

Barry Lopez's Relational Arctic

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Abstract



Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape (1986) can be read as American nature writer Barry Lopez's attempt to evoke a more profound and ecologically sound understanding of the North American Arctic. This article investigates how *Arctic Dreams* uses insights from Jacob von Uexküll's *Umwelt* theory, in combination with what Tim Ingold describes as a particular form of animism associated with circumpolar indigenous hunter cultures, to portray the Arctic natural environment as a living and *lively* space. Doreen Massey has described such spaces as recognizing plurality and allowing encounters. By highlighting networks of relationship and trajectories both human (historical) *and* animal (evolutionary), *Arctic Dreams* recognizes human and animal cultures that not only exist *upon* and can lay claim to this land, but that in a fundamental way *is* the land. In this way the text dismisses previous conceptions of the North-American Arctic as an empty space awaiting colonization and modernization, while on a deeper level it also questions the modern nature/culture dichotomy that allows nature to be perceived as the mere substratum of culture.

Keywords: ecocriticism, Arctic, space, animals, hunting

Resumen

El libro *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (1986) puede considerarse un intento por parte del escritor de la naturaleza americano Barry Lopez de evocar un conocimiento más profundo y ecológicamente sensato del Ártico norteamericano. Este artículo analiza cómo *Arctic Dreams* utiliza la teoría *Umwelt* de Jacob von Uexküll, combinada con lo que Tim Ingold describe como una forma particular de animismo asociada con las culturas de los indígenas cazadores circumpolares, para retratar el entorno natural ártico como un lugar vivo y *vivaz*. Doreen Massey ha descrito dichos lugares como capaces de reconocer la pluralidad y permitir encuentros. Al destacar las redes de relaciones y de trayectorias tanto humanas (históricas) como de animales (evolucionarias), *Arctic Dreams* reconoce culturas humanas y animales que no sólo existen *sobre* y puede reclamar esta tierra, sino que también estas culturas *son* de una manera fundamental la tierra. De esta manera el texto desestima las concepciones previas del Ártico norteamericano como un espacio vacío pendiente de colonización y modernización; mientras que en un nivel más profundo también cuestiona la dicotomía moderna naturaleza/cultura que permite que la naturaleza se perciba como un mero sustrato de la cultura.

Palabras clave: ecocrítica, Ártico, espacio, animales, caza

Barry Lopez' *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* is a text that expresses its environmental concern for the wilderness of the North American

Arctic. The text itself explicitly aims to draw the reader “back to the concrete dimensions of the land” in the hope that the key to “devis[ing] an enlightened plan for human activity in the Arctic” lies in “a *more particularized understanding* of the land itself—not a more refined mathematical knowledge but a deeper understanding of its nature, as if it were, itself, another sort of *civilization* we had to reach some agreement with” (12; my emphasis). Originally published in 1986, the text’s focus of environmental concern is with the detrimental effects of human activities connected to the extraction of natural resources. However, under global warming’s current threat to the landscapes of this region, Lopez’s text has gained renewed relevance.¹ It remains provoking for the way it implicates modern Western culture’s conceptions about the natural world in general, and about the Arctic in particular, in the environmental problems now facing the region. Hoping to move beyond a depiction of wilderness as scenery that serves to deprive wild landscapes of intrinsic value by “relegate[ing them] to the categories of space and use, to the canons of taste” (Shepard 148), *Arctic Dreams* offers its readers a complex ecological vision of the Arctic wilderness.

The North American Arctic Lopez travels and depicts in *Arctic Dreams* constitutes a region of large open spaces dominated by water in liquid and solid form. Soil and vegetation is sparse, if at all present (37). “The overall impression, from the South,” writes Lopez, “would be one of movement from a very complex world to a quite simplified one”; to one in which the bare land “would seem to have run out of the stuff of life” (24–25). The very bareness of the landscape causes him to assert that “[a]nimals define much of the space one encounters in the Arctic because the land, like the sea, is expansive and there are so few people about” (162). For those with “no interest in the movement of animals,” like the early British explorers or travelers in the Arctic, the apparent lack of animals confirms the notion of the Arctic as wasteland (383). When present in their narratives, animals are generally described in terms of nuisances, threats, or as obstacles to their colonial projects. As *Arctic Dreams* makes apparent, these animal observations lack realism and are colored by irrational emotional responses and cultural preconceptions. Thus Lopez communicates to his readers that a true image of the Arctic can emerge only when a sensibility toward animals and the way they conduct their lives is coupled with an acknowledgement of the particularities (of space and time in particular) of the Arctic ecosystems. Accordingly, the text responds to Neruda’s call for literature to “take animals regularly from the shelves where we have stored them, like charms or the most intricate of watches, and to bring them to life” (*Dreams* 129). In reworking what must be understood as a distinctly modern Western cultural conception of animals, *Arctic Dreams* also alters our conception of space. I will in this article give some examples of how this is done, and how the two projects mentioned are interconnected.

In order to clarify the effect of Lopez’s animal portrayals on his representation of the North-American Arctic landscapes, I will open by introducing some theoretical reflections on modern Western conceptions of space. In *For Space*, Doreen Massey

¹ This is reflected in the recent (February 2014) publication of *Arctic Dreams* as a Vintage Classic.

argues that our present conceptions of space are hampered by a long-standing tradition of associating the spatial with representation—and “the fixation of meaning” (20). “Representation,” writes Massey, “is seen to take on aspects of *spatialisation* in the latter’s action of setting things down side by side; of laying them out as a discrete simultaneity. But representation is also in this argument understood as fixing things, taking the time out of them” (23). This association with spatialization has made space the antithesis of life, in the sense that space becomes that through which processes of development are arrested. What remains is space in the form of a synchrony of isolated entities whose structures of relationship may be investigated. This, Massey argues, is structuralist space, “a coherent closed system” which “tells of an order in things” (106). The main argument in *For Space* is for the re-association of the dimension of time with space. Accordingly, the structuralists are critiqued for the way they “equated their a-temporal structures with space” and “rob[bed] the objects to which they refer[red] of their inherent dynamism” (37, 38). Yet despite this, Massey does not simply dismiss the spatializations of the structuralists. Rather, she finds them useful for the way they imply that space should be understood as that which holds and enables relationships (39). And once sophisticated modern sciences—in collaboration with philosophers and ‘voices from the margins’—have reinserted time and a variety of histories into space, the disruptive qualities of the relational nature of space can surface. Precisely through the juxtaposition of “previously unconnected narratives/temporalities,” space emerges as open and always in the process of being made (Massey 39). To recognize this radical openness and dynamism involves a repositioning in relation to space: from imagining space as a (textualized) representation “*at which one looks,*” toward imagining it as that from “*within*” which one partakes of “continuous and multiple processes of emergence” (Massey 54; emphasis original).

Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams*, like Massey’s *For Space*, strives toward depictions of ‘the space of the world’ that do not fall prey to the traditional constraints of representation. As already mentioned, one of the ways in which the text seeks to circumscribe these constraints is by advancing an environmental sensitivity that makes difficult the conception of an Arctic space of blank surfaces of ice and snow. When seen in light of the project of advancing a more complex and true understanding of animals, it is both peculiar and in an odd way natural that this environmental sensitivity is associated with the activity of hunting. *Arctic Dreams* presents the idea of the hunter in its first chapter on large Arctic mammals: “Banks Island *Ovibos moschatus*.” As Lopez watches the muskoxen in the Thomsen River valley from a distance, he feels stirring within himself “an older, deeper mind” that holds his “predatory eye... riveted” (43). By thus introducing its many and detailed animal portrayals, *Arctic Dreams* can be read as part of a tradition of hunting philosophy in which hunting is regarded as an activity through which a reconnection with the natural world is still possible.

Lopez's Method: A Hunter's Sensitivity to Animals and Their *Umwelten*

Thinkers who have examined the role of the hunt from different points of view have emphasized the hunter's environmental awareness. Because the world of the hunt is one of unpredictable events, the hunter's attention needs to be sensitive to all possible clues of *what* might go on *where* (Shepard 146). In the words of José Ortega y Gasset: "Articulated in that action which is a minor zoological tragedy, wind, light, temperature, ground contour, minerals, vegetation, all play a part; they are not simply there, as they are for the tourist or the botanist, but rather they *function*, they act. [...] each intervenes in the drama of the hunt" (142). The hunter perceives the environment in terms of actants² which must be read and understood, and which must determine the hunter's actions, if the hunt is to be successful. In this manner the hunter becomes involved in detailed study of the manifold elements of the environment, and takes on a state of alertness toward, and active interaction with, the environment otherwise associated with animals. In so doing, he places himself in relation to the animal. This expresses a fundamental idea associated with Western philosophies of the hunt: that hunters are no mere tourists exploring surfaces, but people aiming at full integration into the environmental present (Franklin 106; Ortega y Gasset; Shepard). Yet aiming at full integration does not guarantee actually attaining it. Lopez consciously recognizes the implications of his own position as a mere modern visitor to this land, and states that: "I am aware that I miss much of what I pass, for lack of acuity in my senses, lack of discrimination, and my general unfamiliarity" (260). Accordingly, he emphasizes that he can achieve a deeper understanding of the Arctic wilderness only *in* the land and "in the presence of well-chosen companions," such as the local Eskimo hunters (40).

In circumpolar hunter cultures, anthropologist Tim Ingold informs us, hunters are perceived as "immersed from the start, like other creatures, in an active, practical, and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world" ("Hunting" 34–35). Relying on Alfred Schutz's definition of sociality, Ingold claims that the engagement between hunter and prey in these cultures figures in the form of social relationships manifested through non-verbal communications ("Hunting" 46–47). In Schutz's definition, sociality is seen as "constituted by communicative acts in which the I turns to the others, apprehending them as persons who turn to him, and both know of this fact" (qtd. in Ingold, "Hunting" 47). The activity of hunting activates the communication between human and animal. Its success depends upon the hunter's skill in engaging with and understanding how this other (animal) person attends to the environment according to its own modes of perception and action (Ingold, "Hunting" 46).

But animal sociality is not restricted to hunter-prey relationships. Northern indigenous hunters recognize that animals form social groups, and that each animal has a communicative point of view; each is a person. As Lopez points out, "[f]or Eskimos, most relationships with animals are local and personal. The animals one encounters are

² The term *actant*, coined by Bruno Latour, is used by Jane Bennet in *Vibrant Matter* to describe agentic capacities "differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types," including non-living as well as living 'agents' (9).

part of one's community, and one has obligations to them" (201). In contrast to modern Western culture(s), in which persons are understood as autonomous subjects defined by their inner qualities, northern hunter cultures regard persons to be *relational* entities defined by their positions within a relational field (Ingold, *Perception* 149). The person or being represents a locus of self-organizing activity, which "exists, or rather becomes, in the unfolding of those very relations that are set up by virtue of a being's positioning in the world, reaching out into the environment—and connecting with other selves" (Ingold, *Perception* 103). In this animistic perception of the world personhood is intricately bound to life's manifold relationships, and "life, rather than being an internal property of persons and things, is immanent in the relations between them" (Ingold, *Perception* 149). The relational field is no abstract category or purely intersubjective field, but the land itself (Ingold, *Perception* 40). Neither separate nor changeless, it takes the form of an "all-encompassing rhizome—which is continually raveling here, and unravelling there, as the beings of which it is composed grow, or 'issue forth', along the lines of their relationships" (Ingold, *Perception* 149–150).

Because Lopez recognizes his own outsider position in the Arctic, he does not try to emulate an indigenous communal relationship with its animals. Instead he engages advanced modern field biology and Jacob von Uexküll's *Umwelt* theory. Regarded as the father of biosemiotics (Lestel 388), von Uexküll aimed to move away from a mechanistic perspective on animals by arguing that any living being who "perceive[s] and act[s]," should be considered a subject (Pobojewska 323, 325). While ecology and its concept of the niche accept the premise that the physical world represents a neutral and objective basis of existence for all organisms, *Umwelt* theory refuses this. Instead it argues that an "'environmental niche' is merely the physical part of a larger [...] not purely physical whole which is [...] fully comprehensible only from the perspective of the particular lifeform whose world it is" (Deely 129–130). Accordingly, *Umwelt* theory requires researchers to shift their perspective away from what is meaningful for *them* to what is meaningful for the animal under study (Winthrop-Young 231). It involves the biological sciences' attempts to engage with the world 'from within', and in this manner resembles the mode of engagement involved in hunting. That is how Lopez can claim "[t]he discovery of an animal's *Umwelt* and its elucidation" to be part of the "Eskimo hunter's methodology" (268).

Ecological psychologist and philosopher of science Edward S. Reed argues that sociality is a natural phenomenon in humans and animals (116–117). (Sociality is figured here in terms of the individual's realization that the natural environment is shared with animate Others). This phenomenon has "evolved as a refinement of ... perception of, and action in, the environment" (Reed 123). The idea of a fundamentally social natural environment not only changes the notion of the subject (which becomes shared rather than private), but also of perception. Because perception already includes socialized awareness, it *precedes* interpretation and reference to socially constructed categories or meanings. In this manner a social-ecological understanding of the natural environment opposes the social constructivist one in which, according to Ingold, the environment must be "'grasped' conceptually and appropriated symbolically" before it

can be understood ("Hunting" 34). As an alternative the social-ecological model proposes that knowledge of the world is gained not through "construction" but through "engagement" with the world and its Others (Ingold, "Hunting" 41). Accordingly, no qualitative or ontological "rupture or abyss" exists to separate the human from the animal (Derrida 30), nor any distinction between the natural and the social/cultural world. Any such separation would make it impossible for the human to enter into the very relationship with the animate world and the larger relational field that sustains his life.

Lopez finds the engagement with the environment associated with *Umwelt* theory and the indigenous conception of the hunt to represent a valuable approach to the natural world. He offers a definition of hunting attuned to Eskimo hunters' animism, but one that downplays the immediate goal of the hunt:

To hunt means to have the land around you like clothing. To engage in a wordless dialogue with it, one so absorbing that you cease to talk with your human companions. It means to release yourself from rational images of what something "means" and to be concerned only that it "is." And then to recognize that things exist only insofar as they can be related to other things. These relationships—fresh drops of moisture on top of rocks at a river crossing and a raven's distant voice—become patterns. The patterns are always in motion. Suddenly the pattern—which includes physical hunger, a memory of your family, and memories of the valley you are walking through, these particular plants and smells—takes in the caribou. There is a caribou standing in front of you. The release of the arrow or bullet is like a word spoken out loud. It occurs at the periphery of your concentration. (200)

In Lopez's imagination, hunting becomes a way for the human to engage in a 'wordless dialogue' with the land that constitutes an embodied *responsiveness* toward it rather than an abstract interpretation of it; a dialogue that activates a range of sensory input more complex and absorbing than linguistic communication. The passage hints that this form of (biosemiotic) communication exists beyond—and is hindered rather than aided by—rational conceptualizations. Once this conceptual filtering or 'rationalization of meaning' is abandoned, other and more complex forms of communication can emerge. These hold the power to draw the hunter into life-worlds shared with other creatures and allow him to become aware of the myriad of complex and inter-connective relationships that exist in the land. As expressed in the quotation above (and exemplified in the following discussion), these dynamic social-ecological relationships become part of larger overarching relational patterns in which the hunter partakes with his entire being. Because these relationship patterns are simultaneously ecological *and* social, they represent for the individual in question ecological dependencies as well as patterns of meaningful social engagement with environmental Others. Both kinds of patterns undergo dynamic changes, but these are more rapid in the latter than in the former case. In this context the actual killing of the prey becomes an expression of the hunter's active engagement with the environment. It forms part of an ongoing communication which recognizes and responds to the environmental Other, but which ultimately remains a part of overarching relational patterns. Expressed here from the point of view of the *human* hunter, and exemplified by a word in human language, this

form of communicative interaction with the environment is one in which hunters of any biological species can be thought to engage.

Although arguably in consonance with a relational conception of the world, the fact that Lopez's text shifts the purpose of the hunt away from the actual killing of the prey signals Lopez's status as cultural observer rather than active participant in Eskimo hunter culture. For all his sympathy with his Eskimo hunter companions and their mode of engagement with the natural world, Lopez ends his text by reaffirming his disgust at the sight of animals killed (408–409). Reported in a cultural setting in which the killed animal is understood to confirm life's continuation, this attitude is paradoxical. It signals the extent to which Lopez remains a modern Westerner to whom hunting is associated with a particularly violent (and unnecessary) form of sport. As the text repeatedly shows, this form of sport is one that exploits human supremacy over the natural world, and that throughout modern history has had tragic effects not merely on Arctic animal individuals, but also on this region's animal populations.

Tracing Relationship Patterns

Despite this paradoxical attitude toward hunting, Lopez actively employs the indigenous hunter's social-ecological model of the world and describes his own explorations of the Arctic in terms of a hunter's engagement with the land. At the barren Pingok Island, he finds himself involved in the

old business [of] walking slowly over the land with an appreciation of its immediacy to the senses and in anticipation what lies hidden in it. The eye alights suddenly on something bright in the grass—the chitinous shell of an insect. The nose tugs at a minute blossom for some trace of Arctic perfume. The hands turn over an odd bone, extrapolating, until the animal is discovered in the mind and seen to be moving in the land. One finds anomalous stones to puzzle over, and in footprints and broken spiderwebs the traces of irretrievable events.

[...] I squatted down wherever the evidence of animals was particularly strong amid the tundra's polygon fractures. Where Canada geese had cropped grass at the edge of a freshwater pond, at the skull of a ringed seal carried hundreds of yards inland by ice, or scavengers; where grass had been flattened by a resting fox. (254)

The narrator's mode of observation here has a sense of immediacy and anticipation associated with the hunt. It engages his entire sensory system *and* gives rise to imaginative contemplations based in this sensory experience. To the indiscriminate eye, the part of Pingok Island described here is an environment of non-presence. What Lopez actually presents us with is the shell of an insect, a broken spider-web, the bone of an animal; all examples of life passed away. Then some cropped and flattened grass, and a few footprints as evidence of life that has passed through. Only by coupling this sensory information with experience-based knowledge of animals does Lopez manage the feat of allowing this barren land to emerge in his text as teeming with life. This act of interpretation reveals his skill in finding and interpreting signs of animal presence, and is clearly driven by knowledge and the will to understand. It is also expressive of the hunter's effort to imagine the land in terms of the animal life it holds. Yet, as evident in

how the ptarmigan's camouflage throws him off his visual trace and flocks of geese flee at his approach, Lopez is a hunter emerging, and far from fully trained.

Because of his own admittedly limited abilities as a hunter, Lopez supports his animal portrayals with up-to-date information from modern field biology. The chapter on the muskox provides an excellent example of the complex ecological insights that can emerge through thorough scientific investigations of animal-environment interrelationships. Through field biologists' reports we learn that "[i]n their winter pawing, muskoxen expose food for Arctic hares and willow buds for ptarmigan. Arctic fox derive some unknown delight in their company. And in their wandering they stir up insects, which the birds feed upon" (72). While the field biologists study muskoxen in their natural habitat in the hope of discovering response mechanisms determining muskox breeding patterns, findings that reflect how these animals' diet varies according to "their idiosyncratic needs and tastes" speaks of their individuality (71). This individuality is further emphasized by Lopez's narrative voice, which disrupts the objective presentation of ecological facts. With the words "If you were a muskox" he asks us imagine the environment from the perspective of this animal (ibid.).

An important factor of muskox life, and key to its survival in the Arctic, is its sociality. "Muskoxen," writes Lopez, "are unique among ruminants in the amount of body contact they make" (60). When faced with danger, they either "gallop away shoulder to shoulder [...] mov[ing] as a single animal" or form a synchronous "close-contact, defensive formation [...] found in no other species" (61). Within these defensive formations "knowledge of the other animals' personalities" are of great importance, as changes in the herds "suggest that both individual animals and the aggregations themselves have 'personalities'" (62). To the extent that an understanding of these interrelationships escapes us, this is due, Lopez claims, to the way we "unthinkingly imagine the animals as instinctual", without "motive and invention" (63). Only if we leave this conception behind does it become possible to think of an animal like the muskox beyond its placement within hierarchically structured food chains, and to discover its full ecological *and* social significance in the relational networks of the Arctic tundra.

Scientific facts are of vital importance to Lopez's portrayals of Arctic animals, but it is the hunter's mode of engagement that engenders his curiosity and responsivity toward the animals he encounters. The first animal to come into focus in this way is a collared lemming. Lopez writes with great respect of this "year-round resident[] of the local tundra communit[y]," who has migrated so far and so courageously to reach this distant region of the world, and who has the knowledge and strength to survive the Arctic winter (35). His engagement and attempt at communication with this small animal is reflected in the way he 'takes its stare', rather than just observing it, thereby acknowledging and engaging with its co-presence and difference—what Massey (following Johannes Fabian) would call its *coevalness* (Massey 69).

Whenever I met a collared lemming on a summer day and took its stare I would think: Here is a tough animal. Here is a valuable life. In a heedless moment, years from now, will I remember more machinery than mind? If it could tell me of its will to survive, would I

think of biochemistry, or would I think of the analogous human desire? If it could speak of the time since the retreat of the ice, would I have the patience to listen? (36)

The meeting leads Lopez to ponder how Western philosophy's mind/matter dualism has influenced our perception of animals in general, and tended to block our interest in this kind of relationship. As modern science and culture generally work within this conceptual framework, neither has conceived true communication with animal 'machinery' or 'matter' a possibility. Thus Lopez comes to question whether or not a dialogical engagement with animals is still possible, and whether or not modern humans would—after this long separation—even be interested in engaging in it. Although the nature of Lopez's personal engagement is coupled with critical introspection and differs significantly from that of the indigenous hunter, it enables him to recognize the lifeworld of the lemming and to identify what blocks our acknowledgement of this world. As a consequence, this seemingly insignificant little animal is in Lopez's text allowed to rise to "strike[] a posture" on the tundra "that urges you not to trifle" (35).

In the following example, an Arctic fox hunting for food on the seemingly desolate Pingok Island has caught Lopez's attention:

I watch the fox now, traveling the ridge of the sand dune, the kinetic blur of its short legs. I have seen its (or another's) tracks at several places along the beach. I think of it traveling continuously over the island, catching a lemming here, finding part of a seal there, looking for a bird less formidable than a glaucous gull to challenge for its eggs. I envision the network of its trails as though it were a skein of dark lines over the island, anchored at slight elevations apparent to the eye at a distance because of their dense, rich greens or clusters of wildflowers. (267)

One of the points made by Lopez in his reflections on the nature of hunting is that the patterns of relationship between the different objects of the environment are "always in motion" (200). The constant movement through which the fox of Pingok Island engages with the environment in his search for sustenance would be characterized by Ingold in terms of the *wayfarer's* movement *through* the world, which contrasts the traveler's movement *across* its surface (*Being* 149). In consonance with northern theories animism, the line of travel represents for the wayfarer "an ongoing process of growth and development, or self-renewal" (Ingold, *Being* 150). The linear trajectories formed by the fox's tracks across Pingok Island can be interpreted to represent precisely such a spatial trajectory inscribed *on* the land of the fox's life and development *within* it.

Lopez *Umwelt*-sensitivity opens up for a multitude of other creaturely worlds existing within the space of Pingok Island. In addition to the viewpoint of the travelling fox, who "see[s] so much with its black nose," Lopez tries to imagine Pingok through the perceptions of its other denizens:

I wonder how any animal's understanding of the island changes over the year; and the difference in its shape to a gyrfalcon, a wolf spider, or a bowhead echolocating along its seashore. What is the island to the loon, who lives on the water and in the air, stepping awkwardly ashore only at a concealed spot at the edge of a pond, where it nests? What of a bumblebee, which spends its evening deep in the corolla of a summer flower that makes its world 8°F warmer? (267)

The animal life-worlds alluded to here are intricately attuned to this particular environment, and represent various animals' modes of interaction with it. Yet relatively speaking, the number of animal life-worlds within this Arctic environment is low. This simplicity, coupled with the fact that within this peculiar environment animal tracks and traces may be left undisturbed for long periods of time, is what allows Lopez to visualize the fox's tracks in terms of a tangle of lines crisscrossing the land. It also makes it possible for the reader to imagine similar itineraries for the other animal points of view presented here. In this manner the very barrenness of Pingok Island aids in an unconventional conceptualization of this space; one which consists of an interweaving network of trajectories representing different animal persons' continuous processes of development. These biological processes exist on scales of time and distance radically different from—and potentially threatening to—supposedly universal modern human scales.

Arctic Dreams also gives several examples of how *traceless* relation structures manifest themselves. From Thule Lake, California, the southern home of Arctic migratory snow geese, Lopez reports how flocks of five to ten thousand birds “rise from the fields like smoke in great, swirling currents” (154). In watching them, he is struck by “how each bird while it is a part of the flock seems part of something larger than itself. Another animal” (154). The fact that the unity of the flock is figured in terms of *another animal* signals that the relationship patterns within the flock should not be thought of in abstract terms. Not only do these patterns bind the individual birds together, they also allow the flock to take on a particular form of movement and agency. It is this agency that allows, among other things, the great feat of annual migration through which this bird sustains its life. And whereas the itineraries of the fox remain limited to Pingok Island, those of the lesser snow geese connect, or make clearer, not only “the extent of space between ground and sky, [but] between [the Californian] here and the far North” (158). In this manner the snow geese's migrations serve the important function of bringing the network of relationships, generally traced within the Arctic wilderness, ‘home’ to Lopez's fellow American readers.

The Arctic as Organism

The text further traces a multitude of other annual animal migration routes, all of which are journeys to and from nesting or calving grounds, expressing what Ingold would call “renewal along a path rather than [...] displacement in space” (*Being* 72). The North American Arctic is simultaneously also host to forms of migration that occur at different scales in time and space. Here “[a]nimals are still adjusting to the retreat of the Pleistocene glaciers,” as well as to shorter climatic shifts (160). Then there are short-distance migrations attuned to annual climactic cycles, complemented by animal migrations during a season, or in response to diurnal rhythms (161). Yet all of these represent merely particular expressions of a much wider scope of animal movement adjusted to the dynamic alterations of this environment and the possibilities they offer

(158). To Lopez “[t]he extent of all this movement is difficult to hold in the mind” (161). It bespeaks vast and intricate networks of relationship as life-giving to this land as breath is to an animal. “Watching the animals come and go, and feeling the land swell up to meet them and then feeling it grow still at their departure,” Lopez writes, “I came to think of the migrations as breath, as the land breathing” (162). This figuration is repeated in the Epilogue, in which Lopez states that “[t]he land, an animal that contains all other animals, is vigorous and alive” (411). Through the migratory patterns of snow geese and caribous, and the defensive behaviors of muskoxen, Lopez has already introduced us to the idea that animal relationship networks have agency. Here he further asserts that the physical land in fact exists *in and through* the relationships with the animals it supports. Not only do these animals bestow life upon the land. By “always testing the landscape” in search for new means of sustenance or the potential for new life-worlds, they also contribute to the always-changing nature and ongoing creation of new relationship patterns (161).

Knowledge about the ‘all-encompassing relational field’ that *is* the Arctic comes to Lopez from *within* this environment. It is the result both of the experience of being caught in the dynamism of animals in movement, *and* of his contemplative efforts. To visualize and communicate this knowledge, Lopez grants the Arctic body and breath. Thus through attentive awareness of its animals, the text inscribes the Arctic itself as an animal. It is, however, significant that this vision is not the result of sensitivity toward animals *only*. In consonance with his allusions to *Umwelt* theory and the concept of a social and relational environment, Lopez continuously insists that all relationship patterns must include the physical environment. A breath without a body is nothing. “[T]ry[ing] to understand the animal apart from its background, except as an imaginative exercise,” Lopez writes, “is to risk the collapse of both. To be what they are they require each other” (176–177). The great dynamism of animal movement in the Arctic is only possible because—and as a part—of the dynamism inherent in the land. And it is his scientific knowledge in combination with his hunter’s sensitivity that helps this modern traveler bring out the particular vitality of the physical Arctic: its changing sea-ice; its always moving and morphing icebergs; its fast-changing, violent weather and suddenly shifting seasons; and its treacherous air, offering optical illusions turning mountain ranges upside down or enticing explorers into non-existent lands.

Lopez avoids coupling embodiment with anthropomorphization by specifying that the rudimental body he sketches is that of an animal. Through this evasion the Arctic remains wild, powerful and beyond human domination, even within a human conceptualization of it. Also to many past European explorers, Lopez admits, the land gradually became “large, alive like an animal” (393). But the nature of Lopez’s animal is as intricately complex and fundamentally life-giving as theirs was desolate and associated with death (*ibid.*). In his organismic ecosystemic vision, Arctic landscapes are presented as but a few among the world’s many and different ones, all of which are, Lopez claims, “hard to know individually. They are as difficult to engage in conversation as wild animals” (255).

Because Lopez is informed by Eskimo hunters' view of the world and mode of engagement with it, he can recognize the vitality and otherness of the Arctic—while at the same time open up a possibility for dialogic engagement with it. Yet in order to substantiate and justify his conceptualization of the Arctic as an organic unity to his modern readers, Lopez adds the perspective of quantum theory. Accordingly, he claims that although

[a]nimals move more slowly than beta particles, and through a space bewildering larger than that encompassed by a cloud of electrons, ... they urge us, if we allow them, toward a consideration of the same questions about the fundamental nature of life, about the relationships that bind forms of energy into recognizable patterns. (178)

In suggesting that quantum theory's organismic view of the world should be extended to our reflections on the natural environment, Lopez signals the outmodedness of traditional science's mechanistic image of animals. By retaining focus on the individual animals and their network of relationships, his text instead constructs what might be termed a *reconstructive* postmodern ecological vision of the Arctic wilderness; one which "restores *inherent reality*, hence activity and experience to nature" (Cobb 109).³ The combination of quantum theory, *Umwelt* sensitivity, and the hunter's mode of engagement allows the dimensions of space in Lopez's Arctic to become relativized and entangled with time—subjective biological as well as evolutionary time. And whereas this relational vision resembles the animism of northern indigenous hunters, it emerges from within our own culture's system of knowledge production, and hence cannot be dismissed as a primitive, naturalized or unscientific metaphor of the world.

Arctic Cultures and Civilizations

In consonance with the text's re-association of time and space, *Arctic Dreams* recognizes and traces the histories of both humans and animals in the land. In the case of polar bears and Eskimos, Lopez traces lines of relationship with the environment that run parallel, and points out how both have responded by establishing the same food-base, hunting grounds and mode of habitation (108). Thus the bear's endurance, agency, inventiveness and ability to learn from experience are presented as equal to those of the Eskimo hunter. Accordingly, Lopez writes, "[t]o encounter the bear, to meet it with your whole life, was to grapple with something personal." (110). The confrontation was personal because it involved an animal person who existed on the same ontological level as the human hunter, and who held the power to bring termination or renewal to his life. To emphasize that humans constitute vital parts of the Arctic's relational networks, Lopez dedicates the second half of the chapter on migration to the arrival and development of human cultures. His profound and detailed contemplations on the "great

³ Max Oelschlaeger describes a conception of the natural world based on ecology's principle of internal relations and the irreversibility of time in terms of an "organismic idea of nature" (131). To David Ray Griffin this organismic view of the world signals a constructivist (or reconstructive) postmodern turn in science, ushered in by recent discoveries in quantum theory (15).

drift and pause of life” in the North American Arctic ends by an image of “[p]eople, moving over the land” (203). Like animals, humans migrated into this region from places further south, responding to the demands of the environment. The diversity of Eskimo cultures that resulted from this movement went unnoticed by European explorers until the beginning of the 20th century. To them, the Eskimo were primitive or pre-modern Others: a naturalized, homogeneous group of people somehow closer not only to the natural environment but also to the animal Other. “The notion of Eskimos exploring their own lands and adapting anew at the same time Europeans were exploring the Arctic,” writes Lopez, “was something the Europeans were never aware of” (382). The distinctly modern conception of space implicit in their geographical endeavors made them prone to conceiving of Eskimo cultures in terms of *primitive isolates*; described by Massey as place-defined ‘original’ societies lacking any history of contact with the outside world, and passively awaiting their arrival (67–68). Offering detailed descriptions of Eskimo cultures based on a variety of textual reports and archaeological discoveries, *Arctic Dreams* corrects and complicates this simplified and erroneous image, just like it has complicated the image of Arctic animals.

Thus by granting agency, intent, personhood, sociality and history to the animals of the Arctic, *Arctic Dreams* establishes parallels and interrelationships between humans and animals of this region, and describes them both in terms of “non-Socratic societies” (75). Based on these observations, I would argue that implicit in Lopez’s critique of Western explorers’ failure to recognize the cultural diversity and dynamism of human societies of the Arctic lies a further critique of our culture’s failure to recognize its *animal* societies. Like their human counterparts, these animal societies consist of—and owe their characteristics to—individuals involved in complex relational networks. The text’s challenge to Western culture’s anthropocentric perspective is strengthened as human societies in the Arctic are joined by a multitude of animal societies, and Lopez invites us to imagine the land, that larger unity which holds them all, in terms of “another sort of *civilization*” (12). In this manner Lopez refrains from naturalizing the human into an animal. His text shows us ways to imagine animals as existing on the same ontological level as humans, without separating either from their ecological foundations. Instead, both are presented as part of a natural environment that the text allows us to understand in terms of a social space.

Although civilization should be understood in relational rather than in metaphorical terms in this context, Lopez’s move here is bold. The concept of civilization is in itself evasive and has spurred several different definitions. However, all share in reserving the concept of civilization to the *human* social sphere, and to societies that have developed social institutions and stratifications, written language and/or city states.⁴ Even to Felipe Fernández-Armesto, whose work on civilizations focuses on the

⁴ An extensive selection of definitions of the term civilization may be found at the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations’s Web site: <http://www.wmich.edu/isccsc/civilization.html> (Web 25.04.2014). These range from Oswald Spengler’s definition of civilizations as a higher states and/or final phases of human cultures, in turn figured in terms of “*organisms*” (104), to Andrew Bosworth’s definition of civilizations as “culture[s] resting on complex and evolving structures of information and knowledge (best reflected by a writing system)” (25).

human “relationship to the natural environment,” the definition rests upon the extent to which this natural environment is “recrafted, by the civilizing impulse, to meet human demands” (14). As Eskimo hunter cultures throughout historical time have adjusted to the conditions of the natural environment rather than recrafting this environment to suit their purposes, this approach implies that even *human* indigenous civilizations do not exist in the Arctic (Fernández-Armesto 40–55).

Arctic Dreams depicts a variety of encounters with animals acknowledged to have their own rational motivations for—and history of—interaction with the land. Yet this text can hint of a more inclusive and less constructivist definition of civilization primarily because it tacitly activates conceptions of the natural environment from Eskimo cosmology and theoretical theories in which animal sociality is recognized as a matter of fact. In this manner *Arctic Dreams* indirectly addresses the question of whether or not animals, which do not possess language, may be considered subjects. The presumption concerning the uniqueness of human language, like the presumption that human social behavior alone is based in *reasons* rather than in biological *causes*, has served to block the notion of animals as capable of forming cultures (Lestel 380–381). An approach like Lopez’s implies the outmodedness of such presumptions in light of recent developments in the animal and the physical sciences.

Lopez’s proposition that we regard the Arctic in terms of a civilization constituted by a multitude of animal cultures serves to disrupt modern Western culture’s nature/culture dichotomy and to suggest an alternative and less conceptually mediated way of relating to the natural environment. It also brings the question of our relationship with animals into the more familiar sphere of the social. One thing contemporary Western people *are* used to having to deal with is cultural variety, and we have established a set of theories and ethical norms as to how this should be done. Unfortunately, as Cary Wolfe points out, when it comes to dealing with animal Others such a framework is still largely missing (7). In allowing for a way to conceptualize the Arctic and its animals in terms of civilizations and societies, *Arctic Dreams* implies that our approach to these parts of the natural world should be as respectful and cautious as if human civilizations and societies were involved. Hence, it should proceed through dialogue and a search for knowledge, rather than through brute force and attempts at domination. Such a dialogue is made possible through *Arctic Dreams*’ repeated suggestions of ontological equality, in combination with depictions of Arctic space as lively and relational, and always in the process of being made.

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