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HGCC Conference

Talking With the Land:

Signifying and Semiotics in Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*

In chapter three of his book The Environmental Imagination, Lawrence Buell discusses some of the problems that environmental writers encounter when “Representing the Environment.” He begins the chapter talking about language from a deconstructionist point of view: no matter how accurate a representation environmental literature gives of nature, language is still based on signs and things signified, and “signs [are] far more abstract than animal tracks on snow” (84). For this reason, Buell says that “our reconstructions of environment cannot be other than skewed and partial. Even if this were not so, even if human perception could perfectly register environmental stimuli, literature could not...art removes itself from nature” (84). However, Buell doesn't maintain this deconstructionist viewpoint for very long. He soon interjects that “the emphasis on disjunction between text and world seems overblown” (84). In the end, Buell seems rather to dislike the way that “All major strains of contemporary literary theory have marginalized literature's referential dimension by privileging structure, text(uality), ideology, or some other conceptual matrix that defines the space discourse occupies apart from factual ‘reality’” (86). Indeed, such post-structuralist ideas “forbid...discourse the project of evoking the natural world through verbal surrogates and thereby attempting to bond the reader to the world as well as to discourse: it forbids enabling the reader to see as a seal might see” (102). Buell argues that the language of environmental writing should be read as more truly representative of the environment that

their authors seek to describe, and that such a reading serves to “reanimate...and redirect...the reader’s transactions with nature” putting the reader “in touch with the environment” (97).

Buell is not the only environmental writer who feels a tension between post-structuralist theory and “literary realism” or “representation” if you will. Throughout his book Arctic Dreams, Barry Lopez often refers to the way words sometimes fail to accurately represent things, thus forcing us to acknowledge the “inadequacy of...language” (232). However, Lopez also praises the native Eskimos for the way that their language is inseparable from the land and connects them to the land. Though he may recognize that language (especially Western European language) can tend to distance us from nature, Lopez has not lost hope for language. He argues instead that a language that is mutually beneficial to both the landscape and to us is possible if we can stop viewing language as simply an abstraction, and start listening to the land, instead of just listening to ourselves.

If there is a “good” human language for Lopez, one that does not seek to control the land, but is in harmony with it and dependent upon it, it is the native language of the Eskimos. But what is it about the Eskimos that makes their language good, that makes it “come alive,” as Lopez says (277)? Lopez answers, “it is the constant recapitulation in sacred and profane contexts of all these (Eskimo) stories that keeps the people alive and the land alive in the people. Language, the stories, holds the vision together” (298).¹

Post-structuralists like Foucault have argued that “Things and words were to be separated

¹ Though Lopez often (particularly in the chapter I am quoting from here) refers specifically to the stories and narratives of the Eskimo people, he extends the argument about the “goodness” of Eskimo language to all of their language, and not just their stories. For examples, see page 196 (which I cite below) and similar passages in this essay.

from one another...Discourse was still to have the task of speaking that which is, but it was no longer to be anything more than what it said” (as cited by Buell, 83). Perhaps Foucault and his peers were right in saying that language has become abstract to the point that the only thing it can truly represent is itself, but Lopez would argue that self-representation is not the only thing that language can ever do. In contrast, Lopez tells us that people enjoy being among the Eskimos because they are a people who, “when they do speak, make so few generalized or abstract statements, who focus instead on the practical, the specific, the concrete” (196). Thus, Lopez argues, their language seems to represent something other than just itself, and this is, at least in part, what makes their language good. Indeed, the language of these people is not only more representative of the land than other languages, but it is inseparable from that land: “There was no way for [the Eskimos] to separate the stories, the indigenous philosophy, from the land” (297). Because of this close unity between the land and Eskimo language, the Eskimos are said to have “a nameless wisdom . . . it is understanding how to live a decent life, how to behave properly toward other people and toward the land” (298). Thus, due to the apparent inseparableness of land and Eskimo language, the Eskimos are able to have a beneficial, non-destructive relationship with each other and with the landscape.²

Lopez argues that, unfortunately, “The European culture . . . has yet to understand the wisdom, preserved in North America, that lies in the richness and sanctity of a wild

² I do not want to imply here (or anywhere, for that matter) that Lopez promotes a “Noble Savage” metaphor when speaking about the Eskimos. Indeed, there are several instances in the book where he acknowledges that this is not necessarily a perfect people. For example, on page 50 he discusses how some Native peoples, Aleutian Eskimos included, hunted certain species to near extinction. I think Lopez simply wants to draw a distinction between the Eskimo people and their respect for the land which is made apparent with a close examination of their language, and the European settlers who came after them. Do Eskimos sometimes act in ignorance and make mistakes? Yes. Do they, like the European settlers and tourists, kill out of “pettiness...amusement...[and] with colonial indifference” (111)? No.

landscape” (406). This failure is apparent in European, Western language, which tends to separate us from the land by abstracting the land, and this separation usually results in a more harmful relationship with the land. Sometimes, Lopez says, our language and semiotics become so impersonal as to turn “an animal’s life into numbers,” as opposed to the language of the Eskimos, whose “words are too hard to turn into numbers” (270). This idea is similar to ideas expressed by Gary Snyder in his essay, “Tawny Grammar.” The problem with most western philosophy, Snyder says, is that “their humanistic studies turned into an oddly formalistic and cramped concern for language” (75). Indeed, Snyder argues (and I think that Lopez would agree) that we have a tendency to see language as an instrument of control, something that is forever separated from the natural world or the thing that language is meant to represent, and “when occidental logos-oriented philosophers uncritically advance language as a unique human gift which serves as the organizer of the chaotic universe—it is a delusion” (76-7). Lopez says nearly the same thing: “We name everything. Then we fold the charts and the catalogs, as if, except for a stray fact or two, we were done with a competent description. But the land is not a painting; the image cannot be completed this way” (172). To quote Tom Lynch, a colleague from New Mexico State University, “I think the ‘construction’ metaphor is a very limited and harmful one and does not at all get at the subtlety and complexity of this system [language]. It suggests the dominance of human agency or perspective... If I call a rattlesnake a garter snake, I’ll still get a nasty bite. And so would Foucault.” (how do I cite this?)

Of course, there is no language that can actually be the thing it seeks to represent; language will never substitute for the natural world, for, as Lopez says, “whatever

evaluation we finally make of a stretch of land...we will find it inadequate,” just as, when gazing upon the Northern Lights, one immediately becomes aware of “the inadequacy of his language” (232). Oftentimes, words simply cannot accurately describe nature or the experience that one has in nature. Lopez says, “I was drawn to all these places for reasons I cannot fully articulate” (397), but the important thing is that he tries: “In the walls of Axel Heiberg [a mountainous island filled with fjords and glaciers] I found what I had known of mountains as a child; that from them came a knowledge that was received, for which there were no words.” (404).

Thus, though language cannot exactly substitute for the thing it is supposed to represent, it is still a useful tool that Lopez continues to use in order to get us closer to the land. The fact that he is writing this book in an effort to both understand and offer understanding is telling that he has not totally abandoned hope for Western European language. Nevertheless, a traditional post-structuralist approach to understanding language is, according to Lopez, inadequate:

For Whorf [an early 20th century scholar of aboriginal languages], language was something man created in his mind and projected onto reality, something he imposed on the landscape, as though the land were a receptacle for his imagination. I think there are possibly two things wrong with this thought. First, the landscape is not inert; and it is precisely because it is alive that it eventually contradicts the imposition of a reality that does not derive from it. Second, language is not something man imposes on the land. It evolves in his conversation with the land . . . The very order of the language, the ecology of its sounds and thoughts, derives from the mind’s with the landscape. To

learn the indigenous language, then, is to know what the speakers of the language have made of the land. (277-8)

Obviously, we can't escape language: "We bring our own worlds to bear in foreign landscapes in order to clarify them for ourselves. It is hard to imagine that we could do otherwise. The risk we take is of finding our final authority in the metaphors rather than in the land" (247). The authority, then, is not in the language, but in the land. Language can be a useful tool, but is not the final authority: as Buell says, "the ultimate authority, to which both laboratory result and field-camp explanation must appeal, is what's 'out there'" (93). Lopez argues that "our first wisdom as a species, that unique metaphorical knowledge that distinguishes us, grew out of . . . an intimacy with the earth," and says that, in order to find it, "I wanted to enquire among these people;" that is, he must still communicate, using language to talk to the natives who seem to know how to use language in a way that leads to an intimacy with the land and its wisdom (40).

Lopez would argue that it is a lack of communication with the land that most of us are missing. Perhaps viewing language from a post-structuralist perspective is insufficient because, when we become overly concerned with the signs and signifiers themselves, we tend to forget that we are not the only ones that use language; we forget to listen. The Eskimos, in contrast, do not seem to have the same problem. Lopez emphasizes that not only do the Eskimos have a language that is inseparable and more representative of the landscape, but they engage in conversation with the land as well. An Eskimo man listens "to what the land is saying. [He] walk[s] around in it and strain[s] his] senses in appreciation of it for a long time before [he]...ever speak[s] a word. Entered in such a respectful manner, he believed, the land would open to him" (257). For

Lopez, this listening to the language of the land seems to be an important part of having the right kind of language. Just as Snyder feels that “The stratigraphy of rocks, layers of pollen in a swamp, the outward expanding circles in the trunk of a tree, can be seen as texts” (66), Lopez feels that “The land is like poetry: it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life” (274).

This idea of conversing with and listening to the land is prevalent throughout Arctic Dreams. Lopez values the way that Haycock, the great landscape painter, had “a conversation with the land” when he painted (226). The majority of the book is dedicated to extensive observations of the landscape and nature in the arctic, from observations on polar bears and musk oxen to observations on the flora, the frozen tundra that it grows on, and even the varieties of ice and the annual solar patterns. This emphasis on observation, on trying to read the landscape, is evidence of what Lopez is trying to teach his reader: the first step toward developing a better language is to listen to and read nature. It is important that we learn to read and listen to this language of the land, as the Eskimos do: “For a relationship with landscape to be lasting, it must be reciprocal” and this reciprocal relationship is made possible when we pay attention to “the level at which [landscape] furnishes us with...metaphors and symbols” (404). “If we are to devise an enlightened plan for human activity in the Arctic, we need a more particularized understanding of the land itself . . .as if it were, itself, another sort of civilization we had to reach some agreement with” (12). This enlightened agreement can only come about when we “approach [the land] with an uncalculating mind...To try to sense the range and variety of its expression...To intend from the beginning to preserve some of the mystery within it

as a kind of wisdom to be experienced” (228). Lopez would have us listen to the land to try and discover how we can have a more ecologically friendly relationship with it, and then use our language, as he does, to communicate with each other and teach each other the importance of listening and striving for that beneficial relationship with the land. As Snyder says, “The dialogue to open next would be among all beings, toward a rhetoric of ecological relationships” (68). Lopez would argue that we need to stop seeing our language as superior and controlling; instead, our language should be viewed as just another part of nature; indeed, as just one language among the many languages of nature, if it is to be more useful than harmful. As Snyder says, “Language is not a carving, it’s a curl of breath, a breeze in the pines” and “language is also wild” (70).

Toward the end of the book, Lopez speaks of his travels with some Eskimo hunters. The hunt is successful and the party makes a kill. Lopez speculates that “Perhaps the [Punuk hunters] knew exactly what words to say to the whale so they would not go off in dismay or feel the weight of its death...I do not know what words to say to them” (413). But he still maintains hope that there *are* the right words out there. Perhaps the Punuk hunters knew the right words because they listened to the land instead of just talking. And though he may not have found the right words yet, he is searching, and much of that searching comes in the form of simply listening.

By way of an epilogue, I myself have often been frustrated with what I would call the “inadequacy of language” to describe what I’m feeling or seeing. However, I’ve come to realize that this feeling of inadequacy is not necessarily a bad thing. The poet Don Revell once said, “Poetry is the cab you take to paradise. You don’t drive it through the gates; you get out of the cab and go in. And you don’t try to cram paradise into the

cab. Poetry takes you to where you're really paying attention- then the poem ends." I think Revell's critique of poetry can be applied to all language. That is, language should not necessarily be perfect: we should not necessarily be able to perfectly describe things- be it a beautiful sunset or a chair-with language. Instead, language should be able to take us to the point where we are paying attention. Perhaps language should simply take us to a point, a point of desire, perhaps, and from there we start to listen and see and experience. When talking about how cranes, when young, are not called chicks but colts, Aldo Leopold says, "I cannot explain why. On some dewy June morning watch them gambol over their ancestral pastures at the heels of the roan mare, and you will see for yourself" (98).

Works Cited

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George Grattan said:

I'd find it as difficult to theorize or speak accurately about the naturalness of their [the kids at the museum] experience as the five blind men should have found it to speak about the elephant in the fable. I'd know there was something there, but my inability to express its nature puts it all but off-limits to me. Any representation I would offer would be off the mark, as it were.

This statement (and most of the messages in this thread, for that matter) has really got me thinking about the frustrations I myself often feel with the inherent "inadequacy of language" to describe what I'm feeling or seeing. However, as George hints at, I think, this inadequacy is not necessarily a bad thing. That is (bear with me here, I haven't thought this out too thoroughly), maybe one benefit of po-mo theory is that it helps us realize that, in the end, our language IS subjective and, finally, inadequate. The Poet Donald Revell once said to me, "Poetry is the cab you take to paradise. You don't drive it through the gates; you get out of the cab and go in. And you don't try to cram paradise into the cab. Poetry takes you to where you're really paying attention- then the poem ends." Maybe Revell's critique of poetry can be applied to all discourse. That is, language should not necessarily be perfect: we should not necessarily be able to perfectly

describe things-be it a beautiful sunset, some kids banding cardinals at a museum, or a chair-with language. Instead, language should be able to take us to the point where we are paying attention. Perhaps language should simply take us to a point, a point of desire, maybe, and from there we start to listen and see and experience. Like when Leopold, in the "Wisconsin" section of "Sketches Here and There," talks about how cranes, when young, are not called chicks but colts and says, "I cannot explain why. On some dewy June morning watch them gambol over their ancestral pastures at the heels of the roan mare, and you will see for yourself." That is, if Leopold could have perfectly and accurately conveyed the cranes to us, then we might not feel the need to go and see for ourselves. Wouldn't that be tragic?

but I don't

> think that we can know that they weren't having a biological response
> to
> those birds, that somewhere stored deep in their brains the wonder
and
> awe at
> being connected to the natural world wasn't being expressed.--Jane
Frazier

I don't think we can know they weren't, either. I can't prove a negative. I tend to agree with you that some aspect of their response was "natural". But I think where we part company is that after that agreement, I see very little left to usefully investigate. Anything I do to try to talk about or even access that "naturalness" will get hopelessly tangled up in my own perceptions, my own participation in a series of cultural constructs, so anything I would have to say about their "natural" reaction would be "cultured" to a greater or lesser extent at some stage. I'd find it as difficult to theorize or speak accurately about the naturalness of their experience as the five blind men should have found it to speak about the elephant in the fable. I'd know there was something there, but my inability to express its nature puts it all but off-limits to me. Any representation I would offer would be off the mark, as it were. (Doesn't mean I think others who are so disposed shouldn't try, of course-- just that I'll always be conscious of how their own acculturation may be affecting their conclusions.)

--George Grattan, Boston College

What evolutionary psychologists are proposing is a co-evolutionary feedback system between nature and culture. Neither is always dominant. Nature influences culture which in turn influences nature and so forth. I think the "construction" metaphor is a very limited and harmful one and does not at all get at the subtlety and complexity of this system. It suggests the dominance of human agency or perspective. I think we should discard it in our own work, and critique it in the work of others. It's a metaphor that has outlived its usefulness.

Cultures and individuals may have somewhat different responses to a cardinal, to use an example that's come up here, but all cultures will recognize and reflect in their language a difference between a cardinal and an eagle, between an ant and a whale, between a ponderosa pine and a juniper tree. Having different words doesn't create those differences, those differences provoke us to use different words. If I call a rattlesnake a garter snake, I'll still get a nasty bite. And so would Foucault. But George, one of the things that irritates me about this approach we call postmodernism is that insights such as the one you describe here are as old as the hills. There's nothing modern, let alone post-modern, about it. This is what the Buddhist Sutras, the Tao te Ching, and many other Eastern scriptures puzzle over. "The way which can be spoken of is not the true way." "A finger pointing at the moon is not the moon." What is Buddha's "Flower Sutra" if not a expression of the inability of language to express reality. The complicated and problematic relationship between sign and signified, between word and world, is something that humans have been pondering for thousands of years in many cultures. It's not something that suddenly occurred to a few folks in Europe in the middle of the 20th century. And, as Preacher Dave will pipe in, this has been a concern of portions of the Christian tradition as well.

Much of what passes for great theoretical insights in postmodernism, as cutting edge trendy thinking, is just warmed over Buddhism. But that's hardly ever acknowledged. And in this failure of acknowledgement, I see rank Eurocentrism and a parochial presentism. --Tom

Tom Lynch
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