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Reconsidering Polar Literature in the Anthropocene: Locating Hope in the Works of Jean McNeil and Barry Lopez

Ian M Kenny and Irina Souch

HJEAS

ABSTRACT

This article examines the capacities of polar literature within an interwoven framework to think through climate crisis and human involvement therein in the midst of the Anthropocene. *Ice Diaries* (2016) and *Arctic Dreams* (1986) provide the opportunity to reconsider Earth's cryosphere in literary form as mediated places that participate in the global network of the planetary imaginary (Clarke). Examining polar literature through a reparative lens (Sedgwick) enables the tutelary aspects of both landscapes to emerge as they provide strategies for investigating present and future trouble (Haraway). Employing theories from Earth System Science and spatial studies, this paper locates the potential for hope in remote regions that are nonetheless embedded within global realities—climatic and political—through the sharing of stories that encourage life to flourish even in what appear to be the harshest of circumstances. (IMK and IS)

KEYWORDS: Climate crisis, planetary imaginary, polar literature, natural/cultural flourishing



Locating hopeful stories in an age of ecological crisis

Her hull coated in the russet paint that has become synonymous with polar vessels, the RRS *James Clark Ross* approaches Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands to unload its cargo for the return trip to Earth's southernmost continent. Assembled by the assiduous committees of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) in Girton College, Cambridge, the party of scientists, writers, and artists awaits transport at the very tip of the British world, an isolated living holdover, one of its previous outposts of empire. They bring with them the apparatuses of their various crafts; they populate the laboratories, bridge, aft decks, and forecabin, keep to strict schedules, rotate duties, and gather precious information about the Southern Sea and the Antarctic Ocean climate on their way to the base located on the Adelaide Peninsula.

Among the crew of climatologists and marine biologists, Canadian/Nova Scotian author Jean McNeil compiles a poetic, factual, and fictitious archive of everything she experiences to be published in her 2016 memoir *Ice Diaries*. The memoir—at the borderlands between fact and fiction, alternating between the factual lexicon of ice taxonomies, poetry, and

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prose—inhabits the in-between spaces of her 2006 journey to Antarctica with the BAS as an artist in residence. The recipient of one of few coveted spots, McNeil reflects not only on the changing climate through which she physically journeys, but also on the role of the author—and of narrative accounts—to help shape the world(s) that they fabricate and describe as a process that is also part of confronting and constituting an “inner landscape” (McNeil xvi).

Charting the interstices of memory and experience, McNeil’s text represents a contemporary reflection on and development of the polar fiction of the past that was bound up in “[r]omantic fascination . . . connected with the progress of science,” which focused on the peculiar physical—and some believed spiritual—qualities of ice (Lanone; see also Dodds). While clearly indebted to this genre, *Ice Diaries* moves beyond the Romantic tropes of exploration, typically full of the stark presence of death that populates the pages of some of history’s most well-known polar accounts,¹ employing instead a literary style that blends scientific precision with what Potawatomi biologist and poet Robin Wall-Kimmerer has called the “grammar of animacy,” born from “listening in wild places, [where] we are audience to conversations in a language not our own” (Kimmerer 49). The mixing of the precision of scientific terms, descriptions, and predictions with more affective language drawn from the Antarctic itself has the effect of creating a narrative that is not only full of objective description, but is also brimming with life (human, non-human, and more-than-human) and the hope that such considerations bring. At its heart, McNeil’s text is about dreams: about visions of the world, how those are actively (in)formed, and how they help reflect on our own individual and broader societal roles within the Earth system as we imagine various courses for its—and our own—future. In this way, her memoir echoes sentiments expressed by American anthropologist Barry Lopez in his seminal book *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (1986). Lopez spent several seasons living in the Arctic, researching not only the past and present living cultures of those who inhabit the North, including the Dorset Culture and the Tununurmiut people, but also the nonhuman denizens that populate its varied landscapes.

Lopez’s conglomerate account of his Arctic sojourns helps give theoretical body to McNeil’s ruminations. Importantly, the Arctic theory that Lopez develops is not based solely upon external ways of knowing that are superimposed upon the region. Caught up in the lessons of the lemming and the Arctic tern just as much as the living Inuit and long-passed Dorset people, Lopez’s theoretical lens is formed by the Arctic ground itself (Lopez xxviii).

Reading these texts together allows for locating hopeful narratives in a time of unmitigated change for local and global environments alike. Particularly interesting is how, in Lopez's and McNeil's accounts, landscapes, places, and their other-than-human denizens emerge not as immovable natural tableaux or resources for human exploration, but as partners within a complex Earth system, thus encouraging the seeking of connections, opening new ontological paths for our common hopeful future in the face of the Anthropocene. While some of the (future) outcomes of wide scale human intervention in the Earth system have unknown proportions, others are, sadly, more concrete. The idea of the Anthropocene—the recently proposed term to rename Earth's current geological epoch, focusing on the central role human activity and intervention has played in altering regional and global environments—provides a new theoretical lens through which to view the “heady mix of science, politics, philosophy and religion linked to our deepest fears and utopian visions of what humanity, and the planet we live on, might become” (Lewis and Maslin 7). Regardless of the perspective taken, “the story we choose to tell matters,” and the Anthropocene involves numerous stories about “how people treat the environment and how people treat each other” (Lewis and Maslin 7, 13). Thus, the Anthropocene affords context through which McNeil's and Lopez's stories might achieve renewed importance. The Anthropocene is rife with human and nonhuman suffering, as beings around the planet live through the results of unmitigated anthropogenic global warming, ever-increasing amounts of plastic in Earth's waterways, and rapidly rising sea levels (Lindsey). No matter where on Earth they make their home, “almost every living creature is affected by human actions,” and since the Orbis Spike of 1610 was discovered by scientists when coring Antarctic ice sheets, registering a drop in atmospheric carbon rates that correlates to historical mass extinctions in North America, it is increasingly apparent that “we live on a human dominated planet” (Lewis and Maslin 4, 5). In recent years, researchers argued that decreasing mental and somatic health can also be caused by perceiving the realities (both imagined and latent) of climate change (Padhy), leading to what Albrecht et al. have termed solastalgia: the loss of solace in the face of extreme degradation of the individual's environment.

If stories can be considered instructive for “staying with the trouble” as Donna Haraway suggests, then engaging with accounts like those written by McNeil and Lopez is essential. Using the methodology of cultural analysis—a means of reading cultural artifacts with the help of conceptual lenses—we investigate narrative strategies of making meaning that help

develop hope for a livable and common possible future to spring from the growing ruins and precarious phenomena that are endemic to present-day experience. Further drawing from spatial studies and systems-theory, this paper employs a braided investigative approach to help comprehend the objects analyzed, evaluating the stories that emerge. In the Anthropocene, the entire surface of the planet appears as a site of natural cultural encounters, and therefore as a text to be interpreted, made available in narrative form, dovetailing with the guiding principle of cultural analysis, which “seeks to understand the past as *part of* the present” (Bal 1, original emphasis), while apprehending the present with an eye for creating just futures.

Amidst the vastness of thinking on a planetary level in the face of biotic cleansing, extreme human intervention, and ecological destruction, Earth’s polar regions provide timely locations for the re-examination of this host of conundrums in ways that also encourage the development of (tactical) hope to not only cope with these dawning realities, but also to survive, and potentially find new ways to thrive. The septentrional topoi that the peoples living across the pan-Arctic cryosphere once viewed as stable—one might even argue, *frozen in time*—now appear in a state of unpredictable transition, while the largely unpeopled Antarctic also undergoes immense changes, unprecedented in human history. French sociologist and theorist Bruno Latour has argued that to comprehend adequately such phenomena, narratives must move beyond the language of crises and instead, employ the fluid and disruptive terminology that such transitions and slippages bring: “we were used to one world; we are now tipping, mutating, into another” (8). Rather than turning away from the often depressing narratives of disaster, we suggest that these stories contain seeds for developing hopeful visions of the future that *think-with* these ongoing states of transition.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hope as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen,” which is therefore concerned with the future. Hope theorist Steven van den Heuvel has called hope an “ambiguous phenomenon” that has seen an upsurge in academic interest (v). Despite the variety of theoretical frameworks that have been developed, the core of hope “is simple: hope denotes a desire (we hope for something) and it involves probability (the chances of the attainment of desire have to be somewhere between zero and one” (van den Heuvel v). Hope, therefore, must be *cultivated* in relation to a particular or given outcome. It is, however, a slippery moniker, as it enables an endless variety of wishes to be cast forward into the future: “for some, hope signals passivity and resignation from the urgent tasks of life, whereas for others it describes the vital strength

necessary for progress in human history, as well as for individual flourishing” (van den Heuvel v). In relation to climatic questions, Michael Northcott has written that the concept of hope itself is at issue in the global ecological crisis. In the face of ongoing and future ecological crises, then, hope is a troubled concept. To be productive in the realm of ecological thought, we argue that the conceptual framework of hope must decenter the human experience which it inevitably privileges. Northcott also contends that for a fruitful relationship with hope to emerge in a time of ecological crisis, a fundamental reckoning with being and agency must occur, “so that other animals, and ecosystems such as forests, rivers, and even the Earth herself, can be rediscovered alongside humans in the work of halting the processes that are degrading life on earth” to promote planetary flourishing (216). While we cannot know if Arctic terns or icesheets “hope” in the way we do, centering the prospect of their flourishing helps see hope afresh in an age plagued as it is by the pessimistic realities that people and other Earth-dwellers navigate. Given the lack of a common “language” by which to directly understand Earth’s nonhuman inhabitants, moving the study of hope into ecological terrain through ethical stories that give voice to their presence might become a means of attuning to and perhaps even encouraging mutual flourishing.

McNeil’s and Lopez’s texts reveal that if hope is to take root, it must go beyond the boundaries of those “ideas inherited from a different time and place” that employ the “kind of thinking that created today’s global turbulence [but] is unlikely to help us solve it” (Moore 1). This is particularly important to help encourage hope on a broader scale, given the difficulty that many people have when confronting the present and future realities of climate change wrought by human intervention. While science often communicates its findings in the jargon and style of its own tradition through (for the general public) abstract entities and numbers, the writer can personalize and humanize disconcerting geological and climatological truths by using imagination, and even “dream the future into being” (McNeil 346). This is poignant due to the fact that in both McNeil’s and Lopez’s accounts, the polar regions figure prominently within what Bruce Clarke has identified as the “planetary imaginary”: a web of Earth’s ecosystems with myriad overlapping and entwined iterations, a vast archive of objects, stories, and associated experiences with the power to shape perspectives and worlds.

In her memoir, McNeil assembles a glossary of terms that describe numerous types of snow and ice contemplating the power to (re)envision our relationship with the land itself, and dwelling also on the in-between places of her Antarctic sojourn, while Lopez meditates on the tutelary peculiarities

of interwoven imagined landscapes as a physical and psychosocial Arctic “wilderness” that enables, resists, and transcends “whatever we would make of it” (Lopez xxii). McNeil and Lopez show how the Arctic—peopled for millennia by adaptive Indigenous communities as well as more-than-human life despite (settler) colonial undertakings to remove both—provokes reflection on the remoteness and the seemingly untouched “no-man’s land” of Antarctica that nonetheless bears humanity’s trace. Thus, both texts provide strategies for imagining various visions of collective futures and act as hopeful narratives in opposition to managerial or capitalistic perspectives that describe Earth’s polar regions as (future) sites of political and military conflict, scientific field laboratories, global shipping lanes, and heightened mineral extraction.

Remembering, linking, learning

As the crew of the RRS *James Clark Ross* make their halting way South, stopping every twenty minutes to gather water samples as they approach the Antarctic Convergence—a ring of cold water that enrobes the continent, emerging from its glaciers and iced-over landmasses—McNeil, both comforted and disturbed by the ship’s progress, reflects on the peculiar position that they find themselves in. In her account, the ship itself emerges as a place rather than mere conveyance, a floating research hub and community that carries with it the hopes and dreams of developed societies across the world: to comprehend the Earth system so that we might better communicate how to stop it from reaching a point of no return. Frozen in our cultural iconography as a Romantic beacon at the bottom of the world that is hostile to human life and eternal in its frigid steadfastness (Lanone), the Antarctic is, rather, a place undergoing immense change whose end results remain uncertain due to the limited perspective that even the most advanced data modeling brings with it. In the prologue to her memoir, McNeil is candid about the mission she and other artists and writers were sent on by the BAS between 1998 and 2010:

We were understood to be witnesses. The expectation was that our resulting work would further the public communication . . . of climate change science. We would make abstract entities and numbers appreciable to a more general audience than scientists could reach, through humanizing and personalizing them. People would care more. (xviii)

The mission of the polar storyteller is as massive as the continent which she attempts to narrate, trying to give voice to one of Earth's most peculiar landscapes in a way that would make those located thousands of miles away care more about its future.

Due to its physical and cultural massiveness—its near-constant mediation on art, narrative accounts, literature, documentaries, and films²—Antarctica morphs time and experience, bending it, and confusing time's seemingly linear course. And so, McNeil writes that while in the Antarctic, she felt “the press of an external consciousness on [hers]” awakening her long-dormant memories of other affective encounters with place (xvi).

Some places stay behind you. But others refuse to assume their rightful positions on the linear timeline. These form islands in the river of time and in memory, persistent and opaque. There live people and events that happen over and over again, spiraling out beyond that which can be described as already experienced and so known; something about them is being worked out on a timescale far grander than the moment, or our individual lives. They are the past, but the future also. (11)

The grammar that McNeil develops in her diary opens room for contemplating the impact mediations of different places have on the human psyche. These mediations not only affect how we perceive our self in the world, but they also have repercussions for how we experience time. Memory (both of the shifting land itself, and the human minds that apprehend it) takes on a new weightiness, a near corporeal identity felt through her narration of immediate and often striking experiences of the land. As both place and idea, Antarctica fascinates and lingers in the mind on account of an already well-established body of polar mediations.

Relevant to this phenomenon, in his 2020 book *Gaian Systems: Lynn Margulis, Neocybernetics, and the End of the Anthropocene*, historian of science Bruce Clarke describes the planetary imaginary as a collective ongoing process “whenever found or made images of worlds living or otherwise are bodied forth in some workable medium and taken up into popular or artistic images, journalistic or fictional accounts, or other currents of communication” (183). Clarke's theorizations enable places to be accessed—like Earth's polar regions—through the archive of their mediations. When thinking with the form that cybernetics enables, Earth's topoi emerge as connected nodes in a vast living network. This is what James Lovelock, one of the progenitors of Earth System Science, has called Gaia. In the 1970s,

Lovelock advanced a way of narrating the planetary system he saw before him, including the “entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae,” which could all be “regarded as constituting a single living entity capable of manipulating the Earth’s atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts” (Lovelock 9). Following Lovelock’s view of the Earth as a living network, the ability to locate ourselves and other subjects and places within that Earthly system becomes boundless. Accessible both through the cultural plane of the planetary imaginary, and on a physical level through the reality that all places on Earth are enmeshed within one another despite the apparent vastness of the network itself, room for hope opens by thinking inclusive systems, learning from more subjectivities than were previously imagined.

Similarly, in his preface to *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez is concerned with a broad spectrum of tutelary aspects of the region: “all that the land is and evokes, its actual meaning as well as its metaphorical reverberation, was and is understood differently,” depending on the goals and identity of its beholder (xxviii).³ Thus, the author links Arctic dreams—visions of its future—to these varied “projections of hope” (xxviii):

The individual’s dream, whether it be so private a wish as that the joyful determination of nesting arctic birds might infuse in a distant friend weary of life, or a magnanimous wish, that a piece of scientific information wrested from the landscape might serve one’s community—in individual dreams it is the hope that one’s own life will not have been lived for nothing. The very much larger dream, that of a people, is a story we have been carrying with us for millennia. It is a narrative of determination and hope that follows a question: What will we do as the wisdom of our past bears down on our future? It is a story of ageless conversation, not only conversation among ourselves about what we mean and wish to do, but a conversation held with the land. (xxviii)

If, therefore, our collective and individual dreams are so directly linked to hope and to encounters with the land (both physical and mediated), then the necessity of employing reparative reading approaches of Earth’s polar regions becomes essential.

In the chapter titled “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” from her 2002 book *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick explores the tendency to pursue hidden meanings in the academy since the 1960s. Contemplating Paul Ricoeur’s category of the hermeneutics of suspicion to describe a distinct

intellectual position whose “tracing-and-exposure project represents a strategic and local decision, not necessarily a categorical imperative,” Sedgwick defines Ricoeur’s approach as what she calls “paranoid reading” (125). Paranoid reading, she contends, has gradually become “less a diagnosis than a prescription” (125). Thus, she interrogates the go-to fixation on *hidden* forms of repression and marginalization that may blind for us what is concealed in plain view: namely, how US critical theory in particular has become synonymous with revealing the unseen. When interpreting landscapes, therefore, we must be explicitly aware of the influential project of paranoid reading as undertaken by Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and their intellectual offspring. Productive as such approaches may be for a variety of analyses, when narrating and studying environments, moving beyond the notion that the landscape is hiding or concealing meaning “from us,” enables the analyst to see the landscape not as something that obfuscates knowledge, but as a text and site that shelters knowledge that is deeply rooted within its ecological and ontological web. When plumbing landscapes for meaning, an element of investigation will always be necessary: uncovering different forms of knowledge ought to take the form not of overt exposure to utilization, but as an aspect of coming-to-know through careful questioning.

In Sedgwick’s theorization, reparative reading is the act of attuning oneself to the object at hand and employing appropriate theoretical frameworks to unveil the local and contingent relations of knowledge relevant to both the object and the intuitive reader (124). It is in this sense that we suggest that the landscape does not conceal its teachings in a “paranoid” manner but presents the opportunity to develop an attuned way of knowing and inquiring whose methodology is grounded in the land itself. This epitomizes a fundamental tension in learning from the land: much remains out of sight until the researcher interrogates it with open appreciation rather than suspicious intent. The Arctic and Antarctic landscapes that both McNeil and Lopez narrate highlight these tensions on account of the open archival nature of the polar regions: due to permafrost and a lack of biotic diversity of beetles and other insects as well as fungi that would normally break down organic matter, these zones instead preserve what has been left behind. “Decomposition in the Arctic is exceedingly slow, work that must be accomplished by even fewer organisms operating for even shorter periods of time . . . [in] a place where earth and decay are almost unknown, on the lifeless gravels of the polar desert” (Lopez 27). Exposing the Arctic and Antarctic to paranoid analysis would reduce them to zones of turmoil and harsh frigidity. Of course, both regions are examples of extreme habitats where only adaptive

species and specialized human technologies have a chance of surviving, but this does not mean that they are not brimming with life and that lessons cannot be gleaned owing to these particular qualities.

Reparative strategies, therefore, are especially important for comprehending Earth's polar regions as they occupy prominent positions within the planetary imaginary. Thinking with the grammar of networks, systems, and embeddedness as articulated by Lovelock and Clarke, it is possible to draw connections between various physical places and mediated iterations thereof within the Earth system. This sort of hopeful thinking also enacts a facsimile of migration, a key feature to polar landscapes both for animals that call them home, as well as the humans that would visit these remote places. Lopez describes these seasonal movements in collective terms: "The maple seed spiraling down toward the forest floor, the butterfly zigzagging across a summer meadow, and the Arctic tern outward bound on its 12,000-mile fall journey are all after the same thing: an environment more conducive to their continued growth and survival" (158). In McNeil's book, the ship employs similar seasonal habits, coming to the continent early in the Southern spring when the ice begins to melt, and departing as the days turn to night during their procession to winter. Through such rituals, the polar regions emerge as more than locations on a map but rather as places connected through the filaments of movement. Employing the language of these migrations and peregrinations, both McNeil and Lopez encourage the reader to think about the ties that bind us and the polar regions together, overcoming the age-old linguistic and narrative tendencies that have previously separated these seemingly disparate places from our experience of being in the world. Making these enormous living networks accessible to the mind, these cultural mediations also make them accessible to the terrain of hope. Just as the Arctic tern traces a yearly path from Arctic to Antarctic and back again, seeking environments more conducive to its survival, accounts like that of McNeil and Lopez breath fresh understanding into the movements that humans make as we also attempt to find places (be these physical or psychosocial) that are conducive to a broadened understanding of a communal Earthly survival. The movements of the *RRS James Clark Ross* mimic the tern, journeying thousands of kilometers a year to wrestle with the present and future realities, revealing them as new(er) iterations of much older, and perhaps eternal, states of movement.

Circuitry, connectivity, dimensionality

These migratory practices make it clear even from a distance (and by means of the most tenuous threads) that all life on Earth is linked. Seeing the filaments connecting self and landscape enables reflection upon the tendriled circuitry of life on Earth and its subsequent flows. In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez conceives of migration as the flow not only of species, but as the breath of the landscape. This breathing is charted by the creatures that arrive and depart with the seasons, both inward and outward bound:

Standing there on the ground, you can feel the land filling up, feel something physical rising in it under the influence of the light, an embrace or exaltation. Watching the animals come and go, and feeling the land swell up to meet them and then feeling it grow still at their departure, I came to think of the migrations as breath, as the land breathing. In spring a great inhalation of light and animals. The long-bated breath of summer. And an exhalation that propelled them all south in the fall. (Lopez 162)

These breathways enable the further recognition of the landscape itself as a living entity, more than a mere backdrop to human-centered dramas. Through its annual in- and exhalations, the Arctic (and Antarctic) govern the seasonal rhythms of winter and summer not only in the regions themselves, but also, propelling their vital force through the migrations of animals across the entire range of the planet. By linking migration with breathing, Lopez embeds within the identity of the land itself the seemingly escapist tendencies of species seasonally moving away from harsh climates. Such theorizations born from the landscape not only reflect on the identity of a particular place, but also become part of a broader global process of movement. The polar regions are thus made accessible to us as key nodes in the Earth system not only in their mediations, but also in their physical capacity. In other words, imagining the land breathing returns the qualities of life to these already living landscapes that were previously emptied by paranoid human narration, and enable the consideration of “the prejudice we exercise against such landscapes, imagining them to be primitive, stark, pagan . . . It is in a place like this that we would unthinkingly store poisons or test weapons, land like the deserts to which we once banished our heretics and where we once loosed scapegoats with the burdens of our transgressions” (Lopez 255). Lopez “reads” the Arctic landscape in line with Sedgwick’s reparative sentiments. Rather than pursuing a culturally inscribed practice of interpreting Arctic landscapes as alien or hostile—even empty spaces—Lopez offers a narrative

that realigns with the land itself, examining it afresh. From this intuitive reading, the idea of the distant polar landscape as a lively ecosystem emerges in opposition to its past instrumentalization as a landscape concealing taboos. With its own tutelary qualities, the land offers room to pause and consider what might be gleaned from it.

Lopez's approach reverberates through a variety of passages in McNeil's *Ice Diaries*. At first glance, McNeil's account of the Antarctic zone utilizes the Romantic features of conventional polar literature. The scientists aboard the RRS *James Clark Ross* are concerned with studying the forces of nature that have come to characterize the southern continent, which is mostly frozen all year-round: ice sheets and glaciers, striated and compounded into massive entities over millennia that break off during the seasonal melt as icebergs, joining the gyre of floating bergs that are released from Antarctica in the spring and summer. It is a vivid landscape whose motions happen at a scale seemingly ungraspable to the human mind, and thus, appear out of reach. Rather than being pigeonholed as a barren wasteland or formidable fortress that bars human access, McNeil's descriptions of the glaring land and seascape near the British Antarctic Survey's Base R on Adelaide Island reveal these selfsame features as phenomena that enable reflection. Throughout her memoir, the author continuously ponders how encountering the Antarctic—in an almost unmediated way—involves more than the physical confrontation between her body and an extreme region. What results from such an encounter represents a change in one's inner landscape, prompting a "basic wonder about the planet and its workings," a gradually evolving intellectual-emotional position that is triggered by this very encounter between the human body and the land (McNeil 156). Placid and timeless on the surface, what lies underneath the frigid and blinding exterior of the land and seascapes is in fact teeming with life and with meaning, which is far less fixed, or "eternal" than previously considered.

Through the optical and perceptual fallacy of stillness and constancy, the ice sheets of Antarctica provoke the reflection on the *actuality* of the ice sheet which is at odds with how it is typically described. In a striking passage that mimics the language of movement and migration in Lopez's text, McNeil details the return journey that she undertook with pilot Tom to the Rutford Ice Stream, isolated from the rest of the (human) Antarctic community. After departing from Base R on a resupply mission, McNeil looks out the window, and wonders at the landscape that she is passing over:

Our shadow followed us, a perfect silhouette of our plane . . . We flew south, into the sun, over a succession of identical landscapes—nunatak, ridge, snowfield, nunatak, ridge, snowfield. We were passing beyond the peninsula’s edge and into the bulk of the continent. Now there was only ice and more ice . . . here, we were in an iterative world. (194)

Though the ice sheet might first appear as one homogenous mass, flying over its “iterative” planes reveals that it is, instead, a varied landscape composed out of multiple interactions between a rich diversity of elements. What looked static is symphonic and relational, where familiar forms echo and find resonance in each other.

Upon reaching the ice monitoring station, Oddvar, a glaciologist at a remote outpost, points out to the sparsely assembled party that “the ice sheets are in constant motion . . . Just as the continents are, just as the earth is spinning. I always try to remind myself that I’m not standing on solid ground” (McNeil 198). Oddvar employs the language of relationality to access the reality of the ice sheet that he has spent many seasons researching, plumbing its depths for information about the past and future of Earth’s climate. While appearing eternally immovable, the formation is in a state of perpetual motion; it undergoes structural change as fresh ice accumulates in the continent’s center, pushing the older ice out to the edge, flowing slowly into the sea. Featuring prominently in McNeil’s memoir, ice also allows for epistemological reflection. Inspired by *crystallomancy*—a Romantic means of mystic “future telling” by scrying through the ice (xiv)—the author examines the relationship between humans and ice, navigating both historical and present conceptions. Imbricating both the mystic perspectives of Romantic savants and climate science’s instrumentalization of ice sheets as data sets, McNeil reveals that “scrying” with the ice might present a conceptual portal to a new means of understanding. “Whether molecular or esoteric, ice promises revelation,” becoming an aperture through which to learn from the seemingly closed-off southern continent and its nonhuman and more-than-human denizens (xiv).

The ice contains perspective when fathomed by the scientist’s drill, revealing that the bottom of the ice sheet is a zone of massive friction, heating up where it scrapes along the bedrock, causing an increased outflow of ice and water into the sea as it rapidly melts. Coring the ice reveals the distant history of Antarctica itself: part of the supercontinent Gondwanaland some 180 million years ago, its fossil composition reveals that “it had been tropical, carpeted by forests of clubmoss trees, the giant ferns of the Carboniferous

era,” now buried beneath one to two kilometers of ice (McNeil 215). The landscape that on the surface is iterative in its dissimilarity from other places on Earth is also, beneath the accreted layers of ice and snow, part of a common geohistory that connects the now-distant Antarctica to us on the scale of Earth time. Rather than this history being concealed by the ice, it is the ice that has provided the portal to uncovering this knowledge while scientists plumb its depths. The outcome of these meditations ultimately allows McNeil, a stand-in for the reader, to “think of the planet as an organism whose well-being [she] could effect. [She] had considered this before, of course, but in the abstract. In the Antarctic [she] felt closer to the planet than ever before. It was almost as though [she] could hear its pulse” reverberating through the ice (171).

While in Antarctica learning from the land is undertaken nearly entirely with nonhuman partners, Lopez encounters a different form of human knowledge production during his Arctic sojourns. He reminisces ongoing hunting with members of the local Indigenous communities which gave him a newfound understanding of how humans can live fully incorporated within the land:

Hunting, in my experience—and by hunting I simply mean being out on the land—is a state of mind. All of one’s faculties are brought to bear in an effort to become fully incorporated into the landscape . . . To hunt means to have the land around you like clothing. To engage in a wordless dialogue with it, one so absorbing that you cease to talk with your human companions. It means to release yourself from rational images of what something ‘means’ and to be concerned only with that it ‘is’. (199–200)

For Lopez, “hunting” is the act of being immersed within an ecosystem so fully that imposed boundaries between self and world begin to dissipate. In his 1976 book, *Place and Placelessness* Canadian geographer Edward Relph writes about the embeddedness of people within landscape not only physically, but also culturally, and how land itself is often embedded in our systems of meaning making: “[I]n our everyday lives places are not experienced as independent, clearly defined entities that can be described simply in terms of their location or appearance. Rather they are sensed in a chiaroscuro of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, other people, personal experiences, care and concern for home, and in the context of other places” (29). Relph’s work not only helps give theoretical depth to Lopez’s account,

but also introduces the interwoven language of Earth System Science that understands Earth as an animated integrated system.

Further unpacking the politics of Relph's "chiaroscuro," in his 2001 article "Between Geography and Philosophy," Edward Casey highlights the tension between space as a "volumetric void" in which things are positioned, and place, "the immediate environment of my lived body—an arena of action that is at once physical and historical, social and cultural" (683). Casey's focus on the presence of the human body to give landscape meaning helps understand why mediated accounts of landscapes may be essential to encourage hope for mutual flourishing. Incorporating ourselves into this network urges human subjects to turn to mediations of precarious landscapes and draw new lines of association that de-link the trajectories contemporary society has bound itself to: the disembodied, logical, and often dying words and worlds that conventional Anthropocene narratives typically employ. However, while relying on human narrators to spread the story of a particular place is an inexorable necessity, this must be done with attention to the nonhuman bodies who never leave the remote landscapes humans only infrequently visit. Thinking of landscape as "the presented layout of a set of places, not their mere accumulation but their sensuous self-presentation as a whole" (Casey 683) has the potential to move towards a continuous politics of recognition of embodied subjectivities, extended through mediated encounters with the landscape's nonhuman and more-than-human denizens within the globalized web of the Earth-system even after human narrators leave.

Near the end of her book, McNeil too adds another layer onto the dynamics of learning from the landscape that meshes with Relph's and Casey's theorizations. She notes that the landscapes one encounters in the polar regions are not merely "[a] destination, but [also] a dimension" (275). This notion of dimensionality, of being within a landscape to the extent that it produces a different relationship between self and world becomes important when one starts to consider how hope and ecology are wrapped-up with one another. If ecology, from the Greek *oikos* (home) and *logos* (study), is the study of one's homescape, or one's immediate interaction with their environments, then readers become capable of accessing other ecologies through literary accounts and thus learn how to live better on Earth. Such lessons ensuing from the direct engagement with the spirit of the land, are true not only of the Poles, but of all living and ever evolving landscapes. Lopez describes this when, as previously quoted, he recognizes that the land

itself “is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it” (xxvii). He continues,

It is as subtle in its expression as turns of the mind, and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable. The mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces . . . trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement. (xvii–xviii)

These meditations on the graspable as well as ungraspable qualities of the landscape are echoed in McNeil’s book. “The Antarctic,” she writes, “lives outside our narrative, like an extra planet moored at the bottom of the ocean. It does not belong to us” (348). And so, while trying to mediate the tutelary aspects of the polar landscape, Lopez’s and McNeil’s narratives also reflect on the fact that the land cannot truly be owned or known by anyone, either immediately or through mediation. It simply *is*, and to force it to be anything other is a grave mistake. To do so destroys the vivacity with which landscapes make themselves known.

This curious bifurcation is evident throughout both texts: that the land gestures towards new modes of being in and relating to it, but also that the land itself is so abundant with meaning that it becomes nearly too much to bear. Oftentimes, the land interdicts our attempts at meaning-making just as we think we come to know it in its entirety. Instead, it opens itself to the curious observer allowing for momentary glimpses of possible avenues only to close in on itself afterwards, retreating (at least partially) from access. Walking in the dwindling Antarctic sunlight at the end of the summer, McNeil is suddenly struck by this realization:

I have been delivered here, to this moment, for a reason. The connection between us, the iceberg, the mountain, the blue-eyed shag, appeared like a gossamer invisible ribbon, binding us, although loosely. But instead of looking at some mathematical matrix I was suddenly looking into things. Once inside, emanating from this vision was an awareness of the vastness of everything. (235)

Defying complete capturing, the land continuously advances and retreats in and out of focus. “Have we come all this way,” Lopez writes, “only to be dismantled by our own technologies, to be betrayed by political connivance or the impersonal avarice of corporations? . . . Whatever wisdom I would find, I knew, would grow out of the land. I trusted that, and that it would

reveal itself in the presence of well-chosen companions” (40). Both authors describe a volumetric ability to look within the landscapes they perceive that goes beyond the physical reality they see in front of them. In nearly spiritual language, McNeil and Lopez abandon themselves to the land and its teachings, relinquishing authorial control and relishing in the wisdoms of the land.

Conclusion: hope and healing

We have argued that room for hope opens when landscape—and broadly what is called the natural world—is considered not as a resource, but as a partner within a complex Earth system. By taking this approach, different kinds of reparative epistemologies emerge from the land and its human and non-human denizens and enter the archive of the planetary imaginary that encourages seeking connections, while opening new ontological paths for our common future. This process is thrown sharply into relief by the narrative form of McNeil’s Antarctic sojourns and Lopez’s anthropological accounts of the Arctic. Reading the two together, therefore, offers a timely moment for reflection on the production of knowledge in relation to people and their environments in the present, but also on how that knowledge might be mobilized into hopeful narratives.

Attending not only to the human grief of solastalgia, but also to the ongoing nonhuman suffering helps ground hope for the future within an ethical framework of mutual flourishing based on the recognition of mutual benefit. In their 2021 article, “Ways of Healing in the Anthropocene,” Ross Westoby, Karen E. McNamara, and Rachel Clissford write that “grief, as the emotional response to loss, is increasingly used to describe the human experience of the Anthropocene” but also, that “loss and grief must be processed so that hope is possible, not blind hope but pragmatic hope” (1). Envisaged in its plethora of iterations, the Anthropocene provides a powerful metaphor for “activat[ing] new normative and ethical thinking” (Westoby et al. 2). And so, turning to stories that reconsider inherited knowledge encourages affective and intuitive interpretative practices and opens productive spaces for hope. “Instilling hope through reframed narratives may help paint a multifaceted picture of human agency . . . potentially helping to mobilize a more ‘conscious force’” than the destructive history of *Homo Sapiens* has typically allowed for (3). From this vantage point, marine biologist Gavin’s observation that “things flourish in cold in a way they never do in heat” (McNeil 226) is representative of the reframing of cold and

remote places explicit in the works of both authors not as dead spaces, but as places that are brimming with potential hope.

This process of reorientation of the relationship between self and place is not limited to the physical locations Lopez's and McNeil's books examine. They equally include a repositioning of self within a broader Earth timeline, locating not only where we are, but *when* we are, in a productive re-incorporation of space-time as it relates to our experience of the world around us. Near the end of her memoir, McNeil writes:

“But the more I think about it, I see the Antarctic like a mirror, although angled permanently toward the future,” I said. “In the rest of the world, we have to deal with certain threats. But here we’re standing on a continent whose disintegration has the potential to threaten most of what we think of as civilization—coastal cities, infrastructure, agriculture. So actually we’re at the epicenter of threat, although it’s still in the future.” (228)

Reflecting on the ubiquity of global warming and the future of place and people around the world, the author ponders the peculiar disparity of the experience of time while standing on the southern continent. The by now well documented disintegration of Earth's cryosphere, therefore, represents not only cause for concern, it also enables timely reflections on the unpredictability of Earth's environmental future. The Antarctic itself is not the source of this threat, but rather it is human activity that exerts its forces—both seen and unseen—upon this living mass of ice and snow.

Nonetheless, faced with overwhelming and unsettling data, McNeil—removed albeit briefly from civilization—can interpret how these imminent disasters are also able to influence us now, as she moves away from linear associations towards a *sticky* confrontation with our historical present: the Antarctic reaches out of its many iterations and realities to elicit an emergent emotional response. Time morphs and takes on different qualities at the poles. Thinking of the Antarctic as a living milieu that is *changing*, *changeable*, and *changed* instead of a resolute entity creates a powerful architecture for locating hopeful narratives that are both ethical and pragmatic. These do not shy away from the dawning realities of destruction but embrace it as a point of departure for developing visions for a more equitable future that extends grievability and worthiness to a whole host of non-human life forms and forces.

Lopez equally meditates on the lessons that can be learned from contemplating the land in its totality. “The individual animals we watched

tested their surroundings,” he writes, “they tried things they had not done before, or that possibly no animal like them had ever done before—revealing their capacity for the new. The preservation of this capacity to adapt is one of the central mysteries of evolution” (197). This mysterious capacity is not limited to the nonhuman animals of the Arctic alone. Both Lopez and McNeil develop their narratives along the lines of adaptivity. Such adaptive thinking can be effectively linked to dreaming, healing and hope, for it is only through the combination of these sometimes-nebulous processes and states of being that ethical, conscious, and holistic action can be taken in the present, with an eye to the future.

In the final pages of *Ice Diaries*, McNeil has a conversation with Wolff, a member of the research staff:

“But we are also adaptable,” Wolff said. “We are living in a solution-oriented time, rather than a superstitious, fatalistic Dark Age. We are tough-minded.” Wolff’s optimism was gritty, hard-earned. I had the impression that he had taken a decision to view our future with some hope, because the alternative was unacceptable. (312)

When addressing the strategies necessary for thinking through these troubling times, Wolff responds not only as a scientist, but also as someone who has incorporated—through their long affective engagement with the Antarctic sea- and landscape—more reparative attitudes than one way of knowing alone can allow for. Hope, therefore, remains interwoven with the disastrous realities of the present and future that are already at work in the world around us. Rather than hoping against all odds, hope emerges as something that might flourish on account of those odds, in the wintry recesses of the Earth system and its various mediations.

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Notes

1. The Western cultural fascination with the polar regions is long and can be traced in numerous works. Earlier writings like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) and scenes of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* provide a literary backdrop for later accounts by polar explorers, like the journals of Robert Falcon Scott's 1910–1912 expedition to the South Pole, which in turn inspired further literary engagement, resulting in atmospherically eerie works like H. P. Lovecraft's novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931).

2. In the realm of noteworthy polar art (in the Western canon), Caspar David Friedrich's iconic 1823–1824 "Sea of Ice" depicts a ship being crushed by ice that became an aesthetic blueprint for later mediations. Regarding narrative accounts, perhaps most iconic among these are *Scott's Diaries* (1912) that tell of explorer and crew's ill-fated attempt to reach the South Pole, as well as Philip Edwards's *Journals of Captain Cook* which recount (among other stories) his second voyage from 1772 to 1775, which took him to Antarctica to explore its ice mass. These travelogues became foundational for later works of fiction, including Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), and later, H. P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" initially published in the 1936 edition of his *Astounding Stories*, as well as Mat Johnson's 2011 satirical novel based on the same story, *Pym*. For well-known documentary accounts, the BBC series *Planet Earth* features several episodes on Earth's polar landscapes in its various seasons and has become iconic in its mediation of Earth's various biomes. Many films have also been set in polar regions; arguably foundational among them is the 1948 film, *Scott of the Antarctic*.

3. In the same vein, Klaus Dodds and Marc Nuttall assert in their book *The Arctic*: "There is no one Arctic. Instead multiple Arctics collide, coexist, and conflict with one another" (24–25).

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