

# Caught in the Cobweb

Posthuman quandaries in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*

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Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*

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# Abstract

This thesis explores nonhuman landscapes in two works of contemporary nature writing, i.e. Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) and Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986). A close reading of the texts vis-à-vis theories of phenomenology reveals the multiple approaches that each of the first-person narrators combines to ponder a non-anthropocentric interaction with nonhumans. As the name *nonhuman* suggests, this interaction is shadowed by an inherent discrimination, mirrored by nature writings's classical question of the nature/culture dichotomy. My argument is that a shift from representation to *interpretation* is what exposes these narrators' to the uncanniness of nonhuman agency and the perplexity of posthuman thinking. I will show that while *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* does not move beyond this exposure, *Arctic Dreams* contextualizes the quandaries and allows its readers to probe into posthuman ethics by referring to snapshots of life in a hostile northern Arctic.



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# Introduction

Ecocriticism is only a few years short of hitting its twenties. Keeping up with its task of adding vigor to the environmental movement's cultural backbone, it has drawn upon politics and science as much as literature and philosophy to target the roots of contemporary ailments and corruptions. In fact, it is its interdisciplinary nature that enables it to approach complex situations with fresh questions or peculiar perspectives. Nature writing, obviously, has been ecocriticism's regular meal, providing it with opportunities to study the problematic border between an author's mind and the *wilderness* of its subject matter. Still, with the advent of posthumanism, borders are being interrogated more gravely, between humans and nonhumans, between city and wilderness, bionic and biotic and, perhaps most controversially, between the ethical and unethical. In other words, the merging of disciplines has not necessarily led to solutions for the moot situation of nonhumans but only expanded the questions by both height, length and depth. There are waves ahead, and ecocriticism, I believe, should keep a firm grip on its surfing board and snorkel.

This thesis explores nonhuman landscapes in two works of contemporary nature writing, i.e. Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) and Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986). A close reading of these works of non-fiction vis-à-vis theories of phenomenology reveals the multiple approaches each of the first-person narrators combines to ponder a non-anthropocentric interaction with nonhumans. As the name *nonhuman* suggests, this interaction is shadowed by an inherent discrimination, mirrored by nature writings's classical question of the nature/culture dichotomy. While studying the partially-scientific method that Dillard and Lopez adopt to approach nonhuman animals and environments, I will pay special attention to the former's evocation of ethical predicaments and the latter's perseverance to overcome them by probing indigenous oral tradition's mediation between inner and outer landscapes.

As award-winning bestsellers, both works have been anthologized and extensively written about by different critics who have mostly but not exclusively noted their magnificence in merging spirituality with science or lauded the enticing image they offer from their ventures out of the confines of the urban. Yet, what I find underexplored and worthy of study is the way in which these works accommodate phenomenology, post-structuralism and the more recent discourses emerging from the semiotic turn. By a closer look, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Arctic Dreams* reveal an always-already participatory

stance of the writer/reader in what Timothy Morton calls “the mesh”<sup>1</sup> of interobjective phenomena, or a vision of semiotics that according to Bruno Latour, “has never been limited to discourse, to language, to text, or to fiction.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, what distinguishes both works from their contemporaries is their attention to ethically challenging aspects of interacting with nonhumans, a matter that has also been critically acclaimed but mostly in regard to its literary or psychological effect rather than its potential for contributing to posthuman thinking. Consulting the aforementioned theories will help us reread and foreground these ethical challenges and analyze the mental tools and impediments that encourage or hinder their venture into philosophical minefields.

Before proceeding into the chapters, I will provide introductory information to contextualize the analyses and tap into different aspects of nature writing. There, I will discuss how attending to nonfiction literature can spur interesting thoughts that are pertinent to my main argument, which focuses on the tension between definition (fact) and interpretation (fiction). Then where I review the history of the genre, I will emphasize on going back to critically acclaimed works to foreground an underexplored theme, i.e, the instability of nature.

The first chapter will reveal the techniques that the narrator uses to maintain a safe distance from *defining* nonhumans. *Representing* the nonhumans becomes her major occupation, which turns out problematic and porous when the pilgrim underestimates the process of interpretation. Manifesting these problems, as I will explain, is itself a contribution to ecological thinking. However, I will raise issue with the author’s tendency to fill ontological flaws with a quasi-religious spackle, and marginally discuss how her challenge to keep her predisposition to transcendentalism in check limits her access to nonhuman agencies and eventually confines her to representational thinking.

In the second chapter, I will point to how Lopez expands Dillard’s ecological inquiry by inviting deeper speculations about nonhuman agency and by adding the element of human society to his ecology. This consequently allows *Arctic Dreams* to be read for ethical implications and inquiries, which are facilitated by Lopez’s interpretation of what he has observed from the violent circumstances of indigenous people. I will underpin Lopez’s emphasis on the role of an aesthetic dimension (as epitomized by indigenous oral traditions) for realizing a reciprocal and ethical relationship with nonhumans and will link this idea to an

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<sup>1</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 28-33.

<sup>2</sup> Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene”, 13.

argument that runs through both chapters of this thesis, i.e., that *interpretation* is not an observer's projection onto nonhumans but, actually, the unfolding of the nonhuman's uncanny agency.

## Rekindling of self and science

Addressing the ethical impasse, that has arguably deprived modern westerners of a satisfying ecological presence, is akin to venturing onto untrodden thin ice. However, as Timothy Clark suggests, “[f]aced with the spectacle of collective humanity’s intensifying failure rationally to engage with climate change, questions arise which cannot be evaded even if they cannot yet be answered.”<sup>3</sup> To assess literature as a space to tackle such paradigm shifting questions, has become the concern of many scholars who increasingly advise science-laden think tanks to “have a broader scope, and not least take culture and cultural power relations into account.”<sup>4</sup> There is a point in why Lopez, himself an avid researcher, singles out our “passion for metaphors”<sup>5</sup> in an interview, as what distinguishes us human being from all others. On one hand, notable scholars like Lawrence Buell corroborate Lopez’s claim by asserting that “we live our lives by metaphors that have come to seem deceptively transparent through long usages.”<sup>6</sup> And on the other hand, Ursula Heise draws upon a number of scholars (Norgaard, Jamieson) to warn us about the political repercussions of a strict adherence to science and (via Sörlin) turns her hopeful gaze to the humanities: “Without detailed attention to the political, social, cultural, affective, and rhetorical forms that the climate problem takes in different communities, simple insistence on the scientific facts will often remain politically pointless.”<sup>7</sup>

Literary works that, via a liaison with science, postulate an interdependence of the manifold of agents that comprise ecosystems, has long preceded the so far mentioned scholars’ embarking on the field. Unearthing such works and studying their nuances with the aim of highlighting perspectives or modus operandis that can potentially trigger environmental action/inaction will not only expand our understanding of literature’s inherent social affect, but will also assert the function of academic literary studies as a translator of literature to life, or, a terminator of the idea of their divergence. Indeed, “examining nature *in*

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<sup>3</sup> Clark, “The deconstructive turn in environmental criticism”, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Skogen, “Adapting adaptive management”, 448.

<sup>5</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Heise, “The Environmental Humanities and the Futures of the Human”, 24.

literature,” as Keegan and McKusick put it, “can provide a helpful means of interrogating the nature of literature,”<sup>8</sup> and so is my intention.

Surveying the body of literature that specifically dealt with the natural environment was my initial direction, until stumbling upon the genre of non-fiction *nature writing* presented an array of candidates for my inquisition. According to Scott Slovic:

Nature writing is a "literature of hope" in its assumption that the elevation of consciousness may lead to wholesome political change, but this literature is also concerned, and perhaps primarily so, with interior landscapes, with the mind itself.<sup>9</sup>

I shall in a future section elaborate on the characteristics of this genre, including its affiliation with science, and discuss the journey it has been through until today. Now, observing nature writing in its relationship with the constellation of theoretical methods that have, to some contest, been agglomerated under the umbrella of *ecocriticism*<sup>10</sup> may provide us with some interesting insights.

## **A forest of theories about forests**

A school of criticism that seems to be undergoing its rite of passage into adulthood, ecocriticism pays heed to a variety of not only strictly literary but also artistic material to raise questions pertaining to the environment and challenge implicit ecological value systems. “As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human.”<sup>11</sup> Obviously, this gives ecocriticism a stewardship over nature writing and it has, according to Cheryll Glotfelty, been partly responsible for the genres recuperation in the last few decades.<sup>12</sup> Hence, I have situated myself in ecocriticism to magnify the philosophical niches in the two books I will be offering my reading of in this thesis.

To get a preliminary understanding of the mood of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Arctic Dreams*, the works of non-fiction nature writing that have become the subject of this

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<sup>8</sup> Keegan and McKusick, *Literature and Nature*, 1. (emphasis in original)

<sup>9</sup> Slovic, “Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology”, 368.

<sup>10</sup> Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Glotfelty, *The Ecological Reader*, xix.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, xxiii.

ecocritical endeavor, it is perhaps crucial to first demarcate, *environmental* literature from what can be categorized as *environmentalist* literature. According to Slocic:

It is important to realize that environmental literature is not the same as what some might call "environmentalist literature." Environmental literature *is seldom simply propaganda on behalf of conservation causes . . .* Environmental literature, although it frequently expresses a particular political orientation and a concern for social reform in pursuit of environmental protection, also *tends to be exploratory, questioning, and celebratory*—in other words, it is much more than simple argumentation against typical environmental ills, such as destruction of wildlife habitat, pollution, urban sprawl, and excessive extraction of natural resources.<sup>13</sup>

Environmental literature, and non-fiction nature writing in particular, have a philosophical preoccupation and tends to trace the root of environmental maladies in the predisposition of modern human beings. While some works of earlier nature writing, as I shall explain, have in their own right become cornerstones of environmental action in the past, it is today the job of ecocriticism to derive and synthesize ideas from nature writing and anticipate ethical reformations.<sup>14</sup> Not only to compensate for a deficiency of philosophical underpinnings but to provide opportunities, by promulgating literature, to discuss why the technical, science-laden call-to-actions continuously fall short of moving the public toward a greener future and away from a nostalgia for a lost purity in the past.

When it comes to this task, ecocriticism can be spread over a spectrum, some critics tending toward being more political, and some others toward being more philosophical. While the former are quicker to solicit or amplify ethical models and provide pragmatic answers by capitalizing on nature writers that seemingly hold a firmer ethical ground (e.g. John Muir and Aldo Leopold), the latter, who for the moment we can call *ecosophical critics*, do not *strictly* claim to be able to provide a clear answer. Quite the contrary, speculative as it is, this mode of ecocriticism, that the thesis at hand can be a humble example of, ventures to “explore fundamental epistemological questions”<sup>15</sup> or to “negotiate the present in the name of the future.”<sup>16</sup> This manifests itself in its selection of literary material and its motivation for questioning the validity of dominant modes of environmental activism. It does so by pointing

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<sup>13</sup> Slocic, “Nature Writing”, 888-889. (emphasis added)

<sup>14</sup> Slocic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 15. (in reference to Burgess)

<sup>15</sup> Slocic, “Nature Writing”, 889.

<sup>16</sup> Guattari, *The Guattari Reader*, 271.

to ethical blind spots, by uncovering premises that perpetuate the human and nonhuman disjunction, and in general by being fundamentally hostile toward anthropocentric reasoning. A stark example of a widely revered ground for environmental action is, according to Cronon, “the conviction that nature is a stable, holistic, homeostatic community capable of preserving its natural balance more or less indefinitely if only humans can avoid ‘disturbing’ it.”<sup>17</sup> This premise of a natural equilibrium still influences a considerable proportion of environmental activists in spite of the evidence of its inaccuracy. Yet, as Neera M. Singh points out, “with the turn to ‘new’ materialisms, the social sciences and humanities are beginning to engage with the liveliness of the world and to see it not as an inanimate backdrop to human drama but as an animate participant in it.”<sup>18</sup> In this situation, it is of great importance to engage with literary work that correspond with such critical theories to be able to contribute to the solution of contemporary problems. Nevertheless, “troubling as such criticism can sometimes seem,” as Cronon declares:

[I]ts goal in the end must be to deepen and enrich our understanding of the problems we struggle to solve, by helping us see the unexamined, sometimes contradictory assumptions at the core of our own beliefs—assumptions that can distract and defeat us if we embrace or act on them unthinkingly.<sup>19</sup>

Cronon’s remark makes it convenient to affiliate ecocriticism with post-structuralism and postmodern theory. I must here say that I agree with Latour who says, “postmodernism is a symptom, not a fresh solution.”<sup>20</sup> This thesis aims to study this symptom through a phenomenological perspective, and through some of its postmodern reincarnations, i.e., post-structuralism, posthumanism and object-oriented ontology. This might expose this project to avid naysayers who sometimes associate postmodernist theorizing with political naïveté (what Cronon meant by “troubling”). Others even go as far as blaming the endorsement of postmodernity for demoting ecocriticism to useless language games or romantic escapism. I understand that I am glossing over some big issues here that fall out of the scope of this thesis and deserve further elaboration. However, I intend to briefly indicate the tension I diagnosed around a category of theories that bring our attention to characteristics such as “a multiplicity of real actors; acausal, nonsequential events; nonessentialized symbols and meanings; many

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<sup>17</sup> Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Singh, "Introduction: Affective Ecologies and Conservation", 3.

<sup>19</sup> Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 46.

authorial voices, rather than one; dialectical action and process, rather than the imposed logos of form; situated and contextualized, rather than universal, knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> Despite, and because of, this tension I find such theories to be highly thought-provoking and necessary. By adhering to non-fiction authors that border the realm of theory, I entertain the idea of theory as an incarnation or continuation of literature, and by so doing hope to celebrate literature’s robust engagement with society. After all, as David Rothenberg rightfully reminds us, “emotional and philosophical immersion does not preclude political involvement. It should instead be seen as the first step to real long-term change.”<sup>22</sup>

## Foreshocks of an ethos-quake

Needless to say, once you look for the blind spots of institutionalized environmentalism there are many that have been overlooked lest the noble image of the post-enlightenment rationalist, that have for centuries been established in opposition to the uncivilized savage and the animal, is disturbed by contradictions. Florence Chiew, thinking with the posthumanist Cary Wolfe, is well aware of these blind spots as she writes, “what we have come to call ‘ethics’ has from the outset been based on prejudicial practices.”<sup>23</sup> Now, revealing and challenging such prejudices and their incapacity to account for the antagonistic interactions between human and nonhumans, a task I have tried to do via my reading of Dillard and Lopez, is primarily done because, as Glotfelty’s reference to Donald Worster in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* indicates:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more' it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them.<sup>24</sup>

Buell voices a similar concern while he, due to the topic that the title of his book *Environmental Imagination* suggests, emphasizes the imaginative aspect of the human-nonhuman relationship:

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<sup>21</sup> Merchant, “Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative”, 157

<sup>22</sup> Rothenberg, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Chiew, “Posthuman ethics with Cary Wolfe and Karen Barad”, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xxi.

[W]estern metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it.<sup>25</sup>

Combining the two quotes above can shed light on how this thesis aspires to demonstrate the capacity of literature, in its appeal for imagination, to provide a space for ethical speculation. Yet, it remains an open question whether it ever will exist a predictable, solid and all-encompassing ethical system, also whether our currently detected prejudicial habits stem from desperation or contempt. After all, according to Hasana Sharp, “the work of reimagining ethics has only just begun.”<sup>26</sup>

The literature that I have put my finger on are examples of places where this re-imagination is carefully being approached. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* helps to set the stage. While Dillard’s theater of beauty and horror is struck by ethically challenging Dilemmas, *Arctic Dreams* (as its subtitle *Imagination and desire in a northern landscape* indicates) incorporates several perspectives on what it means to be a human in a nonhuman landscape in order to open up new avenues of thinking about reciprocity and ethics. In what seems to be an agreement with Glotfelty and Buell’s belief that the contemporary global crisis stems from an ethical cul-de-sac, Susan M. Ruddick adds that the Anthropocene “raises questions of how we are to live in this world and what our response-ability is to this world, in the Haraway-ian sense of our capacity for an ethical response.”<sup>27</sup> Literature, and in my opinion nature writing in particular, is for reasons I will try to demonstrate in this thesis, a good platform, and a good form, for exercising such questions. Questions either explicit or implicit that in the light of theories by, say, Donna Haraway, whom Ruddick mentions, could be extrapolated and savored.

## **Literary ecology in the advent of posthuman ethics**

Responsibility and ethics are two sides of the same coin. The task here, is not simply to retrieve a new ethical system, but rather to read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Arctic Dreams* as an excuse to reach down to some of our deepest assumptions, the ontological foundation of

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<sup>25</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Sharp, “Spinoza and the possibilities for radical climate ethics”, 157.

<sup>27</sup> Ruddick, “Rethinking the subject, reimagining worlds”, 119.



our ethics, so to speak, that constitutes and fashions our relationship and responsibility to nonhumans. In Ruddick's words, "[t]he issue is not our ethical response to a fragile nature 'outside' of us, but (for westerners at least) the need to rethink the ontological presupposition that guides our ethics: the human–nature divide dominating the western concept of the subject."<sup>28</sup> Given the sensitivity of the situation, also its urgency, consulting with literature, as I will stress, has considerable merits. Literature foregrounds certain complexities, so do science, but it seems to display a far better capability compared to science in making complexities imaginable and livable. Speaking about Lopez's writing, Buell writes:

Literature functions as science's less systematic but more versatile complement. Both seek to make understandable a puzzling world. To a greater degree than science, literature releases imagination's free play, though the play is not entirely free, since the imagination is regulated by encounters with the environment both personal and through the unofficial folk wisdom to which one has been exposed. Thus regulated, the mind is at leisure to ramble among intriguing hypotheses, and it is not only permitted but expected to present theory as narrative or descriptive exposition rather than as argument.<sup>29</sup>

Agreeing with Buell, I would say that Literature, non-fiction nature writing in particular, puts us into a connection with components of our ecosystem by evoking an aesthetic dimension and engaging our imagination. To be more precise, it expands our imagination so we conceive our always-already embeddedness in a network of nonhuman agents. Literature is thus essential for us to be able to speculate an ethics that concerns those components.

It is indeed this very capability (not to be confused with purpose) of literature, or imagination to put it more broadly, that is here key, and not primarily its constituents. Language, in this sense, ought not to be seen only as a means of communication, limited to human beings or confined to what is verbalized or written. By the same token, literature is not a container of preset meanings. Literature, by evoking the aesthetic dimension or hinting at a pre-linguistic reality, invites language to reveal itself in its purposelessness, which provides opportunities for the investigation of the parallels between semiotics and ecology.

With this aspect of literature in mind, ethics, as being foregrounded in several incidents of this thesis, must not simply be sought as a preexisting system that "simply oppose

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<sup>28</sup> Ruddick, "Rethinking the subject, reimagining worlds", 120.

<sup>29</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 94.

the good to the bad,”<sup>30</sup> it is not “a moral compass that orients us from a position outside the object of violation.”<sup>31</sup> It is, as I will argue by referring to theories of phenomenology, a conscious account of a togetherness that is constituted *within* and in the event of “rhizomatic interconnections, assemblages, or a complex ‘coming together’ of things and beings.”<sup>32</sup> Singh, drawing upon the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari adds to our understanding of this shift of perspectives regarding agency and reminds us of its ground-breaking implications. She writes, “an attunement to affect thus re-envisions humanist notions of agency, it helps us to see agency not as a property of individuals but as emergent in relationships and provides a starting point to recognize the profound interconnections that exist everywhere.”<sup>33</sup> More will be elaborated in chapter two as Lopez provides numerous examples of how language, stories, and metaphors play an active role in the lives of Arctic aboriginals.

Nevertheless, to accentuate the contribution of non-fiction nature writing I can here clarify that the geographical places these nature writers have ventured into are no more *natural* than any other place, as some would claim to my dispute, they are rather conditions where this *entanglement, embeddedness, or togetherness* within a network of agents manifests itself more vividly or at least becomes the topic of inquiry. We at once experience literature as what situates the first-person narrator within its surrounding and then the work as a whole, as what enmeshes us readers in our own context.

What is important to keep in mind is how the work places the author and us *within* language, i.e., how *language itself is an environment*. A major part of the thesis reflects upon the two authors’ efforts to imagine a non-anthropocentric interaction with nonhumans. Investigating the material-semiotic (to borrow a term from Haraway) undercurrent of their experiences, something I find underexplored, is an objective of this thesis. When Dillard say that “seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization”<sup>34</sup> she is giving us a hint to this inseparability of language from phenomena, and as Lopez addresses the dynamic between imagination and desire in the Arctic landscape, he is arguably aiming to infer a broad sense of pre-linguistic language. To repeat, this is a vision of language and literature that reaches beyond being a means of communication, it is a meaningless field where varying forms of life and meaning can become possible.

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<sup>30</sup> Chiew, "Posthuman ethics with Cary Wolfe and Karen Barad", 61.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Singh, "Introduction: Affective Ecologies and Conservation", 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 20.

This being said, where I have highlighted the more violent episodes, it has been to argue how each of these authors has inhabited this space, or *situated-ness within land and language* to deal with the ethical issues of facing antagonistic interactions. These are rather heavy concepts, especially for a mind that has been trained to associate language with a clear and stable purpose, and not as a primordial field of probabilities. To be able to get a better grasp of this abstract form of contemplating ethics it might be useful consider another quote by Chiew:

[T]he ethical does not pre-exist the scene of violation or error but is constitutive of it, then ethical inquiry is an expression of the myriad ways by which life bears itself. It is in this sense that we may challenge and redefine our views of culpability and moral responsibility as exclusively human.<sup>35</sup>

What Chiew here means by *exclusively human*, is the anthropocentric premises inherent to our predominant notion of ethics (that pre-existing moral compass), which remains negligent of the affection and agency of other actors. Dillard and Lopez, each in their own way of reifying a sense of reverence for the nonhuman and disputing anthropocentrism, contribute to the undoing of this notion of a moral compass. It is especially in *Arctic Dreams* where the contingent and contextual nature of ethics starts to become more imaginable, and it is arguably the preservation of this “originary reciprocity with the world known to oral culture,”<sup>36</sup> the interplay of imagination and interpretation, that is the morality he relentlessly promotes through the book.

By drawing upon works of non-fiction nature writing that help the manifold of such phenomenology-inspired theories to unravel, as previously mentioned, this thesis implicitly attempts to respond to skeptics of post-structural thinking. I particularly mean those whose preference for disembodied politics over embodied philosophy not only underestimate post-structuralism as a harbinger of an ontological paradigm-shift, but also produces a side effect that eventually marginalizes the agency of literature and literary studies. It is the phenomenological dimension of contemporary philosophy that I find most promising, and non-fiction nature-writing appears as the perfect manifestation of this dimension and the capacity it holds for speculating about reciprocity, language, and ethics. Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Arctic Dreams*, correspond to this objective to

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<sup>35</sup> Chiew, "Posthuman ethics with Cary Wolfe and Karen Barad", 67.

<sup>36</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 50.

such an extent that it sometimes seems fair to see them as figures that deliberately eradicate the border between literature and philosophy. Their ecological contemplations and their special approach to writing, which the flexibility of their genre perfectly accommodates, is pregnant to ideas that now, more than three decades after the publication of their works, have surfaced in the environmental debate. This attests to the success of these notable works in carrying on certain epistemological questions that are not only still relevant but all the more crucial to read and write about.

Finally, what must be kept in mind is that Dillard and Lopez ought not to be valued based on the soundness of their ecological disposition. This thesis, being one that heeds works of literature, is primarily interested in how such works as Dillard's contribute to ecological thinking by the way they write. In other words, writers like Dillard and Lopez, are not the classical ecologists, they are examples of how ecology can be approached differently, once literature and science begin to mate. Ihab Hassan's closing remarks in *Selves at Risk* is explanatory:

The authors here [including Dillard], I do believe, teach *writers* and readers a great deal, since they can teach writers, delight us all. In any case, the authors are, most of them, adventurers incidentally, and seekers mainly *within their literary art*. This does not diminish — it enhances! — their capacity to give back the world. They give it back amply, give us America [and a world] with all its brilliance, dreck, and distractions, give us our interactive planet, in its full glory and indigence, give us the suffering earth, green, brown, blue, its spiritual ecology fierce and fragile - give us all this in a verbal magnificence of questing selves at risk.<sup>37</sup>

The overlapping of writing, pilgrimage and doing ecology, i.e. the overlapping of the material space of Tinker Creek and the northern Arctic with the virtual semiotic space evoked by the texts is what sparks all the analyses you are about to read. Hopefully, they will enable us to see these nature writers as debatable examples for forms of scholarship now being shaped under the umbrella of *Environmental Humanities*. This being said, before proceeding to the main discussions, it is good to take a closer look at nature writing in how it emerged as a distinct genre and how it has interacted with culture at large in the course of its lifetime.

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<sup>37</sup> Hassan, *Selves at Risk*, 206. (emphasis in original)

## What is nature writing?

As the beautifully painted horses on the walls of the Lascaux caves show, our relationship with nature and nonhumans has been the subject of human being's cultural journey since before the invention of writing. In the earliest oral myths and the surviving writings from ancient times, natural places and animals are recurrent, if not steady, elements. Closer to our time, the romantic movement in literature and art, is read as a strife to rekindle with a sense of *natural* purity. However, as Hay Peter puts it "the elevation of place-writing to 'genre' status is predominantly the achievement of a robust North American tradition of nature writing."<sup>38</sup> His immediate example is Barry Lopez, a contemporary author, who's *Arctic Dreams* I will be analyzing in chapter two. But what is really meant by "place-writing"? And how far back in literary history can it be traced?

Literary scholars might not entirely agree upon the answers to these questions, however, there is an obvious consensus that the content of this genre "is much more than simple argumentation against typical environmental ills, such as destruction of wildlife habitat, pollution, urban sprawl, and excessive extraction of natural resources,"<sup>39</sup> despite the appearance of such themes in some of the most notable works of nature writing. Dismissal of such pragmatist functions lends ambiguity to the meaning of nature writing, whose meaning determines the answers to the question of its genealogy. Nevertheless, different categorizations with different histories have been attempted, each inevitably excluding bodies of work and authors, and it is by reviewing these criteria (while assessing their awareness over what has been excluded) that we might reach a fair opinion of how one must elevate *place* in order to be considered a nature writer.

Finch and Elder, in the introduction to Norton's book of nature writing, claim that "nature writing, as a recognizable and distinct tradition in English prose, has existed for over two hundred years."<sup>40</sup> They open their compendium with Gilbert White, one of Linnaeus's early English disciples and declare "the personal element — that is, the filtering of experience through an individual sensibility"<sup>41</sup>—as one element that defines the periphery of nature writing. This suggests that the elevation of place is of interest as long as it contains this *personal* element. Slovic, assigned to write the "Nature Writing" section to the *Encyclopedia*

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<sup>38</sup> Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*, 153.

<sup>39</sup> Slovic, "Nature Writing", 889.

<sup>40</sup> Finch and Elder, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, 21.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

of *World Environmental History*, also accentuates this element while mentioning several other features of the genre in his definition:

For scholars and teachers, the term nature writing has come to mean literary nonfiction that offers scientific scrutiny of the world (as in the older tradition literary of natural history), explores the *private experience of the individual human observer of the world*, or reflects upon the political and philosophical implications of the relationships among human beings and between humans and the larger planet.<sup>42</sup>

This “filtering of experience through an individual sensibility” is reminiscent of Arne Næss’s ecosophy. Næss, known as the father of deep ecology says that “[t]he ecosopher must thoroughly think out, and also 'feel out', what he or she actually wants, not simply as a personal matter, but in a social and ecospheric perspective.”<sup>43</sup> Instead of continuing to argue based on deep ecology, I prefer to read Slovic’s quote as a reference to phenomenology. Phenomenology, I believe demarcates nature writing from other forms of literature that pertains to nature. My theoretical orientation in this thesis predominantly addresses this phenomenological aspect of the two works I have selected, which is fed into the more overarching argument about the potency of literature as an interpretive space.

Furthermore, Finch and Elder add “an important element of play in much nature writing,” and explain how “it is as if playing in a landscape were as important as exploring it, or rather, as if the two become one activity in which we rediscover our wholeness as beings in nature.”<sup>44</sup> This seems to be related the genre’s commonly accepted element of “scientific scrutiny,” which Slovic also mentions. Because the authors’ relationship to science in many cases include a rather playful eclectism, which is motivated by the idea of providing “their readers with an antidote to industrialism and urbanization and an alternative to ‘cold science.’”<sup>45</sup> The quote by Slovic on top of the page seems to provide the most common definition of nature writing that somehow approves of confining its roots to the last two centuries. This confinement, however, is not undisputed.

Keegan and McKusick in their *Literature and Nature: Four Centuries of Nature Writing* assume a broader sense of scientific scrutiny and seem to be less keen on the phenomenological aspect. This allows them to stretch the genre’s history by two more

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<sup>42</sup> Slovic, “Nature Writing”, 888. (emphasis added)

<sup>43</sup> Næss, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Translated by Rothenberg, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Finch and Elder, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

centuries, including such names as William Shakespeare and examples of pastoral poetry. In the introduction to the book, they claim that “[g]iven the important developments that begin around the year 1600, it is a fundamental mistake to suppose that instances of British and American literature of and about nature are either nationally specific or limited to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”<sup>46</sup> This is right after they provide information about their criteria for selection: “the clash between scientific and theological discourses, and the confrontation between the respective notions that nature is either static or dynamic, takes an important turn precisely at the historical moment where this anthology begins.”<sup>47</sup> Besides their indication of the role of science in its competition with other non- or a-rational discourses, which both anthologies consider with varying sensitivities, their attention to the quandary of a static/dynamic image of nature is especially interesting. Though not directly pointed out in Slovic’s definition, this quandary is somehow implicit in his suggestion of “philosophical implications,” and can be seen as a distinctive element between those works that lend more easily to political activism and conversation schemes, and those that speculate fundamental ethical reforms.

The wider range of works that Keegan and McKusick have incorporated in the book seems to be a response to a shortcoming earlier diagnosed by Slovic that:

[B]y emphasizing the genre of so-called nonfiction (essays, journals, letters, treatises), there has been a tendency to marginalize people (including entire ethnic, national, and socioeconomic groups) who have communicated their observations and visions through other media, ranging from written poetry and fiction to oral narratives and song and dramatic presentations.<sup>48</sup>

Hence, besides Keegan and McKusick’s effort “to expand and challenge conventional notions of nature writing not only historically but also at the level of literary form, moving beyond nonfiction descriptive or meditative prose,”<sup>49</sup> they declare that their book “highlights the important and longstanding contributions of women, laboring-class, African American, and Native American authors.”<sup>50</sup> This inclusiveness is rather indicative of their emphasis on environmental content. Roughly speaking, whatever work that shows an inquisitive

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<sup>46</sup> Keegan and McKusick, *Literature and Nature*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Slovic, “Nature Writing”, 888.

<sup>49</sup> Keegan and McKusick, *Literature and Nature*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Keegan and McKusick, *Literature and Nature*, 3.

relationship with nature that goes beyond mere appreciation, no matter poetry or prose, has found a place in their categorization. This openness is reminiscent of, but not exactly matching with, a larger category that Buell calls “environmental texts,” which obviously includes nature writing as one of its factions. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell lists the traits of environmental texts as such:

1. *The non-human environment is present but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history . . .*
2. *The Human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest . . .*
3. *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation . . .*
4. *Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.*<sup>51</sup>

Buell, however, mentions how he has “deliberately [kept] this list short, wanting chiefly to give a flavor of how potentially inclusive *and* exclusive the category of ‘environmental’ is.”<sup>52</sup> Had he added the element of scientific scrutiny to the list, his category of environmental text would roughly coincide with some scholars’, including Keegan and McKusick’s, vision of nature writing, which I find problematic due to its leaning toward a separation of content and form. What causes me to sympathize with tracing the roots of nature writing (or *modern* nature writing) to the early eighteenth century is the emergence of this phenomenological notion, this sense of self-reflexivity, via the often first-person narrator, and the emancipation of literature from being limited to fiction. Nature writing, genuinely defined, ought to take credit for putting the reader into an ecological relationship with whatever they are surrounded by, this is facilitated by the phenomenological and non-fictional aspects.

With all this in mind, I would suggest that the special “place-writing” that Hay attributes to the genre of nature writing, could be summarized as a quasi-scientific and phenomenological approach to the nonhuman landscape that ought to entail philosophical or political reflections on the relationship between humans and nonhumans. There seems to be no consensus regarding the form that this task is carried out through. I, however, while being aware of the risk of being censured for exclusiveness<sup>53</sup>, wish to put emphasis on the non-fiction form and elaborate how this emphasis shapes the turning point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and

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<sup>51</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 7-8. (emphasis in original)

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, 8. (emphasis in original)

<sup>53</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 38-39. (in reference to Murphy)



causes many to still refer back to Thoreau's style of fusing form with content as a benchmark for nature writing.

One of the potential services that nature writing does to literature at large, is to expand our vision of what can be considered aesthetic or literary. This is important because the main argument in this thesis relies on an expansion of semiotics from merely being perceived as a feature of texts to a property of the material world.<sup>54</sup> As far as content goes, literature has had very diverse focuses but never any limits. There is no non-literary content, so to speak. However, when it comes to form, the "academic prejudices favouring fiction over non-fiction"<sup>55</sup> are still influential and responsible for maintaining similar visions within the general public. Considering that nature writing's implicit criticism of "the white-coated, passive, impersonal style . . . the established voice of 'objective science',"<sup>56</sup> encourages a move toward subjectivity, it can be well expected, and indeed more effective, if literature itself also exhibits this move toward unorthodox forms and narrative structures. This shift to non-fiction is essential in the process I have tried to capture in this thesis, that is, of literature re-establishing its voice in its symbiosis with the scientific discourse. Finch and Elder endorse a similar vision when saying:

To a distinctive degree, nature writing fulfills the essay's purpose of connection. It fuses literature's attention to style, form, and the inevitable ironies of expression with a scientific concern for palpable fact. In a time when the natural context of fiction has been attenuated and when much literary theory discovers nothing to read but constructs of self-reflexive language, nature writing asserts both the humane value of literature and the importance to a mature individual's relationship with the world of understanding fundamental physical and biological processes.<sup>57</sup>

Non-fiction accommodates the intertextual movements that both Dillard and Lopez exemplify, the meta-text contemplations that contribute to a promotion of authority, and the unorthodox narrative structure that arguably implies certain worldviews by, for instance, rejecting dramatic beginnings or endings (aspects already exercised by modernist fiction). Moreover, the patch-work style of writing, which often brings the ramblings of the narrator's thought together is also indicative of a different sense of cohesion, or different possibilities of

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<sup>54</sup> Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene", 13.

<sup>55</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 53.

<sup>56</sup> Finch and Elder, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, 27.

perceiving interactions between events, thoughts and ecological entities that are not necessarily causal. Literature illustrates some of its undeniable effects by breathing spirit into the scientific discourse, and for this task, non-fiction seems to provide the common ground that is prerequisite to their dialogue. As Clark points out, the essay has been understood as a kind of ‘antigenre’ as it “offers freedom from the constraints of stricter kinds of academic or journalistic article.”<sup>58</sup> This freedom allows non-fiction to “embrace material from diverse sources that would not be admitted in a scientific paper or a piece of historical research,”<sup>59</sup> which is an advantage for the aforementioned objective. However, if not attended carefully, it can damage the authorship of the writer.

Critical voices have been raised about literary non-fiction authors’ attempt to take advantage of the readers’ trust by manipulating information or slipping unwitnessed or even fictive events into the text as if they have been personally observed. One hears about Thoreau’s recurrent visits to Concord to do laundry or dine in Emerson’s mansion<sup>60</sup>, which some would say contradicts the rather uninterrupted and humble stay in the woods that he allegedly portrays in *Walden*. Other sources point to Dillard’s scientific inaccuracy.<sup>61</sup> For example, the recurrent encounter with the giant water bug in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and Dillard’s description of being woken up by her cat’s bloody paws at the beginning of the book has scandalously been exposed as figments of the author’s imagination or second hand references.<sup>62</sup> What has explicitly been admitted is the fact that both Thoreau and Dillard have pretended that the events in their book have happened in the span of one year, while the truth reveals something else.

Criticisms that batter the alleged non-fiction writer for tricking the audience must be taken seriously, as they point to an important topic that has gained more sensitivity in an era of post-truth politics, wherein an appeal to emotions of the audience, disregarding the *factual*-basis of the message being delivered, has gained a controversial function. Well, if one reads such incidents in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as deceptive techniques that underpin a newly emerged and controversial rhetoric in politics, then it is easy to hold Annie Dillard accountable and to rule out non-fiction as prone to sham and as a form of writing that does not possess any particular power when loyal to its principles. However, if one does not confine

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<sup>58</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 36.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Lane, “Thoreau and Rousseau”, 364.

<sup>61</sup> Mitchel, “Dancing with Nature”, 195.

<sup>62</sup> Phillips, *Truth of Ecology*, 190.

post-truth politics to the contemporary period and begins to ponder the precedence of alternative facts, it is possible, and quite convenient, to assume that it is not really a new phenomenon despite having come into the spotlight more recently. This being said, non-fiction can actually be regarded as a locus for studying the rather underexplored dynamic between fiction and non-fiction and the way each affects human dispositions. Similar to how Latour's coinage "factish" spurs skepticism about the assumed distinction between fact and fetish<sup>63</sup>, and in the light of Donna Haraway's charting of the intertwined discourses that produce our notion of "truth," non-fiction can help us contemplate the boundaries between not only different forms of agencies and knowledge but also what is usually dichotomized as fact vs. fiction. The question also culminates on several occasions where Lopez exposes us to how traditional stories meddle between people and Arctic phenomena: "Eskimos, long-time, keen observers of the polar bear, have advanced other thoughts about polar bears that science has treated with skepticism, and in some quarters with cynical disdain."<sup>64</sup> Perhaps it is easiest to assume that indigenous people live a fake and fictitious life, while we urbanites have, thanks to science, achieved a truer life that is purely based on objective facts, however, this is the assumption that Lopez is persuading us to drop as he exposes us to the complex exchange, between our intentions and our image of the land, i.e., between our outer and inner landscapes.

As stated from the beginning of this thesis, turning to non-fiction nature writing was partly motivated by my desire to fathom the mechanisms of science-laden environmental discourse and uncovering the potential that lies in paying attention to its relationship with literature (here in its non-fictive form). This is how I presume that non-fiction literature can succeed in its objective to transform dominant discourses that patronize what is deemed fictitious or literary. By providing opportunities to think critically about the presumed rational, purely non-fictional basis of science; or according to Finch and Elder, "not by a retreat into unexamined dogmatism, but by restoring to scientific inquiry some of the warmth, breadth and piety which had been infused into it by the de-parted parson-naturalist,"<sup>65</sup> literature is responding to threats of exile. Thus, I subscribe to the idea that the non-fiction form is a noteworthy and distinguishing element of nature writing that deserves much attention. Furthermore, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Arctic Dreams* exemplify a tradition of

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<sup>63</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 18-24.

<sup>64</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 93.

<sup>65</sup> Finch and Elder, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, 22.

first-person narration, which often produces “the underlying narrative structure in which the protagonist leaves civilisation for an encounter with non-human nature, then returns having experienced epiphany and renewal.”<sup>66</sup> This form of paves the way for a more facile interaction with phenomenological reflections. However, I will, for now, tiptoe around the claim of holding the first-person narration model as an essential feature of nature writing.

## Genre history

Now, more convinced with the criteria that trace the commencement of nature writing back to the early nineteenth century, I will mention some of the most notable figures to review how the genre has moved through certain stages before arriving at its current status. I would like to point out that these stages are perhaps not necessarily distinguished by the thematic focus of the works, but rather by what has been recorded of their socio-political impact. I am mentioning this because speculative and wild as a considerable body of work of nature writing is, they seem to offer multiple resolutions based on what ideas a reader opts for and chooses to foreground. This is actually why nature writing is revered not for its capacity to spread awareness but for how it generally provokes ecological thinking.

Nevertheless, despite the varying degrees of resistance that these works show toward being assigned a purpose, they have often been subject to such deeds. Authors like Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Carson etc. have consistently been claimed by certain discourses who have registered their authors as their patron saints and, as a result, these works have been read in accord with the premises of that given discourse. One stark example is Gilbert White’s *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, the book that *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* marks as the starting point of the genre. This work, considered “the first in-depth, in situ study of an ecosystem”<sup>67</sup> has like many of the non-contemporary works of nature writing almost automatically been fed into discourses around a stable and balanced nature, a premise that has remained unchallenged until recent decades. Yet, In her book called *Chaos and Cosmos: literary roots of modern ecology in the British nineteenth century*, Heidi CM. Scott helps us to realize that “although the first two-thirds of White’s chronicle are passably at peace with the world and imply the utopia of a stable and dynamic cosmos, to pin the whole work within this frame of balance deprives White of the credit he deserves for contemplating chaotic

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<sup>66</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 49.

<sup>67</sup> Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 23.

disturbance, the less comfortable mode of ecological thought.”<sup>68</sup> She continues to explain how White’s own methods remained uninfluenced by the “wanderlust of the colonial scientist,”<sup>69</sup> which enabled him to focus his study on a specific locality, in a manner later conceptualized as bioregionalism. She adds how White sought a deeper understanding of natural phenomena, and while acknowledging the inherent value of nonhumans, entertained a vision that “successfully divests the balance paradigm in favor of a more modern view of nature based on discord and contingency.”<sup>70</sup> Convincing evidence attests to interesting overlaps of White’s concerns with those of the more contemporary authors (including the two analyzed in this thesis). This lends an example to the idea that nature writing’s assumed evolution is not necessarily due to a patterned change in content-matter, rather, that a preferred answer to the question of a “confrontation between the respective notions that nature is either static or dynamic,”<sup>71</sup> which Keegan and McKusick trace back to the sixteen hundreds, is decisive in the compartmentalization of the genre’s timeline. Making chronological categories based on themes is appealing, yet, I have come to realize that it is not so easy, and it can be misleading. Works pertaining to the notion of a static nature, those postulating a dynamic nature, or works like White’s that, according to Scott, can be linked to both notions, are to be found all over the course of the genre’s history.

Then comes Henry David Thoreau, considered by many to be the father of modern nature writing. His canonical book *Walden* is praised not only for its wildness in style and how it engages with questions of ecology within the woods, but also for its insightful critique of the industrialized dwelling as exemplified by life in Concord. Finch and Elder, noting a significant leap that might describe the genre’s fruition, write, “[w]hereas White conveys a sense of being unconsciously a part of the natural order he beheld, Thoreau brings an ironic awareness to his nature writing, continually recognizing in his wry style that by focusing on non-human nature we objectify and abstract it.”<sup>72</sup> This ironic awareness is characteristic of nature writing, this sense of attachment and detachment, that is inevitably evoked as language and writing become involved. Moreover, it also relates to the binaries (e.g. culture/nature) that are consistent in the genre, which nature writers have a tendency to deconstruct, precisely through seeking this very sense of awareness. According to Slovic:

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<sup>68</sup> Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 24.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>71</sup> Keegan and McKusick, *Literature and Nature*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Finch and Elder, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, 24.

Most nature writers, from Thoreau to the present, walk a fine line (or, more accurately, vacillate) between rhapsody and detachment, between aesthetic celebration and scientific explanation. And the effort to achieve an equilibrium, a suitable balance of proximity to and distance from nature, results in the prized tension of awareness.<sup>73</sup>

This demonstrates another feature that according to Slovic is a constant in the genre, that of ironic awareness, which is also evident in both *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Arctic Dreams*. The irony presents itself in more than one way, which may in every case be reducible to the subject/object or mind/body binary. A reason why I find the first-person narratives to be iconic is because they can perfectly illustrate this binary, and, as a wide range of nature writers exemplify, provide a better playground for its deconstruction. The already mentioned duality of a balanced/unbalanced nature is also a recurrent excuse for vacillation. In spite of this, ambivalence has arguably not been the most emboldened feature of these authors.

Despite the consistency of the ironic element in nature writing, a sense of assuredness arguably dominates the genre's atmosphere from the second half of the nineteenth century. This is due to the emergence of the environmental movement, which somehow subdues the ironies in favor of pragmatic resolutions (i.e. Conservation of a sacred nature). So, even though the binaries are still there to entice the narrator and the readers alike, the suggested stewardship over nature, or an insistence on anthropogenic destructions sustain the idea of human subjectivity and, perhaps even unwillingly, imply that nature is balanced.

Thoreau posthumously sparks the nature conservation movement due to "his recognition that the natural environment must be protected."<sup>74</sup> His vision was realized by, among others, two other nature writers:

Two of [the environmental movement's] most influential American voices were John Muir and John Burroughs, literary sons of Thoreau, though hardly twins. Muir led the fight to preserve wilderness with his Century articles about Yosemite and Hetch Hetchy, as well as with his founding of the Sierra Club. Burroughs popularized the study of local nature with his many volumes of "ramble" essays, and brought political and economic muscle into the conservation movement by be-friending such influential figures as Theodore Roosevelt and Harvey Firestone.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Finch and Elder, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*, 25.

But, similar to what the example of Gilbert White indicates, Thoreau also seems to provide a double reading of his works, while what predominantly have been prioritized are readings that underpin the premises of conservation discourses and the establishment of the “cultural tradition” or “myth” of “the mountain as cathedral.”<sup>76</sup> *What* it really was that Thoreau held sacred and insisted on protecting is at times not as easy to interpret as one thinks. There is no doubt that he remained a critic of excessive consumption, yet, a growing obsession with the steadily more disciplined protection of natural *cathedrals* have kept ambiguities and key questions in the dark, especially when it comes to the role of human beings in the dynamism of nature. In “Thoreau, Modernity and Nature’s Seasons” David M. Robinson writes:

As Thoreau's journal entries in the late 1840s and early 1850s demonstrate, he was keen to observe the signs of perpetual creativity and undeniable living force in nature, celebrating it both in Journal entries and in his chapter "Spring" in *Walden*. Thoreau's intense interest in seasonal change reflected this conception of the perpetual energy and dynamism of nature.<sup>77</sup>

And Further adds:

[I]t was precisely this revelation of a changing, and therefore vital, natural world that Thoreau craved. The rotting corpse of the horse did not mean stench and decay to him but an unconquerable vitality—it was not a symbol of death but of life itself.<sup>78</sup>

Several episodes in Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*, staged on the shore of an *unconquerable* ocean, supports Robinson’s reading. Bringing out the modern Thoreau, who resists being reduced to a pre-modern nature worshiper and rather embraces the complexity of the issue, is also part of the project of Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), which I have already referred to on a number of occasions. Richard Bridgman, also discontent with the distorted image of Thoreau, rendered by generations of selective readings, presents us with the gloomier side of the author in *Dark Thoreau* (1982).

This is not to condemn the entirety of Thoreau’s legacy and contribution to the environmental movement, after all, Thoreau had a clear political spirit that informs many of

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<sup>76</sup> Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”, 75.

<sup>77</sup> Robinson, “Thoreau, Modernity and Nature’s Seasons”, 78.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

these pragmatic readings, yet, this is to point out how the preference of certain readings and the dominance of certain discourses have succeeded in postponing a more fundamental grappling with a snowballing ecological crisis. The consequence of this was that “nature writers for whom the ultimate purpose of writing about nature is to subtly, slowly, indirectly change how humans perceive their own species and the planet, aiming to bring human civilization eventually into a more sustainable relationship with the non-human world,”<sup>79</sup> or at least those parts of their work that had such indications, were confined to literary and artistic circles, not to be seriously considered as assets to environmental politics until the emergence of ecocriticism at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Amid a minority of pre-modernist advocates, who continued to assign a religious holiness to nonhumans and sought a form of purity in the face of their sublimity, the environmental movement continued to steer nature writing, or readings of it, away from engaging with the *unconquerable* and instead allowed for scientific positivism to promulgate its sense of conquer. The boundary, or better to say hierarchy, between human and nonhuman remained undisturbed.

Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, with the publication of *The Sand County Almanac* in 1949 (posthumously) and *Silent Spring* in 1962 are known as the two most influential writers of environmental literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps because of their rather practical approach, i.e., how they according to Finch and Elder, “sought to create a literature in which appreciation of nature’s wholeness would lead to ethical principles and social programs.”<sup>80</sup> Leopold’s book, more philosophical than Carson’s, remained unnoticed until later in the wake of the environmental movement when Leopold’s philosophical framework, termed “land ethic,” brought ecocentric/biocentric visions of the environment into attention. This is indeed an important book, as it exemplifies the sort of environmental literature that encourages action through presenting a fundamentally new mode of awareness instead of preaching unexplored premises. Drawing upon his education and experience in forestry, Leopold visualized the land, or the biotic community as he called it, as a living organism with intrinsic value and made it his main task to preserve its stability and develop methodologies of living in harmony with it. To put it briefly, he sought a way of protecting the nonhuman by explaining how this protection will benefit *us* humans as well as others. According to Garrard, Leopold was “wary of religious language and imagery, preferring to communicate his natural history observations

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<sup>79</sup> Slovic, “Nature Writing”, 889.

<sup>80</sup> Finch and Elder, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, 26.



and philosophical arguments in a relatively self-effacing, low-key idiom”<sup>81</sup> and thus helped establish a non-anthropocentric vision that does not align with primitivist orientations. Yet, his land ethic is known to have influenced the more radical and ambiguous movement of deep ecology, which seems to perpetually expose ecocentrism to scrutiny and by so doing constantly renew the question of ethics. Despite the fact that Garrard sheds light on some of the problems inherent to Leopold’s philosophy,<sup>82</sup> both deep ecology (in its various versions) and Leopold’s land ethic remain as core discourses within environmental philosophy and episodically manifest themselves in works of nature writing. Important to mention are those attempts, for instance, Roberta L. Millstein’s newly published “Debunking Myths About Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic,” that provide fresh readings of Leopold’s work, by indicating how key points such as his notion of stability and harmony have been widely misinterpreted.<sup>83</sup> Leopold’s ethical model seems to be promising in the light of Garrard’s comment that “[t]he choice between monolithic, ecocidal Modernism and reverential awe is a false dichotomy that ecocriticism can circumvent with a pragmatic and political orientation.”<sup>84</sup> However, the balance that Leopold sought between aesthetics and pragmatism is an unfinished project that needs to be negotiated and devised as a defense against the dominant pragmatism of today’s environmental discourse.

Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is considered as the starting point of the environmental movement which led to the establishment of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Hence, it urges a reading that considers the book alongside its contribution to institutional environmentalism. While one can argue that Carson advocated for a sort of stewardship over nature, and by so doing maintains the gap between human and nonhumans, it is yet misleading to see her as a representative of the entirety of the pragmatic agendas of the environmental movement. *Silent Spring* is a highly revered book that raises awareness about the negative impact of pesticides and is thus held as one of the greatest examples of how literature can make a change. However, respectable as this form of change is in its own right, to revere and magnify this type of change threatens to reduce the ecological capacity of this book and literature generally, and, as Slovic suggests, defines its power on the terms of already established political structures:

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<sup>81</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 71.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>83</sup> Millstein, "Debunking myths about Aldo Leopold's land ethic", 394.

<sup>84</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 71.

Carson is concerned with the particular type of awareness known as "public awareness," the collective elevation of consciousness that is considered valuable mainly because it suggests the potential for political influence. *Silent Spring*, in fact, is the classic example of literary nonfiction designed to raise public consciousness.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps it was the demand of the political climate of the 60s to utilize literature as a means for political mobilization. However, in a similar manner that Buell invites us to cast a fresh glance on the canonization of Thoreau, a critical re-reading of Rachel Carson, and the philosophical leap she made, according to Norwood, from *The Sea Around Us* to *Silent Spring*<sup>86</sup>, can explore what she posits in terms of a relationship to nonhuman landscapes.

In spite of Carson's celebrated impact, environmental issues worsened and appeared to be larger and deeper in scale than anticipated. The Frankfurt school gained ground and more radical branches of criticisms emerged, including those pertaining to environmental issues. These new approaches saw "environmental problems as far too serious to be addressed by the fine-tuning of inherited political and economic institutions,"<sup>87</sup> says Clark, and continuing until today, these critics demand "a rethink of the material and cultural bases of modern society."<sup>88</sup> What such critics see as a clear impediment is, as Slovic rightfully points out, "the commonplace and frequently unexamined assumption that awareness will lead directly to corresponding action,"<sup>89</sup> a notion that still prevails among environmentalists. He does so in order to suggest new avenues of thinking about awareness and the ecological crisis, moreover, to depict the almost hopeless situation of institutional environmentalism in which the later, more contemporary, nature writers penned their work.

What I have tried to do is to quickly follow the course of the history of nature writing to indicate the subsequent periods of "establishing nature as cathedral," and "secular call-to-action," the former seen as responsible for starting the conservation movement and the latter for giving birth the modern environmental movement. However, what I wished to highlight in each example was that the dominant discourses in the aforementioned periods seem to have been determining certain readings of works of nature writing that do not necessarily contradict their stance but significantly simplify their inherent richness. This may vary from work to work, but this is indicative of my argument that splicing up nature writing's timeline

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<sup>85</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 169.

<sup>86</sup> Norwood, "Heroines of Nature", 337-338.

<sup>87</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 169.

based on themes is to an extent plausible but must not come with the price of taming their inquisitive and unstable nature.

Going back to such canonical works with an eye for ambivalence, can make alternative readings accessible and restore to nature writing its unique critique of institutionalism. This is the job of ecocritics, but also of nature writers who with a turn toward post-structuralist notions help to give aesthetics a renewed salience and agency.

The post-structuralist turn in nature writing (and ecocriticism), was, and is, arguably the response to the mentioned pragmatist tendency that seems to maintain a stronghold via its insistence on the insincere boundary between human beings and all else. In this light, bringing the unstable and uncomfortable condition that is key to ecological thinking into the spotlight, is then not simply another trend or epoch but, to repeat Latour's comment, "a symptom"<sup>90</sup> of a structural and ontological detriment that nature writing has been committed to attend to since its inception.

A later generation of nature writers set on to "explore fundamental epistemological questions, trying to understand how the human mind comes to know the world and the place of human experience within the world."<sup>91</sup> While the majority of post-1970s works of nature writing still remained vocal about the detriments of anthropocentrism, their association with varying degrees and forms of environmental philosophy began to balance out the urge for pragmatism. The notion of responsibility did not lose its urgency but was rather extended to a re-inspection of its meaning. In other words, the demise of the outer world began to appear as linked to a contamination of the inner world. In such works, according to Clark, "[t]he focus is outwards on the natural landscape as the agent of the process of psychic transformation, self-realisation and even liberation."<sup>92</sup> The quality and context of this self-realization is also a distinctive element that can roughly demarcate the deconstructive works from other nature writings. Later works narrate a process of embodied ecological thinking while being wary about quick resolutions. This implies a sense of immunity and at the same time harmlessness that an immersion in active thinking and inwardness can by itself entail. Finch and Elder write that "contemporary writers have responded thoughtfully and lyrically to the metaphysical and mythic implications of an evolutionary vision of creation,"<sup>93</sup> which is the case with the two works selected for this thesis.

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<sup>90</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 46.

<sup>91</sup> Slovic, "Nature Writing", 889.

<sup>92</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 28.

<sup>93</sup> Finch and Elder, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, 28.

This being said, it is a mistake to regard Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez as more progressive than, say, Thoreau, Muir or Carson, as if nature writing has been going through a conceptual evolution. Rather, as the precedence of their concerns is traced back to much older nature writers one can see their significance merely in how they better resist the pitfalls of succumbing to what their predecessors have conveniently been reduced to. This they have done by exploiting language and aesthetics, not merely as a container for what is supposed to be *awakening* material, but as a force in its own right. And what they have arguably achieved by their unsettling prose is to remind us that “feeling in control,” or a compulsion to secure this feeling, is perhaps one of the most significant obstacles to ecological thinking that we need to consider. The instability they invoke creates a fertile ground for theorization, which depending on our views upon theory and whether we find it necessary or not, can be something to either bash these works for or to embrace them as undomesticated spaces. This being said, the nature writers I will be discussing can, and should, be seen as theorists, rather than preachers, who while expanding the meaning of what counts as literary, are eager to reiterate the questions of their epoch.

# 1 Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: from definition to representation

An unorthodox rambling narrative, a mastery of language that meshes the figurative and the literal, and a vision that yearns to celebrate the marriage of spirituality and science may have caused Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. The book is a first-person narrator's contemplation upon a year spent in Tinker Creek in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, however, the book could easily have been written anywhere else. *Tinker Creek* is actually not so much regarded in its particularities as a geographical place, it is rather the ecological relationships that the pilgrim exercises that we read about in the book. By this token, Dillard is depicting an idea of *place* that is more akin to a network and is indeed giving us an interesting account of doing ecology. Besides its brilliant style that Buell describes as a "rushy kaleidoscope of perceptual and intertextual fragments, precariously contained by a basketry of image motifs,"<sup>94</sup> it is the peculiarity of her ecological preoccupation that caused me to choose it for this project.

Dillard is a nature writer who takes her readers to some gloomy places, yet, with a devotion seldom seen in her contemporaries. It is not the mere presence of deep horror in this work of non-fiction that makes it unique, but the way she walks us to, and almost through it, that I find worthy of attention. By a reference to theories that for the most part stem from phenomenology, this chapter will focus on the narrator's encounter with nonhumans that braid together the narrator's mind, body, and senses and take us through a train of thoughts regarding nonhuman agency. I shall pay attention to Dillard's display of several concepts that shape the arguments of varying strands of phenomenology to indicate how *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* could be read as a carpet rolled out before mysterious nonhuman agencies that in their emergence threaten not only human exceptionalism and its pertinent ethics but also the concept of humanity at large.

Once emancipated from their romantic caskets, nonhumans display a horrid mode of being that prompts a reconsideration of our definitions of ecology and ethics. Dillard does not embrace the horror with gothic audacity, neither does she immediately choose to distance herself out of helplessness. Rather, I will discuss, by a reference to Timothy Morton's theory

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<sup>94</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 237.

of “Dark Ecology,” how she hints at a space for considering some of the uncomfortable aspects of human life where our ethical guidelines hit a brick wall.

Throughout this chapter, I will highlight the lingual aspect of Dillard’s ecology arguing that she vacillates between the notions of *language as a means of representing the environment* and *language as environment*. From the perspective of the latter, interpretation, as a phenomenological mode of being in the environment, will not be regarded as an asset of human agency that is projected onto the nonhuman landscape, but as the unfolding of the uncanny being of nonhumans. The way by which Dillard attempts, to no avail, to integrate the darker aspects of antagonistic co-existence into her ecology is what I will finally try to explain vis-à-vis her adherence to *representational thinking*.

Despite her ecological disposition, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* clearly sets itself apart from works that provoke the conscience or posit social reforms. She is by no means preoccupied with “alerting the nation to the urgent problems of the environment.”<sup>95</sup> In fact, she does not pay the slightest attention to the anthropogenic damage on the environment that a significant number of her contemporaries, Rachel Carson being the boldest example, had started to voice. Yet, anthropocentrism, the alleged root of all the damage, is definitely something Dillard is determined to challenge. The mammals and microorganisms she relentlessly chases, her fish Ellery Channing, and the river that gulps down its banks in a merciless flood, are, among others, the nonhumans she encounters and strives to unite with. However, once her epiphanies, like when she says “I am the skin of water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone,”<sup>96</sup> is considered in the larger context of the book, questions begin to emerge about the genuineness and gravity of her claim. Morton makes a rightful diagnosis about such aspirations, which he then talks about at length in *Ecology without Nature*, he says, “[e]cological writing shuffles subject and object back and forth so that we may think they have dissolved into each other, though what we usually end up with is a blur.”<sup>97</sup> Now, this is not demoting, paying a closer attention to how this *blur* is reached in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and more importantly, how well it is received, is what this chapter intends to take a closer look at.

*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a work of non-fiction that narrates the life of an “I,” surrounded by a perimeter called Tinker Creek. Their relationship is, however, clearly at stake

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<sup>95</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 9.

<sup>96</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 203.

<sup>97</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 15.

and by no means convincing or solemn. In this context, I take the communication of this "I/narrator/writer" with "Tinker Creek" as an example of an attempted conversation with nonhumans. While the abstract space of this conversation is approachable by seeing it as opposed to, say, assuming a conservation scheme (often based on underexplored premises), such an analogy would only give us a partial opinion. What Dillard has set out to do, like many other nature writers, is to try to explore the nonhuman landscape in an attempt to recognize various forms of nonhuman agency.

Albeit an aura of sacrament is sensible throughout the book because of Dillard's recurrent reference to religious doctrines, the narrator's relationship with the nonhuman is far from the security and fixity that a faith in, say, monism could possibly provide. She also avoids the pitfalls of romantic idealization by a steadfast awareness of what Morton wants us to remember: "[p]utting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistical admiration."<sup>98</sup> Dillard is not one who would overlook contradictions and she does not take the sublimity of phenomena as an excuse for elevating the nonhuman to a deity position. This is sensible in her underlying suffering from a sense of disjunction, which she tries to resolve by finding a way to converse with the nonhuman. Yet, as darkness culminates following her confrontations with the amorality of a world that is "a place of flux and change, movement and indeterminacy,"<sup>99</sup> the transcendentalism, or what Martin Heidegger would call *metaphysics of presence*, seems to surface from the undercurrents, aiding her to take refuge in "spiritual answers to the meaning of disturbing natural phenomena."<sup>100</sup>

## 1.1 Language and denaturalizing the nonhuman

The narrator devises certain methods of seeing and recognition that she continuously tries to refine, to be able to assert the nonhuman as an agent capable of communication. What is interesting, and in my opinion problematic, is the way she insists to equate seeing with representation.

Nevertheless, the narrator's persistent stalking of nonhumans is not motivated only by a desire *to see*, but also a desire *to be seen*. The animals willful movements are on many

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<sup>98</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Papa, "Paradox and Perception", 110.

<sup>100</sup> Brøgger, "Anthropocentric Nature Lover", 35.

occasions reactions to the narrator's intrusion, and it is this sense of being recognized, epitomized by the moments of being seen, that defies the objectification of animals in Tinker Creek. "Did it see me?" she asks herself while stalking a copperhead, and continues: "How could I tell where it was looking, what it was seeing?"<sup>101</sup> Recognizing the capacity of the nonhuman animal to perceive, is a feature that once listed as natural becomes doomed to fall out of the periphery of our attention. Here, a phenomenological awareness of being subject to an other's subjectivity saves the subjectivity of the nonhuman from perishing into oblivion and being marginalized as naturally obvious. There are incidents like these that I refer to as Dillard's attempt to denaturalize the Natural nonhuman.

Denaturalizing the nonhuman is equivalent to constructing what Dillard calls, in reference to Stewart Edward White, "an artificial obvious." The quote she takes from White is arguably a frame through which the whole book unfolds, it is almost as if Dillard said it herself: "As soon as you can forget the naturally obvious and construct an artificial obvious, then you too will see deer."<sup>102</sup> Naturally obvious refers to the multiple ways of flattening the nonhuman landscape under the guise of "Nature" (that with a nod to Morton, I write with a capitalized N). The nonhumans that comprise our ecosystem, in this flattened sense, remain trapped in an impenetrable obviousness as if, in Morton's words, "there is a solid metaphysical bedrock (Nature or Life, for instance) beneath which thinking cannot or should not delve."<sup>103</sup> Now, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* can best be characterized as a collection of attempts to delve, by thinking, into what is presumably obvious. The narrator patiently pursues this task in her attentive and meditative stalking, during which she voices a skepticism toward anthropocentric premises.

Note that this is not to say that everything is culturally constructed, that there is no reality out there separate from our minds. Dillard clearly has a realist position, however, with a metaphysical flavor. Her mental representations of them refer to an outer material reality. This is evident in statements about the nonhumans such as this one, "[m]y ignoring them won't strip them of their reality, and admitting them, one by one, into my consciousness might heighten mine."<sup>104</sup> She does not dispute that there are Tinker-creek-nonhumans out there that exist independent of her. Rather, the denaturalization approach to the human-nonhuman conversation rather emphasizes certain elements of already existing but

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<sup>101</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 226.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid*, 20.

<sup>103</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 171.

<sup>104</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 95.



inconspicuous nonhumans and does not let them stay, according to Dillard, "trapped in the mute things of time."<sup>105</sup> By this token, the deal-breaker of "everything is nature," a usually romantic approach, is preliminarily replaced by a cautious claim that "everything is culture," so that the narrator can envision herself as a component within a network of communication and interpretation.

A reflection upon *constructing an artificial obvious* is here necessary. Following the former remark, the narrator says some interesting things about seeing that elucidates Dillard's vision of this process of constructing an artificial obvious or, as the quote above suggests, the process of *admitting nonhumans into consciousness*. It is still in the chapter entitled "Seeing" that we read:

Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization . . . Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it . . . I have to say the words, describe what I'm seeing. I have to maintain in my head a running description of the present. It's not that I'm observant; it's just that I talk too much. Otherwise, especially in a strange place, I'll never know what's happening. Like a blind man at the ball game, I need a radio.<sup>106</sup>

There is an indication of representation here. However, verbalization is being presented as a method for calling phenomena into attention by drawing them out of their naturalness.

According to Slovic, it is via verbalizations that Dillard

makes herself a more conscious, meticulous observer of the commonplace, an observer able to appreciate the strangeness, or otherness, of the world. Through her encounters with nature and her use of language, she awakens to her own participation in and distance from the organic world and to the dimensions of her own mind.<sup>107</sup>

This is in fact reminiscent of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, in which isolating phenomena in order to void them of any presupposed meaning or signification can be achieved through a technique called *bracketing* (*epoché*). Sokolowski summarizes the concept as the following:

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<sup>105</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 96.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid*, 33.

<sup>107</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 10.

When we enter into the phenomenological attitude, we suspend our beliefs, and we bracket the world and all the things in the world. We put the world and the things in it "into brackets" or "into parentheses." When we so bracket the world or some particular object, we do not turn it into a mere appearance, an illusion, a mere idea, or any other sort of merely subjective impression. Rather, we now consider it precisely as it is intended by an intentionality in the natural attitude. We consider it as correlated with whatever intentionality targets it.<sup>108</sup>

Having made it her objective to come into contact and a conversation with nonhumans, "to look spring in the eye"<sup>109</sup> and "see trees like men walking,"<sup>110</sup> Dillard uses language to recognize her nonhuman counterparts and establish a preliminary idea of their agency.

This helps the narrator in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to attempt to bring phenomena forth, in its thingness, in how they appear in the human consciousness. Albeit, as I shall explain later, nonhumans end up disappearing, or withdrawing, from the outreach of the narrator's subjectivity and put on a show of interobjectivity, only to show that they are not lone actors, but they are subjects as long as they are members of a vibrant network. In other words, phenomena, here the nonhumans, are exposed in their instability, dynamism, and fluctuation between presence and absence.

There is another important point in the quote. The narrator says that she needs a voice to *describe* what she is seeing and that she has to maintain *a running description of the present*. This indicates that she prioritizes the *presence* of phenomena, and is excited about her discovery of how representation can bring things into focus by turning them into concepts and ideas. What is at stake here is that the pilgrim, by depending on a description of the present, risks to confine herself to what is present, which overlooks the ontological potential in heeding to the absence of nonhumans. There is a problem here that Graham Harman's explanation of Heidegger can shed light on:

Not only is metaphysics the attempt to think the whole of beings—even more importantly, it is always a kind of representational thinking, which reduces things to their presence in our minds. In metaphysics, all entities are shown to rest on some

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<sup>108</sup> Sokolowski, *Introduction to phenomenology*, 49.

<sup>109</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 123.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid*, 32.

deeper ground or cause, and this ground is supposed to be more truly present in the world than everything that derives.<sup>111</sup>

And John Llewelyn in “Prolegomena to Any Future Phenomenological Ecology” helps us to see this as one of the pitfalls of phenomenology:

One of the risks to which phenomenology is exposed is that of seeing the nonhuman being as only for the sake of the human being or Dasein. From poets and scientists, phenomenological ecology may learn to be concerned not only with arriving by variation in imagination at invariants; it may learn also a capacity for the incapacity that leaves room at the edge of the *oikos* for the wild, the undomesticated.<sup>112</sup>

This is the pitfall that Dillard occasionally misses to avoid despite her awareness. In her desperation to avoid the allure of definitions she ends up preferring subjective representation to interpretation, which deprives her of wallowing in the pre-conceptualized or pre-theorized state of being. Her inference is in many cases steered by a transcendental mindset, wherein representation and a blind faith in some sort of metalanguage too-easily become an excuse to skip over the undomesticated materiality of nonhumans when it begins to manifest in interpretation.

Language, thus, while being used for denaturalizing nonhumans and releasing them from natural muteness, can fall victim to theocentric conceptualizations, i.e., some superior or underlying *idea* can block the process of interpretation and neglect nonhumans’ expressive agency. A page later she claims to be “the man who watches the baseball game in silence in an empty stadium. I see the game purely; I’m abstracted and dazed.”<sup>113</sup> This testifies to her transcendentalist pre-occupation with abstraction and her insufficient attention to the interaction between nonhumans, language, and the mind. As this concept, the relationship between language and nonhumans, is recurrent through this thesis, allow me to propose some philosophical reflections here, which I hope will illuminate not only this but many situations of meeting nonhumans in both Dillard’s and Lopez’s nature writing.

Dillard’s remark can also be read vis-à-vis Heidegger’s earlier thoughts about language and being. Harman, a philosopher whose Heidegger-influenced thoughts later led to the development of object-oriented ontology, explains that “[according to Heidegger]

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<sup>111</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 151.

<sup>112</sup> Llewelyn, “Prolegomena to Any Future Phenomenological Ecology”, 67. (emphasis in original)

<sup>113</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 34.

[L]anguage is not simply the expression of thoughts that already exist in our minds beforehand. Instead, language is the primary dimension in which humans are able to respond or correspond to being and its claim on us.”<sup>114</sup> In this sense, we are all blind men at the ball game and we simply cannot follow the game without a radio. To sit in silence in an empty stadium is a completely different ballgame, which has nothing to do with ecology or this discussion, it is another example of a naïve attempt at a metaphysical oversimplification.

Heidegger restricted language to humans only, or to be more precise to *Dasein*, the “being of human beings, which harbors the possibility of *raising the question of being*.”<sup>115</sup> Animals, he calls “poor in the world,”<sup>116</sup> because for animals, “[i]n lacking language, an access to things ‘as such’ will always be unattainable.”<sup>117</sup> Another passage, in which Dillard rehearses the same concept, also indicates that she might partially agree with Heidegger about animals:

I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque, so much black asphalt. But at the same second, the second I know I’ve lost it, I also realize that the puppy is still squirming on his back under my hand. Nothing has changed for him.<sup>118</sup>

She is via verbalization, constructing an artificial obvious of the mountain before being absorbed in the moment. The problem lies in how she sets herself up against the puppy, who due to an alleged lack of language and self-consciousness, is dwelling in some sort of ideal innocence. The narrator though, unlike the puppy, is susceptible to self-consciousness “the curse of the city.”<sup>119</sup> This smells badly of romantic notions of innocence that many poets would praise in animals and in children. If Heidegger distinguishes between human beings and animals, it is precisely because of *Dasein*’s prerogative of *raising the question of being*, i.e. its ability to engage in interpretation, not because animals are closer to being. In this chapter, which is called “The Present,” Dillard’s valorization of an absorption in the moment is reminiscent of the already mentioned *metaphysics of presence*, which Heidegger believes has plagued western thought since Aristotle.

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<sup>114</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 140.

<sup>115</sup> Schalow and Denker, *Historical Dictionary of Heidegger's Philosophy*, 71. (emphasis added)

<sup>116</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 84.

<sup>117</sup> Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 98.

<sup>118</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 80.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid*, 82.

Furthermore, Dillard's depriving the puppy of language is at odds with another part of the book, where the narrator contemplates birdsongs. I shall elaborate on it in the following section and will continue the philosophical discussion by referring to the later Heidegger and Jakob von Uexküll. I do not wish to exhaust these pages by referring to heavy works of philosophy, which all deserve thorough studying in their own right. Yet, I believe this is helpful for situating Dillard's form of ecology in the ontological landscape and explaining that her transcendental exit actually goes down to her obsession with presence and representation. This will establish a contrast with chapter two, in which Barry Lopez, with a different view on language, makes a better correspondence with theories associated with the semiotic turn that tend to take a fuller account of nonhuman agencies. To use the same analogy, *Arctic Dreams* makes us think that our radios do not only mediate between the game and us but that the radio broadcast is the continuation of the game's corporeality, or in other words, that the game's affect unfolds in the voice of the yelling broadcaster's interpretation.

## 1.2 Language and the question of nonhuman agency

Dillard hears a birdsong and writes, "[we]'ve been on earth all these years and we still don't know for certain why birds sing. We need someone to unlock the code to this foreign language and give us the key; we need a new Rosetta stone."<sup>120</sup> An array of observations and introspections that comprise *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are preoccupied with this desire to find a new Rosetta Stone, a possibility for a conversation. By this token, Dillard is aligning herself with critics of Cartesian human-animal dualism that date back as long as La Mettrie in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. La Mettrie claims that "the characteristics supposed to distinguish us – language, reason, knowledge of good and evil – are present in actual or potential form in animals as well."<sup>121</sup> However, unlike La Mettrie, Dillard seems to lean toward spiritual/philosophical contemplations and nomadic thinking rather than confiding in mechanical explanations. That is to say, her assumption of an animal language, a rather passing remark, is an excuse for her to speculate animal agency.

When refusing to view birdsongs as the mere result of an "automatic" mechanism, but rather a language with the possibility of carrying deep meanings, Dillard is assuming a subjectivity for the bird. Here she is reminiscent of the influential German biologist and

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<sup>120</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 107.

<sup>121</sup> Blake et al., *From Animality to Transhumanism*. 1.

ethologist Jakob von Uexküll, who is not only known as a pioneer of thinking about animal subjectivity, but whose concept of *Umwelten*, the way an animal “constructs its own environment out of the midst of its perceptions, actions, and relationships”<sup>122</sup> later informed the philosophy of, among others, Heidegger. In a book that maps Uexküll’s vast influence, Brett Buchanan says that Uexküll believed that “conventional biology had run its course by treating animals as objects governed by mechanical laws of nature such that they became accessible to the scientific eye of human objectivity.”<sup>123</sup> In this sense, Dillard’s wish for a lingual communication with birds is a proof of her attempt to denaturalize the animal. In other words, rather than blaming culture as what demarcates humans from animals and attempting to meld both into a natural whole, an arguably Thoreauvian move, she prefers to denaturalize the animal by ascribing language to it. I would be cautious about calling this anthropomorphism (while it by definition is) because Dillard’s denaturalization of the animal is done with the clear intention of disturbing human exceptionalism and not the contrary. Timothy Clark indicates a similar reasoning in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*:

[L]anguage that may seem problematically figurative or ‘merely anthropomorphic’ can also acquire provocative value as a way of doing justice to the agency of the non-human, as in Haraway’s naming nature ‘coyote’ or even Cheney’s talk of the ‘watchfulness’ of rocks.<sup>124</sup>

Thinking of birds as possessing language, or if one wants to go all the way, that the birds sing for a purpose, is conceivably Dillard’s way of elevating nonhuman animals from a mute and flat background and distancing it from definitions that have run their course. However, there is a much more interesting point in what she says next:

It does not matter a hoot what the mockingbird on the chimney is singing . . . The real and proper question is: Why is it beautiful? . . . Beauty itself is the language to which we have no key; it is the mute cipher, the cryptogram, the uncracked, unbroken code. And it could be that for beauty, as it turned out to be for French, that there is no key,

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<sup>122</sup> Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 2.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid*, 7.

<sup>124</sup> Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 192.

that “oui” will never make sense in our language but only in its own, and that we need to start all over again, on a new continent, learning the strange syllables one by one.<sup>125</sup>

Initially by equating bird songs to language as a code that can be unlocked, she was not only committing to anthropomorphism or moving against the grain of Heidegger but, more importantly, she is showing symptoms of an adherence to a Saussurian view of language. In this view, language is confined to intentional signs, especially to what is purposefully uttered, and thus confining meaning into what is stable or predetermined. As Clark helps us to remember, “[s]uch a conception is in denial of that shared proto-linguistic logos that makes any signification possible, our bodily imbrication in the reciprocities of perception.”<sup>126</sup> Yet, when she leaps over this view and instead equates *beauty* with language she arguably breaks out of this denial. There is much insight in Dillard’s intuitive remark. This quote from Andreas Weber’s *Biology of Wonder* might help us make sense of it:

Poets continued to heed the Orphic voice. For them the nightingale's song was a thing of beauty as well as a carrier of meaning. It was proof that the principle of beauty was tied to the presence of a body and could not be detached from it. The nightingale's song kept audible the metamorphosis that living beings ceaselessly desire.<sup>127</sup>

Here too, the agency of the bird seems to be affirmed not primarily based on the assumption that it is necessarily in possession of a linguistic system, like us humans. Rather the bird is an agent as far as it keeps *audible the metamorphosis* through a beauty that is *tied to the presence of a body*. This is more close to a Peircian account of semiotics, i.e. “that everything can be a sign, as long as it has the ability to represent something according to the individual’s interpretation and thought.”<sup>128</sup> And also Heidegger who, while actually claiming that animals do not have language, points to a vision of language in his rather radical remark, “language speaks,” which is interesting to consider. According to Harman:

Humans always speak, says Heidegger. We speak even when we say, hear, or read nothing at all, and even when we sleep. By this, he means that humans must always interpret and articulate the world in some specific way, even when no words are used.

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<sup>125</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 107-108.

<sup>126</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 50.

<sup>127</sup> Weber, *Biology of Wonder*, 201.

<sup>128</sup> Yakin and Totu, "The semiotic perspectives of Peirce and Saussure", 7. (emphasis added)

It is only language that makes humans what they are; animals have no language. But in fact, it is not humans who speak: *language speaks*.<sup>129</sup>

Let us contemplate, if formerly language, or verbalization, was mentioned as what enabled the pilgrim to denaturalize and see, what does it mean that language speaks? The first point to take from the quote is that we not only come into contact with phenomena via *interpretation*. Second, we do not bring things into being via verbalization, but it is verbalization that brings us and things into reciprocal existence. By this definition, when *Dasein* poses questions of *being*, nonhuman agencies unfold through what *Dasein* refers to as *its interpretations*, which simultaneously allow *Dasein* to infer a pre-linguistic notion of language. As Morton says, in *The Ecological Thought*, “[w]hen you think, you move from one place to another, from A to not-A. Like a magic show, thinking is this tricky play. The ecological thought is the Trickster, thinking of the Trickster.”<sup>130</sup> Therefore, when something strikes us as beautiful it is arguably not a fixed state of beauty that we get immersed in. It is an explosion of self-reflective interpretations that hint at this pre-linguistic notion of language, or, according to Weber, to “the essence of reality”<sup>131</sup> that creates the effect. A third point to take from Heidegger’s “language speaks,” is that it is not the human who speaks, it is language that speaks through humans, similar to when the nightingale *keeps audible the metamorphosis*. This third point is important because it gives us a lead to speculate new meanings for agency. When possession of language has exclusively been regarded as an emblem of human agency, “language speaks” puts animals on par with humans as both become embodiments of language. Now, if Heidegger believes that it is solely human beings who are capable of penetrating this embodiment through interpretation it is another story. What is here important, is to recognize the semiotic signification of nonhumans, their potential to spark interpretation, as a form of agency.

The pilgrim is struck by beauty on many occasions, and she does not let the striking go unnoticed as some automatic psychological function. There is a form of ecological relationship constructed in the moment of experiencing beauty that Dillard has a hard time articulating: “I’ve gone through this a million times, beauty is not a hoax—how many days have I learned not to stare at the back of my hand when I could look out at the creek? Come

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<sup>129</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 143. (emphasis in original)

<sup>130</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 82.

<sup>131</sup> Weber, *Biology of Wonder*, 195.



on, I say to the creek, surprise me; and it does, with each new drop. Beauty is real.”<sup>132</sup> Beauty is not, in this sense, a *property* of a nonhumans, it is a realization that emerges through nonhuman agents as a response to the pilgrim’s acknowledgment of their ability to signify meaning.

The chapter called “sounds” in Thoreau’s *Walden*, includes an encounter with bird sounds which can be enlightening once we juxtapose it with Dillard’s reflections. Thoreau feels confident to interpret the sounds he hears. Of course, he does not claim that this is the literal or stable meaning of what they utter, after all this is what *he* hears. However, that Thoreau takes these sounds as signs and engages in constructing meaning is truly interesting:

They give me a new sense of the variety and capacity of that nature which is our common dwelling. *Oh-o-o-o-o* that *I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!* Sighs one on this side of the pond, and circles with the restlessness of despair to some new perch on the gray oaks. Then—*that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!* Echoes another on the farther side with tremulous sincerity, and—*bor-r-r-r-n!* Comes faintly from far in the Lincoln woods.<sup>133</sup>

His interpretation is rather spontaneous and what he says a few lines later might work as a description of the way he engages with such interpretations:

I find myself beginning with the letters *gl* when I try to imitate it,—expressive of *a mind which has reached the gelatinous mildewy stage in the mortification of all healthy and courageous thought*. It reminded me of ghouls and idiots and insane howlings. But now one answers from far woods in a strain made really melodious by distance,—*Hoo hoo hoo, hoerer hoo*<sup>134</sup>

Can this really be called interpretation? Or is this nothing but a train of random references sparked by the writer’s imagination and environment? Uexküll, whose “studies of animal *Umwelten* gradually revealed what appeared to be a living play of signs and interpretations”<sup>135</sup> would arguably answer “yes” to both questions. David Abram traces a similar attitude within indigenous cultures, he points out that “[t]his watching and interpreting of the world’s gestures, as if every movement bears a meaning, accords with a worldview that

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<sup>132</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 271.

<sup>133</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 102. (emphasis in original)

<sup>134</sup> *ibid*, 103. (emphasis added)

<sup>135</sup> Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 31. (emphasis in original)

simply has no notion of pure meaninglessness.”<sup>136</sup> Uexküll would remind us of the animal’s engagement with world-making, via an active interaction with the signs that comprise its environment, and arguably, of the animal’s active interaction with other subjects by itself being a sign that comprises *their* environment.

Uexküll and Heidegger both serve to explain this abstract notion of language as world-maker, perhaps what is difficult to avoid is the division of world-making into a subject and an object of world-making, rendering the former as an active agent and the latter as a passive sign. Now, *interpretation* is that very locus in which I have so far tried to problematize this insincere division. It is still more convenient to think that nature writers write *about* nature, while my effort here is to approach a vision of the situation wherein the writer writes *because of* nature. Thus, theories of language that encompass how we interact with our worlds are helpful for redefining language and nature by inspecting interesting incidents that indicate an overlap. Thoreau continues:

I rejoice that there are owls. Let them do the idiotic and maniacal hooting for men. It is a sound admirably suited to swamps and twilight woods which no day illustrates, suggesting *a vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized. They represent the stark twilight and unsatisfied thoughts which all have.* All day the sun has shone on the surface of some savage swamp, where the single spruce stands hung with usnea lichens, and small hawks circulate above, and the chickadee lisps amid the evergreens, and the partridge and rabbit skulk beneath; but now a more dismal and fitting day dawns, and a different race of creatures awakes to *express the meaning of Nature* there.<sup>137</sup>

When Thoreau speaks of *the gelatinous mildewy stage* of the mind, and *the stark twilight and unsatisfied thoughts*, he is arguably referring to a pre-meaning stage of language, a space that can perhaps be inferred but never really occupied by a phenomenological suspension of the processes of signification. Based on our intention, our playful movement through signs and interpretations, we go about our quest for making our worlds. This is a process that Thoreau’s reflection illustrates beautifully, how creatures awake to *express the meaning of Nature*, in other words, Thoreau realizes how signs agglomerate to form assemblages that one would call *meaning, Umwelten, world or reality.*

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<sup>136</sup> Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 153.

<sup>137</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 103. (emphasis added)

Does the animal have language or not? Entertaining such thoughts is to speculate about nonhuman agency and, as my analysis displays, to think about the nature of language and meaning, a point I raised in the introduction. Therefore, besides referring to theories of language to analyze bits and pieces of these works we must hold in the back of our mind how different views upon language could also change our views upon the entire work and upon literature at large. We would better keep in mind when reading a book of nature writing, that we are actually embedded in words and sentences, which are *creative rather than descriptive*. Cheryll Glotfelty reminds us of this when he says, “literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact.”<sup>138</sup> Indeed, Dillard seems to provide us with such insights into language with her reflections. Albeit, she does not stay committed to them throughout and has a tendency to stabilize meaning. These insights can serve to redefine our notions of environment, ecology, and agency as they help us to see interpretation, not as a task of finding stable explanations for an already existing environment, but as *keeping a relationship* to an already existing environment. In the chapter called “the fixed” Dillard writes:

I look to the sky. What do I know of deep space with its red giants and white dwarfs? I think of our own solar system, of the five mute moons of Uranus—Ariel, Umbriel, Titania, Oberon, Miranda—spinning in their fixed sleep of thralldom. These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits.<sup>139</sup>

First comes the question, then begins the interpretation which reveals the planets in their agential behavior. Remaining in this space of reciprocal meaning making, which affirms and preserves the nonhumans’ agency, is dependent on the nonhuman’s unknowability, on its constant unfolding in *interpretation*. Dillard, like on many other occasions provides herself with a self-convincing quasi-answer: they are “all spirits”! I call it a quasi-answer, because, simultaneous to her rendering of phenomena in the instable interpretive space of myth, she arguably tends to “a transcendentalist leap from matter to spirit”<sup>140</sup> hoping to capture meaning in some spiritual domain.

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<sup>138</sup> Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xix. (emphasis in original)

<sup>139</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 71.

<sup>140</sup> Brøgger, “Anthropocentric Nature Lover”, 38.

### 1.3 Language and deculturalizing the human

In her curious pursuit of nonhumans and her willingness to acknowledge their agency, the writer is not preoccupying herself with stereotypical names and pure positivist observations. When she is emboldening the never-ending novelty of Tinker Creek, she simultaneously scorns this culture of naming the nonhumans:

If you want to find a species wholly new to science and have your name inscribed latinly in some secular version of an eternal rollbook, then your best bet is to come to the southern Appalachians, climb some obscure and snakey mountain where, as the saying goes, “the hand of man has never set foot,” and start turning over rocks.<sup>141</sup>

*Where the hand of man has never set foot* if substituted with *what the tongue of man has never set a name on* reveals the rawness, or “very reality”, that Dillard seeks behind these human-given names. That is, the narrator is still seeking an artificial obvious, but she devises a rather different strategy here to reach it. She does so by distancing herself from scientific nomenclature, a culture, that freezes the nonhumans into impenetrable lumps of species and organisms. She says:

What I aim to do is not so much learn the names of the shreds of creation that flourish in this valley, but to keep myself open to their meanings, which is to try to impress myself at all times with the fullest possible force of their *very reality*. I want to have things as multiply and intricately as possible present and visible in my mind.<sup>142</sup>

Another way of saying this is that such names do not freeze the nonhuman but rather freeze the process of *interpretation*, i.e. the manifestation of the nonhuman’s agency. From this perspective, these names that ordinarily stand for an achievement of a science-facilitated understanding of a nonhuman, conversely reveal themselves as impediments to understanding as they block the process of *interpretation*. Dillard avoids such titles as she traces them back to such cultural impediments, she seems to be agreeing with Grosz, who writes:

If culture does not so much add activity to nature’s passivity, then perhaps we may understand culture as subtractive: culture diminishes, selects, reduces nature rather

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<sup>141</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 110.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid*, 139. (emphasis added)

than making nature over, or adding to it social relevance, significance, and the capacity for variation.<sup>143</sup>

The ontological repercussions of these cultural reductions, that Dillard slightly taps into, is elaborated by Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, a work of ecological philosophy that incorporates the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Abram explains:

By providing a visible representation of that which was - by its very nature - invisible, they nullified the mysteriousness of the enveloping atmosphere, negating the uncanniness of this element that was both here and yet not here, present to the skin and yet absent to the eyes, immanence and transcendence all at once.<sup>144</sup>

Despite having a function, these names are impotent for creating any meaningful relationship, the relationship they establish with the nonhuman is not only exhausted, partial or condescending, it is static. As Dillard says, "I've learned the names of some color-patches, but not the meanings."<sup>145</sup> Meaning is not a static or stable thing; it is similar to what I explained in regard to beauty, the result of a dynamic engagement with *interpretation*.

An awareness of the anthropocentrism inherent to zoological nomenclature and such modes of representation that, according to Frida Beckman, "continually work to characterize, domesticate, and imprint more or less stable forms of life in its various expressions,"<sup>146</sup> keeps Dillard detached from habits of utilitarian objectification. Consequently, the sovereignty of the category that the writer herself belongs to, i.e. human beings, suddenly appears futile. As the pilgrim admits, "as I become closer to it, my fellows appear more and more freakish, and my home in the library more and more limited."<sup>147</sup> This subsequent dwarfing of human subjectivity opens the space for speculations on nonhuman agency and affect. It is close to the end of the book that Dillard writes, "[w]hy didn't God let the animals in Eden name the man; why didn't I wrestle the grasshopper on my shoulder and pin him down till he called my name?"<sup>148</sup> Rather than following the convention of perceiving consciousness as something projected from the human subject onto the nonhuman landscape (via naming), she is thinking

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<sup>143</sup> Grosz, *Time travels: Feminism, nature, power*, 48.

<sup>144</sup> Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 252.

<sup>145</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 129.

<sup>146</sup> Beckman, "J.G Ballard's Dark Ecologies", 62.

<sup>147</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 181.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid*, 223.

of consciousness as something that emerges from the object, i.e., The subject-oriented, anthropocentric nomenclature is debunked in favor of an ontology that is object-oriented.

Nevertheless, when it comes to naming, the narrator mentions a fish she keeps in a bowl at home, whom she has named *Ellery Channing*. Despite it being a human name, an actual human indeed, I would not resolve to highlight the anthropomorphic aspect of it. This naming, in particular, does not produce the side effect of fixing the meaning, it actually does the contrary. This will become clearer in a moment.

Anthropomorphism is still a common approach in the environmentalist rhetoric and in literature. Buell dedicates a whole chapter of *The Environmental Imagination* called “Nature’s Personhood” to the explanation of the tug-of-war between different literary figures throughout history who either dismissed anthropomorphism in favor of “objective correctness”<sup>149</sup> or adopted anthropomorphic techniques to attend to the otherwise forgotten nonhumans. As I have pointed out earlier and as Buell affirms, all forms of anthropomorphism should not immediately be regarded as suppressive or limiting. Of course, if there is stigma around anthropomorphism in the community of ecologists it is due to the fact that the technique has quite often been used inadequately. For example, PETA in a campaign to make us see fish as something more than a catch or a meal has renamed fish into “sea-kittens,”<sup>150</sup> believing that the new name will cultivate a culture of seeing the vulnerability of the fish. In such a case, however, anthropomorphism must not go unnoticed, because, besides fixing the nonhuman into a static and immature image, it works as an anthropocentric act that guarantees the survival of our sense of entitlement to fish. Naming fish “Sea-Kittens” is exactly what Steve Baker, here cited in Garrard’s *Ecocriticism*, calls “disnification”:

One of Baker’s major contributions to liberationist criticism is his elaboration of ‘disnification’ as a critical term: ‘With regard to the animal, the basic procedure of disnification is to render it stupid by rendering it visual’. . . Anthropomorphic animal narratives are generally denigrated as ‘childish’, thereby associating a dispassionate, even alienated perspective with maturity.<sup>151</sup>

Fish have adopted the name of another animal (kitten) that constantly appears in western cultures as a cute pet. Projecting the image of a kitten on a fish (within an established culture

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<sup>149</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 196.

<sup>150</sup> PETA, “Save the Sea-kittens!”

<sup>151</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 141.

of projecting a child-like cuteness on kittens), freezes the fish in a shallow and flat image. Disnification then is a limiting form of anthropomorphism that, like scientific nomenclature, threatens our relationship with nonhumans. According to Clark, “language forms a kind of cultural prison, confining its users to the specific conceptions and presumptions it projects”<sup>152</sup> Later in the book he gives us some examples:

In sum, the non-human, whether sentimentalized as Bambi, bred and slaughtered for a civic or religious feast, sterilized and then cosseted as a pet, watched on television or revered in its ‘rarity’ on some eco-tourist holiday, is caught up claustrophobically in various kinds of human practice and self-image, and yet for all that still extraordinarily remote.<sup>153</sup>

To deculturalize then, is to expose and break out of such prisons.

Dillard’s anthropomorphic move is exempt from criticism as it does not entail a distillation of meaning. Naming the fish Ellery Channing, similar to when she ascribed the ability to speak to birds, merely denaturalizing the nonhuman in anticipation of a conversation, she is opening it to meaning. The enabling effect of naming the fish *Ellery Channing*, as opposed to seeing it as disabling and limiting, becomes evident once we look up the name, it indeed provokes some curiosity about its origin. Ellery Channing was a transcendentalist poet, a close friend and first biographer of Henry David Thoreau. In the chapter called “Brute Neighbors” in *Walden*, Thoreau is visited by an anonymous poet whom many believe to have been nobody but Channing. A poet who, ironically, speaks to Thoreau about *going afishing* as the “true industry for poets”<sup>154</sup>! With this in mind, and at least for those whom this name sparks a curiosity, the naming of the fish creates an interesting dynamism. By choosing this name, Dillard has not stabilized the fish, but rather put it in the midst of an intertextual, interobjective context. She has, in other words, not named the fish, but alluded to the fish, by rendering it in an allusive relationship with another entity. Who is the poet here? This stark example, once closely analyzed, gives room to thoughts about naming in a deeper sense than what nomenclature posits. Lying behind a supposed fixity of the name, as exemplified by the case of the fish, lies a living play of interpretation that must not be underestimated.

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<sup>152</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 46.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid*, 185.

<sup>154</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 188.

The narrator's disappointment with scientific nomenclature pertains to the topic I discussed in the previous section (how nonhumans enter consciousness via language) and urges us to see it from another angle, that is, how language can become an obstacle and trap the nonhuman in an impenetrable and rigid *Culture*. Dillard, a writer, does not lose consciousness of these functions of language. In her quest for interrogating the gap between subject and object she posits that one must approach the nonhuman, without losing awareness of their subtle characteristics in its diversity and reminds us of the stakes of reducing them to actors of an underlying mechanism.

Yet, how long does Dillard manage to face the ungraspability of phenomena after releasing them from a *Natural* background and releasing them from the imprisonment of cultural convention? Not so long indeed. Her transcendentalist tendency does not allow her to sufficiently interrogate the gap between mind and body as her interpretation is weighed down by a desire to find solace in some sort of meta-language. As John Breslin says in his review, "whether the field of investigation is nature or fiction, Annie Dillard digs for ultimate meanings as instinctively and as determinedly as hogs for truffles."<sup>155</sup> In an attempt of constantly trying to transcend her condition, she seems to underestimate the living world of pre-linguistic signs she is conditioned in, and this underestimation arguably leads to her eventual inability to think the living mesh of flesh that entangles her in Tinker Creek. I will discuss this further at the end of the chapter. Notwithstanding, once the pilgrim gets rid of conventional names and categorizations that determine her understanding and approach to the nonhuman landscape, she becomes open to alternative interpretations and as the title of Elizabeth Grosz's book suggests, is then susceptible to "becoming undone." Grosz writes:

The human: when situated at one among many, is no longer in the position of speaking for and authorising the analysis of the animal as other, and no longer takes on the right to name, to categorise, the rest of the world but is now forced, or at least enticed, to listen, to respond, to observe, to become attuned to a nature it was always part of but had only aimed to master and control-not nature as a unified whole, but nature as ever-striving, as natural selection, as violence and conflict.<sup>156</sup>

Albeit, what episodically interrupts Dillard's metaphysics of presence, are incidents through which nonhumans portray a strange form of agency as they withdraw themselves, and

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<sup>155</sup> Breslin, "The Feel and Fabric of Fiction"

<sup>156</sup> Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 24.



to the pilgrim's utmost surprise, refer to or morph into one another. The narrator is persistent in her quest while keeping language *in* her fists, which does not allow her fully forsake representational thinking, thus, she does not seem particularly prepared for what is to be disclosed about her entanglement with the nonhuman.

## 1.4 Meeting the strange stranger

Despite her attention to the intricacies of her surrounding environment and her effort to access the domain of nonhumans, the pilgrim is faced with a recurrent outcome. Nature, as Dillard's reference to Heraclitus indicates, "is wont to hide herself."<sup>157</sup> The pilgrim's multiple attempts at phenomenological reduction is surprised by the nonhumans constant retreat into obscurity. The nonhuman appears to be neither fixed, containable, nor reliably present, it utterly slides out of the clutches of the pilgrim's conceptualization. It is this notion of hiddenness and ungraspability that fills the atmosphere of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that calls for a serious contemplation. If Husserl's transcendental phenomenology helped us to shed light on the intentionality of the Pilgrim's mind toward nonhumans and to understand their correlation, from here on it is Heidegger's critique of the founder of phenomenology that takes over. Heidegger did not exempt his teacher Husserl from the group of philosophers who remained trapped in what he called *Metaphysics of Presence*. What Heidegger realized, and what the pilgrim arguably demonstrates in the narration of her stalking, is a magnificent ontological potential in the *absence* of things, their *withdrawal* toward concealment, as opposed to assuming a steady and stable presence. Let us read one of the examples in which the narrator encounters the nonhuman with a surprise that cause her to recognize the interplay between presence and absence:

I walked up to a tree, an Osage orange, and a hundred birds flew away. They simply materialized out of the tree. I saw a tree, then a whisk of color, then a tree again. I walked closer and another hundred blackbirds took flight. Not a branch, not a twig budged: the birds were apparently weightless as well as invisible. . . Finally I walked directly to the trunk of the tree and a final hundred, the real diehards, appeared, spread, and vanished. How could so many hide in the tree without my seeing them?<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 204.

<sup>158</sup> *ibid*, 18.

For the pilgrim, Tinker Creek is crowded not so much by the presence of nonhumans, but by their absence or constant *withdrawal* from access. This key concept in Heidegger's ontology, here explained by Harman, seems to be pertinent to the narrator's pilgrimage:

A key term for Heidegger is "withdrawal": all things withdraw from human view into a shadowy background, even when we stare directly at them. Knowledge is less like seeing than like *interpretation*, since things can never be directly or completely present to us.<sup>159</sup>

. . .

Husserl's phenomenology holds that things are phenomena (appearances) for human consciousness. By contrast, Heidegger claims that the being of things is not their presence at all, since things are always partly withdrawn into shadow, and exceed all visibility and all concepts we might have of them.<sup>160</sup>

Despite the fact that Heidegger's account of withdrawal does not directly refer to a visual concealment, as in the case of Tinker creek nonhumans, these incidents in Dillard's book can be read as a hint to Heidegger's philosophy. Dillard, continues her stalking, filling the pages of the book in anticipation. Nevertheless, the absence of nonhumans does not imply that they do not have an affect, Morton describes:

[T]hings exist in a profoundly "withdrawn" way: they cannot be splayed open and totally grasped by anything whatsoever, including themselves. You can't know a thing fully by thinking it or by eating it or by measuring it or by painting it . . . This means that the way things affect one another (causality) cannot be direct (mechanical), but rather indirect or vicarious.<sup>161</sup>

As Dillard's anecdotes of stalking the muskrat beautifully symbolize, nonhuman recurrently withdraws itself from the pilgrim's sight and conceptual grip, leaving behind a trail of mystery. About the muskrats, she says, "I began to look for them day and night. Sometimes I would see ripples suddenly start beating from the creek's side, but as I crouched to watch, the ripples would die."<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, the discovery of this characteristic of hiddenness or *withdrawal*, shared among the creeks inhabitants, is clearly the result of

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<sup>159</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 1.

<sup>160</sup> *ibid*, 4.

<sup>161</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 16.

<sup>162</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 193.

Dillard's phenomenological investigations (denaturalization/deculturalization). It is in her stalking that she comes to meet what Morton calls "the strange stranger, the unexpected arrival, the being about whom we know less than we presume."<sup>163</sup> Contrary to her desire for surmounting the gap between herself and the nonhuman landscape, she realizes that when she intends phenomena, she loses them rather than to find them. She walks a step closer toward the muskrat, the muskrat dives into the water. Not only does the narrator take these withdrawals as attestations for nonhuman agency, they lead to a change in her vision of pursuit:

The creatures I seek have several senses and free will; it becomes apparent that they do not wish to be seen. I can stalk them in either of two ways. The first is not what you think of as true stalking, but it is the *Via negativa*, and as fruitful as actual pursuit. When I stalk this way I take my stand on a bridge and wait, emptied. I put myself in the way of the creature's passage, like spring Eskimos at a seal's breathing hole. Something might come; something might go. I am Newton under the apple tree, Buddha under the bo. Stalking the other way, I forge my own passage seeking the creature. I wander the banks; what I find, I follow, doggedly, like Eskimos haunting the caribou herds.<sup>164</sup>

Disregard the interesting reference she makes to indigenous people in their everyday matters, a topic that will be discussed at length in the next chapter, her mentioning of *Via negativa* marks the shift that divides *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* into two approximately symmetrical halves. Dillard explains in the afterword that the first half of the book is characterized by the Christian idea of *via positiva*, "that God is omnipotent, omniscient, etc; that God possesses all positive attributes,"<sup>165</sup> while the second half is characterized by *via negativa*, that is the idea of "God's unknowability."<sup>166</sup>

Dillard's emphasis on stalking and on absence is a sign of her clear distinction from the reductive tradition of, say, wildlife documentaries, which perpetuate the objectivity of the nonhuman animal by trapping it in the frames of the television. Wildlife documentaries edit and arrange data in a mode that creates an image of animals that remains within our perceptual periphery. They form an idea of a zone of proximity that is impotent and

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<sup>163</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 60.

<sup>164</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 186. (emphasis in original)

<sup>165</sup> *ibid*, 279.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid*.

inauthentic because it severely summarizes the animation of the animal and censors its withdrawal. Karla Armbruster highlights this issue and its implications in an article entitled “Creating the world we must save: the paradox of television nature documentaries”:

. . . nature documentaries rarely offer any character - human or non-human - that the viewer can identify with for more than a few moments. The exception to this is the narrator, who is often disembodied, even nameless, and always full of knowledge. By identifying with the narrator, and with the perspective of the camera that so often appears to be the narrator’s eye, the viewer is constructed as omniscient and capable of penetrating the most inaccessible reaches of the natural world.<sup>167</sup>

The stalking of the nonhuman animal with its entire stakes, is salient to Dillard’s phenomenological ecology, whereas the intimacy offered by the television mainly puts its focus on providing the spectators with incidents of presence or visibility. Moreover, contrary to the wildlife documentary narrator, as explained by Armbruster, Dillard’s acknowledgment of the nonhuman’s withdrawal destabilizes her and her readers’ position toward nonhumans. This is a destabilization that Heidegger would claim brings us closer to *Being*, precisely because it opens us up to an infinite range of possibilities and interpretations.

## 1.5 A mesh called “pilgrim”

So far, I have discussed how the denaturalized nonhuman displays its agency to a deculturalized human through its constant withdrawal into obscurity. I have referred to hypotheses of *language as environment* to claim that what we refer to as interpretation is actually the unfolding of the nonhumans’ uncanny interplay between presence and absence. This was all while I provided examples from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to demonstrate how nonhuman agents engaged the narrator in a “perpetual war between light and shadow.”<sup>168</sup> Nevertheless, the nonhuman does not display its agency independent from the others. That is, one must not perceive that nonhuman agencies or affects only manifest in a one-to-one relationship with the human. As the focus of my discussions may have unwantedly rendered such an image, I find it necessary to refer to passages in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that reveal how nonhumans connect to one another in and affect the narrator in their uncannily inclusive

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<sup>167</sup> Armbruster, “Creating the World We Must Save”, 232.

<sup>168</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 2.

entanglement. As Morton points out in *Hyperobjects*, “all entities whatsoever are interconnected in an interobjective system that elsewhere I call *the mesh*.”<sup>169</sup> Note, that this is not a monist vision that agglomerates all beings into one coherent whole, rather, the mesh is an interplay of affective and referential presences and absences which has “no absolute center or edge.”<sup>170</sup> From this perspective, two things need not be adjacent to one another to enmesh, neither do they both need to be present. As the nonhuman in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* seldom appears in isolation, but more often together with something else, it is interesting to see how the presence or absence of each indirectly affects the narrator. According to Harman:

[N]o two objects can encounter each other directly. Given that an object always remains aloof from its dealings with the world, causality can only be *indirect*, can only occur through some medium other than the things themselves, since these forever elude any sort of relation. It will need to be shown concretely how two objects can be absolutely hidden from each other and capable of affecting one another.<sup>171</sup>

One way to explain how the nonhuman indirectly affects the narrator by its absence is to say that its absence gives place to another presence. When the pilgrim stalks an animal, something other than what she was aiming to meet often befalls on her, then something else. i.e. the meeting, never directly fulfilled, comes about by a series of meetings with other nonhumans. The intended animal's recurrent withdrawal into absence brings another into presence or as Morton puts it, “[a] thing is shadowed by another thing because it’s shadowed by itself.”<sup>172</sup> She is chasing a muskrat and she suddenly sees a spider's web, a frog catches her attention and then she sees the giant water bug, she is in the mountains chasing bees when she suddenly sees a floating cloud.

Returning to Uexküll’s hypothesis of *Umwelten*, which he believed is created through “a living play of signs and interpretations,”<sup>173</sup> will make it possible to see these incidents as something other than mere distractions. As Morton puts it, “‘Here’ is a mesh of entangled presences and absences, not a foundational, localist, antiglobal concept.”<sup>174</sup> Indeed, as the narrator shifts her focus from one phenomenon to the other, from one’s absence to another’s presence, she is meshing together those signs that comprise her environment, the world in

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<sup>169</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 83. (emphasis in original)

<sup>170</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 29.

<sup>171</sup> Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 19. (emphasis in original)

<sup>172</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 91.

<sup>173</sup> Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 31.

<sup>174</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 104.

which her pursuit is occurring, and consequently becomes the subject that she is. In other words, this is how she becomes “Pilgrim,” and how she finds herself “at Tinker Creek.” Tinker Creek, “is not a foundational, localist, antiglobal concept,” it is a rather awkward name we might give to our interpretation of the vibrant field of interconnected objects. As I have mentioned earlier, this interpretation should not be seen as a subjective projection onto the landscape, interpretation is where the conjoined agencies of nonhumans unfold, it is a sensible affect of our entanglement. Morton can offer an explanation:

[W]hat is called *subject* and what is called *mind* just are interobjective effects, emergent properties of relationships between enmeshed objects. Some neurons are wired together in a brain, and the brain sits in the skull of a lifeform that is sitting at this computer, typing these words. Mind is not “in” the brain but rather, to use the Heideggerian term, “thrown” into the interobjective space.<sup>175</sup>

Given that *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a first-person narrative, we can easily use the whole book as an example of a mesh. James A. Papa makes a similar suggestion when discussing the theme of beauty: “language itself, i.e., the written text of *Pilgrim*, is used to construct a narrative in which the beauty of the prose passages must stand in for and take the place of beauty itself as it exists in nature and the cosmos.”<sup>176</sup> The collage of visions, thoughts, experiences, senses and emotions etc. that we move through in a mode of interpretation is all we know about the anonymous subject. The assemblage of these entities do not only make up *Tinker Creek*, they make up the *Pilgrim*. As one page becomes present, other pages become absent. Nevertheless, let us take a look at an interesting example of interobjectivity from within the book:

One night this summer I had gone looking for muskrats, and was waiting on the long pedestrian bridge over the widest part of the creek. No muskrat came, but a small event occurred in a spider’s web strung from the lower rung of the bridge’s handrail. As I watched, a tiny pale green insect flew directly into the spider’s web.<sup>177</sup>

This is actually from the chapter called “The Horns of the Altar” in which Dillard is gesturing toward contemplations about the violence that seems inseparable from

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<sup>175</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 84. (emphasis in original)

<sup>176</sup> Papa, “Paradox and Perception”, 111.

<sup>177</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 238.

interobjective/intersubjective relationships. Yet, we must not permit the story of the tiny pale green insect's escape from a violent death to overshadow the symbolism of the spider's web. She is stalking Muskrats, that is what she has initially intended by pausing on the bridge, and she is suddenly, like a pale green insect, caught in the cobweb. As if the muskrat has been a decoy luring in her subjectivity so that it can realize its entanglement in a network of objects. Weber's *Biology of Wonder* actually pays a great deal of attention to this very matter. Weber writes:

[T]his subject reveals itself as a bundle of multiple subjects comparable to a whole biotope through which stream the torrents of the world without any guiding agency in control. We are subjects without a firm center. This also applies to our personal identity. Our ego is not a fixed point. It only arises through interaction with the world.<sup>178</sup>

Weber also emphasizes that “this symbiotic relationship is *material* as well as mental,”<sup>179</sup> lest we do not succumb to representational thinking. Nonhumans are literally entangled in the mesh with their bodies, and so is the narrator. Interobjectivity can be a peaceful interaction and it can involve antagonism, it involves birth and expansion, as well as destruction and shrinkage. The mesh, our environment, is not stable, but dynamic.

This entangling togetherness, the interplay of presence and absence, the dynamism and instability of the mesh and not the least how all this unfolds in interpretation, are all concepts that can also be attributed to language and texts. My motivation for bringing in phenomenological theories of *language as environment* in my analysis has been to propose that such visions that are perhaps more convenient to have about language can help us to make the uncanniness we encounter in the more-than-human world thinkable. According to Abram:

It is this dynamic, interconnected reality that provokes and sustains all our speaking, lending something of its structure to all our various languages. The enigmatic nature of language echoes and "prolongs unto the invisible" the wild, interpenetrating, interdependent nature of the sensible landscape itself.

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<sup>178</sup> Weber, *Biology of Wonder*, 255.

<sup>179</sup> *ibid.* (emphasis added)

Ultimately, then, it is not the human body alone but rather the whole of the sensuous world that provides the deep structure of language. As we ourselves dwell and move within language, so, ultimately, do the other animals and animate things of the world<sup>180</sup>

From this perspective, the unsettling disturbance one, like Dillard, might experience by the unfolding of incoherent interpretations of the nonhuman landscape (what we experience as ethical dilemmas), can be explained and traced back to structuralist visions of language that cannot account for irony and paradox, and yearns for stable, predetermined, meanings. More of this will be discussed in the next section. Before that, let us consider another example of interobjective entanglement from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, one that while arguably being a leitmotif for the book, can highlight the material aspect of interobjectivity.

The pilgrim is on one of her walks when she spots a frog being slowly “sucked dry by [a] giant water bug, collapsing to an empty bag of skin.”<sup>181</sup> She gives her readers a truly horrid description of how the frog’s corporeality is “reduced to a juice”<sup>182</sup> before entering the body of the giant water bug. Her detailed description and the recurrence of this memory through the book is a stark example of denaturalization. What unfolds in the train of thoughts that follow this encounter is nothing but the uncanny affect of an interobjective entanglement. Not only does it attest to the darker side of nature’s vibrancy, it is also pointing to *the juice*, the primordial dimension that I have discussed as the dimension of pre-linguistic language. This strikes a chord with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “prebiotic soup” that can help us envision the realm that Dillard seems to episodically peek into. Buchanan explains how this notion of a primordial prebiotic soup can,

. . . offer an especially evocative picture of the emergence of distinct beings. Just as biologists and chemists have attempted to determine the first appearance of life from out of the Earth’s earliest chemicals such as carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen, as well as various minerals, so too does Deleuze draw a parallel with this prebiotic soup as a kind of substratum from out of which strata emerge.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 85.

<sup>181</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 229.

<sup>182</sup> *ibid*, 8.

<sup>183</sup> Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 171.



Evocative as it might be, Deleuze can support some of the former references I made to Abram and Weber through which I sought to challenge the deeply engrained border we assume between the material world and what we demarcate as the realm of language and semiotics. As Morton affirms, “Causality and the aesthetic, the realm of signs and significance and sensation, are one and the same.”<sup>184</sup> With this mind, the nauseating *juice* that Dillard mentions can be reminiscent of “experiences in which perception has not been probable and definite.”<sup>185</sup> Slovic names Dillard among those nature writers who have a special affinity with such depths of vision, whose “emotional results are disgust, horror, annoyance, surprise, and almost always (at least in retrospect) satisfaction with the intensity of the experience.”<sup>186</sup>

It is in the chapter called “The Horns of the Altar” where Dillard fancies the interobjective relationship of nonhumans in a more material and *fleshy* sense. She gives us an array of examples to illustrate how nonhumans literally feed off one another by, for instance, mentioning “the flies that make a wound, the flies that find a wound, and a hungry world that won’t wait till I’m decently dead.”<sup>187</sup> However, in the course of the same chapter contemplations on the parasitical life of microorganisms build up another vision. It moves us away from a picture of bigger-eats-smaller and urges us to revert our concept of a *food chain* in favor of a symbiotic togetherness that does not necessarily refute violence. Dillard claims that “[f]or most creatures, being parasitized is a way of life,”<sup>188</sup> and consequently, the sinister image of the parasite begins to be balanced out with evidence of their sometimes-crucial role in the corporeal life of their hosting bodies. Nonhumans, from this perspective, are corporeally enmeshed by being subject *to* violence as well as subject *of* violence.

Dillard’s account of the violent mesh of bodies, which sporadically invites the ontological readings I have been suggesting via references to *language as environment*, provokes interesting thoughts when juxtaposed with “the principle of ‘reciprocal construction’ or ‘co-construction’ of the human and the nonhuman environment.”<sup>189</sup> In this regard, Buell refers us to Stacy Alaimo’s concept of “trans-corporeality,” which “as a descendant of Darwinism, insists that the human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world.”<sup>190</sup> Alaimo believes that scientific interventions can reveal how our

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<sup>184</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 88.

<sup>185</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 8.

<sup>186</sup> *ibid*, 8.

<sup>187</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 241.

<sup>188</sup> *ibid*, 231.

<sup>189</sup> Buell, *Future of Environmental Criticism*, 110.

<sup>190</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 11.

bodily separation from what we call our environment is an illusion. Early in her book, *Bodily Natures*, she cites Grosz to elaborate on her picture of the “very stuff” in the “material mix”: “we need to understand the body, not as an organism or entity in itself, but as a system, or series of open-ended systems, functioning within other huge systems it cannot control through which it can access and acquire its abilities and capacities.”<sup>191</sup> Disregarding Dillard’s theological recapitulations, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* seems to share these visions.

Yet Alaimo, just as Dillard, is not claiming to provide us with a new worldview. They both merely uncover aspects of material life by relying on science that severely undermines our notion of separation, the notion that is allegedly responsible for our sense of entitlement or stewardship over nature. Alaimo says:

The cultural artifacts I investigate do not yield one consistent sort of epistemology, but instead reveal that a recognition of trans-corporeality entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even our most sophisticated modes of understanding.<sup>192</sup>

The position and privilege of human beings is fathomed through several scenarios involving the nonhumans, of which the one referring to Paul Siple, is perhaps one of the more interesting ones. Dillard writes, “I think of those crab-eater seals, and the jaws of the killer whales lined with teeth that are, according to Siple, ‘as large as bananas.’”<sup>193</sup> Interestingly, the seal bears the name of its prey, the crab, while bearing the marks from the jaws of its predator, the killer whale. All together, they depict the open system of interacting agents that have largely been disguised under overarching terms such as “evolution” or “survival of the fittest.” Each wound refers to the absence of another entity that directly affects the materiality of a nonhuman, i.e. it accentuates a withdrawing entity, which immediately refers us to a withdrawing predator, which through a flaw or wound refers us to yet another withdrawing predator and so forth. Proof for this claim is what Morton argues in an essay entitled “The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness”:

Every being is hobbled like Oedipus, since every being is marked by the traces of other beings. In this sense, every being has a little trace of nothingness in it, a series of cracks or dark spots that open onto other moments, other beings . . . The hamartia of a

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<sup>191</sup> Grosz, *The Nick of Time*, 3.

<sup>192</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 17.

<sup>193</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 240.

physical system is not an optional extra, but a condition of possibility for that thing's existence. Hamartia means wound or affliction. To exist is to be afflicted, and thus to be fragile. Everything is cracked. Nothing is perfectly consistent and smooth.<sup>194</sup>

The way in which material entities constitute our assumption of a subjective experience via their interobject relationship, what they display by, among others, being parts of one another's bodies, has also been the topic of the emerging field of new materialism. In a chapter called "The Agency of Assemblages," Jane Bennett, author of *Vibrant Matter* and a notable figure in the field of new materialism, relies on Deleuzian concepts to argue how "an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces."<sup>195</sup>

Above, I have given some examples of theories (perhaps with the exception of Morton) that put particular emphasis on the *material* aspect of the nonhuman mesh. Some, like Grosz, even recommend that we avoid speculating ecological questions from the angle of language and culture in order *rediscover* matter. Contrary to her recommendation, I have entertained that angle by raising the concept of *language as environment* and *representation vs. interpretation* due to what I find to be a better strategy. I shall here repeat that this approach, as exemplified by *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and more starkly by *Arctic Dreams* does not hold that there is no material nature separate from the mind, i.e. nature is not born out of culture per se. Quite the contrary, what we deem as material nature is the unfolding of a language, in a much deeper and pre-linguistic sense. Moreover, what we perceive as our interpretation of the world is not a cultural projection or womb for nature (the vision Grosz discards), but the unfolding of material nature and a proof of being in touch with nonhumans. It might sound as if I am also prioritizing material nature over culture here, while what I actually wish to do is to ask deep questions about the boundary that insincerely separates them.

Approaching such visions of matter via post-structuralist notions of language while maintaining a clear distinction from idealism, holds a significant potential for familiarizing us with the less comfortable dimensions of ecology. In other words, the efficacy of the strategy I endorse by referring to these nature writers is more obvious once we attend to the more gruesome aspects of ecology (what we will read in the next section). Because I believe that, in

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<sup>194</sup> Morton, "The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness", 18.

<sup>195</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 21.

dire times, the Cartesian mind and body dualism, that nature writing and the aforementioned theorists have made their project to interrogate, often seems to successfully re-seize us by its lure of representational thinking once death appears in the horizon. Dillard is what I refer to as an example of a victim to this very plot.

## 1.6 The allegories of gore

Dillard appears sympathetic to the theories of phenomenology I have so far based my arguments on when she writes, “landscape consists in the multiple, overlapping intricacies and forms that exist in a given space at a moment in time. Landscape is the texture of intricacy, and texture is my present subject.”<sup>196</sup> Admittedly, she does a good job of revealing the nonhuman landscape’s constant “flux and change, movement and indeterminacy”<sup>197</sup> and showing us the darker side of our entangled life with nonhumans.

Indeed, what made me specifically choose her as the subject of the first chapter of my thesis was her achievement in foregrounding some important ethical issues pertaining to violence and death that arguably shapes the core of the ambivalence we witness today in environmental philosophy. As Morton says, “knowing more about interconnectedness results in more uncertainty. Staying with uncertainty is difficult; plenty of environmental ideology shirks it.”<sup>198</sup> Though she gives us a good glimpse at “a monstrous world running on chance and death, careening blindly from nowhere to nowhere,”<sup>199</sup> the pilgrim does not stay with the uncertainty for too long. Dillard’s vacillation between the wilderness of vibrant interpretation and the solace of representational thinking might be interesting at first but eventually becomes rather disappointing, her final landing on the latter has caused many readers to be, as Slovic says, “put off by what they perceive as the work's anthropocentrism.”<sup>200</sup> Nevertheless, while *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* offers deep insights into the nonhuman landscape and provokes new perspectives on the concept of nonhuman agency, it is commendable for how it admits to the plight of taking ecology seriously.

Responsible for the book's darker hues are Dillard's sharp eye for violence. Many of her observations, the already mentioned frog and water bug incident, for instance, are

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<sup>196</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 139.

<sup>197</sup> Papa, “Paradox and Perception”, 110.

<sup>198</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 59

<sup>199</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 179.

<sup>200</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 8.

depicted as horrid scenes as well as fascinating. The chapter called "Fecundity" is where the darker imagery culminates:

[T]he landscape of the intricate world that I have painted is inaccurate and lopsided. It is too optimistic. For the notion of the infinite variety of detail and the multiplicity of forms is a pleasing one; in complexity are the fringes of beauty, and in variety are generosity and exuberance. But all this leaves something vital out of the picture. It is not one pine I see, but a thousand. I myself am not one, but legion. And *we are all going to die.*<sup>201</sup>

In this chapter, the author provides multiple examples of the extravagance of reproduction among the creek's inhabitants and provokes a striking nightmare atmosphere when she interprets the extravagance as a response to an omnipresent threat of death:

Birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives . . . Every glistening egg is a memento mori.<sup>202</sup>

Dillard describes through many examples how the pressure of death seems to legitimize all sorts of behavior in Tinker Creek and beyond; In face of this omnipresent threat, it seems that survival is the only law, whose infringement is unexceptionally punished. Her examples range from parents eating their offspring, to offspring eating their parents and the mass death that regularly happens in the water world. In their light, the mesh of interconnected nonhumans reveals its thorns and jaws and the shadow of death begins to divide the horizon between the eater and the eaten:

I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and

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<sup>201</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 163. (emphasis added)

<sup>202</sup> *ibid*, 162.

whose beauty beats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them.<sup>203</sup>

Admitting to these issues, and not letting them go unnoticed because of their harshness, is in itself an essential step that Dillard actually takes. This is why I believe every ecologist must keep *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* on his/her bookshelf, just like the pilgrim herself who said she “ought to keep a giant water bug in an aquarium on [her] dresser, so [she] can think about it.”<sup>204</sup>

Exposing the reader to a ruthless material force, in addition to the ontological violence of aporia is one thing, but given the darkness and threatening characteristic of this exposure, it is the matter of presenting it and gesturing toward establishing a relationship to this violent aspect that distinguishes one author from the other. As Dillard herself puts it, “when we start feeling the weight of the atmosphere and learn that there’s death in the pot—we take leave of our senses.”<sup>205</sup> She guides us through a gallery of gruesomeness and, as she allows the shock to widen the gap between her and her nonhuman counterparts, she gradually replaces the question of “whether we can become one with nature” with “whether we even wish to”:

Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me. This is easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe. The words are simple, the concept clear—but you don’t believe it, do you? Nor do I. How could I, when we’re both so lovable? Are my values then so diametrically opposed to those that nature preserves?<sup>206</sup>

I have discussed in previous sections how the pilgrim’s phenomenological approach opens her to new perspectives on nonhuman agency and her entanglement with these interacting agents. Furthermore, while being critical about the division between body and mind, I have been rooting for theories of *language as environment* hoping to provide a sort of loose frame for thinking about the vibrancy of the material world. Where there is a focus on the intricate beauty of nature, Dillard seems to offer us plenty of examples and some mindful words that facilitate our discerning of theories of entanglement. However, when she starts paying attention to the more violent aspect, when there is death, loss, insecurity and many deep ethical dilemmas involved things start to change and, as Brøgger also diagnoses, she

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<sup>203</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 245.

<sup>204</sup> *ibid*, 65.

<sup>205</sup> *ibid*, 91.

<sup>206</sup> *ibid*, 178.

begins to gesture toward “metaphysical answers to questions that literally keep her awake at night.”<sup>207</sup> The analysis of this dimension of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is crucial as it can reveal the stakes and stigmas around theories that deeply interrogate anthropocentrism. According to Slovic, “Dillard is content with the quality of natural mystery itself—its ultimate unsolvability.”<sup>208</sup> This is not untrue, yet, what I believe is fairer to say is that Dillard offers some sort of half-baked solution to the delirium by gesturing toward naïve metaphysical leaps and thus makes no specific contribution to the discourse of environmental ethics. I shall try to shed light on some of the reasons why Dillard succumbs into a spiritual recapitulation, right after she provides us with the philosophical instruments needed for recognizing our entanglement in a flux nonhuman landscape.

Following a contemplation on the hunter and the hunted, she resolves to admit to human being’s privileged position and at one point sees no other solution than undergoing a lobotomy, removing her human sensuality and morality, in order to be able to keep on participating in the extremely violent mesh of life in Tinker Creek: “We are freaks, the world is fine . . . We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized, and live on its banks as untroubled as any muskrat or reed. You first.”<sup>209</sup> So, as Brøgger says, though “her style is suffused with her constant, self-reflexive attempts to come to terms with this side of nature,”<sup>210</sup> Dillard eventually fails to achieve an appropriation of the violent aspect of being entangled with nonhumans and strays into spirituality. After all, “it often takes very little of physical impressions to propel Annie Dillard into dizzying transcendental sensations on a par with Emerson’s own.”<sup>211</sup> She ends the book on what appears to be an attempt to be positive and hopeful. She suggests a “dancing, to the twin silver trumpets of praise,”<sup>212</sup> which I assume is convincing enough for those afflicted with “the beautiful soul syndrome.” This is a term Timothy Morton loans from Hegel and explains as the following: “the beautiful soul sees reality ‘over yonder,’ separated from her by a thin pane of aestheticizing glass. Beautiful me over here, corrupt world over there.”<sup>213</sup> Calling it “the default ideological mode of modernity,”<sup>214</sup> Morton diagnoses the dominant environmental rhetoric and the subjectivities it

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<sup>207</sup> Brøgger, “Anthropocentric Nature Lover”, 34.

<sup>208</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 340.

<sup>209</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 180.

<sup>210</sup> Brøgger, “Anthropocentric Nature Lover”, 34.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>212</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 277.

<sup>213</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 154.

<sup>214</sup> *ibid.*

produces with this syndrome and emphasizes it as a serious impediment to ecological thinking:

Integrity and hypocrisy, keeping the faith and selling out, become the ways to calibrate commitment. This is ironic, since the ultimate hypocrite, claims Hegel, is the beautiful soul itself, which cannot see that the evil it condemns is intrinsic to its existence—indeed, its very form as pure subjectivity *is* this evil. The chasm cannot be fully bridged; not, at any rate, without compromising the beauty of the soul itself.<sup>215</sup>

Of course, Dillard is a literary writer, and not primarily a philosopher or theorist, so the fact that she re-endorses certain syndromes without sufficient contemplation can by no means be held against her. Susan M. Ruddick, in “Rethinking the subject, reimagining worlds,” explains the difficulty of this situation while accentuating the necessity of overcoming it:

[W]e cannot move beyond a generalized appreciation of a lively earth . . . the vitalist point quickly loses its punch: We become overwhelmed by a vast presence of subjects with no ethical basis for our allegiances. It is not that a reimagined, more-than-human subjectivity is sufficient to the task.<sup>216</sup>

I agree that reimagining the more-than-human subjectivity, what Dillard pursues through her pilgrimage, is not sufficient in itself, but being able to occupy the imagined position, with all its stakes, is what determines the succession of the line of thought that seeks to move beyond humanism and anthropocentrism.

The violence that Dillard describes raises a discriminating factor. According to David Lavery, following her confrontation with the brutality of nature, “she [the pilgrim] had lost the unity of eye and world she had once possessed; there had begun a rift between them and her own estrangement from the natural.”<sup>217</sup> The author laments over her self-exclusion from the nonhuman society, as “being eaten,” or simply perishing in favor of an other's flourish, is rendered an invalid option in the shadow of our human's moral and emotional adherence. The consistent skirmish on the human-nonhuman border in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is strikingly suspended in this episode:

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<sup>215</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 118.

<sup>216</sup> Ruddick, “Rethinking the subject, reimagining worlds”, 121.

<sup>217</sup> Lavery, “Noticer: The Visionary Art of Annie Dillard”, 263.



I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down. Look: Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. I cannot feel that way about your death, nor you about mine, nor either of us about the robin's - or even the barnacles'. We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit.<sup>218</sup>

This interruption, despite provoking a sense of distance, is simultaneously self-critical of the distance, i.e., Dillard steadily prepares her readers to face their inherently violent interplay with nonhumans. According to Morton, "[t]he ecological thought includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror. . . Ugliness and horror are important, because they compel our compassionate coexistence to go beyond condescending pity."<sup>219</sup> The topic of human violence, naively simplified as a misdemeanor in the conservation rhetoric, seems to dawn on us through an initial stage of projection, as if we project violence on the nonhuman canvas to be able to slowly face it. The violence ascribed to the nonhuman is easy to find in a human context too, yet, admitting to the fact that "[w]e're all in this Mason jar together, snapping at anything that moves"<sup>220</sup> is a matter of process in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a matter of passage through animal examples. As Morton indicates, "one task of the ecological thought is to figure out how to love the inhuman: not just the nonhuman (that's easier) but the radically strange, dangerous, even 'evil'. For the inhuman is the strangely strange core of the human."<sup>221</sup>

A closer inspection of Dillard's lapses into a separation from nonhumans reveals that these are the very moments she becomes alien to the vision of *language as environment* and of *interpretation as communication*. As already mentioned, her transcendental toolkit makes it convenient for her to retreat into representational thinking, which maintains a division between mind and body. In other words, instead of deeming interpretation, here manifested as ethical dilemmas, as emergent from the interaction of nonhuman bodies, or as Morton says "that ideas and sentences actually are viruses that are mind independent,"<sup>222</sup> she confiscates interpretations in favor of securing the position of an autonomous human thinker. To

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<sup>218</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 179.

<sup>219</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 17.

<sup>220</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 242.

<sup>221</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 92.

<sup>222</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 91.

Heidegger's surprise, all of a sudden, it is not language that speaks, but the pilgrim, yearning for a meta-language that can explain the turmoil she is witnessing. She is stuck between admitting to the brutality of nature and her fragility as a moral being as she says, "this direction of thought brings me abruptly to a fork in the road where I stand paralyzed, unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness."<sup>223</sup>

*Madness*, the instrumental repellent that stalls our pilgrim's progress should not be overlooked. After all, this is the space, or mode of existence, that pushes the narrator to take refuge in spiritual abstractions. What is this space? I would like to emphasize on an earlier part of the book, which is actually the first time of the overall two where the author warns us about "madness":

[T]he mind's muddy river, this ceaseless flow of trivia and trash, cannot be dammed, and that trying to dam it is a waste of effort that might lead to madness.<sup>224</sup>

She then immediately continues:

Instead you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness; you raise your sights; you look along it, mildly, acknowledging its presence without interest and gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance.<sup>225</sup>

In the first glance, juxtaposing the two warnings might produce the illusion of an irony: Futile effort to stop the flow (to move against the flow?) leads to madness, and then when you face the fork on the road, it is the hesitation, the stop, which prevents you from proceeding into inevitable madness. The irony can be resolved once we distance ourselves from what "madness" stereotypically signifies, and yield to the exploration of a space that Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* points to, and Deleuze and Guattari address in their *Schizoanalysis*. But here, Morton's concept of "Dark Ecology" can give us some insight regarding the madness that the pilgrim turns her back on in desperation. Let's look at a definition he provides in a book he wrote with the same name:

The ecological thought, the thinking of interconnectedness, has a dark side embodied not in a hippie aesthetic of life over death, or a sadistic sentimental Bambification of

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<sup>223</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 179.

<sup>224</sup> *ibid*, 35.

<sup>225</sup> *ibid*, 35.

sentient beings, but in a "goth" assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world: *dark ecology*.”<sup>226</sup>

The pilgrim truly voices this “goth” assertion, urging us to consider certain death-bound facts, but also gives us a way out by showing us a transcendentalist backdoor.

However, the difficulty of the situation is not solely because of the radical implications it can have on our approach to nonhumans. As Morton says, “The fact that the strange stranger might bite is the least of our worries.”<sup>227</sup> Rather, as Florence Chiew (building on a fusion of the work of Cary Wolfe and Karen Barad) indicates, it is due to the implications it imposes on our inter-human relationships:

Of course, we are at this point faced with a profoundly unsettling suggestion, for the radical sense of trans-species connectivity that Wolfe feels so strongly committed to must also imply that the questions of cruelty, violence, abuse or indifference do not disappear. They endure, because ethical responsibility, this trans-species experience as a social fact of suffering, compassion, will compromise any ‘pure’ sense of an opposition between good or evil, benign or cruel – indeed, not just between human and non-human animal, but between human beings within the one socius.<sup>228</sup>

Dillard’s inability to successfully cope with violence is because what Chiew notes in the last sentence seems to be taking Dillard by a shocking surprise. Dillard is so focused on the nonhuman throughout the book that she totally excludes the element of human contact and as Chiew’s attempt to elucidate, “a position cannot be posited outside the very problem it deems unethical.”<sup>229</sup> Dillard is standing outside the very problem that has struck her with paralysis by refraining from taking account of interactions with other humans in the process of her exploration. The unbearable distortion of her morality, that leads her to the sarcastic remark of considering a lobotomy, is an unethical situation that she literally retreats from. Furthermore, her being-out-of touch with other humans limits her critique of the individuality of the human frame as she does not expose it to some of its most controversial threats, that is, other humans, a matter that remains almost invisible until the pinnacle of her visions of violence. Rather than including elements of human society in her zone of investigation in the first place in order to

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<sup>226</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 184. (emphasis in original)

<sup>227</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 81.

<sup>228</sup> Chiew, "Posthuman ethics with Cary Wolfe and Karen Barad", 61.

<sup>229</sup> *ibid*, 59.

reach an all-encompassing conclusion in the end, she tries, to no avail, to imaginatively apply the repercussion of her individual confrontation with nonhumans in Tinker Creek to the human context of her urban habitat that she has been ignoring all through the book. Because her ideas emerge from a context that is ostensibly void of human interaction they, according to Chiew's explanation, are incompatible to a situation where other humans are involved. Moreover, Dillard's choice of excluding humans from her ecological narrative has tied her hands. Simply put, due to its inherent exclusiveness by being out of touch with humans, this is a fundamentally deficient context for speculating about human-involved ethics.

Another important point. Dillard's acknowledgment of human beings as part of a ruthless food chain arrives as a shock at the same time that we realize the mind and body dualism she has been smuggling into the book. Her chance of associating with the feeding frenzy is slim, arguably because she refrains from providing a picture of her own subsistence in the book. Unlike, for example, Henry David Thoreau, who obsessively reports the slightest details about the struggles and delights of securing shelter and food in *Walden*, Dillard basically ignores these aspects that could help her to situate and think through the violent phenomena she observes, while not entirely justifying them, by arguing on the basis of survival. It is as if we take her house for granted and that Dillard receives food from the heavens. She, for the most part, remains as an observing mind, or "a transparent eyeball"<sup>230</sup> as she herself says in reference to Emerson, floating around Tinker Creek, oblivious to hunger, until detecting it nonhumans. This is the transcendentalist spirit that occupies itself with representational thinking rather than seeing her corporeality as part of Tinker creek's texture. Had she, for example, registered the experience of participating in the hunting and slaughtering of an animal in preparation of food, had she gone hunting instead of stalking, her contemplation on the violent aspect of dwelling among nonhuman would not produce such a sudden and intense alienating effect. There are references to the wild disposition of indigenous people in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, yet, these are sparse anecdotes and not embodied or personally witnessed examples. It is arguably Dillard's inheritance from the transcendentalists that is to blame for her suspicious incorporeality, that is, the way she almost consistently appears to be inside, and yet outside or beyond her context. An attentiveness to her own corporeal features could humanize, and consequently aid her and her readers to better embody, the issue at hand. This, as I will argue further in my analysis of *Arctic Dreams*, is an essential method for speculating about ethics.

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<sup>230</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 283.

It is interesting that Dillard sporadically makes remarks that anticipates Lopez's method of contextualizing observations within interacting forces including the land, bodies of migrating animals, and not the least, indigenous people. While Dillard seems to be keener on the intricacy of phenomena, Lopez's emphasis on the patterns and rhythms in the Arctic landscape, also on the violent aspects of the lives of indigenous people, provide a frame in which violent phenomena never become fully acceptable but at least thinkable. He does provide an example of "Dark Ecology" in action, and does his best to embody it. Dillard's mentions the north in several places of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (specifically in the chapter entitled "Northing") in a manner of anticipation:

A kind of northing is what I wish to accomplish, a single-minded trek towards that place where any shutter left open to the zenith at night will record the wheeling of all the sky's stars as a pattern of perfect, concentric circles. I seek a reduction, a shedding, a sloughing off.<sup>231</sup>

It is as if she foresees Lopez's exploration of the northern landscape "where unimpeded winds would hone me to such a pure slip of bone,"<sup>232</sup> and imagines how its hostile elements that resist human domination, and its naked patterns, can offer a sort of reduction necessary for an embodied ecology. Other than the enabling/engaging effect she envisages in the Arctic environment, there are also, as Norwood points out, minor references in the book to indigenous people's violent dwelling:

[Dillard] is also taken with [indigenous people's] understanding of the cruelties of nature and even their participation therein. At one point, Dillard describes the way Eskimo women and children once used live birds to entrap other birds to make bird-skin shirts.<sup>233</sup>

However, with the exception of such few references to Indians and indigenous people, indigenous knowledge is not so much emphasized as a contributing element to ecological thinking in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and thus, left for Lopez to extrapolate.

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<sup>231</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 255.

<sup>232</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 255.

<sup>233</sup> Norwood, "Heroines of Nature", 342.

Like Dillard, whose work I analyzed in this chapter, some nature writers are according Slovic content to “startle or unnerve the reader”<sup>234</sup> by disrupting our premises about the uniqueness and superiority of human beings. However, one like myself can claim that the transcendentalist leaps and optimistic notes on beauty in the closing chapter of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* actually dilute the emotional aftermath of becoming a decentered human in a brutal landscape and thus resist to take full responsibility of the ethical dilemmas that the book evokes. My references to Morton’s *Dark Ecology* mostly served to manifest the space that Dillard only takes a peek into but fails to occupy. This being said, while works of nature writing such as Dillard’s make an immense contribution to the deconstruction of shallow ecology, they still yearn for being complemented by other works that give us a clue or direction about how to proceed or what to be open for. Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams* expands some of the aspects of Dillard’s ecology. An expansion that, as I will argue, is achieved by re-contextualizing and embodying this ethical predicament. This enables Lopez to shed more light on the nature of language, literature, and ethics and how they enable an experience of being in an environment.

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<sup>234</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 152

## 2 Arctic Dreams: from representation to interpretation

This chapter aims to analyze Barry Lopez's observations in *Arctic Dreams* and how they expands our understanding of nonhuman agency, which consequently suggests a reconceptualization of dwelling in an environment. Furthermore, as Lopez situates his investigation within the society of indigenous people by studying the overlapping of the material space of their everyday life and the virtual space of their traditional stories, I shall investigate how Lopez helps to depict indigenous people not as ecological idols but as a progressive locus for ecological thinking. Lopez's heed to indigenous hunting cultures and their traditional stories (vs. scientific data) within a vibrant landscape, is his most significant contribution to my argument about how recontextualizing and embodying certain relational questions, provides a more adequate, if not necessary, condition for speculation and scholarship, which science-oriented objectivism can at many times neglect.

*Arctic Dreams*, published eleven years after *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, was also very well received. Barry Lopez, who earned himself a National Book Award for the book, is still visibly present in the academic discourse. Generally, due to his contribution to the discourse of ecology and indigenous studies, his attendance in the public sphere through recurrent "self-reflective interview performances,"<sup>235</sup> and last but not least his heed to the northern landscape, which as we know is becoming hotter, both as a place and as a topic in the climate change debate. Lopez too endeavors to debunk some long lasting and harmful assumptions about our relationship to nature and, like Dillard, utilizes a fusion of science and self-reflective metaphoric language to expand our insight. Yet, despite he seems to be making remarks as exotic as Dillard, Lopez makes an effort "to retain the exoticness of his subject matter, even in the process of making it comprehensible to his readers."<sup>236</sup> He is no less poetic or fragmented at times than Dillard, but it is perhaps his accurate and unswerving way of incorporating elements of history, geography and natural sciences that bestows him a relatively more authoritative status, making him "contrast so vividly with the more flamboyant and whimsical modern nature writers"<sup>237</sup> in the eyes of Scott Slovic.

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<sup>235</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 18.

<sup>236</sup> *ibid*, 148.

<sup>237</sup> Slovic, "Nature writing and Environmental Psychology", 361.

More so, due to his acknowledgment of anthropogenic effects on the landscape, and his stirring of some colonial/post-colonial issues, his name has enjoyed a comparatively longer presence in the academic sphere. Judging on *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez is definitely not apolitical, like some would deem *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, his insistence on respect and attentiveness, epitomized by his bowing to the spirit of the north in the beginning and end of the book<sup>238</sup>, is addressing politicians as well as every one of his readers and is an indisputable effort to foreground responsibility. Albeit, this respect does not seem to primarily signify a respect for a metaphysical spirit or, say, a deteriorating body of matter; it rather seems that is an experience, a dimension and a mode of being that he strives to bring to his readers' attention. Despite the sense of urgency in his writing, i.e. the notion that "awareness is not a mental game, but a condition which helps us to act responsibly and respectfully,"<sup>239</sup> Lopez, as Slovic further elaborates, is "not the type of writer to propose an entirely concrete solution to the situations which worry him. . . Nonetheless, Lopez proposes at the outset of *Arctic Dreams* that the purpose of his book is practical, not merely speculative or rhapsodic."<sup>240</sup> This urgency can partially be seen in accord with the culmination of environmental activism in that particular period of contemporary history. However, the emphasis on responsibility is on the other hand, due to the phenomenological turn in philosophy that brings great attention to bodily experience, in addition to the more contemporary movements that flourish under the names of posthumanism, new materialism etc. that encourage a direct engagement with the rubbles that survive deconstruction. Carolyn Merchant, is among many who believe that recovering from the modernist historical narrative, that she blames for our sense of alienation toward the active forces in our surrounding, is bound to a reconfiguration in our modes of seeking and registry:

A post modern history might posit characteristics other than those identified with modernism, such as a multiplicity of real actors; acausal, nonsequential events; nonessentialized symbols and meanings; many authorial voices, rather than one; dialectical action and process, rather than the imposed logos of form; situated and contextualized, rather than universal, knowledge. It would be a story (or multiplicity of stories) that perhaps can only be acted and lived, not written at all.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 151.

<sup>239</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 138.

<sup>240</sup> *ibid*, 140.

<sup>241</sup> Merchant, "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative", 157.



In this sense, Lopez is expanding the domain of ecology by both width and depth (which is arguably what nature writing aims to do). This he does by illustrating an approach that posits awareness as emergent *from* the environment. He draws inspiration from indigenous people in their reciprocal relationship to the land and nonhuman animals, which is nested in the interpretive space of their oral narratives and he presents a platform on which posthumanist thinking can be observed in practice.

There is considerable overlap between Lopez's work and that of Dillard. However, as mentioned before, Lopez seems to be picking up where Dillard left off, by expanding our notions of nonhuman agency yet further, and via incorporating the features of the northern landscape and the way their agency shape the imagination. What is more important and central in this chapter, is how Lopez adds a human-society element to all of this, which helps his readers to assess the theoretical and ethical speculations in a more mundane and tangible context. If Dillard was doing pilgrimage, Lopez seems to be on a sort of philosophical mission. Slovic's comparison of four nature writers attests to this:

For Dillard and Abbey, the most effective stimulus of intense alertness is change, surprise, the disruption of the facile certainty implied by the Jamesian concept of perception. But Berry and Lopez assume ignorance or limited awareness to begin with, then proceed to enact a gradual and almost linear progression, a continual deepening of awareness.<sup>242</sup>

This sense of awareness entails a sense of responsibility, or to borrow a term from Donna Haraway, it is nothing but a sense of *response-ability*, which consequently opens new perspectives on underexplored forces in the landscape. As I argued in the previous chapter, acknowledging such forces and attempting to interpret them can itself be regarded as action, hence, I have chosen Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* for this chapter in order to conclude with what I will argue to be an important, if not inevitable, result of philosophical inquiries into the environment.

*Arctic Dreams* consists of nine chapters, a prologue, and an epilogue, plus appendices, a detailed bibliography and thought-through index (all attesting to a scientific methodology that underpins Lopez's authority). Through all this, Lopez covers themes such as animal

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<sup>242</sup> Slovic, "Nature writing and Environmental Psychology", 362.

worlds, the history of polar explorations, the relationship between inner and outer landscapes, the dynamic between ethnic narratives vs. hard science, and the life of indigenous people.

## 2.1 Preserving animal personas

The mode of ecology demonstrated by Lopez in *Arctic Dreams* puts most of its emphasis on a corporeal approximation to nonhumans. Following the second chapter, Lopez picks up a study of nonhuman polar animals (Muskox, Polar Bear, and Narwhal) in three consecutive chapters. Although his poetic tone is not entirely absent in these studies, he deliberately tends to “draw authority from modes of discourse taken as more directly representational, such as historical or biographical narrative and, to an increasing degree, scientific papers and reports.”<sup>243</sup> The implementation of scientific data assures the reader that this non-fiction author is well-versed in several aspects that pertains to his subject of study, moreover, that he will care for the border between fact and fiction with the responsibility that we have entrusted him with. Similar to Annie Dillard, Lopez does not permit his scientific vision to reduce the animal into an observed object. Instead, his reliance on science serves other purposes among which extending our awareness of the animals’ uncanny agency and diversity among groups formerly perceived as homogenous is an important one. This takes him as far as to say, “both individual animals and the aggregations themselves have ‘personalities.’”<sup>244</sup> He continues by disparaging our science-driven tendency to look over such personalities and the way they interact to create natural phenomena:

We are sometimes at a loss in trying to describe such events because we unthinkingly imagine the animals as instinctual. We are suspicious of motive and invention among them. The lesson of evolution with the muskox, an animal that has changed little in 2 million years, is that whether it is witty or dull in its deliberation, a significant number have consistently chosen correctly.<sup>245</sup>

This is reminiscent of Dillard’s protest against the naturalization of animals and her insistence in trying to understand them as in possession of traits formerly reserved for humans only. Garrard, in *Ecocriticism*, mentions Masson and McCarthy’s survey of evidence for animal

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<sup>243</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 38.

<sup>244</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 62.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

emotions. It gives remarkable examples of a variety of emotions in animals, including hope, grief, happiness and rage and a debatable set of more complex emotions such as compassion and shame, and explains how this has formed the backbone of the critique on denying personhood to animals.<sup>246</sup> Donna Haraway goes over several cases in *When Species Meet* to legitimize such speculations; and Timothy Morton mocks this denial of personhood in *The Ecological Thought* as he recaps research that proves animals *do* possess all these traits and definitely more that we will never discover.<sup>247</sup> Indeed, acknowledging that every animal combines some of these traits to find a unique personality is crucial for Lopez. Not only because it affirms the agency of those particular nonhumans or because it hints at a possibility of an interpersonal interaction, but primarily because it accentuates how “they are making judgments at every point about what to do.”<sup>248</sup> Nonhumans are beings that make choices based on their interpretation and *constantly change* in order to maintain their symbiotic entanglement in the mesh.

Lopez approaches the point-of-view and the sense of judgement in nonhumans by referring to Jakob von Uexküll, whom I also briefly mentioned in chapter one. Lopez describes Uexküll’s concept of *Umwelt* in a footnote:

The world we perceive around an animal is its *environment*; what it sees is its *Umwelt*, or self-world. A specific environment contains many *Umwelten*, no two of which are the same. The concept, developed by Jakob von Uexküll in 1934, assumes that the structure of the organs of perception, the emphasis each receives, the level of their sensitivity, and the ability of each to discriminate, are different in all animals.<sup>249</sup>

Buell describes how Lopez follows the indigenous people’s footsteps as he “tries to imagine nonhuman perception-how an island looks to a loon or land terrain to a fox [and] tries to get inside the creature's heads and reconstruct how its range looks from its own standpoint.”<sup>250</sup> To achieve communication, he posits, one needs to be open to nonhuman affects agencies that unfolds through interpretation; imagining yourself from the point of view of a nonhuman is but one way to do that. This is why Sigfrid Kjeldaas thinks that “*Arctic Dreams* can be read as part of a tradition of hunting philosophy in which hunting is regarded as an activity through

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<sup>246</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 138.

<sup>247</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 71.

<sup>248</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 92.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 268. (emphasis in original)

<sup>250</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 271.

which a reconnection with the natural world is still possible.”<sup>251</sup> Attention to these forms of *Umwelten*, the “universe of the seal”<sup>252</sup> for instance, is what Lopez has detected to be a sacred part of indigenous people’s culture, which arguably elevated hunting from a mere act of securing food sources to communication, to an embodied exercise of ecological ethics. Lopez carefully studies how, say, traditional hunters engage in an “intra-action,”<sup>253</sup> to borrow a term from Donna Haraway, with their preys by maintaining a “material-semiotic”<sup>254</sup> relationship in the virtual space of their traditional stories. Lopez writes, “[t]he focus of a hunter in a hunting society was not killing animals but attending to the myriad relationships he understood bound him into the world he occupied with them. He tended to those duties carefully because he perceived in them everything he understood about survival.”<sup>255</sup>

Lopez dedicates many pages of his book to foreground how perceiving oneself in the myriad of relationships, a concept I discussed thoroughly in the previous chapter by referring to Morton’s theory of “the mesh,”<sup>256</sup> results from an indigenous person’s active interpretation of the world from the unique perspective of each and every animal it seeks to hunt. According to Slovic, “The mental state of hunting is what Lopez seeks. Just as the two types of ‘stalking’ (active and passive) serve Annie Dillard as metaphors for elevated consciousness, hunting ‘becomes a metaphor that enables Lopez to speak of the requisite alertness of another kind of experience.’”<sup>257</sup> To elaborate on this notion of ethical interaction, which results from respecting a nonhuman’s *Umwelten*, let us reflect on this rather lengthy passage from Haraway’s *When Species Meet*:

Response, of course, grows with the capacity to respond, that is, responsibility. Such a capacity can be shaped only in and for multidirectional relationships, in which always more than one responsive entity is in the process of becoming. That means that human beings are not uniquely obligated to and gifted with responsibility; animals as workers in labs, animals in all their worlds, are response-able in the same sense as people are; that is, responsibility is a relationship crafted in intra-action through which entities, subjects and objects, come into being.<sup>4</sup> People and animals in labs are both subjects and objects to each other in ongoing intra-action. If this structure of material–semiotic

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<sup>251</sup> Kjeldaa, “Barry Lopez’s Relational Arctic”, 3.

<sup>252</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 25.

<sup>253</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 71.

<sup>254</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 168.

<sup>256</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 28-33.

<sup>257</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 159.

relating breaks down or is not permitted to be born, then nothing but objectification and oppression remains.<sup>258</sup>

The exemplification of a lab makes a good analogy as it raises similar ethical question that one might face when contemplating an activity like hunting, an animal is being hurt if not killed. Both Lopez and Haraway seem to point to a mode of ethical interaction that does not exclude corporeal harm and both clearly highlight how the ethics stems from an openness to nonhuman agency. In fact, this exercise, or its ontological implication, is what Lopez suggests can fill the holes of current modes of scientific empiricism:

The discovery of an animal's *Umwelt* and its elucidation require great patience and experimental ingenuity, a free exchange of information among different observers, hours of direct observation, and a reluctance to summarize the animal. This, in my experience, is the Eskimo hunter's methodology. Under ideal circumstances it can also be the methodology of Western science.<sup>259</sup>

For those who might insist that the scientific approach consists of the same activities, Lopez points to the "tyranny of statistics" and how the goal of scientific inquiry to produce statistic data and "standardized animals" inevitably succumbs to the summarization of its subject,<sup>260</sup> and curtailing animals of their agency. The ideal circumstances that Lopez envisages is to move in the opposite direction, to be open to the surge of perplexities that being in touch with a nonhuman entails. Answering the questions of "Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?," Haraway writes:

My premise is that touch ramifies and shapes accountability. Accountability, caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions . . . Touch, regard, looking back, becoming with—all these *make us responsible in unpredictable ways for which worlds take shape*. In touch and regard, partners willy nilly are in the *miscegenous mud* that infuses our bodies with all that brought that contact into being. Touch and regard have consequences.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 71.

<sup>259</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 222.

<sup>260</sup> *ibid*, 223.

<sup>261</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36. (emphasis added)

Companion species, lab animals, or targets of hunt, the subject at hand is a deep inquiry into a fluid life that crystalizes into human and nonhuman corporeality and their contact. What Haraway refers to as *miscegenous mud* seems pertinent to Heidegger's hint to language in its primordial, prelinguistic sense, also to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "prebiotic soup,"<sup>262</sup> which I referred to while reading the pilgrim's encounter with the *juice* that the giant water bug's pray had been reduced to. That was an incident between nonhumans, Haraway and Lopez give us examples of such interactions between humans and nonhumans and of course it is when there is violence involved that questions about accountability and ethics begin to overwhelm us. *When Species Meet*, while criticizing Deleuze and Guattari for disregarding individual animals and overlooking accountability, charts a range of technological, political and biological aspects that compose the mechanism of crystallization of species, whereas, *Arctic Dreams* narrows our attention on the dynamic between evolution and extinction.

Nevertheless, what is especially interesting for Lopez in this regard is how the notion of animal personality, this constant regard for nonhuman *Umwelten*, is manifested in indigenous oral traditions. He goes over several indigenous stories about *Tôrnârssuk*, *Kokogiaq*, etc. that, as opposed to scientific labels that reduce bears to "known objects", maintain the idea that bears have personalities. The stories open an aesthetic dimension or preserve a metaphoric relationship, that engages the imagination rather than pure logic and thus allows interpretation to flourish. Abram, whose *The Spell of the Sensuous* regards indigenous oral traditions from a phenomenological lens, explains through examples how these people retained their relationship to shifting terrains through their stories, he writes:

The only causality proper to such stories is a kind of cyclical causality alien to modern thought, according to which persons may influence events in the enveloping natural order and yet are themselves continually under the influence of those very events . . . these stories affirm human kinship with the multiple forms of the surrounding terrain.<sup>263</sup>

Haraway is not among those who are alien to this concept, her scholarship can potentially be used to underpin such thoughts I discussed in the previous chapter that regard interpretation as a mode of communication or being with nonhumans, and as the unfolding of their uncanny

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<sup>262</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 55.

<sup>263</sup> Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 121.

agency. The consequences of *touch and regard* that she points to, can arguably only breathe in imaginative spaces that are not confined to the rigidity of pure scientific reasoning.

Nevertheless, before getting into discussions about the quality of this interactive relationship let us continue further with this notion of nonhuman agency to see how *Arctic Dreams* helps us to recognize it in elements and places we might formerly conceived of as dead, passive, or barren. This will not make the situation clearer and more simple to understand, but will render us in the midst of what seems to be an orgy of agencies.

## 2.2 A truly living landscape

Lopez, having spent a considerable time in the North, says that “[t]he overall impression, coming from the South, would be of movement from a very complex world to a quite simplified one.” However, he makes sure to emphasize that this impression “is something of an illusion”:

The complexities in Arctic ecosystems lie not with, say, esoteric dietary preferences among 100 different kinds of ground beetle making a living on the same tropical acre, but with an intricacy of rhythmic response to extreme ranges of light and temperature.

With the seasonal movement of large numbers of migratory animals. And with their adaptation to violent, but natural, fluctuations in their population levels.<sup>264</sup>

In this section I will try to unpack this quote, which in only five lines make several points that each deserve a thorough study.

As positive as Lopez seems to be about indigenous people’s co-exposure, together with the animal, to the forces that drive the wheel of evolution, i.e. how “[m]an and bear are affected as well by the vicissitudes of a harsh climate,”<sup>265</sup> he is clear to point out how modern western cultures have abandoned this position and consequently come to neglect the sovereignty of these forces:

Human beings dwell in the same biological systems that contain the other creatures but, to put the thought bluntly, they are not governed by the same laws of evolution.

With the development of various technologies—hunting weapons, protective clothing,

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<sup>264</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 33.

<sup>265</sup> *ibid*, 96.

and fire-making tools; and then agriculture and herding—mankind has not only been able to take over the specific niches of other animals but has been able to move into regions that were formerly unavailable to him.<sup>266</sup>

These speculations in the very first chapter of *Arctic Dreams* hold a very important message. The distinction between indigenous people and westerners seems to lie, not only in their varying relationship to individual animals but also in their position toward the forces that surge through the land. As indigenous people are constantly taking these forces into account through their steady engagement with metaphoric interpretation and negotiation with the land, westerners, whether the romantic explorer or the more politically driven seafarer, seems to have established an identity on the basis of subjugating, an almost denying, the agency of these forces. Lopez writes:

A Yup'ik hunter on Saint Lawrence Island once told me that what traditional Eskimos fear most about us is the extent of our power to alter the land, the scale of that power, and the fact that we can easily effect some of these changes electronically, from a distant city. Eskimos, who sometimes see themselves as still not quite separate from the animal world, regard us as a kind of people whose separation may have become too complete. They call us, with a mixture of incredulity and apprehension, “the people who change nature.”<sup>267</sup>

The preoccupation of western industries with bending the forces of nature to their own needs has, as explained in the previous section, not only categorically dismissed the inherent uniqueness and value of individual animals but has on the broader scale made us oblivious about the unexplored nonhuman agents that manifest themselves in the flourish or demise of diverse life-forms.

It is arguably these forces that indigenous people pay homage to during a hunt. In other words, when each individual nonhuman's personality or *Umwelten* is interpreted, even in isolation, what is arguably being unraveled is the body of forces and the circumstances that the nonhuman is in an interobjective relationship with. An animal has a personality, he argues, and thus agency, because of the choices it makes about how to protect itself and because of the affects it produces by its choices. On a larger scale, the underlying forces in the Arctic landscape also show signs of a personality or a discernable *Umwelten*. Their courses of

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<sup>266</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 42.

<sup>267</sup> *ibid*, 43.



action and their affects manifest in the very flesh of every newborn polar bear cub or the rotting cadaver of a caribou. As Lopez says, “something else about man and nature and extinction, much older, flows here.”<sup>268</sup>

Why all this insistence on granting agency to the nonhuman, on the micro animal scale, or the larger climate scale? Why praise indigenous people’s effort to rehearse and retain these agencies in their stories? Well, the conversation with the nonhuman appears more possible once we assert the nonhuman as an agent, and a conversation with the nonhuman, the missing link that Annie Dillard also wished to accomplish through the chasing of Muskrats, is more conceivable when the less-visible agents are also included. So far, this is anthropomorphic, but not necessarily anthropocentric. The nonhuman agency in focus here, however, is one that is not granted by humans. What we perceive of nonhumans, when engaged in *interpretation rather than definition or representation*, is the manifestation of the very agency of nonhumans. In this sense human beings can only be the granter of nonhuman personalities, i.e. the sentinel of the interpretive space. This is what Latour calls a “metamorphic zone that we have learned to recognize and that is leading us, little by little, beneath and beyond the superficial characterizations, to a radically new distribution of the forms granted to humans, societies, nonhumans, and divinities.”<sup>269</sup>

Speaking of grander approaches to the meaning of agency, Dillard was indeed aware of the deconstructive quality of considering an animal as an instance in a span of evolution as she said “when I lose interest in a given bird, I try to renew it by looking at the bird in either of two ways. I imagine neutrinos passing through its feathers and into its heart and lungs, or I reverse its evolution and imagine it as a lizard.”<sup>270</sup> However, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* does not add much insight to the already established Darwinist notion of the survival of the fittest when she, for instance, claims that “utility to the creature is evolution’s only aesthetic consideration.”<sup>271</sup> She does not do much more than adding to its monstrosity in those episodes that she contemplates the violence of the nonhuman landscape and maintains a very individualistic image of evolution. By so doing, Dillard essentializes and naturalizes several interlocking forces in a given region under the umbrellas of evolution or food chain, and creates an impediment for realizing the intricate intersecting forces that compose an ecosystem. “Evolution” is not inherently misleading as a term, though in many contexts it

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<sup>268</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 52.

<sup>269</sup> Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 119.

<sup>270</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 106.

<sup>271</sup> *ibid*, 136.

seems to be summarizing and concealing the corporeality of forces through which it speaks and downplay the intra-actions. As Morton reminds us, “if there is anything monstrous in evolution, it's the uncertainty in the system at any and every point.”<sup>272</sup> It is the recognition of such prevailing elements such as winds and currents (what allows indigenous people to navigate through the hostile Arctic landscape<sup>273</sup>) that climatic effects become visible. If it is by conversing with the wind that indigenous people finds and follows the paths of life, literally and metaphorically, to call this “fighting for survival” or “grappling with forces of evolution” is an inappropriate simplification.

Given that the aboriginal mode of dwelling that Lopez endeavors to approximate is only accessible through exposing the body to the environment, breaking up the larger forces in a landscape (often summarized under terms such as evolution) into observable elements seems to be an essential tactic. Of course, this has also occurred in the context of science, where a dominion over the laws of evolution has become possible through a detailed study and harnessing of ecological actors such as climatic fluctuations and animal migration. However, as technology has sheltered our bodies against a tangible confrontation with many of such forces, we ought to realize a conversation with; over-arching terms such as “evolution” or “survival” seems to shelter us from approximating them conceptually.

The titles of the second and fourth chapter of *Arctic Dreams* provide the reader with an interesting clue. The titles juxtapose the name of a geographical region with the biological name of an Arctic animal (2. Banks Island: *Ovibos moschatus*, 4. Lancaster Sound: *Monodon monocerus*). The juxtaposition carries on within the bodies of each chapter as Lopez depicts the landscape simultaneous to studying the animal and, vice versa, depicts the animal through elaborating on how its body and behavior is constantly “testing the landscape”<sup>274</sup> in a process of being “adapted to a polar existence.”<sup>275</sup> Later in the book, Lopez plainly says that “The animal’s environment, the background against which we see it, can be rendered as something like the animal itself—partly unchartable. And to try to understand the animal apart from its background, except as an imaginative exercise, is to risk the collapse of both. To be what they are they require each other.”<sup>276</sup> This moves us further than recognizing ecological actors in their isolation and expands our openness and ontological inclusion. Buchanan, in *Onto-*

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<sup>272</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 66.

<sup>273</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 88.

<sup>274</sup> *ibid*, 139.

<sup>275</sup> *ibid*, 47.

<sup>276</sup> *ibid*, 151.

*Ethologies*, cites Deleuze to indicate the same vision: “A living being is not only defined genetically, by the dynamisms which determine its internal milieu, but also ecologically, by the external movements which preside over its distribution within an extensity.”<sup>277</sup> No matter if we look from the purely material perspective or from the ontological, lingual or virtual perspective, it is now obvious that separating a nonhuman from its context, as if it is one autonomous entity, is an expired and limiting observation. Timothy Morton’s also announces the expiration of this vision as he emphasizes the abolition of the background/foreground distinction, “The background ceases to be a background, because we have started to observe it.”<sup>278</sup> He picks up this topic in several publications, including in *Hyperobjects*, in which he endeavors to bring certain geological agents into our focus whose considerable influence have formerly been ignored.

The animals in *Arctic Dreams* are described in their intra-action with forces like hunger, cold weather, darkness, snow, etc. and an ordinary expression of, say, “struggling for survival” is substituted with “polar existence,” which indicates the importance of the regional elements that every animal intra-acts with and combines to make its own world. A fluctuation in snowfall regimes in 1973-74 is, for instance, linked to the migration of seals, which in turn led to a reduction in polar bear population due to starvation.<sup>279</sup> Or, a polar bear’s den-making skills, which has a lot in common with indigenous people’s iglu-making<sup>280</sup>, is described as the bear mother’s constant negotiation with snow in order to avoid over-heating.<sup>281</sup> Lopez’s remarks about animals and indigenous people testing the landscape, helps him to establish a vision of the landscape not as a passive element that only receives the effects of these tests but rather as an active agent. The landscape in his eye is “an animal that contains all other animals,” it is “vigorous and alive”<sup>282</sup> and in a perceivable dialogue with the mind and the body, or what he calls our inner landscapes.

This image of “the land as living animal” intensifies in chapter five, *Migration: The Corridors of Breath*, in which descriptions of various animals in large migratory groups facilitates the author with opportunities to elaborate on this larger animal: “each bird while it is a part of the flock seems part of something larger than itself. Another animal.”<sup>283</sup> Buchanan,

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<sup>277</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 216. (cited in Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 173)

<sup>278</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 102.

<sup>279</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 89.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>282</sup> *ibid*, 335.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

again drawing on Deleuzian philosophy, affirms that “environments, packs, species, and so on, are just as much individual entities as organisms are, it is just that they operate at different scales.”<sup>284</sup> This provides an opportunity to imagine nonhuman agency on another level, not primarily by highlighting the capabilities they gain by staying in a group, i.e. hunting packs, rather, this composite animal makes its opponents more explicit and more thinkable, that is, those nonhuman agents that contribute to animal migration or population fluctuation.

The word “Animal,” stemming from the latin *Animalis*, translates into “having breath.”<sup>285</sup> When Lopez compares back and forth migration movements to breathing, the mysterious combination of elements of the land become more visible: “I came to think of the migrations as breath, as the land breathing. In spring a great inhalation of light and animals. The long-bated breath of summer. And an exhalation that propelled them all south in the fall.”<sup>286</sup> Nevertheless, this grouping together of animals of a flock, or the elements of the land is by no means tantamount to scientific classifications that dismiss an individual’s unique personality. Quite the contrary, it provides an opportunity to situate each animals ongoing production of *Umwelten* within a context where formerly invisible nonhuman agencies can enter the conversation. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari provide an interesting explanation for these groupings, or *peopling* as they call it, that retain a vivacious, yet transient, sense of personality:

The origin of packs is entirely different from that of families and States; they continually work them from within and trouble them from without, with other forms of content, other forms of expression. The pack is simultaneously an animal reality, and the reality of the becoming-animal of the human being; contagion is simultaneously an animal peopling, and the propagation of the animal peopling of the human being.<sup>287</sup>

Seeing nonhumans in the larger picture gradually exposes Lopez to phenomena that demonstrate an agency as he begins interpreting them.

One stark example of such underexplored agents is “time,” that can prove difficult to approach as an active agent if it is not for Lopez’s similes: “Time here, like light, is a passing animal. Time hovers above the tundra like the rough-legged hawk, or collapses altogether like

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<sup>284</sup> Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 173.

<sup>285</sup> Oxford Living Dictionaries.

<sup>286</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 139.

<sup>287</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 242.

a bird keeled over with a heart attack, leaving the stillness we call death.”<sup>288</sup> The evocation of such conceptually and physically, overwhelming agents, is what Morton explains with his concept of *Hyperobjects*, “[t]he time of hyperobjects is the time during which we discover ourselves on the inside of some big objects (bigger than us, that is): Earth, global warming, evolution.”<sup>289</sup> Lopez seems to have recognized this a few decades earlier than Morton, and instead of wallowing in awe has decided to engage with people that seem to have recognized these agents even way before him. These people cannot easily be deemed science-less, but portray approaches that cannot be divided into the faculties of knowledge we have taken for granted. Nevertheless, Lopez’s scientific preoccupation does not become a hindrance in this regard, he uses it as an entrance into that mode of communication or being that he so eagerly trying to reach and promulgate.

Indeed, The scientific observations of *Arctic Dreams* are not utilized to reduce the animal to a mechanical part in bigger mechanic whole but are instead used to reveal additional dimensions of an animals resourcefulness by enlarging and activating their spatial-temporal or even ontological context. It accentuates how a migrating animal is not merely fulfilling an instinctual formula but is actively searching for a way to compromise with the land while being “involved simultaneously in several of these cycles.”<sup>290</sup>

The sharp observation of animals in their numerous migration cycles puts Lopez in a similar position to Dillard in her stalking of the withdrawing muskrats. Lopez is now dealing with an animal whose observation in the body of the migrating flock indicates the larger scenarios at play in the Arctic environment. Perplexed as he is with its intricacy and ontological sublimity, he admits that “[t]he extent of all this movement is difficult to hold in the mind.”<sup>291</sup> Albeit, while Dillard displayed a tendency to make transcendental leaps on such mind-boggling occasions, Lopez tries to deduce certain patterns, cycles, and rhythms from the behavior of Arctic animals, patterns that, again, re-affirms the animals’ conversation with subterranean nonhuman agents. Lopez, thus, retains his engagement with *imagination* and *interpretation* as he is motivated to communicate with the nonhuman agents responsible for the not so seldom brutal exhibitions of the exterior landscape. He writes:

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<sup>288</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 147.

<sup>289</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 118.

<sup>290</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 139.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

The indigenous rhythm, or rhythms, of Arctic life is important to discern for more than merely academic reasons. To understand why a region is different, to show an initial deference toward its mysteries, is to guard against a kind of provincialism that vitiates the imagination, that stifles the capacity to envision what is different. . . . Another reason to wonder which rhythms are innate, and what they might be, is related as well to the survival of the capacity to imagine beyond the familiar.<sup>292</sup>

Here, Lopez's contribution to ecological thinking starts to become more evident as he urges the reader to not only perceive animals as interrelated, conversing agents but also expands the scope of their conversation until it includes formerly overlooked ecological agents that all form a rhythmical conversation. Understanding this notion of rhythm is very important. Because Lopez does not refer to rhythms as strictly regular patterns that discipline the occurrences of Arctic events. Neither does he seem to adhere to Heidegger's notion of bad metaphysics, i.e., that "all entities are shown to rest on some deeper ground or cause, and this ground is supposed to be more truly present in the world than everything that derives."<sup>293</sup> Lopez is rather gesturing toward what, in the former chapter, I referred to as a primordial, prelinguistic sense of language. His attention to these varying forms of *Umwelten* or exposure, that is, the ontological significance he assigns to the material interactive bodies, such as his and those of nonhuman animals, safeguards Lopez through his writing from falling into overarching generalization and representational thinking. He leaves himself open to interpretation so that this primordial language, these lingual rhythms, can exhibit themselves via the unfolding of nonhuman agencies. Latour highlights the importance of this mode of being a part of a network while possessing your position when he says "every thought, every concept, every project that fails to take into account the necessity of the fragile envelopes that makes existence possible amounts to a *contradiction in terms*. Or, rather, a contradiction in architecture and design."<sup>294</sup> *Arctic Dreams* is a gallery of such fragilities in their situated interconnectedness and is devoted to learn how to not only behold such accounts but how to hold on to them.

Furthermore, Juxtaposing the migratory movement of human beings with that of nonhuman animals allows Lopez to fit human beings into the equation. Asserting that "scientists have been aware of different rhythms of life in the Arctic" for years, Lopez

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<sup>292</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 150.

<sup>293</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 151.

<sup>294</sup> Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 124. (emphasis in original)

emphasizes that “all this information should mesh, that in some way the rhythms of human migration, climatic change, and animal population cycles should be interrelated.”<sup>295</sup> While venturing into thought experiments regarding this mesh as a process of semiosis, as a network of actors who each depend on the other for coming into being, Lopez seems to also, like Dillard, be interested in quantum mechanics as a source of inspiration, to demystify, and simultaneously mystify, the relationship between these phenomena for his modern readers:

Animals move more slowly than beta particles, and through a space bewildering larger than that encompassed by a cloud of electrons, but 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.<sup>296</sup>

Karen Barad, a feminist quantum physicist, is obviously interested in patterns and affirms Lopez’s speculation when saying that “there is a deep sense in which we can understand diffraction patterns—as patterns of difference that make a difference—to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world.”<sup>297</sup> One can think that Lopez has become aware of these patterns as a result of his proximity to Arctic phenomena. However, reversing this statement can be more revealing, i.e., that Lopez has accomplished a mode of contact, or a radical unity, with the Arctic phenomena by allowing these rhythmical patterns to unfold in his interpretations. As he himself puts it in the onset of the book, “[a]t the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement.”<sup>298</sup>

Lopez falls short of providing a clear description of the interaction of these agents, and whether they are actually related, into words and admits that “[t]o sit on a hillside and watch the slow intermingling of two herds of muskoxen feeding in a sedge meadow and to try to discern the logic of it is to grapple with uncertainty.”<sup>299</sup> In a quantum physics context, one cannot help but to imagine a resemblance between intermingling herds and the overlapping ripples on the surface of a pond and the uncertainty that Lopez indicates seems to resonate with Bohr’s indeterminacy principle. Bohr’s principle is different from “an epistemological problem about knowledge and uncertainty, whether we can or cannot know reality.”<sup>300</sup> What

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<sup>295</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 148.

<sup>296</sup> *ibid*, 151.

<sup>297</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 72.

<sup>298</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 10.

<sup>299</sup> *ibid*, 151.

<sup>300</sup> Chiew, “Posthuman ethics with Cary Wolfe and Karen Barad”, 64.

Bohr means by indeterminacy is “that the wave-particle duality paradox evokes a fundamental question about the ontology of life and the nature of reality itself.”<sup>301</sup> Notwithstanding the association between quantum mechanics and Lopez’s observation are only loosely established in the text, the “patterns” that make their respective rhetoric to be comparable seems to promise interesting leads for investigation.

The discovery and awareness of patterns such as “oscillation” or “long stillness broken by sudden movement”<sup>302</sup> is an occasion when Lopez communicates with, and becomes a recipient of the affects of, the Arctic nonhuman landscape. These expressions are reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari’s attention to “speeds and slownesses” in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects. You have the individuality of a day, a season, a year, a life (regardless of its duration)—a climate, a wind, a fog, a swarm, a pack (regardless of its regularity).<sup>303</sup>

While tracing these patterns by observing the vigorous conversations between nonhuman agents, Lopez goes on to magnify how indigenous peoples partake in these conversations by a token of similar rhythms in their cultures:

In the Arctic one is constantly aware of sharp oscillation. It is as familiar a pattern of human thought and animal movement to the Arctic resident as the pattern of four seasons is to a dweller in the Temperate Zone. In spite of the many manifestations of this rhythm, and the effect of sharp oscillation not only on resident animals but, probably, too, on the cultures that matured in these regions.<sup>304</sup>

This clarifies his affinity for indigenous people that saturates the book. With numerous examples from both the far and near past he depicts how indigenous people have developed a dynamic mode of cohabitation with the nonhuman, that permits it to be moved through the uncertainties that excessively perplex those who try to press everything into the rational shelves of scientific thinking.

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<sup>301</sup> Chiew, “Posthuman ethics with Cary Wolfe and Karen Barad”, 64.

<sup>302</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 150.

<sup>303</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 262.

<sup>304</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 149.



Albeit, Lopez also provides us with examples of how this mode of indigenous cohabitation has with few exceptions in the history of polar explorations, been categorically ridiculed, or destroyed by western intruders:

The sophistication the whalers felt next to the Eskimo was a false sophistication, and presumptuous. The European didn't value the Eskimo's grasp of the world. And, however clever Eskimos might be with ivory implements and waterproof garments, he thought their techniques dated or simply quaint next to his own. A ship's officer of the time wrote summarily that the Eskimo was "dwindled in his form, his intellect, and his passions." They were people to be taken mild but harmless advantage of, to be chastised like children, but not to be taken seriously.<sup>305</sup>

While scorning this shameful past, Lopez emphasizes on the importance of turning to indigenous people in a dire time when science on its own has not yet managed to provide a convincing rhetoric to transmit coherent visions of the land that encompass both its beauty and aggression:

This time around, however, the element in the ecosystem at greatest risk is not the Bowhead but the coherent vision of an indigenous people. We have no alternative, long-lived narrative to theirs, no story of Human relationships with that landscape independent of Western Science and any desire to control or possess. Our intimacy lacks historical depth, and is still largely innocent of what is obscure and subtle there.<sup>306</sup>

Among the obscure things are elements of our own nature that the West has avoided and eventually ended up in the ethical cul-de-sac that has imposed a paralyzing effect on large populations. Indigenous cultures have been systematically suppressed, neglected or obliterated, arguably because they are not good at hiding what the modern westerners do not wish to see and admit to. In the following sections, I will elaborate on the elements that seems to underlie Lopez's insistence on the value of being open toward alternative modes of being in a world we share with nonhumans.

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<sup>305</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 20.

<sup>306</sup> *ibid*, 23.

## 2.3 Thinking in an iglu

In *Arctic Dreams*, observations of the arctic landscape is recurrently interrupted by observations of indigenous people's dwelling and the author seems to revere both with an equal measure of awe. Yet, this is not a frivolous reverence. As I will argue, Lopez's contemplation about indigenous people is a way for him to think beyond the ecological methods that he has himself been trained in. For instance, he entertains thoughts of merging sciences with art through his interpretation of indigenous worldviews.

Sueellen Campbell's elaboration on the word "desire," that adorns the subtitle of Lopez's book (*Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*), might serve as an explanation for what can be seen as an epistemological gesture toward indigenous cultures as they unfold in their particular habitats:

[O]ur culture does not teach us that we are plain citizens of the earth, because we live apart from the nature world and deny our intimacy with it, we have lost the sense of unity that is still possible in other cultures. Our desire marks what we have lost and what we still hope to regain.<sup>307</sup>

This indigenous sense of unity or intimacy that arguably is the outcome of, a direct engagement with the environment and its inhabitants via indigenous stories, is what Lopez wishes to achieve an embodied understanding of. He foregrounds this, the metaphoric relationship emerging from bodily interactions, as an essential element for negotiating a relationship with an ever changing, fragmented environment, crowded by multiple interlinked actors that uncannily unfold in what we refer to as our *interpretation*.

By helping us to discern this by putting us in a vicarious contact with indigenous people, Lopez is providing us with an opportunity to do what Weber recommends in *The Biology of Wonder*, a book written thirty years after the publication of *Arctic Dreams*:

[I]t is beautiful and very helpful that we can direct our gaze not only to nature itself but also to the many ways in which other civilizations have inserted themselves into ecological systems and have tried to treat nature in a way that both humans and other beings were connected in a continuous process of being mutually healed.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Campbell, "The Land and Language of Desire", 135.

<sup>308</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 350.

To see indigenous cultures as a locus for ecological thinking, one that forsakes our modernist notions and welcomes post-modern notions of embracing paradoxes, multiplicity of realities, intersubjective bodily experience, etc. might be a difficult task for those who remain in the habit of underestimating the indigenous by perceiving them as “uncivilized.” An image that was affixed through a mechanism that Edward Said has carefully studied in his *Orientalism*:

According to the traditional orientalists, an essence should exist —sometimes even clearly described in metaphysical terms—which constitutes the inalienable and common basis of all the beings considered; this essence is both "historical," since it goes back to the dawn of history, and fundamentally a-historical, since it transfixes the being, "the object" of study, within its inalienable and nonevolutive specificity, instead of defining it as all other beings, states, nations, peoples, and cultures—as a product, a resultant of the vention of the forces operating in the field of historical evolution.<sup>309</sup>

This systematic condescension dates back to the time of even the earliest European polar explorers who, with the exception of a few, overlooked the Eskimos intricate relationship with the land, saw them as brutish and “fixed an image of the Eskimo people as a backward race in the European imagination.”<sup>310</sup> Lopez’s book is, however, a testament to the contrary; it suggests an opportunity to see indigenous people as progressive (arguably posthuman) ecologists that seem to know (by inherited experience) a thing or two more than a modern western scholar does, when it comes to skills of physical and psychological adaptation to hostility. Lopez, in his effort to incorporate historical interpretations in *Arctic Dreams*, attempts to emancipate indigenous people and the land from being fixed entities. This plays a significant role in reintroducing the element of time to the Arctic context, which subsequently rehearses dynamism and life.

It is important to note that, in response to the historical subjugation of indigenous people, Lopez is not committing to what Garrard refers to as “turning to the ‘primitive’ models supposed by some critics to be exemplary of an authentic dwelling on earth.”<sup>311</sup> *Arctic Dreams* testifies that Lopez does not think there exists an authentic *model* of dwelling one needs to seek and adhere to, he is quite explicit in stating that there is “no ultimate reality.”<sup>312</sup> He is not looking for a model or answer, but rather, qualities and quandaries that will help

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<sup>309</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 97.

<sup>310</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 158.

<sup>311</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 108.

<sup>312</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 227.

him to push the question further. What is often dismissed and Lopez recurrently points out is the constant negotiation and enquiry of the indigenous people into human and nonhuman cultures within their given habitats, a trait that is by no means primitive, but inherently progressive and evolving. He emphasizes this in the last chapter of *Arctic Dreams* by saying,

[t]he notion of Eskimos exploring their own lands and adapting anew at the same time Europeans were exploring the Arctic was something the Europeans were never aware of. They thought of the Arctic as fixed in time—a primitive landscape, a painting, inhabited by an attenuated people.<sup>313</sup>

Hence, it is not a stable arctic model of dwelling to copy, there is, however, a mode of imaginative attentiveness to the land's interrelated agencies that once extrapolated to other contexts can, depending on their spatial and temporal context, manifest itself as diverse “mechanisms of ordering reality.” Whorf and Boas are researchers that Lopez refers to in order to support his claim that these “mechanisms”, i.e., “these realities were separate, though they might be simultaneously projected onto the same landscape.”<sup>314</sup> In the light of these examples and more, I disagree with Dana Phillips who believes that “Lopez commits what I think of as the anthropological fallacy—that is, he treats cultures as more rigidly structured and codified, and as more distinct from one another, than they are and could possibly be.”<sup>315</sup> Various and distinct as they are, the fact that the indigenous realities that Lopez witnesses share an affinity with nonhumans beside an incorporation of violence is what makes Lopez curious about their mechanisms.

However, Lopez is not the first author to find interest in indigenous people. Many nature writers, among others, Muir and Thoreau, have noted indigenous people, in most if not all cases in this genre particularly, as sources of spiritual inspiration. The recurrence of this type of reverence have in the long run contributed to an idealization of indigenous people and have, disregard their original intent, produced an essentialized *Orientalist* image of indigenous people. The problem is obviously that this conceals their complex and evolving material reality, which as Shepard Krech indicates in *The Ecological Indian*, is not always in accordance with common notions of their ecological sainthood.

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<sup>313</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 311.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid*, 227

<sup>315</sup> Phillips, *Truth of Ecology*, 227.

The idea of The “Ecological Indian”, i.e., “the Native North American as ecologist and conservationist,”<sup>316</sup> gained significant momentum following Shepard Krech’s publication of a book with the same title. It refers to a tendency to blindly revere indigenous people for their ability to live in a harmless harmony with nature’s biodiversity while overlooking some of the serious damages they have imposed on the environment. In the book, Krech goes through examples of these damages done to an array of nonhumans, urging us to think deeper rather than trying to extrapolate a conservation scheme from a type of Indians that have never really existed. Lopez is not oblivious about these incidents and lest the reader of *Arctic Dreams* blindly turns indigenous people into “Nobel savages,” heroes of harmony or romantic idols mentions a few of these controversial incidents. Consider the following:

Hunting wild animals to the point of extinction is a very old story. Aleut hunters, for example, apparently wiped out populations of sea otter in the vicinity of Amchitka Island in the Aleutians 2500 years ago. New Zealand’s moas were killed off by Maori hunters about 800 years ago. And zoogeographers working in the Hawaiian Islands discovered recently that more than half of the indigenous bird life there was killed off by native residents before the arrival of the first Europeans in 1778.<sup>317</sup>

He even explicitly echoes Krech’s thesis:

[I]t is wrong to think of hunting cultures like the Eskimo’s as living in perfect harmony or balance with nature. Their regard for animals and their attentiveness to nuance in the landscape were not rigorous or complete enough to approach an idealized harmony.<sup>318</sup>

In this sense, his approach to humans and the specificity of their characters can be regarded as on par with his attention to the intricacy and diversity of nonhumans. He does not simply endorse the idea that indigenous people are one coherent group of “knowable” people, good or bad, that transcend history and do not change over time. Quite the contrary, Lopez does a good job of declaring how both humans and nonhumans are in an unceasing process of negotiation with the actors in the network they are enmeshed in.

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<sup>316</sup> Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 16.

<sup>317</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 52.

<sup>318</sup> *ibid*, 169.

On this note, and by a closer look, Krech's critique of "the Ecological Indian" can actually serve and support Lopez's interpretation of indigenous people. The picture starts to change once we simply refer to views that discard the idea of a stable biodiversity. Daniel Botkin is among those who claims (based on scientific studies) that:

[T]he predominant theories in ecology either presumed or had as a necessary consequence a very strict concept of a highly structured, ordered, and regulated, steady-state ecological system. Scientists know now that that this view is wrong at local and regional levels.<sup>319</sup>

So is William Cronon, who in the introduction to *Uncommon Ground* writes:

[R]ecent scholarship has clearly demonstrated that the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history than popular beliefs about "the balance of nature have typically acknowledged."<sup>320</sup>

Once such voices are more seriously considered, the condemnation of indigenous people based on their irreversible disturbance of natural *balance* automatically loses its validity and urgency. Of course, Krech is examining the validity of a cultural *image* that has been allegedly falsely representing diverse groups of aboriginals and therefore helps to rid Lopez of what he finds very problematic, i.e., the idea of an "'authentic, traditional Eskimo,' that is, according to an idealized and unrealistic caricature created by the outsider."<sup>321</sup> Consequently, opportunities emerge to perceive indigenous people in their complexity and inventiveness, and to engage in a form of cultural ecology that allows us to enquire deeper into their mode of striving for being in the world.

What is primarily important for Lopez, who remarks the Arctic ecosystem as "stressed", "accident-prone"<sup>322</sup> and "inherently vulnerable,"<sup>323</sup> is not to assess indigenous behavioral patterns from the criteria of conserving a *stable* biodiversity (a pattern that some research indicate changed for the worse after the European interruption<sup>324</sup>). What is interesting for him is indigenous culture not in terms of conservation per se, but in terms of ecology, especially in the *Dark* sense I described in the previous chapter. Despite the fact that it is not the focus of

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<sup>319</sup> Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies*, 9.

<sup>320</sup> Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 24.

<sup>321</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 325.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>324</sup> Burch, "Rationality and Resource Use Among Hunters", 138

*The Ecological Indian*, passages in Krech's book suggest opportunities of probing the ecological discourse that his critique of the essentialized status of indigenous people will inevitably spur:

[T]his book will rekindle debate on the fit between one of the most durable images of the American Indian and American Indian behavior, and that it will spawn detailed analyses of the myriad relationships between indigenous people and their environments in North America.<sup>325</sup>

Nevertheless, as Lopez depicts indigenous people as devoted and experienced ecologists a respective response inevitably builds up in most readers. Again, this is not a frivolous respect for an essentialized image, but a deep respect for a dimension, whose denial have persistently betrayed our ecological investigations.

Yet, as emphasizing this ontological dimension might overlook all that has worked to discriminate between indigenous people from, say, their colonizers, and thus be deemed irresponsible toward inequality and injustice, it is important to note how this approach can actually add more vigor and motivation to the process of healing such deep historical wounds. Contemplating indigenous people's ecology can not only lead to the nullification of shallow mechanisms of hierarchical differentiation but will also credit indigenous people for contributing to our overcoming of highly sophisticated ecological and ethical issues. This credit is well-deserved and instrumental for justifying compensations that go beyond hierarchy-preserving notions like charity. Lopez gives us new and old examples of indigenous peoples' suffering at the hand of foreign exploiters and thus does not allow an overlooking of this undeniable tyranny. Yet, he seems to be postulating that a focus on correcting their image, by moving it *from the confines of representation to the openness of interpretation*, is the essential step toward admitting to their agency and reversing the malady.

It is fairer to say that it is actually not indigenous people he seems to put emphasis on, but a mode of dwelling that Lopez sees being practiced among indigenous communities. That is, he is primarily considering indigenous cultures as a locus for ecological thinking. He praises them because they provide us with interesting questions, not answers. What I just said might immediately strike as condescending or in denial of indigenous people's right to be recognized independent from what they can be *used* for. It might reduce indigenous people to mere ontological objects. Still I ran the risk of provoking such thoughts only to move us away

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<sup>325</sup> Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 28.

from the existing notion that Lopez is romanticizing northerners by representing them as what Garrard calls “figures of ecological piety and authenticity.”<sup>326</sup> Lopez is by no means reducing indigenous people to mere ideas. Spending time among them in the harshest of situations, he is well aware of their corporeal life. He praises them for not only preserving a certain mode of life he fancies, but also for the humble joy he receives from breaking bread with them. Lopez insists that we give indigenous knowledge a serious chance and is not content with hands-off theorization. He has traveled to the north with hopes of *embodying* alternative modes of dwelling in order to assess the possibilities of sustaining a sense of balance in the midst of a fundamentally unbalanced landscape, a posthumanist wish I would say. Lopez soon discovers that stories play a fundamental role in their dwelling. He realizes that even as an author and storyteller, he has yet to learn about the hidden layers of language and literature.

## 2.4 Dwelling in the dark

As much as *Arctic Dreams* reveals the intricacy of the polar landscape and its human and nonhuman inhabitants, it is also committed to visualizing its unavoidable darkness and violence. This, to some extent, describes the partial and simplified view of the Arctic from the perspective of science, as the pragmatic structures of meaning tend to keep the unknown, i.e. what does not easily lend itself to the harness of pragmatism, at a safe distance. Lopez admits to “the tendency to register only half of what is there in a harsh land, to ignore the other part, which is either difficult to reach or unsettling to think about.”<sup>327</sup> This negligence, which at some level becomes systematic, is what Lopez finds responsible for the modern western culture’s inability to communicate with the nonhumans. Simply because, as I argued in the previous chapter, the withdrawal of nonhumans, which according to Heidegger has an undeniable ontological significance, is overlooked. I also explained how Dillard takes her readers into one a deep and dark journey, where we have no choice but to face the violent side of both ourselves and the agents that we are inescapably enmeshed with. Exposing us and admitting to these existential and ethical predicaments was among the major contributions of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to the ecological discourse and arguably the reason for why it became such a revered book in its genre. Nevertheless, the book attempts to end optimistically and thus leaves the predicaments she tapped into relatively unaddressed.

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<sup>326</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 134.

<sup>327</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 200.



Lopez writes *Arctic Dreams* in a place that not only emblemizes the fusion between beauty and violence more starkly, but also is dichotomized between severe periods of day and night. This is the Arctic, where ontological darkness and violence, is kept salient by the actual wintertime darkness that can drive indigenous people into a severe mode of depression they call “perlerorneq.”<sup>328</sup> How indigenous peoples have lived for generations under such circumstances and honed their skills with survival is interesting for Lopez. Seemingly aware of such ethical quandaries that Dillard indicated, he is curious to draw inspiration from indigenous ways of negotiating with the dark side of their habitat. He writes:

No culture has yet solved the dilemma each has faced with the growth of a conscious mind: how to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in all life, when one finds darkness not only in one’s own culture but within oneself. If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox. One must live in the middle of contradiction because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of a leaning into the light.<sup>329</sup>

Instead of immediately leaning into the light, this author takes more than an occasional pleasure in tilting us into the dark, and he does so with a clear intention. To live out contradictions and paradoxes, a point I also raised by referring to Morton’s theory of “Dark Ecology,” is an important point that Lopez patiently discerns by infiltrating indigenous people’s mode of dwelling. These are deep rooted dilemmas that according to Weber, one can call “life’s duality of individual and whole,”<sup>330</sup> or “between freedom and relatedness.”<sup>331</sup> Lopez’s remark clearly indicates that there is no answer or way out of such paralyzing dilemmas that one can retrieve from indigenous cultures, any attempt to do so, by turning indigenous people into romantic emblems, will eventually meet with disappointment. There is, on the other hand, a way of changing our approach and relationship to dilemmas and perplexity, not once and for all but constantly through staying open to the uncanniness of nonhumans that unfolds via interpretation. Here and in other parts of the book, we can see

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<sup>328</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 202.

<sup>329</sup> *ibid*, 336.

<sup>330</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 350.

<sup>331</sup> *ibid*, 349.

examples of an ongoing effort in constituting a relationship with the land and all its hazards, a constant living with fear. On this last point, Lopez shares his experience of indigenous people in the end of chapter six:

I have realized that they are more afraid than we are. On a day-to-day basis, they have more fear. Not of being dumped into cold water from an umiak, not a debilitating fear. They are afraid because they accept fully what is violent and tragic in nature. It is a fear tied to their knowledge that sudden, cataclysmic events are as much a part of life, of really living, as are the moments when one pauses to look at something beautiful. A Central Eskimo shaman named Aua, queried by Knud Rasmussen about Eskimo beliefs, answered, “We do not believe. We fear.”<sup>332</sup>

How is it then to live with fear? Because modern cultures seem to share the belief that there is a way to control this fear. A way that comes about by changing the land according to our own desire, to conceal what we do not wish to face behind factory walls and in far-off societies and by trying to maintain a glamorized image of the West as the culture against violence and bloodshed, or perhaps more absurdly, as the culture most loyal to the principle of non-contradiction. However, this is nothing to remain hidden, especially for those, e.g. social ecologists or deep ecologists, who inquire into the fundamentals of the Anthropocene. Lopez reminds us that “the ethereal and timeless power of the land, that union of what is beautiful with what is terrifying, is insistent. It penetrates all cultures, archaic and modern. The land gets inside us; and we must decide one way or another what this means, what we will do about it.”<sup>333</sup> He says this as he accompanies his readers through the book in a search for an ontological monkey wrench.

Going back to Morton’s *Dark Ecology* can help us elucidate the situation. Morton, tracing our separation from the nonhuman world to the Neolithic agricultural revolution, believes the undoing of such a long-lived illusion to be inevitably dark and unsettling:

Ecological awareness is dark, insofar as its essence is unspeakable. It is dark, insofar as illumination leads to a greater sense of entrapment. It is dark, because it compels us to recognize the melancholic wounds that make us up—the shocks and traumas and cataclysms that have made oxygen for our lungs to breathe, lungs out of swim

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<sup>332</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 169.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid*, 334.

bladders, and crushing, humiliating reason out of human domination of Earth. But it is also dark because it is weird.<sup>334</sup>

He further on suggest a sort of “playful seriousness,”<sup>335</sup> which I believe he demonstrates in his own style of writing as well. This is a view that, he suggests, is capable of hosting the unpleasant, uncanny and dark sides of our humanly existence. Morton’s sporadic references to aboriginal painting etc. in his blog and his books shows that he considers the merit of consulting with already existing forms of indigenous dwelling, including those that Lopez provides examples of. Lopez claims that indigenous people seem to exhibit “a state in which one has absorbed that very darkness which before was the perpetual sign of defeat.”<sup>336</sup> As opposed to the culture of altering the land in order to avoid a confrontation with its inherent darkness, Lopez explains how indigenous cultures do the contrary. He writes, “[t]he great task of life for the traditional Eskimo is still to achieve congruence with a reality that is already given. The given reality, the real landscape, is ‘horror within magnificence, absurdity within intelligibility, suffering within joy.’”<sup>337</sup> This is in line with Morton’s recommendation that we “[f]ind the joy without pushing away the depression.”<sup>338</sup> The indigenous people in Lopez’s examples helps us imagine how “Dark Ecology” would appear once we translate it from paper to action. However, to avoid letting such terms as “playful seriousness” or “suffering within joy” confuse us with their abstract connotations it is important to underline some of the elements that can be deduced from the remarks of Lopez and Morton about living with the paradox.

An important factor I have pointed out through my analysis is the dynamism inherent to dwelling, i.e. the unsettling nature of all forms of settling, which involves interacting with the nonhuman agents that constitute an ecological matrix. In other words, to anticipate a static mode of being that will follow settling a paradox is a mirage and, as Morton indicates, an obstruction of ecological thinking. All attempts to suppress these unresolvable paradoxes directly results in the blocking of nonhuman agency. Because, as I have proposed, paradoxes and the unceasing process of interpretations they spark, are the mere unfolding of nonhuman agencies. An openness toward these agencies is an undeniable necessity for a being-in-the-world that is uncontaminated by the maladies we attribute to modernity and without a doubt

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<sup>334</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 110.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>336</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 337.

<sup>337</sup> *ibid*, 334.

<sup>338</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 117.

our ecological responsibility. Weber gives us an idea about this openness by describing it as having two main conditions: “it must first consider how biological subjectivity comes forth and to what degree the body's needs are the foundation of all value. Second, however, it must take into account that any ethics must be equally based on what is good for the whole.”<sup>339</sup> Further, he describes this relationship with nature, as a dynamic movement through dualisms: “Nature does not conger salvation but healing. Healing means to transform the oscillating dance on the razor's edge of aliveness into the beauty of *a new imagination of what life can mean*. It is a process, not a state, and thus never to be secured.”<sup>340</sup> Interesting that he also points to a process of interpretation, which is reminiscent of Harman's reference to Heidegger that, “Dasein *is* its possibilities, since it is constantly occupied with them.”<sup>341</sup>

It is important to mention, that this idea of embracing darkness and ethical perplexity that I have been trying to depict by putting Lopez and Morton into dialogue, can be prone to abuse or adoption by, say, fascist motivations (as, for instance, Walter Benjamin discusses through his critique of “Aestheticization of politics”). This raises issues with some of posthumanism's premises, which alarms us that we need to take every step with awareness. Such pitfalls await those in particular who contemplate theories outside of a living context, or to be more accurate, those who do not regard theory as emerging *from* the context; to predefine theories is one thing, but to embody them, in the full sense of consciously exposing the body to the unpredictable affects of nonhuman agents, is another. This is why Lopez refrains from theorization and simply provide us with examples of his observations, hoping to give us an idea about how we can start to responsibly communicate with our surrounding by engaging in what Haraway calls “fleshly acts of interpretation.”<sup>342</sup>

“Dark Ecology,” or what Lopez describes of indigenous people's lifestyle is by no means promoting or aestheticizing untethered violence. Both Morton and Lopez focus considerably on animating nonhuman actors in our ecological imagination, all in order to postulate a sense of altruism and to suggest a responsibility of avoiding selfishness. This is not simply an ethical statement, they stress, but a necessary and unavoidable action. Lopez and Morton's warnings about the detriments of perceiving our consciousness as independent from the network of being leaves no room for doubt about its necessity. Selfishness is not only ecological genocide but also existential suicide. The more we expose ourselves to

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<sup>339</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 347.

<sup>340</sup> *ibid*, 349. (emphasis added)

<sup>341</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 60. (emphasis in original)

<sup>342</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 250.

nonhuman agencies by devising smoother policies toward our paradoxes, the more likely it becomes that we will behave ethically, even though this ethics can be difficult to predefine and is not universal. Lopez puts it beautifully: “It is in the land, I once thought, that one searches out and eventually finds what is beautiful. And an edge of this deep and rarefied beauty is the acceptance of complex paradox and the forgiveness of others. It means you will not die alone.”<sup>343</sup>

With an honesty that he endeavors to clarify throughout the book, Lopez tries to take the full responsibility of this acceptance, nearly freezing to death at one point. There are examples we do not have access to, either because they have been lost in translation, because they have not been put into words in the first place, or simply because indigenous people have preferred to keep it to themselves after being ridiculed by intruders. Lopez describes the absurdity of the situation in this passage:

I would think of the Eskimo. The darker side of the human spirit is not refined away by civilization. It is not something we are done with. Eskimo people, in my experience, have, still, a sober knowledge of their capacity for violence, but are reluctant to speak of it to whites because they have been taught that these are the emotions, the impulses, of primitives. We confuse the primitive with the inability to understand how a light bulb works. We confuse the primitive with being deranged. What is truly primitive in us and them, savage hungers, ethical dereliction, we try to pass over; or we leave them, alone, to be changed. They can humiliate you with a look that says they know better.<sup>344</sup>

Offering an opportunity to examine an indigenous portrayal of an embodied “Dark Ecology”, *Arctic Dreams* becomes all the more enticing as a book that reaches for new ecological horizons.

## 2.5 The wild side of reciprocity

The real endurance test for these posthuman theories of reciprocity and being open to possibilities comes when there is a degree of violence involved. How can such concepts and theories respond to the ethical quandaries that emerge from confrontations with nonhumans?

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<sup>343</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 334.

<sup>344</sup> *ibid*, 202.

Because if modern human beings have harnessed nonhuman agencies to such a degree that they have vanished from our zone of consciousness it must arguably have stemmed from a desire to be immune from their violations and undesirable affects. Just as I credited Dillard in the last chapter for stretching her philosophical inquiry to these rather sensitive lengths, I also find Lopez to have done it successfully. *Arctic Dreams* is not a book about dissolving in the grandeur of icebergs, it is not escape literature, rather, it deliberately heeds the brutal side of our intra-action with nonhumans while giving us frames to think about them.

After reviewing several accounts of anthropogenic and climate-based species extinctions that I will refer to in a future section, Lopez asserts that “[f]atal human involvement with wild animals is biologically and economically complicated.”<sup>345</sup> Instead of rushing to deem such occasions as unethical, Lopez seems to postulate an ethics which is not predetermined, but unpredictable, an ethics that emerges from the situation and is contextual. Another remark by Lopez affirms this stance:

Some anthropologists caution, too, that the apparent incidents of slaughter of bison at buffalo jumps in North America and of caribou at river crossings in historic and prehistoric times were ethical in context and consistent with a native understanding of natural history and principles of conservation.<sup>346</sup>

Nevertheless, entangled as we are in the myriad of political, ethical and cultural discourses that Haraway can help to shed light on, it is understandably difficult for us to entertain any thought of an ethical imposition or acceptance of death (of a self or an other), death remains a taboo in the modern west. Cary Wolfe is also interested in this tension. throughout a chapter entitled “Flesh and Finitude,”<sup>347</sup> in *What is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe Carefully describes how such political or philosophical premises that underpins contemporary bioethics have saved such concepts as death and extinction from being drawn into posthumanist interrogations. It is in such a situation that *Arctic Dreams* posits an opportunity to approach death-bound philosophical knots by recontextualizing sensitive issues, from, say, a lab to the frozen surface of the Arctic. Lopez is exposing himself to forces that he hopes will reshape his ecological thinking, and this exposure is inspired by the indigenous forms of dwelling that in the book entangles him with the Arctic’s nonhuman actors. The interpretive space that the

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<sup>345</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 52.

<sup>346</sup> *ibid*, 53.

<sup>347</sup> Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 49.

attribution of mythical personalities to animals opens might be an example of circumstances wherein our occasionally hostile relationship with not only nonhumans but also humans is not simply justified or judged but approached via interpretation.

Indeed, Lopez helps posthumanist projects with his embodied contemplation about our “capacity to annihilate life,” while juxtaposing scientific reflections with what he observes amid indigenous societies, a task that Dillard could not fulfill due to reasons I have already discussed. In an episode where Lopez is contemplating whether ground squirrels have “intentions as well as courage and caution,” he says: “Few things provoke like the presence of wild animals. They pull at us like tidal currents with questions of volition; of ethical involvement, of ancestry.”<sup>348</sup>

But animals do not only pull at us with questions of ethical involvement, they also pull at us with their personal stories about their inner landscapes, stories that violently change and evolve like the Arctic weather. We have to only find a way to stop blocking them or neglecting their material-semiotic voice. Hence, as Buell remarks, Lopez “characterizes western exploitation of the nonhuman world as a massive ‘failure of imagination.’”<sup>349</sup> Stacy Alaimo’s reading of Haraway also highlights the necessity of this acknowledgment:

Acknowledging nonhuman primates as “authors” acknowledges their “material-semiotic” agency. The lively figures populating Haraway’s work, in fact—cyborgs, primates, trickster coyotes, onco-mice, canines—embody material/semiotic agencies that reconfigure the nature/culture divide.<sup>350</sup>

Going back to the concept of animal *Umwelten*, it is important to note that animal worldview that an indigenous hunter tries to retrieve during a hunt is not merely a textual semiotic study, it also has a material side. As an agent exposed to the same influence from the larger nonhuman bodies that speak via seasonal rhythms, climate regimes, light and darkness patterns, etc. indigenous people not only mimic the animal in its mode of negotiation with the environment, they also eat the animal, wear the animal, become the animal. A footnote in Lopez’s book is the testament:

The materials they worked with, of course, came almost entirely from the animals they hunted. Eskimos generally regarded these materials as gifts given in accordance with

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<sup>348</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 42.

<sup>349</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 214.

<sup>350</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 241.

ethical obligations they felt toward the animals. The two parallel cultures, human and animal, were linked in biological ways and, for the Eskimo, in spiritual ways that are all but lost to our understanding today. It was the gift rather than the death that was preeminent in the Eskimo view of hunting.<sup>351</sup>

It is this material-semiotic relationship that is the core of indigenous worldviews. Their stories as well as their activities elevate nonhumans from being mere objects to agents capable of influencing other actors in their habitat. Haraway explains the possibility of assuming such a position without necessarily succumbing to selfish consumerism or associating with other anthropocentric traits. She writes:

I am arguing that instrumental relations of people and animals are not themselves the root of turning animals (or people) into dead things, into machines whose reactions are of interest but who have no presence, no face, that demands recognition, caring, and shared pain. Instrumental intra-action itself is not the enemy; indeed, I will argue below that work, use, and instrumentality are intrinsic to bodily webbed mortal earthly being and becoming. Unidirectional relations of use, ruled by practices of calculation and self-sure of hierarchy, are quite another matter.<sup>352</sup>

Moreover, in *The Biology of Wonder*, Weber depicts a similar relationship based on the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. I refer to these contemporary thinker because what I have been trying to extrapolate from *Arctic Dreams* must be read carefully so that this relationship of gift economy that entails a strict sense of responsibility is not misunderstood. The gift economy must not be reduced to the fallacy of entitlement that, say, religious doctrines have helped to sustain, i.e. the misconception that everything on earth was made for the human. Conversely, a prerequisite to the reciprocal gift economy that Weber aspires to is *selflessness*:

If there remains no fixed structure of a being's self as soon as we really proceed into its depths, into the abyss of a "selfless self," then its actual well-being, is in effect a gift from the other. We come into being only through the other. Self and other are so intimately interwoven that, if we insist on first discerning what a living being is and

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<sup>351</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 172.

<sup>352</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 71.



does, before talking about norms, we immediately run into its entanglement with other. Other is first.<sup>353</sup>

This being said, reciprocity with nonhumans as seen through the native eye of an indigenous hunter must not be confused with the killing of polar bears by the Europeans, which according to Lopez “became the sort of amusement people expected on an Arctic journey.”<sup>354</sup> Lopez further adds:

For these men, the bear had no intrinsic worth, no spiritual power of intercession, no ability to elevate human life. The circumstances of its death emphasized the breach with man. During these same years, by contrast, the killing of polar bears by Eskimos occurred in an atmosphere of respect, with implicit spiritual obligations. The dead bear, for example, was propitiated with gifts. Such an act of propitiation is sometimes dismissed as ‘superstition.’ ‘Technique of awareness’ would come much closer to the mark, words that remind you of what you are dealing with.<sup>355</sup>

Putting aside the quantity of animal deaths, which arguably escalated with following the European intervention and the introduction of rifles<sup>356</sup>, Lopez evidently suggests that there is a qualitative distinction between taking the life of an animal through indigenous hunting traditions and, say, “when entire herds were shot to provide a calf or two for zoos.”<sup>357</sup> Despite that scientific research no longer approves of harming nonhuman test-subjects on the grounds of animal rights, the residue of such worldviews that allowed a European adventurer to do so in the past arguably still haunts western societies, perhaps with a less detectable intensity.

Heidegger’s explanation of how technology *Enframes* and, according to Cary Wolfe, brings forward the world “before us in a mode of instrumentality and utility”<sup>358</sup> is particularly useful to shed light on this distinction. According to James C. Edwards’s reading of Heidegger, “technology is itself a way of revealing things, a way of letting something come to presence. . . . Technology bring things into presence - lets them be seen - in a particular way; it reveals them as having a particular character, a particular Being.”<sup>359</sup> Revealing technology, not as a mere instrument of reaching a goal but a facilitator of particular worldviews is

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<sup>353</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 345.

<sup>354</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 98.

<sup>355</sup> *ibid*, 99.

<sup>356</sup> Burch, "Rationality and resource use among hunters", 138-139.

<sup>357</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 70.

<sup>358</sup> Wolfe, *Before the Law*, 3.

<sup>359</sup> Edwards, "Poetic Dwelling on the Earth as a Mortal", 110.

important as it can respond to the fact that both indigenous people and the European explorers utilized certain forms of technology to kill animals. Lopez also praises numerous inventive ways in which indigenous people engage with technology and tools. However, what arguably remains different between the two is not their use of technology, but the worldviews they each adapt by its use. In his article, Edwards translates Heidegger's explanation of a worldview that has dominated the modern Western context following the flourish of technology:

The characteristic kind of thing brought to light by the practices of technology is *Bestand*, "standing-reserve": that which in an orderly way awaits our use of it for the further ordering of things. When I walk down to my study in the morning and glance at the computer on the desk, the computer, as the thing it is, is *Bestand*. It reveals itself to me as waiting patiently for me to turn it on, to "get its things in order," so I can use it to order and reorder those things and others.<sup>360</sup>

It seems to be crucial to gain a deeper insight into what demarcates the indigenous killing from that of the westerners, what Lopez called "an atmosphere of respect," as this might hold the key to posthuman bioethics and ecology. This is where the indigenous becomes not a behavioral model but a locus for ecological thinking. Whatever it is which makes a polar bear's skin a gift, rather than a "standing-reserve" can be traced in the modes in which one comes to venture into the abyss of the animal and vice versa, this is as much grounded in the mind and language as it is in the land.

As Heidegger traces the appearance of phenomena as standing-reserve back to the *Enframing* effect of technology, he proposes *poiēsis* as an alternative mode, "Enframing conceals that revealing which, in the sense of *poiēsis*, lets what presences come forth into appearance."<sup>361</sup> To fathom the approach of indigenous people to the land and their arguably more authentic mode of *being* they suggest referring to Heidegger's description of *poiēsis* might prove helpful. This I shall do in the following section.

## 2.6 Sharp knives, metaphoric lives

Eclectic as it is, one can still argue that the main theme of *Arctic Dreams* is the description of how indigenous people relate to the nonhuman landscape through their oral literature. Or,

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<sup>360</sup> Edwards, "Poetic Dwelling on the Earth as a Mortal", 110.

<sup>361</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 27.

perhaps it is what binds all the different parts of the book together, just as it allegedly accomodates different parts of an indigenous person's life into a livable assemblage. Indigenous people traditionally engage in the harshest of manual labors and live in the dangerous circumstances of the North with the full exposure of their bodies to the severest of unpredictable forces. Yet, all this, as Lopez wants us to see, is accompanied, mediated or brought together by the metaphoric space of the oral traditions. This literary or metaphoric relationship, although slightly familiar to a literary mind like Lopez, becomes, through his account, much more interesting as it incorporates all aspects of indigenous people's life. In other words, it is not the content or quality of the literature that Lopez primarily heeds to, but the idea that indigenous people live a metaphoric life by actively embodying stories and engaging in constant interpretation. This is particularly interesting in the light of Weber's poetic ecology as it can reveal how indigenous people practice an embodied ecology, or "life as ethical practice."<sup>362</sup> To preach living a story, something unconfirmed by scientific positivism, can immediately raise many eyebrows. But there is more to it. This is not about refuting science and its merits altogether, it is rather about creating meaningful context for knowledge. Or as Martin Lee Mueller puts it, to "create a moral imaginative space where the human can be experienced again in richer and more reciprocal participation with the larger living world."<sup>363</sup>

Nevertheless, *Arctic Dreams* lists examples of several contradictions between indigenous narrations about the polar animals and the accumulated scientific data, and describes how these contradictions majorly resulted in the denigration of indigenous people and in them being branded as a "backward race." The sovereignty of contemporary scientific methods and how they rule out what they find incompatible is pointed out by Lopez on occasions like this: "The Eskimos' stories are politely dismissed not because Eskimos are not good observers or because they lie, but because the narratives cannot be reduced to a form that is easy to handle or lends itself to summary. Their words are too hard to turn into numbers."<sup>364</sup> And, in a manner that seems pertinent to Heidegger's ontology, Lopez posits the metaphoric mode of being in the land as a remedy for the techno-driven calamity of the modern western world, "a genuine antidote to the story of modernity"<sup>365</sup>:

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<sup>362</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 350.

<sup>363</sup> Mueller, *Being Salmon Being Human*, 260.

<sup>364</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 223.

<sup>365</sup> Mueller, *Being Salmon Being Human*, 247.

The incorporation of the land into traditional stories— evidence of close association with the land and the existence of an uncanny and mesmerizing conformity of human behavior in response to subtleties in the landscape —is also still evident. The people, many of them, have not abandoned the land, and the land has not abandoned them. It is difficult, coming from cities far to the south, to perceive let alone fathom the richness of this association, or to assess its worth. But this archaic affinity for the land, I believe, is an antidote to the loneliness that in our own culture we associate with individual estrangement and despair.<sup>366</sup>

Returning to Heidegger, one can notice that this affinity to indigenous people's mode of dwelling is not necessarily a romantic fetish. It is a totally different mode of being in which aboriginal acts of violence against nonhuman actors are entirely distinct from the categorical violence imposed on the nonhuman when reducing them (and eventually the human subject itself, as Heidegger believes) to standing-reserve items:

Both *poiēsis* and technology are ways of bringing things forth into presence, but the things they bring forth are very different. The things brought forth by the practices of technology are *Bestand*; but the things built by the practices of poetic dwelling "gather the fourfold." They make explicit the holistic concatenation (the "appropriating mirror-play" . . . of the fundamental conditions of the life that produced them . . . one can say that the things and practices of poetic dwelling are truer than the things and practices of technology. These things and practices reveal more; they conceal less. In particular, and most important, they tell the truth about us as the conditional beings we are:

"Thinking in this way, we are called by the thing as the thing. In the strict sense of the German word *bedingt*, we are the be-thinged, the conditioned ones. We have left behind us the presupposition of all unconditionedness."<sup>367</sup>

"Holistic concatenation," "us as the conditional beings," these are important remarks by Heidegger, that points to what essential features of our existence it is that a purely scientific vision is prone to overlook. Later, Lopez scrutinizes the western traveler's approach to the Arctic more explicitly. In this approach, everything is seen as a standing-reserve, as

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<sup>366</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 220.

<sup>367</sup> Edwards, "Poetic Dwelling on the Earth As a Mortal", 130.

“substances that can be manipulated at will without regard to unintended consequences. as something to be put to a use”<sup>368</sup>:

What one thinks of any region, while traveling through, is the result of at least three things: what one knows, what one imagines, and *how one is disposed*. . . A Western traveler in the Arctic, for example, is inclined to look (only) for cause-and-effect relationships, or predator-prey relationships; and to be (especially) alert for plants and animals that might fill “gaps” in Western taxonomies.<sup>369</sup>

*Arctic Dreams* is a historical testament to the fact that the way in which the majority of Arctic explorers were disposed to the land was heavily technology-mediated. In other words, prior to departing from European shores, the giant advanced ships (that indigenous people would confuse with moving islands) had already established an enframing (according to Heidegger) for the sea and what was to be found beyond it. For the explorer, the whole globe was a standing-reserve. A similar trend persists in scientific communities these days, where data and taxonomies are the ordinary sustenance.

One can see enframing as a very influential and manipulative story that has been dominating modern technological societies of the West, a story that has been sustaining problematic ethical premises that the survival of standing-reserve is the repercussion of. Numerous scholars, while affirming the story-like and value-laden basis of what we know as pure science, have posited that it is in fact this story that we urgently need to change in order to attain a less-guilt-ridden and more environmentally friendly dwelling. These scholars, including Lopez, while giving credit to scientific inquiry, “do not find it convincing that science alone is up to the task”<sup>370</sup> of rescuing the Anthropocene from the “modern story of separation.”<sup>371</sup> Because, as Weber asserts, “[t]he innermost core of aliveness cannot be classified and negotiated rationally.”<sup>372</sup> In other words, science can organize but it cannot create meaning:

[I]nterpretation can quickly get beyond a scientist’s control. When asked to assess the meaning of a biological event—What were those animals doing out there? Where do they belong?—they hedge. They are sometimes reluctant to elaborate on what they

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<sup>368</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 52.

<sup>369</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 224. (emphasis added)

<sup>370</sup> Mueller, *Being Salmon Being Human*, 247.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid*, 246.

<sup>372</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 354.

saw, because they cannot say what it means, and they are suspicious of those who say they know. Some even distrust the motives behind the questions.<sup>373</sup>

It is indeed in the metaphorical space of *poiēsis* that one ought to seek and create this meaning in. Assuming language in its broadest sense, “language is what welds us together with the silent realm of meaning.”<sup>374</sup> To elaborate, even though everything is already welded together in the web of life, it is by becoming conscious of this mesh, through interpretation, or asking questions of being that meaning can be sought. This is not an ultimate ready-made meaning but one that is made, remade and practiced in reciprocal live-action, such as traditional hunting. A hunter’s sense of freedom negotiates with the web of life and targets a union. “[t]his union, however, is nothing that can be achieved. It is a contradiction in itself and, therefore, always means negotiation, a solution that is not exhaustive but rather a momentary compromise.”<sup>375</sup> Negotiation or interpretation is not a means to an end, it is an end in itself. It is by being open to the uncanniness of nonhumans that one can momentarily hear the language that speaks, the primordial pre-linguistic language.

Many matters obscure to science that Lopez mentions, i.e., how the ringed seal “finds food beneath the ice in the darkness of winter and how it ‘remembers’ the location of its breathing hole,”<sup>376</sup> How “muskoxen navigate over their native landscapes in darkness and snow”<sup>377</sup> and much of the narwhal’s acoustically related behavior,<sup>378</sup> might have been illuminated in the years proceeding the publication of *Arctic Dreams*. But, it is not the capacity of science to *explain* natural phenomena that is the focus of Lopez’s criticism. It is the inability of our current modes of scientific inquiry to adequately incorporate the abyss and the unknown that is the problem, not to mention the problematic habit of *enframing* it is reinforcing. Metaphoric language in the form of story and myth has responsibly filled this niche throughout the human’s cultural history. To incorporate the abyss, we are in dire need for metaphors. It is in the face of the abyss that meaningful relationships are constructed.

However, the frantic desire to reach an objective reality, which is on par with a belief in the existence of a metalanguage, is the impediment against refreshing our notion of ecological ethics, or of finding a direction out of modern ecological calamities. In the chapter

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<sup>373</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 112.

<sup>374</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 346.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid*, 349.

<sup>376</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 90.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

of *Arctic Dreams* entitled “*The Intent of Monks*,” an analogy between indigenous maps with the purely objective satellite data that modern cartographic instruments offer, helps Lopez to argue for the validity of narratives that are alternative to those produced by positivism:

The mental maps of both urban dweller and Eskimo may correspond poorly in spatial terms with maps of the same areas prepared with survey tools and cartographic instruments. But they are proven, accurate guides of the landscape. They are living conceptions, idiosyncratically created, stripped of the superfluous, instantly adaptable. Their validity is not susceptible of contradiction.<sup>379</sup>

He further accentuates the impotency of stand-alone positivist data in creating a productive and lively relationship between man and nature as he writes that, “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. The directions in which it can be sent, the uses to which it can be put.”<sup>380</sup> Positivist data in itself, is influential but not sufficient, as it does not lend us a hand to interpret what we can see and put it in the larger context, in which what we see and us perceivers are enmeshed with withdrawing entities. It is in the foreground of such arguments of philosophers like Latour, who is critical of the story of separation, that we can better understand Lopez’s concern. Latour emphasize the need for a “geostory,” which Mueller describes as the following:

Latour has offered an intriguing name for a genuine alternative to the story of separation: “geostory” as he calls it, would be “a form of narration inside which all the former props and passive agents have become active without, for that, being part of a giant plot written by some overseeing entity.”<sup>381</sup>

This geostory resonates with Heidegger’s *poiēsis* in how it makes explicit a “holistic concatenation,”<sup>382</sup> or, according to Weber, “the true locus of value . . . the living meshwork. The web.”<sup>383</sup> Lopez seems to be in a process of investigating the geostories that generations of indigenous peoples have passed down, and have embodied and redesigned through a relationship of mutual transformation with the land. From this perspective, indigenous

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<sup>379</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 242.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>381</sup> Mueller, *Being Salmon Being Human*, 246.

<sup>382</sup> Edwards, “Poetic Dwelling on the Earth As a Mortal”, 130.

<sup>383</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 345.

people's sexual conduct, for instance, can be seen as much part of a geostory as their traditional hunting of narwhals. This has formerly been simply called culture, however, substituting an abstract word like "culture" with "embodied geostory," in the light of the pertinent theories, might help us to see the significance of indigenous people's oral literature, as well as their hunting activities, as a locus for ecological thinking.

Now, we can realize how the effort that Lopez makes to recognize and activate nonhuman agents prepares the reader to perceive indigenous people's decision making as a part of a larger scheme, and how important this is for the fulfillment of his implicit intent of saving indigenous people from being exiled into romantic imagery. Lopez's emphasis of indigenous people's mode of metaphorical relationship with the world illustrates their life as a dynamic text in which hunting could be seen as writing, and "writing as becoming what surrounds me."<sup>384</sup> Language, according to Weber, "is like a fungal body emerging from this invisible deeper connection, bringing the fruits of a deeper interconnectedness to maturity."<sup>385</sup> Interestingly he uses a metaphor to explain the metaphoric relationship that is created and is manifested in language. Lopez, as the writer of the book, stands as another example, in the way he has written about the Arctic, and about indigenous people, and blurred the distinction of his subjectivity with them through writing.

Indigenous people's relationship to the polar bear has been mediated by many stories among which Lopez mentions a few. It is a good example for clarifying the way stories mediate between man and animal, and furthermore, between man and the outside world in its entirety. However, for reasons slightly mentioned in the previous paragraph, "mediating" seems to be a problematic term for how these stories function. As Lopez points out, "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 intercourse with the landscape."<sup>386</sup> In other words, a geostory is not a descriptive narrative about, for example, a concrete or purely imagined network of agents, "meaning is not representation or imitation of a pre-existing reality, but is inextricably bound to the language of its expression."<sup>387</sup> The stories that indigenous people rehearse about the bear are then a dynamic metaphoric space in which the meaning of a hunter's contact with a polar bear is continuously being constituted through language: "often in a story about *Kokogiaq* or

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<sup>384</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 347.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid*, 348.

<sup>386</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 229.

<sup>387</sup> Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 101.



*Tôrnârssuk* there is some hint not only of the bear's biology . . . but of its personality. . . the polar bear is most often cast as a helper or companion of one sort or another."<sup>388</sup> We must remember that the stories of Kokogiaq or Tôrnârssuk are not universally rehearsed among all of the polar indigenous peoples, and it is not an unalterable, carved-into-stone story, it evolves as each teller engages with the story in every retelling, unlike scientific profiles. "The stories are corroborated daily, even as they are being refined upon by members of the community traveling between what is truly known and what is only imagined or unsuspected. Outside the region this complex but easily shared 'reality' is hard to get across without reducing it to generalities, to misleading or imprecise abstraction."<sup>389</sup> What is important to note, is that these stories entail a sense of morality and are different from the supposedly objective descriptions of science that leave us clueless about the "meaning of a biological event." From this perspective, one can argue that the traditional indigenous hunter never kills a *polar bear object* for the sake of personal gain, but hunts a *polar bear person* for the sake of a meaningful belonging. On the same note, when walking under an Aurora, indigenous people are not walking under a magnetosphere disturbed by solar winds (though scientifically speaking they are) but beneath "the play of unborn children."<sup>390</sup> This apparently nonrational mode of metaphoric dwelling not only postulates meaning and direction but as this example shows can make one stay conscious and responsive to the unborn, a topic sporadically picked up in environmental rhetoric. A good explanation comes from Amos Rapoport, an Australian architect who according to Lopez has mapped the mythological landscape of the Australian aborigines: "the stories that compose a tribe's mythological background, their origin and their meaning and purpose in the universe, are 'unobservable realities' that find their expression in 'observable phenomena.' The land, in other words, makes the myth real. And it makes the people real."<sup>391</sup>

Disregard its function, for those of us who have difficulties with digesting the situation, an analogy with the state of dreaming can help to clarify the quality of a metaphoric relationship with the land: "The mind we know in dreaming, a nonrational, nonlinear comprehension of events in which slips in time and space are normal, is, I believe, the

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<sup>388</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 100.

<sup>389</sup> *ibid*, 225.

<sup>390</sup> *ibid*, 194.

<sup>391</sup> *ibid*, 243.

conscious working mind of an aboriginal hunter. It is a frame of mind that redefines patience, endurance, and expectation.”<sup>392</sup> Lopez later ties this concept to the working of the stories:

The aspiration of aboriginal people throughout the world has been to achieve a congruent relationship with the land, to fit well in it. To achieve occasionally a state of high harmony or reverberation. The dream of this transcendent congruency included the evolution of a hunting and gathering relationship with the earth, in which a mutual regard was understood to prevail; but it also meant a conservation of the stories that bind the people into the land.<sup>393</sup>

And later adds:

To those of us who are not hunters, who live in cities with no sharp regret and enjoy ideas few Eskimos would wish to discuss, such sensibilities may seem almost arcane. And we may put no value to them. But we cut ourselves off, I think, from a source of wisdom. . . This is a timeless wisdom that survives failed human economies. It survives wars. It survives definition. It is a nameless wisdom esteemed by all people. It is understanding how to live a decent life, how to behave properly toward other people and toward the land.<sup>394</sup>

There are traits that, according to Lopez, indigenous people attribute to the polar bear that some scientists have disqualified while others have been more cautious to comment on. Again, giving indigenous people credit for their scientific soundness, or discrediting them entirely for sidestepping science, is not the case here. Lopez, in support of the value of these stories, says that “refuting any of these things is a complicated business. It becomes not only a denial of the integrity of the person telling the story, but a denial of the resourcefulness of the polar bear.”<sup>395</sup> The timeless wisdom that Lopez emphasizes is the very preservation of a notion of resourcefulness of, not only the polar bear, but of everything that an indigenous is entangled in the mesh of existence with. The characteristic details that they attribute to the animals might be updated or altered through generations of continuous observation, but the core of the geostory, that is, the agency and resourcefulness of this polar counterpart seems to remain unaltered. In other words, it is the embedded function of interpretation that Lopez

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<sup>392</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 168.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

<sup>394</sup> *ibid*, 244.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

values and fears losing. He attempts to make us aware of how indigenous people rehearse, live and embody ethics with these stories. As Weber affirms, “Before we can debate a new ethics, therefore, we humans, the speaking subjects, first need to understand ourselves anew through our symbiotic entanglement with all the other beings. Moral reasoning becomes a question of the language used.”<sup>396</sup> These stories are not simply world cultural heritage to be romantically cherished, they are what makes an ethical life possible.

In “Ice and Light,” Lopez mentions several landscape painters in order to extrapolate the idea of a metaphoric relationship: “The other thought draws, again, on the experience of American painters. As they sought an identity apart from their European counterparts in the nineteenth century, they came to conceive of the land as intrinsically powerful: beguiling and frightening, endlessly arresting and incomprehensibly rich, unknowable and wild. ‘The face of God,’ they said.”<sup>397</sup> The question is, how can a metaphorical relationship to the land, one that affirms its intrinsic powers and reveals our enmeshed ecological bodies, complement our scientific surveys? Lopez and Dillard both stand as evidence that science can be instrumental uncovering the mentioned attributes of the land, nevertheless, it appears likely that a geostory that is “experientially informed and scientifically sound”<sup>398</sup> can safeguard us against the enframing effect of technology and reinforce an ethical adherence. The need for stand-alone science to engage in an interdisciplinary relationship with other modes of approaching the land can be discerned from these lines that Lopez writes after lamenting over the fact that the polar research bases that often hosted him were often void of, and negligent of the definite contribution of, painters, novelists, musicians and researchers:

Whenever we seek to take swift and efficient possession of places completely new to us, places we neither own nor understand, our first and often only assessment is a scientific one. And so our evaluations remain unfinished. Whatever evaluation we finally make of a stretch of land, however, no matter how profound or accurate, we will find it inadequate. The land retains an identity of its own, still deeper and more subtle than we can know.<sup>399</sup>

Mueller accentuates the necessity detected by Lopez when saying that “‘Geostory’ is not restricted to the domain of science; it rather invokes a truly holistic perspective on

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<sup>396</sup> Weber, *The Biology of Wonder*, 346.

<sup>397</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 214.

<sup>398</sup> Mueller, *Being Salmon Being Human*, 254.

<sup>399</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 191.

knowledge, including science and philosophy, but also artistic expression, contemplative practices, on-the-ground action, and also a genuine respect for the insights of various indigenous wisdom traditions.”<sup>400</sup> However, not only have the scientific explorations most often fostered our fallacy of stewardship but it has enjoyed a sort of monopoly over discourses, resistant to draw influence from anything that is not positivistic per se. The Dominion of rationality has seen the marginalization of voices, for example, that of the local whaler and the indigenous shaman, and the underestimation of how the human mind is kindred with metaphors, “those fundamental tools of the imagination”<sup>401</sup> that Lopez claims only quantum physics, among the sciences today, has gestured toward rekindling with. Moreover, once the marginalized are witnessed to belong to certain races, classes, nationalities or genders, the rationality, and objectivity claimed by its advocates becomes considerably suspicious.

But the metaphorical relationship with the land holds a high potential of being able to bear the ethics that the environmental movement is so perplexed to pin down. An ethics that emerges, and is inherent to, a direct engagement with the actors within our ecosystem and evolves with its evolution. The metaphoric relationship is that space in which the agency of these forces can be retained and where an engagement with them can become moral. This is why Levi-Strauss stresses, according to Lopez, that for hunting peoples “an animal is held in high totemic regard not merely because it is food and therefore good to eat but because it is ‘good to think.’ The animal is ‘good to imagine’”<sup>402</sup> The commencement of man and animal into the metaphoric relationship is their conscious coalition for the surfacing of the power flows that operate in deep time.

This mode of dwelling as embodied metaphors can hardly be held responsible for the major damage inflicted on the land. In this sense, traditional hunting never measures up to industrial animal farming, which is arguably incomparable in scope to the damage done by even the most non-ecological indigenous peoples. Indigenous people might leave some irreversible marks on the land in its materiality, but industry destroys the whole notion of a metaphoric/aesthetic dimension that hosts interpretation and safeguards the nonhuman from being reduced to fixed defined or labeled objects. There is no convincing argument to show that indigenous people, whose culture had retained its mythological influence, had reduced

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<sup>400</sup> Mueller, *Being Salmon Being Human*, 247.

<sup>401</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 207.

<sup>402</sup> *ibid*, 227.

the animal in their periphery to standing-reserves, despite that cases of overkilling by indigenous people have been recorded in history.

We cannot detach ourselves from the context and judge from afar what the consequence of such acts would have been in larger schemes. This is an open question that we might want to research *within* that context. The metaphorical system they have established stands as evidence that these are capable, self-reflective and progressive thinkers whose wisdom can complement scientific data and is not subjugate to it. The metaphorical relationship with the land, contrary to scientific belief, have been less prone to abuse, it has not been entirely immune to it, but it have actually retained a sense of respect for every animal and differentiated it from a mere object or standing-reserve.

Lopez ends the fourth chapter of *Arctic Dreams*, which is about Narwhals, with a note about *Ki-lin*, a creature of legend in China. Having no commercial, medical or recreational value the creature “embodied all that was admirable and ideal.”<sup>403</sup> No matter what it symbolized, we must pay attention to how the negotiation of its value became possible as a result of it becoming a symbol. With this example, Lopez highlight how a symbol like this, invigorates a metaphorical relationship to the nonhuman, by which ecological predicaments can consciously and responsibly be negotiated “between our private sense of interiority and the larger interiorities that surrounds us.”<sup>404</sup> He summarizes it perfectly himself:

The *ki-lin*, I think, embodies a fine and pertinent idea—an unpossessible being who serves humans when they have need of its wisdom, a creature who abets dignity and respect in human dealings, who underlines the fundamental mystery with which all life meets analysis. I do not mean to suggest that the narwhal should be made into some sort of symbolic *ki-lin*. Or that buried in the more primitive appreciation of life that some Eskimos retain is an “answer” to our endless misgivings about the propriety of our invasions of landscapes where we have no history, of our impositions on other cultures. But that in the simple appreciation of a world not our own to define, that poised Arctic landscape, we might find some solace by discovering the *ki-lin* hidden within ourselves, like a shaft of light.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 129

<sup>404</sup> Mueller, *Being Salmon Being Human*, 259.

<sup>405</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 129.

And a shaft of light is indeed needed, in a time when we no longer can look away from the darkness and inevitable violence that even our greenest modes of civilized life are comprised of. “Dark ecology” can become a dwelling as we rekindle with metaphors, or to put it more accurately, as we forsake the ontological security we once insincerely believed pure science could bestow.

## 2.7 What the *story* is all about

Lopez’s fascination is foremost with the ability of indigenous people to adapt and to change in accordance with the patterns and unpredictable phenomena of their polar habitat. Thus, there is no specific behavior one can discern from indigenous people’s culture and export to other places as an example of green dwelling because there simply is no such thing as a stable and pervasive indigenous culture. As *Arctic Dreams* helps us to see, Indigenous people, their stories, and their culture are constantly changing to be able to adapt to circumstances that vary in both time and place. In spite of this, there seems to be states of mind one can begin to understand and extrapolate to ecological thinking via approximating indigenous people, who has been living for generation in the tension between “beauty and violence.” In one part of the book, Lopez is making guesses about the earlier European explorers experiences in the Arctic and how they overlooked the interpretation of certain phenomena by deeming them primitive:

[P]erhaps they spoke of the Eskimos, how astonishing they were to be able to survive here, how energetic and friendly; and yet how unnerving with their primitive habits: a mother wiping away a child’s feces with her hair, a man pinching the heart of a snared bird to kill it, so as not to ruin the feathers.<sup>406</sup>

The role of stories in indigenous people’s *Dark Ecology* and how this differs from the rational and purely scientific approach still dominant in today’s environmental discourse is what Lopez wants us to think about. And indeed, these thoughts have been picked up by the more recent environmental justice movement in ecocriticism, pursued by scholars like Joni Adamson, who affirms that a thorough research on the capability of oral traditions goes hand in hand with tackling the socio-economic disparity that today devastates indigenous minorities. Adamson writes in an article:

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<sup>406</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 22.

Indigenous knowledges should never be romanticized as somehow “authentically” linking particular ethnic groups to “Nature.” Contemporary indigenous and ethnic minority writers and activists, however, do employ cosmological oral traditions as what I describe as environmental justice “cultural critique” that continues to have explanatory power in the present.<sup>407</sup>

Reasons for why indigenous traditions might be of interest to people like Lopez or Krech, despite the dismissal of their environmental innocence, becomes more visible when the question of accounting for antagonistic interactions with the non-human and dealing with the darker side of an embedded dwelling is at stake. This practically remains an open question, because, while many posthumanist theories have emerged to address this very issue, there is still little work done on translating them into action. Thus, finding and examining examples that seem to correspond with its premises is undeniably important. As Cronon guesses, “the answer seems to be that of living in daily and respectful proximity to the inhuman universe, and then recording and meditating upon and teaching this way of being by way of storytelling.”<sup>408</sup> Indigenous people appear more and more as a subject of praise by Lopez due to their conservation of a dimension that their traditions of storytelling demonstrates, and he seems to suggest that it was the abolishment of this dimension in the rise of rational scientism that contributed to the ethical cul-de-sac that we now seem to grapple with. This is in line with another passage in Krech’s book:

To brand [indigenous people] conservationists is to accept that what might have been most important to conserve was not a herd, or an entire buffalo, or even buffalo parts but one's economically vital, culturally defined, historically contingent, and ritually expressed relationship with the buffalo.<sup>409</sup>

To measure the extent of damages done as a result of a traditional worldview vs. a scientific worldview and argue for the disastrous implications of the latter is one thing, while another thing, is to render both worldviews as dynamic and incomplete, and then to try to resolve the situation by preventing either worldview to become an impediment to the other. Both Lopez and Krech voice their opinion about merging these worldviews with hopes of removing blocks from ecological thinking. They can both be read as indicating that”

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<sup>407</sup> Adamson, "Environmental justice, cosmopolitics, and climate change", 175.

<sup>408</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 146.

<sup>409</sup> Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 149.

[A]n ideology permeated by the hope of reciprocity deeply embedded in native social and natural relations also parallels the ideological predispositions of many Western ecologists and wildlife biologists. Although neither community is single-minded in outlook or behavior, each can usefully complement the other.<sup>410</sup>

Science helps us in our understanding of the human and nonhuman elements that cause a presupposed natural balance to fluctuate. Moreover, it can push us in the direction of perceiving it a norm to contain these fluctuations (Beside the more contemporary work of Latour and Haraway, Foucault's poststructuralist investigations in, say, *The Order of Things* can give us some insight about this mechanism of norm-making). Literature, on the other hand, can serve as a space where the agency of the nonhuman is more seriously acknowledged, which as discussed in the previous chapter is likely to lead to a meeting with "the strange strangers,"<sup>411</sup> i.e., actors we can hardly fathom. Of course, this should not necessarily come with the price of denying anthropogenic effects, but considering the multitude of actors involved in our ecological existence will open new avenues of thinking about these effects and their ethical responses. The example of the Pleistocene extinction, indicated by both Krech<sup>412</sup> and Lopez<sup>413</sup>, is an incident where such contemplations about the role of the human, but also that of climate, for instance, is acknowledged so that reducing the problem to the human does not let us simplify the topic.

Hungry as we are for narratives that could fill the void of a stable history and bestow us with an identity or a plan, we must avoid the pitfall of adopting indigenous stories as ideal models for dwelling. These are not static, unconditional, or especially matured narratives to be exported to other places. What Lopez really tries to highlight and attract our sense of respect to is this capacity of the story, this flexible space of interpretation, that once left open to multiple perspectives will inevitably create that space of negotiation, and posthuman engagement with the world. Simply put, he does not suggest that we starts referring to the polar bear as Tôrnrâssuk, but he strictly emphasizes that we respect the indigenous traditions that does so. His notion of respect is not a passive one, Lopez urges us to distance ourselves from fetishizing stand-alone scientific objectivism, and begin to see the role that stories play, not in our perception of life per se, but our being in the world.

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<sup>410</sup> Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 209.

<sup>411</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 60.

<sup>412</sup> Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 41.

<sup>413</sup> Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 54.



# Conclusion

In the first chapter I showed how Annie Dillard's pilgrimage corresponded to an array of theories of phenomenology, which she practically employed in order to distance herself from definitions and structures of meaning that insisted to define her relationship with nonhumans. The stalking episodes and the withdrawing nonhumans provided good examples that demonstrated a turn toward Heideggerian ontology, or what Dillard herself referred to as *via negativa*. Discussing this turn in the light of the theories of phenomenology allowed me to elaborate on the shortcomings of representational thinking and metaphysics of presence. Metaphysics of presence still has a strong influence on the western culture, Heidegger was sure to call it a problem and the inheritors of his ontology are still struggling to uproot it. As a considerable number of posthumanist lines of thinking can in one way or the other be traced back to the early phenomenologists, I believe that there is still merit in exploring phenomenological methodologies for familiarizing ourselves with the premises that posthumanism is attacking.

After writing this thesis, I find that analyzing non-fiction nature writing can certainly provide us with examples of *theories in action* where the flexibility of the literary space can provide good opportunities to assess their discursive potency and help us imagine their material implication. Dillard's narrative demonstrated interesting possibilities and pitfalls of ecological thinking, especially as it reached for uncharted territories that were guarded by death-bound questions and ethical quandaries.

In the second chapter, Barry Lopez allowed a reading that took the theories of *language as environment* to its extremes by hosting different theories of material-semiotics and offered sufficient material for contemplation about *nonhuman agency*. Lopez's achievement in contextualizing his inquiry by adding the element of human society expanded the project of the first chapter, with more components to consider and a more or less mundane criterion for attempting to tie theories to tangible situations. I tried to illustrate how Dillard provided a platform for testing our ethical threshold, while this platform was put under a relatively more controlled condition in *Arctic Dreams* with hopes that a more mature study could result in material for posthumanist scholarship. Both Dillard and Lopez's work are already in dialogue

with theory and to some extent offering new grounds for theorization. This makes me think about the potency of nature writing as a space for imagining future modes of ecological scholarship. Not only for addressing ethical problems, but also more generally in how they can portray interdisciplinary methodologies and modes of doing embodied field research. Non-fiction nature writing already appears to be equipped with a phenomenological toolbox that can be used for creating self-reflective scholarly spaces.

Indeed, with the emergence and flourish of discourses such as *environmental humanities*, how can non-fiction nature writers of the past provide academic spheres with clues on how to create a dynamic interaction between humanities and science? How can nature writing reveal the possibilities and stakes of communication with alternative forms of knowledge and how can it seize virtual platforms for alternative voices to enter the discourse? Last but not least, how can, say, theories of affect or new materialism, as interrogators of humanist bioethics, capitalize on the body of nature writing that is being produced as a step toward an *embodied* scholarship?

These are questions that occurred to me on various stages of writing this thesis, they were as much inspired by the project as they were by my experience of breathing the air of today's academia, at least as I felt it in the University of Oslo. Having these questions in the back of my mind, they sure leaked into the thesis, however, not to the depths that these questions deserve to be studied. Now more convinced than before about the capacity of nature writing for playing an instrumental role in attending to the issues of interdisciplinary scholarship, I believe that a thorough study of first-person non-fiction literature in tandem with contemporary scholarship on material-semiotics can propose new avenues of thinking about interaction, cohesion and discourse.

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