

Humanities as Narrative: Why Experiential Knowledge Counts

Natalie Gulrud

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In an essay titled “Landscape and Narrative,” writer Barry Lopez reflects on the nature of knowledge in relation to the land. He explains:

One learns a landscape not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it- like that between the sparrow and the twig. The difference between the relationships and the elements is the same as that between written history and a catalog of events.¹ (64)

To Lopez, the value of an ecosystem lies not in the separate organisms and species that inhabit it, but rather in the interactions between inhabitants of the land: between animal and plant, rock and soil. A comprehensive and synthesized view of an ecosystem provides a deeper and more valuable understanding of the land; one that surpasses the understanding of a single species within an ecosystem or even a series of organisms. To know the land, asserts Lopez, is to dwell within the relationships of an ecosystem, a knowledge that is synthesized, comprehensive and unempirical.

Knowledge cannot be diced and categorized when applied to an organic and complex system. Just as an ecosystem presents a series of complicated relationships, so too does the system of knowledge that is the academy. A landscape of sorts, a university is comprised of several divisions, departments, and department specialists, housing several complex systems of knowledge: the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Each one of these divisions is a complete system in and of itself. But to fully understand the profound importance of each academic division, it is critical to comprehend how all of them function together. As Lopez suggests, to know simply one element in a landscape or one academic division is to understand only the categorized,

¹ Lopez, Barry. “Landscape and Narrative.” *Crossing Open Ground*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1988: pg. 61- 71.

empirical aspect of the system. But to understand the connections and the relationships between the systems, to know how the sciences connect with the humanities and vice versa, is to comprehend the true function of the academy and the pursuit of knowledge.

There are, however, many differences between the land and the academy. One is all encompassing while the other occupies only a small fraction of the world and caters to even a smaller percentage of the inhabitants of the world. To attain knowledge from the land is a universal experience whereas to attend a university is a privileged and exclusive experience. Analyzing both the landscape of the world and the landscape of the university, it becomes evident that the extracted knowledge gained at a university is limited to a privileged realm of thinkers and scholars, individuals who are often separated from the land by the academy. So what legitimacy does the knowledge gained at a university hold in the world today, especially in relation to a global conflict such as climate change?

With such a large problem as the warming of the climate it is critical to have scientific knowledge to back up theories for why the global average temperature is slowly increasing at intervals that already are impacting local and global populations. In the case of global climate change, academic knowledge actually serves to legitimize the problem and raise it to the level of global attention, making the issue policy worthy. But once the scientific facts have been elevated to the level of policy it is only productive to move away from a set of information that perpetuates uncertainty, and look to the facts and experiences that validate the real world effects of climate change. Within every scientific truth lies a margin of uncertainty that characterizes the actual field of scientific knowledge. Without uncertainty there would be no use to study the unanswered questions

regarding the physics of the universe or the makeup of the human genome. There is nothing uncertain about the deaths of thousands of Central Americans due to an extremely violent tropical storm, nor is there uncertainty in the fact that annually thousands of Bangladeshi citizens are forced from their homes due to extreme flooding. So while the scientific data collected and presented at meetings of policy makers is pertinent, there is also an important place on the policy maker's agenda for the real world experiences of hundreds of thousands of human beings.

What is the foundation of knowledge then, if the system by which we convey knowledge has been categorized and separated into distinct spheres? A cohesive and comprehensive understanding of a system provides a foundation for life, a method whereby one can dwell on relationships and ideas. But the current trend in knowledge gathering is a rapid gathering of data and information that one is incapable of comprehending in a lifetime. The academy only perpetuates this trend, encouraging students and faculty to become specialists in a particular field, far removed from the reality of the world. Over the course of this summer I have begun to understand why knowledge has been categorized and separated by division, department, and then specialty. Realistically there is too much knowledge to be able to comprehend in a lifetime, too much data to analyze and interpret. If it were not for divisions each and every person involved in the academy would be functioning on overload, pondering how to make decisions or draw conclusions.

To understand the complex nature of any knowledge, one must be capable of comprehending a narrative, for the stories told about the land provide a foundation for self-reflection and contemplation about our place in the world, a method for tempering

knowledge. There is more to a landscape than simply the one we see before us. In addition to the exterior landscape or the landscape that exists outside of the self, each individual harbors an interior landscape, or a projection within the self of the exterior landscape. Relationships in the exterior landscape include those that are named and discernable, such as the nitrogen cycle, and others that are ineffable, such as winter light falling on a particular type of granite.² Similarly, the speculations, intuitions, and formal ideas we refer to as ‘mind’ are a set of relationships in the interior landscape with purpose and order. As Lopez asserts of the relationships in the mind, “The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes” (65). In this passage Lopez explains the importance of experiential learning and how the exterior landscape that one dwells in molds the shape and character of one’s thinking. Where one lives or travels on earth, what one touches, and the patterns one observes in nature all deeply influence the thread of one’s thought and the patterns of the interior landscape. In a similar respect the landscape of the discipline we study, the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities respectively shape the way we see and comprehend the world.

To understand the relationships in an ecosystem is to understand a story, suggests Lopez and these stories told by the land illustrate the knowledge we need to comprehend in order to comprehend, temper, and then absorb knowledge. As he explains, “Inherent in story is the power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call ‘the land’” (68). Thus the function of story is to reorder our confused and over-informed thoughts and place them in a context that rings true with the interior human experience. That is, with each story we hear we bring

² This idea was influenced by ideas from Barry Lopez’s essay “Landscape and Narrative.”

to it our own experiences, and it is these experiences that allow us to gain insight from a story. Lopez's focus on the land is relevant because he believes that the land reflects the stories that we need to know and understand in order to function as whole human beings. To compare the land with the university, both as complex systems that have often been categorized, it is relevant to find the story in the university. Wherein lies the narrative of the academy, and who is telling it?

On a personal level, the information I have gained in this seminar has brought the humanities alive for me. The humanities are the theory behind all of the stories told in seminar, behind the way in which we all connect on a certain point. The humanities are the theories, and the art of story telling is the manifestation of these theories.³ Inherent in any good story is a universal theme that resonates with the human experiences of every member in the audience. And this is where the academy connects with the real world, the intellectual pursuit with the real world experience. Narratives do not present a situation in black and white; rather inherent in a good narrative is paradox, irony and confusion, qualities that discern a pattern we as listeners gain insight from. Brought to the table in a session of story telling are the complex patterns we begin to recognize as universal truths amongst human beings, the foundations of our experiences, and the events that connect us all.

This summer I have begun my own journey toward understanding the connections between the divisions of academia, and the true value in the ability to think like a literary critic, like a scientist, like an economist. To understand the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge is to comprehend the truly complex nature of an environmental issue such as

³ I want to give credit for this idea to Bob Frodeman who partly inspired the ideas for this paper in stimulating conversations over coffee and in seminar lectures.

climate change. My previous background in climate change from my work with environmental NGOs and social justice advocacy groups could not prepare me for the pertinent nature of the scientific and economic information presented in seminar. I have finally begun to appreciate the role of paleoclimatologists and atmospheric physicists. And it has been the experience of interacting with so many multidisciplinary representing their specialties that has aided me in my comprehensive understanding of the relationships between the disciplines. The method by which each speaker has addressed their interests has made the learning experience a thoughtful one. While the data, graphs and illustrations presented in seminar have been informative, the way in which speakers have communicated their experience has been the key in my understanding of the information. The passion behind the story has conveyed to me an experience that only they have known. The experiential knowledge has validated the data they have presented, and has woven the narrative of their topic into the dense tapestry of climate change. The foundation of my learning in this seminar has been the story telling, or I should clarify, the story hidden within the lecture. Those who have conveyed the narrative of their topic successfully have been those speakers who have connected with their audience and have drawn out common passions amongst their listeners. For in every narrative told I have been able to find a common experience, one that brings me closer to understanding the intricacies and complicity of the issue of climate change.

With respect to climate change, it is the relationship between the intellectual pursuit and then the sharing of this pursuit that bridges the gap between the academic who studies the cycles of El Nino and the farmer who depends on the cycles of weather for her crops. By valuing the experience of the farmer equally with her studies of El

Nino, the scientist will gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue and will be better capable of handing out competent advice on weather patterns to the farmer who seeks it. To value the experiential knowledge of each individual is to appreciate and understand the complex relationships of the inner landscape. We do not know ourselves without first knowing one another. That is, we learn about our own pursuits from the pursuits of others, all of which are reflections of an inner and exterior landscape that shapes the lives of each human being. Climate change is not a black and white issue and there is no one right solution to the conflict we have created. Inherent in the story is a complex and intricate tale, one that cannot be reduced to formulas or aphorisms. Experiences matter, they are the threads that weave life together and the stories that we all can relate to. As Lopez asserts:

Beyond this- that the interior landscape is a metaphorical representation of the exterior landscape, that the truth reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in the paradox, irony, and contradictions that distinguish compelling narratives- beyond this there are only failures of imagination; reductionism in science; fundamentalism in religion; fascism in politics. (71)

It is irresponsible to marginalize the role of the humanities in the field of environmental problem solving. It has been the stories of my fellow students and advisors that have brought the information alive to me this summer, the human experiences behind the work and the passion behind the numbers.