

CHAPTER FOUR  
BORDER CROSSING IN THE NEW  
LITERATURE OF PLACE

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In choosing to record their subjective impressions about their surroundings, American Nature Writers have traditionally positioned themselves at the conceptual frontier between the social and the natural, the human and the non-human, the civilized and the wild. They could perhaps be seen as border crossers, passing from one side of the dividing line to the other in order to report back their findings to their fellows. In contrast to the authors who concentrate on representing social relations, nature writers have sought both to critique and to regenerate American society by fertilizing it with the understanding gained from contact with wild things.<sup>1</sup> However in its dependence on the imaginary lines demarcating culture and nature, their work may be instrumental and complicit in maintaining one of the most deep-rooted binary oppositions in Western culture. For the speaking subjects in these texts, the natural world functions as the ultimate expression of otherness. It is often represented as a place of mystery and wonder to be explored and marveled at. Writing back to society, the nature writers communicate about the wild zone beyond the limits of the familiar, but in so doing they have often worked to perpetuate the scandal of the split between culture and nature.

Having structured Western ways of thinking for centuries, the culture/nature division has also been mapped onto American space and inscribed in United States history, nowhere more evidently than in the changing representations of wilderness. From the "howling wilderness" of the Pilgrims to the protected spaces of the National Parks, the American

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<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, Thoreau's intention, as the epigraph to *Walden* wittily proclaims: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."

conception of national territory has evolved in interesting ways,<sup>2</sup> but has historically maintained the fundamental division between self and other, subject and object, that characterizes modern thinking.<sup>3</sup> This dissociation of nature and culture was necessary for early immigrants to conceive of the land as available for appropriation. They saw themselves as bringing civilization to a wild land. At the same time, that wildness was felt to characterize the new nation. Although the division between nature and culture is probably one of the most persistent and least challenged of binaries, it has recently been called into question, notably by William Cronon<sup>4</sup> and Bill McKibben.<sup>5</sup> Ecocriticism has only recently begun to explore the implications of post-structuralist theory for its critical practice, integrating the insights of orientalism, feminism, and environmental justice ecology,<sup>6</sup> and to interrogate the implications of the dualistic paradigm as a model “that fashions our discourses and shapes our cultural attitudes to the natural environment” (Oppermann 112). Contemporary nature writing—which I describe in my essay title’s as “literature of place,” in order to distance its practitioners from the problematic term “nature”—revises the dualistic paradigm in interesting ways, through writing that effaces the lines of demarcation between the social and the natural. The transition toward the blurring of boundaries has been prompted or provoked by the discourse of members of marginalized communities that have become increasingly audible in American society since the Civil Rights Movement. Inspired by the political and philosophical innovations of feminists and members of oppressed ethnic and racial groups, the new literature of place stresses interaction and

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<sup>2</sup> See Roderick Nash for a compelling account of these changes.

<sup>3</sup> This duality is perhaps most decisively articulated in Descartes’s distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, which splits mind and body, interior and exterior, private and public, and of course, the social and the natural. As Philippe Descola argues, this division characterizes the Western “naturalist” cosmogony, which he opposes to other systems of thought that are not based on this dichotomy.

<sup>4</sup> See especially “The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995, 69-90.

<sup>5</sup> According to Bill McKibben, “An idea, a relationship, can go extinct, just like an animal or a plant. The idea in this case is ‘nature,’ the separate and wild province, the world apart from man to which he adapted, under whose rules he was born and died” (41). Cronon and McKibben question the concept of nature for different reasons, Cronon in the name of constructivism and McKibben in order to recover the intrinsic wildness in man, which may be a resurgence of the wilderness ideology.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the volume edited by Armbruster and Wallace.

influence rather than duality and division.<sup>7</sup> This essay studies a number of these texts in order to show how they reconfigure the cultural division between nature and society, attempting to cross conceptual borderlines in order to redefine them as fault lines or zones of convergence rather than as frontiers between two distinct territories. As I hope to show, a number of contemporary writers are working toward a new aesthetics of place and a new conception of humanity's relation to the land.

As a result of the postmodern paradigm shift, we are beginning to recognize that there has never been a time in human history when nature was not impacted in some way by the presence of man, and correlatively, there has never been a time when humanity was not shaped by the natural environment. Interaction, even co-creation, rather than duality, governs the man/nature relationship (Latour). This conviction informs a great deal of the new literature of place, and the texts often seek to rediscover or affirm the lost connections between the human and the non-human. Yet this attempt to re-conceptualize the relationship is problematic, since the frontiers between the self and the other-than-self are essential to the Western subject's conception of himself, as well as his relationship to language and modes of representation. Writers face the problem of how to communicate their excursions beyond the boundaries of familiar social structures.

For authors and, in turn, their readers, the motivation for moving beyond the boundaries defining the social are complex but more or less convergent, even if the modes of adventuring are different. The former have the first hand experience of the land, while the latter tend to journey vicariously, while still enjoying the comfort of their homes, a distinction which suggests the ideological and even oneiric effect of these texts. One of the shared impulses is, first and foremost, a sense of dissatisfaction with the constraints of social life. Exploring a more "natural" world offers the promise of escape from the feeling of confinement that derives from the imposition of boundaries distinguishing the social and the natural. Unfamiliar and untamed places imply a reprieve from man-made rules. Nevertheless, the impulse to cross boundaries does not necessarily mean rebellion against or rejection of society; often it springs from a deep concern for social life. The authors and readers of contemporary American literature of place are not particularly interested in the foreign or the exotic; their journeys into relatively unmapped terrain involve rather the

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<sup>7</sup> Of course this rewriting of relations does not efface the model of domination which sometimes resurfaces in the lumping together of necessarily diverse minorities or the conception of the Indian as the "original ecologists" a thesis examined recently by Lee Schweninger.

discovery of ways of living that have been forgotten or cast aside. This is particularly true of the spate of books written after the traumatic Vietnam war in which the protagonists attempt to find a new coherence in nature and perhaps a form of absolution from sins against it.<sup>8</sup> Generally, writers cross the imaginary frontier between the social and natural worlds in order to occupy a kind of observatory or vantage point, a place from which to consider and then address their fellows, transforming the border zone into a pulpit. The objective of these writers is not so much to escape society as to regenerate it; at least this is the motive for rendering an account of their experience. However, this leads to another problem.

Even if it is indisputable that we have never been separate from the natural world, that human history has been shaped by interaction with the environment,<sup>9</sup> the desire for escape expressed in the work of the nature writers has its origin in that very relationship. There are thus two different angles of perception superimposed: one ontological, the other ideological. The symbolic division between nature and society comes from the productive and transformative orientation of Western culture; in this ideological model the environment is transformed into commodities, and man demonstrates his supremacy over beings and things. Yet the phenomenal success of this system gives rise to a lingering nostalgia for an earlier state of fusion and integration. This desire to belong to the natural world and to escape the constraints of society is exacerbated by the threats incurred by our exploitation of the planet's resources and the precariousness induced by global capitalism. One could even say that the desire to appropriate and the desire to disempower oneself are the two faces of man's insertion in the world. The literature of place is part of the movement of Americans (and more generally members of all the developed countries) toward various forms of recreation and escape, as well as the rediscovery of other cosmogonies. This movement is reflected in the burgeoning literature on adventure, travel, other life forms, or esoteric forms of knowledge. The popularity of nature-oriented literature in this context is its professed excursion beyond the boundaries of society. The importance is less the journey to another place than the passage from here to elsewhere, from the familiar to the unknown, encouraging the fantasy that such a border crossing is possible and that one can shuffle off or at least ease the burden of our responsibility to the world.

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<sup>8</sup> An extreme version of this is found in James P. McMullen's *The Cry of the Panther*, where a return to a wildness untainted by humanity, emblemized in the author's search for "affinity" with the panther, amounts to almost an abnegation of humanity.

<sup>9</sup> Leopold, Moscovici, Shepard, and Wilson expound this idea from various positions.

In certain accounts the project of leaving a predominantly social environment to occupy a natural one leads, after the initial euphoria, to difficult, even nightmarish situations. Even if the possibility of retreat from society is usually available only to privileged, financially secure individuals, and it is often made easier by the accessibility of urban facilities, the accounts reveal not only that the experience is dangerous, but also that it is illusory. The dualistic paradigm that is supposedly surpassed when the subject crosses over into the wild does not disappear. Rather it moves with the escapees, who reencounter it with every step, since they bring it with them. Even worse, the duality is reinforced and exacerbated by the movement away from society. The work of two very different writers will serve to illustrate this paradox.

First, Rick Bass's account of the first year he and his wife spent in the remote Yaak region of North West Montana shows that the dream of escaping into a liberating and healing encounter with nature confronts the adventurers with harsh material imperatives. In *Winter*, the couple's idyllic retreat turns into a fortress of civilization in which the savage Montana winter is kept at bay. The desire to flee a materialistic culture ironically leads the protagonist to commodify his surroundings by turning the trees into cord wood and the wildlife into meat. Even worse, to preserve their privileged peace and solitude in the forest, the newcomers find themselves in the position of trying to dissuade any one else from following their example. Bass's introduction to the *The Book of Yaak* proclaims: "It is not a place to come to. It is a place to save" (xiv). The boundary between town and forest, civilization and wilderness, has to be defended from unwanted incursions, and the space of liberty becomes a space of exclusion.

Secondly, a passage from Cynthia Huntingdon's *The Salt House* allows us to uncover the roots of the nature/culture division. Rather than being based on a veritable division of space, this opposition originates in the individual's phenomenological existence. The dividing line between the natural and the social structures the individual's existence as an independent subject. Without that boundary, that fine line between the world and the self, the individual runs the risk of disintegration, as Huntingdon discovers in a moment of intense communion with her surroundings:

The tree at my back felt rough, marking my skin with the pattern of its bark. The trees live longer than we do, living more slowly. Light entered the slits of my eyes and I could feel the tree breathe behind me, riding the world around, gripping the earth, splitting upward.

If another presence came into my mind—a call, a touch—I might become the forest to be entered. Light flashed on every branch, but inside

me it was dark. Shadows moved along the ground, leaves turned, and the little hairs on my arm stood up.

A thin boundary, finer than a bubble, thinner than a cell wall, stretched and pulled between inside and out, self and world. If this boundary is washed away I will disappear—that thought occurred and went under, like a bottle in a wave raised up and pulled down again. (94)

In her attention to the world around her, the subject becomes opaque to herself (“inside me it was dark”). The boundary between inside and outside diminishes radically, thinning to the infinitesimal dimension of a soap bubble and thus threatening to dissolve the self. Journeying into nature seemingly entails stepping beyond the boundaries of one’s humanity. The subject’s ambivalence about this movement is shown in the word “might” in the phrase, “I might become the forest.” The modal expresses both a longing for and a fear of metamorphosis. Though appealing, the realm beyond the self is also destructive. It is represented as an unimaginable totality which excludes humanity and threatens our grasp of the real. The boundary line between nature and culture is thus constitutive of the Western subject.

In some texts, then, the quest to abolish existential limits by crossing the boundary separating society from nature seems only to reactivate them. Or, to put it differently, these texts confirm that such binary pairs as civilization and wilderness or culture and nature are socially constructed, meaning that they underpin our culture and define our place in it.<sup>10</sup> The wild or the natural tend to be undefined and hence unquestioned.<sup>11</sup> “Nature” and “the natural” are fluctuating concepts which lump together everything which is not us, everything which is outside the space in which we are situated. But paradoxically the “not us” is also the supreme value to safeguard and regenerate our culture, as suggested by the popularity of the claim Thoreau makes in “Walking”: “In Wildness is the preservation of the World” (275). The paradox becomes transparent if we consider that the natural is simply the social in negative form, projected in a distorting mirror. Its defining limit corresponds to the boundaries of our social existence. Moreover, in Western ideology, the natural is always potentially the cultural, waiting to be occupied, transformed, and finally appropriated.

This realization further complicates the issue of writing about nature. Since the frontier between nature and culture is socially constructed and

<sup>10</sup> This is the argument of Cronon’s essay, cited earlier.

<sup>11</sup> At the same time, terms that are set in polar opposition to nature or wilderness, such as society, culture, or civilization are in themselves loose and often undefined or unquestioned (as their use in this essay may suggest).

constitutive of our presence in the world, how does the literature represent it and justify it to readers? Several responses can be envisaged, which correspond to two different ways of reasoning. The first consists in upholding the dichotomy, and in privileging one of the two domains over the other. The second, which I intend to explore at greater length, consists in challenging the dualistic paradigm by effacing conventional divisions between the social and the natural.

Writings which tend to confirm the nature/culture dichotomy may privilege the social, in which case, the non-human, the unknown, or the other are absorbed for the benefit of civilization, which is thereby reinforced. This tendency is demonstrated in the scientific or pseudo scientific descriptions that frequently figure in texts categorized as nature writing. In this mode, the alien is vulgarized, domesticated, and inscribed within the conceptual frames of the known. Writers may respond to the oddity of observed phenomena with humor or a sense of marvel, but ultimately a scientifically objective attitude resolves the mystery. In drawing on scientific approaches or structures to accommodate strange or unfamiliar phenomena, these writers reaffirm human culture. Other writers may take exactly the opposite tack, aiming to regenerate the social by fertilizing it with the values and virtues discovered through the exploration of nature. This orientation seems particularly important in the United States, since the land has been represented as a vital force shaping the American character. At least two variants of this approach come to mind, both of which could be related to Thoreau's championing of "wildness." On the one hand, the regeneration of the social body may be sought through a return to the values associated with wildness in the American mind, for example, liberty, strength, rugged individualism, or self reliance—what Aldo Leopold named "the 'split-rail value'" (177). On the other hand, the social may be asked to yield to the wholly natural, to subsume itself within the all-encompassing organism of the biosphere. This is the premise of Earth First! or the Deep Ecology movement. Non-human nature becomes a transcendent value. To privilege either the social on the one hand or the natural on the other represents an effort to restore values by appealing to a logic of separate, essentialized and hierarchized domains.

In recent writings, however, an alternative approach has begun to appear, favoring the erasure of divisions between the social and the natural. The transition toward a less radical conception of the nature/culture division has been aided by the attention given to the discourse of members of marginalized communities in the United States. For them, far from defining a transcendent value, the binary logic of

separate domains has designated spaces of exclusion within which they have been confined, whether symbolically (in the case of women) or literally (in the case of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, or Asian Americans). Inspired by the political and philosophical innovations of feminists and members of oppressed ethnic and racial groups, the new American nature writers stress interaction and influence rather than duality and division.

As already suggested, after having sketched out the boundary lines, nature oriented writers have traditionally appropriated the resulting border zone in order to turn it into a position from which to testify, a place from which they address society in the name of nature. Thoreau's cabin on the edge of Walden Pond, or rather its literary representation, is an example of such a liminal space of retreat and empowerment. Migrants to the culture/nature borderlands address the social body in their works, while ostensibly keeping themselves at a distance from it. This liminal position reveals at once their vulnerability (after all they often represent privileged social classes who have chosen a marginal position rather than being unwillingly placed in it), but also their strength (their voluntary detachment demands our attention). For them, the border zone is neither a refuge nor a place of contestation. Instead it is a blueprint for a new way to inhabit space.

In the works of a number of contemporary writers, this liminal space has the particularity of being hybrid, of mixing the natural and the social, the human and the animal. An example that could serve as an icon of this effacement of boundaries can be seen in a found object that Chickasaw author Linda Hogan describes in the chapter, "Dwellings," from the book of that title. Hogan's meditation in this essay on various modes of dwelling, human and animal, draws attention to the impossibility of conceiving what is human independently of what is not human, and the bird's nest she describes serves as a perfect illustration:

I was halfway up the trail when I found a soft, round nest. It had fallen from one of the bare-branched trees. It was a delicate nest, woven together of feathers, sage, and strands of wild grass. Holding it in my hand in the rosy twilight, I noticed that a blue thread was entwined with the other gatherings there. I pulled at the thread a little, and then I recognized it. It was a thread from one of my skirts. It was blue cotton. It was the unmistakable color and shape of a pattern I knew. (123-4)

The discovery of the bird's nest takes place at an in-between time and space (at "twilight," "halfway up the trail"). The nest combines man-made materials with natural substances, using whatever is readily available



without making distinctions. The two categories of material are woven together to create a new space of co-creation and co-definition. At this interface, the writer rediscovers her own place and value: she recognizes the thread of her own skirt "in the rosy twilight," hence *in extremis*, a time of day when the light is about to disappear; she has to pull the thread from its meshing with 'other gatherings' (to create a space to live one has to gather, not select and differentiate). In Hogan's representation of the world, humanity shares the same space with what Western culture has long seen as separate and Other. Her vision certainly comes out of a world view that is different from the Western model discussed so far. She draws attention to Native American attitudes to the land in which human dwellers are simply one species that shares the planet with other "nations" of different forms and species. The stories and ceremonies that she recounts in her book serve to critique and offer an alternative to the Euro-American model of detachment from and dominion over the natural world. At the same time, though, she implicitly also alludes to the necessity to compose with the alien culture of the newcomers: all can be gathered into the same nest.<sup>12</sup>

New hybrid forms and motifs also appear in contemporary Euro-American nature oriented writing. The new configurations found there are multiple and not necessarily convergent, nor do they always completely exclude the more traditional tendency to split nature and culture into distinct domains. However, they demonstrate a movement toward new ways of imagining space, exploring new paths and discovering new convergences.

Some writers, like Ellen Melloy in *The Anthropology of Turquoise*, describe the interaction between the two formerly distinct types of American territory. In the Mohave desert Melloy sees the juxtaposition of the lonely desert and the crowded accumulation of all the traces of American consumer society. This odd encounter of opposites appears as a kind of cataclysm, yet, at the same time, a fascinating transformation:

Surrounding me is a desert West as true as the secret, sacred, sunset-kissed place in a remote canyon, the cosmic navel, stripped-down-to-God, buffed

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<sup>12</sup> This spirit of integration can be seen in her discussion of the tourists' habit of picking up potsherds from the Zia pueblo. She points out that "The residents of Zia know not to take the bowls and pots left behind by the older ones"; however, she excuses the theft because "younger nations, travelers from continents across the world who have come to inhabit this land, have little of their own to grow on ... The pieces of earth ... provide the new people a lifeline to an unknown land" (Hogan 123).

spirituality West, where the coyotes howl and the desolate emptiness is stuffed to the mesa tops with meaning. I make a bed in the West of junked cars, interstate-delirious cars, cars that cost more than a house, a place of crumbling mines, factory outlet malls, replumbed watersheds, vandalized rock art, and gut-shot appliances strewn about dry washes, a desert slashed by off-road vehicles or enveloped into protected national monuments that some people want to deprotect and dedesignate. The two Wests squeeze against one another like neurotic tectonic plates. (100-101)

The speaker's vision encompasses two diametrically opposed configurations of space, whose interaction is summed up in the image of "neurotic tectonic plates." On the one hand the spare, elemental landscape evokes the wild ("where the coyotes howl") as well as the spiritual ("the cosmic navel, stripped-down-to-God, buffed spirituality West"). On the other hand, that same desert is over-settled, over-crowded and desecrated by inhabitants who litter the landscape with the signs of their profligate consumption of resources. The wry humor of the passage, where both types of landscape are viewed with similar ironic detachment, works to reconcile the apparent opposition. Similarly, the fact that the speaker can "make a bed" in the midst of that confusion implies a certain acceptance of the contradiction, if only of the dynamism and Whitmanian energy that is contained in its representations.

Other writers go so far as to completely denounce the notion of separate domains, emphasizing instead the interferences and exchanges between them, demonstrating the fragility and permeability of binary constructions of space, as well as the possibility of inversions. Thus, in *Blue Desert*, describing the return to a contemporary American city after traversing the desert that borders Mexico and the United States, Charles Bowden reverses the usual values in describing his frontier crossing:

I have exited the only ground where I truly trust my senses. Most of the Southwest is beyond my belief and strikes me as an outpost of American civilization with the exiled desert merely a faint, scenic mural stretching behind the powerlines and skyscrapers. But the Lechuguilla, the Tule, the Mohawk dunes, these places have a weight with me that makes the cities of my people seem light and insubstantial. There is no point in reasoning with me on this matter. When I touch the steel towers of the Sunbelt, they feel like cobwebs soon to be dispersed by an angry wind. When I touch the earth I feel the rock hard face of eternity. (174)

The writer's subjective description creates an effect of anamorphosis. The hostile desert has become a place to trust, and the American cityscape that has exiled the displaced Southwestern landscape has become the site of

illusion. This inverts the “normal” American city dwellers’ perspective, where the desert appears as a “faint scenic mural,” the place of fantasy and projection. For the border crosser, the city has now become ephemeral. Even more, the division between civilization and nature has dissolved and the dunes and the buildings have changed places, so that the “steel towers ... feel like cobwebs soon to be dispersed by an empty wind” and the sand has the resistance of “the rock hard face of eternity.”

The new depictions of American space also recognize the complexity of the land’s history. The land is no longer “virgin,” but overprinted with the signs of its former occupation. A number of the explorers featured in the new nature writing recognize the knowledge of its First People and orient themselves by following the traces they have left. In *The Way Out*, Craig Childs begins his journey by seeking the help of a present day Diné elder as a spiritual guide through the labyrinth of canyons in which he and his friend hope to travel. Later, when the friends become unsure of their way, they find confirmation in the arrowheads left by Native American hunters:

‘Check out this one.’ I lean my crouch toward Dirk, arm out, and pass [the arrowhead] to him.

He tilts to me, takes it, and does the same, studying the universes suspended inside the rock. He looks up then, attentively rubbing it between his fingers, examining the terrain.

‘You can scout game through this gap down here clear across this lower region,’ he says, using the piece to point in that direction. ‘Maybe for other unwanted hunters coming in from below or any sign of movement. And the wind is blocked from the south.’ He aims the piece south.

He is right. This is the place. (78)

The narrator and his friend seem to fuse with the ancient hunters in this passage, imagining their thoughts, practically imitating their gestures and blending their voices with those that have gone before through the use of the pronoun “you.” The deictic in “This is the place,” designates both the site of former hunts and their current search for a way through the labyrinth. Though this fantasy of merging may be the latest version of the urge to appropriate the land, the place that they are in becomes significant and readable through the decoding of the traces left by its first inhabitants.

Rather than exemplifying the denial of history that characterizes the conquest of the West, writers now acknowledge the connectedness of the first occupants of the American continent and their land. So, Richard Nelson, surveying his Alaskan home, remembers the Native Americans

who once hunted there and recognizes their more integrated relationship to the land:

As I walked around the neighborhood, I thought of the faded, hidden world that still existed there. Hidden because only fragments of the natural community remained, while the rest had been displaced by streets and buildings or had retreated to the countryside. Hidden because a sense for the spirit and power among its living things has dwindled away, though it is still carried on by people like the Koyukon. Hidden because today's residents have forgotten that they, too, are completely dependent on a sustaining natural world, just as the ancient hunters were before them. (244)

The land has become a palimpsest, where the old world is faded and hidden, but still there underneath the modern streets and buildings. Thus one culture superposes the other, and one type of relation with the land supersedes another. Still, this palimpsestic structure calls attention to a forgotten connection with the land and calls for recognition of human dependence on non-human entities. Rather than illustrating the triumph of one form of living over another, Nelson represents his dwelling place as a meeting point of present and past, a zone of where culture converges and shapes itself with nature rather than against it.

The dissolution of the boundary between the natural and the social means that territories that would once never have been considered as affording the opportunity for reflections on the wild have now become zones for literary exploration. In *Wilderness and Razorwire*, Ken Lamberton represents the prison unit in which he is incarcerated as a space that permits encounters with a variety of non-human life forms. His book reconsiders conventional definitions of the social and the natural and reveals how wildness can enter even the most restricted of social institutions:

Indeed, prison as a wilderness is a leap in rational thought. But here, for me, wilderness is a state of mind as much as it is a place or even an experience. I don't need weeks alone in a vast tract of uninhabited space to rid my mind of worldly concerns and tune my body to the rhythms of wildness. I haven't distanced myself that far; I haven't been human—civilized—that long. Like every other living thing, I am still made of earth. I share organic molecules with fungi. I get hungry, thirsty. I desire companionship. I respond to the circadian and seasonal ebb and flow of chemicals in my blood. Wilderness exists because I am aware of it. (207)

Lamberton had been a natural science teacher whose illicit relation with a fourteen-year-old pupil earned him a twelve-year stay in an Arizona prison. There he comes to acknowledge his fundamental need for the contact with and companionship of other species. There, too, his definition of wilderness changes from the commonly held notion of "a vast tract of uninhabited space," to "a state of mind." This shift suggests his new awareness that wilderness is both a cultural construct and a quality that he shares with "every other living thing." Blurring boundaries between the civilized and the wild, he recognizes his proximity, even his identity with other inhabitants of the same environment. Unlike Huntington, the distinction between the natural and the social is no longer the foundation of human existence; instead the life force links humans to all animal and plant life. Thus, by a different path, Lamberton comes to the same recognition as Linda Hogan.

In conclusion, one of the defining characteristics of the new literature of place is its way of redrawing boundaries between the natural and the social and reimagining the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Alongside the dualistic paradigm that justifies the conquest and occupation of territory (the logic of the frontier, of Manifest Destiny, and more recently of exploitative conservationist policies), we can find new representations of space that blur boundaries between nature and culture, putting the accent on connection rather than distinction, on hybridity, convergence and interaction. A new paradigm seems to be in the making for contemporary American society, one in which border zones do not serve to mark out separate domains, but rather to bring multiple entities together in a shared space of co-definition. Writers are rethinking the cultural division between nature and society, attempting to cross boundaries in order to redefine them as fault lines or zones of convergence rather than as frontiers between two distinct territories. The growing complexity in representations of human occupation of and relation to the land in American literature could be attributed to the growing consciousness that the world has entered a near-cataleptic state of global disaster, thus eliciting responses of concern and ethical implication whose ultimate practical consequences are still unpredictable and problematic. Whatever the causes, a new aesthetic, a new connection to place, and a new conception of social and ecological relationships seem to be emerging from contemporary writing about the land.

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