deal with approaching or crossing the threshold that divides Western and non-
Western views of the world, bringing the reader to a point where nature and culture can be
seen as parts of one reality” (559). Lopez’s characters are usually historians, scientists,
biologists, anthropologists, or artists who find illumination and intimacy with the land not
on the terms and methods of their discipline’s epistemology. Rather they experience
through direct contact with the land, people, or animals that teach, erode, and push them to
accept the land outside their own epistemology. These characters learn from the animals
and people who live close to the land how not to impose upon the privacy and mysteries of
the animate earth so that they are no longer in a position where they are outside their
scholarly subjects, but have seen beyond the dualism, the self/world divide, to an
understanding that they are part of the world.

The Epistemology of Surrender

Lopez’s epigraph for Desert Notes, from Charles Darwin’s The Voyage of the
Beagle, embodies the tension that all of Lopez’s characters encounter: “If, as the ancients
supposed, the flat earth was surrounded by an impassable breadth of water, or by deserts
heated to an intolerable excess, who would not look to these last boundaries to man’s
knowledge with deep but ill-defined sensations?” (6) Darwin’s statement on the mysterious nature of what is not known by humans points toward an epistemology “of what is not known” that permeates Lopez’s stories. The “ill-defined sensations” Darwin speaks of are the feelings Lopez’s characters are confronted with in their interactions with the places, people, and animals they are trying to study through the methods of their discipline. All of his characters, with the exception of Libby and David in “Light Action in the Caribbean” (I’ll discuss them thoroughly at the end of the chapter), realize their failure to really know anything in the presence of animals, land, phenomena, and events that give them “ill-defined sensations.” Lopez’s characters, upon realizing their epistemology’s failure to absorb or deaden the mysteries they encounter in animals, people, and places, become allied with Merton’s Desert Fathers who make a “clean break with a conventional, accepted social context in order to swim for one’s life into an apparently irrational void” (7). These characters learn to have a reciprocal dialogue with an animistic world.

The stories often concern the process of shedding epistemological prejudices on the part of the characters, but also by extension, on the part of the reader. Lopez’s stories, as I argued in Chapter One, work to revise or change the relationship between the reader and the text, and further, between the reader and the more-than-human world. Similarly, Native American literature scholar Louis Owens writes that Indian literature and specifically, Leslie Marmon Silko, “challenge readers with a new epistemological orientation while altering previously established understandings of the relationship between reader and text” (171). What Owens writes about Leslie Marmon Silko is applicable to Lopez’s own project. Lopez challenges readers, in Owens’ words, to change
their “understanding of the relationship between reader and text” by placing them in a position where they must shed their expectations that everything about land or animals or people can be explained rationally. The reader must learn to accept that wolverines talk, that birds can speak in “murmurs of Pythagoras,” and mourning doves can help a dehydrated man drink water. Masami Raker Yuki asserts accurately that Lopez’s stories don’t “work” within the reach of materialist and logical epistemology:

what will “ring true” for the listeners is by no means the same as what Occidental culture considers as “the truth.” The former being what psychotherapist Susan Baur calls “Narrative Truth,” while the latter is “Historical Truth.” Baur explains that Historical Truth “is judged by logical, scientific criteria and is expected to be verified and supported by other evidences. Its language is constrained by the requirements of consistency and noncontradiction, and its goals are facts and laws of nature” (23). On the other hand, Narrative Truth “is used to construct a coherent, inclusive story that explains events and feelings by finding the links that might connect life’s separate occurrences.” Therefore, there is no single “truth” in Narrative Truth: it will only “ring true” within the context of different experiences for each listener, thus achieving an acoustic congruence with one’s own sense of truth. (43)

Baur’s and Yuki’s distinction between “truths” that are empirically apparent and “truths” that are felt but cannot be explained can helpfully show how Lopez’s stories seek something beyond an objective and shared truth. He is seeking “truths” and epistemologies that are more individual and subjective. Lopez’s stories create an
experience of Narrative Truth for the reader, an opportunity to discover within the reader’s own context and experience a connection with the events of the story. Narrative Truth, with its recognition of subjectivity and its dependence on metaphorical, sensuous connection, is an animistic understanding of “truth.” How we know, our epistemology, is pushed in Lopez’s stories beyond the confines of scientific positivism to encounter the unexplainable, mysterious, and humbling aspects of life; to read these stories is to experience the more-than-human world.

The “Introduction” to Desert Notes provides instructions on how the land will be approached in the stories that follow. Desert Notes was Lopez’s first book and this “Introduction” also works, I believe, as a perfect introduction on how to read all of Lopez’s fiction. The first paragraphs of the “Introduction” pull the readers away from certainty about the land and implicate them in Lopez’s challenging approach to the land in which the narrative erodes the domination of one kind of epistemology over others: “The land does not give easily. The desert is like a boulder; you expect to wait. You expect night to come. Morning. Winter to set in. But you expect sometime it will loosen to pieces to be examined” (7). The coherence Lopez speaks of in the epigraph is not obvious or readily available in the landscape presented here. The epistemology of science is evoked in the expectation that the land might “loosen into pieces to be examined,” but as the following lines show, any expectation or notion of certainty will not aid understanding and will not provide entrance to the desert:

When it doesn’t, you weary. You are no longer afraid of its secrets, cowed by its silence. You break away, angry, a little chagrined. You will tell anyone the story: so much time spent for nothing. In the retelling you sense another way
inside; you return immediately to the desert. The opening evaporates, like a vision through a picket railing.

You can’t get at it this way. You must come with no intent of discovery. (7)

The instructions teach an abandonment of expectations and notions in what I will call an epistemology of surrender. The epistemology of surrender is the process Lopez’s characters undergo to find dialogue with the land through an abandonment of the notions, prejudices, distractions, and conceits carried in a colonial or conquering approach to the land or people. The directive to “come with no intent of discovery” posits an oppositional path from colonialism in the guise of science, religion, critical theory, or anthropology. The path or process to “get at” the land must be oblique, slow, accidental, and experiential; the path must be a kind of surrender of expectations and limitations:

You have to proceed almost by accident. I learned about a motor vehicle this way. I was crossing the desert. Smooth. Wind rippling at the windows. There was no road, only the alkaline plain. There was no reason for me to be steering; I let go of the wheel. There was no reason to sit where I was; I moved to the opposite seat. I stared at the empty driver’s seat. I could see the sheen where I’d sat for years. We continued to move across the desert. (8)

The “Introduction’s” narrator surrenders his automobile, a human made invention of imposing speed, to the influence of the desert floor. The inquiry and earnestness shunned by the instructions are abandoned for a kind of surrender in which the narrator enters,

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5 Lopez states numerous times in interviews and essays that nature writing is a post-colonial literature. I believe Lopez’s comments point to an under-acknowledged aspect of critical discussions of nature writing: nature writers extend their conception of colonialism to the more-than-human world. For Lopez’s discussion of this connection see The Rediscovery of North America, 42-53.
through the trust of letting go of his steering wheel, a dialogue with the land found outside of usual patterns and expectations: “Until then I did not understand how easily the vehicle’s tendencies of direction and movement could be abandoned, together with its systems of roads, road signs, and stop lights. By a series of strippings such as this one enters the desert” (8). The narrator approaches his subject deliberately vulnerable. Stripped and outside the safety of roads, the narrator finds entrance to the desert through humility. Scientific examination, defeated in the initial instructions of the “Introduction,” is transformed by the humility and surrender of a the narrator into a kind of sensuous, embodied inquiry that brings the narrator closer to the desert:

I developed methods of inquiry, although I appeared to be doing nothing at all. I appeared completely detached. I appeared to be smelling my hands cupped full of rocks. I appeared to be asleep. But I was not. Even inspecting an abandoned building at some distance from the desert I would glance over in that direction, alert. I was almost successful. Toward the end of the inquiry I moved with exquisite ease. But I could not disguise the waiting. (9)

The last line of this paragraph troubles the reader: what is he waiting for? The answer comes in a magical act of the character subsuming into the land: “One morning as I stood watching the sunrise, washing out the blue black, watching the crystalline stars fade, my bare legs quivering in the cool air, I noticed my hands had begun to crack and turn to dust” (9). He has become the desert.

What the “Introduction” to Desert Notes offers is a framework, a pattern for the surrender of conquest carried by an epistemology that denies mystery and life to land and
animals. It is a process that counters the violence of incursion. In *The Rediscovery of North America* Lopez writes:

> what we see in the New World under the Spanish is an imposition of will. It is an incursion with no proposals. The Spanish *impose*, they do not *propose*. I think it is possible to view the entire colonial enterprise, beginning in 1492, in these terms. Instead of an encounter with “the other” in which we proposed certain ideas, proposals based on assumptions of equality, respectfully tendered, our encounters were distinguished by a stern, relentless imposition of ideas—religious, economic, and social ideas we deemed superior if not unimpeachable. (17)

The “imposition of will” that Lopez speaks of shuts off dialogue between the self and the other, whether the other is another human, place, or an animal, closing the possibility of communion or learning. This incursion of ideas imposes objectivity upon the self and denies sentience, mystery, and agency in the other. Lopez continues with what is a direct articulation of the fundamental impropriety of epistemological imposition that denies the sentience of a more-than-human world:

> We never said to the people or the animals or the plants or the rivers or the mountains: What do you think of this? We said what we thought, and bent to our will whatever resisted. I do not suggest lightly, or as a kind of romance, that we might have addressed the animals, the trees, the land itself. The idea of this kind of courtesy is more ancient than “primitive.” (18)

Masami Raker Yuki in her discussion of Lopez’s question “What do you think of this?” writes that this query “involves a physical and perhaps more importantly a psychological
gesture of listening, with which to perceive a response from the other to start building a
dialogue” (30). Yuki points to the reciprocal nature of this kind of “proposition,” an act
of proposing to listen to more than just our own epistemologies, which lends itself to the
animist understanding that our perceptions and our mind depend on this generous
reciprocity of animistic exchange. This “courtesy” of proposition extends into Lopez’s
approach to storytelling. Lopez’s narrative pattern in his nonfiction, Scott Slovic writes,
is to “assume ignorance or limited awareness to begin with, then proceeds to enact a
gradual and almost linear progression toward a deepening awareness” (153). Lopez’s
assumption of ignorance “or limited awareness” works to place him within the same
process of epistemological uncertainty and surrender that his characters undergo in the
stories. By assuming limited awareness, Lopez and his characters allow themselves to be
opened and changed by the people, land, and animals they encounter.

Instructions and Maps into the World

Lopez even places his readers in a position where they undergo this process of
epistemological surrender. In a description of Lopez’s rhetorical style in Arctic Dreams,
Scott Slovic notes that Lopez employs the second person pronoun “you” to place his
readers in a position where they can imagine what he sees in the Arctic landscape. Slovic
suggests that this stylistic move serves “to bridge the distance between author and reader,
to make the anecdote particularly tangible for the reader” (160). This “tangibility”
becomes palpably radical in several stories in Desert Notes and in River Notes when the
second person pronoun is the character; the reader is directly implicated in the narrative.
In the story “Desert Notes” the reader is addressed: “I know you are tired. I am tired too.
Will you walk along the edge of the desert with me? I would like to show you what lies before us” (11). The narrator speaking to “you” in this story becomes forceful, pushing the readers toward the edge of their understanding, daring the reader to follow oblique instructions on how to enter the desert. “You” and the desert, not the instructive voice, become the central focus of the story at the narrative’s conclusion:

I will leave you alone to look out on the desert. What makes you want to leave now is what is trying to kill you. Have the patience to wait until the rattlesnake kills itself. Others may tell you that this has already happened, and this may be true. But wait until you see for yourself, until you are sure.

(13)

The reader, “you,” is implicated in an act of surrender to another way of knowing. “You” are instructed to be patient, to wait, to watch an unfamiliar world, even as the narrator retreats. A similar move occurs in “The Raven,” also from Desert Notes. In this story another distant but insistent narrator suggests another technique or process of epistemology, of knowing an animal:

If you want to know more about the raven: bury yourself in the desert so that you have a commanding view of the high basalt cliffs where he lives. Let only your eyes protrude. Do not blink—the movement will alert the raven to your continued presence. Wait until a generation of ravens has passed away. Of the new generation there will be at least one bird who will find you. He will see your eyes staring up out of the desert floor. The raven is cautious, but he is thorough. He will sense your peaceful intentions. Let him have the first word. Be careful: he will tell you he knows nothing. (22)
The reader is placed in the imaginative position of being vulnerable to the whims of ravens, humble to their presence, at the mercy of their lifespan. The raven even possesses the power and agency to deceive. The experience of “natural history” in “The Raven” subverts the imposition of scientific and epistemological authority. The reader is left to approach the raven and the animate world without the imposition of assumptions.

“Every Animal Knows More Than You Do”

In *The Rediscovery of North America*, Lopez offers what I believe is his clearest statement of the tenets or attitudes that guide his interactions with and approach to the subjects of his stories:

It has been my privilege to travel, to see a lot of country, and in those travels I have learned of several ways to become intimate with the land, ways I try to practice. I remember a Nunamuit man at Anaktuvuk Pass in the Brooks Range in Alaska named Justus Mekiana. I was there working on a book and I asked him what he did when he went into a foreign landscape. He said, “I listen.”

And a man named Levine Williams, a Koyukon Athapaskan, who spoke sternly to a friend, after he had made an innocent remark about how intelligent people were, saying to him, “Every animal knows way more than you do.”

And another man, an Inuk, watching a group of polar bear biologists on Baffin Island comparing notes on the migration paths of polar bears, in an
effort to predict where they might go. "Quajijaujungangitut," he said softly, "it can’t be learned." (35)

The act of listening and the acknowledgment that "every animal knows way more than you do" is what the anthropologist in "The Entreaty of the Wiideema" learns from his experience of epistemological surrender among the Wiideema tribe. He also discovers what the Inuk man insists: some mysteries cannot be explained.

**Learning to Listen**

"The Entreaty of the Wiideema," from Field Notes: The Grace Note of the Canyon Wren (1994) is told in the voice of an anthropologist delivering the story of his time living with the Wiideema, a previously undiscovered hunting tribe in Australia, in a lecture to his peers. The anthropologist, dissatisfied with his inability to connect intellectually with the Navajo whom he had previously "studied," sought a "fresh" people (92). The anthropologist arranged an expedition to Western Australia to serve his ambition, though under false pretense: "I was not interested, as I claimed, in searching out the last refuges of rare marsupial animals and in comparing what I could learn of their biology and ecology with information gathered in conversations with local people" (92). At the first opportunity, the anthropologist retreats from his expedition party to look for his undiscovered tribe. The Wiideema, a nomadic and mysterious tribe, discover him first. His lecture then describes the process of what I am calling an epistemological surrender: his interaction with the Wiideema challenge and erode his assumptions about language, animals, and violence. I will map his lecture to show how his contact with the Wiideema taught him to listen to other people and the more-than-human world and to
acknowledge the role of mystery, just as the Alaska Natives, whom Lopez refers to often, suggest when encountering a new landscape, the unfamiliar: “I listen”; “every animal knows more than you do”; “it cannot be known.”

Beginning the lecture, the anthropologist confides to the audience his feeling of inadequacy and alienation while “studying” the Navajo:

When I finished my doctoral studies among the Navajo of the American Southwest, I realized as many students do, that I know less at the end than I did in the beginning. That is, so much of what I took to be the objective truth when I started—things as self-evident, say, as Copernicus’s arrangement of the inner planets—became so diluted by being steeped in another epistemology that simultaneously I came to grasp the poverty of my own ideas and the eternity of paradox within Navajo thought. (89)

The Navajo’s deviation from the anthropologist’s epistemology and assumptions becomes the impetus for his exploration. During his time with the Navajo he realized that he was not participating in a dialogue, that there was an inequality in his curiosity toward the Navajo. The complex statement that follows suggests the imposition present in his inquiry that he begins to feel culpable for:

When I finished my work among the Navajo—or, to be both more precise and more honest, when I gave up among the Navajo—I had as my deepest wish that someone among them would have been studying my way of knowing the world. I might have been more capable then of accepting the Navajo as true intellectual companions, and not, as has happened to so many of us, have ended up feeling disillusionment, even despair, with my
own culture. I believe I would have been able to grasp our expression of Beauty Way, and in that sense I would have fallen back in love with my own people. (90)

The anthropologist follows this statement by adding, “But it did not work this way” (90). Though he senses, on some level, that he craves reciprocity, dialogue, and exchange of ideas rather than chasing and dissecting the exotic, he nonetheless tries to quell this desire by trying to find a literally “undiscovered people” (91). During this same period in his life, he admits, he lost his family as he obsessively tried to “memorize the full nine days of Blessing Way prayers” (90). His separation from his own community, the poverty of his relationships with his own people, leaves him grasping and searching for relationship. Like many in his discipline, his curiosity, his obsession for the exotic is an attempt to fill the void that he feels from his own disconnection.

The anthropologist’s curiosity is not mediated by any moral concern to respect the privacy of these people whom he might discover: “An important question—why disturb these people if they are, indeed, there?—was one I deliberately ignored. I suppressed it, I will tell you, with a terrible intellectual strength” (91). The anthropologist’s decision to impose his will by invading the privacy of this previously undiscovered people demonstrates, unwittingly, his strong desire to really know a people, to hold relationships.

The anthropologist’s lack of real relationship can also be seen when he deceitfully abandons his own people while on expedition in Western Australia to seek out an undiscovered people. When he encounters the Wiideema, after they discover him walking in the desert, he signals to them that he “very much wished to join them and leave [his] companions” (93). What he doesn’t expect is how deep of a commitment his wish to “join
them” implies to the Wiideema. He describes being initiated, in some way, by the Wiideema as they walk for days and nights, without stopping. He says of this initiation: “My exhaustion turned to impatience, impatience to anger, anger to despair, and despair to acquiescence. In this manner I was bled” (93). The line echoes Desert Notes: “By a series of strippings such as this one enters the desert” (8). Bleeding figuratively begins his process of surrendering his ideological divide and scholarly imposition over his subject. When he states, “In this manner I was bled,” he learns that becoming or studying the Wiideema will not be an act that he wills. The Wiideema erode his assumption of power physically and psychologically by treating him on their terms: “My position during those first few weeks, however, could be construed as that of a camp dog” (93). He becomes frustrated and stops acquiescence to his treatment by the Wiideema after several days. The anthropologist demonstrates his frustration and tries to place himself on level with the Wiideema in an oblique play of power:

I confronted one of the men, Karratumanta, and with a look of defiant exasperation burned a smoking hole in a eucalyptus limb with my hand glass. Karratumanta regarded me blankly. He picked up a stone and threw it with terrific force at a small bird flying by. The stone knocked the bird, a songlark, to the ground, dead. He stripped away its two minute slabs of pectoral flesh and then regarded me as though I were crazy to assume superiority. (94)

He tries to show his agency and power by burning the eucalyptus limb, but the Wiideema man dismisses his frustrated action. If the anthropologist wishes to join the Wiideema, he must undergo this erosion of his perceived difference from them; he would have to learn to listen.
The moment in “The Entreaty of the Wiideema” where the anthropologist is most challenged by his encounter with another epistemology is when he realizes he does not have to be separate from the Wiideema. This moment of recognizing the possibility of participating in mystery as a dialogue and not as something to analyze and figure out happens when he begins to hear what he thinks is his own language, English, being spoken by the Wiideema:

I was not prepared for the day I began to hear English words in their conversations. The first words I heard were “diptych,” “quixotic,” and “effervesce,” words sufficiently obscure to have seemed Wiideema expressions, accented and set off in the run of conversation exactly as they would be in English. (94)

He is at first confounded by the fact that he can sometimes understand these mysterious people’s language and confronts a Wiideema woman named Yumbultjatura. In his anthropologist role he inquires of her for an explanation, but she offers him something that gives him an entrance into community, in a way back into relationship:

“Where did you learn to speak English?”

“What is that, ‘English,’ the name of your language?”

“It’s what we’re speaking.”

“No, No,” She said smiling. “We are merely speaking. You, you, I think might be speaking that.”

“But we can understand each other. How could we understand each other if we both weren’t speaking English?”
"We can understand each other because—how should I put this to you?—we do not have a foreign language. You understand what I say, don’t you?” (95).

Yumbultjaturra asserts something that is inconceivable to the anthropologist, and probably to most readers—she removes the divide between the self and other. She continues explicating how this mystery “works” by stating a kind of admonishment toward the anthropologist that allows him to realize what was missing in his approach to the foreignness, the otherness of the Wiideema: “We spoke to you all the time,” she stated. “And forgive me, but your questions were not compelling. And to be truthful, no one was inclined to speak with you until you put your questions away. You’d have to say this is a strict tenet with us—listening.” (96). The Wiideema woman offers the anthropologist a way to surrender his epistemology of distance and separateness from other people as way of communicating and sustaining relationships based on dialogue and proposition rather than on imposition and assumption. The anthropologist intimates his experience of learning to listen:

She wasn’t, in fact, speaking English. It was not even correct to say that she was speaking Wiideema. She was just speaking, the way a bird speaks or a creek, as a fish speaks or wind rushes in the grass. If I became anxious listening to her, she got harder to understand. The more I tried to grapple with our circumstances, the less I was able to converse. Eventually, in order to understand and be understood, I simply accepted the fact that we could understand each other. (96)
His epistemology becomes, in this moment, based on listening and mutual respect. He recognizes the humanity of the Wiideema and lets go of his preoccupation with their exoticness:

I ceased what finally seemed to me my infernal questions and menacing curiosity. And finally came to see the Wiideema as a version of something of which my own people were a version. (97)

His surrender of questions and his gesture of listening opens the possibility that he might be able to reciprocate and give back to the people he has taken so much away from. The anthropologist seeks to get beyond a voyeuristic non-relationship with the Wiideema to a true exchange of ideas and epistemologies. Seeing the humanity in the Wiideema places the anthropologist in a position where he wants to tell the Wiideema’s story well, as truthfully as he can, when he returns to his own people: “I do not know if I will be successful, or—if I am—whether success will mean anything substantial. But having sojourned with the Wiideema, I want to understand now what it means to provide” (102).

The anthropologist’s desire here, to learn to provide, is an act of supplication so that he may return to his own people and give something back and restore his relationship to the human community.

“The Entreaty of the Wiideema” suggests that the anthropologist’s own people are “undiscovered people”; the Wiideema’s prayer is that we might learn to listen to each other, to the more-than-human world. The anthropologist’s experience of Yumbultjaturra’s voice is analogous to the voices of the animate earth. Just as the anthropologist learns to accept that he can understand her language, we must learn that we can have dialogue with the land; we can listen and know we are in it.
The Nightmare of Entitlement

If "The Entreaty of the Wiideema" is representative of Lopez's pattern of epistemological surrender, then "Light Action in the Caribbean," from his recent collection of the same name, is his nightmarish vision of what happens when characters continue to impose their understandings and expectations onto a place and people. "Light Action in the Caribbean" is Lopez's modern-day story of the Spanish conquest of the Americas played out by an American couple while on vacation in the Caribbean. In every superficial sense this story is an anomaly in Lopez's fiction: the characters use language casually, the story is full of pop culture references, and the story depicts extraordinary violence. "Light Action in the Caribbean" is the only Lopez story I know of with any mention of cyber technology, brand-name clothing labels, and commercial kitsch; it is for these reasons that this feels like the most contemporary of his stories.

The story follows Libby, a twenty-something year old woman who works in a psychiatric clinic, and her sort-of boyfriend David, an upwardly mobile dot-commer as they vacation on San Carlos Island. The basic plot of the first part of the story seems almost innocuous: a couple who do not know each other well fly from Colorado to San Carlos, an island in the Caribbean, to vacation and scuba dive. The second part of the plot seems, upon first impression, to be almost violently disjointed from the first part of the plot and unexpected: Libby, David, and Esteban—their local diving guide, are brutally murdered by modern-day pirates. I read several reviews of Light Action in the Caribbean that pointed to the anomalous, violent nature of this story in comparison to Lopez's other work. I propose that the story offers quite a bit more than these reviews suggest; indeed,
this story is a re-telling of the European incursion into the Americas: the epitome of the imposition of one epistemology over all other possible ways of knowing.

The incursion theme in “Light Action in the Caribbean” is carried subtly through the interactions between David and Libby and between David and the local people of San Carlos. Language mediates David’s imposition onto Libby and toward the people of San Carlos. I track the interactions and language that lead to a process of incursion in this narrative to argue that “Light Action in the Caribbean” is not an anomaly among Lopez’s stories, but is a story that leads to a similar conclusion: the need to listen and to surrender the presumption of the superiority of one way of knowing over another.

The narrative begins as Libby waits for David to pick her up to drive to the airport. As she waits we learn through her actions what concerns her as she is about to travel: she sets up her TV VCR to record all of her favorite television shows while she is gone; she worries about how her diving gear will look together. Libby takes the act of traveling lightly—her concerns are not about learning about another culture or place, or to stake her life in something extraordinary by traveling, but rather concern her new skin lotion, “Benediction.” (127). Even her lotion is superficial: rub in salvation. Voyaging to a new place is not special for Libby because she is not intimate, as far as we can tell, with any place. She is not even at home at home. It is interesting to contrast this moment with Lopez’s other essays and stories about travel in which the act of traveling is understood to be a very serious endeavor that entails responsibilities to the land and people the traveler visits and to the people when he or she comes back home.

Their cab drive to the airport establishes Libby’s (non) relationship with the land:
“Driving from Arvada all the way out to the new Denver airport, thought Libby, was like driving to another country before you could take off. Miles and miles of these nothing fields, no houses, no mountains, no developments, no roads, no trees” (127). The countryside around Libby’s own town means nothing to her; it evokes no feeling, memory, or intimacy. As we’ve seen in Lopez’s other stories, there is no setting that is not charged with meaning, character, and mystery; Libby’s distance from the land is emblematic of her disconnection from real relationships to anything and to anybody, which becomes the basis for her complicity in the incursion of another culture.

David’s first line in the story resonates with an eerie irony, considering the fate of the couple: “You are in command of your universe,” he intoned, closing the laptop firmly and tapping it like a revelatory object” (128). The push-button positivism expressed in David’s statement and his affirmative “tapping” of the computer demonstrates his certainty in the epistemology of modern technology. There is an undercurrent of entitlement in David’s pompous certainty about “the universe” that reveals itself through his interactions with everyone. In a remark to a friend, Libby makes a comment that she repeats several times throughout the narrative: “He did know how to handle it all” (130). A harmless-sounding phone call between David and his mother insinuates his assumption that he is in command and can even foretell the future; the call also shows his unwillingness to place himself in a position to listen to someone else:

“How’s Dad, how’s he getting on?”
“________________.”
“Well, it’s going to get better. I know that. Listen, I wanted to see how you were. I’m going to call you in a few days.” (131)
Obviously, something ails his father, though he does not consider (or acknowledge) the possibility of things not being all right. When David says, “Listen,” he does not use the word to engage dialogue, but to shut it out. His surety that he will call his mom in a few days is underscored with the irony that he will be dead in a few days, no longer in “command of his universe.”

An attitude of imposition, the unwillingness to engage in dialogue is present even in David’s most harmless sounding statements: “If you want to be the guy which they cannot do without,” he instructed her, “you gotta be sure they really get that. Before they know to ask the question, you answer it” (128). David’s comment voices his unwillingness to sustain a dialogue based on equitable power relations even with his peers. Contrast David’s attitude with the Wiideema’s tenet to listen well—the disparity of these two philosophies contrast the imposing and proposing attitudes that Lopez suggests are fundamental to understanding the nature of violent incursion.

David’s “imposing” attitude is bolstered by his sense of entitlement, ownership, and control, an egocentric belief that underlies acts and systems of conquest. The most poignant examples of David’s self-absorbed entitlement can be seen in the couple’s “love” making. In one scene, Libby lists for David what new items of clothing she packed for the vacation:

“And I got some underwear.”

She wished right away she hadn’t said it. He hunched over and began to imitate a crowing rooster flapping its wings and then broke into an imitation of a matador’s capework, daring the bull to charge. (132)
Libby’s wish expresses her knowledge of David’s imposition over her and we see that Libby and David do not share an intimate exchange as lovers, but an interaction of inequality. David’s matador flourish evokes the history of the conquistadors and the Spanish conquest in an action that is more machismo than flirtation. David makes himself the authority, the objective presence whose voice “is the pinnacle of the language” even in sex (“A Voice” 12):

He was watching her get undressed with a look that made her uncomfortable. . . . When they made love and he rolled off and went to sleep and she told him that wasn’t making love, he said it was. “You satisfy me so much,” he explained, “I go straight into dream sleep, right into REM sleep.”

(134)

David does not listen to Libby’s critique of his intimacy—he replaces her critique with an “objective” fact: “it was.” He turns the power relationship to his favor and sets the terms of the dialogue: his pleasure, not hers. This relationship of power repeats itself over dinner when he orders for her, dismissing her choices, or as he ignores her desire to cuddle after dinner—an act of dialogue—in favor of owning and possessing the experience of the hotel resort:

She thought the stars were beautiful. She wanted to lie in his arms, but he hardly looked at her. He sipped a second Courvoisier and nodded at people who walked past, as though they were all in on the same arrangement. When women with large breasts came by, he stared at them until they passed. (134)
David’s gaze at the other resort guests and the women’s breasts impose an “arrangement” of power and certainty that meet the expectations of his own epistemology, that his understanding of the world is shared by the other tourists. When someone, a native of San Carlos, or Libby (after sex) for instance, challenges David’s certainty or does not fit into his view, he reverts to a kind of patronizing, colonial role-play where he tries to “help” the other to see the superiority and truth of his episteme. For example, in one scene David summons Esteban, their native diving guide, to sell him on the virtues of enterprise:

“I’m going to tell you something. You need to evolve—you know what I mean?—evolve to get ahead here. You own this boat?”

“It’s ma boat.”

“Ever think about owning maybe two or three boats? Getting some of your buddies to work for you, booking pax yourself in the States, not through the hotel? You into the Net? You could get a Web site. I could set it up. You could pull in a lot of money . . .

“Well you gotta get better, Esteban, or what are you here for? Right?” (140)

The conversation, so one-sided, repeats the colonial missionary work of demonstrating the value of one world view above all others. David’s rhetorical question at the end of the conversation is charged with an irony that he will not see because he hasn’t even considered that there might be other pursuits in life and other measures of happiness than economic success.

When Esteban notices a speedboat in the distance moving toward his, he remarks to David and Libby, “Could be the military . Tings always changing” (141). David tells Libby, “We might have gotten in too close to Itesea here, so these guys could be hard-
asses about it. Maybe we’re going to have to buy our way out.” (141) The contrast of Esteban’s and David’s statements are the difference between an epistemology that recognizes the uncertain nature of the world and one that believes economic advantage and colonial authority can “handle it all” (130). The problem with David’s worldview becomes violently obvious when a speedboat with three men draw aside their boat armed with machine guns. Esteban is sprayed with bullets. The three men rob the couple and then brutalize them:

   The man with the tattoo hit her in the neck with his fist, knocking her into the engines, and then banged her head on the deck of the boat until she was unconscious. He laid her over the back of a bench seat and raped her. It took him a long time and in the middle of it he lit a cigarette. The man with the watches trussed David with monofilament fishing line and choked him to death while he raped him. (144)

The incredible violence of this story is unprecedented in Lopez’s work, with the exception of *The Rediscovery of North America*, Lopez’s long essay about the Spanish Conquest of Mexico and its reverberating consequences for the cultures of North America. The violence of this story is simply a reversal of the subject of colonial violence. The pirates, historical profiteers from the chaos of incursion, are simply a more visceral, obvious, and quick manifestation of that violent disregard for other ways of knowing, other ways of living that was carried in David’s language.

   As David, Libby, and Esteban sink to the bottom of the ocean after the pirates have abandoned them, the story changes location, tone, and character: “A few miles east a man
was fishing for grouper." (144) Without an explanation or obvious connection to the violent murders that we just witnessed, we are left with a fisherman, a new character—

He held the baited hook up before his eyes. His father had taught him how to make the tiny marks he had cut in its shank, and he stared hard at them now and said, “Do your work.”

He flipped the baited hook overboard and watched the line spool out under his thumb. (145)

The sudden shift in scene and character feels as jarring as the murders, but it too is not anomalous; the grouper fisherman’s request to his fishing hook to “Do your work” is a gesture of supplication, a proposition to the fish hook delivered in humility, knowing that his life depends on mysteries he cannot force, only surrender to.
Chapter Three:

Sensing Wisdom:
The Renegotiation of Storytelling in *Isumataq* Narrative

I took to bowing on these evening walks. I would bow slightly with my hands in my pockets, toward the birds and the evidence of life in their nests—because of their fecundity, unexpected in this remote region, and because of the serene arctic light that came down over the land like breath, like breathing . . .
I remember the press of light against my face. The explosive skitter of calves among grazing caribou. And the warm intensity of the eggs beneath these resolute birds. Until then, perhaps because the sun was shining in the very middle of the night, so out of tune with my own customary perception, I had never known how benign sunlight could be. How forgiving. How run through with compassion in a land that bore so eloquently the evidence of centuries of winter.

--Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

The natural world is a place where you can explore the nature of your prejudice without fear or reprisal.

--Barry Lopez, Interview in *Writing Natural History*

The dipper's song wakes me from my droning thoughts as I walk beside Rattlesnake Creek. I stop and catch him in my sight—he dips into the rush of copper-green water and waves pour over his dark back. From his suggestion—his call floating along, not piercing the gurgle of water—I watch a pair of mergansers cruise over rapids, my first mergansers sighting this spring. The dipper's call gathers the world into my attention: mergansers, cottonwoods, sunshine, and my own breath.

I had been alone; my mind turning over and over the stresses and meanness of life—war, homework, and bills—until the dipper calls and I come to the world we are in. The world expands with his help: I take in the business of squirrels, the swelling flock of
bohemian waxwings lighting on the ash trees, the brush of wind through my hair. I am made present by the kindness of his lilting song, sharp crow caws, knocks of flicker beaks against tree trunks. The birds' kindness is their suggestion of the life beyond my worries.

**Meaning in an Animistic Earth**

When one reads words like “kindness,” “generosity,” and “compassion” used to describe nature, one often assumes that the author is merely projecting his or her sensibilities onto a landscape or an animal. When I write that the dipper was kind to me, or when Barry Lopez states that sunlight “is run through with compassion,” we may seem sentimental, even deluded to suggest anything but dispassionate taxonomic categories for what we see. However, this assumption depends upon the premise that the landscape or the animal is a blank screen or an empty space to be filled with meaning. I would like to challenge this common, materialist notion through a discussion of Lopez’s narrative style that relies upon an altogether different premise: the earth is alive and does provide meaning, even wisdom, through relationship.

That we rely on the landscape for meaning is not, necessarily, a mystical or obscure notion, but is one that is conveniently denied by the modern materialist epistemology that contends that the land is solely raw material for human consumption. Lopez’s stories require the reader to become a lover of the world—someone who will participate in an intimate dialogue with the world and not take on the authoritative position that declares meaning to be found only within the tiny folds of the human brain. In an essay, “We are shaped by the sound of wind, the slant of sunlight,” Lopez suggests
a path to becoming a lover of the land: at the center of this process is the need to
“cultivate a sense of complexity, the sense that another landscape exists beyond the one
you can subject to analysis” (11). Lopez suggests that our minds cannot totalize meaning
for a place; the animate world is complex beyond the simple assumption that dippers or a
creek cannot participate in human meaning. The land and animals are more than scenery
in Lopez’s stories; the land purveys wisdom to attentive characters that sustain “good
relations” with the animate world (11). Lopez writes that this recognition of mystery and
agency in the land comes from a “speculation that it may be more important to human
survival to be in love than to be in a position of power” (11).

In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez asserts, “The observation that [the land] is merely a
space which requires definition before it has meaning—political demarcation, an
assignment of ownership, or industrial development—betrays a colonial sensibility”
(279). Lopez, as I have argued in my previous chapters, posits a relationship with the
animate earth that avoids the imposition of colonialism. Similar to many post-colonial
writers, Lopez often explores indigenous, Native American epistemologies, not for a
sense of authenticity or authority, but to learn other ways of knowing the land. As a
student of Alaskan natives, Lopez has adopted an Inuktitut ideal for an approach to
storytelling that uses the animate earth as a nexus for meaning and changes the power
structure between the storyteller and the reader and between the human and the earth.

*Isumataq*, the Inuktitut concept for storyteller as Lopez defines it, is “the person
who can create the atmosphere in which wisdom shows itself” (*Arctic* 298). As an ideal,
the storyteller, *Isumataq*, does not “give” wisdom; he or she portrays an “atmosphere” of
relationships between animals to plants, people to animals, where readers can discover
within these relationships and in this atmosphere what Lopez says is “a deeper, more profound sense of well being” (Crossing 66). The Isumataq storyteller conjures narrative through relationships of words that refer to a world the reader participates in. Without the relationships in this animate world, there is no meaning and no place where wisdom can be discovered. Lopez directly asserts this notion that language and wisdom originate from the same place:

The landscape 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 man imposes on the land. It evolves in his conversation with the land—in testing the sea ice with the toe of a kamik, in the eating of a wild berry, in repairing a sled by the light of a seal-oil lamp.

A long-lived inquiry produces a discriminating language. (278)

In my first chapter I discussed Lopez’s and the Transcendentalists’ speculations of an external and internal landscape and how the human, internal “landscape” is shaped by and reflects the external landscape. Paul Shepard echoes the idea that there is a “correspondence” between the inner and outer landscapes in a way that is helpful to understanding how Isumataq storytelling “works”:

The lively world of our emotions, fears, and responses is like a great forest with its fauna. We experience those feelings as though they were wild animals bolting through the foliage of our own thick being, timidly peering out in alarm or slyly slinking and cunningly stalking, linking us and our unknown selves, as though they were at home in an impenetrable wilderness,
bearing the gift of themselves as mitigations of our inchoateness. (*The Others* 83)

Shepard’s simile that our internal landscape, including our emotional landscape, “is like a great forest with its fauna” points to how humans locate experiences of fear, hope, self-hatred, death, and change in the bodies of others. This process of seeing human meaning in the bodies of animals or in the sensations of a forest is not a one-sided act of we humans attaching and projecting our emotions and experiences onto foxes, hawks, or dolphins; rather we see in the animals explanations, analogous facts, sympathetic and disquieting behaviors that mediate our understanding of ourselves. The animals participate in this process as much as we do. *Isumataq* narrative works because “the atmosphere,” the world that surrounds and fills us, is charged with meaning; a storyteller evokes and renders this animistic atmosphere where we already locate meaning.

**Animistic Chronotopes**

Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope is useful in understanding how an *Isumataq* draws wisdom and meaning from landscape. Chronotopes, Bakhtin writes, are points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse. Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people . . . Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members’ images of themselves. (qtd. in Basso 62)
Lopez refigures chronotopes, the important places in his stories, so that they are not simply “monuments” or “symbols” for the negotiation and reminder of human identity, but are active powers that interact with humans. The chronotopes in Lopez’s stories are not passive receptacles ready to be filled with meaning, but are fields of relationship fraught with agency: animistic chronotopes. Lopez states in an interview that it is not a whimsical notion to assume that the land can provide meaning or that animals can help us understand ourselves and the world around us:

I think we are coming back to this position where we recognize that for so many thousands of years the natural world gave us our clothing, our food, our shelter. It was the source of humor for us. It was the ground that constructed our stories. And now, again, many tens of thousands of years later, the natural world is still there, still giving help to us in this difficult intellectual risk that we have taken. The traditional idea that the animals are helpers is still relevant today in our highly sophisticated, academic, end-of-the-twentieth century environment. (Lueders 30)

*Isumataq* storytelling depends on animistic chronotopes where the land and the reader (or listener) interact and the reader discovers wisdom because the land and “animal helpers” are offering it. Lopez offers this image that I believe provides a good example of how an animistic chronotope would function in the transmission of wisdom:

I could easily imagine some Thomas Merton-like person, the estimable rather than the famous people of our age, sitting with one or two Eskimo men and women in a coastal village, corroborating the existence of this human wisdom in yet another region of the world, and looking around to the
mountains, the ice, the birds to see what makes it possible to put it into words. (299)

In “Homecoming,” a story in *Field Notes*, the agency of a chronotope, in this case, a small woodland where a family locates their best moments, offers an unexpected possibility with resonating implications: the land could forget a person, and if that person is forgotten by the land, he or she loses everything.

The story follows a renowned professor of botany who slowly loses his connections with his wife and daughter as he seeks recognition from other botanists. His relationships with his family unravel as he has an affair with another woman, shirks his teaching responsibilities to chase scientific notoriety, and spends long days away from home. The botanist finally acknowledges his deceit and his loss of companionship on a rare walk with his daughter in the woods around his house when he cannot identify familiar plants. The woodland is the place where he grew up, fell in love with plants, and cultivated a relationship with his family; the woodland is the chronotope where he is reminded of his own values. While talking in bed with his wife, he tries to reason through his loss:

“... out in the woods, I couldn’t think of the names of half a dozen plants. Dumb. I felt like I haven’t been in the woods in years.”

“You haven’t.”

“Well, let’s not let that get around.” (110)

His first response to his wife’s reminder is one of embarrassment; he does not acknowledge the deeper, more painful truth of his admission: that he no longer knows once-familiar flowers. “You haven’t,” only elicits a curt reply that reflects his concern for
his career standing. She pushes him closer to the truth that nags at his conscience:

"Don't be sarcastic. You haven't been out there. It's Maddy, now, who knows. She
knows every plant that grows here. She asks you what they are to humor you."
Her statement prods him to understand that he does not really know Maddy, their daughter
He is as vague to her as the local flowers are to him.

Alice, his wife, evokes the chronotope, the woodland near their house, to point to
his loss: "It's just some place you occupy. Your life is out there somewhere, Djakarta or
Manaus, or the herbarium. You don't know, don't understand, where you live anymore"
(110). She reminds him that he was once familiar with the plants: "You knew by their
shadows, how they dipped in the wind. You were here then. Now, you look around, it's
not part of you anymore. Why should they remember you when you can't remember
them?" (111). Her question makes him incredulous—"Are you being serious?" he
asks—she is serious; she offers the possibility that his inattention to the family
chronotope, the woodland, caused the woodland's plants to forget him. Alice insists
again: "What if it was in their power simply to forget you?" (111). Unlike Jane
Weddell's attention restored the relationships to her chronotope, the open lot, Colter's
inattention to his family woodland severed his ties to his family and his own values. His
disregard for his home is not simply symptomatic of his estrangement from his family: it
is the cause. Coulter feels the truth of her speculation: "In the silence that followed,
Colter concentrated as he had not in years on unlatching a door that had kept him from
entanglements, from harm. He felt as though he were trying to break through his own
chest" (112).
Coulter rises from bed and walks outside. He physically entangles himself in plants as he lies down and lets himself be embraced by a profusion of life. He recites the names of the flowers he remembers like a litany. When he goes back inside his home, Alice welcomes him with one sentence that acknowledges his entrance back into the chronotopes, back into relationship with the family: “You smell like the woods” (114).

Alice’s wisdom is that she recognizes that the woodland is a chronotope for their family, a storied place that takes care of those who give it attention. Alice recognizes what Badger, from Lopez’s children’s story Crow and Weasel, knows about how stories and the land watch over people:

“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 into each other’s memory. This is how people care for themselves. One day you will be good storytellers. Never forget these obligations.” (48)

Colter is saved from losing his family and his joy by his wife’s reminder that he has not wandered in the forest like he used to. Alice put the woodland into Colter’s memory and he discovered a way to make sense of himself there—the land had remembered him.
Chapter Four:

Imagining Beyond the Cartesian Divide:
Restoring the Reader, Restoring the Earth

It is through story that we embrace the great breadth of memory, that we can distinguish what is true, and that we may glimpse, at least occasionally, how to live without despair in the midst of the horror that dogs and unhinges us.
--Barry Lopez, *About This Life*

“I don’t trust metaphors.”
“I am not talking metaphors. I am telling you the truth.”

--Barry Lopez, “Conversation”

**Freezeout Lake—Choteau, Montana**

The world changes with attention: the marsh by the side of the highway—a pretty place to watch the sun set—gathers into mystery as I sit behind the cattails, long after the sun has disappeared. I watch muskrats swim and dive into sights I will never know, and as I watch them and wonder, the scenery becomes a place of life. Canvas-backs dabble with their bright tail feathers to the sky, their wavering, upturned bodies sending dark velvety ripples to where I sit; pairs of Canada geese cut the sky with their straight bodies and honking cacophony; male meadowlarks give their last trilling calls of the evening, their yellow chests puffed out; redwing blackbirds perched on cattails sway side to side in the light breeze. The slow, deft flight of the short-eared owl lets me know death is here this evening, giving life. From behind my blind of cattails I let go of the highway, the worries of work, and this thesis hanging over my head, when *over my head* thousands of snow geese cross the body of Orion as they return from the wheat fields to rest the night nestled close together on the marsh. They would be tough to tell from the stars if they
weren't moving and calling out to one another in great constellations of arrows. I can hear their wings brush the air—a quiet swoosh of wind. I hold my breath and spin looking up as they descend to the water in long spirals. And then I am here, landed among the mysteries.

The Prison of the Self

Barry Lopez's characters somehow feel or act as if they are, at least initially, separate from and outside the animate, natural world. For Jane Weddell, this separation is marked by her distance from other people; for David and Libby, this experience of alienation is carried by their sense of entitlement in a world that they believed they could command; Colter's separation is embodied in his inattention to his family and the woodland flowers. Lopez's stories, for that reason, participate within the discourse of nature writing that seeks some kind of entrance or atonement for a culture's or an individual's estrangement from or disregard for the more-than-human world. These stories go beyond the post-lapsarian grief nature writers often employ to show the distance modern humans have placed between the human community and the animate world. In these stories what appears to be metaphor dissolves and becomes actual. The "as if" vanishes in favor of the literal truth (this happens, this is). With "The Open Lot" the assertion that anything, anyplace comes alive with attention is made actual in Weddell's observations of bears, panthers, and deer in an abandoned New York City lot. In "Homecoming," Colter is literally embraced by the woodland that forgot him as a result of his lack of attention. With the "Introduction" to Desert Notes, a man who seeks entrance into the desert watches his hands crumble into dust. The metamorphosis of
metaphor into its unexpected and mysterious literal completion only occurs in these stories after the characters are subsumed into other ways of knowing and they have abandoned their notions of what is possible, right, and sentient.

Borrowing from the Catholic metaphysics in which Lopez was trained, I describe and label these completions or actualizations of metaphor as moments of “transubstantiation” where, like Christ’s body and blood becoming bread and wine, animistic metaphors for hope, for entrance into the nonhuman world, are made actual and physical. I am not the first of Lopez’s readers to note his engagement with the beyond-metaphorical sacramentalism of Catholic metaphysics. Douglas Burton-Christie, a professor of Christian spirituality writes of Lopez’s work:

It’s hard for me to imagine a contemporary writer more sacramental and incarnational than Barry Lopez. The way he studies something carefully, intensively, and then articulates it so that a reader can feel its power reflect the mystery of the Incarnation, that God has taken human flesh in the form of Christ. His writing is filled with sacramentality: the idea that ordinary physical things mediate the holy. (qtd in O’Connell 17)

Burton-Christie’s inclusion (and celebration) of Lopez’s sacramental vision is helpful in understanding the transubstantiation of Lopez’s stories where physical things are transformed by attention and faith; however, his seeming embrace of Lopez within an orthodox Christian tradition is slightly misleading. Lopez’s fictional transubstantial sacramentalism does not concern the incarnation of Jesus Christ, at least none of his writing suggests this directly, but it does work to create an experience where his characters and his readers can enter into dialogue with mystery where they may discover the
possibilities of a more-than-human world. Lopez asserts that wild animals already possess the ability to provide human beings with mystery, with possibilities unimaginable that I suggest create the potential for acts like the transubstantiation that occurs in “Emory Bear Hands’ Birds” from *Light Action in the Caribbean*:

> The [wild animals] continue to produce for us a sense of the Other: to encounter a truly wild animal on its own ground is to know the defeat of thought, to feel reason overpowered . . . It is the birds’ independence from the predictable patterns of human design that drew us to them. In the birds’ separate but related universe we are able to sense hope for ourselves. Against a background of the familiar, we recognize with astonishment a new pattern. ("The Passing Wisdom of Birds" 208)

The last two sentences of this quotation resonate deeply in “Emory Bear Hands’ Birds,” a story about hope discovered in the bodies of birds and dreams of animals. The narrator of the story is Julio Sangremano, a prisoner “at the federal prison at Estamos, California . . . serving three to five for computer service theft, first offense” (39). Sangremano tells the story of more than twenty prisoners who become birds one evening with the help of a prisoner named Emory Bear Hands. The prisoners fly away from the prison to live as the animals that have occupied their dreams. Sangremano begins his narrative by setting himself apart in his difference from the prisoners who flew away: “I didn’t leave that day, though I was one of Emory’s men. Why I stayed behind is another story, but partly it is because I could not leave the refuge of my hatred, the anger I feel toward people who flick men like me away, a crumb off the table” (39). Emory Bear Hands was placed in prison for
stealing salmon. When Emory arrived at the prison, he began casually to talk about animals with the other prisoners, including Sangremano, who recounts:

I was put in his cellblock in 1997 when I went in, a bit of luck, but I want to say I was one of the ones who convinced him to hold classes, to begin teaching about the animals. Emory told us people running the country didn’t like wild animals. They believed they were always in the way and wanted them killed or put away in zoos, like they put Indians away on reservations.

(40)

Bear Hands’ stories and talk of animals somehow captivates these prisoners who were not just ideologically distanced from animals, as is the case in many of Lopez’s stories, but were physically restrained from contact or observation of animals. Although Sangremano was, like other prisoners, struck by the power of Bear Hands’ stories about animals, he remained unconvinced of the animal’s connection or relevance to his own life or the lives of any people, for that matter. “Wild animals had nothing to do with my life. Animals were dying all over the place, sure, and for no good reason, but people were also dying the same. I was going with the people” (41). This was Sangremano’s conviction until Bear Hands’ introduced them to a strange idea:

One time, Emory was speaking to a little group of five or six of us, explaining how animals forgive people. He said this was an amazing thing to him, that no matter how much killing and cruelty animals endured—all the songbirds kids shot, all their homes plowed up for spring planting, being run over by cars—they forgave us. (41)
The notion that animals forgive people captured the prisoners' imaginations. It was in this way that the prisoners began to find hope in thinking about animals. Emory, at the bequest of a group of prisoners, talked about animals that watch over people and how each person has an animal totem. His stories changed the prisoners:

Emory had drawn our attention to animals most of us felt were not very important. He talked about salamanders and prairie dogs the same way he talked about wolverines and buffalo. So some guys started to identify with these animals, like garter snakes or wood rats, and not with wolves. That didn’t make any difference to us now.

We each had started to gravitate toward a different animal, all of them living in this place where Emory grew up in Montana. Even when we were locked up we had this sense of being a community, dependent on each other. Sometimes in our cells at night we would cry out in our dreams in those animals voices. (45)

Julio Sangremano dreamed of skunks. Like many of Lopez's characters, the prisoners' experience of the world changes dramatically when they pay attention to the world beyond themselves. The prisoners began to feel the animate world moving inside their own bodies, their own minds. Lopez remarks that the “natural world is a place where you can explore the nature of your prejudice without fear or reprisal”; the prisoners in this story discover a world larger than the one they had condemned themselves to—they see that there is forgiveness provided by this more-than-human world (Lueders 30). They slowly surrendered their epistemologies of violence, hate, and distrust, for a world that was larger and included skunks and salamanders. The hope that these totem animals provided for the
prisoners began to pull the prisoners’ attention away from what had previously consumed their days: “The gangs on our block, except for the Aryan Brotherhood, had unraveled a little by this time. People were getting together in these other groups called “Horned Lark” and “Fox” and “Jackrabbit” (47).

At the point in the story when the prisoners are more hope than they have ever experienced before, Emory Bear Hands is transferred to a prison in Illinois. The prison returned to normalcy in his absence. Some prisoners, like Sangremano, had given up hope, though for some, the animal voices persisted in their minds and they sustained the vision of forgiveness that animals offered. And then a letter from Bear Hands is smuggled into the prison:

By the night of the full moon, June 20th, he wrote, each one of us had to choose some kind of bird—a sparrow, a thrush, a crow, a warbler—and on that night, wherever he was, Emory was going to pray each of us into those birds. We were going to become those birds. And they were going to fly away. (48)

That night the prisoners who chose to go flew away from the prison as birds. The prison guards and Sangremano were left to shake their heads in wonder and disbelief. The prisoners’ hope, their belief in the larger possibilities of life provided by Emory’s stories and their totem animals, was transubstantiated and made actual. The hopeful symbols birds provide for the human minds—“In the birds’ separate but related universe we are able to sense hope for ourselves”—was literally made to fly. Though the prisoners are transformed into birds, there remains an additional mystery that reverberates in the last lines of the story:
In the letter, Emory told us the birds would fly to Montana, to the part of
northern Montana along the Marias River where he grew up, and that each
person would then become the animal that he had dreamed about. They
would live there. (49)

“Emory Bear Hands” is story of transformation, of metamorphosis of, in fact,
transubstantiation. Hope has become “the thing with feathers.” The thing with feathers is
the agent in which the prisoners enter the larger world, a world that is free from the illusion
of captivity.

We are the prisoners; do we carry hope enough for ourselves that we may
transubstantiate our belief to “renegotiate the contracts” we hold with the animate world in
actions?
Coda:
Restoration

And I have an eye myself
for this particular vision, this continuous
validation-by-sight that’s given
and taken over and over by the clam shrimp,
marsh treader, bobcat, the clover-coveting
honey bee, by diving teal, the thousand-eyed
bot fly, the wild and vigilant,
shadow-seeking mollusk mya.

--Pattiann Rogers, From “A Common Sight”

Coarsegold Creek, CA.

The hope that continually inspires this thesis is that the habitats of our language and
stories may be restored so that animals, by consequence of our compassion, attention, and
imagination, may live there; our minds share their habitat. I believe when Gary Snyder
writes that American society “operates under the delusion that we are each a kind of
‘solitary knower’”—that we exist as rootless intelligences without layers of localized
contexts,” he could be summarizing the malady of what Lopez’s short fiction seeks to
heal: our estrangement from the animist nature of our own minds (xxi). Lopez’s stories
provide an atmosphere of relationships where the reader can experience the more-than-
human world as a participant, a place where they can feel the “continuous validation-by-
sight” that the bodies of others provide that help us to root our intelligence and our sense
of self in the world we can touch, see, taste, smell, and hear. The stories demonstrate how
our estrangement is restored with attention, patience, and imagination. The animals
pushed aside by our moral disregard may come back if we pay attention to them and
surrender the delusion that we are separate from the world we inhabit. This is how I know:

I startled a great blue heron just moments ago. Walking down the creek, my feet crunching over the dry, sharp thistles, shattering the privacy of the moment, I felt the intelligence of the creek awaken around me. I heard the chattering of acorn woodpeckers quiet and I heard the scrub jay sound the alarm. The cicadas quit their rhythmic song. The heron saw me before I saw her; she flew off toward a foothill pine, knocking her wing against a branch in her haste.

So, I am now sitting here in the wet sand, under this granite overhang, feeling self-conscious, known, watched. I dig my fingers into the sand. I quiet my thoughts. I do not say anything. I am trying to know myself: I listen to the acorn woodpeckers return to their granary work; the cicadas pick up their drumming. I will wait until the heron returns.
Bibliography


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