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From Simplicity to Complexity: The Two Approaches to  
Nature Taken by Thoreau and Lopez

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Henry David Thoreau's *Walden Pond*<sup>1</sup> is considered to be one of the most important contributions to early environmental thought, but for the discerning environmental critic, the work is beginning to show its age. Certainly, there are enough glimpses of Thoreau's intimacy with Nature, particularly in his chapter "Spring," to show why he is considered one of the forefathers of the environmental movement. And, Thoreau's criticism of capitalism as an activity of entrapment and moral entropy reflects an important shift in Nineteenth Century thinking away from consumption and accumulation as measures of worth. In his thinking, to own a large home, a farm, or a business means, in most cases resigning one's self to huge debt and a lifetime of labor. The price of ownership is one's soul. His poetic diary of his time at Walden reminds us all that there is a different pace and encourages us all to quiet our busy lives by returning to Nature to listen for the beat of our own "different drummer." Thoreau is right, the world needs less money and more people dedicated to self-development, introspection, and real good work. But there are other aspects of the book which are unsettling to someone trying to understand the philosophical foundations that, played out, have contributed to the current environmental crisis. This article is an examination of some aspects of Thoreau's thinking which have contributed to the physical degradation of the natural world. I offer as a contrast and an alternative the nature writing of Barry Lopez to show how thinking about Nature has changed for the better since Thoreau's tenure at Walden.

Thoreau loved the Concord Woods and Walden Pond; he is almost singing when he says

Walden is a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or rarer. Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence....It is a mirror which no stones can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off...<sup>2</sup>

and,

Who knows in how many nations' literatures this has been the Castilian Fountain? or what nymphs presided over it in the Golden Age? It is a gem of the first water which Concord wears in her coronet.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, we already see Thoreau's love as an idealizing, romantic love. His idealization of Walden seems inconsistent with his goal

to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meaning to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give true account of it in my next excursion.<sup>4</sup>

The reader might wonder if Thoreau is more interested in finding the truth or projecting his ideal. So, if we take Thoreau at his word when he says,

I do not wish to flatter my townsmen, nor to be flattered by them, for that will not advance either of us. We need to be provoked - goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot.<sup>5</sup>

then we cannot exempt his poetic anthem from philosophical examination. If he is to be regarded as an environmental philosopher, Thoreau must be subject to the same rigorous philosophical investigation that any philosopher's position must endure. Philosophy demands a critical approach even towards saints and icons. The community of philosophical discourse also demands a variety of critical interpretations and approaches. So, while it may be in vogue to worship Saint Thoreau, philosophy demands that we question his assumptions, analyze his inferences, and understand the various implications of his message. It is important that we go beneath his love, sincerity, and insight to see how Thoreau's position in Walden helps or hinders the environmental movement of the present and the future.

Most of Walden is not about Nature at all. It is about human nature. It is about truth and beauty and how human beings can become higher minded and live better lives if only they were to appreciate Nature more. It is a difficult position for one who is interested in environmentalism to argue against. All of us who claim membership in the movement for preserving the environment are sympathetic with Thoreau's vision. But there is something philosophically unsettling about a position which projects virtue onto nature and then uses these projected virtues as a reason for appreciating and learning from nature.

There are at least two problems with this position. First, we have already diluted the existential integrity of Nature by making it what we want it to be. We never really discover Nature's intrinsic value. We listen only cursorily. We fail to learn its language. Secondly, what happens to Nature when we grow out of our immature love for beauty and morality and succumb to other realities, including economic ones? Is our love of Nature then cast aside like former dalliance? A romantic love of Nature trivializes Nature, but an agapic

relationship, one that recognizes the other for what it is, seems stronger, more enduring.

Lawrence Cahoon feels that Western culture's philosophical foundations have contributed not only to a skewed relationship with Nature, but also to the very destruction of the values originally sought by Western culture. He says that the West is guilty of a "philosophical narcissism" grounded in subjectivist thinking. In his book *The Dilemma of Modernity: Philosophy, Culture, and Anti-Culture*<sup>6</sup> he attributes the erosion of modern culture, including the current degradation of the environment, to a subject-object metaphysics that originated with Descartes and Kant and progressed through The Enlightenment period to become the foundation for modern metaphysics. Subjectivism is expressed in the twentieth century as an inability to see the other, in this case Nature, as anything but an extension of the self. Cahoon says

This means that the subject, in a sense, is nature, is identified with nature; or more precisely, subject and not-subject are each indistinguishable from the phenomenal field....Adorno and Horkheimer's "nature," the material objectivity at which the subject is exclusively directed, is indistinguishable from the phenomena appearing to private consciousness. The world becomes equatable with the contents of the self, and vice versa.<sup>7</sup>

Thoreau's relationship with Nature reflects this attitude. Nature is simply an extension of his psyche. He sees many of Nature's inhabitants as miniature versions of himself and his race. He more often than not anthropomorphizes the inhabitants of Nature rather than investigating their integrative role in their surroundings. Of Walden Pond he says: "If by living thus reserved and austere, like a hermit in the woods, so long, it has acquired such wonderful purity..."<sup>8</sup> Screech owls, "are the spirits, the low spirits and melancholy forebodings, of fallen souls that once in human shape night-walked the earth and did the deeds of darkness..."<sup>9</sup> who should "do the idiotic and maniacal hooting for men."<sup>10</sup> And the frogs are "wine-bibbers and wassailers, still unrepentant, trying to sing a catch in their Stygian lake..."<sup>11</sup> All of these descriptions, of course, make fine, colorful language, but Thoreau more often than not talks of Nature as if it were human rather than noticing the discreet relationships which these beings have amongst themselves. Are these relationships not worth noticing, are they not poetic? In Walden the anthropomorphizing of Nature diminishes the power of Thoreau's message and robs Nature of its existential integrity. Thoreau's reputation is based upon his understanding of Nature, but his understanding of Nature is based upon his moral precepts. Thoreau's position succumbs to the fallacy of *Petito Principii*, he begs the question.

While loving and sincere, he nevertheless suffers from American-style frontier thinking - the kind of thinking that inspired the policy of Manifest Destiny

and the destruction of huge areas of Nature and its inhabitants. The seed of expansionism is revealed when Thoreau says,

...I did not feel crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my imagination. The low shrub-oak plateau to which the opposite shore arose, stretched away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men. "There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon," said Damodara, when his herds required new and larger pastures.<sup>12</sup>

There is, it is imagined, always another ridge, another river to cross. We could solve our problems if we could just escape from our economic, spiritual, and social surroundings. Perhaps this was a viable solution in the Nineteenth Century, but presently the continent and the world is populated and there are no frontiers other than mental ones. If we take Thoreau's message to be that we should expand our mental frontiers so that we can come to an understanding of our economic, spiritual, social, and environmental situation that is good and could be quite useful in our present circumstances. But if it is necessary to move onward into the wilderness Nature is doomed. And, if Nature is simply the playground of the mind, its isolation precludes the dialogue necessary for real change. Thoreau is unconcerned, however, writing that "when [he] has learned a man's real disposition, [he has] no hopes of changing it for the better or for the worse in this state of existence."<sup>13</sup>

Thoreau loves Nature, but nonetheless sees it as a resource to be mined for the benefit of the spirit. If Thoreau's experimental interaction with Nature is merely seeking to find a model for a transcendental morality than he is no better than the farmer who, he says, "...knows Nature but as a robber."<sup>14</sup> Thoreau comes to the forest as a visitor seeking knowledge, but he offers little to Nature in return. Thoreau's quest for an absolute in nature is somewhat akin to earlier quests on North American soil. He has come to the forest, he says, on an experiment. But he has decided his findings before he comes. Instead he has come to find what is here to be used, and then to move on. He says,

My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and forepaws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.<sup>15</sup>

Thoreau's search is little different from that of Coronado's search for the Cibola, the seven cities of gold, undertaken three hundred years earlier. Thoreau even says: "be Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening

new channels...of thought.”<sup>16</sup> Thoreau, along with Columbus and Coronado, set out to find something bright, shiny, and eternal. They each sincerely thought their purpose noble and had incredible adventures, but never really knew what they had encountered. The major difference being that history has recorded the foolishness and brutality of Coronado’s wanderings, while Thoreau has been, not surprisingly, canonized for what I will call ”spiritual mining.”

This is a harsh and confounding analogy for those of us who love Thoreau’s spirit of adventure and the adventure of spirit he attempts. He contradicts his own position on understanding things in their own terms. His remarks on the reading of texts in their original languages reveal that he is a man of incredible depth who is willing to see things on their own terms. He says of reading that ”It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.”<sup>17</sup> But one has to question if Thoreau works as diligently to understand nature on its own terms as he does when he is reading Homer, Aeschylus, or Virgil. Instead, Thoreau, when reading nature, has ”learned to read to serve a paltry convenience....”<sup>18</sup>

Lopez, describing the initial European contact with North America, has touched upon the spirit of all modern contact with Nature, including Thoreau’s, when he writes

[We] impose, [we] do not propose. I think it is possible to view the entire colonial enterprise, beginning in 1492, in these terms. Instead of an encounter with ”the other” in which we propose certain ideas, proposals based on assumptions of equality, respectfully tendered, our encounters were distinguished by a stern, relentless imposition of ideas - religious, economic, and social ideas we deemed superior if not unimpeachable....We never said to the people or the animals or the plants or the rivers or the mountains: What do you think of this? We said what we thought....<sup>19</sup>

Thoreau advocates becoming a true neighbor with nature to see the beauty of the elements, but contradicts himself when he suggests ”To anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself!”<sup>20</sup> a notion which preempts his ability to be a good neighbor. He imposes rather than proposes. He has anticipated Nature rather than listening to it. What can be learned about Nature from projections of ourselves? Projecting moral value, in the end, is little different from projecting economic value. In either case Nature has been appropriated.

Yet, Thoreau says several times reality can be discovered by withdrawing from the hub-bub of the daily grind. He says,

I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that

we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that is which appears to be.<sup>21</sup>

and,

If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale....When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence....<sup>22</sup>

We must sift through opinion, prejudice, and tradition, he says, "...till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a point d'appui..."<sup>23</sup> Thoreau, he says, "craves only reality."<sup>24</sup> But what is reality for Thoreau? Is it his vision of the forest? Is it the forest itself? Is it his relationship with the forest? Is it what he gains by anticipating Nature? His position is ambiguous.

Over and over again Thoreau says he is searching for truth and higher law. In his conclusion he mentions his search for truth several times: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth,"<sup>25</sup> and "No face which we can give to a matter will stead us so well at last as the truth,"<sup>26</sup> and "Any truth is better than make-believe."<sup>27</sup> But what is truth? According to Thoreau Nature portrays the truth. Yet, as I have mentioned above, he rarely gives Nature its due, usually choosing to anthropomorphize Nature so that owls, loons, rabbits, fieldmice, and ants are simply miniaturized representations of human beings. Is truth to be found in anthropomorphized Nature or is there another Nature that Thoreau hasn't revealed to us? Traditionally, absolute reality is not the kind of thing that philosophers, including Nietzsche and Plato in the West and Dogen in the East, have found in Nature. Plato was sceptical of the natural world because it revealed only change and decay, while Heraclitus, as well as Taoist, Buddhist, and indigenous thinkers have heralded nature because it reveals change itself as the only absolute.

Thoreau's asceticism is yet another veil that keeps him from fully understanding the problem at the bottom of such economies of accumulation, even spiritual accumulation. He divorces himself physically and, he thinks, philosophically from his society rather than integrating his ideas with theirs to effect change. Thoreau's thinking reveals a commitment to a metaphysics of detachment when he says

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a same sense [as neighbors]. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences....I can stand as remote from myself as from another.<sup>28</sup>

In all fairness it should be noted that Thoreau feels solitude brings the conscious individual, as a moral being, back into the picture. For Thoreau, there can be no understanding of others without first gaining a self-understanding. But he is paraphrasing Confucius, who infers that no man is an island. Yet Thoreau insists that his solitary thinking itself can be thought of as a community and that we can stand aloof from our actions. His perception is the perception of a scientist. Science, from Bacon and Descartes onward, has de-sensualized nature by relegating it to the position of a lifeless machine, incapable of relationships other than those imposed upon it by human understanding. Thoreau, after Kant, suggests a subjectivist understanding of *Nous* which denies subjectivity to Nature and places human beings in a privileged position because of their abilities to categorize and interpret. Nature is effectively lifeless because our thoughts can stand aloof to our actions on Nature. But modern ecological thinking refutes this view and sides with Confucius's original meaning. We cannot stand aloof from our actions. To be members of a community one must be engaged. Similarly, his idealization of Nature has made it impossible for him to integrate in that community as well. The sensuality of social intercourse has been all but eradicated from his thinking. His relationship with nature is flawed because he fails to notice the philosophical baggage he drags into the forest with him. Whether he lives in his university garret room or in his cabin, he remains a recluse in the midst of a bustling community. This is the baggage of American individualism, Puritan chastity, Emersonian Transcendentalism, and Eastern asceticism of various sorts which actually deny him ontological parity with what the American-Indian peoples would call the plant people and animal people of the forest. Instead, he says "...our very life is our disgrace" and that

All sensuality is one, though it takes many forms; all purity is one.  
It is the same whether a man eat, or drink, or cohabit, or sleep  
sensually. They are but one appetite....The impure can neither stand  
nor sit with purity.<sup>29</sup>

He refers to Human depravities and Nature's purity, yet when he sees in nature what is considered less than chaste - drives connected with what he might refer to as the lower animal instincts of human beings - he chides nature for its savagery and says

Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome. What  
avails that you are Christian, if you are not purer than the heathen,  
if you deny yourself no more, if you are not more religious?<sup>30</sup>

Thoreau's thought retains strong Manichean influences from European Christianity which has traditionally endeavored to overcome and subdue Nature. Christianity spent centuries eradicating the Nature worshipping sensualist religions of Europe. Religions centered upon fertility and with positive and sacred



images of women, sex, and animals were thought to be expressions of evil forces. Thoreau's New England Puritan upbringing, when combined with his admiration of Nature, produces a kind of philosophical schizophrenia. He cannot reconcile Nature's sensuousness physicality with his romantic ideal of human and Natural behavior.

There are, however, alternative metaphysical approaches, which might disentangle Thoreau's position and allow for Nature and human to be involved in a mutual, integrative system. Such a system might allow for the Natural world to be a model for the kind of truth he is seeking. The Japanese thinker Nishitani Keiji, in his book *Religion and Nothingness*,<sup>31</sup> examines problems posed to Western metaphysics by Christianity and its doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Consistent with Thoreau's mentor Emerson, Nishitani suggests that Christianity open itself to a kind of atheism. But Nishitani's suggestion goes a step beyond the Transcendentalists Neo-Platonic notion of "the One," which is still transcendent and therefore distant and inaccessible to human beings.

Nishitani suggests that Christianity modify its version of God, which is separate from human and nature, to be a kenotic God that on a continuum of Being and Sunyata would be somewhere between Meister Eckhart's kenotic God and the no-God position of Zen where Sunyata negates God, being, and nothingness with their opposites resulting in a unification of God, human beings, and Nature in Absolute Nothingness. Eckhart's kenotic God is a more satisfying model for individuals to take faith in and for culture to model itself upon. Certainly a kenotic God could be considered to be in both Nature and human beings and would provide a nexus of value in which both the natural and human would participate. Nishitani posits cultural existence as a reflection of religious experience and, hence, by definition his theory supports a reaffirming notion of culture and Nature. But, while Nishitani's Zen Buddhist approach might remedy the problem of Nature as separate from human existence, it does little for Thoreau's aversion to sensuality. Zen, while affirming the value of Nature for discovering truth, has little use for sensuality.

Thoreau's relationship with Nature is still compromised. Even a kenotic version of Christianity seems to exclude sensuality. The sensual aspects of Nature are still identified with women and are still degraded and stuck in the Christian characterization of woman as virgin or whore - virtuous and beautiful or ugly and depraved. Thoreau is often ambivalent concerning the messiness of Nature. Walden Pond is pure, yet the ground emerging during springtime is "somewhat excrementous in its character...as if the whole world were turned wrong side outward...."<sup>32</sup> And, he isn't comfortable with his own feelings when he says

I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented.<sup>33</sup>

Of course he doesn't do it. He would like to be wild, but shies from actually doing it. That would be to surrender to Nature, which he says must be overcome. We know, however, that his favorite conversation partner, the woodsman, who Thoreau says is a Natural man, would have. But, at other times Thoreau seems comfortable with the severities of the Natural world, as when he writes in his chapter "Spring,"

I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp....Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal.<sup>34</sup>

But by putting Nature on a pedestal more often than not he has forsworn any real understanding or intimate contact with it.

There is, however, a model of Natural/human sociality that would help Thoreau overcome his aversion of Nature's sensuality and put him back in touch with the community of Nature and resolve his philosophical conflict. The American-Indian traditions are, generally speaking, not ascetic traditions except during various ceremonies and rituals. If anything they are known for their propensity to celebrate religious events with feasts. Sexual imagery is regularly integrated in rites, rituals, and humor rather than avoided or degraded as in the puritanical approach taken by Thoreau. Certainly Thoreau's chaste notion of a Nature-based ethics would have been challenged by a scene at Hopi mesas Ramon Gutierrez refers to when he writes of a Pueblo snake ceremony performed in 1582: "The snake/rain, phallus/ semen symbolism of the dance horrified the Europeans."<sup>35</sup> I don't want to overemphasize the role of sexuality in American-Indian culture, merely to illustrate that sexuality is an integral part of regeneration and the powers of Nature which many indigenous cultures celebrate but Thoreau seems anxious to ignore. In the American-Indian traditions, the lessons to be learned about morality come from participating in Nature rather than merely observing it or avoiding it. Even sensuality is received with respect, courtesy, and acceptance. Accordingly, Nature reciprocates with human beings who demonstrate respect. Lopez remembers an Anaktuvuk man describing his encounters with Nature who says,

"I listen." That's all. I listen, he meant, to what the land is saying. I walk around in it and strain my senses in appreciation of it for a long time before I, myself, ever speak a word. Entered in such a respectful manner, he believed, the land would open to him.<sup>36</sup>

Morality can be learned from Nature, but by talking less and listening more. Nature is at the heart of the sacred. The human being functions in the context of the sacred and behaves according to the lessons put forth in the creation

mythologies showing human beings emerging in concert with the natural world. The ceremonial rites connected with the cycles of agriculture, hunting, and gathering reveal strong, even "genetic" connections with the plant, animal, or season being honored and with the human and spiritual community at large.

The American-Indian Nature ethic is entirely consistent with the ethical universality expressed by the Kantian Categorical Imperative but embraces a larger community. One must always consider one's actions in light of a universal harmony which includes the natural and spiritual community. The individual is not prioritized like it is in modern-Western society, but it isn't empty of value either. The American-Indian metaphysics looks at all entities - plants, animals, human beings, and geography - as members of community with the responsibility of maintaining the harmonic and reciprocal balance. As Jamake Highwater says,

The relatedness of the individual and the tribe extends outward beyond the family, band, or clan to include all things of the world. Thus nothing exists in isolation. Individualism does not presuppose autonomy, alienation, or isolation.<sup>37</sup>

To maintain harmony with Nature, tribe, clan, family, and inner self have to interact with their surroundings in such a way as to not upset the delicate balance of relatedness. The American-Indian metaphysics assumes that the non-human members of Nature will behave morally.

Human beings, as Thoreau knows, because they are self-conscious and able to make decisions freely, are vulnerable to distraction, stupidity, greed, sexual perversion, and other activity which could disturb the harmony in the community. If one acted immorally by hunting improperly or having sexual relations with a member of one's own family, or even being careless with ritual action then Nature will reflect the discord. One person's actions are enough to break the harmony of a whole clan. If things are not going well with hunting, growing, gathering, or reproductive cycles, then it is the job of the elders to seek out the imbalance-causing agent and assign the necessary restorative ceremony for those involved, sometimes the entire tribe, though often only a family or clan unit. If a tribe is looking for a good growing season or some other kind of benefit from the powers that emanate from the harmony of a good relationship, then a specific ceremony and/or dance is necessary to set the human community in harmony with its natural community so that both will be in rhythm for and with the task at hand. The human being, after all, is an integral part of the Natural world and effects it at least as much as it effects him or her.

Thus Thoreau's project, to live autonomously, isolated from the members of his "clan" is misdirected. To be yourself in the way Highwater describes means to act with all members of the community in mind. It is not to be exclusionary or autonomous. Being is being compassionately and communicatively. It means

to accept and interact with each thing as it is rather than to project a meaning onto the thing.

Thoreau, however, is comfortable with transferring his own understanding of aesthetics to nature. What is actually there seems unimportant, for "it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do."<sup>38</sup> In effect, Thoreau is tourist in the forest (which is better than most of his contemporaries!) rather than a member of its community because the forest he sees is the forest of his mind and not the forest itself.

Lopez, following the thinking of traditional indigenous peoples, says that this kind of thinking is typical of someone who advocates "...once and for all, as long as possible live free and uncommitted."<sup>39</sup> It is unabashed frontierism. He says that a relationship with nature, like any relationship, requires an explicit recognition of the other and a deep commitment to place. Lopez writes,

The true wealth that America offered, wealth that could turn exploitation into residency, greed into harmony, was to come from one thing - the cultivation and achievement of local knowledge. It was in pursuit of local knowledge alone that one could comprehend the notion of home and its attendant responsibilities.<sup>40</sup>

Instead, one gets the feeling from Thoreau that nature is a park, to be visited, marvelled at, benefitted from, and left till the next time it is needed. He never mentions responsibility to the place he lives. He comes to the forest to get what he needs, and when his need is satisfied, he moves on to satisfy other needs. Nature was simply a resource for understanding. Certainly Thoreau discovers much about himself, but maybe by listening more closely he might have discovered more of Nature. Lopez suggests that environmentalism should facilitate the re-discovery of Nature.

What we need is to discover the continent again...We need to so-journ in it again, to discover the lineaments of cooperation with it. We need to discover the difference between the kind of independence that is a desire to be responsible to no one but the self - the independence of the adolescent - and the independence of people who no longer need to be supervised....And we need to find within ourselves, and nurture, a profound courtesy, an unalloyed honesty.<sup>41</sup>

This passage written by Lopez sounds very much like Thoreau. But Thoreau, despite his passion for truth, is rarely courteous in his assessment with his fellow men or with his perceptions of Nature. He is responsible only to himself. Thoreau moved to the forest to re-discover himself in Nature's surroundings, but failed, in all but a few passages, to re-discover Nature itself.

Thoreau's motto is "Simplify, simplify."<sup>42</sup> In our complicated world this sounds wonderful, yet we learn more each day about the inherent complexity of the world. There are some things which can bear simplification and some which cannot. Relationships are rarely simple. They demand great patience, listening, constant reevaluation and endless communication. They change at varying rates, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly, they grow and decay then regenerate. A modern understanding of nature is one that recognizes the complexity of relationships. The value of Thoreau's wells notwithstanding, the earth is neither continent nor insular.<sup>43</sup> Nature is not solid and conservative nor is it provincial and isolated. Nature, we know through ecology, lives and emerges through the interminable interaction and growth of systems.

Lopez is a nature writer who has spent his life travelling the world while watching, studying, and listening to the complexities of Nature. He doesn't anticipate Nature or expect to find moral absolutes. For Lopez, complexity is an invitation for contemplation. Instead of characterizing Nature as an object to be used by human beings, he attempts to see it on its own terms. His works *Arctic Dreams* and *Of Wolves and Men*<sup>44</sup> are fine examples of an approach which rediscovers Nature and recontextualizes both the human and the Natural. He supplies the reader with as much objective scientific information as is practical in order to describe the thing as simply as possible. One who reads his chapter on polar bears, *T&#244;rn&#226;rssuk*, for example will learn that this lumbering hulk

...dives to the ocean floor for mussels and kelp, and soundlessly breaks the water's surface on his return, to study a sleeping seal. Twenty miles from shore he treads water amid schooling fish. The sea bear. In winter, while the grizzly hibernates, the polar bear is out on the sea ice, hunting. In summer his tracks turn up a hundred miles inland, where he has feasted on crowberries and blueberries.<sup>45</sup>

His other chapters include in-depth studies of the musk-ox, the cold, the ringed seal, the ice, the caribou, the light, the arctic wolf, the tundra, the bald eagle, the lichen, the Eskimo, the flowers, and the European explorers and the American entrepreneurs. But Lopez is not interested in mere description. He is looking for connections. He wants to know what forces bind these elements, these animals, these plants, and these people together. He wants to know what effect they have on one another. He notices what effect the harshness of an Arctic ecosystem can have on all the members of the Natural community such as

When a June sleet storm or a sudden August freeze destroys an entire generation of young birds, or 10,000 seals, or hundreds of caribou calves, it comes home in the starkest way that this is an environment marked by natural catastrophe, an inherently vulnerable ecosystem.<sup>46</sup>

He is not celebrating what Thoreau called Nature's example of immortality, nor is he mourning the loss of so much young life. He is looking for the differences these kinds of natural catastrophe can have on the global community. Will the polar bears wander into town looking for food? Will the caribou-hunting Eskimos rely more upon canned goods that need to be trucked or flown in or will they move into the cities and live on welfare? How will flowers pollinate in the short summer season if there are less birds? How can Natural catastrophes be used as models for understanding the effects of human-induced catastrophes such as overhunting or oil-spills? Lopez says,

To contemplate what people are doing out here and ignore the universe of the seal, to consider human quest and plight and not know the land, I thought, to not listen to it, seemed fatal. Not perhaps for tomorrow, or next year, but fatal if you looked down the long road of our determined evolution and wondered at the considerations that had got us this far.<sup>47</sup>

Through this web of relationships we begin to see value of the subject, be it a seal or a geographical region, emerge in such a way that the thing itself has value.

Lopez also includes historical and mythological understandings of the topic to place it in folk and sacred contexts. In the chapter entitled "A Wolf in the Heart" from *Of Wolves and Men*, Lopez observes,

One of the problems that comes with trying to take a wider view of animals is that most of us have cut ourselves off from them conceptually. We do not think of ourselves as part of the animal kingdom.<sup>48</sup>

Lopez looks at how wolves have been understood by, among others, the Cree, the Flatheads, Pawnee, Omaha, Chippewa, Cheyenne, Hidatsa, Sioux, and Arapaho Indians, as well as early trappers, miners, explorers, settlers of American and European descent. He is fascinated by mythologies which associate the wolf with witchcraft and debauchery, as both Navajo and middle age European mythologies have done. He reflects that the "war" against wolves carried out by farmers and ranchers in the last hundred and fifty years and this country

...reveals a certain amount of self-hatred, but we are drawn back inevitably to the middle ages. At a time when no one knew anything about genetics, the idea that a child suffering from Down's syndrome - small ears, a broad forehead, a flat nose, prominent teeth - was the offspring of a wench and a werewolf was perfectly plausible. The Middle ages were a melancholy time, accurately reflected in the surreal and grotesque imagery of painters like Heironymous Bosch

and Pieter Brueghel the Younger; a time of famine, of endless wars, of epidemic disease, of social upheaval....Wanting to be a werewolf, in other words, was somehow understandable.<sup>49</sup>

Under those circumstances, the appropriation of Nature was appropriate because Nature was alien and antagonistic to human survival. It was somehow normal to want to drift over to the "dark" side if, for no other reason than to be on the winning side. But we know now that such images of Nature are superstitious and based upon mythologies of pessimism and misunderstanding. Rarely, however, do we examine the reputations left behind by these mythologies in our perceptions of Nature. Lopez wants to know how much of these mythological reputations are carried over into our discussions of the wolf's role in current recreational and economic ecosystems, from National Parks to sheep and cattle ranches. His goal, before all else, is to discover the wolf. Who is the wolf, Lopez asks, and what is the meaning of the wolf? What are his habits? What are its relations with the other animals and plants of its surroundings? What have other peoples thought and said of it? How does it fit in my world? What place do I have in its world? And, finally, what can be learned from this relationship? He draws his conclusions only after careful investigation and thoughtful deliberation. As a result the existential integrity of both Nature and human beings is preserved and both are renewed in a reconstructed relationship.

Lopez also writes Natural fiction in a disconcerting, almost haunting style suggesting the approach taken by the Anaktuvuk man described earlier. His characters often listen to the land for past discussions or feel the texture of the soil while conjecturing who might have tread the same path earlier. He seems to empty himself of judgement and opinion when he encounters animals like the blue heron or the raven. He wants to know what they think. His book *River Notes* opens with a mystical story of a blue heron and a mysterious narrator who is trying to feel what it is like to live with the river, with the forest, with the wind, and with cold. But he is always one step behind, finding only a feather or a collection of broken sticks where the heron has spent the night. Finally, he admits defeat and says,

I leap into the jade color of the winter river. I fight the current to reach the rocks, climb up on them and listen for the sound of your voice. I stand dripping, shivering in my white nakedness, in the thin dawn light. Waiting. Silent. You begin to appear at a downriver bend.<sup>50</sup>

In "Twilight", a chapter from *Desert Notes*, the story of a Navajo blanket weaves together its maker and all of its owners into a narrative of powerful healing. The realization of the blanket's genealogy transforms its current owner and helps him to understand that context, in-itself, has the power to heal because it situates him on the ground in the dust and, "It is only from such a height above the floor

of the desert that one is able to see clearly what is going on.”<sup>51</sup> The mysterious tone of the rug and the heron stories help to illustrate Lopez’s sensitive approach to Nature, but they also stimulate an imaginative power to leave behind one’s mundane existence and re-integrate with Nature. It is the imagination, after all, that emerges as the link between the human and the Natural worlds. Rediscovering Nature is not just about the scientific investigation of systems, formulating hypotheses, and coming to conclusions. Learning to accept Nature’s on its own terms requires a wonderment for creativity and wonderment. Lopez, referring to the thinking of A. N. Whitehead, says

...in simply discussing the issues, the merest hint of dogmatic certainty is an exhibition of folly. This tolerance for mystery invigorates the imagination; and it is the imagination that gives shape to the universe. This appreciation of the separate realities enjoyed by other organisms is not only no great threat to our own reality, but the root of a fundamental joy. I learned from [Lopez’s ”pet” wolf] River that I was a human being and that he was a wolf and that we were different. I valued him as a creature, but he did not have to be what I imagined he was. It is with this freedom from dogma, I think, that the meaning of the words ”the celebration of life” becomes clearer.<sup>52</sup>

Learning, for Lopez, involves a gentleness, a sympathy, an openness rather than an agitation, a distance, and an agenda. It requires a style similar to one taken by a sensitive stranger making his first moves toward becoming a part of the community. The subtlety and spirit of his approach overwhelms as in this passage where he describes his delicate pursuit for intimacy with the desert:

You must come with no intentions of discovery. You must overhear things as though you’d come into a small and desolate town and paused by an open window. You can’t learn anything from saguaro cactus, from ocotillo....You have to proceed almost by accident.<sup>53</sup>

Rather than allowing his preconceptions and a distanced scientific observational style to project a mold-fitting world of distinct categories, Lopez casts an eye about the neighborhood, identifies its members, looks for their relationships, and listens for the poetry of the community. His commentary whispers rather than preaches. Finally, when he feels comfortable with his surroundings he inevitably finds himself drawn into the community itself. He lets go of his subjectivity and empties himself in a kenotic act of goodwill. He opens his empiricism to include himself and, symbolically, all human beings in the community called the Natural world as when he says

I developed methods of inquiry, although I appeared to be doing nothing at all. I appeared completely detached. I appeared to be



smelling my hands cupped full of rocks. I appeared to be asleep. But I was not....Toward the end of my inquiry I moved with almost exquisite ease. But I could not disguise the waiting....One morning as I stood watching the sun rise washing out the blue black, watching the white crystalline stars fade, my bare legs began quivering in the cool air, I noticed my hands had begun to crack and turn to dust.<sup>54</sup>

Lopez, finally, allows himself to become the land, to become the desert, to become the wolf, to become the Arctic tundra, not because he relinquishes his autonomy, but because he discovers that autonomy is dependent upon the Natural world.

Both Thoreau and Lopez relate ethics to Nature. But, it seems, Thoreau approached Nature with an absolutist ethics in mind, prepared to find in Nature what he knew must be there, and to announce it loudly. Lopez, on the other hand, approaches Nature empty handed, listening carefully. He doesn't drive life into a corner and suck out its marrow. His ethics is open-ended and comes from long and careful study of Nature not as a transcendent absolute, but as an evolving complexity of living systems and events. He is not an ascetic, and his gift to environmentalism is a technique of dialogue and involvement rather than pronouncement and chastity.

Thoreau's loving anthem to Walden is an inspiration and invitation to change. His love of Nature is infectious. Reading Walden infects one with a potentiality for discovering one's own Walden. We dream that we could be one of his rare visitors to share one of his simple meals. We wish we could walk with him around his Walden and we dream that his spirit lives in our own Waldens. We aspire to join in harmony with his poetic admonitions against slothful living and mourn the damage done by the momentum of the capital and spiritual economies. But Thoreau could have approached his "experiment" differently. He could have approached his project less heavy-handedly, with a subtle curiosity for understanding and done less moralizing. His tone and the philosophical undercurrents of his approach often dilute his message. If he had brought less with him to the forest, he might have left with more, and he might have better understood the connection between his urban life and his life in the forest. Still, Thoreau's vision is a significant contribution to our collective environmental consciousness and, as Lopez says, "The individual desire to understand, as much as any difference in acuity of the senses, brings each of us to find something in the land others did not notice."<sup>55</sup> "No one can tell the whole story."<sup>56</sup>

## Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, Walden Pond from *The Portable Thoreau* edited by Carl Bode (New York: Penguin Books, 1947) pp. 258-573.

2. Ibid., p. 437.
3. Ibid., p. 428.
4. Ibid., p. 344.
5. Ibid., p. 361.
6. Lawrence E. Cahoon, *The Dilemma of Modernity: Philosophy, Culture, and Anti-Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).
7. Ibid., p. 76.
8. *Walden.*, p. 443.
9. Ibid., p. 376.
10. Ibid., p. 377.
11. Ibid...
12. Ibid., p. 341.
13. Ibid., p. 372.
14. Ibid., p. 415.
15. Ibid., p. 351.
16. Ibid., p. 560.
17. Ibid., p. 354.
18. Ibid., p. 356-357.
19. Barry Holstun Lopez, *The Rediscovery of North America: The Thomas D. Clark Lectures, 1990* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1990), pp. 15-16.
20. *Walden.*, p. 272.
21. Ibid., p. 349.
22. Ibid., p. 348.
23. Ibid., p. 350.
24. Ibid., p. 351.
25. Ibid., p. 569.
26. Ibid., p. 566.

27. Ibid...
28. Ibid., p. 385-386.
29. Ibid., p. 467.
30. Ibid., p. 467.
31. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, Translated with an Introduction by Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1982).
32. *Walden.*, p. 548.
33. Ibid., p. 456.
34. Ibid., p. 558.
35. Ramon A. Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 30.
36. Barry Holstun Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), p. 257.
37. Jamake Highwater, *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America* (New York: Meridian Books, 1981) p. 172.
38. *Walden.*, p. 343.
39. Ibid., p. 337.
40. *The Rediscovery of North America.*, p. 21.
41. Ibid., p. 47.
42. *Walden.*, p. 344.
43. Ibid., p. 340, Thoreau says, "One value even of the smallest well is, that when you look into it you see that earth is not continent but insular."
44. Barry Holstun Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978).
45. *Arctic Dreams.*, p. 79.
46. Ibid., p. 33.
47. Ibid., p. 13.
48. *Of Wolves and Men.*, p. 98.
49. Ibid., p. 227.

50. Barry Holstun Lopez, *River Notes: The Dance of the Blue Herons* (New York: Avon Books, 1979), p. 8.
51. Barry Holstun Lopez, *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven* (New York: Avon Books, 1976), p. 24.
52. *Of Wolves and Men.*, p. 285.
53. *Desert Notes: Reflections.*, p. xi.
54. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
55. *Arctic Dreams.*, p. 272.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

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