Of Bears and Women: The Ethics of Gender in Barry Lopez's Arctic Dreams

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Although in his nature writing Barry Lopez has been said to “assume ignorance or limited awareness to begin with, then proceed to enact a gradual and almost linear progression, a continual deepening of awareness” (Slovic 362), in the chapter “Tornarssuk: Ursus maritimus” in *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez seems to do nearly the opposite. Throughout the section he describes the intelligence, mystery, and dignity of polar bears but finally reduces female bears to the vulnerability of a vulva, exposed by the men and their tranquilizer dart. Lopez expresses wonder at the ingenuity of the bears’ instincts, immense curiosity toward the Arctic wildlife, and a respect for living beings, but his interaction with the female bear is described in details that contrast it sharply with the conversation Lopez engages in with a powerful male bear. What is missing—actually, it is stolen—is the female bear’s ability to converse with him in any genuine way. Instead, Lopez represents this scene as one that pornographically mirrors the objectification of women, which forces his female readers to identify with men against themselves. Lopez seems unable to remove himself from the position of social dominance historically held by white males; he is perhaps blind to the privilege that position affords him. Although we may grant to Lopez the important role he has played in changing people’s understanding of animals, landscapes, and science, it is long past time to respond to the gender assumptions implicit in his work.

Because many depictions of animals, including Lopez’s, are rooted in the methods of science (nature writing did grow out of natural history discourse, for example), his text responds to the ideas of animals that arise from the examination of them as objects. The scientific method translates reality into mathematical units and classifies them as parts of a mechanism that operates according to some fixed system. Thus, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, “in [scientific] thought, men distance themselves from nature in order thus imaginatively to present it to themselves” (39). The imaginative presentation, however, fails to recognize the full intricacies of any facet of life because it is removed from any foundation; it has been taken from its situation.

Lopez recognizes the dangers of representation in this mathematical manner, and frequently tries to evade its implications. He says, “We delineate the life history of a ground squirrel. We list the butterflies […]. At a snap. We enumerate the plants. We name everything. Then we fold the charts and catalogs, as if, except for a stray fact or two, we were done with a competent description. But the land is not a painting; the image cannot be completed this way” (172). He offers a patient appreciation in contrast. For example, throughout the chapter “Tornarssuk,” he combines information gained through scientific research with his observations and with the stories and knowledge of others to fill out his representation of polar bears. He does not simply list information biologists have gained from their experiments but mixes it with knowledge gleaned from other aspects of his travels in the Arctic. As Cheryll Glotfelty suggests, his writing in *Arctic Dreams* is
notable for its “eloquent blend of scientific information, history, Native American viewpoints, and personal experience” (285). By using these various approaches and perspectives, he situates the bears as part of a larger ecosystem and fleshes out a more complete picture of what they really do, while at the same time recognizing that he cannot ever fully comprehend them. Lopez also frequently indicates that there are many unknowns about polar bears. For example, he says that scientists are unsure of how the bears communicate to one another that there are seals in an area, but that “somehow they know” where to congregate (104). Such an acknowledgement reveals his acceptance that the bears are bigger than the amount of known information he uses to write about them, while it also allows the bears the vitality and majesty they possess in the world. By acknowledging that there is always something missing from a human understanding of an animal, as Lopez does, he admits that the human desire to scientifically classify the bear and the bears’ refusal to submit to that classification can be accommodated in an important way to minimize the reductionist tendencies of such arrangements. In this way, Lopez’s effort is important because he does not simply follow scientific traditions. Praising him for these efforts is one of the only things Lopez’s critics do with his writing, however.

In much of Lopez’s writing about animals, the challenges of wilderness are epitomized as confrontations with untamed creatures who stand out as distinctively from the landscape as he himself does. As is found elsewhere in literature, the represented animal’s veracity rests in his independence, his size, and his threat to the humans who encounter him in their travels through some symbolic final frontier. Yet it is precisely the gendered aspects of this kind of writing—the maleness of the ideal wild creature and the unquestioned position of the author/traveler—that makes this kind of literature so subversively uncomfortable and perilous for women readers. As Judith Fetterley argues, American literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate; instead, “the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her” (xii). Here, the female reader is forced to relate to the male adventurer, yet still finds femininity at the center of representations in which males impose their power over nature.

As he writes about the bears in *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez sensitively describes his first encounter with a bear—a male—with caution, admiration, and respect. He attempts to acknowledge the fullness of their shared experience. As his boat draws close to the bear, Lopez writes:

> The bear turned in the water and regarded us with irritation, and then, wary, he veered toward a floe. In a single motion of graceful power he rose from the water to the ice, his back feet catching the ice edge at the end of the movement. Then he stepped forward and shook. Seawater whirled off in flat sheets and a halo of spray. His head lowered, he glared at us with small, dark eyes. (78)

This bear has a richness—a presence—that Lopez carefully portrays for his reader. The bear is willfully interacting with the men, realizing their shared space and engaging in a non-verbal dialogue with them. In this passage, Lopez recognizes the bear’s ability to participate in this conversation—the bear is irritated at the human intrusion, but he is not intimidated in the description. Conversation requires agency, and this bear has it. He is seen as a powerful presence: he glares back at his human observers. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty postulates, a being’s position in relation to other beings is one that considers both the things seen and the sense that the self is an object of vision to others. He argues that “the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no
longer know which sees and which is seen” (139). The kind of exchange Merleau-Ponty describes is a conversation because there is agency recognized in all parties involved. The exchange between Lopez and the male bear, then, is a genuine interaction according to this standard.

Much of Lopez’s representation of the conversation is influenced by his own apparent vulnerability in the face of the bear, and that aspect of the interaction may offer part of an answer as to why the equal-agency conversation occurs here. Both parties are wary; both are in danger. Lopez notes that the bear is “a male. The great seal hunter himself” (78). He is impressed by the bear’s power and aggression; the bear “[turns] to glower, treading water, opening his mouth – the grey tongue, the pale violet mouth, the white teeth – to hiss” (78). Those teeth, in that mouth, characterize a potential threat to the men in the boat. While it may be that Lopez feels awe and fear in response to such a show of confidence, the men in the boat maintain a semblance of control, at least in the narrative. Lopez says, “We let him go. We watched him, that undeterred walk of authority” (79).

The bear’s answer to the men’s interference is portrayed as assertive in a way that controls the situation from the outset. He is not a female with cubs, instinctively hiding from a real or perceived danger. Instead, the bear faces the men, addresses them, and turns away on his own terms. And they, male themselves, “let him go,” making it questionable where the vulnerability and where the control really lie here. Both the humans and the bear posture to illustrate their superiority over the other, while the language of the passage maintains the illusion of the men’s position as being in control of the situation despite the bear’s threatening stance.

Lopez acknowledges the effect the encounter has on him. He recognizes that he is “magnetically drawn, in a fundamental but perhaps callow way” (78) to the bear. Lopez articulates a thoughtful portrayal of his response to the exchange with the bear, and even becomes self-deprecating to explain his strong desire to interact with him. He knows that his human presence is “interference” (78), but he excuses it because “To watch polar bears in the wild […] is to marvel at the intricacy of their physiology and behavior” (88). Importantly, this rationalization is based on the fact that the interaction between male bear and man is represented from both sides in the narrative: the bear’s reaction to Lopez is conveyed, as is Lopez’s response to seeing the powerful male bear. Because the bear has a position of agency and the narrative makes this fact clear by validating and detailing the ways he responds to the actions of the men, Lopez can describe this incident as one of “watch[ing] polar bears in the wild.”

Consequently, the “bear norm” is first established by the heroic, fierce, magnificently male bear. In complete contrast, the chapter ends with images of the violated female bear. Lopez, traveling with scientists, begins the final passage by noting that he is “far from” the concerns biologists have about the effects of industrial sites on polar bears; he then explains some scientists’ ambivalent feelings toward the darting and examination of the bears. But his own exchange with “one of the females […] darted” (118), rather than a conversation with a sentient being, is an exchange between her limp, physical body and his scientific curiosity. Lopez says,

While the others made measurements, I looked at her feet. I had once been told that polar bear claws show an annual shading, faint rings, which could be used reliably to age a bear [. . .]. But there were none that I could detect. I looked at details of her fur and felt the thickness of her ears, as though examining a museum specimen. (118)

In this case, Lopez “knows” the bear through his sensual exploration of her body. He is assuming
the position of a scientist who desires measurements, looking for signs of her age in her toenails as though that information could capture something genuine about the bear. He cannot, however, engage in a conversation with the bear because she is not a conscious participant. Instead, she is a “museum specimen.”

By characterizing the female bear in this manner, Lopez accurately describes her situation as one of being on display solely for the humans’ observations, rather than as a living being. Museum specimens are dead. Her body is unconscious. Not only does this bring to mind the specimen collections and taxonomy of the natural history discourse where nature writing originated, but it reminds us of the fact that Lopez is out in the Arctic to determine “how desire itself [...] shapes knowledge” (xxvii). Much as Donna Haraway describes the comforting distance afforded the viewers of Carl Akeley’s African Hall dioramas (134), the biologists are likewise distancing themselves by freezing the bear’s movements with drugs so they may “satisfy their curiosity through observation and learning, ... [and] create an understanding of man’s place in the ecological structure” (Haraway 135). The demand for knowledge in that fashion turns the bear into a specimen for the scientists, and, briefly, for Lopez. Furthermore, the bear never regains consciousness in the scene; readers are left with the sense that she is no longer a living being with a story but instead an object with no role in the future. Hence, this is a scene in which male subjects impose violence on a female subject in acts which eliminate her status and turn her into an object of their desires—in this case, an object which reveals the information they desire to know.

Lopez’s appreciation of the bear’s situation makes him “uncomfortable,” and he finally turns away from her, and in this respect he does express the effect his interaction with the bear’s body has on him. Yet it is seeing her vulva, “a trace of pink in the white fur between her legs ... in size and shape like a woman’s” (118), that triggers his recognition of the fact that he has “invaded her privacy” (118). This remark raises several questions: Why wasn’t the polar bear’s drugged body enough to make him grimace and turn from her limp form? Why does it require visible genitalia (and female genitalia) for him to recognize that the bear’s body is exposed to their invasive scrutiny? And why are the bear’s genitalia marked as those of human women? Lopez suggests that the bear’s vulva does not look like any one specific woman’s vulva, but like all women. Suzanne Kappeler argues in *The Pornography of Representation* that “The discussion of the objectification of women in our culture concerns the gender of women. [...] In the objectification of women as a gender, the subject, the objectifier, the surveyor of women is the male gender” (50). Similarly, the bear’s position in relation to Lopez and the male scientists is equated with all women’s places in relation to men—as objects available to their sexual scrutiny. Obviously, the human observation of a bear’s genitalia would never occur in the kind of legitimate conversation Lopez engages in with the male bear. The female bear’s presence has been stolen, and their interaction is one between her body and his hands and eyes. In that sense, Lopez’s response seems misplaced. Initially, her privacy is invaded when her body is injected with tranquilizers; his handling her paws and fur and viewing her vulva are secondary invasions to that fundamental one. The first is necessary before the second is possible, and it is the injection that makes her body an accessible object and “an image of vulnerability” (Lopez 118).

As the bear becomes “like a woman” in the literary representation of the scene, the act of violence against the bear becomes “like” a rape of women. The issue here then develops into one of what structure of sexuality, or what sexual politics, are represented in the scene. Perhaps the answer
depends on the reader’s point of view. The typical male reader can identify with the hero writer, easily exploring the bear’s body with Lopez and then turning away, satisfied but perhaps a bit chagrined. The feminist reader, in contrast, can find no place to inhabit in the structure of this scene. Her place (as female) would be that of the designated victim, but she has no desire to be there. She cannot, moreover, stand in for Lopez with any comfort—it is not an easy fit—because she too easily recognizes her similarity to the object to be the subject here. The effects of this imposed estrangement from her own perspective as female are serious, as Fetterley suggests:

To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one’s identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness—not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one’s experience articulated […] but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal—is to be not female. (xiii)

Accordingly, female readers feel their position in relation to the bears as doubly excluding. The experience with the male bear reinforces masculinity in the narrative, while requiring women to perceive it as a universal human experience because they do not otherwise have a place in the scene. The sight of the female bear, prostrate and unconscious, also reinforces masculinity by virtue of her difference from the male bear and the male humans, thus forcing women readers to realize that universality is “to be not female” and thus not themselves. By creating a connection between the lifeless, drugged body of the bear—a body being exposed, manipulated, and probed by male hands—and human women, who are all too often in this society exposed to similar invasions, Lopez creates a scene where women are once again forced into a position as objects under the power of men, both as readers and as people.

The positioning of the female bear in this scene prohibits the kind of conversation Lopez enjoyed with the sentient male bear. Of course, such a conversation would preclude the scientific mentality that demands such research in the first place. This is perhaps the fundamental conflict for Lopez in the Arctic: he does recognize the problems inherent in the research the biologists are doing in terms of the physical hazards tranquilizers pose to the bears, for example, and he recognizes the apprehension of female bears in general around the biologists. But he does not articulate the inadequacies of attempting conversation with a drugged body; instead, once he has finished satisfying his own curiosity, he is distressed by her vulnerability. But she has no other role in such a situation. While Lopez acknowledges that he cannot sensually explore the polar bear’s physical body to “know” it and engage in an interaction that involves two participants with equal agency, he maintains the position of one with the power to name animals—and by his analogy, women—as silent symbols, as objects for representation. He remains in the subject position, negating the female bear’s experience in his representation of the scene. Her viewpoint or response simply does not exist.

In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez places the written passage about the female bear so that she is the final image of polar bears. This was a powerful choice to make, one which forces the careful reader to move beyond the initial shock of his defining the bear’s vulnerability as somehow associated with her vulva toward these larger issues. It is not Lopez’s intent in this text which is in question, but the end result of the text itself. As Annette Kolodny writes in “Dancing through the Minefield,”

[What] repeatedly invigorates feminist literary criticism is […] an acute and impassioned
attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance; the consequences of that encoding for women—as characters, as readers, and as writers; and, with that, a shared analytic concern for the implications of that encoding not only for a better understanding of the past, but also for an improved reordering of the present and future as well. (560)

A response to Kolodny’s call for attentiveness helps reveal the many implications for the female bear and the feminist reader in *Arctic Dreams*. Lopez fails to address why he felt undignified viewing her body and genitalia exposed in that manner. He neglects to consider her specific position or her individual perspective as she conceivably struggles to protect her cubs from the noise of men and a helicopter. He refuses to acknowledge the ways that he uses gendered assumptions to create his images of the landscape and the animals, and to include and exclude his readers. He fails to question the cultural privilege that enables him to maintain his subject position in relation to objectified animals and women in the first place. One of the implications of *Arctic Dreams*, finally, is that women are excluded from wilderness: Lopez writes only a few females into his narrative, but they all reveal a stereotype—that women are somehow less capable of surviving there. His representations suggest that “wild” places are no place for women. But ironically, his narrative also reveals that it is the effects of civilization, not the demanding landscape, that threaten their lives.

I think, finally, that if we must “know” the bears (and there are certainly valid reasons when it comes to the effects of local environmental degradation and its prevention), that knowledge should be gained with as little interference as possible. Perhaps this is a naïve position, to believe that the numerous economic, political and scientific structures involved would be satisfied with the sensitive interactions Lopez describes with the male bear. To engage in a conversation, to exist in a situation of equal vulnerability, should be enough. Humans’ interference is the fundamental cause of most environmental problems, and I see that extending into our interactions with other animals. As Lopez himself acknowledges, “the greatest danger to them now … is not hunting but industrial development and what it brings with it, including summary demands for data on polar bear biology and ecology” (116 emphasis mine). Thus, the paradox: human interference in the form of industrial development results in human interference in the lives of bears because, to protect them from us, we must know their biology and ecology. And that knowledge becomes a potentially dangerous mode of control.

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Works Cited


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