


1-1-2005

# "That Could Happen": Nature Writing, the Nature Fakers, and a Rhetoric of Assent

David Thomas Sumner  
*Linfield College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac_pubs)

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## DigitalCommons@Linfield Citation

Sumner, David Thomas, ""That Could Happen": Nature Writing, the Nature Fakers, and a Rhetoric of Assent" (2005). *Faculty Publications*. Accepted Version. Submission 4.  
[https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac\\_pubs/4](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac_pubs/4)

This Accepted Version is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@linfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@linfield.edu).

“That Could Happen”: Nature Writing, The Nature Fakers, and a Rhetoric of Assent

*Any good poet, in our age at least, must begin with the scientific view of the world; and any scientist worth listening to must be something of a poet, must possess the ability to communicate to the rest of us his sense of love and wonder at what his work discovers.*

--Edward Abbey (87)

Much has been made about the relationship between nature writing and science. In perhaps the first academic look on nature writing, Phillip Marshall Hicks defines it as the “literary expression of scientifically accurate observation of the life history of the lower orders of nature, or of other natural objects” (6). We may take issue with some of the minor details in Hicks’ definition, but if you read nature writing--from Abbey to Zwinger--science is there. The foundation of the genre is empirical observation of the more-than-human world. That’s not the whole of it, however. As Jean Arnold notes: “Nature writing [ . . . ] contains this part of natural knowledge that science cannot fathom, the part that must come from human experience, from human self-awareness, from human community structured through ties to the land, and from the human imagination, acting freely” (22). Because of the pairing of empiricism and other human experience, readers come to the genre with certain assumptions: they assume the text will tell them something independently verifiable about the object world--something they could see, hear, or touch if they were in the same location at the same time. They assume they are reading nonfiction, and for most readers, that distinction is important. Readers also come to nature writing with the hope that the writer will use imagination to help them see the world in a new way and possibly offer them a different and better relationship to the more-than-human sphere.

If the proceeding is true, nature writing as a genre is unique, and we must ask: how should we read nonfiction nature writing? How does the nonfiction distinction change the relationship between the writer and the reader? The writer and the world? The reader and the world? Barry Lopez addresses these very questions in “Landscape and Narrative,” an essay found in *Crossing Open Ground*. Here, he considers the act of storytelling and explores how language connects us to landscapes, to animals and to

each other. Lopez is concerned not only with the content of the stories and how they connect us to the more-than-human world, but also with how the stories are received. He is concerned with the rhetorical stance the listener--or in our case the reader--brings to the experience. Lopez wants to find a way to expand notions of knowledge to include not only the empirical and quantifiable, but also the personal. To this end, he asks us to suspend initial doubt for initial belief. To use Wayne Booth's term, he calls for a *rhetoric of assent*.

## I

Lopez sets up his discussion of assent by relating a story he heard from the Nunamiut who live near the Brooks Range in Alaska. He heard the story during an informal exchange of hunting and trapping tales. Lopez writes:

The story I remember most vividly was about a man hunting a wolverine from a snow machine in the spring. He followed the animal's tracks for several miles over rolling tundra in a certain valley. Soon he caught sight ahead of a dark spot on the crest of a hill--the wolverine pausing to look back. The hunter was catching up but each time he came over a rise the wolverine was looking back from the next rise, just out of range. The hunter topped one more rise and met the wolverine bounding toward him. Before he could pull his rifle from its scabbard, the wolverine flew across the engine cowl and the windshield, hitting him square in the chest. The hunter scrambled his arms wildly, trying to get the wolverine out of his lap, and fell over as he did so. The wolverine jumped clear as the snow machine rolled over, and fixed the man with a stare. He had not bitten, not even scratched the man. Then the wolverine walked away. The man thought of reaching for the gun, but no, he did not. (62-3)

Lopez then sends a copy of this story to a friend in Canada who works among the Cree people, asking him to relate the story to his hosts. Upon seeing his friend, Lopez asks him about the reaction of the Cree. Their response illustrates what is key to Lopez's theory of understanding the natural world. "You know how they are," he tells Lopez. "They said, 'That could happen'" (70).

To grasp the importance of these three words, we must first know that the Cree are experts on wolverine; their response is not divorced from experience. They could have assumed a more skeptical stance, doubting until they had proof of this somewhat sensational and anthropomorphic account. However, the story fits within the realm of their experience and, consequently, they assent to the possibility. They give an initial “yes” to the story of the wolverine. Lopez argues that the degree of truth we are able to discern depends upon our willingness to assume the rhetorical stance of the Cree. He insists we will find the most truth “only when we accord one another the respect the Cree showed the Nunamiut.” Without such a gesture of respect, he asserts, “there are only failures of imagination: reductionism in science; fundamentalism in religion; fascism in politics” (71).

The type of respect the Cree show the Nunamiut is the foundation upon which Lopez builds a theory of understanding stories about the natural world. Lopez’s comments on the wolverine story can easily be expanded into theory of reading nature writing. When we approach nature writing, we face a situation similar to that of the Cree. We are asked to judge the possibility of what we are reading. Furthermore, the stories that we read about the more-than-human world have ethical implications. If we assent to a story that gets it wrong, we are less likely to find ethical relationships--we too are likely to get it wrong. Yet if we assent to a story that gets it right, our ability to form ethical relationships to the world is enhanced. In fact, because nature writing often asks us to abandon conventional relationships with the natural world for more ethical ones, our openness to new possibilities, our assent, can have great reward. Moreover, Lopez implies--through example of the Cree’s response--an initial yes when presented with new ideas, stories, or arguments, is what allows the possibility for a more ethical response. The other option--an initial no--as Lopez notes, leads down the path of reductionism, fundamentalism, and fascism.

To see why we must initially assent, we need to look at the work of Wayne Booth. In *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, like Lopez, Booth claims that a rhetoric of doubt leads down the same reductionist, fundamentalist, and fascist path. Booth makes the argument for assent at greater length than Lopez, and in doing so insists that, because contemporary thinking has fallen into an extreme skepticism which he calls *modern dogma*, assent is needed. For an example, Booth points to the philosophy of Bertrand Russell, which he feels clearly demonstrates the excesses of modern doubt. For

Booth, the conflict lies within Russell's quest for certain knowledge and in his denial of any fact or idea that cannot withstand the rigor of empirical testing. Such a narrow test would eliminate many ways of knowing the world. It would especially eliminate the personal as a legitimate way of understanding.

Booth writes:

Though [Russell] often said that nothing is certain, he never gave up the notion that what one should look for, when looking for truth, is the most nearly certain propositions one can find and certainty was always a function of empirical and logical proving. Such a search means in practice that most of what we consider important will be unknowable because unprovable, and it also means that belief in the universal efficacy of doubt becomes the most certain belief of all. (58)

What is at stake here, if we embrace an extreme skepticism such as Russell's, is the abandonment of all knowledge that cannot be verified empirically--the abandonment of most values and of reasoning about those values. Furthermore, if we adopt this extreme form of skepticism, we also embrace an initial "no" instead of an initial "yes." And, as Booth notes, "The notion that we have reason to believe only what has been proved in the sense of withstanding all possible doubts, cannot be lived with by most of us for even a moment" (66).

I might be accused of polarizing the possibilities here. "Can I not suspend judgment until I receive further evidence?" you might ask. And I would answer, "Yes." But in suspending judgment you still only have two possibilities. First, you can suspend judgment with assent. In other words, you can suspend judgment while still granting that the story or argument might be true and "try on" the evidence. You can say, "I will believe it possible until I have reason to disbelieve." Or you can suspend judgment with doubt. "Prove it to me," you may say. "I will doubt it's possible until you have assembled sufficient evidence." But there are still only two ways to suspend judgment--with assent or with doubt.

In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, Scott Slovic asserts that Lopez's theory of understanding the world would reject the narrowness of extreme doubt. According to Slovic, Lopez asks us to change our habitual way of thinking: "The specific change [Lopez] calls for is the renewed reliance

on personal experience, in addition to the less subjective and more quantitative approaches which Western civilization, at least since Francis Bacon, has come to esteem most highly" (141). Lopez asks us to value the empirical along with the personal. Being careful and watchful--being a good empiricist--is something he finds necessary for knowing the world. But Lopez also recognizes the limits of this epistemology and realizes that it is only when close observation is joined with other less quantifiable epistemological methods--the personal, the mythic, the imaginative--that we truly begin to understand what is "out there" and what our relationship to it is, or more importantly, what it should be. Moreover, if we are going to extend our methods of knowing to include the personal with the quantitative, we must also approach new ideas and new stories with an initial "yes."

Assent is especially necessary when approaching the problem of environmental ethics. The idea of expanding our ethical system beyond the bounds of humanity is counter to Western tradition. We have spent millennia in the West with the natural world as our foe--as something to be conquered, as something to be overcome--rather than as something with which to seek harmony. If we are to overcome such a long tradition of domination, we must be willing to "try on" the relationships that nature writers are creating with the natural world and evaluate the "truth" they provide about living in the world. The respect and openness of the "that could happen" stance is vital if we are to explore new ways to live.

Assent, however, does not eliminate the need for useful doubt. The openness of the Cree's response is not naive acceptance. We are often confronted with blatantly false stories. In the specific case of nonfiction nature writing, I would argue there is a certain contract established between the reader and the writer--a contract that requires clear fidelity to the world. If we are asked by writers to accept their ethical vision, we must be able to trust their depiction of reality. Blatantly false stories will affect our relationship with the more-than-human world in potentially negative ways. We must, then, decide when to assent and when to have reason to doubt. Both Booth and Lopez provide useful criteria for such discrimination.

Booth's major criterion for assent is life experience. We all come to stories and arguments with the experience of other stories and arguments that have already been proven to be satisfactorily true or false. Accordingly, Booth writes: "When I meet, as I did last year, a young Forest Service employee who

believes that men on earth can project themselves instantaneously to Venus and back again, I do not grant assent pending disproof; I have no impulse to assent at all, since the claim runs counter to all of my experience” (107). Booth uses an extreme example to make his point; yet, we are usually presented with much more subtle situations. But we all have life experience to rely upon. The assent that Booth is writing about here--gauged by life experience--is very similar to the assent Lopez asks us to adopt. Lopez didn't have enough experience with either the wolverine or the story telling context, so he relied on the Cree. Referring to the Cree and their “that could happen” response, Lopez writes: “In these uncomplicated words the Cree declared their own knowledge of the wolverine”(70). The Cree came to the wolverine story with specific life experience, and even though they had never seen a wolverine to this exact thing, their life experience told them it was very possible; therefore, they assented. [1]

Life experience is also important for Lopez, and he uses experience to help determine the difference between what he calls *authentic* and *inauthentic* stories. Although, in the instance of the wolverine he is speaking about a very specific type of story telling, Lopez's use of the term *story* is more general including nonfiction prose, novel, short story, and poetry as well as traditional narrative forms such as myth (68). The touchstone for his authentic/ inauthentic distinction rests with two “landscapes”--the interior and the exterior. The exterior landscape is “the one we see--not only the line and color of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution.” He then notes: “One learns landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it--like that between the sparrow and the twig” (64).

The interior landscape is “a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape.” So, according to Lopez, the interior landscape must correlate in some way to what's “out there.” This interior/ exterior relationship is important. “Relationships in the exterior landscape,” writes Lopez, “include those that are named and discernible, such as the nitrogen cycle, or a vertical sequence of Ordovician limestone, and others that are uncoded or ineffable, such as winter light falling on a particular kind of granite, or the effect of humidity on the frequency of a blackpoll warbler's burst of song.” In other words, the “interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of the exterior

landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by the land as it is by genes” (65). The relationship between the interior and exterior landscape is one of reciprocity between the world and the individual existing in the world.

The idea of interior and exterior landscape is important because Lopez’s ideas of “authentic” and “inauthentic” are rooted in how these two landscapes correlate. Although in this example Lopez writes about a wild exterior landscape, the same idea applies to a cityscape or a rural scene. For Lopez, it is just as important that the relationships be authentic in a story about a housing project as one about an alpine cirque. As Lawrence Buell notes about Lopez’s work: “Subjectivity is not a mere function of landscape; but it is regulated somewhat by landscape, and as far as Lopez is concerned landscape is the more interesting variable. In short, Lopez remains accountable to the facticity in terms of which he invites his [ . . . ] images to be judged” (94). For Lopez, the relationship between the interior and exterior in the story being told works as a way of determining when to assent, much as life experience does for Booth. For Lopez, stories are theories about the world coming from the landscape within but which must be ultimately judged against the landscape without.

Lopez’s idea about landscapes takes Booth’s idea of life experience one step further and applies it to the specific problem of our relationship with the natural world. Lopez is insisting that our life experiences occur in specific places and that those places shape those experiences. This is not to say that landscape determines our experience, but that it offers a certain range of possibilities. Our experience will differ greatly in the Arctic from our experience in Manhattan. There is a distinctly different set of possibilities in Utah’s San Rafael Swell than there is in Costa Rica’s San Blas Islands. Because we are concerned with nature writing here, such a distinction is vital to our discussion.

The idea of interior and exterior landscape calls our attention to the role that the more-than-human world plays in our lives. The very act of bringing attention to the more-than-human has ethical implications. Lopez, at the very least, calls for an awareness that, as Slovic notes, creates a “condition which helps us to act responsibly and respectfully” (138). [2] But Lopez goes further; by carefully balancing the interior and the exterior, he creates a necessary reciprocity between the two. In other words, the interior landscape, the landscape of the mind, is never independent of the physical or the



exterior landscape. Likewise, except as mediated by the interior landscape of the mind, humans can never understand the exterior landscape. The outer world shapes the mind but the mind also shapes the outer world.

Through a “that could happen” approach and a *rhetoric of assent*, both Lopez and Booth are attempting to find a pragmatic theory of understanding that includes the personal but does not abandon the empirical and quantitative. They both want to expand what can be considered “true.” For example, Lopez writes: “Myth, which we tend to regard as fictitious or ‘merely metaphorical,’ is as *authentic*, as real, as the story of the wolverine in the man’s lap” (68). Even though the creator of any narrative--fictional, factual, or mythic--will always fall short of recreating reality because “perception and language both fail” (69), a story can be authentic if the relationships that are created within the story are recreated with care. The relationships--between people, between people and animals, between people and the landscape and so on--must reflect two things. First, they must reflect something of reality--some connection with the life experience of the hearers and with the landscape within which the story occurs; second, the story must allow the hearer to evaluate the relationships ethically--to ask not only if the relationships are connected in some way to their reality, but also if the relationships are proper. I am not promoting an environmental dogmatism here. I am seeking something much looser. To declare a story absolutely authentic or inauthentic is, in fact, too black and white. Rather, it is a matter of degree and of context.

Lopez himself clarifies these ideas in an interview with Stephen Trimble. Because truth is such a difficult thing at which to arrive, and because truth and writing are much more complex than an attempt at a direct mimesis, the writer’s responsibility is not to a strict literal truth, or even, says Lopez, “to know the truth, because no one knows the truth.” Instead the writer must “set the story up in such a way that truth can be revealed” (70). If the relationships are carefully created, the reader can ask that next ethical question: “Are these relationships authentic?” Or more accurately: “How are these relationships authentic--to what degree?” Moreover, if the story is authentic, the relationships will be carefully recreated and the story will not mislead its hearer or reader about the range of possibilities offered by the place.

The usefulness of the criteria of authentic and inauthentic as a way of gauging assent depends upon the questions we are asking of literature. If these criteria are used as a way of evaluating all literature, they need to be used carefully and self-consciously so that the critic does the literature justice and does not fall into the trap of the overly simplistic that always dogs ethical criticism. Still, nature writing, the topic we are discussing here, is a special case that has its own special set of assumptions. Even though, according to Lopez, fiction and myth can be considered authentic by the above criteria, we are not focusing on these genres. Admittedly, borders between genres are porous, but there is a specific contract set up with the reader in nonfiction nature writing. There is an agreement between the reader and writer; the writer is attempting his or her best to combine empirical observation and literary art. Writer David Quammen puts it this way: “I believe in holding nonfiction to a very rigorous standard of factual accuracy. [ . . . ] If it’s an animal doing a given thing in a given place, it means that that animal did that thing in that place” (Sumner, “Facts” 9). Buell agrees with Quammen and writes that in nature writing there must be “a human accountability to the environment” (7).

If this contract is established between reader and writer, the next question seems to be: To what degree can a writer interpret and still maintain an authentic relationship with the animals and landscapes he or she is writing about? Edward Abbey, for example, took a degree of literary license in his most widely read book, *Desert Solitaire*. The seasonal narrative structure resembles *Walden*, with Abbey starting the book in late winter and finishing the book as winter is returning. Yet the events of *Desert Solitaire* took place over three consecutive seasons while he was ranger at Arches National Monument (Trimble 8). In addition, during at least one of those seasons, Abbey had his wife and child living in the trailer with him, yet they are not mentioned in the narrative and their presence would surely alter the huge ethos of Ranger Abbey, the book’s narrator and protagonist (*Edward Abbey*).

Are Abbey’s omissions forgivable breaches? A writer who goes even further than Abbey is Annie Dillard. She does not merely omit facts and condense time--she creates events. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* begins with the story of an old tomcat:

I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest. I’d half-awaken. He’d stick his

skull under my nose and purr, stinking of urine and blood. Some nights he kneaded my bare chest with his front paws, powerfully, arching his back, as if sharpening his claws, or pummeling a mother for milk. And some mornings I'd wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood; I looked as though I'd been painted with roses.

(2)

Dillard has penned wonderful and engaging opening paragraph, but it didn't really happen to her. In "Surveying the Boundaries: An Inquiry Into Creative Nonfiction," Sarah Heekin Redfield writes: "At the 14th Annual Key West Literary Seminar in 1996 [ . . . ] Annie Dillard casually remarked that she never actually owned a tomcat, let alone a tomcat with bloody paws" (40). Dillard borrowed this experience with permission from a friend, but she did not experience it herself. So is this an unforgivable breach of trust with the reader? Can we no longer trust the narrative because of this fact? Do we approach the text differently now that we know this? Redfield continues: "Several sources confirmed that after the audience let out a synchronized gasp, you could almost hear hearts breaking" (40).

When asked by Redfield, Dan Philippon puts it this way: "The primary [question], it seems to me, [is] whether the writer of nonfiction has a contract with the reader not to present fictionalized or borrowed material as his or her own. That writers of nonfiction use the techniques of fiction writers is a given, but whether they should use fictional material is another question" (40). However, the fact that hearts were breaking at Key West illustrates how nonfiction creates certain expectations from the reader, and the contract between the writer and reader is broken when fictional material is passed off as fact. How often do we find ourselves saying, "Is this a 'true' story? Did this really happen?" Furthermore, when the reader finds that things are fabricated, he or she finds it more difficult to trust the writer. Yet, if we are to practice a rhetoric of assent toward the relationships nature writers are asking us to assume with the world, we need to trust the writer.

Despite the crafted disparity between literary product and actual event, I would argue that *Desert Solitaire* qualifies as authentic. There is an integrity with which Abbey portrays the landscape. Although he self-consciously notes in his introduction that "language makes a mighty loose net with which to go fishing for simple facts," (xii) he carefully sorts out the relationships between himself and the plants,

animals, and rocks in a way that reflects an empirical reality. His portrayal of gopher snakes mating, or of the color, texture, and starkness of the redrock just outside the door of his trailer, or of the white frailty of the cliffrose, have an element of the scientist. The selection of details and the collapsing of time for formal effect do not remove the authenticity from the text. Instead it creates an effect that is genuine. It reproduces in the reader an intended feeling for the landscape and constructs a reasonable theory of reality.

Dillard seems to be playing a bit fast and loose with the reader, and I admit that after finding out about the license she takes, I am more reticent to assent to her arguments. But *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a remarkable book, one of great value, and although it pushes the edges of the distinctions we are trying to make here, much like *Desert Solitaire*, there is much to be said for the other relationships in the book. And for me, the book is still authentic

But how far can art impose itself upon a faithful telling of the empirical reality? Is there a clear line where we should no longer assent to nature writers because of a breach of the reader/ writer contract? When is the work of a nature writer no longer authentic? There is an interesting test case of which to ask the above questions and on which to try our criteria. It is the turn-of-the-century case of the “Nature Fakers.”

## II

Early in the twentieth century, an argument arose between the nation’s most venerable naturalist writer, John Burroughs, and the Rev. William J. Long, also a writer/ naturalist. The argument took place in the popular press over the issue of sentimentality and faithful depiction of natural fact. It was such a tempting controversy at the time that Teddy Roosevelt, himself a naturalist of note and coiner of the term *nature fakers*, could not help entering the fray from the White House. [3]

Burroughs and Long’s argument over the role of art and fact began in 1902 when William Long published *School of the Woods: Some Life Studies of Animal Instinct and Animal Training*. This book was not Long’s first; he had previously published six others. Yet it was this book that finally expended Burroughs’s patience. Shortly thereafter, Burroughs penned an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* titled “Real

and Sham Natural History,” which began a battle in the public press over what real nature writing and natural history were.

The problem for Burroughs was that Long and several other writers were highly regarded by the public as naturalists--an occupation he took very seriously--and widely read by school children. The most important problem for Burroughs, however, was that these writers were claiming their observations to be nonfiction--to be based in empirical observation--when in fact Burroughs felt that their writing was complete fabrication. Burroughs had no quarrel with contemporaries who were equally guilty of sentimentalism and anthropomorphism, such as Jack London and Gene Stratton Porter, because they were writing fiction. But the line between fiction and fact was crucial for Burroughs, and Long was blurring it. As Frank Stewart notes in *Natural History of Nature Writing*: “To Burroughs, Long stood for the nature hacks whose work tarnished the reputation of serious nature writers such as himself. In Burroughs's opinion, the popularity of ‘skillful frauds’ like Long misled trusting readers about nature’s true meaning, a meaning it was crucial to understand” (86).

Long was not the only writer named in Burroughs’s diatribe, but Long was his main target and the only one to fight back. In the article, Burroughs attacks Long’s stories with vigor. One such story is of the death of an eagle that Long claims to have witnessed. The eagle is circling and screaming at a high altitude when, as related by Burroughs:

The great bird set its wings and came sailing at great speed straight toward the earth, passing near the observer [Long], who saw with wonder that the head with partly closed eyes “drooped forward as if it were heavy. [ . . . ] Then with rigid wings he crossed the bay below the point! still slanting gently down to earth, and vanished silently into the drooping arms of the dark woods beyond,” where Mr. Long soon found him, “his head lying across the moss-cushioned root of an old cedar, his wings outstretched among the cool green ferns--dead.” (307)

Burroughs then immediately begins to pick apart Long’s story: “Let us see how probable this event is: birds die as men do, suddenly, or from lingering disease and old age. We all know that when [ . . . ] caged eagles die of old age, or other causes, they sicken and droop for several days, refuse food, and

refuse to use their wings, till some morning we find them dead under their perches” (307). He grants that it is possible for the eagle to be smitten with “apoplexy in the air.” But if that were the case, Burroughs asks if it would “come sailing calmly to earth like a boy on a toboggan slide” (307).

Burroughs’s critique was scathing and to the point and, especially at the time, his ethos as a naturalist and writer was practically unimpeachable. He assumed that his article in the *Atlantic Monthly* would put an end to the “fakery” and that the discipline of nature writing had been justly defended. But in William Long, Burroughs found a feisty and articulate opponent who stuck by his claims and struck back with his pen. Instead of being cowed by Burroughs, Long published a carefully argued rebuttal in the *North American Review*.

Long’s reply directly addresses the matter with which we are concerned here--when to assent. I have argued that we cannot function if we reserve our assent only for verifiable, empirical fact, and that according to both Booth and Lopez there is a need for the personal as well as the quantifiable; but, especially in the case we are considering here--the case of nature writing--there is a limit to how much a story can stray from the empirical depiction of the natural world and still be *authentic*.

Long’s response depends on a differentiation between “Science” and “Nature-study.” Although Long’s depiction of science is a bit of a caricature, the distinctions that he draws, in many ways, are reasonable and resemble those made by Lopez. Nature study, writes Long, “is a world of *appreciation* [ . . . ] rather than a world of *description*. It is a world that must be interpreted rather than catalogued.” He continues: “This upper world of appreciation and suggestion, of individuality interpreted by individuality, is the world of Nature, the Nature of the poets and prophets and thinkers” (688).

Long recognizes that there are different types of knowledge, which is an essential tenet in our argument for assent. Furthermore, as noted earlier, what is acceptable in nature writing, or in any literature, is not nearly as limited as what is acceptable in a scientific report. Even Burroughs agrees with this assertion. In his essay, “Nature and the Poets,” he writes that the true poet has more insight into nature than the naturalist because the poet “carries [nature’s] open secrets in his heart” (Nature 93). [4] The standards and expectations for science and literature are different. Burroughs seems to be saying that literature allows for--even requires--experimentation with perception and understanding. In other

words, nature writing is not just a presentation of empirical data, but an interpretive project that attempts to create reciprocity between the landscape of the mind and the landscape of the world.

In his rebuttal, Long argues effectively for his literary view. He asserts that for nature writing to be effective, the author “must not have only sight but vision; not simply eyes and ears and a note-book; but insight, imagination, and above all, an intense human sympathy”--an argument similar to Lopez’s. Finally, he argues that if the nature writer does not approach his subject with sympathy and imagination, the actions of animals will be “the meaningless dance of shadows across the mouth of Plato’s cave” (692-93).

Long also manages to latch onto the two major weaknesses of Burroughs’s attack. He writes:

Aside from the unwarranted personal attacks [ . . . ] the article has two evident faults that destroy the force of his criticism: (1) it overlooks entirely the individuality of animals and the adaptiveness of nature; (2) it weighs the universe with the scales of his own farm and barnyard. What the animals do there is the absolute measure and limit of what they will do in the Maine wilderness and the Canadian Rockies. (693)

Ending with a preacherly ethos, Long warns Burroughs that “there are more things in heaven and earth, and in the heart of wild things, evidently, than are seen on Mr. Burroughs’s farm or dreamed of in his philosophy” (697). [5]

Long’s rebuttal is astute. The nature writer has more leeway than the scientist; Burroughs may be relying too much on the idea of instinct to explain the behavior of the animals he observes, and just because he has not observed the phenomenon does not mean that it did not occur.

As students of literature at the beginning of the twenty-first century rather than the beginning of the twentieth, we all recognize the impossibility of exact mimetic fidelity and are more aware than ever that any representation is partial. Even writers who are attempting accountability to the natural world are not willing to restrict themselves to only literal detail. For example, in her essay “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” Leslie Marmon Silko claims “a ‘lifelike’ rendering of an elk is too restrictive” because “the detailed reality of a single creature does not accurately portray ‘Elk’” (266-67). But I think that even Silko would agree that the reader of her more mythic rendering of an elk would be conscious of

what she is doing as a writer. This is not to say that a myth is not informed by close observation, but it is a different and distinguishable narrative form. The reader would not expect to run into the mythic elk herself. Instead, when she encountered an elk, she would have a cultural and mythic context within which to understand the encounter.

Yet, if we examine Long's argument more closely, despite his claim of sympathy, imagination, and poetic license, he still spends much of the article establishing his own ethos as an experienced naturalist and outdoorsman, and referring to witnesses that can verify his empirical observations. "For over twenty years," writes Long, "I have gone every season deep into the woods; have lived alone with the animals for months at a time; have followed them summer and winter" (691). Long never abandons the claim that all of his stories are rooted at some point in empirical observation; therefore, despite his interest in literary imagination, he argues that stories must have some sort of accountability to the real. Throughout the article, Long never backs off from his claim that all of the stories are rooted, however loosely, in some sort of empirical method. Even when he relates a difficult-to-believe story about the nest building of orioles in his rebuttal, he is very clear about having observed the behavior he reports. In other words, Long's dispute with Burroughs is not over the idea of nature writing being somehow rooted in verifiable fact; the dispute is over the range of acceptable interpretation. The argument is not over the need for empirical observation in nature literature; the dispute is over the role of such observation. The difference between the two men is the degree of latitude which each sees as acceptable. Therefore, to discuss the idea of assent further, we need to look closely two of Long's stories.

The first is a story found in Long's *North American Review* response mentioned above. It is about a pair of orioles building a nest outside his window. He uses this story to support his assertion that the world's possibilities are not nearly as limited as Burroughs would have us think. He claims to have first seen such an event as a boy, but that after twenty years of patient observation, he finally observed the event again. Long asserts that he observed the following behavior the spring previous to writing the article:

[The orioles] wanted a swinging nest [ . . . ] so they fastened three sticks together on the ground in the form of a perfectly measured triangle. At each angle they fastened one end



of a cord, and carried the other end over and made it fast to the middle of the opposite side. Then they gathered up the loops and fastened them by the middle, all together, to a stout bit of marline; and their staging was all ready. They carried up this staging and swung it two feet below the middle of a thick limb, so that some leaves above sheltered them from sun and rain; and upon this swinging stage they built their nest. The marline was tied once around the limb, and, to make it perfectly sure, the end was brought down and fastened to the supporting cord with a reversed double-hitch, the kind a man uses in cinching his saddle. Moreover, the birds tied a single knot at the extreme end lest the marline should ravel in the wind. (692)

Furthermore, Long claims the nest hangs currently above his kitchen table.

The second story is one of several about “animal surgery” and is about a “woodcock genius.” This tale comes from an observation Long recalled from twenty years earlier when he was in his mid-teens. Long claims he watched the woodcock from the opposite side of a stream. Again I quote the short incident in full:

At first he took soft clay in his bill from the edge of the water and seemed to be smearing it on one leg near the knee. Then he fluttered away on one foot for a short distance and seemed to be pulling tiny roots and fibers of grass, which he worked into the clay and plastered it over the fibers, putting on more and more till I could plainly see the enlargement, working away with strange silent intentness for fully fifteen minutes, while I watched and wondered, scarce believing my eyes. Then he stood perfectly still for a full hour under an overhanging sod, where the eye could with difficulty find him, his only motion meanwhile being an occasional rubbing and smoothing of the clay bandage with his bill, until it hardened enough to suit him, whereupon he fluttered away from the brook and disappeared in the thick woods. (*Little Brother* 101-106)

I chose these two stories not because they are particularly outrageous when compared to many of Long’s other tales, but because they were both printed after Burroughs’s *Atlantic Monthly* attack. The story of the oriole nest builders, as noted above, was printed in Long’s *North American Review* rebuttal.

The second story was printed in a collection called *A Little Brother for the Bear* and appeared at the end of 1903, more than six months after Burroughs's attack. Apparently, Long was not at all put off by Burroughs.

But what do we do with Long's stories, and is there harm in assenting to them? In asking these questions, two more questions arise. The first is whether Long has kept his implied contract with his reader. In other words, despite his claim to literary license, Long also lays claim to empirical truth; therefore, has Long maintained some sort of empirical fidelity? Can we check Long's stories against the facts of the outer landscape and still find them authentic?

It is easy to see that the stories of the "swinging nest" and of "animal surgery" are on the outer edge of believability. But in deciding whether or not to assent, if we are to follow Booth's guide, we must appeal to our personal experience. In my personal experience I have never seen anything like the type of nest the orioles built, nor have I seen an animal perform the kind of first-aid that the woodcock is claimed to have performed. But my own ornithological knowledge is slight. And, as Frank Stewart notes: "When he attacked Long's oriole architects, Burroughs was aware of the bower birds of New Guinea and of the weaver birds of Africa, both of which stitch and weave strips of grass and similar materials into structures far more elaborate than the nest reportedly made by William Long's birds." Stewart also postulates: "We might wonder what Burroughs would have made of recent scientific reports of Capuchin monkeys seen treating their own wounds and the wounds of their offspring with plant and liquid materials, even manufacturing the tools with which to apply the treatments" (102).

So in order to evaluate our assent, or to confidently dissent, we first may need to attain more knowledge about the natural world. The Cree who assented to the story of the wolverine did so from a place of expertise. They had hunted, trapped, and observed the wolverine just as had the Nunamiut. So we must also become aware of our natural surroundings. We must learn the difference between a ponderosa and a piñon pine, we must notice the blue herons, the banded kingfishers, or the Clark's Nutcrackers that enter our lives as we go about our business--we must watch the subtleties in the behavior of the oriole that is outside *our* kitchen window. [6]

However, even with my limited experience with birds, I am not willing to assent to Long. His stories do not fit my small experiences with wild animals. I have difficulty believing the story about the eagle coasting to his death, and Long has other equally hard to believe tales. One example is of wolves snapping at the heart of a stag (Lutts 111). I know enough about wolves to know that they are smarter than that. They know that the best way to bring down prey is to bite where the deer is most vulnerable. A deer's heart is protected by ribs and the wolves would be unnecessarily risking their own lives to act so foolishly. Some of Long's stories may be true; but in my reading, his more outrageous claims undercut his ethos and permit me to dismiss the lot.

However, I think there are still more criteria we can use to decide whether or not to assent. We do not want to fall into the same trap as Burroughs when he demands such a literal accountability to reality that he criticizes William Cullen Bryant's poetry, for example, for its lack of ornithological accuracy. How can we make a literary assent less about bickering over very specific, difficult to verify facts, and more about what type of world these stories create? That is, how can we deal with these stories in a way that is not too limited, but that in some way still attempts to have an accountability to the more-than-human world?

In examining this question, I want to focus on environmental ethics. I am conscious that I am bringing contemporary ethical norms to bear on Long's work, and therefore risking anachronism. However, the contract Long establishes with his readers is reliant upon some type of empirical integrity and is, therefore, similar to the contract contemporary nature writers establish.

The key to this problem seems to be in Lopez's emphasis on relationships. In "Landscape and Narrative," Lopez insists that it is the relationships the storyteller establishes between the various elements of the exterior landscape that determine whether or not a story "rings true." (66). Lawrence Buell talks about the issue of representation and Lopez's theory. He writes:

Lopez's notion of "outer mimesis" in environmental nonfiction seemingly boils down to this. 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 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 (94).

The issue, then, seems to be not whether literature allows a place for the play of imagination, but to what degree that imagination can roam and still be “regulated by encounters with the environment.” So the narratives that we create about the natural world are theories about the world somewhat analogous to scientific theories. But in narrative, the role of imagination is not just freer but also necessary for understanding. Both the scientific and the narrative attempt to make sense of the world around us, but serve different purposes in doing so. Furthermore, both are subject to revision by the outer landscape. Science is one method of attempting to understand and is very effective in addressing certain types of empirical and quantitative questions. Narrative, on the other hand, is an equally important method, and often addresses questions of value, relationship, and ethics. Narrative must take into account what science can provide in terms of empirical and quantitative understanding. Likewise, science must look to narrative to answer questions of values and ethics. One is not subordinate to the other; rather, there should be a complimentary relationship. Yet both must be checked against the outer landscape. “The narrative makes no pretense of total accuracy;” Buell writes, “it is a *theory* of natural history; but nature is the court of appeal” (94). If the stories of William Long do not pass such an appeal, we should value them less because they have not kept the contract with the reader.

Kenneth Burke offers a term that is useful for such a discussion. Any statement must be checked against what Burke calls the *recalcitrance* of reality. In other words, our theories about reality eventually collide with the object world, and the accuracy of our theories is always eventually checked against such recalcitrance. Burke writes: “‘I can safely jump from this high place’ may be a pseudo-statement. ‘I can safely jump from this high place with the aid of a parachute’ might be the statement as revised after one had taken the recalcitrance of his material adequately into account” (255-56). Burke advocates a continual revision with the potential not of getting it right, but of at least getting it better. Lopez seems to argue

that the recalcitrance of the outer landscape provides a corrective to our stories--both narrative and scientific.

Yet, because we cannot observe the birds outside Long's kitchen window ourselves, and because many of us are not expert naturalists, the appeal to the object world may be difficult. If our choices are the response of the Cree (because of my experience, I think that could happen) or the opposite (because of my experience, I don't think that occurred), but we do not have experience with the wolverine, do we have other ways of gauging assent?

Besides direct knowledge of the natural world, there is another consideration. Lopez claims that the key difference between authentic and inauthentic stories--or stories that provide valuable knowledge and those that do not--is the relationships they establish. Lopez's claim implies that because we often read or listen to these stories in order to understand our relationship to the natural world, if we already have some understanding of that relationship, we may be able to work backward from the relationship these stories establish to the stories themselves. We may ask: "What relationships are established in Long's account of the swinging nest and the animal surgery, or in the hunter's account of the wolverine? How are these relationships different? What are the ethical implications of these relationships?"

Let us return to Long's stories. One of the main accusations against Long is that he is anthropomorphizing these animals. But is anthropomorphism always bad? Long shows these orioles thinking ahead, working together, and showing concern for the young that will soon inhabit their nest. The woodcock is credited with the intelligence to know what to do when it has become injured. By giving the animals some human qualities, he breaks down an assumed division between the animal and human worlds. It seems that by making them living, intelligent, sentient creatures, Long overcomes other more damaging notions of animals as little machines. As noted earlier, even Burroughs, who claims to have sympathy with the natural world, seems to buy into the notion of instinct in a way that turns animals into automatons. Long's anthropomorphizing creates a sympathy that could lead to a valuing of these animals. In this world of headlong human development, exploding human population, and habitat destruction, valuing of wildlife is not a bad thing.

The relationships established by Lopez's wolverine story, however, are different in two ways. First, there is a definite division in Long's account between the observed and the observer. Long's account reads, not surprisingly, much like nineteenth-century ethnography. The civilized European observes some unbelievable facts and brings them back to the rational, intelligent Western world in order to be evaluated. He even claims to have artifacts from the observation. "The nest hangs above my table now," Long writes, "a reward of a twenty-five years' search" (692). There is a definite hierarchy established between the observer and the observed. [7]

Such a hierarchy does not exist in the story of the wolverine. Although the wolverine is being hunted by the man on the snow machine, there is a certain awareness and reciprocity between the two. The man is in pursuit, but from the very moment he observes the wolverine, the wolverine is "pausing to look back. The hunter was catching up," writes Lopez, "but each time he came over a rise the wolverine was looking back from the next rise, just out of range" (62). The wolverine was not merely being observed by the hunter; he was also observing the hunter. He is looking back from each succeeding rise and finally jumps the man. The hierarchy that exists in Long is not present in Lopez's example.

As the man tops the next rise, the wolverine is bounding toward him: "But before he could pull his rifle from its scabbard, the wolverine flew across the engine cowl and the windshield, hitting him square in the chest." The wolverine in Lopez's tale is also anthropomorphized to some degree. After the snow machine rolls over, he "fixes the man with a stare" and then, without scratching or biting the man, simply walks away. The wolverine is given a certain human-like consciousness. We are led to believe that his stare had the same intent as would a stare from a man after winning a quick and decisive victory in a tavern brawl. This idea is emphasized even further by the wolverine running, but instead walking away from the beaten man.

However, the same advantages of anthropomorphism occur here without the problems. There is a certain amount of sympathy created for the wolverine just as there is for the orioles and the woodcock. There is credit given for intelligence and ability to survive. The line between the human and the nonhuman is breached here in useful ways and in some similar ways to Long's account. But there is also a certain amount of reciprocity established in the story of the wolverine, which is a result of a lack of

hierarchy. The wolverine is an equal participant in the world. Even though he is being hunted by the man on the snow machine--a man whose economy depends on the wolverine--it is in some ways an equal match and, partly because of his dependence, the man respects the wolverine who has won this round.

We must also look at why the stories were related. In the case of the swinging nest, it was to prove Long's reliability as a naturalist. The wolverine story was an attempt by Lopez to better understand the more-than-human world. It is difficult to ignore these facts when we gauge our assent. Yet, can there be inaccurate stories with authentic relationships? Accurate stories with inauthentic relationships?

The reality is that we are always in danger of being duped. In the final analysis, it is true that we read nature writing not only for the facts themselves, but also for how those facts lead us to see the world. So the relationship criteria can be useful in determining our assent to its ethical position. Although it is possible to have inaccurate stories with accurate relationships, such as in fiction, if the writer claims to be writing nonfiction, the reader expects a certain fidelity to observation and real experience. Furthermore, if we look to a piece of writing to tell us about our relationship to the more-than-human world, and the writer shows little concern with the reality of that world, it is difficult to assent to her ethical claims.

In short, because we are being asked to take an ethical position toward the natural world, a writer has an obligation to portray that world accurately. However, we always risk assenting to an inaccurate story and therefore an inaccurate ethic. So finally, to gauge our assent to the ethical position of a nature writer, we must go out into the world ourselves. We must gain some experience with the wolverine, or even with the birds in our own backyard.

### III

I want to now return to my original thesis: a rhetoric of assent is necessary when reading nature writers because nature writers are imaginatively exploring how we humans can establish a more ethical relationship with the more-than-human world, and any time we are confronted with something that is so fundamentally opposed to thousands of years of human history, we need to abandon an initial doubt for an initial belief which will help us consider the possibilities being proposed. Thus, even if we conclude that Long was indeed a "faker," we must initially assent to his ideas in order to evaluate them effectively.

Finally, I want to return to the work of Lopez. In his essay “Apologia” Lopez recounts a road trip from his home along the McKenzie river in Oregon to a friend’s house in Indiana. On his journey, he takes note of the large number of dead animals along the road. He sees black-tailed jackrabbits lying “like welts of sod,” and a “crumpled adolescent porcupine” with “blood flecked teeth” (83). He encounters dead deer, badgers, snakes, raccoons and “pronghorn antelope swollen big as barrels by the side of the road, their legs splayed rigidly aloft” (86). He also broods over the lives he takes as he drives. He is troubled by the young gull that he strikes and by the immature barn swallow that, despite his wild attempt to avoid the collision, “hangs by its head, motionless in the slats of the grill” (86). As he stops for the night at a motel he “finger-scrapes the dry stiff carcasses of bumblebees, wasps, and butterflies from the grill and headlight mountings”--the “aerial plankton.” As he travels and broods he stops at each casualty and carries or drags it from the road, placing it gently in the grass or depositing it carefully behind a bush, away from the traffic. When asked by a man, “Why do you bother?” he responds, “You never know. [ . . . ] The ones you give some semblance of burial, to whom you offer an apology, may have been like seers in a parallel culture. It is an act of respect, a technique of awareness” (84).

Lopez is asking us to consider certain possibilities. How does our view of animals change if we see them as “seers in a parallel culture?” More importantly, Lopez seems to be attempting to redefine the traditional relationships with the more-than-human. He is asking us to develop techniques of awareness, to perform acts of respect and enter into a reciprocal relationship, all of which seem to depend initially upon assuming a rhetoric of assent. While reading Lopez, or other nature writers, we must consider how the world is presented to us and if it fits our life experience; if it does, we must take a cue from the Cree and say: “That could happen.”

notes

1. In 1999, I asked Lopez about this incident. I commented on how the response of the Cree didn’t say just anything could happen, but came from their experience with wolverine. Lopez responded: “[E]xactly. It has to be empirically grounded in order to say that. They have to say, ‘I’ve watched wolverine and I am aware of the potential. And given the potential, that could happen’” (Sumner, “Nature Writing” 22).
2. Lopez continues to develop his ideas about interior and exterior landscape in “The Country of the Mind” in *Arctic Dreams*.
3. In *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science and Sentiment*, Ralph Lutts makes a thorough examination of this turn-of-the-century controversy.



4. In this essay, Burroughs ranks poets according to their accuracy in depicting the natural world. For example, Emerson is praised for his knowledge of the “New England Fields and Woods” while Bryant is taken to task for inaccurate ornithological detail.

5. Interestingly, as Ralph H. Lutts points out, Theodore Roosevelt wrote Burroughs a private letter after the *Atlantic* article. The letter contained mostly praise for the article and was the beginning of an alliance. “I was delighted with your *Atlantic* article,” Roosevelt wrote to the naturalist. “I have long wished that something of the kind should be written.” However, the president warned Burroughs not to overplay the role of animal instinct--Long’s first enumerated complaint--but to allow “sufficiently for the extraordinary change made in the habits of the wild animals by experience with man, especially experience continued through generations!” (42).

6. On the subject of authority, it is interesting to note that Theodore Roosevelt assembled a panel of naturalists for this very purpose. He was so concerned that Long’s tales were being taken as fact that he gathered the nation’s foremost naturalists and then published their results. (See Edward B. Clark’s “Real Naturalists on Nature Faking” in *Everybody’s Magazine*. Sept. 1907: 423-430.)

7. However, as mentioned above, Long is a nineteenth-century writer and we must take that fact into account. Yet, there are nineteenth-century writers who do not establish an hierarchical ethos. One who comes directly to mind is Thoreau, especially in “Succession of Forest Trees.” Here, Thoreau is the observer, but he is also the observed (80). Thoreau demonstrates the same type of reciprocity I find in Lopez.

#### references

Abbey, Edward. *The Journey Home*. 1977. New York: Plume, 1991.

Arnold, Jean. “‘From So Simple A Beginning’: Evolutionary Origins of US Nature Writing.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. 10.1 (Winter 2003): 11-26.

Booth, Wayne. *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.

Burke, Kenneth. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1954.

Burroughs, John. “Nature and the Poets.” *Pepacton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1881.

---. “Real and Sham Natural History.” *Atlantic Monthly* 9 (1903): 298-312.

Clark, Edward B. “Real Naturalists on Nature Faking” *Everybody’s Magazine*. Sept. 1907: 423-30.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1988.

*Edward Abbey: A Voice in the Wilderness*. Dir. Eric Temple. 1993

Hicks, Philip Marshall. *The Development of the Natural History Essay in American Literature*. Diss. U of Pennsylvania, 1924. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 1924.

Long, William J. *A Little Brother to the Bear, and Other Animal Studies*. Holiday ed. Boston: Ginn & Co., 1903.

---. *School of the Woods: Some Life Studies of Animal Instinct and Animal Training*. Boston: Ginn and Company, 1902.

---. "The Modern School of Nature-study and its Critics." *North American Review* 176 (May 1903): 687-98.

Lopez, Barry. "Apologia." *On Nature's Terms: Contemporary Voices*. Ed. Thomas J. Lyon and Peter Stine. College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1992.

---. "Landscape and Narrative." *Crossing Open Ground*. New York: Random House, 1978.

---. *Arctic Dreams*. New York: Bantam, 1987.

Lutts, Ralph H. *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science and Sentiment*. Golden: Fulcrum, 1990.

Redfield, Sarah Heekin. "Surveying the Boundaries: An Inquiry Into Creative Nonfiction." *Poets and Writers* 27 (1999): 36-41.

Slovic, Scott. *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1992.

Stewart, Frank. *A Natural History of Nature Writing*. Washington DC: Island P, 1995.

Sumner, David Thomas. "Facts, Shapes, and Our Relationship with the Landscape--A Conversation with David Quammen." *Weber Studies*. 19 (Fall 2001): 2-13.

---. "Nature Writing, American Literature, and the Idea of Community--A Conversation with Barry Lopez." *Weber Studies*. 18 (Spring 2001): 2-26.

Thoreau, Henry David. *The Natural History Essays*. Ed. Robert Sattelmeyer. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1980.

Trimble, Stephen. "The Naturalist's Trance." *Words from the Land: Encounters with Natural History Writing*. Ed. Stephen Trimble. Salt Lake City: Pergrine Smith, 1989.