Deepest place we have: Bioregionalism narrative and postmodernism in western environmental literature

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The Deepest Place We Have

Bioregionalism, Narrative, and Postmodernism in Western Environmental Literature.

by

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At the same time that we value the aesthetic beauty of mountains, plains, and deserts, our modern society largely continues to regard the American west as the site of convertible natural resources. Recently, the traditional resources of land, minerals, timber and water have given way to an increasing emphasis on wilderness or pristine landscapes as genuinely marketable resources. Though perhaps less destructive than other forms of economic exploitation, this shift reveals that the entrenched habit of considering nature as resource is ultimately unaffected by rising environmental consciousness.

In part, this is true because of the language that environmental writing and advocacy uses in its portrayal of nature. This language too often reflects the empiricizing and totalizing progressivism of modern capital, an epistemology which is founded in the Enlightenment's concretization of Rationalist thought. This paper seeks to expose the epistemological shortcomings presented by contemporary environmentalism in its unwitting repetition of those values which it seeks to overthrow. Using examples from recent literature, I discuss problems relating to an insistence on subject/object dichotomies, continued projection of essentialist values, and logocentric domination.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between contemporary postmodern critical theory and attempts to fashion an ecological critique of capitalism's detrimental effect on the environment. This critical approach emphasizes narrative epistemologies which introduce competing narratives from multiple human and non-human communities into the process of landscape construction. It relies on readings of Barry Lopez, John McPhee and James Galvin to support a discussion of the role which current western environmental writing plays in this cultural debate. 68 references.

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They call it regional, this relevance--
the deepest place we have: in this pool forms
the model of our land, a lonely one,
responsive to the wind. Everything we own
has brought us here: from here we speak.

William Stafford
Introduction

The closing of its first fully “American” century has come hard to the region we know as “The West”. In raised voices and dramatic actions, the residents of this region, indeed of this nation, are increasingly struggling with changing perceptions of western traditions and landscapes. Colorful legends of the Old West continue to support our contemporary western society by limiting the value of most things that pre-date the arrival of white emigrants to this region. However, the hubris that has accompanied the hardy pioneer and the frontier spirit into our country’s mythic foundations has consistently faced the challenge of dissenting voices. Recently the retrospective critiques of Patricia Nelson Limerick and others have again subjected Manifest Destiny, our national rite of passage, to an analysis in terms of conquest, the subjugation not only of the indigenous populations, but also of the land, and in some sense, ultimately ourselves.

Setting aside the color of legend, we realize that the western lifestyle is heavily dependent upon subduing or combating the surrounding landscape in order to derive even more commercial good from its resources. While we westerners frequently look on the western environment as holding great aesthetic or spiritual value, our aesthetic and our spirit are more realistically confined by our projection of commodity value upon the landscape.

Traditionally, the prized industries in this region have revolved around turning grass, trees, water, and minerals into exportable items of monetary profit. Increasingly, this commodity value has come to include the non-extractive value of restored or “pristine” wilderness. The most recent material which we wish to sell are the lifestyles and aesthetic appeal of our western vistas. And yet, despite frequent protestations to the contrary, our culture has
largely removed us from intimacy with a supporting landscape, fostering instead a system whereby the environment has become an external Other, a potentially profitable resource or object which we often treat adversely, along with those people whose cultural perception of nature is significantly at odds with this dominant voice.

Literature of the west, with its precursors throughout the history of Euro-american writing, has helped to solidify the relationship our culture maintains with the external, non-human world. It's no accident or coincidence that a vast majority of the essays or presentations which deal with the settlement of the western landscape make reference to Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal lecture/treatise "The Significance of the Frontier in the History of America". Over the past one hundred years, his argument for cultural dominion through, among other things, the subjugation of the western waste land has become entrenched in our cultural psyche. Those who have never read the actual essay have read or seen its manifestations, from the works of Laura Ingalls Wilder to Walt Disney's An American Tail: Feifel Goes West. As it spans genres between serious social commentary and the near caricature of novellic westerns, the literature of this region retains its foundations in the ongoing attempts to imagine the relationship between human communities and the surrounding natural world.

From Francis Parkman's description of the west and its wildlife (including the indigenous peoples) as a romantic arena for Western civilization's notions of class, masculinity, and ethnic superiority, to John Muir's dissenting commentary on Manifest Destiny's destructive tendencies, our regional literature seems to range between two conflicting poles. The heirs of Parkman have continued to celebrate the heroic course of white settlement subduing the wilderness while the disciples of Muir follow his applause of the values they feel this wilderness presented in its untarnished state. Both of these approaches rely, however, on a
similar methodology, the assumption that "wilderness" is an apparently intrinsic value of the western region. Where wilderness can be used as a negative or pejorative device to represent the obstacles and under-utilized resources of the region, it continues to serve the language of extractive appropriation of wealth from the forests, rivers, and rock beds of the west. Environmentalist literature and rhetoric attempt to oppose these engines of extractive capitalism by posing this same wilderness not as something to be overcome but as a restorative for a culture far removed from its source. The critical weakness in both of these directions lies in their disregard for the degree to which the whole concept of wilderness exists as a culturally specific construction of Western, Euro-american civilization.

As the stories we tell about our relationships with nature, western environmental writing offers not only a variety of voices raised to describe this relationship, but an arena where we may reformulate or renegotiate the means by which we understand and live with the world around us. Recent texts within this genre have set forth an array of challenges reflecting the current moment of ecological crisis gripping the west, and crucially illuminating the responses environmental advocates have brought against the agents of this crisis. It is important to hold up to critique not only the traditional forces of exploitation and extraction which have so long marked our regard for the west's land, timber and water, but to challenge the underlying perceptions that inform some literary stances of opposition to the prevalent system of capitalist appropriation. Too often, the reaction of one mirrors the pronouncements or actions of the other, each betraying a singular side of the same epistemological pattern.

This paper focuses on uncovering some of the epistemological quandaries which plague environmentalism as they are revealed through western literature. Too often, the words directed against market driven exploitations of nature share a similar tendency to create
essentialist, culturally biased, or materialist positions and thereby continue to support a landscape divorced from human inter-dependence. One interesting, and problematic, example is the recent call for bioregional approaches in environmental consciousness and management. While discussing some of the potential pitfalls of this literary, and social, movement, I would like to more closely examine one of its critical tenets, the re-empowering of a narrative based epistemology of nature. Within this suggested revision lies a possibility for substantially challenging the manner in which we create judgments, histories, and habitations within our landscapes.

The literature associated with American environmentalism has frequently admired narrative forms as they contribute to the construction of meaning and social integrity in traditional cultures. While many of these largely non-indigenous texts bear the marks of drastic cultural oversimplification and appropriation, the challenge that traditional narrative presents to the empirical myth of Euro-american modernism remains substantially valid. In an attempt to emulate a social fabric wherein the human community is linked to the surrounding non-human communities through an interrelation of stories, some important contemporary environmental literature approaches a presentation of nature that is formed out of the competition of many voices, including some understanding of what those non-human voices might be conveying. In considering such narrative of inclusion, as I’ll attempt to define it, we must certainly anticipate problems concerning the difficulty in admitting, let alone identifying, the patterns that may pass for signification by animals with whom we share no known language. This is one of the chief elements of narrative that Barry Lopez’s works, both fiction and non-fiction, help to elucidate.

Lopez’s texts function here as a center point, a focus from which to question our polarized entanglement with nature and to explore the potential effects of a narrative which grants
This exploration borrows heavily on the two movements which have evolved over the recent few decades to challenge the legitimacy of empirical modernism, the preeminent guiding principle for our current civilization. The ecology movement during the past few decades has become an increasingly potent voice in the critique of contemporary, or late model, capitalism, with its associated patterns of resource quantification and emphatically metropolitan development. The advent of postmodern critiques of modern Euro-american epistemologies has likewise brought substantial energies to bear against the systematic drive to dominate the construction of meaning with a monologic, generally empirical, narrative of knowledge and power. Opposing this totalizing system with the voices of multiple cultures and perspectives, postmodernism hopes to subvert the dominance of technologized capital by fragmenting its base of authority, by revealing the hollowness behind this foundation. As such it shares many apparent positions with an ecological critique of modernism’s use-value treatment of nature. The two critical avenues have until recently shared little, and are rendered distinct largely by the site of their respective critiques. Postmodernism’s Marxist roots locate it squarely within the theoretically reflexive consideration of the system of capital power, whereas ecological resistance attains a distinctly exterior position, subverting empirical materializations of nature by empirically narrating the environmental and social destruction wrought by centuries of industrial capitalism.

At this moment of critical and environmental ferment, it seems especially important to bring these two critical movements together in order to examine their respective potentials and failings. Within the study of environmental literature, postmodernist approaches help to uncover the insistent repetition of a monologic and totalizing view of nature which best suits our culture’s progressivist drama. Similarly, the reinvigoration of narrative based
epistemologies points towards a sense of community within a landscape that upholds the value, indeed the inevitable necessity, of human participation within the local environment. This paper goes on to examine some of the processes of constructing landscapes, and the challenges to these processes, as raised by three contemporary western environmental writers. Although none could comfortably be described as postmodern writers, in all the stylistic considerations of that term, each presents a set of potential revisions to our environmental epistemology that act in some concord with this critical theory. Similarly, they show some of the weaknesses in postmodernism’s attempts to form an oppositional stance, without fully removing itself from the structures it wishes to oppose.

The examination of Lopez’s works serves to establish some critiques of current environmental attitudes and literatures, and to offer a tentative formulation of a platform based on narratives of inclusion. Similarly, I use readings of John McPhee’s *Rising from the Plains* and James Galvin’s *The Meadow* as ways to further the examination, and to include some discussion of the problems presented by bioregionalism in its advocacy of placed ecologies supported by narrative. Both works share a common geographical territory in their excavation of human history in the old and new west, and in so doing they read as considerable commentary upon the culture and issues which confront this region’s present day society. In the manner in which only a good story can, the conversations these works have provoked point towards a potential reinvigoration of our western landscape.
Chapter One: Landscape and Ideology in Western Environmental Literature

Throughout its short history, the environmental literature of the west has maintained a curious connection to the commodification and extraction of material wealth from the lands of the region. Some authors, notably John Muir, saw imported capitalist behavior as being remarkably at odds with the potential for a reinvented life in the western wilderness. The logging of California's forests, the conversion of the incredible ecological diversity of the Central Valley into monocultural farmlands, and the unrestricted mountain pasturage of sheep inspired Muir to incendiary criticism both of the environmental disregard shown by industry as it established itself in California and the society which lived at such remove from nature as to be able to encourage such behavior. Moreover, Muir's resistance, his favored ideal of use for the wondrous nature of his new homeland, involved the use of preserved wilderness as a spiritual restorative, a balm for a distracted and unhealthy industrial culture. In his idealized view, a nature devoid of human intrusion preserved the potential for fundamental human morality, a spiritual space objectified as the site for the extraction of some near religious profit. This foundationalism did not, and does not, remove itself from the extractive compulsion of capital. Both systems distance our lifestyles from an effective comprehension of nature as something more than Other, more than material. Foundationalist ethics like Muir's demand the institution of wilderness as an alternative to more prosaically and commercially employed space.

Even our traditional lore about the west, especially that dealing with its "wild" history, resonates with this conflict of perceptions. Westerns in film and print have enshrined the myth of the valiant settler, rancher, and cowboy striving to survive and to control the
western weather, land, or emptiness. Inscribed in these mechanisms of cultural
construction and confession is the depiction of an ideology bent on controlling and
reshaping nature to suit the best interests of Euro-american perceptions of natural, and
national, order. Expectations of fertile farmlands akin to those of the Inland East, or the
Ohio Valley resulted in efforts to physically impose an idealized landscape upon territory
vastly different in soil composition and annual precipitation. From childhood on, we learn
not how inappropriate such an understanding of landscape was, and is, but instead to
honor the stoicism and resourcefulness of the Alcotts, Calders, Wilders and the countless
other emigrants who ride in the covered wagons of our mythology. The landscape we
admire as we read is that of Nebraska converted from tall grass prairies, the domain of wild
beasts, native peoples and yearly fires, to corn fields and cattle pastures, the sure signs of
civilization.

Bound up in heady nationalism and Christian doctrines which supported cherished ideals of
progress, racial superiority, and dominion over nature, Manifest Destiny ultimately
perfected the imposition of capital value upon the land, water, and fauna of the west. A
direct outgrowth of this ideological expression ensured the perception of the western
landscape as an unimproved and empty space. For contemporary pastoralists, this
emptiness allowed the land and its fauna to be effectively stripped of intrinsic value, and
garnered instead as arena where the greater accomplishments of a technologized,
progressive agrarian community might be fashioned. Primitivists, standing against both a
perceived stagnation in the agrarian model and the intimidating congestion of an early
industrial America, saw this same emptiness as being sublimely removed from culture and
its dehumanizing tendencies. (We don’t need to look far today to see how Daniel Boone’s
restlessness at the sight of his first neighbor’s chimney smoke has translated into a modern
day ideal of the west as territory in which a man might escape.) Either way, the perception
of emptiness reduced the incentive to fashion a Euro-american society in the west which emphasized lasting connections to the existing character of the land. This process readily admitted the imposition of external materialist value upon what was perceived as a fundamentally value-less place, legitimizing the construction of a landscape whose physical features represented both possibility for, and potential obstacle to, capital exploitation.  

The language of irrigation in the arid west tells this story most succinctly. Western settlement patterns were established out of the reactions of a people who found the region, in Wallace Stegner's words, "different, daunting, exhilarating, dangerous, and unpredictable, and who entered it carrying habits that were often inappropriate and expectations that were surely excessive" (57). However Stegner seems to have found Mormon Utah as something of an exception to the more problematic pattern of white settlement in general. He viewed their strength of community and irrigated agriculturalism as the most accomplished lifestyle in the region, the most adapted within its constraints. Yet a different view is equally as valid, one which shows that for all their technical wizardry in mastering the flows and means of the Great Basin's scarce water, the Mormon farmers of Utah are perhaps further removed from the constraints and character of the landscape which surrounds them. Their cultural perspective treats water as a naturally occurring commodity. It has value chiefly in terms of economic potential, and must be developed, controlled, and utilized for maximum growth and progress (Endter 290). Under this view, water not diverted from its natural flow for "beneficial use" is wasted, it serves no purpose. The wildness of nature does not present an instance of beauty, for nature is to be improved, made more beautiful through development (275). The fundamental tenets behind Mormon patterns of adaptation to the environment are clearly displayed in the words of John Widtsoe, a Church hierarch: "The destiny of man is to possess the whole earth; the destiny of the earth is to be subject to man. There can be no
full conquest of the earth, and no real satisfaction to humanity if large portions of the earth remain beyond his highest control" (Stegner 87).

As a legitimating myth, the story and effect of Manifest Destiny remain constituent factors in the extractive attitudes frequently resisted by modern environmental writing. The initial mechanisms which denied primary value to the pre-settlement landscape and its population have evolved to effectively promulgate the ideology of natural resource value in nearly every aspect of western scenery. Resistance to this tendency, especially in the last three decades, has often found both expression and inspiration in environmental literature. Muir, one of the founding members of the Sierra Club, remains a prominent voice for today's anti-industrial environmentalism. Abbey's novels and essays about the Southwest have given rise to enacted political theatre and protest in the form of EarthFirst! However, the rhetoric and literature of this resistance often pose genuine concerns about their difference from the structures they intend to oppose.

Modern environmental writing of the western region has largely followed this time honored lead. More recent writers frequently bear comparison to the religiosity of de-humanized nature set forth by Muir. Edward Abbey, for instance, in his book Desert Solitaire, seems to prefer an unpopulated, arid landscape as an escape from the looming apocalypse of the atomic age. For him the desert represents an arena of spiritual combat with the accelerations of technology and the rise of the post-modern age.

"I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us...To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate"(6).
His reading of human history within his chosen landscape is dramatically narrow, obliterating any sense of comparatively recent, and still extant, cultures which adapted successfully to the possibility of long-term survival within the arid environment. In so doing, he continues the construction of a legitimating narrative of isolation and physical removal from the nature with which he so determinably seeks to commune.

Muir, Abbey, and others espouse the wilds as places at odds with the materialism and commodification endemic to modern society in the west. Their voices applaud the spiritual values of isolation within pristine landscapes, landscapes created from the perceived absence of things human, the presence of things somehow timeless, or essential. These writings promote a different set of primary essences to be found in western nature, affirming in this act a sense of what Derrida describes as the inherent logocentricity of Euro-american cultures which esteems "pre-ideological essence(s)", "genuine" presences rather than representations of shaped reality (Quigley 295). Within our culture, the imagined space of environmental resistance is filled by references to a vague set of spiritual essences, such as spontaneity, uniqueness, individuality, that are easily co-opted by a market driven by style and material substance. These essences resonate in the language which describes both the material, political, and social values we attach to our culture, and to the values we find and esteem in nature. For a simple example, consider the marketing of the paraphernalia which we require to mediate our experiences with "the wild". Instead of offering explicit opposition, these norms we follow in our resistance affirm the value of the very structures they seek to oppose (293).

These same qualities have a reflection in the complex set of fundamental or transcendent values which the progressive, instrumentality of modernism has attached to the resource worth of nature. In its attempt to fashion a counter voice, environmental writing tends to include in its response an oppositional set of transcendent principles, establishing an
affinity with the ideology of imposition, of expropriation. As Michael Ryan has stated, the
tendency to posit transcendent principles, whether for resistance movements or entrenched
power structures, creates "a point of authority (an agency), a hierarchical command
structure, and a police force." This tendency asserts certainty and closes down open ended
play" (Quigley 295). As it is consistently implicated in the logocentric constructions of
capitalism, the environmentalism in a great deal of recent literature reaffirms the power of
the very epistemological and ontological perspectives which have led to our current moment
of ecological crisis. They may not offer so much a solution as a continuation of the
frustrating and irresolvable polarization which threatens our relationship to the
environments which surround and sustain us.

Perhaps a short examination of one acclaimed text in this genre will shed some light on the
beginnings of a postmodern critique of contemporary environmental writing along the lines
suggested above. Ann Zwinger's 1978 book *Wind in the Rock* combines enjoyable,
informative natural history and anthropological observations with personal reflections upon
her experiences hiking southeastern Utah's desert canyons. These reflections are distinctly
confessional in tone, matching the poetics of the emotional, spiritual writer confronted by
doubt, fragile introspection, and anticipated restoration: a mode which itself reflects the
assumed primacy of the *individual's* psychological experience within the natural arena that
so characterizes the tradition of modern literature. Beyond a presence in the desert then,
Zwinger emphasizes that place where, as Robert Lowell puts it, "Life changed to
landscape", and the landscape is a private space, where rumination and healing occur.
Perhaps this is a worthwhile, a necessary thing, but in terms of our cultural relationship
with nature, it betrays a valuation based primarily upon nature's ability to be everything that
salves the shortcomings of white Americana: a place defined by emptiness rather than
identity.
Throughout the account of these backpacking trips, Zwinger interjects a sense of the spiritual solace she finds in the unoccupied and timeless worlds of the sandstone chasms. She links her encounters with this spirituality to the experiences of the long vanished occupants of these spaces, the Anasazi, as well as with more extant Native cultures. And yet her sense of the Anasazi reveals much of the attitude towards them we are taught to adopt in the mythology created by our own cultural anthropologists. She values a certain passivity, a harmony in their relationship to the physical world that is part of our overall optimistic stereotype of Indians as the original environmentalists. And foremost, she espouses the silence and challenge the desert brings to the human experience as an antidote to the daily exigencies that make up that same experience.

Zwinger comes to the desert wilderness “as a place to listen to the quiet, to feel at home with ancient rhythms that are absent in city life...here in the wilderness is a safety valve for our civilization”(210). And once again we are cast back to the omnipresence of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, where the taming of the wilderness provided a nearly Darwinian release and evolution of our national culture. Perhaps Zwinger’s use of the term is intended to be ironic, but the irony is undone by her own reinvigoration of the symptoms Turner sought to diagnose, for here in the wilderness Zwinger repeats his project of casting civilization as the instigation of wilderness, the factor producing a need for the empty, redeeming potential of the wild. In her opposition to extractive use of the land, use which provides many of the material needs established by our shared culture, Zwinger uses the desert to provide material for yet another human use, restoration. The landscape of the southwest as created by this text asserts that this is the fundamental value of wilderness space, and that wilderness as opposed to culture is the essential principle by which nature is subsumed into human experience. Somewhere in all of this the actual Anasazi have been obliterated. As such the desert exists as a response to the original erasure of the region’s
intrinsic value within an echo of the terms set forth by the initial moment of that denial. Zwinger's desert is restored as an arena of anthropocentric ideals, ideals which fit the needs of contemporary Euro-American culture as succinctly as the oil and uranium extracted nearby.

Complicit in the fabrication of this myth of solace in the wilderness, Zwinger bemoans the presence of too many like herself, “hordes of backpackers and river runners” trampling “mountain meadows that were once beautifully empty” (211, emphasis mine). The problem with creating a value based ideal of wilderness is that people will adopt the ideal, espousing recreational experiences in nature as a form of participatory environmentalism and antidote to the commercialism which traps them in daily routines. Nature becomes an operation of individuality, spontaneity, and uniqueness, a place where the fundamental humanity of each individual can be reaffirmed through introspection and physical ordeal (to varying levels of discomfort). On a cultural level, texts like Wind in the Rock have helped reinforce the attitude of a nature separate from our own existence, one which leads newspapers to promote river trips which “remind you that quiet is a resource not found everywhere”, and a tourism industry which offers rafting trips that will “emphasize spiritual contact with the wilderness and self-exploration, for $850” (Steere).

This tendency to locate anthropocentric values within environmental features is not confined to such obviously romantic ideals as solitude and spiritual nourishment. Our system of approaching nature is replete with such projections, emphasizing our penchant for treating nature as an Other even while we attempt to renegotiate our relationship to it. As such the language which we rely upon in our attempts to account for our relationship with nature frequently is trapped in the ideology of nature as the wilderness and frontier that has been articulated by both Turner and writers like Zwinger. As environmental
literature continues in its attempts to counter the degradation of ecosystems and the concomitant attitude of alienation from nature, it frequently attempts to assert that the natural scenery prized for its restorative qualities has an additional relevance or legitimacy. A significant factor in this rhetorical strategy is the belief “that nature is valuable in the strong, 'intrinsic' sense that natural objects have value entirely independent of human consciousness”, a fundamental value that extends prior to and beyond human existence within the natural setting (Norton 214).

The difficulty with this approach is that, like previously discussed attributions of use value, any ascription of intrinsic value seeks to create a nature that satisfies the needs of humans and resolves the frailties in our ability to conceptualize a natural order which we have consistently divorced from our own sense of being. Attempting to ascribe value without admitting human presence either in relation to this process or as an inherent part of any value judgment not only endows nature with an ideal value which we necessarily are unable to interpret or include in our social construct, but rests on an act of fancy which defeats the entire proposition. The point is, we are here; removing humanity from the question does little to resolve the difficulties created by and within our presence. Furthermore, the ascription of intrinsic value as practiced in literature, and by extension in popular discourse, relies heavily on a mystical appreciation of animals that again reflects values which we tend to impose upon them. These values are inseparably culture specific and laden with the projections of a particular cultural group (Norton 214), and potentially lead to a sort of elitism of the wild where the values attributed by one culture to certain (powerful) animals gives them a prominence over other creatures in both popular conception and political endeavor. Consider the importance attached to recent attempts to reintroduce the wolf to certain parts of the west, and the scant narration given to endangered frogs, plants, even black-footed ferrets.
By attempting to describe the world in terms of the observable, independent appeal of its constituent parts, this mode of environmentalist rhetoric relies directly on the determining power of objective ascription. This constitutes an identifiable attribute of our Cartesian epistemology which has long supported the measurable gulf between human and non-human identity, and the quantifiable measurement of performance relative to human, indeed Euro-american, standards of worth. “Suffice it to say that defending Cartesian-style objectivity within a representational theory of perception apparently requires foundationalism, either empirical or rationalistic, in order to claim any epistemological warrant for descriptions of the ‘objective’ world” (Norton 218). Thus the reliance on intrinsic value perpetuates the division between the knowing, speaking subject and the passive, in this case, recipient object or Other whose actual participation within the construction of meaning is limited by the voice or presence given to it by its measurers. Either connotation of “wilderness” for instance, functions as an example of this problematic conception.

While allowing the difficulties inherent within this system, the potential to recognize the legitimacy of the non-human world is arguably a viable proposition. Given our present system however, mutual recognition is thwarted by the tendency to assert a final meaning or value, a tendency best described as monologic. Our human, Euro-american voice has determined the values of wilderness from two opposing perspectives. These ascribed values reflect more of what we wish to see than they reveal an understanding of the relationships that make up an ecosystem in which we are but one constituent part.
Chapter Two: Postmodernism, Narrative, and the Western Landscape

The root of the irreconcilable dilemma between capital and environmental proponents lies in their rigid adherence to this system of polarized and self-contradicting perceptions. As they impose the external concept of "wilderness", whatever the intended effect of that term, each camp is caught in the logic that originally promoted the environmental conflicts within our contemporary regional culture. Both sustain the dichotomy between human-subject and nature-object that infuses the history of industrial modernism. A potentially more valid critique or resistance to the ecological threat posed by late-model capitalism must remove itself from the delocalizing, dichotomizing functions entrenched in this ideology. While the rhetoric of both extractive capitalism and preservationist environmentalism is often infused with a concern for local well-being, albeit generally from opposing sides of the ideal, the ethic of "bioregionalism" is often presented as a means of moving beyond the polarized confrontation and dissociative tendencies of the two opposing movements.

Bioregionalist ethics attempt to assert the importance of locality and of the complexities posed by relationships to and within an ecological region, fostering a dependence upon "place" in lieu of capital exchange or preservationist isolation.

Some recent western environmental literature seeks to adopt this pose, moving beyond the traditional framework of nature writing to propose a revised epistemology of nature. Building in some sense on the work of Aldo Leopold, these writers ostensibly seek to give voice to this alternate valuation of place, acting to subvert the objectification of nature, and challenging our culture's propensity towards what Jack Turner has called "commodocide - death through commodification" (ONT 103). As one significant voice in this regard, the
essays and fiction of Barry Lopez have been applauded for their attempts to open our ecological relationship up to a sense of play, thereby denying the formation of closed, foundational meaning. By establishing an ethic of place and of nature based on competing or component narratives, Lopez works to avoid the imposition of a single, legitimizing myth which perfects our environmental ideology. These responses seem at odds not only with western mentalities rooted in Enlightenment ideals of empirical progress and a faith in technology, but also advance the lines of criticism so far directed against the centralizing tendencies of the current global capitalization.

Some of the critical depth of the current ecological crisis in the west derives from the great paradox of western society. Still driven by the mythic forces which inspired and sustained the white expansion into the region, today's westerners feel a fierce attachment to the natural wonders and the supposed freedoms of their lifestyles within this region. This insistence on personal and market liberties is frequently at odds with what we are coming to understand as a lifestyle suited to long term sustainability within this region of arid plains, dynamic forests, and imposing mountains. There are many who feel that nothing could be more inherently "western" than to reshape the land in order for it to produce human scale material satisfaction. Indeed, the idea of landscape is itself a reflection of human presence or manipulation of a surrounding environment. Like wilderness, landscape is a construct of use. The western landscape has been subject to thorough human configuration and manipulation for over eleven thousand years. Despite the traditional rhetoric our culture has built up in the past one hundred of these, it is impossible to view any sense of landscape as a pure instance of nature, devoid of human involvement. The immediacy of our current ecological crisis results chiefly from the degree and scale of the manipulations modern culture has introduced in its construction of the western landscape, and from the
dramatic shift in the perceived role of the non-human world in the western epistemology of nature.

One irony in our current way of understanding nature is that western society makes strident claims for locality while largely serving the extractive conditions set by non-local metropolitan economies, economies which owe responsibility to no place and sustain their presence within the region only through a colonial commodification of its landscape. Here the popular western romance of Zane Grey meets the historical reflection of Bill Kittredge, struggling with a society that has committed “an obvious string of crimes. Maybe we should have realized the world wasn’t made for our purposes, that (it) wasn’t there to have us come along to drain the swamps and level the peat ground into alfalfa land...But we were given to understand that places we owned were to be used as we saw fit”(174).

The crucial dialogue over the content and character of landscape strengthens the importance of Lopez’s work. Regionalist literature must combat the de-localizing tendency of the metropoly on two fronts: place and language. Lopez’s fiction and non-fiction convey a sense of regionalism empowered in the American geography, and furthermore articulate this presence in a manner and language particular to western America and its historical voice, rather than through a voice conditioned by a more generally Euro-American context (Nordström 149). This linguistic revision seems at the heart of the regionalist endeavor; to call western culture into an acknowledgment of its problematic behavior, one must first acknowledge the mythic constructs endowed to the west through language. The poet and essayist Gary Snyder confronts the “wild and free” germ that runs through most western imagery and popular fiction as the manifestation of words changed into consumer baubles, like an ad for a Harley-Davidson (Practice 5). The words themselves have become trickster gaming pieces, promising an illusion while at the same time negating the possibility of the
illusion's actual existence. The language we use to describe our region is thoroughly constrained by the mythic images through which American society has alienated the environment into iconic intelligibility. As Snyder demonstrates, these same words, "wild" and "free", often used to make the west more enticing to potential consumers, have a historical association with attitudes intended to divorce Western civilization from a sense of environmental intimacy.

In one of his essays, Snyder excavates the history of our descriptions for wilderness, revealing a language which serves to isolate the non-human world by assigning it negative values. Wildness is distinguished from the realm of civilized human behavior through such connotations as "uninhabited", "insubordinate", "unruly", and "violent" (9). Casting the non-human in terms oppositional to human values is a linguistic project with a long history, its roots in this country stretch to the second generation of Puritan writers. The way we, as a national and regional people, have grown up speaking of nature emphasizes our attempt to subordinate it and live outside of its processes.

The project of environmental writers attempting to posit a post-Cartesian relationship to nature should be reforming the definitions and connotations of our usual language. And yet this shift is considerably problematic. When Snyder attempts this shift, he creates positive connotations for wild categories, finding concepts that are not far removed from the unmediated, playful, orderly complexity of the Chinese concept of the Dao, or even the Buddhist Dharma, with their connotations of the sacred (10). While burdened with the intervening years of cultural antipathy to nature, he insists that our language shares this capacity to describe wilderness as a place of abundance "as in John Milton, 'a wildernesse of sweets'" (11). Unfortunately, this attempt at revision also represents a return to the 'intrinsic value' dilemma discussed earlier. While these are positive connotations, they
remain impositions of our logocentric order, relying upon the foundationalist ethic which locates pre-human ideals within a non-human landscape. Snyder’s quote from “Paradise Lost” neglects to account for the layers of meaning in the poem’s construction of nature. Milton certainly did not intend to be eco-friendly. He was asserting a divine providence within the order of the Creation, an order which Milton celebrated as being patriarchally defined, with symbolic attributes associated with every plant and animal describable within his ‘wilderness’. The nature that Milton perceived and depicted in his poetry bore little resemblance to a community of participants equally asserting a legitimate reason for existence. It was not, as Snyder claims, “a usage of wilderness (which) catches the very real conditions of energy and richness that is so often found in wild systems”(11).

Snyder’s difficulty with this passage stems from his inability to escape an insistence that wilderness is distinctly different from the natural space humanity can possibly occupy. This considerable conceptual problem is an unavoidable result of his, as well as other writers’, attachment to the idea of wilderness as an inevitable reality, and the incidental affirmation that it offers “a place of archetypal power, teaching, and challenge”(ibid.). Trapped within this culturally biased perception which still binds and defines nature as an external Other with the potential for human consumption, Snyder’s reversal of our linguistic approach to the non-human world falls frustratingly short. Posing language that continues to celebrate such an anthropocentrically configured landscape as a means of resisting more materialist or capitalist appropriations of the environment unfortunately remains trapped within the original, problematic ideology. Nature remains a wilderness defined by an outside, ostensibly objective, observer, a fixed field of representation maintained by a single, powerful, and human voice.
Snyder may be right in his diagnosis of language as a slippery, arbitrary system which constantly changes and meanders “even as language reflects (and informs) the shifting values of the peoples whose minds it inhabits and glides through” (Practice 8). However, what Snyder may correctly diagnose, he fails to put into practice. While recognizing the unfixed nature of language, he doesn’t quite put the next piece together, that language is the media by which different communities engage one another, and it is frequently the site of struggles for authority. To take a readily apparent example, when Euro-american culture assumed prominence over that of the indigenous peoples of the Americas it did so by imposing the power of its language(s). Native languages, and thus the way in which they reflected the world through the epistemology bound up within linguistic expression, were often outright obliterated as a result of our insistence on ‘civilized’ discourse. Snyder attempts to subvert this history of both oppression and limitation in our ecological relationships by embracing Native American mythic and cultural approaches. In so doing he not only adopts a dangerously imperialistic habit of appropriation, but he attempts to combat the prominence of one language system by raising another to higher prominence. He substitutes one totalizing and perfecting myth for another.

By supplanting one language for another, Snyder shares a course with that described by the environmental ethicist Jim Cheney in his article “Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative.” Both authors reveal an understanding of language’s troublesome existence and seek to subvert the established Euro-american perception, description, and by extension, experience of nature/wilderness through an infusion of Native narrative. As such, their intention is to reconfigure our cultural predisposition to divorce from nature into an immediacy empowered by the language of myth. However, both Cheney and Snyder may be rightly criticized for a tendency to insist that the world has an original, true essence which is approachable through some single, linguistic system.
"By suggesting that the world becomes present to us, Cheney seems to be suggesting that the Earth has a (determinate?) language that we can listen to... he suggests a base, a primordial and natural point of departure -- the world expressing itself" (Quigley 303).

This insistence on an ability to access a pre-lapsarian linguistic relationship with nature stems from a need to use language as a means to mediate a closer affinity to the non-human, and non-modern world. Snyder, in his poem "Mother Earth: Her Whales" portrays an essential connection between the language in an animal's actions and nature's inherent sense of order: "The whales turn and glisten/ plunge and/ Sound, rise again/
Flowing like breathing planets" (No Nature 238). In so doing he approaches Cheney's adoration for the way in which "a particular wolf is only one of the ways in which the world has expressed itself" (Cheney 119). Each in his own way would deny or invalidate the unavoidable human complicity in any linguistic endeavor and attempt to present a sense of ur-language "in which the world discloses itself by our being rooted in the world" (Cheney 119).

Cheney links this sense of language with bioregionalist endeavors, and the attempt to fashion a human relationship to place through a linguistically reinvigorated epistemology. He wishes, like Snyder, to use "contextual" language rooted in the experience of place to combat the totalizing and commodifying language of Euro-american modernity.

"Contextual discourse reverses this; it assimilates language to the situation, bends it, shapes it to fit" (120) a "process of human interaction with the land which ensures the health both of the land and the community" (121). Both ethicist and poet applaud the idea of bioregionalism as a means of introducing interdependence between human and non-human communities into our figuration of the surrounding landscape. Such a perspective would embrace languages and existences which have been denied power by the dominant...
epistemology's Enlightenment-based assumptions of power and value. In accordance with a certain definition of post-modernism, this effort arrives from an attempt to remove the authority of the dominant discourse/culture by enfranchising competing myths of legitimation, by re-empowering the stories and storytellers whose existence has long been subordinate to the power of objective, empirical description.

The inclusion or re-inclusion of narrative as a means of defining an epistemology of nature, in opposition to the measurable and evaluative definitions provided by modern society's faith in science and technology, has been a vibrant element in the attempt to join the postmodern competition of language games to the ecological challenge to modernist values. In Snyder and Cheney, this movement follows a path that is by now thoroughly infused throughout environmentalist culture, namely, the assumption that Native American mythic narrative offers a promising means of returning to some "moral" relationship with the earth. The term is Cheney's and comes from his adoption of tribal mythic language as a means to articulate "moral imperatives and to carry them in such a way that they actually do instruct; (to) locate us in a moral space which is at the same time the space we live in physically (129, emphasis original). Narrative, as envisioned in this particular way, relies on an essentialized view of the earth, one which supplants the idea of self, of individuality with a set of prescriptive moral codes determined by a receptiveness to an idealized 'presence' of nature. More than shifting an active or empowered role to nature or the wilderness, contextualized language shaped along these lines repeats the pitfalls of the ecological and imperialist stances it would seek to evade.

The essentialism in both Cheney's and Snyder's conceptions of nature betrays an unwillingness to move away from totalizing application of a single ideology through language. Both seem to prefer to not account for the way in which language, if described
in a poststructuralist sense, is inherently the application of cultural filters in an attempt to represent reality. Our encounter with the external world will always be on the terms of our own language; fashioning an epistemology based on receptiveness to the language nature uses to describe its own presence reflects a continuing imposition of human ideals upon an external order. There is no way to see language as being unassimilated from the situation as if both context and culture had their own linguistic identities.

The tendency to see an absolute, idealized nature continues in the attempts to bring indigenous mythology to play. Gary Snyder claims to offer a legitimate illustration of Native American ecological ethics in his reconstruction of the Tagish/Tlingit Bear Mother narrative. However, his retelling of this integral cultural myth works most cogently to express non-native ideals of behavior while ignoring the social precepts of Tagish culture legitimated by the story. His statement essentializes a native culture into a passive/receptive relationship with their landscape while ignoring the way in which Tagish language (Tagish humanity) has acted to construct this relationship and thence to give it legitimacy. Snyder and Cheney’s assertions that tribal narratives reflect contextual values “involve a parochialism reminiscent of Victorian anthropology” (Smith 8), reversing the modernist assumption of superiority by offering generalized, and idealized portrayals of native culture. Linguistically and politically, these results are at odds with any project bent on defusing an epistemology of totalizing objectivity and cultural monologism.

For instance, it may be possible to avoid the essentializing outcome of Cheney’s attempts to admit the presence of non-human agents within the construction of a human landscape. Admitting that language per se is a human construct, a mechanism by which culture mediates its presence within a represented external reality, does not prohibit us from noticing the exchange of signals or signs that pass between other animals. I would not
argue that the wolf speaks the earth's 'true' language, or acts as a linguistic symbol of an integral morality in nature. But observational experience allows us to note how wolves will address their prey, and exchange a modicum of meaning implicitly understood by each party. Barry Lopez suggests that this is part of a complex ordering of predator-prey relationships to which both communities contribute. "Wolves and prey may remain absolutely still while staring at each other...I think what transpires in those moments of staring is an exchange of information between predator and prey that either triggers a chase or defuses the hunt right there" (Wolves 62). As human factors involved in the construction of a landscape admit the potency of such experience, related and given value through story, we can come to recognize patterns of narrative that include our own lives within the indeterminate signifiers which form a complex and open-ended system of relationships.

An interaction of human language with the awareness of non-human signification, or expression, results in an alternative construction of language/knowledge/power. This new construction does not seek to impose value on, or offer an interpretation of, non-human motives or objectives. It only seeks to endow the non-human presence with the authority to act as a partner in the linguistically enacted power structures which give order to the world. Certainly the end definition is human centered, however, the inclusion of the non-human, even within narrative systems which authorize the discriminate use or taking of life, gives an undeniable power to their presence in the landscape. There is a sense of language that operates in a way still defined by human culture, but which is also a language whose effects, whose ability to represent reality, is realized only through the reflexive inclusion of those non-human 'voices'. Such an understanding of narrative may offer an alternative to the application of logocentric essences and empirically delineated assumptions of power.
It is important to establish a manner in which such a narrative may avoid the pitfalls experienced by Cheney and Snyder. In an attempt to move away from romantic, over-generalized appropriations of Native culture, for example, a revised sense of narrative would seek to not assign interpretation to the culture in a way which prescribes the value it might have for Euro-american culture. By avoiding the imposition of quality, or character, upon non-human lives, such narrative may express the presence of these lives even as it acts as the vehicle to bring them into the construction of a human landscape. An insistence upon essentialism frustrates the efforts of those who would assign the narrative task to 'the world', 'Mother Nature', or 'the wilderness'. In all cases, the narrative remains human; it becomes a narrative of inclusive identity, one which acknowledges that the construction of a human identity and a human landscape relies on an acknowledgment of human interdependence with the non-human world.
In the work of Barry Lopez, narratives of inclusive identity become the integral components in revising our perception of the surrounding landscape. Such narratives work to create an awareness of our human agency in the process of constructing our perceptions. He makes the distinction between exterior landscapes, the elements of the land and the relationships between them, and interior landscapes, which arise from the shape and character of an individual's mental and spiritual apprehension of the external world. "The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by the land as it is by genes" (Crossing 65). The communion of these two landscapes is mediated by narrative in a manner which "draws on the relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape"(68). Narratives, in the language we use when describing our landscape, ought to both reflect the observable feature of the lands we inhabit and establish an authority out of the multitude of stories and relationships around us. For Lopez, the recognition that our presence is part of an inclusive identity, rather than one which maintains an exclusive attitude towards the external world, results in an epistemology of nature based upon the competition of disparate voices. The monolithic Cartesian myth which supports divorce from and opposition to nature, with all of its reflexive movements of resistance, is replaced by an understanding of nature through a multitude of perspectives.

In order to accomplish this subversion of our entrenched habit of turning nature into an 'Other', a revised sense of narrative's potency must challenge our tendency to view nature through the lens of anthropocentric empiricism. Often, our Enlightenment rooted
epistemology presents the differences between human and natural in terms of quantifiable information, a dilemma which affects both preservationist and multiple-use advocate alike. Recent attempts to reinvigorate our management of western resources with 'ecosystem management' approaches highlight this quandary. While attempting to suggest a more environmentally responsive posture, the shift away from pure instrumentalism is only skin deep. Administrative agencies and private industry maintains its insistence on the possibility of measuring net worth, potential impacts, and sustainable use strategies. Accordingly, the distinction between the scientifically human Subject and nature as a finitely describable Other is maintained. The insistence on the power of measurement reflects a culturally biased perception of this landscape to the exclusion of all other paths of experience and observation. The problem doesn't lie so much in the divergent data. It lies in the faith in rational measurement to provide a complete understanding of the surrounding landscape. Such an insistence limits our modern society by establishing confines of inadequate understanding about the places we inhabit.

And yet all cultures base their perceptions of the landscape, and their roles within it, on some form of observation and measurement. Athabascan caribou hunters depend on exactlying keen observation and interpretation of caribou behavior for the continued existence of the community. Their methods are, not surprisingly, very scientific, if attempts to analyze observable information, posit connections between factors and influences, and hypothesize the effects of changes within those relationships can be depended upon as a short definition of science. Something else ties this kind of empiricism to the community's experience, an awareness that the effect of observing and of acting upon those observations affects not only the hunter and his family, but also the continued well-being of the external world. Failure to be a good 'scientist' and a good hunter implies a failure to understand the connections between the hunter and the caribou, the result of
which, established through the legitimating narrative of the community, will be the disappearance of the caribou, and the isolation of the human within his landscape. This cause and effect inter-relationship between human and non-human communities is clearly established through the legitimating narratives of the Athabascan people, the storied existence of which defines the world in which they live. The difference between Athabascan and our Euro-american culture hinges upon our suspicion of inclusive narrative and the politics assigned to the process of observation. To the Athabascans, narrative is the reason for empirical science, in our world empiricism is the narrative.

The exposure of this epistemological shortcoming resonates throughout Barry Lopez's work. His short story "Restoration" vividly illustrates the frustrations of an early French cattle baron named Rene de Crenir in an area of what will become North Dakota. Confronted with the failure of European natural history to accommodate the fauna of North America, the nineteenth century Frenchman became "obsessed with understanding the nature of animals foreign to the European mind, (and)...wanted a new understanding, rooted in North America and representing a radically different view of the place of animals in human ideas" (Winter 9, emphasis original). De Crenir, in a bid to form his own relationship to place, battles the soulless taxonomies established by Descartes and by Linnaeus, taxonomies which deprive nature of narrative complexity and experience, and which enforce a divorce from human participation with nature. Deprived of an adequate understanding of North American ecology, like Lopez's character, we are "in ignorance of something even more profound...in North America the indigenous philosophy grew out of the lives of the animals" (12). The proposition that bioregionalist perspectives are a new way to instill an indigenous philosophy requires the resolution of what Lopez describes as a "conflict of authority, the authority that resides in a book and the authority in the pronghorn antelope" (Aton 8).
There is a danger here: the chief protagonist of this story is in fact not de Crenir, but a young, 20th century, academic narrator, perhaps a writer, who encounters the earlier cattle baron's library quite by chance. What Lopez finds alarming in this character is his potential for becoming “so wrapped up in books that he loses contact with the source” (Aton 8). The narrator becomes “deeply affected by the atmosphere of ideas and history” that are set forth by an old artisan hired to restore the collection of manuscripts. This man, who like the relatives of the mysterious de Crenir, seems oblivious to the surrounding country and has no contact with the nearby townspeople, draws the narrator away from an intimate encounter with the primary source of de Crenir’s epistemological quandary. The trap is laid by books, by an insistence on the text as the authoritative dispenser of misgivings and resolutions, of definition and counter-definition. What was originally an individual’s consternation at the failings of his ideological predispositions when faced with the demands of an unfamiliar place drifts away from these archaeologists of texts.

The narrator, as well as Lopez, find themselves in the position of having to mediate between the acquisitive, progressivist energies of academia and Western empiricism and the legitimacy granted by a redefined landscape of immediate relationships. Within the story this tension is left unresolved; the narrator seems to remain attached to the world beyond that defined by textual experience, to the community of tourists which visits the library/museum, and to the antelope which appear on the hills outside. Lopez hints at the inadequacy our language reveals when one negotiates this border between informed experience and empirical orthodoxy. His landscape seems to flirt just beyond the grasp of the narrator, offering “a smoothness of line, an evenness of tone, that is often called graceful” (Winter 5). Perhaps our language is still a bit out of place here, searching as it is for ways of relating the things that both human and animals are doing. While there are no ways of definitively answering for the non-human, Lopez suggests that a mediating
awareness of both language and the ways in which knowledge is constructed can offer the
tools to elucidate our relationship with the external world (Aton 8).

Lopez's narrative step is a moderate one, which depends not so much on the rejection of
empirical natural science as on revitalizing the political relationship between Western
science and other, non-scientific means of describing the world. The practice of
observation and inquiry into the other-than-human world can only serve to illuminate the
interdependence between human cultures and their surroundings. What is important is
Lopez's rejection of Western science as the locus of total knowledge, and the possibility
that this singular approach, or any singular approach, can provide an adequate vision of our
ecological relationship with our environment. Lopez is in fact inordinately scientific for an
environmental writer. His book Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern
Landscape superbly illustrates the breadth of knowledge he is able to bring to his literary
explorations. However, as Romand Coles has written, "'the facts' are employed to reveal
a site of wonder, mystery, questionability - something to be appreciated and
respected" (244). In Lopez's hands, the facts which have accumulated through observation
and experimentation are employed to open, rather than close, the narrative of the polar bear.

Any such narrative begins with the voice of the storyteller, and in this role Lopez slips into
a position of apparent humility, an openness to the discovery of what is possibly
describable about polar bears. From the onset of this section of the book, Lopez
successfully avoids the attribution of mystical values, or romanticization of some elemental
quality enshrined in these creatures. Instead, Lopez draws his readers into the bears'
landscape, a space ordered and principled by distinctive actions and interpretation bears
must make in the course of their lives. We read as uninitiated novices, lacking a
legitimating presence within this system, drawn only by a fundamental and possibly callow
attraction. There is no position of dominion, or reverence, only the potential for interference (Arctic 78). The path of the chapter leads from this intrusive position through a narrative process of observation and elucidation, as the storyline shifts from an emphasis on the storyteller, to the experience of discovery, and ultimately, to an allowance of the bear’s own narrative. While Lopez does not presume to tell the bears’ story, he does present the possible means by which the animals express their own existence. Their ‘speech’ is realized through an acute awareness of possibility, an unrestricted intimacy with the potential that is the polar bear.

One of the crucial steps in this program is the limited de-authorization of western science. Throughout his descriptions of what science has been able to discern about polar bear behavior, Lopez qualifies his presentation with the limitations of the empirical approach. “The polar bear is only lately known to science, and not yet well” (Arctic 80). A scientific approach, replete with its limitations, remains a powerful narrative force however, one which enables the reader to bridge the immediate emptiness of naïveté in the Arctic terrain of the polar bear. Lopez’s account of our relationship with the bear leads next into a short, encyclopedic presentation of what can be defined about the bears, facts, figures, etc. in such a way that what is prominent is more what is left uncovered, than what is firmly established. The priority in this section rests upon the descriptive capacity of knowledge gained through observation, and its ability to lead towards a recognition of the ineffable, unquantifiable elements that arise from an intimacy with bear behavior. Human presence as architects of this body of information occurs infrequently, and then only in positions where their own attempts to formulate definitive information are frustrated. Lopez backs away from any personal involvement as an apparent narrator, casting his voice through the example of an American scientist whose failure to measure bear heat loss with infrared and ultraviolet film led to an unexpected lesson in the complexity of their heat regulation system. Almost by proxy, Lopez turns up as storyteller in the qualification of human
knowledge offered by the English traveler Robert Brown in 1868: "I cannot help thinking (that) the impressions which we have imbibed regarding the polar bear...are due more to old notions of what it ought to be rather than what it is..." (83, emphasis original)

Without clearly delineated projects of human power within this descriptive exercise, the role of authorizing subject begins to shift away from humans and towards the bear. What we are able to say about them objectively, about their physical systems and measurements is an articulation of where we must begin our attempt to engage the bears in an atmosphere of dialogue. Our own ability to narrate this relationship is suspect, critically limited by its insistence on asserting fixed meaning and identity within the measurable external world. We have insisted on relating polar bears with other members of the bear family, creatures with whom they share a general appearance, but from whom they diverge considerably in all other fields of definition: "We call them both 'bears,' but when you see a polar bear surface quietly in a lead, focus his small brown eyes on a sleeping bearded seal, draw breath soundlessly, and submerge without a ripple, you wonder at the insouciance with which we name things" (86). What is at stake here is the ability to move beyond the narrowness of our epistemological exclusiveness and monologic ascription of knowledge and power. As Lopez recognizes, and asks us to admit, what can be known about *Ursus maritimus* is expanded by what can be said about *pisugtook* through the experience of native Arctic peoples as related by their observations, myths, and art. Through this attempt to refashion the narrative formation of our relationship with the polar bear, our Euro-American epistemology is opened beyond its traditionally self-imposed bounds, combined with a reflexive examination of ourselves as observers, and supplemented with alternate perspectives. In the admission of this multiplicity Lopez suggests we’ll find a more appropriate communion between the narratives of interior and external landscapes.
Ultimately, this balance functions as a result of the acquiescence to presence of the bears, of the external landscape, as agents in a dialogue of place and interdependence. While acknowledging the desirability of engaging nature in a dialogic relationship, environmental writers encounter the theoretical challenges to enacting such a proposition. Almost inevitably, it seems, we are faced with the proposition of assigning some form of inherent or elemental virtue to the elements of nature in order to turn them into recognized, ‘speaking’ subjects. In so doing, we cast wolves for instance, as the so-called voice of the wild. However, this position need not be so dependent upon fundamentalist energies. As Roman Coles reminds us, Theodor Adorno challenges that “if thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye” (Coles 238). Lopez continues in this vein, amassing the physical and ineffable presence of the polar bear within the shared Arctic landscape, and admitting this as the emanations of the bears’ active agency in the creation of presence and meaning within the landscape.

“To follow a bear, or simply to follow in its tracks, is to ‘really learn something’” (Arctic 97). The passages of a bear through its territory are cast as manifestations of its presence, a catalog of the structures which acquire significance through their interaction with the polar bear.

A set of tracks might show where a bear had leaped into the air and come down headed in another direction -- and you would look around for evidence of what surprised it...Fresh tracks turning into a fiord might make no sense until you saw a bird rookery, beneath which the bear had scavenged dead birds...Another set of tracks might turn suddenly and continue in an unerring line, and an aglu, a seal’s breathing hole, would be there at the end, with signs of the bear’s patient waiting. (ibid.)

Here then, Lopez completes the shift away from normative empirical observation and description, and presents the bear as the teller of its own narrative. He seems to have sidestepped the quandary attached to granting a legitimate speaking identity to the non-human through a shift in the terms of what Euro-american epistemology is willing to admit.
as language and the reception of language. In his remove from the emphatic tone of acquisition and closure which characterizes the discourse of natural science, Lopez allows that the observable and mysterious features which we have apprehended seem to be what the bear says, and what we have learned through science is chiefly what the bear has told science. As such, the distinction between subject and object has begun to dissolve, and the human-bear interrelationship is more conscientiously described through a competition of multiple, dialogic narratives.

There is something of a crucial implication in this last phrase. Contemporary preservationist rhetoric often urges us to “get back in touch with nature”, to find restoration in the things nature can “say” to us. Implicit in these recommendations is the distance between human and natural which informs expropriative attitudes towards nature. In fact there is no dialogue in these supposed moments of speech; what nature has “to say” depends entirely on what we expect it to say. If we encounter nature expecting solace, restoration, or a sense of communion at odds with our everyday life, we are closing down the significance of nature. Nature’s contribution to the narrative is relegated to a reflection of our own prior definition of its capacities and these capacities are necessarily an opposition to more human experience. By moving away from the authoritative voice of the omniscient narrator and the certainty claimed by scientific description, Lopez subverts this closure and in so doing fashions a challenge for would-be narrators of a placed ecology. Successfully fashioning a narrative of inclusion is to introduce an awareness of dialogue; where there is a dialogue, there are separate partners. By opening our understanding of nature to a sense of dialogue we admit the possibility that our presence does not necessarily imply control. The meanings we can find in our relationship with nature are not limited to ascribed, reactionary values but are instead potentially undefined. This lack of closure introduces a sense of play into our construction of a language and understanding of nature. Though the form of Lopez’s text is not open in the post-structuralist sense of literary and
textual analysis, the epistemology that he presents hopes to move towards an infinite postponement of resolution. Knowledge, language, and their ensuing positions of authority are all indeterminate factors in the construction of the polar bear narrative.

For this turn to be accomplished with any sense of integrity requires an advanced sense of intimacy in our relationship with our partners in the creation of the landscape. In some ways this returns us to the dilemma over the assertion of intrinsic value in nature. However, if narrative serves as a means to voice the value we give to nature even as we are a part of it, our anthropocentric description of the landscape will suffer less from impositions of instrumental value and benefit from a perception that reconstructs empirical objectivity from within a system of relationships (Norton 222). Lopez outlines the potential that narrative plays in this construction of this relational system based upon his experience with traditional storytelling:

The exterior landscape is organized according to principles or laws or tendencies beyond human control. It is understood to contain an integrity that is beyond human analysis and unimpeachable. Insofar as the storyteller depicts various subtle and obvious relationships in the exterior landscape accurately in his story, and insofar as he orders them along traditional lines of meaning to create the narrative, the narrative will 'ring true.' The listener who 'takes the story to heart' will feel a pervasive sense of congruence within himself and also the world. (Crossing 66)

The task of a storyteller, or a western environmental writer who would fashion such an inclusive ethic of place, should be to open up a realization of the natural order’s inherent and undelineated complexity, and perhaps an acceptance of the mystery that accompanies the knowledge that we cannot know everything. Language in this instance is a ‘natural’ place, meeting informed expectations without limiting the outcomes in natural relationships to nominal prescriptions for resolution. Inclusive narratives craft playful landscapes by escaping from dualistic determinations of us/them, or instrumental/intrinsic value, or subject/object.
Lopez is building on his sense of the function of narrative in ‘traditional’ cultures, presenting the breath of experience crucial to narrative as a means to expand Western epistemologies of nature. His emphasis however is a presentation of an understanding of landscape based upon narrative, rather than on playing out the espousal of Native American lifestyles as paragons of ecological harmony. This trope has its own long history in non-tribal literatures, and in many cases is not so far from the rueful admiration of the ‘noble savage’ so prevalent in the idealism of earlier centuries. To its detriment, the non-native environmental community has frequently relied on stereotyped and erroneously essentialist depictions of Native Americans in their attempt to foster a Euro-american ethic of ecological responsibility. During the nineteen-seventies, even the Federal government turned the actor Iron Eyes Cody into a generic icon of the aggrieved Indian, the American innocence lost to modern industry and waste. Cody’s buckskin clad Indian, like the Navajo, Hopi, or Tagish emulated by Cheney, Snyder, and others, bore only superficial semblance to any actual Indian culture. In truth, the properties and values reflected in his teary gaze were only ours; the vista he wept at was the absence of our ideal selves.

As a popular myth, this attempt at empathy negates tens of thousands of years during which the indigenous people of this continent have manipulated and managed their environments. In so doing they have gained extensive experience in the complex relationships which inform their human existence. Admiring their harmony with the Earth misses the point. What is to be considered favorably is their ability to manage and manipulate the landscape successfully for so long. Integral to this process is recognizing the indivisibility of human and non-human cultures, and the construction of legitimizing narratives which gives authority to the non-human voices. The raveling of intimate experience and imagination through narrative establishes a sustainable myth of presence.
within a deeply understood place, and expands the definition of place to include the human culture appropriate to its ecological characteristics.

Because his presentations of Native American narrative, values, and experiences doesn’t propose their wholesale adoption into a Euro-american ethic of place, Lopez is more successful than many other writers at integrating these often competitive epistemologies. Through his discussions of tribal narratives, he emphasizes the role language and literature play in the relationship a culture establishes among the elements of its place. Implicit within this emphasis is an approving acceptance of alternative ways of knowing nature and ourselves. Lopez posits a revised sense of language as the chief means by which we may move away from the narrowly empiricizing emphasis of Euro-american belief systems. Our language in this instance may be English, French, German, or perhaps Lithuanian; within the experience of our culture over the past half millennia or so, our common language has come to be the voice of an epistemology intractably bound up in the tenets of empiricism and objectivity handed down by the Enlightenment and in the prejudice against natural autonomy established by pre-Enlightenment Christian theology. Those who cannot share in this language cannot, by definition, share in the authority it represents. One major consequence of this self-reflexive construction of legitimation has been the subordination of non-restrictive means of establishing knowledge and power. With the demise of narrative as an empowered vehicle of expression, the Euro-american sense of, and use of, language has become a closed system, subjecting itself only to its own criteria for relevance.

As such, our language attributes meaning to the external world, offering representations of reality as we experience it in discrete, measurable increments. Historically, our view of language has assigned it a status secondary to the existence of an external order, a tool for describing that which always already exists. The essentialism of this position becomes
something of a habit, as we see in Cheney’s insistence on a different pre-existing foundation from which the human voice has somehow become detached. A more accurate reversal is implied in the multiplicity which informs Lopez’s sense of language and its connection to story and the construction of external landscapes. In so doing he opposes our linguistic history in much the same sense that Steven Tyler describes in his consideration of narrative “as the ‘maker of the world, not its mirror...The world is what we say it is, and what we speak of is the world’” (Vizenor 4). The active agent in this framework is language; through a narrative of inclusion, language creates ‘traditional lines of meaning’ which reflect the world through the complexity of human interdependence and dialogic participation within its natural surroundings.

Language therefore is the key to any revision in our relationship to nature and the instrument in constructing newly envisioned landscapes. Revising our linguistic approaches to nature effects a shift in the power structures which endow hierarchy and order within our perceptions of the external world. As we attempt to move away from the commodifying, ‘Other-ing’, language of metropolitan capital, which reduces any landscape to exploitable natural (and human) resources, we move closer to the narratives suppressed under the weight of this instrumentalist and totalizing world view. All of these directions place bioregionalism, and or more specifically, an ecological epistemology based upon narratives of inclusive identity, in parallel with the critical energies post-modernism has brought to bear upon metropolitan, modernist culture in general. Central to this critical discourse is the undermining of the unifying, central myth which legitimizes modern civilization’s authority. As this grand myth is no longer perceived as inviolable, the narratives suppressed under its imposed authority are given increasing critical power.
Bioregionalism’s attempt to supplant the power of metropolitan capital hinges upon the reconfiguration of language as part of this critical approach. In his discussion of *Arctic Dreams*, Romand Coles cites Theodore Adorno’s discussion of the prevalent denial of nature’s voice in Euro-american culture as revealing a fundamental rejection of humanity’s thorough entwinement with the landscape as an extralinguistic world. “To deny this entwinement - to deny nature, that which is qualitatively specific in our own and other bodies, the otherness within and around us - is to bind ourselves to a quest for an abstract and empty sovereignty that destroys the world and is self-defeating” (Coles 231).

Continuing this denial, according to Adorno, consigns our culture to an obliviousness to that which we insist on labeling “Other”, and eventually will result in our willingness to destroy that which we are unable to recognize as having an instrumental value. Such destruction “simultaneously reduce(s) the potential richness of our own beings” and our enjoyment of a real freedom “inseparable from and dialogically intertwined with the fertility and richness of the world, a freedom that implies and affirms the freedom and flourishing of other beings” (231-2). Lopez would add “dignity” to this last, and Coles further elaborates Lopez’s relationship to this “negative dialectic” formulated by Adorno.

According to Coles, Lopez opens up intellectual and spiritual perspectives which challenge the dominant trend towards classification and objectification. Lopez uses science, but recognizes its limit and abjures from closed definitions of the otherness he seeks to understand and convey. The mystery, richness and freedom of nature are admired and preserved in the areas where human and non-human intersect in a continuous state of exchange and encroachment.

Lopez creates narrative as the space where this dialogue takes place. The assemblage of perspectives and interpretations presented in *Arctic Dreams* opens up our epistemology of closure in an arena where different attempts to explain, order, and live within a landscape
compete for authority. The competition remains unresolved, yet the definitions our culture has brought to the Arctic environment are revealed as increasingly suspect. Even our attempts to ascribe the order of measurable time are frustrated in this terrain; how can we define ‘day’ in a place where the sun alternates between continuous presence and continuous absence? “The idea that the sun ‘rises in the east and sets in the west’ simply does not apply. The thought that a ‘day’ consists of a morning and a forenoon, an afternoon and an evening, is a convention, one so imbedded in us we hardly think about it, a convention of our literature and arts. The pattern is not the same here” (Arctic 20). And yet the history of Euro-american experience with nature, especially in the western hemisphere, and even more acutely in the Arctic, has been to attempt an imposition of just such an ordering.

The frailty in Euro-american attempts to bend the Arctic terrain to fit our intellectual predisposition shows clearly in Lopez’s historical account of our attempts to define this unfamiliar world. As with the case of the polar bears, “(w)e know more about the rings of Saturn than we do about the narwhal” (Arctic 128). Our scientists have been able to determine critical but essentially minimal information about this creature’s habits and needs. While the vastness of the unknown and unknowable world of the bear and the narwhal may elude definition, in the day to day world of managing the Arctic, we interpret this absence or definitive data as a material judgment in and of itself. Lopez and the self-critical biologists he profiles ruefully acknowledge this complicated momentum towards asserting useful explications, “The kernel of indisputable information is a dot in space; interpretations grow out of the desire to make this point a line, to give it a direction”(127). In the Arctic, perhaps as nowhere else on the planet, our attempts to evaluate the resource potential of the region demand this scientifically legitimated closure; all in a region where our science is fundamentally challenged by its inability to move beyond the very edges of possible
experience, to grasp more than the slimmest hint of its ecological complexity. While the searches and studies continue, it is the predisposition towards narrative closure that prevents our imaginations and our language from recognizing an authority in the ineffable. Our attempts at grasping the inscrutable world of the narwhal fall short because of our insistence that the world be inherently definable, and that mystery be somehow unacceptable.

To pick up Adorno’s challenge once again, a subversion of this tendency towards closure implies a recognition that nature’s substance lies precisely in its evasion of generalizations and sweeping conceptualizations (Coles 238). The paradox in our attempt to form linguistic relationships with the external world revolves around facing a world which obtains language only through our efforts, yet offers a constant flow of signification (ibid.) Lopez’s essay “Landscape and Narrative” demonstrates the expansion of human experience when augmented by Adorno’s negative dialectic, wherein the relationship between two linguistically active subjects moves towards a continually delayed reconciliation, where neither has value without the other, and towards a judgment engendered by the paradox of non/identity (I am both what is and what is not me, the other is both not me, and me). The occasion for the essay is a story told of an Alaskan hunter’s experience with a wolverine, one which turned at the top of each rise to watch the hunter as he drew nearer.

The hunter topped one more rise and met the wolverine bounding toward him. Before he could pull his rifle from its scabbard the wolverine flew across the engine cowl and the windshield, hitting him square in the chest...The wolverine jumped clear as the snow machine rolled over, and fixed the man with a stare. He had not bitten, not even scratched the man. Then the wolverine walked away. (Crossing 62)

For Lopez, the effect of the described incident was to open up an understanding of the things which cannot be fully understood within the landscape, within our encounters with the nonidentical. The element of mystery activates our awareness of the engendering tension which resides on that interstice between self and other. There can be no single,
definitive meaning interpreted from this event, however, its presence within narrative offers an open-ended, playful significance which informs the landscape shared by human and wolverine. Meaning in the lives of the storyteller, the listeners, and the original participants resides in the exchange of communication between hunter and hunted, and the ease with which these supposedly established roles are upset.

The narrative of the wolverine establishes an experience of a landscape informed by the recognized authority in its elemental features: the wolverine, the hunter, the snow, the terrain, and the way in which language links them together through authority endowing stories. The realization of non-human agency is not expressed as an occasion of oddity, a fluke of nature, but as one expected possibility within the community's own complexity. The dramatic tension between the other-ness of the wolverine and its slippage into the identity and experience of the hunter provokes a sense of essential dialogue. "(I)n its creations/discoveries, in its discoveries of what it has not yet discovered, and in its discoveries of what it can never discover... both a reverence for the earth and a knowledge through which this reverence can become meaningful emerge" (Coles 243).

Reverence, knowledge, identity; as factors implicit within the transformation of a single event into cultural significance, their ability to exert a transformative effect is realized through a continued performance of inclusive narrative. Narrative constructed to emphasize these features preserves the spirit and the instance of dialogue, potentially reconciling our current polarized, environmental moment of crisis. Through a knowledge discovered, related, and legitimized by narrative which posits an inter-related engagement with our landscape, we achieve a "dignity that is ours when we cease to demand the truth and realize that the best we can have of those substantial truths that guide our lives is metaphorical - a story" (Crossing 71). However, it is necessary to maintain a critical posture within this
attempted shift. Truth in a dialogic landscape is not viable, nor approachable as a fundamental essence. It cannot be said to exist as prescriptive or essentializing statement of authority. What is important to realize at this point is that the totalizing authority of truth, its existence as a foundation statement, has been irrevocably altered. The 'truth' I believe Lopez is discussing is more accurately realized as the integrity formed out of open-ended engagements in the fashion of negative dialectics and as such operates against the instrumentalist narrative of use-value landscapes and privileged human subjects. "Beyond this - that interior landscape is a metaphorical representation of the exterior landscape, that the truth reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in the paradox, irony and contradictions that distinguish compelling narratives" lies only the cultural and physical oblivion promised by Adorno to an society isolated from its entwinement with nature (ibid.),

While bioregionalism in some instances seems to share certain aspects of postmodernist critique, contemporary criticisms of the expanding metropoliy of late model, or post-industrial, capitalism do not account for this regionalist response based upon narrative knowledge. Even Coles in his linkage of Lopez to Adorno recognizes the inadequacy of contemporary social critique to counter the conditions which they have successfully described. Over the past few decades, an ecological response steeped in locality has been presented as a means to step further beyond the constraints of the established system in order to raise a critical. Marxist theory remains perhaps the most cogent criticism expressed from inside the established Euro-american system of thought, however its concern for dialectics within the evolving technological society prevents it from accepting lines of criticism this society has long ago dismissed as "primitive" or "non-developed". The distinctions between these critical movements are emphatically revealed by their epistemic relationship to place; an ecological regionalism advocates placed social intimacy and a complexity based on multi-vocal narrative while postmodernism remains a revision
bound within a system already indifferent to locality and built upon the homogeneity of knowledge as capital. It is interesting to contrast this gulf by comparing the ethics of Lopez to those described by Jean François Lyotard, the prominent French postmodernist critic.

Lyotard discusses the divergent frameworks for legitimizing knowledge, narrative and scientific, in his 1979 text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In it he recognizes the advancing capitalization of knowledge as information and the competency to transmit and utilize information as power. While endemic to the hyper-technolization of the post-industrial age, what this development entails for satellite economic zones, such as the west, is an increasing disregard for the identity and validity of local based systems of judgment, behavior, or definition. The ability of a locality to assert denotative or prescriptive elements of knowledge is surrendered to the authority of non-local assemblages of information and power. While this system’s characteristics are apparent enough, and also confronted by bioregionalism, the response suggested by Lyotard is to work toward channeling these developments in a direction potentially least harmful to those whose authority has been usurped. His redress is not to challenge the cultural norm, but to attempt to influence future developments and mitigate potentially totalitarian tendencies.

Within his critique, Lyotard addresses the potential reinvigoration of an epistemology infused with narrative, but remains convinced that such a recourse would inevitably only serve “to the extent that the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own”(28). He is convinced that the subservience of narrative to the empiricizing demands of science demonstrates its absence as a viable alternative. In fact, he sees the incommensurability of narrative knowledge with the prevalent scientific culture as inevitable because of the inherent refusal of narrative to enter into the self reflexive dialectic over legitimacy, a debate which forms
the fundamental question of empirical culture (31). For Lyotard, "narrative as the validity of knowledge" is unable to maintain a position of either practical application or cognitive transmission, and is thus inadequate for the task of competently creating norms of truth or justice (ibid.). In other words, narrative as a tool for constructing ideology is inappropriate because it doesn’t play by the rules which have been established by Western “language games” for the legitimation of the structures of meaning. And yet Lyotard relies on a markedly essentialist view of narrative epistemologies and cultures. He seems to ignore the dialogic process that goes into the creation of a narrative conceptualization of landscape, for example: “a culture that gives precedence to the narrative form doubtless has no more of a need for special procedures to authorize its narratives than it has to remember its past”(22). Lyotard relies on a belief that narratives are static remnants of some mythic time when all information was dispensed. He discounts the active inter-penetration between human constructors of narrative and the criteria of integrity imposed upon their narrative by continuing experience.

Fundamentally, the gap between narrative bioregionalism and Lyotard’s postmodernism results from the latter’s insistence on maintaining the language games he seeks to subvert. Postmodernism, while admitting to some reflexive criticism of this position, upholds the instrumentalist distinction between the speaking subject and measurable object of knowledge, where the subject’s authority has been determined and defined by its presence within established norms of Euro-american discourse. Remaining attached to this privileging of speaker, critic, overarching system actually works against any attempt to open Euro-american epistemology to a more polyvocal inclusiveness. The “other” may be allowed to speak, but this speech is consistently pre-judged and the other remains an other.
A bioregionalism informed by a narrative contribution to knowledge, on the other hand, attempts to establish criteria for legitimation that are based on more disparate and observable interactions with a local environment and on a valorization of multiple human and environmental histories. This response may seem idealistic from the perspective of Rationalist thought, however it must be remembered that the bioregionalist proposal is for a cultural renaissance driven by an alternative epistemology. Indeed, the potential for revision along these lines cannot help but stumble over the practicality of enforcing such thorough shifts in thinking and behavior. Questions of authority will continue to plague bioregionalist endeavors as the genuine presence of multi-vocality becomes harder and harder to grasp. However, its goal remains where knowledge is not managed as an accelerating aspect of capital, but to build a human culture where knowledge is recognized through a dialogic ecological presence, rather than as an aspect of competing programs of power.

For Lyotard, postmodernism is the instability of individually authorized history (Nicholls 4), wherein “knowledge presupposes precisely the neat separation of its own discourse from the object of knowledge”(5). Curiously, this position declines to alter the subject/object dichotomy which has proven philosophically troublesome, especially for ecologists. Given this, the future according to Lyotard is: delocalized, as information needs no home and can be exchanged globally without regard to local characteristics; de-mythologized, as legitimation becomes individual, and by extension, institutional; absolutely metropolitan, as value will not be ascribed to things outside of the new productivity. “This is what the postmodern is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative”(Lyotard 41). What's left is a legitimacy based on an individual's own ability to compete linguistically, and to participate in the extended construction of authority along with everyone else's individual communicability. The
sustaining environment, that which must be described, settled, and employed for future
generations, is information. Databanks are "nature' for the postmodern man" (51).
Lyotard's recourse to the crisis represented by this technologized vision of society is to
ensure that everyone has access to the databanks, an adjustment in language games, an
opening of the means of discourse to everyone (64-5). Attendant to this is an increasing
replacement of permanent social institutions with temporary contracts, flexible constructs of
"metaprescriptives" confined to particularized time and space. The increased distance
between modern humanity and nature enforced by both the modern condition and Lyotard's
prescription can only result in further divorce between western society and western
landscape. The physical contact may remain, but already we see a growing tendency
towards an appreciation of the western environment not as inseparable partner in a life
giving dialogue, but as a recreation site and playground where contact with the landscape is
mediated by the objects and techniques of consumer society. While an ancillary to the
traditional objectification of western resources, the mentality of commodification continues.

It is somewhat difficult to conceive of a postmodern environmentalism that is not bound by
the movement's polarized reaction to late-model capitalism. It has been suggested that the
radically confrontational attitudes adopted by such groups as EarthFirst! have a congruity
with postmodern ideals. However, their attempts to defend the environment consistently
rely on virtually the same ideological foundations which inform their extractive opposition.
The environment remains a passive and essentialized system where human values are
reflected by their very absence. While beset by its own set of problems, the direction
indicated by bioregionalism makes some significant steps towards a more ecologically
sound epistemology of nature. Aspects of an inter-relationship with nature grounded in an
inclusive identity could move beyond the linear oppositions of subject/object,
human/resource by recasting the basis for our construction of landscapes. As much as
these two critical directions may work in differing directions, it seems especially fruitful to
play their energies upon/against each other, in the manner of competing narratives of
knowledge. Lyotard reminds us that the legitimation of knowledge and power are
ultimately evading our grasp and that we are too uncomfortable with the idea of living in a
world that is an open, unresolved text. Perhaps within the exaggerated emphasis on
information in our current culture is an incipient point of maximum tension, an overload
where the contestation of narrative finally overwhelms the tendency to induce oppositions,
dualities, and closures.

Perhaps, though again his texts do not offer a radical departure from resolution in form or
style, Barry Lopez's stories and essays point towards this direction from within their
content. As polar bears and narwhals evade ultimate definition, and their authority as
agents in the creation of their own landscapes are recognized, so are the human
constructors of knowledge and narration inevitably fragile within this space. As his
audience our epistemological stubbornness figures prominently in his literary appeals,
perhaps most eloquently in his short story "The Buffalo." This concise tale offers a
distilled example of Lopez's subversion of the totalizing power of Euro-american
empiricism and insistence upon hierarchical organizations of subjects and objects. In the
story, a club of turn-of-the-century Coloradans asks a group of Arapaho Indians to
augment the white version of the region's history "The white settlers were concerned that
during the years when the white man was moving into the area, and the Indian was being
extirpated, a conflict in historical records arose such that the white record was incomplete
and possibly in error"(Winter 33).

Modern society's current mythological exhaustion, most prominent in its relationship to the
landscape, mirrors this fictional perspective. Bioregionalism suggests a direction which
will not complete the “white record”, but may supplant it with a competition of records, some scientific, some experiential, some mysterious. The Arapaho respond to the settlers’ request by relating a historical narrative about their 1845 encounter with a herd of buffalo which climbed into the mountains while singing a death song, eventually disappearing into the high clouds. Confused with this departure from rational empiricism, “the white people at the 1911 meeting said they did not understand the purpose of telling such a story. The Arapaho said this was the first time the buffalo had tried to show them how to climb out through the sky” (34).

Perhaps this escape, from the constrictions of our limited landscapes, is what is proffered through bioregionalist narrative, and narrative bioregionalism. The adoption of an attitude which grants that our identity is part of an inclusive participation with the external landscape necessitates a thorough responsibility for maintaining the dialogic integrity within our community. An ethic of place, affirmed through narrative, offers a direct opposition to present American culture in the west as characterized by its rootless population, boom-bust economic cycles dependent upon extractive market forces, and distance from political centers. While emphasizing the dependence of human culture upon its intimacy with a locality, Gary Snyder has expressed the sustaining universality that such a perspective entails: “Deciding to settle, paradoxically, makes you completely universal. Until you decide to settle down you don’t belong anywhere. If you don’t belong anywhere, you don’t belong to the planet” (Nordstrom 157). By positing a new ethics dependent upon place and informed by an inclusive epistemological authority, it seems that Barry Lopez hopes to hand down a vision of a society in the west which escapes its historical coursecharted by extractive mentalities and a refusal to admit to responsible living within the landscape. These lessons may seem revolutionary from the perspective of the current order
and its accustomed critiques, but they seem to offer a distinctly optimistic vision for sustainable human culture within the region.
Chapter Four: John McPhee and James Galvin Dialoging the Land

The argument between critical methodologies in our way of apprehending nature is far from academic. While its tenets may seem esoteric, we must remember that to a very large extent the criticism of environmental literature reflects a criticism of not only the stories we tell about nature, but the way in which we imagine these stories. In this way, the criticism, perhaps more than the stories, is extremely germane to this current period in the history of the west. Ultimately, the poststructural term "language game" fails to capture the intensity of the conflict between instrumentalist voices of natural resource measurements and expropriations, and the reflexive counter claims raised by environmental activists. And to go one step further, to move around and beyond the polarity of these entrenched positions seems more and more to offer the only hope for regional lifestyle with ecological integrity and human significance.

The ongoing debate over bioregionalism's potential for offering this revision continues in attempts to form a pragmatic politics and in the ideological explorations expressed through the literature of western spaces. Themes articulated in the co-incident critiques raised by feminism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction often work with an environmental awareness in the attempts to fashion a new 'ecocriticism' which will enable us to write, read, and to live, with a provocative ecological voice. This new critical initiative, and its apparent association with or at least inclusion of bioregionalism, allows us to read some recent environmental texts in potentially invigorating ways, but it also raises a series of developing concerns about the very nature of an ecocritical approach. Questions about the isolationism potentially inherent in bioregionalism as well as the considerable dilemma over
the authenticity of a given regional voice surface in a number of recent texts. Some of these
directions and tensions shared by Barry Lopez and postmodernist thought come to light in
the works of other current writers, notably John McPhee and James Galvin.

McPhee’s book *Rising From The Plains* presents as a very eloquent appreciation of the
west’s esoteric geology, but even more so, combines this scientific study of earthly time
with a study of the modern experience in Wyoming as it is revealed through individual and
cultural mythic narratives. He does this through a interweaving of the lessons he learns
from eminent field geologist David Love during several seasons of highway wanderings
and a series of biographical and historic sketches from the Love family’s eighty year tenure
in the state. In Love, McPhee finds his mythic protagonist, icon of the rugged qualities we
have come to associate with the west, and respected master of the scientific means of
uncovering an instrumental definition within the jumble of wild Wyoming rock. The myths
serve McPhee well; endowing each with a sense of dramatic presence, he is able to
undermine the authority that each has brought to the process of constructing the western
landscape.

From the onset, McPhee revitalizes the perfecting myth about a region that is “still very
much the Old West” when Love’s mother emigrates to the region in 1905. It is the modern
century, the era of progress and unprecedented technological expansion, yet Wyoming, in
McPhee’s depiction, remains foremost a historical process, a place where the mythic
images of western ruggedness just barely suffice to preserve human life against raging
storms, the unforgiving terrain, and, not least, bank foreclosures. Decades later David
Love, dressed in horsehide jacket, two gallon Stetson, and repairing his leaky air mattress
with evaporated milk, lives up to the expectations of a romantically defined western figure.
The point of McPhee’s dramatizations is to convince us of Wyoming’s connection to the
narrative structures which traditionally have defined the west as an arena of exaggerated challenge, a place where the extreme is the norm, "not some mild place like Baffin Island" (6). By recounting the Love family's experience with outlaws, wildcat oil drillers, influenza epidemics, economic collapse, and above all, the land, McPhee revitalizes the definitive authority of our frontier myth. He makes certain that his readers see the Loves as the legitimate inheritors of their place, endowed by Manifest Destiny to pick up the colorful story of the place and add their own narrative of power and extraction. From this foundation, McPhee is able to destabilize our narrative of western history and undermine the force with which this singular, totalizing interpretation has shaped our culture and its landscape.

The landscape of the west, constructed in these terms, appears as a very inhuman place, inhospitably alien to the imposition of Euro-american ideology. A significant part of the romance has been the rigor and stamina of our pioneer ancestors as they faced wind so strong it blew sheep into Montana, and drove settlers insane (65). Inhumanity, alien-ness; these are the projections of a culture unable to conceptualize its surroundings in anything other than oppositional, instrumental judgments. The actual story of the modern Euro-american presence in Wyoming is less like the perfecting myth and more like a complex fall from grace. Here, where we would have great herds of cattle grazing across the rolling high desert basins, we now have sagebrush flourishing in overgrazed sections and wood aster, a non-native species of low tree which works upon the limestone foundation of these basins to systematically spread selenium poisoning to livestock, and people. Wyoming's iconic totems, the bronc rider and his ranging cattle are the unwitting but culpable parties in the poisoning of the land with "one of the ingredients of nerve gas" (8).
While challenging the popular mythology that surrounds western identity and culture, McPhee finds a particularly commendable westerner in David Love. It is Love who relates the story of the aster-selenium combination, a typical moment in the scientist's comprehensive cataloguing of the surrounding terrain. Love is in some measure emblematic of the type of informed inhabitant favored by bioregionalists. His connections to the surrounding land forms are elaborated by academic knowledge that is compounded by an experiential intimacy, built up over years of close observation and interpretation of the natural features which have informed his life. As a child, Love began to appreciate the "obvious and close connection between bedrock geology and ranching" (103). Through geology, McPhee begins to unravel the processional order which links past to present. The relationship between measuring of the land as resource base and the ensuing use of these resources brings the Old West to meet New West in one unending cultural experience. Pivotal within this is the recognition of the physical terrain and the attempts to comprehend this terrain as an expressible, and accessible landscape. David Love's entire life has been spent trying to decipher the narrative told by the land, or in less foundationalist terms, trying to transfer into human voice the relationships between time, terrain, and life which are expressed in the strata of the earth. Bounded by a Rationalist epistemology, Love is an active participant in the construction of an empirical, evaluative, and non-identical perception of nature. The chief purpose of this landscape is then assigned through evaluations of use value and manipulated for human satisfaction. Love is some sense one of the myth makers.

However, McPhee turns this about with a bit of reconfigured western mythology. By adding geologic history not only a component in this modern human experience but a counter voice to it as well, McPhee sets up a competition of narratives that leaves each and all in diminished authority. If to Bernard DeVoto's maxim, "history is an expression of
geography, and western geography is violent," we add an acknowledgment that geography is just the surface effect, the politics of geology, we're beginning to appreciate McPhee's stance towards Wyoming. Geographically, Wyoming is an arbitrary, artificial construction, one of the country's two states marked out squarely in straight lines and right angles. To McPhee, these boundaries only appear arbitrary. "(This) could be looked upon as an affront to nature, an utterly political conception, an ignoring of the outlines of physiographic worlds, in disregard of rivers and divides" (28). However, as he learns through David Love, topographic features such as the rivers, ranges, and divides commonly espoused as natural borders, are extremely temporary in the long term scheme of things, and "in some ways unworthy as boundaries, which are meant to imply a durability that is belied by the function of rivers and divides. They move, they change, and they go away" (ibid.).

It's interesting that McPhee at this moment does not to evoke John Wesley Powell advocacy of a political division of the west according to the lines of watersheds. His denial of the durability of such natural boundaries seems to fly in the face of the resurrection of Powell's ideas by contemporary regionalists. Instead McPhee clearly elaborates a stance which counters the very validity of this fundamental demarcation, this definition of 'place'. A riverbed or drainage divide practically serves the same purpose as any grid division, and advocating such an adjustment perhaps is too easy of an answer, one which seems to avoid more crucial issues surrounding our management of water resources for irrigation and industrial use. Such an attitude would arguably be within McPhee's skepticism of attempts to provide totalizing definition through any master narrative, as expressed in his subversion of western romance and empirical authority's dominance as perfecting myths for the region. McPhee's rejection of the impropriety of Wyoming's nearly square borders serves as his emphatic reminder that all human demarcations of territory are ultimately political.
While McPhee introduces a fragmented sense of the central western narratives, and attempts to introduce some measure of alternative ways of understanding western places, his suspicion of bioregionalist demarcations brings up some potentially troubling aspects of the ethic's tenets. By recognizing that the creation of political entities along the lines rivers and divides is potentially no less arbitrary than the surveyor's sextant and straight rule, McPhee challenges the authority of even this attempt to claim sole legitimacy over regional voice. Whose definition, it seems McPhee wishes us to consider, will be accepted as the authentic construction of a regional landscape? Whose voice is the definitive regional voice? Are we to accept Abbey's vision of a depopulated, gender limited Southwest for example, with its cattle ranches replaced by more esteemed 'wild' animals? Or, do the public lands ranchers so frequently at odds with the environmentalists have the legitimate voice? Those most frequently in favor of some bioregionalist reconstruction of the west usually have a particular ecological agenda that they feel is most appropriate for the future. This position falls again into the polarizing conundrum that besets our current crisis, despite all claims to the contrary. Would McPhee's voice even be admitted into the new dialogue of place in the west, hailing as he does from metropolitan New York?

The potential for isolationism and even a sort of fascism in the creation of bioregional landscapes are valid critiques of a promising philosophy. McPhee isn't entirely pessimistic in this regard, however. His combination of western myth, empirical study, and pragmatic revision leads consistently to an emphasis on the necessity of understanding one's local terrain, on including it as an additional participant in the process of landscape construction. Furthermore, the arbitrary nature of McPhee's boundaries dissuades any sense of isolationism. McPhee's vision of Wyoming is bound only by the immense period of time that has gone into its physical creation. Informed human participation within this landscape leads to connections with the greater arid region, with history, and with the community of
those seeking to find sustainable culture in the broader west. The individual experience related through the Love family's chronicle of settling in Wyoming, and the appropriateness of geologic study within this settlement contribute to an awareness of locality that is at odds not only with extractive, industrial capitalism eventually served by David Love, but with the continuing delocalizing tendencies of postmodern culture.

McPhee must contend with the interdependence between these tendencies and the historical use of rationalist science to support claims for the use value of the west's natural resources. The continuance of western society is inextricably linked to the empirical descriptions of its landscapes. I say this because, if anything, the geologist probably has had more to do with the shaping of Wyoming's character than the state's chosen mascot, the bronc riding cowboy. McPhee notes this salient connection between history and geology lies in the hard choices necessitated by a culture built upon patterns of natural resource extraction.

This strip mine, no less than an erupting volcano, was a point in the world where geologic time and human time intersected. Ordinarily, the close relationship between the two is masked...In this place though, geology had come up out of its depths to join the present world, and, as Love would put it, all hell had broken loose. "How people look at it depends on whose ox is being gored," he said, "If you're in a brownout, you think it's great. If you're downwind, you don't. Wyoming's ox is being gored." (185)

As in Lopez's Arctic Dreams, the problem lies not so much with the science but with the politics attached to the use-value measurement of nature. While the continuation of geology into human history is most cogently expressed by the extraction of oil, coal, mineral, or even water, McPhee uses geology to build up a sense of grandeur in the processes which, over forty-six hundred million years, have shaped the place we now call Wyoming.

Human presence becomes nearly insignificant in the grand scheme of things. McPhee negatively characterizes the destruction occasioned by humans, but somehow the massive upheavals of stone, fire, and earth that accompany tectonic revolution are made to seem,
well, enjoyable or at least awe inspiring. Geology, indeed all science, is cast first as the practical observation of phenomena, and the application of this experience to the construction of an identity within a landscape. While empiricism offers potential understanding, and unmask human arrogance, it is limited without the potential relevance given by narrative (history, folklore, etc.). Within this, science becomes one of the possible means to dialogic relationship with nature. Through a demythologized sense of story, of narrative’s contribution to the establishment of culture and landscape, the scientific measurement in geology becomes the experience of place, its history and its immutable forces. The existence of the power plant tells one story; the telling of that story however, tells another.

What McPhee makes abundantly clear in his interplay between human history, the contemporary west, and geological explication is the significant realization that our presence in the west, with all its mythic overtones, is entirely conditioned by the physical forces inherent to the land. The multiplicity and inscrutability of these forces transcends the human lifespan, even the entire span of human time. Our continuance within a particular place, say, Wyoming, is utterly dependent upon our ability to live within the effects of its cycles and constraints. The tensions between this modern ideal and the reality of our past and present behavior form the integral subtext of McPhee’s narrative, as he plumbs the connections between science, modernity, and terrain.

James Galvin approaches the issue of place and its human habitation somewhat differently in his book The Meadow. On a structural level, the contrasts between the narratives are immediately apparent. McPhee and Love are restless, wandering from place to place like itinerant cowboys. On exactly the opposite plain, Galvin draws us into a very specific
locale and then never leaves home. The sense of a withdrawal from the outside world is emphatic in the beginning pages of *The Meadow*.

The real world goes like this: Coming down from the high lake, timbered ridges in slow green waves suddenly stop and bunch up like patiently disappointed refugees, waiting for permission to start walking out across the open prairie towards Nebraska, where the waters come together and form an enormous island, large parts of three large states surrounded by water. The island never heard of states; the real world is the island. (3)

The effect isn't so much one of isolationism, but of synecdoche; the island, the meadow is one place within the larger world and the concentration upon this place reflects on that whole. The crucial aspect of this island is the attempt to render its boundaries through solely natural features. The political demarcations of human presence assume a subordinate, though present, role, as participation within this "island" is conditioned by the primacy of its physical features. In this way the expansive sense of time which John McPhee incorporated into the narrative construction of a landscape reappears in Galvin to initiate the interdependencies between human occupants and the surrounding terrain. The sense we have of the meadow, and of Galvin's character, Lyle, both islands, depends significantly on this depiction; their history is formed by narrative rather than by measurement.

Whereas McPhee finds a problematic solace in the definition of places through accumulated information, Galvin presents a place that gains its significance and identity through experiential participation. The emphasis being reversed, an informed presence within the landscape arises from the habits of a lifetime spent learning the patterns of seasons, flora, fauna, and matching the needs prescribed by a realized interdependence. Lyle's landscape, overtly admired by Galvin, speaks, or rather offers definite signs which relate its complexity. Here again is the tricky nub between recognition of an other-than-human authority in nature's presence and a reliance on some foundational, logocentric tendency which finds an original identity in nature. Galvin avoids this by opening the landscape
definition process up to a variety of human voices and the reflected presence of nature in each of these. The case Galvin makes is that the natural place, and by extension, the west, cannot be perceived as an inhuman landscape. Place for Galvin is a human construct where natural forces and human energies intermingle in patterns established by affinity and intimacy. Since these are specifically attributes of human involvement, Galvin establishes Lyle as a model to demonstrate the potential for continuance within a place when we live in closer accord with the cycles and processes of the natural world. Lyle "lived so close to the real world that it almost let him in"(3), and managed to sustain a life in the meadow longer than any of its previous human occupants.

In fact, much of Galvin’s book reads along this fine edge raised by already established mythologies which exert tremendous influence upon our process of perceiving the western landscape. His portrayal of Lyle for example, in the breadth of his rustic ingenuity and homespun wisdom, could too easily fall into the trap of new pastoralism, a revised optimism for Jeffersonian virtues and individual morality, only two centuries late. What turns Lyle away from this iconic existence is the intensity of his dialogue with his place. Unarguably, Lyle’s life is dependent upon the success of his simplified agricultural manipulation of the land. However, Lyle is not fixed by the imposition of some external value order which closes the potential meaning(s) to be found within the ecological complexity of his surroundings. His hay meadow may not be measured in terms of commercial worth, or essentialist presence. Lyle’s meadow is the site of an open ended exchange of signs, between himself and the land:

“I’ve been staring at that confounded meadow and those idiot hills and lodgepole stands for over forty years now. I’m about done for and I’m still not sure I’ve seen any of it. All I know is I’m damned tired of looking at the sonofabitch.”

He thinks about how completely the meadow changes with respective seasons, how much it can change under light and clouds between two times he raises his eyes from his book and looks over the tops of his half-lens reading glasses. (53)
The completed picture which eludes Lyle is of himself as much as it is of the meadow. In this sense there is no final resolution, only an awareness of the integrity inherent to the process of recognition and of becoming an intimate component of a landscape.

Similarly, Lyle in many ways seems a beautiful image of the mythic western hero. He accomplishes a level of craft which is beyond the reach of most mortals, continuing to run farm equipment that by all rights belongs in a museum. His hard work has not only helped pull his family through the difficult years of the Great Depression, but given him an ability to approach wild creatures, to stroke the breast of a barn swallow while digging postholes. But there are tensions that Galvin places against the desire to read Lyle in such a perfect way. His health, and ultimately his life, are undone by a dependence on hand rolled cigarettes and the lingering tragedies of his youth. His life has been a succession of tragic losses from which he never seems to quite recover. The beautiful objects he crafts are always made in pairs; we get the sense that one of each is intended for his long dead sister. Lyle seems to have been shattered by her suicide, and is never able to form lasting attachments. This isolates him from even Galvin's notion of community deepened by the experience of place. When he dies, all the evidence of his craft and his worldly possessions amount to an array of garbage bags waiting to be cast away. The meadow, for all the years of Lyle's stewardship, passes into other hands as if the fifty years he spent with the land have affected nothing. "By the end he had nothing, as if loss were a fire in which he was purified again and again, until he wasn't a ghost anymore"(4).

The undercutting of such mythic structures reveals Galvin's attempts to define a bioregionalism that can maintain an emphasis on locality without admitting the epistemological limitations imposed by essentialist pre-conceptions. Like McPhee, Galvin must also acknowledge a revision in the authority usually given to Rationalist empiricism.
through science’s determination of value within the landscape. Galvin however goes much further in his rejection of science’s totalizing agency. In a manner reminiscent of Lopez, he posits that empirical knowledge finds its most appropriate significance when it is related through an inclusive narrative to the human experience of nature. Life and landscape are given definition by the apprehension of this inter-relationship, and its influence on human society creates the conditions for identity, and continuance. Galvin posits that the ability to define an inclusive landscape can most completely be gained through experience. Lyle’s storehouse of empirical information, in some ways as encompassing as David Love’s, becomes meaningful only as it is applied through craft and a kind of ecological responsibility built upon diligent participation in the landscape. One of the characteristics of Lyle which we are meant to admire is the sense that Lyle rarely has to say he’s sorry, rarely has to face the realization that the actions of his life have been counter to neither the dialogic presence of nature, nor his intentions toward it. This sets him distinctly apart from David Love and his catalogue of exploitable, natural resource information.

Galvin, like Lopez and McPhee, presents his account of a individual human experience with a particular place through a multifaceted narrative, tying past and present together from different human, and occasional non-human, perspectives. The landscape that emerges, does so from the tension between these lines of story in an attempt to bridge the gap created by the division of the world into speaking subject and passive object. In the manner that this approach removes the emphasis, and the authority, of any single, totalizing myth, it fits with what Jim Cheney has lauded in Holmes Rolston’s “storied residence”, an approach that emphasizes the narrative logic that creates a holistic ethic from accumulated accounts of human history within a given ecological niche (Cheney 125). We derive meaning from this experience not solely from Galvin’s perspective of Lyle, but also from other local stories of participation within this landscape. Galvin’s competing/colluding narratives create a
community of voices, of lines of discourse, which relate the interdependent nature of the local landscape.

Cheney embraces the layering of ecological and historical perspectives as a means to escape the totalizing and essentializing sweep of modernist epistemology. He equates the poststructural enthusiasm for de-centered authority with a recommended, and attainable, environmentalist strategy. "The narrative style required for situating ourselves without making essentializing or totalizing moves is an elaboration of relations which foregoes the coherence, continuity, and consistency insisted upon by totalizing discourse" (126). One of the difficulties with this position is that Cheney attempts to maintain a coherent, continuous, and consistent relationship to geography and ecology while at the same time dismissing the source of these attributes. Indeed, as Mark Smith has critiqued, Cheney actually substitutes one totalizing discourse for another, and fails to recognize that the forms of discourse which he applauds share the abstracting, and thus totalizing, tendencies of all language systems (8-9). The appreciably unrestrained relativism which forms Cheney's contextual discourse model ultimately seems ineffective because it falls upon the misguided conceptions which he opposes, perhaps collapsing into its own chaotic resonances.

The kind of bioregionalism we perhaps see in Lopez and Galvin makes certain concessions from a poststructural or postmodern point of view. It refuses to be trapped into impotence by the necessity of giving authority to any number of competing narratives, by the anti-modernist rejection of the possibility of being right or wrong. Their point is that yes, there is a better way of being in a place, and that this way must include many voices, and will differ to some extent from place to place. However, a necessary part of any attempt to revise our epistemology of nature mandates that one stance be abandoned in favor of a
preferred, more correct ecological relationship. The terms of this correctness have shifted dramatically from reflecting success according to terms established by rules of human philosophies to successful apprehension and employment of rules established through a participatory ecological relationship. A more modest understanding of postmodernism's relativist perspective might strive to create a sense of an inclusive landscape without reducing the combination of narrative perspectives to culturally transcendent abstractions. Such a perspective would include the similarities and divergences between different cultural accounts of a given place without attempting to resolve these differences, a feat only historically accomplished through the subjugation of one perspective by another. Instead, "(m)oral values in different communities might converge because of similarities in geography, biology, cultural practices, problematics, histories, or any combination of these or other aspects of place" (Smith 15).

In this convergence between communities, the lines of narrative cross to create a mutually responsive definition of place. Individual presence and affinity with a given place can be applauded, even highlighted as our literature examines the troubled tinges of this mythology. But the success of these various unique perspectives is measured only by the degree to which they contribute to a communal sense of landscape. Within the confines of our communities, and along the boundaries our lives form with other cultures', perspectives, and existences, our language forms the basis for the construction of the extensive, surrounding landscape. Historically, this linguistic process has meant the exclusive imposition of Euro-american rationalist values, which limited the external world, and often its indigenous inhabitants, through judgments based on use-value. Certainly this methodology remains at work today, with cost-benefit analyses determining the propriety of environmental protections. As the critical urgency in the examination of our cultural relationship to nature grows, the inherent frailties in traditional environmentalism prevent
us from moving beyond the current, polarized discussion. The energies of postmodernism argue against an exchange of authoritative stances, insisting instead on an opened exchange of discourses which reduce the rigidity of modernism's epistemological authority.

By adopting similar lines, to significantly different ends, bioregionalism and its literature may undermine the established debate by offering an inclusive, participatory perception of the surrounding world. Insofar as environmentalism up until now has frequently replicated the system it seeks to oppose, postmodernist critiques offer ways in which we may understand the logical difficulties which beset the presentation of environmental values in this debate. Challenges to our established notions of essential, intrinsic value in nature uncover space for a more inclusive approach to its elements, one which does not rely on imposed limitations of either material or emotional use-value. The continuing process of defining a bioregionalist epistemology, while troubled by its own inconsistencies and restrictions, may offer a thorough revision to this mono-logic conception of the external world. In a culture that has "lost the nostalgia for the lost narratives" to the allure of technologized power, bioregionalism's attempt to revitalize the role of narrative offers a way to construct local authority at odds with the vacuum of metropolitan life. Crafting a sense of locality, an importance of place must come to terms with issues of isolationism and elitism in order to offer a viable vision of sustainable culture in the west. Perhaps, given an ecological ethic based on place, and on narratives which include the landscape within our own understanding of human identity, a broader definition of self interest may assume prominence in our perceptions of other communities, and of nature.
Endnotes

1. Tzvetan Todorov's fine book *The Conquest of America* outlines the history of this mode of perception as it dates from the arrival of a considerable European presence to the Americas. Beginning with the case of Christopher Columbus, Todorov argues that the Spanish conquistadores interpreted not so much what they saw as what the had decided to see, and that these things were precisely the physical features of the lands and inhabitants which served the ends of enslavement, colonization, and expropriation of wealth.

2. Much of this follows on the heels of Bill Bevis' recent work, especially his formulations of liquidity in Euro-american culture and its divergence from the social mentality needed to fully, even comfortably, articulate a sense of place. The cross cultural divergences in attitudes towards nature can be significantly attributed to the emphasis on individuality and absolute freedom that accompanies modern American attitudes towards private property, capital, and democracy. As he has recently questioned, one wonders whether these attitudes are at all commensurate with a reformulated landscape of inter-relatedness.

3. Snyder's retelling of "The Woman Who Married the Bear" is published in *Practice of the Wild*. It is based on one of several versions of this narrative collected by Canadian ethnographer Catherine McClellan. He infuses the Tagish original with his own descriptions of Yukon ecology, offering a reasonable attempt at contextual setting for the story. However, he omits from his discussion the primary socially constructing meaning the narrative has within Tagish and Inland Tlingit cultures, that of the relationship between clans and clan-members, specifically brothers-in-law.

4. A convincing discussion of linguistic play in the creation of landscapes, especially in the work of Aldo Leopold, was presented at the 1st annual AISLE convention, June 6, 1995 by William Stott of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
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